

Article

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The Shadow and the Arc Light: Finding the Female Workforce in Bombay Cinema**Abstract:**

This paper is connected to broader research concerning gender, labour and the Indian film industry, and develops from my on-going audio-visual project titled "The shadow and the arc light". While it is linked with my previous book project, 'Voices of the Talking Stars' (2017) involving women/work and cinema dynamics, the attempt here is to reclaim feminist narratives from the historical debris and amnesia, in the context of contemporary and emergent feminist historiography. Furthermore, while certain degree of research has been conducted on women as 'directors', my purpose here is not to posit women as 'auteurs'; contrarily, I aspire draw attention to the problems of historical readings which, generally speaking, have been greatly influenced by studies of periods, styles, movements and (great) masters, even though, more recently newer research have examined industrial conditions, cinematic transactions across regions, media histories, and so on. Consequently, my aim is to shift the focus to subjects of labour, and bring to light the characteristics of film work, and enquire where is the female figure on the elusive credit lists? Therefore, I call attention to a historical lacuna, which provokes us to rethink film historiography, and highlight the nature of filmic work and underscore the (un-credited) work done by women, in multiple capacities, during the last century. The 'women's question' thus, urges us to rethink methods of writing histories for cinema. The purpose of this paper consequently is two fold -- first, to understand the nature filmic work, and secondly, to locate the shadow of the women worker in the archives of cinema.

Keywords:

Feminist Historiography, Indian Cinema, Bombay cinema, choreography, costume-design, Naseem Banu, Bhanu Athaiya, Zohra Segal, Madame Simkie, Kamini Kaushal, Ismat Chughtai

[I]nterplay of light and dark constitutes life, although in the world of movies there are times when the dividing line between the two ceases to exist.

(Saadat Hasan Manto, *Stars From Another Sky*, 86)

Speculative methods

Before I present the primary concerns of the paper, allow me to take a detour to I arrive at a more critical reading concerning women and work. So, as the story goes -- my grandmother, Parul Bala Mukherjee (maiden name Ganguly), 1914-2014, and her three sisters, were raised by their maternal uncles (in Chinsura, West Bengal), after the untimely demise of their father (in Dacca, East Bengal). This was the period when the First World War was causing havoc in Europe and its colonies, the Communists had just about arrived on the scene, and the Non-Cooperation Movement in India was taking shape as a definitive step towards Independence.¹ Parul Bala was married off at the age of twelve to an affluent and enterprising gentleman, namely Bibhuti Bhusan Mukherjee (from Jessore, East Bengal), whose construction business took him to many places across the Bengal Presidency. While Parul Bala remained deeply connected to her maternal family and their Gandhian values, her younger sisters, Jyoti, Renu and Ketaki, were also subsequently married off sooner or later. However, Jyoti passed away in 1942, and Renu (Mukherjee) and Ketaki (Banerjee) experienced somewhat wearisome conjugal lives. Renu became a widow at an early age, after she bore three children; and Ketaki, along with her three children, were in fact, abandoned by her husband because she wasn't 'fair' enough.

Renu and Ketaki were about six to eight years younger than Parul Bala, and by the time the Second World War demolished the political and economic promise of 20th century, and communal riots and later partition destroyed Calcutta's (and the imagined Nation's) rubric, all three sisters, along with their children, settled in Calcutta.² Both Renu and Ketaki subsisted in the unknown and uncharted world and were able to raise their children, by working very hard, and perhaps through some support from their extended families. Renu

¹ See the landmark work *Modern India, 1885-1947* by Sumit Sarkar.

² For a broader discussion see Joya Chatterji *Bengal Divided*.

secured a job of Ayah in Calcutta's well known Medical College and rented a low-priced residential house in central Calcutta's (in)famous red light area, more importantly, she provided for her children's University education; whereas, Ketaki worked in a small factory (near Sealdah station), which manufactured bottles for the locally made healing products, and primarily pasted labels on such medicine bottles.³ Ketaki or Chotodida (younger granny) visited our house – which was on Amherst Street, Calcutta -- every evening on her way back home (at Entally), and sometimes gifted us her magnificently embroidered knick-knacks, although, we (me, my mother and aunts) frequently visited Sejdodida's (literally the third grandmother) or Renu's house, which was close by.⁴ I remember how during such evening trips hawkers vended mouth-watering dried yellow-pea curries (*ghugni*), and mesmerizing Arabian jasmine garlands (*bel-phul mala*), in the neighbourhood. In the long run, whilst Renu's sons went on to become college Professors, Ketaki's sons joined a shipping company and her eldest son suffered a fatal accident, thereby, conferring an 'unhappy' ending to an otherwise story of struggle and grit.

My intention of recalling this (personal) story is not simply a matter of nostalgia, although I do wish to keep a record of such marginal narratives.⁵ Through this narration, I wish to signpost few straight forward conjectures which drive much of my research – first, the long history of women, belonging to different strata (class/ caste/ community), who have been involved with diverse types of odd jobs, since the times of war and partition of India (1947);⁶

³ Also see Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta edited *The Trauma and the Triumph*.

⁴ Over the years I have been working on the dense history of the locality through narratives of cinema and culture – by using the film *Jamai Babu* (1931) as a lens, as well as through histories of cinema-halls, small-scale (film equipment) factories in the area, and via the letters written by Ratan Bai – thereby, remapping the history of the locality through public cultures. Also see Madhuja Mukherjee "Inside a dark hall".

⁵ Also see my presentation titled "A Train Arrives at Sealdah Station: The Curious Case of Film Scholarship" here: <https://pad.ma/JQM/info>, presented at the International Seminar 'Fwd: Re: Archive', organized by Pad.ma and Indiancine.ma, Mumbai, 2018.

⁶ Under the rubric of what I describe as "Bearing Memory Project", I presented a series of 'video-essays' at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2015, and at City University of Hong Kong, 2014, underscoring subjects of forced migration and relocation, and emphasised the dynamism between

and secondly, the ways in which financial constraints drove a very large number of women to take up miscellaneous occupations, inclusive of film work.⁷ For instance, Taran Nishat Khan's Sarai Independent Research Fellowship (2004), titled "Socialist Wives", on the communications between Sultana, Zehra and Shaukat, wives of Ali Sardar Jafri, S M Mehdi and Kaifi Azmi respectively, besides unraveling the masculine culture within the Communist party also highlighted in what ways actors like Shaukat Azmi first worked as a radio artist, and later joined theatre and films, because she needed to sustain herself and her child, at the time her husband was busy with political work and was in jail.⁸ The project located the journeys made by these women from somewhat shielded and privileged lives to a tempestuous life of heady idealism, radical poetry and Spartan living. The project also highlighted how, as they negotiated their 'pasts', they created a delicate balance between the newly found bohemian life in Bombay, and their forays into hitherto taboo areas like theatre, broadcasting and later cinema.

Hence, although there are remarkable stories of princesses and elite women chasing a dream and risking their status to become performers,⁹ as well, there are legends about gifted singers (both *Tawaifs*, and gramophone sensations) and (theatre) performers who joined the film industry,¹⁰ alongside, a long list of women from distinct communities and professions,¹¹ there were a large number of women – whose pasts remain shrouded -- who arrived at the shooting sites, as visualized in the landmark film *Kaagaz ke Phool* (Guru Dutt, 1959), solely because they were pursuing a better paying profession. And, as is the case in other fields, a lot many them were neither proficient enough nor

history, memory, and narrative. The project dealt with the import of remembering and retelling, and eventually materialized as an art project comprising a series of 'calendar art'.

⁷ Also see *Mahanagar* (Satyajit Ray, 1963), and *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1960); as well as my essay titled "Notes on the City and Goddesses: Indrani, Nita, Aarti".

⁸ Also see *Kaifi and I* by Shaukat Kaifi.

⁹ The life-stories of Fatma Begum, Sadhana Bose, Devika Rani, Zubeida Begum et al, are cases in point.

¹⁰ Including Jaddan Bai, Ratan Bai and others.

