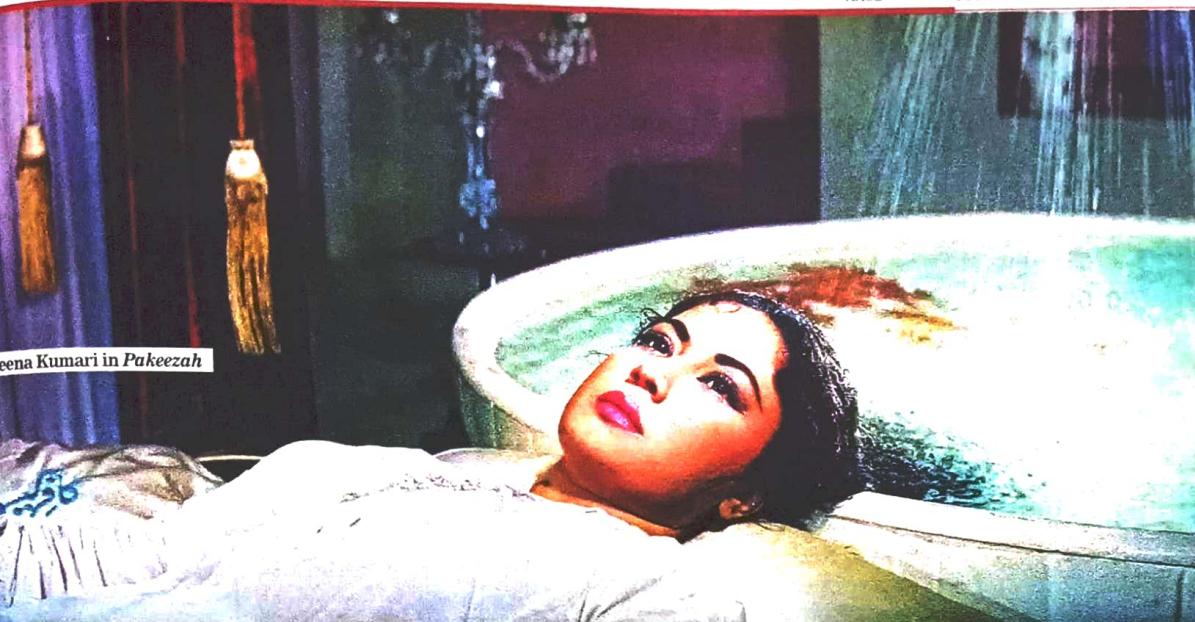




Meena Kumari in *Pakeezah*

Pakeezah, the 1972 classic starring Meena Kumari, has been restored in all its glory and is set to premiere at Lyon, France, in October, followed by a sold-out screening in London. It is directed by Shivendra Singh Dungarpur — whose incredible work with his Film Heritage Foundation has given us back many film embedded in India's rich cinema history — on what went into restoring *Pakeezah*, and his emotional journey with it.

Over the years, you have restored many a classic and made them available for newer audiences as well as old fans. What does restoring *Pakeezah*, a cult film in Hindi cinema, mean to you?

This film is completely rooted in my childhood. My grandmother hailed from the royal family of Dumraon in Bihar. She was obsessed with *Pakeezah*. I remember hearing LPs of the film and going to the theatre with her and watching Meena Kumari on the big screen. It played in cinemas for a long time, and the music was iconic, with Meena Kumari almost becoming eternal. The film became a huge hit but she passed away the same year, and couldn't savour its success.

For me, the restoration has been an emotional journey of two years. This is a film for which I approached the producers myself. All the other films we have restored have been pretty much arthouse cinema, except *Sholay*, and now *Pakeezah*.

In my career, I decided that I must restore films which I love and really want to show to the world. Hence, I started working on regional cinema, and restored films like *Ishanou* (Manipuri), *Maya Miriga* (Odia), *Ghatashraddha* (Kannada), *Kummatty* (Malayalam), along with *Manthan* (Hindi) and now we are working on the restoration of *Bhumika* and *Mandi*, as well as *Madhumati*. In Bengali, we did *Aranyer Din Ratri* and took it to Cannes; now we are

Classic in cinemas

The restored version of *Pakeezah* will premiere in October. A look at the journey of the cult classic

restoring *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* and *Kanchenjunga*, the latter being (Satyajit) Ray's first colour film.

What were the biggest challenges in restoring *Pakeezah*?

In the popular cinema zone, I knew it had to be *Sholay* and *Pakeezah*. But tragically, in both cases, the original camera negative didn't exist. I got in touch with Tajdar Amrohi and Rukhsar Amrohi, the children of Kamal Amrohi (the director of *Pakeezah*) and told them how important it was to preserve and bring *Pakeezah* to the new generation. Bilal Amrohi, Tajdar's son, believed in me and we started looking for the elements.

We found one element within one of the prints, which, however, was not the original print. And then there was something lying at the National Film Archive (of India), and we started that journey. I would look at the frames and almost had tears in my eyes because it brought back such wonderful childhood memories.

