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Overly Dramatising a Scam



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GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN

The Big Bull

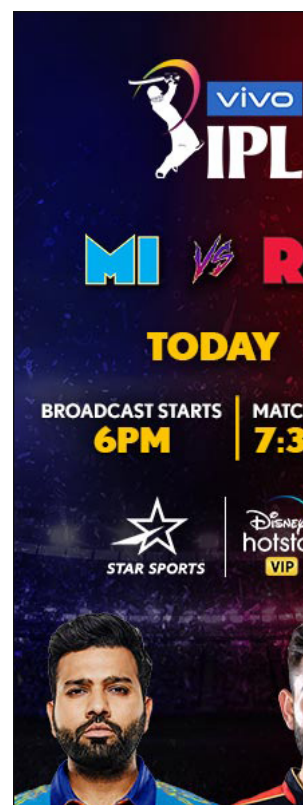
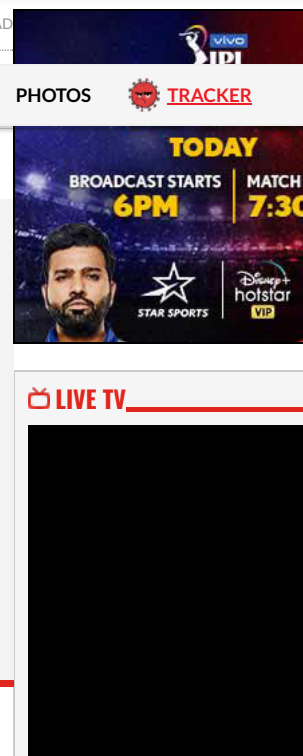
Cast: Abhishek Bachchan, Sohum Shah, Saurabh Shukla, Ram Kapoor, Ileana D'Cruz, Nikita Dutt

Director: Kookie Gulati

Many moons ago, the 'God of Advertising', Alyque Padamsee told me that they sold dreams which men and women strove to make real. In Kookie Gulati's outing on Disney+Hotstar, The Big Bull, Hemant Shah says time and again that he sells dreams, helping the man on the street to achieve what he may have considered impossible. There is a very telling scene in the ploddingly long work with a runtime of about 150 minutes in which Shah (played by Abhishek Bachchan), a broker who has made it good on the Bombay Stock Market, is advising the elevator operator to first buy a tyre before getting a car. An invaluable hint for the guy to invest in a tyre company, which he does and reaps rewards. There are other instances of Shah helping people in need with market tips that turn out to be almost magical.



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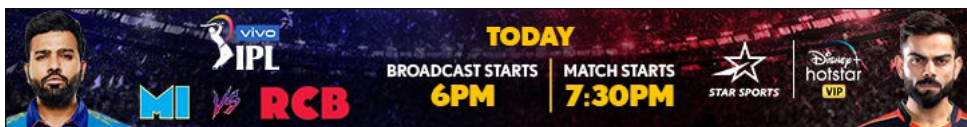
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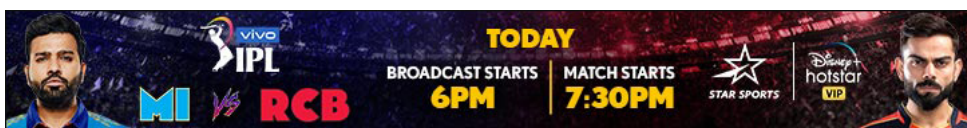
The Big Bull scores with its message that everybody has the right to dream and try and realise it – the way Shah himself made the long leap from a modest home to a palatial mansion. And all because he dared to think big, take even bigger risks, firmly believing in the dictum that there cannot be progress and prosperity without these.