¹¹ Also see *Shalom Bollywood: The Untold Story of Indian Cinema* (Danny Ben-Moshe, 2017).

fortunate enough, and thus, in the course of time many of them disappeared into oblivion.¹² Nonetheless, as attempted through the volume *Voices of Talking Stars* (2017), I wish to accentuate the fact that women render(ed) multiple roles in the film industry, and that filmmaking is ‘work’ and demands incredible amount of physical labour (for example, ten to fifteen hours of continuous shifts), other than a variety of ingenious activities.



<**Image 1:** Shanti, who works in a shop, unwittingly enters the scene and ends up playing ‘Paro’ in *Kaagaz ke Phool* >

The pertinent questions related to such speculations therefore, are as following -- what is nature of work in the unorganized sectors such as films, and what does ‘creative’ labour actually entail?¹³ If labour is the effort that goes into manufacturing a product in return of wages, how many hours of physical labour do film workers put in, and how many hours are spent (inadvertently) in waiting, discussing, interacting, writing, rehearsing, planning, etc., against what of the kind of payments; as well, by what methods are personnel recruited, contracts forged, how do networks and kinship unfold, what are the working conditions in the film sets, also by what means is

¹² See “Epilogue: Who is Badar Begum?” in *Voices of the Talking Stars*, edited by Madhuja Mukherjee.

¹³ See Madhusree Dutta et al edited *Project cinema city*.

the labour force (comprising technicians, light boys, art team, carpenter, dresser, tailor, production team, junior artists, dancers, assistants et al) connected to the final (artistic) product? Indeed, how does one account for the corporeal and the affective labour? And, what are the coordinates between skilled and unskilled labour, which create a film? Besides, how does the subject of 'gender' problematize issues of cinema and labour? In brief, the film industry, despite the current corporatization of finances, on the whole, functions like a private firm -- on the basis of whims and logics of affinity and associations,¹⁴ -- and is generally unscrupulous in the manner in which its personnel are employed for multiple tasks, and are underpaid and uncredited. The women's question thus, despite the glaringly low number of women workers in the industry, influences us to reconsider methods of writing histories for cinema.

This paper doesn't hope to tackle all possible responses to such queries. It primarily is grows from my larger concerns regarding gender, labour and the Indian film industry, and is connected to my on-going audio-visual documentation project titled "The shadow and the arc light".¹⁵ It draws from my wider research pertaining to women/work and the film industry dynamics. In the recent past feminist historiography in relation to cinema has gathered momentum, especially with regard early Hollywood films and studio structures. In fact, even journalistic writings have drawn attention to the fact that Kathryn Bigelow was the first woman to win the Academy award for Best Director in as late as 2010, while Sofia Coppola received Palm d'Or in 2006 and 2017 as well as the Golden Lion in 2010, alongside the recognition of directors such as Mira Nair and Samira Makhmalbaf, to name a few. Thus, figures like Maya Deren, Chantal Akeman, Anges Varda and a few others, appear like candles in the wind, and in Indian contexts, despite some notable films made by women in the arena of Documentary and also within the ambit of video art, women's active roles as directors, writers, cinematographers,

¹⁴ Also see Tejswani Ganti *Producing Bollywood*.

¹⁵ Major Research Project titled "The Shadow and the Arc-Light: An anthology project of the Indian film industry and women as workers" under the category 'Research Support to Faculty Members', Jadavpur University-RUSA 2.0, 2019-2020 (extended to 2021).

sound engineers, music composers, et al, particularly in mainstream cinemas, are rarely visible.¹⁶ My intention, however, is *not* to posit women as ‘auteurs’. Contrarily, I wish stress upon the conundrums of historical readings which, generally speaking, have been greatly appropriated by studies of periods, styles, movements and (great) masters, even though, more recently newer research have tackled industrial conditions, cinematic transactions across the regions, media histories, etc. Consequently, I aspire to shift the focus to subjects of cinema and labour, and bring to light the characteristics of film work, and enquire why is the female figure missing from film history catalogues?

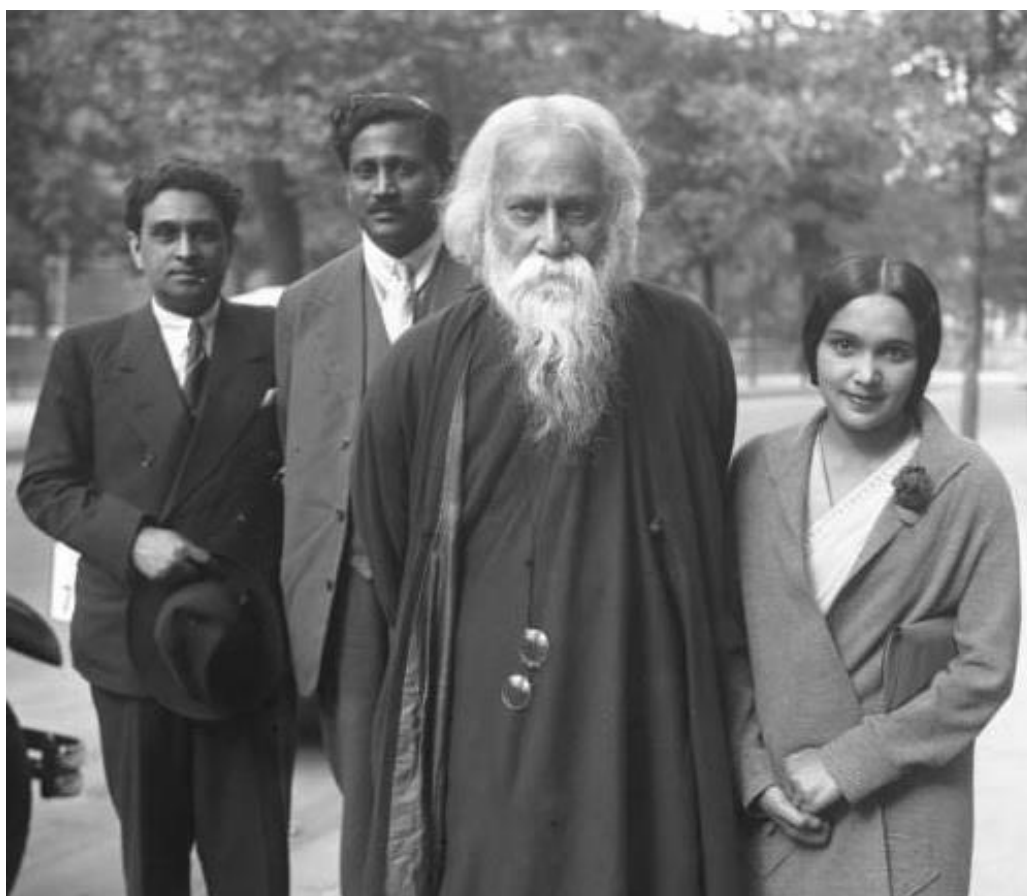
In the context of the ‘Women Film Pioneers Project’¹⁷ researchers, archivists, historians, and curators have excavated biographies of women who worked as directors, producers, editors, cinematographers, as well as accountants, trainers, stunt persons, distributors, costume consultant et al. While, the scope of archival research on women’s contribution in early South-Asian films is limited, I have been particularly impelled by the volume^[SEP] titled *Red Velvet Seat* edited by Lant and^[SEP] Periz, which has anthologized long and short articles to underscore how women were involved with cinema. Besides, Vicki Callahan’s influential volume, which proposes feminist film history, is deeply entrenched in empirical research, and recommends newer approaches of studying cinema. Furthermore, *Feminist Media Histories*’ 2018 volume (4[1]) on “labour” in its attempt to make women’s work visible, discusses how the annual report of *The Celluloid Ceiling* have documented the employment graph in Hollywood, since 1998. Karen W. Mahar’s *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (2006) applies research methods from film and business history, sociology, and feminist scholarship to analyze the gendering of Hollywood studios. To use Denise Mckenna’s words from the introduction to the issue,¹⁸ Mahar’s work traces, “the inclusion and exclusion of women

¹⁶ Journalistic writings aside, some popular books, like *F-rated: Being a Woman filmmaker in India* (edited by Nandita Dutta, 2019), have collated interviews of contemporary filmmakers and have underlined their quandaries.

