

## My 10 favourite Indian films of '16

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Manoj Bajpayee in Aligarh.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

It is never easy for someone like me to cull out favourite films from the dozens and dozens I have seen over the course of 12 months in 2016. For, there is always something in every movie – or just about – that endears me to it. It can be an engaging story that is also well told. It can be a great idea plotted with panache. Or, it can be a fine piece of performance – like Vidya Balan's in *Kahaani 2: Durga Rani Singh* in Hindi, which is one of my 10 most favourite films this year.

I admired Balan's pluck in going completely de-glam and daring to look her own plump self (like Kate Winslet in some movies) to play an ordinary employee in a school at Kalimpong – a hill station in West Bengal. This is of course no sequel to *Kahaani 1*, and director Sujoy Ghosh deftly takes us far away from the first to narrate a story of child molestation involving an uncle and his mother (!). Balan's Durga Rani Singh notices this in the six-year girl, Mini, who finds it difficult to stay awake in class. "They never let me sleep at night", she blurts out to Singh after persistent probing. *Kahaani 2* takes off with Singh having to flee Kalimpong with the child to land in Chandan Nagar (Once a French settlement in Bengal) – where she meets a cop played by Arjun Rampal in a controlled avatar. Balan helps us not just watch a lurid tale unfold, but also feel the trauma with her brilliant portrayal of a woman – herself a victim of sexual abuse – anxious to save the child. *Kahaani 2* has its flaws – the climax was unreal and there were a few contrivances. But as Ghosh asked me, "Can't a director take artistic liberties." So be it.

There is another actor who floored me. Manoj Bajpayee, whose *Aligarh* (in Hindi, helmed by Hansal Mehta), premiered at the Busan International Film Festival. Bajpayee as the wronged homosexual professor at the Aligarh Muslim University literally carries the story from frame to frame with feeling, with a sense of utter dejection. Set in a conservative town in Uttar Pradesh from which the movie gets its name, *Aligarh*, it is about a professor (Bajpayee), fired from the university for his sexual preference, and a young journalist (Rajkumar Rao) who tells this tragic tale to the world.

Alankrita Shrivastava's Hindi work, *Lipstick Waale Sapne* – which I saw at the Tokyo International Film Festival – appealed to me for its freshness of treatment and its novel way of elaborating some of India's burning social issues. It plots the experiences of four women, two Hindus and two Muslims, who live in Bhopal. They are unfulfilled and unhappy, but with the gutsy ability to dream and dare. Beautiful Rehana (essayed by Plabita Borthakur) hails from a family of tailors, goes to college and is enamoured of all things feminine. She cannot of course buy them, but she can steal them, and shoplifts with a devil-may-care hidden beneath a veneer of disarming innocence. Then there is Leela (Aahana Kumra), who on the day of her engagement with a rich guy, does not flinch while taking advantage of a short power outage to engage physically with her boyfriend. And she is all game for this, having been in love with him, but forced into a marriage with a guy she does not care for. Shirin (portrayed with nuanced ease by Konkana Sen Sharma) has three little sons and a husband, who has just come back from Saudi Arabia. He treats his wife with unimaginable coldness, even forcing Shirin to go through a series of induced abortions. What is even worse, he blows a fuse when she finds out about his mistress, and stops Shirin from working as a salesgirl. The fourth woman is a 55-year-old widow, Usha (played with superb finesse by Ratna Pathak Shah) – a darling of the "mohalla". Addressed reverentially as "Bhuvaji" (aunt), she whiles away her time reading pulp fiction, and when she meets a hunky swimming coach, she fantasises through mobile telephone conversations with him, pretending to be one of the characters in the novels she reads.

Another Hindi film that caught my eye was Shubhashish Bhutiani's *Mukti Bhavan* – which I saw at the Dubai International Film Festival. When an Indian movie stops itself from going overboard with emotional dramatics, it seems such a refreshing relief from the kind of over-the-top kind of cinema we are battered with day in and day out. And *Mukti Bhavan* fits perfectly well with the cinema of the subdued. The young Bhutiani, barely 25, presents a poignant plot of 77-year-old Dayanand Kumar (and what a marvellous piece of acting here by Lalit Behl), who wants to spend his last days at the holy city of Varanasi after he has a dream that is recurrent and ominous. He feels his end is round the corner, and he would want to die on the banks of the Ganges in Varanasi. A death there is believed to stop the cycle of birth. But his son, Rajiv (another superb performance by Adil Hussain), is in a quandary. With a wife and a daughter, who is all set to get married, and a boss at office who just cannot exist without Rajiv, he somehow agrees to take the old man to Varanasi. The journey completely changes the way they feel about each other.

