Fear on Film
The Ramsay Brothers and Bombay's Horror Cinema

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You can't make a horror movie in a multiplex.
Tulsi Ramsay

The Ramsay Brothers are alternately revered as India’s most popular pioneers of cinematic horror and reviled as fearsome intruders on the mainstream film industry, botching its onward march toward bourgeois respectability. A clan of seven self-trained filmmakers raised on movie sets and at matinee shows of Dracula and The Mummy, the Ramsay Brothers persist in popular memory as a cottage industry of terror: artisanal, makeshift and wildly enthusiastic about their work. It is alleged that they would shoot on 16mm and blow it up to 35mm; but it is also alleged that they would visit graveyards at odd hours of the night to complete their films. Here was an alternative economy of filmmaking, distinguished by its frugal discipline, internal star system, fierce publicity tactics and invisible revenue patterns. The Brothers were the unacknowledged house-guests of India’s biggest movie industry for years together, and even the 80s, abandoned by the blockbuster, defied by shabby experimentation and devastated by television and video, were nonetheless punctuated regularly by Ramsay hits. Purana Mandir (Ancient Temple, Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1984), a musical mélange of hill-station romance and gothic terror, finished as the second-biggest money-maker of 1984. Trailing only BR Chopra’s Aaj Ki Awaaz (Voice of Today, 1984), the film’s success appears even more extraordinary when one considers the disintegrating commercial climate of the times as television and home video pulled audiences away from cinema halls.

In tracking the career of Purana Mandir, this article attempts to apprehend the story behind a totemic family name, a story that is also very much about Bombay cinema. With little to lose and no family honour to protect, the Ramsay Brothers exemplified the truly explosive potential of unexpected quantities moving in large force fields. In many ways, the impact of their films was primarily disruptive, a series of spectacular challenges for the industry, the press and the audience. Whatever these challenges may have been, they can today serve to illuminate the fault lines over which popular arbitrations of ‘taste’ have been historically conducted.
The Family Enterprise
After years of apprenticeship, the sons of small-time film producer FU Ramsay persuade the patriarch to finance an all-out horror film. The result: *Do Gaz Zameen Ke Neechey* (Beneath Two Yards of Earth, Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, 1972), a breakout hit that sets the style for Ramsay productions to come. Every few months over the next two decades, cast and crew alike would be packed into buses and transported to the outskirts of Bombay for filming. Here, brothers Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay would dispatch directorial duties; brother Kumar would write the scenes while brother Gangu would lens them; Kiran Ramsay was usually in charge of sound and Arjun in charge of production; meanwhile, Mother Ramsay would cook for everyone. Since the execution of the horror genre is painstaking, and its funds limited, it is no surprise that the Ramsay Brothers never worked with bona fide stars. Instead, trending with much of horror across film cultures, they relied on fresh, young blood to lubricate their productions: the appeal of quick money without the hassles of high-maintenance stars. Usually attractive, these young men and women were required to keep pace with the Ramsays; often, they became niche stars, returning to work with the family again in roles only superficially distinguished from one another. A case in point is Arti Gupta, a model who had dabbled in film work previously but made the decisive transition only when she was cast in the lead for *Purana Mandir*. After its success, she became a darling to the Brothers, their very own ‘scream queen’.

Produced on express schedules and shoestring budgets, the Brothers’ titles would then be released on a dozen prints in Bombay’s less-favoured theatres. By the second week, that number would drop to ten; by the third week, only a print or two would remain in circulation in the city. By this time, a Ramsay film would have begun its journey into the interiors, playing on one screen in Pune in its fourth week, and on one in Wai in its seventh. Trade wisdom suggests the Ramsays did 60 percent of their business in rural territories, where returns are slower and smaller and clouded with administrative haziness. Numbers in *Film Information*, despite its meticulousness, represent only the tip of the box-office iceberg since the journal does not record revenues from the less-prestigious ‘B’ and ‘C’ centres, each with their own (tax) evasive histories. There is the additional problem of the journal’s veracity, thrown into question by Tulsi Ramsay’s unexpected and somewhat enigmatic comment midway through an interview: “We were always after *Film Information*. Report should come good, should come good”.

