Women in Indian Cinema

It is an industry of sharp contrast, with work ranging from the noblest to the most preposterous, from the most hedonistic to the most devotional, from the most jovial to the most despairing (Barnow and Krishnaswamy).

Commercial Indian cinema is all of those. The beginnings of film history in India date from 1896 with the first feature film being made around 1912-13. What Barnow and Krishnaswamy omit to say however, is that, in general, the Indian film industry is also conservative and reactionary in the ideals it upholds and the values it projects. This is nowhere more evident than on the question of women.

Commercial Indian cinema is the single most powerful medium of communication in Indian society. It is estimated that as many as 12 million people watch a film in a week. Because they are full of song and dance, romance and colour, it is all too easy to dismiss them as being escapist, melodramatic, romantic or simply spectacular. But if we look deeper, there is no denying that far from being mere escapism or spectacle, the popular Indian film constantly projects existing ideas and values. The social issues it takes up, its methods of dealing with these, reinforcing certain values, undermining others, all these go deep.

Women, as a ‘social issue’, have been present in popular Indian cinema almost right from the start. Barnow and Krishnaswamy tell us that as early as 1924 Chandulal Shah, a film producer, made the first film that dealt with the ‘women’s question’. The film, Gun Sundari (Why Husbands go Astray) was considered a milestone in the rise of the Indian ‘social’ film. It deals with the story of a wife, who, preoccupied with her problems during the day, attempts to discuss them with her husband at night. The latter, tired after a day’s work, is uninterested in a discussion and would much rather have his wife fulfilling her proper ‘wifely’ role. Because she fails in this ‘duty’ the husband turns to a dancing girl. The film presents a definite message and moral: don’t only be a dutiful wife, be a companion too. That way lies happiness.

The tradition of treating ‘women’s issues’ has never been more alive in commercial Indian cinema than at the present time. Film producers and directors have not, for example, been slow to take up some of the issues that currently preoccupy the contemporary women’s movement in India. Among these are marriage, widowhood, dowry, rape. In recent years there has been an increase in the numbers of such films, as male producers and directors show a superficial concern with ‘women’s issues’. As
women become more and more visible on the screen however, it becomes important to ask what this visibility consists of. What are the sorts of roles women play? How are they projected? Do women film stars serve as models for Indian women? How far do their films reflect social attitudes towards them? How far do they shape such attitudes? Equally it is important to look beyond this, to the many thousands of women beyond the screen who remain invisible, as stuntgirls, camerawomen, designers, make up women.

In the limited space available to me here it is not possible to provide answers to all the above questions. However a starting point may be that in spite of increased visibility, Indian women are not in general autonomous and self defined in the films. This is not surprising given that 90 per cent of the directors and producers are men. It is not an oversimplification to say that in popular Indian cinema women are seen very much in bad or good roles. The good ones are, more often than not (self sacrificing) mothers, (dutiful) daughters, (loyal) sisters or (obedient and respectful) wives. They support, comfort and very seldom question their men. They are self-sacrificing and above all pure. It is these ideals that make up their 'strength'. These are traditions which they revere and preserve. On the other side of the coin modernity often seems to be equated with being bad. Bad women, other than being modern, are often single, sometimes widowed. They may be westernised (synonymous with being fast and 'loose'), independent (a male preserve), aggressive (a male quality) and they may even smoke and drink. Often they will wear western clothes but the moment they suffer a change and reform their ways, they will clad themselves in a sari and cover their heads. There are, of course, exceptions to the above stereotypes, but they remain exceptions.

Thus, in spite of some apparent concern with 'women's issues', the commercial Indian film constantly projects the woman as a sex object on the one hand, and as an unequal partner on the other. There is perhaps one film in every 100 that attempts to look at a woman as a human being in her own right. The hypocrisy that equates independence and modernity with badness is very much a product of the middle class morality that pervades Indian films. In a very curious way however, film stars who have made it by a life in acting (Nargis is an obvious example) — a profession that was taboo at one time — do not seem to come in for much ridicule or disrespect. Somehow, they are no longer considered 'bad' women and provided they remain happily married and are good mothers, they are even accorded a measure of respect.

