

Film Criticism

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ISHTI: A Social Critique



Directed by a former head of the Sanskrit department in a Chennai college, *Ishti* (Search for the Self, 2016) is an eloquent social drama where multiple cultural ethos underlining Brahminical prejudices and social discriminations were examined. It is the first film in Sanskrit with a social theme, as previous ones were either biopic or mythological films. Written, scripted, produced and directed by Dr. G. Prabha, it has the distinction of being the opening film of the feature section of the Indian Panorama at the 47th IFFI in Goa.

Period film in the primary solemn language

Set in the backdrop of the mid 1940s Kerala, the film's chosen verbal language of deliberation may kindle a question over the necessity of using Sanskrit instead of Malayalam. But apparently, Kerala too developed a strong connection with Sanskrit. Most of Indian languages except Tamil, and except most of the indigenous languages

in the Northeast, have close relationship with Sanskrit. (Languages of Northeast India are of Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman or Sino-Tibetan origin and more archaic than Vedic Sanskrit while only modern Assamese language and Kochrajbongshi dialect have commonalities with Eastern Indo-Aryan origin.) The Namboodiri Brahmins of medieval Kerala even crafted a different linguistic tongue called Manipravalam that synthesized two traditions of the Dravidian and the Aryan by blending early Malayalam with Sanskrit. That was a result of Namboodiri ascendancy and their view of Sanskrit as “high” culture, as opposed to the vernacular that was used by the ordinary folk. It was also a matter of Brahminical landlordism that allowed them considerable leisure to explore the treatise of ancient Indian languages. However, Sanskrit in Ishti is not only a solemn or liturgical language for religious purposes, but used in entire text of the narrative by all the characters who do not speak another primary language in their daily life.



In the film, there is also the case of institutionalized polygamy and caste discrimination: the Namboodiri practice of only the patriarchal head of the family marrying as many girls as he wants from within the caste while the younger male members going for loose liaisons with women of lower castes. Having a new wife is dictated by the financial needs of the family too as dowry becomes lucrative. The patriarch mercilessly exploits not only the women but also the other men in the family. He or the eldest son of a Namboodiri is heir to the property and income of the family while his own brothers or sons are solely dependent for their survival on him. The film by Dr. Prabha has thrown lights on these decadent habits and feudal interests. That way it becomes a period film, aptly reflected by

a vintage car bringing a young German lady with research interests to a sprawling Namboodiri mansion.

Conflict with tradition: Narrative of protest

Breaking away from the usual pattern of having a central character, *Ishti* is centered on three inter-wined characters: the head of the family, his third wife and his son. It follows 71-year-old Ramavikraman Namboodiri, a Vedic scholar who has just completed a soma yagna and been elevated as a “Somayaji”. His only dream in life now is to conduct agni yagna and become an “Akkithiri”. Ramavikraman’s younger brother Narayanan is left to mourn the death of his son born of his liaison with a “cursed one” (meaning a woman of lower caste) because his elder brother was unwilling to part with some money for treatment. The patriarch who is ready to sell the family’s land for his yagna “to become an Akkithiri”, angrily refused to help. This outright rejection – that to have an “outside woman” is permitted, but “she shouldn’t be a burden” – left Narayanan wretched to the core. “In a Namboodiri family, it is better to be born as a dog, cat or crow than to be born as a younger brother,” the miserable man lamented as he leaves home quietly as a protest against the unfairness and immorality of the system, but not before cutting down his tail hair and releasing it along with his sacred thread at the flaming torch.

The rendering of protest is the key to the minimalist aesthetics of *Ishti* where the young within the conservative Namboodiri Brahmins rose up to break the shackles of blind, exploitative tradition. Preceding Narayanan’s hardships, a few young men from neighbourhood approach the patriarch’s son Raman and they pass him a magazine asking to register their protest against the practice of old men marrying the young girls. “Fight to save our sisters from oldies!” – the magazine discusses it, they tell. But Raman is illiterate while his father blatantly terms the Sanskrit journal as “full of nonsense.”

