

Brigitte Schulze, *Humanist and Emotional Beginnings of a Nationalist Indian Cinema in Bombay : With Kracauer in the Footsteps of Phalke*. Berlin: Avinus Verlag, 2003.

Reviewed by Stephen Bottomore, in: Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, vol 24, no 3 (August 2004)

[...] The sociological element of the book cannot be emphasised too much. This is not a work of conventional film history, dealing only with 'film as film', but is a much wider ranging work. Indeed, some might see it as too wide-ranging, and there are whole long sections which have little apparent relevance to Phalke as a filmmaker, and deal rather with larger issues of the social and political context of India at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries, as well as the theatrical and performance traditions of this era.

In this sense Schulze's book fits into a now well-established tradition of historical/cultural writing known as 'subaltern studies', meaning a social history of the ordinary Indian people ('subalterns'). This has overturned older historical traditions which tended to focus on the dominant cultures and politics of India. One of the main questions that the book seeks to answer is: how did audiences in Bombay in the teen years actually respond to the first "Indian films", and specifically to Phalke's most celebrated film *Raja Harischandra* (1913, remade in 1917)? It is a difficult question to answer, as few spectators from the time wrote about their own reaction or that of others, but the book presents what evidence remains, and also adds a good deal of new information about Bombay's social mix and performance traditions which help us see the film - and its audience reception - in new ways.

[...] Schulze is a sociologist and 'activist' in Indian cinema culture and so is well placed to stress these social aspects, and in doing so she rescues Phalke from being seen solely as an Indian artist, and suggests that he was a true humanist, who we should place in the *international* context of cinema history.

It is important to state that this book is not, nor pretends to be, a general study of early Indian cinema. As I have noted, it is rather a sociological reflection on a single important filmmaker and his most celebrated film. Nevertheless the book contains valuable information about Bombay's early social and film history.

[...] Other useful aspects of this book include a good few pages on Phalke himself and his family background (p.259-), and appendices reproducing some of his writings. The author interviewed several ex-colleagues and relations of Phalke, and these fresh personal statements help us to understand the man, and to bring him to life on the page. Curiously, one of the author's most

important findings about Phalke's celebrated film – she has deduced that the surviving version of *Raja Harischandra* is from the 1917 remake rather than from the 1913 original (as had been assumed previously) – is buried in a footnote on page 270. Another odd item of interest - to be found in part 1 of the book - is the revelation that both Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi mentioned cinema in their writings (in 1904 and 1920 respectively), which suggests how important the new medium was for both the cultural and political elites in the emerging nationalist India. There is a fine bibliography, listing many works on Indian film history as well as on more general Indian history, along with a list of archival sources. [...]

No one who studies early Indian cinema can afford to ignore this book.