

Article
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The Legacy of Prabhat Film Company



Prabhat now FTII Pune

Prabhat Film Company, set up by V Shantaram, S Fatehlal, VG Damle, K Dhaibar and S Kulkarni, had started by making silent films in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, India, in 1929. These met with commercial success and Prabhat Film Company set up its own studios in Pune, also in Maharashtra, India, where the legendary films of Prabhat were produced in the years 1933-1941. Legally, Prabhat Film Company did survive as an entity till 1953, but it never matched its golden period of 1932-41. Today, the Film and Television Institute of India is housed in the premises of the erstwhile Prabhat Film Company. This article sets out to explore the legacy of the legendary films and production systems of Prabhat Film Company in cinema, not just in India but internationally.

We live in an age of instant gratification, where everyone believes that all that they need to know is simply a Google search away, and in its converse- that anything that is not on Google is not knowledge. It takes people of an older, pre-Google generation to arrive at such generalisations, for the young this is simply the way their world is. In this new world, a bunch of old films with grainy black and white images and the simple soundtracks of the early sound era, don't deserve much attention. To add to the problem, not

much is written or discussed about these films of Prabhat on Google or Facebook or Twitter or elsewhere on the online world, and it is assumed that the Prabhat films are simply not worth thinking/ worrying about. So, let's try and prove all this wrong.

To discuss the relevance of the films of Prabhat, I am approaching the issue on four fronts:

1. The choice of stories- the content of the Prabhat films.
2. The stylistics/ structure of the Prabhat films.
3. The choice and use of cinema technology in the films of Prabhat.
4. The production methods used to create the Prabhat films.

There is of course a lot of overlap in these points, which will be pointed out as we go along.

In the cinema industry, in India and elsewhere in the world, every new 'film' project is advised to follow the 'known' and 'well trodden path' of movies that have been commercially successful earlier. This is so today as much as it was true in the days when Prabhat Film Company was making its movies. How much of this 'advice' did the Prabhat pioneers listen to? Quite honestly nothing what-

so-ever, and we need to be forever grateful for that. The Prabhat pioneers were very clear that their agenda was to tell stories that were relevant to their times. Hence stories of empowered women, the struggles of lower caste saints against the caste ridden societies of their times, the tragedy of marrying off young girls to older men, these are just some of the themes of stories from memorable Prabhat movies. These are subjects that are revolutionary, in every sense of the word, even today, eighty years later.



Kunku

It is usually pointed out that memorable Prabhat movies were made at a time when pre-Independence India was questioning all its societal mores, in all its multiple societies, under the influence of the Mahatma Gandhi. Hence it was the ethos of the times that was being reflected in the stories chosen by Prabhat Film Company. But if you look at the other feature films that were made at the same time as Prabhat films, the same ethos does not get reflected in every single story of every single film. So clearly there was a design at work in Prabhat and the stories that were chosen for production.

When you look at the form of these Prabhat films, the sense of design becomes even clearer. The Prabhat films are not 'experimental' films in the sense that *Kalpana* (1948, director: Uday Shankar) or the films of the New Wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s were experimental in their form and subjects. The Prabhat films have songs, dances, stars and spectacle as much as any other film made in the Indian Cinema industry. So, the Prabhat films are very much designed for India's mainstream cinema audiences and their commercial success is what powered the Prabhat Film Company. The commercial success of their films enabled Prabhat to go on with its chosen path of telling

socially relevant stories within the norms of 'mainstream cinema' in India. This is a path that many other filmmakers have tried to follow over the years, but none has ever achieved the heights of the Prabhat Film Company.



V. Shantaram

There is a further detail that needs to be pointed out: Prabhat's films were made at a time when filmmaking equipment was huge and rather cumbersome to take out of the studios. This was especially true for the sound equipment, where recording was being done on optical sound equipment. With such equipment, shooting was largely done on shooting floors, both in India and in cinema industries all around the globe. Traditionally, histories of cinema talk of the Italian Neo Realists as being the first filmmakers who shot their films on the streets and 'real' locations. But take a look at just two films- *Kunku* (1937) and *Manoos* (1939) by Prabhat and you see as many 'real' locations as Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). And this is a good ten years before the Italian Neo Realists! To me this is an aspect of Prabhat worthy of further academic study, to get the films of Prabhat their rightful place in cinema history.

The interesting thing with Prabhat's brand of realism is that they aren't thinking of specifically making films that are 'closer to life' or any such thing. The Prabhat pioneers simply wanted to tell stories in as interesting a manner as possible, without worrying unduly about where or how they would do the actual filming. That is what gave Prabhat the flexibility to switch between *Sant Tukaram* (1936) and *Manoos* (1939) and *Amar Jyoti* (1936), each film with a completely different use of 'reality' and 'realism'. The binding factor is that each story is narrated in as interesting and dramatic manner as possible, without worrying about definitions.

