

SHYAM

A STAR FORGOTTEN

A Biography by

BIMAL CHADHA





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Edited by

MANEK PREMCHAND



BLUE PENCIL

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Bimal Chadha

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Bimal Chadha asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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www.bimalchadha.com

“Send not to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

- John Donne

We should feel a sense of belonging to the entire human race, and hence should consider it our personal loss when anyone passes away, because his death has taken away something from mankind. The suffering and death of others should impact us today, because one day the funeral bell will surely toll to announce the end of one’s own life. We all need prayers for our conveyance to the unknown.

The above quote forms a cornerstone of my life’s philosophy, and while the specific reference here is to my uncle Shyam, I have felt it for others too. I hope I have been able to do some justice to the people featured here.

A handwritten signature in white ink on a black background. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "Bimal Chandra".

Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere thanks to everyone who contributed in bringing this book to fruition. Through this collective endeavour, we have not only created a book but also forged lasting connections, transforming acquaintances into cherished friends who are now akin to family. Each individual involved has invested their passion and dedication, making this project a true labour of love. Our heartfelt gratitude goes out to each and every one of you.

Veena, Monica & Akshay
(Bimal's wife, daughter & son)

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gentleman, for whom we will always be grateful.

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BIMAL CHADHA

(21 February 1946 - 3 February 2022)

Bimal Chadha

A Life Well-Lived

Born on 21st February 1946 in Rawalpindi, Undivided India, Bimal Chadha's formative years unfolded across diverse Indian locations due to his father's army postings. He started schooling at Garrison School, Mumbai, and then at St. Ornella's School when their family moved to Pune. He was exposed to the essence of diversity and cultural amalgamation from a young age. He graduated from St. Francis College, Lucknow, and later pursued a Masters in Biochemistry from the Lucknow Christian College.

His professional journey commenced as a medical representative at Hoechst, but the trajectory of his career took a turn towards marketing, earning him recognition as one of the country's leading marketing professionals. His notable stints included contributions to media giants like *Times of India*, *India Today*, and *Indian Express*. His intuitive understanding of people and their needs propelled him to excel in marketing. Recognised as a leader in his domain, he received numerous awards and accolades. His influence extended to teaching at the Times School of Marketing, where his insights enriched budding marketing professionals.

Bimal's professional journey mirrored his personal one, marked by transitions between cities like Chandigarh and Jammu and finally settling in New Delhi in 1985.

Bimal's exceptional linguistic abilities reflected his deep-rooted



interest in local cultures. Beyond Hindi and English, he conversed effortlessly in Marathi, Gujarati, and Bengali and even had a modest command of Kashmiri and Dogri. His mother tongue, Punjabi, resonated in his heart, connecting him to his roots and fostering his passion for understanding people at the grassroots level. Bimal epitomized the philosophy of being a good human first, transcending the barriers of religion and faith.

As a devoted husband to Veena, Bimal embraced the role of a father with unwavering commitment. His children, Monica and Akshay, were raised with values rooted in appreciating diverse faiths and prioritizing kindness. Family vacations, often road trips spanning different states, were not just leisure but opportunities for cultural exploration and interaction with local communities. Akshay now lives with his mother in New Delhi. Monica is married to Rajan Mehta and they have a daughter, Meher and live in Sydney, Australia.

Bimal Chadha was not just a man of knowledge but a living encyclopaedia for his friends. His open-door policy, extensive knowledge, and unyielding friendships were legendary. He was the torchbearer for family values, putting his family first, no matter the circumstances. Beyond the corporate world, Bimal was an ardent lover of the arts. His passion for old films, Urdu, English, and Hindi literature, and his extensive research on his uncle Shyam, the erstwhile Bollywood actor of the 40s, showcased his multifaceted personality.

Passionate about movies in all languages, Bimal's home resonated with various musical genres. His in-depth knowledge of Indian artists was phenomenal; ask him about a singer, and he would provide details



only found from a close source. His commitment to promoting local talent led to the formation of musical societies.

Deeply affected by the partition of India and having lost numerous friends in the wars between India and Pakistan, he harboured a profound connection with individuals from across the border. This sentiment was notably evident during his research for his book, fostering many friendships while exploring this poignant chapter of history. His dream book on Shyam, which unfortunately stayed unfinished at the time of his death, is a testament to his commitment to preserving family history and stories.

