

DEVELOPMENT OF ART AND RESOLVE TO PRODUCE INDIGENOUS MOVIES

After completion of his course at the J.J. School of Art, Dadasaheb's eldest brother Shivrampant Phalke took him to Baroda (Vadodara) at the beginning of 1886 and put him in the famous Kala Bhavan so that he may develop his art further.

Dadasaheb made real progress in the various arts necessary for movie-making during his stay at Baroda. He had no thought at that time of making movies. Shivrampant worked at Baroda in the office of Rameshchandra Dutt, a Bengali gentleman, and he too was intelligent, analytical, with a literary bent of mind. Due to his association with Rameshchandra, he knew the Bengali language well. He not only spoke Bengali but could also write it. In addition to his Marathi writings, he started writing in Bengali too. Shivrampant Phalke first translated the Bengali novel *Durgesh Nandini* into Marathi. Later, he also translated *Subhadra Arjun*. Dadasaheb must have turned to writing in Marathi due to his elder brother's influence.

In 1886, Dadasaheb was married to a girl from a 'Marathe' family. In 1890, he completed a course in oil and water colour painting. Painting nature scenes became a hobby with him. He became proficient in architecture and modelling too. He bought a film camera that year and then started experimenting with photography, processing and printing, learning by trial and error. He made such a fine

model of an ideal theatre that at the Industrial Exhibition of 1892 at Ahmedabad, he was awarded a gold medal for it. For his prowess in other art forms, he earned gold and silver medals from time to time. One fan of his presented to him a costly camera for still photography. As a result, he started spending considerable time in taking pictures, and processing and printing them.

Principal Gajjar of the Kala Bhavan took a liking for Dadasaheb and gave him permission in 1893 to use the photo studio and laboratory of Kala Bhavan. As a result Dadasaheb started spending days together in this work. Often, he worked until late at night in the laboratory. The work of 'Shri Phalke's Engraving and Photo Printing' was of such a high standard that a foreign photographer, Mr Rerhe, alone was capable of holding a candle to him. Foreigners admired the artistry and ingenuity of his photographs and prints.

About the same time, the Baroda College decided to stage the Sanskrit play '*Veni Sanhar*'. The responsibility of staging it was assigned to Dadasaheb. He not only acquainted himself with the task of teaching acting to the artists, getting them to deliver their pieces effectively, getting their make-up done well, but also did the job of prompting. The performance was much appreciated. He had already done a part in the play staged at the social gathering of the J.J. School of Art while studying there.

Earlier in 1881 Principal Gajjar had introduced Dadasaheb to the then popular Chief Justice Baburao Pandurang Walawalkar. With the encouragement of Principal Gajjar and under proper and discreet guidance of Justice Walawalkar, Dadasaheb learnt in about six months the technique of preparing half-tone blocks, photo-litho, three-colour ceramic photography, etc. He was very fond of learning new arts. As his grasping power was of a very high order, he could become proficient in any skill in a very short time. His idea in learning many trades was to be properly equipped if ever

he had to undertake a supplementary source of livelihood. For acquiring the knowledge of new skills and for his business he had constantly to go on tours. He did not, therefore, have a stable family life. He studied classical music in the Maulabax Music School at Baroda and later performed *Kirtans* too, which combined the arts of music, acting and telling a story interestingly.

Despite the acquisition of various arts, Dadasaheb had no easy ride in making a living. He, therefore, decided to become a professional photographer. Handing over the photo studio and the laboratory of the Kala Bhavan to Principal Gajjar, he left for Godhra in Gujarat for doing business. It was 1895.

His business did not, however, do well at Godhra. A myth had spread all around that a camera sucks up energy from a person's body and the person dies soon afterwards. This had an adverse effect on Dadasaheb's business, which hardly made both ends meet. To add to his cup of woes, he lost his wife in the plague of Godhra in 1900. Naturally, it was a great blow to him. As he did not like to continue in Godhra, he returned to Baroda.

At Baroda, he restarted his photography business. He did not earn enough to make a living and so started the business of painting the stage curtains for drama companies. This led to his getting acquainted with Prof. Shankar Moreshwar Ranade, a knowledgeable person in the field of drama. He acquainted Dadasaheb with full details of the dramatic art and drama production. In short, he gave Dadasaheb the basic training in stage production. Not only that, he also gave Dadasaheb the hero's role in Shakespeare's plays *The Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline* and got him to do the roles properly.

