

Producer Manish Mundra is Indie cinema's unlikely hero

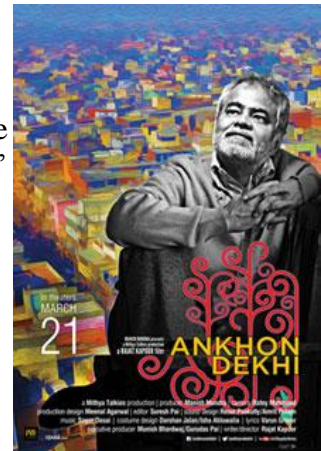
It takes 140 characters and a rock-solid script to convince petrochemicals businessman Manish Mundra to finance a film. Here's more about the producer of films like *Ankhon Dekhi* and *Umrika*

[Ritika Bhatia](#)

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The chance interaction between film maker Rajat Kapoor and [Manish Mundra](#) on Twitter a couple of years ago has, by now, assumed the status of a legend in independent, or indie, film circles. Kapoor vented at the lack of producers willing to back authentic scripts, and Mundra, a complete stranger and outsider to films at the time, tweeted back saying he would produce his film.

“He didn’t believe me at first, but then he sent me the script of *Ankhon Dekhi*,” Mundra tells me on a late night Skype call. “I come from a big family and I could relate to many experiences fleshed out in the script. So I instantly agreed to finance it.” The Sanjay Mishra-starrer took home the Best Film (Critics’ Choice), Best Story and Best Male Actor (Critics’ Choice) honours at the Filmfare awards last month.



Mundra proved a knight in shining armour again a few months later, when Swati Shetty of Samosa Stories reached out to him on Twitter for the financing of her debut production venture, Prashant Nair’s *Umrika*. The film starring Suraj Sharma (*Life of Pi*) and Tony Revolori (*The Grand Budapest Hotel*) recently became the first Indian film to win the audience award at the World [Cinema](#) Dramatic Competition at the Sundance Film Festival in the United States. The 41-year-old managing director of Indorama Eleme Petrochemicals Limited, or IEPL, may be a newcomer in the film industry, but he sure knows how to hedge his bets when it comes to content-driven cinema. (IEPL is a group company of Indorama, a multi-billion dollar petro-chemical firm headquartered in Nigeria).

Dividing his time between Africa and Dubai, where he lives with his wife, Pramila, and two children, 12-year-old Disha and seven-year-old Mayank, Mundra has come a long way from selling soft drinks on the streets as a teenager in Deoghar in Bihar. “My family lost everything when I was small,” says Mundra whose Marwari family had moved there from its native Rajasthan. Mundra believes those early years of struggle and the fear of hard times are what motivate him towards success.

After earning an MBA degree from Jodhpur University, Mundra moved through several firms in the Aditya Birla Group before joining Indorama’s Jakarta branch in 2002 and setting up its petrochemical operations in Nigeria from scratch. All this while, he harboured an intense passion

for the movies. “I had two options at the outset of my career: either I go to Mumbai and jump right into films, or I work hard in corporate life, make my fortune, and then create cinema,” says Mundra. He took the pragmatic way out, and now produces films from his sizeable salary as a CEO. He also has a small stake in Indorama.

Like any kid growing up in small-town India in the 1980s, Mundra was a huge fan of Amitabh Bachchan and Shatrughan Sinha. “I would fight at home to go watch their films. *Muqaddar ka Sikandar*, *Saransh*, *Ardh Satya*, *Masoom*, *Damul* and *Guide* are some of my favourites. Those were the days when we used to clap and sing and dance at cinemas,” he chortles. The film buff has an expansive video library, one of his prized possessions, and recently forced his children to watch *Mr. India* and *Masoom*.



For someone who loves films, it isn't surprising that he says he wants to leave behind a cinematic legacy. “My logic is that we all have to go one day, but what is left behind is something you create. If you create good cinema, then that film becomes a conduit for your life after death.”

