

Tribute to a Pioneer

Nine years before Dadasaheb Phalke, a Calcutta film maker had created India's first feature film.

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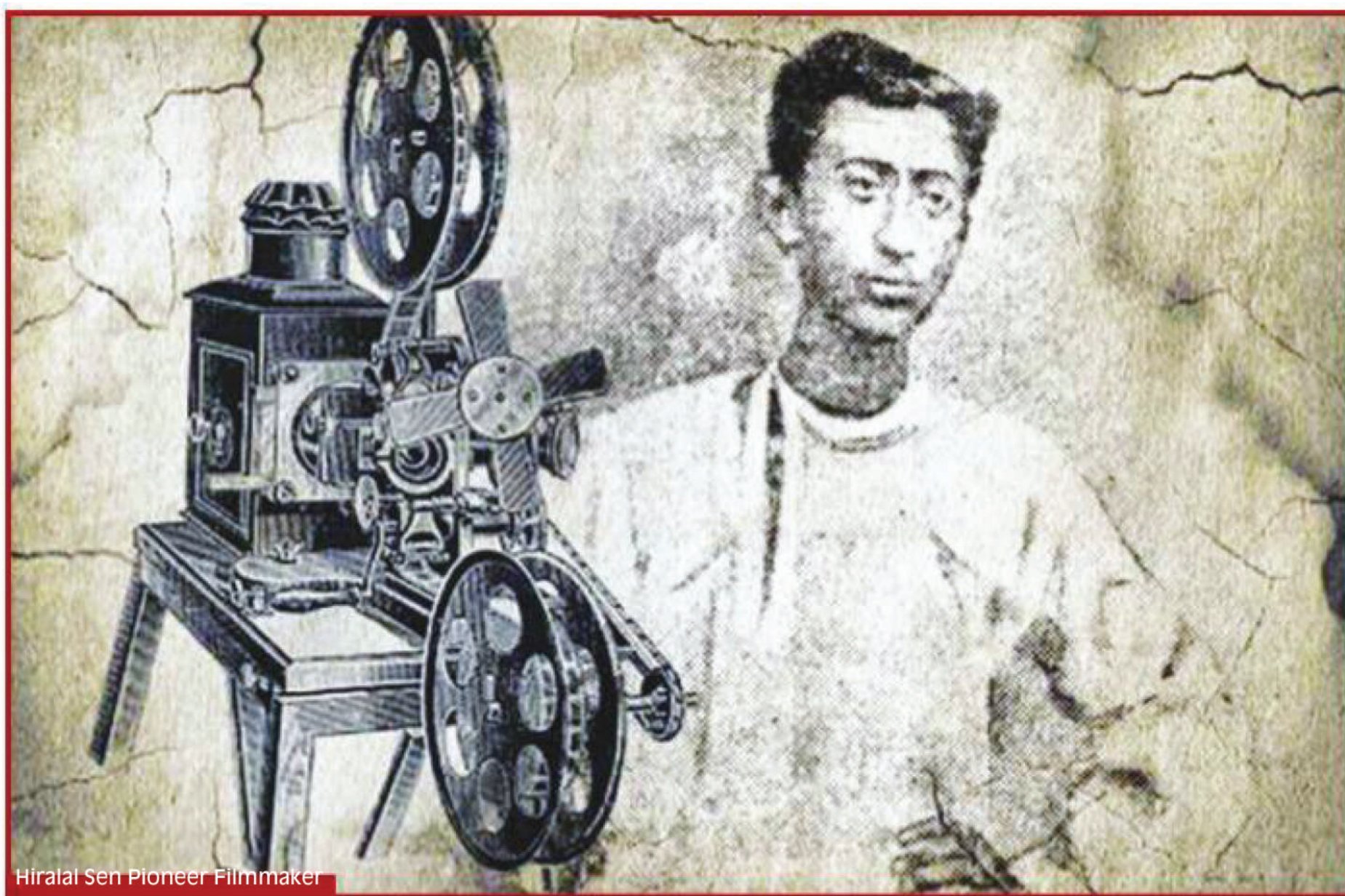
On 25 March 1917, The Englishman newspaper of Calcutta reported a news under the heading "Fatal Calcutta Fire". The sub-heading said, "Bioscope Proprietor's Daughter Killed". The report described the gutting of an office and storeroom of the Royal Bioscope Company near Cornwallis Square. What it did not mention was with this fatal fire one of the most important parts of India's cultural history was destroyed forever.

The fire that Saturday night permanently hushed all tangible testimonial of India's earliest work of cinema picture - an art form that would soon become the biggest mode of public entertainment in India. The fire that evening destroyed all of Hiralal Sen's cinematography made under various companies since 1898 when moviemaking in India was an unknown craft. With this, Hiralal Sen pathetically lost his place in history to Dada Saheb Phalke whose 1913 motion picture is now considered the pioneering work of Indian cinema; thus is Phalke wrongly described as the father of Indian cinema.

