

Buniyaad—How Firmly Founded ?

Ismat Chughtai, the well known Urdu writer, commenting on the women characters of *Buniyaad*, says that the serial goes all out to prove that women are either vamps or nannies and idiots. Add to this a couple of male crooks and the serial falls well in line with the worse of Bombay commercial films, she says.

And this is the least that can be said about the most popular serial delight which Doordarshan Kendra churns out with pride every Tuesday and Saturday. The gullible audiences rush to their television sets to follow the rising and declining fortunes of Vrishbhan, Veeranwali, Babliji, Lajoji, Masterji and a host of other characters. Doordarshan is certainly a past master at the art of "bless the mess" for it keeps the attention diverted from more disturbing exercises.

Buniyaad's success is primarily that it makes people woolly headed and sentimental rather than making them sit up and think. Past experience has shown that Doordarshan is averse to serials which may cause people to look before and after—be it the period piece *Raj Se Swaraj* or the contemporary theme of *Nukkad*.

Buniyaad was started with all the pretensions of looking closely at one of the gravest tragedies which befell the country—the partition. It was supposed to be a historical and social document that was to be seen through the eyes of some lovable characters drawn with care. It has degenerated into the soppiest of soap operas, following the fortunes of two families with the heaviest accent falling on the sexual intrigues of the young as well as the old.

The story of *Buniyaad* started around 1915 in Lahore and it is to continue to the Delhi of 1986 or 1987, but guessing at television's style of functioning, the serial is bound to shut down at a convenient time in 1984, for it can be taken for granted that they would rather not include the November riots in the capital. This would be a never-never topic for them though it would put the carnage of the partition into a contemporary perspective and show the wiles of politicians who will use communalism whenever they require it. But no, this is not the interest of Doordarshan, a wholly government owned and manipulated media.



Lajoji and Veeranwali in their youth

It may be remembered that even in *Buniyaad* the agony of the partition was skipped over very conveniently by jerkily jumping almost a decade. The excuse, of course, was that any freedom struggle inspires the terrorists of Punjab as was said in a CBI report. So, many skeletons are to be locked up in cupboards, including that of the patriot Bhagat Singh. Why perturb middle class complacency by showing anything that is painful or disturbing ? It is easier to keep them involved in family troubles and love affairs.

Master Haveli Ram is, of course, a positively drawn character. A secular person who participated in the freedom struggle, he was shattered by the trauma of the partition holocaust and is disillusioned by the degeneration of cherished values after independence.

The pain of the partition, however, is seen only through the refugees who came to India from Pakistan, most of them being Hindus, with only one odd turbaned fellow thrown into the long shots of the refugee camp. No effort was made to develop the character. And just a passing reference was made to the Muslims who suffered equally in the mad frenzy of 1947. Are these omissions purely accidental ? Or do we say that we are dealing only with a particular community and the writer Manohar Shyam Joshi or the producer G.P. Sippy cannot include everything ? Very well, let's grant them their limitations, but then what was the need for them to pick on a most sensitive historical chapter which has its repercussions in present history ?

The male team making *Buniyaad*, even though the credits show that they have a woman consultant, Krishna Sobti, have shown scant regard for the women characters of the serial. Perhaps the writer, Krishna Sobti, was consulted only on matters of dialect or the Lahore scenario and Manohar Shyam Joshi, speeded by the *Hum Log* success, has used his pen to lazily churn out female stereotypes.

Take Lajoji, for instance, who is the image of martyred

Indian motherhood. She objects in a recent episode to Satbir adopting a child he has not fathered. The *Sanyasini* Pragyavatiji who was the chirpy Veeranwali in the good old days of Lahore, becomes a pathetic seeker of favours for her illegitimate son, not legally but by shedding tears and playing on her coward lover's emotions. Babliji, who is Veeranwali reincarnate, has not the courage to bring up her child as a single parent and, rather than earn a living by hard work, she chooses to take the easy way of glamour and becomes a cabaret dancer. The daughter-in-law of Lajoji, Lochan, is as wicked as daughters-in-law are supposed to be. She isolates her husband

from the family and goads him to be corrupt.

It is easy indeed for the writer to put women at the root of all evil—family troubles or corruption. It seems a wonder that Manohar Shyam Joshi didn't go as far as to say that the partition was caused by some wicked woman : one wouldn't put it past soap creativity.

While objections are raised now and then, *Buniyaad* goes on in full glory, making soap opera history. The secret of its success is questionable but it is a success all right, perhaps indicating that success is often questionable.

—Nirupama Dutt