

Gene Deitch (1924 – 2020) passes away / Manohar Khushalani

Eugene Merril Deitch, an American-Czech illustrator, animator, comics artist, and film director was based in Prague since 1959, Deitch was also known for creating animated cartoons such as Munro, Tom Terrific, and Nudnik.

“Phansi se pehle Corona ki antim ichha” by Sudhir Mangar

A writer and thinker, Sudhir Mangar, makes a very perceptive, video, on lessons to be learnt from the current Pandemic.

A thought on many things in our lifestyle which we are viewing due to corona impact and some aspects of change in society and our thinking perhaps require introspection.

Two Films: Devi and Subarnarekha and Two Masters

of Cinema / Partha Chatterjee



Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak were two masters from the Bengali cinema of the 1950s. They were temperamentally dissimilar and yet they shared a common cultural inheritance left behind by Rabindranath Tagore. An inheritance that was a judicious mix of tradition and modernity. Ray's cinema, like his personality, was outwardly sophisticated but with deep roots in his own culture, particularly that of the reformist Brahmo Samaj founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy to challenge the bigotry of the upper caste Hindu Society in Bengal in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Ghatak's rugged, home-spun exterior hid an innate sophistication that found a synthesis in the deep-rooted Vaishnav culture of Bengal and the teachings of western philosophers like Hegel, Engels and Marx.

Satyajit Ray's *Debi* (1960) was made with the intention of examining the disintegration of a late 19th century Bengali Zamidar family whose patriarch (played powerfully by Chabi Biswas) very foolishly believes that his student son's teenaged wife (Sharmila Tagore) is blessed by the Mother Goddess (Durga and Kali) so as able to cure people suffering from various ailments. The son (Soumitra Chatterjee) is a good-hearted, ineffectual son of a rich father. He is in and out of his ancestral house because he is a student in

Calcutta, a city that symbolizes a modern, scientific (read British) approach to life.

The daughter-in-law named Doyamoyee, ironically in retrospect, for she is victimized by her vain, ignorant father-in-law, as it is to justify the generous, giving quality suggested by her name. After a few "successes", Doyamoyee fails tragically to cure her brother-in-law's infant son, who dies because he is denied proper medical treatment by his demented grandfather driven solely by religion. Doyamoyee goes mad and dies tragically having hovered in the twilight of self-deception and rationality. Her loving husband makes a dash from Calcutta but arrives too late to help avert the tragedy. Her father-in-law's conviction that she was Devi or Goddess remains firm.

Ray's sense of mise-en-scene or literally what he puts in a particular scene, is vigorous, classical. The way he links each scene to tell his story that moves forward inevitably towards its tragic finish with the surety of a well-aimed arrow, is an object lesson in film craft. His pace is unhurried and yet the editing carries the film forward by giving maximum importance to the content of individual scenes.

The impact of Doyamoyee's first appearance on-screen made up as a Devi, and also like a bride with sandal paste dots just above either eye-brow curving downwards and a large Kumkum bindi, offset by Sharmila Tagore's innocent, liquid eyes, is simultaneously a touching as well as disturbing sign. One realizes the importance of this close-up much after leaving the film theatre. It foretells the sending of a lamb to slaughter, although one's initial reaction to the

image is one of admiration bordering on Bhakti. Dulal Dutta's editing, Ray's direction of a fledgling actress and Subrata Mitra's immaculate lensing and approximation of daylight together help create magic.

Ray's visual style is beautiful because it is also understated. Every shot has an organic quality that helps in the unfolding of the narrative, giving it shape, tone, clarity and sensitivity. His camera draws the viewer in as a witness to the happenings that coalesce into a moving story about power arising, ironically, from a lack of knowledge and the certitude that blind faith brings to an economically powerful man who is then free to wreck havoc even on his loved ones with the best of intentions.

Ali Akbar Khan's spare music, helps enunciate the sense of loss that the film carries. He had by then become aware of the need to say more with less in composing background music for cinema.

Khan Saheb, the great Sarod maestro had composed music earlier in Hindi films for *Aandhiyaan* and *Anjali*. His composing skills were not particularly tested except for a raga Mallika based-song sung by Lata Mangeskar for *Aandhiyaan*. His peerless solo sarod carried *Anjali*. He was a little jittery when asked to compose the music for Ritwik Ghatak's *Ajaantrik*.

His score for this film revolved largely around his moving rendition of raga Bilaskhani Todi on the Sarod. There were other interesting bits played by Bahadur Khan (Sarod) and

Nikhil Banerjee (Sitar). But here in *Debi*, he seemed to have intuitively grasped the core idea of the film. He uses a simple Shyama Sangeet dedicated to Goddess Kali as a leit motif both as a vocal rendering and as an astonishingly eloquent Sarod Solo. He also uses another Shyama Sangeet as a counter point. The end result is remarkable. It is amongst the very few truly memorable background scores in Indian films.

Subrata Mitra's Black and White photography helps express Ray's innermost thoughts with precision. His lyrical vision blends with that of the director and includes a genuine sense of the tragic. The slow disintegration of Doyamoyee's mind is photographed with unusual understanding. Mitra was to Ray what cinematographer Sven Nykvist was to Ingmar Bergman in Swedish cinema. It is difficult to forget the images of the last quarter of the film.

The idyllic view of a river in the countryside with two boats in either corner of the frame, in early morning light, just before the return of the young husband from Calcutta in a futile bid to save his young bride's life, is the perfect visual prelude to the onset of the final tragedy that is soon to occur. Doyamoyee's flight from her father-in-law's house with her husband in pursuit through crop-laden fields and her ultimate death amidst enveloping, ever brightening light is a triumph of B/W cinematography.

Satyajit Ray's transformation of Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee's competently told tale into a film of abiding value is worth cherishing. His little touches are worthy of emulation by younger filmmakers travelling on the same path. The way he inverses the role of the maternal figure when the ailing baby

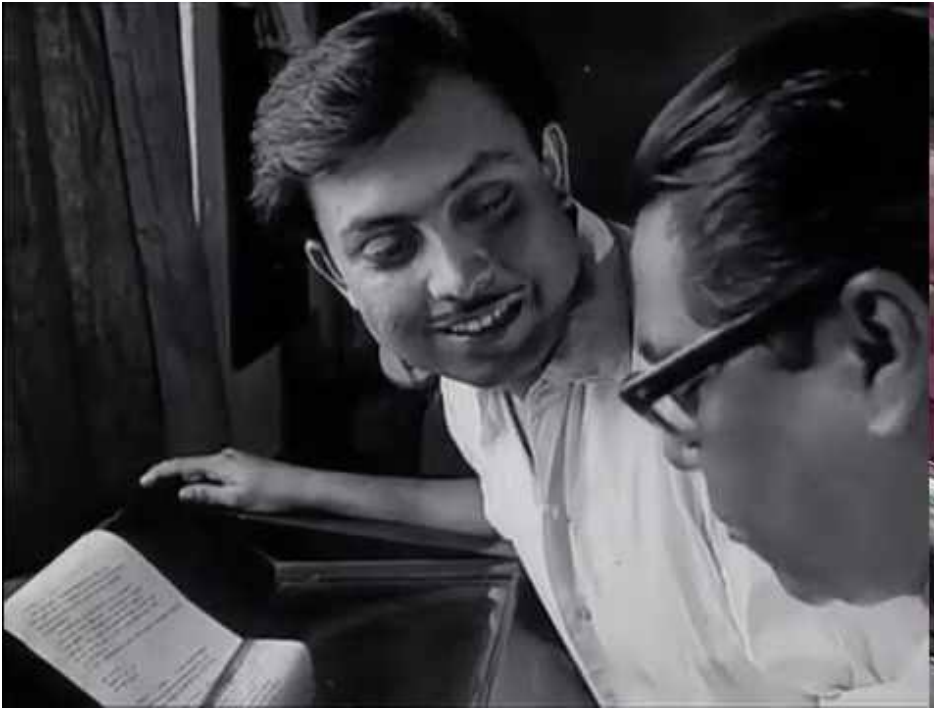
is placed on Doyamogee's lap is an object lesson in filmmaking.

She is only a very young woman who has "Sainthood" thrust upon her by a superstitious, overbearing father-in-law. Her own potential for motherhood is kept on hold as she is willed by others to become a "Divine Mother" to cure the diseases from which that they may be suffering.

Ray's treatment of the film brings to mind that unique constituent of the Indian psyche which seeks solutions to all worldly problems including the cure of disease through supernatural intervention rather than rationality and science. This attitude is also largely responsible for the choice of political leaders and the exercise of choices, both social and political.

