

FILM

## WATER

**Abhijit Ghosh-Dastidar**

Water (Hindi, colour, 120 mins), by Deepa Mehta, plays on *Water* as a thememotif and also highlights water as a witness to the theatre of life. From sacred Hindu texts by Manu, to hyacinths in a pond, to water containers being carried on shoulders, the film focuses on an eight-year-old girl, Chuyia (Sarala), munching sugar cane, while travelling on a bullock cart. The ill man on the cart is given water to drink. The travellers cross a large river, in a boat. Soon the unconscious man dies, and little Chuyia's father informs her that her husband has died. By the riverside, Chuyia's glass bangles are broken, and parents cut and shave her long hair. It is India of 1938, and Chuyia's father leaves her with the grown-up widows.

The other widows console Chuyia, while a middle aged widow, Shakuntala (Seema Biswas) applies vermilion paste on Chuyia's head to cool her. Chuyia revolts against the iron discipline of the eldest widow, Madhu. She finds curiosity in Mithu, a caged parrot. The widows clap and dance in a temple. Daily chores are performed around a water well. A young widow, Kalyani (Lisa Ray), who lost her husband at age of nine, and still preserves long brawds of hair, gives a black dog, Kallu to Chuyia. Kalyani prays before an idol of Krishan god, and instructs Chuyia to repeat the mantra 'Jai Shri Krishna' one hundred eight times. But Chuyia can count up to ten only, and now counts beads while trying to sleep. One day, while dog Kallu is being given a wash in a pond, along with other bathers, the dog runs away, Chuyia and Kaljani chase the dog. A stranger, Narayan (John Abraham), picks up the dog, and hands it over. Kalyani and Narayan meet, while Kalyani resides in the vidhwa (widow) ashram near 'dharam ghat', Narayan resides in a big mansion. Narayan who has just returned home, after completing his law studies, removes old photos from walls, and fixes a photo of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. His mother (Waheeda Rehman) would like him to get married early.

At night, Gulabi (Raghubir Yadav), the hijra comes and sings at the vidhwa ashram. Through the iron bars of a window, he gives a head massage and ganja smoke, to Madhu, the senior widow. In the darkness of the night, he takes Kalyani in a boat to jamindar, Bhubinder Nath's residence. His son, Rabindra is a friend of Narayan. Rabindra is fond of the English, English language and liquour. Narayan is in favour of passive resistance, and would like to join the Nationalists. On the banks of the Ganga river, Shakuntala leads prayer chants, with Chuyia. The local priest, (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) gives religious discourses to the widows, and chants prayers, Kunti, a widow pilfers food, from the plate of an elderly widow. Chuyia feeds dog Kallu, from her own food. When Narayan knocks on the ashram door in search for Chuyia, Kalyani drops water from the upper floor. It rains, and Kalyani and Chuyia dance and hug in the rain. Narayan drops his umbrella, and crosses the river in a boat. Kalyani and Chuyia playfully clap each other's palms. Shakuntala fixes up the meditation point for the priest. Beggars and widows extend their arms for alms before the temple. Chuyia leaves in protest. She gives a sweet to an old widow, and massages her legs, when she returns from the river with a casket of water and a note from Narayan to Kalyani, the old widow is no more. The departed widow's belongings do not reveal anything of value. Kalyani gives coins for the last rites.

After showing Narayan's hand written note to Shakuntala, Kalyani prays at the temple, picks up an oil lamp, and proceeds to the ghat. Playing on a flute, Narayan greets

Kalyani. He recites love message and quotation from 'Kalidas' " Meghdoot". But Kalyani cannot read, and discloses that she has never known her husband. Dark clouds gather, and the widows raise oil lamps and chant prayers. On 'akadesi' day, the widows, including Chuyia are without food and water. Narayan takes Kalyani on a carriage ride. He has applied for a job in Calcutta, but promises not to go anywhere without Kalyani. Kalyani's mother decries the marriage proposal. Chuyia discloses to the other widows, news of the proposal. Madhu, the elder widow, cuts off Kalyani's hair, and locks her up. Chuyia kills the parrot, and cries, The priest advises that a widow can marry only the late husband's youngerbrother. But by a new law widows can marry.

Shakuntala seiges the key from widow, Madhu, and opens Kalyani's door. She tells Kalyani to run away. Madhu threatens that Kalyani will not be given re-entry. With Narayan, Kalyani is on a boat.

Approaching the haveli, Kalyani recognizes that it is the house of Sett Dwarka Nath (Gerson de Cunha), Narayan's father, with whom she has slept earlier. Kalyani returns to the other bank, and declines to divulge anything further. When Narayan confronts his father, the father tells him that a brahmin could sleep with anyone. Returning to the ashram, Kalyani removes her scart and twig bangles on the riverbank. She steadily drowns herself, When Narayan knocks on the ashram door, the funeral pyre is burning. He feels Kalyani's death was not a maya. A widow is sent to an ashram, as it amounts to one mouthless to feed. A town-crier heralds "Gandhi released from prison. Coming," Gulabi, the hijra brings Chuyia to a Sett's mansion. Chuyia enters the bedroom, saying that she has come to play. Next morning Chuyia returns on the boat senseless. Gandhi conducts a meeting on a railway platform, with incantations of "God is truth" and "Truth is God". As the train starts Chuyia moving, Shakuntala runs along with Chuyia, and pleads with Narayan for taking the child. Chuyia is thrust on Narayan's arms.

The town backdrop of "Water" is difficult to identify, but in the last sequence Gandhi's train rolls out from Rawalpur Cantonement station. The plot is excessively simple and unrea-listic for India 1938. The ultra-docu-mentation of the widows makes the narrative resemble a police report. The episodes are brief, and the quick dissolves and rapid editing render them contrived. The river, the rains, and the wide trees re-inforce the images, but the numerous scenes fade out without any importance or significance. The conclusion of the film brings a speetacular climax and an assertion of Gandhi's thoughts, but there is no expression of realism and neo-realism. Gilles Stutgens' camera captures the scenes of tragedy, humour, love and adventure, and leads the narrative its liberal destination. Sarala's performance is full of rich initiatives. Deepa Mehta's social drama on the existential widows is not fully inspiring. □□□