

Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, (1870-1944)
“Father of the Indian Film Industry.”

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Indian audiences were introduced to a projected motion picture on July 7, 1896. It was in the same pattern that brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière used to reveal their cinematographe on December 28, 1895 in the basal portion of the Paris Grande Café. The Indian showing at Bombay’s Watson’s Hotel occurred less than three months after the first public showing of the Edison Vitascope (April 23, 1896) at New York City’s Koster and Bial’s Music Hall, and four months after the London cinematographe debut by Félicien Trewey at the Polytechnic in Regent Street.

Twenty-four shorts including Stormy Sea, A Demolition, The Serpent, The Sea Bath, Hyde Park, Parade of the Guard, London Girl Dancers, Ladies and Soldiers on Wheels, Watering the Garden, Leaving the Factory and Arrival of a Train were shown with the help of the Kinematograph. The Times of India reported a large turnout despite the inclement weather and a one Rupee admission charge. The large audience attendance forced its exhibitors (Lumière team agents) to schedule further showings at the Novelty Theatre. “Reserved boxes for Purdah Ladies and their Families” were advertised along with a wide price range (from a low of four Annas to a high of two Rupees) for admissions. Such a considerable range of admission prices between high and low initiated a feature prevalent even today of film exhibition in India.

The early showings at Novelty Theatre were followed by P.A. Stewart with “Stewart’s Vitograph” (sic) in January, 1897, “Hughes Moto-Photoscope” in September 1897 and the “Andersonoscopograph” of a Professor Anderson and Mlle Blanche in December 1898. These showings attracted mainly the British residents with few Indians. Among the Indians attracted to these “Cultured” showings was Harischandra Sakharam Bhatvadekar, (Save Dada) a Maharashtrian photographer, who became the first Indian film pioneer. In 1896, he ordered a -1(d motion picture) Tj 0 -12.6 TD 0.012 Tc 0.040 Tw (camd

in 1903 of the durbar which celebrated the coronation of King Edward VII in oriental magnificence. Eventually, Bhatvadekar gave up production for exhibition. Many others, like Cursetji M. Baliwala, Hiralal Sen, of Bengal, Morera and Edaljee Patel followed in Bhatvadekar's footsteps. Production of documentaries like Poona Race '98 and Train Arriving at Bombay Station prompted importation of films, cameras and projectors from England and the United States in abundant numbers. Thus occurred the launching of the Indian silent film.

Bhatvadekar's documentaries were milestones in the history of the Indian cinema. Thereafter, progress was rapid. By 1910, people flocked to cinema halls all over India to see foreign films. Even into remote villages, touring outdoor cinemas occasionally brought the thrills of the moving picture.

In 1902, Jamshadji Framji Madan (1856-1923) acquired a "Bioscope" from a Pathe Freres agent and launched a tent exhibition of silent films on the Maiden in Calcutta. Madan, a Parsi importer of liquors, pharmaceuticals, and foods, well combined his business activities with this theatrical interests. For about thirty years, he commanded a well spread self-owned film production-exhibition empire in India, Burma and Ceylon. Madan's first film, Nala Damayanti was released in 1917. The leading roles in this epic story were played by Italians Signor and Signora Manelli.

Abdullay Esoofally (1884-1957) outright bought prints of foreign made silent films to exhibit at his "bioscope" tent shows. Until 1907, Esoofally traveled all through Java, Sumatra, Singapore, Burma, Ceylon and India, showing prints till they wore out. In 1918, he settled in Bombay to build the famous Majestic Cinema with partner Khan Bhadur Ardeshir M. Irani. Alam Ara (Beauty of the World), the first Indian talkie, produced by Irani was premiered at the Majestic theatre on March 14, 1931.

Until now, the typical Indian film showman, like his world counterpart, was the photographer-exhibitor. But, Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, (1870-1944) with this film Raja Harishchandra (1913) made a landmark in the history of the Indian motion picture and earned the title of "Father of the Indian Film Industry."

