

cinema



*Harsh Mayer and Gulshan Grover in *I Am Kalam*.

Taking off on wings of fire

I Am Kalam is a feature on child labour that emphasises the importance of working hard to make your dreams come true.

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

There is a perceptible change in Indian cinema. It is learning to talk of serious issues without pushing the "sermon" button.

In the past few months, we have seen some lovely pieces of celluloid fare that scripted grave issues in a light vein. *Stanley Ka Dabba* was one. Coming close on the heels of this is *I Am Kalam*, another feature on child labour, though it also veers into other areas like class barriers and unequal opportunities.

Newcomer Harsh Mayer (despite winning a National Award is not as natural and easy as Partho Gupte was as Stanley) plays Chotu, working in his uncle Bhatti's (Gulshan Grover in one of his most restrained performances) highway eatery. Chotu is quick on the take, picking up languages and other skills (French from a tourist, English from a royal Rajput friend, fine tea-making from Bhatti and so on).

He is also ambitious, and a chance meeting with Indian

President Abdul Kalam on the telly gets him thinking, especially the man's profound words that hard work and sincerity could help one to tide over fate and destiny.

The rest of the movie takes us through the adventures of Chotu, who rechristens himself as Kalam, and finds a great friend in Rannvijay (Hussan Saad), the son of an erstwhile prince living in the lost grandeur of a period passed by and deeply conscious of social class.

However, like a fable, first-time director Nila Madhab Panda pilots *I*

Am Kalam, into a happy ending.

The work is a little too syrupy, and though Chottu's Kalam learns to knot a tie and get into a pair of smart shorts for school, he is probably one in a million unfortunate children. (Panda seems to agree with this when he said that while his seven-year-old son had a choice of 200 different television channels and 10 kinds of pizzas, 60mn children, all child workers, lived without even one decent meal a day.)

Yet, *I Am Kalam* has this ability to raise hope and let you dream, and Indian advertising guru Alyque Padamsee once quipped that unless you dream, you would never develop the drive to rise.

Distributed by Reliance Entertainment, the movie, made on an unusually small budget of approximately Rs21mn, is set picturesquely in Rajasthan.

The film has been critically appreciated in many international festivals, including those in London, Ale Kino (Poland), Giffoni (Italy), Amsterdam, Kerala and Goa, and has got over 12 Indian and international awards.

Panda — who has been a prolific documentary movie-maker, most of them uniquely insightful and drawn from his own long journey from a tribal village to large, modern cities around the world — said *I Am Kalam* had been sold in 21 countries, proving yet again that emotions are universal.

Currently, he is in talks for a Middle East release.

Award needs some food for thought

This year's Gollapudi Srinivas National Award has gone to Anusha Rizvi-helmed, Aamir Khan-produced *Peepli [Live]*. The trophy will be presented at a glittering, celebrity function in Chennai on August 12.

The day is special for the Gollapudi family, which lost its 26-year-old son, Srinivas, in a tragic accident. It was 1992, and he was shooting his debut film, *Book of Love* in Telugu when a giant wave swept him off the rock he was standing on and sucked him into the vicious waters of the sea.

He left behind his young wife and child, an inconsolable family and an unfinished movie. Six years later in 1998, the Gollapudi family decided to institute an award in Srinivas' name for a debut director. A cash prize of Rs 100,000 was given away.

I was part of the three-member jury for the first few years. Despite my reluctance to be a juror year after year, the Gollapudis would not listen and coaxed me into the panel each year.

One reason why I chose to stay on was the motive behind the prize: it was honourable, I felt, to give a cash reward in a country like India where tens of young directors struggle to make their first few films.

However, ultimately I disengaged myself from the selection

process. To start with, the award money, now at Rs150,000, is too insignificant an amount in these days of runaway costs and inflation.

Surely, the Gollapudis can better this amount by, perhaps, cutting down on needless expenditure that includes inviting Bollywood stars and directors to the August 12 function. This year's invitees include Vishal Bhardwaj from Mumbai.

It will make far greater sense if the money spent on star allure is diverted to increase the prize value. This will help a fledgling helmer to make his second feature.

Another reason why I distanced myself from the August 12 ceremony was the conspicuous absence of Srinivas' widow at the function held primarily to perpetuate the young man's memory.

Also, the Gollapudis seem to be besotted with Aamir Khan. His first movie, *Taare Zameen Par* won the trophy some years ago. This year, it is *Peepli [Live]*. Both these films were, according to me, not quite the best. What was this great idea in awarding a cash prize of Rs150,000 to Aamir Khan that may well be like a pinch of salt in the mighty ocean?

Admittedly, the prize has gone to several small-time helmers as well, and deservedly so, all the more reason why it needs to look more respectable.

The Gollapudis need to do some hard thinking.

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