



MR. JAVED AKHTAR

Indian poet, lyricist and
screenwriter

Taken by the Editorial Board

YT: As a child, you were inspired by Urdu novels and were also influenced by the riveting plots and fascinating characters of different detective stories. How important a role did these stories and your fascination of reading play in helping you nurture your art and become one of the most renowned artists of the Indian film industry?

JA: I was not only reading the original Urdu literature but also most of the classical Bengali literature that was translated into Urdu. Since India had a big Soviet house of culture and they used to publish all their good novels and short stories in Urdu, I read most of them when I was 13 years old, whether it be Russian novels or Italian novels. In Urdu also there were two kinds of novels available, one was the serious novels like 'Gaudaan' and 'Maidan-e-Amal' by Premchand. On the other hand, there were thrillers like 'Jasoosi Duniya'. So, I was reading all of them. I started reading English literature and English novels but that was when I was 15-16. At that time, there was a great influence in me of Hindi cinema because right from my childhood, since I can remember, I was a movie lover. Those

movies, actors, and stories have influenced me, and then came the modern American novels, besides the heavy literature, so I think it was good for me since my sources were different so I did not get committed to one genre or I did not start imitating one style.

YT: As a writer, you have not only created trademark Bollywood films like Sholay and Deewar, but also critically acclaimed and profound movies like Lakshya and Saagar. Considering that these two genres of cinema are significantly different from each other, how different is the process involved in creating such stories?

JA: Firstly, let me correct the record that even Deewar and Sholay are really appreciated. Sholay was praised by none other than Mr. Satyajit Ray. He even said in an interview that he was really proud and happy to see that films of such standard are being made in India now. So, anything which is entertaining should not be looked down upon. You see, there is no genre that is good or bad in itself. For example, if you

are a painter and you are making, say, a calendar that will be treated as commercial art, you have to be a good painter to make a good calendar. If you are a bad painter you will end up making a bad painting. So, you should be good at your work and then whichever genre you will take up, hopefully, you will do good work.

YT: You have been a lyricist, a screenwriter and even a classical poet. As a creative professional, which of these mediums do you personally prefer and in which of these do you think you can display your imagination in the best possible manner?

JA: I would have preferred one of them if I would have been in a situation wherein, I had to choose one. Since I have never confronted such a situation where I have had to choose one at the cost of another, there is no reason that I should have any preference. The very fact that I do all of it means that I enjoy doing all of it.

YT: As a parliamentarian, you were vehemently opposed to the Copyright Amendment of 2012, which made the royalty collected by the producers on behalf of writers and composers non-transferable. After almost a decade of this amendment having been passed, do you think that the condition of composers and writers is much better in the industry today?

JA: In comparison to what the situation was and what the present situation is, yes, it is much better now. However, there is still something left to be desired. After the amendment and after the writers and composers have taken over Indian Performing Right Society Ltd. (IPRS) to a great extent, it has made a world of difference. During the pandemic, there were many of our colleagues who were not in such a happy economic situation, there were at least three to four thousand people who went out of jobs because the world stopped and they had no savings to take care of their families or themselves and we stood by them and we gave money to them again and again from the royalty which was

there. So, anybody who used to get say around 10,000 -15,000 in one year, today he gets 300 - 400 thousands per year. This difference is great and it will keep on increasing because there are still some people who are reluctant to pay honestly and there are some who are not paying even after taking strict legal actions against them. But with every month, every year the collection is increasing. I became the chairman of IPRS in 2017 and the average annual pay of IPRS of royalty was somewhere around 350-400 million but today it has increased to 3000 million. This money is divided and given to the publishers, authors, and composers. The very amount can tell you how much we have achieved, but there is still a lot to be achieved even now.

YT: You have worked as a prominent screenwriter over the years, and your work has been a classic example contrary to prosaic writing. In an industry where mass consumption is hailed over artistic freedom, how do you create work that stands out both ingeniously and authentically?

JA: Cinema is for mass consumption, mostly mainstream cinema. If one is making a niche film or a film that goes to a festival and is appreciated by the connoisseurs and that is good enough for them, such people have the right to do so and one respects them for it. Many great films are made in that genre. But at the same time, there are some people who like to communicate to a bigger audience, which is called mainstream. Now the mainstream has developed a term called 'Lowest Common Denominator' which should not be a licence to be crude, absurd, vulgar, obscene, and in bad taste. The Lowest Common Denominator can be quite high. It may be called the lowest but it can be high, artistic, interesting, sophisticated, have a certain emotional depth, and so on. I mean pictures like *Pyaasa*, *Awara*, *Ganga Jamuna*, *Mother India*, *Mughal-e-Azam*, and so on were mainstream films. They had songs, stars and they were very good films. So, this is no excuse that we are making films for the mainstream. If one wants to

communicate to a larger audience, it does not give them the license to be bad. The difference between a good niche film and a good mainstream film is like giving a lecture in a seminar and giving a lecture to a crowd of 50 thousand people. If you are addressing 50 thousand people, your value and your message should not change, only your pitch will be different because you are not talking to people who are familiar with the subject, have the required knowledge or certain IQ and understanding. You keep your expressions and language a bit more direct than what you would have done in a seminar and so on. So, I think mainstream cinema and niche cinema are different in that aspect only. Only the communication becomes different and it better be because if you are trying to communicate and you fail in doing so, then you have failed. You should be able to deliver your message, whatever it be, it should reach the common man.

