

Critique

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Winging it against Societal Anathema



I am albino, white on the outside and rainbow on the inside. I am the soul who always sees the future as a blank page, one of choices and possibilities. Under this snowy hair, there is only warmth, and these pink eyes are a shade of baby-soft roses. - Angela Caroline Abraham: Author, Philosopher & Founder of <https://www.descriptionari.com/>

*When the child was a child,
It was the time for these questions:
Why am I me, and why not you?
Why am I here, and why not there?
Is life under the sun not just a dream?
Is what I see and hear and smell
not just the reflection of a world before the
world?
How can it be that the I, who I am,
didn't exist before I came to be,
and that, someday, the I who I am,
will no longer be who I am?*

- Song of Childhood – Peter Handke -
Austrian novelist and playwright.

Sandalwood, or the Kannada Film Industry, lately has been throwing up a platoon of aspirational, young, talented filmmakers who have sought to dare to dream. Take that leap of faith. This crop of brave hearts seeks to show that they are birds of different feathers. I have no qualms in treading the less-taken path. Giving wings to their idea and understanding of cinema and its aesthetics.

Of course, these talented people may be few and far between. Given that the industry almost disgorges as many as over 300 plus in a year, in regimental regularity, that is a pox

regarding their merit as good, meaningful films.

However, this handful of young newbies that light up the Sandalwood marquee every once in a while, with their delectable engagement with cinema, ensure there is still some sliver of hope left for the eighty-four-year-old industry that is starved of giving audiences films of quality, sensibility and value and above all, aesthetic merit.

Some have cut their teeth on drawing inspiration from past masters. A few others were assisted and mentored by their path-breaker peers, who shone the beacon for these lot to follow in their luminous trail. Heartfully, these newbie experimenters have not disappointed their mentors. This warms the cockles of cinephiles in search of meaningful movies to watch and wax eloquence about.

In recent years, one has seen very many young film-makers like Chidananda Naik, Sindhu Sreenivasa Murthy, Srinidhi Bengaluru, Jaishankar Aryar, Pratheek Pradosh, Shashank Soghal, Rahul PK, Abhilash Shetty, Sachin B. Ravi, Roopa Rao, Prithvi Konanur himself, the patron and producer of *Mikka Bannada Hakki* and the like, ensuring that all is not lost for Kannada cine audiences.

Joining the bandwagon of the indie contingent with his promising debut feature is Manohara K, a child actor turned film-maker with his well-meaning social drama *Mikka Bannada Hakki (Bird of a Different Feather)*.

The film, which fetched the Asian Talent Best Actress Award for Jayashri, who evocatively and expressively essays the role of the 12-year-old albino girl Sonia at the

Shanghai International Film Festival, also has bagged the Spotlight Award at the Alternativa Film Awards & Festival 2024 held at Yogyakarta, Indonesia, besides the Best Feature Film Award at the Jordan Children's Film Festival.



That young Manohara's *Mikka Bannada Hakki* found favour with the jury despite the seasoned *Pebbles* director P S Vinothraj's *Kottukkalli (The Adamant Girl)*, also featuring at the festival, is to be appreciated and acknowledged.

The “nomadic” Alternativa Film Awards & Festival, held in a different location every year, is aimed at giving international visibility to filmmakers whose work has the potential to create social change. This year's festival focuses on films drawn from Asian and Southeast Asian countries in particular.

Manohara's *Mikka Bannada Hakki*, which featured under the newly constituted Best Debut Indian Film category at the International Film Festival of India in Goa, may have lost out to the Marathi film *Gharat Ganpati* but seems to be winning laurels elsewhere outside. The other films in the fray in the section are the Manipuri film *Boong*, the Telugu film *Razakar* and the Malayalam film *Thanupp*.



With its tagline “*The Future Is Now*”, the 55th IFFI has sought to “*catch them young to identify and nurture young talent early on*”, and rightfully so, providing them with an ideal platform to showcase their talents and skills with a focus on “*Young Filmmakers*” in spotlight on the “*fresh perspectives and innovative ideas brought by the next generation of creators.*”

Be that may, according to AFAF24 Selection Committee Member, Film Scholar from Tajikistan Sharofat Arabova, “*the film (Mikka Bannada Hakki) is an intriguing blend of memoir and re-enacted scenes, where actors seem to forget they're being filmed and simply live on screen. It features sincere observations of daily life in a documentary style, highlighting the struggles of people trying to make ends meet. The authenticity comes from the director's intimate knowledge of the Kannada community, drawn from*

personal experiences. Additionally, it balances tragic and ironic elements while addressing albinism in a light-hearted yet meaningful way, transforming a serious topic into feel-good humour.”

