

The story and the tragedy of the school in our Dalit village, Palaguttapalle, (Vallivedu Post in Chittoor District), in the interiors of Southern Andhra Pradesh, is typical of most rural schools. I have lived here for the past 8 years. I studied computer engineering and had been working in the industry for three years when I decided to resign and search for a more relevant engagement. I spent a year with the Narmada movement and then decided to base myself in a village with a long-term focus, based on a Gandhian perspective of village work. My husband and I did not want to work as an NGO—so we do what we can in our personal capacity, as members of the local community.

Becoming Part of Village Life

We bought five acres of land and have been doing some organic farming. But we keep part of the land inorganic, to keep it from being a loss-making venture. We have taken up afforestation in the adjoining forest under the JFM (Joint Forest Management) scheme with the local Dalit community. We work with the people on local issues, like desilting of tanks or cleaning supply channels to tanks. We are trying to address the growing water crises through various government schemes to improve recharge and through the experimental cultivation of low-water crops in our lands. We feel that if we manage a successful cropping model, then the people will adopt it. Apart from this, we also keep ayurvedic medicines at home, and some of the villagers come to take them from us. We also note and practise their local remedies. We had wished to live within the income that we could earn locally, but as this was not practical, we have had to take up some other projects on and off in order to supplement our income.

Much at Stake

We have been involved with the local schools—teaching there some

A Cure Worse than the Disease **A Report on Rural Schools in India**

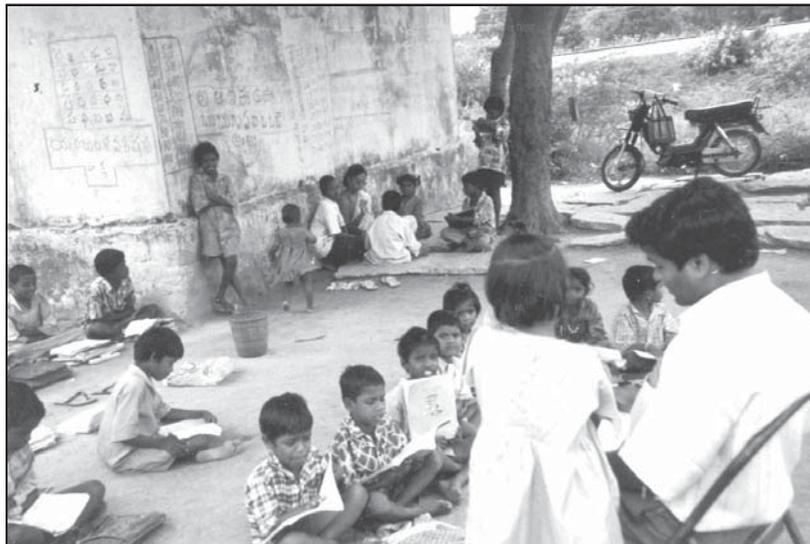
○ Aparna Krishnan

of the time and also working with the teachers in setting up libraries, and so on. Our five-year-old daughter is also attending the local *balwadi*. She joined the village primary school this year because we feel that we need to have a stake in the system we are working with. The village children come home in the evenings to study and play with the books and games that we have collected for them. My husband, daughter, and I live in the Dalit hamlet or the Dalitwada in the village.

The village Panchayat has three government primary schools—one in the Dalitwada (the Dalit section) and one each in the two other caste hamlets. However, with migration under drought conditions and everyone who can afford putting their children into the ‘private schools,’ the schools have dwindling numbers. The

Dalitwada school today has ten children and one teacher. This low figure is due to migration, because all the children in the Dalitwada are enrolled in this school. The school in the Reddy hamlet has 25 children and one teacher. Half the children from that school have moved to private schools. The third school has five children and two teachers! It is a vicious circle, which will eventually lead to the Government schools closing down and the Government giving up what little educational responsibility it takes today.

Although this is the situation, my daughter loves the school! We are a small community of 50 families. So the children play and go to school as a community and seem happy. There is not much learning and consequently no mental stress! There is no creative input either—but the kids somehow



A class in progress at our village primary school

do not seem bored. They sit and teach each other *rangoli* patterns on their slates, or engage themselves otherwise.

