

CHOICE AND CHASTITY: QUEST FOR SELF-DISCOVERY IN *ISHTI*

MADHU IRAVANKARA

Abstract: *Ishti* (2015), the directorial debut of Dr. G. Prabha, is the first ever Sanskrit movie to handle a socio-political theme. Smarthavicharamas such figures in it only tangentially; in fact though the stage is set for the spectacular event the accused—both the woman and the man—walk out on the decadent system and express their quest for freedom which is possible only after discovering their own inner selves. The rationale for including the article in this volume is that it vividly and vehemently visualises the Brahminical economic structures and belief systems which necessitated many a custom including chastity trials. The film is yet to have a theatrical release as it is embroiled in a litigation.

Though tradition is an invaluable asset, not rare are the occasions when it turns out to be a burdensome liability. As far as the Namboothiris in Kerala are concerned, there had been a prolonged period during which tradition acted as a crushing drag on their forward journey and attempts to evolve themselves. What helped the community wriggle out of tradition was the untiring efforts jointly put in by a group of youngsters who aspired for freedom and sought to mend their ways. The saga of V.T. Bhattathirippadu, M.R.B. and Premji who transmuted the lineaments and trajectories of this elite people by means of art, literature and social reformation is not so old. The directorial debut of Dr G. Prabha *Ishti*(2015) is one movie which brings this dark age back to our active attention and visually narrativises the Promethean goals realised by the progressive youngsters who ascended the paradise of freedom by leaving ignorance and fossilised customs behind.

It was V.T. Bhattathirippadu's play *Adukkalayilninnum Arangathekku*, premiered in December 1929 as part of the twenty second anniversary of the Yogakhemasabha, that first exposed the rampant evil practices and conventions among Namboothiris in the public

sphere. The streams of radical thought that began therewith, electrified, galvanised and rattled the whole community. What *Ishti* frames and locates is the ensuing r/evolutionary decade of the 1930s. We have come across many literary and cinematic interpretations and representations of this social system and the historic era that changed everything once and for all. Thus even though the thematic repetitiveness somewhat pales its originality, *Ishti* does deserve accolades as an attempt to tell a tale using a language which is outright cinematic and visual.

We have had only handful of movies which speak the ‘language of the gods on earth’ so far. That *Ishti* follows the flow of Sanskrit movies such as G.V. Iyer’s *Adi Sankaracharya* and *Bhagavat Gita* enhances the greatness of this cinematic endeavour. It goes without saying that Sanskrit is an appropriate medium to verbalise a plot like this.

Ishti addresses multiple evil practices which formerly dominated and afflicted the Namboothiri community. Though such practices and customs were interconnected and complementary, what the movie forcefully foregrounds is the practice of old men marrying women much to themselves. Denial of education to girls, pathetic plight of younger brothers in a Namboothiri household and the mechanical memorisation of scriptures etc., are subjected to a compellingly scathing criticism in the movie.

The movie, which begins with the visuals of ritually kindled fire, ends with the search for the same element. When the old Somayajippadu finds out that the sacred fire he had kept burning so long to get his own pyre ablaze has gone out, what collapses is the tradition he has zealously guarded throughout his life like a precious treasure. The aged Brahmin reasons that if the fire is dead, he is dead too. When *Ishti* ends by invoking semantic scepticism and ambiguity regarding when he passed away (or is he dead at all), what the frames signify is the dusk of a long epoch.

Fire is a structural metaphor in the movie. It is light, and symbolises knowledge and gnosis. It is with the kindling of fire that Somayaga, and for that matter any similar ritual, commences. In every stage of the ceremonial rite, fire is of paramount importance. At the end the straw-thatched shed, under which oblations take place, is also consigned to flames. It is a venerable practice to keep this fire burning until it lights the pyre of the master or his wife and the aged priest faithfully sticks to the tradition.

The old Brahmin is elated at having been elevated as a Somayajippadu as he has successfully conducted a Somayagam. When he is about to move to the sanctum attached

to his house one day, a foreign woman, accompanied by a native, arrives to meet him. She is a German researching Yajnas. The priest enters the sanctum and starts performing the rituals of which the native gives the foreigner a running commentary. He describes the ever-burning fire in the room and the priest's wife sitting close to him for certain rituals. At one point she tries to enter the room but is gently blocked as her presence might pollute the holy space. But then she detects a kitten moving about in the room meowing and her words, almost an aside, metamorphose into an indirect dig at the prevailing customs and conventions: "So this place is out of bounds for humans but not for animals, right?" In this sequence, the director has used the narrative technique of indirectly evoking social conventions which are not unknown to us and has bestowed a new dimensions to them.

The old priest, who happens to head their ancestral household, has two wives. Of the two, the first enjoys a ritually superior status. She enjoys the prerogative to remain seated with her husband during holy functions and benedictions. Raman is her son. With an aristocratic, dignified and graceful countenance, she stands in stark contrast with the other wife who is grumpy, disgruntled and tormented by ungratified sexual desires. She has often lustfully watched her husband's younger brother leaving for Sambandahm in the light of a torch. Once she went to the extent of knocking on his door with trembling hands. However, he, not an immoral man, sensed her carnal desire and banged the door on his face.

