

Aaj Ki Awaz

A Petty Tyrant in the Garb of God's Agent



THIS film is appropriately named. In one sense, it really is the voice of today, a voice duly censored by the government and revised in accordance with the censor board's instructions. What better evidence can there be of its contemporary quality? Today, every voice, however vulgar and distorted or beautiful and strong, has to acquire government approval in some form or other before it can reach a wider audience. Were Shri Krishna to descend on earth today, he too would have to submit his teachings and his love for sport to the scissors of the censor board before bringing them to the public eye or ear.

In Delhi cinema halls, this film had an appropriate prelude. It was preceded by a government documentary that had been made on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's 115th birth anniversary. This documentary presented the entire legacy of the Mahatma as the inheritance of the Nehru family. So, dear friends, if Rajiv Gandhi can befool people in the name of Mahatma Gandhi, why cannot Raj Babbar be accepted as the modern incarnation of Shri Krishna? One might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb.

It is true that Shri Krishna fought an even more violent and mindless Mahabharat than does Raj Babbar in this film, but at least the former did calculate in advance whether or not his aim was attainable. When Duhshasan tried to pull off Draupadi's clothes and insulted her in the assembly hall, Shri Krishna did not consider this sufficient cause to launch a Mahabharat. He merely made his presence felt as a sari supplier. The battle was fought for a throne and a kingdom, not to avenge the dishonour of a mere woman.

But the modern Krishna seems to have become over attentive to women's appeals. Raj Babbar, alias Professor Verma, begins as a godfearing and law abiding citizen who knocks at the doors of the police and the law courts for justice. But when he finds them incapable of protecting sisters and daughters, our hero decides to implement the message of the Gita in his own person. He remembers Shri Krishna's words: "Whenever *adharm*a prospers and *dharma* suffers I become manifest on earth to destroy evil and to protect good."

At first, Verma wonders whether he should become another Arjun but soon decides that he need not take a secondary place since he is fit to be another incarnation of the deity. Accordingly, he transforms himself into a one man or rather a one god brigade and haunts the streets of Bombay so as to be able to kill those Bombay hoodlums with whom he has a personal score to settle.

Since he has assumed the divine mantle it is natural that

he should acquire a couple of followers in the enemy camp. Therefore, police inspector Shafi, to whom the task of capturing this modern Krishna alias Robin Hood has been allotted, becomes his chief devotee and quietly aids and abets him. Finally, when Verma, having completed his Krishna *lila*, surrenders to the police, the inspector pleads with him not to end the *lila* so soon since many villains are yet to be destroyed.

To tell the truth, the viewers too feel let down that the destruction of evil only goes as far as killing ordinary ruffians but ends in surrender before uniformed ruffians who are in the employ of the government. I was moved to protest and enquire of the deity as to who would deal with the policemen, the lawyers, the judges and the ministers. What was the use of beginning the campaign only to end it with a sickly sermon by a judge in a government courtroom? This government of ours is the biggest manufacturer of rogues and ruffians. One dies and a dozen arise to take his place.

The incarnation of Krishna may have satisfied his ego by killing a score of ruffians but the problem is not so easily solved. When Shri Krishna fought on the side of the Pandavas against the Kauravas, although a great deal of destruction did take place, at least the aim was successfully achieved. This was because Shri Krishna knew his own abilities and did not overstretch them. He fought against injustice done by men to men, in the matter of state power, and achieved some success in righting a particular wrong. In fact, he probably knew that his own record in the matter of women was not above reproach. Apart from all the love sport he indulged in, which by today's moralists of the Raj Babbar style would be dubbed pornographic activity, he jilted Radha in the most cowardly, dishonest fashion, and married several women belonging to noble families, thereby strengthening his position as king.

But our Bombay born Krishna decides to fight against violence done to women by men. The poor fellow does not realise that in this battle he will have to take on not just Kauravas or Pandavas but the entire race of men. If he set out, gun in hand, to destroy all those men who do injustice or violence to women the world would be left with so few men that we would have to go looking for them with special searchlights.

If this seems farfetched, let us see what could be made of the film by taking the plot in another direction. Let us suppose that Raj Babbar's sister had not been gangraped by ruffians and that he was able to fulfil his fantasy, which he expresses

in that silly song *Mera chota sa ghar, mera chota sa sansar* (My little home, my little world), of getting her married to a boy from a “good” family, what guarantee is there that his dear sister’s name would not figure in the list of dowry victims within a couple of months? Or that her husband would not leave her at home while he roamed the streets, molesting other women or visiting brothels and would not return drunk to shower her with abuses and blows? And if she were to decide not to put up with such maltreatment but to stand on her own feet, what guarantee is there that her boss and colleagues would not consider her, as a divorcee, fair prey? And so on, and so on. How many men would her brother propose to destroy? When it comes to the test of having done injustice to women, not even many close friends and relatives would emerge unscathed.

