

Toofan

AS its title indicates, this film hopes to take people by storm. It has been launched with the ferocity of an electoral campaign, to boost the failing fortunes of both Amitabh and the political constellation he represents. At the cinema where we saw it, the "House Full" sign was put up well in advance, but tickets were openly being sold in "black" through the lobby grille by cinema employees with the manager's patronage - a shift from the earlier pattern of "black" selling being done in a somewhat surreptitious fashion. The scarcity was clearly an artificial creation. Video cassettes of the film were also being hired out for Rs 20 to 40 a day instead of the usual Rs 10.

The Times of India Group sent us a notice of the premiere of the film, sponsored by them, boasting of the huge amounts wasted on creating the sets of the film, and announcing that the video rights have been bought by Binda Thackeray, son of Bal Thackeray, Shiv Sena supremo. This high powered patronage is not a coincidence. The message *Toofan* transmits, directly or indirectly, is a dangerous mix of government propaganda with that being propounded by the conglomeration of forces backing the *Ramjanambhoomi* agitation.

Its central figure represents today's lumpen politicians who espouse this ideology, and operate by a combination of force and fraud, imagining themselves superheros. This figure has two dimensions embodied in a pair of identical twins, played by Amitabh in a double role. As Toofan, he is a Ram devotee, using physical force, divinely blessed, and identified with Hanuman. He is costumed however, like Superman, in a body hugging outfit in black with scarf, waistcoat and flowing cape in saffron. As Shyam, he is a Krishna figure, linked with a Radha, indulging in mischief, fun and frolic, rebuked by a doting Yashodha type mother. His method of combat in the contemporary world is modelled directly on that of Mandrake. He too is a professional magician who uses magic and hypnotism to disarm villains, and to rescue the innocent. In a typical Mandrake gesture, he converts his opponents' weapons into absurd objects.

Toofan, who is the stern face of nationalism, is presented as a grim, unsmiling figure. Each time he appears, an atmosphere of religious awe is sought to be created - preceded by a miraculous storm, he emerges as a silhouette on the horizon, while disembodied voices hail him. He is never wounded even by bullets and his Sagar Ramayan

style arrows never miss their mark. In the last scene, he descends to earth beneath a huge tricolour unfurled as a parachute. Presented with less realism than vigilante figures in earlier films, he has no associates, no home, no profession. The rootlessness of the new brand of full time politician is glorified as supernatural. No explanation is offered of how he was brought up or how he survives. We are required to believe that he is divinely chosen and sustained, as indicated in the film's distorted version of the famous Gita verse (Whenever *dharm* is on the decline and *adharm* in the ascendancy, I manifest myself): "Whenever the storm (*andhi*) of injustice gathers force, a storm (*toofan*) arises to stop it."

Having thus reduced the issue of *dharm* versus *adharm* to one of combating violence with violence, film makers Manmohan and Ketan Desai feel free to indulge in violence of the most gory kind. The nationalist figure solves all problems with brutal violence devoid of remorse and no different in degree or quality from the violence of the forces projected as antinational - corrupt police officers, dacoits and smugglers backed by the "foreign hand" in the shape of two white men. This is compounded by the needless violence of the plot which knocks off people by the dozen. Our count showed that a total of 57 people die in the film littering the screen with dead bodies. Within five minutes of the film's start (when only five characters have been introduced) three deaths take place. In 20 minutes, 22 have died, and in the first hour, 38. The visual presentation is no different whether it is Toofan killing or his opponent, Shaitan Singh. Policemen and dacoits topple over like ninepins, spouting blood. In addition to deaths there is an abundance of sadistic torture - severe batterings, chopping off of limbs, attempted rapes.

