

# In The Name Manhood—Not Humanity

## Review Of Govind Nihalani's *Ardh Satya*, *Akrosh* and *Vijeta*

*Ardh Satya* is an important film in the history of Indian cinema. The widespread popularity achieved by this low budget, political film is not only an index of the acute dissatisfaction felt by most people in this country vis a vis the governmental machinery but is also evidence of the fact that the director has managed to get his message across in a powerful way without the usual pretentiousness of many "art" films. Ever since the emergency, people's distrust of the various arms of the bureaucracy has found more open expression, but even before, this mistrust had been indicated by people's tendency to avoid contact with this machinery, as far as possible. The rural poor, for instance, seldom go to the police station to report injustices against them. They seem to be freer of the illusion that the police force exists to provide justice. On the contrary, the reaction of many villagers and slum dwellers would be to run as far as possible from uniformed men, knowing that they are likely at the very least to extort bribes, and are also quite capable of perpetrating violence on innocent people while protecting criminals and oppressors.

Thus while the poor seem to have long since understood the character of the police and the bureaucracy, in recent years the urban middle classes too seem to have become disillusioned with the political system and its machinery. The fact that *Ardh Satya* looks at the corruption and perversion of this system primarily from the point of view of the urban middle and lower middle classes, who constitute the majority of filmgoers in this country, may partially explain its instant success. My feeling is that *Akrosh*, in many ways a more radical film, did not run so well because it took us to the heart of terror and exploitation in this country, showing the rural poor as the victims. In *Akrosh*, only stray middle class individuals dare look at the real face of exploitation, because, as the young lawyer and the political activist realise, even acknowledging the existence of exploitation involves grave risks to one's life.

In this review, I would like to deal with all the three films made by Govind Nihalani, which have placed him in a very short time amongst the leading film directors of India. When one sees the three films in succession, one becomes aware



that it is the Govind Nihalani and Vijay Tendulkar combine which produces an *Akrosh* or an *Ardh Satya*. Without Tendulkar's script and dialogue writing, Nihalani can produce *Vijeta*, an outright reactionary, soppy, mediocre, and even in parts boring film. Yet, despite the wide difference in quality and ideology between these three films, a significant common theme runs through all of them. Since these films have an explicit political message, I feel it is important to analyse their political content in the light of this common theme—that of proving one's manhood or *paurush*.

In all three films, the hero is a severely maladjusted person who feels thwarted by his family and his social environment. Thus, in *Ardh Satya*, Anant Velankar grows up in the shadow of a tyrannical father who abuses and beats Anant's mother on the slightest pretext. Unable to resist this violence which he perceives as injustice, Anant feels humiliated and powerless. This feeling is enhanced when he joins the police force, on his father's insistence, but against his own wishes. It is significant that Velankar repeatedly says that his father, and later the system in which his father is just one cog, have deprived him of his manhood, his masculinity. But surely the ability to resist injustice, to be sensitive to others' feelings is a human, not just a manly attribute. The distinction between the human and the manly needs to be made, considering that men have, over the centuries, sought to manifest their manhood primarily through violence, aggression, warfare and domination. The director endorses Velankar's perception through his use of the theme poem which also identifies the sought after attribute as *paurush* or manhood.

This is not a mere verbal distinction because the film succeeds in showing that what Velankar and his father have in common is in fact their way of demonstrating their manly power. Their notions of right and wrong are somewhat different, but their methods of enforcing their notions of right are exactly the same. Thus Velankar's maniacal beating up of the man who molests Jyotsna is inspired as much by his manly outrage that she should be touched by another man while under his protection as by his idea of right. He tells her that he cannot bear the thought of her having to jostle with crowds in buses, and she rightly points out that hers is not a unique predicament. Yet Velankar is capable of

enjoying a cabaret dance in the company of his colleagues, and also of referring to women as *mal* and *chiriya*. He is shown self righteously enjoying himself by beating up the group of eve teasers he arrests from a slum.

Thus the film maker shows that the hero is not much better than any of his colleagues or than his father. He has conventional notions of right and wrong, and a very limited perception of justice and injustice. This characterisation is a major achievement of the film. The hero is not shown as a pure white, incorruptible person pitched against a set of irredeemably black villains. He is a shade of grey like most others around him, a little less grey than some like Shetty but more grey than others like his girlfriend or his mother and his subordinate, the old man who tries to stop him from drinking. The choice of an average looking and sounding young man like Om Shivpuri as hero instead of the Amitabh Bachhan kind of angry young man is very important insofar as it contributes to making the film an important step forward in realism in the history of Indian cinema.

