

The stars of silent films wrought a magic previously unknown to any audience - their eyes and expressions said it all. That they were beautiful/handsome is a given, that they were talented - obvious, that they continue to command a fan-following - this comes as a surprise because the talkies launched a revolution that should have erased these names and faces. *Sulochana, Dinshaw Billimoria, Nadia, Seeta Devi, Master Vithal, Zubeida, and Patience Cooper* -- they live on.

Sulochana (1907-83)

Sulochana or *Ruby Myers* (her real name) was a former telephone operator who went on to become the highest paid actor of her day. Her finest period was with Imperial Studios where her on-screen pairing with *Dinshaw Billimoria* was especially popular. They were among the few stars to successfully transit to talkies.

The most famous of her films - *Wild Cat of Bombay* - saw her in eight guises/characters including a gardener and a street brat! Her virtuosity knew no limits and she could have had no better vehicle for her talent. The sound films at Imperial were mainly remakes of her films - *Wild Cat of Bombay* (1927) was remade as *Bambai Ki Billi* (1936), *Madhuri* (1928) reappeared in sound in 1932, *Anarkali* (1928) was remade in 1935, and the hit film *Indira BA* (1929) became *Indira MA* (1934).

Sulochana launched Rubi Pics in the mid-30s - this marked her retirement from acting!

Ismail Merchant's Mahatma and the Mad Boy (1974) included a tribute to this greatest of the silent screen stars.

Dinshaw Billimoria (born 1904)

D. Billimoria as he was referred to was introduced in action films - both historical and mythological. One of the stars at Imperial Studios, he and *Sulochana* were the star leads, with many extremely successful films to their credit, notably *Wild Cat of Bombay* and *Anarkali*.

In 1942, he acted in and directed *Jawani Ki Pukar*.

Seeta Devi (born 1912).

Born *Renee Smith*, this unknown became a star with *Himansu Rai's Prem Sanyas* (1925), receiving accolades for her performance and bearing.

Seeta Devi's roles in *Shiraz* (1928) and *Prapancha Pash* (1929) established her firmly, but many continued to believe that she and her sister *Percy Smith* alternately appeared as the star!

Master Vithal (-1969).

He debuted as a child artiste at Rajapurkar Natak Mandali and made his first film appearance as a dancing girl in Maharashtra Films' *Kalyan Khajina* (1924) - but *Master*

Vithal was the consummate action hero of his time! The major break came with Sharada Studios *Ratan Manjari* (1926) - this was his first lead role and he remained with the studio as major lead over many years.

The stunt film genre was his forte and he consolidated his position with historical films based on Rajput and Maratha themes. These determined his image - the fearless, noble hero loved by all.

Subsequently he moved to Sagar Movietone, and was engaged in a lawsuit with Sharada Studios, defended by no less than *M.A. Jinnah*, the founding father of Pakistan.

Master Vithal starred in India's first talkie, *Alam Ara* (1931), and later in the super successful *Ramshastri* (1944).

Zubeida (1911-90)

The princess who became a star - *Zubeida* was the daughter of the *Nawab of Sachin* and *Fatma Begum*, actress and India's first lady director! One of *Zubeida's* sisters, *Sultana*, was a star while the other, *Shahzadi*, appeared in films as a teenager.

She commenced her acting career at Kohinoor Studios, at the age of 12. Her finest work was for Kohinoor and Laxmi studios, although she did freelance with other studios.

She honed the role of the 'pure' courtesan to perfection. Her limpid posture and soft uncertain voice were traditions continued by *Meena Kumari* in *Pakeezah* (1971). *Veer Abhimanyu* (1922), *Gul-e-Bakavali* (1924), *Indrasabha* (1925) and the films directed by her mother - *Bulbul-e-Paristan* (1926), *Heer Ranjha* (1928) and *Milan Dinar* -- are her finest performances. *Zubeida* played the lead in India's first sound film *Alam Ara* (1931).

In 1934 *Zubeida*, together with *Nanubhai Vakil*, launched Mahalakshmi Cinetone.

By the late 30s, at the height of her stardom, she had retired, appearing in the rare film thereafter.

Patience Cooper (1905 -)

Cooper is credited with the first double roles of Indian cinema - as twin sisters in *Patni Pratap* and as mother and daughter in *Kashmiri Sundari*!

She was a dancer with Bandman's Musical Comedy before her contract with Madan Theatres. Her career was a smooth one, and she remained at the top till dethroned by *Sulochana*. Her famous films are : *Nala Damayanti* (1920), *Dhruva Charitra* (1921), *Laila Majnu* and *Princess Budur* - both in 1922, *Bilwamangal* and *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves* - both in 1932, *Zehari Saap* (1933), *Khyber Pass* (1936), and *Iraada* (1944).

Excelling in the role of an innocent caught up by events, usually initiated by the males, *Patience Cooper* anticipated the roles that would make *Nargis* famous.

Cooper moreover had the colouring and sharp features that allowed the use of eye-level lighting, rarely used in India.

SOURCE

So Many Cinemas
Author - B.D. Garga
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Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema.
Author -Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen
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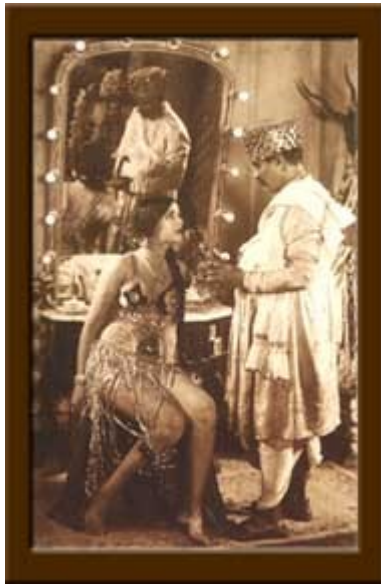
Sulochana (1907-83)



Sulochana(left) and Dinshaw Billimoria in Anarkali, 1928



Zubeida



Zubeida(left)



Patience Cooper