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An internationally known movie-maker of India is concerned about the future of quality film-making in the Sub-continent and suggests several ways for solving the problems, in an interview to the Daily Star.

Mrinal Sen on the Movie Industry—Problems and Prospects

by S.Y. Bakht

MRINAL Sen, recognised as a giant among contemporary Indian film-makers, sees many problems hindering the progress of the film industry in the Sub-continent.

A 'step-motherly' attitude by producers and limited viewer appeal are the two major stumbling blocks faced by both the creative and the short-film makers, he pointed out.

However, he has some solutions of his own which he talked about in some detail, with The Daily Star, during his recent visit to Dhaka.

His visit to Bangladesh was in connection with the opening of the Second International Short Film Festival organised by the Dhaka Short Film Forum recently.

The pipe-smoking, Mrinal Sen termed the festival as a significant event at a time when the country was gripped by election fever and there was an on-going war in the Middle East. He lauded the efforts of the organisers for arranging such an important event privately without any government help.

Short-film making is a very recent phenomenon in this country. Thus, makers of short-films are facing various problems, particularly of financing and marketing. How best to tackle these problems?

It is very much possible to overcome these obstacles, he said reassuringly.

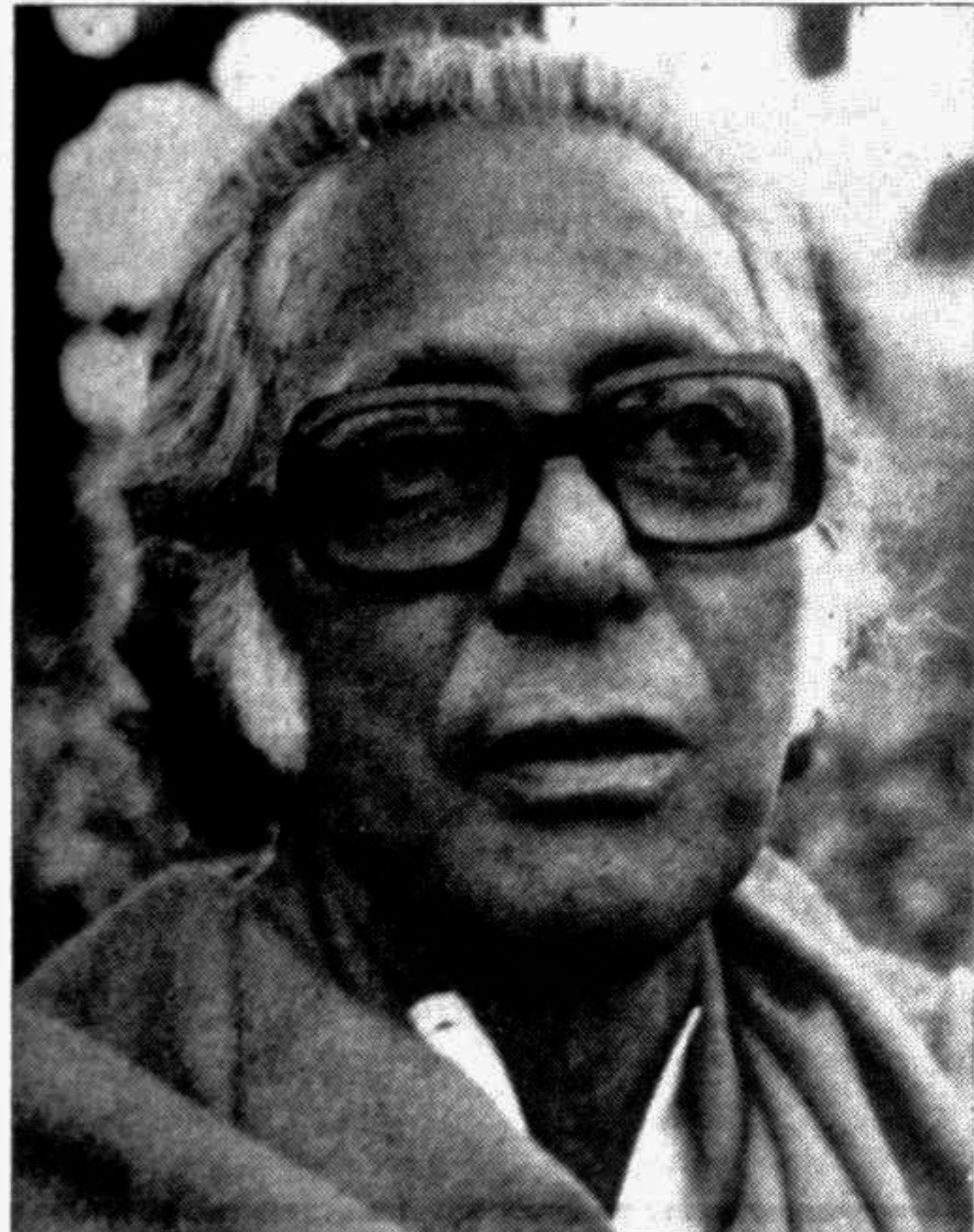
As the local market may not be large enough to make creative or short-films financially viable, he feels that film-makers should tap the overseas market.

