Knowledge and Attitudes towards Balu Mahendra Movies among Gen Z Students: A Cross-Sectional Survey

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Abstract

This study examines the knowledge and attitudes of students of the GenZ from the films Balu Mahendra by cross -sectional survey. Balu Mahendra, a pioneering filmmaker at Tamil cinema, was known for his realistic narrative, unique cinematography and a comprehensive depiction of social and gender questions. While his films have been critically recognized, it is little known about how the younger generations are engaged in and perceive his works. The aim of this study is to fill this gap by analysing acquaintance, perception and engagement with his films among the students of GenZ.

The structured questionnaire was managed to students on various educational environments. The survey included demographic details, familiarity with Tamil cinema, awareness of Balu Mahendra's contributions and perception of topics and social comments present in his films. Key aspects have explored how students perceive their depictions of women, socio-political themes in their films and their importance in the current cinema.

The findings reveal a diverse range of opinions. While some respondents recognized the influence of Balu Mahendra on Tamil's cinema, a significant amount was limited with his work. Some students considered his narrative impressive and relevant, especially in terms of social realism and sex representation, while others considered them obsolete compared to modern film trends. In particular, his depiction of women caused a debate, and respondents were divided between recognition for the development of nuances and criticism for the reflecting of traditional perspectives.

Another critical observation was the role of digital platforms in influencing the evaluation of the film. Many respondents have admitted that it is more inclined to the current digital content than to explore the classic cinema. However, those who watched the films Balu Mahendra acknowledged their depth and artistic merits.

This study contributes to discourse about the relevance of the classic Tamil cinema among new generations and emphasizes the need to integrate discussions about pioneering filmmakers into modern film education. The finding suggests that with a reasonable exposure through platforms for digital streaming and academic discourse, classic films such as Balu Mahendra films can continue to influence and educate younger audiences.

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Introduction

Mahendra (1939–2014) was a revolutionary filmmaker, screenwriter and cameraman whose contributions to the cinema Tamil transformed narration and visual aesthetics. He was born in Sri Lanka and was educated in India, his training at the India (FTII) film and television institute (FTII) influenced his unique film style that emphasized realism and human emotions (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999). His films often depicted everyday struggles, relationships and role of women in society, creating space for discussion about gender representation, socio-political themes and film realism (GoPal & Moorti, 2008).

Balu Mahendra is an early life and career

Balu Mahendra was born as Balanathan Benjamin Mahendran in Batticaloa, in Sri Lanka. His passion for the visual narrative led him to persecute film studies at FTII, where he was trained as a cameraman. His early experience in Ftia shaped his clear visual aesthetics, characterized by a minimalist frame, natural lighting and a deep focus on human emotions (Dissanayake, 2009). After completing his studies, he began his career as a cameraman in Malayalam cinema and worked on films like Nellu (1974) and Rajan Paranja Kadha (1978), which brought him recognition for his technical brilliance (Pillai, 2015).

Transition to filming

Balu Mahendra debuted with the director with Kokila (1977), the film Kannada, who won the National Film Award for the best cinematography. His transition from the cameraman to the director was marked by a profound commitment to realism, as seen in his subsequent Tamil films, including Azhiyadha Kolangal (1979) and Modi (1980). These films were questioned by conventional narrative styles of Tamil film, focusing on narration and psychological depth (Rangan, 2014).

The evolution of Tamil's cinema and the influence of Balu Mahendra

Tamil cinema has a rich history of narration that reflects cultural, political and social shifts. The first Tamil films were rooted in mythology and theater drama, but with the emergence of filmmakers such as Bharathira, K. Balachander and Balu Mahendra, the industry witnessed a shift towards realism and experimental narrative (Srinivas, 2013). Balu Mahendra was a key figure in this transformation and mixed art cinematography with emotionally charged stories. His emphasis on the visual narration and the depth of the figure distinguished his films from the conventional commercial cinema (Pandian, 2010).

Realism in Balu Mahendra movies

The defining characteristic of Balu Mahendra is his commitment to realism. He tried to capture authentic human experience with minimalist narrative and naturalistic cinematography (ARUN, 2017), influenced by European and parallel movements of Indian film (ARUN, 2017). Films such as Azhiyadha Kolangal (1979), Moondram Pirai (1982) and Veedu (1988) are the main examples of his ability to create deeply absorbing stories that focus on human emotions, social restrictions and psychological struggles (Chakravarthy, 2020).

