

Critique

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A Smuggler and Mass Murderer as Superhero and Icon



Pushpa 2-The Rule (2024) Telugu, by Sukumar

Crime pays, and how! Reportedly made at a budget of ₹400-500 crore, *Pushpa 2: The Rule* raked in an amount much more than the production cost in the first few days at the box office, after its release on 5th December 2024. Now that is something for the record books. Is there a moral in this tale of an immoral, ruthless, swaggering rustic, who rises from being a lowly paid labourer to the kingpin of red sandalwood smugglers? To the uninitiated, Pushpa means a flower, in Hindi, and the word was immortalised by Rajesh Khanna in the film *Amar Prem* (1972), when he drawled in a drunken slur, “Pushpa, I hate tears.” Any similarity to the film of 1972 ends right there. While *Amar Prem* was about an

unhappy husband who seeks solace in wine, and a woman of the night, Pushpa, *Pushpa 2: The Rule* is about murder and mayhem, and a criminal who keeps outsmarting a Superintendent of Police (SP), at every step. In his territory, he rules. And hence the title. And the moral? What moral?

The lead role was first offered to Mahesh Babu, a superstar down South, but he turned it down. Guess why? Because writer-director Sukumar had injected an overdose of swag in it. Mahesh felt that it was a bit much. Much? TOO MUCH is more like it! And that is exactly why the box office coffers are jangling. *Pushpa 2; The Rule* will outdo *Pushpa: The Rise*. Being a hero is good.

Being a racketeer is better. And being the epitome of swag is best. Next stop: Allu Arjun, the Icon Star of Telugu films. 42-year-old Allu Arjun, the second choice for writer-director Sukumar. Arjun is a National Film Award winner; his dance can hold you in a trance. They don't call him the Icon Star for nothing. He does dance very well and gives convincing examples of his prowess at rustic, earthy dancing in the film.



Dance and swag can be a deadly, potent combination. Producers Naveen Yerneni and Yalamanchili Ravi Shankar believed in the dance and the swag, and it paid off: the two outings wagged their tails, and how, though two other producers on *Pushpa: The Rise*, Manish Shah and Rohit Sangwan, are missing in the sequel credits. Arjun himself defines his persona, on screen, with a dialogue that comes after the shake of his head, when he is compared to a fire. Not just fire, “Wildfire,” he calls himself. Like a jungle fire, he, and his minions, cut down the rare, endangered variety, red sandalwood trees, that grow in the Seshachalam Hills of Andhra Pradesh and smuggle it to other countries, after transporting the caché to the south-most tip of Chennai, and onwards to Sri Lanka. Yokohama harbour, in Japan, is his next

destination, where the booty of thousands of red sandalwood logs will earn him hundreds of crores of rupees. As the makers might have hoped and prayed, the film would earn much more than their investment and more than the sandalwood Arjun sells on screen.

This ‘flowery wildfire’ learnt the skill of swimming and holding his breath underwater for much longer than the average swimmer, when he was ordered by a child cricketers team to fetch a cricket ball from the bottom of a pond. Just that one ‘below sea level escapade’ was enough. Betraying no signs of education, he lives in the Chittoor district of Telangana, so his natural mother tongue is Telugu. (I saw the Hindi version). The film has been released in Telugu, Tamil, Kannada Malayalam, and, also Bengali, and, of course, Hindi. Pushpa speaks to his wife and a few others, occasionally, in Marathi, and masters spoken Japanese from a language book while being transported, hidden in a container, heading for Yokohama, Japan, for about 3 weeks. He can also speak Bengali. But these are minor skills; Pushpa has majored in the skills of mass murder and mayhem, brought to the audience in IMAX, 4DX, D-Box and PVR ICE formats. In the pre-credit titles scene at Yokohama, he shows you that when he is bound by hands and feet, and suspended high above the sea, lifted by a giant crane, with a mob gunning for him from Mother Earth, you must be sure, he will once again outsmart his opponents. What follows is a display of calisthenics that circus performers, with decades of experience and training, would shy away from, but are innate to Pushpa, and greeted with thunderous applause by fans of Allu Arjun, in the

auditorium. *Pushpa 2: The Rule* is for them. Others are not likely to whistle or applaud at such ultra-super-human acts. And that includes some discerning and demanding critics.

