

Indian movies talk of today's terrible times

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The poster for Gurgaon.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The opening words of Charles Dickens' 1859 *A Tale of Two Cities* sound so apt for the Indian cinema of 2017! As the celebrated author wrote: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..."

Indeed. It is the best of times for India's celluloid world – even as it struggles to ward off the worst in terms of highhanded censorship attitude. There is so much wisdom that is fighting against so much foolishness trying to cling to the light at the end of the dark, dark tunnel, hoping against hope for the joys of spring while passing through the despairing, distressing winter.

Yes, despite the terrible times that India's Central Board of Film Certification is giving to moviemakers, they seem to be shouting, never say die.

Last week, I wrote about a film that gripped me, *Indu Sarkar*, a story set in the draconian days of the 1975 Emergency. This week, I would like to talk about two movies – about one that I have seen and another which opens this Friday. And I am really happy that Indian cinema is starting to look for inspiration from not only the country's 5,000-year-rich history, heritage and folklore (Madhavan-Vijay Sethupathi-starrer *Vikram Vedha* in Tamil was adapted from the folktale of *Vikramadityan* and *Vedhalam*), but also contemporary happenings.

Take *Dhananjay* – which has been helmed in Bengali by Arindam Sil and will begin its theatrical journey on August 11. The film tells the tragic tale of Dhananjay Chatterjee – a security guard in one of Kolkata's residential complexes – who was found guilty of raping and murdering a schoolgirl, Hetal Parekh, in 1990. He was hanged 14 years later on August 14, 2004, after a long trial.

The court proceedings and the final judgment were marked by mass hysteria. There were many, including the former West Bengal (Kolkata is the capital of this State) Chief Minister, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's wife, Meera, who wanted Dhananjay to face the noose. But there were also several others who tried to stop the execution citing dubious pieces of evidence and the accused's consistent claim of innocence.

The question which Sil's movie may pose is whether Dhananjay was framed. In an interview to *Scroll*, Sil said that he was attracted to the Dhananjay case because of what he felt to be great injustice to the executed man and his family. "I started my research, started meeting people. I came across the book by professors of the Indian Statistical Institute. I met Dhananjay's family, their neighbours. I met people who testified in court at the time that Dhananjay was a culprit but now said that they had appeared as false witnesses under duress. They also said that they had been made to sign on some papers that were in English... Also I met Dhananjay's family that had been tormented for the past 27 years. The family was disturbed both by the media and the police. They live in absolute fear, everyday."

Sil adds: "There was no direct evidence, there were no conclusive circumstantial evidence. There was no semen found in the vagina of the murdered girl, no tissue culture was done. There were a series of lapses and this family had no money to fight till the Supreme Court."

This reminds me of the all-time famous quote of an American Supreme Court judge who said: "Capital punishment is for those who have no capital."

While Sil met Dhananjay's family, he could not trace Hetal's. But the director knows that the family moved to Mumbai, Hetal's father was dead and her mother was not in her senses.

Hopefully the film, *Dhananjay*, will help India to take a fresh look at the case. Was the guard guilty? Was he innocent? Maybe time will tell us, and Sil's work could help in this process.

Gurgaon

The other movie, Gurgaon, which opened last week and which I saw has also been inspired by true incidents, and it paints the horrific picture of a rich business family of a father, mother, an adopted daughter and two sons that goes to seed because of greed and avarice. In a way, a microcosm of all that is wrong with India.

Made by first-timer Shankar Raman, Gurgaon (also a rich town bordering New Delhi) is a brutal look at female infanticide, sibling jealousy and parental partiality. Kehri Singh (played brilliantly by Pankaj Tripathi) has risen from the low ranks of a labour class to the higher echelons of moneyed fame. He owns large lands, speaks in low voice, but has the power to silence any opponent.

His son, Nikki (Akshay Oberoi), has modest needs. He wants to own a gym, loves to hop from one nightclub to another and is obsessed with betting over cricket. He loses a huge sum of money, which Nikki has borrowed from a money-lender. Nikki cannot ask his father for the money, and so the young man kidnaps his sister, Preet (Ragini Khanna) – who is the darling of her father and on whose name the man's entire wealth and property stand.

The kidnapping goes horribly wrong, and Gurgaon – much like the town itself – is canvas of questionable past and immoral attitude, a canvas where relationships matter little, where murder is a mere game. And where money is king.

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