

Face to Face

The Esoteric Prince of Cinema

Subhas Datt is the *il miglior fabbro* of the Bangladeshi movie milieu. He stormed into our celluloid history in the early 60s, with *Sutarang*, a story of love and innocence, and over the successive three decades has refined our film taste buds for good cinema with films like *Basundhara* and *Dumurer Phool*. Now leading a life of a recluse imbibed with the ideals of Ramkrishna he does not feel the polluted environment of the filmdom suitable for his kind of cinema. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim.

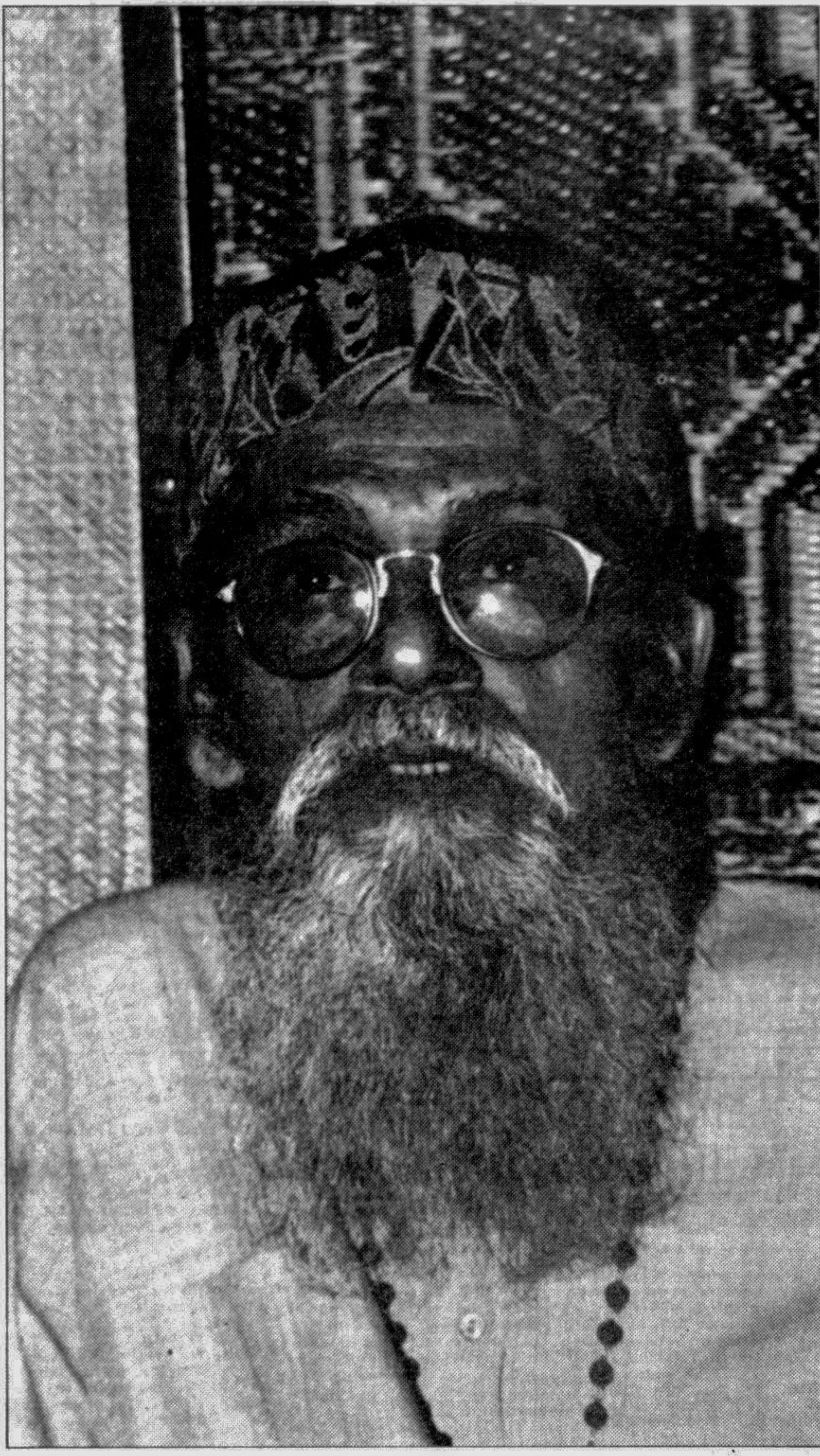
Q: What brings you to cinema?
A: I earned my living as a commercial artist designing movie posters or banners, works related to film industry back in 50s. But never did the idea occur to me to involve myself to celluloid fantasy. Satyajit's *Pather Panchali* made an indelible impression on me and I told myself if this is the language in which cinema speaks to its audience then I must pick up this vocabulary. So, *Pather Panchali* was my *pather lighthouse*. I started reading film related books and journals and frequenting libraries. I came to know that Mr. Ehtesham would start his new production *Edesh-Tomar-Aamar*. I approached him and told him what I was nursing in my mind: "Can I be with you during the shooting of your movie? I want to learn from you the language of the media." Just think of his modesty, in a very apologetic manner he said he was a layman to teach the art of film to anybody. Instead, he offered me a comic role in his movie. I was baffled simply. But then, he convinced me that he would bring out what he wanted from me. And I earned one taka at my debut. But the movie established me as a comedian. Offers started pouring in and my dream to become a filmmaker deferred for