Inspired by the 1980s-1990s Harshad Mehta scam that shook the market, pushing up share prices to impossible digits, Gulati, who has co-written the story and scripted it along with Arjun Dhawan, underlines how India's middleclass profited through Shah's scheming ways. Admittedly, he made a wily use of the many loopholes in the banking and other financial systems. While he feathers his own nest, and what a grand one this is, he is shown to be magnanimous enough to share a bit of his loot – which he justifies by saying that there cannot be anything wrong in playing this game since there is no law against "insider trading". And, this is what he does. The people who benefit – and they are also those in the higher echelons of the financial sector – are deliriously happy with the way Shah craftily pushes up stock prices, greasing the palms of several officials.



But Gulati takes his plot a bit too far for anybody's comfort. To say that the nation was on the verge of bankruptcy and would have gone into a tailspin had Shah not stepped in sounds like pure bunkum. What seems still worse is the implication that India achieved precious little in the first couple of decades after Independence. And Mr Shah arrived as the mighty saviour!

What was it that first motivated him to climb? The girl next door, Priya Patel (Nikita Dutta), whose father makes it clear that Shah can marry her if he can provide her a decent life which translates as a house, a car, etc. And Shah gets on to his upward trajectory, manipulating the market, bribing bank and government officials and disregarding the advice of his own brother, Viren (Sohum Shah), and his mother (Supriya Pathak Kapoor). Shah also rough rides the warning of Manu Malpani (Saurabh Shukla), Chairman of the Bombay Stock Exchange, who tells him in so many words that what the younger man does is nothing but illegal. True, there is no law against "insider trading" practice. But it will come!



Woven into all this is the story of a journalist, Meera Rao (Ileana D'Cruz), whose investigative methods appear brazenly unreal. Look at the way she walks in and out of the chambers of top magnates, and tries twisting them all in her little finger. And this includes, Shah's. She is the film's sutradhar or the conscience-keeper! Finally, she ends up penning a book on The Big Bull.

Bachchan does show patches of performance that are illuminating, and one is reminded of his role in Mani Ratnam's Guru (in which he essays Dhirubhai Ambani). But he is still to get beyond the halo of Bachchan, and fails to sink into the character of a man who is many layered – a loving son, an affectionate brother and a passionate lover/husband. Also, a shrewd businessman who has no qualms about being a downright scamster.

While, Shukla shines in the few scenes he has – as always – the women, including a wonderful actress like Pathak Kapoor – remain pretty much in the shadows. D'Cruz comes off as a pretty prop. There is little authenticity in Rao's character.

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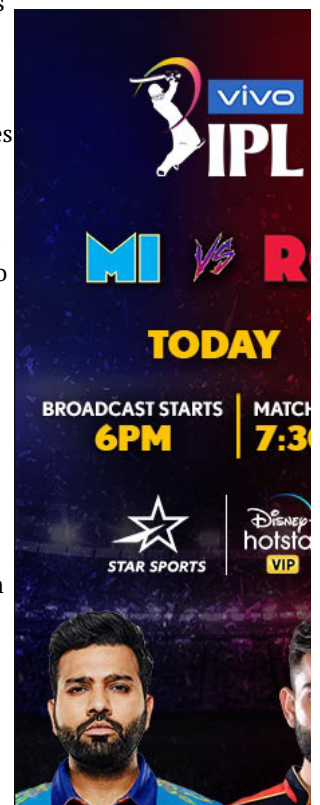
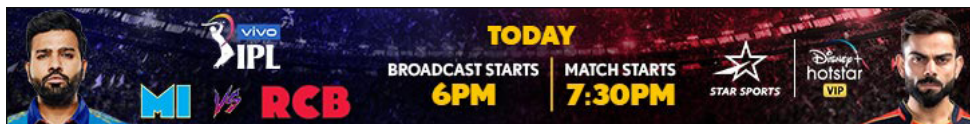


PHOTO GALLERY



Comparisons may be unfair, but the web series, Scam 1992, also about Harshad Mehta was proficiently paced, scripted with subtlety and performed by Pratik Gandhi with a flourish. Bachchan pales here, and The Big Bull in the end looks like, well, “bull”.

Rating: 2/5

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