

cinema



* Nanban ... who cares for logic?

Super Men sing, sway and slam

Two recent Tamil films show how heroism is often stretched to absurd limits,

writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Indian cinema is fixated with Super Men. Romantics are upgraded into ruffians. Good guys grow into gangsters. All in the belief that lasses love men with muscles who can flatten fatties. More importantly, financiers and filmmakers fool themselves into thinking that this is what the ticket-paying public wants.

I watched two movies last weekend, and found that the swanky multiplex theatres in Chennai where the films were screening were far from full. And for both, this was the opening week. I felt vindicated.

Masses are clearly tired of He-Men strutting about the screen, playing god by bashing up baddies and ridding the town/city/country or, better still, the world, of evil.

People may well play video-games or walk into a video parlour and transport themselves into a make-believe state with huge heroes running amok, chasing rogues with

red eyes. But why do viewers have to walk into cinemas for such pulse-pounding adventure?

Admittedly, movie-makers throw in that little extra as a relief to this frenzy of fights. The hero after his punch-and-push pastime that leaves men lifeless on the ground, blood gushing out of their guts, gets an image makeover. His bruised face is all powdered, his tattered clothes replaced with Armani suits or Bond look-alike costumes or, sometimes, in godly attires, before he is nudged into exoticia.

The landscape changes from shabby streets or dreary depots into silvery sands and fertile fields under blue skies with poppy white clouds. Or, better still, the hero is rocketed to the Swiss Alps or English meadows or Spanish villas to woo and wander around pretty bimbettes. There is song and dance, all choreographed with jerky movements, and plenty of side-kicks to infuse colour and

variety. This is essential, for minutes later, the hero is back into heroism, hacking away.

Arya in N Linguswamy's *Vettai* (Hunt) is the new Super Man in Chennai. He wears a hood, a yellow one, not red, lest he be mistaken for the little girl who goes to meet her granny at the far end of the forest. Arya is Gurumurthy, his elder brother, Thirumurthy's alter-ego.

The film begins with kites flying in the air, and two boys quarrelling, when one of them weeps and runs away to fetch his younger brother to settle scores. Years later, when their father, a cop, dies, cowardly Thirumurthy (Madhavan), is pushed into playing police. He is reluctant and clearly unsuited to handle the town's toughies, but is egged on by Gurumurthy.

Every time there is a problem, the younger brother, suitably hooded to hide his identity, helps the older brother solve



* Arya and Madhavan in *Vettai* ... chopping up foes with abandon.

it, invariably through violence. When Thirumurthy gets married to Vasanthi (Sameera Reddy), the wife worships her husband only because he is a He-Man, powerful enough to silence sadists, like the chief villain who walks into their home with a basketful of luscious fruits that actually conceals a ticking time-bomb.

Now, how is Lingusamy going to salvage himself and his film from this tricky corner he has got them jammed? Not to worry, Indian cinema is like those herbs sold on street-corners which can "cure" from malaria to madness to influenza to impotency.

The scoundrels find out that it is Gurumurthy who is Samson, not the man in uniform, and promptly kidnap and beat up Thirumurthy. Weeks later, the wheelchair-bound policeman, in one defining moment, gets up, walks and slides into strength. What a transformation!

From a wimpy weakling to a confident cop, and the brothers together finish off the rascals, hammering the lives out of them before pumping bullets to still them. Sadism crosses the floor, and in the final scene, we see the fight-to-finish on a rooftop overlooking a church.

Madhavan turns into the new action hero in Tamil cinema, presumably injecting buoyancy into bleating boys and, who knows, giving a new feeling of *deja vu* to all those pot-bellied men in Indian police stations.

He is good till he becomes Super Man.

Indian cinema can also have Super Men sans muscles, Super Men who put magic to shame with feats that can amaze magician P C Sorcar. Let me walk into the second movie, S Shankar's *Nanban* (Friend), remade from *3 Idiots* in Hindi. The kind of vehicle *Nanban* uses (as did *3 Idiots*) batters your intelligence and leaves you feeling an idiot yourself. Let us look at the situations that the script adopts.

Nanban begins with a passenger plane returning to the tarmac soon after it takes off, because one of the three lead characters (friends in fact), a young man, has had a heart attack. Minutes later, we see him jump off

the wheelchair and escape from the airport – all to meet a long lost friend! This young man travels by road from presumably Chennai up to Dhanushkodi, touching Ooty and Coimbatore on the way, for a whole day or perhaps more, with no cop chasing him for his misdemeanour. Here is a Super Man who lies and flies out of a jet with the consummate ease of a conjurer.

Another friend of the group impersonates a rich man's son, tops the university, becomes an internationally renowned scientist and settles down in Dhanushkodi teaching children the joys of science and scientific experiments. His degree is given away to the rich man's son, because he is a duffer who cannot get a degree on his own, but has to rely on someone else to do the job. But the friend, who seeks knowledge not medals, becomes a celebrated scientist all right – minus his degree.

In college, this friend helps the sister of the woman he secretly loves deliver a baby in a medically challenging situation by using a vacuum cleaner to suck the little one out! Medicine is made into a mockery! But who cares, for Vijay who essays the part, can work miracles.

The woman waits for a decade, with a rich suitor who puts a price tag on love and life, twiddling. Finally, two of the three friends force her out of the "mandap" in the nick of time and take her to the scientist (the man she loves) at Dhanushkodi. There, the girl quickly gets on to a scooter, wears a helmet and goes riding on the beach in her full bridal regalia to meet her lover boy.

I suppose Shankar believes in equality of the sexes: if Vijay can use a vacuum cleaner to help the child emerge into this magical madness and if a dashing young man can fool the airlines and airport security, why cannot the woman show off a bit, riding a scooter on a sandy beach, washed by gorgeous blue waters?

(Gautaman Bhaskaran feels all knocked down after this onslaught to his body and mind, and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)