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## **Star of the Indian Screen: The story of Sushila Rani from *Filmindia***

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**Abstract:** This article outlines the various entanglements of cinema, film magazines and a woman actor in the early days of Indian cinema through the life of Sushila Rani. As an early woman film journalist working for one of the most renowned film magazines of its time, *Filmindia*, Rani focused on exploring the shifting currents of the film industry and how it affected the lives of the people it touched. As an actress and vocalist, she embodied this idea and used her artistry to bring it to life. Her dedication to the project of publishing the magazine even in adverse circumstances is a testament to her commitment. Sushila Rani came from a very liberal and sophisticated household where it was expected of women to go to college, obtain jobs, or at the very least, have interests outside of the immediate domestic sphere. Her family and peers also encouraged her to keep going even when the odds seemed insurmountable. She was able to and often did discuss anything under the sun, including politics, the arts, and her love of classical music. She had a strong sense of community around her and the confidence to take on new challenges. Sushila Rani's life is explored in this paper to highlight the various challenges a woman actor, publisher and writer faced during the early decades of the twentieth century within the Indian film industry.

### **Introduction**

*A woman draws her identity from the man. A woman is a woman only when there is a man in the landscape (Filmindia, 1946;35)*



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Rani's story illustrates how these underlying issues can contribute to a woman's struggle and even lead to tragic consequences. Sushila Rani became an active contributor to *Filmindia* magazine, which is renowned as the first English-language film magazine, although her name did not appear in the publication. Rani's story highlights women's struggles in a male-dominated society, where they were often not given credit for their accomplishments. The paper is divided into four sections; the first discusses the genesis of the magazine *Filmindia*. The second section describes Rani's role in the magazine, her contributions, and her struggles to make a name for herself; the third section discusses the consequences of the lack of recognition she faced as an actress, and the fourth section discusses the legacy she left behind.

### ***Filmindia Magazine***

*Filmindia* was a popular English-language monthly magazine that was published from 1935 until 1961 primarily under the stewardship of Baburao Patel. It was a high-end periodical with advertising and posters targeted at a wealthy clientele. *Filmindia* was first published monthly in April 1935 for four annas. In the first issue, actress Nalini is depicted on the hand-painted cover. Tarkhud, an actor and novelist whose film *Chandrasena* was directed by Shantaram, too was featured with an Indian street scene in the background with a caparisoned elephant with dangling earrings. The covers' format altered over time, but the first few copies utilized the same templates. Inside the magazine, a significant section was devoted to art plates of the time's stars and a substantial quantity of stills from recent films.

*Filmindia's* content page not only listed what was inside but also contained the editor's viewpoint. The magazine's main focus was to entertain the public and to support and develop the industry by providing honest journalism and criticism of men and the cinema and create a taste in the reader for Indian pictures representing Indian culture and traditions. (*Filmindia* 1940, 6)

The first issue of *Filmindia* was a huge success (Bhatia,10). The magazine had different sections and titles: it began with the editorial, a column called 'Bombay Calling' written by Baburao Patel under the pen name Judas; it also contained gossip from the lives of stars and very often caustic criticism on the morality of the film industry. In addition, there was also a section on editor's mail, in which Baburao responded to readers' letters, 'Our Review' ( Film reviews), 'At home and abroad' ( cinema news from across the world), 'Woes and Echoes' ( a reader's forum where readers' letters would be published), 'Pictures in the Making' (report



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of the production in each studio) and 'Our Women's' page (mostly, though not entirely, beauty tips). Apart from these regular sections, the magazine carried advertisements, posters, and occasional columns from foreign correspondents.

Baburao's advocacy and promotion of Indian Culture was an important part of *Filmindia*. His claim of honest journalism and constructive criticism helped to develop his image as an influential critic in Indian cinema. He was very determined and did not care about others' feelings while writing in the magazine. He wrote most of the magazine by himself and did the reviews which he said "would never be influenced or prejudiced by advertisers or by others." (Bhatia,10) He declared that advertisers who did not like this policy were welcome to stop their advertisements. He was undoubtedly an extraordinary editor. After Susheela Rani joined him in the venture, she recalled:

*his rapport with his readers was tremendous- they admired and respected him and adored him. He got letters by hundreds, even thousands, asking for his views on everything under the sun, and he gladly obliged. His question and answer column was viral, running into several pages in the magazine and covering issues from the beauty of a film star to international politics.* (Bhatia 10)

The magazine was the most influential film magazine in India for a long time. The subscribers to the magazine belonged to British India, as well as South Africa, the Far East, the Persian Gulf, and other countries where Hindi films were popular and Indian communities thrived. Letters from the British Empire were received, demonstrating that the publication was widely distributed. The magazine claimed that tens of thousands of copies were sold. (Bhatia)

Sushila Rani's contributions to *Filmindia* are noteworthy historically since the magazine and its contents continue to be used as primary sources by Indian movie historians today. Additionally, her association with the magazine explains some intense and intimate conversations with actresses of the 1940s, which were perhaps only possible due to Rani's gender. There were few women journalists in those days, and these trailblazers were mainly forgotten.