They should try to reach the "wider minority spectre" of viewers from amongst the pockets of off-beat film-lovers scattered around the globe. "Only then you can get a (sizeable) market for creative films," he added.

The tremendous advancement in science and technology has made the world a much closer place, thus if a film is made in an artistic manner it is quite possible to attract a wider international market in addition to the local market, he opined.

Even foreign producers can be attracted to finance local films, both feature and short-films. He pointed out to his recent 21-minute short-film "Calcutta my Eldorado," produced by a Dutch organisation which invited twelve film-makers from around the globe to make films on the cities they live in. A number of other creative films in India have been financed by foreign producers, he added.

Mrinal Sen is somewhat against seeking government help to produce



Mrinal Sen: 'Short film-makers should tap the overseas market.' —Star Photo

films, as it may limit the film-makers creative liberty. "I feel it is very important that you go your own way and let the government go its own," he said.

"We should be uncompromising and we must try to cultivate patience and passion," the internationally acclaimed film-maker declared.

Film-making is not as expensive and prohibitive as it is drummed out to be by the establishment, he said. Inspired by Gandhi's measure of austerity, Mrinal Sen feels that part of a film-makers aesthetic value should be to make films at a reasonably low cost.

The Tollygunge film industry in Calcutta holds a special place in the realm of Indian filmdom. It is the home-base for many of India's internationally acclaimed directors of creative films.

What is the picture of the Calcutta film industry these days? At a time when there is stiff competition from films produced in Bombay and there is a trend towards copying the Bombay-style of making swashbuckling, glamorous movies,

Because of the competition from commercial Bombay films, producers are increasingly leaning towards making commercial films and not much on making creative films. "The picture (of the film industry in West Bengal) is very

bleak," he replied bluntly, adding, "It's at a low ebb now."

"Although India happens to be the largest film producing country (in the world), it is not with any sense of pride or satisfaction. Most of the films produced are garbage," Mrinal Sen lamented.

The amiable Mrinal Sen, taking time out of his busy schedule, met a number of local film-makers and got the impression that producers here are not much interested in making creative films. Having confessed to holding limited knowledge about local films, he feels that the films made here are somewhat lacking in quality.

"Comparatively, the quality of Indian offbeat cinema is much higher than the offbeat cinema of Bangladesh," he remarked.

How can the quality of local films be improved? Can the flourishing group theatre movement be of any help in making good quality films?

The growth and development of Bangladeshi literature and the high standard that the theatre movement has attained should be an eye-opener for the film-makers here, the affable Mrinal Sen pointed out.

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Inaugurating the Second International Short Film Festival in Dhaka. —Star Photo.

"I personally owe a great deal to the healthy theatre movement in India," he said.

Although he hasn't seen any of the local stage productions, he said, he viewed some of the TV-drama telecasts and felt

that the standard was 'very good' and some of the actors were 'quite powerful.'

"Film-makers have a lot to learn from the stage," he said, adding, "I don't believe in the compartmentalisation of film and theatre, it can be easily abol-

ished through mutual respect."

He mentioned that film-makers like Ingmar Bergman and Elia Kazan also indulged in stage productions. "So theatre and film can really go hand in hand," he reiterated.

When the one-world slogan is sweeping the globe, Mrinal Sen, dressed in the traditional Bengali attire of payjama and kurta, hoped that the existing cultural bond between Bangladesh and India will be further strengthened.

Asked about the possibilities of producing films under joint collaboration, Mrinal Sen saw excellent scope in this field.

The common cultural heritage and history of Bangladesh and West Bengal can be projected in films, hence collaboration is very much needed in this area, he noted. "There is no reason why we should not do that," he added.

Pointing out that a number of films are being produced under joint collaboration in India, he mentioned that his film 'Genesis' was an Indo-French-Belgian production in Hindi with an all-Indian cast.

