

“I Realised that This History Is Going to Be Erased”: Photographer Hemant Chaturvedi on Changing Film Exhibition in India, Its Forgotten Theatres and People

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Hemant Chaturvedi used to work as a cinematographer in the Hindi film industry, having completed over a dozen feature films before changing course and returning to his work as a still photographer. Among one of his recent initiatives has been documenting close to a thousand endangered single-screen movie theatres across India, racing against time as they are closed down and/or demolished. Between 2000 and 2019 the country lost 11,000 single-screen cinemas, so Chaturvedi’s photographic work and the memories he collects on his journeys across the country often remain the only link to the elaborate history of Indian film exhibition prior to the dawn of the multiplex.

In October 2021, Daniela Treveri Gennari and Maya Nedyalkova interviewed him on his life, career and fight to preserve local cinema memory. Below are a few fragments of the rich conversation which ensued.

You can follow Chaturvedi’s work at: <https://www.instagram.com/sankidude.cinemas/> and <https://www.wonderwall.co.in/artistdetails.aspx?artistid=75>.

DTG: Thank you for agreeing to do this interview, Hemant. Could you tell us a little bit more about your education and career so far?

HC: I’m 53 years old, I live in Bombay, I have been here for more than three and a half decades. I am a literature graduate from St Xavier's College, Mumbai. When I finished with my BA, I tried getting into a film institute. For a degree in cinematography, they need you to be a physics graduate, and I wasn't. I got rejected, and then I tried hard to work with cinematographers as an apprentice, but they wouldn't have me. In those days it was very

tough to get an apprenticeship unless you really knew the person. I started as a news cameraman, I used to hang around the Parliament House and places like that. When our Prime Minister was assassinated in 1991, we got pulled to Delhi and filmed the whole funeral and experience with the guests, for the first time.

I got introduced to the world of cinema through a documentary shoot produced by the legendary Merchant Ivory Productions. I got addicted to the experience and eventually became a cinematographer myself. I did about three or four more projects for them as an assistant and then I started working in Bombay in the late 1980s.

Some friends of mine started a television company and a program for the BBC. One thing led to another, and I started doing bigger shows (the last I did for TV was the Indian version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*). I did television for about 12 years and got my first feature film, *Company* (Ram Gopal Varma, 2002), a very famous cult gangster film. This turned out to be a very important film and is still considered a cult movie these days, with people still copying the visuals today. In India there's a trend of people repeating themselves. Once you become popular for a certain style, you're expected to do that thing forever. For me, the challenge was that if someone offered me a film based on what I've just done, I would refuse it. Recently the nicest thing someone said to me was: "If I watch 10 of your movies, I can never tell if it was by the same cinematographer".

I did about 12 full-length features, 800 commercials and one day in 2015 I woke up and said: "I can't do this anymore". I was 47 when I decided to do something that I think is significantly more important for the way I think, and what I want to leave behind for the world. I decided to go back to photography full-time and work on my own projects. I create a series of ideas for the year. Some are more formal, some of them are less formal, and some of them have been for charity. I did a fabulous initiative in my old college in Bombay, as we celebrated 150 years of its opening in 2019. I tracked down about 65 elderly retired teachers and staff from my college. 56 of them made it to the College premises and I did portraits of them, as their most everlasting portrait of them and their favourite place. I created a calendar which I got printed and gave to them, so they sold it, raising money for students who need funding for books. In essence, this is curious, there is a thread that runs through my work now, which is me trying to visually preserve objects, spaces, or people who are about to go.

MN: And you are currently working on a documentary, titled Chhayaankan: The Management of Shadows (2022), which spotlights local cinematographers. How did that come about?