Representation of women in the Balu Mahendra cinema

The depiction of the female characters of the Balu Mahendra was the subject of academic discussion. While some critics claim that his films show strong, multidimensional women who find patriarchal structures, others suggest that his narrative often focuses on the suffering and objectification of women (Sundar, 2015). For example, Moondram Pirai, who tells the story of a man who cares for a woman suffering from amnesia, was interpreted as a poignant story of unconditional love and as a problematic depiction of male dominance over a vulnerable protagonist (Rajagopal, 2021).

Digital media and exposure gene from classic cinema

The consumer patterns of students of Gen Z differ significantly from previous generations due to the

prevalence of digital streaming and social media platforms (Jenkins, 2019). With a mainstream audience preferring rapidly developing, visually stimulating content, classic filmmakers such as Balu Mahendra Risk, they were overshadowed by contemporary trends. However, digital platforms also provide opportunities for rediscovery and critical discourse about previous film work (Mukherjee, 2022). The study examines whether students actively seek genes and engage in Balu Mahendra films or perceive them as outdate relics of the past era.

Literature Review

Review of literature examines existing research on Balu Mahendra's contributions to the cinema Tamil, realism in Indian films, sex representation and involvement of gene from classical films.

Balu Mahendra Film

Balu Mahendra is considered a visionary who redefined Tamil's cinema through his unique narrative and cinematography. Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1999) discuss how his training FTII influenced his approach to film work and mixed realism with poetic visual elements. His films, such as Moondram Pirai (1982) and veedu (1988), are often cited as examples of cinemas driven by car in Tamil Nadu (Gopal & Moorti, 2008).

Realism in the Indian and Tamil cinema

The influence of realism in the Indian cinema can be traced to the works of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Shyam Benegal (Chakravarthy, 2020). Balu Mahendry's film creation is in line with this tradition and uses minimalist narrative and naturalistic performance to display everyday fighting (ARUN, 2017). Scholars say his films span the gap between commercial and parallel cinema, making realism more accessible to the mainstream audience (Srinivas, 2013).

Gender Representation in Balu Mahendra

The display of women in Balu Mahendra was the subject of academic discourse. While some scholars appreciate his nuances depiction of female characters, others criticize the tendency to emphasize the suffering of women (Sundar, 2015). Rajagopal (2021) claims that films such as Moondram Pirai and Julie Ganapathi (2003) reflect empathy and problematic dynamics of strength in the relationships of men and women.

Genz and engagement with classic films

Younger viewers deal with films differently because of the rise of digital streaming platforms. Jenkins (2019) emphasizes how the gene prefers rapidly developing, visually stimulating content, often overlooking a slow narration of character. Mukherjee (2022) suggests that if they do not integrate into educational curriculum or promoted through streaming services, classic filmmakers such as Balu Mahendra can lose the meaning between newer generations.

Research Methodology

Research proposal

This study uses a design of a cross -sectional survey to assess the knowledge and attitudes of students of GEN from the films Balu Mahendra. Research is governed by a quantitative approach using structured questionnaires to collect data from a diverse student population. A cross -sectional design has been selected because it allows effective analysis of generational perspectives in a certain time frame (Creswell, 2014).

The sample technique and sampling

The study was conducted with a sample size of 400 students Gen Z (aged 18-25 years) from various educational institutions. The sample was selected by stratified random sampling to ensure representation at various academic backgrounds, including art, science, engineering and media studies.

Criteria for inclusion

- Students aged 18–25 (Demographic Gen Z).
- Individuals who have at least a basic exhibition to Tamil's cinema.
- Students from universities and universities related to film, media or humanities.

Criteria for exclusion

- Individuals above or below the target age group.
- Students without exposition Tamil films.
- Professionals or non-states.

Method of data collection

The structured questionnaire has been designed and distributed through Google and Offline forms. The questionnaire was divided into four key parts:

Demography

Age, gender, level of education and media consumption.

Awareness of film

Knowing Tamil Cinema and Knowledge of Balu Mahendra.

