



Between the Studio and the World

Built Sets and Outdoor Locations in the Films of Bombay Talkies

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Cinema is a form that forces us to question distinctions between the natural world and a world made by humans. Film studios manufacture natural environments with as much finesse as they fabricate built environments. Even when shooting outdoors, film crews alter and choreograph their surroundings in order to produce artful visions of nature. This historical proclivity has led theorists such as Jennifer Fay to name cinema as the “aesthetic practice of the Anthropocene,” that is, an art form that intervenes in and interferes with the natural world, mirroring humankind’s calamitous impact on the planet since the Industrial Revolution (2018, 4). In what follows, my concern is with thinking about how the indoor and the outdoor, the world of the studio and the many worlds outside, are co-constituted through the act of filming. I am interested in how we can think of a *mutual* exertion of spatial influence and the co-production of space by multiple actors.

Once framed by the camera, nature becomes a set of values (purity, regeneration, unpredictability), as does the city (freedom, anonymity, danger). The Wirsching collection allows us to examine these values and their construction by keeping in view both the filmed narrative as well as parafilmic images of production. By examining the physical and imaginative worlds that were manufactured in the early films of Bombay Talkies—built sets, painted backdrops, carefully calibrated outdoor locations—I pursue some meanings of “place” that unfold outwards from the film frame, and how an idea of place is critical to establishing the identity of characters. I examine how certain spatial imaginations announce themselves as placeholders of the urban, the modern, the natural or the Indian. By asking what spatial meanings Bombay Talkies brought to bear on a particular built environment, I also ask what the actually existing geography of the Bombay region brought to the cinema of Bombay.

Fig. 1 V. H. Desai in middle ground, turning backwards, during a lighting rehearsal for *Bhabhi* (1938).



Bhabhi (1938): Crafting the Generic Indian City

All over the world, as film production grew in prominence, scale and popularity, the city came to represent the acme of cinematic modernity. Not only were the earliest film studios located in and around big cities but city life was also often the main attraction of the movies. Urban architecture, modern technologies, mass transit systems, fashion and commodity culture and the emergence of the modern working woman were some essential features of the cinematic city of the 1920s and 1930s. If Berlin became a cinematic icon of modernity in Germany, represented on film through location shooting as well as elaborate sets, in France it was Paris that dominated the filmic aesthetic of modernity. Social films made in Bombay (now Mumbai) also participated in this

transnational fascination and often showcased the city's architectural attractions, such as Hanging Gardens, Victoria Terminus (now the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus) and the Gateway of India.

Bombay Talkies' earliest films are either set in Bombay or feature Bombay in certain scenes—*Jawani ki Hawa* (1935) prominently features Horniman Circle and the *Mumbai Samachar* newspaper offices; *Always Tell Your Wife* (1936) has extensive scenes at and around the Gateway of India; and *Jeevan Naiya* (1936) begins with a long shot of Marine Drive as viewed from Hanging Gardens. *Prem Kahani* (1937) has rare travelling shots of Bombay: Victoria Terminus; streets crowded with pedestrians, cars, and carriages; stores selling "readymade clothes"; ubiquitous advertising and signage; single and double-decker trams; and the Orient Hotel.

Soon, however, Bombay Talkies (henceforth BT) veered sharply away from a particularly Bombay-brand of transnational modernity to a more diffused form of middle-class urbanism that vaguely signified something "Indian" without specifying a particular place. Films like *Achhut Kanya*, *Izzat*, and *Durga* were set in villages, and a large majority, such as *Janma Bhoomi*, *Prem Kahani*, *Jeevan Prabhat*, *Nirmala*, *Bhabhi*, *Kangan* and *Azad* were set in unnamed semi-urban locales. In *Bhabhi* (1938), a large outdoor set was built to simulate a narrow street in an urban residential neighbourhood. Neither the dialogue nor the publicity materials specify which city the film is set in and the only place name we see is the name of the street—Hanuman Lane—indicating a predominantly Hindu demographic. (Fig.1) These two-storeyed cement homes, with their geometrically patterned wooden balconies and shuttered windows, represent a modern middle-class architectural standard that was ushered in with the growing availability of Indian-made cement since 1914 (Tappin 2002, 82).¹ Hanuman Lane was thus a generalisable middle-class space that could stand in for many such neighbourhoods across the major towns of early twentieth-century India. The decision to choose unnamed and undefined towns as filmic milieus speaks to BT's growing desire to transcend geographic boundaries and address an imagined pan-Indian audience with light, socially instructive entertainment.