The relative persistence of this business model enhanced the bewildering opacity around the family enterprise. Their movies, caught in the divide between the respectable and the ridiculous, the legal and the illegal, often had truly confounding commercial lives. In an article titled “The Paradoxical Situation”, VP Sathe noted his amazement at the fact that “a non-star cast horror adult film like *Purana Mandir* has been released in as many as twenty-three theatres”, continuing that “at most of the theatres, the picture drew full houses” (Sathe, 1984). *Film Information* tells us *Purana Mandir* was in fact diverted to the black market during the very first week of its release. “Video cassettes of *Purana Mandir* which was being shown to about 75 persons was seized from the parlour”, reads a report on a police raid in Bombay. “The police also seized a Nelco VCR, Weston TV and Rs 105 in cash” (*Film Information*, 1984).
Film piracy activates anxieties around legitimacy and public morality for texts entering popular circuits. *Purana Mandir* had already been certified an ‘adult’ film by the Central Board of Film Certification, so imagine the surprise of the police when they entered the parlour to find that “many children were seeing the film at the time of the raid” (*Film Information*, 1984). Worse than the scourge of copyright violation, bootlegging promises to corrupt our young. The censors are out to save our families, and the pirates out to destroy them. Ramsay horror, with its ostensible stock-in-trade of sex and violence, was energised by the efforts of both cops and robbers. Simultaneously, bootlegging served its eternal purpose as a viable other, a mafia-run shadow economy beyond the law. A fiction fed to sustain the myth of ‘good money’, to discriminate between pirates and producers, this shadow economy could make the meanest financiers – even the Ramsays – look like clean citizens.

**Watching *Purana Mandir***

What happens: In the long-long-ago (200 years ago), the indefatigable monster Samri (Ajay Aggarwal) terrorises Bijapur, the sultanate of Raja Hariman Singh. Samri frequently disrobes “naujawaan, shaadi-shuda” (young, married) women, kills children and disinters corpses to eat them. When he attacks the Raja’s daughter, a royal decree is passed ordering his decapitation. Before he is thus executed, the monster makes a vow to return to life once again and curses the King’s female heirs with horrible deaths in childbirth.

Cut to the ‘present day’ and the city. The latest descendant in the line of the Raja is Thakur Ranbir Singh (Pradeep Kumar), whose only child is the attractive Suman (Arti Gupta), a lissome girl of college-going age. Suman is in love with the strapping Sanjay (Mohnish Behl), and the two can barely keep their hands off one another, which sets alarm-bells ringing in the Thakur’s head. Not having forgotten the curse that will strike Suman should she have a child of her own, he tries to break the couple up. Failing, the distraught father reveals the *shraap* (curse) that has followed their family all the way down the centuries from Bijapur. Convinced that the curse is nothing they can’t overcome, Sanjay and Suman leave the city to return to the *haveli* (mansion) where it all began. Eventually, they overpower a back-from-the-dead Samri. The monster is burnt at the stake, the curse is lifted, and the lovers are married with the blessings of the Thakur.

As a narrative device, the curse at the centre of *Purana Mandir* is utterly unexceptional (an obstacle is created and then overcome), but its provenance is fairly interesting, a particularly instructive instance of the Brothers’ ingenious deployment of horror film tropes. In countless American slasher films of the 70s and early 80s (*Friday the 13th, Prom Night, Nightmare on Elm Street*), sexual intercourse outside marriage is strictly prohibited, and trespassers invoke certain death at the hands of a knife/axe/machete/spear/impaling rod/electrocution hotwire/scorching tongs-wielding maniac. In each film, we witness the bodies of young men and women enjoying sex away from the surveillance of their parents in an unpoliced and semi-rural environment where adolescent anarchy prevails. In each film, we witness the bodies of young men and women being yanked back under surveillance, ‘disciplined’ once again through torture. These grisly moments imbue the slasher film with the air of a parable.
or cautionary tale to warn against teenage illicit sex, cinematically converting it into taboo via an experience of Ripper-like horror.

