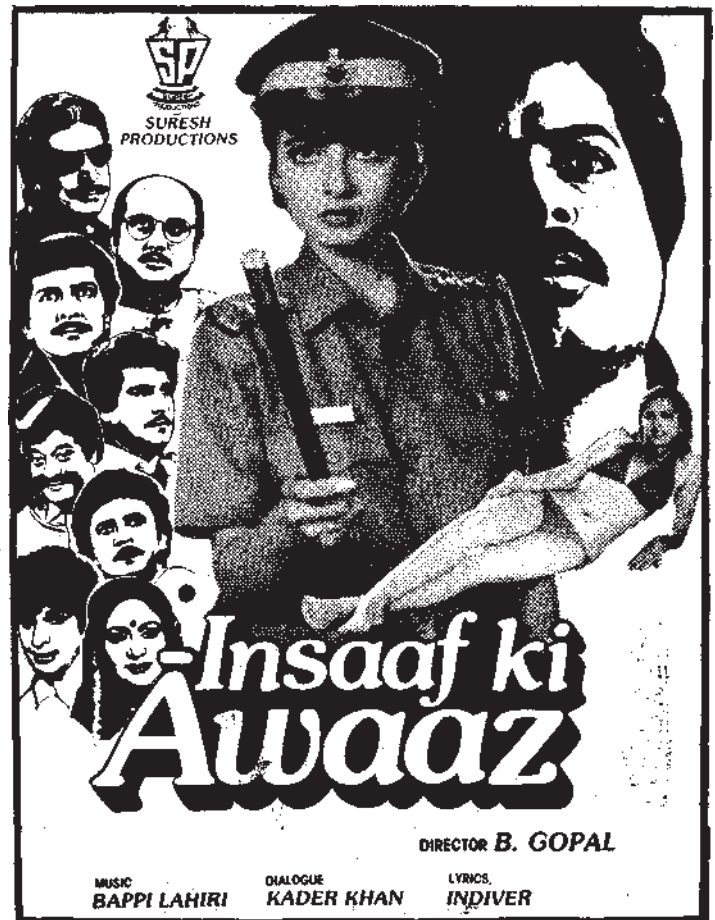


Mythic Saviours Lumpenising Social Protest



THIS film is one more in the genre which was inaugurated by Amitabh Bachan with *Zanjeer*. A whole Spate of them followed such as *Sholay*, *Aj ki Awaaz*, *Insaaf ka Tarazu*, *Bahu ki Awaaz*, *Mard*, *Coolie* and *Kanoon Meri Mutthi Mein* as also the TV serial *Rajani*.

Like *Insaaf Ki Awaaz*, all these films revolve around superman or woman who, with scarcely any assistance, confronts and destroys the corrupt and debased machinery of law and justice, the cynical machinations of politicians, the unholy alliance between politicians and profiteers. The profiteers do not merely indulge in exploitation through intermediaries. They are portrayed as active participants in crime, or at the very least, as themselves hiring criminals, both uniformed and otherwise, for their nefarious purposes. Ordinary people —workers, poor peasants and even many members of the law abiding middle class—are shown caught in their web. But these films hardly ever dwell on the lives and struggles against victimisation of ordinary people. Such people are merely used as a foil to the saviour function of the superman

or woman protagonist who emerges to challenge social injustice.

For instance, *Insaaf Ki Awaaz* revolves around an honest, upright policewoman, Rekha, her even more honest and upright trade unionist husband, Raj Babbar, and her unemployed brother, Anil Kapoor. These three are locked in a confrontation with a deadly nexus of corrupt politicians, represented by an ex MLA and his henchmen, and criminalised businessmen, the owners of Surya Spinning Mills and their henchmen.

Not content with exploiting their mill workers, the industrialists are also engaged in illegal land grabbing, traffic in women, and running of brothels. The trade unionist husband tries to resist their high handed ways of dealing with the workers. His wife, the police officer, comes in their way when they try to use the police as their private army. In order to teach this family a lesson, they arrange for the murder of the trade union leader, with the help of a traitor of a worker, while the husband is sitting on hunger strike on behalf of the workers.

Since the supercop is a woman, she can only be a paler version

of Amitabh Bachan. Her main role is to support her brother's valour and showmanship. After her husband's murder, she realises that the law is an ass whose ears are constantly being twisted by the rich and powerful. So she resigns her police job and swears a pact with her brother to wreak vengeance on the villains.

The brother now takes the offensive, by outfighting the hoodlum brigades of the politician and industrialist, and outwitting them. This he does by seducing the businessman's daughter.

In many films of this genre, the daughters of the corrupt rich are made to side with the rebellious but poor hero. In part, this seems to be a filmi formula for redistribution of social wealth which preempts the question of real redistribution in society. Elevating the poor man to the status of rich man's son-in-law and heir also shows that these films are, at best, headed for power snatching by one group of men from another group, with women used as pawns in the struggle.

In the process, the daughter of the rich man, however rebellious in general and defiant of her father, always ends up at the feet of her husband or lover. For instance, Amrita Singh, as Amitabh's girlfriend in *Mard*, is willing to submit to any insult or humiliation from him even though she is a high spirited girl in all other respects.

