

Ashok Kumar

AFTER Najmul Hasan made off with Devika Rani, Bombay Talkies was thrown into complete chaos. Filming had started, a few scenes had even been finished when Najmul Hasan pulled his heroine from the world of celluloid into the real world. But the person who was most distressed and worried at the Talkies was Himanshu Roy—Devika Rani's husband and the behind-the-scenes brains of the company.

In those days S. Mukherjee, brother-in-law of Ashok Kumar and the well-known filmmaker of many popular movies, was an assistant to Mr. Savak Vacha, the sound engineer at the Talkies. Being a Bengali himself he naturally felt for Himanshu Roy. Somehow or other he wanted Devika Rani to come back. So, without consulting Himanshu Roy, he made some efforts on his own and, by using his exceptional tact, he persuaded Devika Rani to fly from the arms of her lover back into the arms of the Talkies, which offered her talent more room to grow.

And fly back she did. Then S. Mukherjee used his tact once again and prevailed upon his distraught mentor, Roy, to take her back. Poor Najmul Hasan joined the list of lovers separated from their beloveds by political, religious and capitalist intrigues. He was cut off—with a pair of scissors as it were—from the film and dumped into the wastebasket. This created a problem: who should now be cast opposite the already smitten Devika Rani as her lover on the screen?

Himanshu Roy was an exceedingly hardworking filmmaker who pretty much kept to himself and remained quietly absorbed in his work. He had wanted Bombay Talkies to resemble a dignified academic institution and had established it accordingly. This was the reason he had chosen Malad, a village quite far from the city of Bombay, as the site for his film company. He didn't want an outsider for the role because he didn't have a good opinion of them. Also, Najmul Hasan was an outsider.

Here again S. Mukherjee came to his mentor's assistance. His

brother-in-law, Ashok Kumar, who had finished a Bachelor of Science degree and studied law for a year in Calcutta, was working as an apprentice in the laboratory at Bombay Talkies. He had a good face and could also sing and play a little. In the course of discussions Mukherjee mentioned him for the role of the hero. Himanshu Roy had been taking chances all his life. “Well, why not?” he said. “Let’s give it a try.” Darsching, the Talkies’ German cameraman, gave Ashok a screen test. Himanshu Roy saw the results and approved him for the role. The German film director, Franz Osten, had a different opinion but who at the Talkies could dare to go against Himanshu Roy. So Ashok Kumar Ganguly, barely twenty-two years old at the time, was selected as Devika Rani’s leading man.

A succession of films followed. Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar became an inseparable screen couple. Most of their films were great hits. Whenever Devika Rani, a veritable doll, appeared on screen in perfect harmony with the incredibly innocent-looking Ashok Kumar, they elicited feelings of endearment from the audience. Harmless guile, coltish antics, incredibly hilarious romance—even people who normally liked bold, passionate love, both in life and on screen, couldn’t help being attracted to this soft, supple and gentle love and became particularly fond of the pair. Back then, Ashok Kumar was the ideal hero of school and college girls, and college boys, sporting loose, long-sleeved *kurtas*, roamed around singing: *Tū ban kī čīriyā, main ban kā pañčbī, ban-ban bōlūn rē ...*

I saw a few of Ashok Kumar’s films. Clearly, Devika Rani was way ahead of him as far as acting was concerned. As a leading man he looked like a chocolate doll, but little by little the fledgling began to grow feathers and shake off the effects of the intoxicated ideal of Bengali love.