There is a curious sidelight in *Manoos* (1939) where the

lead characters accidentally walk into the shot of a movie being shot and are chased off from the shot by the shooting unit. How does one read that? Is this shot a precursor to Brecht/ Godard and the whole concept of 'alienation' or making an audience aware that they are being told a story, a work of fiction.# Of course the Prabhat pioneers would have laughed off such theories, it just looked interesting in the story is all they would say!



Manoos

The desire to tell their stories in an interesting manner led Prabhat into technical innovations: they made India's first colour film *Sairandhri* in 1933 (the prints of which were made in Germany, but all copies are unfortunately lost). This film did not do well commercially and hence *Kisan Kanya* from 1937 is usually credited as being India's first colour film. The technical ambitions of Prabhat can be seen not just in this episode of *Sairandhri* (1933), but in the well known story from *Amrit Manthan* (1934). At the end of this *Amrit Manthan* (1934), the camera tracks onto the face of the villain and goes into his eye, to show you the devilish look in his eye. This is 1934, when long lenses and special effects were at a primitive stage. So, what had Prabhat done to get this shot on screen: first off they got a longer lens from Germany, I suspect it was a 100mm. Using this lens the camera tracked onto the actor's face, from a mid shot to a close-up. Then using a large model of the human eye (made by Fatehlal's art department), a shot was taken using the same camera tracking speed as the earlier shot with the actor. The two shots were combined together with a dissolve to create the desired effect. This is an early example of what we now call motion control technology, but another example of Prabhat arriving at an innovation to tell their stories in a more interesting manner.

Later, due to a variety of reasons, Prabhat Film Company went into decline, and was eventually taken over by the Government of India and transformed into the Film Institute of India [that was later re-designated as the Film

and Television Institute of India (FTII) in 1974], India's premier cinema education centre. A lot of the support staff and the craftsmen that FTII employed were inherited from the employees of Prabhat (in fact the dhobi, clothes washer man, at FTII is still an old Prabhat employee!). What that meant was that (up to the late 1980's) one could learn a lot about Prabhat Film Company's apprenticeship schemes to train younger employees, especially about upholding technical standards, simply by talking to the older support staff around. Yes, apprenticeship schemes in all the supporting crafts of cinema were common to all the studios in India of the early sound days, but in Prabhat the technical standards were of an incredibly high standard- everything from projection in the theatres to the way of using wood by the carpenters in the art direction department workshops conformed to some internal standard. This was made possible by the fact that Prabhat Film Company was essentially owned and run by craftsmen and technicians: except for S Kulkarni, the financier, all the rest were crafts people of cinema trained with the legendary Baburao Painter and his Maharashtra Film Company of Kolhapur. The craftsman in camera knew the value of his focus puller and his light-men and his electrician, and gave them the respect that they deserved. By extension, the camera person respected the work of the art director and the director and so on. This notion of mutual respect of the art and craft of their fellow workers extended to every department of filmmaking. What all this resulted in was that Prabhat in its prime functioned more like a filmmaking cooperative than a money-making enterprise. And the results are up on screen for the world to see. Of course, this idealism did not last for ever and Prabhat's dream team broke up when individuals became 'stars', bigger than the system that had produced them.



Sant Tukaram

There is another aspect of the Prabhat pioneers that must be pointed out- they did represent the various religions and castes that constitute India. S Fatehlal was a Muslim,

VG Damle was a high ranking Brahmin, and so on. The employees of Prabhat too came from multiple castes and religions. But did all that get in the way of their filmmaking? You can give the answer as much as me- a definitive NO. And why does that not surprise us? Because that is the way we are in India- in complete acceptance of our diversity.

One of the less remembered aspects of the early sound studios in India was the making of films in more than one language simultaneously. New Theatres in Kolkata made films in Bengali and Hindi, while Prabhat Film Company made films in Marathi and Hindi. What this meant was that the films could remain connected to the literature of their region, even when they were remade in Hindi. Not only did this bring regional literatures into the 'mainstream' Hindi film culture, but this phenomenon also brought regional saints into mainstream culture. Thus, the Prabhat pioneers made *Sant Tukaram* (1936) mainstream as much as New Theatres brought *Devdas* (1935) into national prominence.

As a teacher of filmmakers, I am very tempted to draw conclusions about career trajectories of filmmakers, the cinema industry and cinema history based on the above stated facts. But it is important to let individuals draw this kind of conclusions on their own. For me, having pointed out this particular aspect of film/ cinema history is enough, its legacy and what to do about it is your problem dear reader.

Note: My friend, renowned film scholar Dr. Manu Chakravarthi has pointed out that what Bertolt Brecht called 'alienation effect' or distancing an audience from the narrative, is something that is well known in all the performing art forms in India. He gave the example of *Yakshagana* from Karnataka and said this is very common in India. So, in effect were the Prabhat pioneers tapping into this cultural legacy? Quite honestly, I do not know. Maybe some better scholar can answer this question.

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