

A refreshing antidote

By Ajit Duara | Gentleman | August 1999

Jabbar Patel's Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar looks at Hinduisim, modern India and our own prejudices.

Jabbar Patel's Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar is the finest historical film made in Independent India. Nearly three hours long, it covers the period between 1915, when Ambedkar was at Columbia University to October 1956, when he converted to Buddhism, along with hundreds of thousands of his followers. The film, made on an international budget and shot in New York, London and in India, covers a seminal part of modern Indian history and provides a unique perspective on Hinduism. Mahatma Gandhi spoke much on being a Hindu and so did Dr Ambedkar. Their views did not converge, though they respected one another. In Dr Ambedkar's view: " Mr.Gandhi is not a saint. He is a seasoned politician." The movie is a refreshing antidote to the way we have looked at India in this century - a work of cinematic scholarship.

The screenplay has been written by Sooni Taraporewala along with Arun Sadhu and Daya Pawar; the cinematography is by Ashok Mehta. The celebrated Malayalam actor, Mammooty, plays Ambedkar. And it is uncanny how the spirit of the man who framed our constitution glows through his persona. He plays the part with an essential dignity and his voice expresses Dr Ambedkar's razor sharp intellect and the clarity of his thought and speech. The film does not dramatize Dr Ambedkar's personality at all; rather the outstanding scholarship and leadership instincts of the man emerge purely through the screenplay - through his words and deeds. Richard Attenborough's touches of melodrama suited Ben Kingsley's presentation of the Mahatma, for Gandhi was a man who led by emotion. Dr Ambedkar leads by reason and constitutional law and the screenplay appeals to our logic through a well-paced narrative.

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar is an important film because it tells you the struggle of a man who returned from abroad with a clutch of degrees from some of the best universities in the world and faced discrimination at his very first place of employment. The peons objected to his drinking water from the containers in the office. Indeed, it is this unique perspective from which we look at Hinduism, modern India and our own prejudices in the film.

Gentleman August 1999