



To Oscars on *The Good Road*

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Every year, and invariably so, India's Oscars submission for the foreign language section runs into rough weather. The choice of the movie evokes rancorous debates and accusations of nepotism. Not without reason though. For, the panels set up by the Mumbai-based Film Federation of India have very often picked rank bad works like *Jeans* and *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* to mention only two titles.

This year, too, has been no exception, though the anger and resentment have centred on why Ritesh Batra's *The Lunchbox* was not selected. The film's producer, director, foreign distributor and even the media have been upset. For weeks before the Federation's committee, under the chairmanship of Bengali helmer Goutam Ghose, met — and even when it was deliberating in Hyderabad — the Indian press, social networking sites and television had decided that *The Lunchbox* ought to be the country's official entry.

This "verdict" was overruled by Ghose and his 15-member team of jurors who chose Gyan Correa's debut work, *The Good Road*. In the Gujarati language, it was the first ever from the region to have made it as India's offer to a basket of many, many movies — some brilliant — arriving in Los Angeles in the hope of making it to the short list of five out of which one will win the Foreign Language Academy Award.

Nobody knows who Ghose's men were. When I asked the helmer over the telephone when he was in Hyderabad, he regretted that he was not allowed to disclose the names! What perplexed me even more was that the panel was asked to watch a mere 22 films in a nation that produces some 1400 or so every year. Where did the rest disappear?

And predictably when *The Good Road* was declared winner, there were outbursts of anger. The co-producer of *The Lunchbox*, Anurag Kashyap, and Batra were livid, because they were sure that their work would be chosen. It deserved to be, they felt.

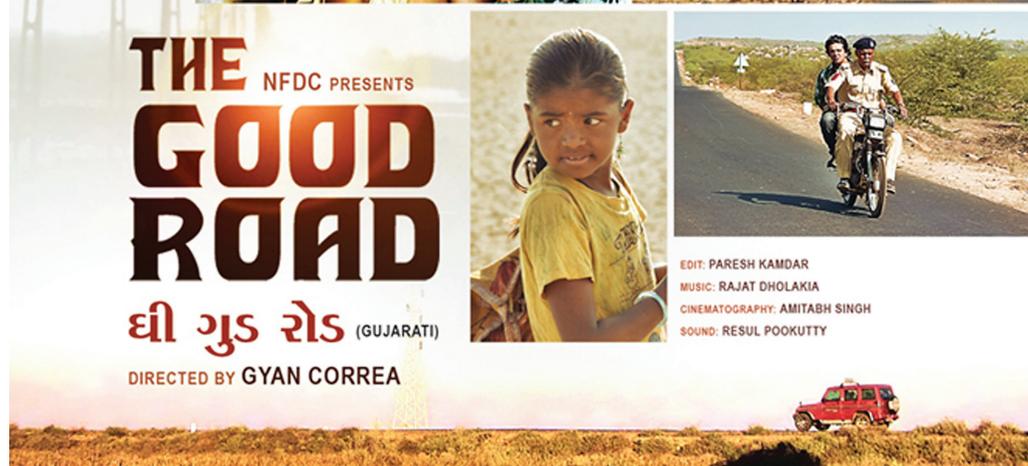
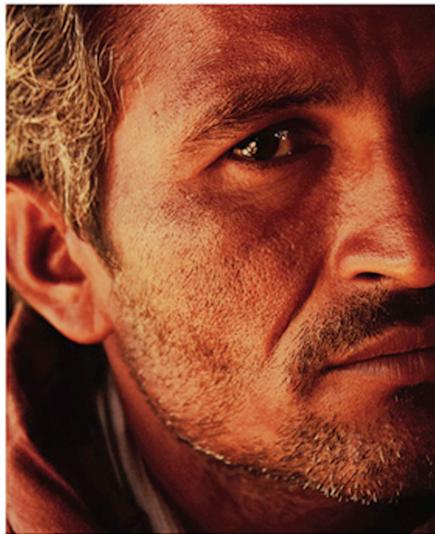
Kashyap tweeted: "First time and I really mean it, I was excited because first time we knew we had a chance... I don't know who the Federation is, but it goes to show, why we completely lack the understanding to make pictures that can travel across borders."