Asked whether he would consider making films under joint collaboration with Bangladesh, he said that he would certainly consider any such proposal, adding that he would very much like to come back for a visit again, as he feels quite at home here.

No wonder he feels at home here. He was born in Faridpur town in 1923 and spent the first twenty years of his life there. Mrinal Sen eagerly informed, looking much younger than his age with only a touch of greyishness on his shoulder length hair.

Although he visited Dhaka on two different occasions after liberation, Mrinal Sen is yet to return to his hometown for a visit. But this time around he planned a day-long trip to Faridpur along with his wife Geeta Sen.

What are his feelings before the sojourn in his birthplace which he left long ago?

"There is no nostalgia in me," he said, "as there is a chance of becoming too emotional and I am a non-sentimental person." But he hastened to add, "I would very much like to visit my hometown, the place is still very vivid in my mind."

As an afterthought, Sen noted the time he was arrested, while still in high school and a member of the Student Federation, for throning the slogan 'Bande Mahtaram.'

With a thoughtful pause, he reminisced about the social harmony and non-communal atmosphere

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Sen's Cinematic Splendour

An Appreciation by Waheedul Haque

His is surely a third kind of eye—distinctly original and far removed from both Ray and Ghatak.

tread—and he kept arriving. That's the great thing about his work. In every new creation Mrinal surpasses himself and sets a new standard, only to be broken by him.

Calcutta 70—done in Naxalite Calcutta, was different all right but not eminent by any criterion. And it hardly held any promise. There was no inkling of where Mrinal was bound for. Without a warning came *Chhaya* (in Hindi and *Bojpur*) and *Oka Uri* (in Oriya). There was no graduating business for him, it seemed. After that there was

no looking back.

While he has proved eminently facile in making films in diverse sub-continental languages, he hasn't neglected his native Bangla. Akaler Shon-dhoney and Ekdin Protidin are two unforgettable films by the maestro—films that bring out with unsurpassed poignancy, among other things, the phenomenon called Bengalliness. For his tone *Khandabar* or *The Ruins*—in Hindi—he chose a Bengali story *Telenapota* Abishkar by Premendra Mitra. Exactly as he has done in the case of his ground breaking work *Bhuban* Some, done on a story by Bonophool.

His is surely a third kind of eye—distinctly original and far removed from both Ray and Ghatak. While all three dwell in common on the human situ-

ation in general, Ray is a reticent purveyor of deep emotions couched in slow images. Ritwik is elemental and has more to say than can be squeezed on to the celluloid. What sets Mrinal apart? Just close your eyes—you will get the answer. No, I don't think that the politics he flaunts in about all his films is capably the distinguishing stamp that will endure as such. Close your eyes, you will know what sets him apart. Ray and Ghatak notwithstanding, there was no greater conjurer of dreams than Mrinal. Poetry and music realised in moving images.

Faridpur-born Mrinal Sen is decidedly the greatest of the now-active film creators of the sub-continent. And one of the best in the world.

Pay the Dues, Then Get Your Diploma

dining hall dues?" I gave him an apologetic negative answer. Another 12 years later, we ran into each other at the Bangladesh Embassy in Washington. We were sitting in a crowded waiting room, each one expecting a call any moment from the Ambassador's Secretary that the boss would now see him. To kill time, we were engaged in a discussion

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

on the US-Bangladesh relation which someone said had entered a new positive stage. Of course, others quickly disagreed. I found it interesting and started wondering if we would ever agree on anything, regardless of the seriousness or insignificance of the subject. May be to accept someone else's viewpoint, and that too without an argument, is a kind of intellectual surrender.

Right in the middle of the discussion, Dr Ghani leaned forward and whispered to me, "Ali, I can't help asking you. Have you settled your dues with the Salimullah Muslim Hall?"

At first, I appeared not to

understand what Dr. Ghani was talking about. Then, I looked blank and sat in a kind of solemn silence, avoiding the eyes of Dr Ghani which were fixed on me. Just then, the Ambassador's Secretary came into the room to lead Dr Ghani to her boss. "I will settle this matter very soon, Sir. You do not worry about it." I quickly whispered to the former Vice

Chancellor, reassuringly, pleadingly.

Since then, I simply dreaded running into Dr Ghani anywhere in the world. But then I often wondered why was he so concerned about my settling the dining hall dues? Perhaps, just a matter of principle. On the other hand, perhaps he could not accept that someone he apparently thought well of—had once given me a most flattering testimonial that could have earned me a job in any university—should take his dear alma mater for a ride just for two hundred taka.