Such repressive censoriousness means almost nothing in Bombay cinema, where it would be impossible to write a film in which teenagers are shown experiencing spectacular death, little or big. Graphic sex and frontal nudity are already taboo, anathema for an idiom which relegates them to a notional, invisible privacy somewhere beyond the end credits. No knives or axes are needed to temper sexual appetite in Bombay; there is already a series of tacit codes in place to make sure no one gets frisky. Institutionalised censorship is only one of these codes; consider equally the ever-present extended family, keeping a watchful eye within the diegetic world so that most unpolicéd and parentless worlds remain dream locales.

In Purana Mandir, therefore, the curse of death is activated with childbirth: as a definite consequence of sex but sex within sacred marriage – almost like a side-effect of legitimate, productive and monitored sexuality. The shraap thus emerges in the rapprochement of fears – a kind of handshake in which both hands pocket something – serving as an instructive example of the way censorship doesn’t just happen to a pre-existing text; rather, it looms always on the creative horizon, a phenomenal presence with institutional weight that challenges filmmakers in highly productive ways.

Further, the shraap also functions within the dominant syntax of monstrosity/sexuality popularised in British Hammer films (The Brides of Dracula, 1960; The Curse of the Werewolf, 1961) and serves as the means whereby the urban is displaced in favour of the backwoods. After the fashion of much horror from the American independent phase (especially The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Tobe Hooper, 1974), this relocation provides the setting for a primitive ordeal from which a young woman, man or (as in the case of Purana Mandir) heterosexual couple escapes back to the order of the city. However, the exigencies of Bombay cinema require Suman’s father to be witness to Sanjay’s physical agency and
masculine prowess in subduing the monster and re-establishing harmony where there was once chaos. Therefore, in an unprecedented move for a horror film, *Purana Mandir* ends not with the bruised dyad but with a happy trio: boy, girl and girl's father. “I'm really proud of you, my son”, the Thakur sniffs. The ‘*Purana Mandir*’ of horror literally modulates into the mandir (temple) of the marriage ceremony as Sanjay and Suman are wed and ‘The End’ is hurriedly ushered in.

Inescapable here is the clunkiness of the Ramsay Brothers who, with their limited budgets and talents, only occasionally realised their ambitions. The frenetic camera movement of some sequences in *Purana Mandir* bears resemblance to the innovative cinematography in *Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981); the baroque, taxidermically-inclined space of the haveli recalls *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963) or any number of Hammer films; the extremely tight composition into which something (a cat, a crazy woman) suddenly emerges to scare the living daylights out of Suman suggests *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978); the coffin and horse-drawn carriage are straight out of numerous Stoker adaptations; there are point-of-view shots that are akin to shots from *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974), as well as the Romero-style gait of the possessed man-servant. For the most part, though, these moments of 'horror' play out as incompetent hack-jobs and incomplete masteries. Night-time shooting was still a problem for the Ramsays, and *Purana Mandir* would have additionally called for a fairly complex choreography of darkness and lighting, silence on set and post-sync sound, not to mention a small army of technicians working with prosthetics, make-up, fog machines and other ‘special effects’. It remains unclear what degrees of expertise were involved, given the general sense of workshop-improvisation prevailing with the family.

