

THE LEDE



Making the Cut

How a septuagenarian American man keeps classic Indian films alive / **Film**

/ **SHUBHRA DIXIT**

A YouTube channel with almost eighty thousand subscribers, tommydan55, is particularly popular among connoisseurs of Indian films. Thomas Daniel, a 74-year-old living in Hawaii, owns it, along with a couple of other channels, all dedicated to classic cinema of the Indian subcontinent. There are mostly Hindi and Urdu films from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s on his channel, but Bengali films have recently appeared as well. Daniel does not speak any of these languages. He told me he has south-Indian films too, but the subtitles are so poor that there is nothing he can do with them. “Apparently, a working understanding of English isn’t a requirement before becoming a subtitler for the Indian media companies,” he wrote in an email.

Daniel, who developed an interest in film restoration while approaching retirement as a commercial fisherman, procures these films from varied sources and restores them to bring them as close as possible to their original print. “Tommydan55, perhaps simply as a cinephile, has contributed significantly to Indian film studies, building an archive that is in many ways more valuable and certainly more accessible

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than the few actual repositories of this cinema history,” Corey Creekmur, the director of the University of Iowa’s Institute for Cinema and Culture, told me.

Daniel has no connection with India beyond two visits in his youth, in the 1970s. About fifteen years ago, he watched Guru Dutt’s 1962 classic, *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*, and he was hooked. “I didn’t know who anyone was,” he told me. “It was Meena Kumari all the way. She’s a force of nature. I only later learned about Guru Dutt.” The film, he said, “has one of my top three favourite dances, the one with Minoo Mumtaz together with the astonishing cinematography by VK Murthy. I didn’t know who he was either, but one can’t help but be very impressed by his use of light and dark, and keeping the support dancers in the shadows much of the time.” He added, “The production values are top notch, the story is coherent (not always true for Indian films). And it’s a heavy drama, which I like.”

Another reason for choosing these films was their relatively shorter period under copyright—about sixty years from publishing for India, and fifty years for Pakistan. “Copyright laws for both countries are understandable and clear,” Daniel said. “US copyright law is a swamp and copyright length is long.”

Daniel makes a marked improvement in the quality of these films. “Classic Indian films on DVD, VCD or tape are of really atrocious quality, among the very worst in the world,” he told me. Creekmur said that the films “are not always pristine, due to the status of available surviving copies, but are consistently the highest quality available, often exceeding what was previously available on DVD.” He pointed out that Daniel had made

available for the first time a widescreen version of Dutt’s *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, a 1959 film that was “long reported lost, and never previously available for home viewing.”

Creekmur commended the range of films on tommydan55, many of which were never easily available before and often never subtitled. This includes the 1936 Indo-German production *Achhut Kanya*, one of the first films to use playback singing. Other films from that year on the channel include *Amar Jyoti*, the first Indian film to play at the Venice Film Festival, Pramathesh Barua’s *Devdas*, starring KL Saigal and Jamuna Barua, and Homi Wadia’s *Miss Frontier Mail*, featuring Mary Ann Evans, better known as Fearless Nadia.

Daniel relies on friends and a network of film lovers to provide him with copies of these classics. He often credits his source for a film in the description. He received a few VHS tapes from a friend in Connecticut. One of his other sources in the United States had a VHS collection as well. “He passed away. His wife sent the whole collection to my friend Surjit Singh, a retired scientist in the US who’s very active in old Indian music circles,” Daniel said. “I told him what I wanted and he sent them to me.”

The copies he works off come in many forms, including DVDs, video CDs, VHS tapes and collections made by film enthusiasts. “VHS tapes are virtually impossible to come by,” Daniel told me, adding that they degrade each year. “Many films never made it to DVD or even VCD, but are on VHS tapes, so there’s a lot out there that might never see the light of day on platforms like YouTube.” Using free software, such as Avisynth and Audacity—for video and sound editing, respectively—Daniel works on each film for forty hours or more.

Besides tommydan55, his two other YouTube channels are tommydan333, where

he uploads songs of the restored films, and tommydan22, which is dedicated to Edwina, an Anglo-Indian background dancer in Hindi films from 1958 to 1967.

Daniel hates logos with a passion. Hence, there are none on the films he restores, even though this means the films can be downloaded from his channel and uploaded onto others—a prob-

lem he faces frequently. These channels often distort the aspect ratio, which is another annoyance for him. As a result, he has started putting a logo that runs for one second to identify these thefts.

In his emails to me, Daniel complained of often being served copyright notices on YouTube by Indian companies, claiming ownership over

BELOW: tommydan55, a YouTube channel with almost eighty thousand subscribers, mostly has Hindi and Urdu films from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

his videos. YouTube does not require the claimant to submit proof of ownership. Besides film restoration, Daniels spends his time dealing with these issues. He has recently started uploading Bengali films. Since then, Daniel said, he has received over seventy copyright claims from a company called Angel Digital. In January 2022, he finished working on *Silpi*, a 1956 Bengali film starring Suchitra Sen and Uttam Kumar. “I’m a sucker for those Bengali romantic films with that pair,” he told me. But Daniel said he cannot upload it because of the many copyright claims against his channel. He has to wait for them to time out.

There are other ways to access archives, such as through the National Film Archive of India, but a visit is essential, unlike the remote ease the internet offers. Websites like Kargarga offer quality prints of rare films but can only be joined by invitation. Indiacine.ma, a project undertaken by academics—much more comprehensive and better catalogued—also has digitised versions of Indian films. But tommydan55 appears to offer an incomparable combination of access and reach, by virtue of being on YouTube, and quality. “Critical discussion of—as well as popular enjoyment of—earlier Indian cinema has been hampered by limited access to a small body of films, ironically from the world’s largest cinema,” Creekmur said. “Tommydan55 is a surprising but now invaluable source for access to older Indian cinema.” ■

