

wknd lifestyle

Director's cut

What was it that so haunted this young man? When he died by suicide in 1964, Guru Dutt was 39 years old. It was his third attempt. In his centenary year (Dutt was born on July 9, 1925), Poonam Saxena revisits the tortured yet exquisite cinema, the unfading legacy and the personal trials of a remarkable artist

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On the morning of October 10, 1964, Guru Dutt was found dead in his flat in Bombay, lying on his bed in a crumpled kurta-pyjama. He had drunk a glass of pink liquid, sleeping pills crushed and dissolved in water. He had turned 39 in July.

This was his third suicide attempt. His first was at the peak of his career, while directing and starring in *Pyasa* (1957), a classic that is considered his greatest film.

What was it that haunted this young man? Biographers have been trying to answer that question for decades.

It was as if success drew him deeper into himself. In her book *Guru Dutt: A Life in Cinema*, Nasreen Munni Kabir quotes his brother, the filmmaker Atma Ram, as saying: "He was quite social in his early days... had a very pleasant nature... Whether it was the success or his filmmaking, he became increasingly enclosed, more and more cut off."

His movies changed too. After early light-hearted releases such as *Aar Paar* (1954) and *Mr & Mrs '55* (1955), both romantic comedies, came *Pyasa*, a dark masterpiece about a poet rejected at every turn, who finds solace with a prostitute. This was followed by the even bleaker *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959), about a successful filmmaker whose anguished personal life leads to his ruin.

The melancholy of his movies made him something of an outlier in the world of 1950s Hindi cinema, when directors such as Raj Kapoor and Mehboob Khan were telling hopeful stories of exuberance-amid-hardship in a newly independent India.

Filmmakers such as Bimal Roy spotlight the darker side, with tales of systemic injustice, exploitation and caste. But Guru Dutt's stories didn't fit in here either. Because the despair he sketched with such artistry wasn't systemic, it was deeply personal.

The descents into insomnia, depression and drink were the story of his life, told in real time.

Guru Dutt was born in 1925, into a family from Mangalore. His father, Shiva-shankar Padukone, moved cities and jobs frequently, before settling in Calcutta in 1929, where he found work as a clerk. (Incidentally, Dutt's given name was Vasanth Padukone. His parents changed it, after a childhood accident, hoping to accord him better luck.)

After his matriculation exam, Dutt stopped studying and began to work, to help keep the family afloat. At 16, he found a job as a telephone operator. The following year, hope dawned. Knowing how much he loved to dance, a relative helped him join Uday Shankar's academy, in 1942.

Two years later, when the school shut, the relative, BB Benegal, an artist and his mother's cousin, stepped in again. He took Dutt to Poona and introduced him to Baburao Pai, chief executive at the pioneering Prabhat Film Company. Dutt was hired as a dance director.

It is hard to tell if fate was smiling or scheming at this point, but this is where he met Dev Anand, who was acting in the Prabhat film *Hum Ek Hain* in 1945. A dholi mixed up their shirts, which is how the two met and became friends, the story goes.

They grew so close that they made a promise to each other: Dev Anand would take Guru Dutt on as director in the first film he produced, and Dutt would sign the actor for the first movie he directed. Both would keep these promises.

As Dev Anand wrote in his autobiography, *Romancing with Life* (2007): "Guru Dutt and I were on the same wavelength. He wanted to make some great films, and I wanted to be a great actor, a great star... We saw masterpieces of outstanding filmmakers together... We were inseparable. Together we tramped and cycled the streets of Poona..."

When his contract with Pai ended, in 1947, Dutt moved to Bombay. He would find no work of significance for almost a year. In those difficult days, he began to write a story titled *Kashmakash* (Conflict). This would later become *Pyasa*.

In 1950, he finally got a break, as filmmaker Gyan Mukherjee's assistant on the crime thriller *Sangram* (1950). In Mukherjee, an educated, talented man, Dutt also found a mentor. He would eventually dedicate *Pyasa* to Mukherjee, who had died aged 47, the year before its release.

Meanwhile, Dev Anand had not forgotten his promise. He invited his friend to direct a movie for his banner, Navketan. Dutt's first film, *Baazi* (1951) — starring Dev Anand, Kalpana Kartik and Geeta Bali, in a tale about an expert card player embroiled in the murky dealings of a nightclub that runs an illegal gambling den — was a hit.

In his cap, scarf and cigarette, Dev Anand cut a rakish figure. As he wrote in his autobiography: "I became a phenomenon after the release of *Baazi*..."

