



Early Marathi Cinema: Prabhat Studios and Social Respectability

Hrishikesh Ingle

Abstract

The history of Marathi cinema, one of the first formations of regional cinema in India, can be traced from the studio era (1929-1953), specifically through Prabhat Studios. Prabhat Studios was situated in Kolhapur and Pune in western India. This paper analyzes two historical characteristics of Prabhat: how the studio imagined a cinema through linguistically specific regional content and forms of performance, and how this filmmaking was institutionalized as an example of artistic excellence, therefore conforming to the notion of social respectability. I argue that the filmmaking practices engendered by Prabhat aimed to project the studio, and cinema itself, as a respectable creative enterprise to Marathi society. This article accesses anecdotal biographies, archival materials, and existing Prabhat films to evaluate this tendency towards social respectability. A significant aspect of this historical account is the spatial spread, or movement, of early Marathi cinema, as it intersects other cultural forms to negotiate modernity.

Keywords: Cultural studies; Indian film history; Indian studio era; Marathi cinema; Prabhat Studios; regional filmmaking; social space.

Prabhat Studios, along with New Theatres and Bombay Talkies, was one of the important spaces defining the Indian studio era (1920s-1953).¹ Prabhat rose to prominence due to the technical excellence and variety of thematic content that it engaged with in the late colonial period (1930s-1947).² The history of Prabhat, apart

¹ The studio era in India is understood as the period where studio-based production was the primary mode of filmmaking dominating the film industries of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras from the 1920s to 1953. The Maharashtra Film Company (Kolhapur) was one of the first studios. Imperial Film Company (Bombay), New Theatres (Calcutta), Bombay Talkies (Bombay) and Prabhat Film Company (Pune) were reputed studios of this period. The closure of Bombay Talkies in 1953 signaled the end of the studio-owned filmmaking era. See Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 15-16.

² The period before independence from British rule in 1947, i.e. from 1920-1947 can be termed as the late colonial period. The beginning of this period is marked by two major turning points, the first being the rise of the Swadeshi movement (1905-1917), in which regional leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak assumed prominence at the national level. Then, following Tilak's death in 1920 came the emergence of Gandhian politics of non-violent resistance. The late colonial period in India is considered the transition towards modernity in Indian cultural history. See Manishita Dass, *Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity, and the Public Sphere in Late Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

from referring to filmmaking of devotional, mythological, and saint genres in pre-independence India, also gives us an insight in to how it encapsulated regional and national cinematic imaginaries. This is characterized by the socio-cultural encounter of creative talent with industrial and technological developments in this period. The expanding body of academic work on Indian film history, however, has yet to address the significance of Prabhat Studios as one of the first sites of regional filmmaking in India. There have been seminal inquiries into the history of other studios. For example, Madhuja Mukherjee's monograph on New Theatres (Calcutta) which identifies the cultural work of film studios in Bengal during the period 1920-1950.³ Prabhat Studios, on the other hand, has largely been glorified only in anecdotal biographical accounts that were prompted by the necessity to preserve the public memories of the studio as a celebrated space for the Marathi cultural realm.⁴ In an attempt to revisit and retrace the emergence of Marathi cinema, this paper unpacks the history of Prabhat Studios, arguing that beyond Prabhat's importance as a pioneering film studio in western India, it has been influential in fostering a regional film culture that negotiates an emergent modernity in provincial spaces like Kolhapur and Pune.⁵

This paper presents an historical analysis of Prabhat Studios detailing two interdependent cultural aspects. The first is the notion of social respectability to be found in films produced by Prabhat, as well as social perceptions of the studio which are evidenced through various publicity materials. The second is the fashioning of a regional social space that Prabhat facilitated through its practices of imagining a cinema through the linguistic and territorial forms of Marathi cultural production.⁶ The paper deliberates this by pointing out the active work of Prabhat's personnel who came to the studio with various regional performance backgrounds. The paper presents this historical analysis in the context of modernity in the late-colonial period, the specific aspects of

³ Madhuja Mukherjee, *New Theatres Ltd: The Emblem of Art, the Picture of Success* (Pune: National Film Archive of India, 2009). A number of studies have been undertaken in relation to Bombay Talkies. See, for instance, the work on film studios in Bombay published in the journal *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*.

⁴ This is best illustrated in Bapu Vatve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*. (Pune: Anant V. Damle, 2001). The archival work undertaken by M/s A.V. Damle to preserve the legacy of Prabhat Studios is largely in Marathi. Another biographical account of Prabhat can be found in Athawale Shantaram, *Prabhat Kaal* (Pune: Proficient Publishing House, 2016).

⁵ The primary sources for this paper are the films of Prabhat made available by M/s A. V. Damle of Pune. Secondary sources include Vatve's *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri* and other biographies referred in the text. This paper also draws on a dissertation, Hrishikesh Arvikar "The Cinema of Prabhat: Histories, Aesthetics and Politics" (MPhil diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2015). The web-archive, indiancinema.ma has been accessed for entries originally published in Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

⁶ Marathi is the language spoken in Maharashtra, a state in western India formed in 1960, with Bombay (now Mumbai) as its capital. Like the Hindustani/Hindi, which is designated as a national language, Marathi is the identifying language of the region called Maharashtra. It is an Indo-Aryan language belonging to the South and Southwest grouping of languages. See B.P. Mahapatra et al., *Constitutional Languages* (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1989). Apart from Maharashtra, Marathi is also spoken in parts of Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Telangana. This corresponds to the historical expanse of the Maratha kingdom, whose capital was in Pune. Marathi is presently spoken by almost 71 million native speakers. See Census of India 2011:

http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Language/Statement1.aspx.

regional assimilation in films produced by the studio, and by highlighting how Prabhat Studios functioned as a space in which the norms of social respectability were maintained.

Prabhat studio is here approached through its spatial features. This expands the studio's historical significance by considering its linkages with provincial social spaces of Kolhapur and Pune in the late colonial period, and the significance of its personnel emerging from the artisanal classes. It also highlights how the studio site negotiated a modern form of cinema with local performance traditions that were rapidly declining. The studio space was also a site for practices like bilingual filmmaking that was directed towards aspiring for a national significance, while rooted in regional sources of narratives and musical traditions. This spatial spread is thus suggestive of how Prabhat, became a reputable filmmaking studio, reflective of a cultural tendency of the Marathi society.

Before elaborating these aspects, we must consider Prabhat Studio's timeline. Prabhat was incorporated in 1929 in Kolhapur, by V. Shantaram, V. G. Damle, S. Fatehlal, K. Dhaiber, who had broken away from Baburao Painter's Maharashtra Film Company (MFC), and S. Kulkarni.⁷ The studio began initial operations from Kolhapur, producing silent films in much the same vein as the MFC.⁸ In 1931, Prabhat produced the first Marathi talkie *Ayodhyecha Raja* (The King of Ayodhya), which re-presented the mythological story of Harishchandra. Dadasabheb Phalke had in 1913 produced *Raja Harishchandra*. Phalke's film is considered to have set the trajectory of commercial filmmaking in India for years to come.⁹ Perceiving the need for better infrastructure, the studio moved to Pune in 1933. From the new site on the outskirts of Pune, Prabhat produced some of the most celebrated early sound films in India.

