

# Challenging orthodox attitudes on sexuality

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**Balak Palak. Producers: Mumbai Film Company, Ravi Jadhav Films, Viva In En. Director: Ravi Jadhav. Marathi, 109 minutes, 2012.**

Making an honest and humourous film about prepubescent sexuality in a conservative Maharashtrian neighbourhood of the eighties is an accomplishment. *Balak Palak* (Children and parents) starts when four excited kids break for their summer holidays and return home to find a curiously dour atmosphere in which a friendly neighbour 'Jyoti tai' has been banished from their *chawl*. We know that she has done something unspeakably appalling and the only clue the children have to her misdeeds is the phrase '*shen khalli*' which is a Marathi idiom referring to the act of premarital sex. They vow to put aside all other distractions and attractions of the vacation in the search for the meaning of this phrase. The four, Avya, Dolly, Chiu and Bhagya, find an ally in the figure of an eccentric classmate, Vishu, becomes their 'guide' in this esoteric quest. Prathamesh Parab portrays this Janus-faced character with beguiling naturalness and ease. The roles of all the children are played sincerely and there is none of that artificial childhood innocence diluting the singularity of these characters.

The series of escapades that follow is truly hilarious. The children hide erotic novels in broken pipes and devour them in extended shower time, risk their lives to become night-time voyeurs of unbelievably bland love scenes at a newlywed couple's window and mastermind a top secret mission to buy a blue film from a lascivious shopkeeper whose discretion can hardly be trusted. In one scene, after watching a blue film for the first time, the youngest, Chiu, feels nauseated and goes running to her mother. Chiu is known for being a blabbermouth and the children are gripped with the fear of being exposed. The mother directs a torrent of rage at them cursing the girls for being hand in glove with the boys Avya is so overcome by fright that he starts to tremble and cry, at which point it is suddenly revealed that she is scolding them for playing in the sun instead of indoors. With humorous irony, this scene reveals the paranoia of living under the constant threat of sudden and unpredictable adult scourging. It cleverly blurs the distinction between the innocent act of playing in the sun and the serious transgression of watching pornography.

The boys want to keep watching blue films, even after they have learnt what '*shen khalli*' means and the girls (particularly the older one, Dolly) get suspicious of their addiction.

Dolly can see the effect it has on the way the boys begin to perceive women around them, an accurate reflection of the phallogocentric nature of most porn today. The internalisation of images of romance from the Bollywood film coupled with those of sex from the blue film evokes in Avya an irresistible attraction towards Chiu. She sees this as an attack on her dignity and soon small scuffles spiral out of proportion; after which none of the children can face each other. A painful period of separation and loneliness follows.

The children's activities are, however, being followed by a well-meaning uncle and an older girl. After futile attempts at trying to convince the parents to pay heed to their children, the uncle devises a plan to catch the children watching a blue film and use this as an opportunity to speak to them about the issue. He allays their fears by urging them to speak openly about their sexual doubts and not to resort to 'dirty' means to answer them. The film ends with the children telephoning their parents to break the communication barrier and initiate a discussion on sex.

Although *Balak Palak* has much to offer in challenging orthodox attitudes, it disappoints by propping up an all too neat dichotomy between the pure and enlightened world of adult sex education and the scandalous and vile world of pornography. The reference to poison in 'Vishu', the boy who introduces them to erotic books and films is telling in this regard. At the end, we see a grown up Dolly and Avya (who are now married) facing the same problem with their child. Dolly says that in today's world, television, internet and films have become their son's 'vishu'. The strong moral disgust towards such media, painting all of it as evil in one go, is an indictment of any exploration that goes beyond established authority in the search for sexual knowledge and pleasure. Knowledge of sex is not a one-time discovery of the act of intercourse which marks the fall of innocence and entry into the 'facts of life'. In the past few decades, such simplistic and universal ideas about sex have been severely critiqued. Should children really turn to their parents for the final word on sex? What about self directed experiments with sources of erotica that open up different social, cultural and ethical worlds of sexuality? In evading these difficult questions rather than unravelling them, the film slips into an altered version of the same protective conservatism it seeks to challenge.