

Once I Was A Banyan Deer

Shilpa Ranade

Histories have chronicles to tell and lessons to teach. Our Animation history too, although not a long one, has recorded important milestones that cannot be ignored and must be examined to understand where we are at in the world of animation.

The post independence scenario saw the implementation of many socialist policies which were meant to trigger the change that our leadership envisaged for our country to cross the threshold from bondage to freedom. This was a time of great promise and potential, a time to address the future and look to making a leap and taking our teeming population heaving along too.

Our populace, although united in freedom, was divided by language, caste and creed across a huge landmass. For the change to be effective every nook and individual had to be reached. The challenge was huge. Every resource had to be tapped.

Animation was seen as a medium of great potential, which could reach out without the baggage of language, it could be a vehicle of change that could tackle issues of gravity; population control, voting rights, women's empowerment, cleanliness, literacy, education, child rights, the list was endless.

To help make the change the power of animation could not be ignored. Although the possibilities of the medium were known, local practice was negligible. We had to look to the West for expertise, experience and training.

Help by way of a UN grant funded the establishment of The Cartoon Film Unit, much on the lines of state funded animation boards the world over. Equipment was imported but animators and technicians had to be trained. Expertise in this area came from America in the form of Clair Weeks, the quintessential American and Disney animator, with years of experience behind him. A group of young enthusiastic people were roped in, among these were Ram Mohan, Samant, Gokhale and Bhimsain.

The first film that was made by animators trained by Clair weeks was 'The Banyan Deer'. This was a Buddhist Jataka tale. The Jatakas were popular stories that made the teachings of the Buddha more accessible to the



common man. Originally these stories were told by the Buddha to his followers and referred to his many avatars before the attainment of Buddhahood.

The story was chosen and it was decided that since this was a Buddhist tale the visual inspiration should also have roots in the faith. There could be no more appropriate inspiration than the grand cave paintings at Ajanta. These are intricate and amazingly beautiful pictorial representations of the life of the Buddha and all the Jatakas. These fabulous murals are resplendent narratives that transport the viewer from cave to cave following the detailed stories where the images hanging on the wall surfaces telescope from one story to the next.

'The Banyan Deer' the Buddha wears the avatar of a noble deer. The paintings at Ajanta have among the human and bodhisattva representations, beautiful and peculiar animal figures. It was decided to use these to model the Banyan Deer.



Clair Weeks coming from the Disney tradition, had brought with him material from previous Disney films, to instruct the animators he was training. He had with him the model sheets from the well known film Bambi.

The protagonist of the film was a deer, this seemed like an appropriate point to help connect the newly minted animators to the subject in their own film. The model sheets from Bambi were used to instruct them in the area of character design. The rules of classical animation were being imparted to the animators, the examples came from Bambi.

The story was Buddhist and the pictorial inspiration was that of Ajanta. These cues were certainly at odds, both diametrically opposite with no meeting point. The animators were at a loss as to how they could adapt the imagery of Ajanta to the rules of classical animation. To quote Ram Mohan, "The Banyan Deer was supposed to be the representation of the Bodhisattva and instead ended up being the avatar of Bambi." It is in this statement that the bane of Indian Animation lies.



Was this the proverbial lost opportunity? Did this turning point seal the fate of Indian Animation. Were we doomed to measure our work by the American yardstick, and uncomfortably wear shoes that never fitted, forcing ourselves to represent and animate in a way that was never natural to our way of thinking?

Quite possibly this was the point in our animation journey that we lost our way.

Banyan Deer

Direction: Ahmed Lateef, Shanti Varma and G. H. Saraiya

Production: Films Division 1959, 10 min, colour

Storyboard: G. D. Gokhale

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