Cantonment to Silicon Valley: Cinematic Traces of Colonial Bangalore in Indian and British Films

Vasantha S.

Associate Professor, Department of English, Government First Grade College, Kadugodi, Bangalore.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17953005

ABSTRACT:

The transformation of Bangalore from a native town (Pete) to a Cantonment and eventually to a cosmopolitan city is truly remarkable. At each stage of this evolution, the city has assumed new forms, identities, and energies across economic, political, social, and cultural spheres. This dynamic progression is vividly captured in cinema, which provides visual documentation of Bangalore's dramatic development. As a powerful medium of mass communication, cinema conveys messages to audiences in compelling ways. Film content often reflects social practices and their impact on people, showcasing diverse facets of society that offer valuable insights into colonial residues and postcolonial reforms. Both disparities and delusions are highlighted through the lenses of colonial and postcolonial perspectives.

KEYWORDS:

Cantonment, colonial cinema, postcolonial films, spatial representation.

Introduction:

Bangalore, once known as Pete, has grown into one of the nation's most influential cities. Celebrated for its moderate climate, the city underwent a significant transformation during the colonial period. It was one of the key centres selected for development under the rule of the Mysore Wodeyars. Many of Bangalore's "firsts" became possible through advancements in science and technology, as well as developments in economic, political, social, and cultural spheres.

Under British rule, Bangalore was divided into two distinct zones:

the native population and the British or Anglo–Indian community. The creation of the Cantonment further reinforced this segregation of people and cultures. The Cantonment, established by and largely for the British troops, differed in every respect from the traditional native Pete. Its cultural life held an undeniable attraction for the local populace. This fascination with new cultural practices and their social impact is effectively captured in both Indian and British films.

Cinema produced by the British and Indians thus serves as a valuable cultural archive, reflecting colonial modernity, the city's geographic transformation, and postcolonial responses to these changes. The shaping of "cinematic Bangalore" is documented in early British newsreels, travelogues, and post–independence films, which reveal traces of colonial modernity in the city's architecture, landscape, and cultural life. By analysing selected films from the 1920s to 2000, this paper explores how visual media captures the transformation of the Cantonment from a military enclave into a modern cityscape imbued with hybrid cultural meanings. The cinematic development of the city from colonial Cantonment to postcolonial metropolis is therefore examined through films that preserve historical consciousness. Cinema not only functions as an archive that records colonial power but also actively participates in decolonising colonial memories. The National Film Archive of India (NFAI) in Pune remains the country's most comprehensive repository of films to study.

Bangalore was under the dual administrative control of the British and the Mysore Wodeyars. However, when administrative authority shifted from the Wodeyars to the British, the city was transformed into a garrison town. The colonial residences and military establishments that emerged during this period significantly altered Bangalore's urban landscape. While the traditional native population struggled to preserve their heritage in one part of the city, the British simultaneously worked to assert and consolidate their own cultural identity. The colonial model of urbanisation, rooted in European modernity, divided Bangalore into two distinct and contrasting entities: the traditional style of Pete and Cantonment Town. This segregation extended not only to physical space but also to people and culture.

Despite the divide, a mutual attraction persisted between the two communities. Europeans were drawn to certain Indian practices, while

native Bangaloreans attempted to imitate Western customs, such as the use of cutlery, English language proficiency, formal education, and European styles of dress. The cinema of the 1930s vividly captures this dualistic interplay of space and culture.

The Cantonment functioned as a representative space of imperial order and discipline in colonial regions, especially in Bangalore. Its Parade Grounds, spacious bungalows, and broad roads stood in stark contrast to the bustling markets, narrow streets, and densely packed shops of the Pete. This stark spatial difference alienated native residents, who viewed the Cantonment as a European world within their own land, often generating feelings of intimidation and inferiority. Conversely, residents of the Cantonment harboured prejudices toward the Pete, perceiving it as a crowded and chaotic area where they might be pickpocketed or harassed.

Cinema became part of Bangalore's modernisation process in the 1930s, initially catering primarily to the Anglo–Indian audience. Early films were screened at the Empire Theatre and the Globe Theatre in the Cantonment. The introduction of electricity further supported this emerging cinematic culture. English newsreels and silent English films, frequently screened in these venues, reinforced the European character of the Cantonment. Gradually, this cinematic influence extended to other parts of Bangalore, including the Pete, where Indian–made and Indian–themed films were shown in non–Cantonment regions in Kannada.

The emergence of European culture within a native landscape and its influence on local communities, along with their acceptance, resistance, and reinterpretation of it, is decoded in postcolonial Indian cinema. Films such as Bangalore Mail (1968) and Galige (1994) reflect the transformation of the colonial city and depict the sense of displacement experienced in postcolonial urban spaces.

In early British newsreels and travel films, Bangalore appears as a sanitised imperial space marked by orderliness and control. These films highlight military drills on parade grounds, imposing public buildings, and the abundant resources of imperial culture. However, the conspicuous absence of native inhabitants points to practices reminiscent of apartheid and reveals the visual narrative of an occupied land. The Cantonment is portrayed as an aspirational space, a realm to be admired but one that remains inaccessible to the native population.

