

A Question Of Emphasis

—Agnisnan and Ek Pal

Ek Pal and *Agnisnan*, both new wave films set in Assam and built around the theme of a married woman's decision to keep a baby born of her relations with a man other than her husband, provide an interesting study in contrasts.

Agnisnan, Bhaben Saikia's awardwinning film in Assamese, telecast on July 20, set in the 1930s, begins by contrasting the quiet dignity of Menaka, an overworked mother of four, with the boorishness of her husband, Mohikanta, a prosperous millowner. Attracted to the daughter of an impoverished villager, he decides to marry her, for which he finds various justifications? including his distaste for Menaka's "worn out" body.

Everyone, including his parents, brother and son, is outraged, and he finds himself isolated in the family but uses his wealth and status to override social opinion. Menaka, although helpless to stop him, vows that she will not let him touch her.

The film now develops into a magnificent study of the difference between strength and power. When the new wife becomes pregnant, Mohikanta makes advances to Menaka but she resists all his attempts, ranging from blandishments to attacks. Simultaneously, she initiates a relationship with Madan, a goodhearted, unemployed youth who is a petty thief.

Her purpose in conducting this intrigue is not made clear until the end when she becomes pregnant and breaks off the relationship which had throughout been steered by her. Her husband now finds himself in a trap, partly endemic to the married state and partly of his own making. He threatens to "crush" Menaka in his mill but is in fact unable to vent his rage on her, because the entire village despises him for a blustering bully and worships her. He is the only one who knows that the child is not his; this would seem incredible to anyone else.

Menaka refuses to tell him the name of the child's father, and defies him to do his worst. In a long, somewhat stagey, final speech she denounces male double standards and brutality, the punchline being: "There were four children in the house. Then a fifth was born and I was not the mother. Now there will be a sixth and you will not be the father."

However, this speech also gives away a couple of unfortunate assumptions of the film maker. Menaka declares that she could have continued her affair with Madan but gave it up because she did not want to lead a "dirty life." Also, recalling her lifelong struggle to live as a Sita or Savitri, she says: "But if there is to be a Sita, there should also be a Ram."

Ek Pal reveals the consequences of having a Ram—a supposedly "ideal man", around. Made by Kalpana Lajmi and based on a story by Mahasweta Devi, *Ek Pal* holds women in very low esteem.

It begins with a pseudo folksong praising the sexual charms of women. Three images of women are presented, all of them derogatory. A group of wealthy, overdressed women at a party exchange notes on their jewels. On the lawn outside, as the pseudo folkdance progresses, the camera focuses on women's limbs in a suggestive way. Behind a closed window, the heroine, Priyam, wistfully watches the dancers. She is swept out of her seclusion by a dashing playboy. He does—all the talking and Priyam, obviously fascinated, speaks not a word for several minutes. This opening scene sets the tone for the film.

Priyam, unlike Menaka, has many options—she is an MA and is the only daughter of dotting parents who allow her great freedom. Yet she is shown uninterested in anything except a man. When the philanderer, Jit, betrays her and leaves for Harvard University, she quietly acquiesces to an arranged marriage, although she seems to be in agony throughout the ceremony. The wedding is filmed in painfully slow detail for no apparent reason except to record an "exotic" Assamese ritual. *Agnisnan* too moves very slowly but its pace, although at times dragging, does convey the tension of Menaka's life.

Ek Pal is supposed to be about a woman's predicament but not a single woman in it is conceived with respect. Priyam,



Priyam — conception lacks depth

her mother and her maidservant are Priyam—conception lacks depth boring stereotypes. On the other hand, two of the men, Priyam's husband and father, are portrayed as exceptionally intelligent persons. Her father is almost unbelievably liberal as her husband turns out to be in the end.

