



## SHAKTI

This is yet another film in the tradition of *Sholay*, the film which inaugurated a new era of violence in Hindi cinema. *Sholay* marked a visible turn in the value system and social morality that Bombay films are now propagating with a fearful vigour. Just as in our political life we can no longer distinguish ministers from goondas, so in Hindi films the hero and villain are no longer distinguishable. This could have meant a more realistic depiction of human nature as a blend of good and bad, but since the Bombay film industry has no interest in real life or ordinary people, their version of the blend has produced a new monster—the Amitabh Bachan type of hero who stands above law and morality, beyond good and evil, who is a law unto himself.

His capacity for violence far surpasses that of the villain, his yearning for blood and revenge are far more frightening than that of a maniac, his ruthless determination and lack of respect for human life close to that of the kind of men who devised and manned concentration camps and gas chambers, his cynicism raised into a heroic cult by tit for tat dialogue of the Salim-Javed variety.

There was a time when our heroes and villains relied on sheer muscle power aided by simple weapons like knives, swords and pistols. But today apart from the hero becoming a superman in muscle power as well as in force and fraud, the weapons of destruction used, give the fight between gangs the dimensions of a full-fledged war—bombs, helicopters fitted with automatic

# Of Krishnas and Draupadis

machine guns, death traps, cranes which crush people to death with gusto. The underworld seems to have monopolized the most efficient products of the technological revolution, with everything short of nuclear weapons at its disposal.

What place do women have in this world of violence and warfare? In *Shakti*, as in most films which specialize in depicting violence, the women appear primarily as patient, longsuffering wives, mothers and beloveds whose business in life is to shed tears, yet go on playing an emotionally supportive role to the men, even while the men are on a killing spree.

Though both father and son are shown to be loving husbands, and the husband-wife relationship is not shown to be as demeaning for the woman as it is in most films, yet all that the women can do is shed tears while the men kill each other. As in real life, so in films, the more violence there is in society the less are women likely to have any effective say in matters of social concern. Since men have acquired an exclusive monopoly over weapons and organized violence and warfare, throughout history, in any major outbreak of violence, be it gang warfare or communal riots or war between nations, women are rendered more peripheral and the main role that falls to their lot is either to lend support to the men in the butchering of others or to protect the “home front” or to be hapless victims of the violence which men on both warring sides inflict on women as part of their attempt to humiliate and crush the enemy. The other role they are allowed is that of cabaret dancers and entertainers.

In *Shakti*, both Rakhee as the wife of superman police officer Dilip Kumar, and Smita Patil as beloved turned wife of golden hearted superman gangster Amitabh Bachan have unending reserves of strength and endurance all put at the service of the two men. Rakhee’s sacrifice is indeed of epic dimensions. Her son, her life, her all is sacrificed at the altar of her husband’s duty. *Patni dharm* is elevated even above sanctimonious motherhood—and these two together are appropriately shown as potent killers as far as women are concerned. Halfway through this revenge and violence bonanza, when Rakhee has exhausted her tears and her strength, because of suffering in vain, she can do little else but get out of the way of father and son so that they can pursue their aims unhindered. Her place is however, taken by Smita who, in no time at all, is turned from a bright, young, independent working woman into a tear-shedding, silently suffering wife, daughter-in-law and mother. In fact, she is one step ahead of Rakhee in the sacrificial virtues which brought

Rakhee to a tragic end. Rakhee, at least, would get angry, scream, verbally assert her rights as a mother, and try to intervene between father and son. Smita is far more self-sacrificing. Like Rakhee, she is usually shown crying but unlike Rakhee she does not ever complain or protest. Nor does she ever intervene in the affairs of men, as Rakhee did. Her mission in life is only to offer herself at the altar of her husband's and her father-in-law's duty. The only role left for this bright, independent woman is to bring up a son who will dutifully follow the footsteps of his grandfather and don the police uniform. No other mission, no other goal.

It is worth noting that at a time when the police as a force is increasingly losing its credibility in the eyes of the people, because they behave worse than the worst criminals, in film after film we are introduced to a rare species—the courageously honest police officer who makes out that joining the police is perhaps the best possible social service. Undoubtedly such individuals exist even in the police force but our films systematically distort the real fate of such officers. The price of honesty in the police force is not likely to be paid by sacrificing one's son. It is much more likely that such a police officer will either be suspended on some trumped up charge or be transferred and demoted or made to resign. He would be rendered absolutely ineffective and removed from the way.

