

# Notes on a Scandal: Writing Women's Film History Against an Absent Archive

BioScope  
4(1) 9–30  
© 2013 Screen South Asia Trust  
SAGE Publications  
Los Angeles, London,  
New Delhi, Singapore,  
Washington DC  
DOI: 10.1177/097492761200483052  
<http://bioscope.sagepub.com>



**Debashree Mukherjee**

Never as yet has there been an industry or profession over which so much ink has been spilled as the film business, and never will there arise a more acute question than now over the exact status our society should grant those men and women whom we have come to know, as “stars”.

Zahir B. Kureishi aka “Zabak” (Zabak, 1940)

Very early into the life of cinema in India it became apparent that this new phenomenon would generate talk. In its affective manifestations, cinema was able to circulate more freely and widely than the physical film object. Fan magazines and tabloids were regularly swamped by letters demanding biographical information about stars. The studios that were associated with these glamorous names became sites of intense speculation and wonder. The film studio was exciting both as an emblem of technological modernity and as a thrilling heterosocial work space. This combined excitement can be glimpsed in a description of the new Ranjit Studio: “Ah, the new studio—the new Ranjit studio! It is big and beautiful with such perfect acoustics that even if the director tried a *tete-a-tete* in whispers with the heroine it would all come out on the sound track as distinct as the song of a lark.” (Judas, 1938, p. 14).

In this article I cast a critical look at the figure of the female film professional, approaching her as a manifestation of, and model for, the urban public woman in 1930s and 1940s Bombay. I will look at the film studio as a space that mythologized some women, sidelined others and made all women socially suspect. The Bombay film studio is rarely studied as a site of work. I suggest that it is precisely as a site of work that the studio impacted modern imaginings of the city and the urban self. These urban enclaves with their impressive buildings, their dedicated workforce, and their promise of erotic sociality, represented an alternative possibility for the working self. They were quite unlike the mills in Tardeo or the office buildings in Fort and swiftly became a locus of much speculative desire. I approach the film studio through the idea of scandal, a constructive mode for approaching hidden histories of women and their work (Image 1).

The most overwhelming narrative that emerges around women's presence in the Bombay film studio is that of respectability and moral danger, the constant subtext being an anxiety about female sexuality. Women in studios were caught in a double bind; not only were they likely to perform the seductive huntress, but they were themselves susceptible to the seductions of their surroundings. It is well established that the first female actresses of the Indian screen were of hybrid ethnicities and ambiguous social status. This added to the moral panic around studios and their female workforce. The studio became the site of much anxiety both outside and inside the film industry. “Concerned” citizens and journalists discussed studio reform in prominent newspapers, simultaneous with suggestions for greater studio surveillance at

---

**Debashree Mukherjee** is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Cinema Studies, New York University, US.

E-mail: [m.debashree@gmail.com](mailto:m.debashree@gmail.com)



**Image 1.** *Romantic India* (Mohan Sinha, 1936), song booklet.

**Source:** Image courtesy the National Film Archive of India.

every Film Congress and industry meeting. Revelatory is this speech made by the film actress, Durga Khote, at the 1939 Indian Motion Picture Congress:<sup>1</sup>

A great deal has been said about the morals of Film Studios. My contention is that the atmosphere is no better or worse than any other walk of life. It is no doubt true that by reason of the fact the screen portrays life in all its aspects, men and women who work to produce these films must necessarily come in close contact with each other....One of the reasons responsible for these impressions of film morals is perhaps the fact that in the film industry all conventions are thrown over-board....Artistes sometimes have to work at unconventional hours of the morning. All these things are beyond the understanding of conventional people whose lives run in chalked out routines. (cited in Sunita, 1939)

This “unconventional” work atmosphere drove the rapidly mushrooming parallel industry of film journals and much revenue was generated on the basis of rumor and gossip. Responding to a frequent question about the moral dangers of working in a studio, the actress Maya Banerjee exasperatedly claimed: “This is nothing but journalistic jesuitry. I have not heard about [*sic*] studio atmosphere being immoral.” (*Mirror*, 1939, p. 18). Such articulations by actresses were increasingly aired in the very journals and magazines that spread the morality discourse, impelled no doubt by the contradictory need to defend the female film professional’s status and right to work (Bandopadhyay, 1993) (Image 2).<sup>2</sup>

Scandal is a significant form of framing modern life. As a set of discursive formations manufactured and circulated in the public sphere, scandals reveal important clues to dominant attitudes toward

social boundaries. Tightly framed within a discourse of morality, film scandals often have less to do with the individual acts condemned, and more to do with the unsettling of studio hierarchies and gender politics. Following Luise White's work on rumor in colonial Africa, I maintain that scandals should be seen not simply as "symptoms" of social anxieties but as direct attempts at articulating the contradictions of modern life (White, 2000). I use scandal both as a form of oral discursivity and as a mediatized event. Hints of scandal are available in film magazines but versions of the same incident retroactively fold back on the rumored event through interviews with colleagues and published memoirs. The scandals discussed in this article have been assembled in a jigsaw puzzle fashion from these varied sources.

Starting with two specific scandals involving women in Bombay films, I will follow the tangential leads emerging from these narratives to uncover competing and complementary truths. These events have an intensified charge to them and are suffused with elusive meaning. Their selection and presentation has been motivated by a need to record the range of social backgrounds that women were coming from and the unique contributions they made to the film production networks they were affiliated with. This range, though limited due to a lack of early documentation, helps us get a sense of the pressures on and possibilities for female cultural workers during an important historical juncture in the life of Bombay as well as its film industry. The last section foregrounds the fact that even within women's film work there exists a distinct hierarchy, a power structure that can only be read through a lack of scandal, an absence even of the aporetic. This article, therefore, is also a reflection on how one "does" history, a gendered history of absence. Attempts to recover women's histories are susceptible to essentializing tendencies. While I try to show the specific affects that modernity and cinema catalyzed for urban women, I will also highlight how socio-historical processes played themselves out differentially over the bodies and lives of different individuals.

## Parrying Patronage: Tales of Slander and New Possibilities

Knowing her simplicity and sweetness it is hard to imagine how anyone could print slanderous posters about her. Those who know her were shocked to see large posters, crammed with falsehoods, pasted all over the city.

Hyacinth, January 1942, *filmindia*

Naseem Banu (1916–2002) was the daughter of a well-known Delhi classical singer and courtesan, Shamshad Begum aka Chhamiya Bai. Shamshad married well and was able to provide Naseem with a comfortable childhood and an elite education. During a summer vacation from school, Naseem came to



**Image 2.** *Actress* (Najam Naqvi, 1948), song booklet.

**Source:** Image courtesy the National Film Archive of India.

Bombay, and like many young girls she was very keen to visit a film studio. Her mother organized a trip to see the shooting of the film *Silver King* (Luhar, 1935), starring Motilal and Sabita Devi. Naseem decided that life as an actress looked eminently desirable. Shamshad, however, had other plans for her daughter and they went back to Delhi. But Naseem's breathtaking beauty had not gone unnoticed and many producers contacted Shamshad to cast Naseem in their films. It was only after Naseem had shed many tears and threatened hunger strikes that Shamshad relented. Naseem's first film was Sohrab Modi's adaptation of *Hamlet*, *Khoon ka Khoon* (1936) in which she played Ophelia. Shamshad Begum also landed a part in the film, as Queen Gertrude, ostensibly because Naseem was too shy to work by herself (see Hyacinth, 1942; Katrak, 1977; Lamchhane, 1999).

The scandal mentioned in the quote from *filmindia* took place around 1940–41 (Manto, 2008). Manto has detailed this incident in a sketch titled, "Pari Chehra Naseem," referring to the sobriquet given her in all film advertising. So legendary was Naseem's loveliness that she was termed the "Beauty Queen" of the Bombay film industry and she had several high profile suitors vying for her attention. Once Naseem entered the world of films, her mother took up a well-appointed flat on the posh Marine Drive and became her full-time advisor and agent. When the Nizam of Hyderabad's son, Moazam Jah came courting, Shamshad decided that life as a princess might hold Naseem in better stead than life as an actress. "Both women spent some time in Hyderabad as the prince's guests. However, before long the worldly-wise Chhamiya came to the conclusion that Hyderabad was like a prison, which would stifle her daughter" (Manto, 2008, p. 595). Shamshad managed to extricate her daughter from this tricky situation and they

returned to Bombay and to films. It was at this point that a bitter Moazam Jah launched a unique smear campaign. In a highly cinematic flourish, the walls of the city were plastered with posters maligning Naseem Banu's reputation. Her sympathizers responded in like (Image 3).

