

The Secret Politics of Our Desires
Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema

edited by
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This book is dedicated to Chidananda Dasgupta, pioneer in reflective film criticism and one of the first to attempt serious social studies of films, and Iqbal Masud, who has made social and political criticism of films an important component of Indian public life.

for Indian Society and Politics', *Modern Asian Studies*, May 1992, 26(2), pp. 289–320; and Ziauddin Sardar, 'Dilip Kumar Made Me Do It', see Chapter 2.

While agreeing with the overall thrust of their argument, one must recognize the scope of the global crisis in public life and democratic politics precipitated by full-blown 'modern rationality'. The hero is what he is, not by choice, but because he cannot be otherwise in the world he lives in. That is the main difference between violence in these films and in those of, say, Hollywood. The changing life-cycle of the film hero is located within that rationality. As a well-known critic of Western modernity, Sardar, who shows little sympathy for the new 'hard', modern face of the hero in Indian films, should have appreciated this part of the story.

The point I am trying to make is beautifully, though perhaps unwittingly, captured by Sardar himself. In his chapter, he recapitulates a moving episode from the film *Mashaal*, in which an elderly couple played by a famous hero and a heroine of earlier years, Dilip Kumar and Waheeda Rehman, are caught in a heartless megalopolis. The wife, injured and facing death, is carried by the morally upright, law-abiding husband in the dead of the night through the deserted streets of Bombay, where he tries to stop a passing car to take his wife to a hospital. But nobody stops while he screams in anguish, 'Brother, stop the car', and no one ever opens a window of the tall apartments lining the street. Dilip in bitter frustration throws a stone at one of the multi-storeyed buildings. No one responds to that desperate gesture either.

11. Fareeduddin Kazmi, see Chapter 4.
12. Byrski, 'Bombay Philum—the Kaliyugi Avatara of Sanskrit Drama'.
13. Veena Das, 'Jai Santoshi Ma', *India International Centre Quarterly*, 9(1), 1981.
14. The rural and the traditional, it is true, are no longer dirty words, as they were in many of the major schools of nineteenth-century social knowledge, including the major dissenting visions. Environmental concerns and the growing discomfort with urban industrialism in recent decades have changed the intellectual culture in this respect. The wisdom of the peasant and the shaman is a trendy concern today. But this revaluation does not cover those who have one foot in the village and the other in the city. They seem neither authentically traditional nor genuinely modern, and are therefore a hybrid worse than both. Popular cinema originates from that liminal world; it is bound to arouse ambivalent feelings.

1

Dilip Kumar made me do it

ZIAUDDIN SARDAR

I

In my twelfth year, I was burdened with two responsibilities: one was a chore, the other a pleasure. In the early sixties, the British Asian community was still in an embryonic stage. In Hackney, my part of East London, there was neither a *halal* meat shop nor a cinema showing Indian films. So every Saturday afternoon, I took a bus to Aldgate East to buy the weekly supply of *halal* meat. On Sundays, I took my mother to either the Cameo Theatre in Walthamstow or the Scala at Kings Cross to see 'two films on one ticket'.

The weekly visit to the cinema was a full-day affair. My mother would start her preparation for the ritual early in the morning. The latest issue of the Urdu weekly *Mashriq* (now defunct) would be scanned to discover the current offering at our regular theatres. Should we opt for the latest Dilip Kumar double bill at the Cameo or see Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* once again at the Scala? The decision was never an easy one, but the strategy followed by my mother was always the same. First, she would try and coax my father to join in the outing and take a lead in making the decision. This ploy seldom worked. Next, Mrs Mital and Mrs Hassan, from the Asian families of the neighbourhood, would be consulted. Intense discussion would follow on the merits of the offerings; minds and positions would change frequently before a consensus was reached. We would leave for the cinema at around twelve, my mother carrying a bag laden with sandwiches, stuffed *parathas*, drinks

and a generous supply of tissues. Sometimes Mrs Mital, or Mrs Hassan, or both, would be in tow. The long wait for the bus, often in bitterly cold or relentlessly rainy conditions, would be rewarded by an equally long wait to get inside the cinema. I would queue for the tickets while my mother and our neighbours would look around eagerly for faces they could recognize. They had made numerous friends during these weekly excursions; friends whom they saw only at the cinema and chatted to only during the interval. I would always return from the ticket office to discover that my mother had bumped into a veritable horde of friends and that they all wanted to sit together. The logistics of finding the appropriate seating pattern in the midst of hundreds of similar networks with identical aspirations would have truly taxed the ability of a beachmaster at the Normandy landings. The performance started promptly at two o'clock and while my mother and her friends watched the films with rapt attention, most of the men in the audience would participate in each film, expostulating vociferously with hoots or hisses as circumstances demanded. During memorable dance sequences, notably those involving Helen, the popular supporting actress whose adaptation of the cabaret carried an ambivalent load, participants would hurl money at the screen. And like a throbbing tidal undertow to the film's dialogue and music, breaking through the hubbub of the audience, would rise and fall, the inconsolable heart-wrenching gasps of sobbing women. In the midst of all this, I would interperse my avid watching of the film with providing my mother, Mrs Mital and Mrs Hassan a generous supply of tissues to staunch their unending tears. We would leave the cinema somewhere after eight-thirty in the evening, exhausted, emotionally drained, but thoroughly entertained.

Yet, all this was only the prelude; the day was far from over. On returning home, my mother would insist on telling the stories of both films to my father. His protests would have no effect on her—locking himself in the bathroom was ineffectual; stuffing his fingers in his ears brought no relief—she simply would not rest until she had related the narratives of the films down to the last detail. Then came the moment we all cherished. Once she had the narrative off her chest, my mother would move on to the songs. She would hum the lyrics to us, taking great pleasure in reiterating the poetic imagery of the songs. At this point, my father would forget that he was tired, that he loathed films, and would

sit up with rapt attention. 'Wah, wah', he would exclaim. 'Repeat the first verse'. 'Umm! The second verse does not do justice to the first'. This would go on for a while before my father would jump up in excitement and declare that the first verse would become the basis of our next *mushaira*.

Now, it was a custom of my family to hold a *mushaira* (poetry recital) on the last Saturday of every month. These were late night, all-night affairs. My father would select the opening verse of a film song and the invited participants would have to justify their inclusion in the gathering by writing a full *ghazal* based on this opening verse. He would insist that everyone recite their *ghazal* in *tarannum*—that is, sing the *ghazal* as though it were a film song—although my father's own *tarannum* left a lot to be desired. After dutifully preparing the meals for these occasions, my mother would sit up praising, criticizing and eventually, in an effortless but novel twist, performing her own *ghazal*. I remember being a full participant in these *mushairas* and writing a few *ghazals* myself.

But Indian films not only set the literary agenda in our house. Through my mother's constant reiteration of the film narratives, they also established our social and intellectual priorities. For us, Indian cinema was just that: Indian in a true multicultural sense. There were no divisions here between 'Muslims', 'Hindus', 'Sikhs', or 'Pakistanis' and 'Indians'—all of us identified with the characters and found meaning in the narratives. The films testified to the fact that all were culturally and socially one. We saw them as a universal symbol of our subcontinental identity; a lifeline for the cultural survival of the Asian community. They brought a little bit of 'home', of what my parents had left behind in Pakistan, to us here in Britain and thus provided a sense of belonging not offered by British society. But more than that, they also conveyed the problems of the society we had left behind. Problems that my parents were convinced would not be repeated here, would have no place in the emerging Asian community of Britain. By her constant, undaunted retelling of film stories, my mother made the deep social and economic inequalities of subcontinental society—the inferior position of women, the conflict between tradition and modernity—topics of everyday discussion. On reflection, it seems to me now that she did more than bringing the film characters alive; my own consciousness was not so much dazzled by celluloid heroes and heroines, as it was stretched by the three-dimensional

cultural, social and intellectual ideas and issues they personified.

