

Hindi Cinema and Its **Unforgettable Icons**

B.M. Malhotra



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To the memories of

My parents, Bir Bal and Veeran Devi Malhotra
and my wife, Swarn Malhotra

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Introduction

This book contains a collection of 37 articles about Hindi cinema, particularly some memorable films, filmmakers, directors, actors, music composers, lyricists, singers and others who have made significant contributions to the steady growth and widespread appeal of this industry. The content is based on the author's observation, study and memory, besides of course some research in terms of the background, dates and other factual information.

Cinema has been a hobby and a passion of the author from his early youth. The collection has, therefore, a certain historical significance as some of the facts may not be known to today's youth. It also has a distinct nostalgic flavour for the older generation of film lovers, who can recapture their past experiences through the flashbacks offered.

The author's knowledge of Urdu and Persian helped him better understand the meanings and appreciate the nuances of certain film dialogues and songs, which continue to have a preponderance of the words and expressions of both these languages.

Cinema has been universally recognised as the most popular and easily accessible means of entertainment. Indian cinema has made great strides since its modest yet enthusiastic beginning over a century ago. Unlike in the days gone by, it is now marketed and watched globally, particularly because of the presence of millions of Indians abroad as well as an ever-increasing number of foreigners now interested in our films.

Marvellous technological advance, including smart trick photography, computer-generated images and special effects devices, besides suitable adaptations and adjustments by our industry to cater to the tastes of international as well as modern Indian audiences have also contributed to the spectacular progress and world-wide popularity of our films. They are now referred to as

Bollywood films, being so named after Hollywood, the world centre for the movie industry. The letter “B” in this new nomenclature comes from Bombay, the former name of Mumbai.

Most of the articles in this collection were published in the magazine, *INDIA PERSPECTIVES* and the specific months of their publication have been indicated to facilitate their perusal by the reader by keeping the time factor in mind. *IP* is published by the Government of India in over a dozen world languages, including English. It is sent to various countries through our Embassies and High Commissions.

A few Hindi cinema-related articles, which remained lost, soon after they were written 4-5 years ago, and which were retrieved only recently, have also been included in this collection. As the discerning reader will appreciate, these previously unpublished articles have not been updated with a view to retaining the feel and flavour of the time of their writing as has been done in case of the other earlier (*IP*) articles.



Anil Biswas

END OF AN ERA

Anil Biswas, 89, the grand old man of Hindi film music and one of our earliest stalwart maestros, passed away in New Delhi on May 31, 2003. He is no more, but the rich legacy of a large number of memorable compositions that he has left behind will continue to bring nostalgic pleasure to vintage film music buffs and connoisseurs alike and offer healthy inspiration to both music



Anil Biswas

makers and professional singers. His prolific career spanned three hectic decades in Mumbai from mid-1930s to mid-1960s, the period that constituted the golden era of Hindi film music. Thereafter, he bade adieu to that tinsel town and shifted base to New Delhi, where he produced music for radio and television serials and documentaries.

His demise marks the end of an era that saw such immortal creations as *Door hato ai duniyawaalo! Hindustan hamaara hai* (Keep off, you colonisers / India belongs to us) from film *Kismet* (1942), which had a record continuous run of three years and eight months at Kolkata's Roxy cinema. This and another song from the same film, *Ghar ghar mein Diwali hai / Mere ghar mein andhera* (All the other homes are illumined / while my home is engulfed by darkness) suited the then prevailing national mood following Gandhiji's clarion call for the Quit India Movement.

Biswas' other entrancing numbers were, *Dil jalta hai to jalne de / Aansoo na baha, faryad na kar* (Let your heart ache / Shed no tears, nor make any complaint) in *Pehli Nazar* (1945) and *Aye dil mujhe aisi jagah le chal jahaan koi na ho* (Take me, my heart, to a place where there be none else) in *Aarzo* (1951). With these super-hit songs he gave big breaks to future popular playback singers, Mukesh and Talat Mahmood, respectively.



Anil Biswas (standing) with Sahir Ludhianvi and Lata Mangeshkar

While he honed the timbre in Mukesh's voice for effective rendition of emotional and sad songs, he advised Talat to retain the natural vibrato or the slight tremble in his voice, as a unique feature for soft, silken singing of romantic numbers, especially ghazals.

