

FILM

## PROVOKED

**Abhijit Ghosh-Dastidar**

PROVOKED (HINDI/PUNJABI/English, colour, 115 mins) from Jag Mundhra, takes the viewer to a world of wife battering and Prison life, in London. In a bedroom with candles, Dipak (Naveen Andrews) wakes up in flames, and runs downstairs with his body swirling in fire and soot. Kiran Alhuwalia (Aishwarya Rai), the wife sits silently in the garden, on the ground floor, with her two children. The husband is in hospital, with medicine being sprayed on his burns. Police investigations begin. Dipak screams; "The bitch tried to kill me." There is quivering heat in the front lawn outside. Kiran's right hand is also in bandages, and she is in police custody.

Detective Sergeant Mars and police inspector continue their questioning in May 1989. Kiran's mother-in-law takes custody of the two children. The police ask Kiran if she had any idea as to how the fire started, and inform that the husband has made serious allegations. She keeps silent during the interrogations, and she is scarcely able to follow English. Kiran's finger prints have been found on a vessel with inflammable oil. She cries that she wants to see her children. Her mumblings before the police are not exactly a confession nor a denial. But there is enough evidence to frame charges, British Newspapers bring out headlines; "Asian mum torches spouse," and "Fieball mom". Kiran is in judicial custody. In jail she is given a Prisoners' hand book. She is asked to empty her pockets, and take off jewellery and clothes in the prisoners' examination room. She tells the women warders that in ten years of married life, she has never removed clothes in front of her husband. She is in prison clothes now, suited in jacket, vest and trouser, there is a flashback to her wedding day, when Dipak brings her to their new house, with her eyes blindfolded. Kiran finds affection from her cellmate, Ronnie (Miranda Richard-son), who is in jail for stabbing her violent husband Mr Jones, the solicitor general charges Kiran with attempted murder. Mary, the defence barrister helps Kiran, who conveys to Mary that she was afraid of her husband. Kiran undresses and shows her back to Mary, which is full of scars, acquired over many nights. Mary explains that since there was no imminent danger, no self-defence could be claimed. The husband was sleeping in bed. The foreground of the film shifts alternately from the prison, to the court, and to Kiran's married life portrayed in flashbacks, some years ago when Kiran had purchased a new jacket, the husband was furious, as Indians should not copy white girls, Dipak spoke fluent English, while Kiran could only speak Punjabi and Hindi. Kiran's mother-in-law refuses telephone calls from Kiran, when she is in jail. Just after marriage, Ravi Sharma, a friend of Dipak, treats the newly weds to a restaurant, with Bhangra music and songs. When dragged to the dance floor, Kiran dances reluctantly with Ravi. This makes Dipak jealous, and on returning home, he slaps Kiran.

When a fellow in-mate bullies Kiran, Ronnie smashes a plate on Kiran's face. There is fraternity among the prisoners, and they disclose reasons, as to why they are incarcerated. Radha Dalal (Nandita Das), who works with a support group,

South Hall Block Group, for women who have been beaten by their husbands, interviews Kiran in jail. Kiran expresses that she feels free in jail. Dipak, the husband dies in hospital. Dressed in white, Kiran attends a Sikh congregation for prayers. There is a cut to her wedding day, when dressed in gorgeous clothes she prepares to marry an unknown boy. The trial continues in December 89. The prosecution proves that the fire was caused by petrol, mixed with other chemicals, which cooked Dipak's flesh, right out of his bones. In the court room, the mother-in-law deposes that Kiran was arrogant. When the defence counsel pleads that the husband would beat Kiran in front of her mother-in-law, the mother-in-law denies ill treatment. The defence produced a letter from Kiran to Dipak, when he had left her for a white woman, entreating Dipak to come back. Under pressure from his superior, the police inspector lies before the court, that when he had questioned Kiran, she was lucid and attentive. Flashbacks reveal that when Kiran was pregnant, Dipak had assaulted her on the abdomen, and pushed her down the staircase. The lady doctor concludes that Kiran was an abused woman. Kiran finds it too shameful to appear in court.

During the course of the trial, Kiran tells Radha, the social activist, that the verdict does not matter, as she had sinned. The jury finds Kiran guilty on account of murder, and sentences her to life imprisonment. In the jail cell, Kiran stars at a photo of her children. Kiran steadily learns English, and chats and plays in the prison playground. She is given a remuneration for various work efforts in jail. She would be eligible for parole after twelve years, and the last six months would be on remand. As time was running out, Radha helps Kiran in filing an appeal, Radha also obtains a Court order, for Kiran to meet her two sons in jail premises. There is a flashback depicting Kiran asleep on couch. Dipak returns home drunk and beats her, and forcibly makes love. When he falls asleep, Kiran pours inflammable liquid, and sets the bed on fire with a candle. The prisoners are troubled when Gladys denies killing her two babies, and affirms that they died when a pressure cooker burst. Kiran is reluctant to give a public statement. She begins writing her auto-biography, which Radha reads out at a public rally, besides Kiran's photograph. The prison mates cheer as the rally is flashed on TV.

Radha succeeds in obtaining an appeal, the police inspector confesses lying in Court, and affirms that Kiran on the night of the fire was incoherent and hardly aware of her surroundings. A psyliatrist testifies to Kiran's depression. The appeal's court notes that the earlier Judge had failed to mention the history of batterings and abuse. Meanwhile, Ronnie has cut her wrists in the prison toilet and is saved by Kiran. In July 1992, Kiran cuts her hair short, and adopts western dresses. Ronnie on telephone has persuaded her elder brother, a senior Queen's Counsel to take up Kiran's case. While proceeding to the Appeal's Court, Kiran remembers her husband demanding an explanation for a bank withdrawal, which she had taken to buy food for her children. Flashbacks recall repeated beatings and Dipak's threat with a hot iron. The night of the incendiary is recalled. The Royal Court of justice notes that the earlier conviction was handed down in error. New hearings follow, and provocation is established, following, an act or a series of acts which makes someone lose self control. But there was a cooling off period of two hours, between assault and murder. Endogeneous depression at material time are found sufficient to order re-trial. While the summing up of the earlier

judge is found accurate, a battered woman's syndrome results in a reduced sentence of man slaughter. Kiran is freed in September 1993, and thanks everybody. She realizes that there was no honour in silent suffering. She states that prison was her first step to freedom.

Jag Mundhara's script binds the husband's brutish offensive, the wife's suffering, life in prison and a recalling of Radha's elder sister's marital torments with legal arguments. Based on a true life story, the pitiable state of Kiran is matched by the joyous movements of the principal characters and the brisk camera movements. There is no saturation of images in the summing of the numerous situations, which are not always police information. □□□