

# cinema



\* From left: Actors Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Anil George and Niharika Singh and director Ashim Ahluwalia pose during the photocall of their film *Miss Lovely* presented in the Un Certain Regard selection at the 65th Cannes film festival on May 24.

## Gangs of India (II)

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**O**n the closing days of the recent Cannes Film Festival, I came across a couple of comments which disturbed me. Christian Jeune, Deputy General-Delegate of the Festival, hoped that there would be some good Indian movies next year, when the 12-day annual event planned to focus on the country, which would be celebrating a hundred years of its cinema. "Otherwise, we would be left with elephants on the Croisette", he quipped.

I could not but agree with this, however uncomfortable I felt at the thought of India being identified with the elephant in this day and age. Indian cinema needs to pull up its socks all right, and try and erase stereotype tags, like "Bollywood is all singing and dancing". While the National Film Development Corporation merely pushed this image by distributing "ghungrus" (dancing bells) along with the invitation card for its Incredible India Party on the Cannes beach, actress Mallika Sherawat was seen at the 2010 Festival with a python wrapped around her, strengthening yet another notion about the country being "a land of snake charmers".

And, *The Hollywood Reporter* review of Ashim Ahluwalia's *Miss Lovely*, the Indian movie in the Festival's A Certain Regard, said "A pair of Bombay movie-business slumdogs dream of becoming millionaires in this unusual Hindi-language arthouse thriller..."; keeping alive yet, yet another clichéd picture of India

that Danny Boyle propagated through his work *Slumdog Millionaire*.

But a change was discernible at French Riviera this May. *The Hollywood Reporter* also wrote a story where it agreed that a new kind of Indian cinema was emerging, going by what was featured at Cannes this year: *Gangs of Wasseypur* in the Directors' Fortnight, *Peddlers* in the Critics' Week and *Miss Lovely*.

Foreign critics termed this kind of fare "alternative movies". I was happy that after decades, Indian cinema — which despite its impressive numbers and domestic popularity had remained a joke, a huge joke at that, outside the country's shoreline — was starting to acquire a new avatar, one that is more respectable.

Admittedly, "alternative" movies are not exactly new in India. For decades, we have seen men like Satyajit Ray, Ritwick Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Aravindan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Shyam Benegal and Girish Kasaravalli among others create pictures that were realistic and shorn of pretension. Benegal even worked within the broad parameters of Bollywood (and its stifling system), that is essentially Hindi language cinema coming from Bombay or Mumbai. And this cinema existed along with that which relied on unreal situations/scripts, garishly coloured costumes, loud songs, and dozens of dances. These "embellishments" hardly ever pushed the narrative.

Worse, this kind of cinema often eclipsed the softer, the sensible and the sublime films.

With a young breed of Indian directors currently making movies with very little artifice and which are rooted to the ground,

Indian cinema appears to be all set for a perception makeover. Some of these helmers — such as Anurag Kashyap, whose *Gangs of Wasseypur* featured in my last column, Vasan Bala (*Peddlers*) and Ahluwalia — may have songs and dances in their work, but they are neither distracting nor irritating. They blend with the narrative.

*Miss Lovely*, by the debutant Ahluwalia who has some acclaimed documentaries to his credit, was visualised as a non-fiction project, before it changed tracks to evolve into a stylised drama. Co-financed with international money, it was picked up by Fortissimo, and has the potential to travel beyond the festival circuit.

Set in the Bombay of the 1980s and within the dark and murky world of semi-criminal pornography industry, *Miss Lovely* is essentially the story of two brothers, Sonu (Nawazuddin Siddiqui, who is not half as good as he was in *Gangs of Wasseypur*) and Vicky (Anil George). They churn out blue films by sexually exploiting young women seeking stardom. Playing pals with both gangsters and cops, the brothers dream big, and when Sonu meets Pinky (Niharika Singh), he knows that she is his heroine for *Miss Lovely*, a fiction feature he hopes to make and which may just about be the ticket out of his grubby world.

Perhaps driven by his concern that Bollywood-dominated Indian cinema is laughed at, Ahluwalia produces an aesthetically pleasing work. (Ahluwalia told the *Reporter*: "The primary thing I want viewers at Cannes to take away is that Indian cinema is not all Bollywood. That's the

misconception. My work wants to break that perception that we are under-educated about cinema).

Some say his work resembles one of Gus Van Sant, and Jeune told me that he had picked *Miss Lovely* because he saw "a great potential in it". (Cannes has been the discovering field of hidden talent.) True, the style is bold, the story quite novel, and it is on par with European art cinema. Nonetheless, characters could have been fleshed out a bit more, the emotional punch could have been stronger, and the pace quicker.

Be that as it may, but as Bala said at the Festival, "A validation like Cannes gives new wings and new perspectives even to the audience. There is something in the back of the mind that says 'it's at Cannes so it must be good'. It is not easily dismissed and that works to the advantage for such films because they need time to be absorbed".

Bala's *Peddlers* came out of a person the director knew. Bala saw him growing up and evolving. It is a kind of coming of age story. The loss of innocence, which is unfortunately viewed as "innocence destroyed". He says, "so I had to create extreme characters and show how they evolved. It is the man-woman relationship that helps human evolution best. The boy-to-man-to-devil curve happens through such a relationship".

Bala's first feature *Peddlers*, talks about two 20-somethings, a boy and a girl, who fall in love even as they are pushed into Mumbai's drug trade. Stalked by a cop, the movie is languid for most of its running time, picking up at the last half hour to a dramatic finale. All three have had bad childhood, a reason touted for their behaviour. Not quite convincing though.

(Concluded)

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