HC: When I left cinematography, I left under some mental duress, taking what I'd call pathbreaking decisions in your own life. I realised the only people who would answer my questions at the time were probably people who came before me, my peers. So I tracked down about 30 retired cinematographers, who were in the age group of 70 to 90, and I filmed in-depth interviews with each of them about their lives, their passions, and their journeys. I haven't finished the film, this year I lost one of the participants to old age. He was 88. I felt

this wave of guilt, that if my own participants don't get to see the film then it's truly shameful to take so long to finish it. So, the film should be finished by the end of the year.¹

In my documentary, there's a cinematographer who talked about "Why is it that some people just get forgotten?". One day they're in the limelight and then the next they're forgotten. His answer was that it's a test of your character. If you forget us, we remain forgotten, if you remember us, we will be remembered. The people that I've interviewed have never been interviewed before, so this is the first time. Since cinematographers are considered dispensable, we haven't been given enough attention when we should have. I keep saying that the generation that had the talent was unexplored. I decided that I will make the film without any restrictions, I will make it a five-hour film if it must be a five-hour film.



Figure 1. Poster for *Chhayaankan: The Management of Shadows*. Copyrights: Hemant Chaturvedi.

DTG: We are very interested in cinema history and the changes in film-viewing geographies. In relation to that, you started The Single-Screen Cinemas Project. Could you tell us more?

HC: So, one afternoon, it was winter, I went for a walk with my camera bag. I went to Allahabad University. It has a beautiful science block dating back to the late 1800s, so I thought I'd go and take some photographs. While walking down the road that led to the university, I suddenly got the sense of a *déjà vu*, and I remembered there used to be an old movie theatre on that road. I found the theatre, Lakshmi Talkies, named after the goddess of wealth. It was a beautiful Art Deco cinema from the 1930s and it was lying in decrepit conditions. There was garbage lying outside... I checked with the local shop, and they said it

¹ The film was completed by 31st December 2021 and distributed via Vimeo where it accumulated more than 2000 views. A recent review can be found here: <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/films/reel-life-the-game-of-light-and-shadow>.

shut about 20 years ago. We have no real respect for our heritage buildings, they just get demolished, irrespective of their age and significance or architectural styles or uniqueness, or whatever it is. So, I finished with the university that day and I came home, and I asked my uncle if he knew the owners of the cinema. It turned out to be a friend of his. We called him and he allowed us to photograph the cinema. They opened it the next day and I went in. I remembered from my childhood the movies and the experiences that I had over there. The first thing you see when you walk in is a statue of the goddess Lakshmi with an arm that was missing and covered with dust. The theatre had been stripped of its furniture and machines; it was just a big empty hall with two beautiful hand painted murals on the walls of the auditorium.



Figure 2. A statue of the goddess Lakshmi in the main lobby of the theatre named after her. Copyrights: Hemant Chaturvedi.

