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Breaking the Barriers: Contribution of Jaddanbai and Kanan Devi in Indian Cinema and Music

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Abstract

The present study deals with the inclusion and rise of women in Indian cinema. This qualitative study aims to determine how Jaddan Bai and Kanan Devi occupied their prime position in a society where the position of women was so restricted that practicing art was a nightmare for them. The film is a diverse medium. Contemporary social context is highly involved with the formation of Indian cinema. Valuable information on the first decade of Indian cinema is very limited or not preserved properly so, it is very difficult to get accurate information about the cast and crew, directors, lyricists, and producers involved in this film. The history gained is mostly male-centric. There is almost no history of female film professionals. According to the majority, women did not work in any position in the film industry except junior artists, dancers, extra, and actresses. According to some of the available sources, some majestic female artists have not only performed but also directed, produced, and composed songs for the film. This paper will try to focus on the contribution and lifestyle of two such empowered women of Indian cinema who grew up among the lowest and most oppressed sections of society and proudly held their heads high and fought against the current.

Key Words: Jaddanbai, Kanan Devi, Women Producers, Indian Film, Tawaif, Female entrepreneur.

Introduction:

The story of women's upliftment amidst unbearable social oppression can be found in the history of the Indian film industry. The pearls of various empowered women are scattered throughout the history of Indian cinema. Evidence suggests that in the early decades of cinema (1920-1940) some female film producers, music composers, costume designers, screenwriters, directors, and even art directors appeared and contributed to Indian cinema (Sing, 2018). But due to the structure of patriarchal prejudice, the contribution of all these women has gradually disappeared from the minds of people and history. The lack of sufficient evidence and lack of documentation in the archives has caused these great women

to be lost in oblivion (Mukherjee,2017). It is known from available sources that 2200 talkie films were made in Mumbai between 1931 and 1950 but less than 10% of these films are available in the Indian National Film Archive (Barnouw and Krishnaswamie, 1980).

In the early twentieth century, the Indian silver screen was not a highly respected profession for women artists. This profession was known as such a degraded profession that the legendary film director Dadasaheb Phalke could not find any female actress for his film and started looking for an actress in prostitute areas. Lastly, he was able to cast a male as a women character. Under the pressure of Victorian socialism, the owners of the film industry did not want to take risk of destroying the "morality" of the artists by hiring professional vocalist Tawaif into the company. So in the beginning, along with songs, only men started to become female characters. But when fast-moving companies compete in the market, their focus shifted to attracting more audiences rather than social reform and moral obligation. Gradually females started to think about their acting careers. The first leading women in Indian cinema came from a group of independent-minded women who already had some outside work experience in various filed for society except only household duties. Mainly these women were from Anglo and Parsee backgrounds. Since it was the silent era of film, language was no barrier for them. During this time the powerful female artists of India who were known as Tawaifs or courtesans began to be marginalized by British rulers and Indian Hindu orthodox society along with Christian social reformers (Bhasin, 2019). These classically trained women are forced into prostitution, some went to theatres, and some to the movies and gramophone to earn their living. We can state some examples i.e. Kanan Devi, Jaddan bai, Gauhar Jaan, Fatma Begum, and so on

Jaddan Bai:

Jaddan Bai, daughter of courtesan Daleepa Bai is the brightest star in the history of Indian film. She was a tawaif. Her mother, Daleepa Bai, was a famous tawaif of Allahabad (Chaterjee, 2019). It is known that Tawaif belonging to Allahabad, Lahore, Kolkata, and Lucknow was adept in performing arts, and literature. The Baiji profession was the only maternal occupation. Mothers passed on their acquired knowledge to their daughters. They were ready to be singers and dancers from a young age. They were patronized by the great Kings, Maharaja, and Nawabs (Oldenburg, 1990). During Jaddan's life, the court system began to decline. She was just five when Jaddan's father died, then her family moved to Kolkata. She struggled a lot in her life to become a prominent name.

Unfortunately, very few people are aware of her contribution. She was simultaneously a singer-actress, music composer, and producer of Indian films (Dutta, 2020). With her immense contribution and will, she paved the way for future generations of female artists. According to various film critics, Israt Sultana was the first female music composer of Indian cinema and Jaddan Bai is the second. But Jaddan Bai is the one who produced, acted, and composed music for the same film- *Talash-e-Haq* (1935). Her films have grabbed the attention of movie fans and critics. The level of fame she has achieved in the film world in a short span of 16 years is very rare. Her career as an actress officially started in 1933. Apart from acting in films, she was equally involved in directing and writing. Films like *Talash e*

Haque and *Madam Fashion* have been released one after another with her exclusive screenplay (Dutta, 2020).

