

# THE PEACOCK

SATURDAY, 23 JANUARY 2021



Shilpa 21.

# A REAL-LIFE MOVIE SCRIPT

BY DAMODAR MAUZO

**I**t is 1923. Ermelinda, the youngest of the three daughters of a farmer's family from the island of Divar in Goa reaches Bombay. She is still barely more than a child, but, as her parents struggle to settle into an unfamiliar city, she skips her schooling. The hardworking girl is good at babysitting, so also at singing and dancing that comes naturally to her. At 16, she turns into a stunningly good looking young woman, sought after by young men. But Ermelinda is smart enough to keep boys at bay, and is soon picked up to act in *Tiatr*, a popular musical drama among Goans in Bombay.

She is noticed by talent-hunting agents from Bombay's nascent, fast prospering cinema industry, and is called for an audition at the Imperial Studio. She gets excited. Pretty and graceful that she is, Ermelinda is immediately picked up for the heroine's role in *Hothal Padmini* (1925). That is the era of silent movies, therefore she finds it easygoing as there is no delivery of dialogues. She chooses 'Sudhabala' as her professional name. Ermelinda performs far better than what is expected of her.

Though the people, in general, look down upon film actresses, Ermelinda maintains her self-respect by not allowing any biggies to take advantage of her openness. She values her self-esteem at all costs. When on vacation in Goa, she becomes the talk of the island. A wealthy landlord, who had earlier ignored her father, falls for her. Though it is below dignity for him to treat the peasants as his equal, he is so crazy for her that, despite her rejections, he follows her to Mumbai. He follows her everywhere and finally giving up his property in Goa turns theosophist.

It is December 1926. She is acting in Shrikrishna Cinema Company's film *Burkhawali* (1927). The unit has gone to Matheran for shooting. A hotel is booked for the unit where a room is allotted to Ermelinda and her Ayah. The shooting schedule gets over at dusk as is customary because artificial lighting did not exist then. Late in the evening, the cameraman enters her room and starts making advances which irritate Ermelinda, who asks him to get out. The cameraman timidly walks out. On the last day of shooting, the exhausted Ermelinda retires to her room and goes for a bath. The cameraman enters, opens the bathroom door, and peeps in.

Ermelinda shouts at him. He retreats. But later in the night he tiptoes in from the back door and molests her. She wakes up raising an alarm. The cameraman flees. Ermelinda complains to the producer, who requests her not to make an issue as that would discredit the company. Later, the director and the cameraman threaten her by pointing a gun.

She lodges a complaint with the 1<sup>st</sup> Class Magistrate in Matheran, who also listens to the director and the cameraman. After many hearings, the verdict is given that infuriates Ermelinda. Acquitting the culprits, the Magistrate calls Ermelinda's story as 'cooked up' and imposing a fine, he remarks, 'she is an illiterate woman and of loose Goanese morals'. The ruling is prejudiced and offensive to the Goan community. The news media too blames her. The wounded Ermelinda appeals to the Sessions Court and after a long fight, she wins the case. The earlier judgment is rescinded. It is widely publicized.

As a heroine, she is now almost indispensable. Once she is on the sets of *Cinema Girl* (1933), waiting for the man who has signed for the role of 'hero' to turn up. The director is furious as a day going waste is a big loss. Fuming, the producer turns to Ermelinda and asks her

to go around the aspiring men flocked to see the shooting and choose a suitable man for the role. She goes and picks up a man from among dozens gathered there. The producer asks the young man picked by her for his name before signing the contract. He is Prithviraj Kapoor.

Ermelinda goes on to act in over three dozen silent movies before the onset of cinema with moving images. She cannot pursue the new career as she is illiterate, and her spoken Hindi is *Bambaiya*, which does not suit the new era. Years pass and Ermelinda lives a miserable life with no savings on hand. A journalist who admires her writes a fine article in his column in which he recalls her celebrated career and makes a fervent appeal for financial help to make the legendary artist live comfortably. Ermelinda's ego is incensed at the pity expressed. The same day she dashes to the Editor and threatens him with defamation, demanding an apology, which he tenders. Unfortunately, that costs the journalist his column.

