

FILM REVIEW

Water

Continued from page 4

Gone is the tendency toward heart-on-the-sleeve emotions that marred both her previous trilogy entries and interim pics "Bollywood/Hollywood" and "The Republic of Love." Sentimentality is replaced here by a deep passion and calm confidence in the power inherent in this startling story (closing title card claims 2001 Indian census lists some 34 million widows).

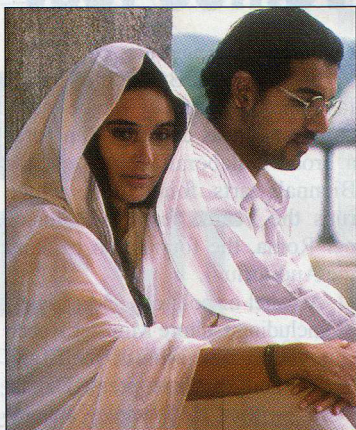
In 1938 India, as the progressive ideas of Mahatma Gandhi are working their way across the country, young Chuyia (Sarala) is told by her distraught father that the older man to whom she's been married has died following an illness. "Do you remember getting married?" he asks her gently. "No" is the solemn reply.

The girl is promptly sent to a widows' home, but the unfamiliarity of her surroundings doesn't suppress the child's natural spunkiness and unforced charm.

She soon settles into ashram life among the 14 other widows, all of whom are shunned by society. Their house is ruled by the huge, foul-tempered Madhumati (Manorama), who smokes pot in the evening while condemning Gandhi's policies with local pimp and hermaphrodite Gulabi (Raghuvir Yadav).

Together, Madhumati and Gulabi prostitute the beautiful young widow Kalyani (Lisa Ray), offering her to the rich Brahmins across the river; when she's not working, Kalyani prays to Krishna and shares her forbidden puppy with Chuyia. Much quieter is middle-aged Shakuntala (Seema Biswas), to whom Chuyia gravitates.

When handsome and idealistic lawyer Narayan (John Abraham) helps Chuyia corral the puppy after it escapes, an escalating romance is sparked between him and Kalyani that eventually destabilizes the dynamic in the house, with tragic consequences.



Lisa Ray and John Abraham share a romance in "Water."

An unerringly stately pace infuses these characters with a quiet dignity that elevates the material and holds pic together across a running time that flirts with the overlong.

The cast is terrific, highlighted at either end of the generation gap by newcomer Sarala's innocent resilience and an utterly charming turn by Vidula Javalkar as an elderly, sweets-obsessed widow known as "Auntie."

Though in the background for much of the film, Biswas becomes a force in the third act: Her climactic, frantic handing-off of Chuyia to Narayan on a train to freedom that Gandhi himself is riding on, and her final gaze back at the life to which she must return, rep pic's finest moments.

Tech credits are tops down the line, led by the shimmering blue-green palette of d.p. Giles Nuttgens, who first worked with Mehta on the final episode of "The Indiana Jones Chronicles"—where she first conceived of the story that would eventually become "Water."

Though occasionally overbearing, Mychael Danna's lush score mixes well with a half-dozen strong songs by prominent Indian composer A.R. Rahman, showcased in nicely handled montage sequences.