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Om Puri: The man who presented the real faces of the subcontinent of India

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Om Puri: The man who presented the real faces of the subcontinent of India

ABSTRACT

The Indian film industry continues to turn out between 1600 to 2000 films every year, making it the largest movie producing country in the world. Yet, it would be a challenge for an average European or American moviegoer to name a film actor from the Indian subcontinent. Naming the films may be easier. For instance, the millennials may be able to name Slumdog Millionaire (2008), the Generation X crowd may mention Gandhi (1982), and the older audiences may recall The Party (1968) and Ganga Din (1939) as movies about the Indians and India. It was not until the movie Gandhi that Indian actors were given the opportunity to play as Indians. Sam Jaffe and Abner Biberman played as Indians in Ganga Din; Peter Sellers was the Indian actor in The Party, and Shirley MacLaine was the Princess Aouda in Around the World in 80 Days (1956). It is reasonable to assume that many film viewers may be unfamiliar with Om Puri, an actor who played in over 325 films in India, Pakistan, UK, and the United States of America, and made films in English, Bengali, Punjabi, and Tamil languages. Om Puri passed away in 2017. His name may be unfamiliar, his face and his work as an actor will remain unforgettable. Between Gandhi (1982) and Viceroy's House (2017), Puri acted in two dozen films in the UK, Canada, and the United States of America. This paper discusses Puri's work in the popular Hindi cinema, in the Indian Parallel Cinema, and in European and North American films.

Keywords: Indian cinema, Indian diaspora, Film and society, National stereotypes in cinema.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the life and work of late Indian film actor, Om Puri (1950 -2017). The goal is attained by dividing the paper into four sections. The first section offers a short biography of the actor. This part also includes his education and training as an actor. The second section describes the magnitude and scope of the commercial Hindi cinema, and the development of a non-traditional, art cinema, i.e., the Parallel Cinema in India. The third section offers a sampling of Om Puri's work in the traditional and Parallel Cinema in India. The fourth section describes Om Puri's work in English language films made in England, Canada, and the United States of America.

OM PURI: A BRIEF PROFILE

Om Puri came from an underprivileged background. He was born on October 18, 1950, in Ambala, India to Tek Chand Puri and Tara Devi. He was the youngest of the eight siblings. His father, Tek Puri, while working for the Indian Railway, struggled to provide for his eight children. Five of them died at very young ages. Only Om Puri, one of his elder brothers, Ved Puri, and an elder sister Vedvati survived past the ages of twenty. When Om Puri was six years old, his father was sent to prison on false charges of theft of cement from the railway warehouse. His wife and children became homeless (The Daily Dawn, 2017). Tek Puri

defended himself successfully and was acquitted, but his family went through serious hardships. His wife, Tara Devi, became mentally unstable and was put in an asylum. His sister, Vedvati, who died in her 20s, also suffered from mental health and had to be institutionalized.

To support the family, the two brothers, Ved and Om went to work. Om was six years old and his brother a few years older. Ved worked as a railway porter, and Om waited tables at a street-side food stall and as a tear bearer and picked coal from the nearby railway tracks (Wikipedia). As a child, Om suffered from smallpox – a condition that scarred his face for life (Puri 2009).

After completing his school studies, Om Puri was able to secure a government job as a clerk making Rs 600 per month. In 1970, he decided to quit his job and pursue a career in acting (Pooja 2018). He auditioned at the National School of Drama in Delhi. Indian cinema has, traditionally, been obsessed with good-looking actors, and the auditioning committee members at the academy were unsure as to what sort of roles could a person play with a smallpox-ridden face? However, on the strength of his performance, he earned the admission and completed his training during 1970 – 1973.