The story ends on a sad note.

Damodar Mauzo is the pre-eminent author of Konkani literature.



Illustration: Pakhi Sen

# AN ETHIOPIAN MOVIE FOR EVERYONE



Photo by Assavri Kulkarni

BY KARISHMA D'MELLO

“This is my debut feature film, and it is about two best friends pursuing their own unique aims and desires, and the different paths they take to get there,” says Jan Phillip Weyl, director of *Running Against the Wind* (2019), which has its world premiere on 22 January at the 51<sup>st</sup> International Film Festival of India. “It’s a feel-good film; a story of friendship. One of the boys is trying to become a marathon runner, while his best friend is an aspiring photographer. It is an authentically and realistically made drama story about a friendship. It’s a life-affirming film.”

“Our film was selected by the cultural minister of the Ethiopian government as our national nomination for the best international feature film category for the Oscars in 2020. That’s what makes it special,” says Samerawit Seid, one of the

producers for *Running Against the Wind*. Unlike Weyl, Seid was born and raised in Ethiopia.

Given its connection with athleticism, the film also features the all-time-great Ethiopian long-distance track-road runner, two-time Olympic gold medal winner, and the winner of four World Championships titles, Haile Gebrselassie performing as himself.

*Running Against the Wind* was filmed within the national capital Addis Ababa, and across other locations spread across the rest of the country. “I was born in Germany, lived there for several years and studied at the Munich film school, but I am Ethiopian at heart,” says Weyl. “That’s why it’s especially a great honour to be Ethiopia’s only contender at the Oscars in 2020. Despite being born in Germany, I am still considered Ethiopian. I believe intercultural filmmaking is a demonstration of unity.”

Weyl told *The Peacock*, “Ethiopia is very close to my heart; the culture, the people, and everything about it. As a student in the eighth grade, I started collecting donations to raise funds to build a school in Ethiopia. Then I was invited to Ethiopia by the Austrian actor Karlheinz Böhm when I was eighteen. Back in 1982, he founded an NGO to promote development in Ethiopia and when he invited me here, I began to learn a lot about the culture through my humanitarian work with him. My time in Ethiopia inspired me to make this film.”

Seid describes the process of shooting for the film as one of their biggest challenges during the filmmaking process. “There were many changes happening within the Ethiopian government at the time. This made our job harder. The tense political climate and the governmental transformations were difficult,” Seid tells *The Peacock*.

“There is a lot of talent in Ethiopia. We have fantastic stories, great writers, directors, actors – we have everything, but no infrastructure or funding to back it up. The government does not support films very much. To them, it’s just entertainment – nothing more. That’s what makes it hard.”

As a writer and director, Weyl hopes more people continue to seek out the film and watch it long after the festival is over. “What I want is for people to understand the unique desire everybody carries within them. Everybody has dreams and desires to live for and strive for – things that they are working towards. That’s what the film is about,” he says. “One of my biggest hopes for the film is that it gets picked up by Netflix, India. It’s a movie for everyone; a movie for every generation. It brings something positive to the world and its audience.”

# DEFIBRILLATING KONKANI CINEMA

BY SACHIN CHATTE

To pick up from where I left in yesterday's column, Konkani cinema has had its share of ups and downs, but mostly a flat line. It would be unfair to call it a 'film industry' because it is not an organized sector. Most of the film makers and producers are on their own, making films out of love and passion for cinema. The Entertainment Society of Goa is doing its bit to bring them under one umbrella, with its guide to the Goan film fraternity.

The first Konkani film *Mogacho Anvddo* was released in 1950, and even though there were films made intermittently, there were only four significant ones in the next half a century – the other notable ones being *Amchem Noxib* (1963), *Nirmon* (1966), and *Bhuierantlo Munis* (1977) which was the first color film in Konkani.

