

cinema



* Smita Patil in the film *Bhumika*, directed by Shyam Benegal.

A spirit called Smita Patil

The brilliant and versatile Indian actress died 25 years ago due to complications after childbirth. It was a great loss for Indian cinema,

writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Smita Patil would have been 56 had she lived. She died 25 years ago in Mumbai — just days after her son, Prateik (now an actor), was born. Doctors said she succumbed to complications she developed after childbirth.

Her younger sister, Manya Patil Seth, differs. “I have gone on record to say that Smita died of heartbreak,” Manya said recently. “As I go through her writings and read between the lines of her interviews, my earlier conviction has grown stronger. Smita looked for an ideal relationship, she wanted her personal life to be good, and she kept hoping things would change for the better. But they did not.”

Smita fell in love with actor Raj Babbar, who was already married, and her family was clearly unhappy with the choice.

I have always wondered why women were attracted to married men. (My bachelor friends used to be livid at this.) We have seen this happen to ‘Dream Girl’ Hema Malini. We have seen it happen — or reportedly so — to actress Rekha. Hema found her future in actor Dharmendra, who never divorced his first wife. Hema and Dharmendra even had children together. Rekha is said to have had an affair with Amitabh Bachchan, who, going by reports, turned an ugly duckling into a pretty swan.

But who is to question the pull of Cupid, the flutter of the heart?

Smita may or may not have died of broken heart, but I feel she should never have died when she did. If I were asked to name just one brilliant Indian actress, I would not wait a second to answer: Smita Patil.

I met Smita years ago, and in the longest ever interview of my

journalistic career, I spoke to her for five days. The setting could not have been more idyllic. It was the hill station of Ooty and Smita was shooting a film, and yes Babbar was there, and perhaps in one of her weak moments, she even suggested that I talk to him as well. I did not. I have always tried avoiding or writing about actors/directors whom I have not found impressive.

That interview with Smita, also one of the longest I have ever written, was published in *Frontline*, a Chennai-based magazine from *The Hindu* stable, which I was a part of then. Allow me to quote from the piece.

“She is warm, she is cold. She is strong, she is weak. She is confident, she is nervous. She smiles, only to weep moments later. She is accepted, she is rejected. For some, she is a most sensuous woman. For others, quite plain,” so began my article, printed

in December 1984. I went on to say, “That is Smita Patil, a bundle of apparent inconsistencies. ‘The contradiction lies within me, and I have not been able to sort it out. I don’t think I ever can,’ she said (during the interview).”

But it is this contradiction in Smita the woman that often rubbed off on Smita the actress, helping her, pushing her to experiment with an amazing gamut of roles. Her rise was meteoric — from a mere television news reader on a Marathi channel, she went on to become an exceptional performer. She was a natural, who emoted with such conviction and with such variations that she astonished her directors and floored her viewers.

I do not think there was a finer actress than Smita. There was something visually earthy about her, sensually warm and attractive in an endearingly feminine way.

Her eyes, large and bright, could convey the deepest of angst and the purest of joy. Her cries pieced your heart, her laughter gladdened your spirit.

She came on the big screen in 1975 with Shyam Benegal’s *Charandas Chor*. Benegal was one of the pioneers of the Indian New Wave who made a cinema that crossed so many barriers. He lived in Mumbai and dared to break away from the silly song-and-dance stuff that was being thrust upon audiences. He made compelling movies like *Nishant*, *Manthan* and *Bhumika*, which redesigned the grammar of Indian cinema.

But could Benegal have achieved a *Manthan* and, more specifically, a *Bhumika* without Smita’s help? I have written several times about my dilemma over *Bhumika*. To me, that remains Benegal’s best film till date. However, was it because we had a master helmer in Benegal? Or, was it because of Smita, who played in it the title role of legendary Marathi actress Hansa Wadkar?

For Smita, *Bhumika* in 1977 turned her fortune. Great cinema and great glories (including National and Padma awards) followed. *Aakaler Sandhaney*, *Aakrosh*, *Bhavni Bhavai*, *Sadgati*, *Subah*, *Arth*, *Mandi* and *Arth Satya* rolled in and went on to garner critical acclaim, and with each she became finer. A diamond that grew brighter with every polish, so to say.

Of even greater value was Smita’s enormous ability to submerge herself into a character. Shooting for Satyajit Ray’s *Sadgati* in 1982, she was worried about how to emote after the death of her screen husband. She had read Munshi Premchand’s story that Ray wove into a script. She asked how to get the scene going, and the director smiled and told her to concentrate on her eyes and lips. When the camera began to roll, Smita overwhelmed by emotion, gave a fantastic shot, and I am told that a couple of Ray’s assistants had to shake her to stop her crying.

In G Aravindan’s *Chidambaram*, Smita continued running on a vast green expanse, till the helmer ran behind her, caught up with her and asked to stop. So involved was she in her portrayals that it amazed her directors and others on the sets.

Smita was a bundle of spontaneity, was never a method actor as her then competitor, Shabana Azmi, was, and this helped. In works such as *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai* and *Arth*, Smita clearly scored over Shabana. There was something earthy about Smita that drew admiration and accolade. An indomitable spirit that soared away too soon.

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