Biswas gave similar breaks or early singing assignments to some other artistes as well like Begum Akhtar, who later rose to be India's ghazal queen, in *Roti* (1942) and playback singers Amirbai Karnataki in *Kismet*; Ira Nagrah (wife of music director, Roshan) in *Anokha Pyar* (1948); his wife, Meena Kapoor, in the same film; his sister, Parul Ghosh (wife of music director Pannalal Ghosh) in *Hamaari Baat* (1943); and Sandhya Mukherjee in *Fareb* (1953). Meena Kapoor sang for him in several other films that included *Choti Choti Baatein* (1965) — his last film as a music director.

Born on July 7, 1914, at Barishal (now in Bangladesh), Anil had shown an innate music sense even in his infancy. Initiated into music by his mother, who herself was a good singer, he could

impressively play on the tabla (a percussion musical instrument) when he was only four years old. Later, while a school student, he got associated with the revolutionaries who were engaged in the



With Lata Mangeshkar and Kamini Kaushal

struggle for the country's freedom. He was jailed seven times for these activities.

After his father's death in 1930 he shifted to Calcutta (Kolkata) where he joined the Gramophone Megaphone Company and wrote and scored music for songs at a payment of Rs. five per song. Subsequently, he joined the Rang Mahal Theatre,

where besides singing and acting he competently conducted the orchestra. He had become proficient in singing khayal, dadra and thumri (modes of Hindustani classical music).

After three years he migrated to Mumbai, where the first film for which he scored music was *Dharam Ki Devi* (1935). Its devotional lyric, *Tere poojan ko Bhagwan bana man mandir aalishaan* (For Your worship O' God / There is a splendid temple in my heart), became very popular and resonated throughout undivided India. In 1937, he came into contact with the famous filmmaker Mehboob Khan and composed music for a number of his films, including *Hum Tum Aur Woh* (1938), *Aurat* (1940), *Bahen* (1941) and *Roti* (1942), for which he also wrote the story.

The other notable films with his music included *Gajre* (1948), *Laadli* (1949), *Tarana*, *Aaram* and *Lajawab* (all 1951), *Humdard* (1953), *Waris* (1954) and *Sautela Bhai* (1962). He based all the

songs of *Humdard* on classical ragas. As a rarity, for the Lata Mangeshkar-Manna Dey duet, *Ritu aaye, ritu jaaye* (Season comes and season goes) he employed four ragas and made the singing duo rehearse the song for a fortnight before its formal recording. Interestingly, Biswas himself had sung some songs to his own tunes.

The perfectionist and disciplinarian in him made no compromises with either the fundamentals of music or the high values in life. Unlike other music directors, who towed the producers' line and adjusted their music to suit the changing demands, including copying western melodies, he strongly resented any effort at dilution or degradation of our classical music, to which he was deeply attached. It was in such circumstances that he found himself as a round peg in a square hole or vice versa and decided once and for all to move away from the film industry.

K.L. Saigal, S.D. Burman and Anil Biswas were good friends and spent many evenings together at Biswas' residence in Mumbai. Biswas planned to score music for a film in which Saigal was to play a singer hero, but the project had to be abandoned as unfortunately, Saigal had, in the meantime, passed away. Biswas regretted having missed the chance of collaborating with the great singer for the creation of some outstanding music. A tape with a message to this effect recorded in Biswas' voice was played at the inaugural function held on April 28, 2003, at the FICCI auditorium in New Delhi to mark the year-long celebrations of Saigal's birth centenary. Biswas himself could not be present because of his illness.

Several other music directors, including Naushad and C. Ramchandra, who had also worked as his assistants, held him in high esteem for his seniority and superb talent. Short but in good health and looking much younger than his actual years until not

long ago, Anil Biswas was ever modest and courteous. Several honours were bestowed upon him, including the Lata Mangeshkar Award of the government of Madhya Pradesh. His haunting melodies will continue to enchant us for a long time to come.