some time. In the later part of 1962 I could manage to start my own film for which my acting career was a period of incubation.
Q: When you began your own film you had the freedom to shed your comedian self. I mean, the stereotype you had been subjected to. But you did not. Why?
A: I thought if I fail in my new career as a director at least I would survive as a comedian. That was the rationale behind not switching to other character roles.
Q: As a director how do you treat a theme?
A: My working method is sort of a punch of Ray and Chaplin: a bit of comedy, presenting the theme in the new realist's detailed treatment and the end should be tragic. This is precisely the chemistry of *Sutarang*.
Q: Did you have to face trouble in making *Sutarang*?
A: In Swami Vivekananda's words: "In every work in your life first you would be laughed at, then face resistance and finally if you can overcome these, your efforts will get recognition." In my life and particularly in the process of making my debut film I had to overcome the phases to win the acceptance of the audience.
Q: You worked with Mrinal

Sen in his film *Calcutta '71*. Tell us about your experience with great Sen.
A: I never liked his method of work. He does not have a written script to follow. What he does is explain a situation to the actors and tell them to get involved into an imaginary discussion according to the theme he has explained to them. He then writes his dialogues that come out of the situation. The whole thing is impromptu. On the contrary, I try to follow Ray's method of planning everything before the actual shot. And since I was a commercial artist I even draw the situation on my script.
Q: As a director what you consider most important to begin with?
A: To me the most important aspect of a cinematic venture is the story and that is my starting point. What I consider in a story is whether it is different. I hate to work with clichés. The second most important thing after that is script. I always love to work in detail. I always keep in mind the time and space in which the characters would perform their roles and finally about the actors and actresses.
Q: Where do you draw line between commercial and serious movie?
A: I call a movie commercial when the sole interest of the

project is business. When you put your creative interest above all else, I would call it a serious movie.
Q: You have adapted famous works of literature by your contemporaries like *Alauddin Al Azad*. How do you interpret a literary work for cinema?
A: First I settle it with the writer, tell him how I'm going to portray theme lest there arise any misunderstanding with the author. I interpret a story through the glass of my memories and experiences.
Q: What do you have to say about the junks that are being churned out regularly from our film industry?
A: My gut feeling is that you have to accept your time. If you cling to old ideals you can, but you will be left behind. Now who are the cine-goers. Teenagers certainly. What they expect from a movie is sentimental light drama immersed in action and violence. In one way they are being exposed to the West more than what their predecessors had and again look at the social scenario composed of hartal, political killings, rape and above all a disturbing unrest. These influence greatly to shape the psyche of our younger generation. You can't stop the degeneration of taste by resisting it or criticising it. The only way out is to educate the audi-

