

Notes on a Scandal: Writing Women's Film History Against an Absent Archive

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Very early into the life of cinema in India it became apparent that this new phenomenon would generate talk. In its affective manifestations, cinema was able to circulate more freely and widely than the physical film object. The film studio, which uniquely brought men and women together in intimate working conditions, was especially susceptible to the discourse of gossip, rumor and scandal. A large part of the glamour of the film industry lay in the possibility of romance, the existence of a new heterosocial space where beautiful, wealthy, young men and women could meet and be drawn to each other. Fan magazines and tabloids were regularly swamped by letters demanding biographical information about these public personalities. The film studios which were associated with these glamorous names became sites of intense speculation and wonder. Through this paper I seek to understand the historiographic productivity of such speculation and talk. Dictionary definitions of the words rumor, gossip, and scandal point to their narrative unreliability and their shaky epistemological status. Instead, if we historicize these discursive moments we might be able to glean something specific to a geographical, socio-cultural context and its moral-political assumptions about propriety and conventional behaviour. Through the following sections I will try to demonstrate how the film historian might use these “illegitimate” sources of history to approach an intimate, and lived history of Bombay’s film work culture.

But first, why turn to scandal? The official archives of Bombay cinema are marked by a palpable absence. The National Film Archives of India was set up only in 1964 and scores of early films are lost to us for reasons ranging from material problems with nitrate, a hesitant film archival culture, and the politics of preservation. Moreover, materials that film historians in parts of Europe and the United States take for granted such as studio papers are practically non-existent. Research on women workers in this period is even more pitiable and basic profiles of several leading actresses are yet to be collated. A lack of direct evidence pushes us to move through discursive constellations framed around women or their absence. Women's lives and work come to us in fragments, sometimes in straightforward celebratory rhetoric in hagiographies, at other times in the form of hints of scandal. In this paper I focus on the status and work of the female film professional in late colonial Bombay. I will try

to both theorize and confront the acute absence of women's histories from official archives of Indian cinema by turning to the discursive form of scandal as its evidentiary entry-point.

The most overwhelming narrative that emerges around women's presence in the Bombay film studio is that of respectability and moral danger, the constant subtext being an anxiety about female sexuality. Women in studios were caught in a double bind; not only were they likely to perform the seductive huntress, but they were themselves susceptible to the seductions of the studio. The film studio became the site of much anxiety both outside and inside the film industry. There were discussions about studio reform amidst 'concerned' citizens and journalists in the public sphere of print journalism, simultaneous with official industry associations suggesting controls and reforms at every Film Congress and meeting. The rapidly mushrooming parallel industry of film journals and tabloids was driven by this "unconventional" work atmosphere and much revenue was generated on the basis of rumor and gossip. Actresses routinely made claims in these very magazines about the wholesome atmosphere of film studios or about moral integrity as the ultimate defense of a pure working woman. These claims directly referenced anxieties circulating within cinema's dispersed publics about the steady emergence of the modern publicly visible city woman – a new breed of secretaries, nurses, writers, telephone operators, and anti-imperial political activists.

Scandal is a significant form of framing modern life. As a set of discursive formations manufactured and circulated in the public sphere, scandals reveal important clues as to dominant attitudes towards social boundaries. Tightly framed within a discourse of morality, film scandals often have less to do with the individual acts condemned, and more to do with the unsettling of studio/social hierarchies and gender politics. However, following Luise White's work on rumor in colonial Africa, I maintain that scandals should be seen not only as *symptoms* of societal anxieties but direct attempts at articulating the contradictions of modern life. Using scandal as a discursive entry-point into the production context, we might be able to tap into moments of irruption and signs of excess that belie stable accounts of Bombay's 'glorious studio years'. I use scandal more as a form of oral discursivity rather than a mediated event. Hints of scandal are available in film magazines, but layers and versions of the same incident fold back on the rumored event through interviews with colleagues, and published memoirs. The scandals discussed in this paper have been assembled in a jigsaw puzzle fashion from these varied sources.

