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Bollywood Extra: In 'Madaari', common man Irrfan takes on the mighty

BY [GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN](#) on JULY 31, 2016 in [ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES](#), [INDIA](#), [SOUTH ASIA](#)

India may top in corruption, but voices against it have been dime a dozen, and cinema has ever so often projected a rebellious shriek against the misdemeanors of the state.



Irrfan Khan in a still from Nishikanth Kamat's *Madaari* (*Puppeteer*)

Films like *Dombivli Fast* (remade in Tamil as *Evano Oruvan/Someone*) and *A Wednesday* (also remade in Tamil as *Unnaipol Oruvan/Someone Like You*) have shown us how the common man when driven to the desperate drop-off takes on the Goliath of a state. While Nishikanth Kamat's *Dombivli Fast* uses violence to make its point, Neeraj Pandey's *A Wednesday* applies a largely cerebral format to focus on the angst of a man living in times of terror.

Kamat's latest foray into the dark and depressing alleyways of administrative crime and corruption is the hard-hitting *Madaari* (*Puppeteer*), scripted through the terrible agony of a young father (played with a touch of sheer brilliance by Irrfan Khan) who loses his eight-year-old son in a road flyover collapse.

The obvious reference here is the March 2016 Kolkata accident. An under-construction flyover came crashing down in a busy city area killing about 27 people and injuring over 80. Though the top brass of the company which was building the flyover was arrested, the truth may never be revealed. And it will remain a conjecture — the fodder for scandals and hearsay — that substandard material was used and in an unduly hasty manner that severely compromised



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Madaari zeroes in precisely on a mishap like this to tell us how a man, a doting, single father and internet repairman, gets mentally shattered after the death of his son — only to subsequently face an inhuman government, more interested in shutting him up with a measly compensation than in trying to get to the bottom of the accident by tracing those guilty of negligence. Is the administration interested at all in fixing accountability and culpability?

A shattered and forlorn Nirmal Kumar (Irrfan) finds himself as crushed as his little boy must have been as he lay under those huge steel and concrete girders. Failing to find any door open to hear his cry, Kumar kidnaps the young son of the 'federal home minister' and begins a cat-and-mouse game.

Reminiscent of the 1989 kidnapping of Rubaiya Sayeed, the grown-up daughter of India's then Home Minister, Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, (she was later freed in exchange for the release of five imprisoned terrorists belonging to the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front), *Madaari* picks such real life incidents to plot a movie whose cinematic appeal lies not as much in great story telling as it does on an exceptionally fine piece of performance by Irrfan.

He is the best of the Khans — far, far ahead of Bollywood actors like Salman Khan, Shahrukh Khan, Saif Ali Khan and even Aamir Khan. In a series of gripping sequences, Irrfan's Kumar bundles the home minister and his corrupt, bribe-sucking political cronies as well as bureaucrats inside a small room and has their confessions telecast live on a national channel — watched in awe and admiration by teeming millions.

It is only Irrfan who can carry a film like *Madaari* — much in the same way he helped an average work like *A Mighty Heart* (helmed by Michael Winterbottom and starring Angelina Jolie) sparkle. The movie was about the kidnap and killing of a Wall Street reporter, Daniel Pearl. A typically under-performing Khan pushes *Madaari* from frame to frame, from one incident to another in a manner that is so refreshingly different from the loud, exaggerated, grossly theatrical acting that has become an integral part of Indian cinema.

Admittedly, Indian movies, Bollywood certainly, is trying to give itself a makeover by roping in men and women who are keen on performing rather than on adding points to their stardom. And happily, Irrfan is one of the few who is willing to sink his teeth into a plot and just disappear into a character.

It was a long time ago that I first met Irrfan. It was at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival in one of its early editions. He was there with his director, Tigmanshu Dhulia, and movie, *Paan Singh Tomar*.

The film was about a star award-winning steeplechase runner who, disillusioned with and humiliated by the administration, turns into a rebel, not a dacoit as some others viewed him. Every time someone calls him a dacoit on the screen, he corrects this by saying he is not one, but a rebel fighting for a cause. He is battling a social order that is not just unjust, but degrades human values, the very humanism, in an awfully brutal manner.

We see this clearly in *Madaari*. In the climax, Kumar gives the same dose of medicine to all those who had made his life a living Hell. It is the threat of death which ultimately forces the home minister to fall on his knees — television camera capturing such moments with gleeful flourish — pleading for the life and safety of his son tied to a cooking gas cylinder, ready to be ignited at the strike of a match.

Paan Singh Tomar was also a strong critique of the system, flawed beyond feeling or remorse. The movie was critically acclaimed, and Irrfan had arrived. After playing a cop in *A Mighty Heart* and in the Oscar-clinching *Slumdog Millionaire* (which the Greek master, Theo Angelopoulos called "a celebration of poverty"), Irrfan stepped into different kinds of shoes.

He was a Shakespearean schemer in Vishal Bharadwaj's *Maqbool* (*Macbeth* adapted to Indian milieu), a ghost in Haider (*Hamlet*, also set in an Indian situation, Kashmir here), and an ageing lover-boy in Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox*.

As the park owner in *Jurassic World*, as an investigating officer in Meghna Gulzar's *Talvar* (based on the actual murder of a 14-year-old girl in Noida, close to Delhi), and as a taxi driver in *Piku*, Irrfan brought a rare dimension to his roles, played out with nuanced subtlety.

He will soon be seen in yet another completely different and classic part — that of a Rajasthani tribal in Anup Singh's *The Song of Scorpions* — a fascinating folklore about a woman (portrayed by the hauntingly beautiful and talented Iranian actress, Golshifteh Farahani) who can draw out the venom of the deadly insect through music.

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As Khan said from Mumbai over the telephone the other day, "it is only now that Indian cinema is showing signs of maturing — although the 1950s and the 1960s were a golden period. We then had our own distinct style. There may have been songs and dances. But we were dealing with issues. Even an ordinary film had something to say. Directors like Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt, Mehboob Khan, Raj Kapoor and the like had something to tell us without making it sound preachy."

But the great news is that Indian cinema is starting to — once again — meander into meaningful movies. And actors like Irrfan are an integral part of this journey.

Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and Seoul Times.

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