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Interview of Art Director A. A. Dalvi by Bapu Watve

Bapu Watve : Dalvi, What is your full name?

Dalvi : Anantrao Atmarao Dalvi.

Bapu Watve : What is your date of birth?

Dalvi : I was born on 19th February 1914 at Hatkanangale, in district Kolhapur.

Bapu Watve : So you are 73 years old now.

Dalvi : Yes. I will complete 74 years in February.

Bapu Watve : Were you from a well-to-do family? What was your father?

Dalvi : Yes. My father was a Police Inspector. Ours was a financially comfortable and well-respected family.

Bapu Watve : What is your educational qualification?

Dalvi : Upto English 4th standard. I did not study further. I had a well-built muscular body.

Bapu Watve : You must have been exercising regularly.

Dalvi : Yes. I was a very naughty child. I used to have hearty meals.

Bapu Watve : What was your nature? Were you a stubborn person?



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Dalvi : Yes. I was very determined.

Bapu Watve : This aspect of your nature must have helped you in future, particularly in the film line.

Dalvi : That's correct. I will give you one example of my nature. Prabhat's owner Fattelal had a theatre at Karad. "Prabhat Theatre". Some work was to be done there and it was assigned to me. I took the carpenter and other staff from Kolhapur and started the work. One day, proprietor Fattelal came from Pune to Karad to see the progress. He wanted the work to be speeded up. I asked him for the deadline. He said he wanted the theatre to be ready by 'Diwali Padwa'. I inquired about the number of days left. On enquiring, he found that we had only 21 days at hand. I promised him that the work will be completed in time and I will not even change my clothes till the completion of work. With determination, we completed the work within 21 days and only after completing the entire work, I changed my clothes. Till then I had not bathed, changed clothes or even removed my shoes.

Bapu Watve : So, by nature, you were stubborn. What was the year?

Dalvi : Must have been 1946 or 47.

Bapu Watve : Where did you work after leaving school?

Dalvi : I did not take any job anywhere.

Bapu Watve : Oh.

Dalvi : I was at home only. We were staying in Mangalwar Peth. Behind our house, there was a bungalow with open space. That was the birthplace of the Prabhat company. I had developed a habit of going to the company every day after school got over and observe the work going on there.

Bapu Watve : You must have been 14 or 15 years old then.

Dalvi : Right.

Bapu Watve : Then how did you join 'Prabhat'?

Dalvi : I was naughty and would get into a fight at the drop of hat. As mentioned by me earlier we were financially well off and I would simply while away time in hooliganism.

My father was worried about my future. I asked him to enrol me in the police.

Bapu Watve : So the police department was your first choice.

Dalvi : Yes. I wanted. But my father was reluctant. He felt that I will kill somebody and my future will be in jeopardy. One Mr Mhaiskar was a close relative of Prabhat's Damale. His relative Mr Banyabhau Mhaiskar was working under my father. Banyabhau Mhaiskar suggested to my father that I should be asked to join Prabhat where I can stay with his relative. So I was handed over to Damalemama / Saheb mama. This was the beginning of my association with Prabhat.

Bapu Watve : Over time, you progressed to become Art Director at Prabhat but you were associated with 'Prabhat' almost from its establishment till its closure. So you know the history of Prabhat first hand. So I am going to ask you few things about Prabhat. Do you remember who established Prabhat?

Dalvi : Yes. There were originally four partners; Shantaram Bapu, Damalemama, Saheb mama and Keshavrao Dhaybar, who established Prabhat and they were financed by Mr Kulkarni. These four people were the founders and they use to work so hard that employees were also required to work hard. There was no distinction between employer and employee and employers were also working with employees. At the time of establishing the studio, the employers had joined employees in lifting material and all such menial work. I have seen it all. Because of their hard work, Prabhat earned such a good name.

Bapu Watve : Were the proprietors expert in all aspects of film making?

Dalvi : Yes.

Bapu Watve : I think no other film company of that time had such a solid team of proprietors.

Dalvi : True.

Bapu Watve : That was a speciality of Prabhat. Due to the paucity of funds the owners also use to work hard themselves and so did employees.

Dalvi : Right.

Bapu Watve : All the time, they would be talking and discussing work only. There was no time wasted in gossiping.