ence. The government role in improving the industry is undoubtedly dubious. In West Bengal the authorities not only give grants to a movie but also make arrangements for its release and all its business aspects. Here in our case after giving the grants the authorities has no connection with the production let alone overseeing the progress of the shooting. You have to give an infrastructure to grow your talents.
Q: What do you think about our present political culture?
A: Let me tell you something, I hate politics. And for a long time now I do not exercise my right to vote.
Q: But do you think you are out of politics?
A: Well, I prefer to remain silent. This is my way of showing protest.
Q: You are an avid reader of the scriptures — Quran, Veda, Bible — we know. Do you think that these scriptures written or revealed thousand of years ago can logically interpret the present time?
A: These books are becoming more and more tenable to me.
Q: How do you look at death?
A: Death is an integral part of life and since you may die at any moment, the only way to make your life meaningful is to work without thinking of benefits.



When I was a Teenager...

FROM childhood, he learnt that whatever he didn't feel like doing could be contributed to his inability. Today he still maintains this, escaping unwanted liabilities by pretending to be ignorant, but he is also one of our senior and respected laureates. He is a teacher, an organizer and he wants to make people happy, make them smile and look at the good things in life. He is Abdullah Abu Sayeed.
At one time, he was obsessed with television. He was also very involved in our literary movement. As a youngster he was quite a writer as well. He still is. Then came the idea of Biswa Shahitya Kendra, an academic forum, which is completing its 20th year today (18th December).
This time we get him to take a trip down memory lane. "I was born in a teacher's family. My father was a teacher all his life, he taught in a college, became its principal and remained in that post for twenty-six years. Therefore, we were always among professors, teachers and other students, which meant that we had a rich academic and cultural background. When the students talked of my father, their love and respect for him touched me. They spoke as if he was not a teacher, but a god. I think it is because of this that I was so inclined towards the teaching profession. I probably wanted people to look at me with similar emotions. Besides my father's inspiration, another reason that may have influenced me to take up teaching was probably my laziness! In our times, teachers were like house-husbands, they taught for a few hours and then it was all relaxing and dozing and doing whatever you liked. I never liked being tied down and so this suited me very well. I thought I could then do so many things. This prospect was valid for me. Today I am a chairman without a chair. This means I'm still free.
My environment spelt studies and values and we knew from a young age that sacrifices had to be made for this, if that is what is required. My parents never told us to study, but they created such an atmosphere that we automatically sat down to study.
What kind of a boy was he at school and what was his re-

IN CONVERSATION WITH ABDULLAH ABU SAYEED

By Navine Murshid

lationship with his teachers?
"I think I was a dumb boy! My intellect progressed at a very slow rate. I was always the last person to understand a given problem, be it mathematics, science or any normal conversation! I vividly remember a classmate who was brilliant at everything. His handwriting was like pearls and he was the apple of everyone's eyes. At a parents' teachers' meeting, when his father came, the teachers were full of praise for him. At that point I was wondering where to hide with my father!
"I also remember another occasion when my teacher in primary school asked me to add up test marks in answer papers. I broke out in perspiration, because I was making gross mistakes and the more I tried to rectify my mistakes, the more complicated it got. When the teacher realized that what I was saying made no sense he was very angry. At that time I could clearly see my future in darkness!
"As I grew up, I picked up things faster. I trained myself so as to do better. I never felt inferior because I knew I was dumb and that is why I appreciated the little I had and worked on it. I had no standards to meet, so my brain took its own sweet time to develop! And it did! The dumb boy became the literary champion at the University. Today, lost is the boy with the beautiful handwriting, lost are the many talents we had...but I'm still here and I reached a place beyond my expectations."

