

Iqbal

Negates Handicap Stereotypes By TERESA THARAKAN

I*qbal*, a small-budget movie starring an unknown theater actor, has overturned accepted Bollywood film industry logic to create a buzz among critics and the public. *Iqbal* has no dancing, little glamor, no top stars, and, horror of horrors, no romance! Much interest was generated when artist M.F. Husain sold four paintings inspired by the movie, and cricket icon Kapil Dev made a cameo appearance in the film.

Iqbal is a pleasant and well-etched story about a village boy who dreams of becoming a national-level cricket star and overcomes great odds to achieve it. The key twist in *Iqbal* is the handling of the hero as an ambitious teenager, who just happens to be deaf and mute. This treatment is in contrast to *Black*, which deals in sympathetic detail with the struggles of a deaf and blind girl to overcome her handicap. *Iqbal* director Nagesh Kukunoor says his aim was to make the audience forget within five minutes that the hero is handicapped. And he succeeds. The fact that the lead character, played by Shreyas Talpade, cannot hear or speak fades into irrelevance as the young dreamer faces his father's objections, lack of money, rivalry and mockery, his own uncontrolled anger, politicking in the selection process, and a drunken and initially unreliable coach.

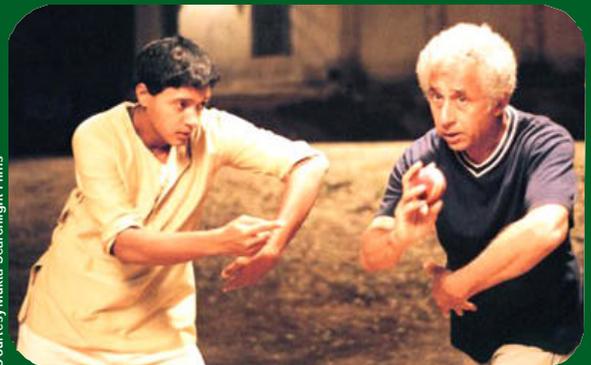
This sensitivity negates the stereotyped role of the handicapped as one incapable of contributing to mainstream life. The father's occasional comments on Iqbal's "restrictions," are contrasted with his mother's pride and faith in him, as well as his kid sister's practical support and her services as a sign language translator.

Only in a single scene does Iqbal's handicap hit the viewer: thrown out of the cricket academy, he goes out at night to a haystack hideout. Here, surrounded by photographs of cricketers, he cries out wordlessly, locked in by his silence and unable to communicate his anguish with another living soul.

However, the boy has learned the importance of perseverance for survival, in this case, the survival of his dreams. And on the road to achieving these dreams, he teaches a few practical lessons to his coach, played by Naseeruddin Shah, who despite his five senses and considerable talent had been handicapped by his inability to deal with the politics and hard knocks of the game.

There are other subtle points made by the movie. Rather than being a suppressed illiterate and housebound girl destined for an early marriage, Iqbal's sister is a confident, outspoken schoolgirl, who helps her brother in his battles.

The film is a successful blend of niche and mainstream cinema. Naseeruddin Shah and Girish Karnad, who plays the villainous coach at the cricket academy, skillfully make the unassuming story and its relatively unknown main actors acceptable to Bollywood viewers. Moreover, as the first release from producer Subhash



Courtesy Mukta Searchlight Films

Top: *Iqbal* sits in his haystack hideout, surrounded by his dreams and photos of his cricket idols.

Above: Shreyas Talpade as *Iqbal* takes a bowling lesson from veteran actor Naseeruddin Shah, playing his coach.

Ghai's Mukta Searchlight Films—created as a division of Mukta Arts to focus on small-budget and art films—the movie has the benefit of established marketing muscle. There are now plans to dub the film into regional languages. Clearly, the mix of simplicity and success for *Iqbal* marks a new and positive trend in larger-than-life Bollywood. □

About the Author: *Teresa Tharakan works as an editor and a freelance writer in Mumbai.*