

'NE potential not much explored'

Sanjib Dey is one daunting filmmaker who does not give up easily, even if he is going through trying times. The 42-year-old award winning director says he struggled for months in Mumbai to get into the industry and sold holiday packages for a living. "I was a crazy young guy," he says to describe his passion for filmmaking. His latest film, *III Smoking Barrels*, which narrates three stories set in the North East, was "extensively shot in Meghalaya". Critics have compared the film with Alejandro González Iñárritu's masterpiece *Babel*. *III Smoking Barrels* was screened at the 38th Durban International Film Festival last year.

Dey's "blissful childhood" was spent in Assam's Golaghat where he studied in Sacred Heart School. "I mostly played with children in the neighbourhood in a century-old British graveyard next to my house. I remember our goal posts were two beautiful marble graves," the director reminisces. Amit Malpani, Dey's producer, is his childhood friend from the same school.

After completing high school from Debraj Roy College in Golaghat, Dey shifted to Delhi University. Later he started his career as an intern for Business Weekend, a weekly business news on Doordarshan. "I soon realised that I wanted to work in movies so I moved to Mumbai. I knew no one in Mumbai and I had no money. Today, whatever little I have achieved in life is because of this magical city," says Dey who has explored big screen, television and advertising for over a decade now and is an official member of both the director's and writer's associations in the Mumbai film industry.

Besides directing and producing some award-winning short films, Dey was also part of two international projects — a Dutch feature film called *I Object* that was filmed in India and an international TV series called *Eagle Four* that was filmed in the rough and beautiful terrains of Afghanistan where he worked with Hollywood and European crew. "In brief, the journey has been very challenging yet very beautiful," he tells *The Shillong Times*.

In an email interview, Dey talks about his inspiration, the film, the potential of the northeastern region and life in Mumbai. Excerpts:

What/who inspired you to come into filmmaking?

Being brought up in a small town was not at all a disadvantage for me. During my school days, I had a circle of friends who loved international cinema and music. We didn't spare a single video parlour in the town. It was during those days that I saw films like *Rambo*, *Rocky* and those Hong Kong martial art films, which left strong imprints on me. But I think it was those films I saw on Doordarshan that inspired me into filmmaking — films of Satyajit Ray, Charlie Chaplin and Akira Kurosawa and of course films like *Jaws* and *ET* by Steven Spielberg or *Umberto D* by De Sica.



How did you come into the industry?

I didn't get the opportunity to go to a film school and after struggling for months in Mumbai, I still didn't get a job in the film and television industry here. So to run my kitchen, I took a marketing job where I was required to sell holiday packages. But I was a crazy young guy. I went to all filmmakers to sell those holiday packages. Eventually my idea clicked, I got to work as an apprentice under senior ad filmmaker Sunil Ghosh, who was planning to make a film in Assam titled *Brahmaputra* with Ajay Devgan, Tabu and Nana Patekar in lead roles. The film was a Hindi adaptation of Sahitya Academy Award winning Assamese novel *Patal Bhairavi* written by Laxmi Nandan Bora. Unfortunately due to the violent political situation prevailing in Assam at that time, the film couldn't go on floor. And Sunil sir was adamant not to shoot it in any other state. The film never happened but my career definitely got a kick start from there onwards. I started working in various ad films with him.

TALKING POINT

SANJIB DEY

III Smoking Barrels is your first feature. How did you get the idea of bringing the three stories together?

III Smoking Barrels is my first feature film. My producer, Amit Malpani, and I were both highly inspired to make a film on the North East and we quickly realised that an anthology of stories will give us better opportunity to explore the land, the culture and her people.

The idea has definitely helped us to showcase an intricate synthesis of various indigenous elements of the region, making the film look grand without really losing the vitals of good storytelling. It also helped exploring few socio-political issues like children in armed conflicts, drugs,

animal poaching and illegal immigrants — all in a single film. It definitely gave us the surface to explore more locations and characters.

How much do you think the potential of NE has been explored?

Very less! The world hasn't yet seen even an iota of North East India's potential.

You have used six languages in the film. How did you manage the script? What were the difficulties in the process of making the film?

The credit for seamless blending of six languages in the script goes to my dialogue writer team. Both my co-dialogue writers, Tasadduk Ahmed and Dev Gupta, were instrumental and we three had a very re-fined collaboration. Although all three of us work and live in Mumbai, we belong to the North East and we are very much attached to our roots. That really helped.

