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## **BETWEEN THE SHOTS, AFTER THE CUTS: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PRABHAT STUDIO**

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**Abstract:** *'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'* (A lot of things change, yet a lot of them remain the same), notes Ashish Rajadhyaksha at the end of *Indian Cinema: A Very Short Introduction*.<sup>1</sup> Rajadhyaksha raises queries about nationalism, industrial mechanisms, state policy and charts key moments from Indian film history to the present-day corporatized Bollywood conglomerate cultures. The question of industrial status and cultural value, both of which were enmeshed into the category of state legitimation loom over the entire book. This article on Prabhat's studio economy is in persuasion of Rajadhyaksha's usage of the French phrase for entanglements of historical changes and residual continuities in film cultures during the period mid-1920s to mid-1950s to ask "what is the '*même chose*'" (same thing) that persists and what are the changes that occur in relation to the economics of the pre-eminent Prabhat Studio (1929-53)?

**Keywords:** regional and national cinema, studio system, economics and nationalism, stardom, vernacular capitalism

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### **Introduction**

In an argument over the settings, props, costume and art direction of the Hindi version of *Dharamatma*<sup>2</sup> (earlier titled *Mahatma*) the writer K. Narayan Kale objected to their north-indianisation as the film was based on Saint Eknath's life (a saint who is inextricably associated with Marathi society). Kale claimed that he did not want to lose the Maharashtra regional roots of his central character. In the late colonial period film production was a site of such contestations and claims of regions attempting to forge their stake in the making of a nation. Between nationalism and nationalisation, there is a window to the lives of Indian Cinemas which tell the story of the making of the nation, but at the same time demonstrates inherent tensions and resistances to the national form. Four frameworks shape our understanding of the



*Figure 1: A Kolhapur Bazaar*

studio period of cinema (1920-60), particularly of late silent and early talkies: 1) national, 2) regional, 3) urban, and 4) industrial.<sup>3</sup> These main grids have furthered queries regarding gender, genre, stardom and technology, cultural affinities and formal manifestations. This is also a period where nation, region, empire and the global are evolving, altering and calibrating categories, which are neither fully formed as seen in their current form, nor were they fully absent. Given this, what then is the nature of the economy that we see in film cultures? Moving beyond recognising anecdotal stories of the processes of film practice, the studios in the Indian context need further investigation that would pry open the implications of filmmaking in the creation of a certain system, help us in locating the profundity of ideological imperatives, and further lead us to identify the self-fashioning of the studios. This article will not look at the film texts, instead the focus will be on what happened between the shots and after the cuts, inside and outside the studio towards interrogating the political economy of Prabhat Studio.

Kaushik Bhaumik points out in his study of Indian cinema (1913-1939) that “the financial health of the (film) industry improved considerably and reflected the increased confidence of investors in treating the industry as a viable commercial option” by the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> Even then, Prabhat did not find financial capital easily. Prabhat was established in 1929 in Kolhapur by a group of five people; V. Shantaram, K.Dhaiber, V.G. Damle, S. Fattelal, and S. Kulkarni, working as a collective towards creating a different model while working within the industrial mode. Before moving toward the central premise of the essay, I shall flag a brief history of Prabhat and its partners. V. Shantaram was trained under the music director Govindrao Tembe in a theatre company, before which he was a door keeper at a cinema hall. He joined the Maharashtra Film Company in 1918 (hereafter MFC) and during that time learnt

production procedures in the studio. He was later a partner in Prabhat and directed most of the films made in the early phase of the studio. He quit the studio in 1942 and started the Rajakamal Kala Mandir studio, thereby venturing into nationalist-developmental films and choreographed musicals.

Keshavrao Dhaiber's autobiography articulates complicated identities in the region of Maharashtra.<sup>5</sup> At a young age, Dhaiber was sold off by his mother to the queen of Kolhapur. He was brought up amidst riches but was put out on the street when the queen passed away. Later, he trained as a cameraman at MFC and was the first one to quit Prabhat studio following an affair with the actress Nalini Tarkhud. Dhaiber started his own studio but after financial losses, he moved to Bombay and struggled to survive.

The third and fourth members of the group that would later form Prabhat, Fattelal and Damle, came from humble families of Kolhapur. Fattelal's father was an overseer in colonial constructions, and Damle was a sculptor who could barely read or write anything except the old Modi script. So, both of them focused on the technical aspects of cinema. Damle and Fattelal directed their first film *Karna* in the late 1920s at the MFC, like Dhaiber and Shantaram who made *Baji Prabhu Deshpande*. These four people from artisanal socio-economic backgrounds operated like a collective. S. Kulkarni was a silent partner in Prabhat, who came from the merchant class, but did not have a say in aesthetic practices inside the studio.

### **The Political Economy of Prabhat Studio**

Manu Goswami, in her problematic of "methodological nationalism," argues that there is a relation between the production of national identity and the space of economy. She states that, "central to the project of nationalism is making the nation appear natural."<sup>6</sup> Neither economies, nor the nation, are natural but constructs and imaginaries. Sudipto Kaviraj's usage of Castoriadis' terms "imaginary" posits, "internally accepted boundaries of a constituted social form", where "the principle of community construction in traditional India was different from the modern nationalist one."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in his recent article on regional political economy, Kaviraj puts forth a historical contingency in formulating the concept of "region" which is "provisional, fallible and corrigible."<sup>8</sup> Kaviraj makes a distinction between two access points of historicity: 1) *generalisation*, where foundational principles are laid out and commonality is sought between varying regions, and 2) *fragmentation*, where only regions exist and anything out of its bounds, does not seem to be "compelling enough" to encounter *historical reality* (emphasis mine). He posits a third way, of *composition*, thereby asserting that regions are historical and remain bound together within a single frame of some kind, "political, economic

or cultural.”<sup>9</sup> These three determinants are in dialogue with one another. I access the production culture of Prabhat to argue for film practice being embedded within these three determinants.

