

Article

Rekha Deshpande

Whispers of the Mountains : Silent Cry of Aravali
Rajasthani Cinema is Exploring New Horizons



Whispers of the Mountains (2025) by Jigar Nagda

Aravali Mountain range is being slaughtered. Within no time the greenery will turn into a desert. Because big industrialists are determined to transform the greenery into bank notes. Their mansions are being decorated with the marble striped off from the mountains and the laborer's lungs are getting affected by silicosis. The trees in the Tapovan area near Nasik are being cut as a part of the preparations for coming Kumbh to create comfortable dwellings for the holy saints who have renounced the worldly pleasures. Forget about those who are thrilled by the concept of Development, but those with their conscience intact can see the Destruction in the Disguise of Development that is coming.

People of Aravali have started uniting to protest the mining efforts in the area. In fact, such protests are going on by not just environmentalists but mainly by the common inhabitants who are going to be affected by this type of Development, all over country. The real development doesn't reach them. They are being deprived of their livelihood, their land, their very lives. But theirs' is a losing battle. For the formidable industrialist lobbies favoured by the government. And yet they keep fighting whichever way they can.

Jigar Nagda lives in Mumbai but has his roots in Rajasthan. He has joined the fight through his own medium i. e. the cinema.

History of the Rajasthani cinema commenced from *Nazrana* a 1942 film, followed by films on traditional themes such as *Babasa Ri Ladli*, *Bai Chali Sasariye*, *Gangaur*, *Baba Ramdeo*, *Dhola-Maravan*, *Laj Rakho Rani Sati*, *Sati Suharan*, *Mhari Pyari Chanana*, *Suhag Ro Singar*, *Chokhe Lago Sasriyo*, *Sawan Ri Teej*, *Derani-Jethani*, *Nanibai Ro Mairo*, *Beenni Vote Dene Chali* and so on.



Naanera (2021)

But in 2021 the film *Naanera* directed by Dipankar Prakash stood out with a fresh theme and a very different, precise treatment. The Rajasthani word *Naanera* means maternal house. The protagonist is a college student whose father has met with his untimely death. Maternal uncles take charge of the rituals to be performed for thirteen days and also of the boy. They get all the various rituals performed by him without even giving him time to mourn his father's death. They are also in hurry to get him some job so that he starts earning and support his mother, their sister. The poor boy is fade up with their nagging and one day, during the thirteen day mourning period he with his understanding cousin slip out of the house, roam about in the city, have fun, enjoy ice cream...

Naanera brings out the meaninglessness of the rituals impactfully,

without indulging in unnecessary details, and through precise sound designing using only the ambience sounds. *Naanera* was an indication of the changes and the maturity being ushered in Rajasthani cinema.

Whereas *Naanera* comments on the polluted family relationships and the cultural -emotional pollution that occurs due to the tradition of meaningless rituals; Jigar Nagda's films talk of social disparity, deprivation and of the environmental disasters, without being propagandist. The city-dwellers do not realize the hardships the villagers living in dark corners of the country without electricity undergo. In his first film *A Boy Who Dreamt of Electricity*, Jigar Nagda portrays the struggle of a poor school going boy to get electricity in his village. The film is made with non-actors, the residents of a village who speak Mevadi a dialect of Rajasthan.

His second film *The Whispers of the Mountains*, lauded in the 56th IFFI held in 2025, is an effort to express the agony, the silent cry of the Aravali mountain range. The little protagonist of the film is again an eleven year old school boy Raghu. He is a good student, intelligent, sincere but dumb, though not deaf. His father Tilak is a tea vendor selling tea to the mine workers in the arid mining area in the Aravali. Raghu helps him in the tea shop. Raghu's school has offered him a scholarship to attend a special school in the nearby city, while a plan is on for yet another marble mine and Tilak is happy that he will have opportunity to open one more tea shop which would be a source of livelihood for Raghu. The greenery has vanished; sources of water have dried due to the mining activities. The air is polluted by the dust emanating from the marble being extracted

and cut. And the villagers have already migrated elsewhere from the polluted area. The mountains are being cut. Dumb Raghu understands the silent cry of the mountains. While carrying water from a faraway source every day he sits for a while by the dusty road watching the mountains pensively. Yet, he has sown a seed by the road and waters it every day. In spite of the dire situation, he has not lost hope and though he can't attend the school he continues to study along with working in the tea shop. The sad, arid land devoid of greenery is as if a reflection of Raghu's sadness. A silent struggle between father's plan and Raghu's hopes goes on.