¹⁷ See <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/>

¹⁸ “Editor’s Introduction: Labor”, *Feminist Media History*, 4(1): 1- 10.

working as filmmakers (particularly as directors) between 1896 and 1928, [and] Mahar accounts for the ways in which institutional “masculinization” pushed women into types of labor that upheld traditional gender norms”.¹⁹ With regarding to Indian film industries, documentaries such as *The Saroj Khan Story* (Nidhi Tulli, 2012), and the fictional narrative dealing with struggles of the stunt-woman Reshma Pathan namely *The Sholay Girl* (Srabani Deodhar and Sai Deoghar, 2019) indicate a new turn in cinema studies. In this regard, I am submitting a range queries concerning matters of labour culture, history of workers’ unions, tussles over legal rights, organizational structures of media industries (including Television and Advertising), and therefore, I call attention to a historical lacuna, which provokes us to reevaluate film historiography and the (un-credited) work done by women in disparate capacities.



¹⁹ Also see Erin Hill’s *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production* (2016), and Emily Carman’s *Independent Stardom: Freelance Women in the Hollywood Studio System* (2016).

<**Image 2:** Devika Rani, a pioneering figure in film production, with Rabindranath Tagore in Berlin, 1931²⁰ >

Alternative approaches

The purpose of this project is principally two fold: a) to understand the types of work upheld by the film industry, and b) to find the absentee women in the lost archives of cinema. The process accordingly, urges us to rethink the *material culture of cinema* and reimagine a *historical ecology of media practice and forms*, which overlaps with multiple times and spaces, and thereby trace the travels of the cinematic objects, as well as locate its accounts in alternative archives (in the public domain, for instance) in order to revisit the ways in which ‘creative’ labour arrive at the site of production, and cultural products take shape.²¹ Subsequently, my (larger) research goes beyond locating the impact of women who hail from diverse ethnicities and communities or held positions of power;²² instead, it engages with divergent media (and intersections between music, theatre, radio and film industries), cultures and practices, alongside trans-regional traffic of women across industries.²³ In this manner, I put forward questions regarding the problem of methods vis-à-vis media forms and geographies, technologies and the economy of industrial structures, and agency. For instance, it is crucial to

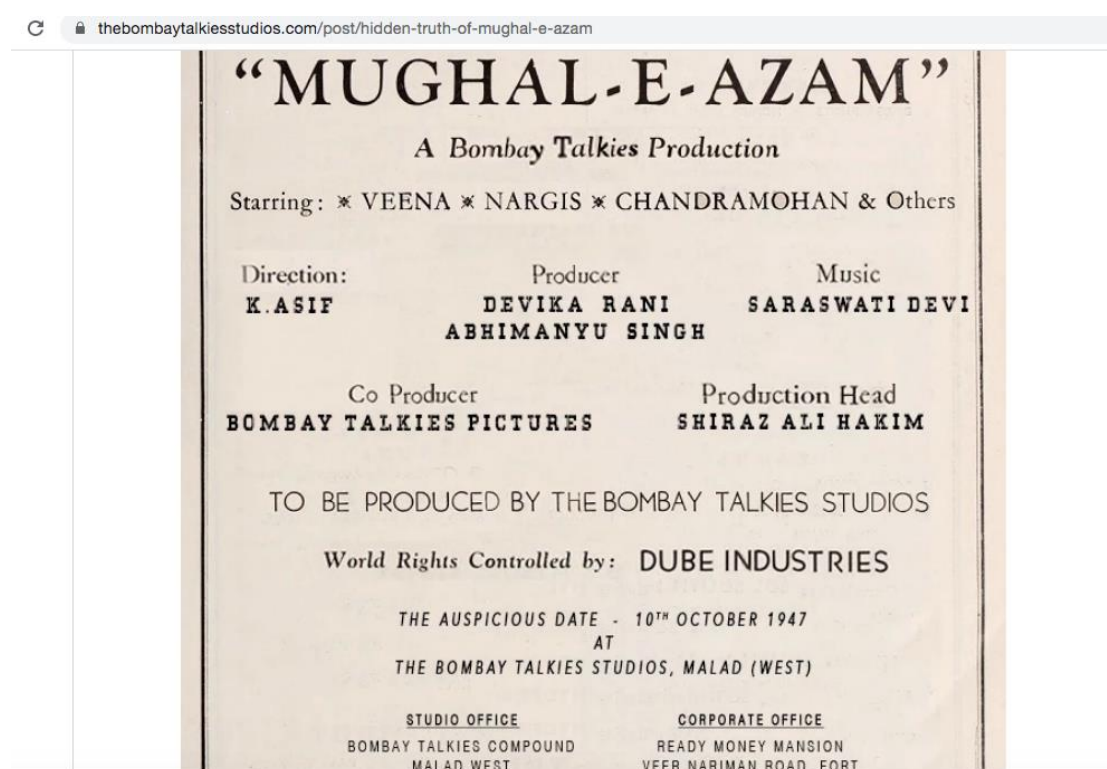
²⁰ Image source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

²¹ In my research so far, I have tried to examine a triad of – ‘Places, Publics, and Practice’, to be precise. It therefore, not only entailed a thorough study of texts and contexts, and research of print publicity (as found in the archives), but the project(s) demanded a closer look at the processes of film making and a close-reading of technological transformations, a study of vernacular texts, and biographies. On one hand, I don’t study cinema history in isolation; on the other, and in order to do so, I have tried to locate a plethora of extra-textual material through private collectors, and as found in the public domain. By emphasizing certain tropes, and highlighting peripheral and incomplete trajectories, I produced a chequered map of Indian cinema during pre-and post independence eras. A range of my work has materialized as video essays and installations. Also see Madhuja Mukherjee “Material, History, Arguments” and “Flaneuse, Viewership, Cinematic Spaces”. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXUmmweLOEg>

²² See my series titled “Miss Cinemawali”: <http://kindlemag.in/author/madhuja-mukherjee/>

²³ I am thinking of many early period actors turned producer/directors like Jaddan Bai, Sabita Devi, Ratan Bai et al, who shifted from Calcutta to Bombay to pursue their careers. Also see “Sabita’s Journey from Calcutta to Bombay: Gender and Modernity in the Circuits of Cinemas in India” by Sarah Rahman Niazi in the volume edited by in Monika Mehta and Madhuja Mukherjee *Industrial Networks and Cinemas of India: Shooting Stars, Shifting Geographies and Multiplying Media* (forthcoming).

reconsider the ways in which, during the 1920s and early 1930s, extraordinary figures like Fatma Begum, Jaddan Bai, Devika Rani, Glorious Gohar, Lalitha Pawar, Pramila, Sabita Devi or Ratan Bai, and others, functioned both as actors and also reinvented themselves as writers, directors, producers et al.²⁴ Besides, the pioneering work done by Saraswati Devi aka Khorshed, in the field of popular film music, demands further study.²⁵ While certain researches have uncovered the project towards gentrification of the industry in the nationalist context (Bhaumik 2001), and have illustrated the formation of the big studios and institutionalization of certain cultural prototypes (also see Madhuja Mukherjee 2008, 2009, 2017, 2019), and thereby shown the process of marginalization of the ‘Modern’ enterprising woman and diverse cultural forms (also see Majumdar 2010), recent studies have refocused the lens toward the groundbreaking contribution of women in making of films, and demonstrate in what ways many persisted on the edge.



<Image 3: Note, Bombay Talkies had embarked on the production of

²⁴ Also see Debashree Mukherjee “Out of Sight: Archiving Hidden Histories of Practice” also see Virchand Dharamsey “The Career of Sagar film Company (1929-40)”.

