

cinema



* The *Gangs of Wasseypur* team cheers at a photocall during their Cannes Film Festival screening... an energetic film that could have done without the PR histrionics.

Gangs of India (I)

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The gangs of India were in their full, mighty self at Cannes during the Mediterranean city's ever-exciting movie festival in May. Replete with "pakoras", "barfis" and "chai" the India Pavilion was invariably crammed with Indian faces and figures.

Conceptualised, created and run by the National Film Development Corporation of India (spending pots of money to present "Incredible India", and completely belying the fact that it is a sick organisation losing heavily), the pavilion may not do hard business (has never really done so), but attracts a wannabe crowd of Indians and foreigners. In the bargain, it resembles a fair. And what a contrast this is to the other pavilions, where hard bargains are made and significant deals clinched.

One of the regulars to the pavilion this year (as he was in some previous years) was Anurag Kashyap, who walked up to me on a rain-soaked morning and declared that his two-part five-and-a-half hour movie, *Gangs of Wasseypur*, was to have been part of the Cannes Film Festival's official lineup. But he declined the festival's invitation, since it was willing to schedule the movie only at the very end of the 12-day event.

So, he said, he chose to have it screened in the Directors' Fortnight — one of those programmes that are organised during the

Festival. The Director's Fortnight, as is the Critic's Week, is NOT part of the Cannes Festival — much as Kashyap or the Indian media may claim time and again. Incidentally, *Gangs of Wasseypur* played at the very end of the Fortnight, and Cannes told me that Kashyap's movie was never in the running for the festival!

Well, Kashyap and Kamal (Hassan), as well as many others, tell an ignorant Indian media what they want to, and journalists faithfully publish such stories. The gullible reader and the viewer believe them. Do film personalities like Kashyap and Kamal need such deceitful promotion?

Let us now turn to Kashyap's odyssey, *Gangs of Wasseypur*. Admittedly, it is an extremely energetic film which took 24 months to be completed. I never felt time stifling me, though there was a 20-minute break between the parts. Kashyap plans to release one part at a time in India, separated by several months.

Would those having seen the first part buy a ticket to watch the second? I have my reservations, also because the latter half is a replay, of sorts, of the first. What is even more of stumbling block is the film's obsession with information. There is such an overload of it that even a seasoned critic like me found it a tad uncomfortable. I did not see any reason for Kashyap and his team to have elaborated on the history of Wasseypur and its lead players.

One of them is coalmine owner Ramadhir

Singh, a character inspired by Suryadev Singh, a mafia don in the Dhanbad belt whose "Government contracts and illegal mining" reportedly earned him billions of rupees a day. Played with a touch of brilliance by Tigra Manjhu Dhulia (remember his excellent *Paan Singh Tomar*, which he helmed?), Ramadhir comes to life in a carefully-written three-dimensional characterisation.

Nawazuddin Siddiqui portrays the dreaded gangster, Faheem Khan, who escaped a bloody attack at Wasseypur in 2004. Siddiqui is equally impressive, particularly in the movie's opening scene that recreates the actual happening.

"The entire setting and treatment of the opening sequence is similar to the real incident. Anurag has gone all out to make sure that the scene doesn't look fake, and the result has been fantastic," says a crewmember, part the 40 men and women of the Kashyap brigade who were flown from Mumbai to Cannes. (India believes in 'extravaganza' all right.)

However, it is Manoj Bajpayee, playing Sardar (whose father is killed by Ramadhir's men), who is the virtual soul of *Gangs*.

He is extraordinary in a role that demands naive qualities as it does vile. Extremely ruthless when he is provoked to pound a guy into a lifeless lump, Sardar can also be foolish enough to become a sitting duck.

Was it the arrogance of imagined invincibility or plain stupidity?

We can only harbour a guess. But when he is not in one of these extreme forms, he plays playboy, wooing and marrying two women, each pouncing upon the other, with one even conspiring to bump him off in a story which takes us through the turbulent times of three whole generations.

The Gangs of Wasseypur is set in and around India's coal capital, and it is this black gold that forms the basis of the film. Caught in an epic feud, two clans in Wasseypur, Khans and Quereshis, are bent on decimating the other. Both are Sunni Muslims, so the enmity does not originate out of sectarian difference, but one born out of power equation and economic alliances.

It is a rancour that goes back in years, and time here does not play healer, but is more of a provocateur.

Often the movie's style may appear Tarantino-esque — stylishly choreographed violence, laced with black humour and punctuated with witty lines. Someone called it a Bihari take on the *Godfather* saga. Kashyap plays with not just the colour red, but also other hues, and he toys with songs, but has intelligently woven these into his canvas. They neither jar nor intrude, and it often seems that these help the film discover joy and beauty in the wilds of Wasseypur which have been bloodied.

The Gangs of Wasseypur is a vast improvement on Kashyap's earlier movies, like *No Smoking* and *That Girl in Yellow Boots*. But the latest outing is still not as convincing or inspiring as his first feature, *Black Friday*, that combined the docu-style with fiction to present one of the best ever visual narratives of what happened post-Mumbai riots.

Next week: *The Gangs of India, Part II*

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