

Studies in South Asian Film & Media
Volume 11 Number 2

© 2020 Intellect Ltd Translation. English language. https://doi.org/10.1386/safm_00032_1

Received 26 July 2020; Accepted 12 September 2020

TRANSLATION

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Shanta Apte's *Jau Mi Cinemat?*

ABSTRACT

Jau Mi Cinemat? written by Shanta Apte (1916–64), a prominent singer–actress with a career spanning nearly three decades in the Marathi film industry, has only recently come to the critical attention of film scholars. A translation of the book will be a valued addition to the archive of film and gender studies. With a view to making a beginning in that direction, this piece contextualizes the book followed by a translation of two of its chapters.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Jau Mi Cinemat is out of print. The few copies available in libraries are not in a very good shape, but a pdf copy is now available. To say I was surprised when I first came across the book, would be an understatement. I went to it expecting an autobiography because that is how it had been mentioned until recently. That although it is autobiographical to the extent Apte draws on her personal experience of the industry, but not quite the autobiography, was the least of its surprises! I believe, there is nothing quite like it in any such writings by filmy personalities, in India or elsewhere; a politically engaged reflection on the

KEYWORDS

Marathi
female
film
star
translation
book

1. V. Shantaram is considered the doyen of Marathi cinema. Having honed his skills in the legendary Maharashtra Film Company in Kolhapur, he along with his partners, started the Prabhat Company in 1929. A master story teller with a fine grasp of the cinematic, Shantaram is best known today for films that had a socially relevant, progressive message. The rebellious Neera of *Kunku* represented the voice of reason against old patriarchal orthodoxies that were enshrined in the practice of child marriage. *Duniya Na Mane* (Shantaram 1937a) was the Hindi language version of *Kunku* released simultaneously.
2. Undoubtedly Apte thought of herself as a writer, even if only one book is available; the last page of *Jau Mi Cinemat?* carries a notice about a future publishing plan announcing four books – *Cinemat Paul Taklyavar* ('On stepping into the film industry'), *Kasa Gaycha?* ('How to sing?'), *Studiol Mauja* ('Fun at the studios') and *Maze Sukhswapna* ('My sweet dream').
3. A book of personal experiences.
4. The Prabhat Film Company was founded in Kolhapur (Maharashtra) in 1929 by the partners V. Shantaram, Vishnupant Damle, S. Fatelal, Keshavrao Dhaiber and Sitaram Kulkarni. In 1933 the company shifted to Pune. Prabhat dominated the Marathi film scene, producing over thirty films, silent as well as talkies, in the two decades following its foundation in Kolhapur. Credited for evolving a uniquely

industry by a film star! Apte is polemical and her sarcasm biting. At the same time there is a conversational familiarity to her polemic. For me, the greatest of challenges was to capture her tone, which is at once acerbic, passionately concerned and intimate. However, like any translator trying to approximate to the texture of the original, one has to stop refining and put it out there!

INTRODUCTION

Shanta Apte (1916–64) was a prominent singer–actress with a career spanning nearly three decades in the Marathi film industry. She acted in over thirty films and is most famous for her stellar role in *Kunku* (Shantaram 1937b), in which she played Neera, a fiery youngster, who protests her marriage to a geriatric.¹ Shanta Apte was also a writer and it is this writing that is of relevance to the consideration of questions of work and labour in the culture industry; in 1940 she wrote and published a small book titled *Jau Mi Cinemat?* ('Should I join the movies?').² Often, referred to as an autobiography or a memoir, it is, in fact, neither. In the brief acknowledgment on the opening page, Apte states that it is written from her own experience – *swanubhavache pustak*.³ In the course of the first chapter, it becomes evident that it is an attempt to answer a frequently asked question by young aspirants – should I join the movies? My translation of two of its chapters (number 6 and 8), will follow this note that seeks to contextualize the book, which in recent years has started to attract critical attention and intrigue film scholars.

A year before Shanta Apte published *Jau Mi Cinemat*, on 7 July 1939, upset over what she saw as a breach of her contract with Prabhat Company, she staged a protest.⁴ Dressed in trousers and T-shirt, she sat and sometimes lay on a bench outside the gate of the Prabhat Studio in Pune, on a hunger strike.

Neepa Majumdar (2015) and Sarah Niazi (2016) have separately and insightfully discussed this event through the lenses of gender, the discourse of respectability, gossip and stardom. Particularly, Majumdar's article throws important light on the connection between Apte's fiery on-screen persona, the strike and her off-screen activist stance, as also on the consistent negative publicity she received post the strike, and its effect on her career. She observes that by striking in such a spectacular manner, Apte drew attention to the fact that actors were workers and employees bound by contracts, a fact normally hidden from public consciousness. More recently, Debashree Mukherjee has read Apte's strike in the context of the 'wide range of similar modes of struggle and defiance in late colonial India' (2020: 26).

