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Maya Miriga (Odia 1984): A Mirage called Life

A film review of *Maya Miriga* (1984)

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Review of a landmark cinematic triumph in Odia Cinema that pioneered its New Wave movement of the 1980s, and propelled a lesser known regional cinema into national and international recognition.



MAYA MIRIGA (1984)

Direction: Nirad N. Mohapatra

Cast: Bansidhar Satpathy, Manimala, Binod Mishra, Manaswini Mangaraj, Sampad Mahapatra

Music Director: Bhaskar Chandavarkar

The most feted film in the history of Odia cinema, *Maya Miriga*, celebrates a directorial debut in the league of the best of Indian cinema's artistic greats, second if only, in its truth, promise and cinematic achievement to Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*. Call it the bane of Odia cinema; neither its film community, nor its patrons of the arts have done justice to the memory of this cinematic masterpiece that continues its date with posterity outside its state of production, purely on the nostalgia of mesmerised critics, and the efforts of its extremely modest maker, Nirad N. Mohapatra.

The story is set in the family of Raj Kishore *babu* (Bansidhar Satpathy), a school headmaster on the verge of retirement. He lives with his mother, wife, four sons, a daughter and a daughter-in-law in a crumbling ancestral house in Odisha's temple town of Puri. A man of modest means, he has never compromised on giving his children a good education, which he hopes will function towards the betterment of the individual and the family.

Eldest son, Tuku (Binod Mishra), a lecturer in a local college, lives with his pregnant wife Prabha (Manaswini Mangaraj); second son

Tutu (Sampad Mahapatra) is in the midst of his IAS examinations; third son Bulu oscillates aimlessly between unshaped ambitions; while the rebellious fourth son, Tulu strives to manage a fine balance between studies and sports. Daughter Tikina is still in school. The running of the house is shared by Raj Kishore and Tuku, whose wife Prabha is forever attending to the myriad needs of the family, almost working like a beast of burden.

Although Raj Kishore's world-wise mother (Kishori Devi) is the titular head of the family, its affairs are effectively run with concerned discipline by Raj Kishore. His wife's (Manimala) writ runs only on Prabha. This status quo – oppressive for some, functional for most and convenient for few – is maintained with all hopes on the family's brightest son, Tutu's success at the Civil Services (a cherished middle-class dream job) to bring in any change. His success attracts an alliance with a rich bureaucrat's daughter, which a doubting Raj Kishore is urged to accept by his wife, in spite of the groom's family status being significantly lower than the bride's.

The new bride comes in with lots of gifts and utility items (fridge, sofa set, dinner table, etc.) that afford the sufficiently modest household a temporary luxurious makeover, though not without upsetting a few family traditions in the line of duties. Unlike Prabha, the new daughter-in-law doesn't limit herself to the kitchen hearth, and promptly returns to

her parent's home ignoring all propriety, the moment Tutu leaves for his training after marriage. The uneasy calm that she's brought with her hefty dowry eventually shatters when she insists on taking those gifts with her to Tutu's new address of posting in another city. In its shards are shamelessly revealed Tutu's awkwardness, Tulu's selfishness, Bulu's helplessness and Tuku's unhappiness.

In the film's final event, as Prabha feigning sickness refuses to carry on with her unappreciated daily chores for the first time, forcing Raj Kishore's wife to re-enter the kitchen to get the family hearth burning, the lines of duty, responsibility and respect are forever redrawn to fresh negotiations over the decreased influence of the retired parents in their household.

An ode to loss

Mohapatra's requiem to the Indian joint family system is unavoidable and hopeful, poignant and even mildly celebratory. In the warm camaraderie and sharing of responsibilities that a joint family ideally prides in, are also present the stifled aspirations of married sons, bitterness of duty bound daughters-in-law and the selfish nurture of ambitious youngsters. Far beyond the addressable financial issues, the film explores and exposes the unacknowledged human sacrifices that are integral to the sustaining of the feel-good imagery of a 'happy' joint family

and how these compromises eventually strain its very foundations.

But in a world striving for utopian ideals of equality at all levels, financial, social and emotional, is the dissolution of the joint family the only solution?

Maya Miriga forces one to ponder on this thought, but arrive at your own conclusion, as it doesn't offer any easy way out. Perhaps this is partly because a please-all solution is beyond the ambit of a true-slice-of-life anecdote to pontificate on possibilities beyond its timeline; and partly because the director opts for a non-judgmental take on every player's motivations that while making them human and real, divests any single character from absolute villainy or heroism. The film however, definitely disturbs in the unraveling of its drama of disintegration in a traditional small town where family bonds are expected to be at their tenacious best.

