

Galige

In Search of an Indian Identity

Director: M.S. Sathyu

Review: Renuka Viswanathan

THE definitive cinematic statement on Indian secularism has been M.S. Sathyu's award winning *Garam Hawa*. After years of dabbling in other themes, he is back again in *Galige*, with another comment on the contemporary dilemma of a national identity. It recently had its preview in Bangalore and will soon hopefully be available on the commercial circuit.

Galige looks at several of the current national malaises. Its heroine, a self-made woman befriends an indigent old couple who pretend to be her long-lost grandparents, although she does not accept their assertion of a biological relationship.

She also develops a relationship with Shashwat, a jobless north Indian with mechanical skills, who reveals himself as a Sikh terrorist on the run after a murderous bomb attack.

The film does not fit the stereotype of an art movie; it does not drag, and there is action, humour, and sensation galore. The tone of the movie is sane, humanistic and all-inclusive. It's a film for young people, about young people. It dips into their hearts and looks at the confusions that trouble them in modern India: namely, their sense of alienation because of the differences we have created based on religion, region, language and even

gender. It proclaims that recognising the essential humanity of a person is what life is all about — a message not very different from that of *Garam Hawa*.

Nithya, a competent mechanic at HMT Bangalore, is the pivot of the tale and the instrument through which humanistic values are expressed. Her complex identity and the setting of the story in Bangalore contribute to creating the impression of diversity that Sathyu wishes to convey. Bangalore has, over the years, grown into one of the most cosmopolitan of Indian cities. People hailing from all

over India, speaking various languages and professing different religions, have been comfortably absorbed into the metropolis and have created a new identity that the city's inhabitants describe as Bangalorean. The provincialism which typifies Delhi or Madras has never been characteristic of Bangalore. Almost effortlessly, today's Bangalore has moved from the national to the international arena and provided a welcome home to many foreigners. In *Galige*, Nithya, like most Bangaloreans, moves comfortably with people from different parts of Karnataka as well as from outside its borders and has an unaffected friendship with a Japanese engineer who has been brought in from Japan (where she has herself had a spell of training) to revamp the functioning of her division in the HMT.

The most significant element in the story is Nithya's lack of an identity in the conventional sense. Abandoned as a baby, she was taken by a *fakir* to an orphanage where she was brought up surrounded by affection. Several times in the film she declares defiantly that she alone is free to break out of the manmade shackles of caste, region and religion because she belongs nowhere and everywhere. This argument effectively silences all those



who counsel her to conform to the norms and conventions of society. She creates her own identity, following the dictates of her heart and mind and drawing her values from daily experience. It is not, therefore, difficult to accept her uncluttered and straightforward approach to friends, acquaintances and situations.

For women viewers, the confidence with which she is shown to be managing her life should be intensely satisfying. At last, there is a woman on the screen with whom independent, self-reliant women can relate, someone who asks for neither pity nor protection. Nithya takes her assignment to train the new workers at the Ranibagh factory of the HMT in Uttar Pradesh as a challenge and scorns the suggestion of her surrogate grandparents to drop out of it by pleading that the job was unsuitable for her as a woman. She defies them openly by moving all over the city on her motorbike day and night with confidence and dignity. She lives alone in the HMT colony and her rooms bear the stamp of her national and international identity, furnished with trinkets from all over India, as well as from Japan. She looks people and the world in the eye, including her bosses who respect her skill, the owner of the hotel where her boyfriend stays, and some senior police officers with whom she comes into contact. In the opening scene she dares to go her own way when, after rejecting the unwarranted claims of her professed grandparents, she picks them up again out of compassion and gives them shelter. Towards the end of the film she boldly declares her intention of marrying a north Indian despite the opposition of her surrogate grandparents.

She drives Shashwat, alias Roop Singh, her boyfriend, around on her motorbike and he drives only with her

consent (as also at the very end, when Sathyu uses this device to convey her grief and desolation on their final trip to the police station to surrender). She lashes out furiously at him when his male pride is injured by her paying his room rent. She is his equal and the relationship between them is that of two close friends sharing common interests. Sathyu chooses to make both Nithya and Roop Singh mechanically inclined. Nithya is not only a technician at her work place but she tinkers around with watches and clocks at home. Sathyu's heroine appeals to us as a modern, self-reliant, humane and intensely dignified person.

