

FILM

SAMANTAR

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Set in Kolkata on the banks of the Hooghly river and in Mumbai, in recent times. Amol Palekar's "Samantar-Parallel Folds" (Marathi/English, colour, 105 mins) is a love story of the elderly, in which things are not quite what they seem, except for the locations. On the banks of the Hooghly river in Kolkata, with the sprawling Dakhineswar bridge in the distance, a charitable hospital is being inaugurated. Mr Keshav Vase (Amol Palekar), a sixty-year-old industrialist from Mumbai, hands a cheque of Rs 5 crore to Dr Paritosh, a psychiatrist. Mr Vase in his discourse informs that forty years ago when an earthquake devastated his town in Maharashtra, the nearest hospital was 30 km away. Receiving a gift of an artifact Mr Vase hears the strains of "Raga Malhar" on a violin and faints. He is admitted in hospital in Kolkata where his daughter Rewa who is an MBA from Harvard, visits him.

Returning to Mumbai, Keshav who owns five industrial plants and employs about 850 workers, wishes to retire. There are plans and negotiations for setting up an industrial project in Madrid. Keshav's medical reports are normal. The factories are being managed by Keshav's nephew, Nandan and others in the family. Like lingering clouds, the violin strains heard in "Seva Dham" on the bank of Hooghly river, return to Keshav's mind, and the ashes from the past accumulate. The house servant Gajzababu is worried at Keshav's distraught state. On a morning walk in a park in Mumbai, Keshav meets an old friend Dilip Saxena from his student days. Keshav recognizes Joytsna, who was a contemporary student and now Dilip's wife, from a wallet photo of the girl. In Keshav's office, a corporate film on industrial designs and manufactured steel products is being projected. Mankrand, married to Keshav's niece Niru intrudes, and demands compensation for three injured workers. He is a radical and Keshav tolerates his wild ways, since his grandfather had contributed generously to the company. Keshav's nephews and nieces arrange a birthday party for Keshav.

There are black and white reveries of art school, attended by Keshav. He is in a car with a girl. An earthquake brings bereavement, Keshav's parents have died, and his siblings are injured, Keshav returns to the charitable hospital in Kolkata. Girls in red blouses, white saris with red borders, sing Tagore songs, greeting Keshav. Saplings are planted in the vast lawns. A phone call from Mumbai conveys message of industrial unrest in Keshav's factory, six fatal casualties in an industrial accident and issue of arrest warrants. Through saddled with responsibilities, Keshav's mind is captured by the familiar violin notes. He climbs the staircase of Dr Paritosh's residence, and enters a sculptor's studio. Shyama (Sharmila Tagore), Paritosh's mother, who never speaks, draws and plays the violin, all day in the studio. Recognizing Shyama, Keshav faints again, and Shyama places his head on her lap. When doctors rush in Shyama informs that Paritosh is allergic to penicillin. When son Paritosh returns, Shyama retires to her room. Shyama remains quiet when son Paritosh asks whether she knew Keshav earlier. Paritosh tells Keshav he was brought up in a boarding school, and never knew his father.

In Mumbai, the nephews fight over the industrial plant. There are allegations of adulteration in the pharmaceutical products. Mankrand demands one-fourth of the plant's value, as his share, with agreement to divorce wife, Niru. He attacks everybody personally. Niece, Niru with a limp cries before Keshav. He pulls out an old violin from a drawer, and craves for solitude, since life has shattered essences. Those have been repeated catastrophes in Keshav's life. Now at the apex of happiness, he seeks the right to live or die as choice. He does not need to fulfill the act of living anymore, and requests his nephews not to keep him bound. While Keshav is on a treadmill at the gym, daughter Rewa suggests Keshav consult a psychiatrist. Rewa was adopted when she was seven years old. After having raised his joint family, Keshav feels he is not a super man; but the flow of life continues. The concept of voluntary death was not acceptable in India, while there is ritual death among elephants, where an elephant dies in isolation. Niru and Rewa hug and cry.

Keshav and Rewa visit Kolkata again. When Keshav enters the pottery studio, Shyama stops playing the violin, but Keshav plays the instrument on the same note. Rewa is introduced. Shyama gifts to Rewa, a sculpture of a leg, and dry 'bakul' flower petals. A flashback brings alive love and flowers. Linking the sculpture of a foot with a similar photo at home, Rewa cries. On the outer varandah of the mansion, Keshav, Shyama, Paritosh and Rewa stand separately, with distances. A boat on the river glides by, and in the distance, Dakhineswar Kali temple is visible. The celebration of life goes on as drummers beat their dhakis (drums). A prisoner has written a letter to the hospital, donating his organs after suicide. Daughter Rewa tries to explain the change of normality in her father. Keshav explains an event in the remote past, that when he had returned to the students' hostel, Shyama had parted for good. Shyama holds Keshav's hands. They go on a boat ride, and take quiet walks in the temple area.

Keshav and Shyama tread old paths and frozen insights, Assistant Salim arrives from Mumbai with documents and cheques. Rewa shows photo of an old sculpture "Sisyphus" by Keshav, to Shyama. Years ago as students Shyama and Keshav had planned to sculpt a bird together. Shyama starts speaking, and recalls Keshav adoring the strength of the Jirate bird's wings. Rewa cries over Keshav's decision to quit life. Shyama leaves a photo of the 'Sisyphus' sculpture and 'bakul' flower petals on Keshav's suitcase. She watches, from the rear of a pillar, Keshav driving off. Keshav visits the hospital under construction, which would be ready in a few months. Paritosh wants blessings from his father, and Keshav hugs him. Keshav is scared of Shyama's silence, and is worried that fragile Shyama may get hurt again. They have been walking away from each other on parallel paths, and Shyama was alive only physically. Driving to Kolkata airport Keshav visits the Tex-India Showroom in Rajarhat. Friend from student days, Jyotsna is manager of the outlet. She recalls when the earthquake occurred thirty years ago everybody had left the hostel. A security guard had gagged Shyama, and tried to rape her. Shyama was three months pregnant, and was in hospital for two weeks, refusing abortion. She would play the violin for hours. Keshav hurriedly returns to Shyama, with a new 'baigan' sari. They hug, and Shyama utters Keshav's name. The dream of planting of seven bakul trees comes alive.

2. Sandhya Gokhale's dialogue and script, and Amal Palekar's direction build an emotional drama of rediscovery of lost personal relations, in a backdrop of vignettes on corporate malpractices, conference arguments and euthanasia, which are already in the public domain. Rewa and Paritosh's uncertainties and doubts, sobs and cries by Niru and Rewa, Shyama's internal grieving make the narrative melodramatic and sentimental. Keshav is nuanced in the imposition of a story, and the attribution of various emotions, generated by a thirty-year-old earthquake, disrupting life and communications. The situations in "Samantar" are not absurdist, but still it is a horribly mushy movie, even without excursions into mental-health issues. The screenplay outlines the characters with broad brushes, and the characterizations remain cursory. Ashim Bose's camera follows the psychological burdens with Anand Modak's music encircles the attractions and the predicaments.