When Ashok came out from behind the laboratory blinds onto the silver screen, his salary was fixed at seventy-five rupees a month. This made him very happy. In those days that amount was quite enough for someone living alone, and living far away from the city in the village of Malad at that. When his salary was suddenly doubled to one hundred fifty rupees it made him even happier. But when it shot up to two hundred fifty rupees, he began to get nervous. Recalling the way he felt at that moment he said to me, “By God, I felt a strange sensation. Two hundred and fifty rupees! When I received the notes from the cashier, my hands began to shake. I had no idea where I’d put all that money. My house ... well, it was just a small place: a bed and two or three chairs, and surrounded by forest. What if a thief broke in during the night? What if he knew I had two hundred and fifty rupees? I didn’t know what to do. I

was in a fix. Theft and robbery give me the shivers. After I returned home I made many plans. Finally I hid the notes in a rug under the bed. But all night long I was assaulted by terrible dreams. The first thing I did after getting up the next morning was take the money to the post office and deposit it.”

While Ashok was telling me this at his house, a Calcutta filmmaker arrived with a contract all ready to be signed. But Ashok wouldn't sign it. The filmmaker was offering eighty thousand rupees, but Ashok was demanding one hundred thousand and no less. A far cry from two hundred and fifty!

Ashok's brother-in-law, S. Mukherjee, also became quite a success at Bombay Talkies. Mukherjee was an intelligent man, a shrewd observer of everything that happened around him. In time he became a producer—not just any ordinary producer, a really major one. He made several silver and golden jubilee films under the banner of Bombay Talkies and also laid the foundation of a particular school of screenwriting. The present writer considers him his teacher in this regard.

Ashok's popularity increased day by day. Since he didn't go out much and kept to himself, whenever people did catch a glimpse of him riots followed. Traffic came to a halt, fans crowded around him, and eventually the police would be forced to use their batons to save him from his admirers' extreme adulation.

Ashok was insufferably churlish when it came to dealing with his fans' passionate devotion. He would become testy in no time at all, as if somebody had sworn at him. I told him many times, “Dadamuni, this behavior of yours is absolutely shameful. Instead of feeling happy you become angry. Don't you even understand that they love you?” But perhaps he didn't understand.

He was a complete stranger to love. At least he was before Partition. What changes may have occurred in him since, I can't say. Hundreds of beautiful girls entered his life, but he behaved very rudely with all of them. He is a typical *jāt* by nature, strangely coarse in his table manners and in his living style.

Devika Rani tried to develop a romantic relationship with him, but he spurned her artlessly. Another actress became bold and called him to her home. She expressed her love for him in the gentlest and most tender words, but when Ashok broke her heart with his characteristic rudeness, she changed track and said, “Oh, I was just testing you. Why, you're like a brother to me.”

He did like her figure though and also the way she always looked

freshly-bathed and glowing. So when she did a quick about-face and called him her brother, he felt crushed.

Although Ashok is not interested in love, like any ordinary man he does look at women with leering eyes. He examines their alluring attributes closely and even talks to his friends about them. Sometimes he also feels the desire to be physically close to a woman, but, as he says, “Manto *yar*, I don’t have the nerve.”

In such matters he is really very timid, which has proved a boon for his married life. If one were to tell his wife Shobha about his lack of courage in this matter, she would certainly say, “Thank God Ganguly does not have this courage, and I pray to God that he never finds it.”

I am puzzled why. Especially when easily hundreds of women openly tempted him to plunge into the blaze of love. Without exaggeration he must have received thousands of letters from women in his personal mail—letters filled with expressions of love. But from this huge pile, as far as I know, he probably never read more than a hundred himself. Such letters keep coming. D’Souza, his skinny, half-dead secretary, reads them with great relish, becoming skinnier and even more lifeless.

A few months before Partition, Ashok was in Calcutta in connection with the film *Chandrashekhar*. Returning to his place from the residence of Shahid Suhrawardy, then Prime Minister of Bengal, where he had watched some 16mm film, his car was stopped by two beautiful Anglo-Indian girls who wanted a lift. Ashok indulged in this fun for a few moments, but lost his new cigarette case in the bargain. When the bolder of the two girls took a cigarette she also impudently took the cigarette case. Later he thought about striking up a relationship with them many times. It was a simple thing but he never dared.

