



ARTS ILLUSTRATED





Cinema

The Becoming

Ananya Kasaravalli brings in a rare form of sensitivity with her debut film – *Harikatha Prasanga* (The Chronicles of Hari) – that traverses the murky waters of mythology and gender with grace and confidence

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When Ananya Kasaravalli speaks, her words are measured, like they are standing one behind the other maintaining perfect one-arm distance. Nothing is said in haste, there are no digressions, and no unnecessary long pauses. It is as if cyclical thought processes have found their rhythm in her words, and there is a special kind of allure to the cadence that it then brings, evident, in abundance – visually and narratively – in her debut Kannada film, *Harikatha Prasanga* (The Chronicles of Hari). Much as the film itself, I found the interview too an immersive experience and I realised that this Kasaravalli was entirely different from the other, senior Kasaravalli – her father, Padmashri Girish Kasaravalli, winner of the National Award 14 times. If her father's films found its powers in the lyricism of subversion in the every day, then the daughter's film finds its powers in the crippling pathos of allusion in the every day. Ananya might have had an overwhelming legacy to carry and the privilege that comes with it,

but she stays true to the only thing that matters – the story.

Harikatha Prasanga is a moving, lilting tale about a male Yakshagana (a now-dying folk art form of Karnataka) artiste playing predominantly female roles, a *streeveshadhari*, and the identity crisis he battles, internally and externally. Based on a story by another stalwart – Gopalkrishna Pai – celebrated Kannada author and screenplay writer for several of Girish Kasaravalli's films – *Harikatha Prasanga* keeps gender at the centre of the stage and yet allows the spotlight to freely travel around it, deftly juxtaposing the contemporary with the mythological. Ananya's rendering of the story, with the added track of two young film-makers making a documentary about the *streeveshadhari* who had allegedly committed suicide, is full of poignancy and studied silences, allowing her own experiences with the art form to find its place in the corners of every frame. 'We come from the same belt – Malnad –

where Yakshagana is performed. It's the ancestral town of my father, and I have heard stories about Yakshagana and watched the performances since my childhood. Although it was just a dance form for me then – a colourful, beautiful form that fascinated me – I studied it only when I decided to work on *Harikatha Prasanga*, and took a year for research. When I was in college, I had actually learnt Yakshagana for three months for a college play, which later became a lucky coincidence for the film. I feel, though, that all of these experiences over the years have accumulated to help me understand this art form better,' she says.

And, somehow, while watching the film, or while talking to Ananya, you are constantly aware of that weight of accumulation, without the burden of time and space or the heavy ties of lived experiences. In Ananya's world, they are just as organic as words.

Excerpts from the interview

I found it interesting that the format of the film was someone making a film, and then within that we see the film itself, except, it isn't the film they are making, but the story they are hearing, sort of like a reconstruction. Tell me how deliberate was this screenplay? And why did you feel the need to have this format, when it did not exist in the original story?

You are right, the film-maker's bit was added and I really like how you have understood it – it is what I intended to do. I wanted to represent the story on multiple levels, because that is what we are also doing with the stories we hear. As a society, we are constantly in need of gossip, with this urge to sensationalise everything – so the film-maker's track was a take on us, in a way, because there is this man going through so much, and yet we look for tiny elements that we can sensationalise and project. There is a line in the film that says “I will construct whatever I want to construct from what I hear”. That was one of the themes I wanted to explore. Also, this idea came to me from Mr. Pai himself. Before he wrote the story, he was with my father for some other

project and they were shooting in the same Tulunadu belt. One day, they were sitting in a teashop when the owner narrated a story about a Yakshagana artiste, and Mr. Pai ended up interviewing a few people to know what happened to the artist. This must have been the origin and research for his story, and I found that fascinating – the process – and didn't want to lose that in the telling.

One of my favourite shots in the film is the one where Hari brings the hen and holds it up to a window above him, and then opens out the window below, so we can see his face. It was the perfect metaphor for the film itself – we see one thing first, and then another to get the whole picture, and even then, we only see it through a window. How did this shot come about?



