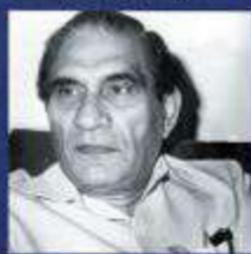


DIRECTOR'S CHAIR

Hindi Cinema's Golden Age



MANEK PREMCHAND

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BLUE PENCIL



*This book is dedicated to two of my dear friends—
Monica Kar, whose cheerfulness, understanding
of Indian culture and love for music humbles.
And Sundeep Pahwa, whose passion for cinema
and knowledge of film directors never fails to amaze.*

DIRECTOR'S CHAIR

Manek Premchand

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First published by Blue Pencil 2024



BLUE PENCIL

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ISBN: 978-81-956660-8-9

Cover Design: Blue Pencil Studio

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Printed at: Saurabh Printers Pvt Ltd, Greater Noida

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Introduction



This book is about the work and lives of many of the better directors from Hindi cinema's yesteryear (i.e., till 1980), with a focus on its golden age, generally considered to have run from the late '40s to the late '60s. The word Bollywood is being avoided here, for several reasons. Firstly, the word suggests that our film culture shines in the reflected glory of Hollywood, which is not entirely true. There's far more to our cinema than being just a poor American imitator, and we're not talking quantity, in which we have for long been the leaders. Our cinema has been inspired by Hollywood but also by films from Japan and Europe, with a healthy input from our own trials and experiences. Secondly, the filmmaking approach in Los Angeles is vastly different from the one in Mumbai. In the USA, usually the script (or a story) is the first thing that is identified, after which are found the funds, the cast, and the crew. The film then proceeds in accordance with the screenplay, almost as if the screenplay was a sacred document like the Constitution of a country. Here in India, while there is usually a story outline to begin with, it is first read out to the proposed male protagonist. In the majority of cases, the screenplay becomes just a kind of rough compass, a dynamic document that can (and often does) change at the advice of the cast, sometimes even as the shots are being readied. The other thing is Hollywood films are not usually music-driven, while music is the cornerstone of a majority of Hindi films. We are seeing fewer and fewer songs in Hindi films these days and our music, attire, and food have also been picking up elements from the West, so in that sense, we are closer to the Hollywood model. But again, this book brings down its curtain in 1980, when things were not so Americanized.

As for the size of the platform, the space is vast even till 1980, with hundreds of people, small and big, directing thousands of Hindi films. Strictly speaking though, the language most films use is not Hindi; it is Hindustani, a mixture of Hindi and Urdu, a point addressed in some detail in the Special Notes section.

An informal survey and a jury of friends!

Because of the vast platform that this book had decided to give to directors (hundreds of names running over 50 years), finding information on many of them became a challenge, as did watching films exhaustively. Further, some

of these directors had made a huge impact on moviegoers, but many others hadn't. The high-impact people—master directors—are characterised by telling a story compellingly. But they also carefully embroider the various elements of style such as camera angles and transitions, along with *mise-en-scene*¹, edits, and post-production sound to bring about a charming confluence of truth and exaggeration, usually within a conflict-resolution framework. Surely the cinema and lives of these masters needed to be showcased more, even if they sat on an egalitarian stage with everyone else here. Hence, it became necessary to ask film buffs who they thought were, say, the 25 most important directors of the time.

Help was taken from a pool of 12 cinephiles, constituting a kind of jury! These are 6 men and 6 women from diverse backgrounds. They range in age from 22 to 82 and are named in a bit. Each of these film lovers was asked to choose 25 directors who would make it to an august assembly and sit like gods in a sort of royal Indrasabha, on top of a mountain, influencing our minds in the plains. Here were the simple terms of reference: these personalities should either have directed at least one spectacular film or then a handful of very memorable films. We had also to bear in mind that we were going to look at people only as directors, ignoring their involvement in other areas of filmmaking like production, story or dialogue writing, music composing, acting, etc. The collated results from this informal jury helped in deciding whose work needed to be profiled more, after which such people were brought down to mingle with everyone on a common platform here.

Here are the names of these informed experts: Antara Nanda Mondal, Gaurav Sahay, Hemadri Ludbe, Lata Jagtiani, Madhur Trivedi, Meenu Gidwani, Monica Kar, Ramesh Narain Kurpad, Sundeep Pahwa, Swapneel Sathe, Vineesh Vedsen, and Yogesh Kamdar.

How this book is divided

The directors are divided into the following four sections, all of which contain some measure of information or trivia about many filmmakers or their films.

The Early Masters is about those who laid the foundations of Indian cinema, some beginning even in the silents, though this section focuses on directors who did their best work—or all of it—from 1931 to 1947. This section looks at their lives and sees their celluloid wins and losses. If some early masters are found missing here, perhaps they did more significant work later, so they may be found in the next section.

Most film historians consider that the golden age of our cinema began in the late '40s. The charged-up atmosphere after Independence, the increasing quality and influence of films, and the rewards they offered from the late '40s inspired many talented people to rush to Bombay to become part of the cinema entertainment universe. The large section of *The Significant Virtuosos* brings pretty much every medium-level or high-level director from 1948 to 1980 on one platform, even if the amount of space dedicated to these names varies widely, not just in correlation with their entertainment quotient or for the availability of their films, but also how much research material could be found about these directors. Not forgetting the weightage given by our informal jury. Thus, some names have a quick outline of the stories of a film or two, while others are represented with more films or details of their personal journeys. The amount of space given to a director has also to do with how much work they did before 1980, our cut-off year. Gulzar, Subhash Ghai, and Govind Nihalani for instance do not get too much space, only because Gulzar (directorial entry in 1971), Ghai (directorial entry in 1976), and Nihalani (directorial entry in 1980) did not contribute too much in the years we are scanning, though they continued to create remarkable cinema after 1980.

Our next section, *Honourable Others*, pens down the names of scores of directors who worked between 1931 and 1980 and missed being in both the preceding lists, but who still twinkle at this point of time as faint stars. Three yardsticks have been used for directors here. One: those who directed just one film till 1980 and that single film made some waves. Two: people who directed several films, with the odd one or two somewhat recalled by the audiences of today. And three: directors about whom not much information is available. Such directors are just named here with some of their films, without details about the banners their films were made for. But thumbnail sketches abound for some, and trivia has been sprinkled over many names in this section too.

The *Special Notes* section finds comedians who directed films and makes a note of Hindi films that were based on published literature, both from India and abroad. It does more, like offering stats on film production over the years, telling us which directors married film actresses, and also offering general trivia.

Why this book

For many years, I have enjoyed studying the fascinating lives of singers, composers, and lyricists and the audio world such people create. During

these years, I have often been like a fly on the wall in many a recording room and writer's study, wondering how it would be to get a 360-degree view by coming out of the audio world and learning about the other side of the subject, i.e., the visual one.

The director lives substantially in the visual universe and hence does not concern himself too much with whether the composer has used a vibraphone or a marimba, or if the lyricist has penned a ghazal or something else. Rather than fretting too much about the instruments used or the raag employed or the rhythms chosen, he focuses on the overall effect the song offers to become situationally relevant in a scene. It's about which actor sings the song in what circumstances, the people present, the setting of the scene, and the atmosphere that the director visually creates. It's about how he takes the aural seed and augments it visually into a composite whole. But he is more than just about filming a song, as we will see soon. When we consider what all he does, his work becomes fascinating.

The more serious thought of looking at the work and journey of directors came to me in March 2022, when I was watching films as a Jury Member at the Bangalore International Film Festival. While watching dozens of films that we were judging, whenever there was a song that came up in the odd film, the other jury members with me wanted to fast forward it. It was as if the song was not part of the narrative, that in fact it disrupted the real story. The other jury members didn't even consider that songs are sometimes a strategy meant to break the monotony of dialogues.

This was a disappointment to me because the fast-forwarding idea suggested that either today's society was not enjoying music in our cinema, or that our current directors didn't have it in them to integrate songs well into the story. Over conversation during a lunch break, the other judges felt that the disguise of lyricism made a film reek of sentimentality, reducing its worth in the scheme of a progress-driven society. How far in our attitudes and cinematic treatment we had travelled, I thought, in half a century! I am sure many of you will recall that we used to go to watch a film not just for its dialogues and performances but also for its songs. Filmmakers knew that, so they paid extra attention while shooting the music parts.

During the years when colour film was coming in but expensive, many black-and-white films showcased their songs and key scenes in colour. Some of you may recall that the producer of the film *Nirala* (1950) was so confident of the film's music that he had distributed posters to the effect that if you left the film in the interval, before watching Madhubala perform on the song *Mehfil mein jal utthi shama parwaane ke liye*, you could claim

your money back. The filmmaker was aware of what they had done to JBH Wadia for his film *Naujawan* released much before, in 1937. This was India's first songless film, but it was a crime thriller based on the story of one night; as such it did not warrant any song. But moviegoers had rejected the film, sending the filmmaker the thumbs down. *Nirala* on the other hand had 9 songs, but there have even been dozens of films with 10 songs or more in them. Many of these films were enjoyed for their music too, for example, *Rattan* (1944), *Anmol Ghadi* (1946), *Andaz* (1949), *Barsaat* (1949), *Albela* (1951), *Baiju Bawra* (1952), *Anarkali* (1953), *Nagin* (1954), *Bhai Bhai* (1956), *Phagun* (1958), *Sohni Mahiwal* (1958), *Dil Deke Dekho* (1959), *Navrang* (1959), *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* (1960), *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai* (1960), *Kohinoor* (1960), *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), *Jhumroo* (1961), *Sangeet Samrat Tansen* (1962), *Dil Hi To Hai* (1963), *Taj Mahal* (1963), *Zindagi* (1964), *Kaajal* (1965), *Dil Ne Phir Yaad Kiya* (1966), *Palki* (1967), *Sambandh* (1969), and *Mera Naam Joker* (1970). The average number of songs in the '70s and '80s went down from the above, but films with 7 or 8 songs continued to be made every now and then. Today, no filmmaker will dare to have 7 or 8 songs in a film; people will think he's insane. They just won't buy tickets, to begin with; forget about asking for a refund later. How society has changed in just a couple of generations!

