

bollywood



* *Raajneeti*: The Prakash Jha-directed ensemble political drama paints a wide canvas with exaggerated cynicism.

The art of politics

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Some films in India stir up a huge hype. They cause controversy. They kick up dust, but, finally, when they actually open in theatres, the racket dies down as dramatically as it had begun. Prakash Jha's *Raajneeti* is one such rumpus raising work from a director who once gave us movies like *Damul*, *Gangaajal*, and *Apaharan*.

In line with his usual socio-political repertoire, *Raajneeti*, true to its meaning, is all about politics in its most undesirable form that pervades 21st century India.

Demonic dynastic ambition that ruthlessly removes men who dare to cross paths, and sinister designs to denigrate and destroy political systems fill the movie's canvas. Dotting it are innumerable characters, each more devious and devilish than the next.

And relationships are steered towards clinching political goals. Childhood romance is told to take a walk. Marriage and money merge to fill the political coffer. A nephew murders his uncle, a man his step-brother, and a cousin his cousin.

Raajneeti was written by Jha, and scripted by him and Anjum Rajabali. One can draw parallels between the film and the *Mahabharata*. So can one in the case of many other movies, for the *Mahabharata* and the other great Indian epic, the *Ramayana*, are so rich with characters, plots and sub-plots that they offer this immense scope for inspiration and interpretation.

A rather vague similarity can be seen between *Raajneeti* and Rajiv/Sonia Gandhi. When Jha cast Katrina Kaif to play a pivotal role, her accented Hindi (which, though, has improved now), seems to have got India's Congress Party slightly uneasy. It felt that there was a resemblance between Indu (played by Kaif) and Sonia.

Although the movie was ultimately cleared with a U/A screening certificate, it was subjected to an unprecedented and uncalled for "pre-censor viewing" by three Congress representatives. According to Jha, they demanded specific cuts: bleeping out some expletives, deleting a scene where a party worker solicits Prithvi Pratap (Arjun Rampal) for an election ticket, and chopping a supposedly hot lovemaking scene between Indu and Prithvi. The other cuts were political. "There was a line that said 'le jayegi vidhwa support samet ke' ('the widow will walk away with all the support'). It was said in the context of an electoral sympathy wave. I had to change 'vidhwa' (widow) to 'beti' (daughter)," Jha told an interviewer.

It is clear that the Congress was determined to erase the slightest sign of likeness between *Raajneeti* and Sonia Gandhi/Congress. Another director, Jag Mundhra, had to pack up his plan to make a biopic on Sonia, because he was reportedly threatened with a legal suit if he went ahead with the movie!

Unfortunately, the Congress disinclination to let Jha have complete freedom over his work led to wide publicity, and the film of course benefited, attracting hundreds of

viewers across India who walked into theatres primarily to satisfy their curiosity.

Simply told, it is a story of two families, headed by two brothers, whose children are so cruelly go-getting that they turn Bhopal (now in the news for what I call the gas murders by Union Carbide), where the film is set and was shot, into a murderous mess. Samar Pratap (Ranbir Kapoor), comes home for a holiday from America, where he is finishing a doctoral thesis on Victorian poetry, but stays back when his father is shot dead on the orders of his nephew, Veerendra Pratap (Manoj Bajpai). Veerendra ropes in a Dalit leader, Suraj (Ajay Devgan), to carry out his nefarious activities, and Samar with the help of his maternal uncle, Brij Gopal (Nana Patekar), gets ready to hoist his elder brother, Prithvi, as the Chief Minister in the ensuing polls.

Indu (in love with Samar) finds herself a puppet, string pulled by her father who barbers her away to Prithvi, hoping that he would be on the all-important chair.

It is a pity that Jha's story starts with a howler, and often sinks into either cynicism or dramatic exaggeration. It appears incredible that Samar, whose passion is Victorian poetry and an American girl, slips into the role of a master schemer and kingmaker, and not uncle Gopal.

Here is a guy who has lived a life completely divorced from the treachery, the deviousness of Indian politics, but returns home to make his moves from one square to another with a confidence and cunning that are hard to believe.

And, then, look at the way Indu gives

up Samar, her childhood sweetheart, to marry his brother, Prithvi. What is more, in a strange turn of emotions, she professes her love for her new husband, and the one night they spend together in bed leads to her pregnancy. Such things happen only in Indian cinema. (*Raajneeti* has one such earlier incident where Samar's mother on a romantic rainy night has sex with her political mentor, essayed by Naseeruddin Shah, and gives birth to Suraj, who on birth is abandoned, much like Karna in the *Mahabharata*).

Worse, some performances are rank bad: Devgan continues with his glum, wooden face, but remains one of Jha's favourite regulars (the brief mother-son reunion is bereft of emotion), and Kapoor sleepwalks through the film, expressionless and sans screen presence.

Yet, off screen, he has been walking around with a halo. Katrina is still stiff, and pretty much out of place in overtly Indian situations.

Raajneeti clearly belongs to Patekar, whose exceptional brilliance can be seen in his perfect sense of timing and the way he throws those one liners. So too is Rampal, whose easy body language infuses refreshing naturalness into a part that is no cake-walk. Bajpai makes his usual bright mark that cannot be missed.

Raajneeti may be one of the better works in recent months. But, given the state of Indian cinema or much of it, this is no big deal.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for more than three decades.)