Through the practice of bilingual filmmaking in both Marathi and Hindustani, Prabhat gained a regional *and* national recognition. This was an industrial strategy for economic gains in a linguistically differentiated national market (where Hindustani/Hindi was prevalent). This strategy is evident when Prabhat's films are juxtaposed with those of other studios like New Theatres, which deployed a similar strategy of producing films in both Hindustani and regional languages. Prabhat's bilingual films projected visual content derived from local and regional sources to a broader national audience. Between 1934 and 1944, Prabhat produced a number of important films, including: *Sairandhri* (1933), *Amrit Manthan* (1934), *Dharmatma* (1935), *Sant Tukaram* (1936), *Kunku* (1937), *Manoos* (1939), *Sant Dynaeshwar* (1940), and *Ramshashtri* (1944). These all came after Prabhat had distinguished itself with six silent films: *Gopal Krishna* (1929), *Khuni Khanjar* (1930), *Rani Saheb* (1930), *Udaykaal* (1930), *Chandrasena* (1931), and *Julum* (1931).

⁷ MFC was one of the first studios outside Bombay. Its name suggests its regional origins and filmmaking concerns, as opposed to Phalke's company, Hindustan Films. The MFC had perfected a production practice where elaborate and detailed backdrops, costumes, and objects made-up the pro-filmic space. See Baburao Painter, "Background and Costume" in *Kalamaharshi Baburao Painter* (Mumbai: Jagatik Marathi Parishad, 1990), 65-66.

⁸ Kolhapur and Pune were both provincial towns falling under the Bombay Presidency under British rule. See *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1885).

⁹ D. G. Phalke's first film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) is attributed to be the first feature length film to be screened widely to a paying audience. A number of historical writings, however, point to H. S. Bhatavadekar (Sawe Dada) as the early pioneer of motion pictures in India. See for instance Amrit Gangar. "Marathi Cinema: The Exile, the Factory and Fame," in *The Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinema*, ed. K. Moti Gokulsingh, et al. (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 72-87.

Two changes marked Prabhat's transition from a small film studio to a larger filmmaking company. First, under the studio set-up personnel were distinguished according to their functional artistic skills, defining their roles within the studio. Moreover, the infrastructural organization of the studio was perfected according to the requirements of different departments like costuming, green-rooms, editing labs, etc. The second change begins with its relocation to Pune. The MFC's artisanal mode combined with apprenticeship of skilled painters and performers was carried forward by Prabhat.¹⁰ There was a focus on channelling the artistic skills of its personnel into the production of various genre films. By the time Prabhat relocated to Pune, this artisanal mode had evolved, with Prabhat founders Damle (an art director) and Fatehlal (a cinematographer) defining both the distribution of work as well as the functional setup of different departments in the studio's mode of production. The physical space of the studio was well demarcated, with separate sound proof buildings for music recording, and an air-conditioned room for post-processing of the nitrate celluloid. The studio had developed a strategized distribution business, initially with Baburao Pai (the film distributor of MFC) and later under its own Central Film Exchange, as well as constructing cinema houses in Bombay, Pune and Madras.¹¹ Baburao Pai became a partner in the company in 1939.

V. Shantaram emerged as the most important figure in Prabhat after the production of the first Marathi talkie, *Ayodecha Raja*. Shantaram's name assumed importance not just as an actor-director, but also as the most accomplished filmmaker of the five founding members. A look at the filmography compiled by Bapu Vatve indicates Shantaram's dominance as a filmmaker, and the division of creative labour within the studio.¹² Shantaram's involvement in Prabhat meant the studio became closely associated with Shantaram's oeuvre as a master filmmaker who made devotional spectacles, social melodramas, and historical fantasies. This was coupled by Shantaram's intricate understanding of the studio infrastructure and its materiality, where personnel performed discrete roles in departments like editing, cinematography, the training of actors, costuming, etc. Shantaram was also keenly aware of marketing and distribution of films, thus ensuring profitable returns for various projects. When Shantaram left Prabhat in 1942 to start Rajkamal-Kalamandir, the studio entered its decline. Damle died in 1945, and differences between remaining managing partners intensified. The Bombay High Court ordered the liquidation of the company in 1952. In 1955, Kelkar Attarwale from Bombay tried to save the studio by renting it to other producers and filmmakers. However, this model ultimately failed to generate revenues, and in 1959 Prabhat Studios was sold to the government of India and in 1961 its buildings were repurposed for the Film Institute of India.

¹⁰ Artisanal mode as discussed in this paper refers to two socio-cultural lineages of Prabhat studios. The personnel of MFC and Prabhat were exemplary craftspeople, who also came from the artisanal castes. This consequently led to the MFC functioning as a school for various craftspeople working towards film production. Painter, and his cousin Anandrao were self-trained artists belonging to traditional artisanal classes in Kolhapur. Anandrao had apprenticed S Fatehlal, while Damle was trained by Painter. Damle later apprenticed Dhaiber. The artisanal tendency is primarily the reason for much of MFC and later Prabhat's films having intricate decors for sets and backdrops, and authentic costumes for mythological and historical films. The implication of this artisanal tendency for Prabhat's social films is discussed later.

¹¹ See Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

¹² Bapu Vatve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*, 335-343.

The history of Prabhat Studios is illustrative of how film studios in the late-colonial period came to prominence through a negotiation of various socio-cultural forces. While Bombay had become the most important space for the film industry till the 1930s, Kolhapur, and Pune, in Bombay's geographical vicinity, aspired to institute cinema as a modern cultural form. This, as illustrated by Prabhat, mobilised artisanal creative practices that were reflective of its regional lineage, and were re-cast in the context of an emergent industrial and social modernity.

Context of Modernity and Prabhat

The period of Prabhat's existence coincides with the late colonial moment of Indian history during which nationalism, freedom from colonial rule, and a transition towards modernity dominated public discourses. In the cultural sphere, these aspects were visible in the tremendous output of the print industry where local (i.e. regional language) newspapers and magazines were filled with discussions of political and social questions. The Indian cinema of this period was similarly influenced by these developments, as it symbolized modernity in the social sphere. Indeed, as observed by Manishita Dass, the cinema in late colonial India had a "role in the transformations of experience, everyday life, and the public sphere - changes [...] subsumed under the label of 'modernity' in colonial India."¹³ Prabhat's ascendancy is illustrative of the transition of regional social spaces towards modernity in pre-independence India. The rapid entrenchment of cinema, especially in cities like Bombay and Pune, was partly due to the exuberant adoption of the cinematic medium by artists who were exposed to a modern literary world; and partly because of the industriousness of people like Baburao Painter and V. Shantaram, who assimilated diverse local performance and artistic practices to evolve a new form of regional cinema. Furthermore, in this period the cinema itself is reflective of a modern turn in public entertainment while simultaneously being the site of technological inventiveness and social anxieties.¹⁴ This created a unique cultural negotiation between existing forms of entertainment and the cinema. A number of scholars have historicized nascent Indian commercial filmmaking in early twentieth century as a cultural negotiation with modernity.¹⁵ Specifically, modernity here implies the growing acceptance of an industrialized artistic realm, a disappearing system of princely patronage, and an enthusiasm for redefining the traditional contexts of Indian society.

While the above description provides the historical contexts of cultural production in this period, we also need to understand that studio filmmaking enabled a certain institutionalization

¹³ Manishita Dass, *Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity, and the Public Sphere in Late Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 16-17.

