

IN September 1993 Bombay Doordarshan began broadcasting a 13-part Marathi serial, *Paulakhuna* (footprint). Focusing on "...the evolution of Maharashtrian womanhood as depicted in the pages of Marathi literary writings from the nineteenth through the twentieth century," the serial provided a glimpse of literary representations of Maharashtrian women in progressive literature from 1893-1953.

The serial presented six novels and a short story: Hari Narayan Apte's *Pan Lakshat Kon Ghetu* (But Who Takes Notice), B.V. Varerkar's *Vidhwakumari* (The Widowed Virgin), Narayan Hari Apte's *M* Patnari Cost* (An Unacceptable Incident), V.M. Joshi's *Susheelecha Dev* (Susheela's God), S.V. Ketkar's *Brahmankanya* (An Unmarried Brahmin Girl), Vibhavari Shirukar's *Shabari* and Arvind Gokhale's *Manjula*. They are all written in a style which would be characterised as "realism". Literature, mirrors lived reality. This allows "realist" writing to be used as historical evidence of how things were. At the same time, since literature captures the textures of inner lives, it is able to provide a different, more sensitive account of past lives. *Paulakhuna* draws on this source to describe Maharashtrian women's lives and their struggles for selfhood and independence. The serial is interested in showing us how literature represented the changing times, at the same time that it initiated this change in the popular imagination.

Feminist critics of the media have talked about the ways in which visual narratives about women tend to reproduce and solidify prevailing patriarchal attitudes about women. They argue that this is because the structure of the visual gaze in cinema is voyeuristic, seeing women through a male perspective. Simultaneously there is a moment of closure in much Indian film and television (which tends to adopt the perspective of

"realist" cinema) where even the boldest of women is seen to suffer the consequences of her waywardness; usually through a tragic end. Just addressing "women's issues" does not promote a woman-centred perspective in film and serials, clearly. Does *Paulakhuna* fall into a similar trap?

In most television programming, the effects of patriarchy on women, if they are a topic of concern at all, are discussed with reference to isolated incidents. This dislocates the incidents from the deeply-rooted historical reasons for the continuity of women's oppression today. *Paulakhuna* goes far in suggesting the historical bases for contemporary oppression and struggle. By focusing on the nineteenth century Brahmin, middle class household as the site of orthodoxy and opposition, the serial provides us with a window into the dominant culture of the time and its slow reform. *Paulakhuna* suggests that the education of women led to their growing sense of self, and later on, their economic independence. The woman that emerges at the end of *Paulakhuna* is a historical creature, whose history consists of the struggles she has waged to claim her autonomy and identity.

So far so good. But even *Paulakhuna* falls prey to the seduction of realism at times. All the writers (except one) are male, and one might ask about the voyeurism involved in writing about women as victims, and providing education as



Paulakhuna

A Marathi Serial on Woman

Review: Anupama Rao

the antidote to patriarchal oppression. Since *Paulakhuna's* story line focuses on this point of view, it seems to present this as "what really happened." In doing so, it secures its portrayal of woman as definitive, because it is real. One could ask if writing by women would be different, and if so in what ways.

Paulakhuna's strength is that it quickly undercuts itself. In *Shabari* we see a woman who questions the persisting inequalities that the educated woman encounters in a marriage. Arvind Gokhale follows with the story of a woman who is expected to manage work, home and satisfy her husband's sexual desires.

There is a critique built into the serial which questions the modernity of women today. Similarly, one might ask about what lower caste women experienced at this time, given their possible oppression at the hands of upper caste, middle class women. The "realism" of the novels and the serial is not able to accommodate this fundamental aspect of upper caste, middle class lives; the power relations that sustained them in a position of domination over others. Given these problems, however, *Paulakhuna* goes a long way in trying to present us with a history of women. It suggests that we read literature historically, and tries hard to provide a sensitive portrayal of women in struggle. It is this history of struggle that will sustain the battles to come, though one of the first casualties might be the "realist" mode of depiction itself!