

Irrfan, still the best of the Khans

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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Long ago, I wrote – perhaps much to the chagrin of others – that the best of the Khans was Irrfan. Many years later, today, I still feel the same. There is something unique about Irrfan that I have really not been able to put my finger on. But let me harbour a guess.

For one, Irrfan, despite all the accolades he has been flooded with, remains disarmingly simple, extremely warm and utterly humble. A few years ago, I remember seeing him almost every day at lunch during the Abu Dhabi International Film Festival, where he was on the jury and I was covering it as a journalist. He had no inhibitions about mixing with a whole lot of journalists and others, cracking a joke or two and even pulling someone's leg – all in good humour. In short, he chose to be one amongst all of us.

Incidentally, it was at Abu Dhabi during an earlier Festival that I first met Irrfan and discovered the kind of potential he had. His movie, Pan Singh Tomar (by Tigmanshu Dhulia), was part of the Festival, and I was awed by his enormous screen appeal. As a champion steeplechase runner – winning medal after medal – he finds one fine day that when his land is usurped, the authorities who had once revered him pleading helplessness. Not just this, but they also dismiss him. Tomar, that was Irrfan's name in the film, turns into not a dacoit, but a rebel, as he chooses to call himself. In sheer anger and desperation, he takes up the gun – transforming from a pleasant sportsman into a vengeful outlaw. Irrfan conveyed this change with admirable effect.

Sadly, it took years for Pan Singh Tomar to find a distributor. But then eventually someone did – and I am told that this happened after Irrfan had sent the clipping of my article on him and the movie to several people – and Pan Singh Tomar became a hit. Irrfan became a name, nay an actor, his sheer brilliance was noticed, and I presume there was, to use a cliché, no looking back after that.

Renowned international directors like Ang Lee (Life of Pi), Michael Winterbottom (A Mighty Heart) and Danny Boyle (Slumdog Millionaire) have gone to town heaping praises on Irrfan.

At home, his Lunchbox redefined – in a way – how Indian cinema could appeal beyond the country's shores. As a widower, Irrfan brought into his character the pain and hopelessness of a lonely soul, but showed remarkable restraint when he got a chance to get close to a married, but lonely young woman. It was a great film, made greater by Irrfan's thoughtful performance – and helped by another memorable piece of acting by Nawazuddin Siddiqui.

Earlier, Irrfan's association with Anup Singh had resulted in Qissa, where Irrfan played the part of a displaced Sikh, who had to leave his hearth and home in Pakistan after the 1947 Partition. In Punjab, his life witnesses one disappointment after another when his wife gives birth to one daughter after another. Till he decides to bring up one of them as a boy! Irrfan portrayed the angst of father pining for a male heir with skilful ease.

Aware that a good actor can never hope to become a great actor, Irrfan has with deliberate consciousness broken away from getting into the same kind of roles.

In his latest, Hindi Medium by Saket Chaudhary, Irrfan turns into a Raj Batra – who owns a fashion boutique in Delhi and fancies himself as a business tycoon. He is rich all right, driving a BMW. But his one failing seems to be English, which he cannot speak even to save his life. His wife, who speaks the language with a clipped accent, wants him to move to the posh Vasant Vihar (from the dowdy Chandni Chowk) and get their daughter admitted to a "five-star" public school. Poor Raj struggles along trying his best to mouth sentences in English, and what hilarity. Irrfan proves here that he can be as much a master of humour as he can be of the serious and sombre (Lunchbox, Pan Singh Tomar, and Talwar, where he is a hardened cop). His flawless timing can really put to shame some of the seasoned screen comedians.

Has he ever essayed a villain? I do not think so, but Singh's upcoming – and which am eagerly looking forward to – The Song of Scorpions may show Irrfan in a somewhat negative light. That is if one goes by the outline of the story, which has the fascinating and charmingly rebellious Iranian actress, Golshifteh Farahani, as a Rajasthani scorpion singer, expert in drawing out the venom of the deadly insect from

the body of one stung by it.

I can imagine how marvellous Singh's work would be given the fact that Irrfan has one of the most celebrated performers in Farahani (remember her in *The Patience Stone*?) as his partner. For me, this would be seeing Irrfan in yet another avatar of a man who has been constantly striving to invent and re-invent himself.

He said in one of his recent interviews that he wanted to keep exploring the myriad aspects of his personality. "I keep looking at ways to break any pattern that may be discernible to me". *The Song of Scorpions* may be just that crack through which we would see an entirely different Irrfan. We have seen him as a "baghi"(rebel), we have seen him as a cop, we have seen him as a taxi driver in *Piku* and now we get set to move along with him on the deserts of Rajasthan.

* Gautaman Bhaskaran has been a keen watcher of Irrfan Khan's works, and may be emailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com