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Films

India's Miserable Oscars Record

Despite a wealth of proven talent, the world's most prolific film-makers fail to make the Academy grade



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

India's Oscars pitch is getting more shameful, and no one seems to care. Aamir Khan's debut, "Taare Zameen Par", the country's nominee for the 2009 Best Foreign Language Academy Award, has been shot down by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. It does not figure in the shortlist of nine movies announced. Out of these, a final five would be nominated that will compete for the Oscar in February.

Along with last year's Cannes Palme d'Or winner, Laurent Cantet's "Class" (France) and the Golden Globe clincher, Ari Folman's "Waltz with Bashir" (Israel), the titles that will cont

end for the five Oscar nods are Austria's "Revanche,"(directed by Gotz Spielmann); Canada's "The Necessities of Life" (Benoit Pilon); Germany's "The Baader Meinhof Complex" (Uli Edel); Japan's "Departures" (Yojiro Takita); Mexico's "Tear This Heart Out" (Roberto Sneider); Sweden's "Everlasting Moments" (Jan Troell); and Turkey's "3 Monkeys" (Nuri Bilge Ceylan).

"Taare Zameen Par" may have its plus point. It tackles a novel theme: dyslexia has hardly ever been a subject in Indian cinema. Khan was bold enough to weave his film around Amole Gupte's story of Ishaan Awasthi (essayed by Darsheel Safary), an eight-year-old boy, shunned by his parents and teachers who do not understand when he talks about "dancing alphabets", a classic symptom of the condition. But the work has little else to offer.

There are glaring flaws in the script. I can never understand how, for instance, in this day and age of internet and information, teachers in Mumbai's reputed schools are ignorant of a common problem such as dyslexia. And, in the end, the movie extols the spirit of competition, which it had set out in the beginning to criticise. Most regrettable, there is nothing Indian about it.

The story could have taken place anywhere in the world, and the jury appointed by the Mumbai-based Film Federation of India to pick a nominee appears sadly out of touch with what the Academy considers a key element for selection in the Foreign Language category: a work must be representative of the country it comes from. Unfortunately, successive Indian juries have paid no attention to this important criterion, often being overtly Bollywood/Hindi language centric in their choices by ignoring movies from other regions or those rooted in Indian culture and ethos.

Looking at this decade, we have always had a film in Hindi as India's nominee, except in 2004, when Sanjay Sawant's "Shwaas" in Marathi was selected. This period saw some exceptionally creative efforts by Girish Kasaravalli (Karnataka), Adoor Gopalakrishnan (Kerala) and Buddhadeb Dasgupta (Bengal), whose movies told stories specific to local cultures and customs, tradition and beliefs. Strangely, not one of their works has ever figured as India's nominee for the Oscars.

Even more unpardonable has been the "boycott" of masters like Satyajit Ray, Ritwick Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, G. Aravindan, John Abraham and even Shyam Benegal, who though working out of Mumbai makes far more meaningful cinema than what pops out of the big Bollywood studios. Given this state of affairs, it is not surprising, therefore, that merely three films – Mehboob Khan's "Mother India" in 1957, Mira Nair's "Salaam Bombay" in 1988 and "Lagaan" in 2002 – have received Oscar nominations since the Foreign Language Section was established in 1956. And, there have been no wins for India.



What a shameful record for a country that boasts of 1,000-odd movies a year, twice as many as Hollywood produces.

Gautaman Bhaskaran is an India-Based film critic and writer and winner of the Cannes gold medal for consistent excellence in coverage



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