Pushpa uses incredible intellectual skills to transport contraband red sandalwood from Andhra Pradesh to Madras, and onwards to Sri Lanka. The route to the port at Rameswaram in Chennai is hundreds of kilometres long, and there are some 100 trucks in the convoy, add to that a bald super-cop named Shekhawat (a Rajasthani surname), with a scar along his pate, who will do anything to stop the Pushpakers from crossing the Telangana border. Never mind the fact that Shekhawat is dumb enough to let the crops grow, the trees felled, the wood cut to size, loaded on trucks and well on its way before he decides to get into his act. He believes in catching the red sandalwood smugglers red-handed and attaining media and police glory through his clever brain. Also, never mind the fact that besides doing his duty as a Superintendent of Police (SP), he is not averse to demanding a large share of the spoils to let the business prosper, whenever he is in a bargaining position. Shekhawat was there in *Pushpa 1: The Rise*, but will not be seen in *Pushpa 3: The Rampage*, if he is dead, as suggested by *Pushpa 2: The Rule*.

Going by the good-better-best rule, *Pushpa 2: The Rule* is SWAGGER, *Pushpa: The Rise* is a modest SWAG. Can we now expect *Pushpa 3: The Rampage* to be the SWAGGIEST (assuming that the flower power runs out of ammo after Part 3, and Pushpa retires after the trilogy), for Pushpa is nothing without the swag? He walks with one

shoulder cockily raised, wears a stone-dead look, and several metallic accessories around his neck and on his hands, which he jingles time and again to remind you that they are there. After all, what is Pushpa without the one-leg-resting-on-the-other posture, an inciting sitting position?



It was this posture that led to his sacking as an ordinary day labourer, carrying wood from one place to another. That he is not getting into the swag position deliberately, when it is uncalled for, is explained in one scene, wherein Pushpa is sitting in an aircraft, thousands of feet above sea level, and does not cross his legs. Clueless and wondering, his henchmen ask him about the same. He replies that high in the air, he is already a man looking down upon his enemies, and he does not need to cross his legs to intimidate them, believing, quite logically, that the posture sends shivers down the spines of his quarry. And then there is the ‘beard brush’. Pushpa strokes his beard with the back of the palm, from left to right, with one hand, and, if the goings-on so necessitate, with both hands. On some privileged occasions, he lets others, mainly his wife, do the hair caressing. What it suggests to the audience is that it means QED—quod erat demonstrandum. On the

other hand, is his beard a phallic symbol? Your guess is as good as mine. The question is, why did it take ‘humiliation’ (losing his job because of his obstinate insolence) to trigger his superpowers? Why did he have to work as a labourer, rather than run his operations, right from Day 1? Alright, this is a film, a work of fiction. So what? Does fiction have to be devoid of logic? Is it very difficult to make a film following logic?

His stern gaze is dispensed with when he is at home, with his wife, and either of them starts getting ‘Peelings’ (an effective substitute for the regular f word) for each other. Read ‘sexual arousal’ for ‘feelings’. His humble and dutiful, loving and doting, wife, is concerned only with matters of the kitchen and a desire to frame and hang a huge picture of Pushpa with the Chief Minister of the state. But when Pushpa’s niece gets kidnapped, she demands that he should not spare the abductors, and mete out the severest punishment, notwithstanding that the girl’s father, Pushpa’s half-brother, has always denied Pushpa the family name, and abused him at every opportunity. And, of course, whether it is in a dream sequence or a celebratory/religious occasion, the couple indulge in the most erotic dances you can imagine, without actual physical contact. To keep her ‘dignity’ intact, Sukumar has inserted an item song, wherein the more slithery, rubbery moves are left to the guest star, Sreeleela, and the dancing chorus girls. When she is pregnant and wants to visit the wash-room, Pushpa carries his wife across his shoulders, till he reaches the toilet seat, and carefully plants her there. Now that is something nobody would find questionable.