Thanks to VHS and single-screen theatres that were not in the best shape, the 80s and 90s weren't kind to cinema, and Konkani films were no different. The revival only happened after IFFI moved to Goa in 2004 and subsequently *Aleesha*

(2004), *Antarnaad* (2006), *Sawariya* (2009), *Paltadacho Munis* (2009), *O' Maria* (2010), *Digant* (2012), *Baga Beach* (2013), *Nachom-ia-Kumpasar* (2014), *A Rainy Day* (2014), *K Sera Sera* (2016), and *Juze* (2017) made it to the Indian Panorama at IFFI. For a state that has a population of just 15 lakhs, the majority of whom live in the hinterland, that is an impressive number of films, especially if you consider the fact that there is probably a much better chance of getting lucky at the notoriously crooked casinos floating on the Mandovi River, than expecting to break even after investing money in producing a film.

For the last few years, there has been an unofficial section at IFFI for Konkani and Marathi films. One could argue either way whether there should be such a section or not but it does serve as a boost for local filmmakers. This year, only two short films could make the cut, both made by young filmmakers – a student of Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute (SRFTI) Suyash Kamat's *Written In The Corners* and *Shinvar* by Manguirish Bandodkar, who studied at the Panjim-based Vinsan Academy.

With technology at their disposal,

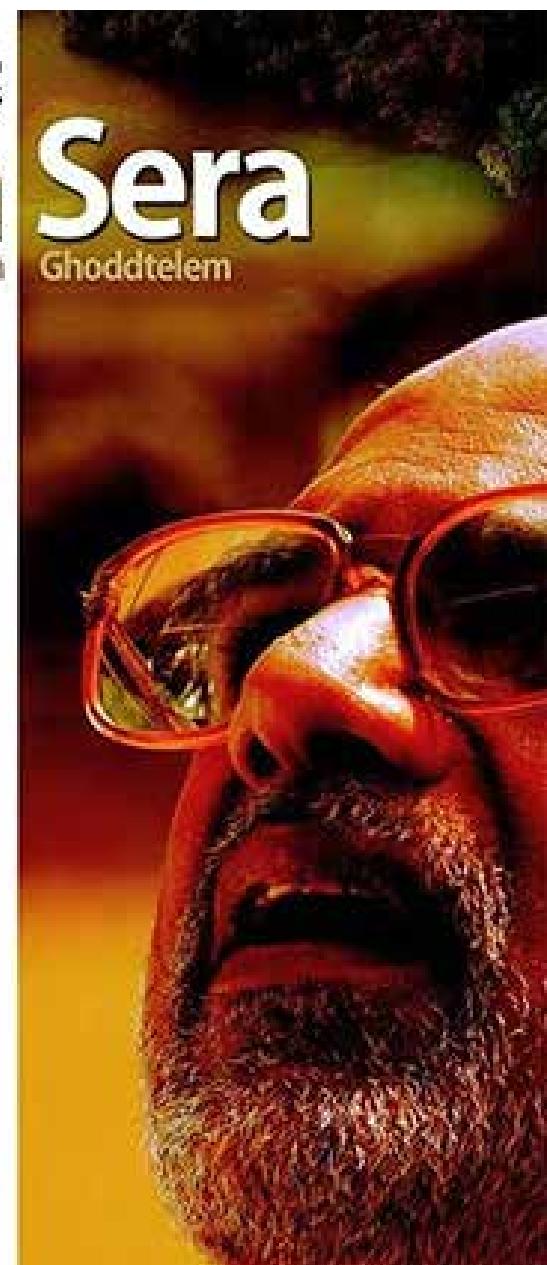


de Goan Studio  
presents

**k Sera**  
Ghodpachem

Story, Screenplay, Dialogues, Direction

Rajeev Shinde



it has become easier to make low budget films but all the stakeholders agree that more needs to be done on several counts. How can one encourage young filmmakers to start making short films? In fact, before that, how can the state help aspiring filmmakers to study film-making given that barring the government institutes like FTII, it is not a cheap affair. Presently, the Art and Culture department gives scholarships to some students but there is no specific scheme related to films – their scholarships are for art, across the board.

