

## Out of the Box

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AMA movie fan but these days I only have time to watch films during long flights. On several recent flights I noticed a Bollywood film with an unusual title: *Toilet: A Love Story*.

I have resisted watching it until I was on a really long flight and so had a lot of time.

It turned out to be a great find. Even though I have visited India several times I can't really say I had any real experience with its diverse culture.

This film certainly gave me a taste of that.

But it also dwelled on some universal social issues: gender equality, conflict between tradition and modernization, and the role of religion in society. That was certainly unexpected for a film about toilets.

The story line is about Keshav, a relatively uneducated rural villager who falls in love with, and marries, a female university graduate (a "topper") Jaya.

His father is very religious and traditional whereas her family is modern and highly educated. A crisis emerges when she moves into his family house and

discovers it does not have a toilet. In that region (rural Uttar Pradesh), few homes have toilets. Men relieve themselves wherever and whenever they feel the need, but women traditionally have to answer the call of nature out in the bushes after dark, often in groups.

Keshav wants to build a toilet in the house but his father objects on cultural heritage and religious grounds.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, Keshav comes up with several solutions, including using the toilets on the train that stops for seven minutes in the village.

Unfortunately, none of these stop-gap solutions are sustainable and Jaya eventually returns to live in her parents' house, which has a toilet.

Finally, Keshav succeeds with a petition to the village government to build a toilet in the front yard, but it is half destroyed by his father while he is asleep.

In a desperate move to draw public attention and pressure on the issue, Jaya files for divorce on the grounds of the unavailability of a toilet.

The case draws much media coverage and protests nationwide, and finally catches the attention of a national minister who sees an opportunity to use this case to force the rapid implementation of the national government's 2014 plan to build 110 million toilets in



# Toilet culture

the country. To speed the paperwork through bureaucracy, he deliberately has the government office toilets locked to make the officials feel the pain of not having the convenience of toilets.

Eventually, the plan is approved and the divorce becomes unnecessary. Keshav's father, in the meantime, has a revelation after his mother suffers a fall.

As she cannot go to the field to defecate, he has to let her use the half-demolished toilet that Keshav had built in the house. He apologizes to Jaya. The villagers start to accept and use the newly built toilets.

It is a happy ending.

The real theme was not about toilets, but about women's rights, the conservatism of cultural heritage versus a national need for modernization, and the power of religion and superstition over public policies.

Through the film, I had a window into part of

Indian culture: the shocking fact that much of rural India still does not have a basic facility that we in Hong Kong take for granted (although I never had an in-house toilet growing up in Hong Kong), that superstition and religion still cast enormous influences on the daily life of many Indians, and that equality often takes a back seat to cultural tradition.

That this film is able to bring out these universal social issues in a lighthearted comedy is the secret to its success.

I saw a cover story in a Hong Kong newspaper that this film has become a big box office hit in China. It was also second on Bill Gates' best six things in 2017. My hat off to Bollywood!

I just wish Hong Kong's film industry can recover some of its mojo from its halcyon days when its films were big hits all over Asia.