Anil (Krishna) Biswas being one of the senior most Indian film music directors with his qualitative yet substantial output and as a mentor for some other music makers was regarded as “Composers' Composer”. Apropos his seniority, he once claimed that if R.C. Boral was the father of Indian film music, he (Anil) himself was its uncle. Anil was reckoned as the first music composer to give Indian film music a distinct identity.

(Originally published in August, 2003)



Ardeshir Irani

FATHER OF INDIA'S TALKIES



Ardeshir Irani

Hundreds of movies were made by several film companies in India during the silent era spanning about two decades, beginning with the release in a Mumbai theatre, on May 3, 1913, of India's first feature film, *Raja Harishchandra*, produced and directed by Dadasaheb D.G. Phalke.

At that time, theatres exhibiting silent movies used to provide hidden instrument players for adding background music and a narrator to offer a running commentary on the film with the twists and turns in its story. The need to dispense with these auxiliary arrangements was felt following the screening, in 1930, in Krishna Theatre, Mumbai, of a short talkie programme showing a khadi exhibition with sounds and voices and a dubbed dance by that era's top heroine, Sulochana, excerpted from the popular silent movie, *Madhuri* (1928). Regular talkies had already been made in Hollywood and even screened in India through selected theatres for the Britishers, as well as Indian elite and educated contemporary urbanites.



Alam Ara poster

Several Indian companies announced launching of new feature films with synchronised dialogue and music, but their really coveted target was the creation of India's first talkie. Three big filmmaking institutions, Madan Theatres, Krishna Film Company and Imperial Film Company entered the fray for realising this ambition. Speed being of the essence, Imperial Film Company, with prompt meticulous planning

and accelerated active work, raced ahead of both of its rivals and won the day when it released India's first Hindustani talkie feature film, *Alam Ara* (Light of the World) at Mumbai's Majestic Cinema on March 14, 1931.

The film was produced by Ardeshir Irani (born in 1886), who had started his career by exhibiting foreign movies in tents and who after turning a producer, had made a large number of silent

motion pictures. As an enterprising pioneer with an unusual creative urge, he aimed at outshining his contemporaries in the show business and stealing a march over them. In fact, it was the extraordinarily successful runs of Phalke's silent classics, *Krishna Janam* (1918) and *Kalia Mardan* (1919) at Irani's own theatre, Majestic, that had propelled him to make his own films.



Master Vithal and Zubeida
in *Alam Ara*

In partnership with a photographer, Bhogilal K.M. Dave, he set up Star Films Limited, which produced its maiden movie, *Veer Abhimanyu* in 1922, featuring Fatima Begum, the popular stage actress, who in course of time, became India's first woman producer-director. Her

daughter, Zubeida, was to blossom into a glamorous silent-movie star. Later, when the partnership broke, Irani first launched his own Majestic Films, followed by Royal Art Studio and finally, in 1926, the legendary Imperial Film Company, churning out a plethora of films on diverse themes.

Irani adapted *Alam Ara* for the screen from the successful stage drama, with the same name, written by Joseph David, a playwright from the Parsi Theatrical Company. Irani's idea to produce this movie as a talkie had sprung from his watching Universal's film, *Showboat*.

Following the tradition of the theatre, he incorporated in the film seven catchy songs, including the oft-cited number, *Dede Khuda ke naam pe* (Give in the name of God), sung by W.M. Khan in the garb of an alms-seeker. Irani himself selected the songs and their tunes. The music was recorded on a single-system Tanar recorder with only a tabla, a harmonium and a violin as supporting

instruments and without a music director.

Again, the photographer was Irani himself and the sound recordist was Rustam C. Bharucha, who had been initiated for the task by the American engineer, Wilfred Demming, who had come to assemble the company's recording equipment. Recording with Tanar system threw up certain difficulties as this sensitive apparatus, used in the open, picked up interfering extraneous noises, including that of a running train close to the Imperial Studio, where the film was shot. Most of the shooting and sound recordings were, therefore, done in the quietude of the night after each day's last train had passed by. This arrangement was doubly advantageous for Irani as besides ensuring a qualitative sound recording, it helped him maintain the confidentiality of the progress of his film's work during its gestation.