DEVIKA RANI: SLIDE

The elopement scandal I start with took place sometime in 1935-36. Details about this incident are reported in biographical sketches like the one quoted in the slide, innuendos in film journals and memoirs of several individuals connected with Devika Rani. Bombay Talkies was founded in 1934 with a very definite vision. Its founder-members were the husband and wife duo of Himansu Rai and Devika Rani who had both spent many years learning film craft in Germany and England. Their ambition was to reconfigure the indigenous Indian film industry by introducing cutting-edge technology, an international team of technicians, a rationalized studio work model, and legitimate financing sources. At the same time, Himansu Rai was bent upon remaking the film industry as a “respectable” place for “respectable” workers. The composition of studio personnel at Bombay Talkies and Filmistan indicated a heightened sense of class consciousness in the recruitment decisions. Devika Rani herself has said that “In Bombay Talkies we were all one class of people – all our recruits were from those sent by the Vice-Chancellors of various universities. We selected our co-stars either from among friends or from the Universities.”

Given this ambition and the emphasis on bourgeois respectability, how do we understand the scandalous elopement attempt by Devika Rani? The film being shot was *Jeevan Naiya*, Bombay Talkies’ second feature film. The studio's first film had starred the same duo of Najmul Hussain and Devika Rani and they had become a major hit with audiences (*Jawani-ki-Hawa*, Franz Osten, 1935). True to the cliché, this on-screen couple seems to have smoothly transitioned into an off-screen one. But such matters rarely become hard facts that can be recorded in the annals of history. A co-actor remembers: “Something happened; what, no one knew for sure. There were stories, rumors. Perhaps only four persons knew the truth. The others could only conjecture.” Devika Rani was finally tracked down in Calcutta and persuaded to return to the studio and her husband. But Najmul Hussain had to be fired. Despite the gossip and scandal, Devika Rani went on to become the first-ever recipient of a major national film award and is perhaps the only actress of the period whose iconic star status has been nurtured in official histories over the years. Her story has always been cast as a simple tale of class and conformism. It might be time to revisit this narrative.

Born in 1908 into a privileged upper-caste Bengali family, Devika Rani was famously the grand-niece of the poet-laureate Rabindranath Tagore. Her fans were well aware of key biographical details including the fact that she had spent some years in London pursuing higher vocational studies. It was there that she met Himansu Rai and they worked on a couple of silent films together where she served first as a set designer and then became an actress. They moved to Germany where Devika Rani learned

the ropes of filmmaking in various departments like art direction, costume and make-up with people like Marlene Dietrich and Fritz Lang. After Hitler's rise to power in Germany, a newly-married Himansu Rai and Devika Rani moved to Bombay and set up their own studio. Rai was sixteen years older than Devika Rani when they married in 1929, and she has mentioned how "he was really like a father." Najmul Hussain, on the other hand, was attractive, young and had a plan. According to another set of rumors about the elopement scandal, Najmul Hussain had been trying to work out a combined contract for Devika and himself with one of most reputed film studios of the day - New Theatres, in Calcutta - which was exactly the kind of establishment that Himansu Rai and Devika wanted BT to be. And so, the lovers left the *Jeevan Naiya* shoot abruptly and went to Calcutta to finalize their contract. Their plan was foiled by Himansu Rai but Najmul Hussain went on work in a couple of New Theatres' films after which his career quietly sank. If we confront these rival rumors or shall we say, competing truths, the basic elopement plot of the scandal narrative opens out into stories of studio competition, individual ambition, a foreshadowing of the displacement of Calcutta by Bombay as the new power center of film production and the fact that the film actress could leverage considerable bargaining power.

Back at Bombay Talkies, Devika Rani went on to star in some of the studio's most enduring hits. This is a history rife with contradictions and I argue that part of the historiographic productivity of scandal narratives is that they highlight the messiness of lived experiences of female stardom and other forms of urban gendered work. The commerce of star-making works on contradictory impulses. Stars are manufactured by a network of forces including studios, producers, writers, stylists, publicists, journalists and the stars themselves. Again, the final commodity, the 'star phenomenon' is a configuration dispersed across various spheres, not just limited to the star herself or her work on screen. The tension between the public and private promises held out by the female star complicates understandings of the individual and subjecthood, between appearance and essence. Richard Dyer has discussed that "[publicity] is thus often taken to give privileged access to the real person of the star. It is also the place where one can read tensions between the star-as-person and her/his image, tensions which at another level become themselves crucial to the image."

