

# READING CORNER

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## CINEMA

### Some All-Time Greats

Cinema by definition telescopes time. A film is said to be a classic if it is seen and appreciated by two or three generations of viewers over a period of 50 to 60 years. It would take longer for a literary work to attain the same stature because the history of publishing is much longer. In India, certain films in Hindi and other regional languages have been seen by people long enough to acquire a classic status.

The first director worthy of serious attention in Hindi cinema was Mehboob Khan. He began life as an extra in the silent era and gradually worked his way up as an actor, assistant director and finally director with Imperial Film Company and Sagar Movietone. He made his mark when he formed his own production company. *Aurat*, his first major film, is about a farmer's widow swamped with debts and her heroic struggle to retain her dignity and look after her children in an overwhelmingly male society. This black and white production starring Khan's wife, Sardar Akhtar, with music by Anil Biswas, had a greater impact than its worthy remake, *Mother India*. The latter is considered a technicolour epic with a moving performance by actor Nargis. The film was a smash hit and brought Khan both financial and critical success. 'Nagri Nagri Dware Dware Dhundun Re Sawariya'—a song from *Mother India*, composed by Naushad and written by Shakeel Badayuni, still haunts. Apart from presenting strong content with panache, Khan specialised in song picturisation as well. His engagement with the landscape around his native village Billimoria, in Gujarat, was poetic and elegant, both, in *Mother India* and *Aan*, a 1951 swashbuckling enterprise shot in Geva Colour and printed in technicolour. Another of his films, *Amar*, on class and love going awry, had outstanding picturisation of memorable songs shot in black and white. Khan also made *Humayun* with Ashok Kumar as the Mughal king and Veena as his wife Hamida Bano, in the mid 1940s. Believed to be lost for many years, seven reels of the film were shown at the Cannes Film Festival in the early 1990s. Sophisticated audiences were surprised with its superior mounting, that is, a combination of all the elements that go into the making of a film.

Kidar Sharma, a dialogue-writer and lyricist from New Theatres, Kolkata, became a director when he migrated to Mumbai in 1941. Unlike the unlettered Mehboob Khan, he was far better educated than many of his colleagues. Sharma was a scriptwriter, lyricist, director and still photographer. He also understood the beauty of the black and white image in motion well. Unlike Khan, who created his films through broad, bold strokes, Sharma's touch was gentler, more intimate and quieter. His first major film, *Chitrlekha*, was about a beautiful worldly courtesan from ancient India coveted by the wealthy and the powerful, with spiritual problems of her own. It was based on a 1934 novel by Bhagwati Charan Verma. The negatives and soundtrack of this film seem to have disappeared and may be lost to posterity with the 1964 re-make in colour left as a poor substitute. Sharma is remembered by three generations of film lovers, including those who have only seen his work on YouTube, for *Bawre Nain*, a film set in a tiny semi-rural settlement with a railway station nearby. Sharma brings to life an unlikely love story between a *tangawali*, earning a living from transporting passengers and a worthless son of well-heeled parents. The chemistry he creates between actors Geeta Bali and Raj Kapoor is unbelievable. In a song shot outdoors in luminous black and white, the director manages the impossible—merging simmering sexuality with gentle sensuality.

**Partha Chatterjee**

A filmmaker, film lover and cultural journalist, he lives in Delhi.

## The Write Choice

It is said that every film is made three times—once on paper, then on the set and finally on the edit table. Before the first version is made, the other two do not exist. That makes scriptwriting the backbone of cinema.

A good script in the hands of a bad director will make for a decent film, but a bad script in the hands of an exceptional director will have poor results. That is why a good scriptwriter makes a crucial difference. An author who writes books is the sole owner of the product. He is the writer, director, sound and light designer, actor and the set and costume designer. A film, on the other hand, is a hugely collaborative process. Just the script itself can be broken down into three components of story, screenplay and dialogues. A scriptwriter can do either or all three of these. A script must adhere to the time limit of the film and hence understanding the structure is the key, as is to look at it as a visual medium. On the other hand, adapting a book to cinema requires letting go of the prose-heavy narrative that a book may have and converting the words into images. Several adaptations, from Dan Brown's work to Ayn Rand's have, in fact, failed in this regard. The examples of *Godfather* or the *Harry Potter* movies shine through—the script does justice to the book in keeping the 'narrator's voice' intact, as well as allowing the characters' unique voices to speak for themselves. Not every book can be adapted into cinema. There have been examples where authors themselves have adapted their books into a good movie, one of them being *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. The key always lies in a good story; if that is honest and true, the medium takes care of itself.

**Sanchit Gupta**

Screenwriter of *Captain Nawab* and *Behen Hogi Teri* as well as author of *The Tree with a Thousand Apples*.

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