

## Awards Notwithstanding...

THIS film is appropriately named. The *aadharshila* (foundation stone) of man's boundless egotism is indeed woman's endless sacrifice.

This is the story of a young man who is suffering from a strong delusion that just because he has graduated from the Poona Film Institute, he has not only the right to make pompous, egocentric films but also to call us, the audience, fools, just because he suspects we may not enthusiastically fall into his trap.

Being unsure of the audience response, the first thing he does in the film is trap a young woman and make her his wife. Thenceforward, he has a captive audience in her and can freely inflict on her his repetitive and self-righteous ravings and rantings. And what can a filmi wife do but gaze adoringly at this self-styled genius, and be willing to play a lifelong "supporting role" to him? Asha in the film is indeed a modern Sita accompanying Ajay, the modern Rama, into self-imposed exile in the jungles of the Delhi and Bombay film world. The film maker Ashok Ahuja (who purports to be relating his own personal story in the film) keeps repeating that Asha's continuing self-sacrifice is crucial to Ajay's struggle. However, one presumes that for every one Asha there must be many, many other women who do not serve some egocentric man or other with such patient forbearance—otherwise we would have had to suffer many, many more films like this one. Watching the film, I blessed every one of those women who saved us and the film industry from such misfortune.

What reward does the poor modern Sita get for her sacrificial contribution? After every supposed rebuff he suffers in the big, bad world, our hero falls weeping on her shoulder, seeking assurance that she will never desert him, will fight by his side, in other words will continue to submerge her identity in his. She stays up nights while he sleeps, she finds a suitable story for his film, she helps write and type up the script, she also keeps house and entertains his hosts of friends. Finally, she sells her jewels to pay for the film which no one else is willing to finance. After all this, when Ajay's friends ask him why he didn't ask for their help in his struggle, this messiah of honesty has the cheek to reply: "I wanted to fight this battle *alone*, and I will fight it *alone*." While saying this, he is leaning on Asha's shoulder, clasping her hand. Within five minutes, when his friends have left, and the two are in



**"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the smartest of them all?" "You, of course! Consider all others fools!"**

their bedroom, he is back using the same tactic again, seeking reassurance: "You are with me in this battle, aren't you?" The moral 1: behind every egocentric man is a woman who panders to his vanity. Inference: if we women stop being so naively self-sacrificing, the world can be rid of a lot of muck and trash.

One can sum up the rest of the film by saying that this national award winning and tax-free film has all the vices of a cheap filmi melodrama without any of its redeeming features. The hero posing as director openly declares his contempt for the audience: "Well, you want songs. Fine, I will give you ten songs." And he has the audacity to actually inflict on us nearly as many terribly dull, meaningless songs without any contextual relationship to the silliness that is presented as a plot.

Ajay's struggle is supposed to spring from his refusal to pander to the audience taste for sex and violence on the screen. However, this honest and committed man falls for every crumb that comes his way—indeed, for every lure of a crumb. He begins his great career with a cheap commercial on the most discredited of all government programmes—the notorious family planning campaign. His commercial tries to convince people that they are poor because they are foolish enough to have more children than the government thinks fit. Not content with these credentials, he goes off to a village to ease his social conscience. We don't know what he sees or learns there, because in the rest of the film, he is too self-involved to glance at any reality outside his own bruised ego. He does, however, inflict on Asha and on the audience a number of pompous speeches decrying the urban, educated people's indifference to the problems of rural India.

What is the hero's proof of his own social concern? A friend approaches him with an offer to make an ad film for his uncle's tyre firm. The hero again inflicts on us a high-sounding speech on his unwillingness to sell his talent by selling toothpaste or toilet soap. Within minutes, however, he is sheepishly walking into the company office, begging for a contract, which they have the good sense to refuse. Ajay does not lose heart—instead in the guise of sharing his dreams with us, he shows us a more than

full-length commercial on cycle tyres, inserted into the film. So we know the stuff his dreams are made of! The commercial shows a poor, lean, miserable husband having to carry a fat, overdressed wife on his cycle. It also unashamedly uses the near-nude body of another woman to sell the cycle tyre.