Indeed, Apte's rebellious act assumes significance in light of the fact that scholarship has drawn attention to the film industry's practice of highlighting the image of actors as artists and entertainers at the cost of their identity as workers. The attraction and glamour of the film industry and the celebrity culture it produces and benefits from, is predicated on covering the reality of actors as workers. Actors too learn to gloss over the reality of their own labour and position in the hierarchy of the industry. Stars particularly, due to their stature, higher incomes and glamorous images position themselves as free subjects, oblivious to exploitation, disconnected from other actors and unencumbered by the capitalist logic of exchange. Speaking of the ideological processes at work in the production of an actor's identity during the studio era, Danae Clark observes that actors likely felt 'alienated from their fellow workers and from their own labor power and bodies' (1995: 21).



Figure 1: Photographic still of Shanta Apte from *Kunku/Duniya Na Mane* (1937, dir. V. Shantaram). Courtesy of the V. Shantaram Motion Picture Scientific Research and Culture Foundation by Copyright under the Creative Commons.

Apte's public protest against felt injustice, and more importantly, her book *Jau Mi Cinemat?* mark her as exceptional in this regard. Not only was she under any illusion about experiencing exploitation but her sense of solidarity with her fellow actors is palpable. In its broad contours, this strange little book aims to warn off the faint hearted, the dreamers, as also those with very little singing or acting talent from joining the industry. At the same time, her manner of argument is by weaving the personal with the political. Her starting point is her own experience of entering the industry as a young talented singer with no training or experience of acting. Her reminiscences of her early days – the difficulties, the hardships, the struggles quickly expand into a passionate critique of what she terms the dark lining of the silver screen. Her debut in *Shyam Sundar* (Pendharkar 1932) had left her bitter and disappointed. Significantly, *Shyam Sundar* is considered to be the first Marathi film to complete a silver jubilee. Yet, Apte herself had earned the ire of critics, who wrote off her film career. Apte complains that everyone from directors, to technicians, to actors were grappling with new technology and transition to sound, and that as a young debutant actress she should have been directed to perform for the screen. Instead, she was made to stand still and sing! It is

sophisticated narrative style and cinematic idiom, the Company's contribution to the making of a modern Marathi public sphere is unquestionable.

5. *Kumarika* means a young virgin.

interesting how Apte is able to see her humiliating experience, not as individual failure but as a systemic problem.

With extraordinary critical acumen, she lays bare the structures of hierarchy, exploitative practices and money power foundational to the film industry. She uses words like 'capitalism', 'oppression', 'workers' rights' and 'rule of money', to lay bare the hierarchy of roles and powers from financiers/ producers, and directors down to various kinds of technicians, artists, scriptwriters, actors and extras. Writing feelingly about the exploitation of child artists and newcomers, she is unsparing in her criticism of the industry that is bound to produce mediocre cinema because it cares neither for art nor the artist but only for profit. She questions the role of advertisers and even the critics who were beholden to their employers in the print media rather than being independent. She bemoans the fact that the audience enamoured of the sparklingly bright images on the silver screen remain blind to the darkness and the struggle behind. Clearly seeing the film industry as part of the larger capitalist economy and aware of the workers movement raging around the world, she says:

Workers against owners, the struggle is on for many years. There have been those who would fight on the side of workers. A new philosophy has emerged. A new politics is taking shape. Yet, the right path is still to be found. Efforts are on to form workers union.

(Apte 1940: 36)

Further, trying to understand the persistence of hierarchies of power in societies despite human efforts to equalize, she states – '[p]ower is not like water that it'll stay level, but rather like smoke – it goes up and up! Maybe the reason for this is human nature itself?' (Apte 1940: 36).

A unique text, *Jau Mi Cinemat?* affords a rethinking of 'the meanings of gender, embodiment, affective labour and human-machine relationship at a critical phase in the career of cinema' (Mukherjee 2020: 24). Thus, even as it is blunt in its criticism of the film industry, it also reveals Apte's own artistic involvement in acting and filmmaking as affording her opportunities not only of paid work and independence but also that of modern self-fashioning. Towards the end of the book, she avers that she doesn't mean to discourage motivated youngsters; nothing is impossible, if you are talented, she insists. The actor must continue to hone her skills; she should eat moderately and exercise for a couple of hours every day. There's no place for complacency and no let-up from hard work. To underscore this point, she takes the example of a scene in *Kunku* that she had found challenging. Interestingly, the scene she cites is not any of the many melodramatic scenes of encounter between her and her old husband, but a scene at the beginning of the film when she has to present herself in front of the man who has come with a marriage proposal. All the work for this scene had to be done by her eyes. She writes:

A *kumarika* had to go and sit opposite the young man, who has come to see her. That was all, but as she sat down, the girl had to glance at the man only once! Which emotions would gather in her eyes? How to bring all that hope in just one look?

