

Critique

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Shackled, Snared *Shivamma*'s Sisyphean Struggle for Survival



Kannada's other, in familiar parlance—art house, cinema—has never really scaled up to its glorious past of the 1970s, when Girish Kasarvalli, B V Karanth, Girish Karnad, and their proteges and the like ruled the roost, ensuring their regionally rooted films became part of the larger national discourse.

Of course, you had another shrewd and prolific craftsman in Puttanna Kanagal, whose films straddled both universes with felicity – finding the right median between box office commerce and art-house

aesthetics. There was a sprinkling of a few others who made the right noises as well occasionally during the era. That was about it.

It was after nearly 45 years since you had a techie-turned Raam Reddy light up the Sandalwood (moniker for the Kannada film industry) skyline with his impeccable 68th Locarno's Golden Leopard winner, *Thithi*. The pulsating pastoral comedic parody, set in Nodekoppalu village of Karnataka's Mandya district, becomes the toast of the nation, pickling every cineaste's discerning palate.

Of course, the tongue-in-cheek rib-tickler fetched Raam Reddy, who honed his cinematic skill with a year's stint at Prague Film School before he made it bold to cut his teeth with *Thithi*, bushel of awards from various film festivals as well. That it was an NFDC Film Bazaar Best Work in Progress product is noteworthy.



Nearly seven years later, making similar headlines and right noises in the film festival circuit is another young, aspiring upstart's eponymously titled *Shivamma*. The upstart goes by Jaishankar Aryar, whose surname the film's titular figure also takes.

An automobile engineer who switched to software in 2014 and worked for a US-based company, 32-year-old engineer-turned-filmmaker Jaishankar chucked his cushy techie job in India's Silicon Valley—aka Bengaluru—to pursue his passion.

Having gestated and germinated *Shivamma* during the year-long break in 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic swamped the country, which finally found fruition in 2022, Jaishankar, like his predecessors Raam Reddy, Pawan Kumar, among lakhs of engineers, steadfastly strove to chisel their ideating minds for creative cinema.

Certainly not before *Shivamma*, like its predecessor Raam Reddy's *Thithi*, as part of NFDC Film Bazaar Work-in-Progress Lab 2022, won the Prasad Lab DI Award and Movie Buff Appreciation Award. Unlike

Raam Reddy, though, who was privileged to have the wherewithal to hone his skill at Prague Film School, Jaishankar was not that fortuitous.

With retired SI father Aryar Parameshwar and homemaker mother Bhagyavathi, Jaishankar, driven to give wings to his inner calling, fell back upon burnishing his cinematic craft through familiar short films routine. Attending a workshop by *Lucia & U-Turn* fame Pawan Kumar on "How to turn your ideas into Films" was the only formal tutelage before he bid boldly to give vision to *Shivamma*.

It is indeed fortuitous that *Shivamma* was featured in the Cinema of the World Section at the recently held 15th Edition of BIFFes, which gave local audiences an opportunity to watch the film. The film saw an astonishing response from audiences with repeat screenings.



His cinematic idiom and visual narrative technique have been deeply influenced by the Iranian cinema of Abbas Kiarostami and Asghar Farhadi, which is evident in how *Shivamma* unfolds before you. Further, that Jaishankar had the insightful potential to craft aesthetic cinema was evinced with his scintillating short *Lacchavva*, which was part of a potpourri of seven ensemble shorts presented by Rishab Shetty as *Katha Sangama*, an ode to the late

Puttanna Kanagal, incidentally the producer of *Shivamma*.

If *Lacchavva* saw a mother from her rural hamlet moving to the metropolis City of Bengaluru to fend for her son, and whose overzealousness to surprise him with his favourite Dharwad Peda, lose her bearings in the hustle and bustle of an unfamiliar city, *Shivamma*, though stays firmly rooted in its rural setting itself where unfolds a saga of monumental proportions.

