



The Labouring Woman In Hindi Films

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MOST Hindi films are placed in a north Indian, urban, upper middle class context. The protagonists are big businessmen or, if the setting is rural, they are big landowners. Even when they are supposedly middle class, their lifestyle is depicted as unrealistically elite. The vast majority of our people, therefore, are almost invisible in Hindi films.

Although few Hindi films focus on the lives of poor people, the protagonist is often shown starting life as a poor person. This is, however, middle class poverty rather than stark poverty. The protagonists are usually "respectable" people going through a bad patch. They retain their middle class aspect in terms of dress, behaviour patterns and attitudes. Their poverty is verbalised rather than visualised. Further, it is presented as a misfortune that has befallen a particular family and that must be overcome, sooner or later.

As long as the temporary poverty lasts, it provides an opportunity for the protagonist to express socialistic sentiments. Since the poverty is by its nature temporary, the viewer is engaged with the ups and downs of this particular family's fortunes, which fluctuate in a manner not common in real life. The viewer is not led to consider seriously the question of poverty in our society. Nor do everyday problems of the poor, such as squalid living conditions and scarcities of various kinds, have to be dealt with in any detail.

The protagonist family rarely has anything to do with other poor people in any consistent way. A community, if present, is a faceless backdrop, but it is rarely present. As soon as the protagonist's poverty phase is over, the poor vanish from the scene.

The externality of poverty to the hero's life is most clearly signalled by his or her clothing which is usually inappropriately glamorous. Poverty is depicted more as a moral than a material condition. The protagonist goes through the experience of poverty as a means to establish his or her credentials as somehow

morally superior to other rich people, particularly to the villain.

In folklore, the poverty phase is linked to the ultimate happy ending, whereby the poor and the lowly are compensated for their sufferings; in the hagiological tale, it serves to sensitise the saint to the sufferings of humanity. In recent years, the former idea has tended to totally replace the latter in Hindi cinema. The Amitabh type hero does not seem to gain in compassion from his experience of poverty. Rather, it only makes him more ferocious in his determination to climb to the top. He may spout socialism but his actions are closer to ruffianism which is seen as justified because he is punishing the rich for their pride. His violence against the rich is directed not at establishing an egalitarian order but at storming his way into their world.

Within this framework, the poor woman has a few limited roles to play. She may be a sentimentalised victim (usually the hero's mother), the memory of whose sacrifices spurs him on in his viciously ambitious career; or a female version of the aggressive male; or, most commonly, his destined wife. However, the last role is often reserved for the rich man's proud daughter whose marriage to the poor man is a symbol of the humbling of the wealthy.

If the depiction of the poor man is not really a depiction of him at all but an unfolding of the rich man's fears and anxieties regarding him, the depiction of the poor woman is even further distanced. She is the vehicle for the rich man's sexual fantasies as well as for his sentimentality. She is the ultimate victim who suffers not just because she is poor and sexually vulnerable but also as wife, sister or mother, sacrificing herself for the male. All these fantasies crowd the reality of her life almost altogether out of view.

Women's Worklife

To begin with, work is a highly underdeveloped theme in Hindi cinema. Barring a few notable exceptions like *New Delhi Times*, *Akrosh*, *Ardh Satya*, *Subah*, *Paar*; hardly any films engage

with the problems or rewards of work. Much more emphasis is placed on romance, violent conflict and family melodrama. The worklife even of the hero usually exists only to feed into these themes. For example, innumerable films have a policeman as protagonist but have nothing to do with what it means for a man to work in the police force. They are all engaged in glorifying the policeman as an embodiment of the good and the lawful, pitted against the erring or villainous law-breaker, often his brother or best friend.

Recently, there have been a few films where a woman's profession is depicted as an ordinary part of her life. But, by and large, in Hindi films, women, to whichever section of society they belong, work only when their families have fallen on evil days. These women are presented as unfortunate victims sacrificing their own interests to those of the family.

Such a woman may be a widow labouring to rear her sons (this image has a hoary history, dating back to films like *Mother India*) or she may be forced to work because the male of the family is irresponsible. Thus, in *Jeevan Dhara*, a woman supports her mother and siblings because her father has become a wandering holy man. Although she proves a highly capable breadwinner, she is shown as uneasily conscious of her aberrant status. She renounces marriage because she sees it as incompatible with supporting her natal family. Whenever there appears to be the slightest chance of her brother landing a job or her father returning to his role as head of the house, she rushes to hand in her resignation so that she can marry and become a housewife. Occasionally, a woman is shown earning because she is unable to find a husband, like the hero's disabled sister in *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Ata Hai*.

If a woman chooses to earn, even when not compelled by circumstances, she is usually portrayed as a freak who must be "cured" of her unfeminine desires by the advent of marital bliss. In *Agreement*, the heroine's success as a businesswoman is presented as "abnormal" as is her insistence on dominating her husband and her refusal to bear children. Her conversion to femininity, signalled by the growth of her hair, donning of a sari and sexual submission to her husband, coincides with his taking over charge of the business.

In a number of films like *Yeh Nazdikiyan*, *Thori Si Bewafai*, *Kaash*, a wife rebels against her husband's infidelity, and begins to earn to support herself and her child, but later repents and returns to him, giving up her job.

Thus, the employed woman in general is viewed with ambivalence. The hostility towards her may be masked as pity so long as her earning is perceived as a mere extension of her role as servicer of the family. But the hostility surfaces when she is seen as competing with men in their domain, trying to discard her feminine roles and assert her independence, even marginally.

In the case of the poor woman, economic necessity appears more clearly to be the reason for her going out to work so she is



'Mother India -- the heroic mother

most often presented as a pitiable victim. But elements of revolt are often inherent in the image of the poor woman. As a woman who does not conform to, or perhaps even subscribe to, the norm of the housebound, self sacrificing wife and mother, she represents a potential threat to the middle class domestic ideal and must be penalised. Her sexual downfall at the hands of a middle class man (villain or hero) is both the symbol of her victim status and a punishment for her having failed to conform to the ideal of the domesticated woman. The rape/seduction/ death which is frequently her doom is a means of simultaneously making her a martyr and of disposing of the threat she represents.

Sentimentalised Victim

At one end of the spectrum is the victim par excellence untainted by any sign of rebellion or competitiveness. She is a mother of sons, and usually a widow or abandoned wife.

