

## **West-orient *Memsab*s of Indian Films in Colonial period: The History, Heritage and Hegemony**

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Indian Cinema is essentially considered an institution of modernity. This is because it is at one level ‘a machine engaged in the mechanical reproduction of images, and so has an impact on the way traditions of representations are refracted through its mechanism’. The growth of Indian cinema and their themes during the British colonial rule considerably parallel the political and societal atmosphere of the country of the time thus asserting its historical and cultural identity. Certainly, there has been a significant contribution of western community and the western technology to this cinematic evolution. It can be ascertained that the pre-colonial period generation invariably benefited from each other mainly through the cultural wisdom, integration of modernism and other thought processes. Interestingly, this intercession diluted gender specification as time passed by. Earlier, due to societal prejudices, women of Indian origin were discouraged from becoming a part of the film industry. So we know that preliminary female actors in Indian film industry were of foreign origins. Considering films and feminism, we can regard it as an extension of prevailing political movement initially interested in two main areas:

- a) The role of women in the film industry: was the emphasis on the ‘great auteur’? This approach promoted the idea of equal representation of women on screen could only come from equal representation in the industry.
- b) The way in which film used images of women: did this affect the way woman were treated in society? Is there a gap between the way women are represented on screen and in their real lives?

In the context of colonial epistemologies, technologies such as films arrived into India at the same time as Europe. In these early years many saw the moment as opportune and sought to capitalize on the possibilities offered by the entrance of this new medium. Film makers in India quickly deployed the medium for their own purposes, mimicking and absorbing each other as well as producing their own visualities and auralities. Women were not left behind in acquainting this art and its know-how.

By the 1920s and 30s, women had entered the silent film industry and had become part of the popular culture as starlets. The ‘modern girl’ was a particular onscreen and off-screen star persona that achieved major fandom through not only the films themselves but also attended media and paraphernalia such as postcards, magazines, and pictures. The heroines were often short haired, wore make up and western clothes, were exotic as well as racially and religiously ambiguous. Hence, the film and visual cultures became spaces producing and linked to the desire for modernization within the context of a loose and expansive understanding of ‘India’. Indian Cinema participated in a social and political economy that strongly emphasizes the location of

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the modern within Indian society. Hence representations of, and contestations over the modern girl, modern family, or the modern nation began to determine *de rigueur* (in fashion).

Scholar such as Roy Armes (1987) in his book *Third world film making and the West* published by University of California Press, has remarked that India is a unique case globally as it has the 'only major film industry to emerge under colonialism'. The significance of colonialism and the anti-colonialism nationalism to the development of film cannot be overstated. However, rather than frame colonial power as simply repressive, that is framing cinema censorship as repressive, negative, erasure, reading through a frame working which colonial power is productive of and imprecated with Indian cinema, framing censorship, a productive tension between the colonial authorities and indigenous creative forces, is more fruitful.

Interestingly, the approach of colonial masters towards film goes in pre-independence period presumably seems to be charlatan, where they propose a theory of 'protection'. Scholars of early film and legal history have commented that the colonial administration paternally saw the Indian viewers of films generally as illiterate and immature, therefore, in need of 'protection' around moral issues, namely race, religion, sexuality and politics. This protection extended in several directions, attempting to prevent any anti-colonial sentiments, offensive images of whites (especially women and inter-racialist) and offensive images of Indians. Anti-colonial sentiments, resistance to colonialism, the peril of white women and interracial desire were strictly restrained from projection. Scholars argue that these censorship codes had long term repercussions also on postcolonial cinema.

The films of other countries were monitored and their consequence observed. The approach was pragmatic and protects colonial minds from other global domination. A well-known Bishop intimately acquainted with India in a speech at a conference in England in 1925 had stated that the majority of the films which are chiefly from America are of sensational stories of daring murder, crimes, and divorces, and on the whole they degrade the white women in the eyes of the Indians. Specifically, the supervision intended under the colonial moment, cinema was an issue worth keeping an eye on because of the growth of nationalism as a movement in India and the increasing waning of colonial authority within the country as well as overseas.

Heroines of western origin were taken in films as heroines and that began the era of western impetus in Indian society on a mass scale. The Anglo-Indian female actors began to make it big in Indian movies and similarly were globalised for mass acceptance and due to political pressure.

