

A great classic in superb Urdu

A
Dawn
6/12/04

NOW that George Bush can confess to getting "teared up" and win an election, I can make my own confession. I am a total sap for movies like *Mughal-e-Azam*, the wondrous classic about Emperor Akbar, his son Salim, and the dancing girl, Anarkali.

The casting is perfection. Prithviraj as emperor: no one has quivered quite like him. Dilip Kumar as Salim: no one has crossed a heart with his sword with his poetry. Madhubala as Anarkali: no beauty better deserved a prince.

Give me a map of my country rising above a plasticine mediaeval-Delhi-skyline on a large screen, a sonorous voice saying "*Main Hindustan hoon*," dollops of the sweetest language in the world, Urdu, and my eyes fill up like a river in the monsoon. Thank God movie halls are dark. What I was not prepared for was the intensity of the rest of the audience. It was a late night show in the heart of Delhi and the hall was full for the colour version of black-and-white film first screened in 1960.

I thought that only sixties' groupies would turn up to relive their comparatively innocent youth. It was an age when virginal love was considered scandalous, so fantasy had a wonderful time. The sixtians were there, and looked frostbitten by reality. They had found husbands instead of Dilip Kumar, and wives instead of Madhubala.

NOTES FROM DELHI

By M.J. Akbar

sure that both of us wished, strangers as we were, that we had the courage to sing louder.

These are some of the things that could shock the young. In a film of 20 reels, unravelling over three and a half hours, there is not a single item number. There is no hint of cleavage. Even the men are overdressed. The highest-paid playback singer in the movie is the classicist Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, who was given Rs 25,000 for *Shubh din aayo* and *Prem jogan ban...* at a time when Lata Mangeshkar and Mohammad Rafi received about a thousand rupees per song.

Forty five years ago, a film could be made in superb Urdu for an India-wide audience. *Mughal-e-Azam* also made marketing history in 1960 when it was released in 150 theatres simultaneously. Today film language is a pidgin patois bred outside known cultures. This does not make it good or bad. To state a fact is not to pass judgment. The relevant point is that the *Mughal-e-Azam* audience of 2004 seemed entranced

tures in every newspaper and magazine around the world.

Bahar's high moments come during two *qawwalis* in which she is matched against Anarkali. The first, "*Teri mahfil mein kismat aazman ke ham bhi dekhenge, Ghari bhar to tere nazdeek aakar ham bhi dekhenge*." "*(Let me test my fortune in your presence, Let me spend a moment near you)*," establishes the interplay of character, ambition, opportunity, love and tragedy. Prince Salim judges the two women. The rose goes to the upbeat Bahar, the thorn to Anarkali, who knows that tears are so often the price of love. She accepts the thorn, and tells the prince, "*Kanton ko murjhanein ka gham nahi hota...*" Thorns never have to face the sorrow of decay."

It is a line that gets derailed in English.

With the ebb of Urdu a civilisation has diminished. Urdu is utterly civil, rooted in values and anchored in two words that supersede translation: *tehzeeb* and *akhlaq*. A "practical" Urdu-English dictionary defines *tehzeeb* as civilisation, etiquette, manners, politeness, courtesy, polish, refinement, instruction, education, discipline, culture. It is all this and much more, including that very delicate wit that nuances an idea or a sentiment with a sensitivity that becomes a bridge between lovers and a gulf between antagonists. *Akhlaq* is the practice of *tehzeeb*.

I wondered about the Urdu-deficit in the Delhi theatre hall. Forty five years ago, a film could be made in superb Urdu for an India-wide audi-