

cinema



* Scenes from the Malayalam film *Shutter* and Bengali language *Shobdo* (Sound) below, shown as part of the 'Celebration of India' section at the Dubai Film Festival this week.

It's a small world

Two screenings at the Dubai International Film Festival show how parochial Indian films can be, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

A movie festival is often a revelation of sorts. Or, vindication. The recent Dubai International Film Festival, which marked the end of the Middle Eastern cinema events for the year — as also my festival run for 2013 — asserted something I have always been saying. Indians are parochial. Let me go back a little in time to describe this.

Years ago, Satyajit Ray was

introduced as a “Bengali movie director” to a gathering of foreign delegates at the International Film Festival of India, held that year in Kolkata.

Ray must have flinched, but he never showed it. Was he just a Bengali? Well, much of his cinema may have been in his native Bengali language (he did make a couple of pictures in Hindi), but his work was not just pan-Indian, but crossed many other boundaries, telling us

tales that could have unfolded in any part of the world.

So universal was the language of his themes that his movies were sought after and loved wherever they went.

Indians are parochial, and terribly so.

Indians may have picked up an umpteen number of habits from, for instance, America. Coke and burger, among others. But what Indians have not is the American sense of national identity and pride. I have seldom seen an American being called a Texan or a New Yorker. An Indian often describes himself as a Tamil or an Assamese or a Punjabi. An Indian has just not been able to acquire a feeling of nationhood. He is not patriotic in that respect.

He is first a Bengali or Marwari or Andhra before he is an Indian.

Such parochialism creeps into many walks of Indian life. Cinema, certainly.

A few months ago, the renowned Indian movie director, Girish Kasaravalli (who is from Karnataka) regretted how terribly parochial people in the country were.

“When one of my films is screened at an international festival, the

audience would be predominantly Kannadigas. Similarly, if a Telugu movie is shown, only the Telugus would patronise it”.

I have seen this myself. When some of Adoor Gopalakrishnan's (another celebrated Indian auteur who comes from Kerala) films are played, most of the viewers would be Keralites.

I was reminded of this great Indian parochialism the other evening at the Dubai Festival. A Malayalam movie, *Shutter*, and a Bengali work, *Sound*, were screened one after the other at a multiplex in a swanky upmarket mall. While the audience for *Shutter* was overwhelmingly Malayali, that for *Shobdo* (Sound) was Bengali. As I walked into the theatre for *Shutter*, I was almost deafened by the babble of Malayalam. Fortunately, I do understand the language, and so was not quite at a loss amid what could have otherwise sounded alien or even gibberish.

Soon after, *Shutter* closed, *Shobdo* came on, and the same cinema was flooded with “Bongs”, and their excitement of watching a film from their own home was apparent by the greetings and backslapping I witnessed. People shook one another's hands, spoke

about family and friends and even talked shop in Bengali, also a language I know having grown up in Kolkata.

Joy Mathew's *Shutter* is painfully long at 134 minutes, and is often boringly repetitive. Although the movie's synopsis says it is a satire on the helmer's experiences in the Gulf, the main plot is quite something else. Admittedly, it is about a Gulf returnee (played by Lal), but it has more to do with his drunken misadventure one night when he gets locked in his garage with a prostitute. His Man Friday, an autorickshaw driver (Vinay Forrt), who plays accomplice and locks the garage from the outside to let the two have some fun, fails to turn up at the stroke of midnight, the hour he had promised to return with hot food.

The unlikely couple find themselves caged in for two nights and a whole day, and most of the narrative centres on this embarrassing plight. While the storyline may have a dash of novelty, the scripting lacks any modicum of realism, and I was left wondering why at all this work was chosen as part of a section titled ‘Celebration of India’. Is this how Dubai wished to applaud Indian cinema?

Kaushik Ganguly's *Shobdo* is a far better effort, and it talks about a Foley artist in Kolkata, who begins to hear less and less of human voices, his attention invariably being drawn to what we call ambient sounds. He would hear the whistle of a pressure cooker, but not what his pretty wife says. The gurgling sound of a stream, the rustle of leaves and the tinkle of a bicycle bell would all grab his attention, and his head would be working on how best to produce these sounds in the studio where he works. In India, sync-sound is still difficult, given the extremely noisy conditions we live in.

There were two gripping performances in *Sound*. Victor Banerjee (he had been a Ray actor, and I still remember his brilliant performance along with Soumitra Chatterjee's in *Ghare Baire*/Home and the World) as a psychiatrist was impressive, and Raima Sen (Moon Moon Sen's daughter and Suchitra Sen's grand-daughter) as the troubled wife is not just pretty, but wonderful in a plain Jane role filled with anxiety and pathos.

Yes, even *Shobdo* could have been better edited, and shorter. Somehow, Indian cinema has the tendency to ramble on, thus losing the grip on the narrative. But more than all this what really disturbed me that evening was this evil called parochialism. It has always divided us, and it continues to do so, only that it appears glaring when it comes to cinema.

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