

## Private view

By Khalid Hasan

# AJ, the forgotten filmmaker

Culture

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A.J. KARDAR — the A so called for Akhtar — who died in London on February 12, two years into the new millennium, in almost utter obscurity, was the only Pakistani filmmaker whose work received international recognition.

His classic story of the indomitable spirit of working people emerging triumphant despite the forces of exploitation, released over 40 years ago as *Jago huva Savera* remains etched to this day in the memory of those who saw it. When I told Maleeha Lodhi of AJ's passing, she recalled the movie and said, "It was superb, not to be surpassed, or even paralleled." The script was written by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, AJ's lifelong collaborator.

AJ made innumerable documentaries, including a memorable one on Iqbal, another on Moenjodaro. They all lie somewhere in the archives of the Department of Films and Publications, yellowed by age. Perhaps, they don't even exist any more, considering the care with which we preserve records. The British failed to teach us many things, among them respect for history and why it should be preserved. Dr Ashiq Hussain Batalvi once said to me, "There is not a scrap of paper that the British in India threw away. Just spend a day at the India Office Library and you will know." He should have known because that was always his first port of call every day.

AJ was Skipper Abdul Hafiz Kardar's favourite cousin. A.R. Kardar, was a cousin too, if not his older brother. A.R. Kardar was one of the few Muslims in the Bombay film industry to establish his own production studio. A large number of hits

flowed out of it, both before and after independence. One post-1947 movie *Dard* starred Surayya and Nusrat Kardar, AJ's cousin. The superb score was by Naushad with Surayya singing one of the most beautiful na'ats ever recorded: *Beech bhañwar mein*. It was set in raag Darbari. After independence, both Kardar and Mehboob Khan came to Karachi, but decided to return to Bombay. Had they stayed, Pakistan may have perhaps had a movie industry after all.

AJ also made a film on the 1965 war — *Qsam uss Waqt ki* — to highlight the Pakistan air force's gallantry and the heroic mission carried out over India by Squadron Leader Sarfraz Rafiqi who never returned. AJ wanted to cast Cecil Chaudhry, who was on Rafiqi's formation, as the hero, but Cecil, the great 'Chacha' F.E. Chaudhry's son and now the principal of St. Anthony's School in Lahore, was cut out to be a crack flier, not an actor. AJ, in the end, settled on Tariq Aziz, later to win fame and fortune as the principal TV salesman for every substandard Pakistani product. The film bombed, which had more to do with its heavy-jowled wooden hero than the nimble director or the estimable Air Marshal Nur Khan who had put the PAF's facilities at the unit's disposal. Faiz wrote the lyrics for the movie but we cannot hold him responsible for the performance of the future star of 'Neelam Ghar'.

AJ was a superb raconteur and of the many stories that he told me, the one about the great Mehboob Khan remains unforgettable. Mehboob came to London in 1952 to sign the British and European rights of India's first colour film *Aan* with Sir Alexander Korda, the celebrated British filmmaker and showman. Mehboob, who did not speak a word of English and only heavily Gujarati-accented Urdu, took AJ as his interpreter.

AJ's link to Mehboob was A.R. Kardar who was married to

Bahar Akhtar, while Mehboob was married to her sister, the actress Sardar Akhtar. When Mehboob entered, Korda walked around his desk, stretched out his hand and said, "I am Alexander Korda." Mehboob turned to AJ, "*Akhtar, iss salay ko batao ke mera naam Mehboob hai aur mein Hindustan ka Alexander Korda hoon.*"

When the National Film Development Corporation or NAFDEC, whose mercy-killing took place a few years ago, was formed, AJ joined it on the production side. He and Faiz also teamed up for a film that was never to see the light of day. AJ picked up a mostly unknown cast, shot the film on location in Pakistan and took it to London to be processed. NAFDEC said he had "hijacked" the original negative which remained its property and which should be returned.

AJ insisted that he was within his rights as director to see to the proper processing of the film. There were recriminations, while the film itself lay stuck in a London laboratory I visited with AJ a few times. The lab had not been paid and AJ could not pick up the tab. NAFDEC refused, while the lab kept pressing for payment.

It was ugly. Faiz, who was the producer, arrived in London. Back in Pakistan, given the virulent nature of the Zia regime and how it viewed Faiz, there was intense pressure on Faiz to produce the negative. At the time, Nasir Ahmed Farooki was in ample funds, the gods who preside over the gaming tables of London, having decided to smile on him.

He it was who dished out the money so that AJ could rescue his negative. AJ arranged a screening and we found the movie visually stunning, though a bit slow-paced.

To this day, it remains unreleased. AJ never returned to Pakistan and never made another film. He used to say, "In this business, you are as good as your last work. And my last work was

so long ago that it is not possible for me to find new work." The Zia martial law machine also instituted an inquiry into NAFDEC and, to its eternal shame, one of the people grilled — Brig. (later Maj. Gen.) Khwaja Rahat Latif of Sialkot having had that dubious distinction — was Faiz himself.

AJ wanted to make a film on the trial and execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Benazir, whom he met more than once in this connection, was enthusiastic but all she was prepared to give the project was her blessings. At one point, AJ found an "angel" in London and a flat was hired and an office set up.

Skipper Kardar had shipped out every scrap of paper relating to the trial, all of which now lies with my books in Lahore, because when it was clear that the project was a non-starter, AJ said, "This 'pulanda' is now yours." AJ had written the script and it was very powerful. I was one of the "consultants" and AJ paid me. When I protested, he said, "As a pro, there is one thing I have learnt in this business. You pay for word done."

In London, AJ lived off Marble Arch. There was a pub next to his flat called Monkey Puzzle where we would hang out. AJ's film team was made up of his friends, the superb cinematographer Mervin Marshall and his colleague Peter Lloyd. Marshall had shot *Jago huva Savera*. AJ had worked with some great names in British cinema, including Walter Lasally. He once said to me, "In life, as in all other things, one should follow the Chinese. And the Chinese say: Slowly, slowly catchy monkey." However, the monkey called NAFDEC was never caught, no matter how slowly AJ stalked it. And he stalked it for many, many years that he said bitterly were a waste. Well, with AJ, another man of genius we turned our backs on, is gone. He was not the first and, sadly, he won't be the last.