The Amir Khan-starrer *Dangal* in Hindi by Nitesh Tiwari is certainly no *Lagaan*. But *Dangal*, based on a true story of a father determined to make wrestlers out of his two daughters in a State like Haryana (known for its male chauvinism), is exciting – especially its fight sequences that begin in mud pits and later travel to matted arenas. When wrestling champion Mahavir Singh Phogat does not get a son – with his wife

giving birth to four daughters – he decides to make the two eldest ones Geeta (Fatima Sana Shaik) and Babita (Sanya Malhotra) into wrestlers, much to chagrin of his community and the ridicule of male wrestlers. But Poghat cannot be dissuaded, and finally his girls win medals for India. Khan is superb – his silences, his economy of words and his rare angst when he finds Geeta rubbish his years of teaching in favour of a new coach at the sports academy where she trains for the Olympics and the Commonwealth Games.

Another movie on sports, this time in Tamil, *Irudhi Suttru* by Sudha Kongara, has Madhavan playing a failed boxer (with a failed marriage) who suddenly finds meaning in life when he finds a young fisherwoman, Madhi (Ritika Singh) with magical potential. He trains her despite her catty ferocity, and fiery red-tape which hinders his every forward step. Lovely acting by Madhavan and Singh and beautiful romance subtly shown. Rare to find a Tamil work with such controlled narration.

Another Tamil film that was amazingly restrained was Manikandan's *Aandavan Kattalai*. Once, the helmer gave us a delightful work called *Kaaka Muttai* – on the travails of two little boys angling for a pizza. In his latest outing, he takes us to a completely different theme. Vijay Sethupathi – in his usual subdued performance (that has often reminded me of Marlon Brando) is a bit more evocatively expressive here as Gandhi, a strapping youth who journeys from a village near Madurai to Chennai in search of a British visa. He plans to get a tourist permit, enter the UK and find work. But there are obstacles. The travel agent who promises to arrange the visa insists that the papers can be easily had if Gandhi were to be married. Unfortunately, the visa does not come through, with Gandhi true to his name, refusing to lie at the British Consulate. A unique script that has been executed with finesse by Sethupathi and his love interest, Ritika Singh.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's 12th feature, *Pinneyum* in Malayalam – which came after an eight-year hiatus – takes us back to the 2000 era in Kerala, which was beginning to see the ugly face of consumerism. It was a time when Kerala's Gulf boom was on with just about every other household having at least one member of its family on the deserts of Arabia. It was not uncommon to see Malayalees flush with money. And those who did not have these, aspired, often desperately, to up their status with Gulf money by chasing sometimes almost impossible dreams. The Nair family in *Pinneyum* also has its aspirations – only that in this case they stoke the fire of avarice. The Nairs' dream begins on a low key, but when their needs multiply, they stoop to committing the most heinous crime. A masterly work with Dileep, Kavya Madhavan, Nedumudi Venu and Indrans.

Sanal Kumar Sashidharan's *Sexy Durga* (Malayalam) – is one of the finest movies I saw this year. Sashidharan has this amazing ability to surprise even a hardcore critic like me, and his debut feature, *An Off-Day Game* (*Ozhivudivasathe Kali*), in Malayalam, was almost magically unpredictable that narrated the drinking bout of some friends on a holiday in a desolate bungalow which turned notoriously evil. In contrast, *Sexy Durga* attempts to tell us that men can be magnanimous when they want to be. And this emerges on a dark night, on a lonely highway. The film opens with a woman, Durga (Rajashri Deshpande), anxiously waiting on a deserted road in the middle of the night – till Kabeer (Kannan Nair) arrives. We do not know whether they are married, but we are sure that they are eloping from an undisclosed destination to Chennai. They have to reach a train station, and have to thumb a lift to get there. Unfortunately, the small van that stops by has two men, all sozzled up. And the ride for the couple turns nightmarish. The style reminded me of Hitchcock – where fear is conveyed without undue blood and gore.

*Brothers* Satish and Santosh Babu's *Ottayal Paatha*, also in Malayalam, is a heart-tugging tale of a father and son. The brothers narrate through a series of sparse frames and economy of words how a grown-up son, Akhil (played by Sarath Sabha), is caught between the love for his girlfriend, Nina (Krishnapriya), and his affection for his old father, Vikraman (K Kaladharan). The elderly man is practically bed-ridden with complications arising out of diabetes severely restricting his mobility. When out of bed, he has to hop on to a wheelchair, and he needs constant care. The family is not well-to-do and lives in a ghetto of sorts, and Akhil has no job, and in any case the city where he lives offers very little opportunity. And when Nina, hailing from an upper class family, suggests that the two go away to Bengaluru, the invitation is tantalisingly tempting. For Akhil, the new city will be like a breath of much-needed oxygen, but the son is wracked by dilemma. Can he possibly leave his infirm father behind to be taken care of by paid employees? The work competed at the recent Cairo International Film Festival.

\*Next week, Gautaman Bhaskaran will list his 10 most favourite films in languages other than Indian, and he may be e-mailed at [gautamanb@hotmail.com](mailto:gautamanb@hotmail.com)