Another fellow actor, Naseeruddin Shah, encouraged him to join the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune (Shah 2014). Puri struggled for 13 years in Delhi and Mumbai before his first acting job. Although Puri was unimpressed by the training he received at the FTII from 1974 to 1976, he remained dedicated to his craft and succeeded in securing film roles long before his other good-looking classmates (Rashid 2017). Om Puri went on to act in over 300 films. It has been said that Puri did not get the opportunity to play the parts that went to other leading men in India, or the kind of parts that went to older actors such as Dustin Hoffman, Robert De Niro, and Anthony Hopkins in the European and American movies, and that he remained an underrated and underpaid actor (BBC 2017). However, in recognition of his work, in 1990, he received the Padma Shri award, the fourth highest civilian honor in India (Indian Ministry of Home Affairs), and in 2004, in recognition of his contribution to the British film and television industries, he received an honorary Officer of the Order of the British Empire (BBC 2017). Anil Zankar, the head of the Film Studies Department at FTII, said, "...the late actor's commitment to work played a great role in his success" (Rashid 2017). Actor-film director, Satish Kaushik credits Om Puri for convincing "the film audiences to look beyond an actor's face" (News 18 2017). In 1991, he married Seema Kapoor, the sister of actor-director Annu Kapoor. The union lasted all of eight months. In 1993, he married a journalist, Nandita Puri. Their son, Ishaan was born in 1997. Nandita Puri published Om Puri's biography titled *Unlikely Hero: The Story of Om Puri* in 2009. The marriage ended in 2013, and Om Puri went back to his first wife, Seema Kapoor. In 2016, Seema Kapoor directed Om Puri in his last Indian film, *Mr. Kabaadi/The Junk Dealer* (2017). The film, dedicated to the memory of Om Puri, was released in September 2017. Om Puri died of a heart attack on January 6, 2017, at his residence in Mumbai in India. He was 66 years old.

CINEMA IN INDIA

Thomas Edison held the first screening of projected images in the U.S. in 1896. In the same year, the agents of The Lumière Brothers brought the moving pictures to Calcutta and Bombay (Ramanathan 2002), and Calcutta. Within the next two years, the local scenes of

trains pulling into stations, horse races, and classical dances were making the rounds in the major cities in India.

Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatavdekar (better known as Save Dada) was the first Indian filmmaker to make movies for the local consumption in India. In 1899, he made two shorts, *The Wrestlers*, and *Man and Monkey*. In 1903, Save Dada produced the first documentary in India: the coronation of Edward VII in Calcutta.

In 1907, a Calcutta-based entrepreneur, Jamshedji Framjee Madan, established the first permanent movie theater in India—Elphinstone Picture Palace, later renamed as Chaplin. In the U.S., the Nickelodeon era began in 1905. Technological advances and the popularity of different genres in the Indian cinema have closely followed the developments in the United States. The first American major feature film, *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith was released in 1914. In India, Dhundiraj Govind Phalke (known as Dadasaheb Phalke) made a historical/mythical epic, *Raja Harichandra/King Harichndra* in 1913 (Rehman 2016). The first American sound film, *The Jazz Singer*, came out in 1927. Four years later, Ardeshir Irani directed India's first full-length talkie—*Alam Ara/Light of the Universe* (1931).

By the late 1930s, Indian filmmakers were experimenting with color and the first color film, *Kisan Kanya/Woman Farmer* appeared in 1937. This was two years behind director Rouben Mamoulian's *Becky Sharp* (1935) – the first American Technicolor feature. The first American Cinemascope film, *The Robe*, directed by Henry Koster, came out in 1953. Guru Dutt completed the first Indian cinemascope film *Kaagaz Ke Phool/Paper Flowers*, in 1959. Similarly, the Indian movie industry embraced other technological advances such as stereo sound, Dolby sound recording, zoom lenses, and digital recording and editing almost at the same time as Hollywood.

