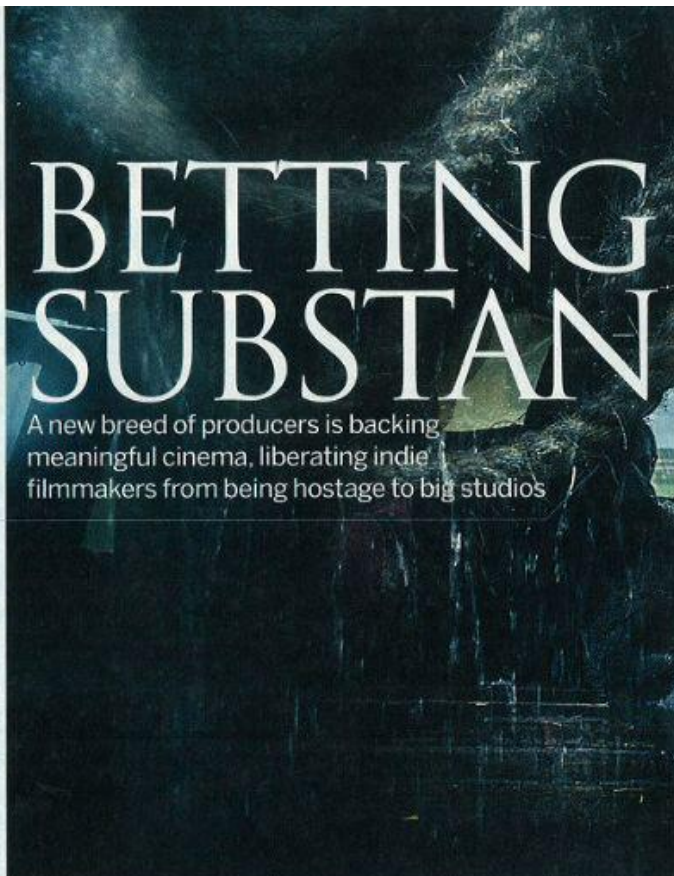


By Suhani Singh

It took an Indian-born, Nigeria-based managing director of a petrochemical company to be writer-director Rajat Kapoor's knight in shining armour. Manish Mundra of Indorama saw Kapoor's tweet about his failure to get funds for his sixth film, *Ankhon Dekhi* (2014) and stepped forward to finance the Delhi-set drama centred on an enlightened patriarch. The film, made on a budget of Rs 8 crore, failed at the box office, collecting less than a crore, but Mundra isn't complaining. "Making films is all about fun, passion and most importantly leaving a mark behind, because I believe good films outlive everyone!" he says in an email interview.

Mundra has no background in cinema but his passion for it and his generosity has now made him the independent filmmaker's dream producer. Since he made his debut last year, his company Drishyam has gone on to fund five more films, all expected to hit cinemas this year, including Suraj Sharma-starrer drama *Umrika*, which won the audience award in world cinema dramatic feature category at Sundance, and Nagesh Kukunoor's *Dhanak*, a children's drama which won two prizes at the Berlin Film Festival in Generation Kplus category including the Grand Prix. At the moment, Mundra doesn't intervene much other than read the script. "I believe in creative independence and I see my role in the whole process as of arranging the requisite money to make the film and to help exhibit it," he says.

He is one of the few, upcoming producers who are investing their earnings from business to make films in which content takes precedence over the presence of superstars. Their arrival has given independent cinema a new lease of life and hope to young filmmakers that they no longer have to depend on major production houses to get their films rolling. Chaitanya Tamhane, 27, is one such filmmaker who had theatre actor-friend Vivek Gomber, 36, come to his rescue in August 2012 when he needed help with his debut film *Court*, the