THE LAUNCHING

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THE SILENT ERA

1913-1931

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Phalke was born at Trymbakeshwar, near Bombay in the family of Dajishastri Phalke, a Maharashtrian Bhramin and a Professor of Sanskrit. Because of his strong interest in fine and performing arts, he was allowed to enroll at the Sir J.J. School of Arts in Bombay upon completion of his secondary school education at Maratha High School. In Bombay, Phalke studied the arts including photography. He later moved to Baroda with his elder brother to continue further studies in fine and graphic arts at the Kalabhavan. In 1909, Phalke sailed to Germany to learn three-color photo engraving and photolithography and returned to India with the latest machinery to run the engraving division at Laxmi Art Printing Works. However, he already knew that a printing career was not for him. In 1911, Phalke completely lost his vision, but fortunately the blindness lasted only six months.

Since foreign films were in great vogue at the time, Dadasaheb Phalke (as he was ordinarily known) saw as many as he could. Upon seeing the film *Life of Christ*, Phalke's alert mind began to visualize the image of Lord Krishna in place of Jesus Christ. The infant Krishna's deliverance from fatal destruction, his childhood pranks with the Gopis in Gokul, Krishna's romantic love for Radha, his battlefield dialogue (sacred song of Bhagavad-gita) to Arjuna, and Bhagwan Shri Ramchandra and his Ayodhya, were all taking storyboard form in Phalke's artistic mind. This idea soon became an obsession. On February 1, 1912, he sailed for London and returned, a few months later, with a Williamson film camera, a printing machine, a perforator (as raw films then available had to be perforated in the dark for camera and projector use) and some raw negative film (because in those days photographic dealers were unable to supply film in India). While in London, Phalke had managed to acquire valuable instructions from Mr. Cabourne, the editor of *Bioscope*, *cine-weekly*, and British film producer Mr. Cecil Hepworth. Deferring the Lord Krishna proposal, he decided to film a well known Mahabharat story of truthful Raja Harishchandra for his first production. In order to raise initial capital and to persuade potential financiers for this major production, Phalke pawned his wife's ornaments. A capsule animated story of the Phalke family along with a short "From Peanut to Plant" on intermittent growth of a peanut plant were shown to the invited prospective financiers. Delighted at the results, he won the financial backing of Yeshwant Nadkarni, a Bombay dealer of photographic products.

Long before this time, theatre and dance had lost their standing and had become the domain of the degraded castes. Theatre had celebrated a golden age (5th Century) in the time of Hindu poet, author and dramatist Kalidasa. Because strong association of the performing arts with prostitution prevailed in 1912, measures to combat prostitution were deemed necessary in order to rescue the lively arts. No respectable Indian women were willing to act in a film. Phalke's efforts to hire a prostitute for the female role were declined by many for fear of being stigmatized. Selecting a male actor to play a female role was as a challenging task. Many men refused to don a sari or shave their moustaches-their symbol of masculinity. In the end, a male cook named A. Salunke was hired to play the heroine role of Taramati.

Raja Harishchandra (King Harishchandra) was mostly shot outdoors on sets designed by Phalke. Indoor scenes were recreated on the sets under his close supervision. Working under multi purpose capacities, Phalke finished his first film in a period of roughly six months. Released on May 17, 1913, at the Coronation theatre in Bombay, Raja Jarishchandra evoked a large audience. Totally enated by an Indian cast,

the four reeler 3700 feet long feature starred Phalke in the title role, and Bhalchandra Phalke (his son) as Rohidas, Harishchandra's son. Success of Raja Harishchandra encouraged Phalke to produce Mohini Bhasmasur (The Legend of Bhasmasur), Satyawati Savitri, Pithach Panje (a one reel comedy), Lanka Dahan, Krishna Janma (The Birth of Krishna), and others. Between 1913 and 1917, Dadasaheb produced twenty-three films. In June 1914, during his second visit to London, Phalke was honored by the British Film Industry group when he showed his first three films at a presentation arranged by Mr. Cabourne, the editor of Bioscope.

