

HISTORICAL STUDY OF INDIAN SILENT CINEMA AND EARLY TALKIES: 1913-1950

(Main Context Silent & Hindi Talkies made in & around Mumbai, India)

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Abstract

Cinema is a field where India has always been at par with world cinema. We Indians are indebted to Dada Saheb Falke for founding cinema in India at right time; he staked everything he had to start making films in our own land. After he started film-making in India, many talented men like Baburao Painter, Homi Mistry followed his footsteps and soon Indian film Industry took a full fledged form. Silent era starts from 1913 and goes till 1931 when Ardeshir Irani releases India's first talkie 'Alam Ara'. Alam Ara in many ways set the mood of Indian films; it was a subtle love story with many song and dance sequences, which became an important feature of Indian film still today. After the launch of talkies in India, there was no looking back for us Indians in the arena of film-making; one after the other talented writers, directors came into film-making. Directors like V. Shantaram, Bimal Roy, Satyajit Ray took Indian Cinema to great heights and at par with the west.

Keywords : Cinema; founding of Indian Cinema; Dada Saheb Falke; silent era movies; advent of Talkies; key film makers of silent and early talkies era.

Introduction : India is a country known for its Cinema love; yet it has minimal amount of research conducted on it; specially the time period where Indian Cinema begins its journey and take the shape is long buried in national archives. In this research paper we would shed some light on this neglected arena of Indian Cinema.

India is a country of cine-lovers; watching movies in free time has always been favorite time pass of our people; here theatre could never attract mass audiences as movies easily do. It is ironic that a place which is known for its cinema loves; has very low numbers of people interested in researching or even know about the beginning time period of Indian cinema. Especially Indian silent films and early talkies have been permanently silenced by the apathy of young generation with almost no interest in digging up this long buried treasure which once habited the glittering world of D. Billimoria, Patience Cooper, Ruby Meyers; kind

of stars with no less charisma of today's Shahrukh or Aamir Khan.

Indian silent cinema and early talkies are an integral part of our cultural heritage yet they are neglected by masses and classes all together. Today we live in the era of hard core marketing; everything today needs promotional tactics to catch viewer's eye. In today's fast paced and competitive times it has actually become the need of the hour to educate the viewer and generate some interest in them about our cinema's past. Hence if our cultural department wants to generate interest in public about the silent era or early talkies which are the most forgotten time periods of our cinema, it will have to imply some promotional strategies which can tell people how skilled and dedicated those silent movie makers and performers were. Like today's top filmmakers and actors, they too deserve our remembrance and accolades for their contribution to cinema.

We need to remind general public the importance of that long forgotten cinematic legacy; it is high time that we refresh public memory about the long forgotten world of 'Silents' and early 'Talkies' of our very own Indian cinema.

Beginning of Cinema in India

Invention of camera had paved the way for capturing live images; before this invention, no one had thought one day reel life would at times even surpass real life. A new form of life portrayal had come into existence. As far as film making is concerned we were not very far behind the west; this credit goes to the founding father of Indian cinema **Dhundiraj Govind Phalke** better known as **Dada Sahab Phalke**. Before Dada Phalke got interested in film making, Indian exhibitors were importing and exhibiting foreign films. One such film was '**The Life Of Christ**'; while watching this film as a mere spectator Dada Phalke felt the need for indigenous cinema where from makers to performers all would be Indians. He told a then tabloid that, " While the 'Life Of Christ' was rolling fast before my physical eyes, I was mentally visualizing the Gods, Shri Krishna, Shri Ramchandra, their Gokul and Ayodhya.....I felt my imagination taking shape on the screen, Could this really happen? Could we, the sons of India ever be able to see Indian images on the screen?"¹

Dada Phalke was so determined to make films in our own land that he staked everything he had to bring Indian images on Indian screen; he gave his blood and sweat to lay the foundation of Indian film industry; in the end his efforts and sacrifices he made were paid off well as on 3rd May 1913 we Indians got to watch our very first *swadeshi* feature film, '**Raja Harishchandra**'. With the release of this film the Indian film industry formally came into existence; this was a film made by Indians for the Indians. The dream Dada Phalke had seen of our own indigenous cinema was eventually realized.

'Raja Harishchandra' was a huge hit as audiences thronged to watch this film over and over again. The phenomenal success of this film attracted many people like Baburao Painter,

Homi Master, Dhiren Ganguly, Ardeshir Irani etc to the newly found vocation of film-making. "Almost immediately thereafter enterprising film-makers in the then existing Bombay, Bengal and Madras presidencies churned out feature films round the clock."² Apparently one after the other many ambitious and creative men followed the footsteps of Dada Phalke and slowly-slowly Indian film industry started taking its shape.

Other Contributors

Like it is stated before many enthusiastic men ventured into film making after seeing the phenomenal success of 'Raja Harishchandra'. The most promising of the lot was '**Baburao Painter**'; being a painter previously he had an eye for details; it is said about him that from technical point of film making he was the master craftsman, "Redesigning an old camera, using artificial lights, painting the sets to get a particular shade of grey on the film, devising and using filters with tinted glass for the first time-the stories about him are legion"³ Apparently if Dada Phalke gave indigenous cinema to the movies; Baburao Painter gave us the legacy of technical brilliance.

This man must have been very much dedicated and talented as the men who learned film making by assisting him also made brilliant feature films. One such name is V.Shantaram; after seeing many hardships in life Shantaram started working with Baburao to earn a living. Apart from assisting him he also started acting in his films as well; in Baburao Painter's major contribution 'Savkari Pash'(1925) Shantaram had a prominent role. Later V.Shantaram started directing films for Prabhat Film Company; he started out in silent era and went on to create history in Talkies era too by winning many national and international awards for his par excellence work on cinema.

