There was always some taint to the notion of poverty in India. Shameful for the rabid nationalists, it was a sign of the struggle in postcolonial times; a difficult problem for representation since poverty for the “foreign eyes” was always different than what it meant to the people living in the slums and villages. The problem of representing that poverty was unique as it was difficult. Indian cinema post-Independence carved out its own style to achieve that. But the new poverty in the age of neo-liberal economy and globalization has a stink to it. It is brutal, ugly, harsh and allied with similar suffering in other parts of the world. India’s prosperity grows in the shadow of its poverty. Kanu Behl’s Titli (2014), is a living testimony to that condition, fiercely laid out, with a sharp cutting edge to its politics. It is not just about Delhi or the new townships that have grown on its outskirts, but it is a scream for attention to the poverty of globalization.

Titli is the youngest of the three brothers, desperately trying to “run away from this fu*@ing hell hole.” He is trying to save money by any means possible, to buy a parking garage space in a shopping mall. His brothers, who live with their infirmed but intrusive father in a broken apartment in poor neighborhoods, are criminals. They hijack cars and sell them, beating, hurting and abandoning the drivers in the process. They are violent brutes, repulsive and disgusting. When a hijacking and kidnapping attempt goes awry, someone at the police station steals Titli’s money, making him broke again. His divorced elder brother asks him to get married so they could “have a helping hand in the business and a front” to their shop selling sundries. Titli is forced to marry Neelu, who, it turns out, is reluctant partner to the family business of kidnapping and stealing. She is also “in love” with some “Prince” but agrees to an odd offer to stay in marriage until Titli escapes from the rut he is in.

The narrative is an unending series of violent sequences in which all characters, Titli included, display limitless and heartless brutality. The assault on sensibilities is relentless, with each scene pushing the limits of what survival means in a circle of poverty and violence. Unlike the older stories of poverty and despair, there is no relief here; this is as gritty as it gets and as harshly realistic as portrayal of poverty can become. Violence is not sensationalist, but exposed in its material existence. There is no hope, not even for Neelu, who harbors some dream of escaping the marriage, the despicable family and a pragmatic but gradually cruel husband, Titli. The film maintains a pace of rapid intensity, combing a few ironic elements in its design (Neelu and Titli’s wedding ceremony and Titli’s new-found empathy for his divorced sister-in-law stand out as examples). Namrata Rao’s editing keeps the frantic pace but keeps the broad tableau open.

The earlier frames of the film, tighter and claustrophobic, open up occasionally in the narrative but as the collapse of the character continues, the backdrop of Delhi’s prosperity comes more pronounced. The prosperity comes in full view as the already chaotic, violent and poverty-ridden world to which Titli belongs draws a sharp contrast. Titli, “the butterfly,” attempts to put his world together, as his devious machinations growing intense. The world around him stays the same, colder, brutal but ever-so prosperous. This is a crime-drama as much as it is a family play; it is about violence as it is about the forces that made it possible. Kanu Behl’s background as a documentary filmmaker allows him to further broaden the range of new realism of Indian cinema. This realism, unlike that emerging from Anurag Kashyap, is not a local denial of the non-realist tradition (rejection of Bollywood aesthetics). Instead, it is rooted in the realist currents of world cinema. It appeals to global conditions from a local perspective. In such a situation, there is no human agency; the social and economic conditions reign over the protagonists. This is the second
feature of realism in world cinema that Thomas Elsaesser speaks of, as it returns to push the limits of the photographic image’s capabilities to capture conditions. Here, the conditions are those of economic divisions; social depravity, and criminal abundance. Here it is, “life-as-is,” brought in full glare of its living dimensions, devoid of pathos or spaces of identification for the viewer. To that end, this is a significant contribution to world cinema.

The film made India’s entry into Cannes *Un Certain Regard* in 2014. For a debut feature, that is a great accomplishment. But to do justice to its main strength, the film ought to circulate beyond film festivals, making the best of the VOD possibilities.

**Category:** Indian Cinema, World Cinema