

**BEST YOUNG CRITIC AWARD**

**6<sup>th</sup> Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition 2025**

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***Dashavatar: Between Mythic Grandeur and Modern Storytelling***



*“Paritranaya Sadhunam  
Vinashaya Cha Dushkrutam  
Dharma-samsthapanarthaya  
Sambhavami Yuge Yuge”*

“For the Deliverance of the Devotees,  
For the Annihilation of the Miscreants;  
To Reestablish the Principles of Religion,  
I do appear Millennium After Millennium”

The suspense-thriller film *Dashavatar* (Marathi), directed by Subodh Khanolkar,

offers an interesting take on the intersections between nature, culture, traditions, and the cost of progress on human lives and the environment. It does not merely dramatize the traditional performing art of Dashavatar, but also seeks to explore and question the fragile boundaries between tradition and modernity, and past and present. While the film has its own flows, the narrative stands out, resonating deeply with the local culture, the ecological concerns of Konkan and their mythical connections, providing an

interesting tale of multiple tensions – between age and responsibilities and development and traditions.

At its heart, *Dashavatar* is a story of a father and son - Babuli Mestry (played by veteran Marathi actor Dilip Prabhavalkar) and Madhav Mestry (Siddharth Menon). Babuli Mestry is a veteran Dashavatara performer – a traditional art form in Konkan dedicated to the stories of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. For generations, Dashavatar performances have been an inseparable part of Konkan's culture, with artists like Babuli dedicating their entire lives to entertain the people through this art-form. While celebrated on stage, Babuli is ridiculed in public as 'half-mad Babuli'. Nevertheless, the stage, the myths, the cultures and traditions of the village and being a part of Dashavatar forms an inseparable part of Babuli's identity in a community that is suffused with a faith in age-old traditions and the protective spirit of Rakhandar. Babuli shares a close bond with his Son, Madhav (another name for Krishna in Hindu mythology), who has lost his mother at a young age – and Madhav's world revolves around his father. Madhav represents the educated unemployed youth from rural Maharashtra – young, talented, desperately wanting to do something for his loved ones but lacking opportunities and thus feeling helpless. He also has a love interest named Vandana, to whom he is reluctant to give a long-term commitment owing to his unemployment and financial instability.

Babuli is growing old, weak, suffering from night blindness owing to the constant exposure to heavy lights during his Dashavatar performances, and has been advised by his family doctor to give up

performing as soon as possible – an opinion seconded by his son, who insists that his father must retire and focus on his health as soon as he gets a job. An adamant Babuli continues to refuse and postpone this retirement until certain familial and moral obligations are fulfilled, but eventually he gives in to his son's concerns – even as he struggles to imagine his life without Dashavatar. Very soon, Madhav lands a job in an ambitious yet controversial mining project going on in his village and Babuli decides to retire as a Dashavatar artist after a final performance on the night of Mahashivratri. His son finally has the financial stability he had hoped for, and looks forward to building a new, better life ahead for them, when an unexpected twist of fate occurs. A tragedy befalls, and an old, devastated Babuli is left alone to fight a battle – a battle against the human greed of development at the cost of nature.

The battle that Babuli decides to fight is not something new to Konkan. For years, Konkan has had a long history of clashes between development and environmental ethics, where villagers have stepped in to fulfill their duty towards mother nature. Villagers from Asaniye (Sawantwadi, 2010), Nanar (Ratnagiri, 2014 and 2024) and many other villages have systemically campaigned to protest against the opening or ongoing mining projects in their respective regions, stating that the excessive mining could lead to several problems: extensive deforestation, loss of habitat for animals and birds, creation of mining waste (eventually polluting the atmosphere), declining perennial streams resulting into water shortage, and most

importantly, loss of biodiversity and damage to the diverse geological terrain of Konkan.

Biodiversity expert and conservation scientist Aparna Watve had mentioned in 2023 that natural habitats which emerged in Konkan through geological processes like 'Sadaa' (flat terrains in which are a result of centuries of erosion of land in mountain ranges and are home to a rich flora and fauna, and hundreds of plants and animal species unique to the region) are being endangered because of the mining projects. These regions of Konkan also house petroglyphs and geoglyphs that are thousands of years old, telling stories of the past civilizations and their progress. However, uncontrolled, irregular mining activities, misclassification of Sada terrains as wastelands and ignorance of the state authorities is resulting in their depletion.