An absolutely insipid film, full of swords and shields, maces and bang-bang, was being made in Kolhapur. Ashok had a little work left to do in it. They called him for it many times but he didn’t go; he detested his role in that film. But he had contracted to do it so eventually he had to go. He took me along. I was writing the film script for *Ath Din (Eight Days)* for Filmistan at that time. Since Ashok was going to produce and direct that film he said, “Come along, *yar*, we’ll work there in peace.”

What peace? People quickly found out that Ashok Kumar had come to Kolhapur. Fans started to gather around the hotel where we were staying. The owner of the hotel was a clever man and he’d find various ways to disperse them. But still some of the persistent ones hung around, moving from place to place in order to catch a glimpse of their beloved actor. As I mentioned earlier, Ashok treated his fans discourteously. I

don't know how they felt about his rebuffs, but I certainly didn't like his behavior at all.

Both of us went for a stroll one evening. Ashok was in disguise: big, dark sunglasses, a stick in one hand, and the other hand grabbing on to my shoulder to use me as a shield if the situation called for it. In this way we reached a store. Ashok wanted to buy something to protect himself against the harmful effects of the dust in the Kolhapur studios. When he asked for it the proprietor gave him a fleeting look before taking a few steps towards the cabinet. Then abruptly he turned around and exploded like a delayed-action bomb, "Who the hell are you?"

"Who am I?" Ashok replied. "I am who I am."

The proprietor looked closely at the face hidden behind the huge sunglasses. "My—you're Ashok Kumar!"

"Not a chance. You must be confusing me with somebody else," he retorted in an exceedingly gruff manner. And then saying, "Let's go, Manto," he put his hand on my shoulder and the two of us walked out without buying the medicine.

As we were turning the corner of the hotel three Marathi girls appeared in front of us—very clean looking, fair-colored, wearing *kum-kum* on their foreheads, flower strings in their hair, and light, delicate sandals on their feet. One of them who was holding oranges in her hands shuddered with excitement the instant she saw Ashok. "Ashok!" she cried to her friends in a muffled voice as the oranges, all of them, dropped from her hands and scattered on the road. Ashok let go of my shoulder and sprinted off.

After S. Mukherjee and his entire team walked out of Bombay Talkies and set up their own studio, Filmistan, I caught a glimpse of Ashok now and then. My first real meeting with him, however, had to wait until I started working there myself.

As things go with film personalities, they seem to be one thing on the screen and something entirely different in real life. So when I saw Ashok up close for the first time, I found him to be quite different than the Ashok on screen. The real Ashok was dark, had plump, rough hands and a strong, well-toned body. He had a rustic way of talking and rather abrupt, unnatural manners. When we were introduced I said, "I am very pleased to meet you."

He parroted out a reply in stock phrases.

Once when someone came to visit Filmistan he said to Ashok in an exceedingly polite manner, "I feel I've also had the honor of meeting you before." Ashok replied in a dubious tone, "*Jī ... jī mujhē kabhī muqābala*

nahīn huā,” (“Well, I don’t think I’ve encountered you before.”) articulating the *qāf* of *muqābala* from his throat. He immediately realized that he had used the word incorrectly, but he glossed over it.

Ashok is very fond of Urdu. At first he tried to learn it but couldn’t get past the primer. Still he has a smattering of it. He can even write a sentence or two in Urdu. At the time of Partition, when I parted from him on leaving Bombay Talkies, he wrote a letter to me in Urdu asking me to come back, but, regretfully, I couldn’t respond to him for a number of reasons.

Like other women, my wife was a great admirer of Ashok Kumar. One day I brought him home. The moment we entered I called out loudly, “Safiya, come! Ashok Kumar is here.”

Safiya was busy inside baking *rotis*. After my repeated calls she did finally come out. I introduced her to Ashok, “She is my wife, Dadamuni. Shake hands with her.”

Safiya and Ashok were both embarrassed. I grabbed Ashok’s hand. “Come on, Dadamuni, shake hands. Why be so shy?”

