

A spoof filmmaker gets his Bollywood moment



ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Nasir Shaikh promoting “Superboys of Malegaon” in Mumbai, the center of India’s film industry. It’s a far cry from his own shoestring moviemaking work in his hometown.

MALEGAON, INDIA

New biopic turns camera on producer of exuberant, no-budget comedy movies

BY MUJIB MASHAL

Nasir Shaikh, the sleeves of his leather jacket rolled up, used his phone camera as a pocket mirror to touch up his hair. Then he stepped onto the red carpet (it was blue, actually) and stood beneath banners dedicated to filmmaking giants like Chaplin, Scorsese and Spielberg.

His own movies, exuberant do-it-yourself productions made with a simple camcorder and a ragtag cast, were about as far from big-budget blockbusters as could be. Yet here he was in Mumbai, the home of Bollywood, celebrated as a cinematic dreamer, attending the opening of a film based on his life.

He put one foot forward, tucked a thumb into his jeans pocket and smiled

for the cameras. “Here, sir, here!” the photographers shouted. “Nasir, sir! Nasir, sir!”

Three decades ago, Mr. Shaikh was an attendant in his family’s “video parlor,” as the dingy little halls that showed pirated and unlicensed movies were called. He had an idea: Why couldn’t Malegaon, his small city of textile mills in the same state as Mumbai, have a film industry of its own?

His formula for “Mollywood” was shoestring ingenious. He and his friends would recreate popular movies but change them enough to avoid copyright troubles. Since there was already so much sadness in his blighted city, every film would be a comedy. Loom workers and restaurant waiters would play heroes and villains in plots that felt close to home, speaking the dialogue of their own streets.

The VHS camera Mr. Shaikh, now 52, used to make his early movies was also used to record weddings. Costumes came from thrift stores. Actors were friends who got no pay, though Mr. *BOLLYWOOD, PAGE 2*

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BOLLYWOOD, FROM PAGE 1

Shaikh tried to find substitutes for their shifts at the mill or the restaurant.

For a spoof of “Superman,” Mr. Shaikh cast a scrawny textile worker as the hero. At one turn, Malegaon’s Man of Steel fights a local tobacco don who is ruining people’s health; at another he dives into a canal to save children. (It mattered little for the edit that in real life he could not swim.)

This Superman could fly, by tying him horizontally to a pole extending from a moving wagon, with an assistant flapping his cape to simulate wind, or by shooting him in front of a green screen that was a sheet hung from a truck.

“Why not?” was Mr. Shaikh’s philosophy. “Why not?” was his attitude.

His productions tapped into something universal: the dream of something more in a place where the routine is stifling and any mobility is out of reach.

Mr. Shaikh’s entry into moviemaking — a daunting endeavor in the era before smartphones and easy digital creation — was in part a solution to a police crackdown on piracy that left the city’s video parlors struggling for content.

His movies, most of them parodies of Bollywood hits, became wildly successful in Malegaon. When his first film ran in the parlors, it brought in four times the few hundred dollars in borrowed money that he and his friends had spent to make it.

“For two months, continuously, the film ran ‘house full’ — three showings a day,” Mr. Shaikh said. National news channels rushed to interview him.

Varun Grover, who wrote the screenplay for the new movie about Mr. Shaikh, “Superboys of Malegaon,” said that most children in India grew up wanting to become either a cricket player or a movie star, even though both were highly unlikely.

The story of Malegaon “is not just inspiring for those who want to come to cinema, but for any person who dreams at night but moves on from it in the morning,” Mr. Grover said. “They turned their nights’ dreams into their days’ reality.”



Left, movie posters dotting an alley in the small city of Malegaon, India, where video parlors still operate. Customers pay 30 cents to enjoy a couple of hours of entertainment.

For his first project, Mr. Shaikh chose to parody the smash-hit film “Sholay,” from the “angry young man” era of Bollywood in the 1970s and 1980s.

To sidestep copyright issues, character names were tweaked just enough. Gabbar Singh, the villain from “Sholay” and one of the most recognizable characters of Indian cinema, became Rubber Singh. Basanti, the heroine he kidnaps, became Basmati.

For actors to play them, he would look for some resemblance — in height, or eyes, or voice at least.

“We couldn’t find the original heroes in these parts,” Mr. Shaikh said. “Duplicates would do.”

