

## FILM REVIEW

### Shwaas

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*Shwaas* is the first Marathi film sent as the Indian entry to the Oscars. Directed and produced by Sandeep Sawant, this human drama revolves around the story of a small boy who will become blind as a result of life-saving surgery.

The film begins with six-year-old Parshuram Vichare being brought to a surgeon in the city by his grandfather because he has problems with his vision. Over the next fortnight it is discovered the child has retinoblastoma in both eyes. Surgery will save his life but leave him blind. The grandfather struggles before agreeing to the inevitable. When the operation is postponed by a day, the grandfather spirits the boy out of the hospital to give him memories that he can cherish all his life. The film ends with their return to their village after the surgery.

The film's most remarkable achievement is its depiction of the two main characters – the child and his grandfather – and their world. It weaves in the mindscape of the little boy and his fond memories of everyday life in an idyllic coastal village. Equally moving is the depiction of the big city through the boy's failing eyesight: distorted bright lights, a haze of colour and movement, and a few moments of distinct vision. My favourite shot is of the little boy, just table high, looking through a rolled-up dosa.

The story is heart-wrenching without being sentimental. Parshuram's confusion and anger, which he is too young to express in words, plays itself out in his tantrums and sullen silences. Equally well portrayed is the frustration of the adults around him who have no way to assuage his feelings.

The grandfather, played with great sincerity by Arun Nalawade, is completely believable in his grief and his painful efforts to do his best for the child. The disorienting experience of the large city hospital, his desperate attempts to avoid making the crucial decision, his inability to tell the child about his condition and the consequences of the surgery, and his final reckless escape from the hospital to give the boy an unforgettable 'day out' are all superbly portrayed. This too is devoid of pathos, yet leaves one with a lump in the throat.

Strangely, though a doctor is specially mentioned as contributing the main idea and plot, the characterisations of the health professionals are not as effective as those of the boy and his grandfather.

No doubt there is something very real about the now brusque, now gentle manner of the busy consultant surgeon who has no

time to talk to his patients. However, he does not reflect on the philosophical and ethical issues he faces. What is the meaning of life for a six year old? How do you make such crucial decisions on behalf of a child? How far does a doctor's professional responsibility go? Dr Sane, played by Sandeep Kulkarni, remains a character. Obviously he has more aspects to his personality but his dilemmas and reflections are not given space to develop.

Even more unconvincing is the portrayal of the social worker who seems more high-strung than is acceptable for this kind of job. Her presence does not add any new dimension to the film.

The film unveils layers of the reality of the medical world but does not offer more than a tempting glimpse and stops just short of delving into the issues it raises.

*Shwaas* could have been a valuable commentary on the modern healthcare system, which dehumanises the suffering of its patients and numbs the sensibilities of its practitioners. With its deeply sensitive and nuanced understanding of human nature, it would have had the advantage of being free from polemic. The film raises several issues that ordinary people face every day – the mechanical signing of consent forms by terrified and dazed relatives, the infuriating bureaucracy of public hospitals devoid of sensitivity, the system of private practice in which doctors have no time to develop relationships with their patients, the tussle between social worker and doctor to palm off the responsibility of dealing with the patient's emotional needs, defining the doctor-patient relationship, and so on.

Almost half the film is shot in the hospital. This background is well etched in technical details but does not come alive as a social space. Some notes jar – like the press haranguing doctors about patients leaving against medical advice. To anyone familiar with large city hospitals this hardly seems material for a scandal.

In the final analysis, *Shwaas* works wonderfully as a film because of its emotional depth. Its canvas is not the world, but the mind, with its countless emotions, thoughts and memories. Ashwin Chitale's Parshuram will rank as one of the most memorable characterisations of a child in a personal tragedy. One scene says it all: an exultant Parshuram returning to the hospital after a 'day out'. As soon as he sees the doctor, he is deflated and allows his grandfather to pull the plastic trumpet out of his mouth. He looks up, his face dirt streaked but radiant, half afraid, half defiant, quite uncertain about what to expect.