

With Rani Zubeida Dhanrajgir's death

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# Curtain comes down on silent movies

By N Raghuraman

BOMBAY, Oct. 16:

WITH the death of Rani Zubeida Dhanrajgir, last month popular heroine of silent movies and first Indian talkie movie 'Alam Ara,' a great silent era has come to an end.

She had acted in 36 silent movies including "Gul-E-Bakawali," a Hindi film. She had featured with great actors like Prithviraj Kapoor and Master Vithal.

The Indian film industry witnessed a revolution following the release of "Alam Ara" featuring Rani Zubeida and Prithviraj Kapoor and produced by Ardeshir M Irani of Imperial film company. It was released at Majestic theatre in Bombay in 1931.

The film though a third-rate romance, was an astonishing success. Four anna tickets were sold in black market for Rs four and five and police had to be summoned to control the crowds.

The same year 22 other Hindi films, three Bengali and two each in Tamil and Telugu were released. The first Marathi film, "Ayodhecha Raja," made by V Shantaram for Prabhat film company at Kolhapur, hit the screen the same time. The Gujarati screen also saw its first film then.

In 1933, 75 Hindi films were made and films in other languages were also produced. The number of songs, 12 in 'Alam Ara,' went up to 60 in Tamil film "Chandraleka." The early Indian films were replete with songs and grand eloquent dialogues in keeping with the tradition of musical dramas.

When films began to talk, a number of production companies came into existence like Sagar, Bombay Talkies, Minerva, Ranjit but the foremost were Prabhat of Pune and New Theatres of Calcutta. The New Theatres was the only company which produced classics like 'Chandidas,' 'Vidyapati,' 'Devdas,' 'Meri Bahan,' 'President,' 'Doctor,' 'Dushman' and so on. A galaxy of directors like Devaki Bose, P C Barua and Madhu Bose came into the limelight. The actors who shone during the period were

Kundanlal Saigal and Pahari Sanyal along with actresses like Jamuna and Kanan. Music directors like Timirvarna Bhattacharya, R.G. Boral and Pankaj Mullick made an impact.

The film, 'Devdas,' based on Saratchandra Chatterjee's immortal novel of the same name marked a radical departure from the earlier films because its dialogues were natural, its music was soft and it had no more than four songs. 'Devdas' was directed by P C Barua and though he made lot of films, later he was remembered as the maker of the single film.

Prabhat film company which made few silent movies from 1929 to 1932 made a series of films in Marathi after its first film of V Shantaram. Many of its productions were later adopted by Hindi and Tamil producers. In 1936 it produced an impressive film "Amar Jyoti" which was later shown in the Venice film festival. Its "Sant Tukaram" won a prize at Venice film festival, the first Indian film to be thus honoured.

Prabhat produced a number of remarkable films such as 'Kunku,' 'Shejari,' 'Manoos,' 'Ramshastri,' and 'Sant Dhyaneshwar.' Its last film was "Apradhi," in Hindi after which it became defunct, like New Theatres of Calcutta. By then V Shantaram had already left Prabhat to found his own Rajkamal Studios but he could never achieve the height of Prabhat.

To Prabhat goes the credit of producing the first Indian colour film — a silent movie called "Seirandhri" which was processed and printed in Germany by the Afga film company. Colourwise, the film was a failure.

In 1933, Himanshu Rai established his Bombay Talkies after his wide experience as director and actor in England and Germany. With him was his British-educated wife Devika Rani, a remarkably beautiful woman. The staff included Ashok Kumar (initially a laboratory assistant), Raj Kapoor (a clapper boy) Dilip Kumar, producer S Mukherjee and writer K A Abbas. The best

films made were 'Savitri' and 'Achhut Kanya.'

Madras which appeared late on the film scene in 1934 produced its first film "Pavalakodi" which was a box office success. Later, several film studios came up at Madras, Salem and Coimbatore. After taking charge of producing Tamil movies Madras slowly grabbed the production charge of Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada films.

Meanwhile, Bombay-based Wadia Movietone specialised in stunt films and its film 'Hunterwali' featuring John Cowas and the buxom German actress Nadia became the money spinner.

In the decade the company made films in Tamil and Telugu with an average of four films a year.

Then came the techni-colour film from Sohrab Modi, whose 'Janai Ki Rani' was a great hit on the Indian screen. Rajit Movietone followed with historical extravaganza with its release of 'Gunasundari' starring Bilimoria and Gohar.

Around the same time the Dalsukh Pancholi productions from Lahore came with a bang of extravagant socials like 'Khandan,' 'Khajanchi.' When the World War II was one year-old, the year saw the ebb in the fortunes of well-established film companies and the emergence of independent producers and big stars.

After independence, north India was invaded by south India in film production. "Chandraleka" the multi-million rupee Hindi version of original Tamil film took north India by storm. Never before was seen on the Indian screen so much spectacle, so much pageant and such an eye filling mix of dance, music, circus and varied situations.

The film collected more than a crore of rupees. Another Madras-based film company, AVM productions, founded by A V Meiyappan, made similar dent into the Hindi market. Similar resounding assaults were made by Pakshiraja Studio of Coimbatore. Its film 'Azaad' starring Dilip Kumar and Meena Kumari earned not only money but also laurels from many quarters.

Nowhere else in India has a film been so closely associated with politics as in Tamil Nadu. The anti-Brahmin and anti-north movement in Tamil Nadu was nurtured and initiated by film personalities like Ramaswamy Natcker, Annadurai, Karunanidhi, and M.G. Ramachandran. The ebullient N.T. Rama Rao also hails from the same filmdom group.

There had been attempts to portray the poverty and misery of the masses. Several films came on the subject but the credit for showing realistic films went to Satyajit Ray in the later years. The trail blazed by Ray was followed by Tapan Sinha, Mrinal Sen, Govind Nihlani, Shyam Benegal and others.

But by and large Indian films, with their superstars continued to be following a childish formula stuff of crooning, love-lorn heroes, villains, fist-fights, vixens, songs, dances, cabaret shows, motherly love, sacrifice, mistaken identities, and all is well that ends well. The revolting nonsensicals also made money.

The trend still continues as majority of the population is illiterate and they will be exploited till there is no resistance from the masses.