What is the relevance of these long-drawn commercial films within this feature film? One suspects that this first film of our film institute graduate director is meant as a self-advertisement campaign. Ashok Ahuja, the director, seems to have shrewdly made the film financing corporation pay for his exhibition of his talent to the government, to private industrialists, and to private producers, who, he hopes, will be future buyers and patrons of his talent. What other explanation is there for the prolonged advertisement commercials and film song sequences inserted in the form of fantasy into this saga of struggle?

He also uses the clever gimmick that Sai Paranjpye had used in *Chashmebuddoor*. He pretends to be making fun of the formula film, and uses this pretext to introduce all its ingredients into his own film, besides his own trash. Clearly, his eyes are fixed on making a film like *Sholay* or *Bobby*, but since he cannot yet mop up the money for such a venture, he pretends to spoof them—a good example of eating one's cake and having it too.

Towards the end, fantasy becomes nightmare for the audience, when the heroic director threatens to make a mass movement of his idiocy. For this crusade, all he needs is a jeepload of blue jean clad boys and mod girls, distributing leaflets for his film in crowded marketplaces and in colleges. Here is the new wave cinema going to the masses—though one doubts whether the expensive advertising campaign undertaken for the film was actually conducted by such methods as the film depicts. Fortunately, the masses do not seem to have responded to the director's overtures. It was heartening to see not more than 150 people in the hall the night we saw the film. Half of them walked out, and the half who stayed cursed loudly and full throatedly.

However, our gallant director is not daunted by people's refusal to see his film. Instead, he fires a parting shot in the form of a newspaper ad issued after the withdrawal of the film: "Films like *Aadharshila* do not find suitable and sustained openings at theatres. But we cannot let this be. *Aadharshila* will be back soon." Since even the lure of a tax free film did not work, perhaps he would like the government to follow up the award by making the film compulsory viewing for people—as are family planning documentaries before feature films?

—*Madhu Kishwar*

#### **CHANN PARDESEE-The Many Faces Of "Heroism"**

It would appear that this, the first Punjabi film to be given the national award, has been so honoured because it manages to come close to the formula Hindi melodrama. It is based on the stock plot—poor woman betrothed to poor man, is raped by rich landlord; confesses to her lover only after marriage; is berated and abandoned; brings up her son alone; the family is reunited in the end and the villain suitably punished.

The theme linking all the convolutions of the plot emerges in the form of the rapist jagirdar's supposed motive—his

overwhelming desire for a son. Fearing that his relatives will think he is impotent and will try to grab his lands, he declares his readiness to keep a mistress or to marry again, just in order to acquire a son. Incensed by Kammo's rejection of his proposals, he rapes her, but around the same time, his wife's prayers are answered and she also conceives. Desperate, Kammo tries to commit suicide. The jagirdar has her saved only because he fears she may wish ill on his legitimate heir-to-be. However, the legitimate heir turns out to be a daughter and the illegitimate child a son. From then on, the jagirdar's role as oppressor is gradually softened into that of a benevolent and ageing paternal figure—on the one hand talking in tender tones to Kammo's son Lali, secretly transferring land to him and buying him a tractor, and on the other hand, worried about his daughter's marriage. It is almost as if all sins can be atoned for by the bestowal of property.

The second half of the film is a prolonged attempt to further sentimentalize this biological father-son tie. Men confront one another in emotionally charged scenes—either violently seeking reprisal and being held back by weeping women who intervene to save the life of husband or son; or accusing each other, as when Lali tells his jagirdar father: "You didn't give your name to my mother. Why should I call you father?"—as though if he had married Kammo, the rape would have been sanctified. This romanticizing of the great "blood bond" reaches its climax when Lali sells his land to pay the marriage expenses of his "sister"—the jagirdar's daughter, Channi.

