

Tribute to Kumar Shahani

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Kumar Shahani's World



“The New Cinema in India represents our aspirations to free ourselves and become a self-determining people. The act of self-determination is one that has ramifications which go far beyond those of ethnicity and poverty. It implies, more than anything else, the recognition of a tradition as a historically vitalising and modernising force. It implies that we internalise the new technologies which have evolved elsewhere and through other traditions, into our own.”ⁱ

(Kumar Shahani)

Kumar Shahani was one of the most prominent film directors of contemporary India who practiced ‘epic cinema’ successfully. Shahani started his film career in the early 1970s. His name in the history of Indian cinema is listed with Mani Kaul, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, and G. Aravindan as a successful film director of the New Cinema movement in India, which started in late 1969. For reference, the New Cinema movement in India started with a manifesto

published by Mrinal Sen and Arun Kaul. With these two established film directors, a group of youngsters joined the new cinema movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of them was Kumar Shahani. Kumar Shahani made his first important film, *Maya Darpan*, in 1972, and *Maya Darpan* became a landmark film of New Cinema in India.

Kumar Shahani was born on December 7, 1940, in Larkana, Sindh, which is now a province of Pakistan. His family, during the

time of partition, migrated from Larkana to independent India. Shahani studied political science and history at the University of Bombay. He also studied screenplay writing and was a student of Ritwik Ghatak at FTII, Pune. Later, he received a grant from the French government and went to Paris to study cinema at IDHEC. He was taught there by the famous French master, Robert Bresson. Historian D. D. Kosambi's writings also inspired Shahani. In many interviews and writings by Shahani, we find that he acknowledges Ghatak, Bresson, and Kosambi as his mentors. Shahani realized the importance of myths and epics in interpreting the contemporary Indian life from both Ghatak and Kosambi. Laleen Jayamanne explicates,

“One of Shahani's mentors, the Marxist historian of ancient India D. D. Kosambi, has made him attuned to the sedimentations of time and human praxis in myth and the epics as well as in archaeological artifacts, even the most humble and mundane, such as microliths readily found beneath the earth in Pune. Shahani tells me that Kosambi's decoding of myth and metaphysical expressions have had a lasting influence on him. Shahani's cinematic project entails a modern reformulation of the ancient oral tradition of epic narration and performance in order to address the contemporary, and he says that his task is made easier by the fact that epic forms are still performed and therefore alive in India.”ⁱⁱ

In Kumar Shahani's film, the influence of Ghatak and Robert Bresson was immense. But still, Kumar Shahani could make his own path in filmmaking. Particularly, his films

were oriented towards a political end, which, according to Shahani, is a process of decolonization of film form and content in Indian cinema. Kumar Shahani borrowed a lesson; to be precise, he learnt a style from Ritwik Ghatak, which was known as epic style, and from Bresson he learnt the treatment of examining subjects before the camera in an introspective way. Kumar Shahani's first film, *Maya Darpan*, shows these features. *Maya Darpan* is a film that tells the narrative of a young girl named Taron, who belongs to an upper-middle-class wealthy family in a small town. The film adapts a short story by the famous writer Nirmal Verma who belonged to the Naya Kahani movement of Hindi literature. Verma's narrative mainly concentrated on the loneliness of young Taran in a semi-feudal social set up.



Khayal Gatha

In Kumar Shahani's filmmaking style, like his contemporary Mani Kaul's, it is observed that he slows down the temporal movement of a narrative. The space and time exposed in Kumar Shahani's films are slowly moving, where Kumar Shahani tries to avoid and deny the Western style of making perspectives and continuity editing. Kumar Shahani, from the very beginning, tried to distance himself from the conventional style of filmmaking, and he introduces a kind of

Indian aesthetic in his cinema, where the films to him were never narrative equivalents to novels, but a film to him was a medium to expose Indian societies in an epic style.

The epic style of filmmaking of Kumar Shahani could be best explored if we discuss *Khayal Gatha*. *Khayal Gatha* was made in 1989. The film shows the history of *khayal* in Indian classical music. The origin and evolution of *khayal* and the development and modernization of *khayal* as a form of Indian classical music were explored and examined by Kumar Shahani in this film. Kumar Shahani's style, approach, and ways of thinking could be best understood with this film, *Khayal Gatha*, which is not really a plot-based film in the conventional sense but a film that in every sense explores the Indian narrative tradition, Indian visual tradition, and Indian musical tradition. Shahani says, "Our epic theatre not only used music as part of its narration but linked itself to what we clearly find as a correspondence with music in the gesture and the use of verbal imagery." He notices his own epic style of filmmaking through the prism of music. He made many short films and documentaries, but the number of feature-length fiction films he directed is limited in number. Apart from *Maya Darpan* (1972), in 1984 Kumar Shahani made another film, *Tarang*; in 1989 *Khayal Gatha* came into being; in 1991 Kumar Shahani made one of the best parallel cinemas in Indian history, *Kasba*; and in 1997 Kumar Shahani made a very thoughtful adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Char Adhyay*.

