

**CINEMA AND THE REINVENTION OF THE SELF:
Women Performers in the Bombay Film Industry
(1925-1947)**

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CINEMA STUDIES

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DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation titled “**Cinema and the Reinvention of the Self: Women Performers in the Bombay Film Industry (1925- 1940)**” submitted by me at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy in Cinema Studies**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university or institution.


Sarah Rahman Niazi

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “**Cinema and the Reinvention of the Self: Women Performers in the Bombay Film Industry (1925- 1940)**” submitted by **Sarah Rahman Niazi** at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy in Cinema Studies** is her work, and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of this or any other university or institution. We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation attempts to focus on women performers and their work in the film industry in the early sound period in Bombay, beginning however a few years before *Alam Ara* in the last years of silent cinema in India (1925-1947). Cinema provided women with radical possibilities of reinvention. The opportunities of employment made available to women in the throes of modernity were crucial in the way their contexts of selfhood were fashioned. These processes of reinvention dynamised both cinematic practices and women's lives as cinema assumed the significances of its own publicness. The cultural history of women performers in the film industry has received minimal attention in the discipline of Cinema Studies in India. The paucity of material like films, studio records and details on actors along with limited critical writing on the early period adds to the predicament of deficiency. The need then is to recuperate from this debris of archival absence the much ignored stories of scores of women performers who transformed the texture of film making and practice in India. These fragmentary traces of the past ask for the weaving of a tapestry that is palimpsestic in nature.

I

The 1920s was an exciting epoch in the history of India's encounter with modernity. The contested site of the nation was in the process of being shaped through the 'modern' moment. Newer modes of experience enabled by technological interventions like automobiles, aeroplanes, trains, telephones, gramophones and cinema were rapidly transforming the public sphere. The rise of urban spaces, with their luring promise of work and reinvention, accelerated migration and interactions between the public. Port cities like Bombay, Calcutta and Madras were products of colonialism and vested with British interests. Urbanism brought its own share of anxieties for the Indian populace. The dichotomy between the traditional and the modern was disrupted and was a source of growing concern amongst the people. This created a glaring gap between older and newer modes of cognition and self articulation. The contrast was set up at multiple levels between the rural and the urban, and within the urban itself. The

fading old centres of princely patronage, power and the momentous acceleration of nationalism affected the social cultural milieu in a decisive way.

Nationalism in the 1930s was dominantly marked by the politics of Gandhi. The sense of being oppressed under colonialism provided a shared bond that tied many different groups together. But each class and group felt the effects of colonialism differently, their experiences were varied, and their notions of freedom were not always the same. Gandhi tried to forge these groups together within one movement. But this unity did not emerge without conflict. During the Non-Cooperation Movement, Gandhi mobilised women to march out of their homes and jobs to protest in service of the nation. The investment of nationalism in moulding public and private life amounted to a series of contradictions and ambivalences. The split domain of nationalism, between the *home* and the *world* had been a long standing debate¹. In this period, the overwhelming preoccupation with the “woman’s question” arising out of the 19th century social reform movement had already been resolved. The movement for social reform, which had been intrinsically tied to the project of nation building, is a prime example where resolutions had been orchestrated in paradoxically constrictive and repressive ways for women. This crucially informed the emergent ‘new’ discourse on women within cultural, social, and political space.

In the changing demography of towns and cities, the public woman became a crucial presence. Women in this period were employed in a variety of professions. Colonial rule had dislocated and transformed the traditional economic system to allow new modern sites of production like industries, mills etc. to take precedence. As pointed out by Geraldine Forbes, these new spaces of employment for women cannot be viewed without criticism due to the harsh circumstances women were pushed into in these fields of work². With education and emancipation effected by the social reform movements, other professional opportunities were made available for women. They entered employment as

¹ Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1995.

² Geraldine Forbes, 159

teachers, lawyers, doctors, secretaries, typists, salesgirls and telephone operators. Kaushik Bhaumik points out that according to Census figures,

There were 1179 women involved in the medical profession in 1931 as compared to 815 in 1921. By 1931, 270 women were employed by the government in various departments of public administration as compared to 5 in 1921. 2411 women entered the professional world as cashiers, book-keepers and accountants. 2457 women were engaged in the professional and liberal arts as compared to 2199 in 1921.³

According to Bhaumik, these enumerations of population during the 1931 census were “notoriously inaccurate” due to the large scale participation of men and women in the Civil Disobedience Movement⁴. At the same time, these figures demonstrate the rising presence of women in professional domains in the 1930s. The figures were probably higher for women engaged in non-official activities like prostitution, domestic work, entertainment and performance, but their employment status was unaccounted for.

This increased public role of women did not necessarily mean any radical change in the way the position of women was visualised. Women shared a contentious relationship with the public sphere. Nationalists like Gandhi were convinced that it was the duty of women to look after the home and hearth, be good mothers and good wives. Women were seen as a homogenous mass in need for enlightenment and reform. Thus, through the early twentieth century, different versions of female emancipation came to be slowly tied to the idea of nationalism, reinvention and regeneration.

Cinema was crucially impacted by these changes and occupied a unique space within this matrix of modernity. Almost two decades before, cinema had had its humble beginnings in tents and theatre houses, where films were exhibited with an array of entertainment routines. The moving spectres of light caught the

³ *Census of India (The City of Bombay)*, 1931, V. IX, 48 – 51, as quoted by Kaushik Bhaumik, “At Home in the World: Cinema and Cultures of the Young in Bombay in the 1920’s.” (unpublished paper), 5

⁴ According to Bhaumik, women participating in political and social activities were also censured. Ibid

imagination of the people, producing fascination, awe and discomfort. These stories are now film history lore. By the 1930s cinema had established itself firmly in the socio cultural fabric. Cities were dotted by the presence of its sites of production and exhibition. Film culture was flourishing and had become a substantial part of the debates in the public sphere through journalism and the press.

1931 is marked as a momentous year in the history of Indian cinema. With the release of the first sound film *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 in Hollywood, the Indian film industry was abuzz with the possibilities of sound technology for themselves. One of the moguls of the silent film industry, Ardeshir Irani of the leading studio of the time – Imperial - began to look for equipment that he could use for the new endeavor. He also contacted a leading playwright of the Parsi stage, Joseph David, to work with him on the scenario for a new film that would have spoken dialogues. Irani imported equipment that he himself called “junk”⁵, and also sound technician Wilford Deming from Hollywood⁶ and worked quietly on a project that was to change the face of cinema in India. Using, as Rajadhyaksha and Willemen point out, the “Tanar single system camera, recording image and sound simultaneously, which was difficult especially for the seven songs which were its highlights” Irani “finally recorded most of the sound himself”⁷ to create the form of musical drama with song, dance and music that would become the standard form of Indian cinemas. The release of *Alam Ara* on 14th March, 1931 at Imperial’s Majestic Theatre in Bombay created a furore with a virtual stampede to witness this new indigenous cinematic form. Thus was born the Indian Talkie that in its many tongued manifestations would dominate the Indian market from thence onwards.

Along with Irani there were several others who had also been struck by the possibilities of sound technology for their own industry. Among them was another

⁵ In an interview, as cited by Eric Burnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, Oxford University Press, New York and London, 1980, 68.

⁶ Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, eds. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, New rev. ed., BFI and Oxford University Press, London, 1999, 103

⁷ Ibid.

leading figure of the times, Calcutta's J.J. Madan, exhibitor, distributor, producer, director and one who had a virtually monopoly on theatres in the eastern region. In the late 1920s, J. J. Madan had visited New York and watched Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*. He realized clearly the changing production relations and technical conditions in the business⁸. The Madans imported R.C.A. sound machines, built sound compatible studios and recorded scenes from popular plays like *Alamgir*, *Shajahan*, *Iraner Rani* and *Mrinalini*. They were prompt in conducting voice tests in their attempt to reinvent themselves for the sound era. On the very same day as the release of *Alam Ara* in Bombay, 14th March 1931, the Madans screened about 31 short films at the Crown Theatre, Calcutta. The Madans followed up Ardeshir Irani's first film with six more talkies in the same year. Madan's first sound film *Shirin Farad*, featuring 42 songs by Jahanara Kajjan and Nissar, released on 30th May 1931 to become the second sound film of Indian cinema and was a booming success, launching Kajjan and Nissar as hugely popular singing stars for the first few years of the Talkies. By 1933 most of the other leading studios had fallen suit and the Talkies had come to stay.

With the advent of sound technology in this period, the nebulous film industry was in a chaotic process of conversion and expansion. It was at a juncture like this that the demand for a new kind of labour force in the film industry was felt. Cinema was an attractive vortex that drew peripatetic groups like the *tawaiifs* and other itinerant performers into its transformative processes. Borrowing liberally from the existing pool of performative traditions like theatre, *nautanki* and the music performed for the gramophone recording companies, cinema created a context for the reinvention of the modes of performance and performers. It allowed for the possibilities of self refashioning previously unknown. Women came to cinema from a variety of backgrounds looking for work, survival, fame and self-transformation. The three dominant groups of women performers that I discuss in

⁸ Eric Burnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, Oxford University Press, New York and London, 1980, 65-67.

the dissertation in the period between 1925-1947 are- the ‘white’⁹ actresses, the women from other performative backgrounds¹⁰ and the educated ‘society ladies’. In some ways, the first group of women, to join films without inhibition were the women from Anglo Indian, Jewish and Eurasian communities. The second group of women who came to the film industry were part of a long standing tradition of performance. The anti-*nautch* movement was gaining momentum and in the wake of the weakening power of princely states and the gradual decline of older forms of patronage, women from these traditions came to the cities looking for new sources of livelihood and hoping in the process to reinvent themselves. The coming of sound had created a demand for singers, musicians and dancers. Cinema needed these women, as much as they needed cinema, as these women from older performative backgrounds were known for their prowess in music and dance; they brought to cinema their repertoires of performance which transformed film music and film aesthetics. The third group of women to join films were the ‘educated’ women.

It was in the 1930s that cinema was also aligned to the discourse of nationalism and reform and this produced an inherent ambivalence within cinematic discourse and around cinematic work. Cinema strove to be adopted within the bourgeois cultural order and be recognised as a legitimate form through the manufacture of star discourses, mechanisms of genre differentiation, characterisation and realism. The body of the actress became a contested site for a plethora of subterfuges to be enacted for the recasting of cinema. As reiterated throughout many contemporary sources, the talkies were tied up aesthetically to

⁹I use the term ‘white’ to denote ethnic configuration of actresses from varied backgrounds such as the Anglo Indians, Eurasians, Jews and other mixed races in early Indian cinema. ‘White’ here works as a metaphor to denote typology of skin which is marked in comparison to ‘brown’ Indian skin and is a binding factor with respect to the categorization of Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish actresses in the film industry. Many accounts of the actresses interchangeably refer to them as Anglo Indian, Eurasian, or Jewish. The term ‘white’ here is not charged with the modern western discourse on race- oppositions with ‘black’. In the context of colonial India, the Anglo Indians, Eurasians and the Jews were in fact placed between the ‘white’ and the ‘brown’. Even though they were liminal figures they were assimilated within a multicultural Indian social fabric which produced a series of other discourses that I will discuss in the next chapter.

¹⁰ This includes women performers who came to the film industry from a variety of performative classes like the *tawaifs*, *gaanewalis* and performing castes like the *bedia*, *kanjar* and *mirasis*.

the desire for verisimilitude/ realism and this was connected to the demand for “respectable” labour. Simply put, in order to represent middle class respectable ‘reality’, actors from the same ‘cultured’ class were sought out. Prior to this discourse of respectability, we see that in the absence of players from an apparently “respectable” class that cinema strove to represent, others like those from the Anglo-Indian community or women from the *kothas* were groomed and trained to masquerade in place of this class. As the talkies did not destroy older traditions from the silent era, women from a variety of backgrounds kept coming to the film industry in search of work and reinvention.

Actresses enjoyed freedoms unknown to women from other socially sanctioned respectable professions. The actresses by virtue of their publicness elicited an ambiguous response, as they presented different models of behaviour and codes for others to emulate and refashion themselves. Their unconventional work, lifestyle, and the intimacy with which actresses circulated as cinematic entities produced deep seated moral indignation and anxiety. This dissertation will explore the tenuous boundaries of repute and disrepute that women performers occupied. Cinema held a certain kind of appeal for women which allowed for the performativity of gender¹¹. Cinema allowed for the construction and production of images of women not merely mimetically as symptomatic of a narrative regime but also as performative bodies. This enabled women to reinvent and redefine their subjective experience of being in a modern world.

II

The history of women performers and their work in the film industry has found marginal space in official documentation and critical discourse. There is, however, new exciting work that is coming to light. I am deeply indebted to Reena Mohan and Dibya Choudhuri’s article “Of Wayward Girls and Wicked Women: Women in Indian silent feature films (1913- 1934)” which appeared in *Deepfocus* in 1996, as a source of inspiration and intellectual engagement. The article

¹¹ Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” in *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, 1990, 33

foregrounds the presence of women in the silent film industry and raises many questions around women's work in cinema, but the nature of the essay form limits the scope of investigation and leaves open many stimulating areas to be explored.

Recent scholarship on the early period includes Kaushik Bhaumik's exhaustive work *The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry (1913- 1936)*. This unpublished dissertation is a seminal critical intervention for the early period as it traces the growth of film production, exhibition and consumption in the formative phases of the Bombay film industry. Bhaumik's discussion of the "discourse of respectability" in the silent period between 1921 and 1928 delineates the contours of the debate that had a deep impact on the 1930s as well and has been crucially relevant to this project. According to Bhaumik, the discourse of respectability was mainly expressed through a "discussion about technological improvement and amelioration of work conditions in the industry"¹², while another strand of this discourse was significant with regard to the cultural status of cinema's performers. In the context of film production and expansion of the industry, Bhaumik's analysis of Bombay as a "centre of a transregional film culture"¹³ provided a map through which the interface between circuits of performance and the journey of many women performers in this dissertation could be made sense of.

Neepa Majumdar's seminal book *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, maps out the early culture of cinema stardom in India from its emergence in the silent era to the sound period. She argues that Hollywood provided a technological model for cinema in the 1930s; however, it was not regarded as a dominantly suitable discourse for stardom. According to Majumdar, the discussions of early cinematic stardom in India must be placed in the context of the general legitimizing discourse of colonial "improvement" that marked other civic and cultural spheres as well. Hollywood's emphasis on conspicuous consumption, material culture and lifestyle was antithetical to the nationalist project of India. It was in response to emphatic

¹² Kaushik Bhaumik, *The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913-1936*, Diss. Oxford University, 2001, 13

¹³ *Ibid*, 109

nationalist discourses that Indian cinema found its model for modern female identities. Thus cinema and stardom were aligned to the constituencies of nationalism and produced a split discourse of stardom which had dual imperatives—matching a Hollywood style discourse and responding to Indian cultural needs and constraints.

Majumdar analyses the role of film journalism in the production of stardom in India. The film magazines adopted the “mise-en scene” of stardom imported from Hollywood. They were part of the “official” discourse of stardom.¹⁴ The bulk of extra cinematic information that circulated in these magazines was limited to sketchy biographical details, filmography and a paragraph describing the actresses face. This ‘profiling of the face’, according to Majumdar, can be seen as “colloquial expressions of Indian aesthetics”.¹⁵ Reviewers wrote about the stars as emotional types borrowing from the *Roop Varnana* tradition of description of heroines¹⁶. As I will argue in Chapter one, there were other modes of portrayal in Urdu poetry like the *sarapa*- (from head to toe) that were similar to the *Roop Varnana* form. The *sarapa* was a popular genre devoted to the detailed praise of the body of the *mashuq*-beloved that can be seen as a model used by the writers in film journalism.¹⁷ While the form of star profiling might have been borrowed from Hollywood as Majumdar suggests, the descriptions draw from vernacular modes of articulation and expression.

In the chapter “Spectatorial Desires and the Hierarchies of Stardom”, Majumdar considers questions on spectatorship, gossip, and popularity with regard to two popular stars, Sulochana and Fearless Nadia, who according to her occupied the highbrow and lowbrow ends of the spectrum of stardom in the 1930s and evoked very different fan responses. I will mobilise her discussion about the

¹⁴ Neepta Majumdar, 34

¹⁵ Neepta Majumdar, 35

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ The book *Filmi Titliyan* in Urdu is a compilation of 86 profiles of actresses from the early sound period. According to the author Bijli Jampuri, “to collect all the beauties together was nothing short of organizing a continental beauty pageant.” The style of the book is poetic prose which is inspired by the *sarapa*. See *Filmi Titliyan*, Raj Publishing House, Hyderabad, 1945, 7

realignment of Sulochana's star image from the cosmopolitan mode to a nationalist discourse in my first chapter on the 'white' actresses. These shifts signal in a crucial way the transformation and reinvention of performers and performance at the site of cinema. Stardom, however, is not the only prism through which the discourse on women's performance in the film industry can be imagined. The 'image' of the 'star' overpowers investigations of actresses who are not merely cinematic entities but subjects placed at the juncture of complex traces of specific realms of history. This dissertation will explore the possibilities of earning a livelihood, survival and the refashioning of selfhood available not only to the stars but to other women performers as well.

Christine Geraghty in her essay, "Re-examining stardom: questions of texts, bodies and performance", emphasises the need to rethink the categories through which stars are examined and understood. In her analysis of contemporary Hollywood star culture and how "film stars make meaning in contemporary cinema", Geraghty makes useful categorisation of the "star-as-celebrity", "stars-as-professional" and "star-as-performer"¹⁸. For a Cinema Studies project located predominantly in the 1930s, the notion of the star as performer draws attention to the work of women and their performance. The need is to mobilise Geraghty's three categorisations simultaneously to accentuate the possibilities of work and stardom that effect out reinvention of women through cinema.

Another pioneering work on actresses in this period is by Rosie Thomas. Her article, "Not Quite (Pearl) White: Fearless Nadia, Queen of the Stunts", is a detailed study of an alternative prototype of femininity in the 1930s as marked by Nadia's image. The essay is an important intervention in the understanding of the stunt films produced by the Wadia Brothers. In the essay, Thomas explores

the construction of one form of modern Indian femininity in the late colonial period, examining Nadia within the film production context of 1930s

¹⁸ Christine Geraghty, "Re-examining stardom: questions of text, bodies and performance" in *Reinventing Film Studies*, Arnold Publishers, London, 2000, 183-201

Bombay and, in passing, drawing comparisons with her shadow persona, Devika Rani.¹⁹

Thomas discusses the ways in which the Wadia brothers dealt with Nadia's "whiteness/Otherness" and in the process negotiated points of tension in her image. According to Thomas, Nadia's image was created within the dual vision of an essentialised Indian cultural tradition while simultaneously recognising the hybridity and fluidity within the porous borders of modern India. Thomas presents Nadia as a "post-modern hybrid wonderwoman" and "an ebullient *virangana* in a modern world"²⁰. Nadia restores order in the battle between the good and bad; she performs daredevil stunts like swinging from chandeliers and leaping from the roofs of high-speed trains. For Thomas, the contradictions within Nadia's star persona as a popular icon within the nationalist context "despite her whiteness"²¹ can be understood in two ways. "As a white woman her status was liminal- the threat of her physical prowess could be contained and her sexuality could be vicariously consumed". Her "whiteness" was simultaneously recognised and disavowed. This indisputably underpinned the ambivalence of her erotic appeal, which for Thomas presents "the classic case of colonial miscegenation"²². Secondly, within the diegesis of the films, Nadia's identity was aligned to the modern cosmopolitan "Bombaiwali" and not to her "whiteness". The charge to Nadia's image comes from the enabling conventions and thematic of the stunt genre and the way in which the Wadias mobilised it. It would be interesting to see the constructions of other 'white' actresses like Sabita Devi and Madhuri, who

¹⁹ Rosie Thomas, "Not Quite (Pearl) White: Fearless Nadia, Queen of the Stunts", in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha, Sage, New Delhi, 2005, 38

²⁰ Between 1910 to 1940s, the warrior woman or the *virangana* was a popular trope in contemporary theatre and cinema. As the narratives of the films reveal, the *virangana* is a good queen who leads her people into battle against injustice and tyranny. She is dressed in masculine attire and displays astounding military skills- horse riding, sword fighting and combat. Rosie Thomas in her seminal work on Nadia has discussed her on-screen persona as a *virangana* prototype. According to Thomas, "the *virangana*'s status derives from her noble deeds rather than her relationship to a man. She is allowed independence denied to other women". But the discourses that circulated around Khoté saw her in juxtaposition to Nadia and other stunt actresses. *Ibid*, 52

²¹ *Ibid*, 55

²² *Ibid*, 55

were very popular stars in the mid 1930s, but their image was constructed very differently and their ethnic difference was mobilised in different ways.

Thomas posits Nadia and Devika Rani as cinematic alter egos of each other. She uses the binaries of the home and the world articulated by Partha Chatterjee to contrast the autonomy of Nadia's "gender ambivalence and multiple models of femininity" against the 'new Indian woman' whose power "lay ultimately in embracing a more limited and essentialized femininity and was consequently comparatively constrained"²³. This new woman, according to Thomas, is best embodied in the figure of Devika Rani. According to Debashree Mukherjee in her article "Good Girls, Bad Girls", this straightforward contrast between Nadia and Devika Rani is problematic as it fails to read Devika Rani's "image against the grain"²⁴. Mukherjee points out that Thomas insists on "the ambivalent and multiplicitous nature of Nadia's screen persona"²⁵, but her "literal textual reading" of Devika Rani's character in *Achhut Kanya* ignores the fact that both women were actually framed by "multiple writings". Mukherjee argues that Devika Rani too was painstakingly constructed by Bombay Talkies as the ideal of Indian womanhood. This debate clearly points to the need to understand the careful fashioning of star personas by studios in the 1930s. Debashree Mukherjee's chapter "Notes on a Scandal" in her unpublished thesis *Writing Cinema, Writing the City: An Affective Journey Through Bombay Cinema with Saadat Hasan Manto (1937-1948)* is a noteworthy contribution to this area of research. In the chapter she uses 'scandal' as a methodological tool "for approaching hidden histories of women and their work"²⁶. She uses three scandals involving Devika Rani, Naseem Banu and Khurshid Homji (Saraswati Devi) as divergent guides to uncover and record the contribution of these women to Indian cinema. She highlights a series of

²³ Ibid, 55

²⁴ Mukherjee, Debashree, "Good Girls, Bad Girls", *Seminar*, June 2009, accessed online http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/598/598_debashree_mukherjee.htm

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Debashree Mukherjee, "Notes on a Scandal" in *Writing Cinema, Writing the City: An Affective Journey Through Bombay Cinema with Saadat Hasan Manto (1937-1948)*, Unpublished Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2009, 68

concerns with regard to the publicness of women and how the scandal was a crucial device for framing modern women in the film industry.

Anapurna Kapse's unpublished paper "After Phalke, before Sant Tukaram" presents an interesting case study of *Gunsundari/The Gifted Beauty* (1927) and *Diler Jigar* or *Brave Heart* (1931). Her argument draws attention to the issues of genre hybridity, urbanity and female performance in the silent period. Kapse argues that instead of focussing on popular cinema in the context of its appropriation by forces of nationalism, it would be more constructive to look at the ways in which popular cinema appealed to audiences through "an eclectic and irreverent performance of a hegemonic discourse like nationalism, and highlight its serious engagement with more pressing modes of immediate urban experience".²⁷ According to Kapse, the theory of *darshan* has provided a "powerful ontology of the photographic image" that has overwhelmingly determined most accounts of Indian film spectatorship. *Darshan* is understood as a "frontal, transcendental exchange of looks between the devotee and its object of worship".²⁸ In the essay she re-evaluates this idea of *darshan* through an examination of films that show the limitations of this devotional paradigm. According to Kapse, the crime drama, the historical and the stunt film imagined "daring, tongue-in-cheek urban scenarios that puncture 'devotion' and 'wonder' as spectatorial affects to insist upon the sexual anxiety and provocation engendered by the here and the now"²⁹. Kapse asserts that the urban films re-frame the codes of *darshan* by privileging spatiality as an organising visual principle of modern experience. The "attractions" of *Gunsundari* lie in the makeover of a traditional Indian woman into "a seductive, flirtatiously westernized, and alluring temptress", even if temporarily. The social film, according to Kapse, often sexualized the "icon of a sublimated, traditional Indian femininity into a radically new permissive feminine type".³⁰ In this the

²⁷ Anupama Kapse "After Phalke, Before Sant Tukaram", (Unpublished paper. I would like to thank Ira Bhaskar for sharing Anupama Kapse's research with me)

²⁸ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology', *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, nos. 25-26, 1987.

²⁹ Anupama Kapse, Op. Cit.

³⁰ Ibid

socials uniquely mobilized the “public” gaze of the film medium. Kapse’s argument draws attention to the fact that the social film had ambivalent strains with respect to the representation of women as often many films mobilised the “taxonomy of social reform” while the action of the film was geared towards “a bold performance of the ‘modern’”.

Eric Burnouw and Krishnaswamy in their introductory chapters of *Indian Film* provide an exhaustive narration of the birth of the Indian film industry. However, women performers are mere anecdotal references littering the predominantly masculine narrative of the film industry. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen’s *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* provides a methodical survey of the basic available information on early cinema. The chronological order of the *Encyclopaedia* significantly enables a dextrously organised bibliography that catalogues and classifies the existing archival entries on films, performers, directors and studios with remarkable attention to historical detail. Many performers, however, are missing from the *Encyclopaedia*. Jahanara Kajjan, Nalini Tarkhud, Enakshi Rama Rao, Naseem Banu, Pramilla, Zillo and Zebunissa are a few names that come to mind and by extention many of these women find themselves missing from the history of cinema. Har Mandir Singh ‘Hamraz’s *Hindi Film Geet Kosh (1931-40)* lists the names of the 931 films that were released during that decade, with credit details and song lists and provides the film researcher a jigsaw of names to speculate upon.

III

The central theme of the dissertation is premised on the crucial nexus between cinema and women performers. The possibility of reinvention enabled by cinema was essential to the way in which women’s selfhood was refashioned and articulated in the public sphere. The ubiquitous presence of women in the public sphere activated a series of frenzied regimes of affect. Women shared a contentious relationship with this public sphere. Catalysed by their presence, the public sphere worked in myriad ways to contain them. Women’s experiences, however, were constituted by a plethora of agents. Their interaction with modern modes of

entertainment displays the diverse ways in which women actively used the technologies emerging in the late nineteenth through the first part of the twentieth century to participate in the public sphere.

The circuits of entertainment in the 1930s were intrinsically tied to each other. In this dissertation, I highlight this interaction between the various modes of performance like the theatre, *nautanki* and the music recording industry with cinema, which allowed performers to negotiate and navigate these routes with fluidity. Cinema became a hybrid space for the convergence of various artists and performers from different backgrounds. Cinema brought together a variety of women into its ambit as the chapters will illustrate. It provided them opportunities to work and transform the parameters of their life. This promise of transformation was true for men as well; however, for women it held the potential for radical consequences. The sheer publicness and mass appeal of cinema reinvented and shaped the contours and contexts of women's experience.

The notion of reinvention, however, holds within its crevices the struggles and hardships of women as well. It highlights the precarious balance between women's hopes and claims in modern society. This dissertation attempts an engagement with women performers who tried to negotiate societal constraints and found ways to refashion themselves through cinema. Cinema overshadowed the differences between women through processes of masquerade and disavowal which flattened hierarchies of ethnicity, class, caste and lineage. Thus the primary focus of this dissertation is on women performers and the possibilities of reinventing themselves that were intrinsically linked to their interaction with cinema which provided women with opportunity to work and earn a living.

This dissertation is also an attempt to map certain contours of the film industry from 1925 through to the 1940s and bring to light individuals and personalities who have so far found minimal attention in academic work. This project is just a beginning which I hope will open up the possibilities for future research work.

IV

In this historiographical project to write a cultural history of women performers in the film industry, I have been inspired by critical and historiographical interventions that have opened up rhizomatic possibilities of research. Guillian Bruno's *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* is an illustrative paradigm that has guided me in this encounter with textual loss wherein I have confronted a scenario in which the primary film texts are lost; records of performances are lost; and documents or records of any kind to throw light on the functioning of the studios and different modes of the organization of work are unavailable. In this situation, Bruno's methodology has been immensely useful. This is a method, in Bruno's own words, in which "the analysts gaze would be able to move, as does that of an anatomist, from visible traces on a surface to invisible ones inside the body of texts. Indexical and inferential, this approach goes in depth and also traverses intertextu(r)al sites of absent presence, riding on the crest of a visible invisibility."³¹ The field of investigation in this project is a vast territory of 'clues' where the boundaries are blurred. The work of micro-historians like Carlo Ginzburg has been inspirational in its emphatic accentuation of the microscopic through the intensive reduction of scale or the scope of observation. This prompts an analytical procedure that revealingly foregrounds a previously unobserved scheme of documentary material which mobilised alongside Clifford Geertz' notion of 'thick description'³², has helped me to dynamically structure the material and offer, I hope, an enriched narrative.

In terms of periodization, I have used 1925 and 1947 as bookends to mark a period in which major transformations took place in the field of cinema. The mid 1920s saw a differentiation and consolidation of genres with mythologicals, devotionals, historicals being made alongside the stunt film and the emergence of the Social as an important new formation at this point. 1925 also marks the

³¹ Giuliana Bruno, "Mapping Out Discourse: An Introduction" in *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*, Princeton University Press, Oxford, 1993.

³² Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, 3-30.

emergence of the Jewish actress Sulochana who was to rise to become the leading star of the silent period. The coming of sound technology in 1930s marked a huge shift in the film industry. With the expansion of various networks and circuits of production, exhibition and distribution, film business entered a new era. In these years, the industry was full of a dynamic and varied cast of performers which I try to map. In 1947, with the cataclysmic event of Partition, the industry was in a state of flux and this led to the departure and arrival of new performers. I attempt to look at the changes that took place during this period with direct reference to the performance requirements and the differing discourses around women performers that shaped the industry as much as it shaped their subjectivities and their personas that contributed to female stardom that was so heady in those early days of cinema.

This dissertation relies heavily on the archive and is aware of the selective appropriation of material and the fallacies of institutional politics. The archive cannot offer direct access to the past and any reading of its contents will necessarily be a reinterpretation. The archive, however, acts both as a repository of cinema history and a reminder of exclusions. Thus despite reservations concerning the reliability of the archive and its tendencies to mislead and manipulate, the archive provides fragmentary sources to the past. The archive can be a dangerously seductive place and the need is to allow the contents of the archive to express themselves without mediation. Faced with a huge body of textual material, this research work is informed by an intuitive response to found material as a search for traces and clues.

I have attempted to mobilise diverse sources and evidences to construct a field of knowledge about performers and their work in the film industry. By the 1930s apart from the regular advertisement page in the daily newspapers, there were a dozen film magazines in the various vernaculars. These film magazines regularly provided the public with a dose of articles on cinema related themes that ranged from short bios of the stars to news around studios to technical pieces on cinematic art along with reviews of films. I have used these film magazines along with publicity material, photographs, newspapers, gramophone recordings and

autobiographies. As many of the performers have not been written about before, I have painstakingly pieced together a temporary working filmography of the actresses from *The Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, cross checking with a variety of sources like film advertisements, studio news sections and film reviews in newspapers and magazines for additional information. I have used sources in English, Hindi, Urdu and Marathi wherever possible and necessary; this signifies the linguistic diversity of film journalism and culture in this period. Often regional differences are expressed through linguistic difference. The *Indian Cinematograph Committee Report* and the five volumes of *Evidences* (1928) was a crucial primary source that I have relied on to understand the workings of the industry during the build up to the transition to sound technology in the film industry.

The analysis and close reading of autobiographies of actresses Durga Khote (*I, Durga Khote*), Leela Chitnis (*Chanderi Duniyaat*) and Begum Khurshid Mirza (*A Woman of Substance*) affirmatively reveal the experiential realms of these performers' histories. The autobiographies are subjective accounts where the personal is enmeshed with the public and reinforce the 'auratic' connotations of these performers' profession. The memoirs act as a source through which the "intimate histories of women can be written"³³ and address questions around agency and the struggle of women in the industry.

V

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. Each engages with women from three different backgrounds. The thematic vectors that intersect each chapter are contingent upon notions of cinematic performance, gender, modernity and reinvention. Through the chapters I try to illuminate the matrix of film culture in the period from 1925 through to the 1940s, focusing on issues around the discursive terrain of women performers in the film industry. Each of the chapters

³³ See Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid ed. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997, 233- 253.

mobilizes the contexts of reinvention for women elaborated in this 'Introduction' through an engagement with specifically relevant archival material.

The first chapter, **White Skin/ Brown Mask: The Case of 'white' Actresses from the Silent Era to the Early Sound Period**, explores categories of gender, ethnicity, modernity and performance through the figure of the 'white' actress in the early years of Bombay cinema. The Anglo Indian, Jewish and Eurasian women were the first group of women who joined the film industry without any inhibitions. These women by virtue of their particular ethnic backgrounds occupied a distinct place in the public domain. Cinema allowed these women to refashion their identities and reclaim the public sphere in a new way. Many women from these backgrounds flocked to the studios looking for work. This chapter begins in the silent period as the presence of 'white' actresses was pervasive in early cinema and maps their journey till the early talkies. With the coming of sound technology it was assumed that the 'white' actresses would be wiped out. The chapter, however, explores the reasons behind such claims and tries to demonstrate otherwise. The transformation of the image of actresses like Sulochana and the presence of popular Anglo Indian actresses like Sabita Devi and Madhuri in the talkies is a case in point. The chapter examines the transformation of cinema through the roles that women from 'white' backgrounds were to play in the film industry. Since there isn't enough biographical material available on these women, this chapter mobilises extant star profiles, film stills, publicity booklets and the filmographies that I have managed to compile from various sources.

In the second chapter, **Performative Negotiations**, the focus is on women performers who came to cinema from the professional entertainment class (*tawaiifs* and *gaanewalis*) and castes (*bedia*, *kanjar* and *mirasis*), as well as from other performative traditions like theatre and the gramophone industry. The transition to sound technology created a demand for performers who could 'talk', 'sing' and 'dance' in the film industry, and cinema drew from these pre existing pools of performers. This chapter examines the personal and professional trajectories of performers like Jahanara Kajjan, Jaddan Bai, Begum Akthar and Noorjehan;

through each figure broader themes around performance and reinvention are discussed. The chapter also demonstrates the intricate links between performative traditions and the fluidity with which performers glided from one medium to another. The decline of princely states and older forms of patronage had made way for new modern modes of entertainment. Encountering cinema, in their quest for better opportunities of work and self transformation many women from other performative traditions were absorbed into its fold. At the site of cinema, performance and performers were reinvented. These women brought to cinema their own repertoire of music and dance, which transformed the aesthetics of cinematic performance. However, these women were in a precarious position with regard to cinema. The slippery terrain of repute/ disrepute elicited an overriding concern with respect with reference to the publicness of these women. This chapter will also explore the complex negotiations, strategies and subterfuges through which these women tried to refashion their selves.

The third chapter, **Desire for Respectability: “Society Ladies for the Indian Screen”** discusses the hegemonic discourses of respectability and the call for the improvement of cinema through its demand for ‘educated’ and ‘cultured’ performers. Cinema was being realigned to the dominant nationalistic paradigm and was contending for cultural legitimacy in the 1930s. It was believed that the kind of performers who worked in the industry largely affected the image of the industry. In a bid to reinvent their image, the studios were frenetically lobbying for women from cultured backgrounds to join the film industry. The chapter examines the ways in which this process was set in motion. Inversely, the studios were also being ‘set in order’ to allow women from ‘respectable’, ‘cultured’ and ‘educated’ backgrounds to enter film work. Thus reinvention was effected at a double register, through a makeover of cinematic work and the transformation of its performers. This chapter explores the ways in which this discourse of respectability constructed women, and in turn affected women’s own perception of their selves. The autobiographies of Durga Khote, Leela Chitnis and Begum Khurshid Mirza (Renuka Devi) provide insights into their self constructions and negotiations within a changing moral order. Even though women wrote under various constraints and

there were different contexts to their writing, they were agents of their own destiny. Their memoirs reveal fascinating anecdotes about their engagement with the film industry and aid in the process of mapping the film industry. Through a close reading of their memoirs, the chapter mobilises discussions around the notions of film work, careers, studios, survival, livelihood, leisure and reinvention.

The **Conclusion** of the dissertation will reiterate the vital possibility of reinvention that cinema allowed women from different backgrounds. It will discuss the possibilities of future research around women's work in the film industry in the early period moving beyond a focus on performers to cast a glance at women director, producers, music directors and singers.