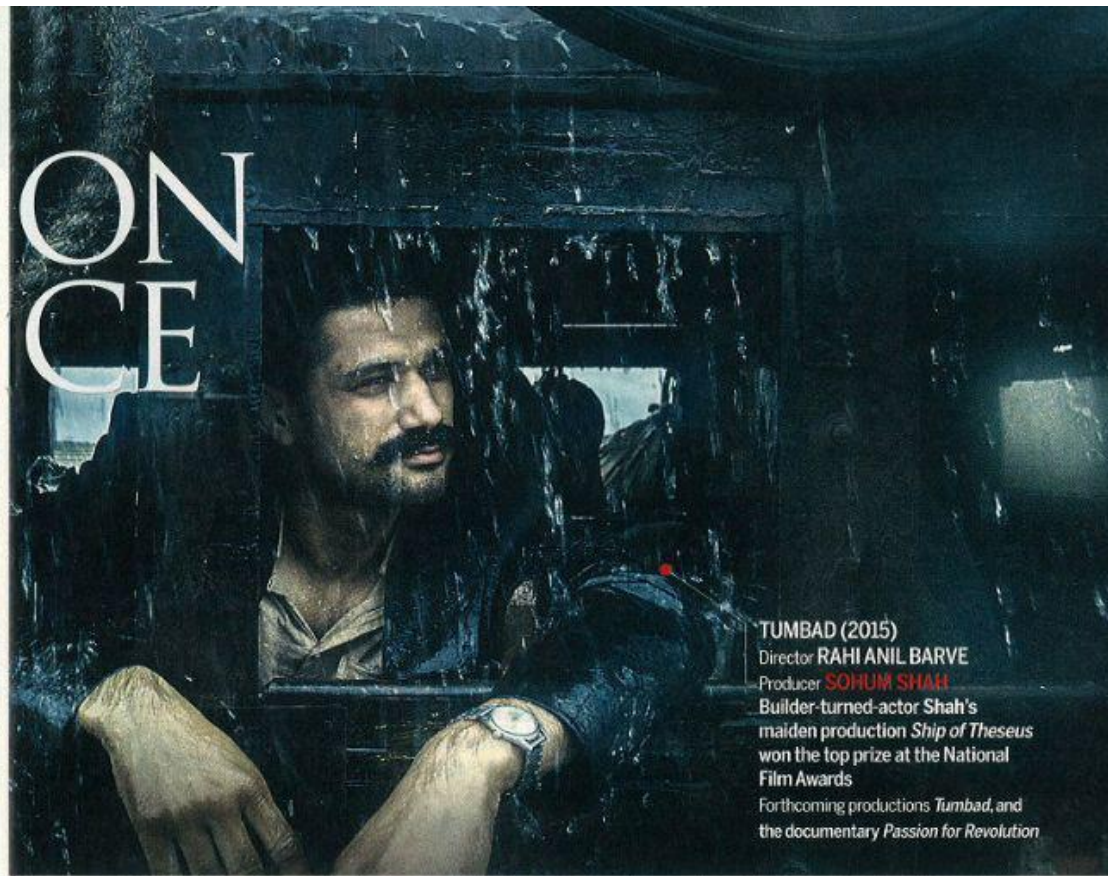
BETTING ON SUBSTANCE

A new breed of producers is backing meaningful cinema, liberating indie filmmakers from being hostage to big studios



FANDRY (2013)

Director **NAGRAJ MANJULE**
 Producer **NAVALAKHA ARTS AND HOLY BASIL FILMS**
 Jointly produced by Nilesh Navalakha, who runs a construction business, the critically acclaimed Marathi film also raked in Rs 7 crore. Forthcoming production Vivek Wagh's *Siddhant* (Marathi)



TUMBAD (2015)

Director **RAHI ANIL BARVE**
 Producer **SOHUM SHAH**
 Builder-turned-actor Shah's maiden production *Ship of Theseus* won the top prize at the National Film Awards
 Forthcoming productions *Tumbad*, and the documentary *Passion for Revolution*

multilingual legal drama which has so far screened and fared well in 45 international festivals. Son of a successful private entrepreneur, Gomber was frustrated with the lack of enticing acting opportunities and decided to chip in his family earnings to follow his late father's diktat: "Stop bitching. If you want to do something, then do it." He collaborated "with someone who you feel liberated with and trust". The two had earlier worked in Tamhane's play *Grey Elephants in Denmark*.

