

Tribute

Amrit Gangar

A Golden Jubilee (1973-2023) of Two Hand-Shakes
V.K. Dharamsey: A Tribute to A Scholar-Activist



Perhaps it was an irony of fate! Of the two hand-shakes, the first, fifty years ago at the Maharashtra Seva Sangh Hall in the far-off suburb of Mulund on Mumbai's Central Railways, the venue for Screen Unit's inaugural film, Andrzej Wajda's 1957 film *Kanal*. Manilal Gala had the courage to launch Screen Unit in the suburb of Mulund and I was privileged to be part of it right from day one. Soon, Gala was to join Ketan Mehta on the production of *Bhavni Bhavai* and the mantle of running Screen Unit fell on my shoulders. Gala introduced me to the tall, lean man with books in his cotton *jhola* on his shoulder. The warm handshake had sparkled with his gaze.

Fifty years later ...

An ICU in a Navi Mumbai (New Bombay) hospital. Fortunately, I am permitted to see him alone for a minute or two. He is bed-ridden, places his finger on the oxygen mask on his nose, gesturing with an apology that he was not able to speak. But lifts his feeble hand to shake hands with me. It is the beginning of April 2023. For me the Intensive Care Unit turns into an

Intensive Memory Unit. Hordes of memories gather around, looking at the invisible tiny lump of Time enlarging itself, the nurse signals me to leave the patient alone. Was that handshake the proverbial ‘diya effect’? Was the lamp’s flame spreading unusual bliss before blowing off? Was it a negative energy?

Two days later, on 6th April morning, Dharamsey’s son Tatsu messaged me, “Papa is no more.” Our common friend and a medical doctor had advised Tatsu to avoid any surgery on the eighty-eight-year-old frail body with fragile lungs. Dharamsey passed away peacefully. In silence. He wished his book on Silent Cinema was out before he bid final adieu to the world, but alas! it was not to be. He would always tell me over the phone, “If it happens, well and good, if it doesn’t no regrets.” Dharamsey, the polymath, had no time for regrets, he kept on working and sharing till the end of his life.



Scientist and Secretary, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research film society, Ramachandran conducting a discussion session with the Swiss filmmaker Yves Yelsin (with a cigarette) and Fredi M. Murer (looking up) at Tarabai Hall, near Marine Lines railway station, Mumbai, c. 1980s. Dharamsey at the extreme left next to Ramachandran.

Well, with V.K. Dharamsey has gone the intellectually igniting aura that India's film society movement had acquired among its governing administrators. It was rare amidst the largely anti-intellectual careerist or vested-interest lot; I had personally observed.

Just on the following day of his passing away, the *Hindustan Times* published my obituary recalling his versatile contribution to scholarship beyond cinema. Though untutored himself, he guided many a Ph.D. students and researchers.

Dharamsey's book (in Gujarati and English) on India's first archaeologist Bhagwanlal Indraji (1839-1888) is seminal. It prompted the eminent Sri Lankan archaeologist and scholar Senake Bandaranayake to write in the preface: "It is an encyclopaedic survey of the work of Bhagwanlal Indraji and a landmark contribution to the history of the development of archaeology as a modern discipline."

Dharamsey, the tall, lean man walked long miles, he travelled in trains, longer miles, and walked through the relics and ruins. It was the same hand that shook with mine, had held the Harappan relics during his work at the archaeological site at Rojdi near Rajkot in Gujarat. He assisted an American team of eminent archaeologists from Pennsylvania University that visited the site every year. Dharamsey brought in the archaeological perception of precision, openness and scientific temper to his research of the silent film, keeping sentimentalism away from scholarship. In 1982, the Gujarati cinema was celebrating its Golden Jubilee (1932-1982) and Screen Unit had published a book (in Gujarati, 'Gujarati Chalachitra: 1982 naa Aare', Eds. Manilal Gala, Amrit Gangar) with critical and research-based articles. Dharamsey's contribution to it was generous and substantial. I was privileged to research with him and write a joint article that, for the first time, wrote about Dawarkadas Sampat (1884-1958), the founder of Kohinoor Film Company, India's largest, Hollywood-modelled assembly-line film production studio in the 1920s.

Sampat was called Carl Laemmle of India. Laemmle (1867-1939), a German-American film producer once owned the Universal Pictures. Sampat was the Father of Indian Film Industry, we argued, with evidences and examples. For the first time, Dharamsey and I had talked about India's first Dalit film director Kanjibhai Rathod working under Sampat at Kohinoor, whose film *Bhakt Vidur* (1921) was politically banned in various parts of India by the British, in the 1920s. Donning Gandhi cap, Sampat himself had essayed the role of Vidur in this film, which, in fact, was a camouflaged story against the British colonialism. The British authorities had smelled it. Dharamsey continued his study of Indian silent cinema and wrote the most reliable Filmography in the book *Light of Asia: Indian Silent Cinema 1912-1934*, first published by La Giornate del Cinema Muto and National Film Archive of India in 1994. It was jointly edited by Suresh Chabria and Paolo Cherchi Usai. Its revised edition came out in 2014, now, based on the newer evidences (all secondary sources very meticulously examined) Dharamsey



updated his previous Filmography of India's silent films. Any discerning reader can perceive his archaeological methodology. I was a very close witness to this when we did the big book *Indian Cinema: A Visual Voyage* (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1998) together and the way he identified many stills of Indian silent films hitherto remaining completely unidentified. This is an unforgettable contribution to the younger film scholars and researchers.