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CHAPTER I

WHITE SKIN/ BROWN MASK: THE CASE OF 'WHITE' ACTRESSES FROM THE SILENT ERA TO THE EARLY SOUND PERIOD

This chapter will explore categories of gender, ethnicity, modernity and performance through the figure of the 'white'¹ actress in the early years of Indian cinema. Film was a lucrative site of business for intrepidly ambitious individuals in search of reinvention. For women from 'white' i.e. Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish backgrounds, cinema became a means to recast their identity; helping them reclaim the public sphere in new and radical ways. The trace of 'white' actresses in the history of Indian cinema configures and transforms the status of performers and performance from the silent to the early sound period. The industry attracted a large number of pretty and not so pretty Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish girls, who became the first group of women to join the industry uninhibited by the social opprobrium against film work. In the period between the 1920s and 1940s many Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish women worked in the film industry: Sulochana (Ruby Meyers), Ermeline Cordozo², The Cooper sisters- Patience, Violet and

¹See footnote 9 on 'white' actresses in the Introduction.

²Ermeline was christened Miss Patty Cordozo. She was born in Bombay to an Anglo Indian family ("Who's who in the Indian Film Industry" in the *Indian Cinematograph Yearbook 1938*, 598). A news report in the *Times of India*, however refers to her as a "Goanese woman of twenty something years of age." (TOI, 15th September 1927) The report also suggests that she was an orphan and seemed to have never had the benefit of school education. Little else is known of her background. Ermeline joined Star Films Ltd in 1921 and became 'Emili'. Her first film with Star was *Mach Gandharva* (Ramamurthy, S. "Screen Heroines: Miss Ermeline" in *Varieties Weekly*, 4th November 1933, Vol. IV, No. 5, 8-9). After leaving Star for a brief stint with Saurashtra Film Company in Rajkot, she returned to Bombay to join Krishna. It is with films like *Swapna Sundari* aka *Dream Damsel* (d. Kanjibhai Rathod/ Harshadrai Mehta, 1925), *Veer Kesari* (d. Kanjibhai Rathod, 1926), *Khubsoorat Bala* aka *Society Butterfly* (d. Kanjibhai Rathod, 1926) out of the twelve odd films she did in the two years at Krishna that she carves out a special space for herself in the cinematic firmament. In 1927 after a long litigation case against the proprietor Maneklal Patel on breach of contract and against director Kanjibhai Rathod and cameraman Chaturbhuj Doshi on charges of sexual harassment, she joined Imperial. At Imperial she worked in films like *Karmayeli Kail* aka *Tainted Virtue* (d. R.S. Choudhary, 1927), *Hoor -e-Baghdad* aka *Forbidden Love*, *Puran Bhakt* (d. Pesi Karani, 1928) and *Cinema Girl* (d. B.P. Mishra, 1929) to name only a few. The transition to sound is a difficult period for her. And in 1933 she leaves Imperial to become a freelance artist,

Pearl, Madhuri (Miss Beryl Claessen), Seeta Devi³, Sabita Devi (Miss Iris Gasper), Rose, Manorama (Miss Winnie Stuart)⁴, Indira Devi (Miss Effie Hippolite)⁵, Iris Crawford⁶, Kumudini (Miss Mary)⁷, Lalita Devi (Miss Bonnie Bird)⁸, Vimala⁹,

working with smaller studios in Bombay like Ashok Cinetone, Jubilee Movietone, Jawahar Movietone and Metro Movietone. In 1937 she retires from the industry. (Film details, *Light of Asia*).

³Seeta Devi worked in the two of the most popular and well known silent films, *Prem Sanyas* aka *The Light of Asia* (d. Franz Osten, 1925) and *Prapancha Pash* aka *A Throw of Dice* (d. Franz Osten, 1929) co-starring Himanshu Rai. According to film archivist V. Dharamsey, the Seeta Devi roles in the films were actually played by two women- the sisters Renee Smith and Percy Smith. See *Light of Asia: Indian Silent Cinema 1912-1934*, Le Giornate del Cinema Muto and National Film Archive of India, New Delhi, 1994, 56.

⁴Miss Winnie Stuart was born in Calcutta in 1912. She was an Anglo India of half Irish parentage. She joined the industry as a child artist in 1926 and was called Baby Iris. In an interview in 1931 she remembered with fondness visiting the theatres, watching films and being inspired by the glamour of film actresses. Her sister who was in the movie business gave her the impetus to seek employment in the industry (*The Cinema*, August 1931, Vol.5, No.1, 23). In 1928 she joined the Young India Pictures. She also worked with Sharda Studio and was the lead in films like *Rajput Cavalier*, *Jewelled Arrow*, *Guardian Angel* and *Nobles Oblige* (ibid. 28). She appeared in the social *Sneh Samadhi* aka *Martyrs of Love* (d. Ramakant Gharekhan, 1929). She joined the Imperial Film Co. and appeared in *Gulam* aka *The Slave* (d. Moti B. Gidwani, 1931). According to the 1938 *Indian Cinematograph Year Book* (Henceforth, *ICYB*), “she retired from Filmland after her marriage with director Moti B. Gidwani.” (631).

⁵Indira Devi was an Anglo Indian girl from Calcutta. She worked with Madan Theatres, Calcutta and acted in films like the 1926 devotional *Jaydeo* directed by Jyotish Banerjee alongside Patience Cooper and Manorama. In the same year she acted in *Durgesh Nandini* (d. Priyanath Ganguly) with Seeta Devi and Patience Cooper. In 1929 she appeared in *Ganesh Jamuna* (d. Jal Ariya). Little else is known about her. (Filmography constructed from *Light of Asia*).

⁶Iris Crawford was an Anglo Indian girl. Her first film was the historical *Pavagadh Nu Patan* aka *Fall of Pavagadh* in 1928, produced by Indulal Yagnik and directed by Nagendra Mazumdar costarring Navinchandra. In 1929 she appeared in an A. R Kardar directed film *Husna Ka Daku* aka *Mysterious Eagle* for United Players Corp., Lahore. She also worked with Oriental Pictures and Imperial Film co. (Information sources- *ICYB* and *Light of Asia*)

⁷Kumudini was a “Roman Catholic Christian by birth” (*ICYB*). It is unclear when she starts her career but in 1928 she is billed in the Shree Jagdish Film Co. costume film *Shamsher Pratigna* (d. R.N Vaidya). In the same year she appeared in the social *Vara Chatan Vidhawa* aka *Silver Cloud* for Excelsior Film Co., directed by Maneklal Joshi alongside actress Rampyari. She was often referred to by both the names even for the same film, adding to confusion. For example in 1929 she is billed as Mary in the Kohinoor costume drama *Zakhmi Jigar* aka *Broken Hearts* directed by Narayan Devare. In the same year she appeared in another Kohinoor film *Jawani Diwani* aka *Flaming Youth* (d. Nandlal Jaswantlal)- with the name Kumudini. According to the *ICYB* “she was married and had retired from Filmland”. (*ICYB*, 626) (This information is pieced together from *Light of Asia* and *ICYB*.)

⁸She belonged to an Anglo Indian community from Calcutta. She was employed by Madan Theatres. (*ICYB*, 627)

⁹Miss Solomon was a Jewess from Calcutta. She appeared in *Nur Jehan* (Imperial Film Co.)

Mumtaz (Miss Queenie), Radharani¹⁰, Yasmin (Betty Gomes), Arati Devi¹¹, Nadia¹², Pramilla (Esther Victoria Abraham) and Romilla (Sophie Abraham) were some of the women who played with and played out the fantasies of the Indian populace on screen.

In this chapter I look at the extant hagiographic records, film reviews and stills to map the roles women from the Anglo Indian and Jewish communities were dressed up to 'play' in the films from the 1930s-40s. These roles helped perpetuate certain stereotypes about women from these communities as well as impinged on the ways that their identity was configured. The attempt is in no way to homogenise or coalesce in an (un)problematic way the history of communities and the *bazaar* oriented nature of film culture, film production and filmic performance.¹³ Through the history of the Anglo Indian and Jewish women in the

¹⁰Radharani was the daughter of a retired Captain of the British Army. Not much is known about her. Her first film is said to be *Flames of Flesh* (British Dominion Films Co., Calcutta). In 1929 she is billed for the social *Giribala* (d. Madhu Bose). (Information pieced together from *Hindi Film Geet Kosh* and *ICYB*, 655).

¹¹ According to the *ICYB*, Aarti Devi was a Jewish girl. Her first film was *Dardi*, a Niranjan Pal Production. She joined Barua Pictures and played the lead in *Aparadhi* and *Punar Janma*. (*ICYB*, 571)

¹² She was born Mary Evans in Australia to a British father who was a soldier in the British Army and a Greek mother. Mary immigrated to Bombay with her parents at a very young age. She grew up near Peshawar where she learnt to ride horses. After her father was killed in France during WWI, she and her mother moved to Bombay. Mary was trained in shorthand and typing, and she tried to get a good job; but at the same time she put on a lot of weight! In order to lose weight, she took up dancing at a school run by a Russian dance teacher named Madame Astrova. Madame Astrova saw talent in Mary and asked her to join her dance/theater troupe which traveled around India. Mary changed her name to the more exotic "Nadia". Nadia left the troupe to work in a Russian circus, but didn't care for circus life and returned to the stage, dancing and singing Hindi songs as part of her act. Looking for new opportunities to work she decided to audition for a role at Wadia Movietone. She was hired by the studio for Rs. 150 per month. To test her appeal with Indian audiences, J.B.H Wadia cast her in his 1933 'orientalist costume melodrama' *Desh Deepak* as a slave girl. Although her role was a miniscule three minute sequence, it was established that Nadia had great screen presence. J.B.H cast her in his next film, 1935's *Noor-e-Yaman* as Princess Parizad. In 1935, J.B.H wrote a screenplay especially for Nadia, *Hunterwali* (the nickname stuck to her for life). She was an Amazonian figure, blond and blue-eyed: a mask-wearing, whip-cracking, sword-wielding, chandelier-swinging heroine who did all her own stunts. Audiences loved her. *Hunterwali* was a huge hit and there was no turning back. (Bio-note pieced together from Dorothee Wenner, *Fearless Nadia: The true story of Bollywood's original stunt queen*, Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2005 and Rosie Thomas, "Not Quite (Pearl) White: Fearless Nadia, Queen of the Stunts", in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema through a Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha, Sage, New Delhi, 2005, 35-69)

¹³According to Kaushik Bhaumik, "cinema grew as a disreputable *bazaar* institution...the industry in the mid-1930s had its antecedents in classes that resided in the *bazaar* which produced and

larger public sphere I try to lay out and highlight the field from where individuals and personalities emerged to participate in the cinematic process. I see the community as marking and inflecting a system of signs on the body of these women through which identity was constructed and through which their attempts at reinvention were engendered - a process of individuation, of 'being' and of being framed within a particular logic of the popular imaginary frames of representation. Thus through the chapter, I hope to illuminate the journey of known and unknown performers whose habitus and textures of skin created a discourse on 'fairness' in modular terms- as *ideal* skin type for the *ideal* feminine gender.

The Public Sphere and the Modern Woman

Chairman: You said a lot of Anglo-Indian girls and others have made inquiries from you about this, profession, Do you think it is really very difficult for an Anglo-Indian girl—I am not talking of the European for the time being—to adapt herself to Indian ways and interpret Indian ideas?

Sulochana: It is not very difficult if she has got the knack of walking and behaving like an Indian—just as I do. ¹⁴

Q. But is it not a little bit difficult to induce Indian ladies to come forward and take part in theatres?

A. They are rather shy, but I think some of them are getting over it. ¹⁵

The familiarity with urban space was crucial to adapting to modern modes of entertainment and employment. Publicness and performativity were crucially tied together. Sulochana's comments set up the contrast between the habituation of Anglo Indian and other Indian women. Through a "corporeal stylization of gender"¹⁶, the codes of behaviour and gestures of the 'Indian woman' were

consumed this disreputable cinema. Correspondingly, much of the industry and its audiences of the 1930s was a product of the process by which the bourgeoisie distanced itself from the *bazaar* and its performative modes." This was, however, also a period when a hybrid form emerged that mixed the style of *bazaar* and *bourgeois* cinema in India. See *Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry 1913-1936*, 7

¹⁴ ICC Evidence V, 4.

¹⁵ Ibid. 6.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire" in *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, 1990, 33.

performatively enacted and (de)/stabilized by the Anglo Indian actress as acts of reiteration and re-citation. Gender was performed not through any interior logic of coherence but through codes written on the body of the Anglo Indian/ 'white' actress. The success of the Anglo Indian actress lay in the polysemy of her image which was made possible at a juncture that was temporally specific. It took 'shy' 'educated' 'Indian' ladies under stringent norms of decorum and propriety almost two decades after the birth of cinema in India to appear on screen. Until then cinema exploited the possibilities opened up by the greater degree of freedom of dress and action that the 'white' actresses allowed.

The excitement generated by the presence of women in the public sphere from the late 19th century was already activating a series of discourses in the 1920s-30s. Cities like Bombay, Calcutta and Lahore had become important spaces where public life acquired new cultural, social and technological dimensions. The metropolises were dotted with sites and sights of modernity like motorcars, trains, trams, telephones, industrial sites like mills, film studios, but also the glamorous spectacle of fashion and modern lifestyles could be spotted on the city streets. Women were taking an active part in the processes of production, consumption and exchange. However access to the city and the use of urban space by women was not always easy. Their ways and movements in the street remained structurally organised and socially oriented along boundaries (invisible or otherwise), redirecting and restricting their forays through the metropolis.¹⁷ Despite impressive reforms in the social sphere, *purdah* and an increasing seclusion of Hindu and Muslim women was perceived as a sign of respectability and with respect to that, the publicness and the professionalism of women was marked with moral distress.

¹⁷ Anke Gieber has made these observations in the case of European women's spatial experience of the city. This comment, however, is equally applicable to women's experience in Indian cities, where women's mobility was part of a social debate and the restrictions were perhaps sharper and more incontrovertible. See Gieber, "Female Flanerie and the Symphony of the City" in Katharina Von Ankum ed. *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1997. Also see Judith R. Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London" in *Representations*, No. 62, (Spring, 1998), University of California Press, 1-30, accessed on 27/05/2008 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2902937>

In other words, the presence of working women, unchaperoned in the public sphere came to be seen as symptomatic of their 'loose' character.

Women from Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish backgrounds grew up in unconventional homes unlike those of other Indian women. They perceived and imagined themselves as 'different': more European than people of other Indian communities. They were groomed in particular ways of the modern. The Anglo-European ancestry of the Anglo Indians was inscribed by cultural markers such as language, dress, and a different domesticity.¹⁸ And these markers continued to shape a distinctive community identity that was bound to England and Europe as home. Jews, on the other hand, were known to tenaciously cling to their Jewish identity. Baghdadi Jews and the Bene Israel of Bombay and Calcutta lived for the most part socially segregated but in close proximity to other Jewish families, studying in Jewish schools and attending Jewish social functions.¹⁹ For instance, the case of Jewish actresses Pramilla (Esther Victoria Abraham) and her sister Romilla (Sophie Abraham) who studied in Christian institutions like the Calcutta Girls' High School and St. James's College.²⁰ As an exceptional case, the Abraham

¹⁸ According to Alison Blunt, "everyday life in an Anglo-Indian home was much closer to British than Indian domesticity. Anglo-Indian women read many of the same household guides as British *memsahibs*, and, wherever possible, employed servants to cook and clean. Meals in both British and Anglo- Indian homes combined a distinctive mixture of western and Indian food, and were eaten with cutlery rather than by hand, and sitting at a table." See Alison Blunt, "Land of Our Mothers': Home, Identity, and Nationalism for Anglo Indians in British India, 1919-1947", *History Workshop Journal*, No. 54 (Autumn, 2002), Oxford University Press, accessed on 14/05/2011 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4289800>, 63.

¹⁹ The Jews in India were divided broadly into three groups- the Baghdadis, the Bene Israel and the Cochin Jews. It is beyond the purview of this chapter to discuss each group. For the sake of the argument, I will concentrate only on the Baghdadi and the Bene Israel as they were both largely concentrated in Bombay and Calcutta. For details on the Baghdadi Jews in India see Jael Silliman's brilliant book, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames*, Seagull Books, India, 2001 and for a detailed study of the Bene Israel, see Schifra Strizower's book *The Children of Israel: The Bene Israel of Bombay*, Oxford University Press, 1971.

²⁰ Pramilla narrates an interesting anecdote about her school. Non-Christians had to pay a double fee at both schools. She recalls the deftness with which her father, Dr. Albert Isaac, avoided the fee and managed to land the girls a scholarship: despite being a well known surgeon, Dr Isaac, for unexplained reasons, lost all his wealth and began supplying sleepers to the railways. The family shifted to Rippon Street in Calcutta- a predominantly Christian locality- and the girls were enrolled at St. James' College. The double fee clause however put tremendous pressure on the family to either pay up or convert to Christianity. Dr Isaac impressed upon the school Principal that he was a member of the Freemasons' Lodge and began supplying necessary requirements to the school. The girls were put on a scholarship. See *Pramilla: Esther Victoria Abraham*, 7.

family was sutured into the Indian social fabric. Their father's side of the family consisted of Hindus and Baghdadi Jews (though some biographical accounts suggest a Bene Israeli lineage). Baghdadi Jews drew impermeable borders between themselves and other Indian communities to prevent assimilation and a feared miscegenation. On the other hand, the trace of inter-racial sex and illegitimacy continued to identify Anglo-Indian women as more licentious than other European and Indian women. In their lives within and beyond the home, both Anglo Indian and Jewish women were seen as admirably emancipated and yet dangerously transgressive. Their ability to mix socially with men and chose whom to marry was another marker of their supposed autonomy and freedom.

Even if women's claim to the city were contrived or seen as illegitimate; Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish women were largely and visibly present in the public domain and entered the workforce in large numbers as early as the nineteenth century. Many of the women were trained and employed at first in the civil nursing service, established in the early 1870s.²¹ At the turn of the century they formed a large majority of the staff in government and civil hospitals as well as in the railways. They were also hired as teachers in English medium schools.²² Pramilla was a teacher at the Talmud Torah Jewish Boy's School in the primary section in Calcutta before a visit to her cousin Rose in Bombay changed the course of her life.²³

²¹ See Lionel Caplan, "Iconographies of Anglo Indian Women: Gender Constructs and Contrasts in a Changing Society", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Oct., 2000), Cambridge University Press, 863-892, accessed on 14/05/2011 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/313134>. However, Caplan does not mention entertainment as a major site of employment of Anglo Indian women. Both the theatre and cinema were important areas of employment for young women from the community.

²² The British gave the smaller religious minorities a position privilege, who found it easy to step into petty jobs in offices and workshops. The customs, railways, and posts and telegraph service were departments which were known to be the preserves of favoured minorities like the Anglo Indians and the Jews. See Laura Bear, "Ruins and Ghosts: The Domestic Uncanny and the Materialisation of Anglo Indian Genealogies in Kharagpur" in Janet Carsten ed. *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness*, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 36-57.

²³ Rose started as an actress with Madan's Corinthian Theatre in Calcutta in the 1930s. She also acted in a number of Madan films like *Naqli Doctor* (J.J Madan, 1933) in which she appeared alongside Patience Cooper, *Alladin and the Wonderful Lamp* alias *Tilismi Chiragh* (1933), *Zehree Saanp* (J.J Madan, 1933) with Jahanara Kajjan and Patience Cooper. Later she went to Bombay and joined the Imperial Film Co. In 1935, when a nineteen year old Pramilla came to visit her

As modern systems of commerce were institutionalised, many Anglo Indian, Eurasian and Jewish girls were hired as shop assistants in European owned retail firms and employed in offices as typists, stenographers, secretaries and telephone operators in the major commercial centres of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. These spaces of employment habituated their senses and bodies to the kinesis of the urban experience. It immersed them in a sensuous world of consumption and exchange. However, there were recurrent complains about long hours, low wages and ill-treatment by customers. Sulochana too had tried her hand at these before she joined the movie business.²⁴ In fact her early films like *Telephone ni Taruni/ Telephone Girl* (d. Homi Master, 1926) through their staging of her former occupation as a telephone operator created direct points of reference to the 'real'.²⁵ This reference anchored and reiterated her cosmopolitan image that the studio was building up. In fact *Telephone Girl* can be placed within the corpus of films like *Typist Girl* aka *Why I Became a Christian* (d. Chandulal Shah, 1926) also starring Sulochana or *The Secretary* (d. Chaturbhuj Doshi, 1938)²⁶ that located the 'white' actress within stereotypical frames of reference identifying communities with specified patterns of employment.

cousin Rose on the sets of *Return of Toofan Mail* where Rose was brought on contract to play the lead, things did not go as planned. According to Pramilla's account, when R.S Choudhary saw her, he told Ardeshir Irani that this was the girl he wanted for the film. A quick screen test and she was signed up. The film however never saw the light of the day and remained unfinished. Pramilla's first film was Kolhapur Cinetone's *Bhikaran* (P.K. Atharti, 1935) with Master Vinayak and Ratan Bai. (Information put together from sources- *Pramilla: Esther Victoria Abraham, Hindi Film Geet Kosh* and *ICYB*).

²⁴ICC Evidence, V, 9.

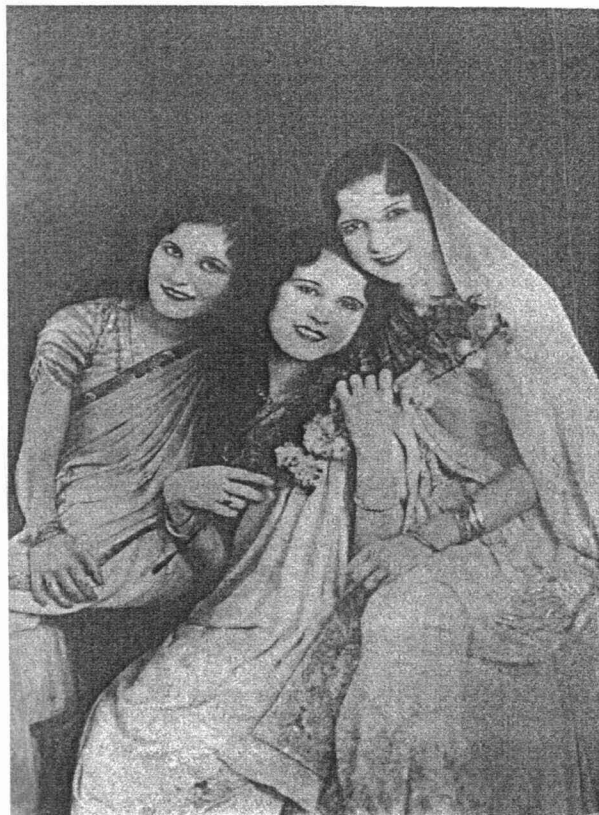
²⁵ According to Neepa Majumdar, it is after Sulochana is "reified as the most popular Indian star" in the 30s that such a biographical connect worked in retrospect as a privileged offering into her private life and can be understood as part of the narrative similar to the 'Hollywood'/ American Dream- the story of a working class girl making it big in the film industry. See Majumdar, Neepa, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2009, 98.

²⁶This Ranjit Movietone social comedy was a huge success. The film starred Madhuri with Trilok Kapoor, Charlie and Wahidan. The back page advertisement in *filmindia* reads "*The Secretary* is a story of a MODERN MAIDEN who had gone WEST. A comedy with plenty of fun, frolic and laughter". See *filmindia*, 1st Dec. 1938, Vol. 4, No. 8, 56.

ART PLATE 1



INDIRA DEVI Alias Miss Effie Hippolite of 'KAPALKUNDALA'
Photograph source: National Film Archive of India



The Three Cooper Sisters – Violet, Patience, Pearl
'Art Supplement', *Filmland*, Puja Number, 1932.

The ICC Report- 'Official' Narratives and 'Supplementary' Bodies

Owing to the difficulty of obtaining *suitable* Indian actresses some Anglo-Indian girls have adopted the profession and several of them play Indian parts with considerable success and are among the most popular 'stars'.

- Indian Cinematograph Committee Report²⁷

Throughout the ICC report and evidences, the moot point with regard to performers in cinema is about the presence/absence of 'respectable' educated Indian women. Emphasising the lack of "suitable" actresses, the statement offers an apologia for the success of Anglo Indian actresses. It exposes the discomfort of the committee in acknowledging the sense of frisson that the Anglo Indian performers stirred in the film going populace through their various roles on screen. The statement reduces their work to circumstance and consequence, completely eschewing cinema's shrewd capitalisation of the publicness and enabling seduction of the Anglo Indian actress. Another act of omission is the wilful negation of the presence of 'other' public women from the ambit of cinematic performance. The *tawaiifs* and the common prostitutes were liminal characters whose putatively overt sexual and transactional nature threatened to cast aspersions on a nascent industry in the process of legitimacy. On the other hand, the Anglo Indian, Jewish actresses were figures who could in some measure be co-opted into a mould of 'respectable' appellations and *could* be groomed to 'play Indian parts' through a series of disavowals, ambivalences and masquerades.

Within the ICC narrative, the 'white' actress is a mere supplement- an adjunct replenishing a 'lack' and reinforcing the urgent need for the presence of 'suitable' performers. It would be quite constructive to view this notion of supplementarity through the Derridian concept of the 'dangerous supplement'.²⁸ The 'supplement', even though characterised as being an addition, functions as an extra surplus to the self sufficient system of the 'natural' presence, even as it

²⁷ ICC, No. 66, 33- 34.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, "...That Dangerous Supplement..." in *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, Corrected edition 1997, 141-157. (I would like to thank Ira Bhaskar for suggesting Derrida as a possible way of reading the supplementary status of the 'white actresses').

underlines the presence of a 'lack'. Derrida expounds the idea of the 'supplement as substitution':

[b]ut the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *takes-(the)-place*. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness... (to) fill up/ accomplish by allowing to be filled through sign and proxy.²⁹

Thus, the supplement adds itself to enrich and accumulate the abundance and completeness of the presence so that the presence can be recognized and identified as the absolute and transcendental signified. I find it extremely productive to use the Derridean idea of supplementarity here, a perspective through which the image of 'white' actresses can be seen as adding force and solidity to the trope of *ideal* Indian womanhood through representation.

The *Telephone Girl*, according to Sulochana was "about an Anglo Indian girl who ultimately turns out to be an Indian girl."³⁰ There was a constant play with meaning through processes of signification; meaning persistently oscillated between the effects of immediacy and deferral. Even though the 'white' actress appeared on screen with Hindu names and Effie Hippolite became Indira Devi or Winnie Stuart became Manorama and so on, their image created a visual discrepancy that their ethnic difference made impossible to overshadow, but which could be re-invented through processes of disavowal. At the same time, what is crucial to understand here is that the supplementarity of 'white' actresses broke out of its ancillary and affixed signage and added an element of exotica to the play of modern fantasy.

The Anglo Indian and Jewish actress was representative of the quintessential modern woman. Patience Cooper's 'exotic' features- dark eyes, ebony hair, light skin tone, allowed technicians to experiment with the imported

²⁹ Ibid., 145 (emphasis original).

³⁰ ICC Evidences, V, 3.

technique of eye-level lighting and achieve the 'Hollywood look', embedding her within a transnational order of stardom in the silent era. No account of early Indian cinema is complete without reference to Sulochana's unique 'star' appeal. The modern woman seemed to have emerged most spectacularly in her films like *Cinema Queen* (d. Mohan Bhavnani, 1925), *Wildcat of Bombay* (1927) and *Indira B.A* (d. R.S Choudhary, 1929). Sulochana was sexy, provocative and fashionable. She wore Western clothes, sported the latest hair styles, put on lipstick, plucked her eye-brows, applied oodles of mascara, and painted her nails.

The ICC report's emphasis on the 'supplementarity' of the 'white' actresses was merely a function of the 'official' discourse seeking legitimacy for cinema. In reality, these actresses provided cinema with urbanely mobile bodies that could be recast and remodelled. The 'white' actresses' presence in the public sphere brought a cosmopolitan charge to their images on screen and added the seductive allure of modernity to a variety of entertainment forms on the stage and films.

Recasting Bodies: Theatre and Silent Cinema

The journey of the 'white' actress began on stage. They became prominent players in the theatre at the turn of the century. The presence of 'white' female performers added novelty to the popularity of the commercial stage just as it did to early cinematic frames. Kathryn Hansen argues that their presence on the Parsi stage served as "expedient surrogates"³¹, circumventing the problem of respectability and enabling theatre managers to capitalize on the appeal of the actresses. The Anglo Indian actress marked as racially 'other' and thus exempt from social taboos on female performance, managed to provide "an acceptable alternative to those Indian actresses whose social position (or lack thereof) prevented their reception as suitable objects of spectatorial pleasure"³² and thus added "the spectacle of racial passing to the play of gender identities"³³ on the

³¹ Hansen, "Making Women Visible: Gender and Race Cross- Dressing in the Parsi Theatre" in *Theatre Journal* 51.2, 1999, 128.

³² *Ibid.*, 141.

³³ *Ibid.*, 141.

Parsi stage. For Hansen, the presence of Anglo Indian women effected a transformation of colonial gender hierarchies. The Anglo Indian actress enabled a “fluidity of spectatorial positions” shifting, in the viewer’s gaze “between the fantasized English memsahib, the material Anglo Indian actress, and the fictional Indian heroine”.³⁴ And thus through his gaze, the male Indian viewer could “possess the English beauty and enact a reversal of power relations that prevailed in British dominated colonial society”.³⁵ Playwright Betab’s comments in his autobiography: “[I]f the dramas of the time didn’t have a fair mistress (*gori bibi*) and a black master (*kale miyan*), they were not plays at all.”³⁶ Hansen reads this as an illustration of how colonial “inversion was an integral part” of the narratives. However one can read this differently.

It is undeniable that spaces of popular entertainment allowed vicarious enjoyment of pleasures and forbidden fantasies. The imaginative terrain of seduction is layered and the variety of stars evoked a plethora of nuanced desires in audiences. Thus no singular reading can be fixed to the body of the ‘white’ actress. The success of the Anglo Indian actress lay in the polysemy of her image. One can read the ‘white’ actress as an exotic ‘other’ eliciting an ambiguous and ambivalent desire for an *ideal* form of the feminine with its roots in Indo- Islamicate culture.³⁷ The desire for the fair skinned Muslim woman from central Asia or the exotic fair beauties from the royal harem or the *pardah nasheen gori bibi* (the veiled fair mistress) of the *haveli* were potent tropes in *masnavi* poetics that were readily

³⁴ Ibid., 146.

³⁵ Ibid., 144.

³⁶ As cited by Hansen. 144.

³⁷ For work on the pervasive and easy traffic between Bombay cinema and the Islamicate imaginary, see Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2009 and Kesavan, Mukul, “Urdu, Awadh and the Tawaif: The Islamicate Roots of Hindi Cinema”, in *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State in India*, ed. Zoya Hasan, Westview Press, Boulder, 1994, 244-57. (I want to thank Kaushik Bhaumik for drawing my attention to this point).

transplanted as the desire for the 'white' actress through genres like the oriental costume drama.³⁸

This desire for the 'white' actress was expressed not only in generic forms as discussed above, but also circulated within the public domain through journalistic discourse that responded to the allure of the star-body in hyperbolic appraisals that followed poetic conventions. Within Urdu poesis, the genre of *sarapa*- 'from head to toe' is devoted to the detailed praise of the body of the *mashuq*-beloved. Her/his physical charms and sartorial adornments are described in a frank playful manner allowing the readers to visualise the beloved through the gaze of the poet/ *ashiq*. Often in the poetic imagination the elusive, aloof *mashuq* is described as a fair *hoor* from paradise. *Filmi Titliyan* is actually written like a *sarapa* but in prose. An example in praise of Madhuri (Miss Beryl Claessen) is as below:

Sudol lekin behat khubsoorat jism, husn-o-jamal ka ek chalta phirta paker
saaf-o-shaffaf burf ki tarha rang, siyah daraz aur musq-bu ghesu, chand si
peshani, hilali abru, makhmoor aankhen, seb ki tarha rukhsaar, anar ki kali
ki tarha surkh aur narm honth, motiyon ki se chamakdar daant, hashar
saman seena.....har waqt titli ki tarha beqarar rehti hain

(Well proportioned but extremely beautiful body, a moving statue of beauty, neat and clean complexion like snow, black long tresses that smell of musk, forehead like the moon, eyebrows like the crescent, intoxicating eyes, apple like cheeks, red and soft lips like the bud of pomegranate, teeth that shine like pearls, bosom that creates unrest....restless like the butterfly...)

- *Filmi Titliyan*³⁹

³⁸ Patience Cooper acted in a costume drama *Toorkey Hoor* (J.J Madan, 1924). As the name suggests the film was located in an imaginary oriental fantasy. As per demands of the genre, the play with desire was affected through the polysemic image of Cooper. Dressed up in ornate costumes that signify the Islamicate, the images reiterated a fascination with masquerade and transformation. The way that Cooper was inscribed in similar films as lead performer highlights a dimension of the performance that emerges in the necessary discrepancy between the coded and direct enactment of a role and the specificity of Cooper's indexically registered 'white' presence. The film was a huge success. Ermeline too acted in an Imperial costume film called *Gulshan-e-Arab* directed by K.P Bhave with Gohar Jr. and Jilloo. The 1929 Imperial Film *Heer Ranjha* aka *Hoore Punjab* directed by R.S. Choudhary starred Sulochana and D. Billimoria. The oriental film configured the tropes of Islamicate fantasy through dress, set design and intertitles. (Information pieced together from *Light of Asia* and ICC Evidence, 151).

³⁹ Bijli Jampuri, *Filmi Titliyan*, 30th March 1945, Raj Publishing House, Hyderabad, 119 (Translations mine)

While journalistic discourse circulated the imagination of the *mashuq* as a *hoor*, the Parsi stage that drew heavily from the romantic *masnavi* tradition had already popularized the imagination of the Central Asian beauty creating desires that fluidly identified the 'white' actress with the beauties of *masnavi* lore. The poets of the Parsi stage borrowed liberally from Indic stories at hand and adding Persian and Arabic flavour gave the tales a new spin. The love stories imported were those of Layla and Majnun, of Shirin and Farhad, and of Yusuf and Zulaikha. Local Indian characters and stories like the story of Heer and Ranjha, Sohni and Mahival, Mirza Sahiban and Sassi Punno in Punjab became the *masnavi* poet's favourite.⁴⁰ The *masnavi* poets offered standard ways of plotting the body of the *mashuq* which bred familiarity in the audience with characters, tropes and motifs that popular entertainment forms like the Parsi theatre eagerly drew upon and these idioms were carried into silent cinema.

The pervasive influence of Parsi theatre on early silent cinema allowed many actresses to make the transition from stage to films. Patience Cooper began as a dancer in a Eurasian troupe- the Bandmann's Musical Comedy, before joining Jamshedji Framji Madan's Corinthian Stage Company as an actress. In the 1920s, song and dance item numbers by groups of young women had caught theatre goers' fancy in a big way. The Madan Corinthian Company had a group of 12 Anglo-Indian girls groomed by the company's dance teacher master Champalal; Cooper was one of them. She soon became a rage all across north India where the company presented its plays. J.F Madan had started the Madan film enterprise as early as 1902⁴¹ and ran the two businesses simultaneously, where performers were interchangeably used. Cooper became the leading Madan star after her success in the mythological *Nala Damayanti* (d. Eugenio de Liguoro, 1920).⁴²

Early cinema in India was characterised by a sense of experimentation with cinematic language and form. The spectacle of cinema was hugely invested in a

⁴⁰Francesca Orsini, "Introduction" to *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History* ed. Francesca Orsini, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2007, 1-39.

⁴¹ ICC, Evidence, II, 829.

⁴² *Times of India*, 8th January 1921.

paradigm of the spectacular 'real'. This 'real' was characterised by a sense of revelation, of new bodies and of new technologies. Cinema was perceived, not without ambivalences, as being central to the production, exploration and transmission of modernity. Citations to modernity through motorcars, aeroplanes, telephones, gramophones, radios, wristwatches, fashion and cinema itself were frequent. Contradictions of modernity were often made visible in this space through the figure of the modern woman. An ambivalence of desire was most clearly coded in the desire for the modern 'white' woman. This alignment of gender, ethnicity, performativity and modernity acted as a prism through which 'star' personas negotiated their presence in cinema.

The popularity of actresses like Zubeida, Gohar and Gulab alongside Sulochana, Patience Cooper and Ermeline is suggestive of the presence of variance within the cinematic landscape of work and performance. According to Kaushik Bhaumik, "[T]hree grades of public women coincided with the three-tier star system that came to dominate Bombay cinema in the 1920s; the modern woman, the Mughal courtesan and the common prostitute."⁴³ And these different modes of female stardom in early Indian cinema reorder and reconstitute the desire for the modern and the pre-modern in unique ways. Film content and stardom was coded to cater to a variety of audiences. It was soon evident by the late 20s that the 'stars' who prevailed over everyone were Sulochana and Patience Cooper. Their stardom was crucially tied to the trajectories of the dominant studios they worked with: Kohinoor and then Imperial in the case of Sulochana, and Madan in the case of Cooper.⁴⁴ The circuits of production, distribution and exhibition were significant in harnessing their claims to stardom.