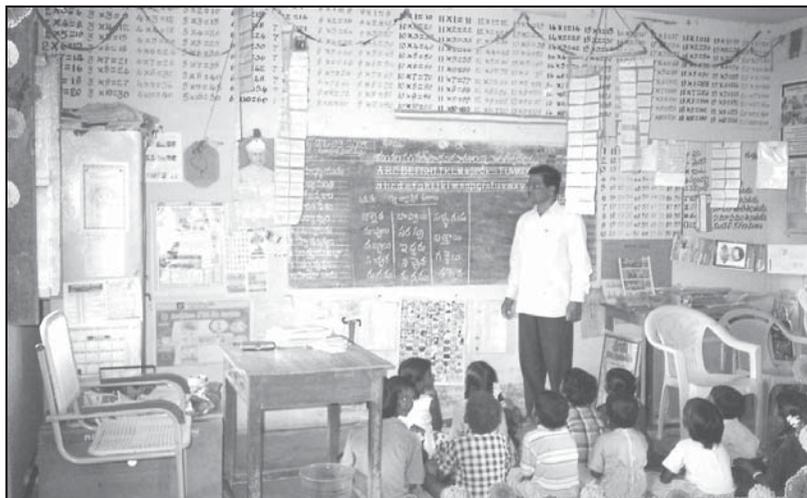
Caning/Yanking the Norm

This is a one-room school at the corner of the village, with one single teacher for five classes. The teachers usually change every year and are generally totally unconcerned with teaching. Caning and yanking by the hair are standard practices—so much so that I have also stopped protesting about it.

As my daughter is better taught than the others, she is not hit but she has had a couple of gentle whacks. The current teacher, though he hits, is not as brutal as some of the others have been. He hits as a matter of policy and belief. And though it hurts the kids at that point in time, it does not seem to do them much damage. In this community hitting is accepted within limits. Parents hit children; husbands sometimes hit wives... So over the years, I have come to regard the hitting as a smaller issue, though I still wince when a child is hit. The schooling has done much more harm to the child than the corporal punishment part.

Copying is Rampant

In the rare and best cases, the teacher teaches for a small part of the day, but with no eye on the progress of the students. Pedagogy, as developed by various government departments, is of least interest to them. After five years of schooling, a few children still stumble on the alphabets while others have some basic reading skills. A bright child somehow learns, but an average child is labelled dull and is humiliated for no fault of his or her own. The system of examinations and detentions is not there till the sixth standard, and there is no other viable system of assessing the students. As they proceed through middle school, they are quite incapable of understanding the



The village one-room school

subjects. But given this scenario, ways to complete the process of schooling through various fraudulent means are quite systematised. The teachers and invigilators encourage cheating and hand out pieces of paper with the answers written on them. Thus the system aids and abets the children in their attempt to pass the examinations through various improper means.

Teachers Help in Cheating

Yet, the primary school children in this village remain bright and interested. I feel that their natural curiosity stays alive, as it is a school where nothing goes on. So it is not able to do any such damage as actually a lot of city schools that overload the children do, though it does them little good and wastes their time.

Additionally, there are naturally other avenues for learning and exploring in a village, which keeps them mentally alert. That is what I surmise—because to an outsider's eye the school is mind-deadening, but that doesn't seem to affect the children. There are about an equal number of girls and boys—our school has five girls and five boys. They attend 8 hours of school a day. Yet, by class five, most are neither fluent in reading nor competent to handle

basic mathematics. Since the internal evaluation tests are simply an exercise in copying, all students complete primary schooling and pass on to the next school four kilometres away. Except for the very rare cases they all continue till class ten.

After class five, they go to high school—without a basic foundation. There they are introduced to English textbooks, which are the same that the children in English medium schools study. They are now completely lost. But they work hard and mug what they can. The public exams of classes seven and ten, which till five years ago maintained some standard, have also become an eyewash. The system completely 'co-operates' in the examination hall—and the children all pass.

