

ORDEAL OF PRODUCING INDIGENOUS MOVIES

One Ganesh Vithal Kulkarni published a monthly, *Navyug*, since 1913. In one of its issues in 1918, Dadasaheb Phalke himself wrote, "I happened to watch the *Life of Christ* in a picture palace called *America India* in Mumbai in 1910. I must have seen movies a number of times earlier, must have often gone there for recreation with friends or family, but that day was a Saturday during Christmas. (The day was definitely Saturday, but the year was 1911 and it was not Christmas but Easter.) It marks a watershed in my life! There are millions of big and small businesses in the world, but that day a poor Brahmin like me from a priestly family laid the corner stone in India, on a scientific basis, of the business of cinema, which occupies the fifth place in the world!"

"While watching the *Life of Christ*, when the feelings of respect for Christ as a person were getting stronger, when I was unknowingly applauding the noble episodes in the life of Christ, I had a strange feeling inside me. What it was, is difficult to describe, but it is certain that while the life of Christ was moving fast before my eyes, I was seeing in those places *Bhagwan Shrikrishna* in his *Gokul*, *Bhagwan Shriram* in his *Ayodhya*. Whatever it may be, I was overpowered by some uncanny spell and I bought another ticket and saw the movie again. This time, instead of imagining, I began to see these things on the screen itself. Will this illusion become a reality? Will the sons of India ever see Indian scenes

on the screen? This thought pestered me the whole night.

"The next two months, I did not feel at ease without seeing every movie screened at every picture palace (in fact, a theatre in a tent-like shelter) in Mumbai. During this period I constantly analysed the movies I saw and contemplated the odds against producing them in India. There was no doubt about the utility of this business from the financial aspect, about its importance from the industrial aspect. How to achieve it, was the question. I felt like having resolved the financial and technical issues and my inner voice told me that, by the grace of God, I would succeed. By His dispensation, I had already won gold and silver medals in the basic arts required for producing movies such as drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, stage art, magic etc. so that my hope for future success was becoming stronger. But what next? How to go about it?

"It was axiomatic that no matter how powerful my enthusiasm, how strong my conviction about success, no financier would take a risk to go ahead unless he was actually shown something concrete. So I sold everything I had and applied the proceeds to this venture, taking a blind leap into the infinite sky.

"My friends thought me crazy and one of them went to the extent of taking me to the lunatic asylum at Thane. Disposal of my trinkets was in progress. About a year went by getting catalogues, books and some equipment from Europe and ceaselessly experimenting. During this period, I might scarcely have got more than three hours' sleep at night.

"Deprived of sleep, going to movies every evening for four to five hours and in the remaining time thinking, experimenting, worrying about providing for the family and facing hateful jibes of relatives, the darkness of the unfathomable future which would end my dreams... these adverse circumstances affected my eyes. I developed cataract in both eyes and became completely blind. However, the timely

treatment by Dr. Prabhakar restored my sight and with the aid of three or four pairs of spectacles I could resume my former routine. Hope springs eternal in human breast.

"This was a time of the *Swadeshi* movement, of use of Indian goods. There was a flood tide of speeches on *Swadeshi*. It had resulted in my quitting a secure government job and taking to an independent, industrial vocation. During this propitious period, I talked to my friends and leaders of the *Swadeshi* movement of my dreams and hopes about cinema. Even my friends of ten to twenty years standing and those with whom I had close relations in private or business life, thought my ideas were all moonshine and I became a butt of their jokes.

"Ultimately, a friend of mine with whom I had business relations for about ten years and who knew my character, love of business, perseverance, financial transactions, freedom from addiction etc., was prepared to consider the matter. I told him about the key to my success and persuaded him to agree. He was in a position, if need be, to help to the tune of about twenty-five thousand rupees.

"Anyone would understand what a pittance a sum of twenty-five thousand rupees was for my workshop, compared with the capital of Pathe and other European and American companies of about seven crore. However, my courage multiplied four-fold when I considered that I got the above sum somehow in a nation where even calling for cinema catalogues is deemed foolish, where the goal is restricted to the exhibition and sale of foreign goods, where seed of the co-operative principle is not yet sowed and where it is a nation of 'commission agencies'. There is no doubt that if I were to increase the figure of my requirement even a little more, I would have had to suppress my ideas and hopes till the end of my days.

