

Trying too Hard and Failing



Still from Belaseshe

Why do some mainstream filmmakers suddenly try to look ‘progressive’ taking up socially relevant subjects and then make a hash of it? A case in point is Dream Girl from the Ekta Kapoor house with the subject of the phone-sex phenomenon increasingly getting popular in India.

Director Raaj Shaandilyaa is not sure whether to make it a film dealing with this social issue and probe ‘why’ men fantasize about ‘loving’ women as perceived through their phone chats, or make a comedy on men pouring their hearts out to ‘understanding’ women though invisible. In a recent issue of the India Today magazine which ran its Annual Sex Survey, about 40% of the respondents said they were not completely happy and satisfied with their sex life. On another section of the magazine, Pallavi Barnwal, founder of RealWomb, a website for authentic and positive conversations on sexuality, examines why wives are not interested in sex with husbands, either burdened with social pressures or the perceived notion

of their image as ‘the obedient Indian wife’ rather than an equal partner. All these issues had scope for examination in the film but instead it slides into a crude situational comedy that even the talented Ayushmann Khurrana cannot save with his woman-mimicking voice and donning a saree. It almost turns the women who work on these chat shows employed by shrewd businessmen into caricatures who are there more for earning a few bucks to run a family than to satisfy their own salacious dreams. In any case, where are they in the script anyway? They appear almost at the end where the protagonist mouths dialogues about how they look after their families with their money, etc. etc. as if to allay the deeply rooted mistrust of women who step out of their comfort zone in our patriarchal society. In an attempt to focus on a so-called ‘bold’ theme, Dream Girl falls by the wayside.

Recent Bengali film Gotro by Nandita Roy and Shiboprosad Mukherjee, projected as the most saleable director duo in Tollywood, loses

its way too despite setting out with the good intension of tackling the issue of caste. Widow Mukti Debi is a strong matriarch whose only son lives abroad. Concerned by increasing crimes against senior citizens, he wants to employ a caretaker but she dismisses them one after another until she grudgingly accepts one the son brings in. His police officer friend suggests this ex-convict certified with good behavior with the intension of rehabilitation. The problem is, he is a Muslim while Mukti Debi is a staunch Hindu with a temple in the house and so his real identity is not revealed. In the long winded story of how she discovers the truth and accepts him as a ‘human being’ the story line falters, interspersed with inane comedy interludes, an unbelievable love interest, tribal dance episodes in Odisha, etc. etc. By then the viewer gets bewildered as to what the directors want to say- the caste divide or a Hindu-Muslim divide, that ex-convicts need to be assimilated by society, or any other message. A good example of how an attempt at tackling an important social issue is spoiled by an eye at the box office and gets misfired in the process.

sympathies he is assisted by his daughter -in-law (Taapsi Pannu), a Hindu girl. In the process, issues of the Hindu-Muslim divide lying dormant in a fractured society emerges, disturbing the viewer too.



Still from Mulk

Sinha’s latest, Article 15 (2019), is also an on the face look at the caste divide in rural India. Its ugly face confronts the city-raised Ayushman Khurrana when as a police officer he is posted in the hinterlands. In the tightly woven script the issue of caste that plagues Indian society even now- and there are umpteen examples of its presence in cities too, does not lose its focus. The images are disturbing but thought provoking whereas a film like Gotro does not leave any after-thoughts behind to ruminate on.



Still from Gotro

On the other hand, Anubhav Sinha’s Mulk (2018) with Rishi Kapoor (Murad Ali Mohammed) a retired lawyer and respected member of the locality, is much more hard hitting. He and his family have to face finger-pointing as his son joins a terrorist outfit without their knowledge. While fighting the case in court brought against them for holding extremist

Yet, Roy and Mukherjee showed promise after making an impact with their first film *Icche* (2011), tackling the problem of excessive parental control. Progressively, the duo seems to have given in to the so-called market forces. The subjects of their films are good but soon they meander and lose the grip on the content. Take for example, their film *Belaseshe* (At the End of the Day, 2015) focusing on the subject of loneliness at old age and boredom of marriage after long years of staying together. When successful publisher Biswanath Mazumdar wants to ‘divorce’ his wife Arati after five decades togetherness, he throws his family – son, daughter-in-law, daughters, sons-in-law into a tizzy. But while trying to find out the reason ‘why’ their respected father/father-in-law has taken this decision they resort to snooping, added with buffoonery in good measure, harpooning the good beginning of

a story that needs to be told. It is saved by some poignant moments that veterans Soumitra Chatterjee and Swatilekha Sengupta in the lead roles emote with great sensitivity .

The positive thing is that even in Bollywood, with its standard dance and song recipes, a new wind is blowing with a new set of filmmakers who walk a different path. Is it a new genre of parallel cinema, a much vilified word after the movement of 1970s fizzled out because ‘the audience didn’t relate to them’ as some critics reasoned, though they were stories of real people ,not cut-paste figures, and led to the so-called Disco age films.

Asked in an interview with Indian Express (October 27, 2019) on why Sinha, earlier associated with mainstream films like Ra.One, Tum Bin 2, had shifted to films like Mulk and Article 15, he said, “ I was this social, political man making films which had nothing of me ...As a filmmaker, if your personality

is not reflected in your movies, then what are you doing, why are you making films?”

A question, at least those with a pretension of tackling social issues, should ask without resorting to lecture-baazi. There is nothing wrong with commercial films; it’s a choice directors/ and producers make and we as viewers know it without expecting a different tune from them.

The problem with films like Dream Girl or Gotro, and their ilk, is that the makers try to place their legs on two boats at the same time and lose their balance. By trying to project themselves as socially conscious with the subject-choice but aspiring to make themselves ‘acceptable’ to the audience at the same time, they do a disservice to the serious issue they want to talk about. Better to stick to the formula of so-called ‘family entertainment’ genre perhaps?

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