Teachers Averse to Teaching

Over the years, schooling has deteriorated alarmingly. The children who passed out some 10 years ago remember committed teachers in their primary school. In the last 8 years, only for a total span of two years have the three incumbents taught. At present, we have a better teacher, but in the last few years so much non-academic load has been put on the teachers that much of their day goes in making various kinds of charts and tables about village data, census and

such like. The odd teacher who wishes to teach gets diverted into filling forms, but even beyond that most of them waste time reading newspapers, etc. With the previous teachers, one could only fume or complain—they would either make the children shout out the tables through the day while they went out for walks or smokes, or simply would not come to school. When inside the classroom, they would beat the children for not knowing what they had not been taught.

A Disabling System

This schooling system only disables the children. Children join school, bright and motivated. The parents of this Dalit hamlet make sure that every child is enrolled, and they send the children scrubbed and shining to school on time every day. The girl child works double—she helps with the cleaning and cooking in the morning, then goes to school, and in the evenings, after returning home, does the housework and then her homework. In spite of a disabling situation—undernourishment and poverty, illiterate parents, unconcerned teachers—many have made it past class ten, and even till graduation. The Dalit hamlet of this Panchayat has the maximum number of graduates! The products of this schooling system are predictably unemployed. They are a disillusioned, frustrated community, pushed back into the uncertainty of an agricultural labour force paid well below the minimum wages. Over the years in school, besides a functional Telugu literacy, what they have learnt is to imbibe the bias that considers manual labour inferior to all other forms of labour. Also, after spending the years of youth under a school roof, away from the rigours of sun and toil, they find it difficult to do this hard work—but that is all there is for them. Their prime years went into the schooling process, and they are finally left

nowhere. In a few odd cases, the unusually bright ones make it to some clerical post. But that is only one in ten. The nine others are wasted.

But where is the root of the problem? Is it because of an ineffective delivery system? Or is this tragedy due to the structural faults in the system—the modern schooling system itself?

Understanding this is important, given the fact that it is completely failing the community, that every shade of political opinion aims at ‘universalising’ this formal schooling, and also that the public has completely accepted the need to be schooled.

Purposeless Schooling

The fundamental purpose of education may be ‘widening horizons,’ and ‘developing better, more sensitive and more responsible human beings’ and this may be realised in a few progressive schools, which begin with a vision for society, and where the commitment of teachers to social concerns is high,

but the middle class, especially the lower middle and the poor, acquire education mainly in the hope of a secure livelihood. Even most of the upper class opts for a school which primarily promotes the career prospects of its students, rather than one that widens their outlook and sensitivity.

To expect government schools to become centres of growth that look at education in its entirety will need a fundamental rethinking of social goals and objectives and re-aligning of priorities accordingly. Until then, at best, the government schools may provide enough learning to improve employment opportunities. And in this hope, children spend 16 years inside a mostly non-functional classroom, thus remaining unschooled in their traditional livelihood skills.

Even with this limited expectation of schooling, the poor are damned from the start. The odds are against them. Besides poverty, they face the disadvantages of being first

Results of School Education at a Glance

**Palaguttapalle Dalitwada, Vallivedu Post,
Chittoor Dist, Andhra Pradesh**

(As on May 2005)

Total number of youth/high school students.....	54
Those who dropped out in middle school and are good farmhands	4
Those who got government jobs.....	2
Those who got some small clerical jobs in town (including those who will join this group after their degree).....	4
Educated unemployed, including those incapable/unwilling to do hard physical work in the fields.....	44
(also including those who are clearly in the process of belonging to this group after a year!)	

Summary!

Those who passed middle school	54
Those who dropped out and entered the labour force.....	4
Of the remaining—	
Those who got clerical jobs, and.....	6
Those who are neither in desk jobs, nor are good farmhands	44

generation learners, of being taught in the vernacular language, and of being subject to apathetic teaching. After completing their initial schooling they encounter a debilitating language shift for higher education and often find the urban employment system relegating them to the lowest jobs in the organised sector, if they at all make it that far.

Then why do parents choose to send their children to schools when these children might learn a traditional family occupation as the source of their future livelihood? The sad truth is that rural India is getting defunct. The agricultural sector is stagnant and sinking. The rural industries of weaving, pottery, and stonework are becoming obsolete. There is hopelessness in the village. With darkness at the end of the tunnel, they put their hopes on the school and laboriously and painfully work their way through it.