Eventually he had to shake hands.

As it happened *qeema*-filled *rotis* were being prepared that day. Although Ashok had already had his meal, when he sat down to eat he wolfed down three.

It is absolutely mind-boggling that afterwards, whenever this dish was made in our house in Bombay, Ashok would invariably show up. Neither I nor Ashok can explain it—maybe it has something to do with the old saying: On each grain is inscribed the name of its consumer.

I have just now called Ashok “Dadamuni.” This means “elder brother” in Bengali. After I became friendlier and more informal with him he forced me to call him that. “Whatever for?” I asked him. “You’re not older than I am. In fact I’m older. Calculate it if you like.”

On calculation it turned out that he was two months and a few days older. So instead of Ashok or Mister Ganguly I had to call him Dadamuni. I liked it because it had a touch of the sweetness and roundness of *rasgulla*, the favorite sweetmeat of Bengalis.

In the beginning he addressed me as Mr. Manto. Later, after I agreed to call him Dadamuni, he started calling me simply Manto, which I didn’t like at all.

On screen he seemed like a chocolate hero to me, but when I observed him in real life he appeared quite athletic. His punch was so hard that it could easily crack a wooden door. He practiced boxing at home every day and he liked hunting. He could also do the most strenuous

ous jobs. What I regretted was that he had no taste for decoration. His house could have had the loveliest furnishings if he had wanted them. But he never cared about such things. And when he did pay attention to them the result was never pleasing. He would pick up a brush and paint all the furniture dark blue, or break the back of the sofa and turn it into some odd-shaped divan.

His house by the seashore is in a particularly filthy area. Salt water splashes against the outer windows, corroding their iron grillwork and a gloomy smell drifts up from the layers of rust. But Ashok is entirely oblivious to it. His refrigerator is rotting in the corridor with his big Alsatian dozing right beside it. In a room nearby his children are raising a rumpus while Ashok Kumar, perched on his toilet seat, is busy making all kinds of calculations on the bathroom wall about which horse is likely to win at the races, or he's holding a paper that has dialogues on it and he's thinking about the best way to deliver them. Ashok is particularly fond of palmistry and astrology. He learned the latter from his father and also studied numerous books on the subject. In his free time he reads the horoscopes of his friends as a hobby. After looking over my zodiac signs one day he asked me, "Are you married?"

"Don't you know?" I said.

After a brief silence he said, "I know. But look Manto ... Tell me one thing ... You haven't had a child yet?"

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Come on, tell me."

He told me hesitatingly, "It's nothing, just that people with your astral signs always have a son for their first child but that child doesn't live."

Ashok didn't know that my son had died after living only a year.

He later told me that his own first child was a stillborn son. "The position of your stars and mine is nearly the same," he said. "It isn't possible for someone with that alignment of stars to not have a son for his first born, or for that son not to die."

Ashok trusts astrology completely, provided the calculations are done correctly. He often says, "Just as the addition or subtraction of even a single pie in accounting can hopelessly mess up the total, so too a slight miscalculation about the position of the stars can lead us astray. That's as good a reason as any not to trust any conclusion one hundred percent. It's entirely possible that one may have made a mistake."

For the horse races, too, he generally sought help from astrology. For hours he would sit in the bathroom making calculations, but he would never place a bet higher than a hundred rupees on any race. And strange

as it may sound, he has always won. The hundred might become a hundred and ten or remain just a hundred, but it never shrank, not even by a cent. He didn't bet in order to win, but simply to entertain himself. His beautiful wife Shobha, mother of three, always accompanied him to the races. After entering the members' enclosure he would sit alone in a corner. A few moments before the start of a race he would give his wife the money to buy tickets for particular numbers. At the end of a race it was again his wife who went to the window to cash in the winning tickets.

Shobha is a housewife. She has some education but Ashok calls her "illiterate" as a joke. Ashok is very successful in his married life. Despite their wealth Shobha does all the housework herself wearing a cotton sari, like a typical Bengali woman, with a huge bunch of keys stuck to one of its corners. I've always found her busy working. Whenever there is a round of whisky in the evening she is the one who prepares delicacies of *gazzak* to go with it, or different snacks such as *namakparas*, roasted *daal*, or pieces of fried potato.

Since I drank too much she often admonished Ashok, "Look Ganguly, don't give Mr. Manto any more to drink otherwise Mrs. Manto will complain to me again."

Mrs. Manto and Mrs. Ganguly were friends and we put them to good use. Good quality cigarettes had become scarce due to war. Whenever some arrived from abroad they were promptly whisked away to the black market. We routinely bought them from the black market. But now and then when we could get them, or anything at all for that matter, at the regular price, we felt a strange pleasure in it.

Sometimes Mrs. Ganguly took my wife along shopping. More or less every major shop-owner knew that Mrs. Ganguly was the wife of the famous actor Ashok Kumar. So all she had to do was ask for something and the item rolled out from the darkest regions of the black market. Then again, Bombay men tended to be quite courteous and kindhearted to women. Whether you had to withdraw money from the bank, post a registered letter, or buy a ticket for the train or cinema—if a man went he'd have to waste away for hours, but for a woman it took no more than a minute.

Ashok hardly ever took advantage of his fame and popularity, but sometimes others used their acquaintance with him for their own benefit without his knowing anything about it. Raja Mehdi Ali Khan once did just that, in a rather interesting manner. Raja was working at Filmistan after I had left. He was writing a story for Wali Sahib. One day Ashok's secretary phoned me to say that Raja Mehdi Ali Khan was ill. I visited

him and found out that he was in terrible shape. His throat was so inflamed and swollen that he could hardly talk and he was feeling so weak that he couldn't get up, even with the help of others. And what was he doing about it: gargling with lukewarm salt water and applying Oriental balm.

I had a suspicion that it was diphtheria. Without further thought I put him into a car and phoned Ashok. He gave me the name of a doctor he knew and told me to take him there. And so I did. The diagnosis revealed that Raja was indeed suffering from that often fatal disease. Following the doctor's advice, I immediately had him admitted to the hospital for contagious diseases where he was duly inoculated. The next day I phoned Ashok and informed him about the nature of Raja's illness. When he didn't express any concern I became furious: "What kind of a person are you?... A man is suffering from such a dreadful disease ... the poor fellow has no one here to look after him ... and you show no concern at all!"

In reply he said only this, "We'll go see him this evening."

I put the phone down and went to the hospital. Raja was feeling a little better that day. I had with me the vaccines the doctor had asked for. I gave them to Raja, comforted him, and went off to my work.

In the evening Ashok got hold of me in Wali's office. I was still angry with him but he persuaded me to forgive him. We got in his car and drove to the hospital. Ashok told Raja that he had been terribly busy so he couldn't come earlier, and he asked to be forgiven. We talked about this and that for a while and then left. Ashok dropped me off at my place and continued on to his home.

The next day when I visited Raja, what did I see? Raja was sitting there with the pomp and majesty of a real *raja* (king): crisp, clean sheets, his pillowcase freshly laundered and sparkling, a pack of cigarettes in his hand, a flowerpot on the window sill, one leg stretched over the other, wearing spotless hospital clothes, ensconced in luxury and reading a newspaper. I was absolutely amazed. I asked, "Well, Raja, how did all this come about?"

He smiled. His huge mop of a mustache shook. "This is nothing. You just wait and see."

"What?" I asked.

"Comforts, pleasures ... if I stayed here for a few more days you'd see the adjoining room turn into a veritable harem.... May Ashok live long—my Ashok Kumar! ... Tell me, why didn't he come along."

After a short while he told me that all this was thanks to Ashok.

When the hospital staff found out that Ashok had come to inquire after him, everyone, young and old, barged in asking the same questions: What—had Ashok really come to inquire after him? What was his relationship with Ashok? Would Ashok come again? When and at what time?

