

Singapore International Film Festival

Films from India: The Servant's Shirt and Split Wide Open

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The Indian film industry produces up to 900 features a year, far outstripping Hollywood's annual output and making it the world's largest producer of movies. Although the overwhelming majority of these are mindless products—musicals, romances, action adventures or peculiar combinations of all three—known collectively as “Bollywood”, there are a number of thoughtful directors in India who reject the lure of immediate commercial success and produce unique and socially conscious films.

The Servant's Shirt and *Split Wide Open*—two of the four Indian movies screened at last month's Singapore International Film Festival—are serious films and far removed from Bollywood tradition. Both movies attempt to explore, with varying degrees of success, some of the social issues confronting ordinary Indians.

The Servant's Shirt by veteran director Mani Kaul is a substantial and humane film about a lower caste young married couple—Santu and his wife Bahu—in a small Indian town in the early 1960s. Kaul, who is also an abstract painter, has produced 23 films since his first Hindi-language film in 1966 and is best known for *Uski Roti* (1970), *Duvidha* (1973) and *The Idiot* (1992). He is one of several thoughtful directors who emerged from the Bombay movie scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Santu and his young wife rent a run-down and leaking two-room hut located in the back of the local doctor's house. The couple are determined to improve their lives, but every aspect of their existence—who they can speak to, be seen with and what they should wear—is dictated by the all-pervasive caste system and stifling social relations.

Employed as a lowly government clerk, Santu's job is to list contraband goods seized by the local police. Every day he faces a stream of interdepartmental memos and reprimands from senior staff blaming him for mistakes committed by others. Those above him are corrupt and incompetent—one of them is an alcoholic—and he is under constant pressure.

Bahu, although more decisive and direct than her husband, is forced to provide domestic help to the doctor's wife, who is also the couple's landlady. Santu and Bahu's relationship to the doctor and his wife is also complicated by the fact that the

doctor overheard Santu complaining about the doctor's failure to repair the couple's leaking roof. Santu's indiscretion, which is regarded as a scandal, has been broadcast all around town and is another pressure on the young couple. The hut's leaking roof, of course, is never repaired.

Life is made even more difficult when Santu's boss tells him that he has to double up as a servant for the head of the district public service. To get this job Santu must be able to fit into the district head's old shirt. How can he hold down two jobs and will it make any difference to his living standards? How will others accept him? How should he address the district head—as a clerk or a servant? What will be his landlord's response? Santu eventually resolves these contradictions by refusing the servant's shirt and the job.

Kaul's carefully constructed film provides a convincing picture of the claustrophobic and rigid hierarchical structure that dominates the town. Apart from the tender discussions between Santu and his wife in bed at night, all other social intercourse in the town is strangely unreal and centres on what individuals can or cannot do, or about the weather, which is blamed for every problem, including sickness and poverty. *The Servant's Shirt* is a measured and compassionate work and one that produces a deep hatred for the caste system.

Dev Benegal's *Split Wide Open*, the second Indian film screened at the festival, won Singapore's Special Jury Prize for best director and a best actor award for Rahul Bose. It was billed as a complex work about poverty, corruption and sexual oppression in contemporary Bombay. Unfortunately, *Split Wide Open* fails to explore these issues in any depth.

Benegal studied film at New York University for two years, made documentaries, and worked with veteran director, Shyam Benegal, before making his first feature, *English August*, in 1994. *English August* is about Agastya Sen, an urbane young man who joins the Indian Administrative Services and is posted to a tiny rural backwater. The film exposes the rural backwardness, entrenched pecking order and petty corruption of the local bureaucrats. Disgusted with his job and the mind-numbing life in the poverty-stricken town, Sen epitomised much of India's younger generation: at odds with the dominant

values, but disoriented and heading into a confused and uncertain future.

