

## SILENT

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Logline: Manav Gokhale, a young mute man, with a successful career of being a sensation more than a decade from 1916 to 1931, in the early film industry of Bombay, onto remain a star actor with fame, money, and women storming in, who soon experiences financial and stardom setbacks with the advent of the talkies in 1931. The story follows his journey.

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2 Seasons

Manav Gokhale's life is as old as Indian cinema itself. Born in Bombay in 1896, the very year that the first moving images were projected at Watson's Hotel under British rule, his story runs parallel with the birth of the industry. Manav was born mute. At the age of ten he lost both parents in a devastating chawl fire and was taken in by his uncle Balram, a cook in the household of Parsi businessman Dorabji Mistry. Balram's family gave Manav shelter, and under Dorabji's care he learned sign language. Though he could not speak, he became known for his promptness and efficiency in running errands across the city. At night he would tear down film posters, stare at them in the glow of a lamp, and mimic the poses of foreign actors. Beside him through childhood was Dorabji's daughter Dinaz, two years younger, who shared with him the adventures and transformations of adolescence.

In 1913, D.G. Phalke sought financing from Dorabji for his dream of making the first indigenous feature film. Dorabji declined, but as Phalke left he noticed the young mute Manav handling schedules and consignments with striking precision. He persuaded Dorabji to lend him Manav's services for his film unit. Manav joined, and for the next three years worked in every department, absorbing the language of cinema without a word. By 1916, when Phalke was preparing to make a film on Krishna, casting proved difficult. One day Phalke caught Manav demonstrating a scene to another actor and was stunned by his expressiveness. He cast him as Krishna. The film's release made Manav a sensation, his silent performance adored across the country.

His fame grew quickly. Between 1916 and 1921 he played gods and mythic heroes in more than twenty films, his photographs worshipped in households. He married Agnus D'Melo, a Times of India reporter three years older, after a long clandestine relationship. But when Phalke's fortunes declined after a string of failures, Manav was courted by theatre magnate J.F. Madan in Calcutta, whose empire of 127 theatres dominated Indian exhibition. Manav accepted the offer in 1921, a move that left Phalke in debt.

In Calcutta, Manav starred in Madan Theatres' mythological films that were commercial triumphs, making him popular in Bengal and abroad. Articles about the mute Indian star appeared in London papers. Yet success intoxicated him. His marriage with Agnus faltered and ended, and he entered into a relationship with Anglo-Indian actress Patience Cooper. Their closeness angered J.F. Madan, who considered her his own interest. Tensions grew until Manav severed ties with Madan.

By then the industry was shifting. The Jazz Singer had premiered in the United States in 1927, ushering in the age of sound. Manav returned to Bombay, where he collaborated with Ardeshir Irani and encountered a young Prithviraj Kapoor in small roles. He married again, this time to the much younger actress Padmini Kaamte. Their marriage flourished and produced a daughter, Devika. He worked in several mythological films under Irani, but the director was preparing something bigger.

With British sound engineer Robert McAwley, Irani made *Alam Ara*, India's first talkie, released in 1931. For Manav, this was the beginning of the end.

Between 1931 and 1934 he was offered only supporting parts, often without dialogue. His presence was tolerated but his silence was now a liability. His final leading role came in 1934 in a film that flopped disastrously, after which he was pushed out of the industry. The humiliation scarred him. His arrogance turned to bitterness, poisoning his marriage to Padmini. In 1936 they separated, and custody of their daughter went to her mother. Determined to prove himself, he mortgaged his home and in 1938 financed a silent film about the struggles of the disabled. Although technically strong, it failed commercially because audiences no longer wanted silence.

By 1939, stripped of his house and cars to repay debts, Manav left Bombay. He sold a restaurant he still owned, bought a small bungalow in Shimla, and spent three years in solitude. In 1942 he opened a sign language school. The locals respected him not as a star but as a teacher. He never remarried, grew gentler with time, and avoided any association with cinema.

In 1957, reporter Azman Batliwala traveled from Bombay to meet him. Manav at first refused, but finally invited him inside and, through his interpreter Samarth Dubey, began to recount his life. Azman then revealed the truth: he was Dinaz's son. Dinaz, Manav's childhood love, was dying of cancer in Bombay and wished to see him one last time. Shaken, Manav accompanied Azman and met her at her deathbed. Their reunion was wordless but full of tears. She died in his arms, leaving him with a final, silent reconciliation.

Through Manav's journey the story of cinema itself is told. He was elevated to godhood when silence ruled, then discarded when technology changed. His life speaks to the cruelty of progress, the intoxication of fame, and the cost of ambition. Above all, it is a story about dreams and resilience, of a man who fought against all odds, and of the art form that both made him immortal and left him behind.