In one of the most famous scenes of “Sholay,” Gabbar Singh’s thugs, on horseback, ambush a train carrying the movie’s protagonists. There was no way Mr. Shaikh could afford horses, or a train. So his heroes made do with a bus. And Rubber Singh’s thugs? “I said, ‘Let’s do one thing — we put the thugs on bicycles, all the thugs on bicycles,’” Mr. Shaikh recalled.

But as he achieved success, he found

— as many do in India — a bureaucracy lying in wait. After his initial films, the police would not allow screenings unless Mr. Shaikh obtained certificates from the censor board. To get approval for one movie, he had to travel back and forth repeatedly to Mumbai for a year.

The industry was also changing: Video parlors were shutting down with the rise of multiplex cinemas and online streaming. Eventually, Mr. Shaikh

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moved on from making movies. His family’s parlor is now a clothing store.

But his legend persisted because of a 2008 documentary about the making of Malegaon’s “Superman.”

At a film festival in New Delhi over a decade ago, Mr. Shaikh was approached by Zoya Akhtar, a filmmaker whose father was a co-writer of many major films of the angry young man era, including



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“Sholay.” She wanted to produce a biopic.

“I know who you are,” Mr. Shaikh told her. “I have copied all of your father’s films.”

The decade it took to make the biopic tested Mr. Shaikh’s patience. But he stuck to the deal, partly because it felt as if he was coming full circle.

“It’s all quite meta,” said Adarsh Gourav, the actor who plays Mr. Shaikh.

Mr. Gourav grew up in a place not unlike Malegaon. He remembers his first experiences at the only family cinema in Jamshedpur, his hometown. He would be on the shoulders of his older brother among the crowd outside the hall, waiting for the shutters to open.

“There’s like this metal bar, which looks kind of like a prison, and people are like rattling the prison, like basically screaming at the guards to open the gate before the show,” he recalled. “And as soon as the gates are opened, everybody just runs inside like their life depends on it.”

Reema Kagti, the biopic’s director, who grew up in a small town, said the

passion of the Malegaon bunch allowed her to explore fundamental questions about what cinema means to places where there is little else.

“This film needed to encapsulate a lot of things, starting from the magic of cinema. Why do we go to the cinema? Why do we need cinema?” Ms. Kagti said. “Why do we need to see ourselves represented in art?”

Much has changed in Malegaon since Mr. Shaikh’s moviemaking days. But the passion for cinema, and the escape it provides, remains. In at least one busy alley, video parlors are still operating.

On a recent evening, men trickled in. It was a respite from 12 hours of jarring mechanical sounds at the loom mills. For 30 cents, they could lean back for a couple of hours, light a cigarette and be carried away. The large posters dotting the alley were time capsules: dramatic collages of bloody and bruised faces, with hand-painted signs listing the showtimes and promising that the “double action” was worth the money.

On one screen was a Hindi-dubbed version of the 2014 Hollywood film

“Lucy,” a complicated metamorphosis story starring Scarlett Johansson and Morgan Freeman. (“Strange film,” one older man muttered to his companion.) In another hall was a 1995 Hindi film called “Jallaad,” about a police officer, played by Mithun Chakraborty, trying to learn the truth about his parents.

“I bet even Mithun has forgotten that he did a film like this,” said Raes Dilawar, who runs the parlors. “But we keep it alive here.”

His method for deciding which films to screen?

“Whatever my heart desires,” he said with a smile. “If it works, it works. If it doesn’t, so what?”

Last month, as he was promoting the biopic, Mr. Gourav returned to Malegaon, where he had spent weeks working to understand the world and the passion of Mr. Shaikh, the man he would play onscreen.

Star and subject made their way around town. Whenever Mr. Gourav’s traveling makeup crew stepped in to fix his hair or touch up his forehead, Mr. Shaikh stepped away, pulled out his phone camera and fixed his own hair. He still thinks in frames, light and angle.

Their last stop was Mr. Shaikh’s home: a small apartment with an open-roof courtyard above a row of shops on a crowded street. Mr. Shaikh had gone out that morning and bought plastic flowers for decoration.

At sunset, the uniformed bodyguards who had come with Mr. Gourav from Mumbai tried to control the small crowd outside the building. One by one, Mr. Shaikh ushered visitors to his rooftop for a photo with the star.

These days, Mr. Shaikh is somewhere between lapping up the recognition for his work and thinking ahead to the projects that could be next, from YouTube shows to films for the big screen. He’s reflective yet fidgety, like a boxer in unsure retirement.

But first, he wants to set up an electronics shop for his sons, 20-year-old twins who are finishing their studies.

“Then, with a free mind, I can come back to this,” he said.