

MANDI

In Wholesale, Not Retail

THIS film is a departure from the formula depiction of the prostitute as a weepy and woeful creature simply dying to “reform.” The lively characterisation of Rukminibai is a welcome change from the stereotypes who populate the average Hindi film. She is shown as a strong and resourceful woman who has developed the various skills required to make the best of a very difficult situation. Skills like manipulateness, self dramatisation, wiliness, deviousness, have become integral parts of her personality without destroying her capacity for compassion, warmth and tenderness. It is also a relief that Shabana is allowed to waddle, yawn, sprawl and grimace like a normal human being, instead of being forced to keep every muscle in place and tailor each movement into plastic prettiness.

Through episode and gesture, the film creates an atmosphere of skilfully contained but all pervasive nervous tension, springing from the precariousness of the women’s livelihood, of their relationships and of their very existence.

The absence of a speechifying message or moral, the element of openness and the satiric mode combine to suggest that the film maker is merely trying to hold the mirror up to a certain aspect of life, without comment or judgement. However, selection and interpretation are subtly built in, so as to convey a message and an attitude. The orientation of the film becomes clear when we compare it to *Anandi*, the Urdu story by Ghulam Abbas, written several decades ago, on which it is based. This story focuses on the institutionalisation of double standards in society. The main characters are the self righteous male members of the municipal committee, who shift the prostitutes out of the town on the plea that these women are corrupting the virtue of young people. After a new township springs up around the brothel, the committee once again proposes to throw out the prostitutes. The story ends on that note. There is



Shabana and Smita — impressive team work

no characterisation at all of the prostitutes. They remain unheard and unseen, a marginalised group who are exploited and used by “respectable” society but are invisibilised and denied the elementary civic rights that are available to other citizens.

Benegal has shifted the focus from social dynamics to a colourful depiction of life inside the brothel. What is the result of his thus placing the prostitutes, particularly Rukminibai, at the centre of the stage? Despite passing references to double standards, the sum total that emerges from his depiction is that prostitution is colourful entertainment and the women are in it to fulfill their needs, to earn their living. If men did not visit them, they would starve as workers do in an industry when the owners declare a lockout. The implication is that keeping the industry going is almost an act of benevolence. There is also a strong suggestion that the women preserve a certain artistic tradition which can survive only on the gracious patronage of men.

So far, some men may have felt guilty when they visited brothels. This film gives them reason for self congratulation. They can now feel that they are providing employment to these poor women who would otherwise starve to death.

It is important to point out that our film makers seem to be obsessed with the image of the prostitute as a *tawayaf*, a singing and dancing girl, an artiste. At any point of time, courtesans are likely to have been a very small proportion of the total number of prostitutes, just as the five star hotel call girl racket is a tiny fraction of prostitution in the country today, because only wealthy men, who are a small section of society, can afford to visit such women. Also, the kind of

courtesans depicted in this film belong to a bygone era. At best, they may be a peripheral part of the profession today. Yet from *Devdas* to *Pakeezah* to *Umrao Jan* and a host of other such films, it is only this variety of prostitution which is dwelt upon by film makers.

The few studies that have been done indicate that the vast majority of prostitutes in India are forced into the trade by grinding poverty and violence, and that they work in cruelly inhuman conditions. They are overworked, underpaid, and brutally mistreated. Disease, deprivation and an early death await most of them after even a few years in the trade.

Perhaps film makers prefer to present only the courtesan aspect of prostitution because it is easier to show that as good fun, without touching upon the hard core of oppression. A lot of vicarious gratification may be derived by the viewer when gorgeously decked up women are shown singing, dancing and flirting with seeming enjoyment, in comfortable conditions. It is surely significant that all the articulate women seem to be, by and large, enjoying their situation, while Phulmoni, the only woman who violently resists the situation, is deaf and dumb. Making her dumb was perhaps a device to contain the tragic dimensions within the overall lightheartedness of the genre.