### Some West-orient Heroines

There were many European female leads contemplating Indian film industry. They dominated the Indian scene passing as "white" even as they appeared on the screen under Hindu names-

#### Seeta Devi a.k.a Renee Smith

Himanshu Rai, the *Bombay talkies* studio owner had his first film as an actor released

called *Light of Asia* (1925) on Lord Buddha with an Anglo- Indian actor Renee Smith with a pseudonym as Seeta Devi. Due to its success he initiated two more collaboration namely *Shiraz* (1929-30) and *Throw of Dice* (1930) with the same actor. *Licht Bild Buehne* a German Film Daily Journal (No.221/1925) reviewing about Sita Devi stated that 'Sita Devi, young Indian girl, not yet 15 years of age, who is supposed to embody the Indian ideal of beauty, also by our standards she is beautiful, noble and graceful'. *Times of India* (15<sup>th</sup> October 1927) states 'But I must frankly admit that to me the gem of the acting was the performance of Seeta Devi as Princess Gopa. To see a young lady who has no trace of the self-consciousness and yet can beat the film star hollow at her own game is a rare treat. All through this lady's performance there was a quite emotional intensity, a subtlety of understanding and expression, a grace and significance of movement, and simplicity and beauty both of appearance and of interpretation, which justify one in being enthusiastic about her. This clearly explains her recognition as a female lead<sup>1</sup>.

#### Sulochana a.k.a Ruby Mayers

Was born in Pune in 1907 named Ruby Myers in an Anglo-Indian Jewish family and became the highest paid actress of the silent era of Indian Cinema with the name 'Sulochana'. Sulochana was the face that changed the face of Indian Cinema – before her, the socially disreputable job of playing a cinema heroine was mostly assigned to slim young men. Till 1927, she had a series of hits like "*Cinema Queen*" (1925), "*Telephone Girl*", "*Typist Girl*" (1926), "*Wild Cat of Bombay*" (1927) in which she portrayed the role of an educated and a self-dependent girl. These movies presented an unusual image of a woman with her identity and position in and relations with the society instead of regular shy, silent suffering woman. In fact so widespread was her fame that when a short film on Mahatma Gandhi inaugurating a *khadi* exhibition was shown, alongside it was added a hugely popular dance of Sulochana's from "*Madhuri*", synchronized with sound effects. Her dances in "*Madhuri*" were all the rage and she became Indian film's first star. One of the reigning stars through the 1920s and 30s her claim to fame included the fact that at one point she earned more than the Governor of Bombay.

However, *Film India* under its section 'India has no Stars' has given a review of her supposedly stardom. It states, "Sulochana, this Jew artist was reputed to be drawing Rs. 5000/- per month,. She went out after 'silents' but came in again into talkies after getting a nodding acquaintance with the Hindi language". The magazine considers only two of her films as hits, one partial hit and twelve flops. Among two such super flops those few people who were tempted to see the picture felt terribly lonely in the theatre and craved for company. Yet, producers considered Sulochana a box-office hit star<sup>2</sup>. Special writers were commissioned to write her stories like M.N. Munshi and R Vasantlal. Elaborate settings were erected and dialogues were altered to fit the lips and a wild pre-release publicity was given.

#### Madhuri a.k.a. Miss Beryl Claessen/Clayson

<sup>1</sup> Indranil Bhattacharya (2009), *Vision of Splendour – Himanshu Rai and Indian Cinema*, NFAI, Pune.

<sup>2</sup> FILM\_INDIA dtd: 01\_12\_1937\_Volume\_No\_03\_Issue\_No\_08.

Madhuri the heroine of “Toofan mail” a sensational fluke became a big pay roll star after the success of the mentioned film. She however earned less than mega stars, that is Rs. 800 /- per mensem (month).

