

= Vanaja ( film ) =

Vanaja is a 2006 Indian Telugu @-@ language drama film written and directed by Rajnesh Domalpalli on a story that constituted his Master of Fine Arts thesis at Columbia University . The film was made on a shoestring budget using a cast of non @-@ professional first @-@ timers for two and a half months .

The film stars Mamatha Bhukya as the title character : a 15 @-@ year @-@ old daughter of a poor fisherman set in the backdrop of a rustic state of Andhra Pradesh in Southern India . She learns Kuchipudi , a classical Indian dance form , while being employed at a local landlady 's house . All seems to be going well for her until sexual chemistry evolves between her and the landlady 's son , and this eventually leads her being raped by him . The ensuing pregnancy disrupts her simple life , and she must choose how to deal with the child .

Vanaja was screened at several international festivals such as the Toronto International Film Festival and the Berlin International Film Festival , among others . It was nominated for the Diesel Discovery Award at the former and won the Best First Feature award at the latter . Beside this , it won several jury prizes at other film festivals , and was nominated for the Best First Feature and Best Cinematography awards at the Independent Spirit Awards . Vanaja found favour with many international critics as well . Roger Ebert ranked it among the five best foreign language films of 2007 . It runs for 111 minutes in with subtitles in English .

= = Plot = =

Vanaja ( Mamatha Bhukya ) is the 15 @-@ year @-@ old daughter of Somayya ( Ramachandriah Marikanti ) , a poor , low caste fisherman from rural Andhra Pradesh . Somayya struggles to support his family due to dwindling catches at sea and mounting debts . One day , Vanaja and her teenage friend Lacchi ( Bhavani Renukunta ) watch a theatrical performance by a former Kuchipudi ( a native classical Indian dance form ) great , Rama Devi ( Urmila Dammannagari ) . The sequence of events lead to a soothsayer predicting to Vanaja that she will be a great dancer . With permission from her father , she goes to work in the house of the local landlady Rama Devi with the hope of learning Kuchipudi . While she is employed as a farmhand , she is entrusted with tending the chickens . When she gets caught playfully chasing them , she lies to conceal her pranks . Her vivaciousness and spunk soon catch the landlady 's eye . To keep her out of trouble , Rama Devi soon promotes her to a kitchen underhand where she meets Rama Devi 's cook , the old , crusty and extremely loyal Radhamma ( Krishnamma Gundimalla ) .

After settling down at the landlady 's house , Vanaja gets invited to play a game of ashta chamma ( a leisurely game in rural towns of Andhra Pradesh ) against the landlady . Knowing that losing isn 't the mistress 's forte , she deliberately gives up her game . This gesture , in turn , eventually secures her the landlady 's mentorship , first in music and then in dance . Vanaja excels at these art forms and seems to be on a steadily ascending path until the arrival of Shekhar ( Karan Singh ) , the landlady 's 23 @-@ year @-@ old son , from the United States . Shekhar is a handsome , muscular young man who is running for an office in the local government . Sexual chemistry is ignited between Shekhar and Vanaja ( still a minor at 15 ) when flirtation and sexual innuendo bloom .

In the meanwhile , her father 's fishing boat is taken away by creditors . He sinks into a state of sadness and begins to drink away their savings . On one occasion , Vanaja 's superior intellect pits her against Shekhar in a public incident which ultimately humiliates him in front of his mother . Matters escalate , and one day Vanaja is raped by Shekhar . She eventually loses her job when she becomes pregnant . She gives birth to a boy , much against Rama Devi 's wishes who would have liked her to abort the foetus . Vanaja hopes that the physical evidence of the child will be proof of the rape and that somehow Shekhar will be brought to justice . However , Shekhar has no desire to marry Vanaja because she is from a lower caste . In the end Rama Devi and Shekhar gain possession of the child , who will grow up to be an upper caste boy .