The story behind this spectacular scandal highlights the precarious position of the ambitious single woman in a metropolitan environment. Women aspiring towards a lifestyle that supported independent up-market housing and other creature comforts had very few options when it came to safeguarding their long-term financial interests. They were also vulnerable to public slander. Crucial to this episode is Shamshad Begum's own history as a courtesan—a lifestyle and career that guided her choices for her daughter.

The courtesan or *tawa'if*, had a special place in the courts of most Muslim and Hindu kings in pre-colonial South Asia. Trained in classical forms of song and dance, the *tawa'if* class of women from Lucknow, Calcutta, Hyderabad or Delhi, formed an influential elite and were known for their cultured ways. Veena Oldenburg writes that, "It was not uncommon for the young sons of the nobility to be sent to the best-known salons for instruction in etiquette, the art of conversation and polite manners, and the appreciation of Urdu literature (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 263). Her research on the *tawa'ifs* of Lucknow shows how these courtesans



**Image 3.** Naseem Banu on the cover of *The Cinema* (Lahore), December 1939.

**Source:** Image courtesy the National Film Archive of India.



wielded enormous power and wealth, often investing their royal patronage in land and small businesses. She suggests that the *tawa'ifs* be seen not as victims of patriarchal power structures, but as women who chose a lifestyle that resisted conventional institutions like marriage in favor of financial independence. By the time Shamshad Begum emerged on the courtesan scene, the subcontinent had been scarred by the colonial presence and the Rajas and Nawabs of yore could no longer support elaborate systems of patronage. Courtesans had to look elsewhere to maintain their privileged lifestyles. It is significant, therefore, that the worldly-wise Shamshad, forsook the patronage of one of the last remaining landed Nizams and chose the film industry as a career for her daughter.

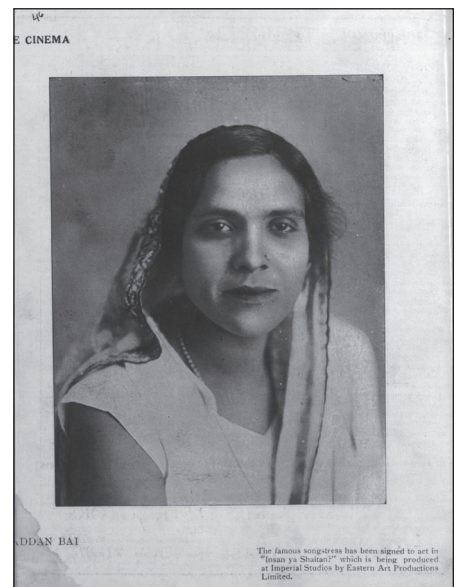
Gerry Farrell describes how the fall of royal courts and the concomitant rise of an urban elite in the early twentieth century, led to the shift of the *kotha* tradition to the cities.

Within the span of one generation Indian musicians could look back to a vanishing world of princely patronage and forward to a new commercial environment fraught with economic and artistic uncertainty. The place of work was no longer the sumptuous and rarefied courts, but the urban *kotha* (salon), theatre, recording studio, concert stage or one of the many European-style music schools that were being established at the time. (Farrell, 1993, pp. 31–32)

The newest technological wonder of the times, cinema, also proved to be an attractive work site where famous singers like Jaddan Bai, Shamshad Begum, and Akhtaribai Faizabadi could showcase their talents as actresses, vocalists, or composers. Cinema work clearly presented a concrete option that could support their aspirations for a affluent lifestyle and provide them independence from capricious male support, be it in marriage or as a landed mistress (Image 4).

The mother–daughter partnership is a model that has worked remarkably well in Bombay. The heroine's mother is such a familiar film industry figure that she is often caricatured as the formidable “Mummy.” However, famous “Mummies” like Jaddan Bai (Nargis' mother) and Shamshad Begum shrewdly managed their daughters' careers and groomed them to be successful stars.<sup>3</sup> Both women, in a convention similar to that of courtesans, launched their daughters into performing arts careers, taught them to be practical about love and marriage and willed them to be wealthy, ambitious, and independent.

The monetary aspect was one of the main attractions of the cinema industry, and helped many men and women overlook the profession's negative reputation. In May 1939, Shanta Apte writes in the magazine *Mirror* that each day she receives four to five letters from young girls wanting to join the movies. She says, there is a “growing tendency among young men and women of to-day to join films due perhaps to this monetary attraction” (Apte, 1939, p. 2). In fact, salaries of actresses were so high by contemporary standards that the figures became a matter of urban folklore. Readers would often write in to magazines curious about individual pay packages.



**Image 4.** A rare photograph of Jaddan Bai in *The Cinema* (Lahore), June 1933.

**Source:** Image courtesy the National Film Archive of India.

Actresses themselves acknowledged in interviews that the money was substantial and more than one actress claimed that her salary rivaled that of the Governor of Bombay.<sup>4</sup> Many of these declarations were designed to bolster the aura of luxury necessary for production of the star image. Nonetheless, judging from interviews with lower-rung studio employees, with actresses many years past their glory days, their autobiographies, and details of their assets, it is evident that cinema acting was a lucrative profession for women. Here are some approximate annual earnings of actresses in 1942 (Judas, 1942, p. 10):

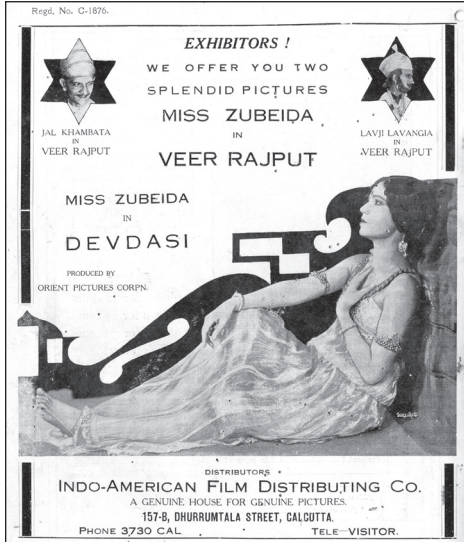
Shobhana Samarth: Rs 36,000  
 Sardar Akhtar, Naseem, Madhuri: Rs 30,000  
 Sabita Devi: Rs 24,000

According to these figures, leading heroines of the day averaged an income of ₹2000–3000 per month, and this during the war years. This was a time when a French chiffon sari cost ₹9, and a brand new imported Studebaker cost ₹6000 (Kazim, 2005, p. 145). Mrinal Pande has noted, “Inasmuch as this was a paid job, over the years, the actresses went on to become the first group of working women to acquire a certain financial independence” (Pande, 2006, p. 1649). Till the late 1940s, at least, top-billed actresses were often drawing higher salaries than their male counterparts. Perplexed by this deviation from the social norm, a reader writes in to *filmindia* (September, 1940, p. 16):

R. N. Vinaya, Agra

Q: Why are actresses paid more than the actors?

A: Because the industry is run by men.



**Image 5.** Miss Zubeida gets top billing for distributors and exhibitors. *Filmiland* (Calcutta), June 1931.

**Source:** Image courtesy the Media Lab, Jadavpur University.

Baburao Patel’s flippant reply is characteristically sexist but still acknowledges the salary disparity as a fact. The film actress had been the leading symbol of the glamour of cinema since the silent days, with actresses like Sulochana and Zubeida ruling the marquee. Film advertisements of the 1930s and 1940s regularly gave heroines top billing, placing their names before the film title, hero, and other credits. Devika Rani, Leela Chitnis, Shobhana Samarth, Fearless Nadia, Rose, Sadhona Bose, Gohar, Shanta Apte, were all leading ladies whose star personas were fabricated and exploited to give a film optimal mileage. The parallel film journalism industry was also driven by actresses whose color photographs adorned magazine covers and drove advertising revenues and sales (Shah, 1950, p. 143).<sup>5</sup> It was the actress again, who had “the power of endorsement” and many leading cosmetics, toiletries, telephone, and textile manufacturers started to exploit the screen goddess’s brand value in their advertisements (Shah, 1950, p. 153). The industry may have been “run by men,” but it was being powered by the women (Image 5).

