

# cinema

## Baffling choice of films at 2012 Osian's Cinefan

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Once Osian's Cinefan Film Festival in New Delhi was given top billing by top critics. But the recently concluded 10-day event appears to have slipped. Maybe, this had something to do with the two-year hiatus which the Festival was forced into by perhaps funding hiccups. This year, there was no great cinema to take back home, with bad projection at the Siri Fort auditoriums and screening delays heaping further dissatisfaction.

Cinefan began on a poor note. Of all the men, Rajesh Khanna's movie clips were screened on the inaugural evening. The actor, who passed away some weeks ago, had little to do with art cinema, and I could not understand a Festival like Osian's being a platform for paying homage to him.

The opening film itself – Japan's *Asura* by Keiichi Sato – was hardly befitting. It was gory, violent and did by no means set the mood for the Festival run.

I have always maintained that a festival's first movie must be joyous and filled with fun in order to get viewers into a frame of mind for the hopefully more serious fare to follow.

A Japanese anime, *Asura* is based on a controversially violent Manga by George Akiyama, who created it in 1970-71. It is set in Japan's Kyoto in the middle of a tragedy-driven 15th century, which saw catastrophic floods, drought and famine with 80,000 people dying. That was also a period which heralded a bloody civil war.

*Asura* is born in dark times as these, and is abandoned by his mother. In his struggle to survive in the wild, *Asura* learns to fight and kill, turning into a beast. Sato weaves the story of human resilience and love to show how the care of a young woman calms the little boy, who experiences for the first time what seems like maternal affection. Complementing this is a monk who plays father to the child.

Often violent – as most Manga comics tend to be – *Asura* is a study in carnage and slaughter of a boy who reminds us how damning Nature can be. There are hints of the recent

tsunami in Japan and its effects on relationships. How do men and women – even children – behave when they face perils from the sea and land?

Japan is known for its legendary humility and consideration as it is also for its aggressive streak of destruction. Sato contrasts these in his animated work, but as much as it is a powerful and moving work, it was depressing to follow the life of the child monster.

What followed *Asura* was not really great cinema. *Mekong Hotel* by Thailand's Apichatpong Weerasethakul paints a portrait of a hotel by a river in rage. Shuffling between different realms of fact and fiction, he studies lovers and a mother and her daughter who eat human flesh. The scenes are repulsive, and the film by itself is a meaningless exercise to shock you.

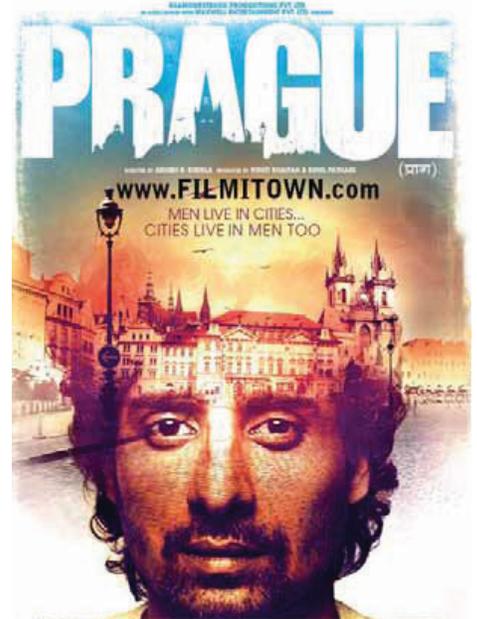
India's *Cosmic Sex* – which led to a mad scramble for seats (!) – was Amitabh Chakraborty's pornography. There was nothing else to it. The plot seemed bizarre. And who were the characters? A transgender, a street walker, a boy who tries to kill his father and a woman who resembles his mother, but teaches him sex!

Then there was Ashish Shukla's *Prague*, whose earlier teasers spoke about the movie being a gypsy love story. True, there is a woman, whose grandmother was a gypsy, but beyond this, *Prague* deals with a hallucinating man, who keeps seeing his dead friend. People die, people manipulate in a script which does not know where it headed for.

Even the better of the films I could catch were not greats. *Postcards from the Zoo* from Indonesia's Edwin begins on a sad note of a child who is lost in a large zoo (probably she was abandoned, for no one comes looking for her), and she grows up there amongst the animals. But the work begins to falter the moment our lady steps out of the zoo to become a masseuse.

*A Man of Honour* by the Lebanese helmer, Jean-Claude Codsi, portrays the lonely life of a guy who flees his country after he commits a murder, but the entire film appears clothed in a misty hue. More like a jigsaw puzzle, but, well, less shocking than some of the others in the Festival.

There were also movies like Anurag Kashyap's *Gangs of*



\* Ashish Shukla's *Prague* ... it's all in the head. Below: A scene from Thai film *Mekong Hotel* ... repulsive theme.



*Wasseypur*, the brilliant *Shanghai* (a study of a small town's aspiration to chopstick its way into a China-like glory) by Dibakar Banerjee – both of which I have written about in my earlier columns – and *Vicky Donor* by Shoojit Sircar. In *Vicky Donor*, Anu Kapoor is simply marvellous as an infertility doctor, who “discovers” a descendant of Alexander the Great in the bylanes of Delhi and coaxes him to become a sperm donor. Really a novel subject that takes us through Vicky's (that is the donor) life, his love for a beautiful Bengali girl and the emotional upheaval they face when they find that she cannot have babies. I only wish that the film had thought of a less clichéd ending.

Dariussh Mehrjui's *The Orange Suit* had social implications as well. It bullies us into caring for our environment. Do not dirty the streets, it says, and uses a photographer-turned-garbage cleaner to brush the filth off this message. But beyond a point the work has nothing to say, and somewhere the Iranian helmer appears to have lost his touch. Remember his *The Cycle* and *The School We Went To*? Both were classics, and *The Orange Suit* pales in comparison.

There was a movie by Anjan Dutt (*Ranjana, I Ain't coming back*), which I liked more than the others – not because Anjan and I began our careers in *The Statesman* of the 1970s. He left journalism and I stuck to it. Well, *Ranjana*... is a sweet musical piece of celluloid with some haunting songs and great acting by Anjan himself. He essays an ageing and cantankerous pop star, who eventually understands that life has to go beyond booze and pawing young girls, life must bloom into helping others to bloom.

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\* Osian's Cinefan opening film was Keiichi Sato's *Asura*, based on a controversially violent Manga by George Akiyama.