If you want to see the film here is a link to Devi:

<https://youtu.be/ittYCEV4nUY>



Ritwik Ghatak's Subarnrekha

Ritwik Ghatak's *Subranarekha* (1962) is a far cry from the world of Maya (illusion) and blind faith. It is rooted in the sufferings of daily life engendered by wholly avoidable political events. The protagonists are victims of the senseless partition of India in 1947. They have been uprooted from their native East Bengal and have come to a Suburb of Calcutta in Independent India.

Life is a relentless struggle for Ishwar Bhattacharya (Abhi Bhattacharya), his little sister Sita (Madhabi Mukherjee) and foster brother Abhiram (Satindra Bhattacharjee) as it is for the other members of the Refugee camp. Ishwar is befriended by a school master, Harprasad (Bijon Bhattacharya). A chance meeting in the street with an old friend, a marwari, lands Ishwar a job in his foundry near the river Subarnarekha in Bihar. Harprasad accuses Ishwar of being a coward and seeking security only for his family and forgetting his suffering comrades in the camp. The rest of the story, or rather its unfolding would do credit to Bertold Brecht, who, despite his intractable stand against the

bourgeoisie, had imbibed vital lessons from medieval Christian morality plays.

Ishwar and his little family find stability thanks to his job. Sita grows up to be a beautiful, musically gifted woman and Abhiram, a writer of promise. Inevitably they fall in love and marry against the wishes of Ishwar, Sita's blood brother and also a father-figure in her life. They elope to Calcutta. Sita, after a few years of marriage becomes a widow. Ishwar, with his life, in a shambles, is rescued by the Sanskrit-toting, indigent school master, Harprasad. Sita, with a little son to feed, makes her debut as a singing courtesan for her drunken elder brother Ishwar: Recognising him she commits suicide. What follows is a most moving, perceptive rendering of the sufferings of the displaced in the 20th century and their chimeral aspirations to stability.

The film was shot on a day to day basis as there was only the skeletal plot of a long-lost brother and sister meeting as client and singing prostitute provided by producer Radhe Shyam Jhunjunwala. Ghatak literally had to work his story in both directions without the knowledge of his producer who was expecting an entirely different, perhaps hugely sensational film. This story is true because Ghatak had to do "Scissors", his only Advertising film, courtesy his friend Chidananda Dasgupta, then with Imperial Tobacco Company. The proceeds from this cigarette Ad film went to do the final post-production work on Subarnarekha when producer Jhunjunwala fled in panic.

Ghatak's cinematographic vocabulary, was no doubt, enriched

by disparate sources. Literature, Bengali, Sanskrit and European had a part to play as did his own considerable literary efforts; he was a Bengali short-story writer of high promise when only in his middle-twenties. Music, both Hindustani classical and Folk including Vaishnav Kirtans, Bhatialis, Bhawaiyyas, Baul songs and other forms helped shape his sensibilities. Cinematically he owed almost nothing to Hollywood but had learnt from films by the Soviet masters like Eisenstein and Dovzhenko the art of editing and dramatic shot-taking. His poetically charged depiction of the passage of time was uniquely his own.

He understood instinctively that cinema and music were sister-arts and that both, more than anything else portrayed the passage of time. His handling of cinematic time was both dynamic and lyrical.

Ghatak knew all about the malleability of time in cinema to arrive at what may be a truth, which in turn opens many doors of perception in the viewer. His handling of time in *Subarnarekha*, is on the surface linear but, in truth, is also very interestingly elliptical.

There is a magnificent example of a scene in a deserted airport where Sita and Abhiram are playing on a Second World War airstrip. Sita tells Abhiram that the British pilots would bomb Japanese positions in Burma and then come back to enjoy themselves in the Air force Mess after the mission. A few moments after, the children start imitating the take-off of an aircraft, the Camera suddenly "becomes" airborne. The sound track makes the illusion all the more real. This scene is a symbolic projection of Sita and Abhiram's future dreams.

Similarly the adult Sita singing a bandish in raga Kalavati on the same deserted airstrip where she played with Abhiram as children, is full of grief and foreboding because her elder brother is certainly going to reject the idea of her marrying Abhiram, her foster brother, who, on a railway platform discovers by sheer chance his dying "low-cast" biological mother.

There is another scene when, after the elopement of Sita and Abhiram, the assistant manager of the foundry starts reading out from a Bengali newspaper about Yuri Gagarin's space flight. Ishwar snatches the paper out of the man's hand and throws it into the foundry as if making a comment, unknown to himself, on the ineptitude of human beings at managing their affairs on Earth.

It is a film of startling transitions. When Ishwar weary of life alone, some years after the departure of Sita and Abhiram, decides to hang himself his old friend Harprasad appears like a ghost at the window and declares "How far gone is the night? There is no answer". Ishwar's suicide is averted and the two friends after a brief conversation end up in the morning on the same deserted airstrip where Sita and Abhiram played as children. Near the wreckage of a WWII Dakota airplane Harbilash tells Ishwar that both as individuals and as a generation they are finished. He suggests to the relatively monied Ishwar that they go to Calcutta to have a good time.

In Calcutta they go to the race-course to bet on horses and in a sharply photographed and edited sequence the two friends

discover the joy of life which further continues in a Park Street restaurant over dinner and far too many drinks. Not for nothing is "Patricia" from Fredrico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* heard on the sound track. This piece of music is used as a poignant, ironic comment on the state of affairs of two lost souls floundering about in a pitiless world. At one point in the sequence, Harprasad tells his friend, "only what you can touch is true. The rest is bogus." This revelation from one of the Upanishads is also an apt comment for Ghatak's time and ours.

The next scene is the one where a drunken Ishwar lands up in a sleepy Sita's humble home to hear her sing without knowing who she is. Now a widow, she, sleepy from hunger and poverty, recognizes him in an instant and kills herself with the curved blade of a bonti, used for cutting vegetables, fish etc. The choice of a bonti on Ghatak's part is intuitive but it is connected with cooking food and therefore economics!

When Ishwar returns back to his job as Foundry manager on the banks of the river Subarnarekha (also meaning the 'Golden Line') with little Binu, the son of the deceased Sita and Abhiram, he finds that he has been fired. The scandalous case resulting from Sita's suicide is cited as the reason for his dismissal. Undaunted Ishwar and his little Nephew Binu set out seeking new horizons accompanied by a hauntingly sung 'Charai Beti' mantra on the sound track. Very few films in the history of cinema have had such a moving ending.

Ghatak's use of music in *Subarnarekha* is exemplary. He uses Bahadur Khan, Ali Akbar Khan's cousin, and the most

lyrical Sarodist in Hindustani music, as music director. Bahadur Khan's theme music subtly emphasizes the illusion suggested by the title of the film. It is one of the most sophisticated and telling background scores in the history of cinema, vying with Joseph Kosma's exquisite work in Jean Renoir's *A Day in the Country*.

Ghatak's use of wide-angle lenses, particularly the problematic 18.5 mm, indoors and outdoors is an act of great daring. He places his characters in their environment and uses natural and artificial light to reveal their states of mind assisted by his unusual lensing. His jagged editing and carefully selected incidental sound adds to the aural richness and augments the film's mood.

Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* is one of the most beautiful and disturbing films about people fighting their destiny bestowed upon them by an unforgivable quirk of history; in this case the partition of India, which had the largest single displacement of human population ever.

If you are excited enough to want to see *Subarnarekha* you can see it right away on this link:

<https://youtu.be/0Qyml5vqvqo>

Film Review: Good Newwz / Neelam Jain



Good Newwz is a light-hearted comic escapade with Akshay Kumar- Kareena Kapoor and Diljit Dosanjh-Kiara Advani as two sets of married couples trying to have a baby through IVF (in vitro-fertilization). The two couples, from opposite ends of the cultural spectrum, have their fates entangled through the ovaries of two wannabe-moms and their shared family name: Batra. Though simplistic, the film's quota of things between human forte and foible makes it relatable in places.

Akshay and Kareena as Varun and Dipti Batra, are a high-flying swish couple in Mumbai, who after failed attempts at parenthood are advised by family to visit an expensive fertility clinic. Enter Honey (Diljit Dosanjh) and Monika (Kiara Advani) from Chandigarh. After some mis-conceptions, and literal ones, they too land up in Mumbai in the same IVF centre, hoping to go back with **Good Newwz**. They bring with them their clichéd, but endearing Punjabi earthiness from the land of “pinnies made by mom.”