In his next movie, *Jaal* (1952), true to his word, he signed Dev Anand to play the lead role: that of a ruthless smuggler who ensnares a perky young woman in Goa.

Baaz (1953), Dutt's third film as director, was interesting for three reasons. It was his first starring role (he would go on to star in all his own films, and was in demand by other directors too). It was his first and only period drama. Set in 16th-century Malabar, he played a young prince who falls in love with a daring anti-Portuguese rebel (Geeta Bali). The film was also his first box-office failure; he never attempted the genre again.

Instead, he stuck to stories about crime and love in Bombay. His next two, *Aar Paar* (1954) and *Mr & Mrs '55* (1955), were runaway hits. A year later came *CID*, produced by Dutt but helmed by his former assistant director, Raj Khosla. That too was a hit.

With these three films, he and Khosla more or less invented Bombay noir, a genre in which the action shifts from plush nightclubs with cabaret dancers and cigarette girls to lamplit city streets and dingy eating houses. Crime is everywhere.

The heroes are rakish rogues; the heroines are luminously beautiful. The sultry "other woman" propels the plot: Geeta Bali as a club dancer in *Baazi*, Shakila in *Aar Paar*, and Waheeda Rehman as a gangster's moll in her first Hindi film, *CID*.

Based on his later films, Dutt is perhaps the only filmmaker of his generation who can be called an auteur. His distinctive personal style reflected in his stories of unhappy and troubled artists, and in the intense visuals he created onscreen.

These included the stunning shots of the Ajanta Studios, dominated by the towering garuda, in *Kaagaz Ke Phool*; and the black-and-white eloquence of *Pyasa*.

From the start, Dutt did marvellous and unexpected things with music too. Think of *Waqt Ne Kiya* from *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, with its panoramic shots of a studio floor complete with cranes, catwalks and cameras; it remains a landmark in Hindi cinema.

The songs in his films were used unusually, often as an extension of the dialogue, beginning without prelude or introductory music (as with Johnny Walker's Jane Kahan Mera Jigar Gaya Ji in *Mr & Mrs '55*). They moved the story forward, lifted the mood, and reflected sweeping emotion.

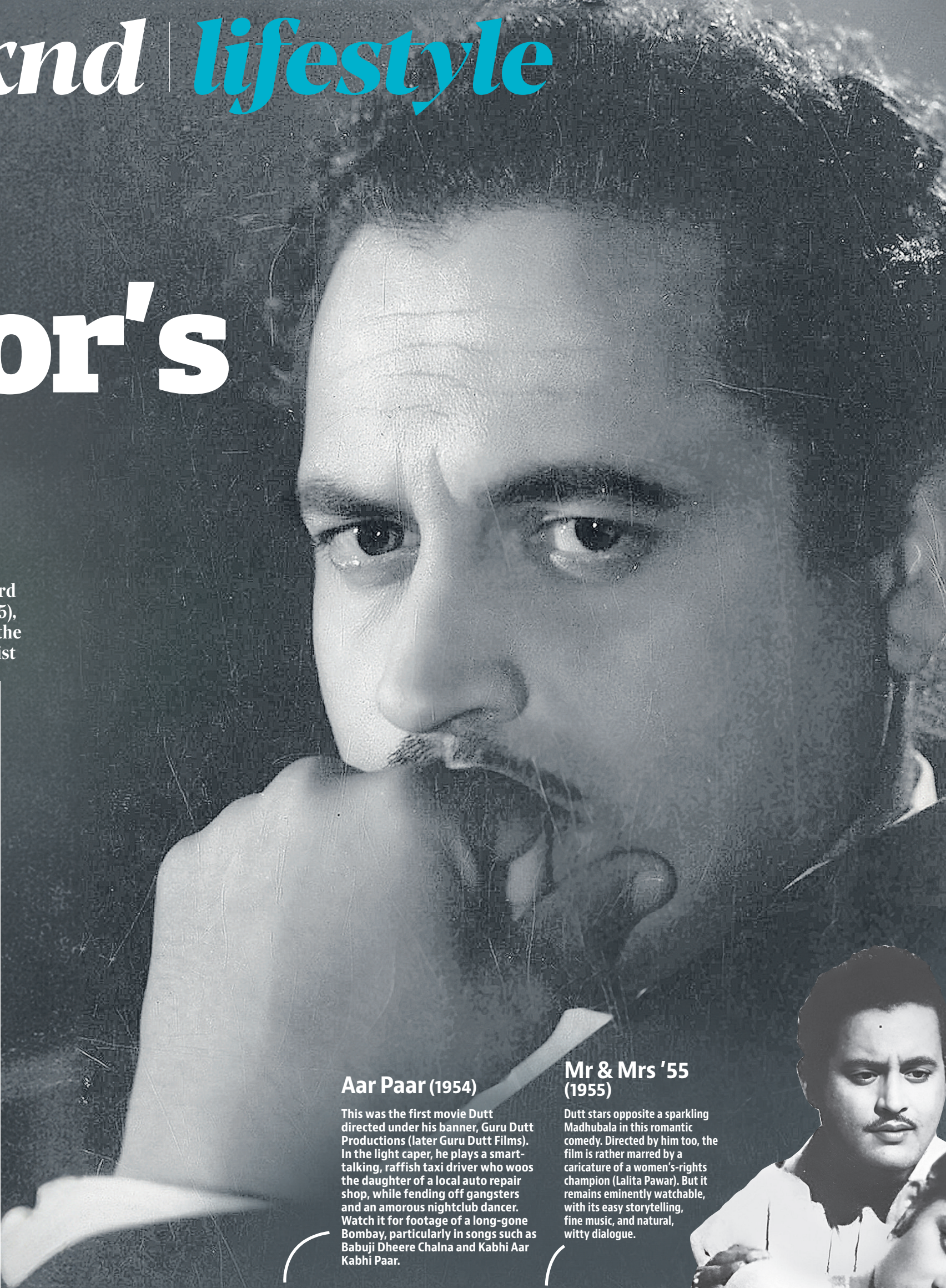
Yet not even Mohammed Rafi's Sar Jo Tera Chakraye could lift the mood of *Pyasa*.