Our house was a microcosm of the Asian community as a whole. Asian Britain was incorporated by the social institution of Indian cinema in which it had a double emotional investment. Firstly, as a prime cultural referent Indian films reflected the diversity and density of life 'back home' and provided a direct emotional link with the subcontinent. Secondly, it furnished a sub-conscious agenda for the future—problems to be avoided, social issues to be addressed, cultural goals to be sought, ideological possibilities to be explored—through the empowerment of being migrants in Britain. Indian films were thus much more than entertainment—they were a source of contemplation, as well as a reservoir of aesthetic and cultural values. They brought different elements of the community together and through this adhesive offered the prospect of rising above the dilemmas the subcontinent had not resolved.

II

In my thirtieth year, I joined London Weekend Television (LWT) to work as a reporter on a pioneering programme for the Asian community. This was immediately after a new television network, Channel 4, had been established with a special mandate to serve the needs of minorities within the convention of British television. Prior to the emergence of Channel 4, the needs of the Asian audience were seen mainly in terms of remedial education. For well over a decade, BBC's *Nai Zindagi*, *Nai Jeewan* programme treated the Asian audiences as infants suffering from serious educational impediments. LWT's *Eastern Eye*, broadcast fortnightly on Channel 4, changed all that. The hour-long magazine programme became a trendsetter as a team of Asian reporters handled Asian stories and brought many Asian faces to the mainstream of British television. By far the most popular strand of the programme was the one dealing with Indian films. Apart from star interviews and a film quiz, this programme showed clips from the latest films, often accompanied by sardonic comments.

I frequently found myself handling the film sections of the

programme. This involved both choosing the clips to be shown and writing the studio scripts that introduced, linked and commented on them. Both the new films that were coming our way and the response from *Eastern Eye* viewers convinced me that Indian films and their British Asian audience had changed profoundly. The film narrative, as the prime instance and instrument of contemplation and self-reflection, had evaporated. Film songs were no longer *ghazals* written by reputable poets, but meaningless words strung together to the beat of a disco number. The audience itself was not interested in the narrative but wanted only to see disco dances and fight scenes. Moreover, they were not willing to entertain any critical, particularly sardonic, comments either about the films or their stars—the viewers demanded total respect and awe. Films were no longer engendering *mushairas* in Asian households, as they had done in my youth; instead, stylized and patently absurd fight scenes were being enacted throughout the Asian community. Far from resisting their status as a commodity—as the earlier films had done by means of stylistic self-reference—the new films projected themselves solely as what they were: commercial vehicles for one-dimensional celluloid characters. The aesthetic experience that stressed contemplation had given way to mindless action.

As an *Eastern Eye* reporter, I travelled throughout Britain hunting for stories, investigating criminals, exposing racism. I was thus able to visit countless Asian households across the country. In each Asian home the story was largely the same: whatever the condition of the house and the financial status of the occupant, the video player would be on and the parents would be huddled together with their children watching Indian movies. There would always be a pile of rented films next to the television. Three or four films a day would be the normal fare. Often I would enter a home to interview the parents and discover the children were fast-forwarding the video to savour the fight scenes or disco dances that they then played in slow motion. When they were not watching, they were enacting fight scenes, uttering incomprehensibly aggressive dialogues, or swinging like their favourite hero or heroine. In the youth clubs I visited and social gatherings I attended, the accent was on emulating Amitabh Bachchan or one of the glamorous new heroines. Young men and women took great care in practising their dance routines, often rehearsing in front of the toilet mirror in preparation for launching themselves,

suitably clad, onto the hub of the social life of the new Asian British community.

For these new consumers the source of pleasure in Indian movies was not in the identification of characters or situations, the language or the poetic imagery (if any), but solely the extent of the aggression shown by the hero and the manner and content of the violence he was able to dole out to the villains along with the style and spectacle of disco dances. These were not the Indian films of my childhood; and these audiences were certainly not the kind of movie goers with which I, my mother and her numerous friends shared the confines of the Walthamstow Cameo or King's Cross Scala to watch Dilip Kumar or Guru Dutt unfold the contradictions and problems, injustices and social malaise, poetry and aesthetics, richness and diversity of Indian culture.

III

In my fifteenth year I saw *Mughal-e-Azam*. I remember it well: it was one of those rare occasions when my father accompanied us to the Walthamstow Cameo. But there are other reasons why the memory of my first exposure to *Mughal-e-Azam* is so vividly engrained in my mind. It was the only film to be shown on its own: every time it was screened, the 'two films on one ticket' philosophy went out of the window. It was a rare film in that it did not have the stock-in-trade of all Indian films: a comedian. No one laughed during its screening; indeed no one hissed, or hooted, or even moved, though everyone cried. We did not so much watch *Mughal-e-Azam* as immerse ourselves in it. But above all, I remember *Mughal-e-Azam* because it taught me the critical linguistic and visual appreciation of the ghazal—it was my object lesson in the meaning of poetry.

Mughal-e-Azam was one of the five main texts of my youth, and its star, Dilip Kumar, was my guide and pathfinder. He was not just my 'hero': both his films, as well as the eclectic analysis of their narratives by my mother, would never have allowed an impressionable young man to accept Dilip Kumar simply as an object of adoration for unquestioning hero-worship. No. He was my guide through the complex world of human emotions; he

opened certain paths and invited me to journey through them, to examine and cross-examine what I discovered *en route*, to dissect and analyse what I encountered. Along with *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Devdas* and *Ganga Jamuna* were my other 'Dilip Kumar texts'. But he could not be my hero for another reason: I was equally drawn towards Guru Dutt. Whereas Dilip Kumar took me to the edge of emotional intensity, Guru Dutt opened my eyes to the reality of the world. One Muslim, one Hindu, yet their different faiths impressed themselves upon me for the synthesis they made possible; what they expressed were discrete outlooks that were part of a necessary dialogue, one stretching the other, tempering the other, informing the other, each enriched, each part of a cultural synthesis, each at home in India, my India. Hence it became possible for me to deal with Britain.

The Muslim and Hindu dimensions of India—the culture, the civilization, the people—fuse together in a seamless whole in K. Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam*. The narrative concerns the love affair of the Mughal Prince Salim, played by Dilip Kumar, and the courtier Anarkali. Between the lovers stands Salim's father, the mighty Mughal emperor Akbar, his Hindu mother, the Queen Jodhabai, the scheming courtier, Bahar, who harbours the secret desire to become the Queen and is herself vying for Salim's attentions, and the social conventions of Mughal India. For Salim, love is far above royal protocol and conventions; for Akbar and the Queen, social convention is everything, although Akbar is also plagued with his own ambiguous ideas of absolute justice. Anarkali knows that her love is pitting father against son and the outcome can only be tragic. Bahar is determined to usher in the tragedy. While allegedly based on a true historical incident, the film makes no attempt to be historically accurate. Indeed, its narrative is deliberately couched in myth and metaphor to link the past with the present: the tragedy that was once played out in the court of Akbar is universal, it is unfolding in every Indian community. We are invited to read Mughal social conventions as the social institutions and class structure of modern-day India.

