

cinema



* Stills from *Uski Roti* (right), *Duvidha* (above right) and *Ashad Ka Ek Din*.



Mani Kaul, the man the world forgot

He was one of the pioneers of the New Indian Cinema and yet received little recognition for his work in his lifetime.

By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Renowned Indian film director Mani Kaul, who died in New Delhi last week after a long battle with cancer, was one of the pioneers of the New Indian Cinema of the late 1960s and the early 1970s that actually began with Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome*.

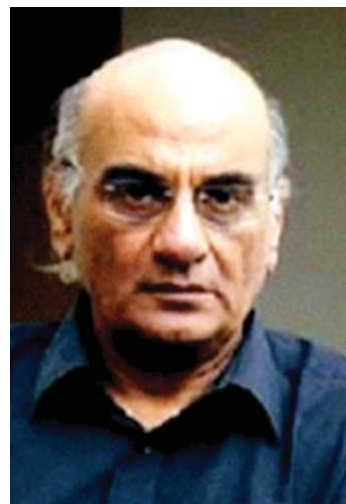
Kaul's *Uski Roti* came almost simultaneously as Sen's 1969 work, and interestingly both spoke about alienation and loneliness. While *Bhuvan Shome* follows a widowed civil servant whose holiday completely transforms his life, *Uski Roti* paints the excruciating loneliness of a neglected wife.

"*Uski Roti* gave birth to a cinematic expression that invoked the structural elements of cinema to collapse the dichotomy of time and space," writes Ashish Avikunthak (who teaches cinema in the University of Rhode Island) in the *Hindustan Times*. "It not only challenged the obscene spectacle of commercial cinema but also was a scathing critique of Satyajit Ray's neo-realist idiom. "Based on a short story by Mohan Rakesh,

it became the radical cinematic text of the Indian New Wave. Soon Kaul made *Ashad ka Ek Din* (1971), followed by *Duvidha* (1973), both of which dexterously pushed the bounds of representation and were an erudite articulation of cinema's infinite possibilities of making meaning," Avikunthak adds.

It is not clear whether Kaul's debut movie has ever had a theatrical release, confined as it was to festival circuits and private screenings. It was shown at the Venice Film Festival, won awards in India and got its maker a place on the Berlin Film Festival jury. And yes, it was as heartily acclaimed as it was vociferously panned.

Ashad Ka Ek Din (1971) and *Duvidha* (1973) — also deal with woman's solitude. In *Uski Roti*, the wife waits a day for her husband, in *Ashad Ka Ek Din*, the wife waits all her life for her husband to return, and in *Duvidha*, the wife accepts a ghost in the place of her husband who is away on long work. Amol Palekar remade *Duvidha* as *Paheli* in 2005 with Shah Rukh Khan and Rani Mukherjee.



* Mani Kaul made 20-odd features, documentaries and shorts.

Yes, with all the trappings of Bollywood — a huge contrast from the original.

Kaul made 20-odd features, documentaries and shorts. This was by no means an impressive number, given the nearly four decades of his life behind the camera. An important reason for this was lack of money. "People come to watch the kind of movies they are used to. I do not fit into any of these categories," he once said.

Here are two fascinating anecdotes illuminating this about Kaul that Neville Tuli, Chairman of Indian arts and Cultural Institution Osian's, wrote to me in an e-mail. (Kaul was the director of a film festival on Asian cinema that Osian organised till 2009.)

"I was introduced to Mani with much laughter and in those moments the deepest of intellectual burdens appeared graceful as a result of existentialist humour. Thus his humour, wit and jokes remain clearest in my mind. Mani was a master on telling his own jokes on himself.

Unless you have heard one of the great Mani Kaul movie jokes, narrated by him, you have not tasted the best of self-deprecating humour. One classic goes like this: Mani's new landlords, an elderly couple invited him upstairs to dinner one night. The husband was

very keen to introduce Mani to his wife, proud of having such an iconoclastic film-maker as his tenant.

"During conversation, the husband tells his wife 'Did you know that Mr Kaul's new movie is about this man waiting at the bus-stop...' 'Oh no, please do not tell me the story and spoil my joy,' she immediately stops her husband.

"Mani calmly smiles at both and says 'I am sorry he has already told you the story'

"How we both laughed when he first told me this anecdote as an introduction to his work.

"Another nugget suddenly emerged, seeing my receptiveness to black humour. Mani begins: 'My uncle used to be this famous actor, Raaj Kumar, and one day we met at some film party. He shouts out from across the room and calls me to him and his friends: 'Heh Jaani, Mani, what is this I am hearing? You want to join movies and that you are making a film, and that it is called *Uski Roti*. What is this? A movie on roti, woh bhi uski roti, no one will see it. Come with me, join me, we will make a film together, we will call it *Apna Halwa*. What do you say?'

"Mani mimicked the famous Raaj Kumar's voice so beautifully that you forgot all the subtle tones, all the art cinema and mainstream differences, the choice to pursue happiness or wisdom, the lone struggle or the group orgies, the triumph of success or integrity. You could read meaning in the mundane."

Despite popular aversion to his kind of work, Kaul remained undaunted and continued relentlessly to make a cinema that he believed in — a kind that was far removed from the melodramatic, grossly exaggerated, song-and-dance movies that were being churned out by production houses like a factory assembly line. At least in most parts of India.

Some of his films, like *Ashad Ka Ekdin*, *Duvidha*, *Ghashiram Kotwal*, *Mati Manas*, *Idiot*, *Naaukar ki Kameez*, *Siddheshwari* and *The Cloud Door*, were epitome of brilliance. With a style that was uniquely personal, he scripted movies out of virtually nothing.

His later films, such *Satah Se Uthata Admi* (1981), *Drupad* (1984), *Mati Manas* (1988) and *Siddheshwari* (1989), "emerged from this painstaking engagement with pre-modern Sanskrit epistemic universe."

Undoubtedly, Kaul, who began his life under the masterly guidance of Ritwick Ghatak at the Pune Film Institute in the early 1960s (when Adoor Gopalakrishnan was also a student there), made a cinema that was intuitive and complex. Such work could never be enjoyed or appreciated by the casual, popcorn-munching, coke-sipping, mobile-texting viewer.

Kaul's work was highly cerebral, far removed from the breezy, sing-song, flippant fare that has been constituting most of Indian cinema.

Strangely, even someone like Satyajit Ray reportedly misread Kaul's *Duvidha*. Ray is said to have commented after watching it: "Kaul's wayward, fragile aestheticism has led him to the sick-bed."

I hope that Mani Kaul will at least now find the place he richly deserved in the annals of world cinema.

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