

cinema



* Madhur Bhandarkar and Aishwarya Rai at the press conference to announce their movie *Heroine* at the Cannes Film Festival, France in May this year.



* Savika Chaiyadej, aka Pinky, is the Thai actress-model chosen to act in *Markandeyan*, apparently more for her fair skin than Tamil language skills.

Fair and, hence, lovely

The other day, I read a small bit of news about Nandita Das, who became a mother some months ago, getting ready to work in a new Thankar Bachchan film. In 2002, she had played the lead role in his *Azhagi* (Tamil). I remember Das telling me how colour-conscious Tamil cinema was, and that she had a tough time stopping her makeup men from trying to lighten her skin tone. In other words, make her fair, and hence lovely.

Indian cinema, certainly movies in southern languages (maybe with the exception of those from Kerala), is obsessed with fair heroines, a fixation that leads to hiring north Indian and even foreign actresses.

The latest craze in Kollywood (from the Kodambakkam area in Chennai famous for its film studios and labs) is for foreign girls. They do not understand or speak Tamil. But this is a minor obstacle, given the availability of excellent dubbing artists, who mimic voices and perhaps even emotions with élan.

What is more, most of these foreign girls have never come to India before. But they are discovered abroad by Tamil movie industry guys who go scouting for them – and all under the pretext of having “fresh faces”. Fresh their faces undoubtedly are, but the actual clinching factor (though unsaid) is the whiteness of their skins (which often starkly contrasts with dark heroines!).

It also appears that producers and directors are the least bothered about the acting skills of these foreign girls. Take the case of Liverpool beauty Amy Jackson, who made her debut in *Madrassapattinam* last year.

Helmer Vijay has been quoted as having said with a dash of pride: “The moment I saw her picture, I knew that she was the person I was looking for. We called her in the morning for an audition, but she coolly walked in at 5 in the evening. I did not even pay attention to her acting, because I knew that she was my heroine”.

Vijayan, who is introducing his son, Shabarish, in *Markandeyan* (Tamil), has chosen a Thai model-actress, Pinky (Savika Chaiyadej is her real name), to play a role. “A part of the film has been shot in Thailand, and it is only appropriate that we have a Thai girl”, he justifies his selection. In the meantime, actor Simbu is searching for a foreign beauty for his upcoming *Vettai Maman*.

All this, it seems, is only to give a fair and lovely look to Tamil cinema.

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Pregnant pause

What is the big deal about Aishwarya Rai announcing her impending motherhood, when millions of women around the world conceive or give birth to babies every hour, wonders **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The past few days have seen a rush of articles in newspapers, magazines and on websites on Aishwarya Rai. Ash is pregnant, screamed one headline. Ash's pregnancy puts Bachchans in a celebratory mood, shouted another, while Amitabh Bachchan Tweeted to say how happy he was.

Indian media has certainly lost its sense of balance. What is the big deal about Rai getting pregnant? She has been married to Abhishek Bachchan for some years, and every married couple in India dreams of starting a family, and it does.

The world over, every hour, millions of women conceive or give birth to babies. In India, hundreds of thousands of women do so. What is so special about Rai that the media has to go to town with this piece of news? Frankly, who cares?

While it is celebration time in the Bachchan bungalow and beyond, there is one man who may not be exactly elated by Rai's impending motherhood.

Madhur Bhandarkar, who is shooting his new film, *Heroine* with Rai in the lead. Must be a disturbed director.

While Rai had agreed to give him 65 days in bulk to complete the movie, Bhandarkar

would need at least 180 days. With Rai's baby due in November, her bump would show quite soon. This is a no, no for *Heroine*. With Rai's character having to look slim and sexy, and to smoke cigarettes as well as snort cocaine, it may be harmful for the child in the womb. Even cigarette smoke on the set can be injurious.

So, there are reports which say that *Heroine* may be shelved. Mumbai-based senior journalist Meena Iyer, who wrote a story on Rai's pregnancy, told me on Sunday over the telephone that the truth was *Heroine* could be dropped.

Let us forget for a moment about the uncertainty of the project and turn our attention to a larger issue in the whole business of Rai's pregnancy.

With the baby set to arrive in the second week of November, she must have conceived in February or earlier this year. Why did she hide it for four or five months? Why did she and Bhandarkar fly down to the Cannes Film Festival in the second week of May to announce *Heroine* at a breakfast media meet?

Surely, Rai must have been aware of her pregnancy by then; she would have been three or four months pregnant by then! Did she hide this piece of information from Bhandarkar

hoping that *Heroine* would be completed before her figure begins to tell the tale?

One can only guess the answers to these questions.

What is more disturbing than all this is the fact that Cannes is being increasingly used as some kind of a platform for inane Bollywood announcements. I could not of course understand the logic behind Rai and Bhandarkar trooping into the French Riviera and calling for a conference to announce their film while they could have done the same thing in Mumbai and seen many more journalists attending it.

The foreign media hardly takes Bollywood seriously, and treats it as some kind of a “comic relief”. Sadly, the better of Indian cinema gets identified with this comedy and suffers.

I dare say the whole Bhandarkar-Rai Cannes business seems like a gimmick at garnering publicity for a movie that if not the helmer, certainly his heroine would have known will run into hassles with her pregnancy.

Indian cinema is going to lose the little respect it has in festivals like Cannes with such gimmickry.
