

## IFFI 2007–Non-Feature Films

Abhijit Ghosh-Dastidar

The International Film Festival at Goa (November 07) offered beautiful, humane portraits in the non-features section of Indian Panorama. Buddhadeb Das Gupta's "Naushad Ali—The Melody Continues" (Hindi, colour, 39 mins) is a tribute to Naushad Ali, the legendary music composer from Bombay's film world, and the film landscape of the times. The film commences with Dilip Kumar, the actor, visiting Naushad Ali, admitted in Bombay hospital. Naushad passed away in May 06. An 'alap' song, composed by Naushad and sung by Bade Ghulam Ali, from "Moghal-e-Azam", is at the debut of the sound track. The voice over states that Naushad was closely linked to Lucknow, where he was born in December 1919.

The camera travels along the lanes and streets of Lucknow, with Moghal monuments in the background. Naushad's father was a munshi in court. Naushad had spent his childhood at his grandmother's house. His uncle, Allam, had a harmonium shop, and soon Naushad found a job in a musical instruments shop. He started watching films from the age of eight at the Royal Cinema hall. He was fascinated by the off screen musicians of silent films. Clips from musical silent films roll by. Babbar Khan coached Naushad on the harmonium.

Naushad shifted to Bombay in 1937. He spent nights below a staircase. He joined DN Madhok's film production company, and made music for films like "Mala" and "Prem Nagar", for which he was paid Rs 300 only for each film. He composed classical music to fit the songs of Shamshad Begum in "Baiju Bawra". He built a house, "Ashiana-Nest" in Bandra in 1953. Naushad's room is full of memories of Alia Khatun. Excerpts from films, like "Ratan" glide by. Naushad was close to the comfort of Nature, which he found in the birds and trees, along Powai lake. He was adept at fishing, and was president of the Maharashtra Angling Association. He had interest in sports, and did daily free hand exercises. As a hunter he shot several tigers. Photography was his pastime. Dilip Kumar reappears in clips from "Uran Khatola" as Naushad's music unfolds. Naushad was the music composer of Kardar Productions from 1942 to 1952. Clips from "Dillagi" revive nostalgia. Amongst Indian film music composers, Naushad was the first to use Western notations. The film notations for "Aan" were published in London. Film clips from "Anmol Ghadi" and "Mother India" illustrate Naushad's association with Mehboob Films. Songs from "Moghal-e-Azam" replete with Akbar, Salim and court dancers had an era of night and eternity. The classical strains of Tansen's lips were preserved, when Bade Ghulam Ali Khan watched reel scenes from the film, and sang. Raag Bhageshwari fetched Naushad Rs 25,000 for a song. Asif Ali knew the value of artists. Naushad felt that background music was the most difficult to score, when there were no dialogues in the accompanying scenes.

Without background music a film would be dull. Foreign technicians remixed the music of "Aan", in London. Flute, sitar, mandolin and dholak were the base. Naushad composed the music of "Uran Khatola" without orchestra, giving film music a new depth and meaning. He gave opportunities to new singers of the

calibre of Suraya, Lata Mangeshkar, K L Saigal, Md Rafi, Mukesh and Shakil Badayini. Nostalgia and film clips re-inforce the feelings of 'yesterday'. David Lean was present at the music recording of "Ganga Jumna" in 1961. As films broke into golden jubilee and silver jubilee records, western music, *cha cha cha* and *rumba* invaded extensively. Stills of Naushad's face is super-imposed on actual film footage, where music was composed by Naushad. Within Naushad, there was a child inside the complete man, who always wanted to return to Lucknow and his grandmother ('Nani'). The voice over commentary refers to old letters. There was no place for the sitar in films full of conflicts and gun fights. During the course of his life time, Naushad was awarded the Padma Bhushan and Dada Shaheb Phalke Award.

There are visuals with Naushad at home with his harmonium and relatives. The video clips and interviews summarize a life lived and now bygone. His songs conveyed passion, sorrow and solitude, as in the shot of his folded spectacles on his note book. Das Gupta's film carries the hints of a music dreamer's journey, in search of fluorescent, divine music. The film portrait of Naushad Ali presents a parallel discovery of the Hindi film songs of the 1940s and 1950s. Das Gupta reconstitutes the songs in an instructive documentary.

H H H

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *The Dance of the Enchantress* (Malayalam, colour, 72 mins) captures the 'Mohiniyattam dance, in its intoxication of body and grace. The ancient myths describe a lovely child, born of union with Lord Krishna. Against the backdrop of classical music, a young girl wearing a red dress, prays to Lord Krishna. Girls in white saris dance the *Mohiniyattam*, in rare moments of great bliss. An elderly lady instructor, sitting on a chair, provides the rhythms, beating sticks and reciting verses. The movements of the dance, are without breaks. Eyes, body, and hands move in unison in the celestial dance. The teacher's eyebrows move with the dance rhythms. The twenty-four codified hand gestures and movement of the eyebrows depict smiles, sorrow, cries, anger, arrogance, fear, disgust, wonderment, valour and peace. Movements of the head are an essential ingredient to the portrayal of human emotions. A girl takes a dip in a pond, combs her long hair before a mirror, and puts 'kajal' (black embellishment) on her eyes. In white costume dress with gold borders, she dances love-lorn, pining for her man. A young lady rests on a tree along a river bank, gazing at a boat with a young man and boatman on board. Drummers play within temple precincts. Sculpture on walls, figures with drums and flutes, and dancers on marble bear testimony to the centuries old dance form. Girl dancers walk past the sculpted figures in a temple.