Perception and attitudes

Opinions on narration, cinematography, gender representation and the importance of his films.

The impact of digital media

The role of streaming platforms and social media in forming a film award.

Data analysis

The collected data was analyzed using SPSS software and using descriptive statistics to identify distribution.

The following technique has been used

Descriptive statistics

Frequency distribution and percentage to understand the distribution.

Ethical considerations

The participation was voluntary and respondents provided informed consent.

Approval was obtained before conducting the survey.

Results And Discussion

The results of the cross-sectional survey provide insights into Gen Z students' awareness, viewing patterns, and attitudes toward Balu Mahendra's films. Quantitative analysis of the survey responses highlights variations in familiarity with Tamil cinema, perceptions of realism and socio-political themes, and opinions on gender representation. These findings are discussed in relation to existing literature to understand generational shifts in film reception.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a critical insight into the perception of the films Balu Mahendra between the audience Gen Z, especially in terms of their socio-political significance, gender representation and film realism. Demographic division in Table 1 shows a balanced ratio of gender, most respondents from urban areas and a high percentage of postgraduate and university students and its graphical representation is shown in Figure 1. This is in line with previous studies that indicate that the urban, educated audience is more likely to be critically involved in the cinema and its thematic elements (Gopalan, 2019; Pandian, 2015).

Knowledge of Balu Mahendra and Tamil cinemas

Table 2 and Figure 2 shows that a significant proportion of respondents (39.8%) have a slight knowledge of Tamil cinema, while only 29.3% showed a high level of acquaintance. The awareness of Balu Mahendra as a cameraman is almost evenly distributed (49.8% is aware of 50.3% unconscious). This suggests that while his contributions to the Tamil cinema are recognized among cinence, his legacy may not be so well known to the younger audience, potentially because of the changing nature of Tamil cinema and the dominance of contemporary filmmakers (Rangan, 2021).

In addition, in the analysis of the number of Balu Mahendra films, 26.8% of respondents said they had never seen his work, while only 24% watched three or more films. This point to the generation gap in the exhibition, probably because of changes in the distribution of movies and streaming preferences (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999). The trend is in

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–21	133	33.3
	22–25	135	33.8
	26–30	132	33.0
	Total	400	100.0
Gender	Male	198	49.5
	Female	202	50.5
	Total	400	100.0
Location	Urban	261	65.3
	Semi-Urban	139	34.8
	Total	400	100.0
Education Level	Postgraduate	99	24.8
	Graduate	86	21.5
	Undergraduate	112	28.0
	Other	103	25.8
	Total	400	100.0

Table 2: Awareness of film among Respondents

Awareness of film	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
Familiarity with Tamil Cinema	Low	124	31.0
	Moderate	159	39.8
	High	117	29.3
	Total	400	100.0
Known Balu Mahendra	Yes	204	51.0
	No	196	49.0
	Total	400	100.0
Aware Balu Mahendra as Cinematographer	Yes	199	49.8
	No	201	50.3
	Total	400	100.0
Number of Balu Mahendra Films Watched	None	107	26.8
	1 Film	91	22.8
	2 Films	106	26.5
	3 or more Films	96	24.0
	Total	400	100.0
Familiarity with Balu Mahendra's Movies	Not Familiar	94	23.5
	Slightly Familiar	81	20.3
	Moderately Familiar	108	27.0
	Very Familiar	117	29.3
	Total	400	100.0

Table 3: Survey Results on Gen Z Attitudes toward Balu Mahendra's Films

Category	Response	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Movies Reflect Socio-Political Issues	Strongly Disagree	132	33.0
	Disagree	112	28.0
	Agree	156	39.0
	Total	400	100.0
Prominent Issues in Movies	Low	66	16.5
	Moderate	51	12.8
	Somewhat High	61	15.3
	High	82	20.5
	Very High	72	18.0
	Extremely High	68	17.0
	Total	400	100.0
Socially Sensible Portrayal	Strongly Disagree	134	33.5
	Neutral	130	32.5
	Agree	136	34.0
	Total	400	100.0
Women Portrayed with Dignity	Strongly Disagree	119	29.8
	Neutral	128	32.0
	Agree	153	38.3
	Total	400	100.0
Likelihood to Recommend	Very Unlikely	102	25.5
	Unlikely	92	23.0
	Likely	108	27.0
	Very Likely	98	24.5
	Total	400	100.0

line with previous studies on the involvement of the audience with the classic Tamil cinema, which indicates a decline in viewers between younger generations, unless films are actively promoted through digital platforms (Srinivas, 2013).

