

**Journal Title:** *Wide Screen*

**Vol. 5, No.1, February 2014**

**ISSN: 1757-3920**

**URL: <http://widescreenjournal.org>**

**Published by Subaltern Media, 153 Sandringham Drive, Leeds LS17 8DQ, UK**

## **INTERVIEW WITH DUBBING ARTISTE SUREKHA**

**DEBASHREE MUKHERJEE**

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**Introduction:** From 2004 to 2006 I participated in an ambitious ethnographic research project initiated by Sarai-CSDS.<sup>1</sup> My focus was on contemporary film production in Bombay and I joined the crew of an independent Hindi feature film in the capacity of Assistant Director (AD). Having recently completed a degree in film and television production, I was raring to get a taste of actual film work. What I observed during the making of this feature film was only partially familiar. As a participant-observer I gained insights into actually existing work conditions in the film industry and the range of invisible labor that goes into the making of a single movie. Every week I would write up field reports based on daily experiences and observations. During breaks in the shooting schedule I would meet individual crewmembers and conduct structured oral interviews. This interview was conducted on February 4, 2005 in Bandra, Mumbai, with a dubbing artiste named Surekha Prasad.

Below are excerpts from the interview presented in the form of the original ‘field diaries’. I have not added any new commentaries or analyses to this unfinished, ‘raw’ form, but the reader will nevertheless find significant clues about the changing material landscape of the film industry; histories of its workforce, their training and organization; traces of technologies, practices, and intermedial links that are disappearing today; and narratives of conditions of work and risk in this heavily mythologized glamor industry. Crucially, Surekha’s casual mention of poor wages, inadequate worker organizing, extreme hours, lack of health and retirement benefits, and sexual exploitation, reminds us of the precarious labor that supports the much-studied star system and Bollywood’s expanding global markets.

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### **I.**

Smartly dressed in a kurta and trousers, she immediately struck me as very ‘composed’, carrying herself in a consciously placid manner. She spoke in beautiful low tones. Her cell phone, which rang incessantly through the interview, allowed me glimpses into the various Surekhas she is when she is not required to sound right, which is after all her job.

***I have been in this line for 20 years***

“I must have been around 18 or 19 when I started out. I’d just completed my SSC exams. My school, KK Raj Popat School in Juhu, was a regular venue for theatrical performances. Om Katare and Nadira Babbar’s groups would practice as well as perform there regularly and I had signed up with them. I ended up doing a lot of Hindi and Marathi plays including a comedy directed by Mohan Azad who wrote *Chandni Bar* (Bhandarkar 2001). Apart from that I regularly did religious plays at ISKCON in Juhu, inevitably playing Sita or Draupadi.

“Anyway, so it was at this time that we were told that some people were required to dub for crowd scenes in *Hum* (Anand 1991). So a bunch of us happily went to Pratima Studio which used to be in the basement of Searock Hotel. It has been shut down for some years now. We were there for four days and had a blast.

“It was easy money. My acting background really helped. It’s not as if you just land up, say a few lines and go home richer. Acting *karna padta hai*. You have to understand the character and the scene. Sometimes they make you cry for your dead son, sometimes you have to laugh like a madman...you have to get emotional. I’ve heard that these days there are some small-time voice training centres, but I’m not sure. When I started out there was nothing. I’m lucky that I was at the right place at the right time. Back then we didn’t even have an association. The Association of Voice Artistes (AVA) was only registered in 2000.”

“Watch any Hindi feature film and wait for the end credits. Keep waiting for the Dubbing Artistes section. You won’t find it. We are simply not acknowledged! Forget individual voice artistes, even the dubbing artiste coordinator/agency finds no mention. But we don’t complain. If they have the sense to credit the junior artiste coordinator, surely they can... It’s basic courtesy. How can I teach anyone that? Surprisingly, the only people who sometimes remember to credit us in their films are directors and producers of B-grade movies. Sampat Jhadav and Rajesh Mittal never overlook our work. Do you

remember how terrible Rani's (Mukherjee) voice was when she'd just joined? She had to be dubbed. That kind of thing makes news; no one knows the other stories. Bhakti Barve, the journalist in *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* (Shah 1983) was completely dubbed. We are the ones who give them our voices so that the character shines through.”

## **II. Process:**

The phone call: One of the ADs calls up a Dubbing Artiste coordinator with a list of requirements. For example –

1. Ten kids for classroom and park scenes (mixed)
2. General crowd (mixed – 15 to 20 persons)
3. School girl – 8-10 years
4. Maid – 40-45 yrs
5. Salesman – 30s etc.