Raja Harishchandra was filmed in Bombay with a small cast and a crew of few dozen people including the entire Phalke family. In October, 1913, Phalke moved to Nasik estate and the company grew to about a hundred. With the exception of crowd scenes, no extras were employed. Such a (family-industry) system governed Indian film production for several years. In Lanka Dahan (The Burning of Lanka), A. Salunke, who played Taramati in Raja Harishchandra, played a double role of the hero, Rama, and the heroine, Sita. Lanka Dahan is a religious story of the beautiful Sita held captive by the ten-headed monster King Ravana on his island empire of Lanka (now Sri Lanka). In the end, Sita is rescued by her husband King Rama of the mainland, with the help of a combined legion of men and monkeys. Character portrayal in lengthy religious Phalke films became alive to Indian audiences. Rama on the screen in Lanka Dahan, or Krishna in Krishna Janma overcame its Indian audiences. "The slinky French heroine Protea, the Italian comedian Foolshead, and those American Keystone Cops were all amazing but might as well have come from Mars."

Phalke provided special-effects in his films by exploring animation techniques such as masking, double exposure, and reversing his images. In Lanka Dahan, he masked unwanted areas of two separate scenes of the sea and a dike and later superimposed each other to simulate the legendary floating stone path built by monkeys for Rama's invasion of Lanka. He experimented with color by tinting frames with brush work on the original print. Using color chemicals, entire sequences were toned to simulate blue for sea or red for fire. By burning down two vast sets, reality was depicted in Lanka Dahan to show Lanka consumed by fire. In Kaliya Mardan, Mandakini, Phalke's five-year-old daughter is introduced dressed in daily attire in an opening sequence. Followed by some title and role designation frames, the same opening sequence is dissolved to Mandakini's role as Krishna. Such techniques were used by Phalke to visually communicate with his audience. In this respect Phalke's cinematographic efforts have been compared with those of the French pioneer George Melies. Initiating steps to dispel the social stigma, Phalke was able to employ two

women in his second film. In *Bhasmasur Mohini*, the roles of Mohini and Parvati were played by Durga, a Maharastrian mother and Kamla, her daughter in real life. In his third film, he employed four women. In *Kaliya Mardan* (slaying of the Serpent), his daughter Mandakini played the role of the boy Krishna, thus becoming the first Indian juvenile actor. By producing *Krishna Janma* and *Kaliya Mardan* in 1918-1919, Phalke was ultimately able to achieve his dream of replacing Jesus on film by Lord Krishna. In 1917, he released a revised shorter version of *Raja Harishchandra* but competition from foreign genre films and lack of financial capital compelled Phalke to expand. "Phalke's films" was now renamed "Hindustan Film Company," with Phalke as a working partner and V.S. Apte, Mayashankar M. Bhatt, L.B. Phatak, Madhavji Jesing and Gokuldas Damodar as five financial backers. The open-air Nasik studio was replaced by a permanent building. In 1920-21, he retired from film production because of a difference of opinion with his new partners but rejoined the company in 1922. In 1923, he produced *Sati Mahananda* for Hindustan Film Company but tight budgetary pressures and release schedules affected Phalke's creative and technical tastes. In 1927, Phalke retired from the company.

In 1931, Phalke produced his last silent film. *Setu Bandhan* (Bridge Across the Sea) was financed by Mayashankar Bhatt. The release of the film with the advent of the "talkies" occurred at an unsuitable time. By post-synchronizing Hindi dialogue, the film was re-released as a talkie in 1934. In 1937, he made a talkie, *Gangavataran*, (The Descent of Ganga) for Kilhapur Cinetone. The film was produced in Hindi and Phalke's native Marathi. Nearing seventy years of age, and unable to stand long hours of work strain, Phalke abandoned film production in 1937. He died at Nasik on February 16, 1944, almost a forgotten man.

In a remarkable concurrence of events, Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* was presented a more or less the same time as Zukor's *Queen Elizabeth*. For Adolph Zukor, his first multi-reel feature paved the way for feature films. Apparently, these presentations establish a fact that in as much as the origin of feature film is concerned, both the East and West started together. However, India, due to its heavy economic problems, lagged behind the rapidly advancing West.