With a paralytic-afflicted husband, a wastrel of a son, and a college-going daughter of marriageable age deeply in love with a boy from another caste, *Shivamma* has her hands full designing ways to bring that extra bit to feed the family.

Doughty, determined and driven by this singular objective, a gusty *Shivamma* sets herself in mission mode, resolute in her resolve and with all the gumption in her command to earn that extra income for the family as its sheet anchor and sole breadwinner.

Well aware that her cook's job at the local Anganwadi school would not suffice to set aside the sum required for daughter *Jyothi's* impending betrothal and marriage, given stringent cultural and traditions prevalent, the 46-year-old ingenuous intrepid woman turns entrepreneur and "*Interpreter of Maladies*" as *Jhumpa Lahiri* would put it.

One cannot fault *Shivamma*, given the impoverishment she and her ilk face in the village. With the debt she is deeply into and her money-making pyramid scheming not leashing enough into the loop, she falls for the fantastical sales pitch of the owner of *Nuform*, taking dealership of the company's health-

boosting supplement products *BFresh & Nuracle*.

Swayed and smitten by the man's promotional promises and propaganda about how retailing the products could turn one into a crorepati, *Shivamma* too adopts wily guiles to woo the impressionable lot in the village around her with her own sales pitch dispensing *gnan* despite fully conversant about the inefficacy of the products.



She was warned repeatedly and nearly walloped by her son *Shivu* to stop fooling people. At the same time, an unfortunate daughter, *Jyothi*, watches as a mute bystander; *Shivamma* justifies her deceit and descent to such trade gimmicks to one of her friends.

"We are stuck in this rusting old village routine. Clean up and work our ass off like a donkey for a meagre Rs 200. If we do *Nuracle* business, earnings from it in two years will make us crorepatis." As the manager goaded the participants at the sales meeting, she resolved herself to her companion, stating, "I will do it."

Despite the reality she suffers ignominy and insults time and again from almost all around her in the village, the film speaks of how the lives of the likes of *Shivamma* are such that they are left with no choice but only resolute and resilient in their drive to better their lives and their family.

Her only constant and truly non-complaining companion is the grinder with which she prepares the drink. She lulls prospective customers to buy the product for their own greater good and well-being, virtually stating that BFresh and Nuracle are Ambrosias that will cure all their ailments.

Succinctly capturing the trials and tribulations is the excellent cinematography Vikas Urs uses, with his framing, slow pans, long takes, and extreme close-ups, to enhance the enormity of Shivamma's situation and psyche and also hold an evocative and reflective mirror into the milieu and circumstances she is boxed in.



Some of the scenes from the film that allegorise Shivamma's situation, as well as Jaishankar's insightful study of real-life encounters, include her son asking her to push the non-starting bike harder, her mouthing the company's manager's forceful words: I will do it., her standing mutely as she is berated for taking loans from the teachers, she berates her daughter for the folly of falling for a boy of a

different caste, besides, of course, the best one of the girl and the boy exchanging messages seated opposite to one another at the village bus stand.

Equally eruditely edited by Jaishankar in company with Chandan, *Shivamma*, filmed in the minimalist traditions, turns out tour-de-force on how abject economic situations in rural hinterlands ensnare people like Shivamma into chasing the aspirational chimaera in the belief they are doing good for the family and resolutely brave the battles not of their own making.

As the Busan jury notes: "We appreciated the originality and intensity with which the director was able to tell this very contemporary story. Here, documentary and fiction meet in an organic and spirited way to make cinema. The generosity of the actors and the scenes create a closeness with this universal story that takes place in an Indian village."

Indeed, shot entirely on location in Yarehanchinala village, Kuknur taluk, of Koppal district, *Shivamma*, belonging to the realistic tradition and genre of socially relevant filmmaking provides hope that in Jaishankar Aryar Kannada cinema has found a new harbinger and beacon of hope for creative and meaningful cinema to come which it is woefully starved at present.

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