Ramavikraman tells his first wife Savithri that his third marriage (on the card) is for the family, as “no income now, a marriage will fetch money, jewels.” Savithri gives him a weird but acknowledging look. Thereafter Ramavikraman prevails upon Savithri and Raman to sell a significant part of the family property to achieve his ambition of becoming an “Akkithiri”. Then he enters into a third marriage of convenience with Sreedevi, a girl of 17, same as his daughter’s age.

Sreedevi is a beacon of light in disguise as she inspires Ramavikraman’s daughter Lakshmi and Raman to learn to read and write. “Knowledge is Agni – fire – we shall become free with Agni,” Sreedevi tells Raman for whom she is “lucky” for being a literate

person. Here fire becomes a metaphor of conflict with differing worldviews: for the conservative it is divine and for the progressive it extends wisdom. But her level of conscience soon becomes a threat to the conservative set-up wherein girls of the community are



denied of any education while boys are taught only to chant Vedic hymns. “With this literacy, youngers are losing their way, no faith in systems, traditions” in Ramavikraman’s view and for Savithri it is “all impact of Kaliyuga”. When the patriarch head negotiates for Lakshmi’s wedding with an old man of his age, Raman intervenes to a telling effect.

Soon a conspiracy is hatched against Sreedevi and Raman, alleging an illicit relationship between the two. Ramavikraman assures his agitated community elders that necessary atonement will be done as per tradition. Raman again remonstrates claiming that only the guilty should atone for a sin and he hasn’t sinned. Unable to bear his firm

reaction, his father orders him to leave the house immediately. Raman's bold protest doesn't end there, as while stepping out he says that only in the outside world he can live as a human being. A chain of drama unfolds as others insist that the "sinner object" must be tried and expelled too. A visually destabilized Ramavikraman wants to fix a date and time for it, but Sreedevi comes out and demands for a trial right at the moment. Her attitude is mocked as "arrogance". "The arrogance comes with reading and writing", thus one let loose his anger, only to sound their collective ignorance, with the climax of the drama unfolding quickly.

Confronting the community elders, Sreedevi firmly holds an open umbrella over her head. She intentionally keeps it leaned towards the male visitors to shield herself, in her words, "from the view of the dirty old men". She tells that once she snaps the gold thread on her neck (mangalam sutram), her husband and other old men become same for her and then she won't need the umbrella to hide herself and she will be a free woman. She actually does so. She adds that vedic hymns and sacred thread are meaningless if one fails to be a human being, whence practicing truth and dharma also ceases to hold value. The shell-shocked elders have no answer except trivial gaze at her as she leaves all behind. The narration is well-founded in subdued acting and sparse dialogues leaving little room for melodrama.

Metaphorical darkness and fire as leitmotif

Though minimalist in overall scheme of things, *Ishti* is a film of elaborate social drama with the orthodox Namboodiri cultural mores at their best. The visual structures never loaded beyond a riverbank, the mansion and its closed vicinity that includes a pond and the courtyard. The compositions are mostly static to give the feel of the stubborn and age-old edifice of religious practices and social perversions. The cinematography evolves into a character of the film



where the mise-en-scene is coalesced with darkness. Shot almost in natural lights, the tonal effect in mostly sepia-like colour grants the visuals a certain depth and meaning.

