

Visaaranai a great pick for Oscars

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A scene from the film.



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By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

India's pick of Vetrimaaran's *Visaaranai* (Interrogation) as the official submission for the 2017 Foreign Language Oscar is undoubtedly a great choice. The movie — which premiered to critically laudatory reviews at the Venice Film Festival in 2015 and which garnered three National Awards at home, including one for the best Tamil work — was inspired by a Coimbatore autorickshaw driver, M Chandrakumar's horrific experiences behind bars that he compiled into a book, *Lock Up*. *Visaaranai* — which had additional inputs by Vetrimaaran — is a compelling piece of cinema which explores the nightmarish torture that four Tamil migrant labourers undergo in an Andhra Pradesh police lockup.

In 2006 — Chandrakumar and his friends, employed in a small hotel in Andhra Pradesh, were picked up by the police, incarcerated in a suffocatingly small cell for 13 days and beaten to pulp for no apparent reason. *Visaaranai* documents the helplessness of such have-nots in the face of injustice and horrific third-degree torture perpetrated by the police.

Lock Up, 160 pages, clinched the Best Document of Human Rights Award in 2006, and Chandrakumar has since then published six more stories, and jots down his points when his autorickshaw is either waiting for customers or for the light to turn green. Late into the night, he pens his stories of suffering. The man also loves to read, Gorky and Chingiz Aitmatov being his favourite authors.

Obviously Chandrakumar is really happy that his story — a cry for justice — will now be exposed to an audience even wider than that at Venice.

Interestingly, *Visaaranai*'s selection comes at a time when the cinemas of India are distraught

over the kind of neglect they have been facing in the international arena. For many years now, Bollywood and its brand of Hindi language movies have been viewed as “the Indian cinema”. As we all know, only about 150 films are made in Mumbai’s Maya Nagari every year, the rest of the produce coming from the other States. In fact, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka make the bulk of the annual total of roughly 1,300 movies.

Also, Indian cinema as a whole has had a poor record at the Oscars. Ever since India began sending up films to LA in 1957 (a year after the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences instituted a separate category for foreign language pictures), the country made it to the nomination list of five full-length features only on three occasions with Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* in 1958 (which lost the Oscar by a single vote to Federico Fellini’s *Nights of Calabria*), Mira Nair’s *Salaam Bombay* (1989) and Ashutosh Gowariker’s *Lagaan* in 2002.

Most of India’s submissions have been in the Hindi language. *Visaaranai* is only the ninth Tamil film to have gone as the country’s entry, the last being Kamal Hassan’s *Hey Ram* in 2000. In contrast to this, other language movies have fared worse: there were just two Bengali entries and both from Satyajit Ray (*Apur Sansar* and *Mahanagar*), and very few in Telugu, Malayalam and Marathi.

Obviously, one of the reasons that may be attributed to India’s poor show at the Oscars is the undue importance given to Hindi cinema by the national selectors — ignoring the contributions from the rest of India. Eminent non-Bollywood directors like G Aravindan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Girish Kasaravalli, Mrinal Sen and Buddhadeb Dasgupta have time and again reiterated that the panel set up the Film Federation of India to pick the country’s Oscar nominee may be seen as favouring the Hindi cinema. This feeling gains significance when one notices that of the 40-plus films that India has sent to LA, a vast majority has been from Mumbai.

There are other factors at play when it comes to winning a place in the Oscar race. What the 6000-odd Academy’s voting members look for in a foreign language entry is a certain uniqueness that can be identified with the country concerned. It was for this reason why I felt that *The Lunch Box* — which was in the national race for the Oscar submission — was not quite apt. It was indeed a very good work, but did it have story that was uniquely Indian? No. And Gyan Correa’s Gujarati picture, *The Good Road*, made it that year, 2013, but unfortunately it could not even clinch a nod.

One is afraid that *Visaaranai*, despite being a riveting piece of drama may not qualify on the “uniqueness” ground. Of course, it is highly engaging and powerfully narrated in all its brutal honesty. Well acted, well directed and well mounted, yes.

However, police violence is a global phenomenon today with American cops often accused of cruelty towards the marginalised blacks in the country. *Visaaranai* is also about khaki highhandedness on four, impoverished daily wage earners who are charged with a crime they did not commit and forced to plead guilty because the force was under pressure to solve a case of theft in the house of an influential officer.

A more important impediment that Indian producers and directors face is the means to organise a publicity campaign in America. This needs huge money. But Vetrимаaran told me the other day that “funding is not a problem. We have enough resources for publicity. We are not dependent on State help”. *Visaaranai* has been produced by actor Dhanush’s Wunderbar Films.

Hopefully, Dhanush, Vetrимаaran and their team would plan a good crusade to attract the Academy voters to watch *Visaaranai*. Not an easy job though. For, many of the members are old and conservative, and their idea of pictures seldom goes beyond Hollywood. And when it does, it is Bollywood whose reputation of being a song-and-dance tamasha is not easy to erase.

Visaaranai, on the contrary, is extremely focussed, and shows no inclination — whatsoever — of being distracted by anything other than its core plot. And happily so.

**Gautaman Bhaskaran has been following Visaaranai since its premiere at Venice, and he may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com*