

## Towards A New Savitri

### SUBAH—Significant Breakthrough

*Subah* is a remake of the Marathi *Umbartha*. Like *Bhumika*, it is based on the autobiography of a Maharashtrian woman—a social worker, in this instance. The film brings a much needed breath of fresh air into the claustrophobic world of Hindi cinema.

If one went by the evidence of most Indian films, one would conclude that there is little else to life besides man-woman romances and marriage. Of course, when the central character is a woman, directors simply must show her preoccupied with romance and marriage, ecstatic or agonised according as her fortunes in that sphere rise or fall. So deep rooted is this obsession that even in a film on someone like Razia Sultan who was known for her courage and ability as a ruler, her romance is made to overshadow her political life.

*Subah* takes a big step forward in that it illuminates the worklife of a woman, by showing in detail not just her work but also her mental and emotional involvement with it. In most films, even in films like *Arth*, the woman is shown taking a job only for economic reasons, without giving a thought to the purpose or social utility of her work. Frequently she becomes a glamourised caterer to the elite—a housekeeper, singer or dancer in a fancy hotel, a model or a boutique owner. Alternatively, she takes a low paid tedious job, like that of a teacher, salesgirl or office worker as in *Nikah*, and is only too glad to relinquish it as soon as a man offers to marry and provide for her. Job satisfaction, if at all taken into consideration, tends to be equated with glamorous surroundings and narrow careerism.

In *Subah* the heroine Savitri chooses to work not just because she feels suffocated sitting at home but because she burns with the desire to be socially useful. The definition of a useful and caring woman as one who looks after her family seems inadequate to her. She chooses her work not because she is maltreated by her husband, but because even though she cares for, and is cared for, by husband and child, she feels a need to express a larger caring which reaches out beyond familial relationships.



Smita Patil—new directions

Her choice to accept the superintendship of a destitute women's home in a village far away from her in-laws' house, becomes a definition of priorities.

The film registers a definite success in its non stereotyped presentation of women's lives—the supposedly happy, the not so happy and the unhappy. Subhash, Savitri's husband, for example, is shown as concerned and caring. He submits with good grace to her decision to leave home and go to live at the Mahila Ashram. However a few months' celibacy is enough to exhaust his patience so he begins a relationship with another woman and cools off to Savitri. Only after she returns home does he tell her about this affair, saying there need be no change in their life, she will just have to make a small "compromise." The fact that the hard core of even a happy marriage is the woman's sexual enslavement, that if, for any reason, however genuine, her sexual services are not available, the husband feels justified in replacing or supplementing her, is very sensitively depicted.

The film takes a searching look at relationships which are normally sentimentalised out of proportion merely to make women feel guilty for "neglecting" them. Savitri's child not only manages perfectly well in her mother's absence but in fact prefers the extra pampering she gets from other members of the family. Thus both wifehood and motherhood are shown to be based primarily on constant giving and self sacrifice by the woman. If she withdraws this giving, or extends it to others so that it is no longer the exclusive attention demanded by husband and children, they begin to look for someone else to dance attendance on them.

The lives of the Ashram inmates too illustrate the injustice implicit in the sexual bargain of marriage. These young women are realistically shown not as "exceptional" cases—girls who are

abducted from happy homes or orphaned or widowed, but rather as victims of violence perpetrated within their own families. One girl went out of her mind after the brutalising experience of the first few nights with her husband. Another's husband was so suspicious of her just because she was goodlooking that he chopped off her long hair and maltreated her. The logic of sexual exploitation by rich men is also realistically shown. In films like *Aakrosh* poor women are often shown as , victims of deception and rape. However sexual exploitation of a much more routine kind is that shown in *Subah*, when a girl agricultural labourer sells her sexual services so that she can buy necessities for her family.

Jabbar Patel avoids the temptation of prettifying and romanticising poverty, of choosing only women with soulful faces and shapely figures as the inmates of the Ashram, or of deluging us with well worn "aesthetic" postures and close ups. The authenticity of setting and costume is a pleasant change from mainstream as well as new wave cinema. Fox once, well to do people look convincingly well dressed without looking like , models from a fashion magazine, and their home looks , recognisable instead of looking like an interior decor advertisement.

