

Films



Ram Ke Naam

Chronicle of a demolition Foretold

Anand Patwardhan's film reviewed
by Mrinal Pande

Anand Patwardhan's documentary film on Ayodhya, *Ram Ke Naam*, was completed two years ago, after the momentous happenings of October 30, 1990. The film makes interesting viewing today because it provides documentary evidence of the feelings and attitudes that began to take visible shape with Advani's abortive Somnath to Ayodhya *rathayatra*. It is almost as if one were face to face with the chronicle of a demolition foretold.

The documentary opens with a vinegary voice barking out details of the proposed *rathayatra* by Advaniji, and quickly pans to the milieu in Ayodhya (Shri Ram Fast Food joints, men on motorbikes with saffron headbands and sunglasses, piles of sanctified *ram shilas* (bricks)) and then goes on to show an excerpt from a video prepared by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) at the Jain Studios, called *Bhaye Pragat Kripala*. The movie informs viewers through various trick shots about the sudden and miraculous appearance of a divine baby (Ram Lalla) inside the mosque in 1949, claiming his birthplace. The camera then focuses on the faces of

the young men (there are no women) watching this video, their eyes glistening with tears, jaws tightly clenched with emotion. Then follows an interview with one Mahant Ram Sevak Das Shastri who, in typical VHP phraseology, confirms the miraculous happenings and deflects some uncomfortable questions by saying, "If I say more, the government might put me in jail."

The Ram Lalla sequence in the video struck a responsive chord somewhere. Then it occurred to me that it was startlingly similar to B.R. Chopra's version of Mahabharata screened on Doordarshan. In this sequence, when the baby Krishna is born, lightning strikes, locks fall off and gates open on their own. Thus does the Jain Studio, and by implication Hindutva get linked up with Chopra's brand of entertainment.

The scenes that follow in the film are by now only too familiar: Muslim crowds bewailing their lack of access to justice, scenes of wanton destruction of property in the communal riots of 1986. Remember Shah Bano? Remember how the innocuous issue of a women's right to maintenance was plucked out from its normal context by the ultra right groups on both sides, then made a pretext for bickering about personal laws and pampered minorities and threatened identities of groups that were allowed to have a special status? The riots that followed, the backtracking and passing of the Muslim Women's Bill are all history

now. But the documentary reminds us of its legacy—the Ram Janmabhoomi vs. Babri Masjid battle. It carries a warning for the future too, as voiced in the slogan. '*Abhi to yeh Jhanki hai, Kashi—Mathura baki hai!*'

One of the forlorn neglected voices of sanity in the documentary belongs to Mahant Lal Das, who was appointed caretaker of the Ram temple by the courts. He reiterates that Muslims never restricted entry to the area and that those who are inciting the youth to wreck the mosque and build a temple there are playing the politics of votes. There are also interviews with women from slums who say they have nothing to say because they are poor and illiterate. But in sheer contrast to such self-effacement is the aggressive posture of the young Bajrang Dal representative from Bihar, the owner of an 'electrical business' who says they shall remove anyone messily and by force if need be, to build the temple. The other member of the Dal, a law student, fends off queries about the historical evidence regarding Ram's date of birth. All he can eventually say is, "I am a law student. They do not teach history in law classes."

Advani's fiery cavalcade enters Bihar in the film. A devotee stands with folded hands, *arti* and flowers, waiting for the *rath*. It is dark by the time the cars come tunnelling through the dark. Then it's broad daylight and time for public meetings. Glimpses of fiery political rhetoric follow. The

CPI(M) leader decries the *yatra* and mocks at the whipped up fervor of the BJP. The BJP rally is addressed by film star Shatrughan Sinha. Crowds are thick everywhere. There is a sound of clapping when Laloo Yadav asks Advani to stop or else. Words, like drops of dew, evaporate as the heat mounts and riot scenes fill the screen once again. The drunk Janata Dal MLA from Haryana declares he is joining the BJP. BJP by now, to the likes of him, justifies everything from capitalism to an aggressive anti-Mandal stand. Even booze. "What I drink was called *som rasa* and drunk by all those heroes in *Puranas*" the MLA says.

The balding income tax commissioner, an MBA from the USA who was axed for having dared raise

objections to fudging of tax arrears of the VHP, says sadly, "When they sacked me, I knew that the rule of law in the country had died."

Somehow after this, the encounter with nearby villagers who voted neither Congress nor BJP but CPI(M) because the former two parties were using religion as a platform, fails to inspire hope for the future safety of communal harmony in the town. The last words belong to *kar sevaks* who broke through the BJP cordon on October 30, in a hail of stones and sticks, and attempt to justify Godse's murder of Gandhi. "Whosoever blocks our path shall be removed like him," declares an old man who carries a blanket on his shoulders, and hatred in his eyes for the media and declares

himself to be a Khatri — Khatri — Khatri.

In India whenever you approach people with cameras and a mike, you get enough to put a picture together. But, after December 1992, one suspects that not only anti-media hostility in Sangh parivar cadres but also a certain secret guilt trip within other parties, would perhaps block off most pertinent queries and make the filming of an honest sequel rather difficult.

Patwardhan's documentary is a relentless reminder of the rare commodity called truth. Though technically or editorially it could be considered flawed on some counts, it should be compulsory watching for all Indians who want to understand how Ayodhya happened and why. □



There is a surfeit of information about recent events in Somalia, most of it from a detached political perspective. We are told about the inter-clan rivalry, the anarchic conditions that prevail in the country and international efforts to provide relief to a starving population. Unfortunately, a huge abyss seems to divide the lay reader from what is perceived as the "Somalian problem" because it seems remote from our own experience.

