



Shahenshah

SHAHENSHAH is one of the very many contemporary Hindi films which tries to cash in on people's discontent with the way our government functions. Most people today despair of obtaining justice from the mechanisms that are supposed to ensure it—the legislature, the executive (especially the police) and the Judiciary. One way of expressing this discontent would be to call for reform of these institutions—to make them more accountable to the people. Most of our Bombay films prefer to propagate a more dangerous formula—sweeping away these institutions and replacing them with dictatorship by an individual or a set of

individuals. It is this fascistic way of thinking (of which terrorism is another manifestation) that *Shahenshah* fosters.

The film takes off from the plight of the honest police officer who is falsely implicated in a bribery case by the criminals he is tracking down, and who finally commits suicide in despair. His son, Vijay (our hero, Amitabh), concludes that the law is an ass and only the simpleminded try to use it to secure justice.

He declares : "I am not a servant of the law; I am myself the law. I will make the law myself, catch the criminals myself, pass judgment myself, and execute the sentence myself." An honest

exploration of this philosophy would logically lead to every individual making the same assumption. It might then follow, for example, that if Shahenshah is justified in smashing a liquor den and intimidating its owner into converting it into a dairy, because he thinks liquor drinking is immoral, another person can use the same violent methods to close down the dairy because he is convinced that milk drinking involves immoral cruelty to deprived calves. However, the film avoids the significant dilemmas contingent on its philosophy because Shahenshah operates by terror. He beats people into obedience. These tactics are essentially no different from those of the villain JK, who silences the witnesses of his murder of an honest journalist by threatening them with the same fate.

Shahenshah appears to have a solution to all society's ills. There is even a brief interlude where he rescues a woman from her husband who was trying to burn her. Apart from this, women figure chiefly as victims of the villains lust. The heroine is a girl driven by poverty to pickpocketing, funning massage parlours and cabaret dancing. That she must be a Christian in order to be a dancer is mandatory. That everything about her, from her dress and her blooming health to her language and mannerisms, reeks of affluence and a convent education despite her slum background is part of the same Hindi film mythology that endows the hero with the ability to knock out dozens of men singlehanded..

Her role testifies also to the, hypocritical puritanism that Hindi films foster in their audiences. Luxury and licentiousness are condemned at tedious length and simultaneously depicted at equally tedious length in almost every commercial film. The censorship laws may be partially responsible—apparently, if cabaret scenes are accompanied by speeches condemning them, they somehow become highminded. Film makers, censors and audience are able to retain a clear conscience while viewing them. Perhaps only when films can have the cabarets without the speeches, will they begin to get over the obsession with these unaesthetic performances, and the audiences lose the sense of savouring forbidden fruit, so that they can move on to more substantial themes.

Shahenshah, when he drags JK into court, lists lust as a crime almost as reprehensible as murder. Indeed, the film is so full of irrelevancies introduced to drag it out to over three hours that all sense of moral priorities tends to drown in a welter of speeches and histrionic scenes. By the time we have run the gamut of pretending to right wrongs ranging from poverty and deprivation, corruption and inefficiency, muzzling, of the press murder and mayhem, liquor, gambling and illicit sex, we are exhausted and just want to get rid of JK at any cost, as Shahenshah has assured us this will be the solution to all problems—and also thankfully the end of the film.

The film could be dismissed as vigilante fantasy were it not for its vision of a society and State run on Shahenshah principles of contempt for the rule of law. Shahenshah openly expresses contempt for legal procedure and flouts it in public. He commits arson on establishments he considers evil such as a luxurious mansion belonging to a corrupt businessman. He extracts money from criminals to mislead them into thinking he is on their side. Finally, he drags JK into court by the scruff of his neck, extracts confessions from him and others by third degree methods, and hangs him in the courtroom.

The pity of it is that the film does pretend to respond to the genuine indignation felt by most people today vis-a-vis the gap between the government's pretensions and practice and against the politician-police-criminal nexus which the legal apparatus is unable to control. However, the film debases people's concerns by sentimentalising the conflict into one individual's melodramatic biography, and by posing as solution the scuttling of democratic institutions by the powerful individual.

The *mai baap* attitude that our political ethos seeks to cultivate in people towards their rulers is based on the same assumptions as the film—that the rulers, like god, are entitled to shortcircuit legal procedure. Shahenshah's concept of an ideal society is ominous : "People's dream of freedom will come true when police can arrest people freely", he says. Government's assuming arbitrary powers to arrest people is becoming a terrifying reality—with the passing of the 59th amendment emergency clause and other repressive laws such as the antiterrorist legislation which are being misused not only in Punjab but other states like Gujarat. Any dream this reality represents is unlikely to be one of freedom.

— Madhu, Ruth