

#CARTIER

The Mansion That Became a Necklace

He proposed an unconventional deal: the mansion in exchange for the necklace, a transfer of the property for \$100 and the pearl necklace



In the world of luxury, some transactions feel almost mythical, none more so than the extraordinary deal struck in 1917 by Pierre Cartier. Imagine trading a grand mansion on something as prestigious as Altamont Road or Amrita Sher-Gil Marg for a single necklace. It sounds implausible today yet a version of that story unfolded on New York's most elite stretch: Fifth Avenue.

Back in 1905, Morton Freeman Plant built a six-story mansion at 659 Fifth Avenue, right in the heart of what was then known as Millionaires' Row. The neighbourhood was lined with the homes of America's wealthiest families, including the likes of the Astor family. Much like the prestige associated with addresses such as Mumbai's Altamont Road, home to industrial giants like Mukesh Ambani, or Delhi's Amrita Sher-Gil Marg, Fifth Avenue symbolized status itself. The address mattered as much as the architecture.

But by 1917, the character of Fifth Avenue was changing. High-end retail stores began replacing private mansions, bringing crowds and commerce, hardly appealing to old-money elites seeking privacy. Sensing an opportunity Pierre Cartier, grandson of the founder of Cartier, arrived in New York with a clear ambition: to establish Cartier as the definitive name in American luxury. For that, he needed not just clients, but a landmark address.

He had his eyes on the Plant mansion. The family, preparing to move uptown, hadn't planned to sell. But Cartier understood something crucial about luxury: it isn't just about wealth; it's about desire. Enter Maisie Plant. One day, while passing a Cartier display window, she became captivated by a breathtaking piece: a double-strand necklace of 128 natural South Sea pearls. Each pearl had been

painstakingly sourced over years, divered from oysters one by one, matched for size, colour, and lustre. At a time when cultured pearls didn't yet dominate the market, such a creation was nearly impossible to replicate. Its value? Around \$1 million, an astronomical sum then, and arguably more precious than diamonds.

Cartier saw his moment. He proposed an unconventional deal: the mansion in exchange for the necklace. The final agreement was almost surreal, a transfer of the property for \$100 and the pearl necklace.

From a purely financial perspective at the time, Morton Freeman Plant made an excellent deal. His mansion was valued at about \$800,000, while the necklace was rarer than rare, expected only to be sold to a select few. Cartier, on the other hand, secured something arguably even more valuable: a permanent flagship location that would cement the brand's identity in America.

But time has a way of rewriting the meaning of value. As cultured pearls entered the market in the following decades, the rarity, and thus the price, of natural pearls declined dramatically. When Maisie Plant passed away, the necklace was later sold for a fraction of its original worth, reportedly around \$150,000, barely a fifth of its earlier valuation.

Meanwhile, the mansion transformed into Cartier's iconic New York headquarters, becoming a lasting symbol of luxury and heritage. What once seemed like a dazzling exchange of equals slowly revealed itself as one of the most lopsided trades in luxury history. The story endures because it captures a simple truth: value is never fixed. What seems priceless in one era may fade in another, while something as intangible as an address, much like those on Altamont Road or Amrita Sher-Gil Marg, can grow into legend.



New Theatres.



Dr. Shoma A. Chatterji
Film Scholar
Journalist & Author

If one were to write the history of Indian cinema today, it will not be either possible or creditable for him/her to skip the name of New Theatres, a studio that produced films in Bengali and Hindi, leant heavily on literature for the source material and worked on the studio system where artists, technicians and writers were employed on a monthly salary and also given "extras" for the wedding of a daughter or to tide over a tough situation, in the true traditional way.

The studio went on to introduce some of the most legendary artists, writers and technicians whose names will remain engraved on the architecture of Indian cinema forever. Among them are directors like Nitin Bose, Bimal Roy, actors like K.L. Saigal, P.C. Barua, Bharati Devi and Kanan Bala, music directors like Pankaj Mullick and R.C. Boral and writers who later became archival names in Bengali literature.

