

Hour of the UNDERDOG

by **Priyanka Srivastava**

REALITY shows ride high on melodrama. Cashing in on sympathy wave that a contestant generates seems to be the mantra to garner TRPs. The music reality show *Indian Idol 5* is no exception. Looking at the final 17 singers who have made it to the competition proper from auditions held at various centres, you realise that the underdog factor has played heavily in favour of certain singers. Besides their singing abilities, their ability to create melodrama has clearly been taken into consideration.

"The audience has a tendency to love a talent who has made his or her mark after fighting all odds. For instance, if a contestant has a rags-to-riches tale for a background or some sort of a

A few of the contestants in the competition proper of *Indian Idol 5* seem to have been selected for their ability to create drama on the show than just singing talent.

deformity, he or she automatically becomes saleable," says ad-filmmaker and image consultant Prahlad Kakkar.

Track record of past shows has proved that the audience is always moved by sob stories related to struggles of contestants, especially from smalltowns. The recent film *Paathshala* made a note of this, where the organisers of a reality show for children pick kids who can move viewers rather than the really talented ones with no drama factor about them.

Says music composer Anu Malik, who has been judging *Indian Idol* for the last five years: "It's a good idea to

encourage people from not so fortunate backgrounds because viewers are interested. After a point, however, it's only talent that counts."

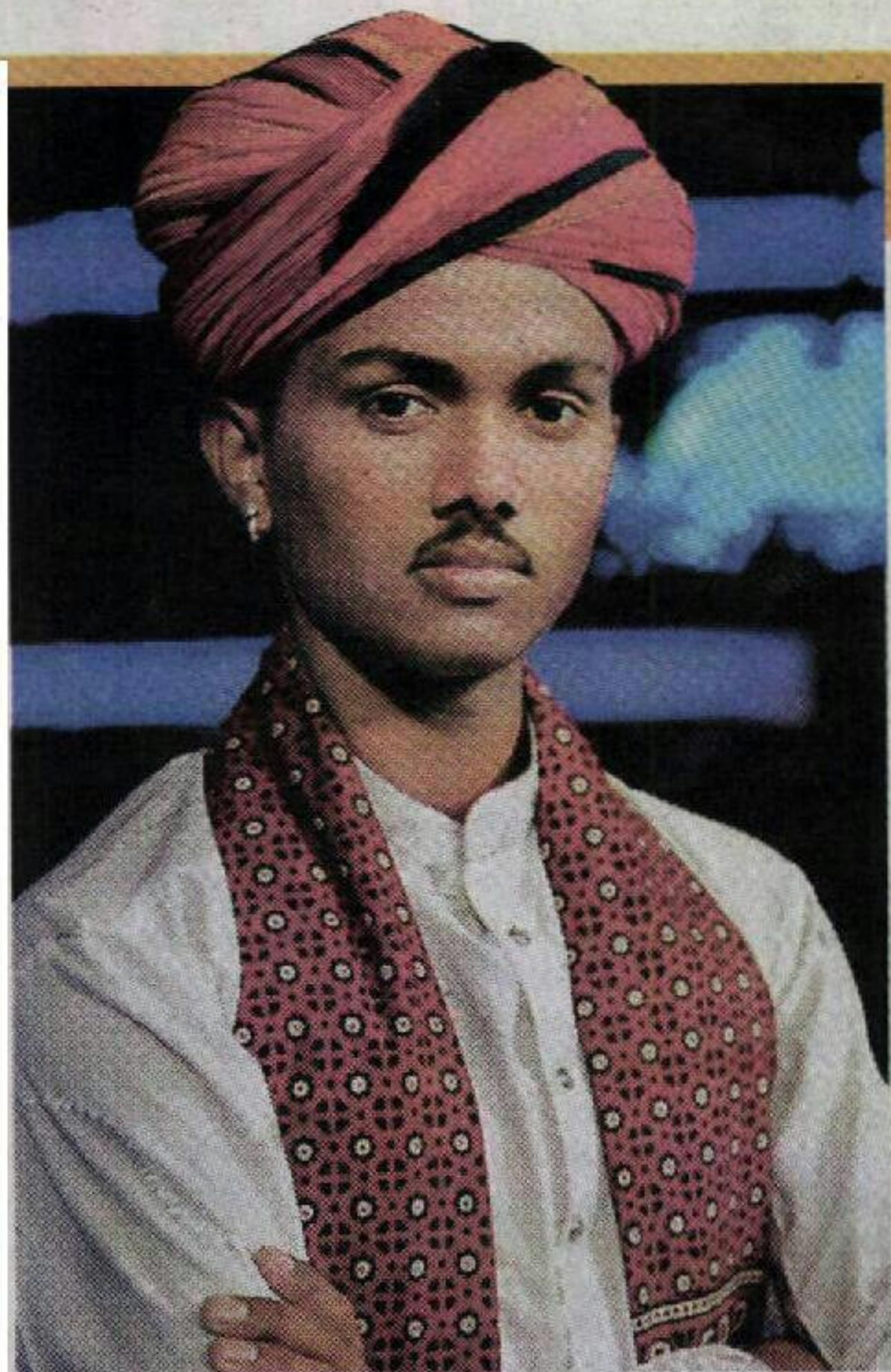
In the past, on the reality show *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Lil Champs 2007*, a visually impaired Diwakar Sharma created turned out to be a rage. He finished first runner-up on the show. Although Diwakar is talented, judges of the show Abhijeet and Alka Yagnik openly pointed out that his physical inability influenced the audience voting pattern.

In this season of *Indian Idol*, there are three contestants who have caught popular attention with their personal problems

more than their singing. Sure, they are talented. But their zest to overcome all odds in personal life has been more of a talking point. Whether they survive, of course, depends on how well they sing. One of these three — Kanika Joshi, who comes from a poor family in smalltown Rudrapur — has already been eliminated, but the buzz is that she will back as a wild card entry at the right time when the channel needs a dramatic boost for the show.

