

They've made a film on the brave nurses trapped in Iraq

Will *Take Off* be India's official entry to the Oscars? With top notch acting, directing, production values and a well-told story, it might be a good move

Suresh Pattai



REAL

Power intoxicates. So does a world, exclusive. When scribes from the Middle East, the subcontinent and international TV networks were groping in the dark, *Khalaj Times* managed to break through barricades and lay a "hotline" to a key source among the 46 Indian nurses held captive in 2014 by the world's most brutal terrorists at the Tikrit Teaching Hospital in Iraq.

The world took notice. But that heady feeling dissipated in a couple of hours as we realised the responsibility we had taken on ourselves. It was a painful dilemma for a reporter who calls people trapped in a war zone. On one side are your ethics, and your hunger to milk the source to the last tiny drop of information. On the other is the hapless victims' expectations of you to lend a helping hand. "Let's be with them till they walk to freedom" was an editorial decision. It was an agonising "Take Off" for journalism on a humanitarian mission.

Away from Tikrit, new channels of communications were opened. We talked to their impoverished families back home with words of comfort and headlined the debt trap they were in. When the ministry of external affairs parroted to the Press in New Delhi that the nurses were safe, we brought out the plight of the shell-shocked victims day-by-day and convinced the then Kerala chief minister (CM) Oommen Chandy that every second mattered.

We were in touch with the ICRC in Irbil discussing the level of their food stocks and possible safe passage. To the outside world, our reports were the barometer of their emotions and requirements. There were crucial nights when the CM's office "scrambled" Delhi on life-threatening situations which were first conveyed to *Khalaj Times* by the nurses.

I had sleepless nights. Their faith in us was so immense that they started to generate calls whenever they were in distress. I could hear bombs slamming into their compound. I could hear their screams of despair and prayers. I knew more than anyone else what was on their dinner plate. How many days they subsisted on cookies. How many kilos of rice were left in the store. They were on a razor's edge as gun-toting terrorists forced them to attend to their comrades. They cried on my shoulders. I consoled them. I texted them prayers. They thanked me even when they were running out of phone credit. I then became one among them, living with them in the confines of war stories.

I never succumbed — neither did the nurses — when the embassy and special emissary stonewalled us, and when the state piled pressure on me to stop writing, and on the nurses to stop talking. I never knew bureaucracy could be so intimidating. For New Delhi, there were no bombs, no blasts, no terrorists, no nothing. But real photos and videos of burning hospital buildings, and a black-clad Daesh terrorist talking to nurses in their living quarters froze my blood.

Armed with an order to board a bus to "nowhere," my source, Marina Joseph, gave a call which she said could be the last. "I am going. I have kept an SMS ready for you. If they take us, we will press the send before they snatch the phones."

The war had already made Marina a woman of steel. Midway to Mosul, sitting in the bus piloted by terrorists, she texted "all is fine". She warned me not to generate calls. A night passed — probably the worst in



EXCLUSIVE GRABS: A terrorist talks to a nurse in Tikrit Teaching Hospital; (below) Smoke from the compound after Iraqi helicopter gunships hit one of the buildings



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the whole episode — as there was absolutely no contact.

Pestered to death the next day by TV channels, I gathered up the courage to call Marina. We talked for a few minutes, about the geography, the architecture of the room, the Ramadan food etc. Then there was this call that everyone wanted to hear. "We probably are on our way to freedom."

"Please, keep me in your prayers," she said before hanging up.

The next five hours were harrowing. The CM's office called to ask why they were not in contact. I too wondered why the woman, who displayed the guts to message me while travelling with terrorists, was not responding on her way to freedom? I had kept space for this as the lead story on the front page. Out of desperation, I rang and the call landed the moment they crossed the Irbil checkpoint. It opened the floodgate of emotions. "This is a second birth," she said emotionally.

I was overwhelmed. This was a journey I undertook without the pretensions of a scribe. Journalism is not always the proverbial "another night, another dollar". We too have hearts, and will walk that extra mile when it's a matter of life and death.

But Marina's cracking voice before she boarded the bus still rings in my ears. "I am going." I am glad she could leave.

REEL



Take a real story, throw in filmy stuff like love, divorce, emotions etc. Stir well after adding the best acting talents, the technical brilliance of a cinematographer and the creative excellence of a writer-director — your dish is ready. Not plain vanilla. A fabulous organic feast leaving a lasting taste.

The Malayalam movie *Take Off* is the work of a genius. Equalling Hollywood movies in elegance, technical perfection and execution, *Take Off* is a passionate attempt to revive simple storytelling.

Like a Michelin star chef, editor-turned-director Mahesh Narayanan has sculpted his work on a recipe he co-scripted with PV Shajikumar. The beauty of the script is the pace a war movie demands. There is urgency in every frame. There is an urgency in the dialogues, an urgency to love, to propose, to live and to work.

The frustration of a woman fighting to break the boundaries of a conservative society is intensely portrayed by the dialogue. "How long will I be afraid? Growing up, I was afraid of my father, then my husband, and now my son."

The first half of the movie is an essay on unemployment, poverty engulfing debt-ridden nursing families, work-life imbalance, gender inequality, the right to love, right to protest, right to divorce and the right to provide for parents even after marriage. The second half is a commentary on professional ethics, greed in times of crises, mindless killings in the name of God, diplomatic insensitivity and the ultimate triumph of goodness.

As a mature writer, Narayanan uses the full first half to make us empathise with chief protagonist Sameera (Parvathy), portrayed as a hardworking nurse, a dutiful daughter and a fighter of injustice. After her romantic relationship and tumultuous married life with Faisal (Asif Ali), Sameera opts for a job to repay her family's debt and to feed them. She marries Shahid (Kunchacko Boban), her caring colleague, before the couple takes up employment in a hospital in Iraq's Tikrit.

Faisal leaves his son in the custody of Sameera, who's pregnant in Tikrit, hometown of Saddam Hussein which has fallen to Daesh militants. The rest of the story is about Indian ambassador Manoj Abraham's (Fahadh Faasil) efforts to rescue the nurses from terrorists. The only visible bump in the otherwise meticulously taken movie is the foolish act of ferrying a boy to the war zone.

The movie is a perfect take off for Narayanan as a director and script writer. Narayanan, an editor well-known for his magnum opus *Vinayakumar*, a Kamal Haasan starrer, was able to weave his magic with his mastery over the craft of filmmaking. While Samu Varghese's stark visuals and Gopi Sander's background score leave you right in the midst of the crossfire, top-notch editing by the Abhilash Balachandran-Narayanan team offers a highly engaging experience.

The casting is brilliant. While Parvathy once again stuns with her extraordinary performance, Kunchacko Boban, Fahadh Faasil and Asif Ali impress with their balanced and mature performance. I would be least surprised if the movie takes off as India's official Oscar entry.

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