

PART THREE

Navyug. Bombay, 1918

Phalke:

"Who am I ? A father adding to me thirty crore slave population of India ? My wife's husband ? A servant of India who has not paid his dues towards his motherland ? A victim to the desire of moneylenders ? A man bereft of worldly wisdom, obsessed by only one aim, and thus mining his family life ? Who am I, then ?"

(After thinking for a while) 'Or, perhaps it is true that I don't know the concept of T, I don't claim anything to be mine. I am beyond the perception of happiness and suffering. - So, enough of this prolixity ! O my fellow-beings! O learned men ! O appreciative men who know all the arts! O pioneer of this new era of reforms! Your appreciation of my works has not decreased in spite of the stories of my misfortune. It is only through your grace that I have been able to establish this beautiful art of silent motion pictures for the entertainment of the people. Kindly appreciate the analysis of this art

I intend to disclose some other time the nature of the business contract which has frustrated all my hopes and ambitions. I must narrate to my fellow-artists how we poor and needy artists who are obsessed by a goal are unnecessarily limited through our ignorance and lack of foresight, and are ultimately deceived. I am compelled to narrate this to my fellow-artists for their future guidance and happiness. Whether such agreements are fair or not will be decided by the law, but I heartily wish that my fellow beings take a lesson from my experience, and learn something.

Footnote by Phalke.

But why is my wife not coming on the stage? She really invests me with new life by calming my mind, which is tortured by worldly (physical and mental) worries. In fact, she is the sole architect of my fortunes. Dear one, if you have finished with your work behind the curtains (padada), please do come out on the stage.' Manager's wife, coming forward: '- Lord, was it you who was saying 'work behind the curtains', &c.? This curtain has created duality everywhere.

There is curtain for women. There are double dealings in thought, and conduct, in case of men, in politics, patriotism, at home, and outside, too.

In short, this curtain has helped to show one appearance from the inside, and another from the outside, and also to cover up mysterious things, to conceal secrets, and prevent them from being disclosed, and to conceal filthy sights from people's vision. Human nature is becoming more and more skilled at concealing vile. I am fed up with all this. The more curtains you have, the greater the absence of straight dealings and innocence.'

'- What you say is correct Who would object to the destruction of curtains which create duality? Who will not support the re-establishment of the era of Truth? Will not be desirable to abolish curtains? I should even say that the work 'curtain' itself should be abolished. The curtain should not dominate even in entertainment or in plays.

During the Moghul rule, the Muslims destroyed coconut coir along with the hairlock of Hindus to convert them. (By destroying coir, they believed symbolically to have converted Hindus to Islam), if I am asking for the destruction of curtains which create duality, I am not attacking all curtains - not the stage curtains, to be sure! If I do that, it would be as impractical and ridiculous as the action of the Muslims in relation to the coir. No!

Let nobody blame this art of silent motion pictures which has firmly established itself by entertaining learned men continuously for twenty-four years.

'- But don't you require the screen even for your motion pictures?'

'- No. This is your misconception. What you call a screen or curtain in cinema is the substratum which holds my visual illusion. Should a water surface be considered a curtain because it reflects? We see our reflection in the mirror - can we, therefore, call it a curtain or screen? Similarly, this screen of the cinema is substratum which holds the vision of my moving pictures. Although the dramatic art on the screen is still young, it has conquered the world with its charming and child-like purity of gesture. Enough of this discussion on the curtains! Now, I must keep the pledge I gave to the learned people.'

End of Interlude

Cinema and requirements of personality of cinema actors.

In the olden days, at the beginning of a play, it was the practice for the stage manager to offer worship to the Goddess Saraswati to acquire blessings for his actors. This was in such terms as 'Let my ignorant actors be learned; may they speak their lines fluently like Bruhaspati, the preceptor of the Gods' and such blessings were granted immediately. By virtue of these blessings, all the actors playing human beings, gods and demons used to shout their speeches so loudly that the spectators had to protect their ears. It is said that the intimate bedroom conversation between Ravana and Mandodari was spoken out so loudly that ladies in the audience were frightened, and the children who were scared remained so all their lives. As a result of this, stage managers stopped asking for blessings from Saraswati and Ganesha in direct terms. Consequently, the voices of the actors became less powerful.

