The Mother of Mother India: Review on Way of Life

‘Directed and produced by a woman and that woman the author of the story and script, the writer of the music and songs, as well as the singer, and to crown it all, the star of the picture, Madame Fashion, at the Imperial Talkies, Lamington Road, has an irresistible claim upon the attention and sympathy of Bombay’s film fans… India’s only woman director and producer, and one of the country’s famous songstresses..’ (Times of India; 1 May 1936)

Who could have imagined that India's first leading ladies of the nation's film industry was a tawaif!

Born to a renowned courtesan mother Daleepa Bai, such was Jaddan Bai's claim to fame that by the time she passed away in 1949, she had established her stardom as one of the feisty leading personalities in the rapidly expanding Bombay film industry. Imperious in her mannerism, Jaddan Bai had a mastery over the very lyrical Urdu-Hindi language owing to her ganga jamuni upbringing. Leading producers & directors paid heed to Jaddan's advice, conflict resolution was her forte, generous to fault, this spirited lady had a string of admirers. But her story began way back in the politically bustling town of Allahabad around the year 1892.

Destiny has a strange way of working. Legend has it that her mother Daleepa Bai who used to be known as Dilipa Devi was a brahmin child widow who was abducted by a wandering group of muslims who trained and managed tawaifs. A parallel story that does the rounds is that Dilipa was a child-widow in a Brahmin household around the area of east Uttar Pradesh (United Provinces in late-19th century). Cursed to lead a miserable life of a widow in an era where the practice of ‘Sati’ was still prevalent, she decided to marry a wandering Muslim musician, Miya Jaan. As per the abduction narrative, she was thoroughly and proficiently trained in the high arts requiring one to become a consummate courtesan. Soon Daleepa's singing and dancing dexterity gained her much populace after which her managers got her married into the community to the troupe's sarangi player Miya Jaan. Either way, it is evident that fate ‘tricked’ her into leading a life of a renowned courtesan than being half dead as a widow.

Jaddan Bai's destiny too was pulsating fast, dying to burst into the world and make a mark for herself. It so happened that Vazir Jaan had invited Daleepa Bai and her husband to reside with her in a part of a haveli in Allahabad where in the other extension resided the scion of Nehru family, Pandit Motilal Nehru. Thus began a twisted tale of fates intertwining the first political family of India with the soon to be first cinematic family of the nation. Daleepa's affair with Pt. Motilal Nehru although alleged, is still whispered in hushed tones through corridors of power and glamour. Through this putative union were born Jaddan Bai and her brother Manzar Ali (later Manzar Ali Sokhta) in one part of the mansion while Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru and her sister Vijayalakshmi Pandit were born to Motilal's wife Swaroop Rani in the other half.

Senior Nehru, although never directly involved in Daleepa's offspring's upbringing due to his political prominence in the country's pre-independence movement era, financially supported her clan. In the years to come it is also rumored that Jaddan Bai used to tie rakhi (an Indian custom involving tying a ‘thread of protection’ between brothers and sisters) to Jawaharlal Nehru and Manzar Ali who later became a labour leader went on to publicly claim that he was Nehru's half

brother.

However, Jaddan away from this political drama was groomed from an early age into the sophisticated tawaif culture which was still very much a matrilineal profession with mothers passing on the skills of the trade to their daughters, training them in the arts of music, dance, and poetry. Daleepa was unknowingly training her daughter who would soon tread into a male dominated industry, leading by example how to be a woman singer, actress, producer, director, screenwriter, and a composer with the trademark of being a proficient tawaif firmly entrenched into her identity. She would in her later career be made to realize the ambiguity of her notorious courtesan background.