She was 40 when she first started acting. It is to be noted in this context, that it was 1932 when the first Talkie *Alam Ara* was released. The beautiful actresses of the silent era were forced to retire from the industry due to poor musical skills and the language barrier. So Jaddan Bai was brought into the film, not for her youth but for her well-trained voice, language skills, and artistry in Indian classical music and dance.

Jaddan Bai was fond of Indian classical music as well as poetry. After getting immense fame in Kolkata, she met a rich Brahmin from Rawalpindi who wanted to go to England to study medicine. They met at a concert and got married despite his parents' opposition. Jaddan had two sons with her ex-partners and a daughter with Mohanchand. The whole responsibility of a family of five had to be taken by Jaddan because her present husband Mohanchand had no particular profession (Chaterjee, 2019). Her ambition was so great that in 1933 she decided to relinquish the secured place and fame of Calcutta. She moved to Mumbai with the idea of becoming a professional film producer, looking for a completely new way of life.

Music Training:

Her early taleem started under her parents Daleepa Bai and Miyan Jan, who was a Sarangi player by profession. Jaddan Bai, approached Shrimant Ganpat Rao Sindhia (Bhaiya Saheb) of Calcutta and became his student. Shrimant Ganpat Rao died in 1920 while she was still a student (Dutta, 2020). So she completed her Hindustani classical music training under Ustad Moizuddin Khan. Ustad Moizuddin Khan, who, to date, is recognized as the best thumri singer in undivided India. She also trained under Barkat Ali Khan. Eventually, she became a more popular courtesan than her mother.

Career and Contribution: Jaddan Bai began recording ghazals with the Columbia Gramophone Company, and All India Radio. She started participating in music jalsas and was invited by the rulers of many princely states such as Indore, Bikaner, Rampur, Jodhpur, Gwalior, Jammu, and Kashmir to perform mehfils (Dutta, 2020). But time does not always go in the same way. Due to British aggression, the courts started to dissolve and the blissful seats of the courtesans began to fade away. Jaddan Bai was very wise and considering the surrounding situation, she decided to choose film as her profession. She was very skilled in Indian classical music the music which has been already discussed. Using that skill and her artistry in dance, and acting she became a shining star in the film world. She began acting when the Play Art Photo Tone Company of Lahore approached her for a role in their movie *Raja Gopichand* in 1933. Later she worked for a Karachi-based film company, in *Insaan ya Shaitan*. She worked in two more movies,*Seva Sadan, Prem Pariksha*.In the meantime, She launched her own movie production house named Sangeet Movietone. It is very rare in Indian socio-cultural history to accept the fact that a woman doing such a big job while standing at that point of time. Eventually, She also introduced her daughter Nargis as a child artist. Who later became a superstar in Indian film. In 1936 Jaddan Bai acted in, directed, and wrote the music for *Madam Fashion*. Jaddan Bai's grandson is Sanjay Dutt is also a star actor

in Indian cinema. Another three films she directed successfully were *Hriday Manthan* (1936), *Moti Ka Haar* (1937), *Jeevan Swapna* (1930).

Kanan Devi:

Just as Jaddan Bai worked relentlessly in Bollywood, an extremely talented woman appeared in the Bengali film industry. She not only worked in Tollywood but Bollywood also. From the mid-1930s to the mid-1980s, she became the First lady (Sing,1992) and the star in the Kolkata cinema world. She teamed up with some of the most famous male stars of her time, such as PC Barua, KL Saigal, Ashok Kumar, and others (Pandya, 2017). She started working as a child actress in the silent movies of the Bengali film world. She is none other than the famous Kanan Devi. However, *Vidyapati* in 1937 established her as the top female star in Kolkata and she never had to look back. As she rose to prominence in her singing career, she was reported to receive a quarterly 25000 tk royalty. She was known and famous as Kananbala in her early life. Kanan Devi, who made her debut in silent films in the twenties, has been the legendary glamour queen of Indian cinema for almost three decades. She came from the lowest section of society. Her father's identity is unknown. However, due to her talent, hard work, and perseverance, Kanan Devi was proudly standing with her head held high among the upper-class society.