Yet, I sat on the matter for a few more years. If I felt no ur-

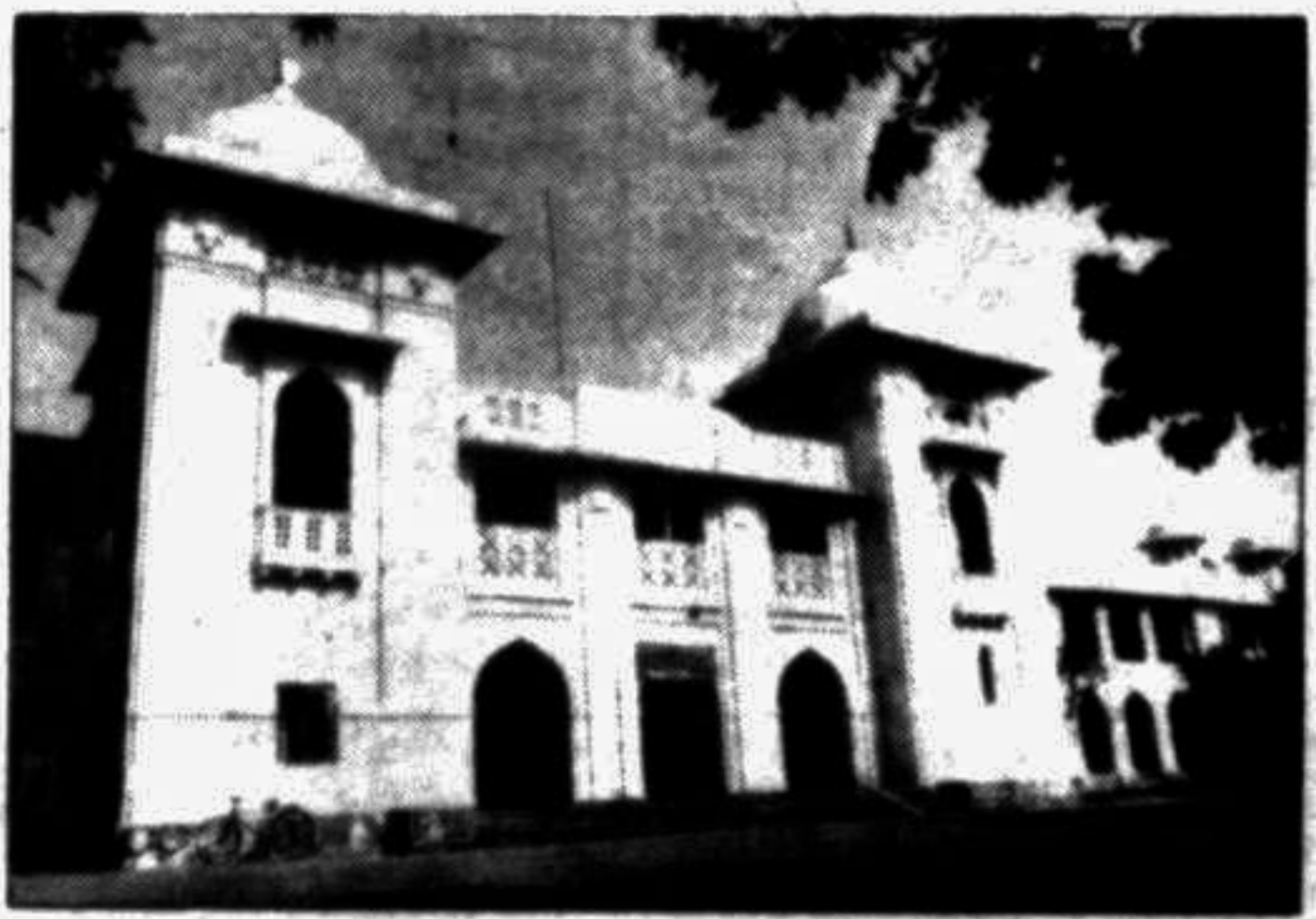
gency about settling my accounts with the Salimullah Hall I also could not figure out how one would persuade the university to dig up records going back to 1952, find out how much I actually owed to the dining hall and then publish my result. It was embarrassingly complicated.

Then, I joined a UN body in 1961 and what was until then

duce documentary evidence in support of my educational or professional credentials. But, then, where was my M. A. diploma?

A visit to the Registrar of the Dhaka University certainly seemed overdue, by 30 years.

By appointment, I called on the Registrar on a sunny December morning in 1981, during one of my visits to Dhaka.



