

## A blinkered Academy ignores southern cinema

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OVERLOOKED: From left: Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Kamal Haasan and Girish Kasaravalli are just some of the notable Indian cinema personalities that the Academy has overlooked for their membership.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The West still looks at India with blinkered vision, and Hollywood and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences still find it difficult to see beyond Bollywood, and its Hindi language cinema. I am not saying this is entirely bad, but India's cinema is unbelievably diverse. And some brilliant work is being done in Kerala, in Tamil Nadu, in Karnataka, in Assam and even in the Marathi language cinema.

Yet, the Academy – about which I am going to talk about here – refuses to travel further than Mumbai, the heart of Bollywood. It is quite likely that the Academy has advisers who are Bollywood centric. Otherwise, why would we get a new list of 774 men and women – whom the Academy invited last Wednesday to join its Oscar voting club of a whopping 8000-plus members now – that has some really glaring omissions from the south of the Vindhyas in India?

As The Hollywood Reporter's columnist, Scott Feinberg, commented: "The bottom line is that the Academy cannot fix the industry's diversity problems any more than a tail can wag a dog... in my assessment, it erred badly". I quite agree with Feinberg, although he was referring to the black-white/male-female ratio in the membership – not the injustice shown to non-Bollywood cinema. The Academy appears to have completely failed to understand India's rich and wonderful diversity.

There are many Indians in the list of 774 invitees. Undoubtedly, some are eminently suitable – like Irrfan Khan, Aamir Khan, Anand Patwardhan and Buddhadeb Dasgupta (from Bengal, not Bollywood). But some others are eminently unsuitable. Pray, why do we have Mrinal Sen's name? As much as I admire his pathbreaking cinema, especially his Calcutta Trilogy and 1969 *Bhuvan Shome* (Mr Shome, which heralded the Indian New Wave), he is sadly a spent force today. He is ill and has not made a movie in years. Will he at all be able to do any justice to his role as a voting member of the Academy?

And what is Goutam Ghose's (also on the list) contribution? After *Paar*, *Antarjali Yatra* and *Padma Nadir Majhi* in the 1980s and early 1990s, he has but made extremely average fare.

Aishwarya Rai figures in the hallowed list as well, but apart from her Red Carpet attendance at Cannes year after year, I do not see anything else that warrants the Academy's invitation to her. Certainly, the Oscars do not need glamour, they require men and women who have the ability to cull out the best from a humungous lot of films.

To top all this, we have Deepika Padukones and Priyanka Chopras – who are no great artists. Can one compare Deepika or Priyanka with a Rekha or a Waheeda or a Nutan? A couple of appearances in Hollywood movies seem to be Padukone's and Chopra's claim to fame in the Academy's famed Oscar hall.

Unfortunately, these Indian invitees seem to have edged out masters like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Girish Kasaravalli and Kamal Hassan. I would have been even happy with a Mani Ratnam or a Vetrimaaran (whose *Visaaranai* made waves at Venice and elsewhere). There are any number of others who could have been worthier than some of the men and women which the Academy zeroed in on.

Take, for instance, Adoor. His latest, *Pinneyum*, was not just a fantastic piece of cinema, but a daring effort – in the auteur's typically classic style – to take on the lion in its den. If he had lambasted Kerala's degenerate feudal system in his early *Elippathayam* (*Rat Trap*) and took on the Communists in a State most alive to this form of ism in *Mukhamukham* (*Face to Face*), he has spared no frame to critique Kerala's Nair community and its greedy consumerist culture that was first visible in the early 2000.

In *Pinneyum*, we see how a modest, god-fearing, temple trotting Nair family, driven by peer pressure and avarice, stoops to murder – and in the process mucks up its very existence, its peace of mind and its smallest of joys. In the end, when the hero returns to his wife after many years, she wants to know if they could live happily again after their family had perished.

Kasaravalli – apart from his landmark films like *Ghatashraddha* (*The Ritual*), *Tabarana Kathe* (*Tabara's Tale*) and *Gulabi Talkies* – has just

created something as inspiring as Koormavatara (Tortoise) – which traces the life of a government servant who on the verge of retirement, discovers Gandhi and his values through a stage play – where the middle-aged man essays the Father of the Nation.

Men like Hassan and Ratnam need no introduction in Tamil Nadu or anywhere else in India. Ratnam has made some great films like Nayagan and Roja. Even his Alaypaiyuthe and O Kadhal Kanmani were gripping. Kamal is a magnificent actor, extremely knowledgeable and cued to world cinema. There are few who can beat him here.

I would have even gone with Tamil superstar Rajinikanth – who was once a brilliant actor (remember his works with K Balachander and Mahendran?). In recent years, he has become a showman, relying on his bag of tricks to mesmerise his fans. But I must say, his fan base is unparalleled, beating even that of Amitabh Bachchan. It is quite possible that his well-wishers need his dose of fantasy in order to swim through the struggles of India's chaotic life.

If men like Adoor and Kasaravalli and Ratnam and Hassan and Vetrimaaran are left by the wayside because others like Chopra and Rai and Padukone have to be accommodated in the Oscar bandwagon, one can merely say that the Academy needs to set its house in order. And, yes, take its blinkers off.

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