

cinema



* Prakash Raj and his young co-stars in the Tamil film *Dhoni*. Below: (from left) scenes from *Taare Zameen Par*, *3 Idiots* and *Aarakshan* ... could do better.

The school of hard knocks

Despite the many films on education, Indian filmmakers don't seem to have learned how to convey their ideas without preaching, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

An engineering college student, whose short fiction feature competed with nine other films at an event held at the Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham University, near Coimbatore, last week, said he had decided to take up photography as a profession. "I was inspired by one of the characters in *3 Idiots*, who becomes a renowned photographer after going through the grind of a course in engineering", the boy beamed to loud applause from the audience, largely made up of students.

Cinema has its other side, apart than the one I have often written about – its negative impact.

Once, Indian movies unabashedly spread messages of patriotism as they did of social values. In Raj Kapoor's *Shree 420*, a song rendered by Mukesh goes like this:

*Mera Joota hai Japani
Yeh Patloon Inglistani
Sar pe lal topi Rusi
Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani*

Which translates into:
My shoes are Japanese

These trousers are English
The red hat on my head is Russian
But even so, my heart is Indian

This is one of the most "love thy country" songs I have heard, and Kapoor, certainly in his early cinema, was fired by Nehruvian idealism. Later, there were men like Manoj Kumar. His films



often spoke about the sacrifices of the toiling farmer and the brave soldier. Sometimes about the evils of Western influence, and Kumar was promptly nicknamed "Mr Bharat".

K Balachander, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Shyam Benegal among others created movies with messages. These were never explicit, but invariably implied and conveyed with elegant subtlety. Women's rights, caste prejudices, capital punishment and a whole lot of other subjects were woven into their cinema.

Unfortunately, the current crop of writers and directors while producing cinema with meaning, tends to be loud and explicit. In fact, it is frequently preachy.

Prakash Raj-written and helmed *Dhoni* (after the cricketer) is one in a row of films that deal with the evils of the Indian education system. It is geared towards cramming and scores, and cares little whether a boy or a girl is ultimately enlightened. In that sense, there is no "real education" in India today, and students in a few institutions like the one run by J Krishnamurthy Foundation, which genuinely believes in education for knowledge rather than grades, find themselves seriously handicapped in their later life.

In *3 Idiots*, the engineering student (played by Madhavan) ultimately convinces himself and his parents that he is cut out to be a lensman, not someone to lay one brick over another and cement them together. Of course, there was his friend and college mate (Aamir Khan) who goads him not only to change his profession, but also to realise his hidden potential. Sadly, today's peers, at least most of them, nudge their fellow beings towards the more popular societal preferences in education.

Subramaniam (Prakash Raj), a widowed, lower middleclass government employee, wants his school-going son to do a degree in Business Administration. But the boy wants to be a cricketer, like *Dhoni*. The father – torn between what he perceives will be a good, economically comfortable life for his son with such a qualification and boy's own dream – is both angry and disappointed. The boy's school believes in cent per cent results and would not want him to tarnish its image. Perform or get out, it orders.

At the other end of the spectrum is the cricket coach who knows that there is a master in the little man, and he tries talking Subramaniam out of his obsession for the career he has envisaged for his son.

The movie makes a valid point, and one does see a good potential in Prakash Raj as an actor. However, where *Dhoni* falters is in its overly verbose and preachy script. Our writers and directors are yet to come to terms with the fact that cinema is not theatre, that cinema must narrate its story through images and not words.

Admittedly, that is difficult, and needs greater imagination and perseverance. So, just verbalise what you want to show!

The earlier *Taare Zameen Par* (Stars on the Earth) with Aamir Khan as a school master also has as its focal point the aspirations of a young boy who would rather look at fishes than figures on the blackboard that seem to dance, a symptom of his dyslexia. The parents are frustrated with the scores on the report card, the teachers call him dumb and his own sibling ridicules him – till Khan somersaults into the classroom as a messiah.

Here again, a brilliant idea is lost in the lousy labyrinth of an ill-written script. The film begins with the notion that competition is not always conducive to achieving excellence, and that academic grades need not be an indicator of a pupil's ability and intelligence. But in the end, *Taare Zameen Par* slips into the same race-you-down-the-road rut.

What irked me most was that teachers were portrayed as idiots: imagine a swanky school in Mumbai where they are not aware of a well-known condition like dyslexia.

The Amitabh Bachchan-multi-starrer, *Aarakshan* (Reservation), deals with yet another modern-day malady in Indian education system. If reservations in colleges and universities are a bane that threatens to deny seats to bright students only because they have been born to upper caste parents, the commercialisation of education, even at the school level, with tuitions and coaching classes spinning money, has been cancerous in its spread.

Enacted by an ensemble cast of Manoj Bajpayee, Saif Ali Khan and Deepika Padukone among others, the movie is clear in what it wants to tell us, though the script tends to get into an exaggerated mode. Yes, it was stagey, and so full of Mr Bachchan.

I am waiting for that one movie on education that will be neatly scripted, well performed and effective as cinema. Probably, what needs to be done is to make a film on the subject and keep stars out.

However, like the Amrita student emboldened by *3 Idiots* to chuck up a so-called lucrative career in engineering for something as tough as photography and cinematography (which entails years of struggle before one is able to establish oneself), there may be hundreds of others in India who could have been inspired by cinema to dream.

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