

JEWS IN BOLLYWOOD

By

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Introduction

When Indian cinema began in 1913 it was taboo for Hindu and Islamic women to perform in public, so until Jewish and other “Anglo-Indian” women started acting in Indian films, women’s roles were played by men, much in the style of Shakespeare. However, the Jewish community was more liberal and educated and willing to embrace the exciting new medium of film. The fact that Indian Jews also had a lighter shade of skin, particular the Baghdadi Jews who descended from migrants from across the Middle East, made these women seem all the more suited to the celluloid. Uninhibited by the value based constraints on their Hindu and Islamic peers, these women pushed the boundaries of Indian cinema and took the industry by storm.

This article is based on the presentation and analysis of images of three major female Jewish stars whose careers spanned the three main stages in the develop of the world’s largest cinema industry that we now know as Bollywood: the foremost actress of the Silent Era of the 1920s Sulochana (AKA Ruby Myers), the star of the early sound era of the 1930s and first Miss India Pramila (AKA Esther Abrahams), the archetype vamp from the Golden Era of Indian film in the 1950s and 1060s, Nadira (AKA Farhat Ezikiel).

The Indian Jewish community comprised three groups, the Cochin Jews who have a two thousand year old history in the south of India, the Bene Israel Jews, who share a 2000 year history and traditionally lived on the Konkan coasts near Bombay which they migrated to in large number at the turn of the twentieth century, and Baghdadi Jews who migrated to India from across the Middle East from the 1600s onwards. The Jewish actresses were all Baghdadi Jews and the fact that their skin was a lighter complexion to other Indians made these women seem all the more suited to the celluloid. While Sulochana, Pramila and Nadira all played distinct and different acting roles, what they share in common is that uninhibited by the value based constraints on their Hindu and Islamic peers they pushed the boundaries of Indian cinema. They took the industry by storm and were mega stars, or what we would now know as celebrities, of their day.

Because there was no prohibition on Indian men acting there was no distinct opening for Jewish men on screen, but one Indian Jew, the Bene Israel David Abraham, became a major actor and he is also profiled below.

SULOCHANA (1907-1983)

The Modern Woman



Born in 1907 in Pune, a centre where Baghdadi Jews lived about four hours from Bombay, Ruby Myers, or Sulochana as she was popularly known by her stage name, was the leading actress of the Silent Era, and as such is arguably India's first female acting superstar. The highest paid actor of the 1920s the fact that Sulochana earned more than the governor of Bombay led to a debate in parliament. Her fame was so great that in 1929, to attract a crowd to a short film about Mahatma Gandhi, it was programmed with one of Sulochana's movies.

Sulochana's success and stand out characteristic was her personification of the modern woman. She was sexy, provocative, fashionable, wore western clothes, sported latest hairstyles and wore a lot of make up. While the clothing in this photo is traditional, it reveals all the characteristics that made Sulochana the queen of the screen: her deep stare directly to the camera, the antithesis of the humility expected of Indian women, not to mention her holding a cigarette, an act which, like her plucked eyebrows, epitomized the modern woman her enticing smile identified with Western women; luscious lips lined with lip stick that are distinct despite the black and white photo. The photo also makes clear the lightness of her skin that made her appear all the more attractive on the big screen. Finally, the image also reveals how she got the stage name Sulochana which means "the one with the beautiful eyes". While the stage name had to suit the character, Sulochana like the other Jewish stars took stage names so that they would have names more culturally familiar for the Indian public.

The Leading Lady



This film poster from 1934 clearly conveys Sulochana's status as the leading lady and draw card in Indian cinema. The film, "Piya Pyare" has a classic Indian storyline which the images reflect with scenes from the film: a fantasy adventure setting in a Rajput-style court with family feuds, deception and contrasting conniving and loving characters. Given her beauty Sulochana plays the lovely princess compared to her nasty twin, a role which is indicative of the positive parts she played. In addition to scenes from the film the poster also reveals the two key relationships that were central to Sulochana's career. Firstly there is Dinshaw Billimoria her co-star in this film and in the majority of her films with whom her career was intertwined. Billimoria was the leading male actor of this period, Sulochana's equivalent, and their on-screen romances were legendary and it was due to this that she was popularly known as the queen of romance. Secondly, the poster carries the name of the film's director RS Choudry and Imperial Studios. Much of Sulochana's career and success arose from her close association with Imperial, one of the first and dominant studios of the Indian cinema, with whom leading directors such as Choudry worked. That Sulochana was an intimate part of the Imperial team explains their mutual success.

