



Leisure

LEISURE

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PROFILE**ON CLOUD NINE**

Actor Ishaan Khatter is a star kid, but he didn't grow up in a glamorous world. His parents, actors Neelima Azeem and Rajesh Khatter, separated when Ishaan was young. As a single mother, Azeem gave him a modest, middle-class childhood. There were no family vacations abroad. His first international trip came when he accompanied his stepbrother, Shahid Kapoor (Azeem's son from her first marriage to actor Pankaj Kapur), to the United Kingdom for the filming of *Shaandaar* in 2014. His idea of training was to head to Adishakti, a theatre troupe in Puducherry, and do a 10-day-long workshop in 2015.

"People assume that I have had an affluent lifestyle," says Khatter. "I'm very proud of [the way I grew up]. I am what I am today because of my mother."

This month he's making his debut in the first Hindi language film by one of world cinema's most renowned directors-Iranian auteur Majid Majidi-Beyond the Clouds. After the London premiere last October, the movie hit Indian theatres on April 20. Working with Majidi was an amazing experience for Khatter, a hardcore fan of world cinema who used to queue up for the Mumbai Film Festival with his friends. "I once watched six films in a single day. I once said, 'I'd like to work with the likes of Majid Majidi'. This film chose me," he says.

Fate had a hand in it, but it worked through casting director Honey Trehan. Having observed him on the sets of *Uda Punjab* (2016), where Trehan did casting and Khatter was an assistant director, Trehan called him up to say that Majidi was looking for talent (He had a tiny cameo. He throws a fit in one of the scenes). At that point Khatter had verbally committed to make his debut with Karan Johar's Dharma Productions. Unwilling to let go off a chance of a lifetime, Khatter prepared a 50-minute test tape, which included him acting in real locations in Versova village and dancing in the rain on a terrace. It was enough to compel Majidi, best known for *Children of Heaven* and *Baran*, to cast him as Amir, a young man from Mumbai's slums with a tendency to court danger. Malavika Mohanan plays his elder sister.

Next came the hard part: telling Johar about the golden opportunity that came his way. "I had to take his permission," says Khatter. "He said, 'Do the film'. He was very gracious about it and could have said no." Khatter's second release, Dharma co-produced *Dhadak*, a remake of Marathi film *Sairat* and starring Sridevi's daughter Janhvi Kapoor, recently wrapped shoot and releases in July.

After the London premiere, the *Hollywood Reporter* singled out Khatter for praise, saying his "noteworthy screen charisma promises well for his future career". That charisma has already made an impression on social media, where his pictures have won him a legion of admirers and also Instagram's Emerging Account award last year. "I find it enriching to engage with people who live a regular life and by that I don't mean ordinary. I like to have a diverse range of experiences. It adds so much to your personality and makes you that much open," he says.

Ask him if he intends to shuttle between mainstream and independent cinema, as his films with Majidi and Johar demonstrate, Khatter says he doesn't like to differentiate between the two. Watching films from across the world, he says, has not made him a cynic. He doesn't ask himself why "we have never done anything like this" but only resolves to do something better. "If you find the ability to go out there and make something happen and not fantasise about it, then why won't it happen?"

Beyond the Clouds is proof of what he calls the growing 'convergence' of cinema, Khatter says, pointing out that Shekhar Kapur and Ritesh Batra have directed a handful of foreign productions. Mexicans Alfonso Cuarón, Guillermo del Toro and Alejandro G. Iñárritu are counted among the top directors in Hollywood. The upcoming Cannes Film Festival will see Iranian filmmaker, Asghar Farhadi, make his Spanish language debut with Everybody Knows.

For Majidi, making a film in Hindi was not a problem, says Khatter. "Majidi sir made the film with an all-Indian cast and crew despite not speaking our language," says Khatter, who explains that Majidi used a translator on the set. The film's dialogues are by Vishal Bhardwaj, cinematography by Anil Mehta and composer A.R. Rahman collaborates with Majidi for the second time after Muhammad. "Majidi observed cultural similarities and found it easy to tell a story about Indians," says Khatter. ???

-Suhani Singh

WEB ENTERTAINMENT

FLUENT STREAMS

The giants of movies and television are constantly railing against piracy-when they're not limiting releases to certain regions and cracking down on users trying to break those borders with proxy servers.

"I tell my fans not to illegally download my films. But to be fair to them, what do they do if the films are not released where they are?" says Bengali actor Abir Chatterjee. Now he has the answer. His National Award-winning 2017 film, Bishorjan, is available on a new, all-Bengali streaming service called hoichoi.tv that Sree Venkatesh Films is pushing with massive billboards across Kolkata.

The site also includes Rituparno Ghosh's Raincoat, which is in Hindi. Featuring Bengali movies, including those directed by Satyajit Ray, it's a great idea. However, the website often hangs at the subscription page, forcing you to rely on the app.

