

# cinema



✳ Anupam Kher, Avtar Panesar and Ashutosh Gowariker at the Doha Tribeca Film Festival held recently.

## Pitfalls and picnics of Indian cinema

Though Indian filmmakers crave for global appeal, the professionalism needed is lacking in many ways. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

**Y**ears ago, I spent four days on the set of Shyam Benegal's shoot at Hyderabad's Ramoji Rao movie complex, a sprawling place with hotels, studios, labs and, what is more, locales resembling a Parisian street, a New York avenue, a Dutch tulip garden, a Swiss ski resort, a Kashmiri landscape and what have you. Benegal — who had been one of the pioneers of the New Indian Wave in the early 1970s with exceptionally realistic films like *Ankur*, *Nishant*, *Manthan* and *Bhumika*, and credited with working within the Bollywood system and yet daring to be different — was shooting *Hari Bhari* with Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das among others.

As I sat in a corner of Benegal's set, a village with a water well, huts and so on recreated at the complex, I could not help noticing

— and to my horror — the various kinds of distractions that were happening there. There were boys walking around with tea and snacks, vehicles just outside the set honking, and people talking so loudly that I wondered how the actors could emote or the director concentrate on getting his scene right. What about the cinematographer? Would he be able to get the kind of compositions he wanted?

Well, *Hari Bhari* was made, and it did see the light of day. A movie propagating family planning, it was not one of Benegal's best. And how could it have been with all the on-set commotion! Of course, I have never seen Benegal on his other sets, and he did make some brilliant cinema. And if he had made it despite commotions, hats off to his power of concentration.

At the just-concluded Doha Tribeca Film Festival, on-set

“chaos” in India was talked about during one of the panel discussions. Indian actor Anupam Kher — who essays a psycho-therapist in David O Russell's *Silver Linings Playbook*, which was part of the Special Screenings — quipped that moviemaking in Bollywood was “like a family picnic.”

I was amazed that after all these years, the picture on a film set was still just about the same like the one I had seen a long time ago at Hyderabad. (However, there are some auteurs like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, who insists on professionalism on his sets. I watched him shoot two of his latest works, *Four Women* and *A Climate for Crime*, where it is all serious business. No picnics there.)

Getting back to Kher, I was also happy that spoke his mind without mincing words. He added that Indian stars threw tantrums (and directors often tolerated such

behaviour) and had no qualms about reporting late for work. The attitude was irritatingly casual. Quite different from what he saw in Hollywood, where discipline mattered, and one could be fired “at the drop of a hat”. Even the top actors there followed rules and ethics.

Kher, who has a Padmashree to his credit and about 450 movies, praised Hollywood for its realism, subtleties and nuanced characterisations. Bollywood, on the contrary, went all out with melodrama, larger than life figures and exaggerations. These were no longer desirable.

Ashutosh Gowariker, who was on the jury for the Arab Feature Competition, felt during another discussion that it was time India made a cinema that appealed to a larger audience, not just the one in at home. “We need to tell stories that are relevant to the world at

large and which deal with subjects that are universally appealing”, he said.

Gowariker whose *Lagaan* was one the three films (along with *Mother India* and *Salaam Bombay*) to have been nominated for the Best Foreign Language Picture Oscar, thought it imperative that India made movies which were tight and short. Audiences outside the country were not inclined to sit through a film that stretched beyond 120 minutes. In short, “international viewers do not want samosas in between”.

Though I am often told that Indian movies are a roaring success outside the country, the truth very often is that they are patronised only by the large number of Indian expats in places like America, Britain, Singapore, Malaysia and the Gulf. Gowariker felt that despite India's big productions with equally big stars, its films still did not appeal to non-Indians. So, it would be wrong to say that Indian movies had a global appeal.

Gowariker added that “a film becomes truly global only when it is understood and acknowledged by different nationalities in their large numbers...We need to tell stories that are relevant all over the world and deal with those subjects that have a contemporary and universal appeal...Even though most Indian films screened outside the country are subtitled in English, foreigners are not quite comfortable watching movies in Indian languages...”

But do Indian producers and directors need to get their films across the seas? After all, India has a huge cinema-going population, with movies still being the cheapest form of entertainment. Not just this, but tens of television channels rely on cinema for a major portion of their content. So, Indian films rely on the domestic market to earn their profits.

Yet, Indian producers and directors, even actors, secretly (sometimes openly) crave for international recognition, even if they do not care much about the international market. Aamir Khan, the man who has said innumerable times that awards did not matter to him, spent huge money and a lot of time trying to push *Lagaan* towards the winning post at Los Angeles. Last year, Kerala helmer Salim Ahamed spent Rs50 lakhs to promote his *Abu, Son of Adam* in Los Angeles when his work was chosen as India's official entry for the Oscars. Unfortunately, it was not even nominated by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Indians want their movies to be at Cannes, Venice and Berlin among other film festivals.

Sadly, these are not happening, at least not as much as Indians would like. And we know the reasons.

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