

cinema



* A poster of the film *Agneepath*, the remake of a revenge saga that is said to have inspired a student in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, to murder his teacher.

Crime and punishment

In the wake of the stabbing of a teacher by her disgruntled student in Chennai last week,

Gautaman Bhaskaran examines the role of violent movies and lackadaisical parenting that can impact a child's sub-conscious mind

Every morning, I see a boy of six on his cycle racing down the road. Cars and trucks zoom by, and his father, puffing and panting, in invariably many hundred metres away from the little racer. My warnings to the parent have been met with sheepish looks. Or, sometimes with a silly explanation that the son loves to do what he sees on the telly. Film stars and models zipping on their motorbikes or cars.

Call it the power of cinema or its seductive appeal packaged in a way that all that flits across the screen seems perfectly right. And parents play abettors in this story.

I have seen and protested about the casualness with which parents treat movies with adult certificates. Mothers and fathers have no qualms about bringing their sons

and daughters — babes in arms to toddlers to tweens — to films with adult content.

Theatres faced with dwindling patronage in the face of rampant piracy, never seem to stop kids from entering auditoriums showing adult fare. The other night, a journalist asked a mother why she had brought her little son to the A-rated violent Tamil film. He always accompanies us and he likes it, she smiled.

For years, I have written about how the sub-conscious mind of a growing child absorbs violence that he or she sees on the big or small screen, and with the mental ability to distinguish between what is right or acceptable and what is wrong or unacceptable yet to develop, the boy or girl grows up confused. And, sometimes ends up committing heinous crimes.

Last week, a 15-year-old teenager stabbed his young teacher with a knife he had been carrying on him for three days. The chance came that morning when he found the teacher alone in the classroom. The woman died on the way to the hospital. The boy was arrested. He made no effort to escape.

It is now known that he was pampered by his parents (who probably believed like many others do today, that their children are right, teachers are not), who showered him with liberal pocket money and anything else he asked for.

He never got decent grades from that teacher, who wrote in his diary that he needed to work harder. But the boy, used to getting whatever he wanted, was in no mood to study and score. He thought that the money his parents thrust into

his pocket could help him buy that weapon to knife his way into a state which was free from his strict teacher. He murdered her in cold blood.

Now comes the climax. He told the police that he had seen the Bollywood film, *Agneepath*, a few days ago and had been inspired by the way the hero, Hrithik Roshan, kills all those who had been responsible for his screen father's murder.

What the 15-year-old lad could not perhaps understand was that this poor teacher had killed nobody, but was only trying to help him better his life.

A strange kind of logic must have clouded his thinking; he must have thought that revenge, violence and murder were the answers to his own difficult plight, however transient it might have been.

What is even more disturbing today is that the line between good and bad in cinema has blurred beyond comfort. Once, we knew who the villain was. For instance, Pran or Nambiar (in the South) played perfectly distinguishable bad men. They smoked, drank, gambled, looted and raped. In the end, they were punished. The heroes never did all this, and young audiences looked up to them, not the rogues.

Today, we have hero Hrithik Roshan going on a killing spree,

butchering about with blood splattering all around. There have been a number of movies — in Hindi, in Tamil, in Telugu, in just about every other language — that have propagated violence as a justifiable means to the end. In *Naan Mahaan Alla* (I Am No Saint), the hero (Karthi) turns murderous in the end, and walks away with several corpses littered on the floor.

A teenager watching this will begin to believe that Roshan and Karthi, their favourite screen guys, are right. The teen probably does not have the faculty to separate Roshan and Karthi from the characters they essayed. The child in the auditorium will probably convince itself by saying that if Roshan can do it, if Karthi can, why not me?

Coming back to where I began this column, as much as one may find it convenient to blame the teacher or the theatre management, the ultimate responsibility must be borne by parents, who in this day and age of crass consumerism feel that the best way to bring up children is to shower them with goodies, not principles. Little attempt is made to teach them the significance of authority. They are never told that the teacher is the most important person in a classroom. On the other hand, fathers and mothers often encourage their boys and girls to question authority too early in life, confusing and confounding them. And this attitude among the young becomes a lifelong affliction.

At Chennai's Loyola College, I used to teach English to 20-something young adults. One of the ground rules I had laid was that the students must be in class on time. Many found this annoying, with some walking in even 45 minutes late in a session of 90 minutes. I stopped allowing them in, and when the time came at the end of the semester, some of them wrote the nastiest comments about me to the principal. One quipped that I did not know the language at all. There was another student, who tried bribing me in exchange for attendance.

Money power in India is growing into a big evil. With teachers often hailing from a background that is somewhat economically poorer than that of the average student, he/she develops a superiority complex which parents fuel further by loading their children with money and expensive gifts.

Finally, as much as I may write that filmmakers have a huge responsibility, the last line of defence must be parents. They must put their foot down and ensure that their children are not exposed to too much of violence. We have frequently seen students turning 'kill-bills' in the West, and the school teacher murder in Chennai appears like the harbinger of frightening days.

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