#### **Nadia a.k.a Mary Evans (Fearless Nadia)**

Australia’s first Bollywood icon (Mary Evans from Perth) was one of the brightest lights of the 1930s and 40s Bombay cinema. A former circus performer, she came to dominate India’s silver screens with her roguish charm, beauty and swashbuckling, death-defying stunts. The Nadia/Wadia productions, beginning with *Hunterwali* (The Lady with the Whip), created a new genre, the stunt film, but without the luxuries of stunt directors, duplicate stuntmen, and the trick photo-graphy of today. Another film with her lead was called *Miss Frontier Mail* – the only 1930s film of Nadia’s heyday to have survived in its entirety – to explore themes of modernity, gender and national identity. I suggest that whilst the filmmakers ostensibly chose *Frontier Mail* as the heroine’s nickname because of its connotations as the acme of speed and modernity, the notion of the frontier – as a luminal zone – formed a subtext to the star persona of Nadia, and to the Wadia stunt oeuvre as a whole. In 1936 the *Frontier Mail* train was the height of glamorous modernity, its name synonymous with speed, sophistication and the adventure of the railways. Nadia thus became an epitome of modernity, courage, justice doer with Indian qualities. The District Judge in a town of Punjab is known to have seen *Hunterwali* than any other film and had attracted much criticism.

#### **Sabita Devi a.k.a Miss Irish Gasper**

Was born in an Anglo Indian family in Calcutta. After initially working with British Dominion Films Ltd., Calcutta, she shifted to Bombay and performed mainly in films produced by Sagar Movietone with her co-star in most films being Motilal. Some of the popular films with Motilal were *Dr. Madhurika* (1935) and *Kulvadhu* (1937) directed by Sarvottam Badami. She formed her own production company, *Sudama Pictures*, in collaboration with Sarvottam Badami along with the assistance of *Ranjit Studios*. She’s stated to have influenced P. C. Barua, who had joined the Board of the British Dominion Film Company and acted in a few silent films, to start his own company. She was one of the earliest female artists to write about film acting as a decent profession for ladies from respectable families. In a letter to the *Filmiland* English weekly, November 1931 issue, titled “Why Shouldn’t Respectable Ladies Join the Films?” she countered claims of immorality and low moral standards of producers and directors, raised by an anonymous actress in the September 1931 issue, “Should Respectable Ladies Join Films?” She stated that “the attitude a man takes towards a woman is governed by the latter’s own integrity, by her actions, words and manner”. She went on to state that people had a “mid-victorian conception” of women on stage and that “A Lady Artiste” was perhaps herself to blame for any unwanted advances<sup>3</sup>.

In critically reviewing her stardom *Film India* states, this girl whom producers have mentally placed on the supposed pedestal of stardom, she is drawing Rs. 3000/- per month. No

girl in the industry gets the half push that Sabita gets from her producers. Ironically, the same magazine contains a film review of the *Kokila* where it mentions her name under the title “star value” and remaining actors as “Other cast”.

#### **Patience Cooper**

Who used her own name worked as a dancer for a Eurasian troupe, the *Bandmann’s Musical Comedy* before joining Indian Film industry. Her roles were mostly naïve, sensuous women caught in the web of passion. She was famous for her role in *Madan Theatre’s Pati Bhakti* (1922) as a devoted and submissive wife Leelavati whose anti-thesis was played by Italian actor signora Minelli apparently dressed in semi-transparent costumes.

#### **Ermeline a.k.a Patty Cordoza**

A sword-fighting, jodhpur- and boot-clad Ermeline (a.k.a Patty Cordoza) starred in *Azaad Abla* (‘Daring Damsel’, 1933) at the *Super* cinema that June.29 Ads in *Mouj Majah* invited viewers to see her “‘parakram’ and gushed. Hands which embraced her beloved now hold a sword to fight tyranny and avenge her father.” It ran for over two months. Nor was this recent. In 1931 the same actress was the active heroine of *Toofani Taruni* (‘Cyclone Girl’) and *Golibar* (‘Avenging Angel’), whilst Indira/Miss Paterson played *Bijli* (‘Miss Lighting’). Not only this Anglo- Indian/European actresses, but her film titles suggest that *Miss Frontier Mail*’s equation between speed and modern womanhood was by no means so original. In fact, newspapers reveal that a plethora of active, booted females – many of them European or Anglo-Indian had been hitting the Indian silent screen since at least 1925<sup>4</sup>.

#### **Pramila a.k.a Esther Abrahams**

Came to films from *Parsi* travelling theatres company. A well-educated girl with pre-University art certificate from London, she became famous for her roles as vamp and a stunt star.

#### **Indira Devi a.k.a Effie Hippolet**

Made her debut with film *Jaydev* (1926). This Russian born actor worked opposite Prithviraj Kapoor in the film *Sher-e- Arab* or ‘Arabian Knight’ (1930).

#### **Rose**

The Jew girl whose keen wit and drawing room ‘legane’ caught the producer’s napping was ‘Rose of Calcutta’. Basking in a big salary and linking her fortune, she acted in several movies.

Likewise, illustration could be considered is of *Madan* theatres a brand of Orientalism co-producing the sensual *Savitri* (1923) with *Cines* from Rome. Directed by Giorgio Mannini and featuring Italian stars Angelo Ferrari and Rina De Liguaro, the advertisement read, ‘charming Hindu story.... taken amid the world renowned Cascades of Tivoli in Rome’. Thus, there is interesting globalised history to be discovered through films for pre-independence era. There is a converse effect where western icons are localised and presented in order to cater to the interest

<sup>3</sup> Neepa Majumdar (2009). *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!: Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*. University of Illinois Press. pp. 75.

<sup>4</sup> [http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/4710/1/Thomas\\_2007\\_final.pdf](http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/4710/1/Thomas_2007_final.pdf)

of the audience.

## Conclusion

The 'white' women in Indian film industry were seen prominently there in the 1920s and 1930s. However, there had been consistent degeneration. They were used as 'extras' due to sexual implications.

*Film India* which was considered a magazine that makes or mars a film with its review gave an interesting article on 'Some Anglo- Indian girls in our Films'. It stated that there had been degeneration of Indian films on the whole. This is particularly because of the craze with several producers in Bombay who employed Anglo- Indian girls as 'extras' for community dances and as maids in scanty costumes. They further scandalize by stating they have seen 'a couple of girls bursting out into sudden affection and kissing the director with a warmth that would have scorched the cheeks of a rhinoceros'<sup>5</sup>.

Secondly, as the talkie films started, the number of Anglo Indian Girls rapidly went down as most of them did not know Hindi nor could they sing. Only a few hard working Anglo Indian girls survived and progressed from silent to Talkie films, like Savita Devi (Iris Gasper) who learnt Hindi/Urdu and singing, with efforts, Sulochana (Ruby Myers), Indira Devi (Effie Hippolet), Lalita Devi (Bonnie Bird), Pramila (Esher Abrahams), Seeta Devi (Renee Smith), Madhuri (Beryl Classen), Manorama (Winnie Stewart) etc. Since singing was an important requisite, the field was now open to singing girls from Kothas, Tawayafs and professional singers. Reasonably good looks and singing ability was what made them actresses. These girls, who came from Kothas and professional singer families used the suffix "Bai" to their names to announce their specialty. Thus you had Jaddan bai, Amir bai, Johrabai, Rattan bai etc.<sup>6</sup>

Also there came an attitudinal change and racism became more prominent as National Freedom Movement intensified. In an enquiry committee a British counterpart is known to have submitted a statement saying that they will ban English actresses taking the part of Indian girls on the ground of social and racial objection. They will also surface objection on an Indian acting as an English person.

Thirdly, there was emergence of well educated, beautiful, cultured Bengali and Marathi ladies who replaced western features with Indian features. Their grooming particularly had a vibrant reformation movement taken place in both these provinces.

The cinematic themes became more and more national and the Indian face was always welcome.

However, the ladies have to be considered as leading female entrepreneurs of Indian Film industry in the colonial India. They were an integral part of decision making working in different capacities as an actor, director, music composer and prominently the proprietor of the film production house. The journey for them was not simple but extremely challenging. However,

<sup>5</sup> FILM INDIA. Dtd: 01/04/1938 Volume No 03 Issue No 12.

they prolifically emerged as an indispensable part of what we today understand as 'making of'  
<sup>6</sup> <http://atulsongaday.me/2014/02/22/dil-naache-aur-gaaye-jawaani/>

modern Indian woman'.

It is important to understand that today's film industry is 'like this' because of what 'it was'. There subsists a considerable stardom having transnational background and interestingly even today heroines of foreign origin are desirable and successful. For example, today in Bollywood you have top actors like Katrina Kaif, Sunny Leon, Jacqueline Fernandes, Lisa Ray etc. who are of foreign origin. Therefore it becomes significant to study the established colonial mindset that is still in vogue.

This paper has thus attempted to take a holistic approach to analyze the cultural transformation in per-independence India and further focused on the feminine endeavors in Indian Film industry that were partly Indian and partly Western.