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"Ek Thi Daayan" is the latest in the list of films on witches, occult and the like, much to the dismay of women's groups who argue that witch hunting is not entertainment but a tragic fact that has led to women being targeted and even killed. Recent films like "Raaz 3" and "Talaash" have propagated the myth in the name of entertaining audiences and "Ek Thi Daayan" is the latest to tap into the regressive trend. Like "Raaz 3" and "Talaash", the film is a big budget one, co-produced by Ekta Kapoor and Vishal Bhardwaj with Emraan Hashmi, Konkona Sen Sharma and Kalki Koechlin.

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The focus of the film, releasing April 19, is on the 'choti' (plait) of the witch. But Ekta shrugs off any concerns that her film might lead to further exploitation of women in the name of witch hunting.

"I don't know what is so regressive about showing a daayan's choti. Those cribbing should delve into folklore from which the film draws its inspiration," she said.

What of the impact, particularly on gullible audiences for whom films such as this strengthen the belief that witches exist? "Media must be more mindful of its social responsibility.

When handling themes shrouded in violence and superstition, it must be careful to not fuel, reinforce and validate these ideas in the name of entertainment. There has to be self-regulation, otherwise such portrayals can do extreme harm," Madhu Mehra, executive director, Partners for Law in Development, told IANS.

Mehra's firm recently released a Witch Hunting Consultation Report on the "gender-based violence that violates women's rights and undermines their dignity". Movies and TV serials on the theme fuel belief, she said.

"Several women are lynched, forcibly evicted from their homes and villages and killed once branded as witches. Studies show that witch hunting is not about superstition but a form of gender-based violence that targets women in rural areas.

"The entertainment and media industry needs to approach gender based violence on par with caste violence, bringing out the injustice of these practices rather than glorifying them," she added.

This is, of course, not a new trend. Over a period of 100 years, Indian cinema has witnessed a barrage of horror movies – some pushing the concept of supernatural powers, and some propagating evil spirits.

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