

A Metaphorical Touch of Sai Paranjape's 'Sparsh'

Dr. Pallav Mukhopadhyay,

Assistant Professor,

Department of Journalism & Mass Communication,

West Bengal State University

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Abstract

On the basis of the real life incident of Ajay Mittal, the film has been able to break the stereotype image of the blind characters and by Naseeruddin Shah Sai has a trusted and malleable actor to realize and implement her vision successfully. The Hindi feature film 'Sparsh' (Touch) (1980) directed by Sai Paranjape stars Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi playing the characters of a visually impaired principal and a sighted teacher of a blind school where both of them fall in love. Though their complexes create a hindrance between their mutual relationships, they try to reconnect and renew through the 'touch' of love. The film remains most memorable for the subtle acting of its lead duo besides the tackling of the issue of relationships with the visually handicapped, exhibiting the emotional and perceptual division between the worlds of the 'blind' and the 'sighted', portrayed by the characters. The National Film Award for Best Hindi Feature Film went to 'Sparsh'. 'Sparsh' won various awards. Naseeruddin Shah won the National Award for Best Actor for his acting in this film. 'Sparsh' is about the existence and emotion of the Principal and the Children of a Blind School. 'Sparsh' has upheld the emotion, sensation and feeling of touch upon which blind people trust in the absence of sight. 'Sparsh' directed by Sai Paranjape is one rare narrative love story which a large section of Film Critics does not think anyone has attempted in Hindi film. This exceptional narrative adds a soft emotional dimension to the entire influence of the film. The film has been presented in a realistic manner with less use of highly dramatic and mainstream methods of filmmaking. The viewers therefore can feel the pain of those handicapped persons. Viewers while viewing the blind students might feel pity and sympathy but

the film possesses a considerable portion of dialogues and scenes where these feelings of the viewers are sidelined by the dominance of self-confidence and self-reliance. Here, the love story set in emotional surroundings applies metaphors to describe the depth sidelining the normal life love story where the beauty is judged by eyes. Despite the unique touch orchestrated by this film, 'Sparsh' has become a classic film. In fact, 'Sparsh' is a touching film made with touching vision. Sai Paranjape's realistic vision to tell this beautiful and realistic narrative is admirable because her journey was not through any commercial way. She has kept the essence and realism alive which is worth watching. After all, to be precise, 'Sparsh' is a fantastic film. This film is an example of real cinematic art form. It also has an authentic flavour of Indian film culture. This is pure and really heartfelt. The film has exhibited the touch that has been realized by the touch of celluloid, the touch of the Director and Actors and Actresses. 'Sparsh' (Touch) has shown us that human beings are ready to touch and be touched.

Keywords

Metaphorical, Touch, Introspection, Life, Inspiration, Sai Paranjape, 'Sparsh' (Touch).

Contribution/Originality: Sai Paranjape's significant film 'Sparsh' (Touch) has appeared to be a milestone that has addressed the normal/abnormal binary. Breaking the stereotypes created by film and society where blind people are often presented as objects of pity, Sai has created a domain where the blind protagonist reflects his self-esteem and suffers from the same emotional problems as any sighted person.

Introduction

Sai Paranjape's significant film 'Sparsh' (Touch) has appeared to be a milestone that has addressed the normal/abnormal binary. Breaking the stereotypes created by film and society where blind people are often presented as objects of pity, Sai has created a domain where the blind protagonist reflects his self-esteem and suffers from the same emotional problems as any sighted person has. On the basis of the real life incident of Ajay Mittal, the film has been able to break the stereotype image of the blind characters and by Naseeruddin Shah Sai has a trusted and malleable actor to realize and implement her vision successfully.

The Hindi feature film ‘Sparsh’ (Touch) (1980) directed by Sai Paranjape stars Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi playing the characters of a visually impaired Principal and a sighted Teacher of a Blind School where both of them fall in love. Though their complexes create a hindrance between their mutual relationships, they try to reconnect and renew through the ‘touch’ of love. The film remains most memorable for the subtle acting of its lead duo besides the tackling of the issue of relationships with the visually handicapped, exhibiting the emotional and perceptual division between the worlds of the ‘blind’ and the ‘sighted’, portrayed by the characters.^{1,2} The National Film Award for Best Hindi Feature Film went to ‘Sparsh’.³

‘Sparsh’ won various awards. Naseeruddin Shah won the National Award for Best Actor for his acting in this film. The National Award for Best Screenplay was won by Director Sai Paranjape for this film. At the Filmfare Awards, it won the top two that are of Film and Filmfare Award for Best Director and a Best Dialogue Award for Sai Paranjape. Besides, Shabana Azmi was nominated for Best Actress. ‘Sparsh’ is about the existence and emotion of the Principal and the Children of a Blind School. Sparsh’ has upheld the emotion, sensation and feeling of touch upon which blind people trust in the absence of sight.

