

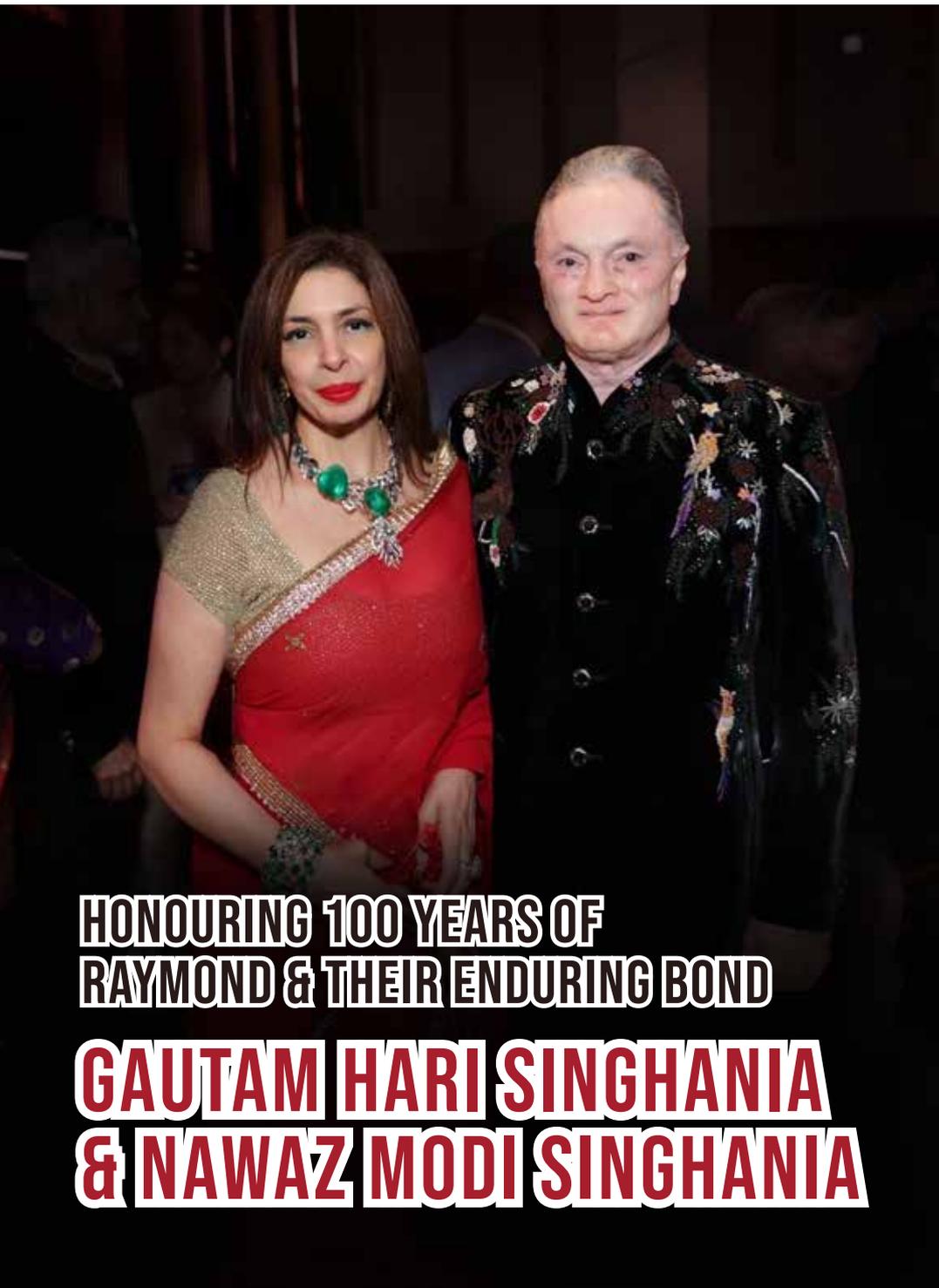
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**HONOURING 100 YEARS OF
RAYMOND & THEIR ENDURING BOND**

**GAUTAM HARI SINGHANIA
& NAWAZ MODI SINGHANIA**

LEGENDS & ACHIEVERS

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Tiger, Kartik & More
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**Parashar Healing:
Ashok Munshi's Ancient
Wisdom, Modern Wellness**

The Luxe Life

**Gourmet Bites &
Couture Cocktails**

Film

Rahul Mittra: “We never lose — either we win or we learn”

This mindset has seen film producer, actor and branding specialist Rahul Mittra consistently reinvent himself with brave choices, garnering many wins and learning too.

