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Development @ what cost?

A film review of *Shanghai* (June, 2012)

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Shanghai (June, 2012)

Rating: ****

Director: Dibakar Bennerjee

Cast: Emraam Hashmi, Abhay Deol, Prosenjit Chatterjee, Kalki Koechlin

One may wonder why a film on the politics of development in an Indian city is called *Shanghai*. The trigger for the film apparently was one of ex-Maharashtra Chief Minister and Indian National Congress Party leader Vilasrao Deshmukh's 2004 pre-election clarion pledges to make 'Mumbai the next Shanghai' – a futuristic city imagery defined by higher high rises, swankier malls, cleaner (poor free!) environs and clogs free infrastructure... In brief, a builder's playing ground or a capitalist's paradise! It was an effectively rhyming, pro-development regional slogan attempting a one-up on Bhartiya Janata Party's national level 'Indian Shining' campaign of the 2000s. 'Shanghai' since, courtesy the voluble sloganeering in favour of, and against the idea



Figure 1. A poster of *Shanghai* (June, 2012)

in Mumbai's media space, has been consciously transformed from a proper noun to an adjective of aspiration in the psyche of Mumbaikars (the residents of Mumbai), which Dibakar

Bannerjee's latest film dissects, spoofs and critiques.

Shanghai's insinuations to real events and people are quite obvious with most of its 'debatable' changes being orchestrated by an organisation called IBP, and a lady chief minister uncannily similar looking to one of BJP's aggressive and controversial pro-development CMs from recent past. The film's core text and inspiration, Vassilis Vassilikos' political novel *Z* (1966), inspired by a real-life assassination in Greece, is innovatively relocated, liberally acknowledged and authentically updated to an all together different terrain to tell a story that's no less compelling and often cathartic. The novel's 'Left versus Right' ideological confrontation is changed into an India specific on-going 'rich versus poor' debate in the film. I caught *Shanghai* running to



Figure 2. An item girl dances to an aspirational song 'India bana Pardes' (India goes Foreign)

full house in a suburban single-screen Mumbai theatre, where critical, art-house fare is rarely patronised. More significantly, its convenient



Figure 3. Dr. Ahmadi (Prosenjit) addresses an anti-development rally in a still from *Shanghai*

denouement, courted spontaneous cheers and claps, as its concerns had stirred a familiar chord amongst its viewers, ordinary Mumbaiers.

Dr. Ahmadi (Prosenjit Chatterjee), a social scientist, acclaimed area-study specialist and academic in an American university is invited by his Mumbai counterparts for a 'motivational' talk in a slum called Bharat Nagar. His hosts are protesting against the slum's impending demolition to make way for another business-cum-mall complex – proliferating ubiquitous

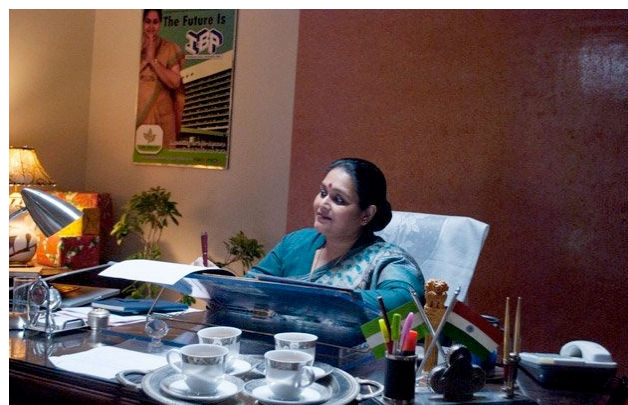


Figure 4. Supriya Pathak plays a 'development at any cost' CM in *Shanghai*

signposts of a modernising India. Ahmadi exposes the true consequences of the developmental makeover through simple allegories. It's like turning an 'independent' land



Figure 5. Emraan Hashmi plays an all weather videographer in Shanghai

owning individual into a 'dependent' employee of a mall constructed on his land, or convincing someone owning a 'free' well of his own to barter it for 'purer' bottled water at a price, he argues. So whose development is it really and at what cost?

Wary from Ahmadi's activist impact in successfully stalling a similar project in the past, a conspiracy is hatched by the 'development' mafia – local industry and governing authorities – to bump him off in a well-orchestrated accident.

The state government sets up an enquiry commission to look into the lapses leading to Ahmadi's 'accident', with an understated premise of reinforcing his murder as an accident. Predictably, like most such commissions from recent history, it lacks the power to prosecute, its

conclusions are predestined and its existence is a facade to deflect media furore and public attention. A 'conforming' bureaucrat, Krishnan (Abhay Deol), is assigned the job but when clinching evidences start questioning his 'given' brief, he gives in to the havoc played by his conscience in spite of being promised of a plum diplomatic posting in Europe.

Into this rich-poor, pro and anti development drama are thrown in an activist student admirer and lover of Ahmadi, a small time porn filmmaker who happens to stumble upon clinching criminal evidence by default and the compromised ground accomplices of Ahmadi's 'hit and run' accident desperately trying to salvage their fast upturning little worlds.

Shanghai is easily the most accomplished film of Dibakar Bannerjee, the 'shock and awe' specialist of new millennium Indian independent cinema. After surprising us with an unusual dilemma in his first film (*Khosla Ka Ghosla*, 2006), the guiltless career motivations of a 'liberalised' common-man in the second (*Oye Lucky Lucky Oye!* 2008), and a collage of the bizarre from small town India in his third (*LSD*, 2010), his latest shocker packs in strengths of the above narratives to fresh thriller impact.

Beneath their unity of satire, Bannerjee's movies are forceful critiques of contemporary Indian society's increasingly comfortable co-existence with unbalanced development in an often-compromised economy. And as always, to

sort these battles between the ‘having’ and the ‘have-lost’ comes an intelligent ‘grey’ crook with some conscience, who manipulates the faults of the system to attempt corrections to personal benefit.

Judiciously endowed with raw performances by relatable characters, *Shanghai* is a disturbing revelation of the messy human cost paid to sanctify the immoral cohabitation between profit oriented liberalisation and lop-sided development. This is provocative Bollywood at its triumphant best – go for it! 🍿

Piyush Roy is a writer, columnist, academic and a former editor of Stardust