A Festival to Remember

THE SUNDAY OBSERVER INFOTAINMENT MAY 11-17, 1997

Manisha Koirala at the celebrations

A festival to remember

Manohar Khushalani writes about an event celebrating 50 years of Indian cinema in Nepal

EVENT

If Kathmandu is the seat of power of the only Hindu kingdom on earth, it is also probably the only country where you don't need a passport, where your very own Indian credit cards are accepted, where a rupee has greater buying power and where Indian film stars are just as popular as in their own homeland — if not more.

Little wonder therefore that the Indian ambassador to Nepal, K.V. Rajan, hit upon the idea of celebrating fifty years of Indian independence with a film festival commemorating fifty years of Indian cinema. Four Indian stars were also felicitated. Among them, two stalwarts, Dev Anand and Waheeda Rehman, and two youngsters of the new generation of the two nations, Shah Rukh Khan and Manisha Koirala. If Raj Kapoor's 'Mera joota hai Japani...' made him a legend in the USSR, Dev Anand's 'Dum ... dum...' did the same for him in the mountain state.

Kathmandu, a sleepy capital with a small-town atmosphere, protected in the womb of the tallest mountain ranges of the world, suddenly became alive and vibrant. The ten days of festivities, flagged off by Jaaved Jaaferi's quaint sense of humor, proved that laughter defies all barriers and unites all ages, sexes and nationalities. "Why are we Asians obsessed with films just as we are with our own mothers? Is it because even cinema has a *maa* in it? Unfortunately Oedipus could not see cine*maa* during his lifetime." For detective movie fans Jaaved belted out an Ajit joke. "How was Peter supposed to respond to Michael's 'Off On Off' signal? With an 'On Off On' signal, silly!" Nobody was spared — other victims of his mimicry included Dilip Kumar, Rajendra Kumar and Amitabh Bachchan. Not to miss the formula film in which the villain is about to drink the hero's blood, Dracula style ("*Main tumhara khoon pi jaunga*"), but for the pendant which he discovers in his adversary's neck and realises they are brothers. And, if he would have us believe him, modern women's clothes remind him of barbed wires which protect the property without obstructing the view. Whew! Thank God for little mercies. There was also the brilliant audiovisual commissioned by the embassy which took us down memory lane and provided nostalgic relief. There were old songs that uplift one's spirits even today 'Ai mere pyare watan...' 'Ye kahani hai diye ki aur toofan ki...' 'Jhanak jhanak payal baje....' There were also excerpts from films that have immortalised Indian cinema: *Mother India, Guide, Chalti Ka Nam Gaadi, Anarkali, Mughal-E-Azam, Nagin, Baiju Bawra*. The list is endless.

Among the stars Dev Anand was called on stage first. He struck such an instant rapport with the audience that it kept him on stage for half an hour. The performance was so brilliant that Waheeda Rehman decided to lose her voice to an allergy and Manisha Koirala had to resort to her native tongue. Shah Rukh Khan of course could not hold a candle to Jaaved despite his Ka-Ka-Kathmandu in his now famous stammer. But it was all in good fun and if the stars did not partake of the cocktails for long, one could not blame them, they were after all being mobbed in *desi* style. If the milling crowds outside the Birendra International Convention Centre were any indication to go by, the festival was a grand success — so what if none of the government officials were present due to "other engagements"? The people were there in full strength to again prove that a people to people relationship is far stronger than ties between politicians.

Manohar Khushalani interviews the Indian ambassador to Nepal, K V Rajan

Mr Ambassador, it is known that this idea of a film festival in Kathmandu was your brainchild..

We found that people here had a lot of interest in Indian films. It seemed a pity not to recognise it as a boosting factor in Indo-Nepalese friendship.

So, this was our way of expressing our appreciation of the Indian film industry, for the friendship and goodwill they have helped build between India and Nepal.

What are the other ramifications of this festival besides goodwill?