Father disappointed

The story of Sircar's life is as intriguing as the stories in most of his films. B.N. Sircar was the second son of Sir N.N. Sircar, Advocate General of undivided Bengal and a member of the Viceroy's council. Sircar was born on July 5 1901 in Bhagalpur in West Bengal. After getting a degree in civil engineering from London University, Sircar returned with dreams of setting up his own business in civil construction. He had not thought of stepping into filmmaking but a chance happening changed the course of his life. He began his career as a civil engineer. At one time, his love for theatre nurtured in him the desire to become a stage manager. But he had to give up his dream as in those days, such professions were considered to be below status in educated families. Interestingly, he is responsible for changing the mindsets of the masses about films as a career. Something happened to bring about some radical changes in the popular perspective on cinema and the film industry.

One day, Sircar saw a long queue outside Crown theatre in the southern parts of Calcutta, which later was demolished. Intrigued by the long queue, he stopped to ask what these people were waiting for. They were waiting to buy tickets for the film being screened in the theatre, he was told. He was amazed at the prospect of this business where people were willing to shell out money without seeing the quality of



B.N. Sircar

the product or even knowing how useful it would be for them. That sowed the seeds of getting into film production.

New Theatres was born spanning a large tract of land off Tollygunje, in the southern extremes of Calcutta. Over the years, it had a lovely garden filled with mango trees, flowers and a "Gol Ghar" in the centre.

One of his first tasks was to build a cinema theatre, and his contact with the film world as a civil engineer, looking after building promotion and contracts, proved to be a turning point. Remember that in those days, the business of construction was not tainted one as is now. He decided to build a cinema for himself. He named the theatre Chitra which later transformed itself to Mitra, and recently its new owners pulled the shutters forever during the pandemic.

The respectable theater

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose came personally to inaugurate the theatre on 30th December 1930. Sircar's father was very angry with his son's choice of stepping into the risky film industry and is said to have thrown the newspaper carrying the news of the inauguration at him. The news of the theatre's opening was marked out in red. However, soon, his father backed him up by not only giving his son his blessings but also finance when he decided to found the New Theatres Studio to produce films. Sircar went on to

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One day, Sircar happened to see a photograph of P.N. Roy, a person he knew well, along with Himanshu Roy, the founder of Bombay Talkies in a cinema magazine called *Bioscope*. P.N. Roy encouraged him to open a studio. So, along with P.N. Roy, B.N. Sircar founded Eastern Filmcraft. They made two films under the banner of Filmcraft, both cinematographed by Nitin Bose. The first of these, directed by Charu Roy, was called *Char Kaanta* and the second film, *Chashar Meye*, was directed by Prafulla Roy.

Sircar gathered around him the best talents of his time, representing the manifold aspects of film-making, direction, music, acting, photography, sound recording, etc. Directors like Pramathesh Barua, Debaki Bose, Nitin Bose, Madhu Bose, Hemchandra Chunder, Phani Majumdar, Kartick Chatterjee and Bimal Roy, all of who went on to become nationally recognised talents in their own respective fields.

On 10th of February, 1931, Sircar founded New Theatres and the rest, as the clichéd saying goes, is history. The sound equipment was imported from Ranco & Co of America and a renowned engineer from the firm was brought from the USA to New Theatres under whose professional guidance famous