Mohapatra's auteur touch is most evident in his not going for the simplistic lure of categorising his characters within the more comprehensible shades of black, white or grey. You empathise with all, though your sympathies may vary. Prabha's quiet rebellion is as much necessary as Tutu's need to breakaway because the pride and fame his career brings to the family can be best realised outside its environs of routine and conformity. It's interesting to note how Tutu lavishes his family with gifts when he is a struggler on a

scholarship, but holds back his funds after getting a well-paying job as the notion of ‘his family’ changes belongingness from that of his first family of parents and siblings to the new one with his wife. His wife’s thinking about herself without any guilt can be sourced to her rearing as an only child in a self-sufficient household that had never awakened her to any habit of sharing.

The neighbour’s lad, who delivers all the good and bad news; the ever brimming tea cup of hospitality even in the most modest Indian household; the covert bickering and overt joys of bonding between brothers never crossing the restraint of hierarchy; the reflective gossip on life between two retired friends; the genuine concerns of non-activity after a busy career on the eve of impending retirement; the delicate firmness and restraint that shapes the daily management of fear and favour in a daughter-in-law/mother-in-law relationship; and a commentary on life in the eighties and the times to come – I cannot remember when I had last seen an Odia film with so many honest vignettes without any hint of deliberate design to make a certain kind of ‘art cinema’ that tends to make such authentic endeavours commercially boring or mournful.

Mohapatra’s intentions are clear in terms of leaving his audience with a closure in a predominantly open-ended story as any slice of life tale would be. He, revealed to me in an interview, like his favourite filmmaker

Yasujiro Ozu, that he intended to leave his audience with a feeling of the ‘*shanta rasa*’ (the emotion of quietude), to highlight the return of the calm, howsoever uneasy, into Raj Kishore’s family, after a churn in relationships brought in by the entry of the second son’s bride. In our last glimpse of him in the film, as Raj Kishore comforts his bawling grandchild with a smile after a night of quiet reflection, stating – ‘*Maa kan tu bi amaku chadi chaliibu?*’ (Dear daughter, will you too leave us and go?) – we are assured that our protagonist has made peace with the inevitability of his family’s disintegration. He isn’t happy, but he isn’t a defeated soul either, as he readies to play a new part to sustain that mirage of ‘life goes on’ in the happiest way possible. Though many filmmakers indulgently talk about Ozu’s influence on their craft, none has Indianised the essence of his celluloid social elegies so truthfully in India, ever.

So what is it about *Maya Miriga* that has made it such an enduring contemporary classic of Indian cinema? In retrospect, its story wasn’t any different from the many crumbling vignettes on the great Indian joint family from the 1980s, a decade that saw an unusual spurt in similar social critiques across all Indian language cinemas.

Is it the finesse of a screenplay that so seamlessly oscillates between documentary and drama to achieve for posterity a celluloid memory of life in an Odia household in a

certain era and time? Is it the perfection in characterisation achieved by its ‘raw and real’ casting, because anyone who walks into a large Odia middle class family cannot not encounter split story images of Raj Kishore, Prabha, Tutu, Bulu or others? Or is it simply the fabulously observant imagery of an omnipresent camera that doesn’t miss the minutest of details while never giving an impression of being there. The truth of Mohapatra’s telling is so formidable that it seems like he’s culled a story from daily life to present a riveting daily drama of the mundane.

Technically, the tautly edited (Bibekanand Satpathy) *Maya Miriga* doesn’t have a single wasted or unwanted moment, with its every take, comment or event contributing to the narrative’s gradual but decisive change of equations. Its seamless transition in time between life updates without the actual depiction of ‘costly’ on-screen shooting events like marriage, child birth, etc. is a valuable reference on how to get across the drama

around busy cinematic moments, while working on a modest budget.

Bhaskar Chandavarkar, music composer of some of the most memorable Indian New Wave Movies of the 1970s and 80s (*Vamsa Vriksha*, *Maya Darpan*, *Samna*, *Ghasiram Kotwal*, *Ondanondu Kaladalli*, *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyun Aata Hai*, *Akriet*, *Paroma*, *Khandhar*), lends an effective background score with functional interludes and two highlight *raga* renditions by Aarti Anklekar that lend voice to the film’s muted tensions.

Noted film critic Maithili Rao termed the vanishing of Nirad N. Mohapatra from the movie making scene after such an ‘exquisitely elegiac, immensely moving first film’ as one of Indian cinema’s greater unanswered questions. I would rather call it a great loss for the Odia film industry and its patrons for being unable to inspire or instigate Mohapatra’s return, because a debutant with such consummate artistry could never have been a one-film wonder. 🙏