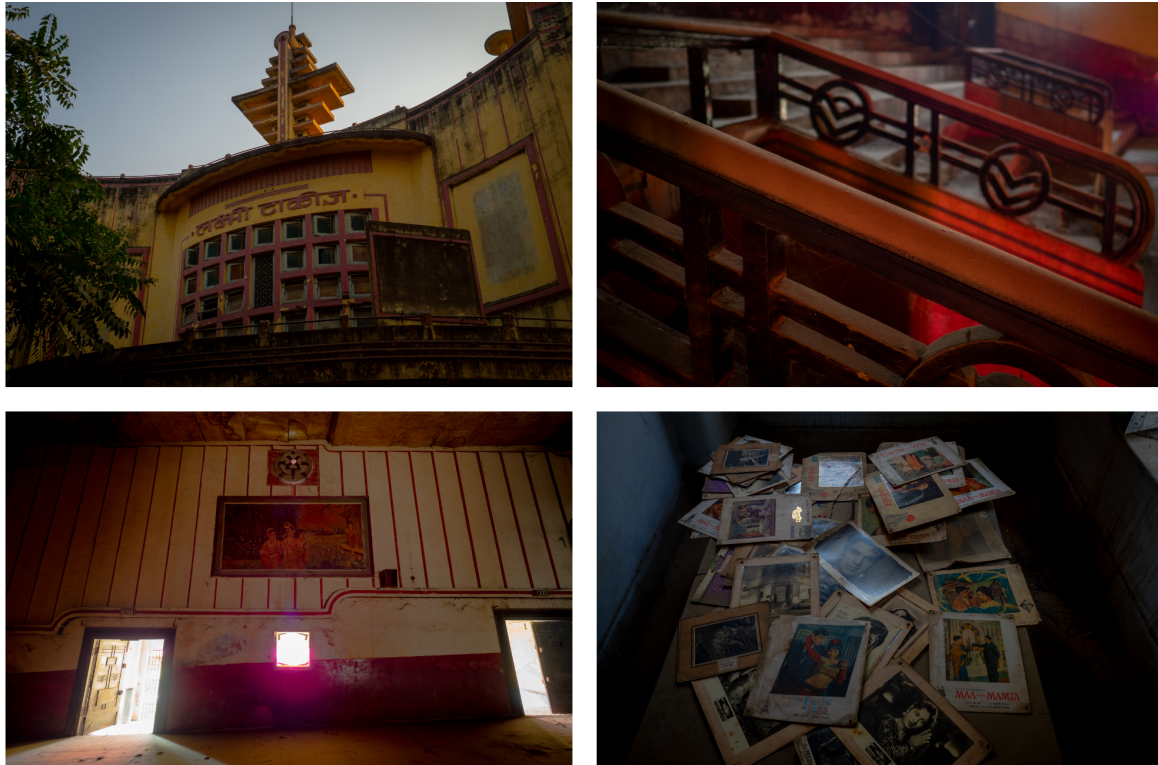


Figure 3. From left to right, top to bottom: Lakshmi Talkies exterior; Art Deco teakwood bannisters; A hand painted mural on the right side wall of the auditorium, a depiction of a scene from the Hindu epic, Ramayana; A pile of vintage lobby cards, found inside a forgotten almirah. Copyrights: Hemant Chaturvedi.

I shot that and came back to Bombay, and, as I was going through the images, remembered all the conversations I had with people. All of them said the same thing: “Cinema exhibition is now as good as dead”. These theatres have gigantic cinema halls which have 1000 seats and are just impossible to fill. You don't have the stars to do that, you don't have the music to do that, and you don't have the stories. I think in India the concept of superstardom (where people waited the whole year for a film) has gone completely. I still remember that a 1000-seater cinema would sell 1400 tickets, so there would be people in the aisles cuddling up on one single seat, standing in the doorway, hanging over the balconies, watching the film. Now there are 20 people in the theatre and that's it. I did some more research and discovered that in the last 20 years, from 2000 to 2019, 20,000 single-screen cinemas dwindled to 9000 single-screen cinemas; we have lost 11,000 cinemas to demolition or closure. I realised that this history is going to be erased. I see this in two ways. A: a landmark of the city, a visual landmark in the city, B: the memories of the people who visited those cinemas, and their memories; when a human being dies, you lose the experiences when the structure is pulled down you've lost the landmark and suddenly it's gone.

I started by looking for permissions in Bombay. I shot three cinemas after 20 days of running around Bombay. I went to another town 200 kilometres away and shot 11 cinemas. After two years of perseverance, I shot one of the oldest cinemas in Bombay. The structure was built as

a theatre in 1890 and it was called Ripon Theatre. Now I have 662 cinemas that I have photographed.²

Of two of the heritage cinemas that I shot in Bombay, one is called Liberty, and was built in 1949. It is an Art Deco masterpiece. Another is Regal, which is from 1932, which was the first Deco cinema in Bombay. When I went to shoot the Liberty, it had been shut for about 3 years. When I was given permission to come and shoot, the manager had only one request: "When you're photographing the auditorium just try and do it as quickly as possible", I said "Okay, why?". He said, "We have 40,000 bulbs running. So, if we run 40,000 incandescent bulbs for you, you can imagine the kind of electricity bill we're going to end up paying". He said it was inherited by their family, but nobody gives them money to maintain it.

