Mirch Masala

Smita as Sonbai -- the last shot

SET in a small Saurashtrian village in the early twentieth century, Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* tells the story of Sonbai, a village woman who fights back when molested by the British government's revenue collector. But more important than the story is the unfolding of the layers upon layers of power that constitute society.

The internal tyrannies of the village, such as those based on wealth and gender, are well entrenched but operate under certain restraints. But the tyranny of the distant *sarkar*, the government, which has no stake in the village, is completely unchecked.

This distinction emerges in the persons of the revenue collector and the village headman. They are men of the same mould. But the headman, even though he cheerfully defrauds poor villagers of their land, and keeps a mistress to prove his manhood, cannot go so far as to molest any village woman to whom he may take a fancy. "One has to keep an eye on one's own roving eye", he remarks. On the other hand, the revenue collector, who camps on the outskirts of the village and owes allegiance only to his superiors in the city, need not hesitate to wreck the entire village if his whims are not catered to. The villagers have no way to prevent his marauding band from running amok and are reduced to suing for mercy.

The village can be seen as a microcosm of pre British Indian society, reduced to a shambles by an outside force it cannot comprehend or control, a government which has no use for any value or norm except brute force. It can as easily be seen as a paradigm of our society today, at the mercy of a more evolved form of that government machinery Gandhi termed "Satanic." Thus, when the headman tells the collector that to surrender Sonbai will create a crisis as it has now become "a question of the honour (*izzat*) of the whole village", the collector replies: "If I let my platoon loose in your village, what will become of this honour of yours. I think of this too as a kind of revenue."

Most of the village men are accustomed to act as petty tyrants over poorer persons, and over the women and younger men of their families. They pay the price in servility to richer men and to older men of their own families. Extending this logic, the top layers of power in the village—the headman, priest and trader decide to maintain their power by kowtowing to the *sarkar*.

Resistance is shown emanating from the least regarded members of the community—the poor Muslim watchman, the wandering minstrel, the school teacher, and the women. This could easily have become a romanticisation or a political formula, particularly as characterisation in the film is in the mythological mode of good versus evil. The film, by and large, escapes these pitfalls, by its attempt realistically to present the limitations of this resistance.

Thus, the women's solidarity, although it spontaneously crystallises at certain moments, is not able to assume a consistent or organised form. The women trapped in the factory where Sonbai seeks refuge, temporarily turn against her when they fear that the soldiers will go on a rampage if she does not yield. The women outside, rallied by the headman's wife, are easily scattered when their husbands beat them and drag them home.

There is an element of unnecessary romanticisation of the old watchman as a male protector: "There is one man still left in the village- never mind if he is old, not young." But, through a couple of moving images, the film conveys an important point which is too often overlooked in history books —that defeat is not a proof of being in the wrong nor victory a sign of moral superiority. One such image is that of the watchman going through the slow graceful movements of his last *namaz* while the soldiers prepare to storm the factory gate. Another is that of the headman's wife pounding rhythmically and furiously at the beautifully carved window of the room in which her husband has locked her.

Deepti Naval puts in a superb performance in this role as a victimised woman who retains her dignity. Smita, as Sonbai, a very different sort of character, is presented in the same mode —conveying a tremendous sense of self respect and resistance against injustice, without making any fancy speeches. In fact, both women speak very little, compared to the men in the lead roles.

The film also operates at the mythic level, using the folk types of the comical hero, the beautiful defiant heroine, the braggart villain, the cowardly rich man and the brave poor man. Its use of colour as symbol — the red of the chillies as the hue of smouldering anger, danger and revolt, and of event as symbol—the woman giving birth even as the men prepare for death and destruction, is fairly obvious and does not need elaboration.

The film is a telling critique of male power in many of its forms—familial, social, governmental—and tries to explore women's modes of resistance. It differs from several other films which deal with the dynamic between oppressor and oppressed, in its ending which is suggestive, not formulaic. Where many political films, from *Garam Hawa* to *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai*, end with the protagonist joining an undefined and purely symbolic protest demonstration, *Mirch Masala* has a genuinely open ending, which operates as a realistic event as well as a symbol.

Does Sonbai kill her persecutor? Does the women's action provide a lead to the me? How do the soldiers react? What becomes of the *swaraji* schoolteacher and the landless peasants he led to break their fetters? Any number of possible endings and beginnings open out from the last frame. Without words, we are told that no cause is ever completely lost or completely won.

—Ruth Vanita