

Ashok Kumar

On 13th October 1911, Bhagalpur in the Bengal Presidency of British India witnessed the birth of a cinematic legend, Kumudlal Ganguly who would later go on to set a stage name Indian cinema would remember as an icon for years to come. Born in the legendary Ganguly family, he was destined for greatness since he was born, being an elder brother to both the great actor Anoop Kumar and the legendary playback singer Kishore Kumar.

Since he was born in a much rather conventional timeline in India, he got married only as a teenager to his wife Shobha, who shared a similar Bengali Brahmin community as his. Being the megastar that he was, it would be a realistic judgment to presume that there was little to no family-work balance, however it is believed that even though a conventional one, he led a very happy and prosperous married life continuing the legacy of the Ganguly family.

It might come as a shock to a few people that the iconic career put in front of the spectators' eyes was not the original path Ashok wanted to take in life. On his father's wishes, similar to his profession, Ashok was initially pursuing law. Unfortunately, he wasn't a gifted student and ended up failing important exams at his college, which forced him to flee to his sister in Mumbai. A sudden change of events led him to work as a laboratory assistant at the Bombay Talkies, where he was able to realize that he would be better off working there rather than becoming an unsuccessful lawyer. A few episodes of persuasion later began the cinematic career of Ashok Kumar but as a laboratory assistant and not an actual actor.

It was not before 1936, whilst shooting the film Jeevan Naiya, that he got his first break as an actor. A series of undesired incidents led to the replacement of the lead actor by none other than Kumudlal, who was then given the infamous stage name of Ashok Kumar. This film didn't just provide Ashok his first gig but also an on-screen partner with whom he would create ever-so-amazing cinematic blockbusters, Devika Rani. This on-screen couple soon became a fan favorite and worked in some of the most widely recognized films of that era including, Janmabhoomi, Izzat, Savitri, Vachan, and Nirmala from the years 1936 to 1938.

The big break of Ashok's career was surprisingly a movie that featured him as an antagonist, Kamat. This movie was the first movie to gross 1 crore at the box office, and that too in the year 1943, it was something no one had expected. This film skyrocketed his stardom and he became a superstar among fans. Things would come down to him being crowded and mobbed by fans in public, so much so that police had to be involved, such was his fame. From the year 1944 to the year 1950, his acting career had hit its peak. He rained blockbusters after blockbusters starring in films that are remembered as great pieces of Indian cinema to this day. Movies including Chal Chal Re Naujawan, Shikari, Sajan, Mahal, Mashal, and Samadhi to name a few. It was during these years that he was considered untouchable in Indian cinema.

The late 1950s saw Ashok Kumar slowly descend into the later years of his acting career, though still considered a superstar, he started working in fewer films and taking a seat back at life. Soon opting for mature-looking roles in the classic Howrah Bridge in 1958, he shifted his attention to films that would complement the looks of his age. He now started considering the roles of older-looking like a father or an elder brother in most of his movies. His biggest hit in the late 1960s was Aashirwad for which he won a filmfare award and a national award the following year.

The final years of his career i.e. the 1980s and the 1990s, were mostly spent in either supporting roles or in television in anchoring gigs. The great actor's and drama maestro's last film appearance was in the movie Aankhon Mein Tum Ho released in 1997.

The list of awards received by the legend would stand intimidating to any actors of the current lot. He was an exceptional artist on screen for which he was respected by a plethora of awards throughout his career, from the very beginning to the very end. The first award he received was in 1959 namely the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, venturing his way to collecting several Filmfare awards for best actor and best supporting actor across a magnitude of films. In 1994 he was also given the Star Screen Lifetime Achievement Award. The last token of respect that he ever lifted with his hands was the Awadh Samman presented to him by the Government of Uttar Pradesh.

The icon passed away at the age of 90 in Mumbai, on 10th December 2001, leaving an enormous fan base with sorrow and memories to cherish.

Ashok Kumar was nothing less than a marvel in Indian cinema, his legacy will be remembered by all the upcoming actors, directors, producers, and viewers. The impact he left on Indian cinema, starting as a worker with no idea where life would take him to become someone people adored and considered as someone without whom they wouldn't even imagine Indian cinema, is truly mesmerizing. It's not for a faint reason that his story is glorified in the world of cinema and that is also the reason that his movies and performances would be cherished and remembered by all his fans as an evergreen treat.