

cinema

Missing the point

The fuss over *Aarakshan* is a waste of time, writes

Gautaman Bhaskaran

The British may have long left India, but the nation of multiple religions, castes, and languages is still fettered. Or, so it seems if one were to go by the volcanic eruption of intolerance and bigotry in recent years.

A girl goes to a pub, and political goons chase her out, stopping just short of molesting her. A teenager walks into a shop to buy a Valentine's card, and he is jeered at and hounded out by men who call themselves nationalist Indians. Two young people hold hands in a park, and they are warned never to do that by self-styled moralists. Worse, "khaps" (consisting of village elders!) whip and even kill two lovers if they happen to be from different castes or communities. It does not even matter if they are married.

Many films in India have run into major blocks, because some group or the other found something not quite to their taste or way of thinking.

Bharatan's *Thevar Magan* in Tamil displeased, if memory serves me right, the Thevars. Earlier in 1989, *Ore Oru Gramathile* caused a huge uproar and led to its ban, but the Supreme Court ruled that "freedom of expression cannot be suppressed on account of threat of demonstration and processions or threats of violence".

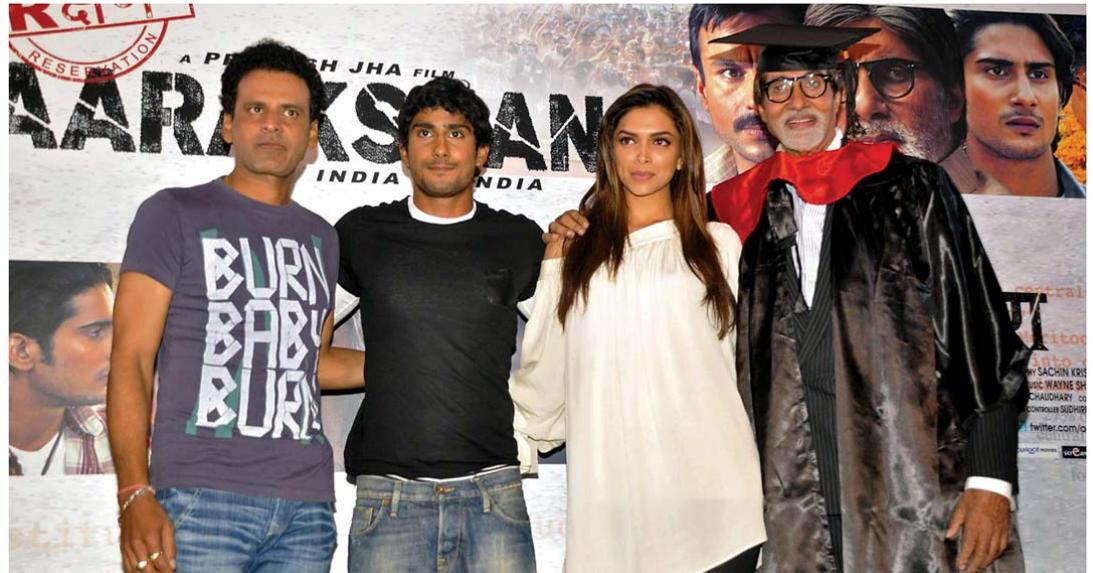
Now, Prakash Jha's latest *Aarakshan* (Reservation) was banned in three Indian states of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra. (Subsequently, two lifted the embargo.) Pray, why? It will incite caste violence, averred political leaders.

Quips Girish Kasaravalli, one of the pioneers of the New Indian Cinema and who makes thought-provoking cinema, "This way, nobody can speak in this country any more... Somebody or the other will be 'hurt' and object". How true.

The saddest part of this whole exercise against cinema in particular comes at a time when the Central Board of Film Certification is getting increasingly liberal, and is also now set to drop its censorial role in favour of a rating or classification system.

The amendment is in Parliament, and when it becomes an Act, movies will be just classified according to their suitability for different age groups. No cutting or mutilating of films any more.