But they end up realising that even the education they get leads them to a dead end and they end up simply joining the ranks of the unemployed educated. There is no employment for these children through these schools—we have a generation in shambles in our village to prove it. And this is a story repeated in each village where the public has responded with eagerness to schooling.

The emperor has no clothes. Did it require wasted generations—fit neither for their traditional work, nor given entry into any other—to realise that there is no employment or newer opportunities for all those children who are going to ‘compulsorily school.’?

Farce of Free Schooling

Where does this leave us? And, will drastic improvement of the system work?

Free and compulsory schooling may sound like we are giving equal opportunity to all. But first the



After schooling, they find it difficult to do this kind of hard manual work

schools have to be of equal quality for all.

There is a heaven-and-hell difference between the schools for the haves and the have-nots. The CSS (Common Schooling System) first recommended 40 years ago by the Kothari Commission on Education (1964-66) and subsequently supported by the National Education Policies of 1986 and 1992 has remained a dead letter for almost half a century. The rationale of CSS is self-evident: To provide education of equitable quality to all children and end the canalisation of children into private, government-aided or government-run schools on the basis of parental ability to pay and social status.

In the village itself, over the past five years, two ‘private English medium schools’ have come up within a radius of five kilometres. These are of questionable quality but those who are able to somehow pay their fee of Rs.100 a month send their children there. These schools do not have qualified teachers and are not particularly good, but they are still better than the government schools. Also, the fact that they are English medium schools is important for the

parents. The children cannot speak English or read an English storybook, but the text in the books is explained to them, and they have some limited vocabulary. The second school, which opened this year and is run by some Keralites, seems to be of a better standard.

Harijanwada is too poor, and so all its children still attend the Government school. But in the upper caste hamlet—which actually consists of only marginal and small farmers, everyone who can somehow manage it has enrolled their child in these private schools, and only the poorest there send their children to the Government school. The Government school teachers have scant respect for, and no sense of accountability toward, these remaining and very poor parents. And therefore the standard of these schools has sunk further.

The Missing Links

But even against this overwhelming trend, let us assume that the CSS happens and that the quality of schooling drastically improves. Once everyone is ‘schooled’ till the age of 15 years, are they all going to get absorbed out of the primary sector into ‘better’ jobs?

So, we have to do the important homework of clearly working out employment possibilities in various sectors for the youth and to tell the people clearly and honestly if schooling is going to bring them jobs.

Formal schooling prepares them, at best, for salaried jobs that are primarily of a clerical nature. These cannot exceed a certain limit because a large segment of the population would be needed outside those jobs, in the primary and secondary sectors of the economy, which incidentally also happen to be the source of generating income from which salaries are paid. Hence, there is a practical restraint on the number of people who can be 'benefited' by the present education system. It could be argued that economic liberalisation programmes are creating more job opportunities, but the number of people receiving education and going without a job is growing at a faster rate. It is only the dream of getting one of a very small number of high-salaried and coveted jobs that has sustained the view that education opens up more job opportunities. If we consider the hard reality, the education system today makes many more people jobless than it is able to provide jobs. (Sandeep Pandey, 1991)

Schooling for Unemployment

As it stands, the formal schools cannot prepare all but only a minuscule proportion of these children for actual employment opportunities and that means the schools can be of no use to them. The poorer communities educate in the hope of a better life. The poorest parents invest much in schooling their children and at the end have a set of dissatisfied, unemployable youth. But if I say dilute schooling, the anti-poor forces can jump at that and wash their hands off even this social responsibility. But for that reason, we cannot refuse to face the worth/worthlessness of the schooling system as it now exists.

The school in its present version is just a waste of time. Also, it distracts attention, as so much resource gets invested in 'universalising' this education as a supposed panacea for the people's poverty and supposed backwardness. Instead, if schooling is specifically oriented towards viable career options for all, then they have a meaning. Intense energies need to go into really strengthening and empowering the poor—and giving them some worthless tenth standard certificates is not doing that.