Raja told them that Ashok was a very close friend of his. Always ready to give his life for him, if it came to that. He even wanted to stay at the hospital with him but the doctors wouldn't allow it. If it weren't for his contractual obligations he would come every morning and evening. He will certainly come this evening. And the result of all this? Every imaginable comfort piled on Raja in what was basically a free room in a charity hospital.

Visiting hours over, I was about to leave when I walked a throng of female medical students. Raja smiled and then said, "Khawaja, I think the adjoining room's going to be too small for my seraglio after all."

Although he is quite a good actor, Ashok can only perform well when he's working with people he knows and can be informal with. That's the reason he hasn't discharged himself satisfactorily in films that weren't produced by his normal team. Among his own people he's able to work openly and freely. He can give advice to technicians and listen to what they have to say. He can also consult others about his acting and solicit their opinions about the various ways he has rehearsed a scene. If, suddenly, he is taken out of this familiar territory he feels quite lost.

Since he is educated and has been associated with a reputable film company like Bombay Talkies for many years, he has acquired competence in nearly all segments of the industry. He knows the finer points of camera work, he understands the intricate problems of the laboratory, he has practical experience with editing, and he has also studied the complexities of directing. So when Rai Bahadur Chunni Lal of Filmistan invited him to produce a film, he accepted the offer immediately.

At about this time Filmistan's propaganda movie, *Shikari*, had just been completed and I was enjoying some leisure and relaxation following a very hectic work schedule that had lasted several months. One day Savak Vacha showed up. After making small talk for a while he suddenly said, "Sa'adat, write me a story for Ganguly."

I didn't understand what Savak meant. I was an employee of Filmistan and my job was to write stories. Writing one for Ganguly didn't require a special request from Savak. Anybody responsible enough at the studio could have asked me to do it and I would have complied. I later learned that since Ashok was going to produce the film himself he wanted me to write a story—an unusual story. The reason he didn't ask for it per-

sonally was that he already had quite a few stories which others had written.

Anyway, an appointment was made with Savak and all of us gathered at his clean, tidy flat. Ashok himself had no idea what kind of story he wanted. "Well, Manto," he said, "write something that's truly entertaining. And don't forget that this will be my first production."

Together we racked our brains for hours but couldn't come up with a suitable idea for a story. Agha Khan's diamond jubilee was underway and a colossal tent had been set up in Barabourne Stadium next door to Savak's flat. I tried to get some inspiration from that. Savak also had a fine piece of sculpture in his sitting room. I explored that for possibilities too. I even thought about my earlier writings. Nothing helped. It seemed I'd run into a dead end.

To wash away the accumulated frustration of a completely fruitless day we gathered on the terrace in the evening for a round of brandy. I must say, when it comes to choosing liquor Savak Vacha's taste is superior. The brandy had both flavor and body. The minute it went down our throats we could feel a blossoming sense of pleasure. The Church Gate station was directly across from us. The market below was bustling; at its farthest end the sea lay face down, perfectly calm as if resting. Big, expensive cars glided by smoothly on the shimmering surface of the road. A steamroller came into view, huffing and puffing. A thought drifted into my mind: suppose a beautiful girl dropped a letter from the terrace with the intention of marrying whoever picked it up—what then? It was possible that the letter might fall on a Packard. Then again, it was equally possible that it might blow over to the man driving the steamroller ... the possibilities were endless ... and interesting too.

I mentioned my thought to Savak and Ashok. They liked it. To enjoy it even more we poured another round of brandy and indulged in unrestrained fantasies. By the time the party broke up we had decided to build the story around this idea.