The Narrative

The film begins with Anirudh Parmar (Naseeruddin Shah) as the Principal of Navjivan Anhvidyalay, a Blind School that teaches and takes care of the teaching and learning of about 200 children. Anirudh possesses a dark and lonely existence for the most part of the film. One day, when Anirudh approaches his Doctor’s Chamber listens to a lovely song. Mesmerized Anirudh reaches at the door of the singer. The singer is Kavita Prasad (Shabana Azmi), a young woman. Her husband died recently after three years of their wedding. Having a sweet voice, Kavita chooses a lonely sustenance apart from the hue and cry of the city. Her only friend is her childhood friend Manju (Sudha Chopra). Manju arranges a party where Anirudh and Kavita interact again. Anirudh recognizes Kavita by recognizing her sweet voice. Anirudh informs Kavita that the Blind School is eagerly waiting for volunteers to read, sing, teach handicrafts and spend time with the children. Initially Kavita is reluctant but Manju and her husband Suresh convince her to strongly consider it. Finally, Kavita decides to volunteer. As Kavita spends more time at the school, a friendship

grows between Anirudh and herself. The friendship grows stronger over the passage of time and they become engaged despite their different personalities and feelings. Anirudh possesses a strong character. The Principal of the Blind School strongly believes that the blind need assistance but not pity. Once, in the office of Anirudh, Kavita tries to assist him with coffee but he gets irritated at the gesture of Kavita offering to overcome his obvious disability with sympathy. Kavita looks to the school as one of sacrificial service. Anirudh realizes this and thinks that Kavita is trying to fill the void in his life with this form of service. He feels that she has agreed with the proposal not out of love but as a sacrifice. During this juncture, Anirudh's blind friend Dubey (Om Puri) tells that his wife who died recently was not happy in their marriage. Anirudh is confused, disturbed by all this and faces a dilemma. He breaks off the engagement with Kavita but does not mention the actual cause. Kavita accepts Anirudh's decision. Kavita, now merely an employee of the Blind School, continues to teach the children. The coldness in the mutual relationships invites conflict and eventually, over a series of events at the Blind School, matures the feelings they did not realize earlier. The film ends with the blind Principal and the sighted Teacher being 'touched' by the depth of their emotion and mutual relationships and ultimately finding a solution.

Production and Filming

Much of this film was shot at the Blind Relief Association in New Delhi and the character of Anirudh is modelled on Mr. Mittal, who was the Headmaster of the Blind Relief Association.⁴

Analysis

The narrative holds a soothing love story of a blind man and a sighted woman. Sai unravels the layers of the narrative so sensitively that any sensible viewer can feel that each one of us have handicaps of varying degree. Kavita, a young widow is struggling with her emotional void when she meets Anirudh Parmar, the Principal of a Blind School. A beautiful and healthy relationship matures which is more tactile than visual and the fragrance spreads through the celluloid. A self made man, Anirudh allows Kavita in his dark universe. However, soon self doubt creeps into the relationship as Anirudh fears dependence on Kavita. Anirudh has a high sense of ego and self-

esteem. Anirudh feels Kavita is trying to justify her second love as a duty? It leads to an intense curdling of emotions and sensibilities in the estuary between right and wrong.

In the outside world, blind people might be struggling to find feet but in the blind school it is the sighted who are yearning to find acceptance.⁵ Sai presents it by means of Pappu, the sighted boy among blind students. He longs for the attention of his teacher but Kavita's entire focus is on blind students. When the sighted boy fights with one of his blind batch mates, he closes his eyes to make the fight a fair one but still cannot succeed to draw the attention. Similarly, Kavita does everything to be part of Aniruddh's universe but he considers it as a ritual to get over her past or as Kavita's friend Manju says he remains blind to her love.

