

**National Film Archive of India
Ministry of Information and Broadcasting
Government of India**

Press Note

NFAI acquires Bilwamangal, a silent film of 1919

Glimpse of missing history of Indian silent Cinema arrives in NFAI, said Shri Prakash Magdum

National Film Archive of India has acquired surviving footage of the Indian silent film *Bilwamangal* (1919) from the Cinematheque Francaise, France. The film produced by the Elphinstone Bioscope in Calcutta later renamed as Madan Theatres Ltd, was directed by Rustomji Dotiwala. NFAI has acquired 594 mts. (28 minutes footage at 18 fps) of this film. The film was originally 12,000 feet long.

“This has been a wonderful addition to NFAI collection”, said Shri Prakash Magdum, Director NFAI. “I wish to thank Cinematheque Francaise with whom I was in touch with to acquire this Indian film. NFAI will be returning this gesture by providing a digital copy of Indian silent film *Jamai Babu* (1931) directed by Kalipada Das from our collection as per mutual exchange policy under FIAF framework”, said Shri Prakash Magdum, Director NFAI.

Shri Magdum added “Bilwamangal is a landmark acquisition for NFAI, as there was no trace of work of studio of JF Madan, available in India till date. With this acquisition NFAI now possesses in its collection films representing three important Indian studios of the silent era – Madan, Kohinoor and Hindustan. Each of these studios had a prolific output making nearly a hundred films each in the silent era. This acquisition is an important for NFAI at a juncture when we are in the process of implementing prestigious National Film Heritage Mission to safeguard Country’s cinematic heritage.”

The last silent films NFAI acquired were from Kolhapur during 1996, titled ‘Murliwala’, ‘Sati Savitri’ and ‘Maya Bazar’ directed by Baburao Painter. India has produced nearly 1300 silent films between 1913 and 1932, most of which were lost due to its Nitrate base. Nearly 28 silent films though incomplete, have been preserved in NFAI’s storage facilities since then.

About the film- Bilwamangal:

Bilwamangal (1919)

Studio : Elphinstone Bioscope Company, Calcutta

Director : Rustomji Dotiwala

Starring : Miss Gohur, Dorabji Mewawala

The Elphinstone Bioscope Company produced its first film *Satyavadi Raja Harischandra* in 1917. The film was directed by Rustomji Dotiwala who also directed the second film of the company, *Bilwamangal* or *Bhakta Surdas*. The film was made in 1919 and was 12,000 feet long (approximately 132 minutes).

Described as “the story of a man’s ruinous obsession with a courtesan”, the film was adapted from a popular retelling of the legend. The character of Bilwamangal was played by Dorabji Mewavala while Miss Gohur, the greatly popular Parsi theatre actress, played the role of the courtesan Chintamani. In the film, Miss Gohur appears in a long dance sequence where her prowess as a performer is clearly on display.

The story of the transformation of the philandering Bilwamangal into the saint poet Bhakta Surdas fascinated a number of filmmakers during the period. Bilwamangal’s stubborn love for the courtesan Chintamani leads to his father dying in grief. His wife, Rambha, is portrayed by several versions as losing her mind. Bilwamangal is hit by a revelation when during his desperate journey to reach Chintamani’s house in a raging storm, he mistakes a snake for a rope and a corpse for a log of wood (in some versions the corpse is that of his wife, Rambha). Chintamani who is herself an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna convinces Bilwamangal to abandon his present life for the life of a saint.

The ornate sets and the lighting in the film are especially striking. In one scene, Bilwamangal’s wife, Rambha, in a state of hysteria walks towards the camera. It is a matter of significance that Madan employed several foreign technicians in his company. The Italian director Eugenio de Liguoro was the cinematographer and director of Madan Theatre Limited’s *Nala Damyanti*, made in 1921. Camille de Grand and Charles Creed were two other foreign directors who worked with Madan in the twenties. Keeping in mind this production practice by Madan, it was highly likely that Bilwamangal also shot by foreign technicians.

Bilwamangal was remade in the talkie era by JJ Madan in 1932 with Patience Cooper, Kajjan and Nawab playing the principle characters. In 1929, Kohinoor Film Company released *Bilwamangal* directed by Homi Master. In 1931, Bharat Movietone released the talkie *Chintamani* directed by Kanjibhai Rathod. The legend was adapted in Tamil as *Chintamani* (1937) by YV Rao. Other notable adaptations of the saint story are Ranjit Studios’ *Bhakta Surdas* (1942) where Bilwamangal was played by KL Saigal to great acclaim. DN Madhok wrote the dialogues and song lyrics in this film. In 1954, DN Madhok directed his own version of the story, *Bilwamangal*, in which Suraiya played the role of Chintamani.