We spoke to Kanika, as well as the visually-challenged Meghna Kumar and Swaroop Khan, an illiterate folk singer from Rajasthan.

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UNTRAINED & UNINHIBITED

SWAROOP KHAN, 19

Halls from: Balya village, Rajasthan

WHEN Swaroop first appeared in the audition round, he was accompanied by his cousins, father and uncle, who played music as he rendered a Rajasthani folk song. When the judges wondered who the real contestant was, Swaroop could barely reply in Hindi. In order to judge him closely, Sunidhi Chauhan asked him to sing a solo Hindi song. He managed to sing a few lines from the *Woh Lamhe* number, *Kyun aajkal neend kam*. Sunidhi selected him but said the boy lacked rhythm. Salim however said Swaroop had a rich, appealing voice and gifted him his jacket.

Hailing from the Rajasthan's traditional musical tribe, Langa, Swaroop has inherited the richness of traditional music. "I am a totally uneducated person from a remote village. My forefathers performed in front of the King in their forts. We have been singers for the last seven genera-

tions, performing at various events and function in Rajasthan."

Swaroop lacks the knowledge of classical music but has learnt tradition singing from his uncle Anwar Khan. He admits realising that his knowledge of music is not complete in the modern set up.

"At the audition in Jaipur, I found it difficult to even speak in Hindi. Bollywood music is a distant thing in our village where there is no access to films, TV and even radio. Our family does not believe in mixing film music with our traditional folk form," he says with some effort.

Ever since he came to Mumbai, he has been taking classes in spoken Hindi and classical music. When he was given the lyrics of the song *Gun gun karta aaya re* in the theatre round, he could not read the lines. However, his innate talent saved the day once he picked up the lines. Says Swaroop, who doesn't quite understand what SMS voting is about: "I just want to match pace with the urban singers who are there in this competition."

SMALLTOWN GIRL CUTS A PICTURE OF STRUGGLE

KANIKA JOSHI, 19

Hails from: Rudrapur, Uttarakhand

KANIKA has been singing ever since she was a kid. Only, at that time when she wowed audiences in smalltown functions, Kanika didn't know what it means to be a successful singer or what it takes to acquire the skills.

"I come from a very poor family. And the environment in my village does not encourage girls to take up singing," she says.

Kanika never had any formal education in music and has learnt Bollywood songs only by listening to the radio — her only tool for 'musical education'. Her parents in Rudrapur have struggled to make ends meet and affording a music teacher was always a difficult proposition.

"I managed to learn on my own and even started performing at various functions. Appreciation gave me confidence to take my singing abilities forward," says Kanika.

She auditioned from Delhi and performed a fast-paced number by Lata Mangeshkar, which impressed the judges. Salim Merchant however felt that due to lack of musical education she has not been able to properly use the full range of her voice.

Kanika has now enrolled in Suresh Wadkar's academy to learn music. Her

family has joined her in Mumbai to boost morale, and her father has actually managed to get a transfer in his job as a lower division clerk to be with her.

Kanika was eliminated in the early rounds but the buzz is that she will back as a wild card entry at the right time when the channel needs a dramatic boost for the show. Meanwhile, to support her family, Kanika has already taken up work. "In order to support my family in Mumbai, I have started to give music lessons to small children," she says. The major problem for her is to cope with the fastpaced life of Mumbai.

"Learning music, teaching music and adapting to a modern, urban lifestyle at the same time is difficult," she adds.

In the piano round, Kanika sang Asha Bhonsle's peppy cabaret *Aao na gale lagao na*, which the judges liked, even as her mother, sitting in the audience, shed copious tears.

"It wasn't a move to create drama or gain audience sympathy. For singers like me who have struggled a lot to reach the platform, it is an overwhelming moment. Tears automatically roll down," Kanika defends her mother's emotional burst.

Achievement has a different definition for her: "For me, breaking the rules by travelling to Mumbai from Rudrapur is itself an achievement. People who made snide remarks about me when I planned to audition have changed their viewpoint now."



GIRL WITH TUNNEL VISION

MEGHNA KUMAR, 17

Hails from: Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh

MEGHNA suffers from a medical condition called Tunnel Vision Syndrome. Put simply, her vision is diminishing as she's growing older due to reduced retina. She started losing vision around five years back and that's when she quit regular studies to take up music.

"Since music is one thing that can be learnt by listening, I pursued BA in this subject," says Meghna, who has completed her Prabhakar degree from Prayag University.

However, singing as a career was not the best option in a small city like Jhansi. So, Meghna took the decision to participate in *Indian Idol 5* and was selected instantly at the auditions in Indore. She floored the judges when she sang *Lambi judaai* and received accolades from Sunidhi Chauhan and Salim Merchant in the theatre round.

Although doctors have declared Meghna as completely blind, she can

vaguely differentiate between light and dark. She cannot identify a person standing in front of her.

"After coming to Mumbai, I have realised the vastness of the music. We have masters who teach the nuances of music. I have also learnt the way to talk and conduct myself on stage," says Meghna.

In Mumbai, Meghna is accompanied by her father Tilak Raj Kumar. Ever since she landed in Mumbai two weeks ago after the audition round, she is mostly busy with *riyaaz*.

She dispels the notion that her medical condition will make it easy for her in the contest.

"To prove myself I have to make twice the effort. I need to give 200 per cent. My inability to see should not colour the perception of the audience," she says. "Till now, I have performed only in front of the judges and they have appreciated my talent and nothing else. The audience voting will start after the piano round. I hope viewers vote for my singing and not out of sympathy."