As a mother, her existence is dedicated to the well being of her sons. If she has any tenuous links with a community, they are severed as the film progresses so that the pathos is heightened by the image of the lone woman facing the big bad world. No relatives come to her aid nor does she try to contact any. This most uncharacteristic rootlessness and isolation is presented as the inevitable condition of a woman without a husband.

In *Deewar*, a mining union leader betrays his striking comrades when the mine owner abducts his family and threatens to kill them. Overcome with shame, and ostracised by the community, he runs away, leaving his wife, Sumitra Devi, to bring up their two small sons.

Thus, the link initially established between the injustice suffered by the community as a whole and by the particular family whose fortunes the film follows, is quickly snapped. The

community's brutal vindictiveness towards the deserted woman and children alienates the viewer and converts the mother-sons unit into the victim of injustice meted out by the whole world. The specificity and social location of injustice (mine owner versus miners) is shifted into a vast, mystified arena (universe versus lone individual). In this vast arena, the mother is the only source of security for the children. She tells them they need not fear starvation: "I am here, your mother is here", and begins to work as a construction labourer

But the Hindi film has travelled a long way from the matriarchal figure of Nargis in *Mother India*. Although the veneration for the mother persists, she has been drained of her strength and vitality. Verbal homage is still paid to her *shakti* (at the end of *Deewar*, her son, when he receives a national award, says he owes it to his mother's *shakti*), but that force is not visible in the action of the film. The woman in *Mother India* engages in vigorous manual labour, trains her sons to work on the fields and builds up a prosperous farm. Her strength and abilities are celebrated, the camera focusing on her at work, towering above her young sons. She emerges as an equally powerful moral force, not hesitating to shoot down her son when he abducts a woman, insulting the *shakti* she represents.

Sumitra Devi, in contrast, is little more than an object of pity. Within a second of the first work sequence on the construction site, she becomes a victim of sexual harassment. In the next sequence, she is shown staggering under a headload of bricks and collapsing. The overseer tells her: "Go and do something you are capable of", and throws her out, accusing her of being drunk. The depiction clearly shows her as physically not up to the task.

It is noteworthy that the general inhumanity of the working conditions is not brought into focus. None of the other labourers men, women or children, is shown feeling any strain. It is only the middle class woman and children who suffer because for them to have to do manual labour is not just a strain but a degradation.

After these two brief work sequences, we are not shown her at work again. The next sequence shows the boys grown up—well nourished, in fact, miraculously strong. No explanation is provided of how she managed to feed them after she was thrown out of the job. But the point—that by earning she made a tremendous sacrifice, stretching her feminine nature to its utmost—is made clear when we see Vijay, her son, a dockworker, lifting huge loads with perfect ease and beating up anyone who tries to exploit him—unlike his mother who could only weep silently when berated by the overseer.

Her role as a moral force is similarly watered down. She rejects Vijay's illgotten gains but the confrontation is enacted between Vijay and his brother Ravi, the good policeman, not between Vijay and Sumitra. Sumitra transfers her allegiance to Ravi and shifts to his house. Since she loves Vijay more, this move involves an extension of her sacrifice and suffering. Her virtue lies in

suffering, not, as in *Mother India*, in her strength in work.

The weakening of the mother figure from *Mother India* to *Deewar* is related to the diminished importance of the woman's work and also to a change in the male role. The male worker has been criminalised (compare, for example, the rickshaw puller in *Do Bigha Zameen* with the tonga driver in *Mard*). The criminalisation is romanticised as the reaction to injustice and also as springing from the desire to avenge the mother's wrongs. The mother has to be a passive victim, an ineffective worker, in order that the son may be an active avenger, an effective operator. Vijay in *Deewar* repeatedly states that he decided to become a smuggler because of his memory of his mother's sufferings. He buys for her the house she had helped to construct, as a labourer.

The same pattern obtains in *Zamanat* where the widowed mother, Parvati (named for Shiva's wife, incarnation of Shakti and wifely devotion) does tailoring at home to support her two sons. A slight variation is provided by the conversion of the bad son, Ravi, when his mother dies of grief over his ways. At her cremation, he swears by her love that he will reform. But his "good" brother,



The weakening of the mother figure from 'Mother India' to 'Deewar' is related to the diminished importance of the woman's work and to the criminalisation of the male role



Ranvir, is hardened by the contempt of the rich into turning criminal.

In *Trishul*, we do not even see the suffering of the mother, let alone her work. We only see her framed portrait in her son's house and hear her story from his lips, about halfway through the film. This invisibility may be due to the fact that she was not a respectable widow but a seduced and abandoned woman. Her illegitimate son, Vijay, dedicates his life to ruining the man who ruined her/his father. After much intrigue and agonising, he is reunited with the father and half-brother he had tried to destroy.

The wrongs of womanhood thus provide a pretext for the film maker to indulge in gory violence between men and in sentimental family reunions. The woman's poverty, of which her work is a sentimental symbol, merely adds a piquant detail to her woes. Even without this detail, the motif of son avenging mother's wrongs by fighting with father would be intact.

A Servant For All Seasons

While the mother who earns to rear her children receives reverence in return for her lifelong service, the younger woman who starts off as a humble servant, dancing girl or labourer and works her way into the hero's heart by her selfless service may end up as his wife or may end up dead.

At one end of the spectrum, the maidservant is merely an adjunct whose presence establishes the protagonist's status. In this, there is little difference between the depiction of the male and the female servant. They are treated as peremptorily as pieces of furniture. For example, in *Rajnigandha*, the heroine is supposed to be an emotional, sensitive woman, but she never seems to notice that her servant is a human being. She does not even respond to his greeting with a smile, and speaks to him, without looking at him, only to order tea or to ask for her mail. The film maker uses the servant to construct the middle class milieu much as he uses the telephone on the set, and invests him with less human significance than even the tuberoses which provide the film with its title.

So also, in *Masoom*, a typical "family drama" with much sentimental dwelling on how people feel, there is no human interaction between employers and servants. Servants are just a convenience who appear only when food has to be served. In *New Delhi Times*, the maidservant, although slightly more humanly depicted, has really no role to play, her one big scene being when she enters screaming hysterically to announce that the family cat has been killed by miscreants. In terms of visual impact that defines a presence, the cat is rendered more memorable than the maidservant, by virtue of its distinctive appearance.

