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Sohrab Modi

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Sohrab Modi

Sohrab Modi was a stage actor who became a film director. His studio, Minerva Movietone, made grand historical films. His best-known film, Jhansi Ki Rani (1953), was the first Indian film shot in Technicolor. It also lost so much money that he had to mortgage his studio.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **Studio**Minerva Movietone, 1936.

02 **Trilogy**Pukar, Sikandar, Prithvi Vallabh.

03 **First**Technicolor film, 1953.

04 **Honour**Phalke Award, 1980.

Who was Sohrab Modi, and how did he start?

1 Who was Sohrab Modi?

1.1 When did he live?

Sohrab Modi was born on 2 November 1897 in Bombay. He died on 28 January 1984 in Mumbai. He was 86.

1.2 Where did he start?

He began on the stage. He was an actor trained in the Parsi theatre tradition. He often performed Shakespeare’s plays translated into Urdu.

17. **Think it through:** Why does his stage training matter? See answer ↓

1.3 How long was his film career?

It lasted 48 years. It ended with Kamal Amrohi's Razia Sultan in 1983.

Quick check 1. True or false: Sohrab Modi began as a Parsi theatre actor. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 2. True or false: Modi's film career lasted only ten years. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: cinemaazi.com; scroll.in

2 From stage to studio

2.1 Why did he leave the stage?

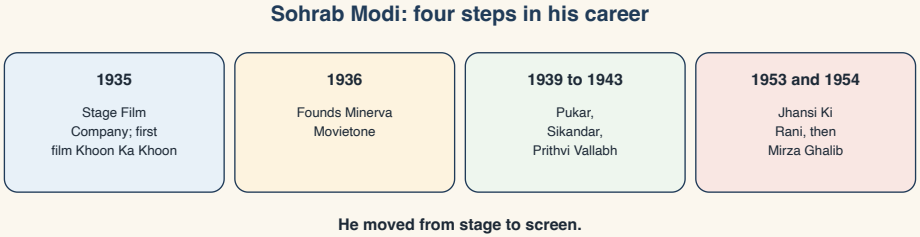
Sound films were becoming popular. Theatre was losing its audience. Modi saw this and started the Stage Film Company in 1935.

2.2 What was his first film?

His first film was Khoon Ka Khoon in 1935. It was a direct adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet. He had already played it on stage.

2.3 What was Minerva Movietone?

In 1936 he launched his own company, Minerva Movietone. It became known for big-budget historical films. Several of its early films were social melodramas such as Jailor, Talaq and Meetha Zahar (all 1938).



From the stage to grand historical films.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: Khoon Ka Khoon (1935) was based on Hamlet. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 4.** True or false: Minerva Movietone was launched in 1946. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What films made him famous?

3 The historical epics

3.1 Which films made him famous?

His historical trilogy was Pukar (1939), Sikandar (1941) and Prithvi Vallabh (1943). The trilogy was a huge success.

His main films

Year	Film	Why it matters
1935	Khoon Ka Khoon	His first film, an adaptation of Hamlet
1939	Pukar	Historical film with monologues on justice
1941	Sikandar	Alexander and Porus; an allegory of the freedom struggle
1943	Prithvi Vallabh	Third film of his historical trilogy
1953	Jhansi Ki Rani	First Indian film shot in Technicolor
1954	Mirza Ghalib	President's Gold Medal for Best Feature Film

Years are as given by Cinemaazi, Scroll and Google Arts & Culture.

3.2 What is Pukar about?

Pukar has long speeches about the idea of justice.

3.3 What happened with Sikandar?

Sikandar shows Alexander's fight with Porus on the Jhelum river. Prithviraj Kapoor played Alexander. Modi played Porus. Battles were shot in the fields of Kolhapur with thousands of extras and elephants. Scroll calls it an allegory of the freedom struggle. The film was banned from theatres in army cantonments.

> 18. **Think it through:** Why would a film about Alexander be banned in army camps? See answer ↓

Quick check 5. True or false: In Sikandar, Modi played Porus. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 6. True or false: Sikandar was shot mainly in studios in Madras. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: scroll.in; cinemaazi.com

4 Why Jhansi Ki Rani?

4.1 Where did the idea come from?

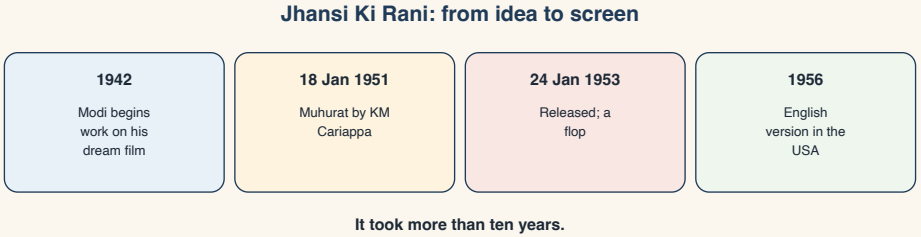
Modi had not liked history as a student. Then he read Vrindavan Lal Varma's novel on the queen of Jhansi. He saw a grand film in it. He began work on it in 1942.