Mughal-e-Azam is structured like a *ghazal*. Before the advent of the film, the Urdu *ghazal* was the main source of cultural expression and cultural entertainment in urban India, as depicted so charmingly in Kamal Amrohi's *Pakeezah*. Essentially, the *ghazal* consists of love lyrics with fixed metrical form which can easily be rendered into music. While love is its prime theme, a

ghazal need not be solely about love: a good *ghazal* wraps a great deal of philosophy, metaphysics, social comment and symbolism into its metaphors, similes and basic theme. Each couplet in a *ghazal* is capable of standing on its own, it may not even bear a direct subject relationship to the previous one, but the whole *ghazal* has a thematic unity and psychic continuity. The symbolic and metaphoric content of a *ghazal* makes it particularly amenable to visualization.

The characters of *Mughal-e-Azam* do not just speak—they refine communication, they distil it, they crystallize it into many-faceted glittering gems, they make poetry of ordinary language. When Bahar asks Prince Salim to accompany her on some routine task she says:

Eyes long to glimpse at you,
Paths await your shadow!

When Salim discovers that Bahar has been spying on him and Anarkali, he summons her to his chambers. She enters the chamber to discover him standing by a candle:

Salim: What does a candle-flame know?

Bahar: Murmurs of the night and a few secrets.

Salim: For that reason every candle-flame is extinguished at break of day. You tried to know a secret; you too can be extinguished.

When the film is not encasing dialogue in symbolism and metaphor, it simply erupts into verse. Salim's declaration of love comes in the form of a poem to Anarkali. She replies in verse. The two lovers even arrange their meeting place via poetry. Determined to settle her differences with Anarkali, Bahar invites her to a poetic duel, which Bahar wins. The total immersion of Indian culture in Urdu poetry is truly brought home when Anarkali feels the need to consult an oracle. She closes her eyes and simply opens a *Diwan* (an anthology of poems) and reads the first verse that catches her eye!

The film's structure moves from narrative point to narrative point with the same poetic intensity. Each sequence is a synoptic expression of the theme, the whole story prefigured in each episode of its narrative unfolding. The opening sections of the film establish that we are being invited to a meditation on love and beauty, art and life. On his return from battle, Prince Salim sees a veiled statue and learns of the bold claims of the sculptor—

his art transcends life, it can subdue warriors, dethrone kings, make ordinary men give up life. Salim wants to see the sculpture but the courtiers prevent him, warning that the royal astrologer has cautioned that seeing the statue before the moon sets could spell disaster, and that the King has ordered the unveiling at dawn in his presence. Unable to contain his curiosity, Salim returns in the middle of the night. As he looks through the beaded curtain of pearls, he declares: 'The sculptor's claim is indeed justified. Only marble can endure the intensity of such infinite beauty. I am tempted to accept the divinity of ideals'. His faithful assistant and companion, Darjan, warns: 'You will be accused of idolatry'. Salim quips: 'But praised for my devotion to beauty'. As Salim walks away from the sculpture, we discover Bahar has been watching him violate the order of the king, and hear the following off-screen dialogue:

Voice: I could not complete the statue. You must stand in its place tomorrow.

Anarkali: The Prince has seen me; he praised your art.

The following morning the statue is unveiled in front of Akbar the Great. Bahar suggests that the conventions of romantic literature should be followed and the sculpture should be unveiled with an arrow. In accepting her suggestion the King comments that stories have a habit of turning into reality. Salim shoots the arrow; the sculpture is unveiled. Akbar exclaims: 'Praise be to Allah! It seems an angel has descended from heaven and taken form in marble.' Then the statue moves and bows:

Anarkali: I am no angel but a human being.

Akbar: Then who forced you to become a statue?

Anarkali: A wilful sculptor of your realm whose name no one knows.

Akbar: His art is indeed praiseworthy. But why did you remain silent when the arrow was shot?

Anarkali: I wanted to see how romantic fiction is transformed into reality.

And like reality the film is many-layered and complex. Not just the reality that Salim, Akbar and Anarkali are actual historic characters with legendary status, but the social reality of India where status, class and creed are a constant barrier to the realization of genuine love. We know that, as the narrative unfolds, several arrows will be shot at Anarkali, not least by Salim himself; Salim will constantly challenge Akbar's orders; and Akbar, not

Salim, will be tempted to accept the divinity of ideals: his own power, Mughal social customs, and his awkward notion of 'justice'. For Akbar, Anarkali will always be a statue, to be admired from a distance, framed, and if necessary destroyed. For Salim, she is not only the object of love but of total surrender. And before the narrative ends, Anarkali herself will not only live out the conventions of romantic literature but will actually establish them.

As the narrative moves, each section rekindles the theme of the statue and the connection between life and art—just as a *ghazal* would repeat its symbolic idea. When Salim accuses Anarkali of 'false love' he recasts her in wax: 'you are like a wax sculpture and as such have no genuine emotions', he says. We discover that the sculptor had no real intention of making a statue: for him, Anarkali was living art; her love for Salim, he predicted, would unfold as a work of sublime art. When Akbar sends Salim to be executed, the sculptor accuses him of being a statue of granite and sings:

He whose religion is royal splendour
Is a man without creed;
He whose heart is devoid of love
Is formed of granite, not flesh!

Art and life are two sides of the same coin; art cannot be divorced from life. This intimate connection is emphasized in the film's songs and dances. In the Indian cinema of the fifties, sixties and early seventies, song and dance are an integral part of the narrative. In *Mughal-e-Azam*, they are used both to make narrative points and to move the story forward. The intensity of these sequences is heightened by another major stylistic *tour de force*: the switch from black and white, in which the rest of the film is shot, to technicolor. In the film's most famous song and dance sequence, Anarkali makes a number of important narrative points as colour bleeds into the screen:

When one has loved why should one be afraid?
I am only in love, I am not a thief.
I shall tell the story of my love
Let the world take my life...

Not only does Anarkali tell Salim, who has accused her of playing with his emotions, that her love is true but also that she is ready to sacrifice everything for her love. She also declares her defiance of Akbar, reveals her love for Salim to the Queen—indeed, makes a public pronouncement:

Our love cannot be concealed
It is there for all to see

Akbar sees her reflection everywhere—in the chandeliers and glass decorations of the palace, multiplied thousands of times. As the song ends, the dance concludes, and Akbar in an uncontrollable rage rises from his throne; off-camera we hear an almighty crash—the statue has finally shattered and a living individual, with all her emotions and aspirations, has emerged.

In the film's other colour sequence, the song is used to sum up the narrative. Akbar has granted Anarkali one night with Salim on the condition that she drugs him before dawn and surrenders herself to be executed immediately. In their only and final night together, the lovers are entertained by Bahar, who is aware of the plan. She is taunting Anarkali but knows that in Anarkali's defeat and final erasure, there is a much greater victory:

How can heart pine less?
How can love diminish?
When the night is so drunken
What shall dawn be like?
The melodies are intoxicating
Goblets brim with joy
The joy that reigns here will be
The romantic literature of tomorrow.
Within this splendour why should
Anyone give a thought to death?