By 1947, *Filmindia* had established itself as a prominent player with monthly sales of ten thousand copies in India and abroad. The publication became a sensation due to its clever blend of rumour and review,

observation, and opinion. Baburao Patel's penchant for self-promotion and humorous writing style contributed to the magazine's popularity and catapulted him to superstar status.

By the time *Filmindia* celebrated its 25th anniversary, it had become fully involved in politics and had begun concentrating on Indian politics and public policy. The magazine was renamed *Mother India* in 1957. Baburao, later, transferred control of *Mother India* to Sushila Rani in 1967.



Fig 1. *Sushila Rani*

### **Sushila Rani**

Sushila Rani Tombat was born in 1918 to a Konkani family with a substantial cultural capital. She was one of four daughters of a wealthy lawyer, Anand Rao, and his classically trained housewife, Kamala Devi. Sushila Rani performed her first concert at nine and was accomplished in the classroom, earning a gold medal in post-graduate degree in Science as well as law from the University of Madras at 23. As a result of her father's thriving practice, the Tombat sisters grew up in comfort. The conversation at home centred on art, culture, philosophy, and the independence movement. (Mukherjee 1) After assisting in the college biology department and subsequently working as a researcher for a pharmaceutical business, Sushila sought and obtained a position as a teacher at a school in Udaipur. Her father persuaded her to accept it. Three months into her employment, Sushila Rani got a persistent foot ache. The medical facilities in



Udaipur were inadequate, so she moved to Bombay and was hospitalized for a month. Before returning to her school employment, she chose to spend time with her uncle's family in Bombay.

For her, Bombay was unfamiliar and intimidating. A relative showed her about the city. One day, he brought her to dinner at the well-known restaurant Wayside Inn in Kala Godha, as Baburao Patel recalled on January 15, 1942, in his journal *Filmindia*.

*At the Wayside Inn, I was providing entertainment for journalists. The most excellent fortunate accident of my life happened to me. The lady entered the eatery wearing a stunning green sari with her army cousin. A little while later, the army major introduced himself and said he wanted to meet me with the woman with him. I also got to know Sushila Anand Rao Tombat. She was traveling to Udaipur to start a teaching position. She never made it to Udaipur. (Bhatia 20)*

In 1942, Sushila Rani became the secretary cum sub-editor of *Filmindia*. Baburao Patel gave her a salary of two hundred rupees per month. (Mukherjee1)

In 1944, her first film *Draupadi* was released. The movie was directed by Baburao Patel and produced by Hans Pictures Ltd. The new face of Rani was revealed in *Filmindia* magazine to promote the movie. After the film's release, she was dubbed "*Screens Volcanic Beauty*" (Bhatia 31). Baburao Patel knew that the most popular and influential film magazine was available to promote Sushila. He would use it to its fullest extent to promote the film at every level and wouldn't be subtle about it. During the year, Baburao Patel and Sushila Rani were married secretly without public notification. In the book *Patel of Filmindia*, Susheela Rani reminisces about those days: "during the initial two or three months, we were not together. He was unwilling to reveal that we were married. He did not even include our wedding photo in the magazine, whereas most of his girlfriends were featured prominently. She will be furious, he stated, referring to his wife, Shireen. It never occurred to him that she might be angry; if he was so concerned about her feelings, why did he get married in the first place?" (Bhatia 38)

In an interview with her, asking questions about her life with Baburao Patel, she said: "After joining *Filmindia*, I started living in Bombay, and the affair deepened. Fifteen days prior to my marriage, I said yes. There were women even after me, and people used to wonder how he could be interested in them. But



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still, he was interested. So married life was mixed up with all this. I was too young, innocent, and naïve, and he was a very seasoned person with many affairs. I didn't realize what I was getting into.” (Mukherjee 2)

From 1946, *Filmindia* gradually and methodically started to become political. Things reached a stage where politics, filmhood, and sex became so intimately linked on its page that one could explain them as a reflection of Baburao Patel's warped personality. As India headed towards independence, he began writing on national issues.