(Apte 1940: 81)⁵

Unhappy with her own performance on the sets during the shoot, she recalls rehearsing the scene that evening at home, and performing it in front of her mother until she had perfected it. She goes on to expand on her commitment to her work and her relentless efforts towards perfecting her art. To the aspiring young actors, she advocates a similar commitment, which, she says, will not only ward off disappointments but can also be their weapon against capitalism! She is confident that if actors are hard-working, sincere and become masters of their art and if they are committed professionals, they will succeed in defeating the anarchy of capitalist power!

How should we read this startling promise? Is this professed faith in individual agency, which contradicts her earlier detailed critique of the systemic nature of exploitation in the industry, a narrative exigency of a book addressed to aspiring youngsters, or simply naïve optimism? Be that as it may, what is even more striking in Apte's example is the conduit she creates with her performative body between the studio and the home as she brings her 'work' home. Her dissatisfaction with her own performance in the studio, under the judgemental eyes of the director and others is contrasted with her rehearsal and successful performance in the domestic space under the affectionate and watchful eyes of her mother. Women's access to modernity, on stepping out of their homes to work as professionals and workers in various industries and modern institutions since the beginning of the twentieth century was shaped by the new forms of capitalist exploitation as well as the gendered oppression they endured. Apte's example, which underscores the contrast between a home that enables her performative brilliance and her work place, the film studio, which lacks warmth and is alienating because of the indifference of its patriarchal authority figures is, I suggest, her sharpest insight about the film industry's work ethic and labour practices.

6. This is the only place where Apte uses the feminine form of the third person singular pronoun. Clearly, she does so because of the gendered nature of the oppression she details in this paragraph.

CHAPTER 6

The Insensate are Superior to the Sentient!

Actors, actresses and child artists are not even humans for these managers and owners of the film industry! They look on them with the same cool unemotional eye that they have for the props and other materials in the studios. Small mercies, one should say! These people will take care of mined stones; carved woods; and the lanes, gutters and garbage dumps set up for scenes. They are always concerned about the additional expenditure, were these to get spoiled or ruined! They will clean and colour the material needed for a film. Concerned about termites, they'll bring inside a block of wood lying outdoors. Move a gunny bag out of the sun and into the shade, afraid it'll fade. They will also take care of the cats, dogs and the donkeys working in films. But... but their avarice makes them blind to that which is the very soul of films – its beauty, its speaking, singing, dancing lifeblood – the actors! And indeed, what is the need for them to be humanely decent towards this class of people?

When a prospective actor is made to stand in front of them, they scrutinize the person like she was an animal.⁶ They will check her voice, check if her body is well proportioned and if her looks are attractive. It's true, they only want to ascertain whether or not the person has qualities befitting an actor. Does the countenance of a wooden statue ever change? Does its shape undergo transformation? Does the sound of an audio machine change? In spite of this, they will give their lives, so to speak, so that these lifeless things remain in a good condition. They take infinite care towards their maintenance. Similarly,

actors' qualities are not permanent; they are bound to change. Are we to think that their oblivion towards the reality of these inevitable changes, this transformation is because actors are, in fact, human? How are these luminaries, with their mission of giving life-lessons to the world through the medium of cinema by bringing ordinary lives and views to the screen, so indifferent to the lives of the very people working under them? Shouldn't it be their concern that the voice, bodies of actors and actresses are taken care of? Shouldn't they keep an eye on their diet and exercise? Should they mind the cost, in case there is some expense on this account? Shouldn't film producers be aware of the fact that actors here are not advanced like their western counterparts?

But if they did, how are they the masters? It is crystal clear to their wonton sense of ownership, that they can easily replace these people, these humans, kick them out when they lose their utility! There's no competition between stones and wood, but it's very much there between human beings. If people leave, or die, others will take their place! But if new 'insensate' material is to be made, won't there be considerable expense?