centres, memorizing notes and studying all day like it is today. There was so much space around that we could play football, cricket, badminton, kabaddi, everything there. We literally played till our limbs hurt. We swam in the lakes, we took walks in the jungle and we roamed around discovering new territories. This jungle had tigers in it. In winter, the tigers used to come out and drink water from the pond near our home. When at one time, my father bought my brother and me toy guns, we thought that it was possible to kill tigers with them. So we roamed around in search for tigers. These are entertainment too. Reading books and gymnastics were popular practices as well. This was because of the war effect. We thought that the only way we could tackle the domination of the British was to gain as much knowledge as possible and to practice self-defense. We knew we had an intelligent enemy and we had to fight brains with brains. So it can be said that that our entertainment was shaped by social and political influences as well. We definitely were not bored. I think it is in fact today's children who do not know how to laugh.
Abdullah Abu Sayeed laments that today's generation is becoming more materialistic by the day. They have no time to read beyond their prescribed texts. His aim to start Biswa Shahitya Kendra was to bring people to read some good books, to provide quality teaching to the young. But the number of people who go there is a small percentage compared to the whole society. Often, even when the children are willing, the parents complain of wastage of time, time being struck off from the academics.
They fail to realize that there are so many things in the world to learn about apart from what test books say. All they can ever think of is what their children would be when they grow up and how to ensure it. It is the competition between parents that interfere with the child's development. Most would rather watch television than read a good book. Why doesn't the parent say anything then, he wonders. Yet, he will go on in his mission to make the world, rather Bangladesh a better place.

"Soul Search"

Fazal Shahabuddin
Poet

Q: What gives you the greatest pleasure?
A: In the dictionaries they say, 'pleasure is the feeling of contentment or happiness caused by any welcome physical, intellectual or emotional experience'. That when a person is content, he is happy and satisfied and may be he discovers some kind of pleasure — mentally, physically or sexually. I am a poet but I am also a human being and naturally I do feel satisfied sometimes. Maybe the word pleasure is not enough to express the nature and quantum of satisfaction I get from the spiritual satiation as a result of my creative endeavours.
Q: Do you have any recurring nightmares?
A: Yes I do. And I did have one throughout my whole life. From my young days I had the strange belief that anyone who is a creative person must experience inexpressible dreams, obsessive fears and acute anxiety. I used to think that poetry itself is a ceaseless source of intense pain and ecstasy. A poet must have that magical vision through which he can reach the infinite — and for that reason I always desired that nightmares should be my perpetual partner of imagination.
Q: What do you dislike most about yourself?
A: That I am terribly indisposed, almost clumsy — but knowing that did not help me a bit — and I cannot do anything about it. My family suffers, my friends dislike it and I lose many things in the process but I am helpless.
Q: What is your greatest fear?
Ans 4: That one day I may lose the passion I have for life.
Q: What has been the biggest mistake in your life?
Ans: If you meant errors by the word mistake then I had millions of them in my life and I am sure I shall have more of them because I am human. I shall name only one. I always wanted to be misunderstood and mistaken. I don't know why.
Q: What makes you cry?
A: Everything. The earth, the sky, the cosmos, the face of my woman, the sound of poetry and music, the seas oceans, the great trees, the flowers, the fallen leaves — every thing. Every thing makes me cry because they all are so shortlived only few billion years. And I know that's like a small dot in the course of eternity.
Q: Who is your role model?
A: I do not know yet. I am in search for one during the past sixty years. I did travel a lot in my imagination but my visions could only discover infinite shadows which one day will lead me to the solitude of my grave.
Q: How important is money to you?
A: Money is good and useful and it can buy many comforts but it is not important to me and should not be important to anyone with a heart.
Q: What is more important to you, your personal or professional life?
A: I am a personal being. Everything I have and I possess is personal my woman, my earth, my sky, my dreams, my love for life and my death.
Q: Are you afraid of death?
Ans Absolutely not. Because I know death is the greatest gift that God has given to humankind. Without death the whole creation will plunge into unthinkable catastrophe and will collapse.
Q: Which book has influenced your life most?
A: Nature, the book I tried to read and understand throughout my whole life.
Q: If you were given a chance to start all over again from zero, what would you want to be?
A: I don't know exactly. And I do not want to know. Because I do not want to start all over again from zero. Because I know that will never bring any new meaning to my existence.
Q: What worries you most as we are standing at the threshold of the 21st century?
A: Nothing worries me at all. I know a century or a millennium means nothing. The earth was populated by great trees and dinosaurs the other day. They lived for sixty-five million years on earth and then vanished. We are yet to complete one million — and we are certain to disappear one day — so what?
Interviewed by Ziaul Karim