



## Hero Hiralal

### -An Exploration of Indianness

by  
**Ruth Vanita**

Hero Hiralal, directed by Ketan Mehta, and shown on TV recently, represents an attempt to make up the lovers' quarrel that the so-called new wave film has had with commercial cinema. It is also a much overdue attempt to understand the role the Hindi film has played in shaping the modern Indian mind.

It is time we acknowledge the fact that Hindi films are a central component of our common culture today, and have shaped our language not just literally but metaphorically. A reference to a Hindi film is the one reference that is guaranteed to make faces light up in any classroom, regardless of the socioeconomic background, intellectual abilities, region or community of the students. There is something truly amazing about a film industry that has generated a range of songs wide enough to appeal to and serve the purposes of an English-educated intellectual conducting a romance as well as those of a roadside Romeo. Hero Hiralal is an expression of this amazement.

Its hero is that most indigenous phenomenon — the autorickshaw driver. His personality is built on the paradox of an imitativeness so intensely experienced as to express a genuine individuality—he is at once the product of a culture and a builder of it. Modelling himself on the film "hero" who lives and dies for love, Hiralal embodies, without intending to, a peculiarly Indian kind of heroism — the Heroism of ordinary people who manage to retain their honesty, expansiveness and even joyfulness in an

existence that, externally viewed, would be considered joyless and deprived.

This is exemplified in a series of innovative, tragicomic images that pay tongue-in-cheek tribute to the Hindi film formula. For instance, when Hiralal manages to conduct his beloved to an inviting tree in an open field, he does not dance round it with her but acquaints her with his recipe for getting rid of pain and stress — embracing the tree and shrieking aloud. This process sends both of them into fits of laughter and thus brings them closer to one another than the song and dance routine would.

However, when Hiralal discovers that the film star he has fallen in love with at first sight does not return his love, the comedy develops tragic potential. He decides on suicide but wants it to be a grand gesture. A powerful film magnate, Sitara Devi, decides to cash in on the idea by making him an icon for young lovers and ultimately somewhat overdone metaphor for the ruthless exploitation of ordinary people's pain by the modern media and the consequent brutalisation of our society. It suggests that the success of the Hindi film is based at least partly on its sadomasochistic cum cathartic effects. The formula, of course, comes to the hero's rescue by making the heroine reciprocate his love and save his life literally at the last gasp.

As compared to his highly imaginative conception of Hiralal (brilliantly played by Naseerudin Shah), Ketan Mehta's presentation of women characters is disappointing. This is especially true of the heroine (played by Sanjana Kapoor) who, throughout the film, reacts rather than acts, and is never allowed to break the mould of the physically beautiful creature whose loveliness consists almost wholly in her physical beauty — a mould in which Hiralal's filmi variety of love casts her. The film never questions the genuineness of Hiralal's love but in fact his emotion is more involved with the quest for self than with any attempt to comprehend the other. Even Hiralal's gesture of slapping her in public when she tells him she does not love him (her only independent action in the film) is endorsed by the film's unidimensional valorisation of his love.

It is this which does not allow the viewer to question the plausibility or even desirability of the heroine's ultimately far greater gesture of love in choosing to pair herself with a man from so completely different a socio economic and cultural background. It is because the film has avoided suggesting any inner life for the heroine that we are able to accept and even rejoice in her choice. The only woman character who keeps us guessing is Sitara Devi, the fairy godmother figure, since we are not, until the end, quite sure whether she is a good or a bad fairy.

All in all, a lively, enjoyable and intelligent film. □