

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Contest 2022: Winner of the Certificate of Merit

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Revisiting Franz Osten's *Acchut Kanya*:
Bombay Talkies' Debut Social Endeavour



Himanshu Rai's *Bombay Talkies* was deemed the pioneer of bold narratives, and though India still had V. Shantaram, his aesthetics were more inclined towards the spiritual, or rather literarily derivative. Gujarati Cinema had some stalwarts like Chaturbhuj Doshi and Nanubhai Vakil, but their interest was towards family socials and mythological, in the same vein as Southern Cinemas. I deem *Bombay Talkies* as an unconventional point of inception for a multitude of complex and extraordinary thoughts, which were not just 'fresh' or 'unorthodox' but rather the need of contemporary Indian society. Its cinema concocted separate, independent traditions of its own, which were further reflected in many of their cinematic work, including *Jeevan Naiya* and *Jeevan Prabhat*, before influencing an upcoming wave of directors like Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, and Kamal Amrohi.

What differentiated *Bombay Talkies* from other mainstream studios was its attempt to uphold cinema as a projection of reality, of subtle Indianness. The *Film Federation of India* published an anthology of opinions on cinema and its traditions in 1956 at the

prospect of the 25th anniversary of the Indian Talkies (*Alam Ara* being released in 1931) and featured an article by Devika Rani where she succinctly wrote about cinema's social onus. I'm tempted to directly quote her because it quintessentially suggests the vision of *Bombay Talkies* — though the studio went down long before this anthology's publication, Rani's argument still reverberates with the studio's apparent working ethics and artistic promises:

... our industry is more than a mere commercial enterprise. It is the answer to an essential social need of our people to be entertained and stimulated to new creative endeavours . . . films, using concrete imagery, [broaden people's] vision into vistas of a fuller and more prosperous life . . .

We are of [the people], they have given us life on which we sustain ourselves. In exchange, let our work be a dedication to them, the people of our land, so that together we can lead our country on the path of progress towards an ideal state in which not only the physical and economic, but also the social, artistic and cultural necessities will be amply provided to every man, woman and child (p. 30).

These empowered opinions, unsurprisingly, gifted the public with terminals of departure: from fantasy and escapism to renouncement and sacrifice, from cultural asphyxiation to liberalisation and canonisation. It enabled the reconstruction of a nobler Indian identity. So *Bombay Talkies* had characters embodying altruism and asceticism (Dr Ajoy Ghosh in *Janmabhoomi*), Para-Shakti (the eponymous *Savitri*), and self-sacrifice and selflessness (Kasturi in *Acchut Kanya*). Indeed, contemporary audiences may perceive these characters as more significant-than-life, but it's more important to situate them within their sociocultural and political context(s) of existing during pre-independent times that were characterised by colonial resistance, Gandhian values of *swaraj* and *ekta*, and utopian dreams. Characters like these capitalised on these agendas to initiate social emancipation; therefore, when we watch *Acchut Kanya*, Kasturi's martyrdom is no tragedy but a blazing symptom of the reconfiguring values of colonial India. The problem(s) of untouchability remains unanswered, but Franz Osten gracefully manages to demystify the caste issue and deterritorialises the *acchut* to achieve basic human heights. Great art doesn't always offer solutions, so we may excuse *Acchut Kanya* for not providing solutions/answers but simply applaud it for being organic enough to tap into the sensitivities of its subject.

Simultaneously, Osten explores subtler, more nuanced themes of jealousy and *panchayat* (gossip) via the route of established social backdrops by introducing the conflict between Mohan and Babulal 'Baidya', the two Brahmins respectively epitomising 'the stupendous promises of tomorrow' and 'the bleak stagnancy of the present. Their episodes accelerate the narrative but do not support the ascending thoughts on the subject, i.e., untouchability. Unfortunately, their intermediary conflicts fit more for the romantic sagas and not for social dramas like *Acchut Kanya*. This further allows us to deconstruct Mohan's progressive opinions about the caste system, which somewhat bears problematic roots. Osten establishes, from the beginning, that Dukhia — an untouchable — once saved Mohan's life and since then became the closest of confidantes. The film never hints at any other previous interactions of Mohan with the untouchable community. So I'm not entirely convinced, speculatively speaking, about Mohan's noble opinions had Dukhia never saved his life or the snakebite never occurred. These are debatable arguments, but *Acchut Kanya* never reveals another source of Mohan's sympathy for untouchables, so it's reasonable to speculate. Undoubtedly, nonetheless, Mohan serves as a great backbone. It's empowering to witness how he defends Dukhia and fights for the latter's fundamental rights that have been deprived of him — and the community he represents — for almost centuries. Apparently, Mohan is the only headstrong character in the film; yes, Kasturi, too, but she's more a product of a conditioned personality, who has been taught to believe that 'her life is to serve others, the larger humanity. No wonder Kasturi happily sacrifices herself to save others, attaining the status of a martyr in the village, yet the causes of her martyrdom remain unused. The girl becomes a goddess, unaffected the social background of untouchables, and so Mohan, consequentially, becomes the mouthpiece of the director/writer. *Acchut Kanya*, thereby, uses Kasturi for romantic melodrama.

