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ACHHUT KANYA (The Untouchable) 1936

B&W/142 mins

Language

Hindi

Director

Franz Osten

Produced by

Himansu Rai

Story

Himansu Rai

Script

J. S. Casshyap

Camera

Josef Wirsching

Music

Saraswati Devi

Sound

Savak Vacha

Lyrics

J. S. Casshyap

Art

Karl von Spreti

Lead Players

Devika Rani as Kasturi

Ashok Kumar as Pratap

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Bombay 400-007



*Kasturi (Devika Rani)
and Pratap (Ashok Kumar),
the star-crossed lovers*

WHAT THIS FILM IS ABOUT

Achhut Kanya is the story of a young woman “who sacrificed herself to save others.” Kasturi, beguiling daughter of Dukhia, a harijan (untouchable) and Pratap, shy son of the brahmin, Mohanlal, love each other. But the village world frowns upon the couple. Most vocal of the critics is the village quack, Babulal, who disapproves of the close relationship between the fathers too. (Dukhia is the pointsman at the level crossing and Mohanlal, the village grocer.) The self-styled doctor has another axe to grind — his pills and potions are not as effective as the medicines prescribed by Mohanlal.

The boy and girl romp and play without a care in the world. But when Pratap’s mother discovers that Pratap has actually eaten food cooked by an untouchable, the elders decide to keep the two apart. Friendship may be within bounds but even for the comparatively less hidebound, the issue of marriage between the two never arises. For their part, Pratap and Kasturi only mildly question the social taboos that separate them.

The villagers, already set astir by the news that Mohanlal’s son has dared to eat food at a harijan’s home, are up in arms when they hear Mohanlal has taken an

*Devika Rani as Kasturi—
the glamorous untouchable*



ailing Dukhia to his home. Incited by the village quack, they accuse Mohanlal of “destroying their religion.” Confrontation steps up into riot when Mohanlal refuses to turn the untouchable out: “Are untouchables not human beings too?” The mob loots the shop and sets the dwelling on fire. Mohanlal is injured; a fever-racked Dukhia stops the mail-train so he may bring a doctor back from the junction. For this highly questionable act he is dismissed. A young man, Manoo, replaces Dukhia but happily he is the son of an old friend. So for the time being, Dukhia and his daughter continue to shelter in the same house.

Pratap’s bride feels she has brought only ill-fortune to her new home. Pratap, while he may be with her physically, his thoughts, she knows, are elsewhere. Pratap, much as he may like to, finds himself unable to return her affections.

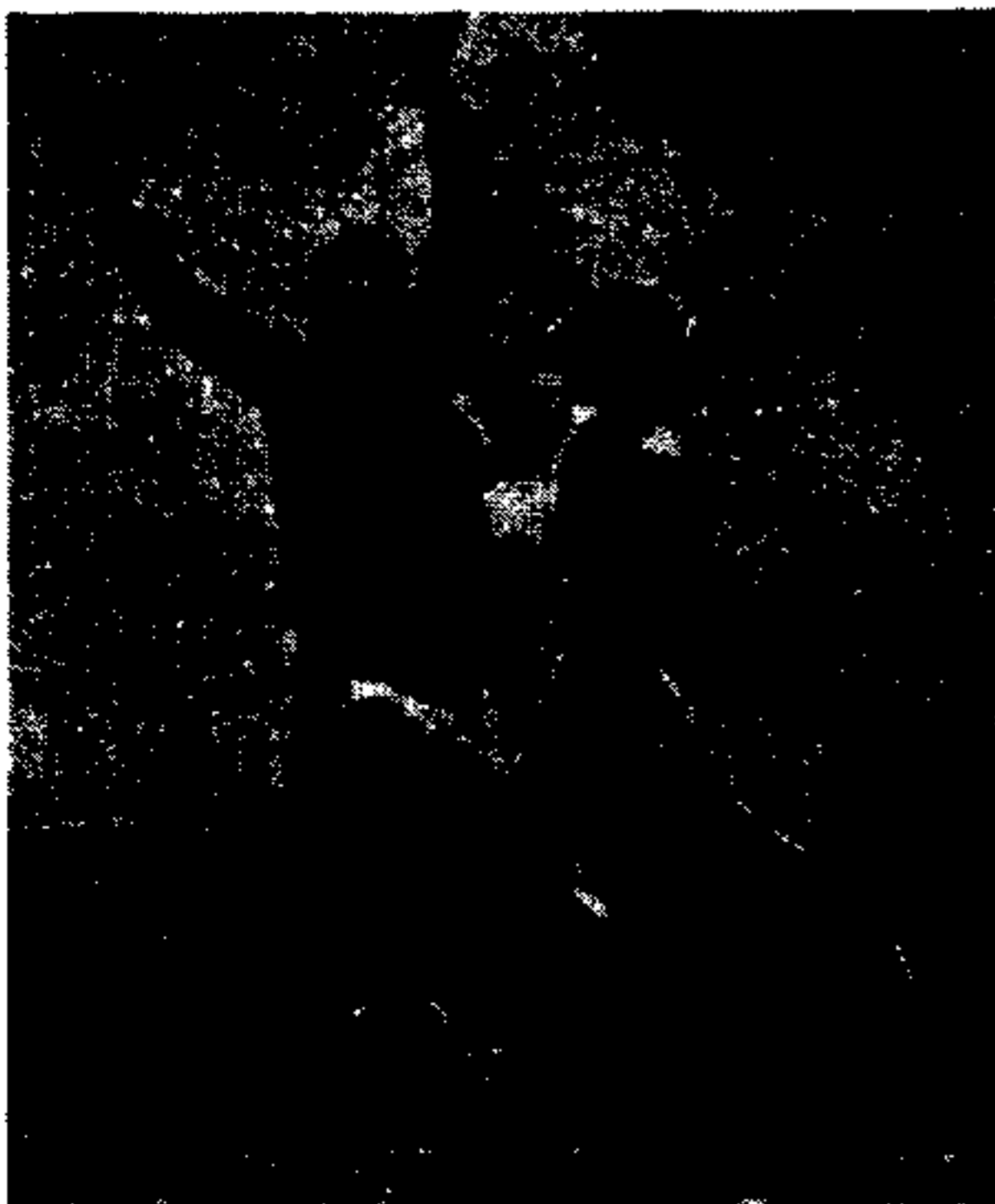
When it is Kasturi’s turn to marry, the bridegroom chosen is Manoo, also a harijan. Pratap suggests to Kasturi that they run away but she sees no escape. He is brahmin, she untouchable. “Why wasn’t I born an untouchable too!” yearns Pratap.