Each one of the men is somehow or other made into a hero. Nek, Kammo's virtuous labourer husband who becomes a blood thirsty dacoit and spends his life plotting revenge and descending on the jagirdar's house with his gang, is, of course, a readymade hero. Who would not sympathize with a poor man who was cheated into accepting a non-virgin as a bride? Lali, as fashionable college student, who unknowingly falls in love with his sister but later settles for one of the dotting damsels whom he had viewed with contempt, is a singing, dancing and prancing hero of the more common or garden variety. Even the rapist becomes a villain-turned-hero. It is suggested that the poor man was pushed into evil ways by his scheming underlings, and by the noble but thwarted desire for a son. His brutality to Kammo seems almost an aberration. In the rest of the film he is shown as a devoted husband and father, even devoutly bowing before god when his legitimate child is conceived. Fortunately, we do not see much of Channi's bridegroom—his springing to defend her with his ceremonial sword, holds promise of yet another hero in embryo.

The only redeeming feature in this welter of proliferating heroisms is the fact that the women are not completely passive victims. They are shown as somewhat active agents. Kammo, unlike most Hindi film heroines, does not beg forgiveness for no fault of hers. She defends the life of her child against Nek's fury, and pays the price by losing her husband and having to bring up the child on her own. At the emotion-charged reunion with Nek, she does not fail to tell him: "You ruined my youth." When revealing the truth to Lali, she says: "Do you want to hear the

truth ? Will you have the courage to hear it as your mother had the courage to endure it ?” and again, later: “Your mother was blameless, Lali.”

Similarly, Channi does not scream or swoon when she finds a bloodsoaked and fierce looking stranger lying in the undergrowth. Instead, she saves his life by using his knife to extract the bullet embedded in his back. Later, she successfully saves her bridegroom’s life when Nek is about to kill him.

The obverse side of this activity is the stupidly aggressive behaviour of Lali’s girlfriend, Nimmo. True, she makes good her boast that she will net him in the end—but one wonders what it will feel like to be the wife of a man who makes no attempt to hide his contempt for her. An even worse fate would seem to be in store for this girl than that of the jagirdar’s wife whose one ambition was to prove herself a good wife by producing an heir, but whose performance of this duty is rewarded in her old age by the knowledge that her husband is a rapist and a murderer.

All in all, a disappointing film which neither deserves an award nor lives up to its claim to fulfil Balraj Sahni’s dream of good Punjabi cinema.

—Ruth Vanita

#### **BAZAR—The Marriage Market**

The fact that this film has been well received by audiences shows the development of a new and hopeful trend in Indian cinema, whereby meaningful films are also beginning to be commercially viable.

The film is a trenchant analysis of the racket in Hyderabad where girls from miserably poor Muslim families are sold to the highest bidders. Once married and taken far from home, they are at the mercy of their husbands, and are often divorced, abandoned or channelled into prostitution. The film is also remarkable for its sympathetic portrayal of how women are forced to become the

instruments of one another’s torture and degradation.

The helplessness of women, apparent or hidden, has been well brought out. On the one hand is the mother of Shabnam, the girl bride. Worn out by poverty and toil, burdened with an older unmarried daughter, she forces Shabnam into a marriage she knows is repulsive to her, yet allows her to say a last farewell to her lover just before the wedding ceremony. Shabnam, the burqa clad 15 year old brought up in seclusion, lives in fear of real and imagined horrors. She seeks to be protected by her lover Farooque : “When we are married, keep me hidden. Don’t let anyone see me, except yourself.” When this attempt fails, her agonized protests are overcome, and her cries of pain interpreted as consent to the *nikah*, she asserts the only form of refusal available to her. She takes the sacrifice to its logical conclusion by killing herself on the bridal bed before she can be outraged by her legal husband. The subtler study of Smita Patil as the woman who appears to be a sophisticated socialite—mixing freely with men, and engineering matrimonial deals, but actually as dependent on men, as insecure and desirous of the “protection” of marriage, reveals very clearly the essential powerlessness of women in a world controlled by male power.

While Shabnam escapes through death, Smita makes a breakthrough. When marriage is in sight for her at the end of the film, she chooses to leave the man she is living with even though he falls at her feet, crying that he cannot live without her. In a symbolic assertion of herself as a responsible agent rather than a pawn in the hands of men, she says : “I am equally responsible for the injustice that has been done.”

