

system, it leaves most of those who pass through it, as 'nowhere people' and for that takes up the best years of their life. But it is not a question of reconciling them to labour in the field. It is a question of giving them a financially viable, honourable livelihood and the 16 years in school seem to fail them completely. However, the curriculum, if it can be oriented towards giving them livelihood skills, can have a meaning. But that will need to be addressed very fundamentally and creatively and in conjunction with a larger pro-poor economic vision of the nation.

When I first came to the village, I came brimming with ideas on how schooling needs to incorporate the existing skills of the village community along with the 3Rs, so that children develop equal respect towards their traditional occupation and knowledge systems. But what I see now is that education, for that matter any educational practice or policy, cannot stand independent of the larger economic and social world. The economic policy of the day leaves little money in their traditional knowledge skills. And until that changes, their skills will be worthless in their own eyes. I feel that if economic worth is found in those occupations, they will automatically be respected by the practitioners and taken up by the next generation. In the meantime the school can, in a focused and limited period, teach them the 3Rs and give them a view of the larger world. The role of the school is limited in this socio-economic world, except for the two or three out of fifty who climb out into the world of clerkdom. But it is not so black-and-white. One in ten children manage to get a job, and that child has to be addressed as well.

Enough work has been done on primary school pedagogy and much

material is available in Telugu. The DIET itself has done good work on the subject, as have individuals. But better teaching methods need more teacher involvement and energy, and the teachers are, most of the time, unwilling to exert themselves beyond making the children copy down what they have written on the blackboard.

At the end of the day, I still continue to teach the children in the Dalitwada through the evenings, encouraging them to write their tenth

class exams, to learn English—simply because the rural economy is dying. Also, it has become mandatory to pass the tenth class to avail many facilities like loans, etcetera. That is the logic we are using on Surendra now, a reasonably bright boy in Dalitwada who simply does not want to continue beyond class eight! But knowing that this schooling is also going to take most of them nowhere... what does one tell them? □

## FILM REVIEW

# *Devrai*

○ Aparna Pallavi

**H**e is your brother. And he is very sick—mentally. You would like to take care of him, but his presence in your house is irritating your husband. And you are a woman, after all ...

He was your lover. When his family found out, they unceremoniously threw you out. You were married to someone else, widowed, and for years you struggled, fought with yourself—to forget, to construct a life for yourself. And now his family wants you to give it all up, to take up the role of a caretaker for your one-time lover, now a schizophrenic. And you are supposed to say 'yes' with a smile!

The recently released Marathi film *Devrai*, is a splendid, intense drama about schizophrenia, with its personal, familial and social ramifications, and the bitter struggles involved in coming to terms with this strange illness and overcoming it.

But viewed from a gender point of view, the film delivers a disturbing, highly masochistic message for

women. When there is a schizophrenic in the family, who is responsible for his care? Must every dysfunctional male be provided with a wife-cum-caretaker? Is a woman's willing 'sacrifice' of her own life a must to reclaim a man lost to mental illness?

Shesh (Atul Kulkarni) is a sensitive and brilliant young man from a village, and his mission in life is to undertake research on the *devrai*, or sacred grove, with which he is deeply connected since his childhood.

But somewhere along the line things start going wrong with his academic plans. And over a period of some years, Shesh eventually succumbs to the strain and becomes a full-fledged schizophrenic.

Shesh's sister Sina (Sonali Kulkarni), who is a housewife and married to a scientist, brings him to Pune and gets him treated. But solutions do not come easy in the convoluted world of mental illness. The entire film revolves around the

quagmire of Shesh's mental landscape and Sina's and his own efforts to get better.

The way the disjointed mental landscape of a schizoid genius has been treated in the film is a genuine cinematic landmark. The central character's fluctuation between the external world and his own tortured subjective reality is fleshed out through the careful blending of images of virgin sacred groves and slick urban interiors. Particularly intense are the moments when the borders between the two fuse in the character's mind. For instance, in one scene Shesh is sitting on his hospital cot, surrounded by the lush grove, his feet buried in the rustling dry leaves, when hospital attendants leap out of the greenery at him. In another scene, Shesh has locked himself in a toilet. When he opens the door and peeps out, he sees his (to him) terrible brother-in-law passing through the grove, and hastily closes the door again.

Atul Kulkarni's rendition of this character is multilayered and the trauma of recognition and acceptance and the painful journey to recovery is also portrayed with unparalleled sensitivity through the character of Sina. Sonali has done a great job portraying a hassled woman trapped between the competing needs of a small child, a suffering brother, a husband who is destructively irritated at being 'put upon'. Particularly poignant is the struggle of this character to decipher the strange stories—part reality, part fiction, part sensitive but convoluted perception—that her brother tells her. At one point, when he tells her that Parvati, a servant of the family, has been murdered by her husband, she rushes to the psychiatrist and then feels foolish when he suggests that she check out the facts for herself.



The conflict within the family—complicated further because of Sina's financial dependence on her husband and consequent inability to take decisions with conviction, is played out with subtle but effective strokes.

But despite this excellent treatment of its central theme, the film has one flaw, and a deep one at that. In the playing out of gender equations that are inevitably tangled in such a situation, the film falls back, rather helplessly, on a bizarre version of the conventional role of nurturing expected of women.

Sina, though willing to take care of her brother and help in his recovery, is trapped between his needs and those of a husband who is willing to 'understand', but cannot stand a mentally ill brother-in-law in his own house. When he tells her 'politely but firmly' that the brother must be sent back to the village home, she succumbs without a murmur.

And she digs up Kalyani (Devika Daftardar), Shesh's first cousin, his one time lover and now a lonely working widow, who must give up the life that she has constructed for herself so painstakingly, take up Shesh's 'responsibility' (whatever that means) and return to the village with him.

The film makes a strong case of the fact that Kalyani 'ought to' accept this 'responsibility', because Shesh 'needs' her—and in the process, it delivers a complex combination of social messages based on the expectation from women that they sacrifice their own needs and freedom for the well-being of their lovers and husbands.

The idea is, Shesh the dysfunctional male 'needs' and hence also deserves a female caretaker. And since Sina 'cannot' deliver because she is tied up by the rival 'needs' of husband and son, Kalyani, childless and 'manless', and so conveniently 'spare', must step in and take the job off Shesh's family.

While the film does make Kalyani mouth a weak protest, it fails to provide any basis for her final 'choice' to do Sina's bidding except for her own desperate loneliness. And the serious implications of this choice for her own life—there are significant romantic and conjugal overtones to the 'caretaker' role—are also conveniently glossed over.

Smaller instances of a sexist perception of mental illness are also strewn all over the film. For instance, at the day-care centre where Shesh undergoes rehabilitation, there is not a single female patient. Sina is singled out for a lecture on the need for patience and perseverance while her husband's insistence that Shesh must be sent back to the village, away from his own personal space, is not questioned. One might argue that these touches reflect the sexist bias prevalent in society, but within the framework of the film, they are not perceived as such.

*Devrai*, as a whole, adds up to a great artistic experience and a very perceptive and insightful film on mental illness, but the sexist bias in the film is too prominent to be ignored. □