

Film Review: 'Why Cheat India' is a rocky ride to the murky side of education



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CHENNAI: Exam malpractice, plagiarism and cheating are said to be common in India's higher education system. With hundreds of thousands of students chasing degrees in engineering or medicine, it's an open secret that fraudsters and students alike can make good money from those desperate to gain top qualifications.

Soumik Sen's movie "Why Cheat India" follows the story of one such conman, Rakesh "Rocky" Singh, played by Emraan Hashmi.

Rocky is a sly, quick-talking figure, who runs an operation outsourcing entrance examinations and assignments for wealthy but dim-witted students to whizz kids low on cash. The former get places at top colleges; the latter, meanwhile, are handsomely rewarded, with Rocky taking a cut of the proceeds.

Starting in the 90's and running to the present day, it is a cold neoliberal treatise (Rocky's closing speech, betraying no remorse, defends his business for benefitting both poor and wealthy students alike). But it is also a reflection on the hopelessness of ambition for many small-town Indians, powerless in the face of a vast, urbanized society that values money above all.

There are several compelling performances. The story of Snigdha Deep Chatterjee's Satyendra, and his rise and fall through a world of manipulation, greed and high living, is a breath of fresh air. Shreya Dhanwanthary, meanwhile, making her debut in a Hindi film, puts in an assured display as Nupur, Satyendra's sister, who falls for Rocky's irresistible charm.

The film is far from a hit, however. It is overwritten, and its drive to push the narrative that, ultimately, all is bleak is too tiring to engage with over the course of two hours. In addition to the overwrought script, the editing is a hatchet job; the combination of the two makes the film both disjointed and, frankly, sloppy.

What is even more concerning is that, Chatterjee and Dhanwanthary aside, the cast and characters are generic and one-dimensional. "Why Cheat India" has tackled an interesting subject matter, an area of widespread organized criminality rarely explored on screen. Yet what Sen has produced, sadly, is not a convincing portrayal, nor compelling action. It is a missed opportunity.
