

Article

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The Golden Age of Indian Cinema



Death of Dilip Kumar at the age of 98 finally brings to appropriate close the golden age of Hindi cinema when three stars shined the brightest - Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand and Dilip. The last was a cut above the other two, in talent, success, grace and perhaps even in looks.

Only those of us of certain age remember the golden age. I will be 85 in three months. At that time there was no television, few indoor entertainment besides reading and listening to film songs on radio. Today's filmgoers seem to have no interest in films made before the arrival of the another set of three actors, all Khans - Aamir, Salman and Shahrukh. Unlike audiences abroad, the Indian filmgoer is not nostalgic of the classics of the past. That is why you will never see a black and white film on any of our regular television channels. That's a pity.

I wonder how many people under the age of forty would have seen Raj Kapoor's *Awaara*, Dev Anand's *Guide* or Dilip Kumar's *Ganga Jamna*. In my opinion two or the three best Bollywood films of all time were made in the golden age – *Mother India* and *Mughal-e-Azam*. Only one, *Sholay*, came later. They don't make films like that anymore though, admittedly, many films of that time were also terrible. *Awaara*'s success was phenomenal. The 1951 film was an even bigger hit abroad than in India. What is it about *Awaara*? Whenever I go abroad on film festival jury duty - from Beijing to Moscow to Cluj in Romania - someone of my age will come and hum the tune of title song of that film. Seventy years ago, in the absence of films from Hollywood, an Indian story of a romance between a rich girl and a poor boy had a huge impact on audiences in the communist countries in eastern Europe and China. According to

a Bulgarian historian, more people have seen *Awaara* than any other film in the history of cinema.



In my subjective view, the golden age began at independence in 1947 and ended in 1964, when Raj Kapoor's last good film, *Sangam* was released. It was also the year in which one of Bollywood's most gifted directors, Guru Dutt, died.

Let's begin in 1947. Five films topped the box office that year, *Shehnai*, *Jugnu*, *Do Bhai*, *Dard* and *Mirza Sahiban*. These films had one thing in common, great songs. It was a major requirement for success of films then. A film with ten songs was not uncommon.

Filmistan's *Shehnai* took the country by storm with that great composer, C. Ramchandra, coming up with a new westernised beat, long before O.P. Nayyar appeared on the scene. Scandalized parents forbade their children to sing that evergreen number, *aana meri jaan meri jaan Sunday ke Sunday*.

There were no long-playing records, only breakable discs that recorded one song on one side and another on the other side. These records were called 78 rpms because they did 78 rounds a minute on a gramophone machine. Almost all films had eight to ten songs to make a set of four or five records. They played for no more than four minutes on non-electric machines that you had to crank up each time by hand and change the needle after playing both sides. The only film I recall without any songs from that era, K.A. Abbas's *Munna*. It failed miserably.

Did you know that until around 1960, our studios continued to use cameras that were introduced into the country in 1931 at the beginning of sound? The manufacturers of these cameras, in United States and elsewhere, had even stopped making spare parts

for them. But the producers somehow managed to fix them with local ingenuity.

Most of the footage had to be shot indoors because of the poor quality of the raw stock. You needed strong studio lights to get a decent shot. Cinematographers like V.K. Murthy, Fali Mistry and Faredoon Irani were geniuses at improvising outdoor scenes that were shot inside studios. Kamal Amrohi's 1949 film, *Mahal*, was shot entirely indoors. It was the film that got Lata Mangeshkar noticed.

At the time when independent India was still young many of the films reflected the hopes and aspirations of the new nation. Nehru was at the helm and his vision of a socialist, egalitarian India had grabbed the attention of filmmakers like Bimal Roy, K.A. Abbas, B.R. Chopra and Zia Sarhadi. The films came wrapped in sentimentality but social concerns of the filmmakers were never in doubt. Village settings for the stories were not uncommon, something that has disappeared altogether since the advent of the multiplexes.



An international film festival in Bombay in 1952 was an eye opener for our filmmakers who, until then, were exposed exclusively to films from Hollywood and occasionally from London. They were particularly impressed by the neo-realism of Italy that explored the lives of the working-class poor and were closer to Indian realities. You can see the influence of Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thieves* in Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen*. Raj Kapoor's *Boot Polish*, a story of two street children, had echoes of another Italian film, *Shoeshine*.

The Kapoors were once the first family of Indian cinema. Their involvement in films spanned over seventy years. Five generations of Kapoors were actors, beginning with Raj Kapoor's grandfather, Bashesharnath, who played the judge in *Awaara*. His

father, Prithviraj, had acted in the first full length Indian talkie, *Alam Ara*, way back in 1931. His granddaughter, Kareena, and grandson Ranbir Kapoor are still going strong. There is no show business clan quite like it in the world. The illustrious Barrymores of America and the Redgraves of Britain don't even come close.