The most common requirement in feature films is for ‘crowd scenes’. Depending on what the crowd picturized is doing in the scene, professional dubbing artistes can provide a wide range of verbal effects from crowds shrieking in a riot to the steady murmur of a crowd in an auditorium. Individual lines may or may not be clearly heard in these cases, the aim is to create a particular atmosphere. Then come the individual, distinctly seen and heard roles where the dubbing artiste has to match the actor's lip movements. These can vary in length from a few words to several scenes.

The specifications: The AD then describes the kind of voices needed in terms of the age, quality of voice (bass/ shrill) and character. Most dubbing artistes are peculiarly malleable insofar as they can smoothly switch between types, eg., from low-pitched, suave executive with accented English to a gruff, abusive truck driver. The fact that the movie business heavily deals in stereotypes has spawned an industry of super-specialized talents.

The Audition or Voice Selection: This may or may not be necessary. The Dubbing Artiste coordinator can select persons she thinks are best suited to the roles from previous

experience. Otherwise the sound engineer at the studio makes the decision. These sound engineers often build up a rapport with the coordinators and recommend them for every new project that comes their way. In case it's an important part, the AD is present and makes the casting decision.

*Going for a take:* Rehearsals are not quite the norm. “The sound engineer gives you a pair of headphones and plays the scene. I generally write down the dialogues as I hear them. Many senior artistes don't even do that. Now I'm perfect. I don't need to write the lines down. I hear them once and it is imprinted in my brain. I can go straight for a take. I know exactly what it means when the director says ‘*thoda aur emotion*’ or ‘*thoda comedy karke*’. I know what to do.”

“The only part that requires some practice is the lip sync. Sync *pakadna* first-timer *ke liye mushkil hota hai*. But one can learn it in two days if there's enough passion.”

### III. Practice:

*I love doing emotional scenes, bilkul dil se...*

“Whatever I do, I do according to the character and the director's brief. I don't really have any preferred style of acting as such. I do what I'm told to, as best as I understand it. That's what I'm being paid for. After all, it is his film not mine.

“I mostly do voices for children. In *Vaastav* (Manjrekar 1999) I did the voice for Sanjay Dutt's child, and was Mohan Joshi's daughter in *AK 47* (Shetty 2004). One time I got a great part; I was to dub for Johnny Lever's girlfriend in *Gambler* (Nihalani 1995). The brief was to give the character a typical ‘*bhaiyya*’ touch and I'm from U.P. so it was really easy and fun. *Bahut comedy type ka role tha aur sabney taarif ki*.

“No, Johnny Lever wasn't there. The ‘artistes’ have different dates for dubbing. Our dates never coincide. So much so, that if an actor is suddenly able to make time and come down for a session, we are asked to leave or wait outside the studio. This happened once when we were dubbing for *Ghulam-e-Mustafa* (Ghosh 1997). Everything was stopped

and we were told to wait outside. Later we heard that Nana Patekar had come. We were quite excited! There's nothing unusual about this. It's part of our job. The actors take precedence. It's the producer's money and the film at stake."

*It's the C-grade films that offer me more scope...*

"Other regular parts I get are doctors, nurses and lawyers. In big Hindi feature films, I generally get these kinds of bit roles. On the other hand, in a C-grade film, I'm frequently called on to dub for the entire heroine's part. Its great fun dubbing for 4-5 hours at a stretch, going through a whole range of emotions..

"It's a common practice to dub the entire part because the girls who act in these films are really young and raw. They barely manage to act and their voice quality is not up to the mark. An experienced dubbing artiste will not only be able to salvage the emotions on screen but also save time in syncing. These producers also never mention us in the credit titles. On top of that they beg and plead with us to take smaller paychecks on the pretext that it's a 'low-budget' film. (*laughs*). These same 'low-budget' films make pots of cash in the interiors and small villages...*masala toh bharpoor rahta hai na!*"

"I've only recently started doing these kinds of films. You need to have had a set of experiences in life and a mature attitude to do the adult scenes. *Odd feel toh hota hi hai...*you're always keeping an eye open for who's entering the room, who's sitting in the recording room...men with no business to be there will just hang around. *Main hamesha dekhti hoon ki kaun sirf enjoyment lenne ke liye aaya hai.* One learns to ignore this kind of behavior. You have to remind yourself that it's a job and there's a skill involved. It's only my voice out there. That distance really helps you accept what you do."

"The directors are generally very professional. They just want to complete the film and sell it. Some guys do try to exploit the situation and act funny. I give them a piece of my mind! No one who knows me can dare mess with me. You must talk sternly. I have an innate gift. I can sniff out a sleazy man anywhere!"

#### **IV. Network**

The industry relies heavily on existing networks and personal contacts. Most positions are filled and studios booked on the basis of friendly recommendations or second-hand advice. I'd spoken to Surekha on the phone several times over the last year. Dheerubhai, a senior sound engineer at Ketnav Studios had given her my number. She would call every few weeks to check on the status of the film and whether any dubbing artistes were required. We finally met at Ketnav again, where she had some time between dubs. It's not like you can go to some junior artistes website and pick the faces and profiles you think most suitable. Someone puts you on to a coordinator for reasons that could pertain to efficiency, price, variety or a small 'cut' on the side. You like his/her work and recommend them to your friends. And so on. Such a system can encourage a particular kind of entrepreneur. As in Surekha's case.