The fertility clinic is run by another doctor- couple, ably played by Adil Hussian and Tisca Chopra, who claim a high rate of **Good Newwz** emanating from their centre. Voila! Both the women are successfully impregnated at the IVF clinic. But

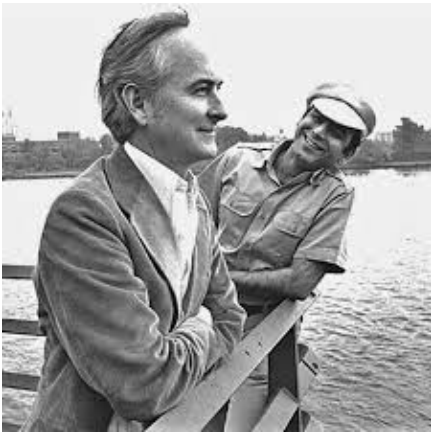
their joy has a short run as they are informed by the poker-faced doctor that the sperms of the two males got exchanged with the wrong wives. The goof-up is because of their shared family name. Now begins the rollicking comedy of errors.

Akshay Kumar is refreshing in this comedy after a spate of social-messaging roles. His comedy timing is spot on. Middle-aged executive in a car selling company, Akshay as Varun Batra has a trying time when his journalist wife Dipti is crazy to catch her ovulating time to conceive. He comes across as a caring, sometimes detached husband who is baffled at the need to have a baby to perpetuate genes.

The film deals with a topical issue of IVF babies, though it is only secondary to the story. At one point Akshay even comments that it is an interesting time when parents can just sit back at home and get a baby from an IVF centre. Debutante director Raj Mehta and co-writer Jyoti Kapoor have come up with racy humor, it being best as a comedy without getting pedantic about any issue. While grazing on the bigger issue of stressful lifestyle being a hurdle in normal conception, as also the social pressure to produce babies, the film keeps you engaged in the confusion of the two couples with exchanged sperms, or 'spams' as referred to by the simple Honey from Chandigarh. You wonder along with them how the conundrum will be resolved.

The content of the film is not as vital as the way it is narrated that makes **Good Newwz** eminently watchable. A laughter-riot, the film is risqué but never teeters on the offensive. The pace is maintained till the end, as is expected from a film co-produced by Karan Johar. I would certainly recommend it to all looking for some good humour – a rarity in Bollywood films. **Good Newwz**, the last Bollywood film to be released in 2019, was a befitting au revoir to the last year and continued laughter in the new.

Ismail Merchant: Film Producer Extraordinary / Partha Chatterjee



Ismail Merchant with
James Ivory

Ismail Merchant's passing away on May 25, 2005 marked the end of a certain kind of cinema. He was the last of the maverick film producers with taste who made without any compromise, films with a strong literary bias which were partial to actors and had fine production values. It is sad that he died at sixty eight of bleeding ulcers unable to any longer work his legendary charm on venal German financiers who were supposed to finance his last production, The White Countess, which was to have been directed by

his long-time partner James Ivory.

Merchant-Ivory productions came into being in 1961 when, Ismail Merchant, a Bohra Muslim student on a scholarship in America met James Ivory, an Ivy-leaguer with art and cinema on his mind, quite by accident in a New York coffee shop. The rest as they say is history. Together they made over forty films in a relationship that lasted all of forty-four years. A record in the annals of independent filmmaking anywhere in the world. Ivory's gentle, inward looking vision may never have found expression on the scale that it did but for Merchant's amazing resourcefulness that included coaxing, cajoling, bullying and charming all those associated, directly and indirectly with the making of his films.

Merchant-Ivory productions' first venture was a documentary, *The Delhi* Way back in 1962. The next year they made a feature length fiction film *The Householder in Black and White*. It was about a young college lecturer, tentative and clumsy trying to find happiness with his wife from a sheltered background. Ironically the script was written by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a Jewess from Poland married to a Parsee Indian architect. James Ivory who knew nothing about the subject did a fine job of directing his first real film. He had made a couple of pleasant documentaries earlier. The crew was basically Satyajit Ray's, a director who was

already being
acknowledged the world over as a Master and whose Apu trilogy,
Jalsa
Ghar (The Music Room) and other films had made a lasting
impression on
international audiences and critics. His cameraman Subrata
Mitra, also
lionized, photographed The Householder which was designed by
Bansi
Chandragupta, the most resourceful art director in India,
trained by Eugene

Lourie, who created most evocative sets for Jean Renoir's The
River, shot in
Barrackpore, near Calcutta in 1950.

The success of the Householder in the West was largely due to
the efforts of
Merchant's energy and drive. He wooed the Press which
responded warmly
almost to a man. His film went to those distributors who could
give it
maximum exposure and a decent royalty. His task was made
easier by the
rousing reception accorded to Satyajit Ray's lyrical cinema to
which
Merchant Ivory's maiden effort owed clear allegiance.

Their second film Shakespearewallah (1965) had an elegiac tone
which
added poignance to its lyricism. It was a fictionalized
account of a true story.

A well-known English theatre couple Jeffrey and Laura Kendall
who play
people like themselves in the film actually ran a peripatetic
theatre company
in the British India of the 1930s, and 40s. The troupe got
into grave financial

difficulties when their audience endowed anglicized Public schools and Country Clubs whose members belonged to flourishing British owned mercantile establishments suddenly lost interest in all things English. The purple patches from Shakespeare done by the company, which also had some Indian actors in real life, as in the film, no longer interested people, whose enthusiasm for culture could best be described as ephemeral.

Only the romance between the young daughter of the English couple and an Indian rake was fiction. The performances were first-rate and Felicity

Kendall as the daughter was moving. Beautifully photographed in B/W by

Subrata Mitra and scored by Satyajit Ray, whose music sold half-a- million

long-playing records, Shakespearewallah was a huge success in America

and Europe. Ismail was only twenty-eight years old when he produced his

second feature film. He proved himself to be a man of fine taste, possessing

the ability to grasp an opportunity when it presented itself.

In retrospect, one can say he best illustrated the idea that artistes are a

product of history. They reflect a certain spirit of their times—so too with

Ismail Merchant and his alter ego, the director James Ivory. They came at a

turbulent moment in Western politics, culture and cinema. The French New

Wave was about to peak and had already revealed the staggering

possibilities of film narration. Filmmakers as disparate in temperament as Alain Resnais, Jacques Tati, Robert Bresson, Jean Luc Goddard, Eric Rohmer and Francois Truffaut had enriched film language and proudly declared it an art form to be taken as seriously as literature, music, theatre or the plastic arts. In the Anglo-Saxon world classical cinema was in its last throes, and its greatest master John Ford was unemployed, ignored by know all young men running Hollywood. There was a niche for a different, gentler kind of storytelling and Merchant-Ivory films filled it. Their early productions were devoted to selling exotic India abroad and who could do it better than Ismail? The third film that Ismail and James did together was set in Benares. The Guru (1968) had the contretemps of a famous classical sitarist with his two wives—one traditional, the younger one modern, as its focal point. Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation had swept across America promising deliverance from the ravages of greed and avarice brought by relentless capitalism. Recognizing this phenomenon, the story included as a catalyst an English pop star and his girlfriend. India and its contradictions, the musician attracted to modernity but comfortable only when maintaining status quo, his celebrity English disciple and his girl both hoping to find peace in the holy city where the ustad

lives, all this constituted a visually interesting but not witty or incisive narrative.

Energetic promotion prevented the film from being a dead loss. While it did not make a reasonable profit, it made money—only some.

Bombay Talkie (1970) the fourth Merchant-Ivory offering was about an ageing male star, who was unable to cope with his own life, fame that was soon going to elude him, and the unreal world of Hindi cinema. Apart from Zia Mohyeddin's powerful performance as an ignored lyricist, and Subrata Mitra's camerawork, including a long bravura sequence at the beginning, there was little to recommend about the film. Utpal Dutt, whose dynamic presence held *The Guru* together, was just about adequate as a harried film producer. Shashi Kapoor who was so good in the first two films, looked tired here.

