

The History of Indian Cinema

Introduction to History, Monsoon 2020

The history of Indian cinema is rich. The Indian film industry is huge today and contributes immensely to the economy of the country. The Bollywood industry, in particular, has grown to produce thousands of movies. At the same time, it is interesting to notice that Bollywood comprises only a fraction of the Indian film industry. Almost all major regional languages have a movie industry of their own that produces hundreds of feature films every year. The Indian audience has grown to love their film industry so much that movie actors are virtually billionaires in India and command immense respect and popularity among the people. But all this had a beginning and that makes us want to explore the beginning of the Indian Film Industry marked by the release of the first-ever Indian feature film *Raja Harishchandra* directed by Dadasaheb Phalke and released on 3 May 1913 under the banner of Phalke Film Company. We take a look into the Indian film industry of the early 20th century and the challenges faced by it. Especially from a society that did not see film-making as a major art form. There is a stark difference in the outlook of people as well in India back then and India today. We also take a closer look at the making of the first-ever Indian feature film. An interesting scrutinization of the art of film-making in the early 20th century is presented here by taking into account several social and historical perspectives.

Let us consider the critically acclaimed Marathi movie *Harishchandrachi Factory*, directed by Paresh Mokashi. The movie is a simple narration of the journey of Dadasaheb Phalke from selling his printing press to creating the first Indian motion picture. The movie puts into perspective the common issues that a filmmaker in the early 1900s India faced. The story describes how the legendary director sees a motion picture for the first time and how the curiosity about the technology makes him want to produce one himself. It gives a detailed account of the difficulties he faces while trying to produce the film including the lack of availability of female cast and the general problems he faced creating a movie at a time when the art of film-making was not inspiring to the general public. Phalke moves to London to learn the art of film-making and when he returns, he is met with a series of challenges including the lack of finances. The movie hilariously portrays these challenges and how Phalke overcomes these, often through innovative thinking. The movie is a historical account of the making of the first Indian motion picture with a focus on the sheer brilliance of the legendary director Dadasaheb Phalke.

Dadasaheb Phalke having to go with a completely male cast despite his best efforts makes us want to analyze the societal restriction that made the life of movie-makers of early 20th century India much difficult. There are accounts of several movies consisting of a completely male cast owing to the stigma that surrounded the involvement of women in movie-making. A neat account of the concept of *female stardom* was done in Neepa Majumdar's "Wanted cultured ladies only! Female stardom and cinema in India, 1930s - 1950s". The author discusses how the idea of a "cultured woman" became the root of female stardom in India in the early stage of the

film industry. Besides, the author talks about Richard Dyer's theory on stardom in much detail. The theory said that the idea of a star should not be communicated to the public through performances, but also through off-screen information and interactions. Majumdar accepts the validity of this theory. But at the same time, she does not acknowledge its relevance in colonial India where the film industry was just born. The idea of stardom was rooting into the minds of the common Indian. But in the early years, when the film industry had just come into being, the idea of stardom was restricted to on-screen performances and as the author mentions, on a "discourse of surfaces" and was rarely based on the "inner essence of the performer".

David A. Cook, in his book *A History of Narrative Film*, gives an account of the growth of the Indian Film Industry. The author takes an Oriental approach while describing the movie industry in India where he tries to communicate to the reader the emergence of an industry that would go on to produce the most number of feature films every year. The author describes the audience as "unsophisticated, largely uneducated and impoverished". Nevertheless, he acknowledges the love that Indians hold for their film industry. The author makes a very keen and interesting observation where he says how the entire world was worried about the transition of Indian cinema from the silent era to the one with the sound. The major problem with introducing movies with sound in India was that Indians spoke a multitude of languages. However, despite the differences, the first movie with sound turned out to be a huge success commercially in India. Cook goes on to describe Satyajit Ray, the legendary Indian filmmaker as a "talented contemporary director of major international stature". Cook, in his book, has described mostly work in the Indian Film Industry during its golden era, as to how people call it today. With the likes of Satyajit Ray, Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, the Indian film industry had made some of the most critically acclaimed movies in its history and had also brought international attention to it. The author then goes on to describe the Parallel Cinema movement or the New Indian Cinema movement that actually produced some of the most important and critically acclaimed filmmakers mentioned above, including Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen etc. The Parallel Cinema movement was led by the Bengali Film Industry in the beginning. Cook calls Satyajit Ray's *Apu* trilogy "to have created a split in the Indian cinema between commercial entertainment and art". Cook goes on to give a short description of the works of some of the most important movie makers to have been associated with the Parallel Cinema movement including Ghatak, Mrinal Sen etc.