Dutt played Vijay, a disillusioned poet belittled by his brothers, spurned by publishers and cast aside by the woman he loves in favour of a rich husband. Perennially broke, he wanders the city aimlessly, finally finding solace in the love of a prostitute named Gulabo (Waheeda Rehman) who never stops believing in him.

If the poet was devastated by failure, Dutt seemed living proof that success wasn't the answer either.

(We) were on the same wavelength... He wanted to make some great films, and I wanted to be a great actor... We were inseparable. Together we tramped and cycled the streets of Poona.

DEV ANAND ON GURU DUTT, in his autobiography, *Romancing with Life* (2007)

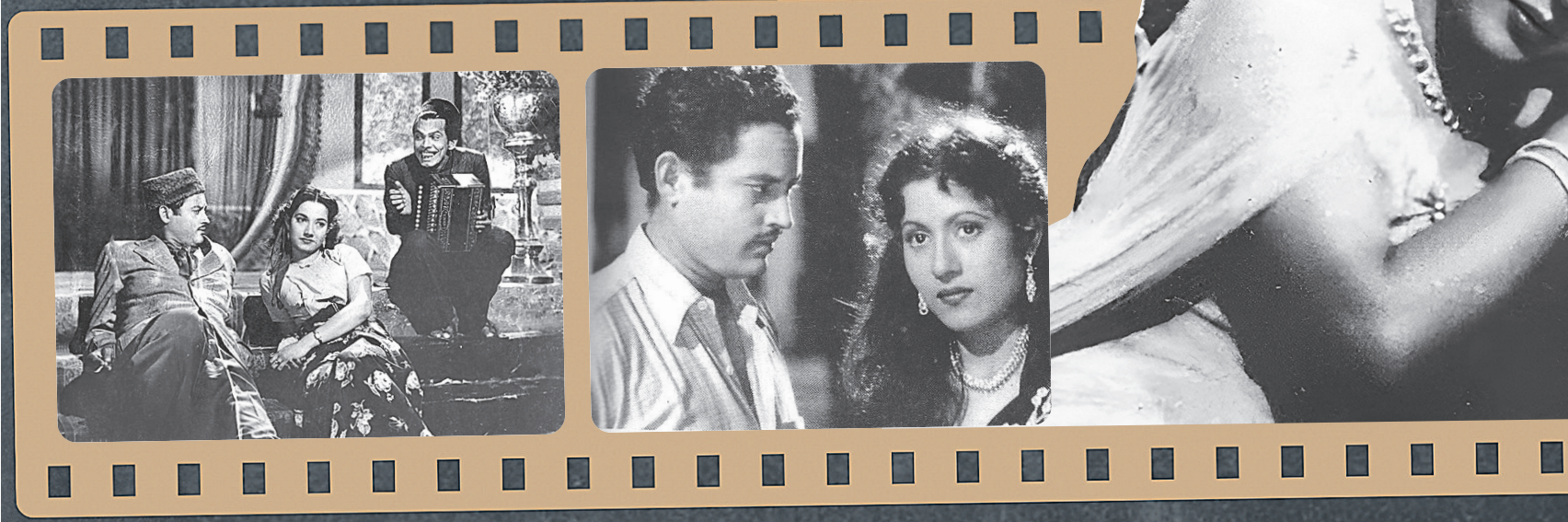


Aar Paar (1954)