Another geniuses of silent era were- Homi Master, Dhirendranath Ganguly, Rustomji Dotiwala, Ganpat Shinde, Kanjibhai Rathod, Mohan Bhavnani, Chandulal Shah etc. Just like V.Shantaram, Homi Master too was good in acting and directing both; his films did excellent business on box office. "Homi Master was considered to be box office wizard and the fastest director during silent era."⁴ Dhirendranath Ganguly too acted and directed both; his most notable film is 'Bilet Firt'(The England Returned,1921). This film was the first social satire on screen about Indian men-women copying British living style. Apart from V.Shantaram, Homi Master, Dhirendranath Ganguly— other film directors chose to show their charisma from behind the camera only.

Advent of Talkies- the biggest change in cinema history

Whenever a person with different outlook and mindset enters a field; something innovative can be expected. Dada Phalke envisaged indigenous cinema and made it a reality; similarly an endearing businessman **Ardeshir Irani** had a vision about talking films and bravely faced all the odds to bring sound to cinema. With making first ever talking film of

Indian cinema he is rightly called 'the father of Indian talkies'. The magic that was once created by our first silent film 'Raja Harishchandra' was re-created among the public with the release of our first talkie 'Alam Ara'(1931).

This movie changed the face of Indian cinema. "Movie-goers lost interest in the silent films overnight, almost."⁵ It was a great change for cinema; big production companies immediately switched over to newly found medium of talking films. Yet there were some small producers who had to stick to silent films due to lack of funds. This is the reason why silent films were made even after the advent of talkies but they could not compete with talkies for long and finally around 1934 the silent cinema met its final fate.

Alam Ara was not only the first Indian talkie; it also marks the beginning of singing and dancing in our cinema. "India's first talkie, presenting the first songs in the history of the Indian talkies."⁶ Irani would have never thought that the singing and dancing he is presenting through his movie would one day become the landmark style of Indian movies.

Making a talkie was not a cake walk for Irani; he had to face many problems, especially in sound recording; he had to shoot the entire film just to avoid day-time noise, but this man was made up of strong mettle, "Despite all the problems, the tenacious Ardeshir completed the 10,500ft film within the schedule—in four months, at a total cost of Rs 40,000. It ran for an impressive eight weeks."⁷ It always takes a strong person to bring a change; Dada Phalke and Ardeshir Irani both had what it takes to do something revolutionary, therefore Phalke is rightly called the father of Indian Cinema and Irani too is aptly called the father of Indian talkies.

Other major film-makers of early talkies

Another big name in the beginning of talkies is **Himansu Rai**; he started off his journey as a film-maker in silent era; his most notable silent movie was "The Light Of Asia": this movie fetched him international recognition and established him in the industry forever. "A gutsy fellow, Himansu Rai. Not only was he the first Indian to envision Indian films finding an international market, but he was the only Indian who brought foreign technicians and also foreign money for the production of films in India."⁸

Himansu Rai's film company 'Bombay Talkies' produced some of the best talkies and also gave the industry great actors like Devika Rani, Ashok Kumar, Leela Chitnis etc. 'Bombay talkies' well caught the nerve of the audience and made some brilliant socially relevant films. One such film was 'Achhut Kanya'(1936) in which the social issue of untouchability was shown with deep sentiments. After Himansu Rai's sudden demise in 1940, his wife Devika Rani looked after 'Bombay Takies' for five years but then in 1945 she sold it out to others and left Bombay permanently.

Another big film-maker who started out with silent films and then kept on making films till early seventies is the noted film-maker of Indian cinema- **V.Shantaram**. He started

his career as an assistant to the technical wizard of silent cinema, Baburao Painter. Later he became a part of Prabhat Film Company and started directing their silents; with the advent of sound he too joined the bandwagon of talkies and gave some brilliant movies to Indian Cinema. 'Duniyana mane'(1937), 'Admi'(1941), 'Doctor Kotnis'(1946) are his memorable work in Hindi talkies till late forties. Just like V. Shantaram, **Bimal Roy** too was impeccable in his works but till 1950 he mostly worked in Calcutta and joined the Bombay film industry around 1950 only. Since cinema was from its very beginning a fruitful vocation; many people came into film world just for good fortune; by 1930's and 1940's cinema's glamour had also started attracting young men and women who dreamed of becoming film-stars.

The fourth decade 1941-1950 again saw many changes and advancements in Bombay cinema. Back in 1936 with the phenomenal success of films like 'Achhut Kanya' and 'Devdass', the social dramas of caste-system and rich-poor themes caught a fancy among the film-makers. In forties we got to see a surge in such films. Proletarian and capitalist themes had also gained momentum with Bombay film makers; Bimal Roy's 'Humraahi'(1945) well depicted the clash between proletarian mill workers and their capitalist owners. Another two films 'Dhartike Laal' and 'Neecha Nagar' are also socially remarkable films of this time period.

Impact of partition on cinema

India got freedom from British imperialism in 1947; but the immediate Indo-Pak partition severely affected all areas of life here. After partition many Muslim artistes who were well established in Bombay film Industry shifted to Pakistan and many Hindu artistes living in Lahore had to relocate to India. This was the biggest turmoil period in our country as well as in cinema but just in a few years the industry again stabilized itself and now it had got another sensitive topical issue of communal hatred for their films.

Conclusion

In totality it can be said that cinema in India has great diversity due to its multi-cultural and multi-lingual atmosphere. Our cinema has mostly seen an upward journey. From time to time bumpy roads did come its way but this creative vocation has always immerged a winner in the end. The only shocking fact about Indian cinema is that despite our people's great fondness of cinema, research on our silent movies and early Hindi talkies is shockingly limited.

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