Batra also accused the Federation of "lacking in vision". Sony, *The Lunchbox*'s international distributor, was so confident that it had plans of similar lobbying campaigns as *Amour*, the French work that won the foreign language Oscar last year. And the media, including *The Hollywood Reporter*, too, was sure that *The Lunchbox* would be India's nominee.

Indeed, *The Lunchbox* is a fascinating movie, superbly crafted, brilliantly acted out and amazingly cinematic (with economy of words and mannerisms). But, Batra's film tells a story of an about-to-retire-from-service widower who catches a whiff of romance in a mistakenly delivered lunchbox, a story which could have unfolded anywhere on this earth. It is in that sense not really



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Indian. Though the plot plays out against the backdrop of Mumbai's "dabba" system, it is not about it. It is not even about a "dabbawalla". (The system helps deliver thousands of lunchboxes every day from homes to workplaces.)

The Lunchbox is about three people, the widower, a lonely, neglected young wife (who begins sending notes in the "dabba" to the man — hoping for love and attention which her husband does not give her) and a young man, who will replace the older guy at office.

Obviously, those in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences who shortlist movies for the foreign Oscars will look for a work which will spell India, and come packed with the nation's smells and sounds, fears and hopes, and dreams and disappointments.

If one were to look at the three Indian films which made it to the Academy's short list of five foreign-language nominees in all these decades since the mid-1950s (when this section was established), they were essentially Indian, and incredibly so. Mehboob Khan's *Mother India*, Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* and Ashutosh Gowariker's *Lagaan* were firmly rooted in the Indian soil with chronicles that revolved around the Indian psyche. They captured the very essence of the nation and its pulse.

In an engaging way, *The Good Road* does this. It is an honest attempt to capture the moods and colours of an otherwise barren and extremely harsh terrain in Rajasthan's Kutch. Shot with an unbelievably low budget of Rs2crores, financed by the National Film development Corporation of India, *The Good*

Road at 92 minutes is a reasonably fair bet for the 2014 Oscars. Flavoured wonderfully with the tones and touches that are so very Indian, nay Gujarati (Correa's wife I am told hails from that part), the movie relies on several non-professionals to weave a largely authentic story that has three distinct strands.

First, we have a grumpy truck driver (who is actually one) and his young assistant out on a nefarious mission, and the two find themselves saddled with a seven-year-old boy (played with disarming ease by Keval Katrodia) and, to the duo's horror, a puppy which the child refuses to let go. The boy is an integral part of the film's second plot, and in a strange way finds himself lost when his parents (Sonali Kulkarni and Ajay Gehi) driving a service utility vehicle inadvertently leave him behind at a highway tea shop. The search for the boy forms much of the narrative, interspersed with the arguments between the driver and his assistant as well as the anxiety-driven search by the parents, who also manage to lose each other, with the wife being stranded in the middle of the desert. She almost dies there. It is into this story that Correa injects the third element, a girl (Poonam Kesar Singh), who on her way to find her grandmother lands in a brothel.

Now the question remains, what about the big publicity which is essential to push a movie in LA? Correa tells me during an e-mail interview that "my producers and I are working on a war footing. It's going well on all fronts, but there is much, much more of the mountain left to climb". Indeed there is.

Talking about the subject of *The Good Road* and the choice of Gujarati, he said: I thought I should get out of the city — and the highways have always fascinated me...When I had completed writing the script, and was looking for a place to set it, I settled on Kutch. I mean the whole package — the topography, an endless horizon, so stark and barren, yet so rich in culture, colour, music. I also had always wanted to cast real people — and if they were to be from Kutch, the film would have to be in Gujarati. All of this kind of fell into place simultaneously."

The Good Road is certainly Indian in essence, in an extraordinarily mesmerising way. But it has its share of weaknesses. The Performances of Kulkarni and Gehi are just not up to the

mark, and the segment about the girl and prostitution has nothing to do with either the boy's disappearance or the truck driver's dilemma. Correa wrote that he wanted to bring the boy and girl together, but found it too sentimental and contrived. So, he let the girl be some sort of stand-alone figure.

Unfortunately, *The Good Road* falls into a pothole here. And mind you, there is some brilliant cinema out there at LA in the form of *The Hunt* (a Cannes competitor from Tomas Vinterberg, Denmark) and *The Grandmaster* (Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong) among others.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran has been watching the Oscars for 25 years, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com