The realism of setting is matched by a realism of character portrayal. Savitri's mother-in-law, for instance, is not overall a very sympathetic character, but neither is she the tyrannical hag we are familiar with in Hindi films. With a few small touches the film maker leads us to see why she, herself a strong minded woman and an active social worker of the old school, is unable to accept Savitri's stepping out of the parameters defined for a working woman by an earlier generation. So also, Savitri's sister-in-law, Maya, though in one sense shown as a typical homely, self sacrificing wife and mother figure, is deftly saved from becoming a stereotype. There is a half conscious sympathy with Savitri conveyed through facial expression, a tautness underlying her surface placidity, a suggestion of emotional and sexual starvation, though she utters not a word of complaint.

This able handling is also evident in the portrayal of the inmates of the reform institution. They are shown as helpless but by no means passive. Hindi cinema has developed a trend of portraying any woman it considers "immoral" as a goldenhearted victim who "proves her credentials by weeping copiously all the time, even while dancing or singing (as in *Umrao Jaan*), by feeling guilty and calling herself evil, often by committing suicide. *Subah*, however, shows these women not as an exotic weepy species but as no better and no worse than other human beings, with intelligence, vitality, and complexity.

*Subah* forcefully brings out the fact that even in the fist deprived situation, when all options seem to have been snatched away, people do manage to devise options, and it is the nature of these options that shocks us into realising the full horror of the situation. When the managing committee decides forcibly to send a girl back to a husband she loathes, and disregards all her

pleas, the girl kills her baby so that she may be sent prison rather than to the man from whom she had run away. Two other girls run away from the Ashram but are pursued, brought back and punished, until in despair they burn themselves to death.

Savitri's perception is used to place all these incidents in a framework. She sets out with the desire to help, and the belief that the inmates need help. Experience makes her realise two facts. First, that the women are quite capable of helping themselves if only they have the means to do so, and if hurdles are not placed in their way. Second, that as an official in the hierarchy of the institution, she can be nothing but an instrument of tyranny. Tyrannised by those above, she is pushed into tyrannising the inmates. As Savitri confronts many realities to which she has never before been exposed, she is bewildered, angry, hurt, and scarcely knows who to blame, but ends up instinctively siding with the oppressed. When two girls are discovered to be in love with each other, Savitri, though perplexed and uncertain, responds instinctively by defending them from persecution by the other inmates and from punishment by the managing committee. Confronted with the misery and oppression generated by the man-woman relationship, which is supposed to be "normal", she is led to place a question mark against the norm, and against the all too common tendency to outcast that which one does not understand. She tells the infuriated mob of inmates that they would be no better than the society which has outcasted them, if they threw out these two girls.

Simultaneously with Savitri's development of this perception, the audience is shown how the system works—how the girls are prostituted and exploited by the authorities, how the slightly bolder ones are black-listed and silenced, and how Savitri ends up, as do most honest government officials, being accused of corruption, isolated, slandered, browbeaten and forced to resign.

Her resistance to injustice in the Ashram is shown to strengthen her similar resistance in her personal life. This again is a step forward from the usual film portrayal of a woman's familial and her public life as at best unconnected and at worst contradictory. In *Arth* finding a job gives the woman economic independence. *Subah* adds an important dimension by showing how a woman develops the ability to protest and to stand up for her rights, an ability which does not necessarily follow from economic independence alone. The film ends on a positive note with Savitri telling the one man enquiry commission sent by government that she will not despair but will continue her work elsewhere. Concurrently, she also refuses the "compromise" her husband suggests. In the last scene she is shown sitting in a train which speeds through the countryside, under a new dawn.

One very unfortunate feature which mars the film is the use of lengthy song, dance, dream and fantasy sequences which could have come straight out of a bad commercial. Surely there are more imaginative ways of depicting intimacy than to show people floating through the air, singing sappy songs? When Smita Patil

and Girish Karnad are made to undergo this ordeal, the effect is grotesque and humiliating. Savitri's hysteria and repeated fits of noisy tears would have been more effective if kept to a minimum. Perhaps because valuable screen time is wasted on such scenes which interfere with empathy, the character of Savitri emerges as finely conceived on an intellectual level but somewhere lacking in emotional depth.

It is heartening to hear that Smita Patil is continuing Savitri's work off screen, and has become actively involved with a women's group in Bombay that plans to set up a shelter for women in distress. Hopefully, such interplay between the life and work of film makers and actors will further this kind of cinema that is more in touch with reality, and committed to changing it.

