

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# MARKETPLACE / Mandi (1983)

Shyam Benegal

## OVERVIEW

*Auteur* Shyam Benegal is a critically acclaimed Indian filmmaker known for social impact films addressing oppressive social structures, such as patriarchy and the caste system. He developed an early interest in photography and filmmaking from his father, a renowned photographer. In the duration of his career, he has worked with other stalwarts in Indian cinema, such as screenwriter Vijay Tendulkar and Kaifi Azmi and actors such as Girish Karnad, Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, and Amish Puri.

*Film* The film cinematically explores the social and economic tensions surrounding a brothel in a developing town. As land and property gain value, the brothel's location in the town center puts in the crossfire of businessmen aiming to gentrify the poorer neighborhoods for profit. In *Marketplace*, Shyam Benegal sensitively explores the moral angles and profit margins cutting into destitute women's livelihoods. In doing so, *Marketplace* humanizes a class of women severely disrespected and oppressed within the town's community. Furthermore, it validates their lives and everyday concerns by allowing them to speak for themselves.

*Background* The film is based on a classic short story, *Anandi*. The story was originally written in Urdu by Ghulam Abbas in 1948. The film's art director, Nitish Roy, bagged the National Filmfare Awards' Best Art Direction for his impressive work in *Marketplace*. In addition to this win, the film and the star-studded cast members were nominated for multiple awards, such as Best Actress (Shabana Azmi as Rukmini Bai), Best Supporting Actress (Smita Patil as Jeenat), and Best Supporting Actor (Naseeruddin Shah as Tungrus), for their phenomenal performance in the film. Although film stars Shabana Azmi and Smita Patil were rival actresses in real life, their collaborative performance in the film affirms the value of real talent.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

Rukmini Bai	The proprietress of a brothel
Jeenat	A talented singer and musician; Agarwal's illegitimate daughter
Basanti	A talented dancer and Jeenat's fierce competitor; fancies the photographer
Phoolmani	A hearing and vocally impaired young girl trafficked from her home
Kamli	A sex worker at the brothel; the policeman's lover
Nadira	A sex worker at the brothel
Shanti Devi	A conservative feminist who runs the town's women's welfare organization
Shrikant	A sex trafficker, who sells Phoolmani to Rukmini
Tungrus	The manservant at the brothel, who is fiercely loyal to Rukmini Bai
Agarwal	The municipality mayor; Sushil's and Jeenat's father
Sushil	Agarwal's son, who fancies Jeenat
Gupta	A businessman who owns a property building and development company
Malathi	Gupta's daughter; engaged to Sushil
Ram Gopal	A photographer and a busybody

## SYNOPSIS

Rukmini Bai is the proprietress of a brothel/entertainment house in a fast-growing town. The establishment boasts of both sex workers and women entertainers skilled in song, music, and dance. Despite the controversy the establishment rouses in the relatively conservative town, Rukmini Bai enjoys popularity, good business, and wealthy patrons. However, things start to turn sour when the local women's welfare association head, Shanti Devi, targets Rukmini Bai's establishment for moral reasons. At the same time, the establishment's location on prime real estate adds another complication. The town's businessmen target the brothel's real estate property to benefit from gentrification and

urbanization. They support Shanti Devi's petition to have a shot at the land. The double pressure forces Rukmini Bai to make tough decisions. She relocates the brothel to a new location on the town's outskirts. The relocation and drop in work opportunities lead to infights among the women and the eventual downfall of the establishment. In taking the viewers into proximity with the women and intimate spaces within Rukmini Bai's establishment, the film narrates an impactful story expounding women's vulnerability in a capitalist and patriarchal social order.

## PLOT

### BROTHEL

**Madame of a Brothel** Rukmini Bai owns the brothel and entertainment establishment. She keenly watches over the women under her care, especially Jeenat, a talented young singer and musician. Tungrus is the establishment's handyman, manservant, and bouncer. Although he is wholly devoted to Rukmini Bai, he fears for Rukmini Bai's soul because of her chosen profession. Therefore, he constantly pleads with her to give up her trade.



