

e.Peak

Arts

Simon Fraser University's Independent Student Newspaper Since 1965 - Online Since 1994

[Home](#)

7, vol 103 -- October 18, 1999

[About](#)

Oh Darling, Yeh Hai India (Oh, Darling, This is India)

keerthik asidharan, the peak

[Masthead](#)

[Et Cetera](#)

[Archives](#)

[Contact](#)

[Links](#)

[Search](#)

Like every major film producing nation, India has both mainstream and alternative film. Since the mid-90s, there have been noticeable attempts at bridging both - the cerebral and the colourful - primarily since the emergence of a new upwardly mobile middle class, armed with mobile phones and sexual dysfunction. This is cinema that will herald the awakening of superlative talent (undeniably influenced by MTV and all its derivatives, yet quintessentially Indian) and which will deal with issues that exist in the periphery of the Western understanding of India. Contained in this genre will be identity crises arising out of increased contacts with the West and the innate impotent rage at the way the bureaucracy and the society - to quote Steve Buscemi from *Reservoir Dogs* - "fucks the individual up the arse on a regular basis."

For an Indian, no longer is it about Indian mysticism, warmth and other spiritual hoopla scores of Westerners arriving at Sahar search for. It is about the need to improve daily existence and to realize the Indian version of the American dream. A society desiring change, willing to change - at what cost, some may argue. But change (Westernize?) it will. And no other medium in India, a country with rampant illiteracy and the resultant problems, is more powerful than the film.

Still reeling under the massive attack launched on the senses by the mainstream Bollywood (the Hollywood then set in Bombay, now Mumbai), the average notion of Indian film has not changed in the West. Either it is the endlessly repetitive damsel-in-distress song-and-dance melodrama, or the exceedingly inaccessible movies by Satyajit Ray, G. Aravindan or Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Although there were filmmakers in the 80s who attempted to strike a balance, commercial success often eluded them. However, since the economic liberalization, and the advent of the satellite television, the society is ready for a new kind of cinema. A middle ground is being carved.

Leading this pack are usually NRI (Non-Resident Indians) - or as Shashi Tharoor reminds us, Never Relinquished India - filmmakers from Australia, Canada, the USA, and the UK, bringing with them their sensibilities and ways of looking at the same damsel-in-distress situations, albeit more smartly.

Foremost amongst them is an Indian born and bred, Dev Benegal - the nephew of the Indian master filmmaker Shyam Benegal. No evident baggage of his renowned uncle accompanies the works of Dev. His first venture was a celluloid adaptation of Upamanyu Chatterjee's silently insightful novel about culture shocks within India called *English, August*. Teaming again with the hunky-star-actor from *English, August* Dev Benegal brought to the Vancouver International Film Festival *Split Wide Open*.

To classify *Split Wide Open* into genres is a difficult task. Is it a scathing farce on modern Mumbai's sexual charades - and the teeming desire of every Indian city to be just like Mumbai? Yes. Is it an attack on the ineffectual system, as every single character spouts words of cynicism and hopelessness in the same breath that the word "government" is mentioned?

Yes. Is it about - at the risk of sounding clichéd - the underbelly of Mumbai that India and Indians desperately try to forget, or at least weakly deny its place in our time, history and social consciousness? Yes. Is it, in an oblique manner, a camera lens's voyeurism and self-righteousness emerging side by side? Yes. Is it about the stage of Indian film and society's changing makeup, where even the most sickening topic, like child prostitution, has to be edited in an MTV-style in order to capture the audience's flickering attention span? Yes. Is it India's reply to Sam Mendes's *American Beauty*? Yes, definitely.

The beginning. We meet K.P. - Kut Price - played by a rather inappropriately cast Rahul Bose. The credentials of Rahul Bose are stellar, including his most famous casting as Saleem Sinai from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a BBC production plagued by geopolitical tussles. The major problem with his performance is that his dialogue delivery in Hindi still reeks of urban sophistication, while the character demands the tone of a gruff, yet touchingly warm kind of hustler-mafiosi.

K.P. is one of the capo-regimes within the water mafia of Mumbai, who, in yet another conventional Hindi film twist, is still the one with the golden heart. He takes care of some street kids, who wander into Mumbai lured by the grand spectacle of films and the promise of riches, only to end up as domestic servants, prostitutes, or be enlisted as the lower expendable links in the underworld operated primarily from Dubai, Karachi and Kuala Lumpur. Meanwhile, in the other part of the film (and Mumbai), is the back room story about the development and presentation of the TV show called *Split Wide Open* - an Indian version of the *Jerry Springer Show* - with guests who are in the cover of darkness and have very spicy tales to reveal. Incest, homosexuality, threesomes - a "you name it, they've got it" kind of TV show.

