



Memorable films of 2014

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Last week, I wrote about some of the movies that have stayed with me till the end of 2014. As the year now begins, and am set to be bombarded by a new crop of films, here are some more from last year's basket.

One is Dietrich Brueggemann's *Stations of the Cross* from Germany. Narrated through the eyes of 14-year-old Maria (Lea van Acken), the movie tells us how her frailty hides a steely resolve to follow Christ's path of 14 stations to the Cross. What moved and angered one most was the underlying tragic tale of suppressed teenage desires.

Brilliantly written by Brueggemann and his sister, Anna (the picture won the Best Script Award at the 2014 Berlin Film Festival), *Stations of the Cross* is divided into 14 chapters, named after the stations. Captured most of the time with a static camera in single takes, the movie batters and disturbs us with Maria's dilemma.

Iraq's *Memories on Stone* also deals with trauma, and what can be more devastating to a woman than finding her name etched by her father on the cold stone wall of a prison where he was tortured and murdered. This is what happens to Sinor (Shima Molaei), who plays the lead in this movie (helmed by Shawkat Amin Koriki) — where a director is trying to make a film about the Al Anfal Kurdish genocide.

Sinor is young and beautiful, and she appears just as the director is about to give up his project when he cannot find an actress. As much as she is passionate about acting in the movie, she needs the permission of her uncle and fiancé. Koriki mixes humour and tragedy to present the socio-cultural realities of present-day Kurdistan. And he does it with remarkable subtlety.

Zhang Yimou's Gong-Lee starrer Chinese work, *Coming Home*, has a lot more misfortune happening. Yimou is back in form here after many years, I would think, and he admirably handles guilt, love and reconciliation in the confined space of a home and family, in the

suffocating times of the country's politically turbulent 1970s.

Adapted from the novel *The Criminal Lu Yanshi* by America-based novelist Yan Geling (whose *The 13 Flowers of Nanjing* was adapted into Zhang's *The Flowers of War*), *Coming Home* is about a victim of Mao's Cultural Revolution. Professor Lu Yanshi — like hundreds of other intellectuals — is jailed.

But when he escapes and comes home to his wife (Li) and teenage daughter, who, keen on playing the first ballerina in a public performance, bites the bait of a Communist Party spy and turns her father in. Zhang's choreographed scenes of the girl spilling the beans across a busy train station and the wife's attempt to save her husband are superbly done. So, too, those sequences when the Revolution ends and the father returns home as a free man only to find his wife unable to recognise him (some form of dementia) and his daughter shattered with sorrow and guilt.

Nithiwat Tharatorn's romance, *The Teacher's Diary*, set in a remote part of Thailand transports us to happier times. It is a beautiful story of how two teachers find love through the pages of a lost diary. And how novel this is! Tightly scripted with witty lines thrown in — that steers the film from sinking into an emotional mush — with great direction and acting, the movie has children playing Cupid to bring together two strangers who had never met before.

Also, the two realise that they are capable of much more than what they thought they could achieve. Their challenges are enormous: the school is in the middle of a large river that is used for fishing by the local folks, who send their children there. And when a hurricane strikes, the male teacher is as frightened and helpless as the kids. In the end, he finds love, having fallen in it as he reads the diary of a female teacher who had quit the school when she gets engaged to a rich guy from afar.

Tackling an equally unusual theme is Ram Kumar's Tamil movie, *Mundasupatti*, which tells the incredible story of a village where people hide themselves the moment they see a camera. They believe that anybody being

snapped will die soon. This illogical view or plain simple superstition emerges after some villagers, whose pictures were clicked by an Englishman in 1947, die.

Thirty-five years later in 1982, *Mundasupatti* — that is the name of the village in the film — had not shaken itself out of this irrational fear. And when photographer Gopi is asked to click shots of a respected elder as he lies dying, it cannot be done till the last signs of life ebb out.

The sombreness of the situation is juxtaposed with hilarity: the mourners scoot at the sight of Gopi's camera. They will not step anywhere near the dying/dead man lest they inadvertently slip into the frames. Of course, it is the early 1980s, a time when mobile telephones with cameras had not arrived in India, and the movie's storyline is believable all right.

What is really commendable is the sheer novelty of Kumar's theme. I do not remember a film where a subject like camera phobia has been tackled, and the director takes us through a series of happenings — some humourously narrated — related to this blind belief. Kumar's innovative climax is just brilliant.

Another Indian movie that endeared to me was Avinash Arun's *Killa* in the Marathi language. Set in the beautiful Konkan region, the film is a poignant presentation of isolation and rootlessness that have been brushed into the cinematic canvas through a little boy, Chinmay (played with natural ease by Archit Deoadhar).

Suffering from a suffocating sense of loneliness, Chinmay struggles to find friends in the new village where his mother (another superb performance by Amruta Subhash) has been transferred. Recently having lost her husband, she is fighting her own demons, but pushes herself to give some kind of stability and continuity to her little son.

But professional compulsions interspersed with corruption and petty rivalry at workplace make her efforts agonisingly painful. There is not much of a story in *Killa*, but breathtaking visuals enrich the film — as Chinmay takes diffident steps towards forging friendship in the village.

Finally, Jethu Joseph's Malayalam work, *Drishyam*, may not be technically a 2014 film. But it opened at the very end of 2013, and I could watch it in Chennai only in early January last year. The movie ran for many, many weeks, and despite no item numbers, no romantic songs or dances, no exotic locations and no "superman" fights, *Drishyam* was a huge hit. And why was it so?

The film was a searing critique of police brutality, and every time Mohanlal's Georgekutty scored a point with cops — not through physical bouts, but smart moves using his cerebral powers — the crowds in the cinema clapped hysterically.

To me the answer came from the sound of the applause: here was a nation clearly angry with the men in khaki, here was a country of overwhelmingly poor people frustrated by police brutality. In *Drishyam*, this is what is seen when Georgekutty, his wife and two young daughters are brutalised by policemen on the orders of an Inspector General of Police, whose son is missing.

Georgekutty and his family are suspects here, and there are gruesome scenes of a burly cop beating up not only the man, but also his wife, and, horror of horrors, the daughters, one of whom is just about eight or nine years old. With an excellent performance by Mohanlal, and some notable moments by Meena (essaying Georgekutty's wife, Rani) and the younger daughter, Esther's Anu, *Drishyam* rolls off as a simple family drama of a cable television operator.

A primary school dropout, Georgekutty is extraordinarily brainy, having learnt a hell of a lot from the movies he watches on the telly throughout the day. For the Inspector General, this is the sore point, being outwitted by a virtual illiterate, and the fact that she is the mother of the missing boy merely adds to her ire — driving her to seek extrajudicial means to ferret out the truth.

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A scene from the *Stations of the Cross*.



A still from *Memories on Stone*.