**The illegitimate daughter** Jeenat is the most famous and talented entertainer at Rukmini Bai's establishment. Rukmini Bai is fiercely protective of her and keeps a close watch to protect her virtue. Jeenat is Agarwal's illegitimate daughter born to his mistress, who had died in childbirth.



**Sex trafficking** A routine morning turns chaotic after the arrival of a deaf and vocal-impaired girl, Phoolmani, a sex-trafficking victim. When Phoolmani realizes that her marriage to Shrikant is fake and that he is actually a sex trafficker, she turns hysteric and tries to jump off the balcony railing. Jeenat and Rukmini Bai attempt to soothe and calm her.



**Rukmini Bai, the mother hen** Rukmini Bai takes pity on Phoolmani and waits for her to get acclimatized to her new life at the brothel. However, when Nadira, one of the sex workers, forces a man on Phoolmani, Rukmini Bai intervenes to protect Phoolmani. She comforts her and informs everyone else to leave Phoolmani alone.



**Phoolmani's tragedy** At a time when Rukmini Bai is away, Nadira forces a male patron on Phoolmani. He rapes her. Phoolmani does not recover from the traumatic encounter and tries to commit suicide. Her medical emergency brings scrutiny to the brothel and its questionable connections to sex trafficking. Shanti Devi's Women's Welfare Association (Nari Niketan) and the local municipality office leap on the chance to evict Rukmini Bai and the women working at her establishment.



## BUSINESSMEN

**Valuable real estate** A wealthy businessman, Gupta, buys prime real estate surrounding the sacred burial site of an Islamic saint, Baba Kharagshah. Around the same time, he also buys the land and buildings in the town's center, housing the town's brothel and entertainment house.



**A new location** Gupta induces Rukmini Bai to give up on their current building by offering to develop a property he owns on the outskirts and give it to the women. He promises that Rukmini Bai will make lots of money if she agrees to move her establishment there. The new location is close to a sacred site, the burial place of Baba Kharagshah, an Islamic saint. Using the burial site as a reason,



## COMMUNITY

### Shanti Devi's propaganda

Shanti Devi leads a march demanding the immediate removal of sex workers from the town. She makes a speech arguing that women should be respected and worshipped in pujas and not sold in marketplaces like mere objects. In a generous move, Rukmini Bai invites Shanti Devi inside. Shanti Devi demands them to hand over Phoolmani. Furthermore, she uses Phoolmani as an example to prove that Rukmini Bai's establishment is an immoral place that needs to be taken down.



### Counsel Meeting

The brothel's fate and the fate of the women housed there come up as a pressing issue at the municipality council's meeting. As prominent council members, the town's businessmen and Shanti Devi vote to dissolve the brothel and throw out the women. The town's doctor pleads for the council to set aside funds to help the women. However, his plea for a fund falls on uncaring ears.



### Cracks and fissures in the brothel

The chaos of relocation and Shanti Devi's persistent harassment causes women to lose faith in Rukmini Bai and splinter into smaller groups. Basanti decides to take up Ram Gopal's offer to sponsor her debut in the film industry. After receiving the town policeman's marriage proposal, Kamli leaves with him. Ultimately, Nadira decides to leave Rukmini Bai and form her brothel.



## YOUNG LOVE

**A marital arrangement** Gupta and Agarwal, two prominent businessmen, decide to get their children married and establish a marital connection between their two families. Accordingly, Agarwal's son, Sushil, will marry Gupta's daughter, Malati. They make plans for business collaborations and gleefully anticipate the vast profits they stand to gain together.



**The engagement party** At the engagement party celebrating Gupta and Agarwal's marital connection, Rukmini Bai's most talented performers, Jeenat and Basanti, are invited for a special performance. The groom, Sushil, is enamored with Jeenat at first sight. Therefore, he stumbles in his efforts to converse with the beautiful, Jeenat. She laughs at his naivete. Later that night, he follows her back to the brothel.



