Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

I am a filmmaker based in India with a Diploma in Cinema with specialization in Film Direction from the Film and Television Institute of India or the FTII as it is better known. Though I’ve done documentaries on various themes, I have always been fascinated with cinema history, in particular the period of the 1930s and 1940s, what I would term as Indian cinema’s first golden period – the heyday of the studio system and a period which proved that art, commerce and social commitment could indeed go hand in hand. Perhaps it is but a natural development that two of our most important technological developments, the coming of talkies and the advent of playback, wherein the songs are recorded first in the studio and then ‘played back’ on location with the actors mouthing and enacting the lines, something we follow till date today happened in this period.

*An American in Madras*, my first feature length documentary, is based in this era.

The film, one of the most difficult one I’ve had to made, as you know by now has a strong American connection. The film primarily traces American-born filmmaker Ellis R. Dungan’s years in India. Born in 1909 and hailing from Barton, Ohio, Dungan reached the shores of India on February 25th, 1935 intending to stay for 6 months but ended up staying in South India for 15 years! During this period, he brought many technical innovations to the developing Tamil Film Industry of the 1930s and ‘40s, and infused a sense of professionalism into its filmmaking. All this, without understanding the language!

At this point I have to say that for those of you not familiar with Indian cinema, we are what I would call the largest institution of the imaginary with well over a 1000 films in various languages and dialects. And these are just the certified feature films.

The film tries to put Ellis Dungan and his contribution in the development of the Tamil film Industry from 1935-50 in proper historic context of the early years of the Tamil talkies. But even more importantly, the film focuses on a rarely documented period in the history of Indian cinema especially in the medium of documentary films.

Naturally a film of this sort needs substantial archival material, in particular film clips and live footage to create an engaging film. A photograph or two might be adequate for an article but a film needs a strong visual element. The archival material used in the material includes…

- Clips from 6 of Dungan’s feature films
- Clips from other films of the time to see where Dungan’s work stands
- Clips from Dungan’s documentaries on India
- Live footage of Dungan on the sets of his earlier films
- An Indian television interview with Dungan taken in 1994
• Interview with Dungan taken in 1995 as an outstanding alumnus of St Clairsville High School.
• Numerous Photographs
• Newspaper articles
• Film periodicals of the time.
• Tamil film memorabilia – song booklets etc....

Just a little side note here. Since Indian mainstream cinema is known for its song and dance, song booklets were unique. Containing the film’s poster, a synopsis of the film left at a tantalizing point, a list of its cast and crew and the words of its songs were sold in the intermission. Many of these have become collector's items today. In fact, the poster of the film, and its title card have been designed using elements from Dungan’s film’s song booklets.

The sources of the material used in the film are many and across three countries – the US, India and Malaysia, which has a sizeable population of Tamil original.

The main sources of archival material in the USA have come from

• The West Virginia State Archives, USA
• Water and Power Associates, USA
• St. Clairsville School, USA

India...

• National Film Archive of India (NFAI), Pune, India
• Doordarshan, Chennai, India
• The Modern Theatres Ltd., Salem, India
• Roja Muthiah Research Library, Chennai, India
• Films Division, Mumbai, India
• Kalki Magazine, Chennai, India
• Collectors and personal memorabilia of individuals

and Malaysia...

• Columbia Video Films, Malaysia

It is thanks to this material, especially that from USA, that one could weave a visual story of Ellis Dungan’s life in India even though he is no more, having passed away in 2001. Otherwise, given India’s abysmal record in film archiving record, it would have been near to impossible to make the film. For this it is important to understand the film archiving scenario in India.

Archiving has never been in Indian blood, not just in cinema but in various other fields as well. In fact, it took India a good 51 years after its first feature film, Raja Harishchandra (1913), incidentally made 2 years before The Birth of A Nation, to finally realize the importance of preserving its cinematic heritage.  The Indian
Government established the National Film Archive of India or the NFAI in 1964 in Pune. By then, however, the damage was already done...

The figures are painful to say the least. It is estimated that about 1700 or so silent films were made in India. Today, the NFAI houses just 5 or 6 complete films and 12 incomplete ones... Even our first film *Raja Harishchandra* is incomplete with only 2 reels existing, the first and the last... In Madras in South India (where Ellis Dungan was based) over a hundred films were made in this period. Only one, *Marthanda Verma* (1931) survives today...