4.2 Who played the Rani?

His wife, the actress Mehtab, played Rani Lakshmibai. He played the Rani's teacher, Rajguru.

4.3 When did shooting begin?

KM Cariappa, the first Indian Commander-in-Chief of the Army, held the muhurat on 18 January 1951.



From the first idea to the US release.

Quick check 7. True or false: The Rani of Jhansi was played by Mehtab. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 8. True or false: The film was based on a novel by Vrindavan Lal Varma. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: artsandculture.google.com

What was the Technicolor gamble, and what did it cost him?

5 The Technicolor gamble

5.1 What was the first?

Jhansi Ki Rani was the first Indian film shot in Technicolor. Modi shot about an hour of the film in black and white before he decided to switch.

5.2 Was it India's first colour film?

No. India's first colour feature film was Kisan Kanya in 1937. Jhansi Ki Rani was the first in Technicolor. This difference is a favourite exam trap.

> 19. **Think it through:** How do you remember it? See answer ↓

5.3 Who helped with the colour?

Ernest Haller shot the film. He had won an Oscar for Gone With The Wind. George Jenkins, a Hollywood colour consultant, helped with the war scenes and songs. Indian labs were not yet equipped to process Technicolor. So Modi stayed in London for weeks to finish the film.

> **Quick check 9.** True or false: Kisan Kanya (1937) was India's first colour feature film. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 10. True or false: Jhansi Ki Rani was India's first colour film. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: thehindu.com

6 Cost, flop and loss

6.1 How much did it cost?

It was the most expensive film of its time. Sources give different figures.

What did Jhansi Ki Rani cost?

Source	Figure
Google Arts & Culture	About 60 lakh rupees
Scroll (Mehelli Modi, his son)	"Something like a crore"
Cinemaazi	Almost one crore rupees

The sources do not agree. Use the word "about" and learn the range, not one number.

6.2 What happened at the box office?

The film was released on 24 January 1953. It was a flop. Mehelli Modi, his son, said it could not have made its money back even if everyone in India had seen it. Modi had to mortgage his studio.

6.3 Does the full film survive?

Not in full. The original colour negative was lost. No print of the untruncated Technicolor version is known. Of the Hindi version, only a black-and-white pan-and-scan print survives. An English version, The Tiger and the Flame, was released in the USA in 1956.

Quick check 11. True or false: Jhansi Ki Rani earned back its cost at the box office. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 12. True or false: The film was released in English in the USA as The Tiger and the Flame. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

7 Comeback and honours

7.1 How did he recover?

The year after Jhansi Ki Rani, he made Mirza Ghalib (1954). It was another historical film. Scroll says he bounced back.

7.2 What awards did Mirza Ghalib win?

It won the President's Gold Medal for All India Best Feature Film. Cinemaazi adds that it also won the President's Silver Medal for Best Feature Film in Hindi. It is the only film to win both.

7.3 What honour did he get in 1980?

He received the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1980. His last film as director was Meena Kumari Ki Amar Kahani (1979).

Quick check 13. True or false: Mirza Ghalib won the President's Gold Medal for All India Best Feature Film. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 14.** True or false: Modi received the Dadasaheb Phalke Award before Jhansi Ki Rani. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: indianexpress.com

Exam Practice

8 Exam traps

8.1 Which traps come up most?

- **Colour or Technicolor?** Kisan Kanya (1937) was the first colour film. Jhansi Ki Rani (1953) was the first Technicolor film.
- **Two honours:** Mirza Ghalib won the President's Gold Medal (1954 film). He got the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1980.
- **Studio name:** Minerva Movietone, founded in 1936.
- **Cost:** sources say about 60 lakh to about one crore. Learn the range.

8.2 What is the film-to-person link?

Pukar, Sikandar and Prithvi Vallabh are his historical trilogy. Jhansi Ki Rani starred his wife, Mehtab. Remember the pair: Modi and Mehtab.