Consider also that India has for decades been the No.1 filmmaking country in the world, in quantity even if not in dollar terms. The paucity of good cinema has long been a problem to be sure, though one must say that some of the films made in recent years have been quite nice, even by international standards. Today's filmmakers are fortunate to have new technology like computer graphics to help them along. Fifty years ago and before that, such help didn't exist. Yet many of our directors produced valuable, impactful cinema. That realization also pushed me to want to study the opus of several gifted film directors and, in a manner of speaking, bring them together on one stage.

The director versus everyone else

Without in any way diminishing the role of the other members of a film's cast and crew, it can be said that the director's role is far more important than anyone else's. He certainly has a vast canvas to paint, unlike the others of a unit, whose roles have more to do with just their own work, without any overarching concern of who else is doing what. It is the director that the cast and crew listen to most. He is the hub in a hub-and-spoke system. Consider this: rare is the film that has succeeded with, for example, just

great cinematography or music or an actor's performance, if the narrative seems choppy. But the reverse is not true, because a competent director can manage to steer a film into success, despite one or two weaknesses in areas like its music, an actor's performance, or cinematography. Consider in this connection Chetan Anand who directed *Haqeeqat* (1964), *Heer Ranjha* (1970), and *Hanste Zakhm* (1973). The heroine of all these films was Priya Rajvansh, who gave quite average performances in each of them, but the director became the lightning rod for these films and it was his overall treatment that made them successful films. Madan Mohan's music in these films was nice of course, but good music by itself has never been enough. After all, the same composer made great music in *Jahan Ara* (1964), the movie that was taken off its main theatre in Bombay on the 4th day of its release. On the converse side, one of the biggest hits of Hindi cinema, *Sholay* (1975) was a huge hit, not because of its music, but in fact in spite of its just passable music. Ramesh Sippy brought exceptional direction to the table, along with many other great values the film offered filmgoers. We also have Dev Anand, who was a fine actor and producer, but as a director, he didn't leave a big footprint, except in the odd film like *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971). Take for instance his *Prem Pujari* (1970), which had a nice cast (Dev, Waheeda, Zaheeda), super music (SD Burman), some wonderful cinematography (Fali Mistry, shooting much in Switzerland), and an absorbing plot (an army officer who believes in ahimsa), but forgettable direction ensured that the film was not a success.

Because the director's work—more than anyone else's work—can make or mar a film, he is what Urdu terms as *rooh-e-rawaan*, i.e., the moving spirit in the project. It is for this reason that the director is always named in film festival brochures around the world, even when the space in the quick description box allows for just one name. Similarly, it is to offer respect to the creative head of the team that the director is usually mentioned last in a Hindi film's credits, conventionally arranged in a U pattern, with the names of the lead actors first, dropping down to the other cast and crew, and rising with the more important contributors like the editor, composer, cinematographer, producer, and finally the director.

Many actors, in India and abroad, earn more than directors, and they certainly have a huge fan following that directors can't approach. The Press is constantly around them too. So, such actors move about with an air of importance. Even so, the director remains the most important part of the project itself. Unless there's a death. If a director dies during the making of a film, there's still hope because his work is behind the camera.

A competent replacement director can take things forward seamlessly. That's what happened for example in *Kathputli* (1957). Amiya Chakravarty passed away, so Nitin Bose completed the film. But if a lead player dies, there's big trouble. Guru Dutt died in 1964, after many scenes were shot for K Asif's *Love And God*, sending the project in a tailspin. Had Dutt lived till at least 1971, Asif may well have completed the film. It's another thing that Asif himself died in 1971, a point elaborated on in his chapter. The case for *Pakeezah* is interesting too because it became a close shave for the filmmaker. While its heroine Meena Kumari didn't die during the film's making, she had become an alcoholic, so much so that she couldn't steady herself to face the camera, much less deliver her lines well. For the few sequences still left, director Kamal Amrohi used a double with long shots. The film was somehow completed and released in February 1972. The audience began rejecting the film. But then came news of her admission into St Elizabeth's Hospital, so people started watching the film. By the time she died, on 31st March 1972, *Pakeezah* had become a hit.

It can be argued that the producer is important too, because if there's no money and distribution, no arrangement for promotion or exhibition, what will be the fate of a film? While that is true, the producer is important in a different way. The following may state the obvious for people who know it, but for the relatively uninformed, the following tells us what a producer and director are ideally supposed to do.

The project either starts with the producer who identifies a good script and then hires a director, or it begins with a director who has found a good story, after which he tries to find a producer who will finance the idea. It's usually together that they hire the cast and crew. Even so, the producer's essential role is finding the money to sustain costs and overruns, getting people to distribute the film when it's ready, arranging its release, handling its publicity, and so on. A film's director on the other hand is the person with the creative vision to start the project and see it through, from the pre-production stage to the final edits. That means he has to sometimes consult with the story's author or scriptwriter. He has extended sessions with the dialogue writer, the set director, the cinematographer, the costume designer, the choreographer, the music composer, an assistant director or two, and all such people whose responsibility it is to handle the art end of things, much like the producer handles the commerce part of the project. Such sessions get accentuated before the shoots and happen frequently, like staff meetings in fine-dine restaurants. During the film's shoots, the director has to interpret the screenplay and explain scenes to the actors, guiding them

along the way. He has to work very closely with the cameraman, but also with the other crew members in a strongly bonded way, ensuring everyone delivers well. As observed earlier, he interacts with the music team and explains the situation for which he wants a song. He has to remain charged with his vision and be seen to be in such a state so he can inspire his team. After the shoots, he has to submit his needs to the editor and then examine how the edits are going. He has to ensure the Foley sounds are realistic, that the dubbing is being synched well, and the dubbing actor's vocal emotions are in synch with the scene. The title music and background score are added in post-production and the director has to evaluate the artistic merit of these.

Sometimes there's a blurring of roles

Thus while their roles are different, both the producer and director share equal importance in a film, the former mainly with the financial aspects of the film, and the latter chiefly with the artistic elements of it. But as mentioned earlier, this is what is supposed to happen under ideal circumstances. In reality though, even with things so cut and dried, the dynamics between the two are not always in happy alignment. The phrase "He who pays the piper calls the tune" sometimes comes into play, meaning the producer sometimes tries to unilaterally choose the cast and crew, as also to control the art side of things. Take the case of *Kabuliwala*, released in 1961. Its story was written by Rabindranath Tagore and the film was made to honour the great author and poet in his birth centenary year. The film's director was Hemen Gupta who was fond of singing-composer Hemant Kumar. In fact, it was Hemen Gupta who as the director of *Anand Math* (1952) had brought a young Hemant Kumar to Bombay to score music for that film. Hemant was also a very strong Rabindra Sangeet exponent, so the director wanted him for *Kabuliwala's* music. But the film's producer was Bimal Roy, who had earlier worked with composer Salil Chowdhury in *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953), *Amanat* (1955), *Parivar* (1956), *Apradhi Kaun* (1957), *Madhumati* (1958), and *Usne Kaha Tha* (1960), with fair to spectacular results. Roy insisted on Chowdhury, never mind that the latter was not a great Tagore fan. The producer had his way. Hemant ended up with just one solo singing outing in the film, *Ganga aaye kahaan se*, even as the film's other songs were wonderful too.

In another instance of differences between the producer and director, we have the case of *Guide* (1965). Its producer Dev Anand had initially decided to shoot two versions of the film, an English one and a Hindi one,

simultaneously, with an American director doing the English version, and Chetan Anand doing the Hindi one. The shoots started but the idea flopped miserably, with the two directors bickering constantly. Thus, Dev as the producer announced a return to square 1. He was now going to film the English version first, and only when that was completed, perhaps 10 to 12 months later, start filming the Hindi one. This had put a spanner in the works for Chetan Anand, because the government of Punjab had sanctioned funds for his proposed film *Haqeeqat*, and they weren't going to wait so long before the film's work even started. It may be that Dev's decision was a situational imperative, even as many felt this was a subtle way to ease out director Chetan Anand, thus wiping the slate clean to make it ready for Vijay Anand to take over as *Guide's* new director.

This has also happened the other way around, i.e., the producer concedes to a heavy-duty director. In *Aandhi* (1975), producer J Om Prakash wanted Laxmikant-Pyarelal to make the music, but he had to relent to the wishes of the film's powerful writer-director Gulzar, who insisted on RD Burman.

The above examples are about the choice of the crew. Now let's visit some points about the actual filming. Not all producers have their own funds to execute an entire film, so sometimes such producers have a financier backing a project. In such a setting, it is this financier who, through the producer, calls the shots over the director. In *Aar Paar* (1954), Guru Dutt was the director and the *de jure* producer, but the film was substantially funded by KK Kapoor, who made Dutt change the climax of the film from an essentially emotional one to an action one dominated by Bombay Police and gunshots. Dutt himself later let others direct some of his films and not only shot the song sequences in them but also had a lot of final say in several shots and scenes. Raj Kapoor was no less. He too would control a lot of the directors' work in films he produced but didn't officially direct.

So yes, a lot of this has also got to do with the stature of the director or producer. Take the case of *Mere Sanam* (1965). Majrooh had written a song which originally went like this: *Ye hai reshmi gesuon ka andhera na ghabraiye, Jahaan tak mehek hai mere gesuon ki chale aiye*. OP Nayyar the film's composer was unhappy, for reasons of meter, with the word *gesuon*. So there was a quarrel. To resolve this, it wasn't director Amar Kumar who was summoned, it was the producer GP Sippy who had the bigger stature. The latter found a beautiful compromise: use *zulfon* in the first line and *gesuon* in the second.