In effect, this great tear-jerker film which has received rave reviews from almost all critics, is nothing but a desperate attempt to whitewash the unredeemable image of the police force, and ends almost like a recruitment campaign for the Indian police service. In a situation when people trust and respect dacoits more than they do the police, when they avoid informing the police about accidents, murders and robberies, because they expect unbearable harassment at the hands of the police, even more than at the hands of criminals, when people would rather keep their houses empty than rent them out to policemen, when we feel afraid and ashamed of being seen talking to a policeman, this film tries to convince us that there is no more noble and socially useful mission than to be a police officer.

This film is an apt comment on the current social and political situation. The existing institutions are shown to be crumbling and collapsing, which indeed they are. The message is clear : We cannot expect anything from the police, the law courts and the other institutions which are supposed to protect the rights of citizens. This is the age of self-proclaimed heroic individuals of the Sanjay Gandhi and Amitabh Bachan variety, who are obsessed with the belief that they alone can save society, mete out justice, and do the "right" thing. Therefore, just as in politics the Congress party has given way to the Indira Congress, the Urs Congress, the Sanjay Congress, so in this film the police as an institution has become irrelevant. Dilip Kumar behaves like a single man police force. What the entire force fails to do, he successfully does singlehanded. In the opening scene, Dilip Kumar insists on going alone to capture a notorious smuggler and manages to humble him, arrest him, and get him convicted. Similarly, his son goes alone to recover some smuggled goods from a rival smuggler.

The supreme "I" needs no helper, no comrade, and in this there is no essential difference between the father's and the son's cult of heroism. The moral : to restore justice to this world, all we need is a couple of supermen with super egos and super muscle power and super weapons. They will bring justice as they see fit for the pygmies who inhabit the earth. The father does this by wearing a police uniform, the son by joining a smuggler's gang.

Women, particularly, are warned that they can expect no safety unless they are fortunate enough, like Draupadi, to have the modern Krishnas protect their honour at every opportune and inopportune moment. If only we could remember moments of such gallant behaviour by men in trains and buses and on roads, we could perhaps identify with Smita's experience when Superman Amitabh rescues her from a gang of goondas in the train. It is significant that this film is trying to convince us of the existence of such Krishnas at a time when women's experience has taught them to expect quite the contrary, and to begin defending themselves from male violence. It is precisely in the Bombay local trains like the one shown in the film that women have tried to organize resistance to sexual harassment (see report on p. 19) because they seem never to have encountered a single Galahad of the tribe so omnipresent in Hindi films.

Why is it that Hindi films continue to din into our heads that our only hope lies in waiting for a Krishna alias Amitabh Bachan to act as saviour, in a context when women are beginning to collectively act against sexual violence? Fortunately, these heroes make appearance only in films or in romantic novels, therefore in real life, whether they approve or not, we are beginning to rely on and develop our own strength.

—Madhu Kishwar

### **SHAUKEEN—Social Message Or Same Old Story?**

This film pretends to be conveying a social message that older men should behave as uncles to young women rather than trying to seduce them. It relates the story of three married, ageing and well-to-do businessmen who go by car to Goa for a holiday and enjoy themselves with an attractive young girl called Anita. After several fruitless attempts to seduce Anita, the three men realize that they are too old for such activities, and seeing Anita with her boyfriend, they decide to go back home. However, the film maker takes advantage of this storyline to strip, rape, gloat over and deface the woman.

While Anita is shown to be loyal to her boyfriend, she spares no effort to entertain and tantalize the old men by dancing in a cabaret and by keeping house for them. Anita's body is continually exposed. She is made to wear one revealing dress after another — cabaret dancing dress, hot pants, swimming suit and so on. If male bodies are exposed, it is either for comic effect as when the old men go for a swim, or to emphasize masculine "strength" as when tall, brawny youths are shown near the pool. The film shows a clear bias against old people, as if youth in itself is a virtue and the old should not be considered living beings with the same needs, desires and feelings as young and middle aged people.

