

FILM REVIEW

Coping with dementia: *Thanmatra*

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What happens to a family when the main breadwinner becomes seriously ill? How does one cope when a loved one suddenly develops a serious mental illness? These are some of the questions that director Blessy Ipe Thomas seeks to bring forward in his film *Thanmatra* (molecule). The film recently won the Kerala state award for Best Film. It also won four other awards.

The film is based on a short story by the late Padmarajan. Ramesh Nair, played by Mohanlal, is a middle-level government employee in the secretariat at Thiruvananthapuram. He is depicted as a "model" husband and father. For example, the principal of the school that his children attend requests him to give a lecture to the other parents on how to help their children with their studies. Ramesh has a single-minded determination to help his son, who is about to take the board examinations, to pass the civil services examination and enter the Indian Administrative Services. He himself had unsuccessfully attempted the examination.

Out of the blue, disaster strikes. One day, he misplaces an important file. It is finally found---in the refrigerator at home. His deterioration is rapid. He loses the way to his office, forgets his scooter, mistakes his office for his home and begins to remove his clothes to have a shower. His colleagues are alarmed and take him to a hospital. After a neurological examination he is diagnosed with pre-senile Alzheimer's disease.

The rest of the film deals with how the family copes with the situation. Ramesh's father lives on his small family plantation and the family is able to move away from their small flat into this relatively secluded home.

The film shows dementia affecting a middle-aged person. This is probably done for its dramatic effect. The film emphasises the ensuing disruption of family life. The doctor who counsels the

family assures them that the patient is not suffering because he is not aware of the condition. There is no structured social support in India to help a family cope with such a situation. The family must rely on its own resources. In the film the family is relatively fortunate to be able to move to a supportive environment. They have the financial resources to be able to handle the loss of the income of the main breadwinner.

The film has many problems. For one, there are no strong female characters. Ramesh Nair's wife (Meera Vasudev), is a supportive wife and mother, but that is all. The parents are focused on the academic success of the son. The daughter, about eight years old, is just a foil. This reflects the social reality in Kerala, where, in spite of 100 per cent literacy, by and large women remain second-class citizens. Secondly, the rate of progress of the disease is shown to be very rapid and Ramesh Nair is virtually disabled in about five years. In reality, the course of Alzheimer's is generally much less precipitate.

The film is noteworthy for tackling a difficult theme. It has focused attention on the social difficulties of dealing with dementia. Kerala is in the midst of a demographic transition. The average life expectancy is now about 75 years. More than 11 per cent of the population is above the age of 60. A large number of the elderly live alone because their children have gone abroad for work.

As the number of people in India living beyond 60 years increases there will be a concomitant increase in the number of people affected with dementia. On the other hand, the trend for families to live in nuclear units makes it difficult for an individual family to deal with a patient on its own. It is an ethical imperative for society to develop support institutions. Dealing with dementia should be a growing social concern. If the film delivers this message, the director will have done a wonderful job.