In this kind of role, we do not see the maidservant working because the camera never reaches the kitchen. Just as the poor working woman appears on the screen only in roles where she directly services the middle class, so also, within the film, she impinges on the vision only in the space her employers inhabit—the drawing room and dining room where she comes to serve tea, and not in her own work environment.

A second kind of role commonly allotted to maidservants is that of comic relief. This kind of role (often played by Aruna Irani) depicts her as a sexually forward, overdressed, unintelligent virago, often married to a male servant. The repartee between the two, usually replete with sexual innuendo, is designed to raise a laugh. Again, work scarcely figures at all since the servant is usually portrayed as frivolous and indolent. These scenes are usually enacted in the kitchen or backyard.

The third kind of portrayal, which has a significantly long history, is that of the maidservant who doubles as a kept woman or graduates to being a wife. This kind of portrayal is resonant with the many connotations attached to being a woman, a wife and a server. The controlling idea is that the faithful female servant is best equipped to become a wife because the essence of wifehood is faithful and self abnegating service.

This theme emerges most clearly in a popular film, *Naukar*. The hero is a widower who wishes to remarry to provide his six year old daughter with a mother. But he suspects that the woman proposed may be too "modern" to fulfil his requirements, in other words, not selfless enough. So he disguises himself and

gets employed as a domestic servant in her house, which enables him to observe her from close quarters. He soon discovers that the maidservant, with her patience modesty and maternal "instincts" would make a more suitable wife than her frivolous, educated and headstrong mistress. But he feels insulted when his daughter suggests that he marry the maid, because he thinks this below his dignity. He decides to marry the maid only after it is revealed that she is the daughter of wealthy parents and was compelled by circumstances to take the job of a maid.

Parentage is a very important factor in determining the poor working woman's fate. In order to be elevated to the status of wife of the hero, she must usually be proved to come of a family that was not poor begin with. The motif of poverty as a transitional phase must be present to establish her credentials as heroine. In *Kashmir Ki Kali*, the heroine, a flowerseller (she is not seen actively engaged in selling flowers but only in picturesque poses



**From selling flowers to arranging them in his drawing room
—Rameshwari's progress in 'Dulhan Wahi'**

in flowerladen *shikaras*) marries the hero after it is found that she comes of a wealthier family than he does. There are, however, exceptions to this rule which will be dealt with later.

The conflation of the roles of servant and wife is significant for its ideological message to wives, rather than to servants. The ramifications of this theme are explored in films where the servant acts as surrogate wife and childbearer.

The theme of surrogacy is central to *Nazrana*. Mukta, a childless wife, is very sympathetic to her maidservant, Parvati, who is maltreated by a brutal and drunken husband. The climax of his misbehaviour is reached when he sells his small daughter, Tulsi. Mukta saves the child by giving her gold bracelet to him. She then pays for the child's education in a boarding school and treats her as a sort of foster child, sending her clothes and gifts. Though Tulsi is not discovered to be of wealthy ancestry, she is depicted as developing other attributes of an upper class heroine—fair skin, which her mother smears with brown juice to protect her from slum hoodlums, education, and accomplishments like singing and dancing. But she also has an element of aggressiveness in her, which, in Hindi films, is often identified with a lower class heroine. She is an expert fighter and, singlehanded, defeats a gang of hoodlums that is in the habit of



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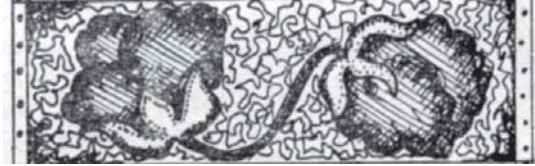


raping the young women of the slum.

This disturbing element of aggression and ability to hold her own in the public arena is soon nullified by her sexual submission to Mukta's husband, Rajat.

After this encounter, we see her completely humbled, constantly in tears and unable to retain charge of her life. The most interesting feature of Tulsi's service to her employers is its multidimensionality. She works as a maid for them when her mother is ailing (but we do not see her do any substantial work except bring in a cup of tea); she stands in as a dancer in the performance choreographed by Rajat, when his dancer, Sheetal, walks out in a jealous rage; she safeguards him from Sheetal's wiles; she sleeps with him while Mukta is on a visit to her parents (Rajat has never

stayed away from Mukta since they were married); she provides him the son Mukta could not provide; she saves him from being shot by Sheetal and kills Sheetal in the process; and, finally, she lets her child be adopted by Mukta and conveniently (for them) dies. Although her life is literally sacrificed for her employers, she dies, full of guilt, begging them to forgive her. *She* must die to



expiate the guilt of the sexual encounter with Rajat but *he* is made to appear a martyr. Both Mukta and Tulsi end up asking his forgiveness—Mukta for not having been wifely enough to forgive this infidelity earlier and Tulsi for reasons unexplained.

Tulsi constantly views herself as indebted to her employers because of Mukta's initial act of philanthropy. She says: "This body is owed to them, otherwise it would have been trampled into the mud long ago." That the transaction—of reciprocating a good deed—is between unequals is rubbed in when Rajat objects to his partner insulting Tulsi and she says: "Why did you take so much trouble for us small people (*chhotey log*), Saheb?"

Here, then, the depiction of the servant has little to do with her actual work but much to do with the vicious fantasies of upper class men towards lower class women.

Since work scarcely figures as a reality in the imaging of the role of the poor woman, it matters little whether she is a prostitute, a dancing girl or a domestic servant. As a servant, she dances; as a dancing girl, she serves. The distinction between her work and her life is so blurred as to be rendered almost non-existent. Her whole life is at the service of the master. She has no time or space to call her own, that is not absorbed in the serving role.

Mein Tulsi Tere Angan Ki, which was a runaway hit, also revolves around the themes of servant's gratitude to master for saving her, and her repaying him with a child. It is set in a rural area, but the only indication of this is that the men play polo with turbans on their heads, and are called "Thakur." Tulsibai, a dancing girl, is rescued by a Thakur Saheb. Her dress undergoes the transformation required to stamp her as a suitable mother for his child—flashy jewels are replaced by simple ones, dancing costume by sari. However, her ancestry precludes her marrying him. Interestingly, the hero is absolved of the blame for harbouring any such inegalitarian attitude. He makes many progressive speeches and is determined to marry Tulsi. It is she who tricks him into vowing to marry a girl chosen by his mother. She says: "In all my births, I have stood at the threshold of your house; I consider it my good fortune to stand as a *tulsi* plant, outside your door."

