



FILMS

Saransh

—A Supplicant's Crusade
In The Tradition Of The Faryadi

THE rave reviews and general acclaim that *Saransh* has received so far convinces me that we Indians are really modest people. We have such a low opinion of ourselves and our capabilities that every time a film which should be considered a two and a half star melodrama appears, we begin to hail it as a masterpiece. The few geniuses who are cursed enough to survive in our midst, such as a Satyajit Ray, rarely get their films widely distributed in India. We push them away into the world of international film festivals where their work is made to become a mere aesthetic experience for an international elite.

What is it that makes *Saransh* appear "different" from the run of Hindi films? True, it is not the usual romance nor does it have wiggly song and dance sequences. It is supposed to be woven around a social

theme—exposure of corruption and the violence of our social system. The hero is a retired school principal who was a freedom fighter, hence his idealism and desire to resist evil and injustice. He displays no Amitabh or Shatrughan type of courage. His brand is supposed to be more within the range of ordinary men. He does not go around fixing corrupt people by his muscle power but by dint of his moral courage—or so the film would like us to believe. He and his wife are intended to symbolise the ordinary couple's resistance and defiance of social injustice, even at the risk of their lives. This is what the film's "message" is supposed to be.

Undoubtedly, the film is less vulgar than most Bombay films. At the same time, it is much more pretentious. It has no cheap songs but certainly some very dull ones.

Even the terribly amateurish way the camera moves from scene to scene or is made to focus at length on dry leaves or on the mock ferocious face of the Swamiji in the scene of the ritual performed over the urn of ashes, is pretentious and mechanical. The director's attempt to make use of visual symbolism comes across as childish gimmickry with the camera. I found it not only unaesthetic but terribly boring.

However, I would have felt more tolerant towards its arty pretentiousness, had the film not put forward a very misleading and dangerous social and political philosophy.

The story is woven around the life of an old couple whose only son who was living in America has been murdered there by some hoodlums. Their world literally falls apart with this news. While the father

sinks into a suicidal depression, the mother is made to fit in perfectly with the feminine stereotype. She seeks refuge in religious mumbo jumbo and fraudulent godmen. She begins to live in a world of fantasy, after her guru prophesies that her dead son's spirit, which is searching for a suitable womb, will soon be reborn very close to her. This gives her strength to bear the tragedy with relative equanimity.

For the next two hours, we are subjected to scene after scene of the most sickly, soppy melodrama. A young girl aspiring to be a film star enters their life as a paying guest and, as though to fulfill the godman's prophecy, gets pregnant by her boyfriend within a few days of having entered their house. The poor boyfriend cannot marry her because he has a corrupt tyrant of a father who is the local MLA and is aspiring to be reelected. The elections being in the offing, the private affair impinges on the murky world of political intrigue. The boyfriend's father is desperately anxious to get the child aborted for fear of a political scandal.

This is where the old couple are made to jump into the fray and launch their crusade. The initiative is taken by the wife and, of course, for the wrong reasons. What else can be expected from a silly woman who is under the influence, not of her husband as she ought to be, but of a misleading godman? Even foolish ideas cannot come to women on their own. She wants the child to live because she believes it is her own dead son reincarnate. Thus, as is appropriate, the woman comes to represent obscurantism, superstition and faith in mumbo jumbo.

The husband enters the fray on a more "rational" note. His decision to save the child has no ulterior motives. He joins the crusade when he finds that the unborn child is to be sacrificed at the altar of unholy politicking. The whole business of saving the unborn child reminded me of anti cow slaughter campaigns, wherein the only thing that the combating parties ignore is the interests and needs of the

creature on whose behalf they wage the battle. The young woman in this case is hardly given a choice in the matter nor even time to think. She seems to be just carried along by the force of the melodrama and hysteria around her because others have picked up the flag on her behalf.

When the retired headmaster joins his wife in the cause he is shown trying to restrain her irrational and superstitious beliefs. But her feminine irrationality, inspired as it is by an intense desire to repossess her son, knows no restraint. Finally, she is shown emerging from her hysteria and craziness only when she receives a tight slap from her dear husband.

I could not help wondering why, if the solution was so simple, he had not slapped her much earlier so that one would not have had to wade through so much melodrama and histrionics. But then men are generous creatures. They put up with women's silliness until the world's patience is exhausted.

Even though, at the end, the director seems to cast his vote in favour of male rationality with a rather sudden final turn, throughout the film he seems to be heavily enamoured of the godman's mumbo jumbo. It seems as if his heart is deeply influenced by his own filmi vulgarised version of the Hindu philosophy of rebirth and reincarnation. However, as is clear from the end, his "modern", educated head does not allow him to go whole hog with it, and he has to cry halt when his bizarre heart starts pulling him too far in that direction. This conflict between his head and heart is resolved very unsatisfactorily despite the tight slap that accompanied the resolution. I would not be surprised if the film ultimately finds a notable place in the *Jai Sanioshi Ma* genre of films.

However, much more mischievous than this leaning is the political philosophy of the film, and the kind of solutions to social problems that it presents. Whenever our hero is confronted by an especially difficult situation, he ends up solving it if not with a magic wand then with a formula that

resembles it closely. For instance, when confronted with clerks who refuse to release his son's ashes arriving as air cargo, and with commission agents who want to make a quick buck out of this difficult situation, our duty conscious hero does not accept defeat. With true freedom fighter spirit, he barges into the room of a high official and scolds him in a tearchoked, anguished voice. The poor official undergoes an instant change of colour and mannerism. Shedding his official arrogance, he goes and fetches the parcel himself, his head hanging in shame. Who dare look such a crusader in the eye? If it had stopped here, one would not have felt irked. In fact, the incident could pass off as unlikely but possibly realistic and appropriate. But when the same formula is used again and again, one begins to understand the particular entanglements of the director's political perspective. The hero tries his formula on the politician father of the girl's boyfriend. It does not work. The implication is not that the formula is defective but that the fellow is essentially a low level run of the mill *goonda* politician. Remember, he is always shown drunk, acting brutally and hurling filthy abuses at everyone. Had it been the prime minister's son instead of the local MLA's son, the formula would have been bound to work.

