

FILM REVIEW: Siddhartha

Visual delight

THE story of *Siddhartha* (adapted from Herman Hesse's novel of the same name) is set in India at the time of Gautama Buddha. The hero (Siddhartha — Shashi Kapoor) is a young Brahmin, anxious to know the meaning of life. After an unsatisfactory meeting with The Enlightened One, Siddhartha realises that wisdom cannot be learnt from any other individual. The secret of life has to be realised through personal experiences.

Accordingly, he enters the Big and Cruel World, where he is soon immersed in the twin 'sin' of amassing wealth and satisfying sexual desires. Kamala (Simi), the beautiful courtesan, takes it upon herself to acquaint Siddhartha with the full depth of sexual experiences. Soon enough, however, the ex-Brahmin is sated with his 'rich' life. He drifts away, and comes under the influence of Vasudeva, (Zul Vellani) the boatman.

He meets Kamala again, when she is about to die, and she gives him her son by him. Siddhartha is still not at peace with himself, and wanders off again. Finally, he comes back to the river, meets Vasudeva and attains harmony with himself. At last, he has found some meaning in his existence.

As is obvious, the entire story is an intense psychological experience, translating which into celluloid is a tall, almost impossible order. Not surprisingly, Conrad Rooks has failed in capturing the spirit of Hesse's book. It isn't that Rooks' failure can be ascribed to the obvious difficulties in translating literature into cinema. Rooks has erred, perhaps consciously considering that after all the film has to make money, in mistaking the form for the spirit.

Visually, the film is a delight (the credit for which goes to photographer Sven Nykvist) but the spiritual turmoil which haunts the book is conspicuous by its absence. Siddhartha ends up being impotent spiritualism wrapped up in a sensual form, which Western audiences could interpret as an 'exotic experience' but which is more likely to inspire a yawn here.

Acting-wise, Shashi Kapoor is far too stylised and sophisticated. Simi looks gorgeous and seduces Shashi quite competently. That's about all.

R. A.

Cinema

IF RANJEET COULD THRASH DHARMENDRA!

The badmen in films only make good punching-bags for the heroes and fight-composers, says CHAITANYA KALBAG.

PICTURE Little Red Riding Hood, seated in a cinema house looking at a Hindi movie. When the drums growl and the shadows lengthen, when the script says it's time for evil, when the *hoi polloi* shift to the edge of their seats, and when, with all the cymbals in town creating a devil of a racket, the villain himself enters, Little Red Riding Hood turns to her grandmother and asks: "What are those dark glasses for, grandma?" And grandma replies: "The better to scare you with, dear."

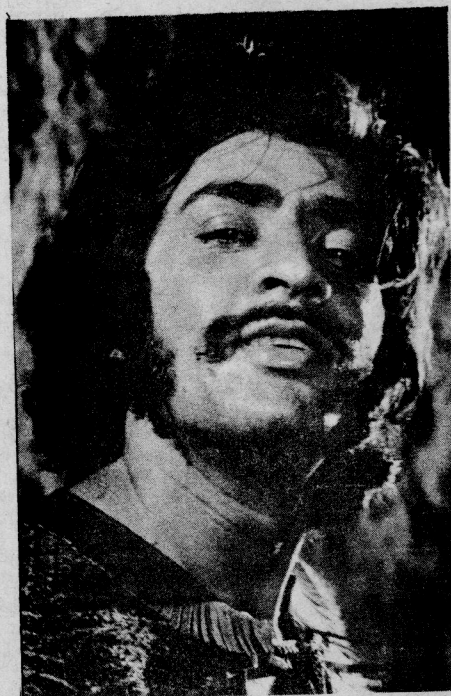
Salim and Javed, K. A. Narayan, and their colleagues, the story-writers, have concocted a recipe for a successful film in which the villain has a very important place. In an industry suffering from a lack of talent and a shortage of imagination, the villain finds himself in the majority of films a glorified punching-bag for the hero to practice his fight director's instructions on.

More often than not a mere foil to the hero's characterisation, the villain is perhaps the only therapy for over-soothed nerves that our doctors of violence could prescribe, in the absence of freedom in trying a really bold theme. Blood-curdlers like *The Clockwork Orange* and *The Exorcist* and *Jaws*, and erotica like *Emmanuelle* and *The Last Tango in Paris*, or a mixture of both elements in *Godfather*, these films are alien to the Indian psyche, malformed through years of apparently virtuous films that descend into a frequent catharsis of bloodied extravagance. For a people weaned on purity and chastity, with bare progress in the sensual thematisations even in the post-Khosla period, the villain affords the opportunity to indulge in all the bestialities that are rumbling under the filmgoer's skin.

It has often been said that the emphasis on violence may perhaps be an attempt to circumvent the taboo on titillation. But the protagonists of the theory assume that every human being has to have either a lot of sex or a lot of fights in the films he goes

to see. What is overlooked is the fact that the violence in a Hindi film is very often pointless to the point of sheer insanity — it is violence designed merely to deviate from an otherwise virtuous screenplay, violence that disappoints rather than pleases the blood-thirsty sections of the audience with its all-too-brief splendour.

The supporters of the Villain Theory add that evil, and violence as a corollary, is an essential part of life. The fact remains that the evil portrayed in the average Hindi film fails to bring home this point. On the contrary, what the audience is subjected to, is a half hour or more of wild slugging and *dhishum-dhishums* in the soundtrack, depending on the director's propensity for violence. The stage may not be too distant when the villain is greeted with boos and derision, with the screenplay man pitting him against the hero in a fiendish flurry of



The type cast 'badman' of the Hindi screen. Ranjeet, seen in 'Aag Ke Phool'.

