

KISMET

The crook and the cripple

Tracing the making of a blockbuster that evoked mass sympathy for our first anti-hero and for 32 years held the record for the longest running Hindi film

Rob the rich and help the poor...That was the moral Kismet preached. And resulted in it being panned by the critics. By glamourising crime and rewarding its hero, a desi Robin Hood, with a family, fortune and even a beautiful bride, they insisted, that the film was messing up impressionable minds. "Which young man would not like to be a criminal and a pickpocket after seeing Ashok Kumar get all this glory and popularity in Kismet?" the popular film magazine, FilmIndia observed in its scathing review. Rai Bahadur Chunilal, who was on the Bombay Censor Board, was slammed for misusing his powers in getting an objectionable production passed because he was closely associated with it (he was the general manager of Bombay Talkies that produced Kismet). However, all the criticism only succeeded in whipping up mass hysteria and crowds flocked to the theatres screening this Ashok Kumar-Mumtaz-Shanti starrer which had premiered at Mumbai's Roxy cinema in January, 1943.

Many found that it wasn't difficult for them to identify with and empathise with the care-a-damn Shekhar who after a third term in jail steps out of the prison gates and promptly gets back to burglary. However, one night when on the prowl, he is spotted by vigilant cops. On the run, he slips into the house of a famous stage actress, Rani. Crippled in an accident, deserted by her father and hounded by a predatory creditor, Indrajit, the frail damsel-in-distress finds an unlikely protector in this amoral rake.

Shekhar pays off the interest on the loan Rani has taken from Indrajit and succeeds in freeing her from his crutches. He also ignites in her a renewed zest for life and her abandoned career. Rani's unconcealed love for Shekhar reforms him too but his past catches up with him when he gifts her a necklace. The necklace is stolen and Shekhar is arrested. His lady is heart-broken. Shekhar is repentant. To make amends he decides to commit one last snatch. This one for Rani. He breaks into Indrajit's house and steals the money needed for Rani's treatment. Then he walks out of her life.

He is immediately hauled up by the law. Blinded by jealous rage, Indrajit has set the cops on him and Shekhar is back in jail. Eventually though, the burgler-with-a-heart get his big break. Through his tribulations and trial he finds his long-lost parents and lands a family fortune. His beloved, once she learns the identity of her unknown benefactor, is more than willing to forget the past and forgive him. And it's all well that ends well for the losers-turned-lovers.

For all its mixed up morals and ignoble nayak, Kismet found a tremendous fan-following especially among the youngsters. The film's appeal can be attributed to the ethos of the time. The Second World War that had divided the world, had taken its toll with economic sanctions and curfew restrictions. In times of scarcity, morality takes a back seat. And the early '40s saw the sudden flourishing of petty criminals, blase blackmarketeers and fly-by-night operators determined to make quick money, by fair means or foul. Rather than be repulsed by Gyan Mukherjee's charming crook they were drawn to him, seeing their own futures reflected in Shekhar's good fortune. He was the voice of a new generation who echoed the changing values of an emerging society. Gyan Mukherjee and his colleagues at Bombay Talkies had gambled with destiny...and reaped the benefits.

Kismet enjoyed an uninterrupted three years run—192 weeks—at Kolkata's Roxy Cinema. In fact, till Sholay came along 32 years later, Kismet remained Hindi cinema's biggest blockbuster. It was Ramesh Sippy's curry western that broke Kismet's record with an unconquered five year run—1975 to 1980—at Mumbai's Minerva theatre. On August 10, 2001, Aditya Chopra's directorial debut,

Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge surpassed Sholay's incredible innings with a 300-week run at another Mumbai cinema hall, Maratha Mandir.

Kismet's unprecedented success not only confounded the trade pundits but also caught Bombay Talkies boss lady, Devika Rani unawares. As Hindi cinema tripped into the fighting '40s, a lot changed within the walls of one of Mumbai's oldest studios. Following the outbreak of the Second World War, the studio's regular director, Franz Osten had been detained in Deolali and then deported to Germany where he was placed under house arrest. The studio also lost a number of other German technicians. That left the door wide open for a new command.

Himanshu Rai, the founder of Bombay Talkies, turned to Sashadhar Mukherjee. By 1940, Mukherjee had proved himself an efficient commander-in-chief and when Himanshu Rai suddenly passed away following a nervous breakdown, a power struggle ensued. The board was rooting for Mukherjee but Rai's wife, Devika Rani insisted that it was her right to succeed her husband. A compromise was worked out. Devika Rani would oversee one production and Mukherjee the next. The actress asserted her leadership by scrapping Narayani, the film her husband had launched just before his untimely death, and starting a new film, Azad with Ashok Kumar and Leela Chitnis. The film was directed by Bombay Talkies new recruit, NR Acharya. The film didn't make waves but the next film, another Ashok Kumar-Leela Chitnis starrer, Bandhan, once again directed by Acharya but under the guidance of Mukherjee, was a silver jubilee hit like Ashok Kumar-Leela Chitnis' first film, the superhit Kangan.

