



The Writer in the Film World: Amritlal Nagar's *Seven Years of Film Experience*¹

Translation and Introduction by Suzanne L. Schulz

At the time of India's independence in August 1947, Hindi writer Amritlal Nagar made up his mind to leave the film industry, saying, "Now I am through with this business of drawing lines in the sand."² According to Nagar, the time had come to produce something substantial, which for him meant literature. Nagar, who eventually wrote fourteen novels, five translations, and countless short stories in Hindi, also wrote screenplays and film dialogues between 1940 and 1947, when he worked primarily in Bombay, but also in Kohlapur and Madras. After Nagar returned home to Lucknow in 1947 to devote himself full-time to writing novels and stories, he was praised for crafting richly visualized characters, a quality attributed to training in script and dialogue writing and one which he later brought to his work in radio in the 1950s.³ Throughout his autobiographical writings and published interviews, Nagar displays an ambivalent fondness towards his prolific years in the film industry, characteristically stating in the early forties, "If I wrote as much in the field of literature as I do in the world of film, I'd have written five novels and fifty short stories by now."⁴

We can situate the "Seven Years" of Nagar's essay within the decline of well-established film studios that had thrived in the 1930s.⁵ These studios provided steady employment and a structured work atmosphere for many writers, actors and

¹ Amritlal Nagar, "Saat Varsh Ke Filmi Anubhav," in *Tukde Tukde Dastan* (Delhi: Rajpal and Sons Publishers, 1986), 124-27.

² Shrilal Shukla, *Amritlal Nagar* (New Delhi Sahitya Akademi, 1994), 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴ Devendra Chaubey, *Kathakar Amritlal Nagar* (Delhi: Jagat Ram and Sons), 30.

⁵ Well-established studios that experienced a rapid decline in the 1940s and closed completely by the early 1950s include Prabhat Film Company, New Theatres, and Bombay Talkies, The exception in Nagar's list of studios is Sagar Movietone, which was only in existence from 1930-1940.

technicians.⁶ By the early 1940s, a new crop of independent producers had entered the Indian film industry, attracting actors and other film personnel with high salaries. Nagar inhabited the film industry at exactly this transitional period. According to Nagar, it was during this time that the “good habits” of following scripts and producing socially relevant films were abandoned.⁷

Despite his critical commentary, Nagar diverges from prevalent assessments of poor quality films by poking fun, through an anecdote he attributes to the comic actor Noor Muhammad Charlie, at fixations on psychological depth and technical knowhow in filmmaking, as well as at “the cult of Rabindranath Tagore,” a key figure of bourgeois arts and literature.⁸ In the second half of his essay, Nagar speaks more directly about work and life in Bombay, and his critiques of weak story-writing and characterization belie his enjoyment of collaborating with director-producer Kishore Sahu, dubbing the first Russian and Tamil films into Hindi, and generally appreciating the cinematic medium.

Nagar's comments remind us that film workers were also film watchers. In this transitional era, many had enjoyed silent film viewings only a decade earlier. Nagar suggests that the era of the silent film was instructive for writers of talkies in the 1940s when he quotes screenwriter Tamerlane's excellent maxim that “the ears are four inches behind the eyes,” emphasizing that dialogues are secondary accompaniments to scenes. Nagar also refers to the experience of frequenting cinema halls, where Kishore Sahu, already well known, had to sit in the balcony or the box, while Nagar was able to

⁶ For example, Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy tell us how Bombay Talkies, one of the studios Nagar mentions, maintained for its staff childcare, healthy food, a library, a medical clinic, and how “[c]elebrated authors and scholars were constantly enlisted to conduct personnel seminars.” Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 119.

⁷ Amritlal Nagar, “Saat Varsh Ke Filmi Anubhav,” in *Tukde Tukde Dastan* (Delhi: Rajpal and Sons Publishers, 1986), 124.

⁸ Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 1913, was one of the most important figures in early 20th century India. The “cult of Tagore” is film historian Kaushik Bhaumik's phrase; Bhaumik associates Tagore with the “rise of the notion of the individual bourgeois artist.” Kaushik Bhaumik, “The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1913-1936” (Oxford University, 2001), 190.

sit in the cheapest class of seats, an indication of the insignificance conferred upon film writers.

As we consider Indian cinema's centenary, when lists are being drawn up of the best and the most important, it is time we seek stories of lesser-known figures of the Indian film industry.⁹ Nagar was one of numerous Hindi and Urdu writers who worked in the Bombay film industry during the 1940s, but in Nagar's case, during his brief seven years in Bombay, he kept his feet firmly planted in both the film industry as well as in the rich literary cultures of his home city of Lucknow.¹⁰ In "Seven Years of Film Experience," Nagar's bright-eyed reminiscences open a window onto the writer's labor in the film industry as he possessed and encountered an array of dissonant sensibilities that somehow worked together each time a film got made. There is something special about the perspective of someone just passing through, when everything remains new and somewhat astonishing.