B. N. SIRCAR
FOUNDER OF NEW THEATRES (1901-1980)

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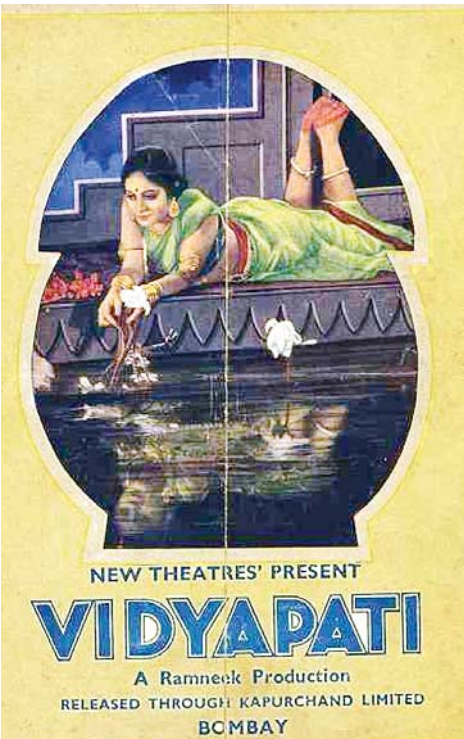
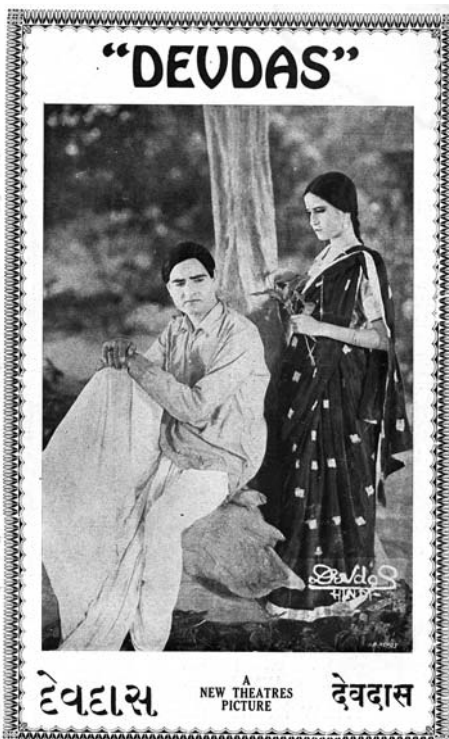
#TRIBUTE TO B.N. SIRCAR ON HIS 125TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY



KANAN DEVI.

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ting sessions with tea and biscuits. At seven sharp, he would take a glass of coconut water. The cigarette at the end of a black holder would always remain aglow," said noted film director late Arabinda Mukherjee, who worked as assistant director at New Theatres from 1947 to 1958.

The gol ghar

Gol Ghar has an interesting history. The story goes that Sircar built it overnight when Rabinranath Tagore was expected to come to the studios for the shooting of his only directorial film, *Natir Pooja*, in 1931. He knew that Tagore would find the studio floors too hot to handle, so, he created this cool corner for the poet laureate which later became his own little island of sunshine.

The Gol Ghar played host to some of the greatest figures in Indian history. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Rabinranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Shyamaprasad Mukherjee and Sarat Chandra Bose are just a few names whose footprints have graced the earth that houses New Theatres. From international cinema, personalities like Frank Capra, Jean Renoir and Pudovkin graced the studio with their presence.

The three films, namely, *Natir Pooja*, *Punarjanna* and *Chirokumar Sabha*, all based on Tagore's works, all of which were directed by Premankur Athority, while *Palli Samaj* based on a novellette by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, was directed by the famous theatre personality Sisir Bhaduri.

After initial teething troubles, Sircar decided to develop New Theatres into an institution of academic excellence and creative artistry in an endeavour to set new standards of filmmaking in the country. The best available talents in the art and craft of filmmaking were given both opportunities and facilities to experiment and explore new form and techniques. These three great masters were Debaki Kumar Bose, Pramathesh Barua and Nitin Bose.

Films directed by these three masters under the New Theatres banner not only launched films with strong social agendas projecting the cultural traditions of Bengal (then undivided) on the Indian screen but also introduced several technical innovations which threw a beacon of light on the early pioneers of film-making in the country and also helped Indian cinema to establish itself and be recognised across the country.