Tarang tells the story of a modern industrial family in India. A strange dynamic of greed for property, kinship complex,

entrepreneurship, individual ego, and self-centeredness among Sethji, his nephew, and his son-in-law is explored in the film, which ends in guilt, mistrust, and calamity. Shahani, being a Marxist, in *Tarang* analyses, a typical



Tarang

Indian bourgeois family, and its internal dynamics from the core. Film critic Aparna Frank explains,

"In *Tarang*, we are confronted, not only with an unusual narrative structure, but more importantly, with a story told through a discourse that makes the spectator aware all the time of a significant mediation going on between the filmmaker and his material."ⁱⁱⁱ

Kumar Shahani's *Kasba* is another very appealing film which reflects Kumar Shahani's political ideology in a clear way. Shahani, as a political filmmaker, is more interested in liberal Marxism. In *Kasba*, Kumar Shahani shows a family — a family of a wealthy businessman named Maniram — and other members of the family, his two sons, his wife and the daughter-in-law named Tejo. Tejo is always placed in a milieu where

the space, particularly the landscape, the house, and the surroundings of Tejo, as Kumar Shahani depicts, are indifferent. The indifferent landscape is very striking. The film slowly unfolds many crosscurrents developing in Tejo's mind. A narrative space is developed in the *haveli* of Mani Ram, but outside it, there is another way of living.



Kasba

There is a landscape that is indifferent but contains a normal flow of life. There is a social life which is captivated in narrow spheres of small businesses. Shahani actually makes a parallel in this film between the two ends. On one end, there is Maniram's family and the *haveli*, and on the other, there are the surroundings and the village society. Kumar Shahani's films very earnestly investigate the formation of subjects in terms of their relationship with surrounding objects. There is a strange interaction shown between the subject and the material world in which the subject is immersed. Sometimes matter exists in its own right irrespective of the mind. Both Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani unfold the filmic space in such a way that the space and the subject enjoy their relative autonomy, and as the narratives advance a complex relationship between the two is established.

Usually, in India, the political filmmakers who want to make political

cinema follow a structure of strikes, industrial settings, and factory workers, which, at the end of the day, according to Kumar Shahani, becomes an imitation of the Western cinematic model of investigating capitalism. But in Kumar Shahani's cinema, the filmmaker emphasizes a family, which is the family of a *seth*, for example. *Seths* in India, as we know, develop capital and circulate it in trade and commerce. They are small holders, yet they are a very important part of the Indian capitalist system.

Kumar Shahani emphasizes equally the structure of a Hindu family in an Indian society. It's patriarchal modes of operation, the semi-feudal framework of morality, and the deprivation of women as far as their desires are concerned. It's conservativeness, it's ways of operation, and the monetary system that dominates an average rural Indian society – all come together in a complicated way in *Kasba*. *Kasba* is a very interesting and introspective kind of cinema that exposes the system of Indian society with respect to capital and the political economy of morality. It should be emphasized that not only the political economy of capital, but the political economy of morality and family structure are also explored by Kumar Shahani in this film.

Kumar Shahani's another major film is *Char Adhyay*, which he made in 1997. *Char Adhyay* is a novel by Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's novel criticizes the violence and dogma in the independence movement in India during the colonial period. Kumar Shahani is interested in this novel because the novel is not only a narrative of few characters, but the novel itself is a critical treatise on the freedom struggle in India. In this film, Kumar Shahani, following his epic style, examines

two important characters of the film, Antu and Ela, who are involved with a secret society that organizes violent movements against British colonial rule in Bengal. Antu and Ela gradually understand the problem of ‘unconditional loyalty’ and ‘dogmatic regimentation’ in the name of patriotism. They try to dissociate themselves from the secret society. The secret society declares them renegades and wishes to perish them.

Kumar Shahani takes a Bressonian style here. Bresson’s style was to observe minutely the characters in a milieu. Bresson’s camera tries to find something that surpasses the narrative in terms of a relationship between the object and the subject. This very style was followed by Kumar Shahani in this film. Though Kumar Shahani developed his own way of looking at the problem, the Bressonian style here helps him a lot.