The journey of Indian cinema making started in Calcutta's Classic Theatre on 4 April 1898 when a short film of a few minutes was shown before a play. This news was published next day in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and later in *Indian Mirror*. But there is no evidence that this film was made by Sen. The owner of the theatre, Amarendranath Dutta, was a good friend of Sen's. In 1898 itself, Sen purchased an expensive camera and other equipment from March John Wrench & Sons of London to form a company named HL Sen & Brothers later known as Royal Bioscope.

He sent Rs 5000 and even paid a commission of 2.5 per cent to a company named John Elliot to import machines to Calcutta. In 1899, Sen purchased another camera from Warwick Trading Company of London. At that point of time, as history records, no one in India had any experience of making a motion picture. Thus, the assumption goes that any film made in India during that time was made by none other than Hiralal Sen.

However, there is evidence that from 1898 to 1917, Hiralal Sen made almost all kinds of motion pictures and



Hiralal Sen Pioneer Filmmaker

earned pan-India fame. His pioneering work got him the offer from the British Government to film the great Delhi Durbar, a rare honour for an Indian film maker.

Hiralal Sen was born in Bogjuli village of Dhaka on 27 July 1869 (some accounts put his year of birth as 1866 or 1867) in a rich family. His father was a top lawyer. At an early age, Sen won national recognition by winning a photography competition organised by Bourne & Shepherd. He went on to win seven all-India best photography prizes between 1887 and 1898. His keenness for photography soon made movie making his love.

When some European freelancers started showing films at various theatres of Calcutta, Sen became a frequent spectator and even tried to learn from them. His success was minimal thanks to the non-cooperation of the sahibs who did not want an Indian to enter that space. By paying frequent visits to Star theatre where one Stevenson regularly used to show films, Sen tried his best to understand the language of cinema making. With his avid interest, he got a chance to learn a little from Rev Eugene Lafont of Calcutta's St Xavier's college, who offered him huge support. It was an unexpected blessing.

By reading books on film making and with an imported camera, Sen started a company named Royal Bioscope in 1898 which was finally registered in 1902. Meanwhile his younger brother, Motilal, and he had a show on 19 November 1898 in Classic Theatre. Advertisements of the

show were published in The Statesman and The Indian Mirror newspaper.

Meanwhile Pathe Frere Company of France had a tie up with Royal Bioscope and it helped Sen to learn many technical aspects of movie making. In 1900, Sen made two films. One was a recording of a Bengali stage play named "Parasya Prasun" by Girish Ghosh and the other was titled as "A Panorama of Indian Scenes & Processions" which was a collection of a few random shots of Chitpur Road, bathing sequences in the Ganges etc. This film was shown in Star Theatre on 10 December 1898 before a Bengali play named "Sati Ki Kalankini".

In the same year, Sen made two trick films with his new camera. One was shown to students of General Assembly - which later to be known as Scottish Church College - on 21 November 1900 at their reunion and later had a commercial release in Classic Theatre.

The Sen brothers started commercial shows in Minerva theatre in 1899 and from 1901, they started showing films regularly at Dalhousie Institute drawing huge crowds in every show. For the commoners of Calcutta, it was a new experience. Thanks to the appreciation they got, and seeing good business prospects, the Sen brothers went on to make a few more short films. Two more of Sen's movies were made in 1901. Those were a part of plays named Duti Pran, Laxman Barjan and Moja. The last two were shown on 3 July 1901.

Amrita Bazar Patrika dated 9 February 1901 reported that Sen's company was doing film shows of at least seven

plays of Classic theatre including Bramar, Alibaba, Sarala, Bridha O Sitaram etc. In 1902, his company imported few more cameras from London and the next year they got the Government contract of filming the celebration of Edward-VII's coronation in India. This is considered India's second news reel film after the one made by Harishchandra Sakharan Bhatavdekar in Bombay.

The contemporary media was all praise for Sen's work. A report published in The Bengalee dated 2 December 1902 reads, "The Royal Bioscope Company: the company we understand have made a valuable addition to their excellent repertory of photo accessories. They have united a high class and beautiful finished machine for taking animated photography and they intend to take impressions of Indian life and scenery." The Bengali periodical "Bangabashi" also hailed Sen's work. Sen and his company stepped into history in 1903 when they filmed a complete Bengali play named "Alibaba O Chollish Chor" and released the film commercially. This was the filming of a stage drama and not based on a creative film script. Its advertisement proudly announced "Complete Drama - Vivid Drama - Flawless Drama". This was what Hindu Patriot dated 23 January 1904. It is known that at this point of time Classic Theatre was closed for six months and it is believed it was closed because Sen was filming the stage play in that period. It is important to note that it was the second time that they filmed Alibaba. Earlier, the Sen brothers had filmed a part of the play - mostly some dance

sequences - and that was shown on 9 February 1901 as an additional attraction.

