

A Breath of Fresh Air Review of *Indira*

by
Rasna Warah

After a plethora of uninspiring commercial Hindi films that reached us in Nairobi in the past year, it was refreshing to finally see a film that attempts to address the woman question somewhat realistically and without excessive melodrama. *Indira*, directed by Nripen Mohla, offers a glimmer of hope to women who feel suffocated and powerless in the male-dominated legal system. This is in sharp contrast to other films of this genre in which the female protagonist's only defence against an unjust system seems to be to become a vigilante and to systematically annihilate men. For example, in *Zakhmi Aurat*, when the heroine (played by Dimple Kapadia) is gang-raped, she launches a campaign of revenge against the offenders by forming a women's group whose main objective is to castrate rapists. And when the heroine's sister and daughter are murdered in *Insaaf ki Devi* and the criminal justice system fails to bring the murderer to book, she conspires to kill him herself.

Such films do not help the women's cause because they breed cynicism and pessimism in the viewers, who know very well that the methods used to obtain justice in these films (castration, murder, and so on) are not realistic and perhaps too extreme to offer any kind of hope to the viewer. Moreover, the viewer is falsely led to believe that justice has been done when in fact no justice has been done

because the social, legal, economic and political systems that oppress women remain unchanged.

The film *Indira* is thus a welcome deviation from the norm. It is the story of a brave and honest lawyer (played convincingly by Hema Malini) who seeks redress for the poor and the powerless. Indira's success is attributed to her supportive parents, who unlike many parents, do not view daughters as burdensome tokens of misfortune. Her upbringing contrasts sharply with that of her cousin brothers whose rich parents believe that sons must be pampered because they ensure the economic and genetic survival of the family. Predictably, the spoilt sons grow up to be drunkards, gamblers and cheats.

Meanwhile, the adult Indira continues to fight her legal battles against corruption, illegal evictions of "squatters" and other noble causes. One of her major victories as a lawyer is when she wins a rape case against a powerful leader. Fortunately, the rape is not as central in this film as it has been in other so-called women-oriented films. A highlighted depiction of a rape is very often used by male directors to excite the prurient interests of the male viewers and to obscure the other harsh realities of women's lives in India.

In the film *Indira*, unlike in other commercial films, the rape victim's first reaction is not to commit suicide. Instead, she seeks justice in court. And when she discovers she is

pregnant, she obtains an abortion. In one of the most moving scenes in the film, the lawyer Indira asks her if she would have had an abortion if she knew that the baby was male (the aborted foetus was female). She says no, she would probably go far away somewhere and give birth to it, not (as in the usual Hindi film) so that the son can grow up and take revenge against his father on his mother's behalf, but because boys do not get raped.

Indira's integrity as a lawyer is tested when her wayward cousins, who are on the verge of bankruptcy, convince their father to seek her legal assistance in securing a delay period from their debtor. Indira does this, but on the condition that her cousins mend their ways and return all assets to their father. In addition, she presents the father with a whip which he uses to beat his grown up sons into submission and discipline. This is where the film loses much of its appeal. Obviously, the director could not resist injecting a dose of violence and revenge into the script.

However, despite this glaring flaw, the film remained for the most part off the beaten track. For example, the heroine is an unmarried woman whose main preoccupation is neither marriage nor motherhood. The men in her life do not try to seduce her or try to win her affections through dishonest means. (The viewers are thus spared the agony of watching countless fantasy love songs and dances.) And even though her parents struggled to educate her, their role is not oversentimentalised. Most importantly, women's equality is presented as a matter of fact rather than a subject for slogans and sermons. For example, when Indira asks her parents for her dowry so that she can use the money to fight a case, she doesn't go into a monologue about the evils of the dowry system. She just states bluntly that she doesn't believe in dowry and would

like to use the money elsewhere.

The film is also unusual in that it suggests love and friendship between a lower class, uneducated man and the powerful, highly educated Indira. It breaks a major trend in commercial Hindi cinema where the reverse is more often the case.

For me, the film had a very personal appeal. At the end of the film, when Indira defies society and performs the final death rituals on her father's funeral pyre, I was reminded of the day when I too broke tradition and lit my father's pyre. (My father had no sons.)

Despite its commercial middle class limitations, *Indira* is a breath of fresh air in an industry where women's on-screen roles have been reduced to cameo appearances as over-emotional mothers, docile wives, sexy girlfriends, pampered daughters and glamorous prostitutes.

Tell Us a Story



Each of the regional languages of India has a vast and rich repertoire of grandmother's tales, folk stories, poems, sayings jokes, witticisms, etc. Unfortunately, these are inaccessible to those of us unfamiliar with languages other than our own mother tongue.

We invite Manushi readers to share with us what has struck you as significant from this repertoire in your mother tongue that has not previously appeared in English. Please send us the original with a fresh English translation identifying the oral or written source of that original.

—Editor