



* Golshifteh Farahani: "When I am far from India, I feel that I am far from my own mother."

Photograph: Zoubin Navi

To India with love

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The recently concluded Abu Dhabi Film Festival had some remarkable surprises for me. It seemed like a believe-it-or-not take when the ravishing Iranian actress, Golshifteh Farahani, called India her "mother".

During an invigorating chat with her at the seventh edition of the Festival that is growing into one of the biggest in the region, Farahani said she was very fond of India, a country she has been travelling to since the past 10 years. "India is my mother," she contended with a look that longed for the nation. "When I am far from India, I feel that I am far from my own mother."

Farahani is all set to visit Goa in the next few days where she will take part in a conference on human rights – and how apt that will be for someone like her who has always fought for them. "It is a very, very important meeting, where a lot of important people from all over the world will come," she sounded enthusiastic.

She seemed to be even more excited about her long stay in India. "After the conference, I will be at the International Film Festival of India in Panaji from November 20. Between the conference and the Festival, I am going

to be spending time in Karnataka, in one of those tree houses in a place called Paradise Island," her eyes glowed as she described the place to me.

"India is my life, my very breath. That is where I go to refresh myself," Farahani is in love with the land. She felt that India was the only country where she could find peace. For, "it is the only democracy in the world which gives you perfect freedom and a perfect sense of tranquillity."

If her words cleverly camouflage a deep anguish at having to run away from her native Iran five years ago and seek shelter in Paris, the "land of liberty", they also convey a streak of her rebelliousness – which is also there in the screen roles she chooses.

Hiner Saleem's Cannes entry, *My Sweet Pepper Land*, which showed at Abu Dhabi as well, has Farahani essaying a school teacher in a remote Kurdish village, bravely warding off the brutal local chieftain and his gang of desperados.

Against the wishes of her 12 goofy brothers, but with her father's consent, she stays alone, and eventually falls in love with a freedom-fighter (Saddam Hussain has fallen by then)-turned policeman, who guards an outpost in the village vowing to uphold the law and stop the chieftain's smuggling of arms and liquor.

My Sweet Pepper Land has bold scenes with Farahani and the cop. The plot itself

centres on the value of education and woman's empowerment – both of which are resisted by male authoritarianism in Saleem's socially provocative work.

In fact, Farahani has had a penchant for such portrayals. In an earlier movie, *The Patience Stone*, which went to several festivals in 2012, including Abu Dhabi, her character in the film is quite akin to that of her own real self. The movie is a "statement of rebellion" – much like *A Sweet Pepper Land*, where as Govend, she even sleeps with the policeman in sheer defiance of Kurdish societal norms.

In *The Patience Stone*, the woman, played by Farahani, is seen tending to her comatose husband with a bullet in his neck, and as the plot progresses, she begins to confess to her husband – partly to fight her loneliness and her boredom. The confessions stretch over several days, and with the passing of time, they get increasingly daring and scandalous.

A point comes when they get so sexually outrageous that they shake the man out of his coma. The film ends on a note of sheer drama. Farahani was wonderful as the tortured wife who eventually finds her voice, her space and her freedom. Which is what she is looking forward to in India.

There was another India lover at Abu Dhabi whom I met: Bosnian director Danis Tanovic. Here was a helmer from a little land in Europe making an Indian movie in Punjab!

He has just finished shooting *White Lies* (working title), starring Emraan Hashmi, Geetanjali Thapa and Supriya Pathak, and produced by Anurag Kashyap. The film, largely shot in Punjab's Patiala, centres on a poor Pakistani and his struggle against a corrupt system.

Many years ago, when I first met Tanovic at the Cannes Film Festival, I could not have imagined that this guy would someday make an Indian movie. His film at the 2001 Cannes was *No Man's Land*, and it won the Best Screenplay Award there. Some months later in early 2002, the movie won the Best Foreign Language Oscar. *No Man's Land* was a gripping story of three soldiers caught in no man's land between the borders of their respective countries.

At the Abu Dhabi Festival with his latest work, *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* – which won the Grand Jury Prize and Silver Bear for Best Actor at Berlin last February, and which is also Bosnia's official submission for the 2014 foreign language Oscar – Tanovic told me in the course of an interview that his movie stood no chance of making it to the nomination basket of five.

"There are far better ones than mine competing ... But I wish India's *The Lunchbox* had been submitted. From Telluride to Toronto, it has been getting rave reviews. I would have withdrawn my work to accommodate this Indian picture. If it could have been nominated as Bosnia's entry, I would have done it. It is such good cinema with fine performances ..."

The cinema he creates is as brutally honest. *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* is quite similar to *No Man's Land* in treatment. Shorn of frills, *Iron Picker* appears bare and blunt, talking about an unhappy incident in the life of a Roma (gypsy) family in Bosnia.

The wife suffers a miscarriage, but the hospital will not perform the procedure unless her husband pays the bill. The family has no health insurance, and eventually with the woman in a critical condition, the husband finds a way to save her.

Tanovic averred that he had read about this tragic episode in 2011, and decided to make a film out of it. However, unlike other movies that have been inspired by or actually based on true stories, *Iron Picker* uses the same family which suffered to play the parts.

Here was a man, his wife and child, all real Romas with no experience in acting, carrying a movie with engaging authenticity. "There is no magic realism about the tribe," Tanovic quipped. "So why would I want to use professional actors or create music and melody around this family in my work. And the best way to narrate the family's anguish was to cast the actual family itself. Nothing could have infused greater legitimacy in the work."

An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker may not be enchanting, but is gripping nonetheless. There is nothing magical about Bosnian cinema either. "Come on, we are just 4mn people. It is like a village in India. When were part of Yugoslavia, we were 20mn. That was something. There is hardly anything called Bosnian cinema today," Tanovic added.

So, it would appear logical that someone with brilliant credentials like Tanovic would try and find an outlet for his artistic expression in India, which affords a million possibilities, so to say. But with *No Man's Land* and *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* having raised Tanovic's bar high, *White Lies* might just have to fight hard to prove its maker's worth.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades, and my be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com