Baburao and Sushila Rani began to live more closely together during this period. As the marriage began to stabilize, pictures emerged in the magazine. Sushila Rani, meanwhile, acted in the movie *Gvalan*, an Amar Picture of Bombay social drama produced and directed by Baburao Patel. She afterwards stopped working in films and started concentrating on music. She studied classical singing, Khayal singing, and light music from Padma-Bhushan Mogubai Kurdikar, Ustad Alladia Khan, and Sundarabai Jadhav.

Baburao Patel passed away on September 4, 1982. Sushila Rani Patel had learned to fend for herself. It was not as easy as it may appear. After his death, most well-wishers had advised her to shut down the magazine. The eminent editor, Khushwant Singh, had even suggested that *Mother India* would be buried along with Baburao Patel. Yet she persevered, determined that it would reach its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. She succeeded in her mission.

She emerged from Baburao Patel's shadow after his death. Despite her husband's periodic discouragement that she shouldn't sing in public, she persevered through thick and thin. Patel used to eject people who arrived with concert invites. She remembers that “ *Baburao got me teachers, but when it came to a concert, he put his foot down. It used to leave me in tears. During our life together, I had to be at his beck and call- so I used to practice very early in the morning.*” (Bhatia 85)



Fig 2: (Sushila Rani receiving the *Sangeet Natak Academy Award 1981*)

Since then, she has hosted singing programs on Akashvani and Doordarshan. She started performing at various music festivals, including Tansen Samaroh, Prayag Sangeet Samiti Samaroh, and Pandit Onkar Nath Thakur Sangeet Samaroh. After Baburao's death, Sushila Rani established the Sushila Rani Baburao Patel Trust, encouraging several young musical talents. She continued to commemorate Baburao's birthday with great pomp each year.

She served on the music advisory council of the national government, the Film and Television Institute (Pune), and the Censor Board. She was also awarded the Maharashtra Rajya Sanskritik Puraskar (1999) and the titles of Sur Shri, Suswarvani, Sangeet Saraswati, and Swar Kaumudi by some of the most prestigious organizations in the nation. Dr. A.P.J. Abul Kalam, the then-president of India, presented her with the Sangeet Natak Academy Award. At 61, she earned L.L.B. and L.L.M. with honors; her name is still posted as an attorney in the Mumbai High Court. She was also a distinguished homeopath.

She shared the screen with legends like Ram Gopal and Mukesh and sang with them in early Hindi cinema production. She died on July 23, 2014.

### **Sushila Rani as a Journalist at *Filmindia***

*On 15<sup>th</sup> June 1942, I peeped into the secretary's room and did I see a film star sitting there. Asked Hyacinth as she looked in through the window at one of the many film stars who visit our office. "She is the new secretary," said an advertising executive. " but that (meaning, of course, the sweet thing inside) is too beautiful for an office." (Patel, 27)*



Fig 3 (*Filmindia's new secretary* 24)

After Sushila Rani started working at *Filmindia*, she attempted to address social issues, particularly those affecting women. Through her writings, she brought attention to topics such as gender-based violence, the lack of education opportunities for women, and the unequal treatment of women in the workplace. She engaged with the public and decision-makers to encourage change and the creation of an equal society. As an editor, Sushila questioned why film stars allowed themselves to be slandered by the public. In one of her articles against a Hindi magazine originating in Calcutta, "A Significant Little Paper", Sushila Rani voiced her concerns about such slanders. Under the headline, "Film actors are all pimps, and film actresses are all prostitutes", this article in the Hindi magazine was widely circulated and contained details about the entire industry and film actors and actresses. (Majumdar 41). Sushila in a strong rejoinder writes that film



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stars must unite and speak out against such discriminatory language to create a more inclusive and tolerant society. She also argues that it is important for them to come together to fight against the malicious slander and rumours spread about them and to create a safer and more supportive environment for all actors and actresses. This is because when the actors and actresses unite, they have more power to stand up against the mistreatment they face and to bring awareness to the systemic issues present in the industry. By coming together, they can create a larger platform to voice their concerns and be heard. This is important because it allows them to come to the table with more leverage when negotiating contracts and raises. It also gives them more power to push for better representation in the industry and to push for better working conditions. This collective power can greatly impact the industry and make a difference in the lives of many actors and actresses. (Filmindia 1942 29)

Sushila Rani wrote in several of *Filmindia's* pieces in the 1940s, including the cover, puzzle competitions, reviews, original articles, stand-alone image plates, and by-lines. In addition to writing about her experiences in the film industry and advocating for female actors, she was one of the first women to appear in the magazine. She definitely helped to break down gender stereotypes and facilitated the entry of more women into the industry. She contributed significantly to the 50-page magazine's content. For over a year, readers of *Filmindia* were bombarded with images of Sushila Rani, stories about her, full-page spreads, lavishly illustrated pieces highlighting her educational credentials, adverts for her radio appearances, and rumours about her marriage to Baburao Patel. By doing so, she showed women they could be successful in the media industry and be the stars of their stories. She also challenged the idea that women couldn't be successful in the industry and showed that their voices could be heard.