Marion Molteno's first novel, *A Shield of Coolest Air*, makes it impossible for us to remain unmoved

Books

A Shield of Coolest Air

by

Marion Molteno, Shola Books, London, 1992

Reviewed by Kavita Charanji

by the events in Somalia because it delineates the human tragedy of the situation. It is a powerful work of fiction that traces the fortunes of Somalian refugees who seek asylum in London. There is Haleemo, alone in the city with her two small children and anxious about the fate of her two older children left behind in Hargesia. Similarly, Anab struggles to make a life for herself with her young daughter, but lives with uncertainty as her 18-year-old son battles the military government in Somalia. Other characters to flee political persecution are Mohammed and Nuh.

Though set in London, the back-drop of the novel is Somalia. Each of the Somalian characters is testimony to the senseless cruelties of a despotic military regime. Anab is a typical case in point. Though she maintains a calm, dignified exterior, she

carries the scars of her traumatic past. Her doctor husband was tortured to death in prison for the "offence" of setting up a community project in a hospital. Her son has taken up arms against the military regime because he is angry both about what it has done to his father and murder of his cousin who tried to prevent soldiers from raping his sister. It seems unlikely that Anab will see him alive again. In similar fashion, the military routinely takes away supporters of the Somali National Movement (SNM) at gunpoint, detains people without trial, and tortures prisoners.

Such images of oppression remain etched in one's consciousness as impersonal news reports do not, because they seem to be the first hand accounts of individuals, even if voiced through fictitious characters. If it is possible to fault Molteno, it is

for leaving gaps in the political context of the story. It would, for instance, have helped to know more about the man-made famine to which international attention has been riveted and about the inter-clan rivalry that has plunged the country into anarchy. Molteno's novel, published in 1992, is located instead in 1990 when Somalian clans were battling the military government. The latter has since been ousted from power.

Yet if there is room for further development of the political background, the author more than compensates for it by her attention to detail in the portrayal of the major characters. Hassan and Rachel stay in our memory for the realistic portrayal both of their strengths and inner conflicts. For instance, the anger of Hassan, who is half Somalian and half British, is directed at a system that can allow his father to languish in a Somalian prison for no real offence and his cousins Mohammed and Nuh to be hounded by the military government so that they are compelled to leave their families and homeland. It hardly helps that he works for the Advice Centre for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (ACRAS) and finds his hands tied by an implacable bureaucracy. He often has cause for despair, as when he learns that his father is suffering from malnutrition or gets news of the suicide of a Kurd refugee served with deportation orders, despite having suffered torture in his homeland. Yet he does neither allow this anger to consume him nor wallows in self pity. As he tells his cousin, "I can't cope with the knowledge that there's nothing I can do."

The character of Rachel, a white South African, is equally well portrayed. She has her share of paradoxes. She has seen racial prejudice at close quarters while growing up in a conservative small town in South Africa. She is angry at the blatant racist attitudes of her own relatives but is reluctant to take a

political stand — and suffers guilt on this score. Yet, at the human level, she is able to relate to Haleemo's plight. This propels her to undertake a political campaign with Hassan (with whom she later falls in love) and ACRAS for refugee status for Haleemo.

Haleemo and the two children she wishes to bring into Britain come to symbolise the wider issue of the Somalian refugee problem. Their future, like that of many other Somalians fleeing political persecution, is to be determined by the British bureaucracy. But the workings of the bureaucracy leave little room for hope. Haleemo arrives at London airport and in her confused state forgets to make a mention of the two children she has left behind. On the basis of that statement, her fate is sealed — she is given the right to remain only for one year, instead of the refugee status that she needs to bring in her two other children. A letter to that effect has already been sent out to her. In the procedure bound bureaucracy's scheme of things, the rules have been followed and they cannot be altered, no matter the personal price that Haleemo has to pay.

In Molteno's world-view, there is room for hope despite the all pervasive gloom. Hope lies in

agencies and individuals being able to influence the decisions of policy makers. It is small and insubstantial efforts, the "shield of air" of the title, such as the campaign for Haleemo's children, that can sometimes work. Whether Molteno's own book provides sufficient basis for such optimism is debatable. None of the refugees are able to surmount the obstacles that are placed in their way by the bureaucracy.

Perhaps the greatest value of the book is that it takes us beyond its setting in Africa and Britain and establishes the universality of certain phenomena. Here we see clearly how our lives are determined to a large extent by those in power. It is easy to draw parallels between the bureaucracy of Britain and that of India. The latter can take decisions on our behalf just as arbitrarily, whether they involve projects for the 'welfare' of the people, irrational taxation laws or marriage and divorce laws. Similarly, oppression has no boundaries it seems. Is there, for instance, much difference between the military government launching an offensive against the SNM because its members belong to a certain clan, the persecution in South Africa on the basis of colour, the 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia-Herzegovina and nearer home, pogroms against Muslims in India? □

Other Books

Where Women Are Leaders: The Sewa Movement in India by Kalima Rose. Vistaar Publications, 1992. Rs 100. The Self Employed Women's Association (Sewa) is widely acclaimed for its role in the women's labour movement in India. A union with over 46,000 members, Sewa's objective is to secure a better deal for the marginalised self employed woman worker. The book traces the evolution of the organisation, its early struggles to organise women, as well as major achievements such as the formation of women's cooperatives and a women's bank. It also analyses Sewa's

efforts at the national level to ensure greater visibility for the self employed sector. **Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread: Procedures and Case Law on Maintenance** by Flavia Majlis. Rs 100.

The second publication in the Gender Justice Series, the aim of this book is to generate greater awareness of the maintenance laws. It explains in simple language, the procedures that women need to follow to secure maintenance. Through a number of case studies, the author reveals the many loopholes that exist in the law and the failure of the legal system to provide justice to women.