

Disclaimer: The following includes spoilers

Two weeks ago, Netflix dropped its first Indian original series which has kept everyone on their toes. *Sacred Games*, an adaptation of the same-titled novel by Vikram Chandra, and directed by Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane, premiered on Netflix on July 6. The original book is a social novel—meaning it dramatises social problems through individual characters. The television adaptation, too, is staged in a similar style and is populated with uniquely eccentric and complex characters who bring Mumbai to life.

The story builds on these characters to provide a layered understanding of what makes the city—it's people and their social interactions. Through



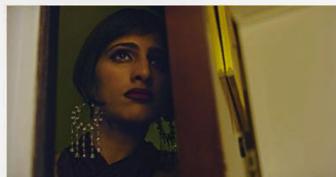
FROM BOMBAY TO MUMBAI

Sacred Games maps the city through a series of communal riots

SARAH NAFISA SHAHID

policeman-protagonist Sartaj Singh (played by Saif Ali Khan), the audience discovers a modern, cosmopolitan Mumbai of politicians, film-stars, the corrupt, the rich, the fanatic, the refugees, the helpless. And through gangster-antagonist Ganesh Gaitonde (played by Nawazuddin Siddiqui), the audience witnesses a 90s Bombay of dreams and of ambition—of gang wars, jazz bars, temples, mosques. Gaitonde tips Singh about a catastrophe awaiting this vivid city in the next 25 days and the episodes follow Singh's investigation parsed with Gaitonde's flashbacks

The plot spans out over a generation, essentially tracing "how Bombay became Mumbai"—a phrase often used to indicate the time when Shiv Sena-BJP alliance came into power in Maharashtra and Hindu-nationalist sentiment started rising in the region. The socio-political landscape behind far-right Hindutva violence becomes the playing field for gangster Ganesh Gaitonde's rise (and fall) through the 90s mob scene. The series depicts Hindu-Muslim communal conflict as intentional and man-made, often a result of direct interventions by party-politicians. The episode titles and story arcs are styled after Hindu mythologies hinting at the rise of essentialist and populist interpretations of Hinduism in India. The "guru" in the story is depicted as a manipulative organised criminal inciting communal violence for personal gains. He has a network of policemen and politicians, including the home minister, who directly manufacture sensationalised riots. Set in the back drop of Babri Masjid incident and the Bombay Riots of 1992-



1993, the show is a direct commentary against ruling parties and criticises the rise of religion-based nationalism. Singh's modern Mumbai focuses more on the cosmopolitanism of the city. Mumbai is shown to be a gritty and glamorous city struggling to catch up with the fast-paced, exhausting structure of urban life. The characters are frustrated from being stuck in a system with rampant corruption where the powerful prey on vulnerable communities. A recurring theme in this part of the storytelling is the importance of status quo, and the extent the rich and powerful would go to in order to maintain it. For example, a key dilemma arises for Singh when he is asked to

frame a youth from the Bengali Bura neighbourhood, a community of Muslim-Bangladeshis, as a "terrorist" in order to justify a death during police crossfire. Through multiple incidents such as this, *Sacred Games* explores the refugee neighbourhoods, the working-class warehouses, the alleys, the road-side stalls, laced with Singh and his assistant Katekar's cynical commentary. However, some of the social commentary feels contradictory in relation to the greater story. For example, Radhika Apte's character, RAW agent Anjali Mathur, gives a monologue asking Sartaj Singh, "Why do you men always have to play the saviour? We don't need your saving!" She feels discriminated

that she is offered a desk job as opposed to field work. While Anjali Mathur's character is supposed to bring a feminist tone to the story, she is ultimately written off by the scriptwriters just like all the other prominent female characters in the series. Although the female characters, such as Kukoo and Subadhra, are vocal and independent, they never manage to survive the first season, proving that they were only means to an end for other men. Especially when it comes to violence, women are often direct or indirect inspiration for them, reiterating the age-old Helen-of-Troy trope.

Speaking of tropes, there's too many in this series. The protagonist Sartaj Singh follows an overdone character arc akin to *True Detective's* Rustin Cole and *Broadchurch's* Alec Hardy—a righteous cop battling his own demons from fighting the good fight, hungover from a broken marriage, and abusing mental health medication. The only reason why Singh's character still remains entertaining is because a slouching, unfit, and troubled, hero archetype is a rare sight in the Hindi-language-centric cinema and television which is saturated with testosterone-fuelled action heroes.