In the first Indian talking picture, *Alam Ara/Light of the Universe* (1931), the actors spoke Urdu, but more importantly, in dramatic scenes, they expressed their emotions through songs. *Alam Ara* had seven songs. The popularity of this film convinced the filmmakers that a mixture of Indian musical theatre and drama written in the poetic Urdu language would draw large crowds. This tradition has persisted. Indian movies still rely on mythical epics and legendary historical characters, and regardless of what language they are made in (Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil); almost all Indian films carry the flavor of Urdu language in their dialog. To this day, with a few exceptions that only confirm the rule, all Indian movies, despite their genre or topic, have musical numbers. The mainstream Indian cinema is musical cinema (Taj 2002). In the early sound films, the stars recorded their own songs. However, with the increase in demand for the movies, the producers were compelled to employ actors who were not necessarily singers. Professional singers (these came to be known as playback singers) stepped in to sing the songs; actors mouthed the words on the screen. The practice began with a Hindi movie, *Dhoop Chaon/Light and Shadow* (1935).

During an average year, India produces 1600 to 2000 feature films, i.e., more than the rest of the world combined. Although half of the Indian movies are produced in south India in Tamil and Malayalam languages, it is the Hindi language output from Mumbai that gives Indian cinema its identity (Lent 1990). The Indian motion picture industry employs 6 million people. It is estimated to be a \$2 billion industry (Cain 2006).

Since the 1990s, the Indian diaspora, in Europe, Great Britain, Canada, and the United States has become a substantial hard currency revenue source for the Indian film industry. In recent years, some of the movies have earned as much as 30% in the overseas markets. However, revenues for the Indian movie industry are primarily from its domestic market that accounts for over 75%. One hundred million people go to the movies every week in India (Rehman 2016).

Despite its magnitude and appeal, Indian cinema has remained an enigma for international film viewers. Artistic recognition has been slow in arriving. A name that is synonymous with Indian cinema in the west is that of Satyajit Ray, a Bengali filmmaker who gained world recognition in 1955 for his *Pather Panchali/Song of the Road*. Only one Indian film *Do Aankhen Barah Haath/Two Eyes Twelve Hands* (1959) has won the Hollywood Foreign Press Award and Samuel Goldwyn Award for best foreign film, and at the time of this writing (February 2018), three Indian films have earned the best foreign film nomination – *Mother India* (1957), *Salaam Bombay/Hello Bombay* (1988) and *Lagaan/Land Tax* (2002). None of these won (Chandran 2002).

The emergence of the star system also runs parallel in Hollywood and India. The star system was in place in India from early silent films. It was, however, *Kismet/Destiny* (1943) that launched its leading actor, Ashok Kumar, as a superstar. The film ran for 187 weeks at a single movie theater in Calcutta (Gosh 2002). This was the beginning of the superstar system. Nearly seven decades later, the commercial cinema in India is dominated by its stars and the singers that lend their voices to the movies. Indian cinema has also had its share of Hollywood genres such as slapstick comedies, screwball comedies, family-oriented drama, gangster/crime drama, social problem pictures, film noir, action/adventure, courtroom dramas, war pictures, tearjerkers, and westerns. Indian filmmakers combine two or three story-types into one picture and regardless of their ingredients; the mainstream Bollywood films are love stories with six to eight songs and dance sequences featuring attractive men and women in the key roles. If one label were to be used, it would be, “escapist fantasies”. Realism has never been the strong suit of Bollywood cinema. This void was filled by the alternative cinema, i.e., the Parallel Cinema of India (Barsam and Monahan 2016).

As an alternative to the romantic musicals of the mainstream Indian cinema, filmmakers, influenced by Italian neorealism and the French New Wave, began to make low budget films using non-actors and actual locations to tell stories about the suffering and plight of the common people. The catalysts for the movement were films such as *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) by Vittorio De Sica, and *The River* (1951) by Jean Renoir (Barsam and Monahan 2016). The harbingers of the alternative cinema were auteur filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Kumar Ghatak, Bimal Roy, Chetan Anand, and Guru Dutt. In the 1960s and the 1970s, Mrinal Sen, Mani Kaul, Shyam Benegal, and Govind Nihalani continued in the alternative cinema making films that dealt with political corruption, inequality due to the caste system, injustices in the judicial system, and exploitation of labor – especially of children and women.

