

Best Mahatma movie since Gandhi



EYE ON ENGLAND

AMIT ROY

The best Indian movie for years — and I know absolutely no one will agree with me — is *Road to Sangam*. Therefore, it is a matter of regret that it has not been included for the London Film Festival which begins on Wednesday, October 14.

Road to Sangam, I would go so far as to say, is the best Mahatma movie since Attenborough's *Gandhi* in 1982. In some ways it has a rawness and an integrity which I found even more moving.

It is by Western and even contemporary Bollywood standards a small affair, shot on location in Allahabad on a budget of not even £1million.

It has been made by two relative newcomers, Amit Chheda, its producer, and Amit Rai, who scripted and directed the film using a lot of local folk in Allahabad.

The movie's general release in India has been postponed but I was first tipped off about *Road to Sangam* in Cannes in May, saw a promotional DVD and then subsequently the full film.

It was just after Quentin Tarantino had boastfully told a press conference after a screening of *Inglourious Basterds*: "I am not an American filmmaker — I make movies for the planet Earth."

When it comes to touching the human soul, though, it is actually Indians who sometimes make movies of the kind of which Ameri-

cans and Europeans appear incapable in today's technology-driven climate.

Such a film is *Road to Sangam* which is based on a real event — the discovery of an urn containing Gandhi's ashes in a bank vault in Orissa in 1997.

I cannot write highly enough about the central performance by Paresh Rawal who is cast as Hashmatullah, a motor mechanic by trade and a devout Muslim in his private life. He takes on the job of repairing an old V8 Ford engine. But following a bomb blast in Allahabad and the round-up of innocent Muslims, there is a strike by members of the community who shut their shops. It is then that Hashmatullah learns that the engine he is repairing is for the truck which had been used once before to carry Gandhi's ashes to the sangam of the holy rivers in Allahabad in 1948, and which is due to be rolled out again to transport the contents of the urn found in Orissa.

He resolves to go against his fellow Muslims, notably the leader of the community, Mohammad Ali Kasuri (Om Puri), and the hard line local mullah, Maulana Qureshi (Pawan Malhotra). Hashmatullah reopens his shop and sets about repairing the engine despite serious intimidation and violence.

The lone fight of one man recalls such classics as *High Noon* and *Twelve Angry Men* but Hashmatullah raises bigger issues: "If we cannot honour Gandhi, a man who died

for us, then what are we doing here in India?"

Gandhi's great-grandson, Tushar Gandhi, puts in a cameo appearance as himself. But it is Paresh Rawal as Hashmatullah who has turned in the performance of his life. *Road to Sangam* is Indian cinema at its best — and it should have been here at the London Film Festival.



TOUR DE FORCE: Paresh Rawal in *Road to Sangam*