

Kalyug Aur ?

THIS film provoked interest by the uproar it generated. It has been repeatedly prosecuted and censored on the charge that it shows the gods in a derogatory light, but was finally released recently, under the title *Kalyug Aur?* instead of *Kalyug Aur Ramayan*.

It seemed to me to have almost nothing to do with the *Ramayan*. It merely uses some names from the *Ramayan* and an aura of piety to parade director and chief actor Manoj Kumar's various obsessions. Foremost amongst these is the obsession, visible in his earlier films too, with himself as reformer—here, as Hanuman, interpreted by him as the epitome of Indian male purity. The chief target of reform, as in his earlier films, is the "Westernised" Indian woman. But in this film, the crusade is conducted with startling vulgarity.

While constantly preaching the need for character reform, Manoj Kumar's vision of women's character is completely external, signified chiefly by dress and deportment. As soon as he descends to earth in the guise of Hanuman, he encounters a shorthaired woman in dress and hat who smokes, drinks and takes part in fancy dress parades. "You should be ashamed", he tells her. "Such clothes are a blot on the name of Indian womanhood." Later, he terms a group of women who mob him at a swimming pool "an army of naked buffaloes." This pattern continues throughout the film.

Wherever Manoj Kumar goes, he encounters women dressed in weird costumes of the kind one has never come across in real life. Clearly, he is chastising no recognisable woman but his own fascination with the female body as an object of contempt. He keeps turning on them like a pettish schoolboy with cries of *besharam* and "Shame Shame." The technique is an old one—expose women's bodies through your lens and then condemn women as shameless while showing yourself, the male voyeur, as the angel they try to lure.

This technique, at its most blatant in this film, is two pronged. On the one hand, pornographic images are projected in the name of exposing villainy—for example, when the surrogate Sita is asked to strip before her husband and in-laws under the threat that they will be killed, or when Ravan is transformed into a half naked eunuch as punishment for his sins.

On the other hand, the hero constantly delivers self righteous chauvinistic speeches on the need to keep evil women and the evil West at bay. This confirms his patriotic credentials and forestalls any possible criticism of him for having made such a film.

Manoj Kumar's formula for saving the country, can be reduced to "Everyone should become a Manoj Kumar." This recipe for reform is sought to be sold with some ingredients he thinks will be popular such as his own brand of women's rights.

The surrogate Sita, after her hair has grown at amazing speed and her dress been changed to a sari, sings a song



Resisting the allure of a seductress turned sanyasini

full of empty threats that she will bear more fire ordeals, will burn the veil and put out the sun. The song ends up with the real demand that she and other women be accepted as wives: "A man who is sold in the market, is not women's god. No gift in the world is as pure as the gift of a daughter." This results in the conversion of her mother-in-law who sobs: "I had forgotten I was a woman—a mother-in-law, a daughter-in-law, a wife, a mother", and proceeds to play all these roles with due servility.

Another such ingredient is religion—reduced to magic of the rabbit-out-of-a-hat variety, superstition and a concluding temple scene with crowds chanting religious songs and slogans.

But I wonder if the audience will find this sufficient compensation for the sheer tediousness of the film. It drags painfully, and the visuals, including the actors' faces, are so unaesthetically presented, that one feels physically and mentally revolted.

—Ruth Vanita