CINEMA

Detective Byomkesh Bakshi to come alive on screen, yet again

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Dibakar Banerjee works with that precision which people jocularly — sometimes caustically or even angrily — term the Indian Standard Time. "I will meet you at nine-thirty at the breakfast place," he told me over the telephone in Goa's Marriott Hotel.

One of the invitees to the Knowledge Series of the just concluded Film Bazaar — which runs along with the ongoing International Film Festival of India here — Banerjee appeared for the meeting an hour late, only to find that he had scheduled another with Marco Mueller, Director of the Rome International Film Festival.

Banerjee and I did meet eventually, and over two sessions we spoke about his latest movie, *Detective Byomkesh Bakshi*, scheduled to open in February 2015.

A character created by Sharadindu Bandhyopadhyay, Byomkesh appeared in a series of stories between 1932 and 1970, and was often compared to Arthur Conan Doyle's sleuth, Sherlock Holmes. As immortal as Holmes, Bakshi might have been inspired by Doyle's creation, but Bandhyopadhyay's style was extraordinarily Indian — although the genre he used was Western.

"The amazing thing about Byomkesh was that Bandhyopadhyay made his investigator so Indian — even though the format was Western colonial. The characters are so very Bengali, so very Calcuttan," Banerjee tells me. "Although people will tend to compare Byomkesh with Holmes, Bakshi is truly a native of the land."

Banerjee who grew up reading the exploits of Holmes and his sidekick, that delightful Dr Watson, was also an avid fan of Byomkesh. Perhaps, it was the early influence of Holmes and Bakshi that steered the director towards crime. Whether it was his debut feature, *Khosla Ka Ghosla* (2006) or later works like *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!*, *Love Sex Aur Dhoka* and *Shanghai*, crime is an underlying factor in all these.

"This is an interesting observation," he says. "Nobody has ever told me this. But you have got me thinking all right. I think crime defines a society. When I was 12 or 13 years old, my friends and I were told never to read Bandhyopadhyay. Sure enough, we all went for him, especially his Byomkesh exploits. His stories, written in a classic and riveting way, spoke about the underbelly of our society, about the darker side of the community. And we found fascinating aspects in the fiction — aspects that differed from the normative. An old man addicted to pornography. A couple kissing each other to death by passing on cyanide, crimes of passion — and this was the world of Bakshi, and as a teenager, it excited me. And that interest in the dark, in the perverse, in the scandalous is the most sensational part of any civilisation. And it is, therefore, not surprising that every Bengali household should have Bandhyopadhyay's *Bakshi Omnibus*."

The film, *Detective Byomkesh Bakshi*, is about the wartime Calcutta of 1943 — a city frightened by a possible Japanese invasion. Calcutta was the only Indian city that saw

FROM THE FILM: Sushant Singh Rajput will play the eponymous detective in the film.

bombings during that war. It was a very historic time. Gandhi's Quit India Movement was on. Netaji Subash Chandra Bose escaped from his home in Calcutta, giving the slip to the British who had held him under house arrest. The British were under siege. Japan had taken over Singapore, Malaya, Burma and so on.

This is the backdrop to the mystery that Bakshi is trying to solve in Banerjee's work. It is the war and it is the city that throws up the dark side of that society. After all, a detective novel is all about environment. Can you imagine Sherlock Holmes without the eeriness of gas-lit London? And perhaps Bakshi could not have been so stimulating without that seedy Calcutta of those times. And it is the 1940s and 1950s Calcutta that is most evocative. "The city and Byomkesh are the two characters in my movie," the helmer avers.

Intriguingly, Bengal has had a long tradition of detectives. "Since the late 1800s, Bengal has had a fascination for detective fiction, and Bengali boys have grown up on it."

Why was Calcutta or Bengal so enamoured by stories about detection?

"Calcutta was probably the only city in India, the Second City of the Empire (after London), and any urban centre has a huge space for pulp, which feeds perversion. And out of this pulp emerges a character who is above this. Hence Byomkesh, hence Satyajit Ray's Feluda, hence Holmes."

But who is more popular — Feluda or Byomkesh?

"Both are equally liked and read. Everybody who has read Feluda has also read Bakshi. There was, though, an essential difference between the two. Ray wrote for the young. His Feluda stories were educational. I learnt something from each and every Feluda adventure. Ray was teaching kids, helping them to grow up. On the other hand, the exploits of Byomkesh are essentially moral stories meant for adults. Like all moral stuff, they have a mix of kinky perversion and the forbidden," Banerjee replies. Yet, the villain in the Byomkesh works is never judged. He is just caught. Bakshi is never judgemental.

Also, unlike many of his ilk, Byomkesh

falls in love with a girl, marries her and has a sexual life. And the girl becomes part of many stories. "He and his wife and his sidekick are in a troika and some may call it ménage à trois," Banerjee laughs.

Now, getting back to the film again — one of the many that has been made on the detective — Sushant Singh Rajput (*Kai Po Che*, *Shuddh Desi Romance* and Shekhar Kapur's upcoming *Paani*) will be Banerjee's Bakshi, and Anand Tiwari and Swastika Mukherjee will be some of the others in the cast.

Banerjee has made changes to the story — the first in Bandhyopadhyay's series — he has picked, and he hopes that he would be able to make several movies on Bakshi. "Any book that is adapted into a film has to have changes," the helmer explains.

Yes, indeed. But the question is, will the Bengali audience, fed on the thrilling case studies of Byomkesh Bakshi, accept this?

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