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IANIS | By [HT Correspondent](#), New Delhi

Apr 04, 2013 02:23 PM IST



Ghosts exist and black magic works. At least in Bollywood, where the upcoming 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.

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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.

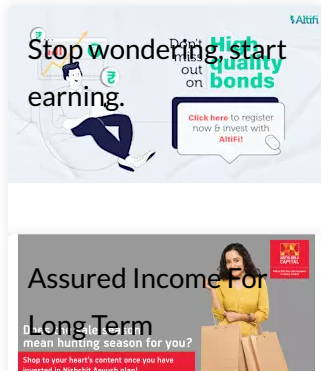
"I don't know what is so regressive about showing a daayan's choti. Those cribbing should delve into folklore from which the film draws its inspiration," she said.

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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.

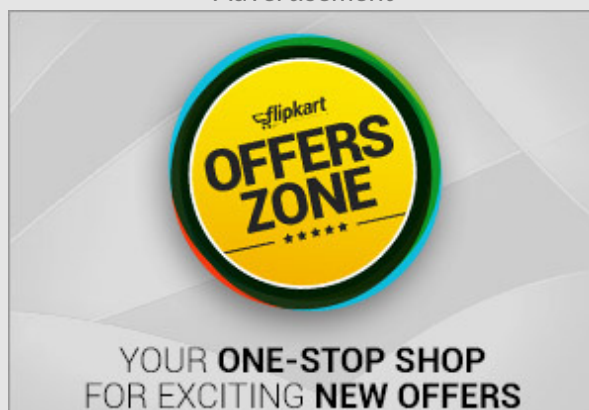
Mehra's firm recently released a Witch Hunting Consultation Report on the gender-based violence that violates women's rights and undermines their dignity.

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.

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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.

There were also the Nagin (snake) movies that showed a woman changing form to a snake to seek revenge. One of the most successful was the Sridevi and Rishi Kapoor starrer Nagina.

For many viewers, these may translate to pure entertainment, but a huge chunk of people, especially in the country's interiors, believe in stories surrounding evil, supernatural, magical and mystical powers.

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Villages in states across the country have reported horrific incidents of witch hunting.

Nevertheless, Bollywood actress Bipasha Basu, who featured in horror films like Raaz, Raaz 2, and Aatma, feels it is imperative for filmmakers to have some Indian context or the other to be able to entertain viewers, especially the masses.

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"In India, if we experiment with the horror genre, which we don't do much, we have to give the audience a good story, good performances, and layer it with fear. Only then it will be interesting.

"I don't think just slasher films, vampire films or zombie films will work because we don't have the roots of it in India. Black magic and devil worship are Indian concepts and it is easier to put those elements in our movies," Bipasha told IANS.

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