Of course, once the idea matured, other suggestions began to flow in. When we decided that *Tamanna* would be one of the films to be premiered, Pooja Bhatt offered the film free of cost, provided there was a good charity, especially for the girl child.

When we started talking to government officials and NGOs interested in the problem of illegal trafficking of minors, particularly girls, from Nepal to India, it struck us that this could be an opportunity for the Indian film industry to support Nepalese projects aimed at preventing this flow of children.

How would you go about it?

By encouraging education, awareness and developmental activities in identified villages here. We also thought the Indian film industry could be motivated into taking up themes concerned with the Nepalese girl child.

What role do you see for the North India Films Association (NIFA) in Nepal?

What you need is some institutional contact between NIFA and the Nepalese film industry. The proximity is there, it is easy to come back and forth, easy to trade films, and so on.

What other role could the Indian film industry play?

Quite a lot. If films are made in collaboration with the Nepalese film industry, or shot in Nepal, it will create an awareness of the tremendous tourist potential in this country.

Are there still some irritants between the two countries? For example, the entire government machinery was absent from the function.

No. This happened only because the entire function had to be postponed by one day. Because of the crippling air traffic controllers' strike in India the stars arrived a day late. There was a lot of interest in this function.

Stars Shine in Himalayan Kingdom | Manohar Khushalani

Along with Dev Anand, Waheeda Rehman, Shahrukh Khan and Manisha Koirala, Manohar Khushalani was invited, by the Indian Embassy, to Kathmandu to attend the celebrations of 50 years

of Indian Cinema as a Columnist of Pioneer, where he ran a column called "Footlights'. The clip of the review published on 2nd May, 1997 is shown in the attachment. Here is a small extract from the 7 column spread that Pioneer gave his piece.

Probably the best public relations exercise between two country is to establish a people to people interaction through cultural activity. Raj Kapoor was probably the best Indian Ambassador of good will for the soviet Union. Nobody perhaps known it better than the snake Indian Ambassador to Nepal. K.V. Rajan. By organising a festival of Indian films at Kathmandu he proved that what Raj Kapoor did at USSR Dev Anand can do in the Land locked Himalayan State. The incredible love and affection of Nepalese common men for Indian actors was brought home by the adulatory response to four Indian sorry three Indian and one Nepales star; Waheeda Rehman, Dev Anand, Shahrukh Khan and Manisha Koirala.

"I am very fond of nature & open spaces. In Bombay it was difficult. What I noticed was that when they retired from cinema long ago, my son was still in school. When someone asked him, where the milk came from. He said Mother Dairy. That's when we decided to move to a Farm and expose our child to that aspect of life as well."

Waheeda Rahman who is leading a more or less retired life & last asked nearly seven years ago is willing to perform only of she gets a central role. "Unfortunately most of the roles available for performers of my agee are stereo typed roles of Aunts or mothers, I would rather not perform than take up such roles"

Waheeda shifted bag & Baggage to a farm house in the outskirts of Bangalore because of she put it her children were not even aware about how the milk come they only knew that it come from a machine in the milk booth. Being a lover of nature she preferred to shift close to it….

“I am very fond of nature & open spaces. In Bombay it was difficult. What I noticed was that when they retired from cinema long ago, my son was still in school. When someone asked him, where the milk came from. He said Mother Dairy. That’s when we decided to move to a Farm and expose our child to that aspect of life as well.” She told me, this too when we were flying later over the everest and I was seated next to her. Both of us were admiring the pristine beauty of nature

Dev Anand despite his severely years displayed such energy and enthusiasm that he would put many younger people to shame. He said that he was greatly in love with this Country and would never forego an opportunity to come to Nepal. He had always advocated that this Country was a good location of or shooting films but not many producers were willing to come due to difficulties of terrash & communication. Dev to probably the most active amongst the stars of his generation. Right now he was making a film in which he was acting as himself © Dev Anand as the actor. A teen age female fun follows him around the counting observing him as an action. She finally manges to meet him. The story appeared to be similar to Guddi.