Apart from the book, his post-retirement mission was to revive the old school association of St. Francis College, demonstrating his commitment to his alma mater. In his later years, he delved into calligraphy, focusing on his favorite language, Urdu. He penned numerous articles for editorials, extensively sharing his life experiences and knowledge.

Bimal's passing on 3rd February 2022 revealed the depth of his impact on people's lives, from close friends to the *maalis*, *paan walas*, and *chowkidars*. Despite COVID restrictions, the multitude who attended his funeral spoke volumes about the profound impact he had on the lives of those fortunate enough to know him. His legacy lives on in the hearts of those he touched, a testament to a life well-lived, marked by compassion, kindness, and an unwavering dedication to humanity.





SUNDER SHYAM CHADHA

(20 February 1920 - 25 April 1951)



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SHYAM : A Star Forgotten

Introduction

Manek Premchand

This book is a fascinating account of Shyam, the successful actor whose life was cut tragically short by, of all things, a fall from a horse, just when he had settled in to stardom and seemed to have the world at his feet. The essential story has been written by his nephew—his brother’s son, Bimal Chadha—who dedicated several years of his life to shine a light on his uncle’s life and cinema.

I had met Bimal many times before he sadly passed away on 3rd February 2022, and in each of those meetings, his eyes had lit up when he spoke about his uncle. At such times, seeing a charge in his passion I would smile to myself, internalising the feeling of what happens to people when they are obsessed with a mission. Being a music lover, I had earlier heard a few songs filmed on Shyam, none more popular than *Tu mera chaand main teri chaandni* from *Dillagi*. Then one day, I was amazed to hear what the film’s composer Naushad said about this song in an interview. Effectively, that *Dillagi* was perhaps the only film anywhere in which the actor who played the villain had sung for the hero! Not just that, the villain’s name was Shyam too—Shyam Kumar to be precise. In the film, both Shyam the hero, and Shyam Kumar the villain were wooing the heroine, Suraiya, so they were adversaries. In the recording room though, they were buddies, with Shyam Kumar playbacking for Shyam! Then I learned about Shyam’s premature death, triggered by a fall from a horse and being dragged for a distance.





In Patanga

When it comes to sending a shudder down your spine, such imagery can hardly be worsened. Perhaps that is the reason why an overwhelming number of people who remember Shyam today first tell you it's the actor who fell off a horse.

Like everyone else, most Indian film personalities live normal life spans, i.e., 60 years or more. Some, however, have died too early. Such names include KL Saigal, Guru

Dutt, Meena Kumari, Geeta Dutt, Madan Mohan, Madhubala, and Sanjeev Kumar, going on to Divya Bharati, and Sushant Singh Rajput in more recent times. But perhaps just two of our film celebrities have fallen off a horse. That would be the Marathi actor and director, Baburao Painter, whose fall in the early 1920s had left him with a permanent speech problem, and Shyam Chadha, for whom it was fatal. He was just 31 when his life was suddenly snuffed out in 1951.

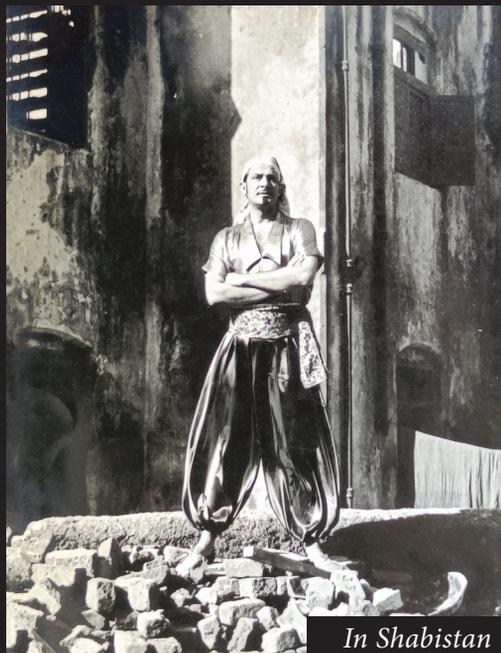
Riding a horse was considered smart in those times. It was the mid-20th century equivalent of driving a sports car today. The filmmaker Mehboob Khan was just an 'extra' till he was admired for riding a wild horse, rodeo-style, in *Shirin Khusru* way back in 1929. Later on, action scenes with men mounted on horseback were typically found in stories of dacoits (Sunil Dutt in *Mujhe Jeene Do*, Amjad Khan in



Sholay, etc.). Since such action scenes were hazardous, filmmakers often used trained doubles for them. But even for songs, just getting on a horse and being taken for a canter wasn't easy. And yet, many still preferred riding a horse themselves. Baby Tabassum and child actor Parikshit Sahni rode one during the song *Bachpan ke din bhula na dena* in *Deedar* (1951), Dev Anand went horseback in *Insaniyat* (1955) as he sang *Zulm sahen na, zulm karen ne, yehi hamaara naara hai*. Later still, both Dharmendra and Suchitra Sen rode horses during the song *In bahaaron mein akele na phiro* (*Mamta*, 1966).