This is capitalism's arrogance, that's what it is! Unfortunately, the country's economy is in such dire straits that merely to make a living, even reputed artists are humiliated into prostrating themselves at the portals of the industry! Then in order to fill their coffers, why won't the industry owners take advantage of such poor needy people? Indeed, if they didn't, how are they the masters? How this godless system of ownership dares to boot the people approaching its doors! Is it so difficult for these masters to comprehend that the people pleading at their doors may not be astute, but are still human beings? Or is it that drunk with power and wealth, their vision is blurred? Whatever the reason, there's no doubt that these masters have become truly insolent!

If you want to see how every word of theirs is imbued with insolence, all you have to do is causally glance at a director's aggressive instructions meted out straight away to an actor.

This is how it goes:

Listen up, mister, if you want to succeed as an actor, firstly, you'll have to forget yourself, that's the main thing. After you forget yourself, you have to become one with the character you are performing, you have to bring alive the character's emotions and transport the audience to the era depicted in the film. That is all you have to do. And in order to do this, you must follow our directions exactly like we tell you. When a film is being shot, you have no idea about what you are doing. That is why we need to give instructions to you, which you must follow and perform accordingly. Do as instructed and your duty is done.

Look at the language! The moment a director gives such instructions to the actor, the actor will no doubt forget himself, sure! That actors are brainless is a common assumption in the film industry. And in case an actor shows signs of having some intelligence, right at the onset, he is sternly warned against using it. Then suppose an actor sincerely follows the instructions of some genius director to the tee, but in the end fails to impress the audience, the blame will fall on him! And the director? The director stays hidden, behind the screen.

The unfortunate thing is that in most companies, stupid men have occupied positions as directors or as other important administrators only because of their connections with the owners. If an actor or an actress has to succeed, an able director, a strong story, good sound recording and flawless

cinematography are a must. If an actor wants to mobilize his hard-earned talent and creativity in a way that he is able to please his audience with the intensity of his performance, it's absolutely essential that the above mentioned four cornered frame-work is in place. Only then he might have a chance at success. I say 'might', because what if there are no good people manning the areas of direction, scriptwriting, sound recording and cinematography? What if all these people are there only due to their connections? And on top, what if they turn out to be a bunch of crooks? Good, talented artists are bound to fail!

It is not that an especially cruel treatment is reserved for successful actors in order to keep them in bounds. However, it is true that efforts are on all the time to undermine accomplished actors. What if they acquire a reputation for being intelligent? What if the audience is mesmerized by the magic of their performance? Wouldn't it mean increasing their wages? Won't they be poached by other companies offering higher pay?

Indeed, it is not the case that people who exercise such cunning are unable to discern quality. However, discernment is of value only if it goes hand in hand with kindness and generosity. But when it comes to generosity, they are completely bankrupt!

This greedy lot doesn't have the business acumen to understand that you need to spend money to earn twice as much. Their tendency is to skimp, to starve artists and line their pockets. Because of such sickening avarice, there are instances of many intelligent, competent actors and actresses being driven to despair and penury. Their lives have been destroyed. Essentially, it is the policy that come what may, even if actors suffer, they shouldn't be allowed to become too big for their boots. If a film makes hitherto unimagined amounts of money because of an actor's superlative performance or some other qualities, shouldn't he be given credit for its success? But this is precisely what owners don't agree to. It is such policies that destroy the lives of many actors...

CHAPTER 8

Dystopic City

...In this murky film industry, there is such scheming, such conspiracies and antagonisms! Everyone, actors and actresses playing main roles as well as child artists are susceptible to its machinations. There's no saying when and who will become its next victim. In this situation, it doesn't take much time for actors and actresses, who entered the industry with such aspirations, such hopes in their hearts, to be faced with the reality of all their dreams going up in smoke. It comes as no surprise then, when some gullible soul gives in to frustration and despair and contemplates suicide. Afterall, they want to live a life worthy of being called human. It's true that life is for living. But on taking birth, if you do something worthwhile, only then can it be called life! To live without a purpose is no living at all. Even a flea infested dog knows to live and does so with exemplary stubbornness until he is dead. Human beings have breath, but they also have minds. The mind can be proud of accomplishments, conceited about intelligence. It is this pride, this conceit of intelligence, accomplishments that is murdered when contracts are signed, and then on actors and actresses are compelled to go on working, holding their dead minds close to their breasts! Actors and actresses are just intelligent, speaking, laughing animals, that's all! In this film industry, they have no more value than that.