The villain Gaitonde, too, follows a cliché, and that too from Kashyap's film *Gangs of Wasseypur*. He is cut from the same cloth as *Wasseypur's* Faizal, played by the same actor. Both of them have similar sense of invincibility, justice, and revenge. Both Gaitonde and Faizal are shown to be messed in the head because of their troubled childhood. They adapt a god complex over the course of their narrative which causes their mob empires to fall. But what makes them particularly a stereotype is the humanised way their monstrous acts are depicted—similar to *Scarface's* Tony Montana and *The Godfather's* Michael Corleone. The cliched rise-and-fall arc, though enjoyable, feels lazy and recycled.

However, it goes without saying that two supporting characters from the series do bring a refreshing dimension to mainstream television. The first of which is Gaitonde's love interest, Kukoo, a transwoman who dances at underground

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jazz bars and rides with criminals. Her character was originally an unsubstantial character in the novel, but the series writers decided to bring her in the forefront and carve her into a multifaceted personality. Played by Kubra Sait, Kukoo is sensual, full of pathos, and most importantly, has agency. The series resists South Asian film culture's tendency to caricature trans identities for comic-relief. Kukoo is depicted as someone living on the peripheries of "normal" society and struggling with depression, but it is done in a way that garners respect instead of pity.

The other remarkable character is that of Katekar, a frustrated constable and Singh's loyal assistant played by Marathi actor Jitendra Joshi. This character stands out because of the equal weight it receives in the story arc as the main hero, highlighting that a hero only goes so far as his support. Katekar's character adds a local Marathi touch to the Maharashtrian city and provides a colourful contrast to the brooding Singh.

Apart from this, the story is brimming with different languages, which has been a rare occasion in Bollywood and Hindi-language productions. Marathi, being a common

spoken language in Mumbai, is rarely witnessed in Mumbai-based films. The series also has scenes in Punjabi and Gujarati, reflecting the multilingual cosmopolitan city Mumbai truly is. This has been possible in part because of Netflix's eagerness to accommodate as many languages as possible. The streaming service's subscribers are



increasingly watching non-English-language content either using dubbed audio or with subtitles. This summons a new era for global cinema, where the audience is culturally ambiguous and so brings in new challenges for regional writers and directors. With *Sacred Games* and its bilingual dubbing, it's only the beginning of an intimately South Asian story becoming globalised. It must be said though that independently

SATIRE

THE WORLD'S FIRST BANGLADESHI DESIGNED CAR IS HERE, AND ITS FANTASTIC

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components and declare the car fit for another five years of duty, while conveniently ignoring the thousands of rats chewing through the brake lines right under their noses. On activating cruise control, it'll be stuck at 7.1 km/h, and constantly remind you at convenient intervals how the car is making steady progress. It might even be a hybrid

employing super-critical technology, where the alternative hybrid power will come from the steady feet of hired help, pushing your chariot to its destination and leaving only natural gas in its wake.

A neat feature for our roads would be the duplicated designs for front and rear—for turning those pesky trips down the wrong side into wholly legal joyrides of convenience. When you aren't utilising the aforementioned feature, though, you'd be perfectly happy looking at the rev counter, which will be reversed between two extremes—"progress" and



produced series have been on the rise in India and is only getting picked up recently in neighbouring Pakistan and Bangladesh (iFlix leading the trend locally). What it may mean for television for the whole region is yet to be realised.

As for my concluding opinion on *Sacred Games*, I must say, this has revived the life in me. How so? Being someone who has to write about films means that I often spend too much time thinking about what to write and less time enjoying any of it. *Sacred Games* does not allow that kind of passive viewership. At the end of the day, it is a crime thriller, so along with its political premise, it never loses on its entertainment value. Every frame is composed aesthetically, acting is top-notch, soundtrack is great. If anybody misses that kind of all-in-one package deals of a series, well this is the one. It's here and all eight of them together. ■

placed under the front driver side door handle, within easy reach of our esteemed law enforcement.

Whether this greatest-of-all-cars will be popular on a global scale or not will depend largely on the marketing, where delusions of grandeur and bold claims will definitely make it a popular product in the post-fact age. The world will be our oyster and our locally designed car will be the king of the road. Onwards, Bangladesh!

Shaer Reaz is in-charge of Shift, automobile publication of The Daily Star.

ABOUT TOWN



AN EVENING WITH KAMLA
Organiser: One Billion Rising Bangladesh
July 28, 4-7 pm, Chhayanaut Cultural Building, Dhanmondi



PALKI O BONDHURA
MUSICAL EVENT
Organiser: 138 East
July 27, 8.30 – 10.30 pm, 138 East, House 10, Road 138, Gulshan 1



ANGER MANAGEMENT
Organiser: Women Support Initiative Forum (WSIF) and EMK Center
July 28, 2.30- 6.30 pm, EMK Center, Dhanmondi