The Regal and the Liberty come to life when they are hired during the Mumbai International Film Festival. That's about the only time they see shows because it's limited seating, based on the number of seats they have, and it is why they choose these cinemas so they can have more people attending the festival. But it's just filling that number of seats. I've seen cinemas, where the cut off point is 35 people – if they have less than 35 people, they will cancel the show, as it's cheaper to cancel the show than sell only 35 tickets. So, no, a revival is not going to happen. It's very romantic and nostalgic trying to hold on to something, but I can imagine someone who owns a 4000-8000 square metre property, and gets nothing from it. I can preserve it at least photographically. I have old glass advertising slides that I picked up from various cinemas. I collect whatever I can to preserve their history.

A photographer one day sent me an email of my ticket booking office photographs and said: "The booking window is something that you don't see until it is your turn, you're always standing in a queue. And when you do, you're only looking at a little oval hole in the wall. You take your ticket with happiness, and you run because you've got a film to watch, but all these years I've never paid any attention to the aesthetic of the ticket window. Just looking at your project I realised I missed a big part of a cinema-going experience by never looking at the booking office". So, I can do an entire exhibition with just booking office windows due to all the different kinds that exist.

The main aim of this project is a book. I've been approached by about 11 publishers now. I did finally make a self-publishing plan, so I've worked out a way of getting the book ready to a point that is ready to print then I'll print about 50 copies. Since I was a cinematographer I have some connections with the movie industry, so I plan to take some to the producers that I work with regularly to a festival called Diwali. That's when producers would normally send gifts like cashew nuts, almonds, bottles of wine and cheese. I want to suggest that they send my book as a gift. Then I'll do a little publicity and create a website and do my usual Instagram posts and say: "The book is ready for pre-order". Over the last 20 years I have managed to collect about 20 books on cinemas across the world. I think people are much happier just going through the pictures and seeing images, with a little caption. The way I want to write my book is primarily through images. What I want to do is write about the endeavour that I have undertaken. How I drive myself, photograph myself, research myself. I'm a one-man

² By April 2022, Hemant reported that that number had increased to 925 theatres across 15 states of India.

crew, in two years I have checked into 175 hotels and I have travelled 32,000 kilometres!³ I have met or called 600 plus people and explained myself and my project again and again, with a knot of nerves in my stomach because I was unsure whether I would get that permission. It's tiring, it's lonely but you have a purpose, so you see it through. I want to write the book as the experience of travelling to the cinema: the Rottweiler that nearly killed me, the snake that slivered on my feet, the scorpion sitting on my camera. I got mistaken for a ghost by the village people in an old cinema, until I came out and I spoke to them, and the old people took 10 steps back. I have all these stories and I want to make it a book about being on the road looking for cinemas, and the things that happened.

MN: So, what are your plans for the future? What more can we expect from you?

HC: I think I need to recover some of my costs, to put into my next projects. I want to just sustain them like a lot of very sensible artists. I don't see myself going and asking people for funding or money. I do want to do a series of exhibitions as well. Since I have a cinema background, I was continuously fascinated by the antiquity of the projectors that I keep finding. Then very quickly I realised that if I also find an old projector operator, it's a beautiful portrait to take, so now I've got about 115 black and white portraits of old men and their projectors in their fashions from that era and these images tell emotional stories. You can see the sadness or pride on their faces, that memory of glory and I've got stories from all of them.



Figure 4. Some examples of the Projectionists' Portraits. Copyrights: Hemant Chaturvedi.

³ By April 2022, Chaturvedi had stayed in 200 hotels, travelled across 700+ towns and driven over 36,000km.

Biographical notes:

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