

## Phillauri, the love story of a ghost

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Phillauri suffers from shoddy writing, even as the charm of its lead actors keep it from sinking.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

I grew up in Bengal that was notorious for its tales of black magic and ghosts. And many popular writers penned stories of the supernatural with a kind of eerie flourish which created inexplicable fear even in adults. The narratives came from even well-known authors like Satyajit Ray, and he wrote these even for children – but of course carefully avoiding blood and gore. And Indian cinema in the 1960s and the 1970s produced several films that were all about ghosts. Some of them were about reincarnation – often with women playing spirits invariably in white attire. These movies were scary all right. Really scary.

In recent times, Tamil cinema in its desperate bid to clinch a universal screening certificate turned ghosts into comic figures. The fear factor was completely missing, and the supernatural beings, in spite of their hideous appearances, were downright funny, even idiotic! While these movies were silly, they did get their fair share of theatrical footfalls. However, this trend now seems to be on the wane.

It is in this context that Anshai Lal's debut feature, Phillauri, grabbed my attention. Here was a ghost which was neither fearsome nor funny. She, yes she, seemed so docile and innocent and lost, and when she emerges from a tree 98 years after she committed suicide, she is bewildered by the kind of people and situation she sees around. Played by Anushka Sharma (whom we last saw in NH 45 as a fiery woman who killed the rogues who had murdered her young husband), Shashi the ghost who lived around 1919 – at the time when the Jallianwala Bagh massacre happened in Amritsar – is a poetess.

Confined in a conservative community in a Punjab village that could not dream of letting its women pen poems, she has them published under a pen name. And her lover, Roop Lal (Diljit Dosanjh), gives voice to her words. But soon after he cuts his first record in Amritsar, he is killed in the Jallianwala Bag tragedy (in which hundreds of Indians were shot dead and hundreds more wounded by British forces under the command of Colonel Reginald Dyer). Pregnant with his child, Shashi assuming that Roop Lal had ditched her after promising to marry her once the recording was over, jumps into a well and dies.

Phillauri traverses 98 years to the 2017 Amritsar, where Kanan (Suraj Sharma of the Life of Pi fame) is all set to wed his childhood sweetheart, Anu (Mehreen Pirzada). But he is born under an evil star which necessitates a marriage with a tree before he can tie the knot with Anu. He marries the tree and it is then chopped off. And Shashi who has been living in the tree finds herself homeless. She wanders into Kanan's home and causes in all her innocence a whole lot of turbulence. She mistakenly believes that Kanan has married her. Maybe, even falls in love with him!

While I must say that the core idea of Phillauri is interesting, the writing – a subject I discussed in my column last week – is shoddy all over again. Writer Anvita Dutt peppers the plot with contrived situations – especially the part relating to Shashi's love story around 1919. It is the same old formula of the girl rejecting the advances of the boy, because he is considered a cad, but later relenting after he turns over a new leaf and begins to sing sensible songs (written by Shashi) compared to the bawdy numbers he used to croon earlier. This portion is really boring, although both Sharma and Dosanjh are quite good, giving us nuanced portrayals of what it to go through forbidden love.

However, the film peeps up when it shifts to 2017 – taking us through the confusion and angst of Kanan as he grapples with the presence of the ghost – a factor that gets him even nervous about settling down with the pretty Anu. She, in turn, is angry and tense imagining the worst. Has Kanan changed his mind about her?

But then all well that ends well with Dutt and Lal deciding that audiences cannot handle two romantic tragedies in the course of a single movie.

Frankly, I was bored with Shashi's life when she was alive and kicking, and this part is such a drag that I began to lose interest in the days preceding the big fat Indian wedding of Kanan and Anu. While Pirzada is a bit stiff, even uncomfortable, essaying a girl in deep anxiety, Sharma comes off with a lot more flair in comparison.

Yet, the final moments of the film are horribly silly with Kanan taking Anu and Shashi to Jallianwala Bag and reuniting the ghost with Roop Lal – who emerges from a whole lot of dead souls. Can anything be more silly?

And at two hours and twenty minutes, Phillauri is a drag. There really is no meat to warrant this kind of run time, and it is sad that what could have been some kind of novelty has been allowed to sink – because of terrible writing. Pray, when are we going to address this?

Cannes' probables:

Even though the Cannes General-Delegate, Thierry Fremaux, has in his recently published book called *Selection Officielle*, let us peep into the enthralling process of picking movies for his Festival, the line-up will remain a play of possibilities and conjectures till the final list is announced at the end of April. The Festival begins on May 17.

According to punters, the hot favourites among European auteurs are *Happy End* by Austria's Michael Haneke, *Loveless* by Russia's Andrey Zvyagintsev, *A Gentle Creature* by Ukraine's Sergei Loznitsa, *Thelma* by Norway's Joachim Trier, *Superfluous Man* by Hungary's Kornel Mundruczo, *The Square* by Sweden's Ruben Ostlund, and *You Were Never Really Here* by Scotland's Lynne Ramsay.

From France, we may have *Mektoub is Mektoub* by Abdellatif Kechiche, *Ismael's Ghosts* by Arnaud Desplechin, *Jeannette* by Bruno Dumont and *The Workshop* by Laurent Cantet.

The most significant American contenders are *The Beguiled* by Sofia Coppola, *Wonderstruck* by Todd Haynes, *Radegund* by Terrence Malick and *Downsizing* by Alexander Payne.

Then there is Japan's Naomi Kawase with her *Radiance* and South Korea's Hong Sang-soo with *Claire's Camera*.

There are also whispers about *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* by Greece's Yorgos Lanthimos, *Where Life is Born* by Mexico's Carlos Reygadas and *Kings* by Turkey's Deniz Gamze Erguven. *Kings* is based on the true story of Roman Polanski, who is still being haunted by the ghost of rape – a terrible incident that blotted his life many decades ago in the US. Lee Chang Dong may also be on the Croisette (Cannes's pretty beach front) with his mystery film, *Burning*, inspired by a work by Haruki Murakami.

\*Gautaman Bhaskaran has covered the Cannes Film Festival for over 25 years, and may be e-mailed at [gautamanb@hotmail.com](mailto:gautamanb@hotmail.com)