**A doomed love** Sushil follows Jeenat to the brothel and has a secret meeting with her. When Rukmini Bai discovers Sushil in Jeenat's room, she throws a fit and strongly forbids all future meetings. Rukmini Bai reveals the truth that Jeenat is Agarwal's illegitimate daughter to secure Jeenat's compliance. Since Jeenat is Sushil's biological sister, Rukmini Bai argues that they cannot be lovers.



**The youngsters run away** Jeenat feels claustrophobic under Rukmini Bai's care and longs to be free and fly away like a bird. When Sushil offers the chance to run away, she accepts his offer. Discovering their plot, Rukmini Bai and Agarwal are hot on their heels. They recover Sushil but not Jeenat. As a result, Rukmini Bai is inconsolable in her grief over losing Jeenat.



**The grand exit** When Rukmini Bai learns about Nadira's and Basanti's plans, she feels betrayed and decides to quit her business. Only Tungrus follows her on her journey. In the wilderness, Rukmini Bai vents her anger at the world, at losing Jeenat and losing her position as Madame. However, in the distance, they see a figure in white approaching them. When they recognize her as Phoolmani, they rejoice at being given a chance to redeem themselves.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **RUKMINI** Agreeable (Shrewd, Kind, Assertive)

Rukmini Bai is the Madame of a brothel. Although she uses a firm hand in running her establishment, she expresses genuine care toward the women working at the brothel. She takes personal responsibility for their welfare and never allows male patrons to disrespect or injure the women. In particular, she cares for Jeenat and is very protective of her.

*Shrewd* Rukmini Bai is shrewd in her dealings with outsiders, especially men who might misbehave with women at the brothel. Her hard life prepared her to empathize with women's woes while being a canny advocate for their rights and well-being. Shanti Devi, Rukmini Bai's rival, organizes many protest marches against the brothel. When dealing with Shanti Devi, Rukmini Bai takes the high road, keeping the peace while using sarcasm to counter Shanti Devi's overt insults. When the municipality passes legislation to evict sex workers from their building, Rukmini Bai makes a bold decision to ensure everyone's security. She accepts Gupta's offer to build them a new set of buildings on the town's outskirts instead of receiving Agarwal's hush money.

*Kind* Rukmini Bai's kindness is a hidden face witnessed by a select few, primarily the women at the brothel. Although she appears calculating and money-minded, she never compromises on deals if it harms the women relying on her. She always takes their side when the townspeople deliberately draw them into trouble. When Phoolmani becomes terrified and catatonic, Rukmini Bai takes pity on her and treats her with kindness to help her acclimate to the new reality.

*Assertive* When the town's powerful leaders move to demolish the brothel and evict the women, Rukmini Bai boldly asserts their right to exist in the town. She dismisses Shanti Devi's accusation that women are the problem behind the townsmen's demoralization. Instead, she insists that women are the victims forced into the trade because men seek sexual satisfaction outside their marriages.

### **JEENAT** Open (Childish, Talented, Intuitive)

Jeenat is one of the girls living at Rukmini Bai's establishment and is Agarwal's illegitimate daughter. Since her childhood, Jeenat has been training in singing and music and spends many hours a day in training and practice. Although she is devoted to Rukmini Bai and deeply appreciates her love and support, she feels suffocated under Rukmini Bai's overprotection and longs for freedom.

*Child-like* Jeenat is a teenager in the film. Rukmini Bai's shelter and care allow Jeenat to be blasé and youthful. Her child-like personality expresses itself in fearlessness. When men approach her with devious intentions, taking her for one of the sex workers at Rukmini Bai's establishment, she laughs gleefully at them instead of recognizing the harm they could do to her. In all such encounters, Rukmini Bai shows up to save Jeenat.