Hosted by an expatriate Indian named Nandita, played with predictable elegance by model/veejay Laila Rouass, the television show *Split Wide Open* is immensely popular. Meanwhile, K.P. tries to get his own thing going on the side, and soon his own gang beats him up and trashes him.

K.P. meets Nandita. Sparks fly. Three to five other stories are briefly mentioned, and in a very skilful manner, meshed around the show *Split Wide Open*. Death, betrayal, prostitution, birth, revenge, et cetera, colour the canvas.

The other noteworthy events in the film include a powerful cameo by Aayesha Dharker as a daughter who catches her father with a child prostitute, and the tragicomic role of a priggish English priest who is both a homosexual and a pedophile, clumsily delivered by Mr. Nagarkar.

The true stars of the film are the insightful-yet-not-self-righteous screenplay of Farukh Dhondy and the taut direction of Dev Benegal. The former reveals himself as a very sophisticated storytelling master with panache. Yet, unlike a lot of the present day glut, both Western and Indian, the focus of his writing is the main story.

All characters, even the child abuser and the abused child, remain in a morally ambiguous grey area - all acting on their own need to survive and to cater to their instincts, with the possible exception of K.P. Our heart does go out to him in his tribulations and his charming yet ego-less eagerness to impress, clarify and ultimately get Nandita to bed.

With everything mentioned in a matter-of-fact manner, it does feel a bit odd to realize that one empathizes with K.P. For Nandita, K.P. develops from a fascinating creature of Mumbai's mafia-masala-dom to a lovable hunk. Yet, in the grand scheme of things this is a minor question. For those accustomed to India, or who are within purview of post-colonial affairs, the subtleties and understanding displayed in this film are great.

The identification of English as the panacea for all social struggles and the hilarious mish-mash of technology and native cultures (water@gangajumnaki.com) is also interesting. Like Alan Ball who wrote American Beauty out of his experiences of growing up in an American all-white-fences-prickly-roses suburbs, Farukkh Dhondy presents a materially impoverished and equally disturbing indictment of Mumbai and India.

Dev Benegal, the already established award winning documentary filmmaker responsible for Anantarupam (the Infinite Forms) and Field of Shadows, to quote a friend of mine, "has finally arrived." Not just a stylistic maverick like many video-music directors plaguing the world's film industry, Benegal's Split Wide Open is slick and sensitive. All the child actors have been handled with care, in that they aren't coquettish or too sympathetic towards their own ilk. In an age where swear words, grainy pictures and frontal nudity is the key to being called a good film, it is assuring to see that there are exceptions to this trend.

Clarity of purpose is what strikes me most about Benegal's film and, as he says in another context, "we had a look at India - moving from the Oriental mysticism, fantasy and nostalgia; onto a contemporary, vibrant exploration of what it means to be a young Indian today." Like all cities draped in socially conservative fabrics, whether it be Santiago, Cairo, Tehran, Mumbai or Singapore, their ugliness is waiting to be exposed. Ugliness we all acknowledge gleefully as existing in the West, yet turn a blind eye when it hits home.

Cinematography by Sukumar Jatania, editing by Renu Saluja and the music by Nitin Sawhney deserve to be mentioned. The soundtrack includes Massive Attack and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan among others.

I had read Toronto programmer David Overbey once note that India's masala maestro Mani Rathnam, "makes movies - let[s] the cinema take care of itself." No country's cinema was in greater peril than that of India.

At the risk of generalizing, the Indian film industry is plagued by directors who wander in creative wastelands, resorting to age old formulaic numbers, screenwriters who have perfected plagiarism into an art form, and actors who believe good acting means raised eyebrows and loud shouting. Things are changing. It is time to watch out. Rules will be bent and uncomfortable silences will follow film screenings.

Mr. Benegal, if he continues this path, can be assured his lion's share in this reawakening. To repeat the modern Indian mantra, 'Mera Bharat Mahaan' (My India is Great) after watching Split Wide Open requires cockeyed optimism. Problems with censor boards and political right-centre-left wings is inevitable for this film. But, what the heck. The more they hassle you, the more ruckus you create. It requires vision, talent and a lot of balls. This film lacks none of these.

[[Back to issue 7](#)] [[Send The Peak a comment on this story](#)]

The contents of The Peak are protected by copyright. For information on rights regarding specific articles (including reprinting, where applicable), please contact epeak@mail.peak.sfu.ca with the full URL of the content in question.