

# cinema



✱ The cast of Malayalam film *Traffic*, directed by Rajesh Pillai.

## Waiting for the PRO

When it comes to promotion, south Indian filmmakers certainly believe in hiding their light under a bushel, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

A friend of mine from the southern Indian town of Palakkad called me the other morning and suggested that I watch an “excellent” film, *Traffic* made by the Kerala director, Rajesh Pillai. The movie, I knew, had received rave reviews, but living in Chennai I do not get around seeing much of Malayalam cinema. Very few films from Kerala play in my city, although it boasts of a large Malayalam population.

My curiosity about *Traffic* having been tickled, I wanted to see it, and called Pillai. Coincidentally, he happened to be in Chennai, and had already screened his work to some friends. He promised to call me over for the next screening in a few days. After a full week, when I called him again, he said he had completely forgotten about me when he showed his film the second time.

The few other critics and cinema writers in Chennai have had not got the invite either.

We are still waiting to see *Traffic*, which according to Wikipedia “is an emotional thriller based on a road trip from Kochi to Palakkad, inspired by the real events that happened in Chennai”. Further reading indicated that it could be about organ transplant and illegal trade in it.

Certainly sounds interesting, but, well, Pillai has to have the inclination to promote his movie.



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For, however good one’s work may be, it needs to be seen, spoken and written about if has to move. After all, what is art without appreciation?

Lack of public relations (PR) is a major impediment with southern Indian producers and directors. They are extremely lethargic about promotion. And what a contrast to Bollywood mandarins. If ever I want to watch a Hindi film, which may not have been theatrically distributed in Chennai,

all I have to do is punch the numbers on my mobile telephone.

I would either be sent a DVD of the movie concerned or sometimes even invited to Mumbai — air passage, five-star accommodation and food all thrown in. The best part is that at the end of the film or trip, nobody would ever ask me whether I liked the movie and where I would be writing about it. It is of course another matter that I rarely accept such invitations.

In Chennai, on the other hand, for the very few media shows that are held, the PR officer would accost you after the screening to ask that irritating question, “Sir, what did you think of the film”? I have often wondered how I could possibly shoot out an answer minutes after the credits have rolled on! Somehow, professionalism is conspicuously absent in Chennai.

## Flat jokes and a lazy script

Madhur Bhandarkar — long before he became a movie director — used to work in a video parlour, where on many lazy afternoons he would watch cinema from all corners of the earth. It was during those days that he watched *Malgudi Days* on Doordarshan, a television station run by the government of India. He was so impressed by the serial (based on R K Narayan’s literary works) that he decided he would someday pay a tribute to it. This opportunity came to him when he recently helmed *Dil Toh Baccha Hai Ji*.

The film’s opening credits contain a pictorial homage to the cult television show, with caricatures created around the characters. “The show fascinated me. Of course, Shankar Nag was a huge source of inspiration. I made up my mind that whenever I made a rom-com, I would try and honour the show somehow,” said Bhandarkar.

“I sat with my graphic artistes and gave them the photo stills that needed to be worked into caricatures. Since they are designed around situations in the movie, they work as the perfect lasso for the audience to familiarise themselves with the characters in *Dil Toh Baccha Hai Ji*. It is a very old-school concept borrowed from films like *Padosan*, which has a similar beginning with caricatures. It is an attempt to engage the audience.”

However, once the caricatures have faded out of the frames, there is not much humour to get us into guffaws — even though *Dil Toh Baccha Hai Ji* has been touted as a comedy, Bhandarkar’s first ever.

The director who earlier gave us thematic dramas, such as *Chandni Bar*, *Corporate*, *Page 3*, *Traffic Signal* and *Jail*, ends up in his latest work narrating the sob story of three men sharing a roof and bonded by unrequited love. So, the movie may disappoint those Bhandarkar fans anticipating a huge change in his form, style and story line. And the plot of male bonding is not exactly hot enough to seduce one into a theatre. The first weekend cinema admissions have been low.

Naren Ahuja (Ajay Devgn) is fighting loneliness after his recent divorce and takes in two guys, Abhay (Emraan Hashmi) and Milind Kelkar (Omi Vaidya) as paying guests in his sprawling ancestral house. While, Naren tries to infuse a bit of Botox into his sagging physique by dreaming of a possible relationship with a very young office intern, June (Shazhan Padamsee, daughter of the celebrated theatre personality and advertisement guru, Alyque Padamsee), Abhay beds multimillionairess Anushka Narang (Tisca Chopra) and Milind woos a radio jockey, Gungun Sarkar (Shradha Das). However, Abhay’s ulterior motive to get rich through Anushka hits the wall when he actually falls in love with her stepdaughter, Nikki Narang (Shruti Haasan, daughter of Tamil superstar, Kamal Haasan). Milind faces his own variety of misfortune when he is taken for a neat ride.

Clearly, the women here are on top, seductively strutting around, leaving the men absolutely clueless in what turns out to be a lazy script, dampened further by careless performances. Hashmi is making it a habit to sleepwalk through his parts, and Devgn refuses to take off his wooden mask. Haasan is more of a doll, plastic than pulsating. The acting honours undoubtedly go to Padamsee, who really fits her chirpy character in what may well be a career clinching debut in a large canvas of otherwise forgettable actors.

Perhaps, Bhandarkar should stay clear of attempting the comic.

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✱ Madhur Bhandarkar (centre) comes up with a lukewarm comedy in *Dil Toh Baccha Hai Ji*.