

In conversation with Imtiaz Ali

Moderator: Aashish Singh
Consultant (Ex - Yash Raj Films, Balaji,
Netflix, Lyca Productions)

Aashish: As a writer director, what comes first to you writing or direction?

Imtiaz: The problem with me and many film makers is that they don't know where writing ends and direction begins. They don't even know what comes first. For me, these two things are kind of related in a way that I feel they are the same thing. Sometimes the location inspires the story, it changes the story. At other times, the story has come into existence because of a location. Sometimes a location is just a setting. Personally, I rely a lot upon locations to tell the story.

Aashish: Now you are a producer also. So is there a conflict, If you like a location as a writer-director, but it's a little expensive and probably there another location that has a great rebate. Who wins in the end?

Imtiaz: Actually, it's easier. Now that I am a producer, I have more say. Earlier, when I was just the director, I was even more sensitive about the producer's money, so to speak. Now I can say that no problem, let's go for it. However, what's more important is what it (location) does to the story, what influence it has?

Aashish: All your films had incredible music and it blends very well with the locations. How do you emphasize on the location from music and background score perspective?

Imtiaz: Okay. Once I have a story or a basic idea of a screenplay, I visit those places that I think are the right location for the film be it a Corsica or a Prague or a Budapest. But there I am not only looking at the physical locations. I am also looking at the music. I am also looking at the casting agencies or what ever resources I can derive out of this

place. I am looking at how the whole film can be docked over here culturally.

It is ridiculous to go somewhere far away and not take a bite out of its culture. Let's say, Corsica in Tamasha, which is an island off the coast of France. They are very fierce people and they have a very specific style of music, which is called the acapella. Being the shepherds of the hills, they used to call each other out from different cliffs, which over the generations became music, which they mastered. And somehow, if you use a certain music which is organic to the place... you will instantly feel that, the film belongs there.

Even in highway, as the story travels, the music changes... because the location is changing. So music is a very important thing.

Aashish: You mentioned Corsica. I am really curious about how did you think about Corsica in the first place, because I don't know of any film that was shot there before that?

Imtiaz: You don't always plan these things. We were talking about Corsica, because this girl (character) used to read Asterix comics. I used to read Asterix when I was a kid and in one of the comic books was 'Asterix in Corsica'. Even in the sketches, one could see that Corsica was a very unique location. Also, no one really goes to Corsica... which actually was important for the film. So that's how I chose Corsica.

Aashish: We have also seen you repeat a few locations. Like the Czech Republic for example?

Imtiaz: I think Prague has this distinction that in Europe it was the only capital city which was not broken down in the Second World War. So the buildings over there have a very specific look. That older look, which in many other places in Europe, unfortunately, doesn't exist.

And also, Prague has become like a very touristic city now. very crowded. So, the film that you are talking about

was about a tour guide. So, Prague had to be in the itinerary of his travel. I don't mind repeating a place but also there is thrill in going to a new place.

Aashish: You spoke about crowds and you shot 'Jab Harry Met Sejal' in multiple countries with a superstar like Shah Rukh Khan. How did you manage that? I'm sure the crowds must have been a big challenge.

Imtiaz:

See. If you really want to shoot a film with a star in a crowded place, there are ways to do it. It takes a little planning. You have to change the order of the shooting. For instance, the most crowded shots like there was a shot in Prague where Shah Rukh is walking amongst hundreds of people... was the first shot. After that first shot, I knew that people will start to recognize him and they will talk about it on social media and then in the next three, four hours, it will be swamped with people. But we managed to take those shots. And then we scooted. We left the location.

Aashish: There are a lot of tourism official and international film commissions here. Do you have any advice to them? And secondly, after you've shot on a location, how can you build more brand value for that location? Like, for instance, what maybe 'Zindagi Na Milegi Doobara' did for Spain.

Imtiaz: I would like to say that rebate is not the only thing that people are looking for.

It about the ease with which shooting can happen and in a certain location it reduces cost. How good the services of line producer are? For instance, if you have a great location manager, who in the recce can break down locations in a certain way so that you can save the overall number of days. If you have a certain reduction in cost because of the service that you (film commissions) are providing then that is a very important thing for film makers. Wherever I go I hear this word rebate, I love it obviously but if the producer doesn't feel that he has full control then he will still not come

because the whole mechanics of shooting is something to do with how much control we have on the costs.

Aashish: After shooting, how do you market that destination? Are there ideas that the tourism bodies? For example, there's a Yash Raj tour in Switzerland for the locations of 'Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge'. You also have the Harry Potter tour in London.

Imtiaz: See there is obviously a connection between popularity (of a film) and tourism. Indians are crazy about cinema. And thankfully for us, those who are interested in cinema, are also interested in travelling. But (the question is) how are you going to project the city or the country when there are many things that are specific to that place. For example, a certain place has a certain landmark, then the person from tourism will know that this can promote this location. So, I feel that having an insight into the story and then force the story to be at that particular location is something that can be planned before shooting.

