

# cinema



✱ Stills from *Anhey Ghorhey Da Daan*.

## An anguishing voyage

Gurvinder Singh's *Anhey Ghorhey Da Daan* traces the lives of pathetically unfortunate people in the course of roughly a day: the story begins just before daybreak and ends before midnight.

By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Every film is a social study. However shallow or vague it may be, it nonetheless tells you about a community, its people, its culture, its tradition, problems and prospects. Sometimes, about their prejudices, their anger, their disillusionment.

Or a movie could be a picture album taking the viewer around a country showing its architectural and historic splendour.

Remember Raj Kapoor's *Around the World* (in eight dollars) that literally gave Indians a wonderful opportunity to see places as varied as the West Indies and New York and the Swiss Alps — and at a time when travelling abroad was such a luxury.

Gurvinder Singh's *Anhey Ghorhey Da Daan* (Alms of the Blind Horse) is by no stretch of imagination anything as exotic as the Kapoor work. But the movie, which had its premiere at the recent Venice Film Festival, screened at the ongoing Abu Dhabi Film Festival to encouraging response.

With little or no narrative, the movie is a frighteningly bleak look at the other India which has been making media headlines and, well, disturbing the conscience of a nation that has grown insensitive to the grinding hunger, the degrading poverty and the horrific suffering of vast millions of citizens, each living

on some thirty rupees a day or so!

Singh's debut feature, produced by the National Film Development Corporation of India, begins with a shot that shocks you into this grim social reality of this country. A house somewhere in rural Punjab is being ruthlessly demolished. A home is being destroyed, and the family living there is in excruciating agony, powerfully brought out with feeling through the wailing of a woman, who finds herself and her family roofless, virtually before the night breaks into dawn.

Left shivering in the cold in the region's bitter winter, she and her family do find solace in the community of people around them. One of them offers to let the family stay with him till it can find another place to live.

But the community of Dalit Sikhs is itself weak and oppressed, literally voiceless in the face of the mighty rich, one of whom has been responsible for the destruction of the family's peace. When community elders gather and march to the village's headman's house, the man sounds more phony than true when he offers to see what he can do.

Gurvinder draws a remarkable contrast between the poor and the powerless and the rich and the powerful. In one of the first scenes of the movie, we see the arrogance and insensitivity of the man, who comes

along with cops to ensure that the last brick on the house is pulled to the ground. When he notices a trace of defiance in the man who has been living in the house, he is promptly pushed into the police van and whisked away, while the rest of the community stands mute in helpless anger.

*Anhey Ghorhey Da Daan* traces the lives of these pathetically unfortunate people in the course of roughly a day: the story begins just before daybreak and ends before midnight, but in those hours, Singh's film follows several characters. One of them is a cycle-rickshaw puller, caught in trade union politics and protests, an ugly gnash on his head telling the tale in all its cruelty.

Then there is his sister, looking blankly into a future that has no future, and in the final scene, we see her walking out of her home into the darkness of the night, the stillness broken by gun shots. Between these instances of the crumbling house and the aimless wandering of a young woman, we see a man, a woman and two children paying a visit to the village, to their parents' home, only to find on their return that their money has been stolen.

The movie can be seen as a power indictment of India's yawning disparity in wealth, more appropriately as a poignant study of the misery of low castes.

Adapted from a Punjabi novel by Gurdial Singh and scripted by Gurvinder, *Anhey Ghorhey Da Daan* (in Punjabi) is a story he read in Hindi a decade ago, a story which must have made such an impression that it remained with him all these years.

During a chat with Gurvinder at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, he tells me that it was "the movement in the fiction that excited him the most. It was fascinating to see how the characters move from one place to another, how scenes change." Shots of the village elders silently walking in a group to mark their protest, though feeble and seemingly ineffective, or the rickshaw-puller pedalling away or even the young woman, his sister actually, walking in the ghostly eeriness of the village as it lays in slumber and swathed in the darkness of an extremely chilly winter's night convey a sense of journey, maybe though without a destination.

Singh elaborates further his source of excitement when he avers that the play of light and shade, the moods and the spaces all gave him a sense of joy and many moments of thrill.

This apart, Singh says that since this was his first feature a "lot of things excited me...even the idea of capturing light and seeing how different times of the day could create or enhance different moods..." He feels even this can be a valid

reason to make a film. A graduate of the Pune Film and Television Institute of India, Singh got a four-year grant from Bangalore's India Foundation for the Arts to study and document the folk ballads of Punjab.

Travelling through the length and breadth of Punjab, he lived and breathed folk forms, moving closely with the musicians and other performers, who usually belong to the underprivileged classes. "I understood these people very well. I could see their struggles, their anxieties".

Singh adds that his movie could not have shaped so starkly real had it not been for his intimate experience with the poorer sections of Punjab.

*Anhey Ghorhey Da Daan* certainly has its weaknesses and flaws, but as Singh quips that it served more as an experiment, an exercise towards something stronger and bigger.

"Yes, it does bother me that my first work may not find theatrical distribution, perhaps confined only to the festival circuit (it has gone to Busan as well, apart from Abu Dhabi and Venice). I am not arrogant to say that it is only an artistic exercise and I do not care if people see it or not. The fact is that every artist needs an audience. There cannot be a creation and no viewers".

Singh is now ready with what hopefully will be an even more engaging work. His second script is ready, and it is set in the 1984 Punjab at the height of militancy and the year of Operation Blue Star, the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the ghastly anti-Sikh riots. The work will study how the common man was caught between the ideology of the militancy and the state's strong-arm methods. "My film will reveal how helpless he was and how much he suffered," Singh smiles, probably content that he has hit upon a cinema that is meaningful, travelling beyond songs, dances and mere melodrama.

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