The careful omission of unpleasant realities is evident in the complete absence of pimps or bullying men from the film. This makes it seem a woman controlled world, which, as is well known, is rarely the case. The depiction of the brothel as a woman headed household unit like a brood of chicks under the wings of a mother hen serves to obscure the fact that the world of prostitution is heavily male controlled. In the original story it was a whole colony of prostitutes that was moved out of the town. Here, it is just one isolated brothel which seems to be without roots in its surroundings. For instance, we are not told anything about the background of most of the women. Rukminibai sighs that she was once betrayed by a man, but does so in a theatrical manner intended to be semicomical, and gives no further details.

It is noteworthy that most of the men in the film are depicted as loveable rogues or fools who are bossed over and outsmarted by the women. The policeman is the prime example of this style of characterisation. He is relentlessly bullied by Rukminibai and led up the garden path by Zeenat while his own style of bullying appears like a harmless game. His attempts to sleep with Zeenat are always frustrated at the last moment. This may be a good joke but has little to do with reality. Policemen are not likely to be at the receiving end of beatings, even from strongwilled women, and they invariably extract economic as well as sexual bribes from prostitutes whom the law places at their mercy.

The fact that the police use the law as a weapon when it suits them but perpetrate the trade at other times is exposed

but far too briefly and peripherally. The fear of arrest is among the most grim realities of a prostitute's life and hangs like a sword over her head. In the film, the arrest and raid are deliberately underplayed. We are not shown what happens at the police station and the women seem none the worse for their experience when they return to the brothel. This salient omission preserves the overall vision of prostitution as colourful entertainment rather than exploitative institution.

Aggarwal is another good example of how a combination of comic and pathetic characterisation can be used to obscure basic issues. His moral cowardice, perfidy and self seeking are overshadowed by the supposed golden heart revealed when he dissolves into tears at the plight of Rukminibai and her crew. His son's innocence, too, is strategically overplayed so as to reassure us regarding male intentions, and move us to tears or mirth depending which way we are inclined, but certainly not to provoke serious thought.

Other male hangers-on of the brothel, such as Tumrus and the photographer, also serve only to confirm that these women have the whip hand over the men around them.

Even the moneymaking schemer Gupta is partially redeemed by the fact that he acts as a saviour for the brothel inmates when the woman politician's campaign renders them houseless. Thus all the men emerge as basically well meaning fellows who can be helpful in spite of their "human" weaknesses among which is their desire to visit prostitutes.

By contrast, all women who are not prostitutes are presented as distinctly unsympathetic stereotypes—the pampered, pretentious brat, her doting, mealy-mouthed mother and the hypocritical political virago who leads the antiprostitution campaign. Thus the same mode of caricature is used to very different ends in the case of men and of women.

Towards the end, the film becomes more and more unconvincing. Zeenat, who could have been a very interesting character, seems to be used as a prop for Rukmini and dismissed when that purpose is fulfilled. The relationship of tenderness and support between the two women disintegrates in an unaccountable manner when Zeenat abruptly disclaims all connection with Rukmini. After this, the clichéd mechanism of discovery—that Zeenat is Suni's sister—is used to engineer Zeenat's disappearance into thin air. What is the implication of this gimmick? That a woman who is neither prostitute nor wife is literally nowhere?

The concluding scene seems superficially to depict Rukminibai's triumph over adverse circumstances since she is able to set up another brothel after being thrown out. But whose is the ultimate victory? The average family melodrama ends with the heroine falling at her husband's feet or into his arms, with tears of gratitude for the privilege of being allowed to serve him "happily ever after." Since the

prostitute is supposed to belong not to one man but to men as a group, she is shown worshipping not just one male but the principle of maleness. With cries of ecstasy, she embraces and prays to the *Shiv ling*, which is a phallic symbol, and sure enough this divinity ensures her survival, for Phulmoni comes running up, eager to be the first inmate of the next brothel. The process of setting up the new brothel is thus not shown as Rukmini's struggle but as a gift from the phallic deity.

Such an ending has the effect of vindicating the status

quo and those who perpetuate it. If the film maker were to show a woman enslaving herself because she has no other alternative this would help us understand the compulsions of her predicament. But to show her enslaving herself with tears of joy and gratitude is to gratify the master's desire to have a willing slave.

Brothels sell women's bodies in retail; films such as this one bring the sale of body and mind onto the wholesale level of the *mandl*.

—**Madhu, Ruth**