In any case, there have always been situations of disagreements between the producer and director, which is a key reason several directors turned

into producers too. The list includes Yash Chopra, Mehboob Khan, V Shantaram, Bimal Roy, Shakti Samanta, Raj Khosla, Nitin Bose, Guru Dutt, and several more.

There have also been people like Dev Anand, GP Sippy, and J Om Prakash who became producers first and later ventured into direction, though such people have been much fewer. However, the objective of becoming both remains the same: to smoothen the functioning of a film project. That said, our book attempts to look at just the creative side of things, something for the world to enjoy, rather than the commercial end of things that chiefly aims to make money for the investors.

Action, Cut, and much more

It's quite fascinating to observe a film director at work. He commands respect from the cast and crew, who just wait for him to speak his orders into the megaphone. It's his call to see through the camera what shot the cinematographer has been asked to plan, for which he uses the vocabulary of the trade: "zoom in", "dolly out", "pan", "tilt", "crossfade" or "dissolve", etc. It's he who shouts "roll the camera" to the cinematographer and "action" to start up the actors, and "cut" to stop the shot capture from going further. He sometimes sits high on a crane with the cameraman, the giant machine gracefully swooping down or pulling back to meet the vision of the director. It's he who explains to the actor how to attempt the sequence again, and it is he who thumbs up the take. He is clearly the boss on the premises, much like a captain of a plane. Many people, especially insiders, feel that a film director is no less a star than those that appear in front of his camera. In many cases, he *is* the real star of a film, especially when the actors are newbies.

That's about the work and importance of film directors. *Jaate-jaate*, a few other observations.

Why we have brought our curtain down in 1980

While this book begins its story at the cusp of the 19th-20th century, it spends more time on the 1931 to 1980 period—the first fifty years of the "talkies". Although Indian cinema was born in 1913 with Dadasaheb Phalke directing *Raja Harishchandra*, the films that were made till early 1931 were without sound, so we can hardly focus on them. Most people believe that it was on 14th March 1931, when films started offering sound (and music), with the arrival of Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara*, that Indian movies incidentally turned 18 years of age to mature as *proper* cinema. In fact,

sandwiched within these 50 years (1931-1980) lies the golden age of Hindi cinema and its music, i.e., from the late 1940s to the late 1960s, and that is where the centre of gravity of this book lies. We end our story in 1980, by which time it is generally agreed that many great film directors had either finished their best work or had passed away. In support of that closure I am tempted to quote from the thoughts of that great film authority Bunny Reuben²:

“The era of giants has gone forever from Indian cinema with the passing of filmmakers such as Mehboob Khan and Sohrab Modi, V Shantaram and K Asif, Bimal Roy and Guru Dutt and Raj Kapoor. Of the old school BR Chopra is still with us with a large and significant body of work behind him—and Dev Anand too, whose best work as a filmmaker was all done up to the years of *Guide*, *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* and *Prem Pujari*.

“We now live in the era of hollow ‘bigness’ and sham showmen. The era of giants is gone forever. Barring a few makers whose best is yet to come, Indian cinema is well ensconced in the era of pygmies.”

Most of the known directors are here, but...

Because of the 1980 cut-off point, we have ignored directors who entered after that year or did better work after that year. Thus, the names of impactful directors such as Raju Hirani, Suraj Barjatya, and Sanjay Leela Bhansali, etc., had to be ignored. That part was not so difficult. The tricky part was how many and which films to identify for the directors taken in because we couldn't include all the films of all the directors. Enter subjectivity.

Lata Mangeshkar used subjectivity once when she had to choose her 10 best songs for a Long-Play record. The occasion was to celebrate her silver jubilee-in-playback-singing at a function held at Bombay's Rang Mandir in 1972. On the stage were SD Burman, VK Dubey (General Manager of the music company HMV), and among others, Lata herself. On the record were 10 songs, chosen personally by Lata. Now with such a difficult choice of only her 10 best songs, she could have chosen one song per composer and represented ten maestros to get high approval ratings. Surprisingly though, she chose only 9 composers; while one composer had two songs on that LP record. The composer honoured thus was Madan Mohan. If this was a surprise to music lovers, consider now the shock: she did not choose a single song created by SD Burman, who ironically was releasing this very record at the function! Lata Ma'am did come in for much whispered criticism from her fans, even if just for this strange decision and not for the songs themselves. Another issue about her approach was to look through

the prism of the composer while ignoring the lyricist.³ But subjectivity was her privilege here, so we shouldn't rain too much on her parade.

Years later, in a coffee-table book called *The Hundred Luminaries of Hindi Cinema*, authors Dinesh Raheja and Jitendra Kothari included such people in their 100 list as Mithun Chakraborty, Shatrughan Sinha, Amjad Khan, Mehmood, and Manmohan Desai, while not including heavyweights like OP Nayyar, Majrooh Sultanpuri, VK Murthy, and Shakti Samanta. Most glaringly, even the Venus of Hindi cinema, Madhubala was not profiled. The point I am making is we are all subjective, however hard we may try not to be.

All such subjectivity eventually brought up this situation: people like VM Vyas (26 films) and Nari Ghadiali (over 15 films) don't find a detailed mention in this book, while K Asif, with just four films (two complete and two incomplete ones actually), does because of just one extraordinary film: *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960). Other directors with copious outputs, like RS Chowdhury and Vithaldas Panchotia may have been fine for their times, but history has not considered remembering them too much. Incidentally, some of you may wonder why the great Satyajit Ray has not found much space here. The fact is, Satyajit Ray, with just two Hindustani films, is not saluted big time here, only because his wonderful work was really in Bengali cinema, which falls outside our pale here.

A couple of other things. No attempt has been made to offer detailed reviews of anyone's films, something that has been done well by many others over the decades. However, you will find quoted here parts of some reviews from the period. Coming to the titles of films, we have tried to spell them, as far as possible, the way the filmmaker spelt them, even if some spellings do seem odd now and then.

And a last point, which is an admission I need to make. When I started this project, I did not have the foggiest idea what I was getting into, no concept that the subject would expose itself to be so wide and deep that I would someday soon get the daunting feeling such a book cannot be written with any competency. Most of the directors profiled had passed away, and in many cases, their next of kin were not around or then had little idea of cinema itself. Part of my work had to do with finding something written about directors decades ago, but tunnelling through a fog of gossip writers became a huge task. Surely these must be the reasons accomplished film historians that many of us admire, like BD Garga, Mihir Bose, and Bunny Reuben did not attempt writing an exhaustive omnibus on just Hindi film directors. I realised my own smallness in handling the project only when I

was halfway into the tunnel, after which I toyed with the idea of dropping it altogether. But it was too late; the genie was out of the bottle and so here we are. That said, I must surely have made errors of omission and commission. So, while I feel privileged to shine some light on the subject, let's hope another writer will come along, sandpaper this work and build upon it to offer a fuller, truer history of our directors and their cinema.

I also hope a large majority of readers will find some value in these pages. I am grateful to many friends who helped clear the fog that descended upon my brain throughout the time I was researching and writing this book. They also made corrections in my drafts, gave me photos, and offered fresh insights. Lata Jagtiani, Sundeep Pahwa, Antara Nanda Mondal, Monica Kar, Archana Patankar, and Yogesh Kamdar, please accept my gratitude.

Manek Premchand

1st January 2024

Endnotes

1. *Mise-en-scene* has to do with the things that are exposed to the camera: the use of lighting, the sets, props, costumes, and actors, including the movements of the latter. It's about format vs content, i.e., the narrative itself, along with the music and other sounds.
2. Mehboob, India's DeMille, page 361
3. Sadly, this fixation with the work of singers and composers, to the near-complete exclusion of lyricists, is an old Indian habit.





The Early Masters



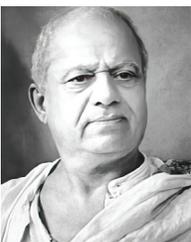
This section takes a brief look at the life and work of many of the early masters of Indian films, those who laid the foundations of landmark cinema from the 1930s (and some from the even earlier era of the silents), years before the golden era that began in the late 1940s. By ‘masters’ is meant not just directors, but hands-on producers as well, because in the early days, there was a greater blur between the work of a producer and a director. During a film project, several people did different things at some time or another, with many facets of filmmaking overlapping with each other. As time passed, both film production and direction became complex fields, pushing cinema into more compartmentalized specialization.

Readers must first note that this particular section manages to glance at overall Indian cinema, not just Hindi cinema, though the focus is on the latter. The work of these early filmmakers also paved the way for many regional centres to come up with gifted directors who too made notable Hindi films. Secondly, if you find a few prominent directors missing here (for instance Sohrab Modi and Nitin Bose, both remarkable men who started in the 1930s), it is probably because such people went on to do valuable work in the 50s and 60s as well, so you may find their detailed mention in the two chapters that follow this one.

It is generally agreed that these were the Big Four of Early Indian Cinema: DG Phalke, Baburao Painter, JF Madan, and Ardeshir Irani. But there were significant others too, so they are here as well. We start with the Father of Indian Cinema, DG Phalke, and then proceed alphabetically.

Dadasaheb Phalke

(30th April 1870-16th February 1944)



In 1969, twenty-five years after Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, the father of Indian cinema passed away, the Government of India set up the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in his memory. This, India’s prestigious award for work in Indian cinema, is widely recognised as the ultimate honour you can earn for a lifetime’s work in the industry. What is the story of this remarkable pioneer?

