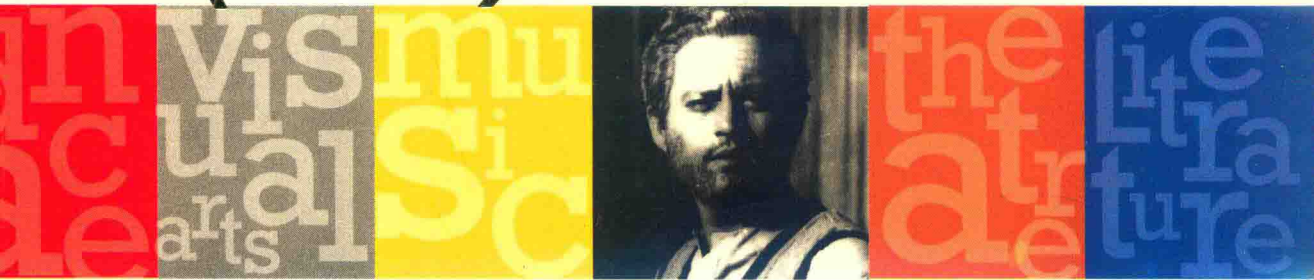


Volume 6 | Cinema

Pathfinders

A Journey through India's Art and Culture



Devina Dutt EDITORS
Mukta Rajadhyaksha

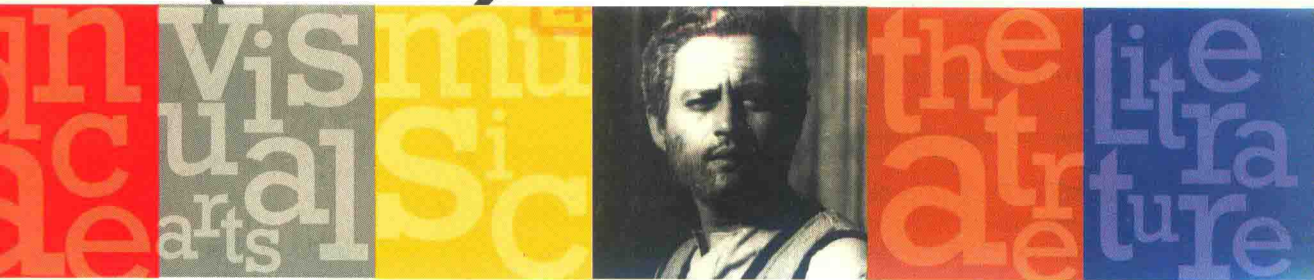


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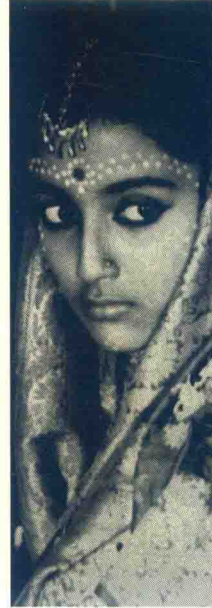
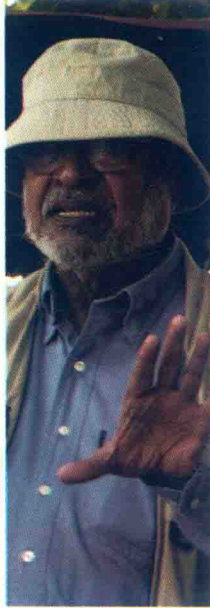
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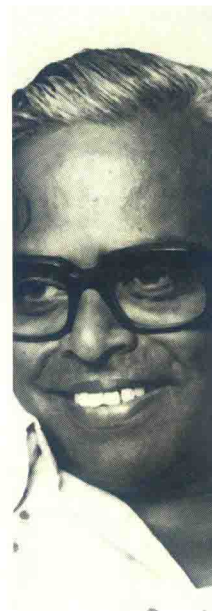
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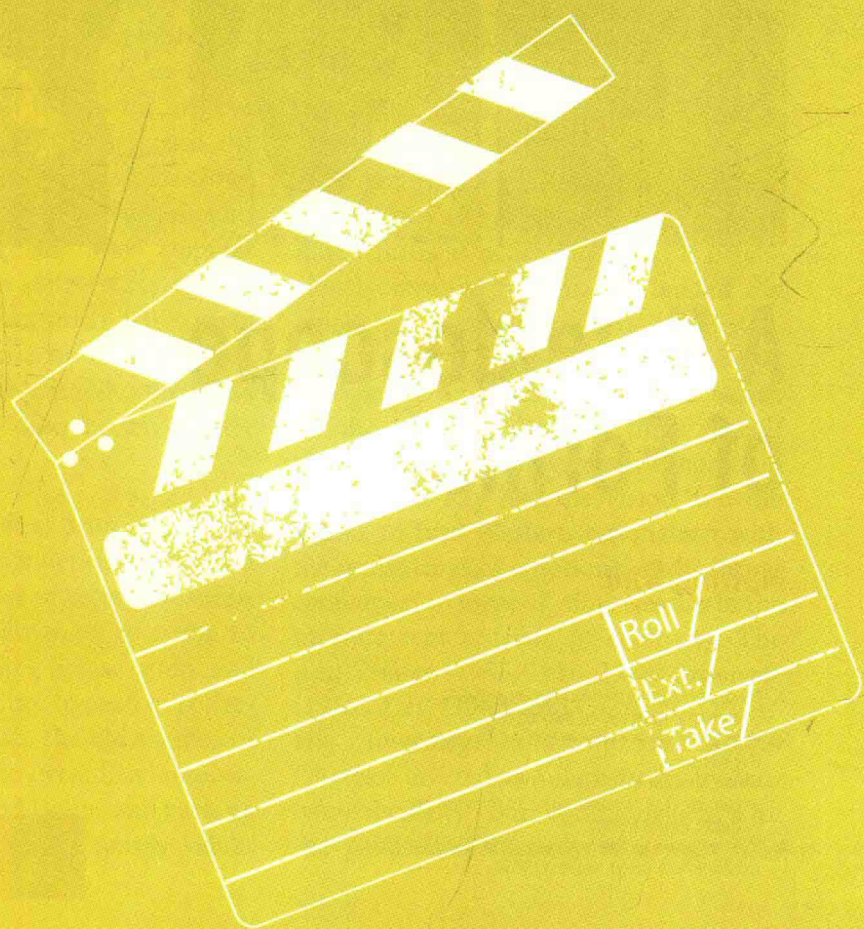
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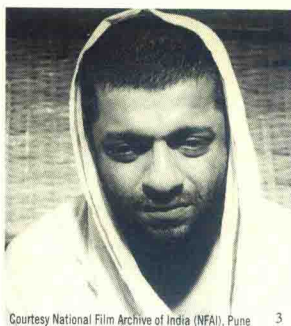
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A Kaleidoscope of Forms

Maithili Rao

1. Madhabi Mukherjee in *Charulata* (1964), written and directed by Satyajit Ray
2. Vyjayantimala in *Sangam* (1964), directed by Raj Kapoor
3. Girish Karnad in *Samskara* (1970), written by U. Anantamurthy and directed by Patabhi Rama Reddy
4. V. Shantaram as the jailor with B.M. Vyas in *Do Aankhein Barah Haath* (1957)

1



By its very nature, cinema, the newest of the arts, which came into its own as late as the early years of the 20th century, draws freely from tradition (classical and folk) and other allied arts while incorporating prevailing trends and representing a people's collective cultural journey. The justified pride of entering the comity of nations as a socialist, secular republic from the crippling confines of colonialism is obvious in Indian cinema of the 1950s, not just in the all-India Hindi film but also in the many thriving cinemas sustained by linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity. Assertive patriotism is the vivid connecting thread that runs through the varied textures of a pluralistic society subjected to the push and pull forces of change that buffeted a nascent nation state and its adventure with the experiment of a clamorous, at times chaotic, democracy. Given the inherent unpredictability in the way popular culture captures the zeitgeist, as well as the fact that an elephantine Indian society reacted slowly to events that crowded the course of a new republic, mediated reality found its way onto the screen after a considerable gap.