"I was totally convinced that the sum of about twenty-five thousand was quite sufficient to create enough interest

in the public to offer a capital of two lakhs or more, if necessary. My experiments, experience and self-confidence assured me of it. I hoped that if I screened a few films, from their proceeds, my studio would slowly expand. If necessary, my friend would arrange for more capital. Else, financiers eager to pounce on a ready-made scheme would easily come forward or, at least, my countrymen would, by forming a co-operative, help accomplish my task by a united effort.

"I am never impatient in my work or satisfied with half measures. I am proud of it. In regard to this project too, I did not think it right to take the risk of investing a big amount until I compared my own ideas with the actual situation on the ground by visiting Europe. I needed a very small sum for making a trip to Europe and buying the necessary equipment to prove to my friend that I had the skill and that it was not risky to invest more capital. Only that much amount I borrowed from him at a very high rate of interest and a solid security. I willingly signed a *Marwadi* partnership agreement according to which, if I succeeded by the grace of God, the financier would reap a rich harvest. Thus due only to my love of it and the self-confidence that I would most certainly establish in India the unforeseen art of cinema, I laid the foundation of a mammoth industry with very little capital (with which only a hair cutting saloon or a small restaurant could be started)." This gives an idea of the straits through which Dadasaheb passed and was going to pass.

Dadasaheb had bought from an English company a toy cinema and some reels of film. He started showing movies at night by focussing candle light on a lens and projecting the pictures on a wall. In order to find a book on cinematography, he went on visiting photography shops in the Fort area and elsewhere, but to no avail! Finally, in the Dhobi Talao area, in the photography shop' of Nadkarni & Co, he

got a book (ABC Guide to Cinema), worth a shilling. Although it did not contain much useful information, it had advertisements about the equipment, and was important from that angle. The nightly shows on the wall continued. Besides, going to cinema houses also had not stopped. Due to extreme strain on the eyes, he lost his sight again, but Dr. Prabhakar restored it as stated in Dadasaheb's article reproduced above. On losing sight, Dadasaheb was very much restless due to the prospect of his being unable to reach his goal, of being unable to make the cinema industry indigenous. He prayed to God that though he may not become a star in the sky, he may at least be allowed to become a household lamp.

Dr. Prabhakar had very rightly advised Dadasaheb not to do anything in future that would strain his eyes, but soon after he started seeing a little, Dadasaheb again began seeing movies and plays and reading the catalogues and books obtained from abroad. The objective of making the movie business indigenous, which had cast such a spell over this master craftsman would not allow him to rest. He was not in a mood to heed anybody's advice. It was not in his veins. He never let up until he finished whatever he undertook. He would not mind his health or home and hearth or anything else.

Dadasaheb had taken it to his heart to go to London to get technical knowledge. He met leaders of the *Swadeshi* movement and explained his plan to them: "It is essential that this cine-industry becomes Indian. Indians see the culture of foreigners through their films. When will they come to know the antiquity and greatness of Indian culture? Moreover, how will foreigners come to know Indian culture? This industry will gradually provide work to many. All my endeavours are meant for these objectives. Please consider all this". Since Dadasaheb was past forty, was penniless and his technical knowledge was bookish, no one

encouraged him in his endeavour to make this industry indigenous.

How to get money for a foreign trip was a difficult question facing Dadasaheb. There was no prospect of getting financial assistance from anywhere. In January 1912, Dadasaheb told Yashwantrao Nadkarni, proprietor of Nadkarni & Company, his idea of producing Indian movies. Nadkarni respected Dadasaheb's imagination and skill in photography. He was the first to feel sure that if Dadasaheb meant it, he would fulfil his dream.

The very next day, Yashwantrao Nadkarni took Dadasaheb to his father-in-law Solicitor Abasaheb Chitnis. In that meeting, the solicitor counselled his son-in-law that there was no risk in giving a loan of up to ten thousand rupees to Dadasaheb for the project. The *Marwadi* agreement referred to by Dadasaheb was as follows. He clearly said, "I have nothing to offer as security against the loan, but I can offer you a partnership in the business for your daring in giving me a loan. Even if something untoward happens to me abroad, you will definitely get your money back, as I am ready to assign my insurance policies worth Rs 12,000 to you right now. I have nothing else."