Dhundiraj Phalke was born to Govind and Dwarkabai Phalke on 30th April 1870 in Trimbak, a small city near Nashik in Maharashtra. He went to

school near his home, but finished his matriculation in Bombay, because his father, a Sanskrit scholar, had started teaching at Bombay's Wilson College. The entire Phalke family consisting of the senior Phalkes, along with their 4 daughters and 3 sons had moved to Bombay. Showing much interest in the arts, Dhundiraj went to different institutions to learn drawing and painting, only to chase these up with photography, which included processing and printing of photos. But these were the early days of photography, and many people distrusted the whole business. In general, it was thought that you could get sick or otherwise be negatively affected by what the camera could do to you. Thus Dhundiraj couldn't yet monetize his professional expertise. He had got married too, in 1886, but lost his wife in 1900 in the bubonic plague that ravaged Bombay for a few years from 1896. Downbeat, he started painting curtains for stage shows. These were very popular at the turn of the century. This occupation kept him busy and even got him a few odd roles in plays.

In 1902, two years after living as a widower, he remarried. His wife's maiden name was Girija Karandikar, which was changed to Saraswati Phalke. He now quit painting curtains and started commercial photography while trying his hand at other activities like performing magic and running a printing press. This last business, which he ran with different partners in Lonavala and Bombay, gave him much success. He spent 9 years doing all these things, even going to Germany to obtain colour machinery and guiding his printing press to high commercial success. But business at its zenith, Dhundiraj gave up his partnership. During all these years he was learning to be sure, while his destiny was secretly sandpapering him to help him find his passion and become a great pioneer—the definitive one—in the field of filmmaking.

Life begins at 40

In early 1911, he went to watch a silent film that was made in France: *The Birth, Life, and Death of Christ*, a film that ran for 33 minutes. Dhundiraj watched it mouth agape. He wondered if he could do something for Indian mythology. Wouldn't it be nice if he made a film on Lord Krishna and Lord Rama, worshipped by millions here?

The energised man, now in his early-40s, put the idea of cinema on the front burner, getting everything else out of focus in the process. He bought or borrowed dozens of books and journals, which he read again and again. He purchased a camera and experimented with taking short motion pictures. He became obsessed with films and nearly lost his vision doing all this, some 18 hours a day. Seeing him so, people who had negative

ideas about photography were convinced that the occupation had turned a normal person into a crazed idiot.

Later, in December 1911, there was a huge spectacle that hit the press with photos and text: the Delhi Durbar. This event was historic because it was to celebrate the coronation of King George V, as also to proclaim him as Emperor and Queen Mary as Empress of India. The event also announced the moving of India's capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Photographers from around the world converged in New Delhi and took awe-inspiring motion pictures of the event, something not lost on Dhundiraj. Earlier, he had been amazed at the slick film on Christ, and now, during the Delhi Durbar, he marvelled at European photography in general. These two milestones of 1911 were a tipping point for him. He now decided to take a trip to England, learn the craft, buy some equipment and raw stock, and zip back home.

In 1912, the charged-up young man got on a boat headed for England, spent a couple of months there, bought the equipment he needed, and steam-shipped himself back to Bombay. He watched in dismay as he saw a film being released by two other Indians, Dadasaheb Torne and Nanabhai Chitre who made *Pundalik*, which opened for screening in May 1912. But the film's photographer was an Englishman named Johnson and the prints were processed in London, so there were clear foreign elements in the film. Much before Torne and Chitre though, another man from Maharashtra, Harishchandra Bhatavdekar (later called Save Dada) had made several short films, beginning as far back as 1899. But his films, such as *The Wrestlers* (1899), and *Delhi Durbar of Lord Curzon* (1903) had been documentaries, meaning short films that are intended to offer education on specific subjects, while feature films are longer and essentially aim to entertain. So, while Save Dada was immediately called India's first documentary maker, the title of Father of Indian Cinema was waiting for Phalke, who decided to go completely Indian, to make a film that would entertain and run for at least half an hour. He chose to film the story of the truth-seeking king, Harishchandra of Ayodhya, but couldn't find actors to do the many roles in the film. He put out ads in the local press, but still no luck. Somehow, he cobbled together an all-male crew, to play even the women's roles, like that of queen Taramati. Funds were vital, and while he didn't beg or steal, he did borrow a lot. He borrowed against his insurance policy and he pledged his wife's jewellery too. Forgetting about his food, the time, or his health, he went about his mission. That, in short, is how *Raja Harishchandra* was completed.

The film was released on 13th May 1913 at the same cinema hall as Dadasaheb Torne and Chitre's *Pundalik*, in Girgaum, Bombay, i.e.,

Coronation Cinematograph. The cinema, after many overhauls, has become Cosmopolitan Restaurant and is located very close to Sir HN Reliance Hospital.

As the posters said, *Raja Harishchandra* was “the first film of Indian manufacture”. The film clicked, giving Phalke the zeal to make more mythologicals. He moved to Nashik, which had a better climate and plenty of places to shoot in. He now made *Mohini Bhramasur* (1913), which too was successful. Then he made *Satyavan Savitri* (1914), which also clicked. His success meant that one print of his films wasn’t enough, he needed a couple of dozen. Moreover, his hand-held camera was outdated. So just before the war started, he sailed for England again. When he returned in late 1914, World War I had begun, so whoever was making small films had to shut, principally because the raw stock was imported and it was being severely restricted now. That’s because celluloid and high explosives use the same substance in manufacture. But this energised man soldiered on. He wrote articles on cinema. He made one-reel shorts on educational subjects and comedies. When things began improving, he returned to regular lengths and made *Lanka Dehen* (1917) which became a special hit. It was a story from the Ramayana, in which Lord Hanuman sets Lanka on fire. The film had plenty of special effects which Phalke created in the rudimentary technology of his time, without any computer graphics we so take for granted these days. Phalke went on making films for many years, like *Shri Krishna Janma* (1918) and *Kaliya Mardan* (1919), but his financial successes reduced in number, even as he could no longer get along with increasingly pokey partners.

After some years, talkies arrived in 1931, something that depressed Phalke, a strong believer in silent films. He watched in further dismay as 1931 witnessed not one but two sound films on the very theme he had pioneered 18 years earlier, i.e., *Raja Harishchandra*. In that year, Kanjibhai Rathod directed *Harishchandra* for Krishnatone, Bombay, while JJ Madan directed *Satyavadi Raja Harishchandra* for Madan Theatres, Calcutta. V Shantaram missed the 1931 calendar, but in 1932 he too made the story and he did so in two versions, Hindi and Marathi. These were *Ayodhya Ka Raja* and *Ayodhyecha Raja*. So after some reluctance, Phalke, now in his mid-60s, gave the new technology a shot. He directed *Gangavataran* (1937), his only sound film. When he brought his filmmaking curtain down, in 1937, cumulative financial burdens ensured Dadasaheb Phalke was broke. Advancing years, financial reverses and new technologies like playback singing conspired to put the bewildered man to pasture. On 16th February

1944, this extraordinary pioneer died in Nashik, personally moneyless, but leaving the world rich with a legacy of 95 feature films and 27 shorts.

Many years later in Goregaon, a suburb of Mumbai, the local state government set up the Dadasaheb Phalke Chitranagri (also called Film City). The place permits you to take a 2-hour bus journey that shows you studios where they shoot films and TV serials. Can't say visitors have been raving too much about the place.

As for Phalke's legacy, it is interesting that while he is considered to be a pioneer at home, foreign film historians are not so excited. Here is what Brian Shoosmith of the University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh writes, "What Phalke developed was a variation of the Hindu joint family with himself as the patriarch. Phalke was responsible for all aspects of the filmmaking process and there is little evidence of him developing any sense of continuity or of any of the people who worked for him going on to develop their own companies or products. Because of its indigenous roots, Phalke's solution to filmmaking tends to be much admired in India although it contributed little to the eventual directions the industry took."¹ *C'est la vie.*



Amar Mullick

In the '30s and '40s, there were senior directors at New Theatres, Calcutta, including Nitin Bose, Premankur Atorthy, and PC Barua. But there were juniors who had assisted these seniors and were then given independent assignments. Amar Mullick was one such man. Heading the production department at New Theatres, he migrated to the art side of filmmaking, beginning with *Badi Didi* (1939) which was a Sarat Chandra story about a Hindu widow who falls in love with her oddball teacher with disastrous consequences. The widow's role was portrayed well by Molina Devi, for which the audience praised director Mullick too. New Theatres next gave him *Haar Jeet (Abhinetri)* to release in 1940. This was also a biopic of a woman and it became a super hit, especially for its music by RC Boral, with the song *Mast pawan shaakhen lehraayen* on everyone's lips.

He started his own company in Bombay, Amar Mullick Productions, under which he offered the world another biopic, *Swami Vivekanand* (1955). Mullick's better work was in the '30s and '40s, which is why he is here.



Ardeshir Irani



Fast worker

Ardeshir Merwan Irani was a Parsi born in Poona on 5th December 1886. When he was in high school, films had started coming upon the scene, so like many other teenagers he too was highly impressed with such ‘moving pictures.’ He dabbled as a young schoolteacher for some time but soon joined his father who was in the business of selling musical instruments. Confidence pumped up after winning money in a lottery in 1912, Irani moved to Bombay, began importing films, and started showing them in tents, sometimes pitching them in the open, and sometimes inside theatres that were originally designed for stage plays.

Star Films

Meeting with an overwhelming response over the years, Irani distributed and exhibited dozens of films with different partners, while he also set up a few cinema exhibition halls in his journey. In 1914, he joined hands with film distributor Abdullaly Esoofally to buy Alexandra Theatre in Bombay, converting it into a cinema hall and managing it for decades. They screened foreign and Indian films, including Phalke’s *Kaliya Mardan* and *Krishna Janam*. These latter were such hits that Irani decided to become a filmmaker too. In 1921, he partnered with Bhogilal Dave (mentioned independently later) to set up Star Films Limited and together they produced their first silent film, *Veer Abhimanyu* (1922), directed by Manilal Joshi and based on the life of the great warrior from the Mahabharata. Irani went on to direct many silents in the 1920s. Says film historian BD Garga, “He (Dave) photographed while Irani directed most of the 17 films they produced until the Company went into voluntary liquidation in 1924.”² Garga goes on to name *Ratnavali* (1922), *Krishna Arjuna Yuddha* (1923), *Champraj Hado* (1923), and *Chandragupta* (1923) as films directed by Irani.

