

Sudhin Das, renowned exponent of Nazrul songs for over half a century, left for his eternal abode on June 27, 2017. A pall of gloom has enveloped the art circuit with his passing.

I have distinct memories of Das, the man who took music to great heights and helped restore the authentic songs of Nazrul which were subject to rampant distortion by a vested quarter.

As a girl of barely eight years, my imagination would run wild whenever I glimpsed Sudhin Das and his wife, Nazrul Sangeet exponent Nilima Das, endearingly called Nilima *di*, enter the premises of my aunt's house

Das almost single-handedly worked on the Herculean task of authenticating the original notations of Nazrul Sangeet, the "swara lipi".

Several times when I visited the Nazrul Institute, our mentor Sudhin Das would be seen engrossed in stacks of old gramophone records while busy instructing a group of young students. "I never tire from teaching the original tunes..." he would say.

He expanded on his work: "More often than not, these discs are in such poor condition, that it is a laborious job to even grasp the lyrics, let alone decipher the delicate filigree works of the different musical

songs that he composed in *Bhairabi* Raga would be tuned in *Bagesree*, or some of his classic songs would be sung according to whims. In contrast to Tagore songs, which were structured, the singers had no option to change even a notation, let alone the style," added Das.

"Tagore's creations were guarded against distortion under the copyright of Biswa Bharati which was not the case for Nazrul songs. Nazrul's legendary popularity, his immense stock of songs and the lack of copyrights were certainly at the core of the problem."

"How difficult was it to start this initiative?" I had asked.

TRIBUTE

SUDHIN DAS

PASSING OF A MENTOR, PURIST AND LOVER OF NAZRUL'S HERITAGE

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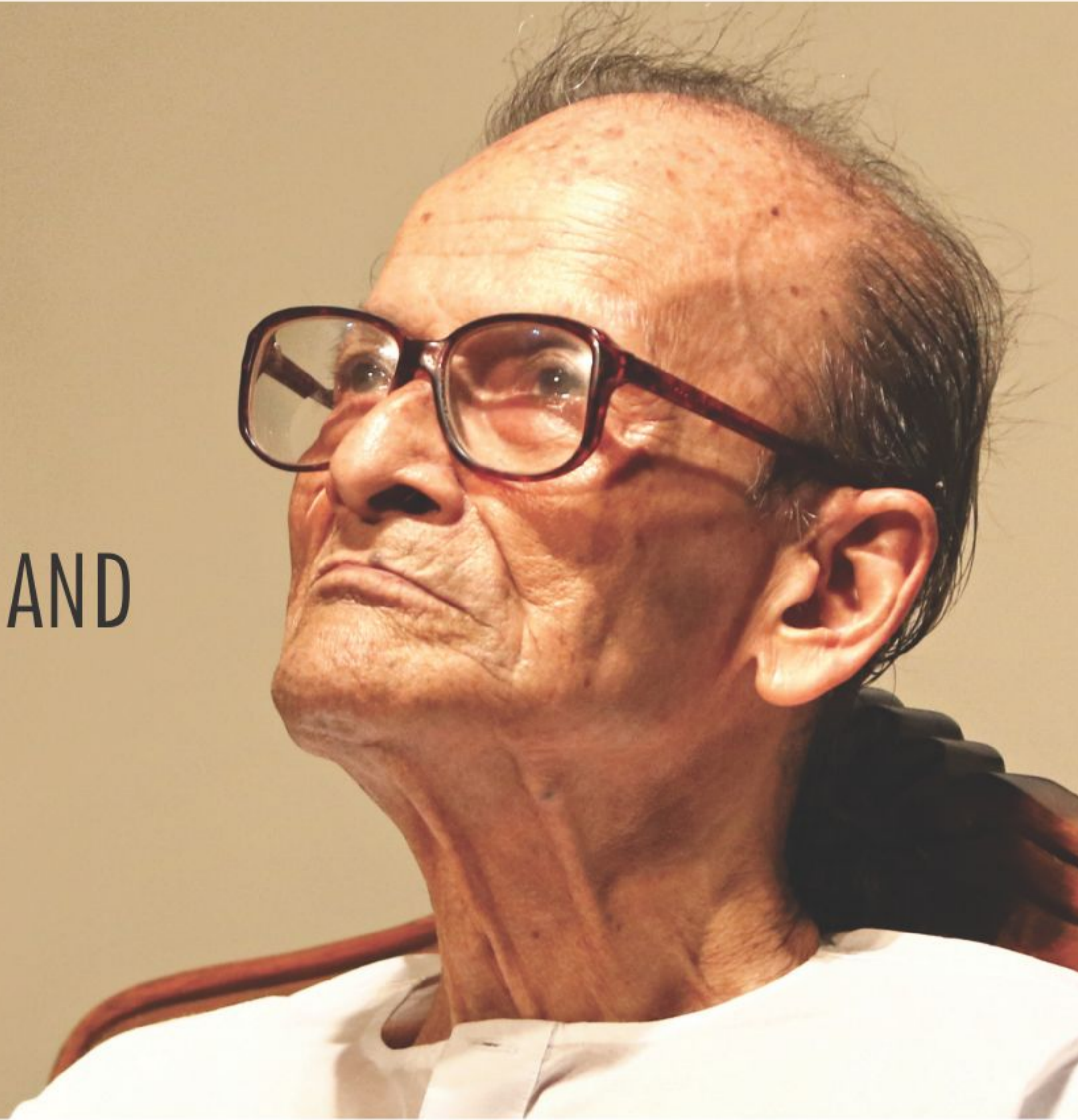


PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

at Aashian Building on their Vespa scooter. To me they seemed to be none other than the iconic screen pair Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. Watching them on their motorcycle reminded me of the song "Ei Poth Jodi na Shesh Hoy". Moreover, the pillion rider, Nilima *di* seemed to have an uncanny resemblance to the exquisite Suchitra Sen. Much later I learnt that many other artistes fondly addressed her as Suchitra *bou di* too...

It was a time when private tutoring in music was rare but not unusual in Dhaka. Sudhin Das, always in spotless white pajama-panjabi would teach my elder brother and I at our Dhaka University campus. At times he would accompany us on the tabla and give voice lessons along with classical music. I clearly remember the first song—"Jhiler Joley Ke Bhashale, Neel Shaluker Bhela, Meghila Shokal Bela". The words seemed to evoke imageries of our native land in Sujabad. There were other rare spiritual songs—"Laili Bhangio na Dhyani, Mojni'r e Minoti... Laili Kothaye Ami Shudhu Dekhi, La I'lar Jyoti", "Kalma Shahadate Achhe Khoda'r Jyoti" or the raga-based song "Rum Jhum Rumjhum ke Bajaye" in raga Nirjhorini created by Nazrul that created a ripple effect in increasing my yearning to know the man behind the songs. Much later, I came to know that Kazi Nazrul Islam would often visit my maternal grandfather Khan Bahadur Abdul Hamid, Zamindar of Sundarpur, Murshidabad, India, where Nazrul would often stay, write poems and hunt as well. Once my grandfather had told Nazrul to write a song on Sundarpur. Sitting on the bank of the river Mayurakhi, Nazrul had instantly written the song "Ei Sundar Phool Sundar Phol Mitha Nadir Pani, Khoda Tomar Meherbani".

genres of Nazrul songs ranging from semi-classical to the folk and ghazal to modern, and one has to master the exact technical nuances to carry on with the task."

"After Nazrul was incapacitated by a neurological illness in 1942, his works fell into the hands of so-called intellectuals and well-wishers who took advantage of the situation. From then on these were tampered beyond imagination," said Das.

Das was himself a victim of circumstances. The songs he taught the students that he had gathered from West Bengal were immensely popular. But as time went on, he realised that a group with a shallow understanding of Nazrul was adapting the songs, and commercialising it for profit. This group was at the heart of distorting the poet's heritage. "It was then that we started our campaign for authenticating Nazrul Sangeet notations," Das would say.

In 1976-77, a noted publication house of India printed a third edition of 900 songs of Nazrul. However, a careful scrutiny revealed that most of the songs in the publication were not authentic. It was then that Sudhin Das visited Kolkata and challenged the works by Abdul Aziz Al Aman, the author of the notation book.

Expressing his indignation, Das said, "Do you think one would ever be allowed to add a few brush strokes here and there to the original works of Rembrandt, Picasso or Michelangelo? Or change the lyrics or tunes of Tagore, according to one's taste? That would be a clear distortion of the creativity; in short, it would be a crime."

"Nazrul was very liberal with his songs and allowed eminent artistes to make variations keeping the original form intact. But he hardly imagined that the immortal

Talim Hossain, founder GS of Nazrul Academy inspired Das to work on the authentic notations of Nazrul. But the project failed to continue after five publications, due to a difference of opinion.