As far as spectatorship is concerned, did this focus on the film actress indicate an overwhelming adult male viewership? Panna Shah's statistics on audiences in Bombay City in the late 1940s give us a fragmented picture. She records that in theaters like Metro, Regal, and Eros where there was a largely fixed clientele, 40–50 percent of the total audience consisted of women, while 20 percent comprised children and adolescents (Shah, 1950, p. 107). Special *zenana* shows were held for women, sometimes with the heroine of the film present at the screening (Image 6).<sup>6</sup> Even though audience composition varied greatly depending on the locality of the theater, it seems that women were contributing to ticket sales in large numbers.

Naseem Banu escaped the life of a gilded prisoner in Hyderabad, but was she able to make it as a career girl in the movie business? By most standards it is accurate to say yes, she was. Naseem came back to a successful run of films with Minerva Movietone. She starred in Sohrab Modi's popular social drama *Talaq* (Modi, 1938) and reached the pinnacle of popularity with her role as Nur Jehan in Modi's lavish historical, *Pukar* (Modi, 1939). By 1941, Naseem was a coveted heroine and was drawing a hefty salary. In an interview to a fan magazine in January 1942, Naseem said that "she isn't terribly anxious to get married but if she meets a good and attractive man she might consider changing her name" (Hyacinth, 1942, p. 39). Not many women in those days had the luxury to make such a statement. The same interview is indicative of the complex ways in which fan magazines aided in the manufacture of the star image and encouraged fans to view the actress as a superior modern figure worthy of awe. Thus, Naseem is revealed to be "simple but extravagant," "earns over ₹2500 a month and can well afford to buy real stones," "has over a thousand saris and continues to buy more," "loves riding," "her favourite perfume is Worth's 'Je Reviens'," and she wears perfect make-up. This fairytale description sells dreams of a high-end consumer lifestyle that firmly locates Naseem as a chic cosmopolitan, coded via her enthusiasm for fashion and luxury (Images 6 and 7).

This brand of the modern lifestyle was distinctly hybrid as Naseem's appetite for saris co-existed with horse riding; her distaste for cigarettes and alcohol did not hinder her club going. Moreover, lest these luxuries be seen as hedonism, the actress' economic superiority was validated through a strict work ethic: "Naseem works hard for her large salary and although she is exhausted after her work at the studio she still manages to fit in a daily three-hour dancing lesson." (*Ibid.*, p. 33) Thus, the actress' life is presented as a mix of toil and consumerist pleasure. Tracy C. Davis has noted a similar fact about Victorian actresses that they "enjoyed freedoms unknown to women of other socially sanctioned occupations, but in order to convince society that they were distinct from the demi-monde and to counteract negative judgments of their public existence, they endeavored to make the propriety of their private lives visible and accepted." (Davis, 1991, p. 69). In a letter to the editor in February 1940, a fan asks



**Image 6.** Padmadevi, "Colour Queen of India," looks charming with a telephone in hand. Advertisement in *filmindia*, December 1937.

**Source:** Image courtesy Sushila Rani Patel.

From: Biren Kazmi [Benares]  
 "Who is the best dressed Star  
 in the Indian Film World?  
 Miss Rose beats all."  
 Says Baburao Patel in  
 Filmindia's Editor's Mail  
 August 1935 Issue.

And She is still the Best  
 Dressed Star and one of  
 Our Regular Customers.

For Style & Elegance  
 in Sarees and Silks  
 visit  
**PURSRAM'S**

**MISS ROSE**, the best dressed Lady  
 of the Indian Screen, as she appears  
 in India Artists, Ltd. "BAHURANI".

**U. N. PURSRAM**  
 HORNEY ROAD, FORT, BOMBAY.

**PURSRAM'S SILKS ADD TO YOUR  
 PERSONALITY**

**Image 7.** Miss Rose, "the best dressed Lady of the Indian Screen," in an advertisement for Poursram's Silks. *Filmindia* (Bombay), April 1940.

**Source:** Image courtesy Sushila Rani Patel.

Baburao Patel: "Is Leela Chitnis married?" Patel replies that "Yes, she is married and is a happy mother of four children."<sup>7</sup> Patel's reply to the reader's question contains within it an anxiety about the social reputation of actresses and the phrase "happy mother" is ideologically loaded. Such public discourse exerted pressures on film professionals, especially women, to play out conciliatory versions of femininity in a public domain. At the same time, the ambivalent messages in a star interview also held out the figure of the actress as a model for emulation.

Around this time, a "shy and withdrawn" young man called Ehsan started up a film company called Taj Mahal Pictures (Manto, 2008, p. 596). The Second World War had led to a major boom in motion picture revenues and each new day saw new film companies being created. Ehsan signed on Naseem as the leading lady in his first production, *Ujala* (Multani, 1942), and by the end of the film Naseem had agreed to marry him. The wedding was followed by the announcement that Naseem had given up her acting career. *Ujala* did not do well at the box office and Ehsan wanted to give his production efforts another try. "My father stopped her from working in movies but, strangely, he requested her to work in his own productions," recalls

daughter Saira Banu in an interview (Lamchhane, 1999, p. 120) (Image 8).

The war years saw several changes take place in the film industry. As Manto recalls, "Several film companies came into being and while some survived, others perished. Many stars were born and quite a few disappeared from the scene" (Manto, 2008, p. 597). While Taj Mahal Pictures was battling its financial and certain legal tangles, a major icon of Bombay cinema passed away. Himansu Rai, director of Bombay Talkies Ltd, died in 1940 leaving his wife, and co-founder of the studio, Devika Rani to take over as Controller of Productions. Around this time, Bombay Talkies internally split up into two production units, one of which was headed by Sashadhar Mukherjee. Mukherjee's unit had recently produced a string of hits such as *Kangan* (Osten, 1939), *Bandhan* (Acharya, 1940), *Jhoola* (Mukherji, 1941) and the landmark *Kismet* (Mukherji, 1943). The second unit was run by Devika Rani's protégé, Amiya Chakrabarty, but was not able to match the Mukherjee team's success. In 1943, citing irreconcilable differences, S. Mukherjee and team left Bombay Talkies Studio to set up Filmistan Ltd. The breakaway group included Gyan Mukerji (director), Ashok Kumar (actor), Savak Vacha (sound engineer), Dattaram Pai (editor) and Rai Bahadur Chuni Lal (producer/financier). Sa'adat Hasan Manto was close to this set and was given a fixed writing position at Filmistan (Joshi and Joshi, 2012; Manto, 2008; Pal, 2005; Shah, 1984).

S. Mukherjee wanted to create a sensation with Filmistan's debut venture and he knew that he needed a heroine with as much star power as his rival, Devika Rani (Manto, 2008, pp. 597–598). He was determined to pull off a coup. If Filmistan brought the angel-faced Naseem back to her adoring fans it





**Image 8.** A publicity plate for *Ujala* in *filmindia*, February 1942.

**Source:** Image courtesy Sushila Rani Patel.

was sure to create a sensation. But Ehsan had his terms. He would let Naseem work for Filmistan only if S. Mukherjee agreed to produce Taj Mahal Pictures' next film. The barter was finalized and Naseem started work on *Chal Chal Re Naujawan* (1944), Filmistan's maiden production, written by Manto. The film that Filmistan produced in exchange for Naseem was *Begum* (Majumdar, 1945), also written by Manto and starring Naseem Banu and Ashok Kumar. The popular film actress evidently had a high exchange value (Image 9).

Naseem Banu separated from Ehsan soon after and he eventually migrated to Pakistan (Ramachandran, 2003). Thereafter Naseem took on the role that her mother had played in her life and prepared her daughter, Saira Banu, for a stellar career. Saira Banu, with her mother as manager and stylist, went on to become a successful and glamorous star making a series of hit films with none other than S. Mukherjee.

Naseem Banu's career trajectory highlights the diverse backgrounds and traditions that the Bombay film industry welcomed and supported. In turn, we see how the old-world courtesan lifestyle informed the industry by creating a unique work culture. This was a strictly female lineage, which understood the value of individualized star auras long before stardom was recognized as an essential part of cinema's



**Image 9.** “Controller of productions of the Bombay Talkies Ltd., she is still India’s Number One star today, having made a welcome return to the screen in *HamariBaat*.” Devika Rani in a publicity photograph in the *Dipali Year Book of Motion Pictures*, 1943.

