

New Delhi Times

The *Times of India* of June 1, 1986, carries a small UNI report on page 9 that reads: "The screening of the film *New Delhi Times* has been banned by subjudge V. K. Jain following a petition moved by a local advocate. Mr A. K. Chaturvedi, in his petition, had alleged that the film contained some remarks derogatory to the entire community of advocates."

This absurd proceeding reflects not only the hypocritically indirect mode of censorship favoured by the authorities in this country but also the dangerously arbitrary and sweeping powers they have. The line alleged to be "derogatory to advocates" is a teasing remark "All lawyers are liars" made by protagonist Vikas Paride to his wife, Nisha, who happens to be a lawyer. The remark is obviously a joke, since she is shown as a conscientious and honest person. No other lawyer appears, and the film has very little to do with the legal profession.

The film is about how politicians stop at nothing in their drive to capture and cling to power. Vikas Pande, executive editor of a Delhi based newspaper, decides to follow up the murder of a harijan MLA in his hometown and uncovers a gruesome story of communal riots, murders, smuggling, illicit liquor rackets, defection's and bribery, generated by a tussle for chief ministership between the incumbent and a rising star in the same party.

His persistence in trying to expose the culprits leads to his being threatened, harassed and roughed up by hired hoodlums, and nearly losing his job. Finally, the rival politicians strike a deal and murder Vikas' crucial witness, a poor old watchman whom they had confined in a mental asylum. The film ends on this sombre note, with the battle lost but the war continuing.

New Delhi Times is remarkable for the sincerity of director Ramesh Sharma. Unlike many contemporary films which pick up a current theme like women's oppression or police corruption primarily for its saleability, *New Delhi Times* shows genuine involvement with the issue of violence and inhumanity in public life, and does not pretend that there are easy answers to the questions raised. It pursues the issue with single-minded intensity, not resorting to comic relief, songs and dances or tearjerking formulae.

However, the film maker's sincerity is often naive, even simplistic. Although it is true that the Indian press has played an important role in safeguarding civil liberties, it has not been nearly as consistent or committed to this task as the film would lead one to believe. Large sections of the press have connived with vested interests to distort facts and whip up prejudice

against minorities

It is not clear, for example, how a newsman with Vikas Pande's dedication to truthtelling could have reached the apex of his career without having earlier fallen foul of authorities or of the underworld. This appears to be his first such experience. Even more incredible is the character of the industrial magnate who owns the newspaper and presides over Vikas' crusade with patriarchal benignity. Modelled rather obviously on R. N. Goenka, he lacks the complexity of the original. The film does not sufficiently indicate that this situation is not typical of the Indian press and is, in fact, rather exceptional.

When the film does show a provincial newspaper owner succumbing to pressure from above, he is shown ringing up Vikas and asking him to reveal the truth in the national press. Thus, those sections of the press who act in collusion with vested interests are shown in a favourable light as mere victims, never as part of the politicians' cliques. Similarly, when Anwar, the photographer, appears to be cynically exploiting disaster situations to build his career, he almost immediately reveals that this cynicism is a mere facade he has been forced to erect in order to cope with the everyday recurrence of such disasters.

On the whole, the world of the newsmen is posed as an almost idyllic one of camaraderie, honesty and decency—communal harmony being implied in a hackneyed fashion in the friendship of Vikas, Anwar and D'Mello — against the completely evil and corrupt world of, politics which engineers communal and other violence. This black and white contrast, which is not borne out by reality, pervades characterisation in the film, Vikas and his freedom fighter father being shown as pure and totally uncorrupted while the politicians are dyed in the grain villains.

The film also poses political and social issues inaccurately when it shows the world in which they are played out as an exclusively male one. Vikas' wife, Nisha, although nominally a professional woman, is never seen unescorted in any public place.

The film maker intends to present theirs as a progressive marriage but succeeds only in preparing a saccharine version of an old stereotype. Nisha, who functions essentially as Vikas' shadow and is entirely peripheral to the action, suffers the consequences of his activities but cannot appreciate his principles. Her "unenlightened" reactions are intended to throw Vikas' "heroism" into bolder and more tragic relief. She constantly complains of his neglecting her and taking unnecessary risks. If she took the legal profession at all seriously, she would also be working late into the night rather than languishing on beds and sofas in fancy attire.

Clearly, the film maker conceives of her only as a prop to the male protagonist, to add to the decor of his home and act as his nurturer, on whose shoulder he can weep at midnight. Even the sole legal case Nisha takes up turns out to be a prop for Vikas, since her client provides the clue to the whereabouts

of the crucial witness Vikas needs to unravel the mystery.