When acting in plays, Dadasaheb very carefully observed how make-up and costume were done. He would discuss the subject with the make-up man. Later, he started

doing the make-up for children's plays according to his own ideas. He achieved mastery in this art as well. Many guardians of the children said that Dadasaheb transformed their wards so completely that they could not recognise them.

Prof. Ranade had trained Dadasaheb in facial expression, movements on the stage and delivery of dialogues. He gradually began giving this training to amateur artists. If an artist failed to turn up for a show, Dadasaheb would often tide over the difficulty by doing the absentee's role himself. If a producer so requested, he would sometimes direct his play, write a play or make changes in the script as desired. He would also assist in stage settings.

To facilitate the training of new artistes in acting, he had thoughtfully displayed in his studio, photographs of artistes in foreign films showing their varied facial expressions. Many amateur artistes visited his studio to see these photographs. It was at this time that he presented the Sanskrit play *Veni Sanhaar* referred to earlier.

Even so, Dadasaheb was not able to establish himself. Once when he was in a depressed mood, a German magician arrived in Baroda. Dadasaheb had always an urge to learn new arts; so he got introduced to this magician. They became friends. Dadasaheb learned from him various items of magic based on chemical reactions, technical ideas, illusions, playing card tricks etc. This helped him later in trick photography in his film-making. Towards the end of 1901 Dadasaheb began to hold public shows of magic as Prof. Kelfa (letters of his name in reverse order in Marathi) and became very popular as a magician.

After he started film production, he filmed his magic shows. His daughter Mai (Mandakini) Athavle remembers an incident about his magic shows. Once when going to Mumbai by railway, the train halted for quite some time in the Khandala *ghat* due to some technical flaw. As there was no indication of the train resuming its journey soon,

Dadasaheb obtained a pack of playing cards from a passenger and entertained the travelling public with playing card tricks. In 1902, Dadasaheb remarried at Baroda to Saraswati, daughter of Shankar Vasudeo Karandikar and niece of the proprietor of Kirloskar Natak Company and renowned singer-actor Bhaurao Kolhatkar (*alias* Bhavdya). This marriage proved to be propitious for Dadasaheb. Saraswatibai stood by him like a shadow all the time with a smiling face during the period he had to face many difficulties and ordeals in his great work of producing movies indigenously in India for the first time. She even actively helped him in his work. Her sacrifice was unprecedented.

The year after his marriage, with the encouragement and active help of an influential person like Dr. Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, Dadasaheb got a job as a photographer and draftsman in the Archaeological Survey department of the government. This job took him to all parts of India, which too benefited him in the long run. He could study the ancient splendour and architecture of India through an artist's eye. He thoughtfully photographed many temples, rock carvings, riverside *ghats*, astounding stone-carvings etc.

Notwithstanding all this interesting work, Dadasaheb's artistic mind did not find the job engaging enough. Besides, Dadasaheb's patriotism was boundless. The movement against the partition of Bengal had a great effect on him. As a result, he resigned from the secure government job in 1906 and his self-respecting, idealistic mind was obsessed with the thought of an independent industrial vocation.

Dadasaheb gave up the job for the sake of patriotism, but what next? He decided to go into an independent vocation. Dr. Bhandarkar already loved the highly intelligent Phalke. He was ever willing to help the versatile Dadasaheb. With his active assistance Dadasaheb set up a printing press at Lonavla under the name and style of 'Phalke Engraving and Printing Works'. The knowledge required for this

profession, which he had obtained fifteen years earlier, was now useful to him.

Dadasaheb first secured the job of making photo-litho transfers for the Ravi Verma Press of Lonavla. Thereafter, he started the work of half-tone block making and printing. The newspaper *Rashtramata* published in its supplement photographs of great men like Lokmanya Tilak. These risky jobs were assigned to Dadasaheb who dared to make blocks and print photographs of revolutionaries and national leaders and was not afraid of the police inquiries that took place now and then. He now turned his attention to tri-colour printing.

This new business of Phalke was on the way up. Consequently, Phalke Engraving and Printing Works was shifted from Lonavla to Dadar Main Road for the sake of convenience. As his elder brother was the Dewan of Jawhar State, he persuaded the Prince to grant two thousand rupees for developing the business. Dadasaheb's ambition was to make his tri-colour printing most up to date. A rich merchant named Purushottam Vishram Mavji agreed to give necessary assistance for this purpose to Dadasaheb who had discussed the matter with Dr. Bhandarkar earlier. He generously and willingly agreed to give up his partnership in Phalke Engraving and Printing Works, as he did not want to come in the way of progress of an ambitious artist like Dadasaheb. The two business partners parted company, keeping their close relationship intact. Purushottam Mavji took the place of Dr. Bhandarkar as a partner.