Genre and gender were crucially intertwined in this matrix of cinematic desire. Stars like Sulochana, Patience Cooper and Ermeline acted in a variety of

⁴³ Kaushik Bhaumik, "Miss Sulochana, or how I stopped worrying about sex and learnt to love the movies" paper presented in the 'Stardom Workshop' at School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

⁴⁴ For details on Kohinoor see Bhaumik, *The Emergence of Bombay Film Industry* and on Madan Theatres see Biren Das Sharma, *The Forgotten Empire: The Madan Theatres Pvt. Ltd.*, Sarai

genres. The silent period was characterised by this creative engagement with genre and stars. Studios tried all kinds of new tactics to mobilise their star's aura in the most effective way possible. Star bodies were not fixed to generic specificity yet. This becomes apparent from the variety of films that the actress performed in. Ermeline for example, played a range of characters- like the vamp, the damsel in distress, etc.⁴⁵ Her star persona oscillated between various signs of signification. The performances did not code her rigidly because of which her work during this period was characterised by a raw risqué charm and an unabashed sense of body and being. She was not conventionally good looking but was considered a good performer and a hard working artist. According to S. Ramamurthy, “[A]part from her qualities as a beautiful and talented actress, she was well versed in certain *manly* arts like horse riding”⁴⁶ and was at her best in “strong cowboy roles and vampish parts.”⁴⁷ Thus the polysemic charge of the ‘white’ actress’ image was in the mobility of her body within various registers of performance and modernity.

The social, the crime drama and the stunt film were conceptualized in bold and risqué urban scenarios that insisted on the anxiety and “provocation engendered by the here and now.”⁴⁸ The ‘white’ actresses were key aids in the display of this ‘exotic’ spectacle of contemporaneous modernity. Urban films radically altered and destabilised the field of perception through a fetishization of cinematic travel that took “the body itself through dynamic new locales.”⁴⁹ In *Wildcat of Bombay* Sulochana appeared in eight different characters and disguises,

⁴⁵ See footnote for Ermeline in this chapter.

⁴⁶S. Ramamurthy, “Screen Heroines: Miss Ermeline” in *Varieties Weekly*, 4th Nov. 1933, Vol. IV, No. 5, 9.

⁴⁷ According to Baburao Patel, “During the silent days she has done some excellent work...all the parts played by her so far have gone on well.” See “Our Screen Heroines” in *filmindia*, 30th June 1935, Vol. I, No. 3, 12. What is remarkable is that while her on-screen image in the silent period was multilayered, in the sound period it gets fixed as a vamp and was buttressed with stories of her off-screen brashness and tempestuous behaviour. The *Times of India* reported that Ermeline was fined Rs. 65/- for rash and negligent driving and for striking a police constable. “She admitted that she has quaffed a glass of toddy on the day of the occurrence and slapped a policeman” See ‘Last Minute News’ in *Filmiland*, 6th Aug. 1932, vol. III, No. 12, 14.

⁴⁸ Anupama Kapse, “After Phalke, Before Sant Tukaram” (Unpublished paper. I would like to thank Ira Bhaskar for sharing Anupama Kapse’s research with me)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

while Patience Cooper was double cast in films like *Patni Pratap* (as twin sisters, d. J.J Madan, 1923) and *Kashmiri Sundari* (as mother and daughter, d. Madan, 1925). The mobility of the body blurs perceptions and through the shape shifting reproduced the kinesis of the modern experience.

The affective regime of speed and physical action was best embodied within the generic corpus of urban films like the stunt film. The urban stunt film visualised the human body in thrilling new coordinates where the actresses' body was cast in roles that enabled them to adopt gestures and perform movements that exceeded or significantly diverged from prevailing codes of gendered social behavior. The woman's body was embroiled in a heady fantasy of carnal voyeurism through a visual vocabulary that represented her in exciting new scenarios that exceeded the normative registers of decorum and modesty. For example kissing or smoking on screen. Even before the famous Himanshu Rai-Devika Rani kiss in *Karma* (d. J.L Freer Hunt, 1933), Sulochana, Patience Cooper and Seeta Devi locked lips with their co-stars without inhibition. The extreme test and inversion of masculine/ feminine codes of behavior was in the 'stunt' films. The pervasiveness and popularity of the stunt film extended beyond its silent days to the sound period, during which time it acquired a status of a new kind of spectacular attraction distinct in the Nadia films. The poesis of the stunt film also lies in the use of a new kind of feminine form- agile and modern, that was staged as an eroticized fetish and whose appeal was fully monetized and exploited by the studios.

The 'white' actresses through their modern sensibilities transformed modes of address in the theatre and early silent cinema. The polysemy of their images and bodies produced an array of signification which theatre companies and early silent films mobilised. As their bodies were cast in 'new' radical ways through acts of performativity and performance, the experiences of women from Anglo Indian, Jewish and Eurasian backgrounds were radically reinvented. The coming of the sound technology in the 1930s affected another series of reinventions for cinema as well as for the 'white' actresses.

ART PLATE 2



Sabita Devi

“This talented star of Sagar has given a wonderful performance in *300 Days & After*
Sagar’s latest social hit now drawing large crowds at the West End Cinema.”

filmindia, Vol. 3, No. 11, 31st March 1938.

Transition to the Talkies

When movies were silent, glamour was all important. [T]oday tastes are different. The mike discovered that beauty was only negative-deep....Inevitably, with the Talkies there came to the screen a wider variety of heroines, with more distinctive and many sided appeals.⁵⁰

- N.S Chetlur

Film labour and culture at the threshold of a paradigmatic shift embarked upon new forms and idioms of performance and experience in the 1930s. The transition to sound catalysed the mushrooming of new studios and dispersed the field of cinematic experimentation into a new phase. This fervent escalation of film production created spaces to accommodate new genres and stars. Even though older traditions of visuality and pleasure were still in use, the new aurality made possible by the introduction of sound technology, transformed the landscape of silent cinema, infusing their spectre like forms with vernacular jargon and musicality. In an article titled "The Indian Talkies" B.L Bedam writes of the new conditions of work that 'talking pictures' demanded. The talkies were not merely "speaking silents"⁵¹ but were different because the "Talkies are a new art"⁵² and had ushered in the 'discord of tongues'.⁵³ The rapid transition to the 'talkies' pronounced the imminent demise of the 'white' actress from the screen. Stars of the silent era like Ermeline, Seeta Devi and Patience Cooper could not sustain their former status in the film industry. Failure at a 'sound test'⁵⁴ was cited as one of the reason many studios had to let go of their most valuable stars. Apart from the ability to speak fluently in the Indian vernacular, a practical knowledge of music and an appropriate modulation/ tone of voice were the most crucial requirement for the 'talkies'. The lack thereof accentuated the acute problem of finding suitable female performers for the screen. This spawned off a demand for *tawaiifs* and

⁵⁰ N.S Chetlur, "Our Girls!" in *Picture Post*, 1st September 1943, vol. 1 No. 7, pp 25-27.

⁵¹ B.L Bedam, "The Indian Talkies" in *Filmland*, 11th June 1932, pp 11.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Eric Burnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, Oxford University Press, NewYork and London, 1980.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

baijis, who in turn brought to the cinema a reoriented idiom of traditional performance, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Despite claims that ‘white’ actresses were flushed out of the industry because of the sound boom, there was enough capital in the market to sustain the careers of glamour queens like Sulochana.⁵⁵ The transition to sound did not hinder other starry eyed ‘white’ girls from across the country seeking employment in the industry.⁵⁶ New ‘white’ stars emerged in this period like Sabita Devi, Madhuri and Nadia. Even though they faced stiff competition from singing stars like Jahanara Kajjan, Kanan Bala, Jaddan Bai and other actresses like Devika Rani, Durga Khote, Shanta Apte, the ‘white’ actresses were still the highest paid actresses until the late 1930s.⁵⁷

Contemporary narratives delineated the need for new personnel- both educated and skilled. The industry sought to align cinema with the social status of its labour in a bid for cultural prestige and legitimization within the framework of nationalism and reform. However this demand for the reconfiguration of the existing constellation of stars coexisted with the expansion of the limits of

⁵⁵In 1934, Sulochana acted in the Imperial costume drama *Piya Pyaare* or *My Man* (d. R.S Choudhuri), *Anaarkali* (d. R.S Choudhuri) and the fantasy film *Magic Flute* (d. Homi Master, 1934). According to the *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, *Magic Flute* was a remake of the 1929 silent film by the same name directed by M. Bhavnani. The story was based on the work of Munshi ‘Nashtar’. In 1935, she acted in the social *Do Ghadi ki Mauj* (story & d. Homi Master) according to a review of the film, *Do Ghadi ki Mauj* released at Imperial Talkies. The theme of the film was “ordinary”. “If the direction had been better the picture would have improved. Sulochana’s work is not convincing...Good Box office attraction with Sulochana...Will run well in cities all over.” (*filmindia*, 30th June 1935, Vol. 1 No. 3, 43). In the same year she also acted in the talkie remake of *Bambai ki Billi* aka *Wild Cat* (d. Nandlal Jaswantlal) with D. Billimoria and *Pujarini* aka *Dancer of the Temple* (d. Nandlal Jaswantlal). In 1936, she acted in the social *Shaan-e- Hind* aka *Pride of India* (d. R.S Choudhuri) and costume drama *Jungle Queen* aka *Jungle ki Rani* (d. Nandlal Jaswantlal, 1936). The cast of *Jungle Queen* included D. Billimoria, Zilloo, Lakshmi, Jamshed ji, Ghulam Rasool, Meherbaan and Syed Ahmad. In the year 1937, she worked in three films- costume drama *Jagat Kesari* (d. Homi Master), socials *New Searchlight* (d. Homi Master) and *Vaahri Duniya* (d. Gunjal). It is unclear what she does in the year 1938, whether she performs at all. In 1939, she acts in a social *Prem Ki Jyoti* aka *Do Dost* 1939 (d. Gunjal). (Filmography pieced together from various sources- *Hindi Film Geet Kosh* and *filmindia*).

⁵⁶ In her evidence to the committee, Sulochana mentions how often she got letters from girls seeking advice on possibilities of work in the film industry. She said, “I receive many letters from up-country asking to join...from their letters they must be a very good class. From Muhammadans mostly, and I have had one or two Anglo Indian girls who wanted to join.” See ICC Evidence V, 2.

⁵⁷ Sabita Devi was paid 2000 per month. See *filmindia*, December 1938, Vol. 4 No. 8, 22.

participation which went beyond this very logic of cultural assemblage. Testament to this is the variety of backgrounds that men and women who worked in the film industry belonged to. Thus there was always a tension in the field between contesting desires for respectability and the presence of apparent elements of disrepute.

The 'white' actresses treaded the middle ground between being 'white' and not 'white' enough. In the silent period the polysemic nature of her image was mobilised by the studios to bypass the skirmishes of the repute/disrepute dyad. However the transition to the talkies brought with it a series of complications. Even though attempts were made in the silent period to flatten the processes of racial signification through make up and costume, in the 'talkies', sound threatened to shatter ever more, many of the ambiguities and disavowals. The masquerade needed to be embedded within a different set of codes. As the epigraph by Chetlur suggests sound had split the visual field between the face and the voice. One wonders if the creolized tongue of the 'white' actress was an impediment to the fantasies of *ideal* Indian womanhood that had been so painstakingly constructed. The editor of *Filmland* in the June 1932 issue gives credit to Seeta Devi, Sulochana and Patience Cooper for having "taken great pains to learn Urdu and Hindi dialogues for appearing in the talkies." Seeta Devi, we are told, learnt Urdu songs with such perfection that she was able to earn the approbation of experts who saw her talking on the screen at Hyderabad at a private show. He did however wish that "Madhuri in Bombay and Sabita Devi in Bengal would follow suit as quickly as possible."⁵⁸

Many of Sulochana's silent films like *Wildcat of Bombay* (1927) *Madhuri* (d. R.S. Choudhary) and *Indira B.A* (d. R.S. Choudhary, 1929) were remade in this period. *Indira M.A* (d. Nandlal Jaswantlal, 1934) proved to be a huge success. However the image of Sulochana was realigned with dominant national and reform discourses in the talkie period, and she was recast as the *ideal* Indian woman,

⁵⁸ Editorial, *Filmland* 18th June 1932 issue, Vol. 111 No. 114, 2.

“marked by filial piety, sartorial modesty and contained sexuality”.⁵⁹ According to Majumdar, Sulochana represented the high brow spectrum of the star discourse in the 1930s.⁶⁰ The cosmopolitan charge of her image identifiable through films like *Cinema Queen* and *Telephone Girl* was reworked through a “narrative of transformation”⁶¹ in *Indira M.A.* Majumdar argues that the way in which the “moral trajectory” of the film- from the “flapper” girl to her eventual return to “Indian roots and her recognition of her Indian suitor, Kishore” recast Sulochana in more ambiguous terms.⁶² While the “flapper” allowed for the vicarious display of modern fashion and glamour, the transformation aligned her to the new idea of womanhood promoted by the discourse of improvement and respectability in the film industry.

As indicated throughout film magazines in the 1930s-40s, the legitimizing call for respectability created an overarching impetus for reform and improvement. Studios were frenetically trying to reinvent their ‘sullied’ image⁶³ and mobilised the image of their stars for the purpose. While there was a demand for ‘respectable’ and educated women to join the film industry (which I will explore in the third chapter) the studios tried to fashion the image of their new ‘white’ stars through a series of ambivalences. I would like to use the example of Sabita Devi (Miss Iris Gasper) to illustrate the manner in which the film industry reconfigured the image of the ‘white’ actress in order to respond to the anxiety around ‘respectability.’ Sabita Devi made her debut in the British Dominion Films’ historical *Kamanar Aagun* aka *Flames of Flesh* (d. Dinesh Kumar Bose, 1930). Her co-stars were

⁵⁹ See Neepa Majumdar’s discussion on *Indira M.A* in “Spectatorial Desires and the Hierarchies of Stardom” in *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only: Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2009, 98.

⁶⁰ Neepa Majumdar, 93-94.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 98

⁶² *Ibid.*, 98-100.

⁶³ N.N. Guha Chowdhury stressed in his article “Should Respectable Ladies Join the Films?” that the purity within the studio can only be made possible if the studio authorities show greater attention to details and keep a closer eye on the natural pitfalls (of young actors falling in love or the presence of “female artistes from degraded class of society”). He wrote, “Unless this be done we cannot expect intelligent women to come up to the studio for a profession.” See *Varieties Weekly*, Vol. III No. 45, 11-14

Debaki Bose and Dhiren Ganguly. In the same year she also appeared in Indian Kinema Arts' crime film *Kantahar* aka *Diamond Necklace* (d. Kaliprasad Ghosh) with Durgadas Banerjee. Her next film was Barua Films' *Aparadhi* (d. Debaki Kumar Bose, 1931) with P.C Barua. In the same year she appeared in *Marnar Parey* aka *After the Death* (d. A.K. Roy) with Dhiren Ganguly. In 1931 she acted in the British Dominion Films' social *Takay Ki Ni Hay* aka *Money Makes What Not* (d. Dhiren Ganguly). These films established her status amongst the leading ladies of the time. In 1934 she joined Sagar Movietone and this proved to be a turning point in her career. At Sagar, Sabita Devi as the lead performer acted in three-four films per year. If sheer volume of output or salary accrument is seen as a mark of achievement she was very successful. In fact even in terms of reviews, her performances were appreciated.

There was a lot of hype with regard to her educated and respectable background. And the fact that she wrote poems and articles in the magazines strengthened that image. She wrote articles urging 'respectable' women to join the film industry and promoted the image of the studios as a professional space of work. Her response to an article "Should Respectable Ladies join the Films" by 'A Lady Artiste', published in a 1931 issue of *Filmiland*, gives a clear sense of the manner in which the actress participated in and consolidated the drive towards establishing the studios as 'clean' working environments that was so important to the 1930s. The author of the afore-mentioned article lashed out at the studios to "set their own houses on order"⁶⁴ because she believed that "film acting is not a bad career to take to, but for the people we come in contact therein. It would require high moral courage and character to withstand the scandal that accompanies the actress in and out of the studio."⁶⁵ Sabita Devi wrote in response to this piece stating that, "I have always been treated with the greatest respect and courtesy...and in contributing this article I am doing so not as propoganda, or with any ulterior motive, but for the purpose of defending myself and the good name of

⁶⁴ Article reproduced in Samik Bandopadhyay ed. *Indian Cinema: Contemporary Perceptions from the Thirties*, Jamshedpur, Celluloid Chapter, 1993, 108.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

many fine gentlemen and friends I have had the pleasure of meeting and working with in the film world.”⁶⁶ Her comments on the ‘thorough gentlemen’ who she worked with and who embodied “the aspirations of the West with those of the East” and held to “the traditions of the East in respect of their attitude to women” reflect the cumbersome binaries of the *home* and the *world* at work.⁶⁷ By placing her emphasis on the “tradition of the east” as a site of superior values, Sabita Devi aligns herself to the nationalist discourse on women.

Sabita Devi’s image was constructed by studios like Sagar where the charge of the ‘modern’ coalesced with figure of the *ideal* educated Indian woman. In another article titled “Garbo as ‘Susan Lenox’”, she claimed to write “not as a film struck Garbo ‘fan’ but merely as an appreciation of a humble sister artiste.”⁶⁸ She aligned herself with the transnational order of stars. Interestingly, there were constant rumours about how her “mummy” was going to take her away to Hollywood.⁶⁹ These speculations fuelled the notion of Sabita Devi as a star of ‘international’ stature and positioned the ethnic coordinates of the ‘white’ actress with Hollywood, which was seen as the greatest form of recognition and popularity. At Sagar she acted in many socials like *Grihalaxmi* (d. Sarvottam Badami, 1934) with Jal Merchant, *Shehar ka Jadoo* aka *Lure of the City* (d. K.P Ghosh, 1934), *Doctor Madurika* alias *Modern Wife* (d. Sarvottam Badami, 1935)⁷⁰, *Lagna Bandhan* aka *Forbidden Bride* aka *Acchut Daman* (d. K.P. Ghosh, 1936) with Motilal, *Village Girl* aka *Gram Kanya* (d. Sarvottam Badami, 1936) with Surendra, *Kulvadhu* aka *Daughter in law* (d. Sarvottam Badami, 1937) with

⁶⁶ “Why Shouldn’t Respectable Ladies Join the Films”, *Filmland*, 7th November 1931. Article reproduced in Samik Bandopadhyay ed. *Indian Cinema: Contemporary Perceptions from the Thirties*, Jamshedpur, Celluloid Chapter, 1993, 111.

⁶⁷ See Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1995.

⁶⁸ *Filmland* 11th June 1932, 4.

⁶⁹ It seems that Sabita’s mother played an important role in managing her film career. Much like the *filmi* mummies of today, she shrewdly managed her daughter’s career and was present at the studios to keep an eye on the happenings. Howlers of the Month’ in *filmindia*, August 1938, Vol. 4 No. 4, 56

⁷⁰ The film was based on a story by the Gujarati novelist K.M Munshi. An advertisement in *filmindia* celebrated the coming together of “two Great Stars Sabita and Moti” The names of the leading pair appeared in bold typeset (*filmindia*, 30th June 1935, Vol. 1 No. 3, 33).

Motilal, *300 Days and After* aka *Teen Sau Din Ke Baad* (d. Sarvottam Badami, 1938) with Motilal, *Aapki Marzi* aka *As You Please* (d. Sarvottam Badami, 1939) with Motilal (She sang 2songs) and *Ladies Only* (d. Sarvottam Badami, 1939) with Surendra.⁷¹

Most of the characters she played in these films established her as an ordinary woman with extraordinary travails located within the 'everyday' modern. In *Shehar ka Jadoo* aka *Lure of the City*, Sabita Devi played the character of Sarju. Sarju pines for her father, who she lost sixteen years ago to the seductions of the city. Masquerading as a young boy Sarju goes to the city looking for her father.⁷² In the city she meets Kishanlal (Motilal), a "millionaire-drunkard" who she "becomes friendly" with. Kishanlal's mother who "cannot recognize her as a woman" invites her to the house. The one page publicity spread read - "the facts are revealed at the End. Kishanlal being corrected by Sarju becomes a loving husband..."⁷³ Sitara plays Nartaki- a dancing girl – the "sign of the polluted atmosphere of the city". The moral contrast between the urban and the rural is effected through clear signs of urban depravity like the dancing girl, the drunkard millionaire in need of correction by the village belle Sarju. Interestingly Sarju can access the city only through masquerade and ambivalence, like the 'white' actress who can own the space of cinema through charades. The publicity machinery functioned in exciting ways. The image of Sabita Devi dressed in trouser and shirt with a sailor neck scarf appeared on the cover of *Rangbhoomi* with the title "a scene from Sagar's forthcoming film *Grihalaxmi*". At first glance, the image appears extremely exciting. In the next issue, however, there was an erratum that stated that the image was not from the film *Grihalaxmi* but from the film *Lure of the City*. The studio wanted to maintain a clear distinction between the two films that were released in the same year. In publicity material for *Grihalaxmi* aka *Educated Wife*, Sabita Devi was dressed up in a traditional Indian saree with a

⁷¹ Filmography constructed from various sources- *Hindi Film Geet Kosh* and advertisements in *filmindia* (1935-1939).

⁷² *Rangbhoomi*, 29th July 1934, Yr 3, No. 18 (Translations mine).

⁷³ 'Bhool Sudhar', *Rangbhoomi*, 5th August 1934, Yr 3, No. 19, 10.

magazine in hand. While the 'other' woman played by Swaroop Rani in an inset looks seductively into the camera with the telephone receiver in hand. The contrast was all too apparent. Even though education was as much a symbol of modernity as the telephone, it was in the way that the two women were positioned within the frame and the way in which the look of the audience was invited to share her/his gaze with the seduction of the 'other' woman, that the contrast between the modern 'good' and the modern 'bad' woman was affected. In *Vengeance is Mine* her image was contrasted with an image of Sitara Devi in a seductive dancing pose. Thus her image was constructed in an oppositional manner.

At Ranjit studio the star image was constructed differently. Their two stars - Gohar and Madhuri, were mobilised towards two different ends. Keeping in mind the reputation that a studio like Ranjit was trying to build, it is not surprising that such was the case. While Gauhar played the obedient Hindu domestic wife in many films and was more popular in the socials, Madhuri's star persona was ambiguously constructed. Some of the films that Madhuri acted in were: *Pardesi Preetam* aka *Street Angels* (d. Nandlal Jaswantlal, 1933) with Raja Sandow and E. Billimoria, *Kashmeera* (d. Nandlal Jaswantlal, 1934), *Sitamgar* aka *The Tyrant* (d. Jayant Desai, 1934), *Toofaan Mail* (d. Jayant Desai, 1934), *College Girl* aka *College Kanya* (d. Jayant Desai, 1935)⁷⁴, *Noor e Watan* (d. Jayant Desai, 1935), *Raj Ramani* (d. Jayant Desai, 1936), *Matlabi Duniya* aka *Neglected Wife* (d. Jayant Desai, 1936)⁷⁵, *Toofani Toli* aka *Reckless Rogues* (d. Jayant Desai, 1937), *Thokar* aka *The Kick* (d. A.R Kardar, 1939) and *Paagal* (d. A.R Kardar, 1940).⁷⁶ As the names of the films suggest, Madhuri acted in a mix of stunt and social films.

⁷⁴ The star cast of this 'social' film included Raja Sandow, Keki Bava, Ghori, Dixit, Ishwarlal, Ram Apte, Charlie, Khatoon, Shanta and Sheela. "College Girl released at West End Talkies"- "A good picture with 100% entertainment and probably Jayant Desai's best directorial effort so far. The picture contains only two songs which is a pleasant departure. The story is ordinary- there is no spectacle in the picture, in fact there is nothing extraordinary and yet there is not a single dull moment in the picture..." in "Tabloid Review" *filmindia*, 30-6-1935, Vol. 1 no. 3, 42.

⁷⁵ *Neglected Wife* was huge hit. The star cast included Raja Sandow, Ghori, Dixit, Ishwarlal, Ram Apte, Charlie, Khatoon, Kamla and Shanta. The song '*mein hoon upto date, mera dhanda upto date...*' was a very popular. *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 313.

⁷⁶ *Paagal* appears to be her last film with Ranjit Movietone, Bombay. She appeared in the social *Qaidi* aka *The Prisoner* in 1940 for Film Corporation of India, Calcutta, directed by M.F Husnain.

In 1934 an image of Madhuri dressed up in a *lehnga* appeared in *Rangbhoomi*. In the image, Madhuri was juxtaposed with a large painting of a woman in the background in a dress with ruffles, bare midriff and a long slit revealing the leg.⁷⁷ The image split the seductions of the actress. There is a kind of dyad set up between Madhuri and the woman in the painting, in terms of sexuality, a kind of homage to her “naughty but nice” image mobilised by the studio. In the film *College Girl*, Madhuri played the role of Urmila. According to a review of the film, Sunder Lal, the villain tries to haul his friend Harihar Rai into “the life of a debauchee and alienates his affections”⁷⁸ from “the devotions of an ideal Hindu wife Sushila” played by Khatoon. Harihar Rai “makes audacious advances to Urmila...and tries to seduce her”. Urmila being “the emblem of staunch character, repulses his love.” The film was apparently “diffused” with an “ultra modern atmosphere...which shows the vicious life of modern youngmen.” The reviewer stressed that the film was charged with contemporaneity as it depicted “the four stages of society of the Twentieth century...*College Girl*- seems to disclose the complicated details...conditions of 1935.” The contrast between the two women, Madhuri and Khatoon was staged through the “synchronal run” of the theme of comedy and tragedy. As a sub-plot, the romance between Urmila and Madhusudan (the hero), allowed the film to “depict real example of a society girl” and explore the modern charge of Madhuri’s image. In stunt films like *Noor-e-Watan* and *Raj Ramani*, Madhuri appeared in western style clothes and masked.⁷⁹ The *Ranjit Bulletin* was an effective mouthpiece for publicity and Ranjit came up with interesting strategies to promote their films. Since *College Girl* and *Noor-e-Watan*

The star cast included Ramola, Mehtab, Nandrekar, Monica Desai, Vasti, Leela Mishra and Praveen. In terms of billing her name appears last on the list, so perhaps she was cast in a secondary role. In 1943, she acted in Zahoor Raja’s *Mazaq* with Pahari Sanyal. (*Hindi Film Geet Kosh*).

⁷⁷ *Rangbhoomi*, 22nd July 1934, Yr 3 No. 17 (the pages are not numbered).

⁷⁸ “What Others Say!” “(Mr. Shrivastava of Lucknow, Reviews Ranjit’s *College Girl* ...the review appears on the pages of *Movies* 24th November 2935)”. See *Ranjit Bulletin*, 7th Dec 1935, Vol. II No. 6

⁷⁹ *Noor-e-Watan*- the story of a “villainous Prime Minister and a commander who, dethrones the Raja of the State on the pretext of insanity, puts his half mad son on the gaddi and establishes the reign of tyranny, terror and injustice.” E. Billimoria was cast in a double role, where he played both the “foolish prince” and “a dashing young Jagirdar”. Madhuri played his love interest and was in disguise, “known as Burkhawali”. See *Ranjit Bulletin*, 26th Oct 1935, Vol. I No. 25.

were released in the same year, Ranjit worked hard on their advertising to mark the difference between the two films. It began with an article titled “Good bye- My Dear College Girl”⁸⁰ where Madhuri was quoted as “I would like to continue to play the same role...but I can’t help it if the picture is finished and I shall have to say good bye to my dear ‘College Girl’”. In August 1935, the publicity for *Noor-e-Watan* began; the film was still under production.⁸¹ According to “All over a Mask”⁸², “Madhuri the Venus of the Silver Screen...has declared that henceforth she would be concealing her face.” This was a ploy to garner interest in the public. According to Ranjit’s own admission, letters started pouring in stating that, if Madhuri will not “show her alluring face”, this will create “a little furore amongst the picturegoers throughout the length and breadth of India.”⁸³ Madhuri’s image that was carefully constructed as both the repository of ‘ideal’ feminine form (through her photographs) and urban cosmopolitanism (through her films) produced an ambivalence of desire. In an open letter to the editor, Subramaniam from Kumbakonam wrote,

True to her birth, Miss Madhuri is very splendid in adopting European charms and her winning smile with her charming personality storms the public with appreciation. If only she can portray the ideals of Indian woman, her pictures will be more appreciative. Nobody can deny that this

⁸⁰ The article doubled as a promotional for *College Girl*. *Ranjit Bulletin*, 25th May 1935, Vol. I No. 17

⁸¹ This is suggested by a studio report that read, “We are sure that Madhuri’s fan will shower letters of praises after seeing her in ‘Noor-e-Watan’- which is fastly getting along.” See *Ranjit Bulletin*, 17th Aug 1935, Vol. I No. 22. The film released in October, as suggested from a review of the film in *Ranjit Bulletin*, 26th Oct 1935, Vol. I No.25.

⁸² This article is written as a descriptive dramatic piece describing a day at Ranjit Studio. Madhuri, E. Billimoria and director Jayant Desai are in conversation with each other. “A gun shot was heard- the whole room was engulfed in smoke. A young girl wearing mask was seen getting down the stairs. She had fired the gun”, when Desai and Billimoria apprehend the girl for “creating a row” and take off the mask, Madhuri cheekily replies “Thing is that, Mr. Desai, I had dressed up as the masked one for ‘Noor-e-Watan’- and was getting down...if I take off the mask then the makeup would have been spoilt. If the makeup is spoilt then the photography would suffer- if the photography is bad...” Jayant Desai “cut the dialogue short” and said “Well well Miss Madhuri a good speech that. These speeches are no good for a Maramari scene.” And thus the calm of the studio returned as Madhuri unmasked herself with a “smile on her face.” See *Ranjit Bulletin*, 3rd Aug 1935, Vol. I No. 21.

⁸³ “Don’t be Disheartened”, *Ranjit Bulletin*, 17th Aug 1935, Vol. I No. 22.

charming siren of the screen puts forth a mass of sex appeal to the public but still it is better if she limits this to a certain extent.⁸⁴

The 'white' actresses in this period were recast in alluring new seductive ways by studios like Ranjit and Sagar. Their images unlike those of Durga Khote's or Shanta Apte's in social films, from the same period were very differently imagined. There was the charge of the modern urban body that still added to the charm of their presence on screen. While the impetus of reform and desire for respectability was gaining momentum, studios like Ranjit and Sagar were trying to come up with new ways to balance the drives between the modern cosmopolitan and social reform. While Ranjit was known for producing a motley mix of social and stunt films with urban twists to the tales, Sagar was known to produce mostly social films with an attractive modern production style.

Another studio that emerged in this period with a dominant 'white' star was Wadia Movietone. The Wadias were most popular for their stunt films. Within the bourgeois nationalistic framework, stunt was not a respectable form but it was a "genre of no consequence".⁸⁵ In terms of the box office, the stunt had been a popular form since the 1920s. As pointed out by Neepa Majumdar, in the sound period, the Wadias "reinvented the genre by experimenting with formal and publicity mechanism...locating the change specifically in the type of stunts" through an element of "realism" and a wider acceptance and participation in the "discourse of physical culture."⁸⁶ Majumdar has argued that the Wadia star Fearless Nadia represented the low brow spectrum of stardom.⁸⁷ In this period, Nadia was scandalously absent from most of the contemporary journals.⁸⁸ Her

⁸⁴ *Motion Pictures Monthly*, 1935 Annual Issue, 155.

⁸⁵ Neepa Majumdar, 105.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁸⁸ According to Majumdar, "In the hierarchies of star discourses, the popularity of actors associated with low-brow genres was registered almost exclusively in the unofficial star discourse that was marked by silence." *Ibid.*, 105.

persona was then 'recovered' in the 1970s through a series of networks.⁸⁹ The work on Nadia has read her image variously as a "virangana"⁹⁰ and as a "radical feminist actress".⁹¹ It is her hybrid engagement with the kinesis of modernity and affective alignment with Indian cultural traditions that positioned her uniquely within cinematic imagination. Thus figures like Sabita Devi, Madhuri and Nadia were recast in the sound period in a variety of alignments and misalignments, but one crucial referent that was consistent, was their polysemous modern self.

The response to the 'white' actresses was like the response to the experience of modernity: ambivalent and anxious. In 1938, Baburao Patel lamented the 'degeneration' of Indian pictures and felt that the onus lay with the Anglo Indian girls who worked in the films as 'extras'. He wrote:

The number of these girls is hardly thirty... Goaded by the impulse of supplying sex appeal ...some of the producers departed on the disgusting practice of engaging these girls as 'extras' for community dances and as maids in scanty costumes...Perfectly hermaphrodite, they neither appeal to men nor women. For a tenner a day which they get, they come with rouge and lipstick, shake their hips and legs, pocket the money and go away... Driven to live on their wits, modern life had made these girls the most detestable scums of society.... So many times these girls have been shown and reshown, exposed and re-exposed that by now there is not a part of their body with which even a riff-raff from the street is not familiar....By now every atom of sex appeal in these girls is dissipated. Some of these girls misbehave so badly in the Studio while working, that to kick them in the face would be a mercy. We 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... We have no objection to a few good girls from the Anglo Indian community seriously taking up screen as a career... there are already some really useful top liners from this community. But the material we have described above must not be admitted in our studios to suffer a stain of utter debasement in our pictures.⁹²

⁸⁹ Majumdar points to the variety of biographical and critical scholarship that has been produced about Nadia. *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹⁰ Rosie Thomas, 52.

⁹¹ According to Dorothee Wenner, Nadia was "one who wielded revolvers to the accompaniment of rousing music, then raced along the top of rushing trains, beat up men and played with lions. Nadia was smart, self confident, and so funny into the bargain that it was...impossible to distinguish between what was real in the life of the actress, and what belonged to the world of fiction according to oriental standards." See "Prologue", ix.

⁹² Editorial- 'Some Anglo Indian Girls in Our Film!' in *filmindia*, 1st April 1938, Vol. 3 No. 12, 3-4.

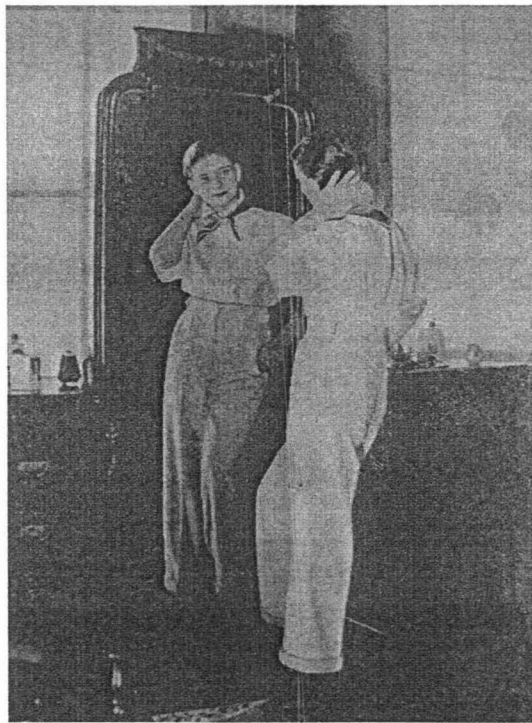
ART PLATE 3



Toofan Mail, Miss Madhuri, *Rangbhoomi*,
Yr 3, No. 16, 15th July 1934



Madhuri, *Rangbhoomi*, Yr 3, No. 17, 22nd
July 1934



Sabita, *Rangbhoomi*, Yr 3, No. 18, 29th July 1934.

Baburao Patel's vitriolic comments indicate a tension, where the 'white' actresses in popular perception were both desirable and disreputable. This of course, was linked in a crucial way to reactions with regard to the publicness of modern women. By the 1940s, the 'white' actresses faced stiff competition from other actresses and began to be cast in secondary roles. Their gradual effacement from the top order of stardom in the film industry was related both to the "supplementarity" of their bodies and to the discourse of respectability that was at its pinnacle during this time.