**Source:** Image courtesy the National Film Archive of India.

Thus we see a typically ambivalent fan response to the Bombay actress, which delights in tut-tutting about star affairs, while also being awed by the actress’ wealth, refinement, and sophistication. This was a time when fans, both male and female, were frequently writing in to film journals asking direct and practical questions about an actress’s salary, the route to an acting career, the numbers of actresses in Bombay and their retirement age.<sup>9</sup> Such heightened curiosity points us in the direction of film audiences and we see how the physical presence of cinema and film stars in Bombay affectively impacted the cityscape with its promises of freedom and mobility. Audiences were watching and consuming and desiring a new urban lifestyle (Image 10).

industrial apparatus. The courtesan background also complicated prevalent notions of respectability as the *tawa'if* straddled the domains of high culture as well as social stigmatization. The film actress similarly generated mixed responses from her public, representing success and talent at the same time as sexual promiscuity. Ironically, the scandal involving Prince Moazam Jah was casually dismissed by Naseem Banu at the time. This is what she is reported to have said: “I don’t care very much what they write about me. I’m sure my fans will not believe anything so horrible.” (Hyacinth, 1942, p. 33). Even if they did, the incident was so wildly romantic, involving Nizams and princes in an age of mass picketing and typing pools that it might actually have added to her otherworldly appeal.

The financial independence and bargaining powers wielded by a mother–daughter team like Shamshad–Naseem gave them a degree of immunity from gossip. Naseem and others like her, had the adoration of their fans and that helped them leverage financial and social transactions. Scandal and disrepute work to censor transgressive behavior, but simultaneously help circulate transgressive imaginations and acts. Similarly, the very assumption of promiscuity amongst film folk, allowed certain transgressions to slip through. Elaine Aston affirms this view in a Victorian context:

Juxtaposed with the risk to the actress of being seen as ‘no better than she should be’ was the ‘redemption’ of the star actress through her celebrity status. It is a condition of celebrity-making that a star’s aura, her charisma, can overcome these tensions and conflicts. This goes some way in explaining why, for example, [actress] Ellen Terry was feted as ‘an icon of Victorian femininity’ despite being a mother of two illegitimate children. (Aston, 2007, p. 253)<sup>8</sup>

The foundational narrative of the Bombay film studios of the 1930s and 1940s privileges a handful of men as the main movers behind a history of success, progress, and power. Himansu Rai and S. Mukherjee are valorized as visionaries who molded the shape of things to come.<sup>10</sup> It might be time to acknowledge that certain women played a large role not just as the on-screen face of these powerful studios but also helped build reputations and fortunes.

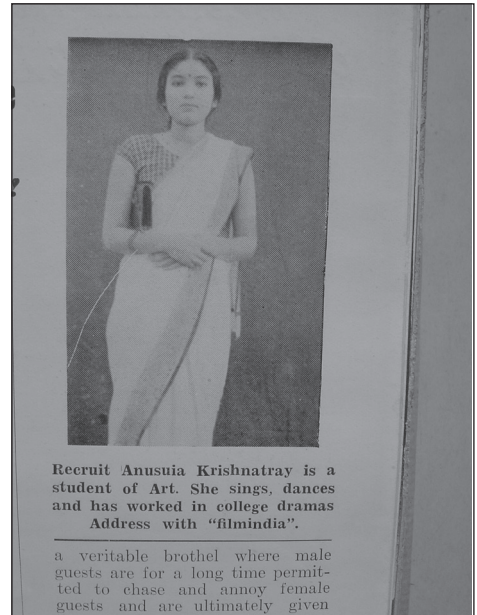
### Community Caprice: Tales of Modernity and Miscegenation

For many a long year now—in fact, ever since the unfortunate heat, alarms and excursions occasioned amidst the Parsee community by the release of the Bombay Talkies’ first picture—*Jawani-Ki-Hawa*—the press and the public have thought it well and wise to undergo a self-imposed censorship on the subject of the Indian screen as a career for Parsee women.

Russi K. Karanjia, Editor of the *Sunday Standard* (Karanjia, 1940, pp. 19–25)

Khorshed Manchershah Minocher-Homji was born in 1912 into an affluent middle class Parsi family. In keeping with the Parsi community’s emphasis on high culture, she received classical vocal training under the renowned musicologist, Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkande at Maurice College, Lucknow. The completion of her training coincided with the arrival of radio technology in Bombay, with the Radio Club broadcasting its first program in 1923. Musical programs were a huge component of radio programming and many an upcoming classical singer got her first break on the airwaves. From 1925 to 1927, Khorshed and her sister, Manek, featured in a monthly radio program, singing their own songs accompanied by musical instruments like the sitar, *dilruba*, and organ. The program became a hit with listeners and the duo came to be known as the Homji Sisters (see Pasupuleti, 2009; Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1999; Ranade, 2006).

The sisters’ radio success came around the same time that Himansu Rai and Devika Rani set up Bombay Talkies Ltd. Rai was well aware of the several problems that beset the film sector in India. Not least among them was the fact that film companies often functioned in an arbitrary, unorganized, and ad hoc fashion. Rai wanted to structure Bombay Talkies as a well-run educational institution with separate departments for each component of the filmmaking process, like Camera, Sound, Script, Music, or Costume (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 1980). While the in-house German crew could shoot and record sound, even direct actors in a foreign language, an Indian film needed Indian music. Perhaps it was this fact coupled with the sheer dynamism evident in the Homji sisters’ embracing of a new medium that attracted Himansu Rai. He had heard their programs on air and invited them to Bombay Talkies. Khorshed



**Image 10.** A new phenomenon begins in *filmindia* magazine—recruitment advertisements for women. *filmindia* 1946.

**Source:** Image courtesy Sushila Rani Patel.

was offered a handsome salary for the post of Music Director, while Manek was offered a singing character role in their first film. Both girls agreed to the terms and were signed on for Bombay Talkies' debut film, *Jawani-ki-Hawa*. The film premiered in 1936 at the Imperial Theatres, Bombay.

The hullabaloo that ensued seemed a normal reaction to "respectable" girls joining the film industry. Yet, the violence of the reaction and the networks of power that were mobilized, point to a slightly more complicated explanation. The Parsi or Zoroastrian community in India comprised a small but prosperous population based mostly in Bombay. Well-educated, westernized and liberal, the majority consciously aligned themselves with the British and was in the vanguard of Bombay's culture and commerce (Luhmann, 1994). Parsi women were among the most visible on the cityscape, dressed after European fashions or in the latest sari styles.<sup>11</sup> They drove cars, went to the races, visited clubs and thronged the movies (Shah, 1950, p. 106).<sup>12</sup> Influenced by European literature and theater, it was the Parsi community that started the immensely popular and eponymous, Parsi Theatre in Bombay. Theaters were built, Shakespearean three-act plays were written, actors were trained and audiences were consolidated. In fact, the Bombay film industry inherited much from the Parsi theatre, but that story has been told (see Gupt, 2005; Hansen, 1999, 2002). It is remarkable therefore, that this legendarily "modern" and dynamic community should react so vociferously to the entry of the Homji sisters into a film studio.

But vociferous they were. Once word got out about Khorshed and Manek, the entire Parsi community erupted in protest. *Jam-e-Jamshed*, the influential community newspaper, initiated a major campaign to mobilize Parsi opinion. Bombay Talkies' distinguished Board of Directors included four Parsi members: Sir Cowasji Jehangir, F.E. Dinshaw, Framji H Sidhwa and Sir Phiroze Sethna. Disturbed by the intensifying protests, they demanded that the sisters be replaced. However, 50 percent of the film had been shot and a re-shoot would cost the company ₹1 lakh. Commerce won over community solidarity and the directors agreed to let Manek act, with a mild warning to the management to desist in the future from using Parsi girls on screen. In a tactical move, Himansu Rai gave both women Hindu screen names—Khorshed became Saraswati Devi, and Manek would henceforth be known as Chandraprabha (Pal, 2005; Pande, 2006; Sathe, 1984; Shah, 1984; *Times of India*, 1935).

Outraged by the Directors' decision, the Parsis of Bombay continued their agitation. The Parsi Federal Council got involved, the Commissioner of Police was met with, and an appeal was made to the President of the Board of Film Censors to stop the film from getting certified. These frantic efforts paid off and a special screening of *Jawani-ki-Hawa* was held for the censors at Imperial Cinema. In an anti-climax, the film was decreed "harmless" and was cleared for public exhibition. Undaunted by the official verdict of the censors, picketing and demonstrations outside the Imperial cinema continued. The outcome was that three picketers were arrested and the film got tremendous free publicity.