So also, before being allowed to don a police or dacoit's uniform in *Insaaf Ki Awaaz* or *Kanoon Meri Mutthi Mein*, the heroine has to agree to remain obscenely *pativrata* towards the man in her life. Thus, when supercop Rekha inadvertently hits her husband in the course of performing her police duty, we are shown the waves of the sea freeze in midair and a covey of birds stop in midflight. She says that for this crime of overstepping the limits of a wife, she is prepared to face the severest punishment from god or her husband. However, her thrashing her daughter, on the false suspicion that she is in love with a boy, is seen as a morally righteous act.

In, the role of her brother's subordinate, Rekha proves singularly ineffective. She is severely beaten up by the villains the moment she doffs her police uniform, and lands in hospital. Finally, in a desperate bid to save her daughter from being raped by the men who had murdered her husband, she stabs one of them to death. For this, she is brought to trial.

In the courtroom, she indulges in much raving and ranting about her crusade for justice and the failure of the law and order machinery to protect her. Since the film has already run its permissible length of three hours, the judge quickly sees the point, condemns the villains to life imprisonment, and recommends the reinstatement of Rekha, commenting that the police force desperately needs officers like her.

Viewing various films of this genre, one has often wondered why our film industry, financed and controlled by the powerful

and corrupt commercial and political elites in our country, is so eager to produce such crude and vulgar exposes of its own class and kind. It is noteworthy that even the government does not seem to mind such critiques of the institutions upon which its rule is based. In comparison, serious political films like *Thaneer Thaneer* or *Prisoners Of Conscience* invariably get into trouble with the government, even though their criticisms far more restrained and sober.

Having viewed dozens of such bizarre films, one is forced to conclude that the cynical exposure of social and political institutions is not inspired by the urge for social reform. Rather, it is motivated by a desire to sabotage social protest and subvert, whatever notions remain of social justice.

The new rich sections of the big business class which dominate our film industry and the political power holders in our country, are an extremely insecure elite. They have not yet managed to ease their conscience about the unscrupulous ways in which they have amassed wealth and power, nor do they think they have acquired sufficient legitimacy and authority in the people's mind. It will probably take them a couple of generations to get over this uneasiness and acquire the legitimacy that traditional elites enjoy.

Right now, they seem acutely aware of the enormous resentment and contempt in which they are held by the people over whom they lord. This adds to their insecurity. Most of these

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films try to work towards a cathartic but harmless release of this popular sentiment of contempt for the government and other powerful elites in order to preempt a real life explosion. Both the people's exploitation and their attempts to obtain justice are presented in such, grotesque ways as to lose all political significance.

In films like *Mard*, a double safety device is used. The rulers are shown as British even though the film is not even vaguely historical. The forms of exploitation, though grotesquely presented, are not historical but present day forms—bonded labour, slum demolitions and various other kinds of real and symbolic bloodsucking of the poor. The second safety device is the channelising of social protest not through the people but through mythic saviours, our filmi supermen heroes.

All these films have certain common themes and purposes. The most characteristic purpose is to spread contempt and cynicism towards the existing political and economic institutions. However, the films are always careful to limit their criticism to the level at which people come into contact with the rulers' representatives in their everyday lives. We are assured that at the very top, there are a few benevolent and supposedly just figures. All problems will vanish as soon as they are brought to the notice of this godlike eminence—whether it is the British queen in *Mard*, the ministerial figure in *Saransk*, the judge in *Insaaf Ki Awaaz*, or the various authority figures in the TV serial *Rajani*. The bottom and middle layers of the political and economic hierarchy are made out to be villains. Their criminality can, however, only continue until the hero devastates them and brings their misdeeds to the notice of the remote but benign supreme ruler.

This seems to be perfectly in tune with the political culture we are building in our country. The answer to every problem, whether it is rape in police custody, wife murder, drought,

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In these mythic films, ordinary people are forced to assume the role of passive spectators. They are presented as faceless crowds. Despite their numbers, they are shown as incapable of taking initiative on their own behalf. Their only purpose is to suffer degradation at the hands of the villain or mindlessly to cheer on the hero, and to act as cannon fodder in the conflict between the two. In film after film, we are shown a superman who ostensibly raises the banner of revolt on behalf of the oppressed, but whose ultimate aim is to catch the eye and ear of the top layers of authority. Despite their bloodcurdling rhetoric of revolt, the films end with justice being dispensed as a boon by the remote but just ruler at the top. The exploits of the superman in *Mard* end at the doorstep of this ruler just as Rekha's crusade in *Insaaf Ki Awaaz* ends in the courtroom.

These films undermine all social and political institutions, so that, as in real life, all legitimate ways of resolving problems are subverted and we are left with a prime minister at the top, who is accessible to people only through powerful intermediaries. People are led to believe their only hope lies in some power broker

bringing their miseries directly to the notice of the all powerful ruler who establishes justice arbitrarily, case by case.