Hopefully, if more and more such films are made, they will be able to counter the hold which the money-churning film industry has acquired.

—Lilavati

### **Women Lecturers Mobilize Against Dowry Death**

Dr Shakuntala Arora, a lecturer in the Hindi department of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee women’s college, Delhi University, died of burning on June 5, 1982. Her family and her colleagues feel that harassment and torture over a period of years, drove her to kill herself. The police have registered a case of suicide, but Shakuntala’s colleagues are demanding that her husband Subhash Arora be arrested and prosecuted.

The pamphlet brought out by the lecturers of S. P. Mukherjee college details the facts of Shakuntala’s ten year long married life : “The sad tale of her prolonged suffering started with her marriage to Dr Subhash Arora, a lecturer of Hansraj college. At the time of the wedding, the

bridegroom insisted on a scooter as an item in the bride’s dowry. The parents had to comply with the unjustified demand. When Shakuntala entered her in-laws’ house, she was asked to pay off an amount of Rs 25,000 which her parents-in-law had incurred on the marriage. She was forced to bring this money from her parents. Any resistance on the part of Shakuntala led to beatings and mental torture. One fulfilled demand led to another. During her stay at her in-laws’ house, Shakuntala, earning in four figures, was given an allowance of Rs 100 only to meet all her expenses including breakfast, which she rarely had the privilege to eat at home, and conveyance from Kashmere Gate to Tagore Garden, her place of work. At the

time of the birth of her first child, she received no cooperation from her husband and his people... The same heartlessness repeated itself more violently at her second delivery. She was kicked in the stomach by her husband before being taken to hospital. Only 20 days after the caesarian operation, Shakuntala, badly beaten up and in tears, with the small baby in her arms, entered her mother’s house to seek temporary respite from the tortures of her husband. She had no money to pay off the taxi. These are only some of the many cruelties which turned Shakuntala’s life after marriage into a hellish nightmare. Two days before her death, she was beaten up and forbidden to participate in a function

related to her brother's marriage, because she had failed to get money from her widowed mother. The poor mother had already parted with whatever she had to quench Subhash Arora's never-ending lust for money. A highly educated and well placed woman was put to an inconceivable mental and physical humiliation..."

Though Shakuntala died in the summer vacation, the teachers of Mukherjee college contacted each other and mobilized support. About 60 persons demonstrated in front of police commissioner Bajrang Lal's office on June 11. They gave him a list of witnesses and evidence. He promised a speedy investigation. However, when the university opened more than a month later, no investigation had been conducted.

The district commissioner of police, west Delhi, came to the college and told the large gathering of teachers: "This is not a case, it is an incident...it is a tragedy...! have 5,000 incidents like this, it is a very ordinary matter." He refused to register a case, and insisted it would be useless to charge the husband with abetment to suicide because the phrase

would apply only if the husband had handed over a tin of kerosene and a matchbox to the victim, in the presence of an eye-witness. The police trivialized the issue and shouted at the teachers.

On July 17, the staff association acted in accordance with their call in the pamphlet: "We all have a duty towards the innocent victim who was denied the basic right to live. We should join hands to seek social boycott of Mr Subhash Arora and to curb the vice of dowry before it assumes uncontrollable proportions."

They demonstrated outside his house in Multan Nagar. Quite a few neighbours joined them. Although the couple and their two children aged nine and two, had shifted to this house only a month before Shakuntala died, the neighbours recounted several instances when they had seen her being beaten and pushed around. Two days before her death, her husband had beaten her severely and dragged her out of the house. One neighbour said that the nine year old daughter kept shouting: "Papa used to beat Mummy, that is why Mummy died" but was silenced by the threat: "Mummy has died and if you don't keep quiet, Papa will also be taken away by the police."

