

'Little Zizou' puts Parsis in comic spotlight after 30 years

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New Delhi (IANS): Bollywood provided a hilarious take on Parsis with the 1978 film "Khatta Meetha" that starred Ashok Kumar and Pearl Padamsee. Thirty years later Sooni Taraporewala's "Little Zizou" is another humorous insight into the community, taking digs at their stereotypical oddities.

"Khatta Meetha" highlighted the biggest dilemma among Parsis - their problem with inter-caste marriage. An offspring from such a union is considered to be a non-Parsi, resulting in their fast dwindling numbers, which is pegged at about 100,000 now in India.

But "Little Zizou" talks about religious fundamentalism and reform, while putting the spotlight on traits unique to the community.

One did have Basu Chatterjee's "Baaton Baaton Mein" (1979), but that was more focussed on relationships. Since then all movies on Parsis have brushed aside the comic punch to portray the community's angst with grim dramas like "Pestonjee" (1988), "Percy" (1990), "1947: Earth" (1998) and "Being Cyrus" (2005).

"Thematically, Parsis in films have been a more modest and serious vein with only two films 'Khatta Meetha' and 'Baaton Baaton Mein' being made on a lighter note than the handful of the rest. While the former is remembered for its comic genius, the latter was a mixed-affair in terms of comic touches," said noted film historian Gautam Kaul.

Photographer-writer Taraporewala, who made her directorial debut with "Little Zizou" after writing Mira Nair's acclaimed films like "Salaam Bombay!" and "Mississippi Masala", has woven together every possible trait of the community.

For example, Parsis' habit of boasting about every little achievement is lucidly shown in "Little Zizou". This includes the presence of a Zubin Mehta portrait in every Parsi house and the oft-repeated talk about Indira Gandhi being married to a Parsi.

"Zubin Mehta collectively belongs to every Parsi mother - he is "apro" or "our" Zubin. A love for and deep knowledge of Western classical music is a very Parsi trait. Many people in Mumbai have an experience of their Parsi neighbours blasting classical music and I used that in the opening of 'Little Zizou' along with apro Zubin's portrait on the wall," Taraporewala told IANS.

"Indira Gandhi was married to a Parsi (Feroze Gandhi) and many in the community thought it was lucky for her that he had the 'Gandhi' surname, as most people thought she was related to the Mahatma and had no clue that this was not so.

"I brought this up in a humorous way to link it with the character of Khodaiji (one of the characters) whose name literally means 'god' but who in reality is nothing of the sort and capitalises on his fortunate name, just as Mrs. Gandhi sometimes did," she explained.

Both Kaul and Taraporewala point out that there have been numerous instances where Parsis have been typecast for small appearances in Bollywood movies.

"There have been movies over the years that have typecast the community by depicting a Parsi character in comic situations in a trademark attire for a Parsi resemblance," said Kaul.

"The stock Parsi man in his white dugli and black pheta and the woman in her gara sari - this is what some of us (Parsis) wear to weddings but in Bollywood films all Parsis have to be dressed like this even if they are standing at the bus stop waiting for a bus," remarked Taraporewala.

National Award winning filmmaker Jahnu Barua says films on the community have taken a backseat because they get "elbowed" treatment from audiences.

"It's very unfortunate that our audience has been spoiled over the years and they are not mature enough to accept such films. Take 'Khatta Meetha' for example and now 'Little Zizou' - these films are brilliant attempts at bringing back the elbowed out culture of their communities," Barua said.