Dalvi : Yes.

Bapu Watve : Which film was under production when you joined Prabhat? That was a period of silent films.

Dalvi : Yes. Silent films. The first film was 'Gopalkrishna'.

Bapu Watve : No. No. Had you joined when 'Gopalkrishna' was being made?

Dalvi : No. Before I joined, they had made 2 pictures.

Bapu Watve : So which film was being produced when you joined?

Dalvi : 'Gokulcha Raja'

Bapu Watve : Historical film.

Dalvi : Yes. Historical. Then silent movies 'Ranisaheb', 'Chandrashekhar', 'Julum'.

Bapu Watve : You forgot one more film 'Bajarbhattu'.

Dalvi : Yes, Yes. 'Bajarbhattu'.

Bapu Watve : 'Ranisaheb alias Bajarbhattu had first child artist. What kind of studio did you have?

Dalvi : In Mangalwar Peth, there was a deserted place earmarked for vehicle parking, of approximate size 40 feet by 70 feet or at the most 50 by 100 feet. After cleaning the place for constructing the studio, large girders were brought. 8 to 10 girders on one side and 8 to 10 girders on another side with horizontal angles fixed at the tops of the girders. Wires were laid on the angles and on the wires cloth curtains were fitted. Each curtain was about 45 feet long. So if both curtains are fully closed they would overlap. The lower curtain would fall and the upper curtain would be pulled up so that unwanted light does not come in. Depending on the requirement of light the curtains were raised or lowered on the pulleys. It was quite a laborious work.

Bapu Watve : Amongst the owners, what was the work distribution?

Dalvi : Shantaram Bapu was head of the direction and acting. Kulkarni never came. Keshav Dhaybar looked after the Camera department. He was also an actor so, if required, could put on the dress and act.

Bapu Watve : Yes. He used to work in Maharashtra company also.

Dalvi : That is correct. I must tell one incidence. A huge set was constructed for 'Chandrakanta'. In the rainy season, there was a big storm and the set collapsed on the ground. The next day, everybody joined to erect the set again. Nathuram, Razak Mistry, Bhaskar, I started working. The girders had to be put up, hammered in, wires had to be stretched, straightened and fitted. Sahebmama, Damalemama, Anna, Kesukaka all joined in the work of putting up girders, cutting and hammering them, fixing wires etc. Owners were also working with employees. There was no differentiation amongst owners and employees. Everybody treated it as their work.

Bapu Watve : What were the responsibilities of Damale and Fattelal?

Dalvi : Damale used to look after all the construction work or mechanical work and general engineering work. He had an inclination for that. Sahebmama was a good artist. He was energetic but lacked in strength. He would work as a general assistant in getting tools, equipment etc. All owners worked together.

Bapu Watve : Damalemama was also a good painter. He was a specialist in the background.

Dalvi : Yes. In 'Chandrasena', a large background was required. About 60 or 70 feet long. Sahebmama and Damalemama were both working on it. They had 2 books and were looking at the pictures and painting after seeing them in the book. I and one person were also given a book. We were new and were learning by observing them.

Bapu Watve : What was your salary at the starting when you joined Prabhat?

Dalvi : For the first six months I did not get any pay.

Bapu Watve : No salary. You were an apprentice.

Dalvi : Then I started getting 10 Rs. salary, which was later raised to 15 Rs.

Bapu Watve : Which department were you attached to?

Dalvi : I was put in the screen printing department by Sahebmama-Damalemama.

Bapu Watve : Had you studied drawing before joining the screen printing department?

Dalvi : No. The only drawing I learnt was in the 4th standard of the school.

Bapu Watve : So you had no special training in drawing.

Dalvi : No. Saheb mama-Damale mama were my teacher. No one else.

Bapu Watve : Can you mention any special set from the time of silent movies?

Dalvi : Yes. In 'Chandrasena', the face of a demon was created. It was 20-25 feet tall. For making that under the direction of Saheb mama, I prepared on the ground, a face made of stones and mud with eyes, nose and all. Then a paper was stuck on that and paper mould was then made. Then with the support of the girder, it was made vertical and the carpenter nailed it. That is how a 25 feet tall face of a demon was made. The scene showed Ahiramani standing with Ram and Laxman lying on the floor. People from Madras had come to see the set.

