



Revelling in mediocrity

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

When I ran into Shekhar Kapur at the recent Dubai International Film Festival, he quipped in reply to a question from a fellow Indian who was with him, that Bollywood could hope to be “internationally recognised” only when it stops “celebrating mediocrity”.

Kapur, who chaired the Muhr Asia Africa Feature Jury, was not saying anything that had not been said or written before. In fact, I have stated many times in my columns that India not only tolerates a mediocre cinema, but also celebrates and worships it.

So Kapur was merely reiterating what many now admit, at least in private conversation. However, Bollywood alone does not produce bad fare.

Now, take this Tamil movie I watched just the other day. Titled *Endrendrum Punnagai* (Forever A Smile), it certainly did not bring a smile to my face. It turned out to be ridiculous. Mueenuddin Ahmed's second feature, *Endrendrum Punnagai*, promoted itself as a romantic comedy, but it did not quite fit either of these bills.

Much like many other Tamil films, Ahmed's work has the standard comic interludes, and much like most of Tamil cinema, the humour is inane, alternating between buffoonery and lewdness. In fact, for the first 30 minutes or so, Ahmed lets his camera wander aimlessly — capturing three friends — Gautam (Jiva), Baby (Santhanam) and Sree (Vinay Rai) — as they go about with their juvenile pranks even while seemingly trying to run an advertisement agency.

Gautam's father — played as ever to perfection by Nasser and also wasted ever so often in roles as unchallenging as this — abandoned by his wife, tells his seven or eight-year-old son never to trust a woman. The boy takes this to heart, not only growing up into a woman hater, but also pressuring Baby and Sree to remain single. It is only when Gautam's pals decide defy the no-marriage rule that a crack develops in an otherwise firm bond.

Endrendrum Punnagai is a predictable piece of a movie where we know what would happen when Trisha Krishnan's Priya walks into the lives of the three men as a project consultant to an ad film being made by them.

It is bad enough that much of Tamil cinema is clocked in clichés and crassness. What is worse is that it continues to handle actors with immense potential with utter callousness.

Trisha is a fine actress, who can masterfully deliver an equally fine performance, but she often finds herself playing nothing better than a doll. As for Santhanam, Tamil producers and directors need to take him out of mindless comedy; he could well turn out to be a riveting performer even in lead roles.

Apart from patchiness, Indian cinema — a lot of it at least — is poor on ideas. It keeps returning to the same formulas, gleefully believing that these work, but little realising that audiences keep coming back to theatres because they do not have a choice.

But this prolonged “honeymoon” can end sooner or later. For viewers are beginning to get restless, and they are also getting increasingly exposed to some marvellous movies from other countries that have believable scripts, engaging narratives, brilliant acting and so on. The films also offer plots hitherto not tackled.



INSULTING INTELLIGENCE: A scene from *Endrendrum Punnagai*; below, Santhanam as Baby in the film.

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Noted Irish director Jim Sheridan — who presided over the Muhr Arab Feature Jury at the Dubai festival — is toying with a remarkable idea that he would love to translate into a movie or television series.

“I wonder why nobody has ever thought of making a film on the East India Company, which literally heralded the birth of capitalism. I am fascinated by the way the Company grew in India — from a trading house to a ruling conglomerate”, Sheridan tells me in the course of a lightening 10-minute interview I managed to get with him at Dubai.

He avers that he and Indian actor Sanjay Suri (who was also part of the Sheridan jury) have been wondering why the East India Company had not caught the fancy of Indian writers, helmers and producers.

“The Company fought against Afghanistan



all by itself. It provoked the opium war in China. So when the East India Company introduced capitalism, it was the most ruthless variety. I have never seen such kind of capitalism being the subject in a movie. China and India are part of what I call capitalist communalism, and a film on the East Indian Company will be interesting.”

Sheridan says he will certainly be interested in making a movie set in India — perhaps, about the growth of the East India Company. He will prefer, though, to make a television series on the topic. Yet, he also realises that it is not always easy for an “outsider” to make this kind of cinema rooted in Indian culture, tradition and history.

“There is always this issue of empathy. When people write a film or direct one, they seldom think of the spiritual side of things. And the spiritual dimension is the deepest. It is not easy for an outsider to have this kind of empathic belief”, Sheridan contends.

Despite this, Sheridan sees big American studios making movies for Indians and Chinese in not too distant a future, because of the large presence of these two communities in the USA.

I think studios already are doing this. Big American houses like Fox, Warren Brothers and Columbia are now in India tackling Indian scripts, Indian themes, Indian nuances and Indian actors. Several Tamil movies have been made by them, let alone Bollywood films.

The only thing, though, is that American productions of Indian movies appear no better than those made by desi guys. Strange this is. For, Hollywood fare usually comes with a great script and direction.

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