Movie Review: Brahman Naman (2016)

3.5 Stars (out of 4)

Brahman Naman was a part of the 2016 Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles.

“Right now, we could have been in between the thighs of whores losing our virginity, but here we are trading electoral trivia.” “That’s all we have, Ajay: trivia.” Brahman Naman paints a hilarious portrait of the lives of some sex-obsessed college quiz masters in 1980s Bangalore.

Naman (Shashank Arora) leads the university’s quiz team, which includes his right-hand-man Ajay (Tanmay Dhanania) and their pal with a broken leg, Ramu (Chaitanya Varad). Onstage, they rule the school with a mastery of arcane knowledge and British literary quotations. They recruit a timid younger student named Randy (Vaishwath Shankar) to fill out the team.

Offstage, however, the guys rank low in the social pecking order, a fact made painfully obvious by their foil, Ronnie (Sid Mallya), the handsome captain of the cricket team. Naman’s plan to humiliate Ronnie by distributing pictures of the jock’s genitals backfires when proof of the captain’s endowment entices even more of the university women into the athlete’s arms — and out of reach of the desperate quiz team.

And I do mean literal pictures of genitals. There are a lot of penises in Brahman Naman, as well as plenty of breasts, bodily fluids, and some inventive methods of masturbation. This is not a tame Bollywood sex comedy. (The dialogue is entirely in English, too.)

Naman and his friends armor themselves in condescension, convinced that their superior brainpower will yield future rewards, both fiscal and romantic. Thus, Naman regularly humiliates the one woman who is actually attracted to him — Ash (Sindhu Sreenivasa Murthy) — because of her acne. Ash is sweet and cute and deserving of someone far better than Naman, a fact he slowly realizes over the course of the film, as a tiny seed of understanding grows within him.

As rotten as Naman often is, it’s hard to dislike him, because the source of his bad attitude is so obvious.
His intellect and status as a member of the respected Brahman caste hold no sway with the ladies in town. He wants to have sex, but he’s also terrified of it. He feels equally entitled and unsure.

Writer Naman Ramachandran’s delightful script is brought to life by director Qaushiq Mukherjee (better known as Q). The story is peppered with strange asides, in the form of Naman’s daydreams and quiz questions for the audience. Ronnie is introduced with a few-seconds-long montage of him catching balls and doing other crickety things, establishing him as a classic ’80s teen movie villain.

The eclectic soundtrack plays an important role as well. My favorite moment is when Naman’s crush, Rita (Subholina Sen), walks by, and Ramu cries, “Oh, no! Not again!” Before my brain could complete the thought — “Aren’t those the lyrics to…” — Rod Stewart’s song “Infatuation” kicks in. Rita walks by in slow motion while Naman gawks. The music drops out abruptly, and we’re left with Ramu singing, “Infatuation. Infatuation.”

The cast is something special. Arora’s magnetism — the selling point of the movie Titli — makes Naman the most charming of anti-heroes. The rest of the supporting cast is amazing as well, including Biswa Kalyan Rath of “Pretentious Movie Reviews” as a frenemy with outlandish tales of sexual conquest.

Brahman Naman is a real treat, with great characters and visual flourishes that make it a must-see movie.