¹⁴ The Indian Cinematograph Committee Report (1927-1928) reflects various anxieties. It points to the concerns of colonial rulers about the popularity of Indian film, and the possibility of it becoming a source of increased anti-colonial sentiment. It also registers the threat to social morality instigated by the exposure of the masses to the cinema. The four volumes of Evidence of the ICC Report are now available at https://indiancine.ma/texts/ashish:The_Complete_ICC_Reports/40.

¹⁵ One of the seminal arguments of Indian cinema's encounter with modernity is elaborated in Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology," in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, ed. P. Sudhir et al. (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993), 47-82. See also, Kaushik Bhaumik, "Querying the 'Traditional' Roots of Silent Cinema in Asia," *The Journal of the Moving Image* 7 (December 2008).

of film practice in which narrative filmmaking was perfected as the dominant mode of cinema.¹⁶ Located in the regional city of Pune, Prabhat Studios was instrumental in transforming the film industry of western India. As a film production enterprise, Prabhat contained and replicated the emergent capitalist modernity of Indian cities. This modernity has been pointed out by Ashish Rajadhyaksha as the context necessary for cinema's "ubiquity."¹⁷ It is facilitated by a structural system of "governmental trade development, agricultural research, working compensation, taxation and so on."¹⁸ Prabhat, as we shall see, became one of the foundational studios demonstrating the adoption of latest technologies, as well as engendering a production practice of creative excellence, mostly drawn from local and regional artistic forms.

Modernity is also manifest in the expansion of exhibition spaces in cities like Bombay and Calcutta, where the cinema was embraced in society as an embodiment of a modern temperament. On the other hand, the film industry was to reimagine narratives of specifically Indian origin, thus instituting what Rajadhyaksha has termed the cultural contests of traditional content with modern technology.¹⁹ Prabhat's drive to be the best studio reflects its embrace of modernity, as it employed modern technologies and hired skilled personnel and talented artists. Its trajectory thus encapsulates three crucial moments of film history in western India: the coming of sound, socio-cultural negotiations of transitioning film production from provincial social spaces to urban middle class public culture, and the anchoring of a predominantly linguistic regional address. The latter two moments are especially significant for the idea of a linguistically defined regional film culture, as they precede the formation of a Marathi cinema before the territorial demarcation of Maharashtra in 1960.

The coming of sound was a definitive moment, where the contours of regional film practice materialized. Sound posed a technological challenge to the studio, which created a distinct department for musically accomplished artists and re-fashioned their talents for the requirements of cinema. In the films, sound provided a perceptual dimension that could address both local and national audiences. While the projection of dramatic action had been perfected through the use of inter-titles and pantomimic gesture in the silent era, with films like *Ayodhecha Raja*, sound instituted the dramatic aspect in Marathi (and Indian) cinema by borrowing from the immensely popular *Sangeet Natak* (literally, "musical drama" and a genre of Marathi theatre).²⁰

¹⁶ This is best illustrated in the workings of the Hollywood studio system as elaborated in David Bordwell et al., *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985) and Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005).

¹⁷ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "Teaching Film Theory 2," *The Journal of the Moving Image* 11 (December 2011), 43. Though Rajadhyaksha mentions this in a different context, his reference to the colonial period aptly surmises the socio-economic and political conditions within which cinema as a cultural form became accessible and available to public in western India.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 43.

¹⁹ Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Phalke Era".

²⁰ See Geeta Kapur, "Mythic Material in Indian Cinema," *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 14.15 (1987): 79-107. The striking aspect of early Indian cinema is the frontal depiction of mythological tales. This "frontality" has been argued by Geeta Kapur as the schematic for accessing the Indian film form. She proposes that "frontality of the word, the image, the design, the performative act" result in forms where the cinema directly addresses the audience (80). With the coming of sound Prabhat's films added another dimension of this address. The cinema, in Prabhat's case, borrowed from the prevalent *Sangeet Natak* tradition of musical performances. The closing of theatre companies had prompted the shift of performers and

Sound thus inaugurated a new mode for visual *and* aural pleasures, in which visual perception was complemented by talking (and singing) actors on screen. Prabhat was one of the first studios to capitalize on the popularity of singer/actor-performers of the Sangeet Natak, which had been the most prevalent form of dramatic entertainment before the arrival of the cinema. The emergence of sound film thus opened new possibilities for companies like Prabhat to forge interactivity with Marathi audiences.

Moreover, sound could imagine specifically regionalized narratives in the cinematic realm. We can therefore observe that when Prabhat began making sound films it re-made Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) as *Ayodhecha Raja*, thus re-presenting it in sound. Similarly, MFC's *Sinhagad* (1923), based on the legendary story of Tanaji (one of Shivaji's brave soldiers) was made only in Marathi.²¹ For studio personnel, the making of talkie films proved to be the juncture where the earlier artisanal tendencies were re-ordered as people like Damle and Fatehlal became expert technicians of the cinema.

In the documentary, *It's Prabhat* (2004), Shyam Benegal talks about the remarkable technical feat that the studio achieved in producing talkie films.²² The transition to talkie, observed in early sound cinema, bordered on experiments of trial and error, with the perfection of marrying visual and aural tracks mastered by the end of the 1930s. Bapu Vate has described how Damle's inherent skill with mechanical devices helped in recording live sound as filming progressed. He also mentions the manner in which Damle was able to identify snafus with the projector when a preview screening of *Ayodhyecha Raja* was arranged.²³ The technological mastery that Prabhat achieved in recording and reproducing sound is an indication of how the aural (voice, music, and sound) became a determining factor for differentiating national and regional cinema. If in the earlier silent mode, the visual material inscribed regional-ness to the filmic content, through costume or the details in backdrops, then with the arrival of sound there emerged an institutional push to exploit the regional address by way of differentiating dialogues and lyrics for linguistically diverse markets.²⁴ Aural tracks were therefore distinctly treated as the conduits of regional (linguistically differentiated) address. Prabhat's talkie films demonstrate a process of bilingual filmmaking in which Marathi and Hindi versions of the same film would have the same scenario, but actors, dialogue, and lyrics would differ. This demonstrates an interest in addressing regional audiences, but at the same time the studio was negotiating a national audience, markets and circuits. It is through these negotiations of sound technology, its deployment for reaching linguistically diverse markets, and the studio's own efforts to institutionalize a mode of production that one can confirm the notion of regional modernity.

personnel into the film industry. There is an ontological moment of modern cultural history in this network of theatre artists working for and in the cinema. This moment can be argued in terms of a vernacular culture being assimilated into the cinema, giving rise to the specifically 'regional' content of early sound films. See Meera Kosambi, *Gender, Culture, and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema before Independence* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014).

²¹ Prabhat's *Sinhagad* was produced in 1933. Bapu Vate, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*, 336.

²² Madhavi Vaidya, *It's Prabhat*, Documentary (Pune: M/s A. V. Damle, 2004).

²³ Vate, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*, 51-54.

²⁴ See quote by Satish Bahadur, cited in Gangar, "Marathi Cinema," 73.