Another message the film succeeds in conveying very effectively is that the police force as an institution functions to perpetrate injustice and violence, not only through its corrupt but even through its upright and dutiful officers. Thus, when Velankar is doing his duty by trying to stop molestation of women, he nevertheless routinely disregards all due process of law. He does not register a complaint but simply beats up the accused men and then lets them go. This is a completely illegal procedure, but no one questions it. Similarly, in the course of duty, he is expected to beat up striking workers regardless of whether they are in the right or not. And he proceeds to beat them up quite conscientiously. It is thus clearly shown that even a well meaning, honest, dutiful officer is likely to end up protecting those who have wealth and power against those who do not, because that is the real function of the police force.

Velankar gets into trouble when he goes too far and kills an undertrial, but his father's comments on this stress the fact that beating and torture of undertrials are routine matters. Even a killing could have been hushed up. Velankar's mistake was in not being clever enough to hush up the matter.

The film maker also points out that the personal moral standards of these so called defenders of morality are no different from those of the so called offenders against morality. Thus the police officers who are supposed to suppress traffic in women are shown visiting brothels and enjoying cabaret dances. They are supposed to check corruption but they use corrupt means when it suits them, as Anant does to escape the threat of suspension. Since the point of the film is to show the way the system can corrupt everyone who comes in contact with it, the hero too is shown happily accepting the little daily acts of corruption which go in his favour. The film is a major breakthrough in its realistic portrayal of the conflict as going on between people who have been corrupted to different degrees, not between the completely corrupt and the completely incorrupt.

However, when Velankar at the end is made to murder Shetty in a fit of righteous indignation, at one stroke the Om Shivpuri type of real life protagonist degenerates into the Amitabh Bachhan type of hero, something which the film seemed to have tried to avoid so far. It has been argued that considering Velankar's explosive temperament, this end is very much in character. However, I found it not only out of character but also a very negative end. It is important to analyse the political import of such an end. Let us first consider some different possible ways of ending the film.

1. Velankar could be shown murdering the villain. This is the ending chosen by the director.

2. He could be shown accepting the terms offered by Shetty. This, it seems to me, would be more in tune with his character since whenever he has been outraged by something wrong, he has invariably ended up making a



shabby compromise. He joins the police force despite his declaration that he would not join it. He makes himself dutifully obey orders instead of resigning when he becomes aware of the hypocrisy and corruption inherent in the police force. When he gets into trouble, he saves himself by offering a bribe to an influential contact in Delhi. Most important, his anger at the functioning of the police melts into thin air when he expects to get an award for bravery. Therefore, it would not be entirely out of character for him to fume, rage and swear, yet end up accepting Shetty's terms.

3. He could have refused Shetty's offer, faced the trial and punishment, and come out of it a shattered and broken or maybe a sadder and wiser man. This would not have been an entirely exceptional way of handling the situation, though succumbing to Shetty would perhaps be more typical in today's context.

4. He could have killed himself instead of killing Shetty. This is in fact how the script writer Tendulkar had originally devised the ending and given Velankar's overall situation and temperament this perhaps would have been the only dignified way he could register his protest and his refusal to succumb beyond a limit.

Why then does Nihalani choose the very exceptional and nontypical action as an ending? What are the consequences of this choice? It seems to me that this ending is an important contributory factor for the resounding success of the film. Yet in my view this ending is politically contradictory to much that the film suggests. Why?

First, because it gives a false sense of optimism and victory which the audience can enjoy, consisting as it does of people who are not very different from the protagonist.

Most people I talked to about the film said that they had felt happy that somehow “justice was done.” Some even went so far as to say that the killing of Shetty represents the “victory of good over evil.”

The question arises : can justice be done by exterminating an individual or even a group of individuals, as Amitabh Bachhan is shown doing in another current film, *Inquilab* ? Will Shetty’s death change things in any way for anyone ? Is not rather the killing merely an act of revenge, born of the desire to make Shetty suffer as he had made others suffer ? The audience is invited to enjoy the thrill of seeing Shetty’s death pangs which are dwelt on in as much horrific detail as those of his victims. Is it acceptable to enjoy the suffering of someone we think bad, but not of someone we think good?

