

# **The Beginning of Indian Cinema**

**Written, Directed, and Produced by Raghav Suri**

## **PART ONE**

**A VIEW THROUGH HIRALAL SEN'S BIOSCOPE**

Today, India stands as one of the rising global powers. It's one of the largest economies today and has seen significant economic growth since independence. A resurgence of her culture is occurring both in India and abroad. Indians in India, Indians in the diaspora, and foreigners are all reveling in the beauty, diversity, and richness of Indian culture.

Of course, today, one cannot imagine the rich artistic culture of India without mentioning Indian Cinema. The country produces more films than any other and makes films in over 20 Indian languages.

But how did this dynamic industry get started? For that, we'll have to go back over a century ago.

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Picture the scene – it is India in the early 1900s. The First World War will be the defining moment of the next decade – though the world doesn't know it yet. There is a continued movement toward the independence of India from the British Empire – though it will still be almost half a century until India gets her independence – and then a bit longer for parts of Western India to get independence from the Portuguese Empire.

In the midst of the freedom struggle, as in any freedom struggle, are the great artists who document the journey. They tell stories of heroism, of courage, often dark – though often with a hope of light of a nation looking to break the shackles of Empire. An ancient civilization looking to reclaim its glory and once again take its rightful place on the world's stage.

One figure who documented the beginnings of the Independence movement, the Swadeshi movement, and the resurgence of India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Hiralal Sen.

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Hiralal Sen is widely hailed as one of the pioneering filmmakers in India. Sadly, a fire in 1917 led to the loss of all his films and no copies are known to exist today. Nevertheless, his contributions continue to occupy a significant place in the story of Indian cinema. If we discuss The Beginning of Indian Cinema, Hiralal Sen's name must be known.

Hiralal Sen was born on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, 1868, in the Bengal Presidency's Manikganj district in a village called Bagjuri. This land is now part of Bangladesh. Despite being born in his family's village, Hiralal Sen spent most of his life in Kolkata – then called by the British name, Calcutta. His father was a well-known lawyer who belonged to a respected Baidya zamindar family from the region.

In the year 1898, a motion picture was screened at the famous Star Theatre – one of the prominent theatres in the city – located in the Bidhan Sarani area, then known as Cornwallis Street. Hiralal had watched a short film which accompanied a stage

performance of The Flower of Persia. The short film was made by a certain Professor Stevenson. Hiralal got to know Professor Stevenson and decided to borrow the latter's camera.

Hiralal Sen was clearly fascinated by this rather new medium of the motion picture and wanted to make his own production. He decided to make a motion picture called "A Dancing Scene" which was a recording of the stage performance of The Flower of Persia. He would later, with his brother Motilal's help, by a film projector – known as an Urban Bioscope. One year later, Hiralal and Motilal Sen founded the Royal Bioscope Company.

In his lifetime, Hiralal Sen made a total of 40 short films. Most of these films were recordings of stage performances, often performed at the Classic Theatre. Many of these were stories about India's history and some of the greatest historical figures in Indian history. These motion pictures included Bhramar, Hariraj, and Buddhadev.

Hiralal Sen also produced a feature film in 1903 called "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" – based on the classic tale from The Arabian Nights. However, it's believed that this film was never screened.

He also made a business from creating films for advertising purposes and news purposes. He was not only the first Indian filmmaker, but the first Indian advertising filmmaker – having made one advertising film for Jabakusum Hair Oil and another for Edwards Tonic.

However, perhaps most notably for the time period was a film he made in 1905. The film is "**Documenting the "Anti-Partition Demonstration and Swadeshi movement at the Town Hall, Calcutta, on the 22nd September 1905"**" and is regarded as India's first political motion picture.

One must remember that with so many movements against the British Empire, it was bold to make a film that challenged the Crown's authority. This film was also documenting a demonstration against the potential partition of India – which would, alas, occur in 1947. The Swadeshi movement was a movement encouraging self-reliance and self-sufficiency. It played a key role in the Indian independence movement and the path toward Indian Nationalism.