*Talented* Jeenat is the main attraction at Rukmini Bai's establishment because of her great talents in music and song. At public performances, her audience always pays her rapt attention. Consequently, Rukmini Bai often tells her not to worry about anything but to improve and develop her art through consistent practice. Her talent allows her to escape the harsh life of women who work as sex workers. When the most celebrated marriage in town, uniting Agarwal and Gupta families, is announced, Jeenat is invited to perform at the occasion.

*Intuitive* Although Jeenat is young, she displays remarkable intuition and courage in her decisions and actions. She takes off after Rukmini Bai, whom she respects and adores. Jeenat extends empathy and support to Phoolmani when she witnesses Phoolmani's panic at being sold to the brothel. She extends similar kindness to other women, including her friend, Basanti. When Nadira forces Basanti to entertain an influential man, Jeenat interjects and takes Basanti's side, refusing to let her be bullied.

### **TUNGRUS** Emotional (Volatile, Faithful)

Tungrus is the only man at the brothel. He works as a manservant. However, he also becomes a bouncer when male patrons act rowdy. The women trust him and allow him into their private spaces knowing that



he would never take advantage of their trust. He helps them when they need things from outside the compound.

*Volatile* Tungrus is a silent man in most scenes. However, he tends to get drunk at night and wander about the buildings rambling about his love for Rukmini Bai. Tungrus has a volatile temperament at times and turns mad suddenly. When two pet monkeys escape their handlers and run amok at the brothel, Tungrus acts crazy in imitating the monkeys. Finally, he successfully confounds and catches them.

*Faithful* He has a one-sided love for Rukmini Bai and admires her deeply. Although the two share a trusting relationship, the film does not reveal their friendship's origins. He worries about Rukmini Bai and her involvement in illegal and immoral work, such as sex trafficking. While drunk, he often warns her about karma and advises her to give up the brothel. Despite his misgivings about Rukmini Bai's chosen career, he never abandons her. Whenever there is trouble at the brothel, Rukmini Bai hails Tungrus, and he never fails to appear.

**SHANTI DEVI** Rational (Judgmental, Conservative)

Shanti Devi is a conservative strait-laced woman who runs the town's women's welfare organization (Nari Niketan). She draws on her significant power and authority as a municipal council member to sway legislation against sex workers. She dresses in plain white clothes, announcing her piety and commitment to living a life of service. Her attire is a visual contrast to Rukmini Bai, who always chooses to wear gaudy and colorful clothes.

*Judgmental* Shanti Devi considers herself a feminist, working hard to restore women to their true worth and value in society. Since her strict moral codes severely limit her idea of a "good" woman, she rejects women like Rukmini Bai, demeaning them and their lives. Shanti Devi believes they are bad women who willfully commit immoral actions. She never bothers to understand the underlying social conditions that force some women to become sex workers. Therefore, Shanti Devi considers sex work demeaning and disrespectful to all women. As a result, despite being a self-declared feminist, she oppresses fellow women for arbitrary reasons.

*Conservative* Although Shanti Devi considers herself a feminist, she is also conservative in her ideas about the ideal society and the roles of womanhood. As a conservative, she feels morally offended by the presence of the sex industry in her town. Accordingly, Shanti Devi uses her power on the municipal council to liberate the women. Instead of blaming the patriarchal social order that supports the sexual objectification of women and the townsmen for creating the market for sex workers, she blames the women who are the real victims of the system. She blames the women for offering their bodies to the town's men and corrupting them.

**AGARWAL** Emotional (Anxious)

Agarwal is a prominent and wealthy man in the town with deep secrets. The first secret is about his children. Sushil is his legitimate, and Jeenat is his illegitimate daughter. He supports Rukmini Bai because Rukmini Bai took care of his mistress until her death and helped raise Jeenat in secret. Agarwal's second secret is about his financial instability resulting from recent losses. The main reason for Agarwal's wish for his son, Sushil, to marry Gupta's daughter, Malati, is the resulting marital agreement between the two families. Agarwal plans to bounce back from the recent losses through the dowry and the resulting business cooperation between the two families.