Even more important is the question : is Shetty’s face really the face of power in this country ? His face is that of a stereotyped villain, black and repulsive, but it is also shown as the face of a lower class man who has risen from his lowly origins. It is significant that the faces of those who really wield power are not shown on the screen. One only hears their voices on the telephone or references to them in conversation. They need men like Shetty to stay in power as much as Shetty needs their patronage to carry on his business.

Shetty’s face is repeatedly projected on the screen as a demonic symbol of evil. But those in power are not likely to be such obvious looking villains. Is power not much more glamorous and attractive in its appearance ? We may feel momentarily satisfied at the sight of Shetty being throttled, but to me, this throttling seemed a characteristic assertion of the popular and deadly notion of manhood rather than an assertion of humanity. The killing of Shetty, in my view, robs the film of some of its radical potential and channelised it towards middle class self righteous indignation. That perhaps is why this film has been successful in winning the heart of the government, and the powers that be, who have rewarded it with exemption from tax as well as with the president’s gold medal.

This is where I feel Nihalani’s vision differs from Tendulkar’s. While Tendulkar’s plays almost always leave the audience deeply disturbed and self questioning, Nihalani’s film presents a self righteous vindication of the hero, and vicariously, of the viewer. Suicide by the protagonist would imply that he passes judgement on himself—he thinks himself not fit to live after he has killed the undertrial. But Velankar wants to save his skin after he has killed the undertrial. He does not perceive himself as a murderer at that point. Instead, he passes judgment on Shetty, kills him, and then give himself up to the police. Now his surrender is shown not so much as proof of his murderousness as of his ‘moral courage.’ He stands as the representative of middle class self righteousness.

This ending is also closely linked with the theme of the loss of manhood. Velankar feels that he is emasculated by the system. The term he uses is “emasculatation”, not

dehumanisation. His anger against Shetty is not so much against his doings but more because, as he says “When I see him I feel as if somebody is challenging my manhood.” In what way does Shetty challenge his manhood ? When Velankar is able to arrest and beat up someone, Shetty’s son, for example, he feels vindicated in his manhood. But his attempt to arrest and punish Shetty is thwarted by Shetty’s influential control over top police officers. Velankar is humiliated in front of his juniors, and is not able to beat up Shetty. Velankar tends to see the ability to resist injustice and the ability to be violent as identical, and to identify these abilities with his “manhood.” Thus he tells his girlfriend : “The institution I serve is bent upon crushing my manhood. I cannot bear this. I will not be able to live this life of impotence. If I do not overcome this impotence, I will go mad.” Significantly, the hero’s final outburst of murderous rage is expressed in the words he speaks just before he pounces on Shetty : “You want me to be your dog, your kept woman, your whore.” The idea of dependence and degradation is linked in his mind with the idea of a helpless, dependent woman, a creature for whom he has only contempt.

This is not just Velankar’s perception. The director, through the theme poem from which the title is drawn, emphasises that he too sees the conflict as between potency and impotence : “*Ek palre mein napunsakta, Doosre palre mein paurush, Aur thik bich mein ardh satya*” (in one scale of the balances is impotence, in the other manhood, and between the two hangs a half truth). This poem suggests that manhood is identified with truth, and impotence with untruth.

But how does Nihalani show Velankar vindicating his manhood ? By the murder of Shetty. He counters violence with superior violence. He throttles Shetty with his bare hands, that is, he meets Shetty man to man and proves himself the “better man.” He is shown feeling vindicated, announcing his murder with pride. He has overcome his impotence. One can imagine him making a neat little speech in court on his triumph. By this logic, the police force would be vindicated if it allowed full play to Velankar’s manhood, and allowed him to kill all those he thinks are in the wrong.

I could be accused of overstretching the point here, if the theme of losing and vindicating one’s manhood were not visible as an obsession in Nihalani’s other films.

