

Critique

Dipsikha Bhagawati

Bhagavadajjukam: Classic Revisited



"The life you refer is only the body."

"What use is salvation after death if you starve when you're alive?"

-Bhagavadajjukam

Sanskrit plays or any branch of literature and art created in this ancient and subsequently rich genre of language is conventionally considered to be too grave. But exercising the issue of "Transmigration of soul" as its master theme, Bhagavadajjukam breaks down this stereotyped tag. It's a screen transformation of the original Sanskrit farce, written in the 7th century CE by Bodhayana, sharing the same title. The director, Yadu Vijayakrishnan Parameswaran, has left no key unturned to make this challenging mission of projecting a vintage play, a bona fide stakeholder of the silver screen, portraying different tasks and ideologies both of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, featuring

a sensitive issue of religious belief, through felicitous comic reliefs.

In religion and philosophy, transmigration, reincarnation, or metempsychosis is the rebirth of the aspect of an individual that persists after bodily death—whether it be consciousness, mind, the soul, or some other entity—in one or more successive existences. In Hinduism and South Asian religions, transmigration is related to the karmic cycle where one's moral action determines the condition of the soul and the quality of its rebirth. In Hinduism, the cycle of rebirth is eternal unless the soul is liberated (moksha) by knowledge or arduous effort (Yoga). In Buddhism, the rebirth doctrine, sometimes referred to as reincarnation or

transmigration, asserts that rebirth does not necessarily take place as another human being but can also lead to existence in one of the six realms of existence, which also includes realms of heaven, animal, the ghost and the hell.

Prahasana (farce) is one of the ten main varieties of Sanskrit drama. Hasyarasa (satirical comedy) holds fixed importance in this dramatic genre. The story, being the invention of the playwright's imagination, should be that of the people of low status. A Sage or a Sannyasi, or any such person, should be the hero when it is called shuddh-prahasana (pure farce). ***Bhagavadajjukam***, the earliest available farce, in which comical situations, harmless humour and wit are dominant. Being a celebrated ancient play, written in one of the less practised and less shared languages is transferred to celluloid, it is bound to face multi-layered challenges- technical, performative, horological, and most importantly, to scoop out a preoccupation or prejudice regarding linguistic cascade and 'prefixed seriousness' as a paradigm of an existential gravity of cinematic language. The director has stated that he never wanted to write a new story; he was searching for a story with a soul. The history of Sanskrit cinema dates to 1983 as a part of Indian cinema. Despite being a heritage language and comprising unparalleled literary pieces, only 13 Sanskrit films have been made to date, being initialised by 'Adi Shankaracharya' in 1983. But there's no separate industry for Sanskrit films. ***Bhagavadajjukam*** is the latest addition to the list.

Here, a crucial doctrine of both the two ancient religious streams- Hinduism and

Buddhism- is handled enough through two pivotal characters- Parivrajaka and Shandilyan and the other allied characters. ***Bhagavadajjukam*** has been adapted into theatre plays in many languages and art forms, such as Koodiyattam- a traditional art form of Kerala. Asserting how the language posed a serious hurdle, Yadu Vijay Krishnan said that he had included some chosen actors from the Sopanam Theatre Group as the majority knew the characters and dialogues very well. The founder of the Sopanam Theatre Troupe, Kavalam Narayana Panicker, made a play on the ***Bhagavadajjukam*** in 2011. Bharata's hāsya in Nāṭya Śāstra and Bergsonian's theory of laughter or comic relief become tenable for a comparative aesthetic study as they approach the stagecraft of the comic socio-aesthetically. The comic paradox implies the tension in the nature of comedy, which on one hand, must arouse emotion in the audience and simultaneously detach them from the emotion for the comic manifestation. The famous Rasa-sutra or basic "formula", in the Nāṭyashāstra, for evoking Rasa, states that the vibhāva, anubhāva, and vyabhicāri bhāvas together produce Rasa: tatra vibhāvā-anubhāva vyabhicāri saṃyogād rasa niṣpattiḥ. Bharata elaborated the process of producing Rasa in terms of eight Sthayi Bhavas – the principle emotional state of the character expressed by the performer with the aid of Vibhava (the cause) and Anubhava (the enactment); thirty-three Vyabhicāri (Sanchari) bhāvās – the transient emotions; and, eight Sattivika-bhavas – the involuntary physical reactions.

In the film ***Bhagavadajjukam***, Shandilyan joins the discourse of Parivrajaka not to attain any such wisdom of life or any

