

The Chetty Brothers

Bioscopes and Achaar

Today we have television, which brings packaged entertainment right into the comfort and intimacy of our homes. Many homes have several television sets that allow one, the emphasis is on the singular, to stretch out on the sofa or sit up in bed to indulge one's individual tastes. This culture of private casual comfort that has developed around the box has moved into movie theatres as well. In fact, the word 'theatre' which implies an audience, a social gathering and a social occasion, seems inappropriate. The cinema has become much smaller and more private and more and more people treat it as an extension of home. Some throw their legs over the seats in the row in front and stretch out as if on their sitting room sofas. Viewers enter dimly lit cinemas, sit in the dark in secluded seats, watch in silence, file out in darkness as soon as the credits begin to roll and return as individuals to a crowd of individuals.

It was different in the location. Going to the bioscope was a social occasion. Families, friends and neighbours, all dressed up, walked together to the bioscope for an afternoon's or an evening's entertainment. Outside the bio, there was the buzz of people in close interaction: vendors of stamvrugte, peanuts, achaar and kerriballs, impatient children stretching out their pennies for these goodies and gangs playing dice on the corners.

According to Uncle Surti Baba,

There was only one gang, you know, they called themselves Mafia. It was Coloured, all Coloureds. They used to come and hang around, these Coloured gangster.

They used to worry lot of Indian youngsters who came to Royal Bioscope, Empire Bioscope - most of the Prinsloo Street boys, you know, Muslim boys. Most of their families had shops in Prinsloo Street. The gangster, they see Indian boys, then they say, 'Give us money. If you don't give us money, we going to hit you, take your watches, everything.'

They thought it's only one way to get help - they come to me, you know, because I was very mean. □ I wasn't acting like a gangster, but I used to help Indian boys who had trouble from the gangster. I told them, 'All right when you go to bioscope, you just let me know, then I'll be around there. □ Whoever comes, and ask you money, you don't have to speak to them. □ The rest I'll do it.' □ So when they stop the youngster there, on the stoep of the bioscope, then I go there and say, 'You want money.' □ *I say, 'No, leave the childrens and get off from here. If I see you next time, you what you calling, asking money, taking their watches, and things, then you will get me because I'm not scared of your gangsters.*

I'm not gangster but I'm not scared.'

So they used to leave them.

You know what made me so brave, I had a cousin, you know, they also stayed in location; the one chap had a gambling house at Mooloo's cafee. □ Now the chap who was running the gambling house, this gangster used to come and worry them.

Then one day, it happened like that, that they hit my cousin very bad at the Mooloo's cafee.

I was in bed.

Somebody came, knock at my door, my wife open. 'Uncle is sleeping.' 'No, tell him to wake up quick, they are killing his brother.'

So I got out of the bed and I went in the cafee you know. □ I didn't waste time. You know that time I was young, very young and I didn't waste time. And I had a bayonet by me. And I went.

The first to get hold of is the leader of the gangster, and I chopped him here, open. Then I wanted to chop again, then my other cousin caught me.

He say, 'Broe, what are you doing?'

'Let me take this bastard away, they worrying our Indians too much here and we can't take it. They can't overrule us.'

Then I left him.

That's how I got well known by the Indian boys. After this, wherever I go, when they see me coming, they used to give way because they know that they can't stand front of me. You know, when I was a young boy in India we used to hire a teacher, who can learn us how to fight with the stick, like Zulus do, how to fight with the stick, how to defend yourself. There I learn in India all this tricks. I was quite healthy

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you know, nobody could overpower me.

When the Chetty Brothers took over the management of the three bioscopes in the location, they kept a stern eye on the gangs. Gang members who interfered with customers, were banned from all the cinemas. This was a death sentence to offenders who begged and pleaded with the Chettys to let them join their friends inside. As people's lives revolved around the cinemas, to be denied entry was severe punishment indeed.

Inside the bioscope, there was as much of a hubbub as outside. It was cheerfully noisy, especially as the theatres, each with a capacity of six hundred seats, were always full and the large brightly lit open halls with flat floors encouraged interaction among people who knew each other well. They moved about freely and there were always children running up and down the aisles.

