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RENOWNED actor Amitabh Bachchan made unusually bold observations recently about the problems with film censorship in India. He spoke of the perennial hardball played between filmmakers and the state since colonial times, which explained the fact that questions are still “being raised on civil liberties and freedom of expression”.

In a wide-ranging speech at an international film festival in Kolkata, Mr Bachchan critiqued “fictionalised jingoism” prevalent in recent Indian themes, and berated the terror of “moral policing” that stalks filmmakers.

Cinema is a malleable commodity, however. It works in the spirit of egalitarianism, which Mr Bachchan applauded. But it also works in exactly the opposite way. Cinema has served the purposes of patriarchy and it has stood up for gender equality and women’s rights. It bats for capitalism. And it has batted for socialism and often enough for fascism. It sometimes addresses the spiritual quest of a people, and at others reflects assorted human emotions with aesthetic flair. Cinema has been a handy tool in the fight against oppression and usurpation of one’s land or country too. Indian moviegoers are rightly distressed by the right-wing assault on the country’s essential pluralism. Juxtapose their travails with a wider aperture, however, on the world’s remotest film festival.

Ariel Sophia Bardi from Rome visited the Auserd refugee camp in Algeria to report on this little-known film festival that seeks to applaud the liberation struggle of Polisario.

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“At about 10 pm, in the middle of the Sahara desert, just two lights were shining: the moon and a projection screen. Around 70 people gathered in front of the screen as a film was beamed onto it from a 16-wheeler truck. Some sat on carpets, rolled out over rocky, reddish sand; others crouched on low dunes. They all watched attentively as a voice boomed from speakers: ‘Those who don’t know the Sahara think there’s nothing here but sand. But, in the Sahara is an occupied country. And a people in exile.’” The message was reported by the freelance writer and photographer in Foreign Policy.

“It was the second night of the 17th edition of FiSahara, the Western Sahara International Film Festival, held on Oct 11-16 in the Auserd refugee camp in Algeria’s westernmost province of Tindouf, which borders Mauritania, Morocco and Western Sahara.”

The homeland of Palestinians has been similarly turned into an open jail under Israeli occupation. Despite the inhuman conditions their people live in, Palestinian filmmakers remain among the most admired actors, directors, writers globally. Isolated and intolerant Iran too produces its own subtle dissenters, not least through cinema. Politically and economically pummelled Pakistan churns out award-winning films.

Bachchan spoke absorbingly of how film censorship was born from a chemical accident. Early film stock used nitrocellulose, a compound used in explosives as guncotton. Laced with camphor, it became nitrate film which, though not explosive, was highly inflammable. A nitrate fire in Paris killed 126 people in 1897, and similar incidents over the next decade led to the first ‘World’s Cinematograph Legislation’. Passed in Britain in 1909, it was initially ushered in to improve safety standards by controlling the issue of cinema licences; the act made licences necessary for public screenings. Bureaucracies harnessed it to regulate not just the conditions in which the film would be screened, but also the content of the film itself.

The colonial experience in Indian cinema witnessed a cat-and-mouse game between nationalist filmmakers and British rulers. Songs were often composed with layered meanings to outsmart the censors. Bachchan offered the example of the 1943 song from Kismet, “Door hato ae duniya waalon Hindustan hamara hai” (‘back off from here, India belongs to us’). The song was a trick. Overtly a call to defeat Germany and Japan, its essential point was not missed by the audiences — a call to oust the British.

The 1952 Cinematograph Act set out a structured censorship, which remained a double-edged sword. Just days after Bachchan spoke, Indian censors cherry-picked issues and stalled Pathan, a movie starring Shahrukh Khan and Deepika Padukone. Khan, as with several others in the film fraternity, has been in the cross hairs of the Hindu nationalists for some time, as is Padukone. She stands accused of sympathising with Indian separatists and extremists, all because she stood in solidarity with JNU students when a girl student was attacked by right-wing hooligans on the campus. Pakistani film Maula Jatt was due for release on Friday after years of aloofness between the two countries. It was suddenly put in the freezer indefinitely.

Bachchan was till recently regarded as somnolent towards the swirling social and political currents rocking Indian democracy. His critical comments therefore came as a shock to admirers in the unreservedly pro-establishment mainstream media, who all but airbrushed his speech. On the other side, an evident shift of focus, possibly a change of heart too, lent hope to a troubled old order.

Bengal has been at the heart of India’s intellectual ferment but not exclusively so. Together with Satyajit Ray and others, there have been important progenitors of cross-cultural perspectives that make up Indian cinema. They include but are not confined to Shyam Benegal, M.S. Sathyu, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Mani Ratnam and Saeed Mirza. Devika Rani, Dilip Kumar and Balraj Sahni, who also had a pronounced intellectual side to them, which got reflected in the themes they preferred or excluded from their repertory.

Dilip Kumar would often say that good cinema needed good literature, which he asserted was in short supply since the times of stalwarts like Premchand, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Ismat Chughtai. By the time Amitabh Bachchan took centre stage in the 1970s, the literary baton had passed for better or worse into the hands of the Salim-Javed duo. Unwittingly, perhaps, the ‘angry young man’ genre of vigilantism they jointly heralded to overwhelming applause has been tweaked today to serve the purposes of Hindutva vigilantes. But that isn’t quite the dramatic irony Mr Bachchan or his literary props had provisioned for.

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