

**M**AMMO was the opening film of the 26th International Film Festival of India held in Bombay from January 10-20, 1995, a most appropriate choice as the inaugural film in a city racked by communal violence. It was also shown in Delhi at Mavlankar Hall on February 23, 1995, on the occasion of the Pakistan-India People's Convention on Peace and Democracy. The convention was attended by about 100 persons from both Pakistan and India, who are activists in human rights, environmental, social and political fields. There were also trade unionists and artists present. Despite the fact that some reels got mixed up at the time of the screening, the film touched the hearts of most of the viewers.

Mammo is a film that breaks all formulas. There is no sex interest, car chases or action, songs, dances, special effects, or technical gimmicks. It does not even have cute children to pull one's heart strings. The film also does not spout polemics: it has no overt messages of *sadbhavana*, or communal harmony. The director, Shyam Benegal, stated that, except for the ending, the script is based on the true story of an aunt of Mr. Khalid Mohamed, the film critic of *The Times of India*.

Mammo is the nickname given to Mehmooda Begum by her two sisters. Prior to partition, she was married to a man living in Lahore, so after partition, she automatically became a Pakistani. Although childless, her marriage was happy. But after her husband's death the bickering in his family over property resulted in her being thrown out of the house. The only family she had left were her two sisters in India.

Mammo goes to Bombay on a visitor's visa to stay with her beloved *apa*, Fayyazi, a widow living with her

## FILM REVIEW

# Mammo

**Director Shyam Benegal**

**Running Time: 110 minutes**

**Producer: N.F.D.C. & Doordarshan**

**Review : Vijaya Mulay**



**Surekha Sikri and Farida Jalal in *Mammo***

orphaned 13-year-old grandson. Mammo wants to spend her declining years with her sister, Fayyazi, and her grand-nephew. She manages to get her visa extended several times on some pretext or other. However, when such extensions are no longer possible, she goes to a tout. After paying him, she manages to get her name removed from the register of foreign nationals. Unfortunately for Mammo, when the tout is apprehended, the illegal aliens he took money from are rounded up and deported. Mammo is among those deported to Pakistan where she has no family and no place to live.

After some misadventures,

Mammo manages to get back to Bombay through the use of false papers that claim she died in Pakistan. As she is no longer officially alive, there is no longer a threat of repatriation to Pakistan: the dead can return but not the living.

The two main protagonists—Mammo, played by Farida Jalal, and Fayyazi, played by Surekha Sikri—are middle-aged ordinary housewives; their concerns are everyday affairs, and their aspirations are what any ordinary human being would have. In a subdued and quiet tone, the film succeeds in showing how a person like Mammo is trapped by borders which are not of her making. It is a simple

tale that has been told by the director in an adroit manner, and both actresses, as well as the young boy, played by Amit Phalke, make it a poignant tale. Furthermore, the delineations of the two sisters - Fayyazi, the quiet one, and Mammo, the extrovert - are done cleverly. For instance, when the letter announcing Mammo's arrival comes, Fayyazi's young grandson is not pleased that a complete stranger is going to stay for an indefinite period with them. His worst fears come true when he discovers that Mammo babbles all the time, and so even his study period is no longer sacred. Furthermore, when she keeps asking him about his school and friends, he barely manages to be polite. Fayyazi is annoyed at his behaviour, but Mammo takes it all in stride. She embarrasses him when she chats with taxi drivers about their homes in Uttar Pradesh, or enquires about the health of the immigration officer's family when she meets him for the second time. However, slowly, the boy comes to realise that Mammo is genuinely interested in people and that this is her way of building relationships, clumsy though it might seem to a young boy.

When their third sister and her husband, with his connections in the Middle East, try to diddle Fayyazi out of her share of the ancestral property, Mammo takes up cudgels on her behalf. They tell Mammo that, as a foreigner, she has no say about the ancestral property. She is stunned because she never considered herself a foreigner in India. But they are not able to silence her.

She tells Fayyazi that she must not be afraid of speaking her mind, as the boy's interests have to be taken into account. He finds her more understanding and willing to overlook his misdemeanours, whereas his grandmother remains stern. Despite her

love for Mammo, Fayyazi anxiously watches whether the affection of her grandson for Mammo is not going to be at her cost.

In his speech the day following the screening, Dr. Mubashir Hasan, who was once a federal minister in Pakistan and is presently a well known writer and political activist there, talked about the memories that the film invoked in him. It had a special significance for him as it was the story of someone from the town of Panipat, where his family had lived for 600 years. Mr Mubashir knew two sisters in Panipat, one of whom was named Mammo, who had gone to Pakistan after partition. Hasan and his family were not interested in returning to Panipat but his mother hankered to go back as she wanted to be buried in the family grave with her ancestors. She finally gave up when she learnt that

the family grave did not exist any longer. Only then did she agree that a new grave for the family be set up in Lahore.

The visa policies of both the Indian and the Pakistani governments do not respect the legitimate aspirations of their people for family reunion. Resident visas are given on a periodic basis and are subject to all kinds of considerations. The Bombay police record shows that in the last few years, 1,284 Pakistani nationals have gone underground in Bombay. Would it not be much better if genuine cases of family reunion were considered based on the merits of each case and returning resident visas were given with the option of applying for citizenship at the end of a specific number of years? The poignant tale of Mammo drives this point home. □

## *Second-Hand Dress*

*My body is draped in the cotton  
which clothed her,  
my arms wrap around the body  
she bore,  
and my womb receives  
the life hers gave.*

*If only she'd lived  
to wear out this dress,  
to drop tears  
on the grandchild I'll bear her,  
to see the contented aging  
of her only son's brow.*

*I never knew her,  
this woman  
I've become.*

**Mary Elizabeth Lauzon**