

For Bollywood, Oscar is a big yawn again

While the 80th Academy Awards for Merit has the global entertainment industry electrified, it has yet again bypassed India, the world's largest producers of films.

Known as the world's most prestigious movie award, the glittering 13.5-inch statuette of a knight holding a crusader's sword on a reel of film continues to evade India, a land where filmmaking began at about the same time as the rest of the world. 'Eklavya - The Royal Guard', India's official entry this year for the Academy Award in Best Foreign Film category, failed to make it to the final list.

The first film to win an Academy Award in the foreign film category was Jean Renoir's 'Grand Illusion' in 1938. Even developing third world countries like Algeria and Bosnia have won an Oscar for a foreign film in the last 69 years. Notably, Bosnia became a sovereign nation in the 1990s and India has been making films even before independence.

It's only three times that an entry from India has been found good enough to be nominated in the best foreign film category of the world's most prestigious award, let alone winning it.

India's first ever entry to the Oscar 'Mother India' got the nomination for the best foreign film, but lost by just one vote. After that there was a long wait of 31 years before 'Salaam Bombay' by Mira Nair made it to the list of the final five.

Recently, India's interest in the Oscars was re-ignited when 'Lagaan' was nominated but lost to 'No Man's Land'.

It does seem the Academy tends to favour European films with France leading the foreign language film nominations with 34 in total and having bagged nine Oscars, and Italy following with 27 nominations and 10 wins. But the Oscar has also gone to movies with people from Arab, Far East and Slavic backgrounds.

Indian films never seem to have fitted the Oscar bill. Satyajit Ray, whom the Academy conferred with the 'Lifetime Achievement Award' on his deathbed, never bagged a film-specific award. His 'Pather Panchali' won 11 international awards, but no Oscar.

Ironically, Vittorio De Sica, who won two Oscars for 'Shoeshine' and 'The Bicycle Thief', had deeply impacted Ray's work. Even last year's Oscar-nominated Iranian director Majid Majidi is a self-confessed admirer of the legendary Ray.

Besides Ray, many filmmakers and an endless number of films have missed a chance at the Oscars but have gone on to join the repertoire of the finest cinema of the world. They include Jean-Luc Godard and Françoise Truffaut, masters of the French New Wave, and others like Yasujiro Ozu, Michelangelo Antonioni, Mrinal Sen, Claude Chabrol, Alain Resnais, Kristov Zanussi, Robert Bresson and many more.

The other Indian to have won an Oscar is Bhanu Athaiya, well-known costume designer from Mumbai. She was jointly named for the best costume designing for Richard Attenborough's multiple-Oscar winner 'Gandhi' (1982).

In 2005, filmmaker Ashvin Kumar's 'Little Terrorist' got nominated for the Academy Award in the Best Short Film category. And then in 2006, 'Born Into Brothels', a documentary filmed in part by children of sex workers of [Kolkata](#) took home the golden statue.

With Indian studios churning out 1,000 films a year, it has the potential to be a film superpower. An Oscar will help in consolidating its power. But most experts say that India is simply not sending its best to the Academy.

.*_

India's official entry for Academy Award in Best Foreign Film category - 'Eklavya' - predictably did not get nomination but it did rack up a major controversy leading to charges of bias levied against the 11-member jury of the Film Federation of India (FFI) that is responsible for selecting the official entry.

Positive fallout of the litigation surrounding the selection of Vidhu Vinod Chopra's multi-starrer 'Eklavya' was that the FFI has at last framed draft guidelines to ensure a fair and transparent selection process. The guidelines said no person connected with the production or commercial exploitation of a competitive entry can be a member of the selection jury.

Reforms in FFI's procedure for selecting India's official entry are a crying need of the hour. For the last six years, Hindi cinema has dominated India's selection to the Oscars. The only exception was the Marathi film 'Shwaas', in 2004.

Says filmmaker Sudhir Mishra: 'Oscars may not be the most authentic one every time yet their strike rate is pretty high. A small film like 'Good Night, and Good Luck' qualified for nominations in six categories including Best Motion Picture only because the Academy recognises the value and talent seeded in such films.

'The Academy won't award a film that doesn't understand its craft. That's precisely why one can't ignore the Oscars,' he says, adding: 'We ourselves disrespect our talent. The FFI does not include films that are not subtitled in English for the jury to select from. As a result, those filmmakers who don't have money to get their films subtitled are not even considered.'

Prithvi Nandy, CEO of Prithvi Nandy Communications, says: 'The Oscar is important for us simply to prove the point that we can make movies as good as Hollywood, which is a fact. We have the talent. We have the skills. All we lack is the scale and that will come with bigger markets and bigger budgets. There are three big movie industries.

'Hollywood, the Indian movie industry and the Chinese-Hong Kong movie industry from where some of the best talent, like John Woo and Zhang Yimou, have already migrated Westwards. We also want to show the world that we have talent that can win the topmost awards. It's a matter of ego, pride and self-satisfaction. That's what movies are made for. Our out and out commercial films may not stand a chance but we also make good films.'

Nandy says the problem lies in the selection process.

'As long as we choose 'Paheli' over 'Hazaaron Khwahishein Aisi', we are in trouble. Not because

'Paheli' is a bad film. But 'Hazaaron...' is the kind of film Oscar judges and audiences worldwide can better identify with. The problem with Bollywood is that it is not proud of its best products. It is only proud of its star cast products, most of which bomb at the box office. Yet the distributors, the trade, the investors, all swear by them because it's hip to do so. Kitsch is in. Excellence is not.'

Here is hoping that India will never again make the mistake of sending a film like 'Jeans' as our official entry solely because it had a song featuring seven wonders of the world and Aishwarya Rai as the eighth wonder.

Priyanka Khanna (© IANS / India eNews)