There is a lot of disagreement about her birth. One is that she was brought to Posta Baganbari by a wealthy man from Harkata goli of Kolkata. Another view was that his mother was baiji. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that a child does not have a healthy developmental environment. Another story tells that a small jeweler Ratan Chandra Das was the father of Kanan Devi. However, there is controversy over whether there was a social marriage between his parents. However, due to the untimely death of her father, Kanan Devi and her mother became homeless, and a huge debt fell on them (Bhattacharya, 2016). Eventually, the helpless mother and daughter found refuge in a distant relative's house. Unnecessary torture began. As its level was out of control, they were forced to move. They had to move to a slum house at a very low rent. Her mother probably worked as a maid to support the family. Little Kanan Bala never went to school again.

Music training:

To get oxygen in that claustrophobic life she went to Bholada to hear music. Bhola da was a very ordinary middle-aged widower. In the evening, he sat with the harmonium and sang devotional songs (Devi,1974). In this way, a new world has opened for Kanan. Bholada continued to introduce Kanan with kirtan, baul, vatiali, bhajans of Meera and Surdas, Sanskrit mantra, Brahma Sangeet and many songs of Atul Prasad were an integral part of their musical evening. She was influenced by devotional and love poems of Hindustani music, ghazals, and bhajans (Bhattacharya, 2016). But suddenly Bholada passed away. At that time, Kanan went to Ascharyamoyee dasi, a singer with a very amazing voice. Maybe Kanan lived next to the house, the girl's beautiful form and wonderful voice attracted her. She started training. But in the memoirs of Kanan Devi, this woman is mentioned only as 'Baudi'.Kanan Devi was among the early singing stars and her singing style was unique because it usually in a rapid tempo. She got training under Ustad Allah Rakha in Lucknow (Devi 1974). She was then employed

as a singer at Megaphone Gramophone Company, she was taking taleem from Bhishmadev Chatterjee. She learned Rabindra Sangeet from Anadi Dastidar (Bali, 2017), kirtan from Dhirendra Mitra, and Nazrul Geeti from Kazi Nazrul Islam himself. Of all the teachers, Raichand Baral, the father of Indian film music, made a great impression on her career (Naville, 2016). Kanan Devi acted in seven Hindi films though she was a Bengali-born Bengali actress of her time. Hits like *Vidyapati*, *Mukti*, and *Jawani ki Reet* are on this list (Sing, 2018), But she won a greater place in the Indian cinema world for Lagan and Street Singer after collaborating with Kanhiya Lal Saigal, India's best-ever playback singer from the Forties and Fifties.

Career and contribution:

Kanan Devi received an offer to act in a small role in *Joydev*. After Joydev, she acted in only one film of the silent era. In the talkie age, actors had to give sound tests or voice tests. Kananbala also had to appear in a sound test and passed successfully. After passing, Kanan Devi's salary was probably fixed at Rs 80 in Madan theatre (Das, 2021). Kanan Bala's voice was wonderful and suitable for Talkie. There was no shouting, there was no extra bulge of expertise. In 1932 Kananbala left Madan theaters and joined Radha Films. Kananbala's first film for Radha Films was *Sri Gouranga*. After that, under the banner of Radha Films, Kananbala made films like *'Manmayi Girls School'*, and *'Kanthahar'* one after another hit (Sing, 2018). The journey of actress Kananbala in Madan and Radha Films was not smooth. It was very difficult for a fatherless girl who had no primary education to make her place in such a big film industry (Devi, 1973). There was no shortage of opportunists around a helpless young girl seeking a job. She had to endure many insults, ridicule, and neglect, to keep her alive as far as possible and move towards the goal. Kanan Devi was a very intelligent and wise woman. She realized that her only way to survive in this difficult life was through her talent. So she is determined to overcome all socio-economic and personal barriers, and she continues to work hard to rise to the top. In this way, she established herself at the top of mainstream society. There was no resource for her to climb up but she became a brand through her effort. She turned the producer with her production house named Srimati. She collaborated with her husband Haridas Bhattacharya and produced many hits (Sing, 2018). This is a very rare instance for a girl like her in that socio-economic context.

Acting and singing were not just a profession to her. She was an inborn talented artist. Acting and singing were her love and passion. The appreciation she received in the field of performing arts was part of her creative vitality. She pursued her dream so passionately, and that allowed her financial freedom and independence, which is an elusive dream for many other women of her time.

Conclusion:

History reveals that in past, girls' education, participation in the arts, and communication with the outside world were very restricted. Patriarchal society never allowed female family members to come forward. Most of the women remained silent in the corner of the so-called happy household, not allowing all their being to blossom. Despite huge barriers, some

empowered women paved the way for others to come forward. Women like Jaddan bai, Kanan devi reached such a supreme position economically and socially that many male members of the society could not reach.

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