

R.D. MATHUR

(Compiled & edited by Krishna Murari)



Rameshwar Dayal Mathur, popularly known as R.D. Mathur was born in Delhi on 9th January, 1915 where he did his graduation at St. Stephens College. Seeing his son's interest in photography even as he was doing his graduation Gauri Dayal, his father, encouraged him to go to America to study photography and its allied subjects. He gained admission at the prestigious New York Institute of Photography and Cinematography where he studied portrait photography, commercial photography, cinematography and film processing. A science graduate, he was allowed to complete the one year course in six months. The remaining six months he spent in Hollywood undergoing practical training at the famous MGM studios and the Fox Film Corporation (Later 20th Century Fox).

He returned to India in year 1934/35 and applied for a job as a technician with the famous Bombay Talkies Studio. Himanshu Rai, the head of Bombay Talkies took him in as an apprentice to the German Cinematographer Josef Wirsching at a monthly salary of a hundred rupees. At Bombay Talkies apart from assisting Wirsching, he also worked in the studio's laboratory taking over Ashok Kumar's duties when the latter became an actor.

Due to the onset of Second World War (1939-45), the German technicians were called back and thus R.D. Mathur got his independent break with Anjaan (1941) starring Devika Rani along with Ashok Kumar. In fact he was the first Indian Cinematographer to photograph Devika Rani, the 'first lady of the Indian screen' who till then, had been photographed only by foreign technicians.

He went on to photograph several other films at Bombay Talkies including Basant (1942), Humaari Beti, Hamari Baat (1943), Jwar Bhatta (1944, in which Dilip Kumar made his film debut) and Pratima (1945). He further moved on to photograph and direct Gajre (1948), a Suraiya- Motilal starrer, Maghroor (1950) starring Meena Kumari also photographing Madhosh (1951) and photographing and directing Aagosh (1953) with Nutan and Nasir Khan.

Meanwhile, after a long hiatus work resumed in December 1951 on the earlier shelved Mughal-e-Azam. The old cast of Chandramohan, Sapru and Nargis in the roles of Akbar, Salim and Anarkali were replaced by Prithviraj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar and Madhubala respectively. Mughal-e-Azam was a magnum opus in the truest sense whose photography was entrusted to R.D.Mathur.



Receiving Filmfare Award for Best Cinematography from Dr. Rajendra Prasad, former President of India

The piece-de-resistance of the film still was the famous 'Sheesh Mahal' or Palace of Mirrors set. This provided R.D. Mathur the biggest technical challenge of his life. The set was full of mirrors and initially gave him sleepless nights as to how he would light it. He went through several photographic journals trying to find a solution but in vain. Finally with a lot of trial and error he decided to use bounce lighting instead of direct lighting. More than a 100 reflectors were hung or suspended on the sets at Mohan Studios with lights even borrowed from other studios for shooting done in the night. Dozens of different types of clamps and hangers with arms were made in order to hide the lights behind pillars, arches etc. Light arrangement with painstaking artistry had to be done to do justice to the excellent work done by the Art director Syed Sahib to put up huge and intricate sets depicting the grandeur of the palace. Many a times the cast and crew laboured for hours and hours just canning two -three shots a night, such was the quest for perfection. For the spectacular battle scenes in the films he used at least 8 cameras to capture all the action.



With wife Chanda Pyari



Mathur (centre) with (from left) JBH Wadia, Nasir Khan, Nutan, Dilip Kumar & Agha

Colour processing was not done in India at that time so the rushes were sent to Technicolor Ltd, London. The technicians there were amazed to see the results and could not believe that a palace scene with mirrors could be photographed so brilliantly as this was done for the first time in Hollywood or Bollywood history.

Mughal-e-Azam (1960) was a huge success at the box-office and his expansive camerawork was as much a star of the film as its actors, dialogues, music and direction. The film won for Mathur Sahib the prestigious Filmfare Award for Best Cinematography which he received at the hands of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, then President of India.

In the meanwhile he also photographed H.S. Rawail's Dilip Kumar -Vyjayantimala starrer Sangharsh (1968) and then was called in by Kamal Amrohi for Pakeezah. Pakeezah too, being made in colour like Mughal-e-Azam had huge sets rich in architectural grandeur, now familiar to him. A highlight of the portion shot by him in the film was the song *Chalo Dildar Chalo* across the wide expanse of sea and sky to the boat on which the lovers ride.

Following Pakeezah, he also shot Razia Sultan (1983) for Kamal Amrohi - again a film rich in grandeur and style. Apart from this he shot some other films, Heera (1973), Ganga ki Saugandh (1978), Dharam Kaanta (1982), Daata (1989) and his last film, Jai Vikranta (1995).

Speaking about his approach to his work, Mathur Sahib used to say that he firstly sought to give depth and perspective to the sets through lighting and proper exposure. To quote him, "It is my aim that whatever the art director has created should be visible on the screen in minute detail." He believed that every film had a different photographic approach and that photography should help the flow of the story - *khwaabon ko haqeeqat mein badalna*. He was also known for his splendid close-ups, courtesy his studies on portrait photography. He instinctively knew how to bring out strengths and hide weaknesses of faces through make up suggestions and lighting.

He was extremely happy that he had a very pleasant, rewarding & satisfying career as a Cinematographer and will always be remembered for his brilliant contribution ever put on celluloid.

A calm, soft-spoken man and a firm believer in God, R.D. Mathur later shifted to Delhi, his native place where he breathed his last on 26th April, 2001.

Editor will like to acknowledge inputs from RD Mathur's family : Mrs Meena Mathur and Mr. Vishwanath Mathur