After the wife, Sanyukta, confronts and berates her, Tulsi

*Tulsi seems to be a favourite name for women in this kind of service role. It could be because this is not a name favored by the educated urban classes today, and because the *tulsi* or basil is a nonshowy, serviceable plant with many domestic and religious uses, and grows in the courtyard of most middle class homes.

commits suicide, leaving Sanyukta overcome with remorse. Thus, as in *Nazrana*, the two women are pictured as responsible for each other's misery, while the man is portrayed as benevolent and well meaning.

When Tulsi's son grows up, he saves the life of Sanyukta's son as well as the family property. Tulsi repays her "debt" through her death and her son, and is rewarded vicariously when her son (after many misunderstandings with his brother and Sanyukta) is accepted into the family as a legitimate child. Tulsi's work as a dancer is projected as something she has to be rescued from. Her real life's work is to bear a son and then die.

Roti Kapda Aur Makan-is a "progressive" variation on the theme in so far as the labouring woman, Tulsi, finally graduates to being the hero's wife, despite her having been raped and borne an illegitimate child. Her loyalty to the hero and willingness to sacrifice herself for him are contrasted with his girlfriend. Sheetal's infidelity and desire to climb the social ladder. Sheetal breaks her engagement to the unemployed but virtuous Bharat when her wealthy boss proposes marriage. She cannot recover from the guilt and dies to expiate it, handing over her ring (given by Bharat) to Tulsi as she is dying. Tulsi's son and disabled father conveniently die so as to render Tulsi free for marriage.



Even in 'Mandi', the young daughter, shown here with her mother, must disappear from brothel in an inexplicable fantasy ending

This film displays somewhat greater involvement with the questions of social injustice, poverty and price rise in its title song and in a slightly more detailed focusing on Tulsi's life. She works as a construction labourer. Her work is conceived in the normative pattern of "woman works when man cannot." Her father, a factory worker, lost his leg in an accident; she was raped by a shopkeeper and his friends when she went to ask for grain on credit. She was forced to work to support her father and the child born as a result of the rape. Tulsi is shown at the construction site with a load on her head, or perched on the building that is under construction. But she spends more time conversing with Bharat or tearfully recounting her story to him than doing any work.

Tulsi always appears in brightly coloured, smart clothes, with matching jewellery, with no sign of dust or sweat on her. In the title song, she dances in mud and water, mixing it with her feet in time to the music, but her clothes remain spotless.

Here, too, then, work and poverty are moral rather than material realities. Tulsi's moral status as a virtuous, hardworking woman (contrasted with Sheetal who works as a secretary not so much for financial reasons as because she dreams of acquiring wealth) is reinforced by her work and poverty. Although Sheetal and Tulsi are held up as ethical contrasts, their relation to their work is in fact very similar. Sheetal leaves her job to marry above her class; Tulsi does the same. This is the ideal established as an aspiration for the poor, working woman in Hindi films.

Graduating To Wifhood

One of the most successful films on the theme of the poor, working woman who qualifies to be the hero's wife was *Dulhan Wahi Jo Piya Man Bhaye* where the erstwhile flowergirl wins the heart of the hero and his father by her exemplary womanly virtues and ability to serve. She was shown standing at her flowerstall but the only customer seen was the hero, carrying off bouquets as he rushed past her and ultimately carrying her off in the same style. In dress and appearance, she was nothing like a flowerseller.

In *Bobby*, also a hit, the fisherman's daughter, after proving the truth of her love through numerous ordeals including a suicide attempt, is considered fit for the rich master's son. In both these films, work is an indicator of lowly status rather than a focus of attention on its own account.

From the mid-seventies, a spate of Amitabh starrers developed the trend of a gutsy, enterprising young poor working woman being picked up and groomed for wifhood. This figure is a watered down version of an earlier figure in Hindi cinema.

In *Do Ankhen Barah Haath*, the woman toyseller who lives independently with her child, proves a match for the prisoners and later becomes their ally, is made of much sterner stuff than her counterpart in the Hindi film today. She continues independent up to the end of the film, and shows no coyness about being part of the all-male venture in cooperative farming. When the mentor is killed by the lobby of farmers opposed to the cooperative, she

leads the memorial prayer and continues to take the experiment ahead with the prisoners. She is taken seriously as a person and an earner, and is very far from being a figure of fun.

Basanti in *Sholay* set the tone for the contemporary trivialisation of this figure. She is a tonga driver, and the film stresses the fact that she is an unusual woman, courageously



Manual work in the Hindi film is usually a transitory phase in the protagonist's life



plying a “male” trade. She spiritedly defends her choice of trade, saying : “If Dhanno, a mare, can pull a tonga, why can't I drive it?” She is shown as a competent driver. But any potential seriousness in the portrayal is undercut by her mannerisms which make far greater impact on the viewer than her work. She is excessively, almost insanely, garrulous, chattering nonstop like a magpie. Most of what she says makes no sense. It is idiotic and repetitive jabber. Jai, one of the two heroes, despises her as a silly woman ; the other, Viru, says she “talks sweetly” but this estimate is clearly a result of his infatuation with her.

The way she is dressed is more suitable for a dancer than a tonga driver—and in fact she doubles as a dancer, providing the standard dance numbers at Holi and later, in the dacoits' den. Her horse is also decked up with ribbons and buntings. The net result is that she and her equipage look more suitable for a carnival than for any serious work.

This style of depiction is reserved for the woman worker. Male workers in the village, such as peasants and, artisans, are shown soberly and realistically, dressed in normal attire and going quietly about their business.

Most significantly, Basanti is the only worker who prays to god to deliver her from her work. Her reason : her hands are getting rough and calloused from constantly holding the reins. She asks god to get her a good husband soon. Hidden in the temple, Viru pretends to be god's voice answering and says she should marry him (Viru). He says : “If you don't marry him, you will keep driving the tonga all your life.” The prospect of having to carry on with her work all her life is seen as so terrible that she would rather marry a man she has been consistently rejecting — even though her work has been depicted as fairly easy and stressfree.

Work, at least manual work of any kind, in the Hindi film, is usually a transitory phase in the life of the protagonist, whether male or female. The one notable difference is that the man usually transcends it through his own efforts and becomes wealthy, so that if he marries a rich woman, the marriage is only a reinforcement, not a cause, of his newly acquired prosperity ,

whereas the woman usually escapes through marriage. The man raises her from her humble position.

