

Manoj Bajpayee, the man behind myriad masks

August 10 2016 01:37 AM



TALENTED: Manoj Bajpayee effortlessly switches between different characters, taking on the very identity of the person he is portraying.



Rate

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

This may sound so ironical, but a country with a population of 1.3 billion or more people and producing about 1,300 films year after year can boast of very, very few actors — men and women who are willing, without the least of hesitation, to look and play a character. Manoj Bajpayee, the actor from Bihar born in 1969, is one among that handful number.

As his latest outing , Budhia Singh—Born To Run, opens, one may as well quip that much like the little lad from India’s Odisha (formerly Orissa), a running prodigy, Bajpayee may well be described as the man born to act.

Like Irrfan Khan, who often gets a movie sparkling, even though his role may be tiny, tiny, Bajpayee too has this extraordinary ability. In Khan’s case, I saw this in the Michael Winterbottom-helmed, Angelina Jolie-starrer, A Mighty Heart — where as a Pakistani intelligence officer, he virtually stopped the film from sinking into the abyss. Similarly, Bajpayee gave a new meaning and dimension to Neeraj Pandey’s Special 26, where he essays an officer of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). He was very good there as a cop who gets fooled by a bunch of thieves masquerading as the CBI. I still remember one of the last scenes where Wasim Khan (Bajpayee) bursts out laughing — his laughter camouflaging his intense frustration at having been foxed by the gang led by Akshay Kumar’s Ajay.

Though Bajpayee first appeared in Govind Nihalani’s Drohkaal and Shekar Kapur’s Bandit Queen as long ago as 1994 and in very minor roles, I actually noticed him only in the 2011 Aarakshan — where he is a corrupt educationist, a political appointee, who enriches himself by

running a coaching institute. The movie was a powerful indictment of caste-based reservations in educational institutions and government jobs.

In contrast to this evil character, Bajpayee's next role in Chittagong (2012) was laced with nobility and goodness. As a school-master-turned-freedom-fighter, Surya Sen, Bajpayee was admirable, spearheading the fight for India's independence from British colonial rule, and planning to capture the town of Chittagong (now in Bangladesh) in 1930.

Bajpayee seemed to have returned to his old ways in Anurag Kashyap's Gangs of Wasseypur (2012), where the film in two parts has Manoj playing Sardar Khan, a leader of coal mafia, a womaniser — recklessly brutal. In an important way, these two movies actually pushed Bajpayee on to a highly noticeable pedestal.

He was as vicious in Jha's (also) 2012 Chakravyuh — where he yet again dons the garb of an outlaw, a Naxalite running a kangaroo court on a set of rules that was inhuman.

As much as he was first-class in the works of Kashyap and Jha, it was Hansal Mehta's Aligarh, which opened early this year, that revealed a finer, disarmingly sensitive Bajpayee. He was wonderful as Shrinivas Ramachandra Siras, a professor teaching Marathi in the Aligarh Muslim University. Ridiculed and sacked from his position for being a homosexual, Bajpayee transformed himself from the vile educationist of Aarakshan, the brutal beast of Gangs of Wasseypur and the dictatorial Naxalite of Chakravyuh into a helpless, passionate gay in Aligarh — who listens to melodious romantic Hindi film songs and sees a rickshaw-puller. One night, when he is caught in a sting television operation, organised by his rivals in the university, Siras is devastated — portraying the pain and anguish of a man wronged in such a demeaning manner. Bajpayee was an epitome of brilliance. To me Aligarh was the high point of his career. The actor's latest on-screen experiment in Budhia Singh—Born To Run — as Biranchi Das, a coach who has a judo school — brings out yet another aspect of Bajpayee's talent. Inspired by the real-life Budhia, who at the age of five ran from Puri to Bhubaneswar — a distance of about 70 km — in seven hours, the movie has Bajpayee getting into the shoes of a tough coach, who sees the phenomenal talent in the boy. He loves him, but is also cruel to him — pushing him into terribly strenuous marathons. By the age of five, Budhia had undertaken over 40 long-distance races, thanks to Biranchi — who walks the tightrope between hope and despair, between sympathy and strictness.

Budhia, who also comes to love Biranchi, calling him 'Sir' , has had a bad childhood. With an alcoholic father who dies and a mother who sells him to a roadside bangle vendor for Rs850, Budhia is rescued by Biranchi — who also runs an orphanage for children.

It is by sheer coincidence that Biranchi notices the boy's almost magical ability to run for long hours without getting tired, and the man begins to groom the child for the 2016 Olympics. The film's release now could not have been more timely with the games now on at Rio de Janeiro.

The movie also tells us how the Odisha Child Welfare Department puts spooks in Biranchi's wheels of dream. Later, he was murdered. However, the killing had nothing to do with Budhia, but was traced to the coach's enmity with a local gangster.

With Biranchi gone and a ban on Budhia's marathons still in force, the boy now in his early teens lives in a government hostel. The coach's dream is all but broken. Though Budhia still wants to run, his ability to do so has gone down considerably. One is told that he cannot even win a school race!

The film plays out all these facets of Budhia's and Biranchi's lives. Writer-director Soumendra Padhi keeps his work firmly on a tight leash, not allowing any unbelievable excesses to creep in. He also gets a wonderful performance from Mayur Patole, who comes off as such a natural, essaying Budhia in a work that while being fantastical in its story line, has been crafted with engaging precision. Some may aver that it is often predictable. But then that has been Budhia's story — predictably successful — at least till Biranchi was alive. His death, though, was entirely unforeseen, a mitigated disaster for the boy in red running shoes. He could have

been at Rio winning a gold for India — as Biranchi had hoped, and was aiming for. But death blew it all up.

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