Conclusion

The long journey of the 'white' actresses from the stage to cinema was marked by processes of reinvention. The publicness of 'white' women was central to their initiation into modern modes of employment and entertainment. Many 'white' women were already working professionals, but as the pay scale in cinema was higher compared to other jobs, it provided them with an alternative source of earning better livelihood. Cinema opened up the possibilities of self fashioning for women from 'white' backgrounds, through the performativity of gender and the stylization of bodies. In these processes of reinvention, cinema too was transformed by the presence of these women. Their urbanely mobile bodies were enabling and allowed cinema to use them in ambivalent modes of address. Masquerading variously as the *ideal* Indian women, the *gori bibis* or the hybrid *virangana* woman, the polysemy of their image made possible the explorations and engagements with the fantasies of the Indian populace. The charge of the 'white' actresses lay in their affiliations to modernity than in their ethnic difference. Their entry into cinema in the popular imagination and 'official' discourses was based on an imagined sense of 'lack'; however, their 'supplementarity' added force to the constructions and play of characters. Cinema capitalised on the seductive charms of the 'white' women well into the early sound period. Sulochana, Patience Cooper, Ermeline, Sabita Devi, Madhuri, Nadia among others transformed cinematic performance with their cosmopolitan verve.

The advent of sound technology had shifted the paradigms of cinematic production. The talkies had opened up the field of performance to a variety of performers. While the 'white' women continued their journey into sound cinema, they were accompanied by another kind of professional public women. These women from a variety of performative traditions and lineages like the *kotha*, the theatre, *nautanki* and music recording companies, came to cinema in similar hopes for self fashioning and transformation. Cinema was a hybrid vortex that encompassed and made space for all kinds of individuals in search for reinvention. In the next chapter, I will explore the interactive circuits of performers and performance that brought to cinema another kind of charge through their musicality.

CHAPTER II

PERFORMATIVE NEGOTIATIONS

Cinema at the turn of the century was embedded within a history of entertainment and modes of pleasure in India. Salons, commercial theatres, *nautankis* and *numayesh* at *bazaars* and fairs offered the modern subject the pursuit of a variety of amusements. This chapter maps the complex web of interactions between these various modes of entertainment through which the conditions of performers and performance itself underwent reinvention. The coming of sound technology in the 1930s reanimated traditional performative genres of singing, music composition and dance for the sake of cinema. In the wake of this paradigmatic shift (from silent to sound), cinema sought traditional orders of performance as productive sites for scouting talent. The demand for actresses who could ‘talk, sing and dance’ was met by the public woman in her various avatars- the *tawaif*, the *gaanewali*, the circus acrobat or the theatre/*nautanki* actress. Overriding concerns of disrepute with respect to their publicness, these women were seamlessly claimed by the cinematic medium for its own agendas. In this chapter I examine the lives and times of Jaddan Bai, Jahanara Kajjan, Begum Akthar, Noorjehan. I discuss the ways in which these women produced themselves anew with the aid of the cinematic enterprise (as professionals) and its apparatus (as cinematic entities). The stories of these exceptional women act as social texts that provide a glimpse into the lives of modern women and artists who were trying to understand and come to terms with their place in the world.

I choose to examine the intersection of individuals’ personal and performative histories to gain insight into women performers’ identities. My central question is: how do these women fashion themselves and their lives within shifting fields of power and meaning, in particular situations within particular historical and cultural contexts? These processes of reinvention appear deceptively

to be fluid and natural, while actually often fragmenting the identity in the process of crafting it. Issues of gender, respectability and livelihood converge in intricate ways and lead to the production of a heterogeneous identity for the female performer. The performances in films of the women I discuss, in combination with photographic images and the recordings of their musical flourishes provide striking insights into this creative production of the 'self'.

Theatricality, the Mechanical Reproduction of Sound, Cinema and Performative Negotiations

Early 20th century society in India was marked by a state of flux. Culture was in transition, as patronage made way for global mass media and capital. With the decline of princely benefactions and the rise of a new clientele - British and Indian- the public sphere at the turn of the century was catalysed by this new change. In this interface with modernity, technology played a crucial role. Performance, its practices and perceptions were transformed through the disruption and reinvention of the traditional. The advent of technologies like the gramophone, cinema and eventually the radio brought new paradigms of entertainment. The gramophone also altered irrevocably the textures of music and its reception for generations to come. The popularity of sound recording had far-reaching social and musical effects. The reproducibility of the voice, the body, and the quantification of musical performance through the collapse of time to three minute gramophone recordings, revolutionised the ways in which musical entertainment was imagined, produced and consumed. This dissemination of 'new' repackaged forms of entertainment to a mass audience democratised the auratic quality of the classical, bringing music out of its obscure performance milieus into the market. Importantly, it renewed the discourse on authenticity and brought to the forefront anxieties about the fidelity and authority of such mechanised articulations. The desires that were once articulated through tradition were now projected via modern technology. And here technology appeared as both destroyer and saviour, as instrument of both memory and oblivion and the longing for the past was accompanied by an odd sense of futurity.

This moment was captured in sound by the early recordings by Gramophone and Typewriter Ltd (GTL). In 1902 on his first recording expedition for GTL, T. W. Gainsberg recorded a variety of Indian sounds. The first musicians he recorded were set up by John Watson Hawd (GTL's agent in Calcutta) with the help of two 'fixers' from local theatres- Amanendra Nath Dutt and Jamshedi Framji Madan.¹ The first recordings that were made of Indian musicians were of two *nautch* (dancing) girls - Soshi Mukhi and Fani Bala of the Classic Theatre. They sang extracts from the popular theatre shows of the time such as *Shri Krishna*, *Dole Lila* and *Alibaba*.² These early recordings made by Gainsberg are indicative of the way in which musical relationships between various modes of entertainment were mediated and established. And this sustained link between the various performative genres of the stage, the *nautanki* and the salons was eventually extended to the talkies.

For the first two decades, along with *tawaif* music, drama songs and star actor-singers figured prominently as some of the most popular gramophone recordings. GTL recording experts recorded many songs from the drama repertoire already in vogue. These were released commercially and sold successfully. Popular plays were *Indrasabha*, *Vikram Charitra*, *Bhul Bhulaiyya*, *Harishchandra*, *Tilusmati Mohur*, *Dil Farosh* (Indian version of the 'Merchant of Venice'), *Shakuntala*, *Khuda Dost*, *Haseen Chatra* etc. Stage artists who were recorded were Miss Mohtaal, Miss Acheria, Master Chhagan, Shankar, Narayan, Niren, Miss Gafooran (Calcutta), Mister Debu, Nooriya, Mr. Motishan, Master Tikol, Mr. Pestanji, Mr. P. S. Karua, Mr. Jamboola and Miss Arsiwala, Mr. Bholaji, and Mr. Naroji.³ The music recording industry transformed drama music into a commodity for mass circulation before the advent of the talkies, thus mediating through music

¹Micheal Kinnear, *The Gramophone Company's first Indian recordings [1899-1908]*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1994, 11.

² Ibid, 11-12.

³ Suresh Chandvankar, 'Gramophone Celebrities of the last century', in *The Record News*, Annual Volume, Journal of Society of Indian Record Collectors, 2006.

the relationship between drama and cinema.⁴ In the early years, gramophone and cinema industries were sporadically connected. Enterprising entrepreneurs in film business experimented with and used the two media to complement each other by playing the gramophone records as sound accompaniments during silent film shows. As early as 1902, J.F Madan had started the Madan film enterprise.⁵ He made short films of the plays that were staged by the Madan Corinthian Theatre Company and exhibited them. Although the films on celluloid were silent, voices were recorded on gramophone cylinders /records. These were then synchronized while screening, thus reproducing the illusions of the stage.

By the 1920s-30s, the novelty of the gramophone had translated into affirmative success. Even though GTL's monopoly remained intact, new players had emerged in the market. Small recording concerns were floated by intrepid dealers in various parts of the country to cash in on the success of the gramophone business. These concerns bore individual names and labels, but in fact, operated in these territories under the jurisdiction of GTL. In Calcutta- Megaphone, Hindustan and Senola; in Madras- Hutchinson; in Bombay, Jai-Bharat and King Records; in Uttar Pradesh- Maxitone, Aerophone and Star; in Punjab- Jeinophone, Gulshan, and Frontier Trading Company; in Rajasthan- Marwadi Record Company and others were established.⁶ There was considerable competition between companies to sign recording contracts with the best and most popular artists. These record companies scouted for new and unknown talent along the length and breadth of the country. Recording contracts turned obscure artists into widely known performers.

⁴ For a fantastic study on how the new sound media of gramophone and sound cinema took up the already existing live performance genres of Tamil drama and, in so doing, how these new media worked together to create and sustain a mass culture of Tamil film songs, see Stephen Putnam Hughes, "Music in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Drama, Gramophone, and the Beginnings of Tamil Cinema" in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 66, No. 1, Feb., 2007, 3-34.

⁵ ICC, Evidence, II, 829.

⁶ According to G. N. Joshi, these units became sister companies of the main Gramophone Company but were founded on the capital of their respective dealers. In fact, all these different concerns were sustained and fostered at no cost to the GTL. This was a clever move as the GTL managed to accumulate musical talent from across the country and keep the record pressing factory at Dum Dum (est. 1928) busy at all times. See "A Concise History of the Phonograph Industry in India" in *Popular Music*, Vol. 7, No. 2, The South Asia/West Crossover, Cambridge University Press, May, 1988, 149.

Many aspiring vocalists and musicians were attracted to the opportunity of recording, because it offered a handsome income as well as a chance to establish an immediate reputation as ‘gramophone stars’.⁷ The star system for musicians and performers promoted by the gramophone brought a new kind of prestige and fame that had not been possible previously for those in the profession. This popularity was achieved, in part, through a rigorous publicity and marketing machinery.

An examination of archival material from the 1920s onwards reveals the overwhelming number of women who came to cinema from performative traditions of the *kotha* and the theatre that had been capitalized on by the gramophone industry. In fact, it was the star order already set up by the theatre and gramophone companies that cinema hoped to tap into. Sultana, Zubeida and Shehzadi; Miss Mushtari, Goharbai Karnataki and Amirbai Karnataki⁸; Mukhtar

⁷The earliest/ ‘first’ ‘gramophone star’ was Gauhar Jaan. She was a woman of exceptional talent and grace. Her fame and popularity was unprecedented. She was born as Eileen Angelina Yeoward in 1873 to Armenian Jewish parents, William Robert Yeoward and Victoria Hemming. The marriage of her parents ended in a bitter divorce when she was barely six years old. Angelina and her mother Victoria then moved to Benaras, where they converted to Islam and took on the names of Gauhar Jaan and Badi Malka Jaan, respectively. It was in the vibrant culture of Benaras that Gauhar was trained in the art of the courtesan- poetry, music and dance. Like many peripatetic performers, they travelled around to cultural centres like Benaras, Bombay, Calcutta and Mysore looking for work and patrons. Fortunes turned for the mother and daughter as they moved to Calcutta and established themselves in the court of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. They were counted amongst the most famous *baijis* of Calcutta. Her gramophone records were labelled as ‘First dancing girl, Calcutta’, indicating her elevated status as a premier courtesan. In her recordings for Gaisberg, Gauhar Jaan recorded songs in Hindustani, English, Arabic, Kutchi, Turkish, Sanskrit, Bengali and Pushtu. This body of work represents many of the vocal styles current in India at that time like *khayal*, *thumri*, *dadra*, *ghazal*, *kajri*, *chaiti* and *hori*. She was the first ‘star’ whose image and voice was mobilised by recording studios for mass appeal and a series of outlandish myths were circulated that added to her flamboyant, glamorous persona. She became notoriously famous for throwing a lavish party that cost Rs20,000 when her cat produced a litter of kittens or for the fact that she was among the few people in Calcutta who flouted government regulations and went around in a four-horse-driven buggy, for which she paid a fine of Rs 1,000 a day to the Viceroy. She appeared in numerous catalogues, postcards, advertisements and even matchboxes peering demurely into the camera or cradling the gramophone horn to her bosom. For more details on Gauhar Jaan, see Vikram Sampath, ‘My Name is Gauhar Jaan!’ *The Life and Times of a Musician*, Rupa Publications, New Delhi, 2010 and Michael Kinnear ‘Discography of Miss Gauharjan of Calcutta’, in *The Record News*, Vol.9, *Journal of the Society of Indian Record Collectors*, 1993. Some of the other artists who attained celebrity status were Jankibai of Allahabad aka ‘Chhappan Churivali’, Zohrabai Agrewali, Malka Jaan of Agra, Angurbala, Indubala and Mushtari Bai. For more details see, Suresh Chandvankar, ‘Gramophone Celebrities of the last century’, in *The Record News*, Annual Volume, *Journal of the Society of Indian Record Collectors*, 2006.

⁸ Goharbai and Amirbai’s father was a tabla player named Hussein Khan, based at Bilagi (40 km from Bijapur). He had six daughters and a son- Allamma urf Ahilya, Amirbai, Goharbai, Badi Manni and Nanni Manni. (Information about one daughter is missing). Some sources claim that

Begum⁹, Sardar Akhtar, Miss Moti (Sushila)¹⁰, Miss Bibbo¹¹, Miss Anvari¹², Ratan Bai¹³, Khursheed¹⁴, Miss Gulab¹⁵, Zebunissa¹⁶, Miss Lobo, Sharifa and Husna

Goharbai (born around 1908) was also called Gauramma in her early life. Amirbai and Goharbai worked for Vanivilas Naatak Company, a Kannada troupe, around 1930s. Gohar learned music under the tutelage of Panchakshari Gawai. Basavraj Mansur, the brother of Mallikarjun, used to compose Kannada songs for her and accompany her on the harmonium. The Marathi stage singer Shankar Nilkanth Chapekar discovered the talents of the two sisters and suggested they should move to Bombay to build a career. After Goharbai's move to Bombay, 'Nanasaheb' Chapekar would visit film studios to get her a role. Goharbai worked for Bhavnani Films at a salary of Rs 800 per month before her entry into Gandharva Naatak Mandali in 1938. In 1932, she acted in two Sharda Movietone films- *Raas Vilaas* (d. Nagendra Majumdar) and *Sassi Punno* (d. C.M Luhar and S.R Apte). In 1933, she appeared in *Kaalaa Pahaad* (d. S.R Apte), *Vikram Charitra* (d. H.S Mehta), *Rambha Rane* (d. H.S Mehta), *Sohni Mahiwal* ((d. H.S Mehta) with Krishnarao Chonkar as Mahiwal. In 1934, she acted in the stunt films, *Kaalaa Waagh* (d. Nagendra Majumdar) and *Mere Imaan* (d. Nagendra Majumdar). In 1935, she acted in Ajanta Cinetone's *Pyaar Kii Maar* aka *Queen's Wrath* (d. A. P Kapoor). In 1936, she worked in four films- *Bansari Baalaa* (d. A. M. Khan, Paramount Film Co.), *Gol Nishaan* (d. M. Udvardya, Navbharat Movietone, Bombay) and *Graduate* (d. Raja Yagnik, Educational Talkies, Bombay) and *Burkhaawali* aka *Bombay Mail* (Indian Liberty, Bombay). In 1937, she acted in six films. She was the actor composer for the Jaybharat Movietone's costume drama *Chaabuk Sawaar* (d. M. Udvardiya). She acted in over 25 films till 1946. Goharbai Karnataki is most famously remembered for her infamous relationship with Bal Gandharva. The story goes that, in 1937, Goharbai's 78 rpm record of songs was released. These songs were originally tuned for the play *Kanhopatra* for Bal Gandharva by composer Master Krisnarao. Bal Gandharva sued her. Interestingly the *Indian Cinematograph Year Book* (Henceforth, *ICYB*, 603), described Goharbai Karnataki as a "Famous Radio singer". But the lyrics for *Kanhopatra* were based on a traditional source and so it was ruled that a tune was not the property of any particular individual and the records stayed in the market. But soon enough, Goharbai and Bal Gandharva reconciled their differences. In 1938, Goharbai joined Gandharva Natak Mandali "prompting many old timers to leave the troupe" as people felt that Goharbai had "cast an evil spell on him". He married Goharbai in 1951. (Compiled from- *ICYB*, *Hindi Film Geet Kosh* and "About Gauhar Karnataki" by Dhananjay Naniwadekar, online accessed from: <http://www.lifekidhun.com/hindifilmsandmusic/personalities/gauharkarnataki.html>

⁹ Songstress from Amritsar was introduced by Madan Theatres Ltd in 1931. She joined East India Film co. According to *ICYB*, she floated her own concern, Mukhtar Film Co. in partnership with Mr. Chaturbhai M Patel of Bombay and produced some films. See *ICYB*, 644.

¹⁰ She first joined the film industry in 1932. She had worked with Imperial, Krishna, Sagar and Kumar. "She excels in vampish roles." See *ICYB*, 688.

¹¹ Her real name was Ishrat Sultana and she was a songstress from Delhi. She performed a minor role in *Alam Ara*. Then she joined Ajanta. She worked with Rainbow Pictures, Taj Productions, Sagar Movietone.

¹² She was born in Lucknow. She became popular with New Theatres' *Pooran Bhagat*. See *ICYB*, 569.

¹³ Her real name was Imam Bandi. She was born in 1912 in Patna. She joined films in 1932 and made her screen debut with *Subeh ka Sitara* (New Theatres, 1932). Her mother brought her to Calcutta at the age of five and from the age of twelve, she began her musical *taleem* and was trained as a dancer. She was well versed in Urdu, Hindi, Arabic and English. ("Contemporary Stars" in *Varieties Weekly*, 4th February 1933, Vol. III No. 18, 13). She worked with Eastern Arts and Kolhapur Cinetone and in 1938 she worked with Imperial. See *ICYB*, 668.

¹⁴ Songstress from Lahore; she first appeared in Hind Mata's *Mirza Sahiban*; later played the lead in National Movietone films. She joined Mahalaxmi and then Saroj. See *ICYB*, 624.

Bano (mother- daughter duo)¹⁷; Miss Putli, Shanta Kumari, Rampyari¹⁸, Heera, Zohrabai¹⁹, Sitara Devi²⁰, Miss Zillo²¹, Phool Kumari, Miss Dulari, Shireen Banoo, Miss Badami, Ameena, Shakeera, Mohini, Chanda, Padmabai and Tara were some

¹⁵ Born on the 10th June 1908 at Jammu Tawi, Kashmir. She joined Krishna Film Co. in 1923. She was a “rage in silent days” she played “chiefly the vampish roles.” See *ICYB*, 604.

¹⁶ Zebunissa was born in 1913 in Peshawar. In 1926, she joined Royal Art Studio (Bombay), in 1927 she joined Imperial., in 1928- Sharda, in 1930- Surya Film Co., Bangalore, in 1931 she returned to Bombay and joined Saroj. According to the *ICYB*, she “excels in vampish parts” *ICYB*, 699.

¹⁷ Husna Bano joined the film industry in 1935 and made her debut with New Theatres’ *Daku Mansoor*. Shareefa made her debut in Madan’s *Bharati Balak*. She worked with Wadia Movitone and Saroj Film Co. See *ICYB*, 609 & 680.

¹⁸ In an interview with *Varieties Weekly*, she said, “I am a lingayat born in a village in Carnatic side; I don’t remember my exact date of birth but can tell you this much that my present age is 24” (‘An Interview with Miss Rampiyari’ in *Varieties Weekly*, 18th February 1933, Vol. 3, No. 20, 8). Her first film was *Pani- ma- Ague Latter* (dir. Zaveri Bhai, 1926) for Royal Art Studio. She joined Kohinoor Film Co. and acted in *Gunsundari* (dir. Chandulal Shah, 1927). She went on to join Excelsior and appeared in minor roles in films like *Hamlet*, *Kamasena Lilavati* (1928), *Silver Cloud*. She worked with Krishna in silent films like *Dreamland*, *Dare Devil*, *Veer Rathod*, *Miss Dolly*, *Lioness* and *Valiant*. According to S. Ramamurthy, “she was a pioneer to dare to play Amazonic roles...These she did with amazing agility and acquired certain proficiency in performing light stunts...she possesses a lofty masculine tinge of affectation, which makes her act true to her amazonic portrayals.” (‘Screen Heroines’ in *Varieties Weekly*, 21st October 1933, Vol. IV No. 3, 14). At Krishna she was one of the highest paid actresses. She was well versed in Urdu, Hindi, Gujrati, Canarese and Telugu. As a performer she was trained in the art of singing and dancing. In the interview, amongst her “special qualifications” she listed “driving, sword play and riding” keeping in mind the requirements in the talkies. It appears that she was also a stage dancer. She freelanced with Ranjit, Kumar, Ambika, New Theatres and East India Film Co. See *ICYB*, 666.

¹⁹ She was from Lahore and joined the film business in 1932. Her talkie debut was in *Anang Sena*; She joined Jayant and played the lead in *Jahr-e-Ishk*. See *ICYB*, 700.

²⁰ Sitara Devi was born in 1919 in Calcutta. She was the daughter of Sukhdev Maharaj of Benaras. She was trained by her father and by Achchan Maharaj at the palace of the Raja of Mymensingh and later by Kathak maestro Shambhu and Lachhu Maharaj. She joined the film industry in 1933 and worked in studios like Trilok, Sagar, Kumar, Taj, Golden Eagle and Huns. See “If Music be the Food of Love...” in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 8th February 1992, 70.

²¹ She made her debut in the film *Punjab Mail*, where she played the role of a madwoman. The role was well received and the success prompted the producers to cast her in a similar role in *Father India*. According to columnist S. Ramamurthy, “[S]he is at her best while portraying a mad character.” (‘Screen Heroines’ in *Varieties Weekly*, 16th September 1933, Vol. III, No. 50, 17). However she acted in a variety of roles. She appeared in the costume drama, *Champraj Hado* (Nanubhai Desai, 1923) and the mythological *Indrakumari* (1923) for Star Films Ltd. In 1924 she joined Majestic Film Co. and acted in *Mumbai ni Sethani* aka *Call of Shaitan* (d. Ardeshir Irani) and *Razia Begum* (d. Nanubhai Vakil, 1924) with Raja Sandow. Her silent films like *Sadevat Savlinga* (Kohinoor Film Co. 1924) with Putli, *Shahjahan* (Naval Gandhi & Ardeshir Irani, 1924), *Chhatrapati Sambhaji* (d. N.D. Sarpotdar, 1925), *Gaud Bangal* aka *Magician of Bengal* (d. K.P. Bhawe, 1925) and *Kali Nagin* (d. B.P. Mishra, 1925) established her as a versatile star. She made a transition into the sound period and was cast mostly in secondary roles. (compiled from- *ICYB*, *Hindi Film Geet Kosh* and *Varieties Weekly*, *ibid*).

of the actresses²² who worked through the first two decades of Indian cinema. The transition to sound catalysed a change in the configuration of the film industry. It created a demand for persuasive and eloquent speakers, singers and musicians and various media like the gramophone, theatre and cinema began to overlap in their use of musicians and music.

Jahanara Kajjan was a versatile performer. She acted in films and simultaneously performed on the stage as well. Kajjan was the daughter of a well known dancing girl Suggan, who was the mistress of Nawab Chammi Saheb of Bhagalpur.²³ Kajjan's "knife-dances" during the interval of silent films were known to keep audiences spell bound.²⁴ According to an advertisement, in 1933 she appeared on the Corinthian stage, Calcutta in two stage plays *Dil ki Pyas* (Aga Hashr Kashmiri) and *Dardi Jigar* (Master Rahmat Ali). The interaction between the various forms of entertainment was fluid. Kajjan glided from one medium to another with aplomb. Born in Patna, she migrated at an early age to Calcutta in search of opportunities. She joined the Madans and became part of their diverse entertainment enterprises. She received numerous offers from chiefs and nawabs of various princely states to perform and settle as a court performer.²⁵ There were constant rumours of her move to the state of Rampur, where the nawab- a connoisseur of culture was known to possess a large repertoire of musicians, singers and artists for his entertainment at court. In an interview with B.R Oberoi, Kajjan however, rubbished these reports as false allegations made by entrant editors at the behest of rival production houses. She said "*I have refused them all because I love to act in films.*"²⁶ In the silent period at Madan's, Kajjan was mostly cast as an 'extra', while Patience Cooper was the leading star. According to S.

²² Compiled from *ICYB, EIC, Varieties Weekly* and Yatindra Mishra, "The Bai and the Dawn of Hindi Film Music (1925-1945) in *The Book Review*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 2, Feb 2009, 46-47.

²³ Mrinal Pande "Moving beyond Themselves' Women in Hindustani Parsi Theatre and Early Hindi Films" in *Economic and Political Weekly* April 29, 2006, 1650.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Interview with B.R. Oberoi, *The Cinema*, 1933.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

Ramamurthy, Kajjan “unnoticed for the want of admirers”²⁷ starred in many forgettable silent films. It was after the sound boom that she was rechristened as the ‘lark of India’ as her “voice was found suitable for the mike”.²⁸

The coming of sound technology brought an immediate and broad consensus within the Indian film industry that the cinematic medium was in need of restructuring. The three hallmarks that came to define successful early Indian talkies were measured through the proficient use of music, language and sound recording. Music replaced the presumed visual universality of silent films with a new aural universality. Music was believed to appeal directly and in an unmediated manner to the hearts and minds of film audiences, regardless of whether they understood the language of the film.²⁹ The industry stressed emphatically on the need for an independent cinematic language devoid of theatrical influence. In reality, however, large numbers of performers were drawn from the stage. Sound enabled Indian film producers to exploit musically based drama traditions in ways that had been beyond the reach of Indian silent cinema. The initial treatment of films was that of an operatic form. Early films contained as many as fifty or sixty songs within the standard running time of about three hours. Songs made up as much as four-fifths of any given film scenario. This was the case in Kajjan and Master Nissar’s box office hits *Indrasabha*³⁰ (69 songs) *Shirin Farhad*³¹, *Laila*

²⁷S. Ramamurthy, ‘Our Screen Heroines: Miss Kajjan’ in *Varieties Weekly*, 23rd Feb 1934, Vol. IV, No. 20, 12.

²⁸ B. R. Oberoi, *The Cinema*, 1933.

²⁹ B.R. Oberoi, ‘Some facts about Indian Talkies’ in *Filmland*, 25th June 1932, Vol. III No. 115, 5-7.

³⁰ According to S. Ramamurthy, *Indrasabha* was made twice by Madan Theatre. The 1931 was a silent film, while the other in 1932 was a talkie directed by J.J Madan. See *Varieties Weekly*, 23rd Feb 1934, Vol. IV, No. 20, 12. A reviewer of the film wrote, “Sometimes entire conversations are carried out in songs between the courtiers and the king.” See *Filmland*, 9th July 1932, Vol. III No. 117, 19.

³¹ *Shirin Farhad* (d. J.J Madan, 1931) was released on May 30. It is interesting that the screening of the film was accompanied by the screening of what was considered as the first Gujrati short comedy film *Mumbai ni Sethani*. See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 14.

*Majnu*³² (24 songs), *Bilwamangal* and *Chatra Bakavali*³³ (49 songs). When asked which film she considered her best, Kajjan said

I believe *Pati Bhakti* (d. J.J Madan, 1932)³⁴ and *Dil Ki Pyas* (d. J.J Madan, 1935)³⁵ are my best films, because in these films I liked my work and enough time was given for rehearsals. Generally we don't get enough time to rehearse. Sometimes I had to play the part after a few hours I was given lines to rehearse. Our producers hurry up the pictures...³⁶

The above statement is a revealing insight into the conditions of work during the early sound period. It shows that though singing stars, musicians and performers of the stage brought their repertoires, singing styles, and musical accompaniments to cinema, they did so under the new constraints of film production.

The transition to sound turned the fortunes of many. Kajjan was no exception. The inversion of star status effected out by the talkies in the case of Kajjan and Cooper was primarily based on the difference in their musical performance. A reviewer of *Bilwamangal* (d. J.F Madan, 1932)³⁷ wrote, “[M]iss Kajjan as the wife plays her role to perfection...Her songs are very melodious.” With regard to Cooper who played the role of Chintamani, he wrote, “...her acting is throughout excellent. She speaks Urdu very well, but her songs disclose that she

³² *Laila Majnu* (d. J.J Madan, 1931). See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 8.

³³ *Chatra Bakavali* (d. J.J Madan, 1932) co-stars were Patience Cooper, Mukhtar Begum and Shahla. See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 24.

³⁴ *Pati Bhakti* was a social film adapted from Hari Krishna Johar's play of the same name. Kajjan's co-stars were Patience Cooper, Rosy, Master Mohan and Surajram. According to Master Fida Hussain, the second part of the film was *Swami Bhakti* (1932). See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 57.

³⁵ *Dil Ki Pyas* was produced by Bharat Lakshmi Pictures and was based on the story written by Aga Hashr Kashmiri. The cast included Sohrabji Kerawala, Jahanara Kajjan as Krishna, Bal Gandharva Prabodh as Pratap, Patience Cooper, Surajram, Fida Hussain, Mukhtar Begum, Rosy, Panna, Violet and Lakshmi. In the same year Kajjan appeared in the stage version of *Dil ki Pyas* at the Corinthian Theatre. (compiled from- *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*).

³⁶ B. R Oberoi, *The Cinema*, 1933.

³⁷ According to the *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, *Bilwamangal* was the “first colour film in India which was printed abroad.” (22) There were a few scenes that were coloured and according to the reviewer, “the colour process used has been termed as Madan Colour”. (*The Cinema*, April 1932, Vol. 5 No. 8, 32) The film was based on Aga Hashr Kashmiri's play. See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 22.

is not a singer of high order.”³⁸ The Kajjan- Nissar duo became a hit pair and their fame was based precisely on their musical talent. In the thirty one odd films she did between 1930- 1940, her melodious voice and beautiful Urdu diction were cited as the main reasons for her tremendous success. Nazir Ahmed wrote,

The emotional utterances of Miss Kajjan give us the inevitable impression that in her nature are hidden vast reservoirs of energy and moral strength whilst her slim and plastic throat seems to be a priceless storehouse of beautiful songs. She chants like a siren. Within barely a couple of months Kajjan has approached the pinnacle which spells stardom in Screenland. Her siren like singing has made her the most popular of the screen players.³⁹

The Cinema- Courtesan nexus and Performative Reinvention

Apart from the women from ‘white’ backgrounds and those from the theatre, the other major group of professional women in the film industry belonged to the courtesan tradition. In the gramophone recordings as well as in the early talkies we find preserved a crucial and unique element of *tawaif* culture. Courtesans were influential cultural elite before they were beleaguered and pushed to the margins of society in the late colonial period under the impact of social reform movements. They made innovative contributions to Hindustani music, Urdu poetics and dance forms like Kathak owing to their expertise in the aesthetics of the arts. It was commonly believed that young nawabs were sent by their families to *kothas* of famous courtesans to be initiated into the world of literature, culture, etiquette and polite manners.⁴⁰ The *kotha* was like a ‘sanctuary’ that provided an escape from a repressive and punitive social world.⁴¹ It was a world

³⁸ Review of *Bilwamangal* in *The Cinema*, April 1932, Vol. 5 No. 8, 33.

³⁹ Nazir Ahmed, ‘My Impression of Miss Kajjan (Jahan Ara)’ in *The Cinema*, Nov. 1933, Vol. 8 No. 1, 22.

⁴⁰ Veena Oldenburg in her seminal work on the courtesan tradition has called their “lifestyle” resistance and eloquently states, “Their way of life is not complicitous with male authority; on the contrary, in their own self-perceptions, definitions, and descriptions they are engaged in ceaseless and chiefly non-confrontational resistance to the new regulations and the resultant loss of prestige they have suffered since colonial rule began.” See “Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India”, in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Speaking for Others/Speaking for Self: Women of Color, 1990, 261-263.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 267.

with its own structures and hierarchies. Rigours of training and an early initiation into public life prepared these women with wisdom and skilled charm to survive in the world. At the *kotha* they inculcated professional skills to earn money and manage their lives with dignity and self esteem. Claims of liberation and empowerment at the *kotha*, notwithstanding, the performances of the *tawaiifs* were part of a larger, more complex and certainly more clearly defined code of interactions with other social groups. After the anti-nautch movement and the ban on public performers these women unlearnt and adopted a different process of socialisation. The pressures of patriarchy, colonialism and newer forms of oppression impinged upon states of being and had to be constantly negotiated. Thus, when the sounds of the *kotha*, unfamiliar to a majority of the Indian middle class, made its way into their homes through musical performances of the gramophone, a series of disavowals were effected out. On discs, often “amateur” was printed after the names of these women to indicate that they were not professional performers, and were therefore respectable despite their skills in musical performance.⁴²

According to historian Saleem Kidwai, many of these women “had to reinvent themselves through polite myths to reinforce their self-esteem which had consistently been battered by references to them as fallen and dangerous women. They had to constantly camouflage their personas.”⁴³ The perennial use of appellations like *miss*, *begum* or *devi* were subterfuges to pass off as ‘respectable’; however some maintained their links to their past through the use of *bai*. These masquerades appear to be far more complex than easy qualification as these women were public figures. By virtue of their publicness their identities were forged and consumed by a public, discerning enough of their position and profession. There existed a sense of their past and it circulated within the domain of the oral. Some of the courtesans did make conscious efforts to erase out a ‘dark’

⁴² Gerry Farrell “The Early Days of the Gramophone Industry in India: Historical, Social and Musical Perspectives” in *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 2, British Forum for Ethnomusicology, 1993, 31-53.

⁴³ Saleem Kidwai, “The singing ladies find a voice” in *Seminar*, Aug. 2004, accessed on July 7, 2011 from <http://www.india-seminar.com/2004/540/540%20saleem%20kidwai.htm>.

past. Most appellations like *miss*, *begum* or *devi* were dictated by the film studio/ gramophone/ theatre company executives who felt the need to couch the identity of their performers in a garb of respectability.

Jaddan Bai was one of the many women from a *tawaiif* background who had sensed that a career in cinema would bring possibilities of reinvention devoid of social opprobrium that the *kotha* had come to represent by the 1930s. She was extremely shrewd and understood that opportunities lay ahead in this new medium not only in terms of achieving financial security, at a time when her resources were drying up, but also that cinema held the promise of social recognition and respect. She did not shy away from experimentation. Prior to her tryst with cinema, she had tried her hand at recording discs for gramophone companies. Some of her recordings that are still obtainable reveal considerable musical talent. She joined the film industry in her mid- thirties in 1932, an unusually late age to make a debut as a heroine. She was driven by a fierce need to succeed and to transform conditions for her family. In a move of expediency she set up her own production house, Sangit Movietone in 1936 and became a composer, a director and a producer. She did very few films, but her ambidextrous talent is apparent in the various roles she adopted throughout the production of many of these films. She was the lead heroine and sang her own songs. In addition, she was also a music composer⁴⁴, scriptwriter⁴⁵ and producer. Unfortunately since none of her films survive, the only way to recapture them is to piece them together from publicity film booklets, song books, reviews, advertisements and photographs in journals.

The story of Jaddan Bai's life foregrounds the multiple vectors of agency at play through which identity was fashioned and the self was exhibited through the 'performative'⁴⁶. The formation of the subject is always already fraught with

⁴⁴ She provided the music score for *Raja Gopichand* (d. B.M Shukla, 1933) and *Talash-e-Haq* (d. C.M Luhar, 1935). Compiled from *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*.

⁴⁵ In 1948, she wrote the script for *Anjuman*, starring Nargis and Jairaj. It was produced by Sangit Movietone. *EIC*, 105.

⁴⁶ I draw from Judith Butler's seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, her formulation that the categories of gender are performatively enacted and stabilized through acts of reiteration and re-citations. Gender

complexities. The identity of the professional working woman⁴⁷ is shaped by myriad agents like class, religion, and language. Thus identity is reproduced within the multiple domains of the gendered self, the modern self, the physical and emotional self, as well as the artistic self. The figure of Jaddan Bai presents a different kind of subjecthood where processes of enactment led to a splitting of the self along different vectors. The ease with which Jaddan Bai shifted careers from the *kotha* via the gramophone to cinema makes us see her as a fiercely independent woman who never seemed hesitant about taking risks. Women like Jaddan Bai were negotiating the spectrum of performative idioms to craft an identity for themselves articulating their presence both in professional practice and in day to day self presentation.

Jaddan Bai had shown great potential as a singer and performer from an early age. Her mother Dilipa, who was also a *gaanewali*, realised that a rigorous training in music would reap rich dividends. She therefore entrusted Jaddan's musical *taleem* to the legendary doyen of Benares *gharana*, Ustad Moijuddin Khan. Jaddan was also taught music by Ustad Barkat Ali Khan of the Patiala *gharana*. The instructions by her mentors shaped Jaddan's musical expression and the various inflections in her singing. According to Kishwar Desai, she made her public debut in Benaras⁴⁸ as a teenager.⁴⁹ From then on, she became a popular songstress and invitations for *mehfils* and performances began pouring in from wealthy patrons and connoisseurs of art. According to Amjad Hussain, she received 'big offers' from the states of Rampur, Bikaner, Alwar, Kashmir,

identities are constructed and constituted by language and cultural inscription. See "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire" in *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, 1990, 1- 34.

⁴⁷Butler uses the Foucauldian notion of 'power as discursive' and states that the body is not a "mute facticity" i.e. a fact of nature and like gender it is produced by discourse. But because there is no "interior" to gender the law cannot be internalised, but is written on the body through a stylization of gender. *Ibid.*, 24- 25.

