

[PRESS RELEASE]

Sitaare Zameen Par:

Portrait Photographs of Bombay Cinestars from the Golden Era

By JH Thakker

*Yaad na jaaye, beete dinon ki,
Jaake na aaye, jo din
Dil kyun bulaaye unhe?*

It is hard to forget
Those bygone days,
Days not meant to return –
Why does the heart recall them?

Lyricist: Shailendra, Singer: Mohammad Rafi, Music Director: Shankar Jaikishan,
Movie: *Dil Ek Mandir* (1963)

Musical melodies with evergreen lyrics that lingered, melodrama peppered with unforgettable dialogues, and the grandeur of a royal past or modern city serving to be the *mise-en-scène* of a romance: these were some of the major leitmotifs that the post-Independence Bombay cinema was known for. We revisit today the ‘golden era’ of the Bombay film industry and the faces behind them with a sense of nostalgia as well as fascination, since the world that they evoke is both timeless as well as transient. These figures from the past are like those distant and disappeared heavenly bodies which now exist only in their silver shadows, cast on the retinas of earthly beings.



We, at KNMA, are delighted to announce the opening of our nostalgia-fuelling exhibition and its ‘first day first show’ presenting the charm and opulence of the magical and sparkling fifties and sixties of Hindi cinema. This exhibition of the portrait photographs of Bombay cinestars by the eminent J H Thakker, offers a snippet of a particular chapter from the long history of celluloid in the subcontinent: the crucial decades roughly between 1947 and 1968. This interregnum coincides with what has widely been registered as the “Golden Age of Hindi Cinema”, when the post-Partition India became the second largest film-producing country in the world after Hollywood, partly due to the influx of migrants to Bombay (Mumbai) specifically from Lahore film industry in Pakistan. Thakker, also a Partition refugee, set up his “India Photo Studio” at Dadar

in 1948, a spacious art-deco apartment which was to be graced by a constellation of upcoming and established actors of the Bombay cinema such as Dilip Kumar, Meena Kumari, Madhubala, Bharat Bhushan, Nargis, Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand and Nutan. A master of composition in black and white and sepia tones, he created magic developing his silver gelatin prints.

Thakker quickly understood the exceptional role assigned to him—that of shining the glittering light of these stars on the earth, while masquerading as any other crew member on the movie set. Thakker not only utilised his technical acumen and astute sense of the “chiaroscuro” (the light and dark gradation of tones) but deployed imagination to formalise and posture glamorous subjects as the icons of popular romance. Within these “temples of desire” exquisitely perfumed by timeless music, song and dance compositions, Thakker’s practice can be contextualised as that of an idol-maker.



The newly Independent India had a vexed relationship with the burgeoning film industry, despite the role it would play in cementing nationalist values and the creation of popular stars across cultural differences. By the year 1968, Thakker, as Bombay cinema’s favourite photographer, had distanced himself from the world of stardom. He was disillusioned by the sharp changes in production process wherein the Technicolour reigned supreme and actors were no longer required to spend long hours at the photo studio for promotional stills. Instead, Thakker now preferred to use his vast repertoire of photographic talent to image the common people with the same interest.

In 2003, the expert lensman joined his beloved stars in the night sky, leaving behind countless photographs and memories of an era of filmic time.

- Roobina Karode

Image captions:

Image no 1: Nargis, Photograph by JH Thakker, Silver gelatin print, Collection and image courtesy: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

Image no 2: Dev Anand, Photograph by JH Thakker, Silver gelatin print, Collection and image courtesy: Kiran Nadar Museum of Art

Biography

Jethalal H. Thakker (1923-2003) was a significant figure in the history of Bombay cinema as well as the culture of independent studio photography in India. His ancestral family belonged to Quetta, currently in Pakistan. During the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, Thakker moved to Bombay (Mumbai) from Karachi where he was working as an apprentice at a photo studio. He eventually set up the India Photo Studio in Dadar, just beside the famed Chitra Cinema, a location which helped him connect with the aspiring actors of Bombay film industry. During the 1950s and ‘60s, Thakker became popular for his distinct style of creating ambient as well as dramatic compositions. Thakker’s black and white portraits played a substantial role

in shaping the public persona and stardom of Bombay cinestars. Some of the important film photographs that Thakker produced during the zenith of the Bombay cinema's Golden era—the 1950s—include Dilip Kumar's *Footpath* (1953), the Russian actor Oleg Strizhenov starrer *Pardesi* or *Over the Seas* (1957) as the first-ever Soviet-Indian movie, superhits like *Chori Chori* (1956) starring Raj Kapoor and Nargis etc. A portion from his body of work has been displayed at the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai (1993), National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi (2000), and Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum (2016).
