



Mundra-backed *Ankhon Dekhi* (right) won the Best Film Critics award at Filmfare; *Umrika* (above) took the Audience award at Sundance Film Festival this week. A still from Nagesh Kukunoor's *Dhanak* (below)



# PROJECT RESCUE

A Dubai businessman saving indie filmmakers from disillusionment is the cinema lover's newly favourite star

Arpita Chatterjee  
mirrorfeedback@timesgroup.com  
TWEETS @MumbaiMirror

It takes 140 characters to convince Manish Mundra to fund a film.

When director Rajat Kapoor, in a moment of vexation, took to Twitter in July 2012 to announce his temporary retirement from filmmaking, he was protesting the lack of support from financiers to see *Ankhon Dekhi*, his latest film, through. The Sanjay Mishra-starrer took home the Best Film (Critics) and Best Male Actor (Critics) awards at Filmfare last week, but couldn't find a producer. Mundra saw Kapoor's tweet, agreed to fund the one million dollar project — again, through a tweet ("Sir, I am a huge fan, and I will produce your film") — raising curiosity all over again about who indie cinema's latest rescuer really was.

Doing the knight in shining armour act before, Mundra had made news last September by rescuing the 16th edition of the Mumbai Film Festival organised by Mumbai Academy of Moving Image (MAMI), when title sponsor Reliance pulled out. His contribution totalled Rs 50 lakh, making him the single largest contributor to the Mumbai film fest. And he isn't even a Mumbaiikar.

The 41-year-old managing

director of Indorama, a multi billion dollar petro-chemical firm headquartered in Nigeria, divides his time between Africa and Dubai, where he lives with his wife and 12-year-old and seven-year-old son in a penny plain apartment whose one corner is strewn with toys. The living room is fragrant with the lingering aroma of hing, speaking of a lunch of bhakridal.

"My story starts with nothing. My family lost everything when I was little," says Mundra, who sold cold drinks on the streets of Deogarh in Bihar, where the Marwari family had moved from native Rajasthan. He decided to live with his maternal grandmother while pursuing an MBA from Jodhpur University, taking over the reigns when she fell ill.

He stood first, he smiles, sipping on a cup of chai at the dining table.

Working through several firms in the Aditya Birla Group, he joined Indorama's Jakarta branch in 2002, sticking on to set up its petrochemical operations in Nigeria from scratch.

Not new to risks, his decision to back a good script is gut-driven. And it speaks of a passion he has harboured since he was a boy, running errands for his mother to shave off a few rupees to buy a cinema ticket.

This year, he plans to invest



**I can afford to take a risk in cinema because I make my money elsewhere**

double of last year in film production. His film company, Drishyam Films, runs out of an office in Andheri with a team of six. "One or two good films a year is what I am currently looking at making," he says.

And he is open to co-productions ("it's important to share the risk, expand the span

of investment and the scope of the film"), like he pulled off with Swati Shetty of Samosa Stories. The two are behind Prashant Nair's *Umrika*, which won the Audience award in the World Cinema Dramatic Competition section of the recently-concluded Sundance Film Festival 2015. Suraj Sharma, Tony Revolori (*The Grand Budapest Hotel*), Prateik and Adil Hussein star in a story about a boy who tries to save his mother from heartbreak, by fabricating letters from his brother, believed to be in America, but actually, missing. Interestingly, Shetty also reached out to Mundra on Twitter.

*Dhanak*, Nagesh Kukunoor's upcoming project, and *Waiting*, a film by Anu Menon starring Naseeruddin Shah and Kalki Koechlin are part of Mundra's 2015 final line-up which he zeroed in on after racing through close to 50 scripts. "I can afford to take a risk in cinema because I make my money elsewhere," he clarifies. "The last 20 years have seen awful cinema from India. I'm looking for stories with an Indian ethos. Which is why I am keen to go to festivals; to put India on the map of good filmmaking."

The other criteria, is Amitabh Bachchan. With *Laawaris*, *Kala Patthar* and *Deewar* as favourites, Mundra speaks of backing a film that stars the senior star.

The quiet confidence is what makes him a dream producer, says Menon, who recalls going into a tizzy with ideas for marketing *Waiting* just before it went on floors, says Mundra simply said, "You go and make the best film you can and the rest will follow."

His ability to back you, without conditions, is what sets him apart from the others," she says.

It's his roots, believes director Neeraj Gheywan, whose first feature film, *Masaan*, Mundra will produce, that draws him to stories from the hinterland.

And giving back to small-town India isn't restricted to cinema.

Mundra speaks excitedly of a school in Jodhpur that supports 280 students whose parents can't afford to educate them. His foundation, Society for Rational Development (SFORD), was set up with the idea of providing lesser fortunate kids with the best possible classroom experience.

He might be a philanthropist, but Mundra has his indulgences. Cars don't capture his fancy ("I still use a company vehicle"), but the A. Lange & Sohne on his wrist captivates his imagination like a child's. "I started with nothing. I am not afraid of going back to nothing," he says, defining Mundra's biggest strength as producer — least risk position holder.