In *Akrosh*, the poor tribal, Lahania, is shown as someone who has bottled up his rage against his exploiters. It is highly significant that none of the women tribals are shown similarly bottling up their rage. The ability to feel indignant, the anger of the title is shown to spring from thwarted manhood. And manhood is thwarted because Lahania is unable to protect the women of his family from sexual exploitation by forest contractors and their henchmen. The problem is viewed not so much as injustice towards the women as injustice towards the man and his manhood. After his arrest, Lahania can only writhe in torment because he is now surrounded by those

who have power over him. At home, he could vent his rage on his wife by abusing and beating her. Like Velankar, he finds himself impotent to overpower them with violence, which he certainly wants to do. Therefore he vindicates himself by murdering his sister. Supposedly out of concern for her. This killing is shown in so sympathetic a light that it appears as a vindication of suppressed humanity, here identified with manhood. The film ends with the lawyer declaring that he is going to defend Lahania in court. Once again, it should be pointed out that in Tendulkar's original



**Akrosh; Vindicating manhood through violence on women**

script, Lahania was not shown murdering his sister. Instead, the whole crusade to save him was shown petering out and coming to nothing, as often happens in real life.

*Vijeta* is the film which most clearly shows the hero's mastery of the art of killing as a self mastery and a vindication of manhood and heroism. The hero, Angad, is a school dropout. He seethes with rebellious feelings towards his father but feels deep tenderness for his mother and grandmother. In doing so, he identifies himself with his mother's rebellion. She had objected to her husband's extramarital affairs, and had retaliated by cutting off all physical and emotional contact with him. The alliance between mother and son creates a lot of tension in the house.

When he begins to train as an air force officer, Angad proves to be sensitive and averse to violence. This aversion is dubbed "unmanly" and "cowardly" by everyone, including Angad and the director. Angad is not good at boxing, riding and other manly sports, and is also afraid of risky air exercises. He is one of the few cadets who has occasional qualms about whether it is right to kill unarmed civilians by dropping bombs on them. However, this conflict is given a strange twist halfway through the film. The moment his father tells him: "I will be very happy if you are successful in air force training", Angad suddenly forgets all about his early rebelliousness and indignation, and sets out to prove himself his father's son. From this point on, the mother

rapidly fades out as a character and, after sinking into her husband's arms, is soon gotten rid of by a most unconvincing and unnecessary death. The manhood of father and of son is thus simultaneously vindicated.

Manhood is to be vindicated through killing. This is pointed out in the mother's words to her husband, when she is defending Angad's choice of an air force career: "History gave you the opportunity to prove yourself, now let Angad prove himself." Here, she is referring to her husband's participation in the partition riots. The film repeatedly exploits the trauma of the partition shamelessly to stir up communal and nationalist, chauvinist feeling in favour of war between India and Pakistan.

Throughout the film, the mass murder called war is glorified and romanticised. The flights of the fighter planes are shown in the most lyrically lovely way. We are shown planes soaring up through clouds into the flawless blue, but are not shown the devastation caused below by bombs, perhaps because there is no way that scene could have been prettified. No part of the agony and inhumanity of war is allowed to come through. The soldiers are shown indulging in the most sickly, sentimental camaraderie, and being sent off by their women, who are not even permitted to weep. Angad's girlfriend is repeatedly told "No tears." In the film's value system, sensitivity and aversion to killing, even mourning a death is equal to cowardice and unmanliness.

At one point, Angad voices some doubts: "I hope no innocent people will be killed at my hands", and is reassured: "The vermin must be ground along with the wheat." This analogy is blatantly misleading. Wheat is ground to feed people so the grinding is necessary, but does war in any way improve the lot of ordinary people in either country? Later, when Angad's girlfriend questions the necessity of war, his father retorts: "Why is only war bad? Riots are even worse than war. In war we kill known enemies but in riots we kill those who were our friends." This spurious logic is the only explanation offered for the film's glorification of war. How does the fact that riots are bad mitigate the badness of war? Also, who is the known enemy? Is the ill paid soldier who merely obeys orders a known enemy? Are the civilians who are bombed by fighter pilots known enemies? And do ordinary people on either side of the border have any real quarrels with each other? Is it not politicians who draw artificial boundaries between human beings and arbitrarily define one set of people as enemies, people we have not even seen, far less "known"?

These questions are not asked, and the hero comes back a *vijeta* or victor over himself and his enemies. He is shown as having successfully sorted out his personal problems, and dispelled his rebellious feelings towards his father as well as his aversion to violence. The film ends up as a shameless documentary, glorifying the acts of the professional killers called armymen.