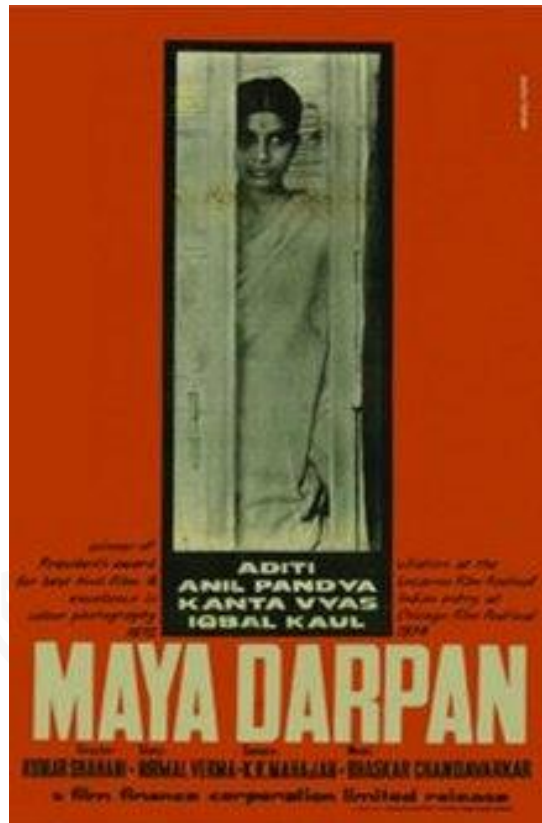
Char Adhyay, the film, is primarily based on the dialogues between Antu and Ela, where Kumar Shahani tried to follow the Tagore’s lines meticulously. But the way his camera constructs spaces become very interesting. And this is very much a Kumar Shahani style to overcome the dominance of dramaturgy in the narrative. He establishes a relationship between the objective world and the character in order to penetrate the outer shell of the narrative and finally to enter the discursivity.

Another very important aspect in Shahani’s film is his method of designing sound. Kumar Shahani never designs sound merely to follow the demands of the narrative. On the other hand, in Kumar Shahani’s film, sound follows a parallel development with the visual. Sometimes silence plays a role in his sound planning. Shahani keeps in mind the role of sound in Indian culture. He emphasizes the fact that ‘seeing is believing’ is not the central reasoning in Indian life. As a process of decolonizing Indian cinema,

Shahani shifts the focus from visual to aural perception, which helps the viewer discover a new method of reasoning — a philosophical take on cinema. *Char Adhyay*, *Khayal Gatha*, *Maya Darpan*, *Kasba*, and *Tarang* show Shahani’s unique understanding of the role of sound in cinema.

Music plays a central role in Shahani’s soundtracks. He says, “Music is perhaps the most highly developed sensate

function of human understanding. One can begin to speak of the aesthetics of sound only in relation to music because it is this that provides the most fundamental expression of the states of being and of acting in a continuously impinging disorder.” There are several instances that Kumar Shahani mixes up the classical musical tradition of India with the folk tradition. Particularly, we can again go back to *Kasba*, where, at the last sequence, or probably in the penultimate sequence,



Kumar Shahani's camera shows a landscape; and then comes a song. The music actually holds a sense of movement, whereas the camera very interestingly shows an immobile landscape. Conventionally, in those sequences, filmmakers prefer to pan or tilt on nature to add some visual movement. But Shahani did the reverse in order to create a room for the sound, and the autonomy of sound is felt by the audience. The sound designing becomes an out of the ordinary part of his style of filmmaking.

In the history of Indian cinema, therefore, Kumar Shahani is remembered as an unique filmmaker who tries to observe, examine, and investigate Indian modernity of the 19th and 20th- centuries with the help of some aesthetic, political, and ideological imports from the Indian tradition. He is a politically conscious filmmaker who never

entertained slogan-mongering but threw light on some under-illuminated areas of Indian modernity. Ashish Rajadhyaksha explained,


“Shahani has framed his resistance through a curious strategy that must be described as political, if not always conventionally so. Focusing on the symbolic significance of individual action, it has linked such action and its capacity to perform inside a specific site – an agglomeration of speaker, author/filmmaker and spectator – within an ethical universe. The ethics would be defined by the transactions taking place between these figures: transactions that derive from commodity exchange, but which also signify a new historical as well as performative practice for understanding such exchange as natural, gratuitous and commodified – which he described as the epic.”^{iv}

ⁱ Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2015) *Kumar Shahani: The Shock of Desire and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Tulika Books

ⁱⁱ Laleen Jayamanne (2014) *The Epic Cinema of Kumar Shahani*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press

ⁱⁱⁱ Aparna Frank (2014) ‘Critical Review: Kumar Shahani’s *Maya Darpan* (1972)’, *Synoptique*, 3(1),

^{iv} Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2015) *Kumar Shahani: The Shock of Desire and Other Essays*, New Delhi: Tulika Books

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