Her success in the media industry was a direct challenge to the patriarchal values of Indian society. This society viewed women as secondary to men and incapable of achieving success. When she was part of the publication from 1942 to 1948, she was actively involved in all the discussions. She was asked what her opinion was or which movie she most enjoyed. She explained that she prefers social films to historical films. In the same interview, she made remarks regarding women, stating that marriage is a problem. She added that a college education is considered shameful, and sex workers in the same society are called lost women. (Filmindia, 1942 29). The magazine later published articles addressing these issues. Her opinions



were ahead of her time and opened up the conversation around these topics in the magazine. Her remarks showed that she was an advocate for women's rights and the education of women long before the feminist movement articulated these issues.

For purposes of brevity, I will discuss two articles by Sushila Rani in the next section. The first article looks into how social dynamics have changed over time and how they affect people's lives; the article also explores women's various societal roles and how they are perceived. The second article analyses the kissing scene in films from a feminist perspective discussing how it challenges traditional gender roles.

### **The Social Pictures**

In order to attract more audiences to the cinema, filmmakers used mythological themes as they were more appealing to regular Indians. Rachel Dwyer draws upon the mythological genre in her lively discussion in order to convey the Hindu myths and legends through sources such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* epics. As a result of the nationalist movement in the 1930s and 1940s, Dyer argues, devotional films flourished, as well as films produced in Bombay which depict Indian Islamic culture, such as historical and courtesan films as well as 'Muslim social' films.(Dwyer) The use of mythical themes in films was also a great way for filmmakers to create stories that were larger than life and could capture the audience's imagination. This was very attractive to regular Indians, who often didn't have access to other sources of entertainment. However, beginning in the early 1930s, this pattern started to shift. This shift was due to the emergence of social realism, which focused on representing the everyday experiences of regular Indians and telling stories much closer to their everyday lives. This genre became more popular with regular Indians, who found the stories more relatable and realistic. This shift was due to the influence of the Indian freedom struggle, gaining momentum in the 1930s. There were more historical and biographical films produced. However, these films were not genuinely historical or biographical; they did focus on a historically significant figure, but the portrayal of the topic was nearly always fictionalized to appeal to and amuse the public. This was seen as a way to create films that could capture the general public's attention and be grounded in history to lend the film a sense of relevance and importance. While the historical figures may have been accurate, the events and story elements surrounding them were often exaggerated or fictionalized to make them more entertaining for audiences.



Based on this concept, Sohrab Modi's 1939 film *Pukar* was a tremendous hit. Shantaram's *Udaykal* (1930) and *Dharmatma* (1935), and Modi's and Prithvi Vallabh's *Sikandar* (1941) were other famous films produced during this period. These films were popular because they used real-life characters of ancient Indian rulers but intertwined them with fictional plots, creating an entertaining mix of fact and fiction. They also used spectacular sets and costumes, great musical scores, and dramatic performances to add to their appeal. *Achhyut Kanya* (1936), a renowned social play made during the period leading up to independence, dealt delicately with the issue of untouchability in Indian society. These films were part of a movement towards making films with greater social relevance and suggesting reforms for social issues.

Rani wrote an article titled 'The Power of the Screen' that shows that she was well-informed about modern politics, social issues, and the film industry. She emphasized that social imagery was more exciting and helpful than historical and mythological information. She believed that knowledge of modern media and social issues was more relevant to the needs of the people and that it could be used to instil positive values and inspire people to take action. She said that when it comes to social cinema, there aren't too many movies that exhibit social consciousness as most are made only for entertainment purposes. She argued that social imagery was more engaging and useful than old-fashioned stories because it was more relatable and could educate people on current events and social issues. She further argued that it could motivate people to become more involved in the community, particularly by providing them with a better understanding of the issues they were facing.

She, in a caustic remark, says , "... for instance, the picture of the Bombay talkies with the inevitable zamindar and well-dressed village belle and the usual damsel-in-distress situation, and tell me what social purpose do these pictures serve beyond a temporary and frivolous entertainment?" (Patel 1942) She suggests that such films while providing temporary entertainment, do not address significant social issues or have any lasting impact. She believes such films rely on outdated stereotypes and do not challenge the status quo.