Bapu Watve : Yes. People came from Calcutta, Madras and Mumbai.

Dalvi : Yes but people from Madras were studying how the shot was taken, from which angle etc. They went right up to the carpenter's room. Beyond the carpentry department, there were laboratory, printing and editing rooms. All this layout of the building was designed by Saheb mama-Damale mama.

Bapu Watve : Yes. I have heard that the film industry was curious to know how such a large set was constructed in such a small place.

Dalvi : Yes. They used to visit. In the same way, there is a long shot of court in 'Ayodhya Raja', the one in which Taramati and Rohidas were sitting and the beggar comes.

Bapu Watve : Yes.

Dalvi : For that, a tin shed was used. It was Saheb mama-Damale mama's idea. If they come across any tin shed, they would always think of ways of emptying it and using it for a set.

Bapu Watve : All 'Prabhat' films had beautiful sets and backdrops. Did these people study that? There is a technique of making sets, background, or property. Were they continuously studying that?

Dalvi : Yes Yes. They used to study. And Saheb mama and Damale mama were very creative people. They would exchange their ideas and discuss and finalize and then they would come and brief us on what they wanted. Sometimes the discussions took place in our presence and then the work would progress.

Bapu Watve : So since you were an assistant, you could also learn.

Dalvi : Yes. That was great learning not available elsewhere.

Bapu Watve : After making 6 silent films, the period of talkie films arrived. And then the studio was shifted to Shahupuri at Kolhapur since the old place was small.

Dalvi : Yes.

Bapu Watve : The first film was 'Ayodhyecha Raja' in 1932. Can you recall anything from that? That was the first talking film in Marathi. It was a daring act by 'Prabhat'.

Dalvi : Yes. Yes. It was the first talking film in Marathi. The recording was carried out by Damale himself and the camera was handled by Fattelal. Babu Sheikh assisting for recording. And since Damale mama himself was an engineer, he looked after all technical sides personally.

Bapu Watve : He had not learnt to record anywhere.

Dalvi : No. But he read lots of books on that subject. And wherever he went he would make it a point to learn all technical developments.

Bapu Watve : You told us about the set of 'Ayodhyecha Raja'. Anything else you can say about that time. All the set were considered magnificent.

Dalvi : For 'Agni Kankan', Muslim type sets were to be constructed. Saheb mama said the weapons have to be a different type. In Prabhat one always learnt something new. The weapons in hands of the hero of 'Agni Kankan' had rounded edge and not sharp like a javelin. They applied that idea and people liked it. Saheb mama-Damale mama were always thinking of something new. Sahebrao said we will make the main door tall. Damale mama said Ok. Everything used to take place with combined thoughts of two.

Bapu Watve : In 'Machhindranath' the set of Queen's court is so large and magnificent. Queen entered the court riding on a horse and the throne had tiger's or Lion's face.

Dalvi : Lion's face. That was the idea of Sahebrao. Then, Damale came to see the face and suggested making it more ferocious etc.

Both Damale and sahib used to instruct me either separately or sometimes together. There is a scene of queen Tilottama entering the court riding on a horse. A woman was needed to hold the horse. How can you get a woman at the eleventh hour? Mohammad was asked to put on woman's clothes.

Bapu Watve : The same Mohammed who later on became a well-known cameraman?

Dalvi : Yes. E. Mohammad.

Bapu Watve : E. Mohammad.

Dalvi : He is in the film dressed as a woman and holding the horse. You see, one has to strike the idea 'on the spot', which is important.

Bapu Watve : The jaws of the lion were opening and closing. Who designed that mechanism? Damalemama?

Dalvi : It was a combined effort of Damalemama, Saheb mama and all of us. Of course, the final word was Damalemama's. He was an engineer and the head.

Bapu Watve : Yes. He had not passed Engineering examinations, but he had a technical brain.

Dalvi : Great brains.

Bapu Watve : God's gift.

Dalvi : When the studio was being set up at Pune, Damale and myself were at Pune for a year. I came in 1934. Damale had come in 1933.

Bapu Watve : In Prabhat, in those days, anybody could be asked to put on make-up. Were you ever asked?