In front was a stage with a proscenium arch and heavy curtains behind which was the screen. One child, Boma, whose father ran the café at the Empire, always stared intently at the proscenium arch, hoping to catch actors in the act of slipping onto the screen. She always wondered where they were hiding and how they suddenly appeared before her. Once, she even climbed the little stairway at the side of the stage and slipped in behind the curtain to see whether the actors were waiting in the wings.

She didn't find anyone and couldn't understand it but no one else seemed to be bothered by it. Other children simply waited to enjoy the performance. Children paid a ticky for the hard seats in front while parents paid sixpence to sit in cushioned seats in the back rows. Once in a while parents and children sat upstairs in the raked gallery with its comfortable seats.

Then they didn't have to strain to look over or between heads or move their own heads when the heads in front swung from one side to the other.

At the Empire Theatre, where the hatch of the café looked out into the main hall, people who sold refreshments watched all the films. When children got tired or bored, they turned to look at the sweets, chocolates, nuts and cool drinks. During intervals, everyone headed for the café. There was always an interval before the main feature. As cinemas usually had a single projector, there were breaks when reels were changed.

The programme began with newsreels, followed by cartoons, serials like *Zorro* and *Fu Man Chu*, and trailers (previews of forthcoming attractions).

The interval before the main feature was long, at least fifteen minutes - time to get drinks and snacks. When the bioscopes showed double features to bring in the crowds, there were two intervals, another before the second film.

During the main feature people laughed loudly at the antics of comedians like The Three Stooges, Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin, cheered and clapped for heroes like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers and Tarzan, and shivered when *Frankenstein*, *The Undying Monster*, *Dracula* or *Werewolf* appeared. Boma, who thought the actors were hiding at the side of the stage, couldn't look at the monsters.

She covered her eyes or ducked down behind seats praying that they would not come out into the audience to get her.

The Empire Theatre, the Royal Theatre and the Orient Picture Palace, as their names suggest, looked far beyond their settings in the tiny Pretoria location and the escape they provided was to very distant lands, real and imaginary. There were two shows a day, a matinee in the afternoon and a show in the evening and the three cinemas were always full. They catered to a very small area so overcrowded that it easily sustained the three bioscopes and cinema owners became prosperous and powerful. Bioscopes served people from the Cape Location, the Asiatic Bazaar, Marabastad, Bantule and the surrounding areas. People went at least once a week, Friday and Saturday nights being the most popular times.

Serials kept them hooked.

Biera, who lived around the corner from the Royal Bioscope, like most children and adults too, was addicted to the serials. As she just had to see each week's episode, she and her friend Joan would sneak off to the bioscope without their mothers' consent.

“After school we used to run to the bioscope. They used to have this Zorro serial. Joan would tell her mother, she's coming to me because I had the cotton and I would tell my mother I'm going to Joan because she has the mat. You know we did that type of cotton work at school and we used that as an excuse. You

know the Royal bioscope and Uncle Poonie, the ticket collector, the big fat one; he had big eyes. W

e get to Uncle Poonie, 'Please, please, please, let us just go and see the serial.'

We go in the bioscope, see the serial and run out. He say,

'Kom, kom, gaan julle nou, julle ouers kom vir my raas,' because he knew we'll say, 'Uncle Poonie het ons laat gaan.' Then they used to go and scold him. O Hene!

If they caught us, we got lekker hiding."

During the silent movie era, piano players from Marabastad and Bantule provided appropriate background music while women in the location swooned over matinee idols like Rudolph Valentino and everyone laughed at comedians like Charlie Chaplin. In the forties, with the advent of the talkies, there was a flood of musicals starring Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, Jeanette McDonald and Nelson Eddy, the singing cowboys, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, and crooners, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra.

Indian movies also came in with talking films.

People from the Asiatic Bazaar and surrounding Indian locations flocked to the Orient to see comic stars like TA Mathuram and NS Krishnan, and stars of melodramas and tragedies, Thiagaraj Bhagavathar, Leela Chitnis and Ashok Kumar. As all Indian films were musicals, the music and dancing were as important as the drama. Afterwards, people bought the records, the large black 78 discs, learned the songs and tried out the dances. On Sunday mornings, the Asiatic Bazaar rang with the sounds of Indian film music issuing loudly from every radiogram in every home.