A writing on Indian cinema would stand incomplete without talking about the corporatization of the industry. Amit Khanna is widely regarded as the man who brought in the notion of corporatization and branding of Indian Cinema. The immense optimism shown by Khanna on the future of Bollywood was looked down upon by his contemporaries who mostly believed that cinema was just a bubble in India that could burst any moment. Amit Khanna's book *Words Sounds Images: A History of Media and Entertainment in India* is essentially an entertainment encyclopedia that talks vastly about the time he was actively involved with Bollywood, which is for over 45 years. Khanna talks extensively about the influence of Movies and films in the life of Indians after a painful partition in the 1950s and the rise of the star culture in the country. Khanna goes on to describe some of the important names associated with Bollywood in the 20th century including the setting up of the Bombay Talkies in 1934 by Himanshu Rai and his wife Devika Rani. Khanna also speaks about music and the effect they had on common Indian households. Khanna also speaks to some extent about the coming up of other regional movie

industry, especially the ones in South India including Malayalam, Tamill, Telugu etc. Khanna also talks at length about the lack of monetisation efforts in the Indian Movie Industry in its early days, over-production of films in the industry etc. He envisions through his book, an era of Cinema that is led by monetisation through the right use of digital technology in his books. He believes that the access to smartphones, computers etc to people and the rise of streaming services like Netflix has now given all sorts of films a chance to show.

Mihir Bose writes about Bollywood with much enthusiasm in his book, *Bollywood - A History*. He describes the story of Bollywood from the beginning of the Indian Film Industry and the influence of the West on it and the influence Indian cinema had on the West. Bose brings to our notice the fact that unlike other inventions and technology like cars and typewriters, the art of movie making had come to India as soon as the technology came into being. And cinema, as an art, captured the imagination of the common Indian like none other. The author goes on to give an account of the evolution of the industry and the changes in the techniques of movie making. The first Indian movies were short documentaries. The industry soon moved on to seek inspiration from Hindu myth, Shakespeare and more. The industry then saw the inclusion of more social themes which drew the ire of many owing to the Western influence it had. Bose also talks at length about the evil of censoring in movies. He contrasts how the influence the independent government had on the movie industry by censoring intimate scenes including the act of kissing. Bose does not shy away from pointing out the irony in the same first in the fact that while India established itself as a free democracy, the censor board was cracking down on the movie industry. This was opposed to the British policies that did not show any objections to showing natives kissing on-screen. The greater irony, although, lies in the fact that a country that is known to have produced ancient relics on intimacy like the *Kamasutra* found it necessary to censor intimate scenes on-screen. Bose ends on a positive and optimistic note that Indian Cinema is capable of reinventing itself and would soon reach beyond the shores of India.

Numerous accounts have been made on the history of Indian film industry by numerous authors, mostly insiders of Bollywood. The Indian Film Industry has grown fast. But while at one point there was a lack of commercialisation, we stand at an era where movies are being over commercialised. However, the industry continues to bloom and still remains to be the one that produces the most number of feature films in the world every year and also has produced some of the highest grossing movies of all time. However, a balance needs to strike between filmmaking being appreciated as an art and the commercialisation of the same. Just as how we saw in the golden age of the Indian Film Industry that saw the industry get major attention in the global arena.

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