



# Guru Dutt

INTENSE & HYPERSENSITIVE FILMMAKER

B.M. MALHOTRA

**G**uru Dutt Padukone, one of the most intense and prodigious creators of meaningful films during the Hindi cinema's golden era of the 1950s and 1960s, is best known for his all-time classics *Pyassa* (1957), *Kaagar Ke Phool* (1959) and *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* (1962), besides his much-applauded money-spinner *Chandvin Ka Chand* (1961).

Born near Bangalore on July 9, 1925 of educated middle class parents, he received his education in Kolkata (Calcutta), where the family had moved when he was only five. Attracted by dance, he trained under Uday Shankar at his Dance Academy at Almora and in 1944 made his debut as a choreographer, assistant director and actor in *Lakharani*, a film produced by the Prabhat Film Company at Pune. Here he made friends with Dev Anand and Rehman, both of whom also made their first appearance as actors in the same company's *Hum Ek Hain* (1945) of which also he was assistant director and in which too he played a small role. After completion of that movie Dev and Guru parted with a promise to help get each other work in the future.

Later, in Mumbai, Guru Dutt worked as an assistant to directors Amiya Chakraborty and Gyan Mukherjee in *Girls School* and *Sangram*, respectively. Redeeming his promise, Dev Anand invited him

to direct *Baazi* (1951), produced by Navketan Pictures, which had been set up jointly by Dev Anand and his elder brother Chetan. *Baazi*, an urban crime thriller based on a story by actor Balraj Sahni, with S.D. Burman's music and Sahir Ludhianvi's lyrics and starring Dev Anand and Geeta Bali was a big hit.

Impressed by his work Geeta Bali asked Guru Dutt to direct her next film *Jaal* (1952) in which he got inducted Dev Anand as the hero opposite her (now Guru kept his word to Dev). The same year he was signed for Geeta Bali's sister Hardarshan Kaur's film *Baaz* not only as its director but also as hero opposite Geeta Bali.

Later, he launched his own Guru Dutt Productions with his debut film *Aar Paar* (1954) with Shyama and himself in the lead roles. Then followed *Mr & Mrs 55* (1955) in which he appeared opposite Madhubala and *C.I.D.* (1956), directed by his assistant Raj Khosla, with Dutt's discovery Waheeda Rehman, Shakila and Dev Anand playing lead roles. All these films which had lively music by O.P. Nayyar succeeded at the box office. While the first two were frothy comedies, the last mentioned was a crime thriller.

*Pyassa*, his first classic, unfolded the story of an idealist poet disillusioned with the world and the



With Madhubala in "Mr. & Mrs. '55".

selfishness and falsehood of its inhabitants. The film was inspired by the life of poet Sahir Ludhianvi, who had loved and lost and carried deep pain in his broken heart. He vented all his grief through lyrics like "Yeh duniya agar mil bhi jaaye to kay hai" (There is no point in getting this worthless world), "Jalaa do ise, phoonk dalo yeh duniya, mere saamne se hata lo yeh duniya" (Burn and destroy this world and take it away from my sight). He dwelt on the miseries, injustices and excesses in this world and tickled the conscience of those who were proud of India, urging them to mend matters.

Incidentally, all art to a degree is autobiographical, as is borne out by Sahir's couplet "Duniya ne

*tajurrubat-o-bawadas ki shakal mein/ Jo kuchh diya mujhe wohi lauta raha hoon main*" (I am only returning what this world gave me in the form of experiences and accidents).

Sahir's lyrics were effectively set to music by maestro S.D. Burman and deftly integrated into the film's structure by Guru Dutt. As a result of this happy confluence of the talents of three creative artistes, the songs acquired great significance.

Guru Dutt's next classic, *Kaagar Ke Phool*, was India's first cinemascope film in black-and-white. It reflected through a prism of cynicism how a director viewed the tinsel world and nostalgically recalled his experience as a once much-adulated film-maker and now cast aside as a failure and spent force

by those very people who had earlier fawned on him. Even his upper-class in-laws and wife discarded him.

As suggested by the film's title, *Kaagar Ke Phool* (Paper Flowers, which are artificial, without fragrance and are often used in films for decoration), Guru Dutt sought to expose the ubiquitous artificiality and hypocrisy of humans including those in the film world.

