

# cinema



\* Prateik Babbar and British model Amy Jackson in *Ek Deewana Tha*. The real-life couple's chemistry was soggy in this Hindi remake of Tamil film *Vinnaithaandi Varuvaaya*.



\* Brazilian model Giselli Monteiro played (a largely silent) Punjabi girl in *Love Aaj Kal*.

## Is this fair?

**Gautaman Bhaskaran** wonders why foreign actors with nothing to recommend them except their fair skin should be recruited in Indian films

**M**uch as Indians deride colour prejudice, they are racist themselves. Pick any matrimonial column in any paper, and one will invariably find parents touting their light-skinned daughters or seeking fair brides for their darling sons. And, fairness is no longer for women alone. It is

for men too, with actors like Shah Rukh Khan and John Abraham advertising creams that help one get rid of a dark complexion — and seduce women. Sexual attraction is all about colour, fair colour, or so we are made to believe.

Indian cinema as a reflector of society is often besotted by fair skin, white skin as it is commonly described. Nobody wants a dark

woman to play heroine, unless the character is a tribal. Dusky Smita Patil used to rue this, and she once told me how she had always found herself a few steps behind the fair-skinned actresses.

When Bollywood or Kollywood (Chennai's tinsel town) run out of "white" girls, they try borrowing them from each other's territories. Khushboo was one of the earliest

expats from Mumbai who made it in South Indian cinema. Then there has been Kajal Agarwal, Tamannaah and so on.

Indian movies now seem to have either run out fair damsels or feel that audiences need someone more exotic. So, there has been a new kind of recruitment in films. Foreign actresses.

Not to worry if they cannot perform to save their lives or even speak the local languages. They look good, in fact gorgeous, with svelte figures, and being willing to kiss their rugged co-stars, even go beyond. Indian heroines hesitate doing these because they have an image to guard. Some still do not mind getting intimate on screen, but I wonder whether a Kajal or a Trisha Krishnan would be so inclined.

This trend of perfectly Indian stories tuning in to "firang" girls has now gone to an awfully stupid extent. Imagine Brazil's Giselli Monteiro essaying a Punjabi "kudi" (girl), Harleen Kaur, in *Love Aaj Kal*, and an Indian schoolgirl in the eminently forgettable *Always Kabhi Kabhi*. The latest "intruder" is British model Amy Jackson in *Ek Deewana Tha* by Gautham Vasudev Menon, who remade this Hindi film from his own earlier version in Tamil, *Vinnaithaandi Varuvaaya* (Will You Cross The Skies For Me?).

The Tamil movie had Trisha playing a Kerala Syrian Christian girl, Jessie, and though I found the work pretentious and convolutedly plotted, she was good and entirely believable.

Now, I do not know what went wrong, but Menon cast Prateik (Smita Patil and Raj Babbar's son) and Jackson in his Hindi rendering, *Ek Deewana Tha*. Jackson stepped into the Kerala Syrian Christian mould, and she was naturally a huge disappointment. She was

extremely uncomfortable playing the part, and it showed. Her Hindi was stilted, and her acting even more so.

Casting is as important as scripting, and if a director goes wrong with it, his film may well crash. I, for the world of me, could not understand why Menon chose Jackson, although he was in talks with Trisha for the role. Was it on Prateik's insistence that Amy found a place? The two are said to be in love, and yet I found their screen chemistry soggy.

Both made a boring pair, wooden, expressionless and almost unfeeling. Was their off-screen affair an impediment to their on-screen romance and passion?

Yes, Jackson is quite a looker, but so was Ingrid Bergman, so was Audrey Hepburn and so were Nutan and Waheeda Rehman. But these actresses emoted with brilliance and with great conviction. They were no bimbettes.

I would understand if these foreign girls had in them even a smattering of talent. But lacking in such a key area, they often prove to be such a liability that they tend to sink, taking along with them the movie as well. Obviously, it is the fair skin that seems to be clinching the deals for these girls.

My question is, will an American casting director ever commit such a blunder? Will he rope in Katrina Kaif to portray a British lover in his film? Will he ask Irrfan (he no longer wants to use Khan as part of his name) to play an American? Will he, at all, seek Salma Hayek to be an all-European cheer leader?

Why then are Indians beginning to slip into this habit of signing foreign lasses to essay Indian characters? Obviously, it is the colour of their skin in a country which pretends that it is not racist. Or, believes it is not.

## Marco Mueller in Rome

**M**arco Mueller, often known as a friend of Indian cinema, has been named the Artistic Director of the Rome International Film Festival, which was founded only in 2006. After steering the world's oldest movie

festival at Venice for eight years through some of its most turbulent storms, Mueller had to quit, a development I felt was unfortunate, given his record in getting the 12-day event afloat and sailing on the Adriatic.

During its early years, Rome was

projected as a serious rival to Venice, and some observers now seem to think that if Mueller is given a reasonably long tenure, he could give Venice nightmares.

Mueller said: "I am returning to my hometown after 22 years, to work on an exciting project: the new development — after what's been done in the first six years — of a festival that wants to cater to the needs of those who make movies, who show movies, and of those who watch them."

Mueller was hired by Rome after a protracted political struggle, which blurred

party lines, and which ended in early March with the appointment of Paolo Ferrari as the President of the Festival. Ferrari replaced veteran critic Gian Luigi Rondi, who was bent on opposing Mueller.

The Festival may be held in October or November, and for Mueller, it is not going to be a Roman Holiday.

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