The perception of socio-political problems and realism in the films Balu Mahendra

The key aspect of this study was the evaluation of how the viewer's gene perceive socio-political themes in the films Balu Mahendra. Table 3 shows that while 39%of respondents agreed that his films reflect socio-political problems, a significant part either disagreed (28%) or strongly disagreed (33%).

This suggests divergence in the interpretation of the audience, which is in line with the research of generational differences at the film reception (Sundaram, 2017).

Mixed reactions can stem from the fineness of Mahendry's socio-political commentary. Unlike contemporary Tamil filmmakers who accept explicit political sending of messages, the narration of Balu Mahendra often puts social criticism into the personal and home environment (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004). This nuance approach may not always be immediately recognized by younger viewers who are accustomed to apparently political stories.

In addition, in assessing the significance of problems in films, the reactions were widely
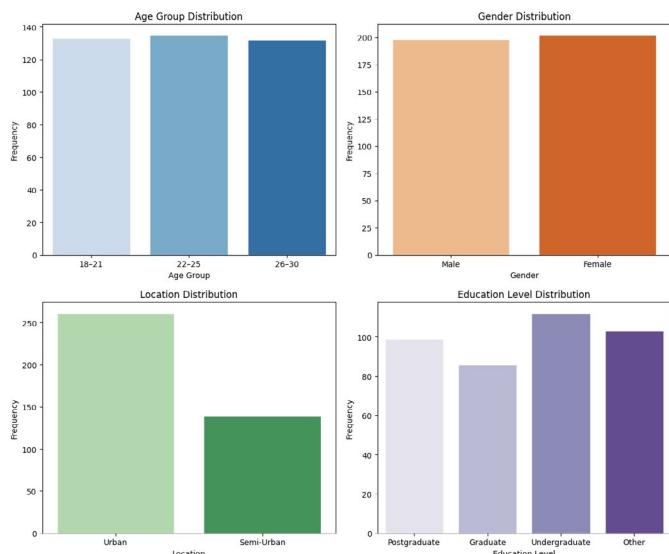
Figure 1: Graphical representation of Table 1

distributed throughout the spectrum, with only 20.5% rated as "high" and 17% as "extremely high". This strengthens the idea that Mahendry's films focus more on realism and human emotions rather than explicit activism, a contrast to a more direct political narrative found in filmmakers such as PA. Ranjith or Vetimaaran (Ananthakrishnan, 2020).

Representation of women and social sensitivity

One of the most discussed aspects of Mahendra's
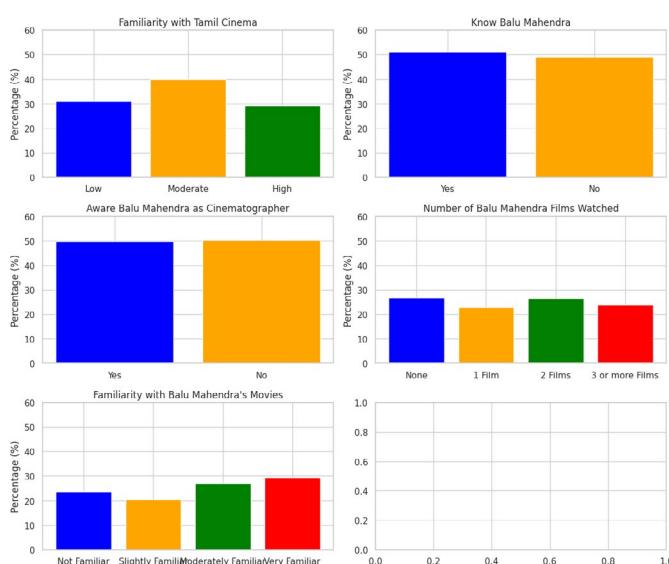
Figure 2: Graphical representation of Table 2

work is his depiction of female characters. The results of the survey show that 38.3% of respondents agree that women are depicted in their films with dignity, while 32% remained neutral and 29.8% disagreed. This response indicates a divided perspective, probably affected by the evolving feminist discourse at Tamil's cinema.