Scholarship on Indian cinema, regarding this period, indicates that the studio system in India cannot be fully understood in terms of a one-to-one correspondence with the classical Hollywood studio model, as Indian film production did not prescribe to a fixed form of labour.<sup>10</sup> Many members of the cast and crew juggled several roles at Prabhat. After the regional turn in Indian Cinema studies, the centralising and often hegemonic tropes of Bombay cinema have been identified and critiqued.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in the cities around Bombay, in the Bombay Presidency, the economic impulse came from diverse roots for three reasons. Firstly, the economies of the princely states texturally differed from the ones of late British India. Premakur Athorti revisited his stay in the Kolhapur studios and described the impact of feudal elites in Kolhapur on its creative and cultural economy. He recalls, “when the Kolhapur state slapped a special tax on the Prabhat Company, they left town and created a new studio in Poona.”<sup>12</sup> He met with Dadasaheb Phalke in the Raja’s studio, where Phalke said:

Why did you have to take a job in this place? These are dangerous people. For smallest of lapses they can extract revenge on you. *You do not know the true nature of these native princes.*” I said, “I know such princes and their whims very well. But I must tell you too Dada Saheb that I am too a very dangerous person. I care a fig for them. I am a British subject.” Dada Saheb said: “*you being a British subject will not help you at all.* Suppose, you escape them and go to Bombay. They will issue a warrant against your name and send it to Bombay claiming that you have stolen their precious jewelry. According to the pact between the British and these principalities, the British will have to hand you over to them[...]<sup>13</sup> (emphasis mine).

There were then informal overlaps of power which operated outside the economies of the studio. Secondly, being proximate to Bombay presented a duality of emulation and accented differentiation of Marathi personnel in film style. A problem which continues to the present day is that of Marathi cinema either being imitative of Bollywood, or presenting a simultaneous cultural disassociation and protectionism through the weaving of the pride politics of Marathi identity with policy. The Gujarati end of this Bombay Presidency story will perhaps yield an equally compelling and complex picture. Thirdly, the pace of cinema technology and the resultant exhibition moved at different speeds in various parts of the regions. This can be evidenced by Painter’s exhibition representative, Pawangadkar, who spoke of secondary and tertiary circulations of their silent films, where priority was given to Western Indian circulation of the film and then circulated in the rest of the sub-continent.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the cultural location in a city is an important aspect to analyse the site-specificity of a film production. The spatial analysis of Poona in the 19th and 20th century is based on Wayne Mullen’s GIS (Geographical information system) model and shows the tripartite structure of the town which included 1) the

Native city, 2) Civil lines and 3) the cantonment, changing under the British regime.<sup>15</sup> Mullen's approach breaks down myths about spatial hierarchies which are assumed to act in tension owing to the rigidity of spaces. Instead, he presents "symbolic segregation" as a defining character, thereby assigning signification to architectural developments. This reorganisation of places such as civil buildings, courts and post offices was done for its "tactical utility".<sup>16</sup> As early as 1910, the imperial writer, Valentine Chirole's book *Indian Unrest* had a chapter specifically on Pune and Kolhapur regarding the unresolved caste tensions between the Maratha middle caste and the Peshwai upper caste lineage.<sup>17</sup> These tensions led to a diverse range of cinemas in the two places, amongst them, Kolhapur persisted from the post-1940s with the rural folkish film brand of films right till the 1970s, whereas in Pune, the cultural sphere shifted back to theatre and music and stopped film production around the 1960s. However, some minor companies remained in operation.

Hence, in the late colonial times, the film studio space becomes an interesting example of the agency asserted by filmmakers for creating alternate worlds, and newer imaginaries on screen. The cultural location of Pune must have been shaped by the new urban experience, the moderate and reformist discourses of the rationalist G.K Agarkar, economist Gokhale, or a pioneering figure in sex education R.D.Karve, feminist writers Kashibai Kanitkar and Malati Bedekar, women's rights activist Ramabai Ranade played an important role in the arguments made in Prabhat films. In such a cultural climate of the early 1930s, while reformist films like *Amritmanthan*,<sup>18</sup> *Sant Tukaram*<sup>19</sup> and *Kunku*<sup>20</sup> were being made, there were also revivalist historicals such as *Rajput Ramani*,<sup>21</sup> and *Sinhagad*<sup>22</sup>, signifying valour and pride of the martial classes, thus gearing back to Hindu nationalists like Tilak and Savarkar among others. A textual reading of the films shows the polyvalent concerns of studios, akin to the differing role of patronage and capital played in devising a production system.

To return to Rajadhyaksha's query mentioned earlier, the question which runs as an undercurrent can be put forth as follows: Is there such a thing as "Indian Cinema?" While providing an elaborate answer to this question is beyond the scope of this article, I shall posit an argument through Prabhat Studios as it lies at the cusp of relationships between the regional-national, artisanal-industrial, tradition-modernity, reformist-revivalist, bazaar-respectability discourses, owing to its location in Kolhapur and Pune in Western India, which was one of the most diverse and prolific constellations for film production with several dynamic social, political and cultural engagements and affordances.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 2: On Location: Inside the studio – Amritmanthan

The Prabhat partners started from artisanal roots in MFC run by Baburao Painter, it had allegiances to the princely patronage of Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur. In a ten-page letter, Damle spoke extensively of ownership, division of labour and partnership. He mentioned that the film enterprise should be treated like a “family business”. Animosity grew when the apprentices had to sign the muster and the two separate factions, that of Dhaiber-Shantaram and Damle-Fattelal, wanted to leave the company. Baburao Pendharkar, the actor trainer and manager of MFC suggested that they start a company together. After many financiers bailed out, it was Sitaram Kulkarni, a merchant in the *Sarafa* (Goldsmith’s lane) who provided Rs. 15,000 as the initial capital for building the studio. Tanibai Kagalkar came in to help build the Prabhat studio in Kolhapur. Earlier, she had helped MFC when a fire burnt down the studio. A later Prabhat contract between the partners had several policies, but more importantly, it had the following clause: “no partnership will be passed on to anyone by lineage.”<sup>24</sup> Preference was to be given to individual talent and their collective concerns about making progressive films. It was also decided that no partner will be allowed to have a relationship with any actress or members of the cast, crew, or labour since it was one of the factors of factions in many of the studios at that time. The company was started on June 1, 1929. Very little has been written about the studio, particularly in terms of its modes of production and the material conditions of the studio setup, and its technological experimentations. All these are key determinants of the political economy of the studio. Prabhat, with the patronage of feudal resources, made its first bilingual talkie *Ayodhya ka Raja / Ayodhyecha Raja* in 1932, in their Kolhapur studio which had a steel-glass structure. But after five talkie films, they moved to Pune, the cultural capital of the Marathi