Once they learn filmmaking, they should also be encouraged to make short films, to start with. A small fund of say Rs25 lakhs a year, which is a minuscule amount compared to the IFFI budget, could be set aside for young and deserving filmmakers to make 4-5 short films every year. Any aspiring filmmaker in the state will tell you that a pittance sum of Rs.5 lakhs would be akin to a king's ransom to make a short film.

There is a Film Finance scheme run by

the government, but in its present *avatar*, the money (50% or 50 lakhs, whichever is lower) to the producer comes a good year or two *after* making the film. The problem there is pretty evident – you need extremely deep pockets to get involved in the business of movies.

The government could consider something on the lines of a Film Development Corporation, run by the Entertainment Society of Goa, where they shortlist scripts, mentor them and help produce a film, all done professionally at a minimum cost.

Once a film is made, it is up to the audience to patronize and support it. That sadly doesn't happen a lot. Only a once in lifetime film like *Nachom-ia-Kumpasar* (2014) gets a repeat audience, which is an exception to the rule. Most Konkani films are barely seen by 2-3% of the population. If that number goes up, to say 8-10% of Goans watching Konkani films, it will be a game-changer for Goan cinema. Here's hoping for a better future for our home state's cinema.

# THE JOURNEYS OF LIFE

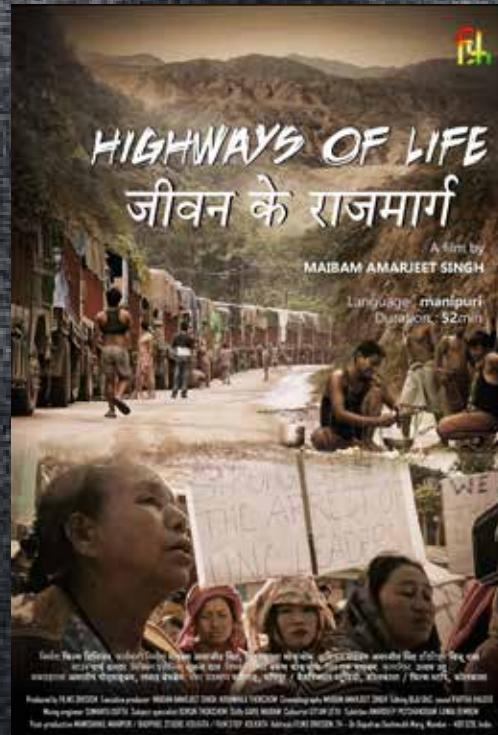
BY SUYASH KAMAT

If one wonders what it takes or what one must do to be able to make films, filmmaker Amar Maibam's life is the answer. Born and brought up in Manipur, Amar's journey to making multiple award-winning fiction and non-fiction films began differently. It is a story that began at home. "My father, M.A. Singh, is one of the first FTII graduates from Manipur. That makes me a second-generation filmmaker." Starting his career as an assistant to his late father, Amar was drawn into independent filmmaking because of the creative freedom that enabled him to tell stories of the human experience.

But circumstances weren't all that bright and owing to financial troubles at home, Amar had to start looking after his family, and began working as a bus conductor, doing so for close to 10 years in the late 1990s. This, he believes, is where he first really saw the life he has portrayed in his new documentary *Highways of Life* (2019), a story about a group of truckers who maneuver through the perilous highways of North East India, putting their lives on the line, ferrying essential commodities to serve three million people in the landlocked state of Manipur.

"After I left the conductor work, I came into films again in 2005-2006," Amar says, and he began working with his father again while beginning to engage in independent documentary work himself. He made his directorial documentary debut with *City of Victims* (2009), a film on extra-judicial killings in Manipur.

A few films since then, Amar began delving into the idea of making something about the



universe he closely inhabited a decade ago. He began shooting his documentary in 2014 after having formulated it in a workshop conducted by the Manipur Film Development Corporation, Television and Cine Foundation Manipur, and Documentary Resource Initiative (DRI), Kolkata. The workshop, organized in Imphal, opened up Amar's world and he went on to secure a grant by the Films Division to fund his film.

