

FILM

MAATI MAAY

Abhijit Ghosh-Dastidar

Based on a Mahasweta Devi short story, "*Maati Maay—A Grave Keeper's Tale*" (Marathi, colour, 98 mins), directed by Chitra Palekar, delineates superstitions and evil spirits. An angry man with a stick walks through fields, throwing furious glances at a hut. From the hut emerges Chandi/Ghoul—evil spirit (Nandita Das), tapping a utensil. Children run from the rail yard, at the sight of 'Ghoul'. A man warns that the Ghoul kills children. Narsu (Atul Kulkarni) washes skulls and bones. He works in a government mortuary. A dead body of a beggar has been found behind the temple. Bones are packed for a doctor. Narsu looks after cremation of unclaimed bodies. He collects coins from an agent, who receives the bones and skulls. He halts before the hut, while 'Ghoul' disappears. A woman offers prayers for protection from 'Ghoul'. At the Ahsan Village fair, Narsu buys a flute and cookies for his teenaged son, Bhagirath (Kshiti Gavande). Returning from the fair, father and son walk over the rail tracks.

Chandi meets her estranged husband, Narsu, and her son at the village pond. She complains that there was no oil, and no food; and no shop-keeper will sell anything to her. She stares at the still waters, and observes son, Bhagirath. She was scared to be alone; and mother and son look at each other's reflections in the pond. The son protests that 'Ghoul' was no human being. Steadily Narsu relates past history to his son. Bhagirath was Chandi's son. He has a sister, Tulsi; and Dhruvadi was his step mother. He dreams of apparitions and sees Ghoul. The child wakes up crying in fear. At the school function, he plays the flute, with accompanying drums and cymbals. The children sit crosslegged on the floor, Bhagirath reads an essay to the visiting teacher. Narsu returns home with a bottle of country liquor.

During the next few days, as Narsu and son, Bhagirath take respite with snacks, the narrative continues. Chandi's ancestors were keepers of the village graveyard. She was the daughter of Bhagwan, a grave keeper. After her father's death, she walks around graves. One night Narsu meets Chandi with a lamp, in the forest. She was the loveliest bride around. Soon Bhagirath was born, and was expected to be more cleverer than his father. But destiny made things different. Chandi has sole charge of burning the dead. At night Chandi is called to the graveyard, to prepare the burial of children. She is tired, and milk from her breasts spills on to a dead child. This is treated as a bad omen by the villagers. To prevent wild animals from plundering graves, she erects signs on the mud. The villagers charge Chandi as the evil eye from the lower caste, and prevent her from touching the children.

Chandi is required to handle dead children only; and bury them in the graveyard, with picks, axes and shovels. She loses heart in the work which is God given. Narsu sells human and animal bones. There is an epidemic in the village, and more deaths are expected. The villages and forests were full of corpses, and Chandi receives summons for more burials. When Seth's son dies, Chandi tells the villagers that She was not the evil Ghoul. But no one else will do her work, and she had the blessings of king Harishchandra. She had ancestral responsibilities for performing the last rites. Suffering from chest pains, she wakes up at night after a nightmare. Her son has disappeared, and the nightmare is complete with dead bodies of children, a fire dancer with drums, and a black wolf. Bhagirath wants to hear the whole story. Chandi's sister arrives with her

daughter. Many kids have died as a result of goddess Massamma's curse. Now Chandi's sister, Yashodra's, daughter Jamna dies. Yashodra had been suffering from the curse of a daughter. But the hostile villagers and Yashodra attack Chandi for killing Jamna. Chandi is charged for as the evil spirit. She pleads that she has never harmed anyone, and She was doing God's work. The villagers beat her up. Narsu, the husband accuses her of the evil spirit, 'Ghoul'. Terrified, she wants to run away, and not perform her ancestral work. There are no more calls for burials. Silent, mute and reflecting, she remains at home, and suggests children should be cremated.

At night, Chandi hears cries under a banyan tree. The villagers speak of Chandi casting an evil spell on Narsu. At the toddy shop, Narsu gets into a brawl over Chandi going out at night. Villagers attack Narsu's house with lit torches. Charges of evil spirit keep rising, and Chandi is accused of feeding her breast milk to dead babies. People drive her away from the village. Hearing the factual details from his father, one day after school Bhagirath runs to Chandi's hut, and meets her. They watch at each other's reflections in a mirror. Bhagirath requests his mother to have a change of clothes, Chandi tells him to go home. The son offers to recite a poem. She walks away with a water pitcher. At the hut she cries, and pulls out a broken mirror, and looks at herself. The child's voice echoes in the landscape.

One night four villagers put up tree trunks on rail track, to derail a train, with the purpose of robbing treasury money. Chandi tries to remove the tree trunks and logs, by pulling and chopping the wood. She is unable to clear the tracks and stands on the tracks, waving at the on-rushing train. The steam engine driver fails to stop the train, and Chandi is run over. However, the government cash bags are saved, along with the lives of the passengers. Chandi is awarded a bravery award by the BDO. There is a search for Chandi's near relatives. Bhagirath steps forward at the ceremony, as Chandi's son. "Maati Maay" begins with the present, and after about twenty minutes the past is recounted by Narsu. There is no vast distancing, but the frequent cuts to Narsu and son, Bhagirath sitting in the present in static frame, leads to a slowing down in the pace of images. The little stories are episodic and theatrical. In the absence of any date specified, except the steam engine at the end, Chandi's miseries appear contrived and paranoid. The images are colourful and exuberant, but Debu Deodhar's camera scarcely travels beyond long shots and close shots. Chitra Palekar's script does not have any plan of cinema, except to relate stories. The dissertation on the marginalized fails to convincingly align the events with the characters.