Majestic Films

After this, in 1924, Irani instituted his own independent studio, Majestic Films. Here he was joined by gifted directors like Bhagwati Prasad Mishra and Naval Gandhi. Mishra died in 1932, by which time he had directed over a hundred silents for Irani, including the phenomenal *Veer Durgadas* (1924), based on the life of the warrior from Marwar who defeated Aurangzeb and restored Rajput honour. Mishra accompanied Irani as the latter moved from one studio to another. In Irani’s final outfit, Imperial, Mishra directed

Alladin and the Wonderful Lamp (1927), which became a super-hit. Naval Gandhi directed for Majestic Films such features as *Chandan Mayanagri* (1924), and *Sanyasi* (1924).

Royal Art Studio

No one knows why Irani's Majestic Films shut down, after just 18 months and with just fifteen films to show, especially since many of these were quite successful. He next established Royal Art Studio which also had a similarly short lifespan, making mostly costume dramas of fictional kings, their palace intrigues, and their romances. The most successful of Irani's films here was the narrative of a bandit, *Naharsingh Daaku* (1925).

Imperial

In the November of 1926, Irani finally set up Imperial Film Company which would go on to make some 62 silents, including the super successful *Wildcat of Bombay* (1927), in which the Jewish actress Sulochana played eight roles, the first occurrence in our films, and a number later beaten by Sivaji Ganesan and Sanjeev Kumar. The film's amazing success was in no small measure due to its director, Mohan Bhavnani.

Imperial would frequently feature and promote the abovementioned Sulochana, India's first sex symbol. She would appear in 36 films made by Irani. The studio would go on to boast of many other firsts too. For instance, Mehboob Khan first faced the camera—even if in a cameo—in Irani's film *Shirin Khusrau* (1929), while Prithviraj Kapoor was featured in a key role in *Alam Ara* (1931). This last was the first sound film made in India—talkies as they were called then—and it was directed by Irani himself. The idea was a game-changer when it came to how we consumed and made films till then. For audiences, it was first silent moving pictures, then live musicians accompanying the silents, and now speech and music from the film itself. For filmmakers, the practice of including title cards and subtitles was dumped. That was easy. Recording directly to film and then reproducing the sounds in cinema halls posed a challenge. Irani achieved all that and beat to the finish line another enterprising Parsi, JJ Madan of Calcutta, who owned a huge production company and over a hundred cinema halls. Irani's *Alam Ara* (meaning Ornament of the World) was released on 14th March 1931 at Majestic Cinema Bombay. Less than a month later, on 11th April 1931, was released the first Bengali film with sound, *Jamai Shashthi*, produced by Madan Theatres Limited. Irani would go on to produce and direct the world's first Persian-language film, *Dokhtar-e-Lor (Lor Woman)* (1932), and produce India's first completely indigenous colour film, *Kisan*

Kanya (1937). Shantaram's *Sairandhri*, made earlier in 1933 was in colour too but the film had been processed in Germany.

About *Alam Ara*, when Irani was planning it in late 1930, not everyone was excited by the success of sound in films. Many considered talkies like USA's *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and UK's *Blackmail* (1929) as just examples of a passing fad. A prominent journal of the time, *The Moving Pictures Monthly* in its October 1930 issue announced that sound was a novelty that would disappear soon, adding "There is a rumour that one prominent film company in Bombay is thinking of drifting into this doubtful direction." That company was Imperial and the rumour was true. But the fears were misplaced.

The story itself is about two queens married to a king who has a commander-in-chief in his army. One queen delivers a son who grows up to become the prince and heir apparent, played by Master Vithal. The other one attempts to seduce the commander-in-chief (Prithviraj Kapoor), who rejects the royal advances; he pays for this rejection by being interned when the queen frames him for making advances on her. The commander's wife gives birth to a girl who grows up to be played by Zubeida. This girl and the prince fall in love, even as plenty of palace intrigue happens along the way. The film was a hit.

After the instant success of *Alam Ara*, Irani gave assignments to various directors in films that would be released in the same year, 1931. Examples: *Anang Sena* (director Moti Gidwani), *Daulat Ka Nasha* (Pesi Karani), *Draupadi* (BP Mishra), and *Noor Jahan* (Ezra Mir). Next year he assigned RS Chowdhury to direct *Madhuri*, Rustom Poonawala was given *Nek Abla*, and Madanrai Vakil received *Sati Sone*. Over the years, Irani kept assigning responsibilities to such gifted directors.

Irani made movies up till 1945, after which time he was plain tired of plodding on more. Imperial's final offering, *Pujari*, was released in 1946. For his extraordinary work in cinema during colonial times, the British honoured Irani with the title of Khan Bahadur, which was the equivalent of Rai Bahadur, a title given to Hindus only. Irani remained in touch with industry mates as well as audiences though, and he passed away in Bombay on 14th October 1969, a few weeks before his 83rd birthday.

Sadly, no copy of his path-breaking film *Alam Ara* exists. History does salute this innovative filmmaker though, in the form of records. The song, *De de khuda ke naam pe taaqat hai gar dene ki* has been noted as the first song recorded for a Hindi film, i.e., *Alam Ara* (1931). The film was shot at Jyoti Studios near Opera House. It was in the fitness of things that the

Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai renamed the Kennedy Bridge, near which the studio was located, to Khan Bahadur Ardeshir M. Irani Bridge.



Baburao Painter

(3rd June 1890-16th January 1954)

There were two men named Baburao, both in cinema and even working together (the other was Baburao Pendharkar who was essentially an actor, even if he may have directed the odd silent film. For more on him, do see the chapter on V Shantaram). Baburao Painter's original name was Baburao Mistry. He was



born in Kolhapur and was not formally educated but was marvellous with skills, such as sculpting, painting, costume design, and even in a machine workshop. He came to be especially associated with painting backdrops for many a stage play. Impressed by Phalke's success with films, he wanted to get on that bus, and he did. After raw stock began easing up when WWI ended, Painter (as his surname came to be called) set up the Maharashtra Film Company. He assembled a team from a group of friends and absorbed a couple of outsiders for making cinema. These would be names such as V Shantaram, VG Damle, Sheikh Fatehlal, K Dhaibar, and Baburao Pendharkar.

His first film was *Sairandhri* (1920) which was from the Mahabharata, and he got instant recognition for the depiction of a brutal killing in the film. In the story, Keechak, an evil commander of a kingdom is a powerful man with lusty ambitions. He tries to molest Sairandhri, the queen's maid-in-waiting. Bheem takes revenge on Keechak by killing him with his bare hands. This act looked so gruesome that audiences were horrified. More importantly, the recently instituted board of censors had the entire scene removed from the film, causing a lot of buzz. Painter's next venture, *Surekha Haran* (1921) was also a tale from the Mahabharata, and it is in this film that he gave an acting break to a young V Shantaram who was doing odd jobs in this company.

Baburao Painter was a painstaking filmmaker who perhaps had his actors rehearse their roles more times than any other director in film

history, many times with the actors exasperated with their work. What prevented many of them from giving up was perhaps the fact that Painter was harsh on himself too. Moreover, he was extra patient if actors flubbed their lines and multiple takes were needed. Painter introduced artificial lighting in cinema, and allowed his team to improvise, even in the light of all those rehearsals. He understood the importance of publicity, no matter how it happened. He would come to be hugely associated with historical films, especially those revolving around the life of Chhatrapati Shivaji. Such silents include *Sinhagad* (1923), *Kalyan Khajina* (1924), *Rana Hamir* (1925), and *Shahala Shah* (1925). From these *Sinhagad* was India's first historical feature film. It was the story of Shivaji and his trusted aide Tanaji. Painter himself played Shivaji, and in one scene fell off a horse. The fall would leave him with a speech issue for the rest of his life. The saving grace was the astonishing success of the film. In fact, it was the success of this film that invited the attention of the bureaucrats; from now on an Entertainment Tax was to be levied on films.

After making the abovementioned features, Painter directed *Savkari Pash* (1925) the first social in Indian cinema. It was about a moneylender and how farmers would get under the man's vice-like grip. The film bombed. But Painter remained married to this theme. He would make the film again, as a talkie in Marathi, later in 1936. That would fare well, but we must return to the 1920s when Painter was still making silent cinema. He did direct a few of these, but when sound came in 1931, he was disappointed. He, with others such as Shantaram, thought sound films were just a fad. Maharashtra Film Company shut shop now.

A disillusioned Baburao Painter, with a scarcity of funds and impaired speech, went back to painting and sculpting. A few years later, a friend induced him to direct a film again. That was *Usha* (1935), a fictional mythological made by Shalini Cinetone Kolhapur in two versions, Marathi and Hindi. These did so-so commercially. Jump-started anyway, he made *Savkari Pash* (1936) as mentioned above. This was India's first remake of a film. Shalini Cinetone then gave him to direct *Pratibha* (1937), a fantasy venture, in both Marathi and Hindi, which was a failure in commercial terms. Saddened by the results his recent films were getting, he went out of circulation again, this time for a decade. He re-emerged to direct the Hindi language *Rukmani Swayamwar* (1946) for Pradeep Pictures Bombay. Next year, he co-directed with V Shantaram—an ex-employee—the Hindi film *Matwala Shair Ramjoshi* (1947). This film was about a poet who was excessively fond of the bottle and of a woman, and how he finally succeeded

in getting hold of his life.

As a swan song, in 1952 Painter went on to direct *Vishwamitra*, the story of the revered ancient Indian sage. But the spark had by now left this once-extraordinary filmmaker. However, for people who know about the early masters of Indian cinema, Baburao Painter is a huge name. That's why he came to be called Kalamaharshi Baburao Painter. That's why he is here.



