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Bright Lights and Shadows: Histories and Politics of Labour and Law in the Indian film Industry

Cinema as an industrial form has always depended on an array of labours, but a labour history of cinema remains, with a few exceptions, curiously absent from film studies. The hyper visible lives of actors and stars and the excess of publicity accorded to the is only matched by the almost total invisibility of labourers involved in the making of films. The turn within film studies in India from textual analysis to social histories of cinema has opened out new areas of research possibilities especially in the early history of cinema. Cinema emerged in India within a climate of suspicion by nation list leaders and never accorded the status of an industry, achieving this status as late as 2001. But despite the absence of a formal recognition the history of indian cinema is simultaneously a history of various labour initiatives, attempts at creating collectives and unions for greater bargaining power. In my talk I will focus on the contested history of labour initiatives in the postcolonial period leading to the passing of special legislations protecting the rights of labourers in cinema (Cineworkers Regulation of Employment Act 1981, Cineworkers Welfare Fund Act, 1981) and along the way we shall encounter star studded cricket matches, tragic mishaps with tigers and falling lights and bittersweet stories of cooperation and conflict between the state the film industry and the men and women who work behind the magic screen.