The dispersed effects of the star can be seen in the ways in which Devika Rani, directly or indirectly came to represent Bombay Talkies and its work ethic. Elsewhere I have suggested that more than her screen work as an actress, it was her work as a public icon that contributed to Bombay Talkies' fortunes and also enshrined her in official narratives of Indian cinema. At the same time, her screen

portrayals added extra dimensions to the public image. She consistently played the good girl martyr figure in her films even as she performed the role of the ideal Brahmin wife and partner to a powerful studio boss. Himansu Rai, a canny entrepreneur, was conscious of the dominant perceptions about film studios as morally dubious spaces. Worried that talented workers were wary of film work, he set out to carefully construct an image of his studio as a family, with him as the benevolent bourgeois patriarch and Devika Rani as the presiding ideal Hindu wife and partner. In fact, Himansu Rai actively mobilized Devika Rani's background and breeding to allay fears of young men and women who were afraid of the stigma of film work. This image-work by Devika Rani was also exploited by a section of film journalists who were also keen to remake the film industry as a legitimate art form and work place. As late as in 1945, the reader of a film magazine asks the editor: "Does society really ostracize those educated girls from respectable families who join the film industry?" The editor replies: "Where did you pick up this fairytale? ... Do you know that several provincial governors have shaken hands with Devika Rani?" In reality, life for the educated actress was hardly prestigious but as an exception, Devika Rani did her work well. She took up the role of the symbolic spokesperson of Bombay Talkies and played the charming diplomat conferring with politicians and bureaucrats at official functions. She also performed a mentoring role to young actresses who sought film work but were apprehensive about its social repercussions. In 1939, a fan declared that Devika Rani's greatness was demonstrated by the fact that *her* name was the "hall-mark [of a good film] not the studio's [name]. All Bombay Talkies' pictures have been sold on Devika's name; she is no 'star' of their making." But this name had to be created and nurtured.

Fans regularly asked pointed questions about their idol. Eg: "Has Devika Rani any children?" or, "Who is the better worker between Sushila Rani and Devika Rani?" Such public discourse exerted pressures on film professionals, especially women, to play out conciliatory versions of femininity in a public domain. Thus we see Devika Rani tread the fine line between tradition and sophistication in her public life. But lurking behind every gesture was the threat of excess. The darkly painted mouth was seldom seen without its ivory cigarette holder. The diplomatic duties led to rumors of romantic liaisons. Inscribed in reminiscences by the actors and technicians of Bombay Talkies lie anecdotal accounts of Rani's notorious bad temper and bad language. These accounts highlight the performance of certain modes of behavior which allow other taboo acts to slip through. It is impossible to hermetically seal the cinematic persona from the public woman. The two interact in subtle ways and the meanings generated by the filmic text are rendered unstable.

In the context of Europe, Rita Felski has said that the markers and meanings of the modern woman could be appropriated by dissident or disenfranchised groups to formulate their own resistance to the status quo. “Thus in the early twentieth century the figure of the New Woman was to become a resonant symbol of emancipation, whose modernity signaled not an endorsement of an existing present but rather a bold imagining of an alternative future.” On the other hand, the nationalist construction of women in India is said to have created a different kind of new woman. This woman awkwardly balanced a modern education with a traditional life of domesticity. Both the versions of the New Woman appear inadequate in the context of Devika Rani’s life and work.

Instead, it is evident that Devika Rani was able to play an aspirational role model for modernizing young women of the time. Straddling the realms of fiction and reality with her continuous performance, she embodied the competing demands from modern women – to represent education, reform and ‘Indian’ values, as also to be at par with the enterprising, sophisticated, fashionable woman of Europe and America. The modern femininity she represented, was a **viable** role model for the urban college girl. Under the public performance of her married status, Devika Rani was able to wield power and sidestep convention. It was exactly this route that later actresses like Shobhana Samarth chose for herself when her family opposed her desire to act in films. She agreed to an arranged marriage as a way to free herself from the restrictions imposed on single girls. On meeting the prospective groom, Kumarsen Samarth, she asked him if he was okay with her acting after marriage. He was, and she shot her first film just a few months after the wedding.

Devika Rani potentially created a huge scandal by eloping with her leading man. Yet just a few months later, upon the release of *Achhut Kanya*, she was being hailed as a screen goddess. How did her fans reconcile these opposing narratives? Just as the actress cannot be claimed to be a unified subject in complete control of her meaning and intention, so is the fan made up of contradictory desires. Just as a fan may want to see Devika Rani perform subaltern, melodramatic roles in every film, she may simultaneously be gratified by gossip about Devika Rani’s latest affair. Rather than being limited by her generic cinematic avatars, the star’s transgressive acts fulfill certain fantasies of the spectator-fan. It emerges, therefore, that the film actress was not so much circumscribed by the nationalist constructions of the new woman, as she was aware of them. This awareness enabled a performative engagement with ideals of femininity and can be seen as a specific kind of work required from female actors.