I think it is perhaps only due to the absence of this direct blessing that the voices of the actors nowadays have become so feeble that even the spectators on the front seats have to use ear trumpets. If this situation continues, very soon, we may see the actors merely miming, and the spectators will be reading the text of the play. Perhaps in order to avoid this situation, the dramatists of today created the art of motion pictures, which does not require any text at all and can be easily understood even by children. Thus, in a sense, the exponents of the film art have done a great social service. All the differences of caste, language, race, have disappeared. All peoples, Hindus, Muslims, Parsees, Chinese and Japanese, are gathering together in the cinema houses. The veil of the ladies has disappeared. Men and women have equal rights on seats in cinema theatres. Formerly, a person had to put his children to bed, and men stealthily go to see a play. Now, the situation is changed. The cinema has become a means of short entertainment for the entire family, which they can enjoy without sitting up late till early morning. As I have adopted the principles of the above mentioned silent playwrights, I have again to praise Saraswati and Ganesha, and seek some fresh blessings. These will not be for 'orator-actors like Bruhaspati', but will be quite different from those sought by my predecessors. In a tropical country like India I get only dark, ugly, and emaciated persons for actors. I may get now (through the blessings) beautiful and handsome artists. At the beginning of my plays I shall invoke the god Madan, and his wife Rati, for the gift of beauty, the Sun god for brightness, the god Hanuman for health and physique for my actors. Let my visuals be perfect in all respects. I ask for such a novel and unheard of blessing because beauty has been my obsession for the last thirty years, ever since I took to the visual arts like painting, drawing, photography, theatre, and cinema I have started giving this subject even greater importance since I started making movies. Although my art is flawless scientifically, yet, to create on the screen a faultless visual image of a physically defective actor is beyond my power. Photography reveals what exists in reality, and artificial devices like retouching cannot be done in cinematography.

Photography can convert a fair thing into a dark thing. This is called retouching. Cinema is also photography, but it is not possible to retouch an image on film. This is because the picture is very small, i.e. 3/4 of an inch, and the faces on it are often smaller than a pulse grain. If one would keep a pencil on it, every point of the pencil mark will be enlarged on the screen. The face will thus come on the screen as though pierced with nails.

Footnote by Phalke.

Hence, I always required handsome and finely built actors. So, I advertised, 'Wanted, Fair looking actors'. To my surprise, most of the applicants flocking to my door were ignorant even of the meaning of the word 'good looking'. Hence, in subsequent advertisements I began to specify that ugly, lacklustre, or defonned actors need not take the trouble of visiting me. The very next day, a man came to me with this new advertisement in his hand. His normal complexion was very dark, which could at best be improved to bluish after soaping the face. And this blue-black person told me he had enacted the role of Mahashveta, the lady in white in 'Shapa Shambhrama', for a famous company. After two hours, descended another gem of an actor. He gave the impression of looking at the boxes in the inner room while he was talking face to face with me of his experience of acting. Immediately, I knew he was cross-eyed. In the afternoon, a man with a 40 inch waistline came to claim the role of Taramati in my 'Harishchandra'⁵

As if this person, who looked like a woman in advanced pregnancy, or even as a walking advertisement for some health tonic, was the power actor to portray the character of Taramati - an unfortunate, dejected, and resigned person.

In short, many actor-applicants who came to me were merely interested in earning their bread, as possible screen idols. They were an ugly lot, with gloomy faces, visible, protruding teeth, with malformed eyes and noses, with hollow cheeks scarred with pox, i.e., with faces which were created by the god Brahma at the end of his working day, when he had run out of material. O India! What a terrible state you are in ! Sometimes, some candidates used typical womanish expressions as refrains while describing their acting experiences, in order to prove that they had been portraying female characters. I was even scared that one of them would put his arms around me in embrace.

The moustache constituted the main difference between actors playing male roles and actors playing female roles. Actors playing male roles had blacker lips, more hollow faces, and redder eyes. These can be considered minor differences. I was very surprised to see that the changed advertisement didn't bring any different kind of applicants. The truth dawned on me when I looked at a mirror in a betel leaf shop. Any man chewing betel leaf in front of a shop would look at the shop mirror, and indulge in a play of his eyes, examine himself with a serious face for any fault in his dress. Only when he is convinced, after seeing from all angles, that there is not the slightest flaw in his total appearance, will he move off with a smile of content. This is the common, stereotyped behaviour of human beings. Hence, I arrived at the firm conclusion that nobody considers himself ugly. In India herself, there will be 30 x 2 crores of mirrors. But, how many faces will there be which could really grace these mirrors, and how many of these are likely to come to my films? A person may appear beautiful simply because we like that person, or love him. We may have a sensation of happiness because we are in a mood of love, or joy, or intimacy, or youthful exuberance. A person may appear beautiful simply because we like that person, or love him. We may have a sensation of happiness because we are in a mood of love, or joy, or intimacy, or youthful exuberance. This sensation of happiness is quite different from the happiness derived from looking at a person with a beautiful, healthy form. The cinema demands this kind of physical beauty, which gives rise to faultless visuals. There is always absence of perfect visuals in our country. This may be the effect of a hot climate, or of poverty, or it may be due to satisfaction with very modest requirements, or due to the conviction of the nothingness of the world. But, in my opinion, the main reason is that, even in childhood, we are brought up with a pessimistic attitude towards life, and a total indifference towards life, and a total indifference towards worldly dealings. If we are really to follow the principles of Vedanta, we will not have contempt for happiness caused by physical things. On the contrary, we will be the real followers of Karmayoga, and we will be in a very desirable state of detachment.