Bombay Talkie did nothing for Ismail Merchant or James Ivory. Two films in a row that barely made money, put the company under financial strain. For the first time in his life, Ismail was forced to deal with the unyielding Jewish moneymen of New York on less than equal terms. The experience marked him for life and made him a skinflint. His old friend and colleague Shashi Kapoor, remarked on television that Ismail did not like paying any of

his actors and technicians anymore than he absolutely had to. The Savages (1973) was made in the U.S. in an old colonial Restoration mansion, in Scarborough, forty minutes away from New York. The old place

and the jungle nearby gave Ivory the idea of bringing in jungle dwellers from Stone Age into the twentieth century. An object the "Savages" had never seen before, a coloured ball, suddenly descends in their midst. The retrieval of it by people from the modern era provides material for a potentially hilarious and wise film. The script based on an idea by Ivory and not written by Jhabvala, lacked subtlety and humour. Although the director saw it as a "Hudson River Last Day in Marienbad", his film had all of Alain Resnais's intellectual tomfoolery but none of his poetic intensity. Merchant understood right away that original material was not the duo's cup of tea, and thereafter relied, exclusively on literature to provide the ballast for their films.

After The Wild Party (1975), a sincere but inept attempt to recreate the excesses of the Jazz age in sinful old Hollywood, an undertaking the inspiration for which may well have been the jewelled prose of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Merchant Ivory production was again in dire straits. Certain critics including Pauline Kael of the New Yorker even called

Ismail and James a pair of amateurs. The energy that drove their first two films seemed to have deserted them.

Merchant would have to turn things around speedily before America wrote them off. *Roseland* (1977) set in a real ballroom of that name in New York where people come to shed their loneliness was too civilized, too tentative to move viewers. Although it had a solid cast led by old-timer Teresa Wright with Lou Jacobi, Geraldine Chaplin and Christopher Walken who featured in the three inter-connected episodes, it was lacking in drive. Ivory seemed to have found a cinematic language that was true to his temperament, but it still needed polishing. The opportunity came with an adaptation by Ruth Praver Jhabwala, who else, of Henry James's *The Europeans* (1979). The interiorized pre-modern drama was just what Merchant Ivory productions needed. Accolades followed and actress Lee Remick's performance in a pivotal role was greatly appreciated. It was more than a success d'esteeme. People in large numbers bought tickets to see it. Ismail and James had finally made it to the front rank of American and European filmmakers. They were still in their late thirties.

The following year in 1980, they tried their hand at an experimental musical *Jane Austen in Manhattan* about various troupes wanting to

perform a 19th century manuscript by Jane Austen written in her childhood that was recently discovered. It starred Anne Baxter, who shot to fame thirty years

earlier as Eve Harrington in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *All about Eve* and

Robert Powell, also a contemporary of hers. Made on a shoestring budget of 450, 000 dollars, it was like the proverbial curate's cake, good in parts.

Quartet (1981) based on Jean Rhys's despairing existentialist novel about

bohemian Paris in the late 1920s starring Isabelle Adjani, Maggie Smith,

Alan Bates and photographed in luminous low-key by Pierre L'Homme,

cinematographer to Jean Pierre Melville, father of the French new wave, was

a feather in James Ivory's cap. It was possible only because of Merchant's

exceptional organizing skills and uncanny judgment of the artistic and

commercial climate of Europe and America.

There was indeed room then for a quieter, more reflective kind of cinema in

the English-speaking world, especially after Hollywood had expended its

energies on mainly violent moralistic dramas and thrillers. The 'serious'

French cinema, thanks or no thanks to the brilliant cinematic combustions of

Jean Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, Jacques Rivette and Chris Marker had been

forced to virtually abandon the linear narrative, with the

notable exception of Francois Truffaut and, more so, Jean Pierre Rappeneau. It secretly welcomed well-told stories from any part of the world. Satyajit Ray's films and those of Merchant Ivory found favour with discerning French audiences, principally in Paris.

Ismail and James returned to the twilight world of Maharajas and 'illicit' love; the consequences of one is probed by a young Englishwoman in Heat and Dust (1983). Julie Christie is the woman who comes to India to understand her late grandaunt's affair with a Maharaja (Shashi Kapoor) and falls in love with a handsome youth (Zakir Husain) and gets impregnated by him. It was a big hit. Though Merchant-Ivory had to take a lot of flak from the critics. Ismail's logic was clear. Someone had to pay for the homes and offices in London, New York and Bombay (now Mumbai). The next year it was time to regain critical acclaim and the affections of a loyal audience. Once again it was Henry James to the rescue and his Bostonians was Merchant Ivory's key to success. It restored their prestige and gave them an unspoken right to adapt works of 'difficult' writers for the screen.

E.M. Forster, a great but not popular English writer was next on their agenda. A Room With a View (1986) featuring Daniel Day Lewis,

son of

poet C. Day Lewis, Helena Bonham Carter, Judi Dench and Maggie Smith, was the first attempt to find a cinematic equivalent to Forster's prose which was at first glance unsuitable for an audio-visual interpretation. There was too little physical action in his writing—A Passage to India and Where Angels Fear to Tread have short bursts of it—most of what occurs was in the minds of his characters. Merchant and Ivory won a fair bit of critical acclaim, and made decent amounts of money on it.

Their films were always about people, trying to find themselves—deliberately or not. The price they pay to arrive at an understanding with life is usually heavy. Most often they are aware of their dilemma; however, there are exceptions. Does Stephen, the faithful old butler in Lord Darlington's household really comprehend what an unfair hand he has been dealt by his former employers in Remains of the Day (1993)? Only Miss Kenton, the housekeeper, who like Stephens is now without a job, seems to know despite a stoic acceptance of her fate.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel helps Ivory make perhaps his finest film: a quiet, understated, but never the less powerful depiction of class and privilege in pre-war England. The same pair of actors Anthony Hopkins, and Emma

Thompson from their Forster triumph of a year earlier *Howards End* were repeated to great effect in *Remains of the Day*.

Howards End (1992) was set during the economic depression that swept

Europe and America in the late 1920s through the mid-1930s. It was about

naked abuse of power and ruthless assertion of privilege. Anthony Hopkins

as an aristocrat with a roving eye is riveting but it is the women who elicit

both respect and sympathy. Emma Thompson and Helena Bonham Carter as

sisters from the middle-class whose trust is betrayed heartlessly by the

aristocrat, culminating in the murder of a male friend of the younger sister,

with their accurate reading of social situations, throw the film into a political

perspective which needs no polemics to comprehend.

If this article is as much about *Ivory* as it is about *Merchant* then there is a

reason for it. They were joined artistically at the hip. One was at his best

only when complementing the other. It was Ismail who encouraged, even

inspired James, to stretch himself to discover his true *métier*; to take risks

with complex literary texts that were difficult to film but could be

immensely rewarding once an effective method was discovered.

Who for instance had dared to film primarily uncinematic authors like

Forster and James in an Anglo-Saxon cinema? Who dared to gamble and

win but Ivory egged on by Merchant. To make meaningful cinema out of texts with sub-terranean relationships hidden under a patina of good manners, where what was being said and done often meant the opposite, was no mean achievement.

This kind of interiorized drama was also the highlight of *Mr and Mrs Bridge* (1990) with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward playing the eponymous couple. Set in Kansas City during the Depression, it travels over two generations to Paris. The inclusion of the Louvre as a location was a masterstroke, made possible through Ismail's penchant for legerdemain.

Apart from Newman and Woodward's stand out performances as a rich couple stultified by time unable to understand the changing world around them, there was the elegant presentation of a difficult idea. Adapted from two novels by Evans Connell, *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge* was a critical as well as a commercial triumph.

Ismail had once said in an interview that he had brought in *Jefferson in Paris* (1995) for five million dollars; a feat beyond any producer, independent or backed by a Hollywood studio. To make a period piece about the second president of the United States and him courting his future French wife, for such a sum was a well nigh impossible task. The film was

panned despite

Nick Nolte's caring performance and Pierre L'Homme's telling photography.

It was only a year earlier in 1994 that Ismail had made his own debut as a director in feature films. It is not that he had never been behind the camera

before. His short *The Creation of Women* (1960) had been nominated for an

Oscar in its category and later *Mahatma* and *The Mad Boy* (1974) of twenty-

seven minutes duration was highly acclaimed. It is quite possible that he had

grown tired of fundraising for large projects that had to be reasonably

budgeted to be commercially viable. He wanted to do a small, intimate film

he could call his own. He chose Anita Desai's novel *In Custody* to do as

Muhafiz in Urdu. He got Desai and Shahrux Husain to write the screenplay,

which was set in contemporary Bhopal. Noor, a huge, custardy man, a once

important Urdu poet is on his last legs, dying of adulation heaped on him by

sycophants much like the rich food he so enjoys. He lives with his two

wives, one like him old but unlike him reliable and the other a young,

opportunistic tart rescued from a local brothel and the mother of his son.