Actors who were captured in that film were Amar Dutta, Kusumkumari etc. If "Alibaba" was really a complete feature film made by Sen and released commercially in 1903 then this is not only the first complete feature film made in India but the oldest film of the world. Edwin Porter who made "The Great Train Robbery" also released it in 1903.

Many researchers doubted that this Alibaba may have been an imported film but film historian Somnath Roy after checking all volumes of Motion Pictures (1894-1949) published by America's Library of Congress has concluded that no such film was made in Europe and America during that period. So, Alibaba made by Sen for the second time was indeed a complete feature film made by an Indian.

Sen reached one more milestone in 1905 when he made two advertisement films, the first of their kind in India. One featured Batakrisna Paul's "Edward Anti-malaria Specific" and the other CK Sen's "Jakakusum Hair Oil". The first one was shot at Dumdum while the second was shot at Agarpura near Calcutta. In that sense, Hiralal Sen is also the father of Indian commercial advertisement cinema.

In the same year, by filming nationalistic leader Surendranath Banerjee's political meeting at Calcutta's Town Hall, the Sen brothers for the first time in India captured a political meeting in a motion picture. Jyotish Sarkar took charge of the camera in this project. Unfortunately, there is no evidence left of this path-breaking works.

The Royal Bioscope Company soon became the top travel cinema company doing all kinds of entertainment. Sen's company started getting invitations to film private functions of the rich and famous in Bengal, Orissa, and Assam. They were called to film private parties of the royal families of Bhawal and Baneli. Apart from their regular shows in Classic theatre, Sen also used to show his films in Minerva and National theatres and even with a foreign travelling theatre company named Unique. On 2 February 1901, Sen had his cinema show in the All India Industrial Exhibition and received a gold medal with grand ovation for his high quality cinematography skill. The grand success of Royal Bioscope inspired a plethora of new bioscope companies like London Bioscope, Oriental Bioscope, Imperial Bioscope etc. All of them had their primary learnings from Hiralal Sen.

Lord Curzon who had seen Sen's work in a garden party at Malda was very impressed. No wonder that for the 1903 Delhi Durbar, Sen was invited to capture moving moments in motion camera. Royal Bioscope started facing tough competition from 1905 onwards when JF Madan entered Bengal to do the same business. That was the time when Hiralal also failed to show his steel as a businessman and failed to respond to Paul Royal, the head of Pathe Frere, in time for a joint venture. Pathe Frere was very interested to work with Sen in India, but

they were simply ignored by him. In their absence, that place was taken by JF Madan to earn money and fame.

The last big project that Sen executed was filming of the Delhi Durbar in 1903 and arrival of the British Royal Family in Delhi in 1911. In 1913, his younger brother Motilal parted with him and Sen also left Royal Bioscope with bad memories. He first formed a company named HL Sen & Co but soon left to join a new company named London Bioscope with a partner named Ram Dutta. They even opened a show house where present day Ganesh Talkie is situated.

However, Sen was cheated and lost everything. Sadly, at about this time he was detected with cancer. Sen, now jobless, near insolvent and suffering from cancer had entered a pathetic stage of life. It forced him to sell his house in Haritaki Bagan near Ultadanga and forced him to come to a rented house at 18 Blacky Lane. In 1917, after having made at least 40 films of different forms, Hiralal Sen painfully saw his entire body of work consumed by flames, leaving no evidence of his of his pioneering contribution. He finally died as an isolated and broken man.

Even from his death bed, Sen offering free consultation to young film makers and even to JF Madan to whom he lost his empire. In 1917, JF Madan became a giant in Indian film and Dada Saheb Phalke who started making film after Sen captured the crown of India's pioneering persona.

In 1927, the Government of India instituted a "Cinematograph Enquiry Committee" under the presidency of Dewan Bahadur T Rangachari. This committee interviewed Dada Saheb Phalke on 13 February 1928 and based on his claim that nobody before him had worked with cinema, blindly and irresponsibly concluded that Phalke was the pioneer of Indian cinema. This narrative ravaged the truth that nearly nine years before Phalke's feature film, Satyavadi Raja Harishchandra, a man from Calcutta indeed brought a complete drama to the screen. Without belittling anyone, it can thus be said that Hiralal Sen is the father of Indian cinema. Sen made three advertisement reels, five news reels, eight documentaries including political meeting, and various marriage ceremonies of rich families. He also made some twelve feature films which were all filmed versions of stage plays. Hiralal Sen is a pioneer who did a tremendous job to popularise cinema in India. His work was very badly archived. Today, just hundred years after his demise he is not even remembered by common cinegoers. There is not a single well-researched biography of the man. The fire at his younger brother's house which killed his niece had also killed his entire achievements in life. Today not a single film made by him is available to watch, nor a still photograph of the man. Only some paper cuttings, old advertisements, personal memories and tangible evidence like his camera have saved his name from being banished into oblivion.

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