Bhabhi is a story about regressive social values and the toxicity of gossipy, middle-class morality. In fact, the original title of the Bengali story by Saradindu Banerjee, which served as the basis of the screenplay, was *Bisher Dhan*, titled in English as "Poison Smoke." The hero, Kishore (played by Jairaj), promises a dying friend that he will take care of his young widow. Kishore and the widow, Bimla (Maya Devi), become good friends and live together in Kishore's city home as siblings. Kishore

refers to Bimla as his *bhabhi*, or "sister-in-law." Their living arrangements, however, become a thorn in the side for various people, culminating in a social scandal that prompts Kishore's father to publicly disown him. In the meantime, Kishore falls in love with a charming neighbor, Renu (Renuka Devi), but again, various malicious forces intervene to keep the couple apart. The film aligns with its young lovers and their conspicuous modernities—Kishore is a scientist and professor, and Renu is a confident woman who freely speaks her mind, with a social circle that includes male friends—and deploys both interiors and exteriors to convey life in a generic Indian city.

Built sets play a major role in the narrative action of *Bhabhi*. The elaborate outdoor set of Hanuman Lane serves as a kind of public square where characters meet and separate, and learn trust and caution. Fig. 1 depicts a lighting rehearsal for a comic scene of misunderstanding where Renu's father, Benoy Babu, flees in fright from Kishore, who has been described to him as a dangerous street ruffian. Josef Wirsching uses a mix of natural light, artificial lights and reflectors for this scene, heightening the look of the dappled sunlight that filters through the set (note the foliage in the image). In the film, this scene lasts a full two minutes, including one long shot of Benoy Babu walking down the lane through pedestrian and cycle traffic. He soon bumps into Kishore who lives next door. Kishore is holding a bottle of spirit, and, prejudiced by poisonous hearsay, Benoy Babu assumes that Kishore is an alcoholic. Panicking, he runs home and sees an old and respected friend at his doorstep. The friend reveals that Kishore is a college professor and the spirit is for the chemistry experiments that he conducts in his private laboratory at home. Contrite, Benoy Babu now invites Kishore home and the love plot between Renu and Kishore develops. The spatial proximities and parallel anonymities of the urban thus play a key role in the development of the plot. (Fig. 2)

Benoy Babu is played by the famous comedian V. H. Desai, in his first film for BT. In a short biographical sketch, Sa'adat Hasan Manto refers to Desai as "God's clown" (2008). Desai, a former lawyer, turned to acting after a period of poor health. He had a painfully acute problem of being unable to remember his lines. Manto recounts that take after take would be reshot while Desai misremembered or misplaced words. However, he was a huge hit with paying audiences and BT hung on to him as the studio's comic mascot. Speaking of *Bhabhi*, Manto says, "What torture the staff and technicians of Bombay Talkies suffered during the making of that movie, it is not possible to describe. Many times, they almost gave up on him but persisted because they saw it as a challenge" (2008, 467). How many rehearsals and retakes did this scene require? Does Fig. 1 carry traces of the tired bodies of the crew as they rehearse with a notoriously absent-minded actor?

Set design, as Mark Shiel points out, is "anthropomorphic and customised for different clients" (2015, 58). The actor's body and the set must, in a sense, "fit" each other, and in a studio where actors were full-time employees, necessarily the sets were designed with prior knowledge of the actors who would perform in them. Hanuman Lane may not have been calculated according to Desai's physical dimensions but his presence, the movement of his body during rehearsals and retakes, even the movement of the dirt on the ground as it is unsettled by the production crew, leave imprints on the set as traces of human labour. The actor, the crew and the set exert mutual pressures on each other, affecting the final image registered by the camera and projected on the screen.



Fig. 2 The proximity and anonymity offered by the spatial attributes of *Bhabhi's* built sets propel a key plot development.