Bhalji Pendharkar

(3rd May 1897-26th November 1994)

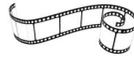
Bhalji Pendharkar and his elder brother Baburao Pendharkar (not to be confused with Baburao Painter) were maternal cousins of V Shantaram. Pendharkar was from Kolhapur, which before becoming famous for its chappals and mutton was a big centre for cinema. The vast amount of work done by Bhalji Pendharkar was in Marathi films. Before that, he dabbled in silent films, mainly for Prabhat, then he set up his own production unit, while he kept on his work in direction. He named this company Jayaprabha, a portmanteau of the names Jayasingh and Prabhakar. It's like this: Bhalji (as he came to be respectfully called) had married twice. Prabhakar was his son from his first marriage. When he married the second time, it was to a singing actress who already had kids, including a son named Jayasingh, hence the name Jayaprabha. After some time, he changed his company's name to Prabhakar Pictures.



He became popular for the many silent and Marathi biopics that he directed well, for instance, *Bajirao Mastani* (silent, 1925), *Raja Gopichand* (1938), *Netaji Palkar* (1939), *Maharathi Karan* (1944), *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (1952), and *Maharani Yesubai* (1954). He was active in making films for 45 years, from 1925 as we saw to *Taambdi Maati* in 1969. These are the Hindi films that he directed, some of which were made simultaneously in Marathi as well:

- *Aakashwani* (1934) for Kolhapur Cinetone, Kolhapur
- *Raja Gopichand* (1938) for Saraswati Cinetone, Poona
- *Alakh Niranjana* (1940) for Arun Pictures, Bombay
- *Maharathi Karan* (1944) for Prabhakar Pictures, Bombay
- *Valmiki* (1946) for Prabhakar Pictures, Bombay
- *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (1952) for Prabhakar Pictures, Bombay

For his meaningful and huge work, Pendharkar was honoured with the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1991.



Bhogilal Dave

In the mid-1920s, when the silents had gotten very popular, one of the men associated with this popularity was a man named Nanubhai Desai who had written stories for a few films and co-directed (with BP Mishra, who was mentioned under Ardeshir Irani earlier) *Razia Begum* (1924), the film that would get banned in the northern parts of the country (for reasons that can be found under Dhiren Ganguly later). Around the same time, an enthused young photographer named Bhogilal Dave watched a recent import called *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), which was taking the world by storm. The film journeyed through the adventures of a swashbuckling hero portrayed wonderfully by the super agile actor Douglas Fairbanks. Dave had earlier worked with Phalke in the latter's Hindustan Film Company, and then had gone on to partner with Ardeshir Irani, with whom he had produced *Veer Abhimanyu* in 1922. Not just that, he had filmed well over a dozen silents for Irani before the two parted ways. And now, Dave had watched *The Thief of Baghdad*. The film's special effects were wondrous, with flying horses, swordfights, and magic carpets. In the story the thieving drifter fell in love with a princess, so there was plenty of romance as well.

Dave joined Desai and together they started Sharda Movietone in 1925. They found an 'Indian Douglas Fairbanks' in the athletic Master Vithal, who could do many of the things the Hollywood original did. Sharda made several films with this swashbuckling young man, such as *Swarna Kamal* (1926), *Bhedi Trishul* (1927), *Gulzar* (1927), and *Kaala Pahad* (1927), all photographed exceptionally by Dave, who became famous for filming action scenes imaginatively. These films were directed by Nanubhai Desai or others like KP Bhawe, but as observed at the start of this section, in the early days the producer (in these cases Dave) used to have a lot of say even on the artistic side of the film, such as in the choice of story, camera angles and so on.

Apart from these films, Sharda made several movies based on the Hollywood model, especially those featuring vamps, something that other filmmakers had found scary to attempt till now, playing safe as they did with mythological and historical themes. The studio had Naval Gandhi direct *Vamp* (1926), whose title itself told viewers what the story was

about; people had seen several foreign imports with golden-haired home breakers. Sharda went on to juice the theme, making *Wronged Wife* (1930), *The Enchantress* (1930), and *A Woman's Vengeance* (1930). These films received much success. The next year, 1931, brought with it sound cinema, signifying the beginning of the end for swashbuckling hero Master Vithal, whose high-pitched voice was totally unfit for an actor.

When the first talkie, *Alam Ara* was released, in March 1931, Dave lost no time in taking a trip to Germany both to learn the technique of talking films as also to buy the necessary machinery for the same. His company also arranged for two German technicians to sail to Bombay and help with setting things up.

Here are a couple of Sharda's early sound films:

- *Sassi Punnu* (1932), directed by SR Apte and CM Lohar
- *Rambha Rani* (1934), directed by HS Mehta



BN Sircar

(5th July 1901-28th November 1980)

Birendranath Sircar received the prestigious Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1970. What did he do to deserve the honour? Plenty, short of actually directing films, which he let others as long as they consulted with him from time to time. He was a civil engineer with a degree from Glasgow, and he used his education to start a business in Calcutta upon his return in 1926.



At this time films were getting very popular, with Madan Theatres of Calcutta doing so well. So when he was making buildings, Sircar thought of constructing a cinema hall for himself. He made that hall and called it Chitra. Later in 1930, something sparked in him a desire to even make films. He took on a partner and made a film called *Booker Pooja* (1930) which did not get any money or recognition. Then he took two partners and established a company called International Filmcraft, which made two silent films, *Chashar Maye* and *Chor Kanta*, both released in 1931. No luck yet, but Sircar wasn't giving up so soon. He saw sound coming into films and people reacting favourably to such cinema, so he shut down his earlier company and started New Theatres for making films with sound.

He purchased an expensive Tanar camera that recorded sound directly on film and hired the services of the American sound engineer named Wilford Deming to install and supervise the sound system for New Theatres. Deming had come as a representative of Fox Films of the USA, to promote American films in India. Then Ardeshir Irani had taken the American's help for *Alam Ara*, after which Sircar had offered the visitor a retainer in Calcutta.

Under Sircar's eagle eye, New Theatres made many Hindi and Bengali films, especially several successful films with the sensational singing-hero KL Saigal. Here are some of Sircar's early productions, with the directors mentioned:

- *Dena Paona* (Bengali, 1931, directed by Premankur Atorthy)
- *Josh-e-Mohabbat* (Hindi, 1932). The film was made, but no cast or crew details are available
- *Mohabbat Ke Aansoo* (Hindi, 1932, Premankur Atorthy) This was KL Saigal's first film
- *Subah Ka Sitara* (Hindi, 1932, Nitin Bose)
- *Zinda Laash* (Hindi, 1932, Premankur Atorthy)

In 1932, wanting to switch tracks by making his stories based on Bengal's rich literature, Sircar requested Rabindranath Tagore to direct a Bengali film called *Natir Pooja*, meaning the prayer of a dancing lass. This is the only film Tagore directed.

Just some of Sircar's Hindi language productions now:

After that, New Theatres released *Puran Bhagat* (1933, Debaki Bose), *Rajrani Meera* (1933, Debaki Bose), and *Yahudi Ki Ladki* (1933, Premankur Atorthy). This was followed by *Daku Mansoor* and *Chandidas* (both 1934 and Nitin Bose). This last film was based on the story of a poet from 15th-century Bengal who falls in love with a washerwoman called Rami. This film introduced background music to lend weightage to the actors' emotions and to impact audiences more. The music composer of this feature was RC Boral. It was the same Boral under whose supervision (and in collaboration with Sound Engineer Mukul Bose) the breakthrough of playback singing was achieved in Sircar's *Dhoop Chhaon* (directed by Nitin Bose) released the next year in 1935.

We have looked at some New Theatres' Hindi films from 1932 to *Dhoop Chhaon* (1935). Here are the rest of Sircar's Hindi films:

- *Devdas* (1935, director PC Barua)
- *Kaarwan-e-Hayat* (1935, Premankur Atorthy)

- *Manzil* (1936, PC Barua)
- *Millionaire (Karodpati)* (1936, Hem Chandar)
- *President* (1937, Nitin Bose)
- *Mukti* (1937, PC Barua)
- *Vidyapati* (1937, Debaki Bose)
- *Adhikaar* (1938, PC Barua)
- *Street Singer* (1938, Phani Majumdar)
- *Dushman* (1939, Nitin Bose)
- *Nartaki* (1940, Debaki Bose)
- *Kashinath* (1943, Nitin Bose)
- *Meri Behen (My Sister)* (1944, Hem Chandar)
- *Humrahi* (1945, Bimal Roy)
- *Anjargarh* (1948, Bimal Roy)
- *Yatrik* (1952, Kartik Chatterjee)

Yatrik brought down the curtain of the great work done by BN Sircar and his amazing New Theatres after over two decades of meaningful cinema, with more films in Bengali than in Hindi.

BN Sircar's New Theatres had done outstanding work in the entire 1930s. But when the new decade arrived, people began leaving Calcutta for Bombay. They were leaving to either escape from Debaki Bose's infamous dictatorial style or then because Bombay was offering better financial returns. These departures became more pronounced in 1942, after a fire broke out in New Theatres' studios, destroying much celluloid but also damaging everyone's confidence. By 1942, Calcutta became a hub of army action too, with WW II well into play. The Japanese, enemies of the British who had colonised us, started bombing Calcutta. BN Sircar became low-profile, even if he didn't stop making cinema. Later still, in 1947, when the country was partitioned, Bengal was partitioned in the process. After 14th August 1947, two-thirds of Bengalis became citizens of East Pakistan, effectively slashing Sircar's audience base.

But in the '30s, his audience had been huge. And the directors he had introduced or promoted, many names such as Debaki Bose, Nitin Bose, and PC Barua not only went into production for themselves, but became schools of cinema. They can be found with an independent mention on these pages.

It is Sircar's attention to detail, his meticulous planning which spared no expense, his choice of gifted actors and crew, and his selection of subjects that made him stand out to deserve the Dadasaheb Phalke Award mentioned at the start of this story.