To add to Raghu's miseries widower Tilak is planning to remarry, for which he needs to replace his old mud house by a Pakka house. He borrows money from the overseer. But the divorcee woman he is supposed to marry puts conditions: The woman does not want Raghu to stay with them, besides her ex-husband would keep visiting the house to meet their 16 year old daughter. The conditions are unacceptable to Tilak.

Though father-son relationship looks as arid as their surroundings, always immersed in the struggle to survive, Tilak cares for Raghu, he thinks it essential to tell Raghu about his marriage plan but does not know how to convey it to him, for he does care for little Raghu.

During all these happenings Tilak is also coughing incessantly and is diagnosed with Silicosis. His lungs are affected due to the dust of marble. Silicosis proves to be the turning point in the story. With his own plans shattered Tilak is sitting at the same place watching the horizon devoid of the mountain range, where Raghu used to sit. He has made

up his mind. He cancels all his plans and asks Raghu to go away from the devastated land, study and have his dreams fulfilled. For the first time in the film the father hugs his son. The father-son bond which was so far dumb now speaks volumes. Tiny green leaves have appeared where Raghu had sown the seed by the roadside.

The protagonist is dumb. His helplessness, melancholy pervades all the visuals and yet they are eloquent. They do the speaking. The visual medium is at its best in the form of *Whispers of the Mountains*.

And the Rebellion



Ru-Ba-Ru (2024)

There is one more Rajasthani short film *Ru-Ba-Ru* directed by Kapil Tanwar worth mentioning, that attacks the vicious age old tradition of Rudali a form of women exploitation in Rajasthan. This story of exploitation becomes all the more poignant on the background of the unsavoury surroundings of the region. But the rebellion of the two sisters against the tradition of the land is as unyielding as the surroundings. Bhadra the elder sister is a Rudali and Rukmini the younger one is a Nachniya, a traditional dancer. Rudali is a paid mourner and Nachniya is summoned to dance and

entertain to celebrate auspicious occasions like marriage, birth of a son, birthday etc. But otherwise, they are hated and shunned by the society. Rudali is considered inauspicious whereas Nachniya is treated as a fallen woman and the male members of the society think it their right to exploit them sexually as and when they wish. As for both the sisters, mourning and entertaining respectively are their professions, their only source of earning. But they strictly guard their dignity keeping the men at bay, warding off the male gaze using their acerbic tongue. At the end of the day both of them share their woes, get drunk and that is the only solace they have in their hopeless lives. Bhadra is tired of the meaningless crying loudly and continuously and suffers from sour throat. Rukmini is exhausted by dancing. Both of them are fade up with their professions and wish they would be able to swap them among themselves.

And one day, in a state of drunkenness it really happens. Bhadra is called to mourn on an old man`s death where she dances furiously, whereas Rukmini mourns relentlessly at an occasion of a child` s birthday. Parallel editing keeps the tempo of their mourning and dancing rising to the crescendo, heightening the impact of the rebellion. The seeming drunkenness is actually the manifestation of their fierce rebellion against the exploitation, the revenge on the male dominated society. The enraged householders scorn their outrageous behavior. But the anti-climax comes when the young mother of the birthday kid comes forward and asks the fiercely mourning Rudali to bless her child. The young generation has challenged the age old cruel tradition. The house is stunned.

It is so saddening to think how the genre of short films of substance is so deprived of the wide exposure it deserves .

Rekha Deshpande is a member of FIPRESCI.