While the spillover from the fierce spirit of fighting for independence fused into optimistic stories of resurgent India, there was an unwillingness to come to terms with Gandhiji's assassination and the trauma of Partition. Instead of collective guilt and anguish, the old themes of fighting against caste prejudice, empowerment of women and Dalits, and harking back to traditional Indian family values

are knit together into patchwork quilts that offer familiar and familial comfort. This continuing tendency describes the run-of-the-mill film as well as the subtext of films made by auteurs that rise above the prevailing mediocrity.

The 1950s and 1960s are truly golden decades for the whole of Indian cinema, breathtaking in their range of cinematic achievement realised by so many auteurs with sharply defined individual sensibilities and the emergence of actors who went on to become iconic stars in their own particular firmament. It was the age of titans.

Even now, it is astonishing to realise that Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Guru Dutt, Bimal Roy, Raj Kapoor, Tapan Sinha and Vijay Anand all made their most memorable films during these glittering years before the rancorous war between mainstream and art house cinema began. Ray, who is as acute a critic as a prodigiously creative film-maker, lauded the pioneering achievements of Bimal Roy, an older fellow Bengali who had migrated to Bombay and had appreciative words for the energy of Bombay films even if their aesthetic went against his ingrained refinement. Ray had the vision and the genius to fuse Western rationalism with the wellsprings of emotional and cultural rootedness to forge all-time classics in the incandescent crucible of creativity: The *Apu Trilogy* (1955, 1956, 1959) *Jalsaghar* (1958), *Devi* (1960) and *Charulata* (1964). His towering contemporary Ritwik Ghatak—erected as an adversary by acolytes—branded our consciousness with the passionate intensity of a man who



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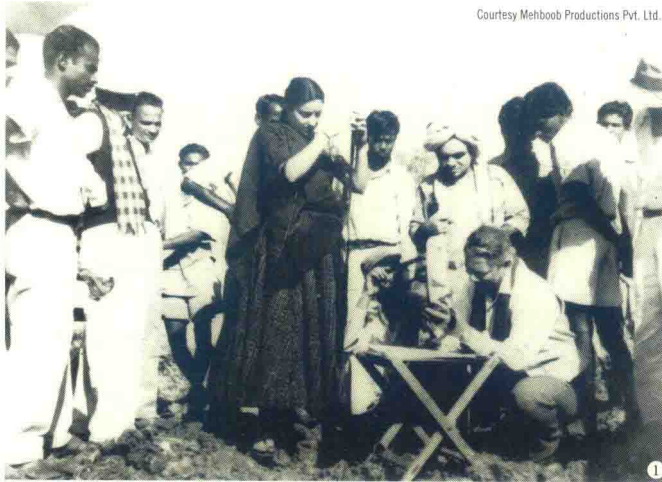
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was uprooted from his beloved East Bengal. Ghatak's angst-ridden, unruly genius bequeathed an unmatched legacy of epics that mined our mythology, married it to painful reality and encapsulated the whole with innovative use of sound.