Lowering Already Low Standards

Unless it is able to design itself such that it gives viable employment opportunities to the children, why waste all their time? If the schooling system as it exists is a flawed structure in itself, will that be the end of 'rigorous schooling'? The World Bank is a player with scant regard for the underprivileged, and it has primarily pressured the Government to reduce its role in the crucial education sector and is therefore responsible for the winding up of various health and education programmes that supported the economically and socially weaker sections of society in years past. At the World Bank Conference on 'Education for All' (EFA) held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, developing countries were pressured to go in for cheaper alternatives to education, such as literacy drives and non-formal education. This was accompanied by a dilution of what was considered to be the acceptable minimum level of schooling. Instead of elementary education, Governments were encouraged to provide five years of primary education, the rationale being that eight years of universal free elementary schooling was too much for a developing economy to promise its people. Poor countries were pushed to opt for adult literacy and non-formal education, minimum levels of learning and multi-grade teaching

with fewer teachers. Despite all that, the World Bank expresses an interest in improving literacy levels in the country and has made its recommendations. These have largely been followed. But experts have been drawing attention to the negative changes that have been introduced on the advice of the World Bank.

These World Bank innovations—cheap alternatives to universal elementary schooling—perpetuated socio-economic divisions in society. Under pressure from the World Bank, the Government is now moving away from earlier commitments that it had made on education. In the National Policy on Education 1992, the Government committed itself to providing three teachers per primary school. But, under the World Bank sponsored DPEP, an "innovative scheme" of multi-grade teaching was introduced. This allows a single teacher to handle five classes simultaneously.

Anil Sadgopal, a professor of Education at Delhi University and an activist in the cause of elementary education, has drawn attention to the dilution of the Government's commitment in recent years on several well-established norms. For instance, the teacher to pupil ratio of 1:30 has been raised to 1:40; the Operation Blackboard norm of three teachers and three classrooms for every primary school has been reduced to two teachers and two classrooms; the cost of educating a disabled child in an inclusive classroom has been reduced from Rs.3000 (US \$67.88) a year to Rs.1200 a year.

WB Innovations Anti-poor

In the article "Education for Too Few" in the news magazine *Frontline*, Sadgopal writes: "The Government decided to replace the regular formal schools with low-quality, low-budget parallel streams of primary education for the educationally deprived children, two-thirds of whom are girls.

This policy stance is apparently the result of the Structural Adjustment Program of the International Monetary Fund-World Bank, which imposes drastic cuts in expenditures on education, health and other social welfare sectors as a condition for the grant of additional loans or aid.” He argues that the adoption of various World Bank innovations, such as introduction of parallel systems of education and the replacement of the regular teacher with “a para-teacher who is an under-qualified, untrained and underpaid local youth appointed on the basis of a short-term contract,” is “tantamount to institutionalising discrimination against the poor, a majority of whom would be Dalits [the oppressed castes], the tribal people and religious or cultural minorities, two-thirds of each segment being girls. Most of the disabled children will also fall in this category earmarked for discrimination.”

In the essay, “Globalisation and the Political Economy of Education,” which appeared in a non-governmental organisation report entitled *Children in Globalising India: Challenging Our Conscience*, Sadgopal points out that it was pressure from the World Bank that forced the Government to reduce the tenure of elementary education from eight to five years. And this has been further reduced to three years under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programme—the Literacy Mission, Education Guarantee Scheme [EGS] and District Primary Education Program [DPEP], which have been merged under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan). These are recommendations, coming out of a total lack of concern for the poor. There is an attempt to dilute the quality of ‘schooling’ for the poor, with no concomitant plan on what other better avenues are to be built up for them. The overarching context of these current literacy drives is the Structural Adjustment Programme,



The curriculum should be oriented towards giving them livelihood skills

which aims to plug the Indian economy firmly into the world capitalist system.

Literacy is not Education

Critics of the World Bank’s role in education have drawn attention to the fact that it is interested in literacy, not education. A bureaucrat involved in a World Bank-funded project told *Asia Times Online* that the total literacy campaign appears to be an exercise in numbers, in trying to get children to enrol in schools rather than an effort to empower them through education.

