

cinema



* Shanghai ... a no-nonsense reflection of what India is all about today.

The road to Shanghai

Dibakar Banerjee's film is a hit with the critics, and here's

why, explains the hard-to-please **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

My friends say I am terribly critical. Too hard on the films I watch and write about. Maybe. But sometimes, I let my heart rule me, not my head. I watched Dibakar Banerjee's *Shanghai* twice within five days, and I seemed to love it all the more during the second screening in Kolkata, where I had been on brief visit.

It was one of those afternoon shows, and the huge theatre in a swanky multiplex had just about 20 people. When the movie began to roll, I could not help feeling a sense of excitement — as if I was about to see *Shanghai* for the first time.

Now, if someone were to ask me why I loved *Shanghai* so much, I wonder whether I would have a rational, logical and critical answer. I have always said that however excellent the script, the direction, the performance and the other production values of a film may be, it must, above all, touch my heart.

For instance, I adored John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love*, not his latest, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. I liked Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* a lot more than his earlier *Moulin*

Rouge, which I called it "a movie without a soul". I have never quite fancied Quentin Tarantino's stylised violence, but when he came out with *Inglorious Basterds*, I was literally moved by this fantasy tale of the Nazis. Michael Haneke disturbed and frightened me with his unadorned sadism in *Punary Games*. Yet, Haneke's latest, *Love, Pain & Or at Cannes for Best Picture* was just superb and sublime, touching and beautiful.

Similarly, Banerjee's first feature, *Khosla Ka Ghosla*, was a poignant study of a middle-class man's aspiration to own a house, and his anger and frustration when he loses it to a wily land shark. There were some remarkable performances — especially by Anupam Kher, who essays Kamal Kishore Khosla and finds himself pitted against the ruthlessly corrupt Kishan Khurana (another notable piece of acting by Boman Irani).

I did not like Banerjee's *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* or *Love Sex Aur Dhokha*. Abhay Deol is a lovable Punjabi Sikh thief in *Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!* outwitting cops, security guards and others. It was a zany work, but there was something missing in it, that something which could have pushed it to the skies.

Banerjee's worst attempt so far has *Love Sex Aur Dhokha*. Divided into three sub-plots, the film is a mix of honour killing, MMS scandal and sting operation. Though about the present-day evils in India, *Love Sex and Dhokha* was hardly up to the mark. It was too casual.

But, now arrives *Shanghai*, Banerjee's latest creation with Abhay Deol in what I would unhesitatingly call his career best role. Nephew of yesteryear star, Dharmendra and cousin of Bollywood actors, Sunny Deol and Bobby Deol, Abhay has been seen in several films till now, significant among them being *Dev D* (a modern take on *Devdas* with a positive twist in the end, a contrast to the original Bengali romantic novella written by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay in 1917), *Manorama Six Feet Under* (a thriller with too many turns), *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (about two people who miss a train in the middle of the night in yet another thriller, though with a comic touch).

The actor was also in *Honeymoon Travels Pvt Ltd* and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (a pleasing adventure of male bonding set in Spain).

But as Krishnan, an Indian Administrative Service officer in Shanghai, Abhay is brilliant. With the shrewdness that is said to be an undeniable characteristic of a Tamil Brahmin, Deol's Krishnan is suave, seductive, sombre and silent as he goes about heading a commission set up to find out how the social activist, Dr Ahmadi (Prosenjit Chatterjee), is killed.

Ahmadi arrives in a small town called Bharat Nagar, which (for its politicians' hope) hopes to be another Shanghai (hence the title). And the town is ready to welcome the International Business Park (IBP) and its commercial ventures. But there is catch here. The swanky IBP will be established on poor people's land. Their farms would have to go, and their homes too.

So Ahmadi urges the simple rural folks not to let this happen. Coming out of a public meeting — held against a backdrop of violence with the pro and anti-IBP groups clashing with each other — Ahmadi is run over by a small truck.

While the local police call it an accident, Ahmadi's student and lover, Shalini (portrayed most unimpressively by Kalki Koechlin), thinks it is plain murder. The state's Chief Minister essayed in a brief but powerful cameo by Supriya Pathak Kapoor wants Krishnan (also the vice-chairman of the IBP) to probe the incident.

Helping Krishnan, though without being asked to, is Emraan Hashmi's Joginder Parmar, a videographer who shoots pornographic movies (when he is not covering political meetings and discussions and social functions). A tape recorded by his uncle falls into Parmar's hands, and it contains clinching evidence which can nail the guilty.

Banerjee must have had real guts to cast Hashmi, known till now as a serial kisser. In *Shanghai*, he is completely different, and proves that he is an actor who needs to be taken note of. He is as strong as Deol, with tobacco-stained teeth, a funny smile and a hesitant approach who will ultimately break an impregnable wall to reveal the dirty truth.

In many aspects, *Shanghai* is a no-nonsense reflection of what India is all about today. It is a country where dreams force men to maul and murder, where the poor are hunted down and chased away from their home and hearth.

But it is also a nation where men like Joginder are willing to risk everything to stop the "dog" from escaping, where someone like Krishnan (need he have spoken those three sentences to his mother over the telephone in the most atrocious Tamil?) is brave enough to fight the mightiest of political power.

Adapted from Vasilis Vasilikos's novel *Z* (which was even made into a French movie by the same name in 1969), *Shanghai*, in the ultimate analysis, underlines hope, the hope of India which is crawling through dark days of policy paralysis.

Banerjee heims with understated brilliance the dilemmatic pull between corruption and conscience, between life and death. Ahmadi is not afraid to die, Joginder is, but still dares to help nail the guilty, and Krishnan chooses soul over Stockholm (an assignment in that city that Kaul promises him).

One of the best works I have seen this year, *Shanghai* is yet another example of how Indian cinema is moving away from meaningless fare.

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