

*Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition on Film Criticism 2020*  
Certificate of Merit  
 Nayan Jain

***Cargo: A Blemished Approach to An Overwhelming Future***



A contemporary myth has myriad labyrinths to meander especially when it is woven on screen. Conflicting the longing and quintessential paradox of existentialism, the film philosophers have ironically coaxed and explored the hunger to ponder the synthesis of the space time graph and the frippery of mankind in this mammoth universe. Film makers have perceived this perspicacity of science fiction unequivocally, a segment of them is fascinated with idea of progressive technology while the other faction, extend their canvases to the dystopia. The opacity distorting the two extreme poles of progress and regress has been well revamped by the debutante director Arati Kadav. Audience might want to ‘give a penny for her thoughts’ as she introduced a fresh sub theme to the science

fiction genus as her ambitious and empirical venture emanates in cahoots with the Hindu epic Ramayan and thus creating her own ballad!

In her interview with the Movie Buff, Arati Kadav said, “I really like stories about things that don’t exist.”

Often regarded as one of the most famous cuts in the history of cinema, the scene from the film ‘2001: a space odyssey’ by Stanley Kubrick where the ape throws a bone in the air which is immediately transitioned by a matching cut to the spaceship was the most effortless way of drawing the comparison between the embryonic war tools to the modern warfare

machinery. This entire scene just takes the viewers light years ahead into the future of human evolution. Similarly, Arati Kadav employs the postulation of the human evolution to demons or 'Rakshasas' who have evolved with the passage of time to be categorized as 'homo rakshasas'. Transporting the viewers to the year 2027 and introducing terms like 'Manushya- Rakshas peace treaty (Human- Demon peace treaty)' and 'Rakshas bhavan Mahanagar Pallika' immediately gives an inkling of the subliminal message of peace and concord steered in the director's vision set in the near future. Starting with some of her early screenplays like the short film 'Raavan' where she narrates the story of the 92<sup>nd</sup> descendent of Raavan played by Vasan Bala, one can marvel at the director's fascination with the concept of inclusivity. Defying the general acuity of a barbaric Rakshas and plummeting the character to someone who faces 'human problems' imparts the critiques with an insight into the expansion of the literary sense of the director. The same catalyst drive the concoction of the film 'Cargo'.

The Rakshasas that embody the human form act as a facade to indicate the splendor of adorning the human life and the preeminence of the human race. This is a wunderkind step to amplify the interpretation of erstwhile grey shaded characters to a more simplistic one as a protagonist, especially in reference to the marginalized 'Asur' community of Jharkhand who have been shunned down for ages. The sincerity of the character sketching is reflected as the identity of the Rakshas community is preserved with mention to their special powers, like achieving 84.6 percent invisibility, shots of 4 hands and third eye, healing powers etc.

The entirety of the plot revolves around the manifestation of the bedlam of intellect- the question of life, death and what happens after it. The fictional process of 'post death extraction services' acquaints with the sacramental anecdote of reincarnation which might have been dumped as the residue in the subconscious mind.

As humans die on Earth, they do not grace their presence in swarg (heaven) or narak (hell) which is against the idea of inequality of karma (actions), rather the dead or 'cargoes' are directed to the extraction bay of the space craft Pushpak 634-A where their memories are wiped clean, they are stripped off every morsel of worldly materials accumulated and sent back again to Earth for a fresh life. The presumably slovenly Rakshasas have prim and proper counterparts like Prahastha played impeccably by Vikrant Massey who carry out the entire process in a very mundane and slow governmental procedure. Such an extension in our metaphysical vocabulary itself stands out as the watershed moment for Indian Cinema. The plot arguably has a stark similarity to the anime series Death Parade which to some extent belittles the originality of the concept. However, Arati's field of vision isn't just restricted to stupefy the 'more than life' technology but to highlight the transient nature of life. She exemplifies this journey of life through Prahastha's lens - humans take birth, do their deeds, embroil in emotions, meet other humans and finally die. Parallely, Prahastha adorned the extraction bay of Pushpak 634-A as an astronaut 75 years ago, has been doing his work in solitary confinement since then, in between his journey he meets several cargoes and learns about their stories, encounters the bubbly valedictorian Yuvishka Shekar played seamlessly by Shweta Tripathi who is often found vlogging her experience, absorbs the tenacity of life and finally bids farewell to this journey of extraction and reincarnation.

