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## Smita Patil: Fiercely Feminine

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**SMITA PATIL: FIERCELY FEMININE**

BY

LAKSHMI RAMANATHAN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City  
University of New York

2017

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate  
Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis  
requirement for the degree of Masters of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

### SMITA PATIL: FIERCELY FEMININE

by

Lakshmi Ramanathan

Advisor: Giancarlo Lombardi

Smita Patil is an Indian actress who worked in films for a twelve year period between 1974 and 1986, during which time she established herself as one of the powerhouses of the Parallel Cinema movement in the country. She was discovered by none other than Shyam Benegal, a pioneering film-maker himself. She started with a supporting role in *Nishant*, and never looked back, growing into her own from one remarkable performance to the next. She quickly became the go-to actress for most of the film-makers working in Parallel Cinema at the time. Patil was soon critically acclaimed both within the country and outside, for her work.

She created some of the truly unforgettable female protagonists in Parallel Cinema, roles for which she is still remembered and admired. These characters are feisty, fiercely feminine, and have left an indelible impression on critics and audiences alike.

What is it about her that enabled Patil to create these portrayals with such honesty and intensity? This thesis looks at her persona, as well as her craft, in order to answer this question, examining three of her films in detail: *Bhumika*, *Manthan*, and *Subah*.

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## **INDIAN FILM INDUSTRY**

The film industry in India dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in fact celebrated its 100 year mark quite recently, in 2013. *Raja Harischandra*, based on a legend from Indian mythology, was the first full length feature film released in the country, in 1913. The first talkie, *Alam Ara*, was released in 1931. The film was a commercial success, though no print of it currently exists. The industry typically did not believe in segmenting its audience, and tickets were priced at affordable levels. This was so that a majority of the country's large population, from different economic strata, had easy access to this medium of entertainment.

Over the course of the last century India has emerged as a key player in the business; and Indian Cinema has become a truly global enterprise. The country is the largest producer of films in the world, as per the data released in 2009 by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, (UIS). India produces almost twice as many films as the USA does, though the latter still has the lead in terms of global revenue generation, possibly on account of both Hollywood's reach and the per ticket price levied.

The market for Indian Cinema – apart from the domestic one – has historically been in South East Asia, the Middle East and the Soviet Union. But starting in the 1990s, there was a growing demand for Indian films among the Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), in the UK and the USA. The industry responded by consciously marketing cinema as a way for NRIs to connect to their roots and their culture. As a result of this – as well as an increasing awareness of Indian Cinema among non-Indians – it can be argued that to an extent Indian Cinema has moved into the mainstream in these countries. Today some of the more high profile films, in terms of budgets and star casts, have international release dates: they are released on the same day in London and New York as they are in Mumbai.

Films are made in several Indian states, close to about eighteen of them; and so there is a wide range in terms of language, content, budgets, production values, access to talent, etc. Indian Cinema is said to have gone through a Golden Age from the mid-1940s to the 1960s, which is the period when two principal trends – Bollywood and Parallel Cinema – made their mark.

### **Bollywood**

“Bollywood” is a term that was coined in the 1970s and has since become a part of film parlance, with Popular or Commercial Cinema being used as alternate terms. It refers to films made in Mumbai in the Hindi language, though it is often taken to refer to all cinema coming from India. The evolution of Bollywood is quite fascinating. Soon after independence, the themes of Hindi language films typically centered on Indian epics, or dealt with social issues. In the late 1960s and early 1970s – as the industry grew further – the focus shifted to romance films, and the romantic male lead was born. This in turn led to the emergence of the “movie star”, and Rajesh Khanna emerged as one of the more successful early romantic leads of Bollywood.

Alongside the romance films and extending well into the 1980s and beyond, another genre emerged, that has since come to stay: the action film. The result was an even bigger phenomenon, the “action superstar”. It would not be an exaggeration to say Bollywood has never quite been the same again. Amitabh Bachchan was the original superstar in this genre, epitomizing the “angry young man” in several films early in his career. He then made a successful transition to a brooding romantic, and even to a comic lead. He was thus able to establish himself as an anti-hero who fights for justice, but could turn around and essay a more regular Bollywood song and dance routine as well. It was during his dominance in the industry that the “blockbuster” film was introduced: these are typically films with a storyline about an extended family – or a set of characters – with all the thematic elements of a Bollywood film. As

a result the films allowed for a roster of multiple stars, though usually Bachchan headlined the cast, and was therefore the main draw. What is remarkable is that he was able to deliver box office hits one after another during this time. It was not uncommon for one of his films to be the top grossing film of the year for several years in a row.

The 1970s and 1980s was also the period when the concept of the “masala” movie was born. Masala is a mixture of spices used in Indian cuisine. In film parlance the term – attributed to a few of the directors and screenwriters working at the time – refers to a film that mixes several genres in one work: romance, action, comedy, and melodrama. These films tend to have long song and dance numbers that all too often have nothing to do with the storyline; they are akin to fantasy sequences providing an opportunity for the filmmaker to shoot in exotic locations, with multiple costume changes for the stars. The films aim to appeal to a broad audience with something on offer for each segment; they basically provide escapist entertainment for the viewer. They tend to have formulaic characters – heroes and heroines, villains and vamps, and comedians. The storylines are a hotchpotch of love triangles, family ties, sacrifice, crime, corruption, change of heart, redemption, etc., with no serious attempt being made towards a realistic portrayal of the content. Thus the quintessential Bollywood film came to be.

What accounts for the melodrama, and the musical element in Bollywood? One answer might be the influence of ancient Sanskrit drama on Indian Cinema, leading to the paramount importance of emotion in these films, and even to the emphasis placed on song and dance. Sanskrit is an ancient language of South Asia, which served both liturgical and literary purposes. Sanskrit literature in fact comprises a rich tradition of poetry and drama, as well as scientific, philosophical and religious texts. And Sanskrit drama is in some ways similar to the Wagnerian notion of “musical drama”, tending to combine a dramatic story, epic staging, and music.

Gradually with increasing box office clout and their ability to sell a film, stars began to command huge salaries for their work. As the films themselves started to pay attention to technical excellence, production budgets grew. Thus Bollywood has over the years become larger than life in a sense – not just in terms of its reach and influence – but also in the amount of money typically invested in the films, and therefore the revenues sought to be realized.

### **Parallel Cinema**

The other important trend in Indian Cinema is the emergence and growth of Parallel Cinema. This movement, also known as Art Cinema, originated in the 1950s in West Bengal, in the eastern part of the country. Inspired by Italian Neo-realism, it developed as a counterpoint to popular cinema; Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak were some of the filmmakers initially associated with it. Ray in particular credits Vittorio de Sica's neorealist masterpiece *Ladri di biciclette* with sealing his resolve to be a film-maker. He saw the film when living in London for a brief period, and found it deeply affecting.

Though there were some earlier films recognized internationally – *Neecha Nagar* in 1946 and *Do Bhiga Zamin* in 1954, both at the Cannes Film Festival – Ray's *Pather Panchali* released in 1955 was the film to firmly establish the Parallel Cinema movement. It went on to win several National Awards in India; was feted at the major international festivals – Berlin, Cannes and Venice; and was received with critical acclaim at others both in the UK and USA. Ray himself came to be recognized as a major talent.

The idea of this parallel movement grew out of a sense of frustration the filmmakers had with popular cinema, with its song and dance conventions. They wanted to make an alternative kind of cinema, one that was inspired in part by the literature of the time in the country. They wanted

to tell stories that reflected contemporary society, highlighting social issues and concerns. But they wanted to do this in a realistic manner. The Indian Government's initiative in the 1960s, to finance independent films that told stories with Indian themes, served as a further impetus. This was under the aegis of the Film Finance Corporation which later became the National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC).

In the 1970s and 1980s the movement traveled to the western part of India, broke into Hindi language cinema, and so gained a much wider reach. There were a slew of filmmakers who worked in Parallel Cinema: Shyam Benegal, Mani Kaul, Saeed Mirza, and Govind Nihalani, to name a few. Benegal in particular made several powerful films in the 1970s that provided strong social commentary, and are today considered to be early classics of Parallel Cinema. He is also credited with discovering many of the leading actors who went on to become mainstays of the movement. So he is rightfully considered a pioneer, and one of its most influential filmmakers.

Subsequently the movement spread to regional cinemas, with talented and award-winning filmmakers emerging in other Indian languages such as Gujarati (Ketan Mehta), Kannada (Girish Karnad, Girish Kasaravalli), Malayalam (G. Aravindan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan), and Marathi (Jabbar Patel). An interesting trend was the collaboration between filmmakers working in different languages – be it with screenplays, scripts, or even performance. It was almost as if a lot of the talent at the time desired to come together to make meaningful cinema, cinema which could have a positive social impact. Chidananda Dasgupta, the eminent film critic and historian, and a co-founder of the Calcutta Film Society, wrote: “The difference between art cinema and commercial cinema in India is simply the difference between good cinema and bad – between serious films and degenerate “entertainment”. The new cinema in India is a creation of an

intellectual elite that is keenly aware of the human condition in India.”<sup>1</sup> Though in his enthusiasm to commend Parallel Cinema, Dasgupta delivers quite a scathing indictment of commercial cinema as a whole!

Parallel Cinema saw a decline in the 1990s, due to a variety of factors. The withdrawal of funding by the NFDC was certainly a significant one, coupled with the rising costs of making the films. In addition there was the growing popularity of television, competing for the attention of the audiences. Critics have argued there was probably a question of quality as well, that with the number of films being made their quality inevitably suffered. So the movement did not survive beyond a decade or two, while Bollywood has gone from strength to strength. A lot of the directors who were the beacons of Parallel Cinema have either faded away, or moved to television. As for the actors, several of them have made the transition to Bollywood, with varying levels of success. If anything some of the more astute among them have straddled the two worlds from fairly early in their careers.

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<sup>1</sup> Chidananda Dasgupta, “The New Cinema: A Wave or a Future?” in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, eds. Aruna Vasudev & Philippe Lenglet (New Delhi: Vikas, 1983)

## **SMITA PATIL**

Smita Patil was born in 1955, in Pune, Maharashtra, into quite a non-film background. Her father was a state-level politician, and her mother a committed social worker. She had a fairly typical Maharashtrian upbringing, and went to high school in Pune. The family later moved to Mumbai when her father became a Cabinet Minister. Patil herself was reluctant to leave Pune, as she thrived in the rich cultural milieu of the city. A milieu that was exemplified by institutions such as the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), and the Theatre Academy. She did stay on initially to complete her final year in school, but eventually had to make the move to Mumbai, to join her family.

There is a popular misconception – often repeated – that Patil is a graduate of FTII. Established in 1960 in Pune, FTII is an autonomous institute functioning under the Indian Government’s Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. It is considered the premier training ground for talent in the country, with several of its noted alumni working as directors, actors and technicians in Indian film and television. Mirza, one of the past Presidents of the institute, and himself an acclaimed screenwriter and director, has stated on its website: “I have been a student of Film and Television Institute of India, Pune in the seventies. For me, this Institution has been at the forefront of aesthetic and technological breakthrough in Indian Cinema over the decades. That is why it has built a national and international reputation. Our endeavour is to ensure that the students who study here receive all necessary inputs to keep them abreast of the latest innovation across the world. Moreover, to provide them the creative and aesthetic environment to realize their true potential. We are working towards establishing an Institute that will be a centre of excellence.”

Patil was certainly a frequent visitor at FTII, being a resident of Pune. She had a serious interest in cinema, and regularly attended the institute's evening screenings. Her only exposure to actually working under the aegis of the institute however came when she was cast in *Teevra Madhyam*, the prize-winning diploma film directed by Arun Khopkar in 1974. The film created quite a stir at the institute, winning awards for sound and cinematography as well, while Khopkar himself went on to become a respected film-maker and writer. There is an interesting story about how Patil came by her role. While he was scouting for a suitable actress for his film, a young newsreader on television was suggested to Khopkar, though he didn't actually get her name. A few evenings later, when he was heading to the center of the city, he happened to walk past an electronics store. He noticed that most of the television sets in the store were tuned to the same channel, showing a close-up shot of a young woman. A woman with clearly defined cheekbones and striking eyes. It did not take long for him to realize this was the newsreader who had been recommended to him; and he tracked her down right away.

Patil agreed to act in his film without hesitation, and Khopkar remembers and has remarked on the total commitment she brought to his student film. For one thing, she had to familiarize herself with the tanpura, a string instrument used as an accompaniment in Indian classical music. And she worked diligently to understand the notes. This trait of hers that has been noted by others as well: the way she immersed herself in the films and roles she accepted, and the single-minded focus with which she prepared for them, in order to bring her best to them. So Patil can be said to be more a graduate of FTII by association; having acted in a student film, and later going on to star in films directed by alumni of the institute. Over the course of her career, she also had the opportunity to work alongside several actors who were graduates of FTII themselves.

However her first, consistent exposure to the camera came when she was a newscaster on Doordarshan, the Government owned television network. Benegal is said to have “discovered” her on television, and he proceeded to cast her in a small role in his 1975 film, *Charandas Chor*. Whereupon a successful collaboration between director and actress was born, spanning a period of nine years and six films. The first four of these films were made from 1975 to 1977; and so in a sense, it could be argued that Patil arrived with a bang into the world of Parallel Cinema, in films helmed by one of its acknowledged masters.

Benegal directed her in three films between the years 1975 to 1977: *Nishant*, *Manthan* and *Bhumika*. She has a supporting role in *Nishant*, playing the wife of the youngest in a family of four brothers. They are the feudal lords in the small village, given to perpetrating atrocities on anyone as they fancy, including abducting the attractive wife of the village schoolmaster for their personal pleasure. Patil’s is a conventional presence in their home: of wife, and keeper of family and social traditions. Yet she is not as docile as it would seem, on two counts. For one thing, she is always questioning her husband and his unthinking obedience to the dictates of his older brothers. She challenges him to be more of his own man, and is instrumental in his transformation into a more sensitive human being. She also rises above her initial insecurity about the captive brought into her home, and reaches out to her woman to woman. Of course the change she effects in her husband, and so his more humane treatment of the schoolmaster’s wife, renders her concern less important. In fact the shifting power dynamic between the two women is one of the highlights of the film. What makes it all the more interesting is that the other woman is played by Shabana Azmi, an actress already firmly established in Parallel Cinema by virtue of Benegal’s earlier film *Ankur*.

Some of the commentary on Patil's presence and performance in the film are noteworthy. Azmi recalls: "I don't have a clear memory of when I first met her but it was probably during the making of *Nishant*. ... I remember her as a fairly quiet kind of person. There was one scene that the two of us did together. She comes and tells me to eat. And that's the scene that stayed."<sup>2</sup>

Karnad, who has acted in several films with her, remembers Benegal shooting Patil performing tulsi puja, a ritual performed by traditional Hindu wives: "That was the moment I knew a star was born. She glowed."<sup>3</sup>

But the highest compliment came from none other than Sen, a doyen of Indian Cinema:

"Suffering humiliation and fuming within – that was Smita Patil in her maiden appearance in Shyam Benegal's *Nishant*. It was an unforgettable portrayal of an oppressed woman in a feudal set-up and, indeed, an experience to watch. I was awed."<sup>4</sup>

Patil subsequently became Benegal's first choice, for *Manthan* and *Bhumika*. The former was her first starring role, where she plays a Dalit woman in a small village in Gujarat, while *Bhumika* was the film that won her the first of two National Acting Awards, and sealed her status as a talent to reckon with. In it she plays an actress who is trying to navigate her career and life in a male-dominated industry and world, struggling to come to terms with all of it, and find some modicum of inner peace.

She soon became the mainstay of many of the directors working in Parallel Cinema at the time, and starred in films in several Indian languages. Muzaffar Ali, Mirza, and Kumar Shahani were

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<sup>2</sup> Maithili Rao, *"Smita Patil: A Brief Incandescence"* (India: HarperCollins, 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Maithili Rao, *"Smita Patil\_ A Brief Incandescence"*

<sup>4</sup> Maithili Rao, *"Smita Patil: A Brief Incandescence"*

among those who worked with her in Hindi; Mehta and Patel directed her in Gujarati and Marathi respectively. Patil also worked with Ray and Sen, in films they made in Hindi.

Most interestingly, she chose to work in Malayalam, a South Indian language, with one of its leading directors, Aravindan. His films typically tended to have minimal dialogues, as Aravindan relied more on his actors' ability to convey emotions through their body language and facial expressions, especially their eyes. In a sense this worked wonderfully for Patil as she did not speak Malayalam. But she was more than capable of conveying the emotions and feelings of her character non-verbally, and so created an arresting portrayal of the female protagonist. The film *Chidambaram* explores relationships between men and women, as well as themes of guilt and redemption; it went on to win the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in 1985.

Patil stayed committed to Parallel Cinema in the initial years, despite offers from Bollywood.

After winning her first National Acting Award, she is known to have said: "I know I want to act in good films. But good directors are so difficult to come by. I hope I don't get pushed into doing commercial films, because, truly, that will be the end of Smita Patil!"<sup>5</sup>

However in the early 1980s, she forayed into the world of commercial cinema. Again in her own words: "I remained committed to small cinema for about five years. ... I refused all commercial offers. Around 1977-78, the small cinema movement started picking up and they needed names. I was unceremoniously dropped from a couple of projects. This was a very subtle thing but it affected me a lot. I told myself that here I am and I have not bothered to make money. I have turned down big, commercial offers because of my commitment to small cinema and what have I

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<sup>5</sup> Patil quoted by Ramya Sharma, "When she was good, she was very, very good," *The Hindu*, October 16, 2015

got in return? If they want names I'll make a name for myself. So I started and took whatever came my way. ...”<sup>6</sup>

She had a banner year in 1982, when she had tremendous successes in two Bollywood films: *Namak Halaal* and *Shakti*. Incidentally Bachchan played the male lead in both films; the former was a typical Bollywood blockbuster, while the latter was a classic tearjerker that pitted father against son in a family drama. Both films were among the top grossers of the year, *Namak Halaal* being in the first spot, and *Shakti* in the fourth spot. Patil went on to work with some of the renowned producers and directors in Bollywood, and starred opposite some of the leading actors of the time.

Of course she continued to work in Parallel Cinema all the while, and delivered one powerhouse performance after another. If anything her move to commercial cinema was vindicated when some of her films in alternate cinema, such as *Ardh Satya* and *Umbartha* were box office successes, in addition to being critically acclaimed. These films helped put Parallel Cinema on the map in a sense, both within India and outside the country.

Patil's career was quite suddenly and tragically cut short, when she died in 1986, soon after the birth of her son. There were a dozen or more of her films released posthumously. The highlight of these is *Mirch Masala*, in which she plays the confident and courageous Sonbai, a woman in a small village in pre-independence India, who stands up to the local tax collector who is preying on her, as well as the men in the village who want to hand her over to him because they are terrified of his wrath should she resist. The film functions best as an allegory, and has almost the quality of a fable, “where an everyday woman transforms into a living symbol of rebellion

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<sup>6</sup> Patil quoted by Monojit Lahiri, “A Blazing Talent Remembered,” *The Hindu*, December 20, 2002

against a patriarchal feudal order.”<sup>7</sup> While we realize that her reprieve from the tax collector will be a temporary one, the closing shot of the film is one for the ages. It is an image of Sonbai – of Patil – looking into the camera with an unblinking, unflinching stare, evoking the image of Devi. Devi is a Sanskrit word that literally means Goddess, embodying the female divine principle, and is a supreme being exemplifying courage and power.

*Mirch Masala* was the centerpiece of the International Film Festival of India in 1987, in a fitting tribute to Patil’s career. Her performance left an indelible impression on both critics and audiences alike, as a summation of her career and the many unforgettable characters she created on screen. In 2013, it was included in Forbes India’s 25 Greatest Acting Performances of Indian Cinema: “Patil was a great actress. Many of her great performances are laser-like in focus on a few things. ... *Mirch Masala* covers the entire oeuvre of her acting chops. From the low key of the early frames to the full blast upper registers in the closing stages of the film. The transformation is awesome.”<sup>8</sup>

Over the course of her career, she acted in seventy-six films, of which twenty-seven were films in alternate cinema. So while she came to Bollywood later in her working years, a full two-third of her output was in popular cinema. What this is indicative of more than anything else is the rate at which Bollywood churns out its films. What is more interesting is that Patil crafted a sort of middle ground for herself in Bollywood. She made several forgettable popular films, but once she came to stay in commercial cinema, she also created a few characters who went beyond being a mere decorative presence in the film. Characters who did not subscribe strictly to the

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<sup>7</sup> Maithili Rao, “*Smita Patil: A Brief Incandescence*”

<sup>8</sup> Shishir Prasad, N. S. Ramnath, Sohini Mitter, “25 Greatest Acting Performances of Indian Cinema,” *Forbes India*, May 2013

Bollywood code of what a “heroine” should be. It could be argued that it was her unique sensibility, and the ability to bring to life strong female characters, that allowed her to do this.

In the short span of years she was active, Patil was the recipient of several awards:

- National Film Award for Best Actress for *Bhumika: The Role* (1977), and *Chakra* (1980)
- Filmfare Award for Best Actress for *Jait Re Jait* (1978), *Umbartha* (1981), and *Chakra* (1982)
- Padma Shri Award (1985), a Civilian Award from the Government of India

She was also nominated three more times for the Filmfare Award for Best Actress, as well twice for the Filmfare Award for Best Supporting Actress.

## THE PATIL PERSONA

In film studies – and even in common parlance – a distinction is often made between an actor and a star. A star is someone with charisma, or a certain appeal, someone with a larger than life personality whose presence in a film is usually sufficient to ensure its success. In other words, a star has tremendous marketability. But what makes a star a star? This question has been the subject of a lot of discussion, and Martin Shingler sums it up rather well when he writes: “... some qualities are commonly considered necessary for a star to achieve success: most notably, charisma, expressivity, photogenic looks, mellifluous voices, attractive bodies, fashion sense and style.”<sup>9</sup> However Jeanine Basinger in her inquiry into the nature of stardom, alludes to that something more – that elusive and undefinable quality – that goes into making a star. Whereas in the case of an actor, outstanding talent is the overriding quality that comes to mind. This is not to say that stars don’t have talent, or that actors don’t have star qualities. There are certainly film stars who successfully combine elements of both the actor and the star: one could argue that Meryl Streep is a case in point.

Richard Dyer uses the term “star” inclusively; and goes on to make a distinction between different types of stars. He distinguishes those for whom every character they play is in essence an extension of who they are, or an extension of their star image. In other words, they are usually being themselves on screen, and there is no distance or separation between the characters they play in their films and who they are. John Wayne in Hollywood or Shah Rukh Khan in Bollywood would fall into this category. Then there are those who maintain a sense of separateness between their characters on screen and their sense of self; a Bette Davis or a Cate

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Shingler, *Star Studies: A Critical Guide* (London: British Film Institute, 2012)

Blanchett would fall into this category. The latter aligns with the term “actors” used in the distinction made earlier. So however we may choose to describe it or arrive at it, there is a distinction to be made. A distinction between someone who oozes charm and glamour, has the physical presence to ignite the screen, and thus ensure commercial or box office success; and someone who has tremendous talent, the ability to almost disappear into their characters, and create realistic portrayals on screen. Of course there is the further qualification of acting styles adopted by different actors, but that discussion is beyond the scope of the analysis here.

There are several writers on films and film stars who have taken the conversation further, and so built on the vocabulary we can use to understand the mechanics of stardom. One of the useful articulations in this regard comes from Christine Gledhill, in an essay she published in 1991. In talking about film stars, she used the terms “real person”, the “characters” or “roles” they play in their films, and the star’s “persona” which is quite distinct from the first two. The real person is “the site of amorphous and shifting bodily attributes, instincts, psychic drives and experiences.” The characters or roles played are “relatively formed and fixed by fictional and stereotypical conventions.” The persona however combines elements of both, and gives a public shape to the private. It is a consolidated projection that derives authenticity from the person behind the characters in the films, but draws on those characters as well. Gledhill also adds “image” as a fourth component, but that is something over which the star has less control, as it is influenced by extraneous factors to a very large degree.

It is useful to look at Patil using the Gledhill framework, to help position her in the context of Indian cinema. To begin with, she was not a “star” in the conventional sense. She did not have some of the qualities which would be considered a prerequisite for Bollywood stardom, be it exceptional looks, glamour, or fashion sense. But it was not just the absence of these qualities;

Patil had a further factor that worked against her. She was not fair of skin, but was really more a dark and dusky beauty. This is not typically acceptable in Bollywood, or even in a non-film setting in India for that matter, as there is a huge premium placed on being fair of skin in the country as a whole. But she had an arresting face: luminous eyes, sharp features, and an ability to convey both intensity and sensuality with one look. So hers was a different kind of beauty, of the dark and sultry variety, a beauty that took hold of the imagination in its own way.



Figure 1: Patil as Bindu. Still from *Manthan*, directed by Benegal, 1976

What is unquestionable though is her talent, as evidenced by the characters she created in her films. These are characters who stand out for their authenticity, their boldness, and their ability to “step out” of the bounds of convention. There is a searing truthfulness Patil brings to these characters which has made them indelible in collective memory. The various accolades she received for her work stand testimony to this talent. As early as 1984, and unusual for someone who was under thirty years of age – and had been active in cinema for barely ten years – Patil’s work was honored by a retrospective by the French Cinematheque at the Festival of La Rochelle, at the prompting of director Costa Gavras.

What then is the Patil persona? What is etched in the memory of critics and audiences, in the thirty years after she passed? To Annette Kuhn she “... epitomized “the new Indian woman,” projecting a strong self-assured sexuality, independence, and intelligent concern with the world about her. Refusing the saccharine glamour of the mainstream film industry, she set a new style for stardom – and femininity – in the eighties, celebrating a sensuality and simplicity associated with Indian traditional lifestyles, while passionately critical of women’s oppression within traditional systems.”<sup>10</sup>

Closer to home, Monojit Lahiri wrote in his tribute: “Her dusky, smouldering, earthy looks, coupled with her histrionic voltage, made her one of the stars of the New Cinema that was blitzing the screen and consciousness of a newer and more perceptive audience.”<sup>11</sup>

And Suresh Kohli summed it up thus: “In one’s reckoning, Smita Patil was, perhaps, the most accomplished actress of Hindi cinema. Her oeuvre is outstanding, investing almost every

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<sup>10</sup> Annette Kuhn & Susannah Radstone, eds., *“The Women’s Companion to International Film”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

<sup>11</sup> Monojit Lahiri, “A Blazing Talent Remembered”

portrayal with a powerhouse realistic performance. Look at her performances from art house cinema to mainstream films – Subah, Bhumika, Mirch Masala, Ardh Satya, Giddh, Chakra, Bazaar, Shakti.”<sup>12</sup>

There is certainly that amorphous blend of physical and psychological attributes that are unique to her, that helped Patil create her distinctive characters on screen. Among the more noteworthy of these, that merit mention are: Bindu in *Manthan*, Usha/Urvashi in *Bhumika*, Amma in *Chakra*, Kavita in *Arth*, Najma in *Bazaar*, Savitri in *Subah*, Jyotsna in *Ardh Satya*, Shivagami in *Chidambaram*, and of course, Sonbai in *Mirch Masala*. These characters represent women across a spectrum of Indian society, while they also have certain qualities in common.

They are women from rural and urban settings: Shivagami is from small village Kerala in the southern part of the country who gets married to a laborer in a tea plantation, while Kavita is a successful film star in Mumbai and so at the center of things in more ways than one. Most of the characters represent women from contemporary Indian society, but Sonbai is someone from the pre-independence period. Amma is from the dregs of society, living in Dharavi, the largest slum in India – and possibly one of the largest in the world. Jyotsna on the other hand is everywoman, a college lecturer in Mumbai. But what they have in common is the fact that they are all able to step outside their boundaries.

Whether they are affluent or poor, whether they are successful in their careers or striving to make something of themselves, and irrespective of the part of the country they live in, the truth is for these women there are clearly spelt prescriptions and proscriptions on what is expected of them. As well as very clear repercussions for any behaviors that are seen as inappropriate or deviant,

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<sup>12</sup> Suresh Kohli, “Immortal Performances,” *The Deccan Herald*, April 2, 2011

behaviors that challenge the status quo. In other words, the women are expected to know their place in society, and behave accordingly. But Patil's characters refuse to abide by these dictates; rather they chafe at them. They are strong, feisty women who are ready to take on the system, and the challenge of carving a path for themselves. Even if it means going against their families, going against the conventions of marriage, and uprooting their lives. Sometimes they are amoral, and more about their survival. At other times, they acknowledge and act on their desires.

How does she bring these characters to life? There is something about her persona that allowed her repeatedly to create them on screen with such believability. Three films will be explored in detail in an attempt to lay bare this persona, to describe her craft, and understand how the characters function: *Bhumika*, *Manthan*, and *Subah*.

## **BHUMIKA**

Benegal directed Patil in *Bhumika: The Role* in 1977, a remarkable film in many ways, not in the least because of what it meant to her career. To begin with, the film is about Hansa Wadkar, a well-known actress of the Marathi stage and screen in the 1940s and 1950s, who led a rather unconventional life, especially as a woman working in a male-dominated industry. And who better to play her than Patil, a young actress starting out on her own journey in the industry, which hadn't changed all that much when it came to gender roles. An actress who went on to create not one, but several portrayals of feisty women on screen, and made them her calling card, so to speak. It was however an incredibly demanding role for someone in only her second starring role in cinema. It is no wonder then that Patil has been quoted as saying "Hansa Wadkar is the most difficult film I have done so far, and therefore, the most satisfying. It was frightening at first-it is a plum role which any actress would give her right hand to get-and I didn't feel confident enough to tackle it."<sup>13</sup>

It was in a sense the role of a lifetime that came to her quite early on, and helped establish her credibility without a doubt; and Patil walked away with the National Film Award for Best Actress for her portrayal of Wadkar. As Anuj Kumar writes in *The Hindu*: "Smita Patil took a long time to realize that she belonged to the cinematic space and it was through the making of "*Bhumika*", her fourth film, that she realized her potential. Usha lives many lives within the 142 minutes of the running time and Patil peels off numerous layers as the narrative goes back and forth. No wonder she grabbed the National Award for the author-backed role."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Vaiju Mahindroo, "The Actors," *India Today*, November 19, 2011

<sup>14</sup> Anuj Kumar, "Bhumika," [www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com)

The film also documents the history of Indian Cinema itself: the studio sequences capturing the various roles the protagonist plays over the years serve almost as a walk-through of Indian films through that period, both in terms of content and craft. *Bhumika* is loosely based on Wadkar's candid memoirs, "*Sangtye Aika*" (Listen, and I'll Tell), though Benegal chose not to do any research on his subject by talking to her family or friends, preferring to say his film was "inspired" by her memoirs.

*Bhumika* is about Usha/Urvashi Dalvi, a successful actress of her time, tracing both her personal and professional story arcs. It delineates her struggle to retain a semblance of independence while striving toward a fulfilling life with her family, her search for a sense of self as she is buffeted between these two desires. And she is trying to do this in the public eye, in the midst of all the attention and acclaim that goes with being a film star.

Usha comes from a family of courtesans in a small town, though her mother has made a stab at respectability by marrying into a higher caste. Her grandmother is an acclaimed singer, and trains her in classical music, for which she shows considerable talent from an early age. Keshav Dalvi, an older neighbor, takes an interest in her that goes beyond her talent for music, often crossing the lines of appropriate behavior with her. He has a complex relationship with the family: he respects the grandmother for her ability to develop Usha's talent; he sympathizes with the mother for her patience with her ne'er-do-well husband, on occasion even behaving a little suggestively toward her. But it is Usha on whom he showers most of his attention, making an insistent and rather distasteful claim on her affections. Not surprisingly her father dislikes Dalvi intensely, but is unable to get rid of him because he provides the occasional financial, and the more frequent emotional support to the women.

When her father dies, Dalvi is instrumental in getting Usha an entrée into films, suggesting it will merely be a temporary phase in her life. She is overwhelmed but intrigued by this new world, and relies on him for support, though she also yearns to break free of him to freely indulge in her new life. Her mother does not help things, as she sees a career in films as a regressive step, something she does not want for her daughter. She is also not enthusiastic about Dalvi's involvement in Usha's life; if anything there is almost a trace of jealousy in her demeanor when she sees his entire attention being focused on her daughter. But in her vehement opposition to Usha's continuing friendship with him, she literally pushes her into Dalvi's arms. Though Usha is unsure of herself at this point, she pursues him as an act of rebellion against her mother. She is the one who makes sexual advances toward him, quite a bold step for a girl of her background. She becomes pregnant, and subsequently chooses to marry him.

There are four leading men in her life: her husband Dalvi, her co-star Rajan, one of her directors Sunil, and Kale, a businessman she takes up with at a later point. These men can be viewed as two distinct types. Dalvi and Kale are essentially small town men, who prefer to conform to a prescribed code of behavior, with clearly spelt out gender roles and expectations. Though in Dalvi's case, the roles have gone awry because he lives off his wife's earnings, and has to contend with the ensuing struggle that it entails. On the other hand, Rajan and Sunil are from the world of films, from a make-believe world if you will. They are used to life in a big city, and wear their affluence and privilege rather lightly. Despite living in a fishbowl they have no need to conform to social mores, because they are men working in films. Rajan however is mindful of repercussions of their behavior on his female co-star, whereas Sunil is completely agnostic in this regard.

There are two pivotal scenes in the film that tell us a lot about Usha, the milieu she was raised in, and her way of coping with intimidation. In some sense they mirror each other, even if they occur at different stages in her life. They elicit a similar response from her, though it is expressed quite differently on each of the occasions; and they involve the two most contentious relationships in her life.

The first instance is after she has been launched in films, when she makes a trip home to see her ailing grandmother. Usha is excited to share her success with her family, with her equally excited grandmother in particular. Dalvi arrives at her home, and shows her a scrapbook he has created of newspaper clippings about her. So the three of them are a unit, immersed in the joy of her success. Usha is the happy center of it all, luxuriating in the love and approval she receives from the other two. Patil essays a youthful exuberance in these scenes, bounding into her home with joy, and literally spilling over with her excitement. Her innocence and simplicity can be seen in the very casual way she is dressed, almost a throwback to her upbringing in a small town. She conveys a sense of not really being able to believe in her own success. So when Dalvi suggests they visit the local movie hall to watch one of her films playing there, she jumps at it.

Her mother on the other hand holds back, watchful of the closeness between Dalvi and her daughter. She stands as the sole, disapproving outsider. She objects to Usha spending time with him, and even brings up the matter of his being from a lower caste. Usha however feels she has earned the right to be independent, and does not have to account for her behavior to anyone. As she walks in late one night after an outing to the movies, her mother pounces on her. When she is nonchalant about disobeying her dictate about Dalvi, her mother drags her to the prayer room in the house. She demands that Usha swear that she will stay away from him from then on. This is a common practice in the Indian tradition, where an oath taken in the presence of the divine is

considered absolutely sacrosanct. Usha cannot but accede to this demand made of her. But we see her subsequently rushing over to Dalvi's apartment, in tears, complaining about her mother. He is happy enough to comfort her. Usha reminds him of his proposal to marry her, and initiates a physical relationship with him, which takes him by surprise. But once again, he is happy to comply.

Patil swings from happy, to rebellious, to upset and teary, and then to intimate and sexual, all in the arc of one sequence. We almost get a sense of where Usha is headed observing her in the prayer room: when she is asked to take the oath, she refuses to meet her mother's gaze; rather she keeps her head down all the while, seemingly doing what is required of her. She then heads straight to Dalvi.

The second instance is several years later, when Usha has been married for a while; we see her daughter is now an adolescent. Her screen name is Urvashi, and she has gone from strength to strength in the industry, a much sought after star at this point. Dalvi seems to be in charge, making decisions on her films as well as her co-stars, and managing her public appearances. He has just signed her up to play the lead in a new film, opposite the reigning superstar Rajan, and insists they attend the producer's launch party. This is to be her first film with Rajan after a break, since her husband has long been jealous of their relationship and so has ensured they have not worked together. He is watchful of her behavior all through the evening, especially when she engages with her co-star. Patil is very much the ravishing star in this sequence, at the center of things, alongside her handsome leading man. Her public persona takes over once she is at the party, and she oozes glamour. She also enjoys flirting with Rajan, perhaps out of habit; or perhaps because she has missed his attention and adulation.

Patil brings to the fore the passive-aggressive element in Usha's relationship with Dalvi in this sequence. She seemingly agrees to attend the party because he insists. But once she gets there, she enjoys the attention, and is outgoing and assertive, all the while cushioned by the fact that she is in the presence of other people. She is however watching Dalvi watch her, taunting him in a sense. The sequence continues with their return home; when Dalvi questions her behavior, she insists there was nothing untoward there. They talk around the issue: he cannot openly challenge her as he has been instrumental in bringing the two stars together. Yet his suspicions run deep. While she is not guilty of an affair with Rajan, she knows there are feelings at play there, particularly on his part. Further she is not above using the situation to rile Dalvi; and so will not set his mind at rest.

The undercurrent of violence in their relationship rears its head, as he removes his belt threateningly. This only leads to her further taunting him, at which point he loses control. Dalvi slaps her even as she tries to hold him off; he then drags a protesting Usha to the prayer room – once again, the ubiquitous prayer room – to take that infamous oath. This time she does not want to comply. She is bristling at the indignity of being treated thus in her own home, in front of her daughter. She sputters with rage, at the fact that he is treating her exactly in the same manner her mother did years ago. She is older, she is a married woman, she is a successful actress; yet here she is being pushed around in her own home, by a husband who is essentially living off her earnings.

In this instance, when he throws her down in front of the deities, Usha holds her head up, and meets her husband's intensity with an equally intense look herself. There is no cowering her down now, as she meets his accusing look with a defiant one. When he repeats his demand that she take the oath to affirm her innocence, she does swear. But her words are not what he wants to

hear: she gives him a baleful look as she swears that she will do exactly what she wants with her life. Rao writes: “Rage and determination in her eyes, the steady voice vibrant with emotion, Smita stamps the scene with the hallmark of unsurpassable perfection.”<sup>15</sup>

Patil evokes the distinct change in Usha in the intervening years between these two sequences, the inevitable self-assurance she has earned, as a result of which she is assertive and quite unafraid to speak her mind. Yet her gender belies her success, and she is not above being bullied by her husband. This fact is key in the film, and is at the core of her struggle.

Usha’s relationship with Dalvi is complicated; they are almost inextricably tied together because of their history, something she is not able to shake off easily. There is a scene early in the film, a flashback to when she is a little girl in their hometown, when Dalvi chases her even as she tries to escape him. As she runs down some steps, Usha falls down and hurts herself, and bursts into tears. He immediately comforts her, and gives her money to buy some sweets, in an attempt to distract her. So there are these two sides to him, which she has been privy to all along. He has been her advocate on many occasions, has pushed for her both at home and in the industry, and has taken pride and pleasure in her success. But he is also predatory, hovering around her on other occasions, and pushing her towards what he wants her to do. And there is certainly an unsavory aspect to his interest in a girl who is much younger than him, with whom he pursues a relationship rather relentlessly.

For her part, Usha leans on him, especially initially; but she also sees him as an encumbrance. She is loyal to him, as someone who has helped her family, but she is also aware of his parochial attitude. Does she want to shake him off, even early on in her career? Is her mother’s stinging

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<sup>15</sup> Maithili Rao, “*Smita Patil: A Brief Incandescence*”

disapproval instrumental in her linking her fortunes more closely with him? Or has she also been taken in a little, and misunderstood what he wants for the two of them?

We see an evolution in her relationship with Dalvi. Patil's Usha is full of uncertainty and insecurity in the early years, which we see every time she runs to him for assurance and comfort. Though she is also dismayed by his presence at inopportune moments, when he brings her crashing down to reality, from her make-believe world. But she wants to believe there is a happy ending in store for her – as a wife, as part of a loving family – when she decides to marry him.

She learns however that her husband has no intention of letting her walk away from a lucrative career. He makes that clear to her on their wedding night, though he does break it to her rather hesitantly. We see Patil's face in a reaction shot, the tears in her eyes, even as she quietly acquiesces. She goes on to become a huge star in her own right, and delivers several hits. Their relationship suffers in the process, as she is completely dismissive of Dalvi in many instances, viewing him as nothing more than a pimp. Her strong independent streak asserts itself, especially as the breadwinner in the family. But she is kept in check by the pull of tradition, and she is definitely cowed down and even threatened by the cruel streak in her husband on occasion. As when he forces her to have an abortion when she finds herself pregnant several years into their marriage, though she is excited at the thought of a second child, and desperately wants to carry to term. This then is the leitmotif of their relationship: the buffeting between these two poles. Usha is unable to leave the world of films behind; she is not able to build a happy and fulfilling home life with Dalvi either.

She grows more independent over time, pursuing relationships outside her marriage. So she does break free of Dalvi in a sense. There is a pattern to these relationships: she is seeking someone or something that will complete her, fulfil her, and make her feel secure and cared for. She has an

affair with Sunil, a director she works with, who preys on her vulnerability and seduces her. But she realizes that he is quite self-centered, and is not someone she can build a life with.

Usha then makes an attempt to break free of her life as an actress, and truly build the life she yearns for. She meets Kale, a businessman from a small town who is visiting Mumbai, and decides to go back with him to his family home. She discovers that he already has a family, but gamely accepts the situation, making the transition from life in a big city where she is the cynosure of all eyes to living in a household with its strict patriarchal mores. What she doesn't bargain for is that she will be denied even the smallest of freedoms: she is literally not allowed to step outside the home without Kale's permission. Kale will brook no dissent from the traditions his family lives by, which leaves Usha no choice but to leave, to go back to Mumbai and the world she left behind.

By now she is wiser, though perhaps saddened. Dalvi does tentatively seek a possible reconciliation. But she has realized the truth of the bitter statement made by Kale's wife: the beds change, the kitchens change, men's masks change, but men don't change. Patil's Usha is now completely free of her husband, free of any emotional tie with him, be it anger or certainly anything positive. She seems to have attained a measure of equanimity, not looking outside – not leaning towards someone else – for her happiness. As she stands by the window of her hotel room, gazing outside pensively, she seems to have accepted that she cannot have it all: a successful career and a fulfilling personal life. She could not have the latter, even when she was willing to give up her life as an actress. And she is finally at peace with it.

The one relationship that comes closest to a friendship between equals is what she has with Rajan, her co-star. He is in love with her, and is genuinely caring and supportive of her. But he is also held back by his hesitation, and her circumstances, not to mention social mores. Usha looks

for something that Rajan is unable to give her, when she turns to him after an explosive disagreement with her husband. He can only school her about not doing anything inappropriate. Much later observing their repeated skirmishes, he is ready to step up and commit to her, but by then it is too little too late for her. She has come to value the friendship, which she doesn't want to compromise.

Usha's relationship with her daughter is also one that bears consideration. She is a more loving and caring parent than her mother was to her, but she is also mostly an absent parent. While she insists that she wants to spend time with her daughter, she quickly and repeatedly reverts to her own preoccupations. And she is not above using her in the power struggle with Dalvi. But when her daughter is all grown up, with a home of her own, and wants to have Usha live with her, she steps back. Has she realized that she has to complete herself? Is she standing alone at the end, both literally and figuratively, suggesting an evolutionary arc to her story?

*Bhumika* is about the protagonist's journey from a rebellious teenager to a saddened, but wiser woman who is apparently able to stand on her own. Patil gives a bravura performance, a highly nuanced one. She vividly brings to life the gradual transformation her character goes through over the course of the film. What is truly remarkable is just how young she was when she acted in *Bhumika*, that she was able to portray Usha's search for self and meaning over the course of her life when she was a mere 22 years old herself! To quote Benegal: "I felt that she did have that range when I first discovered her. This film gave her an opportunity, but both she and I had to work very hard to get her to do that, because when I was in pre-production, I wasn't sure that

she had the commitment or the grit to go through with this. But I discovered later that she did, because she really worked very hard on this film.”<sup>16</sup>

Derek Malcolm, in his notes on the film for the London Film Festival, speaks to how well Benegal captures Usha’s basic conflict on screen: “... sensitive to the agonies and predicament of a talented woman whose need for security was only matched by her insistence of freedom.”<sup>17</sup> One could argue that it is Patil’s performance that allows him to realize his vision so completely and so powerfully.

For many critics and fans, *Bhumika* is probably her best work, the film that springs to mind immediately when considering her filmography. To quote Dinesh Raheja and Jitendra Kothari on her performance as Wadkar: “The role that established 22-year-old Smita Patil as an actress of extraordinary merit. It remains arguably her best work. ... Smita has perhaps never looked as soul-searingly natural and beautiful as she does here. She completely seems to share her character’s psychic space. Yet going beyond the instinctual, she shades her scenes with the right amount of thought and doubt. It’s a magnificent performance that’s never less than three-dimensional.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> William Van Der Heide, ed., *Bollywood Babylon, Interviews with Shyam Benegal* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2006)

<sup>17</sup> Derek Malcolm, “London Film Festival Programme,” *The BFI Library* (1978)

<sup>18</sup> Dinesh Raheja & Jitendra Kothari, “The Best of Smita Patil,” [www.rediff.com](http://www.rediff.com)

## *MANTHAN*

Benegal was at the helm of *Manthan*, a Hindi film released in 1976. It is a fictionalized account of the launching of the first milk co-operative in Gujarat state. The backdrop of the film is Operation Flood, an initiative of India's National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), to address the issue of milk deficiency in the country. Verghese Kurien, the pioneer in the field, subsequently became the Chairman of the NDDB and was the architect of the program. Kurien in fact collaborated with Benegal in developing the story of the film, and the protagonist is said to be loosely based on him.

There is an interesting aside to *Manthan* that speaks to Benegal's creativity in funding it. The film is about the power of the collective to successfully launch a movement and transform lives; and in turn it was crowdfunded by 500,000 farmers who contributed as little as Rupees 2 each to raise the sum of Rupees 10 lakhs (the equivalent of \$ 14,930 in current terms), for the project. The film went on to win the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Hindi in 1977. It was also India's official entry for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1976, about which Patil remarked to journalist Piroj Wadia: "Fantastic! Don't know what to say. It's the best movie Shyam's made and it could represent the Indian audience's liking. ... But it's been handled well and it's doing well, surprisingly."<sup>19</sup> The last comment was in reference to the subject matter of the film being rather dry, with not too much entertainment value.

*Manthan* literally means "churning". We see this churning operating at different levels in the film: in the personal and the professional realms, at the individual and the collective levels, and certainly on the local villagers and the visiting change agents from the city. We witness a

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<sup>19</sup> Maithili Rao, "*Smita Patil: A Brief Incandescence*"

transformation unfolding over the course of the film that will challenge the status quo in the village, and build up to a positive change.

The film tells the story of Dr. Rao, a young and idealistic veterinary doctor, who arrives with a specific agenda at a village in Gujarat. The poor of the village subsist through cattle rearing and milk production. They sell the meagre quantities of milk they generate every day to Mishraji, the local dairy owner, who pays them a pittance for it. He takes advantage of the double-edged sword of their poverty and illiteracy: acting as principal moneylender in the village, he locks them into crippling debt. Dr. Rao, along with his team, aims to set up a co-operative society that will be collectively owned and operated by the villagers themselves, effectively liberating them from the clutches of Mishraji. Needless to say this is easier said than done, and he faces several obstacles in his path.

The first roadblock is the distrust the villagers have towards people from the city, and the ensuing cynicism, as their poverty and lower levels of awareness are usually exploited by the latter. Dr. Rao has to overcome this in small steps, through demonstrations of his advocacy, his sincerity, and his consistency. A more difficult problem he runs into is the caste politics in the village, with a large number of the milk producers being Dalits, members of the lowest caste in the Indian caste hierarchy. So there is an additional layer of distrust: the Dalits do not believe they will get a fair shot at participating in or running the co-operative. They think the upper castes, led by the Sarpanch (the village headman), will muscle them out of the venture, and nothing will really change in their lives.

As a counterpoint to Mishraji and the Sarpanch, the power players in the village he has to grapple with, Dr. Rao discovers two kindred souls among the Dalits, Bhola and Bindu. They overcome their initial doubts and rally behind his endeavor. They are able to do this even if they

don't always understand everything that is playing out around them, even if they cannot articulate what they feel or believe. Despite the fact that he comes from a completely different milieu, they see the humanity emanating from Dr. Rao; and they respond to him from the heart.

Patil takes on her first lead role as Bindu; this is also her third outing in a Bengali film. She is a poor, uneducated woman in a village. She is moreover a Dalit woman, a member of a completely marginalized community at the lowest end of the Indian caste hierarchy. So she is rather insignificant in the scheme of things, someone who is not very articulate. While she does have a man in her life – a husband who makes an appearance at her hut every once in a while – she seems to manage life on her own. She owns a buffalo, and makes a living by selling the little milk she produces every day. But she does have courage to stand up for herself, and the resilience to pick herself up time and again when life beats her down. She is a survivor.

Bindu in a sense is a mute presence in the film – and in the village. We see this right through, as she doesn't speak much to anyone, but is a witness to everything that goes on. She primarily conveys her thoughts and feelings non-verbally, especially through her eyes. Patil shines in bringing this to the fore, her expressive face allowing her to speak volumes without words. The film serves to highlight this particular quality of hers, a quality that can be seen in several of her subsequent performances. Though Bindu can certainly raise her voice when pushed. If anything she vacillates between this outspokenness on occasion, and a certain resignation to her fate on others. As Sunanyan Bhattacharjee writes: "The extremely talented and suave Smita Patil, playing the role of Bindu, is at her feisty best and takes the movie to an altogether different

dimension. If you happen to have a taste for cinematic layering, it is extremely difficult to not see Bindu's famed interplay of sensuality and grit."<sup>20</sup>

The relationship between Bindu and Dr. Rao is an important one. It could even be argued that it is the most important one in the film, as its arc is closely aligned with the latter's entry into and exit from the village, which is the setting of the story. There is an empathy Dr. Rao feels for her, leading to a sense of a connection between them, a mutual attraction even. This almost palpable connection exists despite the fact that they come from completely different backgrounds. But it also means it has to remain unacknowledged, that nothing can be done with it. So there is almost a heartbreaking quality to his ability to feel her pain. She is in some sense less able to comprehend the relationship dynamic, and so is helpless in dealing with it. What Patil does wonderfully is to distinguish this helplessness her character feels, a helplessness related to feelings of the heart. It is quite distinct from the resignation she conveys in response to the exploitation she faces at the hands of forces beyond her control, when she is backed into the corner as an underprivileged woman.

The first time we meet Bindu is when Dr. Rao is attempting to collect milk samples from the villagers. She has just milked her buffalo, left the container of milk at the entrance to her little hut, and walked inside. Dr. Rao initially asks to speak to her husband; but realizes from her dismissive response that there isn't a man running things here. She dismisses him too, her aggressive tone and language suggesting that she doesn't trust him. While still inside the hut, she catches him bending down and helping himself to a little milk from her container, though he does leave some money in exchange. She marches out, and proceeds to follow him as he moves

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<sup>20</sup> Sunayan Bhattacharjee, "Manthan: A Masterful Voyage into the Troubled Heart of Indian Village Life," [www.thecinmaholic.com](http://www.thecinmaholic.com), October 2016

away, walking very closely behind him, almost threateningly. Patil has no dialogue at all; but we see clearly from her body language that she is running after this stranger because he has done her wrong and she is ready to fight him. Only when he stops to question her does she accuse him of stealing the milk, and calls out to her fellow villagers to adjudicate on her behalf.

Dr. Rao attempts to make peace with her subsequently, to enlist her support in his project. He comes by her hut, and engages her in a conversation about the state of affairs in the village. She is still suspicious, but a little more willing to talk to him this time. Maybe driven by the novelty of being asked for her opinions, she is quite expansive in her commentary. Patil as Bindu is completely at home here, whether physically as she sits on her haunches, or otherwise as with the dialect she speaks. She is critical of Mishraji, and derisive when talking of her husband, who she says is probably lying drunk somewhere. When Dr. Rao asks her a question about the quality of the milk the villagers sell, she takes umbrage at what she thinks is a suggestion that it is adulterated. She only relents when talking about Bhola, and has something positive to say. But when the latter questions her about talking to an outsider, she doesn't hesitate to tell him to mind his own business.

So we have this feisty woman, who lives with her child, and makes a living by selling milk. She devotedly tends to the buffalo which provides her with her daily sustenance. She doesn't seem to be easily cowed down by the people around her, be it the villagers or the visitors from the city.

We see her argumentative nature come to the fore again when Bindu takes the lead in getting the villagers to walk away from the local dairy. She is loud and outspoken, and openly challenges the price fixing by Mishraji's henchmen, goading the others to sell their milk to Dr. Rao instead. When the doctor is reluctant to get involved, she becomes argumentative with him too, leaving him with no choice but to help them. When Mishraji's henchmen attempt to tamper with her

buffalo in retaliation, she is immediately up in arms without any fear. She is ready to confront anyone who threatens her livelihood. Patil is assertive and forthright in her various interactions in this sequence, exuding a confidence that we see in her body language and tone of voice.

There are two key sequences in the film that capture the essence of Bindu's relationships – with Dr. Rao and her husband – where we witness her vulnerability, and so her helplessness. The first is an extended sequence when the doctor runs into her a little outside the village, walking by herself, looking for her buffalo which seems to have run away. There is a jauntiness to Patil's step, and a certain carefreeness to her demeanor: this is her milieu, and searching for her buffalo is something she does every so often.

He walks along with her, and attempts to enlist her help in getting Bhola to join the co-operative. She pauses, her look softens, and she smiles. This is the first instance when we see the quality of their interaction go beyond empathy, to a mutual attraction if you will. They are walking closely together as the path through the fields is rather narrow, and so they are very aware of each other's presence. Bindu has a misstep and of course, the doctor holds her to keep her from falling: there is a physical contact which both of them register, she perhaps even more so. Benegal can be faulted here for a stereotypical depiction of the moment.

A little further down, Bindu sits down by a stream to clean her feet, and the doctor catches himself staring at her. She notices this, and looks him in the eye – not shying away from the moment, and then asks him about his personal life. This is a moment when Patil exudes femininity and sexuality. When he responds minimally, she specifically asks him about his wife; he responds with a little half laugh, looks away, and makes an irrelevant comment about her buffalo. She considers him – his response – for a minute, then asks him to leave. She is implying that she doesn't really need his help.

Throughout this sequence, Patil registers several emotions that capture the various dimensions to Bindu. At the beginning she is her usual feisty self; we see this both in her confident body language as she walks along, as also in her voice when she answers Dr. Rao. He is once again acknowledging her value as a source of information, in asking about Bhola, as he did on an earlier occasion. But this time he goes one step further. He asks her to help the team; so there we have this Dalit woman who Dr. Rao treats as a human being with the ability to actually participate in and influence events in the village. She will talk to Bhola if the doctor wants her to: for her, it is more than just participating in the process, she wants to do it because he is asking her to. We see her face softening, see her smile when she responds to him; she is opening herself up to a new experience at many levels. Patil has vulnerability writ large all over her face.

But when she spies him looking at her when she is washing her feet, she is all woman – meeting and holding his gaze, rather than demurely looking away. We sense the sexual undertones to the interaction, as do the two characters themselves. Bindu talks to the doctor with confidence when she asks him about his wife. After all her life has been an open book to him, while she knows nothing about him. But by now Dr. Rao has recovered from the moment, steers the conversation back to the missing buffalo, basically side-stepping her question about his wife. She realizes that he is pulling back from the conversation – and her. The distrust she has shown earlier rears its head again: in her mind, now that he has gotten what he wanted, he is free to go back to his world. The physicality in Patil’s performance at this moment is remarkable. We see her literally opening up as she engages in the conversation with the doctor. But when she perceives him retracting, and so rejecting her in a sense, she is jolted and withdraws herself. Patil closes ranks, and reverts to her casual dismissive stance.

The scene closes with a lingering shot of her face, with a thoughtful look; she is certainly confused. She seems to be unsure if Dr. Rao has just used her much like the other men in her life. So is he then no different from any of them? She was surely right in the attraction she sensed between them? She even responded to it in a sense, but saw him immediately brush it aside. So there is certainly disappointment at that. Is she more impacted by their interaction, while the worldly doctor is able to camouflage his feelings and walk away? What we don't know of course is whether he walks away because he realizes that nothing can come of their attraction, and so it doesn't seem right to encourage it in any way. Bindu though has run through a gamut of emotions, and is left hanging at the end.

The other key sequence in the film immediately follows, and introduces us to both their spouses. Bindu's husband has surfaced after an absence – which is his wont to do – and attempts to assert his dominance over her, particularly as it relates to her involvement with Dr. Rao and the co-operative. There is an almost menacing quality to him, and he lashes out at the doctor when he comes by the hut, accusing him of taking advantage of a simple village woman. Dr. Rao is taken aback, and walks away quietly. Bindu herself is tongue-tied, in the classic tradition of a woman who is cowed down by the presence of her husband. Her neighbors have also witnessed the moment, adding to her ignominy. There is a different quality to Patil's silence and hesitation in this scene, as it is a hesitation born of fear rather than inexperience. She seems to be stripped of her personhood at this moment.

We also see Dr. Rao's wife, who has arrived on a visit to the village, to spend some time with him. However she seems to have very little patience or tolerance for his work, and so doesn't appreciate his total involvement with it. Later that same evening, he is at home trying to do some work, while she is sulking, feeling neglected and bored. He is dismissive of her feelings, saying

she doesn't quite understand the extent of his responsibility to the villagers. It would seem that he doesn't expect her to grasp what he is trying to accomplish. However when she complains that he has had no time for her since her arrival, he does relent. He puts his work down, and joins her in bed; so they seem to be able to connect at least at the physical level for the moment.

The scene cuts to Bindu's hut, where this is certainly not the case. Her husband is eagerly waiting for her to complete her chores, intending to stake his claim on her physically. As soon as she settles down for the night, he creeps up to her and places his hand on her. She rejects him, at which point all hell breaks loose; he accuses her of an inappropriate relationship with Dr. Rao, which has given her the confidence to challenge him. He tries to force himself on her; she grabs her child and runs to a corner. Even as she is cowering in fear, she dares him to approach her, and insults him further by spitting at him. Patil shows us the reserves of strength and courage Bindu possesses, as she stands up to her husband.

There is an immediate payoff, as he slinks away, but it turns out to be only a temporary reprieve. He comes creeping back early the next morning before anyone is up, poisons Bindu's buffalo, and disappears once again. This is his way to get back at her. We then cut to a shot of Bindu on her haunches, her head clutched in her hands. The buffalo lies dead nearby; and she is clearly reeling from this turn of events.

Bindu's devastation is compounded further, when Bhola asks for help from the co-operative on her behalf, so she can buy a new buffalo. Dr. Rao tells them they have to follow due process and raise the issue at a meeting the next day. But he pulls out his own wallet and offers some money to tide her over, when he realizes it is a question of her survival. Bindu's reaction is key here: she is completely taken aback, and runs out of the office. The doctor claims not to understand what has gotten into her, though his colleague is aware that there is more to their relationship than

meets the eye. Bhola runs after her, and thrusts the money into her hands. But she flings it aside, her eyes brimming with tears. She came for help thinking the doctor would understand her circumstances, but she did not want a handout from him. This is a moment when she is rendered completely helpless: granted because her husband has killed her buffalo, but Dr. Rao's action seems to have cut her to the core. We see a hurt and perplexed look on her face.

Dr. Rao's response to her through this crisis is very impersonal; whether it is in response to her husband's overt threats, or due his own wife's presence, he adopts a very professional tone with her. It is as if he is negating their earlier connection and conversations. He goes to the extent of ignoring her as he drives by, and can see her waiting at the roadside hoping to catch his eye. Dr. Rao is a decent man, who wants to do the right thing, especially as it relates to Bindu. Though he does retreat quickly and summarily, and the look on his face suggests an ease with which he is able to do this. But it is the impact on Bindu we are concerned with. Patil portrays her emotions to perfection: a mix of anger and hurt, of not quite being clear about the feelings churning through her, and so conveying how broken she is. Her tear-laden face tells us she is still caught up in their dynamic, and not able to pull back as easily. Arguably it is quite possible that part of her sorrow comes from not knowing what she even wants from the doctor at this point. But is it possible that he is an even greater disappointment than her own husband?

There is one final interaction between the two of them: he has been derailed by false accusations about his behavior and has been asked to leave the village and his project. But he cannot go without seeing her, without acknowledging her. So he comes to her hut one last time. Bindu is sitting on the ground to the side cleaning some grain, when she spies him approaching from the corner of her eye. When he nears the entrance to the hut, her husband suddenly materializes to stand between the two of them, to keep them apart. Dr. Rao wants to talk to Bindu before his

departure; her husband responds to say she is not at home, when the doctor can clearly see her right there. Once again, she is tongue-tied, and stripped of her personhood. The two of them look at each other helplessly, while her husband waits with scarcely concealed impatience for the doctor to move away. Their difference in caste and class, as well as social mores, have conspired to tie their hands. We can see the pathos of the moment register even on the doctor's face, but it is Bindu who feels the anguish of the moment deeply, and breaks down in tears. She knows her role in the doctor's troubles, having understood that she was used to bring a false charge of rape against him. But she is also aware that she cannot take back her accusation. They are both victims of the situation, but she more so than he. He can leave to return to the city, and pick up his life and work; she is left behind and will have to continue to submit to the circumstances of her life. In Patil's performance, this is the lowest point for Bindu; by conspiring with the two powerful men in the village, her husband has gained the upper hand in a decisive way. The three men have succeeded in getting the doctor out of the picture completely, each to for his own end. This is a scene where she does not speak, but conveys the poignancy of her situation non-verbally, through the mute sorrow in her eyes.

In the final scene of the film however, we see a different Bindu. The villagers have recovered and are lined up at their co-operative, the legacy of Dr. Rao. She walks up with her child on her arm, her container of milk on her head, and joins the group. There is once more a jauntiness to her step, and a confidence in her body language.

Bindu is the quintessential woman – more so a woman from the lower social strata of society – who is put upon by the people around her, as well as the circumstances of her life. She has a husband who brings nothing to her life; she is also at the mercy of the powerful forces that

govern the lives of the Dalits in her village. In effect she has very little leeway to escape the contours of her life.

Her connection to the doctor churns up feelings that leave her confused and eventually heartbroken. It is unfamiliar territory for her, but she has the courage to indulge it in a sense. Of course things unravel completely; and neither the doctor nor she can fight the forces in the village that conspire against them. And she is back where she began: alone with her buffalo and her child, producing and selling a little milk every day and getting by.

Survival is what she knows best, what she is good at. The men in her life come and go – be it the good doctor or her worthless husband; she herself goes on, despite whatever life throws in her path. Patil zeroes in on this resiliency, and makes it the touchstone of her character.

Even as recently as 2012, Ziya Us Salam from a new generation of film critics writes of her performance: “As a woman fiercely protective of her space, Smita Patil comes across as an artiste with a thousand expressions.”<sup>21</sup> Her role is not that of a conventional heroine; and despite the poignancy of her situation, she displays a strength that allows her to lead the charge for change, along with Bhola. He is vociferous about it, while she is more covert, yet quietly insistent.

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<sup>21</sup> Ziya Us Salam, “Manthan,” *The Hindu*, September 14, 2012

## SUBAH

Patel directed Patil in the Marathi film *Umbartha*. The film was made simultaneously in two languages, with the same cast; both versions were released in 1981. For the purpose of this paper, we will take a close look at *Subah*, the Hindi version. *Umbartha* means “threshold”, while *Subah* means “dawn”; both titles allude to a new beginning, but in slightly different ways as we will see.

The film is about a social worker, who wants to leave her home and life as she knows it, and pursue meaningful work which she believes will make a difference in the lives of women. She wishes to go beyond the threshold of her home to follow her heart, even if it means being temporarily separated from her loved ones. This is not something that a lot of Indian women aspire to do, or certainly are allowed to do. The decision eventually leads to a permanent separation from her family, and she leaves home without a clear sense of where she is headed. So she steps out into the world with a finality, crossing the threshold of her home. But she does so with a confidence that she will land on her feet. She is going towards a new dawn.

*Umbartha* was adjudged the Best Feature Film in Marathi at the 29<sup>th</sup> National Film Awards, for “a sincere cinematic statement on the theme of a woman seeking to establish her identity by pursuing a career, even at risk of alienation from her family.”<sup>22</sup> Patil herself has commented: “It’s my most important role to date. The film deals with women in their own right rather than as appendages to men. It is the first film to tackle the highly sensitive and controversial issues of lesbianism, bride burning and wife beating.”<sup>23</sup> What is remarkable is that she was starring opposite Bachchan in *Namak Halaal*, one of the biggest Bollywood blockbusters of its time,

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<sup>22</sup> 29<sup>th</sup> National Film Awards, *Directorate of Film Festivals*, 1982

<sup>23</sup> Maithili Rao, “*Smita Patil: A Brief Incandescence*”

while working on *Umbartha/Subah*. Patil had been cleared to alternate on ten day shoots for each film, a particularly daunting task considering the extreme ends of the spectrum her characters in the two films inhabit.

She is Savitri, the protagonist of the film, married into an affluent household, and living comfortably in a large joint family home. The family consists of her widowed mother-in-law, Mrs. Mahajan, a dominant and articulate woman who is a prominent social worker in the city, the kind a lot of wealthy women tend to be. The work gives her something to do, gives her visibility and standing in society; but it is not a calling and certainly not something she loses sleep over. In fact her approach is very matter of fact, and she demonstrates very little of the empathy associated with her line of work.

She has two sons, both successfully engaged in top-tier professions in the Indian social context. The elder of son Mohan is a doctor, while Subhash, the younger son, is a lawyer. They are both married: Maya is Mohan's wife, and Savitri is Subhash's. She has a young, school-going daughter, Rani; the older couple is childless as a result of which they too dote on the only grandchild at home. The family lives together in a large house, with a luxurious garden, and are tended to by a battery of help. Though we do not know which city they live in, we can surmise that they live in a fairly large and urban setting, and further that they are one of its well-respected families. So this Savitri's milieu: she lives with educated, intelligent and well-meaning people.

The film can be viewed in three acts. The first act is set in the family home, and serves to introduce us to its members, as well as to set up the basic conflict in the plot. The second act is an extended one, set in a small town, in the women's hostel where Savitri takes up a job as Superintendent. The final act brings us back to the family home; so we come full circle in a sense, as we witness the denouement.

We get a clear sense of Savitri's state of mind in the first act, as well as the conflict in her marriage and her life. The opening sequence of the film is a long shot of her seated in the garden by herself; the camera then pulls in for a close-up of her face. She looks bored, disconnected, almost as if she is afloat somewhere in her own mind space. Around her we see and hear the bustle of activity. After a few minutes of staring into space, Savitri gets up and walks about, but she doesn't really interact with anyone. She is more a detached observer of all the activity; in fact we are not even sure she is really observing much. Patil conveys this listlessness vividly, both with the withdrawn look on her face, as well as her detached body language. We see the first sign of life on her face when the postman arrives with a letter for her. From her excited look, we can surmise that she has received some favorable news, something she has possibly been looking forward to. Almost immediately though her face clouds over; so the contents of the letter also raise some questions in her mind.

The scene at dinner later in the evening, with the entire family reveals more about our protagonist. When her daughter fusses over her food, Savitri admonishes Rani to get on with her meal. It is Maya who plays the classic role of the mother, immediately trying to coax the child to eat. She then leads Rani away from the table as she continues to be disruptive. This is again typical of a mother who would willingly inconvenience herself in order to take care of her child. Subhash gives Savitri a pointed look and suggests that she should tend to Rani, and let Maya finish her dinner. She attempts to do that, but to no avail. Rani seems to prefer her aunt's bedtime stories to her mother's, alluding possibly to Savitri being more matter of fact and less indulgent, possibly in taking care of her in general.

Instead of returning to the dinner table where the others are still engaged in conversation, Savitri retires to her bedroom to wait for Subhash to join her. He soon does, but is not happy that she

seems so obviously out of step with the rest of his family. He cites her arrogance because she has a degree in Social Work from Bombay. We learn she is a gold medalist from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, one of the premier institutions in the country.

But Subhash also seems to appreciate the fact that she needs to be fulfilled in her work, to engage in a very different type of social work than his mother. Savitri is listening to him silently. There is one moment when he says: "I want you to be happy." Her response is: "What should I say? Thank you?" Needless to say he is annoyed at the response, and her recalcitrant attitude. So we see the couple dancing around each other in a sense: Subhash is not completely uncaring and insensitive, but there are definitely moments when he sees things more from the point of view of the patriarchy, and is impatient with his wife's inability to fall in line. For her part, Savitri is engaged in being a wife and mother, but she is restless, her heart seemingly not in it. There is an indifference she displays when pulling away from her family. Patil convincingly presents her character's dilemma to us, the uncertainty writ all over her face, even as she plays the devoted wife. And certainly when she questions the sincerity of her husband's support.

One final moment in the opening act that is significant is when the family is gathered together, and the conversation turns to one of Subhash's cases. He proudly reveals his ploy to win the case by casting aspersions on the plaintiff's character, in order to have the court doubt her story.

Mohan admires his strategy, and the other women are amazed by his ingenuity.

Savitri on the other hand is visibly upset, and at one point she gets up abruptly and walks away. Again she is the one who doesn't belong in this family circle. Is it because she is more sensitive, more idealistic than all of them? She wants to help women through her work, while her husband is willing to go all out to win a case, even if it involves harming the reputation of a woman.

There is also an added nuance: unlike Maya who is happy to be a wife, and a willing audience to

the exploits of the men, Savitri wants to be out in the world like them, and wants to be taken seriously herself. We see her walk into her room and pause for a moment; she then retrieves the earlier letter, and waits for her husband with a determined look on her face.

She has been offered a job as Superintendent at a women's hostel, some three hundred miles away, and wants to accept the position. It is her dream job in a sense, a job that will be a stepping stone to building her career. Savitri tries to convince Subhash of the need to follow her heart, but he is aghast, as his initial response is to think of the social repercussions of her action. But he rallies around, even "argues" her case with his family, as the extended family will always have a say in such matters.

The question on everyone's mind is the same, whether it is articulated or not: why can't she find a suitable job where they live, so she doesn't have to abandon her family, disrupting their lives as a result? The implication is women can do what they want, but do it within the confines of the social system, without upending social mores. Eventually though Subhash doesn't want to stand in the way of her happiness if the job is her answer; and Savitri is very appreciative of his support. She will accept the position, and travel alone to the small town where the hostel is located; she is also ready to leave Rani in Maya's care to pursue her dream. Patil is every inch the professional now, having committed to her decision.

The bulk of the film is set in the women's hostel where Savitri works. She arrives there in the morning, the dawn of her work life in a sense. The hostel – Mahilashram or Women's Home as it is loosely termed – is a home for destitute women from the lower socio-economic strata. These are girls who have been abused and abandoned by their families, and by society. Some of them are unwed mothers, who seem to invite a particular wrath from others. There is however an intent to rehabilitate the girls, as we see them receiving some vocational training.

From the very beginning Savitri is confronted by several issues at the hostel: the indifference of the staff, and the lack of discipline among the inmates, to name a few. But the victimization of the inmates is the single big truth that jolts her, a victimization that manifests itself in many different ways. Then there is the nonchalance of the Chairwoman of the Managing Committee, who drops by on her first day. She will not allow Savitri too much autonomy to do her job; she also makes it very clear that at no time should her social life be interrupted with hostel matters. So there we have it: the Chairwoman and her mother-in-law could have been cut from the same cloth, with their similar hard-nosed approach to their work. The former if anything appears to be even more unfeeling.

The scenes at the hostel bring out wonderful nuances in Patil's performance. We see her self-doubt to start with, wondering if she has taken on more than she can handle when she grasps the various realities the inmates are dealing with. She is further confronted head-on by the circumstances at the hostel: the bribery from vendors who supply goods, an illicit prostitution racket involving the complicity of the staff who are supplying girls to local politicians, not to mention the complete amorality of the inmates themselves.

She is the strict disciplinarian who wants to have the hostel running smoothly, and she makes no bones about communicating her intolerance for anything less. She surmises that the previous Superintendent was possibly involved in some of the corruption at the hostel, and further that she was probably responsible for some of the staff and inmates overstepping their boundaries. Savitri is determined to change the tone of the place by example.

To this end, she is very physically present at various activities at the hostel. We see her with her hands clasped behind her back, walking up and down the lines during the morning prayers. She wants to ensure that the inmates are on time, appropriately dressed, and participating in the

prayer. She also attends their vocational training sessions, to see for herself the type of skills they are learning. When she is at these sessions, she pauses to talk to some of the girls, and takes time to get to know them. In these instances she is all about the task at hand, but she is also a benevolent presence exuding care.

She is sensitive and empathic in dealing with the inmates, and attempts to assess how best the hostel can help rehabilitate them. She slowly earns the trust and love of the girls, especially when they see that she is quite different from her predecessor. There is a certain camaraderie she is happy to encourage, provided the girls are willing to play by the rules.

However she soon runs into problems at various levels. One of the more serious issues she has to navigate is the sheer indifference of the Managing Committee, which is laid bare at their meeting. Savitri realizes that the committee members are a diverse and motley crew, with most of them having little or no interest in the mission of the hostel. They are especially insensitive to the hardships – and therefore any psychological damage – the inmates may have suffered. They are harsh in punishing any inappropriate behavior from the inmates, as they want the punishment to act as a deterrent to such behaviors in future. She struggles to elicit some humanity in the members when dealing with the inmates, to no avail. The Chairwoman is especially impatient and tough, and suggests that she should take a rational rather than emotional approach herself.

Initially Savitri is able to maintain a brave front about being away from her family. However as she gets embroiled in the affairs of the hostel, her calm exterior is threatened. She is especially emotional after her disastrous meeting with the Managing Committee, when a particularly heartless decision made about the future of one of the inmates causes a terrible turn of events. The experience of butting heads with the members, of being unable to evoke any feeling of empathy from them, and the ensuing tragedy leave her feeling altogether very vulnerable and

raw. Patil evokes this vulnerability vividly on a call to her family Savitri makes right after, when she is extremely emotional and barely able to retain her composure. She allows us to see her character's quite determination slowly break down in the face of the stark realities she has to deal with at the hostel.

The other harsh reality Savitri has to deal with is the state of her marriage after her decision to leave home. In a pivotal sequence Subhash pays her a surprise visit at the hostel; we are not sure whether this is because he genuinely wanted to surprise her, or because it had to be spur of the moment on account of his work. Or perhaps he was testing her, to see what kind of reception he would get. The last certainly seems a possibility since he exhibits an irritation almost from the moment he arrives. Granted everything that can possibly go wrong does, but there is a quality to his annoyance that suggests he is primed for it.

He arrives unexpectedly, but is quick to get impatient when it takes some time for her to come out and greet him. Savitri on the other hand is overjoyed to see him, as we see from her visible excitement and body language as she runs out to meet him. The girls are also very happy about Subhash's visit; they crowd around the office trying to catch a glimpse of him, amidst a lot of giggling and excitement. While this does embarrass him, Subhash is needlessly short with them. He seems to be keener to get some private time with his wife, and finds all of the excitement his arrival has generated quite trying.

This is in keeping with the Subhash we know, harking back to the first act of the film and his ruthless strategy to winning his case. He seems to be his mother's son, and demonstrates very little empathy now, as he did then. Once again he is skirting the thin line between showing a genuine interest in Savitri's work, and not really caring about it all especially when it interferes with his needs. The film captures their dynamic brilliantly: does Savitri call her husband out on

his behavior, or should she be thankful for the extent of the support he provides? It is a commentary on the turmoil any woman could face when she pursues a career seriously, when she makes certain choices, and the judgment she invites from her family and society as a result.

Subhash does calm down, and looks forward to the evening with her. But there is a crisis with one of the girls who is pregnant, which ends in her death. This devastates Savitri, who is completely broken when she returns from the hospital. Subhash attempts to move quickly from saying a few comforting words to her, to initiating sex, which he has been hankering after since he arrived. They hit an impasse when she turns away from him. In turn, he leaves earlier than planned, without even a proper goodbye to his wife. We see Patil at a loss to understand his extreme response, from the disappointment on her face as he abruptly drives away from her even as she is still talking.

Savitri hits a new low after he leaves. She picks up an album of photographs, and we learn of the milestones in their life together as she leafs through them. Patil's face in reaction is most revealing as she seems to reflect on their relationship. It is a formal relationship in some instances: with both of them playing traditional gender roles and being quite comfortable in them. At other moments, there is a casual and intimate quality to their interaction which suggests something more egalitarian. Savitri's dilemma as noted elsewhere is to navigate this back and forth successfully. The physical act of taking up the job in the hostel, as well as being witness to the lives of the many women who have been tossed aside by their families and society, has had a profound impact on her state of mind.

Simultaneously her professional life starts to unravel. Some of her independent decisions are viewed as a clear transgression on her part by the Managing Committee, even if they are in the best interest of the inmates. Further when two of the girls set themselves on fire, suggesting they

would rather die than live in the hostel, it takes a huge toll on Savitri. She has to maintain her composure, and be the calming and mature presence in the face of the calamity. But she does respond emotionally, breaking down as she is overcome by a sense of helplessness. We see a complete transformation in Patil's persona by this time, and she is no longer the confident, committed professional who took charge at the hostel. She is appalled at the lack of humanity she has witnessed at many levels, even cowed down by the circumstances to an extent. She is also broken up about her personal life, and is barely able to hold herself together.

The real issue is her effort to change things at the hostel, which would not augur well for anyone involved. Nobody wants to rock the boat, especially not to benefit the girls themselves. Savitri is seen as the impediment, an outsider who poses a threat to their world. No doubt she is idealistic, unable to dig in and play by the rules to an extent, and work from within to effect change. But she is also completely out of her depth, and so cannot even attempt it.

The second act closes with the Managing Committee instituting an inquiry against her: for overstepping her boundaries, and for the several crises with the inmates during her tenure. This is with a view to removing Savitri from her position, and so returning to business as usual. She is very perturbed about the inquiry initially, and is concerned about defending herself. However she soon begins to comprehend what she is up against. She even receives threatening phone calls, meant to scare her off. We see her register this, come to terms with her situation, and pull herself together for her inquisition.

The inquiry sequence where she is questioned by an official from the Government is a powerful one, which gives Patil the perfect opportunity to capture the essence of her character. Her fulfilment in her personal life is questioned, suggesting that it is unhappiness there that must have caused her to accept a job away from home. Her drive to be a change agent, and her belief

in the principle of welfare work are dismissed; and Savitri is dubbed a romantic for her notions about her work. She soon realizes this is a losing game, and cuts loose, insisting that she will not give up on trying to better the lives of women who have been discarded by society. The camera is trained on Patil through her monologue; all we see is her face and her never-say-die commitment, as she closes with: "I will not lose hope."

Savitri chooses to leave the hostel, as she has come to the end of her tether. She returns home, to the third and final act of the film. She walks in on a day much like any other, with everyone at home going about their business. A first jarring note is when the help doesn't recognize her. Maya surfaces and welcomes her back, wondering if she has come home for a holiday. Mrs. Mahajan has a mere passing curiosity in her return. Rani is slow to warm up to her mother, perks up at the thought that she may have brought her a gift, but loses interest when she realizes that is not the case.

But it is Subhash whose arrival she is keenly anticipating. We see her slip back fairly easily into the role of a wife, tidying up their room, and dressing up herself for the evening. Patil has a thoughtful expression on her face though, as she is uncertain how the reunion will go. He seems happy enough to see her; she catches a whiff of liquor on his breath, and so learns of a change in his lifestyle. But Savitri just wants to be comforted by the solidity of their relationship for the moment. Subhash is very happy to learn that their life can return to normalcy, and embraces her with joy, to which she responds with equal intensity. It is later that he discloses a bigger change in his life: he has been in a relationship with another woman for the past several months, a pragmatic arrangement to meet his physical needs, as he states it. But he will not break things off now that she is back; rather she will have to adjust to this new reality in their lives.

Savitri is stunned, though she doesn't question him about it. We see the extent of her devastation later: she breaks down completely and dissolves in tears, while Subhash is sleeping peacefully.

She has returned home having had to accept defeat at the hostel, but realizes that she has become superfluous there too. Patil crouches in a fetal position on the bed, shrinking into herself as she is weighed down by the turn of events in her life, both personal and professional. We can also read the act as drawing into herself, in order to gather the strength to deal with these reversals.

She exudes a sense of calm the next morning, as she packs her bags once more. She has been gutted, has exorcised her emotions, and now is ready to face her new reality. But she will face it on her own terms. She sees no reason to continue living at home; in fact she doesn't even bother to respond to him, when her husband questions her actions. She does not have a sense of where she is going, or what exactly she will do; all she knows is she has to make that final break and step out completely into the world. In the final shot of the film, Savitri is on a train pulling away from her family and home, this time permanently it would seem. There is however a quiet determination in her eyes.

The final freeze frame on her enigmatic smile has generated a lot of discussion, as has the film itself. Debates on the rightfulness of the protagonist's decision have been split on both gender lines, as well as class lines. So it would seem that *Umbartha/Subah* definitely touched a nerve. "It's an engrossing story of a professional woman who dares to seek a life for herself, and at the same time fulfil a passion for helping other women. And in reforming others, she reforms herself."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Umbartha," [www.prisonmovies.net](http://www.prisonmovies.net), July 2016

One of the biggest accolades that came Patil's way upon completion of the film was from Vijay Tendulkar, a leading playwright, literary essayist and social commentator in India. He wrote several screenplays in his time, *Umbartha* being one of them. He had some initial misgivings about casting Patil in the film. Subsequently he is quoted as saying: "I don't know why I resisted casting her. It's my life's biggest revelation of an actor. I can't believe this girl did this role. ... This role will be remembered in the film industry for all time."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Maithili Rao, "*Smita Patil: A Brief Incandescence*"

## CONCLUSION

In the all too brief period she was active in films, Patil delivered several powerful and remarkable portrayals in Parallel Cinema. Though she took her time to make the move to popular cinema, she acted in close to fifty Bollywood films as well. But what she is remembered for is her work in alternate cinema, for being the mainstay of the movement in its heydays, along with Azmi, Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah.

Her characters are drawn with a searing honesty, and with a fierce femininity, something Patil was able to do repeatedly and convincingly, with the trademark stamp she brought to her work. Some of these performances – Sulabha/Savitri in *Umbartha/Subah* for one – are remembered as milestones in Indian Cinema, and admired even today. In fact the film’s director Patel has remarked on how actresses in later years have sought him out, asking him to write similar roles for them. Arguably though it is Patil’s work that has elevated the character to its cult status.

As recently as 2015, many of her directors and co-stars had an opportunity to reminisce about Patil’s talent and her commitment to work, at the release of a biography by Maithili Rao. There was the inevitable speculation as to where she might be in her career if she was alive and still working. To quote the actress’ sister Anita Patil-Deshmukh: “Smi (as she is fondly called) was already thinking of direction. ... She was an avid reader and interested in script writing.”<sup>26</sup> A considered opinion is that she would be at the helm of women-centric films, moving from powerful portrayals in films directed by others to bringing impactful stories to life herself.

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<sup>26</sup> Alaka Sahani, “On her 60<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary, family and film-makers remember Smita Patil,” *Indian Express*, October 17, 2015

Another thought is that Patil would be engaged in developmental work, with women and children. Mahesh Bhatt who directed her in *Arth* commented: “Had she been around, she would have been fiercely entrenched in working for women.”<sup>27</sup>

Certainly some of this is informed by a close personal relationship with the actress, as in the case of Patil-Deshmukh. However there is an element of extrapolation involved as well, which is probably a result of the kind of films Patil acted in, as well as the kind of female protagonists she played. She did have a passion for, and so was involved in women’s causes: she donated the prize money from both her National Acting Awards to women’s organizations, and is known to have helped raise funds for women’s centers. So much so that Patil was invited by the Indian Government to participate in an International Women’s Conference organized by the United Nations as part of the Women’s Decade in 1985. But the question that begs asking is whether she herself becomes a feminist icon as a result?

What we know for sure is there was a certain sensibility afoot in Parallel Cinema at the time which led film-makers to tell stories that questioned social mores, and create roles that broke away from tradition. Patil’s persona and talent allowed her to stake a claim as an essential part – or even as a spokesperson for – of this sensibility. We could speculate that who she was intrinsically as a person, and the type of characters she played in her films, served to feed off each other, as a result of which there is a larger than life sense of Patil as a feminist.

What we have on record however, is the incontrovertible evidence of her films; we have the work she has left behind, which has garnered praise from far and wide. Elliot Stein, an American journalist and historian, who also served as a film critic and wrote for several publications in the

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<sup>27</sup> Alaka Sahani, “On her 60<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary, family and film-makers remember Smita Patil”

1970s, has commented: “At 25 Smita is clearly the queen of Indian parallel cinema, as much an icon for film-makers of the milieu as was Anna Karina for the young directors in France at the outset of their new wave. Patil is not a classic beauty, but the lady glows. She never makes a false move on screen.”<sup>28</sup>

She was a blazing star in the firmament of Indian Cinema, who continues to light up the collective unconscious of the people. As a result of which there is an ongoing search among critics and audiences alike for an actress who is deserving of the mantle of her successor. It would seem that Ray who directed Patil in *Sadgati*, was quite clear in his mind when he wrote to his biographer Andrew Robinson: “... there is really no one to replace her ... .”<sup>29</sup>

Benegal who discovered and nurtured her talent in the early years, called her instinctive and spontaneous in front of the camera. He admitted to having had several films lined up for her at the time of her death, including some roles which he felt only she had the range to play. In his words: “How does one ever reconcile to a loss of such colossal talent? Forget comparisons, I wonder whether there are many who have come close to producing even a fraction of the kind of work she has left behind.”<sup>30</sup>

In 2011 when rediff.com conducted a Readers’ Choice poll on The Greatest Actresses of all time, the result was a list of ten actresses. And Patil was adjudged second. It is a true testament to her compelling presence, to her staying power, and the impact she has had on the industry. In thinking about the confluence of persona and talent that come together to create unforgettable performances, it is fitting to conclude with her own words: “In every role, there are situations in

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<sup>28</sup> Stein quoted by Monojit Lahiri, “Remembering the Timeless Bhuika,” *The Sunday Indian*, December 29, 2013

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Robinson, “*Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*,” (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1989)

<sup>30</sup> Benegal quoted by Yogesh Pawar, “25 years on: remembering Smita Patil,” *DNA*, December 11, 2011

which I can imagine myself. The rest is a mystery, one that I must preserve. It is for the director to unfold this mystery.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Patil quoted in “Bhumika: The Roles of Smita Patil,” *The Film Society Retrospective Program Notes*, 2010

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