

A dip to salvation

In a Braj language film that premiered at TIFF, the Mahakumbh becomes the site of one man's miraculous transformation

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY



JITANK SINGH
GURJAR



SHELLY
SHARMA

THERE are very few films in the Braj language and on Braj culture," Jitank Singh Gurjar tells us. For the theatre artist and filmmaker who grew up in central India and wrote plays and his first film *Baasan* in Braj, *In Search of the Sky* (*Vimukt*) meant a return to the language and cultural nuances of his region. Shot in the Barai and Patwa villages of Madhya Pradesh, the film had its world premiere at the 50th Toronto International Film Festival. It was the only Indian film selected for TIFF's Centrepiece programme which showcases diverse global voices. "It always felt important to me to produce work in the language and with this story, I put myself in it by bringing in the dialect, music and nature of the land I grew up in."

The film's story, written by Pooja Vishal Sharma who is also its producer, was inspired by a newspaper

headline about abandoned individuals at the Kumbh Mela and centres a journey to the Mahakumbh of a poverty-stricken couple and their son who has mental difficulties. Its first half, which captures snatches of the family's life in the village, is infused with the beauty of its natural setting and uses earthy, warm tones, tight frames and static shots. "The story is about Naran, a man who is most connected to nature and who has found bliss in ignorance, who doesn't know much and that's enough for him to be happy," the film's cinematographer Shelly Sharma tells us. "His world is not just driven by struggles. There is the love that his mother pours into him, the warmth of the friendship that he shares with a local boy and the belongingness that he finds in the village even though he's often treated badly there. His inner world is full of beauty, purity and innocence," says Sharma, explaining that it is the sense of that beauty that spills out onto the early frames.

The limited motion of the visual language that dominates the first half, representative of the family's claustrophobic life, changes in the second as they travel to Kumbh, the film tracking their long, arduous journey to the pilgrimage site by bus, bullock cart, train and boat. "It's the first time we see them together as a family enjoying some moments together," Sharma points out. "[Once at the Kumbh] we expand their world. We shot real crowds there and brought in the colours, the vast and diverse culture of India because where else would you see that other than in Kumbh," Sharma insists. For the team though, none of whom had been to the religious gathering before, the Kumbh schedule was expectedly rigorous. "There were huge crowds [there was no crowd



controller], the cast and crew had to walk nearly 20 kilometres with equipment each day since we couldn't take vehicles inside. We had to employ guerrilla shooting strategies, such as starting fights nearby to distract people and stop them from looking at the camera," Gurjar recalls. "It was emotionally and physically draining," Sharma agrees. But

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Shelly Sharma, cinematographer

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there was also help extended by complete strangers. "Everyone was really kind. People obliged when we asked them to participate with small activities like drying a sari in the background. They were there for a purpose, and we were there for another, but somehow they synced."

The film's leads are local theatre actors. We learn that to embody Naran, a person who is maladaptive by nature, actor Nikhil Yadav spent time with residents at the Swarg Sadan Ashram in Gwalior. Gurjar's own background in psychology and theatre also helped him equip the actors with emotional tools and backstory to craft expressions, behaviour

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and body language.

"That in between all the giants from India at this year's TIFF (like Anurag Kashyap's *Bandar*, the Huma Qureshi-led *Bayaan* and Hansal Mehta's *Gandhi*), our small film found a place, is big. It gives a push to the entire independent filmmaking community," Sharma who is also credited as creative director and executive producer on the film, observes.

"We are showing a side of India that hasn't been shown this way before, and bringing up conversations about the way mental illness is looked upon in rural areas." There are plans of a long festival run and eventually a theatre release. "This film is made for the big screen and we want our audience to be able to see it that way."

smdmail@mid-day.com

Cutting cakes and calories

Baking queen Pooja Dhingra gets into the battleground of sweat and pain, thanks to Hyrox



"Being always in the overweight category and then having an 'athlete' tag meant a lot to me," says pastry chef Pooja Dhingra

TANISHA BANERJEE

THE air inside the indoor arena is thick with sweat and adrenaline. Sneakers slam against the floor in rhythmic bursts as hundreds of bodies surge forward for the first kilometre run, the gateway to a gruelling sequence of eight runs and eight workouts. Thirty-nine-year-old pastry chef Pooja Dhingra, who has spent years behind an oven, never imagined she'd be among them, juggling towards the finish line. "Being always in the overweight category and then having an 'athlete' tag meant a lot to me." For someone who had lived with self-doubt around fitness, Hyrox felt both intimidating and irresistible. Now, swept up by the roar of the crowd and the shared determination of strangers, she finds herself chasing more than a finish line — a new identity.

Hyrox is a global indoor fitness race that blends running with functional workouts in a simple

but punishing formula: a 1 km run followed by one workout, repeated eight times. Born in Europe, it has spread to cities worldwide, all following the exact same format so a participant in Mumbai runs the same race as one in Berlin or New York. Marketed as the "race for everybody," it's built for both professional athletes and everyday fitness enthusiasts looking for a challenge. Its virality lies in its design — photogenic, shareable, and instantly recognisable. When the format arrived in India, Mumbai's restless fitness community embraced it as both a test of endurance and a badge of belonging.

Mumbai has long been a city of endurance from its dawn mara-

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POOJA
DHINGRA

thons to boutique gyms in Bandra and a thriving Instagram fitness culture. Hyrox fits into this landscape, offering something that feels both aspirational and accessible. For Dhingra, the decision to sign up for Hyrox was sparked not by ambition, but by a friend's casual suggestion at the gym. She hesitated at first, unsure if she had the stamina to finish. But with coach Rajput's guidance, she undertook a three-month training regimen — five days a week of gym workouts, evening runs, yoga, and stretches. "Our lives and personalities became about Hyrox for a time," she recalls. "I trained for three months specifically for the race."



KUNAL
RAJPUT

What began as self-doubt transformed into exhilaration when she crossed the finish line. The sense of community, training side by side with others chasing the same goal, left her hooked, and she is planning to travel to future races.

As both coach and participant, Kunal Rajput straddles both worlds. A strength-training enthusiast, he had to embrace running to prepare for Hyrox. "It's a social currency; a wave everyone wants to surf. People want to be seen as fit, doing something challenging, and Hyrox gives them that talking power; it is still

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pretty difficult and challenging," he says.

The format's flexibility is part of its appeal, as it has no time limits, multiple categories, and the option to race solo, in doubles, or as a relay team. What he notices most in others is the lack of structure where people underestimate the endurance required, mismanage pacing, or neglect nutrition. Still, he sees Hyrox's accessibility as its strength.

Beyond finish times or medals, for many, Hyrox offers a chance to rewrite personal narratives. For Dhingra, it was identity-shifting. "I never thought I was an athlete," she says, but the race reshaped how she saw herself. This is what gives Hyrox its cult-like energy worldwide. It's not simply a race but a lifestyle statement; a way to push boundaries, and to post about it afterwards.

As the final metres blur under pounding sneakers, the finish line becomes a proof of resilience. Dhingra remarks, "Watching so many people participate with near-common goals is both inspiring and wonderful." She had only one goal as she participated in Hyrox: "To finish it. And that I did."

tanisha.banerjee@mid-day.com