*Anxious* In town, Agarwal maintains a respectable presence reinforced by his business success and prominent connections by marriage. Since the rest of the town does not know about Agarwal's secret illegitimate daughter, he is anxious about others finding out. As a result, he often becomes Rukmini Bai's pawn and secret weapon against efforts to oust her from town. Ultimately, he is constantly anxious that she will expose his secret if he refuses to comply with her demands.

**GUPTA** Rational (Influential)

Gupta is a wealthy man who makes his fortune in the real estate business. As the owner of a successful

land and property development business, he gets the first pick on all the property development initiatives proposed by the town's municipality council. He is Malati's father and Agarwal's friend and business partner. Rukmini Bai is Gupta's longtime mistress.

**Influential** As an influential and affluent man, Gupta is respected in the community, and his words carry weight in the local councils. When the municipal council discusses the project to develop the land near Baba Kharagshah's burial place, Gupta wins the bid. Out of affection towards Rukmini Bai, he offers to build her and the women in her establishment a new home in the newly developing area. Despite deciding against complying with the municipality council's orders to leave, Rukmini Bai accepts the offer because she and the women with her have nowhere to go. Thus, Gupta's influence and business acumen influence all the townspeople.

## THEMES

**SOCIETY** (Sex workers, Gentrification, Superstitions)

**Sex workers** Major parts of *Marketplace's* plot occur inside a brothel run by Rukmini Bai. The brothel's location in the center of a fast-growing town renders it vulnerable to the press of urbanization and gentrification. Director Benegal opens a window into the lives of women working in the adult entertainment industry through the narrative's placement inside the brothel. From tracing their origins and bitter pasts, *Marketplace* makes steady progress in humanizing the entertainers and the sex workers while also acknowledging the townspeople's excessive moralizing condemnation. While the townsmen visit the brothel by night and openly praise the highly trained and talented performers, they refuse to support the women during the day in public spaces and open debates. When the municipality council discusses razing the brothel's building and surrounding property, none of the male patrons speak for the women. The town's doctor makes a case for the women because he treats all his patients equally. Although he insists on setting aside funds to help the women's transition, no one else backs him. Consequently, the motion fails to pass in the council. Although everyone is aware of the women's situations that led to their path into sex work, they choose to willfully ignore the facts to avoid taking responsibility for the women. Although Rukmini Bai is a profit-minded Madame, she shows a deep awareness of social circumstances forcing women into sex work.

Furthermore, the insider perspective unveils the hierarchy determining different women's respectability and privilege based on their talents in singing, music, dance, and sex work. Since women like Nadira and Phoolmani do not have special musical and dancing talents, they are pushed to the lower rungs of the hierarchy, consisting of sex workers. Women on the upper rungs, such as Jeenat and Basanti, are apex performers, trained and talented in song, music, and dance. They never entertain male patrons because they draw money through highly demanded live performances. Moreover, they are esteemed performers at the town's high-class public events, such as festivals and engagement parties.

**Gentrification** *Marketplace* depicts a town on the brink of being developed into a regional commerce center. The existing properties are re-evaluated in light of new goals. Accordingly, the town's infamous brothel, located near the marketplace, with heavy foot and motor traffic, is deemed an eyesore. Therefore, the town's municipality council leans into profit-making in their decision to scrap the brothel buildings. Since they are unwilling to pay the brothel's women money for relocation, they take the moral high ground to accuse the women of being evil and evict them without compensation.