Sadly, the final years of Hiral Sen's life were marked by financial hardship. The fire which destroyed all his films occurred just a few days before his death in 1917. He died at the age of 49 on the 26<sup>th</sup> of October in Calcutta. He had been suffering from cancer.

His name has been remembered perhaps only by cinephiles and film historians. However, in 2021, a Bengali film called "Hiralal" – written and directed by Arun Roy was released. The film tells the story of Hiralal Sen's life and his impact on Indian cinema.

While his films didn't survive, his legacy does. And at the same time that he was making films, another filmmaker, on the opposite side of India was also discovering this exciting new medium. This filmmaker would ensure that India would also be a country that produced motion pictures and that soon enough, an entire industry would flourish in the country.

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**You've been listening to "The Beginning of Indian Cinema – Part One – A View Through Hiralal Sen's Bioscope.**

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**The Beginning of Indian Cinema**

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**PART TWO**

**THE VISION OF DADASAHEB PHALKE**

There's a small debate as to which film is India's first feature film. Hiralal Sen's film "Ali Baba and The Forty Thieves" was completed in 1903 but there seems to be no record of this film ever been screened and no copy of the film is known to survive – due to the fire that destroyed Hiralal Sen's entire filmography.

In 1912, a film called "Shree Pundalik" was screened. While some scholars cite this as India's first feature film, many argue that this can't be considered a feature film as it was simply a recording of a stage play. It was a silent film recording of a popular Marathi play. Though the camera man was an Englishman, the director was Dadasaheb Torne and there are a few film historians who regard him as the Father of Indian Cinema.

However, most would agree that the Father of Indian Cinema and the pioneer who helped birth what is now the world's largest film industry was Dhundiraj Govind Phalke – popularly known as Dadasaheb Phalke.

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Dhundiraj Phalke was born on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, 1870, in Trimbak in the Bombay Presidency – now in present-day Nashik, in Maharashtra. He was from a Chitpavan Brahmin family that spoke Marathi as their mother-tongue.

His father was Govind Sadashiv Phalke and was also known as Dajishashtri. He was a noted Sanskrit scholar as well as a *pandit*, a Hindu priest. His mother, Dwarkabai, was a housewife. Dhundiraj was one of seven children and was in training to become a *pandit* like his father and one of his elder brothers, Raghunathrao.

Dhundiraj didn't pursue becoming a *pandit*, however, his connection to the Hindu dharma and the history of India is something that clearly influenced his life and would later influence his career as a filmmaker.

Govind Phalke eventually got a job as a Professor of Sanskrit at Wilson College in Mumbai then known as Bombay. In Bombay, Dhundiraj finished school and attended college. It was in Bombay where Dhundiraj developed a love for the arts. He attended the Sir J.J. School of Art and took a year-long course in drawing.

He married his first wife, whose name is unknown, in 1886. The marriage lasted until the year 1900 until her passing. In 1902 he married Saraswatibai and they remained married until his death in 1944.

Dhundiraj continued to pursue his education of the arts, taking up courses in painting and even architecture and modeling. He would later pick up photography – including processing photographs and printing them. Photography is clearly what interested him the most and he decided to pursue the medium as a career.

Following his first wife's death, he was living in Baroda where he ran a photography studio. However, despite the fascination that one would expect from this new medium – there was actually a lot of fear. Dhundiraj offered his services to take portrait

photographs. However, many people were skeptical and rather frightened of the camera. Many people felt that the camera could suck out the energy from their body – and lead to a premature death. In the day when we can snap an endless amount of photos with our phones, this seems odd but it was a very real fear. Even the then Prince of Baroda felt that getting his photograph taken would end his life prematurely!

While The Prince eventually changed his mind, Phalke's photography business didn't seem to have a future. He was facing financial difficulty and he had to learn new skills to make a living.

He did a bit of everything – though he was particularly enamored by magic. He studied magic from a visiting German magician and he soon became skilled enough to perform in public. Reversing the letters of his surname, he began performing under the stage name Professor Kelpha. It was around this time that he married his second wife and eventually found a job working at the Archaeological Survey of India as a photographer and draftsman. Yet, he wasn't happy with this job and eventually quit after working with the organization for three years.