Dalvi : Yes. I was required to put on make-up once. There is a shot showing Taramati carrying the dead body of Rohidas. In that shot, I am holding a torch behind her.

Bapu Watve : Ok.

Dalvi : You can see the film. But you may not recognize me.

Bapu Watve : Ok.

Dalvi : It was very common then. I think, till 'Amrutmanthan', nobody besides staff was called for shooting.

Bapu Watve : Anybody in a studio could be asked to put on make-up?

Dalvi : Yes. In Kolhapur, the entire staff was shown as a mob. No outsider was called into the mob scene. Carpenters, Moulders, Make-up men, Lab people, whoever was free was called to the dress department to wear a dress.

Bapu Watve : For the children's role, we were there.

Dalvi : Children from everybody's home were called. In 'Mayamachchindra', Kolhapur children. In 'Dharmatma', Pune children, all of were owner's children of age 5,6 years had acted in it.

Bapu Watve : Also seen in Sant Tukaram, Gopalkrishna...

Dalvi : Yes, yes and in Dharmatma you can watch them in the scene of.....

Bapu Watve : In the film 'Sinhagad' for night fighting shooting, there was no electricity in Kolhapur then. I have heard, and you can confirm, that fight scenes were shot at night with truck lights and 'Mashaal' (torch) lights.

Dalvi : Yes. Correct. The company had three trucks then and the front lights of them were switched on. There were also a few 'Mashaal' (torches). Sometimes, we also set actual bushfires.

Bapu Watve : Ok.

Dalvi : Yes. 'Mashaal' (torches) and fire on one side, on the other side three trucks plus one car and also sound truck.

Bapu Watve : That shot must have looked very authentic.

Dalvi : Yes. The idea originated from Sahebrao and Damale.

Bapu Watve : Did 'Prabhat' silent movies had a good run at the theatre?

Dalvi : Yes. Silent films ran well.

Bapu Watve : And the talking films, 'Ayodhyecha Raja', 'Agnikankan', 'Maya Machchindra', 'Sinhagad'; did they also run well at the theatre.

Dalvi : They all ran well because there was no film to match their quality. In 'Maya Machchindra' the movement of long frocks of dancers gave an impression of waves floating on water. People use to visit just to see that dance. Prabhat had a peculiarity. Copper ornaments had to be from Apparao More and drapery by Shripatrao Kakde only. Shripatrao Kakade used to be at Pune for 6-8 months at a time, preparing drapery for a forthcoming film.

Kakade for drapery, Copper ornaments, waistbands or hand jewelry from Apprao More. They use to be stationed at Pune always.

Bapu Watve : They were from Kolhapur.

Dalvi : Yes. But they used to be called to Pune from Kolhapur. They used to be treated as part of a company. Owners treated all men well.

Bapu Watve : Then Prabhat also took a major risk of making a colour film.

Dalvi : Yes.

Bapu Watve : This was not attempted till then even by established firms.

Dalvi : Yes.

Bapu Watve : Owners of Prabhat enjoyed accepting challenges.

Dalvi : Yes. They liked challenges.

Bapu Watve : You have seen difficulties faced by them. There was no electricity then, so the shooting had to be carried out in natural sunlight. The shooting was not possible in the rainy season. Since shooting could be undertaken in sunlight only, one side of

the studio had to be kept open all the time. This resulted in disturbance due to outside noise. Were these difficulties not faced by Prabhat while making a colour film in 1933?

Dalvi : All difficulties were there. But when the company decided to make a colour film, the whole atmosphere had got charged. Since this was going to be the first time in the country, everybody was determined to make it a success.

Bapu Watve : Everybody was determined.

Dalvi : Yes. Everybody was determined. Nobody relaxed.

We were attempting something which was not done by anybody yet. No efforts or expenses were spared. What a drapery it was! And that Devaki's statue. I think it was 7 or 8 feet tall. The mud work was done by Malwankar. Then it required cement mould. That whole night Sahebrao was working with us. Me, Malwankar, Datta Mane, Sahebrao and 5 or 6 watchmen. About 25 gunny bags of cement were brought. One person will pour cement, I will bring water, Sahebrao will do the mixing. This went on all night. Sahebrao was with us all the time. Nobody slept or ate. Since the owner was so determined and working himself, we were also determined. The only thing that went wrong in that film was the golden colour. In the mythological film, in those days, there used to be a lot of gold. That colour did not show up properly. But the fact remains that we dared to do something new.