While Anita seems to be a very versatile young woman capable of doing everything perfectly, it is finally clarified that she is interested only in getting married to her boyfriend. She goes out of her way to please the old men only so that she can be with her boyfriend who is driving their car, and her efforts are rewarded when they give the boyfriend a job! The last glimpse we have of Anita is when she bursts into tears as her lover drives off, telling her to be "a good girl" till he can return and marry her. The car disappears and she is left in the distance — a forlorn figure. Her intelligence and beauty seem to have meaning only in relation to him, and her achievements too only enhance his pleasure, his career, his domestic life. We are given to understand that left to herself this self-sacrificing girl would be a miserable non entity.

Significantly, while Anita's virginity is technically preserved for her husband-to-be, she is figuratively raped by the looks of the old men who, in the climactic scene, look her up and down while she sleeps, try to touch her and make as though to attack her.

The last trick up the film maker's sleeve is of course to show the woman thoroughly enjoying her degradation as sex object cum unpaid domestic servant.

—Ariane Loening



## Coming To A Dead End

### PREM ROG and NIKAAH

These two films address themselves to the question of women's status and seek to convey a message of protest against the oppression of women. *Prem Rog* deals with the status of widows in upper caste, landed Hindu families and *Nikaah* with the status of divorced women in rich Muslim families.

Both films trace the process of the reduction by unjust treatment of a lively, versatile girl to a weeping, lonely woman, and both present a faithful suitor as the immediate way out of her predicament for the woman, while at the same time trying to

emphasize the need to change social norms. However, it is significant that in both films it is only the presence of the good, understanding, faithful man that saves the woman. She is shown to be miserable until he appears to rescue her. And what causes him to appear? The woman's overwhelming, beauty and charm. Thus, while the films are at one, level trying to show the heroine's predicament as typical of the predicament of many women, at another level, this purpose is lost sight of, since she cannot but be perceived as exceptional. For one thing, how many women are so extraordinarily beautiful? And for another, how many women have a suitor waiting patiently in the wings, to step forward as soon as they are rejected by husband and family?

Niloufer, the central woman character in *Nikaah*, is portrayed as a strong woman with a sense of self, and an equally persistent sense of the difference between justice and injustice. She refuses to grovel before her husband when she feels that she has been wronged. Her husband Waseem feels very threatened by this dignified self-assertion and tries to crush it. Niloufer's diary is well used as a symbol of her identity. She writes this diary before marriage as well as through both marriages, so the audience continually has an idea not just of her suffering but of her perception, her articulate point of view.

Before marriage, Niloufer is shown as a girl who can take care of herself. She tells off Haider in no uncertain terms when he makes flirtatious advances, and is touched only when she begins to feel there is something more to his feeling for her than sexual attraction. After marriage, Waseem takes for granted that she will happily wait for hours and submit to his sexual desires whenever he chooses to put in an appearance. She not only resents but resists this treatment, telling him when he makes drunken advances: "The place where men's desires are always submitted to is a brothel, not a home."

Her loneliness in this marriage and the way her lively spirit is wearied by the endless waiting and the emptiness of the huge house which matches the emptiness of her life, are well depicted. Her diary and her songs are used to express the quality of her endurance which, however, is distinguished from the passive suffering of the stereotyped Hindi film heroine by its self-awareness and its contained rebellion. The line: "*Shayad unka aakhiri hai yeh sitam, Har sitam yeh sochkar seh gaye*" (I endured each one of his acts of injustice, thinking that it would be the last) well expresses the psychological process by which women too often learn to live with oppression.

When Waseem, infuriated by her resistance, pronounces *talaq* and unilaterally divorces her, she goes to stay in a girls' hostel and tries to make out a living by writing poetry in magazines. Before marriage, she had wanted to do a journalism course but her parents had refused permission. She is on the brink of destitution when Haider, who has remained unmarried, cherishing her memory, reappears, sympathizes with her, rescues her from a rape attempt by a roguish employer, and gives her a job. She takes the initiative in proposing marriage to him and the second marriage takes place.