The only other women in the film are a gratuitously introduced striptease dancer in the background of one scene and Vikas' sister, seen for barely a minute on a darkened verandah. Both are entirely extraneous to the action. Also mentioned is a dowry victim whose case is the only one Nisha deals with, presumably on the assumption that such cases are the only proper ones for women lawyers. To pose political and social questions in this fashion as purely male concerns is to pose them unrealistically and thus ill equip oneself to evolve answers.

The film is technically well executed and much of the photography is brilliant, particularly the stark shots of the rioting. At times, the director uses the awkward device of a

commentary as a transition instead of allowing the action to speak for itself. This is particularly irksome at the beginning and end of the film.

Despite all its limitations, however, *New Delhi Times* was a relief to watch, after the normal run of Hindi films. At several points, one felt a sense of surprise that the film was allowed to be screened uncensored. This seemed to be an indication of the relative freedom of expression still prevalent in our country, now belied by the bizarre ban which, fortunately, has not yet taken effect. Somebody should take the judge's thinking to its logical conclusion and demand a ban on the Bombay film industry on the ground that it is "derogatory to the entire community of women."

—Ruth Vanita

Muslim Women Bill Challenged

The Muslim Women(Protection Of Rights On Divorce) Bill which was rushed through parliament on May 6, has been challenged by eminent lawyer Danial Latifi and Mrs Sona Khan, advocate, who have filed a petition in the supreme court, pointing out that the new Act discriminates against Muslim women, contravenes Muslim law and violates the Constitution.

The Act lays down that a divorced Muslim woman shall be entitled to maintenance from her husband "within the iddat period" which it defines as three lunar months after the divorce, and her children shall be paid maintenance by their father for a period of two years from the dates of their birth. She shall also be paid her *mehr* or dower and all the properties gifted to her before or at or after her marriage by her relatives or her husband or his relatives. If the husband does not pay these amounts, she may appeal to the court.

After the payment of these amounts by her husband, the divorced woman is entitled to appeal to the court against her natal relatives. The magistrate may order them to pay her maintenance. Her children are the first persons liable to maintain her, and after them her parents.

If, however, she has no relatives or if they are not in a position to maintain her, the magistrate may order the State Wakf Board functioning in the area where she resides, to pay her maintenance. The amount of maintenance are in all cases left to the magistrate to decide, according to what he deems "reasonable and fair."

The Act also provides that on the first hearing of an application made by a woman accusing her husband of not having paid her the *mehr* and *iddat* maintenance amounts, she and he may, if they wish, declare that that they would prefer to be governed by section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code.

Although the ruling party used its majority in parliament to push this bill through, ignoring all opposition and women's protests including protests by Muslim women, protest continues to be voiced in various forms.

Sabha Husain, activist of the Janwadi Mahila Samiti, told us that they had held meetings in many parts of Delhi with Muslim women. Many of these women had to come to the meetings without the knowledge of their families. Although women were upset by the way the issue was being used to attack Muslims they were perturbed by the provisions of the bill.

A survey conducted by Marketing Research and Advisory Services, reported in Gentleman magazine, based on interviews with over 1,000 people in the four major cities, found that 71 percent of Muslim men interviewed supported the bill whereas only 40 percent of women interviewed supported it.

The Bill is full of inconsistencies and manifest injustices. To place responsibility for maintenance of a divorced woman on her relatives is uncalled for because most women in any case return to the natal family when abandoned by the husband. A woman is not in a position to sue her natal relatives when she is dependent on them. As for Wakf boards, they are, by all accounts, usually defunct and in a state of penury.

The Act allows the husband to get away scot free even if he has unilaterally divorced his wife. He is not even responsible to maintain the children for more than two years. The Act does not say who is responsible to maintain the children. The provision that husband and wife may declare a preference to be governed by the Criminal Procedure Code from which the Act otherwise excludes them, seems to be included to give the man the option to pay monthly maintenance in case the *mehr* amount is a very large one. It is absurd to expect him to opt to pay maintenance in the woman's interest. If he wished to do so, the woman would not need to approach the court in the first place. The Act everywhere betrays callous haste and lack of reflection. Clearly, it has been pushed through without the slightest regard for the women and children it will affect. It is intended as a populist measure to preserve a vote bank for the ruling party. That this Act by its title should claim to be protecting Muslim women's rights is a good example of the art of doubletalk which our government has perfected.