But instead of realising the absurdity of his kind of crusade, our hero, the champion of women’s honour, goes and surrenders to the police so that people are compelled to commiserate with him on his martyrdom, thereby losing sight of the basic issues. After all, in this country, even dreaded dacoits manage to get a lot of public sympathy if they happen to fall into the hands of the police and the judiciary.

Even though many of the grotesque obsessive killings are done to the tune of Gita *updesh* by an ostensibly Bharatiya fellow (remember he is a Sanskrit teacher and wears khadi kurta pajama) the real inspiration for such films comes from the recent exceptional commercial success of vigilante films such as those of the Hollywood genre that made a legendary star of Charles Bronson. In these films, the hero starts off as an ordinary decent citizen but someone in his family, usually his wife, is murdered by hoodlums and the police are ineffective in bringing the killer to justice. This compels him to prove his manliness by spending the whole movie on a shooting spree. The films focus on and are really meant to satisfy the audience’s insatiable desire to see more and more blood and gore as close up as possible, while at the same time, still feeling righteous.

The director’s portrayal of the genesis of urban violence is stereotyped and misdirected. It seems to be the typical recoiling of a middle class man from the lower class man’s “uncultured” forms of entertainment. Thus, the director shows middle class men drinking in a very “civilised” way at parties, but lower class men constantly erupting into drunken brawls. All the violence on women shown in the film is perpetrated by hoodlums on strangers whom they encounter in public places. No privatised violence is shown. This portrayal is at odds with reality. In real life, many more rapes take place at home. When men drink, they are more liable to beat their wives and children than to attack strangers.

In the film, it seems as if women would be living in the best of all possible worlds if only they were not exposed to strange men. This, alas, is not true.

The one sided emphasis on the stray violence of street fights and the complete invisibility of other kinds of more

systematic violence make the hero and his friends seem like angels opposed to devils. There seems to be no awareness that the hoodlums whom the hero slaughters are men like himself with families and personal lives, or that men of the hero’s set can also be violent and cruel. The hoodlums seem to have no existence beyond the liquor den while the hero is all virtue, with no vices, and is perfectly non-violent before he picks up the gun to revenge his sister’s dishonour and death.

Even before the hero or his family are personally affected, he is ready to “cleanse” the city by what he considers legitimate means—the use of the police force. This strategy fails miserably. The point is not just that the police are known to be corrupt and usually in collusion with criminals, but that police action results in sending criminal activity underground, thereby making it even more difficult to combat and allows for more corruption.

Though Verma does discover the link up between lawbreakers and so called law enforcing agencies, the audience is assured that the police force is essentially on the side of the right, despite a few dishonest individuals in it. Thus the corrupt officer is suspended when his superior, who sits under a portrait of Indira Gandhi, overhears his phone conversation with the crooks. A very flattering but not very realistic portrayal.

Since our hero does not have the state power which would enable him to pass death sentences “legally”, his cleaning up campaign has of necessity to be branded “illegal.” But the director is at pains to point out that his methods are essentially the same as those of the police, that they are on the same side. For instance, when Verma fails to have the brothel raided by the police and the organisers thrown into jail, he mobilises a frenzied mob who rush into the brothel and the liquor den, and beat up everyone there indiscriminately, with the intention of terrorising them into abandoning those haunts.

While issues of social violence and ruffianism in urban areas must of course be confronted, at the same time it is vital to realise that the film’s suggestion of how the problem can be dealt with will only further aggravate the problem. The director’s portrayal of the wrongdoers as a subhuman species, who behave with irrational brutality and even emit animal sounds, and make apelike gestures, leads to very dangerous conclusions.

This is typical authoritarian philosophy which has time and again been used to justify extermination of those who are branded as the source of evil by those who arrogate to themselves the role of judge and executioner on the pretence of purging society. This unrealistic portrayal of the villains as inhuman creatures even extends to their deaths. Just as in life they are one dimensional characters like those in comic books so too their death is a comic book affair. It is bereft of suffering that would enable us to recognise them as fellow human beings, however debased. It is just bang bang, dishum.

