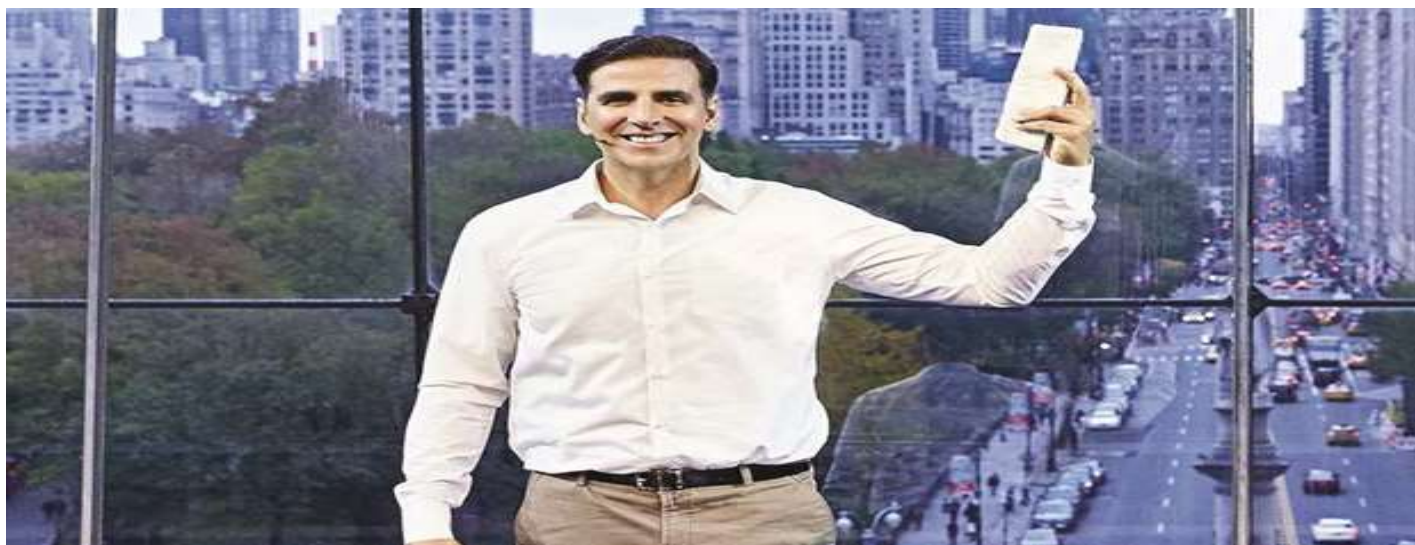


Akshay Kumar is falling into preaching scripts

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CAMPAIGNER: Akshay's Pad Man also suffers from classroom approach.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Bollywood actor Akshay Kumar is the new Mr Bharath. Also as the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party sympathiser – or that is what is being told – the new title fits Kumar to the T. Once, Bollywood star Manoj Kumar had earned this honorific. His films like Purab Aur Paschim, Roti, Kapada Aur Makan and Kalyug Aur Ramayan among others were highly patriotic, and sang the song of India.

Admittedly, Akshay's cinema is more veiled than Manoj's. It reflects on important social issues, but its messages are seldom subtle. They sound too preachy for comfort. Remember Akshay's sermon at the end of Jolly LLB 2 – where he lectures the judge, the defence lawyer and all those present in the courtroom about the evils of mollycoddling anti-social elements, who bump off innocent men and free terrorists – all for a huge sum of money.

Akshay's Toilet: Ek Prem Katha fictionalised the problem of shortage of toilets in India. About 50 percent of India's one billion plus population does not have toilets at home or loathe to use public washrooms. And these men and women use fields and even the roadside open places as toilets. And women often fall prey to rapists in such vulnerable situations.

Toilet : Ek Prem Katha, by Shree Narayan Singh, while zeroing in on a lofty subject, failed to impress me, because there was something pretentious about the movie. Sermonising sentences do not appeal to me any longer, for I feel like sitting in a moral science classroom.