The unique selling point of a New Theatres production was (a) a solid storyline, (b) hitting songs and background music, (c) sound technique, and (d) good acting. Sircar never interfered with the making of any film. Afterwards, he would watch it at a morning screening at New Cinema in Calcutta. Among

the 150 films, it is difficult to sift the wheat from the chaff and say that these are the best. From Doctor (1940) to Pratiruti (1941) to Udayar Pathy (1944) to Anjan Garh (1948), from *Puran Bhakt* (Hindi - 1933) to *Vidyapati* (Hindi-1938) to *Devadas* (Bengali - 1935) to *Mukti* (1937), every New Theatres film defines a distinct identity for itself, remembered for different reasons.

New Theatres produced 150 films within its span of 24 years from 1931 to 1955. Its own studio came into being on February 10, 1931 located in Tollygunge, the centre of Calcutta's film world. Its phenomenal success, in turning out almost an uninterrupted line of quality films, is credited solely to the enterprise and imaginative facilities of B.N. Sircar. The Partition of India in 1947 took away a large part of the market in what is now Bangladesh and Pakistan almost overnight. Added to this were the communal riots between 1946 and 1947 that affected revenues in a big way. The elephant remained silent after the last production *Bakul* in 1955.

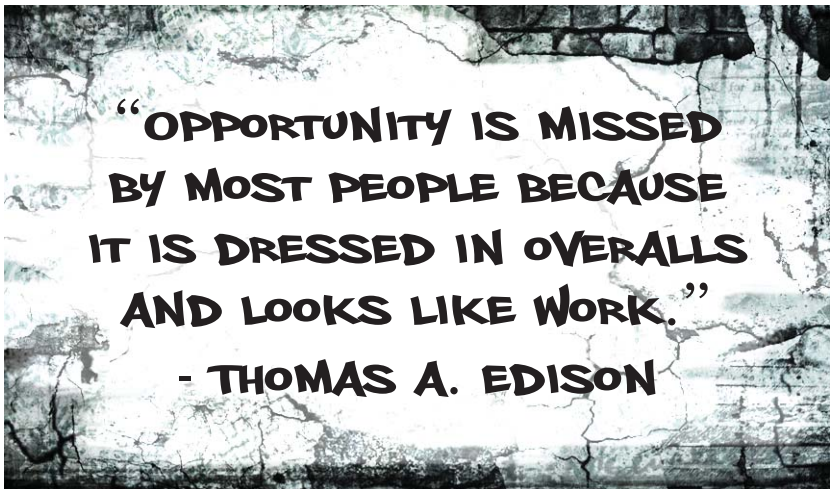
Dilip Sircar, late son of B.N. Sircar, said that along with his father, he had travelled to London in 1949, ten years after Pramathesh had left New Theatres. "Barua Saheb was convalescing in London at the time. During the one month we lived there, Barua would visit us everyday and we would sit and chat for hours. Though he was in failing health, not once did he fail to come." One of his last wishes was that, after his death, his hearses be carried to the door of B.N. Sircar's house on Elgin Road. "My father was very sick and bedridden at the time. As I was about to return from the studios, I got a call from my father. In a shaky voice, he informed me that Barua was no more."

I came home with a heavy heart. In keeping with his last wish, the hearses carrying Barua's body arrived in front of our residence. The streets were bursting with huge crowds gathered to pay their last respects. But I was watching my father, an old man, trying to hold his balance with the bars of a huge window, trembling and sick, waiting to pay his last respects to the man who once was a part of his favourite family, New Theatres. I shall never forget that moment," reminisced Sircar.

The award

Sircar won the Dadasaheb Phalke Award soon after it was instituted. He also won the Padma Bhushan for his rich contribution to Indian cinema. When one watches a New Theatres film today, one is struck by the quality of timelessness it has, in terms of story, treatment, acting, etc. because nothing, except the quality of the film print and its soundtrack, appear to be dated.

rajeshsharma1049@gmail.com



BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman