

MAD *about* madhuri

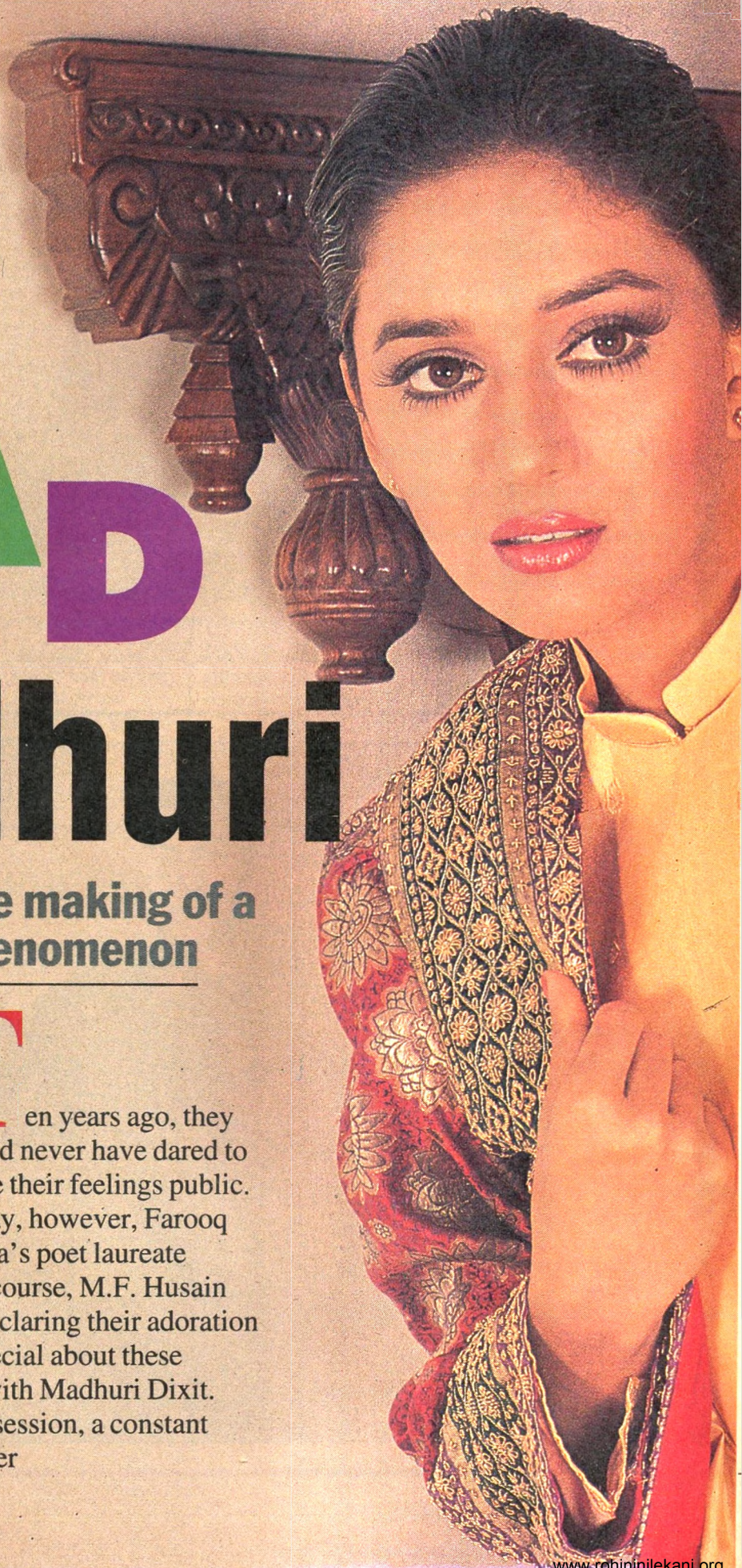


The making of a phenomenon

Ten years ago, they would never have dared to make their feelings public. Today, however, Farooq

Abdullah, T.N. Seshan, Orissa's poet laureate Sitakanta Mohapatra and, of course, M.F. Husain can get away with publicly declaring their adoration of her. After all, what's so special about these people? Everyone is in love with Madhuri Dixit.

She is almost a national obsession, a constant fixture with the media. And her

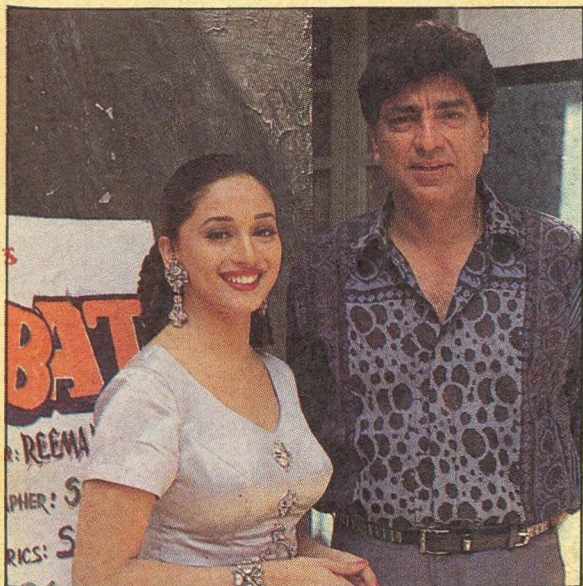




BEHIND THE SCENES

The people who've created the Madhuri magic

perfect everything," says Anna Singh. There was not much to perfect, she adds, because Madhuri is such a beautiful woman. "We started the transition with *Beta*, then we did *Dil Tera Aashiq*. People began to appreciate her new look. And then



Rakesh Nath: ten years with Madhuri



Saroj Khan: "The sky's the limit"



Anna Singh: d

Rakesh Nath

■ Madhuri's secretary. Or manager, if you prefer. He doesn't mind what you call him. No one meets Madhuri without making an appointment through him. Rakesh Nath, better known as Rikku, has worked with Madhuri for more than ten years. He says he had not seen any of Madhuri's films when he agreed to work for her. "I just liked her face," he explains.

Today, Madhuri and Rakesh Nath have a comfortable working relationship. So much so that Rikku is now the producer of a film being directed by his wife, Reema (a successful script-writer of films like *Dil Tera Aashiq* and *Yaarana*) named *Mohabbat*, starring Madhuri. People have accused Rikku of using his influence to get Madhuri to star in the film. But Madhuri claims that it was one of the few scripts that excited her the most.

How does it feel to be the secretary of Bollywood's number one star?

Rikku is all praise for Madhuri. "It is very difficult for me to work with her. You know why? Because she is such a nice person. We all have to be extra careful about her. She doesn't complain. She doesn't demand anything."

Anna Singh

■ One of Madhuri's two dress designers (the other one is Kashmira). Anna Singh, who owns a boutique in Juhu, Bombay, has worked with Madhuri for many years now, but not on an exclusive basis. Even today, she also designs for other stars like Pooja Bhatt and Jackie Shroff.

Earlier, there wasn't much of a need to devote too much energy on Madhuri. But once she started to get noticed for her talent, her vivacity on screen, it was a different story. People began to say that Madhuri had no dress sense and was not bothering enough about her wardrobe.

"That's when we went all out to

came the best. *HAKK* broke all records as far as costumes were concerned."

Anna's strategy with Madhuri is very clear. The key word is simplicity. "Most of our senior actresses have had a penchant for lots of jewellery, lots of heavy clothes. With Madhuri, we give her just enough accessories to complement her, not burden her. Madhuri has an exquisitely beautiful face. We just have to let it be."

Anna Singh is all praise for Madhuri's professionalism. She cites the instance of the film, *Rajkumar*, where the actress had to wear a heavy Malaysian-style headdress for three days and dance. She did not complain once.

Saroj Khan

■ Imagine Madhuri without her dances. No *Ek, do, teen*. No *Choli ke peechey*. No *Mera piya ghar aaya*. Luckily, with Saroj Khan around, you don't have to imagine any such thing. This versatile choreographer

has played a major role in Madhuri's success. And she revels in the knowledge that she and Madhuri make a great team. A choreographer must take into account the performer's own limitations while composing a dance sequence. "With



g: dressing the superstar

Madhuri," says Saroj Khan, "the sky's the limit." She says Madhuri performs knee movements which are the most difficult, with great ease and without any precautions like knee-caps. According to Saroj, one of Madhuri's best performances is the climax song of *Yaarana, Jaane woh kaisa chor tha*. "She did the whole *mukhda* in one shot, which is really difficult," says Saroj. That's the kind of Madhuri magic which has helped Saroj to bring home four *Filmfare* trophies.

Saroj Khan's strategy for Madhuri in forthcoming films: no more *jhatka* movements. Saroj Khan wants to ring in the old in 1996. "I am heading towards the graceful movements of old Hindi film songs," says Saroj. "Like *Aayiye meherban* and *Shola jo bhadke*. There's a lot of body language, a lot of hip movement and I'm looking for that." Saroj has experimented with a more malleable Madhuri in *Mohabbat*, and the audience will soon let the choreographer know whether her strategy will work in the new year.

fans include not just countless men, but women as well. Of all ages and from all walks of life. Everyone seems to be bitten by the Madhuri bug. It is a sign, both of our more liberal times and her unique personality that Madhuri has managed to single-handedly extend the boundaries of respectability. From *Ek do teen* to *Akhiya milaon*, Ms Dixit has helped diffuse the line between vulgarity and decency. Today, fond mothers are actually encouraging their kids to swing their hips to the tune of *Mera piya ghar aaya*, a song that could have been perfectly obscene but for the innocence on Madhuri's face.

Here is an ordinary Brahmin girl, who like Hema Malini before her, has brought middle-class family values into the film industry. Focusing exclusively on her work, she has risen steadily up the charts for ten years, hitting a new industry high with *Hum Aapke Hain Koun (HAHK)*. She has had the boon of satellite television which gave her image an arching forklift, bringing her face into the drawing room almost every day. If that brings with it the dangers of over-exposure, it also allows Madhuri the advantage of reminding viewers constantly that she is one of them, the girl next door.

But why is Madhuri such a rave? Is it because of her talent, her great personality? Is she anything more than the sum of her lips and hips? The answer is: no. There's nothing particularly sparkling, frothy, enchanting or vivacious about Madhuri Dixit, the person. And it is precisely this that contributes to the Madhuri magic. You expect a star. You get a woman. An Indian woman. Sensible, reserved, conservative, reasonably well-informed. You get a professional actress. Committed to her job. Perhaps like any other working girl.

Madhuri, like Madhubala before her, happens to be in the industry at the right time. Today, it is music more than anything else that's propelling the fortunes

of Hindi cinema. If audiences are at last flocking back to cinema halls, it is because of the songs and dances. Also, television and commercial cinema have become symbiotic, each feeding the other and creating a large resurgent market for Hindi films. In such a scenario, Madhuri is quite naturally in her elements. She has been learning to sing and dance (Kathak) since she was three years old. It is her dancing that shot her to fame, and judging by current trends, it is her dancing that will keep her on top.

To follow Madhuri at work is to watch the transformation of a beautiful but simple woman into a stunning, vivacious superstar. Utter the words 'camera, action' and Madhuri will switch on her dazzling smile (if the shot calls for it) and the appeal in her eyes. You can tell that Madhuri enjoys her performance, especially her dancing. That is why she appears natural, not contrived in each sequence. Her body, so quiet in



THE RACE TO THE TOP



SRIDEVI



JUHI CHAWLA

■ Sridevi, the last uncontested number one heroine, has, by now, burnt herself out. Juhi Chawla has to be content with remaining in the top five bracket. Meenakshi Seshadri has long since given up. Manisha Koirala came a very close second with *Bombay*, but *Akele Hum Akele Tum* has dipped her chances in the sweepstakes for now.



URMILA



KAJOL

Then, there is Urmila Matondkar. Whether she will remain a one-film wonder or continue to shine, will soon be known. And, of course, there is the *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* super-hit girl, Kajol. Now, she is the real contender for the number one spot. And she is a good ten years younger than Madhuri. She has the talent, she has the looks and she has the backing. But will Kajol replace Madhuri as Bollywood's number one actress?

repose, suddenly erupts into a *jhatka* movement, or a sensuous twirl. This is the Madhuri the crowds have come to watch.

Her sex appeal does not come so much from exposing too much of her body as from exposing the right parts: her midriff and upper back. Sure, she has worn plunging necklines in her sequences. But more than her cleavage, it is her waistline that comes to mind. She does with her fully-clothed hips what belly-dancers achieve with their bare abdomen. And choreographer Saroj Khan promises that we haven't seen it all. Yet,

with Madhuri, excesses don't seem indecent. Her colleagues say it is because of her face. It is so innocent that nothing looks bawdy. Even if she tries.

And now, Madhuri, as part of her constant efforts to reinvent herself, is looking to give a different direction to her work. Inevitably, she wants to do more meaningful roles.

So far, her films fell largely into the girl-meets-boy-overcomes-oppositions-and-lives-happily-ever-after stereotype,

except for a couple of films like *Anjaam*, where she plays an avenging angel. The film flopped despite the Shah Rukh Khan-Madhuri combine. And with good reason. "What I've done so far has not been my best," Madhuri admits. So, she is much more choosy now about her scripts. Where she used to do 10-15 films a year, she is now doing a maximum of five to six.

And some good projects have come her way. She is particularly excited about Chimpoo Kapoor's upcoming *Prem Granth*. It's the story of a rape victim. "It has a very large canvas," she says. "The character is very strong, the film deals with how she faces all of society. It has a lot of scope for performance." Another Madhuri-starrer expected in 1996 is *Mrityudand*, again a film dealing with a woman. Both these movies are going to be quite risky for Madhuri's career. Although she has made forays into offbeat cinema with *Prahaar* and *Dharavi*, it was a long time ago. But Madhuri is prepared to take the risk. "Even if my star quality is a little faded in these films, I don't mind. Because I have my other films to balance that."

If Madhuri's strategy works, it will be no mean achievement. Rare is the actress who has successfully straddled both the worlds of parallel and mainstream cinema. Dimple Kapadia comes to mind, but nowadays, she is concentrating almost exclusively on offbeat roles. Shabana Azmi tried it, but gave up. And Smita Patil's career was cut short.

In Madhuri's case, however, it's going to be even more difficult, because what the audience loves about her is precisely what offbeat cinema will not allow. The crowds will never accept a Madhuri without the song-and-dance routine. Unless, of course, she can pull off coups alongside. Like the recent live concert tour to the US, UK and Canada. She drew capacity crowds everywhere with her high-energy dancing. In fact, such tours are now going to become a regular feature of Madhuri's life. The next one is slated for March, to the Gulf countries. And more are planned.

Why does Madhuri seem even more of a megastar than her predecessors? Sridevi was also in the big league, but she never became a national craze like Madhuri. Hema Malini and Rekha, too, had an impressive fan following,

but they did not have the electronic media to boost their image further.

That's the advantage today's stars enjoy, which even Amitabh Bachchan had to largely do without. Pankaj Parashar, director and ex-adman, offers another reason. "Stars are now much bigger than they used to be, because the upper middle-class has grudgingly accepted our cinema. Earlier, they used to turn up their noses at it, so they make programmes in English about Hindi movies. And all those snooty people, who now feel inferior to Ruby (Bhatia), and want to be like her feel that if Ruby praises Madhuri, why can't we? That's how stars are getting more respectability now." Parashar says that no star ever had the kind of hysteric following that Rajesh Khanna enjoyed for three years. But the difference was that he was still looked down upon by the intelligentsia, by English-speaking people. Now, all that has changed. And Madhuri is one of the beneficiaries of that change.

And yet, stardom does not seem to have affected Madhuri in any way. She remains largely unaffected by all the publicity. But that sounds too good to be true. How did she manage it?

There are two reasons. One, the Hindi film industry itself has been rapidly changing over the years: it has become more professional, has attracted more talent and has even acquired a certain respectability. Everyone in Bollywood today is talking of quality. And producers, directors and actors have come to realise that as audiences get more sophisticated and as more and more legitimate money enters the industry, every frame counts. And Madhuri is an out-and-out professional.

The second reason has to do with Madhuri's background. Even today, at the height of her stardom, she remains under the influence of her family. Assisted by her secretary Rakesh Nath — known as Rikku — to the industry — Madhuri's family members have seen to it that her image is not tarnished by rumours and Bombay's film press.

Now take a look at Madhuri's career. An overwhelming majority of her 40-odd films have been at best mediocre. And with the single exception of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, which is a story in itself, where are Madhuri's super hits? *Tezaab*, *Dil*, *Ram Lakhan*, *Beta*, *Khel*, and recently, *Raja*, did reasonably well at the box office, but not well

enough to make Madhuri a superstar.