Thus Dadasaheb secured a sum of Rs 10,000 by mortgaging his insurance policies and started preparations for going to London. When the news was out, there was criticism that he was running after a chimera. Some persons even said to Saraswatibai that when this money was gone, they would have to beg for a living. She silenced them saying, "I will be his partner in any adversity." Ignoring the criticism, Dadasaheb stood firm by his resolve and on 1st February 1912, boarded a ship for London.

On 3rd February a daughter was born to Dadasaheb. When he learned about it, he said it was a good omen: "First daughter, money faster." This daughter of his, Mandakini, was the first child heroine of the Indian film world. She did

the part of 'Balkrishna' in Dadasaheb's renowned silent movie *Kaliamardan* of 1919. She lived in Nashik. I have recorded an interview with her lasting two hours for the National Film Archives.

Dadasaheb was a total vegetarian so that during his stay in London, food was a problem. Fortunately, however, a Maharashtrian Muslim named Mr Abdulla arranged for Dadasaheb's vegetarian meals in his hotel. Dadasaheb was religious-minded, but here caste barriers did not prevail. Dadasaheb told Abdulla the purpose of his visit, because of which Abdulla not only held him in great respect, but also treated him as his elder brother.

The problem of food having thus been solved, Dadasaheb now applied himself to his work with enthusiasm. In the Piccadilly Circus area of London, he saw a name-board of 'Bioscope Cine-weekly'⁷. One who has to achieve one's goal cannot afford to be hesitant. Dadasaheb entered the office of the periodical. The editor, Mr Kepburn, was in his room. Dadasaheb met him and told him that he was a subscriber of the *Bioscope*. He also told him the purpose of his visit.

Mr Kepburn advised Dadasaheb against the adventure of movie production. He said, "Even in England many producers have been unsuccessful and many of those that are still in the field are pulling on somehow. Besides, the climate of India is not suitable for movie-making." Dadasaheb told him resolutely, "I have the self-confidence and persistence to surmount all difficulties". He then had a discussion with Mr Kepburn based on his technical knowledge gleaned from books. Dadasaheb's imposing personality, impressive style of speaking, his being a vegetarian and having no addiction, even of smoking, had a very salutary effect on Mr Kepburn. Impressed, he assured Dadasaheb of all possible help and co-operation. He got in touch with the famous film producer from Walton, Mr Cecil Hepworth, and requested him to give all guidance to Mr Phalke.

As a result, Hepworth's manager came to the railway station in his car to take Dadasaheb to the studio. Dadasaheb could see all the departments of the studio and their working, which was not possible even for a Londoner. Hepworth sent for his technicians and asked them to hold a demonstration of filming. Like Mr Kepburn, he too advised Dadasaheb on the machinery to be bought. Accordingly, Dadasaheb bought the essential equipment, namely, a Williamson camera costing fifty pounds, a printing machine and a perforating machine for the film. Hepworth agreed to the equipment being tested by doing a little filming. This was possible only because of Mr Kepburn's word and Mr Hepworth's affection for him. The dealer of the equipment also explained how to use it. Phalke's visit was recorded in the issue of *Bioscope* dated 28th May 1914.

Phalke stayed in London for two weeks. He happened to see there a movie titled *A Daughter of Bharat*. It was produced by Seling Corporation of London and depicted Indian life. The heroine's name was Mrs Pandita and the hero's, Mr Ramabai (which is a lady's name). He sported a beard and wore a fez, while Mrs Pandita wore shoes, lehnga (loose trousers) and covered her head with a scarf. Seeing this movie, any Indian would have been wild with rage because of its perverse view of Indians. Dadasaheb registered a strong protest with Mr Kepburn in this connection and said, "The missionaries seem to have spread misleading notions here about India, Indian culture and traditions. When I come here next year with my movie, you will see the real India". Thanking Mr Kepburn and Mr Cecil Hepworth profusely for their help, Dadasaheb returned to India on 1st April. Before returning, he placed an order with the Kodak Company for raw film. In those days, Dadasaheb had to go through a religious purification ceremony for having returned from abroad.