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Apr. 13, 2005. 06:49 AM

Film sends up India's boy-mad culture

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PRITHI YELAJA
STAFF REPORTER

When a boy is born in the Punjabi community, it's a time of great celebration; relatives hand out *ludoos*, a traditional Indian sweet, to mark the occasion.

What happens when a girl is born?

"They hand out Kleenex," says Gagan Dhaliwal, the lead character in *Pink Ludoos*, which is being screened in Toronto this week as part of the Reel World Film Festival. Set in suburban British Columbia, the film uses humour to tackle a serious social issue.

However, the controversial Indian/Canadian movie has upset some in the Indian community, who say it portrays them in an unflattering light.

Along with the usual digs at Indian customs like the caste system, superstitions and arranged marriage, the feature film is the first by a Canadian producer to explore gender selection — aborting female fetuses because of the preference for sons. The practice continues in China and India, although it has been outlawed, along with the caste system and dowries, by the Indian government.

The preference for boys also endures among those immigrant groups in Canada, though that mindset is slowly changing with education, says Raminder Dosanjh, wife of federal Health Minister, Ujjal Dosanjh, who has spoken out against gender selection. "With education, women are becoming emotionally and financially independent."

Under Bill C-13, the Assisted Human Reproduction Act, passed last year, the practice is banned in Canada, though, like in *Pink Ludoos*, it's just a short hop across the U.S. border to clinics that still provide the service.

"People in the Indian community, even educated ones, talk openly about their desire to have sons. It's very sad," says Manpreet Grewal, manager of multicultural and immigrant services at a community centre in Abbotsford, B.C. "As soon as a woman gets pregnant, the whole talk is about the child being a boy."

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The movie's Vancouver-based writer, Belle Mott, came up with the movie because she knew of women in the Indian community there who had abortions after finding out they were having a girl.

"There's tremendous cultural pressure, so a woman thinks of herself as incomplete and is perceived as a failure if she has only girls and no boys," says Mott, 42, who was born in Punjab and came to Canada with her parents in 1969. (Her real name is Balbir, but she changed it as a child because kids couldn't pronounce it. Her maiden name is Bains.)

Boys are more valued because of archaic thinking that views girls as an economic and emotional burden, says Grewal. Parents have to save for a dowry to marry off girls and then there is the sorrow when they leave home to move in with their in-laws. Sons, on the other hand, are expected to live with their parents even after marriage. Property is also traditionally passed down through sons, but daughters have no right of inheritance.

In *Pink Ludoos*, it's Gugan's destiny to defy that tradition. At 19, Gugan is doing her best to straddle two cultures. She smokes dope, sneaks in a window after staying out all night with her boyfriend, but has also agreed to an arranged marriage.

But when she finds herself pregnant by her boyfriend with triplet girls, she decides to keep them, even though it means being kicked out by her mother — played by Shaheen Khan (*Bend it Like Beckham*) — and being ostracized by the Indian community.

Despite the heavy issues, the movie is funny and that, coupled with a punchy script, attracted Toronto-based Gaurav Seth to direct it.

"It raises this serious issue of male domination in Indian culture and treats it in a very playful, palatable way," says Seth who shot the film last year in Victoria B.C. in just 16 days on a shoestring budget of \$1.2 million.

"In some ways India is so progressive, but on the other hand still so backward. The Indians didn't have a problem electing a woman as prime minister but they still hang onto this prejudice that boys are better than girls," says Seth, 36, who was born in Mumbai, studied film in Russia and came to Canada in 1999.

The film has received favourable reviews at other film festivals including in San Francisco and Whistler, though some Indians in the audience were defensive about the negative portrayal of their culture.

They told Seth that the mainstream tends to associate Indian culture only with the caste system and arranged marriages and as a director it was his duty to present the positive side. But Seth — who also directed the critically acclaimed *A Passage to Ottawa* in 2002 — said he's comfortable enough with his culture not to gloss over its negative aspects.

Though they have not yet seen the movie, Grewal and Dosanjh are not surprised it has stirred controversy.

"You don't want to sweep problems under the carpet, but when you're an ethnic minority you're already stereotyped so much, you don't like to see those stereotypes reinforced in film," says Grewal.

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While the Indian community is quite diverse, such portrayals have the effect of "painting the community with the same brush," particularly in the eyes of the mainstream audiences, adds Dosanjh.

When you're a filmmaker who belongs to an ethnic minority there's huge pressure for you to be socially responsible to that community, adds Mott, who has a degree in English literature and works as a supply teacher.

"Indians don't like to see their flaws pointed out.

"They still want something where the audience goes out and says, 'Indians are great people and wouldn't it be great to be part of that culture.'

"We haven't allowed audiences to see our vulnerabilities because we're still looking for approval from white people."

Mott jokingly refers to her film as "group therapy" for Indians.

"Everybody has to admit there's a problem, then we can start addressing the issues. It (*Pink Ludoos*) will appeal to Indians who are objective about the culture, but if you're still in denial, probably not."

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