

Critique

Latika Padgaonkar

Naanera



***Naanera*, Rajasthan, 2022, Director: Deepankar Prakash**

How strong is the hold of social mores on the thought and behaviour of people in today's India? Pretty strong, it would appear. Strong enough to crush a young man's mind and overturn his dreams. *Naanera*, an award-winning film by Deepankar Prakash, tackles a conventional theme with finesse and compassion but, alas, does not move towards an optimistic end.

The film begins with images of young Manish, his head tonsured. Clearly, there has been a death in the family – his father's. The film ends with images of him (this time sitting next to his mother in a boat) – once again, his head tonsured – this time, his grandmother has died. Between these two deaths, we see a taciturn, bewildered, and diffident Manish, at first looking pale and undecided, not knowing what the future holds now that his father is no more. Later – even while things have happened that could have changed him – a still undecided young man not knowing how to handle a family whose hold on him is near total. For his own 'good', of course.

Every scene in the film's first half follows the daily life of a typical Rajasthani joint family. Their two-storey home is in a slightly less than a middle-class area of a city. Following the death and

cremation of Manish's father (Manish is now left with his mother and an ailing grandmother), relatives get together to immerse the ashes, perform the rituals (with a background narration of the Hindu ideas of life, death, rebirth and the everlasting soul); they tie a pagdi on his head (denoting his responsibility henceforth of running the house); they mourn. But the genuine sense of mourning is Manish's. His look is blank; he seems tongue-tied, utters no words, and moves slightly. The relatives, by contrast, are a pragmatic lot. They discuss money matters too. That cannot be avoided.

The film's pace is gentle and slow, but at no time does it drag. We now see how relatives can 'force' their help on others. Manish's uncle (his mother's brother) insists that Manish and his family can no longer live on their own (even though Manish is 23 years old). They must move in with their relatives. The intentions may be worthy, but no choice is given to the bereaved family. Uncle has so decreed. The move is swift. And it is best for everyone.

They now settle in another home. A few overhead shots give us an idea of a typical, old-fashioned, two-storied house with peeling walls,

steep staircases and tiny rooms located in a narrow alley. Once settled, the ‘helpful’ relatives try to cheer up the cheerless young lad: They take him out for a paan, help him apply for a government job in the usual dusty, file-crammed office, and, as traditions dictate, find a girl for him to marry. She is sweet, her family is good, and once married, all will be well. Poor Manish is completely uninvolved; his eyes barely change their sorrowful gaze. His inner turmoil is no one’s concern.

But one scene of male relatives tying a turban on Manish’s head is frighteningly symbolic. A lengthy turban is twisted endlessly round and round with an almost violent zeal, covering not just his head but his eyes and mouth as he cries out in pain. The turban-tying becomes a measure of their suffocating hold on him.

But change does happen. Returning home one evening in a rickshaw, Manish gives vent to his frustration: he drinks and drinks like a fish – straight from a bottle. Then, at home and in tears, he tells his cousin, Pooja, of his unhappiness; he cries on her shoulder. She comforts him. And Manish kisses her. Can this be a new life-changing moment in his life? Will he tread another path? We wonder. During a prayer-and-offering ritual at home, he texts Pooja, asks her to meet him upstairs, and leaves the ceremony. She meets him and thus begins an affair. The director gives the viewer a gentle pause here through shots of rain and soft music.

Then we see the pair go to Manish’s old house. The pretext is to clean it; the intention is to be together in each other’s arms.

So where does the narrative take us? The unaware relatives are avidly discussing the forthcoming engagement. They are delighted. She is such a lovely girl and from such a good family; she will fit in so well here. Why the hurry, Manish asks his mother. Well, she answers, the family wants it; after all, these people helped us, she says. Engagement and weddings have now become obligations. Debts that Manish must repay. And so the engagement happens. Manish is silent. He says he does not like the girl.

The film moves towards a climactic build-up. Pooja goes to Manish’s room in the middle of the night; the family discovers she is missing. Seized by anxiety, the relatives search for her frantically everywhere. Should they inform the police or not? No, they should not; she must be in the house because the front gate is locked.

They find her hiding in Manish’s room. The two receive a severe tongue-lashing, for what has been affected here is ‘family honour’.

But now comes the twist. Amid the dressing down, the sick grandmother dies....and the family must contend with another death. Once again, we have images of Manish, his head tonsured, sitting by his grieving mother in a boat and immersing his grandmother’s ashes in the river. We feel his sense of defeat even when nothing is said. Perhaps he has understood the bitter irony of his life. The camera moves slowly from the distant boat in the river upwards towards the sky.

Naanera is an ordinary tale of an ordinary family in an ordinary setting. And told with an engaging dialogue and superb realism, yet with restraint, intelligence and modest means. It banks on the familiar. An Indian viewer will have no trouble understanding the circumstances, the characters, and the conventional environment – all of which tell you that in families such as these, there is no room for non-conformism or individualism, that life lived in this ‘established’ way is a fundamental social construct, and to challenge it is risky. Happiness is not one person’s alone; it is collective, shared. Only then do social structures stand intact. Thought, action and behaviour patterns must be within family ‘limits’. Once that is ensured, the family – the backbone of the social edifice – can provide the support needed in times of adversity.

Manish, alas, breaks these unspoken barriers. He neither understands nor agrees. But does his family also have a point? Manish may not have said a word, but he has cavorted, most unacceptably, with his cousin. And that, too, after his engagement. Perhaps his silence itself is the culprit.