If there is romance of the husband-and-wife kind, and tragedy of the kind that was epitomised in the South films of the 50s, 60s, and 70s, many of which were remade in Hindustani, coupled with the emotional track involving his mother and his step-brother, there are also elements of comedy. Taking the ‘seats’ of legislators and ministers literally, he flies thrones and sofas to their houses, with millions of rupees stashed inside them. This is a recurring motif in the film. With the vulgar sums of money he has in his coffers, he gets his favourite legislator appointed Chief Minister. This is the same man who ‘made’ him the President of the smugglers’ Syndicate, a few years ago, a noble task indeed. Thanks to him, the foresters are earning income that is several zeroes more than what they were earning, hitherto. And what he does, when a Parliamentarian and a Central Government Minister’s nephew dares to kidnap his niece, is to be seen to be believed.



Setting immoral or amoral precedents, he bribes an entire police station staff into taking huge sums of money, in exchange for their resignations, to leave the SP a lone hunter. He could have arranged for the transfer of the thorn in his side to another place, through a government order, but that would be too meagre a punishment for his

‘indiscretions’ of challenging Pushpa. How dare a high-ranking Police Officer try to intercept his illegal consignment. Instead, when forced to apologize for his acts to the SP, he reluctantly utters the big word, “SORRY”, only to throw his driver out of the car while driving back, and head for the place where he had tendered the apology to Shekhawat. A five-star hotel, the place is still reverberating with the sound of Pushpa’s “Sorry”, recorded by Shekhawat, on a two-in-one radio cassette recorder (they went obsolete twenty years ago), and fed to TV channels. Driving at breakneck speed, he pushes Shekhawat into the swimming pool, a few feet away, and urinates in the water while Shekhawat is still floundering. Once he manages to emerge from the pool, the undressing and ‘purification’ of the SP follows, and it is not the first time that Shekhawat is reduced to a man almost, or all, in the buff, in the franchise. This is also the second example of toilet humour in the movie, the first being the scene wherein he carries his wife and plops her on the commode. There is little to distinguish between toilet humour and wholesome comedy in the film.

The writing and directing of the film is credited to Sukumar. But they do not acknowledge the twist in the tale, borrowed from the Shahrukh Khan film, *Raees* (2017), wherein the smuggler hero uses the watery route to transport his contraband (liquor), taking advantage of a favourable water-level, and the roadblocks installed by the SP at vantage land route points have no takers or truckers. This is replicated almost entirely in *Pushpa 2: The Rule*. Another borrowed twist

comes from the 2024 Alia Bhatt starrer, *Jigra*, wherein the smugglers head for a nearby neighbouring country, across the sea, to shake off the law, which is in hot pursuit, in motor launches. Honouring international sea-faring law, the police of one country have no jurisdiction over the waters patrolled by the other country’s coast guard. So, how come the smugglers’ boats are allowed safe passage? Because they are fishing boats, fishing boats are allowed in international waters, subject to a treaty between the two countries under reference. Smell something fishy? I did. Please excuse the fact that each boat has several logs of red sandalwood booty attached to its aft bottom, which the host country’s laws do not log on to. And what’s more, the man himself, Pushpa, or, to use his full name PushpaRaj, is waiting on the other side, to take control, once they land on the foreign shore, which is a mere six kilometres away. Frustration galore for hot in pursuit, poor Shekhawat, who has to quickly take an about turn, when the coast guard opens fire on his boat for trespassing.



There is plenty and more to make Allu Arjun and the Pushpa franchise fans go gaga, applaud and whistle, eliciting Oohs and Aahs! He is in his element, and swag seems to have percolated down to his cerebrum and cerebellum, not to mention the medulla

oblongata. He even manages to convince in his limited acrobatics-laden dances and intimate moments with his wife. And everybody loves a 'hero' who, when cornered, works out a way out that leaves his nemesis floundering and swearing. Pushpa has another personality trait: he asks his supporters to keep their distance when he is about to be up close and personal with his wife, making funny excuses for the delay in joining them in his drawing room, or when he tells women to move away because his anger is about to boil over, and he is on the verge of spitting out expletives in this mode. After all, Pushpa is an ethical man.



