

cinema



* Irrfan Khan: On a higher plain.

The brightest Khan

He is neither good looking nor muscles his way to impress the audiences. But Irrfan Khan has created a niche for himself based on his sheer acting talent. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

He is the quietest of the Khans in India, and there are no less than five of them. While Salman moved his muscles and sometimes his might to invariably attract the wrong kind of attention, Shah Rukh got audiences especially in Germany on a high, Saif caught me by sheer surprise as Langda Tyagi in *Omkara* and Aamir cleverly wormed his way into the almost impregnable fort called the Oscars Academy — Irrfan Khan stayed in the shadows. Maybe, he was overly sensitive, and felt hurt when people did not quite like the way he looked. It did not help either when his cameo in Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* was edited out, and a couple of his early movies were adored by critics, but not box-offices.

But Asif Kapadia's *The Warrior* and Vishal Bharadwaj's *Maqbool* just wiped Irrfan's memory clean of all these unpleasant thoughts. People who saw him in London

after *The Warrior*, which, opened in 2001, called him a “sex symbol”, and this adulation may not have catapulted him into mid-air, but certainly pumped the essential vitamins into his psyche. *Maqbool* came two years later, and as the title character in the Hindi adaptation of Shakespeare's celebrated play, *Macbeth*, Khan played the role with flawless perfection.

The screen had finally parted to reveal an actor consummately at ease with the parts he portrayed. As Ashoke Ganguli in Nair's (she was setting right a wrong) version of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake*, he was every inch the immigrant desperately seeking a place among New Yorkers. He was pairing with Tabu again after *Maqbool*. In an interview once he said: “You know when we met for the workshop before shooting *Maqbool* I was really apprehensive. Even on the sets we met almost as strangers.

“When we finally started

shooting I wanted to sit with her for 10 minutes holding her hand just to establish a comfort level. That never happened. First we shot the poignant climactic sequence. The way she reacted to me in that scene convinced me that we were like a nut and bolt on screen.

“She became a part of me and I part of her. My love for her character possessed me. During her death scene, I achieved a mental state that had prompted me to become an actor in the first place”. Well, in *The Namesake*, Khan took his acting to a still higher plain.

Recently at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival with his latest work, Tigmanshu Dhulia's *Paan Singh Tomar*, Khan was at his casual best — dark glasses, narrow trousers and a shirt that did not scream colour. While Adoor Gopalakrishnan joined the Pune Film Institute hoping to be a playwright, Khan went to the National School of Drama in Delhi because he wanted to be in cinema!

“When I was young, we were not



allowed to see movies. I grew up in Jaipur. My father was a nawab, and my family looked down upon films. They were seen as ‘naach-gaana’ stuff.

“But I was enthralled by cinema, and it had a dramatic effect on me. The stories moved me, and I kept thinking of them. When someone said that a movie was bad, I could never understand. How can a film be bad, I used to wonder, because each one I saw, I just loved it. And there was this uncle of mine, who visited us once or twice a year, and I used to wait for him, because he took me to the cinema. Although, he was a bearded, conservative man, he was somehow fond of movies.”

When young Irrfan could not get into a theatre, he listened to radio plays, and read Shakespeare in badly translated Hindi (or was it Urdu?). But the stories, especially Shakespearean tragedies stayed with him, and much later in life, Bharadwaj's *Maqbool* fell on his lap.

After many movies had flowed down Khan's bridge, including Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart* (on *The Wall Street Journal* reporter, Daniel Pearl's murder), Anurag Basu's *Life in a Metro* and Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Paan Singh Tomar* came. “Dhulia told me about this movie years ago. It was just a two-line idea, but I was absolutely fascinated by it, and it stayed with me. The story was so powerful,” Khan said.

So was Khan's contribution in a film that arguably gave him the best opportunity after *The Namesake*. As *Tomar*, Irrfan was admirable. He was hard, yet compassionate to the right cause, fast on the track and the trigger, yet patient enough to explore avenues other than violence before letting bullets out of the barrel.

Set in the badlands of Chambal, where dacoits still rule with their own sense of justice and punishment, *Paan Singh Tomar* was gripping. Of course, they do not call themselves dacoits, but rebels or ‘baaghis’, although they kidnap for ransom, buy weapons illegally and kill at random.

Tomar was, of course, real, who lived in Madhya Pradesh. Driven by a patriotic zeal, he joined the army soon to become a champion

runner in steeplechase ruling the game for seven years in a row with an unbeaten 10-year record in the sport. He represented India at the 1958 Tokyo Asian Games, and rose to become a subedar in the Army.

However, a family dispute over his landholding that led to his aged mother and young son being brutally beaten provoked *Tomar* to use his gun not to defend his motherland, but to protect himself and his family. The bullets soon became his buddy when he found that the Army he had served and made proud of with his sports medals ignored him.

The administration machinery, the police, included, cared little for his glory on the playing fields and refused to help him survive, pushing him into the ravines. In a very telling manner, Dhulia's work is a critique of how India disregards, even snubs, its sportsmen and women.

Dhulia, who assisted Shekhar Kapur in his *Bandit Queen* (on dacoit Phoolan Devi), was inspired by the movie to make *Paan Singh Tomar*. He actually operated in the same areas where Phoolan Devi did, and Dhulia shot his film exactly where Kapur made his *Bandit Queen* — that is Bhopur, close to Agra.

Khan agrees that in the case of Phoolan Devi and *Tomar*, it was the system that forced them into crime. Phoolan was a poor Dalit girl exploited by upper castes, till she was raped and ravished, a humiliation that blinded her to reason. With *Tomar*, it was different. The police stood as mute spectators while his family was abused, his land taken away, his crop destroyed, and his meritorious past as a star sportsman in the Indian Army merely jeered at by the administration. *Tomar* does resist taking up the gun till he is pushed to the precipice, and when he does that there is no stopping him. Like the sport, *Tomar* says in the picture, he will only stop at the finishing line. And that line is one that precariously separates *Tomar's* life and death.

The actual shooting of the movie itself was fraught with deathly impediments. Khan tore a ligament in his leg, and could not run at all in a film that was all about running and jumping. For six months, the shoot had to be put off, and the project that was to finish in eight months took another 12.

Jaggaan Gujjar was another major stumbling block: he was a dreaded dacoit who was operating in the same area where the movie was being shot. But as luck would have it, Gujjar surrendered, and even then Dhulia hired a few former dacoits to protect his unit.

In the end, it was worth all this wait and worry, with Khan putting his best foot forward. Literally.

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