If you suffer from the impression that our movie stars live charmed, fabulously wealthy lives, think again. After the colossal failure of *Mera Naam Joker*, Raj Kapoor had to mortgage his beloved studio. When he took his father to New York for medical treatment he slept on the floor of my friend's apartment because he could not afford a hotel room. Khwaja Ahmad Abbas was Raj Kapoor's favourite script writer. Besides *Awaara*, he wrote *Shri 420*, *Jagte Raho* and *Bobby*. I met Khwaja Ahmad Abbas in 1967 in the corridors of the Blitz's decrepit office in downtown Bombay and became friends. He wrote Last Page, the paper's popular column that he had brought along with him from Bombay Chronicle after that daily folded. The column began in 1935 and continued till Abbas's death in 1987. It holds the distinction of being the longest running column in the history of Indian journalism. My column in Blitz was somewhere in the middle pages.

Abbas was quite versatile. Besides being a journalist, he wrote novels, short stories and film scripts. He was not so successful as a producer and director of films. With the possible exception of *Anhonee*, starring Nargis and Raj Kapoor, none of the twenty or so films he made were a success. There was a reason for that. The films were not very good. But he has the distinction of giving Amitabh Bachchan his first role.

No one in Indian cinema has been more exploited than the most famous of all our heroines, Nargis. All her at RK Films studio, in which she was a partner, focused on the hero, played by Raj Kapoor, and she was cast only as the love interest. In her last film at the studio, *Jagte Raho*, Nargis had five minutes of screen time. Her best films were made elsewhere, especially opposite Dilip Kumar until a jealous Raj Kapoor put a stop to that pairing.

Mehboob wanted Nargis for *Aan*, India's first technicolor film, but her lover wouldn't allow it. The role went to Nadira, a newcomer, who made a mess of it. Nargis will forever be remembered for *Mother India*. That came her way only after she walked out on Raj Kapoor leaving a message on his tape recorder.

Three women held the centre stage in the films of 1950s and 1960s, Nargis, Madhubala and Meena Kumari. All three started off as child artistes providing meal tickets for their impoverished Muslim families. Of the three, Meena Kumari's story is the most tragic. Mahajabeen, her real name, was born in a tenement in Bombay that, according to Vinod Mehta who wrote her biography 'was spectacularly unfit for human living'.



Meena Kumari blossomed late. In her earlier films - most of them cheaply produced mythologicals - she looks quite plain. As Mehta puts it, "She did not have a pretty face, she had something much better - an interesting face, and it became even more interesting when she reached the age of thirty." Once she was in right hands, she became a remarkable performer.

Madhubala could do tragedy - *Mughal-e-Azam* - as well as comedy - *Mr. and Mrs. 55*. Her true love was Dilip Kumar but her father from hell

would not let her golden goose marry him. The affair ended acrimoniously in court where Dilip, in true Hindi movie fashion, declared his endless love. She married Kishore Kumar in desperation towards the end of her life.



I met Dilip and his charming wife, Saira Bano, for the first time at a dinner party at the home of well-known barrister Rajni Patel on one of my visits from New York. The other guest was Vinod Mehta, then the editor of *The Observer*, an iconoclastic and very readable Sunday newspaper. I met Dilip the second time in 1981 at his Pali Hill residence when I tried to interest him in a screenplay I had written. He took it with him to Deolali where he was heading for the Eid holidays. That was the last I saw of the screenplay and Dilip.

Dilip Kumar was a genuine “superstar” of his time. Yusuf Khan, his real name, would still be selling fruit wholesale in Mumbai’s Crawford Market had he not met Devika Rani by chance. She was impressed with his good Pathani looks and natural charm. Bombay Talkies was in search of a new hero. Ashok Kumar had left to set up Filmistan. The other actor on the studio’s payroll, Najam-ul-Hassan had been fired for having an affair with Devika Rani who happened to be the boss’s wife!

Dilip Kumar’s first film, *Jwar Bhata*, did not make waves when it was released in 1944. The second film also flopped. But the young actor hit the jackpot with *Milan* which was based on a Tagore story. Years later, Dilip Kumar was to pay homage to the film’s director, Nitin Bose, by giving him credit for directing *Ganga Jumna*, a film that was directed by Dilip himself.

Dev Anand sometimes behaved like a peacock on the screen, more in love with himself than the heroine but he was our ultimate urban romantic hero, sometimes a gambler, sometimes a taxi driver, always street-wise, always with never-say-die spirit. He wore a suit and a tie with elegance. He looked ridiculous in costumes. The social dramas that were churned out in Madras did not suit his style. First time he went down there, the director, S.S. Vasan, made him wear a dhoti in *Insaaniyat*. He never went back. Devsaab, the name by which he was known respectfully among the film people, had the habit of walking at an angle that defied gravity. This manmade women’s heart flutter, both on screen as well as in the cinema halls. He serenaded them with the voice of Kishore Kumar though some of his best songs were sung for him by Hemant Kumar and Rafi.



Dev Anand met Guru Dutt at Prabhat Film Studios in Pune. They became friends while Guru Dutt was dance director in one of the films. A dhobhi was responsible for the two becoming friends. He had mixed up their shirts. They shared a passion for cinema: Guru Dutt wanted to make great films and Dev Anand to become a great actor and star. The two made a pact, solemnized by the clinking beer glasses. Guru Dutt swore that Dev Anand would be his star when he became a director. The actor pledged in return that Guru Dutt would be the director of the first film he would produce.

The film was *Baazi*. For me the 1951 film, inspired by Hollywood film *Gilda*, defines the films of the golden age of cinema,