Sathyu has entered into the minds and mannerisms of young urban Indians very well indeed. They, like Nithya, are confused about the distinctions that their elders have drawn between individuals. The old people who come to adopt Nithya and are instead adopted by her, keep up an incessant nagging in an attempt to lay down the ground rules for her life. By not tying the heroine down to a natal relationship, Sathyu is able to depict the conflict between the generations without losing credibility or audience sympathy. The elders sponging on Nithya disapprove of her friends and her freedom and dislike the idea of her marrying Shashwat, whose origins and background are so different. To all this, Nithya responds almost brutally, insisting that she is an orphan, and therefore beyond the pale of social conventions. Sathyu appropriately makes Shashwat's mother respond in a similarly negative manner. The first question posed by Shashwat's Punjabi (Sardarini) mother when she hears of his marriage is whether the girl is a Sardarini. And it is her husband who gently reminds her that this should make no difference, that what is important is that her son is alive.

In Sathyu's movie, the young people are comfortable with diversity. They speak several languages, take people at face value without first ascertaining their regional or religious identities, and move around easily in their youthful milieu instead of remaining insular, hidebound by convention and prejudiced against aliens like the older generation. Their values, derived from their own painful experiences, are valid. They forge friendships on their own terms and make sense of life, rejecting the biases handed down to them by their parents.

Nithya makes the acquaintance of Shashwat on a train journey between Delhi and Bangalore. This episode is a marvelous *tour de force*, and it effectively reveals the director's chief concerns. The train becomes a microcosm of the continent and in it people of different faiths, regions and languages meet and mingle freely as individuals. A group of Muslims get down at a station to offer their evening prayers and it is Shashwat, the runaway Sikh terrorist, who brings a laggard old man back to the train when it begins to move.

The train gives Sathyu an opportunity to develop the most experimental part of the film — its multilingual soundtrack. Technically speaking, this is a Kannada film, but Sathyu lets his characters use several languages without dubbing or subtitling. This daring action gives the movie the flavour of real life. Nithya from Bangalore speaks Japanese and Hindi in her own way, Shashwat and the Japanese consultant, Toshiro, speak Kannada without self-consciousness about their own accents. And the entire 15 to 20 minutes of flashback in Chandigarh and Delhi are shot entirely in Punjabi and Hindi. With little Hindi and no Punjabi, I found no problem in relating to what was going on. Sathyu insists that all

Indians can and do understand a great deal of what is said in any other Indian language. The most beautiful touch of this linguistic harmony occurs when the young people in the train play at *Antakshari*. A song that ends in a particular sound in one language is picked up spontaneously by the next person in another language. What a marvelous way of rising above the fruitless debates about language that have engulfed our thinking and media. The delicious touch of the Sardar speaking fluent Tamil to a waiter on the train is no mirage. One can hear several such dialogues on cross country train journeys.

The message that Sathyu conveys through the behaviour of his young characters is relevant to all of us today. It takes us back to the roots that we have forgotten while forging other identities. The young people fight their own battles and face up to their responsibilities. The message is full of hope, even when the young terrorist goes off voluntarily to jail. For he has turned away from the awful destruction that his terrorism has unleashed. His girlfriend stands by him courageously and shelters him. However, at the end, she tells him that he cannot run away forever since the police have caught up with him and

she is pregnant. At that point, he comes out of his hideaway with dignity and courage, an arm thrown companionably around her shoulder before driving down on her motorbike to the police station. This is one of the few occasions when she is shown sitting behind him, slumped disconsolate and defeated. Her grief comes through with force and without melodrama. We remember the orphan who will now bring another into the world and wonder about its identity. If these are the young who will inherit India, there is hope still for the nation. □



THESE books of poems from Calcutta's Writers Workshop can be read as falling broadly into two groups — those that are Victorian in style and sensibility and those that are influenced by the modernists. Joshi and Krishnasami, who constitute the former group, tend to write with rhyme and rhythm and to foreground emotion, while Sadarangani, Nalapet and Patnaik tend to write free verse and try to sound sceptical about emotion.

