

Mehboob Studios, Bandra, Mumbai

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Mehboob studios, apart from being a centre for film production is involved in holding several cultural art events, hence included in the list of cultural centres on this web site. The text and images are reproduced from the digital edition of *vervemagazine* for the benefits of view, *paramanuseniorshealth.org* acknowledges credit to the above web site for all the text and images.







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MEHBOOB STUDIO... TIMES PAST AND PRESENT

Text by Alpana Chowdhury. Photographs by Ritam Banerjee.

Mehboob Studio's heyday as a hub for Bollywood's escapist confections may be over, but its walls continue to resonate with the sound of music at festivals like the Mahindra Blues, or come alive with intellectual debate when Anita Desai and Mahasweta Devi hold forth on matters literary.... Constantly re-inventing itself, the dream factory acquires new avatars to adapt to changing times, discovers Alpana Chowdhury

I am visiting the historic Mehboob Studio, in Bandra, after almost two decades. As a film journalist, many moons ago, this was one of my favourite haunts where I could drop in, unannounced, on a Dev Anand set and be treated to his famous charm and a cup of studio tea poured out of a battered aluminium kettle. Now, I am stopped at the entrance and made to sign my name and other details in a register and deposit my bag at a counter....

I have come for Anish Kapoor's installation exhibition and security measures are firmly in place. These are bomb-ridden times and one can never be too safe. But as I enter Stage Three where I have seen many a candy-floss fantasy being shot, a heart-stopping blast occurs and a startling splash of red hits one of the sooty walls. A few seconds later, I realise that this mock-action is part of Kapoor's show! Looking around me at what looks like a factory in World War-torn London – gloomy, black walls reaching up to a stark roof – I can't help missing the wonderful interiors created by Sudhendhu Roy for a Yash Chopra romance. Romance? Here I am in a large hall, with cold sheets of steel bent cleverly to create illusions of a very different kind. Kapoor's cerebral triumphs, awe-inspiring though they are, have none of the warmth of stories spun from the heart.

A year later, I am once again outside Stage Three. This time it is a sad occasion, very sad. The star of my teens is no more...Dev Anand has passed away a few days ago, in a hotel room in London, literally with his boots on; and there is a prayer meeting for him at Mehboob Studio where he had donned the pancake for many of his memorable films. Once again, there is security blocking our entry. This time it is some Johnny-come-lately who seems to be lording it over Navketan after the death of the actor whose doors were always open to us. "Devsaab will be very upset, wherever he is. This kind of high-handedness is totally against the Navketan culture," I reprimand the upstart before he lets us in.

Inside, I notice that many of the present-day stars have come with bodyguards in tow whereas the actor's heroines from yesteryear, Waheeda Rehman, Zeenat Aman and Hema Malini come graciously, condole with family members and leave quietly, unobtrusively. The walls stand silently, witnessing the swiftly changing times....

Another year passes.... Now the tall, barn-like structures of Mehboob Studio listen in to animated discussions on the slums of Mumbai, dysfunctional families and whether Indian languages are being ignored. It is that time of the year when writers of varied hues congregate here for an annual literary fest; and instead of Salman Khan you see William Dalrymple strolling across from one studio floor to another. Star-struck fans have been replaced by bookworms seeking autographs from serious writers like the handsome Aatish Taseer.

Café Coffee Day and other upmarket brands have put up stalls but I fail to grab a cuppa before the morning event from CCD because it hasn't got its act together as yet. So I amble across to the old studio canteen and am rewarded with a piping hot filter coffee which keeps me going through the day. At lunch, we come back here to have delicious chicken curry and daal fry that doesn't burn a hole in our wallets. This is the food that stars like Nargis and Sunil Dutt must have tucked into between shots of Mother India, the film that made the owner of the studio taste everlasting fame.

Mehboob Khan bought what were orchards, then, in 1951, and completed building Mehboob Studio in 1955. This is where he shot his magnum opus Mother India, a film that garnered both, stupendous success and critical appreciation. During the shooting of the film, the studio provided the backdrop for a heady romance between Nargis and her young co-star, Sunil Dutt, who played her wayward son, Birju, in the film.