While Satyajit Ray’s films were critical successes, Guru Dutt, Shyam Benegal and Mrinal Sen made films that were also commercially successful, thus creating a Middle Cinema, i.e., socially relevant films that appealed to the masses. The success of the Parallel Cinema also launched a group of non-glamorous players as bona fide actors who eventually gained star status in the Indian cinema. The initial stars of Parallel Cinema were Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Om Puri, and Naseeruddin Shah. Notably, all four graduated from the Film and

Television Institute of India (FTII), as did many of the directors, cinematographers, and editors of the Parallel Cinema.

OM PURI IN INDIAN CINEMA

Puri began his film career with a children's film, *Chor Chhupja/Robber Take Care* (1975), directed by B.V. Karanth, an alumnus of the National School of Drama, who later became the School's director. Two years later, in 1977, Karanth offered Puri a role in a feature film, *Godhuli/The Hour of the Gods* (1977).

Although Puri came from a part of India where Punjabi and Hindi were the common languages, his first mainstream film, *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1976) was in the Marathi language. The film was a collaborative effort by 16 FTII graduates and jointly directed by K. Hariharan, Mani Kaul, Kamal Swaroop, and Saeed Akhtar Mirza. In 1978, Mirza cast Om Puri in his next film, *Arvind Desai Ki Ajeeb Dastaan/The Strange Story of Arvind Desai* (1978).

Puri made his mark as an actor in a 1980 art film, *Aakrosh (Cry of the Wounded)*, directed by Govind Nihalani. Puri played the role of a peasant trying to make a modest living for himself and his wife played by Smita Patil. Puri, the farmworker, is exploited by the landowner and his supervisor. The supervisor rapes Puri's wife and has Puri arrested to conceal his own crime. His wife commits suicide out of shame. While in prison, Puri learns that his father has passed away. Tied and shackled, the police bring Puri to the funeral grounds to complete the Last Rites of his dead father by lighting the funeral pyre. While watching the burning funeral pyre, he notices the supervisor lustfully eyeing his pre-pubescent sister. Sensing what might be in store for his younger sister; he grabs an ax and kills his sister to forestall her dire future as the supervisor's future victim. Upon completion of his desperate act, he lifts his face to the sky and screams endlessly. This is the second time that we hear his voice in the movie. The first time was in a flashback, as he hopelessly tried to rescue his wife. Puri won the 1980 Filmfare Award¹ for Best Supporting Actor.

The following year, Satyajit Ray cast Puri in the lead role in *Sadgati/The Deliverance* (1981). Om Puri played, a poor cobbler (an untouchable according to the Hindu caste system) who goes to a priest's house to invite him to his house to set the wedding date for Puri's daughter. The priest asks Puri to sweep the floors, carry heavy bundles of hay from one part of the house to the other, and chop some firewood. Puri, using a small ax, struggles to cut down a huge stem. Exhausted by the heat and hard labor, he collapses and dies. In many ways, this role was an extension of the character he played a year earlier in *Akhrosh*. The two films established him as an underprivileged victim of the hypocrisy of a corrupt political system and its traditions rooted in an inhumane caste system.

Still working with the directors of the Parallel Cinema, Puri acted in Shyam Bengal's *Arohan/The Ascent* (1982). Once again, Puri played a naïve and poor land tiller in a village in Bengal where the communist movement was on the rise. Om Puri stands up against the tyrant landowner and his thugs. At the end of a prolonged legal battle, Puri is victorious at the expense of losing his family and his health. The film, a comment on the failed promise of communism, earned Puri the National film award as Best Actor.

¹ Filmfare Awards are considered the most prestigious awards within the Indian mainstream film industry.