identity in 1934, and built a massive studio on the outskirts of the city. It was regarded as one of the most state-of-the-art studios in the pre-independence era as it was well-equipped with new, advanced technology and machinery. With sustained efforts at making films with progressive content, the studio grew from “regional obscurity to national attention.”<sup>25</sup> The economics of varying film companies from this period drew from familial to industrial, from joint stock to partnership agreement contracts, from princely patronage to imperial ones. The modern inequities brought by the colonial economy, differentiated internal gradations of a region, and at the same time, as Kaviraj argues, “introduced an entirely new dimension to economic life by first linking parts of the Indian economy to the British imperial structure and indirectly to the world economy, which in a real modern sense developed in the 19th century.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, there was a lag in the legal formulations being applied to the material realities of the day. To put it differently, several filmmakers and producers such as the notably successful Ardeshir Irani and the Madans came under scrutiny for not opening up their accounts for inspection to the Indian Cinematograph Committee in 1927-28.<sup>27</sup> The dubious nature of generating finances and of attaining revenues, thus, makes it difficult to use empiricist methods for success or failure of a film in this period. Instead, I wish to track the economy as a cultural activity itself, not unlike Ritu Birla’s assessment of firm as family and the vernacular capitalism of the Calcutta based Marwari community.<sup>28</sup> This way of historical research, she notes, can lead to an understanding of “culture as a way of being, as the shifting meanings attending to lived practice, as ethos and ethics.”<sup>29</sup> The basic thread followed by this investigation of the colonial period is that of law which was not directly assimilated as policy by the entrepreneurs; rather it was contested in the early 1900s and slowly negotiated with until the 1940s.



Figure 3— Kirloskar cots as strong as the partners at Prabhat Studio

This advertisement shows all Prabhat partners standing on a cot made by the Kirloskar Company. The implication remains that even with all the partners standing on it, the cot does not break, just like their partnership. By this token, even the public image was moving towards the outlook of a family business that Damle wrote about in the letter mentioned earlier. From Durga Khote to Hansa Wadkar almost everyone from the studio evoked this imagery of the ‘family’ and ‘domesticity’.

But the studio also projected another image of moving towards what we can call ‘social entrepreneurship’. Here ‘social’ denotes its commitment and responsibility towards its publics and ‘entrepreneurial’ towards an autonomy freeing itself of its feudal pasts. Several others, such as, Master Winayak, Bhalji Pendharkar and Baburao Painter, continued to work with the Raja’s patronage in Kolhapur. All the other companies started by Marathi personnel either shut down after three to four productions or relayed personnel, equipment, premises of the studio to one another forming new notional companies after the fall of the earlier ones. Among these formations, Prabhat lasted 32 years and made around 45 films including several which were multilingual.

### Gendered and Domesticated Economy

Sections	Section Head	Partner executive
Direction and Writing	K. Narayan Kale, Raja Nene, D.D. Kashyap, Athavale, Mukhram (Permanent members) and others on contractual basis.	V. Shantaram
Music	Keshavrao Bhole	V. Shantaram
Camera	V. Avdhoot (Shantaram’s relative)	Dhaiber (later) Damle
Still photography	Pant Dharmadhikari	S. Fattalal
Sound and Projection	Shankar Damle	V. Damle
Art Direction	S. Mestri, Vasant Painter	S. Fattalal
Makeup and Costumes	Dada Paranjape	K. Dhaiber (later) Shantaram
Tailoring	Babalal (S. Fattalal’s brother)	-
Acting	Mane Pahilewan	Dhaiber (later) Shantaram
Laboratory Printing	Ram Vankudre (Shantaram’s relative)	S. Kulkarni, Ram Mugaldhudh
Editing	A.R. Shaikh (Fattalal’s son-in-law), Anant Mane	Shantaram

Figure 4: The studio structure of Prabhat



The table in figure 4 indicates that Shantaram clearly had creative control over several key sections of the company. There was however a sharp division of labour; creative supervision was Shantaram's area and Damle looked after the managerial aspects. On a normal day, one could witness Shantaram looking at the camera or the actors and their movements on screen, attempting to create and resolve dramatic tensions. At the same time, Damle gleaned the background of the frame to provide adequate supplies for the creation of the backdrop and setting. Often, Fattelal saw an empty foreground and asked V. Avdhoot and E. Mahmud (assistant cameramen) to fill the frame and created an interesting block for the actors to move around. This division of labour around directorial control was not carried forward when Damle-Fattelal took up direction. Shantaram had famously employed a man to narrate stories to him at night. He used to shoot the day's work and immediately cut the dailies, according to his daily scenario book. When he went back home (just across the street), he wrote the next day's scenario. Daily, Shantaram Athavale and Raja Nene, the assistant directors had to pick up the scenario book from Shantaram's house and read it on their way to the studio while daily chores were being supervised by various section heads.

Let us turn to a broader query of the studio system, its labour and their organisational treatment under colonial regimes, since the studio system was not recognised as an industrial business venture by the erstwhile colonial governance. Two legal cases show the transient nature of contractual employment of female actors for Prabhat. In Durga Khote's case over tax returns, the judge said to the lawyer, "Mr. Joshi's (the opposing counsel) contention is that if you look at the terms of the contract, it is clear that a relationship of *master* and *servant* is established between the film companies and the assessee (here, Durga Khote)."<sup>30</sup> However, the judge also noted:

*... the mere establishment of relationship of master and servant is not sufficient when we are dealing with a person who is practicing a profession, because in the course of the practice of that profession it may become necessary for the person to get himself or herself engaged to a particular master temporarily. But even while he or she is so engaged, he or she is really practicing his or her profession and the service is merely incidental to that profession. The position is different when a professional person permanently accepts an employment and exchanges his profession for service.*<sup>31</sup> (emphasis mine)

Shanta Apte had two interesting cases against her. One, where the question of jurisdiction was highlighted as she had signed the contract in Bombay for an Indian Music Congress performance in Calcutta. Even though the case took place after she left Prabhat, these ancillary revenue mechanisms show how the star was tied to many structures aligned with and created by the studio system. In the second case regarding her contractual obligations towards Prabhat, the judge notes:

With regard to Miss Shanta Apte, it seems that in March, 1940, she was under a contract with the Prabhat Film Company of Poona, but it appears that she was not satisfied with that company and was not likely to renew her contract with them. Several producers were anxious to secure her services for their future productions and the company thought that it was not advisable to wait till the period of her contract with Prabhat Film Company had expired and secured her services even at the risk of having to pay her waiting salary for the unexpired period with the Prabhat Film Company. This gave the company the *advantage of advance publicity*, and the very fact that the company *had secured the services of Miss Shanta Apte was an item of considerable advertisement value to the company*.<sup>32</sup> (emphasis mine)

Shanta Apte had famously gone on a hunger strike in 1939.<sup>33</sup> While Apte's hunger strike was mocked as fanciful rhetoric to malign Prabhat's reputation, the contingency of the master-servant relationship is well established in these two cases. The symbolic capital that the studio generates around Apte, even when the contract was reaching its end, denotes the gendered economies of the studio system, which would be assessed in this section. Apte's scathing critique of the studio system is visible in her autobiographical assessment (*Jau Mi Cinemat ?*) and her vulnerable location in it.<sup>34</sup>

Years later, another Prabhat actress, Shanta Hublikar of *Mera Ladka*<sup>35</sup> and *Admi*<sup>36</sup>, was watching *Admi* in an old age home, where she felt forgotten and abandoned by her family and the public. She then wrote a critical autobiography of her days before and after the studio titled *Kashala Udyachi Baat?* (Why speak of tomorrow?) which was also the title of her hit song from *Manoos* as she did not remember who she was and watching the film made her remember that. The other women in old age home were discussing how Hublikar may have been dead by then. Hublikar shuddered at the thought of being remembered and forgotten at the same time.<sup>37</sup> The title of Apte's book *Jau mi Cinemat?* signifies a skeptical outlook of the future in the representational medium with a poignant, telling question mark; while Hublikar's title presents a temporal ephemerality and anxiety not just of being washed away by the new tide and depleting stardom but the weight of the labour and the medium felt by the actor over the years. The third major Prabhat actress, Hansa Wadkar, who acted in the last film made by the studio *Sant Janabai*,<sup>38</sup> connects the dots of the prevailing power and sexual politics of the studios in different settings.<sup>39</sup> Be it Prabhat or Bombay talkies, her recollections reflect the mobility, claustrophobia, exploitation which were later evoked in two films, playing with the reel-real identity, Anant Mane's *Sangtya Aika*,<sup>40</sup> and Shyam Benegal's biopic *Bhumika*.<sup>41</sup>

Aural stardom and performance was spread over varying mediums which the actor maneuvered through. Particularly interesting is the case of Bal Gandharva, a pioneering female impersonator, who was not allowed to play a female role in the film *Dharamatma* addressed at the beginning of the article. Director Shantaram wanted to help Gandharva out of his financial debacle. Gandharva, who had benefited from the extravagant lifestyle in his theatre days was

suddenly losing his audience to cinema. And, thus, Shantaram started the first and the only co-production under the Gandharva-Prabhat banner. Gandharva did not get to play as a woman, while Wadkar and Apte faced a different situation particularly from the music director - Keshavrao Bhole. Bhole often complained that both actresses did not really have *feminine voice* and that their voice needed to be *recalibrated and feminised*. These prevalent gender constructs also threw up another conundrum in Gandharva's case, as his transition to cinema was a bumpy one. Bal Gandharva did not stop singing after four-five minutes (the length of Gramophone record). A lot of film was wasted when he got into the *rasa* of the song and sang according to his own aesthetic accord rather than the limits imposed due to the gramophone record. It was difficult to stop him from singing theatrically or ask him to evoke emotions or speech in the non-linear modalities of film shooting. Writer Kale was attempting to create a rhythm in dialogue, and he often stopped the shooting for a certain punctuation or pronunciation of the word, which caused further delays. Gandharva's performance became excessive of the interlinked economies of film production and its ancillary profit mechanisms. The technological machinery blocked his performative elaborations. In the new world of cinema, the visual and aural economisation was controlled by technology. He eventually got a chance to play the female character of Meerabai in Baburao Painter's self-reflexive stage talkie. Gandharva notably benefitted from the earlier feudal patronage which supported his extravagant lifestyle and his stature, but he could not fit into the studio economy. Another illustration of regulating the established aural practices for the cinema is observed in the case of Shanta Apte when she played the role of the sister who turns delusional after the kingdom is taken over by a coup initiated by a minister of the king in *Amritmanthan*. Shantaram and Bhole, the music director, were troubled by Apte's full throated voice, they softened her Khayal training towards a more popular Sangeet Natak mode. It is rather interesting that the studio regarded Apte's masculine voice and Gandharva's effeminate gestures and speech both as excessive to the confines of gender. Thus, the cultural economy, and technological artifice also manifested the tensions arising from pre-defined gender roles for actors where anything excessive was to be aligned to the demands of a studio process of filmmaking.

### **The Ramshastri Episode**

Baburao Pai joined Prabhat after a breakthrough in policy took place regarding the guarantee money distribution system which ensures that the director, producers and studios receive a specific amount of money regardless of how the film performs at the box office.<sup>42</sup> Dadasaheb Torney also had silent contribution towards Prabhat, especially for distribution, exhibition strategies which he created, and also for the equipment he provided in its early days of



Figure 5: Towards Prabhatnagari

transition from silent to talkie era. Earlier, Baburao Pai owned the Famous distribution agency with Torney. Prabhat was buying theatres and naming them ‘Prabhat Talkies’, especially in south India. It was his suggestion to start a Prabhat magazine (called *Prabhat Monthly*). Prabhat positioned itself as a brand which provided a ‘privileged’ entry into the studio to those readers who subscribed to the magazine. Pai stepped into Dhaiber's shoes. This change also

signaled the movement of the studio towards a strategy of expansion of their film business. Thus, the Central Film Exchange was established under Baburao Pai. Prabhat bought new theatres every year to ensure a Prabhat release in every big or small city.<sup>43</sup> This policy decision was taken to increase direct profits and to eliminate middlemen in distribution and exhibition. Shantaram had regular meetings with most of his distributors. In one such meeting, around 1939, he proposed that to eliminate the practice of guarantee money it was better to encourage theatre owners to promote films locally. A year later, he claims that the films earned 20% profit.<sup>44</sup> Figure 6 shows the privileging and the value of being a Prabhat viewer, as the fellowship would give special access to the Prabhat fan to the studio as well as assured seats at the cinema hall. So, most of these strategies have a localized appeal, catered through the emblematic signage of Prabhat. While the regional accent was a form of the strategy integrating and expanding was another which the studio failed to achieve and sustain in later years.