Second, when the man is a worker, his work is not trivialised in the same way that a woman's is. For instance, in *Mard*, Amitabh as tonga driver, spends more time fighting than earning, but he is not absurdly dressed like Hema in *Sholay* nor is he a figure of fun in the same way. His wit provokes admiring laughter at the expense of others while her chatter provokes semi-indulgent, semicontemptuous laughter directed at her.

Because Viru is not upper class (he is a petty criminal turned reformer who finally settles down as a farmer) Basanti's outspoken ways do not have to be trimmed to fit into a middle class drawing room. But in several other films of this genre, the rescue and raising of the woman worker also entail her being divested of her boldness and freedom, and made suitably submissive and ladylike.

This transformation is perhaps an unconscious acknowledgment that the process of substituting marriage for employment is not really one that has anything to do with poor, working women in India. It is a purely middle class obsession and experience.

Poor women can very rarely afford the luxury of giving up their employment when they marry. Most of them continue working at strenuous jobs during pregnancy and frequently up to the day of childbirth. The necessity to earn usually becomes more pressing after marriage, when they have to bring up children. The idea of becoming a full time housewife is remote for most poor women in India. Many of them even take up employment subsequent to marriage. It is in the middle class and lower middle class that people aspire to keep married women at home. It is in these sections of society that the non-working or rather non-employed wife is a status symbol. While the poor may aspire to this condition, they can rarely afford it.

It is a measure of the film makers indifference to poor women's experience that they habitually transfer the middle class woman's experience onto it. The kind of marriages outside and much above one's economic stratum that are constantly shown in the Hindi film, such as construction labourer marrying an engineer on the site, (*Roti Kapda Aur Makan*) are also a transference of experience. It is not uncommon for an officer in a white collar profession to marry a woman secretary or other subordinate, but for him to marry an uneducated labouring woman is extremely rare.

The Pygmalion like gentrifying of the poor woman also occurs in Hindi films as if it were the most natural thing in the world and without any conscious effort or conflict of the kind experienced in the Shavian model. The purpose of this gentrifying is not so much to open a new sphere or career to the woman but to divest her of her boldness and make her a submissive, ladylike wife who can ornament a drawing room.

In *Zanjeer*, the depiction of the woman knife sharpener is

imbued with this kind of strong class bias. She is introduced singing and dancing on the streets and sharpening knives while doing so, as if she is playing a game. She is dressed in a highly inappropriate fashion, with a tasselled cap like a performing monkey and a lot of heavy Kashmiri jewellery. She also changes this outlandish costume from one sequence to another. She creates a spectacle for the whole colony, jumping on to the bonnets of cars, flirting with men, and dancing like the standard cabaret dancer in Hindi films. Later in the film, a street dancer is shown going through a very similar exercise.

The positive aspect of the depiction is that she is a woman capable of looking after herself. She lives alone and combats a molestation attempt by a ruffian. But as soon as she comes under the hero's protection, all this changes. He takes her to stay with his adopted brother and sister-in-law, saying that she will learn something if she stays there. When he finds her sharpening knives in the kitchen, he snatches them from her, saying : "I brought you here not to sharpen knives but to learn something." The something she learns (as she lists her accomplishments later) is how to run a house economically, how to cook, how to sew buttons on shirts, and so on. The transformation of her personality is complete. She begins to talk and behave coyly like a middle class girl, sheds her street lingo and uninhibited ways, and wears only saris, demurely draped round her shoulders.

Once she is domesticated, Mala becomes the stumbling block in Vijay's crusade for social reform. While he is in a depression thinking of people's suffering, she babbles on about the curtains and decorations they will have in their house until he reproaches her : "Yes, we will live in a beautiful house and forget the ugly world outside ; I will not desire to know what is going on outside your beautiful curtains." He forgets that he is the one who brought her into the domestic sphere. In the final showdown, she makes a last display of skill by throwing knives at the villain but, ultimately, Vijay disarms her and throws her knives into the water.

Here too, then, the woman's work is just an entertaining interlude and her main aspiration is to flee from it into marriage.

In *Parvarish*, there is a minor variation on the theme. The heroine and her sister are pickpockets. Their rescue by the good policeman involves not just upliftment in marriage but also moral reform. As pickpockets, the women are depicted in the same frivolous style as are workers in *Sholay* and *Zanjeer*—over-dressed, giggly, comic figures. None of the stress and strain of the profession comes through. In real life, such women are brutally harassed by policemen. The film reverses reality so that the policeman is the saviour—first helping financially, and later marrying, the heroine.

There are many other films in which the theme of the heroine being raised from worker to wife is present as a subordinate theme, for example, in *Zamana*, one brother's girlfriend is a magician who does a cabaret plus magic show performance in a restaurant and the other's girlfriend, Reshma, is a dancing girl in a brothel.

He pays off the madam and marries Reshma. She is totally transformed in appearance (sari clad, head covered) but her lack of culinary skills provides comedy. She serves burnt *rotis* and inedible *dal* which the hero is forced to eat and appreciate, so as not to hurt her feelings. He has to eat all of it because she says with wifely devotion : "If you eat, it is as good as my having eaten." This depiction of the prostitute as completely unskilled in household matters has no base in reality as, in fact, these women have to run the home for themselves and their children. The stereotype of the unmarried woman as unable to deal with simple domestic tasks is also calculated to make her feel guilty



Work as entertainment — glamourisation in 'Umrao Jaan'

and to convey the message that she will become a true woman only when she gives up employment for marriage and housewifery.

It is significant that a woman's work is only shown at some length when it is in the entertainment industry (singing, dancing, magic show) or it is converted into entertainment in a completely artificial way (construction labourers singing and dancing or knife

sharpener singing and dancing). Otherwise, the work processes and daily routine are not shown at all. Dance sequences are shown at length not to shed light on the woman or her worklife but in a plastic way, as entertainment in and of themselves for the viewer. Since the work of a domestic servant, for example, is not entertaining in that way, it is not shown at even half the length that a dancing girl's work is shown, even though the latter is usually entirely irrelevant to the story.

Far more time is spent wallowing in sentimentality —showing the woman in tears or praying or caressing her sleeping children. It is as if the viewer must be spared the tedium of watching even briefly a monotonous work process or a worklife that is not equivalent to entertainment. Paradoxically, the dance sequences are so predictable and repetitive, that they become far more monotonous than an imaginatively depicted worklife would be, and viewers frequently walk out of the hall while songs and dances are being shown.

