

A Degrading Experience

**UTSAV: Producer: Shashi Kapoor
Director: Girish Karnad**

The hoardings of *Utsav* display the jewel bedecked torso of Rekha with her arms cut off below the shoulders like the Venus of Milo. This disturbing image forewarned us not to expect much from the film. But we were not quite prepared for the degrading experience that the film turned out to be.

Utsav bears as much resemblance to the Sanskrit play *Mrichhakatikam*, by Sudraka, on which it is supposed to be based, as a rotting corpse does to a living creature. In *Mrichhakatikam*, Vasantsena, an accomplished courtesan, celebrated as the Lakshmi of her city Ujjayini, falls in love with Charudatt, a brahman renowned for his virtue and nobility. His chief virtue is generosity. He has spent all his wealth on almsgiving and endowment of works of public utility, and is reduced to poverty. By her love for him, Vasantsena shows that she is motivated not by avarice or lust but by her appreciation of his goodness. Therefore, when rejecting the advances of Shakar, the king's brother-in-law, who uses his wealth and influence to act as a petty tyrant, Vasantsena says: "Good qualities, not rape, give rise to love."

Charudatt in *Mrichhakatikam* is a happily married man, but he realises Vasantsena's worth and responds to her love. Shakar tries to murder Vasantsena and falsely accuses Charudatt of the crime. Shakar blatantly pressurises the judges to convict Charudatt. The people of the city flood the streets to mourn Charudatt's imminent execution. Earlier, Charudatt had helped Aryaka, an innocent and worthy person unjustly persecuted by the king, to escape. Various people, including officials and slaves, are moved to revolt against the injustice of the regime as manifested in Shakar's unbridled misconduct. Vasantsena turns up in the nick of time to have Charudatt reprieved. The king is overthrown by Aryaka and his supporters. Aryaka, now the new



king, bestows an estate on Charudatt. Shakar is in danger of execution but Charudatt magnanimously intervenes to have him pardoned. Charudatt's first wife, Dhuta, hearing that he is dead, is about to jump into the fire, but is also saved at the last moment. The play ends with the marriage of Charudatt and Vasantsena.

Utsav can only be called a travesty of *Mrichhakatikam*. The director seems determined to wrench the play to fit into a cheap Bombay film formula. This he does by throwing in songs, dances, sex scenes, fight scenes, bawdy humour—none of which have any aesthetic or entertainment value.

Further, he, for no visible reason, divests the characters of the dignity they have in the play. Charudatt is turned into an improvident, bored husband who has gambled away his fortune. Neither his magnanimity nor his renown are anywhere in evidence. For instance, his pardoning Shakar at the end has been removed. Vasantsena is a beautiful body with no desires except those of the body. Even before she sets eyes on Charudatt, she seems mesmerised by his voice and she is made to behave like a coy bride approaching the nuptial chamber as she moves towards the invisible singer. Within a few minutes of encountering Charudatt, and before they have exchanged a dozen words, she sets out deliberately to seduce him, by asking him to undress her.

The camera .gloats over every detail of this process. It need scarcely be mentioned that there is nothing remotely like this scene in *Mrichhakatikam*.

Throughout *Utsav*, the relationship between Charu and Vasantsena continues to be what it is in the first scene. They are overwhelmed by a desire to sleep together and show no interest in any other sort of interaction. No doubt, such relationships can and do exist, but why make such a fuss about them, trying to portray them as legendary love affairs? Why spend so much time and energy on boring and repetitive details of these sexual encounters? Clearly, the director, knowing there is little in the film to attract audiences, uses Rekha's body as bait to keep them hooked.

Indulging in the cheapest voyeurism, the director expects the viewers to delight in it too. Under the illusion that everyone's fantasies are as sickly as his own, he imagines that a researcher into any aspect of sexuality can be nothing but a peeping Tom too. Hence his absurd portrayal of Vatsyayan, author of *Kama Sutra*, as a peeper into brothel rooms, which are shown as the only data base for his research.

In *Mrichhakatikam*, the courtesans, although not accorded the honour given to wives, have much more power in the public world than do the latter. They are treated as respected citizens, addressed as "Arya." They are wealthy and resourceful, and move openly in high society. *Utsav* tries uneasily to incorporate this dimension of ancient Indian society, but the film maker is unable to discard the virtuous woman versus vamp syndrome. Therefore, he cannot refrain from rewriting the relationship between Charudatt, Dhuta and Vasantsena, as a version of *Pati Patni Aur Woh*.

In *Mrichhakatikam*, Dhuta, although she has no decision making power, is allowed a dignified reticence. But the maker of *Utsav*, although unwilling to see the wife as struggling for more power, must pry into her mind and be sure that she is brainwashed into not just submitting to but also joyfully accepting her husband's unilateral right to extramarital affairs. Thus, Dhuta is initially made to react with anger against Charudatt's straying. She walks out and goes to her parents. But, very soon, she returns, having undergone an inexplicable change of heart, and sets about bedecking Vasantsena for Charudatt's pleasure.