The economics of aged Brahmins marrying again and again is straight and simple. They justified the string of weddings on the ground that the practice was a pious deed of sorts meant to enrich the family which is facing financial troubles. The priest is preparing himself for a third marriage and naturally his wives and son loathingly disapprove of him. He claims the new alliance is driven by no intention other than boosting the sagging fortunes of the family through the dowry he would receive. The high priest is desperately keeping the family up and running by selling off old cows, and cauldrons and pots in the cellar. These visual frames accentuate the systemic decay and overall decadence that have infected the *Illam*.

It is with unusual visual depth and beauty that the director has shot the old priest's first night with the young Sreedevi. Though enamoured, old age enervates and prevents him from consummating marriage. Sreedevi had great expectations before stepping into the nuptial chamber. She tantalizingly tugs at his tuft and tickles his ear, who lies on her lap like a child. But in no time she realises that nothing can come off the aged man. Thenceforth everything is a cynical joke for her. He is not passionate about either; his only concern was the dowry she would bring along with. Once he gets hold of it, he lightly and causally

forgets her youth and tramples on her emotions. By picturing their first night the director darts a number of piercing questions to the larger society.

Learning of holy scriptures is integral to Namboothiris. The strict and exacting process starts at a tender age. The preceptor recites scriptures and the disciples would repeat the same with impeccable accent, chiselled pronunciation and conspicuous gusto. In this mechanical exercise, the sole focus is on acoustic correctness and clarity. The disciples never grasp the meaning of verses or the contained therein. They are taught neither writing nor reading. Under such a system the Namboothiris were churning out whole bunches of idiots for long. Owing to this, obedience or acquiescence to tradition becomes the norm, and to question it is impossible.

It is within such a framework that the character of Raman is introduced. Though illiterate he is a complete artist whose days are devoted to making Kathkali costumes, wooden crowns, bangles, etc. He is an accomplished mural painter too. What rudely awakens him to his contemptible existence is the ridicule harped on him by a neighbouring girl named Meenakshi. The entry of Sreedevi, who also makes fun of him, worsens his predicament. Later when Sreedevi volunteers to educate him, he is only happy to be her student. He was sad in being unable to read the monthly *Samajikakshemam* which regularly featured progressive ideas and ideals. By attaining literacy, he actualises his long-cherished dream. Though belatedly, he understands that knowledge is light which leads one to emancipation. What emboldens him to quarrel with his father over the evils and superstitions within the community and to leave his natal home is the knowledge which he acquired with the help of his step-mother.

In the past, convention did not permit younger brothers of a Namboothiri household to marry from within their own community. They were free to have Sambandhams with women from other communities. But they were unable to look after such women and their children mainly because they themselves subsisted at the mercy of their eldest brother who exercised absolute control over landed property and other resources. For every single need, these unfortunate men had to depend on the goodwill and kindness of the eldest brother.

Such a younger brother—Narayanan—figures in *Ishti*. His Sambandham, Subhadra, mother of a boy around ten, would wait for him. They used to passionately make love. Once their son caught a fever which deteriorated into delirium. She pleads with Narayanan for some money so that she can avail the help of a physician. Though he initially expresses helplessness, finally he demands money from his elder. The old man, however, turns the

request down and the boy passes away soon. Narayanan, without knowing the tragic news, reaches for Sambandham as usual. Subhara places his mat and pillow on the veranda and closes the door on his face.

Subhadra is willing to provide sexual pleasure to her man despite all other deprivations and destitutions. But when her son is laid up with fever and later dies, she loses her sanity. She flares up and bursts out against Narayanan. The director obliquely hints that her emotional trauma and verbal explosion are aimed at a whole system, not an individual. It is this incident which leads Narayanan to the realisation that it is better to be born as a dog than a younger son in a Namboothiri family.

Narayanan, who stands desolate and defenceless in front of his son's grave, jettisons the useless Brahminhood. He cuts off the traditional tuft using a pair of scissors and burns the holy thread which together symbolise and safeguard one's Brahmin status. He walks off his house with a cloth bundle slung across his shoulder and transforms into a bird that soars up the sky of freedom by flapping its wings! At this moment, he becomes the prototype and harbinger of brewing future storms.

It is a twosome that brings bits of light to the *Illam* from the outer world. One is the little Meenakshi. Spreading light, she flutters in Raman's workshop. Raman discovers himself in her innocent jibes and laughter. Though within limitations, she tries to fill the *Illam* with light which is now immersed in pitch darkness.

The next person to reach the *Illam* as an isle of light is Sreedevi. Though she enters the household only as the third wife of the old man, she is scholarly, a versatile genius capable of understanding things realistically. She is proud and glad of Raman's worshipful dedication to art. Soon her attention falls on the meticulousness with which he carves crowns and makes Kathakali costumes. The charm of his mural paintings captivates her. Unlike the other chambers of the *Illam* which are engulfed in darkness, his room is bright and colourful. The optical configurations of his space are a declaration of freedom by the artist.