The scholars argue that while Mahendry's female characters were often central to his narratives, they were also exposed to emotional and social restrictions reflecting their times (KRISHNAN, 2016). Some critics consider his films progressive as depicting the internal struggles of women, while others say that his narrative, albeit realistic, occasionally strengthens traditional gender roles (Gopalan, 2019). Neutral reactions (32.5%) concerning socially sensible depictions further support this debate.

The involvement and probability of the audience to recommend

The study also evaluated the enthusiasm of the audience for Mahendra films in terms of recommendations. Table 3 and Figure 3 shows that 27% of respondents probably recommended its films, while 24.5% were very likely, indicating a slight connection. Combined 48.5% of respondents, however, indicated unwillingness (unlikely or very unlikely).

This hesitation could spring from generational shifts in the preferences of narration. Research suggests that the audience prefers the GEN Z Give by rapid narration and visually dynamic cinematography, which contrasts with Mahendra with a slow contemplative style (Chakravarthy, 2022). Moreover, the emphasis of his films on everyday realism than a spectacle can cause it less attractive to the audience accustomed to the main commercial cinema (Dwyer, 2019).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on a study on the perception of Balu Mahendra GenZ, the following recommendations are designed to increase the awareness, recognition and engagement with its film heritage (Figure 3):
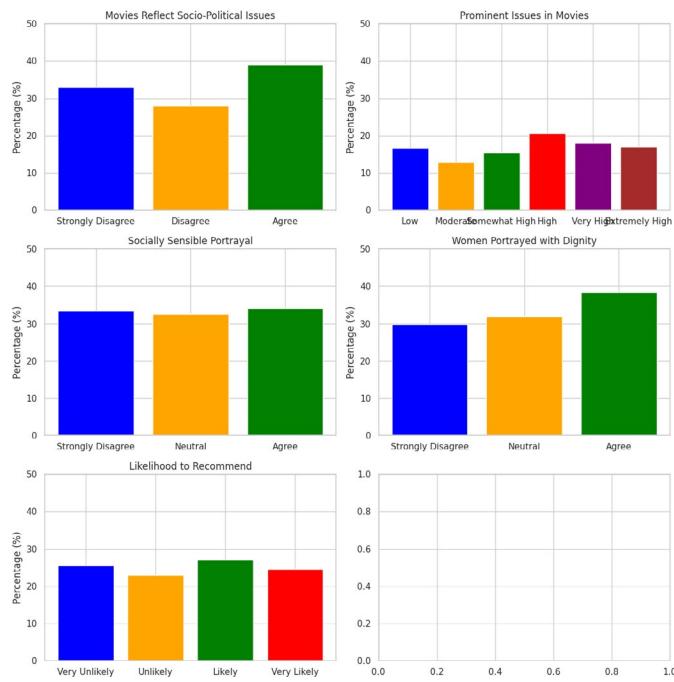
Figure 3: Graphical representation of Table 3

Raising awareness through digital platforms

- Due to the slight knowledge of Tamil cinema and limited exposures to Balu Mahendra, digital platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and YouTube can be used to re -introduce their works to the younger audience.
- Creating curatorial lists of songs, special projections or exclusive content on OTT platforms that emphasize the contributions of Mahendra could increase the wiring.
- Campaigns of social media, cooperation with influenced and academic film discussions could help bridge the gap in the field of knowledge between the Gen's audience.

Incorporating the work of Balu Mahendra in Film Studies

- Universities and film schools should include Balu Mahendra films as part of their curriculum in Indian cinema courses, cinematography and narration techniques.
- Workshops and guest lectures of film scientists or experts in the field discussing its style, themes and technical innovations could provide a deeper understanding.

- The management of the film retrospective and the panel discussion in academic institutions can support the critical involvement of students.

Association of generation preferences in a film award

- Since GenZ audiences prefer visually dynamic and fast-paced narratives, interactive content such as short-form video analyses (e.g., Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts) on his cinematographic style and thematic depth could be an effective way to engage them.
- Developing VR/AI-enhanced film experiences that allow viewers to explore Mahendra's signature cinematography techniques could attract younger audiences interested in technology-driven storytelling.

Support for gender discourse and realism in Tamil cinema

- The study emphasizes mixed perceptions concerning Mahendry's depiction of women. The organization of discussions of feminist films, comparative analyses with current directors and debates on the evolving gender representation
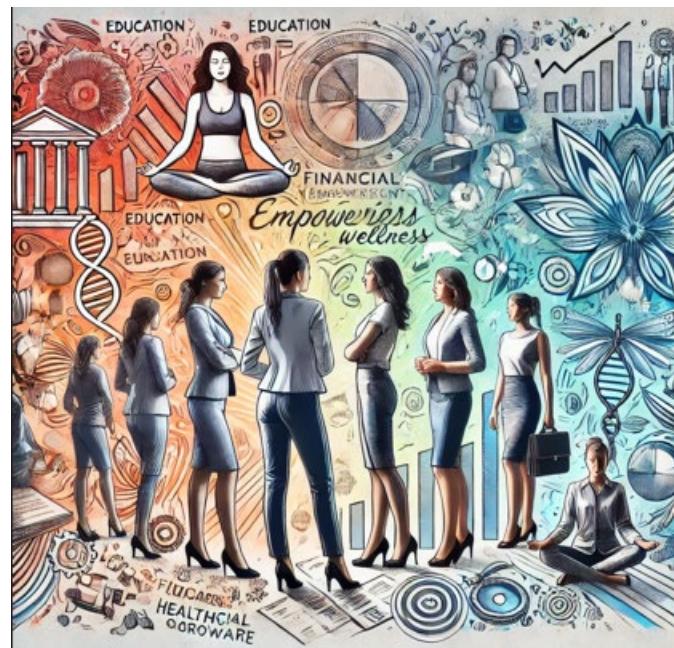
Figure 4: Gen Z Recommendation Intent toward Balu Mahendra's Films

at Tamil cinema could provide more nuanced understanding.

- Encouraging modern filmmakers to inspire the inspiration from realistic techniques of Mahendra's narratives and adapt them to the current socio -cultural contexts, can help maintain its influence in the Tamil cinema.

Performing further research of the reception of the audience

- A depth qualitative study involving discussions about a focus group or ethnographic research could provide an insight into why certain audience segments appreciate the work of Mahendra, while others remain indifferent.
- A comparative study on how classic Tamil filmmakers like K. Balachander, Bharathira and Balu Mahendra are perceived by different generations, could help understand the development of the reception of Tamil's film over time.

Organization of Film Festivals and Renewal Projects

- Hosting Tamil's classic film festivals representing renewed versions of Mahendra films can provide renewed visibility.
- Government and private organizations could invest in the digital restoration of their films to preserve and promote them among the current audiences.
- Cooperation with international film archives and universities could create a global exhibition for Mahendry's contributions to realism in the cinema.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable knowledge of the consciousness, perception and acceptance of Balu Mahendra Gen. Demographic data emphasizes that the audience is predominantly young, urban and educated, but their knowledge of Mahendry's work remains limited. The finding suggests that while a significant proportion of respondents recognize Balu Mahendra as a filmmaker, their involvement in his films is relatively low, suggesting a generation

gap in the film's award.

Analysis of Genz attitudes reveals mixed reactions. While some viewers recognize socio -political depth and realism in their stories, others remain neutral or critical of a certain display, especially when it comes to sex representation. This suggests the need for a more nuanant approach to understanding his film contributions in contemporary perspectives.

Strategic initiatives such as digital promotion, academic integration, gender discourse and film renewal efforts are necessary to address these challenges. The use of modern platforms, educational framework and programs for films on the community can be revived for younger generations.

Finally, this research emphasizes the importance of maintaining the rich legacy of Tamil Cinema and adapts its techniques to the story of developing audience preferences. Future studies may further explore the intergenerational comparison, detailed qualitative knowledge and the wider impact of realism in the Indian cinema. The bridging of the abyss among classical filmmakers and modern audiences not only honors their contributions, but also ensures their lasting importance in the ever -developing film environment.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

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