When Vasantsena later questions her, she says that she does not mind Charudatt's straying because, first, his conquering so beautiful a woman as Vasantsena is a sign of his manly prowess, second, she is younger than Vasantsena and has produced a son for Charudatt therefore her position is secure, and, third, Charudatt has acquired a new sexual vigour from Vasantsena which he now practises on Dhuta too, so she finds her conjugal life much more satisfying than before.

On the surface, it may appear that the film maker has animated what was a flat character in *Mrichhakatikam* by providing a glimpse of the workings of Dhuta's mind. But, in fact, what he presents is not a woman's aspirations and expectations but his own recipe for a successful marriage. Dhuta is used as a vehicle

to convey a lesson for wives—that they should allow their husbands a little fun and games. In doing so, they will not only prove themselves true wives, like the mythological Kannagi who carried her leprous husband to a brothel, but will also do themselves a favour because their husbands will come back refreshed and give a better performance in bed. And, lest the wife fear that she may lose her husband to the other woman, the film maker distorts the ending to reassure us that the nuclear family will emerge triumphant.

At the end, when Charudatt, saved from execution, is embraced by his wife and son, Vasantsena is made to burst into tears and run away. This is psychologically inexplicable since Dhuta has already accepted the triangular relationship, but the director must chastise the "loose" woman for having dared to try and break up the harmony of the family.

In this same vindictive spirit, he makes Vasantsena ultimately accept the advances of Shakar. This, again, is completely inexplicable since she had found him repulsive and had spurned him at the risk of her life. But what does psychology matter? The formula is more important. And the formula is—a woman, particularly a single woman, always means Yes when she says No. If a man pursues her long enough, she will give in. Even if the man is a rapist and a murderer like Shakar. This formula is very popular with Bombay film makers, who frequently make the hero use molestation as a form of courtship. Needless to say, *Mrichhakatikam* is not responsible for this sickly male fantasy.

Thus, the director has the satisfaction of driving home a "moral" while having used the "immoral" affair to show many titillating scenes that are quite unnecessary to plot or characterisation. However, the Vasantsena-Charudatt story does not provide scope for violence which is a necessary ingredient in most Bombay formula films. So the political intrigue subplot is expanded and used to show long drawn out fights, chases and escapes from prison, none of which have any resemblance to scenes in *Mrichhakatikam*.

If the director adds violence to the original story, he simultaneously subtracts sense from it. We are given no inkling of what is wrong with the regime. The law court scene, the incident of Charudatt saving Aryaka's life and the revolt of Shakar's minions are removed. Thus, the injustices and the sense of discontent among the citizens are invisibilised. All we see is an insane looking Aryaka, recruiting unsavoury social scum in a most unlikely fashion, and getting into bizarre fights at the drop of a hat. The only sign of superiority he manifests is a Bachhan like ability singlehandedly to defeat dozens of armed opponents—hardly an indication that he will make a more just king. Yet, in the end, we seem to be expected to accept on trust that the new regime is an improvement on the old, because people are shown cheering—just as we are expected to accept on trust that Charudatt's and Vasantsena's is a glorious relationship just because the camera dwells in such detail on their bodies, particularly Vasantsena's.

Overall, what is most disappointing about *Utsav* is that it

presents a degrading spectacle of human beings, both individually and collectively. There is hardly anything dignified, attractive or lovable about the main characters. And the society is presented as chaotic and nonfunctional. People, whether in small groups or large crowds, behave in a savage manner— uttering wild cries, indulging in sexual cavorting, mindlessly attacking each other and fleeing each other. It is as though the director cannot conceive of an ordered, civilised society with norms and institutions different from those of the twentieth century.

In contrast, *Mrichhakatikam* displays an active intelligence at work—the dramatist’s ordering intelligence that holds together an organic vision of a society, and a range of individual intelligences aspiring towards a better, more fulfilling life—so that when Charudatt, in his summing up, speaks of the universe as a continual reconciling of opposites, he describes a dynamic

and unpredictable world very different from this formula ridden film where one can predict not only what is going to happen next but what every character is going to say and do next.

We wondered why the director chose *Mrichhakatikam* of all unlikely sources as a base for his script. Its pace and texture are entirely unsuited to the mixture of cliches and pornography that he seems interested in churning out. We could only conclude that this is his way of getting past the censors. The ancient past is used as a respectable facade to acquire tax free status. It is unfortunate that the ignorance of our history that is so prevalent should be reinforced by such gross distortions. Would it not perhaps be wiser to allow such film makers to make the pornographic films they want to, so that they do not have to dress them up in pseudohistorical garb and trap unwary viewers into going to see supposedly historical and artistic films which turn out to be mere pornography ?