The vivid darkness is metaphorical as it falsely hides prejudices and dogma of the feudal autocracy. When Sreedevi speaks about Agni as a symbol of knowledge, it implies that she is the harbinger of hope against the all-pervading darkness in the lives of the characters in the film, the society as a whole. Sreedevi's blossoming into a social rebel is presented as a final showdown of contempt towards all the links to her marriage and her position within the family through the acts like taking off the mangalam sutram, throwing away the umbrella and her shawl which ridicule regressive social values. When the patriarch's brother moves with a blowtorch at night it becomes a potent force of the fire within and when in the solo dramatic moment he burns the trademark thread in it, the fire becomes a medium of fighting all kinds of darkness. Fire is the leitmotif here as on the other side too it is integral, evident from the two outdoor and indoor initial sequences of performing soma yagna as also the patriarch's marriage scene. The dichotomy is quite evocative, from darkness and light, fire and water, natural and artificial traits, to the humane and cruel existence. In a symbolic fall-out of Sreedevi's exit, Ramavikraman finds that the sacrificial fire he has kept alive from the yagna in order to use it to light his own funeral pyre is extinguished, leaving only ashes behind – as if the fire of life from the house is vanished. However the vanishing of the fire that put the aged Namboodiri in utter despair remained inexplicable: because it was not shown how and why the carefully and piously kept fire was gone.

Theatrical threads and aesthetic blend

A discussion on *Ishti* brings forth different other Indian films which very relevantly dwelt Hindu rituals that attaches the weaker sex at the receiving end. Two debut films can be cited as glaring examples in this regard. Girish Kasaravalli's *Ghatashraddha* (*The Ritual*, 1977), based on a novella by eminent Kannada writer U. R. Ananthamurthy, was set in the early 1940s and it exposed the ordeal of a young widow undergoing pregnancy, abortion, ritualistic excommunication under merciless Brahminical patriarchy. Likewise, Dr. Santwana Bordoloi's *Adajya* (*The Flight*, 1996), based on a novel by prominent Assamese litterateur Mamoni Raisom Goswami, was set in pre-Independent India and it scripted a strong rebellion against Brahmin customs by a young widow who was put through purification of the soul by fire for alleged blasphemy.

In both of those films, the suffering female goes through either utter humiliation or extreme self-sacrifice. In contrast, Dr. Prabha's film sets apart escape routes to the misfortunate souls including the female lead in a hostile atmosphere. But to make it happen, the filmmaker who penned the story himself had to rely on a theatrical structure of the narrative which made many of the scenes wanting in cinematic details. That makes the rebel in Raman's appearance contrived at some delicate situations. Smooth editing couldn't conceal Raman's forced and sudden entry at crucial moments, as if he always hears everything and steps into the scene at the right moment which is akin to performance in a stage play.

Yet there are beautiful moments, for example the enactment of a dream sequence where Raman practices Kathakali with Sreedevi, which is suggestive of his tender feelings developing towards her. The sequence is elegantly designed in relevant costumes, make-ups, and in extreme low indoor light. Kudos to the director's creativity, as it is known that only in modern times Kathakali compositions roped in

women artists; but in the film it happens in the dream of a progressive mind, so it is futuristic. In another scene, Ramavikraman mistaking his daughter for his young wife Sreedevi leaves the viewers shocked as much as him and it left little to imply how immoral of him to marry a young woman of his daughter's age. The sensuous feminine limbs of his daughter from backside were too deceptive for the male gaze, and the scene – shot in dark corner of the room – gives a rare aesthetic blending.

Ishti's sound design is sometimes injected with the chanting of mantras ironically by trained boys who are not taught of the meanings of the Vedic hymns. The space for reciting the hymns and performing rites are considered so sacred that strangers and particularly females are not allowed to go nearby. The underlying gender bias and racism are subject to farcical portrayal here and this is depicted right from the beginning when the first wife of Ramavikraman is seen sitting idle in the riverbank observing her husband and a host of male members of the community performing soma yagna while shielding herself from others' view by an open umbrella. Next, the German scholar escorted by a man who speaks with a Keralite accent is promptly debarred from entering the room of worshipping. An aide of the family head tells that "she shouldn't pollute" the place. When she notices a cat inside, she is more than amused and smilingly remarks that she was not told that an animal could be allowed into the sacred room: she is actually taking a dig at the irrationality of the Hindu belief systems. The method of practicing the mantras by young pupils gets an oddly stern side of the whole affair that cannot escape the curious eye. Had there been subtitle to the recited Vedic hymns, it would have added more flavour and substance to the narrative.

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