⁴⁸ Kishwar Desai, *Darlingjee: The True Story of Nargis and Sunil Dutt*, Harper Collins, 2007, 18.

⁴⁹ Her date of birth is highly contentious, while Desai writes that she was born sometime in 1897, there are accounts that specify her birth date as 1900. See Desai, and TJS George *The Life and Times of Nargis*, East West Books, Chennai, 2007.

Jodhpur, Jaipur, Indore, Gwalior, Baroda and Mysore.⁵⁰ Her peripatetic lifestyle ensured that she travelled to different states to perform carrying with her baggage an entourage of musicians and family members in tow. Like many performing women of her time, Jaddan Bai became the bread winner of the family from an early age. Despite an erratic source of income, her entire earnings were spent on the upkeep of her family, her *ustads* and accompanists, as it was customary in those days. Often she struggled to make ends meet. She was popular, though fame came to her sporadically. Her aspirations as a public performer were not merely out of necessity. From the various anecdotes of her life what emerges is the image of a woman who was passionately talented and enjoyed her career as a public woman and performer.

Jaddan Bai clung to her roots to create a niche for herself in the talkies. She played on her identity as a courtesan to strengthen her foothold in an industry which was to a large extent influenced and vitalised by the tradition of the *kotha*. In 1932 she received a rousing welcome from the industry when she decided to join Playart Phototone⁵¹ in Lahore. Journalist Amjad Hussain wrote “the film industry is to be congratulated on enlisting the services of such an eminent songstress of India as the famous Jaddan Bai.”⁵² The article goes on to delineate her background and makes an interesting remark, “this lady was born in (the) United Province of Agra and Oudhh and *unlike* the majority of the professional musicians of India, belongs to a respectable Muslim family of the district of Allahabad.”⁵³ In *Darlingji*, Kishwar Desai narrates an episode when Jaddan Bai

⁵⁰ One is not sure whether she actually performed at all these states or not. But it is important nonetheless that the perception of her popularity was part of the network of information that circulated about her and ‘saw’ her as ‘popular’. See Amjad Hussain, “A Brief Biographical Sketch: Jaddan Bai” in *The Cinema*, Sept. and Oct. Vol. 6 No. 1, 10.

⁵¹ Playart Phototone was launched in 1928 by Abdul Rashid Kardar as United Players Corporation which then became Playart Phototone. The release of their inaugural *Husna ka Daku* (1929) starring Sitara Devi is believed to be a historic moment for the Punjab film industry. Kaushik Bhaumik, 117. Also on the Punjab film community in the Bombay film industry see Manto, *Stars from Another Sky* (New Delhi, 1998).

⁵² Amjad Hussain, “A Brief Biographical Sketch: Jaddan Bai” in *The Cinema*, Sept. and Oct. Vol. 6 No. 1, 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, (emphasis mine).

was introduced by her husband Uttamchand Mohanchand as Jayadevi to a “bemused” K.N Singh. This seems contrary to Jaddan Bai’s own entrenchment within her performative tradition which was apparent in her choice to retain her appellation ‘bai’ which was heavily connotative of her origins. An anecdote by Saadat Hasan Manto is a case in point. Nargis (a rising star at this point in the story) visited Manto’s house in Byculla with Jaddan Bai. Manto in his inimitable style writes,

Jaddan Bai had been talking of some dissolute nawab....the conversation turned at one point to a well known courtesan who had the reputation of having bankrupted several princely states. Apa Saadat (Manto’s relative) was in her element, ‘God protect us from these women. Whosoever falls in their clutches is lost to both this world and the next. You can say goodbye to your money, your health and your good name if you get ensnared by one of these creatures. The biggest curse in the world, if you ask me, are these courtesans and prostitutes...My wife and I were severely embarrassed... Jaddan Bai, on the other hand, was agreeing with all her observations with the utmost sincerity. Once or twice I tried to interrupt Apa Saadat, but she got even more carried away. For a few minutes she heaped every choice abuse on ‘these women’. Then suddenly she paused, her fair and broad face underwent a tremor...She slapped herself on the thigh and stammered, looking at Jaddan Bai, ‘You, you are Jaddan. You are Jaddan Bai, aren’t you?’

‘yes’Jaddan Bai soberly replied.

Apa Saadat did not stop, ‘Oh you, I mean, you are a very high class courtesan?’...Jaddan Bai did not flinch, but calmly and in great detail continued her story of this most notorious courtesan.⁵⁴

Unlike many of her contemporaries, Jaddan Bai did not shy away from her past. Jaddan Bai’s play of identity was Janus faced in that it looked to the future, while it also simultaneously looked back towards the past. She distinguished herself from the general brood of performers, reinventing and vitalising her position of marginality to a state of empowerment. Jaddan Bai was often invited to many functions and gatherings to promote cultural enterprises in Punjab. On January 13, 1933 she performed at one such gathering for the Local Cinema Art Society to felicitate Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan, a prominent local elite and politician

⁵⁴ Manto, ‘Nargis: Narcissus of Undying Bloom’ in *Stars from Another Sky: The Bombay Film World of the 1940s*, tr. Khalid Hasan, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1998.

at the YMCA hall.⁵⁵ Her presence at the public meeting was reported as a momentous occasion, something that was perceivably within the ‘natural’ order of celebration and performance. This is indicative of how deeply the elites were entrenched in the vestiges of court entertainment. There was an interesting dialectic between these transformed contexts of publicness and performance despite the social paranoia against the *tawaif*.

Rimli Bhattacharya in her work on the 19th century Calcutta stage actress Binodini writes, “[T]here is a kind of *discourse of redemption* which many actresses participated (in) and which they internalised for the purposes of self worth.”⁵⁶ There was a felt need to conflate work with a sense of *dharma*, a duty to work which accords value to their labour and to their talent. “The rich text of the actress’s *dharma* by which she lives and works, comprises pleasure and pride in performance”.⁵⁷ Binodini’s autobiography, *The Story of an Actress* overwrites this text, so that at the individual level, it is only “the sense of sin (fullness) which remains foregrounded through redemption”. It is not surprising that in the interest of redemption, Binodini casts herself as either a *patita* or *bhadramahila* or both, and Bhattacharya points out that little or no space is accorded to “her sense of identity as a *worker who is a woman*.”⁵⁸ Jaddan Bai, however, was of a different generation and perhaps with that came a whole different baggage. She did not have to couch her desire to work in terms of *dharma*; and yet her repertoire of films is fascinating as many of them can be read as morality tales. At the same time, it would be naive to assume that Jaddan Bai was invested in this *discourse of redemption*, even if the morality text did try to obliterate all traces of steps painfully taken by the actress towards gaining worth in and through work.

The negotiation of a pre-cinematic identity and a ‘new’ cinematic self produced frenzied extra-diegetic signs on the body of the actress. From the 1930s

⁵⁵ *Varieties Weekly*, 28th January 1933, 20.

⁵⁶ Rimli Bhattacharya, ‘Introduction’ to Binodini Dasi’s *My Story and My Life as an Actress*, tr. and ed. Rimli Bhattacharya, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998, 194.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 195 (emphasis mine).

the social film was located within a melodramatic manoeuvre where the discourse of reform was sutured into the narrative. The social melodrama, where the films' mode of address regulated the circulation of meaning on the basis of given social relations, presented an example of contradiction in the form of Jaddan Bai's morality tales. Here the intersection of genre, gender and identity produced an ambivalent narrative of self construction that Jaddan Bai was engaged in. The central theme in her films like *Nachwali* (1934), *Talash-e-Haq* (d. Chimanlal Lahore, 1935)⁵⁹, *Hriday Manthan* (1936) and *Madame Fashion* (1936) was the travails of the modern woman in her various avatars as a *tawaif*/ prostitute/ wife. In this imaginative universe, the modern woman inhabited the ambiguous space of desire and sexual agency. These films complicated the problematic splitting of the image of the modern woman- as a carnal prostitute and the modest wife, through the 'fallen woman' routine that was a popular trope in the films of the 1930s. In *Talash-e-Haq* Jaddan Bai played the role of a 'fallen woman' unfairly pushed into the brothels. According to a publicity leaflet, the hero of *Hriday Manthan* "in the flesh and blood could be found today wandering in the bylanes of Calcutta, a sad wreck of humanity broken by drink, privations and suffering- a victim of Society's cruel laws. The heroine for her part is living the degrading life of a 'daughter of joy'."⁶⁰ The film drew on the myth of Sita and her subsequent *agni pareeksha* to melodramatically engage with the victimhood of women forced into prostitution by 'Society's cruel laws'. The film was shot in Sonagachi, the red light district in Calcutta to add a touch of realism. The narrative of the film dealt with the life of Nirmala Devi who was forced to leave her home because her husband suspected her of being 'impure' after she was kidnapped. In *Madame Fashion* Jaddan Bai played the role of Sheeladevi, the wife of the wealthy Seth Amarnath. After her world travels with her husband, Sheeladevi became a slave to fashion. Even though her husband had helped her become a "respectable society lady"⁶¹, he was unable

⁵⁹She composed the music score of the film. According to Yatindra Mishra she used the *kotha* style music which was resonant in songs like '*Ghor- ghor- ghor-ghor barsat miharwa*' and '*dil mein jab se kisi ka thikana hua*'. See "The Bai and the Dawn of Hindi Film Music (1925-1945) in *The Book Review*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 2, Feb 2009, 47.

⁶⁰ As quoted by Desai, 40.

⁶¹ See advertisement for *Madame Fashion* in *filmindia*, May 1936, Vol. 2 No. 1, 49.

to withstand her demands. She befriended the villainous Mister Jagdish. Her husband, extremely envious of this relationship, accused her of promiscuity. She left home but not her fixation with fashion and drinking alcohol. After many twists and turns she came to the sad realisation of her plight and asked for her husband's forgiveness.⁶²

Even though the morality text may not have granted the actress the pleasure she derived from and was able to give to others in her profession, condoning mainstream prejudice and promoting a stereotype was perhaps a ploy to survive the morally fraught domain of commercial cinema. Despite the hard work, and the economic and physical hardships work in the cinema entailed, Jaddan could not take success for granted, or assume that the social codes deployed by the cinema could be set at naught. Through the play with identity and manoeuvring of dichotomies of repute and disrepute through her films, Jaddan Bai was clearly creating a discourse of the self that was entrenched in the moral climate of the 20th century. By playing the *tawaiif*, however, often an autobiographical moment in the films, she perhaps subverted the morality text and punctured the *discourse of redemption* through an assertive celebration of her own individuality and identity.

The films produced by Jaddan Bai at Sangit Movitone did not particularly fair well at the box office. The films, however, did well enough for her to sustain and maintain her household. Her status as a producer enabled her to establish a strong foothold in the industry, and she commanded a lot of respect in the film industry. Like the *baijis*, with their matriarchal gharana system where daughters were trained by their mothers as performers, Jaddan Bai turned her energies to preparing her daughter Nargis as an actress in the film industry. Ironically, even though her sons joined the business, they came nowhere close to their mother or sister's success. Manto writes of how Jaddan Bai was trying to launch a production of her own with Ashok Kumar and Nargis in the lead.

During our conversation, we discussed many things but discreetly, things such as business, money, flattery and friendship. At times Jaddan Bai

⁶² Desai, 38-39.

would talk like a senior, at others as the movie's producer and at times Nargis's mother who wanted the right price paid for her daughter's work.....They were talking big money, money which was going to be spent, money which had been spent....each paisa was carefully discussed and accounted for.....it did not occur to me that Jaddan Bai herself was playing a most fascinating role and the one she had chosen for Nargis was even more fascinating....⁶³

According to Kidwai, Nargis was taught everything except to sing. She was given a westernised convent education and inserted into a cosmopolitan modernity that prepared her for a different kind of stardom. "With the success of Nargis, both as a star and a public figure, the cover up of the origins of these artistes was complete. The gana had been successfully withdrawn from the treasures bequeathed to a ganewali's daughter."⁶⁴

From Akhtaribai Faizabadi to Begum Akhtar

Witty, vibrant, and engaging with the world at various levels, Begum Akhtar was a remarkable woman who took life head-on, and by many accounts, perhaps a bit recklessly. As a tawaif, she was trained to charm the system and subvert narrow patriarchal practices by means of a highly sophisticated seduction. At another level, she was a hapless victim, constantly tormented by the twists and turns of her own destiny.

*Begum Akhtar: Love's Own Voice*⁶⁵

The life of the legendary *ghazal* singer, Begum Akhtar is perhaps one that has been the most written about. She is often remembered for her rich sonorous and timbered renditions of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Mir Taqi Mir and Jigar Moradabadi. Unfortunately, her tryst with cinema has been almost forgotten. Despite having only nine films to her credit, the staging of gender and modernity in the encounter with cinema in her story throws light on the intrinsic links between cinema and survival as in the case of many other performers in the 1930s. The film industry not only promised the young Akhtaribai Faizabadi the glitter of the world, it also in some ways carved out an image for her that she hesitantly mobilised, but also

⁶³ Manto, 102.

⁶⁴ Kidwai, 2007.

⁶⁵ S. Kalidas, Lustre Press, Roli Books, 2009, 8.

eschewed from usage. Her ambivalent relationship to cinema is fascinating wherein the stigma attached to the identity of the performer/ actress worked in myriad ways for Akhtari in her journey from a 'bai to a begum'.⁶⁶ Her story is a reminder of the ways in which reinvention was a constant strategy that allowed many professional women to negotiate the treacheries and dichotomies of the home and the world.

In 1914, Mushtari gave birth to twin daughters Bibbi (Akhtari's childhood name) and Zohra in the city of Faizabad. Asghar Hussain, their father was a lawyer, who was smitten by the charms of Mushtari.⁶⁷ Many trials and tribulations changed the course of Bibbi's life. Like many performers she lived an itinerant life migrating from one city to another in the hope of better fortunes. It was in Gaya that Bibbi began her musical training under the tutelage of Ustad Imdad Khan, a retired musician and close friend of her uncle Yusuf. She also learnt music from Ustad Ata Mohammad Khan of Patiala and then from Ustad Zamiruddin Khan, who was a sarangi player. According to Rita Ganguly, "it was a rigorous schedule. She had to be up every morning at the crack of dawn. And Mushtari ensured that whatever money she made, a chunk of her income was spent on Bibbi's *khurak* (diet) of pure ghee and almonds."⁶⁸ All her three ustads helped shape various inflections and nuances in her voice through stringent exercises in voice culture. Bored to tears with the rigorous *taleem*, Bibbi was on the verge of giving up, when one day she heard her guru Ata Mohammad Khan elaborate a plaintive note in raga

⁶⁶ Many writers like Rita Ganguly and S. Kalidas, talk of this journey as a process of coming of age. The appellations from 'bai' to 'begum' attribute a certain transition to maturity, sophistication and respectability. See Ganguly, *Ae Mohabbat...Reminiscing Begum Akhtar*, Stellar Publishers, New Delhi, 2008 and Kalidas, *ibid*.

⁶⁷There is an uncertainty about Mushtari's profession and identity. According to S Kalidas, she was a tawaif, however Rita Ganguly says that she sang *marsias* (elegies of the sacrifices during the holy war), *naat* (poetry in the praise of the Prophet Mohammad) and performed in the *zannana sozkhani* (ritualistic mourning by women)during the month of Muharram, somehow a more 'respectable' kind of singing. Also whether Hussain was legally married to Mushtari or whether she was his mistress is unclear. Hussain abandoned this family for his more acceptable 'respected' family.. According to her disciple Rita Ganguly, this sense of betrayal stayed with Akhtar for a long time and had deep implications for Akhtar, in that many decisions were taken under the influence of a hope for a union with her father. See Ganguly, 16.

⁶⁸ Ganguly, 19.

Gunkali so beautifully that she changed her mind and resolved to follow his advice faithfully. In an interview with Susheela Mishra, she says,

[S]illy girl that I was, I did not appreciate his valuable advice at first. I used to get bored with the dull voice exercises. Today my heart overflows with gratitude for my guru, who so patiently moulded my voice and made it so pliant.⁶⁹

Young Bibbi's first inspiration was an actress called Chanda Bai, whose performance she sneaked in to see when a Parsi Theatre company came to Faizabad⁷⁰. In an interview with a correspondent from *Statesman* she said, "I would bribe my aya and used to stand glued to the door of the improvised theatre to catch the strains of Chanda Bai's ghazals".⁷¹ But she was reprimanded by her mother time and again for watching such 'cheap' stuff. Ganguly narrates an interesting episode - Bibbi wanted Ustad Ata Khan to teach her a song; when he asked her what kind of a song she wanted to learn, a naive Bibbi responded by singing and enacting the Chanda Bai song she remembered. Ganguly writes that he was affronted and told Mushtari, "[Y]our daughter is not cut out to be a classical singer. Her interest lies in *singing cheap songs*".⁷² Clearly the distinctions between high and low brow art were established for Bibbi early on in her formative years. The constant reiteration to discern 'cheap' songs from the more sophisticated 'classical' renditions deeply conditioned her mind and in fact her decision to leave the film industry was in some ways influenced by this disparagement of popular music.

In 1925 it was decided that the family would move from Gaya to Calcutta in search of better opportunities for the burgeoning career of Bibbi. Their visit coincided with a charity concert organised by the East India Theatre Company to raise funds for the victims of a massive flood in Bihar. All the stalwarts of music were invited to make their contributions through their performance. Incidentally, it

⁶⁹ Susheela Mishra, *Illustrated Weekly*, 1969 (source- National Film Archive of India [NFAI]- no details on issue or page numbers)

⁷⁰ "The Singer and the Song" in *Statesman*, 13th Dec 1970.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Ganguly, 23 (emphasis mine).

was also Ustad Bismillah Khan's first public performance⁷³. As the story goes, after the inaugural *shehnai* recital, no other artist could be traced in the green room to take up the second item. Ustad Zamiruddin recommended that his *shagirda* be allowed to perform. On being asked her name, Mushtari was prudent enough to know that Bibbi would not make for an interesting name for an artist, and she suggested 'Akhtari Hussain' trying to maintain the frayed linkages to the father. However she was vetoed by the ustad who seemed to know the imperatives of the market and Bibbi became 'Akhtaribai Faizabadi'⁷⁴.

At the age of eleven, the young girl had pleased the notorious Calcutta critics. Recognising that a new star was on the rise, JN Ghosh, the chief executive of Megaphone Recording Company offered to sign her for his company with the promise of a hefty salary, a flat, and in case the record sold well, they would be provided with a phaeton for local conveyance. Since Akhtari was a minor, her mother signed the five year contract, was paid a small signing amount and a guest house was arranged in Bahu Bazar⁷⁵ until an alternative residence could be found for them. Akhtari recorded eight songs three and a half minutes each at the Megaphone Studio. Her first ghazal *Woh asire dam-e, bala hoon main jise chain tak bhi na aa sake* did very well and prompted Gosh Babu to arrange for a flat for the mother daughter duo at 16 Rippon Street.⁷⁶

Akhtari had blossomed into a beautiful young attractive girl, and so with popularity as a recording artist the invitations to join theatre and cinema came pouring in. The wealthy Pesi Karnani of Corinthian theatre told Akhtari "*Awaz bhi hai, shakal bhi, surat bhi hai, ada bhi hai. Is nazakat se theatre karogi, toh lakhon mein khelogi.*"⁷⁷ Soon she was signed by the company for Rs. 300 per month. She was hugely popular as a singing star in many Agha Hashr Kashmiri plays like

⁷³ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁷⁵ Bahu Bazar in Calcutta was a hub for professional musicians.

⁷⁶ Susheela Mishra. (source- NFAI- no issue details or page numbers)

⁷⁷ Ganguly, 37.

*Shirin Farhad, Nala Damayanti, Maneka Apsara, Laila Majnu*⁷⁸ and *Noor-e-Watan*. She made her debut with *Nai Dulhan*, based on Agha Munshi's script. After six months of rehearsals she descended on stage dressed as a fairy singing an invocation set to *Raga Sohinee*. Master Fida Hussain was cast opposite her as the main lead. He fondly remembered her,

She was given the script in the morning, and when she came in the evening, she was so thorough that she didn't need to refer to it. Her diction was perfect and she was razor sharp, picking up everything with absolute ease....Every time Akhtari did something innovative. Akhtari sang so well, but she acted even better. Her exit from the stage to move into music was a huge loss to the world of theatre. God only knows where did she disappear? So, we were forced to disband that production of *Nai Dulhan* and start a new production.⁷⁹

Nai Dulhan was a huge success and ran for two shows a day three days per week for months. The popularity of Akhtari on the stage prompted many invitations from the princely states of Bardhaman, Darbhanga, Dinajpur, Dhaka and Coochbehar to perform at their *mehfils*. During the month of Muharram, when Akhtari returned to Faizabad with her mother to perform the *sozkhani*, crowds flocked to listen to her. As in the case of many gramophone and theatre stars, recognition and fame was immediate and was bolstered by the mass appeal of the new media and its instantaneous circuits of dissemination. She was served a legal notice by the Corinthian Theatre Company for her disappearing act. Due to her popularity, however, an agreement was struck between her and Karnani. She was then offered the lead in *Nal Damayanti* opposite Master Fida Hussain. In an interview in the *Statesman*, she recalled how her mother was horrified when a python was strung around her body during the making of the play.⁸⁰ The play created a furore in Calcutta circles and soon she was spotted by East India Films who signed her on for Rs. 500 per month.

⁷⁸ Akhtari played the character of Majnu in the play because the role demanded the actor to sing sixteen songs. Laila was played by actress Prem Lata. See Ganguly, 60.

⁷⁹ Ganguly, 49.

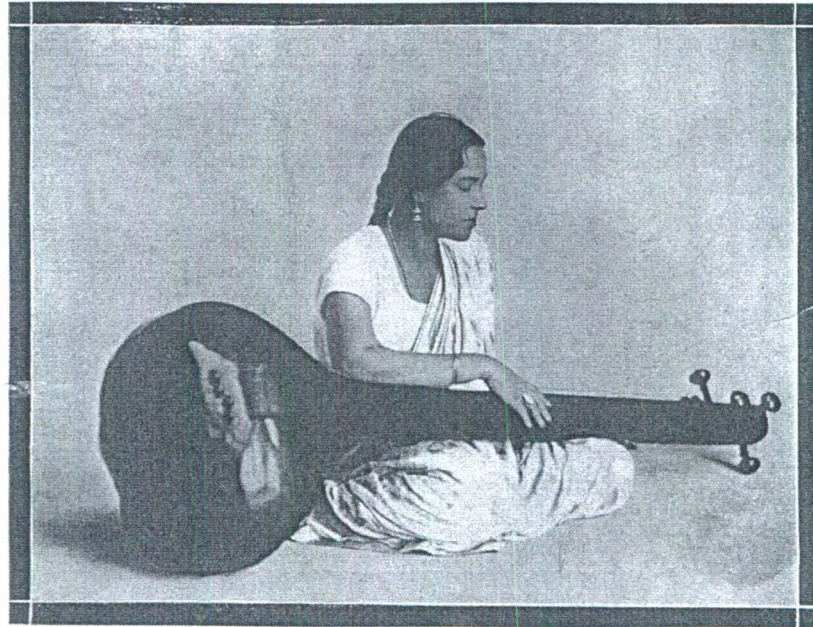
⁸⁰ *Statesman*, 13th Dec 1970.

ART PLATE 4



Jahanara Kajjan
Photograph Source: National Film Archive of India

ART PLATE 5



WHAT PRICE FASHION!

Yes — Shiladevi paid a very high price for being a generous Queen

Modern India!
Where is its Place?

Know the truth from the painted lips of

MADAM FASHION

Direction:
Bai Jaddan Bai

Now Running 3rd Week
at
Imperial Cinema

RANGEET FILM Co. PRESENTS

MADAM FASHION
Starring
JADDAN BAI - BABY RANEE
A. HUSEIN - Miss SURAIYA
ANSARI - NAZMIN BEGUM
P. BOSE - MISHRA - M. SINHA - YUSUF

मैडम फैशन

Jaddan Bai and Madam Fashion
Photograph source: National Film Archive of India, Pune

ART PLATE 6



Miss Akhtari, 'Ek Din Ka Badshah', *Rangbhoomi*, Yr 3, No. 7, 13th May 1934.

In 1933, Akhtari made her debut in films with the historical *Ek Din Ka Badshah*⁸¹ with Athar, Sabita Devi, Mazhar Khan, Indubala, Bachchan and A. R. Pahalwan as her co-stars. In the same year, East India Films' *Nal Damayanti* (d. J.J. Madan) was released with Mukhtar Begum, Indubala and Mazhar Khan. The film was based on Tulsi Das 'Shauda's play. In 1934 she acted in a historical *Mumtaz Begum* (d. Akhtar Nawaz) with Mazhar Khan, A. R. Pahalwan, Athar, Anwari and Gul Mohammad. It appears that Akhtari had a fluid contract with East India Films. In 1934 she also acted in the Madan social *Roopkumari* with Mohanlal, Miss Rosy, Miss Lakshmi and Master Kanji. The song *Meri up-to-date hai fashion, bin baat na karna* was a super hit. In the same year when Akhtar Nawaz was directing the social *Ameena* for Kali Films, Calcutta, Akhtari was the lead actress alongside Nawaz, Zarina and Mahjabeen. In 1935 Madan Theatres produced the social *Jawani Ka Nasha* (d. Manzoor Ahmad Nazar Azeemabadi) with Akhtari as the star. The cast included Mohammad Khalil Ahmad, Aghajani Kashmiri, Sabir Khan, Miss Qaisar Faizabadi and Choudhrayan. Her next venture was another social *Naseeb Ka Chakkar* (d. Pesi Karnani, 1936) for Manohar Films, Calcutta. The film was scripted by Munshi Haider Hussain Lucknawi. *Anarbala* directed by A.M Khan for Advance Pictures, Bombay was released the same year. The film also starred Ameenabai, Musa, Abdul Rahim, Abbas, Rafiq, Anwari, Rajkumari, Usha Rani and Zohra Khatoon. Unfortunately since none of her early films are available for viewing it is difficult to gauge the merit of these productions.⁸² Only two of her films survive- *Roti* (d. Mehboob Khan, 1942)⁸³ and *Jalsaghar* (d. Satyajit Ray, 1958).

⁸¹ There is confusion over the name of the director of the film. While Ganguly writes that the film was directed by Tahir Hussain (57). According to the *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, Raj Hans was the director of the film (80).

⁸² I have reconstructed Akhtari's filmography from the *Hindi Film Geet Kosh* and advertisements in film magazines.

⁸³ The music of the film was composed by the legendary Anil Biswas. According to the *Hindi Film Geet Kosh* the film had 14 songs, out of which Akhtari sang 6, Sitara Devi sang 4 and Ashraf Khan 3, but due to some trouble between director Mehboob Khan and Megaphone Records, 3-4 ghazals were subsequently deleted from the film. A blogger G. Bhagwat writes "Those who know Begum Akhtar in the recent years will be surprised to hear her sing songs like *Char Dinon Ki Jawani* and *Uljah Gaye Nainwa*." All the ghazals are available on Megaphone gramophone records. <http://www.hamarforums.com/lofiversion/index.php/t26148.html>

Although her career as an actress was on the rise, long hours of work at the theatre and studio was not entirely appealing to her.⁸⁴ Ustad Ata Khan Sahib was also unhappy with her 'deviations' into stage and film acting and wanted her to make a choice between a career as a musician or an actress. An invitation from the court of Hyderabad and a prolonged stay distanced her from the film studio. According to Susheela Mishra,

[t]he artist in her was acquiring a maturity which she had not attained so far. The uncertainties of the theatrical world, the superficial glitter of the film world and the unsteadiness of a life without moorings began to pall.⁸⁵

The altercation with the studio bosses was the last straw and Akhtari decided to stay in Lucknow. Mushtari set up her daughter's *kotha* 'Akhtari Manzil' on the edge of Hazratganj, a posh commercial hub of the colonial city in 1938. Now her performances were limited to private *baithaki mehfiles*, where the singer performed seated in gorgeous attire and heavy make-up enunciating the meaning of the musical performance through *abhinaya*- emotive gestures. These *mehfiles* were vestigial reminders of feudal practices and court entertainment.

The intricate ways in which various performative and entertainment media were tied together through their use of performers and musicians in this period is most clearly embodied in Akhtari's journey from gramophone to theatre and cinema. Her career as a gramophone-theatre artiste and film actress was symptomatic of the entertainment industry in the 1930s. The convergence and collaboration of media practices created a new and much-expanded public. Accessibility and consumption of performances, and performer-music bodies became more readily available to the public in various formats. The desire for the traditional was satiated through modern mass technology. Those who did not have access to Akhtari's *kotha* paid to hear her in the theatres or the films. Her decision to revert to an older mode of performance curtailed this access and restored a sense of exclusivity to her performances which added to her prestige. The fame that

⁸⁴ Saleem Kidwai, 'Zikr Us Parivash Ka': Begum Akhtar in Lucknow' in *Writings on Lucknow* ed. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, Penguin, 2007, 149.

⁸⁵ Mishra, 1969.

theatre and cinema brought was perceived as ephemeral in comparison to a musician's fame. Although music was instrumental in her stardom- cinematic or otherwise- the genre and mode of articulating musical talent was crucial. Cinema did not fit into the idea of a 'respectable' performative tradition. Her move to classical music was perceived as a putative sign of her 'maturity', throwing into sharp relief the tension between classical musical and cinematic performance. She returned to cinema in a special appearance in Ray's 'art' film *Jalsaghar*, where she performed with stalwarts of classical music, Vilayat Khan, Salamat Ali Khan and Bismillah Khan. The film was a critique of the new petit-bourgeois class in Bengal that though financially more powerful than the old landed aristocracy lacked the latter's cultural identity and taste; the sequence in which she appeared was a celebration of the arts of the *gaanewali*, her voice and her music, and Akhtari was cast not as her past self as Akhtaribai Faizabadi – but as her reinvented self - Begum Akhtar within the diegesis.

Akhtari sought to refashion her life constantly. The final transformation was effected through her marriage to the England- educated lawyer Ishtiaq Ahmad Abbasi. Most biographies suggest that she was eager for marriage⁸⁶ and craved for the attached sense of security and respectability that came with it. According to Kidwai, in most accounts, Abbasi stood out as the 'unsympathetic villain' who forced her to leave music to ensure her complete transformation from a *bai* to a *begum*. It was rather incredibly assumed that Akhtari reluctantly submitted to her husband's dictates⁸⁷, with no agency of her own. To achieve this goal of becoming a respectable homemaker was never an easy task for any *tawaif*. Jaddan Bai married Uttamchand Mohanchand (fondly known as Mohanbabu), who was from Rawalpindi. According to some accounts, after their marriage both Jaddan Bai and Mohanbabu tried to start a new life and dabbled in more 'respectable' professions.⁸⁸ Many failed attempts left Jaddan Bai to fend for their livelihood.

⁸⁶ See Ganguly, Mishra and Kidwai.

⁸⁷ Kidwai, 154.

⁸⁸ Mohanbabu tried to set up some business ventures which failed. According to Desai, he took up medicine again and resumed his plans for England, though nothing seems to have materialized. See

Married to an unemployed and insolvent man, Jaddan Bai was forced to be the sole breadwinner. So, despite the marriage the *mehfils* continued. On the other hand, as Begum Akhtar, Akhtari's life had completely transformed. At her husband's home, Mateen Manzil in Lucknow, she had to be careful of the responsibilities and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour within the confines of the *kothi*. "She would periodically take a break from domesticity and disappear for a few days to a friend's house, where other musicians would gather to make music, drink and party."⁸⁹ Despite occasional transgressions, the reinvention of her performative self, from a *bai* to *begum*, was paradoxically accomplished in the re-emergence of Begum Akhtar as a classical performer in the concert performance circuit with the sign of the *tawaif* concealed, and the sign of the actress definitely erased.

Circuits of Cinema and Circuits of Performers

As argued previously in the chapter, cinema enabled a process of reinvention and transformation of a variety of performers and performative idioms. Apart from the *tawaifs*, a variety of castes and classes of professional performers like the *mirasi*⁹⁰, the *bedia*⁹¹ and the *kanjars* existed in India. Traditionally these

Desai, *ibid.* 22. Also see Namrata Dutt Kumar and PriyaDutt, *Mr. and Mrs. Dutt: Memories of our Parents*, Roli Books, New Delhi, 2007, 30.

⁸⁹ Kidwai, 156

⁹⁰ In north India the *Mirasi* were Muslim converts from the Hindu Dom and were said to have converted to Islam at the hands of Amir Khusro, the 13th century Sufi poet. The word *mirasi* is derived from the Arabic word *miras*, which means inheritance. In terms of genealogy they are the hereditary antecedents of many communities in North India. The north Indian *Mirasis* are divided into five main sub-groups, the *Abbal*, *Posla*, *Bet*, *Kattu* and *Kalet*. For further details see H. A Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes & Castes of Punjab*, 105- 115 and *People of India Uttar Pradesh*, volume XLII part II ed. by A Hasan and J C Das, 973- 977.

⁹¹The *Bedia* tribe is found in the north, north-west and central provinces of India. This community is known for its peculiarly 'deviant' tendencies. Initially regarded as a 'warrior' group, it is believed that a series of military defeats forced them to resort to prostitution, hunting and illicit brewing. Traditionally they were nomads known to be skilled in the folk arts of dance and music, rural acrobatics and black magic. Interestingly the *Bedia* women are the breadwinners for their natal families, while the men are economically non productive leading in many cases a parasitic life. The legendary nautanki actress Gulab Bai belonged to the *Bedia* tribe. During the colonial rule, the *Bedias* were branded according to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 as "addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences." After independence, they were denotified in 1952, when the Criminal Tribes Act was replaced with the Habitual Offenders Act, but the community continues to carry considerable social stigma. For further details see Anuja Agrawal, *Chaste Wives and Prostitute Sisters - Patriarchy and Prostitution Among the Bedias of India*, 251 and Deepti Priya Mehrotra's *Gulab Bai: The Queen of Nautanki Theatre*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2006.

castes were stationed within the village or were travelling troupes integral to the social fabric. As an essential part of the ritualistic paradigms of the community they were frequently called upon by rich patrons to celebrate and mourn the passage of life. Many of these castes transformed themselves, adapting in times of need. Monetisation and technological transmutations ensured that many of these castes found readily the opportunity to work within the entertainment industry. The expanding circuits of film production and consumption in the 1930s reinforced this process. According to Kaushik Bhaumik, the intensification of the circuits of cinema transformed Bombay into a centre of trans-regional film culture.⁹² This created a crucial link between Bombay, Calcutta and Lahore. As apparent from the trajectory of many performers in this chapter, the circuits of performance coalesced with the circuits of cinema. Cinema looked towards newer sites of burgeoning performance and film culture in search for fresh and available sources of personnel. Punjab proved to be a gold mine in this pursuit. Some of the notable performers who came from Punjab were Jaddan Bai⁹³, K.L Saigal, Prithviraj Kapoor, Sardar Akhtar, Pran, Munawar Sultana and Noorjehan. Apart from these performers, Punjab provided the film world with scriptwriters, singers and music directors. Film personalities in the 1930s and 40s from Punjab included AR Kardar, the singer-musician Rafiq Ghaznavi, the scriptwriter Saadat Hasan Manto and the music director Ghulam Haider.

From 1931- 1934, the production of films in Punjab went through many upheavals. In 1931, the number of films produced in Punjab had gone up to six.⁹⁴ According to Bhaumik, this was a high point of the Punjab film industry but the industry was to collapse by 1933.⁹⁵ Most of the companies shut down within a short span of time, as they failed to produce even their first film. The films that had been completed and released failed miserably at the box office. But within these

⁹² Kaushik Bhaumik, *The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913-1936*, Diss. Oxford University, 2001,109

⁹³ Her brief stint at Playart Phototone associated Jaddan Bai with the Punjab film industry.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 116.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 116.

four years, an interactive crosscurrent had been established between Bombay, Calcutta and Punjab.⁹⁶ According to Himansu Rai, the Punjab artists were the most handsome and he appealed to them to join the industry in large numbers.⁹⁷ The performers from Punjab were considered to be the most attractive owing to their fair creamy complexion. Their powerful voices and semi-classical training in music made them automatic stars in a period when songs made or broke a film.

Noorjehan's journey to stardom was played out in this interactive circuit of Lahore-Calcutta- Bombay. She was born in the small town of Qasoor, Punjab on 21st September 1926 as Allah Wasai. Her parents Fateh Bibi and Madad Ali were *kanjars* by caste. Singing and dancing was their means to earn a livelihood. At an early age, Wasai displayed an immense propensity to sing. They were, naturally, overjoyed that their thirteenth child⁹⁸ was going to contribute to their personal income. Her mother sent her to Ustad Ghulam Mohammad (also a native of Qasoor) to cultivate her nascent musical talents. He instructed her in the traditions of the Patiala Gharana of Hindustani classical music. Once she had learnt the basic grammar of classical music and voice culture, she was ready to join her sisters in Lahore to pursue a career in stage singing.