In a country like India where so many people live in abysmal poverty, tackling illiteracy requires a multi-pronged approach to eliminating poverty—something in which the World Bank does not appear to be interested. Given that simple fact, dependence on the World Bank for funding the education sector seems foolish. In the absence of initiatives to redistribute land, to ensure better prices for farmers’ produce, and to reform the wage structure, we cannot expect to make a dent in poverty. But the World Bank, on one hand is pushing various countries in the direction of destroying all their traditional livelihoods and is then recommending that school skills also be diluted. The grim fact that we need

to face is that schooling as it stands is a hoax on people, and, therefore, to mindlessly expand it and to make it compulsory is to turn a farce into a tragedy.

Need for a Basic Rethink

But if not this schooling, then what? And here we may need to do a very fundamental rethinking while looking at the very purpose of education and of schooling. Schooling and education has to fit into a larger social vision and paradigm and concern about where these children are to be at the end of the day. Maybe we will also reach a conclusion supportive of far less schooling, as we know it, but far more of life-enhancing skills, to be actively learnt in or out of school.

There was a time when education had meant a move towards freedom and building social relationships; now it has come to mean the one and only route to respectable jobs. Over the past two or three decades people have become very aware of the need to educate their children. This is because white-collar jobs and ‘education’ have been irrevocably linked. But most schooled people get no jobs, and are ‘nowhere’ people. So my objection is to the schooling system itself. Even if it were made more efficient as a

system, it leaves most of those who pass through it, as 'nowhere people' and for that takes up the best years of their life. But it is not a question of reconciling them to labour in the field. It is a question of giving them a financially viable, honourable livelihood and the 16 years in school seem to fail them completely. However, the curriculum, if it can be oriented towards giving them livelihood skills, can have a meaning. But that will need to be addressed very fundamentally and creatively and in conjunction with a larger pro-poor economic vision of the nation.

When I first came to the village, I came brimming with ideas on how schooling needs to incorporate the existing skills of the village community along with the 3Rs, so that children develop equal respect towards their traditional occupation and knowledge systems. But what I see now is that education, for that matter any educational practice or policy, cannot stand independent of the larger economic and social world. The economic policy of the day leaves little money in their traditional knowledge skills. And until that changes, their skills will be worthless in their own eyes. I feel that if economic worth is found in those occupations, they will automatically be respected by the practitioners and taken up by the next generation. In the meantime the school can, in a focused and limited period, teach them the 3Rs and give them a view of the larger world. The role of the school is limited in this socio-economic world, except for the two or three out of fifty who climb out into the world of clerkdom. But it is not so black-and-white. One in ten children manage to get a job, and that child has to be addressed as well.

Enough work has been done on primary school pedagogy and much

material is available in Telugu. The DIET itself has done good work on the subject, as have individuals. But better teaching methods need more teacher involvement and energy, and the teachers are, most of the time, unwilling to exert themselves beyond making the children copy down what they have written on the blackboard.

At the end of the day, I still continue to teach the children in the Dalitwada through the evenings, encouraging them to write their tenth

class exams, to learn English—simply because the rural economy is dying. Also, it has become mandatory to pass the tenth class to avail many facilities like loans, etcetera. That is the logic we are using on Surendra now, a reasonably bright boy in Dalitwada who simply does not want to continue beyond class eight! But knowing that this schooling is also going to take most of them nowhere... what does one tell them? □

FILM REVIEW

Devrai

○ Aparna Pallavi

He is your brother. And he is very sick—mentally. You would like to take care of him, but his presence in your house is irritating your husband. And you are a woman, after all ...

He was your lover. When his family found out, they unceremoniously threw you out. You were married to someone else, widowed, and for years you struggled, fought with yourself—to forget, to construct a life for yourself. And now his family wants you to give it all up, to take up the role of a caretaker for your one-time lover, now a schizophrenic. And you are supposed to say 'yes' with a smile!

The recently released Marathi film *Devrai*, is a splendid, intense drama about schizophrenia, with its personal, familial and social ramifications, and the bitter struggles involved in coming to terms with this strange illness and overcoming it.

But viewed from a gender point of view, the film delivers a disturbing, highly masochistic message for

women. When there is a schizophrenic in the family, who is responsible for his care? Must every dysfunctional male be provided with a wife-cum-caretaker? Is a woman's willing 'sacrifice' of her own life a must to reclaim a man lost to mental illness?