When asked, in 1985, about her precise individual contribution to Bombay Talkies, Devika Rani was modest but astute. She replied simply, “I had the background. I had the breeding.”

Naseem Banu (1916-2002) was known in the 1940s as Pari-Chehra or the Fairy-Faced One. Her mother was a well-known and wealthy Delhi classical singer/courtesan, Shamshad Begum aka Chhamiya Bai. Her first film was Sohrab Modi’s adaptation of *Hamlet*, titled *Khoon ka Khoon* (1936) in which she played Ophelia. Her mother also landed a part in the film, as Queen Gertrude, ostensibly because Naseem was too shy to work by herself.

The scandal mentioned in the quote from *filmindia* took place around 1940-41. In a biographical sketch, the writer Manto, tells us that Naseem was referred to as the ‘Beauty Queen’ of the Bombay film industry and among her many suitors was the son of the Nizam of Hyderabad, Moazam Jah. Naseem’s mother, Shamshad Begum was now her full-time advisor and film agent but decided that The Nizam’s offer was too good to refuse. Manto says that both women moved to Hyderabad “as the prince’s guests” but Shamshad Begum soon realized that “Hyderabad was like a prison, which would stifle her daughter.” Shamshad managed to extricate her daughter from this tricky situation and they returned to Bombay and to films. It was at this point that a bitter Moazam Jah launched a unique smear campaign. In a highly cinematic twist, the walls of the city were plastered with posters maligning Naseem Banu’s reputation. Her sympathizers responded in like fashion.

The story behind this spectacular scandal highlights the precarious position of the ambitious single woman in a metropolitan environment. Women aspiring towards an up-market lifestyle had very few options when it came to safeguarding their long-term financial interests. They were also vulnerable to public slander. Crucial to this episode is Shamshad Begum’s own professional history as a courtesan, a lifestyle and career that guided her choices for her daughter.

The courtesan or *tawa’if*, had a special place in the courts of most Muslim and Hindu kings in pre-colonial South Asia. Trained in classical forms of song and dance, the *tawa’if* class of women from Lucknow, Calcutta, Hyderabad or Delhi, formed an influential elite and were known for their cultured ways. Veena Oldenburg’s research on the *tawa’ifs* of Lucknow shows how these courtesans wielded enormous power and wealth, often investing their royal patronage in land and small businesses. She suggests that the *tawa’ifs* be seen not as victims of patriarchal power structures, but as women who chose a lifestyle that resisted conventional institutions like marriage in favour of financial

independence. By the time Shamshad Begum emerged on the courtesan scene, the subcontinent had been scarred by the colonial presence and the Rajas and Nawabs of yore could no longer support elaborate systems of patronage. Gerry Farrell has described how the fall of royal courts and the concomitant rise of an urban elite led to a shift of the *kotha* tradition to the cities. The newest technological wonder of the times, cinema, also proved to be an attractive work site where famous courtesan-singers like Jaddan Bai and Shamshad Begum could showcase their talents as actresses, musicians, vocalists, or even composers. It is significant, therefore, that the worldly-wise Shamshad, forsook the patronage of one of the last remaining landed Nizams and chose the film industry as a career for her daughter. Cinema work presented a concrete option that could support their aspirations for a lavish lifestyle and provide them a way out of complete dependence on capricious male support, be it in marriage or as a landed mistress. At this point I would like to draw some attention to the unique role that women like Shamshad Begum played in the creation of their star daughters. The mother-daughter partnership is a model that has worked remarkably well in Bombay. The heroine's mother is such a familiar film industry figure that she is often caricatured as the formidable 'Mummy.' However, famous 'Mummies' like Jaddan Bai (Nargis' mother) and Shamshad Begum shrewdly managed their daughters' careers and groomed them to be successful stars.

