

FILM

## Khela

Abhijit Ghosh-Dastidar

Rituparno Ghosh has written and directed, "Khela" (Bengali, 110 mins, colour), an impressionistic look at the pressures of film making and personal trauma. It is an intriguing work and daring memoir that mixes memories, sociology and the anxieties of film making. Before a large house, Shila (Manisha Koirala) gets down from a car, while husband, Raja (Prasenjit Chatterjee) remains in the car. The wife hands over a bunch of keys to Raja. The marriage has broken up. Shila is unable to explain to her elder sister, Rimi (Rupa Ganguly), as to why she has returned from her husband's abode. It was four years of marriage and the couple did not have any children. There is a cut back to the past, where Shila's mother rejects the idea of not having any kids. "Khela" abounds in the past being recalled. Raja, a non-mainstream film maker, is directing a film on Gautam Buddha's life, based on a historical classic by Aban Thakur.

Raja flips through an album of photos, containing profiles of child applicants. The producer, Bikram (Shankar Chakravarty) stumbles on a childhood photo of Raja, taken at his aunt's (pishi) house, several years ago. Shila discusses her marriage with sister, Rimi, Raja has been serious about his work, and has had no time for family. Art has been supreme for him, and there was no value for life. From an upper story window, Raja spots two school boys with their satchels, having 'phootchkas' (soup pies). Raja selects one of the boys, Abhirup (Akashneel Dutta Mukherjee), for the role of Nalak, in his film. He meets Abhirup's parents, who have worries over the six weeks shooting programme, which would clash with school studies. Abhirup's father (Bharat Kaul) is a businessman, and his mother, (Pushpita Mukherjee) is a home maker, who has also to care for her father-in-law (Haradhan Banerjee). The parents are opposed to the idea of Abhirup going on an outdoor shooting in forests, outside Kolkata, Abhirup also has a younger sister.

Precocious Abhirup telephones Raja to ascertain whether he has been selected for the film role. As parents are not in favour of the shooting, Abhirup suggests he be kidnapped. Raja meets Abhirup in front of his school. They take a walk in a park. There are rapid cuts to the school church spires, the school bell, and children bustling about. Raja and Abhirup move away in a car. As Abhirup had forgotten to write to his parents, he sits in the car and writes a letter stating that he is going for film shooting. To avoid the pet dog barking, Abhirup at night posts the letter in his house letter box. There is panic at Abhirup's home. Abhirup's mother accuses her husband of scolding Abhirup excessively when he had poured ink into an aquarium. There is a flashback when Raja wants to watch a video film at home, and wife Shila wants to converse. The couple calculate the cost of rearing a child. At a level crossing, Raja smokes in the car, and Abhirup gazes out of the window. A flashback leads to 10 am on a winter morning, when Raja would like to continue sleeping, and Shila insisting that he wake up. As the train passes, Abhirup goes missing for a while.

The film crew has assembled at a forest and hilly area. The costume designer, Anjali (Raima Sen), from Ahmedabad, and the sound recordist, Palash become friends with Abhirup. When Raja telephones his wife, at home, there is no response. Shila is singing, on a verandah of her mother's bungalow,

in Kurseong. Abhirup cries after being shaved bald, and tries to run away. He threatens to disclose the 'kidnap story' and inform police. Chocolates bring reconciliation. As Anjali types an e-mail message to her mother on the computer, her voice over reads the letter. On the sets, Raja as director has an honesty of purpose. A flashback shows Raja as vulnerable, while Shila clicks photos on zoom lens. At night the film crew sing clapping hands. Raja knocks on Anjali's door, handing over a diary, with shooting script notes. Anjali promises to wake him up early. Inside a mosquito net in Kolkata, Abhirup's mother cries. The local studios could not provide any information on the outdoor shooting. Police have been informed. On set, Abhirup is briefed by the assistant director. During shooting action, Abhirup dressed in saffron walks along trees, amidst religious songs. The first take turns out 'excellent', even though Abhirup has hidden his chocolate bar inside the 'dhoti' folds. The sound recordist teases Anjali, over stitching Raja's torn shirt. Police in Kolkata visit Raja's empty house. The security in Rampurhat, Birbhum have been alerted. Raja is annoyed when Abhirup has released butterflies from a jar. Hiding below a bed, he watches Anjali's naked legs, as she puts on jeans. Abhirup brings out a jar with a caterpillar, which would change into a butterfly in three weeks.

In Kolkata, on Abhirup's birthday, Abhirup's mother returns home from the temple with prasad. Anjali protests when accused by Raja of not taking proper care of Abhirup. There is a birthday celebration in the evening, at the outdoor shooting. Raja slaps Abhirup when he declines to go to bed early, in order to wake up early for next day's shooting. Anjali gifts a bag to stop Abhirup crying. Meanwhile, Raja receives a letter from wife, Shila, with a legal draft of a separation memo, for signature. A cut to Kolkata, presents Shila returning home with a packet of cigarettes for Raja all drenched in rain. Abhirup confides to Anjali that he has been kidnapped, and Anjali insists that Raja write to Abhirup's parents. Police are on the trail, and Raja shifts the shooting locale. When asked by a police inspector at a railway station, Raja misguides the police. Producer Bikram is annoyed when he hears that Abhirup has been brought to the shooting, without the knowledge of the parents. He wants to stop shooting and return the child. Raja breaks down and cries. Abhirup's parents receive a letter from Raja. Police keep searching. On the sets, rain is showered by fire brigade personnel. Abhirup develops temperature.

Anjali, the costume designer has been offered a job by a French film production company. She is in tears, having developed affections for Raja, and being confronted by his indifference. Raja confesses that he loves all the film unit members. The shooting is over, and Abhirup stays with Raja; while the film unit pack up and depart. The child now wishes to listen to the director's instructions.

Raja visits wife Shila, at Kurseong with Abhirup. The child's temperature rises. Next morning when Abhirup wakes up, Shila informs that his parents were coming to collect him. Raja suggests to Shila that they stay together, and he could not live without her. The lawyer's draft remains unsigned, and Shila rests her head on Raja's shoulders. When Abhirup's parents arrive, butterflies fly inside the jar.

Every problem in "Khela", whether on the film set or outside the set, is solved almost instantly. The protagonists give genial performances, in the cluttered design of the Narrative, which swings from present to past, and the plot shifting from diverse locations and situations. Rituparno's story line never

realizes its potential for pathos or comedy, as the child and the film crew are cardboard cut-outs. The numerous flashbacks offer wattly expositions and an array of chiches. The aspirational songs do not build powerful drama. Abhik Mukherjee's camara is mobile, but without social observations. □□□