

Critique

**MK Raghavendra**

## *Sherni* and the 'Truths' of Indian Cinema



If one studies Indian popular cinema closely, one realizes that it is not mimetic. Mimesis is art imitating the real in its detail, in the belief that reality cannot be boiled down to an 'essence' or reduced to a 'meaning' to be derived from it. The earliest cinema was the documentary (by the Lumieres) and the one following it was fantasy (George Melies). These two went on to become the two components/ polarities of cinema – catching reality through a mechanical device and expressivity and interiority using set design, performance and montage. This came from the recognition that the real is nothing in itself without an observer and that all capture of the objective real was 'contaminated' by personal/ subjective expression. But when Indian cinema arrived through DG Phalke, it avoided both courses and took the line of the mythological (*Raja Harishchandra*). Phalke insisted that his film was 'realistic', i.e.: it was bringing to life

a truth everyone recognized. Rather than represent the world perceptible to the senses, it tried to represent underlying 'truths' directly. The 'reality' caught by the senses, Indian philosophy has primarily insisted, is ephemeral.

When popular cinema left the territory of the mythological and embarked upon 'socials' the content of the films was still familiar 'truth'. Popular cinema told stories relating to ideals and archetypes ranging from ideal love to archetypal mothers-in-law - played by Lalita Pawar. With technology becoming sophisticated these ideals remain intact, cinema relaying durable messages. It could pertain to the ideal family in which the young are obedient as in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!* (HAHK) or the genius whose achievements belie effort as in *3 Idiots*. The messages are variable but they are presented (even when they contradict each other) as the 'truth'. The

truth conveyed separately by the films may contradict each other but it nonetheless receives complete affirmation in that particular film. For instance, honesty was a key virtue in the 1960s and 1970s cinema but in the new millennium, 'self-actualization' through illegality became installed as a virtue (*Bunty aur Babli*, *Guru*) and there was no acknowledgement of integrity being a good thing.

Art cinema is not different in this sense of purveying truths: where popular cinema dealt with ideal friendships (as in *Sangam* or *Sholay*) art cinema dealt with the decadent bourgeoisie capitalists and the solidarity of the working class (as in the films of Mrinal Sen) or religious tolerance. The messages change as do they types relaying them but they remain 'messages' purveying some 'truth', even if it is the brutality of the police (as in *Visaranai*). There has been the occasional other filmmaker who does not fit the 'purveyor of truth' model – Ghatak, G Aravindan, Adoor – but Satyajit Ray was the only one to systematically base his films on observation rather than apriori conclusions, with the exception of a few films like *Sadgati*.

Indian art cinema and popular cinema both derive from a general inclination to purvey so called truths, which translate as truisms or familiar sentiments that may not be relevant to the existing situation. The young people agreeing to wed people other than those they have set their heart on (in HAHK) are not different from Mrinal Sen's poor (*Calcutta '71*) who bear their misery stoically when the rain is pouring into their hovels. Taking ameliorating steps would detract from their given status as dutiful children or victims, which is how they are conceived. The real situations are rarely the way Indian cinema portrays them but familiar truisms are favored over the actual ground realities. The latest film to do this is Amit Masurkar's *Sherni*, set in the jungle and dealing with a supposed man-eater that politicians are wanting to put down. The protagonist, as may be expected, is an upright forest official played by Vidya Balan, and her aim is to save a tiger from certain death at the hands of a hunter. To add gender concerns to environmental ones, Vidya Vincent is in a bad marriage and being exploited by her husband.

There is a shrewd calculation in the choice of the tiger as the subject because the animal draws tourist crowds most unfailingly and would hence draw audiences as well. Some years ago, in Ranthambore in Rajasthan, where tiger sightings are commonest, the true value of the tiger became evident to me. The place is so famous that singer Katy Perry had chosen it for her wedding and a wild tiger had graced the occasion with its presence. Rentals are sky-high in the resorts around Ranthambore and a luxury tent could cost over Rs 25,000 a night. Tiger sighting is not rare but one may have to stay several nights if one's heart is set on it. There was, then, a scheme afoot to shift a tiger from Ranthambore to Sariska, where there were no tigers. The reason was that a political bigwig owned a resort in Sariska and the room rentals would jump if tiger sighting was offered as an attraction. People may or may not see a tiger but they will pay through their nose for a story about yesterday or last week's sighting.