Bapu Watve : How was the technique of making colour film learnt?

Dalvi : By studying some German work. By bringing books on the subject and studying the same.

Bapu Watve : So nobody had gone abroad to study. It was all imagination.

Dalvi : Yes. Later on, the film was taken abroad for processing.

Bapu Watve : While constructing sets or making drapery for colour film, did you have made anything different? Were any special precautions taken? Or was everything the same as for making a black and white film?

Dalvi : You see, Sahebrao was the chief technician and expert. He wanted to do everything new. Everything had to appear rich. Be it clothes or ornaments. For the set of kitchen, so many gunny bags full coconuts were brought that for the entire duration of film shooting, a cook was breaking them open. But the owner did not question why so many coconuts were required. In the same way in 'Ayodhyecha Raja' for a scene, to show a wood depot, so much firewood was brought that the stock was piled sky-high.

Owners never questioned the expenses. They were satisfied only with a good shot. That was the secret of their success.

Bapu Watve : The set of King Virat's court was also grand.

Dalvi : It was constructed in a big studio with tin walls on two sides.

Bapu Watve : You have earlier described the set in Kolhapur studio. Was this that big?

Dalvi : This was at least double in size, about 150-200 feet long and 100 feet wide. It had a glass ceiling to protect from rains and wind and curtains were fixed inside to avoid direct light. For required sunlight, curtains were to be pulled apart and mirrors were provided on top to direct sunlight to the actor's face. The mirror had to be adjusted with the movement of the sun.

Bapu Watve : Quite a difficult task.

Dalvi : Yes. Vitthalrao Sonavane was assigned the job of adjusting mirror angle to direct light to the artist's face.

Bapu Watve : Were the artists employed by the studio on a full-time basis.

Dalvi : Yes. They remained in a studio all day.

Bapu Watve : I have heard, that when a lady like Durgabai Khote, who hailed from a well-to-do, cultured and educated family, joined for film 'Ayodhyecha Raja', although Taramati had no horse-riding scenes, she had to learn horse riding and sword fighting.

Dalvi : Yes. For 'Mayamachchindra' she had horse riding and sword fighting scenes. She was very sincere and hardworking. We never went near her but even from a distance, we could make out how involved she was in the character and used to mount the horse or get down from the horse and in her dialogues. That scene in 'Machchindra' was shot in Kolhapur Townhall.

Bapu Watve : Which scene?

Dalvi : That 'Chalo Machchindra Goad Gaya' dance scene. It was shot in the Townhall of Kolhapur.

Bapu Watve : Outdoor Shooting?

Dalvi : Yes. That outdoor was filmed at Town Hall.

Bapu Watve : One does not realize. The garden was so decorated.

Dalvi : Nobody used to go there except our Chatrapati Rajaram Maharaj. The hall was emptied as per his orders.

Bapu Watve : That is why the desired effect was possible.

Dalvi : Yes. Also for 'Sairandhri' the chariot with eight horses with all its accompaniments was given by Kolhapur Maharajah. He had also given his elephant and horses for 'Ramshastri'. Kolhapur was a princely state then and Maharaja was very enthusiastic. He had even built a studio; 'Kolhapur Studio'

Bapu Watve : Another first by Prabhat. When Poets' convention was held at Kolhapur, Prabhat had filmed that and that used to be shown with the film 'Sinhagad'

Dalvi : Yes. That is correct.

Bapu Watve : Not only recitals by poets but shots were also shown after applying make-up to poets.

Dalvi : Atre and others were there.

Bapu Watve : Yes. Atre, Choudhary, Sanjivani Marathe, Girish were there.

Dalvi : I remember Atre and Sanjivani Marathe. Atre has also written some songs for films. Prabhat always wanted to bring novelty.

Bapu Watve : I was called 'Kavya Srushti'. People liked it.

Dalvi : Yes. And there was also some national anthem sung by 5/6 girls.