The mining activities are also threatening the survival of indigenous communities who have led an eco-centric and sustainable lifestyle for generations, and whose survival depends on the natural habitat of the region. The constant and unchecked rise in the industrial and mining activities is thus endangering the biodiversity of the region and threatening its ecosystems.

And Babuli's struggle is against all of these. From being the ageing yet popular performer on stage, Babuli takes up the leadership to save his village from the clutches of a greedy developer. The art emerges as a metaphor to a broader struggle for the protection of the environment. Here, the narrative of *Dashavatar* aligns itself with the real world issues, and the film reflects on the environmental activism in the region - where the destroyer and protectors of mother

nature are none other than humans themselves.

The symbolic connection between *Dashavatar* and Babuli's real life is worth mentioning - the visual marvel of *Dashavatar*. According to Hindu mythology, it is believed that Lord Vishnu took the 10 avatars or incarnations to defeat the evil brewing in the world and to restore the cosmic order. In the film, it is Babuli who represents this divine principle - as he reappears in several avatars of Vishnu, to punish the miscreants who were responsible for a personal loss and the collective damage they were causing to the village. The villagers have spent generations with a faith in their *Rakhandar*, the mythical protector of the village. However, little do they realize that it is Babuli who is their modern day *Rakhandar*, the protector, who is doing everything in his power to protect the village and its environment from the evil eye of human greed.

*Dashavatar* has been repeatedly compared to Rishabh Shetty's Kannada blockbuster *Kantara*, with audiences and critics pointing out the similarities between the plots. However, placing a direct connection between *Dashavatar* and *Kantara* would be a hasty generalization. While *Kantara* is remembered for its visual spectacles along with a thrilling storyline, *Dashavatar* relies on a cultural memory and a story of a generational battle infused with emotions and nostalgia. Dilip Prabhavalkar's portrayal of Babuli stands out amongst all other characters, an outcome of his decades of experience as an artist. From being a loving father to a son, to a celebrated artist of the village, and then a lone fighter seeking vengeance and justice for his son and for

mother nature, Prabhavalkar effectively portrays all shades of Babuli, leaving a mark on the minds of the audiences. As Babuli prepares himself to deliver the final act, his facial expressions reveal his inner turmoil to the audiences, highlighting the fact that a determined human intervention alone can preserve the culture, traditions and protect nature. As he brings incarnations of Lord Vishnu to life, the boundaries between myth and reality are blurred.

One of the strongest assets of *Dashavatar* is its production design, where cinematographer Devendra Golatkar has done a commendable job. Shot in the rich natural landscape of Konkan, audiences get to see the sweeping images of the hilly regions, the rivers and lakes, the tranquil villages and a lush greenery - with an intriguing interplay between the bright daylight and shadowy nights. The visual marvel of *Dashavatar* is effectively supported by its memorable background score composed by A. V. Prafullachandra. Bringing together elements from folk music and modern music, the composer has sustained rather enhanced the visual charm of the film. The lyrics penned by Guru Thakur enhance the effect of the music leaving a lasting mark and the minds of the audiences.

However, it is to be noted that the first half seems a bit dragged or slow, taking time to establish the setting and the characters - although none of them except the protagonist

really get a proper development. The supporting characters, despite having done a good job, never really complete their character arc, leaving behind a sense of incompleteness. The plot of the film gains momentum in the second half only. Towards the climax, the audience cannot help but feel the predictability in the certain elements of the story - this can be attributed to the growing and popular trend of similar folklore thriller films being made in several other languages.

In all, *Dashavatar* is a film made with high aspirations, combining the elements of environmental activism, folklore and cultural preservation - blurring the boundaries between age-old traditions and contemporary concerns. It does succeed in many aspects, owing to the commendable performances by the artists, and an effective use of music and cinematography by the filmmaker. But it may not always deliver as much as the audience expects from it. However, the real strength of *Dashavatar* lies in its central message that culture and environment cannot be separated from each other, as the ritual beliefs and practices are rooted in the natural habitat where humanity has thrived for generations. When human greed threatens these landscapes, the followers of myths and memories become the protectors of mother nature.

Image Source: [mymahanagar.com](https://www.mymahanagar.com)

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