Meanwhile, Subhash Arora has

continued to teach mathematics at Hansraj college. On 24 July, S. P. Mukherjee college teachers, who are all women, arrived en masse at Hansraj. They explained the situation to teachers of Hansraj and asked them to help create social pressure for a fair investigation of the case. They suggested the formation of a joint action committee including representatives of both colleges. Animated discussion followed. At first, Hansraj college teachers, who are almost all men, resolutely defended their colleague, saying they had known him for years and never noticed anything unusual, and advising Shakuntala's colleagues: "Do not get carried away by emotion, do not get sentimental." Finally, Hansraj staff agreed to discuss the matter in their staff council.

Shakuntala's colleagues are sad and angry that although they knew she was being constantly beaten and harassed by Subhash Arora, they had not directly intervened. Now there is a positive agreement among the teachers of S. P. Mukherjee college that justice should be collectively sought, and they are actively working to extend the dialogue beyond the two colleges.

—Deepti, Shobha

## Two Big Anti-Dowry Demonstrations

WHILE this issue is being printed, two large demonstrations against dowry-related atrocities on women, have been organized in Delhi. On August 2, the Bharatiya Janata Party organized a demonstration of about 10,000 women and many men and children, from Windsor Place to Boat Club. The rally was addressed by Vijaya Raje Scindia, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Shakuntala Arya among others. Some of the slogans raised were: "*Indirateraj main, Bahu jalayi jail hai*" (Indira, daughters-in-law are being burnt under your rule) and "*Jo saas bahu ko jaleye, Aisi saas narak mein jaaye*" (A mother-in-law who burns her daughter-in-law will go to hell.) A memorandum was handed over to the Lok

Sabha Speaker, pointing out that "the plight of the Indian woman is horrible. Every form of cruelty and oppression has been institutionalized to her grave detriment. If dowry is the issue, a bride shall burn, if the caste is low, a rape shall result." They demanded that "parliament by statute set up a standing commission on women, on the lines of the commission on scheduled castes and tribes and the minorities commission, to keep permanent vigil with regard to the problems of India's 35 crore women."

On August 3, the Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch, a joint front recently formed by about 30 organizations, including women's wings of various political parties such as All India Democratic Women's

Association (CPI-M), National Federation of Indian Women (CPI), All India Women's Conference (Congress-I), and Mahila Dakshata Samiti (Janata Party), students' unions, trade unions, youth groups, and voluntary women's organizations organized a rally of about 2,500 women and men, from Jantar Mantar to Boat Club. The Manch was formed at the initiative of Pramila Dandavate of Mahila Dakshata Samiti. The rally was addressed by representatives of various organizations. Some of the prominent speakers were Susheela Gopalan, Pramila Dandavate, Vimla Farooqui. Amrita Pritam presided over the meeting.

The memorandum handed over to the Lok Sabha Speaker contained a list of demands. The major demands were: steps to ensure that marriage expenditure does not exceed 10 per cent of the total annual income of the parents or Rs 10,000,

whichever is less; registered women's organizations to be invested with the power to institute cases against those indulging in dowry practices; compulsory share for the daughter in the testator's property; a half share for the wife in all assets acquired by the couple after marriage; compulsory registration of marriages with a declaration of all assets given to the bride and groom; institution of a national commission on women; annual report to be issued by the government on dowry-related cases and action taken with regard to them; constitution of area-wise local committees

with representatives of police, administration and registered women's and other voluntary organizations to investigate all incidents of dowry and other atrocities against women; compulsory post mortem by two doctors in all cases of unnatural death of women; compulsory registration and investigation of all deaths of women, including accidental deaths, within the first 10 years of marriage; rehabilitation services to be set up by government with the active involvement of voluntary organizations.

The rally was attended by the parents

of several dowry victims, including Mrs Ravi Kanta, mother of Rita Khurana, the 29 year old assistant director of planning, whose body was found on July 27 in the Lidder river at Pahalgam, where she had gone with her husband J. R. Khurana, after their marriage on July 11. Rita's parents want an enquiry to be conducted into her mysterious death.

To mobilize people for the rally, the Manch had held a 15-day-long campaign, wherein several meet-ings were organized in different parts of the city and in some colleges of Delhi University. □