

cinema



* *Pyaar Ka PUNCHAMA* went through many edits to suit certification standards.

Getting the scissors out

Censorship is invariably rather skewed in Indian films, with most edits being done on arbitrary grounds, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Leela Samson has an unblemished record as a Bharatanatyam dancer, choreographer, teacher and writer. Director of Chennai's Kalakshetra, founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale in 1936 as a cultural academy to preserve traditional values in Indian art, especially Bharatanatyam, Samson wears many hats.

She has been the chairperson of the Delhi's Sangeet Natak Akademi since 2010, and was recently asked to head the Central Board of Film Certification. However, it is this crown that rests rather uneasily on her head. For, as she herself recently told me over the phone when I sought an appointment with her that she knew very little about cinema, thereby at

once lending herself to criticism.

Several people have voiced their displeasure over Samson's new role, but the one most vocal has been the Indian film director who makes Bengali cinema, Buddhadeb Dasgupta. He feels that political considerations have begun to cloud appointments in artistic institutions, nothing new though in India where the favourites of ministers and bureaucrats have landed cushy assignments.

"This is a dangerous trend and I am shocked by the recent developments," Dasgupta has been quoted as having said. "In recent times, I find political clout is what ensures that a person gets a plum post. Look at Leela Samson. She is a very reputable danseuse. We

all respect her for that. But, have we ever found out whether she is equally well-versed or literate about cinema? Just because a person is a good dancer, it doesn't qualify her to be the Censor Board chief. I've been told that her proximity to certain ministers was influential in making her the Censor Board chief," Dasgupta added.

However, when I met Samson at her office on the sprawling and heavily wooded, (though rather unkept) grounds of Kalakshetra, she presented a picture of utmost serenity. Absolutely composed and dignified, and with amazingly modern ideas for one who is about 60, she could well be an antidote to the current crop of Indian movies, crassly exaggerated, loud and

sometimes unnecessarily violent.

Yet, she has no doubt that cinema should not be censored. Not scissored and mutilated. No art form should be. But the problem arises from the other end, she tells me. Often, directors and producers are reluctant to accept an adult certificate in "order to allow us to pass their films without cuts".

They would rather have their movies edited or chopped and be seen by just about everybody than retain the whole intact and let only over-18s watch them.

Some weeks ago, Luv Ranjan's *Pyaar Ka PUNCHAMA* ran into censor problems, and he was asked to make cuts if he wished have a Universal (viewing) certificate. Samson invited him over to Chennai and watched his movie. Ranjan told *Business of Cinema* that she was quite comfortable with the film, "but the minute she left, the regional officer in Chennai turned around and told me, 'So what if she approves? She doesn't have to be answerable to others'".

I could then well understand what Samson meant when she told me that she had found the Film Certification committee "strange and though its members were younger than me, their views were very different from mine".

However, Samson asked Ranjan to take an Adults certificate (because the work was very good and needed to be seen in its totality), but he was insistent on everybody viewing *Pyaar Kaa PUNCHAMA*. Ultimately, he had to settle for a UA, which requires parental guidance, because some scenes may be unsuitable for children under 12.

Ranjan had to edit parts of his work to get an UA. He said: "I was forced to make the most ridiculous cuts, because my release was around the corner. In one sequence showing my heroine, they (censors) said there was too much cleavage. They asked me to reduce it by 50%. Then they asked me to reduce the length of a kissing sequence. In reducing it, all the humour in that sequence went... Censors had serious issues with the theme of live-in relationship".

While censors have been unabashedly liberal with the goriest of violence on screen (sometimes giving movies with such visuals Universal certificates), they have tended to squirm at the sight of two people kissing or making love. Admittedly, censors are now beginning to ease their standards.

Samson agreed that as an artist she was totally against censorship in any form. In any case, it is no longer the censor board (a commonly stated misnomer). It is the certification board, and would soon be the classification board (with an amendment likely to be effected to the Cinematograph Act in the coming Monsoon session of the Indian parliament) that will merely give a rating to each film, like in the West — such as suitable for over 18, over 15 and so on.

Samson averred that in a nation like India with its mindboggling diversity in language, religion, culture, food and clothing, it was not easy to sit on her chair.

Samson has a final word on this whole issue. "Do not let anybody cut your movie. It is your work of art. But accept a classification. Stick to it".

Indeed, great. But every time I walk up to a cinema ticket counter, the guy there will never fail to tell me that a film is for Adults, only those above 18 will be permitted to watch. After this little lecture, when I enter the auditorium, I invariably see boys and girls barely 10 or 12 rushing to their seats, clutching a bag of popcorn, to watch a movie that is just not for them.

A few weeks ago, while the characters in *Aaranya Kaandam* (Tamil) were slicing each other's jugular and letting the blood create designs on the screen, these little men and women were watching wide-eyed while their teeth were crushing the crispy corns!

But some do protest, as a boy of four did the other evening when I was watching *Delhi Belly*, with an Adult certificate. He was visibly distraught, crying that he did not want to see violence even as his parents tried hard to pacify him.

Here, as much as the theatre had no business to admit such a young child, the parents were greater culprits, I feel.

Samson needs to address issues such as these too, and, well, certainly, tempestuous days await her.

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