

Culture Central

Sankhayan Ghosh Posted online: Tue Jul 16 2013, 05:31 hrs

At the end of the national anthem, played before the beginning of a movie at the Bharatmata Cinema, the audience — sometimes seated to its full capacity of 600 — breaks into a customary chant, Bharatmata ki Jai. This is as much a cry of adulation to the iconic movie hall as to the nation, and is the title of a documentary film on this Lower Parel landmark.

Bharatmata Ki Jai, a film made as a degree project by students from the Centre for Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), is going to be screened at the National Centre for Performing Arts on July 19 as a part of Fresh Pix Series, an annual film screening series showcasing student-made films

“We wanted to tell the story of a cinema hall that for 75 years has been showing mainly Marathi films,” says Avadhoot Khanolkar, one of the members of the group. Other members of the team include Arpita Chakraborty, Shweta Radhakrishnan, Anurag Mazumdar, Amol Ranjan. What particularly interested Khanolkar and his team was the theatre’s significance in the city’s cultural fabric. Bharatmata Cinema, situated in Mumbai’s “mill-district” of Parel-Lalbaug, is a reminder of the city’s once-vibrant working class culture. It now stands as the only theatre in the city that solely screens Marathi films.

The film tells the story of the hall primarily through two characters — its owner Kapil Bhopatkar, from the current generation of the Bhopatkars, the original founders, and Baban, the movie theatre usher and “a film-buff”. They represent two ends of the class spectrum, bound by love for the movies. The film explores the place Bharatmata has in the collective consciousness of the lower-middle class Marathi demographic.

“Many said that it’s the only place which they felt was their own, and how they feel out-of-place in shopping malls, where others see them with an alien gaze,” says Khanolkar. The film, however, started out as something else. Khanolkar and his friends had set out to make their degree film on Dada Kondke, one of the iconic personalities in Marathi film history. Since research on Kondke would take them outside the city to Pune and Ratnagiri, the group found a subject in Bharatmata Cinema, which is closer home.

“We are all from small towns in different parts of the country. And we relate more to the audience culture of the small screens where people freely enjoy themselves while watching a movie, unlike multiplexes where they seem more apt to be called zombies,” says Gupte.

Among the film festivals it has been screened at are the 13th RAI International Film Festival of Ethnographic Film, Edinburgh, River to River International Film Festival, Florence, and it also won the Award for Best Script (Non-Fiction) at the 1st National Student’s Film Festival, FTII.

sankhayan.ghosh@expressindia.com