Provincial Spaces and Prabhat

The history of Prabhat presents a manifestation of modernity, and also points to the spatiality of the regional. The studio, although located in a regional town, fashioned a cinema that addressed the nation. The functioning of Prabhat Studios as a regional space can be used to formulate a notion of a Marathi public sphere, in which the cinema presents a “horizontal spread” which addresses both the local and national social spaces in Presidency towns. The three cities of Kolhapur, Pune and Bombay are central to the proposition of regional spatiality and the studio era.²⁵

In the late colonial period, Kolhapur was a princely state and home to the seat of the residual Maratha rule. Chatrapati Shahu Maharaj, a pioneer of social reforms active in the early twentieth century, supported the building of hostels, the funding of grants for higher education, and most significantly, promoted arts and culture in Kolhapur. The princely contribution to Indian cinema also came from Rajaram III (b.1897-d.1940; as Chatrapati: May 1922-Nov 1940), who invested in and formed a film company and studio in Kolhapur named Kolhapur Cinetone.²⁶ Prabhat, when it was set-up in 1929 got financial help from Tanibai Kagalkar (a court singer who was related to Keshavrao Dhaiber) to build the studio.²⁷ Thus, practices of patronage and capitalist investments in provincial towns were deeply related to the origins of Prabhat. This must be understood in conjunction with its implications for the artisanal class. What is interesting in the cases of MFC and Prabhat is the social transitioning of the artisanal class through the institution of cinema to emerge as enterprising filmmakers.

The MFC was a studio of the artisanal caste that benefitted from princely patronage, but shaped a production practice that furthered artistic excellence. Baburao Painter came from the Mistry class (defined as carpenters, painters or artisans). His proficiency at painting and sculpting gave him the moniker ‘Painter,’ and he painted backdrops for several theatre troupes in Western India from 1910 and 1916.²⁸ Baburao’s apprentices (who later formed Prabhat) were an eclectic mix of classes. Shantaram’s father was a Jain and his mother was a Maratha.²⁹ Fatehlal also came from the Mistry class.³⁰ The artisanal castes here need to be situated first as providing creative labour for building the elaborate sets, backdrops and props of early silent films in Kolhapur. Second, this had a bearing on depicting social scenarios that seemed to interrogate Brahmanical dominance of ritualistic and creative fields. In films like *Sant Dyaneshwar* and *Sant Tukaram* (discussed later) the depiction of the saints as figures who question Brahmanical supremacy on spiritual and religious knowledge foreground the saints in their social contexts. This caste consideration suggests that by the time Prabhat was formed, social hierarchies had begun to acquire a fluidity, where creative talent could be passed on to the next generation

²⁵ See Arvikar, “The Cinema of Prabhat.”

²⁶ See <https://indiancine.ma/BIN/info>. Kolhapur Cinetone is considered to have been set-up to rival Prabhat when it moved to Pune. Master Vinayak, Bhalji Pendharkar and Baburao Pendharkar were the main personnel who produced films in the company.

²⁷ Arivkar, “The Cinema of Prabhat,” 38.

²⁸ See <https://indiancine.ma/DL/info>.

²⁹ Meera Kosambi, *Gender, Culture, and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema before Independence* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014), 326.

³⁰ See <https://indiancine.ma/CEG/info>.

outside the restrictions of kinship and occupation. In the progressive cultural contexts of Kolhapur, therefore, new modern arts like the cinema and the traditional performance arts intersected to shape the labour-intensive film industry.

During the early twentieth century, Pune was transitioning to a capitalist city, where modern modes of communication and a local municipal corporation anticipated the industrial transformation that shaped the city after independence. It also points to the spatiality of a provincial town that was segregated, in terms of demography, but functionally interwoven through trade and social mobility. After the end of the Maratha rule in the 1820s, Pune (then Poona) transitioned from being the seat and capital of the Peshwa rule to one of the garrisoned towns of the Bombay Presidency under British rule. The city grew in three distinct spaces: The Civil Lines, The Military Cantonment and the Native City. A fourth space, the Sadr Bazaar, acted as a conduit for fluid social hierarchies.³¹ Pune therefore had expanded centrifugally, while older Peshwa sites remained (and still remain) at the epicentre of hierarchically stratified caste and colonial identities. In the post-Tilak age of the 1930s and 1940s, Pune had become a site of learning and print capital for Marathi publishing. The city emerged as a space where lower classes had started to lay demands on the traditional Brahmanical spaces for access to learning and higher education.³² The Pune municipality was established in 1916, subsequently driving its expansion as a prominent urban centre.³³ The most significant capitalist turn, however, was the interconnection with Bombay by railway, when the Deccan Queen was started in 1930.³⁴ This announced the urbanization of a provincial town in western Maharashtra. By 1933, therefore, when Prabhat had moved to Pune, the city had transitioned from the seat of Maratha political power to an urbanized town of cultural significance.

In contrast to Pune and Kolhapur, Bombay was a cosmopolitan city that had become one of the chief sites of the film industry in late colonial India. The development of cinema in Bombay has been mapped and historicized by Kaushik Bhaumik.³⁵ His insights into the making of Bombay film culture shed light on some crucial industrial aspects. Of significance is how the second wave of filmmakers after the 1920s instituted an intra-industrial realignment to adopt new technologies, thus transitioning out of the artisanal-centric production methods.³⁶ More importantly, Bhaumik's elaboration on Bombay cinema between 1928 and 1935 situates the

³¹ See Wayne Mullen, "Deccan Queen: a Spatial Analysis of Poona in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries" (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2001).

³² See "Poona District," *Gazetteer of Bombay State District Series*, vol. XX (Bombay: Government Central Press, 1954), 163-316.

³³ *ibid.* The Gazetteer notes: "Not only was the Poona municipality one of the first municipalities to be set up but it was also the first to have a majority of elected members and also to have the privilege of having an elected president" (67).

³⁴ The Deccan Queen started running between Pune and Bombay on June 1, 1930. It was one of the first trains to run by electric locomotion. The train was one of the fastest ways to commute between the two cities. As with Rajadhyaksha's comment (cited in footnote 18), the train connection is also the connection with capitalism and modernity. It marks the expansion of Pune outwards to transcend spatial boundaries of provincial territories.

³⁵ Bhaumik, "The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry."

³⁶ Bhaumik charts the developments in the 1920s as a "long road to respectability." Bhaumik, "The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry," 82-108.

constant negotiations with regional centres of filmmaking including Poona in the Presidency areas. Here, he contends that the expansion of Bombay cinema was based in the building of exhibition sites in small-town locations, and the interexchange of personnel from regional centres like Lahore, Calcutta, and Poona into the Bombay industry. Additionally, Bhaumik has highlighted the role of film magazines and print culture as a determining factor in negotiations between the regional and Bombay film industries. One indication of this is how Prabhat produced its own publicity magazine, entitled *Prabhat Monthly*.³⁷ The Bombay film industry was therefore not a stand-alone entity, uninfluenced by various regional filmmaking centres in its geographical vicinities. Rather, studio filmmaking generated a nuanced distinction of audiences and marketplaces. The Bombay studios produced predominantly Hindustani/Hindi films, which were marketed at wider national consumption, while regional film industries attempted to generate vernacularized public address, thus entrenching their identity from the perspective of linguistic affiliation. It is intriguing, therefore, to see how Prabhat's films permeated a regionalist cultural address through various performance forms, musical genres, styles, and its own artisanal thrust of projecting grand visual spectacles.³⁸ The significant aspect of this regional address, as argued below, was its referencing and self-affirmation of Marathi social spaces.