Again, the apparent concern with women's issues is less than skin-deep. When, a few years ago, women's organizations launched a campaign against rape, the Indian film industry was not slow to take up the challenge of making a social film on this particular subject. B.R. Chopra, one of the most prolific of directors, presented viewers with a film which claimed to deal with this issue sympathetically. The film, Insaaf Ka Tarazu (Scales of Justice) dealt with the story of Bharti, a model who lives and works alone in Bombay and who supports her younger sister through her work. Bharti is raped in her flat one day by a young businessman whose advances she has been rejecting. Boldly, she decides to take him to court where the scales are heavily weighted against her and she is made to feel the guilty one. While attempting to elicit some degree of sympathy for her (particularly through her treatment in the court), the film insidiously manages to project Bharti in a bad light because of her lifestyle, her way of dressing, her profession. Had she been good in all of these things, the rape need never have happened. And again, while claiming to deal with rape as a 'social' issue, the film constantly treats the actual act (which occurs three times, once in the introductory credit role, once with Bharti and once with her younger sister) in the most titillating manner possible. This film, predictably, drew largely male audiences whose sympathies undoubtedly lay with the rapist and who salivated, heckled, participated and obviously felt at one with the rapist right through the film. No doubt many of them
saw themselves in a similar role. Thus, the director and producer, while claiming to have made a 'social' film, actually ended up producing a box office success which makes no attempt to even begin to challenge the social and political realities of rape.

There is a seeming paradox in the way women are treated in Indian cinema. For it is also true that on occasion, there is a certain amount of reverence shown towards them and they are often shown as being very powerful. For example, the reverence shown to a mother is considered the most sacred and unquestionable of duties, and a mother’s strength and power in the household is seen as absolute. But it is also true that her authority seldom extends beyond the confines of her home. It is the father or son who runs the family business while the mother runs the family home. *Mother India*, one of the all-time classics of Indian cinema, is one such film. The story of a peasant woman whose husband leaves her because he loses the use of his arms and is therefore unable to farm; it shows how Radha, the woman, takes on the responsibility of earning a living and bringing up her family in the face of constant hardship. The film projects Radha as, on the one hand, an extraordinarily powerful woman and on the other, as the archetypal mother whose life is made up of self-denial and sacrifice for the sake of her two sons and who, till the end, remains fiercely loyal to her absent husband.

In recent years, new Indian cinema has attempted, to some extent, to redress this balance by looking at women’s issues more seriously and by attempting to avoid some of the stereotypes. The films *Bhumika* and *Nishant* by Shyam Benegal are good examples of such attempts. The new Indian cinema is characterized by the more independent film directors making films with less money, and the subject matter is more overtly serious and political. Such films have come out of the tradition of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, but are different in that younger directors dominate; some of whom have also come out of the commercial cinema market in order to make more relevant and politically outspoken films commenting on various aspects of contemporary social reality in India. But, although new Indian cinema has made a name for itself in the international marketplace, it has had little impact at home, where it is most important. This is partly because it is hampered by a lack of finances and partly because it makes the mistake of not speaking a popular language and therefore not catering for the popular culture.

Change will be slow to come in commercial Indian cinema, and there will be no real change until such time as women begin to make films about themselves. Three women film directors have appeared on the Indian film scene in recent years: Aparna Sen, Sai Paranjpye and Prema Karanth. A small number in a film industry that makes as many as 700 films a year. But a beginning nonetheless. The issue of the images of women in cinema has only been treated in a perfunctory way by the Women’s Movement in India; there has been the occasional agitation about a particular film (for example *Insaaf ka Tarazu*) but not very much more than that. However, women’s groups are now attempting to collect information about the ‘hidden’ women in commercial and new cinema, and about the effect of cinema on its audiences. This will hopefully lead to a more concentrated and organized campaign around the images of women in cinema. The problems of creating one’s own media, particularly in an area as expensive and as mystified as film, are enormous. But the women’s movement in India is both strong and resilient and there will perhaps come a day when it will be able to counter male images of women in cinema.

Urvashi Butalia