

Films can make the difference

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The task of a history teacher is often most unenviable. At the very outset, the teacher has to counter the belief that studying history is a necessary evil imposed on the students by the school or the “Board” – and that only mathematics and the sciences are “important” subjects, as they alone will lead to impressive and lucrative career options. Furthermore, students (and most adults) still harbour the impression that history merely involves memorizing a certain amount of information, especially unpronounceable names and dates, which are of no relevance to their lives. Added to this is the problem that most history textbooks tend to be nothing more than chronicles of events, which fail to inspire critical thinking, reasoning, or analytical debate.

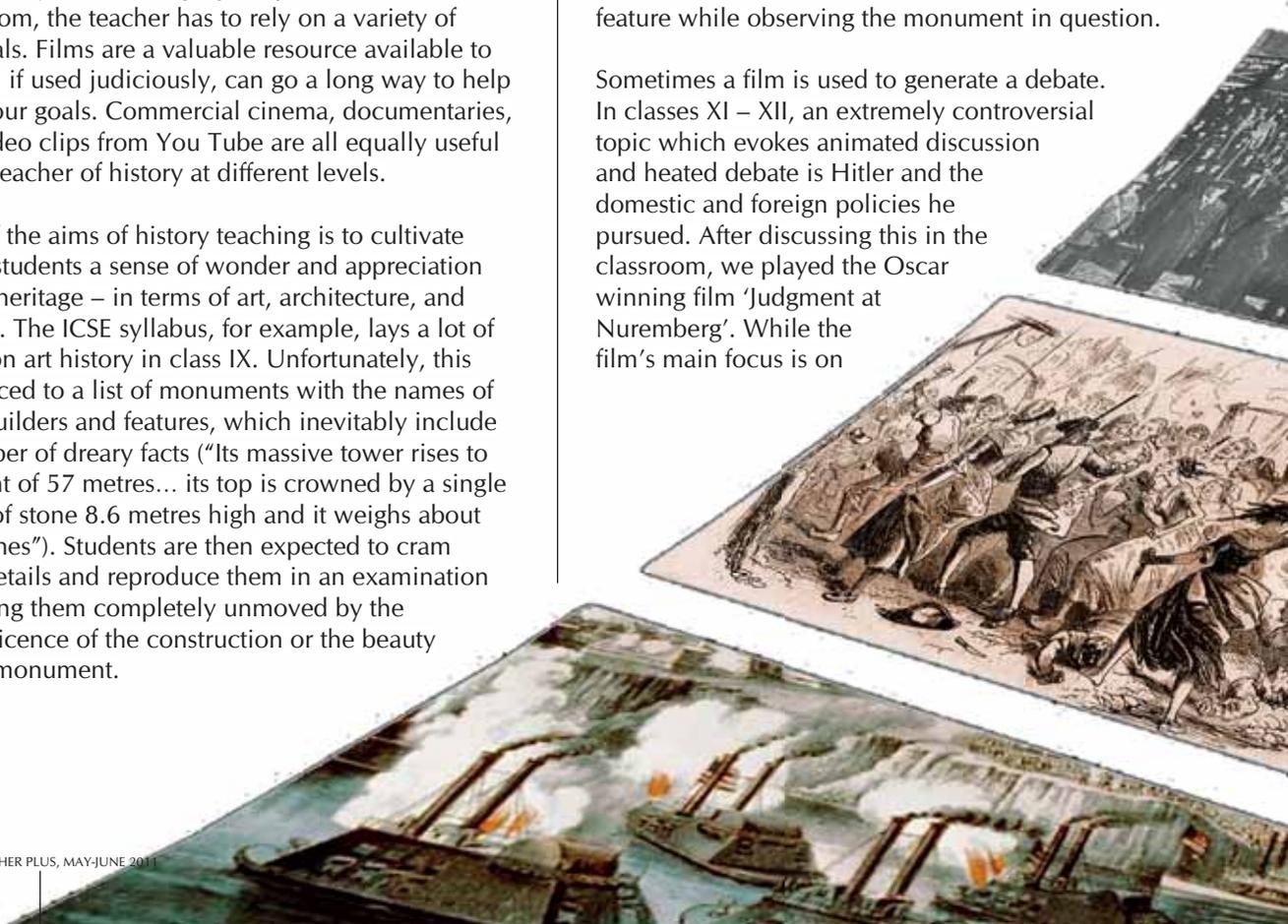
Faced with the daunting task of inspiring a love for the subject and bringing the past alive in the classroom, the teacher has to rely on a variety of materials. Films are a valuable resource available to us and, if used judiciously, can go a long way to help reach our goals. Commercial cinema, documentaries, and video clips from You Tube are all equally useful to the teacher of history at different levels.

One of the aims of history teaching is to cultivate in the students a sense of wonder and appreciation of our heritage – in terms of art, architecture, and culture. The ICSE syllabus, for example, lays a lot of stress on art history in class IX. Unfortunately, this is reduced to a list of monuments with the names of their builders and features, which inevitably include a number of dreary facts (“Its massive tower rises to a height of 57 metres... its top is crowned by a single block of stone 8.6 metres high and it weighs about 80 tonnes”). Students are then expected to cram such details and reproduce them in an examination – leaving them completely unmoved by the magnificence of the construction or the beauty of the monument.

We have found the documentaries in the Purva Uttara (Past Forward) series produced by Marg Publications particularly useful in teaching the art history of India. The stunning photography captures the spectacular features of sites such as Sanchi, Mamallapuram, Delhi, and the Taj Mahal to mention a few. The commentary by experts like Vidya Dehejia exposes students to an analysis of the socio-economic milieu (so important in the study of art history) and also to different interpretations of the stories the stones tell.

