

Critique

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**Personified Phantom of an Imperialistic Paradigm:  
*8 Down Toofan Mail***



"May I have your attention, please, train number 8 down, Toofan Mail from Calcutta to New Delhi will be arriving at platform number one." - a grave male voice is sprinkled from the blank black. And at that second - slackening train wheels, hurried steps in a busy station are captured in a fair close shot. The periodic backdrop of the film is clear at the initial shot - the flared leg pants, the organic, almost non-polished colour of the visuals - featuring the decades of the volatile seventies. The Mid 70s was an environment of oppression, suspicion, and secrecy due to emergency, followed by the protests Bihar movement, popularly known as the JP movement, culminating in the contemporary electoral exercise and the quiet revenge by the masses. That was a time - parallelly of turbulence and anticipation.

The film "8 Down Toofan Mail" is a fictional take of a real-life story. Situated in a dense forest area

in Central Ridge, off Sardar Patel Marg, Chanakyapuri in Delhi, an ancient building of the 14th century, from the Tughlaq era - 'Malcha Mahal.' In that very palace, a family of three - Begum Wilayat Mahal and her children - Prince Ali Cyrus Raza and princess Sakina used to live till their demise. They claimed themselves to be the legal heirs of king Wajid Ali Shah the ruler of Oudh, a royal dominion in Uttar Pradesh. Their forty-year stay in Malcha Mahal didn't have any authorized claim. In 2019, Ellen Berry, a New York Times reporter, had exposed the candour behind this imperial claim. It had created a major jerk in all the spheres of the national society, thereby establishing the aptitude of cajoling in captivating global media.

The script begins with Wilayat Mahal having arrived at a railway station in Delhi in the seventies, along with her children, a cortège of servants and pet

canines, crouched in a waiting room for more than a decade. Her escorts used to address her as 'Royal Highness,' expecting the same hook from others too. This gripping sojourn grabbed the attention of global media. In 1984, the issue was negotiated by discussing it with the then Indira Gandhi government.



This less portrayed history is being transported to celluloid by actress turned director Aakriti Singh in her debut film "8 Down Toofan Mail". The film stars Akriti Singh and Telugu actor Surya Rao in lead characters as the Queen of Awadh, i.e., the prima donna, and Gurpreet Singh as the station master.

Location: Delhi Railway station (the setup was done at Faizullapur in Uttar Pradesh). 1974. Railway workers are preparing to go on a strike. But station master, Gurpreet Singh, a government servant, is sincere in his invested responsibilities. Concurrently, a young lady wearing an exorbitant saree gets off the train. Three men escort her, carrying some heavy wooden chest and a large chandelier, and head towards the first-class waiting room of Delhi station. The very body language of the lady carries an imperial tint. As time rolls by, this lady, the very

queen, becomes more mysterious, representing a now non-existing dynasty of nawabs through her engrossing verbal catchups, restricted moves, and lightly shaded sarees flaunted open hair, windy curly locks - and the engrossing vintage beauty. A Nawabi heir, basically an Urdu speaking lady, when speaks the word - 'megalomaniac,' is something that reveals a grip over the pictorial clarity of characters in a film, that is tried to be depicted as a period piece of history through recreating authentic on-screen fantasy. A queen is always a queen, no matter how dire and shrewd the situation is - no matter she's the queen of a lost empire - she's always been addressed as 'her royal highness' by her attendants. The scene when the queen sits on a bench in the railway platform as the commoners do and takes an umbrella covered with a mirror worked dupatta - unfolds her tendency of being royal – once a queen, always a queen.

The close angle shots capturing her tensed face, the medium-long shots covering the reminiscent of a mahal in frame with both the protagonists are the beauties of carrying imperial pragmatism in cinematography. Amazingly portrayed, the frames, the brought back' setup with old radios, the big two rupee note, the time travel, and the BBCs. The emergency period of the seventies has been parallelly intertwined with a story of loss and despair, of royalty in crisis, and the pain of partition. The radio commentary of the film - 'Woh Kaun Thi' has spiced up a comparatively slow growth of the cinematic narrative with a silver tint. Her confidence is reflected in her powerful words: "Rukiye mat, thakiye mat, waqt nawabiyat bakshega" - an inclusive one-liner of the film.

The railway station is projected as a metaphor to personify the pain of dislocation, the vulnerability of once invested designation, and the liquid existence of a royal heir. Though her identity is a matter of suspicion for the station master, the railway workers, and even the rickshaw puller who explains her to be a 'jinn,' she's stuck to her stand. The pragmatic throw of the rickshaw puller and his organic utilitarianism serve as a voice of conscience that something is there; something is unreal behind all these 'projected' exhibitions. This is proven to be factual when a girl comes to meet her after listening to her radio

interview and requests her to back home. She gives her a phone number, but she casually throws it, and later, it is grabbed by those concerned, rebellious railway workers who detect it as a contact number of a 'contemporary discreet place.'



