

A tale of two cities — and two festivals

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A still from *The Truth Shall Not Sink With Sewol*.



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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Charles Dickens wrote his classic, *A Tale of Two Cities*, in 1859 — about London and Paris, about their turbulent times. About 150-odd years later, one may well write about the turmoil of two other cities — far, far away from London and Paris. Busan in South Korea and Mumbai in India have in recent times faced tumultuous times. And their upheaval — like the European cities — was political. But the victim here was cinema. While Busan held on and refused to buckle, Mumbai gave in and crumbled.

In 2014, the Busan City Mayor urged the Busan Film Festival not to screen a documentary called *The Truth Shall Not Sink With Sewol* made by Lee Sang-ho and Ahn Hae-ryong. Why did the Mayor do this? The movie was a damning critique of how human carelessness had led to a humungous tragedy in which a ferry boat sank killing 300 people.

Unfortunately, I have not been able to see this film, but here is an excerpt from a review in *Variety*: “*The Truth Shall Not Sink With Sewol* brings impressive urgency and plenty of outrage to bear on a tragedy that will demand continued scrutiny in years to come. Emerging barely six months after the South Korean ferry disaster that claimed the lives of more than 300 passengers in April, this raw, ragged, controversy-stirring item never pretends to take a comprehensive view of its complex subject, instead using a narrow account of one man’s stonewalled rescue efforts to pry open a small, infuriating window on the staggering levels of government incompetence and media collusion at work.”

Commendably, the Festival director, Lee Yong-kwan, stood his ground, and screened the documentary. He was clear that his Festival would not be subject to censorship, and that he

would not be cowed down by political threat.

The world saw the truth through *The Truth Shall Not Sink With Sewol*, and gasped in shock over the South Korean administration's gross incompetence. The media had shameless colluded with the government to print untruths — in the hope of keeping the Korean citizens in the dark.

Soon after, Lee was sacked. But he had friends and admirers, who demanded that he be reinstated, and that the Busan mayor, Suh Byung-soo, apologise for trying to tinker with the freedom of the Festival.

The Korean Film Groups' Emergency Committee for Defending Busan International Film Festival's Independence — a union of nine major movie industry organisations in the country — said that it would not participate in the Festival.

Things have eased now a little with this year's Festival having been held after a political promise to safeguard the Festival's independence. But Lee is still not back, and the reportedly trumped-up charges of financial misappropriation against him are yet to be cleared. Many Korean film directors and producers kept away from the Festival this year. The 21st edition ran from October 6 to 15.

On the other hand, the ongoing Mumbai Film Festival Mumbai, organised by the Mumbai Academy of Moving Image and supported by Reliance's Jio, buckled under alleged political pressure largely exerted by some political organisations, which — livid over the recent attacks in India blamed on cross-border terrorism — said that they would not allow the screening of any movie which had any links with Pakistan.

The Mumbai Film Festival hurriedly cancelled the screening of *Jago Hua Savera*, a 1959 Pakistani classic. The Festival Director, Anupama Chopra — who is also a movie critic — refused to be drawn into any controversy. By taking the path of least resistance she played it safe. But the question is, was that good for a Festival of such reputable standing?

I regret the Festival's decision all the more, because *Jago Hua Savera*, helmed by A J Kardar is not just a Pakistani film. It is a truly international work, with some Indians on the cast and crew. The revolutionary Pakistani poet, Faiz Ahmad, wrote the screenplay and even penned lyrics for this quasi-documentary fiction, while a German-born British cameraman, Walter Lassally, caught the fantastic rural scenes with a kind of unforgettable magic. He used the Arriflex camera with superb dexterity to capture a set of rank amateur actors as they went about their mundane lives on the banks of Meghna. The style was true realism.

The original story came from West Bengal's Manik Bandhopadhyay, the lead actress, Tripti Mitra, too. She was a member of the Indian People's Theatre Association. And Indian music director, Timir Baran, co-composed along with Pakistan's producer-composer Nauman Taseer. Shanti Chatterjee, an assistant of Satyajit, was also part of the crew. And one can see Ray's influence in Kardar's work.

The black and white work was part of 2016 Cannes' prestigious Restored Classics — a section which has also seen the works of Indian masters like Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen.

Made in what was then East Pakistan (a part of Pakistan, but which is now Bangladesh, an independent nation), *Jago Hua Savera* is a haunting piece of celluloid that was also Pakistan's first ever submission to the Foreign Language Oscars. The year was 1960. A moving story of fishermen in East Pakistan, the movie traces their weaknesses and strengths — clearly underlying their never-say-die spirit in the face of a hostile nature and prowling man-eating tigers.

A Cannes brochure said: "By many standards, life in these far flung tiny villages is dull and monotonous, yet, for the people who live there, life is full of trials and turbulence. This is the story of the people of the river to hunt for fish. This is the story of one such man, of many such men, each aspiring to own their own boat". The simple folk had a simple aspiration — to own a fishing boat, but caught in a web of loans, they lost even before they began their fight. The big sharks were too powerful for these small fish".

A couple of years ago, Jago Hua Savera was restored with the help of the Nauman Taseer Foundation. Taseer had been the financial backbone of Jago Hua Savera in its original avatar. Now his son, Anjum, took it upon himself to reconstruct a long-forgotten classic. He dug up the prints from France, London and Karachi, screened them at festivals like the Three Continents at Nantes (France) and New York, before he got restoration teams to work on the film, a painstaking job.

When the digitally-remastered movie was shown at Cannes, Faiz's daughter and celebrated poet now living in Lahore, Salima Hashmi, had tears welling up, and she called the experience "emotional". Understandably so. For, her father was in jail — as part of the anti-Communist crackdown by Pakistan's General Ayub Khan — when Jago Hua Savera premiered in London. The movie went on to win a Gold at the 1959 Moscow Film Festival, and nothing was heard of it after that. Till it re-emerged as a brand new print at Cannes.

In an important way, Kardar's brilliant piece of creativity came as a turning point in the cinematic fortunes of East Pakistan — which really had no money for the arts, and was always subjugated culturally by the rich and politically powerful western wing. Jago Hua Savera also brought fame to Pakistan as a whole. After the 1947 partition of the Indian sub-continent, the thriving movie industry in Lahore shifted to what was then Bombay. Talent migrated, and Bombay became Maya Nagari, while the film industry in Lahore floundered and perished. Jago Hua Savera came as a whiff of fresh air in 1959, injecting oxygen into Pakistan's business of cinema. But the glory was not allowed to last by Pakistan's military rulers, who saw a threat — real or imagined — in the emergence of cinema in their eastern wing, which boasted of several men of letters.

At Cannes in May, Jago Hua Savera was described by critics and others as a landmark work. It is a pity that the Mumbai Film Festival was not bold enough to assert its independence — like the 2014 Busan Film Festival did.

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