The celebrated Urdu writer Sa'adat Hasan Manto has narrated an incident wherein a 'respectable' female relative, speaking to Jaddan Bai herself, unknowingly rues the entire courtesan class. 'Apa Saadat was in her element: "God protect us from these women. Whosoever falls into their clutches is lost both to this world and the next. You can say goodbye to your money, your health and your good name if you get ensnared by these creatures. The biggest curse in the world, if you ask me, is these courtesans and prostitutes." My wife and I were severely embarrassed and did not know how to stop Apa Saadat.' Jaddan Bai apparently heard out this harangue with equanimity and then disclosed her identity to the mortified woman. This incident took place almost a decade after Jaddan Bai wrote her first movie script, but attitudes towards traditional female performers had remained unchanged

Although a child of destiny, Jaddan had to struggle in her initial days to find her feet as a tawaif. Miya Jaan's passing away when she was five, and her mother's intermittent travel from Punjab Provinces, back to Allahabad lead to young Jaddan's amateurish formal training in the craft of vocal rendition. Now one must not forget that in the late 19th century, courtesans also known as Bai Jis, were the only few sources of entertainment for the elite. A deft courtesan had to allure her patrons and the entire mehfil through her thunder like sonorous voice, cutting across every heart and capturing souls of the seekers.

To gain formal training in classical Hindustani music or what was known as pukka gana, Jaddan Bai reached out to Shrimant Ganpat Rao popularly known as Bhaiya Saheb Scindia of Calcutta. After his passing away she advanced her musical training under Ustad Moinuddin Khan who is renowned as one of the best thumri artistes till date. Ustad Chaddu Khan Saheb, Ustad Laab Khan Saheb, and Ustad Barkat Ali Khan (younger brother of Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan) further polished this young enchantress in the performing arts in which the then tawaifs of Allahabad, Lucknow, Calcutta, and Lahore were expertly adept. Isn't it ironical that a girl who initially could not strike root due to her inexperience in music, later on became the first ever woman music director of our country!

Belonging to the tawaif culture akin to that of Geishas of Japan, Jaddan was groomed into being a sophisticated courtesan who catered to the nobility of the Indian subcontinent. The tradition particularly had risen during the Mughal era. Tawaifs were masters and contributed to music, dance, theatre, and the Urdu literary tradition, and were considered authorities on etiquette. By and far tawaifs were majorly a North Indian tradition pivotal to the Mughal, late Nawab court culture from the 16th century till late 19th century.

One cannot overlook the kind of power, all social, political and even financial, the tawaifs held within their zardosi draperies. An easy example could be the fact that it were only these

courtesans of ‘low’ socio-cultural background who owned properties and even paid taxes in an age where women of ‘high’ birth could not even come out of the purdah tradition they were held in. Having said that, one does not wash away hands with the fact that though powerful, these women were also at times sexually exploited by patrons, mentors, or relatives but then tawaifs had a sense of blinding sexual liberty which was unheard of in those times.

Jaddan herself, although involved with various men in her lifetime (as per records three), only married once. Her eldest child, Akhtar Husain, was a son from her liaison with a Hindu man Narottamdas Khatri also known as Bachhi Babu. Her second ‘marriage’ with the harmonium master Ustaad Irshad Meer Khan also resulted in a divorce after he sired Anwar Husain. Now Uttamchand Mohan, from a well to do family in Rawalpindi was the third (and perhaps the last) man in her life. He had intentions to study medicine and become a doctor, for which he was to go to England. But after having encountered Jaddan and absolutely entranced by her beauty and character he fell in love with Jaddanbai and proposed marriage.

It was never a piece of cake for him to marry the woman of her dreams. Mohan Babu's family became emphatically distressed with him and threatened to break all ties if he went ahead marrying this four years older than him, already a mother of two, lady whose profession lead men into scandalous alleys. Nonetheless, he braved the consequences of going against his family to tie the knot with Jaddan Bai.

Almost like a movie’s plot, Mohan’s hurdles were not done yet. Jaddan Bai was ready but only if he embraced Islam. Converted by none other than Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Mohan became Abdul Rashid and the nikah took place. Although now an Islam convert, Mohan Babu gave a hindu name to her bride: Jayadevi. Both husband and wife fluctuated beautifully between the two religions and even brought their children up in a mixed religious and cultural background.

From this union on June 1, 1929 was born Fatima Abdul Rashid who later went on to become the superstar actress of the Hindi film industry Nargis. Even she had two names at the time of her birth, her Hindu one being Tejeshwari Mohan.