Where, then, does the horror inhere in a Ramsay film? The genre’s conventions, forced into visibility by the yawning gap between aspiration and accomplishment – when the make-up is under-baked, or the camera doesn't move nearly fast enough, or when the cat looks less like it's jumping into the frame and more like it's being chucked into it by a spotboy – can be moments of unintentional hilarity, as globally circulating ‘signs’ of horror are shriveled to an embarrassingly inchoate generic language that cannot conceal its own manufactured-ness. These moments can also, however, cause shudders, involuntary recoils at the excessive materiality of the image; the Ramsay films often gain in stature as a result of this unexpected effect. Terror here is less a matter of slick technical virtuosity and more a matter of something earthy and visceral. The vampire-overlord in *Bandh Darwaza* (Closed Door, 1990) has none of the ethereal, otherworldly quality of the early sound phase or the Hammer films; he is an affective, if inelegantly prosthetic monster. In *Aur Kaun* (Who Else, 1979), the corpse of a murdered woman rots in a refrigerator and is eventually sunk in a lake. The texture of every Ramsay film is heavy with the smell of bodies – the dread of corporeal finitude played out in a *mise-en-scène* of involute caves and subterranean dwellings.
Afterlife: Ramu, the Ramsays and the Haunting Problem of Genre

Without a doubt, the Ramsay films are indispensable today for the gauntlet they throw to connoisseurs of genre, even as recent work from the likes of Ram Gopal Varma (Kaun?/Who?, 1999; Bhoot/Ghost, 2003) accedes to a rapidly standardising idiom of horror, boasts top-of-the-line technical credentials and features a star-cast of appreciable order. If the Ramsay Brothers haunt Varma's work at all, it is as yesterday's awkward yet undisputed champions, a beloved and campy underground.

Having risen to international prominence as an essayist of urban desolation, Varma seems especially well-placed to articulate the postmodern sense of vulnerability that has overtaken city life. His films usually unfold in a cramped and intimidating world of high-rises and garbage, a “spatial topography of dread, decay and death” (Mazumdar, 2007), pushing a feeling that “the everyday social world and the world of terror are contiguous and threaten to overlap”, a “strange sense of hyper-location” (Vasudevan, 2002). If his gangland films vibrate with the energy of individuals kicking to stay above the surface, his horror films telescope that energy into visions of possession, paranoia, and pain.

For Kaun?, Varma recruited Mazhar Kamran, a director of photography who had the previous year assisted on the steadicam-shot gangster film, Satya. Kamran brings everything he learned while shooting chase sequences and gunfights to Kaun?’s three-storey set. Complete with winding staircase and huge glass windows, the house swoops and shudders around Urmila Matondkar’s already diminutive frame, scaling her isolation into relief. Varma is credited with introducing the use of the steadicam in India in the late 80s, and his incubation as a videoshop owner is crucial here. Historically, the fortunes of the steadicam are tied up with the fortunes of the horror film, its effective execution canonised by Halloween and The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980).

In Bhoot, the camera’s smooth insinuations, along with Varma’s idiom of disorienting Dutch angles and strident synth sounds, give jump scares and boo moments their slickness. Aided by Adlabs on FX and Dolby on Sound, Varma freely trades in throwbacks to classics like Chucky while purloining from current Japanese horror like Ju-on. Clearly, Varma’s appetite is as large as the Brothers’; only his ambitions are higher. Where the Ramsays managed a former Miss India for Purana Mandir, Varma gives us a Miss Universe in Vastu Shastra (2004). Varma doesn’t play with the placeless hill stations and havelis of the 70s and 80s, nor do his films play there. Bhoot, for instance, “scared the daylights out of the city audiences, converting the shrieks and screams in the auditorium into the jingle of coins at the ticket-windows...” but never made it too far past the ‘A’centres, as “revenues from circuits like Rajasthan, Bihar and UP came crashing down as the first week progressed” (Film Information, 14 June 2003).
Simultaneously, the Ramsay Brothers are entering a trans-continental fraternity of ‘B’ cinemas, positioned synonymously with such figures as Mario Bava and Georges Franju, other derogated practitioners of horror who have been revitalised by globalisation’s enormous reach and recycling capacities. Long-forgotten as mindless Bombay bilge that wasn’t even available with pavement hawkers, *Purana Mandir* is now being disseminated as intellectually affluent, global ‘trash’ cinema by the Mondo Macabro DVD series, a glossily packaged “walk on the wild side of Asian Cinema”. The rehabilitation, however, has long roots, discernible in two divergent reviews of *Purana Mandir* that appeared in the year after its release. *Filmfare*, India’s top-selling film magazine, had given the movie a pass in its opening weeks; in January 1985, however, testifying to *Purana Mandir*’s box office muscularity, the magazine gave its top critic, Pritish Nandy, a whole two pages to review it. Titled “Indiana Jones Returns to the Temple of Gloom” (*Filmfare*, 1-15 January 1985), Nandy’s piece is an exercise in brutal belittlement. His observations are usually unkind (“the cardboard walls are falling off”), sometimes lazy (the repeated reference to the movie’s monster as Shaitan; his name is Samri), and often unverifiable (“The results are predictable… Everyone wants the gate money back, while the ushers hide under the chairs”). Failing to mention even once that the film was a gargantuan success on any scale, the review concludes thus:

