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The seth that was ART

TO the evolution and refinement of cinematic arts, the contributions made by several wealthy Lahore-based non-Muslims cannot be ignored when writing about the history of filmmaking in the sub-continent. Not only did they build a chain of film studios after the advent of talking movies but also constructed scores of cinema halls all over northern India, where films produced by them were screened regularly. Included among these pioneer filmmakers was the Karachi-born Seth Dilsukh M. Pancholi (1906-1959).

Following the release of *Alam Ara*, the first sound motion picture in a Bombay theatre in March 1932, a large number of affluent people joined the newly-emerging domain of arts, which promised vast opportunities not only to make good money but also served as a mode of creative expressions. Major themes, which dominated films produced from different film centres in India, including Lahore during the 1930s and 1940s, were pegged to the themes of social and religious exploitation, fantasy, feudal oppression, history and romance. Mass production of films during the early period of cinema in the sub-continent had a telling effect on their quality and the films gradually became sillier, shriller and more gimmicked-up, with no end of this trend in sight.

A large number of studios were set up in different regions of the sub-continent — Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Lahore for the production of films in regional languages on a mass scale. The man, who set up the first studios for film production in Lahore was Roshan Lal Shorey, who was followed by Seth Dilsukh Pancholi, both of them being wealthy Hindus.

Dilsukh Pancholi, the inheritor of a cinema network from his father, Rewashankar Pancholi (set up during World War I) studied scriptwriting and cinematography in a film institute in New York. His training abroad helped him expand his father's Lahore-based Empire Film Distributors (1922) the name of which he changed to Empire Talkies Distributors in 1931. Soon there-

after, he emerged as the largest importer of American films for screening in northern and western India. An exclusive contract, which he signed with RKO (of the United States) gave his company access to photophone sound equipment. He made a few documentaries, including footage on the Karachi session of the All-India Congress Committee (1931).

Before Pancholi entered the business of film production in the late 1930s, Lahore already had a two-floor film studio built by Roop Lal Shorey, where several Punjabi films were produced. Pancholi made his debut as a filmmaker by first producing a Punjabi movie *Gul Bakauli* in 1939, which was followed by *Yamla Jat* in 1940. Both these films did a roaring business at the box office and helped Seth Pancholi establish his credentials as a successful filmmaker. It may be recalled that these films won wide acclaim primarily because of the highly creative and original songs composed by the legendary Master Ghulam Haider.

In 1941, Pancholi's Urdu film *Khazanchi*, for which music was also composed by Master Ghulam Haider, paved the way for the Lahore film industry to become an ineluctable part of the national mainstream of the Indian cinema. Seth Pancholi set up a couple of studios (one on Upper Mall and the other on Canal Bank near Muslim Town), Lahore, with five floors and produced several more successful films under the banner of Pancholi Arts Pictures. In those days, film studios used to keep creative people — actors, actresses, composers and technicians on their payrolls. Whether a film was produced or not, these employees got their salaries regularly each month. The highest monthly salary in those days, which an artiste received, was Rs250, which composer Master Ghulam Haider was paid by the Pancholi Arts Pictures.

Included in the long list of employees of the Pancholi Studios, were directors Moti B. Gidwani, Narinjan, Ravindra Dave and Shaukat Hussain Rizvi; actress Ramola, Nur Jehan, Smriti Biswas and actors Ajmal, Pran and Om Prakash and com-

poser Master Ghulam Haider. It was the teamwork of highly talented artistes and technicians, which contributed to the success of a number of films produced under the banner of the Pancholi Arts Studios.

The lilt and cadences of songs composed by Master Ghulam Haider for Pancholi Arts Pictures' film, *Khazanchi* (1941) inspired Lata Mangeshkar so much that she rehearsed these songs day and night to get mastery over their rendition. In a song competition held at Pune, she was adjudged the best singer among all the participants after she recreated the *Khazanchi* songs in her voice. So much impact had been created by Ghulam Haider's compositions that they reached the lips of millions in the sub-continent.

Seth Dilsukh M. Pancholi did not want to leave Lahore after the creation of Pakistan and stayed in the city for a few weeks after August, 1947, to look after this studios and distribution office.

However, after some threatening phone calls made to him allegedly on behalf of some people with vested interests in his property, scared the Seth out of his wits. He decided to migrate to India, leaving everything behind. The only material he took along were the negatives of his film *Patjhar*, which was released in India in 1948.

In India, Pancholi could produce only one film, *Aasmaan*, which was released in 1952. He could not overcome the loss of his empire in Lahore. In 1959, he died in Bombay at the relatively young age of 53. However, his contribution to the cinematic arts are written in the annals of sub-continental cinema. There are still a number of senior workers in the Lahore film industry, who still remember Pancholi and recall with nostalgic fondness the good old days when they were associated with the Pancholi Arts Pictures more than half a century ago.

It will be a great tribute to Seth Pancholi and to the Lahore-based industry if prints of some of his super hit movies like *Yamla Jat*, *Chaudhry*, *Khandaan* and *Khazanchi* are retrieved or borrowed from India. — SAEED MALIK