The lovers are ecstatic in each other's company; there is no dialogue between them. Indeed, on most occasions when Anarkali and Salim are together they look at each other in meditative silence. When, earlier in the film, Anarkali meets Salim, she passes by the famous Mughal musician Tansen engaged in his regular evening rehearsal. The lovers' meditative silence is realized by the intervals in Tansen's music. The duration of the intervals produce tonal and auditory tension captured in the glances exchanged by the lovers. The purity of the musical notes resonates with the purity of Anarkali's and Salim's love for each other. It is not just the connection between love and music that is being played here. Just as music conveys deep mystical meaning, so the ecstacy of love is realized, not in a physical but in a spiritual union.

The notion that love is spiritual and not merely physical is crucial not just for an understanding of *Mughal-e-Azam* but of Indian culture itself. Mysticism is a central feature of both Islam and

Hinduism. In their unconditional love of God, the mystics seek total annihilation of their Self in the Divine. Since both Islam and Hinduism see the physical and spiritual as an integrated whole, it is natural for Indian culture to postulate that true love, love worthy of serious consideration, must move from physical to spiritual realms: the lovers must unconditionally surrender themselves to each other without concern for worldly consequences. Only by following in the footsteps of the mystics can lovers elevate their initial physical attraction to a new level of consciousness and spiritual union. This is the message of such classics of romantic literature as *Laila Majnu*, *Heer Ranja*, *Shreen Farhad* and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's popular Bengali novel *Devdas*, which was originally made into a film by P. C. Barua in 1935 and remade with Dilip Kumar in the lead in 1955.

Devdas, the son of a wealthy landowner, falls in love with Parvati, the daughter of a poor man he has known since childhood. When Devdas is away studying in Calcutta, Parvati's father arranges her marriage to an elderly man. Despite her love for Devdas, Parvati decides to suffer in silence and obey her father. When Devdas hears of this he is heart-broken and takes to drink. He is befriended by Chandra, a prostitute, who is totally devoted to him and is willing to give up everything to save him. Parvati too tries to save Devdas but without much success. The drink takes its toll, Devdas becomes ill and finally dies outside Parvati's house.

Devdas has been much criticized for presenting, in the words of Kishore Valicha, 'a love devoid of any sexual significance'.¹ Such a comment totally misses the point. Devdas' love for Parvati, as that of Salim for Anarkali, is unconditional. Parvati is not the object of love for Devdas but is the subject of his complete surrender. To see Devdas as a pessimist, self-pitying and self-destructive lover is to reduce him to a single dimension, a categorization that his complex character does not fit. He never says what he means, and his words always convey the opposite meaning of his true intentions. He is an idealist seeking the impossible: the release of his suffering which can only be achieved by raising his love for Parvati to a more sublime and spiritually unified state. His long and tortuous, apparently meaningless, train journey is, in fact, a metaphor for his personal quest for a spiritual union with Parvati: a mystical journey at the end of which lies the total desolation of the Self. The climax of the film, the burning of Devdas' body on

the funeral pyre, signifies the ultimate release from his suffering. For Devdas this is the only apotheosis of the irreconcilable challenge of his love in the actual social and cultural environment. In this ending the audience finds a beginning, a challenge to reflection and action.

The theme of *Devdas* is consciously reiterated by Guru Dutt in *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959)—Paper Flowers—to provide us with another complex reflection on impossibilities and the shadow world they create in modern India. The central character is Suresh, played by Guru Dutt, a film director engaged in making *Devdas*. So we have a film within a film whose narrative is told in flashback, another film within a film, a film where ends precede beginnings. The many-layered storytelling in *Kaagaz Ke Phool* is set amidst a comedy of manners, but the various levels of comedy are neither random nor gratuitous and are definitely not simple light relief—they are an essential dynamic driving the tragedy of human relations which is the heart of the film. The juxtaposition makes *Kaagaz Ke Phool* a discourse on film-making and fame as well as on tradition and modernity and the ineptness of both to generate human fulfilment in a contemporary setting. It is a bitter satire created through the rapid succession of incongruous moods.

The narrative begins after we have been told the story. An old man limps into a film studio and the overlaid song reflects on the life that has brought this visibly poor wreck to his present condition:

What have I gained from this world
I am left with nothing but tears
Once my path was strewn with flowers
Now I can't even hope for thorns
Selfishness drives this world
I have seen many who parted ways one by one...
Spring is like a guest who stays just one night
When the night ends happiness fades with the dawn
All happiness lasts just a fleeting moment
Everywhere there is a sense of unease...

But the opening lyrics turn out to be ironic since the tragedy of *Kaagaz Ke Phool* is the product of selflessness and the quest for selfless fulfilment. The old man remembers when he was a famous and successful film director. What he remembers is an incongruous figure, a thoughtful man in his prime, reflectively puffing on his

pipe amidst the glitter and acclaim of a triumphant career, a man apart in the middle of all the adulation he receives, because his big house is as empty as is his life, despite his conspicuous achievements. He has only a cupboard of old memories, symbolized by a child's doll.

In Delhi for the launch of his latest film, Suresh tries to visit his daughter Pammi. We learn that he is separated from his wife and, as the headmistress informs him, thus denied access to his child on her mother's instructions. Suresh determines to challenge his ex-wife but cannot penetrate the indifference and heartless elegance of her exotic family: Sir B. B. Verma and his vapid wife are surrounded by their dogs and their playboy son Rocky. This elite ménage of wealth and position is responsible for his separation first from his wife and then from his daughter. The pompous and opinionated Sir B. B. explains that his home is dedicated to fine things, not vulgarity. The dirty world of film—dirty because it panders to the common populace—is a social shame to his honour and reputation, as his wife points out. Suresh's name cannot even be mentioned in their polite society. The product of all their refinement is that they lavish inappropriate attention on a bunch of dogs, their daughter hides herself away and refuses to discuss her own daughter's well-being with the husband she abandoned and the irrepressible Rocky lives a seemingly irresponsible lifestyle racing horses, drinking and womanizing.

As he wanders aimlessly in the rain after leaving the Verma household, Suresh meets a beautiful young woman taking shelter under a tree. Decency is the subject of their witty word play: she is not the kind of girl who talks to strangers and doesn't like films; he makes films but is not the kind of man who accosts young women. She is too poor to own a coat, and he leaves her his overcoat to keep her from the rain before rushing off to catch his train to Bombay and plunge back into the world of film.

In Delhi we have seen everything Suresh wants and cannot have. In Bombay he is a lion who can have anything he desires to make his films. Even the most fashionable actress must succumb to his quest for authentic simplicity; even the studio houses must indulge his decisions. But nothing could be less appropriate to Suresh's quest than the *dramatis personae* arranged by the studio. Into this farce walks Shanti, the poor girl from Delhi. Intent on returning the overcoat, she blunders onto the film set and by a chance mistake the wrong piece of film is printed and there on

celluloid is the image of innocence and simplicity Suresh has been seeking.

In the most crass of conventions Shanti is to be propelled to stardom against her will. She is not an actress, she is Devdas' Parvati, or, as Suresh calls her, simply 'Paro'. It is her absolute simplicity that attracts Suresh: she is a girl who knitted sweaters to support her way to matriculation. And it is his passion for ideas and quest for simplicity that attracts Shanti. And it is their mutual desire to express the ideas encapsulated in Devdas that allegedly strikes a bargain between them.

From this point on the making of a film version of Devdas is the calm centre of a frenzied world that is reiterating the themes of *Devdas*. Shanti becomes a puppet: the movie moguls would package her as a star in gorgeous sari and permed hair; to please Suresh she will spend a night with her head wrapped in a towel to undo the perm and remain Suresh's vision of Paro, the simple village woman who is the real India. The subtle play on public and private worlds that runs throughout *Kaagaz Ke Phool* paves the ground for the real tragedy of decency. Gossip published in a film magazine suggests a romance between Suresh and Shanti. His daughter's classmates taunt Pammi with 'the facts' in print and she runs away from school to confront Shanti. A different kind of eternal triangle, one created by a vain and fashionable world in conflict with enduring principles, means that all three central character must suffer and lose. The celluloid image of Devdas is a great success but public fame is the springboard to personal suffering. For the sake of Pammi, Shanti goes back to village India to teach, leaving only a knitted sweater to join the doll in Suresh's cupboard of memories. Suresh goes to court to reclaim his daughter and loses, and with his double loss begins a slide into self-destruction. Robbed of family and selfless love, his career evaporates, he degrades himself with drink and ends up a poor and destitute man, given a job and shelter by his former driver. Meanwhile public acclaim has brought Shanti back to the world of films to become a star and Pammi grows to womanhood and is to be married. On the eve of her wedding, chance brings Pammi to the garage where her father now lives and works. Suresh has rehabilitated himself in the midst of compassionate simplicity, but shame prevents him revealing his presence to the daughter who longs to make contact with her lost father. They are now part of different worlds, incommensurable worlds that cannot

communicate.

To earn money to buy a wedding present for his daughter, Suresh asks a drinking companion to get him a job as a film extra. This is the man who directed *Devdas*, the friend announces as prelude to a series of reflections on the fallen state of the once famous man. As an extra in a religious epic, Suresh must say the lines, 'I am swearing peace (*shanti*), everlasting peace.' As we see him bowed ready to say his lines, the actress walks into the shot: we see only her feet as she says, 'Father, only those who can find no other path come here. Have you lost your way?' It is of course Shanti who asks the question to which Suresh can make no reply. Shanti alone recognizes Suresh. He is thrown off the set and, as a studio hand reclaims the shawl that envelops him, we see that he is wearing the sweater Shanti knitted, now torn and full of holes. Wordlessly he runs off and she pursues him, only to be caught in a crowd of adoring fans.

And so we are back to the beginning of the film. Suresh wanders down from the lighting gantry to the floor of the studio and sits in the director's chair. When the crew arrives he is still sitting there and is recognized at last in death. The studio manager arrives and pushes his way through the mourning crowd and announces: 'Haven't you seen a corpse before? Get rid of it.' He marches off to the shout of 'lights' and on a dark screen as these points of light stare out THE END, the final re-edit appears, and we hear the closing theme:

Fly away O thirsty bee
 You will find no honey in these raging torrents
 Where paper flowers bloom
 Visit not these gardens
 Your naive desires have found a sandy grave
 Your hopes are stranded on the shore
 What the world gives with one hand
 It wrests away with a hundred hands
 This game has been played since time immemorial
 I have seen people abandon me one by one
 I have seen how deep friendship lies
 I have seen people abandon me one by one
 What have I gained from this world
 I am left with nothing but tears...

From the first to the last frame, *Kaagaz Ke Phool* is a delicately crafted work of art. Its theme and juxtaposition are presented not just through the narrative, but also through songs. Despite

their different moods and settings, all the songs—just as in *Mughal-e-Azam*—comment on the film's theme: even Shanti's seemingly innocuous song of numbers to her village schoolchildren culminates with the two lonely numerals, one and nought, who find completeness as ten, being pulled apart by the envy and jealousy of the other numerals. The central characters are located in the world of the film business, both as the actual setting and as a metaphor—indeed, what better metaphor for the selfishness of the world of modern manners? When Rocky discusses the 'tragedy of the year', a winning race-horse shot after breaking its leg, we know that it is not just the vacuous conversation of a playboy, but the word-play of the only character in the film who seems to have everyone's number. When he asks what use is a three-legged racehorse, Shanti, and everyone else, knows he is really speaking of Suresh. Rocky's incongruous hunting trip to the village is, after all, a considerate and compassionate effort to reunite Shanti and Suresh, and as such the film's episode of supreme irony.

Is *Kaagaz Ke Phool* just another reflection on the absurd cruelties of fate, before which decent people are impotent sufferers? The evidence would seem to be overwhelming. But ultimately even its most poignant lyrics, those that counterpoint the film and express its theme, are also ironic. The action of the film has shown the way of the world. The world of film-making in which the action takes place has conjured the shadow world, the dream of *Devdas* and *Paro*, a dream that is preoccupied with a yearning for a simple, noble India, for an innocence that has been lost and which endures in suffering. Love, in *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, is the yearning of the lost and alone; love is also an understanding that looks beneath surface appearance, a joining and completeness. Is the unhappiness of *Kaagaz Ke Phool* then simply that Suresh and Shanti cannot, because of society's conventions, be together?

The film admits of another interpretation, that neither of the central characters knows how to cope with the channelling of selfless love into their lives as a positive force. Shanti's song sums up their predicament:

You are no longer yourself
 I am no longer myself
 Our restless hearts rush to meet each other
 As though we have never been apart

You lost your way
 I lost my way
 Though we had walked in step for such a little while
 Time has inflicted great cruelty on us
 You are no longer yourself
 I am no longer myself
 I can think of no place to go now
 I would walk away but no path is open to me
 What do I seek? The answer escapes me.
 I cannot stop my heart from weaving a tapestry of dreams...

Both respond to society's conventions with a decency the modern world clearly does not deserve. But as they gradually change places, Suresh sinking into the ignominy of the gutter while Shanti returns to the world of films, buys Suresh's old home and has a cupboard filled with old memories of unfinished pieces of knitting, it is they as people who have clearly failed to keep hold of something vital. It is not just fate, it is not just the selfishness of the world that separates and destroys them, it is their own inability to keep hold of the very best in themselves. Both Shanti and Suresh do the right things—they base their actions on decency and propriety. Of their values and sacrifices the selfish world around them remains oblivious. In doing what is right, however, they both diminish themselves and give themselves up to self-pity and bitterness and thus they destroy themselves. They can make nothing of the completeness of their mutual understanding; they cannot surrender themselves to the best in themselves and make a progression to a higher level of peace. The paper flowers of the world interpose themselves.

Kaagaz Ke Phool is a film of contradictions, at its most pithy when it appears to be most flippant, and its strongest characters and villains are women. The web of fate is created by the irredeemably awful Veena, Suresh's estranged wife who is no one's puppet, especially not that of her bombastic father Sir B. B. Verma. She is a woman who glories in the power she possesses, the power of denial and deprivation—she deprives Suresh of a home, companionship, love (if they ever did love each other) and his daughter. Her reward is that the governor-general will attend her daughter's wedding. The hand of fate is wielded by Pammi, Suresh's daughter. Twice she interposes herself. First, as a child, claiming to understand everything, she confronts Shanti as the scheming woman who is keeping her parents apart, making it impossible for her to reunite them. But the child is as alone and

abandoned as either of the central characters, and as active in creating her own abandonment. On the eve of her marriage to an empty-headed socialite she again runs away to search for her father and naturally demands that Shanti tell her his whereabouts. As a child or a woman Pammi seems incapable of any self-reflection on what she is asking for or witnessing. The film's most pertinent comments on human relationships and especially women come from Rocky, the comic relief, who alone of all the characters acts with compassion for others.

