

Neeraj Pandey's cinema: does the means justify the end?

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MORE OF THE SAME: Aiyary is also a study in disappointment with the system.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Director Neeraj Pandey's disillusionment with the Indian system is hardly concealed in his cinema. Of the five films he helmed, four are unabashed critique of all that is wrong in India today. His debut, *A Wednesday*, which opened a new kind of societal bashing – dignified, decent and decorous – spoke about a common man's angst.

As Naseeruddin Shah playing the nameless individual tells the Mumbai Police Commissioner how uncertain and insecure life has become in the face of terror attacks, we, the audience, realise with a start, but heck, how true. Shah explains that every time he steps out of his house, his wife gets paranoid. She keeps telephoning him on one pretext or the other. Have you had lunch? Have you taken your pills? Will you get me vegetables on your way back home? All this is a mere excuse, quips Shah, for his wife to keep checking if her husband is safe!

While the 2008 *A Wednesday* was a hard-hitting commentary on the state of security in today's India – with bomb blasts and gun-toting extremists making a mockery of human life – I had serious reservations about Pandey's quick-fix solution in the feature. If one were to follow his line of thinking, the country can turn into a banana republic.

Again, Pandey's second movie, *Special 26*, which I quite enjoyed and where I, for the first time, liked Akshay Kumar, had me tumbling in turmoil. A dilemma that Manoj Bajpayee, essaying a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) officer, conveyed in a single sentence. "Wah, since he (Kumar) could not get into the CBI, he formed an illegal force" to loot tax evaders.

Set in the 1980s, at a time when there were no mobile telephones and no 24/7 television channels, *Special 26* traces the exploits of Kumar and his associates (including Anupam Kher), who pose as CBI men and raid the offices and houses of corrupt politicians and businessmen. Kumar and his gang of criminals win, win all the way, and the film's last frame shows them enjoying a cricket match at Sharjah.

Will there be a sequel? Pandey had once indicated that there might be one. And will part two serve justice to the fakes?

Pandey's latest, *Aiyary*, is also a study in disappointment with the system. Here the director takes us into the life of a special intelligence unit of the Indian Army. Actor Siddharth Malhotra portrays Major Jai Bakshi, who gets fed up with the questionable nexus between some of the army men and politicians.

When they collude with a mercenary arms dealer to buy weapons at prices several times higher than the actual value, Bakshi turns a rogue to dispense his own brand of justice, and with the upright chief of his unit, Colonel Abhay Singh (an excellent performance by Bajpayee), getting a whiff of the scandal, the movie becomes one long chase. With his arm-candy, Sonia Gupta (Rakul Preet Singh), in tow, Bakshi is smart enough to be a step ahead of his pursuer.

Here again, the moral of the story is dicey, and Pandey turns in a script which is far-fetched and highly unconvincing. Why would an upright and righteous officer like Singh let go his subordinate, Bakshi? Was the older man really so fond of him to pardon him? I have niggling doubts here, because in spite of the fact that *Aiyary* is a fictionalised account, the message seems messy.

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Naachiyar

The essential difference between Tamil and Malayalam cinema relates to make-believe. Admittedly, cinema was once all about creating the magically unbelievable – and seducing audiences to accept it, endorse it and even promote it. And out of this emerged supermen, super women and even divinity.

If an N T Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh once vowed viewers with his deity avatars on screen that later transformed him into the State Chief Minister, Tamil pictures created men like M G Ramachandran (who became the Chief Minister), and are now pushing Rajinikanth and Kamal

Haasan with tall political ambitions.

We have even Tamil stars like Vijay in the wings, waiting to play politician in real life. The cinema from Kerala has seldom resorted to this, with the result that it is edging past Tamil movies — still loathe to let go the temptation to make men and women into some kind of super, super human beings.

Take, for instance, director Bala's latest outing, *Naachiyar* where actress Jyothika, plays the title role, dons the khaki and turns into a punching, boxing being. She is abusive, contrary to what the Tamil Nadu police have been strictly told not to resort to. As *Naachiyar* makes a loud entry into her police station, she is not just rude, but also foul-mouthed and aggressive.

Moments later, an informer tips *Naachiyar* about a missing teenage girl. The cop swings into action, takes the wheel of her vehicle (with her official driver left behind) and goes looking for Arasi (Ivana). But the girl is whisked away by her uncle just as *Naachiyar* storms into the frame. A chase ensues till the uncle's van is intercepted, and out gets the policewoman to beat the daylight out of him.

Highly, highly improbable. No cop will dare this. No woman cop, for sure. But on screen, Jyothika has to be given that medal for bravery, and a halo has to be placed around her. For, only then will she have a chance to win, well, maybe a political fight someday.

But given the kind of mindset in Tamil Nadu, and the huge level of awareness among the youth here, producers and writers must understand that such daredevilry is counter-productive these days — when there is zero tolerance for police brutality among the population, and, more importantly, when people have begun to feel that cinema encourages many an evil.

Why, stalking as well. In *Naachiyar*, G V Prakash who essays a poor boy, Kaathu, is seen following Arasi. But yes, here his stalking pays, and she reciprocates. But look at the newspapers the other day which reported the horrific incident of a dejected stalker setting on fire the girl he wanted to wed. When she repulsed his advances, he tried killing her. With 70 per cent burns, she is battling for life. And this is not the first of its kind in Tamil Nadu.

But, of course, in *Naachiyar*, Arasi and Kaathu live happily ever after, thanks to the policewoman — who ensures that the couple unite. The film, though, begins with a rape case being foisted on Kaathu after Arasi is found pregnant. He is shoved into a juvenile home with its cliched image of boy bullies. *Naachiyar* takes Arasi under her wings, and sees her through her pregnancy.

However, Bala's script — admittedly more optimistic than his earlier ventures — seems all confused. The plot meanders from sexual assault to romance, and finally, we are thrust with the ridiculous. The newborn child's DNA does not match that of its father! And who is this new guy?

The only redeeming feature in *Naachiyar* are fine performances. Ivan is hauntingly refreshing, and Prakash plays the boy from the slums with natural ease. But Jyothika overdoes, and fails to impress.

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