The first war was won by Mukherjee but the battle was far from over. Back in the saddle Devika Rani started Anjan. This time she cast herself opposite the saleable Ashok Kumar and introduced a new director, Amiya Chakravarty. Anjan didn't impress and it was curtains for one of Hindi cinema's best-loved on-screen couple who had starred in eight films together including Jeevan Naiya, Achyut Kanya, Janma Bhoomi, Izzat, Savitri, Nirmalaa, Vachan and Anjan.

Anjan's non-success spurred Sashadhar Mukherjee to take new risks. He invited an old college friend, Gyan Mukherjee who was editing a science magazine in Kolkatta, to direct a film for his studio. Gyan Mukherjee's Jhoola that brought back the Ashok Kumar-Leela Chitnis team, was a surprise hit.

With Kangan, Bandhan and Jhoola behind him Mukherjee was riding high. But Devika Rani wasn't defeated yet. With Basant in '42 she hit back with a vengeance and the ball was back in Mukherjee's court.

Challenged, he turned to his creative team in Bombay Talkies to come up with a film that would silence everyone, once and for all. The film was Kismet.

The story was simple, the screenplay gripping. And after Devika Rani and Leela Chitnis, Ashok Kumar made an equally successful screen pair with Mumtaz Shanti. They had first been cast together in Basant and the two Mukherjees were shrewd enough to repeat Mumtaz Shanti in their next film. As the crippled Rani who struggles to regain control of her life, she evoked pity and admiration in equal measures and drew a large following. But undoubtedly, it was Ashok Kumar as Shekhar who was the star of Kismet and proved Frank Osten wrong yet again. The German director had bluntly told Himanshu Rai that his new discovery, lab assistant Kumudlal Kanjilal Ganguly (who opted for the screen name Ashok Kumar) would never make it as an actor because he had a "tremendous jaw" after watching him in Jawani Ki Hawa where he was a silent passenger in a late night train. Rai didn't heed Osten's advice and launched Ashok Kumar as a hero in his next film, Jeevan Naiya opposite his wife Devika Rani. And Ashok Kumar's jawline didn't distract from his fresh-faced appeal. With every new film the once lifeless and listless performer gained in confidence and with Kismet he turned himself into a role model for generations of star aspirants.

Even after becoming a star Ashok Kumar retained his job as laboratory assistant at the studio. He was viewing the final print of *Kismet* in the editing room with a mixture of pride and satisfaction, when Devika Rani's blue-eyed boy, Amiya Chakravarty walked in, demanding to sit in on the rushes. After a while he ordered Ashok Kumar to leave the lab. Seething from the humiliation, the star rushed out. Back in his room he raged silently. "Yes, I will leave," he muttered angrily under his breath. "But only to return some day. Yes, I shall..." Soon after he stalked out of the lab, heading for Devika Rani's room. He wanted to say goodbye to the boss lady before walking out. But he was stopped by a security guard who told him officiously that memsahab didn't want to be disturbed "by anyone".

For Ashok Kumar this was the last straw. Earlier his brother-in-law, Sashadhar at whose insistence Ashok Kumar had come to Mumbai and joined Bombay Talkies photography-cum-lab department, had had a similar run-in with his former co-star and when he had issued an ultimatum to Devika Rani — "Either Chakravarty stays or I do" — he was told coolly that Mr Chakravarty would stay. Following the incident Sashadhar Mukherjee had walked out of the studio.

Mukherjee and Ashok Kumar's exit was followed by a mass exodus. Rai Bahadur Chunilal, the studio's general manager who had had a major role in not just clearing *Kismet*, also opted out. Dattaram Pie, the studio's editor, too decided he didn't want to work in a place where his former colleague was not welcome. And where his friends were going Gyan Mukherjee was going too. V.H. Desai, Kavi Pradeep, P.L. Santoshi, Shahid Latif, S.B. Vacha and Marshall Braganza also walked out to join Filmistan, the new studio founded in mid-'43 by Sashadhar Mukherjee with Rai Bahadur Chunilal, Ashok Kumar and Gyan Mukherjee as his partners. And Devika Rani suddenly found herself left without her best talents. But for the moment she was not disturbed because Bombay Talkies was on a roll. *Kismet* was busting box-office records and continued to do so for a long time. Over the years critics have come up with their own reasons to explain the popularity of this crime thriller released in the same year as *Ram Rajya* and *Shakuntala*. Shobhana Samarth's mythological, *Ram Rajya* ran for a record 88 weeks. While V. Shanatram's first film for his newly founded company, Rajkamal Kalamandir, *Shakuntala* reigned for 104 weeks at a theatre in Mumbai. But neither of the two films could match *Kismet*'s overwhelming success.

