

BLOODY TALE: *Jigarthanda*

The sound of silence

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Indians must be about the noisiest race on this planet. The other day, I had been to a swanky restaurant in Chennai, where 20-odd men descended for dinner, and their incredibly loud chatter upset my mood and perhaps my digestive ability. Indians, without exaggeration, talk in decibel levels high enough to shatter the eardrum.

Even a normal, unanimated conversation between two people tends to be uncomfortably deafening for those around. On trains, Indians chatter away into their mobile phones in tones that tear your peace apart. In temples, in churches and even in crematoriums, the noise levels are excruciatingly painful.

So, it is not surprising that movies should ape what is going around. Tamil films take the cake here. The sound is ear-splitting, almost hysterical and theatrical. The characters seldom seem to have a soft exchange of words. They debate, they argue and they have a wordy free for all at the top of their voices. They scream, they screech, they shout, they berate – but they rarely talk in pitches that are gentle and smooth.

Added to this is the torturous background score – and this not just in Tamil cinema – whose intrusiveness is impolite and impertinent. Worse, the music is often so piercing that dialogues are lost, and with most Indian movies using the score as a cue to push the audience into a particular mood, the notes from any instrument are as displeasing as they possibly can be. Above all, they are endless and leave you with a sense of fatigue – physical and mental.

It only follows, then, that cinema viewers have got so habituated to sound on the screen that the moment there is silence, they get restive. Even babies begin bawling, completely

ruining the serenity of silence that some directors have begun to use now. Audiences are not comfortable with visuals without voice. They want constant flow of decibels usually in the form of music. The louder, the better. The more continuous the background score, the greater the comfort. Or, so it seems.

Admittedly, in the structure of cinema, music is the most noticeable feature of sound, which, if used with care, becomes a 'creative presence'. Otherwise, it jars. Sadly, very little attention is paid to background score in Indian cinema: many use it to hide directorial defects, exaggerated acting styles, poor dialogue deliveries and other shortcomings.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan is one of the rare Indian directors who understands this. In his second feature, *Kodiyettam*, he did not use background score at all. There are other sounds though. The call of birds, the beat of drums, the din of crackers and the sound of a moving truck are appropriately used. But there is no music in the background.

Explaining this, he once told me that "Since the audiences are watching the life of Sankarankutty (the lead character portrayed by actor Gopi), it is not good to impose upon them the image of a stereotype hero. Interestingly, those who watched *Kodiyettam* did not notice the absence of background score. This experience is an encouragement for a rethink among those who believe that music is an unavoidable factor in cinema."

Gopalakrishnan believes that music need not be the only hyphen between two actions or dialogues. There are so many sounds one can use. We live among a variety of 'noises', made by automobiles, machines, men, animals and birds. The honking of a vehicle, the drone of a water pump, the laughter of men, the trumpeting of an elephant, the howling of a jackal and the cawing of crows are some of the sounds that can be used to enrich a frame and convey an idea.

"Even silence is part of sound," he avers. "It is squeezed in by two spells of sound. Silence also

lends greater importance to the sound that is to follow. So, it is with great care that a director must introduce sound after a period of silence."

This was brought out with brilliant effect in the romantic French work, *The Artist*, made in the style of black-and-white silent film. There is one telling scene which conveys the coming of sound: Director Michel Hazanavicius shows a wine glass being placed on a table, and the thud it makes is magnified with such novelty that even critics at Cannes gasped in wonder.

Jigarthanda

Director Karthik Subbaraj's forte has been thrillers. He debuted with *Pizza*, a supernatural story, and is now on to *Pizza 3*. But between these two, he wove another film, *Jigarthanda*, the tale of a fledgling helmer and his compulsion to create a gangster movie. Diffident but with a dream in his eyes and a song in his heart, young Karthik Subramaniam (played by Siddharth) goes to a producer, who asks the debutant to make a violent film and throws a few DVDs on the table. One of them is *Godfather*, the other a Quentin Tarantino work.

While Siddharth – whose passion is arty stuff – agrees to the producer's diktat, secretly deciding to make a Mani Ratnam copy, well something like *Nayagan* or *Thalapathy*, Subbaraj is decidedly inspired by Tarantino's violent imagery and the Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men*. But unfortunately, Subbaraj fails to get to the kind of stylised, orchestrated brutality and bloodshed which the two American auteurs have perfected with not just extraordinary conviction but finesse.

And set-in-Madurai *Jigarthanda* turns out to be a crude copy of sorts – with blood flowing freely, men doused in petrol and burnt alive and with the butcher's knife used to scoop out the guts! When a cop walks into the house of "Assault" Sethu (Bobby Simha) where the drama of gore is being enacted, the body is quickly dragged away, and sambar is

spilled on the blood to camouflage it.

The point is either you have it in you to make such sadism work or you do not. Tarantino has, Hitchcock probably did not, and so he chose to make murder most foul appear as pleasing as possible. Subbaraj stands somewhere between these two helmers, clearly undecided, like his young hero, whether to go the Tarantino way or adapt the Hitchcockian style. So he picks a bit from here and a bit from there.

And, *Jigarthanda* drags us into 170 minutes of needless songs and a distracting love story (between Karthik and Lakshmi Menon's Kayal, who steals saris from shops) to present a plot of potholes – where some scenes reminded me of Gabbar Singh's legendary acts in *Sholay*. At other times, Subbaraj, who also wrote the movie, transforms Sethu into a buffoon, with an instructor teaching the Madurai gangster (the temple town has taken on this unholy tag of being a goonda's paradise with some violent stories being set there) and his henchmen how to act.

What follows is a film (within the film) by Karthik where Sethu seems like a circus clown. Karthik's movie is of course a hit, and audiences are in splits. So, the kind of fear that Sethu had been evoking (Sleep my child, sleep or Gabbar will descend on us) among the Madurai men evaporates into mirth and merriment in the darkened auditoriums. Fright flies out, fun darts in.

If Subbaraj wanted to send a moral through his work – shed no blood – *Jigarthanda* flounders in a maze of 1960s kind of explanatory dialogues, and images that confound, and these despite fine performances by Simha (great expressions and body language) and Karunakaran as Karthik's sidekick. As for Siddharth, he just about manages to look bewildered, and all the time!

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