²⁵ Also see Shikha Jhingan “Backpacking Sounds: Sneha Khanwalkar and the ‘New’ Soundtrack of Bombay Cinema” on contemporary cinema.

Mughal-E-Azam in 1947; moreover, consider the information that it was Saraswati Devi who was touted as the music-composer of the film. >²⁶

Notwithstanding certain methodological problems arising from the motivated analyses of the forceful debates around issues of respectability and ‘actresses’ (during the early period), which to an extent valorize the predominant notion about cinema as risqué and precarious work, scholars like Debashree Mukherjee (2013b) and Rashmi Sawhney (2013) have been able to sieve accounts of the journeys of certain ‘actresses’, who gradually shifted towards film making and were involved with film production. Sawhney, in her unpublished paper (titled “Fatma Begum, South Asia’s ‘First’ Female Director: Resurrections from Media and Legal Archives”),²⁷ brilliantly stitches together Fatma Begum’s remarkable career, by meticulously analyzing varied and scattered material, and thereby, presents a comprehensive story of Begum’s outstanding attempts to make films, and subsist in the business despite law suits and legal battles. In point of fact, legal tussles, court cases and scandals were/are part of the various onslaughts which women survived in more ways than one.²⁸ While Sawhney puts forth specific questions about method, fluid and improper archives, Debashree Mukherjee, in her article “Letter from an unknown woman,” specifically examines the characteristics of film work by locating fragmentary letters written between Devaki Rani and other actors, during her times. First is case of Begum Khurshid Mirza aka Renuka Devi, and the second is that of Pramila nee Esther Victoria Abraham. Debashree Mukherjee (2011, 60- 61) describes how as young divorcee Pramila landed in Bombay and:

[s]he became associated with the stunt film genre, acting in adventure films like *Jungle King* (Wadia Movietone, 1939), and *Bijlee* (Prakash Pictures, 1939) where one would find her dressed in tiger skins and jumping off horses. [...]

²⁶ Screenshot taken during research on Bombay Talkies for academic purposes. See <https://www.thebombaytalkiesstudios.com/post/hidden-truth-of-mughal-e-azam>

²⁷ In the volume edited by Monika Mehta and Madhuja Mukherjee *Industrial Networks and Cinemas of India: Shooting Stars, Shifting Geographies and Multiplying Media* (forthcoming).

²⁸ Such scandalous legal tussles were true for Fatma Begum, Ratan Bai, Naseem Banu, Shanta Apte and others. Also see Neepa Majumdar "Gossip, Labor, and Female Stardom in Pre-Independence Indian Cinema".

She further adds that:

A story that remains untold about actresses from this period is of the multiple technical roles they were often asked to perform in a loosely organized film industry. Pramila *performed her own stunts in many films* (severely injuring herself on more than one occasion), and *even worked as colour coordinator and design consultant on Ardeshir Irani's second colour film, Mother India* (Imperial Film Company, 1938).

Furthermore:

By 1947, Pramila was in the exact same position as Devika Rani, *managing a production and distribution business completely on her own as Kumar* [her husband] moved to Pakistan with his first wife. [Italics added].

In reality, above and beyond the varied types of work emphasized here, many women together with Pramila were also making certain personal and professional choices by staying back in India, and by continuing to work in the industry, at the time their husbands migrated to Pakistan. Moreover, Debashree Mukherjee (2011, 63) is particularly precise in suggesting that the adoration of the Modern girl effectively, “flattens and generalizes the multiple lived experiences of women in the film industry. It also posits a complete temporal rupture in demographic and discourse”. In point of fact, the questions that need to be asked at this juncture, in the context of emergent researches, are the problems of the film industry as a place of work.

Writing about ‘scandals’ and ‘scandalous’ silences, and about the career of Naseem Banu, Debashree Mukherjee (2013) also points out how Naseem’s mother mobilized her career, and later the manner in which she herself designed the career and costumes for her daughter Saira Banu. Naseem Banu in fact, got tailors and embroiderers to create the clothes, and also designed jewelry for her daughter. More conspicuous perhaps, is Saadat Hasan Manto’s (1998) narrative about “Pari-chehera Naseem”. In an otherwise almost contemptuous commentary on contemporary Bombay film world, Manto is compassionate towards Naseem Banu, and the book closes with his memories of her. While he was not particularly impressed by her performances, he

mentions in detail how she was careful and selective about her clothes. Manto writes (1998, 176):

When *Begum* went into production she took charge of the costume department. It was estimated that the costumes would cost ten to twelve thousand rupees, but to save money [since it was her husband's production] she had a tailor permanently installed in her house, to whom she gave all her old saris, shirts [kurtas] and ghararas [wide pajamas], with detailed directions on how to stitch the costumes we would need.

Whereas it's hard to find Naseem Banu's credit for the work and investments she did, I wish to point out that her method of working was unerringly like any competent costume designer. Moreover, Actor and MP Vyjayanthi mala also reiterates similar incidents, and mentions in what way her mother coordinated with the art department and the director, and selected colours, material, designs, and jewelry for the landmark film *Madhumati*²⁹ If Debashree Mukherjee's (2013) conversations with Dr. Sushila Rani Patel (journalist, singer, actress, married to Baburao Patel, and the ghost writer for *filmindia*), illustrate how there weren't *any* woman working in the departments connected to film production (during the early phases), her interview with Ram Tipnis, the veteran Make-up artist, demonstrates in what manner there were few female hair dressers in the studios, though, commonly, 'actresses' got their domestic helps and/ or their mothers to assist them with costume and other work related matters.³⁰ The 'notorious' mother of Indian film 'actresses' hence, perhaps, doubled as managers, costume designers, and even in certain cases functioned as financial advisers, caregivers and perhaps did errands during the shoot. A careful scanning of the credits of the films since the 1930s-40s does divulge a few names of women, sporadically, yet, as a rule, a range of work done by women have been unrecognized, unpaid and brushed aside as part of the familial job, despite the fact that many scholars have written about the stupendous financial power and the personal

²⁹ See Rinki Bhattacharya's *Bimal Roy's Madhumati*.

³⁰ This point, nevertheless, may be disputed since certain articles on the costume designer Leena Danu reveal she was neither credited nor paid for a host of work she delivered. See: <https://beyondbollywood.co.in/2020/08/07/how-late-costume-designer-leena-danu-never-got-paid-for-umrao-jaan-1981/>

independence ‘actresses’ enjoyed.³¹ Briefly, while successful ‘actresses’ yielded substantial power and traded their iconic star values, the women working behind the scenes were invisible and remain unaccounted. Truly, it does not demand much critical thinking to comprehend why certain kind of work – ‘costume’ design for instance–,³² which is an integral part of film production and filmic universe, were, by and large, allotted poor budgets, and were generally assigned to the ‘actresses’ to tackle.³³ Likewise, it is perhaps self evident as to how hairdressing was a culturally coded practice, and therefore, it was befitting to employ professional female hairdressers, in an otherwise manifestly male dominated industry.



³¹ See Priti Ramamurthy "The Modern Girl in India in the Interwar Years".

³² Also see Madhuja Mukherjee unpublished paper titled "Speaking with Suhasini Mulay: A short story about a long strife".

³³ Debashree Mukherjee (2013, 27) writes:

Women's labor, be it in the film industry or otherwise, has often been denied the status of work. A woman "helping out" with washing the negative or designing a costume hardly qualifies as a film professional by official standards. Within a visual economy of desire and commodity, the filmic image is heavily dependent on elements such as costumes, jewelry, hair styles, and make-up. An actress who does her own hair and make-up, or decides the diegetic appropriateness of a collared blouse versus a choli, adds to the affect and meaning of the filmic text.

< **Images 4 & 5:** Pramila (L) and Naseem Banu (R)³⁴ >

As we unpack the features of film work, we must also take into consideration the fact that film work enmeshes physical perils, in the lieu of health facilities. In the two short stories penned by the eminent author Manto, namely “My name is Radha” and “Janki”, Manto retells his meetings with various aspiring actresses, at the time he worked as a writer with Bombay’s renowned production house. Besides Manto’s views regarding the female figure awaiting political awareness of sorts, and his caustic comments about the Nationalist (Congress) types, these stories are strewn with details about the distinctiveness of film work. For instance, in “Janki” the woman arrives from Peshawar first to Pune, and thereafter, relocates herself in Bombay.³⁵ More important, she meets Manto with a recommendation letter from a common friend, and later, after a series of failed screen tests, through Manto’s references she finds a job as an actor in Bombay.³⁶ And, although she finds (quite a few) lovers as well, one cannot discard the fact that, it is Janki who suffers severe health conditions, which includes Bronchitis and Pneumonia (and an abortion), and is finally saved by Penicillin shots, stolen from Army hospital. Similarly, “My name is Radha” presents specifics of the studio life – the extensive phases of waiting between the shots, for the rains to subside, for one’s turn to emanate, for make-up, for lights, and for other things. However, it primarily narrates the story of Radha aka Neelam, the ‘second’ heroine/vamp of the film that Manto is writing, who endures Malaria and finally succumbs to love and disease. While body is central to the plot – Raj Kishore’s (the haloed male lead) athlete and powerful physique vis-à-vis Manto’s weak and slim body – one speculates why both Radha and Janki physically bear the brunt of industrial and historical underdevelopment. These writings lead us to questions such as -- in what ways skilled/ unskilled workers are employed, how are contracts spelled out, pay scales settled, in what manner work is

³⁴ Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

³⁵ Interestingly, Manto mentions how she arrives via the ‘Frontier Mail’ and later takes the ‘Deccan Mail’ to go to Bombay from Pune. Note, both are names of films by (fearless) Nadia.

³⁶ Also see Saadat Hasan Manto *Stars from another sky*.

evaluated, and how are work related statuses determined? More important, when the industrial set up is quite unsystematic, how do the workforce arrive at the site of work? And, where do they go when work fizzles out? Within the limited scope of this paper, I shall try to tackle a few (definite) conjectures, in the light of feminist historiography.

Entering the field

One the matters that has troubled me personally, is the problem of the entry point in the film business. While, there are reports (since the 1920s) regarding auditions and screen tests, and even about the chance factor, which ensue in acting roles; as well, more recently, TV shows have brought forth singers and dancers,³⁷ I enquire, how does a film professional -- an amateur and aspiring director, writer, composer, lyricist, musician, sound engineer, cinematographer, editor, costume designer, art director, production designer, choreographer, dancer, action director, et al – get the so-called chance? Whereas, it is difficult for any person to find the ‘clandestine’ door as it were, during the Conference on^{SEP} “The New Work Order”, held at Christ College, Bangalore, during December 2019, Anubha Yadav emphasized how it is further problematic for women, since a whole lot of pre-production meetings frequently happen at informal places (in the producer or director’s house, for instance), and recurrently at very odd hours, and thus, such interactions often exclude qualified women, unless of course, she is a friend or a friend of a friend.³⁸ Therefore, one of the ways in which one may understand this predicament, is by examining how some of the trained personnel managed to enter the scene during the Post-independence period.

Academy award winning costume designer Bhanu (Rajopadhaye) Athaiya, for instance, writes (2010) how she grew up in Kolhapur, and was influenced by the music and theatre scene of the city, as well as by her father, who was

³⁷ For example, exceptional singers like Sunidhi Chauhan and Sreya Ghoshal have entered the industry through TV reality shows.

³⁸ Many of the biographies including Bimal Roy’s as well as Manto’s writings narrate about such meetings, and gatherings.

associated with Baburao Painter (one of the father figures of Prabhat Film Co.), and had also made a film titled *Mohini*. In that film eight years old 'Bhanu' had played a part, and she recalls the meticulousness of the production. Later, driven by her artistic inclinations she arrived at Bombay, with an aim to join the J J School of Arts. Likewise, her early sketches, published in *The Art of Costume Design*, demonstrate that, she had a keen eye and panache for figurative drawings and costume. Athaiya writes how (2010, 29):

The *Fashion & Beauty* magazine office was situated in Botawala Chambers opposite Horniman Circle South Bombay. I would take a train from Khar to Churchgate and walk towards the Town Hall to reach my office. In the afternoons, I would take a train from Churchgate, get off at Charni Road and walk to Blavatsky Hall my art studies till six in the evening, and then go Hima Devi's [family friend] house at Khar. This was my routine during my first year in Bombay.

Besides, at the time India was on the threshold of Independence, Athaiya joined *Eve's Weekly* magazine, and did fashion illustrations for it. Moreover, her training at J J School of Arts, fellowships with her seniors, and the Progressive Artists Group (PAG), brought her under a new fold. Meanwhile, she also joined a boutique as a fashion designer, which extended her links, and her clientele included the new stars on the block, namely Kamini Kaushal and Nargis. While she started to style Kaushal and Nargis, she quickly became 'costume designer' for films as well. Athaiya, was arguably one of the firsts, to be exclusively hired and credited as 'costume designer'. Additionally, it was possibly *Shree 420* (Raj Kapoor, 1954), which drew attention to her work and expertise, which was followed by other significant films, directed and produced by Guru Dutt. Besides the fact that Athaiya seems to have been located in the mesh of multiple networks, actors like Kamini Kaushal, and directors like Raj Kapoor and Guru Dutt had other correlations with Bombay based painters, writers, theatres artists, dancers and particularly with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), and the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA).



< **Images 6 & 7:** Madam Primakoff designed the costumes of *Urankhatola* (1955), while Athaiya's earliest break was *40 Baba ek chor* (1953)³⁹ >

³⁹ Image source: LP record cover of *Urankhatola*, and glass negative plate (for theatrical projection) of *40 Baba ek chor* author's collection.

Truly, we need to recognize the import of the Progressives in order to fathom in what ways the careers of women professionals were unfolding. During November 2016, I had interviewed the veteran actor and director (of TV programmes) Kamini Kaushal. Kaushal had made her acting debut with the Grand Prix (Jury Award, Cannes Film Festival) winner film *Neecha Nagar* (Chetan Anand, 1946). Regarding her experiences she said the following:

‘Necha Nagar’ was quite literarily thrown into my lap. Chetan [Anand] knew my brother. I use to do a lot of plays [in Lahore] he knew that. We had our dramatic society. He said ‘why don’t you work in my film?’ I said ‘its not nice to work in films’. [...] My brother said ‘why don’t you work in Chetan’s film?’ He [Anand] was trying to do something definite, not something vague. [...] He was very motivated, and well read. [...] There is a very dramatic scene in which I am taken to the hospital and I don’t want to go. It was very very dramatic. And, I did the scene. [...] Having done so much radio, you knew how to control your voice. [...] We were all theatre people, not film guys. We were very raw. It came easy. [...] Only I didn’t like the smell of makeup. [...] We used to have our rehearsals at Chetan’s house in Bandra. I would take train from my home by myself.

I have raised this point earlier (2016, 2017c) that, Chetan Anand, of the Nav Ketans, was associated with IPTA, and his house became a centre for enlivened debates. And, although the Anand brothers themselves were not Left leaning per se;⁴⁰ both the theme and formal experiments of *Neecha Nagar* accentuate the ways in which filmmakers of the period were speaking to contemporary crises and international currents. *Neecha Nagar* was loosely adapted from Maxim Gorky’s *Lower Depths* (1902), and depicted with great intensity the physical misery of the people living in the slums and in the ghettos. In point of fact, a number of groups and associations, such as the Progressive Writers Association (/PWA, 1936), Indian People’s Theatre Association (/IPTA, 1944) and Progressive Artists Group (/PAG, 1947), had already taken over Bombay’s cultural sphere so to speak, and the city became a principal location political and artistic transactions. Note, in 1943 the headquarters of the Communist Party of India (CPI) was moved from

⁴⁰ See Ranjani Mazumdar “Cosmopolitan dreams.”