In 1983, Govind Nihalani wanted to make *Ardh Satya/Half Truth*, a film about an honest policeman in India. Nihalani approached one of the superstars of the time, Amitabh Bachchan for the lead role. Since the movie was a low-budget project to be directed by a relatively unknown director and scheduled to be made on a tight schedule, Bachchan turned down the project. Nihalani offered the part to Om Puri, the star of his previous film. Here, as sub-inspector, Anant Valenkar, Puri is pitted against the corrupt politicians, organized crime, and the dishonest judicial system. He is crushed repeatedly; still, he keeps trying to do the right thing. He ends up killing one of the gangsters and turns himself in. *Ardh Satya* brought Puri his second National Film Award for the best actor and became a career-defining film for him. Later, Puri would say of Bachchan's decision, "I am thankful that he refused *Ardh Satya*" (Sen 2017). Bachchan commented on Puri's performance as "physically arresting" (Puri 2009). The performance also brought Puri his first international award as the Best Actor at the Karlovy Vary Festival in the Czech Republic (then Czechoslovakia). The success of *Ardh Satya* also launched a new trend of cop films in the Hindi movie industry. While the art films established him as a serious character actor, the commercial films in Hindi, Punjabi, and other regional languages offered him a variety of roles in many different genres to display his dramatic and comedic range. A sampling of the movie titles attests to his range and diversity: *Disco Dancer* (1982), *Chachi 420/The Trickster Aunt* (1997), *A.K.47* (1999), *Farz/Duty* (2001), *Awara Paagal Deewana/Wayward, Crazy, Insane* (2002), *The Hangman* (2010), *Mr. Kabaadi/ The Junk Dealer*.

In *Seepeeeyan* (1984), he played a humble husband, a man belonging to a lower caste who marries a woman from a higher caste and gradually wins her affections. In a 1985 film, *Zamana/Time*, he played the uncle of Rajesh Khanna and Rishi Kapoor – two highly popular leading men of the time. He was a militant Sikh leader in *Maachis/Matches* (1996), and an unbending and upright police officer in *Gupt/The Hidden Truth* (1997). In 2003, he was the courageous father of a martyred soldier in *Dhoop/Sunshine*. In 2010, he gave a captivating performance as the aged and tired executioner who was forced into his ancestors' profession in *The Hangman*. He was fighting international criminals in the action films *Don* (2006) and *Don 2* (2011).

In addition to playing serious roles, Om Puri was also equally effective in comedic roles in films such as a 1984 comedy, *Janey Bhi Do Yaro/Just Let It Go, Friends, King of Bollywood* (2004), *Singh Is Kinng* (2008) and *Mere Baap Pehle Aap My Father, You First* (2008), and a 2013 Punjabi film, *Bhaji In Problem/Brother in Problem*.

OM PURI IN EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN FILMS

Beginning with a memorable cameo in *Gandhi* (1982) to the time of his passing in 2017, Om Puri appeared in nearly two dozen films made in the UK, Canada, and the United States of America². In Mike Nichols' *Wolf* (1984), he delivered yet another unforgettable scene with Jack Nicholson.

² A partial list of Om Puri's film made outside of India: *Gandhi* (1982), *Sam and Me* (1991), *City of Joy* (1992), *The Burning Season* (1993), *Wolf* (1994), *Brothers in Trouble* (1995), *The Ghost and the darkness* (1996), *My Son the Fanatic* (1997), *Such a Long Journey* (1998), *East is East* (1999), *The Mystic Masseur* (2001), *The Zookeeper* (2001), *The Parole Officer* (2001), *Code 46* (2003), *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007), *West is West* (2010), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012), *The Hundred-Foot Journey* (2014), *A Million Rivers* (2015), *Viceroy's House* (2017).

