

If you want entertainment, forget Udta Punjab

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A poster for Udta Punjab.



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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Cinema has been a social crusader since time immemorial. While Hitler and Mussolini used the medium to promote Fascism, political organisations in India like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu and the Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh came to power through films. These were used to propagate their political ideology.

Outside the political sphere, there were directors who used movies to raise debates about social issues. Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* brilliantly captured the terrible suffering of farmers, while Amrit Nahata's *Kissa Kursi Ka* was a hard-hitting satire on the Emergency. In recent times, Prakash Jha's *Aarakshan* critiqued reservations in education and employment. The helmer's *Chakravyuh* spoke about the horrors of Naxalism.

Abhishek Chaubey's much controversial *Udta Punjab* — which initially faced 89 cuts but was eventually allowed by the Bombay High Court to screen with just one excision — looks at the terrible substance abuse in Punjab, albeit through a fictionalised account.

Made up of three separate stories — which though are linked to one another through cocaine and other ecstasy drugs — *Udta Punjab* is undoubtedly an important social document that exposes the kind of addiction ruining the State's population, fast turning the region into another Mexico.

And the film could not have been more timely, with the elections to the Punjab Assembly due early next year. The electorate is bound to ask why the ruling Shiromani Akali Dal, an ally of the Bharatiya Janata Party which holds power in New Delhi, has been turning a blind eye to

this destructive habit that has enslaved even teenagers and housewives. And mind you, Punjab shares its border with a none-too-friendly neighbour, Pakistan, and all of us are aware about narco-terrorism.

In fact, the movie begins with a night scene where a large packet of cocaine is flung across the border into Indian territory, and a poor Bihari migrant worker and onetime sportswoman, essayed with fantastic conviction by Alia Bhatt, picks it up and gathers later that it is worth Rs3 crores. Confused and even angry that cocaine destroys people, she throws the powder into a well, but is caught in the act by precisely those guys who had been searching for the missing packet. The young, innocent woman is drugged and turned into a sex slave, forced to sleep in her stupor with even cops.

The second story traces the life of a pop singer, Tommy Singh, whose creative genius is fading and is kept alive by massive doses of mood elevators. He often appears like a raving mad man, misbehaving on stage and provoking his innumerable fans into fits of anger. But a chance meeting with Bhatt's character seduces him into sobriety in a sequence which seems so absurd. "Ever since I saw her, I no longer feel the need to take cocaine. After a long time, a tune has begun playing in my head after I set eyes on her. I've got my mojo back." This is how Tommy describes his transformation. Surely, this is joke!

The third story of a doctor, Preet Sahni (played by Kareena Kapoor), takes us into the medical issue of addiction. When the young school-going Balli, a brother of a corrupt cop, Sartaj Singh (Diljit Dosanjh) — who along with others in uniform allows free movement of drugs for an attractive monetary consideration — falls a victim to substance overdose, Sahni saves him. A meeting between a worried Sartaj — who begins to realise the folly of his greed and how he has been instrumental in destroying an entire population — and Sahni pushes them to plan an expose of the drug cartels. A hint of a romance between the two lightens up an otherwise sombre mood of the film — which for most part has been shot in dull light to convey the impending doom.

Indeed, Udda Punjab — while being a compelling social study of a grave evil like drug addiction in Punjab — is far from anything remotely entertaining. In fact, much of the narrative has a dull documentary feel about it, and except for Bhatt, who has certainly given her career best performance, the others appear flat. If there is little chemistry between Dosanjh (so wooden) and Kapoor (who is so reluctant to let go her twinkle, even when she confronts a murderous Balli), Shahid turns into a joker in the second half, running around half naked trying to find the Bihari lass. I had gone hoping to see a Shahid whom I saw in Haider, but the actor in Udda Punjab literally dumped my hopes into the dungeon of drugs.

And, the flow of the movie is jerky — as jerky as a tottering addict — and the narrative is structured most haphazardly. Come on, I had expected Chaubey to have given us something as splendid as Ishqiya.

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The Narrow Path

Some of the most fascinating films are now being made in Kerala, and a magical mix of pure arthouse fare and so-called commercial cinema, albeit with artistic sensibilities intact, have been hitting the screens in recent times. One of them is brothers Satish and Santosh Babusenan's Ottayal Paatha/The Narrow Path, a heart-tugging tale of a father and son.

The brothers narrate through a series of sparse frames and economy of words how a grown-up son, Akhil (played by Sarath Sabha), is caught between the love for his girlfriend, Nina (Krishnapriya), and his affection for his old father, Vikraman (K Kaladharan). The elderly man is practically bed-ridden with complications arising out of diabetes severely restricting his

mobility. When out of bed, he has to hop on to a wheelchair, and he needs constant care. The family is not well-to-do and lives in a ghetto of sorts, and Akhil has no job, and in any case the city where he lives offers very little opportunity. And when Nina, hailing from an upper class family, suggests that the two go away to Bengaluru, the invitation is tantalisingly tempting. For Akhil, the new city will be like a breath of much-needed oxygen, but the son is wracked by dilemma. Could he possibly leave his infirm father behind to be taken care of by paid employees? Yes, there is Mary Chechi (Prajusha), who stops by to cook for the father and son, and is fond of Akhil in a strange sort of way. But...

The Narrow Path takes us through this trying journey, a very Indian journey of strong emotional bonding between parents and children that does not let one go from the other, and in a strange twist in the movie we come face to face with the unexpected. And a solution emerges, however, painful it may be.

In a telephone chat from Kerala on a recent morning, Satish says that "we had wanted to explore hatred, hatred between a father and son — something we felt was unusual. But as we went along writing the script, we found the hatred starting to melt, especially after the issues which lay deeply embedded in the psyche of the two men were resolved... In an important way, The Narrow Path is a film about discovering oneself, the real within you."

Akhil had always held his father responsible for his mother's untimely death from jaundice, and the boy feels that had the old man taken her to a proper hospital instead of treating her with alternate medicines, she could have lived. And it takes the fear of separation for the father and son to talk about it. Finally, the father admits that it might have been his egoistic tendency that stopped him from seeking modern medical help, and the son is relieved at this acceptance.

Satish and Santosh who have made several corporate movies and music videos for many television channels like MTV, Star and Channel V, made their debut feature last year. It was called The Painted House, which also talks about in a surrealistic way the pain and pathos of an elderly man as he grapples with the unreal.

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