Last September, Mundra bailed out the 16th edition of the Mumbai Film Festival, organised by the Mumbai Academy of Moving Image, when title sponsor Reliance Entertainment pulled out. His contribution totalled Rs 50 lakh, making him the single largest contributor to the fest. He has set up a film company, Drishyam Films, in Andheri in Mumbai, which is now producing a slew of interesting indie titles, including Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masan*, Anu Menon's *Waiting* starring Naseeruddin Shah and Kalki Koechlin, and an experimental project, *X*, which has 11 directors contributing to the same story. There are a lot of emails, tweets and inbox messages cluttering Mundra's feed. But his theory is simple: “I'm very clear about one thing — I need to read the script and sit with the director. Then if I feel a connection, I immediately decide to just do it.” He is drawn to films dealing with human behaviour and relationships.

It's his roots, believes director Ghaywan, that draw him to stories from the hinterland. *Umrika* is a story about a boy who tries to save his mother from heartbreak by fabricating letters from his brother, who is believed to be in America but is actually missing. Mundra's third production, Nagesh Kukunoor's *Dhanak*, is a heartwarming tale of a brother and sister set amid the dunes of Rajasthan. It has just clinched two prizes at the Berlin International Film Festival — the Grand Prix for best feature-length film and a children's jury special mention for best feature. His connection with human interest stories from the hinterland isn't restricted to cinema. Mundra speaks proudly of a school he has set up in Jodhpur, which provides free education and meals to over 250 students whose parents can't afford to educate them.

Drishyam, in partnership with Sundance Institute, is now organising the Drishyam–Sundance Institute Screenwriters Lab 2015 to be held in Goa in April. Films like *Margarita with a Straw*, *Umrika* and *Masan* have come out of the lab, convincing Mundra that this important programme



for emerging screenwriters needs his support. Shiladitya Bora, whose upcoming debut film, *Minefield*, is co-produced by Mundra, calls him a very quick decision taker. “*Ankhon Dekhi* was produced over a tweet. X got financed over a phone call at midnight that lasted 7-8 minutes,” says Bora. “Mundra is a co-producer in *Minefield*. I mailed him the details of the project, we had a quick chat on Facebook the next day and bam, he was on board.”

According to Sudhish Kamath, a director of X, Mundra is not your conventional producer, and that’s what sets him apart. “He’s like this omnipresent ghost. You can’t see him, but he’s around all the time and knows what’s going on. He’s very instinctive. Like the genie from *Arabian Nights*, he shows up when you say the right words.” Kamath advises aspiring film makers hoping to get Mundra’s support to “better have something interesting to pitch”.

Mundra concedes his life has taken an interesting turn since that Twitter chat with Kapoor. Most of his time still goes into managing his business, but late evenings, early mornings and weekends are reserved for reading scripts. Yet for all intents and purposes, he is a director’s producer. “Cinema is a director’s viewpoint, my role is just to finance, to enable the director to focus his energy on his art rather than the budget,” says Mundra. His business background has armed him with an appetite for risk, something that has proved to be a great blessing for Indian film makers who aren’t interested in joining mainstream Bollywood’s Rs 100-crore club. *Ankhon Dekhi*’s Kapoor recalls how when he was worried about the film’s release or prospects, Mundra would tell him, “Sir, why are you worrying? You have made a wonderful film. That is enough.” Mundra has a vision and the conviction to follow it through to the end, says Kapoor. “All the films he is producing are stories that he believes in, the kind of cinema where his heart lies.”

After Sundance and Berlin, Mundra is busy working on the release strategy for *Umrika* and *Dhanak*. After losing money with *Ankhon Dekhi*, he has learnt the value of international co-production. “They reduce your financial liability and give you a larger perspective, a bigger market, and more forces to support the film worldwide,” he explains. He has dabbled in different production models as well: *Ankhon Dekhi* was fully financed by him; *Umrika* was co-produced with Shetty; *Masan* is a co-production with Phantom Films, and international producers Arte, Pathe and Macassar.

Drishyam is now entering the distribution market and will release both *Umrika* and *Dhanak* later this year. “The market is changing. There are more people like me who believe in content-driven cinema. India has a huge audience but the key is to keep budgets low. I want to make small, beautiful films,” he says optimistically. He has been learning on the job, and is determined to break even this year. “I believe *Masan* will go to Cannes; *Birdman* had many parallels with *Ankhon Dekhi*. And about Oscars 2016, god willing, *Umrika* will be there!”