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H'wood tales: From Sabu to Ash

The name Sabu Dastagir may mean little to today's movie buffs, many of them in thrall of Hollywood headed Aishwarya Rai. In 1935, documentary film maker Robert Flaherty, creator of *Nanook of the North*, decided to make a movie based on Rudyard Kipling's *Toomai of the Elephants*. Search for a lead character led him to Mysore, where 11-year old Sabu was a budding mahout in the Maharaja's stable. A reedy boy clad in a dhoti and an oversized turban, Sabu wowed Flaherty with his handling of pachyderms, a skill he learnt from his late father (who it was said taught elephants to rock Sabu's cradle when he was a child).

Sabu was brought to the United States to play the lead in *Elephant Boy*, as the film was titled. It was a cinematic and commercial success and made the lad an instant star. "With a smile as broad as the Ganges and charm enough to lure the stripes off a tiger, the young Indian also added the authenticity needed in the lead role," records film historian Philip Leibfried. Flaherty won the Best Direction award for the movie at the Venice Film Festival, and Sabu was the toast on both sides of the Atlantic.

Now you'd think that would be the end of the story and Sabu would return to India after a one-film affair with Hollywood. Many Indians of that era who achieved fame in the west, notably the mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujam and the chess player Mir Sultan Khan, found it hard to hang in. But young Sabu remained in the Hollywood hunt, going on to play Mowgli in *Jungle Book*, and starring in films such as the smash-hit *Thief of Baghdad*, in a career that would last another 25 years.

By 1940, Sabu Dastagir was a well-recognised Hollywood actor and had signed up with Universal Pictures, starring in *Arabian Nights* in 1942 and *Tangier* in 1946, among other films. In between, he became an American citizen and entered the US armed forces, serving as an air force tail gunner in World War II and winning the Distinguished Flying Cross. In 1948, he

married actress Marilyn Cooper, who bore him two children, before he died of a heart attack in 1963 at only 39.

So it isn't Aishwarya Rai, or Om Puri or Kabir Bedi or even I.S.Johar who made the first major foray into Hollywood, but a young mahout from Mysore. What is instructive here is that Sabu got locked into exotic Indian character roles at the start of his career -- playing a jungle boy, an Indian guide etc -- and found it difficult to get out of the niche.

But times have changed. The west's celebration of Sabu was spontaneous and based on his exotic appeal. Ash's splash is driven by hard-nosed marketing which barrels her onto Oprah, Good Morning America, and David Letterman. Her appeal is also more universal -- a cousin in New Jersey who doesn't care for Bollywood called excitedly not because she appeared in a L'Oreal commercial, but because the ad showed during a National Football League game. Now that's mainstream.

So Ms Rai's success cannot be predicated on exotic beauty, but on a wider appeal. It has to be based on varied roles (and not just an Indian babe), fuelled of course by marketing and promotion. Beauties there are many and at 31 it won't last for ever. If she is going to leave a lasting record that will be archived like Sabu's, the tough part begins now. Otherwise she's just a fleeting image -- 'ash in the pan'.