A Misogynist's Concerns

*Susheel Kumar Sharma**

Like father, unlike son. I do not remember my father ever going to a movie alone or taking my mother to one. But yesterday I took my wife to Kangana Ranaut's "Manikarnika". It being a Saturday, I was comparatively free. Moreover, as per my original schedule I should have been in Delhi, less to participate in a national seminar and more to get my wife's book released. It is her second book of short-stories, "*Dehri Kaise Laanghun*". She writes in Hindi. As the luck would have it, our reservation in the train was not confirmed despite it being W/L1, 2. I, of course, did not try to approach anyone and left it to the sweet will of God to plan things for me. Why – I'll narrate that story some other time. The unpacking of the suitcases has its own perils as so many dreams have already been shattered. I as a husband and a companion had the task of not only placating my better half but had to boost her morale up (we are old enough now to boost up estrogen levels) so that she keeps on writing and churning out more stories, though getting a publisher for them is no easy task. This collection has been waiting to see the light of the day now for several years, five to be precise. My father would not have chosen to act the way I did in this precarious (?) situation.

To return to my wife, she had been planning to see three Hindi movies, *Accidental Prime Minister*, *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* and *Uri* (sequence as per her priority), the last one at the suggestion of her elder son. I had shifted to Allahabad (then not rechristened as Prayagraj) in 2001. But I have not seen even one movie in the city all these years. May be, because I feel that a teacher has to lead a puritan life. Otherwise also this city always keeps one on one's toes, so there is hardly any pass-time left for recreation. I have only some vague idea about the locations of the theatres, knowing the show timings or the movie schedules etc. is out of question. My laptop, therefore, was my guide as asking someone would make me look ridiculous. *Accidental Prime Minister* was nowhere there. She wanted to watch the rest two in one go, after all she had presumed that my day was reserved only for her. But both of us had our own hunches. I, therefore, booked tickets for *Manikarnika* only. The price of the ticket was one deterrent. She kept on repeating the price used to be Rs 2.50 per head earlier. From where could I bring those days back? I just

mumbled things have changed, theatres have changed, people have changed, films have changed and even tastes of the film-goers have changed.

As we were sun-bathing after our lunch to while away time, reading casually, cracking peanuts, and eating *khajoors* as sweeteners, my younger son gave me a call from Indore. He sometimes talks to us, the elder one rarely does. He was surprised to know that we had planned to go to a movie. He said in the entire 27 years of his life he had never seen us going to a movie. I told him that we had seen a movie together when we were at Jaipur almost four years ago. It was more for site seeing, as tourist, as it was my first visit there. As a young boy I had a fancy for the city and a tour to the city would have remained incomplete without going to Raj Mandir Cinema. The movie there was immaterial, though we neither regretted the decision of going there nor of watching the film. By the way it was Kangana Ranaut's *Tanu Weds Manu Returns*. Both of us became fans of her after the film – it was our first encounter with the actress. I patted my back for my taste when my friend no less than Prakash Joshi openly wrote about his having become a fan of hers. Prakash has a better sense of aesthetics and is a trained connoisseur of theatre and films. My wife gently tried to remind her son that we had taken him to one while he was seven months old. We (three adults and two children) had travelled to Rudrapur from Pantnagar, a distance of about 20 kms, riding our Bajaj Chetak scooter to watch Sanjay Dutt starrer *Naam*. She also complained without any ill-will that because of him she had to be out of the theatre most of the time. Naturally, the son said, he did not remember it. Otherwise too children tend to forget the sacrifices (!) of their parents. He was calling us from his way back from Ujjain after having a *darshan* of Mahakaal. I told and reminded him, it was his second chance to be there. He had gone there first as a toddler with us, when we were there to attend our interviews. I was looking for a change of my job, and my wife was seeking one. He did not disbelieve me though he did not remember. I also told him of the popular belief that Mahakaal calls one thrice. He tried to dissuade us from going to *Manikarnika*. He said, the reviews of the film were not very high but our tickets had already been booked and could not be changed. Otherwise also how does it matter to a person who is out just to good humour his wife? In your sweet will let my will lie is the hard learnt formula for an Indian husband!

Why did I choose to watch the movie? Was it for Kangna? Indian wives do not mind their husband's falling for a film actress because they know that the appreciation is harmless as actresses are far beyond the husband's actual reach. Husbands also openly proclaim to be the fans of one actress or the other.

We had been expecting crowded roads because of the impending crowd of three crore (thirty million) and traffic restrictions on account of upcoming Shahi snan on Vasant Panchami (Sunday). Our fears were belied as the roads were almost deserted to what we had witnessed early last week (Mauni Amavasya). We could easily reach the PVR riding our LML scooter. It was our first ever entry into the Mall/PVR premises at Prayagraj though it has been there now almost for ten (?) years. We walked slowly, looking at various shops, looking for the ways, lifts and the escalators notwithstanding that my better half cannot walk very fast after her illness last year. The ambience inside the mall was of emerging India, trying to emulate the rich western countries though most of the shops were devoid of customers. Most of the persons in them appeared to be either salespersons or curious onlookers but not the buyers.

The first problem at the PVR entry point was my helmet. The security man gently reprimanded me for not keeping it with some counter on Ground Minus one. I could not understand him. So, I asked him again with equal gentility where it should be kept next time. He immediately guided me. As we were there just in the nick of time before the show was to begin, he was polite enough to keep it safely instead of turning me away and making me run to look for its proper place. The hall was not overcrowded, not even full. After the commercials were shown the film was screened.

The film is about Rani Laxmi Bai, who is not Kangana's chachi (aunt), but a national hero, not a heroine. All of us have heard and read about her bravery in our history and literature books, particularly Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's poem "Khoob Ladi Mardani Woh To Jhansi Wali Rani Thi" was a must for each one of us in our school days. Then why was the hall not full? Was her valour not the proper subject matter for a film? Do we Indians not appreciate our women to challenge the gendered roles?

The show began with the national anthem. Not one person remained seated; on the other hand, there were some who had been humming along with. This was entirely in contrast to the hullabaloo in the newspapers against the practice of playing anthem. The film being on a known historical subject matter is rightfully not full of dance, drama, and sentimentality for which Bollywood is generally known. We are told that it has also not done proper revenue earning so far. But the film will certainly not die its own death and will be kept on being screened both lawfully and unlawfully (violating the copyrights) in Indian households. So far, there has been no demand for making its screening tax free though it deserves to be so.

I kept on wondering why the reviews were not good. Is it because a daring young queen has been shown challenging the patriarchal system? Had that been the case the so-called feminists and their supporters would have come out so openly. Are the feminists and their ilk silent as Laxmibai revolts against the patriarchal system not for her personal agenda but for a cause? Why are all of them silent? – perhaps because this does not suit their agenda of maligning India on the basis of gender discrimination. The film is full of saffron flags. A large number of people in this country and elsewhere and their supporters in the film world, art critics, actors, directors etc. are allergic to this colour; they just want to see either red or green or white everywhere. Kangana is faithful to the historical facts in the film (credits have been given to two historians in the titles of the film one of whom is from Jhansi and another perhaps from Prayagraj) and therefore, lamenting that the fellow film fraternity is not promoting the film. Is she politically incorrect? The film is full of words like azadi, desh, swarajya, swantrata, matribhoomi, Bharat. This vocabulary is not liked by a large number of people who feel orphaned after the departure of the British from this land. The film paints the local dummy rulers, intriguing insiders, their British patrons and the East India Company in a very bad light. The British have left a very strong lobby behind them, many of whom pride and masquerade themselves as "opinion builders" in today's India. They exercise their control on various media channels – both print and electronic. The film has been done in Indian costumes because of the historical nature of the subject. Will it please the marketeers who are out to promote only a western dress sense and western attires? There was not one shop in the Mall selling Indian costumes though on every floor they had many showrooms of the multi-national brands. The film did not have music to suit western ears or western instruments. There was no whistling and shouting during the screening so common in Indian theatres. Was it owing to the taste of the crowds or a different class of persons had come to watch it? I shed tears in one or two scenes; I also clapped. I do not know about others' shedding tears or eyes getting moistened. However, in clapping I was joined by another young (unknown) lady who had come with her husband (in India it is very easy to make it out) and was sitting next to me. Which scene was it? – the last scene where Kangana/Laxmibai enters the flames willingly – call it Sati or Jauhar or suicide.

What will you call me – a misogynist?

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