Later at a function to felicitate the stars. Dev held the audience spellbound with his half hour long talk which was special with experiences of Nepal, tales of the role of the King in shooting of his films and personal advice on how to lead a dynamics life like him.

Manisha Koirala’s entering was greeted by compliments to her beauty and brains in Dev’s inimitable style. The local scribes were most comfortable with Manisha in her native tongue. Ms Koirala had no plans to act in a Nepali film in the near future she left it vaguely to events and occassions.

Ô

Manohar Khushalani accompanies Indian filmstars on a recent trip to Nepal for a celebration of the golden jubilee of India's independence

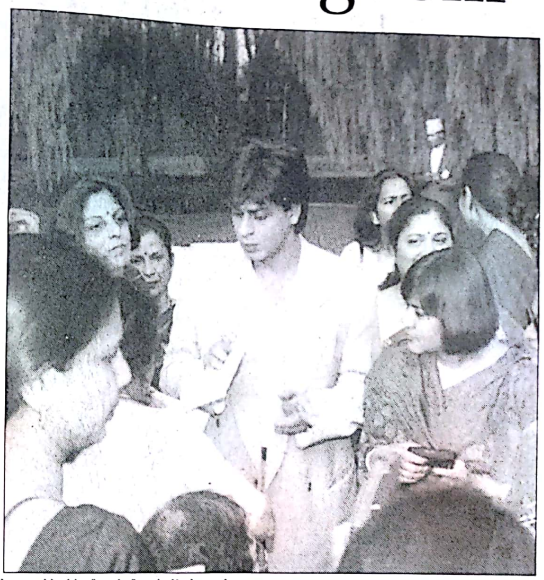
Stars shine in Himalayan kingdom

As the Royal Nepal Airlines Boeing 737 circled over the Himalayan ranges to get a clearer view through the dense cloud layers of the jewel of the Himalayas — Kathmandu — our hearts thumped in anticipation. At the very first sight of the toy-like township nestled in the mountain ranges, gone was the fatigue of the two sleepless nights due to the 48-hour flight delay, caused by the lightning all-India ATC strike. What awaited us was the first official celebration of 50 years of Indian independence in Nepal. Thankfully there were no political speeches on the cards, only entertainment and more entertainment.

Probably the best public relations exercise between any two countries is to establish a people-to-people interaction through cultural activities. Nobody perhaps knows it better than the suave Indian ambassador to Nepal, K V Rajan. By organising a festival of Indian films at Kathmandu he proved that what Raj Kapoor could do for India in the Soviet Union, Dev Anand can do in the land-locked Himalayan kingdom. Later this year, the ambassador is also planning an NSD theatre festival in Kathmandu.

The incredible love and affection of the Nepalese common man for Indian actors and actresses was brought home by the adulatory response to the four filmstars: Waheeda Rehman, Dev Anand, Shah Rukh Khan and Nepal's own Manisha Koirala, of whom the valiant Gorkhas are extremely proud. The streets around the Birendra International Convention Centre were jam-packed with fans as the four stars waded through the milling crowds to attend a function organised to felicitate them.

Inside, Dev held the audiences spellbound with his half-hour-long talk which was spiced with his experiences of the hill state, tales about the part King Birendra played in easing the way of Dev Anand's shootings in Nepal, the guitar-toting hippie girl who inspired the creation of a role for Zeenat Aman in *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*, and of course some personal advice on how to lead a dynamic life and remain young like himself.



Representatives of cultural camaraderie: Dev Anand meets Queen Aishwarya (left); Shah Rukh Khan mobbed by female fans in Kathmandu

As far as Shah Rukh Khan was concerned, great as the confluence of two generations of performers may have been, he was too busy warding off the bevy of Himalayan beauties out to mob him. "Oh no, not here too!" he smirked.