Chandulal Shah



Born in Jamnagar on 13th April 1898, Chandulal Shah graduated from Bombay University in 1920 and right away got a job at the Bombay Stock Exchange, where he trained to be a stockbroker. It is also here that he first became aware of speculation, of quick returns when the tide favoured you. No one knows why he was invited to join Laxmi Films in 1925. Laxmi would be a short-lived studio, shutting shop soon, but not before Shah had directed a few silents for the owners. The first of these was *Vimla* (1925). They kept him busy for two more silents: *Paanch Danda* (1925), and *Madhav Kam Kundala* (1926). Next, he got a job at Kohinoor which had several other directors under its umbrella, such as RS Chowdhury, Nandlal Jaswantlal, and Mohan Bhavnani. Here, the young director met with an actress named Gohar who had begun making waves on the silent silver screen. Notes filmmaker Karan Bali, “The first film independently directed by Shah at Kohinoor was *Typist Girl* (1926) starring Sulochana and Gohar made in 17 days. The film did extremely well at the box office leading Shah to direct another five films for the studio, all featuring Gohar.”³ The most notable film he directed for Kohinoor was *Gunsundari* (1927) in which Gohar essayed the role of a wife who loses her straying husband to an oomph girl, but who eventually transforms herself to win him back.

The married Shah and Miss Gohar would team up for decades in what was more than a professional relationship. Meanwhile, unhappy with politics at Kohinoor, Shah and Gohar left the studio to join Jagdish Films, where he directed 4 features that had a woman-centric story, all featuring Gohar again: *Griha Laxmi* (1928), *Vishwa Mohini* (1928), *Chandramukhi* (1929), and *Raj Laxmi* (1930). These were not hits but he and Gohar were cementing their relationship.

In late 1929 Shah founded, in partnership with Gohar, Ranjit Film Company (later changed to Ranjit Movietone). The name was a tribute he was paying to Maharaja Ranjitsingh of Jamnagar, Shah’s birthplace.

Over the years, this studio hired a who’s who of big names like directors Kidar Sharma, Nanubhai Vakil, AR Kardar, and Nandlal Jaswantlal, as also composers such as Khemchand Prakash, Bulu C Rani, Gyan Dutt, and

Ustad Jhande Khan. His stables included performing artists like Sitara Devi, Khursheed, Motilal, Gohar Jaan, Raja Sandow, Billimoria brothers, Prithviraj Kapoor and KL Saigal. Adding cast and crew, it is estimated that at one time Ranjit had 700 people on its payroll. With their help, Chandulal Shah produced or directed dozens of films, both silent and with sound. Ranjeet became very popular for what it offered to the public and Chandulal Shah became powerful. He presided over both the silver and golden jubilee celebrations (in 1938 and 1963 respectively) of Hindi cinema in Bombay. He became the first President of the powerful Film Federation of India. He was friendly with political leaders, chiefly Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who sometimes showed up at film-related events, including premieres, arranged by Shah. Interestingly Shah himself became known with the prefix Sardar when that title was prompted for him by film journalist Baburao Patel.

In his long film journey between 1925 and 1963, Shah wrote 8 film stories, directed 35 films, and produced a whopping 137 films. These last include many memorable movies, such as *Raat Ki Rani* (1935), *Tansen* (1943), *Moorti* (1945), *Jogan* (1950), and *Footpath* (1953), in which he handed over the direction to others. Shah had started by directing *Vimla* in 1925 and shut his movie shop with *Akeli Mat Jaiyo* (1963), which he had written and produced, while he and his partner Gohar Mamajiwala had given the film's direction to Nandlal Jaswantlal, who had a long association with Ranjit, starting with *Pardesi Preetam* 30 years earlier in 1933.

Since our focus is on directors, let us glance at the names of just a few talking films Shah himself directed:

- *Devi Devyani* (1931) was a mythological, and the first sound film from Ranjit
- *Radharani* (1932) was a period drama based on the life of Saint Meera. It featured Gohar in the role.
- *Sati Savitri* (1932) saw Gohar changing her costumes to fit under the mythological skin of the sacrificing Indian woman who was devoted to her husband Satyavan.
- *Shailbala* (1932) had Gohar too, paired again with Bhagwandas, her hero in *Sati Savitri*.
- *Gunsundari* (1934) was a remake of his earlier film of the same name, released as a silent film in 1927 and outlined above. It starred Gohar in the eponymous role, something that she had done in the 4 films listed above as well.
- *Barrister's Wife* (1935) was a social drama in which Shah featured an early qawwali in Hindi cinema: *Nazariya taane hai teer-kamaan, jaane*

legi ye kis-kis ki jaan. It was filmed on Noor Mohammad “Charlie”, India’s first comedy king.

- *Qeemati Aansoo* (1935) was a love triangle featuring Gohar, Billimoria, and Keki Bawa.
- *Sipahi Ki Sajni* (1936) was a costume drama in which Gohar, a princess sets out in search of a map that will take her to a treasure chest. That map is in the possession of a king, a rival of her father’s. She steals it from him, but his son the prince (Eddie Billimoria) wrests it back from her. As the two go on to fall in love, a new player enters the scene, a fugitive from the law (Ishwarlal), who captures the prince.
- *Achhut* (1940) was a result of a call against untouchability given by Mahatma Gandhi. Shah wrote the story and directed the film starring Gohar who suffers as an untouchable Hindu girl and is made to convert to Christianity so that she can get protected. But she returns to her fold to fight the evil. This was Gohar’s last film as an actress.

After a break of 13 years, Shah directed *Paapi* (1953), starring Nargis and Raj Kapoor, the latter in a double role (his only double-role film). The story is about a man who steals money to help his girlfriend, and when discovered by the police, goes on the run. He bumps into a holy man who looks exactly like him, so he dons the swami’s clothes to pass off as the holy man. Eventually, everything is exposed, and yet it ends happily for all.

Oot Patang (meaning absurd or nonsensical) was a 1955 film, a comedy that starred Usha Kiran with Agha, Jankidas, Maruti, Indira Bansal, and Rashid Khan. By now Chandulal Shah’s son Naveenchandra had entered films. It is the latter who produced this venture.

Zameen Ke Tare (1960), also produced by Naveenchandra Shah, was a children’s film populated by songs and dances. It brought to fame the sisters Honey and Daisy Irani. This was the last film Shah would direct.

During the years when his sun was at its zenith, Sardar Chandulal Shah had, as observed before, some 700 people on his payroll. His Ranjit Studios was said to have ‘more stars than can be found in the sky’. But later, Shah’s films stopped recovering money, either because he lost his enthusiasm or then the public tastes changed. Moreover, his speculative moves made him lose lots of money, both in gambling with cards and at the Bombay Stock Exchange. So he went bankrupt. He was devastated now; his bankruptcy and its concomitant sense of inadequacy had sapped his energies. The man who often wore sharkskin suits and polished shoes was reduced to wearing crumpled clothes and basic footwear.

Writes film historian Shishir Krishna Sharma, “Since all the efforts to

control the deteriorating circumstances failed and there remained no other option, all the real estate of Ranjit Studios, as well as the Gohar Jaan-owned multi-storied building near Opera House was mortgaged in the year 1950 to Asian Insurance Company (now Life Insurance Corporation of India). And this property could never get released.”⁴

Sardar Chandulal Shah passed away in Mumbai on 25 November 1975. His once awesome power and consequent fall remind you of Shelley's poem *Ozymandias*. In the middle of a desert stands a statue of the once-powerful king. Now the statue is in ruins. On the pedestal of the statue appear the words:

*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!*

But around the decaying ruin of the statue, nothing remains; only the 'lone and level sands' that stretch far away.

Writes film and music historian Nalin Shah about Chandulal Shah's funeral: "The man who led the industry from infancy to maturity died a broken-hearted man in 1975 at the age of 77. Raj Kapoor was the only important filmmaker among the handful of mourners. No one else had time to pay homage to the Sardar of the film industry because his funeral had no commercial value.”⁵



Dalsukh Pancholi

(1906-1959)



Pancholi was first a successful importer and distributor of American films into the country. He then established Pancholi Art Pictures to become a film producer, first in Punjabi films, then in Hindi-Urdu films, in Lahore. After a few Punjabi features (in one of which, *Yamla Jat* of 1940, he introduced Pran in the role of a villain), he produced an Urdu-certified film called *Khazanchi* (*The Cashier*) (1941) which was a musical hit and which became the first Indian film to do a Golden Jubilee run. With the phenomenal success of this feature, Pancholi organised a high-profile *Khazanchi* talent contest for singers, of which the winner was a 12-year-old girl called Lata Mangeshkar. As such, Pancholi gets the credit for helping discover India's Nightingale.

Next year, in *Khandaan* (1942), Pancholi introduced Pran as a hero. He also introduced Shaukat Hussain Rizvi as the film's director. (Rizvi later married Noor Jahan and they jointly set up the Shahnoor Studios in Lahore).

Pancholi used to give the direction of his films to competent directors like Moti Gidwani, Prahlad Dutt, and his own nephew Ravindra Dave but he also used to actively participate in all spheres of filmmaking, without interfering too much. But his films started failing in the mid-1940s, even as his distribution was going great guns.

When the Partition happened, it was cruel to many people who had to uproot themselves. Pancholi too was shattered. He left Lahore for the safe shores of Bombay, where after steadying himself, he started Pancholi Productions. Pancholi himself directed *Aasmaan* in which he introduced as a composer a fellow émigré from Lahore, OP Nayyar. The film, released in 1952, didn't do well. Interestingly, *Aasmaan's* hero was Dilip Kumar's younger brother Nasir Khan who in fact had opted to go from Bombay to Lahore after the Partition, but he had realised his folly and returned after a while. Pancholi next made *Lutera* (1955), retaining Nasir and bringing in the latter's wife Begum Para as well. This film, directed by Ravindra Dave, did not do well either. Dave it was yet again, in *Farishta* (1958), a Pancholi Productions offering that also fell flat. The depressed Dalsukh Pancholi spent the autumn of his life recalling his better days. He had done his bit, especially when he was based in Lahore when India was undivided.