= = Cast = =

Mamatha Bhukya as Vanaja  
Urmila Dammannagari as Rama Devi  
Ramachandriah Marikanti as Somayya  
Krishnamma Gundimalla as Radhamma  
Karan Singh as Shekhar  
Bhavani Renukunta as Lacchi

= = Production = =

= = = Background = = =

Director Rajnesh Domalpalli graduated with bachelor 's and master 's degrees in electrical engineering in 1984 and 1986 . While working on his bachelor 's degree at the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay , he wrote short stories . One of his stories , The Dowry , was twice selected for broadcast by BBC World Service while he was in graduate school . During schooling , he was introduced to south Indian classical music , especially on the veena , and followed this up with years of training on the vocals .

While he was working as a software engineer in Silicon Valley , California , he pursued filmmaking and graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree from Columbia University .

A short synopsis , including a character and a conflict study of Vanaja , was Domalpalli 's project submission in his first semester at the Columbia University in fall of 2001 . The story was inspired by a child 's scream upon being separated from her mother in Sophie 's Choice . Over the next three semesters , however , the story veered from its original focus of mother @-@ child separation to what Domalpalli later described as a study of " elements of class distinction and conflict that continue to infuse our society and culture even today . " Referring to its emphasis , he said the film was also about " fading institutions of folk art , old buildings that are collapsing , things which we should be protecting ? which are a part of our heritage . " Speaking of the need for preservation of Indian culture and heritage , he said that making the film was an opportunity to emphasize the Indian folk arts , too .

= = = Filmmaking = = =

With the early version of the script being ready at the end of his fourth semester , Domalpalli 's initial intent was to find financing for the film in India and then in the United States . However , he could not find financing . Domalpalli decided to select non @-@ professionals and train them in a year . In the United States , producers voiced similar concerns over the marketability of the film and what they referred to as " its lack of cohesion . " Beside this , Domalpalli 's inexperience in filmmaking added to their concerns . Recalling initial hurdles , Domalpalli later said , " it was only when I showed my professors a rough cut of the film , and they approved , that purse strings finally came loose . " It eventually constituted the thesis for his master 's degree .

He imbibed socio @-@ cultural ethos from his upbringing in several rural areas of Andhra Pradesh , and this prompted him to make the movie in the Telugu language . In 2004 , he began filming with a meagre sum of USD 20000 provided by his mother Latha Domalpalli , the eventual film producer . Referring to filming the burrakatha ( a story telling technique used in southern India ) scene at the beginning of the film , Domalpalli said :

If you talk to people who perform a Burrakatha , you will see a huge difference in the way the older generation performs the art vis @-@ à @-@ vis the way the way the younger generation performs it ... This has happened because of the advent of television . Burrakatha is a long @-@ format art form . The point we are making is that if we don 't protect these folk arts , they will be on their way out .

The producers faced a stiff challenge in securing a rural bungalow to serve as the landlady 's mansion . Even after obtaining a building as the best possible fit in the coastal town of Bobbili , infestation of snakes and bats posed a problem for the crew . In addition , the building was not strong enough to support the filming equipment . Under these circumstances , the makeshift production designers refurbished the building with space for chicken coops and goat pens as required by the script . To make the space look inhabited , local help was sought for trampling the ground with their livestock . The local people wanted to act as extras in exchange for providing farming tools , bullock carts and other material . As a result , the crew had to ensure that these extras didn 't look into the camera during filming .

" Given the rural nature of the story , and the tendency of most local acting to lean towards the theatrical , it was clear that non @-@ actors drawn from hutments , labor camps and the vast Indian middle class were the right choice , " said Domalpalli , referring to his choice of casting . In addition , the inclusion of Radhamma 's character was to bring a natural feel for the film . Her behavior such as the way she " sits , stands , moves , grunts and groans ? that is the way people from a village talk and behave ... You would immediately recognize a person who served you breakfast ... That makes a point . "

Referring to the challenges faced in casting , he said that while they were canvassing local people for auditions , they were warding off rumors that they were after the people 's kidneys . When placing a newspaper advertisement for the landlady 's character did not seem viable , they advertised for household help instead . Upon seeing this , Urmila Dammannagari turned up for the interview with Domalpalli . Inadvertently , their conversation veered toward the film and the real motive behind the advertisement became evident . Though initially shocked and despite the fact that she had to commute 25 kilometres ( 16 mi ) from her house to the location , she took up the role . Professionally Krishnamma Gundimalla , who played the role of Radhamma , carried bricks on her head as a construction worker . On the other hand , Ramachandriah Marikanti , who plays Vanaja 's fisherman father , was a municipal sweeper and worked as a security guard .

