

Top Class, Or Over The Top?



Sye Raa

A multi-lingual film called Sye Raa Narasimha Reddy (SRNR) was released on 02 October, the date on which Mohandas Karamchand 'Mahatma' Gandhi was born, in 1869. India knows him as the father of the nation and the world remembers him, 150 years later, as an apostle of peace and non-violence. The film was released even as Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary was being celebrated across the country. Now here's the supreme irony: SRNR is one of the most violent films ever seen in India, with blood flowing like water, on screen, in a land reputed to have had milk flowing through its rivers, in eons gone by.

As audiences, we are party only to what is retained on screen, so, if any of the stomach-churning content has been deleted or muted by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), it is too little, too late. Since this film is granted a U/A certificate by the CBFC, which allows children above 12 to see the film when accompanied by adults, the, se-

rious questions have to be raised as to what will qualify as fare suitable for an A certificate, for adults only? Here, we are not talking about mature film audiences, like film society members, critics and serious students of cinema, but the lay, mass audiences. Unwary moviegoers will be subjected to such massive butchery over 170 minutes that, if they can survive, they will become more desensitised, beyond belief. And if they do not survive? What will they do? Walk out? Those who stay, having paid the price of a ticket, will pay the price.

All the decapitation is justified as either retaliation against the ruthless British colonials, back in 1847, or as suo motu moves to attack the foreign enemy. Patriotism, nationalism and the freedom struggle are very noble sentiments indeed. But is all of the above justified, in anatomical detail and often slo-mo shots? During the end credit titles, the makers roll a list of about 100 patriots and freedom fighters,

with pictures, and dates of births and deaths, on the left half of the screen, implying that the film is dedicated to them, and, had they been alive, in 2019, they would have endorsed the blood flood. By doing so, the makers do no justice to the memories of many of them, led by Gandhi, who might have had nothing to do with such a venture.

production that had a decapitation scene, and a furore was raised about, it far and wide. Then we had the slo-mo taking of bullets piercing heads, shot in trade-mark style by Sam Peckinpah. Peckinpah, who died in 1984, seemed to have passed on his mantle to a certain V. Srinivasan, who directed DKD. Remember, Peckinpah had a following, however minus-



So, did the film witness a walk-out at the show where I saw it, along with knowledgeable film critics and seasoned cinephiles? On the contrary, there was thunderous applause on at least ten occasions, when patriotic rhetoric was mouthed, or a no-holds-barred attack was launched at the British by the rag-tag army of Sye Raa. By the film's yard-stick, we should have driven the British East India Company out in 1847 itself, but history made us wait another 100 years.

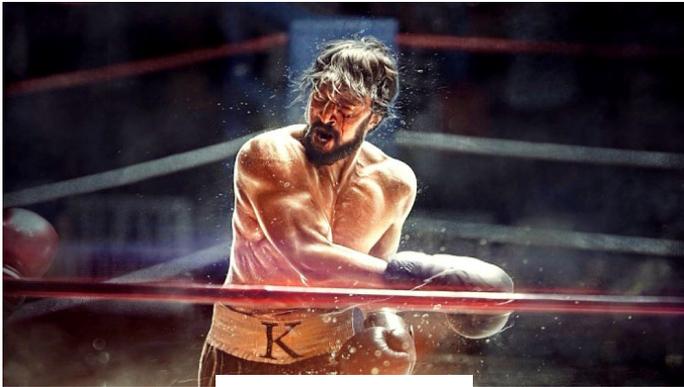
I had seen *Dushmanon ka Dushman* (DKD, 1984), a dubbed version of Chiranjeevi's original Telugu film. It was distributed by a friend of mine, who was himself a dubbing and radio voice. It was, till then, the most violent Indian film I had been privy to, with Chiranjeevi, then 28, perpetrating the major part of the bone-breaking bonanza. But in *SRNR*, Chiranjeevi has left DKD far behind. We might recall *Soldier Blue* (1970), the Hollywood

cule, in India too. *SRNR*, with a 63 year-old Chiranjeevi in the saddle, leaves all that puerile stuff far behind.

Another multi-lingual released in September uses references to Ramayan and Mahabharat while telling the story of a mafia-type gang. It is called *Prasathanam*, originally made in Telugu, like *SRNR*. When you have classics like the Mahabharat, Ramayan and Shakespeare's works, why look elsewhere for inspiration? Update the setting and references, but retain the blood and gore.

A little boy asks his father, "Papa, killing somebody is bad, isn't it?" "Bad", agrees the father. "Then why did Ram kill Ravan?" "Because Ravan was bad," comes the justification. And what does the film then proceed to offer? A 152-minute story, filled with shootings, killings, and rape. They call it *Prasathanam*, innocuously. The word means departure. While there is a steady procession of souls being lib-

erated from their body cages for onward travel to their other world, why understate the theme using a synonym? So, if nationalism was the peg on which SRNR is hanged, religious mythology is the peg in Prassthnam.



