

Why They Remain *Kanyas*

In MANUSHI Issue 141 in the article, “Five Holy Virgins, Five Sacred Myths” by Pradip Bhattacharya discusses the characters of three of the five holy virgins. These virgins were not virgins in the usual sense of the term, because all of them had more than one consort. The question, why are they called “holy virgins” has intrigued all Hindus. Bhattacharya shows that all these five were exceptional women with minds of their own who sometimes defied the conventions of society and sometimes guided their husbands instead of following them.

But why the adjective ‘*kanya*’ meaning virgin? In Kolkata, scholar and writer Prof. P. Lal who spent a whole decade translating the *Mahabharata* regularly reads out this translation to a select study circle. During one of these sessions this question came up. Prof. Lal was of the opinion that virginity does not mean mere physical virginity. It means a freshness of mind, having a mind of one’s own, which a woman may or may not retain after her marriage. If she retains it, then she is still a ‘*kanya*’, as Kunti was. If she does not, then she is not, as Madri was not. We all agreed to this explanation.

Susmita Bhattacharya, Kolkata

Thank you for bringing this fact to the notice of our readers. In his discussion of Kunti in this issue, the author has included this interpretation of the term ‘kanya’ by P.Lal.

Editor

Pioneer Nation Builders

I thank you for the much-needed reappraisal of Hindi cinema in the essay “The Idea of India” in issue No.139.

As a college student in Calcutta in the 1970s, I too slipped into a



Responses to MANUSHI

high-brow, critical attitude towards Hindi films. But by then I had seen too many films and heard too many songs for this high-brow attitude to remain intact for long.

Notwithstanding the gory violence, cliched stereotyping and vulgarity of Bollywood films, by the late 90s I found myself thinking differently about Hindi cinema, based on examining my own early memories. This was in parallel to the transformations taking place in my



life, going from my ‘English-medium’, intellectual identity, to a more organic and emotional relation to my society and its common people.

In modern India, Hindi cinema has willy-nilly played the role of building a common language (albeit north Indian), of perception, communication, vocabulary, symbols, icons, idioms, song and music in a highly complex, diverse and pluralist society where almost

everything else has had the effect of pulling and keeping people apart. Perhaps no other formal or institutional effort has had such an impact on social integration. Hindi cinema has been the principal medium of social communication cutting across all the socio-economic-cultural divides.

Much more so than school social studies texts and perhaps also the role of the family in a rapidly changing society, it is Hindi cinema that educates and socialises Indians, about Indian history, religion, culture, values, mythology, etc. Two Indians can watch a movie and thus share a space and vocabulary when perhaps nothing else in their life circumstances would bring them to a shared emotional experience. In turn, this helps to create other kinds of unifiers.

I believe, Raj Kapur’s brilliant film *Teesri Kasam* is a better lesson in cultural education than provided by most of our schools and colleges. One can cite numerous other films, which provide deep insights into Indian culture. I am also reminded of the questioning of allegiance to dominant social values underlying the song “*mudh mudh ke na dekh mudh mudh ke*” in *Shree 420*. There is a place and need for more such films in modern India since there has been a steady degeneration

recently; the reasons for that are many. Films made upto the 1970's are still eminently watchable, while most of the current output can be forgotten in minutes. There is hardly any story-line any more. For a long, long time, no major work of literature has been filmed. The recent production of Sarat Chandra's *Devdas* is therefore a welcome development.

In recent times, the success in Bollywood of the south Indian director Mani Ratnam's films like *Roja* and *Bombay*, and of the south Indian music director A.R. Rehman, suggests that a two-way cultural exchange is taking place. One remembers that not so long ago, Tamilians were made fun of in north India with crude mimicry like "*Madraasi, illay po*". I know that now in Calcutta, Bengalis are buying and hearing the Tamil albums of A.R. Rehman. So in their own way, films and music are enabling Indians to learn to respect one another, a fundamental requirement for co-existence in a pluralist society.

Similarly, many Indians were brought closer to Muslims by the songs composed by Muslim lyricists and music directors.

We need a proper assessment of the role of Hindi cinema in modern India, one that is not tainted by intellectual elitism. What our cinema has done for society needs to be celebrated, and the various colourful characters who worked to build the whole edifice hailed as pioneers and nation-builders.

V Ramaswamy, Kolkata

Fashionable Couases

I agree with your article in issue No. 140 entitled, "Physician, Heal Thyself." It has become very fashionable to talk about the exploitation of rural India and its farmers but do these Anti Globalisation Brigades realise that if they really want to help the poor and vulnerable they should be there on the spot living and bearing all that pain and suffering instead of shouting slogans in the metros?

I know many people who either go to a foreign country or to a five star hotel to discuss '*Hunger in India*' over a big luncheon organised by people who are only good at receiving grants or making project reports. These are psuedo intellectuals who only claim to be worried about the poor. When these people are getting their fizz and biz by protesting against people possessing things the poor can't even dream of, while they themselves seek hefty global grants, who wants to join them in their protests? If these people are sincere about their efforts then let them start at home and protest about the poor infrastructure provided by our government, the dismal performance of the public sector, which has siphoned off billions of rupees over these decades without providing any useful service to society. My grandmother had a saying in Punjabi which, roughly translated, means 'First put your house in order before blaming outsiders for ruining you.'

Suman Sharma, New Delhi □

It finally takes off

MANUSHI Pilot Project for Hawkers

After crossing numerous hurdles and obstacles, we are beginning work on September 9, 2004 to build the infrastructure for the Model Market for street vendors at Sewa Nagar. If this pilot project is successful, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi is committed to replicating it all over the city. We thank all those MANUSHI friends who helped in various ways in materialising this project. In the next issue, we will provide you some glimpses of the daily battles we have had to wage and the numerous threats we have continually faced in order to execute this simple project.

Appeal for Support

Our work with street vendors has placed enormous strain on Manushi's very limited finances. Consequently Manushi is going through a serious financial crunch. If this work is to spread and acquire deep roots, we require additional resources on a continuing base. We appeal to MANUSHI friends to donate generourly for the cause of street vendors.