He decided to give entrepreneurship a try. He set up a printing press company called "Phalke Engraving and Printing Works" along with the noted scholar R.G. Bhandarkar.

One of his major clients was the Indian painter Raja Ravi Verma. They would print his works and this proved to be a major success. Finally, it seemed that Dhundiraj Phalke was succeeding in business. Eventually, Phalke moved his printing business from Lonavla to Dadar.

In 1908, R.G. Bhandarkar left the company and Purushottam Mavji joined as partner. The company was now called "Laxmi Art Printing Works" and it was doing so well that Phalke was able to travel to Germany to buy extra machinery for his business. However, Phalke and Mavji had certain differences pertaining to how to run the business. Eventually, Phalke decided to leave the company he started to find a new venture. By now, he clearly had the confidence that he could succeed in whatever endeavor he tried.

In fact, Phalke had received such a great reputation as a printer that many investors offered him money to start a new printing press – though he turned down every offer.

We can't really know why Phalke turned down such lucrative offers – particularly since he had proven success as a printer. Maybe he was now stable in his career but he wasn't completely fulfilled. While printing paid the bills, it clearly wasn't his calling. Clearly, Phalke had something else written in his destiny. But, what did destiny have in store for Phalke?

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1911, Phalke, accompanied by his son Bhalchandra went to the America India Picture Palace. They went to see a motion picture called "Amazing Animals." Bhalchandra was particularly amazed at seeing moving images on a screen.

Seeing animals being animated on a screen was quite a treat and he told his mother about it when he got home. The next day, Phalke decided to take his entire family to see a motion picture at the same cinema. It just so happened that the next day was Easter Sunday. As a result, a film about Jesus called "The Life of Christ" made by the French filmmaker Alice Guy-Blaché.

While watching a film about Jesus Christ, Phalke began seeing images of Hindu gods including Bhagwan Ram and Bhagwan Krishna. It shouldn't come as a surprise – after all Phalke was the son of a pandit and was trained to be one himself. He realized that this fantastic medium called the motion picture could be used to tell stories of Indian history and of Hindu *itihaas*.

**It was then that Dadasaheb Phalke began his journey which would lead him to be known as The Father of Indian Cinema!**

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Phalke spent a year buying equipment as well as several books on how to make motion pictures. He became so invested in learning how to become a filmmaker that he mortgaged his insurance policies to travel to London to learn how to make motion pictures. Upon arriving in London, he met a one Mr. Cabourn who was the editor of a magazine called "Bioscope Cine-Weekly."

Mr. Cabourn introduced Phalke to Cecil Hepworth – a noted British filmmaker who made several silent films in a variety of genres. Hepworth showed Phalke how a motion picture was made. Phalke eventually bought a camera and film to take back to India. After two months in London, he was ready to travel back to India and embark upon a new adventure.

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In 1913, at the age of 43, Dadasaheb Phalke made history with the release of India's first full-length feature film, "Raja Harishchandra." Shot on a shoestring budget with minimal resources, the film was a labor of love for Phalke, who served as writer, director, and producer.

"Raja Harishchandra" was more than just a cinematic endeavor; it was a testament to Phalke's unwavering determination. In a time when Indian cinema was still in its infancy and few people in the country had even seen a motion picture, Phalke defied all odds to bring his vision to life, laying the groundwork for a burgeoning industry that would captivate billions of people across the globe.

The success of "Raja Harishchandra" heralded a new era in Indian cinema, inspiring a wave of filmmakers to explore the medium as a means of artistic expression and social commentary. Phalke's pioneering efforts paved the way for the establishment of the Indian film industry, providing a platform for storytelling that resonated with audiences across the nation.



Beyond his groundbreaking debut, Phalke's contributions to Indian cinema were multifaceted. He went on to direct and produce over 95 films during his illustrious career, spanning a wide range of genres from epics to social dramas. His technical innovations, including the use of special effects and elaborate sets, set a precedent for future generations of filmmakers.