Now Jaddan was a loving and kind mother. But at the end of the day she was a tawaif too. Thus, once Nargis gained her adolescence, Jaddan not only tricked her into (most unwillingly as she was taken out of St. Mary’s, an elite girls’ school in Bombay) starring in a film for her friend Mehboob Khan but also allegedly put her daughter’s nath (virginity) on the market and allowed a wealthy Muslim prince to pay handsomely for her. This alleged act of initiating her daughter into the profession was apparently treated as Nargis’ first affair.

However cruel it may seem to the twenty first century sensibilities, the act was just a matter of fact, a tradition on which the courtesan culture stood firmly. Also, this alleged rumor does not take away from Jaddan Bai her strength of character as it may be of interest to note the demand that the respectable and wealthy medical student convert for the sake of the [already married] courtesan, a demand that Nargis, at the height of her career, was unable or unwilling to make of Raj Kapoor or Sunil Dutt with whom she was involved and later married to.

Jaddan was also in fact the primary and sole breadwinner for a family of five since though Mohan babu was devoted to his wife but as he was not equipped for any specialized profession and remained dependent on her for financial support.

Jaddan Bai was extremely capable and resourceful in her music but she could not take to her mother's profession in the end, owing to her late commencement of her training, and for a much more socio-economic reason —the courtly system of patronage went through a steep decline in her lifetime and a discerning few gaanewalis (professional singers) turned their attention to new avenues of sustenance like the gramophone and radio. Jaddan did one better and chose the cinema.

Jaddanbai's entrée into producing, acting, singing and composing music for films retrospectively came at a historically significant time. This was when the industry was beginning to earn some respect and women from respectable families, such as Shobhana Samarth and Durga Khote, had begun to act in films even as the tawaifs and marginalized women such as Anglo-Indian ladies in Calcutta were on their way out with the advent of the talkie. Jaddanbai, therefore, stands like a bridge between the two waves of history that changed the trend of Indian cinema forever.*

A film producer based in Lahore, Hakim Ramprasad was much enticed by Jaddan and offered her a role in an imminent film. Jaddan Bai became a part of Playart Phototone around the year 1932 and acted in her first film in 1933's Raja Gopichand. At the age of 40, Jaddan Bai began her career as a film actress. Although old to be starting a screen career, the coming of sound to India in 1932 meant that many of the actresses of the silent era could no longer perform due to their lack of Hindi-Urdu and poor singing voices and there was no concept of playback singing those days! One must rememeber that this was the era when cinema was barely beginning. The subcontinent just a year ago had its first 'all singing all talking' full length feature film Alam Ara released in 1931. Thus hired not for her youth but for her voice, diction, and enunciation, she was cast in her debut film as the mother of the title character, Raja Gopichand.As a multi-lingual trained singer, Jaddan Bai was exactly what the industry was looking for in an actress at the time. After her debut she worked in Insaan Ya Shaitan, Prem Pariksha, and Seva Sadan.

It is a measure of Jaddan Bai's ambition and courage that in 1933 she decided to give up established fame and riches in Calcutta and relocated to Bombay with the radical plan of becoming a film producer. An apartment on posh Marine Drive was rented and old patrons were contacted who had taken a liking to Jaddan in her earlier performing days to fund her new projects. Jaddan Bai launched her own film production company, Sangeet Movietone, in 1934. The company's first feature film Talash-e-Haq/Search for Truth was produced in the year 1935. Jaddan also then went ahead and changed her daughter's name from Fatima to Baby Rani when she was only six and introduced her in films as a child artiste with Madam Fashion directed by her in 1936.

Basically an actress and a singer, Jaddan Bai directed Talash-e-Haq (1935), Hridaya Manthan (1936), Madam Fashion (1936), Jeewan Swapna (1937) and Motiyon Ka Haar (1937). She deserved greater recognition than the history of Indian cinema has given her. She was a woman of talent, of wise business sense, of entrepreneurship and, as a wife and mother, led a contented life with her third husband and three children and made a name for herself in an industry that was absolutely inhospitable to women. Such was the life of this courtesan.