



The Rai Stuff

Follow the journey of Bollywood sweetheart Aishwarya Rai from 'Queen' to 'Bride' and now 'Survivor'.

By Kasha Van Sant

Stepping away from a well trodden path can be a daunting prospect, but what if that path was one dictated to you by your own internal compass and defied the convention that put you on the map? This is possibly a scenario that Aishwarya Rai, one of the world's most beautiful women must be familiar with. Having been catapulted to stardom since winning Miss World in 1994, India's most famous export is seldom away from the media glare. Brushing all beauty pageant clichés aside, she is the epitome of what an ambitious woman should be. More determined than ever, she is ready to shed her skin and receive the acclaim as an actor and a humanitarian.

Aishwarya spoke exclusively about her latest role in the film 'Provoked' and how it will shatter the preconceptions. Based upon the true life case of Kiranjit Ahluwalia who was jailed for the murder of her abusive husband in 1989, 'Provoked' was something that Aishwarya could not turn her back on despite the digression from her usual role. Executed with well known diplomacy, she states,

"We are all here for the bigger picture not just the salaries, and this story hits close to home for many people. Domestic violence has been a dirty little secret within families for centuries and has touched many lives. The sad fact is that the abuse still continues and we must each help those that we see in abusive relationships or situations; the best we can. Or at least as much as they will allow us to help"

Remarking on Kiranjit she adds,

"I could only imagine what Kiranjit truly experienced during her marriage and in prison. I think when you are a compassionate person and not just an actor; you can feel things that others have gone through without actually having personal knowledge."

With this statement Aishwarya draws a line through any references to any past tumultuous relationship. So, it is evident that behind the cool façade she is brimming with ideas and untold ambitions; a factor that was capitalised upon by Jag Mundhra, the director of the film. He told us,

"Aishwarya zeroed in on it, of all the various projects, this was the one she picked up. I think at this stage in her life, she's known around the world as the 'Grandmaster of Bollywood', and as one of the most beautiful women on the planet, she wanted to use that name and fame."

Understandably Aishwarya may have been daunted by this move towards the mainstream, but as the astute business woman that she is; she ensured that the transition was as seamless as possible by carefully choosing roles such as 'Bride and Prejudice' and 'Mistress of Spices'. Reassurance came from many quarters including Hollywood heavyweight Harvey Weinstein.

"I was approached with a script, which as an actor I was happy to do, and as a person. They know where my heart lies and they knew I would be happy to give my voice to this on a larger platform. I think the timing was perfect and I am thankful for the support from all my well wishers. It is that kind of support and strength that gives me conviction and belief in backing stories that I want to tell, even though they are not perceived as the regular commercial thing."

Jag Mundhra is more than ready to admit the draw that Aishwarya Rai has, firstly enabling the concept of 'Provoked' to evolve from Rahila Gupta's original script from the novel 'Circle of Light' to acquiring funding for the film.

"It's the power of a brand name, a star name that you cannot deny. It'd be one thing for me to sit there and say 'oh well, I got it all done' - it'd be wonderful to say that, but the truth of the matter is, unless somebody of the calibre of Aishwarya Rai lends their name to a project; investors won't be interested."

This is a fact that she is all too aware of,

"At the end of the day this is an industry, as much as we may like to creatively do all types of cinema; this industry does involve commerce. So when investors are putting in money in, they expect some kind of return, and that return can be shown by the audiences that watch the film. At the end of the day people are just interested to see what Aishwarya Rai is doing. Good subjects like these will widen the audience."

It can be seen that the "very smart, savvy girl" that Jag Mundhra describes is clearly in full control of her image and has made the conscious step to get involved with the next level of stimulus. Although most people forget or rather, choose to ignore the many facets to Aishwarya Rai; it is worth bearing in mind that she will be noted for being a little more than a visual masterpiece.

Jag speaks of the professional motivations for Aishwarya's involvement in 'Provoked', as a "stretching of the muscles"; whilst Aishwarya maintains her empathic viewpoint.

"The world offers many gifts but many hardships also. Poverty, famine and any form of abuse are paramount to me. The key is that we can make a difference. We must make a difference and help those who cannot help themselves."

When Aishwarya Rai agreed to playing the role of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, she took on a huge responsibility. The first being to do justice to the character, the second to withstand the extremely tight schedule and the third to shrug off the media strait jacket that tied her in to one style of acting.

The strength of Kiranjit was rewarded in 2001 by Asian Woman Magazine after her landmark case caused fissures in the legal system. With regards to 'becoming' Kiranjit, the challenges were two fold. It was not until the filming was nearing completion that the two women met for the first time; so no character analysis was possible. She spoke philosophically,

"I was really keen to meet Kiran, so I was really pressuring Jag to get all the facts about the case as it was communicated through the papers, so that we could deliver as close to the truth as possible. I am glad I finally met her and personally I was very glad that we connected."

