

Critique

Latika Padgaonkar

Sthalpuran: Chronicle of Space



Sthalpuran by Akshay Indikar is one of those unusual films which lingers with its shots and lingers in the mind. The director is in no hurry to tell his tale. In fact, he is in no hurry at all. Spread over three monsoon months when the rains are at their most bounteous in the Konkan region of Maharashtra, the film's 'story' - if I can call it that - is enriched and deepened by the verdant countryside. The film is a veritable ode to nature - the deafening crash of the ocean waves, the gushing streams, the darkened skies, the thunderous clouds, the occasional lightning, the trees heavy with leaves and branches. Nature empties all that is in its lap for the world to savour.

Dighu, the 8 or 9 year-old protagonist, is moving with his mother and older sister from Pune to the Konkan. In the train, by the window, he watches the passing scenery, sleeping intermittently. We have little idea of what is on his mind.

And that is how it will be throughout the film. It takes the viewer time to learn that the father has left the family. And neither Dighu nor we will know the whys and hows of the father's disappearance. And so, here they are, moving to his grandparents' house, perhaps for good.

What pushes the film gently ahead - without there being a story in the conventional sense - are the stray thoughts and impressions that come to Dighu's mind and which are spelt out every now and then on a soiled piece of paper (maybe a diary?) which fills the screen. "7 June - Mother never told us when we will return to Pune"; "10 June - Roaring sound of the sea - have not heard this in Pune"; "15 June - don't know where Dad has gone, even sister does not know."

Much of the film consists of still shots, but once in a while the camera does move very gradually - mostly to the left. The compositions may give you a view of the family eating dinner around a table, or children studying at school. These images, however, take up only half the frame - the rest of the frame could be a wall. When the camera does, indeed move, it is slow, slow, caressing all that is in its path - a sleeping Dighu, a mournful Dighu, his head on the table with faint sounds of Kumar Gandharva singing in the background, the incandescent light outside, the misty morning, the fast moving shadows of a fan's rotating blades, a piece of earth, a portion of the sky,

a bit of water – everything has a special place in the film.

It is these sights, sounds and rapturous colours that Dighu absorbs. For Dighu's mind is different. It could be because of his move from an urban to a rural setting; or because of the memory of his father; or that of his school friends he left behind in Pune and who he misses. This young boy is both contemplative and curious, absorbing the beauty around him. Not consciously. Nothing in the film appears to be staged. Rather, his immersion in nature is spontaneous. Dighu sits and watches the movement of a stream; on his way to school, he looks at lights and colours and peers at insects; he lies down and sleeps near the sea. He is quite simply following his natural instincts, and we can feel (possibly without him understanding this himself) his oneness with his environment. And the director, through the film's rhythm, ensures that we join him in reverence.

Meanwhile, we are given fragments of daily life in the village: Dighu and his sister attending the local school; Dighu spending time with his grandfather learning how to read the clock; his sister reading out to him a story from the school textbook. On 2 July, Dighu does say, "Minu knows everything but doesn't tell me anything."

Meanwhile, his mother finds a job in a dull and drab factory, and once Dighu admits he does not like to see her talking to a man. Then there is the little excitement of Konkani life: a local folk theatre group performing Dashavtar. At night, Dighu has a vision of Shiva with a trident crossing a bridge, and feels he himself is mystically lifted up from his bed, still asleep, still horizontal.

"16 July – Nothing."

And then he meets an unkempt, middle aged man, sitting with a beedi in his mouth, then lying down in the rain. They wave at each other, later walk playfully in the rain together, engage in a game at the bus stop. Then suddenly, from one shot to the next, the man disappears, and you wonder if Indikar hasn't moved into the world of magic realism.

Once, Dighu goes (alone, surprisingly) to Goa. He finds himself in the midst of a carnival: Christ on the Cross, painted faces, people wearing outlandish masks of wizards and sorcerers, vendors peddling all kinds of bric a brac. A new world opens before him. Alongside, a traditional ceremony is held to celebrate the coming-of-age of his sister. And we suddenly realise that Minu had stopped accompanying her brother to school. Poor Dighu has no idea what this coming-of-age is all about.

By now, the rains have ceased. The sun is out, casting its rays on a world of plenty - full of sparkling vegetation and plentiful water. The contemplative Dighu is on a boat. *Chronicle of Space* is a poetic account of a child growing up in beautiful if unfamiliar surroundings (space of the earth and space of the mind). No great discoveries or surprises here, only quietude. A gem of a film with simple and crafty camera work and editing and an apt sound design. And, needless to say, a sterling performance by Neel Deshmukh as Dighu.



Sthalpuran: Chronicle of Space

Direction/Editing: Akshay Indikar

Cinematography: Jagadeesh Ravi

Screenplay: Akshay Indikar, Tejashri Kamble, Rekha Thakur, Sonia Mahale, Shashank Shende, Shrikant Patil, Medha Patil, Gajanan Zarmekar, Deepa Moghe

Cast: Neel Deshmukh, Anushree Wani

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