

Dishonest, Voyeuristic Mishmash

Maya Invents New Forms of Female Exploitation

○ Vijaya Mulay

In the World Film Festival of Montreal held recently, an Indo-US co-production titled *Maya* was presented in the competition section. Its 27-year-old director, Digvijay Singh, a graduate of St Xavier's college, in an interview he gave, described to me how a newspaper report he read about child rape in India had suggested the theme for his film. The film critic of the *Montreal Gazette* praised *Maya* lavishly. I went to see it with great expectations. Like many other Indian viewers I was very disturbed by what I saw.

The film centres around a young schoolgirl Maya (Nitya Sethi), who lives in a town in Andhra Pradesh with her well-to-do uncle Arun (Anant Nag) and aunt Lakshmi (Mita Vasishtha). Her parents live in a nearby village. Arun and Lakshmi love her. Her cousin Sanjay (Nikhil Yadav), just one year younger than Maya, is her favourite playmate. Both have a good time running around, playing pranks and games. Sanjay willingly accepts all blame when their pranks are reported. Their relationship abruptly changes when she starts menstruating. Her aunt talks about holding the ceremony that is required in her community when a girl reaches puberty. They all go to the village where Maya's parents reside. Arun and Lakshmi decide that since Maya is like a daughter to them, they will arrange for the ceremony to be held in a grand manner. The parents accept this offer with gratitude.

The main priest of the temple, Ramulu (V. Saxena) is consulted. On an auspicious day, the girl, decked in finery, is taken in a procession to the temple. The procession stops at the temple steps. The head priest, who is holding Maya, enters the inner sanctum with three other priests. The door of the holy sanctum is closed. While Maya screams, all of them rape her by turn. Impervious to her screams and cries, the family keep on feasting in the temple yard.

The only person affected by her cries is Sanjay, who bangs on the temple door pleading for help for Maya. His father tells him not to shout and assures him that Maya is all right. Unable to believe it, he runs out of the temple complex and sees their servant, who is drinking the local brew. The servant tells Sanjay that he should not worry about what is happening to Maya. He adds that his own mother had to go through the same ceremony and that Maya would be all right. Sanjay then meets a friend. The friend tells him that the priests did the same to his sister, and if there was any chance of Sanjay being able to prevent Maya's fate, he would have told him.

Back at the temple, the priests bring out Maya, who looks half dead. The head priest hands her over to the family and tells them that the ceremony was successful and that Maya is a blessed girl. The uncle thanks him. At home, Maya vomits and is ill but her mother and aunt keep on assuring her that there is

nothing to worry about, that everything is all right. Sanjay and his friend take their revenge by throwing pieces of meat in the courtyard of the head priest's house to defile it. The film ends as Arun, Lakshmi and Sanjay leave. Maya looks wistfully at the departing car. Presumably she will not go to school any more.

The film shocked not only Indians but many Canadians too. When asked, I told my Canadian friends that I know of menstruation rites held in several regions of India, but these are strictly women's affairs full of congratulation, singing and feasting; I knew of the custom of *devdasis/jogins*, banned by law but still practiced in certain pockets of India where the police and social activists have not yet succeeded in wiping it out. But this custom was not tied in the manner depicted in the film with menstruation. Girls were given to the temple service by their family as *devdasis* (servants of goddess Yellama or other local deities) from the age of nine onwards for various reasons, ranging from one less mouth to feed, to getting a boon, or avoiding a catastrophe, but definitely not to get them ritually raped by several priests. These children are from marginalised low castes. If and when the children are abused, the parents do not have the necessary clout to challenge the exploitation. I told my friends that the practice of ritual gang rape by priests as a menstruation rite is not known to me but I would enquire further.

I spoke to the film's director Mr. Singh about the research that he had done and the areas where he found such a practice in existence. He told me that it exists in certain areas of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. There are many variations of the practice, he reported. I asked to see his research references and he gave me two pages from his research portfolio. They contained the address of a number of websites, which he suggested I consult. I did. Nothing in the material had anything to do with menstruation rites. Rather, the references described *devdasis/jogins* and abuses of this system. The websites also gave accounts of how parents felt helpless to prevent the

abuse. Prof. Rabab Naqvi was just as disturbed by the film as I was. He wrote a scathing critical article about it after learning that Mr. Singh's research did not support what he had portrayed. I too sent a critical letter to the editor of the *Montreal Gazette*.

If Mr. Singh was so moved by the story he read in the Bombay paper, he should have made a film about a young *devdasi* and not this voyeuristic sensational mishmash. His research in other respects is also poor. Girls approaching puberty do not sleep in the same bed as a boy of their own age, nor bathe together with boys as was portrayed in the film. The worst thing he did in the film, which is absolutely not

acceptable, is to misrepresent the oppression of *devdasis* for commercial exploitation. In making a feature film some license is permissible, provided the basic truth is not distorted, as it is in *Maya*.

The lie certainly seems to have paid dividends to him. The film has been purchased for North American release. It has been invited to the Toronto, Vancouver and London festivals. He has already received funding for his next film project. □

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