Shooting and developing the documentary over 5 years, Amar spent endless, grueling hours to make this omnipresent yet ignored universe of

highways and truckers accessible to the audience. Speaking about one of his most challenging experiences while filming, he shared, "There was a protest going on at the National Highway 37 and we went to capture the moment. Most people were pelting stones at that moment." While Amar and his cameraman were shooting this, the police falsely accused them of instigating protestors and arrested them, confiscating their equipment, and ultimately, making them delete their footage. "Next day, we were part of the newspapers, accused of being fake journalists and imposters."

Manipuri cinema, initially having made its mark with filmmakers like Aribam Syam Sharma, finds itself in a phase of a minor resurgence with filmmakers, like Amar, Haobam Paban Kumar, and others, who are experimenting with the form. Amar wants to continue working with regional Manipuri cinema and make human stories that reflect our day to day reality. With traditional theatres slowly vanishing from Manipur, a younger crop of filmmakers look at OTT platforms as a possible solution for the exhibition of their films. 'Haobam Paban's *Loktak Lairembi* (2016) streamed on Netflix. Given the number of Manipuri inhabitants in Bangladesh, Myanmar, and several parts of Assam, I believe our stories can reach them through these OTT platforms" Amar stated.

While *Highways of Life* does the festival rounds, Amar is already working on his next documentary on the two-time Commonwealth Games gold medal-winning weightlifter K. Sanjita Chanu and the doping scandal she was part of, which he hopes to complete and release later this year.

*Highways of Life* is at 20.15 at Inox Screen 2.



*'Don't worry, it's only bird flu'*



# “BURIED UNDER THE RUG”

BY DR. LUIS DIAS

**E**n *Isyhos Anthros* (*A Simple Man*, 2019) by Greek director Tassos Gerakinis is a psychological thriller set on a beautiful little island. The contrast between the lush natural setting in which the drama unfolds and the ‘ugliness’ the human psyche can conceal is stark.

Makis (Takis Sakellariou) is a vintner (wine-maker), and a widower with a quiet disposition, who lives on a remote island off mainland Greece with his 30-year-old daughter Sofia (Katerina Papanastastou). He was compelled to raise her as a single parent after his wife died, and their relationship has never been easy. Sofia blames Makis for the death of her mother and also accuses him of being judgmental about her failed marriage, which has compelled her to return home to live with her father.

When Michalis (Christos Strepkos), a dangerous fugitive from the police, takes Makis hostage, his primary concern is to protect his daughter. Makis invents a story, pretending to be an immigrant worker, a mere bottling assistant. But none of his ploys can prevent his daughter from falling in love with the criminal.

The police dragnet draws ever tighter around Michalis, who grows increasingly desperate and cold-bloodedly murders two officers who identify him. This terrifies Makis even further, but Sofia is too besotted to listen to her father and becomes an accomplice in helping Michalis escape. What the film explores is the dark corners in the personalities and histories of Makis and Sofia, not just the criminal Michalis.

Gerakinis (who also co-wrote the script with Christos Strepkos, who plays Michalis in the film) spoke about his film to the Greek magazine *In Exarchia* just a few days ago. What fascinates him is “the dark side behind the everyday faces we meet... Everyone has a story worth telling,” he felt. Everyone has a unique story, “personal dramas and

injustices” that might escape the casual observer.

Gerakinis has lived in the countryside, and he says that “contrary to the beautified and often sanctified image we may have” it also conceals “many dark secrets”. He goes as far as to say that *A Simple Man* has an “anthropological direction”. People in our everyday lives, just like Makis, are “invisible”, just another statistic. Life in the countryside, particularly on a tiny island can be literally insular, with “an indifference to what is happening outside”, born out of conservatism, and entrenchment in the personal home and hearth. This, says Gerakinis, is why his character in the film Makis, “as often happens in Greek society,” prefers “to bury things under the rug” and avoid conflict. But this burial can only compound psychological trauma.

Sofia’s character comes across as a dynamic female figure who, in taking matters into her own hands, attempts to break free from the chains and stereotypes imposed by an orthodox patriarchal society while on the other hand being inexorably drawn to a strong male figure, embodied here by the escaped convict Michalis.