Devan, a young Hindu lecturer devoted to the Urdu language is asked by his

publisher friend to do an interview with Noor for his journal. What follows,

is in turn, comic and sad. Noor's interview is botched by a novice sound recordist. He dies suddenly, but Devan somehow manages to bring out a collection of Noor's poems.

Muhafiz is also about a highly expressive language that is being allowed to die out in independent India for exclusively political reasons. All official work in courts and police stations was done in Urdu before the partition of India in 1947. Immediately after, Hindi became the official language of the State. All avenues of Government employment suddenly closed for Urdu students. Noor a poet of sensitivity and discernment became a victim of capricious politics. To add insult to injury, his second wife sang his ghazals and passed them off as her own.

Ismail chose the more difficult intimist mode for his film. Rarely did the cinema go out of the poet's house. There were precisely five other locations, namely Devan's home and his college; his colleague Siddiqui's home and the office of the Urdu weekly which has commissioned Devan to do Noor's interview and the visit by boat to Sufi Saints' Mazar on an island in a lake. The last scene of Noor's funeral procession is seen mostly from a distance, mainly to create scale.

Too many things went wrong for intention to match achievement. For one,

Ismail had been away from home for much too long; true he did come back periodically to make films, but these were not connected closely with the imperceptibly changing social scene. He did not really have the time to study India for he was far too busy administering to the needs of the film at hand. His knowledge of Urdu, for all his enthusiasm, was at best sketchy. Choosing the poetry of a revolutionary poet like Faiz Ahmed Faiz to do duty for most of Noor's was a mistake. Anyone familiar with Faiz's oeuvre will immediately realize that it does not sit well on the lips of a bacchante like Noor. Perhaps Josh Malihabadi's poetry would have been more apt, for it would have been closer to Noor's spirit. More attention should have been paid to his ghazals especially those picturised on his second wife. They are sung in a lackluster manner by Kavita Krishnamurthy. Even the one rendered by Hariharan lacks conviction. They should have had more melody, more raga content. This was all the more surprising because Ustad Zakir Husain was the composer. Ismail was in much greater control doing his second film Cotton Mary (2000) in English, with a script by Alexandra Viets adapted from her own play. It was about an Anglo-Indian Ayah who decides to make herself indispensable to her English mistress whose baby she helps to

nurse. Mary, though, a servant uses her dominant position over her employer suffering from post-natal depression, to push her own case to go to England—home country for the Eurasian. As expected all her schemes fall apart and she is finally taken in by her relatives who she had till recently despised. Mary never really comes to terms with her own identity.

This problem of identity forms the core of *A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries* (1998) directed by James Ivory and based on an autobiographical novel by Kaylie Jones, daughter of James Jones, author of *From Here to Eternity*, *Go to the Widow Maker* and *The Thin Red Line*. The fundamental question of recognizing oneself is raised once again in *The Mystic Masseur* (2002) the last film that Merchant directed. V.S. Naipaul's comic novel about an Indian from Trinidad trying to discover himself in London allowed for a mixture of wit and seriousness.

Ismail and James worked together for the last time together in 2003 on *L'Divorce*, a farce set in contemporary Paris in which doltish Americans and French do not know what to do with themselves. An American young woman, pregnant with her first child, is abandoned by her upper class French husband for another woman. The hapless mother-to-be is joined by

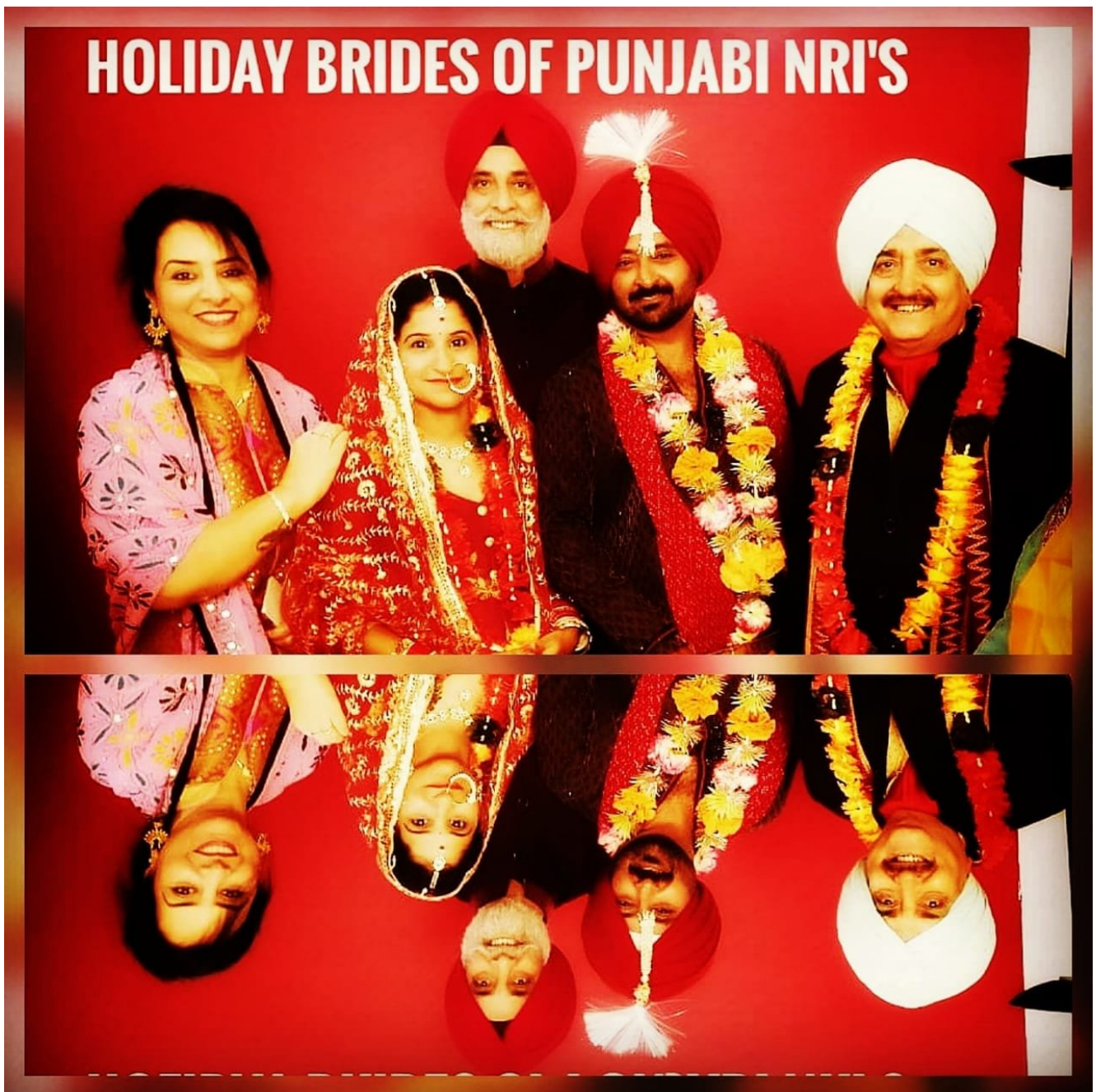
her younger sister newly arrived from the U.S. only to be seduced by her estranged brother-in-law's rake of an uncle! The absconding young husband dies a gratuitous death; a sweet, chubby baby is born to his wife. Nobody learns anything from what life has to offer.

Ismail Merchant's life had a lot to offer. In middle age he had become a gourmet and gourmand, a television celebrity and a writer of popular cookbooks. He had proved his worth and durability as a producer of quality cinema whose foundation lay in good writing and had gifted the world an unusual and talented filmmaker in James Ivory. He had also paved the way for those independent producers and directors, not necessarily from India, who were to follow after him. Last but not least he had proved that if there

was a will to make a really fine film then the means to make it could also be found. He was a man of rare qualities.

A film on how young brides of Punjab fall victims to some

NRI's



“Thousands of Brides are waiting for their NRI grooms in Punjab... This is perhaps amongst the top social malice of Punjab...” According to the director of the film, Satya Prakash Sabarwal, “These Runaway Grooms should be given capital punishment for this heinous crime.” You can watch this film and see if you agree with him.

This film is the latest, in a continuing web based series on Social Issues by TVNF.