Pakeezah was a film with huge impact. It was a powerful, culturally oriented film. One doesn't see that genre — a Muslim social — anymore in our cinema. It is an important film of its time.

It was a big challenge to work on the colours. When I looked at the prints, I was very disappointed because I wanted to get the exact colours of the film. I did a lot of research on the colours. The prints were faded and there was a lot of

controversy about the colour of the clothes that Meena Kumari wore in the song *Inhi logon ne*.

The problem is that none of the people who worked on the film and could help me are alive. I didn't have that problem with *Sholay* because (director) Ramesh Sippy was there to help. I also showed parts of the restored film to Amitji (Amitabh Bachchan) and Dharamji (Dharmendra) was also alive then. But with *Pakeezah*, I had no one to tell me how it was shot and the other nuances that went into it.

I had to look for the stills of the film, and I found the original booklet, which had the colours of the film. Amrohi's children had memories of going to the set, so they could also help me with information. *Pakeezah* was shot on Eastmancolor Kodak, which had just come in. That translated into a very vibrant film.

Once the restored version comes out, it will have a massive impact and the new generation will discover Meena Kumari. They have heard of Meena Kumari, but they have never seen her on the big screen. The film was in the making for a long time....

Kamal Amrohi dedicated his whole life to it...

Yes, 14 years! What is interesting is that he started shooting it in black-and-white in the early '50s. Amrohi got involved with Meena Kumari but their relationship had a lot of ups and downs. She had walked out of the film, but then (actress) Nargis saw the rushes and convinced her to come back. By then, colour had come into cinema. So they decided to shoot *Pakeezah* in colour. They started reshooting, but by then, Ashok Kumar — who was the main hero of the film — had aged.

But Amrohi kept shooting and reshooting, it was his passion project after all. When I spoke to his children, they said that the film had become so central to his life, that anything they asked him for, had the same answer from him: "After *Pakeezah*."

There is an entire generation of filmmakers who came up, inspired by *Pakeezah* and Amrohi. (Sanjay Leela) Bhansali is one of them, but his films can't match up to *Pakeezah*, in terms of its colours, sets, costumes, flavour and language. Also, the performances are so naturally embedded in the culture... if anyone tries to do it in their films today, it looks forced. People lived in that milieu, and understood it. Look at the dialogues of *Mughal-e-Azam*... they are like textbooks.

Pakeezah emotionally binds the viewer... it is a journey through

poetry and art, but it has all the elements of commercial cinema.

When I showed the restored film, so many people cried, and that is a huge thing for a film that Amrohi started making 70 years ago. I always knew it would be well received. In London, it was sold out in 10 minutes. We are showing it in October at BFI IMAX, where *The Odyssey* was released. We will be premiering it at Festival Lumiere in Lyon, France. In the restored film, one will get to see the kind of detailing which you don't have in the version uploaded on YouTube.

Has restoring any other film been as much of an emotional experience as *Pakeezah*?

We started the Film Heritage Foundation in 2014, and have restored many films, but *Pakeezah* is the closest to me because of my grandmother... she brought cinema to me through *Pakeezah* and that film became my life for that time. All the films I have worked on have been very important to me. I am working on restoring films from every region and state in India. But *Pakeezah* holds a special place for me.

When can we watch it in India?

The producers, the Amrohi family, will decide on the date. It will, of course, happen after the premiere and other screenings. It should be released soon.

What would you cite as the biggest compliment for your work so far?

I had recently been invited by President (Emmanuel) Macron (of France) for the Lumiere Summit. I was the only Indian present, and it was a huge honour. It was about not just looking at preserving

cinema within your own country, but also at other places, especially those affected by war. It was hugely inspiring to be there and to interact about the work we do.

Also, in 2026, we have had our restored films playing in almost all the major film festivals, be it Venice, Cannes, New York, London, Toronto or Berlin. I was also on the Berlin jury. We have also released many restored films, including in the US.

People tell me I do incredible work, but that only stems from my love for cinema. The question always is: "How can I get people to enjoy cinema the way I enjoy it?"

Is there a film that is lost forever and you regret not being able to restore it?

India's first sound (talkie) film *Alam Ara* (1931). That has been lost forever. I have visited studios and I have met Ardeshir Irani's (director) family, but I haven't got anything, be it film or stills. I hope at some point I am able to find something of this vital piece of India's cinema history.

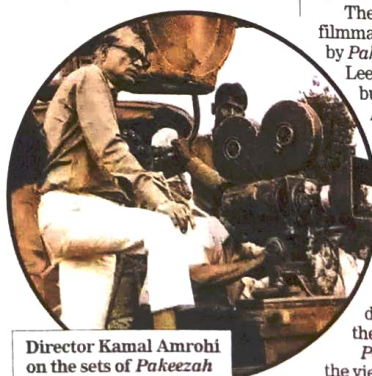
Priyanka Roy

Pakeezah is an important film in Indian cinema because...

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Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, founder-director of Film Heritage Foundation



Director Kamal Amrohi on the sets of *Pakeezah*