

FILM

New Films by Kasaravalli and Viswanathan

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As Girish Kasaravalli's "Nayineralu -in the shadow of the dog" (Kannada, colour, 132 mins) progresses, affinities and confrontations develop in the celluloid drapery of obsessions and superstitions. In a village near Mysore, the temple indoors, with arati and bells, remains immune from the restive 'Quit India movement' outside. Achchaannaiah (Sringeri Ramanna) and his wife, Venkatlaxmi (Pavitra Lokesh) follow the religious, Hindu scriptures, in their daily lives. Twenty years ago, their son, Ramanna, was drowned in a river. The widow daughter-in-law, Nagalaxmi (Rameshwari Verma) and the granddaughter, Rajalaxmi (Ananya Kasaravalli) live with them. Naga-laxmi performs all household chores, but her widow bondage is perturbed when Putramma the village priest and Aitha, the barber bring news that the late husband has been reborn in a distant town. Eighteen-year -old, Vishwa (Ashwin Bolar) is her real husband.

Rituals follow ; the barber shaves Nagalaxmi's head. Body shaking folk dances reciprocate feelings. When Vishwa arrives in the village, Naga-laxmi's father-in-law gives him a body massage. Nagalaxmi has to accept Vishwa, as the re-incarnation of her husband, and pours ghee on Vishwa's rice plate. But they do not share a room. When Nagalaxmi is drawing water from a spring, Vishwa drifts perfumed flowers in the water canal. Nagalaxmi's father-in-law feels disturbed, but the mother-in-law is convinced that Vishwa is her lost son. Vishwa feels thrilled when Nagalaxmi speaks to him. Nagalaxmi rescues Vishwa from a swarm of bees, and they embrace amidst flowers and foliage. The mother-in-law advises Nagalaxmi to stay away from all sacred rituals. Nagalaxmi's daughter, Rajalaxmi and Vishwa, the re-incarnated husband are of the same age, and Rajalaxmi finds it difficult to accept the myth of re-birth. She threatens to leave, if Vishwa stays.

The mother-in-law does not approve the relationship between Nagalaxmi and Vishwa. Vishwa's brother denies responsibility of providing land and money to Naga-laxmi. The Shastri father-in-law decides not send back Nagalaxmi and Vishwa. The village society no longer accepts Nagalaxmi as a widow, nor as a married woman. The fulfilment of a relationship is not rejoiced. The oracle had asked that Vishwa be accepted, but Nagalaxmi has embraced him. Everything in Naga-laxmi's life is accidental, and nothing by choice. When Nagalaxmi conceives, she crosses a river with Vishwa, and takes refuge in another village. Soon Vishwa develops friendship with a young porter girl, Sukri (Sindhu Ras). Vishwa's relationship with Sukri leads to charges of adultery, and Vishwa suffers a two-year jail sentence. He refuses to sign a bail application. When Nagalaxmi has labour pains, she cries for a boat. The new born daughter, Bharathi grows up amidst coconut fields, rivers, swamps and islets. Nagalaxmi has doubts in faith and re-incarnation.

"In the shadow of a dog" is based on story by Dr S L Bhyrappa. Much of Kasaravalli's film is set in outdoors, which mollifies the weight of indoor temple rituals and oracle superstitions. As Nagalaxmi and Vishwa look at each other, differences and affinities are not concealed. The glowering of village elders does not make the parody of superstitions, glib and inauthentic. Rama-chandra Aithal's images do not possess any suddenness, but they carry the immediacy of Nagalaxmi's predicament. While the parallels between the dog, representing good and bad deeds, following Yudhistria in

the 'Mahabharata' are approachable and accessible, Kasaravalli's narrative structure is obvious and coercive, which reduces the naturalness of the rural images.

ANDHOKARER SHABDO

Ashoke Viswanathan's "ANDHOA-KARER SHABDO—SOUNDS OF DARKNESS" (Bengali, colour, 123 mins) engages on the travails of life and film making simultaneously. A brief pre-credit sequence ponders over escape from death, and a discourse on death. A young film director, Ashok Bhattacharjee (Tota Roy Chowdhury) and Amar Chowdhury (Kunal Mitra), the producer, discuss with Rachna (Rachna Shah), the script writer, the next twenty five days of shooting of the inner story and the outer story. It is the film director's first film, and a new actress declines short roles. The film within and the film narrative converge and diverge.

A young man, Neil notices a young lady, Sonali (Rituparna Sen Gupta) being pushed and slapped by a another man. Neil protests and protects Sonali. The ruffian pulls out a gun and shoots a bystander. In Kolkata, cinema reality gets larger than life, as questions are raised as to who gets beaten, and why? After TV and newspaper interviews, Neil meets Sonali. Sonali visits Neil's residence, and meets Neil's parents (N Viswanathan and Alokanda Roy), and his mentally handicapped brother. The deranged brother keeps singing, and Sonali gives him sweets. There are bits of conversation on Girish Ghosh protesting over a girl in the role of a man ; and suggestions of changing Star Theatre's name to Binodini Theatre. The film production team demands food and hilsa fish. There are anxieties that the National Awards jury and the Indian Panorama jury should understand male domination complexes. Soon Neil gets a job in a bank, and friendship with Sonali continues. Reasons become irrelevant. The film director and the script writer make love. Just when the film makers accept that truth begins with a dream, reality strikes.

Some youngmen are playing cricket by the roadside. The cricket ball is swung inside the premises of a working girl's hostel. A young man with a blue shirt enters the hostel to retrieve the cricket ball, and stares at an unsuspecting girl. The girl raises an alarm, police arrive, the men flee, but Neil a bystander is arrested, since he is also wearing a blue shirt. After some time at the police station, Neil is bailed out. The parents are disturbed, and news reports pour of a "Bank Officer arrested for unlawful entry". The heroine does not agree with the script, and wishes to continue the Neil-Sonali relationship. The parents disapprove, and Sonali breaks off the relationship on phone. Media dictates public life. The possibilities of film multiply. Rural elements are essential for foreign festivals. Leaving home, Neil walks along deserted stretches at night. A girl and a boy on a motorbike are attacked. A man in a taxi protests and gets beaten up. On 01 January, '02, a sergeant is killed by fellow policemen for protesting against molestation.

The rebel in Neil is now dead. He becomes Subodh, and the conformist comes alive. He reaches Sibagram village with ponds, where villagers sing. A girl, Sulekha (Sohini Sanyal) is throwing stones at a tree, and Neil gets hurt by a pebble. Sulekha takes Neil to her house. Neil introduces himself to Sulekha's father, a hotel owner, as Subodh Ghosh, the great author. In the village, there are strict prohibitions on the cutting of trees, and all bodies are buried. Neil takes job as a hotel manager, in Sulekha's father's hotel. Neil / Subodh avoids conflict. As a young man snatches a newspaper from a man, Neil offers another newspaper. When a man refuses to pay, Neil notes in the hotel Register. A prospective groom's family comes to see Sulekha. The film makers discover that word is close to a mirror, a reflection. Neil remains a sadhu in the rural

woods, and there is a cut to Kolkata city. He leaves the village before Sulekha's wedding.

Neil suffers from trauma after Sulekha's marriage. Unable to forget the past, Neil returns to the village hotel. Meanwhile, the viewer learns that Sulekha and Sonali are relatives. Sulekha finds Neil / Subodh's photo in Sonali's photo album. On telephone, Sonali seeks Neil's forgiveness. The return of the lecher and killer, makes Neil / Subodh alive. He sings, and the village belles sing and sway. Colour shifts to black and white. Sonali's Neil was the intrepid rebel, but Neil at the end of the narrative is spineless, and virtually dead. As it rains one night, hoodlums and magic show players arrive. The magician (Debdoot Ghosh) tries to make Neil / Subodh jovial, while five drunks eye the girl companion.

Vishwanathan treats illogical situations, as a natural phenomenon. But allegories are missing in the juxtaposition of real life, news stories and parody of sentimental Bengali cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. While the docu-style news enactments have a frenetic pace, the narrative dramatic sequences are marked with a stark absence of any tension, or even any puzzled exchange of glances. The outer film attempts to face the terrible moments of film making. The reconstruction of the inner film script and the dramatization of real life events do not build any situationist spectacle. Shirsha Roy's camera has sufficient tracks and cranes to compose the serio-comic episodes. Vishwanathan's script rocks and reels to the rhythms, ticks and vocabulary of the multilayered, portentous narrative on film making and film making material.

The films were mounted at the Indian Competition Section of Osian's Cinefan festival of Asian Cinema, in July 06. ❧❧❧ ❧