Recalling those days in an interview, Saraswati Devi said, "My god, when I think of those days, my hair stands on end. They (the community) were determined to get us out of the film. The newspapers added fuel to the fire... The result was that Himansu Rai and his unit were threatened, even their lives were threatened" (cited in Pande, 2006). The hysterical force of this scandal raises some new questions for us. The Parsis "energetically educated" their daughters and were vocal about social reform in other communities on the women's question (Luhmann, 1994, p. 342). "Female Education, Free association of Women with Men at public, social, and other gatherings, ... Abolition of Child Marriage, Re-Marriage of Widows among Hindus," were some of the issues tackled by the "Grand Old Man" of the Parsi community, Dadabhai Naoroji (Bakshi, 1991). Moreover, Parsis had been associated with the film industry in fundamental ways since its earliest days. Madan Theatres in Calcutta, Sohrab Modi's Minerva Movietone, and Wadia Movietone, were important institutions run by Parsis that helped shape the Indian



film industry. Why then, when it came to their own women, did the same film industry become a site of danger?

As is wont with scandal, the most obvious reasons for a controversy are also the most misleading. Clues to an alternative explanation can be found in a trenchant article by Russi K. Karanjia, cited at the start of this section. In a “plea to the Parsi orthodoxy to lift the morality ban of film as a career,” Karanjia, with the authority of being a Parsi himself, asserts that “Parsi Girls Have Personality For the Screen/ Don’t Starve Them, Give Them A Career!” (Karanjia, 1940, p. 13). The article outlines how Parsi elders do not recognize the changing status of film work and are anachronistically worried about the respectability quotient of cinema. But almost unknowingly, Karanjia gives us another insight into the hostile view taken of women’s film work.

Arguing for Parsi women’s entry into the movies, Karanjia stresses that economic circumstances had changed over the years and the community was not as prosperous as it once had been.<sup>13</sup> According to him, the financial crisis brought on by “Prohibition, losses in the share market, growing unemployment, and severe competition from sister communities” made it imperative that the young women of the community made the most of the lucrative film sector. Another Parsi man called Pithawalla foreshadowed Karanjia’s concern for his community’s economic woes, eight years earlier, in 1932. In his book, *The Parsi Heritage*, Pithawalla said:

Today the scale appears to turn the other way. The Parsis themselves are getting poorer by the day. They do not seem to stand the strain of racial competition, physical exertion, and moral bankruptcy. One can but wholeheartedly wish that the Parsis possessed the Iranian glory even in a foreign land. Nothing but degeneration and demoralization appears to have set in amongst them. (cited in Luhrmann, 1994, p. 336)

To add to the troubles of the numerically weak community, Karanjia tells us that marriage rates seemed to be falling drastically and the numbers of single Parsi women in the city were steadily increasing. Also, the Parsi emphasis on or imitation of Western lifestyles had resulted in the creation of “a cultured, sophisticated, languorously westernized middle class Parsee girl [who] finds herself a misfit in the rather dull and drab professions of stenographer, secretary, nurse, mid-wife and teacher” (Karanjia, 1940, p. 25).

Karanjia, in all sincerity, wanted Parsi women with their fair looks and sophisticated manners, to aid in the economic uplift of the community. What he missed was that the arguments he presented in “favor” of women’s film work, might very well have been the reasons “behind” the “moral ban.” Already, by the late 1930s, film industry pay scales were dramatically higher than the remuneration available in conventional profiles of “stenographer, secretary, nurse, mid-wife or teacher.”<sup>14</sup> The degree of financial independence possible on a film salary would allow women to live independently and on their own terms.

A pamphlet circulated in 1993 and dramatically titled “Immediate Urgency for the Formation of the World’s Zoroastrian Organization to Combat Against Our Dwindling Numbers,” tries to understand the reasons behind the Parsis’ slow but steady decline in numbers, finances and cultural power. This more recent document uncannily voices the fears stirred up by the Homji sisters:

Paradoxical as it may sound, it may be stated again that, the very higher standard of education we are seeking to have for our youngsters, seems to have gone by itself to militate against our numerical strength. This happens to be particularly so with respect to our girls who having once obtained higher education are often found to outstrip our boys in many fields by securing posts oft times more lucrative than the boys by virtue of their somehow displaying better Personality, Academic Background, and better Application to work. This happens to make the incompatibility between them and the boys noticeably pronounced. (cited in Luhrmann, 1994, p. 346)

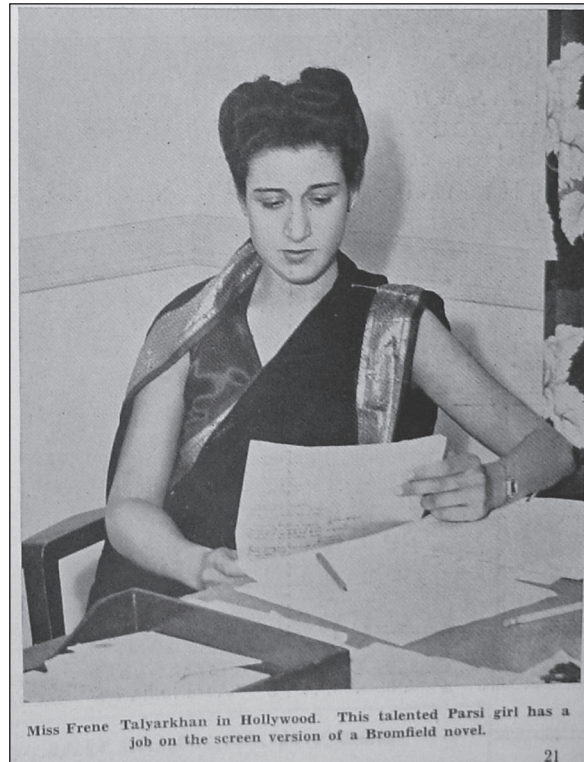
The social and economic crises of the community might thus be read as the catalyzing forces behind the desperate agitations against the Homji Sisters' entry into film. The community had rigid rules against mixed marriages and increasing numbers of Parsi women were opting out of marriage altogether. Unmarried, financially independent women who refused to aid the community biologically by producing racially pure offspring could not be tolerated to help out with their financial superiority. Such an eventuality would overturn gender roles and power equations. According to Luhrmann, "[the Parsis] identified closely with the British and with the traits of progressiveness, rationality and, in particular, masculinity, which the colonial authorities tended to ascribe to themselves as a contrast to the traditional, irrational, effeminate, 'natives'." (Luhrmann, 1994, p. 333). The community frequently highlighted its intrinsic "masculinity" in self-descriptions that were linked with notions of racial purity and superiority. The greatest crisis for such a self-definition would arise if the female members of the community took on the masculine role of providers.

The chief concern for Russi Karanjia in 1940, however, was very focused. A young woman named Frene Talyarkhan, daughter of a Parsi judge and a "society girl" had recently been invited to Hollywood to work on an adaptation of a Louis Bromfield novel. Karanjia was worried that once she returned to Bombay, the Zoroastrian community elders would ostracize her (Karanjia, 1940, pp. 21–23). While it seems unlikely that Talyarkhan returned to a screenwriting career in Bombay, she certainly worked as an English-language journalist in the city in the 1940s. And so we see how writing for newspapers is allowed while writing for film is taboo; singing on the radio is allowed while scoring music for films is taboo. The anxiety about women in film is generally centered on the image. The visual of the female body, scanty costumes, intimate scenes with male actors, and the potential for inciting improper thoughts in unnamed viewers are some factors that are purported causes for moral panic. What could be the problem with the work of an off-screen music composer or a film writer? (Image 11).

The problem appears to be with the film studio itself, as a supposedly unregulated site of excess. Unlike the filmic image, the film studio was a privately owned workplace inaccessible to the lay public. Moreover, exponentially escalating revenues,<sup>15</sup> gradual recognition in political quarters,<sup>16</sup> and the strengthening of producers' associations and unions, increased the power of the big studio-owners and made them increasingly immune to moral criticism and interference. Even the powerful orthodox sections of the Parsi community could not prevail against the Bombay Talkies' Board of Directors. As an allegedly ungovernable space, film studios like Bombay Talkies, despite their efforts to clean up the image of the film industry, simultaneously represented mystery and panic in the public imagination.