In Gerakinis’ view, “Sofia’s relationship with Michalis is essentially the way to break the relationship with her father, to bring a vertical rupture and finally leave the island.”

The breathtaking Greek landscapes are a particular highlight of the film, but for Gerakinis it is much more personal. “My gaze, when I am in the countryside, is not the gaze of a tourist or a man who sees this art in the landscape. For me, it is an experience. As a child, I played here, I grew up in the fields and [I also know] the cruelty that lurks in the provincial cities. The fact that the film took place outdoors was something very familiar to me and piqued my interest. It is a familiar and foreign environment at the same time, but I cannot see the countryside with the tenderness of an outside observer.”

It calls to mind another film I had written about just a few days ago, *Dev Bhoomi* (*Land of the Gods*, 2016) by Serbian director Goran Paskaljević,

which has a similar juxtaposition of jaw-dropping natural beauty and the “dark secrets” festering among its inhabitants. Hell is just a couple of thought processes away, even in earthly Paradise.

Gerakinis told *In Exarchia* that “The Goa festival – meaning IFFI - will be the first [in which] we will be able to see it in a hall and I hope we can do it”, he said. On that score, he can rest easy. Far from being “buried under the rug”, *A Simple Man* will walk the red carpet in the 51<sup>st</sup> IFFI World Panorama section.

Dr. Luis Dias is a physician, musician, writer and founder of music education charity Child's Play India Foundation [www.childsplayindia.org](http://www.childsplayindia.org). He blogs at [www.luisdias.wordpress.com](http://www.luisdias.wordpress.com).

# WILL YOU BE MY FRANKENSTEIN?



Illustration: Rai

BY DR RACHANA PATNI

February - being the month dedicated to love - is often something I look forward to, especially as my husband's name is Valentine. However, in the last few years, something about the way in which it has been celebrated, and how it is represented in society, has been troubling me. The festival seems to isolate people who are not in relationships which is something that I have been particularly committed to challenging. In fact, I have been working on getting together a podcast series for February, that is dedicated to self-love, and highlights the diversity of love beyond couplehood. So, serendipitously, when I heard about the documentary *The 14th February & Beyond* (2020), I was intrigued to find out more.

This film has been produced with attention to technical sophistication and is dedicated to demonstrating the various ways in which Valentine's Day in India (and elsewhere) is about everything but the celebration of love. It highlights the commercialisation of love, especially regarding what I think

of as the '*navratriification*' of Valentine's Day by adding a whole week in advance of 14 February to buy a different thing each day including roses, teddies, and chocolate. It also highlights the crimes against women that are catalysed around Valentine's day and the unparalleled access it gives boys and men to tease and harass women in public.

I learnt more from the Director Dr. Utpal Kalal, who had just witnessed a heartening reception of his film at the screening at the 51<sup>st</sup> International Film Festival of India. The lingering and loud applause gave him a sense that the message had really moved the audience. In our conversation, I found out that he had made good use of his med school years - to not just get his MBBS but also to study films – and had gone so far as to create his own curriculum built entirely on the free digital resources available to him. I have written before about the importance of films in creating empathy and Kalal was amazed to discover the genre of documentary film making, which he saw as an empathy-generator, and realised that this genre was his calling.

Kalal said, 'I was brought up in a

small village, and they used to publish romantic *shaayari* from guys who wanted to woo girls in the village. It used to be a big embarrassment for the girls as everyone was known by their first names. It would get worse every year. Even when I went to study for my medical entrance exams in Kota, I noticed that in the coaching institutes, security personnel were deployed to prevent teasing and molestation. Despite being an introvert, I also felt a strange feeling in February when I would notice my other friends had girlfriends.'