Besides the novelty of its theme, the tautly-crafted film had the slickness of a Hollywood production. There were many who pointed to the striking parallels between Gyan Mukherjee's film and Walter Wagner's *Algiers*. The director himself vociferously denied being influenced by the Hedy Lamarr-Charles Boyner starrer. The only influence he would admit to was that of Francis Marion. When Gyan Mukherjee along with Sashadhar Mukherjee and Ashok Kumar was brainstorming on *Kismet* they had a flash of epiphany. "We realised that somehow our films were not as gripping as those made in Hollywood," Ashok Kumar recalled years later. The reason, they shrewdly analysed, was the absence of a good story and a taut screenplay. A friend based in the US sent them a book on screenplay writing by Francis Marion. The book had a scene-by-scene break-up of 20 unforgettable classics from *The Champ* to *Ben Hur*. Marion stressed the need for logic and conciseness when writing a script. Every scene had to follow a logical pattern, had to be integral to the plot and be able to hold the audience's interest. The plot, he pointed out, had to be such that it could be encapsulated in a single line. "The book opened our eyes to the complex world of film making. It vividly explained how to write a scene and establish a character. *Kismet* was full of Francis Marion's influences," Ashok Kumar admitted.

Without him even realising it, Hollywood had played a significant part in moulding Ashok Kumar too. It wasn't just Francis Marion who had impressed the star. On Himanshu Rai's recommendation he had seen *A Tale Of Two Cities* and was stunned by the power of Ronald Colman's histrionics. His reading of some American and European books had also given him some invaluable tips on acting. From *Rehearsal* he had learnt about voice control. It had also instructed him to rehearse in front of the mirror. His brother-in-law was another guide. Sashadhar Mukherjee was one of those few people

who was confident that his good-looking but painfully shy brother-in-law would make a credible actor and repeatedly urged him to “personalise” his acting. “Make your dialogue your own, natural and spontaneous, not studied and contrived,” he’d advise Ashok Kumar who in time realised that this was what set his idols, Ronald Coleman, Spencer Tracy, Leslie Howard and Charles Laughton, apart. Unconsciously, the star was reinventing himself and the change became very apparent in *Kismet*. The reviews all spoke about his “natural” acting. At a time when stylised and affected acting was the norm, Ashok Kumar’s Shekhar didn’t look like he was acting at all.

If Ashok Kumar’s acting style distinguished him from his contemporaries, then Shekhar’s style also set him apart from the other heroes of the day. He was one of Hindi cinema’s first Westernised heroes. The cigarette dangling from his lips became Dadamoni’s trademark. He smoked his way through Howrah Bridge, Sangram, Inspector and Night Club. In fact, the cigarette came to stay on the lips of many heroes down the decades from Shatrughan Sinha to Rajnikant.

Actually, Shekhar wasn’t so much a hero as an anti-hero. The first anti-hero of Hindi cinema. For Ashok Kumar experimenting with his image of a romantic hero usually dogged by tragedy, was a gamble. But the success of his last film, NR Acharya’s *Naya Sansar* had given him the courage to risk his career on a new role. Of course, *Naya Sansar*’s Puran was a crusading investigative reporter while *Kismet*’s Shekhar was a rouge, albeit a charming one. The prince of thieves though was cast in the Robin Hood mould. He may not have succeeded in winning over the moralists but he did manage to woo the man-on-the-streets. And Gyan Mukherjee’s rationale was borrowed by filmmakers down the years for justifying the negative shades in the character of their leading man. Raj Kapoor himself picked up the environment versus hereditary theory from *Kismet* and used it with brilliant effect in his *Awaara*. Defending her Raju in court, Nargis holds his father, the judge, responsible for depriving and dehumanising him. She argues for nurture over nature in the formation of an individual’s personality while building up her case in defense of Raju who is brought up by a small-time crook in a slum after his mother is disowned by her moralistic husband.

The lost-and-found formula that was exploited to the hilt by Manmohan Desai, also had its genesis in this crime thriller. In the years since children have, time and again, been separated from their parents by natural calamities like floods and earthquakes, kidnapped by disgruntled servants or vengeful dacoits (Suhaag) or lost in a mela. And then miraculously reunited during a tearful climax with lockets, tattoos and songs providing the key to lost identities.

