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On with the Offbeat - Saibal Chatterjee

Two high-profile releases could change the fortunes of serious films.

There is little common ground between *Bandit Queen* and *English, August*. While one is stark, searing, sledgehammer-wielding - delves disconcertingly deep into the heart of darkness in rural Hindustan, the other, armed with a wickedly funny script and a quiver full of hard-edged one-liners, lays bare the chaos, confusion and corruption that prevails in small-town India. Even in terms of style and mood, the two films could well have come from two different planets. Shekhar Kapur's unblinking study of caste-gender hatred has no room for redemption; in Dev Benegal's maiden feature, which uses English as its principal language, whacky, irreverent humour is an escape chute.

The only link that hitherto bound the two films together was their steadfast defiance of Bollywood's narrative conventions. Now, there is another. Both films are being accorded high-profile all-India releases in December. *Bandit Queen* made on a Rs.4-crore budget for UK's Channel Four, is being released all over India by Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited (ABCL) while *English, August* a privately produced film for which the cast and crew agreed to accept deferred payments, has been acquired by the Rupert Murdoch-owned Twentieth Century Fox for theatrical distribution in at least 15 Indian cities.

But the question refuses to wither away: will the winter of 1995 really change the way 'offbeat' ventures like *Bandit Queen* and *English, August* are treated in Bollywood? Says Sunder Kimatrai, Fox's India representative: "There is definitely a market for a film like *English, August*. Otherwise, we wouldn't have taken up the film." Bobby Bedi, producer of *Bandit Queen*, agrees: "It is true that there were no mass audiences for such films in the past, but today things are different."

ABCL, too, is willing to believe that there is indeed an audience out there for meaningful cinema. Says a source: "Bombay wasn't a typical commercial product, yet it did exceedingly well at the box-office. There is no reason why *Bandit Queen* shouldn't."

Attitudes may be changing, but for obvious reasons neither *Bandit Queen* nor *English, August* are being positioned as art-house products. Says Kimatrai about Benegal's film: "We are targeting a mainstream, English-speaking urban audience." So is ABCL. But there is, at the same time, the realisation that such films can not be for the mass market. Fox bosses are aware that people who flocked to see *Speed* may not be enthused to the same degree by *English, August*. But they are not unduly perturbed.

*English, August* based on the Upamanyu Chatterjee movie premieres in Bombay on

November 25 before travelling to other parts of the country from the first week of December. There is one anxiety though: unlike *Bandit Queen*, which has got the buzz "from Cannes to Kanpur", *English, August* despite bagging awards at Nantes and Turin is still a relatively unknown quantity. So test screenings have been organised in Bombay and elsewhere. "The response", according to Fox sources "has been hearteningly encouraging."

This celluloid view of "the real India" through the bewildered eyes of an IAS rookie sent off to a small, smelly, scorching town in the backwaters of central India has much going for it. One, its language is English. Two, it is contemporaneous. Three, it is well-acted. And above all, it is laced with wit. Just the kind of film that college going kids with an aversion to `arthouse' products are likely to adore.

*Bandit Queen*, on the other hand, already has a large audience awaiting its arrival, thanks as much to the controversies it has raked as to the wide critical acclaim it has garnered. "And that," avers an ABCL source, "makes our task much easier. The initial draw is bound to be tremendous."

Yet, aggressive marketing will hold the key. Because both, *English August* much more than *Bandit Queen*, are the sort of films that are normally relegated to limited-engagement morning shows in the metros. Fortunately, their backers have the muscle required to jostle for space in the market. While ABCL's ability to promote *Bandit Queen*, especially after their success with *Bombay*, can never be in doubt, the publicity exercise for *English, August* has already not going with highly visible promos on Star Movies, a TV channel from the same stable as Twentieth Century Fox.

For Benegal, Fox's decision represents a major triumph for his kind of cinema, neither pulp fiction nor mere arthouse talking points. "This is the first time a film of this sort is being released across the country in this manner," he says. But will this winter of hope lead to a summer of joy in the back alleys of Bollywood? It will, but only if moviegoers vote with their feet.