The disparity between cinematic representations and lived reality encouraged postcolonial filmmakers to reclaim Bangalore as a site of memory and identity. Bangalore Mail, directed by L. S. Narayana, reflects this shift. Set against the backdrop of the Bangalore Railway Station and the cosmopolitan quarters of the Cantonment, the film portrays how cultural and moral practices were increasingly shaped by mobility, crime, and urbanisation. It also reverses the role traditionally attributed to the Cantonment in the lives of natives. The film deconstructs the idealised image of British–built spaces as orderly and disciplined by revealing how illicit activities operate behind this façade. Wide cityscape shots, crowded railway platforms, and English signboards highlight the colonial infrastructure and evoke memories of its lingering presence.

Picture: South Parade Road

The photograph of South Parade Road, or the present M. G. Road served as the central artery of the Cantonment. Its streets were symmetrically aligned and designed in a distinctly European style. The shops and tree–lined avenues evoke the discipline and order characteristic of colonial urban planning, often described in travelogues of the period as the "garden garrison" of the Raj.

In Bangalore Mail, this spatial representation blends colonial orderliness with its gradual transformation into a native urban environment. In the film's opening sequence, the railway station, adjoining arterial roads, vehicles, and pedestrians collectively convey the spatial discipline of the city, contrasting sharply with native space. While the colonial frame emphasised order and symmetry, postcolonial films foregrounded disorder, conflict, and spatial mobility. Thus, cinema becomes a lens through which both colonial control and postcolonial urban reality are simultaneously reflected.

2. Cantonment landscape:

The Cantonment landscape is often perceived as an exclusionary and surveillance–driven space. Its parade grounds, church spires, and regimented bungalows reveal a distinct visual order and discipline. The very layout of the city reflects narratives of control and authority: wide streets designed for military parades, bungalows spaced to maintain racial distance, and clubhouses and theatres functioning as spaces of segregation. In Bangalore Mail, the protagonist's movement through railway offices and police stations highlights the lingering presence of this rigid colonial spatial order. The film captures the Cantonment as a space marked simultaneously by order, surveillance, morality, and discipline, oscillating between colonial fascination and decolonial critique. It reveals both an admiration for the perceived orderliness of colonial infrastructure and a critique of the oppressive systems underlying it.

Galige, another film that explores colonial traces from a postcolonial perspective, was produced in 1994 but is set in the 1940s during the period of British rule. It examines themes of political anxiety, modernity, and urban transition.

As the title itself suggests, time plays a crucial role, functioning

as an instrument and mechanism of power. Colonial clock time replaced traditional, natural timekeeping practices, disrupting the everyday rhythms of native life. Agricultural cycles, temple schedules, and community–based notions of time all underwent significant transformation. Deadlines, institutional schedules, and bureaucratic rigidity–manifested through school timings, office hours, and legal deadlines–created anxiety and pressure for ordinary people who were compelled to adapt. These remnants of colonial systems of measurement, timeliness, and documentation continue to shape the everyday experiences of common people even in the post–independence period.

The structural changes introduced in the town during postcolonial times similarly recall the colonial era and its enduring influence. Newly constructed schools, municipal offices, and public buildings evoke memories of British rule, which systematically segregated people and spaces within a unified administrative framework. In contrast to the rigid orderliness of the colonial period, postcolonial urban expansion is often marked by visible chaos and overcrowding.

The education system is another site of contention. The continued reliance on a bureaucratic, literacy–based English and science–oriented curriculum perpetuated aspects of the colonial educational framework. Deference to this system helped produce a skilled administrative class that came to be associated with middle–class respectability.

In Anglo–Indian cinema, the Cantonment is often depicted through the perspective of the British. Films such as The Planter's Wife (1952) and The Rains Came (1939), though not directly set in Bangalore, explicitly portray the spatial imagination of the Cantonment and the native town. In contrast, Indian cinema frequently positions Anglo–Indian characters in liminal spaces–railway colonies, military clubs, and colonial quarters. These portrayals unintentionally evoke nostalgia for colonial rule and highlight the blending of modernity with indigenous life.

In contemporary times, Bangalore presents a new urban identity that carries remnants of colonialism while simultaneously striving to decolonise its imperial past. The city's colonial grids and bungalows now serve as backdrops to new forms of alienation, and the visual architecture of empire continues to shape postcolonial sensibilities. Yet the Cantonment persists as both a colonial memory and a site of ongoing decolonisation.

References:

1. Bangalore Mail. Directed by L. S. Narayana, performances by Rajkumar and Narasimharaju, Chitravani, 1968.
2. Galige. Directed by M. S. Sathyu, performances by Avinash and Pavitra Lokesh, National Film Development Corporation of India, 1994.
3. The Planter's Wife. Directed by Ken Annakin, Rank Organisation, 1952.
4. The Rains Came. Directed by Clarence Brown, 20th Century Fox, 1939.
5. Rajadhyaksha, Ashish, and Paul Willemen. Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema. New Revised ed., Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 1999.
6. Srinivas, Lakshmi. House Full: Indian Cinema and the Active Audience. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
7. Sawhney, Rashmi Devi. "'Uncontained' Archives of Cinema. " Exploring Past Images in a Digital Age: Reinventing the Archive, 2023, pp. 215–235.
8. "Archival Documentary Reveals How the British Saw India – and How Indians Returned the Gaze. " Scroll.in,
9. https://scroll.in/reel/871575/archival-documentary-reveals-how-the-british-saw-india-and-how-indians-returned-the-gaze?utm_source=chatgpt.com
10. "Window to Past: Rare Films from Colonial India Digitised in UK. " Hindustan Times,
11. https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/window-to-past-rare-films-from-colonial-india-digitised-in-uk/story-ZUtCEmNJqSbtTIxEQvBM4J.html.

Funding:

This study was not funded by any grant.

Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.