Multiple Roles and Cross Dressing

“THE WILD CAT”

OF THE strange mysteries characteristic of all great cities, none puzzled the people so much as the sensational murder trial announced in all the newspapers of Bombay.

The Court room was thronged to its utmost capacity for hearing the verdict in respect of the notorious criminal on that memorable day. When proceedings were thus in progress some one threw a note on the Judge's table. The note required the Judge to desist from pronouncing capital sentence on the accused. Nothing, however, deterred the Judge. His stern duty just had to be done.

The next day the papers published startling news that the Judge's child had disappeared. strenuous efforts of the police failed to trace the child's whereabouts.

Ten years rolled by and Mr. Beharilal, the Judge, who had tried the case and lost the child has not been able to come across his daughter again. Beharilal had a son named Pratap, who cherished notions that success can never be attained by fair means alone. With the help of his Guru, who was a staunch believer in truth and the ways of righteousness, he had started importing Japanese fabrics which he passed off as pure swadeshi Khaddar. The Guru, however, was blissfully ignorant of Pratap's duplicity.

Pratap was in love with Indoo, ostensibly under promise to marry her but whom he continued to feed on false promises, and was having affairs with other girls at the same time.

Bombay is ringing with the daring adventures of the "Wild Cat" who had meanwhile sprung up in the den of robbers on the farthest outskirts of the town. Her exploits lay in spend-

See
SULOCHANA as
"WILD CAT"
and U.S.H.A
D. BILLIMORIA
as SURESH



बम्बई की बिल्ली

बम्बई की बिल्ली अदभुत ज्ञान अदभुतों की दे-
हण्डन मीर है; क्यों कि, जिन बन्दानों की पीठी सारी
बम्बई में लुप्त करी थी; उस पीठीका एक समदर
जिस पर कि एक बड़े आदमीके बालकवा लून् करनेका
इकामा था, आज उसका पैसाग होबाला था।

सुन्दरता पूरा हुआ, और ना० न्यायाधीश पैसाग
लुप्तने का रहे थे; इन्हे एक बड़े न्यायाधीशके
देखकर आकर पठा। उस संजमे एक बिड़ी भेटी हुई
थी। इन्ही देहण्डन मीरमें, बम्बर कहेते आकर पठा,
इसका कुछ पता न चला; मगर उस बिड़ाने न्यायाधीशके
पगकी टी गयी थी।

“अबदेर ! मर अदभुतको पानीकी सजा पर-
माई, तो तुम्हारे बालकवा हरा किवा चालण; और
तुम्हारी बम्बई सहीलालन न रहेगी !”

जब नि० बिहारीलालने इस कान्ठी वरामे
परवाह न की; और सजा दे काजी।

दुखे दिन सारी बम्बईमें सज्जती नच गयी;
न्यायाधीश नि० बिहारीलालके बेटी ईलाकी बन्दानास
अपानक उठा के गये।

इस पदमाके कठिन होनेको मरह बम्बई विहाल
काज चीत गया। लेकिन अमीरान बिहारीलालके उनकी
दस प्यारी लकड़ीका पता न मिला।

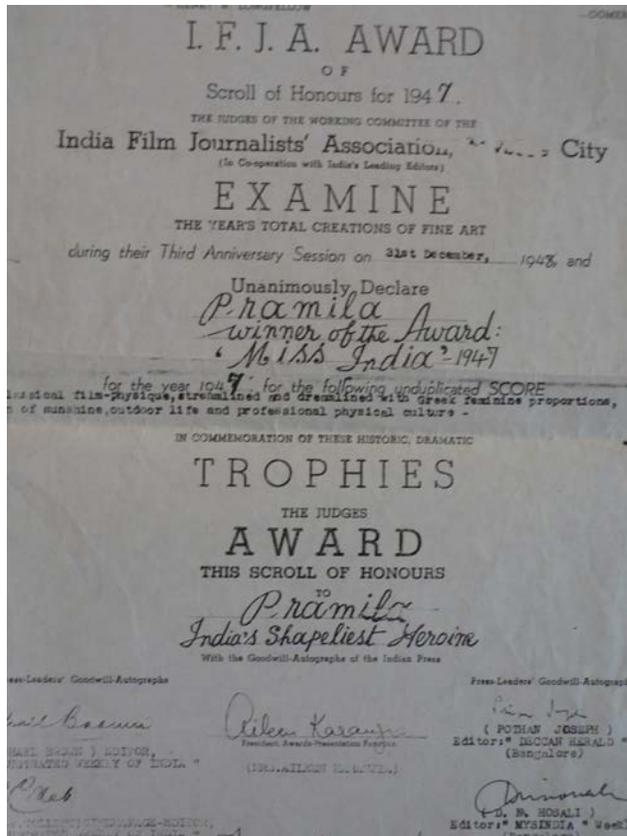
अनुपम शरदने कपूरना
पायभं, अतिरातने
पांडना, अने दीप
अह भदने वास्तुना
पायभं खुबिया,