There is one more vital layer to the Frene Talyarkhan story. It was not just any film studio that was the threat, it was the particular case of the Bombay film studio. She could work in Hollywood, but it was her entry into the Bombay movie industry that was the anticipated problem. Luhrmann outlines how for the average Parsi male, "the rhetoric of asserting similitude to the European entailed the assertion of distance from non-Parsi Indian communities" (Luhrmann, 1994, p. 339). Identifying with the colonizers required an assimilation of their attitudes toward the colonized. The strict emphasis on marrying within the Zoroastrian community was a bid to maintain racial purity, and in a familiar colonial trope, "the intense regulation of sexual interaction became a prominent attempt to regulate the boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized, and by these regulations to articulate a hierarchical relationship between them" (Luhrmann, 1994, p. 342). Ann Laura Stoler has described how:

the colonial politics of exclusion, was contingent on constructing categories, legal and social classifications designating who was "white," who was "native," who could become a citizen rather than a subject, which



**Image 11.** “Miss Frene Talyarkhan in Hollywood,” *filmindia* 1940.

**Source:** Image courtesy Sushila Rani Patel.

children were legitimate progeny and which were not. What mattered were not only one’s physical properties but who counted as “European” and by what measure (Stoler, 1989, p. 635).

Stoler is interested in analyzing how “colonial authority and racial distinctions were fundamentally structured in gendered terms” and how central the regulation of sexuality was to colonial strategies of rule.

For Frene or Manek or Khorshed to join the Bombay film studio signified the possibility of sexual interaction with non-Parsi men. The Parsi single woman was the locus of much contemporary anxiety. Her education, liberal upbringing, and the modern delights of the city were tempting her to stray from her traditional duty to the community. She was marrying late, and she was mixing with “native” men. Within the film studio, the Parsi man was safe but not the Parsi woman. On her rested the burden of ensuring the purity and continuance of the racial line. Surrounded by socio-economic transformations and a change in relations of power, the final blow that could be dealt by the Parsi girl was the horror of miscegenation, a mode of sexualized racial competition.

Almost in confirmation of the worst fears of sexual humiliation, on December 13, 1947, the *Times of India* carried this letter to the Editor:

Recent years have seen an overabundance of males in [the Parsi] community but they have done little justice to their sex. Because of continuous inter-relation marriages, they have grown up unhealthy, weak specimens of manhood....All in all it is a sorry state of affairs which offers the Parsi woman nothing in the way of matrimony....[A good] idea would be to continue to do what many of our women are doing—marrying outsiders....In our zeal for the poor lost Parsi male, let us not forget that there is something called the Parsi female!

Signed, "Frene Talyarkhan, Bombay."

The presence of women in the Bombay film studio catalyzed different fears for different social groups. As we have seen through these narratives of scandal, most of these anxieties were predicated on the sexual identity of the urban working woman. These scandals mostly masquerade as morality tales meant to incite outrage or serve a warning. Instead, if we excavate fragments of sensational rumor and gossip outside a framework of morality, we can apprehend untold or peculiarly local contestations of gender and modernity. A study of the cinematic configuration of the city's public woman brings to the fore the unique communal claims on gender in South Asia. We are reminded that a direct application of the values, reactions, and theorization of Western modernity is likely to miss the myriad shades of modernity wrought by India's historical, cultural, social, and political specificities.

Despite the communal brouhaha, the newly-christened Saraswati Devi went on to become an immensely successful music composer, gaining public recognition with her compositions for *Achhut Kanya*. "*Main ban ki chidiya banke ban-ban boloon re*" sung by Ashok Kumar and Devika Rani, became a national hit and was on the lips of every college student. Saraswati Devi had to work out very simple tunes, with nursery rhyme rhythms for Ashok Kumar and Devika Rani, as they were both completely raw and untrained as singers. This was an era before the playback system came in and actors had to sing their own songs while shooting.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, it is Saraswati Devi herself who is credited with introducing the playback system in Indian cinema. According to legend, Chandraprabha nee Manek had to shoot a song sequence but had a sore throat. Himansu Rai suggested that Khorshed sing into the microphone instead while Manek moved her lips in a synchronized manner. And thus was the playback mode devised. The stories of women's work in film, told through certain moments of irruption, also yield details of practice and innovation that tend to get obscured in the rush to glorify watershed transformative moments.

## A Scandalous Silence

During rehearsals, Mr Wadhvani insisted that I slap the guy as hard as I would in the actual take. I tried to reason with him but to no avail, and the poor extra also asked to be hit according to the instructions of the director. I slapped him eight times till my palm was tingling, but even then Wadhvani didn't accept the take.... When we resumed work the next day, I saw another extra play the part of the soldier in place of the one who had received the slaps a day earlier. When I asked what became of him, I was told quietly so Wadhvani wouldn't hear, that he had suffered a mild stroke of paralysis in the face. (Kazim, 2005, p. 153)

This disturbing incident is recounted in the autobiography of another woman born Khurshid, but rechristened for the movies. Khurshid Mirza aka Renuka Devi joined Bombay Talkies at the age of 21, already



a mother of two. She went on to become quite popular in films such as *Bhabhi* (Osten, 1938) and *Naya Sansar* (Acharya, 1941). Embedded in the richly textured account of her film years, are brief mentions of characters that worked on the fringes of studio life. The male “extra” described in the quote above represents a parallel world of work within the studio, an “extraneous” world undocumented and rendered voiceless. The discourse of scandal privileges the star figure as the object of controversy. It does not, on the other hand, allow us access to the numerous fringe players whose work took place beyond the arc lights. This silence surrounding the work of lower-rung employees and temporary crew in the studios of Bombay is nothing short of a scandal in itself.

The histories of Naseem Banu and Khorshed Homji were pieced together from a disparate array of materials. Interviews, tributes, and obituaries memorializing these women aided me in my enterprise. Such genres of memorial do not exist for the workers I wish to discuss here. Thus, I had to move into the realm of ethno-historical research to track down real people and their memories. In 2008, I was fortunate to be able to meet Ram Tipnis, who joined Filmistan Studio as Head of the Make-Up Department in 1945. Tipnis *dada*'s story is significant not just as an account of an earlier time, but also because it is an unlikely voice.<sup>18</sup> While there is a paucity of published research on the early years of the talkies in Bombay, the little that exists has had to depend on official studio sources, the Indian Cinematograph Committee Report (1928) or interviews with directors and producers. Journalists, as well as film historians have had negligible interest in film practitioners other than stars, directors, and playback singers.

During the interview, Tipnis *dada* took great care to emphasize how informal the atmosphere at Filmistan was. He mentioned how S. Mukherjee “was very strict when we would shoot. But after shooting hours he was very friendly.” This repeated stress ironically points to a distinct sense of the hierarchy at play in a big studio like Filmistan. Modeled along the lines of Bombay Talkies, each department was separately housed and had a specialist in charge. Tipnis *dada* worked with a team of two assistants for each film. Both were men. Not only were women not employed in the make-up department, Tipnis *dada* says that the only women routinely hired in film studios were actresses, extras,<sup>19</sup> or hairdressers.

In fact Bombay Talkies and Filmistan started the trend of having a separate Hair Department. Before that the actresses would get their maids to do their hair or everyone would just do their own hair, you know Indian style....Even in the Costume department we had men. Sometimes if they needed help they might call the Hair assistant, but no, there were no other women employed in the studio. See, I have traveled all over the world and there are ladies in other countries who do make-up, who write and even do camera. But not in India. Now they are trying, as make-up artistes. Initially our union opposed this. Why you know? Because they are not used to the odd hours...Also, in our Indian culture, it was not accepted for a woman to come in so much contact with men.

The search for lost narratives of women's work necessitates a journey through other narratives such as Tipnis *dada*'s. In the process one is able to gather clues as to the organization of studios, existing work profiles, and practices. A studio like Filmistan boasted a fairly streamlined organizational structure in comparison to most of the other smaller film companies of the time. However, several important aspects of film production were still neglected. This neglect was reflected in the lack of technicians devoted to areas such as Costume Design. Ram Tipnis has already told us that men handled the work of costumes. He also refers to wardrobe decisions being made by the Director, in consultation with the Art Director. In the era of black and white film stock, costumes had to be selected using a monotone glass to check what that particular color would look like in black and white (*filmindia*, July 1940, p. 41). One could only choose between various shades of grey, black or white, and therefore, the Art Director and

Cameraperson would guide the choice of shades. Tipnis dada also mentions a "Tailor Master" whose role was limited to getting the clothes stitched, hired, and ironed.

