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Journey of a Friendship between two Film Directors: Kundan Shah and Saeed Mirza

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It was the maelstrom among the 1970s generation of students at the Film and Television Institute of India that could yield an epic like 'Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron'.

It was late one night, around 11pm, when Kundan Shah asked his old buddy and collaborator Saeed Mirza to come outside and look up at the sky. It was completely dark. He however insisted that there was "a lot happening out there." Out there was a "secret the world needs to know."

Shah wasn't referring to any mystical experience. These dark skies, he said, carried "electronic and digital money [...] to all kinds of destinations." They included people with stock exchanges, banks and safe havens. "Frankfurt [...] London [...] Shanghai [...] New York [...] Tokyo, [...] loot of money launderers, drug dealers, speculators in stocks and shares, manipulators of commodities and their prices, arms dealers funding deadly insurrections, money looted from countries by dictators, robber barons, politicians, or just plain thugs." There was also "money being wired by the big corporates: the arms industry, the food and pharmaceutical cartels, the mining and mineral cartels, the commodities cartels, the chemicals and oil corporates, the big trading houses. All this is happening in that dark sky: the loot and the legitimate [...] all part of the great capitalist system."

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Shah's voice then dropped to a dramatic whisper. This Great Unknown, he now saw, was also a domain of information. "This is critical", he said. "It is a mind game." Most of the avenues of mass media are "under their control [...] and to keep us from thinking more deeply, every single raw f***ing emotion will be used to divide, emasculate all of us: patriotism, entertainment, sports, fear, hysteria, nationalism, race, religion [...] to prevent any rational discourse that sees the larger picture." Their motto, he said, is simple: "If you have to think, don't think beyond your nose. Live in your little island, amuse yourself [...] we will run the world for you."

As always, back of it all was an idea germinating for a possible film. The film, this time round, would be "a great documentary." It would show how a hundred years ago a "group of bankers and some very powerful industrialists got together to lay down a framework for running the world and moulding it to suit their needs (and) to bring order into what they thought was chaos." It would show how they grew to a point where the "now control the world."

It is worth speculating on what that unmade film might have looked like. A fast-moving, apocalyptic comedy, perhaps? Towards the end of his life, says Mirza, Shah's views turned "more and more surreal," even as his "bizarre and sometimes viciously crude representations of reality came so much closer to the sordid 'truth' of our times that it was embarrassing to quite a few of his friends and admirers."

"Was it because they saw their own acquiescence to this state of affairs difficult to stomach?"

This book is about the long-term collaboration and friendship between Kundan Shah and Saeed Akhtar Mirza. That friendship has been the stuff of cinematic folklore in Indian cinema. They first met as batchmates at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in 1974 and lived and worked together until Shah's death in 2017. It was an unlikely twosome. One was a sophisticated and urbane Marxist with an "easy facility with the English language" and a way of walking and talking, of dealing with women on campus, conversing easily about "socialism, Marxism, the Naxalite movement in India, the Vietnam war, liberation movements in Africa." The other was a man who "looked like an insurance agent" or a "mid-level functionary [...] in a government office," not the manager, not the boss, and certainly not a film director.

The friendship lasted over 40 years. Over this time Mirza's was the more settled trajectory, a well-known cycle of films from *Arvind Desai ki Ajeeb Dastaan* in 1978 to *Naseem* in 1995, while Shah's career was the more wayward. He came "from a trading family," his father a small-time dealer in Aden ("do you know what that means... it means a narrow, tunnelled mind... f*****g fixed... eternal

mind"). Breaking free was hard, for when he started his career it was foretold that this would be to, first and foremost, maintain a family in which "everyone has to contribute in some way" and in which he, as the eldest of seven siblings, was required by tradition to assume the largest responsibility. After the FTII he went to Hyderabad to start a film commune, returned, got married and gave up films to migrate to England, abandoned that to return almost broken, assisted Mirza, then entered the mainstream film industry, moved out, and entered television where he along with the Mirza brothers (Saeed and Aziz) made the landmark *Nukkad* (1986).

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Mirza now casts this friendship on an epic plane. They work together, they meet at least once a fortnight to shoot the breeze, either in Shah's office or Mirza's home in Bandra, separated by 200 yards. They would "talk about a lot of things but the real concentration would be on recent political events in India or anywhere else in the world." As they talked, planned and fantasised, the friendship covered a planetary canvas. He has fashioned the story as a "mural," with numerous brush strokes, with stories to be told and memories revealed.

The story begins with their first conversations at FTII. It is still the Emergency and Shah is taking his first, hesitant, steps into something resembling a political stance. There are conversations with Shah, and there are soliloquies reflecting on current matters long after his friend has passed on. The book straddles the "mayhem of 1996 to 2012," the Babri Masjid demolition and the riots in Bombay, the events in Gujarat after 2002, Kashmir and the Northeast, Shaheen Bagh in 2019, and the Covid pandemic in 2020. It covers theories of empire, from those of ancient history to the newly militarised empires of the West, discusses totalitarianism, and produces soliloquies that cover centuries of history.