In 1982, the then executive director of Nazrul Institute Md. Mahfuzullah took over and requested Das to work for a project at the Authentication Board of the Nazrul Institute. "Out of a total 34 *swaralipi* (notations) books published from Nazrul Institute, I worked on 24. Each song takes several days to decipher," added Sudhin Das. Eminent composer and singer Sheikh Luthfar Rahman and Das's students SM Ahsan Murshed, Rafiqunnabi and Salauddin Ahmed have followed Das in making authentic notations from the original discs that were recorded before Nazrul fell grievously ill.

"TV and Radio should have a cell to scrutinise Nazrul's original songs. If strict measures are taken for a year the authentic tunes will once again be practised by all," Das had said with confidence.

We are still some way off from fulfilling Das' dream but this tireless "defender" of Nazrul songs will never be forgotten.

For his untiring commitment, he achieved much adulation at home and abroad. Among his prestigious awards were Ekushey Padak, Nazrul Gold Medal, Nasiruddin Gold Medal, Zebunnessa-Mahbubullah Trust Gold Medal and the Altaf Mahmood Gold Medal.

He dedicated his life to preserving the work of our National poet, a national heritage. He has earned the love of a grateful nation.

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My father didn't look like other people's fathers when I was a young child. He was tall and fit and square-chinned and took great care with how he dressed. He wore Italian velvet blazers and Lanvin ties and Persol sunglasses. Other dads' polos, tucked high and tight into dress pants, could barely contain their cheerfully ample selves at dinner parties; my father would be dressed with casual, throwaway stylishness in a camel sweater, a Kashmiri shawl thrown casually over his shoulder. "Your dad looks like a movie star," my sister's friends would tell her. "Salam-bhai is one hundred percent Vinod Khanna," various aunties would coo. Indeed, my father had paid close attention to matinee idols of his youth. He could tell you which of his suits looked like Clint Eastwood's in *Dirty Harry* and which of his broad-buckled belts was like Robert Redford's in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. I learned early that style came from the movies.

Dad didn't just dress well himself; he made sure my mother, entirely unworldly, did so as well. He practically curated her sarees, nixing colors he

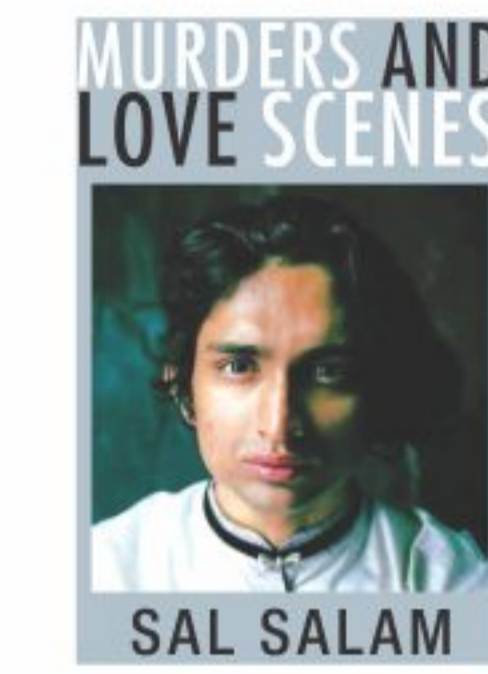


deemed unflattering and frowning on cheap poly-blends. There is one saree I remember in particular, a feather-light chiffon thing spangled with sequins that delighted my six-year-old magpie heart. I thought of it as my mum's *Chandni* saree; it was the sort of thing Sridevi wore with such glamorous demureness in Yash Chopra's *Chandni*.

Sridevi was my earliest style icon. When she shot up like a giant flower against a blue, blue sky in a big, off-shoulder white dress sashed with gold, her curls askew, in a song from her 1991 film *Lamhe*, I fell headlong in love. I couldn't tell then if I wanted to be around her all the time or just be her, but there was no evocation of grown-up life, with its attendant romances and its not-fully-comprehensible allure, more satisfying to me than Sri in *Lamhe*.

The attraction of her look in the film to a child is not hard to understand; she wore big billowy pastel-colored stuff that moved wonderfully as she romped and danced, and she had the coyly elfin face of a child herself atop her grown-up body. But I was already a budding aesthete and a dreadfully snob, and I found myself responding joyously to the unflashy, Western-feeling costuming, very different from the look of most mainstream South Asian cinema of that time.