When the corrupt politician, in a desperate bid to have his grandchild aborted, gets the girl arrested on a trumped up charge in order to lock her up in the Nari Niketan, our noble masterji is made to use the same formula with great histrionic effect. He gets into a pious rage and with eyes flashing self righteous indignation, he barges into the room of a top-notch official in the ministry- perhaps the home minister or perhaps the police commissioner. The peons and personal assistants try to stop the hero but no, in this crusading mood he cannot be restrained. And sure enough, this man at the top, whoever he is, underneath it all, at heart, is another honest fellow. He has an

added qualification—he was student of our noble masterji. So to prove himself a worthy pupil, he even gives a neat little sermon to respected masterji, without as much as asking him to sit down, on how there is always hope and one should never lose hope that justice will be done. Of course, he makes a couple of phone calls, gets the girl released and solves all the security problems the masterji has been facing. The sequence preceding this scene is very significant in its political sycophancy. We are shown several shots of the awesome ministry building with the government of India symbol of authority—the Ashoka symbol of the three lions. Now our hero has appealed to the ultimate seat of power. How can it fail him?

The political message that the director wants to convey through these various episodes is clear—while the system is rotten at the bottom because of the petty corruption and hooliganism of petty people, at the top there are enough *dudh ka dhula* (milk bathed) good, uncorrupted men in seats of power, who never take long to set things right as soon as they are brought to their notice. It is only the scum at the bottom who seem to be mucking things up.

How flattering this view must seem to those in power. I am surprised that director Mahesh Bhatt could resist the temptation to take the formula to its logical conclusion. Why does he not show dear masterji coming to Indira Gandhi with a similar anguished *faryad*, when he is faced with the injustice of the corrupt MLA. She, for sure, would love it. Even if she couldn't fix the erring MLA she certainly would have fixed Bhatt's fortunes for life.

Similarly, one wonders why the director chooses to let the biggest injustice pass unprotested, namely, the death of the son in the USA. Surely, by the same logic, if he sent the anguished father to give the god Brahma a piece of his mind, the whole problem would have been solved at the outset.

The entire crusade for social justice has

a real Bharatiya touch. A personal appeal to the seat of authority is made on the strength of the petitioner's personal attributes—somewhat in the tradition of folktales regarding petitions made to the Great Emperor over the heads of various layers of the intervening hierarchy. The conscience of the seat of power is so stricken that it decides to yield to him on his grievance though it has it in its power to refuse. Even though, in the ordinary course of events, the higher ups do not deign to intervene in the everyday injustices of the system, they decide to make an exception of this particular petitioner. Our hero, as the petitioner, wins justice not really by explaining the issues involved but mainly on the force of his pious indignation, tears and anger. That is why, even though he gets the system to yield to his plea, there is not even a hint that it really changes anything basic in the system which, one can safely assume, reigns unmoved as before. Changes in the system are not really anywhere on the director's agenda—his effort is to show the godlike munificence of the upper rungs of the power system.

Even though our directors have now been using technicolour film for several years, as far as characterisation is concerned, they still find it difficult to deal with anything beyond two colours—black and white. If they are avant garde kind of directors, they may, instead of two, manage to deal with two and a half colours. The best example of this kind of characterisation is the boyfriend of the young woman in the film. Since it is a “social cause” movie, of the Bombay new wave variety, it is necessary that it end on a note of success and optimism. If there are so many good people at the top, how can the crusade lead to failure? For this, a rather unconvincing change of heart on the part of the boyfriend becomes necessary even at the cost of making him change his grain altogether. Up to then, he had appeared to be a rather colourless, spineless, cowardly, slimy fellow. Suddenly

he transforms himself into a rebel and decides to be on the girl's side even against his powerful father. The only warning we had of his good intentions up to then was his bringing bundles of notes and a *mangalsutra* for the girl to shut her up when she protested against his cowardliness. At the same time, the way he hands over and the way she accepts big chunks of cash, seems more like a man dealing with a prostitute or a kept woman than with a woman he loves and intends to marry. Anyway, the fellow has to undergo an abrupt transformation in order to ensure that the victory did not change to defeat, and the director is not faced with the problem of a heroine who has a “bastard” child.

The kicks, abuses and beatings he receives from his corrupt, tyrannical father are supposed to bring about his sudden sensitivity and courage to rebel. May all the young men of this country be blessed with such tyrannical fathers and receive such kicks from them. It seems that is the only way they will learn to be responsible and courageous, if we are to believe this deeply insightful cinematic characterisation,

Most of the acting too seemed very laboured and contrived. As a friend remarked, you can tell a movie by its make up. If I had not been so impressed by all the rave reviews I would not have had to go through such a disappointment, and would have known what to expect from the first few scenes, which introduce us to the characters who are made to look older than their age with a lot of bad make up. One could easily make out where and how the wrinkle effect had been created and the way the old man was made to appear bald by hiding his hair under a synthetic cover.

The most pleasant part of the film for me was the natural, modest and endearing acting by the young woman. Her talent seems to have been overlooked because of all the attention that has gone to the endless histrionics.

—Madhu Kishwar