Around 1928 or 1929, about five years before BT was established, Himansu Rai was employed at Germany's legendary UFA studios.² German cinema in the 1920s was renowned for its spectacular set

design, most notably represented in the acme of expressionist film style, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). By the time Himansu Rai and Devika Rani joined UFA, set design had come to dominate debates on the differences between the two most prominent filmmaking nations of the world—Germany and the United States. The precedence of narrative over sets was deemed American, with critics arguing on both sides for greater or lesser emphasis on design and architecture. In 1929, Erich Pommer, “probably the most noteworthy of all producers the world over,” (Collier 1929, 38) started his own production unit at UFA and ushered in a production strategy that retained spectacle and the affective appeal of melodrama but introduced a strict spatial economy of a “restricted number of locations” (Bergfelder, Harris, and Street, 2007, 118). This was the year that Pommer’s unit produced such canonical films as *Asphalt* and *Blue Angel*. Devika Rani has claimed in interviews that Rai and herself worked with Pommer, and this might partially explain BT’s economical and non-flamboyant use of sets (Malik 1958, 35). Indeed, there is little that is epic or spectacular in the constructed sets of early BT.

Rai, Osten, Wirsching and Rani were amply familiar with the world of epic filmmaking fashionable in the Weimar Germany that they had left behind, but they were neither interested in nor financially equipped to replicate that aesthetic in Bombay. The spectacular backdrops of their pre-BT silent films were largely possible because films like *The Light of Asia* (1925) and *A Throw of Dice* (1929) were shot on location in the existing palaces and forts of Rajasthan and elsewhere. (Fig. 3) Bombay did not offer such medieval architectural splendours. Besides, the BT vision had left behind the fashionable Orientalism of the Indian Players’ silent films, focusing now on reformist pictures for a self-consciously modernising India. These were to be modest films about ordinary characters that

Indian viewers could identify with, made on modest budgets. BT films remain focused on plot and character, with an overriding insistence on moral and social messaging. Sets are largely functional and sustain the plot, valued more as environments that enable a certain kind of sociality or community, or conversely, threaten social bonds. Set design, though elaborate and detailed, does not serve as seductive spectacle in the visual world of BT, but as an environment or *medium* to carry bodies and emotions.

Hanuman Lane features prominently in *Bhabhi*, returning again towards the end of the film, this time as a space of public violence. After a period of forced separation and romantic resentment, Kishore returns to a city that is engulfed by riots. Again, neither the city nor the causes of mob violence are named, but the dialogue and visuals draw on audience familiarity with the phenomenon of urban crowd violence and police deployment. Sounds of rioting and men’s raised voices are heard off-screen as Kishore ventures out in the midst of chaos to fetch a doctor for Benoy Babu. We are not shown any violent confrontations but we see the aftermath of the riots as Hanuman Lane is strewn with debris and Kishore returns all bloodied and faint with injury. Bombay’s audiences were well acquainted with the codes of such urban phenomena; the city had seen communal riots take place at an alarming frequency in preceding years. Curfews, shuttered shops and expanded police presence had become a familiar reality. In 1938, a film could therefore reference mob violence and curfews with the assurance that urban audiences would be able to fill in any gaps in the storytelling with their own personal experience. Just as urban proximity is diegetically mobilised to further the plot, current socio-political crises are also utilised towards narrative resolution. And it is Bombay’s contemporaneous political and communal specificity that surfaces via implication here, even though the sets are careful to indicate

a generic Indian city. The outdoor set not only serves as a material simulacrum of the city as social crucible, but also draws on the real city outside the studio gates in order to convey its meaning.

Bombay Talkies had three sound stages, or indoor studio floors, that were soundproofed. Fig. 4 provides an insider’s glimpse of the use of indoor sets to create a filmic milieu of lived life. This densely crowded image gives us a synoptic view of the elaborate assemblage of the mechanical and the manual, the technological and the human, that constitutes the world of film production. Occupying the bulk of the frame is a built set of a terrace, with a gazebo structure wherein Kishore and Renu enjoy their final reunion. The film ends

with the song “Hum qaidi” (We are prisoners) as the couple garland each other with flowers and reiterate that love is a consensual bond of commitment, arrested as lovers are in a mutual form of capture.³ The terrace set is built on a raised platform decorated with potted plants and hanging creepers. Lights illuminate the painted background and the protagonists, as a system of water sprinklers overhead produces artificial rain. A thick water hose and sturdy metal chains vertically cut through the image, highlighting the tenuous and temporary nature of this environment held aloft by pulleys and links. This photograph shows the filming of a make-believe world, but as Siegfried Kracauer remarked about his own visit to UFA studios, “there is nothing false about the materials: wood, metal, glass, clay.

Fig. 3 The opulent palaces of Rajasthan offered spectacular, Orientalised sets for some of Rai and Rani’s early, pre-BT films.