From the first decade of sound films in India from 1931-41, where more than 1500 films were made – 1004 in Hindi, 281 in Tamil, 149 in Bengali, 91 in Telugu, 100 in Marathi, 10 in Gujarati, 9 in Kannada, 3 in Malayalam, 20 in Punjabi, 3 in Assamese, 1 in Oriya, 5 in Persian and one in Pushtu – less than 10% of these survive... Among the films tragically lost forever is India's first ever talkie, *Alam Ara* (1931), it's reels sold by the producer's son without the knowledge of his father for silver...

As per the Censor Board's Records 1724 films were certified in India in 32 languages in 2013. Total number of Indian films in the archives is just about 6000. This when Indian cinema celebrated its centenary in 2013. So you can see the amount of films we've lost.

There are deeper problems. The NFAI, which is the only official archive in India, is a government body that is run by bureaucrats who have nothing to do with cinema. The employees are government servants and not really trained personnel. It is not surprising then that even after films have been sourced, collected and brought to NFAI, their preservation, the maintenance of the right conditions of humidity and temperature - especially of the old flammable nitrate prints leaves much to be desired. While fires were common in the early days of cinema, as recently as 2003, a fire broke out at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) vault destroying many of Indian cinema's old classics. And just a few months back in July, the Bombay Talkies office in Mumbai caught fire destroying prints of many of its films made in the 1930s and 40s...

In the light of this, coming back to Dungan's films... From his 13 feature films in India, 11 in Tamil, 1 each in Telugu and Hindi, 5 were sourced from NFAI, which I have to say looking at the earlier statistics is suddenly a rather healthy ratio! These films were *Ambikapathy* (1937), *Sakuntalai* (1940), *Meera* (1945, Tamil), *Meera* (1947, Hindi) and *Manthiri Kumari* (1950). Wherever possible, I took the extracts from Blu Ray discs that the NFAI had made of some of the films as - 1) the resolutions of the Blue Ray 1920 X 1080 was the same as HD, what I had shot the film in. 2) For those films not available in Blu Ray, I used the 35 mm print positive of the film. A clear DVD print of *Ponmudi* (1949) was sourced from Columbia Video films in Malaysia. The others seem lost forever or could not be traced...

What helped the film most is Ellis Dungan himself. I was lucky that being an American, Dungan had a sense of archiving in his blood. He realized the
importance of and thus recorded his life in India. What’s more he understood when history was unfolding in front of him and wanted to be a part of it. During World War II when he was unable to enlist, Dungan joined the Madras Government as their official photographer. He not only shot photo features, but also war propaganda films and several documentaries. He also wrote an autobiography on his remarkable life, *A Guide to Adventure*, co-written with Barbara Smik and published in the year of his death (2001), which played an important role in research for the film. But most importantly, he also understood the importance of preserving his material and for it to live on after him for future generations as he donated it to the West Virginia State Archives, USA.

Almost 200 photographs have been used in the film, mostly from the Ellis Dungan collection. There is extremely rare live footage of Dungan on the sets of his first three films, *Sathi Leelavathi* (1936), *Seemanthani* (1936) and *Two Brothers* (1936). None of the above three films have survived. This footage is the only record that they ever existed and give us an idea of some of the scenes that were shot for them... Historically, possibly this is the earliest existing live footage of the making of films in India. It helps us in putting events in historic context. For instance, the making of *Sathi Leelavathi*, filmed by Dungan in 1935-6, shows a song being sung live in front of the camera with an accompanying orchestra outside camera view. This before the advent of ‘playback’ caught on in India. Extracts from two documentaries based in India - *In a South Indian Village* (1945) and *Tiger Shikar in India* (1955) - have been used. Their prints are not available in India but exist in USA thanks to Dungan!

I have kept the film as simple as possible. The idea was to combine making an engaging film, which I’m glad has been to various festivals around and is to play at the Prague Indian film Festival on October 25th and at the Seattle South Asian Film Festival on November 1st, at the same point documenting an early era of Indian cinema history through the medium I now best, film. The film deservedly gives it due to a pioneer of early Tamil cinema, who happened to be American. It gives an added dimension and a historical perspective bringing to life the archival material, in particular, the material so professionally preserved by the West Virginia State Archives.

Thank You!