

cinema



* Vidya Balan seen during the promotional event of her movie *The Dirty Picture* in Bangalore, India, last month. It's still not clear if the film is a biopic of sultry south Indian actress 'Silk' Smitha or not.

Tempests in tinsel teacups

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Cinema in India has often been impeded by extra-constitutional authority with self-styled keepers of society's morals stopping movie screenings either through vandalism or court cases.

M F Husain's documentary, *Through the Eyes of a Painter* (1967), ran into turbulence at the recent International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in Goa's Panaji. The screening was postponed by a few days reportedly because of right-wing threats. The festival director, Shankar Mohan, however, said that legal technicalities were the reason why Husain's work could not be shown. Probably he was referring to some court cases against the celebrated painter, who seems to be vilified even in his death.

The documentary was ultimately screened amidst heavy police security, clearly conveying that there had indeed been intimidations.

Through the Eyes of a Painter was to have been shown at the Festival, in 2009 when Husain was living. But IFFI, cowed down by pressures from right-wing radical groups, decided not to show the documentary then.

The movie is a beautiful work produced by the Films Division (a wholly Government organisation), and is a winner of Berlin's Golden Bear. Another controversial documentary, Umesh Agarwal's *Brokering News*, was also shown at the Festival. The work examines three aspects of paid news: media coverage of elections, movie reviews and business/industry news.

Agarwal said he was not suggesting that the media should be controlled, but it should be responsible and accountable. (Well, in my long years as a journalist, commentator and film critic, I have seen media men accepting money and gifts to write PR pieces or "positive" film reviews. So, Agarwal's

work certainly had a point that calls for a debate.)

Somehow cinema in India is always under the scanner of radical groups, which see the medium as powerful enough to colour public opinion.

In the case of Milan Luthria's *The Dirty Picture*, it was South Indian actress Silk Smitha's brother, Vadlapatla Vara Prasada Rao, who filed a petition in the Andhra Pradesh High Court challenging the release of the movie.

Happily, the petition was dismissed and the judge concerned ruled that if Rao felt that *The Dirty Picture* was obscene, he could also file a defamation suit. It now remains to be seen if that will happen.

Smitha committed suicide some years ago, and Rao said that the film's producers had not sought his family's permission to make it in the first place. The producers disagreeing with this averred that their movie was not a biopic of Smitha, but that of a struggling

Bollywood actress, Reshma, played by Vidya Balan.

The producers' contention now sounds somewhat hollow, for months preceding the opening of *The Dirty Picture*, public spaces were full of how the film traced the life of Silk Smitha. Often, this kind of build-up is counter-productive, leading to unnecessary hype and uncalled for attention.

Why must the producers go on a denial mode? It would have been honest and easier to say that it was indeed a biopic, but tempered with artistic liberties. (Some years ago, Mani Ratnam did the same thing with his *Guru*. While the movie left none in doubt that it was indeed based on the life of industrialist Dhirubhai Ambani, Ratnam kept saying no.)

Be that as it may, it seems ridiculous to me that the decisions of the Central Board of Film Certification are overruled by state governments or men with radical views. It not only belittles the importance of an independent body

whose primary task is to determine the suitability of a movie for public viewing but also, sometimes, negates the board's very existence.

What is more, bans and threats are happening at a time when a Bill to simply age-classify films (not censor or scissor them) is in Parliament. Leela Samson, Chairperson of the Board, had said that this amendment would be effected in the monsoon session of Parliament. But that is long gone, and it is now the winter session, which is being disrupted by the opposition on some ground or the other.

Beyond all this is the fact that cinema is targeted not just by organisations known for their extremist views, but also by others normally moderate in their thinking. The late Jag Mundhra used to tell me how unhappy he was at not being able to do a biopic of Congress party president Sonia Gandhi. Till his end, which came some months ago, he was hoping to get working on his dream script.

Mundhra said that he had even thought of casting Italian actress Monica Bellucci as the older Sonia in the movie that would have been more of a love story between her and her late husband, India's onetime prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.

Mundhra got legal notices from the Congress trying to restrain him from going ahead with the project, and he said that he had nearly succeeded in convincing Sonia that his film would be more of a personal exploration of her life rather than a strictly political work.

However, Sonia remained unconvinced, saying that despite her being a public figure, she was intensely private and would not want her story on the screen.

Biopics can be compelling, a case in point being Luc Besson's recent one, *The Lady*, on Aung San Su Kyi, Burma's social/political activist.

Though a little too long at 143 minutes, particularly for a film whose protagonist spends most of her time under house arrest, *The Lady* nonetheless manages to engage with splendid mounting and a gripping narrative. Starting from the 1947 assassination of Suu Kyi's father, a celebrated hero having won his people's affections after he helped free Burma from British rule, the movie traces her blissful family life at Oxford, before she arrives at Rangoon to be with her ailing mother — a defining moment when she witnesses the military's bloody atrocities on the country's young people. She stays back, and fights and wins an election, but the country's strongman, Ne Win, is no mood to concede defeat. He puts her under house arrest that lasts for 15 years.

The Lady closed IFFI with both Michelle Yeoh (who essays Suu Kyi) and Besson walking the red carpet.

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