

cinema

An idea of India

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Often, the most sombre of issues is trivialised in India. A classic case of this is the Gollapudi Srinivas Memorial Foundation Award given every August 12 to a first-time director. Srinivas, son of Gollapudi Maruthi Rao, was just 26 when he drowned in sea as he was helming his first ever film, *Prema Pusthakam*. That was in 1992.

It is not clear whether the movie, like its title, *Love Book*, was autobiographical. Srinivas, a Telugu, loved a Tamil girl for seven years and married her despite bitter familial objection. Nine months later, a huge killer wave washed him away as he was standing on a rock at the edge of the water.

Widowed very early in life and pregnant with Srinivas' child, she was reportedly shunned by his family that, otherwise, holds a grand show every August to keep the young man's memory alive.

"When I hear of this event year after year, I feel a sense of sheer hollowness," decries a leading Chennai lawyer who was involved in the young widow's legal affairs. True to this, the woman that Srinivas loved and adored is never in the picture as the ceremony unfolds, usually with a lot of pomp and show.

This year, Bollywood celebrities descended on Chennai for the ceremony: actress Vidya Balan, actor Anil Kapoor and director Madhur Bhandarkar. The sole non-Bollywood representation came in the form of playwright-actor Girish Karnad. Both Balan and Bhandarkar flew business class, stayed at a luxury hotel and had their managers in tow. Balan also had her hairdresser, I am told, and all this for just an evening.

Really appalling was the attitude: Balan refused to give a one-to-one interview for the Chennai media, which was kept waiting in the hotel lobby for almost four hours. Bhandarkar and Kapoor too kept the journalists waiting for hours.

Finally, when the show began, Amit Rai, this year's Gollapudi Award winner with his *Road to Sangam*, walked up the stage to receive his prize money of Rs1,50,000 (\$3,200). When the award was first instituted, the amount was Rs100,000 (\$2,100). Today, such prize money is meaningless, given the large amount it takes to make even a very modest film.

Why not cut the frills and raise the award amount, so that a debutant director may have to struggle a little less to make his next movie? I see no meaning in organising a celebrity march year after year, except that it, as a filmmaker quipped, helps the Maruthi Rao family business gain enormous publicity.

Now, for the movie itself. *The Road to Sangam* has a hard-hitting plot about religious fundamentalism.

It could be Hindu, Christian or Islamic, but the fact remains that such dogmatic views help nobody. It is true that the father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi was killed by a Hindu bullet — it's not widely spoken about, though. Decades later, the man and

his secular followers must have been shamed by the desecration of a historic mosque. Yet, to suggest Muslim fundamentalism in India was in response to that terrible incident is too simplistic.

Rai leads us to that and gently hints that the sense of nationhood is missing. The pride in being an Indian has disappeared; it went soon after the country's independence, and as Paresch Rawal, essaying a brilliant motor mechanic in the film, says, an average Indian's identity comes from the language he/she speaks, his/her faith and then his/her caste, sub-caste... Of course, there is a new religion in India: that of money, which has clearly divided the nation. But *Road to Sangam* is not about that. It is about rigidity.

Rawal's Hasmat Bhai has been repairing a vintage Ford car engine. It belongs to the vehicle that once took Gandhi's ashes to the far corners of India in 1948. However, one urn containing his remains lies forgotten in a bank vault. When his great grandson, Tushar Arun Gandhi (who plays himself), finds it, he decides to immerse it in the Sangam, (the confluence of three rivers considered sacred by Hindus) at Allahabad.

But Hasmat Bhai finds it difficult to keep his commitment in the face of a notice issued to his community to shut shops and strike work for two weeks. This is to protest the arrest of some Muslims after a bomb attack.

The rest of the *Road to Sangam* describes how Hasmat wins over the *maulvi* (portrayed wonderfully by Pavan Malhotra) and the other leaders of his community, one of them being a character essayed by Om Puri (who has begun to look terribly tired and bored).

Though Rai's work raises an important issue — that of the pressing need to live as one nation rather than as fragments, the film suffers from its preachy undertones.

There are frightfully long dialogues by Hasmat that seem such a yawn. These days, nobody wants to listen to sermons, particularly the younger of the cinema-going audiences.

Rai has obviously taken the easy way out — as some other writers and directors have in India — of narrating the story through words, not visuals, ignoring, in the process, the very meaning of the medium.

To quote a cliché, a picture can say in just a frame what it may take a thousand words to convey. Provided, the visual is conceptualised with imagination and intelligence.

I really do not know whether *Road to Sangam* was the best work among the number of entries that the Gollapudi Trust received this year. But Rai's first work does not talk highly of modern Indian cinema's standards.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and International cinema for over three decades, and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in.)



* A promotional poster of *Road to Sangam*, directed by Amit Rai. Below: Paresch Rawal (second left) plays mechanic Hasmat Bhai in the film.