Sometimes we distribute worksheets in advance to the students so they know what to look out for as they watch these films - thus ensuring it is not just passive viewing. For instance, for the film on Delhi, we give them a list of features of Indo-Islamic architecture to look out for: open courtyards; use of calligraphy for decoration; use of arches; a combination of red sandstone and white marble. Students tick off each feature while observing the monument in question.

Sometimes a film is used to generate a debate. In classes XI – XII, an extremely controversial topic which evokes animated discussion and heated debate is Hitler and the domestic and foreign policies he pursued. After discussing this in the classroom, we played the Oscar winning film ‘Judgment at Nuremberg’. While the film’s main focus is on



the Nuremberg trials, it also tries to show us that all Germans were not ardent and blind followers of Hitler. The moral and political dilemma that the ordinary German citizen was confronted with during the War is brought forth with the right mix of empathy and reason by the film, which often answers a lot of questions and provokes several new ones.

A film such as Satyajit Ray's 'Ghare Baire' (The Home and the World), available with English subtitles, similarly works very well to highlight the fact that a mass movement (the Swadeshi Movement in early 20th century Bengal in this case), should not be seen only in black or white, but that students of history should also note the several shades of grey – something that school textbooks fail to do. It also brings alive the period, which would have otherwise remained completely alien to the present generation of students. From a simple Chinese porcelain ashtray to a traditional Jamevar shawl sported by the then zamindars, the typical stained glass windows that came with the British and the condition of widows in Bengal, Ray's cinematic mastery creates rich images which leave a lasting impression on young minds.

To give the students an understanding of a particular period in the history of a country, the teacher needs to emphasize not only political developments but also social trends. In this context, films are particularly useful to the teacher who tries to teach European history to students of class VIII who have no previous exposure to western culture and society in the 18th and 19th centuries. In teaching the American Civil War, for instance, clips from 'Gone with the Wind' help bring alive life in the Southern plantations – the women in their crinolines on the one hand, and the slaves on the other.

'A Tale of Two Cities' has been an excellent teaching aid to a discussion on the causes and events of the French Revolution. The character of Madame Defarge and the plight of Dr. Manette clearly show the problems of the people in 18th century France, while the indifference of the nobility to the plight of the common man is brought home to the students through memorable scenes such as the breaking of the wine cask on the streets of St. Antoine. At the same time, the sympathy that Charles Darnay evokes in the viewer also serves to highlight the fact that all the nobles were not evil and that there were excesses on the part of the revolutionaries too.

David Lean's 'Doctor Zhivago' is an invaluable aid to the teaching of the Russian Revolution to students of classes XI – XII. Since students come up to these classes without any previous knowledge whatsoever of Russian history, regular lessons fail to drive home the discontent of the peasantry and the reasons for the mass desertion of soldiers in the Imperial army, which helped to swell the rank and file of the Bolsheviks – so vividly captured in the film. The haunting music and the evocative scenes, apart from the touching love story, never fail to move students.

Closer home, a study of our freedom movement inevitably provokes discussion on the efficacy of Gandhian Satyagraha in defying the might of the British Empire. Until recent times, when “Munna Bhai” popularized the concept of “Gandhigiri”, we came across a certain scepticism in our students who seemed to scoff at methods such as fasting in dealing with communal riots on the one hand and British imperialism on the other. In this context, Attenborough’s ‘Gandhi’ works extremely well to show the students just how effective Gandhi’s methods were. The clip on the Dharasana Salt Satyagraha leaves an indelible impression on young students’ minds of the courage and strength of character of the satyagrahis. The film is also an excellent tool to help the students analyze the nature of Gandhi’s leadership – his charismatic appeal, his ability to take up issues that touched every Indian’s heart and even the grudging respect he commanded from his opponents, as in the memorable court room trial scene.

Even popular cinema can be used effectively by the teacher and its impact on the students, for obvious reasons, is sometimes far greater than documentaries. ‘Rang de Basanti’ became a cult film for a while among the youth, and we teachers rode the wave to initiate discussions on the relative merits of violence and non-violence in India’s freedom struggle. Other films, ‘Mangal Pandey’ for instance, can similarly be used, provided the teacher takes care to point out the historical inaccuracies in the film.

You Tube is a veritable treasure trove that teachers now have at their disposal. Clips from the World Wars for instance give meaning to terms such as “trench warfare”, “dogfights” and “blitzkrieg” and help students grasp the changing nature of war and military technology in the 20th century. Clips from famous speeches of great leaders can transport students to the scene where the action took place – Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream...”; Winston Churchill’s “We shall fight them on the beaches...”, and countless others are all there a few mouse clicks away to liven up even the duller lesson.

There are countless ways in which films can be used in the history classroom – and we have presented just a few suggestions here. However, a word of caution. Screening a film can never be a substitute for the role of a teacher – it can at best complement the lesson and should be used in conjunction with all the other classroom devices and teaching aids that we regularly use. In order to consolidate learning, further work is needed – in the form of worksheets,

class discussions and further research – either before or after the viewing. Moreover, the teacher must be aware of historical inaccuracies, if any, in the films she uses and be careful to point these out to the students who may otherwise be left with lasting impressions which are incorrect. In sum, in the hands of a careful teacher, films and film clips can prove to be an extremely useful tool to enhance the teaching – learning experience in the classroom.

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