The story was prepared but it metamorphosed into something entirely different. There was neither a letter written by a beautiful girl nor a steamroller. At first we had wanted it to be a tragedy, but Ashok favored a comedy, and a fast-paced comedy at that, so we exercised the balance of our mental resources toward that end. The story was finalized, Ashok liked it, and filming got underway. Every single frame was prepared according to Ashok's direction. Very few people know that *Ath Din* (*Eight Days*) was directed in its entirety by Ashok Kumar. Although D.N. Pai's name appears in the film's credits as its director, not even an inch was

actually directed by him. The “director” didn’t have much importance in the Bombay Talkies’ organization. Everybody worked as a team. At a film’s release the name of one of the team members was listed as its director. The same procedure was followed at Filmistan. Since D.N. Pai was the film editor and very skilled at his job, it was collectively decided to put his name in the credits.

Ashok is as good a director as he is a character actor. I found that out during the shooting of *Eight Days*. No matter how ordinary the scene he really worked very hard on it. A day before the shooting he would ask me for the revised scene and then sit in his bathroom for hours contemplating its minutiae. It may sound odd but the bathroom was the only place where Ashok could concentrate fully on matters requiring his attention.

This film featured four new actors—Raja Mehdi Ali Khan, Upendranath Ashk, Mohsin Abdullah—former husband of the “mysterious” Neena—and the present writer. S. Mukherjee was to be given a role but, when the time came, he backed off using my refusal to work in his film *Chal Chal Re Naujawan* because of camera fright as a convenient excuse. The fact is he was himself scared of the camera.

Mukherjee was to be cast in the role of a shell-shocked soldier. The uniform and the rest of the paraphernalia were ready. When he backed down Ashok was baffled. He had no idea who else to pick for the role. Shooting had to be suspended for several days. When Rai Bahadur Chunni Lal started to get testy, Ashok came to me. I was rewriting some scenes. He took the papers from my table, put them aside and said, “Let’s go, Manto.”

I went out with him. I thought he was taking me to listen to the tune of a new song. Instead he brought me straight to the set and said, “Here, you play the role of the madman.”

I knew that Mukherjee had turned down the role and that Ashok was having a difficult time finding someone to do it. What I didn’t even suspect was that he’d ask me to do it. So I said, “You haven’t gone mad, have you?”

He became serious and said, “No Manto, you’ll have to.”

Raja Mehdi Ali Khan and Upendranath Ashk chimed in. Raja said, “You’ve cast me as Ashok’s brother-in-law even though I’m a nice person and I was most unwilling to play that part because I respect him a lot. So I’m sure if you play a madman the sky won’t cave in, will it?”

We started to joke around. But what started as a joke ended with Sa’adat Hasan Manto being cast as the mad Flight Lieutenant Kripa Ram. God alone knows what I had to go through in front of that camera.

The film was finished. When it was released it turned out to be quite a success; critics called it the best comedy. Ashok and I felt especially happy. We decided that our next film would be something entirely different, but that was not to be.

Shortly after the filming of *Eight Days* began, Savak left for London seeking medical treatment for his ailing mother. By the time he returned the film industry had gone through a revolution. Many companies had become bankrupt. Bombay Talkies was in very bad shape. After the completion of the mourning period for the deceased Himanshu Roy, Devika Rani left the industry to tie the knot with the artist son of an exiled Russian nobleman. After that many foreigners took over the running of Bombay Talkies but couldn't improve its condition. Eventually Savak Vacha returned from London and, with Ashok's help, he boldly took the reins into his own hands.

Ashok had to leave Filmistan and, in the meantime, I too received an offer of Rs. 1000 a month from the Lahore-based Mr. Moti B. Gidwani. I would have accepted it but I was waiting for Savak. When he and Ashok got together at Bombay Talkies I joined them. It was the period when the British were drawing up rough sketches for the partition of India—in other words, when they were standing on the sidelines gleefully watching the conflagration they had themselves started.

By the time I stepped into Bombay Talkies Hindu-Muslim riots had already begun. In these riots people's heads were being knocked off and big fires were being set the way wickets are knocked down and boundaries are hit in cricket.