Salimullah Muslim Hall: Unpaid dues.

only an awkward question suddenly became a crucial matter. In my bio-data, I had mentioned that I held the Master's degree in English Language and Literature, and I had noted that I could be asked to pro-

He was considerably younger than me, pleasant in his manners and full of curiosity about what he kept referring to as my "unusual problem." He looked intrigued and a little puzzled, but still most willing

to help, except he just did not know how. He called a couple of his officers. My proposed short meeting with the Registrar immediately turned into a major high-level conference concerning the degree which I was due to receive some 30 years earlier.

Several new problems cropped up.

First, it would be impossible to dig up the record of my dining hall dues. (My answer, "I would be happy to make a contribution of one thousand taka to the dining hall account of the Salimullah Hall, or even more, regardless of the size of my dues.")

Second, it was just possible that all my records, including my diploma, were lost or destroyed during a fire that ravaged part of the administration building some years ago. How would we then know that Mr. Ali did pass his M. A.? (My suggestion: "Maybe we can persuade one of my former teachers, still associated with the Dhaka University, to sign a sworn affidavit before a judge of the High Court, in support of my claim.")

It was nearly lunch time when I left the Registrar who by then, looked dejected. Since I was leaving Dhaka the following day, we agreed that wife of my brother, Nishat Ali would take charge of the mat-

'Meeting a Milestone'

Nurul Azim Chowdhury

ON 24th of this month, I strolled into the just-concluded International short festival at the Shabbagh Public Library Auditorium—and thanked my luck. I met with the rare privilege of seeing "Meeting a Milestone" celebrated film-maker Goutam Ghosh's documentary on Shehnai-Wizard Ustad Bismillah Khan. I say rare since it is not often that you see a great work of art on a living legend, by another eminent artist with the added bonus of the maker himself introducing the background of his creation.

"Meeting a Milestone" is 78 minutes of pure pleasure, both audio and visual as the eyes feast on the tender observations of the man Bismillah Khan and his surroundings through Ghosh's probing camera, and the ears listen to historical discourse interposed with enthralling Shehnai played by the great Maestro. Between the two feelings, a larger than life Bismillah Khan reaches out overwhelm the viewer.

Just like the slow buildup of a rage from the very initial blowing Bismillah Khan's Shehnai, the film starts almost languidly, against the backdrop of Benares, that age old city on the banks of river Ganges. With deft handling of a well knit script, Goutam contrives to perfectly blend a mist, an all engulfing haze, over Benares with the melancholic and enchanting melody of the Maestro, as if Bismillah Khan's musical expression with micro-tonal accuracy and mystique city are complementary. Indeed, Bismillah Khan himself admits this when he says that Benares is the "Than" for Shehnai practice. Without being intrusive, Goutam's camera captures that spirit of the city, which is so holy to millions, in all its nuances but always only as the necessary background for Bismillah Khan's ascendancy to greatness from humble but conducive surroundings. Goutam's lenses are soft in probing, continuously looking closely, almost caressingly, at the towering personality with admiration and affinity of one artist to another. Here is a piece of art from one who has shot into fame with such creations as *Par, Antorjoli* Jatra. Here he treats as his subject one who has over half a century of devotion elevated a traditional folk instrument to a new height forcing the music world to recognize sheer talent and bestow the instrument the honour and status of a concert instrument.

But the wide-screen also lets you in to the deep recesses of a simple man who has become a legend and by his own rights one of the greatest exponents of music of the subcontinent. The wit and humour behind those crinkled eyes, the soft melodious voice getting agitated with passion for music at times and serenity of a white bearded appearance have all been gently captured in celluloid by Goutam Ghosh.

With a thoughtful pause, he reminisced about the social harmony and non-communal atmosphere

masterly handling of a legendary subject. Goutam Ghosh has offered us a poignant fare, which in time may become a milestone of sort in documentary films.

Within a month, Nishat performed a miracle.

One fine morning, the diplomatic pouch from Dhaka to Kuala Lumpur brought me a well-wrapped up packet which contained, not one but two of my diplomas, one for my M. A. and the other, like a bonus, of my graduation, with honours. My name, in full, was there in both the diplomas, in deep black Indian ink, which had not faded a bit even after thirty years. I could not just believe my eyes.

Nishat never told me how she had managed to sort it all out, more specifically, how much she had paid the authorities in the Salimullah Hall. I knew by then if a close relative does you a favour, you do not ask for the details.

"What shall we do with your two diplomas? Should we frame them or keep them in our bank's safe deposit box," asked my wife.

Somehow it did not matter any more. We decided to leave them with our bank in Kuala Lumpur. They are still there.