

AMIT ROY



Cannes and the healing power



for more info log on to .. www.roadtosangam.com

THE film that moved me most at Cannes is by western standards a small affair. *Road to Sangam* was shot in Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh, India, on a budget of not even £1 million.

If Cannes wasn't so obsessed with movies about the Nazis – "for God's sake, grow up, the war was over in 1945", you sometimes feel like telling them – *Road to Sangam* might well have merited consideration for competition.

Instead, there was much fuss about the anti-christ, which sought to shock with scenes of genital mutilation.

Another film also shown in competition, Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, though enjoyable, was a "Jewish fantasy" about – what else? – Nazis in which Hitler and his top henchmen are blown up in a Paris cinema.

"I am not an American filmmaker," Tarantino (pictured right) told a press conference. "I make movies for the planet Earth."

However, when it comes to touching the human soul, it is actually Indians who sometimes make movies of the kind of which American and European filmmakers appear incapable.

Such a film is *Road to Sangam*, which was offered to Cannes but was not included for

competition in any category. It is based on real events which followed Mahatma Gandhi's assassination on January 30, 1948.

After his cremation, 20 urns containing his ashes were sent to towns and villages across India and dispersal in holy rivers according to Hindu rites. However, one urn ended up in a bank vault in the state of Orissa and lay undiscovered until 1997.

This is the starting for Amit Rai's fictional story. The central character for Rai, a first time director and scriptwriter, is Hashmatullah (Paresh Rawal, pictured above), a motor mechanic by trade and a devout Muslim in private.

He takes on the job of repairing an old V8 ford engine. But following a bomb blast in Allahabad and the roundup of innocent Muslims, there is a strike by members of the community who shut their shops.

It is then that Hashmatullah discovers that the engine he is repairing is for the truck which had been used

once before to carry Gandhi's ashes to the confluence ("sangam") of the holy rivers in Allahabad in 1948, which is due to be rolled out again to transport 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 local mullah, Maulana Qureshi (Pawan Malhotra).

The latter wants to exploit the situation for his own ends, just as the extremist "Islamic leaders" have been doing in the UK to encourage young British Muslims to become jihadis.

Hashmatullah reopens his shop and sets about repairing the engine, despite serious intimidation and threats of violence.

The fight of one man against the rest recalls such classics as *High Noon* and *Twelve Angry Men*, but Hashmatullah raises bigger issues, such as the status of Muslims in India.

"If we cannot honour Gandhi, a man who died for us, then what are we doing here in India?" he ponders.

Indian cinema at its best.

