

Santosh and censorship

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India must be one of the very few countries in the world where movies are still censored and the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) is still very active. Sometimes, a movie is chopped beyond recognition, taking away its very soul! Sometimes, it is banned outright. For years, there has been a demand for and much writing on the need to do away with this kind of censorship, replacing it with a system that will grade films according to their suitability for different age groups. Unfortunately, this is yet to happen, and this is in a country where ancient temples have some of the most erotic sculptures – and which are freely available for viewing.

The latest movie to face this kind of censorship is Sandhya Suri's *Santosh*, which was screened at the Cannes Film Festival last May to huge applause and acclaim. Britain's offering to the Oscars race, the movie has been blocked in India by the CBFC. Penned and helmed

by British-Indian filmmaker Suri, the work unfolds in a fictional northern Indian town and follows the life of a policewoman, a young widow, who is determined to probe the murder of a young Dalit girl. The subject is really nothing new: we have seen this in movies like *Article 15*. So why this hullabaloo over *Santosh*? I wish I had an answer to this. The CBFC sometimes makes decisions like this without any justification. In a very strong way, the film is a scathing indictment of the ills facing the police force. But I have seen far more gruesome versions of this in, for example, *Drishyam* – which was made in multiple languages. The first was in Malayalam with a brilliant performance by Mohanlal – a DVD shopkeeper. He and his family are brutalised by the police.

Getting back to *Santosh*, what is it all about? The movie follows the journey of a recently widowed policewoman, Santosh (a fine performance by Shahana Goswami), who, following the death of her policeman husband, is given a job in the force. Heckled by in-laws and blamed for her husband's death, she is really happy to taste independence and a sense of self-respect for the first time in her life. And when a Dalit girl is killed, Santosh's boss, Geeta (Sunita Rajwar), ropes in the young cop, seeing her tremendous potential and passion for cracking crimes.

Crisply written and edited with disarming simplicity, *Santosh* is a great example of why a film need not be embellished with songs and dances and grand locations or star actors (who have to perform for unrealistic effect) to work and work in a compelling way.

Santosh is available on MUBI.

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