She used the film *Padosi* (1941) as an example of a good social film since it dealt with the contentious Hindu-Muslim topic. The films of the time were often seen as escapist entertainment, and Sushila's critique was that they were not tackling social issues that were present at the time. She wanted filmmakers



to be more conscious of the day's issues and use films as a vehicle for positive social change.

### **The role of women**

Women in Hindi cinema were often marginalized within patriarchal socio-cultural frameworks, fighting to break free from ideological stereotypes that denied their self-identity and self-expression. Hindi cinema represented women's identity tied around traditional values during the 1940s. Women were portrayed as ideal mothers, submissive homemakers, dependent daughters, immoral prostitutes, cabaret dancers, and strippers. Sushila Rani attempts to challenge such representations and values associated with them through her writing in her article 'The Power of the Screen'. These were some of the issues that she dealt with.

### *Marriage*

During this period of film-making, some fundamental guidelines needed to be observed when depicting women in films, such as, prohibition of premarital affairs and the presence of no more than one romantic interest. Women needed to adhere to the traditions and rituals of their particular religions and follow the established norms of marriage, prayer, religion, and practice. Being married, fulfilling the obligations and responsibilities of the conventional Indian wife according to family norms, being the ideal mother, daughter, and daughter-in-law, etc., were all prominent themes in Indian cinema narratives. Belonging to a patriarchal social framework and performing the function of a woman within the limitations of this structure and social order had also become the role of women in films.

Chakravarty (1989), commenting on realism in Indian films, says, "A woman's social and individual identities are therefore both conferred by marriage... while part of this has a dramatic function...the overall traditional attitude to women remains in place..." (p. 46-47).

Sushila Rani points out in her article that such representations of women were dependent on the cultural ethos of Indian society and similar manifestations in cinema are constructed through a patriarchal ideology. Sushila Rani remarks, that regardless of the role given to women, whether as wives or daughters, they are always depicted as a companion or sidekick to the male protagonists. According to the film industry, a predominant notion is that the wife is the main caregiver for the husband, she cares for the children, and she plays the role of the weak link in the hero's life. When the villain kidnaps or threatens the wife, the protagonist or hero has to rescue her in a dramatic action scene. A wife is nothing more than a



satellite to her husband; her work and life revolve around him.

Sushila Rani in the article expresses her dismay over the depiction of or mocking the use of the word 'marriage' and expresses her desire for change. Most of the films, according to her, seem to convey that women provide comfort to their husbands when they return home after work and provide assistance and support to their husbands whenever they are having trouble. She argues that in the depiction of women in Indian cinema, new forms of self should emerge and need to be articulated. There are a range of injustices and oppressions that women face in society, and the purpose of redressing these injustices and oppressions is not only to remove them but also to recover and restore the voice and position of women which had been erased and taken away earlier by patriarchal discourses. The purpose of this article is to challenge the rules of female morality and at the same time to expose some of the hypocrisy in the behaviour of men.

### *Prostitution*

In the early days of cinema, when Phalke was beginning to make films, women were unwilling to act due to the stigma attached to public performance. This was because women were expected to be reserved and modest, and public performance was viewed as inappropriate for women. Conversely, men were seen as more socially and culturally acceptable on stage and in films. Acting, singing, or dancing for an audience was associated with prostitutes and courtesans, outside the boundaries of decent societies. This meant that women were typically restricted to backstage roles such as set designers, costume designers, and other behind-the-scenes roles. Women were also typically restricted to playing female roles, and these roles were often less complex than those written for men. This created an imbalance in the industry and perpetuated the idea that women could not perform as well as men.

Since the prostitute is specifically a performing woman living in a brothel where the women sing to entertain their clients, the entire discourse on her position in society also represents the position of an actress in society. The prostitute is seen as a representation of the female role in society, so when a woman takes up a profession as an actress, it is often seen as a reflection of the same societal expectations that the prostitute is subjected to. The film's sympathetic delineation of the actual moral worth of its fictional prostitute parallels reformist journalistic arguments, which condemned the social ostracism of film actresses. This idea is reinforced by the fact that both prostitutes and actresses were seen as "fallen



women" in the eyes of society, and both were subject to the same expectations and judgments. As such, cinema, therefore, needed to present both professions in a way that challenges the traditional notions of morality and allowed viewers to consider the humanity of all women, regardless of their profession.