The new printing press was named 'Laxmi Art Printing Works'. In order to obtain the technical know-how of colour printing and to buy the necessary machinery for it, Dadasaheb went to Germany in 1909. After completing the study and buying the machinery, he returned to India. According to the prevalent social mores, Dadasaheb had to undergo a purification ceremony, having returned from a

foreign country. Dadasaheb's knowledge of coloured printing was so perfect and his printing so beautiful that the work of colour printing at the Laxmi Art Printing Works went on increasing and the business prospered. Only the Times of India Press could do colour printing as attractive as Dadasaheb's, which shows what degree of proficiency he had achieved in this art. The periodicals *American Painter* and *British Painter* admired Dadasaheb's printing a great deal.

Dadasaheb never felt at ease until whatever he undertook, was done to his entire satisfaction. He constantly thought about it, was obsessed by it. To work for it untiringly was part of his nature. He constantly tried to make his printing artistic, outstanding and attractive, worked day and night for it, but the overwork put a tremendous strain on his eyes and, gradually, his sight was affected. However, he was not prepared to rest which resulted in his losing his sight altogether.

Fortunately, a renowned ophthalmologist Dr. Prabhakar started emergency treatment for his eyes. It was efficacious. Dadasaheb's eye sight went on improving and was completely restored. At the same time, Dr. Prabhakar advised him not to do any work in future, which would strain his eyes, because if the sight were to be affected again, it would be very difficult to cure him. Dadasaheb agreed, for the time being at least.

Dadasaheb had also started publication of a pictorial magazine with an artistic get-up, in both Marathi and Gujarati. He loved gardening and was knowledgeable in that field too. He tried to maintain a clean and beautiful garden.

'Laxmi Art Printing Works' made a very good name for itself. Its work was appreciated all round, but some evil eye fell on it. Differences developed between the business-minded partner Mavji and the artistic Dadasaheb. More and

more interference began to take place in Dadasaheb's ideas and plans. This was not likely to be stomached by a free-spirited man like Dadasaheb. As a result, at the beginning of 1911, he abruptly left 'Laxmi Art Printing Works' without taking a *paisa*.

As the word got around that Dadasaheb had left 'Laxmi Art Printing Works', many Gujarati financiers started knocking at his door. Finding that he did not talk about the matter, they approached Saraswatibai and said, "Sister, what does it matter if he has lost Laxmi Art Printing Works. We shall have Saraswati Art Printing Works instead." Dadasaheb was such a large-hearted man that while leaving 'Laxmi Art Printing Works', he had promised Mavjiseth that he would not turn to this business again. This had buoyed up Mavjiseth. Dadasaheb apprised the Gujarati financiers of his promise.

This queer, quixotic behaviour of Dadasaheb enraged his family and well-wishers. He was even questioned openly: "Kicking the goddess of wealth who came to your door in the shape of big financiers, which other occupation are you going to find to gain fame and fortune?" He had no answer. He had severed the partnership abruptly, without any plans for the future. He felt frustrated. This was his test by fire and the Indian film industry was born as a result.

Efforts to produce movies had started in America, Britain, France, Russia, Japan and Germany in the previous century. America was in the vanguard of these efforts. In 1885 when Dadasaheb was studying in the J.J. School of Art, an inventive American, George Eastman, had invented a film for making movies. Coincidentally, when Dadasaheb was in the final year of his course at the Kala Bhavan in 1889, Eastman improved his film further, which is in use till the present day. This was an important stage in the progress of movie-making. The same year, the British inventor William Fridgegreen invented a camera that could use that film so

that making and projecting movies on the screen made considerable progress. Because of this, as stated earlier, William Friegreen is considered the father of movie art.

