

# cinema

## Slaves to an idea of beauty

Stars who get obsessed with how they look or dread aging probably end up in a sorry state,

writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

In the age we live in, physical appearance has become so important that not just women but men too seem to be slaving for it. Film stars are no exception. Rather, they are completely besotted by how they look — on screen and off it.

Take, for instance, the current Indian fixation called Aishwarya Rai. A commonly heard criticism is that she is never willing to shed her glam-doll image to cross the barrier between a star and an actress. Even in Mani Ratnam's latest *Raavan/Raavanam*, she is decked up, despite being held prisoner in a frightfully harsh terrain by a bunch of uncouth ruffians.

Even her scars look a beautiful pink and as ornamental as they can possibly be. She wears couture clothes designed by Kolkata's Sabyasachi Mukherjee, and is never without mascara and a trace of lipstick. And, of course, she looks divine in the most physically and emotionally trying moments — but fails as an actress.

Obviously, Rai's attention is all towards how pretty she can



\* Aishwarya Rai: looks ravishing even when she's playing a damsel in distress!

be, rather than how well she can perform.

But Ratnam is not the only director guilty of pampering Rai's vanity. Some years ago, Bengal's Rituparno Ghosh walked into this trap as well by letting the camera caress Aishwarya. His *Choker Bali*, set in the early 1900s, has

Rai playing a very young widow. Childless, she is part of a cruel tradition that humiliated and tortured such women, banishing them to widow homes (which still exist today in places like Varanasi) and to a life of utter deprivation. They were denied simple pleasures like eating meat or fish.

Despite all this, Rai managed to look as ravishing as ever.

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We have two classic cases from the world of cinema. One is Bengal's iconic Suchitra Sen, whose recent illness and hospitalisation provoked my thoughts on this subject. She has lived a life of recluse for years, refusing to get out of her palatial Kolkata bungalow and to meet anyone other than her daughter, Moon Moon Sen, and granddaughters, Raima and Riya.

It is reported that India's most prestigious movie award, Dadasaheb Phalke Prize, had to be denied to her, because she refused to travel to New Delhi and receive it from the country's President.

Now, why would she have shut herself away? Perhaps, she did not want anybody to see her grow old and infirm.

She would have preferred the world to remember her as a stunning woman: the Suchitra who took Bengal by storm with her aristocratic beauty and classic poise. She was an epitome of dignity and grace.

The first Indian actress to have got an international honour — that at the 1963 Moscow Film Festival for her *Saat Paahe Bandha* — she created a sensation with one movie hit after another, including *Aandhi* in Hindi, where she portrays a character resembling former Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi.

Pairing with another great Bengali legend, Uttam Kumar, she remained on top for two decades. The romantic pair never faltered.

It is said that she had to refuse Satyajit Ray's offer to act in his *Devi Chaudharani*, because of problems



\* An archive picture of reclusive Hollywood siren Greta Garbo: 'getting old is very painful process, especially for a woman.'

with her dates. Ray never made the film. She also could not do a Raj Kapoor movie.

In 1978, at age 47, Sen realised that she was aging in a tinsel world that has never been kind to older actresses — and made an exit. She has hardly ever been seen in public after that. People dubbed her the Indian Garbo.

Greta Garbo, that lovely Swedish actress, also vanished from the public eye or just about. She was only 36 when she decided to quit. Discovered by film director Mauritz Stiller, who transformed her from a plain sales clerk to one of the greatest films stars cinema had ever known, Garbo's ethereal beauty and enigmatic personality added to the runaway successes of movies like *The Torrent* (1926), *Love* (1927), *Anna Christie* (1930), *Grand Hotel* (1932), *Anna Karenina* (1935), *Camille* (1936) and *Ninotchka* (1939).

Hardly had the flash-bulbs stopped popping when she walked out of the make-believe world and far away from arc-lamps and greasepaint. She moved to New York and erected an almost impregnable fortress around her. Fans were devastated by Garbo's mysterious movie, and her reclusiveness added to her mystique.

However, a biography of Garbo, penned by Antoni Gronowicz, gives a plausible explanation for the actress' decision to exit when

everything was going in her favour.

"After my bath each day" she had said, "I examined my naked body in the mirror, and every day I noticed new wrinkles. So I underwent massages, dieted, and performed strenuous gymnastics to hold off age. But I was not successful.

"Getting old is a very painful process, especially for a woman. And most especially for a woman who was once a great and original beauty".

Greta Garbo hid herself behind huge dark glasses on the rare occasion she chose to get out on the streets. Suchitra never even did that. So mortally petrified they probably were of withering away in layers of wrinkles that they preferred to shun society and call it off with community.

Garbo died when she was 84 having spent no less than 50 years as a loner. Sen is almost 80, and she has been a recluse for over 30 years of her life.

Both stars threw away really huge chunks of their lives presumably fearing that they would begin to look less alluring as they grow older. What a waste to have chucked away decades of artistic excellence!

(Gautaman Bhaskaran grew up in Kolkata as a Suchitra Sen fan and an admirer of Greta Garbo, and may be contacted at [gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in](mailto:gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in))



\* Suchitra Sen as Paro in Bimal Roy's 1955 epic *Devdas*: the talented actress withdrew from the public eye at her peak.