“After I got over my initial diffidence I started to try for bigger roles. Simultaneously my contacts grew. I met with a lot of directors, producers, sound engineers and dubbing artistes along the way. I figured that I could easily use this network to start my own thing. After all, I had a dense and ready database of voice artistes, studio contacts and potential clients. *Bombay mein sab kuchh goodwill pe chalta hai*. In 1997, I got my first contract as a Coordinator for *Mr. and Mrs. Khiladi* (Dhawan 1997). We recorded the whole thing at B.R. Studios.”

This is what they call 'locational inertia' in Economics. In Surekha's instance, all that one needs to start a 'business' is virtually just a bunch of phone numbers. Individuals don't have to relocate to start firms but instead use existing local networks. Of course this is true for most informal, knowledge-based set-ups as much as Bombay's film industry.

#### **V. The 'Industry' and its Workers**

“I got married in May 1993 and converted to Islam. I am now Ghazala Khan, but I'm still known as Surekha Prasad in film circles. No, no...It's not out of any motivation other

than practical purposes. All my contacts have been developed as ‘Surekha’ so it would be pointless to try to push a new identity. Even when the riots took place in 1993, I remember work going on as usual. Industry *mein aadhey* Hindu *hain* or *aadhey Musalmaan*. There’s no communal prejudice at all. Even after ‘93 no one stumbled, because we all knew that the whole thing was orchestrated by politicians. Individuals in the Industry may have certain strong views or may be aligned with a particular political party, but it never affects our work.”

“Our association is very new and very weak. You can’t compare us to the Junior Artistes. They have the most powerful association in the industry. They have the clout to stop a shoot if their people don’t get paid on time.<sup>ii</sup> We don’t even have a fixed wage list. The booklet says something, but those are guidelines, not rules. No one can be held accountable. Sometimes we don’t get paid at all. Often we get called for one line, but are made to stay for the whole shift and do as much work as possible. Who will complain? They are the rich and mighty, if we fight, we’ll be bidding goodbye to our careers. Contract *nahi milega. Apne pet par kaise laath maar sakte hain?*”

“On the upside, I have to say that it’s an easy job and the money, when you get it, is good. It is fast money. A voice artiste generally gets paid immediately after her work is complete, which could be at the end of the day. A steno or secretary starts with 2000 a month. Even after many years of hard work, she can boast of maybe 8-10,000 max. Besides, she’ll have to be a graduate. Here you can be a school dropout and still start with 500 a day. Even if you work for only ten days in a month, you’ve got 5000 in hand! College girls, out to make extra pocket money for clothes and shoes, are thronging to this field. So now there’s too much workforce, and not enough work to go around. These new people are all non-members without cards. Even sound recordists and sound effects guys are doing this on the side. It’s a free for all.

“I know so many artistes who have grown old in this line. They’ve given the best years of their lives to the industry and now there’s no one to look after them in their old age. Man Singh is at Death’s door and Ajay Chadhha, who’s been a judge in every film, is

seriously ill. No one cares. There's no insurance or health plans, no PF or pension. For a woman it's even tougher. If you don't marry you have nothing. I don't want to die lonely like Parveen Babi. I see young girls using their youth to get ahead. That's fine. If it's your choice, you're free to do what you want. But they don't understand that in a few years they'll be industry discards. As it is, men are wary of marrying industry girls. I have two daughters and will strongly dissuade them from joining this line if they ever think of it. There's no future, no guarantee. We survive on the strength of our personal bonds. There's no guarantee about tomorrow, you might be in trouble and need help. If you don't stick by the next person, they won't stick by you."

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**About the Interviewer:** Debashree Mukherjee is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Cinema Studies at New York University. Her dissertation tracks a history of work and material practice in the late colonial Bombay film industry (1931-1948). Trained as a filmmaker, Debashree has worked in Mumbai as an assistant director, writer, and cameraperson; while also conducting ethnographic research for Sarai-CSDS' 'Publics and Practices in the History of the Present' project. She holds an M.Phil degree in Cinema Studies from the School of Arts & Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and an M.A. in Mass Communication from Jamia Millia Islamia.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Field notes are accessible at <http://www.sarai.net/research/media-city/field-notes/film-city/jjyp>.

<sup>ii</sup> This is a favourite myth circulated by junior artistes themselves. While it is true that the JAA is indeed powerful and has been known to stop shoots due to payment or membership issues, many of these stories are exaggerated and junior artistes continue to be among the exploited majority in the film industry.