One cannot but help admiring the sensitivity and intelligence with which this film has been made. It speaks volumes for Hindi cinema and the Ramsays, our horror movie moghuls, who have (with this film) graduated towards serious, thought-provoking cinema of a kind rarely seen before. (Nandy, 1985)

Six months after Nandy’s review, another critic with *Filmfare* was also given two pages for an article on the Ramsays. In “Love at First Bite” (*Filmfare*, 1-15 August 1985), Roscoe Mendonza expressed boundless hope that a future re-evaluation would show the Brothers to have been auteurs. Mendonza’s article is a half-winking, implicit but obvious rebuttal to Nandy’s:

We need such films. It may be fine for Mrinal Sen or Saeed Mirza to trumpet the ways and means in which their movies serve the needs of society. Likewise, the dukes of commercial cinema, who tout the need for entertainment in a weary society. But can either of these two cliques bring to their film-making a true understanding of the Indian Psyche the way Ramsay brothers have? (Mendonza, 1985)

Horror, writes Joan Hawkins, “is perhaps the best vantage point from which to study the cracks that seem to exist everywhere in late-20th century sacralised film culture” (Hawkins, 2000). *Purana Mandir*, as it passed through the press mill, turned the pages of *Filmfare* into a cultural war-zone. In hindsight, it seems perversely appropriate that the Ramsays rose to prominence in the 70s, a period lit by the promises of the Indian New Wave and scorched by the anger of Amitabh Bachchan, and scored their biggest hits in the 80s, the decisive abyss of Bombay film history, a terrible time that produced few other memorable victories.
Virtuosos of the cinematic badlands of those years, the Ramsay Brothers challenge scholars of Bombay Cinema to take another look at its trash. The Ramsay Brothers – the men, the movies, the money, the mockery, the memory – have found altogether new channels via which to haunt the contemporary.

Notes
3. Purana Mandir, according to Film Information, 27 October 1984, sold almost six lakh tickets in the first week of its release in Bombay alone. On 14 prints, the film ran to near full-house capacity at such subpar locations as Plaza, Filmistan and Jubilee. A week later, it registered 85 percent business on 11 prints in the city. Four weeks into its theatrical run, it was running in Bhopal; a week after that, it had dropped almost entirely off the radar, a mere blip in Delhi (two screens: Plaza, Jubilee).
4. Komal Nahta, Editor, Film Information. Interview with Kartik Nair, 3 September 2009, Film Information office, Bandra, Mumbai.
5. Ramsay, op. cit.
6. “The steadicam is usually used to capture chase sequences. In fact, Ram Gopal Varma was the director who first introduced the steadicam in India, with his film Shiva (1989)” (Mazumdar, 2007).

References
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