But, India now has a relatively new "watchdog" whose teeth are sharper than the sharpest pair of censor scissors, and the



* This August 2, 2011 file photo shows actors (from left) Manoj Bajpayee, Prateik Babbar, Amitabh Bachchan and Deepika Padukone posing during a press conference to promote their movie *Aarakshan* in Mumbai. The film was initially banned in three states over its perceived incitement to caste violence.

"watchdog" has the unbelievable ability to predict whether a film will cause social unrest and communal flare up or not.

The "watchdog" ruled, at least in some states, that *Aarakshan* was not appropriate for the general public. Which can get swayed by what Jha's characters say and do. There can then be riots, looting and deaths. Truly cinematic, I would think.

And these men, who fancy themselves as the keepers of morals, preservers of social sanctity and upholders of community's peace, live believing that movie audiences are downright gullible — willing to bite what the story writer and the director dangle on the screen.

"Come on", laughs Kasaravalli, "cinema has never had that kind of power and pull, and even the average Indian knows what to take and what not to. He is intelligent".

Let us now examine *Aarakshan*. Much as its critics will disagree, *Aarakshan* is not really about caste-based reservation in government jobs and higher educational institutions.

Even a casual viewer will understand in no time that the movie is about the commercialisation of education. Which is also what Jha said. And as much as politicians will rave and rant about religion and caste, today's India is unmistakably divided on economic lines.

One of Chennai's leading lawyers and social activist, Geeta Ramaseshan, tells me that people give her greater respect and importance if she were to travel in a big car. "You should see the way they look at me when I step out from a small car", she says.

This is the point that *Aarakshan* tries to make. Consumerism. Education is now a consumer product. Have money, and you have the best education at your fingertips, and in the film, we see a Pandit or Brahmin as desperate to get a seat in a good college as is a Dalit, once called Harijan by Mahatma Gandhi. How do you get a seat in such a college? Through bribery, through political influence and through strong-arm tactics. *Aarakshan* clearly shows us all these.

What happens when a student with low percentage gets into a reputable college through the back door, and has to compete with brainy fellow students? He needs 'special attention'; and the mushrooming of private coaching centres or tuitions has helped many in India to strike gold.

As one character in the movie tells another: parents are prepared to beg and borrow to educate their children. Whatever be the amount of money involved.

And such coaching centres are nothing new in India. I have seen them in the Kolkata of the 1960s, and I have seen them in the Chennai of the 1980s. I see them still today, and whatever be the economic crisis, these centres go on merrily minting money.

Aarakshan is all about this, and I cannot understand why India's politicians cannot see this.

However, beyond all this is the fact that the movie is mediocre, and pretty much so. It would have sunk without a trace had politicians not made such a hullabaloo, going to the extent of banning it.

Many are trooping into the theatres because their curiosity has been aroused. Jha

and his producers must be chuckling.

It is a film full of Amitabh Bachchan. As Prabhakar Anand, the principled principal of a renowned college in Bhopal, he is above caste politics. He goes by merit, and is willing to teach for free.

His detractors, consumed by the greed for money, see him as a terrible nuisance, and in a series of calculated moves — often unbelievably exaggerated — dethrone him. He, his wife (Tanvi Azmi) and daughter, Poorbi (Deepika Padukone) find themselves on the streets.

Deepak Kumar (Saif Ali Khan) is the Dalit son of a housemaid who gets into Cornell, thanks to the largesse of Prabhakar. Kumar loves Poorbi, and along with Sushant Seth (Prateik Babbar) form a great threesome at Prabhakar's college, until the court ruling on reservation (for the Dalits) begins to destroy their camaraderie. Each raises a fort around him/her.

If performances are disappointing (wooden Khan and Babbar) with some salvation, though, coming from Padukone, Bachchan and Manoj Bajpayee (as Professor Mithilesh Singh who tries destroying Prabhakar), the script tires you with its hyperbolic nonsense. Preachy and moralising, *Aarakshan* is often silly and stagey.

But this is not what Indian politicians are bothered about. Are they?

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades, and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)