The sad way the movie shows the actual moral worth of its fictional prostitute is similar to how reformist journalists criticized how society treated movie actresses. Both groups of people were subject to judgment by society, yet cinema portrays the protagonist's value beyond her supposed profession. This idea mirrors the same sentiment of reformist journalists, who argued that women should not be judged solely on their public persona. (Majumder 84)

As Sushila Rani argues, a prostitute is always shown in Indian movies as a miserable woman who doesn't belong. She gets no salvation, no hope, and no mercy. Still, the economic part of a prostitute's life—the urgent need to support oneself in a society that doesn't accept her—is ignored, and every day she is overwhelmed with criticism. This is because prostitution is seen as a shameful profession, even though it is often the result of poverty and lack of education or opportunity. The economic side of the profession is often overlooked, and so these women face not only economic hardship but also social stigma and discrimination. “Couldn't Indian screen extend more human treatment to our discarded step-sister and pleading for greater understanding and toleration provide the prostitute with a better means of livelihood.” (Patel 1942, 31) Questioning their authority to humiliate them, Sushila argues that women can create spaces for themselves to express their opinions and reject the notion that their voices are not important.

### **Kissing on the Screen**

One of her well-known articles for *Filmindia* is titled "Give us a real kiss" - a plea for more realism. In this article, she argued that filmmakers should not just focus on glamorous scenes but also portray real-life situations and emotions. She believed that this would make films more enjoyable and relatable to the audience. In this article, she asks the director and screenwriters why this false sense of decency and humility exists in depicting the actual tenor of romance on screen. She argued that by showing more realistic and honest portrayals of love, filmmakers could make films that appeal to a wider audience and show how real people in the real-world experience romance. She believed that this would make films more meaningful and engaging for viewers. She further adds that in India, personal values are constantly tied to



religious impulses. By creating more authentic and honest portrayals of love, filmmakers can create stories that are more relatable to Indian audiences and better reflect their values. This can help bridge the gap between the stories filmmakers tell and their audiences' experiences. Through the years, our people have come to see kissing as disgusting behaviour that is, thus, morally wrong. Therefore, filmmakers must create stories that are more accepting of these intimate acts as they can help to shift the Indian society's perception of them. This will encourage more people to embrace love and express their feelings more positively and healthily. In a humorous tone, she argues that if the objection to kissing was made for hygiene reasons, it might be tolerated until pyorrhoea was considered incurable. If a couple are on a river bank, this procedure is repeated from stone to stone or from tree to tree. This can be done by showing that these intimate acts are natural, accepted, and a sign of love. It is also important to normalize conversations about hygiene and sexuality. This can help to reduce the stigma associated with these topics.

She is, however, at the time aware that she could face criticism and knew that many will criticize her for writing this truthfully. She can already hear thousands of voices shouting at her (Patel 31). She is aware that the truth she speaks may challenge the status quo, and this could lead to criticism from those who wish to maintain the status quo. She also knows that many may think that her speaking the truth would create unrest in her community, but she is confident that her words will not lead to any upheaval.

Love is already a great feeling; how much more so would it be? The on-screen value would be appreciated if it was delivered with integrity and passion. (Patel 1942,31)

In the same year Horniman a well-known British editor of the *Bombay Chronicle* supported Sushila Rani's "Kissing is the thing." He says, "Miss Sushila rani's outspoken demand for real kisses on the screen. That is the thing! She had greatly served the Indian film world through her courageous articles. And that is the correct attitude for all romance and kisses will continue to dominate in the world, whether some people like them or not" (Patel1943, 35) Horniman recognized the importance of Rani's opinion, and saw the value in her argument that real kisses should be allowed in films. He felt that her opinion was important and should be given a platform, and that romance and kisses would continue to be a prominent part of films in spite of all opposition.

She wrote copiously, often using her by-line. At one place, she described in a humorous vein the cinema-

going experience in Bombay - a sophisticated theatre, a black market for tickets, a loud audience and sleazy men who tried to touch women in the darkness. As she says, “you are in a seat now, and suddenly you become aware of a stink pervading the auditorium.” (Patel 1944,33) Her writing style was a mixture of humour and sarcasm, which enabled her to paint a vivid picture of the cinema-going experience in Bombay - from its luxurious theatres to the black market for tickets to the unsavoury characters who would harass women in the darkness.

Years later, in 1985, for the magazine's 50th birthday, Sushila Rani published a lengthy article expressing her love for Baburao Patel. She wrote about how she had admired him since she was a child and how his work had inspired her to pursue a career in writing. She described how the magazine had been an integral part of her life, and how it had shaped her views and values. “He had been by my side for nearly forty years, and now the man who dominated my life was no more. I have loved and married despite it not being a perfect match”. (Bhatia 82) This was her last message to the publication. The magazine had ceased operations the same year.