Entertainers

Almost every film has a cabaret number. The sequence in *New Delhi Times* provides an example of how irrelevant such scenes usually are.

Whenever the dancing girl becomes a heroine, she is not presented as a real worker or earner, but wholly through a moral lens. Her work conditions are usually glamourised out of all recognition and often placed in the past so as to distance them and free the viewer from any qualms. Examples of this genre are *Pakeezah*, *Umrao Jaan*. Apart from sometimes striving for authenticity in terms of costume or set, these films have little sense of history and transpose the preoccupations with domesticity and with reforming the non-domestic woman backwards in time. The women are divested of any absorption with their work either as a livelihood or as art. They seem to have no concern with such mundane matters as money. They are usually presented as miserable in their profession and yearning to get out of it into marriage. Their songs are usually addressed to some beloved, past or present. They perform not to earn a living but to carry on a romance with him. Frequently, they are shown singing or dancing with tears in their eyes and grief in their hearts.

This stereotype persists in films showing contemporary prostitutes as well. Most unrealistically, the brothels are shown as glittering and glamorous places, visited only by the affluent. The women are beautifully dressed and show no signs of ill health or harassment by police or concern for bringing up children, as do prostitutes in real life. They are stereotyped as either young, beautiful and goldenhearted or as old madams with evil avaricious motives.

The fact that the majority of prostitutes and dancing girls in India today are poor, working women and face the problems faced by other women in the unorganised sector, such as lack of legal protection of any kind, unhygienic work conditions, lack of



‘Mandi’—all fun and games?

medical care, no unionisation, and harassment by the police, in addition to the social stigma and ostracisation and often the burden of illegality that is unique to their work sector, does not emerge in the Hindi film.

When the prostitute is shown in her off work hours, she is either romancing or agonising. We never see her in ordinary occupations such as with her children or family or in other non-romantic relationships. Like the domestic servant whose life is depicted as service, the prostitute's whole life is depicted as entertainment. The paradox is that though her life is presented so rosily, she is nevertheless shown as miserable and longing to get out of it. The didactic factor overrides all others in the portrayal of women in the entertainment sector.

An exception in some ways was *Mandi*, in that most of the women continued in the profession at the end of the film and this was not presented as a terrible tragedy. In the Hindi film as a rule, the woman entertainer is not taken seriously as a worker and this is evidenced by the fact that the film rarely ends with her still in the profession. Either she dies or she marries the hero or she reforms and becomes a sort of saintly figure.

But even in *Mandi*, the tendency to present the women's life as entertaining is present. The women appear to be having a good time rather than earning their living. While this is a welcome change from the doom and gloom with which the prostitute is normally depicted, it is no solution—it is like the domestic servant

in her trivialised, comical *avtar* in the Hindi film. In *Mandi*, the comic mode is used to undercut the hard realities of prostitutes' situation, and the rampant police exploitation of these women. The police are made into figures of fun who are part of the general bonhomie and are even mocked and chivied around by the women

Problems At Work

The one and only problem at work for the unorganised sector woman worker that the Hindi film takes definite cognizance of is sexual harassment on the job. A very large proportion of the poor, working women shown in Hindi films are molested, and the molestation often becomes a major turning point in the film. Take the example of *Ek Chadar Maili Si*. The heroine, Rano, begins work as a construction labourer when her second husband fails to support the family with the result that her children and old parents-in-law are starving. The much more likely avenue, in a rural context, of agricultural labour, is not explored—perhaps because construction labour is closer to the urban viewer's experience and affords a better chance of presenting her as a figure of pathos. In the one and only work sequence she mops her brow, picks up a headload of bricks and, immediately, the overseer tries to molest her. She slaps him and loses her job there and then, on the first day of work. Her second husband, alerted to his duty by her plight, comes to the rescue, beats up the overseer and takes on the role of breadwinner once again, so that she can revert to being a housewife.

Although this kind of portrayal is supposed to be sympathetic, it has several damaging effects. First, it strengthens the myth that sexual molestation is the inevitable lot of every working woman, especially every poor, working woman. Usually, a male intervenes to rescue the woman, by inflicting physical violence on the molestor and pushing the woman back into the confines of the home. Occasionally, he even kills the woman, as in *Akrosh*. The woman's individual resistance is almost immediately replaced by male violence on her behalf, so that she is pushed back into the role of a protected and passive being.

Second, by showing a molestation episode as the dominating reality of a labouring woman's life, film makers tend to obscure the other, more routine harshnesses of working conditions and injustices like unequal, and less than minimum, wages. Sexual molestation seems to arise out of the "nature" of men their tendency to be attracted to women who are not secluded—and the viewer can feel there is little any authority can do about this. On the other hand, a focus on illegal exploitation of women labourers in matters of wages and overtime would lead to the asking of more uncomfortable questions.

Such portrayal also reinforces the misconception that it is only work outside the home which exposes women to sexual violence and that the housebound woman is safer from such violence. The ideological effect is to reinforce the notion that woman's place is in the home and that a "real" man would ensure that she was protected at home. Violence, sexual and otherwise,

by husbands, including educated, prosperous husbands, is relatively less often portrayed, with the result that most violence on women seen on the screen is by evil strangers or, more recently, by evil in-laws. The difference is that while husbands are more often shown as "good" than "bad", employers of poor working women are much more often shown as outright wicked and their wickedness takes shape only as sexual abuse. This tilting of the balance does not seem to be borne out by real life.

A major, although perhaps unintended effect of such depictions is a sensationalisation of the labouring women's



While it is true that sexual exploitation is an important problem faced by poor women, it is not as if this situation is unvaryingly faced by every woman



worklife. Its monotony is obscured by a scene of rape or seduction which caters to the voyeuristic impulse and provides entertainment much as the singing or dancing labourer does. Other important problems such as maternity leave, childcare, lack of security in service, that have been taken up by labourers' organisations, are ignored as far as the unorganised sector is concerned and barely shown, even for the organised sector. A brief vignette of women arguing with the manager about their right to take breaks to breastfeed infants in the creche in *Insaf Ki Awaz* was a rare exception to the rule.