Lahore in the 1930s had a vibrant performance culture. The family went to Bazaar Shekhpurian in Lahore where her sister Eidan and cousin Haidar Bandi had already begun their careers on stage. At Lahore's Mahabir Theatre, a nine year old Allah Wasai sang the popular hymn *Hastey hain sitare ya Shah-e-Madina* and became an instant hit. Henceforth, Allah Wasai performed with her sisters at the *melas, urs* or the *zinda naach wa gana* (live song and dance) attractions before the screening of films in theatres.⁹⁹ She would sing popular film songs, *ghazals, naats,*

⁹⁶ BR Oberai, 'Why the Punjab Productions Failed', *The Cinema*, July 1933, 28-29, as quoted by Bhaumik, *ibid*.

⁹⁷ *BC*, 25 May, 1932, as quoted by Bhaumik, *ibid*.

⁹⁸ Her sisters Eidan, Gulzar, Ameena, Baharo and Umda were already performing on stage. See Aijaz Gul, *Mallika-e-Tarannum: Noorjehan The Melody Queen*, Vitasta, New Delhi, 2008, 1.

⁹⁹ These performances before the films were an interesting ploy adopted by the exhibitors around the Bhati Gate area in Lahore. Unlike the 'prestigious' cinema houses on McLeod Road that screened the latest foreign and Indian films, the cinema halls around Bhati Gate area could afford to run only low grade or old Indian films for a second run. Thus these performances were an added

folk and semi classical numbers. According to Pakistani music critic Sarwar Ali, “[K]aafi and Dastaans of *Heer* and *Mirza Sahibaan* were essential ingredients of folk traditions of Punjab, and were rendered at *Melas* and *Urs* of saints. Music came with *Tappas* and *Bolian*.”¹⁰⁰ These influenced Noorjehan’s singing. Her voice carried a peculiar *ang* (style) which added novelty to her singing and suited the different performance milieus that she was singing in. She received 7-8 annas for each song.

Like many performers looking for opportunities and reinvention, the family moved to Calcutta in the hope of greener pastures. During their stay in Calcutta, they visited Mukhtar Begum and sought her help in finding work. The networks of film recruitment were informal in those days, and this practice had its own set of social circuits. Mukhtar Begum and her husband, Agha Hashr Kashmiri, who worked at the Corinthian Theatre, encouraged the sisters to join the film business. They were introduced to various producers and appropriate recommendations were made. The girls were hired by Indira Movietone run by Seth Sukh Karnani. The pretty and charming Punjabi trio was fondly called the ‘Punjab Mail’, a clear advertising strategy to target the Punjab circuit. Allah Wasai became Baby Noorjehan. At the studio, they were groomed and coached in acting, dancing and singing. They had to report to the studio everyday at nine and stay in the studio till late evening, as was the norm in most studios during that time.

attraction to draw in audiences. This was a popular practice in many towns and small cities of Punjab. Often these shows became a novelty independent of the film that was being exhibited. Professional publicity men known variously as the *Dhindora-walas* or the *Dhol-walas* would be seen hovering around the bazaar or outside the theatres with drums and hand bells advertising these performances. According to Nevile, the audience was mostly male, especially in the Bhati Gate area; however, there were special shows for ladies only on Wednesdays which were another source of excitement for the young men. See Nevile, “Zinda Naach wa Gana (Live Dance and Song)” in *Lahore: A Sentimental Journey*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2006, 96-104. Also see “Editors Page: Monkey Tactics” in *Filmworld*, 28th July 1933, Vol. I No. 16, 5-6 and H. P Shungloo, “Noisy Publicity” and “Advertising by Drum Beating” in *Filmworld*, 11th Aug 1933, Vol. I, No. 18, 14, 15 & 19.

¹⁰⁰ As quoted by Aijaz Gul, 8

ART PLATE 7



Noorjehan

“Noorjehan aur Mein” by Shaukat Hussain Rizvi

Photograph source: <http://www.hamaraforums.com/index.php?showtopic=31195>

According to Aijaz Gul, Noorjehan first appeared in a silent venture by Indian Pictures, Calcutta, called *Hind ke Tare* (1930).¹⁰¹ She did bit roles in B and C grade films for smaller productions. In 1935, K.D. Mehra launched a Punjabi film with Seth Karnani, *Sheila: Pind di Kudi*. Actress Pushpa Rani¹⁰² and classical singer Mubarak Ali were cast as the lead pair. Noorjehan's role in the film was limited to the song *Lang Aa ja Pattan*. The film was made on a shoestring budget and was completed in a record time of ten weeks. Even though the film was produced in Calcutta, it had a limited release there. It was exhibited only in Lahore to cash in on the Punjab film market which was proving to be a lucrative circuit for Indian films.¹⁰³ The film proved to be a resounding success.¹⁰⁴ As apparent from many of Noorjehan's films, studios in Bombay and Calcutta were quick to recognize this growing site of film exhibition and consumption. They oriented their production strategies towards regional tastes. This started a trend in film production where themes central to the Punjab imaginary with elements of costume, setting, music and dance were made to attract the Punjab audiences.¹⁰⁵ The film stills and advertisements in the newspapers and journals reflect this definite increase in the use of motifs peculiar to Punjab. In turn, this also created a demand for performers, writers, musicians and directors from Punjab who could nourish this process of production of Punjabi films.

In the period between 1935- 1939, Noorjehan worked in many films, dividing her time between Bombay, Calcutta and Lahore. In 1938 she briefly returned to Lahore and picked up her stage acts again. She acted in films like

¹⁰¹ Aijaz Gul, *ibid*. The entry on the film in *Light of Asia* does not mention Noorjehan. See *Light of Asia*, 184.

¹⁰² According to Ghulam Haider, Pushpa Rani was Noorjehan's cousin. See "Baby Noor Jehan" accessed on 5th July 2011, from <http://www.thefridaytimes.com/31122010/page28.shtml>

¹⁰³ In the latter half of 1930s, Punjab was the biggest film market for imported and domestic productions. In 1932, it was the second most profitable circuit for Indian films after Bombay, bringing in an average of rupees 20 to 25,000 per film. See Bhaumik, 117.

¹⁰⁴ Pran Nevile, "Going to the Cinema" in *Lahore: A Sentimental Journey*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2006, 89.

¹⁰⁵ Kaushik Bhaumik, 117.

Missar Ka Sitara (d. Mino Kartak, 1935)¹⁰⁶, *Mr. & Mrs. Bombay* (d. Nanubhai Vakil, 1936)¹⁰⁷, *Heer-Sayyal* (1937), *Fakhr-e-Islam* (d. Nanubhai Vakil and Safdar Mirza, 1937)¹⁰⁸, *Taran Haar* aka *Qaumi Diler* (d. Kakubhai Desai, 1937)¹⁰⁹, *Na Hone Waali Baat* aka *Impossible* (d. R.N Vaid, 1938)¹¹⁰, *Imperial Mail* (d. Safdar Mirza, 1939)¹¹¹ and *Naari Raj* aka *Miss Calcutta* (d. Nanubhai B. Desai, 1939)¹¹². These early films as Baby Noorjehan gradually set her up as a singing star in an era where aural stardom was a sure sign of success.

In 1939, Noorjehan was spotted by Dalsukh M. Pancholi, who had set up his Pancholi Studio on The Upper Mall, Lahore. He signed her for three of his forthcoming films - *Gul Bakawali* (1939), *Yamla Jaat* (1940)¹¹³ and *Khandaan* (1941). Ghulam Haider trained and composed songs for Noorjehan to perform in the films. This collaboration proved to be a huge success. *Gul Bakawali* was a small budget Punjabi film but it raked in a lot of money for Pancholi. The songs of the film like *Shala Jawaniyan Mane* and *Pinjre de wich qaid jawani* were instant hits with the Lahorias.¹¹⁴ Shaukat Hussain Rizvi¹¹⁵ the editor of *Gul Bakawali* was

¹⁰⁶ *Missar Ka Sitara* was a stunt film produced by Mino Kartak Productions in Bombay. She played the role of Ajuba. Not much is known about the film, its narrative or her performance. However according to Mino Kartak (as quoted in *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*), the task to compose the music of the film was given to Damodar Sharma; however due to some differences he left the production and Munnibai who played the character of Hamida in the film composed 4 out of the 11 songs. *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 236-237.

¹⁰⁷ *Mr. & Mrs. Bombay* was a social film for Jayshree Pictures, Calcutta, with Zubeida, Jal Merchant Jayadevi and Rani Premlata. See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 316.

¹⁰⁸ The film was produced by Indira Movietone. The star cast was Patience Cooper, Rasheed, Ghulam Sabir and Anees Khatoun. See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 360.

¹⁰⁹ The film was produced by Bombay based studio Indian Liberty. The film starred Goharbai Karnataki, Master Baccha, Ibrahim, Bose, Ali and Mansoor. See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 393

¹¹⁰ This social film was produced by Indira Movietone, Calcutta. The star cast included Baburao Pehalwaan, Pratima Dasgupta, Miss Shahjahan, Sunder Singh, Nazir Begum and A. Samad Khan. See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 427.

¹¹¹ *Imperial Mail* was a stunt film produced by Indira Movietone. She performed with her sister Eidan, Miss Gulzar, Miss Shahjahan, Miss Gulab, Babu Rao, Nisar Ahmad, Sunder Singh, Ghulam Mohammed, Samad Khan and Ramesh Joshi. See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 464.

¹¹² *Naari Raj* aka *Miss Calcutta* was a Madan social with Jahanara Kajjan and Jal Merchant as the lead pair. See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 317.

¹¹³ Noorjehan was cast opposite M. Ismail in the film. In fact, Pran started his film career with *Yamla Jaat*. He made his debut as a hero with *Khandaan*. See Aijaz Gul, 18.

¹¹⁴ Pran Nevile, 88.

roped in by Pancholi to direct *Khandaan*. Noorjehan was fifteen years old and this was her first adult role. Now the prefix Baby was dropped from her name.

In *Khandaan*, Rizvi exploits her aural stardom. She was not a very good actress, but it was in the song sequences that her personality strikingly emerges. The picturisation of song *Hum Khelenge....* is an excellent example. The song opens to an instrumental piece being played on a gramophone. Noorjehan's contact with the gramophone thrills her and she bursts into song. The presence of the gramophone in the song sequence celebrates the central link between the music recording industry and the early talkies. This alliance is established through the musical performance of Noorjehan who was to go on to become one of the biggest singing film stars of India and later Pakistan. The two industries collaborated and worked in tandem to sustain the film song, which was emerging as an independent entity. Record companies were vying to sign exclusive contracts with film stars and studios. Other singing stars that were most sought after by the music recording industry were Shanta Apte, Kanan Bala and Suraiyya. The citation inserts Noorjehan into the history of musical performance and entertainment. The gramophone was seen as instrumental in disseminating musical material to entertain but also to teach. Many artists and musicians were known to play recordings repeatedly to learn and mimic without the recourse to a teacher or notation. In an interview with BBC, Noorjehan talks about how as a child she was enamoured by Akhtaribai when she heard her voice on the gramophone. She would try to imitate her.¹¹⁶

Between 1941- 1947, Noorjehan acted in a string of films - *Duhai* (1943), *Naukar* (1943)¹¹⁷, *Nadan* (1943), *Dost* (1944), *Badi Maa* (1945), *Village Girl* (1945). *Zeenat* (1945) proved to be extremely successful at the box-office. *Zeenat*

¹¹⁵ Shaukat Hussain Rizvi was a trained mechanical engineer from Azamgarh, U.P. He worked in his family clocks and watches business until he moved to Calcutta and joined Madan Theatres as an assistant projectionist. He then worked in the editing department and trained under Ezra Mir. Apparently for *Gul Bakawali*, Rizvi not only edited the film, he re-shot large portions of the film to ensure continuity. He also edited films like *Khazanachi*, *Yamla Jat*, *Chaudhury* and *Poonji* Pancholi. Sources- Aijaz Gul and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syed_Shaukat_Hussain_Rizvi

¹¹⁶ Accessed from <http://www.madamnoorjehan.com/her-life-and-art/interviews/40-interview>

¹¹⁷ *Naukar* was based on the story by Saadat Hasan Manto. See Manto, *Stars from Another Sky*, 158.

was a star vehicle for Noorjehan who was extremely popular by then. The film featured the first women's *qawwali* - *Aahen Na Bhari Shikwen Na Kiye* sung with famous singers of those days, Zohra Ambalewali and Amirbai Karnataki which must have been an added attraction.

In 1947, the partition of India into two independent states - India and Pakistan, caused irreparable damage to film production in India, particularly in Lahore. This cataclysmically altered the nexus of film production between Bombay-Calcutta- Lahore. The migration of film personnel destroyed the vibrant exchange that had become intrinsic and natural to the workings of the Indian film industry. Many Muslim artists departed from Bombay and Calcutta for Pakistan. For Lahore this came as a shock. Film production in Lahore had revived in the 40s with Pancholi Arts but the Partition deprived this nascent industry of its crucial film circles. The much needed capital investment and expertise in film production and distribution was cut short. The changed configuration of the industry made spaces that were once open for itinerant performers, like Jaddan Bai, Noorjehan and many others, inaccessible. Even though film production did not cease and in 1947, two of Noorjehan's films were released- *Mirza Shahiban* and *Jugnu* (d. Shaukat Hussain Rizvi)¹¹⁸, the industry was in a state of flux. In this sudden migration of artists from both sides, many careers were destroyed but also established. Noorjehan and Shaukat Hussain Rizvi shifted to Lahore after the Partition; they were allotted the Shouri Studios, which was subsequently renamed Shahnoor Studios. Here, Rizvi started his new film *Chanway* (1951) which did well. Noorjehan re-established herself and her career and soared to new heights like a phoenix rising from the ashes. Her departure is seen by many as an opening that allowed Lata Mangeshkar to strengthen her position in the industry and reorder the categories of aural stardom that women from performative traditions like the *kotha* and the *bazaar* had painstakingly established. These changes in the film industry are signs of an experience and a history that was larger than hers.

¹¹⁸ *Jugnu* was a resounding success. Noorjehan's leading man in *Jugnu* was Dilip Kumar and the music was by Feroze Nizami. The song *Yehan badla wafa ka...* was very popular. See *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 334.

This is an unwritten history of the loss of Lahore and the eventual wilting away of the cinema that was produced from Lahore.

Conclusion

The transition to the talkies threw open the demand for new kinds of performers who could talk, sing and dance in a register peculiar to cinema. But before this cinema-specific idiom could be achieved, myriad performative traditions were used as easily available references and sources to draw from. As demonstrated through the chapter, this period was characterised by a frenetic interface between forms of entertainment like the music recording industry, theatre and cinema. In the 1930s-40s, the overlapping interactions between these media were held together by their shared investment in music and musical performance. In its search for performers, cinema turned to women with strong roots in musical and performative traditions. The women from the *kotha* were part of an older order of entertainment, where music and dance were integral to performance. The decline in older traditions of patronage and a changing moral order forced these women to venture out of the *kothas* to ‘new’ centres of entertainment in search of reinvention and work.

As many of the performers were from the *kothas*, *bazaar* or theatre, these actresses were always already seen as ‘fallen women’. In the popular imagination, *tawaiifs* were associated with overt sexuality and were labelled as ‘available’ women. However in their lives these women performed divergent roles complicating the dichotomies of public/private and respectability/disrepute. Women from these backgrounds chose to be part of the film industry out of a sheer need to survive and a passion for the performative. For these public women, the ‘new’ performance traditions provided an opportunity to escape from prostitution, a way out in the face of uncertain income and a flight from dependency on male members of their family. Though deeply entrenched in patriarchal feudalism, singing and dancing were often means by which women supported entire generations of dependants. For many of these actresses, their location in a structure of social difference was both a condition to enter a “disreputable profession” like

cinema, and their embodied liminality, the condition for reworking it. They earned respect for their work and carved out an identity that was exciting and new. They faced frustrating denials, loss, rejection and loneliness. Whether on screen or off, their lives were turbulent, dramatic and full of unexpected twists. Sometimes it seemed that the romance and tragedy of the silver screen spilt over into their lives making their stories ever more poignant, layered and multi faceted.

In the 1930s, cinema began to align with bourgeois middle class identity. The fervour of nationalism and the reform propaganda was reiterated and reconstituted in the call for a 'new' ethos for cinema that was located in a renewed discourse of 'respectability'. The elites of the film industry urged newly educated Indian men and women to embrace cinema to redeem it from its 'tainted' past. This 'act of cleansing' the studios was a long drawn-out process and the influx of women from the *kothas* did not cease but the space of performance opened up to new players. While in this chapter I have discussed how women from varied performative backgrounds re-fashioned themselves, in the next chapter I will explore the processes of self transformations of women from 'educated' and 'cultured' backgrounds at the site of cinema.

CHAPTER III

DESIRE FOR RESPECTABILITY: “SOCIETY LADIES FOR THE INDIAN SCREEN”¹

Educated men and women must be induced to act for the film. At present there is a sort of stigma attached to film acting, because the actresses (and to a less extent the actors) are generally not drawn from the respectable classes. The whole tone of the studio must be raised...With time, spread of education and improvement of conditions of life we hope that this difficulty will disappear.

- The Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-28²

Film acting is not a bad career to take to, but for the people we come in contact therein. It would require high moral courage and character to withstand the scandal that accompanies the actress in and out of the studio.

- Should Respectable Ladies join the Films by A Lady Artiste in *Filmland*, 1931³

The ICC report repeatedly reiterated and made suggestions expressing the need for “cultured” and “educated” women for the Indian film industry. At the brink of expansion in the 1930s, a section of the industry was caught in a maelstrom of this heated debate around ‘respectability’. It was in this period that cinematic discourse was recast; moving from a ‘cosmopolitan mode’ of the 1920s to an increasingly ‘bourgeois- nationalist mode’ beginning in the 1930s⁴. Through appropriation, cinema participated in the highly charged moment of nationalism and its petition for progress and reform. Neepa Majumdar has argued that the “discourse of improvement” of cinema was shaped by the split domain of

¹Nalini Turkhud “Society Ladies for the Screen” in *Filmland*, Puja Special 1932/ Vol. III, No. 1270, 9.

² *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-28*, 47& 82. (Henceforth ICC)

³ Article reproduced in Samik Bandopadhyay ed. *Indian Cinema: Contemporary Perceptions from the Thirties*, Jamshedpur, Celluloid Chapter, 1993, 108-109

⁴ Kaushik Bhaumik, 144

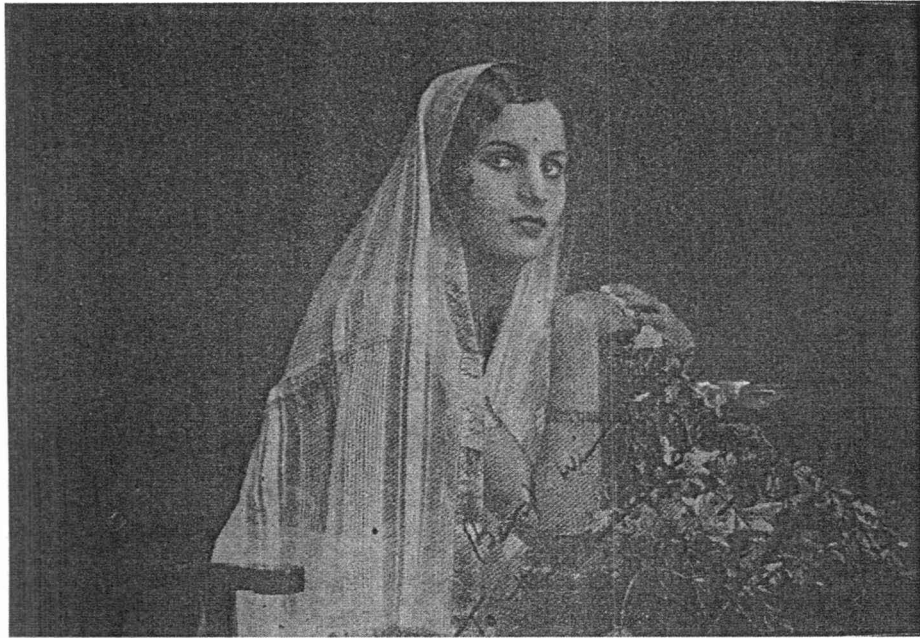
nationalist thought- the home and the world⁵. Thus within the registers of urban modernity, notions of work, culture and ethics were being redefined and reordered in the film industry through an emphasis on skill, talent, technology, but most importantly through the figure of educated upper class actress.

The educated elite in India grounded the agendas of progress in different and unlikely terrains. They created institutional spaces that were both concrete and discursive. Through the press, education, literary genres and mediated forms of entertainment, ideas, tastes, individual and group identities were reshaped and refashioned⁶. The public sphere was synergized through the awareness of 'other' genders, classes and castes. Institutions like Bombay Talkies, Prabhat, and New Theatres realigned the horizon of expectations thereby allowing the discourse of 'respectability' and 'improvement' to become hegemonic. This common horizon and space gave rise to a public discourse on 'respectability' which did not necessarily put constraints on the existing limits of participation. After all, the range of backgrounds that many of the performers came from and formed the hybrid composition of film labour in the 1930s, highlights the presence of variance, dissent and difference in this period (as clear from chapters one and two). However, the discourse on 'respectability' did pave the way for new trends in the industry. The idea of 'respect' acquired certain plasticity with regard to the existence of various kinds of beliefs and norms. Identity could be moulded and took on a new kind of mobility and flexibility. Social relations could be questioned and became consciously impermanent. But within the discourse of respectability and improvement, the demand for 'educated' personnel appealed to an imagined (ideal) community of serious, equal and educated minded citizens. Abstract marks of identity such as educational qualifications and familiarity with cultural traditions were emphasised as crucial to this process.

⁵ Neepa Majumdar *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2009, 54

⁶ The formation of the public sphere is a differential process which takes place at the level of the discursive, the linguistic, the political and the economic. See Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi, 2009.

ART PLATE 8



Nalini Tarkhud, *Filmland*, Puja Number, Vol. III, No. 127, 1932



Renuka Devi
filmindia, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1st Jan 1939

The figure of the public woman in her various manifestations was already a ubiquitous presence, as apparent from the discussion in the previous chapters. Women became crucial agents of/ for change in this period as education and emancipation propelled and charged the public sphere with the presence of the newly educated Indian woman. Women had already begun to organise and constitute themselves through the reading and writing of journals, autobiographies, poems, narratives and diaries in this period, thereby extending their sphere of activity to include new roles and personae.⁷ At the same time, these women shared a contentious relationship with the public sphere. Education was tied to a complex negotiation with moral respectability, which became a requisite for public access. It allowed educated women expression, mobility and access to spaces hitherto inaccessible but not without contradictions. This entrée to spaces was contrived and was undercut by implicit exclusions and often by self-censorship. The ‘publicness’ of women was always already a cause of great anxiety, mockery and ridicule and elite women were no exception to this disparagement. The public sphere worked in myriad ways to also marginalise and subject them to surveillance and control.

The nationalist paradigm, as pointed out by Partha Chatterjee, made it possible to displace boundaries of the *home* from its physical confines to a more conciliatory, yet culturally and socially determined set of differences. For this purpose, specific codes of conduct were fixed for men and women. Once the *essential* femininity of women was fixed in terms of certain culturally visible *spiritual* qualities, it was possible for them to venture out into the *world*, to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programs, and even seek public employment outside the home.⁸ Modern women received

⁷ See Gail Minault, “Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and *Tahzib un Niswan*: Women’s Rights in Islam and Women’s Journalism in Urdu” in *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, ed. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2007, 70-98 and Francesca Orsini, “Women and the Hindi Public sphere” in *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi, 2009, 243-308.

⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1995, 130

education in classic literature and were taught, as Chatterjee points out, to inculcate the virtues of

Orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting, hygiene, and the ability to run the household according to new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world. For this she would also need to have some idea of the world outside the home, into which she could even venture as long as it did not threaten her femininity.⁹

The film actress posed a peculiar problem to Chatterjee's home/world thesis; the demarcations of the public and the private were severely ruptured in this case, as film actresses circulated in the public domain in their most intimate form as cinematic entities. The home/world dichotomy needs to be reordered and reconfigured in the case of actresses, as Partha Chatterjee's paradigm of the '*ghar*' and '*bahir*' to identify social roles of gender in the late colonial period were tumultuously jolted into a blur in their case. Unlike the treacherous demarcations of the domains as female / male, the actresses were pushed to grapple with this dyad by various circumstantial necessities. The actress treaded the realm of the home and the world simultaneously; in fact the 'self' that negotiated the public was distinctively enmeshed with the one that mediated the private.

This chapter attempts to engage with the discourse of respectability in the Bombay film industry and its demand for 'educated' and 'cultured actresses'. A reinvention of cinema was sought through the reinvention of the scandalous figure of the film actress. As women began to articulate their positions afresh they were seen as 'saviours' of a disreputed form like cinema. In some ways, cinema participated in the processes that enabled women to assert, establish and participate in acts of self-definition and self-worth. The autobiographies of actresses like Durga Khote, Leela Chitnis and Begum Khurshid Mirza (Renuka Devi) are a storehouse of information.¹⁰ Along with other material, this chapter will also use

⁹ Ibid., 247

¹⁰ Other autobiographies by actresses are Shanta Apte's *Jaoo Mee Cinemat* (Shall I Join Films?), *Sangte Aika* by Hansa Wadkar (Shyam Benegal's film *Bhumika* is an adaptation of the book) and Snehalata Pradhan's *Snehankita*. I haven't been able to source Shanta Apte's memoir.

the autobiographies to explore the ways in which these women sought to articulate, negotiate and refashion their position through film work.

The Site of Work and the Rite of Cleansing: Setting the Studios in 'order'

The 1930s were marked by a substantial economic and technological shift, as film business inched slowly towards an industry formation through the expansion of the networks of film production, exhibition and distribution. As clear from the previous two chapters, this was indicative of the new possibilities for work and created a demand for labour. As part of the efforts for consolidation and organisation, the new enterprises promoted a new consciousness of professionalism, technical expertise, division of labour, new investments and capital¹¹. The studios were frenetically transforming themselves into professional organisations with well equipped spaces for work as well as leisure. The studios constantly boasted of the most recent and technologically fine equipment procured from abroad or bought locally. They also showed off their indulgences like in-house swimming pools or a menagerie of animals in their studio. Despite the glamour, public opinion was divided. The studio as a site of work evoked a great sense of anxiety and discomfort. On the one hand, the film industry was seen as the destination for making a quick fortune; on the other, it was seen as a prime site for culpable vices and moral depravity. The complex nature of film production, the proximity with which men and women worked, and the odd hours of work added to deep seated tensions in the industry and in the public sphere.

It was believed that women from 'cultured' backgrounds would endow cinema with their 'charm' and 'beauty', and obliterate the 'taint' of the tawaif/actress through their perceived 'chastity'. The 'respectability' tag was used to mobilize the essential *spiritual* basis of Indian femininity and legitimise the film industry within the paradigms of nationhood and reform. Through this conflation

¹¹ Kaushik Bhaumik, 82

“the moral status of cinema became feminised”¹² as it coalesced with the moral status of its stars. Devika Rani¹³, Durga Khote, Leela Chitnis, Shanta Apte, Renuka Devi, Sadhona Bose¹⁴, Nalini Turkhud¹⁵, Enaxi Rama Rao¹⁶, Shobhana Samarth¹⁷, Maya Bannerjee¹⁸ were among the few who were celebrated as the first crop of educated cultured actresses. Their entry into cinema was publicised and their ‘respectable’ lineage was a constant topic of discussion in newspapers and journals as part of the industry’s attempt to forge new perceptions about film work.

Setting the studios in order was the first step in the discourse of respectability to ensure that space of work was conducive to the entry of ‘respectable’ women. The three big studios- Bombay Talkies, New Theatre and

¹² Neepa Majumdar, 61-62

¹³ She was the grandniece of Rabindranath Tagore and daughter of Col. M.N Chowdhary (who was also the Surgeon General, Madras). She was educated in Madras and Shantiniketan and married Himanshu Rai. ‘Karma’ produced by Himanshu Rai was the first Indian talkie in English that made her internationally famous. See Debashree Mukherjee, “Good Girls, Bad Girls”, *Seminar*, June 2009, accessed online http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/598/598_debashree_mukherjee.htm

¹⁴ Sadhana Bose was born on 20th April 1913 in Calcutta. She was married to director Madhu Bose. She was the leading actress in Madhu Bose’s drama troupe, Calcutta Art Players. In 1936, she joined the film industry in 1936 and appeared in Bharat Laxmi Pictures’ film *Alibaba* directed by Madhu Bose. She also acted in *Avimoni*, *Kumkum the Dancer* (1940), *Rajnartaki*, *Purbarag*, *Maa O Chhele*. See, *ICYB*, 582, *Hindi Film Geet Kosh* and “Sadhona Bose Becomes a Star Overnight” in *filmindia*, May 1940, Vol. 6 No. 5, 24.

¹⁵ Belonged to a respectable Hindu family, she graduated from Bombay University and joined the film industry in 1929 in *Toy Cart*. She worked in *Sacred Ganges* and then she joined Prabhat. She floated her own concern Jayshree Films in partnership with Mr. K Dhaibar. See *ICYB*, 690

¹⁶ Enaxi Rama Rao had graduated with an M.A degree from Madras University. She appeared in films like *Shiraz* and *Vasantsena*. She married to M Bhavnani in 1931. According to the *ICYB*, “She has acquired wonderful proficiency in Indian classical and folk dancing. She often contributes enlightening articles to the Cine-Press.” See *ICYB*, 598

¹⁷ Shobhna Samarth was a Marathi actress born in 1915. She made her screen debut with *Orphans of the Society* (Kolhapur Cinetone). Her film *Nigahen Nafrat* (1935) was a huge success. She was the poster girl for the Bombay Telephone Co. advertisement. (*filmindia*, 30th June 1938, Vol. 4, No. 2, 12). She is best remembered for her portrayal of Sita in *Ram Rajya* (1943). She was married to director and cinematographer Kumarsen Samarth and later produced and directed a pair of movies that launched the careers of her daughters, Nutan and Tanuja. (Compiled from- *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, *ICYB*, *filmindia* and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mukherjee-Samarth_family)

¹⁸ She was born in Lucknow on 7th Feb 1915 and was also known as Mrs. Romola Jawhery. Before joining films she was a kindergarten teacher. She joined films in 1934 as a dancer for Madan’s Tollywood Studios and toured northern India as an ‘oriental dancer’. She also worked with Sagar Movietone. See, *ICYB*, 632

Prabhat emerged in this period as the leaders in the industry.¹⁹ Their reputation was manufactured through a complex web of networks and mobilisations. Most crucial to this production of respect was the cognizance that these studios were backed by the leading businessmen, politicians and the cultural elite of the time and were run on “superior financial resources”.²⁰ Their reputation also came from the simple fact that they were producing technically better films, which were characterised by advanced cinematographic skills and stellar sound recording.²¹ Films like *Maya Macchindra* (d. V. Shantaram, 1932) and *Puran Bhakt* (d. Debaki Bose, 1933) were seen as “real endeavours” that added to the prestige of the film industry.²² Their investment in ‘respectable’ high brow genres like the social, mythological and historical as opposed to stunt and comedy was celebrated and consolidated their cultural status in the public imagination. By the mid 1930s, the three studios had carved out a distinct identity of respectability for themselves through a strict code of genre differentiation, star personas, and technique.

The films produced at Pune were advertised and marketed for their “Prabhat touch”. Their main market was Maharashtra. Known for translating mythological and legendary material for cinema, their films came to be defined by their use of colossal sets, spectacular war scenes, costumes, extravagant gestures, “heavenly miracles, high flown talk about patriotism” and devotional music.²³ New Theatres in Calcutta began with the best talent available in the market. The studio boasted of an accomplished staff of directors like P.C Barua and Nitin Bose and singing stars like Saigal, Kananbala and Jamuna. One of their strengths was their use of music. According to Durga Khote, New Theatre was the pioneering

¹⁹ Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, “These Three! Prabhat- New Theatres- Bombay Talkies” in *filmindia*, May 1939, Vol. 5 No. 5, 45

²⁰ According to Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, “[T]heir ledgers, cash books and bank accounts are, we believe, audited every year”. Ibid 45

²¹ Reviews of films by Bombay Talkies, Prabhat and New Theatres took their technical efficiency for granted. Film criticism was based on the subject, theme and performance.

²² Jagdish Lall Sharma, “Some Aspects of Present day Screen” in *Varieties Weekly*, 11th Nov 1933, Vol. IV No. 6, 12

²³ Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, 46

company that introduced Ranbindra Sangeet and orchestral music to cinema²⁴. By using high brow genres of musicality, New Theatres defined their music strictly outside the realms of the *kotha* or *bazaar* and this was crucial to the process of garnering respectability for their films and their studio.

The organisation of work was a crucial way in which studios aligned themselves to respectability. Prabhat and New Theatres were known for their use of a domestic vernacular to define work space. Khwaja Ahmad Abbas wrote, “[T]he studio (New Theatres) I believe is run more or less on the lines of benevolent feudal autocracy rather on those of modern big business”²⁵. The studio was like home and the workers were like family²⁶. Bombay Talkies, on the other hand, built their formidable reputation as a well-knit active organisation of actors and technicians. Their established and set members of crew were a mark of stability and consistency. They were known to possess the finest equipment and apparatus. The emphasis on technique and their use of this technology added to their reputation. According to Abbas, Bombay Talkies resembled Hollywood studios in their efficient and regular administration. According Neepa Majumdar, “the most basic mechanism for an improved cinema was emulation of Hollywood in technical matters”.²⁷ This allusion to the “Hollywood machinery”²⁸ was part of the rhetoric of improvement to garner respectability for the studios and film work.

Once the studios were aligned to the discourse of improvement, work culture and ethics, it was conducive for educated and cultured women to enter film business. Figures like Devika Rani and Durga Khote²⁹ were seen as role models

²⁴ Durga Khote, *I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography*, tr. Shanta Gokhale, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2007, 68

²⁵ Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, 51

²⁶ Durga Khote in her memoir describes work in the studio as a joint family set up. I will discuss this in next section of the chapter. See Durga Khote, 61

²⁷ Neepa Majumdar, 54

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 54

²⁹ Search engines on the internet without hesitation herald Khote as “one of the first women from respectable families to enter the film industry thus breaking a social taboo” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Durga_Khote). Khote herself repeatedly reiterated her lineage with the ‘respectable’ elites of the Marathi community; she belonged to the Laud-Khote clan in Maharashtra.

who had set a precedent for other women from their class and background to enter films. Inversely, through the figure of these women the aura of respectability was bestowed on other actresses as well. The meteoric rise of Bombay Talkies was linked to its star actress Devika Rani.³⁰ According to Debashree Mukherjee, “more than her screen work as an actress, it was her work as a public icon that contributed to Bombay Talkies’ fortunes”.³¹ As the symbolic spokesperson for Bombay Talkies, she was seen as a “charming diplomat conferring with politicians and bureaucrats at official functions”.³² Her image was a positive reinforcement of the discourse of respectability and value that the industry mobilised consistently. After the success of *Bhabhi* (d. Franz Osten, 1938) starring Begum Khurshid Mirza (Renuka Devi), Baburao Patel wrote “Bombay Talkies have found another Devika”.³³

While the industry was trying to fashion its own identity, for newly educated women entering the public sphere, cinema provided the possibility of work and also reinvention. This induction of middle class women into films signals their emergence and participation into an economic sphere which was very different from other spheres of work like education, medicine and social work that were becoming popular arenas of employment for women in the 1930s.³⁴ Familial ideologies of the middle class mediated in different ways the entry of women into the economic sphere. These ideologies also became a constricting force as issues like sexuality and morality ensured that the participation of women was tenuous.

The autobiographies of actresses Durga Khote, Renuka Devi and Leela Chitnis are testaments of the *idea* and claims of the movement for education in the

Her first film J.B.H Wadia’s *Farebi Jaal* (d. Mohan Bhavnani, 1931) was sold through advertisements such as: “Introducing the daughter of the famous solicitor Mr. Laud and the daughter-in-law of the well known Khote family.” See Durga Khote, 35

³⁰ Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, 54

³¹ Debashree Mukherjee, “Notes on a Scandal” in *Writing Cinema, Writing the City: An Affective Journey Through Bombay Cinema with Saadat Hasan Manto(1937-1948)*, unpublished diss., 81

³² *Ibid.*, 81

³³ *filmindia*, 1st January 1939, Vol. 5 No. 1, 48

³⁴ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

early 20th century. The memoirs are ‘texts’ that offer perspectives with which it becomes possible to tease apart and display processes, each partial and over-determined, through which cultural authorities fashioned the image of the film industry and bestowed the onus of “respectability” upon educated women actors. They also provide an insight into the subjective realm of the actress’ experience in the film industry. Through the 1930s-40s, the industry was structured around a set of required skills and a series of pre-existing profiles for workers. This had a performative and constitutive effect on how these women lived, worked and wrote about themselves.

