

Critique

Utpal Datta

The Life of a River



An extra-wide long shot of a dried-up river and vast barren land is the film's beginning. The rough texture and dried brown colour of the dry soil simultaneously remind a line from T S Eliot's poem 'The West Land' - 'The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf clutch and sink into the wet bank.'

Director Aditya J Patwardhan has made the film *A Nomad River* (2021) with an incredible blend of beauty and craftsmanship, recreating some actual events and fictional scenes to discover cinematic narrative in a new way.

This story depicts the personal struggles of two young men and two young women who arrive at a critical moment in life. The director presented his statement on contemporary India with some current events and experiences and took the film to the point of acute sensitivity to realization with philosophical depth.

Kankana, an actress in the film, seems to have some gap in her relationship with her father. She dials her father's number on her mobile, the phone rings,

but she abruptly disconnects the line. The inanimate elements in the close-up shots and the facial expression of the actress simultaneously beautifully express the intensity and pride of the relationship.

Indian actress Kankana living in Los Angeles, comes to India to study Indian classical music performance rituals from Pandit Krishna Mohan Bhatt. She received an invitation to play an Indian classical music singer. Adriana, a refugee from devastated Venezuela, did television journalism in India, and she needed to stay a few more days in India as she had no home to return. She finds a job in an Indian television channel and starts reporting for it.

Ravi is another young television journalist, an associate of Adriana. Another character, safaiwala Sooraj stands up to all odds with as much strength as possible, hoping that the most significant effort for change will come from the so-called lowest class in society. In a long shot, Sooraj was cleaning the entrance of a house with his broom in the soft morning light. His physical expression of dedicated

work and aesthetically attractive use of light and shadow in the frame has transformed the scene into a scene of prayer. These four characters are the principal spokesperson of the director, and their works have expanded the key statement of the film.

The film begins with an image of the dried-up river, talks about India's climate change, the water crisis in food and agriculture, and the problem of poverty and hygiene. A river flows to its home; that home is a sea. But the river does not find its home; it lost its way in some city or slum. The director suddenly changes the camera viewpoint from the natural horizontal frame to vertical to visualize this statement and create a jerk in the audience's mind.

Similarly, the image of the breathless surroundings of the chaotic and unsettled multi-story tower on the screen explains how the river vanishes nowhere. The fast train that comes forward over the bridge over the high pole lined in rows on the chest of a dead river is also a visual metaphor of technical development and the incremental void in the environment.

Television journalist Ravi seems to be the principal narrator of the story. His description or narration is a part of his job and simultaneously an organ of the story's speech. Sometimes, the gap between whether his words as spoken by the television journalist or the film's commentary disappears and intelligently spigots the film's structure.

Similarly, Adriana has also spoken a lot in front of the television cameras - it has also helped the film's narrative and revealed the character and the issue. Sadguru travelled thousands of kilometers in India to raise public awareness for river conservation as a campaign titled 'Rally for Rivers' organized in 180 programs across sixteen states in India. Both the journalists travelled along with the program to cover the series of the event.

The characters of the journalist duo emerge from the imagination of the director, but the sequence of the events was authentic. Aditya, the writer-director, blended these actual events and fictional stories so brilliantly that both the characters came out as close to real feelings. The difference between 'looking true' and 'making the fictional character true'

is absent in this film. The director brilliantly portrayed both the journalists as if they are actual characters like Sadguru.

The director used two unique shooting styles. For the reporting part, he used his camera in the format of television reporting without maintaining the continuity of shots and for the drama portions; he followed classic cinematic style.

The picturization of this part is realistic, occasionally decorative. But the subtle depth of the acting was not appropriate in the performance of the classical music scholar. This weak expression in the film's climax, the required dramatic shock of Panditji's and Kankana's scenes, did not meet the demands of the story and screenplay.

But Panditji appeared on screen with his natural expression, and that angik- aharya acting created an atmosphere to match the documentary reality feel of the film. Pandit Krishnamohan Bhat was deeply aware of the turmoil of Kankana, and that is why he connected Kankana and his father. Father has arrived, Kankana runs and hugs her father - this scene captured in a wide frame has once again proved the director's command over the medium. This scene is in contrast to the opening scene, and this difference organically creates the plot's growth. Director Aditya developed most film sequences in the format of television reporting, so wherever the director had time to build a drama scene, he used all the possibilities of cinematic art.

The producer gives the role of the proposed film to another actor who has maximum insta followers. Kankana came down to India to do the research work for that character only. With this small sequence, the director stylishly explained how aesthetic qualities are now being pushed away by cultural marketing.

Kankana decided to go back after knowing that the producer had dropped her from the film. But Panditji's words hold her back. This time she learns music as art, not to be used for acting purposes. In the dawn, while the last night moon was still shining, in such an environment, Kankana worships music in front of Panditji. The film ends hoping for the end of the night and a new day will start.

The conventional structure of a screenplay is absent here because the film does not apprise to a traditional story. The writer-director assembled typically scattered stories from the life of four people, did it profoundly, and led all the four narratives to a common goal, as a river flows to its destination, a sea or an ocean.

This assimilation was not an outcome of the hidden undercurrent of stories. The result is derived from the profound philosophy of the film's core content, intention, and purpose.

Life is nothing but a river that flows to a destination, but sometimes, the river gets lost during the journey. The director has tried to express this philosophy with the help of some dramatic moments. He has also attempted to establish a personal crisis on a larger platform that connects with a wide society, and to achieve his desired destination, he has joined Sadguru along with his Rally for River program with his narrative.

The inclusion of Sadguru and his rally converted a few parts of this fiction film into a documentary film. The director juxtaposed the works of the journalists with Sadguru's rally with such a crafty hand that, as a result, the separating line between fact and fiction came out of focus and the fiction part also came out in the narrative of a documentary film.

During the journey, Adriana takes rest on a bench of a railway platform. This scene is beautiful from the visual angle, and it looks like a metaphor for her life—she has found some moments of rest during an uncertain journey of life.

The amount of dialogue in the film is relatively low as most of the statements of this story are expressed by visuals. Most of the spoken part was

played by journalist Ravi, Sadguru and musician Krishnamohan Bhatt. Adriana has said a lot on television shows and that would not have done any harm to the film even if it had reduced its volume for not helping the film's original statement much, but the film's pace would have been smoother.

The character of the journalist Ravi was vital, as he is the thread-bearer of the narrative, but the character remained underdeveloped. The same comment applies to the visuals of cities, as the visuals spoke the same statement. So was the lengthy discussion in Los Angeles. Some suggestive visuals in those scenes would have made the narration even more visual and impactful.



The film starts with a visual of a barren field and ends with a new morning sky. The film is complicated in form, but the narrative is simple and straight from the heart. That is the reason how Aditya J Patwardhan effortlessly and refreshingly told an unentertaining theme like Climate Change. This entire narrative pattern reflects Aditya's command over the medium and conviction of his content. Congratulations to the entire team.

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