The Hindu mythology has a bravura role to play here. Firstly, the naming of the characters add a feather to the cap. Prahastha was the commander of Ravan's army in the epic Ramayan and considerably like his namesake, he is efficient, propellant and a lone wolf. Interestingly, he is the sole employee in the spacecraft 'Pushpak 634-A' which was Ravan's flying chariot and the numbers '634' have an angelic reference. Nitigya played by Nandu Madhav is an officer who channels the working of the space station hence the name Nitigya (one who specializes in Strategy). Yuvishka's younger brother is named as Ghathotkach (reference to another epic

Mahabharat). Secondly, the gimmicks of the director's mind are rummaged through as the concept of 'karma' and reincarnation come in brilliance. It is the karma which drives all the jaunt of life and life is fuelled only with deeds of mankind. The glory of solitude is decorated through Prahastha and the 'loneliness detective' played by the talented Biswapati Sarkar(TVF fame)that triggered the realization of unraveling this journey of life alone.

These unsettling interrogations are explored through technology rather than debating much about the process of scientific interventions. Nolan's 'Interstellar' probed more into the virtuoso of technicalities whereas Tarkovsky's 'Solaris' elegiacally broods over the banality of human conversations.

The dialogues are neat and precise especially the ones that hit straight at the subtlety of the denotation, "*Kabhi bhi kuch bhi humesha ke liye khatam nahi hota*" (Nothing is gone forever) and "*Kisi bhi cheez ka kya matlab hai?*" (What does anything mean?). They elaborate the uncouth and ephemeral nature of existence. Utterance of this detachment is depicted through various tableaux like the ejection of the cargo's clothes into the space that is engineered on the heels of serenity. Ironically, it is the presence of Yuvishka that makes Prahastha realize his loneliness and detachment. The slow pace of the film and long pauses bopping in between the background music by Dada Saheb Phalke award winner Shezan Shaikh give time to breathe into the tone of characters. However these pauses are not a mistake on Kadav's side but an honest flaw in the contrivance at the expense of character formation. Momentum is too raw to put the 'meat on the bone' of the world that Prahastha is a part of. In Matrix, the

whole shebang comes across as self-explanatory, however the editor Paramita Ghosh wants the audience to be accustomed to stimuli which untowardly pulls off a sense of exhaustion. Despite such a broad space for writing, keeping aside the budget constraint, the film lacks focus, consistency and most importantly a soothing human impact. The flexibility and the esoteric sway of the presentation could have been robust, had the film been broken into episodes with each cargo alluding a story.

The exceptional production design by Mayur Sharma stands as a snowball effect for the screenplay. Too modern to be called as a Kubrick's set but the retro set up of the convex bulbs, old televisions, analogue screens etc. do remind of the 'USS Callister' episode of the anthology series Black Mirror. The unabashed symmetry in the hiatus prompt the eccentricity of Wes Anderson and some sequences of 'Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind'. The slow writing gets saturated in the brine of the retro disposition of the metallic design and the warm colour palette. The costume and the makeup insinuate the memories to ferry back to the 80s. The evocative cinematography by Kaushal Shah and the redolent VFX complement an imagery to jolt the isolation in the intergalactic space. All in all, a picture of the near future set back in the past is created!

Science is just as shielded and undaunted without experiments as much as much cinema. Rutherford's and Bohr's model of atom were imperfect but paved the way to a brighter future with superfluous experiments until the correct one was achieved. The Indian cinema lacks its representation in the science fiction cult and hence movies like Cargo should be welcomed and embraced as space is the limit!

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*Ms. Nayan Jain is a student at Delhi University. Based in Delhi.*