Like Mundra with *Ankhon Dekhi*, Gomber had absolutely no experience in film production and learned the importance of man-management skills and business of film distribution on the job. Gomber's company, Zoo Films, may not have a long list of projects like Mundra or Sohumi Shah, a real estate businessman who produced the National Award-winning

Ship of Theseus (2012) and upcoming projects such as the 1920-set fantasy mystery *Tumbad* and the documentary *Passion for Revolution* on the rise of the Aam Aadmi Party, but what he does share is their vision "to get new writers and new stories" out.

"They have fresh ideas and new perspectives," says Mundra about his desire to work with upcoming writers and directors. "They are ready to go to any extent to make quality cinema... and are much more professional and brave besides being creative." It explains why Mundra has backed 11 directors, many of them making their debut, in *X—The Film*, also looking at a release in the first half of 2015.

It's a sentiment shared by the Chennai-based C.V. Kumar, producer of Tamil films such as *Pizza* (2012), *Soodhu Kavvun* (2013) and the recent Siddharth-starrer *Enakkul Oruvan*.

Born and brought up in Madurai to a family that ran a travel company specialising in pilgrimage tourism, Kumar was drawn to cinema at 15 when he took a short videography and cinema course from Arena Multimedia. Later, as his family business expanded to include trips to international destinations, Kumar visited Walt Disney and Universal Studios, where he was inspired to join the business of making films. He raised Rs 1.5 crore for his first film, *Attakathi* (2012), from his family business, savings and contributions from friends. Featuring new faces, Kumar struggled to release it in theatres until Gnanavel Raja of Studio Green bought the film for Rs 2.25 crore and spent a further Rs 3.5 crore to market it. The film ran for over 50 days and made Rs 7.67 crore. Kumar's philosophy is clear: "Don't make movies a gambling game with your eyes fixed

