

A tale of two films – the bad, the good

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A still from The Postmaster.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Recently, I saw two movies, one in the Bengali language and the other in Tamil. The first was part of the just-concluded Chennai International Film Festival, the second in a theatre amongst an unruly crowd that whistled, hooted and screamed every time the Tamil hero, Vijay, appeared on the screen. Or, on those dozens of occasions when he turned into a Superman, jumping over high walls, to bash up baddies. Honestly, I missed out on some dialogues because of the din. But the mob of an audience could not care less. It was there to create a ruckus, and it did that shamelessly without the least of respect for public space and sanctity. And after all this suffering, the movie seemed like a third-degree torture.

I have often found that Indian cinema writes a story and script for an actor, and Tamil films have been doing this with an almost obsessive passion. I have seen this in the case of Sivaji Ganesh and M G Ramachandran (MGR). In recent times, Rajinikanth has commanded (maybe even demanded) this – with authors and directors penning plots that transform him from a mere mortal into a demigod. The latest to join this club of actors is Vijay, whose Bairavaa in Tamil language catapults him to unbelievable heights. And writer-helmer Bharathan travels along the roads of Thirunelveli in Tamil Nadu to empower his hero, Bairavaa (Vijay) with almost supernatural powers.

Bharathan's yarn begins in Chennai, where Bairavaa works for a well-known private sector bank as an officer responsible for collecting principals and interests from those unwilling or unable to pay. In one such case with the bank manager having failed to collect Rs64 lakhs from a wilful defaulter, enlists the help of his employee, Bairavaa – who undertakes the operation and succeeds through highly questionable means – methods which some years ago came in for sharp criticism and were stopped by some of the leading banks. I really do not understand how the bank in question in the movie has allowed its name to be associated with such an unlawful activity.

Bairavaa would have hardly finished being the manager's saviour, when he gets embroiled in the life of a girl, Malarvizhi (played by Keerthi Suresh, and what a tongue-twisting name she has been given). She has been traumatised by the unnatural death of her policeman father and a friend, killed by a notorious gangster, PK (Jagapathi Babu) – once a butcher, but now a "respected" industrialist running a medical college, where Malarvizhi and the friend had been classmates.

The rest of the film flows like an evil fairy-tale with Bairavaa using all the powers at his disposal to vanquish PK. More often than not, Bairavaa uses his bare fists to grapple with dozens of hideous-looking men – whose bullets and knives invariably whizz past our hero. Even when tens of sachets containing petrol are hurled at him, and a large mob of hooligans carrying burning torches chases him down the streets of Thirunelveli, he remains undefeated – with the minor inconvenience of having to strip himself of his shirt to display his bare chest (a la Salman Khan).

Yes, there are pauses to these mindless fights (with an irritating background score), when Bairavaa gets tired of running or fisting around or, better still, tossing a coin in the air or preaching before a judicial magistrate the importance of educational institutions being run by noble men. And these pauses are used for Bairavaa and his lady-love, Malarvizhi, to literally explode into songs – a mere excuse to get the lead pair cavorting in exotic locales in designer wear.

Sadly, Vijay is turned into a mere showman – a clever ploy to get his fans into the theatres, and here again he has hardly anything original to offer. In the end, Vijay is a bit of an MGR, a bit of a Rajinikanth and a bit of a Surya. And sadly so. Suresh despite her early promise, makes hardly an impression. But who cares about the heroine in a Vijay movie. He has to hog the title and just about every frame. Indeed, he ends up being the very soul and spirit of a film he stars in. Bairavaa is no exception, and will not appeal to anyone other than a Vijay fan.

The other movie was The Postmaster. Rabindranath Tagore wrote Postmaster in the final years of 1800, when he was leading a lonely life in what was then East Bengal – now Bangladesh. The poet's state of mind and his restlessness find an echo in the story – which Satyajit Ray adapted most poignantly to film in his 1961 Teen Kanya. It had three short stories, one of them was The Postmaster.

The young Bengali director, Srijon Bardhan, revisits Tagore's tale of The Postmaster in his debut work. But as Bardhan told this writer soon

after the screening, "I have modified Tagore's story to make it more contemporary. My story is set in Plassey or Palashi (as it now called, and which is 150 km from Kolkata), and the year is 1971". Lucky for Bardhan, for the village on the banks of the Bhagirathi has really not changed at all since the 1970s, and he found it relatively easy to shoot there. "But we still did build a set at Palashi, and the villagers have left it untouched as a memorial to the movie."

If one were to compare Tagore's *The Postmaster* and Ray's film with Bardhan's *Postmaster*, the essential difference lies in the relationship between the postmaster, Nanda Sen (played by Ishan Mazumdar) and the young maid, an orphan, Ratna (Pujarini Ghosh). While the original maid was barely 12 or 13 and some kind of an outcast in times when girls had to be married by age nine, Bardhan's Ratna is 16 or 17. Sen and Ratna in Bardhan's edition have a sexual relationship that culminates in marriage – a union that his aristocratic family in Kolkata strongly disapproves of, mainly because the girl belongs to a lower caste.

Bardhan avers that although Tagore was a rebel of sorts, he knew that a narrative about sexual love between an older man and a very young girl, a child in fact, would not have been accepted by the society of his day. "But today, romantic love between a man and a much younger woman is common and accepted".

The director says that as a lover of Tagore's prose and poetry, he was fascinated by *The Postmaster* – which "I kept reading and re-reading for years and years, till I found a common thread running through what I visualising for my script and the original story. It was the innocence of love. The girl was really very innocent, and the love she had for the postmaster was divine and pure. My postmaster is also strong on this."

Bardhan's work – as he himself admits – "may be placed somewhere between rank commercial fare and arthouse stuff". It is quite melodramatic, and has the ingredients that go to make a masala movie. "If I make something very arty, I do not think the present-day audience will like it. Certainly, not men and women of my generation (Bardhan is 26). So, I had to make it peppy. But I have retained the essence of Tagore's version."

Apart from introducing sexual love between Sen and Ratna (it was purely platonic in the original), Bardhan steers his story towards marriage between the postmaster and Ratna, and his subsequent dilemma at having to abandon her and their child on the insistence of his father who on his death bed, forces a promise out of his son. Although, Sen makes sure that Ratna and the baby are taken care of (with sufficient money), he, while playing an obedient son, behaves like a cad to a teenage girl, whom he marries and bestows motherhood upon her!

Tagore did not fall into this trap. His postmaster was never in love with his maid, called Ratan, and he had never encouraged her. He never had any romantic notions about the relationship. It is quite possible that the girl being alone and lonely might have developed some sort of affection towards the postmaster. But the love was brotherly, absolutely platonic. In fact, she talks about this in Tagore's tale.

Bardhan – who has also composed music for his film – offers some haunting numbers, and uses the Palashi landscape to give his *Postmaster* a feel of poetry. There is Tagore in this, all right.

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