

National awards only for Bollywood and biggies

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BIG-BUDGET SPECTACLE: Baahubali in Telugu walked away with the Best Film Award at this year's National Film Awards, but there were so many better alternatives.

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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

In a country like India whose diversity is its beauty, its joy, there are forces out to wreck this variedness. Much like thrusting Hindi on a nation that has over 20 languages and innumerable dialects, and much like pushing a Hindutva agenda on a multi-religious community, this year's National Film Awards have gone mostly to Bollywood fare, Hindi language cinema to be precise, or the big, big blockbusters. The other cinemas of India have been left holding regional recognition. The smaller pictures with modest budgets have gone unsung.

Baahubali in Telugu has walked away with the Best Film Award. But what a pick for the best feature. Made at a huge cost, this Hindu mythological epic was probably pushed into the top slot because of its content. For, there is no performance worth the name in the movie. The script is poor, there is lack of continuity, the plot is confusing and the style of storytelling archaic. Above, it is pretentious with a capital P. Yes, it has special effects, but compare them with an Avatar or even a Titanic, Baahubali will totter on the track.

A far better choice in the Best Film category could have been Vetrimaaran's Visaranai — a brutally powerful look at police highhandedness that premiered at the Venice Film Festival last year. The use of raw force on defenceless migrant labourers is a telling example of what

power and uniform can do to soil humanness.

But Visaaranai had to settle as the Best Tamil Film, dumped into alleyway we in India call regional cinema — much like how Satyajit Ray was once introduced at the International Film Festival of India in Calcutta as the “Bengali director”. Could anything have been more insulting to a man who literally put Indian cinema on the world map at Cannes in 1956 with his immortal classic called Pather Panchali. That Song of the Little Road led India to a mighty highway.

And what about Sanal Sasidharan’s An Off-Day Game? Which is pure cinema, unpredictable and unpretentious.

We also had Gurbinder Singh’s Chauthi Koot (which played at Cannes) — a story of fear and uncertainty set in the times of Punjab insurgency and narrated in a gripping Hitchcockian style.

These are but just three examples of the kind of movies that could have been far worthier of the Best Film trophy.

But the National Awards jury, headed by the Bollywood mandarin, Ramesh Sippy, and handpicked by the Directorate of Film Festivals (a wing of the Union Information and Broadcasting Ministry), had other ideas.

Among performers, Amitabh Bachchan got to wear the Best Actor hat for his portrayal of a grumpy old constipated man who is so mulish that he forces his daughter to take him from Delhi to Kolkata in a taxi. There was nothing extraordinary in Big B’s acting, but then Big B being Big had to be among the winners. So what if there were far better artists than him!

Two names come to my mind so easily, so effortlessly. Kamal Hassan’s cable television operator in Papanasam who foxes the cops with such amazing cunning is a performance that will remain etched in my memory. Hassan reinvented himself — after a long time — as Hassan the actor, totally convincing in a part that gave him an excellent opportunity to sink into the character. And he did this so superbly — brushing aside all the trappings of a superstar that he is.

And what about Nawazuddin Siddiqui as and in Manjhi-The Mountain Man, directed by Ketan Mehta. Siddiqui was brilliant as a poor farmer who loses his wife because a mountain stands between his village and the nearest hospital, fatally prolonging the journey.

There is more to come. Salman Khan starrer Bajrangi Bhaijaan was adjudged the Best Popular Film, a work that many have felt was a huge PR platform for Khan — who has been evading a prison term for “drunken driving” (which cost a pavement dweller his life) and for reportedly shooting an endangered black buck in Rajasthan’s Bishnoi territory.

And Sanjay Leela Bhansali was the Best Director for Bajirao Mastani, a look at Martha valour, a subject that probably endeared him to the jury, which is facing its share of controversies. One of them relates to music director Illyaraja’s brother, Gangai Amaran. He was part of the panel that honoured Ilaiyaraja for the background score in the Tamil work, Thaarai Thappattai. However, Amaran has been contending that he did not take part in the deliberations on music. Obviously, such unilateral celebration of the biggies and Bollywood has caused a storm in the social media. Ananth Mahadevan, producer, director and actor, said that the awards were as bad as sending Jeans for the Oscars some years ago! Gurbinder Singh, despite winning a trophy for the Best Punjabi Film (Chauthi Koot), felt that the prizes were a “complete farce”. Veena Bakshi, whose The Coffin Maker was a riveting look at death, quipped, “what a sad and shameful turn of events”.

One would like to end this piece with an observation that Roman Polanski once made: “The awards are as good as the jury”. There you go.

Uyire Uyire

There was a time when Indian cinema had a dozen songs or more in just about every film, but they were an integral part of the narrative and they pushed the story to its next chapter. But today, songs and dances (to boot) stick out like sore thumbs, and have been a cause for Indian movies' poor performance on the world stage. What is more, Bollywood and others are often ridiculed, and termed "sheer nonsense".

One had expected someone as talented as Jaya Prada (Satyajit Ray once described her as the most beautiful woman) and an ace politician like Amar Singh to invest their money in at least an above average movie, but what they have produced — Uyire Uyire (Tamil) — is unwatchable.

And Jaya Prada has introduced her son, Siddhu, as the hero in her film, written and directed by AR Rajasekar. To top this, a house as renowned as Eros International is distributing the movie!

Let us take a look at what Uyire Uyire has on offer. The first half is a juvenile romp of two rather mature looking actors, Hansika Motwani (as Priya) and Siddhu (as Rahul) — who meet on a plane that takes off from Mumbai to Chennai, but is forced by bad weather to land at Goa's Dabolin Airport.

Now, a carpet of coincidences is laid out for us to blindly tread on. At Dabolin, Rahul gets a call from his best buddy who is getting married the very next day in Goa. Rahul had forgotten all about it, and having struck a love-hate relationship with Priya on board, he coaxes her to accompany him. She has never seen Goa, and jumps at the invitation. So, what if the guy is a total stranger and may be a potential villain.

The marriage is hurriedly pushed aside for the couple to go sightseeing in Goa, beaches and bikini babes for the voyeuristic viewer. And a song thrown in. What more can one ask? And for those who might have been waiting for Siddhu's he-manship, the director throws in a scene that hyphenates the wedding and the picnic on the beach. Clad in a brocade sari and heavy gold jewellery, Priya wanders on to the sands in the dead of night, while Rahul is busy drinking (with the liquor is injurious warning trying hard to spoil his spiritedness) with pals celebrating a bachelors' party.

But then sixth sense forces him to the beach, where he sees Priya about to be raped by men in dark outfits on motorcycles, their racing engines creating all the frightening din. Superman Rahul vanquishes all, about half a dozen or more burly men. And then the couple return to the airport, where the same plane is waiting to take them back home to Chennai.

But the tone and tenor the film changes dramatically after this. We are taken back in time to a story about how Priya's brother maniacally pursues Rahul's sister in college, leading to a disastrous fight between the two men.

Must we say more in a movie where Siddhu looks positively uncomfortable lisping dialogues in Tamil (one presumes his mother tongue is Telugu) and he is hardly of an age for college romance. He looks far too old for this sort of thing, and Motwani can hardly pass off today for a giggly college girl in the flush of first love.

If the plot is beyond the wildest of one's imagination, the director and producers could have at least got the casting right. And the script writer must have been the laziest guy around, peppering the narrative with needless songs and dances and unbelievable coincidences. Bad editing gives the work a jerky look, and in short Uyire Uyire is an insult to one's intelligence. Eminently avoidable even if there isn't another movie for miles on the horizon.

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