

## What went into making one of India's finest actors

Book: 'Unlikely Hero Om Puri'; Author: Nandita C. Puri; Price Rs.395; Publisher: Roli

There was a time when the railway authorities sent sweepers with human faeces to his home to threaten his family out of official accommodation. When he got small pox as a child, his hands were tied to the bed to prevent him from scratching his face.

But Om Puri, one of India's finest actors, still carries the pockmarks - as he does the varied experiences that life offered him from a tender age.

Journalist-author Nandita Puri's tome on her famous husband offers these rare insights into the private life of Om. Her book encapsulates everything - from the poverty he suffered to his many torrid love affairs.

Before one can begin to think that the account will be biased, Nandita in the preface asserts that a certain 'distance' was created between Om and her when she started writing.

The biography begins with Om's early life, marked by financial struggle. Born in Ambala, Punjab, in 1950, he was the youngest of eight children. Om's father was employed in the railways as a junior officer. Neither of his parents was well educated.

After the family was forced to leave its accommodation provided by the railways in a hurry, Om's brother began to work as a railway porter while he himself worked in a tea shop.

Ironically, Om, a name to reckon with in the entertainment industry, can recollect no entertainment in the first four years of his life in Ambala. There were no family celebrations. His father was temperamental and would keep losing his job.

His mother's family decided to lighten the burden by adopting him. Thus Om moved to Patiala, where he spent his formative years.

It was in Patiala that Om's penchant for acting was first noticed. He would observe people and then perform alarmingly close impersonations.

Om's talent was professionally first noticed when Harpal Tiwana, the founder of modern Punjabi theatre, saw him performing in a play. Tiwana invited Om to join his theatre group Punjab Kala Manch. In the biography, Om says: 'Harpal Tiwana was my first guru. His contribution was much more than my drama school professors.'

The 59-year-old actor's first film was 'Chor Chor Chhup Jaye' in which his co-actor was a monkey called Ramu! When he was paid, Om did not know how to react - it was a sum of Rs.3,000 and he had never seen so much money. The actor used it to pay for his tuition at the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune.

The same Om went on to work in films like 'Ardhsatya', 'Party', 'East is East', 'Chachi 420', 'Kalyug' - a body of work that ranges from parallel cinema to Bollywood to foreign films.

It was while filming 'City of Joy' that the actor met his second wife Nandita. She reveals that she was particularly impressed with Om's grounded nature, simplicity and lack of 'starry behaviour'.

Nandita goes on to reveal Om's many affairs without making him seem vulgar. She even describes how the actor often found himself torn between two loves. But the couple have been married for over 15 years now and have a son.

Nandita writes with wit, confidence and panache. It is striking how she describes the actor's weaknesses without turning them into a rant.

The biography is peppered with photographs of Om's early life and there are some poignant ones of his family. The fact that his wife has written with objectivity and portrayed an honest image of her husband is commendable.

The book has made headlines for candid accounts of love affairs, but it would be a shame to see it in a restricted light.

The biography, 'Unlikely Hero Om Puri', dwells on not only the actor's struggle, but also his anxieties, strengths, weaknesses, his culinary skills and his love and devotion to his family.

(Samini Philip can be contacted at [samini.p@ians.in](mailto:samini.p@ians.in))

*Samini Philip* ( © IANS / India eNews)