The year Principal Gajjar handed over the studio and the laboratory of Kala Bhavan to Phalke, two important developments took place abroad. In 1893, George Melier of Paris succeeded in making trick photography: a man is transformed into an animal, he floats in the air, vanishes, is cut into bits and is rejoined. His short movie *A Trip to the Moon* is worth mentioning. The same year, on 1st February 1893, with the foresight of having to film the artistes appearing in a film in future, Edison constructed in New Jersey a studio, of the size of a room, which would allow sunshine to come in. He named it 'Black Maria'. Filming of some animals was done there too. Production of short movies had started in America, Britain and France from 1896. In 1903, when Dadasaheb started working in the Archaeological Survey department, the world's first movie with a story, called *A Great Train Robbery*, made by the American director Edwin Porter, was screened. Its length was only three quarters of a reel.

In 1908, Dadasaheb founded 'Laxmi Art Printing Works'. That year David Wark Griffith entered the American film world. He wanted to be a writer, but, willy-nilly, had to become an actor. Later, he became a director. He was the first to recognise the power of the camera. Filming until his time was done by placing the camera at a fixed place, as if filming a stage play. He was constantly thinking: What then is the difference between a play and a movie? He realised that no one had gauged the power of the camera. In 1909, for the first time, Griffith used the 'Close-up' in his movie, *Love of Gold*, because of which facial expressions could be seen clearly. His production department, however, did not like the idea. The audience thought him crazy: Who is this director? Where are the hands and feet of this character? We see the full figure of a person in a play, was their

comment. They were not used to seeing a close-up. It was not possible at that time to understand its effectiveness.

In the movie *Romana* of 1911, Griffith used 'long shot', 'mid-shot', 'three-fourths' shot etc., which are used today. That led to the query: How can the camera move constantly from place to place? When doing this picture he took care to see that stage settings, make-up, light effects, shooting, script were proper and natural. Not just these things, but he also successfully used the modern techniques such as 'fade-in', 'fade-out' etc. as well. In 1912, in his movie *After Many Years*, he used the 'flash back' technique, which again led to severe criticism. "This director is a softhead. Why does he tell the story from the wrong end?" was the type of criticism he faced.

His photographer Billy Bitzer, however, understood that Griffith was a man ahead of his time. He was certain that Griffith was going to revolutionise the technique of film production. Without heeding the criticism, Griffith took amazing strides in technique and is, therefore, considered the 'father of film technique'. Initially, he was against producing small movies of one or two reels. How can a whole story be covered in limited length? How can it be effective? These were his objections. But the producers were not persuaded. Ultimately, the length of movies went on increasing as he advocated. The advances he made in the technique were slowly absorbed and taken further on.

Nearer home, Dadasaheb had left 'Laxmi Art Printing Works'. He had rejected, in no uncertain terms, the requests of the financiers who knocked his door. There was no other occupation or employment. Days dragged on without work, there was no plan for any other activity and there was no desire to work for someone.

Every evening, Dadasaheb went for a walk with his son Bhalchandra (Babarai). Once, when out roaming in a dejected mood, he went to see a movie, just to relax, in a

theatre, which had opened in a tent on Girgaon Back Road at the place where the Harkisondas Hospital now stands. Mostly, American silent movies were shown there. Returning home at night, Babarai said to his mother, "Mom, we saw today men and animals moving about on a screen. It was wonderful." "What did you show him?" asked Saraswatibai. "Do you want to see? I will take you there tomorrow."

The next day, Dadasaheb took Saraswatibai to the show. As it was Easter, *The Life of Christ*, a movie on Jesus Christ's life, was screened that day. Viewing it, Dadasaheb wondered why such movies were not produced in our country. Our audiences see western culture in these movies. How will Indians be able to see their own culture? That must be done. We have any number of mythological and historical stories. If they were screened, they would have a good effect on the viewers. A message for the country's freedom can be spread. For that purpose, the business should be in Indian hands. Somebody must do it. Why somebody? I will do it, he thought. He saw Shrikrishna in place of Jesus on the screen and Yashoda in place of Mary. Lost in his thoughts, he did not know when the movie ended.

Saraswatibai was wonderstruck to see the pictures moving on the screen. On the way back home, she asked Dadasaheb, "How do the pictures move on the screen?" "You will come to know by and by," he said. "I am going to start the business of such moving pictures. Shrikrishna, Shriram, have to be shown instead of Christ." Hearing this, Saraswatibai was speechless. It was a revolutionary day in the lives of Indians: Saturday, 15th April 1911! Some records mention the year as 1910. Dadasaheb too has mentioned 1910 in his memoirs about this episode. But it was 1911, as the issue of *The Times of India* of 14th April 1911 contains an advertisement of the movie *The Life of Jesus*.