

cinema



* Stills from *Sahib Bibi Aur Gangster*.

Plotting in a palace

Tigmanshu Dhulia's *Sahib Bibi Aur Gangster* is an excitingly impressive work that has all the essentials of a good cinema. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Unfortunately, India makes two kinds of movies. At least largely so. Good ones and bad ones. There is not much cinema happening between these two poles.

Tigmanshu Dhulia's *Sahib Bibi Aur Gangster* is an excitingly impressive work from a director whom I discovered at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival last year. The man and his work were as exciting to me as was the Festival itself that I covered for the first time.

Dhulia came to Abu Dhabi with his *Paan Singh Tomar*, a compelling biopic of an Indian sportsman who is pushed by the system into becoming an outlaw. An excellent piece of acting by Irrfan Khan enormously helped the movie to fly above the clouds.

Paan Singh Tomar is set in the badlands of Uttar Pradesh and is the story of a champion steeplechase runner, an Indian Army jawan and one who represented India in the 1958 Tokyo Asian Games. After a

family dispute that leads to his old mother and young son being beaten up, Tomar seeks the help of the Army, which had once basked in the glory of his continuous victories. But it ignores and humiliates him leaving him with no option other than turning into a dacoit. What an end to a celebrity sportsman!

Paan Singh Tomar, for some strange reason, is yet to open theatrically.

In a way, Dhulia's next work, *Sahib Bibi Aur Gangster*, is also a plot driven by the strange twists and turns of life. This film opened a few weeks ago.

Although Dhulia's debut feature, *Haasil*, was raved about, I have not had a chance to see it. His next two efforts, *Charas* and *Shagrid*, which again I have not seen, are reportedly disappointing. But well, now comes *Sahib Bibi Aur Gangster* that is undoubtedly as gripping as *Paan Singh Tomar*.

Through a multi-layered screenplay, *Sahib Bibi Aur Gangster* captures the story of a fictional

princely state somewhere in India (probably in Uttar Pradesh), whose king/Sahib (played with great panache by Jimmy Shergil in what is probably his best role till now) has to literally beg his stepmother for money, his father having bequeathed his wealth to her.

Sahib has other woes to grapple with, dreams and desires as well. His Bibi, played by Mahie Gill (her wooden performance is one weakness in the movie), is apparently caught in a web of hysteria (or some form of psychiatric illness) and excessive sexual drive. These seem like the most plausible reasons why Sahib neglects her, choosing instead to spend his nights with and his "alms" on a mistress.

It is into this palace of problems that Gangster (superbly portrayed by Randeep Hooda) walks in to replace Bibi's injured driver. A passionate sexual affair begins between Bibi and Gangster, the lowly hoodlum whose ambitions soon turn ruthlessly unreal. He

starts to fancy himself in the shoes of Sahib. Despite Bibi's warning that their relationship cannot hope to go beyond the four walls of her bedroom, Gangster uses his gun and guile to force an explosive climax.

The script, co-written by Dhulia, is really neat, and never gives away what is to come. Detailed and written for the intelligent viewer, we are left guessing till the final frame.

Yes, there is a lot of blood flowing, conveying that this is a story unfolding in a region that sees violence as a means of solving problems and settling personal vendettas. And there is, of course, plenty of sex happening, probably as a balm to quieten angry minds and soothe the bruised bodies.

Beyond these is the angst of loneliness that the film conveys admirably. Sahib knows that his days as the master of all he surveys is over. There is nothing to survey any more, not even money, which is firmly locked up in his stepmother's chamber.

Disillusioned with love (Bibi's voracious sexual appetite that pushes her to stray kills his desire for her), he seeks comfort in the bed of his mistress, and the attraction here is purely physical. But he knows that this relationship is fragile, and the minute he would

stop paying her money she may well call it quits.

Bibi is unhappy as well. There is this lurking insanity in her. Childless and devoid of marital bliss, she tries finding solace in the arms of her lovers. Often men who are inferior to her in social status.

On the other hand, Gangster is bitter, having been rebuked and insulted by the woman he had once loved. Despite his education (he is a graduate and can speak English), the woman finds him uncouth, not sophisticated enough for her. He is naturally desperate to take Sahib's place, wishing that the journey from the bed to the throne will be easy.

Then there is Sahib's mistress, also wallowing in loneliness, hoping against hope that someday she would become the queen of his palace, and not just remain the queen of his heart - causing anxiety in Bibi, provoking her to hatch a murderous plan.

Sahib Bibi Aur Gangster is extremely engaging, one of the very, very few movies to have been so this year.

Let us hope that Dhulia's - who graduated with a Master's degree in Theatre from the National School of Drama in New Delhi and who was the casting director for Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* - next ventures, *Milan Talkies* and *Bhivani*, will be as interesting as his last two.

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