An article written in 1940 says that "there is no worker at present in any of our studios to whom the designation of Costume Designer can be applied" (*filmindia*, July 1940, p. 40). The writer describes instead, the Costume Man, an equivalent of today's Dress Man, who is "the fellow who folds up the dresses after the day's work and generally looks after them." Dress designs, a vital part of the overall impact of the filmic image, were influenced by the ideas of the Director or imported fashion magazines. This state of affairs continued well into the 1960s when Naseem Banu started to design clothes and jewelry for her daughter Saira Banu's films. Talking about the 1960s and 1970s Saira Banu says:

We didn't have the concept of a dress designer then. Those days we had heroines wearing a green blouse with a blue sari! Maganlal Dresswala supplied the costumes for the costume dramas. She's [Naseem Banu] the one who got the tailors and the embroiderers, and had my clothes made. She even designed my jewelry. (Lamchhane, 1999, p. 121)

Back at the departmentally structured Bombay Talkies, it was Devika Rani who was Head of the Costume Department, working in the multiple roles of actress, costume designer, diplomatic representative and later, Controller of Productions (Guruswamy, 1984).

Dr Sushila Rani Patel, journalist, classical singer, and former actress, corroborates Ram Tipnis' confident assertion that there were no women working in film studios apart from actresses and hairdressers. Married to Baburao Patel and ghost writer of several sections in *filmindia* magazine, Sushila Rani had seen her share of film studios. Jogging her mind back to her studio work and visits in the 1940s, she is able to answer my question only through the memory of absence. "I didn't see any women around. They just weren't there." (Patel, 2008).

Is it really possible that the case of the Bombay film studio should differ so widely from the experience of studios in North America, Britain, or Italy? Giuliana Bruno has described how early studios in Italy employed large numbers of women in laboratories and editing rooms as daily wage workers (Bruno, 1993). Sitting row after row in sweat-shop conditions, these women spliced and joined film negatives, and hand-colored black and white film. Bruno explains the high concentration of women in this kind of film work by suggesting that "the assembling of film must have seemed appropriate for women as it resembles other tasks considered specifically 'feminine.' An underpaid job, it required patience, attention, and care and was repetitive – all characteristics of housework" (Bruno, 1993, p. 105). Indeed, Kamlabai Gokhale's description of women getting together to wash film in Dadasaheb Phalke's home indicates that women were involved with forms of film production and post-production that were not yet acknowledged as such (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 1980, p. 18). Other clues are available in contemporary sources if we approach them obliquely. In a highly offensive editorial from April 1938, Baburao Patel discusses reasons for the deteriorating quality and success rate of Indian pictures.

For instance, we shall quote only one aspect which of late has become a craze with several producers in Bombay. We refer to the Anglo-Indian girls who work in our pictures as 'Extras'...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 by their wits, modern life has made some of these girls the most detestable scums of society. (Patel, 1938, p. 4)

The same morality discourse, seen in the case of Naseem Banu and Khorshed Homji, resurfaces in a new and communal avatar. Where does immorality lie? Is it intrinsic to the Anglo-Indian girl or does it

lie in the fact that a young female workforce is compelled to participate in an underpaid, unorganized, sector and also suffer slander? Women's labor, be it in the film industry or otherwise, has often been denied the status of work. A woman "helping out" with washing the negative or designing a costume hardly qualifies as a film professional by official standards. Within a visual economy of desire and commodity, the filmic image is heavily dependent on elements such as costumes, jewelry, hair styles, and make-up. An actress who does her own hair and make-up, or decides the diegetic appropriateness of a collared blouse versus a *choli*, adds to the affect and meaning of the filmic text. When editors such as Patel launch moral attacks against certain gendered work practices, their tone is "scandalized" but this extreme reaction also reveals the popular appeal and circulation of images of pale-skinned chorus girls and extra dancers.

Across multiple narratives of multiple female film professionals we can see clear affinities. Theirs was a form of work that was an intensely "gendered" experience, and they each negotiated urban modernity using the skills of their community while also resisting community conventions. The huge differences in cultural status and class notwithstanding, we see that similar claims were being made on the bodies and lifestyles of these women. The modern urban woman used a variety of strategies to negotiate spaces within and alongside frameworks of capitalism, patriarchy, and nationalism. What backgrounds were film employees coming from, what were the circuits via which this new work pool was accessed, what was their perceived position in contemporary society and in what specific ways did the movies enable them to forge a new life in the city?

The film studio played a major role in the city's imagination of itself, both due to the looming physical presence of sprawling, modern buildings that teemed with a new kind of worker, as also through their affective presence inscribed in networks of gossip, rumor, and speculation. Alternative forms of community were formed, based on desire and aspiration that had the potential to cut across stable social demographics. As Denise McKenna has said about Hollywood:

Part of the magic of the movies also disguised the sleight of hand which helped Los Angeles invent Hollywood. This is, in some ways, to say that Hollywood and Los Angeles formed each other's unconscious. They were part of each other's origins—Hollywood did emerge as the nation's dream factory, but first the film industry gave Los Angeles the opportunity to dream itself. (McKenna, 2008, p. 7)

The Bombay film studios gave their workers a chance to imagine new selves and new ways of being in the world. Tied to the public sphere through the movie industry's elaborate publicity mechanisms, this brave new world was available to the "ordinary" person living and working just beyond the walls of the film studio.

## Notes

1. Durga Khote herself was hailed as one of the first educated "society girls" to step into the world of films. The fact that she was married and came from a respectable family of lawyers was much publicized at the time in an attempt to break the conventional perception of screen work.
2. For example, see Sabita Devi (1931) and Chandravati Devi (1935). Reprinted in Bandopadhyay (1993).
3. Jaddan Bai had also been a courtesan and was noticed for her singing by K.L. Saigal in Calcutta. She went on to become a gramophone singer, actress, and eventually set up her own production house, Sangeet Film Company.
4. Both Sulochana and Naseem have made this claim in interviews.

5. "Analyzing the contents of 12 Indian fan magazines of July–August 1948, published in English, it was found that the advertisements and pictures were largely devoted to actresses [60.9% of the total]...Even on the cover page, pictures of actresses were predominant." See also Haynes (2010).
6. For example, *BC*, January 14, 1937: "*Awakening*—Special Show for Ladies at Krishna...Mrs Hansa Mehta will preside, and speeches will be made by Mrs Enakshi and other prominent ladies."; *BC*, January 1, 1946: "*Amrapali*—The Picture that Women Like. Zenana show at Roxy, 1 p.m."
7. Question asked by Matadin Narnoly, Bhagalpur. The "Editor's Mail" section was one of *filmindia's* selling points and was known for Baburao Patel's witty, irreverent, acerbic replies. In this context, the reply about Leela Chitnis is exceedingly tame and striking.
8. In the context of the Bombay film industry, it might also explain why, for example, Devika Rani was hailed as the "Darling of the Indian Screen" despite her reputation for extramarital affairs. For a longer discussion about Devika Rani and her complicated star persona, see Mukherjee (2009).
9. "How many women graduates are working in our films?", "How many young girls are working in the various film companies?", "Can you tell me the exact age at which actresses retire from the film line?", "What are film actresses paid per picture?" and many more such questions in *filmindia* 1942–1946.
10. Histories of Indian cinema are often traced through the personal achievements of men. Revealing is the vocabulary around these men as evidenced in just one representative book, Ramachandran (1985). In it are essays on Dadasaheb Phalke, "Father of Indian Cinema," Ardeshir Irani, the "Father of the Indian Talkie," and J.F. Madan and B.N. Sircar, the "Patriarchs of Indian Cinema." (Emphases mine).
11. "Turn of the century photographs of the Parsis show...the women sometimes in European dress, and they wear stockings, English shoes and pearls" (Luhmann, 1994, p. 339).
12. English newspapers of the period often feature photographs of Parsi women achievers, in the fields of sport, music, and education.
13. See also Luhmann (1994, p. 340): "There is a question of exactly how wealthy the famously successful Parsis were....It is clear that there were a disproportionate number of rich Parsis, but also that there were poverty-stricken and slum-dwelling Parsis....Nevertheless, by the mid-nineteenth century, if not before, wealthy entrepreneurs began to seem prototypically Parsi to the Parsis themselves and a significant shift in self-perception seems to have taken place within the community."
14. A lack of materials on urban women's work and incomes necessitates an inferential account. Manto tells us that in 1937 he was receiving a salary of ₹40 at the Imperial Film Company—"Meri Shaadi," 2004, 33; the *BC* states that an average salaried person got ₹200 per month—*BC*, January 11, 1937, front page; contrast these figures with Gohar Mamajiwala's first salary of ₹300 more than a decade before, in 1925. Cited in Girish Karnad (1980, p. 74).
15. One can get an idea of the increase from the fact that Manto started screenwriting at a monthly salary of ₹40 in 1937 and was apparently being offered ₹1,000 by 1943.
16. Various separate associations of producers, distributors, exhibitors, journalists, technicians, and artistes had been formed by the time the First Indian Motion Picture Congress was held in Bombay in 1939, inaugurated by S. Satyamurthy, prominent member of the Indian National Congress. In 1946 Bombay's Premier, Kher, inaugurated the All-India Film Conference. The Conference was organized by the Motion Picture Society of India (1932). Alongside the conference came the proposal to create an All-India Federation of the various film associations and organizations.
17. "The songs were sung on the sets by the actors themselves. Later, shorter versions that could be included on a 78 rpm record, were recorded in the HMV studio. For these three-minute numbers, all the musicians and the singer-actors had to troop into the studio, usually late at night when traffic was thin and the danger of being interrupted by honking vehicles and nosy passer-bys was diminished somewhat."—Bhattacharya (2003).
18. I refer to Ram Tipnis as "*dada*" following a Bombay film industry tradition to address wardrobe assistants, art directors, and make-up artistes with the suffix "*dada*" meaning "older brother".



