

Controversies galore at film festival in Goa

November 21 2017 09:22 PM



SHOWMAN: Shah Rukh Khan performs during the opening ceremony of 48th edition of International Film Festival of India (IFFI) at the Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Stadium in Bambolim, near Panaji, Goa.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

As I pen this column on Monday morning, the International Film Festival of India is all set to start in Goa's capital city, Panaji, in a few hours. But what a start it is going to be. The Festival and the National Film Development Corporation's Film Bazaar will begin their roll in a fog of controversy.

To begin with, the Indian Panorama – which has since time immemorial been touted as the gem of the festival showcasing the best of the country's cinema – has run into a mess with two of the movies, selected by an eminent jury, headed by director Sujoy Ghosh (with some interesting works like *Kahani*, *Kahani 2: Durga Rani Singh* and *Satyanweshi*) and aided by helmers like Nikkhil Advani and Gyan Correa, thrown out by India's Information and Broadcasting Ministry. Which organises the Festival and the Bazaar, and which had in the first place handpicked the 13 members of the Panorama jury!

The jury was put up in a five-star hotel in Mumbai, given 153 films and asked to choose 21. This was done over 18 days and at considerable cost to the public exchequer.

I have no quarrel with this, but having spent this huge money of ours, the government in what seemed like a brazen and ill-conceived decision, dropped two movies, *S Durga* and *Nude*, from the list of 21 titles selected by the Ghosh jury. And, without even a by your leave!

I am told that such a step violates Clause 8.5 of the Indian Panorama 2017 Regulation, which clearly states that "the decision of the juries shall be final and binding, and no appeal or correspondence regarding their decision shall be entertained".

The Ghosh panel had reportedly told the government that an explanation must be given in the event of any change in the list. But no such thing was done, and obviously the members of the jury are peeved over the fact that after having taken time off from their busy schedules and sat through hours and hours of screenings, their choice was tampered with.

What is more, the panel was not even consulted before a couple of replacements were decided to fill in the slots which went vacant after *S Durga* (in Malayalam) and *Nude* (Marathi) were banished from the list.

Ghosh resigned in protest, and so did a couple of other members, and the legendary actress, Shabana Azmi – who along with the late actress Smita Patel had been part of the New Indian Cinema of the 1970s – has asked Bollywood to boycott the Festival.

I have not seen *Nude*, but have read reports about it. Directed by the National Film Award winner, Ravi Jadhav, the film is based on his own experiences as a student of the Sir JJ School of Art in Mumbai. It tells the story of a poor woman who works as a model without letting her family know about it. There is nothing offensive or titillating.

Sanal Sasidharan's *S Durga* – which I have seen – is a film that should have never been dropped from the Panorama. The young helmer, Sasidharan, who had earlier made a gripping work called *An Off-Day Game* (whose climax was completely unanticipated), has given us an equally mesmerizing *S Durga*. Here we see a young couple running away perhaps from home and trying to thumb a lift on a lonely road in the middle of the night. They have to reach a train station, and are on their way to Chennai, and a small van stops by and picks them up. There are two sozzled men in it, and this is the beginning of the couple's nightmarish night.

Mind you, Sasidharan does not throw in violence, not at all. No rape here. No fights. No sickles. But the helmer's marvellous way of hinting at violence instils a deep sense of fear not only in the man and the woman, but also in the viewer. I remember watching the work with some unease – uneasy about the million things that can go wrong that night on the Kerala highway. Will the man be beaten up, or worse killed? Will the woman be raped? But no, nothing of this sort happened. What Sasidharan conveyed in somewhat classic Hitchcockian style was the fear of fear. The fear of something terrible happening. This can be far more unnerving than actual violence.

No invite for journalists at festival

What is equally disturbing about this year's Festival is its move not to invite any journalist to cover the event, including the Bazaar. Any film festival anywhere in the world takes pride in inviting journalists, because it understands that only they, and they alone, can promote the event – or least talk about it in their newspapers or websites or television channels. Three of the biggest festivals in the world — Cannes, Venice and Berlin — invite a large number of journalists, and I have been one among them for decades. In fact, I have covered Cannes alone for 28 years, Venice for a good 18 and festivals like Dubai, Cairo, Abu Dhabi, Marrakech, Tokyo, Deauville, etc for several years – and all on invitation. But sadly, my own Festival in Goa has denied me an invite, and I am going to miss it for the first time in nearly three decades.

That journalists will not be invited (some read this as not welcome) was conveyed to me by the Festival's new director (who was part of it for several years once upon a time) Sunit Tandon, and head of the Film Bazaar, Raja Chinai. They averred that they had been given explicit instructions not to invite journalists.

The decision appears so shortsighted, given the fact that with the Festival now surrounded by a huge controversy it would have been prudent on the part of the government to invite journalists, who could have written balanced pieces – instead of the one-sided stuff that may now emerge from the computers of the Festival's publicists.

* Gautaman Bhaskaran, who has

covered the Festival for almost three decades and the Film Bazaar for many years, will not be in Panaji this year, and he may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com