By Nichola Marie

You wear many hats — journalist, brand strategist, film producer, entrepreneur, actor. How do you juggle these diverse roles and ensure you do justice to each?

Well, my life has been like most of my films: Unpredictable. But that's how I want it to be. For me, the journey is important, never the destination. Most of my work is driven by passion and I enjoy what I do.

Take us back to your early days in journalism. What lessons from that phase still shape the way you work today?

I started writing early and felt encouraged when my articles started getting published in the children's corner of newspapers and magazines. I felt fascinated by the art of being able to express myself through one's writing. By the time I was finishing university, I was drawn to community affairs, foreign affairs, crime and other important societal issues. This led to my resolve of being a journalist growing stronger and I joined the 'Times of India' editorial team in Delhi in the 1990s. Though the editor back then told me that I wouldn't get to file stories for a year and that I should learn and be at the desk, I was adamant to start right away. My first story appeared within a week of my joining, as it was an exclusive. Apart from picking up sub-editing, I was driven by the desire to break clutter with interesting and engaging stories. Soon, I started filing stories on myriad topics, some of which had a positive impact. Whatever I did during my stint as a young journalist has helped me shape my personal and professional trajectory in multiple ways.

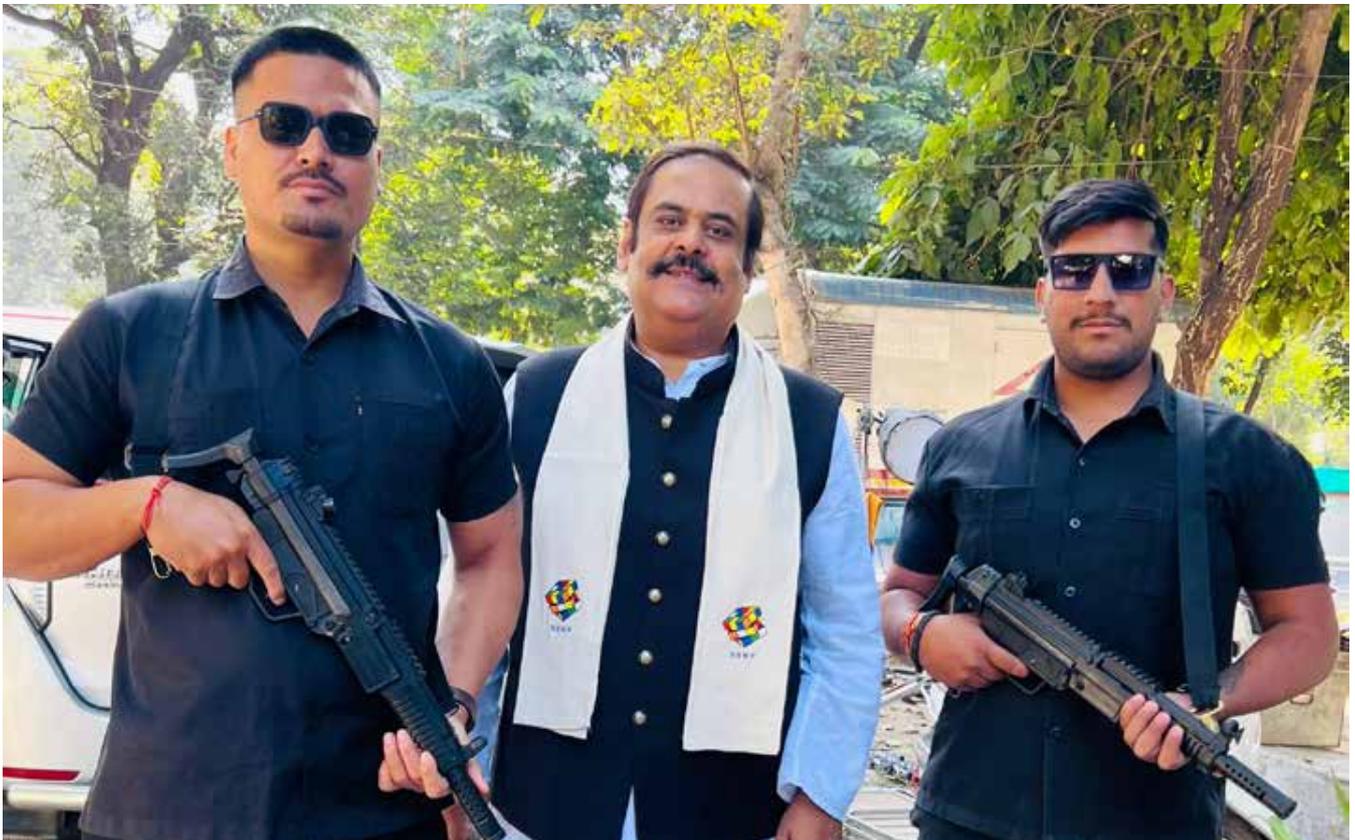


Transitioning from media and branding into film production is quite a leap. What drew you to cinema, and how did you make that shift?

I think part of that has to do with my childhood. Born in Amritsar and brought up in Chandigarh, my IAS father would take us all to watch movies regularly. Being the youngest of three siblings, initially I was excited to be part of this monthly ritual primarily for the popcorn, ice cream and hotdogs, but as I started watching multi-starrers like 'Amar Akbar Anthony', 'Haathi Mere Saathi' and the likes, I was hit by a plethora of emotions. I remember watching the Dharamji starrer 'Maa' as a six-year-old and coming out of the cinema hall crying. Years later, I would attempt to make similar small-town, rooted stories.