Soon, other producers started hiring the studio as it was close to the Beverly Hills of India, Pali Hill. Guru Dutt was one of them and he shot the delightful Madhubala comedy, Mr And Mrs 55 here. Portions of his black and white tragedy, Kaagaz Ke Phool, too, were shot here. Who can forget that pathos-soaked shot of Guru Dutt breathing his last in the director's chair, with a beam of light coming in through the studio door? For Dev Anand, Mehboob Studio became like a second home as he faced the camera here for most of his acclaimed films. The lilting lyric, Abhi na jao chhod kar...ki dil abhi bhara nahin, which he sings in Hum Dono, to Sadhana, was not picturised in sylvan surroundings, but on Stage One of this studio! Such is the magic of cinema.... Large portions of Guide, too, took shape under the arc lights of Mehboob Studio. Till his very end, this beautiful studio with its impressive wooden doors and tree-lined drive-in remained the stylish actor's favourite shooting ground.

Apart from Nargis and Sunil Dutt's love story, 100 Hill Road witnessed many an affair down the ages. The telephone operator, at one time, was privy to some of these dalliances as lovebirds had to go through her to whisper their sweet nothings in each other's ears. The

make-up rooms too were filled with passion. Abrar Alvi, Guru Dutt's scriptwriter, used to have the unenviable task of hurrying Madhubala out of her reverie and her room after her paramour, Dilip Kumar, had paid her a visit. Later years saw, among others, the Sridevi-Mithun Chakraborty, Salman Khan-Katrina Kaif relationships blossom here.

From lilting lyrics to rumbustious chartbusters, this grand old studio has had all manner of songs and films shot within its cavernous precincts, easily adapting itself to the trend of the day. It has also seen wildly fluctuating fortunes. After the glorious success of Mother India Mehboob Khan was not as fortunate with his subsequent films and his coffers were much depleted when he died in 1964. However, in the '70s the studio's luck revived when its floors began to reverberate again with the magical words 'Silence... Sound... Camera... Action'. Badshahs of entertainment like Manmohan Desai flocked to Mehboob Studio and its late owner's sons were able to pull themselves out of the red.

Unfortunately, in 2000, the studio hit bad times again, with a fire gutting stages One and Two. For nostalgia buffs it is heart-wrenching to see the skeletal remains of these stages where many a classic had taken shape. Compounding the grief are whispers of rifts in the Khan family. As you stand in the corridors of the main building and gaze at the posters of Aurat, Mother India and other films made by a man who was one of the earliest to make strong, woman-oriented films, you marvel at how these pioneering filmmakers dared to go off the beaten path, risking all they had at stake.

Recognising Mehboob Khan's oeuvre of films, the Indian Postal Department brought out a stamp in his centenary year, in 2007, and the august function was held here, on the very same grounds where Mehboob Khan had lovingly crafted so many of his films. And, fortunately, unlike other studios that closed shop long ago, this iconic landmark carries on his legacy, going from strength to strength.

Apart from film shoots, a host of cultural activities keeps alive the memory of a man who had the courage to be different. Sometimes the studio's walls resonate with the sound of music at festivals like the Mahindra Blues, at other times its garden comes alive with intellectual debate when, under its decades-old trees, Anita Desai and Mahasweta Devi hold forth on matters literary, and, at other times, its grounds buzz with art melas. Constantly re-inventing itself, the dream factory acquires new avatars to adapt to changing times, changing tastes.

And so, almost 60 years after Mehboob Khan built a studio for himself, the place continues to stand rock solid even as Bombay becomes Mumbai, and the elegant homes around it give way to crass towers. Remaining an oasis of old-world charm, immune to the cacophony of blaring horns on the traffic-choked road outside, it re-packages itself, again and again, to survive the onslaught of builders and bull-dozers that are fast gobbling up what was once a very beautiful suburb of a very beautiful city.

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