Prabhat Studio and Regional Affinities

The bilingual filmmaking of studios like Prabhat and New Theatres in the early sound period indicates the regional rootedness of cinema in western India.³⁹ It presents a distinction between markets and geographies of film consumption. Prabhat's bilingual filmmaking is marked by the projection of regional, Marathi content for a national, Hindustani-speaking audience. This occurred in two phases: the first is the early talkie period, until about 1935, when *Amrit Manthan* was made, the second begins with *Sant Tukaram* (1936). In the first, Prabhat's films were highly influenced by the studio's ties to MFC. The films aggregated themes and stories that MFC had worked on, predominantly through their artisanal framework. An aesthetic which carries through is the construction of visually elaborate, intricate sets to build a pro-filmic space, and deploying stage performers from theatre companies in acting roles.

When the talkie era began, language became a primary concern as Prabhat aspired for a national presence. Prabhat's first three talkies, *Ayodhecha Raja* (*Ayodhyaka Raja* in Hindi, 1932), *Agnikankan* (*Jalti Nishani* in Hindi, 1932), and *Maya Machindra* (*Maya Machindra* in Hindi, 1932) were bilinguals, produced in both Hindustani and Marathi. Bapu Vatve has described the conditions that led to the conception of *Maya Machindra*.⁴⁰ The film is

³⁷ *Prabhat Monthly* was edited by Baburao Patel, the famous film critic and editor of the magazine *Film India*. Through discussions with various scholars, it is understood that *Prabhat Monthly* was printed in the same printing press as *Film India*.

³⁸ The term spectacle here refers to the imaginatively intricate sets and backdrops for films like *Amrit Manthan*, *Chandra Sena* (1935), *Amar Jyoti* (1936), etc. Also, in the years after 1935, the studio site became an attraction in itself, ensconcing a fantastic 'nagri' (town) that one could only wonder about. See Athawale, *Prabhat Kaal* and Vatve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*.

³⁹ New Theatres produced films in Bengali and Hindustani/Hindi. A number of important artists were part of New Theatres productions and were later propelled into the Bombay industry. One of the most celebrated films from New Theatres is *Devdas* (P C Barua, 1935). See Mukherjee, *New Theatres Ltd*.

⁴⁰ Vatve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*, 61-66.

characteristically regional, emerging from its intersection of orality, sourcing from theatrical performances of the Sangeet Natak traditions, and its mythical tale told through studio-style filmmaking. The film was based upon a Hindi Sangeet Natak, written by Manishankar Trivedi titled *Siddha Sansar*. Govindrao Tembe, the music composer and singer in Prabhat—also a seasoned Sangeet Natak personality—had performed this play in 1920 at Indore. However, the play was never published, and this posed a problem for preparing a script for *Maya Machindra*. One of Prabhat's organ players, Rajarambapu Purohit, had memorized the entire play, and he re-wrote it for Tembe to make the script. For the Hindi version of this film, Narmadaprasad wrote the dialogues. Such practices in the studio space led to a filmmaking tendency that intersected with not just prevalent performance forms, but also with their regional, vernacular rootedness.

Hrishikesh Arvikar situates the bilingual practices in these early talkies by presenting various instances of interactions between local, Marathi writers and lyricists like Shantaram Athwale and those writing dialogue or lyrics for the Hindustani-Urdu versions of Prabhat films.⁴¹ The regional in early talkies was regimented under the dominance of a specifically Marathi cultural context that the space of Prabhat had assimilated and engendered. People like Bhole, Athwale, Apte and Shantaram preferred to work with Marathi language scripts, dialogue and lyrics. Hindustani-Urdu or other languages were therefore utilized to exploit the circulation of films in markets beyond Marathi-speaking territories. It follows that although the films were bilingual, their essential visual aspects were derived from regional Marathi artisanal imaginations. Speech used in dialogue and song was also inflected by the literary and theatrical lineage of personnel like Bhole, Tembe and Athawale. All this underpins the ways regional content was expressively incorporated in Prabhat's early talkie films.

The second period, beginning in 1935-1936, is marked by saint films like *Sant Tukaram* and *Sant Dnyaneshwar* in which the narrative content is drawn from local, regional traditions. The use of regional content became a formal consistency in Prabhat's saint films and distinguishes them from its fantasy or social genre films. In the saint films a unique cultural negotiation is observed, as they at once depict the biographies of the saints while interweaving the underlying devotional philosophy into the narrative. In Marathi social spaces, the saints of the Bhakti movement are iconic figures. The Bhakti movement made religious and spiritual thought accessible to the common classes. The lives of the saints encapsulate a social narrative which rejects Brahmanical hegemony over institutions of religion like the temple, and over rituals of everyday life. There is therefore an implicit social politics of reformation in Prabhat's saint films.

In films like *Tukaram* and *Dyaneshwar*, this is presented in the narrative as a social conflict of ideologies. It often takes the form of a linguistic differentiator between dialects. The Brahmanical, standard speech of Salo Malo, for instance, in *Sant Tukaram* is deftly counter-positioned to that of Tukaram, his family and his devotees, who speak a more colloquial dialect. These films thus imagined a cultural world outside the dominant Brahmanic, scriptural impositions on the devotional realm, consequently opening up the questions of caste hierarchies, the centrality of folk performance forms like Bhajans and Kirtans, and more significantly, the re-inscription of Eknath or Tukaram's spoken (later written) hymns, commonly referred to as *abhangas*.⁴² Both *Sant Tukaram*, and *Sant Dnyaneshwar*, create a subtle cultural interrogation of

⁴¹ Arvikar, "The Cinema of Prabhat," 147-150.

⁴² The Bhakti movement in Maharashtra (then a Maratha-ruled provinces) have important saints: Dyaneshwar is considered to be the first saintly figure to advocate the route of Bhakti towards the deity

gender, caste, and performativity. This can be understood from the case of Vishupant Pagnis, who played female parts in the theatre. Vatve has indicated that this was perhaps the reason that he was chosen to play the part of Tukaram, which required a genteel projection of the saint.⁴³ The articulations of dialogues, and singing that Pagnis performed are illustrative of how his prevalent style was channelized to create the iconic image of Tukaram.

The power of *Sant Tukaram* as a film is evinced by the iconicity of its visuals and its linguistic performances. Geeta Kapur's original reading of *Sant Tukaram* as a revival of the mythic for social change in the context of India's struggles for independence situates the iconic in a decidedly nationalist paradigm.⁴⁴ The frontal address, in which a figure addresses the camera (and by extension, the audience) directly, is suggestive of how in Indian cinema the on screen figure assumes deification. The frontal figure seems to arrest movement on screen into moments where the screen-audience interaction enters into an adulatory inter-exchange of projection and perception. This process is termed as *Darsana* in Indian Film Studies.⁴⁵ However, *Tukaram*'s iconicity goes beyond its frontal-address aesthetic. The film's iconicity is indicative of several deeper social meanings. First, it indicates the historical and popular mnemonic presence of Tukaram and his hymns in the Marathi society. Second, the performances of Tukaram's *abhangas* manifest the secular trajectory of the Bhakti philosophy. Third, Bhakti's linguistic register evokes a devotional realm that is uniquely vernacular and regional. *Sant Tukaram* and *Sant Dynaneshwar* therefore affirm the Marathi social spaces, where these vernacular aspects are transposed in the cinematic narratives of the saints' lives. Such an inscription of the vernacular in Prabhat's films assert its entrenched regional affinities. In comparing the specific regional aspect of Prabhat with those of the Bombay Talkies, Ravi Vasudevan observes that:

The overall result was a strong regional identity in the world conjured up by the studio, one rather different from the abstractions of Bombay Talkies, a studio which took recourse to a simplified

Vitthal (a minor form of Lord Vishnu). He is also seen as the first saint to use the written form of Marathi with his commentary on the Bhagwat Gita called *Dyaneshwari*. Namdev, Eknath, and Tukaram are some of the most famous saints due to the simplicity and evocative hymns that they wrote and which are recited by people in Maharashtra. Sant Janabai was one of the first female devotional poets of the medieval period. See Jayant Lele, ed., *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981). The 'saint literature' is an important genre and tradition in the Marathi cultural realm, where the hymns are recited and studied for their devotional philosophy. The *abhangas* are the primary form in this literature. *Abhangas*, literally means 'that which is not separated'. The suffix 'a' added to the 'bhanga' denotes a negative meaning to 'bhanga', which means to separate. The term refers to the devotional poetic form of the saint poets like Tukaram in the praise of lord Vitthal. The last line of an Abhangas usually carries the signature of the poet. Hence many of Tukaram's abhangas have 'tuka mahne' (says tuka) written in the last line. The Kirtan is characterized by the performance of devotional songs (including abhangas) and tales from the lives of the saints. It is usually accompanied by musical instruments. See Ana Schultz, *Singing a Hindu Nation: Marathi Devotional Performance and Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴³ Vatve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*, 123-124.

⁴⁴ Kapur, "Mythic Material in Indian Cinema."

⁴⁵ See Ravi Vasudevan, "The Politics of Cultural Address in a Transitional Cinema: A Case Study of Indian Popular Cinema," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 130-164.

Hindustani to appeal to the broadest market and whose fictional worlds often appear uprooted from reference to any specific regional habitat.⁴⁶

Regional rootedness is therefore manifested, and projected, through the iconic screen figures of the saints, their style of expressing a popular form of Bhakti poetry, and the affirmation of the secular devotional message through their lives, as recreated in the films.

Sant Tukaram and Prabhat's other saint films take part in an interesting process of recasting linguistically specific devotional philosophy into vernacular cinematic narratives. The transpositions of the linguistic into a devotional register, of narrative conflict assuming a social and caste significance, and the miraculous, constructed to manifest divinity of the saint, indicate a mobilization of the cinema as a technological institution to address regional social spaces. In *Sant Tukaram*, this process engendered for Prabhat and Marathi cinema a remapping of a cultural mnemonic onto the studio mode of production, assimilating vernacular actors, story writers, musicians, and the audience. To illustrate this, I will highlight the film's opening sequence.

In the film's opening, Tukaram is singing the abhanga *Panduranga Dhyani*, *Pandurang Mani* (*Pandurang in My Thoughts and Mind*) in a devotional serenity. He is isolated in a private devotional expression, a state which is rendered in the film through a continuous, closely framed shot of Tukaram with no cuts. This is followed by an excited Salo Malo reciting the same abhanga, with a modified musicality, to a crowd of seated devotees in the Panduranga temple. Salo interrupts his singing with forceful interjections to claim his authority over the abhanga. As he sings, he interacts with the crowd of devotees. The editing in this sequence expresses this interactivity, and effectively contrasts with Tukaram's serenity in the previous sequence. Salo Malo assumes a distinct caste hierarchy, wearing Brahmanical robes as he stands and preaches to the predominantly lower caste devotee crowd in the temple.

In the next scene, Tukaram's poverty-stricken domestic space is depicted. As his wife Awali bathes their domestic buffalo, Tukaram enters the house and is confronted with his sick son. An argument between Awali and Tukaram erupts, as Awali accuses him of neglecting the household for the love of Panduranga. She drags the sick child to the temple with the intention of punishing the deity with slippers. Awali's outburst in the temple and her threat to beat the deity with slippers, attracts Salo Malo's reproach. As Awali turns to confront Salo, the magic of the deity is expressed as a ghostly hand caresses the sick child and cures him of sickness. The child begins to jump around, announcing that he has been cured. At that point, Tukaram enters the temple and Salo Malo admonishes him for allowing his wife to threaten the desecration of the deity. Tukaram apologizes and accepts any punishment that is offered by Salo Malo, who declares that Tukaram is henceforth banished from entering the temple premises. This scene is followed by an abhanga, that Tukaram sings in a melodramatic rendition to express his anguish at not seeing the deity in the temple again. The film's themes of conflict and devotion are emblemized in these sequences. Tukaram is set up as a calm, devotional, and lower caste man in conflict with the brahmanical Salo Malo. There is representation of a miracle, rendered through the cinematic techniques of double exposure and superimposition. However, the underlying thread of social conflict is bound by a peculiarly vernacular presentation of Tukaram's biography, where the events of the narrative are imagined through a common mnemonic of abhangas and kirtans.

⁴⁶ Ravi Vasudeyan, "Devotional Transformation: Miracles, Mechanical Artifice, and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema," *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts & Contemporary Worlds* 1.2/1.3 (August 2005): 240.

The above discussion of the saint film genre, and *Sant Tukaram* in particular, situates the regional rootedness of Prabhat in the regional sources of its narrative form. As indicated, the cultural significance of devotional poetry, its cinematic renditions, and the caste conflict assimilate into a form that can address audiences beyond the spaces of Marathi-speaking audiences. This regional content becomes even more pertinent when we consider Prabhat's social film genre. Producing films for a national audience, however, necessitated a realignment of regional content. A linguistic and vernacular regional-ness formed the physical context of the studio space, and also determined the creative processes that defined studio filmmaking in this era. This context, I argue, is the clue to how Prabhat effected its narrative tendencies through genre films that were refracted from the lens of a modern Marathi socio-cultural milieu. It is thus pertinent to note that the studio era of Marathi cinema is almost entirely defined by Prabhat, whose contracted artists, singers, actors, and craftsmen built its social capital.

Prabhat Studios and Social Respectability

Prabhat's status as a successful business enterprise and a vital space of creative cultural production is referential of the emergence of modern Marathi society in the late colonial period. Biographical recollections of personnel associated with Prabhat describe the studio as a respectable place of work. In the memoirs of the noted writer P. L. Deshpande, the studio emerges as a marvel of modern technology where excellent craftsmen could imagine a cinema that the Marathi people accepted as a respectable art form.⁴⁷ He writes, "the people of Prabhat conformed to the then contemporary notions of social respectability, and their films too were demonstrative of it."⁴⁸ There was indeed a deliberate push towards situating the film industry, and the filmmaking business in particular, as a socially respectable enterprise in pre-independence India. Madhuja Mukherjee has traced the narrative filmmaking of New Theatres, identifying a shift toward integrating the Bengali literary lineage into its cinema in order to dissipate social perceptions of its being an amoral entertainment.⁴⁹ In Prabhat's films and other early Marathi cinema, respectability is transmitted through textual and extra-textual aspects.