### Sushila Rani as an Actor



Fig 4 (Draupadi 2)



Fig 5 (Sushila Rani 14)



Sushila Rani stated that she was not interested in acting in movies. She wanted to pursue a career in music and felt that acting would be a distraction from her goal. She also felt that she would not be able to fully commit to acting and the lifestyle that comes with it. She claims in her introductory article published in 1942 that one of the producers offered her Rs. 1500 per month before she even had a screen test. She was wary of the glamour and attention that comes with being a movie star, feeling that it would interfere with her focus on music. She also didn't want to be viewed as someone who was only in the business for the money. She valued her craft and wanted to be recognized for her skill and dedication.

In an interview published in *Filmindia* in 1942, Sushila Rani reminisced:

“When I came to Bombay, the talent scouts of a couple of studios spotted me. I don't know how but without even giving me a screen test, I was offered Rs.1500/- a month by one producer and Rs.2000/- by another producer... "The job of a secretary in "filmindia" suits me and pays me just enough to meet my needs ..." The work I am doing is good and interesting, and I like helping in the editorial work." (Patel, 1942)

Initially, she was drawn in and seduced by the beauty of films, but when she stopped and thought objectively about her whole movie career later, she decided it was not worthwhile. In the interview conducted by Abbas on 1942 in *Filmindia*, she conveyed her opinions: “Baburao Patel may not like my honesty, but he is performing his job as a publicist for the Indian cinema business.” However, she added that Patel shouldn't be offended if he encounters certain people who have independent thoughts. She enjoyed working as a secretary for *Filmindia*, which satisfied her need. She was always fond of writing and editing; her work was outstanding and interesting.

In 1944, while she was actively working on the magazine, Baburao Patel desired to return to filmmaking, intending to produce a film titled *Draupadi*.. His new secretary, Sushila Rani, was the ideal heroine since she was a fresh face, composed, and conventional, and she was within reach. Soon after she started working in his office, he began marketing the film in his magazine using his flair. Whether he was attempting to pursue Sushila or using her as a new face is unclear, but it is evident that he ensured that she remained in Bombay.

A few days before filming started, tragedy struck. Anandrao (Sushila Rani's father), who was in poor



health, fainted while climbing the steps of the building one morning. He suffered a heart attack and died as a result. She was heartbroken, but she had a film to complete. Despite her grief, she was determined to finish the film as a tribute to her father, who had been an avid movie fan. She continued to work, relying on her determination and strength to carry her through the tragedy and complete the project.

Baburao dived headfirst into his film. Chandra Mohan, Mazhar Khan, K.N Singh, David, and Baburao Pendhakar rounded up the remarkable cast. Govardhan Patel and Jatin Das were responsible for the disrobing sequence and the camerawork respectively. In the January 1944 edition of *Filmindia*, a two-page advertisement entitled "*From the Blackboard to the Silver Screen*" was prepared. (Bhatia 31) The advertisement highlighted the film's star cast and its production team, as well as giving readers an insight into the behind-the-scenes techniques and processes used by the film crew. It was an innovative and ground-breaking way of promoting the film and created a buzz within the Indian film industry.

Sushila Rani's rendition of the enthralling melody in *Draupadi* was a distinctive and original element. In 1944, Sushila Rani was featured on the cover of the *Filmindia* magazine, and several images of the film's spectacular set were scattered throughout the publication. As the film received widespread acclaim, she was portrayed as a multitalented, highly brilliant woman with not just a university degree but also a beautiful, melodic singing voice. She was a perfectionist who wanted jewellery crafted from her designs and songs created to her specifications. Her own *Filmindia* magazine characterized her as "irritatingly dictatorial yet a popular taskmaster." (Bhatia 32)

Later, Sushila Rani felt oppressed and powerless due to Patel's constant desire for her and his increasingly overbearing and possessive behaviour. "He could not stand anyone else talking to me. There was a jealous side to him that remained till the last day of his life". (Bhatia 32) She recalls that when Baburao approached her for marriage, she was shocked : "I did not want to get married, but not to someone so much older." (Bhatia 32) This oppressive behaviour was further enforced by Patel's age and power, which left Sushila Rani feeling like her opinion was not valued and that she had no choice but to accept his offer of marriage. This further increased her feelings of powerlessness and oppression.