Rashmika Mandanna makes a comely, seductive wife to Pushpa, and matches the item song girl Sreeleela, step for step, even when the trio are the centre of the audience's attention. Her limited desires from life as Pushpa's wife might not hold a candle to feminism, but can we expect an oversized, scheming and murdering thug's wife to be anything like a feminist? Her bravado is limited to egging him on to repair the troubled relationship with his step-brother and to punish the goons who kidnap his step-brother's daughter.

As Bhanwar Singh Shekhawat, 42-year-old Abdul Hameed Mohammed Fahadh Faasil, who made his Telugu debut with *Pushpa: The Rise* matches his antagonist, and, in equal measure, contrasts his personality. Pushpa is all about hair and beard, wholly hirsute, while Shekhawat is hairless, on the head and the body. For reasons that need not be spelt out, he remains several steps behind Pushpa. Fahad Fazil is among the highest-paid and most popular Malayalam actors. Son of director Fazil, Fahadh began his career at the age of 20, with his father's 2002 romantic film *Kaiyethum Doorath*. Hindustani films have yet to cast him, but with *Pushpa 2*, he makes a strong case for the likely jump from Kerala-Chennai-Telangana-Andhra Pradesh-Karnataka to Mumbai. Why was he cast as a Rajasthani is not clear, but he is fair, and can pass off as a North Indian, so if they wanted a variation in dialect from Hindi, the following choices were available: Punjabi, Bihari, Uttar Pradesh, Haryanvi, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhandi, Uttaranchali, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhandi or Rajasthani. Rajasthani is good enough. Wonder why the producers did not think of dubbing the film in Rajasthani too. It is the move to try and pass off Pushpa as a Maharashtrian that pricks the suspension of disbelief. What do you say about words like "kissik" and "lappa"? Inventions, or some high-end Hindi/Hinglish?

The photography, editing, art direction and music are of a high order. The second half peters out in comparison with the first half, something that is more than likely to occur when you make a film 201 minutes long. Polish cinematographer Mirosław Kuba Brożek captures all the ambiances very well,

including surface, underwater and aerial shots. Naveen Nooli could have been more ruthless with the 'delete' and 'cut' buttons. Music (Devi Sri Prasad-DSP) goes well with the film, though the Hindi songs, like the Hindi dialogue, do not have lasting quality. Perhaps lip sync and conforming to literal translation are the issues to blame. The sets and locales are well-created and crafted by Nani Devarapali and Rajkumar Gibson Talari. Babu Tyagi's Special Effects are laudable. The titles come in stages, mostly in Hindi and sometimes in English as well. End credits roll at a speed that only P.T. Usha or Usain Bolt might be able to match. If they cannot be read, why have them at all?



A gargantuan, spectacular ode to the male ego, the ego of a ruthless mass murderer and the biggest smuggler in his state, with the

entire police force and the political leaders up for sale, with the villagers falling at the feet of the Big Boss, are, surely, not the values we should impart to our teenagers and early 20sers. These are not values at all, and should not be propagated through any medium, to any age group. They find expression here thanks to our country being a democracy and censorship standards that bend to accommodate films like *Pushpa 2: The Rule*. PushpaRaj has all the qualities and strengths of a hero, only he is a dreaded criminal who toys with the police and the elected legislature of his state, and of the country. Should he be the role model we would like to adopt? The answer is a resounding "No". Should the blockbuster box-office revenue--₹1,600 crores (US\$190 million) worldwide, till 26 December, the highest-grossing Indian film of the year, the second highest-grossing film in India, second highest-grossing Telugu film, and third highest-grossing Indian film--justify the subject and treatment? After all, money is money, whether it is earned by intellectual or physical toiling or gained as filthy lucre! You got me there.

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