Prabhat's "social films", which emerged after 1937, were produced with backdrop of the nationalist freedom movement and are significant markers of how Prabhat affirmed social respectability. It is perhaps no coincidence that the studio strategically moved towards producing films on social themes, as 1936 had seen the success of *Achhut Kanya* (Untouchable Maiden), made by Bombay Talkies.⁵⁰ Prabhat's films like *Kunku/Duniya Na Mane*, *Manoos/Aadmi*, and *Shejari/Padosi* underscore the studio's engagement with themes like child marriage (*Kunku*), an honest man's love for a prostitute and his efforts at restoring her in society (*Manoos*), and communal harmony (*Shejari*). Here too the cinematic is inflected with vernacular linguistic and literary forms, specifically with writers like Narayan Hari Apte working in the studio. Apte had also written the script for *Kunku* whose significance as a social film is underscored in the implicit

⁴⁷ See P. L. Deshpande, "Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri," in Vatve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*, 1-12.

⁴⁸ Author's translation, *ibid*.

⁴⁹ See Mukherjee, *New Theatres Ltd*, 21-40.

⁵⁰ *Achhut Kanya* is considered as one of the earliest examples of the all-India social film, produced in the late 1930s India. See Ravi Vasudevan, "Film Studies, New Cultural History and Experience of Modernity," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30.44 (November 4, 1995): 2809-14.

reference to the Child Marriage Act of 1929. This act was informally known as the Sharada Act, from the play *Sangeet Sharda*, about the marriage of an elderly serial widower with a girl child. *Kunku* begins with a sequence of this play being enacted by children of the *chawl* (a tenement apartment building), where Neera (Shanta Apte) resides. Like in *Sangeet Sharda*, Neera is sneakily married off to an aged lawyer by her maternal uncle. When Neera learns that her new husband is old enough to be her father, she resists with anger and resentment. Her anger finally culminates in the suicide of her elderly husband, Kakasaheb, breaking Neera out of the bonds of a forced marriage. *Kunku* thus engaged with a national social problem, through a story that was rooted in a regional imagination. A similar trajectory is observed in *Manoos*, in which a prostitute named Kesar (Shanta Hublikar) is rescued from a menial existence by Ganpat (Shahu Modak), a police constable. Both *Kunku* and *Manoos* address the issue of restoring marginalized women into socially acceptable normative structures, thus effecting a sense of justice in the narratives. Prabhat's willingness to produce these films demonstrates their investment in the portrayal of and engagement with social evils, setting them apart from the melodramatic treatment of untouchability in *Achhut Kanya*. *Kunku*, *Manoos* and *Shejari* are emblematic of then contemporaneous debates in Indian society about social reform which had assumed importance at a national level.

Prabhat's social films indicate the ways the studio was actively working toward affirming its social respectability. Indeed, respectability was wrought in the very formation of the Prabhat Studio, as its personnel included renowned literary writers like Apte who were influential in choosing stories for films, noted stage performers who cultivated their skills for the demands of narrative filmmaking, and accomplished musicians like Bhole and Tembe who created musical scores drawn from diverse sources. The organizational structure of Prabhat also institutionalized this respectability, especially with regards to female actors. The studio had strict rules forbidding personal relationships between female actresses and their co-workers.⁵¹ One instance illustrating this is how Durga Khote was convinced to play the lead part in *Ayodhecha Raja*. Khote had earlier played a part in film *Farebi Jaal* (1931), where she was portrayed as the wife of an alcoholic. Khote, then married to Vishwanath Khote, had met with disapproval from her husband's respectable middle class Marathi family for playing this character, and was asked by them not to act in any more films. However, the respectability of her career as an actress was recuperated when she was contracted to play Taramati, the lead role in *Ayodecha Raja*.

As sound films began to displace silent films, a star system emerged in which female actors were projected to the public imagination with an implicit sexuality. The three issues of the magazine *Prabhat Monthly*, edited by Baburao Patel, carry this veiled sexuality in the captions that accompany images of Shanta Apte and Durga Khote. The second issue of this magazine includes a full-page image of Shanta Apte, looking into the distance (Fig. 1). Apte's costume reveals a bare shoulder and arms. The caption reads, "Look at Shanta the sweet siren of Prabhat. She is coming in this apologetic costume without any apology except her youth and beauty."⁵² The magazine was introduced to readers as a service for the "friends of Prabhat" who wanted to know "details of Shanta Apte – her hobbies and activities."⁵³ However, as pointed out by Neepa Majumdar, information was based solely on actors' professional lives, and avoided details of

⁵¹ Arvikar, "The Cinema of Prabhat," 38.

⁵² Baburao Patel, *Prabhat Monthly* 1.2 (November, 1936): 3.

⁵³ See Baburao Patel, "Just Another Link," *Prabhat Monthly* 1.1 (October, 1936): 4.



Fig. 1 Shanta Apte, featured in the second issue of *Prabhat Monthly* (November 1936).



Fig. 2 Lord and Lady Bourbone. Standing (from left to right): Baburao Pai, Dadasaheb Torane, Vishanupant Damle, Governors P.A., P.M. Modi, V. Shantaram, K. Dhaybar, S. Fattelal.

Image Courtesy of M/s A V Damle.

stars' personal lives and private selves. This indicates how, despite their growing fame, the emergent female stars of the talkie era were more or less protected from public scrutiny behind a veil of social respectability.⁵⁴

While other studios like New Theatres sought respectability from using literary sources for movies, Prabhat's social respectability emerged from its personnel, as well as its films, and the public's perception of the studio as a creator of engaging films. Prabhat's development from a small studio in Kolhapur, to its expansion in Pune, and its establishment as one of the best studios in India, was contingent on the artistic excellence of its films. *Prabhat Monthly* served as an important para-textual conduit for the studio to impress its respectability upon the public. It contains many examples of the studio's active cultivation of a positive public image. In one article, Baburao Patel details visits of distinguished personalities to the studio, including the queens of Akkalkot and Sawantwadi from the neighbouring princely states.⁵⁵ One image shows the visit of Lord and Lady Brabourne (Fig. 2). The studio also established the Prabhat Fellowship

⁵⁴ Neepa Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!: Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

⁵⁵ See Baburao Patel, "The New Temple of Art," *Prabhat Monthly* 1.2 (November, 1936). 5.

Scheme, the winner of which would be made a privileged patron of the studio, and a special guest at exhibition spaces and cinema theatres.⁵⁶

Another crucial instance of respectability is found in the personal and professional relationships between various internal personnel. Prabhat seems to have promoted informal interactions between its staff (aside from female actresses), replicating social kinship, where age, skills, and intellect were revered by suffixing a person with an honorary word like “dada” (elder brother), “mama” (maternal uncle) etc. Prabhat thus demarcated an inherent hierarchy of work which corresponded to the respect that a person like Shantaram, Fatehlal or Damle received from artists and colleagues.⁵⁷ Such respectability suggests a larger social practice of Prabhat Studios. It points to familial kinships forged not only out of real-life relationships, but also in the culture of politeness, social interactions and the manner of organising the studio departments.

It is evident that Prabhat worked to maintain its image as an institution of social repute, one where avoiding gossip, suppressing sexual objectification of female actors, and observing middle class social norms superseded concerns of leveraging popularity of its screen personnel for economic gain. This notion of respectability was driven towards projecting a public image of the studio that valued artistic excellence over sensational romantic liaisons. Such an insistence thus aligned the studio with the social spaces from which Prabhat had emerged fostering a sustained bond with the Marathi social sphere. It also effectively secluded the inner workings of Prabhat from public scrutiny.

