

## **V Shantaram and the growth of a new aesthetic**

"In our profession, an artistic failure is nothing; a commercial failure is a sentence. The secret is to make films that please the public and that allow the director to reveal his personality. "

:John Ford

Rajaram Vankudre, better known as V Shantaram, was born in the princely state of Kolhapur in present day Maharashtra. As a teenager he worked on the railways, which after their initial spurt in the 1850s were undergoing the second major phase of expansion in the wake of the world war. Kolhapur was brimming with pioneering theatrical productions, and the young Shantaram, bitten by the bug, joined the company of legendary dancer and singer Bal Gandharva, which was known as the Gandharva Natak Mandali, in 1914-15. While working there he was trained by eminent musicologist Govind Rao Tembe and Tabla master Tirakhwan, whom he would later employ in his own company. Thereafter like so many of the other early pioneers of cinema, he became attached to a cinema hall as an odd job man. He also simultaneously became an assistant photographer in a local studio. While working there he became aware of the film company which the famous painter Babu Rao Mistry had launched and he decided to throw his lot with him.

Shantaram's first initiation into cinema was through the Kolhapur film company of Babu Rao painter, one of the three great pioneers of Indian cinema. Artistically probably the most important director in the early period of Indian cinema Baburao had little formal education. It was while watching the films which he showed that Baburao learnt his cinema, studying each frame for its composition, lighting, decor and dramatic technique. A training which stood handy when he launched his own film company, the Maharashtra Film Company in Kolhapur in 1919. Raising finances through the patrons of his art, Babu Rao invited and trained many of his old associates, Sheikh Fatehlal, Vishnu Govind Damle and N D Sarpotdar all of whom became giants of silent cinema, fabricated a camera and started his first film. Sairandhari (1920)--another Mahabharata tale-- the first film made by him was based on a popular Marathi play Keechak Vadh. It was there that a young Shantaram joined him to start work. Initially a mere studio hand, Shantaram found his stock rising after Babu Rao had cast him to play the lead role of Krishna in a film on the Lord.

As particular about his casting as he was about other aspects of his film making, Babu Rao was always on the look out for the right person, and anybody even a carpenter, or a technician could be called upon to play the lead role if Babu Rao thought that person fitted the role. Surekha Haran, the biopic on Krishna which Babu Rao made in 1921 found Shantaram catapulted into the lead role, and thus he began his long and fruitful association with cinema. As the actors were always around Babu Rao had the liberty to conduct meticulous and sometimes exhausting rehearsals. One of his actors, a contemporary of Shantaram recalled,

" He wrote his own screen-plays with shot-divisions in a very systematic manner. HE would take umpteen rehearsals before actual shooting, study each character in minor detail...explain to the actor his role in situation and allow the artist sufficient leeway for interpretation. However he was very slow, and we sometimes get annoyed with him"