Kaagaz Ke Phool contains all the hallmarks of a Guru Dutt film—a passionate revulsion against social inequalities, a hatred of materialism, a longing for the realization of selfless love and an irrepressible idealism. The art form used both for criticism and examination of the theme in *Kaagaz Ke Phool* is cinema; in *Pyaasa* (1957)—Thirsty—the same terrain is covered with poetry as the medium of discourse. The silent message of both films is essentially the same: art is an integral part of life not just as a source of reflection but also a medium of positive social change.

Vijay (Guru Dutt), the protagonist of *Pyaasa*, is a poet in love with Meena, his former college classmate. But while Meena loves Vijay, she chooses to marry a rich man, Ghosh. Vijay is unable to get his poems published, because they are concerned with poverty, hunger and social inequalities, and is finding it difficult to make a living. He is eventually thrown out of the family house by his selfish brothers who sell his poems as wrapping paper. One day, while wandering aimlessly he hears a woman reciting one of his poems. She turns out to be Gulab, a prostitute, who had rescued his manuscripts and fallen in love both with the poet and his poems. Gulab devotes herself to Vijay, who is so disgusted with the materialism and social inequalities he sees around him and frustrated with Meena's actions, that he decides to commit suicide. But an act of kindness on his part leads to the death of a beggar wearing his jacket. The world assumes that Vijay is dead. Gulab eventually persuades Ghosh to publish his poems, which are an instant hit. Vijay's talent as a poet is realized and his death anniversary is celebrated with great fanfare. When it is discovered that Vijay is alive, all those who had deserted him—his brothers, Ghosh, even Meena—suddenly gather around him and declare his greatness. But Vijay refuses to acknowledge his fame, declaring that he is not the same Vijay. He returns to Gulab and together

they walk away, 'far, far from this world'.

There are, in fact, four 'thirsty' characters in *Pyaasa*. Vijay eventually rejects the materialistic world of Meena and accepts the world of Gulab, which only increases his thirst for social justice and equality. When Vijay asks Meena to explain her betrayal, she says 'life is not just poetry and love, but also hunger'. She did not marry him because he could not support her financially. 'So you sacrificed your love for money', replies Vijay. He is appalled not just by the fact that money is so important for Meena but also at the growing consumerism, and attendant dehumanization, in India. When, in a drunken stupor, he visits a prostitute who is dancing for her customers, and hears her baby crying in the background, he feels not only pity for the woman but contempt for a society that has placed her there. He walks out of the den, falls in the street and sings what is undoubtedly the most powerful indictment of Indian society:

These streets, these action houses of happiness
These brown caravans of life
Where are the caretakers of dignity?
Where are those who take pride in India?

When he acquires fame, Vijay refuses to be seen as a commodity. 'I am not the Vijay that people are asking for', he tells Meena when, following him desperately, she corners him in a library. 'Just what is your complaint?' Meena asks, perplexed. Vijay replies:

I have no complaint. I have no complaint against any human being. My complaint is with that society which takes away humanity from human beings, which for small gains turns brother against brother, friends into enemies. My complaint is with a culture that worships the dead and treads the living under its feet, where crying two tears over other people's pain and sorrow are considered cowardice, where to meet someone in hiding is seen as a sign of weakness. I can never be happy in such a society.

We see Vijay walking away from Meena in a long shot where he is little more than a silhouette. A ghost of a wind forces books and paper from the library shelves to fly everywhere as if to say that all this learning does little more than sustain the inequalities in the society that Vijay rejects.

Meena is materialism writ large. But all her wealth does not really satisfy her, her happiness is illusive. When Vijay meets her in the lift of Ghosh's publishing empire, he imagines himself dancing cheek-to-cheek with her. The scene is deliberately

unrealistic. For Vijay, she is just as unattainable as the happiness she seeks through materialism. The door of the lift closes to indicate that Meena is in fact in a prison: a prison of her own making. You have never understood, Vijay tells her, that one's own happiness is acquired only by maintaining the happiness of others. Meena has destroyed Vijay's happiness for money: she will always be thirsty.

Gulab is just as thirsty as Meena and Vijay. She longs for dignity as much as for Vijay's love. When she eludes a chasing policeman by accidentally running into Vijay's arms, and he saves her by saying that she is his wife, the expression of joy on her face signifies the momentary quenching of that thirst. He leaves her but she follows him to a rooftop. Her emotions and desires are expressed by a passing street singer: 'Make me your own, hold me in your arms, satisfy my thirst...' Unlike Meena, she understands Vijay's quest and complaint: she is, after all, a victim of the society he despises. After Vijay's presumed death, she takes his poems to Meena who, typically, asks: 'What do you want for these poems?'. 'Price?', retorts Gulab. 'Can one place a price on beauty and questions of dignity?' The question is particularly ironic coming from a woman who sells herself for money. In the final sequences of the film, Gulab hears someone calling out to her in her dreams. She wakes up and rushes out to the door of her house: it is Vijay. 'I have come to tell you that I am going away, far away'. 'You have come back only to tell me that?' 'I have come to take you with me'. Her face transforms with joy and the two lovers walk away together. But where is 'far'? Towards death? A joint suicide pact? We know that Vijay has already tried suicide and it had failed.

Perhaps the journey will take them far, as far as the location of the fourth silent character in the film: India, a new India.

The emergence of a new India depends, to a large extent, on the successful resolution of the old conflict between tradition and modernity. In Guru Dutt's films, modernity is always presented as rampant materialism that drowns the selfless love and innocence that is integral to tradition. No synthesis is possible between the two: the one devours the other. But we are being presented with a very specific form of modernity: westernization—Sir B. B. Verma and his family in *Kaagaz Ke Phool* being the ultimate metaphor. When tradition and westernization come together,

helplessness and impotence is the outcome. Dilip Kumar's *Ganga Jamuna* (1961) explores the helplessness engendered by the clash of tradition and westernization, not from the viewpoint of a sophisticated film director or a radical poet, but from the perspective of a simple, uneducated peasant.

Ganga Jamuna opens with a vision of village India and zooms in on one family, a widowed mother and her two sons, Ganga and Jamuna, destined to follow the diverging paths of the holy rivers of the land. The mother is an icon of mother India—noble, devout, honest, sincere, but poor, hard-pressed and abused. The youngest son, Jamuna, is the hope of the family. His hope is, as an early scene in his school suggests, iconographic and national—a good education to become a virtuous and hardworking citizen, a leader of tomorrow. The mother works as a maid for the second wife of the village landlord. The wife of the landlord is the only person in the village impervious to the integrity of the mother. In the brief exchanges between the wife and the mother are encapsulated the problems of the relationship between wealth and poverty: the one uncomplaining and enduring, the other high-handed, abusive and oppressive. One such exchange takes place through a curtain when the mother brings water for the wife who has retired into her dressing-room to prepare to take her bath. Our point of vision is the mother, and the device clearly underscores the remoteness of capricious power and of the reality the wielders of such power refuse to see.