Lucknow to Bombay as well.⁴¹ Therefore, one may propose that, there was a dynamic presence of a number of Progressive figures, who in the long run not only contributed to the cultural mood of the city, but created a significant dent in the industrial practice.

Other than illustrious figures such as Manto, who had arrived at Bombay during 1936, and later, alongside Shaheed Latif, worked with Filmistan studios,⁴² there were other influential Left-wing writers, including, the Diva of contemporary literature namely Ismat Chughtai (married to Latif), as well as Krishan Chander, Ali Sardar Jafri, along with performers like Balraj Sahni and Zohra Segal, and poets like Sahir Ludhianvi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Prem Dhawan, Shailendra, Kaifi Azmi, and others, who not only gradually drifted towards Bombay, but also shifted their energies to popular cinema. Moreover, M F Hussain, who was associated with the PAG, reportedly painted posters for popular films during the early phase of his career.⁴³ In actuality, IPTA had a very broad base and a number of artistes, inclusive of the famous musician Ravi Shankar and singer-composer Hemant Mukhopadhyay (nee Kumar), Salil Chowdhury, along with Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, et al, were active members of the group and the movement. Furthermore, IPTA connections prompted established Calcutta-based directors like Bimal Roy (and his associates) to migrate to Bombay as well.⁴⁴

Bombay's urban map and its enormous expansion through the last century has been deliberated upon by historians, just as, the quick economic development during this time, as well as growth of small-scale industries in the suburbs, which caused mass-scale migration towards the city, have been

⁴¹ Also see Pradhan's *Marxist Cultural Movement in India*.

⁴² See Debashree Mukherjee's "Lost films of Manto" <http://pharaat.blogspot.in/2012/05/debashree-mukherjee-lost-films-of.html> (accessed on 9th May 2019).

⁴³ See street photos and photographs of hoardings taken by Hussain during 1980s <https://scroll.in/magazine/887087/mf-husains-photographs-of-film-hoardings-will-take-you-back-to-chennai-of-1980s> (accessed on 19th March 2020).

⁴⁴ Also see Madhuja Mukherjee "Forking Paths of Indian Cinema".

examined in length.⁴⁵ I contend that, by the 1940s, Bombay became, figuratively speaking, a place to arrive at especially for writers, music composers, dancers, actors as well as labourers, from Lahore and Calcutta and other places.⁴⁶ Besides the Calcutta contingent (many of whom shifted from New Theatres after the weakening of the studios during the war), there were another group who travelled from the Pakistan side of Punjab, just as, Manto and singer-performer Noorjehan along with others, migrated to Lahore to track newer careers, following the formation of the two nations. Albeit, not for the ‘first-time’, nevertheless, by the 1940s artists, writers, filmmakers, music composers, singers, et al, gradually headed for Bombay, and in due course generated a formidable milieu as well as spaces of artistic dialogues.⁴⁷ Gyan Prakash (2010: 128) in his book *Mumbai Fables* writes that, “Intellectuals and artists were drawn to Bombay’s pulsating modernity, but they also viewed it as deeply contradictory”. While the city became the locus of cultural and professional transactions, and the film industry became a place towards which many artists deviated, and cinema became a decisive medium for mass mobilization, as well as a mode through which the darkness of the times could be effectively articulated. By drawing inspiration from French and Spanish Popular Front cinema, IPTA brought out a pronounced agenda vis-à-vis cinema. IPTA, as specified by Sudhi Pradhan (1979: 248), proposed a movement through “film shows of progressive films depicting the life of the people like “Grapes of Wrath” [John ford, 1940] or by producing films in consonance with the ideals of the People’s theatre”.

While the life of the poor, conflicts between two types of Patriarchy, individual suffering, grief, redemption and social reform were widely accepted themes of the studio Socials,⁴⁸ direct involvement of the Left brigade in film production changed the focus to specific issues of class, nation, social hierarchies and labour, and moreover, transformed the prevalent narrative styles by

⁴⁵ See Meera Kosambi’s *Bombay in transition*.

⁴⁶ See Gyan Prakash’s *Mumbai fables*.

⁴⁷ Also see Kaushik Bhaumik *The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913–1936* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis).

⁴⁸ Also see Ravi Vasudevan “Addressing the Spectator of a ‘Third World’ National Cinema”.

bestowing a new direction and flair. *Dharti ke lal* (K A Abbas, 1946), which drew from Krishan Chander's *Annadata* and was co-written by influential author Bijon Bhattacharya, was made by the IPTA collective and became a cinematic milestone, especially because of its mode of narration, staging of the situations, mise-en-scene, and performances. While the film did not do well at the box-office, and was criticized by *Filmindia*, nonetheless, both the city and the film industry offered the Left writers, artists and activists exceptional opportunities and good earnings. In the process, IPTA and PWA, and specifically the Progressive women, became important constituents of the Bombay film industry.

Progressive women

My intention, by means of the above discussion, is not to show how the IPTA was possibly a clout of the intellectuals. Rather, I hope to demonstrate how the Progressives were instrumental in creating spaces for 'women' and their work. For instance, other than camaraderie and professional liaisons between Kamini Kaushal, Nargis and Bhanu Athaiya, Kuashal's first film (*Neecha Nagar*) involved another extraordinary figure, namely Zohra Segal. While Segal was born in a conservative family in Uttar Pradesh (United Province at that time), she was educated in Lahore, and enjoyed an exceptionally exciting life.⁴⁹ Furthermore, in time, Segal became one of the leaders of the Cultural Squad of the Communist Party of India (CPI), and she not only performed in *Neecha Nagar*, she also acted in IPTA's landmark venture *Dharti Ke Lal*. In the interim, Segal was engaged as teacher at the Uday Shankar 'India Cultural Centre', situated near Almora, and finally also performed in Shankar's outstanding modernist project *Kalpana* (1948).⁵⁰ While, Uday Shankar is well known for his remarkable choreography, and its international appeal, it is also accepted that he devised idiosyncratic dance movements and gestures (especially fluid hand movements), which were created by drawing from ordinary actions, and by reinventing the 'rhythmic' (and repetitive) physical movements of labourers. His style of choreography, as palpable in *Kalpana*,

⁴⁹ See Zohra Segal biography *Close-Up*.

⁵⁰ Prarthana Purkayastha "Dancing Otherness".

was a fundamental departure from the 'dance-films', which were often framed by ritualistic mudras. Additionally, Guru Dutt was Segal's student at Uday Shankar's centre, therefore, at the point the Nav Ketans produced *Baazi* (Guru Dutt, 1951), Segal was roped in to choreograph some of the dance sequences of the film. Consequently, I argue that, Segal introduced to Hindi cinema a specific type of performance style, which was new, yet, irreplaceable and recognizable.



<Image 8: L-R Zohra Segal, Amala Shankar and others.⁵¹ >

I wish to stress upon the manner in which performers hold their hands together, their movements, gestures, and the mode in which shoulders and the entire torso sway, to the rhythm of the drumbeats, in the song '*Dil mein samaake nahin bhoolna*' from the film *Neecha Nagar*. I contend that, such a style, in effect, is distinctive, haunting, influential, and has been personated in other films. *Neecha Nagar* presented two dance sequences -- a "twin",

⁵¹ Image source facebook Uday Shankar page public post on July 9, 2020.

another "trio" dance – in which the composition of the performers, their movement across spaces, as well as the flowing side sways, undulations, arm positions, and hand gestures were clearly drawn from the compositions created by Uday Shankar. Moreover, what may be described as the Uday Shankar "style" also comprises "make-up, costume, music, lighting, staging and showmanship"; therefore, what develops through the groundbreaking choreography done by Madame Simkie (Simone Barbier), for the three-fold song sequence (*'Ghar aaya mera pardeshi'*) in the film *Awaara* (Raj Kapoor, 1951), is a testimony of the fact as to how far accomplished dancers and choreographers determined the popular melodramatic mode.⁵² As a matter of fact, it may be effective to reiterate that if Vasudevan (1989: 41) argued the following:

in Hindi Melodrama there is an ambivalence which addresses the forbidden fears, anxieties and pleasures offered by the narrative- the fear of the father, the attractions of sexuality, anxiety attached, in the polarity of West-East, to the question of identity [....]