Alam Ara became the first film in which instead of using dialogue cards, the actors actually spoke their lines in their natural voices adjusted to the situation of each scene and distance from the camera. The microphone needed to be concealed at odd and even awkward places outside the range of the whirring camera. Zubeida and Master Vithal, both well-established silent-movie stars, played the lead roles. They were supported by Prithviraj Kapoor, Jagdish Sethi, Yakub and W.M. Khan and some others. This 10,500 feet long film was completed in five months at a cost of Rs. 40,000 and was such a roaring success that its admission tickets of the actual value of a quarter rupee sold for Rs. five in the instantly self-generated black market.

Interestingly, the film's hero, Master Vithal, who for his striking physique and athletic prowess was known as "India's Douglas Fairbanks", was virtually a rank stranger to Urdu, the then predominant stage language, and could utter his dialogues only falteringly. Fittingly, therefore, he was cast as a prince who remained in a trance for a considerable length of the film with his

lips practically sealed.

With the lead provided by *Alam Ara* many more talkies were made in quick succession. The entry and ascent of the talkies meant the descent and exit of the silent movies and the latter were, therefore, elbowed out of circulation, though initially during the transition, there was some resistance as the makers and promoters of silent movies pleaded with the publicity blurbs, "silence is golden" and "silence is gold, speech is silver".



India's first colour picture
Kisan Kanya (1937)

The second talkie released was Krishna Film Company's *Ghar Ki Lakshmi* and the third Madan Theaters' *Shirin Farhad* both of which for their excellent sound recording were technically much better than *Alam Ara*. However, *Alam Ara* had drawn crowds for its appeal as the first novelty package rather than for technical finesse, which these subsequent talkies could boast of. Imperial's second talkie, *Daulat Ka Nasha* was a moderate success.

To Irani also goes the credit of making India's first talkie in English, titled *Noorjahan* (1932) and the country's first Persian film *Dukhtar-e-Noor* (1933), for which he called musicians from Iran. Encouraged by the success of his first Persian film in that country, he made two more films in the same language — *Firdousi* and *Shirin Farhad*. His other firsts included setting up of our country's earliest colour laboratory and the production of India's

first colour picture, *Kisan Kanya* (1937), featuring Master Nisar, Padma Devi and Ghulam Mohammed.

After a long and saturated innings, this "grand old man of Indian cinema" and "the father of the Indian talkie", passed away in 1969 at the ripe age of 83. His multihued and prolific record with a number of trail-blazers makes him an immortal in the annals of Indian cinema.

The very first Indian film song, *De de Khuda ke naam peh pyaare taaqat ho gar dene ki/ Kuchh chaahe agar to maangle mujhse himmat hai gar lene ki* was sung by the actor, Wazir Mohammad Khan. It was the same actor who three decades later lip-synched on the screen the patriotic number, *Aye mere pyaare watan, ae mere bichhde chaman, tujh pe dil qurbaan*, which was sung by Manna Dey to Salil Choudhary's music in *Kabuliwala* (1961).

Alam Ara, music for which was scored by Feroz Shah M. Mistri also included six other songs. Out of these, only *Badla dilwayega tu sitamgaron se* was sung by the film's heroine, Zubeida. In the film's story, there is a king with his two queens but without an issue. After one queen gives birth to a son, the other, stung by jealousy, plots his death. The army chief, who refuses to join her in her nefarious scheme, is jailed and his family exiled. His daughter Alam Ara is brought up by nomads who years later successfully invade the kingdom, release the army chief and punish the guilty queen. These developments end happily when Alam Ara and the prince who had fallen in love with each other are married to live happily thereafter.

(Originally published in April, 2004)



Ashok Kumar

COLOSSUS OF INDIAN CINEMA

Ashok Kumar, the doyen of Indian film industry, breathed his last on December 10, 2001, in Mumbai. It was almost as if an era had come to an end. He had brought to the Indian screen the rare grace and polish which are so hard to come by nowadays. So it was only natural that his passing away made banner headlines in all the dailies in the country; television channels ran special programmes to pay rich tributes to this great actor who was a legend even in his lifetime. Eminent personalities of the film world spoke in glowing terms about the charisma this great actor lent to the roles of all shades and hues he played in innumerable films.