This was the first movie Dutt directed under his banner, Guru Dutt Productions (later Guru Dutt Films). In the light caper, he plays a smart-talking, raffish taxi driver who woos the daughter of a local auto repair shop, while fending off gangsters and an amorous nightclub dancer. Watch it for footage of a long-gone Bombay, particularly in songs such as Babuji Dheere Chalna and Kabhi Aar Kabhi Paar.

Mr & Mrs '55 (1955)

Dutt stars opposite a sparkling Madhubala in this romantic comedy. Directed by him too, the film is rather marred by a caricature of a women's-rights champion (Lalita Pawar). But it remains eminently watchable, with its easy storytelling, fine music, and natural, witty dialogue.



The filmmaker was well-off, had moved into a larger flat in Bombay and bought farm land in Lonavala. None of it made him happy.

A turbulent personal life may have contributed to his despondency. In 1953, he married the beautiful singer Geeta Roy, whom he met during the making of *Baazi*. By all accounts they were very much in love, but their marriage soon soured. She hated the rumours of a great love between him and Waheeda Rehman, and hated even more the idea that they might be true.

Amid the turmoil, Dutt's next film, *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, with its tale of a successful film director's self-destructive slide into penury and alcoholism, was so dark and defeatist, it crashed at the box office. Even Waheeda Rehman didn't believe in it.

In an interview with Nasreen Munni Kabir, she said: "I thought the film was too sad... too heavy... I know there are many good moments in *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, but as a whole I don't think it worked."

Dutt, who set great store by commercial success, lost a little more of himself with this failure. He never directed a film again.

Still, he had great hits. His production company, Guru Dutt Films, produced *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* in 1960, directed by M Sadiq. The story of misunderstandings, sacrifice, duty and love, set in Muslim households. It swept the box office and was, by the numbers, the biggest hit of Dutt's career.

Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam (1962), the last major film he produced, was directed by his

long-time writer Abrar Alvi and, for many Guru Dutt fans, is second only to *Pyasa*. The tale of the decay of a feudal zamindari family in turn-of-the-century Bengal features Dutt alongside Meena Kumari, who is magnificent in the role of a chhoti bahu who turns to alcohol in an attempt to win over her indifferent husband (Rehman).

In 1963-64 alone, he played the lead in three family dramas made by other production houses: *Bharosa*, *Bahurani* and *Sanjh Aur Savera*.

He had already tried to kill himself a second time by this point, swallowing 38 sleeping pills during the making of *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* in 1962.

Through it all, he continued to love movie-making. Even after he stopped directing, in films such as *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* and *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam*, he shot the songs. Waheeda Rehman has never been filmed more beautifully than in the song *Chaudhvin Ka Chand Ho*.

What was it that haunted this young man? All these years on, this remains an enigma. As Yasser Usman, author of the 2020 biography *Guru Dutt: An Unfinished Story*, puts it, "He never gave interviews. No magazines ran cover stories on him. Whatever we know about him is through what others have said."

And yet, in a way, he had been telling his story all along; he had built his life, legacy and fandom around it. One can't help but think of Vijay's words in *Pyasa*: "Yeh duniya agar mil bhi jaye toh kya hai?"

SEE HOW
Tigmanshu Dhulia, R Balki, Anurag Kashyap and others have paid tribute to Guru Dutt in their films

{ **FILMMAKER RAJ KHOSLA** } AT 100

Dutt, dacoits and a double life

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He had the best possible start as an aspiring filmmaker, working as assistant to the great Guru Dutt. He went on to become one of Bollywood's most versatile directors.

In a 35-year career (1954-89), he directed 26 films, adroitly shifting between Bombay noir thrillers, spooky tales of mystery, love stories, family socials and dacoit dramas.

Raj Khosla grew up in Bombay, hero-worshipping the singer KL Saigal, who coincidentally lived close to the Khoslas' home in Matunga.

Khosla, in fact, dreamed of being a playback singer. But, given the opportunity to sing a few songs in films such as *Bhool Bhulaiyan* (1949) and *Aank-*

Raj Khosla (left) directed 26 films in a 35-year career, including a 1971 precursor to Sholay (1975) called Mera Gaon Mera Desh (above right). WIKIMEDIA