

# bollywood

## Reel visions of the real

**T**amil cinema has been in anguish for years. Much like the mega-buck, muscle-ripping Hollywood that has been trying to lord over European celluloid fare even in its own home turf, Bollywood has been systematically eclipsing the “other” films in India.

Strangely, of the 1,200-odd Indian movies in many languages that pop out of the cans every year, a mere 250 are from Mumbai (or Bombay as the city was once called). The rest are produced in several cities, most notably Chennai: roughly 250 annually that are technically as good as Bollywood.

Yet, cross the seas around India and one finds that Tamil cinema is largely treated as Bollywood’s unheard-of cousin. An important reason for this is attitude. A producer or director or even a public relations person from Mumbai is pushy in the right kind of way and willing to walk many extra miles to promote a film.

In Chennai, they have little idea of publicity. Or, it turns into idolising. The days preceding the release of a Kamal Haasan or Rajinikanth movie is marked by fan club frenzy. Huge wooden cutouts of the stars are anointed with milk and honey, and garlanded with roses and jasmine.

At other times, temples are built for stars or they are given bombastic sounding titles, such as “Ulaganayagan” (Hero of the World), “Thalapathi (Group Leader)” “Ilaiyathalapathi” (Young Group Leader) and “Captain” among others.

However, in recent months, a trace of change is perceptible. Producers and financiers are fed up with mollycoddling stars, pandering to their unreasonable demands and giving away 60 or 70% of a total movie budget as their fees, with the result that not enough is there for other areas of production.

There is a marked tendency now to try out actors and not stars, rope in fresh faces and move away from the formula. The 2008 *Subramaniapuram*, written and directed by M Sasikumar, set a new trend. The low-budget movie caught the eye of critics and audiences for its original script, authentic sets as well as costumes, superb helming and imaginative editing.

The auteur recreated the temple town of Madurai of the 1980s and got rank novices

Foreshadowed by the Hindi film industry, Tamil cinema is slowly learning to travel the road not taken with varying success, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**



\* A scene from *Angadi Theru*

to enact the story of crime, disappointment and passion, injecting a marvellous sense of novelty into a cinema gone stale and sour.

*Subramaniapuram* emboldened a few others to get off the beaten track. Magilzh Thirumeni gathered a few men and women and asked them to perform for his *Mundhinam Paartheney* (Seen You Before), a plot that dealt with a problematic issue today: lack of leisure that mars the most personal of relationships. The film looked at the lives of Information Technology professionals. There

was no melodrama here, no exaggeration, and no superficiality.

The narrative focused on a group of software professionals with their peculiar anxieties and aspirations. (One guy was devastated because he was a virgin at 29.) They existed, not quite lived, in claustrophobic, incestuous confines.

The computer screen and the space around it was their world and they had little idea what lay beyond.

Vasanthabalan got more daring in his

*Angadi Theru* (Market Place) by tackling a terrible social malaise that unfolded in a market place (actually Chennai’s Ranganathan Street in T Nagar), maddeningly crowded and emotionally brutalising.

Tens of poor boys and girls, barely out of their teens, are herded out of their villages and appointed as sales staff in a swanky, multi-storeyed showroom.

They are denied decent wages, forced to work excruciatingly painful schedules, given unpalatable food to eat and made to sleep in rooms that resemble cattle-sheds, humiliated and harassed.

Boys are whipped into obedience, girls pawed into meek submission.

The movie looks real with the actors willing to appear ugly, their faces bruised and their clothes dirty – conveying a deep sense of tragedy.

N Lingusamy’s *Paiyya* (Boy) is a delightful spin, a road movie that explores the blossoming of love in adversity. Karthi and Tamannaah play the lead parts in perhaps a first-of-its kind work. Again, an effort has been made to give it a true feel.

But, Lingusamy and his script seemed to have hesitated to travel the whole way on the same mode. The film suffers because it is punctuated by a 1970s and 1980s kind of style that comes in the way of substance. For instance, the hero remains undefeated, fighting off two notorious gangs, one led by a Mumbai don and the other a sumo wrestler look-alike!

*Mundhinam Paartheney* too cannot resist the temptation to step back a little in time. Its song sequences in places like Venice and elsewhere in Europe sticks out like a sore thumb.

Clearly, the dances, all imagined to boot, are mere excuses for exhibiting an array of costumes, some downright distasteful.

In *Angadi Theru*, there is overkill. It remains annoyingly depressing. The greys, if at all there are any, hardly show. The movie is uncomfortably gloomy, despite a feeble shot at portraying human resilience and hope.

Yes, Tamil cinema is now getting into the mood to explore new ideas. But the form is not willing to keep pace.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and international cinema for three decades.)



### Ajith returns to racing

Ajith Kumar, with popular movies such as *Aasal*, *Aegan* and *Billa* behind him, was peeved to find actors like him being compelled by politicians to endorse their views and share the dais with them.

Earlier, actress Khushboo was targeted by radical political elements, which questioned her views on liberal sexual mores. Legal cases were slapped against her (and a temple built for her was ravaged!), and it was only the other day that she got relief from the Supreme Court. In the meantime, Ajith, Khushboo and some others have begun to ignore

politicians and get on with their lives. Ajith is getting ready to jump on to the car race track: he will take part in the Formula 2 Championship in Silverstone in the UK. A great chance for him to merge the real with the reel.

### Vidya Balan as ‘Silk’

Vidya Balan (left) may be a Tamil Brahmin from Palaghat, a community known for its orthodox views. But, well, like the Tamil cinema, the belle is into newer avenues and experiments. Two of her latest films, *Paa* and *Ishqiya*, catapulted her into the big league of not stardom, but acting. As

the mother of a handicapped boy in *Paa* and as the courageous, gun-toting woman in Uttar Pradesh’s badlands in *Ishqiya*, she was inspiring. Now Balan may play Tamil cinema’s ultimate male fantasy, ‘Silk’ Smitha, who committed suicide years ago. Balan and her movie may well provide an insight into what one can term celebrity dejection and death.

### Spoof, Benegal style

Hope Shyam Benegal’s *Well Done Abba* reaffirms that some of India’s best regarded films are deeply rooted in the country’s culture. As one of the pioneers of the New Indian Wave

that began in the late 1960s, Benegal broke out of the studio system and the formula-driven Hindi cinema with his *Ankur* (The Seedling). Set in the countryside, *Ankur* spawned many more such rural tales, the latest being the Boman Irani starrer, *Well Done Abba*. A delightful satire on India’s convoluted corruption, there is not a dull moment in the movie.

What is more, it is no serious homily on bribery and nepotism. Rather it is a great spin on them with one extraordinary high point: that there are still oodles of hope here. Benegal scripts this through one remarkably honest cop and one dogged driver, who never says die!