But the grapevine tells us that after Shyam's accident, most people were aware of the dangers involved. They were informed, mainly through word-of-mouth, of the tragedy that had visited the debonair actor who was young, robust, and at the peak of his career. So if it could happen to Shyam, it could happen to anyone.

Shyam is an epithet of the dark-skinned Lord Krishna, who famously played his enchanting flute and loved butter. As I write this, my mind rushes to the film *Dillagi*, in which the opening scene introduces us to Shyam who plays his flute, mesmerising all the girls in the neighbourhood, Lord Krishna style. Not only that, soon after, he has a spat with his *bhabhi*





Having a spat with Bhabhi in Dillagi

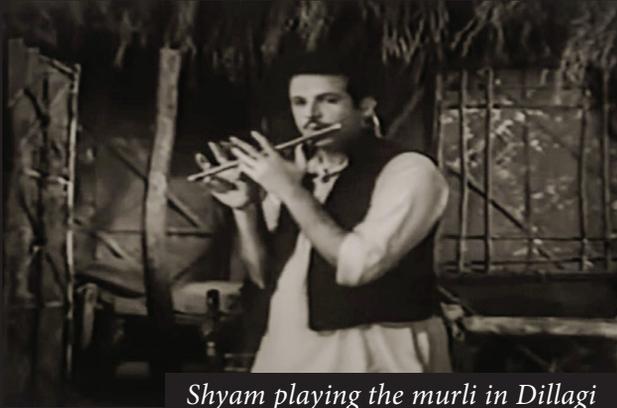
who won't give him any part of the butter she is making. He then proceeds to play the flute in many a song in the film.

Then I think of the popular KL Saigal song, *Ek raje ka beta lekar udne waala ghoda* from *President* (1937). There is a line in it that goes, *Itne mein honi ne apni bansi wahaan bajaayi* (where honi means fate; so this line means, 'fate intervened by

playing its flute'). In this case, playing the flute is figurative of course, but taken in Shyam's context, one is prone to say, "Ouch, that hurts!"

It has been two years since Bimal Chadha passed away. At his home though, he is considered to be very much alive, guiding and loving them. A striking portrait of his adorns a central position in the family's living room in Delhi. His large-heartedness, his humour, his love for music, his *Punjabiyaat*, none of these were lost on his friends and family, who remember him so much, and so fondly. His son Akshay has clearly inherited his father's passion for offering a light to dispel the darkness enveloping the life and times of a significant actor and beautiful person. Bimal's wife Veena shares this mission. I am grateful they have offered me a platform to edit this touching book in which the narrative essentially belongs to Bimal Chadha, who penned extensive first-person-account notes that spanned several years. His story is





Shyam playing the murlidharan in Dillagi

helped generously by his father, Harbans Lal Chadha (Shyam's younger brother), with copious inputs from many other people who knew Shyam or then knew about him or his cinema. All of us have

collectively endeavoured to correct the historical error of glossing over an actor who formed a key link in the timeline of Hindi cinema during the middle of the 20th century.

As you read on, you may find emerging the focus of a handsome young man, gifted for the screen, with a Casanova-like image when it came to his leading ladies, but given all that, a generous human being, never forgetting family values.

(Manek Premchand is a renowned Film Historian and author of several books on music and cinema.)





*(L to R Sitting) Din, Harbans, Taji, Bimal, Shyam
(Standing behind) A house staff member and Bhapa*

Memories for a Lifetime of Joy

Bimal Chadha

As I sit at my table to write the extraordinary story of my uncle, film actor Shyam Chadha, my mind is filled with dozens of memories, some sad, most happy, but none of them dull. These start in my childhood. As such, I have confirmed these events with my parents and other family members, so this is high-fidelity. I begin with early memories of a typical evening at our home.