Actor Naseeruddin Shah has often considered 'Sparsh' as his most memorable performance. The shift in eyeballs, his gestures, body language, facial expression and the body posture, the Actor has almost become Aniruddh. Actor Naseeruddin Shah has said in his Autobiography, 'And Then One Day', that the chemistry behind to play a blind character is that the characters direct their ears instead of their eyes at the point they were addressing and that caused their sometimes ungainly bodily posture, which having absolutely no self consciousness, they were oblivious to. Naseer absorbed it by following Mittal. The Actor's education in Aligarh Muslim University also facilitated as the Institution had one of the best schools for the blind in the country. He observed some blind classmates during his college days. He observed meticulously the movements of the blind persons and tried different techniques to get the accurate movement of a blind character but ultimately trusted his imagination. 'I had always been able to shut out all aural stimuli whenever I felt like it, but shutting off all visual stimuli proved equally easy.'⁶

Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri often acted together like passing football between two midfielders. Here in a supporting role, Om has managed to leave an impact, despite Naseer's immersive performance because he has created another blind character which is as real and distinct as Anirudh. Shabana Azmi has the skill and acting prowess to make the earthy dramatic and the dramatic reliable. Director of Photography Virendra Saini has made a thoughtful environment initiating from the shot when in a hazy morning in Delhi Anirudh is approaching Kavita's voice. 'Sparsh' has been produced by Basu Bhattacharya. In fact, Director Sai Paranjape wanted Sanjeev

Kumar for the character of Anirudh but when he was not available then her next choice was Naseer. After forty years, one could not imagine any other actor in the role of this character.

Magic with Simplicity

Subtle, simple, sincere and stunning are four words one can use to explain 'Sparsh'. 'Sparsh' follows Anirudh, a blind young Principal who is dedicated to ensure that the students have the best possible future and tries his best to make things accessible to them. He is fiercely independent. He does not like it when others extend a helping hand. As a bold character, he does not want anyone's pity and sympathy. Initially, Anirudh thinks he is satisfied with his life as it comes in his way until he interacts with Kavita. She finds a new purpose that has taken her away from the lonely life she had accepted to live.

Sai has again provided the viewer with another example of the impact subtlety has on film. The representation of 'Sparsh' is simple, down to earth and has been orchestrated efficiently. It has been done so effectively as it echoes the silence of the untold words between the characters. Director Sai Paranjape has tried to uphold the awareness regarding the educational facilities available for the blind students and the limitations of the Schools for Blind. This educational aspect of the blind students is also a part and parcel of the lives of Anirudh and Kavita. The Music of the film deserves a special mention. Though the film consists of only a few songs, the lyrics of the songs exhibit the depth of good poetry.

The bondage between Anirudh and Kavita and between Kavita and the blind students The development of the bond between Anirudh and Kavita and between Kavita and the children reflected smoothly. Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi are obviously one of the best on-screen pairs in Hindi films. The two have always performed well while working together. This film has exhibited their good on screen chemistry. The other artists including Om Puri, Sudha Chopra and the Students, provide good cooperation. With simplicity as Paranjape has created cinematic magic, something very few directors will be able to display on screen.

Touching Film

This film deals with people with handicaps. One's bitterness due to blindness and the other's depression due to heart break. Society's nature is to exhibit blindness as a major handicap than heartbreak. The film poignantly has exhibited that both are debilitating and need a lot of work to overcome. Anirudh and Kavita are able to explore each other. Their individual disability first assists them in working together then gradually bonding together and thereafter separates them apart. To bridge the gap between them a well-wisher ultimately steps in. There are some endearing scenes with the kids and the dialogue is very engaging. The sequence where Anirudh portrays his feelings about Kavita's beauty indicates special mention for poetry. Both Naseer and Shabana have excelled in their minimalist style.

Introspection of Life

Hindi films have dealt from time to time with the subject of disability. 'Sparsh' is such a film starring Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi, two celebrated actors in Hindi film and after viewing this touching film no one has any doubt about their acting skills. Anirudh's strength is self-reliance who becomes annoyed and irritated if anyone shows him pity or sympathy. He hates it when blind people are referred to as 'Bechaaras' (helpless). His personality is strong and commands respect from his students and staff alike. One can argue whether this exhibition of strength and courage is an effort made by him to conceal the pain and incompleteness he feels within him. On the other hand, Kavita does not want to conceal her duty and want of purpose in life. She chooses singing and gardening to consume her time.

The narrative commences really slowly with hardly any movement in the first twenty minutes. However, things get momentum when Kavita joins Anirudh's Institute as a Mentor, Guide and Friend to the Students. They warm up to her immediately and she is thrilled to receive so much love and respect from them. She starts coming to the Institute on a regular basis and starts devoting her entire time and energies completely to the happiness and benefit of the Students. She tells them stories, helps them prepare for dramas but more than all this, she gives them the motherly love and affection they were devoid of earlier.