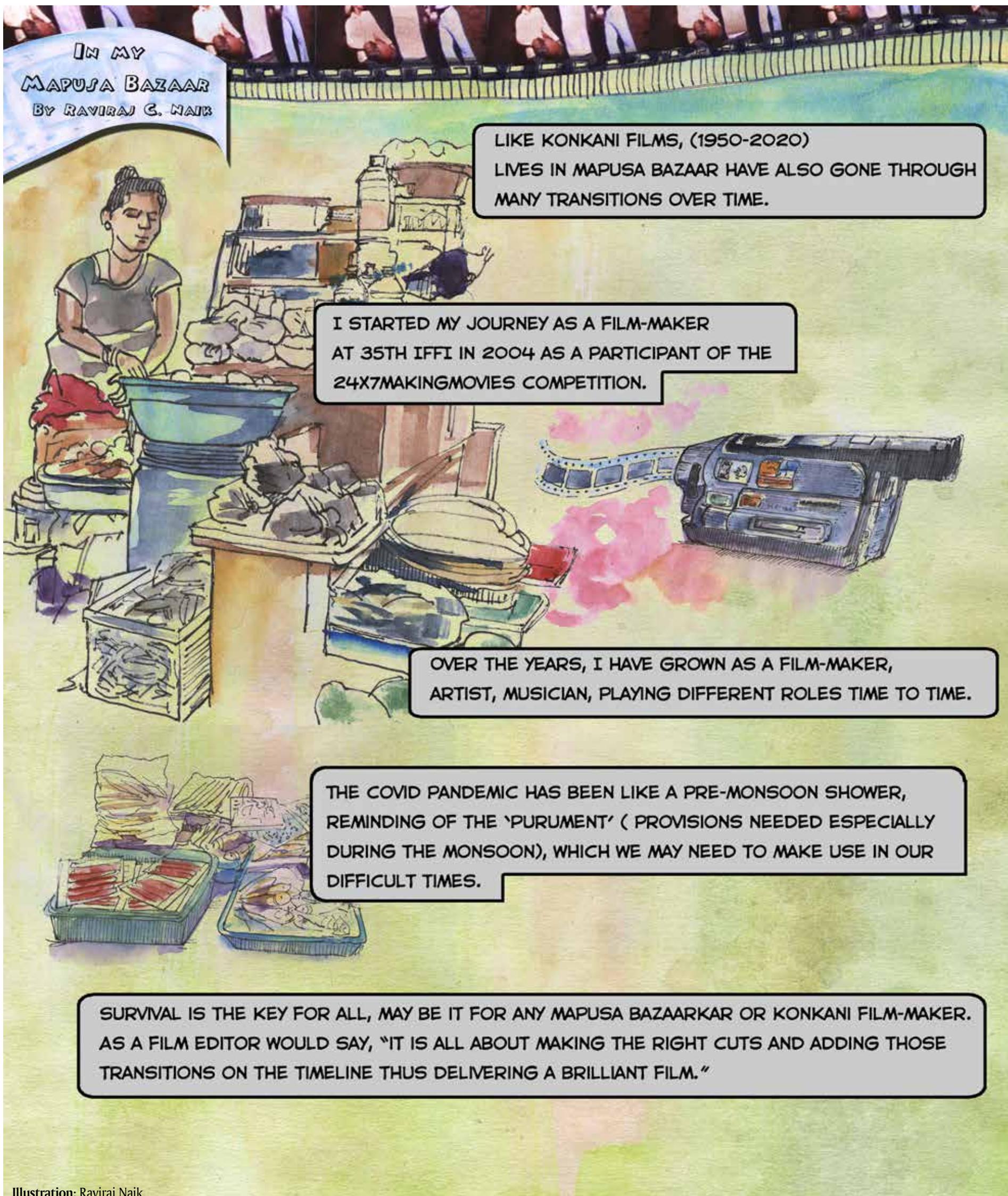
Instead of making the right-wing argument about Valentine's Day being an anathema purely because of it being a western and liberal celebration, this film highlights the ways in which Valentine's Day is more likely to bring experiences of violence and violation in the private lives of women. It was also interesting to see the global trends in women's mental health and wellbeing being challenged, with victims of domestic violence feeling the urge to couple up with their abusers again, with jilted lovers resorting to acid attacks in India and shoot-outs in the United States, and with suicide lines noting a remarkable increase in

the support needed by women around Valentine's day.