For casting Vanaja and Lacchi , he said that they met approximately 2500 children , interviewed about 260 , and finally selected two from a shortlist of five to play the roles of Vanaja and Lacchi . Parents of these children were distrustful of them because their wards would have to frequently commute to Domalpalli 's house for acting lessons for at least a year . Domalpalli felt that " to convince people to devote so much of their children 's time and energy was hard enough , but to find the right combination of intelligence , commitment and talent as well was probably the steepest cliff they had to climb . " While visiting schools for identifying the child cast , Mamatha Bhukya at first was not selected because her hair was short . But after she sang a song on Mahatma Gandhi , she was selected for the role . Srinivas Devarakonda , a disciple of well @-@ known Kuchipudi guru Vempati Chinna Satyam , taught Mamatha the classical dance form for a year in the basement of Domalpalli 's house . Due to this sustained effort , she altered her ambitions from becoming a doctor to an actress and a Kuchipudi dancer . Bhavani Renukunta was chosen for Lacchi 's role after an interview at the Hyderabad office of Varija Films , the company that handled the publicity .

Suriname @-@ born Milton Kam , who had shot 10 feature films and more than 50 short films , was chosen as the director of photography . Since Domalpalli 's experience was limited to short video films with a different aspect ratio , he was shocked to look through the Super 16mm lens the day they commenced the shoot . However , Kam helped him to stay composed during the production .

Domalpalli used Carnatic music for the background score . This featured the violin @-@ playing of B. S. Narayanan , a student of renowned Carnatic violinist T. N. Krishnan . Narayanan played the popular Jayadeva Ashtapadi " Sa virahe " , having retuned it in the mode or r?ga known as " Behag " .

Domalpalli used " janapada geetalu " in the film ; folk songs that are rarely heard . To record these songs for the film , Domalpalli and his crew traveled to towns and villages in rural Andhra .

= = Release and reception = =

The film was released in the United States on 31 August 2007 . After being screened at over 100

film festivals in 49 countries , Vanaja has won 24 international awards and 2 nominations . The Motion Picture Association of America ( MPAA ) , the body that governs the Oscars , invited the screenplay to be placed in the permanent archives of the Margaret Herrick Library . The DVD , which released on 8 March 2008 , has subtitle options in English . Besides interviews with Domalpalli and Bhukya , unedited dance sequences and several short films of Domalpalli , the DVD is available in 16 : 9 Anamorphic widescreen , Dolby Digital 5 @. @ 1 Surround , widescreen and NTSC format . While reviewing it , Jeffrey Kauffman from DVD Talk observed that though most of the film was made using natural lighting situations , the color and saturation quality was excellent . Further , the reviewer was quite favourable about the use of exotic sounds right from birds to the instruments .

= = = Special screenings and awards = = =

On 11 September 2006 , Vanaja first premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival . The same year , it won an Honorable Mention for the Golden Starfish Award at the Hamptons International Film Festival . It won the Best Narrative Film award at the Indo @-@ American Arts Council Film Festival . Following that , it was showcased at the International Film Festival of India and the International Film Festival of Kerala by the end of 2006 .

