



prithviraj kapoor

Prithviraj Kapoor was without a doubt the most handsome Indian actor of Pre-Independence India and the founder of India's first film family - the Kapoors.

He was born in Prithvinath Kapoor in a middle-class landlord family in Samundri, a district of the industrial township of Lyallpur, Punjab, the son of a police officer. He got most of his early grounding from his grand father, Dewan Keshavmal. After finishing schooling at Lyallpur and Lahore, he enrolled at Edward College, Peshawar where he developed a taste for the theatre and earned a major reputation on the amateur stage in Lyallpur and Peshawar. He was married at 18 and did a year of law after graduation but interrupted his law studies to pursue his dreams of acting. Taking a loan from his aunt, he left Peshawar for Bombay in the winter of 1928, leaving behind his wife and three children saying he would send for them later.

In Bombay, he joined the Imperial Film company and acted in several B.P. Mishra adventure and love stories such as Cinema Girl (1930) opposite Ermeline, India's Clara Bow. He acted in India's first ever talkie Alam Ara (1931) though not in the lead role, which was essayed by Master Vithal. He then joined the Grant Anderson Theatre Company performing Shakespeare in English, winning special acclaim for his role of Laertes in Hamlet.

The turning point in Prithviraj's life came when he shifted to New Theatres, Calcutta in 1933. He broke through that year with Rajrani Meera (1933) and then with Debaki Bose's Seeta (1934). He mainly acted in their Hindi versions with Durgadas Banerjee often playing the same role in the Bengali version. Prithviraj was associated with some of the best films of New Theatres like Manzil (1936), President (1937) and his crowning glory Vidyapathi (1937) where he played the King Shiva Singha whose wife falls in love with the poet Vidyapathi.

Chandulal Shah hired Prithviraj for Ranjit Movietone where he worked from 1938 - 1940. His best known film with Ranjit was Pagal (1940), where he played a psychotic doctor in an asylum. Tricked into marrying the less beautiful of two sisters, he injects the one he wanted to marry with a drug that renders her insane. He then keeps her in the asylum where he brutalises her. It was a dark role unlike anything he had played before.

The title role in Sohrab Modi's Sikander (1941) immortalized Prithviraj Kapoor. This epic film was set in 326 BC when Alexander the Great, having conquered Persia and the Kabul Valley, descends to the Indian border at Jhelum and encounters Porus (Modi) who stops the advance with his troops. Sikander's lavish mounting, huge sets and production values equalled the Best of Hollywood then particularly for its rousing and spectacular battle scenes and was rated by a British writer as...

"...well up to the standard of that old masterpiece The Birth of a Nation."

Its dramatic, declamatory dialogues gave both Prithviraj Kapoor and Sohrab Modi free reign to their histrionic proclivities. Prithviraj made a handsome, dashing Sikander and the film heightened his enduring reputation for playing royalty, enhanced further by his role as Akbar in Mughal-e-Azam (1960).

In 1944 he invested his earnings and set up Prithvi Theatre. He was the first to use the concept of modern, professional urban theatre in Hindustani. Before him there were folk and Parsi theatre companies but his was the first modern professional repertory of that scale and influence. When there were losses at the box office or if

production costs went haywire, he channelled his earnings from films to bridge the fiscal gap. In over 16 years of its existence under Prithviraj Kapoor, Prithvi Theatre did some 2,662 shows. He played the lead in every single show, even when he was running high fever - one play every alternate day for 16 years! In fact Prithviraj Kapoor was so committed to Prithvi that when Jawaharlal Nehru wanted him to lead a cultural delegation abroad he said he couldn't due to Prithvi's engagements. When Nehru asked him why he didn't have an understudy to play his roles, Prithviraj replied he knew another person who did not have any understudy and that person's role was far more important than his. Who asked Nehru. You, Prithviraj replied. Some of Prithvi's well known plays include Deewaar, Pathan (1947), Gaddar (1948) and Paisa (1954) - which he directed as a film in 1957. Prithvi Theatre also launched many new talents such as Ramanand Sagar, Shankar-Jaikishen and Ram Ganguly.

His major film work in the 1950s include V.Shantaram's Dahej (1950) and his son, Raj Kapoor's Awaara (1951). The latter starring Prithviraj and Raj as father and son was perhaps Raj Kapoor's finest film. The dramatic confrontations between Prithviraj and Raj were a highlight of the film. The film and particularly the title song (Awaara Hoon) swept through Asia breaking box office records in the Middle-East being dubbed in Turkish, Persian and Arabic. The film also swept Russia where it was called Bradyaga (Vagabond). (An interesting fact here is that the villain of the film K.N. Singh did his own dubbing in Russian!) Raj Kapoor and Nargis became superstars in Russia. When they visited Russia, bands played Awaara Hoon at airports, a puppet show by a leading Russian puppeteer had in its final play puppets representing Raj Kapoor and Nargis!

While directing Paisa, he lost his voice which sadly never regained its full sonorousness. Subsequently he closed Prithvi Theatre and reduced his film work.

Aasmaan Mahal (1965) saw another memorable performance from Prithviraj as an old Nawab who refuses the wealth offered by capitalists who want to turn his dilapidated mansion into a hotel. The film, which suggests that the old feudal order must be allowed to fade away with dignity while its descendants take the cue from 'the people' rather than from entrepreneurs, won Prithviraj laurels at International Film Festivals.

Among his later films, Teen Bahuraniyaan (1968) saw him as the loveable head of the family trying to knock sense into his giddy headed daughters-in law enamoured by a film star staying next door and Kal Aaj Aur Kal (1971) directed by grandson Randhir Kapoor (son of Raj Kapoor) saw him play the head of a family in a film dealing with the generation gap between the grandfather and grandson with the son caught in between both . Interestingly Prithviraj Kapoor, Raj Kapoor and Randhir Kapoor enacted the main roles. By now however his health had deteriorated and he completed the dubbing from his hospital bed. He had also played the patriarchal head in the Punjabi film Nanak Naam Jahaaz Hai (1969). The film was the first really major successful Punjabi film in Post-Independent India with a major cultural impact on Punjabi sikhs at home and abroad and is credited with the revival of the Punjabi Film Industry in India.

Around this time Prithviraj felt the need for a theatre space which would provide amateur theatre groups with professional facilities. With this in mind he leased out a plot of land in Juhu, Bombay with the hope of some day building a theatre on it. Unfortunately though, this was not to be realised in his lifetime. He succumbed to

Hodgkin's disease in 1972 leaving behind a rich cultural legacy and a vision for Indian theatre.

Prithviraj Kapoor was posthumously awarded the Dadasaheb Phalke Award for his contribution to Indian Cinema. His son, Shashi, has revived Prithvi Theatre in his honour, a most befitting tribute for someone whose motto was - The show must go on...