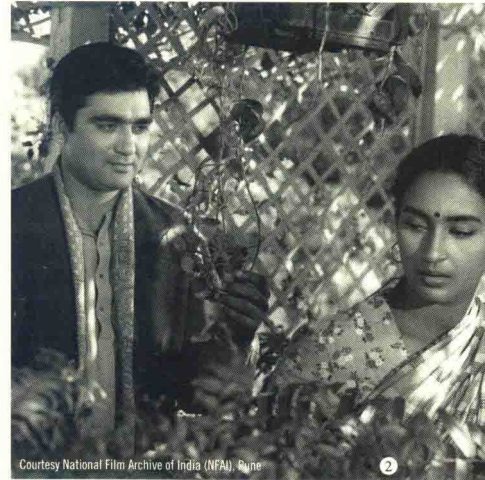
Tapan Sinha added a lyrical note to this spontaneous symphony with his poignant *Kabuliwala* (1956). Sinha's *Nirjan Saikete* (1963) found the perfect narrative style for an episodic encounter between a writer and a compartment load of widows bound for Puri. The unrepentant *enfant terrible* Mrinal Sen took his first steps on the road to confrontational political cinema with the charming *Neel Akasher Neeche* (1958) and *Baishey Sravan* (1960). The 1960s Bengali mainstream cinema broke with its New Theatres past to celebrate the chemistry of a freshly anointed box-office couple, Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, in a series of hits—the flashback-ridden drama of love lost and regained in *Saptapadi* (1961) and *Grihadaha* (1967) being the most notable. *Saat Paake Bandha*, the popular Suchitra Sen–Soumitra Chatterjee marital drama (1963) was remade in Hindi and Telugu.

Meanwhile, a mini exodus of talent from Bengal had followed in the wake of Bimal Roy's move to Bombay. The ambience remained ineffably Bengali even though Roy's films were in Hindi, from Indian cinema's neorealistic

1. Satyajit Ray explaining the mood of the scene to his actor
2. Uma Dasgupta and Subir Banerjee in *Pather Panchali* (1955)
3. Nutan and Ashok Kumar in *Bandini* (1963), directed by Bimal Roy



Courtesy Mehboob Productions Pvt. Ltd.

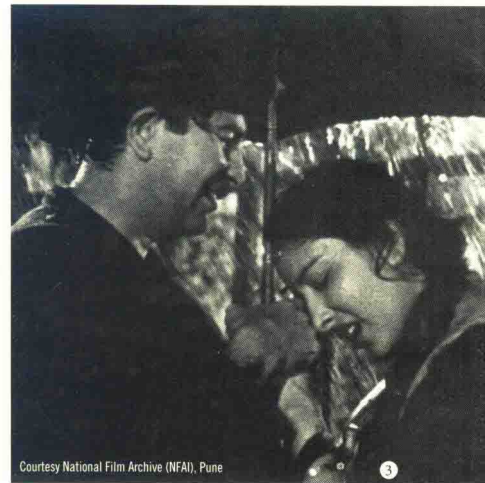


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classic *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) to the hauntingly dark *Bandini* (1963). The Bimal Roy legacy of sensitive storytelling with social purpose is reflected in the work of Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Gulzar who graduated from being editor and lyricist/writer respectively, into important, independent film-makers.

In the first flush of nationhood, Bombay played hospitable host to the Progressive Writers movement and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), attracting many significant creative talents. The early Raj Kapoor classics—*Awara* (1951) and *Shree 420* (1955)—owe much of their impact to K.A. Abbas' writing. Raj Kapoor's flamboyant Indianisation of Chaplin packaged socialism with engaging, if facile, romanticism. The subsequent degeneration of a dynamic creator—his ebullient optimism coincided with the dawn of Independence—into self-indulgent mediocrity and corruption of popular taste is one of the unlamented tragedies of Hindi cinema.

Bombay was a city dwarfed by giants. Mehboob Khan was the lion in winter who recast his earlier *Aurat* (1940) into the iconic archetype *Mother India* (1957). K. Asif's lifelong obsession culminated in the magnificent *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960) that has the dubious distinction of defining 'history' for the popular imagination that is notoriously ahistorical. Its cult status is critic proof,



Courtesy National Film Archive (NFAI), Pune

1. Mehboob Khan directing Nargis and Mukri at the outdoor location of *Mother India*
2. Sunil Dutt and Nutan in *Sujata* (1959), directed by Bimal Roy
3. Raj Kapoor and Nargis in the famous song sequence 'Pyar hua ikraar hua' from *Shree 420* (1955), directed by Raj Kapoor



Courtesy National Film Archive of India (NFAI), Pune

thanks to the evergreen music and sheer scale of spectacle, not to forget the subdued eroticism and moments of quiet drama amidst the high rhetoric.