Obviously the Ray and Ghosh classics bear watching and re-watching. With more than 500 Bengali films where "subscribers are spending close to 50+ minutes daily", the service has a niche edge over Hotstar, Netflix and Amazon Prime. It's also adding at least two original shows a month. Many of these offerings, however, appear to have sacrificed quality (e.g. Dupur Thaakurpo, a series on a Savita Bhabhi-esque character). ???

-Malini Banerjee

LEGALLY STREAMING

Spuul.com has films in Punjabi, Malayalam, Tamil, Bhojpuri and a few in English and Hindi as well

Yupptv.com lets you stream TV channel content online

Herotalkies.com is available outside the country and "streams Tamil movies legally". They also claim to be coming to India soon

Apalimarathi.com streams Marathi films and videos

CINEMA SHOCK TREATMENT

O

n a pristine beach, a large door stands by itself. It's one of the few physical elements of a spare outdoor "house" that demarcates a space where two young women are free to love and to get married around a sacred fire with only a large trident as witness.

If there had been more visual poetry like this surreal, dialogue-less scene in Raj Amit Kumar's Unfreedom-now available on Netflix, after Indian censors prevented its release in 2015-this could have been a brilliant film. As it stands, the film's good intentions and earnest performances are stymied by excessive symbolism and on-the-nose dialogue. Even that scene on the beach doesn't trust the images to make the point. It ends with one of the women telling the camera: "This is our home. A home without walls. Just earth. Water. Fire. Love. It's actually none of your business to pass judgement."

Unfreedom cross-cuts between two unrelated stories, in New York and Delhi. In the first, a terrorist, Hussain (Bhanu Uday), tortures a liberal Muslim scholar (Victor Banerjee); in the second, Leela (Preeti Gupta) tries to break free from her controlling father (Adil Hussain) and rebuild life with her former lover (Bhavani Lee).

These narratives examine different forms of intolerance, and the many ways in which people can be caught in a continuum of innocence, complicity and guilt. Oppression and conditioning paint them into corners, leading them into degrees of extremist behaviour: a boy who watched his family massacred goes on to perpetuate a cycle of violence; a woman is so haunted by social expectations that while trying to assert her sexual autonomy, she also insists on marrying her lover (though the latter is reluctant to enter a full-fledged commitment). A victim in one context becomes a criminal in another.

These are worthy themes, but in exploring them Unfreedom often preaches and some of the characters look like caricatures. In the closing sequence, the director uses split screens to connect the dots-right down to showing characters similarly framed or performing similar actions.

The censor board blocked Unfreedom from being released in theatres alleging that its explicit treatment of homosexuality would "ignite unnatural passions". There is something unsettling about this, as it suggests the board shares the values of the homophobic patriarchs who savagely assault the two lovers in one scene.

There is some discussion of religious fundamentalism, some provocative exchanges (including the "blasphemous" line "What the f- does Allah have to do with this?") but nothing we haven't seen in other, subtler films. And there are nude scenes, but here, too, the treatment is heavy-handed: A woman exposed and defenceless, sobbing on the bathroom floor; a bohemian artist sauntering naked through her studio apartment. These clichéd efforts give the impression that Unfreedom is too glossy to do justice to its subject.

n

-Jai Arjun Singh

BOOKS

Pearls Before Wine

THIS IS NOT JUST A COLLECTION OF POPULAR RECIPES BUT A COOKBOOK THAT SERVES AS A RICH RECORD OF CULINARY HISTORY AND PERSONAL STORY

M

ost millennials no longer cook at home (or even eat anything but salad and nuts), so it is interesting to note how many recent cookbooks celebrate the food of erstwhile princely India. Obviously, there is a pleasure in reading and dreaming of such food as you crunch your way through a mound of healthy rabbit food. However, there are still some brave souls who venture into trying out such mouth-watering recipes, which may not be always healthy, once in a while.

This handsomely-produced and lavishly illustrated volume is also a memoir of a time when friends and family gathered round a dastarkhwan and spent hours licking their fingers and burping politely. Alas, it is now only in these nostalgic accounts that one gets to hear of something called gosht ki chutney or Salim bakra-a slow cooked whole goat stuffed with chicken and eggs.

As I ploughed through these memories, full of praise for the warm and gracious hospitality of the author by guests and friends who have supped with her, I remembered the stories my grandmother would tell us of the Nawab of Rampur's legendary feasts where pearls were crushed and mutton cooked in a marinade of secret ingredients that had saffron-infused milk and such exotica.

To return to this book, it is neatly divided into sections: biryanis and pulaos, seafood, meat and poultry, rotis and pickles. There is also a separate section on snacks and sweets as well as a list of menus for hosts who want to dazzle their guests with nargisi kababs, tamatar ka kut, imli murgh or double ka meetha.