Watch the film on this link

Holiday Brides of Punjab

Marcello Matrianni- An Actor for All Seasons / Partha Chatterjee



Marcello Mastroianni with Sofia Loren in Yesterday Today Tomorrow

Marcello Mastroianni (1924-1996) was for many the most charismatic of European actors, and along with Jean Paul Belmond, the most subtle. He was, for many the most versatile actor in the world. There is something loutish about the obviously gifted Gerard Depardieu as there was about Marlon Brando, but there was nothing but finesse about Marcello Mastroianni's screen performances, even when he played negative characters. In his own gentle, self-effacing way he became the embodiment of the Italian, and even the European male, marooned, between the romantic, poetic memories of a not too industrialised Italy/Europe before the First World War, and the aftermath of the Atom bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States of America to end the Second World War. His first memorable role was opposite the young, sassy Sophia Loren, already with her talent for comedy in place, in Alexandro Blasetti's, *Too Bad She's Bad*. He played a harried taxi driver pushed beyond his bounds of patience by a beautiful girl-pickpocket (Loren) and her bogus professor father (Vittorio de Sica). Mastroianni revealed a flair for comic timing, and held his ground against a formidable actor/comedian like de Sica, who was also one of the giants of Italian Neorealism having directed emblematic films like *Bicycle Thieves*, *Umberto D*, and *Miracle in Milan*.

His throwaway good looks also made him over the years a huge star in Italy, and eventually internationally. He wore his stardom lightly as he did his enormous acting talent. Chiara, his daughter by longtime lover and dazzling French cinema actress Catherine Deneuve, remembers him as a father who came to fetch her from school when she was a child. He was the embodiment of an extraordinary man hidden inside an ordinary man; perhaps that is the reason why women found him so attractive. Both his strength and his vulnerability can be seen in that sequence from Luchino Visconti's, *White Nights*, in which he is dancing frantically in a public place, and suddenly falls down. Visconti's interpretation of a tale by Dostoyevski became both controversial and famous, and Mastroianni's performance remained in people's minds. Federico Fellini found in him the ideal actor to play his frazzled, alienated characters, funny in an off-centre way in two films, *La Dolce Vita*, and *8 1/2*. The first film dealt with the Roman glitterati at the end of the 1950s determined to live it up as if there was no tomorrow, the second, was about a film maker who is trying to shoot a film with autobiographical dimensions but does not know what to do. When asked by journalists how does he plan to end the film? the Stetson-hatted director (Mastroianni) replies "I am looking for an answer." His reply rings true.

Michelangelo Antonioni, between the two Fellini films, cast him in *La Notte*, in 1961. There was no scope for humour, even implied, in this dour master's films, not in this one. Mastroianni took it in his stride and delivered a quietly moving performance alongside the sultry French actress, Jeanne Moreau. Antonioni's angst-ridden film captured the imagination of intellectuals in Europe and America. It was time to get back to comedy with a serious touch.

Vittorio de Sica cast him opposite Sophia Loren in *Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*. It was a three-part film about Naples and Neopolitans. In the first story he is a harassed husband and father of a large family, whose wife has been sent to prison for selling American cigarettes in the blackmarket; in the second he is a journalist having a clandestine affair with a multi-millionaire's wife whose Rolls Royce car he manages to damage while saving a child; finally he is a foolish son of a rich man in love with a religious prostitute! Loren and Mastroianni excelled themselves in this film, need one add. He showed his versatility again by playing a turncoat who literally puts on the wrong coat and gets shot dead in *Allonsanfan* by the Tavianni brothers, which was set in the Garibaldi period and the unification of Italy in their late 19th century. A little before that he had played Mersault, the accidental killer, very convincingly in Visconti's, *The Stranger*, a rather academic version of Albert Camus's profound novel, *The Outsider*. Of course, there was that wonderful chemistry with Sophia Loren, in Dino Risi's bitter-sweet comedy, *The Priest's Wife*.

The 1980's saw him reunited with Fellini: He played himself in *Intervista*, a film about Fellini, and then in *Ginger and Fred*, he was paired with Guilettina Masina a marvellous actress and Fellini's wife. It was a poignant story of a couple of old time Music Hall performers who do the dance routines of Fred Astair and Ginger Rogers from old Hollywood musicals on a Television Christmas Special. It is difficult to forget him as a middle-class homosexual with whom a fading, overworked housewife (Loren, who else) falls in love during the Fascist late 1930s under Mussolini.

He remained married to his wife from 1948, Flora Carabella, and the union produced a daughter, Barbara. When he died of cancer, his last partner film maker, Anna Maria Tato was with him. The most enduring image of him, that weds the person to his art, is of him as Mandrake the Magician dancing with the aging but still voluptuous Anita Ekberg, first in front of the camera, and then in silhouette behind a translucent screen in *Intervista*. It was the acme of romance.

Jodha Akbar – The Film /

Seema Bawa

Seema Bawa analyses this highly controversial film with a historical perspective



Actors: Aishwarya Rai and Hrithik Roshan

The historian in me could not resist having a *dekko* at a historical romance based on a character such as Akbar, who indeed is a larger than life figure of world history. A man of vision, statesmanship and great depth Akbar was the *Insaan-e-Kamaal* of his era. Hrithik Roshan as the young Akbar indeed does not disappoint even though in terms of physique he does not match the descriptions of the historical Akbar. The scenes depicting his valour, strength and prowess in battle, though competently performed are not exceptional. It is the sheer regalness of his bearing and the small details such as the fluid and effortless movements with which he sits on the throne, an act which requires immense theatrical perfection, that help him make the character his own. The scene showing Akbar getting into a trance while listening to mystical music of Sufi dervishes is authentic to the sources and enacted with great felicity. Aishwarya Rai as Jodhaa is right out of Mughal-Rajput miniatures paintings in her stance, apparel, ornaments and indeed her entire external persona.

The character of Akbar is better delineated because of the

wealth of source material available, much of which is hagiographic in nature. That is not to say that the counterview was not available as is seen from the killing of Adham Khan Akbar's foster brother. Other aspects of Akbar's prowess such as his exceptional skill as a bare-hand fighter, his dueling an elephant, his consulting philosophers of other faiths; all having basis in historical sources ring quite true in the film.

Jodhaa, on the other hand, being largely a figment of the writer-director's imagination, has been conceptualized with less depth. The single character trait that has been reiterated is her spirit, and her spirited resistance to patriarchal values which while anachronistic to the period depicted, is also quite tedious. Her depiction as a Rajput woman of honour and integrity is overstressed.

As for the characterization of secondary characters, unlike *Lagaan*, in *Jodhaa Akbar* this aspect has been largely ignored. Instead we have stereotypes paraded as Rajput Ranas, and good and faithful courtiers such as the *Khan-i-khanan* and Todar Mal versus fanatical *ulema* and scheming relatives. The entire structure of Mughal aristocracy, the *mansabdars*, so significant for the actual and visual construction of the Mughal era, is overlooked.

The film succeeds in reconstructing the sense of architectural spaces of the grand Mughal era, especially the *Diwan-i-Aam*. The battles and the epic scale are well done even though the armies rush towards each other rather than in formation.

The music of AR Rahman goes well with the film but does not stand out. The background score though is excellent.

The film is at one level an elaborate seduction of the spirited though mono-dimensional Jodhaa by a rather desirable Akbar. The plot is entirely based on coitus-interruptus, which is interrupted ad-nauseum where the consummation is heartily

to be wished for so that one can finally go home. The sexual tension is very well structured and indeed works very well but for the length it has been stretched out. The political intrigues and the romance appear to be yoked together by violence and are not linked organically. Indeed they should have been two separate films.

Perhaps the entire relationship of Jodhaa and Akbar should have been read within the context of sexual politics that underlay the harem of the Mughals, which could have served as an interesting back drop to the delineation of Emperor Akbar, arguably the greatest monarch and statesman this land has seen. We know that Akbar had at least two wives (besides many concubines) before he married the Rajput princess. The Rajput princess, whatever her real name may have been, would have been competing with them for her Emperor's favours and allusions to the same may have made interesting viewing. Instead the harem intrigues center around her conflict with Maham Anaga Akbar's foster mother whose importance had waned by the time Akbar attained adulthood.

The film is largely didactic in that it addresses issues of shared cultural heritage and communal harmony without appearing to preach. The historicity of Jodhaa/ Harka or Jia Bai is irrelevant to the film.