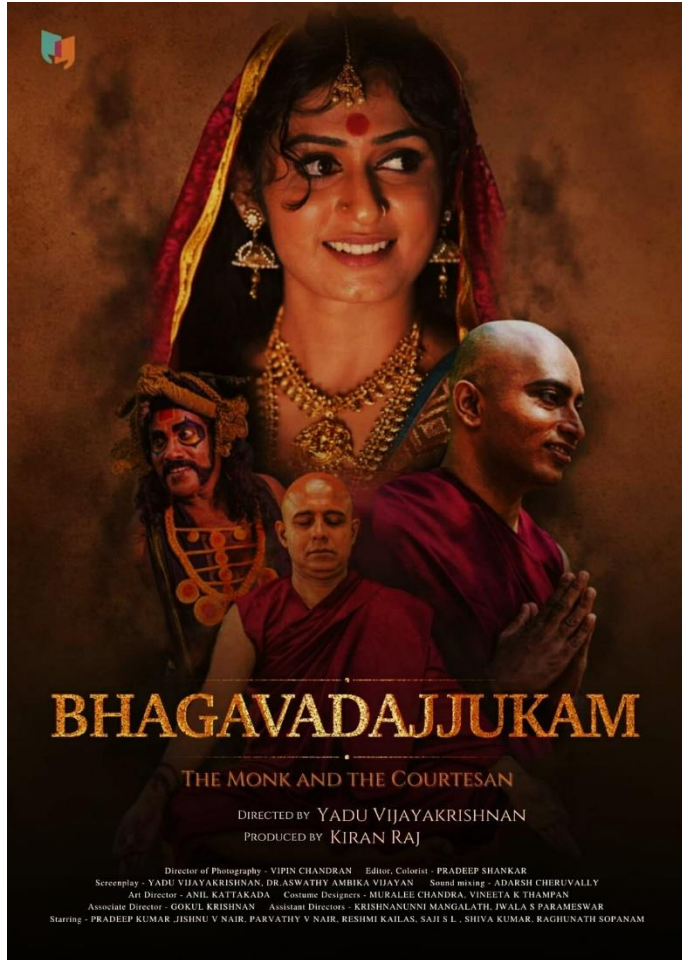
higher realm of religious beliefs, but to satisfy his hunger, as advised by one. The sharp frames of the camera capture their conversation, the grave words of Parivrajaka and the confusing nonchalance of Shandilyan through controlled medium close shots and their life amid serene but labyrinthical greenery through wide angle shots-suggestive of the Vistara of knowledge and parallelly the vast dilemma of an ordinary man to understand the labyrinths of Dharma-whether to adapt as a necessity or a priority, as here projected through Shandilyan and the group of harlots. Over time, he meets a courtesan named Vasanthasena. But before a story would bloom, Vasanthasena dies on the spot because of Yamdoot's carelessness by snakebite. Shandilyan is left in deep agony. As his guru and refuge, Parivrajaka couldn't bear his disciple's tears and transferred his soul to the body of Vasanthasena. But the two worlds to which Parivrajaka and Vasanthasena belonged were just at opposite poles.

When one talked of Dharma, moksha and the fragility of life, the other's string was attached to life's mortal and feasible sequences. The collision between these two worlds of opposite ideologies follows in a series of hilarious events and debates. Yamdoot, being scolded by his supreme authority, transmigrates the soul of Vasanthasena to the body of Parivrajaka. Bodies are being occupied by souls, which possess entirely different temperaments. Their behaviour and conversations produced nothing but serious comical effects- that can be called 'comedy of errors.' Nothing goes conventionally as expected, and this is the twist the director has indulged into. From the

poster of the film, its title, or on a strict note, from its generic flow, *Bhagavadajjukam* isn't expected to be that comical, but to handle a challenging theme through farcical incidents is a fact to credit. In the original script, the play was set in a garden which happens on a single occasion. But according to filmic grammar, it's not that viable. To convert it into a cinematic experience, the director retained around seventy per cent of dialogues from the original drama, and the film was shot on different occasions in different locations. But the field is very static here, as most of the conversations between the transmigrated souls of Parivrajaka and Vasanthasena are set in this field, where a venomous snake bit her. Here, as he projects the forests, the director could have exercised a little opportunity to make the field a little more vital. Although the film, the farcical chemistry produced by the blending of comedy and tragedy is strong enough to create an arresting effect. A Vaidya is being called to cure sick Vasanthasena, who has already been possessed by the wise soul of Parivrajaka. When 'she' found major lacks in his medicinal and linguistic competency and started cross-questioning, the Vaidya at once left the place in shame by saying- "she's bitten by a grammatical snake."

Hindu theology defines vital red and sacred saffron as pious colours, and in Buddhism, yellow, green and orange are defined as holy tints. Yellow symbolises wealth, green is meant for peace and protection, and most dominantly, orange symbolises fire and purity- that burns all the impurities of a psychic circle and mortal follies. In *Bhagavadajjukam*, these colours are pitchforked to create a dominant aura of calm religious discussion and a sense of grave

mystery. These colours dominate the majority of the visuals. Contradictory debates regarding two different religions exist, but no high-pitched or hyper-argumentative ambience is projected anywhere. The characters are presented true to the doctrines of their concerning beliefs, and arguments are offered in a witty and farcical manner following the ancient Indian dramatic theories. It's evident that the film unfolds and decodes the grammar of cinema in its tour de force and "the law of tolerance", practised in any ethical course of religious exercise.



In an age where Sanskrit texts and scriptures are not exercised with much room

and are not given proper archival protection, it's a pride to watch a film in Sanskrit. The invested effort of the crew in neighing with such films that carry our vintage socio-cultural and theological heritage is commendable. The dialogues don't sound monotonous, and the feel is like listening to conversations in a familiar dialect. Sanskrit films often feel like the ones that come dubbed from other languages where the dialogues sound flat sans emotion or life, and the entire movie is left giving the vibe of a documentary or a ritualistic stage performance. *Bhagavadajjukam* stands apart in terms of naturalistic dialogues and acting. The cinematography, art design, and background score make it a beautiful cinematic experience. This film, with its one hour eighteen minutes run time, comes with a beautiful song. As a cinematic adaptation of an ancient Sanskrit play, that re-incarnation of time or time travel is a crucial catching up to do. The body physics of the characters and their costumes too demand balanced coordination. The director is committed to these aesthetic nuances, and *Bhagavadajjukam* has paid off this integrated investment.

The arresting cinematography that flashes out the temperature of the characters and the story, true-to-life colour projection to illuminate that "current of lenient religious tint", the comic reliefs and its free-flowing visual frequency reflect the panache of the entire cinematic mission, accomplished by the director with ingrained effervescence.

☐ Dr. Dipsikha Bhagawati Teaches English at Dawson Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School, Nagaon, Assam.