#### **MUJHE INSAF CHAHIYE—Changing Concept Of Justice**

“The woman of today is not like Sita who silently sank into the earth, nor is she like Shakuntala who quietly bore her child in the forest. She is not Ahilya who turned into a stone and waited for Ram to come and free her...She who fought for „justice, several speeches, in *Mujhe Insaaf Chahiye* contain its essential message. The film is a frontal attack on the hypocrisy of a society which sanctifies motherhood only when the mother happens to be married. Recently several Hindi films have been concerned with the question of the so called illegitimate child. However they have tended to focus on the “poor” man caught between his wife and the “other woman.” The characteristic solution to his problem, as in *Masoom*, *Bandhan Kachey Dhagon Ka*, *Souten*, is to kill off the other woman, and to get the child adopted by the man and his wife, thus placing it firmly within the family structure, which, presumably, is the only proper place for a child to grow.

Whenever the question of justice for the other woman has arisen, the furthest that can be imagined is that somehow or other the status of wife or co wife should be conferred on her. The man, who has deceived his wife as well as her, ends up putting *sindoor* in her *mang* after her death, as in *Bandhan Kachey Dhagon Ka* and *Mang Bharo Sajna*.

*Mujhe Insaaf Chahiye* shifts the focus away from the agonising man and wife to the experience of the “other woman”, not as a repentant, weeping victim but as a strong and determined person who evokes the respect of the viewer. This woman does not want to make the man taken responsibility for his deeds by marrying her or adopting the child. Instead, she wants to see to it that he does not get away scot free while she is socially disgraced. Realising that the fear of social disgrace is the weapon used by male society to silence women, she refuses to abort the child or to bear it in secret.

The film maker emphasises that male power consists not in any strength, physical, moral or mental, possessed, by men, but only in the fact that the weight of social opinion is with men. Both father and son are shown calculatedly taking advantage of social bias. When Suresh refuses to marry Malti, he exultingly says: “By giving woman a womb, god has made things very easy for us men. God is great, really great!” Malti, on the advice

of her lawyer, Shakuntala, quietly taperecords this and a few other incriminating speeches of his, on the basis of which she successfully sues him for rape (since she is a minor, seduction counts as rape) and breach of promise.

The first half of the film follows the standard romance formula with a number of unnecessary and unbelievable song-dance fantasy sequences. In the second half, the tone changes completely. The significant difference in the portrayal is that it does not seem like the battle of an extraordinary woman. Malti defines justice not as revenge, a la films like *Insaaf ka Tarazu* where the woman shoots the rapist, but as turning the balance of social opinion against him. She is depicted as an average, spirited, middle class girl. Her struggle with her family, her breaking out and running to seek refuge with Shakuntala, the advocate of women's rights, are depicted in a way that women seeing the film could get an idea of the alternatives available today, at least to educated women in some big cities. The film realistically captures the pattern that has been followed by many urban women's struggles—an individual woman takes a courageous step, fights her battle in the arena of the courtroom, and is supported by groups of women staging protest demonstrations, while social pressure is built up by sympathetic media people.

The film has some brilliant moments as when Shakuntala counters the defence lawyer's insinuations by asking him what proof he has that his son was really born of his intercourse with his wife, and goes on to point out that it is the woman who decides who the father is, therefore there can be no proof of rape, seduction or paternity except her word.

In *Arth* too, the woman rejects marriage, and chooses to live with a child. Here this choice is given a wider meaning when Malti establishes a school for orphans, and refuses Suresh's offer to adopt her son and Shakuntala's daughter, saying that she wants to bring them up in a free atmosphere. Thus the restrictive atmosphere of the family is unfavourably contrasted with the healthy environment of collective living in the *ashram*, and both Shakuntala and Malti are shown as respected, useful members of society in contrast to the three wives in the film whose opinions are carelessly brushed aside by their husbands.

Yet the film maker seems to retreat from the logic of his criticism of marriage and what it does to women. Sexual relationships outside marriage seem to be castigated as sinful. In the very objectionable cabaret scene, the focus is on a western woman, seemingly as a symbol of the extramarital sexuality to which Suresh has fallen a prey. Furthermore, marriage is shown to reform Suresh and convert him into a respectable, philanthropic member of society. When his wife gets to know about his past, in disgust she leaves him and comes to stay in Malti's *ashram*, but Malti advises her to forgive Suresh and sends her back with him, saying: “A married woman's place is in the home, not in the *ashram*.” However these were small disappointments in an otherwise important film, which is well worth seeing. Rekha and Rati give a moving performance.

—Ruth Vanita