

Asian Corner | Gautaman Bhaskaran

WOMEN POWER IN INDIAN CINEMA

Indian cinema, despite its often breezy song-and-dance look at life, has always had a fascination for socially provocative issues. Directors such as Satyajit Ray, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Bimal Roy, Shyam Benegal and even Raj Kapoor were deeply idealistic and rooted in Nehruvian and Gandhian philosophies. They dreamt of an India that went beyond gender, communal and caste prejudices, paving the way to a truly egalitarian society. In a way, films here have not just been reflections of society, but also leaders of society. They have shown the way, set standards for communal uplift and encouraged debates.

It is in keeping with this line that Indian movies have of late turned their cameras to the plight and prospects of women. Where young girls are murdered to uphold the honour of their families, where female foetuses are aborted and where girl children are killed soon after they are born (resulting in an unhealthy male-dominated sex ratio), filmmakers are infusing in their women characters a rare kind of spirit and strength. And this is not confined to Bollywood or the essentially Hindi language cinema that emerges from it.

The other day, I saw a Tamil movie, "Aaranya Kaandam" (Jungle Chapter),



Rani Mukherjee in 'No One Killed-Jessica'

where Subbu (played wonderfully by model Yasmin Ponappa) finds the courage – after years of humiliating sexual slavery to a gangster – to kill him as well as her lover, whom she feels will turn out to be as bad. This may be an extreme look at woman power, but the signs of scripting such strong-willed female protagonists are clearly discernable now. There is no

dithering here.

Hindi films may not usually portray women as ruthless as Subbu, but the characters could be rebellious, with a devil-may-care attitude. Look at actress Kangana Ranaut's Tanu in Anand Rai's



Gul Panag

"Tanu Weds Manu", a woman from a small north Indian town who smokes, drinks and chooses a lumpen specimen as her boyfriend to shock the world around her. Then there is actress Konkana Sen Sharma, a writer in "Wake Up Sid", whose prose inspires women to free themselves from societal shackles.

These women are extremely comfortable with their gender and sexuality, and seem like harbingers of a social revolution that is ready to sweep India. The characters they essay are daring and a bold departure from the norm. It is a wake-up call for the meek and submissive woman.

Producers and scriptwriters, keenly observing trends both in society and on the screen, have begun to believe that Indian audiences are now ready for such provocative cinema. What is more, they are quite sure that the ticket-paying masses are willing to be stimulated by such movies, even led by them.

A spate of stirring films set the trend some years ago, exploring the market for viewer acceptance, which came and quite easily at that. In Madhur Bhandarkar's "Chandni Bar", actress Tabu's character escapes her misery as a bar maid by choosing an underworld don whom she feels will give her a life of reasonable comfort.

Actress Gul Panag, who acted in "Turning Thirty", says "it is time that

women celebrated life." Interestingly, "this movie came to me when I was turning 30, and I found the characterisation refreshing. It was a break from the myths surrounding yesteryear women," she adds. "Turning Thirty" was a hit with the modern working woman in India, who found that it was playing out a slice from her own life.

The movie that made a lot of noise in recent times was Raj Kumar Gupta's "No One Killed Jessica". Retelling the horrific story of a young aspiring model, Jessica Lal, who was shot dead in 1999 when she was serving as a celebrity barmaid at a crowded socialite New Delhi party, the film came at a time when the prime accused, son of an influential Indian politician, was finally charged and



Konkana Sen Sharma

incarcerated. Leading Bollywood actress Rani Mukherjee was a crime reporter in the movie, a woman who called herself a "bitch" and had no qualms about pursuing her story and her prey to the end of the world. So what if she had to take her shoes off and climb on the bonnet of her editor's car to force him to let her do a story, in this case the Lal murder case?

"No One Killed Jessica" conveyed the new woman in her very raw power, ambitious to the core and one who would not let anything stop her. It is a kind of new confidence that Indian cinema is instilling into women. In the process, she may look heartless and brash. "So what?" Rani Mukherjee quips.

Yes, so what, as long as women are not shown as weeping souls, lost in a man's world and dependent on him for their little joys.