The dancers paint their hands and faces, holding hand mirrors. The girls apply *alta* (red paint) on their feet. Bell trinkets are tied to ankles. Three girls dance in candlelight. Dance invocation to gods is accompanied by prayers for blessings. There are odes to Shiva, the valiant god of love. Passengers in a bus at night, discuss the *Mohiniyattam*. Vocal compositions by Swathi Thirimal and poet Vallithal fill the off-screen sound. While a girl is reading, a lady fries rice flat cakes in an apartment. The camera records passengers, sitting or standing, in a bus. With strains of classical music, the camera moves forward to a temple's inner court. Girls wearing orange saris, with blue borders, dance. The musicians

render rhythms, as the camera pans on legs. The girls enact the flow of music, as a lady instructor sings softly, playing a veena. The dance movements are heightened with sandal wood paste, on the faces and hands of the dancers. The camera deftly delineates the dancers' combing and coiffure of long hair, adorning with flowers, and offering betel leaves. Besides a river, a girl pushes a swing. A dancer's hand gestures describe the shooting of five arrows of love. On an open varandah, a dancer dances to Kamdeva, the god of love. Dances continue in darkness of temple interiors with candle light. With the music of lover's flute, the dancers wait in agony for Lord Krishna.

Three girls are with their lady dance teacher. A fourth girl has stopped dancing, since her fiancée's family, did not approve her dancing. The girls go shopping, buying saris, necklaces and jewellery. While the girls dance on a stage, the camera records city streets, the movement of cars, and traffic. The sound track blares a Malayalam pop song. Within a court yard, a senior lady dance teacher, dances before her students, as if on a bed of tender leaves, with all the hesitations and indulgence of love play. Coconut trees are stretched across the blue sky. The girls watch the rains pouring, and pray to their 'guru' with folded hands. The teacher sits cross legged, as the girls dance before her. Prayers are chanted to lord Krishna to redeem the devotees and grant benevolence to the performers. In the soothing light of the full moon, the musicians and the dancers remain blissful and eternal. Adoor Gopalakrishnan's script and scenarization portrays the *Mohini-yattam* dancers at their dance practices, rehearsals and performances. Avoiding voyeurism, the film frequently cuts to trees, rivers and nature, and city life, away from dance courtyards and auditoriums. The dance rhythms are embroidered in the music of dholak-drums, cymbals and tanpura. The classical vocal renderings make the dance movements vibrant. M J Radhakrishnan's camera pursues the nuances of enchanting Mohiniyattam dance, with fluctuation and fluidity.

H H H

"Rajarshree Bhagyachandra of Manipur" (Manipuri, colour, 58 mins), by Aribam Syam Sharma, has an English voice over. The film is heralded by a woman soloist singing, playing on dholak-drum. Manipur is guarded by seven hills, and the centre of the kingdom is Kangla. Paintings, scrolls, and drawings chronicle a succession of kings. King Bhagya Chandra was a Vaishnava king, who defended his kingdom with a ruthless sword, and encouraged the classical dance of *Manipuri Ras*. Manipur fell into British dominions in 1891. The state suffered under British and Japanese bombings of World War II. Manipuri dances describe the diverse ethnic groups, and different belief systems. From Maipak's camera meanders through old palaces and courtyards. The prayers and soul of Manipuri Vaishnav religious sect are songs and dances. An overhead shot of drummers and cymbal players leads the scenario to Manipuri Natya Srikirtana, which was patterned on Vaishnav art Philosophy. The camera moves forward and glides back as the drummers play standing. Indigeneous music and dances of Manipur, entered the Natya Srikirtana, along with the rasa and other variations of the religious and devotional songs. The religious songs were of Lord Chaitanya's *Srikrishna kirtanas*.

There are candles and offerings on the dance court. Surrounded by musicians of cymbals and drums, the solo lead vocal remains at the centre. Drums, cymbals and conch shells build up the collective prayer of music accompanying the movement of the Manipuri dances, adoring Lord Krishna. The life cycle of Vaishnavites continues outside the dances. A child's head is shaved, while rituals are bound with prayers. the religious wear yellow robes. The male musicians have bare upper torsos. Women sing with cymbals. At a wedding ceremony, a bride showers flowers on the groom. Rhythmic steps precede the exchange of flowers. The kirtan songs are associated with seasons and harvests, bells and cow herds. Sharma's dow-fiction explores the Manipuri dance styles, with all their hallucinatory effects, and without any metaphor on present day Manipur. □□□