

# cinema



✱ Ravi Krishna in the much-censored Tamil film *Aaranya Kaandam*.

## Censor board should cut out meaningless dogmatism

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**E**ver so often, Indian films crash into the censorship wall and flounder or even freeze. Sometimes, the movies are frozen for months, even years. Anurag Kashyap's 2004 feature, *Black Friday*, based on the 1993 serial bomb blasts in Mumbai, lay in the cans for well over two years.

India's Central Board of Film Certification ruled that *Black Friday* could not be shown in India. The Supreme Court then intervened. The movie hit Indian theatres in 2007, after it had been applauded in Los Angeles, Locarno and Britain. Typical of India to stir from its slumber after global recognition.

Documentary makers have faced

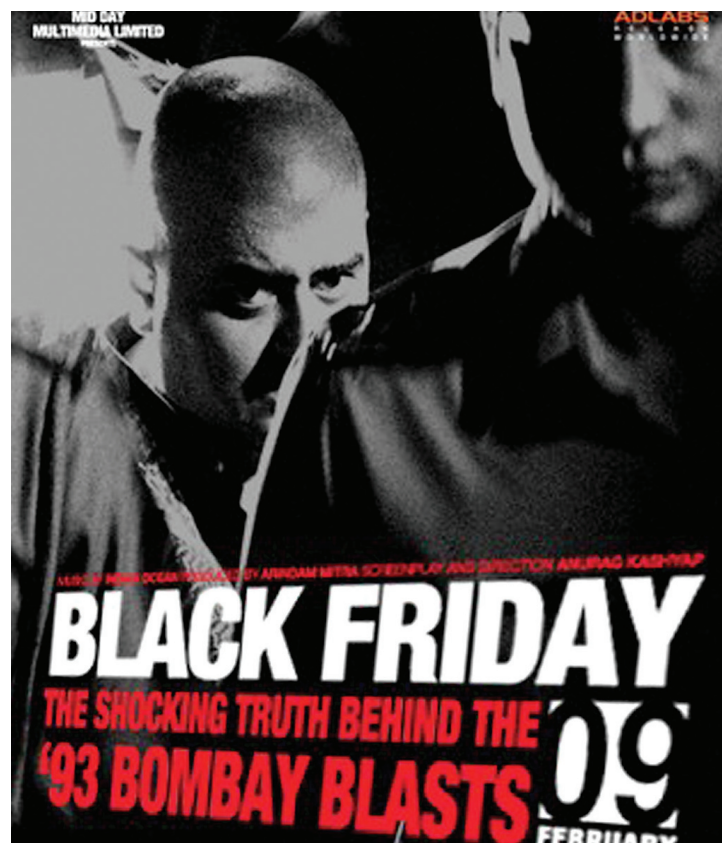
greater censure. Anand Patwardhan is one great example. Virtually all his films faced very rough times. His 1985 film *Mumbai Our City* was telecast after a four-year legal battle, while, his *Father Son and the Holy war* (1995) — though adjudged in 2004 as one of the 50 most memorable international documentaries of all time by *DOX*, Europe's leading documentary movie magazine — was screened on India's national television network, Doordarshan, in 2006, 11 years after it was made, and eight years after the director had filed a case in court.

In 2002, his *War and Peace* was refused a censor certificate, because the Board wanted him to make 21 cuts. Patwardhan went to court and

won the case, yet again.

S Krishnaswamy's documentary on Punjab's Operation Blue Star, *After a Thousand Days of Terror* (1984), was not certified by the Board, and hence could not be shown in India, although it was widely seen abroad. The Operation was conducted by the Indian military to flush out Sikh terrorists holed inside the sacred Golden Temple at Amritsar in Punjab; their leader, Jarnail Singh Bindranwale, was killed.

Krishnaswamy says that though the entire filming was supervised by the military authorities, with their checks extending into the editing room, to ensure that sensitive material did not find its way into the documentary, the Board did not permit its screening without cuts. The director was in no mood to listen, and the movie was never released.



✱ The rest of the world got to see the 2004 film *Black Friday* before Indian viewers did.

In Krishnaswamy's case, the Board's attitude seemed particularly dogmatic, given the fact that he and the military had ensured that nothing of a sensitive nature had got in. Yet, the Board, which is a wing of India's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Ministry, refused to budge, indicating a serious lack of connect between different government departments. Ironically, the External Affairs Ministry went on to make several hundred copies later and showed the film all over the world.

