

Tribute to Dilip Kumar

Siraj Syed

Reminiscences of Dilip Kumar, the Director And a Look at His Biography



Dilip Kumar was not the best actor around for me when I was a young, mainly because I had not seen any of his early films, like *Jwar Bhata*, *Jugnu*, *Andaz*, *Deedar*, *Mela*, *Babul*, *Devdas*, *Madhumati*, *Naya Daur* and *Yahudi*. Then, I began to catch on, with films like *Koh-i-noor*, *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Leader*, *Dil Diya Dard Liya*, *Sunghursh*, *Aadmi*, *Ram Aur Shyam*, *Gopi*, *Bairaag*, *Sagina*, *Kranti*, *Karma*, *Vidhaata* and *Saudagar*. Thoroughly impressed, I placed him at the top of a list that included Ashok Kumar, Balraj Sahni, Yakub, Motilal and the latest to make it to the list, Sanjeev Kumar. When Sanjeev Kumar donned nine

roles to essay the *navarasas*, in *Naya Din Nayi Raat*, Dilip Kumar agreed to do the voice over at the beginning of the film, paying Sanjeev rich tributes.

Of the other films, *Dil Diya Dard Liya*, *Sunghursh*, *Aadmi* and *Ram Aur Shyam* (remade more than once) sufficed to put him right on top, as the best actor in Hindi films. *Sunghursh*, in particular, though a box-office failure like *Dil Diya Dard Liya*, had a supporting cast that stood right-up to him: Balraj Sahni, Sanjeev Kumar, Jayant and Ulhas. *Dil Diya Dard Liya*, an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, had the iconic scene where he lets out his frustration

and anger before a stone deity. The scene was copied in *Deewar*, with Amitabh doing the honours. It was subsequently rehashed in several films, with varying degrees of artistic success. The rest of the films had their place near the top, too, and I watched them many years later, but *Leader* and *Qila*, both seen at first release, were disappointments, *Qila* not befitting even Dilip Kumar's choice of subject, more so that it was a double role. It was time to call it quits, and that is exactly what Dilip Kumar did.

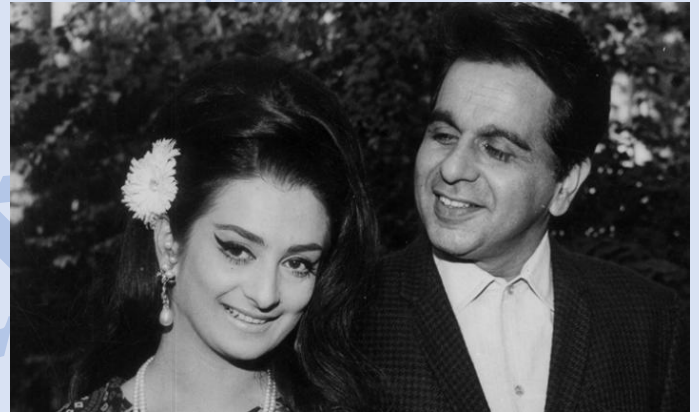
Qila was released in 1998. That year is etched in my memory in golden words. Through the good offices of Padma Shri Dr. Roshan Kumari, Saira Banu's one-time dance teacher choreographer, and life-long family friend, I landed up a small role in *Zaraa Dekho to Inka Kamaal*, a TV serial directed by Saira Banu, on paper. I say "on paper" because, de facto, it was directed by Dilip Kumar. Those days, I was based in Singapore, and was on a short visit to Mumbai when the offer came along. I was overcome with joy. The role was that of an old-time film writer, who lands up at Hema Malini's house to narrate a story to her, in the hope that she will say yes to the project, and his luck would change for the better.

Word was sent to me that I would be required to wear a *sherwani* and a matching cap, which, luckily, I possessed, inherited from my late father's wardrobe. Then, I was to go to Yusuf Saahab (Dilip Kumar)'s house for rehearsals. I was a bit surprised at the rehearsals call, because the role had hardly two scenes, and not too many dialogues. Normally, serial-makers would not ask for rehearsals for such a role. But all my 25 serial makers (by then, I had acted in 25 TV serials) would remain on one side, and Dilip Kumar would be a class unto himself. There had been some talk, many years ago, that he had ghost-directed *Dil Diya Dard Liya* and *Bairaag*. But here, he was merely helping out his better half.

My home is barely two kms away from Dilip Kumar's, and I arrived there as scheduled. We did many versions of my accent, but none seemed to satisfy him. He then said, "You should speak like the writers of the 30s and 40s." I did not have the courage to tell him I was born in the 50s, though I was playing a much older character. Naturally, I had never met any writers from the 30s and 40s. We adjourned for

the day, only to meet the next day, again, and continue the search for the right intonation and diction.