Cinema was truly what Dadasaheb Phalke was born to do. His films were a hit and audiences would line up to see Raja Harischandra and his other works. With the money collected from his films, he was able to pay off all his debts. He was such a household name that his status in society increased even further from his work. During the First World War, his investors were unable to finance his films. But this didn't stop him – he managed to secure finances from royals such as the King of Aundh and the Princess of Indore. The Indian Nationalist and Freedom Fighter Bal Gangadhar Tilak also tried to help him with financing his films, along with some prominent financiers including Ratanji Tata.

Phalke was approached to turn his production company into a limited company. Textile Industrialists from Bombay wanted to help Indian cinema grow and thrive and they offered to invest in Phalke's film company. In 1918, his company "Phalke Films Company" became the "Hindustan Cinema Films Company." The company's first film was "Shri Krishna Janma" which was a major success and ran for 10 months. In today's lexicon, it would have surely been part of the "100 Crore Club!"

Phalke did have certain creative disagreements with the other owners of the Hindustan Cinema Films Company. Though the company was successful in producing films, he became frustrated with these differences and eventually decided to part ways. He and his family left Bombay and moved to Kashi. He also decided to retire from filmmaking. While in Kashi, he did write a play in the Marathi language called "Rangbhoomi" which had a limited run and didn't match the success and fervor that his films did.

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While Dadasaheb Phalke had decided to walk away from cinema – the industry wasn't done with him just yet.

Many figures from the industry tried to convince him to start making films again. At first, he was skeptical as he felt there was no place for him left in cinema. But the fact was – Phalke was now needed more than ever.

The company he helped found, Hindustan Cinema Films Company, was suffering financial losses. Many felt the only way to revive it was to have their star filmmaker make a comeback.

He decided to rejoin the company as an employee and start making films again. The first film he made once joining the company again was "Sant Namdeo" which was

released in 1922. He continued to make films for the company until 1929. Sadly, none of these films were as successful as his earlier work.

He then left Hindustan Cinema Films Company and started a new film company called Phalke Diamond Company. He made a film called “Setubandhan” for the company which took a total of two years to complete – mostly due to monetary issues.

The film wasn’t a major success and one of the reasons was that it was a silent film, like all of Phalke’s films. But by this time, the world of cinema had introduced sound and dialogue as a regular part of films. The silents were being hushed by the arrival of the talkies. India’s first talkie was “Alam Ara” which was released in 1931. Phalke decided to dub “Setubandhan” to Hindi and re-release it. The film was released again in 1934 with a Hindi dub, but sadly, wasn’t financially successful.

It was quite clear that Phalke also had to produce a talkie. In December 1934, Maharajah Rajaram III of Kolhapur approached Phalke to make a new film. The Maharajah had his own film company called “Kolhapur Cinetone” and wanted Phalke to make a film for the company.

The film was “Gangavataran” and was once again based on Hindu scriptures – in this case, the *Puranas*. The film was the first Indian film to be screened at Bombay’s Royal Opera House. Sadly, this film was also a flop. At the time, films dealing with social issues in contemporary India – such as those made by V. Shantaram – were more popular. Dadasaheb Phalke was 67 when he made “Gangavataran” and after finishing the film, he decided it was time to call it a day.

He retired from filmmaking and spent the rest of his life in Nashik.

Dadasaheb Phalke passed away on February 16, 1944, at the age of 73. While his final films weren’t financially successful, he was nevertheless recognized as The Father of Indian Cinema. To this day, he is remembered for helping pioneer what is now the largest, most diverse, and most dynamic film industry in the world.

Film historians have written several books about Dadasaheb Phalke’s life and career. The filmmaker Paresh Mokashi made a Marathi-language film in 2009 called “Harischandrachi Factory” about Dadasaheb Phalke and the making of “Raja Harischandra.”

Since 1969, the Government of India has given a lifetime achievement award to any film professional who has made significant contributions to Indian Cinema.

**The award is called: The Dadasaheb Phalke Award.**

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