However, after the second marriage, the film maker begins to

romanticize both men in a most unrealistic fashion. On the one hand is Haider, the adoring husband, obedient to Niloufer's every whim. Though he seems to belong to a species not seen on this planet, it is nevertheless interesting to see for once on the screen an "ideal husband", if only as a relief from all the unrealistic "ideal wives" we are forced to see in average Hindi films. On the other hand, Waseem is overnight transformed into another rare specimen:— the repentant husband. He explains that he used to neglect Niloufer only because he was so busy making money to make her happy. One wonders if his drunkenness was also part of this noble scheme. We are treated to shot after shot of him weeping and waiting in a lonely house for her to return.

At this point, Haider cannot resist assuming the masculine role of imposing choices on the woman. He happens to read bits of Niloufer's diary and a letter from Waseem, and decides unilaterally that she still loves Waseem. This idea is reinforced by his stereotyped notion that "a woman can never forget her first love." He there upon decides to divorce her by pronouncing *talaq*. However, he thinks he is inspired by the noblest of motives—that of setting her free!

In the showdown that follows, Niloufer clearly tells the two men that they have been extremely presumptuous and unjust in treating her like a piece of furniture to be used and discarded at will. To Haider she says: "You too have turned out to be a man after all. A man who treats a woman not as a woman but as a piece of property..." She also registers her protest against the law which requires a woman's consent for marriage but gives the unilateral right of divorce by *talaq* to the man alone. She declares: "Who are you to set me free or to give me *talaq*, Haider saheb? Now, it is who I am leaving you and going away..."

As soon as she indicates that she will decide her own course of action and take control of the situation, Waseem steps forward to silence her with a pious lecture: "God will never forgive you, Niloufer, if you leave Haider." Then follows an absurd contest wherein both men vie with each other to prove their nobility and generosity, while Niloufer is once more reduced to silence and tears.

While the average Hindi film ends in a contest of muscle power and wits between hero and villain, this film climaxes with the men making speech after speech, each praising the other and trying to take all the blame on himself. There is every reason for the men in the audience to feel pleased as punch at this revelation of a new dimension of Manliness. Waseem and Haider between them effectively wrest the initiative from Niloufer, make speeches condemning men who divorce their wives, and ironically end up confirming what Niloufer said: "Men contest with each other, but it is always a woman who is at stake."

The other women in this film are shadowy figures, but for a change they all, even her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, are shown as supportive and sympathetic to Niloufer. There is a vivid sketch of her room mate in the hostel. This girl is a typist who complains that her father married her to a typewriter instead of to a man and it is now too late for her to marry so she keeps changing boyfriends as she does the sheets on the typewriter.

This is a very damaging portrayal and confirms the prevalent prejudice that women take up jobs only when forced to do so, as an alternative to marriage, and that most single, working women are sexually promiscuous. Significantly, Niloufer leaves her job after her second marriage and stays home as a contented housewife while Haider goes to work. She is shown as merely aspiring for an attentive husband, not for a life of her own.

On the other hand, *Prem Rog* firmly places the exploitation of the girl widow in the context of the exploitation of women in general. This film explores man-woman relationships in the context of the upper caste, landed families' relationship to lower caste, landless families in a village. Early in the film, Padmini's brother tries to abduct and seduce Padmini's friend, a poor Brahmin girl. Realizing that she is insecure as long as she remains unmarried, she agrees to marry an old widower who will accept her without dowry. Padmini's father too sexually exploits a village woman whom he shoots in the ultimate showdown.

After Padmini is widowed, she suffers at the hands of her own family and her in-laws as well as the village community as a whole. Initially, her husband's older brother's wife rescues her just as her head is about to be shaved. This woman's predicament is sensitively depicted. Her sympathy for Padmini springs from her own experience as the wife of a drunken and tyrannical man. She tries her best to make Padmini feel wanted, giving her the keys of the house and integrating her into the family. However, one night when she is away, her husband rapes Padmini. The film here makes a significant departure from the formula of Bombay films. It does not try to twist the plot so as to preserve the heroine's virginity for her husband, nor does it assume that a raped woman can only commit suicide. Though Padmini is a virgin widow, she is raped by her brother-in-law. This is a realistic depiction of what in fact happens to widows living in joint families.