YT: You have, with sheer determination and hard-work, been a part of the Indian movie industry for almost 50 years. As someone with considerable experience, how do you think the pandemic has shaped the way in which the industry functions? Do you think the pandemic has affected the kind of content produced in the industry, considering the changing preferences of the audience?

JA: We shall only be able to gauge the impact of the pandemic on Indian cinema, after a couple of years. The simple reason for this is because the movies and content which was being produced in the midst of the pandemic, will only be released one to two years down the line, and that is when we will be able to tell. Nonetheless, I think that the pandemic surely gave people the time necessary to introspect and review their values, style, manner of storytelling and so on. At the moment, however, the film industry has been going through a strange phase. Movies are not performing well, and perhaps we were moving in this direction for quite some time now.

Take the example of the music industry. Young people rather remember songs released 40 - 50 years back, than the music released one to two months ago. Thus, somewhere along the way, Indian music lost its shelf life, and I feel that this has come to Indian cinema too. This is where young filmmakers must assess the reasons behind this occurrence. After all, hospitals were always there. People would always fall sick. However, there remains a difference between an individual falling sick, and a pandemic. In the film industry too, some films were always unsuccessful. However, the current scenario is like that of a box office pandemic gripping the silver screen. Hence, young filmmakers have to re-evaluate their visions, values and their manner of communication and decipher the reasons as to why they can no longer reach the common Indian.

YT: In the past few years, Indian mainstream news media has been accused of being complacent and not executing its function in the desired manner. As a proponent of freedom of press, do you think the Indian media has been serving its purpose of providing relevant and accurate information to the citizens?

JA: No. There are ample reasons behind this. Media, as of today, is majorly electronic. I, rightly or wrongly, feel that there is a notion amongst the present Indian media, that if they stream anything that goes against the current dispensation, they can land into trouble. It is not my place to judge whether this line of thinking is appropriate or not, but this is the impression I get from the media, and hence, I rarely find them ever being critical and/or openly critical. On the other hand, there lies another compulsion on electronic media. They survive, all round the world, on advertisements. Advertisements of refrigerators, air conditioners, and other expensive appliances. These can only be bought by the affluent, upper-middle class Indian. Thus, these advertisements have channelled electronic media into catering news for the elite Indians, of their interests and views. Thus, why should the

media cover the village? Such people will not buy such appliances. The financial gains of the advertisements have influenced the media into covering news that only a small section of the Indian demographic can relate to. This is the sad truth, that the Indian media has abdicated their responsibility.

YT: **Considered a pillar of democracy, the role of social media is to ensure that the people are aware of the social, economic and political developments taking place around them along with playing a pivotal function in creating public opinion. Having used the platforms as an active means of voicing your opinion, how important is social media and its distinguished fraternity in influencing public views in a politically dynamic environment?**

JA: Of course, it is very important. The kind of polarization we see in society today is to a great extent due to the media. Primarily, the media is responsible. Constantly discussing topics which are actually irrelevant to the real problems of the average person. How many discussions have you seen about employment or price rise? How many discussions? It is constantly about something which is actually of no significance but it is turned into something very important. And indirectly, this only causes polarisation in the society.

YT: **The Indian audience has evolved with time with respect to the kind of songs that they want to listen to and the stories that they want to watch on screen. As a screenwriter and a lyricist, how has your process changed so as to cater to these changing tastes and preferences?**

JA: I have already said this before that today Indian film music has no shelf life at all and music is played as long as the movie is in the theatre. The moment the movie is removed from the theatre, the music vanishes and it does not have that kind of life that once upon a time hindi music used to have and I am very sad about it. But many factors

are responsible for it. One, since perhaps the last thirty - forty years, our society's list of priorities did not have poetry, literature, classical arts. I mean, there was no priority given. Whatever can be put in a bank is important and the rest of it is not important. Only those vocations are important which can give you some kind of economic security like doctor, engineer, civil service and so forth. But anything which cannot be deposited in the bank is not important. Coaching is not important; language is not important and no attention has been given to this. So, today when you see a young person, his or her vocabulary will be not even one-fourth of the great languages, in any language. Language is not just a vehicle of communication; it is a vehicle of culture. When language shrinks, culture and tradition shrinks. I mean how would you know what is your folk art, folk poetry, folk song, folk music? You do not know. Most of the people are not aware of it. So, it will reflect. Ultimately, the people who are making films do not come from Mars, they were born in this society and they hardly know about the nuances of the language. Films are not made by some Martians. Films are made by people who are born in your society. They grew up and they started making films.

YT: **Your work continues to resonate in the lives and hearts of millions around the country; the students of St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata are no different. What message would you like to pass on to them?**

JA: See, messages are given by very big people. I am not that big and I don't believe that young people need my message. They are smart people; they are better people. They may get polluted like me after a little while but, at least now in this age, they are much better people - more sensitive, more sensible people. So, please see to it that our world, the world we have made, does not spoil you and you remain what you are and remain true to yourself. And you do not need any suggestions from anybody who is of my age!