Shesh (Atul Kulkarni) is a sensitive and brilliant young man from a village, and his mission in life is to undertake research on the *devrai*, or sacred grove, with which he is deeply connected since his childhood.

But somewhere along the line things start going wrong with his academic plans. And over a period of some years, Shesh eventually succumbs to the strain and becomes a full-fledged schizophrenic.

Shesh's sister Sina (Sonali Kulkarni), who is a housewife and married to a scientist, brings him to Pune and gets him treated. But solutions do not come easy in the convoluted world of mental illness. The entire film revolves around the

quagmire of Shesh's mental landscape and Sina's and his own efforts to get better.

The way the disjointed mental landscape of a schizoid genius has been treated in the film is a genuine cinematic landmark. The central character's fluctuation between the external world and his own tortured subjective reality is fleshed out through the careful blending of images of virgin sacred groves and slick urban interiors. Particularly intense are the moments when the borders between the two fuse in the character's mind. For instance, in one scene Shesh is sitting on his hospital cot, surrounded by the lush grove, his feet buried in the rustling dry leaves, when hospital attendants leap out of the greenery at him. In another scene, Shesh has locked himself in a toilet. When he opens the door and peeps out, he sees his (to him) terrible brother-in-law passing through the grove, and hastily closes the door again.

Atul Kulkarni's rendition of this character is multilayered and the trauma of recognition and acceptance and the painful journey to recovery is also portrayed with unparalleled sensitivity through the character of Sina. Sonali has done a great job portraying a hassled woman trapped between the competing needs of a small child, a suffering brother, a husband who is destructively irritated at being 'put upon'. Particularly poignant is the struggle of this character to decipher the strange stories—part reality, part fiction, part sensitive but convoluted perception—that her brother tells her. At one point, when he tells her that Parvati, a servant of the family, has been murdered by her husband, she rushes to the psychiatrist and then feels foolish when he suggests that she check out the facts for herself.



The conflict within the family—complicated further because of Sina's financial dependence on her husband and consequent inability to take decisions with conviction, is played out with subtle but effective strokes.

But despite this excellent treatment of its central theme, the film has one flaw, and a deep one at that. In the playing out of gender equations that are inevitably tangled in such a situation, the film falls back, rather helplessly, on a bizarre version of the conventional role of nurturing expected of women.

Sina, though willing to take care of her brother and help in his recovery, is trapped between his needs and those of a husband who is willing to 'understand', but cannot stand a mentally ill brother-in-law in his own house. When he tells her 'politely but firmly' that the brother must be sent back to the village home, she succumbs without a murmur.

And she digs up Kalyani (Devika Daftardar), Shesh's first cousin, his one time lover and now a lonely working widow, who must give up the life that she has constructed for herself so painstakingly, take up Shesh's 'responsibility' (whatever that means) and return to the village with him.

The film makes a strong case of the fact that Kalyani 'ought to' accept this 'responsibility', because Shesh 'needs' her—and in the process, it delivers a complex combination of social messages based on the expectation from women that they sacrifice their own needs and freedom for the well-being of their lovers and husbands.

The idea is, Shesh the dysfunctional male 'needs' and hence also deserves a female caretaker. And since Sina 'cannot' deliver because she is tied up by the rival 'needs' of husband and son, Kalyani, childless and 'manless', and so conveniently 'spare', must step in and take the job off Shesh's family.

While the film does make Kalyani mouth a weak protest, it fails to provide any basis for her final 'choice' to do Sina's bidding except for her own desperate loneliness. And the serious implications of this choice for her own life—there are significant romantic and conjugal overtones to the 'caretaker' role—are also conveniently glossed over.

Smaller instances of a sexist perception of mental illness are also strewn all over the film. For instance, at the day-care centre where Shesh undergoes rehabilitation, there is not a single female patient. Sina is singled out for a lecture on the need for patience and perseverance while her husband's insistence that Shesh must be sent back to the village, away from his own personal space, is not questioned. One might argue that these touches reflect the sexist bias prevalent in society, but within the framework of the film, they are not perceived as such.

Devrai, as a whole, adds up to a great artistic experience and a very perceptive and insightful film on mental illness, but the sexist bias in the film is too prominent to be ignored. □