Likewise, the AFAF24 jury's citation reads, “*The film captivates us by exploring how people confront struggle with humour and self-awareness. Without judging those around her—even those unwittingly causing her frustrations—it reveals great talent hidden in unexpected places.*”

Co-scripted with author Sonia S, whose book (based on her personal experiences suffering from albinism) the film takes its title and thematic content by Manohara, the film, despite a few fault lines in its execution and cinematic liberties, still works well for discerning audiences thanks to its various narrative devices as also bravura portrayal of albino afflicted girl by Jayashri and fine cinematography work by Sanjay L Channappa.



The child actor of mentor-patron Prithvi Konanur's *Railway Children*, now pursuing his Masters in Commerce at National College, Basavanagudi, took that definitive leap of faith to turn debutant director and found in Sonia's autobiographical book a ready, solid tale to tell, is to be appreciated having also assisted

Prithvi as his understudy in his later projects. On the other hand, Sonia is pursuing PUC at Bengaluru's St Benedict's PU College.

One of the film's drawbacks stems from the fact that Manohara sought to depart from the book to make his movie much more appealing and emotive to watch for the audience. While in reality, Sonia had supportive family members and friends, in Mikka Bannada Hakki's, Sonia is saddled with a perpetual drunkard and impoverished peanut seller father with a mother who tries to make ends meet, including funding Sonia's schooling and other academic habilitment requirements.



This conscious departure from Manohara, who has sought to focus on "*what would happen to a girl with financial difficulties who does not have people to fall back upon,*" actually works against the larger premise of the film's central narrative objective of showcasing the trials and tribulations of those afflicted with albinism and the society's outlook, acceptance and disreputable attitude towards with them.

The film centres around Sonia, residing in a small hamlet, with dad Kitty and mom Devamma with her busy body and precocious young brother Rama, whose innocent and innocuous posers wisecracks to his sister and

elders provide the film's hilariously comedic and guffaw moments but that also has a touch of subtle homily in them.

As if her nonchalant father's preference for his son, who makes no bones about his disdain against his daughter due to her condition and his deleterious drinking habit, was not discouraging and discomfoting enough, the situation at her school only further compounds her misery if one may call that with both classmates and the teachers, whether by design or ignorance, are impervious to her condition and the unique needs she requires.

Always the butt of jokes and reprimands, Sonia, however, stoically takes them in her stride and braves through all life's trying and testing moments, talking to herself while returning home or alone, venting out her unexpressed inner thoughts and feelings, what she otherwise would have wished to state if asked with more politeness, genuine kindness, and understanding by those around her.

This cinematic device (of Sonia talking to herself) works wonderfully for the film, and Manohara must be complimented for intuitively and cleverly choosing this approach in bringing forth the state of mind of Sonia and the inner recess of predicaments she is put through as a result of her skin condition.



Apart from her understanding and attentive mother, it is thanks to the sympathetic PT master who genuinely shows his knowledge of her condition that Sonia, driven to desperation and contemplating plunging into the village pond, blossoms into a stand-up comedian as she also wades through the trying situations she is faced with both at school and homestead.



Taking a linear format, Manohara ensures that the film's central sensitive and social theme is not lost in the comic format he has given to the narrative so that the underlying heavy-handed message of the film is driven home subtly and deftly.

Such is the forceful manner in which Manohara brings forth the protagonist's haplessness, portrayed with finesse by a rather prodigious young Jayashri. The impacted audiences will think Sonia would take affirmative action against the offenders rather than in meek submission.

Besides Sonia's social and economic impediments and discriminatory and dismissive attitude at her school, how her latent sense of humour helps the young girl face the indifferent and prejudiced society

that belittles her fragile and differentiated existence is brought out with utmost understanding.

By comparing and contrasting the two cosmos of Sonia – the impoverished home with an indifferent father and an equally disdainful distancing and treatment at school, Manohara has highlighted the state of education and the social stigma still attached to such persons.

However, despite all the misgivings, one notices that the school turns out to be the catalysing force which propels Sonia's confidence and acceptance to come to terms with herself and, in the process, successfully transact with those around her and negotiate with her circumstances in an empowering manner.

In the process, *Mikka Bannada Hakki* is a reflective mirror and a searing, searching indictment of a callous society that, more often than not, easily marginalises the most vulnerable denizens. Sonia's sagacious saga shines a harsh and haunting spotlight on the inequalities that pervade our society and forces us to confront uncomfortable truths about the nature of privilege and prejudice.

In sum, *Mikka Bannada Hakki* turns out a film on an individual's triumph of will against all odds and oppressions, subtly and deftly exploring the silent transformation of Sonia from a shy, self-pitying taunted girl child into a mature young teen who learns to seek solace within herself and contend with her social situation and surroundings.