Even in circumstances which could conduce to sympathetic treatment, the woman character is so presented as to provoke

at best pity and at worst contempt. For instance, Priyam, in the classic situation of a bored middle class housewife, becomes an irritat-ing presence because she shows no desire for activity of any kind. She is shown sitting around idly, drink-ing cognac, or pottering about with decorative plants, while husband Ved is physically and mentally absorbed in his work. Unlike a Charulata, she has no undefin-ed yearnings. Her only desire is a very limited one— for a child.

On the other hand, Menaka in *Agniman*, even in circumstances that could easily provoke a snigger, for instance, when overhearing her husband and his second wife's lovemaking or when meeting Madan, is presented with invincible dignity. When she weeps, the camera looks at her in context — framed by the house and the garden - and includes Madan, uncertain how to react to the breaking down of this strong person. When Priyam in *Ek Pal* cries, the camera focuses on her heaving body and its pretty curves and unnecessarily zooms in on her face. All this works to detract from her dignity.

When Ved leaves for a work trip to Kenya, the film maker introduces a song which is totally out of keeping whh the lack of emotion between them : "*Mein to sang jaun banwas.*" (I will go with you into exile. You are descended from the sun, my lord ; Keep your shadow with you, I will walk in your shadow). This is paral-leled by Priyam's sentimentality vis a vis Jit, with whom she revives her affair and by whom she conceives.

The occasion is used to propagate the absurd and dangerous theory that a woman conceives only by a man she loves. If this was so, the birthrate in this country or anywhere in the world would be abysmally low.

Priyam's decision to keep the child, in defiance of waeial convention, is projected as striking a blow for women's emancipation, but in fact acts as a double fidedged weapon. She fights not for the right to have a child as an aspect of the right to self definition but rather for the right to be "a mother", saying that her childlessness made her feel a "silence", a "cave" within her. Whereas Menaka used motherhood as a weapon since it was one of the very few weapons available to her, Priyam, in true stereotypical fashion, needs motherhood to "complete" herself. When pregnant, she says : "I am complete, I am filled."

This reinforces the notion of woman as a creature wholly of the body. Priyam is mindlessly dominated by her physiology — she wants a man and wants a child in ihe same mindless way, unable to explain these wants to herself. Instead of shedding light on the sources of her unease with herself, the film mystifies them via the song : "*Apne ap se dar lagta hai.*"

Menaka, although compelled by circumstances to live only as a reproductive being, applies her mind to her own and to others' predicament, emerging as a complex, thinking, feeling being. Though restricted to the arena of her home, she leaves the viewer in no doubt of her ability to function in a larger world. Priyam, with all the world before her, is shown as capable of being nothing but a wife— merely be-cause she is a woman.

When Jit behaves perfectly in character by asking Priyam

to abort the child, she reacts with highmindedT scorn with which we are expected to identify, making out that her love was somehow "higher" than his. But it is not clear how this is so, since neither of them shows more than a physical affinity for the other. Is a longer lasting sexual drive nobler than a transitory one ?

When Ved returns, he accepts the child after some initial agonising and does not even ask who the father is. Nothing in his earlier behaviour could have led one to expect this. He had been shown as perfectly conventional, saying, for example, that he would want his wife to be beautiful, a good cook and a



hostess. However, characterisation is sacrificed to the film maker's desperate need for a Ram.

The child's arrival is very much in Ved's interest,-although he is made out to be doing Priyam a great favour. She will now have something to keep her busy and will not get on his nerves with her constant de-mands for attention. He will be free to work as late as he likes and to forget wedding anniversaries with impunity. The biggest benefit is that of having a wife eternally in his debt instead of a critical and complain-ing one. As she looks up at him adoringly in the last sequence, the song speaks for her : "You are a warrior, my lord, you must protect me."

The subplot in *Ek Pal* seems to have no purpose-other than to show the poorer classes as violently irra-tional. Ved's gardener, an old widower, is shown marrying a girl young enough to be his daughter, and then violently maltreating her. When she bears his child, he kills it because he suspects it is not his. On the other hand, Priyam's child is kissed by Ved. Such are the benefits of being a factory manager—if not in life, at least in a film made by someone with so touching a belief in the "enlightenment" of the upper classes.