The programme was anchored by none other than the inimitable imitator, Jaaved Jaffrey, who interspersed the audio-visual on Indian cinema with his pet, often heard and sometimes unheard of jokes. While Jaaved did his best to liven up the proceedings, what was really a treat were the nostalgic numbers segmented decade-wise.

The first decade from 1947 to '57 had songs like *Awara hoon, Jeevan hai agar zahar to, Chhor da aanchal zamana kya kahega, Mera dil ye pukare aa ja,* and *Ai mere pyare watan*. What a comedown it was moving into the present decade with songs like *Chhoo le chhoo le, Choli ke peeche kya hai* and *Chumma de de*.

Earlier at an informal Press conference the Nepalese and Indian scribes had the opportunity to talk to the Bollywood stars and one particularly got an interesting glimpse of the mindsets of the older legends and how they were coping with the new trends in cinema. Waheeda for example was surprisingly positive about modern Indian cinema.

She disagreed with the suggestion that there was too much exposure in today's films and quoted examples of many films which were wholesome like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and *Kabhi Ha Kabhi Na*. Waheeda herself is leading a more or less retired life and last faced a camera nearly seven years ago.

She was willing to undergo the ordeal again only if she got a satisfying role. "Unfortunately, most of the roles available for performers of my age are stereotyped ones of aunts or mothers," she clarified. "I would rather not perform than take up such assignments."

Talking of the time when she lived in Bombay, Waheeda said that her children there worked hard in school and watched television rest of the time. They were not even aware about where the milk on their table came from. They only knew that it came from a machine in the milk booth. That was enough for her and she shifted bag and baggage to a farmhouse in the outskirts of Bangalore. Being a lover of nature she thus got an opportunity to get close to it.

Dev Anand, despite his 70-odd years, appears to be getting younger — if not in appearance, then in intensity. He displayed such energy and enthusiasm that would put many younger people to shame. As he said, he is greatly in love with Nepal and will never forego an opportunity to come to this country. He had always advocated that this place was a good location for shooting films but not many producers were willing to come, due to difficulties of terrain and poor communications.

Unlike Waheeda, Dev Anand will like to work right till his last breath. Currently, he is making a film in which he is acting as himself — Dev Anand, the actor — who is followed by a teenage female fan around the country until he awards her an audience. Although the thespian would not admit it, the story sounded similar to *Guddi*.

Manisha Koirala's entry to the Press conference was greeted by the evergreen Dev in his own inimitable style. While she felt awed by the presence of performers whom she admired as a youngster, he proclaimed that now he was her admirer. "You know, I kept my hand close to my heart when I shook hands with you the first time," he confided to the giggling star.

The local scribes were most comfortable with Manisha as she switched to her native tongue. Manisha has no plans to act in a Nepali film in the near future. She left it vaguely to events and occasions. Manisha was happy to come to her country but she had no desire to settle here, she said. Living in Mumbai suited her.

Dev Anand was not bothered by the repeated box-office failures of his recent films. He claimed that he never lost money in any film and that if any of his films were appreciated for their quality, that was enough of a reward for him. When this correspondent asked Manisha Koirala if she would prefer to make a good film or a box-office hit — she said she would rather have both, but if it came to a crunch, she would opt for a role in a good film.

Dev Anand put it more succinctly: Many times a good film succeeds at the box office and many times it doesn't. Many times an average film also succeeds. But if a film succeeds it must have some merits — it cannot be ignored even if the critics think it should be.

Shah Rukh Khan had very little to say except that he would not act in an art film and would no longer do the anti-hero roles. Of course, once upon a time he acted in a Mani Kaul film, because he understood it. Most art films according to him were pseudo-intellectual.

A special flight over Mount Everest with Waheeda Rehman and Jaaved Jaffrey, however, struck an ominous note. The Everest was not visible due to heavy clouds, even while we were in the midst of a golden jubilee celebration. A government had fallen in New Delhi and the future was equally cloudy.

Fortunately, the clouds in Indian politics shifted a little just before the curtains were drawn over the festival in Nepal, with the installation of a new government in India.