The process of making the film was very difficult because of the demanding nature of the

script. It's a very edgy and different kind of a film and it required lots of research and hard work. We filmed for two years across the North East. Moreover, there are around 90 visual effects shots in the film, including an elephant chasing sequence. These all cumulatively tested both our patience and passion.

The film has been compared with Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel*. What do you have to say?

Babel is a masterwork of a master filmmaker. I think the comparison has been in the language aspect — the seamless use of so many languages in both the films.

Which directors are your inspiration?

Difficult to answer. There are many directors who have inspired me. Among the contemporary lot, I would say Andrey Zvyagintsev, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Damien Chazell, Guillermo del Toro among many others. In the older lots — Sam Peckinpah, Mario Bava, Steven Spielberg, Sergio Leone, Clint Eastwood — a lot of them — Akira Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray, Masaki Kobayashi, Ritwik Ghatak, Fritz Lang. I also admire Bimal Roy, Ramesh Sippy, Vijay Anand, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Shekhar Kapur. The list is too long. All these giants collectively must have been my influence. Bruce Lee and Charlie Chaplin have also been a great influence. Watching Tarkovsky, Bergman or Ozu always gives me a feeling that cinema can be a spiritual journey too.

You have worked with Govind Nihalani on which project? You have also worked with foreign directors. What, according to you, is lacking in India film industry today?

I assisted Govind Nihalani sir for a big budget music video made for Rajasthan Govt. The song was written by Javed Akhtar, sung by Sukhwinder and composed by Late Aadesh Srivastava. As far as foreign collaborations are concerned, I have assisted Australian director Sean Lynch and Dutch director Henk B de Ukiel. I also collaborated with Italian and Hollywood music composer Michele Josia along with our local favourite Anurag Saikia for *III Smoking Barrels*.

I feel fortunate to be part of the Indian film industry. I guess we have far more liberty than in many other countries. But I think we definitely need more theatres across India. Let's make it like China. And our mainstream films need better content and form to compete in the growing foreign film market. In our 100 years of cinema history, how many technical inventions have we really made? High time, we need to give importance to the science of filmmaking too.

What do you think about films and the movie industry in the North East (barring Assam that has produced great filmmakers)?

Unfortunately there are very less films coming from the North East. There is no dearth of talent in this region, but we need better motivation. Local government has to come forward to support the local film industry.

Apart from Assam, Manipur has been producing some good films although they lack infrastructure. They should be role model for other NE states. And language shouldn't be a barrier, a Khasi or a Bodo film should have all the qualities required to get released with subtitles in entire Assam and other North Eastern states and vice versa. This way, NE films will get wider audience and the film industry can thrive.

What will be your message for the young directors from this region?

North East is a warehouse of amazing stories. Who on earth is going to make a feature film on one of the fiercest battle of Second World War — The Battle of Kohima? So many untold stories! All aspiring directors should continuously keep making both short and full length films. I think our younger generation is a bit lucky. They have a huge digital platform like YouTube at their disposal. They have the biggest distributor for free. So what's stopping them? Go and pick your camera guys!!!

What is your next project?

Working on a love story in Hindi language. Too early to reveal though.



III Smoking Barrels was extensively filmed in Meghalaya along with other parts of NE. Famous death metal band Plague Throat has performed in the film.



Bollywood & TV journey

Worked as an assistant director in *Sooper Se Ooper* (starring Vir Das, Deepak Dobriyal), *The Desire* (starring Shilpa Shetty, Jaya Prada, Anupam Kher), *Black Forest* (starring Richa Chaddha)

Directed non-fiction TV shows like *Houzee* with Rohit Roy as a host for ZEE TV. Worked for popular soap called *Kareena Kareena*



Your chicken may have steroids, party drugs

By Maneka Sanjay Gandhi



The medical use of Ketamine Hydrochloride is as an anaesthetic used in medical procedures, or surgery. It is a white crystal that can be used as a recreational hallucinogenic anaesthetic (and is used for date rape). It is banned in this country for open sale as it is a party drug. Unfortunately, the veterinary hospitals have suffered as a result of this recent ban because we now have to use more expensive anaesthetics when we operate on animals. Like all drugs it has major side effects. An allergy to it may result in tightness in the chest or throat, trouble in breathing, swallowing, or talking, hoarseness or swelling of the mouth, face, lips, tongue or throat. Sometimes it can cause a loss of appetite and nausea. It can cause urinary tract damage from the kidney to the bladder. It induces a dream-like feeling, jerky

muscle movements, drowsiness, confusion, unusual thoughts. The effects don't last long but until they wear off, ketamine can cause a loss of feeling in the body and paralysis of the muscles.