Fans of the British novelist, Paul Scott, and the Indian diaspora saw Puri in the lavish 1984 BBC production of *The Jewel in the Crown* based upon Scott's Raj Quartet novels (1965-75). However, it was Roland Joffé's *City of Joy* (1993), a film with Patrick Swayze, which introduced Om Puri to the international film audiences. Of Puri's work on the *City of Joy*, Swayze said, "The biggest thing I found working with Om as an actor is that he gives all of himself and with no fear, no defense, no justification.... His character, Hasari Pal, an aging rickshaw puller, is the core of the *City of Joy* and I felt he deserved at least a nomination at the Academy Awards" (Puri 2009). Playing an alcoholic Pakistani cab driver in *My Son the Fanatic* (1997) he carried the film as its lead player. The film was written by Hanif Kureishi, and it offered Puri a three-dimensional role of a father who realizes that the survival of his family as a unit depends upon accepting the cultural values of his adopted country, England. Two years later, in *East is East* (1999), Puri played, George Khan, a different kind of a Pakistani; a father raising seven children in a London suburb. The film presented a realistic view of Pakistani culture and traditions, and the two generations of immigrants and their children trying to redraw their identities. Even as a tyrannical father, Puri was charismatic, funny, and charming in *East is East*.

Mike Nichols sought him out again for *Charlie Wilson's War* (2007) to play yet another Pakistani, although not a likable character – General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq who overthrew the democratic government in Pakistan in 1976 and ruled the country, as a dictator, during the years of the attempted and failed Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. General. Zia-ul-Haq is generally credited with two things: The Islamization of Pakistan that led to the Taliban movement, and the death of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the elected leader of Pakistan. Om Puri's portrayal of Gen. Haq, from the mannerism of the dictator to his Punjabi accent, was impeccable.

In 2014, the Swedish film director, Lasse Hallström cast Puri opposite Helen Mirren in *The Hundred-Foot Journey*. The film was produced by Oprah Winfrey and Steven Spielberg. Om Puri as Papa Kadam plays the head of a displaced Indian family. The family escaped Mumbai after the mob attacks following an election dispute. The rioters burned down the Kadam's family restaurant. The family takes refuge, first, in England, and then in France where Papa Kadam opens an Indian restaurant a hundred steps across the street from an established French restaurant owned/run by an icy *restaurateuse*, Helen Mirren. Reviewer Lemire labeled Puri's performance as that of "*the Indian acting legend*" (Lemire 2014).

Discussing the theme of the *Journey*, Puri told the YouTube at the differences in people from different cultures and places were superficial, and deep inside, people were all the same. Once we understood the other person's culture and point of view, there was no difference."

For his final English language film, *Viceroy's House* (2017), Gurinder Chadha, a Punjabi speaking film director of Kenyan Asian origin, cast Om Puri as Ali Rahim Noor, a blind old Muslim who was once a rebel and was put behind bars during the British rule of India. He plays the father of a woman who falls in love with a man of a different religion during the final days of the Raj in India. *The Guardian* credited Puri's work as a performance of great warmth (Bradshaw 2017). Writing for the *Observer*, Mark Kermode said, "the late Om Puri is effortlessly engaging as Aalia's blind father (Kermode 2017). Reviewing for *Times of India*, Neil Soans wrote, "The most poignant role is played by the late Om" (Soans 2017). Another reviewer, Umresh Punwani, said, "... no matter for how short duration Late Mr. Om Puri was with his role, he will make you miss him... he shines in his role as a blind

Muslim father who doesn't want the partition to happen. There's a scene where his daughter cries with him and that's where you realize what Bollywood has lost" (Punwani 2017).

The director of his last English language film, *Viceroy's House*, Gurinder Chadha had this to say of Puri: "As one of the most talented and versatile actors of his generation, he showed in his characters how similar we all are – how human and imperfect – and in so doing changed the way we think about race and representation. He put a human face on a label and showed we all want the best for our children and families" (Chadha 2017). Amitabh Bachchan observed that Om Puri was "one Indian actor who had been able to bridge Indian art cinema, Hindi commercial cinema and Western cinema (Puri 2009).

At home, Om Puri became the face and voice of everyman. Elsewhere, he has become the face of India and its people in various shades of their idiosyncrasies and charms, warmth and passion. He leaves a nation forever indebted to his art.

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