Addressed fondly by almost one and all in the Indian film industry as *Dadamoni* (Bengali for a gem of an elder brother), Ashok Kumar, the nonagenarian doyen straddled the silver screen like a colossus for six and a half decades from the mid-1930s. During this marathon span he played a wide variety of roles of heroes and character actors with unmistakable naturalness, aplomb and finesse and even produced and directed a few films.

He began his career as a trainee technician and was soon made a laboratory assistant in the once famous and now long-defunct Bombay Talkies in Mumbai under the company's founder,



Ashok Kumar

Himansu Rai, in January 1934. Ashok's only sister, Sati Rani's husband, Sasadhar Mukherjee (or S. Mukherjee, who later became a successful producer and Chief of Filmistan) was already employed in the Bombay Talkies as a sound recordist, and it was through him that Ashok secured the job under Rai.

Ashok Kumar was born on October 13, 1911, at Bhagalpur (Bihar) in his maternal grandfather's house, where his mother, Gauri Rani Devi, had gone from Khandwa (Madhya Pradesh) for confinement and the delivery of her first baby. Ashok's father, Kunjalal Ganguly, was an advocate practising at Khandwa. Kunjalal named his first-born son as Kumud, beginning



Playing a journalist in *Naya Sansar* (1941)

with the letter 'K', like his own name. On the same analogy, in due course, he christened his second and third sons as Kalyan and Kishore. Kumud and Kalyan were finally renamed Ashok and Anoop, while Kishore alone retained his original name.

Incidentally, all these three Ganguly brothers became film actors and even appeared together in the hilarious comedy, *Chalti Ka Naam Gaadi* (1958). Ashok, whose name on his joining films

was extended as Ashok Kumar, rose to be a consummate thespian and a towering figure of Indian cinema. Anoop Kumar mainly played supporting and secondary roles, while the multi-talented Kishore Kumar developed as an outstanding playback singer and a singing comic actor.

Ashok spent his early childhood at Bhagalpur, where his grandpa had formed the Adampur Dramatic Club, in which our future hero was an observant and absorbent witness to erection of the stage and sets as also rehearsals and final enactment of plays. Although not yet in his teens, he precociously picked up the rudiments of presentation of stage dramas and even played a small silent role of a boy seated on a railway platform bench, reading a newspaper.

His introduction to cinema occurred when accompanied by his mother, he watched a bioscope (as cinema was then locally called) show under a tent at Khandwa in 1922. Two silent movies of a football match and a horse race were shown after an introduction by a compere and supported by music produced by instrumentalists seated near the screen.

After his B.Sc., Ashok studied law in Calcutta, where he saw many Bengali stage plays and films and entertained an ambition of becoming a film director. Leaving his studies midway he went to Mumbai, where Himansu Rai offered to make him an actor but the German director, Franz Osten found Ashok unsuitable for his “square jaw and too-young and girlish” looks. However, Rai appointed Ashok as a trainee technician and later a laboratory assistant with a monthly salary of Rs. 250, then a hefty sum, in safekeeping which Ashok experienced awful jitters.

In 1936, when the sets of Bombay Talkies' first film, *Jeevan Naiya* were ready and the shooting was due after a couple of days, the film's hero, Najmul Hasan, suddenly disappeared. Rai, after keenly assessing Ashok Kumar, persuaded him to fill the void as



With Meena Kumari in *Bandish* (1955)

hero against Rai's star wife, Devika Rani as the heroine. Rai also pampered, encouraged and groomed Ashok. The film, when released, was a success and apart from the kudos showered on Devika Rani the debutant Ashok's role was also appreciated. Then followed *Achhut Kanya* in which too Ashok was paired with Devika. The film succeeded enormously and its duet, *Main ban ki chidiya ban ke ban ban doloon re* (A free bird, I fly everywhere) crooned by Devika and Ashok became very popular.

The film catapulted Ashok to fame. Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu, for whom Himansu Rai arranged a special screening of the film, also encouraged him. Ashok's parents, who had initially opposed his acting in films, now accepted the *fait accompli* and, in fact, savoured their son's success and popularity! Thrilled and happy, Ashok too found it hard to wrench himself away from films for some alternative lucrative career.

His third film, *Janma Bhoomi*, again with Devika Rani, was also a success. His other films with her in the next two years were

End of the sample preview.

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