

Devika Rani: An Iconoclast in the world of cinema

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In 1933, when talkies in Indian motion pictures was at its infancy and most of its performers were at their learning phase of acting before the camera, an Indian girl with her elegance, sophistication, charms and bravery was setting the silver screen on fire. She was not only mesmerising the audience of Europe and US with her acting skill, command over the English language and enigmatic screen presence, but also daring to enact in a nearly-four-minutes-long kissing sequence on the screen with her co-actor.

The lady behind this near impossible thing hailed from two of the most elite and educated families of Bengal - she was Rabindranath Tagore's grand niece and daughter of Dr Manmatho Chowdhury, the legendary surgeon of India.

She was Devika Rani.

Devika was the first diva of Indian silver screen who apart from being an actor, marked her footprint in history as one of the earliest female heads of a film studio in the world. In 1941 when she was 34 years and at the twilight of her career, *The Mirror* magazine voted her the most beautiful woman of Indian screen, keeping her much above much younger actresses like Leela Desai, Kanan Devi, Shanta Apte, Naseem, Leela Chitnis and Hansa Wadkar.

Born in Vizag in 1908 and educated in a boarding school of England from the age of nine, she also completed her training from Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and Royal Academy of Music of London with scholarship. Devika went on to learn textile designing and home decor in England. In an era when association with cinema for ladies used to earn social stigma, she by every standard was an exceptional Indian lady having a huge exposure, knowledge and experience of both the worlds. From her early youth she was a Bengali by culture, an Indian by spirit and a global citizen by attitude.

At 16, Devika's life changed when dashing and handsome Himanshu Rai, another elite Bengali lad educated in Tagore's school and in Britain, met her at Niranjan Pal's London house. Niranjan, who was a close friend of Savarkar, teamed up with Himanshu in 1928 and made a silent movie named *Light of Asia* in 1925 - the first Indian film that made waves in the western world. Himanshu and Niranjan together made films like *Siraj* in 1928 and *A Throw of Dice* in 1929. Last two films were jointly produced by UFA, British Instructional Company and Bruce Wolf of the UK.

Devika worked in her last film as costume designer and soon she secretly married a much older and already married Himanshu in Madras. This fairytale marriage within a few years would be converted into a nightmare and would change Devika's destiny forever.

In 1933, the couple produced and acted in an English movie named

Karma, directed by JL Free Hunt. In this movie, Devika and Himanshu locked their lips for nearly four minutes and scripted the history of the longest kiss in the world of cinema. The record is still unbroken even after 90 years. *Karma* was also made in Hindi under the title *Nagin Ki Ragini* and released in India with a very poor response at the box office. She got an offer from Hollywood's 20th Century Fox for the film *The Snake Charmer's Daughter* which she returned.

BBC's short wave radio service to India started with a Rabindrasangeet "Gram chara of ranga matir poth" sung by Devika in 1934.

Himanshu Rai was a pioneer in Indian film making and in 1933 itself, he had decided to make films in India under the most modern infrastructure that he had seen in Germany and the USA. Backed by Devika's strong support, the couple moved to India and purchased a huge piece of land in Malad near Bombay. There, in 1934, Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani converted their dream into reality. They, with active financial and technical support of Sir Chimanlal Setalvad, a Bombay stock broker, Sir Chunilal Mehta of Central Bank of India, Sir Cawasaji Jehangir and Sir Phiroze Sethna, formed India's first ultra modern film studio in pure Hollywood line named *Bombay Talkies* (BT).

A report published in The Times of India dated 9 August 1934 shows *Bombay Talkies'* ambitious dream of making six films in twelve months with a projection of making at least a profit of Rs 35000 per film. It also had a plan to distribute films made by other studios and to make a profit of Rs 100000 per film.

Bombay Talkies was equipped with the best of infrastructure and human resources. From Germany, France and Britain, Himanshu and Devika brought a few of the finest technicians and creative brains to Bombay as permanent employees. The studio employed nearly 400 people, almost all living inside the studio complex. It brought director Franz Osten, set designer Karl Von Sprei and cameraman Josef Wirsching on its payroll.

The studio had soundproof floors, lab, editing room, projection room, archive, talent hunt, provision for natural lighting indoors, acting and music workshop studios and many more. Its size and facilities in Malad were much bigger than Calcutta's *New Theatre* and Pune's *Prabhat Studio*.

Devika was extremely selective of taking actresses in her payroll. She found none with sound education and decent family background except Leela Chitnis, Rajkumari of the Burdwan Royal Family and Khorshed Minocher Homji, known as Saraswati.

The first film produced by BT was *Jawani Ki Hawa* released in 1935.

Devika played the leading lady of the film. The film poster featured mostly her photo and name, even skipping the name of the hero. This showed the weight of Devika's brand value as a cine star of the 1930s. It was directed by Franz Osten who joined BT with many other highly talented and trained Ger-

man, French and Brits on Himanshu and Devika's call.

Jawani Ki Hawa had tough competition with New Theatre's *Street Singer* starring KL Saigal and Kanan Devi. The film did moderate business but was highly appreciated in the media for its advanced technology and the natural acting of Devika.

By this time, Devika, who had grown up in a liberal atmosphere and always enjoyed her freedom, was passing through an emotional crisis with her husband Himanshu, who was too engrossed in making cinema and delegating massive responsibility to her both in production and in acting.

