



# ‘We are telling a universal story’

◀ M5

life story was even more fascinating and disturbing... The revelation of the man's identity and unexpected religious rites that followed left me stunned with the bizarre nature of identity politics.

I asked myself — where was the need for all this politics and extremism and disruption of the lives of very poor people?



Dekh Tamasha Dekh

As the story progresses, you come to a surprising climax that shows how absurd the whole fight has been from the start.

## What is the larger story here?

I believe that humanity precedes identity. I have believed for a long time that any faith or belief that propagates something that does not pass the test of humanity has to be challenged. This is true not only for India, but anywhere else in the world.

## When did you start thinking of these themes?

This film is located in the 1990s. Sadly it was around these times we began witnessing a very

drastic shift in the issue of identity. People began to pigeonhole others on the basis of their religion.

If I said something about the human condition and humanity, some people would say, ‘He is saying it because he is a Muslim.’

I have been watching how religion came to be more and more politicized and militarized. People began to say, ‘If you do not believe in what I believe in, you are wrong.’

In many of the plays I chose to adapt, especially *The Royal Hunt of Sun*, I challenged such ideas. And they are challenged in the new film.

**You have said you do not believe in hammering a message.**

That is why it is not a film that lectures. It tells a good story and the rest follows. It is also an entertaining film. It will move you deeply and make you ask questions about larger humanity. In the process, I hope it has effortlessly sensitized the audience.

**You have made a film with a very talented cast, but they are not youthful heroes or established actors. What would draw people to your film?**

It is the subject and the way it is treated that will bring the audiences. Word of mouth and good reviews will also help.

Many of the artists in the film are working with me for the first time. I have worked with Satish Kaushik before. He played the lead in *Salesman Ramlal*, my stage adaptation of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

He is a wonderful character actor; his talent shows all through my new film.

**Would a film of this nature appeal to audiences in small towns and villages in India?**

Conventionally speaking, no. But we believe it would interest them because we are telling a story they can

relate to.

We have had a few test screenings in small towns and the audiences got in no time all the humor, conversations and nuances in the film.

## What was the reaction at NYIFF?

I was pleasantly surprised when several Americans came up and discussed the film at length. I thought they would miss some of the nuances and strands in the story, but they got it all.

Listening to them has convinced me that my film has gone beyond appealing to Indians at large. What we are telling here is a universal story. ■

Filmistaan — a celebration of a bond that could transcend nationalities — was a clear favorite at the festival



## Bollywood beyond Borders

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make a Bollywood film,” he said, adding, he found one such backer from Mathura.

“In India nobody really reads a script. Script narration then becomes very crucial,” Kakkar said.

He narrated the story with a condom joke and everything began to fall in place.

The film — starring actors Sharib Hashmi, Kumud Mishra, Gopal Dutt, and Inaamulhaq in key roles — tells the story of a Bollywood buff.

Sunny (Hashmi), who an assistant director, fantasizes about becoming a movie star. He is thrown out at every audition, but won't give up his passion.

When Sunny goes with an American crew to Rajasthan to work on a documentary, a terrorist group from across the Indian border kidnaps him to secure the Americans as hostages.

The twist comes when Sunny realizes that the house in which he is confined belongs to a dealer in pirated Bollywood films. Soon, an unlikely friendship develops between the two men, ending in a thriller-like climax.

The movie might have cost a fraction of an average Bollywood movie, but it does not look like a film made on a shoe-string budget. With its pulsating sound track and appealing performances, it becomes an instant winner.

Kakkar, who also wrote the screenplay, said he knew Hashmi (who played a small role in *Slumdog Millionaire*) for years and though the latter worked as an assistant director, he was also looking around for meaty character roles.

Several actors in the film are from the prestigious National School of Drama — alma mater to generations of world-class actors from Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri to Nawazuddin Siddiqui — Kakkar added.

At the India Film Festival of Los Angeles, Kakkar had criticized the aesthetic limitations of small digital devices that are increasingly the screens of choice for younger viewers.

‘To me, a movie on a phone is not a movie,’ he was quoted as saying there, adding that he was inspired to make movies by the ‘romance’ of seeing them on a huge screen.

He echoed those thoughts in discussion with journalists and audience members at the NYIFF, where he said he had been thinking of making a film about the possibility of friendship between ordinary Indians and Pakistanis for years.

In one of the poignant scenes in the film a very old *hakim* speaks about his yearning to see Amritsar where he had grown up. And Sunny talks of his grandfather, who continues to recall his Lahore years.

Kakkar recalled how his own grandfather, who had migrated from Lahore, had continued talking about Lahore for years and his desire to visit the city of his youth.

Small-budget films like *Filmistaan* are rarely shown widely in North America. But if any distributor had heard the applause the film received in Los Angeles and New York, he might leap at the chance to distribute a sleeper hit. ■