

Film Review

Movie: Anandi Gopal, Director: Sameer Vidwans, Writer: Karan Shrikant Sharma. Stars: Bhagyashree Milind, Lalit Prabhakar, Geetanjali Kulkarni, Producers: Zee Studios, Kishor Arora, Shareen Mantri Kedia, Akash Chawla, Arunawa Joy Sengupta. Duration: 134 minutes, Release date: February 2019.

This biopic in Marathi is the story of Anandibai Gopal Joshi who was India's first woman doctor. Anandibai had a meteoric life after getting a medical degree from the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, USA, in 1886. She returned to India in March 1886. She was feted on her return, in sharp contrast to the aggressive orthodoxy that had earlier made her and her family move to Calcutta (presently Kolkata) to advance her education. When she returned, she had already contracted tuberculosis and died of the disease in 1887. She was just short of her 22nd birthday (born 31 March 1865 and died 26 February 1887).

The film is on the life of Anandibai. Her evolution from a playful child-bride to a resolute young woman is beautifully brought out. The film makes us experience the life of the protagonist in her historical period. Almost as important a role in the movie is that of her husband Gopal Rao Joshi. Gopal Rao was a postal clerk, a widower and 20 years older when he married Anandibai who was only 9 years old at that time. A strong protagonist of women's education, Gopal Rao's condition for marrying Anandi was that she would continue to pursue her studies. Anandi obediently tried to fulfil this condition. The film is full of episodes of Gopal forcing the child Anandibai to study while she prefers to spend her time in housework and play, as would be expected of a child bride of her age. The element of coercion in Gopal Rao's efforts to 'emancipate' Anandibai is overwhelming in the film and includes beating her when she does not obey. Gopal Rao's mother-in-law from his first marriage cooperates to the best of her abilities, though one can see her obvious discomfort, both in the context of Anandibai studying without doing the expected household activities and at the excessive coercion she has to undergo.

However, when Anandibai loses her newborn child because of lack of timely medical intervention, we see a determined woman, keen to take up medicine, especially as many women refused to get themselves examined by a male doctor. As medical education for women was even more difficult than other forms of higher education, this required an additional effort.

Gopal Rao, though a postal clerk, reads English literature and tries his best to get Anandi formal education, and motivates her to learn English, a vehicle for higher education. Somehow, Gopal manages to get Anandibai admitted in the Missionary School for Girls in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. Anandi is the only Indian girl and is humiliated by her 'white' classmates. She is even made to sit on the floor. Besides, Hindu Brahminical orthodoxy are up in arms against women's education. The couple is socially ostracized, and there are disturbing scenes of how a group

threatens and humiliates the family. Gopal Rao gets himself transferred to Calcutta where he approaches a missionary to send Anandi to the USA. In the mid-19th century, North America was the only place encouraging women's medical education, unlike many other countries, which thought women were not physically fit enough to take up the profession. The couple is however asked to embrace Christianity. While Gopal is ready to change his religion and call himself Albert and change Anandi's name to Victoria, Anandi is not so submissive. She boldly refuses by saying that she cannot accept the country which does not accept her religion. She finally sails to the USA and is admitted to the Women's Medical School, Pennsylvania. She finishes her degree course in medicine. However, she is racked by tuberculosis. Anandibai returns, only to die soon after, leaving behind her story as inspiration.

What is fascinating about the film is its inspirational message. It brings out the stirrings of modern India and the tensions between modernity and orthodoxy in the mid-19th century. There are situations that we can all relate to. There are disturbing themes. The most edifying character is that of Anandibai herself, her steadfastness once she herself is convinced about her goal. Gopal Rao is more complex. How does one judge the coercion, tending to cruelty, in a person whose ultimate aim is women's emancipation through better education? Without his support, it is impossible that Anandibai would have even perceived her goal, let alone realize it. However, does a 'larger goal' justify this behaviour? The movie also brings out the many faces of hypocrisy—racism in a missionary school—and aggressive orthodoxy in the social elite. Many of us had similar mixed feelings when watching the movie 'Dangal', where the father pushes his daughters to wrestling excellence in an overtly man-dominated contemporary society, sometimes appearing to be cruel (only to be kind?).

To a lay person, the depiction of the time period shown in the film seems generally authentic. However, there is a scene where Anandibai, when in college in Calcutta, is discussing the 'unfolded protein response' (UPR). The UPR emerged in our academic consciousness barely a decade or two ago. In the mid-19th century, the question on UPR would have anticipated the biology of the future by over a century!

The film keeps the viewer involved. The English subtitles along with snippets of Marathi that one can understand are enough to keep us engrossed. It is inspirational and also disturbing at times—just like life itself. I recommend it for viewing by those involved directly or indirectly in medicine who will find aspects linked to their experience. Though a woman-centred film, all sexes will find something to think about and reflect on.

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