Any poet necessarily speaks to

BOOK REVIEW

Verse, and Worse

Women's poetry published by Writers Workshop, Calcutta during 1994

Esha Joshi, *Spindrift*; Christine Krishnasami, *For a Spell*; Neeti Singh Sadarangani; *The Serpent of Slumber*; Anuradha Nalapet, *Nothing is Safe*; Purabi Patnaik, *Quest*; Manorama Biswal Mohapatra, *Only a Poet can Dream* (translated from Oriya by Prafulla Tripathy); Vijaya Mukhopadhyay, *Shadow in the Seed* (translated from Bengali by Enakshi Chatterjee).

Ruth Vanita

other poets, especially to chosen ancestors, but there is a difference between conducting an integrated dialogue with the past and producing a poor imitation of it. Very few of the poems in these collections succeed in getting past the imitative stage.

Krishnasami's verse oddly combines imagism with overt didacticism and free verse with sudden bad rhymes. Thus, in "*Dance of Bliss*" we are shown mongrel puppies playing and then suddenly told: "The natural condition of existence/is not

sorrow but celebration...All grace, all light/in endless delight". I found only one poem here, written in memory of her father, in which the image really worked. The poet seems aware of the superiority of this poem as she has named the collection for it:

*For a spell
The unforgettable
fragrance lingers
In the moistened handcloth
That had served merely to
enfold with care the string
Of fresh jasmine flowers.*

The image effectively evokes a common sight — old south Indian gentlemen tenderly collecting or carrying flowers in a damp cloth for *puja* or for the women of the family.

Nalapat is probably the worst of this set of poets — most of her verse is of the kind adolescents scribble in their diaries and wisely leave there when they grow up. We are treated to profundities like: “Life is no illusion,/ if it were, then why die?/and if death is an illusion,/why birth?” (“*A Dog, in this Century*”). She shares with Sadarangani a predilection for chopping up prose lines arbitrarily into sections and arranging these in different patterns on the page, for example:

*All seems well before the T.V.
you prop
your feet*

up

*and settle with celluloid fiction
for the night.*

(Sadarangani, “*Routine*”)

Is there any reason why the line should not be broken again after “settle”, or why “up” should be placed as it is? Would it make any appreciable difference if the lines were rearranged:

you prop

your feet

up

and settle

with celluloid fiction

for the night.

Yeats’s “sculpture of rhyme” has been replaced with sculpture of layout which costs the compositor more than the poet!

The promise in Sadarangani’s and Patnaik’s verse lies perhaps in their use of verbs which, rather than adjectives, constitute the strength of English as compared to some other languages. In Patnaik’s short poem

“*Adultery*”, the verbs build towards an effective climax: “We have met...We have left...We have leaped...We have loved.” Similarly in her “*The Sati*”, violent verbs combined with shifting pronouns: “We tore a rent”, “Rough hands coiled in her hair”, “they martyred”, culminate in a powerful metaphor:

*she became the celestial bride
whose handful of agony
they all worship.*

I found Esha Joshi the most interesting poet of the lot. She has a wider range, works competently with many different rhyme schemes and moves with ease from serious sonnets to parodies and children’s poems. She is the only one who displays a sense of humour, using literary allusion to good effect, as in “48” which begins “My heart leaps up when I behold/ A rainbow coloured salad” and ends “Ah then my mouth with pleasure fills, / Champing those golden fries and grills”. Some of her haikus are quite telling: “In the glass I see your face, not mine” and “Healthy body?/When you don’t know you have one!”

I am not competent to comment on the quality of Mukhopadhyay’s and Mohapatra’s verse, and in any case the originals are not available in these volumes. All I can say is that the translations do not read well, constantly irritating by their awkward idiom. Here’s a sample, chosen at random:

*With her mind engaged
somewhere else
She was looking at the sky,
A bevy of small birds
With chirping noise
Gave voice to
the morning and evening.*

(Mohapatra, “*She Wasn’t Feeling Well*”)

It’s a pity that Writers Workshop which does such a good job at producing beautifully bound volumes and has published poets like Kamala Das, Nissim Ezekiel and Vikram Seth, should be so indiscriminating. It might not lose better poets like these to bigger publishing houses if it didn’t compel them to appear in the same list with decidedly mediocre ones. □

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