

Indian cinema is still a slave to stars

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VALID: Naseeruddin Shah's criticism of Rajesh Khanna and his work was both valid and in spirit of India's healthy democratic norms.



Rate

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Star spats are not exactly new in India, which has even seen celebrated auteurs getting into slanging matches.

The mid-1960s saw the famous "rivalry" between two of India's leading lights in cinema, Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen. Ray — credited with brilliant films like *Pather Panchali* and *Charulata* — and Sen — also renowned for cinematic excellence in movies like *Bhuvan Shome* (which was one of the pictures that heralded the New Indian Cinema in 1969), *Mrigaya* and *Kharij* — clashed in the columns of Calcutta's leading dailies like *The Statesman*. Newspapers were the only platform available those days — when Twitter and Facebook were not even in the remotest corner of anybody's mind.

One of the clashes pertained to Sen's *Aakash Kusum*, but later, Ray's son, Sandip, called these a "healthy competition" not rivalry. In 2013, Sandip quipped: "You cannot perform in a vacuum. Only when you have stiff competition do you have the urge to excel. Mrinal Sen's and Ritwik Ghatak's presence naturally urged my father to outshine himself. I am sure that my father's presence had a similar effect on them as well."

Away from such professional tiffs, if I may say so, Ray and Sen were good friends keeping tabs on each other's ideas, thinking processes, techniques and styles. "My father and I would run into Mrinalbabu all the time during our post-production work. We would mostly be in different editing rooms at NT 1. Often I would find my father and Mrinalbabu engaged in stimulating conversations. I would soak in every bit of it," Sandip reminisced, adding that he himself had remained one of Sen's biggest fans to this day.

Today, stars and directors lash at each other through the social media. Recently, we saw a

huge conflict between two Bollywood actors, Hrithik Roshan and Kangana Ranaut, that degenerated into an awfully unpleasant war of words. There have been similar squabbles among other film personalities. Sometimes, they are out in the open, in public domain.

The latest "tiff" seems to be between one of India's most talented actors, Naseeruddin Shah (whose presence made so many movies so extraordinarily meaningful) and Rajesh Khanna (perhaps the country's first superstar, who died in 2012).

In an interview to Hindustan Times, Shah lamented the mediocrity which had seeped into Hindi cinema. He said the decline began in the 1970s, courtesy the late Rajesh Khanna — a superstar by industry standards, but a poor actor at best.

Khanna's daughter, Twinkle (now married to Bollywood star, Akshay Kumar), lambasted Shah saying that it was unfair to criticise a man who was dead, and who cannot respond.

Unfortunately, Twinkle was wrong. India is a healthy democracy where men and women have the right to be critical of one another's views and work. Come on, we pick on even Nehru and Gandhiji, and both have been long gone.

And, I think Shah was bang right when he said that Khanna was a poor performer. Not just this, he brought into Indian cinema the craze called super stardom that belittled writers and directors, while placing actors on a high pedestal. Khanna often got the kind of kudos which he certainly did not deserve. He was not actor, for I saw the same guy with the same hair style in film after film. Sometimes, even in the same costume, the Guru Kurta, for instance. He seldom got into the skin of a character. He was the same Rajesh Khanna in every production.

It is unfortunate that Khanna was largely responsible in heralding an era that gave undue prominence to actors — rather than to directors or writers. Bollywood — especially — became star, not auteur, driven. So many of us watched such engaging works like Anand, Aradhana, Amar Prem, Safar and so on because Mr Khanna was starring in them — and, sadly, not because they were exemplary pieces of work — well written, well directed and with good production values.

This star phenomenon still prevails. We are waiting to see Rustom because Akshay Kumar (Twinkle's husband) plays the lead in it. We scrambled to watch Kabali, for the hero of all heroes, Rajinikanth, was essaying the title role. We are now told that Kumar has replaced a good actor like Arshad Warsi in Jolly LLB 2. Warsi carried the first part with wonderful finesse. Why was Warsi taken off the sequel? The producer, Fox, if I am right, was looking for an actor with star value, and these days, Akshay Kumar fits the bill to the T.

India's Chaitanya Tamhane on Venice jury

It is not very often that a film director gets fame and accolade with his very first movie. India's Chaitanya Tamhane is one, whose debut feature, Court, premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2014, and was later sent up as the country's official entry for the Oscars. That it did not even make it to the finals — the short list of five — is another question. But Tamhane is now shining bright, all over again, after being picked for the Orizzonti jury of the upcoming Venice Film Festival, which will roll on August 31. The event runs till September 10 on the island of Lido, off mainland Venice.

Court, a Marathi feature, won the Lion of the Future Award and the Orizzonti Prize for Best Movie at Venice in 2014. Since then, the film has gone on to clinch as many as 32 international awards. Tamhane was recently selected for the Rolex Mentor-Protégé Arts Initiative under the mentorship of Mexican helmer, Alfonso Cuarón.

Cuaron's slate has a bewitching variety that spreads from Yu Tu Mama Tambien (And Your Mother Too, about two teenage boys' sexual romp with an older woman on a road trip), Charles Dickens' Great Expectations (with Gwyneth Paltrow, Ethan Hawke and Robert De Niro), Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban and Gravity (with George Clooney and Sandra Bullock that opened the Festival in 2013).

Tamhane's Court examines India's legal system through the trial of an ageing folk singer in a Mumbai sessions court. In an important way, the movie is a searing critique of all that is wrong with the country's judicial process — but narrated with exemplary subtlety.

The Orizzonti jury will be headed by the celebrated French auteur, Robert Guediguian (*The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, *My Sweet Pepper Land* with Iranian beauty Golshifteh Farahani). The other members of the panel will be American film critic and historian Jim Hoberman, Egyptian actress Nelly Karim (who won the Best Actress Award at the Cairo International Film Festival in 2004 for *My Soulmate* by Khaled Youssef), Italian actress Valentina Lodovini, Korean star and director Moon So-ri, Spanish movie critic and scholar José Maria Prado.

Orizzonti is the most important sidebar at Venice that screens the works of new directors in an attempt to explore emerging trends in cinema. There are 18 full-length features here that will be part of the Orizzonti competition. One film will play out of competition, and there are several shorts — both in competition and outside.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has covered the Venice Film Festival for over 15 years and will be back on the Lido this year.)