Anil Biswas’s music also contributed largely to the film’s success. From the fiery ‘Aaj Himalay ki choti se humne takraya hai...’ to the pathos filled ‘Ghar ghar me Diwali hai, mere ghar mein andhera...’, from the devotional ‘Ab tere siva haun mera Krishna Kanhiya...’ to the melodious ‘Papiya re mere piya se keh do...’, Biswas’s score exhibited the range of his versatile talent. Undoubtedly, the highlight was the lullaby ‘Dheere dheere aa re badal mera bulbul so raha hai . Dev Anand who was a struggling star aspirant then, remembers seeing *Kismet* four times at Mumbai’s Roxy theatre. “I was haunted by ‘Mera bulbul...’ The song was a rage,” he once confessed during the course of an interview.

‘Door haton aye duniyawalon Hindustan hamara hai...’ was another favourite. The film was released during the Quit India Movement of 1942 and each time this song came on screen, the public demand for an encore was so loud and vociferous that the film had to be stopped, respooled and the song played again.

It is interesting that Sashadhar Mukherjee’s first reaction to Kavi Pradeep’s evergreen lyric was, “Do you want my film to be banned?” His indignant anger was understandable. At a time when nationalist fervour was simmering and spilling over in protest marches, why would the British censors pass a song that got off to such a rebel rousing start, ‘Door haton duniyawalon Hindustan hamara hai...’? However, the poet calmly assured his producer that the censors would not touch his

song. And to Mukherjee's surprise they didn't. 'Door haton duniyawalon...' was passed without a single cut.

It was only later that the censors realised how cleverly Pradeep had fooled them by inserting a line in the second stanza, 'Shura huawa jung tumhara, jaag utho Hindustani, tum na kissi ke aage jhukna, German ho ya Japani...'. The references to Germany and Japan against whom Britain was fighting the Second World War at the time, had won them over. It was only after they saw the kind of patriotic frenzy the song whipped up in the theatres that they realised that they had been taken for a ride. Despite their stringent licensing system the poet-lyricist had managed to smuggle in nationalist sentiment through a song. But to their credit, the British censors didn't recall the film for recensoring and 'Door haton duniyawalon Hindustan hamara hai...' played on to become the clarion call of the nation. But Kavi Pradeep had to go underground following rumours that he would be arrested.

The nationalist movement and the added tension of the Second World War were taking their toll. Following inflation there was an acute shortage of raw stock. The length of a film was restricted to 11,000 feet. However, thanks to Rai Bahadur Chunilal's contacts, Kismet, along with the two other big grossers of the year, Shakuntala and Ram Rajya was exempt from the length restriction by special permission. Nevertheless, during the making of the film Gyan Mukherjee had to keep a close eye on footage and prevent unnecessary wastage of raw stock. He overshot on only one occasion and the one to blame was VH Desai, the comedian. The former lawyer often messed up his lines. Knowing this, Gyan Mukherjee had given him only three words for this scene. He had to walk down the road to where Ashok Kumar was standing and ask him, "Kuch mila, partner?" However, even these three words proved too much for Desai. Everytime Gyan Mukherjee called, "Action!", Desai would sedately walk down the street and then come up with a line from Jhoola or Naya Sansar. At the end of 100 retakes Mukherjee was tearing his hair in frustration wondering how on earth he was going to get the shot canned. He was advised to pack-up for the night and start again the next morning. Twelve hours later, Mukherjee returned refreshed and ready for the ordeal that continued through another 23 retakes. The 124 take was okayed and everyone finally heaved a sigh of relief.

Kismet was shot entirely in Bombay Talkies studio at Malad, a way-out suburb of Mumbai that resembled a little village. Ashok Kumar lived in a bungalow that was only a 10-minute walk from the studio. His next-door neighbour was another Bombay Talkies' employee, actor-choreographer Mumtaz Ali. There was only a compound wall separating the two houses and Mumtaz Ali's son Mehmood grew up idolising Ashok Kumar. The master comedian of later years was a frequent visitor to the studio. He would gang up with Ashok Kumar's younger brother, Kishore Kumar, Rai Bahadur Chunnilal's son, Madan Mohan who was to become a well-known music director, Suresh and his brother Prakash who grew to become a talented cinematographer. The kids were allowed to play in the studio's garden but strictly forbidden from entering the sets. However, Mehmood who was the leader of this brat pack, would often sneak in to watch the action unobserved. On occasions he would be caught by Ashok Kumar and would get a real dressing down because Dadamoni was averse to children been a privy to his reel-life romances. However, the scoldings had little impact on the mischievous Mehmood. Gyan Mukherjee was a keen observer to all these goings-on. The naughty Mehmood had caught his eye and one day the director turned up at the boy's house with a request, "Would Mumtaz Ali allow Mehmood to act in a film as the young Ashok Kumar?" Permission was easily granted. The film was Kismet. "Sab kismet ka khel tha," the funster laughs everytime he was reminded of his beginnings.

—[Roshmila Bhattacharya](#) (originally found online at Screen magazine, link no longer works)