

# When beautiful lyricism meets terrible violence

Bauddhayan Mukherji's *The Violin Player* is an unusual tale told in an unconventional length of time

SANKHAYAN GHOSH

**W**e hear about filmmakers talking about things that helped them decide to make their film: a character, a one-line story idea, a scene or even an image.

For Bauddhayan Mukherji, it was the length of the film. And it came from Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the Iranian New Wave filmmaker best known for *Kandahar* (2001).

Makhmalbaf's *The President* opened the International Film Festival of India in 2014, where Mukherji's first feature film *Teenkahon* was also playing.

If that wasn't thrilling enough for the Bengali director, he found out that they were being put up in the same hotel. During their brief meeting over breakfast, Mukherji recalls asking Makhmalbaf about how the length of his films differed significantly over the years: while his latest, *The President*, was two hours in duration, *The Man Who Came With the Snow* (2009) is 75 minutes long. "He told me a simple thing: give a story the time it needs."

## A peculiar problem

Mukherji has been fiddling with the idea of *The Violin Player* for a while.

But he was struggling to go ahead because of a peculiar problem. Its length was somewhere between a short film and a feature length film. It would be too long to qualify as a short film and too short to get a theatrical release as a feature film. "I was told by people in the fraternity that I will never be able to release it because the exhibitor will not be able to sell popcorn. In India we do not believe in films which are 70 minutes long. If an average Indian film is two-and-a-half hours, then my film gets over by the time the interval comes."



**STRIVING FOR RECOGNITION:** Ritwick Chakraborty plays the titular character: a failed instrumentalist drudging through an unremarkable everyday existence in Mumbai.

The meeting with Makhmalbaf encouraged him to make the film and not worry about the length, the release and the business.

By July, 2015, Mukherji had completed *The Violin Player*, which premiered at the India Gold Section of Mumbai Film Festival. It is 74 minutes long.

The titular character is a failed instrumentalist drudging through an unremarkable everyday existence in the big, bad city of Mumbai. One day, he meets a mysterious man who wants to employ his music for something that he ideologically doesn't agree with. It's a bizarre but an unbeliev-

Mukherji says the violin has a certain violent poetry in it, a manifestation of the protagonist's struggle

bly lucrative offer that he can't refuse. The job is depressing, crude and repelling but can he, as an artist, find liberation even in the unlikely of place?

*The Violin Player* is about this one day. "The premise is actually taken from a real life violinist I know. Only that I have ended it in my own way, with a cinematic closure that

wasn't there in his story," says Mukherji, who is guarded about the specifics of the story of his first Hindi feature film because he doesn't want to take away the surprise element.

It is the second feature film by Mukherji, a seasoned ad filmmaker. His first film, *Teenkahon*, was a triptych of short segments inspired by the narrative and filmmaking style of three different eras. It was presented by Imtiaz Ali, which helped it get a release outside Kolkata as well.

As for *The Violin Player*, Mukherji is concentrating on the film's festival run. It has

played at the International Film Festival of Kerala as part of the International Competition, and is now gearing up for the Durban International Film Festival.

Several other festivals, including two respectable ones yet to be made official, are lined up. *The Hollywood Reporter* gave it a favourable review: "Starts as a weak adagio but concludes in a thrilling vibrato".

## Underlying elements

Featuring Ritwick Chakraborty and Adil Hussain, among others, *The Violin Player* also has underlying

elements of the banality of Bollywood music and its failure to recognise musicians, just like the film's protagonist. But why did it have to be a violin and not any other instrument? Mukherji says that the instrument has a certain violent poetry in it, a manifestation of the protagonist's struggle with himself.

"It's a very physical instrument, unlike, say a santoor. It had to be something that has intrinsically two sides: a terrible violence and a beautiful lyricism. It has a strange sense of movement, lyricism and violence that worked for the narrative."