CINEMA

From *Midnight's Children* to *Special 26*

Gautaman Bhaskaran gives his verdict on two recent releases

This week I am in a mood to fly from film to film. I have seen several in the past few days. Most of them have disappointed me, and being a slave to my conscience, I never walk out of a cinema, however stupid or boring a movie might be.

When my friends tease me about a profession that involves watching films and being paid for watching them, I quip that they do not understand how painfully torturous it can be to sit through a movie that neither moves on the screen nor moves me.

I would ask my pals to imagine a long day at a festival starting at the crack of dawn and ending well past midnight (with four films, interviews and writing packed in) that throws up a lousy celluloid work as the last show. I know how my body and mind would long for that bed to curl on. Well, that is the hazard my assignment as a movie critic entails, and I have over the years learnt to take the smooth with the rough.

Let me talk about two works, one quite bad, the other excellent.

The other day, I went for Deepa Mehta's *Midnight's Children*. For months, Mehta had managed to create an exciting buzz about her film. She has always been quite good at that. Of course, it has often caused her huge problems.

Her *Fire* provoked radicals, who felt that the director had no business to talk about lesbianism — which it did not. But who is to reason with men who are bent on destruction at the slightest hint of controversy.

Mehta's *Water* may have passed unnoticed, but for the publicity the shoot was given. It drew the attention of fanatics, who drove the helmer and her cast as well crew out of Varanasi, the chosen location.

Mehta's latest, *Midnight's Children*, was mostly shot in Sri Lanka (where *Water* too was), and it did raise some hackles in India. Salman Rushdie — who had authored *Midnight's Children* and also co-wrote the movie script with Mehta — was stopped from visiting Kolkata, because his *Satanic Verses* is still banned in India. Mercifully, *Midnight's Children* opened in the country without the kind of trouble that Kamal Hassan faced with his *Viswaroopam*.

Well, *Midnight's Children* narrates the story of those innumerable children who were born at the stroke of the midnight hour on August 15, 1947 when India became an independent nation. However, the plot has more to do with the life of one such boy, Saleem Sinai (Satya Bhaba), who lands in a rich man's house after the hospital nurse (Seema Biswas) — in a soap operatic style — switches him with a child from an affluent family. The child of rich parents grows up in a poor household.

The film pans across decades, trying to incorporate many of the landmark events that overtook the subcontinent (partition of Pakistan and India's Emergency), and the paths of these two boys (the other is portrayed by Tamil actor Siddharth) cross. Mehta infuses magic realism into her political allegory, and underlines how destiny has its last say and laugh.

Midnight's Children sets out ambitiously, even manages to hold on to that high ground for a while, but fizzles out long before the credits roll on at the end of 148 minutes. It left me deeply dissatisfied; I found the script lose its focus, and the work could not hold my attention. Obviously, Mehta was too reverential towards the book, and in her eagerness to incorporate all the literary sub-plots, slides and slips. Probably, it is not always a good idea to let the author of a book pen the movie script as well.

In the end, despite some interesting performances by Biswas and Saleem's grandfather, Dr Aziz (seems like homage to E M Forster's *A Passage to India*), played by Rajat Kapoor, Mehta cannot save her work from appearing fractured and overly glossy.

A quiet splash

Now take Neeraj Pandey's *Special 26*. It opened along with *Midnight's Children* and *Viswaroopam* — but with the least fanfare or PR build-up. And what a gripping movie it is. An excellently crafted story mounted on a neat, believable script and edited with a style that took my breath away.

If at all there is something amiss, it is a stodgy and wooden performance by one of the ensemble cast. Akshay Kumar has never been known for acting ability, and as a conman in Pandey's second work (after his brilliant *A Wednesday*, whose sequel, I am told, is coming), Kumar's Aju is no scene stealer. But, yes, he somehow manages to hold one's interest because the role — at least most of it — entails one to look more stern than soft, with a blank, expressionless face.

Also, Pandey falls prey to what I term "box-office pull", by inserting a romance between Aju and Priya Chavan (Kajal Aggarwal) and a few songs — a needless distraction in an otherwise taut crime thriller.

However, the film manages to tide over these drawbacks by offering some marvellous acting. Anupam Kher (as P K Sharma, assistant to Aju), Manoj Bajpayee (as the Central Bureau of Investigation/CBI officer, Wasim Khan), Jimmy Shergill (Sub-Inspector Ranveer Singh) and Divya Dutta (policewoman Shanti) excel. Certainly Kher and Bajpayee, and if Shergill could not do as well, it was because his character has little to offer.

Above all, the plot and pace drew me right into the gripping incidents — inspired by a heist in a huge jewellery shop in the heart of Mumbai in the late 1980s. Of course, Pandey uses this robbery as the last one in a series, a huge one at that, to take us into a climax, a twist, which I knew was coming, but could never put my finger on what exactly it would be, as I sat watching the four conmen sail through one con job after another.

Posing as CBI officers and smartly turned out, replete with ties and polished shoes, Aju and Sharma along with two others (essayed by Rajesh Sharma and Kishore Kadam) pop into the narrative with a raid on a minister's house in Delhi, curiously on India's Republic Day. Wads and wads of currency notes tumble out of every wall and roof of the man's house, and after the lot had been carried away by the "CBI guys", the minister finds what a big fool he has been made into. But he does not want to file a police report. Obviously, the money is all unaccounted wealth made through graft and corruption.

This precisely is what Aju's gang capitalises on: the victims' inability or unwillingness to file police reports (thereby attracting press publicity) and fear for agencies like the CBI and Income-Tax. A dread that still haunts dishonest Indians, though today's communications systems would have made the exploits of Aju's men far more difficult to pull off. The 1980s India had no mobile phones, and we could see how the fake CBI officers effortlessly disconnecting telephones by cutting their wires. And see the way phones were tapped in those days.

✱ While *Midnight's Children* (top) relies on spectacle, *Special 26* lets its cast and solid story do the talking.

Pandey enjoys every moment of this period, and never loses sight of those tiny details that give us such pleasure. We see a grimy Connaught Place in New Delhi pasted with Vimal ads, lovers at Mumbai's bus stands (Bandra, was it), empty roads with Maruti 800s appearing dwarfed in the presence of large Ambassador cars, and marbled hotel lobbies.

Great attention has been paid to the period, and I could not catch a single false prop sticking out. All these are helped by a screenplay which conforms to the milieu.

In the end, the real CBI gets into the act, and Bajpayee — delivering his lines with an acerbic tongue, a piercing gaze and a perfect sense of timing — sinks into Wasim Khan in order to try and catch the fake guys at their own game. What follows is a pulsating cat-and-mouse match in which the head is used, not the arms. There is absolutely no violence, and yet the drama keeps you captive. Completely and joyously.

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