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A stalwart on the Malayalam screen

FOR the third time a luminary of Indian cinema passed away during an international film festival without any official mourning, when producer-director-actor Prem Nazir breathed his last early on January 16. Geeta Bali died in 1965 during the third (and first competitive) IFFI. Polyglot actress Ragini (of Travancore sisters) passed away during the 1978 Filmotsav at Madras. If such a thing had happened abroad, the deceased would have received appropriate homage, which is as befitting as honouring the living ones with a retrospective.

Prem Nazir was a national artiste and the principal pillar of strength to Malayalam cinema. It is difficult to imagine what the Malayalam cinema would have been without Prem Nazir serving as its mainstay through its difficult transition from a single-digit cinematography to the front rank of Indian cinema. In the years immediately after Independence, there were only four dominant cinematographies — Hindustani, Bengali, Telugu and Tamil. Bengali lapsed into crises when the massive exodus from what then was East Pakistan crippled the socio-economy of West Bengal. Telugu and Tamil succumbed to the musical exuberance of Hindustani cinema.

There was not a single Malayalam film in 1947, despite the first Malayalam talkie having already appeared in 1938. The rise of Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand had created star images of unsurpassed following. The regional cinematographies yearned for comparable images to satiate their ego. And thus rose Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen in Bengali; Sivaji Ganesan, M. G. Ramachandran and Savitri in Tamil; A. Nageswara Rao, N. T. Rao and P. Bhanumathi (later D. Jamuna) in Telugu; Raj Kumar and Kalpana in Kannada; and Prem Nazir and Sathyan in Malayalam.

No doubt there were stars before them but they fascinated mostly the urban youth as cinema's reach was still confined to urban areas largely in the Madras Presidency. Invariably, these stalwarts had aged and could not be the matinee idols of a new generation that was to form the main slab of moviegoers in 1950s. Malayalam cinema did not even have great screen names to boast of. So, when Prem Nazir arrived on the scene in 1952 (with "Marumakkal") there was a new screen personality, a new debonair actor who could be the heart throb of the youth. Prem Nazir acquired the halo of a romantic hero and a loyal following. He soon became the first real star of Malayalam Cinema.

Then came two epochal events — the institution of National (then called State) Film Awards effective from 1953 and, three years later, the linguistic reorganisation of India. The dispersed Malayalee personality was reassembled into a distinct linguistic identity in the birth of Kerala State with Malayalam as its language. While Karnataka (then Mysore State) gained the least from the reorganisation, Kerala gained the most. Without the tribulations, the Telugu Cinema had faced (the War, the

Andhra agitation and later the Telengana agitation), the Malayalam cinema extended its reach from Nager Koil to Cannanore.

Working in Madras (and coming from the Travancore area), Prem Nazir, like the Telugu-Kannada artistes of the time, could not only speak Tamil but also act in Tamil films. Another factor that helped Prem Nazir's instant rise — as it had the rise of ANR, NTR, MGR and Sivaji — was the continuing reign of mythologicals and devotionals. Costumed musicals, filmed start-to-finish within the confines of a studio, contributed their own. All such films for a long period (some 15 years) kept him before his fans, nourished his romantic image and provided him unlimited scope for rehearsing and refining his talent in essaying diverse roles.

Since the bulk of South Indian cinema was (and still remains) theatrical-visually and aurally, Prem Nazir's stage background and his extraordinary command of Malayalam helped him win the hearts of his audience in the same fashion as did Sivaji's Tamil dialogue in his very first film "Parasakthi." By the end

in the aftermath of the post — "Gunga Jumna" developments, production rose steadily in all regional cinematographies, especially in Malayalam. In this phase of proliferation, Prem Nazir became the single biggest asset of Malayalam cinema and also gained from it personally.

Polish film academican Prof. Jerzy Toeplitz' discovery of Ramu Kariat's "Chemmeen" — 1965 had led to the film bringing to South India its first President's Gold Medal. The next national film awards jury, presided over by author-diplomat (late) K. P. S. Menon, singled out Basu Bhattacharya's "Teesri Kasam" and P. Bhaskaran's "Iritinte Aathmavu" (The Soul of Darkness-1966) for the PGM and the Second National Best Film award, respectively. It was a dividing line: the era of supremacy of Hindustani cinema that had dawned with Mehboob's "Ek Hi Rasta" — 1939 ended with "Teesri Kasam" and the era of the thematic supremacy of Malayalam cinema began and lasted until the mid-1970s.

