

# cinema

## Nothing official about it

The government's control over Indian films is all-pervasive and often counter-productive, writes

**Gautaman Bhaskaran**

**F**or long, it has been perceived that the government should not run cinema in India. But it does, often brazenly. When the government chooses to leave the medium alone, hoodlums and self-styled moralists take over with an energy that can frighten the bravest out of his or her wits.

I remember how Toronto-based Deepa Mehta and her cast and crew stayed in a fortress of sorts at Varanasi for days as a fanatical political mob went about threatening the team, asking it not to film and go away from the city.

Theatres in Mumbai and elsewhere screening Mehta's earlier work, *Fire*, were ransacked, because it spoke about lesbianism, though the director shouted herself hoarse saying that her work was about relationships.

Ultimately, Mehta and her lead actresses, Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das, both sans their lovely locks having consured themselves for their roles as suffering widows in the movie titled *Water*, packed up and left Varanasi. Mehta made the film all right, though many months later and in Sri Lanka with Seema Biswas and Lisa Ray. Poor substitutes for Varanasi, where the story was actually set, and of course, the original actresses.

However, actual government interference can be equally dogmatic and hard to handle, because it is usually covert. Prakash Jha's *Raajneeti* could not get a censor or the right-to-publicly screen certificate till the helmer made the changes he was told to. One of them was to erase all traces of similarity between the Katrina Kaif character and Congress Party supremo Sonia Gandhi. Sometimes,

I wonder whether she herself would have minded it, having seen her rationality on many other issues.

Now, with the National Film Awards season approaching, the government, which is in charge of these, has decided to change the basic pattern of selecting the winners. A two-tier system will be introduced, whereby movies will be short-listed by several regional panels (north, south, west, east, etc) and sent to a national or central committee in New Delhi that will take the final call.

This scheme was in vogue till the mid-1970s, and was done away with, because it had caused confusion and controversy. Favours were granted and the results often rigged.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's first work, *Swayamvaram*, which was almost thrown out of the race, pushed the government to rethink on the two-tier method of choosing the winners.

This is what Adoor told me and I have written this in my recent biography on him (*Adoor Gopalakrishnan: A Life in Cinema*): "In those days, regional panels used to recommend regional films for the National Awards. There was a panel in Chennai that previewed movies in four southern languages (Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada and Telugu). This preview came on the heels of the Kerala State Awards, and there were people on the Chennai panel who were well entrenched in the Malayalam film industry. They were not happy that younger people like Gopalakrishnan, with a degree from the Pune Film Institute to boot, were trying to become a force. They rejected *Swayamvaram*. A distressed Adoor sent a page-long telegram (there was no



✱ From left: Best Child Actor award winner Shams Patel with Arjun Rampal (Best Supporting Actor), Kangna Ranaut (Best Supporting Actress), Priyanka Chopra (Best Actress) and Upendra Limaye (Best Actor) seen during the National Film awards in New Delhi, India, in March this year. The National Film Awards are the most prominent in India, and the country's oldest, but rarely above charges of favouritism.



✱ A scene from *Water*, directed by Deepa Mehta. Facing intense political mob fury over her earlier film *Fire*, Mehta was forced to shift the shooting of *Water*, about the widows of Varanasi, out of India and also change her cast.

e-mail those days, and no direct telephone dialling) to Ramesh Thappar, who was presiding over the National Awards Committee in New Delhi, requesting the panel to view *Swayamvaram*. Thappar was powerful, and close to Indira Gandhi. There was no reply from Thappar.

"But wonderful news came over the radio as Adoor and his friends were having tea. For one who had little hope of his movie being recognised, it must have shaken him when he heard the radio say that *Swayamvaram* clinched the National Award for Best Film.

The cable had worked, and Thappar had done justice not just to a Malayalam movie but to small, intimate and meaningful cinema. Adoor's victory that day symbolised a victory for such films.

"Thappar did more. He recommended that the regional committees be abolished, and the selection process left to a single panel in New Delhi." This was done

— but is now all set to be undone.

The government makes little effort to understand an issue, and is invariably pressed into taking decisions that it later regrets. Year after year, the Directorate of Film Festivals, a wing of the government's Information and Broadcasting Ministry, constitutes a panel to choose 20-odd movies to be shown at the prestigious Indian Panorama, which is part of the International Film Festival of India, held every November in Goa.

Last year, there were 100-odd movies that the panel was asked to pick from. The panel, meeting in New Delhi, conducted itself in an absolutely shameful way.

The chairman, a respected film director himself, hardly saw a movie; in fact, he was out of New Delhi for several days when the screenings were on.

Another member, a well-known producer, was out of the country for almost the entire duration. Yet, both cast their votes. The

Directorate looked the other way.

Admittedly, even as it does speak poorly of the panelists' ethics, the government's role in selecting such men and failing thereafter to ensure their attendance cannot be overlooked.

The less said about the Goa Festival that the Directorate conducts the better. It has degenerated into a sham. If the choice of Director (who presides over the Festival since he heads the Directorate) has been highly suspect (the present incumbent was an intelligence officer and another served in the Agriculture Ministry), the organisation is severely short of officers.

The Deputy Director, the longest serving officer there, has been asked to take additional responsibilities at the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute in Kolkata. The man has to shuttle between New Delhi and Kolkata! Mind you, the Directorate has just about one more officer apart from the two Directors.

What is more, millions of rupees, all public money, are spent on the festival that manages to put up nothing more than a third-rate 10-day show. It no longer gets a decent crop of movies or celebrities. Yet, the film festival continues, offering annual foreign jaunts (including Cannes and Berlin) to its officers — but very, very little to delegates.

What does the Indian government care as long as it has a finger in the pie called cinema?

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