It is in the same background that a fantasy of Raman unfolds itself in the form of a reverie. Slightly fatigued and bored, he slips to a stupor and has a dream in which Sreedevi and himself are together, making each other up. Afterwards they perform as Krishnan and Radha with a soothing and mild background score.

What Raman has towards Sreedevi is respect with a tint of adoration. He is sad of and sympathetic to her misfortune. Despite occasional transgressive fantasies, he always reminds himself that she is his father's wife. Sreedevi reciprocates the feeling. She has utmost reverence for Raman being an artist and wants him to be enlightened. The relationship between the two is innocuous and innocent. That precisely is why they are able to take part in the developments in the final sequences of the movie without the sense of guilt, fear and repentance. They are falling prey to the social rigidity and hubris which impute sin onto a pure a bond.

The old Brahmin and both of his wives are dead against educating girls. Once the wives, after finding a crumpled paper on which Sreedevi has scrawled a line, scold her. They loudly and emphatically declare that a woman's world is the kitchen and the dark interiors. "Your husband is 71 and you 17. We have to wait and see how much longer can you remain married", they warn her. Their warning does contain the stark reality that young women who marry old Brahmins out of compulsion have to face the angst of widowhood sooner than later.

Both the wives are jealous and evil at heart. Understandably neither likes Sreedevi. The young Sreedevi deprives them of peaceful sleep as they can easily guess that the old man prefers her to them. At one point of the movie we see these women eavesdrop from an adjacent room the resonating laughter spilling out of the nuptial chamber when Sreedevi tries to awaken her husband. They consider Sreedevi a fiend who has come to steal the fortunes of their wedlock.

One day Raman unknowingly walks into a discussion on marriage carried out by his father and others. On learning that the discussion was about his own marriage, he gets enraged and explodes as the only concern of his father is dowry. Now it is time for Lakshmi, the old man's daughter, to have a suitable marital alliance. The build-up sequence to this decision is pregnant with meaning and speaks volumes of the way in which girls of this community got married. She is standing in front of a looking glass in her father's room, appreciating her own maturing body and newly attained womanhood. The father, who enters the room from behind, does not see her face and thinks it is his wife Sreedevi. He sails close to her with amorous expressions and gestures. Then with a shudder he understands the mistake and realises Lakshmi has come of age.

An old bridegroom (gaunt and feeble with a hoary beard and bulbous nose), along with his retinue, reaches the *Illam* with the formal proposal to marry Lakshmi. Sreedevi whisks her

to a convenient spot from where they can see the future husband. At 73, he is desirous of having Lakshmi as his fourth wife. Raman intervenes and fiercely opposes the proposal. Defying his father he insults the group and sends them out of the house brusquely and unceremoniously. Blind with simmering rage, Raman runs up to his workshop and breaks all the artefacts and suchlike objects showcased there. Sreedevi, who rushes to the scene to pacify him, steps on splotch of paint on the floor and is about to slip down. Raman holds her aloft and prevents the danger. The second wife of the old man, who carefully watches all the meetings and interactions of the two, loses no time in delivering an exaggerated description of the incident to her husband. He is of course shocked. The moral vanguard of the community also arrives promptly. Despite initial resistance and refusal, the old man succumbs and expresses his willingness to do whatever penance is dictated by tradition. They quickly decide to charge Raman with incest and subject Sreedevi to Smarthavichara. Raman outright rejects the demand for a ritualistic atonement as he feels no wrong has been committed. The old priest expels him from the house. To everyone's consternation Sreedevi also leaves the house on his heels, only after unleashing a blistering verbal assault on the illogical customs and beliefs which have wreaked havoc to individual lives and on the social standing of the entire community. Walking to the outer world she throws away the customary palm-leaf umbrella, abandons the chest cloth and unties her long hair. It is through the perspective of Lakshmi, standing on the grilled upper floor of the *Illam*, that the audience watch Raman and soon afterwards Sreedevi leaving the old ancestral home. Both declarations of freedom augur well for Lakshmi's future.

Ishti is the search for one's inner self. In the movie every character is in search of themselves. The old priest, his brother Narayanan, son Raman and young wife Sreedevi are absorbed in and propelled by the pursuit of searching and finding their own selves. The quest of the old priest runs into an impasse created by the uncertainty enmeshing the moment of his demise. Narayanan embarks on an uncertain journey by forsaking the insignia and shackles of Brahminhood. By choosing to tread the pathways leading to freedom, Raman and Sreedevi eventually re/discover themselves.

The movie, in short, is a milestone event because of its sensitive theme, bold treatment and brilliant visuals.

Contributor:

MADHU IRAVANKARA is former Professor of Chemistry at Catholicate College, Pathanamthitta, and a film-maker.

Translators:

ANOOPA C.R. and **DEEPTHI T. DIVAKARAN**, are Assistant Professors of English, Maharaja's College, Ernakulam