The Portrait of a Lady: Autobiography and Writing the Self

The domain where the new idea of womanhood was sought to be actualised was the home, and the real history of that change can be constructed only out of evidence left behind in autobiographies, family histories, religious tracts, literature, theatre, songs, paintings and other such cultural artefacts.

- Partha Chatterjee³⁵

Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated.

- Judith Butler³⁶

The autobiography crucially enables a process of archiving the ‘self’ through a language of performativity. In the act of writing, experiential realms of the writer’s history are affirmatively revealed. This experience is organised as a dialogic interaction between the personal and the public. In the case of the actresses, it extends their performance on screen to the literary pages of the autobiography, thereby providing supplementary insight into their auratic lives. They carefully orchestrate their ‘image’, which is reinforced and reinstated through the act of narration itself. The autobiographies of Durga Khote, Renuka Devi and Leela Chitnis, were written in retrospect and so the politics of the present sporadically permeate memories of their past. Their memoirs are visibly laced with

³⁵ Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question”, in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, Zubaan, 2006, 250

³⁶ Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” in *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, 1990, 1-34

a sense of creating and masking a persona through constant investment in the definition and re-definition of the 'self'. They draw from a set of personal and collective memories, often shifting and partial, that contest their own attempts at framing the 'self'.

The title of the book, *I, Durga Khote* feeds into the persona that Khote performatively construes for her readers and fans. The emphasis on the 'I' comes from her own awareness and perception of her status and position. Her autobiography was published in 1982 in Marathi. Khote conjures up a world which is selectively nuanced by a careful exercise of choice and processes of rejection and elaboration. She possesses an insightful eye for detail, for spaces and objects. Leela Chitnis' *Chanderi Duniyet* was published a year before, also in Marathi in 1981.³⁷ Chitnis' account has often been read as a tale of agony and exploitation.³⁸ The production of narrative, however, is contingent upon the manner in which the construction of the self is in a constitutive relationship to the outside world. The story that she candidly narrates presents a concise history of the film world and her place within it. It maps the transitions of her life as a performer, from being a leading star to the marginalised position of an 'extra'. In the process of writing, she dons variously the role of a diarist and chronicler. She inserts snippets and perspectives on the state of the film industry from the 1930s-1970s, and has chapters on her life, marriage and liaisons. Begum Khurshid Mirza (Renuka Devi) wrote her memoir as a nine part series for the monthly magazine *Herald* from 1982-1983 under the title *Uprooted Sapling*. The editor of the magazine, Razia Bhatti encouraged her to recollect and write about her rich and varied life. Mirza wanted it to be compiled and published as a book. It was her editors and publishers who felt the need to supplement her writing with details and further research. Her daughter Lubna Kazim and Mirza's niece, Shahla Haidar worked on the

³⁷ I would like to thank Nikhil Narkar for translating *Chanderi Duniyet* from Marathi to English.

³⁸ Shanta Gokhle aligns Leela Chitnis' account with Hansa Wadkar's autobiography, as personal accounts where these actresses projected themselves as "suffering women exploited by the world of men". See "Translator's Note" in *I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography*, Shanta Gokhle tr. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006, xiv

manuscript to develop, complete and present it in its present form³⁹. Thus there are multiple agents that define the text and context of writing about the 'self'. In such a case, the 'self' is produced as a linguistic game of endlessly deferred meaning. However, it is in the interstices of this 'play' with meaning that the 'self' emerges waiting to be reclaimed.

Livelihood, Leisure, and the Reinvention of the Self

I was a woman in need. This was like a straw to a drowning man. So I assented. I had no clue what the film business was all about, what one did in it, where one got costumes and make up, what lines I would have to speak, how one was supposed to play a role or sing. I was terrified. I had no idea what I'd got myself into...All I had been doing till then was folding my hands before God in prayer, 'Dear God, please look after my children...please look after my children.

- Durga Khote⁴⁰

In 1926, Durga Khote's husband lost all his money on the stock market. Creditors began taking charge of their property one by one. Inadequate and insolvent, Mr. Khote suffered from a typhoid attack which aggravated his asthma. He was then asked to take complete bed rest. With nothing to survive on, Khote moved back into her paternal home- the Laud Mansion. She did not want to burden her father, so she decided to look for work. Without a graduate degree, however, 'respectable' jobs like teaching and nursing were hard to come by. She started taking home tuitions but this did not ensure a good and steady income. Mr. Khote found some odd jobs. But his ill health made it difficult for him to work. According to Khote, "[H]e had never worked in his life. He had never done anything at all, ever. Without a university degree, it was impossible for him to get a better job".⁴¹ In dire need for work when J.B.H Wadia offered her a small role in *Farebi Jaal* (d. Mohan Bhavnani, 1931)⁴², she was more than happy to accept the

³⁹ Lubna Kazim, "Preface" to *A Woman of Substance: The Memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza 1918-1989*, Zubaan, New Delhi, 2005, vii

⁴⁰ Durga Khote, 33.

⁴¹ Ibid., 32

⁴² *Farebi Jaal* was Mohan Bhavnani's first sound production. In 1925, Bhavnani had directed the Imperial action hit *The Wildcat of Bombay* starring Sulochana.

offer. Her role in the film was minute, lasting only ten minutes. She played the heroine's older sister⁴³ who gets beaten up by her drunken husband in a fit of anger and succumbs to death. She was made to sing in a 'weepee voice', and she confesses she wept a lot in the scene pouring her heart out to perform. She was paid Rs. 250 which was perhaps insufficient but it took care of her "immediate problems."⁴⁴ She was twenty six years old, a mother of two and a housewife with a home to run- such a woman would hardly be considered suitable for the heroine's role in Bombay.

Leela Chitnis' pursuit of a livelihood brought her to cinema in the similar way as it did Khote: under duress. At a young age, she married Dr. Chitnis against her parent's will.⁴⁵ Dr. Chitnis did not have a permanent job.⁴⁶ With no regular source of income and three children to support, Leela Chitnis took up a job as a primary school teacher. In 1933, Dr. Chitnis with a group of intellectuals like K. Narayan Kale, director Anant Kanekar and S.V. Vartak, author Keshavrao Bhole and actor Keshavrao Date started the 'Natya Manwantar' theatre company.⁴⁷ This

⁴³ The lead was played by another 'cultured' lady, Enakshi Rama Rao, wife of director M. Bhavnani.

⁴⁴ Durga Khote, 34

⁴⁵ Leela Chitnis was born in Dharwar, Karnataka. Her father was an English Professor. According to Chitnis' account, her mother wanted her to study and go to college. But Chitnis was in love and she refused to pay heed. At the time of her marriage she had merely passed high school. See Leela Chitnis, 13

⁴⁶ She always refers to her husband as Dr. Chitnis and never specifies his profession. He was probably an academician, but that is speculation. In vague terms, she talks about his visit to America which provided for them financially for a while. According to Chitnis, M.N. Roy was her husband's friend and would often visit them. Dr. Chitnis and Roy would be immersed in elaborate debates about Marxism and left politics. She, however, never participated in these, but as the host would be engaged in serving tea and snacks to the guests.

⁴⁷ *Natya Manwantar* was established with the aim of introducing the modern intellectual drama of Europe to Marathi theatre. The group started as a reaction against *Sangit-natak*, which had become decadent and parochial. The idea of revolution is apparent in the name of the group- *natya* which means 'theatre' and *manwantar* 'change of an age'. According to Leela Chitnis, the first plays staged by the group were Vartak's *Andhalyanchi Shala* (School for the Blind), *Lapandav* (Hide and Seek), *Usna Navra* (Husbands on Rent) and *Takshashila* which was adapted from Ibsen's *Vikings at Helgeland*. Although *Natya Manwantar* did not bring about a revolution, it did effect various changes. It deviated from the prevalent actor-manager tradition, and its constitution and organization differed from other Marathi companies. Realistic decor and acting style, absence of comic characters, restriction of the duration of songs to three or four minutes, removal of soliloquies, and attempts to coordinate the various constituents of a production formed its salient features. In true radical fashion, the founders of the company cast their wives- Jyotsna Bhole,

was Chitnis' introduction to the world of performance. She acted in most of the group's productions and performed in Nasik, Aurangabad, Pune and Nagpur. In 1934 the group disbanded and this renewed her search for work. The links between the circuits of performance were porous. During this year, she came into contact with actor Master Vinayak⁴⁸ and Babubhai Mistry, who took her to meet Chimanlal Desai, the proprietor of Sagar Studios. She was hired at Rs.150 per month as an "apprentice to learn acting".⁴⁹ She would go to the studio at ten and sit around and read a book! Her work on stage was beginning to get noticed and offers to work in films started pouring in.

Begum Khurshid Mirza's presence in the industry presents an interesting contrast to the above two examples. Her entry into cinema was accidental. She belonged to a progressive elite Muslim family. Mirza was the daughter of Shaikh Abdullah and Waheed Jahan Begum, who were pioneers in promoting education for Muslim women. They were the founders of Aligarh Women's College.⁵⁰ Her husband Akbar was a government officer posted in the hinterland of U.P.-Gorakhpur. Her life was content with an array of retainers- a cook, an ayah, a

Padma Vartak, and Leela Chitnis in the plays, as a way of emphasising the need for educated women from respectable backgrounds to join theatre. See Leela Chitnis, 62-63.

⁴⁸ The meeting with Master Vinayak at playwright Mama Varerkar's house put her personal life in turmoil. After the group broke up, Dr. Chitnis had started losing interest in life, in the family and in her. The couple was drifting apart. When Leela met Master Vinayak, she felt immediately attracted to him. She recounts that "the sensation of his presence lingered on even after the meeting". She was "thrilled" with their brazen feelings for each other; she had no control over her emotions. In her memoir, Chitnis is quite outspoken and matter of fact about her relationship with Vinayak. See Leela Chitnis, 46-48.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁰ Shaikh Abdullah was a Kashmiri Brahmin who converted to Islam and attended Aligarh College in the 1890s, while its founder, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, was still alive. He was part of the first generation of western educated Indian Muslims. He was convinced that education was an important step towards women's liberation from social oppression. In 1902, he married Waheed Jahan, who was an active partner in his campaign. Their endeavour to promote female education met with vehement opposition from most quarters. However, the Abdullahs persisted and found new and innovative ways to counter this resistance to women's education. They ran the school as an extension of their family, and were fondly called 'Papa Mian' and 'Ala Bi'. Begum Abdullah would regularly visit the school to teach and supervise. They organised meetings, conferences and exhibitions, encouraging women to participate. They were founders of the Urdu magazine *Risala Khatun*, which championed the cause of women's education and created a platform for them to contribute in the public debates through writing and reading. See "Foreword" and chapters 2-5, in Kazim, Lubna, ed. *A Woman of Substance: The Memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza 1918-1989*, Zubaan, New Delhi, 2005, viiii-xiii & 20-85.

'masalchi' boy who helped the cook, a gardener and a sweeper at her disposal. There would be regular soirees at the local club, where the couple would meet friends in high offices and play tennis, badminton, bridge and carom for amusement. When Akbar would be on one of his inspection tours of the mofussil, they would go "searching for man eating panthers".⁵¹ In 1937, a letter from Mirza's brother Mohsin, changed the course of her life. Mohsin was a scriptwriter and his wife Shahida acted in Bombay films under the pseudonym Neena. In the letter, Mohsin wrote about a day at Bombay Talkies. He described the studio and the efforts of Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani in exalted terms.⁵² She writes,

I was impressed and, without telling Akbar, wrote to him (Rai) mentioning my acting experience in school plays and my enthusiasm for dramatic art, enclosing a snapshot of myself.⁵³

Himanshu Rai wrote back to her, inviting the couple to Bombay, at the expense of the studio, to see how films were produced and if they were not comfortable with the set up, there would be no compulsion to work. Initially Akbar was hesitant as film work was not particularly respectable, but on his wife's insistence and the temptation of a free trip to Bombay, he finally reluctantly agreed. In Bombay, they were won over by the charms of Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani. The picnic lunches, dinners at the Taj, beach parties and the promise of a new and exciting life in Bombay held a lot of appeal for the couple. Mirza passed her screen test and was given a small role in *Jeevan Prabhat* (d. Franz Osten, 1937) starring Devika Rani and Kishore Sahu. She adopted a screen name-Renuka Devi "to escape recognition".⁵⁴

Despite their 'elite' 'cultured' background many educated women came to cinema to earn a livelihood in the process of which they reinvented themselves. In the 1930s, rarely did women from this class join the film industry for reasons

⁵¹ It is interesting that she devotes an entire chapter to her game-hunting trip with Akbar at Azamgarh. See Begum Khurshid Mirza, 116

⁵² Ibid., 137

⁵³ Ibid., 137

⁵⁴ Ibid., 139

otherwise. Devika Rani and Begum Khurshid Mirza were part of the exception. In her autobiography, Durga Khote presents the reasons for her entry into cinema as a kind of aftermath of a tragic moment of deprivation. For both Khote and Leela Chitnis, the tough domestic circumstances, along with the encouragement from the men in their lives prompted their pursuance of a career in films. Khote's father was optimistic about the prospects of viewing cinematic work as a way of "earning a living,"⁵⁵ for women. While Chitnis' husband urged her to work in the plays staged by his theatre group, he saw her choice to venture into films as her sole decision.⁵⁶ Begum Khurshid Mirza's account presents a striking contrast. Her film career was premised on the good impression that the owners of Bombay Talkies had created in her mind. Her husband had an ambiguous attitude towards her entry into the public space of films. He treated her work as a distraction and a hobby; her salary was a great source of discomfort for Akbar. Accepting payments from Himanshu Rai, he thought would label her as a "professional".⁵⁷ He laid out a series of stipulations before 'consenting' to allow her to sign the contract with Bombay Talkies. The conditions were that she would not sign any more contracts, meet distributors, or attend parties outside the studio and that she would be "accorded the same respect and regard as Devika Rani."⁵⁸ Despite reservations, the couple revelled in the extra income that allowed them the luxuries of a new car, expensive hunting and pleasure trips. With great excitement Mirza recounts her purchases from her first 'pocket' money from film work, "pure English wool, imported leggings, cardigans, underwear, socks and clothes" for her daughters, "English tweed combination suite" for Akbar, saris for friends, fashionable clothes, shoes, bags, blouses to

⁵⁵ Durga Khote, 35

⁵⁶ Leela Chitnis narrates an interesting anecdote in this regard. During the performances of the *Natya Manwantar* plays, the owners of Adarsh Chitra Pictures, Pandit Mishra and Seth Govind Das, were present. They were impressed with her performance and went to seek permission from Dr. Chitnis. She writes that Dr. Chitnis was nonchalant and told them that it was for her to make the decision, not him. She joined the film company and landed a part in *Dhuandhaar*. See Leela Chitnis, 72

⁵⁷ Begum Khurshid Mirza, 140

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 140

match and Irish linen cut out mats with embroidery and silks that she ordered from England.⁵⁹

Even if careers were built as part of an instinct to survive or leisure, there was pleasure to be derived out of work and performance. Cinema allowed women to reinvent themselves and transform their context of living. The benefits and comforts from the hefty salaries they received were small incentives. As apparent from the next section, both Leela Chitnis and Durga Khote worked hard to build careers for themselves and manoeuvre and push aside the anxieties around film work.

Building a Career and Anxieties around work

The memoirs of Durga Khote, Leela Chitnis and Begum Khurshid Mirza provide an insight into the culture of work in the film industry in the 1930s. In the process of recounting anecdotes about the trajectory of their careers, they make critical observations about studios and film work. In each account, however, the self is positioned in a peculiar interaction with work/ career/ studio.

Durga Khote's first film *Farebi Jaal* bombed at the box office, charged with morally poor content promoting decadence and debauchery, and the Maharashtrian community tore her to shreds. Newspapers attacked her for being 'falsely pampered' (in Marathi 'laud' means pampering and 'khote' means false) and bringing disrepute to her family name and status⁶⁰. The dawn of Prabhat in her life turned her fortunes in the film industry. Director V. Shantaram was scouting for new talent for his Marathi- Hindi venture *Ayodhyecha Raja* (1932). He chanced upon the sequence in *Farebi Jaal* and was impressed with Durga Khote's performance and offered her the lead role in the film. After her disastrous first

⁵⁹ Ibid., 141

⁶⁰ The contemporary newspaper *Dnyanprakash* reported that the eminent female impersonator Bal Gandharva in a public meeting had said, "when women from respectable families enter professional theatre, they are likely to go astray. Durgabai Khote says she would work only with Govind Rao Tembe. Well, Tembe might be your guru but why insist on this?" According to Vasant Desai, Mr. Laud sent a legal notice to Bal Gandharva asking him to give a clarification of the defamatory news report and warning criminal proceedings in its failure. As quoted in Gayatri Chatterjee, xxviii

film, her family was adamant to hear no more about the film industry. Shantaram was conscious of the dominant perceptions about film studios. He set out to carefully construct an image of his studio as a family. Trying to convince Mr. Laud to allow Durga Khote to act in his film, as narrated by Khote, he said,

Mr. Laud, it makes good business sense in our profession to get the best work out of our artists. [Y]ou can make any arrangements you like for a companion to ensure her comfort. It is unfortunate that Durgabai's first encounter did not turn out well. [w]e will treat her like one of the family.⁶¹

Mr. Laud relented and Durgabai became the new 'star' for Prabhat Films. *Ayodhyecha Raja* was a big budget mythological about an episode in the life of Raja Harishchandra. Durga Khote played the lead role of Rani Taramati opposite Govind Tembe. Khote's anecdotal stories of her experience in Kolhapur and the way work was organised, describe the studio as a joint family set up:

The shooting and every other part of the work were done in such a warm and congenial atmosphere that one was filled with sadness when it was over. It was not the owners of Prabhat alone, but also their families and the Company workers in general who had treated me with great respect and love. They would inquire solicitously after my food, health and other arrangements. [W]hen Bakul and Harin (her two sons) visited Kolhapur, they made much of them. With what words can I express my gratitude to them all?⁶²

Such stories with their clear romanticization of Prabhat fed into the myths that had previously circulated about various studios and their working procedures in the public sphere during the 1930s. This was part of the grand narrative that sought to restore the film industry from notoriety to respectability. Locating work and career within the domain of the home, the studios were cleansed of their excessive vulgar associations with sex and scandal to allow respectable women like Durga Khote to venture into film work.

Leela Chitnis' memoir presents a different side to this façade and charade of respectability by the studios. Her experience of working with Prabhat was contrary to the 'one big happy family' image that Khote presents. In 1937, Chitnis

⁶¹ Ibid., 57.

⁶² Durga Khote, 61.

worked in their film *Wahan* (d. K. Narayan Kale) with Shanta Apte. Chitnis writes that she was not completely at ease working at Prabhat because she felt they treated her like a second class actor.⁶³ Shanta Apte is another actress whose grouse against Prabhat is a little known fact. According to a report, Apte went on hunger strike at the gates of Prabhat “for non payment of her dues”⁶⁴ in July 1939. What is striking about this episode is the manner in which the contemporary press dealt with the issue. Prabhat was one of the prestigious studios of the time, and a protest from their lead performer put their reputation at stake. The industry was shocked, not at the unjust treatment of the actress or the fallibility of film contracts, but at Apte’s mode of complaint. It was felt that she should have come to an “amicable settlement with her proprietor” as “this procedure did the star no good except giving her some news publicity.”⁶⁵ She was also criticised for bringing bad publicity to the studio. What happened after and how it all ended can only be speculated upon. The film journals adopted a unanimous silence on the matter, though Baburao Patel would occasionally take jabs at Apte and make inferences about her temper tantrums.⁶⁶

Durga Khote consistently presents a different picture of Prabhat. She was one of their lead actresses, and one can only speculate on whether her treatment by the studio was any different from that of Shanta Apte. After the success of *Ayodhyecha Raja*, Khote worked in Prabhat’s *Maya Macchindra* (d. V. Shantaram, 1932). The film was based on the mythic story of princess Kilotala, the queen of a kingdom of men-hating women. In the end, her kingdom turned out to be only an effect of *maya* (magic). Although the ending of the film reinstated social patriarchal order, it allowed for some amount of gender bending through the figure

⁶³ Leela Chitnis, 127

⁶⁴ “Notes and News” in *filmindia*, August 1939, Vol. 5 No. 8, 21

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 21

⁶⁶ In January 1939, Apte was reported to have stormed into Baburao Patel’s office and slapped/caned him for some adverse remarks he had made against her. In “Editor’s Mail”, a reader asked “I do not for myself think that there is much of “beauty” in Shanta Apte. What do you think?” to which Baburao Patel with his usual wit replied, “I have never seen a woman so beautiful as I saw Shanta flushed with temper during the three minutes that she was in my office. She almost hypnotized me, I am still nursing that impression and have thrust aside her screen appearances.” See *filmindia*, Jan 1939, Vol. 5 No. 1, 17 and *filmindia*, Dec 1940, Vol. 6 No. 12, 16

of Kilotala. According to Khote, the dominant expression on the heroine's face had to be "warrior like"⁶⁷. The most captivating feature of the film was Kilotala's pet cheetah Sundari who followed her around like a "faithful dog". This presence of the now tamed ferocious cheetah at the feet of Kilotala added to the glory and style of the character. For the role, Khote was trained in the art of fencing, wielding the *dandpatta* (double edged sword), riding and other martial skills. Khote did not perform any stunts in the film, though in many advertisements the suggestion was made that she did.

Prabhat was not the only studio that Durga Khote worked with in the 1930s at the height of her career. She writes that during 1934 and 1935, she acted in four films in Calcutta. She worked in *Rajrani Meera* (d. Debaki K. Bose, 1933), *Seeta* (d. Debaki Bose, 1934), *Inquilab* (1935) and *Jeevan Natak* (d. Debaki Bose, 1935).⁶⁸ She signed a four-month contract for each film and was paid Rs. 2500 per month. At the end of each shooting schedule she would return to her family in Bombay. In that period she says, "I earned Rs. 40,000."⁶⁹ Work was beginning to take its toll on her family life. Khote refused offers from Lahore and Calcutta as she wanted to stay close to Bombay. In 1936, she started work in Shalini Studio at Kolhapur. The studio was owned by the Princess Akkasaheb, Chhatrapati Rajaram Maharaj's sister. Work at Royal Studio was regal in style and pace and governed by whim.⁷⁰ She acted in two films in Kolhapur - *Ushaswapna* (d. Baburao Painter, 1937) and *Pratibha* (d. Baburao Painter, 1937).

⁶⁷ Ibid., 66

⁶⁸ There is some kind of confusion here. According to contemporary sources, *Jeevan Natak* was produced under the banner Debaki Bose Productions and was shot in Bombay. (*filmindia*, 31st July 1935, Vol. 1 No. 4, 37). There is also some confusion over her co-star who Khote claims was Prithviraj Kapoor for all four films. But again in the case of *Jeevan Natak*, according to the *HindiFilm Geet Kosh* it was P. Jairaj. But "Studio Close Up" mentions Mubarak and not Prithviraj Kapoor or P. Jairaj. See *filmindia*, 30th June 1935, Vol.1 No.3, 40. Also see Durga Khote, 68.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 77

⁷⁰ Ibid., 82

ART PLATE 9

FILMLAND

LEADING ILLUSTRATED FILM WEEKLY OF INDIA

11th March 1933
Vol. IV No. 144

□

Mrs. Durgabai Khote portrays the difficult role of the queen of the amazons in Prabhat's talkie 'Illusion'. Mark the miniature lion on the hairdress of Mrs. Khote which ascertains of what an amazon queen she is

□

Distributors:
Aurora Film Corporation

□

Two Annas in Calcutta
2½ Annas Outside Calcutta



Durga Khote
Filmland, Vol. IV No. 144, 11th March 1933

In 1937 another development took place in Khote's life. As she writes,

[P]eople in Bombay suggested that I should enter the film production business. I myself had been wondering how much longer I could expect to get roles that were suitable for me and which were worth doing. I was thirty one and had eight films behind me.⁷¹

She took the suggestion of others and started a production house - Natraj Films- with director Parshwanath Atlekar, music director Govindrao Tembe and production manager and actor Mubarak. Associated Productions, owned by a wealthy solicitor, Natwarlal, was to handle all the financial responsibilities and as per contract would not meddle in the creative process of filmmaking.⁷² *Soungadi* went on the production floor. There was a lot of speculation in the press with regard to the film, as expectations were high from the "illustrious staff".⁷³ Work was progressing; with half the film already shot, a series of mishaps stalled the production of the film. Durga Khote's husband had a heart attack and passed away while he was sitting in a parked car at Grant Road Market. Natwarlal promised her, on behalf of the company, that she would be released from the contract without demanding compensation for losses⁷⁴. She was in shock, but there was work to be finished. Her father was there to comfort her and she gathered herself and shooting was resumed. In 1938 *Soungadi* was released and was a moderate success. According to a review, the film held a particular appeal to "the intelligentsia from the society."⁷⁵

By 1940s, Durga Khote had established herself firmly within the top star order. She was a freelancer and worked at her own pace. In a broadcast for All India Radio, she said "[E]very role, I played, had a higher purpose in it and I liked everyone of them for one reason or the other."⁷⁶ The studios she worked with

⁷¹ Ibid., 84

⁷² Ibid., 84

⁷³ *filmindia*, 1st Oct 1937, Vol. 3 No. 6, 31

⁷⁴ Durga Khote, 89

⁷⁵ *filmindia*, 1st April 1938, Vol. 3 No. 12, 48

⁷⁶ K. Ahmad Abbas, "Indian Films and Stars on the Air" *filmindia*, Feb 1940, Vol. 6 No. 2, 39

persistently mobilised her respectability tag to promote the films. In her early films, she often played the role of warrior princess, like *Maya Macchindra* and *Amar Jyoti* (d. V. Shantaram, 1936)⁷⁷ straddling the world of myth and valour. She was constructed in the idealistic *virangana* mode. The charge of the *virangana*, however, in Khote's films came from a complex negotiation with the ideal traditional woman. This manufactured ambivalence appealed to a large section of the middle class audience that was roped in to elevate the status of cinema's fledgling respectability. In her autobiography, Khote is conscious of this construction and she mobilises it through reiteration and narration, juxtaposing the dyads of film work and family life.

In her autobiography, Leela Chitnis narrates the trajectory of her professional life with immense personal detail. Discussing the films and processes of production, she laces each anecdote with her forthright opinions. She displays tremendous awareness of her environment, and unlike Khote does not shy away from sharing salacious gossip with her readers. While Khote limits her account to her own life and career, Chitnis places herself within the larger history of the film industry.⁷⁸

Leela Chitnis made her debut with Adarsh Chitra's *Dhuwan Dhar* (d. Gaya Prasad, 1935).⁷⁹ When she watched the complete film at the premier, she was extremely disappointed and broke down into tears. The film predictably bombed at

⁷⁷ One of Durga Khote's most memorable roles as the pirate Queen Saudamini. Faced with extreme patriarchal laws in an ancient seaport kingdom and denied the legal custody of her infant son, Saudamini becomes a pirate. With a feeling of resentment and a desire for revenge, she declares war on the state. Saudamini captures the Queen's ship and takes everyone on board hostage. Amongst the captives are Princess Nandini (Shanta Apte) and the minister of justice, Durjaya (Chandramohan). Her meeting with Nandini and a series of disclosures about her son, Sudhir (B. Nandrekar) effects a change of heart. There are some fantastic sea battle scenes, horse riding chase sequences, sword play and captivating stunt actions with back projection special effects. The film was screened at the Venice Film Festival in 1936. See VCD jacket of the film.

⁷⁸ Chapter 33, for example, is devoted to a detail on studios and their use of genres for product differentiation. Chitnis discusses the disintegration of the studios in 1942 and the change in pay scales and the emergence of the temporary contract system. She signposts landmark films produced from 1930s to the 1960s. She passionately writes about the star system and the poor treatment of character artists in the film industry. Leela Chitnis, 211

⁷⁹ This was Adarsh Chitra's first production. The star cast included Vishnu Dayal Bhargav, Bhabubhai Shah, S.N Banerjee, and Kamla Varerkar. See film advertisement in *filmindia*, 31st July 1935, Vol. 1 No. 4, 50.

the box office. After her disastrous debut, she worked in *Shri Satyanarayan* (d. Drupad Rai, 1935).⁸⁰ In 1936 she acted in *Chhaya* (d. Master Vinayak) for Huns Pictures, which was well received by audiences. She received an offer from Prabhat to work in their film *Wahan* (d. K. Narayan Kale, 1937) with Shanta Apte. She acted in Darayani Pictures' *Insaaf* (d. J.P Advani, 1937) and *Gentlemen Daku* (d. Ram Daryani, 1937)⁸¹ in which she had to dress up like a man, smoke and perform stunts. Chitnis moved from studio to studio, taking work wherever it was available. She acted in *Jailor* (d. Sohrab Modi, 1938)⁸² and *Sant Tulsidas* (d. Jayant Desai, 1939)⁸³ before her big break with Bombay Talkies.

In 1939, Leela Chitnis received an unexpected call from Himanshu Rai's secretary to come for a screen test for a role in their forthcoming film *Kangan*.⁸⁴ Chitnis writes that she found this unusual, as she had never been called for a test before. It was not a norm in the industry. She emphasises how through their insistence on small details like a screen test, Bombay Talkies marked themselves

⁸⁰ *Shri Satyanarayan* was a devotional film produced by Model Pictures, Bombay. *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*, 260.

⁸¹ The film was advertised as a detective thriller. The screenplay was written by Dwarka Khosla. The story of the film revolved around Chitnis' character who shunned by society, "becomes an outcast and takes to a life of crime in a rather fashionable way." See *filmindia*, 31st March 1938, Vol. 3 No. 11, 42 & 44.

⁸² *Jailor* was a social produced by Minerva Movietone. In her memoir, Chitnis writes that Sohrab Modi was a tyrant on the sets and wanted to maintain hierarchy and pressure on his staff. Thus the atmosphere was always tense. Ironically in the film he plays the jailor and Chitnis plays his wife, Kanwal. See Leela Chitnis, 129.

⁸³ *Sant Tulsidas* is a devotional film produced by Ranjit Movietone. Chitnis plays Vishnupant Pagnis' wife, whose love distracts him from his goals. The film was a stupendous hit. A review in a contemporary film journal wrote, "[T]his is undoubtedly the greatest ever picture ever produced by the Ranjit Movietone and Sardar Chandulal Shah deserves congratulations...Technically this picture is a revelation and establishes a new reputation for Ranjit". The review goes on to comment on the 'lavish' and 'spectacular' scale of production, the excellent quality of sound recording, the 'powerful' use of lights and camera. As for acting, Chitnis as Ratna is praised for her histrionic performance. According to the reviewer, her "comparatively small role" in the film is overshadowed by Vasantee who "sings her way straight into the hearts of the audience." In the publicity material Leela Chitnis is the star used to promote the film, not Vasantee. The reviewer adds that the name of the film was "enough to fill houses." See *filmindia*, 31st August 1939, Vol. 5 No. 8, 31

⁸⁴ The outbreak of the Second World War affected the production of *Kangan*. The film was still being shot when director Franz Osten was arrested by the British government. The film was handed over to the young associates N.R Acharya and Najmal Hasan Naqvi to complete the film. See Leela Chitnis, 142 and *filmindia*, Nov 1939, Vol. 5 No. 11, 45.

as a highly professional set up. She was impressed by the massive studio building at Malad which was “huge and elegant like a British government office”.⁸⁵ Chitnis was also struck by the “western” manners of the studio personnel.⁸⁶ On her arrival, she was taken to the green room for an elaborate make up session and her hair was personally set by Devika Rani. The team at Bombay Talkies experimented with the look of her character for two days; they tried variations on makeup and costume, for eight hours each day. She passed the screen test and signed a contract with Bombay Talkies for three years on a monthly salary of Rs.1500, with Rs.1000 increments each year. By the time she finished *Kangan* and *Bandhan*, her salary was Rs. 4000 per month. Work at the studio was disciplined⁸⁷. She started music and voice coaching lessons with Saraswati Devi. Her pair with Ashok Kumar became a huge success.⁸⁸ The three years at Bombay Talkies were her most successful years. Her second husband Guli, managed to convince Himanshu Rai to allow Chitnis to work in other productions.⁸⁹ Along with the Bombay Talkies productions, she acted in films like *Chhoti si Duniya* (d. B.S Rajhans, 1939), *Ghar Ki Rani* (1940) and *Azad* (1940).⁹⁰

Chitnis was hoping to renew her contract with Bombay Talkies. Her liaison with Shashadhar Mukherjee, however, was to cause great discomfort to the studio bosses. Mukherjee’s wife got a whiff of their affair and landed at the studio. According to Chitnis, she created a “storm” out of the episode and threatened to commit suicide if the management did not intervene and break the alliance.⁹¹ Fearing another scandal that would endanger their otherwise ‘clean’ image, the

⁸⁵ Leela Chitnis, 211

⁸⁶ She was impressed by Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani, who greeted her in a “western style”. Leela Chitnis, 153

⁸⁷ Chapter 25 is a detailed account of the schedule at Bombay Talkies. See Leela Chitnis, 155-159

⁸⁸ Her three films with Ashok Kumar were *Kangan* (d. Franz Osten, 1939), *Bandhan* (d. N. R. Arya, 1940) and *Jhoola* (1941)

⁸⁹ Leela Chitnis, 168

⁹⁰ Not much is known about these films. They find no mention in the *Hindi Film Geet Kosh*.

⁹¹ Leela Chitnis, 209

management in their interest did not renew her contract.⁹² This episode changed the course of her career. The scandal was averted, but her career began to spiral down.

From 1941- 47, she worked in a series of mediocre films. She wrote the script for *Kanchan* (d. Manibhai Vyas, 1941).⁹³ The film did not do well. She gathered all her resources and started a production house with Guli called Chitra Productions. Their first film *Kissi se Na Kehna* (1942) was unsuccessful. Some of the films she acted in were- *Rekha* (d. Mahendra Thakur, 1943)⁹⁴, *Kiran* (d. Gajanan Jagirdar, 1944)⁹⁵ and *Chhar Ankhen* (d. Susheel Majumdar, 1944).⁹⁶ In 1947, the Partition of India, severely affected film business. Chitnis' career was at a threshold of uncertainty. She was not getting any more offers to act in films. In her forties, with no new films at hand, in 1948, when Shashidhar Mukherjee offered her the role of Dilip Kumar's mother in *Shaheed* (d. Ramesh Sehgal)⁹⁷ she could not refuse. Durga Khote and Leela Chitnis transitioned into character roles around the same time, while Begum Khurshid Mirza departed for Pakistan.

⁹² In 1935, Bombay Talkies were firefighting to avert an impending scandal. During the production of *Jawani Ki Hawa* (d. Franz Osten, 1935), Devika Rani and Najmul Hasan ran away. Shashidhar Mukherjee, a sound recordist at this time, was the 'chief mediator'. Devika Rani was found in Calcutta and persuaded to come back. Najmul Hasan was fired. See Manto, "Ashok Kumar: The Evergreen Hero" *Stars from Another Sky: The Bombay Film World of the 1940s*, tr. Khalid Hasan, Penguin, New Delhi, 1998, 1-19 and Debashree Mukherjee

⁹³ There is not much information available on *Kanchan*. She does not go into details about the film. See Leela Chitnis, 191

⁹⁴ Apparently Mehboob's *Najma* (1943) and Ramnik Production's *Rekha* were offered to her at the same time. She was keen on doing *Najma* because the hero of the film was Ashok Kumar. She was hoping that their hit pair would strike gold once again and resurrect her fledging career. Ramnik Lal the owner of the production house, however, offered to pay double the price that was being paid to her for *Najma*. The money was good, Guli insisted that she should act in *Rekha* and so she turned Mehboob Khan down. See Leela Chitnis, 219

⁹⁵ In *Kiran*, she was united with her onscreen hero Ashok Kumar.

⁹⁶ She returned to Bombay Talkies. Devika Rani was now the head of the studio and most people had moved on. The old grandeur of the studio had now gone. The film did not do any business. See Leela Chitnis, 224

⁹⁷ The stars of the film were Kamini Kaushal and Dilip Kumar. Chandramohan who had previously played her father in many films, was now cast as her husband in the film. Interestingly, she was offered the lead role in Minerva Movietone's *Mera Munna* (d. Vishram Bedekar, 1948) with Motilal. However, once they discovered that she was playing a mother's role in *Shaheed*, they cancelled her contract. This highlights how conventionally limited the rules and roles are for leading women in Indian cinema. And this is somewhat true even for today. See Leela Chitnis, 233

ART PLATE 10

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Vol. 1 No. 4
31st JULY 1935



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Leela Chitnis
filmindia, Vol. 1, No. 4, 31st July 1935

ART PLATE 11

SWEET - HEARTS ?