Significant shifts are evident in the film makers' attitude to violence by the hero. In earlier years, the villain in Hindi films often underwent a change of heart. This option (and even the aspiration on the hero's part to reform the villain) has increasingly been eliminated of late. However, even in films of this decade, there was a tendency to shield the hero from the stain of deliberate violence. Generally, the villain would either be killed by the hero in sheer self defence, or he would destroy himself, or he would be handed over to the police. In *Toofan*, however not only does the hero have no compunction about killing in cold blood but, perhaps for the first time, a child is shown

deliberately killing a captive man, and this is legitimised. This initiation of children into the cult of violence is reminiscent of fascist organisations' attempts to indoctrinate youth.

The justification offered for the hero's murderousness is that he is the saviour of the people. People appear only as passive victims raising slogans of "*Toofan Zindabad*". Significantly, Shaitan characterises them as provoked to violence only by religious fervour, especially that related to temples: "If it was so easy to break temples and take out gold, then the countless gold lying in this country's thousands of temples would be ours. People become mice and creep into their holes at the sight of us, but at the name of religion they confront us like lions." Counting on this formula to win support, the film makes several gestures towards the *Ramjanambhoomi* controversy, for example, *sadhus* who find an image of Hanuman under a tree declare "Wherever *moorti shapna* (instalment of idols) takes place, there should be a temple there -*Jai ramji ki!*" This is as clear a reference to *Janambhoomi* supporters' instalment of idols in the mosque as could have got past the censors. Another such reference to contemporary events is contained in what may be termed the disco *bhajan* "*Lanka main danka bajaney aya, Bajranga*." This song- dance is led by Toofan who inaugurates the temple, clad wholly in saffron for the occasion. One of the most painful aspects of these crude attempts to project Hindu nationalism as the cure for all ills, is the distortion of Hindu philosophy. The Gita's sophisticated concept of many paths to self realisation gives way to a threatening imperative: "Liberation is to be found here, Everyone will have to come here."

In his other incarnation as Shyam, Amitabh operates the politician's second formula - of throwing crumbs to the people. He is an entertainer whose theme song, a straight lift from the Grammy award winning "Don't worry, be happy" presents a Hindi version of American pop psychology. The actions he performs while singing this song are revealing. First, he and his friend Gopal help a cripple cross the street and give him an (appropriately metaphorical) ice lolly. Then, Shyam makes magical water flow from a tap at which poor women are waiting in a long



queue, magically transforms a drunkard's liquor bottle into a feeding bottle for his hungry baby, arranges a love marriage between a Hindu boy and a Christian girl whose parents were keeping them apart, dances with train passengers, explains overcrowding in trains as due to overpopulation, producing a Nirodh as the solution, sends video parlour clients to the cinema, and, finally, teases and molests a film actress at a shooting and dances with film extras - a scene supposedly reminiscent of Krishna's pranks with the women of Braj, but actually closer to Youth Congressmen's antics at international youth meets. The seeming dichotomy between the two faces of heroism appears in the fact that Toofan, the protector of women, appears when Gopal's wife's *sari* is being unwound, Draupadi style, by a would-be rapist, while Shyam himself unwinds the *sari* of the indignant film star he accosts and jerks it to the tune of "*Haath mein tera pallu hai*" (that is, you are completely under my control).

In the shift that *Toofan* makes from domestic melodrama, the staple of Hindi films, to national melodrama, women's roles get severely truncated. They exist only to provide sex and sons, or, at most, to act as pawns in men's attempts to entrap each other. Devyani, the surrogate mother, is usually alone, lamenting her son's absence. As the men have little time for love of women (the strongest emotion betrayed by Shyam is for his friend Gopal, while Toofan is too engrossed in himself for any other emotion) the film makers resort to crude objectification of sex in the form of phallic symbolism and of the girlfriends cavorting around in revealing clothing.

That the film envisions the world in general and politics in particular as a jungle where each man is for himself and fights alone, is evident in the isolation of both Toofan and Shaitan. For the first time, we have the unrealistic portrayal of the dacoit chief as killing every one of his associates (except the two foreigners) in order to keep the booty for himself. Similarly, Toofan has no real allies and always fights alone. It is to be hoped that the similarity between Toofan and Shaitan will communicate itself to viewers and unwittingly undercut the intended message of the film.

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