19. There is no systematic information on female extras in the 1930s and 1940s. As always, there are occasional clues. In an article titled “Hyacinth In A Film Studio,” the anonymous writer says that male extras earned approximately ₹12 a day, while female extras earned ₹2–8 a day (Hyacinth, 1942, pp. 39–41).

## References

- Acharya, N.R. (1940). *Bandhan* [Motion picture]. India: Hindustani.
- . (1941). *Naya Sansar* [Motion picture]. India: Hindustani.
- Apte, S. (1939, May 14). Films are not my goal but a means to an end. *Mirror*, 2–4.
- Aston, E. (2007). Studies in hysteria: Actress and courtesan Sarah Bernhardt and Mrs. Patrick Campbell. In M.B. Gale, & J. Stokes (Eds), *The Cambridge companion to the actress* (pp. 272–290). Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bakshi, S.R. (1991). *Dadabhai Naoroji: The grand old man*. New Delhi: Anmol Publications.
- Bandopadhyay, S. (1993). *Indian cinema: Contemporary perceptions from the thirties*. Jamshedpur: Celluloid Chapter.
- Barnouw, Eric, & Krishnaswamy, S. (1980). *Indian film*. New York & London: Columbia University Press.
- Bhattacharya, Roshmila (2003). Breaking barriers: Ashok Kumar. *Screen* online, posted on 12 December, 2003 (accessed on March 13, 2009)
- Bruno, G. (1993). *Streetwalking on a ruined map: Cultural theory and the city films of Elvira Notari*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Davis, T.C. (1991). *Actresses as working women: Their social identity in Victorian culture*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Devi, Chandravati (1935). What I actually think of the screen. *Moving Picture Monthly*, Annual 1935.
- Devi, Sabita (1931). Why shouldn't respectable ladies join the films. *Filmiland Annual 1931*.
- Farrell, G. (1993). The early days of the gramophone industry in India: Historical, social and musical perspectives. *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, 2, 31–53.
- filmindia* (1940). Enter another technician—The costume designer. *filmindia*, 6(7), 41.
- Gupt, S. (2005). *The Parsi theatre: Its origins and development*. Trans. and ed. K. Hanse. Kolkata: Seagull Books.
- Guruswamy, S. (1984). Interview. *Screen*, October 5.
- Hansen, K. (1999). Making women visible: Gender and race cross-dressing in the Parsi theatre. *Theatre Journal*, 51(2), 127–147.
- . (2002). Parsi theatre and the city: Locations, patrons, audiences. In *Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life* (pp. 40–49). New Delhi: Sarai, CSDS.
- Haynes, D. (2010). Creating the consumer? Advertising, capitalism and the middle classes in urban western India, 1914–40. In D. Haynes, A. McGowan, & T. Roy (Eds), *Towards a history of consumption in South Asia* (pp. 185–223). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Hyacinth (1942). Naseem thinks Shantaram wonderful! *filmindia*, January, 8(1), 31–39.
- Joshi, L.M., & Joshi, K.P. (2012). *Niranjan Pal, A forgotten legend & such is life, An autobiography*. London: South Asian Cinema Foundation.
- Judas (1938). Bombay calling. *filmindia*, 3(10), 9–14.
- . (1942). Bombay calling. *filmindia*, 8(1), 9–11.
- Karnad, Girish (1980). Glorious Gohar. *Cinema Vision*, 1(1), 74.
- Karanjia, R.K. (1940). Parsee girls have personality for the screen. *filmindia*, 6(10), 19–25.
- Katrak, A. (1977). Movie queens of yesteryear: Naseem. *Filmfare*, February 4, 44–46.
- Kazim, L. (2005). *A woman of substance: The memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza, 1918–1989*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Lamchhane, P. (1999). Memories: Naseem Banu. *Cineblitz International*, 11(1), 119–112.
- Luhar, C. (1935). *Silver king* [Motion picture]. India: Hindustani.
- Luhrmann, T.M. (1994). The good Parsi: Postcolonial feminization of a colonial elite. *Man*, 29(2), 333–357, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

- Manto, S.H. (2008). Naseem: The fairy queen/*Pari chehra* Naseem. In K. Hasan (Ed. & Trans.) *Bitter fruit* (pp. 594–605). New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Majumdar, S. (1945). *Begum* [Motion picture]. India: Hindustani.
- McKenna, D. (2008). *The city that made the pictures move: Gender, labor, and the film industry in Los Angeles, 1908–1917*. Ph.D. dissertation, New York University.
- Mirror* (1939). Maya interview. May 14, p. 18.
- Modi, S. (1938). *Talaq* [Motion picture]. India: Hindustani.
- . (1939). *Pukar* [Motion picture]. India: Hindustani.
- Mukherjee, Debashree (2009). Good girls, bad girls. *Seminar*, 598, June.
- Mukherjee, G. (1941). *Jhoola* [Motion picture]. India: Hindustani.
- . (1943). *Kismet* [Motion picture]. India: Hindustani.
- Multani, K.M. (1942). *Ujala* [Motion picture]. India: Hindustani.
- Oldenburg, V. (1990). Lifestyle as resistance: The case of the courtesans of Lucknow. *Feminist Studies*, 16(2), 259–287.
- Osten, F. (1938). *Bhabhi* [Motion picture]. India: Hindustani.
- . (1939). *Kangan* [Motion picture]. India: Hindustani.
- Pal, C. (2005). *Shooting stars*. Mumbai: Screenworld.
- Pande, M. (2006). Moving beyond themselves: Women in Hindustani Parsi theatre and early Hindi films. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 41(17), 1646–1653.
- Pasupuleti, K. (2009) Profile of Saraswati Devi. Retrieved from [http://members.tripod.com/oldies\\_club/Saraswatidevi.htm](http://members.tripod.com/oldies_club/Saraswatidevi.htm) (accessed on April 9, 2013)
- Patel, B. (1938, April). Some Anglo-Indian girls in our films! *filmindia*, 3–4.
- Patel, S.R. (2008, August). Personal Interview. Bombay.
- Rajadhyaksha, A. & Willemsen, P. (1999). *Encyclopedia of Indian cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Ramachandran, N. (2003). Naseem Banu obituary. *Sight and Sound*, 13(3), 28.
- Ramachandran, T.M. (Ed.) (1985). *70 years of Indian cinema, 1913–1983*. Bombay: Cinema India-International.
- Ranade, A.D. (2006). *Hindi film song: Music beyond boundaries*. New Delhi & Chicago: Promilla & Co.
- Sathe, V.P. (1984). Hallmark of Bombay Talkies. *Screen*, October 5.
- Shah, N. (1984). The musical odyssey of Bombay Talkies. *Screen*, October 5.
- Shah, P. (1950). *The Indian film*. Bombay: Motion Picture Society of India.
- Sunita (1939). Morality & films. *Mirror*, May 14.
- Stoler, A.L. (1989). Making empire respectable: The politics of race and sexual morality in 20th century colonial cultures. *American Ethnologist*, 16(4), 634–660.
- Times of India* (1935, September 12). Readers' views: Parsi ladies and the films. *The Times of India*, p. 16.
- White, L. (2000). *Speaking with vampires: Rumor and history in colonial Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zabak (1940, October). A square deal to our film stars. *Filmindia*, 51.