Split Wide Open, which Benegal wrote with Upamanyu Chatterjee, deals with the life of KP (Rahul Bose), a young hustler working for one of Bombay's "Water Mafia"—the criminal gangs that control the public water taps in the city. KP, which is short for Kut Price, also sells European mineral water—probably falsely labelled—to up-market tourist hotels and the wealthy. KP used to deal drugs but stopped, as he tells a British tourist, because "only some people need drugs but everybody needs water."

He is devoted to Didi, a 10-year-old street girl, who, like KP, came to Bombay from a rural village in search of work. She lives by selling flowers at a busy intersection. KP, who attempts to present himself as a successful young entrepreneur, also maintains a close friendship with a Christian priest who provided him with food and shelter and a rudimentary education in the English language when KP first arrived in Bombay. Knowledge of English is useful in India, KP explains, "because it means you don't have to work".

KP's life, however, is turned upside down when the mafia thugs discover that he is not handing over to the gang all the proceeds of the illegal activities. He is severely beaten and cut out of the racket. Soon after KP discovers that Didi has disappeared and begins a furious hunt of the city, a search that takes him and the audience to some of the seedier enterprises in the vast city.

As he attempts to find the child, KP strikes up a friendship, and then a sexual relationship, with Nandita (Laila Rouass), a brash young middle class woman who has returned to India from London to host "Split Wide Open", a new television show. The program is an American-style talk show, which allows Bombay citizens to anonymously discuss sexual matters on live television. The program, like its international counterparts, sensationalises these issues and is a wild success.

Nandita hires KP to try to persuade people to appear on the program. Soon after they discover, via information from someone appearing on the show, that Didi has been abducted and used for sex by a respectable businessman. KP tracks her down only to discover that the child, who has been provided with good food, clothing and money, and various luxury items, does not want to leave the businessman.

Disillusioned by Didi's rejection, KP also learns that the Christian priest, his other close friend, has died. At the same time Nandita, who clashed with the television program's producer after one of the guests attempts suicide on air, loses her job. The New York-educated daughter of the businessman who abducted Didi replaces Nandita to host the show. An angry KP concludes that "Bombay has won again" and the film ends with Nandita and KP discussing how they can expose the situation facing Didi and other street children.

Split Wide Open provides a picture of the terrible exploitation of Bombay's street children, and thousands of others living on

the margins of society, and at times bluntly satirises the media hypocrisy and cynicism of sections of the city's middle classes. But these issues are not examined with any real passion and so the film often fails to rise above the one-liner wisdom of its main characters. Benegal has KP directly address the camera explaining his background and concerns on several occasions, but most of these comments are played for laughs, not to rouse the audience to examine some of the issues themselves or to reflect on them more deeply.

Comments from KP such as "This stuff happens, it will keep happening", "This is Bombay, only entry, no exit", or "TV is sad. Life is fun" are of little assistance and simply emphasise the film's underlying theme: that all this is shocking, but little or nothing will change.

Character development in *Split Wide Open* is secondary to the various twists and turns in the plot and one feels little emotional attachment to KP or Nandita. Benegal seems to be simply touching base with these characters, without allowing the audience to make a real connection to them.

The relationship between KP and Nandita is also unconvincing and left me wondering why these largely self-absorbed individuals could fall in love, let alone decide to collaborate in the exposure of the exploitation of children. In fact, the last moments of *Split Wide Open* seem to be directed towards convincing the audience that it would not matter what KP and Nandita did, their efforts would fail anyway.

As the movie fades to black, the closing titles explain that in the 1990s Bombay's residents rioted after being denied water for a week. The water mafia responded by drastically escalating the price, but "life and TV in Bombay," the titles explain, went on as usual. The message is obvious—no matter how bad things become, Bombay will never change.

Benegal clearly has some ability and is no doubt concerned about the situation facing the most oppressed sections of society in Bombay. But his tendency to skate across the surface of events and not probe the issues is a real weakness. The end result is an unsatisfying film in which poverty, the exploitation of children and other social problems are just backdrops for a rather average tale about a street hustler and a television hostess.



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