Did you think Karim's served the best ishtew? Well, now you can make it in your kitchen and serve your biryani with a mirchi ka salan to die for. And how could I forget the haleem, the roghni or besan roti, badam ke paan or the ande ka achar?

The combinations are helpful and since the author personally vouches for each recipe and her guests (from Saudi ambassadors and food critics to the glitterati that grace page three) have endorsed her culinary skills, I'd say the book is a winner.

And do you know what? The author, Doreen Hassan, is actually a Goan and a vegetarian. Now put that in your degchi and stir thoughtfully. n

-Ira Pande

A SLICE OF HYDERABAD

HALEEM

Hassan uses boneless meat. Tsk tsk. True Mulkis insist on pulled mutton

SALIM BAKRA

A slow cooked whole goat stuffed with chicken and eggs

TAMATAR KA KAT

Plays a supporting role in Hyderabadi cuisine but often steals the show. Hassan's use of cream is unorthodox

SHEER KHORMA

It's richer in Hyderabad of course. Purists will faint at the use of condensed milk recommended here

FOOD

TWIST OF AUSTRALIA

Though inspired by Australian cuisine, the food at The Wine Rack in Mumbai, now three months old, is interestingly familiar. Soft shell crab pakoras, Kolhapuri slow-cooked lamb, garlic naan and Goan pork sausages share space with nahm jim, avocado raita, crab bisque or pecorino risotto.

"I wanted patrons to feel less intimidated, both by the wines we serve and the food," says chef Sarah Todd, who opened her first restaurant in Goa three years ago after winning fame as a contestant on the sixth season of MasterChef Australia (2014). "We wanted to be accessible and fun."

Todd's aim with The Wine Rack was to break the stereotype of wine being something you had with an eight-course meal. "Pairings with Indian food seemed relatively unheard of and I wanted to break that myth," adds the chef. At the restaurant, she does justice to her Australian roots and the Indian influences with dishes like the red wine duck kulcha with cranberry jam and gorgonzola, which, she says, pairs well with a pinot noir. With chefs from India, including Sanjeev Kapoor, Ranveer Brar and Saransh Goila, making regular visits to Australia, food exchanges between the two countries are more common than ever.

Todd's Goa restaurant, Antares, has won a loyal following with its Australian fare prepared with local produce. Finally able to spare time away from the Goa kitchen, this year Todd made the jump to Mumbai with The Wine Rack.

She doesn't like using the word 'fusion'. But she recognises that the world is now a much smaller place and when it comes to recreating a dish native to another place, making it taste flavourful will inevitably trump authenticity. "Indians are very nostalgic about the food they've grown up on. I'd never be able to serve them what their mothers or grandmothers did. But I love to find a way to serve the food with a little twist of my own," she says. ???

-Moeena Halim

SPORTS

RETURNING SERVE

W

hen squash coach Satinder Bajwa returned to Chandigarh from the US in 2010, he didn't want to "give back" by nurturing Indian champions. Formerly director of Harvard University's squash programme from 1999 to 2010, over his career he'd mentored eight-time world number one Pakistani squash player, Jansher Khan, and a host of others. But when he came home, he wanted to use sports to help the underprivileged. So he built a world-class squash facility in Attawa village near Chandigarh, with Rs 2 crore from his own savings.

"Sport is a great equaliser. It gives you the push to move forward in life," says Bajwa, whose centre has more than 60 trainees. Named Khelshala, the programme charges Rs 100 per month, compared with Rs 130 to buy a squash ball at a regular sports shop. His wards include children of rickshaw pullers, hawkers and domestic help. More than 10 of his trainees are playing at the national level, and 25 at the state level. Khelshala's Priya Gupta (20) won the Women's Open division of the National Squash Circuit in 2016 and 2017 and has been invited to apply for the Young India Fellowship at Ashoka University.

Bajwa feels the most important contribution of the centre is towards the academic life of the trainees, who also study on their own at the premises.

Currently in talks with the Chandigarh education secretary to offer squash as a physical education subject in schools, he hopes to take the model statewide.

"In the West, sports are prioritised not to make top players, but to get children to make it to college," says Bajwa, who holds a degree in Avionics engineering from England's Southall Technological College. "You cannot be a champ for life, academics is what will take you far." ???

-Sukant Deepak

BOOKS

MAP LEGENDS

In this age of Google Earth, there's a nostalgic romance surrounding the days when the Himalayas had yet to be fully surveyed, when mountaineering books had titles like *Blank on the Map* and *Conquistadors of the Useless*.

Legendary Maps from the Himalayan Club, handsomely quarter-bound in a leather-like volume from the 1930s, is a celebration of that era.