Four different accounts, Shantaram's autobiography *Shantarama*, Babu Watve's *Ek Hoti Prabhat Nagari*, Shantaram Athavale's *Prabhat Kaal* and Keshavrao Bhole's *Majhe Sangeet ani Digdurshan* narrate the events at Prabhat Studio in the years after 1940 very differently from one another.<sup>45</sup> The liquidation documents provide another variation on the story. The incidents detailed in this section are a combination of these narratives and an attempt to unravel the reasons for the fallout between the partners that are personal, political and driven by the changing economic conditions that affected the Prabhat model of business. During the shooting of *Shejari*, Shantaram, who was already married, had a relationship with Jayashri who

played the female lead Girija in the film. Shantaram tells the story of his affair with Jayashri as the primary reason for the differences with other partners of the studio.

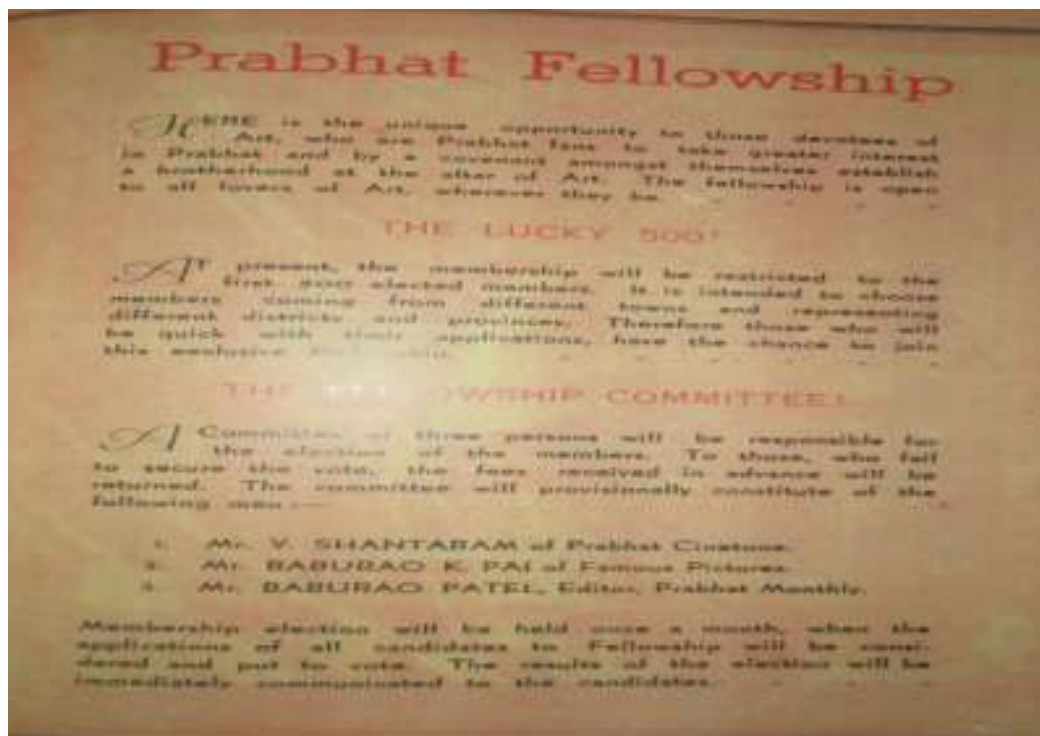


Figure 6: In the late 1930s Prabhat offered monthly fellowships for its readers.

The company did not allow intimate relationships with actresses. However, Shantaram made a valiant argument about Fattelal's relationship with Gulab Bai in the early Prabhat days till they got married later. In a rather interesting move, Shantaram had asked Jayashri to resign from Prabhat so that their relationship wouldn't interfere with his stake at Prabhat.<sup>46</sup> Clause 20 of their partnership agreement, (insisted upon by Baburao Pendharkar who played villainous roles in the early Prabhat Talkies) became the controversial point for discussion. Pendharkar had insisted that the partners "will serve Prabhat all their lives; and if they start carrying any business other than Prabhat's film production then the profits of such business should be shared by Prabhat and not the defaulting individuals."<sup>47</sup> This clause became pernicious for Dhaiber when he wanted to leave the studio in 1937. Later, Shantaram's departure was influenced by his affair with Jayashri, but it was not the sole reason as it was in Dhaiber's case. Shantaram being equated with Prabhat was a troubling dynamic for the others partners. In the story that Shantaram narrates, Damle and Fattelal had started buying properties, theatres and reaping benefits from them. According to Shantaram, these advantages were a violation of the agreement. Damle and Fattelal claimed they were planning for their old age and their families,

whereas the young Shantaram, in his mid-30s, had his life ahead of him. Babu Watve's narrative, more favourable to the Damles in particular, highlights the expansion plan proposed by Walchandseth, a businessman. Watve writes, "Except Damle, everyone else got lured by this plan that was an investment of around 20 lakhs."<sup>48</sup> When Shantaram was about to take up the job of a director with the I.F.I (Information Films of India), there was a resistance from the rest of the partners. In a meeting in October 1941, he was asked to work without seeking profit participation in Prabhat if he was to take up the role at I.F.I. According to the minutes of a meeting in early January 1942, four contractual members of Prabhat viz., Raja Nene, Keshavrao Bhole, Keshavrao Date and D.D. Kashyap were fired by Shantaram without the consent of the rest of the partners. Nene was Damle's relative. This event sparked off a crossfire between the partners.<sup>49</sup> Nene and others got their contracts reinstated. Shantaram was given two options. He was asked to run the studio on his own and pay off the other partners. This was financially impossible for him, so he chose the other option and left. On 21<sup>st</sup> April 1942 Shantaram was freed of his contractual obligations with returns of three Lakhs.<sup>50</sup> Athavale's version of the story was about Shantaram gaining control of the studio, which "he had anyway already, but he wanted it to be a legal contract binding on the other partners."<sup>51</sup>

