



PRIZE-WINNER: A still from Chaitanya Tamhane's multilingual movie, *Court*.

India presents 'realistic silence' at Venice Festival

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Indian director Chaitanya Tamhane's multilingual movie, *Court*, clinched two important prizes at the 71st Venice International Film Festival, which drew to a close last Saturday. The movie won the Lion of the Future Award for the best first feature of the Festival. The honour carries a cash prize of \$100,000 to be shared between the director and the producer. *Court* was also adjudged the best film in the Orizzonti or Horizons category, which is the most important section after Competition and Outside Competition.

The most striking aspect about *Court* was its narrative style – which was so very different from the courtroom battles we have seen in Hindi cinema. There is absolutely little drama in Tamhane's *Court*. No fiery speeches, no sarcasm, no punchy dialogues, no theatrics – the kind we saw in the recent courtroom work, *Jolly LLB*, for instance. Tamhane's *Court* is realistic. The judge in the Sessions Court is ordinary. The prosecution lawyer is a housewife once she steps out of the hallowed premises of the court, and the defence counsel is no hero either.

And it is in these settings that we see a story unfold, the story of an ageing folk singer, whose lower middleclass existence forces him to take private tuitions and who is accused of abetting the suicide of a sewage worker. The prosecution plea sounds absurd. The folk singer had in one of his ballads egged sewage labourers to kill

themselves. The following morning, a worker is found dead in a gutter. Did he kill himself or was his death accidental? The prosecution alone is sure that it was the folk song which had pushed him to suicide.

In an interview with me at Venice, Tamhane says that he researched for a long time before scripting *Court*. He attended several court sessions and watched the interplay of judges, lawyers, suspects and criminals.

He avers: "The judiciary is an authorised but violent institution that metes out life and death judgments. It is one of those platforms, where otherwise bracketed people from across class and cultures, interact and mingle. I was curious to explore the figures of authority involved in a trial: the judge, prosecutor and defence lawyer, who are themselves slaves to rules, protocol, and hierarchy. I very soon realised that these people come from the same families, the same socio-cultural context that the rest of us belong to. The only difference is that they happen to be in a position of power.

"So in that way, the film also became a study of the society, the collective. I started out by interviewing a lot of lawyers, activists, and academics. Their insights about the judiciary became the foundation of the script. I was also inspired by the trials of cultural activists across the country, who were persecuted for their ideologies rather than their actions ... As my protagonist, Narayan Kamble (played by Vira Sathidar) was"

Kamble is a man who sings songs highlighting the pressing issues of the day. It can be termed "protest music", which was "born as a reaction to British colonialism, and

later became an offspring of the Communist parties. In the last hundred years, Mumbai has been an arena for protest politics. Since the 1930s,

artists have sung protest songs and staged agit-prop plays.

"Kamble belongs to the 'Dalit' community, a group that has been traditionally regarded as 'untouchables'. His is a history of thousands of years of oppression and marginalisation. His character is based on the protest singers of the Dalit Panther movement of the '70s and part of a radical anti-caste movement.

Today, all these groups and the movement inhabit a diminished space. All forms of resistance (legal and cultural) are being neutralised and under constant State surveillance."

Tamhane contends that when he started researching and writing *Court*, he had not envisaged it as a critique of India's legal system. "For me, more than the story and the characters, it is the setting which excites. I wanted to create a realistic mood and atmosphere in a courtroom, and what you see in my movie is completely different from what is presented in the movies on this subject.

"In an actual sessions court, there are no histrionics, no microphones, and nobody knows what is going on. But yet some of the stories that unfold there are stranger than fiction."

Tamhane's *Court* hits these all right. There is no sharp oratory, no moral sermons. But, yes, what moves and troubles us is the utter helplessness of the accused, Kamble in this case, who comes from a poor socio-economic

background. Kamble has to stay in jail for months (or years) only because he cannot wield money and muscle power. And in a way, the prosecution appears more pushy than the defence.

Is there some hidden power which is interested in keeping Kamble in prison? Is the judge partisan to the prosecution? Why does the defence seem so helpless?

These are some of the questions which are bound to exercise our minds as we walk out of the screening of *Court*. There was another Indian movie at Venice, Aditya Vikram Sengupta's debut feature, *Labour of Love*. It narrates a story sans dialogues. In an India which is bombarded with the noisiest of sounds, this work had musical scores though.

Helmed with sheer lyricism, *Labour of Love* or *Asha Jaoar Majhe* is about a young Bengali couple living in a recession-hit Kolkata, their humdrum middleclass existence filled with monotonous jobs and punctuated by meal breaks and sleep. They never meet each other. For, the man works at night in the printing press of a newspaper, and his wife during the day in a handbag factory.

With Ritwik Chakraborty as the husband and Basabdu Chatterjee, wife, the film chugs along sporting only two characters, the tedium of their lives coloured by the couple's love for each other. Which is exemplified through her cooking and his washing up.

This inhuman sacrifice – of leading lives without meeting each other – has probably been necessitated by West Bengal's (Kolkata is in this state) precarious economic situation, where many chase very few jobs.

It is only at the end of 80-odd minutes of the movie that director Aditya Vikram Sengupta lets his protagonists meet. But this happens in a fantasy sequence, where they are shown happy and loving. At other times, for much of the film, the husband and wife seem serene and content. Perhaps resigned to their punishing fates.

During a chat with me the other morning at Venice, Sengupta says that this kind of marital existence is not exactly rare – lives led with the two people hardly meeting each other or being able to communicate. This could have been one reason why there are no dialogues in *Labour of Love*.

"But initially, I did not envisage my work without conversations. There was at least one scene which had them. However as we went about shooting the movie, it started to evolve in such a way that it needed no dialogues to make its point," Sengupta says. He then found it unwise to break the rhythm of the film by imposing that "talking scene".

But could not the couple have got other jobs which would not have been so hard on them? *Labour of Love* is set in the Kolkata of 2008-9, when the city was in the throes of a severe recession. Obviously, the man and the woman must have found it hard to find other jobs, jobs that would have helped them to spend time with each other. Sengupta's film was inspired by a two-page short story, *Adventures of a Married Couple* by Italo Calvino. There has been one other movie on this, a 11-minute short, *The Adventure of a Married Couple* by Iran's Keywan Karimi. This is also, like *Labour of Love*, a poetic variation of the Calvino story.

A website write up on the short film has this to say: "Trapped in daily repetition, between the frenetic sound of a glass bottle factory and the guarding of a shed filled with naked mannequins, a young couple meets at evenings. They eat without looking at each other, not even speaking."

While Karimi offers her couple at least a chance to meet, Sengupta is harsher. His couple do not see each other at all. Or, at best, one fantasises about the other.

● Gautaman Bhaskaran covered the 71st edition of the Venice International Film Festival, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com