Kalal's documentary brings together the historical, psychological, sociological, political, and personal aspects that make Valentine's Day about everything except about love. All of this left me feeling even more committed to doing something loving on Valentine's Day. It would be great if we could dedicate Valentine's Day to learning more about self-love, respect, and mutuality in affectionate relationships.

With Valentine's Day around the corner, it would be important to take stock of how much we subscribe to the happy couple metaphor in making sense of a fulfilled life. More people than before are choosing to stay single or to engage in different forms of relationships that challenge ownership, heterosexuality, fidelity, and even proximity. What is this thing called love? It's what you make of it!

*Dr. Rachana Patni is a Panjim-based leadership consultant who works globally. She is the founder of The Centre of ME and writes on emotional wellbeing and mental health.*



# GLOBAL WARMING'S COLD RECEPTION

BY ROHAN MENEZES

Greta Thunberg, the Swedish 18-year-old climate activist, who is globally famous for sparking worldwide strikes for climate action, was the subject of the documentary *I Am Greta*, which screened at the 51st International Film Festival of India to a theater under half full.

Climate change is the human-caused shift in global temperatures (primarily through fossil fuel emissions) that will inevitably result in famines, extreme weather events, and mass migration over the next few decades if left unchecked. Yet, as we see from the evidence at IFFI, the opportunity to learn more about it doesn't generate much enthusiasm.

There are some ready explanations for this: the COVID-19 crisis, and people not wanting to depress themselves. But over the past few days, I have seen a sexual abuse drama and a movie about a man dying from cancer with packed audiences. This leaves the obvious explanation; people aren't interested in hearing about climate change.

To a 20-year-old like myself, it seems like the demographic that makes up most of IFFI audiences simply doesn't care. As Thunberg says, older generations tend to place the world's problems on our shoulders, saying we are their hope, but there is "simply not enough time to wait for us to grow up" and take the reins on issues like climate

change.

*I am Greta*'s numerous clips of worldwide protests clearly shows that the crowds of people, who protested for environmental action from elected representatives and the UN, leaned heavily young. It is the same with the My Mollem campaign in Goa. The movement, currently working to prevent three environmentally destructive projects in our tiny state's largest protected area, is primarily

youth-driven.

Much the same is true of COVID-19 as well, as a quick walk around IFFI locations will tell you. The people most commonly following pandemic protocols like mask-wearing, aside from the especially vulnerable elderly, are people under the age of 35. Some younger people are also not taking precautions, but when compared to the more vulnerable middle-aged, among whom mask-wearers are not very

prevalent at all, it is clear who cares more.

I think young people tend to be the most informed, having grown up with unlimited information via the internet, so it is no surprise most activists have come from our demographic. But *I am Greta* also portrayed the frustration young activists face in today's world. As Suyash Kamat, the 26-year-old filmmaker (and my colleague) said, showing Thunberg going from conference to conference to no avail "portrayed the futility" of presenting this cause to older people who willfully "ignore [it] despite it being such an immediate catastrophe."

Kamat pointed out it really "takes a toll" to be fighting that seemingly meaningless fight. Thunberg asks herself, "why do they even invite me?". It's a good question. The same people who ignore climate justice welcome climate activists at their events. Perhaps, they want to seem like they are doing something without actually doing anything.

Climate change is all of our problems. Young people have been doing more than their fair share. Seven million came together to protest in 2019 when Thunberg called for climate action. But we still need older generations to stand up and give a damn, to get politicians to take action, hold wrongdoers accountable, and make sustainable choices. That's true for the pandemic too. Until then, as Greta says, young people are left to keep doing the "same thing until they get it."



Illustration: Chloe Cordeiro

## PEACOCK PICKS



**Spring Blossom (2020)**  
Dir: Suzanne Lindon  
73min, French  
9:10am, Maquinez 1

**Asuram (2020)**  
Dir: Vetri Maaran  
Tamil, 140mins  
16:00 Inox Screen 2



**Summertime (2020)**  
USA 95 min. English  
Director : Carlos López Estrada  
12.10pm, Maquinez 1

**The Castle (2020)**  
Director : Lina Lužyt  
90 min. English, Lithuanian  
19:30, Inox Screen 3



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