Part of this vibrant cinematic activity and yet standing aloof is the lone genius Guru Dutt. His early romantic comedies and crime thrillers are shot through with a mysterious strain of melancholy that culminates in *Pyasa*'s romantic, world-rejecting angst (1957) and the relentless self-scrutiny of the film-maker confronted with fear of artistic failure in *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959). Dutt is Keatsian in his despair, half in love with 'easeful death'.

Bombay cinema nurtured leftist laments for an oppressed lower middle

class in Zia Sarhadi's *Humlog* (1951) with as much care as the trend-setting tragedy of brothers on opposite sides of the law in Nitin Bose's *Gunga Jumna* (1961) or the technical pizzazz and storytelling skills of Vijay Anand who made the best Navketan films: *Guide* (1965) and *Jewel Thief* (1967). Chetan, the oldest and most poetic Anand brother, had earlier made the first 'Bombay city film' *Taxi Driver* (1954). Uncharacteristically, he was the quickest to respond to the bitter taste of defeat in the 1962 war with China in *Haqeeqat* (1964). This contrasts with the non-reaction of Hindi cinema stalwarts, despite their ties to Lahore, to Partition. The glossy multi-starrer *Waqt* (1965), a story of brothers separated by an earthquake, was meant to be read as a disguised



Courtesy National Film Archive (NFAI), Pune

allegory for the cataclysmic splitting of the subcontinent. That is why Ghatak's obsessive angst stands alone till M.S. Sathyu, a South Indian theatre director, confronted the pain felt by a *shareef* Muslim family left adrift in post-Partition Agra in his lone masterpiece *Garm Hawa* (1973).

Marathi cinema failed to find its home in Bollywood-dominated Bombay. V. Shantaram's Prabhat days of glory did not last long. Set in the last days of Peshwa power, *Amarbhoopali* (1951) with its evergreen music and anti-British overtones created a double-edged legacy. Lavani, Maharashtra's vigorous folk dance, was given artistic respectability but this contributed to the degeneration of popular Marathi cinema, where the dancer's exploitation by the feudal landlord became a staple genre and the dance itself became an excuse for raunchy rusticity and unmitigated vulgarity. *Do Ankhen Bara Haath* (1957) held on to the reformist theme and the film's triumph at Berlin is the stalwart's swan song, though

-
1. Guru Dutt in *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959), directed by him
 2. Sapru, Tanuja, Ashok Kumar, Vyjayantimala, Dev Anand and others in *Jewel Thief* (1967), directed by Vijay Anand



Courtesy: National Film Archive of India (NFIA), Pune

with the advent of colour, he continued to churn out garish musicals. P.K. Atre's *Shyamchi Aai* (1953) had the distinction of being the first Marathi winner of the President's gold medal and enshrined the suffering mother as the fount of all wisdom—a pan-Indian phenomenon that persisted well into the 1980s. Bhalji Pendharkar's reverential bio-pic *Chhatrapati Shivaji* (Hindi/Marathi, 1952) was presciently seeded with future repercussions—social and political—by creating the definitive iconography of the warrior-king which was invoked to sanction linguistic chauvinism.

This is not unique to Marathi cinema. Below the Vindhyas, the fiery anti-Brahmin, anti-religious, anti-North Indian

ideology of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) found the perfect propaganda vehicle in film. With writers like Karunanidhi dominating the field, the thrust given to cleansing Tamil of Sanskrit accretions was aided by the theatrical tradition of rhetorical perorations. Shivaji Ganesan's much admired control over diction and stentorian dialogue was effectively used in his debut film *Parasakti* (1952) to articulate DMK ideology.

Telugu cinema was not immune to this linguistic zealotry either, since Madras was the centre before Hyderabad became an alternate production facility, thanks to government largesse and the resurgent pride of a people who demanded and got the first linguistically created state. Telugu