At the film 's screening at the 2007 Berlin Film Festival , it won a standing ovation from the audience , bringing Mamatha Bhukya to tears and emotionally affecting Rajnesh Domalpalli . The film won the Best First Feature award at this festival . The same year , Vanaja received a special international jury prize at the Cairo International Film Festival , Best Feature at the Memphis International Film Festival , Best International Film at the Sacramento International Film Festival , and a Platinum award at the WorldFest @-@ Houston International Film Festival . It received a special mention for the grand jury prize at the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles , the Milo? Macourek Award in special recognition for a feature film for youth at the Zlín International Film Festival , an Achievement Award at the Newport Beach Film Festival , and a special jury prize for Best Production Design at the RiverRun International Film Festival . It won the prize for Best Cinematography at the Rhode Island International Film Festival , the first prize in the live @-@ action feature film category at the Chicago International Children 's Film Festival , and the Camério Meilleur Long Métrage / Starlink Aviation award at the Carrousel international du film de Rimouski . In addition , the film won also won an award for the best live @-@ action film at the International Young Audience Film Festival . Bhukya won the best actress award at the Asian Festival of First Films . It was chosen as one of 13 " key films " when the Locarno International Film Festival focused on India in 2011 .

= = = Reviews = = =

The film received an overall positive response from critics and was particularly noted for the theme and for Mamatha Bhukya 's performance . The review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes gives the film a score of 85 % based on 26 critic reviews with an average rating of 7 / 10 . Roger Ebert described Bhukya as " a natural star , her eyes and smile illuminating a face of freshness and delight . " Writing about Vanaja , he added that " there are the glorious colors of saris and room decorations , the dazzle of dance costumes and the dusty landscape that somehow becomes a watercolor by Edward Lear , with its hills and vistas , its oxen and elephants , its houses that seem part of the land . In this setting , Domalpalli tells his story with tender precision , and never an awkward moment . " Ebert listed it among the top five foreign films of 2007 . According to Laura Kern from The New York Times , the film " is a coming @-@ of @-@ age tale that is engrossing , if slightly overlong , and absolutely timeless , unfolding against an antiquated class system that sadly stands firm in rural areas of India to this day . "

A review in Variety called it " a film that touches the heartstrings as it brings home the cruel class distinctions that poison Indian societ , " and said it " is more than a children 's film , despite revolving around a central character of 14 . Its social message , linked to the story of a poor farm girl who

aspires to be a dancer , never feels forced , and the moral issues it depicts are realistically complex . " Commenting on its commercial feasibility , the review concluded that " while that might not translate into obvious box office potential , art house appeal is there for distributors willing to seek out a market . " The Chicago Tribune wrote :

It 's a touching , believable , often funny but ultimately sad tale of how one class can take advantage of another , even in the guise of patronizing benevolence . Though sometimes shifting abruptly in time , Vanaja is an arresting story of modern @-@ day hardship and class exploitation , recalling Charles Dickens as well as Western fairy @-@ tale lore . Domalpalli 's settings are ultra @-@ real in detail and color , from the crude , almost feudal deprivations of Vanaja 's dirt @-@ floor background to the stately rituals and autocratic entitlement of the well @-@ to @-@ do .

Speaking of Bhukya 's performance , the San Francisco Chronicle writes , " Bhukya delivers an entrancing and natural performance , deftly balancing both the wide @-@ eyed childishness of a young girl with the dawning awareness of life 's darker possibilities . She 's also an accomplished dancer , which she proves at several points in the film . " It adds , " can this wonder @-@ filled film truly be not only Domalpalli 's first feature , but originally part of a thesis submission at Columbia University ? Both in the film 's writing and direction , Domalpalli displays maturity , wisdom and a loving sense of visual and character detail . " Marc Savlov of The Austin Chronicle proclaimed , " director Domalpalli , who , with his debut feature , turned in what may well be the best Columbia University master 's thesis ever . " The Hartford Courant also claimed like the Chicago Tribune that the film would remind the Western audience of Charles Dickens , and further stated that it " ... gives a detailed sense of place and shows a mastery of story telling . The themes of fate and class resonate and the work of the amateur players is remarkably moving . "

Despite the generally positive reception , some critics differed in their opinion of the content and depiction . The New York Post criticised the film saying that " there 's enough mush in the Indian melodrama Vanaja to fill an entire season of a TV soap opera , " adding that toward its ending , the " viewers will be bored stiff by ( the ) long , tedious film " . Though the " narrative meanders ... [ it ] evokes village life with stark authenticity , " said a review by Time Out .