The film pillars the central theme of untouchability by the conventional romantic plot; however, it doctors and overshadows the socialist

message and ends up being treated like an everyday love–story. Osten deploys the monumental classical music by Saraswati Devi to exclusively serve the romantic interests of the narrative, much to the ignored costs of exploring the central theme via the quintessence of music. Eight out of eight songs closely deal with romantic longing, heartbreaks, bucolic poetry, and hopelessness; indeed, the music is refreshing and identifies with the narrative (a characteristic often found in Early Popular Bombay Cinema), but its failure to unpack the central theme feels saddening. It would have been constructive to include a socialist ode, considering the demands of the genre. Nonetheless, I feel good about the music in general. One song that typically stands out is Saraswati Devi's 'Kith Gaye Ho Khewanhaar'. The lyrics are heart–wrenching, and with Devi's impeccably breaking voice, the song achieves a haunting element . . . staying with the film across. The overarching figure of the old woman — who is singing the song and coincidentally commenting on the sad, romantic situation(s) between Kasturi and Pratap — remodifies into a trope, as this tradition of introducing 'the coincidental over–watcher' later becomes a signature feature of several directors including Guru Dutt and V. Shantaram. The function of this coincidental figure was of a commentative nature. Most comments were made either on the upcoming romantic plot ('Boojh Mera Kya Naam Re' in Raj Khosla's *C.I.D.*) or any established romance ('Ab Toh Ji Hone Laga' in Guru Dutt's *Mr. & Mrs.* '55), though exceptional cases had these figures redesigned as prophesising emissaries ('Saqiya Aaj Mujhe Neend Nahi Aayegi' in G. Dutt and Abrar Alvi's *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam*) or outraged voices ('Saaiyan Jhooton ka Bada Sartaj Nikla' in V. Shantaram's *Do Aankhen, Barah Haath*). Osten manages to significantly use this figure to serve dual

purposes: (1) to comment on the ongoing romantic turbulence and (2) to insinuate the audiences' virtual participation in this travesty. The figure, again,— transforms into a symbolic microphone for audiences to communicate to Kasturi their mutual identification with her plight. Strangely, the old woman's diegetic voice is audible only to Kasturi and could be a more significant social representation of women's trauma and woes.

Conclusively, we realise that *Acchut Kanya* may be construed as problematic in approach and genre. Still, Osten successfully precludes them from trivialising his subject and strictly encourages more open, urgent conversations about untouchability and other social conundrums. I consider this particular stream of thought as the film's anchor; it becomes the intrinsic reason why *Acchut Kanya* is deemed a classic even today. Thoughts always matter, and, therefore, despite the screenplay's few shortcomings, I was motivated to revisit one of *Bombay Talkies'* most iconoclastic, memorable, and brave projects. We live in troubled times, and during a point where sociocultural problems like casteism and inter–state disparity still linger across, it's crucial to remind ourselves about the perpetual nature of these issues since when people have been talking about these and since when activism had become a key defining aspect of the film language of Bombay/Hindustani socials. The world of literature and film often proffers empowering texts — and so we've had Bama's *Karakku*, Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, or Nicholas Kharkongor's *Axone*, amongst a plethora of others — and *Acchut Kanya* was one such early popular archetype. The film was a reflection of *Bombay Talkies'* vision of social progression and its curiosity for cinematic experimentation(s) and deconstruction. A precursor in several ways, indeed.