After taking over, Savak Vacha took stock of the poor condition of Bombay Talkies, and had to face many difficulties. He removed an undesirable person, who happened to be Hindu, and this created many problems. But when his position was filled, I realized that Muslims held the key positions. I was there, as were Shahid Latif, Ismat Chughtai, Kamal Amrohi, Hasrat Lukhnawi, Nazir Ajmeri, Nazim Panipati and the music director Ghulam Haider. When all of them came together the Hindu employees felt hatred for Savak Vacha and Ashok. When I mentioned this to Ashok he burst out laughing: "I'll tell Vacha and he'll give them a dressing down."

The dressing down produced exactly the opposite result. Vacha started getting anonymous threatening letters: if he didn't throw out the Muslims his studio would be torched. Vacha would read those letters and fly into a rage. "Those bastards—they're telling me I'm at fault. So what if I am? Why do they care? They'll torch the studio? Let them. I'll throw

them smack in the middle of the fire.”

Ashok’s mind and heart are blissfully free of communal prejudice. He could never think along the lines the people who sent those threats were thinking. He always told me, “Manto, this is just madness. It will pass.”

But, instead, the madness continued to grow. I was beginning to feel guilty. Ashok and Vacha were my friends; they took my advice, they trusted me. But I was no longer sure of my own feelings. What if something adverse did happen to the Talkies—how would I face Ashok, how would I face Vacha?

The riots were at their height. One day on our way home from the Talkies we stopped for quite a while at Ashok’s place. In the evening he offered to drive me home. To take a shortcut he drove through a belligerent Islamic neighborhood. A wedding procession was coming from up ahead. The minute I heard the band playing, I lost my wits. I clutched at Ashok’s hand and shouted, “Dadamuni, where have you come?”

Ashok understood my anxiety, smiled and said, “Don’t worry.”

How could I not worry? The car was passing through a fanatically Muslim neighborhood where no Hindu dared set foot. To top it off, just about everyone recognized Ashok and knew that he was a Hindu, a famous Hindu whose murder would put quite a feather in their caps. I didn’t know any prayers in Arabic, nor even a single verse from the Qur’an suitable for the situation. I was cursing myself and praying incoherently in my own words with my heart pounding away: “Dear God, don’t let me down. Please don’t let any Muslim kill Ashok or I’ll have to keep my face bowed down out of shame and guilt for the rest of my life.” This wasn’t the face of my community, but my own, and yet I didn’t want it to be lowered before another community because of such a heinous act.

When the car came near the wedding procession people started to shout, “Ashok Kumar, Ashok Kumar.” I froze. But Ashok kept his hands on the steering wheel and remained quiet. I was about to shake off the numbing sense of fear and tell the mob to be sensible, that I was a Muslim and that *he* was escorting me back to my place, when two young men stepped forward and said calmly, “Ashok Bhai, you won’t find a way through up ahead. Here, drive through this side street.”

Ashok Bhai? Ashok was their brother. Then who was I?

I took a quick look at my clothes; they were made of *khadi*. God knows who they thought I was. Then again, it was quite likely that in Ashok’s presence they hadn’t noticed me at all.

When our car pulled out of that neighborhood, oh, did I breathe a

sigh of relief! Just as I was thanking God, Ashok laughed and said, “You panicked for no reason at all. These people—they don’t bother artists.”

A few days later at the Talkies, when I literally cut up Nazir Ajmeri’s story—which was filmed as *Majbur*—and tried to make some changes in it, Nazir Ajmeri admonished both Ashok and Vacha, “Don’t involve Manto in such discussions. He’s a story-writer himself so he can’t remain impartial.”

I thought about that a lot but couldn’t understand it at all. In the end I told myself, “Manto Bhai, you won’t find a way through up ahead. Stop the car ... and drive through a side street.” Quietly I took a side street and came to Pakistan where my short story “Thanda Gosht” was put on trial. □

—*Translated by S.M. Mirza and Muhammad Umar Memon*