*Sherni* is about 'man-animal conflict' and the way it is illustrated in the film is that there are several tigers in the vicinity and one of them kills a cow. A short time later it kills a villager, and a hunter arrives there to shoot the tiger. Tourists are never mentioned and we are led to believe that poor farmers retain their land grazing a cow or two in quiet, in a situation ripe for tourism. Even a space like Bandipur in Karnataka, where one sees little but spotted deer, has resorts mushrooming around it and land prices skyrocketing. The villain in *Sherni* is a 'conservationist' who is out to bag a numbered tiger (T12) and willing to casually kill T1 - although T12 is known to be female while T1 is male. Killing a tiger is allowed only in exceptional circumstances and the unsanctioned killing of the wrong tiger could land the hunter in jail.

Man-animal conflict is a very genuine problem but a filmmaker sensitive to the issue must be attentive to ground realities. The forest in the film looks like a teak plantation shorn of its undergrowth, and hardly supportive of wildlife. This is a sight one often sees when one drives to celebrated forest areas in India, huge trees with not even grass under them, but this is not where the tiger lives. Man-animal conflicts are in different kinds of places, often where there is encroachment upon forest land and farmers

respond to the destruction of their crops by connecting their fences illegally to high-voltage lines – or by poisoning a kill. None of this is as dramatic as a hunter with a rifle equipped with telescopic sights taking aim at a tiger. The actual details in man-animal conflicts are far more sordid.

In the context of what was said earlier, *Sherni* is dealing with a very real issue but showing bad faith by glamorizing the subject matter through focusing on the tiger. As another detail, the mushrooming of resorts around forests – and the food thrown away – has seen the proliferation of stray dogs that gather and hunt in packs, often picking deer as their quarry. But this detail is perhaps too repugnant for a film like *Sherni* in which the conflicts must be uncomplicated and familiar: the upright official against corruption, political representatives courting their electorate and undermining the law, the largest predator as the subject rather than the unpretentious herbivore. Most important is the habitat itself, about *Sherni* does not have much to say. It is an actual fact that there is an explosion in the population of tigers in captivity and it is the tiger habitat that is shrinking.

*Sherni*, like many other Indian films, may have its heart in the right place but it does not pay enough attention to the ground reality in the field it is surveying. It simply adapts the formulaic story of the courageous loner struggling against systemic corruption - because it is the bearer of a familiar

message. Let us take one fact about governmental postings which such stories do not take into account, a scenario known to us in the audience and not a moral truism. The bureaucracy is the conduit through which political parties raise their funds. This being the case, an ‘honest’ official who does not pass on lucre to his or her bosses will be deemed ineffective and transferred out immediately to a position of the same grade, which is still innocuous. In fact, the reputations of such officials precede them and postings are decided on their amenability to do what is required. We might add here that the electoral system is responsible for corruption and it may not reflect upon the individual ‘honesty’ of either the politicians or the officials involved. From the viewpoint of the official, the functioning of a department is common knowledge to those working in it and the idea of an official ‘awakening’ to a state of affairs is ludicrous. To draw a comparison from Satyajit Ray’s films, the way Ray treats corruption in *Janaranya* is more ‘mimetic’ than the portrayals of art cinema. If one is appalled initially people in such positions make choices early in their careers. If they have reached the seniority of Vidya Vincent, they have already made them. But a film like *Sherni* has still to deliver a truism corresponding to a message and Vidya Vincent is its bearer. As always, the message has to be borne by someone played by a star.

**▲ Mr. MK Raghavendra is a writer on culture, literature and politics, specializing in film, particularly its political side. He won the National Award, the Swarna Kamal for Best Film Critic in 1997, and received a Homi Bhabha Fellowship in 2000. Since then, he has authored five volumes of academic film scholarship from international publishers. He has also published four volumes of popular film criticism for Oxford University Press and HarperCollins. Two of his books have been translated into Russian and published in 2020. He is a Member of FIPRESCI-India and its former Secretary.**