Baburao Pai had bought land for Prabhat at Cadel Road in Bombay and after the Prabhat partners had made it clear that they did not want to move, he started his Famous studio there. Damle's diaries between 1939-41 are an interesting read, if one can decipher the Modi influenced Marathi script. They show an account of his fluctuating health, scribbled notes on the working of a film (probably *Sant Sakhu*) along with changes in business strategies. Damle died in 1945 and the studio lost its administrative anchor. In June 1945, Prabhat was turned into a limited company from its original partnership with two groups – Anant Damle (V.G. Damle's son)-Baburao Pai, and Fattelal- Kulkarni.<sup>52</sup> Earlier, there was a dimension of veto voting when partners disagreed on aesthetic issues or business policy decisions. After a series of conflicts, Shantaram had trouble gathering veto votes as Damle and Fattelal, generally echoed each other's opinions. At times, the sleeping partner, S. Kulkarni voted with Shantaram. By 1945, after Shantaram left, the veto votes did not result in any concrete decisions at the administrative level or the aesthetic one because of these group formations. In 1949, Baburao Pai who had taken Dhaiber's place was removed as the head of the Prabhat Central Film Exchange and Prabhat theatres when most of the films bombed at the box office, and Fattelal-Kulkarni got the ownership of the studio. After Kulkarni left with his share, Anant Damle filed for liquidation. Pai, Fattelal and Damle tried to outdo each other in the bidding process.<sup>53</sup>

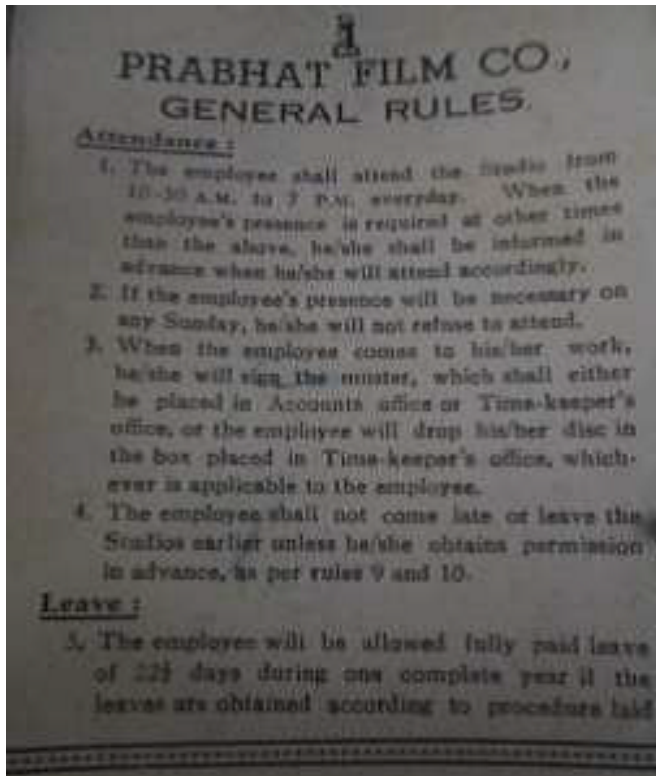


Figure 7: Prabhat Film Company: General Rules

Kelkar Attarwale, a perfume factory owner bought the studio in 1957 after a renewed auction on the court's order. He rented the studio and produced one film titled *Gajgauri* in 1958.<sup>54</sup> The studio was finally sold to the Indian Government for 12 lakhs on 1st April 1960. This became the location for the Film Institute of India which was later rechristened as the Film and Television Institute of India.<sup>55</sup>

Now I shall focus on Ritu Birla's argument about law, media and business under the colonial state to theorise a model of the Prabhat economy.<sup>56</sup> A number of factors such as the restrictions on raw stock in the tumultuous war period and the

economic oscillation in 1945 will be seen to understand the contemporaneous global economic shifts which affected the Prabhat model. A combination of these reasons led to the failure of this small *family or kinship*-based enterprise. The private concern nature for film companies was meant for maintaining sovereignty. The earlier idea of a collective expanded to the logic of family since the family members of Prabhat partners were employed in the second phase of the expansion of the studio. Most of them worked in the technical departments. The tension came from the personnel being tied to the logic of kinship under the rubric of a Hindu Undivided Family (HUF).

The artisanal-apprenticeship mode of training from Painter's MFC, was carried forward and modulated by Prabhat for the creation of its own model of family business. After the success of the silent films, the five partners emerged as entrepreneurs making business and aesthetic decisions on common grounds. Bombay Talkies, based in Bombay came under severe scrutiny when preferential treatment was given to them for raw stock during the period of the Second World War for their film *Kismet*.<sup>57</sup> It is interesting to note that the internal factions of Prabhat during the *Ramshastri* episode, where the partners could not see eye-to-eye and eventually went in different direction, used the lack of raw stock as a reason to not show the directorial credits of the film. Furthermore, inflation initiated the financial losses of Prabhat eventually leading to the liquidation of the company.

This model was not limited to Hindus but affected non-Hindus as well. The contradictory pulls of extending the business to family members, but at the same time family members having to prove their worth in the business, underlines the aspect of negotiation within the family-unit logic of business. While HUF business had a gendered passage of property and propriety, but its overlap with Prabhat's progressive concerns presents an impasse between the religious law, studio and contractual management, and aesthetic practices at Prabhat. The inevitable question in the gendered succession of HUF raised its head in the form of *lineage* after the partners started leaving. The family business model which Damle suggested became a problem for sustaining Prabhat in its later days. Unlike MFC's lineage which followed a straightforward apprenticeship mode, the two binding clauses that caused factions between Damle'son-Fattelal on one side and Pai-Kulkarni on the side were: 1) the sexual economy of the studio which did not allow the partners to have relationships with actresses, and that 2) the firm should not be passed onto family by lineage. However, the situation of the studio on the ground was different.