But the bioscopes were more than places for films; they also provided venues for social, cultural, educational and political events. In the early years, before schools were built, they accommodated school classes. On Sundays, when there were no screenings because of the Christian Sabbath, the bioscope halls were used for social functions and local entertainment - meetings, weddings, physical culture exhibitions, drama productions and dances. Miriam Makeba, Dolly Rathebe, the Manhattan Brothers, the African Inkspots and Hugh Masekela were some of the entertainers, who performed at the bioscopes and celebrities, such as Canada Lee and Sarojini Naidu, addressed audiences from their stages.

Before bioscopes were built, films were shown in makeshift venues. Habib Keshavjee began his career in this way, showing films to African audiences at the Dougall Hall in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Bombay Star, a little tin shanty on Boom Street, in which silent films were shown, was the first bioscope in the location. It opened sometime in the 1920s and was not far from the building that was to become the Orient Picture Palace. After it closed, a new Bombay Star was built further along Boom Street where the Blue Lagoon Café now stands. When Ismail Keshavjee bought the building, he turned it into a shirt factory.

It is not clear when a Mr Patel and his partner, Mohamed Jeeva (Jeeva Barber) acquired the Nav Jivan Hall in Boom Street. This double-storey structure built in 1905, had shops in front and a dance hall upstairs. Additions, in 1915, included a much bigger dance hall at the back. Patel and Jeeva, who did not keep the property long, may have used the big hall to show films. Before Athieammal Chetty acquired it, the property appears to have changed hands several times and the big hall may also have been used by others, including a group from Durban, for screening films.

Sometime in the mid to late 1930s, when the property was up for sale, Mrs Athieammal Chetty, a mother of six sons, put in a bid. Everyone knew Mrs Chetty, a big light-skinned woman, who became the head of her family when her husband died in 1934. They saw her everyday, pushing her barrow all the way to the market on Church Street where she bought the vegetables and fish that she hawked around the location. She also collected bottles and sold them. How could this widow, a hawker with six young sons, afford to buy the property?

People thought she was mad. How would she keep up the exorbitant instalments of £50 a month?

But she had six sons.

The three older boys, who had attended the Good Shepherd School, began working after they had completed their primary education. Kanabathy, the eldest, in his early twenties, was a bookkeeper employed by one of the Keshavjees. Her teenage sons, Vella and Siva, who had taken up the hawking trade, also ran a stall in the fruit and vegetable market at the corner of

Vermeulen and Church Streets. When Mrs Chetty bought the property, these three boys undertook to make the payments. This was a family enterprise, but Kanabathy, who had helped to purchase the property, did not get involved in developing it. Namasivayam, the fourth brother, was killed in a horrific car crash in 1938. Aroomoogam (Aroo) and Shunmugam (Sanoo) were still at school. Vella and Siva took initial responsibility for the development of the property and were joined by Aroo and Sanoo when they were old enough.

As the enterprise grew and flourished, these four men, Vella, Siva, Aroo and Sanoo, came to be known as the Chetty Brothers.

Like their mother, the Chetty boys were driven to succeed and worked very hard. When they acquired the Orient property, it comprised a double-storey building with dance halls, a barbershop with the striped pole in front, a billiard room and a café. At first they concentrated on developing the potential of the venue virtually as it stood. After they had improved the café, they kept it open twenty-fours a day. They kept the dance halls open but converted the billiard room into a grocery store. Though they worked extremely hard, they couldn't afford to give up hawking or their stall in the market and had to manage all their ventures at the same time. Their most successful undertaking was the café; it became the goldmine that allowed them to meet their financial commitments, expand their fruit and vegetable trade and upgrade their grocery business.

On Saturdays, the grocery store stayed open until 18:00 or later. By law, they were required to close at 13:00 but the demand from African customers was so great that they continued business behind closed doors, making sure that customers slipped in and out unobtrusively. When they bought a lorry, they took their business into Marabastad and Bantule where they made deliveries of groceries, fruit and vegetables and supplied the malt and corn for making beer that African people were not allowed to buy. There were harsh restrictions against Africans, who were subject to curfew laws, liquor laws, and restrictions as to where they could shop and what they could buy. As they were not welcome in the CBD, where there were no facilities for Blacks, no restaurants and toilets, African people went to Boom Street where Indian businessmen, who had to obtain special permits and display prominent signs advertising "Native Trading," reaped the benefits of discriminatory regulations and, in the 1950s, led the Chettys to establish a General Dealers' Wholesales that supplied stores in Atteridgeville

and other townships.