Sushila Rani was overwhelmed by the loss of her sister and the guilt of not being able to save her, as well as the pressure from Baburao to continue her film career. She felt like she needed to get away and start



over, so she decided to flee Bombay and the film industry. She returned in early 1945 under this immense strain when the movie, *Draupadi* was still playing. B. G. Horniman, a well-known British editor of the *Bombay Chronicle* and a frequent writer for *Filmindia*, gave the film a review. He called it a "powerful and moving drama which grips the attention and holds it until the end," praising Sushila Rani's performance as a "brilliant piece of acting." Horniman further added that "Draupadi sprung Sushila Rani at one bound into stardom. She dominates the whole production with a wholly dominating personality that overwhelms one with the compelling sense of modesty, sweetness, and purity of Indian womanhood" (Bhatia 36). His review gave her the validation she needed to continue her career and put the tragedy of her sister's death behind her.

*Filmindia's* readers speculated that Baburao Patel may have hired people to carry out counter-propaganda to boost interest in *Draupadi*. Despite the overwhelming dominance of stars in the general discussion on cinema at this time, the idea that stars were a purposefully created commodity was still new. Baburao Patel strategically used the experiment to push his agenda and ensure that Sushila Rani's story was seen as more important than other films at the time. He manipulated the narrative surrounding his film, creating a sense of urgency and importance that other films did not have. This helped to make it stand out from the crowd. By focusing on the star as the main marketing element, and creating an aura of urgency and importance around them, the film was able to capture the attention of both the audience and the industry. This allowed the film to stand out from the rest, as it was not relying on traditional film marketing methods but rather on the star's presence and influence. Since stars existed in both real life and media texts, the mechanical explanation of their use and existence is a simplification of the difficult work that went into repressing and limiting unexpected and contradicting portions of a star's public persona. This strategy was designed to give the star a level of control over how they were portrayed and protection from any negative publicity that might arise from their public actions.

Furthermore, it allowed them to create an image that was appealing to a wider audience and that had the potential to be profitable. Sushila's many on-screen performances helped her develop these surprising traits. As a result, the star's strategy became a success, enabling her to craft an appealing persona that resonated with audiences and opened up a range of business opportunities for her.



She started working on another movie, *Gvalan*, directed by Baburao Patel, soon after. It was the story of a village girl. The movie was set in the backdrop of pre-independence India and highlighted the importance of religious harmony and understanding. It was a story of a village girl who had to face life's various challenges, but with her friend's help, she overcame them and achieved her dreams.

Sushila Rani, who portrays *Draupadi* with poise and dignity, does a full romp as Shyama, the milkmaid in *Gvalan*.. She sings, dances, and flirts with creative and passionate recklessness. She elicits the audience's emotions and garners the sympathy of the enormous crowd with her masterful emotional performance. Sushila Rani's performance is a testament to her skill and understanding of the character and the scene. She fully embodies the character of Shyama and captures her personality, emotions, and the arc of the story. She manages to elicit the desired emotions from the audience and creates a lasting impression.

After the film's release, she ceased acting and continued contributing to the magazine. She wanted to share her story with a larger audience and saw the magazine as an opportunity. During this time, Baburao Patel relocated with his first wife, Shireen, so she just brushed off her problems and began working. She felt that writing would provide her a platform to express her thoughts and feelings and to reach a wider audience. She also wanted to take advantage of the new opportunity to make a living while Baburao moved in with his wife. She began managing a significant portion of the letters, picked questions from the many received each week, spoke with printers, block builders, and authors, including the all-powerful editor. Taking on this new role allowed her to use her education and knowledge of the industry to her advantage. She was able to leverage her experience in the industry to navigate the complex relationships within the publishing industry and to use her skills to create a career for herself. Her increased confidence in her abilities allowed her to take on more challenging tasks and connect with people in the industry more meaningfully. This enabled her to start her journalism career and pursue her passion for music.

### **Conclusion**

Sushila Rani witnessed a changing India; she was born and grew up in a colonized country, finished her studies when the world went to war. She had married a man fourteen years older than her; she saw India gaining independence, successive governments, four big wars, innumerable new laws, and much social change. Her significant strength was that she remained a modern woman in temperament and outlook,



though firmly rooted in Indian tradition. She was more than a witness to history in some respects; she epitomized that history. She continued missing from the archives as a journalist, an actress, and an entrepreneur and was made invisible inside the movie industry. This article is an attempt to recover that elusive past.

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Fig3: *Filmindia's New Secretary*. Baburao Patel, Bombay, Bombay, Aug. 1942, p. 24.

Fig 4 : “Draupadi .” *Film Poster*, Baburao Patel, Bombay, Jan. 1945, p. 2.

Fig 5: “Sushila Rani.” *Draupadi Success Poster*, Baburao Patel, Bombay, Jan. 1945, p. 14.



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