⁹ Excellent work has recently been written on lesser-known film industry personnel. On industry practices and the Indian Movie Stunt Artist Association, see Nitin Govil, "Recognizing 'Industry,'" *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (Spring 2013). On make-up artistry in the Bombay film industry, see Debashree Mukherjee, "A Material World: Notes on an Interview with Ram Tipnis," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 1, no. 2 (2010).

¹⁰ One of the most familiar perspectives of a writer in 1940s Indian cinema is Manto's classic (Sa'adat Hasan Manto, *Ganje Farishte* (Lahore: Maktabah-yi Shi'r o Adab, 1975). This book has been partially translated into English by Khalid Hasan in Saadat Hasan Manto and Khalid Hasan, *Stars from Another Sky: The Bombay Film World of the 1940s* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998). Another example of a writer who straddled both the Hindi literary world and the film world is Narendra Sharma. See Narendra Sharma and Ravikant, "Cine-Sangeet *Indra Ka Ghora Hai Aur Akashvani Uska Samman Karti Hai!* Film Music Is Lord Indra's Horse and Akashvani Respects It!," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 3, no. 2 (2012).

Seven Years of Film Experience¹¹

(Amritlal Nagar, 1960)

In 1940, I entered the world of films in a time of transition. Back then, actors of old theatre companies, local amateur singers, and career writers were in the majority. Usually, there was much depravity; the hacks were no more than lackeys of the Seths. Stories in those days were all showiness and fighting. Crudity and licentiousness held sway. In some studios, Seths had set up playgrounds for their carnal amusement. From the clean atmosphere of New Theatres, Bombay Talkies, and Sagar Movietone, a few films had been made on the basis of the best social stories and Bengali and Gujarati novels. Premchand went and came back disappointed. Ugraji also had an indifferent stint before returning. Sudarshanji, on the other hand, had really got into it and made Bombay his home. The eminent poet Pradeepji had just attained prominence. Due to this healthy inflow of well-educated, cultured actors, technicians and writers, the old-timers were jealous and became hypercritical.

In this context I recall a delicious joke cracked by the then famous actor Shri Noor Mohammad Charlie. He narrated: "Listen Sir, literary artists do not stand a chance next to these career writers. Even if literary men have art, they don't know the art of selling it. Just imagine that Tagore Sahib wasn't the son of an important man, and poverty forced him to come, novel tucked under his arm, to sell it to a film company. Now picture him sitting in the Seth's office. Tagore Sahib is stroking his beard with his delicate hands and narrating an extremely psychological and tragic sequence. Sethji is puffing on *bidis* and continuously yawning. For him, the word 'psychological' is like a thorn stuck in his throat and so, in the grips of fear, the poor man can't say a thing. The film heroine, that is to say, the Sethji's mistress, is also sitting right nearby. She too finds no pleasure in Tagore's novel."

¹¹ Nagar, "Saat Varsh Ke Filmi Anubhav," 124-27.

“Meanwhile, when word came of the arrival of Munshi Brown-Nose, both the Seth and the heroine perked up. The Seth told Tagore Sahib that Munshi Brown-Nose is a ‘very fine storywriter’ whom he will be pleased to meet. Munshi made his appearance. His get-up was unusual. Wrinkled, dirty pajamas, soiled *sherwani*, a notebook under his left arm and his right flailing an ‘Aadab.’ As he came in, he glanced over at Tagore contemptuously and then told the heroine: ‘Lady So-and-So, today I’ve come here determined to take a generous prize from you and Seth. By god, what a story and, you won’t believe what dialogue I’ve written and what powerful psychology I’ve put in! Seth, I swear on my script, no other dialogue writer could have written it. And Seth, I wrote this story just for you. So many others were after me saying, ‘Munshi Brown-Nose, give that story to me!’ Mangu Bhai turned up at my house this morning, trying to arrange my first deal of the day for five thousand rupees. I said, I’m grateful, but I’m going to give the story to my Seth and no one else. After this, when I went out, Changu Bhai Seth was going by in a car. As soon as he saw me he stopped, and said, ‘Munshi give me that story.’ I managed to shake him off too. Then I met Hormozi Seth who forcibly dragged me to the Taj Mahal Hotel, plied me with whiskey, flattered me, placed ten thousand rupee notes before me and began to snatch the notebook from my hand, but I said, ‘No, I’m giving this to my Seth and Lady So-and-So will be its heroine!’ I explained that there is no other connoisseur like my Seth. Come on Seth, give me a *bidi* to celebrate this.’

