

INDIAN PANORAMA

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THE INDIAN PANORAMA, accompanying the International Film Festival of India at Goa (Nov/Dec 2010), presented a weave of contemporary Indian films, having creativity and breadth. Girish Kasaravalli's "Kanasemba Kudureyaneri -Riding a Dream" (2009, Kannada, 110 mins, colour) studies a tribal community of grave diggers in Karnataka, who believe that Sudra is 'gama' the god. From a pond in a desolate area, women fill up water vessels, and trudge through fields with vessels on their heads. Village huts stand isolated. A scantily clad grave digger, Irya (Vaijinath Birader) returns to his hut, without finding any work. No deaths in the village result in no work for Irya. Washing blood stains from his shirt, he tells his wife, Rudri (Umashree) that they were merely colours. Rudri protests at wastage of water. Basanyappa, the tractor cart driver does not give Irya any ride on the muddy track. Irya accidentally knocks down a colour pitcher on the roadside, and women throw paint. Hema (Pavitra Lokesh) and Sivamma (Sadashiv Brahamavar), along with child daughter, Pinki (Baby Soundarya) return to the village in a swanky sports jeep. Sivamma's old father Matadhyaya has been ill for six months. The father fails to recognize his son and daughter-in-law. He lives in a smelly room in large mansion, and relieves himself in bed. Sivamma's mother is no more, and now there is nobody to take care of the old man. The grandfather becomes cheerful after seeing Pinki.

Shivamma is principal of a college and wishes to set up an English medium school in the village. A title card intersperses, 'Irya's Dream'. A man with a torch at night, tells Irya to get ready. Irya seeks guru Siddha's blessings, and guru Siddha informs Irya that senior Matadhyaya Gowda would die shortly, and the Gowda family pay well. Irya moves around the village in a torn shirt, and villagers enquire who has died? When Shivamma drives off on his car, Irya is told to stay away, as Shivamma was on a special work, and Irya's presence is treated as inauspicious. Irya reaches the Gowda mansion, and the estate manager informs that nobody has died. Village women feel that land can last long, but not money. Irya continues to dig a grave, and demands wages for his labour from the Gowda household. But death does not arrive, and the premonition was in a dream. Irya's wife Rudri feels the dream has turned false. Meanwhile over tea, village landlords discuss land for industrialization. Basamyya decides not to sell land. Unable to sell land, educated children of landlords have moved to the city. Inside the estate, child Pinki and her mother Hema, play at dragons, miming scary images of ghosts, as Pinki switches off the lights. Shivamma is faced with the dilemma of selling the land, to raise money for the school. His old father dies. The landlords have gathered in the court yard with court forms. The estate manager requests for performance of last rites, and then register of land sales. One landlord is reluctant to postpone land sale. Hema and Pinki stay back for the rites. Irya, the gravedigger calls, but is sent away with a tip. He leaves protesting that his dream could never go wrong.

Maid-servants in the estate smell the stink of death. Old Gowda's room is not cleaned, Pinki plays counting thirty five doors and sixty four pillars of the mansion, while Hema sits forlorn. The estate manager reads from religious books, and goes without food till rites are performed. Shivamma's return to the village is delayed, as his job is still incomplete. 'Rudri's dream' has a water vessel rolling down steps of a pond, and a peacock feather floating. The water reflects guru Siddha's face. Irya sharpens his digging tools in a field. Guru Siddha is to be facilitated with liquor and food. Rudri buys vegetables in the market on credit. Village women offer rice as charity. A rich farmer offers money to Rudri for good fortune. When Rudri tells Pinki to go inside the mansion and play, Pinki says the house is stinking. The caretaker affirms that there has been no death, gives money for Lord Siddha's blessings. Rudri does not allow Irya to taste the food, before offerings to Siddha. There are sounds of conch shells, and Irya hears rumours of old Gowda's death. Irya begins to lose faith in guru Siddha, as still there is no official announcement of any death. Same day at three, presents child Pinki faking up crying at night, from rotten smells. Mother Hema, gets fragrance for Pinki. The estate manager burns incense. Labourers in the estate are given a day off. When Shivamma returns home, Pinki informs of rotten smells. The estate manager admonishes Shivamma for putting business before his father's last rites. Now Irya is to prepare the grave, and the servants would arrange the bier. The rotten smells force Rudri to search for a rat. In the incense filled room, the estate manager has put old Gowda in a sitting position, so that the body does not stiffen up too much, for the bier. Pinki is despatched to an uncle's house, and servants are informed that master Gowda has passed away. When Irya is summoned, he refuses to dig the grave. He is forcibly taken to old Gowda's house, where he is able to discern from the smell for the rotten body, that Gowda had died days earlier. The grave, dug by Irya two days ago, would be used for burying Gowda.

Irya sits below a tree with fluttering clouded, prayer flags. Flower offerings, conch shells and fireworks accompany old Gowda's funeral procession. Irya is beaten and driven away from the procession, and his shirt is torn up. He limps to a tree with bells tied. When he screams that old Gowda died a few days earlier, the landlord's servants push him into a ditch. He limps home with Rudri. An affluent villager, Budam-Saab gives Rudri medicines for Irya. But Irya is unable to walk, and finds let down by guru Sidda. Budam tries to persuade Irya to go to hospital. A sage in garb of guru Sidda visits the hut, and demands food. After a hearty meal, the guru tries to wake up Irya, and confesses to mistakes caused by liquor, meat and grasses. Rudri chases the guru away. The power of Sidda's rosary rudraksh continues in "Yet they dream". Irya is tilling the earth, and Rudri pours water in the fields. Siddha reappears in the day time, Irya wants to cultivate the fields, but Sidda points to the rocky terrain. There are borough holes of rats. With a rope tied with twinkling bells, Sidda draws furrows and offers to teach cultivation.

Kasaravalli's film swings from the illusions of a grave digger to the social reality of village poverty, and land sales for industry, and the uncertainty of death. The narrative is full of exclamation-mark poverty shocks, superstitions and irrational dreams, and contemporary debates over sale of land. Many of the eerie sequences and irrational beliefs plunge into repetitive images, adding to a sense of dislocation. The morbid anticipation of death haunts the

fiction, while poverty and rural exploitation remain unsettling. In spite of the spatial freedom, "Kansembo Kudureyaneri" remains ploddingly prosaic and fails to develop the allegorical, dramatic levels. The actors are full of conviction, and HM Ramachandra's camera follows random patterns in the less rigidly structured script. □□□