



At Grant Road lies an old compound that has witnessed the earliest era of cinema in the country. The Jyoti Studios Compound may be where one finds motor garages, woodworks and a marriage hall today, but it was once a place where the filmmaking industry evolved.

Filmmaker Ardeshir Irani, known for his silent feature films, founded the Majestic Film Studio and the Royal Art Studios, where he produced films. Both these studios were short-lived. However, at the Royal Art Studios, Irani met Dadasaheb Torne, who had experience making feature films. Torne advised Irani to start a studio and film production company (Gahlot 2023). Irani set up Imperial Films Studio in 1926, which is present-day Jyoti Studios (Gangar 2021). He also opened a film production company, Imperial Film Company, and appointed Torne as a manager at both places.

Imperial Films Studios became closely associated with the costumed historical genre. It launched Anarkali (1928), which was shot here and released overnight. It was the first studio to shoot scenes at night for Khwab-e-Hasti (1929) using incandescent lamps (Ganti 2004: 16). In the 1930s, Dadasaheb Torne realised that talkie movies had created a revolution abroad and thus suggested making a talkie to Irani. He had already learned how to use the machinery, and since they had all the machinery required for the production, he taught the technicians in the Imperial Film Company how to use them. The work on the talkie was kept a secret.



The studio created history within two months. On 14th March 1931, it released the first talkie of India, *Alam Ara*, shot at the studio. It was the first full-length sound feature film. It was released in the Majestic Cinema Theatre with the words, “All Living, Breathing 100 per cent Talking Peak Drama, Essence of Romance, Brains and Talents Unheard of Under One Banner” (Outlook 2022). The film was such a hit that tickets were sold in black, and police had to be called for crowd control.



The shooting of *Alam Ara* was not an easy one. It was a time when dubbing for films had not started. Sound had to be captured simultaneously to shoot a talkie. However, this was quite difficult as the sound from passing trains at Grant Road Railway Station just behind the studio would interfere with the shoot. The film would commence shooting at 01:00 am after the last local train had ground to a halt and packed up before the first train left Churchgate station at the stroke of 04:00 am. The crew also had to be cautious about extraneous noises, as they were shooting with a Tanar, a single-system camera which recorded sound directly onto the film. There were no booms then, with microphones hidden at odd places (Outlook 2022).

Irani also made the first Persian language sound feature film at the Imperial Film Studios in 1933. This film was called *Dukhtar-e-Lur*, and it was also the first Iranian movie to feature a woman in the lead (Ganti 2004, 16). Later, to save costs of filmmaking, Irani produced *Kalidas*, a film in Tamil on the sets of *Alam Ara*, with songs in Telugu (Indian Memory Project).

After *Kalidas*, another historic figure came to work here with Irani. Saadat Hasan Manto worked at Ardeshir Irani's Imperial Film Company, where he wrote his first film, *Kisan Kanya* (Sethu 2022). In 1937, *Kisan Kanya* shot here became the first indigenously processed colour film made with the Cinecolour process (Deol 2019).

The studio introduced several personalities of Indian cinema. The eminent filmmakers of that time, R.S. Choudhury, B.P. Mishra, Mohan Bhavnani and Nandlal Jaswantlal, were at the studios along with stars like Mehboob Khan, Sulochana, Zubeida and Jiloo. Even Prithviraj Kapoor came to the studio looking for work and met Ardeshir Irani, after which there was no looking back (Jain 2005). Irani went on to make 62 films here.

The studio was transferred to Ardeshir Irani's son, Shapoorji Irani eventually. A lot of talkie studios had emerged in Bombay. He rented out the studio premises to shoot different films. *Shyamchi Aai*, directed by P. K. Atre, which won the President's Gold Medal for the All India Best Feature Film, was also shot here (Jaiswar 2023).

The Imperial Film Studio became an ideal place for shooting films with its beautiful garden, varied backdrops and a red building that looked like a jail from the outside and an office from the inside. It also had suitable exhibition infrastructure and in-house equipment (Jaiswar 2023). It was also significant for its efforts at technological innovation (Ganti 2004: 15).

Celebrities like Shashi Kapoor, Amol Palekar, Vidya Sinha, Dara Singh, and Jackie Shroff were regulars here. Several Gujarati films like *Har Har Mahadev* (1973) were shot here, while only parts of some Hindi films like *Rakhi aur Rifle* (1976) were filmed at the studio (Soni 2023). During the National Emergency in 1975, several filmmakers shot Hindi films here. By this time, Parsee patrons supported Jyoti Studios (Wiki Phalke Factory 2006).

As time passed, the studios' proximity to the railway station proved to be a hindrance. The land inside was given to tenants as a part of the pagdi system since the owners shifted abroad (Jaiswar 2023). The studio saw its last days in the 1980s. Although some shooting continued, it was close to negligible. Over the last two decades, there has been no shooting at Jyoti Studios; however, the contribution of the studio in creating pioneering films that moved audiences remains a lasting legacy.





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