

# MOVIE REVIEW



Movie Review

Devrai: The sacred grove *within*  
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'O Mother Earth! You are the universe and we are but your children. Grant us the ability to overcome our differences and live peacefully and in harmony, and let us be cordial and gracious in our relationship with other human beings.' (*Atharva Veda*, XII.1.16, in Krishna 2019, p. 6)

The thoughts expressed in this verse from the *Atharva Veda* capture what the movie *Devrai* aims at achieving. Released in the year 2004, *Devrai* is a film in Marathi directed by filmmakers Sumitra Bhave and Sunil Sukthankar, and produced by Schizophrenia Awareness Association and K. S. Wani Memorial Trust. The film stars versatile actors of the Marathi film industry, including Atul Kulkarni, who plays the main protagonist Sheshashayee Desai, around whom the entire film revolves. Shesh, as he is endearingly addressed all through the film by his near ones, has a brilliant and empathetic mind. He considers himself to be seamlessly integrated with the environment. He is an individual who understands the synchronicity that exists between humans and nature. The sacred grove or *Devrai* as it is called in parts of western Maharashtra is the reason for him to exist, it provides meaning to his life.

A plunge into the depths of dense forests and the unfathomable layers of the mind are what the movie *Devrai* is all about. Although the name Sheshashayee is associated with Lord Vishnu, the creator in the Hindu trinity, Shesh reminds one of the Hindu mythological legend, in which that the earth is balanced on

the head of the Sheshnag. Shesh behaves in a similar manner where he takes upon himself the responsibility of conserving the Devrai or the sacred forests. Set in rural Konkan, the sacred groves or the Devrai that Shesh is concerned about conserving are governed by the reigning deities of the groves. Conserving sacred groves is the job of a conservationist. Shesh believes it is his responsibility to look after the Devrai and protect the rare plants and herbs thriving in it for future generations.

Shesh, his younger sister Sina and their maternal cousin Kalyani, have a serene and enriched childhood spent in the lap of nature. As they grow, Shesh is fascinated by nature and experiences an intimate connection with it. There is a bond between Shesh and Kalyani, a bond of love and understanding, which is broken as it is considered incestuous by his own mother. Shesh is able to speak his heart out to Kalyani, and as they grow together, he expresses his desire to carry research on the Devrai.

As Shesh matures he finds that things do not work out the way he wanted them to, they do not go according to his plan. In spite of having performed exceedingly well at the SSC examination, he is unable to secure admission to medical school as he falls short of a few marks. From thereon, he witnesses a downfall. He completes his graduation in four years in place of three and is unable to complete his postgraduate studies. His only goal in life is to conserve the Devrai by dedicating his life to it. As he grows up, people around Shesh find him increasingly morph into an introvert, erratic and constantly angry with his surroundings.

Shesh's goal in life is to carry research on the Devrai or the sacred groves. However, this goal remains unattained as he loses grip on himself, he is unable to control his anger and anxiety. Nanditha Krishna, a renowned environmentalist, has mentioned in her work titled *Hinduism and Nature*, 'Most of the cults associated with sacred groves in Maharashtra are Mother Goddess cults—Kamaljai, Marijai, Bhavani, Bhagvati and Tathawade' (Krishna, 2017). Parvati, in Shesh's imagination, is a manifestation of the similar feminine element. Shesh experiences displacement in terms of the emotion of love and at the same time he silently observes the systematic destruction of the environment around him in the name of progress. In the meanwhile, Kalyani his cousin and his soulmate,

is abruptly removed from his life due to the tag of incest associated with the relation and Sina gets married. Shesh continues with his life all alone, post his mother's demise, unable to complete his postgraduation, while he is consumed with the burning desire to conserve the Devrai.

Shesh starts hallucinating as he perceives Shambhu, the caretaker of his orchards as the oppressor and his wife Parvati as an extension of nature, and the physical manifestation of deity of the sacred grove. Parvati in Shesh's mind represents the deity of the sacred grove that is close to his heart and Shambhu is out to destroy her. The Draupadi disrobing scene from the epic *Mahabharata* is played out in the movie where Shambhu tries to oppress Parvati and the rescuer is Shesh. Obviously, these represent the goings-on in Shesh's mind.

Shesh's world of imagination, created by his own mind, keeps weaving an unreal world for him which removes him far from reality. The symptoms of schizophrenia are conspicuously visible, especially when Shesh cannot control himself and his anger. After one such bout of anger, when caretaker Shambhu is unable to control Shesh, he is sent to Sina's place at Pune. Shesh has already withdrawn into a shell with no one around to communicate, whilst living alone. Sina is married to Dr Desai, who works with the National Chemical Laboratory, Pune. When at Sina's place, Shesh attends a house party that his brother-in-law throws on being promoted. The socially reticent Shesh gets upset when he overhears someone at the party mentioning about some 'patent' and the politics involved in its approval. Shesh connects that with the destruction of the Devrai back home which is imminent as a developmental project is underway at his native place in Konkan which could mindlessly harm the ecology. At the party, Shesh loses control over his emotions. Anger and hallucinations take the better of him.

He is admitted to a hospital and thereafter undergoes treatment at the mental health department. Handled by sensitive medical professionals, who identify his condition as schizophrenia, a mental health disorder where the patient experiences certain chemical changes that are beyond his control. The reasons for the change could be genetic or situational. The exact cause is unknown, is what a senior mental health professional explains to Sina, who is now Shesh's

primary caregiver. A schizophrenic individual creates an unreal world around himself which he believes to be his reality, his comfort zone. The illusion of this unreal world can be broken only with the help of medicines and unconditional love provided by discerning caregivers.

The film depicts the chaos that takes place in Shesh's mind stemming from the growing disconnect that he observes between nature and human beings, and between human beings. The movie sensitively brings out the need to conserve the environment and bring back the ecological balance. At one point in the film, we find Shesh telling his mother that he is a sanyasi who is already wedded to the Devrai. In another scene, Sina's husband vehemently expresses that the society has turned schizophrenic with its Janus-faced behaviour and double standards. The conclusion of the film is heartening as it positively proclaims 'love, care and concern' as being the antidote to all woes of humankind, be it at the personal or at the environmental level.

An extremely sensitively made film, Devrai drives home the fact that we all have a sacred grove within ourselves which we need to conserve and rejuvenate. 'Aham Brahmasmi' is the principle which is at work here. Also, the following verse in the *Mundakopanishad*, embodies the central message in the movie:

Atas samudra girayas ca sarve asmat sandante sindhavas sarva rupah  
 Atas ca sarva oshadhayo rasas ca yenaisha bhutais tishthate hyantar atma  
 From Him, all the seas and mountains, from Him flow rivers of every kind;  
 From Him are all the herbs and their juices too;  
 by which, together with the elements, the inner soul is upheld.  
 (*Mundakopanishad*, 2.1.7., in Krishna 2019, p. 8)

## Works cited

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