



Evil of Gabbar lives on

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The other evening, I walked into a plush multiplex in Chennai to watch Ramesh Sippy's *Sholay*, which has been airbrushed to look swanky new. Not just this, but the film has also been digitally converted into a 3D format.

Watching *Sholay* after 39 years was immensely enjoyable. It first opened in 1975, at a time when India was experiencing one of its darkest days. Those were the days of the Emergency, imposed by the "Steel Lady" Indira Gandhi.

Sholay had nothing remotely political though. It raised no questions about the Emergency. So the movie ran, and ran in many, many theatres — often for more than 100 days. And those were not days of multiplexes, whose rise and rapid spread during the past years have not only led to many more films being produced, but also to a movie not running in a cinema for more than a week or two. Because, others are jostling for screen space!

What those hundreds of men and women who watched *Sholay* in the mid-1970s did not know was that the film had run into censor problems. These men with sharp scissors (they still exist in India, only that their excising instrument is not as sharp these days) would not let *Sholay* have the brutally sadistic end it was supposed to have had.

And what was that? Sanjeev Kumar's Thakur Baldev Singh, an ex-cop, wearing spiked shoes,

smashes Amjad Khan/ dacoit Gabbar Singh's skull. The censors said nothing doing to this scene, and Sippy had to re-shoot the climax — where the police arrive just as Thakur is about to kill Gabbar. With the Emergency on, there was no way that Sippy could convince or challenge the men with the scissors.

I am told that a copy of the director's cut is with the BBC. Some have seen it, and described it as extremely violent.

In fact, *Sholay* turned out to be not only a cult movie, but it redefined Indian cinema. It brought violence to the fore in Indian cinema, which had till then had its share of wrestling and other forms of fights.

But *Sholay* in a way celebrated sadism; Khan as Gabbar was brilliantly evil. He was obnoxious, malicious, revolting, vile and foul — a dacoit who killed at will, who killed even as he laughed, even as his victims laughed. He was an outlaw who gunned down a teenager, who butchered a child, who slaughtered women and sliced off the arms of men.

Quite unlike a real dacoit (perhaps), who did follow some norms, some ethics; they would not really kill women or children. But Gabbar was an exception, so was *Sholay* that virtually created a new kind of cinema in India that had hitherto been largely romantic with songs and dances. Yes, there were villains, like Pran, but they were not as malevolent as Gabbar.

Incidentally, Khan was not the first choice for the role. It was Danny Denzongpa, who could not give dates for *Sholay* as he was busy with a Feroz Khan production. I wonder whether Denzongpa would have been as riveting as

Amjad Khan. He was par excellence, the one actor that probably *Sholay* owes its phenomenal success to.

Sholay was a disaster, though, when it opened on Independence Day in 1975. The exploits of two petty thieves, Veeru (Dharmendra) and Jai (Amitabh Bachchan), hardly caught the imagination of the Indian masses when the film opened.

But after the initial run, *Sholay* caught the fancy of the people. About a retired police officer — whose arms are chopped off and family butchered by a dacoit who escapes from prison — the Sippy drama had a liberal dash of the Western genre, neatly meshed into delightful Indianness.

The cop, played with exceptional restraint by Sanjeev Kumar (who personified a kind of frustrated anger that I have not seen anybody else do in Indian cinema), hires two small-time thieves Veeru and Jai, to capture — not kill — Gabbar.

I really wonder whether Khan ever got to do another part as provocative as Gabbar's with its unforgettable one liners. "Kitney Aadmi they" — was one that became an inseparable part of youth conversations.

Indeed, it may not be an exaggeration to say that if *Sholay* is still remembered as a cult work after all these decades, Gabbar was a pivotal reason. Khan made the character menacingly attractive. He brought a certain fiery viciousness to the role, laced with his sardonic laugh and utterly arrogant look which seemed to mock any challenger.

In fact, Gabbar was inspired by a real dacoit

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— also named Gabbar — who had terrified villages around Gwalior in the 1950s, and if he got hold of a policeman, his nose and ears were sliced off. Some shades of the gangster in Sergio Leone's *El Indio*, essayed by Gian Maria Volonte, can also be seen in Gabbar.

Sholay itself had borrowed bits and pieces from other works, even some classics like Akira Kurosawa's 1954 *Seven Samurai* and Leone's *Spaghetti Western*, *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). Some scenes will also remind one of *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy* and the *Sundance Kid*.

For all the cruelty and carnage in *Sholay*, some borrowed, some thought of by writers, the movie played Cupid at another level. The set, recreated in Karnataka's *Ramnagar* (near Bangalore), turned into a lovers' paradise.

A much married Punjabi Dharmendra chased a chaste single, rather conservative Tamil Brahmin Hema — even causing havoc with lights and bribing light boys so that more takes could be had of those shots with her — which meant more time with the girl he eventually managed to marry five years after *Sholay* was released. And yes, Sanjeev was also in love with Hema, but lost out to Dharmendra.

Jaya Bachchan, who portrays Radha, the widow of Thakur's son, had married Amitabh just four months before the cameras rolled, and the couple was still in a honeymoon mood. So *Ramnagar* was not just about vengeance and violence, but also about the blossoming of love and extraordinary male bonding (between Veeru and Jai) that some Western writers felt appeared to take on homosexual colours.

However, despite the romance and even some comic interludes, some by Dharmendra himself (remember the scene where he tries blackmailing Basanti's (Hema) mausi (aunt) into agreeing to their marriage by threatening to jump off a village tower) and some by Bachchan, *Sholay* was violent all right.

And *Sholay* did blur the line between legality and criminality, between violence and social order. And in 1975, this was new. For Indian cinema had not quite got around to turning law-breakers into law-enforcers or law-enforcers into law-breakers. Veeru and Jai as well Thakur himself are precisely that, and had Sippy not been forced into it, he would have shown the ex-cop kill Gabbar in the most ghastly manner.

Well, all said and done, *Sholay* went on to become a classic, and unexpectedly so. But what surprised me no end was that many of those who watched the film that evening with me in Chennai knew the dialogues.

Even before Bachchan could say, "*Thumhara naam kya hai Basanti* (What is your name Basanti?)" viewers said it. And as the screening ended, Gabbar's hiss seemed to echo and re-echo through the darkness of the night.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran saw *Sholay* only once nearly four decades ago, but remembered just about every frame when he watched it again recently, and he may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com