The famous character actor Janki Das wrote this about Pancholi:⁶ "A dear friend of mine, producer Dalsukh Pancholi, the film tycoon who carved a film empire in Lahore, in whose golden jubilee movie, *Khazanachi* I played a key role as far back as 1939, breathed his last as he got into his car while returning from the office of his distributor who refused to pay him the instalment. Pancholi's last words were, 'Janki Dass! Never put your children in films...'"



Debaki Bose

Born on 25th November 1898 in the district of Burdwan about a hundred kilometres northwest of Calcutta, Debaki Bose was initially a political columnist who edited a weekly called *Shakti*. He had earlier studied at Calcutta's Vidyasagar College and after finishing his studies in 1920 had immediately joined Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation movement started



just then, in September 1920. For that, his parents "...threw him out of their home, forcing Bose to lead a life fraught with struggle. After serving as a street hawker selling vests and *gamchhas*' (thin, coarse-cotton towels), Bose decided to leave Calcutta and enter the film industry's gateways."⁷ But he had to wait long before things happened to help him, hence his years of work as an editor.

In 1928, when filmmaker-actor Dhiren Ganguly set up the British Dominion Film Company in Calcutta, he met Debaki Bose somewhere and the two clicked. Ganguly hired Bose to both write a script and act in the film made on that story: *Flames of Flesh* (1930). In the same year and for the same studio, Debaki Bose wrote a story and directed the film made on it, *Panchashar*, with Ganguly in the lead role. Bose went on to write a story about Chandidas, the famous poet from Bengal who had lived 500 years ago. This story was snapped up by Nitin Bose, who directed the talkie (*Chandidas*, 1934) based on Bose's script for New Theatres. But even before the release of this historical work, Debaki Bose got a directorial break in New Theatres for another historical that he had written. This was about Puran Bhagat, a prince from the Punjab who was exiled for 16 years because some astrologer had predicted that if the boy was not sent away, he would die. When the prince returned home, he found that his father had taken a second wife, this time a young woman about the same age as Puran. This young stepmother fell in love with Puran, but when he rejected her advances, she had him framed for molestation. As a result, the prince ended up suffering. *Puran Bhagat* (1933) was incredibly successful.

Interestingly, *Chandidas* was taking inordinately long to complete, so immediately after *Puran Bhagat* was released, BN Sircar gave Bose another project: *Rajrani Meera*, which too was released in 1933 and which too wowed audiences. Next year, Debaki Bose got famous as the writer of *Chandidas* and the writer as well as the director of *Puran Bhagat* and *Rajrani Meera*. Soon, he got busy wielding the megaphone for several studios both in Calcutta and Bombay. He also went into production for himself, as is evident from the following list of films he continued to direct:

- *Seeta* (1934, for East India Film Company, Calcutta)
- *Inquilab (After The Earthquake)* (1935, for New Theatres, Calcutta)
- *Jeevan Natak (Life is a Stage)* (1935, for his own Debaki Bose Productions, Bombay)
- *Sunehra Sansar* (1936, for East India Film Company, Calcutta)

- *Vidyapati* (1937, for New Theatres, Calcutta)
- *Nartaki* (1940, for New Theatres, Calcutta)
- *Apna Ghar* (1942, for Circo Productions, Bombay)
- *Shri Ramanuja* (1943, for Shri Films, Calcutta)
- *Meghdoot* (1945, for Kirti Pictures, Bombay)
- *Krishna Leela* (1946, for Geetanjali Pictures, Bombay)
- *Chandrashekhhar* (1948, for Pioneer Pictures, Calcutta)
- *Ratnadeep* (1952, for Chitramaya, Calcutta)
- *Kavi* (1954, for Sunrise Pictures, Bombay)

Debaki Bose received a lot of applause for the extraordinary conceptualization of his narratives. For example, in *Seeta* (1934), the opening scenes showed a beautiful story of the life of Lord Rama and Sita through murals. Moreover, the treatment of his story delicately advanced the idea that unlike conventionally believed, Rama was not Maryada Purushottam (the highest human being); it was Sita who was greater.

But Debaki Bose was on his best turf when handling the theme of poets from the past. *Rajrani Meera* (1933) was about the great poet-saint from Rajasthan. *Chandidas* (1934) as we saw was a poet from Bengal. But perhaps his greatest film was *Vidyapati* (1937), the story of the great Maithili poet belonging to the 14th century. Though Debaki Bose worked well into the 1950s, he is considered to be at his finest in the 1930s and 1940s, especially in these stories of great poets who had lived centuries earlier. These were his essential legacy.

But not just the stories of poets from the past, Debaki Bose understood and valued poetry and music in general. He collaborated with gifted lyricists and musicians who created great songs that Bose went on to film. In *Vidyapati* (1937), he filmed Kanan Devi singing *More angna mein aaye aali*, with its then-scandalising line, *Choli pe nazariya jaaye, mori chunri lipat mose jaaye*. He had Pankaj Mullick sing his own tune that decorated Arzoo Lucknowi's ghazal bundled with a rubai in *Ye kaun aaj aaya savere savere* (*Nartaki*, 1940). It was a coup of sorts when he roped in Jagmohan Sursagar to sing in a film (*Meghdoot*, 1945), the song being *O varsha ke pehle baadal*, for Fayyaz Hashmi's poetry and Kamal Dasgupta's music.

Debaki Bose died in Calcutta on 17th November 1971.



Dhiren Ganguly

(26th March 1893-18th November 1978)

Dhiren Ganguly, or DG as he was popularly called, was born in Calcutta in 1893. He went to Vishwa Bharati at Shantiniketan to learn painting and music and soon got popular with friends and family for his ability to make them laugh. His father had a government job needing transfers, which is why DG spent some time in Hyderabad as well. He continued to study the Arts, this time at Nizam College Hyderabad, where in time he became a teacher, then graduated to become the headmaster. All this time he was making people laugh.



In his free time, Ganguly began dressing up as different people and getting himself photographed in various poses. He posed for the camera as a man and woman, young and old, rich and poor. In one photo, he was both the speaker on a stage as well as the 4 listeners in the audience. In 1915, he got these photos published in a book titled *Bhabher Abhibhaktae*. His sense of disguise was loved by his readers. Ganguly then wrote 3 more books. During these years, he was also watching developments in films. Phalke had released *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913, and now Hiralal Sen and Jamshed Madan were getting busy with cinema in Calcutta. In early 1920, Ganguly sent two of his books to Jamshed Madan, one of them being the one with his photos. This was no different from the portfolios aspiring actors make these days. Madan did not consider him worthwhile, but in late 1920, one of Madan's senior employees, Nitish Lahiri, joined Ganguly to set up a film production studio they called the Indo-British Film Company. For this outfit, they first co-directed a silent film called *Bilet Pherat* (also titled *England Returned*), released in 1921. This was the first Indian film featuring passionate lip-to-lip kissing as was common in American and European imports. The story was about a young man (Ganguly) who goes abroad for some years and returns with Western values and mannerisms. The man's performance and the accompanying title cards in Bengali that gave visual expression to his words had the audience in splits. Ganguly hit instant fame in his maiden outing.

Ganguly and Lahiri followed this film with another comedy, this time kneaded with mystery. Someone gets killed and someone else gets the rap for it, the film being *Sadhu Ke Shaitan* (1922). This film couldn't succeed, and nor could the partnership. Disappointed with the audiences

in Calcutta, Ganguly went back to Hyderabad where he started another company called Lotus Films. With blessings from the Nizam, he made a few films, established a film processing lab, and also purchased a couple of cinema halls to screen films. It seemed to be going beautifully well for him until his ship suddenly hit an iceberg. He allowed the screening of *Razia Begum* (1924), a film on Delhi's only woman ruler, which had passed the censor in Bombay, but had run into difficulties in several other parts of India for offending Muslim sensibilities. A furious Nizam ordered Ganguly to leave Hyderabad in 24 hours.

Ganguly had recently left Calcutta with unpleasant memories, so now he headed for Bombay. He spent a couple of unsuccessful years in the city, trying to establish himself as a distributor, but that didn't work out so he left for Lucknow in 1926. Here he became a comedian in a play called *Alik Babu (Master Liar)* and was much appreciated in that role. In 1928, recharged, he headed for Calcutta again, where he met with PC Barua and Debaki Bose, who were beginning to get excited about cinema too. He set up the British Dominion Films and took Debaki Bose to write a story and act in a film on that story, *Flames of Flesh* (1930). Bose then wrote another story and directed Ganguly this time, the film being *Panchashar* (English title, *Five Arrows*) (1930). Ganguly went on to direct many talkies, some Hindi ones too, such as *Night Bird* (1934) and *Bidrohi* (1935) in Calcutta, and *Country Girl* (Hindi title: *Dehati Ladki*) (1936), in Delhi. For his awesome contributions, Ganguly is treated as an early pioneer in Indian cinema. In 1975, in recognition of his valuable work, the Indian government bestowed the highly-valued Dadasaheb Phalke Award on Dhiren Ganguly.

On a lighter note, Ganguly's moving between the cities of Calcutta, Hyderabad, Bombay, Lucknow, and Delhi may invite a chuckle from today's cricket enthusiasts because all these cities have cricket teams under the Indian Premier League. Was the man sent on an early recce to determine the sporting facilities at these venues?



Dwarkadas Sampat

(14th October 1884- 4th November 1958)

This cranky man, whose biggest legacy is to have founded Kohinoor Film Company, had many quirks. Keeping a tiger for a pet was one of them. The other was an unusual way of talking to people, almost never looking them

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