Satish Bhatnagar, the pen-wizard, passes away at 88 - A small tribute by Siraj Syed

From Raaz, the film that launched Rajesh Khanna, to Seeta Aur Geeta, the multi-starrer blockbuster, to Mahabharat (with Dr. Rahi Masoom Raza), the epic reinterpreted for television, Satish Bhatnagar carved out milestone after milestone in Urdu script, without much ado, puffing on his trademark pipe. He had to give up the pipe on medical advice, and in his last days, for the same reason, he could not even travel the short distance to the B R Films' office, where he spent the last few decades of his life, as a senior member of the empanelled writers retained by the banner. He last worked for them on the Baghban screenplay. Earlier, he had worked in the Prakash Mehra camp too, writing for films like Hera Pheri. Other credits include Abhilasha, Maryada and Kasauti.

Bedridden and seriously ill for nearly three years till he breathed his last, he had requested me to try and find a producer for his Chandragupta Chanakya screenplay, which had been waiting for a backer ever since the project was shelved decades ago. Ashok, his Pune-based nephew, and Saroj, his ailing sister who lived with him in his last days, launched a search to trace the script, but I could finally see it only on the 8th of July, a day after he passed away. The chaatha is being held today, though, at 4 pm, at his residence since 1961: 5 Garden Homes, Chitrakaar Dhurandhar Marg (Khar-Danda Main Road), Near Dandpada, Khar West, Mumbai. Phone: 022 26463302.

Some lesser known facts about Satish Saahab:

- There was no funeral, since Satish Saahab had donated his body for medical research.
- He was a freedom-fighter and acknowledged as such by the Indian government.
- He worked for the BBC in London before he was persuaded by Guru Dutt to migrate to Mumbai and write a film for him. Unfortunately, the film was never made.
- Whenever Guru Dutt and wife Geeta got into an argument, Satish Saahab would play mediator.
- He got into a debate with writer Krishan Chander over a piece he had written, but instead of taking umbrage, Krishan Chander developed great regard for him.
- Poet Nida Fazli has dedicated a sher (couplet) to Satish Saahab, after he was amazed to see an 80-plus Satish Bhatnagar regularly sweeping his doorway and the footpath outside.
- He wrote commercial radio programmes for Mr. Ameen Sayani, and edited a film fortnightly called Pointer in the 1960s, published by Jagmohan Mattu and Ameen Sayani, with my late brother Riaz as Assistant Editor. When he moved on, Riaz, became the Editor. It was here that I got my first taste of journalism, as an 11-year-old proof-reader. Riaz and I visited him often, and after Bhai Saahab's death, I continued the tradition. My last visit was on 11th May 2010, Satish Saahab's 88th birthday.

Siraj Syed, 10 July 2010 (Picture taken by me at his residence in 2007).

Written by:
Siraj Syed

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Tributes
Thanks for carrying it, Mohanjee.

At the chautha, some of the persons present were Ameen Sayani and his son Rajil, Dr. Achala Nagar, Daisy Irani, Meenakshi Thakur, Hasan Kamaal, and The Shroff family of film financiers. AmeenSaahab narrated to me that he was to make a film on Satish Saahab’s adaptation of Charlie’s Aunt, which was earlier bought by Guru Dutt. After Guru’s passing away, Ameen Saahab bought the rights from Atmaram, Guru’s brother, and signed Shankar-Jaikishan and Mahmood. Co-incidentally, they finalised Shashi Kapoor and Tanuja to do the main roles, the very actors Guru had approached when he was planning to make the film. Both had excellent vibes with AmeenSaahab. Unfortunately, AmeenSaahab was told by a veteran distributor, who worked out the costing and returns, that he could not expect any profit from the project, only heavy losses! So, the film was abandoned on paper itself, and AmeenSaahab gave up the idea of ever producing a film.

Siraj Syed

A good many valbuaels you’ve given me.

Rahul