Before the Chettys took over the Orient property, the two halls in the building had provided venues for recreation and entertainment. On Sunday afternoons, there were dances in the hall upstairs, the "Steppie Jan", patronised mostly by African people from Marabastad and Bantule. The men, formally dressed in black coats and white trousers, and the women, in elegant dresses, danced there in the ballroom style. Friday nights in the hall downstairs, the big dance nights of the Coloured community, people danced lang-arm to the music of live bands. Loud and vigorous music and dancing went on until one or two in the morning. The squares formed the grand finale: the entire crowd divided up into small groups, formed squares and danced as in folk dances with the leader of each square signalling the different variations to his group.

But dances had to move to the Dougall Hall on Von Wielligh Street and to other venues when the Chettys converted the Orient Hall into a cinema. They put in fixed seating and a projection room and turned the hall into an elegant auditorium with a stage and facilities to cater for live performances as well. They called their cinema The Orient Picture Palace and it soon became as important to the location community as the Royal and Empire Theatres. Ezekiel Mphahlele recalls the opening of a cinema, perhaps this one, in *Down Second Avenue*. "Talking pictures had just arrived in Pretoria.

A new Indian-owned bioscope hall, the Star Picture Palace, opened for the first time in the Asiatic Bazaar with a showing of *The Singing Fool*, featuring Al Jolson.

Excited crowds flocked at the cinema to see the new wonder in the history of film."

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At the beginning, when they were competing with the Keshavjees, the Chettys had difficulty

getting rights for films. After the Ismailis left the location, however, they acquired the monopoly.

Then the Orient showed English films most days of the week but reserved Wednesdays for Indian films. And Wednesdays were always sold out in advance to people who came from all over Pretoria and the nearby towns. As Indian films, in the old days, depicted stories from Indian mythology and folklore, they gave children of the Asiatic Bazaar a glimpse into their ancient heritage.

The Orient Café, the mainstay of the Orient enterprise, flourished even more after the cinema was built. Vella, responsible for trading activities on the property, managed the grocery store and wholesale business, while his wife, Govindammal, ran the café with the help of her sisters-in-law. They produced two items, egg sandwiches and achaar-bread, which were extremely popular with the bioscope crowd, especially with African patrons. Govindammal and her sisters-in-law, who spent about three months during the mango season putting up the year's supply of achaar in the big yard behind the café, found that with the opening of the bioscope, there was a much bigger demand.

Ten bags of green mangoes no longer sufficed, they needed hundreds of bags and what had been a small snack item for the café suddenly took on a life of its own and burgeoned into an industry when merchants in the area began putting in orders for achaar.

As a result, a little factory was established behind the café. The Chettys were extremely innovative in devising equipment for the manufacture of achaar.

They invented and patented a machine that chopped the hardest mangoes into chunks, and bought a concrete mixer for blending chopped mangoes with spices and oil. The sons of Jimmy Kruger, former Minister of Justice, from whom they had obtained a monopoly, supplied mangoes from the Northern Transvaal.

As mango pickles are made from hard green mangoes, soft ones being quite unsuitable, the moment a shipment arrived, the mangoes had to be chopped up.

If the shipment arrived in the middle of the night, the family had to jump out of bed and begin the pickling process right there and then.

Very soon, they were producing twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand 25-litre tins a month of "Orient Achaar." But when the manufacturing, marketing and distribution of achaar became more than they could manage, they restricted themselves to manufacturing and supplying to wholesalers who put their own labels on the product. The success of the Chettys, pioneers in the achaar business in the Transvaal, stimulated the establishment of rival companies.

In the 1950s, when the Ismaili community left the location, the Chetty Brothers bought the Royal and Empire bioscopes from the Keshavjees, gained the monopoly of the cinema business in the location, and became prominent, powerful people. The cinemas were money-spinners and patronage, especially African patronage, set the Chettys on the road to a business empire. At Easter time, all three cinemas catered specifically for the African communities with simultaneous showings of *The Life of Christ*. The film, originally a silent black-and-white movie, was hand-coloured and more frames were added to make the movement more natural. On Good Friday, continuous performances began at 06:00 and ended at 01:00 the next morning. Even after Group Areas relocations, when African people were moved out of cities, there was still a demand for the film and the brothers continued to dispatch copies to townships all over the country for many, many years.