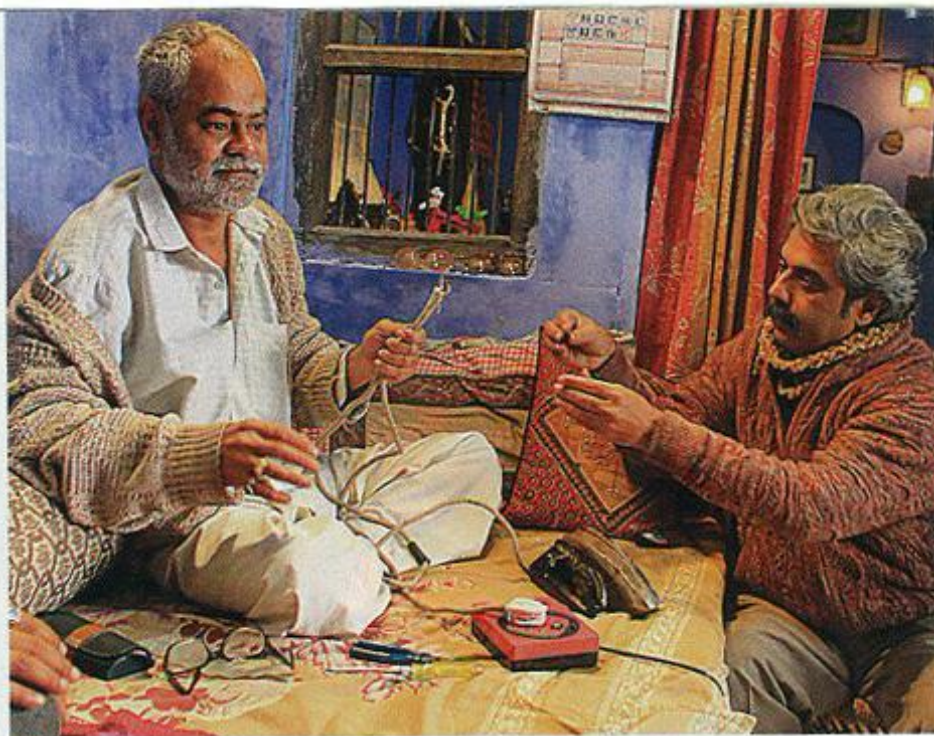
CINEMA **NEW PRODUCERS**

only on making big bucks". He says he isn't concerned with signing an A-list hero or including songs and comedy sequences to appease the masses. So far it has paid dividends with multiple hits and anticipated projects such as *Irudhi Suttru*, starring Madhavan.

Like the 35-year-old Kumar, who left his family business to focus full time on cinema, Sohum Shah, 32, too handed over his real estate business to his brother to focus on a career as an actor and producer. Apart from *Tumbad*, he will also be seen in Meghna Gulzar's *Nyodda*, a Vishal Bhardwaj-produced drama inspired by the Aarushi Talwar murder case. "Whatever I wanted to do in business, I had done," says Shah. "I couldn't do the same thing my whole life."

Shah moved from Sri Ganganagar in Rajasthan to Mumbai in 2009 to pursue acting when he met filmmaker Anand Gandhi. He auditioned and was cast for the part of the morally conscious stockbroker in *Ship of Theseus*. It was only after Gandhi struggled to raise the money that Shah stepped in as producer to raise Rs 2.5 crore. Later, the film would reach cinemas thanks to the efforts of filmmaker Kiran Rao and UTV but wouldn't last too long. "A film should entertain you in a novel way," says Shah about his process of picking projects. Shah also brought to cinemas *Gulabi Gang*, Nishtha Jain's documentary on women's rights activist Sampat Pal, and produced a short on acid attack survivors, *Newborns*.

Ashi Dua, 30, is another industry outsider like Shah who is putting her faith in a newcomer, Jasmeet Dhodhi, for her second film, a period romance. Inspired by her stint with Anurag Kashyap in *Dev.D*, Dua established a production house, Flying Unicorn. In 2013, she forayed into films with *Bombay Talkies* which screened at Cannes. Dua was one of the lucky investors who had the backing of a major studio, Viacom18 Motion Pictures, to help her make the Rs 6.5-crore film which would go on to make Rs 8.49 crore. Dua feels the current environment is conducive to people like her who don't have a filmi lineage. "You can be easily intimidated and feel you don't belong here," she says, "but people



ANKHON DEKHI (2014)

Director **RAJAT KAPOOR**

Producer **MANISH MUNDRA**

The film may not have made profits but it earned industry goodwill for **Mundra** and critics' awards for **Kapoor**.

Forthcoming productions Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan* and Anu Menon's *The Waiting* with Naseeruddin Shah and Kalki Koechlin



PIZZA (2012)

Director **KARTHIK SUBBARAJ**

Producer **C.V. KUMAR**

In his first year as producer, **Kumar** delivered his second hit with this Tamil film which spawned a sequel and a Hindi remake.

Forthcoming production Sudha Kongara Prasad's *Irudhi Suttru*



such as Anurag, Dibakar Banerjee, Zoya Akhtar make you want to be in the industry. When their films do well, it gives you hope and say, 'I have a chance here if I make good cinema'."

Dua is clear that international acclaim doesn't entice her as much as her film being appreciated by audiences at home. "You never aim to make a film thinking this is a festival-type film," says Dua. "If it happens, it's a bonus. But if in my own country it struggles to get a release, it's a bummer." Gomber, whose film has won awards and cash prizes at festivals such as Venice and Mumbai International Film Festival, shares Dua's sentiment. "No matter what you do abroad, *agar ghar mein nahi dekhi to kya baat hui* (If it is not seen at home, then what's the point?)." Gomber and Tamhane are hopeful of releasing *Court* in India in April. "We want to see it through on our own," says Gomber, "and hope we can recover something and put it back into making more films."

with Saranya Chakrapani

Follow the writer on Twitter @suhani84