“Once you are driven by passion and enjoy what turns you on, turnover follows. Compelling content is of foremost importance for me and marrying it to box-office success is my endeavour.”



Your very first film, 'Saheb, Biwi Aur Gangster', became a cult success. Looking back, what did that moment mean for you as a newcomer to the industry?

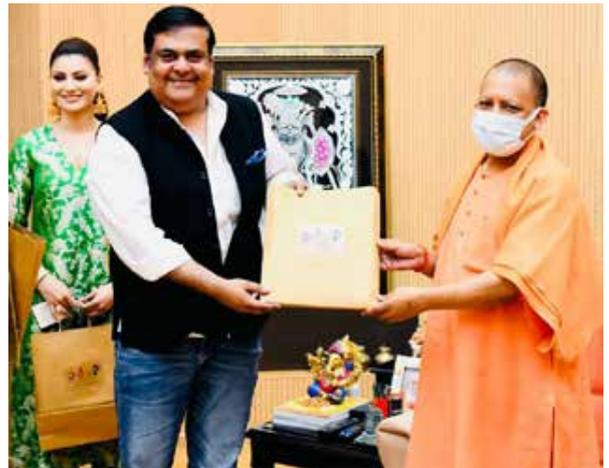
By 2010, Brandsmith, the company I had founded after quitting 'Tol', was established but I was craving to get out of my comfort zone and wanted to attempt something that would be seen as an important watershed. This was the time when Shah Rukh Khan was ruling the film industry and films were largely being made for the NRI or urban audiences.

Coming from a small-town background myself, I wanted to tell stories from the hinterland, stories that would tickle the sensibilities of viewers and probably force them to change their palate with regard to watching films.

That's when the idea came of a modern-day ode to the classic 'Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam' with actors Randeep Hooda, Jimmy Sheirgill and Mahie Gill. We wrapped 'Saheb, Biwi Aur Gangster' in a little less than a month in the remote Devgarh Baria in Gujarat, depicting it as Uttar Pradesh. It was all done with my life's savings and personal loans from family and friends. The film became one of the biggest hits of 2011 and was nominated for all the major awards.

Fortunately, it succeeded in making the audience ponder over the kind of content that was being served to them, as my film was seen as clutter-breaking, disruptive content. I am glad that I was part of the movement that changed the narrative of Indian cinema.

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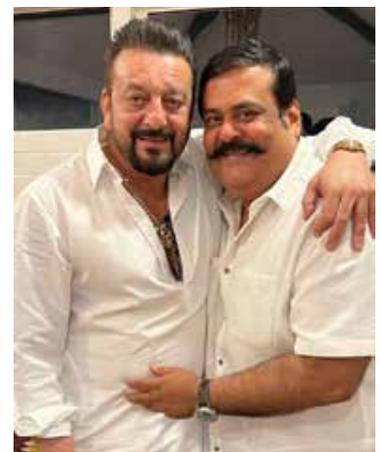
You've collaborated with some of the biggest names in Indian cinema. What, in your view, makes a great partnership in filmmaking?

Making a film is a collaborative process. More than 20 different crafts and departments work in unison to achieve a common goal. I feel that the producer's job is one of the trickiest and most challenging. Cinema is a rare field which is a mix of heart and mind, commerce and creativity, and my endeavour has always been to back engaging content that aimed at entertaining audiences. It is thus imperative to be courageous with your choices and compassionate towards the entire team. Also, it's important to have positive engagement as against interference and, above all, possess the passion and flair for filmmaking, which is by no means for the faint-hearted.

You're often described as a risk-taker who backs unconventional stories. How do you balance creativity with the business side of films?

Anything that tickles my sensibilities and possesses a germ of marketing in its one-liner is generally how I decide about a film, followed, of course, by a well-written script. Budgeting is crucial too as budgets make or break films, followed by the right casting. Once you are driven by passion and enjoy what turns you on, turnover follows. Compelling content is of foremost importance for me and marrying it to box-office success is my endeavour.

“While OTT has been getting the eyeballs, cinemas are running to full capacities with moviegoers hitting theatres with a bang for some films. Hence, OTT and movie-watching experiences in cinemas will not only co-exist but co-thrive. The audience is king, and content is the kingmaker.”



Beyond cinema, you've built a reputation for creating powerful brand narratives. Do you see common ground between storytelling in advertising and storytelling in films?

The purpose of a story is to grab the audience's attention by offering them an immersive experience. It's then alone that trust is built between the storyteller and the consumer of content. The character, plot, theme and genre hook the audience by fostering trust and creating a connection. So, be it a brand campaign, play, series, micro drama, or a movie, narratives have to be rooted to emotionally engage the audience.

The film industry is constantly evolving — from multiplexes to OTT. How do you see this transformation impacting the kind of stories being told? How do you view the industry today?

Covid-19 changed the viewing preferences of the audience. Traditionally, movie buffs in India have eagerly waited for the films of their favourite stars, and this factor would contribute largely to a sizeable opening weekend business. But now they don't mind waiting for the reaction of cinemagoers and critics to get a whiff of what lies in store. Also, if word of mouth is not favourable, the discerning audience doesn't mind waiting to watch it on OTT after a few weeks of release.

Just like a growing number of filmmakers are following a clear demarcation with regard to the content they are creating, for the cinema hall and for OTT, viewers have begun to do the same. Only larger-than-life action films with catchy songs warrant the cinema-viewing experience. But one thing is sure: Though there is no formula to decide what goes where (theatre or OTT), there's clarity that OTT can no longer be considered the dumping ground for sub-standard content.

While OTT has been getting the eyeballs, cinemas are running to full capacities with moviegoers hitting theatres with a bang for some films. Hence, OTT and movie-watching experiences in cinemas will not only co-exist but co-thrive. The audience is king, and content is the kingmaker.

“I started my career as a journalist with a salary of ₹2,500 and have since then been on a magical journey. It's important to enjoy the journey without worrying about the destination. Setbacks and criticism are part of the journey; one has got to grow through what one goes through.”





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With such a diverse career, what keeps you motivated to keep reinventing yourself?

Our DNA is what we are all born with. It defines an inherent code to succeed or fail as a specific gene pool and that is something we simply inherit. But it's the drive that we have to inculcate on our own, which eventually will determine your life in the long run. I've always made my own choices, be it beginning my professional life as a journalist against my family's wishes to compete for the civil services or quitting journalism and shifting to the realm of corporate communications and branding and finally to making films. The snake that cannot shed its skin perishes and hence, reinventing oneself is essential. I, too, followed this and stuck to my choices, which paid off well in the long run.

Success brings visibility, but it also brings challenges. How do you deal with setbacks or criticism?

What is life without challenges? The only thing constant in life is change and it's these changing scenarios that make it interesting. I started my career as a journalist with a salary of ₹2,500 and have since then been on a magical journey. It's important to enjoy the journey without worrying about the destination. I live in the moment and try not to dwell on the past; I only look back to see how far I have travelled. Setbacks and criticism are part of the journey; one has to grow through what one goes through. One should keep the mindset of a winner. We never lose - either we win or we learn.

Outside of work, what passions or interests ground you and keep you balanced?

I love to travel, play table tennis and swim regularly. Meeting self-made people and achievers from varied backgrounds, and reading are my other interests.

Finally, what legacy would you like to create — as a filmmaker, a storyteller, or a changemaker?

In the end, only two things matter — the lives you have touched and the choices you have made. With regard to both, I think, I've done fairly alright. I may have been the jack of all, but I surely am the master of my own!