



* Shah Rukh and Deepika pose with director Rohit Shetty and some thugs from the film.

A film named idiocy

Chennai Express is a pointer to the way

Bollywood bigwigs presume that Indian audiences are a bunch of morons. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Much of the Indian cinema that we see even in this day and age is a sheer insult to even the most basic of human intelligence. Rohit Shetty's latest two-hour-plus blockbuster called *Chennai Express* is not only a fine example of what I just said, but also a pointer to the way Bollywood bigwigs presume that Indian audiences are a bunch of morons.

Deepika Padukone plays a village belle named Meenamamma, and she is the daughter of a South Indian don (Sathyaraj), who in his greed to control a second village wants to get his daughter married to a Tamil goon. Meenamamma runs away from home and boards the *Chennai Express* in Mumbai, which is all set to chug to the South.

We see Meenamamma making a dash for the train as it begins to move out of the platform. Shah Rukh Khan's Rahul is on board with an urn containing the ashes of his grandfather that his grief-stricken widow instructed her grandson to immerse in the sea off the holy town of Rameshwaram. But Rahul, single, naughty and cavalier at 40, plans to hoodwink the old lady, get off at the Mumbai suburb of Kalyan, meet his two pals and go on a holiday to Goa. We see Meenamamma running to

catch the moving train, and Rahul helps her — and three horrendous looking thugs, all cousins of the girl, chasing her and hoping to take her back to her father.

Do you call this a script? Or even a story? A five-year-old will be able to narrate something far more logical than this.

What is Meenamamma doing in Mumbai, and, pray, why is she trying to get on to a train which will take her towards father's little kingdom? And *Chennai Express* must have been on a double slow run for Rahul to help four people to get on — one after the other. The train had not still crossed the platform when the last of the cousins settled on the seat. By the way, I thought that the bogies of Indian trains today were connected to one another through vestibules. Shetty must have forgotten this or must have deliberately overlooked it to enable his lead actors to meet.

There is more coming to bang your logic into senseless stupor. Meenamamma is Tamil, but is unable to pronounce a single word in the language with the vaguest of accuracy. Maybe she grew up in Punjab or Portsmouth. Her hunk of a suitor, another Tamil, talks Tamil with flawless Punjabi/Hindi accent. Maybe, he just migrated to Tamil Nadu from the Hindi belt

to take over his father's nefarious business.

So, in the Shetty scheme of things, there is nothing called casting or casting director. Padukone looks alluring. Take her. So what if she has to portray a Tamil girl, but cannot speak Tamil to save her life. Her unsavoury suitor looks huge and menacing. Great. So what if he cannot lisp the most basic of Tamil words. Let him come in. *Chalta Hai!* Indian masses merely go for looks. Who cares if the plot sounds implausible or the narrative is piloted through a maze of idiocy.

Let us get a little ahead with the *Chennai Express* as it passes along some of the scenic splendours of the Western Ghats. I could not understand why Rahul would sit put on the train when the thugs were not really interested in taking him along with them. Probably, the 40-year-old bachelor boy wanted to ogle Meenamamma, and who cares if his friends were frantically waiting for him, first at Kalyan and then at Karjat. And by this time, Rahul's mobile telephone had been flung out of the train by one of the cousins.

Midway on the *Express*' run, the goons pull the chain. The train stops, and father don is waiting on the tracks with a huge crowd to receive his runaway daughter. Even Hans

Anderson's fairy tales would seem more rational than this Shetty movie.

Chennai Express thereafter chugs into one senseless stop after another. There is romance, there are fights, there are cars sturdier than battle tanks and there are characters stereotyped and stupid, characters who run around with sickles. In Shetty's imagination, there are no real characters — at least not in Tamil Nadu.

To top all this, Shetty's hero, Khan, is no actor. At best, he seems like a glorified, hugely paid, 'nautanki' artist, who is called upon to play a joker in an attempt to tickle the viewer. The humour falls flat, most of the time. And *Chennai Express* goes off track with its mayhem which Shetty and his team would term film.

Vijay's *Thalaiva*

Now one more Tamil movie has run into rough weather. Actor Vijay-starrer *Thalaiva* (Leader) did not open in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry on August 9.

The film was released elsewhere though, in foreign territories and even in the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu. This is a dangerous trend, for it often leads to pirated disks being circulated in a non-screening region. This kills revenue, and Vijay is one of the few stars whose name on the credit list spells box office bonanza. Reverentially and affectionately called Ilayadalaapathy (Junior Commander), he is — like some other actors and actresses — celebrated as a demi-god.

Several reasons are being attributed for *Thalaiva* not screening (at the time of writing this column)

in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. It is said that members of a political group sent threat notices to some of the biggest multiplexes in Chennai warning them not to show the movie. They felt that *Thalaiva* was taking pot-shots at some caste-based issues.

Thalaiva also faced a legal hurdle when the son of a Mumbai businessman — on whom actor Vijay's character is reportedly based — filed a civil suit stating that the film had distorted the lives of his father and grandfather.

The son averred that his father as well as grandfather were well-known community leaders among the Tamil population of Mumbai's Dharavi. But they were being depicted as 'dons' in the movie.

Finally, *Thalaiva* also ran into a financial hurdle when the state government refused to give it tax exemption. This can lead to losses for producers/distributors.

Tamil Nadu, like some other states in India, is overly touchy about cinema. There is always some group or the other — both political and apolitical — which raises objections to a film.

We saw this in the case of Kamal Hassan's *Viswaroopam*, when some Muslim outfits felt that the movie portrayed the community in bad light. The film could not open for several weeks. By then the excitement had waned.

However, sources said then that the "actual reason" for *Viswaroopam* running into a storm was Hassan's "disagreement" with a television channel over screening rights. The channel had the "support of a political party".

The truth, we would never know. In the case of *Viswaroopam* and, now, *Thalaiva*.

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