

FILM REVIEW

Taking on the taboos

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***Dhyasparva* (Marathi): an era of yearning. Director Amol Palekar**

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, Indian society was in the grip of a religious orthodoxy that had oppressed women for centuries. A few enlightened people such as Raghunath Karve dreamt of liberating women from the clutches of this orthodoxy. *Dhyasparva* is a film about the life of Karve, the pioneer of birth control in India. Right from childhood, Karve questioned religious customs and taboos and tried to find scientific and logical answers. He grew up amidst social reformers, including his father Dhondo Karve. Together, they sought to change the miserable social condition of women.

Raghunath Karve (Kishor Kadam in the film) worked on problems associated with childbirth, women's sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases. He believed that women had every right to control and regulate their reproductive lives. He was a rationalist; unlike many in the orthodox male-dominated society, he did not believe that childbirth lay in god's hand. In 1919 he went to Paris to study mathematics. He earned the honour of being the first non-white member of the staff. He took the opportunity to widen his horizons, gained scientific knowledge about sex and STDs and learnt about modern methods of birth control. The idea of a birth control clinic began to emerge in his mind.

After coming back to Bombay, Karve started a birth control centre in his home. He wrote the book *Santati Niyaman* in Marathi. Later, he started a Marathi monthly known as *Samajik*

Swasthya ("social well-being"), in which he wrote about various aspects of birth control and women's sexuality. He was criticised for his articles in *Samajik Swasthya* and was penalised twice by a court, but he continued to express his views.

Karve's wife Malati (Seema Biswas in the film), supported him in his work. She encouraged him to undergo a vasectomy to set an example, even though the couple never had a child. The husband-wife relationship between the two is wonderfully depicted in the film. Several other scenes are crafted particularly well, such as when Karve defends his views at a public lecture in Pune on women's sexuality, where he faces the rage of orthodox people and is appreciated by a few progressive people.

The film is a sincere attempt to depict Karve's message and vision. Director Amol Palekar is known for films that deal with sensitive issues, and *Dhyasparva* gives us one more reason to appreciate his work.

The medical themes of *Dhyasparva* remain relevant today. Women's health continues to be a neglected issue in India. Repeated pregnancies – whether in the hope of a boy or due to a lack of knowledge about birth control—adversely affect the health of women. The maternal mortality rate in India was 407 per 1,00,000 live births in the year 2000, or more than 1,00,000 deaths every year due to pregnancy-related causes. These figures have not substantially changed in the last few years. The incidence of sexually transmitted diseases in India, including HIV, is on the increase. India's population keeps growing along with the attendant problems of the increasing numbers. Raghunath Karve had foresight in addressing such issues, but his voice did not reach the people of India during his lifetime. Will we listen to him now?

Pandve Harshal. Taking on the taboos: *Dhyasparva* (Marathi). Director: Amol Palekar. *Ind J Med Ethics* 2007; 4: 92.