Of the three films made by Nihalani, *Ardh Satya* is the

one which at least tries to pose a counterpoint to the ideology of maleness. The women characters, despite their brief appearances, are able to put a question mark to the culture of violence which parades as manliness and heroism. Very remarkably, Velankar's girlfriend is not shown admiring his violent behaviour, even when it is ostensibly aimed at protecting her from molestation. She is not impressed by his display of manhood, and tells him she feels repulsed by and alienated from him when he is in a violent frame of mind. She constantly reminds him that by staying in the police force, he will lose himself and will become a dehumanised instrument of violence. She tries to persuade him to resign his job. However much she may like him as a person, she is clear that she will not marry a police officer, because she knows that a person begins to become what he or she does, and it is a police officer's job to do violence.

Even more remarkable is the depiction of Velankar's mother. She retains her gentleness and humanity even though she is brutally beaten up throughout her married life. She manages to register her presence as a living reproach to the beastly existence of her husband. She has a kind of quiet courage that her son lacks, demonstrated in the scene when she pleads with her husband to let the boy choose his own profession. Infuriated, her husband showers blows on her while Anant watches through the door, but dares not confront his father. The most pertinent question in the film is posed by this very frail woman : "Is there no way to do things except by beating?" (*Kya marne pitne ke alava koi doosra upai nahin hai ?* ) She is duly snubbed by her husband : "You are a fool."

The women's vision and view of life thus emerges as the real counterpoint to the world of male aggression. It is significant that every time Anant does something notable, good or bad, he goes to Jyotsna as though he wants assurance and seeks her judgment. The director thus makes her voice and that of Anant's mother the voice of reason, humanity and compassion. But in giving the film this particular murderous end, Nihalani undoes what he has built so well and carefully. This time, Anant is not shown going to Jyotsna for her opinion. Instead, he is shown going alone to the police station, and the film ends with his vision, not with hers. In the original script, Tendulkar had followed Anant's suicide with a last scene showing Jyotsna standing at a bus stop, her eyes moving up to a banner that proclaims : "A policeman is a citizen in uniform. A citizen is a policeman without uniform." This was followed by the hustle and bustle of Bombay life, suggesting to the viewer that life goes on as before.

Ending the film with the murder of Shetty gives the feeling that Velankar has, after all, been heroic. So every man who himself would not dare deal such a blow feels as though his desires and fantasies have been vindicated. Velankar acts on the suppressed murderous desires which many of us momentarily feel when confronted with arbitrary power. But does mere acting on murderous desires really challenge

power ? Will not Shetty's place be taken by his son and by others, while Velankar rots in jail ? Also, are the police and their system worthy to judge, worthy to imprison and punish ? Are the officers to whom Velankar surrenders any better than him or than Shetty ? This is where the film fails to carry its analysis to its logical conclusion.

It is ironical that the speech by the civil liberties activist should turn out to be such a weak statement and not go any further than proclaiming what all the other characters in the film seem to feel: "We cannot deny that the police is necessary... It is shameful that the police should sully its tradition by these atrocities which have become everyday



occurrences ..The police exist to safeguard the life and property of the citizens, therefore it is important that the police remain, impartial." If this statement represents the political philosophy of the director, then it is far less radical than the implications of the film's action.

Why should we take the existence of the police force to be as inevitable as the rising of the sun ? The police as an institution has not existed in all known societies. It is a fairly recent creation, and came into being in specific historical conditions. So why should we assume that it is a basic part of society? Why should we not think that it could become unnecessary under changed conditions?

It would be a mistake to see the Indian police force as being accidentally corrupted today, thereby sullyng any kind of glorious tradition. No doubt they protect life and property of citizens but in any conflict between rich and poor, that definition almost systematically excludes the lives of those who have little or no property. In India, the violence they perpetrate has been more nakedly exposed oftly because the conflict between the haves and havenots is sharper here than in some other countries.

Perhaps we need to modify the question asked by Anant's mother, and ask : "Is there no way to manage without a police force ?" This may sound Utopian but, in my view, the illusion of a police force which is incorruptible and honest is even more Utopian than the vision of a society without institutions of coercion and violence such as the police. Anyone who has the power to inflict punishment on others, to arrest, to jail, will inevitably abuse that power. That is in the nature of power itself. Therefore, if we dare not even imagine or envision a society without a police force, there is very little hope for a humane existence on this earth.

**Madhu Kishwar**