The monetary aspect was definitely one of the main attractions that drew workers to the cinema industry, and helped many men and women overlook the question of the profession's perceived reputation. In fact, salaries of actresses were so high by contemporary standards that the figures became a matter of urban folklore. Readers would often write in to magazines curious about individual pay packages. Actresses themselves acknowledged in interviews that the money was substantial and more than one actress claimed that her salary rivaled that of the Governor of Bombay! Many of these declarations were designed to bolster the aura of luxury necessary for the star image. Nonetheless, judging from my own interviews with lower-rung studio employees, from actress autobiographies, and some studio papers it is clear that cinema acting was a highly lucrative profession for women. Here are some approximate annual earnings of actresses in 1942: **SLIDE**

Mrinal Pande has noted, "Inasmuch as this was a paid job, over the years, the actresses went on to become the first group of working women to acquire a certain financial independence." It also appears that actresses were drawing higher salaries than their male counterparts, as seen in the following query from a reader to the editor of a film magazine: **SLIDE**

Baburao Patel's flippant reply acknowledges the salary disparity as a fact but is misleading. The film actress had become a symbol of the glamour of cinema since the silent days, with actresses like Sulochana and Zubeida ruling the marquee. Film advertisements of the 1930s and 40s regularly gave the heroine top billing in print advertisements and publicity material. The film journalism industry was driven by actresses whose colour photographs adorned magazine covers and drove advertising revenues and sales. **SLIDE** It was the actress again, who had "the power of endorsement" and many leading cosmetics, toiletries and textile manufacturers started to exploit the screen goddess's brand value in their advertisements. **SLIDE** The industry may have been "run by men," but it was being powered by the women.

Naseem Banu's choice to work in the film industry seems to have paid off. By 1941, she had done a series of successful historical epics and social dramas and was drawing a hefty salary. In an interview in January 1942, Naseem said that "she isn't terribly anxious to get married but if she meets a good and attractive man she might consider changing her name." Not many women in those days quite had the luxury to make such a statement. The same interview goes on to describe Naseem as "simple but extravagant," she "earns over Rs.2500 a month and can well afford to buy real stones," "has over a thousand saris and continues to buy more," etc etc. This fairytale description sells dreams of a high-end consumer lifestyle that firmly locates Naseem as a chic cosmopolitan, coded via her enthusiasm for fashion and luxury. However, lest these luxuries be seen as simple hedonism, the actress' economic superiority was validated through a bourgeois nationalist insistence on hard work: "Naseem works hard for her large salary and although she is exhausted after her work at the studio she still manages to fit in a daily three-hour dancing lesson." Thus, the actress' life is presented as a mix of toil and consumerist pleasure. Such descriptions of an actress' private life cannot be seen as a simple mythologization but, instead, lend out the figure of the actress as an aspirational model for the modern woman.

Naseem Banu's career trajectory highlights the diverse backgrounds and traditions that the Bombay film industry was able to support. In turn, we see how the old-world courtesan lifestyle informed the industry by creating a unique work culture. This was a strictly female lineage, which understood the value of individualized star auras long before stardom was perceived as an essential part of cinema's industrial mechanisms. The courtesan background also complicated prevalent notions of respectability as the *tawa'if* straddled the domains of high culture as well as social stigmatization. The film actress similarly generated mixed responses from her publics, representing success and talent at the same time as sexual availability. Ironically, the scandal involving Prince Moazam Jah was casually

dismissed by Naseem Banu at the time. This is what she is reported to have said: “I don’t care very much what they write about me. I’m sure my fans will not believe anything so horrible.” Even if they did, the incident was so wildly romantic, involving Nizams and princes in an age of mass picketing and typing pools, that it is likely to have added to her other-worldly appeal.

Scandal and disrepute attempt to censor transgressive behavior, but they also help circulate transgressive imaginations and acts. We see a typically ambivalent fan response to the Bombay actress which delights in gossiping about star affairs, while also being awed by the actress’ wealth, refinement and sophistication. This is a time when fans, both male and female, are frequently writing in to film journals asking direct and practical questions about an actress’s salary, the route to a career as an actress, the numbers of actresses in Bombay and their retirement age. Surprisingly, ads like these start to appear in the mid to late 1940s: **SLIDE** (Recruit Anusuya) Film work enabled a cross-section of women to imagine concrete possibilities to overcome the hurdles of poverty, caste, lineage and patriarchy and negotiate new terms for themselves. These narratives point us in the direction of film audiences and we see how the physical presence of cinema and cinema stars in Bombay affectively impacted the cityscape with its promises of freedom and mobility. Audiences were watching and consuming and desiring not just stars but a new urban lifestyle.

