

'ROOTING FOR ROONA'

DOCUMENTARY : 41 mins

Produced by Curley Street

Directed by Pavitra Chalam and Akshay Shankar

It is not easy to make a medical documentary which will be equally liked, both by doctors and lay persons, but Rooting for Roona is one such film. The Director Producer duo of Pavitra Chalam and Akshay Shankar, from the production house Curley Street, have successfully woven the medical and the human story of Roona into a captivating short film (41 mins).

A young couple in the remote village of Jirania Khola in Tripura has given birth to Roona, who has a serious birth defect called Hydrocephalus. Her young father in his early twenties, who is a brick kiln worker and her equally young mother, a homemaker, have been taken by surprise with Roona's peculiar condition, that is causing her head to enlarge rapidly. It has now reached the size of a watermelon. But they seem to have accepted it as a fait-accompli, without seeming to try and understand much about the medical condition.

In this remote Tripura village, the condition has remained undiagnosed and untreated. This is the plight of many parents in India, especially in rural India, who give birth to children with rare and serious birth defects such as Hydrocephalus (excessive accumulation of water- CSF in the brain as has happened in Roona's case) and others such Spina Bifida, Cleft Lip or CTEV. Many such families are left to fend for themselves due to lack of access to timely expert medical advice and care – a consequence of India's fragmented and overwhelmingly privatised and unregulated Healthcare delivery system.

In this case, the young parents are puzzled at Roona's plight,

but accept her as she is. While the father looks lost and inexpressive, the bond between Roona and her mother is nicely documented and developed throughout the film.



Life in the rustic farmland of Tripura is well captured by the directors and the cinematographer. The unobtrusive original background score by Tapas Relia suits the mood of the story.

As Roona grows so does her head. She becomes a curiosity in her neighbourhood and is accidentally discovered by a visiting journalist photographer. Her story was later picked up by global media. And a collaborative effort began to get her treated. Several organisations and agencies got together to offer Roona the required medical treatment – better late than never. Funding for Roona's treatment and for the filming was raised via crowdfunding. The film was apparently India's biggest crowdfunded film of 2013.

A Neurosurgeon from a leading tertiary care Hospital in Gurugram takes special interest in her case. She is going to require several major surgeries spread over a couple of years.

The documentary then follows Roona's medical journey which keeps taking the parents from their simple Jirania life into the alien world of a tertiary Hospital in a Metro. Roona's mother is particularly happy with the progress Roona is making. Roona has become more active and expressive. The film

cleverly depicts the hopes and aspirations of a mother for her daughter. The scene where Fatema is talking to Roona while doing the household chores is particularly impressive and touching.

Although the hospital visits and the interaction of the doctors with the family are documented well, one feels it would have helped to explain the science and technology a bit more.

Roona is now a few years old. Fatema is pregnant with her second child. The parents have had no medical guidance regarding preventing birth defects during their second pregnancy. (Or it has not been shown in the film.) It would have added to the emotional quotient of the film if the dilemma of having another baby (as is usually the case in such situations) would have been highlighted.

Fatema and Abdul are scheduled to take Roona to Delhi for her final operation. But Roona has a fall See the film to know what happens further.

This is a remarkable and diligently documented film, shot over a period of several years depicting the story of Roona and her parents. It is recommended watching for one and all.