Bapu Watve : After 'Sairandhri' it was decided to shift Prabhat Studio to Pune and Damalemama went ahead of others. Whose idea was it?

Dalvi : Must have been Damalemama's. These matters were not discussed with employees. Damale came ahead for about one year and purchased the land, appointed the contractor, and supervised the construction. The studio was designed and built by him.

Bapu Watve : So we can call the present studio his memorial.

Dalvi : Yes. Yes.

Bapu Watve : He had not studied engineering but had command over Civil Engineering.

Dalvi : Anna was in Germany at that time,

Bapu Watve : Yes. Right.

Dalvi : I remember because he had brought Chrysler car made in Germany while returning from Germany.

Bapu Watve : Ok.

Dalvi : That was Chrysler double door, left-hand drive, car. Unlike the four doors that present cars have, that car was long with only two doors. He had brought it to Pune studio.

Bapu Watve : Did the shooting start immediately after you shifted to Pune?

Dalvi : No. The process of shifting the studio from Kolhapur to Pune took about six to eight months. The process consisted of loading material in a truck at Kolhapur studio, taking it to Kolhapur station and unloading and loading it in a wagon. When the wagons reached Pune we used to go to Pune station, unload the material and load the same in a truck and again unload the material after bringing it to the studio. For six to eight months we use to go to a studio, eat food and attend to getting material from wagons.

Bapu Watve : So till then you had no work.

Dalvi : Yes.

Bapu Watve : First film produced by Prabhat, after coming to Pune was 'Amrutmanthan'. At the same time, they also produced two short films. One was 'Prabhatnagar of Prabhat' which described the working of 'Prabhat' and the other was the first cartoon film 'Jambuka'.

Dalvi : Yes. 'Jambuka', I recollect.

Bapu Watve : Do you remember?

Dalvi : Yes. I do not know whose idea was original. But must have been Sahebrao and Damale who were always working on something new. A special department was formed for making 'Jambuka' with 8-10 people in it. Dodwadkar, cartoon Kulkarni etc. And 'Prabhatnagar of Prabhat' described working of the company, various departments and Proprietors. Idea was to inform the outside world about the new studio of Prabhat.

Bapu Watve : Yes because Prabhat had started earning a reputation all over the world.

Dalvi : And I must tell you about the grand birthday celebration of Prabhat.

Bapu Watve : It was established on 1st June 1929.

Dalvi : Yes. 1st June was Prabhat's birthday. For 2 or 3 days before that, the whole premises would be thoroughly cleaned. It would be spotless. For birthday celebrations, people use to come from Mumbai, Calcutta, Delhi, Lahore everywhere. The whole celebration was a grand spectacle.

Bapu Watve : You must have lots of memories from those days. But what are you doing now?

Dalvi : After Prabhat.....

Bapu Watve : No. I am asking you about present days.

Dalvi : At present, I do only decoration work. For about 2-3 months in three years, decoration of 'Dagdusheth Ganapati' is carried out by me. It takes about three months. It gives me great satisfaction and people also recall days of Prabhat by looking at decoration. People identify me with Prabhat and say they remember Prabhat by looking at my decoration.

Bapu Watve : You put in a lot of hard work for Prabhat and also for others later on. But you were not adequately compensated financially.

Dalvi : I do not regret that. I believe in fate. One has to work hard, sincerely, with full dedication and the financial rewards will follow. You will get what is in your luck. One should not be hankering after money and should be happy and satisfied with whatever he gets.

Bapu Watve : Now about your shifting to Pune from Kolhapur. From a small studio at Kolhapur, you came to a grand studio at Pune. That was the biggest studio in Asia then. What was the benefit from Art Director's angle?

Dalvi : An Art Director in me could construct very large sets. Statues were big. Models and mouldings were also huge.

Bapu Watve : Was there a moulding department at Kolhapur.

Dalvi : Yes. But that was small. Here I made a statue of 'Gurudev Datta' for 'Amrutmanthan' which was 25-30 feet tall...Hoardings were also very huge.

Bapu Watve : The sets also use to be huge. That was a specialty of Prabhat.

Dalvi : Yes. This was the number one studio then. The 400 feet long road stretching from one end of the studio to the other end, with streetlights, shown in 'Manus', was possible only because of the big size of the studio.