The portrayal of molestation and rape as the inescapable fate of women in the unorganised sector also reinforces the stereotype of poor women as easy prey for rich men, and sexually not very modest or moral, somehow "available." While it is true that sexual exploitation is an important problem faced by labouring women, and they are often compelled by circumstances to submit, it is



The middle class obsession with secluding women seems to influence the obsessive portrayal of the labouring woman as a victim of sexual aggression



not as if this situation is unvaryingly faced by every woman, nor is it necessarily the most pressing problem every woman faces. The middle class obsession with secluding women and preserving their chastity on the pretext of protecting them from harm, seems to influence this obsessive portrayal of the labouring woman, who is more mobile and less secluded, as, by definition,

a victim of sexual advances or aggression.

There is a category of films which uses the molestation episode as a springboard to develop a full fledged vendetta drama between the raped heroine (often turned dacoit) and her outraged male protectors on one side and the rapists on the other. *Sitapur Ki Gita* is a typical example. As per the normative pattern of why women go to work, Gita starts earning only after a serious crisis in the family. A flood separates her and her younger brother from their father. She then begins to work as a maidservant in a big landlord's house and spends all her earnings on her brother's education, herself remaining illiterate.

As a maidservant, she is shown very briefly, doing some gardening and helping her mistress dress. She is always attractively dressed with jewellery and make-up. When she carries food for the landowner and his friends who are hunting in the forest, they try to rape her. She flees and her childhood sweetheart comes to her rescue. But the attackers get her booked on a false charge of theft and when she comes out of prison and marries her beloved, they gangrape her and kill him.

Gita then becomes a dacoit and joins a gang headed by her father who is a Robin Hood figure, robbing the rich to aid the poor. It is noteworthy that we do not see her doing any dacoity as a way of making a living. All her attacks are aimed at her rapists whom she kills one by one, using a combination of force and fraud. Once this is done, she surrenders to her brother, now a policeman. So her work is always geared to moral rather than material ends. Her personal vengeance is depicted as a social crusade on behalf of the oppressed. Her worklife conforms to the pattern of sacrifice for male family member — molestation episode — end of worklife. Although she presumably spends years working, her work is only very briefly depicted.

The New Wave Film

The dominance of the molestation problem in the Hindi film extends even into new wave films. It is central, for instance, to *Ankur* and *Akrosh*.

In *Ankur*, the woman's husband, a dumb farm labourer, is insulted and falsely accused by the landlord. The strenuous nature of the labourer's work, such as climbing palm trees, is shown in some detail. Humiliated, he runs away, and in his absence, his wife works as a domestic servant in the landlord's house. The labouring woman is shown doing some sweeping and grinding in the landlord's house. But the camera focuses on her grace and beauty, dwelling on the attractiveness of her work movements, thus obscuring the work itself. She is viewed from the perspective of the male who is charmed by her—there is much play on her large eyes and beautiful figure. This contributes to an overall romanticisation. Her worklife does not emerge as a living reality apart from providing the base for her relationship with the landlord. After seducing her, the landlord insults her and drives her out, so as to prove to his new bride how virtuous a husband he is. The labourer husband returns and innocently

accepts and welcomes her pregnancy, without remotely suspecting that it has nothing to do with him. The contrast between the landlord's meanness and her own husband's simple virtue becomes clear to her and the film ends with her hurling abuses at the landlord.

Ankur is one of the few films in which poverty is not presented as a transient affair. The film concludes with the woman living as herself in her own context. She does not end up dead or married to the rich man. She survives the seduction rather than being wrecked by it.



'Ankur' — the male viewer in the background

Manthan, which dealt with a rural milk cooperative and the problems it faces, had a poor peasant woman as one of its major characters. But the film did not focus on the fact that most dairy work is in the hand of women. The women were shown waiting in queues with the milk and doing a little milking and churning, but more emphasis was placed on the silent charm of Smita and the unspoken attraction between her and cooperative organiser than on any work she did.

Akrosh was another of the very few new wave films dealing with the rural unorganised poor. The wife of a tribal, Lahaniya, is lured, raped and murdered by the landowner and his associates. She is presented only in a brief flashback. Here, too, she is not seen working but only having an argument with her husband. In this encounter, she emerges as a foolish woman who cannot see through the landowner's machinations and accepts his gifts at face value. Her husband slaps her and, a few moments later, she is locked in a passionate embrace with him. The shots of her gasping passionately in his arms were widely used to advertise the film. This, the most memorable picture of her, operated to

reinforce the stereotype of the tribal woman as a highly sexed, rather mindless creature.

The notion that rape is the inevitable fate of all labouring women, unless death intervenes to save them, was reinforced further by the depiction of Lahaniya's sister. She was shown in a very brief sequence, being watched lustfully by a contractor, while working for him. Soon after, in the climactic scene, she is beheaded by her brother to "save" her from seduction or rape, which, it is thus implied, is a fate worse than death for a woman. She did not speak a word in the film nor was she allowed to do anything but stare at the camera like a dumb, helpless animal.

In *Subah*, too, a flashback on the early life of one inmate of the rescue home suggested that sexual molestation is somehow inseparable from a woman field labourer's existence. The sequence is a silent one—the woman labourer succumbs to the landlord's advances so as to save herself and her family from starvation but is taken away by the police when she becomes pregnant. The fact that the sequence is wordless has a lot to do with the simplistic nature of the presentation.

In all these films, the viewer is told next to nothing about the woman's own perception of or response to the sexual advances. There is a built-in assumption that (a) this always happens (b) the woman is always unwilling but is incapable of effective resistance and hence is doomed if her male relatives cannot intervene. This tendency to present the poor, working woman as literally and metaphorically dumb reinforces the notion of her as a pitiable victim who would be a wife and a mother rather than a worker if the world were rightly and justly ordered.

In *Aghat*, which deals with organised labour, the widow of a worker, who dies on the job, appears briefly. She comes with her son to the honest union worker's house and makes a heroic statement. Light and shade are used to present her as a romantic and symbolic figure (white clad, veiled, and a stark contrast to



'Paar'—woman as the weak helpmate

the self seeking, black goggles wearing, rival union leader).