For Jag the reasons for keeping the two apart were based upon practicality and purity of performance,

"I said to Aishwarya, "in my opinion, you should not meet her, none of the actors should meet their counterparts". The reasons being of course I was not making her look like Kiranjit; what was important was that she was a battered woman, and I wanted her to represent millions of battered women around the world. We also have to think about personal bias which can come in when you see a person and form an opinion about their guilt or innocence, based on how they behave."

Aishwarya admits in retrospect that this was the correct decision to make.

"I am told that it was her two sons that actually wanted to meet me, and when I did finally meet her we just hugged. Professionally I am glad that we met at the end because actors are like sponges they pick up from life, pick up from

people and by meeting the person I would have picked up traits. That is what Jag stressed. He said, "none of the other actors have met their real life character". So this was a representation of the facts as they were".

It will never be known whether the Aishwarya felt effrontery or unadulterated empathy; either way meeting the intensely private Kiranjit Ahluwalia at the end of filming was a more fortuitous than it seemed.

Anyone that watches 'Provoked' will no doubt see Aishwarya Rai in a very stark light. As well as broaching one of the biggest taboos in Asian culture, the challenges of patriarchal society and arranged marriage; aesthetically this is an appearance that most will not associate the face of L'Oreal cosmetics. When asked if she felt any uneasiness towards arranged marriage she responded as expected,

"No, because abuse does not distinguish between the two."

When it came to creating the unkempt Aishwarya it was easier than expected, as Jag Mundhra explained.

"I think if you try too hard with the make-up then it looks unreal and unnatural, she, of course accepted that and worked with me. So we gave her very little make-up - practically no make-up at all. As she transforms, you start seeing the dark circles under her eyes, she starts looking very plain. Even though in her plainness Ash has very wonderful features, I didn't even try to change the colour of her eyes because in Northern India you have a lot of beautiful women who have light eyes and who have fair skin."

Even amid the petty rumours that this matter was too close to Aishwarya's heart for comfort; her own conviction as a woman connected her to 'Provoked'. Right down to the "strange sense of catharsis" that she spoke of.

'Provoked' may represent a defining moment in the career of Aishwarya Rai, it will raise eyebrows as well as profile and win accolades to boot; but the extreme pressure under which it was made echoed throughout the cast and crew. For the extremely spiritual Aishwarya, who is no stranger to incredibly tight deadlines, the fact that everything fell into place was another source of inspiration.

"I can get on with really tough demanding schedules but this by far, goes to number 1 on my list of toughest schedules ever; because I worked around the clock through the whole month. I think that was only possible because someone up there was really backing us, giving us the strength to go the way we have as a team."

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For Jag Mundhra the pressures of shooting for up to 19 hours a day, and coordinating all of the scenes around the shooting schedules of his cast, left him in hospital with internal bleeding; four days before the film was due to wrap. He elaborates,



"Fortunately they found the leakage and they sealed it. They said that I had lost so much blood that if I had not come into hospital that day, then within the next few hours my organs would've started to shut down."

Physical injury was not the only challenge that 'Provoked' faced as the media frenzy surrounding the film went into hyper drive. Be that the consequence of the microscope that Aishwarya Rai lives under; in the smoke and mirrors of constantly hushed relationships or just the genre crossing that she has been criticised for. Jag is quick to defend,

"A successful person is not measured by how many friends they have, but how many enemies they have. It is a sad reality of life that so many people want to put her down. I mean you can't put her down for her beauty because it's genetically inherited. That's where she got branded, but there is the false assumption that people make - that if you're beautiful you are brainless. Most people would rather be in her shoes but they can't be. So the best way to do it is to bring her down. It's a very sad reality."

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This point was demonstrated by the outcry that occurred during the filming of one of the scenes in 'Provoked' when a disgruntled reporter with whom Aishwarya could not schedule an interview, fabricated stories that the cast and crew disrespected the Guru Granth Sahib in the Gurdwara where filming was taking place.

In true style Aishwarya is a consummate professional who just dives in and gets on with it. It is with the help of her well wishers whom she refers to as her "angels" that she is where she is today. On the making of her life story she remarks,

"So many things have happened in my life, so that's going to be one long movie. I don't know if that will or should be made. I am still living a very full life everyday so I live each moment for what it is. Let's see what the future holds."

It is doubtful that criticism of Aishwarya Rai lies in her demeanour if the impeccable manner in which she conducts herself is anything to go by. Of her competence as an actress 'Iruvar', 'Choker Bali' and 'Devdas' should be enough to silence critics. If not, 'Provoked' is bound to propel her into the stratosphere.



KIRANJIT ALEWALIA