"Iritinte Aathmavu" also threw into national limelight its lead players — Prem Nazir

Prem Nazir's towering presence is pervasively seen in the Malayalam films. He represents a unique phenomenon in Indian cinema. The 700 odd roles he portrayed in the films represent many facets of contemporary society.

of the 1950's, Prem Nazir's top position had become a fact.

Then occurred another epochal event at the dawn of the Sixties — the release of Dilip Kumar's "Gunga Jumna" — 1961, that changed the fortunes of regional cinema throughout India and for ever. Departing from the standard Urdu dialogue used in films, Dilip Kumar opted for a little known dialect-Purbia, as the lingo of an all-India film. The smash success of "Gunga Jumna" (almost entirely distilled from two Mehboob films — "Aan" and "Mother India") led to a series of long-term developments, pertinent among these in the context of regional cinema being:

a) the regional filmmaker recovered his linguistic pride and returned to filming in his own language with a gusto never witnessed before;

b) State governments intervened decisively for the amelioration of their own language films; and,

c) major regional cinematographies were inspired to take to colour filming, beginning with Satyajit Ray in "Kanchenjunga" — 1962.

Following Mehboob's example in filming "Aan" and "Mother India" in the garden region of his native Gujarat, Dilip Kumar had located his film near Deolali (where he had spent his boyhood). Inspired by Dilip's example, the Malayalee filmmakers returned to their picturesque homeland. And thus a contextual realism surfaced that made Malayalam films look different from other three South Indian films.

(known already) and an unknown 26-year old Telugu girl T. Sarada (who was later to receive the national best actress award thrice — a record broken only by Shabana Azmi who won the same honour four times). From this film also began Prem Nazir's histrionic excellence which is yet to be fully appreciated and evaluated. Playing a demented youth — Velayudhan, Prem Nazir discovered his prowess as a dramatic actor of great intensity. From 1966 to 1976, Prem Nazir rode high at the crest of a tidal wave of popularity and also gave his best to Malayalam cinema.

For this, Prem Nazir was not beholden to any of his directors who merely featured him in their films for the star value he represented but could never harness his resources as an actor. Knowing the manner in which artistes are directed in Malayalam films by the traditionalists as well as by the Parallel-waalas, I have no hesitation in saying that whether it was Prem Nazir, Adoor Bhasi, Sankaradi, Thikkurisi, Kottarakara, Sathyan, Madhu, P. J. Antony, Balan Nair, Mohan, Mamooty, Sudhir, Gopi, S. P. Pillai, or the distinguished female players (such as K. P. A. C. Lalitha, Jayabharati, Shiela, Sarada, Jalaja etc), the histrionic excellence is entirely the personal achievement of sensitive, competent artistes. The directors have no major hand in it. Malayalee directors do not change the persona of an artiste. They cannot. The maximum contribution the best among them make is clarificatory — to the extent of describing the state of mind

or the dramaturgical context within which he or she has to emote. They do not and cannot invent a personality for an actor in a particular role.

Hence, after the mid-1970s, Prem Nazir could not regenerate, could not grow beyond his performances in 1970s. Under such circumstances, Prem Nazir strove to make as many films as was humanly possible and in the process set up a world record — appearing in the largest number of story films — about 750 on a rough count, in Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada and Telugu. A greater achievement perhaps was that until his most active



Jalaja, Kaviyoor Ponnammam and Prem Nazir in "Ente Nandinikutty."

phase, Prem Nazir maintained himself in excellent shape

The first thing that registered on my mind about his art as an actor was his articulation. Then I knew much less (than I do now) about the wide local variations in Malayalam speech from district to district.

I therefore used to "see" his Malayalam speech. Without a conscious effort, he intoned differently in different roles, such as the reluctant and some times bemused speech of aluth or Soman in K. S. Sethumadhavan's "Adeytha Katha," or of the prankish Sivaraman of A. Vincent's "Thriveni," or the anguished, revengeful speech of Velayudhan of "Iritinte Aathmavu," or the protestations in Vincent's "Assurwithe" and Bhaskaran's "Kallichellamma" etc. (Most Malayalee actors articulate the same way film after film). Contrasting with the above is his straight oratory in "Ganga Sangamam" and "Kattalpalam."

Several times I have shared the platform with Prem Nazir in Delhi every time I used to marvel at his uninterrupted torrent of words for hours on end. This gave his dialogue in the early films a sustained flow unhindered by any breathing problem which must have pleased the language conscious domestic viewers of the 1950s, unlike the mixed language now heard in Malayalam socials.

The enormity of Prem Nazir's output restricts a judicious assessment of his total contribution to the art of acting and to the art of cinema in Kerala. Yet, some aspects stand out for easy decipherment. First and foremost being his great range — mythologicals, devotionals, period films and folklore, socials (in Hindu, Muslim and Christian settings), suspense, psyche-dramas etc. Taking only the socials, that form the vast bulk of his films, Prem Nazir's films acquire a social and sociological significance. In this context, the most deserving for attention are the films of Leftist ethos that deal either with the underground resistance (K. S. Sethumadhavan's "Anubhavgal Pallichakkal" from a novel by Thakazhi Sivasankaran Pillai) or about trade unionism in Ke-

rat, Prem Nazir's enormous output would make it difficult to avoid losing sight of his histrionic achievement in the search for great roles in memorable films. Making 20-25 films a year (more than the total annual output of some European countries) may sound mechanical but it would not be possible without a minimum reserve of talent.

The 700 odd roles of Prem Nazir are as many facets of the Malayalee society and personality. An important aspect of the psychology of the movie audience is its enchantment with a romantic ideal. Prem Nazir's handsomeness and longlasting youth image conveyed a sensation of glamour to the star crazy youth while it gave a sensual delight to his female admirers (who outnumbered the male ones).

It is therefore understandable that when teamed with a more dramatic actress — Sarada, Prem Nazir was received more as an actor. But when paired with Shiela, he became a romantic ideal and their film a harmonious duet. Indeed, the Prem Nazir-Shiela films played the same magic on the Malayalee screen as did the Uttam Kumar-Suchitra team in Bengali, Dilip Kumar-Kamini Kaushal, Nargis-Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand-Suraiya teams in Hindustani and Raj Kumar-Kalpana team in Kannada. In spite of having featured with artistes like Ragini, Shobhana, eternally charming K. R. Vijaya, Vijayasree Jayabharati etc, Prem Nazir appears at his natural best in films with Shiela, such as "Muthassi," "Devi," "Kallichellamma," "Anubhavgal Pallichakkal" etc.

It is my firm conviction that Prem Nazir had superb talent for sophisticated situational comedy, something closer to Peter Sellers. The proof are films, such as "Kadal," "Adimakkal," "Aadeytha Katha," "Muthassi" and, above all, "Thriveni," adapted from "Fanny." But an overdose of sobbing and the proclivity to killing characters that make Malayalam and other South Indian films heavy tearjerkers became a stumbling block in Prem Nazir's fulfilment as a comedian. The sadistic dispensation of middle class writers and the fondness for heavy doses of melodrama on the part of mediocre directors have generally deprived the Malayalam and other South Indian films the fresh breath of comedy. Films like "Mr. Sampath" and comedienness like Sridevi are freaks.

Like most top stars of the South, Prem Nazir embodied great humanism and was a man of charity. He nourished the admiration and adulation of millions of his admirers by steadfast devotion to Malayalam cinema Malayalee culture and Malayalee people. It is deplorable that the audiovisual show on 75 years of Indian Cinema put up by the NFDC at the IFFI-89 inauguration made no reference to either Prem Nazir or Sarada while it duly climaxed its pedestrian show with a pedestrian song from an equally pedestrian flop — "Shahenshah."

As far as Kerala is concerned, Prem Nazir's towering presence accounted for the sustenance of production stream for the newcomers to take over in their time. The glamorous image of the star Prem Nazir and the shining image of Prem Nazir the man merged into making him a unique phenomenon in Indian cinema. A Muslim who gifted an elephant to a Hindu temple and who played heroes of the Hindu epics, "Benazir" (peerless) Prem Nazir stood aloft as a symbol of composite Indian culture, edifying the secular traditions of Indian civilisation.

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