**Who's afraid of the
documentary film / Keval**

Arora



Remember the cynical manoeuvring by which the Film Federation of India had, some years ago, denied entry to video documentaries in their festival? And how this had brought home the threat that this medium can pose to vested interests? After initially denying space to video films in its international film festivals, ostensibly because these were 'in a different format', the Federation had inserted a censorship clause for all Indian entries to the festival. The row that ensued had been extensively reported in the media, so a bald re-iteration should do for now. Film-makers had come together to form an organisation named VIKALP with the aim of safeguarding the rights of documentary film-makers. Launching a Campaign Against Censorship (CAC), they had run a widely attended 'Films for Freedom' programme of screenings and discussions at educational institutes.

This proactive initiative has had an interesting spin-off. It has placed the agenda of activism and its methods on the front-burner for a generation that is often written off as a self-absorbed 'I' rather than a 'why' generation. (By the way, what is this generation's current alphabetic habitation? Is it still Generation Y, or is it now staging its last stand as

Gen-Z?) The video documentary has, as a result, been so comfortably privileged as the conscience keeper of the nation that I'm tempted to play the devil's advocate and ask if theatre isn't a better mode of communication through which activist agendas can be carried out. However, before outlining crucial differences between the video documentary and theatre, let's identify some strengths that both share.

The video documentary and theatre performance have, unfortunately, often been disparagingly prized as no more than a handmaiden to other activisms – as techniques by which grass-root actions extend or advertise their interventions. Such a view has treated video and theatre as little more than a courier service, as blandly variable vehicles of a relentless messaging. Put another way, the medium has been equated with its message; and has therefore been valued, from its aims to its achievements, for the literal directness of its effort. NGOs have been particularly susceptible to this lure of social advertising, perhaps in the belief that generating the same message through a variety of formats extends its effectiveness, even though all it really does is relieve the tedium. If Doordarshan was obsessed years ago with televised puppet theatre as its favoured mode of disseminating advice to farmers and pregnant women, it's the NGOs' turn now to patronise street theatre with a similarly deprecatory optimism.

Why puppet theatre and street theatre is anybody's guess. I don't think the social sector's preference for these two forms is based on any insight into their potential. Rather, these forms are trivialised when used as a platter for pre-digested data and handed-down attitudes, as a dressing-up that goes hand in hand with a dumbing-down. Obviously, state television and the NGO sector rate the urban proscenium stage as the 'true' theatre, and puppet theatre or street theatre as cute country cousins suitable for rustic and other under-developed tastes. (Not that its performers have seemed to mind: in a

shrinking market, even wrong attention is welcome as preferable to none.)

Yet, it must be pointed out that there is a faint glimmer of wisdom in the social sector's choice of theatre and documentary film for carrying out its activist agendas. This wisdom is hinged on two features common to all performance: greater accessibility, and the affective power of storytelling. Performative cultural modes are accessible to audiences in a special way because they circumvent the barriers of literacy and the drudgery of reading. Such accessibility is then magnified through the affective power of stories that theatre and film usually place at their centre. To the extent that the theatre and the documentary film tell stories, they can never be reduced to mere data transcription codes. It is immaterial whether their stories are real or fictional, or whether these are particular instances or typical cases, because performative modes that tell stories irradiate even simple statements with a penumbra that deepens, authenticates and often problematises the business of a literal messaging. Clearly, the potential of theatre and film for activist causes remains unrealizable if these are used merely to sugar-coat mundane fare.

It is when we define accessibility in physical terms that differences crop up in the respective potential of film and theatre as activist space. Film is unrivalled in its ability to reach out to vast numbers of people. There is no gainsaying the seduction of spread: if maximising contact with people is vital to the activist impulse, the medium that reaches out more effortlessly will obviously be regarded as the more enabling one. In contrast, theatre performances exist in the singular and have to be re-constituted afresh for each act of viewing. Not only does this call for much more forward planning, it also implies that there can be no guarantee that later shows will work exactly like the earlier ones. Films, on the other hand, travel to venues more rapidly than do theatre

troupes and offer an assurance of stable replication (every spectator gets to see exactly the same thing as created by its crew, give or take some transmission loss on account of projection equipment).

Of course, problems of technology and finance do cramp film-makers, sometimes so severely that I think 'accessibility' should be defined not just in terms of audience comprehension and taste, but also in terms of the artist's access to the tools of her art. However, recent developments in video technology have ensured that these twin pressures are less burdensome to today's film-maker – high-end digital cameras have become cheap enough for independent film makers to acquire their own hardware; sophisticated editing software, faster computer processors and capacious storage disks now enable footage to be processed at home. The result: a fresh impetus to the documentary film movement which is evident in the range and number of films being made today.

It is interesting to note that if this celebration of accessible technology and reduced expenditure were to be taken to a logical conclusion, it is theatre rather than the video film that would shine in an advantageous light. It's cheaper to make plays than films, and it's possible to make them without recourse to equipment of any kind other than the human body. Most theatre performances can be designed without technological fuss in a way that even the barest film cannot. Such a theatre gains a quality of outreach that far outstrips the reach of film. For, what technology can ever hope to compete with the affordability and the portability of the body and the voice? Sure, this isn't true of all theatre productions. But I would argue that productions which depend on technological assists for their effects (take, for instance, the romance with projected images that most plays glory in nowadays) end up shackling themselves in ways that erase their fundamental nature. I say this fully aware that some of us believe that the facility which technology brings

in some ways is well worth the price that has to be paid in others.

Take another difference between film and theatre. Films possess a huge advantage in terms of authenticity in reportage. They have no peer if the business of activism is to disseminate images and narratives of actuality, to show things as they actually are. But, if the primary purpose of activism is to persuade and engage with people, then the advantage that film enjoys over theatre is considerably neutralised. The very attractions of the film medium – stability, replication, transportability – become limitations from this point of view.

It is a truism worth repeating that the uniqueness of theatre performance is that it is a live event. People come together at a particular time, to a particular place, for a transaction where some people show things to others who watch. In film, there is no equivalent scope for interaction and therefore no lively relation between actor and spectator. The idea of a collective spectatorship – where the audience becomes a prototypical community – is of course common to both film and theatre. But, in the latter, this ‘community’ includes the actor as well. It is not just the audience that watches the actor, but the actor too who ‘reads’ his audience and subtly alters his performance accordingly. Interaction, engagement and persuasion between the performers and audience is so central to theatre that it is often the richest source of dialogue in the performance event.

Where, pray, is any of this possible during a film screening? The film spectator remains more or less a passive recipient of a fixed structure. The film may well ‘play’ with the spectator’s responses, but even such playing is welded to a grid that is frozen unalterably on videotape or celluloid. Interactions in the theatre between performer and spectator are, in contrast, dynamically dependent on the particulars of that performance. In other words, the fragile instability of theatrical performance becomes a powerful opportunity for an

activist intervention, as is evident in the way Augusto Boal has actors interrupt the performance and address audiences directly in his Theatre of the Oppressed. Techniques used in Theatre-in-Education methodologies ('Hot-seating', for instance, where spectators talk back to 'characters' in the play and offer their comments) is another case in point.

As I said, where, pray, is any of this possible with film?

An earlier version of this article was first published in
FIRST CITY (November 2004)

The Cinema of M.F. Husain

M.F. Husain's two feature length fiction films, Gaja Gamini and Meenaxi are classic examples of having one's cake and eating it too. In each case, the cake is delectable. True that the two films are not for a mass audience whatever that may mean, but that there is a sizeable audience for them, mainly urban, is beyond dispute. Had they been promoted properly, there would have been jam for the distributors and exhibitors. These two films are genuinely experimental and also eminently accessible to those with open minds-not necessarily intellectual or in tune with European Cinema-but just receptive to new ideas. They share certain avant-garde qualities with Ritwik Ghatak's 'Komal Gandhar' (1961) and are even more advanced in terms of ideas and equally fluid in execution.

It is both unfair and unrealistic to compare Husain's achievements with that of other artists – painters and sculptures – who have also made films. In 1967, his Short, Through The Eyes of a Painter won the top prize in its category at the Berlin Film Festival. Shortly afterwards, an

illustrious colleague Tyeb Mehta also made a Short for the same producer, Films Division of India (Government run) in which a slaughterhouse figured prominently. It too was widely appreciated. Then Gopi Gajwani, a painter who also worked with Span Magazine an organ of the United States Information Service, made from his own pocket two abstract short films in 35mm. They were shown once or twice and disappeared for nearly 30 years only to surface during the recent Golden Jubilee Celebrations of Lalit Kala Akademi. Both Mehta and Gajwani were interesting film-makers who might have found a voice in the New York underground cinema of the 1950s and 60s. Sadly neither proceeded further with film-making for whatever reason.

