

Chapter 2 - Activity 4



MEHBOOB KHAN – *The Producer*

In every village there is a little boy with a dream. The nearest city is the Mecca of his dreams. He is a boy in constant agony of his dream. The dream haunts him night and day. He hopes and prays, plans and whispers and then one day runs away from the world that holds him back. For, in a new world he has a new birth – a birth in adult years in which he rocks his own cradle with lullabies of his ambition. In this new world life becomes his school and experience his mother. That has been the story of pioneers all over the world.

30 years ago a young man of 18 sat every day on the little railway station of Bilimora, once a village of 4,000 people, and looked longingly at the trains that steamed in and out at regular intervals. Dreamily he looked at the rail tracks which disappeared in the horizon. But his Mecca was 135 miles away, the fabulous city of Bombay, where, the young man was told, people had built houses with bricks of gold.

To a boy who had never been allowed to go beyond three miles of his home, 135 miles meant a journey to the Moon. But young Mehboob was haunted by a dream. He scraped some money and at last landed in Bombay in 1927, with only Rs. 3 in his pocket.

His love of art took him to the gates of the Imperial Film Company. Admission to the study was almost impossible, for the girls who worked inside seemed to need protection from adventurous gate-crashers. A big bearded Pathan guarded the gates of the studio. But Mehboob was resourceful. He knew a railway omcer who had some influence over Khan Bahadur Ardeshir Iran, the boss of the Imperial Film Company. Mehboob passed through the gates and was taken into the presence of the great man.

One look at young Mehboob, and Khan Bahadur Irani roared, “Another moonstruck lad! Why don’t you go back and do some honest work on your father’s farm?” Before Mehboob could fumble out a reply, he heard the muezzin’s call to prayer from the adjoining mosque. Mehboob folded his hands and said, “Seth, I’ll just say my prayers and come back. Please excuse me.”

Mehboob rushed to the Pathan watchman's guardhouse and within a minute was praying by his side.

This little incident, however, was not lost on the portly Khan Bahadur. Mehboob was engaged as an extra artiste in the company and soon forgotten. Mehboob thus joined a band of 700 studio workers many of whom saw one another only on the pay-day which they called a census day. But Mehboob was not on the payroll. He got a job all right but the boss had forgotten to name the salary and the studio accountant refused to recognize Mehboob even as an employee.

Those were hard days for young Mehboob. Youth has dreams but dreams don't bring diners home. Mehboob somehow managed to live with a poor friend, sharing his bread. For the bed, however, he had to seek the indifferent hospitality of a railway station.

A kindly director gave Mehboob his first role and smiled slyly as Mehboob enthusiastically put the make-up on his face. Mehboob was to play one of the 40 thieves in "All Baba and Chalis Chor". The director put Mehboob inside a big jar throughout the picture without ever a chance to peep out at the camera. Mehboob is still wondering why they put him there because it would not have made any difference to the pot or to the picture whether a man was inside or not. Mehboob, of course, spotted the jar when he saw the picture. But that was a pot of Mehboob's future destiny. It was big enough to hold him and his destiny – both.

Mehboob's next role was a standing one – standing in a crowd, hoping and praying that the cameraman would catch him at least once. Four months passed in such star roles and Mehboob still did not know how a pay-packet looked. He rushed to his old friend in the railway and once again Mehboob was ushered into the august presence of Khan Bahadur Irani. The Khan Bahadur was of course too busy, though doing nothing as usual, and in a minute Mehboob was started on a salary of Rs. 30 per month. The first four months were clean forgotten and no compensation was asked or offered.

Out of these Rs. 30/- Mehboob sent Rs. 10/- to his old father every month and lived on Rs. 20/- in the city. To a man who had lived four months in a strange city without a single pice, the sum of Rs. 20/- was a windfall.

But this five-time praying Muslim boy soon attracted the attention of Mr. R. G. Torney, the General Manager of the Imperial Film Company. The religious trait in the young man appealed to Mr. Torney and he took Mehboob under his personal patronage and saw to it that he got some roles to play. Many of them were silent roles, played silently without even the camera being conscious of them.

Three years passed in this manner and then one day in Jaipur, working under Torney himself in a picture called "Mewad-no-Mawali", Mehboob was asked to ride a horse, come rushing towards the camera, stop dead and then ride away. The wild and well-fed horse of the Maharaja of Jaipur never expected a raw village lad from Bilimora on its back. The horse resented the insult but Mehboob somehow persuaded it to rush towards the camera and rear up for a second. But the next second the royal horse bolted with the village lad clinging to it for dear life.

But the camera had caught the risky second and when a fortnight later the portly Khan Bahadur saw the rushes, he jumped and asked, "Who's this boy, Torney?" "Our Mehboob, sir," said Torney. "Which Mehboob?" asked the Khan Bahadur. And Mehboob was soon brought before him. The Khan Bahadur looked at him for a minute and asked. "What salary do you get?" "Thirty rupees, sir." "Torney, give him ten rupees more," ordered the Khan Bahadur.

That was the first nod of recognition Mehboob got in life. Thanks to the Maharaja's horse who had almost sent him back into the lap of Allah! Mehboob's prayers now became more intense.

Mehboob soon got some important roles and by 1931 was drawing Rs. 60/- per month playing the villain for Sagar Movietone, a cooperative concern of the Imperial Film Company.

Now Mehboob began to write his first story. His new bosses – Dr. Ambalal Patel and

Chimanlal Desai – gave him 71 appointments to hear the story. They didn't keep one. At the 72nd appointment, Mehboob, however, succeeded in getting Dr. Patel interested. Mehboob's first picture, "Judgement Of Allah" was soon on the sets.

When this picture was released in Bombay, Mehboob's two bosses were anxiously waiting outside the auditorium for the verdict of Baburao Patel, the editor of "Filmindia" and the most feared critic of India. After the show Chimanlal was the first to break the ice with, "What do you think, Baburao?" "You have got a new director, Chimanlal, a man who is destined to go a long way," said Baburao Patel congratulating the producer. That was in 1934. The prophecy has come true, beyond even the expectations of the great critic.

The roaring success of "Judgement Of Allah" brought new assignments to Mehboob. For Sagar Movietone, Mehboob directed "Al Hilal", "Manmohan", "Jagirdar", "Watan", "We Three", and "The Only Way". After this series, he joined the National Studio and produced and directed "Aurat", which won new laurels for Mehboob as a motion picture director. "Roti", a dynamic story on a man's bread-hunt followed also from the same studio.

In 1942, Mehboob established his own production unit and produced and directed "Najma". Then came "Taqdeer", "Humayun", "Anmol, Ghadi", "Elan", "Anokhi Ada", "Andaz" and "Aan".

"Mother India" is Mehboob's 19th picture in 30 years of his film career which began as an invisible "thief" sitting in a jar throughout a whole picture.

The dream of the village boy of Bilimora has come true. In "Mother India", Mehboob proudly, and yet humbly, presents his motherland to the world with the prayer:

"Bismillah -ir -Rahman -ir -Raheem.
Al -hamd -u -lillah -i -Rabb11 Alameen.
Ar- Rahman ir- Raheem.
Malik -i -yanm -id -deen.
Iyyaka nabudu wa Iyyaka nasta'een.
Ihd -nassarat al mustaqueem.
Sirat- al Lazeena ana'mta alaihim Ghair -11
maghdoob- i- a'laihim wa laddallin. Ameen."