Yes, Singh and Akshay may argue that it is only this kind of approach which will have the power to drive home a point in India's countryside. Superstitious men and women, whose literacy levels may not be adequate enough to instil a sense of personal and public hygiene in them may need stars like Akshay to tell them what is right and what is wrong. They may want to believe Akshay Kumar, not a social worker out there in the villages trying to teach about public hygiene.

Akshay's latest, Pad Man, which hit theatres on February 9, focusses on yet another hugely challenging issue in India – the use of sanitary napkins. The two most important hurdles here are steep prices and safe places to dispose them off.

Inspired by a Coimbatore entrepreneur, Arunachalam Muruganantham, who created a huge awareness for sanitary napkins by manufacturing a low-cost product, beating the expensive one made by multinationals, R Balki's Pad Man has Akshay essaying Lakshmikant Chauhan in a Madhya Pradesh town. Despite stiff opposition and degrading humiliation, Chauhan is bent on ensuring that women use the pad. He certainly wants his new wife, Gayathri (Radhika Apte), to use it. But neither she nor his sisters come around to his way of thinking – till public disgrace forces Chauhan to leave his home to pursue his dream to herald a social revolution in women's sanitation.

We all know that Muruganantham won this war and garnered accolades, but remained steadfast in his mission. So, he refused to commercialise his invention of an inexpensive machine to make pads. Instead, he gave the machines to self-help groups. Chauhan follows the real pad man.

But Hindi cinema being Hindi cinema, Balki had to include an entertainment angle. In walks Sonam Kapoor's Pari Walia, a young professional whose chance meeting with Chauhan during an emergency. A romance between the two merely mucks up the movie, and even the run-up to the Walia-Chauhan professional relationship is clumsily written.

What is much more irksome in the preachy undertones of the script – a pit that Akshay has been falling into time and again. His Airlift (where he spearheads a rescue during the Iraq-Kuwait war), his Toilet and now Pad Man have all suffered from this – what I call – classroom approach. I think Indian audiences are quite mature today, and do not need to be spoon fed.

Savarakathi, a dark comedy in Tamil

There is little doubt that Mysskin – who, once inspired by the protagonist, Prince Myshkin, in Dostoevsky's novel, The Idiot, changed his

name from Shanmugha Raja to Mysskin – loves Western literature, and most likely European cinema. His 2017 Thupparivaalan was a take on whom he calls his favourite literary character, Sherlock Holmes. Now, I could not miss the strong resemblance that Savarakathi – scripted by Mysskin and helmed by his brother, G R Adithya -- has to Serbian auteur Emir Kusturica's movies like Black Cat, White Cat, Life is a Miracle and others.

Kusturica is a legend of course, and his cinema of the absurd is magical and mesmeric. A mindboggling number of colours, a sheer variety of characterisations and vivid vibrancy fill his canvas, and out of this rumbling run of events, I have seen great stories emerge, meaningful and mighty. There is nothing frivolous about Kusturica's creations.

Mysskin comes somewhat close to this kind of cinema in Savarakathi, aided by his brother. As the ruthless Manga, Mysskin out on a day's parole from prison, clashes with a foolish barber, Picha (Ram), as he rides his rickety motorbike with his heavily pregnant wife, Subhadra (Poorna), and two young children to attend the marriage of his physically challenged brother-in-law (getting secretly wedded to a rich girl). Picha's bike hits Manga's plush car at a traffic junction, and the barber gets into a war of words with the outlaw. Manga's bruised ego pushes him to chase Picha for a whole day – till the parole ends.

Mercifully, the chase fraught with hilarity does not – like much of Tamil cinema – slip into the shoddy and the silly. Humour has a certain class here, and attracts smiles rather than laughs. The events race, and include the most outlandish: Watch a pregnant Subhadra escape from a hospital, where Manga had forcibly carted her, by jumping over several parapet walls, watch that part where Poorna's brother hurries the marriage registrar to complete the paperwork quickly and watch Ram who after pretending to be a strongman, cowers before the towering, heavyweight of a Manga. There is a lot more of the unexpected here.

The dark comedy kept me engrossed – certainly the first half, with Mysskin, Ram and Poorna putting their best foot forward. Poorna was a revelation to me. As the highly hysterical and stone-deaf mother of two and expecting the third, she is marvellous as a woman who has no clue why the bad men are chasing her family.

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