Actually, to be honest, so much thought didn't really go into that shot. I wanted to make it interesting, so we reveal the chicken, Hari and the family in bits. Also, the film eventually becomes an organic expression of how you think, so you do what is needed at every point. I am glad you see the metaphor, though!

Identity, and gender itself, is an interesting subject, especially in the context of Yakshagana and performance. What made you want to work on this story in particular as a debut film? Was there any other story that came close?

I was sure this is the film I wanted to make. I think the theme is very relevant and is needed for the times we live in. When you place the theme in a traditional art

form, it is different; and when you perceive something like that in today's time within the context of the dance form, it becomes something else. Also, when I was studying film-making at the LV Prasad Film and Television Academy in Chennai, I got an opportunity to work on a documentary on trans-femininity, so that set the base for this film and gave me a little more context to what Mr. Pai was trying to touch upon in his story.

The story of Amba and Shikandi that we see as one of the performances, somehow, fit into the contemporary world of Hari, in terms of being ostracized for no fault of his. How consciously were the Yakshagana performances chosen?

They were chosen very consciously. In the first bit, the scene is between Arjuna and Hari dressed as a woman; and in that segment, it is a projection of masculinity and gender. In the second performance, we bring the story of Amba, also of the same conflict, but here Amba swears to come back in her next birth and kill them all, which she does as Shikandi. And in the third performance, Hari plays the role of Radha. I wanted to bring this kind of questioning of gender and the performative element of gender. Also, questions about gender were already there in our mythology, the stories constantly spoke of it, and I wanted to bring that out. So, yes, they were all deliberately chosen.

What is it about this story that appealed to you the most? And what happened to that appeal when it became a screenplay?



What appealed to me the most was Hari's conflict. There are two kinds of conflict – one is the conflict of self and the projected image as an artiste, and the other is the conflict of performance and gender. These two elements fascinated me from the beginning and I concentrated more on that. I want to believe that they have come out in the screenplay as well. I was very confident about this story, even though people around me felt it was too complex a subject for a first film. Even when I worked on the script, I was extremely conscious of the subtle line between the two genders, because Hari isn't transgender. He is gender fluid, not a transperson.

In your earlier interviews you have talked about researching the subject for a year

and spending time in Udupi with a troupe to understand the art form better. How hard does it become to separate yourself from a lived experience and then translate it into an imagined experience in the film?

I think it is not very difficult. I, for one, believe that if the film-maker cannot understand the subject at a very deep emotional level, then he/she won't be able to pull it off. It was very important for me to do this one year of research. And it was not just me, but also my cinematographer, Udit Khurana, which was also important because a cameraperson cannot be an outsider to the film. Similarly, I can't be an outsider to the pain and empathy of what the character is going through. You understand and internalise



everything first, and then when you start writing, you keep it aside and it becomes extremely technical. This divide has to be there in any artist/e, and it is true of all art forms. An artist will have hundred ideas, but when she picks up a paintbrush, there is technique involved, it is not just a splashing of colours. So we have to merge these two elements and be conscious of that process, too.

Gopalkrishna Pai and your father Girish Kasaravalli have co-written the screenplay with you. In some ways that could have been overwhelming and in some ways liberating, but in what ways was that decision intuitive to the film itself?

It was very organic because, as I mentioned, there was already this whole process of them understanding and discovering the story together years ago, before I took on the subject. So it wasn't a deliberate choice to co-write the screenplay, but a more organic choice when I started writing it. I was very conscious though that I was working with two very senior people and it was overwhelming in the beginning, because I didn't



Stills from the film **Harikatha Prasanga** (2016). All Images Courtesy of Ananya Kasaravalli.

know how to contradict or express a disagreement, but I grew out of that emotion and it became a true collaboration, for the joy of the film itself.

And, finally, since you are an actor, too, which character in Harikatha do you see yourself as?

I don't know if I could have performed or pulled it off, or even come close to the performance in the final film, but Hari is my all-time favourite. I simply fell in love with that character.



