

Kesari Chapter 2 fails at documenting the horrific Jallianwala Bagh genocide

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Once, Bollywood actor Manoj Kumar flew the patriotic flag, singing songs and mouthing dialogues that spoke of India's greatness. Films like *Kranti*, *Purab Aur Paschim* and *Upkar*, among others, had national pride woven into them.

Today, the mantle has been passed over to actor Akshay Kumar, who seems not to be missing half a chance to sink into the "desh bhakt" movement. His latest outing on this road is *Kesari Chapter 2* – which details less and dramatises more the legal battle that followed the 1919 Baisakhi Day Jallianwala Bagh massacre in which hundreds of men, women and children were brutally shot dead by Indian troops commanded by General Michael O'Dwyer – who was then the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab. He was evil personified.

But nobody has been able to tell me what provoked him to turn into a monster. The movie does give us a vague clue as to how he was bullied by Sikhs as a young boy. He harboured this throughout his life. But this, to me, appears unconvincing, as much else in the film.

Kesari Chapter 2, helmed by Karan Singh Tyagi, arrives as the latest in Akshay's basket of movies, which

pumps into us a feeling that India is great. In it, the actor plays advocate C Sankaran Nair, who takes on the Crown and O'Dwyer in the hallowed portals of a court. He held the Briton guilty of what he called genocide. It was that, undoubtedly.

But the movie failed to convince me beyond a point. Jallianwala Bagh was a humongous tragedy, which happened in 1919, signalling a feeling in England that enough was enough. The British Empire was clearly bleeding, and it was finding it increasingly difficult to take on the burden of its colonies. And the problems of these faraway countries were often beyond the understanding of the English.

I also found the choice of actors not quite apt. Akshay somehow did not fit the role of a hard-hitting lawyer out to teach the Englishman a lesson after his cruelty to a crowd of peaceful people that had gathered in the Bagh to protest against the draconian Rowlatt Act, which gave the police insane powers. Indians were also made to crawl on some streets in Amritsar. Peeved over what he felt was an insult to his authority, the general ordered his troops to open fire on the crowd without any warning!

Pitted against Nair is Madhavan's

advocate Neville McKinley (a drunk who sobers up too quickly for my comfort and slips into the black coat). If Nair's quick turnaround from a fiery advocate of the Empire to one loyal to his motherland was unrealistically quick, Madhavan seemed a terrible miscast in a part that should never have been his in the first place. Wonder why he picked this. If writing is important, casting is even more so. No wonder we have renowned casting directors in Hollywood and Europe, but India draws a blank here.

But yes, the Bagh massacre (the scene was too superfluous and failed to convey the enormous anguish and suffering of the people) led to far-reaching changes. O'Dwyer had to step down and was recalled. At home, he was shamed and humiliated. I have no idea what happened to McKinley. Maybe there was something about him in the several paragraphs that came at the end of *Kesari Chapter 2*. They rolled away far too quickly. Yes, O'Dwyer died in 1940, leaving behind a dark legacy, which, though, provoked one of the initial stirrings of India's freedom movement.

The writer is a senior movie critic and author. Views expressed are personal.