Then, it was Madame Simkie's choreography, which crystallized the above-mentioned formal and dominant aspects of Hindi melodramas.⁵³



⁵² See Ravi Vasudevan "The Melodramatic Mode and the Commercial Hindi Cinema".

⁵³ Due to the misleading and incomplete information regarding film crew, earlier it was thought to be Segal's choreography.

< **Image 9:** Snapshot from *Awaara*, choreography by Simone Barbier >

About her film career, Segal said the following, during her conversations with C. S. Lakshmi (2000):⁵⁴

my sister [Urza Butt] wrote and said, 'Why don't you come to Bombay and try your luck here, in films?' So, both my husband and I went to Bombay to try our luck as dancers. But the films there were so awful. The type of things I was expected to do--in one, the director came and said, 'Look there is a big bowl of roses and you come out of it in a bathing costume' (Laughter).

Segal's scathing remark concerning contemporary Bombay cinema also alerts us to the fact that, if film work is *work* as in toiling -- involving hours of physical labour in return of wages --, then the creative aspects cannot simply be read in the light of path-breaking 'aesthetics' whatsoever; also it elucidates the point that many of the artists (counting Segal) were in actuality trying out the new and evolving medium, and the emergent professional set ups ensured bigger budgets, wider viewership, and better salaries, in comparison to other associated fields (like theatre and radio).⁵⁵ Segal has been credited for the choreography of a few films, such as *Baazi*, *Nau Do Gyarah* (Vijay Anand, 1957), *CID* (Raj Khosla, 1956), at the time when dancer 'masters' and exemplary dance (male) Gurus called the shots.⁵⁶

To C.S. Lakshmi's query regarding her experiences of being a 'dance director' in "the male-dominated film world", Segal said the following:

I didn't really like it. Not so much because it was male-dominated but because you had to, more or less, cater to what the director wanted except perhaps for Guru Dutt's

⁵⁴ Also see "Zohra Segal's Shankar-Style Choreography in *Neecha Nagar* (Hindi, 1946)" on <http://cinemanrityagharana.blogspot.in/2014/02/zohra-segals-shankar-style-choreography.html> (accessed on 2nd April 2019).

⁵⁵ See "Suraiya" by Chughtai in *Yeh Un Dinoñ Ki Baat Hai: Urdu Memoirs of Cinema Legends*.

⁵⁶ Some of the most prolific dance directors were Lachhu Maharaj (who choreographed dance numbers of *Mughal-E-Azam* [1960], *Pakeezah* [1972], etc.), B. Sohanlal (choreographer of films such as *Madhumati* [1958], *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* [1962], *Guide* [1965], *Jewel Thief* [1967], and so on) and others, who played decisive roles in producing the narrative modes of Bombay cinema.

films like *Baazi*. He had been my pupil in Almora when I was teaching. So he knew the technique of Uday Shankar and he liked it. That's why he asked me to come. So, I had no problem with him because he knew my style and he let me do whatever I wanted.

Baazi literally marked the advent of contemporary hybrid dance forms; it also introduced locations such as nightclub, pubs etc., which appeared as new spaces of leisure, and provoked a range of debates in popular magazines of the period. More important perhaps, are the seductive dance numbers performed by Geeta Bali (for instance, '*Sharmaye kaahe, ghabraaye kaahe*'), and the recognizable hand gestures, shoulder movements, and the swinging of the body, conceived by Segal -- which are apparent even to untrained eyes. If *Baazi* essentially introduced the Noir mode to Hindi cinema, comprising generic settings and character prototypes, then *CID* demonstrated the dark side of Hindi melodramas and larger predicaments. As I have discussed elsewhere (2016), the Noir-type *mise-en-scene* -- for instance, low key lights and long dark shadows, silhouetted figures emerging from nowhere, or actors performing scenes totally in the dark, as well as unnerving close-ups of their faces, angular shots, and indistinct reflections -- fashioned a setting for claustrophobia, melancholia, and anxiety. The gloom was spawned through extensive night shots and night shoots, as well through the sharp juxtapositioning of visual extremes between night and day; additionally, by way of meandering shots through indefinite streets and mansions, set against the 'Noir' sky/ backdrop.

Yet, the Noir-like invocation of *CID*, which opens with a murder, is intercepted by comic interjections, 'light' romantic songs, shot in day light, and hence, producing a complex field of styles and genre-mixing. Again, I have argued in another context (2015), how the well-known song by Geeta Dutta, '*jata kahan hain dewaane*', the soundtrack of which has disseminated in the public domain across decades, was censored and deleted from the film. It was supposedly edited out for its allusive lyrics (by Majrooh Sultanpuri), and especially for the expression 'Fifi'. Thus, in actuality, the 'Fifi' song is non-existent in the film; though, Anurag Kashyap reinvented it and applied it in

Bombay Velvet (2015). So, within the framework of this paper, the query is -- what actually transpires in this sequence in which the popular musical composition plays to its glory, although, the full song is absent? I suggest that, in absence of the song (and voice), a combination of Athaiya's work (costumes), and Segal's work (movements, gestures), unfolds and momentarily overwhelms the plot. Hence, as Shekhar (Dev Anand) enters the villain's den, takes the stairways and later enters a room, the prelude to the song soars, and thereafter, Kamini (Waheeda Rehman), holding her veil in a danseuse like posture, turns her head and reveals her face, just as, the camera tracks and the music stops abruptly, before the song could begin. This (musical) sequence, of about two minutes (from 51: 15 to 53: 08 on the timeline), which bears traces of a song including the prelude and choreographed movement, in reality flows around the music and the mise-en-scene, performance and figurations, in order to chronicle a lack, which is conspicuous through its absence.



<Image 10: The fragments of the absentee song 'Fifi' from *CID* >

It is curious as to how during this period many such connections were forming and reorganizing through the impressive interventions of the Progressives. For example, while Segal, Athaiya and Guru Dutt worked together with the Nav Ketans, Athaiya also collaborated with Raj Kapoor (and later with Yash Chopra, Sunil Dutt and others); whereas, Kamini Kaushal also teamed up with the legendary Ismat Chughtai, for the films Chughtai wrote, and Shaheed Latif directed.⁵⁷ There are many such stories of alliances between Raj Kapoor and Shailendra, as well as between Guru Dutt and Sahir Ludianvi and others. Since, Athaiya worked with both Kapoor and Guru Dutt she describes in what way Kapoor would sing the song, if need be, to explain the situation, and thereafter, narrates how she would draft a design and seek his approval. She adds that (2010, 36-37):

the stars would come for measurements and fittings at my Colaba residence cum workshop on the first floor of Sandhurst House behind the Taj Mahal Hotel. [...] My house-cum-studio was spacious. I would receive the actors and discuss the ideas in the huge drawing room. In the balcony, there would be several craftsmen working on embroidery designs, while upstairs in the loft there were sewing machines for stitching garments. I would take the actors into the side room for measurements and fittings. It was a busy place.

Athaiya also writes in length about the material, colours, shapes, and (audacious) designs she selected. She particularly mentions the actress Sadhana, with whom she created certain new-age and fitted *salwar-kameez* for the film *Waqt* (Yash Chopra, 1965). Nonetheless, it is not apparent from her writing whether she crafted costumes for the male actors as well (except for films like *Reshma Aur Shera* [Sunil Dutt, 1971] and later films).