The landlord's wife has a brother, whom we see being awakened from a drunken stupor by Ganga, the first unfortunate encounter of lives that are crossed and heavy with fatal implications. The brother is a well-to-do hanger-on, in need of money to indulge the pleasures of the flesh. While his sister bathes he enters her room and takes her jewellery box. On the way to sell the glittering contents he throws the empty box onto a pile of dried dung chips where it is found by Ganga. The blame for the theft falls on the mother. The police search her home and find the empty box. She is imprisoned. The entire village, symbolized by the verbose, vacillating village clerk, knows this to be a gross injustice, the crime an impossibility for the suspected, alleged criminal but there is no one who can interfere with the workings of a remote and uninvolved system of 'justice', until the landlord himself arrives and agrees to post bail for the mother. She is released and goes home, but pierced by the shame and finally

overwhelmed by this travesty in the name of justice, she dies before the family altar.

This short opening prelude is quick and deft. The parameters of the film are set, its issues, characters and dramatic dynamic all drawn in rich vignettes, even the love interest is not neglected. We have seen Ganga with Dhanno, the stormy argumentative relationship, while Jamuna has cast longing eyes upon Kamla, the landlord's daughter, the epitome of the quiet submissive ideal beauty. The love interest, like the whole of this prelude, is no thumbnail sketch. It is a representative icon so emblematic as to be instantly recognizable and therefore to suggest permanence and timelessness.

Time moves, visualized by the maturing of the harvest and the turning of the wheel of a bullock cart. Ganga and Jamuna are now young men. Ganga, as irrepressible and lively as ever, is now working earnestly to provide for his brother's education. The dream of bettering the family's condition, of development, endures consuming the 'sweat and blood' of the poor and is symbolized by the fountain pen Ganga has bought as a present for his brother who is off to the city to finish his education. As his brother leaves, Ganga promises that Jamuna can rely on his support as long as he lives: development will be driven by the efforts and aspirations of the poor who do not participate in the new horizons it opens. But for this idyll to succeed there must be peace, the peace of freedom from capricious oppression—and that is not the burden of Ganga Jamuna's story.

By now the landlord has died. Management of the estate is effectively in the hands of the witch's dissolute brother, who acts as if it were his own—the doubly rentier devoid of any sense of responsibility to a communal ethic. On his way to some debauched pleasure the brother hears Dhanno singing in the woods and is stirred by thoughts of casual indulgence. He pursues her intent on rape. Dhanno runs and screams, Ganga hears her cries, comes to her rescue and beats off the landlord. For this defiance there must be revenge. Ganga is framed for the crime of stealing grain, brought to court and sentenced to prison on bought, perjured testimony. In the face of a foreign system of 'justice' Ganga is rendered silent, submissive, shorn of his articulateness, made a mere pawn to be disposed of; no one speaks for him. This system of 'justice' is a tool of the wealthy, not a representation of the will of the people.

Ganga's concern is for his brother, whom he cannot support while in prison. He begs the village schoolteacher to provide for his brother and not to inform Jamuna of his troubles, not to drag him back into the world of village oppression from which he is escaping. We see Jamuna in a comfortable setting, working away among his books in his city lodgings. But this vision of golden opportunity cannot survive the abuses back home. The camera pans across Jamuna's lodgings in the reverse direction to show them shorn of everything he has accumulated. Denied the support of his brother he has sold everything. The camera ends its movement on Jamuna picking up the last suitcase of his belongings ready to leave his lodgings, but the landlord takes even that to compensate for unpaid rent. Destitute, Jamuna takes to the streets. A crowd rushes by chasing a thief, who drops a pearl necklace in the scramble to escape. At the police station we see the necklace returned to its owner; the inspector informs the flighty, urbanite owner that it is the honesty and integrity of Jamuna that has secured the return of her property. Casual and careless she offers Jamuna a reward. When he replies that he has merely done his duty she pockets the money and walks off. In the city too, honesty is its own reward, it has no reciprocal financial obligations between rich and poor.

Ganga is released from prison to be met by Dhanno, the only person who has stood by him in his ordeal. He learns that Jamuna has written to tell of his distress and ask why his brother has neglected him. Even the schoolteacher, who taught virtue and idealism, has let Ganga down. And still the landlord pursues Ganga, who takes to the hills with Dhanno, where they join up with a group of outlaws. Made an outcast, Ganga leads the bandits on raids against the landlord, though his life of crime is not particularly venal or successful. Back in the city the inexorable forces of a blind and unresponsive system of justice are marshalling the final indignity. Jamuna has been recruited into the police force and is assigned to his native village of Haripur to root out the nest of bandits.

The train bringing Jamuna back is set upon by the bandits, but they are fought off by the police contingent. Back in the hills Ganga learns that Dhanno is pregnant and that his brother has returned as police inspector and resolves to give up the life of an outcast. But he descends from the hills for one last defiance of the corrupt order. He bursts in on the arranged marriage of

Kamla, taking place amongst a conspicuous display of wealth, insisting she will not be married against her will, without her consent. Ganga's 'crimes' represent a different kind of justice, an insurgency against all forms of oppression. But they compel Jamuna, whose virtue and aspiration have been coopted by an alien institution of 'justice', to pursue his brother and usher in the final denouement.

Ganga surrenders himself to Jamuna against the pleas of Dhanno, who has no faith in the system of 'justice' that will victimize her and their unborn child. The bandits descend on the jail where Ganga is held to liberate him and in the shootout Dhanno is fatally wounded. Ganga makes off to the hills with the dying Dhanno. Blundering through the smoke of her funeral pyre comes the landlord, whom Ganga shoots. In his torment he then goes to the village and sets fire to the landlord's house. In the midst of the flames Jamuna confronts his brother and the duty laid upon him by his office as police inspector. He has sought to use his position to bring charges against the landlord for suborning the perjury that put Ganga in prison, but the system is inflexible, too slow-moving and inept to extricate the victims from the cycle of oppression that has enfolded them. Jamuna is compelled to shoot his brother in the back as he seeks to escape. The dying Ganga makes his way back to his village home, the place where we first saw him as a boy at the beginning of the film. In this simple unchanging setting he seeks the only atonement and ultimate justice available to the poor. Before the family altar he prays for forgiveness from god and dies where his mother died, as his mother died, broken by the abuses of a corrupt system.

Ganga Jamuna is an emblematic tragedy that wields its sophisticated analysis deftly. It presents itself as a powerful, emotional human drama. Its potency as social document is that its characters are what they are; they are not made—artificially that is, by clumsy crafting—to represent and stand for the issues the film directly and indirectly alludes to. The characters are rounded and real; they speak in dialect, face and endure life in a specifically dramatized story that is real enough to be a commonplace of real life. *Ganga Jamuna* is no formal celluloid tragedy.

It is a film of cleverly drawn heroes. Ganga (Dilip Kumar) is the most captivating hero: the spirit, independence and eventually the defiance of the traditional order which, pushed to the limit, becomes a resistance to the established order, its iniquities,

corruption and injustice. Jamuna is the aspiring hero whose traditional virtues are co-opted and twisted into impossibly conflicting loyalties by the path laid out for progress, whose actual system is unable to resolve or immediately alleviate the competing claims for natural and legal redress of the world it has to deal with.

