

Are enough Bollywood films dealing with Indian sub-cultures?

Historical epics, book adaptations, sci-fi thrillers and tragedies - Hindi cinema is churning out movies on multiple themes. But do many of them deal with the myriad sub-cultures of India? Filmmakers are divided in their response.

Some blame audiences for the elbowing out of movies with the flavours of a specific region or community, while others argue that films like 'Tahaan' and 'Little Zizou' are keeping the flame burning.

'Over the years what has happened in mainstream cinema is that the link with the socio-cultural aspect has gone haywire. Films have become detached from the Indian ethos,' national-award winning filmmaker Jahnu Barua told IANS.

'But it's not the film or the filmmakers who are to be blamed; the audiences' approach is at fault. Filmmakers don't follow a categorical taste unlike the viewers,' added Barua, who is now making 'Har Pal' with Preity Zinta and Shiney Ahuja.

'It is very unfortunate that our audience has been spoiled over the years and they are not mature enough to accept such films. In the process, they are only missing their own bit,' he added.

Rajkumar Gupta, who directed the critically-acclaimed 'Aamir' that highlights the problems of the Muslim community and the increasing religious polarisation in modern India, also blames the audience.

'Watching films is very subjective for the audience. They are not coming out for the kind of experimental cinema that is happening though they have started showing some positive signs, which is very minimal,' Gupta told IANS.

In the past, films like 'Khatta Meetha' (1978), 'Baaton Baaton Mein' (1979), 'Pestonjee' (1988), 'Percy' (1990), '1947: Earth' (1998), 'Being Cyrus' (2005) and 'Little Zizou' (2009) put the spotlight on the Parsi community, while movies like 'Devdas', 'Parineeta' (2005) and 'Chokher Bali' (2003) focussed on the Bengali milieu.

Young filmmakers too tried their hands at highlighting regional as well as religious eccentricities of a multi-cultural nation. For instance, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's 'Khamoshi: The Musical' drew its inspiration from Catholics.

Prakash Jha's 'Mrityudand' (1997) and 'GangaaJal' (2003) drew their plots from politics in Bihar. Then there was Vishal Bhardwaj's 'Omkaara' based in the Uttar Pradesh hinterland. Recently, Santosh Sivan in 'Tahaan' used Kashmir as a backdrop to highlight how conflicts impact children's minds and their lives.

Gurinder Chadha dealt with NRI issues in 'Bend It Like Beckham' and Mira Nair in 'The Namesake'.

Some filmmakers say such films are few and far between.

But veteran filmmaker Shyam Benegal - who has made films like 'Ankur' (1973), 'Manthan' (1976)

and 'Trikaal' (1985) on social differences in Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and the Portuguese in Goa respectively - does not agree.

'It's not only about the sub-cultural aspect. Whatever inspires a filmmaker - she or he goes on to make the same... every filmmaker hopes to get a major audience. He may or may not, that depends upon the story. If the story is good, aesthetically pleasing and the audience can still relate to its subject, the film surely does well,' Benegal told IANS.

'Films have been set in the realistic milieu since the time we started making films in India. Though audiences want to see stories that revolve around universal subjects, they also want a window to their own world,' added Piyush Jha, whose upcoming film 'Sikandar' is set in Kashmir.

'Take for example 'Slumdog Millionaire' and 'Lagaan' and their worldwide acceptance. Setting a film in the sub-culture milieu is not negative any more if the emotion is universal,' he explained.

Photographer-writer Sooni Taraporewala said: 'For a change certain films are being set within very specific, real and authentic worlds as opposed to the generic, homogenised pan-Indian 'Hindu' family one saw in most Bollywood films.'

'I hope it will inspire more filmmakers to do the same as India has a wealth of diversity and we have only seen a very minute fraction of it on screen,' added Taraporewala, who made her directorial debut with 'Little Zizou', a film on Parsis.

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