Meanwhile, I had accepted a compering assignment at Madh Island, almost two hours' drive from his bungalow, the next day. Surely the rehearsals would not continue for a third day. They did. We met at about 4. The show was scheduled to start at 8. I chanced my arm and hoped to leave by 6 and make it to the location by 8. But luck was not on my side. At least not yet. That day, he was preoccupied with visitors and phone calls till about 5.30. I began to panic. When we got down to doing the lines, I, most humbly, pleaded with him to let me go by 6. He flew into a rage, accusing me, and persons of my generation in general, of lack of commitment and wanting a slice of the pie without due effort.



I turned to Saira Banu, in who I saw a saviour. She is gentle and warm. In just a few words, I explained to her the problem at hand. She took up my case and put it to him, addressing him by a nickname that was the name of a fruit. "Look, he has been coming regularly for three days. Besides, language is not a problem for him, as you might recall. He compered the show recently organised by Roshan Kumari. He also compered the function of our Wedding Silver Jubilee. Today, he is the anchor for the show at Madh Island, and if he does not reach in time, there will be chaos. Please let him go."

And, thank heavens, Dilip Kumar suddenly melted. "I now recall that you speak fluent Urdu, so these dialogues will not pose any problem to you. You may leave, but not before having tea with me." Tea was served, and Dilip Kumar offered me a piece of toast, a regular item with his tea, with his own

hand. I was overwhelmed. Sairajee whispered in my ear, “Consider yourself blessed. There are very few individuals whom he offers toast with his own hands.” Soon, I left, and made it to the show in time. All thanks to Saira Banu for being the large-hearted soul she is.

At the shooting, a few days later, Dilip Kumar probably had a rethink about my style of delivery, and asked me to demonstrate it all over again. I was, by now, petrified, but listened carefully as he read a couple of lines himself, for my benefit. That’s when I cracked it. I must do it exactly as he has shown, or it could mean a protracted prep. Being a professional mimic, I grasped the nuances of his speech and reproduced it to then best of my ability. “That’s it. You have finally hit the nail on the head. We are ready to roll.” And the shooting went off smoothly.

My dream had come true. I had worked with Dilip Kumar, albeit in the capacity of the legend as a director, not actor. But how many have had even that fortune? It would have been another zenith scaled had I got the opportunity to work with him as an actor. No, I told myself, don’t be too greedy. You never get everything you want, do you?

The King Speaks: Dilip Kumar

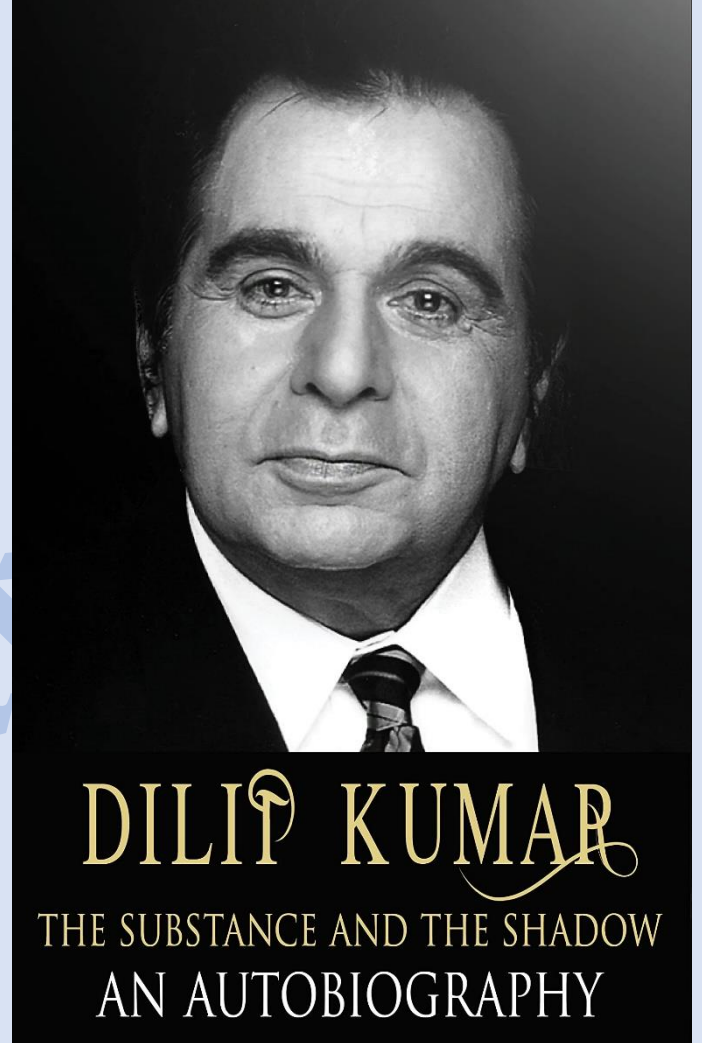
*The Substance and the Shadow – An Autobiography:
As Narrated to Udaya Tara Nayar (2015)*

The biography is dedicated to Amma and Aghaji. Amma, obviously, was his mother. Agha is a common word in Persian that means Sir or Mr, used here for his father. Arriving when he turned 92, it is not a day too early. The book is divided into 25 chapters, Filmography and Awards and nearly 100 pages of reminiscences of over 40 family and extended family members, friends and associates.

*‘Sukoon-e-dil ke liye kuchh to ehtemaam karoon
Zaraa nazar jo miley phir unhey salaam karoon,
Mujhey to hosh naheen aap mashvaraa dejiye
Kahaan sey chhedoon fasaanaa kahaan tamaam
karoon’*

This piece of Urdu verse appears in the beginning, and a great piece of poetry it is, to start an autobiography. I have taken the liberty to

phonetically correct part of it and linguistically correct some more of it. Roughly translated for the benefit of those who do not understand Urdu,
‘To console the heart, I need to do something
Let our eyes meet, I will greet them again
I am not in my senses, you advise me
Where should I begin the tale, and where should I end
it’



If you are 92 and come from a family of 12 children, were born in Peshawar, have worked and lived in Deolali, Pune, Mumbai and Chennai, got all possible recognitions and awards (the latest being India’s second highest civilian honour, the Padma Vibhushan), served as the Sheriff of India’s urbs prima, Bombay, spent years with the National Association for the Blind, postulated the Film City (Chitranagari) on the lines of Hollywood and a cultural centre that ultimately took shape as Nehru Centre (Worli Mumbai), you would have so much to say. By that yard-stick, the book does not say too

much. A lot of the content is already well-known: the great admiration he has for Ashok Kumar (mutual), how Amitabh Bachchan worships him, how Dharmendra idolises him, how Manoj (Harikishan Goswami in real-life) Kumar named himself after Dilip Kumar's character in *Shaheed*, how Raj Kapoor was a pal, and how devoted and loving Saira Banu (former film star, often called Beauty Queen) is, as his wife and a person.

What is interesting is his candid admission that he ghost directed, and even edited, several of his films, that he was almost entrapped by Madhubala's manipulative father into a marriage, that producer-director A. R. Kardar got him into trouble with Income Tax authorities, and that he was 'involved' with a woman called Asma.

What are worth enjoying every bit are the recap of the 1920s-50s, the family and the formative years of Yousuf Khan, the son of fruit merchant Mohammed Sarwar Khan and his years as a fruit trader and sandwich-seller himself. A detailed picture emerges of Nagdevi Street and Crawford market, the trading hub of Mumbai. The family lived on Nagdevi Street and traded from premises in Crawford market. Crawford Market still exists, though I cannot identify the Nagdvei Street building. From there, the Khans moved to PaliMala, about 1 km away from where they presently reside. Dilip Kumar and Saira Banu both own properties on Pali Hill, Mumbai's Beverly Hill, among other places.

Language is uneven, and there is more than acceptable repetition. This is possibly due to the

recording in instalments, and each of the transcripts then being arranged as a fresh chapter. Halfway down the track, it appears that Saira Banu has contributed more than Dilip Kumar to the contents of the biography, but how in heaven's name could that have not been the case? Firstly, she is his self-confessed better ¾ ths and secondly, he has been in and out of hospital at least a dozen times in the last six years, suffering from a variety of ailments that include some loss of memory! But yes, the tomes of tributes at the end could have been avoided, or, at least reduced, or pages increased, to add other content as balance. Rumours declare him dead every month for years now. As they say, the more one is killed off in rumours, the longer he lives.

P.S.:

Of the many films that starred Dilip Kumar that were either left incomplete or never made, I sorely miss *Janwar*. This was directed by K. Asif and co-starred Suraiya, who had already acted with Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand and Shammi Kapoor. It was a remake of the Hollywood film *Gilda*. The couple had never been paired, and Asif was then making *Mughal-e-Azam*, only his second completed film. This would have been his third. Serious differences arose between the three, on the sets, and the film was shelved after a few reels were canned. Obviously, the pair did not work in any later film either. Suraiya retired in 1963 while Dilip Kumar called it quits in 1998.

▲ Mr. Siraj Syed is a Member of FIPRESCI-India, based in Mumbai.