Coming to bat against empire

Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker

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Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, screenplay by Kumar Dave, Sanjay Dayma and Ashutosh Gowariker, story by Ashutosh Gowariker, dialogue by K.P. Saxena

Satyajit Ray, a towering figure in the world history of cinema, was a vocal critic of his country's film industry. In an article titled "What is Wrong with Indian Films" written in 1948, Ray lamented the prevailing conformism and escapism of Indian cinema. Today the situation has hardly changed.

Most of the hundreds of films produced yearly by Bollywood are made out of a handful of standard types. They deal with family melodrama of true love and arranged marriage, the petty lives of wealthy nonresident Indians who are torn between seductive yuppie dreams and the demands of tradition, or with improbable Indian Rambos who single-handedly defeat the Pakistani army. The tiresome back and forth between the syrupy and the titillating, the obligatory and baroque song-and-dance, the obtuse jingoism—in short, a general and suffocating want of seriousness—continue to afflict Indian cinema.

This is a shame. The rich history and textures of India, the dignity and complexity of its peoples, the explosive contradictions of its social life offer an abundance of material that perhaps only a multimillion-dollar industry could manage to sedate and defuse. Indian cinema, as a whole, is still not a pretty picture.

In this context, *Lagaan*, a film that was nominated for this year's Oscar for best foreign picture, can appear as a positively refreshing work. Terribly long by Western, though not by Indian standards, *Lagaan* is a rewarding experience for the viewer, and generally does not test his or her patience. The cinematography is gorgeous. The acting, with the very unpleasant exception of Gracy Singh, is convincing. The questions raised by the film are far from vacuous. One gets the impression that the artists involved, beginning with actor and producer Aamir Khan, were seriously committed to the project and understood its significance.

Lagaan is set in 1893, and tells the story of Champaner, an Indian village that is oppressed by drought and by the cruel demands of a captain of the British colonial army who oversees the cantonment. The officer doubles the villagers' yearly tax—"Lagaan"—on a whim. Infuriated by the defiance of the impetuous peasant Bhuvan, the captain challenges the Indians to a cricket match. The tax would either be tripled or cancelled for three years depending on the outcome of the match. With the very survival of the village at stake, Bhuvan manages to overcome the initial skepticism, ignorance of the foreign game, as well as caste and religious differences, leading the Indian villagers to victory and freedom. Hindus and Muslims, untouchables and Brahmins unite to defeat the British at their own game.

Some of the nuances of the plot cannot be appreciated without a basic understanding of cricket. For instance, the ineffectiveness of the spin bowling with a new ball, or the allusion to written rule about one villager's swing-and-throw action. Beyond these technical details, there is also something important about the political complexities of this sport that is worth noting. C.L.R. James, a remarkable intellectual from Trinidad who was for some time involved with the Trotskyist movement, memorably discussed them in his book *Beyond a Boundary*. In India, as in the West Indies, it is the masses that play cricket; countless youth, shoeless,

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on improvised fields, using makeshift equipment. They do so in spite of the sport's conservative traditions and foreign origins. The colonial legacy of the sport in this sense has been overcome. And yet cricket in India is also a colossal industry. The salaries, privileges, and match-fixing scandals of the national team's players are in constant tension with the national and popular passion for the sport. One of the merits of *Lagaan* is that it does explore intelligently some of these social and historical tensions as they manifest themselves on the cricket grounds.

Of course the story is also a broader metaphor for the courage, resilience and ultimate triumph of the Indian nation against British imperialism. There is no question that this would make for an important and delicate subject at any point in time. But in this particular moment, when the reach of imperialism is being felt everywhere with increasing and tremendous force, a film like *Lagaan* is necessarily invested with special significance. This alone might be sufficient to distinguish it from the unyielding pointlessness of Bollywood's productions.

In making sense of the film's importance and popularity, one should also consider the more specific political context in contemporary India: the demise of the Nehruvian attempt to maintaining a measure of economic and political independence from the West. The program of so-called "reforms"—privatization of state industries, opening up of many sectors of the economy to foreign capital, the relaxation of monetary controls—which began not incidentally in 1991, has precipitated the already dire conditions of large sections of Indian society. It has also created a climate in which the questions of nationalism and imperialism appear with renewed force at the center of political discourse and preoccupations. The advocates of "reform" must constantly contend with implicit, and at times explicit suspicions that they are selling out the Indian nation to the West. Their response, and this began under Congress rule, has been to assert an increasingly aggressive Hindu nationalism.

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