> **Quick check 15.** True or false: Modi's historical trilogy included Prithvi Vallabh. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 16.** True or false: Jhansi Ki Rani won the Dadasaheb Phalke Award. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember this

- **Studio:** Minerva Movietone, launched in 1936.
- **Historical trilogy:** Pukar (1939), Sikandar (1941), Prithvi Vallabh (1943).
- **Jhansi Ki Rani (1953):** first Indian film shot in Technicolor; starred Mehtab; a flop.
- **Not the first colour film:** that was Kisan Kanya (1937).
- **Honours:** Mirza Ghalib (1954) won the President's Gold Medal; Phalke Award received in 1980.

Explain it back: Say why Jhansi Ki Rani is called the first Technicolor film but not the first colour film.

Practice MCQs

1. In 1936, Sohrab Modi founded which film studio in Bombay?

A. Minerva Movietone

B. Bombay Talkies

C. Prabhat Film Company

D. Filmistan

See answer ↓

2. Sohrab Modi's 1953 film "Jhansi Ki Rani" holds which distinction?

A. India's first sound film

B. India's first 3D film

C. India's first Technicolor film

D. India's first film shot abroad

See answer ↓

3. What happened to Minerva Movietone after the release of "Jhansi Ki Rani"?

A. It merged with Bombay Talkies

B. It nearly went bankrupt from the film's huge Technicolor costs

C. It expanded into a chain of cinemas

D. It was nationalised by the government

See answer ↓

4. Sohrab Modi directed "Sikandar" (1941), often called his finest film. Who is its subject?

A. Akbar

B. Alexander the Great

C. Chandragupta Maurya

D. Ashoka

See answer ↓

5. Sohrab Modi received the Dadasaheb Phalke Award for 1979. When was it actually presented?

A. 1980, at the 27th National Film Awards

B. 1979

C. 1984, the year of his death

D. 1954, alongside Mirza Ghalib's honours

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** The correct answer is **Minerva Movietone**. Sohrab Modi launched it in 1936. It became known for big-budget historical films. Memory hook: Modi, Minerva. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The correct answer is **India's first Technicolor film**. Jhansi Ki Rani (1953) was the first Indian film shot in Technicolor. It was not the first colour film. That was Kisan Kanya in 1937. Memory hook: Technicolor 1953, colour 1937. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** The correct answer is **It nearly went bankrupt from the film's huge Technicolor costs**. Sources put the cost at about 60 lakh to about a crore rupees. The film was a flop. Modi had to mortgage his studio. Memory hook: big colour, big loss. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** The correct answer is **Alexander the Great**. Sikandar (1941) shows the fight between Alexander and Porus. Prithviraj Kapoor played Alexander and Modi played Porus. Memory hook: Sikandar means Alexander. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** The correct answer is **1980, at the 27th National Film Awards**. Modi received the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1980. That was long after Jhansi Ki Rani (1953) and Mirza Ghalib (1954). Memory hook: Phalke came late, in 1980. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** He often performed Shakespeare's plays in Urdu. ↑ 1
2. **False.** It lasted 48 years, ending with Razia Sultan in 1983. ↑ 2
3. **True.** It was a direct adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet. ↑ 3
4. **False.** It was launched in 1936. ↑ 4
5. **True.** Prithviraj Kapoor played Alexander. ↑ 5
6. **False.** Its battles were shot in the open fields of Kolhapur. ↑ 6
7. **True.** Mehtab was Modi's wife. ↑ 7
8. **True.** Modi read the novel and saw a grand film in it. ↑ 8
9. **True.** Jhansi Ki Rani was the first in Technicolor. ↑ 9
10. **False.** It was the first Technicolor film. Kisan Kanya was the first colour feature film. ↑ 10
11. **False.** It was a flop, and Modi had to mortgage his studio. ↑ 11

12. **True.** That version came out in 1956. ↑ 12
13. **True.** It also won the Silver Medal for Best Feature Film in Hindi. ↑ 13
14. **False.** He received it in 1980, long after 1953. ↑ 14
15. **True.** The trilogy was Pukar, Sikandar and Prithvi Vallabh. ↑ 15
16. **False.** The Phalke Award went to Modi himself in 1980, not to the film. ↑ 16
17. **Think it through.** Stage actors learn to speak with force. He was known for a sonorous voice and impeccable Urdu delivery. ↑ 17
18. **Think it through.** The film shows Porus resisting a foreign invader. ↑ 18
19. **Think it through.** Kisan Kanya (1937) means first colour film. Jhansi Ki Rani (1953) means first Technicolor film. ↑ 19

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