A Scandalous Silence

A discussion of the film scandal privileges the star figure as the object of controversy. It does not, however, allow us access to the numerous fringe players who comprised a parallel world of work within the studio, an ‘extraneous’ world undocumented and rendered voiceless, that of lower-rung employees and temporary crew. Even though the histories of Devika Rani and Naseem Banu had to be carefully stitched together from varied fragments, I least had the sporadic interview or obituary to start from. Such genres of memorial do not exist for numerous other female film professionals who helped consolidate the early studios in Bombay city. That in itself, is its own scandal – the scandal of silence. This scandal reminds us that even within women’s film work there exists a distinct hierarchy, a power structure that can only be read through a lack of scandal, an absence even of the aporetic. It serves us well to remember that socio-historical processes played themselves out differentially over the bodies and lives of different women.

This part of my work is very new and I will only point to certain methods and observations so far. I had to move into the realm of ethno-historical research to gather oral histories in the absence of any

documented research. In 2008 I met with Ram Tipnis, who worked as a make-up artiste in various Bombay studios in the 1940s. Among other things he mentioned that he always worked in an all-male make-up department as film studios hired women only as actresses, extras/junior artistes or hairdressers.

“In fact Bombay Talkies and Filmistan started the trend of having a separate Hair Department. Before that the actresses would get their maids to do their hair or everyone would just do their own hair, you know Indian style. ...Even in the Costume department we had men. Sometimes if they needed help they might call the Hair assistant, but no, there were no other women employed in the studio. See, I have traveled all over the world and there are ladies in other countries who do make-up, who write and even do camera. But not in India. Now they are trying, as make-up artistes. Initially our union opposed this. Why you know? Because they are not used to the odd hours... Also, in our Indian culture, it was not accepted for a woman to come in so much contact with men.”

Ram Tipnis' confident assertion that there were no women working in film studios apart from actresses and hairdressers, is corroborated by Dr. Sushila Rani Patel, journalist, classical singer and former actress. Jogging her mind back to her studio work and visits in the 1940s, she is able to answer my question only through the memory of absence. “I didn't see any women around. They just weren't there.”

Is it really possible that the case of the Bombay film studio should differ so widely from the experience of studios in North America, Britain or Italy? Giuliana Bruno has described how early studios in Italy employed large numbers of women in laboratories and editing rooms as daily wage workers. Sitting row after row in sweat-shop conditions, these women spliced and joined film negatives, and hand-coloured black and white film. Bruno explains the high concentration of women in this kind of film work by suggesting that “the assembling of film must have seemed appropriate for women as it resembles other tasks considered specifically ‘feminine.’ An underpaid job, it required patience, attention, and care and was repetitive – all characteristics of housework.” Given the acute lack of documentation in early Indian film history as also the lopsided focus on stars and directors, is it possible that an alternative story of women's contributions in the early Bombay film industry, can still be told?

Once again, brief clues can be found across sources. Naseem Banu's daughter, Saira Banu herself became a film actress in the 1960s and 70s, and she says, “We didn't have the concept of a dress designer then. Those days we had heroines wearing a green blouse with a blue sari! [My mother] was the one who got the tailors and the embroiderers, and had my clothes made. She even designed my jewelry.” From a newly-discovered cache of studio correspondence, we learn that a stunt actress of the 1930s, Pramila (Esther Abraham) was unofficially hired to be the color consultant for a very early

attempt to make a color film in Bombay. I have also come across examples of female music composers, directors, producers, film journalists, and screenwriters living and working in a Bombay film industry where Ram Tipnis and Sushila Rani claim to have seen no women workers. More disturbing is the fact that historians take this denial of women's work and presence at face value. Women's labor, be it in the film industry or otherwise, has often been denied the status of work. A woman 'helping out' with washing the negative or designing a costume hardly qualifies as a film professional by official standards.

The narrative of work and status that emerges through this paper is, necessarily, a very partial account. The Bombay film industry positioned women workers in a new, unfamiliar mould. It thrust upon them a new publicness, be it as stars or as crew firmly placed within the urban public sphere. Film studios saw the coming together of women from a wide range of economic, religious and cultural backgrounds. In many of these trajectories are contained hints of struggle, transgression and negotiation. This is a public archive of histories that need to be reclaimed; they cannot be neatly classified either as stories of passive exploitation nor as stories of active agency. The instability of narratives of rumor and scandal can thus also enable feminist historians to view uncertainty as the key to the status of gendered film work itself.