Even her critics admit that Madhuri does not really need a good script to give a memorable performance. She is, in that sense, an 'independent' actress who can carry a film on her own.

And yet, nobody thinks that Madhuri is a great actress. Not yet. She reminds her fans more of Madhubala, another beautiful heroine with a dazzling smile. The general consensus is that Madhuri has not explored her full capabilities yet.



Madhuri is an ordinary Brahmin girl who has brought middle-class family values into the film industry. Focusing exclusively on her work, she has risen steadily up the charts, hitting a new industry high with *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*

She feels the same (*see interview*) and she is still waiting to deliver her best performance. Co-star Anil Kapoor thinks that comedy could well become Madhuri's forte. He says that a good performer can be judged by the way he or she handles 'light' roles. No amount of good camera work and lighting can help an actor deliver an easy punch-line. He says Madhuri has that talent. Her recent film, *Raja*, did portray her in a comic role but comedy is hardly going to sustain Madhuri in the months to come.

But where is the competition? Sridevi, the last uncontested number one heroine, has, by now, burnt herself out. Juhi Chawla has to be content with remaining in the top-five bracket. Meenakshi Seshadri has long since given up. Manisha Koirala came a very close

RATING MADHURI

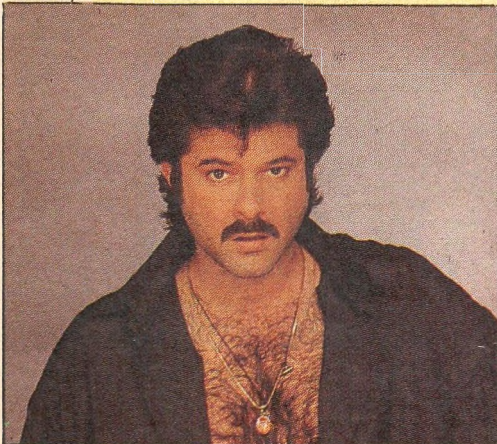
What they say about the superstar



Shabana Azmi: family is the key

Shabana Azmi

■ An acclaimed actress herself, but who has not been able to adjust to the demands of commercial cinema, Shabana Azmi has many kind words about Madhuri with whom she did Prakash Jha's *Mrityudand* recently. "She is an intelligent, sensible girl. She has been able to contain her success. It is a very rare quality." And Shabana believes this quality has a lot to do with Madhuri's family background. "Who you become depends on the people around you," she says, "and Madhuri surrounds herself with her family. It keeps her feet firmly planted on the ground."



Anil Kapoor: the gamble paid off

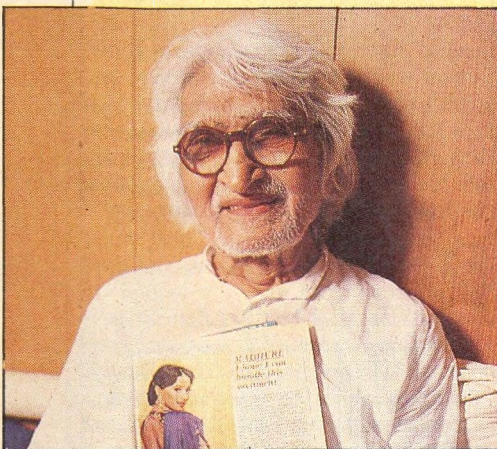
Anil Kapoor

■ Madhuri has co-starred with Anil in more films than with any other actor. And it's been a winning combination by and large. Interestingly, Anil Kapoor likes to take some of the credit for Madhuri's success. "I've seen her since the time she faced the camera almost for the first time, in *Bajrangi* [the film got shelved later]. She was very nervous, very thin, very awkward. Everyone's reaction was discouraging. They said she's got a sisterly look, she has no passion, no sex in her. Even I was very demoralised. But then, we saw the rushes and we were thrilled."

Kapoor says it was after the first shoot of *Hifazat*, their very next film together, that he realised Madhuri's potential. He signed up four or five films in as many days with Madhuri, including *Parinda*, *Tezaab* and *Ram Lakhan*. It was a gamble, but it paid off.