Husain never let go of his dream of making fiction films while he continued to paint with his customary zeal. As a lad he wanted to be an actor in Hindi cinema, but that did not happen. He, instead started to paint large banners and hoardings to publicise popular movies, an exercise that gave his line power and eloquence. He has always been an avid filmgoer nursing a secret desire to direct. When the opportunity came he was becoming bored with his celebrity status. Everything he did was fodder for gossip columnists.

Husain's relationship with women for over four decades has intrigued many, but his understanding of the feminine psyche has seldom if ever been appreciated. He is one of the few men anywhere in the world truly at ease in the company of women. Gaja Gamini and Meenaxi are his tribute to womanhood : playful, subtle, witty, humorous and even wise. He is without consciously intending to be one, a woman's director.

Neither Madhuri Dixit (Gaja Gamini) nor Tabu (Meenaxi) has ever been directed with more finesse. In each case there seems to have been a complicity with the director; a rare oneness.

Both Gaja Gamini and Meenaxi are episodic in nature, supple in

there handling of time. They are, for all the narrative ballast they carry, essentially explorations in feminine psychology.

Meenaxi is about a blocked writer's muse in Hyderabad who sells perfume, more so metaphorically, for she sets him on a course of self-discovery and understanding. This journey takes the form of a novel-in-progress, which she helps Nawab (Raghuvir Yadav) the protected old world aristocrat man-of-letters, write. It is a process that we the viewers share in with continuous pleasure.

It begins with a celebration of the engagement of Nawab's younger sister where he fortuitously meets Meenaxi (Tabu). A qawwali, Noor Alla is being sung which runs like a leit motif in the film and is crucial towards its understanding. When in the final sequence of the three-episode film the words Yeh Barkeye Tajjali (This bolt of lightening) are sung from this very qawwali, Husain's cinematic intentions and credo for living are made transparent. There is a joy that communicates itself, a transformation of dull and mundane reality into beauty-fleeting but recurring; each time new and significant. Here, as in Gaja Gamini Husain's understanding of cinema is truly remarkable, he knows that its prime business is to create and sustain an illusion.

Here content has no meaning by itself but only when it is expressed through completely filmic means. Realistic and unrealistic cinema and all else are but convenient labels. What counts is the sudden discovery of the truth through paradox, humour, wit and intelligence. A touch as light as Husain's is essential for such an undertaking.

Ashok Mehta's camera in Gaja Gamini serves Husain's vision faithfully, even beautifully in patently artificial surroundings. It relies on building atmosphere and capturing facial expressions to help articulate conceptions that attempt to find a mean between what seems to be painterly and musical

preoccupations. His lighting, compositions and camera movements veer towards classicism. It is after all a move from the world of P.C. Barua's Devdas (1935) and hence Husain's youth-a strategically placed bullock cart in an early sequence confirms this view-to a sparking creative life in wise octogenarian splendour. It is both a stylish and a stylized film.

Shamistha Roy is art director in both films. In Gaja Gamini her challenge was to create a poetic reality out of deliberately artificial settings. Meenaxi of course, gave her more freedom because of its sweep and its intimate association with the naturalistic (physical) world. She comes through admirably on both occasions.

Gaja Gamini had veteran Bhupen Hazarika for the songs and dynamic young tabla player Anuradha Pal doing the background score. Hazarika's songs are melodic and unusual without being intrusive. Pal's racy tabla acts in dynamic counter point to a gently flowing story.

Nawab's literary odyssey and Meenaxi's pivotal role in it is what propels the film forward. The second episode is set in Jaisalmer, where she is transformed into a Rajasthani prince's niece, beautiful aware and socially committed. An ardent water conservationist. By this time Nawab has 'invented' Kameshwar (Kunnal Kapoor) so that he can be her suitor. This tale embraces abstract and concrete ideas like desire, emotional fidelity, illusive stirrings of love, and they are highlighted by two sparkling songs, Rang Haiye-Rang Haiye, and Ye Rishta, whose picturisation show an acute awareness of current marketing and advertising trends in electronic and print media.

The vocabulary of chic Advertising and Travel films is stood on its head with impish delight to create genuine romance. This is to be sure, a trapeze act without a net and Husain and his young son Owais, also his indefatigable associate,

come through with flying colours. **Meenaxi** shows a greater daring in the recognition of primary feelings than **Gaja Gamini** and a youthful energy charges every frame in it.

Bombay Film Industry wizard Waman Bhonsle of the Waman-Guru duo edited Gaja Gamini and rose to the occasion. His vast skill and experience was invaluable in making such a complex film a success. Meenaxi has availed of Sreekar Prasad's exceptional editing skills. He brings an easy flow to a story that could have easily gone out of hand.

Meenaxi, of necessity looks and feels improvised, even tentative but its tentativeness is its strength. **Gaja Gamini** is more centered its emotions more distilled, there is the voice of experience in every idea expressed and its wit and humour is more worldly. Here Madhuri Dixit playing the heroine with the majestic female elephant's gait is a fully realized woman in each of her several avatars. It is a terrific adventure in time and the nature of memory.

Husain painting dark rain-laden monsoon clouds on a canvas in the first sequence and then, the repeated descent of a bundle (gathari, usually carried by woman) from top frame in double quick time with the immortal blind singer from the early talkies, K.C. Dey singing Teri Gathari Main Laga Chor Musafir Dekh Zara (Beware Traveller, A Thief is about to steal your belongings) to bridge a time lag of over 65 years, on the sound track, sets the tone. Already ambiguity and awareness are harnessed together for what will be a poetic exploration of woman and her role in different civilizations spread over a time span of a millennium.

Kalidas, Leonardo da Vinci, C.V. Raman, are all aware of Gaja Gamini and care for her. Only Shahrukh, played by superstar Shahrukh Khan, an international photographer, is in love with her. She loses him in a war. Husain's ideas of life and art find deeply satisfying expression in a studio bound production.

Meenaxi, is film mostly out in the street or in nature. It is an onward journey of a staid, middle-aged writer and his attempts through his writing, aided by the mysterious, feminine Meenaxi to find out what constitutes life and makes it worth living. Nawab travels from Hyderabad to Prague to thank Maria, a character of his ongoing novel who works as a stage actress and waitress and is really a metamorphosed Meenaxi, for giving him a perspective on his work and therefore life. Maria loves the traveller Kameshwar, who has 'progressed' from the previous episode in Jaisalmer to this one. Originally, he was a belligerent Hyderabad motor mechanic who wanted to become a singer. Theirs' is a youthful love full of creative potential.

Nawab's novel is not complete but a new realization of life's beauty has dawned on him. He 'dies' in his quest and re-awakens to the strains of the qawwali, Noor Alla and sees Meenaxi with new eyes as dancers, darvesh-like, whirl around her. He is enchanted all over again. A cycle of understanding life and its myriad possibilities completes itself and a fresh one begins. Nawab achieves Barkat (progress, realization really) through Harkat (activity) thanks to Meenaxi's guidance.

Santosh Sivan's cinematography in Meenaxi is lively, buoyant and many a time, air borne. It is important to keep the camera moving in what is an impressionistic film. A series of impressions instead of incidents comprise the narration. Each one is clear yet ambiguous, pulling in opposite direction creating a poignant feeling of truth, though not always by design.

A.R. Rahman in Meenaxi has composed melodies that are beautiful because they are apt and vice-versa. His background score evokes youthful romance. His music is a bridge between the past and the present pointing towards the future.

Songs have a crucial role in this film. Clarity and ambiguity

play hide and seek in each of the six that are there. They chart Kameshwar, Meenaxi and therefore Nawab's progress in their journey through life and their appreciation of it.

Owais Husain, the painter's younger son started out as his father's assistant in Gaja Gamini. Here in Meenaxi, he is associate director and screenplay writer. Much of the film's coltish, romantic vigour comes from him. Song picturisation seems to be his forte. He even integrates dance into the film's flow with aplomb. Raeima Husain, his young, talented wife has been of considerable help in these areas as she has been in producing an unusually demanding film. But the overall visualization, aesthetic and philosophical slant, not to forget its sense of fun, is all M.F. Husain's despite his having reportedly said, "It is seventy percent Owais's film and thirty percent mine". In this project he has been like the great jazz bandleader and pianist Count Basie, who directed his band with precise, economic piano playing. It was said of him that he needed only two notes to express a musical idea when others needed twenty.

There is a seamless poetic continuity of ideas and feelings running through Gaja Gamini and Meenaxi. They joyously affirm the continuous cycle that nature goes through to renew itself.