Also, this kind of portrayal helps men feel vindicated. I

have no doubt that given our social environment, many men fantasise themselves as Raj Babbar. However, none of them actually live such a life or perform such heroic deeds. The hero's ability, therefore, is likely to function as a release of pent up desires, a vindication of some of the direct violence they would like to, but dare not, use.

The association of cold blooded killings with manliness and protection of women bestows on plain and simple murder the kind of legitimacy that it normally lacks. Most people in our society grow up with the feeling that killing another human being is wrong. In order to override this feeling of natural guilt, all the people murdered are made to appear not human but like vermin or like evil robots in human shape. That is why the doings of our crusading hero appear as the triumph of the movie culture version of manliness rather than of justice.

Whenever men incite each other to commit some cruelty or other, they usually do it in the name of manliness and they taunt each other with being like women or effeminate. In this film too, before he begins his ruffian extermination campaign, Verma challenges the men gathered around, saying : "If you are not prepared to die like men why don't you wear bangles and sit at home ?" If only men would understand the simple truth that if a few of them did in fact give up their much vaunted manliness and sit at home, with or without bangles, the world might get some of the peace and quiet for which it thirsts in vain !

It is not accidental that all the women in the film are shown as passive victims of violence who can only scream and cry to men for help. The only woman shown fighting back, though in a rather histrionic way, is the hero's girlfriend, and her battles are confined to the courtroom where she fights for a man's life, not to protect a woman.

In real life, the few attempts made publicly to combat violence on women like rape or wife beating, or sexual harassment in public places, have been initiated by women's organisations, not by individual men like Verma. Why then this unrealistic portrayal of a good man as the only saviour available to the uniformly weak and helpless female species ?

Even so, there is no doubt that when Verma picked up a pistol to destroy the ruffians, many of us in the audience did feel vindicated. Most of us have experienced the frustration and anger that he is shown going through when he seeks protection from the law and order machinery and gets only a legal stamp on injustice. While most of us give up in despair and become cynical, he decides to "restore" justice with the help of a gun. His action is made to appear an attractive solution.

However, since our hero is not the first man in this world to have tried out this formula, original though he may try to appear, we are somewhat in a position to evaluate the real worth of his actions. We

know from history and from contemporary reality that

the hand which holds and loves the gun is usually the hand of a tyrant. Every Hitler, Zia and Khomeini who has picked up a gun has done so with precisely this pretence of restoring justice.

Every man who picks up a gun may or may not perish by the gun but many of those around him do perish by it—physically as well as morally. We would also do well to remember that there are hardly any guns in the world which have learnt consistently to discriminate between the innocent and the guilty, the good and the bad. They only know how to divide the world between the powerful and the powerless.

So, even though the film ostensibly tries to deal with the problem of social violence, it is essentially part of the problem, not part of the solution. It is likely to inspire many more petty tyrants into believing themselves to be god's own agents.

Finally, a few words about this innocent Allahabadi Sanskrit scholar descending into the corrupt and decadent big city culture of Bombay. If this fellow has lived in Allahabad and studied at Allahabad university it is hard to believe that he can be as innocent of the ways of the world as he is made out to be. Some of the country's toughest ruffians and hoodlums are known to have been trained at Allahabad university.

It is interesting that of late, so much is being made, in our films, of the lack of safety for women in big cities like Bombay. The truth is that, when all is said and done, Bombay is among the very few cities in India where women are relatively freer to move out even at night, and where they do move around unescorted, to go to work on night shifts or even on other pursuits. In cities like Allahabad, even during the day, one sees very few women out on the streets and certainly none at night. This in itself is proof of much greater violence against women latent in the atmosphere of these cities and small towns in comparison to Bombay.

I have an uneasy feeling that films such as *Aaj ki Awaz* somehow end up creating unnecessary fear and panic in the minds of people. Apart from encouraging more petty tyrants to pick up knives and guns, this film is likely to encourage more parents to impose even more restrictions on their daughters' movements and to feel even more justified in doing so. The repeated flashbacks of the girl screaming in agony and the incidents of rape and molestation in public places such as streets and trains that are plentifully scattered throughout the film are likely to have the effect of intimidating women rather than inspiring them to come out and claim their place in the world.

I went to see the film at a 9.30 p.m. show and when I emerged from the cinema hall after midnight I felt that the roads of Delhi were much safer even at that hour than the nightmarish world of the film.

Madhu Kishwar
(translated from Hindi)