The book contains sketch maps drawn by intrepid men who set foot on unexplored mountain ranges, who climbed peaks that till then had only been worshipped from distant villages.

These maps and articles have been selected from past editions of the *Himalayan Journal*, an annual journal that has chronicled mountain adventure since 1929. The editors have picked some historic moments.

The highest hills tell the tallest tales, where triumph meets tragedy. Maurice Herzog retraces his steps from Dhaulagiri to climb Annapurna instead, and pens his book much loved by generations to follow (1950); Tony Streather digs in his ice-axe to stop the fall of seven fellow climbers attempting K2 (1953); Willi Unsoeld and Tom Hornbein traverse Everest from the West ridge to the South (1963); Reinhold Messner traces a vertical line up the Rupal Face of Nanga Parbat, losing his brother Gunther

while descending down the Diamirai (1970).

Interesting nuggets like Tilman and Shipton entering the Nanda Devi basin (1934), W.H. Murray's circumambulation in Garhwal and Kumaon (1950), and Robert Pettigrew's first ascent of Papsura (1967) shine with attention to detail.

The book unfolds west to east, from Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh, a seemingly logical sequence for the maps, but it's a dizzying journey as the accompanying accounts yo-yo in time from 1936 to 1965 to 1930 to 2003 to.... One wonders if a chronological order from 1930 to 2015 might have been smoother. Perhaps, then, the romance of first discovery, and the excitement of filling in yet another blank on the map would have retained their historical progression.

Being early renderings, many of the maps are approximations in scale, and some were corrected by subsequent exploration, but somehow such inadequacies only serve to enhance the aura around that first foray into an untravelled world. What matters to the reader is the fact that these lines were sketched by the hand that held the wooden ice-axe. ???

-Sanjeev Saith

Last Sanctuary

B

By his own admission, Hugh Thomson was somewhat underprepared in terms of mountaineering training to join the 2000 expedition to the inner sanctuary, the valley that encircles Nanda Devi, among the most inaccessible peaks of the Himalayas. His kit bag contained nothing more useful than a set of miniature bottles of vodka. But he was well versed in the history of earlier expeditions, including the first successful entry into the sanctuary by Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman in 1934 and later ascents to the summit. He weaves their adventures and characters into his witty and erudite narrative of his own expedition, which included such mountaineering luminaries as Narinder 'Bull' Kumar and the late George Band.

The valley surrounding Nanda Devi is encircled in turn by two concentric rings of high mountains, and can be entered only by one treacherous gorge. It has an abundance of wildlife and flowers unimaginable to anyone on the blizzard-blown heights that enclose it. Thomson calls it the 'last' sanctuary, one of the few places left on Earth relatively untrodden by mankind.

But there's a serpent in this paradise. In 1965, the CIA hatched a hare-brained scheme to plant a nuclear-powered spying device on the summit of Nanda Devi to keep an eye on China, which had by then developed an atomic bomb. If the plan was daft, its execution was incompetent. As their team approached the summit, to everyone's surprise, it started to snow; so they decided to leave the device and come back to

finish the job in the spring. They duly returned the following year to find the contraption had been swept away in a landslide, along with its plutonium-238 fuel rod-which could continue to despoil one of the sources of the Ganga with radiation for the next 850 years.

The sanctuary has been closed to civilian climbers ever since, on the orders of successive Indian governments. The purpose of the 2000 expedition was to consider the feasibility of reopening it; but their positive report has not borne fruit. The scandal also explains why Thomson's book was not released in India when it was first published in 2004. One shares his hope that its tardy appearance now will at last focus minds in New Delhi on a problem that cannot be ignored just because it is lying somewhere under a blanket of snow. ???

-Giles Tillotson

Q+A

RAREFIED AIR

Anshu Jampsenpa,, mountaineer, on setting records, taking risks and regulating Mt Everest

Q. You made history with the fastest double-ascent of Mount Everest.

Records are just an offshoot of my passion for mountains. It's the climbing itself that has changed me enormously as a person. I appreciate the fragility of life more.

Q. Has the pursuit of 'firsts' cheapened mountaineering?

A lot of climbers climb to simply get their names in some record books. But mountaineering as a sport will never be cheapened. A casual attitude will never bring you success.

Q. What's your life like away from the mountains?

Well, I am a mother to two lovely daughters. My husband Tsering Wange is also into adventure. He runs a travel company, Himalayan Holidays, and I help him with it.

Q. What does Buddhism

mean to you?

I was born a Buddhist. To me, god is above religion, any religion. It's an intimate connection between god and you. I've always felt his presence in the mountains.

Q. What are your plans for

the future?

I would like to lead an all-Indian women expedition to Mt Everest next year if funding and sponsorship money comes through well in time.-with Tongam Rina

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