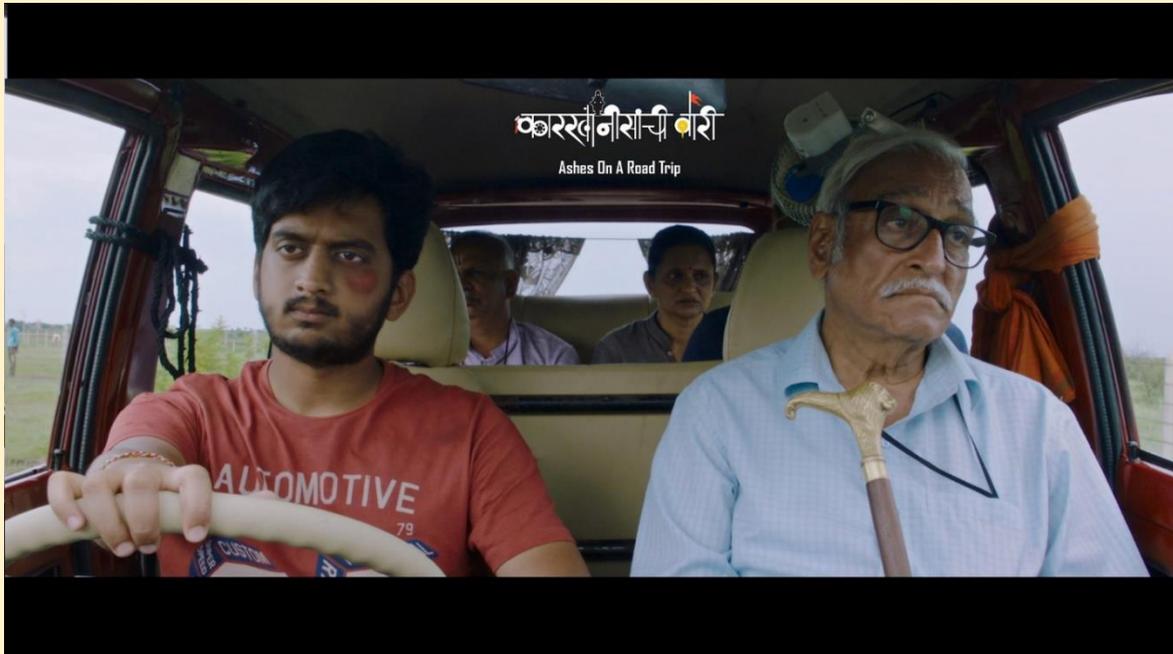


Film Criticism

Lalit Rao

Ashes on A Road Trip: An Independent ‘Road Movie’ which Highlights the Importance of the Joint Family System

Collin English dictionary defines the term "Road Movie" as a genre of film in which the chief character is on the run or travelling in search of, or to escape from, himself or herself. It is a subgenre of the 'travel film' in which a viewer is able to discern a certain existential or a metaphysical bent, via themes of escape, discovery, rebellion and transformation. Although the road movie is strongly associated with American cinema, it has made positive inroads into Asian and European cinemas. This is one reason why most erudite viewers are familiar with the road movies made by Monte Hellman, Bob Rafelson and Wim Wenders. As far as Indian cinema is concerned, in recent times, some 'road movies' have been helmed by directors working in the realm of song and dance factory which is popularly known as 'Bollywood' film industry. However, it is not so often that serious viewers have come across a road movie belonging to Indian independent cinema. From this yardstick, Mangesh Joshi's new film *Ashes on A Road Trip* can be described as a different kind of 'road film' wherein there is more than one central

character who valiantly delineates that an ordinary family with the outward appearance of a "Perfect Family" isn't a perfect family at all. Each family has its share of happiness and misfortunes and should have the ability to strike a balance between these two extremes.

Ashes on A Road Trip begins with a quote by the famous Russian writer Leo Tolstoy: "Happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". It is about the Karkhanis family which is feeling unhappy as one of its important members Mr. Purshottam Karkhanis aka Puru Dada has died and his close family members including three eccentric brothers, a frustrated sister and a 'good for nothing' son have to carry out a road trip in order to immerse his ashes in Chandrabhaga river near Pandharpur town in Maharashtra, India. It is often said that death and controversies are strange bedfellows and an envelope left by Puru dada sows innumerable seeds of discord among these people. All members of Karkhanis family feel that a substantial amount of

money would be dished out to them. Comic relief in the film is guaranteed through sporadic incidents which have a direct bearing on the 'high expectations' of these people as they have landed themselves in bad situations. They are firm in their belief that the sudden acquisition of wealth would provide them with much needed material succor. It is only in the end of the film that their emotional as well as financial conflicts are resolved albeit in a very brusque manner.



Just like his previous film *Lathe Joshi* (2016), Mangesh Joshi's concern for the family is very much evident in this film too. His film highlights the importance of a joint family in a modern era where more and more people are compelled to abandon the pleasure of living together in favor of the independent existence of a nuclear family. While the former didn't have too many family members and was somber in tone, the latter boasts of a large family and a highly comical tone. From a conventional point of view, *Ashes on a road trip* is not a didactic film. However, if one wishes to derive some key life-affirming lessons from it then the importance of family relationships after the death of a family member and the role money plays in a person's life could be listed as two of its principal lessons. Although there is one major death in the demise of Puru dada in the film, there are also minor deaths as his family members are as good as dead even while they are alive as they are merely continuing their meaningless existence. In many ways, they accentuate the famous Socratic dictum, 'an unexamined life is not worth living!'

Ashes on A Road Trip also boasts of ample suspense. One awaits with bated breath the contents of a letter left by the dead man which would have to be opened by the family members at the end of their pilgrimage. It is hoped that this would help viewers to remain glued to their seats and experience how in a matter of hours comical situations get transformed into a serious matter. The overall tone of this film is light but it still manages to remain serious. This can be viewed as a positive quality. There are a couple of poetic songs in this film which make things lighter. Director Mangesh Joshi has managed to achieve an amiable balance of genders in this film as all women characters have been depicted as vulnerable as other male characters. Whether it is Puru Dada's wife, his sister or even his son, each family member faces a difficult situation regardless of who they are. The cast is made up of 'who's who' of Marathi cinema and all actors have justified their inclusion in the film. *Ashes on a road trip* had its international premiere at Tokyo International Film Festival 2020 and it was very much appreciated by Japanese audiences who are as passionate as Indian audiences as far as family life is concerned. It is hoped that this film would also be appreciated in all those countries where family is still considered to be the most important unit of a social system. Lastly, on a very optimistic note it can be said that the success of this film will go a long way in creating renewed interest for Marathi cinema as well as independent cinema made by young people in India.

Ashes on A Road Trip

Director: Mangesh Joshi

Producer: Archana Borhade

Cast: Amey Wagh, Mohan Agashe, Geetanjali Kulkarni, Pradeep Joshi, Vandana Gupte, Shubhangi Gokhale, Mrunmayee Deshpande and Ajit Abhyankar

Screenplay: Mangesh Joshi & Archana Borhade

Editor: Suchitra Sathe

Cinematographer: Archana Borhade

Background Score: Sarang Kulkarni

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