

bollywood

Repressing cinema

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

When the Cannes Film Festival opened last week in the bright and sunny environs of the French Riviera, wine, wit and glamour adding to the merriment, it did not forget a renowned Iranian director jailed in his country. Jafar Panahi, the man who gave us such priceless gems as *The Friend*, *The White Balloon* and *The Circle*, has been shut away in the Evin Prison in Iran.

At the festival's inauguration last Wednesday, an empty chair stood symbolically on the dais to mark the absence of Panahi, who was to have been on the Palm d'Or jury.

The jury President, Tim Burton, appealed for the director's freedom, and the Festival screened a short clip a day later that showed Panahi talking about a police interrogation he underwent before his arrest. "I am innocent. I have not made any film against the Iranian regime," he said. Panahi has been accused of making a movie about the disputed 2009 Iranian presidential election.

Iranian cinema has blossomed in recent decades, thanks to Panahi and several other world-renowned auteurs, such as Abbas Kiarostami, but state censorship under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad makes it hard for them to work in their own country. Kiarostami's film, *Certified Copy* in this year's



competition, was shot in Italy — the first movie he was forced to make outside Iran.

Smothering cinema is not the privilege of Iran alone. China has done it with impunity. Lou Ye's *Summer Palace*, narrating a love story against the backdrop of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, was banned there, but a print was smuggled out of China and screened as part of the prestigious Cannes Competition in 2006.

A furious Beijing banned him from making films for five years, but Lou was undaunted. He made his next, *Spring Fever* surreptitiously in Nanjing, and Cannes screened it in the 2009 Competition.

But such tyranny is also happening in France, right here where I am covering the 63rd edition of the Film Festival.

The French government is peeved over the fact that a supposedly inaccurate version of history has found its way into Rachid Bouchareb's competition entry, *Outside the Law*. He is Algerian, but with a French nationality.

The film focuses on the 1945 Algerian revolt against occupying French soldiers a day after World War II ended. The French government's handling of the uprising led to the massacre of thousands of people.

Incidentally, the movie has been marked as an Algerian entry, not French. A French Government official, Lionnel Luca, said Bouchareb had the right to say what he wanted to, but his truth is not France's.

That may or may not be so, but Bouchareb's last film, *Days of Glory*, about North African soldiers fighting on the side of France during World War II, did get French politicians thinking, and evoke a public debate. French President Jacques Chirac watched *Days of Glory* and passed a law granting recognition and fair payments for the Algerian war veterans.

This time, however, things could take an ugly turn with an extreme rightwing website condemning the Cannes festival of irresponsibility. It has threatened to protest when *Outside the Law* is screened on May 21, the fag end of the 12-day event.

Xavier Beauvois' competition entry, *Of Gods and Men* may also lead to unpleasantness. The movie elaborates on the 1996 massacre of French monks in Algeria. Franco-Algerian ties have always been touchy, and cinema has merely increased the friction. Paris may find it extremely uncomfortable when it plays at the festival.

India, which calls itself an enlightened democracy and a free nation, tries to stop what it considers unpalatable.

Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday* (1994), a docu-drama about the investigations post 1993-Mumbai serial bomb blasts, did not get a screening certificate for a long time.

More recently, Karan Johar's *My Name is Khan* ran into a storm with Hindu nationalist parties, who were annoyed with the movie's lead star, Shah Rukh Khan. He had criticised an Indian Premier League decision not to take Pakistani cricket players.

The parties threatened to burn down theatres screening *My Name is Khan*, which was eventually released amid tight security.

It is clear, then, that there are many ways of subjugating cinema. But I suppose, the love for the medium finds its fans. Like, for instance, the Iranian interrogator who told Panahi after grilling him for hours that he loved *The Circle*. And, like the Cannes Film Festival that has always dared to be different.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been covering the Cannes Film Festival for 20 years.)



Eye candy: Bollywood actress Mallika Sherawat holds a snake as she poses during a photocall to promote the film *HISS* by director Jennifer Lynch at the 63rd Cannes Film Festival on Sunday.

Rising from the ruins

Mrinal Sen's *Khandar*, much like its name, was in ruins, as hundreds of other Indian movies are, shockingly many of them in the National Film Archive of India at Pune. So, it came as a pleasant surprise that the Archive, meant to preserve and protect the nation's glorious cinema heritage, is now into a programme of restoring old and priceless movies. *Khandar* is one that has risen like the Phoenix — not from the ashes, but from the ruins. It has been remastered by Reliance MediaWorks, which operates one of the world's largest restoration facilities. *Khandar*, is pure auteur fare that narrates the story of a city photographer (played rivetingly by Naseeruddin Shah), who goes along with two of his friends to a village in ruins. There he meets a blind, dying woman and her lovely young daughter (Shabana Azmi). The mother is waiting for a man who had promised to marry her daughter, but the younger woman, the photographer and his friends all know that it will not happen. For, the man had broken his promise and married someone else. Shah's Subash impersonates the man, and peace descends on the mother. But playing this little game, though reluctantly, the photographer falls in love with the young girl, his camera lens playing cupid for them. Sen's work is part of this year's Cannes Classics.



* French Culture Minister Frederic Mitterrand reads a letter from jailed Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi (top), before the screening of *You Will Meet a Talk Dark Stranger* presented out of competition at the 63rd Cannes Film Festival on Saturday.