This gradually converted into mental and physical abuse and soon Devika became a victim of domestic violence in the hand of her husband, a man whom she loved madly. It was later revealed that she was forced to act and dance before the camera with a 104-degree-body-temperature and even when she was menstruating heavily.

At this time, Devika, as bold as she always was, dared to elope with an actor named Sheikh Najam-Ul-Hussain to Calcutta and locked themselves inside Oberoi Grand for days. It is believed both had a plan to join Calcutta's New Theatre and resettle in life as a couple.

This was such a big personal and professional devastation to Himanshu that he had no option but to bow before Devika to call her back on her terms to complete a film named *Jeevan Naiya* in which both Devika and his elopement partner were acting.

Devika, leaving Najam in Calcutta, returned to Bombay as a stronger woman, grabbing more power to dominate both her workplace and her home. However, her relationship with her husband was never repaired after this.

Ashok Kumar, then working as a lab assistant in BT, replaced Najam and the film was completed. Next year, Ashok and Devika gave Indian cinema its first blockbuster *Achhut Kanya*. The film was released in July 1936 at Bombay's *Roxy* cinema, rocking India with its strong social message. Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarojini Naidu came to watch the movie at Roxy and ever since, Nehru became a fan of Devika Rani. *The Times of India*, dated 26 July 1936, reported " ... a real gem of pure acting which places her at the head of India's screen stars which Garbo herself could hardly surpass ... Her singing too is marvellous."

All film magazines of that era like *Film India*, *Mirror*, *The Motion Picture* magazine unquestionably hailed her as the most elegant face on Indian screen.

In the next few years, thanks to Himanshu's declining health and his untimely demise in 1940, Devika ruled *Bombay Talkies* with her iron fist but she drastically failed to keep the team that her husband shaped up. Devika's arrogance, overpowering propensity and untamed smugness of her aristocratic background created a huge gap with her team. More to that, expressing discomfort in the proximity of those co-artists whose backgrounds contained social stigma, made her quite unpopular in the organisation. It is said that once she openly expressed her displeasure on knowing the social background of Hansa Wadkar, one of the legendary Marathi actresses working in BT.

From 1940, the BT team was divided into two rival camps - one under Devika and the other under Sashadhar Mukherjee, with whom Ashok Kumar and Gyan Mukherjee teamed up.

It was decided that each group

would produce one movie but the actors would work in both. Surprisingly, most of the movies produced by Sashadhar and directed by NR Acharya and Gyan Mukherjee like *Bandhan* (1940) and *Jhula* (1941), both starring Ashok Kumar and Leela Chitnis, became smash hits while *Anjan* (1941), produced by Devika and directed by Amiya Chakraborty, did not do well. In *Anjan*, Devika paired for the last time with Ashok Kumar, ending a saga of eight most memorable films of early India cinema as its first romantic pair.

In an interview to Chandi Mukherjee given in 1988, Ashok Kumar clearly said that he was never comfortable with Devika for her suppressing attitude. She, as per Ashok, was always a boss or boss' wife rather than a co-star. As there were serious lapses of emotional attachment among them, their films like *Jannabhumii* (1936), *Prem Kahani* (1937) and *Nirmala* (1938) did not do well. However, films like *Izzat* (1937), *Savitri* (1937) and *Vachan* (1938) did moderate to good business.

In 1942, Devika grabbed more power in BT, making herself production head of all films under the studio. This forced a mass resignation of a huge number of artists like Sashadhar Mukherjee, Ashok Kumar, Gyan Mukherjee, Pradeep Kumar, VH Desai, Harbans Singh and Rai Bahadur Chunilal, the General Manager of the studio from *Bombay Talkies*.

However, before leaving BT, Gyan Mukherjee and Ashok Kumar completed *Kismet* (1943) which became the biggest commercially successful cinema of that era. It was produced by Sashadhar Mukherjee.

Devika, then the un-challenged boss of BT, ran her best possible studio. She scouted a young handsome boy and launched him with the name Dilip Kumar in a film named *Jawar Bhata*. She also introduced a teenaged beauty giving her a name Madhubala who will later become one of the highest-paid entertainers in India in the post-independence era.

Devika made BT extremely profitable and earned good money for herself. In 1943, thanks to the success of her last appearance on screen in *Hamari Baat*, she took a Rs 20000 bonus from the Board of Directors and hiked her monthly salary to Rs 2750 with an additional entertainment allowance of Rs 300.

Involved with Russian painter Svetoslav Roerich, son of legendary Russian humanist Nicholas Roerich, she found him to be a shelter to nurse her various emotional wounds and gradually their love turned into a relationship of bonding.

She decided to leave her share in BT to marry Svetoslav. She left BT and also the city of Bombay to settle with her husband in Naggar near Manali and after a few years, sold everything and settled at Bangalore, where she died in 1994.

Devika Rani is the name of a revolution

In today's India, where women empowerment is still under challenge, Devika Rani in 1930s to 1940s not only participated but also literally dominated a man's world which was unprecedented in the contemporary world that she lived in.

A winner of India's first *Dada Saheb Phalke* award and also the *Soviet Land Nehru Award*, she was a lonely soul and at the last stage of her life said with a regret that she had a long life and no one should have a long life like her.

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