



Master Ravi and Nirupa Roy.



Master Ravi in a still from the film Coolie.

**Famous child star of yesteryear Master Ravi, who has had a successful career away from the arc lights in the hospitality industry, now longs to return to his roots – Bollywood**



Ravi Valecha with Shashi Kapoor, recently.

# 'Newness, poetry missing from Bollywood films now'

MEHRE ALAM

DOHA

**I**N those split seconds that were to separate life from death, small, terrified eyes gaze deep into a potential saviour. Unexpectedly, the steady-intent-covering stare ends up softening the hard edges around the gangster's heart. It's a child on the flat's balcony, hiding from a gang out to take his life. And it's one of their very own telling his comrades to go look elsewhere for the prey he says 'isn't seen around'.

The child gets a lifeline. He lives to see another day, though brooding all the time why his cop father had left him at the mercy of his kidnapers, while not budging an inch from his so-called principles.

The saviour in that frame was actor Kulbhushan Kharbanda. Child star Ravi Valecha was playing a young Amitabh Bachchan as the die is cast in the 1982 classic *Shakti*. The intensity with which Ravi Valecha pulled off that scene remains etched in the memory of many a cinema buff, including Yours Truly.

By the time *Shakti* hit the theatre screens, Valecha, who was known as 'Master Ravi' back then, was already a big name in Bollywood, having made his debut with Shashi Kapoor-starrer *Fakira* (1976) at age four, followed by *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), *Desh Premi* (1982), *Coolie* (1982), where he had so convincingly played Amitabh's childhood characters. His role in *Amar Akbar Anthony* stood out as a stellar performance.

And then Master Ravi did the vanishing act. "I left the film industry at the pinnacle of my stardom. The industry used to call me a 'child star' and not a 'child artist'. Apparently, I was the highest paid child actor of my time. I was paying income tax when I was 10 years old!" recalls Valecha, as he opened up to *Qatar Tribune*.

From a child star in Bollywood, he graduated to a career in the hospitality industry. "Mr Manmohan Desai (the legendary filmmaker-director of *Amar Akbar Anthony* fame), who was a mentor to me, suggested that I quit films for sometime

saying he would re-introduce me once I grew up," he explains.

Citing the irony of the situation, he says, "When I was young I never got to study. So, in order to upgrade my skills later, I did lots of courses. I also did my MBA in 2010.

"And now, I am mulling over taking up acting once again." But what made him choose the hospitality career in the first place? "I was always very passionate about cooking. When I came to learn about a course on cooking that could also get one into the glamorous world of hotel and hospitality, I got attracted to it. I applied for the common entrance test for a hotel management course, and, fortunately, I cleared the entrance test, group discussion, interview etc. from among

some 700,000 applicants vying for just about 1,200-odd seats.

"You'll be surprised to know when I joined IHM-CTAN (Institute of Hotel Management, Catering

Technology and Applied Nutrition) Mumbai, I wouldn't even eat a cake because it had eggs and I was a pure veggie. My food production professor advised me to give up my seat because as a chef, I would have to prepare and taste non-vegetarian dishes, and if I did not, I wouldn't pass out of the institute.

"So I took it up as a challenge. Three years later, I was named the best student in cookery in western India, by the institute."

Valecha has worked at Taj Mumbai as a chef. He has also worked in mass catering, company catering, fine dining, event management, facilities management and then worked at HDFC bank as Head of Hospitality and Facility, and finally at Vedanta India, as the head of administration. "Currently, I am on a sabbatical. I am working towards getting back into the film industry," he declares.

Valecha had recently bumped into Shashi Kapoor. How was the feeling? "I met him at Prithvi Theatre. Unfortunately, he could not recognise me. He couldn't speak very clearly. Mr Kapoor was the one who had introduced me to the film industry in *Fakira* when I was just four. He was basically my godfather in the film industry. He was always a mentor and a guide, wherever and whenever I worked with him." Sharing anecdotes from

*Shakti*, the classic he worked in as a child actor with some of the most towering figures of Bollywood, he says, "*Shakti* was one of the biggest films of its time. Mr Dilip Kumar, Mr Amitabh Bachchan, Ms Rakhee Gulzar, Mr Amrish Puri, Mr Kulbhushan Kharbanda, and above all, the director, Mr Ramesh Sippy. They were all stalwarts of the film industry. It was really exciting for me to do that film at such a young age. I remember the love and affection showered upon

me by Dilip Kumar and Rakhi whom I call 'Rakhi Didi'.

"I have fond memories of Rakhi Didi cooking on the sets and making wonderful dishes. Mr Dilip Kumar used to treat me like his own son and would often get sandwiches for me from his house. We both used to eat sandwiches in the evening and take a stroll around the studio.

"As far as the acting performance is concerned, I would give the entire credit to the director, Mr Sippy. The way he handled me, a 10-year-old boy at that time, was truly fantastic. He used to explain each and every shot and clearly spell out what he wanted the character to feel and do on the screen."

Is he still in touch with Bollywood people from his acting days? "Frankly, no," he replies, adding: "The work that I was doing was very demanding and hence I couldn't keep in touch with a lot of people in the film industry. However, we have recently formed a group of the yesteryear child actors and we are all in touch and meet regularly."

Bollywood, he says, has changed a lot. "Earlier it was a director's industry. The director was the captain of the ship and everybody had to follow his lead.

"Secondly, films were made based on story and poetry and every scene had some relevance. Each and every actor was an artist who performed to their best capacity as per the director's and the character's requirements. Today, I feel – with due respect to the current lot working in the industry – that there are many artists but very few actors. There are many more films now but fewer new stories. And the poetry has been missing."

Any regrets about missing out on a full-fledged Bollywood career? "No regrets," says Valecha, whose current favourite actor is Aamir Khan.

"But as I said earlier, I am trying to get back into the industry. There is a saying here that once you enter the industry, it's very difficult to get it out of you. So now that I have done whatever I had wanted to do in my professional life, I am willing to take the plunge. And I hope and pray that I succeed."



Master Ravi