Sri's garden-party-ready frocks signified class and elegance to me before I knew those words. They were of a world



FASHION IN FILM A LOVE STORY



that looked cool to the touch; where the sounds and colors were appealingly muted in contrast to the noise and heat and scheduled chaos of my middle-class Bangladeshi expat childhood; where one could be brown and still live large in the English countryside and ride in helicopters with men who looked like money and probably didn't wear lungis or burp at the dinner table. No other film or TV show I'd seen up till then had shown me that sort of sophisticated universe peopled by folks of color, and I wanted in. Perhaps I began figuring out, albeit in an inchoate sort of way, while watching and rewatching that movie, that class, race, societal aspirations—all that stuff was coded into what one chose to (or had to) wear.

My interest in both fashion and film only grew with the passing years. But as a fat, unwittingly gender-non-conforming adolescent, I wore in real life only the things I hoped would render me as invisible as possible. My sister, willowy and mostly willing, became the subject of my movie-inspired styling experiments. I sketched short kurtas with flared salwars for her to take to her tailor so she'd look like Kareena Kapoor



in some hit song of the early 2000's. (Kareena Kapoor also inspired the clothes of the heroines in the stories I wrote; they inevitably wore little leather minis and fur stoles like the actress in that seminal celebration of cis-heteropatriarchal high capitalism, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*.)

As a teenager, I became obsessed with *Before Sunrise* and the impossibly cool-seeming lead pair of Julie Delpy and Ethan Hawke who talked books and philosophy and love in Europe in what looked to me like the ideal version of young-grown-up-hood. Of course, I then tried to cajole my sister into a tank maxi-dress over a t-shirt (by then a dated look, now on-trend again). If people around me looked more like the beautiful, sensitive, hyper-intelligent characters in the movies I loved, maybe the world I lived in would be prettier and kinder and a little less brutal?

I wished the girls I knew dressed like Jean Seberg in her insouciant little outfit of slacks and that New York Herald Tribune t-shirt after watching (and barely understanding) *Breathless*; more acutely, perhaps, I, although I couldn't have articulated as much to myself back then, wanted my own timorous, unresolved self to look as cunningly gamine and androgynous as she did.

In college, I began a delirious, complicated love affair with Classic Hollywood. (The misogyny and the

racism and the social conservatism! But also the wit and the style and the Great Faces™!) I also launched upon a new era in my relationship with myself, one that was much more candid now that I was in a new world (which was, of course, also the New World) and free of old constraints. I turned inward, navigating the shifting sands of my sexuality and gender identity with the curiosity and wonderment I'd previously felt only for art, and simultaneously outward, looking in those old movies for new ways to look like and be myself. Katharine Hepburn, straight-backed, high-cheekboned, flat-chested, and fast-talking, the lines of her gowns (when she wasn't, much to the consternation of the studios back then, wearing pants) somehow both squared off and fluid, became my idol. She wasn't just assured in her in-between oddness - she was positively and radiantly unquestionable in it.

I was learning a lesson about self-presentation from the movies and its icons once again, and this time it was one of self-determination and self-love through personal style. Tilda Swinton, who makes a *sui generis* kind of performance art in the liminal spaces

It is possible, I told myself as I watched her glide through the film, to be a new genre of person, a lovely new species, a story of one's own telling.

between all sorts of identities both onscreen and on the red carpet, became another key inspiration. As Orlando in Sally Potter's exquisite adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel-length love letter to her paramour, Swinton is an original as a beautifully avian Elizabethan nobleman in enormous sleeves and also as a powdered, startled eighteenth-century noblewoman in gorgeous rococo frippery. It is possible, I told myself as I watched her glide through the film, to be a new genre of person, a lovely new species, a story of one's own telling.

Now, when I walk out of my little flat in a big city, looking one day like Howl from *Howl's Moving Castle* (white shirt, wild hair, vintage cape, eyelashes that seem to *listen*) and another like something out of a Jacques Demy musical (candy-colored, mod-adjacent, nattily shod, ready to break into dance and bittersweet song), I feel sometimes as if I've willed myself into my own surreal little movie. I wonder, then, what it would be like to reach across fields of time gone by and tell a plump little six-year-old I know, agog as Sridevi whips her big white skirt around, that there may not be manor houses and helicopter rides in the future, but the clothes—and the adventures to be had in them—will be lovely in their own queer fashion nevertheless.

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