



\* Amna Ilyas, who essays Rubina in the film is firmly rooted.

# Running on exaggeration

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**O**ften, I have seen in my long career as a movie critic that films which create a lot of buzz before they are theatrically released turn out to be disappointing.

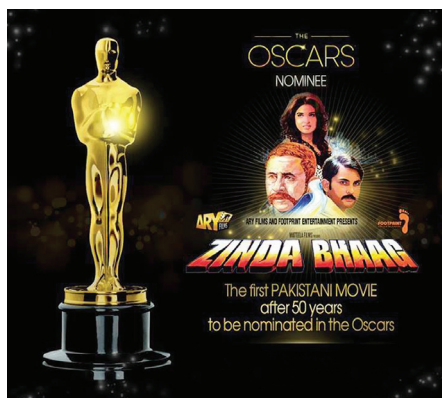
The Pakistani movie *Zinda Bhaag* (Run For Your Life) streamed into the recent Abu Dhabi Film Festival with a bang, but ended with a whimper.

Days before the movie's official screening there, media men and delegates were excited about it with both its directors, Meenu Gaur and Farjad Nabi, mixing and mingling with journalists and others at the main Festival venue, Emirates Palace. It was impeccable PR all right, but there was a good reason why *Zinda Bhaag* aroused so much interest.

It was the first Pakistani film in as long as 50 years to have been submitted as the country's official entry for a possible Oscar nomination in the foreign language category. For a country whose movie industry suffered a setback after the 1947 partition of the subcontinent — when the cinema industry moved from Lahore to then Bombay — participation in an event like the Academy Awards is no mean achievement. Although Pakistan's film industry had revived in the 1950s, it again declined in the 1970s, with just about a handful of movies being produced today.

So, *Zinda Bhaag* had to compete with a very small number of films — as compared with, say India, where about 1300 movies are made every year. Nonetheless, there was general elation about Pakistan getting into the big league of international cinema. And what could be bigger than the Oscars.

However, *Zinda Bhaag* was disappointing. A story about three young



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men trying to emigrate illegally is a subject that has been beaten to death by even very renowned directors the world over. Who can ever forget Fellini's masterpiece *I Vitelloni*.

In *Zinda Bhaag*, three friends from the bustling and rather prosperous city of Lahore, Khalidi (Khurram Pataras), Taambi (Zohaib) and Chitta (Salman Ahmed Khan), dream of a golden lifestyle in the West, and are out to chase that. But the means to get out of Pakistan — trying to get a forged visa and taking the help of a strongman (played by Naseeruddin Shah) — appear to have been written rather too simplistically.

In contrast, Khalidi's girlfriend (Amna Ilyas, also seen in another Festival entry, Pakistan's *Good Morning Karachi*) is rooted to the ground, and would rather succeed through lawful methods. She is critical of her boyfriend's method to leave Pakistan that she feels is a huge gamble — a gamble which can multiply his financial debts. And, worse, put his life in danger.

Unfortunately, this aspect does not come powerfully enough in the film, the part having been dealt with in a hurry. If the script flounders here, it lacks focus. The movie wants to say too many things in about two hours, and so appears jumbled with many of the scenes seemingly out of place. They look jumpy. The colours jar, so do the songs. Too many of them are a drag on the narrative.

Post my *Zinda Bhaag* viewing, I buttonholed Gaur and Nabi at the magnificently ornamental Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi for an interview. Why did they think of unlawful immigration? Is this a pressing issue in today's Pakistan?

Gaur told me that it was so, and the little stories in her film were stories that she and Nabi had actually heard from relatives and close friends. "What struck us about these is that there was a parallel universe with its own rules, its own aspirations. Some people have made it good in the West. Some have been deported", she said.

Although the directors had planned to make a movie about illegal immigration (known as "dunky" in the Lahore lingo), they broad-based their plot to make it a kind of contemporary story that happened every day in Pakistan (Now, I know why they slipped). "We did not want to do something about our country which can look clichéd. We have seen so many of these clichéd films from Pakistan. We were tired of the stereotyped cinema about Pakistan we saw in the international arena. We did not want to do a movie about geo-political

significance, about war, about terror", Gaur emphasised.

In order to make the film seem "real", Gaur and Nabi went to several middleclass localities to find their actors. "In fact, one of the three protagonists had actually been deported, and these men — non-professionals — had their own experiences to talk about, and these also added to the story, Nabi contended.

Even Amna played a role that is very close to her own life. As Rubina in the movie — who believed that one must not take shortcuts in life to rise, but small and steady steps — Amna had worked very hard to become the "supermodel" she now is.

So have many others in Pakistan's cinema industry, which revived in the 1950s (that decade was called the golden period of cinema there as it was in India), but declined during the 1970s when the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq began to systematically delegitimise cinema by imposing punishing taxes and rigid censorship, Gaur averred.

Well, things have been looking up now, Nabi told me. "There is a fresh crop of directors. They have the freedom to make the kind of cinema they believed in. The absence of a studio system in Pakistan despite being somewhat daunting, was also a good thing, because one could make what one wanted to without the fear of being categorised into any genre. *Zinda Bhaag* is one that defies definition".

It sure does defy definition. But, I feel, it suffers from too much of freedom. It seems to be wanting to say too many things — and all in one single film. The result, it lacks focus and appears muddled. Much like a Bollywood potboiler.

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