Prabhat's business evolved in to a public limited company from a privatized entity in the global economy of cinematic practices. As Birla argues:

Performing difference, anti-colonial nationalism ... operates through a distinction between the 'outer' realm of statecraft and economy, where the *nation-state* is embedded *inside* capital's social logic; and an inner realm of *nation* asserts itself as *outside* to this logic.<sup>58</sup>

When the HUF turned into a limited company (a common strategy in Bombay film companies) which has shares in the market, the partners became liable for the losses made by the company. Thus, film production ran on a shifting base of economy which was *outside* as opposed to the cultural sphere of film production, that came from the *inside*. The earlier, privatised economy of Prabhat was open to *outside* investment in global, national and local economies to generate symbolic or real capital, but the culture that it deployed remained *outside* the economy of its business strategies which relied on *internal* ritualistic orientations of running a business like a HUF. Birla's framework of "vernacular capitalism" and "firm as family" with respect to Law and Media in the late colonial period, thus provides us with an insight into the workings of a filmmaking studio, whose networked relations, habits, strategies in the everyday working of the studio, forged a complex negotiation between latent feudalism, kinship formations, middle-class respectability, domesticity and industrial demands. While the films remained largely reformist, the economy of the studio was dominated by conventions of domesticity, technological determinants of the medium, and moral implications of the industry. Prabhat was transitioning from the makeshift production system towards a capitalist industrial one, but since nation, state, region and empire were concepts which were still being framed, it moved, grew



and transitioned through all of them. These possibilities were open in text, subtext and context of film production in the seemingly marginal film infrastructures in Kolhapur and later in the culturally prominent envisioning of Marathi publics through the social entrepreneurship model in Pune, while recessing into the familial mode of business. The discussion presented in this article has thus posited the grids of simultaneity of emergent industrial, latent feudal, entangled familial and technologically gendered economies of Prabhat.

Let us turn finally to the film text, of the labour, affect and its memories which have passed on over the years and perhaps not to be found in archival material and documents. Aman Wadhan's dialogue exercise film, *Prabhat Nagari Vol -1*, shot in FTII hears the sounds of the past of Prabhat lingering in the ethos of the film education campus now. We see the older labour in Prabhat revisiting the studio, reminiscing the production setups, styles and people inside Prabhat. They also guide the young spotboys and camera attendants regarding the jobs in the film. At the beginning, we see four camera attendants and spotboys diagonally wipe the frame to show bust-like images of the four Prabhat partners on the erstwhile location of the Prabhat studio in Pune. The image of the workers running with a crane in the artificial rain across a studio corridor in hyper slow motion seem to be an imprint of Prabhat's memory on the site. One of the Prabhat workers revisiting the site notes a spectral presence of this memory when he says, "The rain will erase all the images of memory, yet the sounds of the past will linger on." The film presents a haunting, melodic resonance of past generations of workers by forging a continuity of their rhythmic movements in the present-day image. Labour carries this weight of past legacy as the sounds of the dead or the undead keep echoing in the background. The production spaces of early studio setups in Indian cinema have gone through a change of ownership and have passed on the baton to new personnel, but at FTII a 'presence' of the Prabhat of yore is felt, even today. A film studio is a space between reality and artifice. It actualizes parallel worlds by toiling through the everyday. From Prabhat to FTII, this site of production, which saw various filmmakers and workers come and go, learn their craft and create different parallel worlds, suggests a spatiality and its altering planes which can perhaps be investigated separately.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ashish Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 118.

<sup>2</sup> *Dharmatma* (Directed by V. Shantaram, 1935).

<sup>3</sup> For the tenet of the national see, Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993). For Bombay cinema's intricate relationship with the city see, Ranjani Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). For the industrial tenet see, Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Also see, Kaushik Bhaumik's D.Phil thesis for early industrial networks and for regional assertion Kaushik Bhaumik, *The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry: 1913-1936* (University of Oxford, 2001). See Selvaraj Velayutham, *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 2009). and Sharmistha Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema: "An Other Nation"* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Kaushik Bhaumik, *The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry: 1913-1936*, 111.

<sup>5</sup> Keshavrao Dhaiber was a middle caste boy who was under the wings of the town elites until he was 17. However, enumeration of fuzzy publics on one side, and oscillations in the morphology of the caste question on the other, resulted into complicated identity claims. Dhaiber joined Painter's MFC to earn a livelihood, whereas Damle, who came from a money lending family also worked with Baburao 'Seth'. Painter however came from the Mestri caste. There is a dynamism to the social mobility of caste as seen in their biographies. See, Damle Mama and Keshavrao Dhaiber, *Eka Zindagichi Patkatha* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, "Three Planes of Space Examining Regions Theoretically in India," *Economic & Political Weekly* 46, no. 52 (2017): 56-60.

<sup>9</sup> Sudipto Kaviraj, "Three Planes of Space Examining Regions Theoretically in India," 60.

<sup>10</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Jonas states that: "One theme which is central to relational thinking is the idea that the region represents a contingent coming togetherness or assemblage of proximate and distant social, economic and political relationships, the scale and scope of which do not necessarily converge neatly around territories and jurisdictions formally administered or governed by the nation state. At least in this respect, proponents of the relational turn are arguably justified in wanting to distance themselves from bounded, static and historical representations of space and place." Andrew Jonas, "Region and Place: Regionalism in Question," *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 2 (2012): 263-272. I would like to thank the author for sharing this paper, which reflects that the deft association of territorial boundedness and the relational nature of region work in tandem with each other. Thus, the region is in flux and opens out different trajectories in relating to culture beyond the "boundary". Another viewpoint on the "boundary" can be seen in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993)

<sup>12</sup> Athorti's account presented from his regular column (1951-53) in *Basumati Weekly*, translated by Baidurya Chakravarty. Premankur Athorti, "Annals from the days of silent cinema," [indiancinema.ma](https://indiancinema.ma/documents/YP/2), <https://indiancinema.ma/documents/YP/2>.

<sup>13</sup> Premankur Athorti, "Annals from the days of silent cinema," [indiancinema.ma](https://indiancinema.ma), <https://indiancinema.ma/documents/YP/2>.

<sup>14</sup> For Pawangadkar's evidence, see Indian Cinematograph Committee, *Indian Cinematograph Committee: 1927-1928: Evidence 3* (Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, 1928), 862-68.

<sup>15</sup> Wayne Mullen, *Deccan Queen*, (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2001), X- Xxii.

