

Bollywood rolls into reality

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A scene from Talvar. Right: Manoj Bajpayee in Aligarh.



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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

These are the best of times — to quote Charles Dickens from his Tale of Two Cities — for Indian cinema. Indeed. Mainstream Bollywood is trying quite hard to shake off its oft-ridiculed image of being a song-and-dance tamasha. Hindi films have been, for a while, picking stories that actually happened, and scripting them with a fair amount of authenticity.

Last year, Meghna Gulzar spun a story around the horrific murder of a teenager and a man servant at Noida, near New Delhi, in 2008. The movie was called Talvar, and interestingly Gulzar fictionalised her film only to the extent that she used professional actors (Irrfan Khan and Konkana Sen Sharma among others). Beyond this, Talvar stayed true to truth.

About the killing of 14-year-old Aarushi Talwar and the 45-year-old servant from Nepal, Hemraj Banjade, the movie, according to Gulzar, who spoke to me last year, “is completely based on the incidents which really took place. The cremation of Aarushi that we see in the film, the characterisation of her father, Dr Rajesh Talwar (an even tempered man), and the in-house rivalry in the Central Bureau Investigation (which took up the case later, after the local police had botched it up) as well as the goof-up by the Uttar Pradesh police did actually happen off the screen. All of them.”

Again, a few weeks ago, I saw Neerja, a movie about the courage and sacrifice of a 23-year-old Pan Am flight stewardess. In 1986, the plane on its way from Bombay to New York, was overpowered by four Palestinian hijackers when it landed at Karachi airport. Neeraj Bhanot was shot dead at point blank range, when she was helping little children escape through the

emergency exit — whose doors she had opened for passengers to flee.

I saw all this in Ram Madhvani's film where Sonam Kapoor essays quite poignantly the brave air-hostess, and much of the narrative remained close to the what happened that September 5, 1986.

Hansal Mehta's Aligarh is also based on incidents that took place. It explores the extremely painful experience of a Marathi professor, Shrinivas Ramchandra Sirus — who was gay. Teaching at the Aligarh Muslim University, Sirus — played with brilliant confidence by Manoj Bajpayee — attracted the jealousy and rancour of some of his colleagues. They planned a sting operation and photographed Sirus as he was having consensual sex with a rickshaw-puller.

The professor was suspended from the university and thrown out of his official quarters — even though homosexuality had been decriminalised in India then. Sirus went to court and the judgement went his favour. But days before he was to have resumed teaching, he was found dead with traces of poison in his blood stream. Was it the suicide of a gentle soul, who could not bear the hurt and humiliation of being a subject of ridicule in a society that thought that it had the right to peep into others' bedrooms?

There are some beautiful moments in Aligarh. Sirus asks a young journalist how homosexuality can be described in just three words, "gay". It is all about love, passion, uncontrollable urge, feeling...he says.

Aligarh expectedly caused a controversy with Indian censors certifying it as only suitable for adults. Honestly, Mehta's film was not on or about homosexuality. It was by no stretch of imagination, promoting homosexuality. Rather, the movie was about human rights, individual privacy and the democratic freedom of all, including homosexuals.

But today, India is being dragged into dark times by some organisations. The country's rich cultural history and social norms (as even depicted by temple statutes and ancient texts) are being debased and misinterpreted to convey that homosexuality is a disease!

Finally, come August and we will see Akshay Kumar playing Kawas Manekshaw Nanavati, a decorated officer of the Navy, who shot dead his wife's lover, Prem Ahuja, a rich playboy businessman.

Nanavati, as the story goes, walked into Ahuja's flat in Bombay and asked him whether he would marry Sylvia and take care of her children. Ahuja is supposed to have laughed in sarcasm and said that he could not marry every woman he slept with. This angered Nanavati so much that he drew his pistol and shot Ahuja dead. Nanavati surrendered to the police, but was freed after three years by the Maharashtra Government — which had to bow down to immense public pressure to free Nanavati — seen by the world as the wronged husband. And this included Ahuja's own sister, Mamie.

We would see this tragic love story unfold in debutant Tinu Suresh Desai's Rustom that will have Ileana D'Cruz as Sylvia.

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Lars Von Trier building Jack's House

A few weeks ago, the celebrated but eccentric genius, Danish auteur Lars Von Trier, actually broke his long self-imposed silence following the disastrous 2011 press conference — held just minutes after his Melancholia was screened at the Cannes Film Festival. In a hall packed with international journalists, including me, Von Trier expressed his sympathy for Hitler. It was certainly meant to be a joke, but a loud gasp went up, and in a short while after, with hundreds of protesting telephone calls from all over the world, the Festival had to ask the

sheepish looking helmer to leave the French Riviera.

After that tumultuous afternoon, Von Trier never opened his mouth, not in public, and when he made two more movies, *Nymphomaniac Part One and Two*, he chose not to attend a press conference or stay mum. He never went back to Cannes, although the Festival supremo, Thierry Fremaux, said just a year after the *Melancholia* incident that a brilliant filmmaker like Von Trier was always welcome, and that the ban no longer applied.

Von Trier is now all set to make his next movie called *The House that Jack Built*. In a short message, he said that after the *Melancholia* debacle, he was not sure whether he would be able to make another film. But he managed to helm *Nymphomania*.

Now with *The House...taking shape*, he was more confident that he would continue stepping behind the camera. In a Facebook message, he rounded off this statement with a quote from the late British musician and actor, David Bowie: "This ain't rock'n'roll -- this is genocide".

The House that Jack Built revolves around a serial killer (seems like the season for these monstrous men, for one recently saw *Aarathu Sinam* in Tamil, which was all about a serial killer), and interestingly Von Trier has written the story from the murderer's point of view.

Interestingly, the director had initially planned the film as an eight-part television serial.

One is sure that any movie that pops out of Von Trier's basket is bound to appeal for one reason or the other. His films such as *Breaking the Waves*, *Dancer in the Dark* and *Dogville* depicted the suffering woman. Later, *Antichrist* and *Nymphomania* (1 and 2) were sexually graphic. Much earlier, Von Trier's *The Idiots* showed actual sex, not simulated, and his *Melancholia* explored how a marriage anniversary celebration turned into an ugly slanging match with members of the family accusing one another of sexual perversion.

The House that Jack Built will — one is sure — take us on a cinematic high.

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