



✳ Even the sidebars at Cannes festival, Directors' Fortnight and Critics' Week, have selected Hindi works!

# Mumbai parade at Cannes

Although India is celebrating 100 years of cinema, only Hindi films have been selected for screening at Cannes, going along the general mood prevailing in the country. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Indian cinema is 100 years old. The celebration, however, seems to focus on the Hindi language cinema with Dadasaheb Phalke's 1913 *Raja Harishchandra* being honoured as the first Indian film, the starting point of moving images in the country.

But, then, there was *Shree Pundalik* made a year before that in 1912. Even earlier than this, Bengal's Hiralal Sen was making movies.

Sadly, the centenary celebration appears to be confined to Mumbai and its Hindi cinema. Or largely

so. Other flourishing centres like Chennai, Thiruvananthapuram, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Kolkata and Guwahati among others have been forgotten in the seemingly desperate attempt to prop up Mumbai and its mandarins.

It is, therefore, not surprising, that the Cannes Film Festival's 66th edition – from May 15 – has gone along with this general mood prevailing in India. It is the country of focus at Cannes, and the Festival is all set to pay homage to Indian cinema by screening the Hindi language (but of course) *Bombay Talkies*, made up of four

short stories, directed by different people. The movie purports to be a tribute to “the power of cinema in India”. The undoubtedly best segment here is Dibakar Banerjee's (remember his *Shanghai*). He brilliantly reworks Satyajit Ray's short story, *Patol Babu Film Star*, and unrolls the dreams and disappointments of a very ordinary man, who lives with his wife and little sick daughter in a Mumbai slum. Banerjee's hero, Purandar, is youngish against Ray's middle-aged, middle-class hero of once-upon-a-time Calcutta.

Pestered endlessly by the little girl for a story, Purandar steps out of his surreal atmosphere, crowded with an alarm clock (whose shrill ring does not move him, does not even get him to blink his eyes), a cock, an emu (yes, indeed that large bird, and whose presence may have been inspired by the emu farms in India that took a beating recently) and a whole lot of giggling women washing clothes or utensils. He lands in the midst of a street-side crowd watching a film shoot.

The crew suddenly realises that it needs an extra hand, and we hear a woman asking her assistant through a mike to zero in on a guy in the crowd. Purandar is flabbergasted when he is picked, and asked to walk past the movie's hero, brushing against him. Having had a little experience in his father's theatre troupe, he tells the crew that the scene would be more authentic if he were to walk reading a newspaper. Fantastic says the crew, and our man is delighted.

Nawazuddin Siddiqui (*Kahaani*, *Miss Lovely*, *Gangs of Waspeypur*) is excellent as Purandar, especially when he is trying to rehearse imaginary lines just before his shot. Surrounded by strikingly tall white buildings, he is just lost to the world as he steps into his dream, the dream of stardom. Here is a struggling man doing the oddest of jobs being pushed into the limelight – reportedly a take from Siddiqui's own life.

Also connected to the celluloid



world is Zoya Akhtar's (*Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*) offering in which a small boy is obsessed with Katrina Kaif's *Sheila Ki Jawani*, even dressing up as her and, in a stunning finale, dancing to the song on a public stage. When his elder sister finds her father reluctant to finance her school trip, she digs into her piggy bank, but there is not enough in it. So, she and her brother hatch a plan to stage the *Sheila* song with the boy doing the jig.

The children (particularly Naman Jain) are naturals, and propped up by strong lines, they get Akhtar's short flying. Even more remarkable is the casualness of the lines. Here is an example. “What do you want to be when you grow up?” the boy asks his elder sister. “Nothing,” she says. “Nothing?” he asks again. “Nothing. But I want to travel the whole world.” “Oh, so you want to be an air hostess?” “No,” says the girl, “I want to be a passenger.”

Also with a strong link to cinema is Anurag Kashyap's (*Gangs of Waspeypur*, *Ugly*) piece, the weakest of the four in the anthology. Goaded by his bed-ridden father, a young man from Allahabad lands in Mumbai with a jar of sweet pickle to try and get Amitabh Bachchan taste it. The man waits outside Bachchan's bungalow for days, befriending the watchmen, the roadside food seller and an Amitabh look alike.

The film feels fine till this point, but when the man finally meets Bachchan in all his benevolence, there is something that rings hollow. The entire documentary

effect is diluted, and Kashyap's effort looks banal.

Finally, Karan Johar's portion in the anthology has the least to do with cinema. Except that Rani Mukherjee's Gayatri edits a movie gossip magazine and her husband (Randeep Hooda) is an ardent connoisseur of old Hindi film songs. And into their lives walks an intern, who flirts outrageously with Gayatri from day one.

Though Johar presents a dramatic climax and manages to extract fine performances from his actors, he stretches his artistic licence to a point that his work not only flounders, but also seems downright stupid.

I cannot think of an intern behaving so casually and so scandalously with his editor, and the editor choosing to be reciprocal. I cannot think of a senior television anchor (Hooda) beating up a visitor because he hugs him goodbye. There is, though, one fine sequence here: a beggar girl singing a lovely Hindi number. Her expression just haunts you long after the curtain falls.

As much as *Bombay Talkies* may be one of the better movies I have seen in recent months (it opened in India on May 3), I would think that the anthology could have been far more representative of Indian cinema had it included films from Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Bengal – to say the least.

The Festival – on its part – could have presented a worthier tribute to 100 years of Indian motion pictures had it chosen at least one South Indian movie. Instead, we have two Hindi works in the Cannes' official sections – Monsoon Shootout apart from *Bombay Talkies*. Even the sidebars, Directors' Fortnight and Critics' Week, have selected Hindi works!

What is even more disappointing is that the Indian summer on the French Riviera is turning out to be a Kashyap summer. He is connected with all the four films which will play at Cannes: while he has helmed one part of *Bombay Talkies* and the whole of *Ugly* (in the Directors' Fortnight), he has co-produced *Monsoon Shootout* and *Dhaba* (The Lunchbox), in the Critics' Week. Last year, Kashyap's *Gangs of Waspeypur* (Part 1 and 2) screened at the Directors' Fortnight.

Strange.

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