

# cinema



\* This October 3, 2009 photo shows Indian actor Shinye Ahuja exiting the Arthur Road Jail in Mumbai. On April 27 this year, a court in the Indian city of Mumbai granted bail to Ahuja, who is appealing against a 7-year prison sentence for raping his maid.



\* Bollywood director Madhur Bhandarkar, is being accused by a starlet of rape.

## What tangled webs they weave

India's filmmaking community is embroiled in a mess of scandal and 'casting couch' allegations, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

**B**ollywood is in a soup. Some of India's other "Woods" are in a mad mess as well. Not really a great time for the country's cinema in one sense with shame and scandal in the one big family.

Madhur Bhandarkar, in particular, seems to be running into one storm after another. In May at Cannes, after a grand launch of what he called his dream film, *Heroine*, his own heroine, Aishwarya Rai, declared herself pregnant. She said she could handle the movie, but Bhandarkar was not so sure that she would be able to take the strain of what was to be a demanding role.

Bhandarkar had already shot some footage, and the angry and disappointed director said he felt cheated because Rai must have known about her pregnancy at Cannes and even earlier, but chose to keep him in the dark. He had no option but to drop Rai.

He even came close to packing up the project, till Kareena Kapoor, the original choice for the part, agreed to step in, but with riders. Bhandarkar probably had no choice but to accept them.

Now, another woman has emerged to hassle the helmer. Seven years ago, aspiring Bollywood actress, Preeti Jain, accused Bhandarkar of raping her. He had promised her the world in return for sex (Pray, how does this become rape?).

The case dates to 2004, when Jain alleged that Bhandarkar promised to cast her as the lead heroine in a film and raped her 16 times in five years.

The police closed two of Jain's reports alleging rape. They said they had no evidence to charge Bhandarkar. But a local court set aside the second report (which concurred with the first) filed in 2009, and told the police to probe further.

Bhandarkar, however, said, "As the lower

court has issued a process against me in a case which has been going on for seven years, I would like to state that we will challenge this order in a higher court and seek justice."

A recent NDTV programme on this case had a few speakers, including Jain. While she was brutally open and said unflinchingly that Bhandarkar had intercourse with her, the others, including journalist Bhawana Somaaya, were apprehensive of the charge. They were not prepared to believe Jain, and that Bhandarkar could have raped her. The two might have had sex with mutual consent, but to call that rape appeared farfetched to them.

Some years ago, Bollywood actor Shinye Ahuja's promising career was ruined when a court found him guilty of raping his housemaid. Early this year, he was jailed for seven years, but is now out on bail. As far as I remember, the maid had changed her statement twice.

What is the truth? Is Bhandarkar guilty of all that Jain has accused him of? Or, is she a woman scorned and in fury? Did Ahuja really rape the maid? Would we ever know?

In another take, the Karnataka cinema recently saw a tempest in a teacup. The Kannada Film Producers' Association slapped a three-year ban on actress Nikita Thukral for reportedly having an affair with a married actor, Darshan.

Paradoxically, Darshan himself landed in prison after his wife accused him of beating her and threatening her with a gun.

When leading Kannada actors like Puneet Rajkumar, Shivarajakumar, Ramesh Aravind and others lambasted (and rightfully so) the film body, it immediately lifted the ban.

It was assumed that better sense prevailed, but no, not really. The association seemed to have taken this as a blow to its pride. A post in one of the blogs says: "Muniratna Naidu,

the Association president, wrote a letter to Thukral... Each sentence drips with sarcasm?"

Here are some examples that smack of sheer arrogance. "It was our foolishness to impose a ban on such a good girl....We have understood our mistake, thanks to several intellectuals... This is a free country, anybody can go anywhere. Who are we to stop them... Henceforth, Nikita can go anywhere, act in any movie. We have no objection... The word 'ban' has been banned from the Kannada film industry."

A clear case of wounded ego, injured pride.



### Mumbai Film Festival

The Mumbai Film Festival will roll with Bennett Miller-directed, Brad Pitt-starrer *Moneyball* on October 13. A quirky tale about how an Oakland executive drafts players for his baseball club through computer analysis, *Moneyball* is based on true events and holds out a winning recipe.

The Festival will close on October 20 with Charles Martin Smith's *Dolphin Tale*, starring Harry Connick Jr, Ashley Judd, and Morgan Freeman. Also based on an actual story about how a bottlenose dolphin, Winter, was rescued off Florida, the movie has Freeman playing a doctor who creates a prosthetic limb for the injured mammal.

The Festival's premiere competition for debutant helmers will showcase 14 films, including Pablo Giorgelli's *Las Acacias*, Julia Leigh's *Sleeping Beauty* and Markus Schleimer's *Michael*.

Apart from this, there will be two other competition categories: Dimensions Mumbai and Harmony Celebrate Age.

A total of \$200,000 will be given away to winners in these three sections.

Lars Von Trier's Cannes competition entry, *Melancholia*, Venice opener George Clooney's *The Ides of March*, Monica Bellucci-Rachel Weisz-starrer *The Whistle Blower* and Wim Wenders' *Pina* will have their India premieres at Mumbai.

The Festival's other highlights include tributes to moviemaker Mani Kaul, artist-film-director M F Hussain and Bollywood singing-dancing legend Shammi Kapoor (all of whom died this year) as well as a retro of the main competition jury president, Hugh Hudson's movies.

The other members of the jury will be Roger Spottiswoode (director of James Bond movie, *Tomorrow Never Dies* and the Arnold Schwarzenegger starrer, *The 6th Day*), acclaimed Polish director, Jerzy Skolimowski, and the young Korean director, Na Hong-jin (lauded for his films, *The Chaser* and *The Yellow Sea*, which was shown in Cannes this year).

Veteran Indian movie-maker Basu Chatterjee will preside over the jury of the Harmony Celebrate Age section, which encourages a cinema that looks beyond the stereotypes of old age.

Director-producer Kiran Rao (*Dhobi Ghat*) leads the jury of the short film competition, Dimensions Mumbai.

The other members of the jury are Vikramaditya Motwane (whose *Udaan* was part of this year's Cannes A Certain Regard), Nishikant Kamat (*Mumbai Meri Jaan*), Onir (*My Brother Nikhil*) and actress Renuka Shahane.

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