The waiting room is decorated with chandeliers and other fancy objects to create the ambiance of a royal court; the sofa is transformed like that of a throne. When the station master Gurpreet Singh wants to stop them, the person wearing Lucknow Nawabi suit and hat, standing next to the queen, explains that she is Wilayat Mahal, the descendant of Maharaja Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh. Hence, she must be addressed as "her royal highness." Everything Gurpreet tells them to withdraw from the unauthorized stay just gets helplessly restricted within the four walls. This unusually interesting issue hooks notice of the press reporter and of BBC, who came to cover the railway strike. This eventually fixes her appointment to the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

The film accentuates multi-layered political easter eggs, locating the arrest of Railway Union Leader George Fernandes during the JP movement.

The catchy dialogues make the film more pragmatic. Once, while talking to Indira Gandhi about the return of Malcha Mahal, Wilayat Mahal says: "The palaces of Awadh are our heritage; if we do not take care, then who will do? You can understand this. You, too, are carrying on the legacy of Nehru."

The sheer engineering of portraying the characters as "they were" and "how they grew" over time is a vital force of the visual. As an actor, Akriti Singh carries an imperial charisma and engrosses the audience all through. She manages to confuse the audience with her authenticity until the end, whether

she is an actual princess or a ruffian. Surya Rao's performance gets a higher definition with the ascending graph of the film. The most conversant face of Indira Gandhi is credibly depicted through her specs, her famous hairstyle, and her familiar voice, without showing her face in front of focus. She is a level royal woman who arrives in the waiting room of the station, a mysterious entity who carries along with herself a group of escorts, expensive paintings, and books written in Urdu - the Ghalib Shayari - these add much to the making of fantasy in physical stature. Though her status is under suspicion, the grace and class at odds with her gloom actualize her words to be proven. Her typical Indian enigma, emotional impetus, and pizzazz are well projected as the Maestro Satyajit Ray had painted juncture royalty in his acclaimed "Shatranj Ke Khiladi." Her restricted words, mixed with an internal dilemma somewhere, remind me of the iconic performance of Shaukat Azmi in the film 'Garam Hawa (1974).

The film is nowhere preachy. Its flow is so organic that it incarnates a real-life adaptation. In moments at brackets, it warns us against its own ambiguous command through the fertile aesthetic approach. The editing and the sound design are conspicuous enough not to get hooked by either being calculated or nonchalant. The dialogue has a chemistry that mounts from Akashvani to Doordarshan. The independent, minimalistic approach of its narrative texture functions as a challenging trail to several maximalist ventures. The humble production design and cinematography are well paralleled to the snug of the lesser hyped "Great Indian Summers." Still, it's that abiding halts between the time cuts that have made it composed and operated.



The script slowly enforces the equivocal relationship between Gurpreet and the queen. The responsible station master at first feels the whole thing too cranky, and "her royal highness" irritates him; he locates himself in a dilemma. But as their conversation grows, as his mother one day comes to meet her and expresses her wish to make her, her daughter-in-law, if she'd be a Sikh - simultaneously a nuanced soft-story starts to develop.



The chromatin of this experimental screen project is its carefree narrative style, the electrifying dept of simple musical stretch, thumri of Nawab echoed through the ruins of the mahal - the song by Rabbi Shergill, carrying a pseudo-Sufi tint (Hamahüñ Kä Khiläb) and an intense emotion parallely creating

a euphoric epiphany, rarely found in a comparatively low budget film. It proves that aesthetic homework and a sense of passion have much catching up to do in shaping striking cinematic moments in the reincarnation of Indian Cinema if exercised to be experimented by any. The mysterious entity that is carried through turns out to be more intense when the entire crew vanishes too unexpectedly and the transfer of fantasy in its script is invested through a finer cinematic grip.

Though the magnitude of the subject consists of the pure politics of its contemporary period, the director has put little effort into that. The film comprises these theoretical elements - comedy, farce, tragedy, horror, soft romantics. "8 Down Toofan Mail", though somewhere lacks the energy to hook its audience all through, it must be considered that a steady nerve of the budget would have compensated the deficit.

Personified Phantom of an Imperialistic Paradigm: "8 Down Toofan Mail" is an invested projection of the pursuit, rescue, and resumption of honour: "Rukiye mat, thakiye mat, waqt nawabiyat bakshega."

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