

Adoor and Buddhadeb ignored at Goa festival

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A still from The Bait.

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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Although it cannot be disputed that a jury is made up of men and women, and every group may well have widely differing perceptions about a movie, I still believe that in some instances there can be no two opinions. For example, the work of a master auteur is a must for every film festival – and this is an unwritten code which the world's premiere festivals, like Cannes or Venice or Berlin, follow to the T. If a Pedro Almodovar or a Ken Loach or a Jafar Panahi or a Hirokazu Kore-eda were to submit a movie to any of these festivals, not one of them will refuse to showcase it. On the contrary, they would be only too eager to present the work and go to town with it.

But India is different ball game. While the Toronto International Film Festival screened the latest creations of two of India's most celebrated directors – Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Buddhadeb Dasgupta – the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), to run from November 20 to 28 in Goa's Panaji, has been brazen enough not to include them on its list. While Gopalakrishnan has made Pinneyum (Once Again), Dasgupta came out with his Tope (The Bait).

I have not seen The Bait, but have watched Once Again. Adoor made this movie after eight years, his last being in 2008. This is a powerful punch on the evils of consumerism – where Gopalakrishnan narrates a heart-rending story of a humble God-fearing family in Kerala that turns greedy and monstrous once it tastes money. And, believe it or not, it stoops to murdering an innocent man in order to lay claim on insurance money. Much like his other 11 films, Adoor narrates a story in Once Again that documents a chapter from Kerala's society – which in recent years has been largely living on money sent home by Gulf expats.

There is another movie, which I strongly felt needed to be part of IFFI – which boasts of showcasing the cream of Indian cinema in the Panorama: Satish and Santosh Babusenán's Malayalam work, Ottayal Paatha (The Narrow Path).

The Narrow Path will, however, be part of the ongoing Cairo International Film Festival's (November 15 to 24) 16-title competition. The movie will compete for the Festival's top honours along with those from Egypt, Poland, France, Spain and China.

The Narrow Path is a fascinating study of guilt and sacrifice, supreme sacrifice. Narrated through sparse frames and economy of words, the film tells us the tragic story of how a grown-up son, Akhil (played by Sarath Sabha), is caught between the love for his girlfriend, Nina (Krishnapriya), and his affection for his old father, Vikraman (K Kaladharan). The elderly man is practically bed-ridden with complications arising out of diabetes severely restricting his mobility. When out of bed, he has to hop on to a wheelchair, and he needs constant care. And when Nina, hailing from an upper class family, suggests to Akhil that the two go away to Bengaluru, the invitation is tempting. For him the new city will be like a breath of much-needed oxygen, but the son is wracked by dilemma. Could he possibly leave his infirm father behind to be taken care of by paid employees?

This year, Cairo will have two more Indian titles in sections other than competition. Half Ticket (in Marathi by Samit Kakkad), is a remake of the riveting Tamil work, Kaaka Muttai. Kakkad, whose first feature was Aayna Ka Bayna, told this writer some months ago that he would not touch the soul of the original, but would merely carry out some cosmetic changes to include certain nuances of the Marathi language. The setting would be Mumbai, not Chennai as it was in Kaaka Muttai, whose music director, GV Prakash Kumar, had been roped in for the Marathi edition as well.

Kaaka Muttai was a delightful film about two little boys from the slums who go to the quirkiest of extent to earn that Rs300 needed to buy themselves a pizza from an outlet which opens next to their shanty. It is both novel and hilarious when the two get a makeshift pull-cart to transport sozzled men from the roadside bar to their homes – in order to earn a few rupees. At other times, the children pick coal that drops from passing steam engines to feed their family of a mother (played with extraordinary ease by Iyshwarya Rajesh) and a grandmother. The father is in jail, and the wife is struggling to get him out on bail – grappling as she is with crooked lawyers.

The third Indian entry, Alankrita Shrivastava's Lipstick Under My Burkha (Lipstick Waale Sapne in Hindi), which won a prize at the recent Tokyo International Film Festival, paints the painful lives of four women in Bhopal bearing the brunt of societal prejudices. Despite being unfulfilled and unhappy, they are gutsy enough to dream. With an excellent star cast that includes Ratna Shah Pathak and Konkana Sen Sharma, Shrivastava's work was a hit in Tokyo – and may well prove as popular in the historic city by the Nile.

Achcham Yenbadhu Madamaiyada

True to the title of his film, Achcham Yenbadhu Madamaiyada or Fear is Foolishness, lyrics from the popular MG Ramachandran's 1960 work, Mannadhi Mannan, Gautham Vasudev Menon turns his hero, Silambarasan, into a superman – a fantasy figure that Tamil cinema celebrates so often. Never mind that such antics seem juvenile in contemporary cinematic lingo.

And our hero (his name is withheld till the end), an MBA graduate from an middleclass Chennai family, embarks on a road journey on his bike, and his pillion rider is Leela (Manjima Mohan), a budding screenwriter and friend of his sister (looks like a lift from the director's earlier work, Vinnaitaandi Varuvaayaa).

For what appeared like the most boring part of the narrative, the entire first half has the lead pair working on a preamble to a love story. An umpteenth number of times the hero is caught glancing at the attractive Leela, but he looks away every time her eyes turn towards him. Felt like some 17th century love story. Come on, boys and girls can do better than this today.

Post intermission, the bike veers into a dangerously dramatic lane – which is full of chases and shootouts. And what a bloody mess it is. One loses count of the number of bodies that lies scattered in hospital wards, in police stations and in private houses – with the hero toting a revolver which never runs out of bullets.

And the absurdity does not end here, and we see an abundance of it a couple of years later, when Mr Hero turns into a cop, donning crisp khaki and sporting dark glasses, to complete his unfinished mission.

Interjecting into the plot is his sleuthing to find the criminals behind the ghastly attack on Leela's family early on in the film that actually pushes him to press the trigger. A one-man army – Bond and Iron Man rolled into one – he vanquishes his adversaries with a knock on the face or a kick on the belly or a karate twist of the arm or a gun shot. His battlegrounds vary from the inside of a train compartment to deserted highways to lonely hospital wards where even ghosts may fear to tread. But our hero, fired as he is by the celebrated MGR song, cannot be stopped as he marches on like a battering ram. Why let fear overpower and defeat you, he keeps muttering in an irritatingly large number of voiceovers – which often impede the flow of imagery. There are other voiceovers as well – a lazy way of telling a story on screen.

Even on the performance platform, both Silambarasan and Mohan are largely unimpressive, the chemistry between them soggy – which Menon probably tries to pep up with some great visual shots of Kanyakumari and a few AR Rahman compositions.

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