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- <sup>16</sup> Wayne Mullen, *Deccan Queen*
- <sup>17</sup> Valentine Chirol, *Indian Unrest*, (London: Macmillan & Co., 1910), 64-72.
- <sup>18</sup> *Amritmanthan* (Directed by V. Shantaram, 1934).
- <sup>19</sup> *Sant Tukaram* (Directed by Damle-Fattelal, 1936).
- <sup>20</sup> *Kunku* (Directed by V. Shantaram, 1937).
- <sup>21</sup> *Rajput Ramani* (Directed by Dhaiber, 1935).
- <sup>22</sup> *Sinhagad* (Directed by V. Shantaram, 1933).
- <sup>23</sup> See Neepa Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s-1950s* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010) for discourses on gender, stardom and respectability.
- <sup>24</sup> Dhaiber narrates various stories of early lessons of craft of cinema learnt at Painter's MFC. However, he is critical of Painter's moody behaviour and erratic mode of production. The letter was written by Damle, where he repeatedly mentions the mode of 'family business'. But Prabhat also believed in merit of crew and artists. Damle had seen downfall of studios which came up, and after two-three years folded up shop, because the studio was run either by a family who did not have aesthetic or managerial merit. Hence, Damle and Baburao Pendharkar insisted on such a clause in the partnership agreement. Keshavrao Dhaiber, *Eka Zindagichi Patkatha* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1968), 24-44.
- <sup>25</sup> Eric Barnouw and S Krishnaswamy, "Discord of Tongues," *Indian Film: 2* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 59-120;
- <sup>26</sup> Sudipto Kaviraj, "Three Planes of Space Examining Regions Theoretically in India," 60.
- <sup>27</sup> Indian Cinematograph Committee, *Indian Cinematograph Committee: 1927-1928: Evidence* (Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, 1928). While, Irani's Imperial Film Company was one of the most prolific film productions and Madans controlled  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the exhibition system, the Maharashtrian filmmakers' reactions to the skeptical committee were rather different. Phalke opined about the quality of films, infrastructural limits and a possibility of collaboration with the empire film, He mentioned that he was slowly moving towards scientific and industrial films while Painter's representative, Pawangadkar complained about the control princely states exercised over the production system, how Painter managed to avoid censorship and how the MFC depended on cyclical economy of production in which the films would only recover the money in six or eight months after which the next production could be started. See, Indian Cinematograph Committee, *Indian Cinematograph Committee: 1927-1928: Evidence 1* (Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, 1928), 158-191 for Irani's oral evidence; see Indian Cinematograph Committee, *Indian Cinematograph Committee: 1927-1928: Evidence 5* (Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, 1928), 15-18 for Madans oral evidence; see Indian Cinematograph Committee, *Indian Cinematograph Committee: 1927-1928: Evidence 3* (Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, 1928), 862-68 for Pawangadkar; see Indian Cinematograph Committee, *Indian Cinematograph Committee: 1927-1928: Evidence 3* (Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, 1928), 869-883 for Phalke.
- <sup>28</sup> Ritu Birla cites Natalie Zemon Davis to study such models of "economy as cultural activity". See Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Capital and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 10.
- <sup>29</sup> Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Capital and Market Governance in Late Colonial India*, 10-45.
- <sup>30</sup> Commissioner Of Income-Tax, ... vs Durga Khote (1995), <http://indiankanoon.org/doc/490668/>.
- <sup>31</sup> Commissioner Of Income-Tax, ... vs Durga Khote (1995).
- <sup>32</sup> The Cine Industries And ... vs Unknown (1941), <http://indiankanoon.org/doc/191336/>.
- <sup>33</sup> See for instance Majumdar, Neepa. "Gossip, Labor, and Female Stardom in Pre-Independence Indian Cinema: The Case of Shanta Apte." In *Doing Women's Film History Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015, 181-92.
- <sup>34</sup> Shanta Apte. *Jau Mi Cinemat ? (Should I Join Cinema)* (Bombay: B. Govind (Shanta Apte Concerns), 1940)
- <sup>35</sup> *Mera Ladka* (Directed by Kale, 1938).
- <sup>36</sup> *Admi* (Directed by V. Shantaram, 1939).

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- <sup>37</sup> Shanta Hublikar, *Kashala Udyachi Baat*?(Pune: Shrividya Prakashan, 1990), Prologue;114-123.
- <sup>38</sup> *Sant Janabai* (Directed by Govind Ghanekar, 1949).
- <sup>39</sup> Hansa Wadkar, *Sangtye Aika* (Pune: Rajhansa Publication, 1970), 16-24.
- <sup>40</sup> *Sangtya Aika* (Directed by Anant Mane, 1959).
- <sup>41</sup> *Bhumika* (Directed by Shyam Benegal, 1977).
- <sup>42</sup> V Shantaram's narrative emphasizes the interlocking of ambitions of moving towards Bombay's rapid rate of productions, resistances to the same, complex interpersonal relationships, and contractual obligations of partnership agreement. See V. Shantaram, *Shantarama* (Dr. Shantaram Museum, Mumbai: Rajpal and Sons, 1987), 283.
- <sup>43</sup> V. Shanatram, *Shantarama* 1987, 291.
- <sup>44</sup> V. Shantaram, *Shantarama*, 1987, 287.
- <sup>45</sup> For all four narratives see Shantaram Athavale, *Prabhat Kaal* (Pune: Venus, 1965); Keshav Bhole, *Majhe Sangeet ani Digdurshan* (Bombay: Mouj Prakashan, 1994); V. Shantaram, *Shantarama* (Dr. Shantaram Museum, Mumbai: Rajpal and Sons, 1987) and Bapu Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagari* (Pune: A V Damle, 1993).
- <sup>46</sup> V.Shantaram, *Shantarama*, 316.
- <sup>47</sup> Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagari*, 323.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid, 328.
- <sup>49</sup> The meticulous minutes of the meeting shows several conflicts and resolutions which occurred in such studio spaces, along with the conundrums of the contractual method deployed by the studios highlighting its shifting power centers.
- <sup>50</sup> Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagari*, 328
- <sup>51</sup> Athavale, *Prabhat Kaal*, 136.
- <sup>52</sup> Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagari*, 284-286.
- <sup>53</sup> Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagari*, 248.
- <sup>54</sup> Watve, *Ek Hoti Prabhatnagari*, 286.
- <sup>55</sup> Rikhab Dass Jain, *The economic Aspects of the film industry in India* (Delhi: Atma Ram and Sons, 1961), 80.
- <sup>56</sup> On a side note, Birla's narrative marks a new site of the local ways in which ancillary, extra-legal economies moved and most notably so in her fourth chapter on gambling cultures, and in the fifth chapter the gendered domestication of women in transactive economies. See Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Capital and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 143-231.
- <sup>57</sup> Ravi Vasudevan, "Film Studies, New Cultural history and experience of Modernity," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30 (No. 44), 1995: 2809-2814.
- <sup>58</sup> Ritu Birla, *Stages of Capital: Law, Capital and Market Governance in Late Colonial India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 27.