**Superstitions: Omens** *Marketplace* contains many ominous moments that set the tone for future events. When the municipal council decides to demolish the brothel's buildings, Gupta promises Rukmini Bai that he will make alternative arrangements for the women. He also promises Rukmini Bai that she will make even more money at the new location. As he leaves, the pet parrot screeches, "liar liar." Although Gupta keeps his promise to fund their transition, his promise about more profits turns out to be a lie. After moving to the new location, the women's sisterhood becomes strained. Nadira cuts a deal with Gupta and leaves with her followers to establish a new brothel. The parrot is ominous in other instances too. When Jeenat feels trapped under Rukmini Bai's over-protectiveness, she spends time with the parrot contemplating the caged parrot's lack of freedom. The town's madman notices Jeenat's fascination and encourages her to free the parrot and also free herself by running away. Accordingly, when Sushil offers

the chance to run away with him, she agrees immediately. At the film's end, when Rukmini Bai is thrown out of her own brothel and loses Jeenat, she finds hope again when she sees Phoolmani running toward her. She believes that it is a sign of forgiveness.

## **JUSTICE** (Victims)

**Victims** Although most women join the brothel because they have nowhere else to go, some girls are victims. One such example is Phoolmani, a victim of sex trafficking. Although Rukmini Bai is gentle with Phoolmani, wanting to give her time and space to adjust to her new life. Nadira, one of the long-standing sex workers at the brothel, forces a man on Phoolmani. The traumatic encounter causes Phoolmani to commit suicide. Although they catch her in time, she needs medical attention at a hospital. Between letting Phoolmani die and taking Phoolmani to the hospital at the cost of exposing the brothel's secret involvement in sex trafficking, Rukmini Bai chooses the latter and saves Phoolmani's life. Inevitably, news of Phoolmani's tragic arrival at the brothel fuels moral protests against the brothel, resulting in their eventual eviction.

## **RELATIONSHIPS** (Family)

**Families** *Marketplace* introduces unconventional family structures that defy traditional family structures, consisting of biologically related parents and children. The women at Rukmini Bai's brothel express genuine empathy and understanding toward one another. Although a hierarchy determines each woman's place, they express a united front against the external forces that look down on them and scheme to throw them back on the streets. Although Rukmini Bai is the Madame, she never ill-treats her underlings. Instead, she empathizes with every woman under her care because of her tragic past with a cheating man. She has a soft corner for young girls like Jeenat and Phoolmani. Tungrus is the only manservant whom the women treat like a brother. When Tungrus refuses to abandon their old building and move to the new location, the women feel bad about leaving him behind and beg him to come along. Although he refuses initially, he eventually changes his mind and rejoins the women. Everyone is ecstatic about having him back.

**Incest** Agarwal's family shows a different example of an unconventional family. While his son, Sushil, is born to his legal wife, his daughter, Jeenat, is born to his mistress and grows up under Rukmini Bai's care. When Sushil and Jeenat meet for the first time, they fall in love without realizing the incestuous implications. Since Agarwal's affair with his mistress and the resulting daughter are secrets, his children do not realize they are blood-related siblings.

## **APPEARANCE vs. REALITY** (Secrets)

**Secrets** Many secrets are hidden beneath the brothel's glitter and glam. Agarwal hid his mistress and the resulting love child for years by stowing them at the brothel. The arrangement allows Agarwal to live his public life as an upstanding citizen and a lucrative businessman. As the only person who is privy to the secret, Rukmini Bai uses the secret to apply pressure on Agarwal. Accordingly, Agarwal draws on his power as the head of the town's municipal council to indirectly support the brothel. The brothel's second hidden backer is Gupta. Rukmini Bai is Gupta's long-term mistress. As a result of the illicit relationship, he becomes their hidden backer and privately bankrolls their move to the new location.

## **PAST** (Transience)

**Transience** The resulting confusion spurs new secrets among the women. The talented dancer, Basanti, decides to run away to Bombay with her secret lover, Ram Gopal, the photographer. Similarly, Kamli plans to flee the town with her lover, the town's policeman. Nadira, who has always resented Rukmini Bai's leadership, gathers a band of devoted followers and decides to start her own brothel.