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## The Genesis and Growth of Cinema in Tamilnadu

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The oldest colonial port-city of Madras could not compete in the 19th century with its Bombay and Calcutta counterparts in many matters like rapid industrialization, growth and prosperity. However, on a lesser scale Madras enjoyed the benefits of a presidency capital. As the most populous city in the South, Madras attracted both the British and Indians alike by the possibilities of new and increased opportunities in employment, professional advancement and trade. With the inflow of Indians from all over the South to the city during the 19th century, Madras expanded to the west and south incorporating the surrounding villages into a sprawling decentralized conglomeration.<sup>1</sup>

The urban setting of Madras witnessed the emergence of professional drama as an early form of Indian commercial entertainment in the later part of the 19th century. From about 1870 touring drama companies in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhrapradesh performed Parsi style musical stage production in different Indian languages of well known Persian and Hindu stories.<sup>2</sup> By the end of that century, members of the Indian professional classes organized their own amateur dramatic associations as a high class alternative to commercial drama. Both amateur and professional drama contributed greatly to the creation of Tamil cinema in the 1930's. These Indian entertainment formats and venues did not provide the initial context in which the cinema took root in Madras. From the mid 19th century, the British also

began amateur theatrical groups to entertain the elite of Madras with regular drama performances at venues such as museum and the Victoria public hall. European drama of limited scope in the Madras city developed later to beat the other colonial port cities of Bombay and Calcutta.<sup>3</sup> The occasional circus performance and the regular military regiment bands play at the marina or in various public parks in and around the city as well as the occasional music recitals and dances increased the pace of development.<sup>4</sup> However, compared to Europe and United States, film exhibitors in Madras from the outset pitched their entertainment at a more affluent and high class clientele.

The first moving picture show in Madras is attributed to an American exhibitor M. Edwards. He visited the city for a short engagement at the Victoria public hall during 1897.<sup>5</sup> With a seating capacity of about 1000 the first screening was displayed at the rate of two rupees, three rupees and five rupees per ticket.<sup>6</sup> Pandi Duraiswamy thevar, a zamindar and patron of music from Palavanthan in Ramnad was the first person responsible to bring the shadow show to the interior of South India.<sup>7</sup> Travelling agents of the imperial Tobacco company used moving pictures of publicity tours through South India.<sup>8</sup>

The city of Madras turned the most important market for the early touring cinema shows in South India.<sup>9</sup> Travelling cinema companies frequently visited Madras city throughout the first decade of this century. The reason for this was that

several Indians from the south also entered the business of film exhibition while using Madras as their base of operation.<sup>10</sup> The early film exhibitors Samikannu Vincent and Venkiah<sup>11</sup> moved to Madras and rose to the extent of receiving patronage from the Governor and the leading rajas of the presidency.<sup>12</sup> They set up theatres in the city of Madras for larger audiences and longer engagements.<sup>13</sup> Besides this, they performed two shows nightly at out door locations with their own large and well ventilated tents and oil engines for generation of electricity.<sup>14</sup> They promised a balanced program consisting of varied coloured, comic, historic and tragic films<sup>15</sup> to construct different relationship to its viewers based on varied impulses.<sup>16</sup> To get more audience Venkiah routinely advertised by providing special accommodation to native ladies.<sup>17</sup> The resident European community of Madras which formed a small minority of the city's population figured as preferred audiences.<sup>18</sup> The elite English educated and wealthy classes who inclined toward Western culture also preferred cinema.<sup>19</sup>

In 1910 Madras and the rest of British India were still covered by about seventy touring cinemas.<sup>20</sup> The names of Mrs. Klug and the French cinema company Pathe Freres were treated as the exhibitor of the first permanent cinema hall in Madras<sup>21</sup> and the first international supplier of films to open offices in India in 1907.<sup>22</sup> Mrs. Klugs first commercial theater in Madras turned the hot season to comfortably cool.<sup>23</sup> It appeared as the most comfortable theatre in Madras with the novelties of electric lighting and new tip-up seats.<sup>24</sup>

In South India, cinema acted as a social equalizer. The hierarchical position of the patron was replaced by the individual's purchasing power.<sup>25</sup> Venkiah chose George Town for his second permanent cinema hall, known as the Crown Theatre, explicitly in order to cater to the public living in the north of Madras.<sup>26</sup> The second theatre in the neighbourhood was the Cinema Majestic in what had been known as the Grand Theatre close to the Crown on St. Xavier

street.<sup>27</sup> Similar to the attendance at the Crown, the Majestic mainly attracted the Hindu audiences<sup>28</sup> and the Lakshmi Theatre at Cenkaam Bazar catered exclusively to George Town's Muslim population.<sup>29</sup> Outside of the presidency towns also cinema theatres thrived with considerable initiative.<sup>30</sup> In January 1915, S. Vincent, a successful touring exhibitors opened one of the first permanent theatres outside of the Madras city. This was followed by the establishment of such cinema halls in other provincial cities.<sup>31</sup> By 1921, the number of permanent cinemas in the Madras presidency had risen to 14 with half in Madras city and the rest in other Urban centres.<sup>32</sup> The first cinema theatres in these provincial cities were not specially built for the purpose of screening films. Originally, they were built to host commercial dramas or to serve as public town halls.<sup>33</sup> Cinema became an attraction to the villagers and it's glamour soon went upto the hills.<sup>34</sup> As a consequence of that by the middle of 1920s there were three seasonal cinema halls in the Nilgri mountains.<sup>35</sup>

The Europeans and Anglo-Indians did not attend Indian cinema theatres chiefly because they found the Indian music which accompanied the films to be horrible.<sup>36</sup> Again, the cinematography exhibition was likely to pose a public nuisance. Hence the Public Resort Act of 1888 insisted special sanction of the commissioner of police with full information of any performance atleast seven days before hand to hold cinematography exhibition.<sup>37</sup> In 1915, Greenwood, the Electrical Inspector for the Public Works Department of Madras Presidency, proposed to extend a special set of rules already worked for city of Madras to the rest of the Presidency. It is surprising to see that the Madras Government implemented the plan before any action had been taken by the Government of India.<sup>38</sup> Green wood, with a clear acknowledgement of the current political climate, suggested the establishment of censorship to deal with the inflammatory matters contained in films.<sup>39</sup> But, the establishment of censorship immediately created a black market for films to be continued till date.

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