

cinema

Behind the greasepaint

This season does not seem to augur well for Indian cinema. Last week, when I was on my way to Venice, I saw Salman Khan at a lounge in Mumbai airport. He was with his brother, Arbaaz Khan, and they were taking the same flight as mine, but travelling further, across the Atlantic, to America for a medical operation. Salman had been long troubled by a facial nerve disorder that needed surgical intervention. I am told the procedure was a success, and the Bollywood actor is on his way to full recovery, which will be curiously followed by the shoot of *Ek Tha Tiger*!

Earlier, Tamil superstar Rajnikanth fell ill and had to have an operation in Singapore for an undisclosed ailment. He is still recuperating, much to the dismay of his fans, who are hoping that the actor would soon be up and about and complete *Rana*. Deepika Padukone, his co-star, must be wishing this even more.

Between, Khan's and Rajnikanth's surgeries, two deaths occurred in tinsel town. Shammi Kapoor, who got the snows of Himalayas melting with his booming "yahoo" even while he whispered lyrically to Saira Banu or Sharmila Tagore, died after a long battle with kidney disease that had in recent years confined him to a wheelchair and enslaved him to the dialysis machine.

An Ayurvedic doctor friend of mine at Coimbatore, who used to frequently fly down to Mumbai to treat Kapoor, told me that the man's resilience was phenomenal. He was always chirpy, always full of life. Of course, do we not remember him in *Dil Deke Dekho* or *Professor*, which in all probability was reflecting the actor's attitude to life.

Then there was the death of Mani Kaul, an ardent student of Ritwick Ghatak who was one of the pioneers of the Modern Indian Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. Kaul suffered from cancer for years.

Another brilliant artist, legendary in fact, Soumitra Chatterjee, is also ill with cancer, though he is still on his feet, on stage, on screen, trying to make the most of time.

I remember one great meeting with Chatterjee at his Kolkata home years ago. That morning when I met him, he was clearly tired. His journey by road from Kolaghat the night before had been weary. A long pile-up of trucks on the highway had got him delayed by several hours, and the evening before, when he staged a play, had been no less strenuous. Theatre can be exacting, minus the cushion the screen provides.

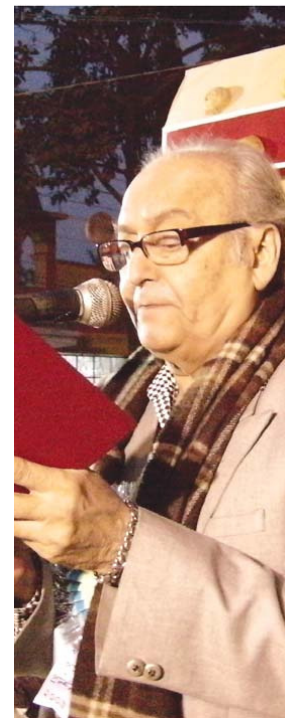
Yet, Chatterjee kept his date with me. He was punctual, and had even

Thespian Soumitra Chatterjee is not moping about his cancer diagnosis, but eager to give life his best shot, writes

Gautaman Bhaskaran



* Soumitra Chatterjee and Sharmila Tagore in Satyajit Ray's *Apur Sansar* (1959). Chatterjee was known to be one of Ray's favourite actors. Right: Chatterjee at a social event in Kolkata in a 2009 picture.



opened the door to let me in.

The actor must have picked up the discipline and humility from the man who made him what he is. Satyajit Ray, of course. He not only introduced him (and Sharmila) to a demanding Bengali audience in the 1959 *Apur Sansar*, but also cast him ever so often in his films. Chatterjee was part of 14 Ray movies out of the 31 features the master made.

Ray once said that he would have used him many more times, but for the scripts, which were unsuitable for Chatterjee. Writer Pauline Kael described Chatterjee as Ray's "one man stock company".

Right from the first film of his with Ray — as Amal in *Charulata* where he catches the fancy of Madhabi Mukherjee's lonely wife — Chatterjee has twisted and turned and changed his colours with the ease of a chameleon. He has been a brash hero, a taxi driver, a detective, a revolutionary, a famine-stricken priest, a lover and what have you.

Apart from Ray, Soumitra's

excellence was frozen on frame by men like Tapan Sinha (*Kshudista Pashan*) and Mrinal Sen (*Akash Kusum*) and Ajoy Kar (*Saat Pake Bandha*).

But has Chatterjee been a director's actor (as cinema usually deems fit)? I tend to disagree with this. I feel that a good horse can be nurtured into a better animal. But can one train a donkey to become a horse?

The actor of 300 movies was detected with cancer some months ago. But Chatterjee is not moping. He says he wants to live, not by evading death, but by making the most of every minute.

He has been doing a lot of theatre recently, and has two films to wrap up, one by Mrinal Sen and the other by Asit Sen. At 74, Soumitra appears unfazed, and ready to face the challenges of the stage and the screen. Much in the same way, he did in his early 20s as Ray's Amal.

Well, death itself may fear knocking him down.

Venetian blues

As I pen this column, the 68th Venice International Film Festival is half way through. But there is as yet no sign of the Indian contingent. The other evening, I ran into a girl called Gul, who is looking after the publicity of Gurvinder Singh, whose movie, *Anhey Ghorhey Da Daan* (Alms for the Blind Horse), is part of the Festival's Orizzonti.

Gul told me that Singh would be in the following day, and when I asked her for her contact details she smiled and said: "I do not carry a mobile phone, I do not have an e-mail (or something to that effect)".

How then would she get in touch with me, I quipped. She smiled again and she would, even while refusing to take down my contact details. Will you use pigeons to send me the message, I was exasperated. She smiled again.

Well, it has been three days since that smiley exchange with Gul, and I have no clue where Singh is or whether he has arrived at all.

If Mr Singh is going to have this kind of public relations with the media, his *Blind Horse* is sure to lose its way in the bewildering web of Venice's streets and canals.

The other Indian director, Amit Dutta, whose *Sonchidi* (Golden Bird) is also playing at the Festival, will of course not arrive on the Lido. He never comes to Venice, preferring to let his cinema speak. Which can be quite foxing.

That, gentle reader, is Indian cinema for you.

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