

FILM REVIEW

Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro

by Partho Dutta

Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro is an important film and deserves to be recognised as such. It is rare that films are made which try to face the predicaments of urban Muslims sensitively but squarely. Saeed Mirza, the director, has a long history of making films which have pointed out the ridiculousness of stereotypes to which the minorities are subject to in popular Hindi films. Readers may remember his film on the travails of a Goan motor mechanic *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai*. In another way *Salim Langda* is an answer to the genre of 'Muslim socials' which portray Muslim in an acceptable and safe way.

But if Mirza is breaking out of the stranglehold of one kind of film he seems to be lapsing into another. For if we are to judge this film not only on moral grounds but also cinematically we have to grasp the tradition within which a film like this is possible. If you are going to watch *Salim Langda* the chances are that you are more likely to watch it on at video than in cinema halls (where it has had limited distribution). It will then become apparent how overarching is the hegemony of television. It may be unfair, but the lingering suspicion on watching this film is that Mirza has put to good use the left-over sets from his popular T.V. serial *Nukkad*. With its T.V. format, poster-like compositions and the flashy colours it is difficult to tell which genre the film is straddling, the 9'o'clock serial or the *masala* film. And if the didactic note or the pretence to reality is taken as a plea for the film's authenticity, can it not also be argued that there are many versions of the real?

Basically the film argues a case for Salim's identity—of his being young, poor and Muslim in a cut-throat world. But his final tragedy is because of the circumstances he finds himself in the Bombay underworld. It is not very clear what this has to do with his being an underprivileged Muslim. In generalising on the impact of lumpenisation, Mirza looses out on the main theme he had set out to explore.

Perhaps one is being too harsh! There are equally convincing vignettes of Bombay's *mohall* life, of the joys of friendship and camaraderie and pleasure of loafing around. Salim Langda's (Pawan Malhotra) is the cocksure world of the petty thief. His beat lies between his home (where he feels secure but neglected) and the police station where he has to report everyday to keep his record straight (there is a sense of pride in association with the police

although he is not spared the insults and humiliation of this association). Salim earns his living by receiving protection money and doing the odd job for the big bosses of Bombay's underworld. His final ambition is to ape these underworld kings whose status he envies. It seems the easy way to make big money since he lacks the education or the ambition to do anything else. In this he is helped by his two cronies Peera (Makarand Deshpande) and Abdul (Ashutosh Gowariker). Ideally he would like to see his family happy. His father is a retrenched textile worker, his mother has taken to sewing to make ends meet and there is a young sister to be married off.

The conscience of the film is Aslam (Rajendra Gupta) who wants to marry Salim's sister. He is a poorly paid proof reader and an intellectual who has the courage to stand by his convictions. Salim has to save him from trouble when he suggests in an article that Muslim girls should be encouraged to seek higher education. In a remarkable extended monologue of the film Aslam sums up the Muslim predicament in urban India. Only education can dissolve mutual prejudices, the *mazhab* is no guarantee of unity. In the film this message comes across with full force and if this is also the director's viewpoint, a remarkably courageous thing to say. But one is not very sure. Surely there are ways in which religious tolerance can be reconciled with the allegiance to the *mazhab*?

The women of the film play supportive roles, but they are not full-blooded. The way the narrative is built they have little to contribute to Salim's world view. His girlfriend Mumtaz is a dancing girl and leads an equally dangerous life. What is it to be Muslim and a woman in Bombay's sleaze industry? Although the film is from Salim's view point the women's predicament is well worth pondering about.

Films like *Salim Langda* have a long ancestry. On the one hand there is *Garam Hawa*. On the other hand we have a movement where talented and radical directors (Ketan Mehta for instance) consciously want to break out of the ghetto of 'art cinema' and create a niche for themselves in the popular world of Hindi film. This may be called the going-to-the-masses syndrome. Its success can be seen from the popularity a film like *Salim Langda* achieves. The most spectacular culmination of this trend is evidenced in Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay*. Nasiruddin Shah (who together with Shabana Azmi and Smita Patil carried the new film movement on his shoulders) once cynically remarked how tired he had become of doing the same roles again and again. What he was trying to point out was the cliché ridden concerns of the young film makers. Saeed Mirza's film does not fall in that category, although the conventions he uses comes perilously close to it. This style may be popular and even populist but unlike the Hindi film, whose place it wants to take, at least it has something brave about it. □