



India out of the Oscars race



CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED: A screen grab from *Liar's Dice*, which was India's 2014 submission for Oscar consideration.

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

At the recent International Film Festival of India in Panaji, Goa, two young men walked up to me and decried that their movies had not been selected for the Indian Panorama. This is an important section of the festival where the cream of Indian cinema is showcased. Why did these men choose to accost me? Well, I was part of the 13-member Feature Film Jury that picked 26 movies out of about 180 that were sent up for selection.

I told the young directors that whether I had wanted to pick their works or not, it would have been the decision of a majority of the jurors that could have mattered. And, in case, the verdict of a jury was always subjective. A particular jury might like a film, another might not.

It is in this context that one must view the short list of nine movies chosen by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences from a record number of 83 submissions in the foreign language category this year. Of these nine, the final five nominees will be announced on January 15, 2015.

Some of the critically acclaimed films have not found a berth. One of them is India's *Liar's Dice* – which did garner decent reviews, though I am yet to see it. The Hindi road drama has been directed by Geetu Mohandas, and stars Geetanjali Thapa and Nawazuddin Siddiqui.

The *Variety* review had this to say about *Liar's Dice*: "Following her 2008 short *Kelkkundo*, which won several international prizes, writer-director Geetu Mohandas makes an assured feature debut with the quietly effective *Liar's Dice*. This Indian road drama, following a young woman's search for her missing husband with a surly stranger's (Siddiqui) help, is

always interesting to look at and nicely observed, though it does take its leisurely time getting to what feels like an overly abrupt, somewhat cryptic resolution.

"In a snowy village near the Tibetan border, Kamala (Thapa) has worried long enough: It's been five months since she last heard from her husband, who took a distant construction job. Has he been hurt in an accident? Has he run off with another woman? For lack of any real information, she's determined now to track him down physically."

India and Mohandas will perhaps find solace in the fact that some of the year's most outstanding movies failed to make the cut. And these are not only among my favourites, but also considered exceptional by many other critics across continents.

To name just one, The Hollywood Reporter's Scott Feinberg writes: "There were a few glaring omissions that are pretty hard to stomach. Where is Cannes Palme d'Or winner *Winter Sleep*, from Turkey, and Jury Prize winner *Mommy*, from Canada's 25-year-old prodigy Xavier Dolan? Where is Israel's socially significant *Gett: The Trial of Viviane Amsalem*, a Golden Globe Award nominee, and Hungary's edgy *White God*? And, most upsetting to me, where is Belgium's *Two Days, One Night*, the latest in a long line of masterpieces by the brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, a Critics' Choice Award nominee – and the fourth that the Academy could have but failed to nominate. I totally get that there is not room for everything, but several of these would have been on the top-half of a list of nine for me and many other cineastes I know."

Certainly mine as well.

However, there are some interesting films in the basket of nine. Poland's black-and-white Holocaust work, *Ida*, Russia's tale of greed and corruption, *Leviathan*, Sweden's haunting adventure, *Force Majeure* and Argentina's sex comedy, *Wild Tales*, are in

the pick-me-up contest where the finalists will vie for the statuette. I also quite liked Mauritania's first-ever Oscar submission, *Timbuktu*, by Abderrahmane Sissako – a deeply disturbing story of religious dogmatism that I saw at the Venice Film Festival in September.

Feinberg adds: "But it is now more incumbent on journalists than ever before to talk up the great international gems that won't have a shot at a trip to the Oscars, including those mentioned above, because otherwise they can quickly fade into oblivion, and that would be a terrible injustice."

So, in the light of what Feinberg avers, Mohandas's *Liar's Dice* perhaps needs to be written about more widely now.

Here is the full list of the nine movies:

Wild Tales (Argentina)
Tangerines (Estonia)
Corn Island (Georgia)
Timbuktu (Mauritania)
Accused (The Netherlands)
Ida (Poland)
Leviathan (Russia)
Force Majeure (Sweden)
The Liberator (Venezuela)

Pisaasu

Mysskin-helmed *Pisaasu* – which opened last Friday – is not the run-of-the-mill horror story. The ghost here is generally friendly – an unmistakable reminder of the 1990 American work, *Ghost*, starring Demi Moore, Patrick Swayze and Whoopi Goldberg, that was directed by Jerry Zucker. But, while the American *Ghost* (Swayze) infuses neither horror nor mystery into the plot, Mysskin's *Pisaasu* (Pragya) has these elements, though in a vague sort of way.

However, but for brief heart-thumping thrills, there is very little to scare us. Even during those scenes where the ghost

appears with her hair dishevelled and face blackened, young girls in the auditorium were found laughing. Yes, laughing all right.

Much like Swayze's ghost – who stays with his girlfriend (Moore) helping her escape from all kinds of dangers – *Pisaasu* (played by Pragya) becomes Siddharth's (Naga) silent friend, at times a moralistic friend. A violinist by profession living alone in a swanky flat (but who sits with blind beggars in a Chennai pedestrian subway), Siddharth is perplexed to find his beer bottles breaking or opener vanishing or mother (who comes to visit him) being mysteriously saved after she has a fall in the bathroom. So, this *Pisaasu* is a good Samaritan with moralistic overtones!

But why does she take a fancy for Siddharth – even helping him save Rs50000 that a woman pretending to be a medium (she resembles Goldberg in *Ghost*) tries to claim as her fee? When Bhavani/*Pisaasu* (Pragya) is seriously wounded in a hit-and-run road accident, Siddharth rushes to her aid and gets her to the hospital, but she dies there tightly holding his hand. It is quite another thing that the attending doctor does not even think of resuscitating her – but that is Indian cinema, which believes that the story must move on, come what may.

While Naga goes around with a mop of hair covering one of his eyes and hardly impresses, and Pragya walks through an insignificant part, Radha Ravi as her devastated screen father, catches one's eye with a degree of brilliance in a movie which, at best seems, like a half-hearted attempt by a director who showed promise in his earlier *Onaayum Aattukkuttiyum* and *Anjathe*.

● *Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com*