What holds all this together is the cinema. More particularly, a vision of a cinema in India. Such a vision has been, over the years, so extreme, so uncontrollable, that it would realise every fear that the colonial and eventually independent Indian state had of what might happen if it were not strictly regulated. The students at the FTII, for example, were not just filmmakers. They were "agents provocateurs," people with "hidden agendas." They were, says Mirza with a flourish, "entertainers, philosophers, inventors, comedians, magicians, anarchists, dreamers, Marxists, humanists, painters, architects, adventurers, dropouts, ethnographers, poets, writers, even fascists." As students eagerly absorbed the "early masters who were pushing the language and grammar of the medium to new frontiers" to make their own work, "it did not matter whether you were a student director, cinematographer, sound engineer or editor, your work was beginning to see remarkable change."

"If this did not cause debate, what would?"

‘Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron’

It is the unassuming Kundan Shah's entry into this maelstrom with perhaps the startling arrival of the most extreme cinema to come out of this history that dominates the book. It is a conundrum that Shah has posed to the Indian cinema ever since he made his first film, *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* in 1983. The film is of course now the stuff of legend, as a comedy set in a particular moment, in Bombay, at a time of rampant real-estate corruption, cement shortage and tabloid wars. Shah himself has spoken of it as a film that was almost doomed to fail. "There was a lot of anger, frustration, all things I was living through and what you are reading in papers, and you know, Antulay was Chief Minister at that time, and you were hearing that builders and some kind of [...] May be true, may not be true, all those things came (into the film)," he says in the video conversation that accompanies *Jaane Bhi Di Yaaron's* DVD release by NFDC. To make a film such as this, he went on, "you have to come down to that level [...] You can't make *Jaane Bhi do Yaaron* in a thirty crore budget, it can't take the weight [...] It has to be done on that level. Because you are doing everything to fail."

Equally important was the collective energy of the former students of FTII and other filmmakers who helped make it and were in it. Shortly before this film, the Yukt Film Collective (that Mirza had helped start) had made *Ghashiram Kotwal* as a collective film, listing 16 names, including actors, directors, cinematographers and sound designers in a single list named *tantradnya* – technicians. Shah's film did not follow that particular system but brought the principle of collectivity in multiple ways of attributing credit inside and outside the film – in for instance naming the film's bumbling photographer duo Vinod Chopra and Sudhir Mishra (the film's production controller and co-scriptwriter respectively) – and in crediting everyone involved, whether centrally or marginally, with its making.

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Here Mirza throws new light on that history. Shah is presented as a nerdy bespectacled "forensics" man in a terrycot shirt, a "conspiracy theorist and a huge one," who followed "subaltern channels on the internet" that "talked about certain things (that) would happen six months later," scarily "predicting a future through political, economic and social analysis." From his student days, he was an inveterate taker of notes of every film he saw, "noting down entries and exits, camera angles and checking for continuity jerks." He then became a natural accounts man who worried about a two-rupee discrepancy and insisted on cheap travel. He had two dozen pens in the office with which to write film scripts between 10am and 6:30pm, and thus a cupboardful of unmade scripts as he went "on an almost manic journey to script more ideas that he hoped one day would turn into films."

Gradually, as the orderly and nerdy accountant turned into manic filmmaker, Shah found himself attempting "two basic and contradictory things that could not be reconciled." "Simply put, his script was too long, the budget was too small [...] If this would not cause havoc, what would?"

Mirza elaborates. "To shoot and edit the entire script would require a certain number of days. The budget that he had would allow him just two-thirds of that time. Since he was not going to cut down his script and his budget would not be increased, how the hell would he manage? It was a crisis waiting to happen [...] What transpired during the shoot and editing is the stuff of legends... a great film where the budget was 'miraculously increased', shooting time was stretched to the point of cast and crew exhaustion, and almost one-third of what had been shot was left out in the editing bins."

Shah never made another film quite like it. While some of his films did well, others – especially his last, *P Se PM Tak*, a return to some of the zaniness that had defined his first film – failed completely. In one conversation, again over the whisky, Shah muses: "I think my producer is confused too. I hope he doesn't feel that I let him down. I know my film lacks polish ...that's how it was meant to be."

Tumultuous journey

"The short and unassuming man in glasses who looked more like a clerk than a film-maker had been through a tumultuous journey," writes Mirza. He sees his main reason to write this book as the need to tell of "a journey worth revealing," one in which Shah 'attempted to unmask the "big lie" that all of us have to live to accept the political, economic and social circumstances we find ourselves in'. He was "born to be inflicted with pain because he could no longer be just a film-maker."

Towards the end of his life, says Mirza, Shah's views turned "more and more surreal," even as his "bizarre and sometimes viciously crude representations of reality came so much closer to the sordid 'truth' of our times that it was embarrassing to quite a few of his friends and admirers."

"I now see the world as a *sadak chaap* and obscene *tamasha* [...] an obscene circus [...] does that make sense to you?" As he muses, Shah wonders whether he should make porn films. All he wants now is relevance. "Is my cinema relevant?," he asks. Because "cinema doesn't become good only if it gets its politics right [...] something more is needed."

A new something to be sought in the darkness of the night sky.

Ashish Rajadhyaksha is an independent scholar. While most of his writings are on film, he has also researched and written extensively on India's digitization initiatives, most recently 'In the Wake of Aadhaar: the Digital Ecosystem of Governance in India' (2013).