Indra Kumar

■ He has achieved a hat-trick of successful films with Madhuri: *Dil*, *Beta* and *Raja*. He is not just a good director to her, he is also a good



M.F. Husain: more Madhuri paintings



friend. Meeting him after many weeks, she tells him how she really misses being on his sets, remembers the camaraderie of the unit, the fun she had there. He keeps telling her how much weight she has lost, how it is taking away from the radiance of her face, how she must put back two kilos. Finally, she mildly rebukes: "It's just that you have got used to seeing *mota, mota* people these days."

Of his three-times-lucky heroine, he says, "She is highly professional. And the main thing with Madhuri is that she knows how to put her co-stars, actors, directors at ease. The tension that is usually there when you work with famous artistes is not there with Madhuri. I have never seen this knack with anybody else."

Pankaj Parashar

■ He is one director who is at the moment praying that the Madhuri magic will carry over into 1996. His much-delayed *Rajkumar* is set for release in January. It is a fantasy film, and he is hoping that it will succeed where a similar, much-touted *Sridevi*



second with *Bombay*, but *Akele Hum Akele Tum* has dipped her chances in the sweepstakes, at least for now.

Then, there is Urmila 'Rangeela' Matondkar. Whether she will remain a one-film wonder or continue to shine, will soon be known. And, of course, there is the *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* super-hit girl, Kajol. Now, she is the real contender for the number-one spot. And she is a good ten years younger than Madhuri. She has the talent, she has the looks, she has the backing. But will Kajol replace Madhuri as Bollywood's number one actress?

That's the Rs one-crore question for the highest-paid actress of Hindi filmdom. What is in store for Madhuri in

film *Roop Ki Rani, Choron Ka Raja* failed.

Parashar believes that a good script is the key to turning an actor into a star. Whoever has an instinct for accepting the right projects also has a great chance of beating the industry average of hits. "Madhuri has put in that amount of work for that much of time and her luck has been sustained in getting the right projects. That is a very difficult thing to do, getting the right projects. She has unimaginable talent, like any good actor. And she has been lucky."

A. Rajadhyaksha

■ Film critic and co-author of an encyclopedia on cinema in the sub-continent. "Madhuri has amazing mobility," he says. "She is able to hold her own even when the director is not quite sure what to do with her. Bachchan had that same quality. To be a star, you have to be autonomous of the script. The way Hindi films are packaged, they are a combination of bits and pieces put together. Most actors get fragmented by that. But Madhuri knows how to

avoid being fragmented. Look how she managed to make *HAKK* her film, although the role was not special."

Rajadhyaksha feels it would be a mistake for her to accept serious roles, as very few heroines have been able to make the transition into meaningful cinema.

M.F. Husain

■ His obsession with Madhuri has become a national topic of conversation. And Husain is still ecstatic about Madhuri. He is planning many more paintings of her. And a film to be co-produced by Madhuri, where the actress will represent women through the ages of civilisation. "Madhuri has the magic I was looking for. In my paintings, I have always been concerned with the essence of the female form, as a manifestation of Shakti. And when I saw *HAKK* the second time [I walked out half-way the first time], I noticed that the body movements in her dances which could have so easily become vulgar, have a grace, an electrifying power."

1996? Will the people eventually tire of Madhuri this year? After all, she's had a longer run than Sridevi did, possibly longer than Rekha as well. She has to be dethroned sometime...but when? So far, her chart has been climbing steadily up since *Tezaab*, peaking with *HAKK* and probably stabilising a little lower on the scales after *Raja*. Now, *Rajkumar* needs to become a super hit to keep Madhuri in the number one slot, because films coming up after that are a big gamble for her. *Mrityudand* and *Prem Granth* are both serious films with offbeat treatment. Not much of the bump and grind. And *Mohabbat*, produced by Madhuri's secretary Rakesh Nath and directed by his wife Reema, is again going to be a risky venture for the prima donna, along with the deadpan Sanjay Kapoor and the young Akshaye Khanna.

Not that the future is bothering Madhuri very much. She has never let the stakes get too high. Never allowed herself to be too vulnerable to the ups and downs of her career graph. She sums up her philosophy thus: "I live life the way it comes. I believe that if you just keep doing what you are good at, things keep happening." •

Rohini Nilekani/Bombay