Kasturi is a traditionally dutiful wife: “Your happiness is my happiness,” she says to Manoo. When Manoo’s first wife, from whom he is estranged, wishes to return to him — he spurns her. On the other hand, Kasturi welcomes her as an elder sister and says she will willingly serve them both.

Manoo and Pratap’s wives, Kajri and Meera, discover they have a common source of unhappiness — Kasturi. Playing on Meera’s feelings for Pratap, Kajri persuades Meera to help her ruin Kasturi’s reputation once and for all. But the scheme misfires.

Pratap has a stall at the nearby village fair. Kasturi agrees to go along with Kajri and Meera and according to plan, they abandon her there. Pratap is surprised to see Kasturi and gives her a ride back home. They recall the happy times they have shared: “Don’t remind me of those days,” pleads Kasturi. Manoo is informed that Kasturi has left him for Pratap. Inflamed with jealousy, he sets

*Tension on the railway tracks:
Kasturi and her father try
to stop the mail-train*



Notes on *Achhut Kanya*

Portrait by Svetoslav Roerich
of his wife, Devika Rani
Roerich



out to kill Pratap. Brahmin and untouchable youth battle on the railway tracks as a train approaches the level-crossing. Kasturi, her finery glittering in the train's headlight, frantically attempts to halt the onrushing train. The man she loves and the man she has married are saved — she is not.

A TASTE FOR TRAGEDY

From the beginning, a section of Indian filmmakers had shown a keen awareness of India's social and political problems. Though most of the films initially were mythological or costume dramas, and after the coming of sound, flesh-baring musicals as well — at least a handful of filmmakers had tried to use film to project a discussion of the country's problems. Even in the silent era, Bhalji Pendharkar's *Vande Mataram Ashram* had been banned for its explicit attack on the English educational system.

By the '30s the pressures had become more insistent. The struggle for national independence led by Gandhi and Nehru, their assertion that Indian society must first prove itself worthy of self-rule by cleansing itself of its evils, the missionary work of leaders like Karve and Gokhale — all this had succeeded in keeping problems such as the position of women, the caste situation and economic inequalities, in the forefront of public discussion.

Himansu Rai and Devika Rani had, at the very start of their illustrious career, made successful international co-productions; Devika Rani had offers from foreign companies such as Fox Film Corporation to act in their films, but the pair had returned to India to work here. "Let us learn from these people," Himansu Rai had said, "but let us put the knowledge to work in our country."

Bombay Talkies Studio was built and equipped with infinite care under the supervision of Himansu Rai in the year 1935. The staff that numbered over 400 included some foreign technicians such as director Franz Osten and cameraman Josef Wirsching who had both worked on Rai's silent films. The studio was known for its egalitarian ethos. Caste was never a consideration, no work was considered too low for anyone's status.

At this distance one can see that the Bombay Talkies films had an element of careful craftsmanship, of contrivance, which often made them mechanical. The best films of New Theatres and, certainly, of Prabhat have an ebullience, a certain spontaneity which is missing in the Bombay Talkies films. Its plots are too consciously structured, its elements fitted together with too great a deliberation. *Achhut Kanya*, for instance, plays on the taste for doom-laden romantic tragedy popularised by *Devdas*, while talking of social injustice and inequality. Yet the girl's death results from an act of personal heroism, which would appeal even to those who didn't agree with the film's basic thesis.

The film appeals today for some of its carefully worked out sequences — for instance, the village fair — and the expressive and subtle performances of its lead players, Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar.