

## INTERVIEW: OMAR ALI KHAN

KISHORE BUDHA

The Telegraph labelled *Zibakhana/Hell's Ground* “zombies wearing Saris”. Omar Ali Khan shrugs off Western criticism of his films: “Not only do they expect to laugh at how awful our films are supposed to be, they have the nerve to demand that awfulness. Why should I dance to their expectations?” He talks about how he made his film, digital cinema, and the state of the Pakistan film industry.



Figure 1 Omar Ali Khan

*Kishore Budha (KB):* Where do you place your film in the history of the Pakistani horror film and indeed Pakistani cinema itself?

*Omar Ali Khan (OAK):* I reckon it is the first horror film with a more modern and contemporary approach and feel to it. There is neither a hairy monster or fanged creature nor anything from a mad scientist's lab causing havoc. This is the first one that has a family of psychopaths as the main attraction so in many respects the film is a barrier breaker not only for Pakistani cinema but for South Asian cinema as well.

*KB:* You have used the classical Hollywood teen-horror formula, though you place it within specific Pakistani socio-political context. How do you react to this charge?

*OAK*: Fair enough, there is no denying that the film's basic orientation is western... indeed to take it a step further, it is one of many bastard offspring of the legendary genre-defining *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, yet the setting and the sights, sounds, characters and essential flavour is distinctly Pakistani. This film is a mad horror buff's attempt at saying thanks to all those great horror films that I grew up in awe of in a respectful yet fun way. It is very much a homage and very much tongue-in-cheek with loads of references – some obvious, some not so obvious – to horror films and even desi pop culture to some extent.



**Figure 2 A still from Zibakhana/Hell's Ground**

*KB*: What format did you make the film in and why?

*OAK*: High Definition Digital because we couldn't afford film and this was the most affordable option with which we were able to achieve a result that we were fairly happy with, considering the cost.

*KB*: What were the issues faced in the making and distribution of the film?

*OAK*: We faced a myriad of issues in making the film. I won't go into the details but just to say that the July in Islamabad is the most uncomfortable month of the year and we were shooting all night on a high intensity shoot that was crammed into 30 days with a film crew of very naive and green individuals. There were people falling sick, people getting knocked out by heat exhaustion, various species of animals showing up on set, things we hadn't quite taken into account and on occasion there was a certain amount of tension in the air due to various personality issues. Fortunately these found a way of resolving themselves sooner rather than later.

A big problem was that our budget was at breaking point and suddenly we needed to hire a giant set of lights and the power to run them, which meant every drop of monsoon rain was a disaster and half the time we were battling with the rain! It was as far removed from a glamorous shoot as possible and at the end of it my bed never looked more inviting. Distribution – we are undertaking the distribution of the film in Pakistan independently which might be a first! By this I mean, we found that since we have no stars in our film nor any way to grab an audience other than our trailer we

would have to take a chance on word of mouth and buzz, and at the moment there is an attempt to get the film (once passed by the censors) to screen in one cinema in the three main cities in the country. We are still working on it and are fascinated to see how people used to watching “Shaan and Saima” films and Bollywood films will react to this. And if indeed we can tempt anyone to even check it out, considering we have no resources for advertising.

*KB:* If you were to make the film again, how different would it be?

*OAK:* Now that we can spot the film’s weaker moments on screen, I would generally try to go back and attempt those in a different way to make them work more effectively. Secondly, I would have liked to have given my editor a ton more minor detail shots than I did and this time things would be different with days, not hours or minutes, assigned to small detail pick up shots. Also, the shoot wouldn’t be as crazily hectic and perhaps I would have used even more zombies! I think given the restraints we had and the relatively low cost equipment at hand, it’s a minor miracle that the film looks like it does and I have a very hard working DOP to thank for that.

*KB:* Is a sequel in the offing?

*OAK:* It is being discussed and various scenarios have been concocted, whether it is given the go ahead or not remains to be seen.

*KB:* How do you react to the discourse in the (Western) media when your film is introduced against the backdrop of Bollywood? Am I right in assuming that Pakistani cinema cannot escape being compared with the Mumbai cinema?

*OAK:* It has only once been associated with Bollywood at the ICA in London but otherwise the film defies falling into the Bollywood or Lollywood category. I have always warned people in the introductions I have given that the film is unrecognisable from the typical Bollywood stuff or Lollywood stuff. Not in a condescending manner, but just that it is coming from a different direction altogether. In the case of Lollywood, we badly need more genres and styles to be introduced into the mainstream which is horribly redundant.

*KB:* How would you define Pakistani cinema?

*OAK:* Stagnant, redundant and existing on a life support system that isn’t working out. But that said we might have a turning point with the hugely successful *Khuda Ke Liye* leading a trio of films that are almost considered the new wave and I am flattered that our film might be considered one of those by some.

*KB:* If Pakistan had a film industry, what would it’s contours be in terms of aesthetics, the kind of films made, film styles, genres?. What I am trying to get at here is how it would be distinct from the films produced in Mumbai.

*OAK:* Our films these days are virtually three types – the Urdu films that are virtually deceased and now are mostly pale imitations of superior Bollywood products. Their emphasis is on trying to capture the slickness and aesthetics of Bollywood. The recent movies of Javed Shaikh come to mind – pleasing inoffensive piffle. Then there is the cinema of the Punjab which has a crude earthiness to it and the songs remain folk-music based rather than disco or techno like the rest of the world. These movies are very formulaic, highly sexist, very violent and often very, very poorly constructed.

The aesthetic and style of the Punjabi film is different from the Urdu film in that the Urdu film is comparatively genteel while the Punjabi one is loud, aggressive and in-your-face. Then lastly we have the Pushto cinema, which is representative of a culture that is in many ways rather different to the Punjabi/North Indian culture. So their films are on another realm altogether and made solely for Pushto speakers. The biggest difference is that while Mumbai's industry has developed by leaps and bounds, especially since the '80s, our films in Pakistan are being shot on cameras and projectors from 1940, and this is NOT a joke... its true. Everything about our industry is outdated and antiquated – from the equipment and the mindset of the film makers to the age of the people working in what is left of the industry, it's all old and decaying and falling apart. To even compare the Pakistani film industry to Mumbai today would be pointless as there simply is no comparison. There may have been (an opportunity) back in the 60s and even the 70s but certainly not any more.

**KB:** Would this industry have an alternative?

**OAK:** There is hope, especially with digital shooting, editing and projection becoming so much more affordable. Secondly, multiplexes are being built, which could either destroy the local product totally by selling and screening only Hollywood films. Still, 2007 has shown that there might be change and hope in the air. For the first time in an age, rather than hear of the usual cinema being ripped down, one has opened up in a locality in Lahore and has people massing there regularly ever since. People do want to go to the cinema, but the environment of the cinema has to be welcoming and pleasant and safe and secondly the product has to be attractive as well!

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**About Interviewer:** Dr Kishore Budha is one of the editors of *Wide Screen*. He has published a chapter on genre and nationalism in Hindi films in the book *Filming the Line of Control* (Routledge). His forthcoming book includes *Historical Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (Scarecrow Press).