

Asian Corner | Gautaman Bhaskaran

Indian cinema taps real stories

Indian cinema is trying to shake off its image of song-and-dance melodrama. Instead, we have, in recent times, been seeing slices of reality, often actual happenings in the community, being scripted into powerful films. Yes, they are fictionalised, but the connections are obvious and apparent. Some tend to deny the links, like director Mani Ratnam once did with his film “Guru”, starring Abhishek Bachchan-Aishwarya Rai. Most of those who watched this movie knew that it was the rags-to-riches story of one of India’s most powerful businessmen, the late Dhirubhai Ambani.

Early this year, Raj Kumar Gupta released his “No One Killed Jessica”, which narrated the tragic end of a young model. In 1999, Manu Sharma, son of a powerful Indian politician, shot and killed Jessica Lal, a model and aspiring actress, at a New Delhi party. What was the provocation for Sharma to commit this crime? Lal, who was playing a celebrity barmaid, refused to serve Sharma and his friends, who had barged into the gathering uninvited, because it was time up and stocks had run out. Sharma, already quite drunk and not used to hearing “No” in an essentially money-driven, male chauvinist society, became so enraged that he took out his

gun and shot Lal at point-blank range. The story-line of “No One Killed Jessica” ran almost like the actual happenings on that terrible night. The film was a hit, largely because it had the ability to disturb us, to look beyond mere entertainment. So writers, directors and producers are now trying to stop fantasising and are beginning

to use topical issues to spin a yarn and connect with audiences. If the subject is controversial, so much the better.

The latest topic to get moviemakers all excited is the Neeraj Grover murder. Grover was murdered by the jealous boyfriend – a naval officer named Emele Jerome Mathew – of Maria Susairaj, a small-time actress. It is



Actor Abhishek Bachchan and his wife, actress Aishwarya Rai

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alleged that Grover had fallen in love with Susairaj, and Mathew had caught the two red-handed one night, leading to the cold-blooded killing. Mathew is still in prison serving a long sentence, while Susairaj, who helped him cremate Grover, has just been freed after a three-year incarceration.

Ram Gopal Varma’s curiously titled “Not a Love Story” reflects on the gruesome murder (Grover’s body was cut into small parts and stuffed into a sports bag before being burnt).

“What excited me about the story were the emotions involved. It’s about two people in love who got caught up in a rollercoaster emotional ride due to certain circumstances. It was love that drove them to chop the victim’s body. It was love that turned them into such dreadful souls,” Varma has been quoted as saying.

In India, issue-based cinema is now coming of age. Thankfully, no longer dubbed arthouse fare, these films have been quick enough to tap real stories, sometimes boldly so. They have not shied away from telling us the gritty truth. They have even been able to rope in big stars.

A leading Bollywood star and excellent actress, Vidya Balan is now shooting for “The Dirty Picture”, a biopic of the late South Indian artist Silk Smitha. Her almost vulgar dance numbers and semi-nude scenes made her into a “soft-porn star”. But in 1996, a depressed and disillusioned Smitha committed suicide, and it is her life that Balan is essaying. “That calls for a lot of guts,” said her co-star in the movie, Naseeruddin Shah, one of



Rani Mukherji plays a crime reporter in "No One Killed Jessica"

India’s most distinguished performers who has been acting in both art and

mainstream cinema with equal ease.

Another renowned actor, Irrfan Khan, who was seen with Angelina Jolie in “A Mighty Heart” and “The Slumdog Millionaire”, plays a celebrated athlete pushed by society’s indifference and cruelty into becoming an outlaw in “Paan Singh Tomar”. And there are more examples of cinema drawing from the community: Ankush Bhatt explores the grimy lives of Mumbai pickpockets in his forthcoming “Bhindi Bazaar”, while Santosh Gupta’s soon-to-open work, “Faraar”, traces the bloody exploits of the playboy ‘bikini killer’ Charles Sobhraj, now in a Nepal jail and who still remains irresistible to some women.

It seems that Indian cinema has realised that pretty faces, gorgeous costumes and picture postcard locations alone will not get the ticket-paying viewer into a theatre. He or she now wants to watch a film that, while entertaining, will also exercise the mind. Audiences are perfectly ready to look at issues on the screen with an unflinching eye.



Irrfan Khan in "Paan Singh Tomar"