

'Bhakshak' – Film Review

– By Dr. Shaweta Anand, AIF

Credit is due to Red Chillies Entertainment for having the courage to give voice to the harrowing story of abused minor girls through their new film *'Bhakshak'* ('predator' in English) on Netflix. Released in February 2024, the film has been inspired by real life events at a state-funded shelter home in Muzaffarpur. These events came to light after Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) submitted a startling report to Bihar's Social Welfare Department in 2018 as part of their 'Koshish' project.

The machinery sprang into action, thanks to the relentless pursuit of justice by the real-life feisty journalist Nivedita Jha – portrayed as Vaishali Singh by celebrated actress Bhumi Pednekar in the film – and SSP Harpreet Kaur – portrayed as Jasmeet Gaur by actress Sai Tamhankar. Their struggle eventually led to the conviction of 19 people including former Bihar MLA Brajesh Thakur. He was charged for rape, gangrape (section 376(d), IPC) aggravated sexual assault under section 6 of POCSO Act, criminal conspiracy and offences under the Juvenile Justice Act (JJA). The accused women involved in the case were charged with abetment to crime, criminal conspiracy, Section 12 of POCSO Act (sexual harassment) and under provisions of the JJA. In a submission by the Bihar police in this case, at least 34 minor girls were drugged and raped at the Muzaffarpur shelter home. The Patna High Court, Supreme Court, the CBI, local police and other activists also got involved in the high-profile case. The film that is directed by Pulkit and produced by Gauri Khan and Gaurav Verma also highlights that even heinous crimes can go unnoticed if the powers that be get complicit in



crimes against children, but sooner than later, they get appropriately exposed and punished.

Bhakshak was shot in all of 39 days, tells the story of the trials and tribulations faced by the gritty journalist Vaishali Singh whose unwavering commitment to the cause of justice for the abused girls is the main highlight of this film. On the one hand, the film shows the underbelly of crime against girl children in Indian cities going through the churning of rapid development and globalization, on the other hand, it uplifts the spirit by showing the coming together of a few conscientious people, led by Singh and the SSP, to uphold justice. The perverseness of the Indian male mind-set that tends to be misogynistic, patriarchal and abusive at the very base is also well brought out in the film when the male characters objectify girls and women and

perceive them as limited to their bodies and sexual organs. However, as the main narrative of the story builds up, some of the women characters, including SSP Jasmeet, are able to exhibit courage, moral strength, and a dogged belief in the justice system even though their struggle was often uphill, exhausting, and complicated to finally get the accused behind bars. The film ably exhibits the bureaucratic hurdles and political patronage that high-profile criminals enjoy.

Although the story-telling was disturbingly dark or graphic at some points, where the makers seemingly over-stretched their creative license in a bid to stand out, the ultimate message of the film is loud and clear. Even in a very crime-prone state such as Bihar, not all hope is lost until the time a few conscientious people from various walks of life join hands in the common pursuit of justice.