“Guiding the Seth and his mistress into the palm of his hand, Munshi Brown-Nose resumed: ‘these earnest college boys have come out into the *fillum* industry and spouting off *tek-neek and sy-cology*. C’mon Seth, next to Munshi Brown-Nose, what worth can they demonstrate through the miracles of technique or psychology? Come on Seth, all these guys start their scenarios with ‘fade-in’—what’s the new technique in that? I have begun this story-scenario with a ‘fade-out.’ People arrive at the cinema hall. At exactly three o’clock the screen fades out and then, just imagine, the company’s name appears, then Lady So-and-So’s name sparkles, then, picture this, in big letters your name glitters, people applaud, and the scene begins. I request your attention to the scene, Sethji. Munshi Brown-Nose has outdone himself when he writes, ‘It’s a moonlit night and for miles the oceans waves are flowing.’ When the camera turns we see that it

is a desert—desert—desert! There is no human or human's spawn, no bird or beast of prey and the clouds are looming overhead; lightning flashes and torrential rains start falling. What a scene I've created, Seth, light me a *bidi* for it. Oh, yes, Seth, when the camera turns, what do you see? There is a tall palm tree standing there and one man is sitting in it. Who is that man, do you know? Go ahead, ask, who is it? Yes, he's your hero, Seth. And do you know what the hero is doing sitting in the tree? Go ahead, ask, what is he doing? It's here that I show the miracle of psychology! The villain has kidnapped the heroine, and the hero climbed up the tree to look for her. His eyes are filled with tears and he is singing a song, 'Darling...Darling...Darling...Darling.' Not just one time, not just two times, he calls out to his beloved a full four times. The hearts of listeners break. What a scene! Light me a *bidi* to celebrate.”

In the beginning, I was fortunate enough to live and work with decent people. Two producer-directors who are today very famous, Shri Mahesh Kaul and Shri Kishore Sahu, became my close companions. Neither of them was merely a film person. Both had studied Indian and foreign literature and also wrote short stories. Maheshji and I lived together. In the beginning, during the period when Kishore lived in Shivaji Park, his mother looked after us too. Afterwards, due to conflicts of business and personal ambitions, we grew apart. There's no point in making all this public now. To help me forget that bitterness, I have cherished countless sweet memories. And what's more, our paths and areas of work have long since grown apart. Therefore, in this auspicious moment of confession I won't fail to mention that the three of us researched our tasks with great diligence and dedication. Kishore was a star, so apart from the balconies and boxes of select cinema halls he could not sit among the lower classes. For Maheshji and me it was easy to sit with every sort of public, from the 4 ½ *anna* class to the pricey class, and gauge their opinion.



Image 1: Nagar contributed to the screenplay and dialogue for Kishore Sahu's film *Raja* (1943). As was the practice, Nagar's name does not appear on posters and ads for the film (*filmindia*, January 1943) Image courtesy of National Film Archives, Pune.

Image 2: Nagar dubbed *Meera* (Hindi version, 1947) into Hindi from Tamil. A review in *filmindia* rates Nagar's dubbing as "50% successful" and acknowledges that it must have been "no end of a ticklish job to fit in Hindi words on the Tamil lip movement." (Review: *filmindia*, January 1948; Ad: *filmindia* January 1947). Image courtesy of National Film Archives, Pune.

I worked as a dialogue-writer for Kishore's initial films. We put our heads together for hours to break down every single scene in the film. I never enjoyed such a privilege with any other producer-director. The fact of the matter is that I felt a true personal connection with Kishore's work. Writing for others was nothing more than a business proposition. Perhaps because of Kishore's education at Bombay Talkies, he had the good habit that once the scenes were outlined and dialogues written, he didn't change even one word on the set. In my opinion, this is one major reason for Kishore's success in the world of films.

During my seven years in the film industry, I came to understand that often enough director-producers managed to aesthetically appreciate only those episodes, which they had already seen in some Hollywood movie. The knack for understanding story or

characterization was completely absent in most people. Some people wrote well with the help of their commercial instincts. But even those were few and far between.

For the most part, writers and directors considered a story "filmi" by the flow of its dialogues alone. This trend was extremely flawed. Such people functioned by abandoning the first principle of the film medium and continue to do so even today. Famous scenarist Tamerlane wrote: "Don't forget the fact that you are making motion pictures and also don't forget, that the ears are four inches behind the eyes." From this perspective, the scenarios from the silent cine-film era are still relevant. Dialogues are but complementary to scenes. Since I am no longer in the film business, I can say without exaggeration that in this respect we three were the *only* true scenarists at that time. Today's scenario-writing is another name for a camera-driven cinematography. There is a singular lack of dynamism in its narrative, or in acting, or in characterization.

As far as I know, I can safely say without boasting that I was the first Indian writer to "dub". Before me, under the auspices of Soviet Film Distributors, a couple of writers had made inspired attempts but without any success. This was indeed a very tricky job. I got the assignment to dub the Soviet Films picture, *Naseeruddin in Bukhara*. After removing the said film's Russian dialogues, I wrote Hindi dialogue to put in their place. And synching dialogues to the actors' lips of the original film was very challenging work indeed! I succeeded in it, but received even wider acclaim for the next Russian film *Zoya*. My third successful and satisfying assignment was the Indian Cuckoo Shrimati MS Subbulakshmi's Tamil film *Meera*.

From my time until now, the number of people who really understand stories in the film industry is very small. This is the greatest misfortune of our country's film industry. Experts in the subtleties of acting are also extremely rare and as a result our films have become distant from our lives.

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