As a matter of fact, the industrial condition during the 1950s and 1960s is likely to be a combination of old and new practices. On one hand, while directors like Raj Kapoor were incorporating more structured and assembly-line production modes (and therefore, hired ‘choreographers’ and ‘costume designers’ as opposed to ‘dance masters’ and ‘dress-walas’) for his ambitious

⁵⁷ For instance, *Ziddi* (1948), *Arzoo* (1950), and so on.

film projects; on the other, at the same time, a noticeably imaginative group of filmmakers (involving Bimal Roy, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, as well as music composer Salil Chowdhury, and director Ritwik Ghatak et al), seemed to have continued with the older systems, for either budgetary constraints or by choice.⁵⁸ Athaiya's note on *Chaudvin ka chand* (Mohammed Sadiq, 1960), however, draws attention to certain approaches to film work, and shows how work was done. She explains how (2010, 59):

[...] the evocative scene of the wedding night, where the groom sees the bride's face for the first time and is thunderstruck by her beauty. *I fashioned Waheeda's dupatta out of net so that her face remained covered, but was yet seen by the camera*, giving a effect of mysterious anticipation. [Italics added]

A comparative study of her work in relation to the interview of the cinematographer V K Murthy conveys the manner in which filmmaking is a complex and mutual process. Murthy states that:⁵⁹

We first worked in colour in *Chaudvin ka Chand*. Guru Dutt was the producer of this film, but not its director. [...]. Sadik Babu was the director and Nariman, who at that time was my first assistant, the cameraman. *But whenever there was a song sequence or scenes related to a song sequence, Guru Dutt and I would take over.* [...]

I decided to use nitro-flood lights, which are used for still photography. They have a colour temperature of about 5000 kelvin. I used them on the sets for the face light and was the first person who thought of this. Now these were white lights, so I used them in combination with the old Mole-Richardson lights that were in the studio. I did all the experimentation in Chaudvin ka Chand. [Italics added]

⁵⁸ In point of fact, several actors have narrated during their (TV) interviews as to how Hrishikesh Mukherjee had little or no budget for costumes, and a number of them used their own clothes in Mukherjee's middle-class dramas.

⁵⁹ Murthy, V. K. (2009). "Interview by the Raqs Media Collective". Seminar, June 2009. http://www.india-seminar.com/2009/598/598_interview.htm (accessed on 13 May 2019.)



<**Image 11:** [cropped] snapshot from the song of *Chaudvin ka Chand* >

Despite Murthy's exceptional innovative talent, it must be highlighted that Waheeha Rehman's enigmatic close-up was enlivened by make-up, costume, lights, lensing, camera movement, and uses of colours, and there were many 'hands' behind such picturisation. Furthermore, as research demonstrates, women participated –actively-- in such quests for new directions.

Explorers and forerunners

At the time I conversed with Kamini Kaushal (in 2016), I had enquired about her interactions with the director Shaheed Latif. To this she replied:

“I think his wife [Ismat Chughtai] was a bigger contributor. [...] I mean he was good, he was okay; he executed her concepts very well. But she was the one; she was the thinker behind him. It’s a fact. There was a warmth about her writing.”⁶⁰

And, how do you remember Chughtai? I asked. “Smiling, always smiling” Kaushal said. Later, Kaushal added that, “she is a very very lovable person. Very friendly and very warm”. Kaushal’s collaboration with Chughtai and her films, as well as her memory of the times, underline a particular kind of camaraderie that was perhaps infectious. Moreover, besides monetary needs as it were, many or most of the Progressive women had acquired substantial training, and were making certain strategic moves vis-à-vis cinema. Kamini Kaushal, who was a Graduate from Kinnaird College for Women University, Lahore, narrated the following regarding her college life:

We used to cycle around. But I grew up much later. [...] I was interested in doing things. Like whether it is drawing or painting or elocution or making films [...] we were given complete freedom in our home. That was the most important element I think I imbibed. [...] That was the norm in our home. [...] Let them explore the world, let them discover. My brother would take us with him everywhere. Us, three sisters. [...] *I learnt Kathak and Bharat Natyam in Lahore, before Partition. [...] There were no restrictions as such. I went cycling, I went swimming, I played all the games. But it was not anything that I was doing anything extra special. [...] I did all this without self consciousness. [...]*

And, “boyfriends”? I asked gingerly.

I did not have boyfriends. Right next to us was the FC College [Forman Christian College], I could have picked up [italics added] so many. So one day, one did ask me “may I

⁶⁰ The interview was conducted in English, Kaushal’s words and expressions have not been edited.

cycle down with you”, I said, “well the road belongs to you as much it belongs to me”. [Laughs loudly...] *I had so many interests that the romantic interest lit up in my life a little late. [...] I was intriguingly preoccupied with so many things. [...]* [Italics added].

In fact, while speaking to Kaushal I was reminded of Chughtai’s court case, and her description of Lahore. Even when she (as well as Manto and Latif) visited Lahore to combat legal battles, Chughtai describes her delight about travelling to Lahore. “Lahore was beautiful, lush and lively,” she writes (2013: 27). “It greeted everyone with open arms. It was city of people who were amiable and loved life. It was the heart of Punjab.” “We wandered about the streets of Lahore [...]”, Chughtai explained. Lahore, where many of the Left authors were educated (though Chughtai herself studied and married in Aligarh), and its progressive milieu, thus, is crucial in understanding the Progressive impulse.⁶¹ In fact, Zohra Segal, who studied in Lahore as well, travelled to Europe in car (convertible Dodge) with her Uncle ‘Memphis’ (maternal Uncle, S S Khan) and others, during 1930.⁶² As described by Kiran Segal (2012), Zohra Segal wore jodhpuris, a cotton top and a Kashmiri jacket. They toured from Dehradun to Lahore, and to Multan and Ziarat; from there on they travelled to Quetta and Baluchistan, and to Meshad in Iran. Afterwards, they went to Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz. From Shiraz they reached Basra, and to Beirut, thereafter, from Beirut they visited Balbek, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Egypt. Finally, they took a boat down the river Nile, and in due course via some detour landed in Dresden.

⁶¹ See Karuna Chanana “Schooling of girls in pre-Partition Punjab”.

⁶² See ‘Uncle Memphis’ in Kiran Segal’s *Fatty*, 47- 62.



<**Image 12:** The author with Kaushal during November 2016>

En fin, as a way of conclusion, I wish to read such explorations as symptoms of the feminist yen. While travel stories are a pivotal to a modern world,⁶³ and film and other cultural fields involved substantial travel – for instance, a number of artistes migrated specifically from Lahore and Calcutta to Bombay during the late 1940s, just as, Jaddan Bai moved from Lahore to Allahabad to Calcutta to Bombay, Devika Rani journeyed from Waltair to London to Berlin to Bombay, or Nadira came from Baghdad to Bombay and Helen from Rangoon to Dibrugarh to Bombay, to walk on uncharted terrains as it were; it might be productive to ask what ensued when women trekked the routes. I contend that some of them found the proverbial entry point, which probably became somewhat approachable due to their artistic and political engagements. While, as mentioned in the introduction to this paper, it is possible that Partition and the Progressive movements influenced women to pursue career goals, as well, women with financial crunch needed to find some

⁶³ Also See *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel* by Inderpal Grewal.

rewarding work; by and large, the film industry appeared like a meaningful employment to women. It is also noticeable that, the film industry, prior to the ways in which the studios streamlined film production during the 1930s, was far more accessible to women arriving from diverse fields and locations. Moreover, until the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) graduates (for example filmmakers like Aruna Raje and Renu Saluja) emerged on the scene and identified film school networks, there were hardly any women in the 'technical' departments (like camera, sound, and editing) who were 'trusted' with shooting, toiling, managing, planning and so on. Nevertheless, I imagine that, writes like Fatma Begum, Jaddan Bai, Enakshi Rama Rau, Frene Talyarkhan, Snehaprabha Pradhan, Protima Dasgupta and Ismat Chughtai created an opening and a space for women in the wonderland; or Devika Rani, Naseem Banu and Bhanu Athaiya were effective in creating iconic visuals, characters and scenes which left its traces in films and in the public memory, as well, composers like Saraswati Devi and choreographers like Madam Simkie and Zohra Segal emphasized upon the labour aspect of song/dance sequences, and made songs, dance and performance an integral and momentous feature of popular Hindi cinema.

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Bio-note:

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