Paar is one of the rare films which presents the agricultural labourer without any physical prettification. The woman here is cast in the role of helpmate. In the village, she is not shown engaged in work. Her general tendency in the film is to hold back her husband from protest action of any kind, because she is afraid of the consequences. In the town, she does not do any work, except when she is forced by circumstances and her husband to help him drive a herd of pigs across a river, in order to earn the money to return to the village. She is pregnant, and halfway across the river, begins to flag and cry that she cannot go on. She has to be supported, encouraged, bullied and half dragged along by her husband. This could be seen as a metaphor for her relationship with him and her role in general. She has to work because the situation necessitates it, but she is not really an equal partner. It may be pointed out that this is contrary to the actual situation, wherein women of the poorer sections of society carry not just an equal but a larger burden of work and economic responsibility than men. Her presence in the climactic scene of herding pigs across the river is intended to heighten the pathos, highlight the stark injustice and oppression to which the poor are subjected. What the scene conveys is that because she is a woman, she is weaker and less equipped to bear the strain her husband bears. While it is hard for him, it is harder for her because she is a woman. It is unjust that she has to work at all. This emphasis misses the real issue which is that, in fact, poor women suffer more than poor men not because as women they are unable to bear the burden that men bear but because a heavier burden is imposed on them than on men.

In *Chakra*, reality is even more callously ignored. This film, set in an urban slum, sets out to portray the life of urban slum dwellers. But not a single woman is shown doing any sort of work to earn a living. This is strange, as in any urban slum, women do various kinds of remunerative work, such as making



'Akrosh'—the scene used to advertise the film

bidis and other such items on contract basis, rag picking, domestic service and vending of various kinds. The heroine of *Chakra* is kept by different men and is seen serving them food and drink or else taking voluptuous baths at inordinate length or posing in the doorway of her hut, awaiting the men. Other women are shown as prostitutes or objects of sexual exploitation. All this feeds into the stereotype of poor women as sexually promiscuous and masks the reality of their worklives.

Another recent new wave film showing working women was *Mirch Masala*. Set in a Rajasthani village in pre British India, the film shows the village women working in a small scale spice factory. There is a strong tendency in the film to romanticise the women's worklife. The camera constantly dwells on the glowing reds of the chillis and of the women's costumes. The redness is treated as symbolic of many things including passion, danger and protest. The tough and hazardous nature of the work of pounding chillis tends to be obscured by this symbolism. This extends also into the depiction of the work process. The women are shown pounding the chillis while singing, and working in rhythm with the song. When they put on the red masks before beginning work, the camera views them through an ornamental lattice, deflecting from the significance of the mask as a device to save them from inhaling too much chilli powder. Overall, the



The tendency to stereotype the labouring woman is part of the overall tendency in the Hindi film to present characters as types



picturesque and colourful quality of the women, their dresses and their work emerges most strongly from the work sequences. Further, their relationships to each other are also romanticised to some extent.

Symbolic and actual reality are made to merge a trifle awkwardly, in these sequences—for instance, the birth of a baby girl being welcomed by the women in the factory while the men outside are preparing to storm the doors. There is an element of artificiality in the build-up of solidarity among the women workers. However, on the positive side, the women do emerge as characters in their own right, with differences of temperament and perception. They are not shown in the victim mould, and their resistance at different levels—from the heroine's individual fightback to the final assault on the Subedar—has a resonance which most Hindi films lack when portraying resistance. Resistance is not here identified with revenge, as it is in most Hindi films.

In *Trikaal*, the domestic servant is portrayed with relatively greater understanding. The film is set in preindependence Goa in an elite Christian family. The maidservant is the chief support of



'Mirch Masala'— women's resistance

her widowed mistress and is privy to all the secrets of different members of the family. Although the man through whose eyes the events are seen, sums up her role at the end of the film as that of a milch cow whom anyone and everyone could milk—in other words, a passive victim of exploitation, in fact, she emerges with more dignity than this summing-up suggests. Although it is true that she is primarily a server, sacrificing her entire life for the benefit of her employers, the portrayal of her as confident and friend of her mistress, and as almost a member of the family seems fairly realistic, given the feudal set-up of the household and the village. She comes across as dignified, self-contained and capable.



Reactions of characters are so stereotyped as to be completely predictable. This makes for passive viewing as the viewer is rarely taken by surprise



She also has an emotional life of her own which is suggested through brief glimpses such as her slipping away to the church service at a moment of high tension, her laughingly succumbing to the protagonist's advances, and her sensitive responses to her mistress' moods. She is also a survivor, being the only member of the family who merges into contemporary reality instead of escaping it by migration to Portugal or to a big city. She marries, despite having had an illegitimate child, and goes to live in a

village.

From Types To Human Beings

We have emphasised the tendency of the Hindi film to stereotype the poor working woman and to evade any realistic portrayal of her life or work. While it is true that this tendency is exceptionally strong when the poor, especially poor women, are being portrayed, it must be recognised that this is only one part of the overall tendency in Hindi cinema to present characters as



When the Hindi film endows its characters with full humanity, there will be a possibility of its perceiving the humanity of poor women too



types. In the formula film, characters are consistently presented as black and white, hero versus villain, without any shades of grey. The most that is conceded to flexibility of character is a reform or change of heart undergone by a villain. Even this is less and less seen in recent Hindi films, reform being replaced by outright elimination of villains. Reactions of characters even to exceptional situations are so stereotyped as to be completely predictable. The audience is programmed to predict what the character will do, even the exact words a character will use when

reacting to, say, death or disaster of any kind, as also in love and in emotional moments. This makes for passive viewing as the viewer is rarely taken by surprise and hardly ever required to reflect on the issues raised by a situation. Formula scenes are designed to evoke standard emotional responses such as tears, laughter, admiration or contempt and hatred. Mixed emotions that could lead to exercising of the mind are studiously avoided.

When film makers by and large avoid even exploration of experience in all its complexity in their own class, it is only natural that they rely more heavily on stereotypes when dealing with a section of society from which they are distanced. Even new wave films have in the main not made any remarkable breakthrough in the exploration of human complexity and, consequently, of societal complexity. They, too, rely on good and bad types, placing these types in the spectrum of rich and poor. Interestingly, some films of the fifties experimented more in this direction than films of the last decade.

Until Hindi cinema matures to the extent of acknowledging the complexity and diversity of human nature and experience, and overcomes the temptation to fall back on the small range of stereotypes that it has established for itself, there is little hope that the experience of poor working women will receive less cavalier treatment than it has hitherto. When the Hindi film endows its characters with full humanity, there will be a possibility of its perceiving the humanity of poor working women too, instead of viewing them through glasses coloured with pathos or voyeurism