

Varnapatala – The Spectrum Spectacular

Name of the Movie	: Varnapatala
Main Actors	: Jyothi Rai, Suhasini Maniratnam, Anoop Sagar and Dhanika Hegde
Director	: Chethan Mundadi
Production Company	: Sai Ganesh Productions
Date of release	: 8 th April 2022
Running time	: 1 h 48 min

“Varnapatala” is a 2022 release Kannada movie (with English subtitles) directed by Indian National Award-winning director Chethan Mundadi and produced by Entrepreneur Kavitha Santosh and UK-based pediatrician Dr. Saraswathi Hosdurga jointly. Starring Jyothi Rai, Suhasini Maniratnam, Anoop Sagar, and Dhanika Hegde, this film is based on the journey of a child with autism named “Myna” and her mother “Nithya.” The movie takes the audience through the challenges of parenting a neurodivergent child in a society that is unmindful of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD is a neurodevelopmental condition with impairment in reciprocal social communication, repetitive or stereotyped behaviors, and difficulties with sensory processing.

The cinema begins with sketching Nithya’s character and her relationships, seamlessly moving into the throes of helplessness she experiences in early motherhood. The complications of Myna’s childhood being not only different but misunderstood spills into Nithya’s marriage and job. The plot movingly expresses Nithya’s moments of grief, vulnerability, worries, and distress. The strictures of society spanning from individuals to institutions leave the duo bruised by stigma, sexual predation, and bullying. Some of these are so relatable that it hurts. The nuanced matrix of a woman who is both a committed mother and a professional, vulnerable yet powerful, independent yet seeking help, is effortlessly played by Jyothi Rai. The movie zooms in on the difficult parent–child relationship, unfulfilled maternal expectations of emotional reciprocity, and the loneliness of charting the unknown territory of neurodevelopmental disorders. The most poignant moment is when Nithya says, that as a mother, she craves to hear her child call her “Amma” (mother in Kannada) and struggles to get to hear this word. The parent must relearn a new language along with a new perspective of life. Acceptance, which is the heart of reconciliation and healing, is a long-fought and seldom-won battle. Nithya finds herself undergoing waves of frustration and hope which she finally begins to ride with confidence when she discovers Myna’s hidden genius.

The United Nations Conventions on the rights of persons with disabilities, the distinction between disease and disability, and taking accountability for the differently abled persons were important aspects included in the film, among the other

unfortunate experiences with society such as the neighbors, school, extended family, and workplace, making it a whistle-stop tour of a stereotypical experience of ASD in India.

While there is a mention of therapies, there is an ominous omission of the importance of the role of psychiatry in the diagnosis and/or management of ASD. In many parts of the world, ASD falls under the psychiatrist’s remit. For that matter, the role of a psychiatrist in addressing challenging behaviors and carer stress is conspicuous by its absence.

True to life, the focus is on the neurodivergent child, and this overshadows maternal mental health. Studies have found that parents/carers of autistic children are more likely to experience mental health issues than other parents/carers.^[1] Autistic young people have more needs which may lead to parents/carers experiencing additional stress, exhaustion, or burnout, contributing to an increased risk of mental health difficulties or morbidity.^[2]

Given that, historically, the etiology of autism was erroneously and horrifically ascribed to “Refrigerator Mothers,” it becomes all the more significant to include the role of mental health in mothers. In a study done by Bitsika and Sharpley, two-thirds of parents of autistic children in the sample were clinically depressed, further highlighting the importance of psychiatric input to address these issues.^[3] The mother was at the brink of suicide, yet there was no discourse on psychiatry in maternal mental health. This presents a gaping flaw in the narrative.

The representation of ASD was not only medically sound but imagined with great attention to detail ensuring the audience was not only served entertainment but also education. Dr. Hosdurga has attempted factual accuracy, psychoeducation, and sensitization to autism using striking examples. She delivers on all fronts. The changing profile of the child’s face on her successive birthday cakes, the layered interpretation of her name Myna, and the dynamics of expressed emotions are some instances of an outstanding script. Undoubtedly, the real hero of the film is Dhanika Hegde who plays Myna, she carries the movie on her tiny but talented shoulders.

The film moves quickly and no frame is wasted. The editing is crisp and meaningful except a few meandering scenes. There are several aching moments that seem to pass too quickly,

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slowing down the narrative at these junctures would have added greatly to the impact of the film. However, the script makes up for the speed by ensuring that much is conveyed and the story is well-rounded.

The filmmakers have taken ample artistic liberties to cloak a heart-wrenching reality into commercially palatable clothing. Perhaps, there is no pleasant way to carry a theme as somber as this. It is a noble film with noble intentions.

There are some golden moments of brilliance in the film, my favorite being the literal and figurative screen that separates the world from viewing a person with disabilities for whom they really are and for their lived experience which one will never fathom.

At the outset, this is a movie about ASD but it in a larger sense is also about maternal mental health, inclusivity, pressures of parenthood, about holding out hope for one another. It is not just about the 2% of children in India but about children who are square pegs in a round hole.

Varnapatala in essence is about that proverbial prism of good people who transform a ray of light into a colorful rainbow.

In today's world of multi-crore movie clubs and blockbuster concoctions, Chethan Mundadi and his team have lent their voice to an important conversation. Despite being a film in an Indian regional language, it has universal relevance and appeal. Like it is the theme of autism, this movie transcends language.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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