

## 'Chak de! India' wins Best Film award in Sydney

It came as no surprise when Shimit Amin's 'Chak De! India', a gritty tale of Indian women hockey players that also starred 90 Australian players and over 9,000 Australian extras, won the Best Film Award at the 5th Australian Indian Film Festival gala night here Thursday.

Indian heartthrob Akshaye Khanna received the Best Performance Award for his role in 'Gandhi My Father' at the glittering ceremony hosted for the first time at the Museum of Contemporary Arts, situated on the Harbour foreshore overlooking the iconic Opera House.

The awards were chosen by an esteemed group of Australian film critics, including Peter Thompson (Showtime), Margaret Pomeranz (ABC TV At The Movies), Nell Schofield (Channel 9 Sunday Show), Marc Fennell (Triple J), Adrienne McKibbons (Metro Magazine) and Ian Taylor (ABC TV).

Back home, 'Chak de! India' has won applause from audiences and critics alike.

'I am encouraged to do something different. 'Chak de! India' has been great for Indian audiences at home and abroad,' Amin said.

He disagreed that it was 'a middle-class film'. 'It is a nationalist or patriotic film that crosses all boundaries and embraces all. It just took over India! Seeing 'Chak de!' placards at cricket matches has been very flattering for the film. There is this 'Chak de! India' spirit in the air.'

What led Amin to make a women's sport film? 'It is a sports film that portrays the country. Five years ago, the Indian women's hockey team had won the Commonwealth Games, but they didn't get much attention for their feat. The game has low profile in India and there is less support and money for hockey. Jaideep Sahni, who wrote the script, felt if this movie did work, something positive will happen.'

Among all hockey-playing countries, why did Amin come to shoot in Australia? 'It is such an athletic country and probably has one of the highest numbers of women in sports. Coupled with it, the weather, language and the line producer, MG Distribution, helped me opt for Australia,' Amin told IANS here.

The crew and cast spent nearly three months shooting in Melbourne and Sydney. 'The enthusiasm and passion of a great group of multicultural people we worked with was phenomenal. It built a great community between film and sports people. The Australian Film Commission was really inviting and that makes it easier to work.'

Shimin also thanks Australians for accepting to lose in the final match in the film. 'They were gracious and sportsmanlike in their defeat.'

For Amin, story is always secondary. 'I really go for characters in my film. As in 'Ab Tak Chhappan', I relate to characters and script. In 'Chak de! India', the script was terrific. We just wanted to make something pretty grounded and that honesty has come through in the film.'

Actor Sagarika Ghatge, who puts her cricketer fiance in place in the film, told IANS: 'I really felt that hockey is not looked up in our country and what Preeti Sabharwal (the character's name) did is how

I felt, as the true sportsperson.'

'In fact, we underwent three-month hockey training session prior to the commencement of the shooting. We learnt a lot from Australian players,' she said.

'I have some wonderful memories of the time spent in Melbourne, where shopping and cuisine is great. We didn't get to see much of Sydney, so I am hoping to explore it in the next few days,' she added.

The Sydney festival, which has writer and director Yash Chopra as its patron, is attended by over 40,000 people each year.

This year's screenings include 'Cheeni Kum', 'Dhoom 2', 'Eklavya', 'The Namesake' and 'Laaga Chunuri Main Daag'.

*Neena Bhandari* ( © IANS / India eNews)