PRAMILA (1916-2006)

Imagery and Beauty





The arrival of the talkies in the 1930s led to a new generation of stars that included Esther Abraham, who like Sulochana adopted a stage name suitable for an Indian audience, Pramila. Her career reveals the relationship between acting and perceptions of beauty in India. As the above image shows, Pramila was chosen as the first Miss India following Indian independence in 1947, an award in which the film industry journalists played a key role. The color photo above reveals all the characteristics that made Pramila a star and a beauty queen and what this entailed: the natural beauty, the fine features, the make up of mascara, blush, lipstick, the western jewelry, long eye lashes but with the Indian Bindi red dot on the forehead remaining. As with Sulochana, the sexuality and styles embodied in this mage are regarded as western and modern, which were indeed characteristics of the Baghdadadi Jewish community. The emphasis in the award notes "India's shapeliest heroine" and exhibiting such features would not have been something many traditional Indian's would have deemed acceptable.

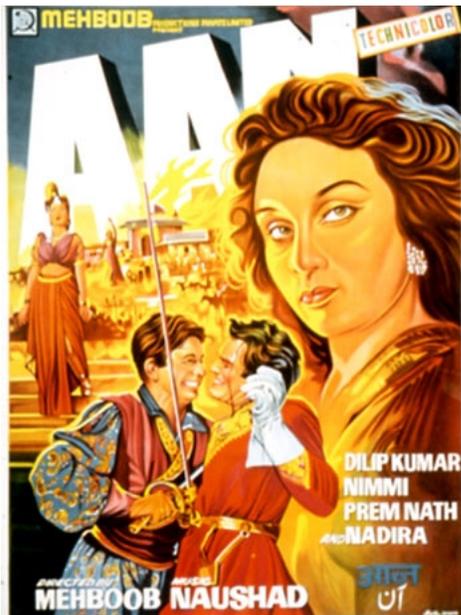
An Action Hero





During the early period of Indian cinema, and particularly prior to Indian independence in 1947, Indian films emulated the adventurous action themed films of Hollywood and it was usually the Anglo-Indian female actresses that played the hero role, once again being very Western in their roles and actions. While Pramila had a long and diverse career in which she also played traditional roles, she had the lead in a number of Hollywoodesque style action films that were popular in the 1930s. This was the case with the 1939 feature BINJIL from which the above images are drawn which indicate the almost super hero roles Pramila played, with a catwoman type outfit and mask. There was nothing these super hero types could not do, from shoot a gun, to fly a plane, and like any good hero in this role Pramila was the master of disguise. These characteristics, and the absence of inhibition in revealing her figure, were once again symptomatic of the modern western woman.

NADIRA (1932-2006)





The period following Indian independence in 1947 was known as the Golden Era, being a golden era for the country and its cinema, and it was also the time when color was introduced to the big screen. Leading producer-director Mehboob Khan was planning his first color Feature 'Aan' or 'Savage Princess'. It was common in Bombay for the Jewish and Islamic communities to live in the same suburbs where their religious cultural traditions had more in common with their respective faiths than they did with the Hindu community. It was in one of these suburbs, Nagpada, that the attractive Baghdadi Jew Florence Ezekiel was spotted by the Muslim Khan. He cast her in the lead role in Aan, as seen in in the above film poster, and Nadira became an overnight star in this 1952 classic opposite the leading male star of the time Dilip Kumar. Aan was a spectacular blockbuster and huge success and Nadira, flooded with offers by producers became one of the most in-demand actress of the 1950s. As the still from the above film scene shows, Nadira played a bold heroine role as an arrogant princess who heads out to seek revenge for her brothers death, while the leading character, a peasant boy played by Dilip Kumar, falls in love with her.

