

Five moving Indian movies of the year

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MESMERISING: Irrfan Khan in a scene. The protagonists push *The Song of Scorpions* into mesmeric light and shade.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Somehow, films this year did not excite me as much they had in the past. But, anyway, here are five Indian language movies that moved me for a variety of reasons.

The Song of Scorpions: Anup Singh's *The Song of Scorpions* in Hindi – which I watched at the Dubai International Film Festival early December – fascinated me for its simple story and brilliant performances by Irrfan Khan and Iranian actress Golshifteh Farahani. Set in the golden sands of Rajasthan, the movie is a folktale narrating the life of a woman, Nooran (Farahani), who has this unbelievable power to draw the poison out of one bitten by a deadly scorpion found in the desert. She sings to get the venom flowing out. It is into her life that Aadam (Khan), a camel trader, comes, only to create a web of deceit, jealousy, anger and revenge. I think Singh has this unique ability to fathom the human mind, and, in a way, his plot resembles a Shakespearean drama, minus the dramatics. For, both Aadam and Nooran display a kind of gentleness that will put to shame the loud histrionics of many Indian actors. And in a quite sort of way, they push Singh's narrative into mesmeric light and shade.

Bareilly Ki Barfi: Ashwini Iyer Tiwari (who earlier gave us *Nil Battey Sannata*) goes to a small town in Uttar Pradesh for her latest outing, *Bareilly Ki Barfi* (also in Hindi) – where we see Ayushmann Khurrana (as a printing press owner), Rajkumar Rao (a salesman in a sari shop) and Kriti Sanon, who works for the electricity department. Sanon's Bitti Mishra – a young woman whose cigarette-smoking, boozing and carefree temperament make her most undesirable for the marriage market – lives in Bareilly, where prospective grooms prefer a bride who will be content being closeted in the kitchen rolling rotis. Tiwari underlines how the country's small town culture is trying to break free of its age-old shackled existence. Bitti is a free-spirited person seeking a partner who will not insist on keeping his wife within the walls of a home. And when she meets Chirag Dubey (Khurrana), the author of a novel titled *Bareilly Ki Barfi* – an account of a woman who has an uncanny resemblance to Bitti – Cupid strikes! It is a wonderful study of changing small town attitudes.

Dhananjay: In a world where the debate on capital punishment is raging, Arindam Sil's Bengali film, *Dhananjay*, is a powerful critique of what I have been calling "State sponsored murder". The work, based on a true incident, is immensely disturbing, and has immense social ramifications. Sil's movie opened on the eve of the 13th anniversary of Dhananjay Chatterjee's hanging in Kolkata on August 14, 2004. The young man had aged parents, a brother and a wife, and in what seemed like a heartless action, the noose was placed around his neck on his birthday. He was 39. The film narrates how two lawyers argue for the reopening of the case – producing evidence to show that Dhananjay might not have committed the crime he was convicted of. Throughout his 14-year-incarceration (which by itself could have been a full sentence), he had said a million times that he did not rape and murder 18-year-old school-going Hetal Parekh, who lived with her parents and brother in one of south Kolkata's high-rise residential complexes. He also said that he was being punished for being poor.

Vikram Vedha: Pushkar-Gayathri's *Vikram Vedha* (Tamil), starring two very different kinds of actors, tops in script and performance. The story of a cat-and-mouse game played by a ruthless encounter cop and a hardened-by-circumstance don may not be exactly oven fresh, but the ability of the husband and wife team directing the movie to adapt the age-old, but timeless folklore of King Vikramadityan and Vedhalam (Betel) to the crime and criminality of modern times is what makes the work sparkle. The narrative is stylishly crisp, the craft flies, and the subtlety seen through the imaginative choice of colours (white, black and grey and the way they change on the costumes of the protagonists) as well as the unbelievable casualness of Vijay Sethupathi as gangster Vedha push the picture to the point of perfection. Or almost. Madhavan's (as the policeman Vikram) method acting translates into a power-packed affair. He does not have to take his shirt off or display his biceps; the firmness of his jaws says it all. Also, one should not miss the message: it lambasts without mincing words the horrors of extra-judicial killings in India, something the nation saw for the first time during the Emergency imposed by the Indira Gandhi government.

Take Off: Mahesh Narayanan's Malayalam work, *Take Off*, is crafted with precision and stays true to what happened in Iraq's Tikrit – where nurses from Kerala were held hostage in 2014. Sameera (Parvathy) is one among them, and India depends on her pluck and courage to lead the nurses to freedom. Two Hindi films – *Airlift* and *Tiger Zinda Hai* – are also about rescue missions in West Asia, but *Take Off* is miles ahead of them, because Narayanan makes sure his work is firmly rooted to reality. Parvathy is brilliant as the nurse who has to take care of her old parents back home, and her escape – as that of others with her – becomes singularly imperative.

Finally, here are my two consolation prizes. Avinash Das' debut Hindi feature, *Anaarkali of Aarah* drills into us a woman's right to say no, and it means no. In today's India, with men stalking women and trying to force an affirmative answer to their refusal, Das's work punches you in the face with its moral. Anurag Kashyap's *Mukkabaaz*, also in Hindi, explores communal obsessions like caste prejudices and cow slaughter in a nicely told plot.

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