



Mocking movie certification

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Cinema censorship has had a rough time in India. To begin with, the entire exercise of certifying a movie as A (Adults only) or UA (Children over 12 though they must be accompanied by their parents) or U (Universal viewing) has become a farce.

I have seen young children trooping into theatres across India — chaperoned by their parents — showing the bloodiest, the goriest, the most sadistic and the most violent films.

Cinemas have stopped stopping children from sitting through such screenings. Given the shrinking profits — particularly in States like Tamil Nadu where a ticket cannot be priced above Rs120 — theatre managements would rather let a seat be occupied by a child than let it go vacant.

Yet, there was a time in the 1960s and the 1970s when cinemas insisted on proof of age if there was the slightest of doubt about one walking into an adults-only show.

Here, one can turn around and ask whether parents are not as much to be blamed as theatres. Why do they accompany their children to movies that they are not supposed to watch? I would presume parenting in modern India is driven by guilt. A mother and a father tend to pamper their son or daughter as a misplaced sense of compensation for their inability to spend time with him or her.

There have been occasions when I have confronted parents in adult only shows during intermissions. The stock reply has been that they were not aware that the movie they were seeing was so terrible or had been certified A. Fine, now that you know, why not take the kids and walk out? The parents would never do that!

So, it only follows that certification tends to become a meaningless exercise.

In this context, the recent resignation of Leela Samson as the chief of the Central Board of Film Certification assumes significance. She quit over the speedy clearance of the film, *Messenger of God*.

Starring the controversial religious body head, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, the movie was opposed by several groups in Punjab on the ground that it was blasphemous. Singh



IN THE SPOTLIGHT: Leela Samson's resignation has reignited debate on the controversial nature of censor approval.

has claimed to be Guru Gobind Singh in the past.

Samson told the media that the Board had not cleared *Messenger of God*, but an appellate tribunal — which the film's producers moved — had done so in less than 24 hours. Usually, the tribunal takes a long time to decide on a movie.

"It is a mockery of the Central Board of Film Certification. My resignation is final. The officers of the organisation are chosen by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting

like political party workers are", Samson averred.

But the Board itself has not always been above board — political interference or not. For years, there have been allegations of corruption among its officers. They have been accused of accepting bribes to either clear a film quickly or give it a favourable certificate like U — which can mean more viewers.

Last August, the CEO of the Board, Rakesh Kumar, was arrested reportedly for accepting a bribe to pass a regional movie. It was

also alleged then that some top Bollywood producers had paid him money to get their films speedily cleared — and perhaps, with a U or UA.

Probably, this explains why a particular movie is passed through a brutal pair of scissors while another slides through it unscathed. Obviously, something is amiss here.

The Board asked for extensive cuts in *The Girl With a Dragon Tattoo*, and its director, David Fincher, said nothing doing. The film could not be screened in India. And this is the reason why so many great movies never come to this country.

Vishal Bharadwaj's latest, *Haider*, is said to have been allowed for public exhibition after 41 cuts!

Sex and nudity are a no no with the censors — and strangely so in this land of the Kama Sutra — while carnage and savagery as well as crude vulgarity (watch some of the item songs) and sexism are freely allowed. So many helmers have begun to copy Quentin Tarantino's style of choreographed violence. Look at the way blood spurts out creating designs in the air. Tamil cinema is most guilty here. Examples, *Subramaniapuram* and *Aaranya Kaandam*.

What is equally perturbing is the "extra-constitutional" censorship. After the Board allows a film for viewing, some group or the other finds something objectionable, and threatens to burn down theatres that dare to show the movie. Often, the so-called objectionable issues are religious.

It is time, it is time that the Government — which controls the Board — sets this institution in order. It must have officers who are clean, who are not political appointees and who, above all, understand cinema in its entirety. Samson is certainly a brilliant dancer, but I have always wondered what her relationship to cinema was.

Finally, let us get rid of film certification. Instead, let us have a system of rating (above eight, above 13, above 15, above 18) like the one that is followed is the USA or UK. And any theatre flouting this must be punished with a cancellation of its licence.

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Vikram only saving grace in I

The only high point of Shankar's *I* (in Tamil) is Vikram's enthralling performance, first as a rustic body builder and later as a disfigured hunchback. As the guy from the gutters who speaks slum Tamil and whose passion is confined to exhibiting his ripping muscles or ogling at the pictures of the sexy model, Diya (British model turned largely Tamil actress, Amy Jackson), Vikram's Lingesan keeps us riveted to the screen. His transformation from the uncouth to the suave — and later to the horrific figure covered with huge swellings — is done with an authenticity rare to come by in Tamil cinema.

But this alone is not enough to take us through a 189-minute romp of silly dances, sillier wit

(Santhanam as the hero's sidekick has now become an irritating bore, but the actor does not seem to care about this) and stupid fight sequences (which are an endless pain).

And the film has unabashedly borrowed from Victor Hugo's 1831 Gothic novel, *Hunchback of Notre-Dame* and the traditional fairy tale, *Beauty and the Beast*. Not doing any better than or infusing any novelty into these age-old yarns.

Playing the Beauty, Jackson remains as unimpressively wooden as I first saw her in *Madrassapattinam* and *Ek Deewana Tha* — barring a couple of teary-eyed scenes in *I*. But yes, her appeal lies in the dare-bare costumes she sports, and this looks like a major point to draw front-benchers.

A top model, Diya, manages to clinch an advertising contract in China with Lingesan as her romantic partner — when she can no longer resist the come-to-my-bed advances of John (Upen Patel) with whom she had been sharing a lucrative professional stint.

In China, she pretends to love Lingesan to help him get over his old-world diffidence and make the campaign work. Lingesan flips for her all right and also turns into an epitome of style and success that get five men — each with his own axe to grind — ragingly mad. And there is neither much story after this nor just about anything to guess. It gets all yawningly predictable.

Some picture postcard scenes of virgin China (with titillating Diya) may be a ploy to get us into a sense of exhilaration, but images of burnt



or electrocuted men are downright distasteful. And a ridicule of them

by Santhanam's character is in sheer bad taste. Or plain simple juvenile.