Most interestingly of all it is a film of wonderfully drawn heroines. The mother is the victim of the traditional order, with the resilience and power to endure everything except the perverse assault upon her dignity. Kamla too is a heroic victim, the woman suppressed and sacrificed by the oppressive system of traditional wealth, the woman with advantage made into a chattel to be exchanged against her will and without her consent. Both characters are in their different ways heroines, both in their different ways must be victims, because in the final analysis they are prepared to be submissive in the face of oppression. The true, consummate heroine, matching Ganga in a profound sense, stretching from the superlatives of the performance by Vijayantimala to the barbs of their dialogue, is Dhanno. She is the possibility and potential of traditional woman as resistance and defiance, a theme as powerfully drawn as is Ganga's. Dhanno is independent, she earns her own living by her own 'sweat and blood'. She is spirited; all her exchanges with Ganga and everyone else mark her out as self-possessed, capable, in charge of her own life; and she is neither passive nor submissive. While events move others, she charts her own course, standing by Ganga, advising him, counselling him and sharing his fate by her own choice and decision. Witty, articulate, intelligent, with an independent motive for action, this is a heroine drawn directly from tradition—from the real meaning of traditional womanhood. Alongside Ganga there is always Dhanno and between them there is a genuine, enduring and meaningful partnership. A man who not only wins but appreciates Dhanno can only have scorn for the Brahmin who seeks to prevent their marriage by arguing that she is of a lower caste; such a man must make his last, most virulent, defiance of the established order by rescuing Kamla from her arranged marriage. The heroines' stories, the women's stories, are not sub-plots having attendant details—they are the story. Ganga has no doubts, he must defy the Brahmin and marry Dhanno. Jamuna throughout the film acquiesces to the established order that requires him to deny his love for Kamla and accept that their ideal match is impossible. Not even his education and participation

in development will resolve that dilemma. Ganga is triumphant in his tragedy because he sees clearly and acts to resist his oppression in partnership with Dhanno. Jamuna survives tragically enmeshed in submission to incommensurable worlds, irreconcilable aspirations. Nowhere is the contrast more clearly made than in their relations with women and the nature of the heroines they cherish; the one heroine they share, their mother, and the two contrasting loves of their lives. *Ganga Jamuna* is an indictment of corrupt tradition and complicit modernity; its challenge to the audience is explicit and lucid and centred on the question of women, for its human drama empowers women too as agents of cultural resistance and change.

There are a number of common threads running through *Ganga Jamuna*, *Pyaasa*, *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, *Devdas* and *Mughal-e-Azam*—the five main texts of my youth. All five texts are concerned, nay obsessed, in their individual way, with the idea of justice and the notion of unconditional love. All have a longing and respect for the integrity of tradition. But none of them presents tradition as though it were a utopian goal—indeed, all five texts see traditional values as something just as much prevented by traditional society in history as commodified and unframed by Westernized modernity. It is not romanticized, traditional utopias that these films seek or promote; rather they argue for a tradition based on the integrity of its own authentic idealism. Indeed, in Guru Dutt's films there are only two options—suicide or return to traditional idealism. But even Guru Dutt's idealism is a rounded, all-embracing idealism: it addresses women as well as men, it enables men to express feminine emotions and it seeks change in tradition as well as transformation in modernity. All five texts show women as strong characters. In *Mughal-e-Azam*, the conflict is as much between Akbar and Salim as it is between Bahar and Anarkali: it is really the unwritten alliance between Akbar and Bahar that spells tragedy for Anarkali. In *Devdas*, Parvati is forced by social custom to acquiesce to her father's wishes but is strong enough to visit Devdas in the middle of the night—something no stereotypical traditional woman would ever do! And *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, *Pyaasa* and *Ganga Jamuna* are awash with strong women making their own decisions for good or bad. The aesthetic of all five films is authentically Indian: taking its cue from classical tradition and folklore, representing India in

all its diversity and multicultural layers, and seeking to influence, change and engage its audience purely on the basis of shared cultural assumptions.

As works of art, these films effortlessly combine different forms—poetry, music, dance—into an integrated whole through the energetic use of consummate visual imagination and superbly literate dramatic structures. The richness of these classical texts of my childhood is in their use of metaphor: the images on the screen are creative devices, dense and multi-layered, constantly suggestive of connections and resonant with reference to wider cultural associations and ideas. Framing, composing, pacing, sound, rhythm, totalities, poetry, language are all used to transform the image, to lift it beyond the simple needs of narrative, to describe it differently, thus making the visual image in itself another layer of complex metaphor. The film-makers' metaphors are the essence of their reliance upon their audience. The audience cannot be passive, they are not taken for granted, and only they can complete the allusions, implications, suggestions and challenge of the metaphor—only they have the key to interpretation of the complex communication this cinema offers. This appeal to the audience is the trademark of a self-confident, domestic and domesticated *métier* of cultural production: a genuine Indian cinema, of India, for India. It is an Indian cinema made of the rapport between, and the shared culture and affinities of the film-makers and their audience. The metaphors of this medium then become a self-reflective vehicle for a whole society, a challenge to think, to discuss, to differ and to agree, to interpret variously and most of all to see its own condition rounded and contextualized in creative, suggestive and imaginative ways through the film-maker's selection, juxtaposition and perspective. The metaphors define the aesthetic and ideological possibilities and become the yardstick for cinematic 'literacy' and intelligibility. A sophisticated film creates a sophisticated audience.

I grew up not just immersed in the metaphors of these texts, but thinking with them, they were part of my vocabulary, they were embedded in my imagination. My love of tradition, of poetry and language; my distaste for social inequalities and concern for social justice; my devotion to unconditional, selfless love; my quest to rescue traditional idealism from ossified traditional societies; my determination to act against the helplessness and impotence generated by Westernized modernity, can all be traced back to

the impact that Dilip Kumar and Guru Dutt had on my imagination.

Modernity, in the form of his urban education and co-option in an alienating system of middle-class justice, renders Jamuna totally passive. He is reduced to the expression of a single emotion: impotence. While Ganga is a complex character and capable, in his traditional simplicity, of a range of emotions and actions, Jamuna, the archetypal good urban-industrial man, is a one-dimensional cripple. *Ganga Jamuna* warns us about the imminent arrival of a one-dimensional Westernized, urban man. It is the only film that also offers a prototype of a possible solution: Ganga is cultural resistance writ large. He was to inspire me in both my intellectual and my practical endeavours.

IV

In my thirty-first year, I found myself at the Rochdale General Hospital. I was working on a story about the exploitation of Asian doctors by the Health Service. I had discovered that the Asian doctors were overwhelmingly employed in junior positions, their qualifications regarded as inferior. They were mostly working in areas shunned by their white colleagues (infectious diseases, for example, had large numbers of Asian doctors). They were seldom promoted and were forced to work incredibly long hours.

I was interviewing a doctor in his house near the hospital when he was called on his beeper. The interview had just started and the doctor asked if I could wait for his return. Without waiting for my answer, he instructed his wife and children to entertain me, and rushed off to the emergency. The children slipped a cassette in the video player and the entertainment began. It was *Sholay* (1975).

I was appalled by what I saw. Here was the complex world of Indian culture filtered through a western lens and rendered totally incomprehensible. Here was the theme of the *Seven Samurai*, out of the regurgitation of *The Magnificent Seven*, spewed up as an Indian spaghetti-western. Columbus insisted that Westward is the East; *Sholay* set out to prove it. The narrative is linear enough.