

cinema



* In this photograph taken on May 3, 2011, Veteran Indian Bollywood actor and accomplished wrestler Dara Singh and his son actor Vindoo attend the Dadasaheb Phalke Awards ceremony in Mumbai. Dara Singh, a champion Indian wrestler-turned-actor whose film and television career spanned over half a century, died aged 83 last week.

India's first Mr Muscles

In a long and varied career, wrestling champion Dara Singh entertained kings and princes in British India and vanquished world title-holders like Lou Thesz of America before taking up acting and politics. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Dara Singh faded out of Indian memory in the late 1980s. After his last wrestling bout in 1983, the muscled macho man slipped from the ring and popped out of the screen pushing a product or two to pump up the physique.

This was a far cry from the Steely Singh who had tussled his way to victory in no less than 500 matches, and who had once lifted the 200kg King Kong of Australia and thrown him out of the ring — firing the imagination of a newly independent nation which celebrated his virility and vigour against its own malnourished emaciation and frailty.

Adding to his halo was his use of the free-style mud wrestling he picked up and perfected in the “akhadas” of Punjab.

Singh, who was born near Amritsar in 1928, grew up to 6ft 2in, weighing 132kg with a chest that measured 54in. Termed India's first superman, he entertained kings and princes in British India, earning titles such as Rustam-E-Punjab and Rustam-E-Zamaan, and vanquishing world champions like Lou Thesz of America.

Singh's glory was eclipsed when television came to India, and wrestling rings ceased to amuse. The living room became an arena for all kinds of shows, most notably cinema. And though muscles mattered on the screen, they had to have the icing of suave looks.

When actors like Vinod Khanna and Salman Khan (followed by Hrithik Roshan and Shah Rukh Khan) unbuttoned their shirts, Dara Singh had to but put on his. But he knew that he would always be the

first to have bared his chest to the camera.

It is not clear whether Singh's foray into cinema and television was some sort of a last-ditch battle to re-enter the limelight. But whatever the reason, his films hardly made the kind of mark his wrestling had. He could never be, for example, a Johnny Weissmuller, a champion Hungarian-Austrian swimmer who transformed himself into Tarzan, neatly diving out of the water to trapeze across the trees — an act he repeated in 12 movies winning accolades and fans.

The only off-the-ring role which fetched Singh a modicum of respect was that of Hanuman in Ramanand Sagar's 78-episode *Ramayan* in the late 1980s. Probably, Singh earned this because of the mythological and even religious reverence that Hanuman enjoys in India, the

Monkey-God whose enormous physical prowess once helped him lift a whole mountain and carry it across in order to save the lives of Ram and Lakshman. Hanuman is believed to be a protector of life, and the Indian masses, steeped as they were — and still are — in spiritual superstition, perhaps saw the costumed Singh as a divine incarnation.

The wrestler's natural strength and stories of his humungous appetite merely added to this persona.

Sadly, Singh's celluloid performances — other than the one in *Ramayan* — were really nothing to talk about. Most of the 144 films he did were eminently forgettable, and the only exceptions I can easily think of were *Mera Naam Joker* and the very recent *Jab We Met*.

Yet, when Dara Singh died last week, he got the media into a tizzy all right. Even a sedate newspaper like *The Hindu* frontpaged an obituary of his and also carried a long op-ed page article. Was it because he was still remembered and revered for the muscle he gave the newly independent India? Singh injected confidence into this nation through his daredevilry inside the ring, and when he beat his opponents, invariably foreigners, the people possibly saw these victories as a triumph of sorts over an invader who could not be punished.

Dara Singh portrayed yet another part that not many could have known. In the 1990s, he substituted his physicality with political perspicacity. He became an important power dealer in Delhi, rubbing shoulders with the politically mighty, disbursing favours not just for others, but also for himself. He wrested a Rajya Sabha seat in 2003, reinventing himself as a canny player, making use of all the tricks he had learnt while fighting foes on rough, muddy patches. So what if Parliament was not a cinema set or a wrestling ring? It afforded as much excitement and a chance to wrestle, and for Dara Singh it must have been replay time.

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Messy Cocktail: The Marrakech Film Festival will celebrate 100 years of Hindi cinema this December, and Amitabh Bachchan (but who else) will lead the Indian (read Bollywood) team to the fascinating Moroccan city. But I have been pondering over a question: what have Hindi movies achieved in all these decades? Very little, I would think.

Here is a recent example. Homi Adajania's (remember his *Being Cyrus*, a dark and twisted tale of a dysfunctional family) *Cocktail*, starring Saif Ali Khan, Deepika Padukone and Diana Penty, feels like a drink that has been shaken senselessly. Gautam Kapoor (Khan) is a Romeo who picks up girls with his admittedly innovative opening lines. Do not ask me to get lost, he says to one woman. I know

that first impression matters, and should I come back again if you are not impressed, he tells his foreign boss in English which she does not understand. Earlier on the plane from Delhi to London (where just about the whole film rolls), he seduces the hostess. How very easy all this seems, but this must be Adajania's world.

Kapoor then meets Veronica (Padukone), a girl who drinks and dances and beds the first hunk who comes her way. He moves in with her, and finds Meera (Penty), a woman who comes to England and gets ditched by her husband already shacking up with Veronica. Meera, as the name screams, has to be chaste, religious and dressed modestly. Stereotyping again.

And then arrives Gautam's mom (Dimple Kapadia) from India and barges into Veronica's flat to almost die of shock. Her dear son is living with two women! No mummy dear, he says, it is only Meera that I am with, he lies, because the older woman will not accept Veronica and her ways.

Mom is relieved. She likes this ideal Indian woman, not that semi-nude Veronica. But mom does not know that her son is sharing bed and brush with the wild woman.

The first half of the film is a romp through the silliest of situations, and yes, the three take mummyji to the beaches of Cape Town, only to give a chance to Veronica to sunbathe in a sexy red bikini. Mum does not like that, but well, her son is with Meera. But mom gets a second shock when she sees Gautam kissing Veronica on the seashore, but is naive enough to believe that he was merely resuscitating her after a drowning incident!

Can *Cocktail* get more distasteful? Yes, it can, post intermission, when the movie gets melodramatic (truly in the Bollywood style) with both Veronica and Meera falling in love with Gautam. Veronica even suggests that they share the guy. But after minutes and minutes of tearfully ridiculous scenes, a final solution is reached in Delhi. (It has to happen in the motherland.) What is it? Not difficult to guess, not at all.

If there is a saving grace in *Cocktail*, it is the performance. Boman Irani, who essays Gautam's uncle, is just superb, especially in those scenes where he is with Kapadia, his screen sister. While Padukone is wonderful as the reckless lass, Penty makes a grand debut as the demure woman who hopes that life would not cheat her twice. But then Khan is slipping. He is good only in parts, and what saves him are the lines given to him. They are cheeky and fresh, and these produce a good laugh.

If you must see *Cocktail*, do so by all means, but leave your thinking cap at home.

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