Well, Indians, it seemed in this case, were not considered mature enough to watch what happened in the Golden Temple after a thousand days of horror.

It was great loss for Indian viewership, particularly because Krishnaswamy and his team were the first civilians to enter the Temple after the military operation.

The Censor Board, arrogantly believing that it is indeed the nation's keeper of morals, continues to be as rigid even today — in this day and age when hundreds of television channels and Internet sites bring the most dreadful stories and images right into the living room. How depressingly archaic all this appears.

Now, the latest fracas is between the Board and the Tamil feature film,

*Aaranya Kaandam*. Not only has it been butchered by the censors, but, to add insult to injury, it has also been slapped with an adults-only certificate. This means it cannot be watched by under-18s, a situation most producers regret because it shrinks their market.

Interestingly, the movie won the Grand Jury Award at the South Asian International Film Festival in New York, and is said to depict in depth the activities of the drug mafia in Chennai.

The movie does have blood and gore, but so did *Rakta Charithra*. There have also been any number of Madurai-based Tamil films in recent times that have been as violent, and yet cleared for public viewing without major cuts.

The purpose of citing all these examples is to reiterate my long-standing view that India should adopt a rating system for cinema like that in the USA or the UK. One may have a 12+ category, a 15+ category, an 18+ and so on, and grant certificates without calling for cuts.

As much as writers/directors/producers have a right to artistic liberty, audiences must have the freedom to make their own choices and watch what they want to. I am sure they are mature enough to decide what is right and what is wrong.

### This bloody life!

Sudhir Mishra has never been a favourite director of mine. His films — *Dharavi* about the fortunes and misfortunes of a Mumbai cabbie or *Calcutta Mail* narrating the plight of a father searching for his young son, or *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi* on the aspirations of three Delhi university students, or *Khoya Khoya Chand* looking at the lives of movie celebrities in 1950s Mumbai — did not quite haul my heart. But his latest, *Yeh Saali Zindagi*, shook me out of the unflattering impression I have had of Mishra. It is a damn good film — intelligently scripted, well directed, wonderfully acted out and imaginatively edited. Despite its many characters, there is little room for confusion. One way Mishra avoids

this is by printing the names of the characters on the screen as and when they make their first appearances. Of course, even then one may not know who the actor himself or herself is. Take the case of Aditi Rao Hydari, who has acted in only one Tamil (*Sringaram*), one Malayalam (*Prajapathi*) and one Hindi (*Delhi-6*) movie till now. But as the wife of a gangster, she splendidly portrays the distress and dilemma of having to live a life fraught with nerve-wracking uncertainty. She is a topper, certainly, as Shanti. So are others. Arunoday Singh as Shanti's husband, Kuldeep, living precariously between the demands made by his gangster boss, cooling his heels in jail, and a wife, furiously pleading for a dignified existence, infuses into his role an amazingly charismatic restlessness. He really cannot decide whether he ought to go back to

his pretty wife that he so passionately adores (and their little son) and a simple life of hot lentils and bread or play with guns and lives, his own included. It is, however, Irrfan Khan, who shines the brightest. He is brilliant as Arun, a gangster who falls for the wrong woman, crooner Priti (Chitrangda Singh), in love with the already engaged son of a corrupt Minister. In many ways, *Yeh Saali Zindagi* is Khan's film, and the twists of turns of this crime thriller often follows those in Arun's life. As the gentleman gangster, willing to bite the bullet for his love (so what if she wants another guy), Khan's one-liners are delivered with unbelievable subtlety. His amazingly restrained mannerism — that does not ditch him even when he is hung upside down from the balcony of a high-rise building — is a rare treat in an industry

that goes for the melodramatic as a hungry tiger for its kill. Adding up to this are the stunning visuals of Delhi, where the story unfolds in an exciting pace, throwing up surprises and shocks at the turn of every frame. Basically, it is the tale of Arun working for another gangster and falling foul of him. Cupid strikes Arun, but the arrow seems to be for someone else. Kuldeep's story forms a powerful subplot, and finally intertwines with the main narrative. Links are clearly established, and the plot is tied up neatly in the end. Indeed, one of the best works I have seen in many months.

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