

The Censor Board is prudishness personified

March
07

2017 10:07 PM



A scene from Lipstick Under My Burkha.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

A few weeks ago, I wrote how Indian cinema has become the favourite whipping boy of politically-charged hooligans, who double up as extra-constitutional censor board. The noted Bollywood director, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, was roughed up recently in Jaipur, where he was shooting a historical film called Padmavati, the queen of Chittoor. The poor man had to grovel and promise that he would not have any scene in his movie which might depict the rani in a romantic relationship with Sultan Alauddin Khilji. We do not even know whether such a sequence was even part of the script.

I have always felt that these anti-socials get their courage from India's administrative wings. One of them is the Central Board of Film Certification, which is now headed by Pahlaj Nihalani – whose views on cinema could not be more archaic, could not be more defeatist and stiflingly conservative.

Let me cite the example of a really interesting movie, Lipstick Under My Burkha, which I saw late last year at the Tokyo International Film Festival. The movie is about four women, who, though they live in Bhopal, a city with a small-town attitude, dare to dream. One of them walks into a public toilet and strips herself of her burkha and emerges with attractively painted lips and hep clothes. Another woman goes through a series of abortions, because despite three children, her husband refuses to use contraception. The third is forced into a marriage with someone she does not care, and does not even flinch when she gets physical with her lover just before she gets engaged. The fourth is a middle-aged unattached woman who reads pulp fiction and romanticises about a hulk of a swimming coach.

It is this film by Alankrita Shrivastava – which conveys the emerging tendency among Indian women to break themselves free of age-old societal shackles – that has been denied a censor certificate. It was not even given an adults-only (18 plus) exhibition rights – and this means that it cannot be shown in any public venue in India.

And mind you, this Nihalani decision comes in the wake of a report submitted by a committee, headed by the legendary director, Shyam Benegal. The panel, constituted by the government, recommended that certification must replace censorship. This is how it is in the US, in Britain and so on.

Indeed, why must the government tell the movie-going audience what they must or must not watch. It is high time that the Board limits its role to certifying films – 12 plus or 15 plus or 18 plus – as is the case in the US and other parts of the Western world. As Shrivastava told an interviewer in Glasgow (where her work won the Audience Award recently) that when a "person who is 18 has the right to cast his/her franchise, why cannot he/she watch my movie."

She also felt that the Board was not comfortable with an alternative point of view. It was scared of the female point of view. "My movie is all about the dreams and desires of four very different kinds of women".

I think the Board is easy with men's perception of life. It is okay with male gaze, stalking and so on. But just turn the mirror away towards a woman's idea of life and living, the Board begins to squirm in its seat.

And what exactly is the Board's grievance against Lipstick Under My Burkha (Lipstick Wale Sapne is the Hindi title)? The Board said in a letter to Shrivastava that her film was being denied a censor certificate for being "too lady-oriented" with "continuous sexual scenes". Also, it had "abusive words, phone sex..."

This means that the movie cannot be shown at all in India.

I find the Board's view incredulous. One must watch some Tamil films to understand what I am trying to say. They are so full of blood and gore, with violence that is choreographed to make it appear that there is nothing wrong in killing and maiming another human being. They are also so full of highly questionable acts like denigrating women and stalking them.

What is shocking is that some of these movies are passed with a Universal certificate. And I have often been appalled by little children walking in to watch this bloody trash.

Another film that is under the Board's scanner is Jayan Cherian's Ka Bodyscapes. The Board here in this case as well has refused a

certificate, because, according the director's Facebook page where he quotes a letter from Nihalani's office, "the movie is glorifying the subject of gay and homosexual relationship, nudity accentuating vital parts of male body (in paintings) in closed shots in the whole film. The movie is explicit of scene offending Hindu sensibilities depicting vulgarity and obscenity through the film. The religion of 'Hindu' is portrayed in a derogatory manner especially Lord Hanuman (shown in poor light as gay) which may cause law and order problem in society. The movie contains posters depicting homosexuality throughout the film and derogatory remarks against women. Abusive language is used in most of the places. The film has references to Hindu organisations indirectly which is unwarranted."

Forget censorship, look at the English!

Ka Bodyscapes talks about three men and their dilemma. Haris, a gay painter, and Vishnu, a Kabbadi player, are lovers. Their friend Sia, is an activist, who refuses to conform to the norms of femininity. All three are trying to find a space in society.

Even if Shrivastava and Cherian win their fight with the Board and manage to get screening rights, there is a mob waiting on the streets to pounce on them. As Tamil director, Leena Manimekalai, told a gathering of young film enthusiasts in Chennai the other evening, "it is very difficult to take on mobocracy. We are trying to battle an enemy whose identity is unclear". She was bang on.

*Gautaman Bhaskaran has been

writing on Indian and world cinema for close to four decades, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com