The liquor store owner sells alcohol to people, makes brutes of them, all for the sake of his business. The butcher in Bandra knifes the cow, only for

the sake of a living. Because they must live, fill their bellies, prostitutes have to sell themselves. But the bigwigs in this topsy-turvy film industry are not struggling to fill their bellies. Indeed, they have huge stomachs and a bigger hunger. Their stomachs need to digest motorcars worth thousands and five-storied buildings in Mumbai. Is there any difference between them and liquor sellers and butchers?

There's a difference. At the most it'll be said that a liquor seller or a butcher is involved in an inferior business. But what about the conduct of film producers? Which adjective will appropriately describe their behaviour?

Every day, they self-promote through newspapers, bragging about their lofty plans and ideals regarding service to the people, people's education, industrial development etcetera, etcetera. Are they really capable of educating the populace, of effecting industrial growth? Truth of the matter is, highly cultured people are not yet involved in this industry. As yet, the conditions here are not such that an atmosphere of friendliness, empathy, warmth can exist. The reason is that the people who own this business are not truly liberal. Neither are they aware that there are certain ethics of business and trade. They don't know that they have certain obligations towards society, towards the nation and that it is their responsibility to fulfil them. They are involved in transactions worth crores of rupees. Huge amounts of our nation's wealth are invested in the business, and the public too supports it with its small contributions. That is why it is imperative that some responsible leaders or the government take steps toward legally regulating these companies. Such regulation has become the need of the hour.

What efforts have been taken by the managers and owners of film companies to improve actors' efficiency or to afford greater stability to their lives? Is it not their responsibility to ensure that their health is taken care of, that they get acting lessons and singing practice? Shouldn't they provide a library, so that actors become knowledgeable? Isn't it their responsibility to arrange for equipment for exercise and sports and many other things needed for actors' well-being? Till date, no one in any film organization has made any such provision. Neither do I see any sign of it materializing any time soon. This is the bleak reality of the dark film city.

It is painful to see the plight of actors. Their enthusiasm, their confidence is systematically destroyed here. They are alienated from their personal life. All in all, their whole life can be shattered. And the unfortunate thing is, their plight has not come to anyone's notice, neither has anyone inquired about their problems. Apart from one or two companies, in most companies in Hindustan, people don't get paid for months together. Reposing their faith in the future, the poor actors buckle up and continue working. Additionally, the Damocles' sword of reduction also hangs over their heads in some companies. Just as workers are exploited in industrial hubs and big industries in Hindustan, actors too are being exploited in a similar fashion. There, the workers and their leaders will fight for their rights, but who will give voice to the suffering of the people in the film industry?

Someone has to put forth actors' issues before the public, and there's a reason why this has become urgent. An organization specific to Maharashtra called Maharashtra Film Federation is in the making. It's not really my concern, even if it is formed, whatever its cost-benefit! But I do want to forewarn that such an organization will prove extremely detrimental to actors. Presently, if an

ordinary actor leaves his job, he is unable to find work with another company without a testimonial from the previous company. Besides, owners of the earlier company throw their weight around to ensure that the actor doesn't get work elsewhere. Now many owners and producers of these film companies are backing this so-called 'federation'. I have no doubt that attempts will be made by this organization to completely destroy or demolish actors as a class. In this manner, these great benefactors of film art, these people, who pretend to be concerned about enlightening and serving the populace, will come together and impinge upon actors' right to live with dignity. Owners are against actors; once these opposing camps are entrenched, then actors will have no option but to accept permanent subjugation. If this scheme of theirs is to be opposed, if their ignoble intentions and treacherous plotting is to be defeated, then it is absolutely necessary that actors overcome their lethargy and indifference and build their own organization. I want to caution them that only if they organize, will they be able to live a life of dignity, failing which enslavement and a dog's death will be their lot.

Is this murky film world, in fact, *Muglaili*?⁷ Is this the slaughterhouse of Bandra? Is this seeming *Indranagari*, actually hell?⁸ Is this some inhuman mechanical dystopia that's an elaborate conspiracy to exploit the poor?

I am aware that these questions would have risen in the minds of some readers after having read my description of the film industry. Some people may wonder if my narrative is excessively melodramatic, just like the films, which often use techniques of exaggeration and gaudy spectacle in order to communicate their message clearly. But this narrative is not melodramatic. There's in fact no exaggeration in it. Indeed, I should have used even stronger language to enumerate this reality, but I refrained from doing so. All I want to say is, sincere aspiring actors and actresses should understand the real nature of the film industry; parents should think twice before sending their children to this hell; and educated youngsters should be very careful in this place.

7. *Muglaili* refers to the period of the Mughal kings, a time of untold oppression in Marathi popular imagination.
8. *Indranagari* is the city or the court of god Indra, often associated with wealth and luxury.

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