

FILM REVIEW

Devrai: sensitive but from the care-giver's point of view

DEEPA DANDEKAR

Bapu Trust for Research on Mind and Discourse, B1/11 and B1/12 Konark Pooram, 6th floor, Kondhwa Khurd, Pune 411 048, INDIA. e-mail: wamhc@vsnl.net.

Devrai (117 minutes, Marathi) 2004 tells the story of Shesh, a young man diagnosed with schizophrenia, and the dilemmas faced by his sister Sina and their cousin Kalyani.

Shesh (Atul Kulkarni) is a brilliant boy who aspires to be a scientist. He loves the forested environment, especially the *devrai* or sacred grove in his village where he wants to conduct research. But his mother does not support his ventures and a frustrated Shesh withdraws into his own world surrounded by the *devrai*. Gradually, he feels that the existence of the *devrai* is endangered. He starts hallucinating, identifying the *devrai* with Parvati (Amruta Subhash), the estate caretaker's wife, and terrifies her with his overtures. For a change of scene he is sent to his sister Sina (Sonali Kulkarni) in the city where she stays with her husband and young son.

In the city, Shesh's symptoms become more acute as he attacks those who he feels threaten nature. For some time, he is hospitalised and administered anti-psychotic medication and electro-convulsive therapy. But his symptoms continue and he reacts violently to those around him. He is considered unmanageable and 'dangerous' to a family with a small child. He stops taking his medicine and starts hallucinating again.

Sina tries to manage Shesh by putting him in a day-care centre but he has a relapse and is re-hospitalised. Sina finds it impossible to keep him home as he disrupts the household functioning. The only long-term solution seems to be to send him back to the *devrai* with which he is obsessed. She leaves Shesh at their village home, near the *devrai*, in the care of Kalyani (Renuka Daftardar), their unmarried cousin sister.

The film depicts the internal experience and logic of hallucinations in an in-depth and sensitive manner, giving a context to Shesh's violent outbursts. Thus it breaks out of the stereotypical portrayal of 'mad' persons as irrationally violent or with a 'split personality'. It depicts the social and familial stigma surrounding mental illness as well as the concerns and dilemmas faced by caregivers. It also tries to explore family insights, support structures and alternative institutions of mental health care.

On the negative side, the film reinforces gender roles. Conjugal concerns predominate Sina's world, and she has limited space for her own brother. Would it have been the same if Shesh were her husband's brother rather than her own? It seems acceptable to the filmmakers for Sina's husband to be impatient or mistreat Shesh because of his illness.

Sacrificing Kalyani to the role of carer only because she has no conjugal responsibilities is disrespectful to women who choose to remain single. This depiction also follows stereotypes. Single women seem to have an uninteresting life with no formal ties that can be given up any time for the sake of family loyalty. Kalyani is treated as a carer, by extension a proxy institution and an object of Shesh's convoluted desires.

The movie subscribes to a bio-medical perspective. Services for the mentally ill are limited to institutional or medically supervised daycare that only manage and control symptoms. Here, the movie is largely driven by carers' concerns. There is little awareness or concern about alternatives to the bio-medical paradigm. For example, Sina is more interested in Shesh 'behaving' than whether he feels better. He is hospitalised mainly to control his behaviour. Moreover, other than psychiatrists or carers, no one from the general community is shown interested in mental health.

A psychiatrist tells Sina that Shesh projects his unrequited love for Kalyani on to the *devrai*, which he also sees as embodied in Parvati. But Shesh himself is unaware of this crude and simplistic interpretation. His need to be understood is ignored by all around him. Thus the chief character in the film is portrayed as powerless, frustrated and emasculated. He is not allowed to have insights into his condition, or develop any coping – perhaps the most refreshing elements of the film *A Beautiful Mind*.

Regarding ethical concerns in this film, is it right to place a person diagnosed with schizophrenia without medical support in an uncontrolled environment? Kalyani does not understand the nature of Shesh's problem and how to deal with it.

Restraints, heavy medication, hospitalisation and ECT are shown as valid methods of controlling patients who become violent. Violence itself is further mystified: everyone watching *Devrai* will feel afraid of Shesh and agree to his 'management' by any means, whether or not it violates his rights. Nowhere is he counselled or spoken to. The emphasis is on the carer's safety rather than the dignity, safety and self-determination of the sufferer.

Still, the movie is well developed in patches. There are sensitive and intense moments interspersed with rushed sequences and verbose narratives, inconsistent in pace. At its best, *Devrai* leaves the viewer with mixed feelings. An understanding of Shesh's problems leads them nowhere since this is within a carer-driven, bio-medical paradigm. Although a half-hearted attempt is made in the end to give Shesh what he wants, he remains misunderstood till the very end, a 'mad' person.