The admission of African people to the bioscopes was risky but cinema owners, who depended on African support, turned a blind eye to the law. And when African people, trapped by curfew regulations, looked for places to hide out for the night, they often came to The Orient.

The police, well aware of this hiding place, often raided the bioscope.

They arrived in big vans, kicked down the doors, and viciously rounded up the people they found there. Nothing, however, not curfew laws, not prohibitions, nothing could stop people from coming to the bioscope, the place that provided magical escape from everyday living in the location.

As a result, the doors of the Orient Picture Palace, like symbols of liberation, remained under constant attack during the days of apartheid.

When the Chettys began to build their cinema network with bioscopes in Johannesburg, Durban and Mafeking, they gave up the achaar business for cinema-related enterprises such as film and video distribution and advertising. As their network extended into neighbouring countries and into the Middle East, it dawned on them that theirs was more than just a flourishing business, it was a corporation and needed appropriate management. They set themselves up as a board of managers and each one took on a different responsibility. Siva, the administrative genius, became CEO; Vella, manager of the wholesale and catering business; Sanoo, manager of the cinemas and Aroo, advertising manager - Tip Top Printers and Publishers had been established on a stand next to the Royal Bioscope.

Constantly alert to new development opportunities and optimizing them, these brothers had created a financial empire. Their vast network had emanated from their humble beginnings as hawkers in a tiny location, Marabastad, a grid of a dozen short streets.

Their acuity, perseverance and hard work, which had taken them to the highest levels of achievement, received national recognition in the 1980's, when they were nominated for the Businessman of the Year Award along with Martin Jonker and E.G. Chapman. Their phenomenal financial success, which gave them the power to negotiate within the apartheid system, led to relations with officials in high places and benefits of preferential treatment.

But the enforcement of the Group Areas Act sharply halted their runaway success. Though the relocation of Indians opened up some opportunities in new Indian townships, the brothers lost a great deal in the Asiatic Bazaar. The biggest blow was the loss of the Royal bioscope. When they were given notice to close the cinema and Tip Top Printers and vacate the sites, they fought hard against the rulings. But the supply of electricity to the bioscope was cut and that put it out of commission. Then on the pretext that a highway was to be constructed through the property, the Royal Picture Palace was demolished. It was the only building to be torn down in that street and the plot has remained vacant ever since.

After the National Indian Council (later the South African Indian Council and then the House of

Delegates) appointed by the government in 1964, took control of trading and zoning rights in Indian areas, the progress of Indian merchants was severely curtailed. The Chettys' ownership of the Orient was threatened when the site was put up for sale by the authorities. As properties in the location were on 99-year leases from the City Council, people owned only the improvements that they had made on sites. Despite furnishing proof that all the improvements at the Orient belonged to them, the Chetty's were not allowed to purchase the site. The town planner, Mike van Blommenstein, who supported the Chettys' claim, petitioned the Council on their behalf but to no avail. It was only in 1995 that the brothers became the official owners of the land and the property. It was not an unqualified victory; they were restricted to running the cinema, nothing else. The bottle store was closed but the grocery store and café, though they were in jeopardy, stayed open.

Today, the Orient, the only bioscope still operating in the location, has two showings daily, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. There are no late shows as the location is not safe at night. When the Chettys were nominated for Businessman Of the Year, it was on the basis of the number of properties they owned. Ironically the nomination came at a time when they were forced to watch their most cherished enterprises being reduced in scope or destroyed one by one. Now the Chettys, with all the other people who have put in claims for restitution of property in the Asiatic Bazaar, wait for the return of their homes, the sites of the Empire and Royal Theatres and other business ventures.

After 1994, large-scale poverty with its concomitants of crime and violence that had been contained in apartheid townships all over the land, burst into the developed areas of the new South Africa announcing the HIV+ status of our country. The poor and homeless who invaded the Asiatic Bazaar, now Marabastad, declared in their silent way that nothing will go forward as long as they cannot. Marabastad in central Pretoria becomes more and more of an eyesore and more and more crime-infested by the day. But descendants of the Chetty brothers still have a vision for the future, which does not differ markedly from official proposals for redevelopment of the area. They too envision good roads, proper housing and sanitation, shopping areas and other facilities.

But these things happen only when individuals see the opportunities for development and, like

the Chetty Brothers, seize them.

[1] strapping

[2] Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue*, London: Faber and Faber, 1959, p.95.