In films like *Mard*, the acme of this genre, collective action is never even tried. As each of these films progresses, the hero becomes more and more successful as he relies more and more on his own mythic powers rather than on collective action. The hero's horse and dog are allowed more of a role in the struggle than are the people on whose behalf he fights. Since the superman, unlike the mythical gods, does not even vanish into the dawn of liberation, the people receive him as a new ruler after the older evil ones have been vanquished. They exist only as followers, a chorus of admirers of the superior king.

In films like *Aaj Ki Awaaz* and *Insaaf Ki Awaaz*, collective resistance is briefly tried, then abandoned as ineffective. Raj Babbar in *Aaj ki Awaaz* tries to organise his neighbours to fight against gangsters but soon after his sister is raped, he ceases to attempt collective action and takes on the mantle of a god descended to wreak vengeance on evildoers. Even Sri Krishna had to use Arjun as his chief warrior and a whole army of Pandavas to back him up, but the modern filmi incarnations of god do not need any help.

Even the trade union struggle in *Insaaf Ki Awaaz* is shown as essentially the exploits of a heroic individual. Even when he uses strikes, demonstrations, fasts as weapons of struggle, other workers are shown in nameless crowds. Their suffering has no individuality or specificity. They provide a passive backdrop for the fantasy of the mythic conflict between hero and villain. After the murder of the union leader, even the pretence of collective struggle is abandoned. His brother-in-law's vendetta campaign shifts the focus to avenging the murder instead of obtaining workers' rights.

Unlike the heroes and heroines of the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, *Do Anken Barah Haath* and *Mother India*, the superman hero of the 1980s is not very different in his actions or methods from the villains, except that we are told his brutality and trickery are in the service of a supposedly good cause. His heroism consists primarily in outdoing the criminals in indiscriminate violence.

Such formula films, therefore, help direct people's feelings of discontent into various self destructive channels. The majority of people, for all their enjoyment of the superhero's antics, know well that the Bachan formula of redress can work only on the screen, not in real life, and hence end up feeling cynical and disheartened about possibilities of social change. But the few who are romantic enough to believe the dangerous myth that the only way to deal with tyrants is to beat them at their own game, end up becoming gangsters.

These films thus accelerate the lumpenisation of social discontent, a phenomenon visible in the streets of any Indian city. These gangsters end up being dealt with as a 'law and order'

problem. But the lumpenisation of social discontent helps create a conducive atmosphere for repressive policies to be implemented without much resistance because of the widespread feeling that real life gangsters need to be dealt with by strong arm methods even though the filmi ones may be applauded.

The belief in a superhero who descends in people's midst to release them from bondage, also strengthens self contempt among people. It teaches them to feel helpless and reinforces the habit of servility. The contempt in which the rulers hold the people, becomes part of their own self view.

By continually discrediting every collective form of social protest and by romanticising individual heroism as the ultimate solution, these films debase serious social and political movements, reducing them to struggles between devils and angels rather than viewing them as a struggle against oppressive institutions and power structures and how, in the process of trying to change them, people can obtain greater justice for themselves. The attention shifts from institutions and structures to the absurdly grotesque portrayals of the good guys and the bad guys.

In the 1950s and 1960s, films often ended with the villains undergoing a change of heart. The films of the 1980s insist on exterminating the 'bad guys'. Thus, every film ends with a few



reinstated woman cop, in uniform, framed by the map of India, executing a salute.

Only the very naive or the mischievous can continue to believe that the only thing wrong with our system of governance is its manipulation by corrupt politicians and businessmen, and that those at the top are eager to right all wrongs but fail to do so, only because they never hear of the truth. A closer look reveals that even if these manipulators did not exist, the entire government machinery, especially the police, would still ride roughshod over people, for it is not accountable to them.

This government is organised to tyrannise over people, hence the vast, pervasive and arbitrary powers in the hands of government functionaries at all levels. It is deliberately built in such a way that only the grease of corruption can keep it moving. Therefore, by making a case for a more powerful police system, these films help seduce people into a very dangerous, ideology, further solidifying the hold of the rulers and furthering the demoralisation of the people.

There was a time that whenever I saw a film used to take special note of how women were portrayed. Now, I am beginning to feel concerned that the men of this country do not seem to be bothered about how they are portrayed. If one were to believe Bombay filmland's version of 'mankind', one would think there are only two kinds of men in this country —hoodlums for a supposedly good cause, and hoodlums for plain self aggrandisement. The former are heroes, the latter villains, but both behave like hoodlums nevertheless. Is this all there is to the men of this country?

—Madhu Kishwar

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dozen murders which create the mistaken notion that justice has been done whereas nothing in the social system is shown to have changed. This allows for much self righteous indignation in the audience who see themselves as the good guys and almost feel that by applauding the good guys thrashing the bad guys, they are contributing to the moral cleansing of society, whereas in effect they are applauding their own brutalisation. They even have to pay an entrance fee to be thus cynically manipulated.

The reason the producers of these films try to discredit and preempt collective struggles is that such struggles have the power to force the rulers into becoming more accountable to the people. And this our new power elite is not going to allow. It is significant that most of these films end with the police being vindicated even while the rest of the political system stands condemned. *Insaaf Ki Awaaz*, for example, symbolically ends with the