The director in *Kaagar Ke Phool*, like the poet in *Pyassa*, reckoned himself as a social reject. Old and poorly attired, he was irresistibly drawn by his former film studio. Goaded by his unfulfilled ambitions, he went there and occupied, amidst vast emptiness, the director's chair to which he was



“Baaz” (1953), directed by Guru Dutt. The scene shows Guru Dutt with Kuldip Kaur.

no longer entitled, and anti-climatically, just died while sitting there.

Besides its lyrical quality and narration, the film stood out for its beautiful visuals by V.K. Murthy, bestowing on him the Filmfare Award as the best cinematographer. In tandem with Guru Dutt he created an artistic chiaroscuro using the black-and-white tones to emphasise sadness and joy.

The film was, however, a colossal failure at the box office and devastated Guru Dutt. Disappointed and dejected, he never again took directorial credit for any of his subsequent films. He produced and acted in *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* (1961), ostensibly directed by Sadiq. It was a romantic drama with a Muslim background, set in the decadent era of the Nawabs of Lucknow. The film bagged three Filmfare awards - M.R. Achrekar (best art director), Mohd. Rafi (best playback singer) and Shakeel Badayuni (best lyricist).

Encouraged and psychologically rejuvenated by this film’s success, Guru Dutt went on to produce another ambitious film, *Sabib Bibi Aur Ghulam*, for which he gave directorial credit to Abrar Alvi. Based on Bimal Mitra’s insightful Bengali novel, the film dealt with the gradual disintegration of feudal nobility at the turn of the last century. The pivotal role of a wife was competently played by Meena Kumari, the sharp focus being on how she takes to drinking liquor to deter her husband from seeking company elsewhere. Dutt acted as her factotum, in empathy with her but unable to offer any crucial help. The film was much appreciated and earned four Filmfare awards for best film, best director, best actress and best cinematographer.

Having been exposed to the great K.L. Saigal’s memorable classic *Dandas* and the trends of the times, nihilistic and abnegative thoughts got embedded in Guru Dutt’s psyche and found expression



With Meena Kumari in "Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam" (1962).

through his above discussed biographical films. Like Shakespeare's King Lear, who faced two simultaneous storms - one, physical, blowing around him with all its sound fury and the other, internal, which engulfed and gripped his mind - Guru Dutt, too, faced a dilemma as a public performer and a private person.

A parallelism could be traced in the professional and personal lives of Guru Dutt and Raj Kapoor. Both as producer-director-actors made classics of great dimensions. Both spent a good part of their

childhood in Kolkata where they were charmed by Saigal's soulful yet melancholic songs. After a time, Raj could, however, cut himself loose from the *Devdas* syndrome.

Both Raj and Guru were shattered by the failure of their most ambitious and semi-autobiographical films (*Mera Naam Joker* and *Kagaaz Ke Phool*). While Guru Dutt sank deeper with shock and grief, Raj rose from the ashes like a phoenix and with a vengeance made a hugely successful *Bobby*. Both employed a similar stratagem to show a wife

trying to dissuade her husband from seeking pleasure outside; Guru by making Meena Kumari sip whisky in *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* and Raj by having Vyjayanthimala perform a sort of strip-tease in *Sangam*.

Both lost to the outside world their most favourite heroines whom they had specially groomed for long and who had contributed in a big way to the success of their films.

While any shocks of Raj's behaviour, reflecting his exteriorized frustration and anger, were absorbed by his understanding family, in the case of Guru Dutt, the situation got compounded as his words and actions rebounded with equal if not greater force, leaving him more dejected and despondent. While the resilient Raj survived all odds against him because of his extrovert nature and positive attitude, Guru, being a hypersensitive introvert and an inveterate pessimist, remained mired in misery and wallowed in unending grief.

Thus, driven to the extreme by his failures and matrimonial incompatibility, Guru Dutt reportedly ended his life on October 10, 1964 by consuming an overdose of sleeping pills. Those close to him, however, felt that the cause of his untimely death was not a deliberate suicide (he did not leave behind any note) but an accident resulting from another of his several efforts at diluting his grief. Only this last time, the intake of an excessive quantity of barbiturates proved fatal.

<sup>u</sup>  
The author is a freelance writer.