ONLOOKER

blood-in-the-dust shots strongly reminiscent of a village cock-fight.

To add to the confusion, these 'badmen' of the screen protest in interview after interview that they have been 'typed', cast in a villain's mould (as though a villain were so much blancmange). But they do not fail to quote Pran's example, often with a touch of envy. Pran, who who could be called the archetypal Hindi villain, has in recent years impressed the public with more sedate, more benign roles. As the fiercely loyal Sher Khan in *Zanjeer*, and the drunken but golden-hearted Michael in *Majboor*, Pran has proved that a villain isn't a villain by any other name.

Even if the infrastructure of situations in a film story calls for a villain, (the Crook Around the Corner syndrome) the script-writers let their imaginations run riot when it comes to the quantity and the quality of crimes the villain commits. And th's, when people nowadays are beginning to recognise and to appreciate less fantasised films, is deplorable. Gory over-indulgence can never succeed at conveying the ubiquity of evil.

This repetitious casting of a set of men in villain's roles has its repercussions on their chances at trying more sober roles. The public refuses to accept them in any role other than that of a villain. This leads to the villains developing individual mannerisms and styles. The result is, there are at least a dozen villains waiting to be assigned 'bad' roles, each with a particular specialty. This paucity of roles leads to drastic measures being taken to remain in the public eye. On the one hand are stories that Pran and Prem Chopra are good husbands and exemplary fathers when not shooting. On the other hand, we find a relative fresher like Ranjeet resorting to a "daring, revealing" pin-up in a film monthly, with his briefs slung suggestively over an object d'art nearby.

The villain's part in the Hindi film is therefore highly implausible. He ends up failing to frighten. The violence he represents is weak, ineffectual. The manic sniper in *Dirty Harry* was superb because he didn't seem to be superhumanly evil. The demented, one-legged k'l'er in *House of Wax* was chilling because he did not go around killing his victims in a fairy-tale haze of contradictions. The villain in a Hindi story may be plausible, but when he lands up in the script-writer's hands, he is subtly tailored to fit into the phantasmagoric aspirations of the scriptman. It is difficult to imagine Pran or Premnath acting in a *Dracula* film, trying to emulate Christopher Lee's hiss and

bared vamprie teeth. Histrionics are unnecessary for an Indian villain.

This association with the villains in every film that is released could result in the people at a bus-stand wondering where the villain who's just whizzed by in his car is headed for, and which lady he's on his way to rape. Brainwashed by their on-screen antics, we find it hard to visualise them as clean-thinking citizens off-screen.

Lessening the prevalence of villainy in film plots would render our fight composers jobless. The villain, for them, is the catalyst in an otherwise wishy-washy set-up, the means by which the hero proves his manhood to the admiring heroine, the reason for the stuntmen's exist-



Pran is the rare example of a villain now playing benign roles.

ence in short, the only dash of colour in a grey story. The very essence of the villain's co-stars' relevance revolves around h's shadowy presence.

Right from the day Prince Paris abducted Helen of Troy and inspired the Trojan Horse and Homer's *Iliad*, villains have held the stage at various points in history. But it is only in the history of Hindi films that the villain has held the stage for so long, and so unfailingly.

Will Rogers says in his autobiography: "There is only one thing that can kill the Movies, and that is education . . . Some say, what is the salvation of the Movies? I say, run 'em backwards. It can't hurt 'em and it's worth a trial." It's certainly worth a trial, if only to get to see, for once, a Ranjeet thrashing the daylights out of a Dharmendra!

Trends hits and misses

CHHOTI Si Baat's success has had predictable results. Many other producers have decided to produce similar 'quickies'. All are hoping that just as B. R. Chopra hit the jackpot with his Rs 6-lakh film, they too will have similar luck.

What is more, even Raj Kapoor is going ahead with his *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram* at breakneck speed. Considering that his *Mera Naam Joker* took almost five years to be completed, it is quite intriguing that he seriously plans to finish the new Shashi Kapoor-Zeenat Aman starrer by the year end. The difficulty in getting dates from busy stars has supposedly convinced him of the necessity of making *Satyam* a 'quickie'. As the ace showman says, "Today everyone in films has become a taxi. Two hours here; three hours there; one hour elsewhere, and so forth".

However, one should keep in mind that in film-land there is many a year between intention and execution. After the failure of *Ishk, Ishk, Ishk*, Dev Anand had announced a 'quickie', *Bullet*, to be directed by that master director, Vijay Anand. The film is still nowhere in sight.

Of the recent releases, *Chalte Chalte*, *Lakdi Bholi Bhaii*, *Khalifa*, *Nehle Peh Dehlaa*, *Subse Bada Rupaiya* and *Shanker Shambhu*, the latter three films have done well. *Shanker Shambhu* was released in the north quite some time ago and had proved to be a hit of sorts, but it was not certain that the film would fare as well in the metropolitan area of Bombay. Had it been an unalloyed dacoit story, like *Pratiggya*, it would have just passed muster in Bombay. But the producers gave the dacoit story a smart twist by bringing the bandits to Bombay and that has done the trick.

The success of *Sabse Bada Rupaiya* proves that the top stars' allergy to Mahmood notwithstanding, the funster remains very popular with the people. And that two decades after he introduced R. D. Burman in *Chhote Nawab*, Mahmood continues to have a sharp ear for good music. Debutante Basu Manohari's music in the film is one of its highlights.