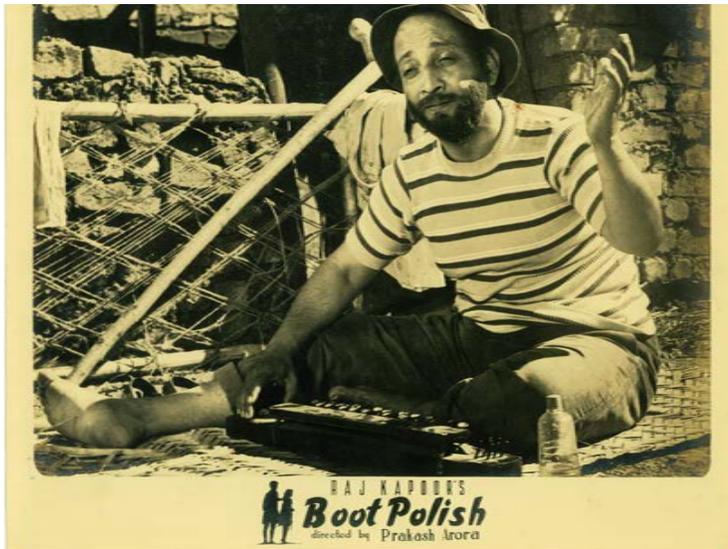


Following her role in Raj Kapoor's 1954 classic "Shree 420" Nadira was typecast as the vamp which is the role she continued to play into the 1960s. The vamp is distinct character in India film, the temptress who tries to drag the hero away from the heroine. While heroines embody the ideal feature Indian features of a humble and respectful woman, the vamps are regarded as loose, a characteristic which the Jewish and Anglo Indian actresses were widely associated with. The film poster reveals the three characters, the heroine at the top, the hero in the middle and the seductress vamp, Nadira, bottom right. In the film, the hero and country boy Raju, played by Kapoor, falls in love with heroine Vidya (Kapoor's common co-star and on and off screen lover Nargis), a poor school teacher who has a paralysed father. Maya, played by Nadira, is the femme fatale who embroils Raju in a decadent life. At Mayu's behest Raju is seen doing all the decadent western things that should be shunned: gambling, playing the trumpet in a club surrounded by dancing girls. Nadira used her sexuality to master the vamp role and is remembered as mastering this role in Indian cinema.



Here we see an image of Nadir praying at home. The image reflects the synthesis of Indian Jewish experience. Nadira is in prayer, posed like a Hindu, with the Bindi red dot on her forehead and in traditional Indian attire. Indeed the Hindu Ganesha god is placed on the table but above it is the Star of David and Chanukah candelabra. This image reflects the comfortable coexistence between the Jewish and Hindu cultures and religions that exist for the Jewish community in India and was part of the lived experience of the Jewish film stars such as Nadira.

David Abraham (1908-1982)





David Abraham was a member of Mumbai's Bene Israel community and was strongly associated with friendly uncle roles. Being called uncle in India is a term of respect for older men, for example the founder of modern India, first Prime Minister Nehru, is affectionately referred to as an "uncle". David had this status in Indian film, following his performance in Raj Kapoor's 1954 classic 'Boot Polish' which Time magazine reviewed as a "miniature masterpiece" which won many awards including for David as Best Supporting. Kapoor was a politically left leaning producer and David was also active in left leaning theatrical groups, and this film that has been compared to 'Slumdog Millionaire', offers a sympathetic perspective about street kids reflected in the screen shots provided above.

In *Boot Polish* the boy and girl Bhola and Belu are forced to become beggars in Bombay by their wicked aunt Kamala Chachi, but they are shown the straight and narrow path by the one legged bootlegger, Uncle John (David), who encourages them to take up the honest trade of polishing shoes. Uncle John's care for the kids, empathy, pain and his own pauperism come through in the stills of the above film shots, as does his role almost as a prophetic type leader of the children. This warm caring role, together with other character roles, became the trademark of David's career spanning over 100 films. As a Bene Israel Jew he did not have the lighter colored skin of Baghdadi Jews, and he never played the handsome hero or indeed villain. *Boot Polish* established a realist precedent in Indian film that was later seen in films such as 'Salaam Bombay' (1988) which replaced sentimental optimism with a clear portrayal of a miserable reality. This was seen in the squalor conveyed in the scenes of David and the children, and is an outcome that the politically conscious David and Kapoor would have been conscious and proud of.