Padmini returns to her parents where she is cruelly treated— forced to sleep on the ground in a small hovel, to eat dry scraps, to wear only plain white, to walk barefoot and to spend most of her time praying and fasting. Rishi Kapoor who was in love with her since her girlhood, now wishes to marry her and thus comes into conflict with all the reactionary forces in the community. It is interesting that the poorer villagers are shown rallying behind the young lovers while Padmini's mother too revolts, not just on her daughter's behalf, but also against her own oppression. Both she and Padmini's sister-in-law very forcefully condemn the double standards of upper caste men who immure women in huge mansions but themselves perpetrate cruelty and injustice, and also take all the decisions regarding women's lives. The lives of other widows are also woven into the story— a low caste woman whose remarriage is supported by the same Thakurs who consider a widow remarriage in their family to be a stain on their "honour", and Padmini's great aunt, a child widow who spent her life in the hovel where Padmini is confined.

In the ultimate confrontation, Rishi firmly tells Padmini's grandfather that he is not willing to secretly elope with her because this is not just a question of their personal happiness, but a

larger social question. He points out that these upper caste, rich families set the social norms and spread their rotten ideas and values through the rest of society. He is therefore determined to marry openly and set a social example. The situation explodes into a riot with the Rajputs brutally firing on the villagers and preparing to burn Rishi and Padmini to death. However, Padmini's grandfather, who is somewhat sympathetic to the lovers, shoots the rapist brother-in-law, and consents to the marriage. The carnage results in the death of the two most tyrannical men — Padmini's father and brother-in-law, thus ironically liberating both her mother and sister-in-law through widowhood.

Padmini is portrayed more or less as a formula film heroine. She is a passive victim throughout, always doing what is expected of her as a good woman. The film maker too views her in the stereotyped way, witness the fantasy sequence where Rishi imagines her burning in the flames of passion. This horrible symbol is disturbingly close to the flames of the Sati pyre or of Sita's trial by fire. As far as portrayal of a woman is concerned, *Nikaah* does a better job, Salma Agha giving a fine performance as Niloufer. But on the whole, in its development of the theme,

*Prem Rog* is perhaps a more positive statement, a more searching analysis of the social context in which the various forms of women's oppression are rooted.

—Ruth Vanita

PS : The end of *Prem Rog* was truly frightening. The film ends with a whole row of dead bodies. Almost all the men of Padmini's family and in-laws' family and many of their hirelings are killed in a free shoot-out between the men of the two families, and between them and the villagers. And why so much violence and murder and bloodshed ? Because the young widow has dared fall in love with the nephew of the poor village priest. All these men kill each other in order to prevent the young widow from loving and wanting to marry the man of her choice. She has to literally walk over the dead bodies of so many men of her two families, in order to fulfil such a simple aspiration. Is this a way of telling us that even the simple desires of women cannot be fulfilled without physically exterminating so many men who stand in the way of our finding love and happiness? We fervently hope our struggle for a humane existence will not have to be such a bloody one !

—Madhu

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## The Hospitals And Other Institutions Bill

THIS is a bill which proposes to take away the right to collective bargaining from a large section of working women and men. It has been very cleverly titled by the government. The word "hospitals" immediately makes people feel that the bill deals with an essential service in which a strike could cause patients to suffer and to die. Actually, the bill covers not just hospitals but all educational institutions, research institutions, institutions connected with defence, atomic, space and other scientific research, and institutions run by charitable and social organizations.

This bill is one of a series of repressive laws being passed by government to crush people's protests against the worsening economic conditions being created by government policies. In December 1980 the government enacted the national security

act, which gives district magistrates and police commissioners the power to detain anybody without trial. In September 1981 came the essential services maintenance act which empowers government first to declare any service "essential" and then to punish its employees if they go on strike.

The government is now introducing three bills to amend the industrial disputes act, 1947. In 1978, the supreme court in its judgment on the Bangalore water supply and sewage board case, held that all hospitals, educational institutions and essential services such as water supply are to be considered "industries," since even though they do not produce goods for the market, they do produce "services which are part of the wealth of the nation." Thus all these institutions came under the

purview of the industrial disputes act, and employees got the protection of labour laws. A bill is now being introduced to amend the industrial disputes act, so as to specifically exclude hospitals, educational and other institutions from its purview. The government is thus trying to cancel the effects of the supreme court judgment and to snatch away an existing right from nurses, doctors, teachers and staff of the institutions concerned.