In order to have a healthy body, and beauty, we have to get rid of the ignorance in us. We must try to make our bodies healthy, and free of disease or other faults, by studying sciences like eugenics. 'What is the significance of this physical body?' At least in my view, a good physical manifestation. The consideration of physical appearance has never been a problem in the traditional theatre of today.

Why, then, should it be so important in the case of silent motion pictures ? My answer to this oft-repeated question is that the current traditional plays are oral, while the silent plays are visual. I would like to explain it further by comparing *the* two. In the case of stage plays, the audio element is predominant throughout. Even if an actor has not memorised his lines, he can act with the help of prompters. An actor may be running a high temperature, but can perform very well, provided his voice is clear. At times, a device providing the actor with a voice, by connecting an improvised phonograph through rubber tubings, and concealed under his clothes, would work. You can very well close your eyes, and hear what is going on. The actor is not necessarily supposed to have good looks, if he is a singer with a good voice. For these looks are often turned into bad looks, as most people are not able to sing without distorting their lips and faces. On seeing Shakuntala's beautiful face of the demure camel carrying his hunting material was more beautiful.

One can easily neglect an actor's age, height, and physique, if the dialogue spoken by him is spicy, poetic, and in keeping with the character's temperament, age, and situation in a play. Krishna and Balaram may look like Subhadra's younger brothers, but the vocative 'Dada' would suffice to show that Subhadra was younger than them. The reference to her being married, in the dialogue, will be adequate for spectators to guess Subhadra's age. The scenes on the stage can very well be seen with closed eyes.

The colourful, golden, embroidered, dresses of silk, satin, and velvet can easily hide ugly, deformed and worn out limbs, and almost the entire body. The remaining space of a few inches can be made to appear tender, youthful, and fair, by applying whitening agents. If the songs and dialogues are not audible, these visuals can keep the spectator amused. These scenes are to be seen with the eyes only. If the singer's voice is not good enough, the organ comes to his rescue. If the songs and dialogues are not audible, there are also the text and song pamphlets to help. If none of the elements on the stage is able to entertain you, you can very well look around. A very picturesque description of Kanva's hermitage is suggested simply by pointing towards the wings. There are so many other scenes which can be appreciated through words only. You might as well use your eyes for picking out the bugs in your seat.

It is true that the above description is rather humorous exaggeration of the reality, but the actor of the silent (film) play has only one or two means at his disposal to attract the minds of the spectators. The first means is beauty and physique and the second is the display of emotions on the face. An actor of the silent play must possess these qualities in a large measure. An actor possessing these two characteristics alone can be popular on the screen, but on the stage, an actor can get applause even in the absence of these two factors.

The above discussion is not prejudicial nor in any tone of contempt. I have made this detailed comparison only for the purpose of establishing the subject. A stage actor's performance is not a simple one. It involves many elements : loud declamation, constant practice, learning the text by heart, identification for four five hours with the character he is enacting, and studying the author's thoughts and emotions and conveying them to the spectator's mind.

All these difficult tasks require great skill. I was, myself, once, an amateur actor. I may also mention here, that most of the famous actors are my intimate friends.

Apart from his acting ability, the cinema actor has an additional responsibility. His face and the mobility of the other limbs is to be enlarged many times on the screen because specific meanings are conveyed by photographing the same in a large close-up. The success or failure of a film and the film makers's fortune or misfortune, depend on the space of some inches on the actor's face.

The stage for a screen actor is not limited to twenty square feet. It extends over acres and miles of the world stage. He must know how to climb a tree, ride a horse and swim. He has to run, climb the hills and move about in the sun. Hence, he must be healthy and bold. Any individual having beauty and strength is not necessarily useful in the cinema, though. That person would be able to do anything, provided he has the will, is quite a different consideration. But it is desirable that an actor appearing in front of the camera is already trained in plays. Now, I will specify as to what kind of stage actors can be useful for the cinema, and then take your leave.

An actor who conveys to the spectator the author's thoughts through his (writer's) words and charms the spectators only through his voice is practically of no use in front of a camera. An actor who gracefully conveys the author's thoughts through his acting skills is proper for the cinema. A screen actor must be able to charm the spectator through his mere acting skill without much depending on spoken words, or at times, even doing without them. Such an actor is more suitable for the cinema. If such an actor is healthy and handsome, all the better. Only such actors can become 'cinema stars' after a period of deep study and long experience.

In Western countries, there are such institutions for the grooming of actors selected from the group of people who are suitable in all respects. The fee for training such deserving actors is £60 (Rs. 900 only).

Next time, I will explain why female characters should be enacted by women artistes only. I am also thinking of giving some interesting information as to how a silent play is performed in front of the camera.