

cinema



* Ranbir Kapoor and Ileana in a scene from *Barfi*, directed by Anurag Basu.



* Paan Singh Tomar and *Akasathinte Niram* (below) were swept aside in favour of the commercially successful, yet plagiarised Bollywood product *Barfi* for the Foreign Film Oscar nominations this year.



India's official entry for the 2013 Oscars? *Barfi* was chosen from 20 films that the Film Federation of India shortlisted.

The final choice – *Barfi* – was made by an 11-member committee, headed by the Assamese director, Manju Bohra, whose credentials for a task like this are suspect.

The panel chose to brush aside far better works, such

as *Paan Singh Tomar* (Hindi) and *Vazhakku Enn 18/9* (Tamil) and *Akasathinte Niram* (Malayalam). These were Indian in every sense, and the Academy looks for original stuff that is neither plagiarised from nor inspired by other cultures. Or movies from other countries.

There is nothing novel about *Barfi*. As Basu himself conceded, it is "inspired" by Charlie Chaplin. More precisely, *Barfi*'s hero, Ranbir Kapoor, apes his grandfather, Raj Kapoor, who in turn copied Chaplin. Worse, many scenes are a blatant rip-off from Chaplin's cinema.

The leading Indian daily, *Hindustan Times*, has listed 10 scenes from *Barfi* that have been copied from other films, and these are not just Chaplin's. Sequences from Jackie Chan's *Project A*, Johnny Depp's *Benny and Joon*, and Hollywood classics *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Notebook* have been lifted.

Pritam's theme tune in *Barfi* sounds similar to what Yann Tiersen composed for the 2001 French comedy, *Amélie!*

Apart from this aping, there is nothing Indian about *Barfi*. Nothing unique about Kapoor's acting, and what is really silly is the way Basu has glossed up his characters. Kapoor plays poverty-stricken deaf-mute guy, who manages to look suave even in some of the most trying moments.

The story of a rich girl falling for this man and even willing to shack up with him in his shabby hut by the Howrah Bridge in Kolkata seems ridiculously implausible. To top all this, we have Priyanka Chopra essaying an autistic girl – and this completes the nonsensical movie.

Now, pray tell me, why would the Academy give an Oscar to *Barfi*, let alone nominate it?

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Barfi and the bitter truth of India's Oscar entries

Why does the country with the world's most prolific film industry regularly send the wrong film to the Academy Awards, wonders **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

It never ceases to amaze me how unashamedly and unconcernedly Indian selectors pick the wrong movie for a possible Oscar nomination. And this happens year after year. Yes, there have been some exceptions to this.

Ever since the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences instituted an Oscar for the Best Film in Foreign Language eons ago, only three Indian works have made it to the short list of five nominated movies. No Indian film has ever won the coveted trophy – not *Mother India*, not *Salaam Bombay* and not *Lagaan*.

One of the greatest follies of those choosing an Indian entry to compete on a world arena of exceptional cinema has been their obsession with Bollywood and Hindi language. All three that clinched the Academy's nomination were in Hindi. It does not call for any cinematic expertise or extraordinary common sense to understand that some of India's great masters have been consistently ignored by selectors.

Has any of Satyajit Ray's movies or Ritwick Ghatak's or Mrinal Sen's

or Adoor Gopalakrishnan's or Aravindan's or John Abraham's or Girish Kasaravalli's or Guru Dutt's or even Shyam Benegal's been sent up as India's official entry for the Oscars race? I do not think so.

Buddhadeb Dasgupta's Bengali work, *Lal Darja / Red Door* (1997) was chosen, but that was a long time ago, and the helmer has made many more exceptional pictures since then.

Way back in 2008, I wrote: In the last decade, we have always had a Hindi film as India's entry for the Oscars, except in 2004, when Sanjay Sawant's *Shwaas* in Marathi was selected.

This period saw some exceptionally creative efforts by Kasaravalli, Gopalakrishnan, Benegal, who made movies in their own languages and which told stories specific to Indian culture and customs, tradition and beliefs. Strangely, not one of their films has ever figured as India's nominee!

Kasaravalli tells me over the telephone from Bangalore that "forget Hindi cinema, only those made within the strict confines of Bollywood are selected for an Oscar

nod. Has a Sudhir Mishra work ever got in, not to mention a Benegal work... The other handicap that Indian regional cinema faces is lack of funds to promote a movie in Los Angeles before the nominations are out. The whole exercise can take months and involves a lot of money. An Aamir Khan could do it for *Lagaan*. Maybe Basu can. But I cannot, unless the National Film Development Corporation of India steps in. I doubt whether it is bothered about regional fare?"

So, in effect it has to be a work made by a rich Bollywood producer.

Salim Ahmed, whose *Adaminte Makan Abu* in Malayalam was India's choice for 2011, regretted over the telephone from Thiruvananthapuram that though "I went three times to Los Angeles and spent Rs500,000 from my own pocket. I found my PR and publicity campaign miles behind those of many others. It is just not enough to have a good work in hand. I think it is more important to have good money. Otherwise, nobody in Hollywood takes notice?"

Would this, then, mean only those with money power are picked

by the Indian panels? It would be such a pity, for often producers with deep pockets end up making unadulterated trash.

Money apart, the fact that barring a few occasions when a movie in a language other than Hindi was sent to the Academy smacks of an unhealthy prejudice against cinema from the rest of India. Acclaimed Bengali director Rituparno Ghosh tweeted in angst, "Why this discrimination?" In the past five years, only two non-Hindi films – *Harishchandrachi Factory* (2009, in Marathi) and *Adaminte Makan Abu* (Malayalam) – were sent. "India has a strong enriching tradition of regional cinema being made all over the country. Why then is this continuing emphasis on Bollywood work for the Oscars?" Ghosh lamented.

I am sure if only such rich regional cinema had been sent more often, India could have won many Oscars. Ray and the others made movies that were essentially Indian in flavour, in spirit, in sentiment. Above all, they were original creations emerging from brilliant minds. These men are/were unusual thinkers whose works no Oscars committee could have easily ignored.

But much like the other fields in India, cinema is plagued by nepotism. The result: India gets no gold at the Olympics, and no Oscar. And, Indians don't seem to care.

Otherwise, how does one explain a film like Anurag Basu's *Barfi* being