Conclusion: Respectability after the Studio

Prabhat’s reputation as a respectable film enterprise is significant to the history of Marathi cinema. The mode of production that regimented the Marathi filmmaking industry under an unacknowledged but perceptible culture of respectability seems to have long lasting influences after the studio had closed down. Prabhat served as the training grounds for a number of notable personnel, fostering their creative talents. Though a large number of personnel, including Shantaram, migrated to the Hindi film industry, the network of artists, actors, and technicians continued Prabhat’s adherence to social respectability. While the scope of this paper does not permit me to consider the repercussions of the social capital of respectability beyond the 1950s, it is important to note that, in the later period, cinema and social respectability remained entrenched in the Marathi social sphere with the work of literary figures like G. D. Madgulkar.⁵⁸ This suggests that while Prabhat was invested in nurturing filmmakers’ creativities, its social stature had to correspond with the grandeur of its sets, the technical mastery of its filmmakers, and imbuing its workplace with respectability where its artists could feel at home.

In this paper, I have demonstrated how Prabhat Studios was instrumental in fostering a regional Marathi cinema in Kolhapur and Pune. In the context of Indian film history, a spatial demarcation emerges between regional studios and those that constituted the Bombay film industry. This is discerned in the study of Prabhat, and how provincial towns fostered a localized

⁵⁶ See *Prabhat Monthly* 1.2 (November, 1936): 7-9.

⁵⁷ See Vatve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*, 25. Damle was known as Damle mama, while Fatehlal was addressed as Saheb mama.

⁵⁸ G. D. Madgulkar began his apprenticeship at Huns studios in Pune. In the 1960s Madgulkar was a singular figure who dominated the Marathi film industry with his stories, scenarios, dialogue-writing, and lyrics. Most famously, he wrote the script for *Do Aankhein Bara Haath* (dir. V. Shantaram, 1957).

assimilation of artistic practices that was quite different from those that defined the Bombay film industry. As this paper has shown, filmmaking in provincial spaces served to re-align traditional craft in the aid of an emergent form of entertainment. It proved to be a sustaining space for celebrated theatre artists who had excelled at the Sangeet Natak. It was perhaps this assimilation of accomplished craftspeople that resonated with the Marathi public, and helped to establish the motion picture's respectability. By contrast, the Bombay industry was cosmopolitan, its artists hailing from across India, and, according to Kaushik Bhaumik, driven by the logic of the *bazaar*.⁵⁹ By the time various studios had closed in 1953, the Bombay film industry had assumed a pan-Indian identity, and thus was a commoditized cinematic institution. The spatial difference is observed in the move of artisanal, kinship-oriented studios like Prabhat towards a regional social sphere, while the Bombay film industry's bazaar mode coalesced into a national form of the Hindi cinema, whose regions were numerous and whose address spread across geographies. This also indicates the formative period of a regional film industry, where cinema and society engendered one another as a self-referential prism of cultural production.

Hrishikesh Ingle is an Assistant Professor of Film Studies at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Bhaumik, "The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry."

⁶⁰ **Acknowledgements:** I am thankful to the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and comments that have helped to improve the rigour of this paper. I would also like to acknowledge the work of the journal's copyediting team for their efforts. This paper would not have happened without Hrishikesh Arvikar. I thank him for sharing his research with me, as well as providing photocopies of important documents. He also provided valuable feedback during our discussions on this topic. A condensed version of the ideas presented here was published at: sahapedia.org (an online encyclopedia of Indian culture).

References

- Arvikar, Hrishikesh. "The Cinema of Prabhat: Histories, Aesthetics and Politics." MPhil. diss., Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2015.
- Athawale, Shantaram. *Prabhat Kaal*. Pune: Proficient Publishing House, 2016.
- Bhaumik, Kaushik. "The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913-1936." PhD diss., Oxford University, 2001.
- . "Querying the 'Traditional' Roots of Silent Cinema in Asia." *The Journal of the Moving Image* (December 2008), n.p.
http://jmionline.org/article/querying_the_traditional_roots_of_silent_cinema_in_asia.
- Bhole, Keshav. *Majhe Sangeet Ani Digdurshan*. Bombay: Mouj Prakashan, 1994.
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge, 1985.
- Dass, Manishita. *Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity, and the Public Sphere in Late Colonial India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Deshpande, P. L. "Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri." In *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*, 1-12. Edited by Bapu Vatte. Pune: M/s A V Damle, 1979.
- Indian Cinematograph Committee. *Evidence*. Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927-28. Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1928.
- Gangar, Amrit. "Marathi Cinema: The Exile, the Factory and Fame." In *The Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinema*, 72-87. Edited by K. Moti Gokulsingh and Wimal Dissanayake. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Ganti, Tejaswini. *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*. Bombay: Government Central Press, 1885.
- Gomery, Douglas. *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*. London: BFI Publishing, 2005.
- Kapur, Geeta. "Mythic Material in Indian Cinema," *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 14.15 (1987): 79-107.
- Kosambi, Meera. *Gender, Culture, and Performance: Marathi Theatre and Cinema before Independence*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2014.
- Lele, Jayant, editor. *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981.

Mahapatra, B.P., G.D. McConnell, and H. Kloss. *Constitutional Languages*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1989.

Majumdar, Neepa. *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only!: Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

Mukherjee, Madhuja. *New Theatres Ltd: The Emblem of Art, the Picture of Success*. Pune: National Film Archive of India, 2009.

Mullen, Wayne. "Deccan Queen: a Spatial Analysis of Poona in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries." PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2001.

Painter, Baburao. "Background and Costume." In *Kalamaharshi Baburao Painter*, 65-66. Mumbai: Jagatik Marathi Parishad, 1990.

Patel, Baburao. "Just Another Link." *Prabhat Monthly* 1.1 (1936): 4.

---. "The New Temple of Art." *Prabhat Monthly* 1, no. 2 (1936): 6.

"Poona District." *Gazetteer of Bombay State District Series*, vol. XX, 163-316. Bombay: Government Central Press, 1954.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish, and Paul Willemen. *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish, "The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology." in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, 47-82. Edited by P. Sudhir, Tejaswini Niranjana, and Vived Dhareshwar. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993.

---. "Teaching Film Theory 2." *Journal of the Moving Image* 11 (December 2012): 40-48. http://jmionline.org/article/presentation_5_teaching_film_theory_2.

Ranade, Ashok. "Thoughts, Values and Culture: The Performing Arts." in *Intersections: Socio-Cultural Trends in Maharashtra*, 194-210. Edited by Meera Kosambi. Hyderabad: Orient Longman Ltd., 2000.

Schultz, Ana. *Singing a Hindu Nation: Marathi Devotional Performance and Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Vaidya, Madhavi. *It's Prabhat*. Documentary. Pune: M/s A.V. Damle, 2004.

Vasudevan, Ravi. "Devotional Transformation: Miracles, Mechanical Artifice, and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema." *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts & Contemporary Worlds* 1.2/1.3 (August/November 2005): 237-57.

---. "The Politics of Cultural Address in a Transitional Cinema: A Case Study of Indian Popular Cinema." In *Reinventing Film Studies*, 130-164. Edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. London: Arnold, 2000.

---. "Film Studies, New Cultural History and Experience of Modernity." *Economic and Political Weekly* 30.44 (November 4, 1995): 2809-2814.

Vatve, Bapu. *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagri*. Pune: Anant V Damle, 2001.