The scene is our large drawing room. My uncle Shyam is surrounded by his friends and I hear laughter and wisdom and the odd song happening. I am too young of course, so all that goes above me. Being young, I also remain unobserved in this milieu, even as the elders indulge me when I'm spotted. At times unexpected people drop by. When he is not shooting, Shyam loves these sessions at home. He enjoys taking a shower and then getting into comfortable clothes such as his silk *tehmat* (a kind of lungi worn by Punjabi men) and a white *kurta*.

Besides my dad and my *Mamaji* if there's anyone from the family visiting us, he is expected to join in such an assembly and offer his inputs. Amongst my uncle's regular friends are the writers Rajinder Singh Bedi, Rajinder Krishan and Manto. The actor Om Prakash lives right across the street and filmmaker Ramesh Saigal is just down the road.



They have only to be informed to join in. I remember many others i.e., writer Ismat Chughtai, her husband Shahid Lateef, and then Krishan Chander, Balraj Sahni, Randhir, C Ramchandra, and many others visiting us on some evenings.



In Patanga

Manto always prefers to sit on the floor. Because he dresses in a white kurta-pyjama and has dishevelled hair, he looks like an ordinary man. One day someone asks him why he sits on the floor. He replies, “I am afraid I might fall off the sofa when drunk.” While everyone else drinks from glasses, Manto prefers to drink in the tall metal tumbler which is famously used for Punjabi *lassis*. When asked why the metal tumbler, he says “So that none of you may see my drink, how much I drank or left in the glass.” He is very fond of me, perhaps because I am the first and only child of my family. But Uncle Shyam is also extremely fond of me, so much so that I call him ‘Shyam Daddy’. This means the child in me fails to recognise my own father. Shyam often puts his hand around my waist or shoulder, holding me firmly, so that I don’t stray away. He teasingly addresses me as ‘*Suar da Puttar*’ (Son of a pig). Manto retorts from the floor: “*Eh Sher da Puttar hai*” (He is a son of a lion). When Manto defends me thus, I flex my arm to show them my biceps. Manto hugs me tight, plants kisses on my cheeks, and holds me in his arms,



after which he makes me sit on the floor beside him or in his lap. I can still feel his warm hugs and kisses, which tells me just how much Shyam and Manto must love children.

Yes, Shyam and Manto are very caring and loving, and it is true their children will, in time, get the best of their fathers. But we're running ahead of the story. First, we continue with my boyhood. So when the first drinks are being poured, I advance my small silver baby glass for my quota. My drink is made too, a diluted two drops of Scotch in my baby glass. The last drink is kept aside for my dad, Shyam's younger brother. Shyam asks me, "Shall we offer him one?" In benevolence, I nod my head and gracefully allow him. They say "Cheers" and I raise my glass too. That done, it is time for healthy discussions. These can be on any topic under the sun, except politics, work and ragging. These three subjects are taboo in this forum. The focus is more on anything literary, mostly a good book or a piece of poetry. Typically, someone reads a bit from a book and then throws it open for discussion. Shyam is a very active participant in these. But the language has to be Punjabi. Should anyone speak in any language other than Punjabi, he is exposing himself to Manto's wrath. Manto can use the choicest abuses in chaste Punjabi, something he cannot do in his prodigious writings. His argument is, "We all hail from the Punjab, and Punjabi is our mother tongue. Why speak in any other language?" Fair enough!

But he is not done yet. He contorts his face to mimic the English that is uttered by anyone at such meets, for everyone to laugh their heads off. Writer Rajinder Singh Bedi is the quickest to react to Manto.





Shyam with Manto (4th from left) and others

After showering the choicest Punjabi expletives on Manto, he adds, “You preach Punjabi but write in Urdu. Aren’t you a double-faced person?” Manto feels deflated, thinks for a moment, and then is ready with an answer. “I would be the happiest to write in Punjabi, but Punjabi cannot earn me my two meals, support my family and my *daaru* (liquor). Hence, it becomes unavoidable for me to write in Urdu.” That silences Bedi.

All such living room sessions at our home are held way past my dinner time. But I eagerly wait for Shyam to be ready and the sessions to start. And once they begin, they end late. At some point, I nod off, and later, go to sleep for the night. It is invariably Shyam who picks me up and gently puts me on my bed.

Of all Shyam’s friends, I remember music composer C Ramchandra as a boisterous person, though I have no recall of how he manages the conversation in a predominantly Punjabi milieu. Perhaps he is busy listening, laughing, drinking, and humming something. There is

END OF SAMPLE

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