I was indeed privileged to have worked with Dharamsey on several publications on behalf of the Federation of Film Societies of India (FFSI), Western Region and the respective film societies we headed, he was the General Secretary of Amateur Film Society and I, of, Screen Unit. To my mind, one of the most significant publications was the special

number of IFSON (Indian Film Societies News), published on the occasion of the FFSI celebrating its Silver Jubilee (25 years). For this number, we had interviewed some veterans such as Kumar Shahani, NVK Murthy, Georg Lechner (who was the Director of Mumbai's Goethe Institut / Max Mueller Bhavan), G. Aravindan, Malati Tambay-Vaidya (then Managing Director of the National Film Development Corporation), Basu Chatterji, Bikram Singh, P.K. Nair and others. Iqbal Masood, Khalid Mohamed, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Vidyadhar Date, VP. Sathe and several other scholars wrote insightful articles for this number. I personally think, for any scholar researching on India's film society movement, reading this number will provide some useful insights. [Pic. Above: Cover page of IFSON conceived and edited by V.K. Dharamsey and Amrit Gangar; published by Opendar, Regional Secretary, FFSI-Western Region]

Dharamsey knew Satyajit Ray quite well. He would give him some rare journals of Illustrations and Designs. In 1980, on behalf of Screen Unit and Amateur Cine Society, Dharamsey and I organized (the word curator was not much in vogue then as far as cinema was concerned) a select retrospective of Ray's early films including the *Apu Trilogy*, *Teen Kanya* and *Rabindranath Tagore*. More than the screenings of films, the publication that we brought out was unique, it is considered to be a landmark contribution today as it was

cyclostyled on cheap foolscap paper, but with rich contents, running into approximately 100 pages (which could easily turn out to be a handsome 200-page book). It was completely typed out by me on stencil papers. The loud takā-tak of my rickety typewriter still ring in my ears. And I still think I could do whatever I could because of my wife and children who suffered all the inconveniences I caused them. Nevertheless, what a joy it was working, all gratis, for as they say, labour of love and sharing with the young minds of Screen Unit, average age of its membership was barely twenty-two! Incidentally and more importantly –



Dharamsey with Satyajit Ray, c. 1960s in Calcutta / Kolkata

We came to know that Satyajit Ray was in Mumbai as he was re-recording one of his films with his favourite sound-wizard Mangesh Desai at the Rajkamal Kalamandir. We found out which hotel he was staying at. One evening Dharamsey and I were at the Hotel Shalimar, Kemp's Corner. Dharamsey knocked at the door and a tall man in milk-white kurta pajama opened the door inviting Dharamsey and I in his baritone. He was Satyajit Ray himself. He immediately recognized Dharamsey. Very gracefully, he offered us tea and enquired about the state of film society movement in Mumbai and Maharashtra. Sitting down, he, attentively, read through our mimeographed foolscap-sized book on him and his work. He congratulated us profusely, saying this is how film societies should work and dedicate themselves to – to the intellectual integrity, rigour and depth even without resources. Immediately, he pulled out the

hotel's letter-head and wrote down a message in his calligraphic hands, while apologizing for his inability to inaugurate the event as he was to leave for Calcutta / Kolkata the next morning.

Besides including an exhaustive bibliography (compiled by Dharamsey) of books, articles and reviews of Ray's films and interviews with him, this unique mimeographed publication carried some fascinating anecdotes. Let me pick up one for my readers and in fond memory of V.K. Dharamsey (he was generally addressed as Virchandbhai by his Gujarati friends):

'PATHER PANCHALI' IN SAUL BELLOW'S 'HERZOG': In the Nobel Prize-winner Saul Bellow's novel *Herzog*, the character (Herzog), who has an obsession for writing letters to various people world over, writes a letter to Vinoba Bhave of India. He writes:

“Recently, I saw PATHER PANCHALI. I assume you know it, since the subject is rural India. The things affected me greatly – the old crone scooping the mush with her fingers and later going into the weeds to die; and the death of the young girl in the rains.’ Herzog, almost alone in the Fifth Avenue Playhouse, cried with the child’s mother when the hysterical death music started. It was raining also in New York as in rural India. His heart was aching. He too had a daughter, and his mother too had been a poor woman. He had slept on sheets made of flour sacks. The best type for the purpose was creosote.”

Manik da read this anecdote. Congratulating us, he laughed out loud. Those sounds are etched in my memory-scape indelibly and enduringly. Dharamsey cannot die. The two handshakes will always remain warm, a brilliant golden jubilee moving between them...

Astu...

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