LEELA CHITNIS and KOKILA

In any feathers, even in those of a man, Leela that glamorous girl commands attention. And with Kokila there is a double attraction in Daryani's "Gentleman Daku" which will be soon coming to the screen

Leela Chitnis and Kokila
filmindia, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1st August 1937

Constructing the Private within the Public

The autobiographies of Durga Khote, Leela Chitnis and Begum Khurshid Mirza record the variegated experiences of these actresses, negotiating spaces for themselves at home and in the public sphere. Their memoirs eschew derivatives that would construct them as a singular form of modern Indian femininity. Their personas are engulfed within a dynamic of ambivalences where the past is variously shaped and continuously readapted to the contingencies of the present. Through their accounts, the actress' persona emerges at the cleavage between the 'modern' and the 'traditional'. There was a necessity to cultivate the "material" realm of modern western culture (through education, emphasis on English speaking, fashion etc) while the distinctive "spiritual" essence of the national culture was retained (through adherence to rituals, religious ceremonies, feudal familial values etc.). The actress epitomised the 'new Indian woman' but her power did not lie in embracing a limited and essentialized femininity which was constrained and restrictive. They moved between both realms effortlessly.

The scandalous figure of the actress was a constant source of anxiety for the film industry in the 1930s- 40s. The sexual overtones of the actress were to be contained through the regime of respectability. This was effected in two ways: through the inclusion of 'educated' women within the fold of cinema and through the advocacy of greater respect for female stars. For the first, cinema was defined within the ethics of work and thus the grooming of women from educated classes to act, sing and dance was legitimised and made acceptable⁹⁸. For the second, the images of the actress needed to be projected as images of domesticity and

⁹⁸ This is an example of how singing and dancing were detached from their connections to the *kotha* and legitimized within the domain of a respectable profession through their alignment with 'educated' women. This was executed through an elaboration of film employment as 'hard work' in film journals. Shanta Apte wrote, "I get up at four in the early morning. And I spend over six hours in the practice of my beloved art of music. [T]he studio work, music and dance take up the major portion of my time." See Shanta Apte, "Films Are Not My Goal, But a Means to an End" in *The Mirror*, 14th May 1939, Vol. 2 No. 51, 3

restrained femininity.⁹⁹ What women made of these injunctions, however, was a different matter.

Durga Khote' selfhood reordered through the prism of the present is defined by a broader principle of work ethics and a commitment to her family which percolates through the autobiography in the form of a protective mother/assertive actor dyad. The text literally signposts this self-construction as mother and as an actor- the balancing act, so dextrously 'performed' by the 'new' woman. She travelled extensively for her shoots in India and for leisure around the world. She is almost apologetic at times for not spending enough time with her sons. Yet when she speaks of her trips to Europe, Russia and China, there is a sense of exhilaration and accomplishment. She displays immense courage and confidence to embark on these trips, mostly alone and without a chaperone. The trip to Darjeeling was in Khote's words *"like a glorious dream. The only sign that I was awake was that I was thinking of the boys all the time."*¹⁰⁰

Begum Khurshid Mirza throughout her memoir constructs herself as an 'ideal wife'. She took a special interest in the domestic space but less as a metaphor for the 'motherland' than as a model for modernity¹⁰¹. Her education, elite upbringing and travels around the world had positioned her in a mould where the self was articulated outside of the most basic cultural norms of Indian Muslim society. Unveiled and articulate, Mirza's indulgent social lifestyle coupled with the kind of mobility allowed by cinematic work were unusual for other Muslim women from her class. However, in order for her to negotiate the home and the world, a series of disavowals had to be set up. The possible seductions at the studio were kept at a distance through her emphasis on Akbar's presence but also through her own sense of propriety. An intimate photograph with Akbar was the cause of a

⁹⁹ According to Kaushik Bhaumik, "The drive towards domesticating the female star reached an apotheosis when magazines started publishing pieces depicting mock marriages of stars, thus plugging an image of stars as ordinary householders", 162.

¹⁰⁰ Durga Khote 75.

¹⁰¹ Siobhan Lambert Hurley and Sunil Sharma have made a similar observation with regard to Atiya Fyze in *Atiya's Journey: A Muslim Woman from Colonial Bombay to Edwardian Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2010, 103

lot of speculation. She writes, “[P]eople have often asked me which movie that snap is from. I laugh and tell them that no film hero of mine ever got that close to me.”¹⁰²

Akbar’s presence on the sets made her mindful of what kind of roles and scenes she could perform. For the Bombay Talkies film *Bhabhi*, she got Himanshu Rai to re-write the scene where the swooning heroine had to be carried to the sofa by the hero. She knew that Akbar would disapprove. Rai, she writes, was surprised that a make believe scene would be the cause of trouble between the couple; “he nonetheless obliged and rewrote it”.¹⁰³ Bombay Talkies for Mirza was the ‘ideal’ studio. The atmosphere was ‘professional’ and ‘respectful’. It was the other studios that were a cause of worry. She contrasts her experience of working at Bombay Talkies with her experience of working on *Sahara* (d. J.P Advani, 1942) at Pancholi Studios in Lahore. At Pancholi, a hired studio, she was not completely at ease; even though the perks were great (Rs. 5000 per month salary, a suite of rooms at the Elphinstone Hotel and allowance for regular visits to home), she felt that she was “not on the same wavelength” with the other cast and crew. She writes in dismay about the treatment of the artistes especially the extras by the producers, but emphasises her position as separate from ‘the girls’.

Their chaperones as well as the studio hands bullied the girls equally because they and the madam, who accompanied them, were desperate to get into the films to earn a regular income. My aloofness, along with Akbar’s stern presence, terrified them and apart from wishing me a very respectful “good morning”, they steered clear of me. I suspect they were afraid of annoying me because of my husband’s police badge.¹⁰⁴

Her memoir presents her ambivalent relationship to film work. By stressing the ‘desperate’ need of ‘the girls’ and their ‘madam’ to earn a livelihood through film work, she posits herself in contrast and reiterates her husband’s discomfort of her being labelled as a “professional” actress. Her marital status and husband’s position helped her to tackle the seamy side of studio work. Mirza retired from the

¹⁰² Begum Khurshid Mirza, 111

¹⁰³ Ibid., 141

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 146

film industry in 1944 at the age of 26, as the type of values projected by emergent actresses and the amount of compromises required on the home front were both not desirable to her.¹⁰⁵

In comparison to the sanitised accounts of Khote and Mirza, Leela Chitnis' memoir bursts with sexual agency and promiscuity. Chitnis candidly narrates anecdotes about her attractions to co-workers at the studio. She falls in and out of love easily. She discusses her relationship with Master Vinayak¹⁰⁶, Baburao Pendharkar¹⁰⁷, Gajanan Jagirdar¹⁰⁸, Guli¹⁰⁹ and Shashadhar Mukherjee with ease. After a series of failed relationships, she married Guli not only because she was emotionally attached to him but also because she felt that marriage would sort out her personal (she had three children from her previous marriage) but also her professional problems. She aspired for stability which she thought marriage would ensure. She is open about her tumultuous marriage to Guli, his drinking problems, embezzlement troubles, and her desire to abort their child.¹¹⁰ In contrast Khote

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 160

¹⁰⁶ Master Vinayak and Baburao Pendharkar were step brothers. Master Vinayak was not happy with Pendharkar's relationship with Leela Chitnis. Like a filmy villain, he pressured Pendharkar into breaking off his alliance with Chitnis. See Leela Chitnis, 110

¹⁰⁷ Her affair with director Baburao Pendharkar began on the sets of Shalini Studio's *Sahukari Pash* in Kolhapur. Before narrating the anecdote about their romance, she starts by elaborating on how intimacy between actors and directors is developed through work. She cites Raj Kapoor and Nargis as prime examples of successful actor – director relationship which produced hits like *Awara*. See Leela Chitnis, 105

¹⁰⁸ Gajanan Jagirdar was born in Amravati and was a graduate from Bombay University. He joined the film industry in 1929 and worked as a director with studios like Shalini, Huns Pictures and Minerva Movietone. See *ICYB*, 612

¹⁰⁹ According to Leela Chitnis, Guli was a film distributor in Bombay. Not much is known about Guli. The *ICYB* does not mention him.

¹¹⁰ In chapter 21, Leela Chitnis writes how soon into their marriage, Guli's excessive alcoholism started bothering her. The money that she had given him to invest in some insurance policies was squandered off on alcohol and other amusements. He would always ask for more and more money. Chitnis was distraught by her family life. With three children from the previous marriage to support, she didn't want to lose hope and so she continued to work. During the making of *Sant Tulsidas* in 1939, Chitnis discovered she was pregnant. She writes in explicit terms, how she didn't want to burden herself with another child, so she decided to get an abortion. She didn't include Guli in her decision as she knew he might not approve of such a drastic step. While Guli was away in Lahore, Chitnis got herself admitted into a hospital. But as life would have it, Guli returned unexpectedly and was furious. A few months later on 8th June 1939 Chitnis gave birth to a boy, who was named Raj. Chitnis writes in retrospect, how Raj was a lucky blessing for her. *Sant Tukaram* was released on 16th June 1939; it was also the year that she was offered the contract with Bombay Talkies. See Leela Chitnis, 131-133

elides over various ‘unpleasant episodes’.¹¹¹ She briefly mentions her marriage to Mr. Khote, but the failure and her unhappiness in her relationships with men is glossed over by a narrative of misfortune. For example her romantic liaison with and eventual marriage to Nawabzada Mohammad Rashid is downplayed. The title of the thirteenth chapter “From the Frying Pan into the Fire” is all revealing, yet the chapter itself is not. Her meeting with Rashid, their friendship and eventual marriage and break up, is masked with an ingenious emphasis on her discomfort at his initial advances, but as she constructs it, his interest in her children brings about a change in her feelings towards him.

The autobiographies of these actresses in no way define or dictate any set patterns for an analysis of actresses. These memoirs represent the everyday experiences of actresses within larger histories. Each autobiography is contingent upon the plurality of experience, of the self and of the world.

The Cinema Star and the Respectability Scandal

The moral status of cinema, as we have seen, was tied crucially to the anxiety about the publicness of the actress. As the previous sections have argued, the industry adopted various ploys and mechanisms to mask its ambiguous position within the domain of the cultural order. Through the figure of the educated actress the scandal of performing women was sought to be disguised. Women were in a complex bind with regard to film work, where the threshold between repute and disrepute was always already on the verge of collapsing. Neepa Majumdar has argued that information about the private life of actors and actresses was rarely circulated in “official print discourse”.¹¹² Through the stock use of *rasa* and *sarapa* as a mode of writing, inferences were made by journalists about the beauty and nature of the stars¹¹³. The private was tucked away and cordoned off from these narratives. There was, however, another route for the private to reach the public.

¹¹¹ Gayatri Chatterjee, “Durga Khote: The Contour of a Life and Work” in *I, Durga Khote: An Autobiography*, Shanta Gokhle tr. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006. xvii-xxx.

¹¹² Neepa Majumdar, 38

¹¹³ The writings of columnist S. Ramamurthy are a case in point. I have discussed the *sarapa* in Chapter one. Also see Neepa Majumdar, 35

This was through the “unofficial” circuit of gossip.¹¹⁴ When the transgressions of the industry found their way into the public sphere, there was bound to be a scandal. Tanika Sarkar raises important questions that reflect upon issues of female identity, morality, and scandal when she asks,

But who is the good woman? Where does her goodness lie, and what destroys it? [W]ith these questions we come to the heart of the puzzle, to the waves that the scandal made.¹¹⁵

Interestingly, an article in the Times of India of 27th July 1927 reported that in a case filed by a cinema star the magistrate had disbelieved the Complainant’s story. This was the Matheran case that involved the well known silent cinema film star Ermeline and the equally well-known director of the times, Kanjibhai Rathod. The Matheran case created a sensation in Bombay. It lasted six long months and came to a conclusion in May 1927. The complainant Ermeline had been employed at the Shri Krishna Film Co. in Bombay. The accused Chaturbhai Patel was a cameraman in the company and Kanjibhai Rathod a famous director. Lt. Col. B. B. Paymaster, I.M.S. First Class Magistrate and Superintendent of Matheran, acquitted both the accused and ordered the complainant Ermeline to pay the maximum amount of compensation prescribed under the law, Rs 100, to each of the accused, ‘for bringing false and frivolous charges against them’.¹¹⁶

Flashback- the Complainant’s Story

On December 7 1926, a team of twenty eight members from Shri Krishna Film Co. went to Matheran to shoot some scenes for their film *Burkhawali* (or *The Veiled Queen*). After the long gruelling hours of shooting everyone returned to the Lakshmi Hindu Hotel where the crew was lodged. Chaturbhai Patel occupied the

¹¹⁴ See Neepa Majumdar’s fantastic section on ‘Theorizing Gossip’, *ibid*, 38. As an example of the way gossip about actresses circulated, see Manto’s story on Sitara Devi and her lovers in “Sitara: The Dancing Tigress from Nepal” in *Stars From Another Sky*, 195-215

¹¹⁵ Tanika Sarkar, “Talking About Scandals: Religion, Law and Love in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal” in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2007, 82

¹¹⁶ “Cinema Star Fined: Matheran Case- Magistrate Disbelieves Complaints Story”, *Times of India*, 27th July 1927. See *Flashback: Cinema in the Times of India*, compiled by K.N. Subramaniam and Ratnakar Tripathy, 59

room adjoining to Ermeline, who was accompanied by her ayah. In the night Patel entered her room and propositioned her. Her remonstrance roused the ayah and Chaturbhai went away apologising. She complained of his conduct next morning to Maneklal Patel, the proprietor of the company.

In spite of her complaints and a warning that was issued to him, at midnight on December 9, Chaturbhai Patel entered the bathroom of Ermeline's room on the pretext of taking drinking water and secretly unbolted the backdoor and left. A few hours later he entered her room through the backdoor and placing his hands on her shoulders "used criminal force towards her with intent to outrage her modesty".¹¹⁷ She raised an alarm; Maneklal Patel and others gathered on the scene. The next morning Ermeline went to Maneklal to ask him for her dues and for permission to leave the place, as the film in hand had by this time been completed. Maneklal asked Ermeline not to make too much noise and disgrace the Company and promised to send her away to Bombay the next morning. In the afternoon, on December 10 after the mid-day meal, Ermeline went to Kanjibhai Rathod and asked for permission to go to Bombay, but Rathod instead tried to intimidate her by pointing a revolver at her and asked her to keep discretion about the episode.

This is where the plot thickens. In the news report in July, an interesting angle had been added to the event. In the afternoon of 9th December when Ermeline returned from the shoot, exhausted, she asked for some milk and ice. When the ayah went to the kitchen to fetch milk, both the accused gave her some liquor in the consequence of which she remained unconscious for some hours so as to miss the afternoon train for Neral. The report in September¹¹⁸, however, stated that struck with terror at the revolver episode, Ermeline retired to her room and slipped away with her ayah through a backdoor to the telegraph office and wired M.R. Vakil, a friend of hers in Bombay. She then moved to the Pinto Hotel, and started the next morning for Bombay. On her way she met her friend Vakil at the Neral station and went in his company to Bombay. This embellishment of the

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 59

¹¹⁸ "Film Star's Story: Incidents at Hill Station", *Times of India*, 15th Sept 1927, See *Flashback*, 60

event with new details can be seen as part of “a shared field of discussion” performed by “an interpretive community”.¹¹⁹

The Judgement

Separate trials were held of each of the accused and occupied between them nearly 60 hearings. Lt. Col. Paymaster in giving his judgement stated that both the complainant and her ayah were unreliable witnesses and neither had corroborated the other’s evidence. “The story told was extremely improbable”.¹²⁰ The complainant had a strong motive in bringing the Film Co. and its officers into trouble, as she wanted justification for backing out of her contract of service and wanted to join a new Company where she was starting immediately. And one can make the connection that the new firm in question was Imperial which she joined in 1927.

According to reports, there had been a dispute between Ermeline and Maneklal about the terms of her agreement. The company alleged that even though she had entered into a written contract to serve them for three years, she left the company abruptly in October 1925. Ermeline on her part denied the contract but admitted that she had agreed to act for the company, at the persuasion of her solicitor, and complete the shooting of *Burkhawali* at Matheran provided the company undertook to wrap up shooting within a week. The arguments against her case were as follows,

She had not taken her ayah with her, when she had gone out of Bombay before, for the purpose of taking scenes. No complaint was made by her ayah or her mistress to anybody in the hotel on the first night nor about the revolver incident. The revolvers kept by the Film Companies were for dramatic purposes only, with blank cartridges, and the complainant having been used to such firing could not be said to have been intimidated thereby, even if it was assumed that the accused Kanjibhai did point any

¹¹⁹ According to Tanika Sarkar, “An event of the ‘gossipable’ kinds adds to a peculiar intimate twist to it...A scandal performs the same function within an anonymous, abstract public: it draws an unseen community of concerned people closer together by focusing on intimate issues about its constituents.” Tanika Sarkar, 56

¹²⁰ “Cinema Star Fined: Matheran Case- Magistrate Disbelieves Complaints Story”, *Times of India*, 27th July 1927. See *Flashback*, 58

revolver at her. The accused in both the cases had been supported by the evidences of independent witnesses.¹²¹

Ermeline appealed against these orders to the Session Court of Thana, who found that the orders of the magistrate awarding the compensation at Matheran could not be sustained as “a strong undercurrent of a leaning against the complainant due mainly to the fact that she and her ayah were *untutored women of loose morals and bad association.*”¹²² The judge held that in neither case the evidence on record justified the inference that the accusation was false and frivolous and the award for compensation was unwarranted. The orders were therefore set aside and the compensations if deposited were ordered to be refunded. No further legal action was taken against the accused.

The Ermeline case with both its initial judgement and even the assumptions about actresses that reverse what had earlier been ordered demonstrates the razor’s edge that actresses walked between respectability and a quick assumption of loose character. They were perennially embroiled in litigation cases and were seen as easy targets. There were various cases in the courts against Sulochana, Gulab, Seeta Devi and Sultana, which were reported widely and followed with keen interest by the public.¹²³ The scandals posed a peculiar problem for the film industry in the 1930s on its way to legitimacy and respectability. Women from ‘dubious’ backgrounds like the Anglo-Indian community, the *tawaiifs* and the prostitutes were in any case considered outside projects of reform and outraged public morality when attempts were made at assimilation. The entry of educated cultured women into a ‘dubious’ space like cinema posed another order of the problem altogether.

In 1933 a young girl by the name of Shyama Zutshi found herself in the middle of a huge public outrage. Zutshi was an educated woman belonging to a

¹²¹ Ibid., 59

¹²² “Film Star’s Story: Incidents at Hill Station”, *Times of India*, 15th Sept 1927, See *Flashback*, 60 (emphasis mine)

¹²³ For a detail on the scandals related to the actress mentioned see *Flashback: Cinema in the Times of India*, compiled by K.N. Subramaniam and Ratnakar Tripathy, 58-63

family of Kashmiri pundits from Lahore. She was all set to debut in Ajanta Cinetone's *Noor-e- Haram* aka *Afzal* directed by Mohan Bhavnani opposite Master Nissar. Much was being made in the press with regard to her social status and university education. An advertisement in *The Cinema* read:

“Long Expected and Anxiously Awaited

Picture

COMING VERY SOON

Ajanta Cinetone's first marvellous production which marks the beginning of a new era in talkie production

AFZAL

Alias

Noor- i- Haram

Highly Popular Story from Arabian Nights.

Full Of:

AMAZING ADVENTURES, INTERESTING SCENES, MELODIOUS SONGS, GORGEOUS SETTINGS, BEAUTIFUL MUSIC & MAGNIFICENT DANCES.

Featuring: MASTER NISSAR, ABDUR RAHMAN KABULI, MISS SHYAMA ZUTSHI, M.A (*famous society girl of Lahore*) and EDUCATED SINGERS AND MUSICIANS.

The First Picture At Last Produced In A Perfect Studio, with Living Realism & The Greatest Screen Appeal.”¹²⁴

¹²⁴ *The Cinema*, May 1933, Vol. 6 No. 6, 21

Even though the tone of the advertisement might seem exaggerated and appears highly self congratulatory, one gets the sense from accounts in popular journals that the first rushes of *Afzal* screened for the film fraternity in Bombay received a somewhat positive response. However, when the May 1933 issue of the *Moving Pictures Monthly* carried a photograph of the leading couple, the ‘Hindu community’ of Punjab took objection to Zutshi appearing with Master Nissar “who is a *Mahomedan*”¹²⁵ and a “*common actor without any education and culture. [T]here was every chance of contamination in the atmosphere when she went to work.*”¹²⁶ Chandramohan Watal¹²⁷, an influential conservative Kashmiri pundit, who was himself an actor vehemently opposed the entry of a girl from the Kashmiri community into films and fought tooth and nail *to get her to leave*. The matter came to the local papers and the issue became highly communal. The local government had to intervene and warn the presses concerned. When matters became worse, despite shooting more than half the film, Zutshi’s parents arrived in Bombay to withdraw her from the studio.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ “Notes and News” in *Filmiland*, 10th June 1933, Vol. IV No. 157, 22

¹²⁶ “Editorial” in *Filmiland*, 1st July 1933, Vol. IV No.160, 1 (emphasis mine)

¹²⁷ Chandramohan Watal was born in Narsinghpur in what was then known as the Central Provinces to Kashmiri Pandit parents on July 24, 1906. He left home in 1930 and took a series of odd jobs, including managing a cinema and a film distributorship. During this last job he met V. Shantaram of Prabhat, who was struck by his pale gray-green eyes and thought he would make an excellent actor. He made his debut in the 1934 Hindi version of V. Shantaram’s *Amrit Manthan* as the serious intimidating high priest. After the phenomenal success of the film, Chandramohan became the undoubted star of the 1930s- 40s and soon became one of the highest paid actors of the time. He worked in *Dharmatama* and *Amar Jyoti*....Sohrab Modi’s *Pukar* (1939)...Mehboob Khan’s *Roti* (1942). His last film was *Shaheed* (1948) where he plays Dilip Kumar’s father Rai Bahadur Dwarkadas. (compiled from an obituary by Khorshed Dhondy, “The Chandramohan Story” in *Sound*, April 1949, 54-56 & 76)

¹²⁸ Shyama Zutshi went on to make her debut with Punjab based Oriental Talkies in 1934. The film *Vishnu Bhakti* was directed by G. R. Sethi, co-starring, Amirbai Karnataki, Chandrakala, Madhav Kale, Master Bacchu and R.S Murthy. In 1935, she acted in the K. L Saigal and Rajkumari starrer *Karvan-e-Hayat* directed by Premankur Athorthy for New Theatres, Calcutta; other cast members included Pahari Sanyal and Ratan Bai. In the same year she acted in the social *Majnu 1935* for Kamla Movietone, Punjab, directed by Roop K. Shouri, alongside Harold Louis, Ameer Begum, Mukhtar Begum and Sultan Beg. In 1936, she worked in the Leela Chitnis and P. Jairaj social *Berozgaar* directed by B. S. Rajhans for Indus Film Corporation Limited, Karachi. In 1938 she worked with director Roop K. Shouri and his Kamla Movietone team in *Tarzan Ki Beti*. Her next film was another social *Chhoti Si Duniya* in 1939 directed by B. S. Rajhans for Ray Pictures, Bombay, with Leela Chitnis and P. Jairaj. Shyama’s last film was the 1939 stunt *Khuni Jadugar*, directed by Roop K Shouri for Kamla Movietone, Lahore. After which she returned to private life, and unfortunately there isn’t much that is known of her. This brief filmography is compiled from various sources like *Hindi Geet Kosh Vol. 1* and advertisements in *Filmindia* and *Rangbhoomi* issues from 1933-39.

ART PLATE 12



Shyama Zutshi
Photograph source:
National Film Archive of India

According to the editor of *Filmiland*, the public from the Punjab province was known for their *tendencies* of tracing the genealogies of artists in productions to determine the merit and competence of the film. In a tone of sarcasm he wrote, “If Miss Kajjan appears in *Bhakt Soordas* in the role of a Hindu lady, rowdy spirit must be let loose, the screen must be ripped up because Miss Kajjan is not a Hindu by birth, blood and faith- no matter whether her acting and songs are of high order or not”.¹²⁹ The editor of *Rangbhoomi* however condoned the episode stating “yes, Shyama Zutshi made an obvious big mistake (bhari bhoor) that she agreed to act with an actor like Master Nissar. On joining the company, she should have demanded for an educated (shikshit) and competent (yogya) actor to work with. If the owners of the company had refused to comply with her wishes we would have reprimanded them. However in the present scenario we cannot but blame her”.¹³⁰ These two varying perspectives point to the need for a nuanced understanding of the dissemination of magazines in various vernaculars.¹³¹ While the Hindi journals catered to the ‘masses’, the English medium journals were for the newly English - educated Indian elite, which was why perhaps the tone of the two pieces was so different.

Rumours began that the film was *likely to injure the religious feelings of the Muslims*.¹³² This was not the last or the only controversy that the film was going to be skirting. On its release at the Pearl Talkies in Amritsar on 4th August 1933, the cinema hall was picketed by a group of angry protestors and thirteen arrests were made by the police. On 24th June 1933, Dharamdas Tekchand, B.A, wrote a letter to the editor of *Filmiland* titled “A visit to the Ajanta Studio” clearly referencing the controversy and trying to allay the fears and dispatch the hostility against the studio. As a clever strategy, producer M. Bhavnani organised a special

¹²⁹ “Ourselves” in *Filmiland*, 10th June 1933, Vol. IV No.157

¹³⁰ Editorial on the Afzal scandal in *Rangbhoomi*, June 1933, 2nd edition, No. 14. (Translations mine).

¹³¹ See Lalit Joshi’s coherently articulated article, “Cinema and Hindi Periodicals in Colonial India (1920- 1947)” in *Narratives of Indian Cinema*, ed. Manju Jain, Primus Books, New Delhi, 2009, 19-51.

¹³² “News From Bombay” in *Filmiland*, 17th June 1933, Vol. IV No. 158, 11(emphasis mine)

screening for the local elite. Finally in September 1933, the film was released as *Afzal alias Hoor-i- Haram* with Master Nissar and Miss Amina.

The Zutshi scandal, under the garb of respectability and moral outrage against film work and studios, was a clear symptom of the growing communal tension between the Hindus and the Muslims. It indicates clearly the building up of communal passions in the 1930s leading to the cataclysmic Partition in 1947. Perhaps, this scandal also foreshadowed the manner in which women and women's bodies would be the site for the violent and bloody struggles of honour between the two communities in the Partition period.

But this was not the first time that a community had reacted so strongly. When word spread that Begum Khurshid Mirza had joined films, there was a tremendous uproar in Aligarh during the mid-1940s. Local news-papers were scathing in their criticism of her. Her father, Shaikh Abdullah, was advised that as the founder of the first Muslim girl's school in Aligarh, he had the responsibility to stop his daughter from setting a bad example for other educated Muslim girls. Abdullah issued a public statement that the responsibility of a married woman lay with her husband. The ensuing tensions prevented Mirza from visiting her hometown Aligarh for at least two years.¹³³ Debashree Mukherjee has used the scandal as a discursive tool to unearth the dominant attitudes towards women's work in the film studio.¹³⁴ She writes of how the Parsi community had vociferously opposed the entry of the Homji sisters- Khurshid and Manek (rechristened as Saraswati Devi and Chandraprabha) to Bombay Talkies, much to the consternation of Himanshu Rai who was the doyen of the movement of cleansing studio spaces and initiating a demand for educated personnel. The Parsis prided themselves for their 'modern' ways and were intrinsically linked with performative spaces like the theatre and cinema; thus their unwillingness to embrace a new professional

¹³³ There is no evidence of this tension in the film journals of the time. This is indicative of the discourse of respectability which sought to hide scandals involving educated respectable actresses to keep the image of studios clean – like the Devika Rani- Najmul Hasan affair was kept out of public eye. See Begum Khurshid Mirza, 139

¹³⁴ Debashree Mukherjee, 102

opportunity for their women came as a surprise. The scandals reveal within their crevices another side to the morality tale, the contradictions and contested claims of and for modernity with regard to Indian women.

Conclusion

The possibilities of work for educated women in the film industry allowed public discourse to recast perceptions about studios. The studio as a contested site of excesses was to be chastised through the presence of women from cultured and respectable backgrounds. This, however, was not such an easy process as argued in the chapter. The discourse of respectability and improvement attempted to legitimise cinema through complex negotiations. The reputation of the studios had to be manufactured through genres, technology and most importantly through the figure of the female performer. A series of masquerades were used to manage the charge of the actress' sexuality. The use of a domestic vernacular to define work coincided with the domestication of the image of the actress. But through the 'morality machine' women from 'other' backgrounds like the 'white' actresses, performers from the stage and the *kotha*, were absorbed and moulded into the folds of respectability. The autobiographies of 'educated' and 'cultured' actresses provide insights into the conditions of work at the studio, allowing readers to engage with their struggles for survival, livelihood and pleasure. The stories of the actresses are vignettes of women in the throes of modernity, where the actresses are located at the cleavage of the public and the private. The entry of women from 'educated' backgrounds into the public sphere was a matter of debate and anxiety. This produced an ambiguous response to actresses. While cinema sought to reinvent its own status through associating with 'respectable' 'chaste' performers, for women, cinema opened up a world of new experiences, interactions and reinventions. And in these processes of transformations, cinema allowed women to fashion anew their contexts of living and selfhood.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation through a discussion of a variety of women performers highlights the vital ways in which cinematic intervention and work reinvented women's experience of modernity which has been varied for women as many of the stories in the dissertation suggest. Cinema became a means through which women earned a livelihood, survived and took part in activities of leisure. They were allowed access to the public sphere in new and radical ways. Even though this relationship to the public sphere was fraught with complexities, they made an indelible mark on the public through their work and personae.

The transition to sound technology was a momentous event. The chaotic conversion to sound was accompanied by the rapid expansion of modes of production, exhibition and distribution. Cinema was a lucrative site for enterprise and business. There was enough capital in the market to sustain the careers of a variety of film personnel and studios. As apparent from the advertisements and studio news columns in the film journals, new studios and companies were floated in high frequency; while some succeeded, others failed. This paradigmatic shift brought about a series of complications- some obviously technological and performative but some to do with status and recognition. The 'discourse of respectability' in the 1930s was gathering momentum. It marked in a crucial way the positions and conditions of women in the film industry. The three broad groups of performers- 'white', women from various performative traditions and 'educated' 'cultured' 'ladies' worked and performed in the industry in simultaneity. In popular imagination largely fed by film journals, however, this was not the case. The hegemonic power of the 'discourse of respectability' was to alter the dynamics of the film industry. As cinema was lobbying for prestige and recognition, the gradual transition from disrepute to repute was imagined through the entry of 'respectable' 'educated' women like Devika Rani and Durga Khote, and the departure of 'other' figures like the 'white' actresses or the *tawaiifs*. It is interesting that film magazines often fantasized about an imaginary transition from 'white'

Anglo Indian actresses to 'educated' Indian women.¹ Women from performative backgrounds like the *kotha* did not find a space in this argument. They were scandalous, marginal figures in the 'discourse of respectability'. The coming of sound technology, however, created new demands for singers and musicians, rendering the *tawaiifs* and *gaanewalis* a pervasively common feature in many studios. A series of disavowals and ambivalences were affected along with new demands and roles imagined for women performers. While women from 'white' backgrounds masqueraded as upper class Hindu women, women from professional performative classes and castes were couched in the garbs of respectability through appellations and pseudonyms. Educated women too had to be groomed to sing thus resulting in new patterns of behaviour and self-presentations.

As most Indian women were restricted to homes and their public mobility a matter for social debate, the auratic presence of actresses was rendered more 'visible' and produced ambivalent responses bordering on awe and moral anxiety. In popular imagination, performing women by virtue of their publicness were seen as 'overtly sexual' and began to be labelled as 'available' and 'fallen'. Despite social opprobrium, the charm of cinema did not diminish, and the industry continued to attract women from different backgrounds to take up acting as a profession. Work at the studio was not always easy: long hours at the studio, rehearsals and acting and grooming lessons occupied a large part of their day. But pay scales in the film industry were usually higher than other professions and actresses enjoyed higher salaries compared to their male co-actors.² Women chose to be part of the film industry for many different reasons. Some came looking for sheer survival, some for the promise of luxuries like fashion and travel, and some for a passion for the performative. Cinema became a means through which women could articulate themselves and participate in public and social life. While they

¹ Jagdish Lall Sharma, "Some Aspects of Present Day Screen" in *Varieties Weekly*, 14th Nov 1933, Vol. IV No. 6, 12

² Sulochana, Ermeline and Sabita Devi were the highest paid actresses of their time. The journal *Filmland* reported that Ermeline's salary was "Rs. 750 per mensem", interestingly more than her male co-stars Dinshaw (Rs. 500) and Eddie Billimoria (Rs.300), Prithviraj (Rs.450) and Jamshedji (Rs.500). See "Searchlight" in *filmland* 18th June 1932 issue, Vol. 111, No. 114, 22 and *filmindia*, December 1938, Vol. 4 No. 8, 22.

brought to cinema their own charms, skill and talent; cinema conditioned their experiences and the way they lived their lives.

Tracing the contribution of women performers from 1930s to 1940s was a tricky task. It required a diligent and trained eye to sift through the debris of archival material. The archive is deceptively seductive; it holds promises but often doesn't keep them. Even though this period is better archived than the silent period, the job of the researcher is never easy. Finding clues only to reach dead ends can be frustrating. The researcher has to constantly find innovative modes and methods to navigate around impediments. This dissertation looks at many performers previously not worked upon like Jahanara Kajjan and Sabita Devi. It was a challenge to gather material and put it all together in a coherent fashion. Many of these accounts are incomplete and partial because of the lack of more evidence. It was, however, important to tell these stories so as to indicate the amount of work that still needs to be done in order to retrieve the vestiges of the past. Putting the evidence together was like a puzzle, piece by piece. I have relied heavily on footnotes. It was not only an effective way to annotate, but allowed me to digress into other narratives and share more stories. In the case of many women, their personal stories could not be traced, but I have pieced together a working filmography for these women, so that at least their professional trajectories could be mapped. The autobiographies of Leela Chitnis, Durga Khote and Begum Khurshid Mirza were a pleasant discovery through which the voice of the performers could appendage other narratives and reveal the experiential realm of performers. These memoirs, however, were not without their own complexities as chapter three has tried to demonstrate. Thus this dissertation has mobilised a variety of sources to map the film industry in the 1930s- 40s through its women performers.

There are still hordes of women in the dusty pages of film ephemera like journals and booklets that need to be resurrected and their stories told. Every archive is constituted through a process of selection, during which recorded information may have been excluded and discarded as well as preserved. There are

many women who have not found their way into the archives. The focus on ‘stars’ has provided for a glossy narrative of the film world, where many performers find no place in them. The ‘extra’ or ‘super’ girls are such unknown entities. I have tried to provide names and whatever little information I could find about these women; however, there is still a lot more to be done. I have not been able to include performers who acted in stunt films, as the material on these women was hard to come by. Stunt was not considered a ‘respectable’ genre. Contemporary film journals tried to keep their distance in order to maintain a ‘clean’ and ‘respectable’ image of the film industry for their ‘educated’ readers. There were, however, stray film reviews, advertisements, studio news items, photographs and most importantly articles that decry the vices and ill effects of stunt/ crimes films on the ‘masses’.³ It is in this negation and absence that the traces of stunt films can be found. Fearless Nadia is missing from many of these film journals. It is in retrospect through the seminal work by Riyaz Wadia, Rosie Thomas and Dorothee Wenner that omissions stand corrected, and Nadia was able to reclaim her place in cinema history. This dissertation hints at the possibilities of future research around women’s work in the film industry in the early sound period. As apparent from figures like Devika Rani, Jaddan Bai, Durga Khote and Leela Chitnis; women were involved in a variety of processes of film production. It would be productive to shift the focus from performers to women who worked in the industry as producers, directors, music composers, singers and writers. This is just one of the areas that could be developed as full-fledged projects from the exciting encounter with the material that I have presented here, and I look forward to this and other work on the period.

³ See “Bombay Calling: Stop Producing Crime Picture” in *filmindia*, April 1939, Vol. 5 No. 4, 7-8 or review of the Sharda Movietone’s stunt talkie *Masked Terror* aka *Kala Pahad* (d. S.R Apte, 1933) starring Goharbai Karnataki and Navinchandra in *The Cinema*, X’mas Number, 1933, 29-32.

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