The running of the Blind School has been shown remarkably well. It looks like considerable research went into the whole thing and the results are fruitful. All the little students act in such a natural way that the viewers will wonder whether they are really visually handicapped or just performing their characters. There is one kid 'Pappu' who stands out and incidentally he is the only kid in the school with the gift of sight. The boy feels jealous due to Kavita Aunty's attention to his blind friends rather than himself. There are a lot of moments between the Students and Kavita that are really sensitive and emotional.

The strength of this film lies in its dialogues. Unlike many other films from the 1970s and 80s that looked like they were made without prior written material, this one looks like it was made after meticulous planning. The narrative is set in the suburbs of South Delhi and even the locations are devoid of any misery or darkness just like the content. The music of the film is full of sweetness. 'Sparsh' is such a film where never once is a kid shown crying over his lack of sight or feeling depressed about it. And that is the film's true victory and real achievement.

A Different Face of Indian Film

As opposed to the general notion of Hindi films, this is not a regular run-of-the-mill film based on stereotypes. It is a sensitive film, with a self-respecting visually-impaired Principal of a Blind School, who hates the society for pitying people like him. The Principal has tried to make his Students self-confident and self-reliant like himself.

The Character of 'Anirudh Parmar'

Anirudh Parmar's character was a challenge in two ways. Anirudh's blindness introduced humanity to him. He selects teaching as a profession where he will educate the students having the same disabilities. Anirudh's self-reliance is his pride and he appears as a productive human being based on self-confidence.

'Sparsh' — The Touch

Director Sai Paranjape's films always tackle plots and characters which are real and which can be easily identified by the viewers. In fact 'Sparsh' is such a film that provides nostalgia to the

audience. The film upholds a visually impaired Principal who wants to live independently, to be accorded the dignity and respect other sectors of society are granted. He does not want sympathy rather wants and needs normal behaviour towards him and his blind Students. Anirudh Parmar who matures a relationship with Kavita has left an impression that remains in the minds of the viewers. Paranjape has sincerely tried to explore both sides of the narrative with a rare unsentimental stand point. He has successfully dealt with the complexes grown in the minds of Anirudh and Kavita.

Awesome Acting, Script and Direction

This film has the talented actors who performed with utmost sincerity, effort and dedication. The narrative was simple but directed in a brilliant way. Director tried to catch minute details in the life of blind people. Relationship between the lead pair was the best part of the film.

Perfection

The film exhibits a slow start but the viewers have become amazed by Naseeruddin's acting and Shabana's natural smile and eyes. Of course, the plot was not the usual one. This film has an attraction that may take some time for the viewers to fully attain to it but when they do, they will not take their eyes away. It is a unique plot with unique dialogues and characters. How the director has captured the most inner feelings of the characters and how perfectly the actors do their best to express, it is truly amazing. Everything has appeared as perfect and this becomes a film which rushes tears into the viewers' eyes.

A Metaphorical Touch

'Sparsh' directed by Sai Paranjape is one rare narrative love story which a large section of film critics does not think anyone has attempted in Hindi film. This exceptional narrative adds a soft emotional dimension to the entire influence of the film. The film has been presented in a realistic manner with less use of highly dramatic and mainstream methods of filmmaking. The viewers therefore can feel the pain of those handicapped persons. Viewers while viewing the blind students might feel pity and sympathy but the film possesses a considerable portion of dialogues and scenes where these feelings of the viewers are sidelined by the dominance of self-confidence

and self-reliance. Here, the love story set in emotional surroundings applies metaphors to describe the depth sidelining the normal life love story where the beauty is judged by eyes. Despite the unique touch orchestrated by this film, 'Sparsh' has become a Classic film. In fact, 'Sparsh' is a touching film made with touching vision. Sai Paranjape's realistic vision to tell this beautiful and realistic narrative is admirable because her journey was not through any commercial way. She has kept the essence and realism alive which is worth watching.

Source of Inspiration

The 1980s witnessed the Golden Era of Hindi Films when new directors, Writers and Actors like Nassiruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi arrived and completely changed the landscape of Hindi Cinema. One of the much discussed classics of that period is 'Sparsh'. Actor Manoj Bajpayee in an interview with Anupama Chopra said that he was informed that Actor Al Pacino saw the performance of Actor Naseeruddin Shah in 'Sparsh' before he acted in 'Scent of a Woman'. And the Academy Award for Best Actor went to Al Pacino for his performance.

Conclusion

After all, to be precise, 'Sparsh' is a fantastic film. This film is an example of real cinematic art form. It also has an authentic flavour of Indian film culture. This is pure and really heartfelt. The film has exhibited the touch that has been realized by the touch of celluloid, the touch of the Director and Actors and Actresses. 'Sparsh' (Touch) has shown us that human beings are ready to touch and be touched.

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