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Oscars are white, not black or brown

BY [GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN](#) on [JANUARY 23, 2016](#) in [ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES, INDIA](#)

Man never seems to be getting rid of prejudices. While in India, people are divided over caste — with Dalits being brutalized by other Hindus — religion (Muslims vs Hindus) and so on, America appears to be struggling to come to terms with blacks. Yes, after all these decades when the US passed laws against such discrimination.

And the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences — which awards Oscars — is now being seen as anti-black. In 2015, Oscar nominations were soundly criticised for their “lack of diversity”. This may be read as failure to recognize black talent.

This year, the picture is grimmer. *Creed* was written and helmed by a black man, Ryan Coogler, and the film had a black actor. But the only nod here went to a white man.



Straight Outta Compton got only a single nomination

Straight Outta Compton had an impressive black ensemble cast and was directed by F Gary Gray, also a black. But the movie got only a single nomination — for screenplay which was penned by two Caucasians.

Unlike last year, when blacks had pinned their hopes on just one title, *Selma*, which garnered two nods for best picture and song, 2016 presented more opportunities in movies such as *Creed*, *Straight Outta Compton*, *Chi-raq* and *Beasts of No Nation* (by Cary Fukunaga).

One was certainly shocked to see some great acting talent among blacks go unsung. What about Idris Elba in *Beasts of No Nation*, Michael Jordan in *Creed* and Will Smith in *Concussion*? Their performances were remarkable, but the Academy chose to ignore them.

For blacks, disregard for their ability is merely one more irritant in Hollywood, which has for years never made any serious attempt to write interesting parts for them. American cinema magazines and newspapers have been constantly questioning this. In 1982, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People made public a list which showed that blacks had been kept out of important roles, both behind the camera and in front of it.

Admittedly, the Academy has been making an effort in recent months to set right this issue. Last June, it inducted into its voting list 322 new members, and most of them with a supposedly broader outlook. But the Academy's current 6000 or so voting members are not only white but also above 50, and these men and women perhaps carry age-old biases. So the 322 members

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cannot really be expected to usher in any change worth the name.

However, the Academy has not given up. On Jan. 22, it moved to defuse the race row by announcing plans to double the number of minority members by 2020. On January 26, its board members will meet to try and see how best it can counter the criticism of racism and lack of diversity in nominations.

There is a feeling that the Academy might go back to raising the number of best picture nominees to 10 (as it was) from the present eight. *Straight Outta Compton*, for instance, could have made the cut if the number had been 10.

There is also a demand for the number in acting categories to be increased from the present five — which some feel might help black actors. Will Smith and Idris Elba are two examples of black artists having failed to be nominated this time because the number was five.

Also, the Academy may consider simplifying the voting process which may allow greater variety in the Oscar race.

But in the end, a complete re-haul of membership which will allow a whole lot of younger people to enter the Academy's voting citadel is what that can work as some sort of magic.

Another point of disapproval has been the neglect of India. In all these long years, since the mid-1950s when the Academy introduced a category for films in languages other than English, merely three Indian movies have been nominated — *Mother India*, *Salaam Bombay* and *Lagaan*. None could walk away with the statuette on the big night.

Imagine, a country like India, which produces 1300 or so films a year (which is almost twice as many as Hollywood makes), has not been able to clinch more nods — and not even a single win!

Of course, some may explain this away by contending that India is just not good enough when compared with the rest of the world that sends in non-English movies.

Come one, does this not sound a trifle far-fetched. It is not easy to digest that Indian cinema could have been so bad that it could net only three nominations — and no victories — in the nearly 60 years that the foreign language Oscar had been in existence.

Many Indians feel that the Academy's prejudices are at work here as well. For the Academy — as it is for the greater part of the Western world — Indian cinema is Bollywood, and nothing beyond. And Bollywood is mostly a silly romp of song and dance.

To begin with, Bollywood makes films that go beyond songs and dances. Such movies are meaningful, well crafted and wonderfully enacted.

And Bollywood's annual contribution is just about 250 films, with the rest coming from other regions of the country. And many of these are fascinating and capable of competing with the best of world cinema. This year's *Court* (in Marathi, the language of the western Indian state of Maharashtra), which did not get a nod, may be cited as a riveting work which failed to move the Academy.

Obviously, perceptions in the West need to change, most importantly the Academy's — which today stands at a crossroads — facing criticism and boycott by blacks. And, Indian hurt.

Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and The Seoul Times.

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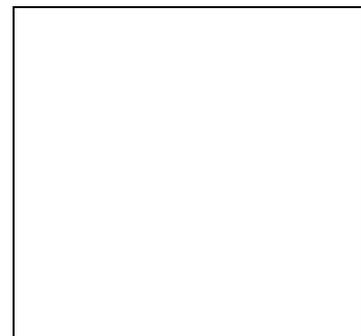


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