The second bill being introduced seeks to amend the Indian trade unions act, 1926, so as to empower the registrar of trade unions to cancel the recognition of any union if he thinks its membership is not valid, and to settle disputes between unions. Since the registrar is a government official, the bill will actually empower government to favour pro-management unions and derecognize pro-worker unions.

The hospitals and other institutions bill, which, if passed, will become a new act, is the most dangerous of the three. It proposes a new method of settling disputes between employees and management in these institutions, by setting up grievance committees and consultative councils. These committees and councils will have an equal number of

representatives of the authorities and the workers. The procedures and regulations for their functioning are not specified in the bill, but are left to the authorities to decide. Any dispute which cannot be settled in the councils or committees will have to be referred to arbitrators, whose decision will be final and enforceable within 30 days.

The bill tries to replace the method of collective bargaining by a process of settlement of individual disputes. All matters relating to individuals, such as suspension or termination of an individual, will have to be settled by the grievance committee. This means that injustice to an individual cannot be fought collectively. The bill pretends that such injustice is merely the "grievance" of an individual rather than an attack on the community to which the individual belongs, and therefore the other workers have no right to support the individual's fight against injustice. According to the bill, all industrial matters such as wages, allowance, hours of work, facilities, will be referred to consultative councils.

The principle of equal representation is bound to lead to frequent deadlocks. The bill lays down that in the case of a deadlock, the decision of the arbitrators will be binding on the workers. However, if the government is their employer, as is the case in most hospitals and other institutions, the government can reject or modify the decision, and no time limit is applicable for enforcement of the decision. This means that the government can indefinitely postpone implementation of the decision, and workers will be helpless to demand quick action since all means of demanding and agitating have been declared illegal.

The bill explicitly prohibits all forms of agitation including strike, gherao, dharna, work to rule and go slow. Workers are also prohibited from going to court against any action of the authorities done under this act. The bill lays down that only trade unions having 30 per cent of workers as members will be recognised. No procedure of verifying membership is laid down. The authorities will thus be free to arbitrarily challenge the validity of unions. Thus the

fundamental right to form associations and to appeal to court for redress of injustice are both attacked by this bill.

Strike by workers and lockout by authorities have both been made punishable with a jail sentence of six months and a fine upto Rs 5,000. However, only the government has the right to complain to court. The government may well choose to complain against workers but not against the employer, particularly in cases where it is itself the employer. We know that so far workers have won most of their rights through agitation, because conciliation machinery has proved utterly ineffective. Crores of rupees owed by various industrialists to workers in the form of provident fund and other dues are still outstanding because the government, which has the authority to prosecute the employers, chooses not to do so. With such a record, how can we believe that government will suddenly become efficient in settling disputes under this act? The effect of the bill is on the one hand to take away from employees the right to protest against unjust decisions and on the other hand to make the authorities above the court of law. Thousands of women are employed in hospitals and in Educational institutions. These sectors absorb a large part of the educated women's workforce. This large proportion of women may be one reason which makes government think that workers in these sectors will quietly

accept this repressive measure. Government seems to be experimenting on these sectors with the intention of later introducing similar legislation for other industries. It is well known that the working conditions for nurses in primary health centres and hospitals, and for teachers in schools are deplorable. These women are underpaid, overworked and insecure. Now even the little protection they may get from labour legislation is being snatched away. This section of the workforce is already isolated and not strongly unionized. Teachers in private schools, for instance, are largely unorganized. Both nurses and teachers are often the victims of arbitrary suspension and termination of services (see Manushi No. 8 and this issue, page 21). The only way they can fight such injustice is by ceasing to consider it an individual "grievance" and by organizing themselves. This bill will destroy even the possibility of such self-organization.

Since such a large group of working women are going to be affected by the bill, it is important that women's organizations join the nationwide protest and see that even if government does use its numerical majority to force the bill through parliament, the workers in hospitals and other institutions unite to render it completely ineffective. The government can put laws into the statute book but it cannot implement them if the people collectively resist such implementation. □