It can also lead you to experiencing a distortion of reality, giving you a floating or detached feeling, as if the mind and body have been separated, with some people feeling incapable of moving. It causes headaches, confusion, agitation, panic attacks and impairment in short and long term memory.

Frequent use is sometimes associated with the development of depression. Studies show that frequent anaesthesia drugs in young children may lead to long-term brain problems. This may also happen in unborn babies if the mother ingests ketamine during the third trimester of pregnancy.

Ketamine can be injected, mixed into a drink, or snorted up the nose. And now you can eat it in your chicken as well.

Consumer groups in America have filed a case against the third largest chicken company (with a sale of

more than 2.8 billion dollars), after the US Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) scrutinised 69 poultries and found 82 "unconfirmed residues" in the chicken, including ketamine, antibiotics, pesticides and growth hormones in the chicken. The company sold its chicken — as most poultries do — as 100 per cent natural.

The company not only sells chicken under its own label but supplies to different distributors who sell under different labels, and thousands of standalone restaurants. And now India is allowing the import of this chicken.

No one knows why the poultries were using ketamine. Was it to sedate the animals before slaughter or before live transport? Was it to make the consumer feel "high" or "satiated" after eating the chicken?

These are the same poultries that refused to reduce antibiotic use because "raising chickens without antibiotics would lead to a high number of chicken deaths". So they admit that their chickens are so badly kept in filthy, inhu-

mane, factory farm conditions that they are in a permanent state of illness that needs antibiotics.

All over the world consumers are becoming resistant to antibiotics. Normal infections have escalated into a new world of superbugs that doctors have no tools to fight. All investigations show antibiotics, used on animals bred for slaughter, as the main culprits.

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention's 2013's report links two of 18 antibiotic-resistant bacteria to the use of antibiotics in animals.

Ketamine wasn't the only problematic substance found in the chicken: What were the other 82 "unconfirmed residues"?

Eleven antibiotics were found. Chloramphenicol, a powerful antibiotic that can trigger bone marrow suppression in humans, prohibited for use in animals that will become food; amoxicillin, known as a "medically important for humans" not approved in poultry.

Desethylene ciprofloxacin, a "medically important antibiotic for humans"; Prednisone, a steroid; Ketoprofen, an

anti-inflammatory drug; Butorphanol, an opioid analgesic, pesticides Abamectin and Emamectin were also detected.

Two substances, banned in chicken production, included the synthetic growth hormones Melengestrol acetate and Ractopamine. Three instances of penicillin residue were detected, for which the residue regulatory limit is zero. Consumers eating the chickens are also eating steroids, recreational and anti-inflammatory drugs and prohibited antibiotics. All these can make people very sick.

In 2013 the FDA issued new antibiotic regulations. Has it made any difference to the use of antibiotics in chickens?

No. Antibiotic use is on the rise. They are simply relabelled. "Growth promoters" (meaning antibiotics and hormones) has been removed from labels, but the drugs are still routinely used for the new indication of "disease prevention".

Even after the guidance was published, a Reuters investigation found all the poultry factory farm companies using antibiotics, hormones and pesti-

cides pervasively, completely ignoring the regulators.

But antibiotics are the least of the unlabelled drugs and chemicals lurking in chicken. According to the Associated Press, US chickens continue to be fed with inorganic arsenic to produce quicker weight gain with less food and enhanced colour. This arsenic goes into the human body.

The effects of ketamine are more pronounced when eaten with alcohol. So people who eat chicken nuggets while drinking may have a trance like confused reaction that is not caused by the alcohol alone.

Most people do not realise that big pharmaceutical companies all have a veterinary division in which they make hormones, antibiotics etc. for animals raised for food. They never advertise this. And until a crisis happens the media do not report it. But the danger to human beings is acute.

(To join the animal welfare movement contact gandhim@nic.in, www.peopleforanimalsindia.org)