Pahlvaan

Released in the same week as Prassthnam was Rambo V: Last Blood. At least here, the title said a lot about the contents. In the climax, John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) lures an entire gang of hard-core criminals into his tunnel, and they fall victim to Rambo's arsenal of weapons, taking turns at getting killed in goriest imaginable ways. In fact, they all seem to be waiting with bated breath, for the deployment and employment of the updated, 2018 edition, bow, an innovative weapon that is trade-mark Rambo. And then there is the climactic ode, to the one and only Rambo, a walk down memory lane, 1982 onwards, when Stallone was 36, to 2018, when he was 72. Well, if Stallone can do it at 72, what's wrong with Chiranjeevi at 63? If Stallone can pull out a human heart with his bare hands, Chiranjeevi can chop off a countless heads with his twin swords. Head count is high. Hearts don't count! No patriotism or religion here: it is pure vengeance.

Also September fare is Badshaah Pahlwan (Hindi screen title), Pailwan, Pahlwaan, Pehlwaan, Pehlwan, Bailwan and Phailwan, depending on which website you are surfing and which language version are you searching in

the engine. Phonetically, Pahlvaan is the nearest to the Urdu original, and means wrestler. Spell it any which way, the film remains a wrestlemaniac's delight, with fight after fight after fight, and not much more. It is not patriotism here, but 'cause'. One piece of dialogue defines the carnage: "One who fights to prove his strength is a 'rowdy' (bully/goon), but one who fights for a strong cause is a warrior." Discounting the stunts, where he is either beating or getting beaten by opponents, with or without blood-letting, protagonist Sudeep has barely five scenes where he needs to emote. And the film is a good 160 minutes long. The kind of battering that Sudeep receives in the boxing ring, with his face reduced to pulp, will remind you Boxer (Hindi/Mithun/1984) and a couple of Hollywood cult boxing films too. But this scene typifies Pahlvaan: One main piece of gear used by boxers is called the mouth-guard/gum-shield, which is a kind of denture that protects teeth and gums when blows land on the jaw, undeniably the most battered part of any boxer's anatomy. Watch out for this Ethylene-vinyl acetate (EVA) made prop that might just leap out of the screen and land in your lap, unless you take 'evasive action'. Now that is virtual reality, in top gear! The peg? Motivation, inspiration.

Rambo V



August gave us Saaho, one more from the Telugu stable, with Bahubali (2015, 2017) fame Prabhas in the lead role. Gory and one-sided fights, a floating, free-falling and soaring mortal superhero, and flesh flaunting femme fatales could not compensate for flim-

sy premises and disbelief inviting sequences. What awaits us over the next 172 minutes is fare that should not be open to pre-teenagers, but the UA certificate does just that. Admittedly, it is not in the same league as SRNR, yet the Adults Only certification was essential. The obvious inspiration, and the peg to hang the story on, is provided by the Mahabharat. Using violence is a writer/director's prerogative, being part of the freedom of expression. However, since we have a Central Board of Film Certification in place that can either certify such films for Adults only, for Universal exhibition or for children above 12, when accompanied by Adults (UA), without any cuts or mutings, or with cuts and mutings. In the six weeks before this piece was written, we



Prassthanam

have had five films that have little artistic merit in depicting blood-letting, often offering it gratis or to appeal to the animal instinct in us. In such cases, the CBFC has to be extra meticulous in performing its duties. In the past, makers like Shyam Benegal and Manoj

Kumar have made films based on religious epics and patriotism, and they did have some violence, but they appear childish and pale in comparison to the above examples.

There is much more to these genres than rhetoric and jingoism, decapitation and mass extermination. Whether these five films are technically brilliant and enjoy box-office success or not is not relevant at all. Top class is different from going over the top. We, as discerning audiences, must assess how such films use the medium for the narrative they have chosen. Makers have the right to make films of all manner, including, possibly, graphic and extensive depiction of Hitler's concentration camps, and a true to life sequential documentation of the French revolution, when innumerable accused were decapitated. Till we are sensitive enough to react humanely to such levels of cruelty, it might even be okay to watch them.

Are we reaching a stage of desensitisation where such mass murders, of thousands and millions, will fail to move film-buffs at all? Or, what is of greater concern, such scenes will draw awe and admiration from lay, casual viewers!

This piece was written in the first week of October 2019. One can only guess what intensity of mayhem will be waiting round the corner during the last three months of the year, post a bloodcurdlingly violent preceding cinematic five weeks.

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