

THE PEACOCK

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Illustration: Pakhi Sen

IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19

BY DAMODAR MAUZO

Last year when we rejoiced in the Golden Jubilee edition of IFFI, hardly anyone knew what was in store for the following year. The Corona virus that landed in India in January 2020 spread its wings in multiple directions and grew up in manifold proportions, leading to lockdowns and lockouts. All cultural activities came to a standstill, probably for the longest time in the world's modern history. Cinema halls and theatres remained closed, film releases were postponed, festivals stood cancelled, and the films in the making came to a halt. Billions of dollars went down the drain. Given this situation, I least expected IFFI's 51st edition to happen.

Last March, when I had put my right foot forward to leave for France, to participate in the Paris Book Fair, little did I know it was not to be. India was the Guest of Honour at the global event, and I was proud to be one among the few representing my country's literary fraternity. End of February, I was back from Delhi after attending the Festival of Letters, unmindful of the forthcoming catastrophe. I became apprehensive only after knowing the rising rate of

infections and death toll threatening the entire world. The cancellation of the event was announced by the host country just a few days before the proposed dates. In view of this experience, the ambiguity arising out of the pandemic condition kept me hopelessly guessing the fate of the 51st edition of IFFI, until the dates were announced.

Over the last ten months, the pandemic has taught me a few lessons. My backlog of reading and writing shrank. I began participating in literary events online, like many of my fellow writers. But I also learnt to choose a film of my choice.

I don't know if I can call myself a film buff, but I haven't missed a single edition of the IFFI ever since 2004, when it started being staged in Goa. I believe watching movies has helped me imagine differently, and hone my writing skills. Last few months, with guidance from my grand-children, I have been using OTT platforms to self-curate films.

This year, for the first time, the 51st IFFI is held in two segments to cope up with the Covid-19 situation. The physical one, like before, for a limited audience, and the virtual segment for those film enthusiasts who refrain from going in public. This

will especially help the elderly folks, like me, to maintain the physical distance and yet enjoy the selected movies. Viva IFFI.

Whenever there has been a global catastrophe or a national disaster, it gradually, if not instantly, finds its way into art, literature and cinema. India has observed this scenario post- partition. Bhisham Sahani's outstanding novel *Tamas* that was made into a film, stands testimony to this effect. As the new normal emerges, I am sure, plenty of new stories will erupt and many more will find their way into films. I understand, a few feature and short films have already been made and more are in the making. Undoubtedly, the year 2020 has provided plenty of fodder to creative minds.

The pandemic situation has given birth to many desirable and undesirable incidents. A large poverty stricken students' community has been at the receiving end, unsure on how to cope up with online classes with no gadgets in hand. We always complained time was inadequate, but it suddenly became abundant, begging you to make the best use of it.

While the slowed down pace of lifestyle benefitted a handful

of entities like writers and artists, household violence recorded a phenomenal rise. Patriarchy deeply rooted in Indian society has further aggravated the domestic violence. Cases of paranoia and xenophobia have sprung up, as if they were waiting in the wings for an opportunity to pounce. A tsunami of hate engulfed many parts of the country and the world, leaving the marginalized at the mercy of the perpetrators. For instance, the George Floyd incident in US is smoldering even today. Sentiments against migrant labourers flared up as if they were the cause of the pandemic. In a few cases even the approach towards elderly people was dangerously sickening as some families felt that the older people were easily expendable. This tsunami of hate and abuse shamelessly flaunted violence, cruelty and neglect. How can we expect this to go undocumented?

The silver lining to this dark state of affairs is that the vaccination drive has started, thereby providing succor to the paranoid mind. Apparently, a new dawn is setting in bringing hope in the new year.

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



Photo by Assavri Kulkarni

THE HELMSMAN

BY SACHIN CHATTE

Most bureaucrats and IAS officers are used to wearing several hats and looking after multiple portfolios. Amit Satija has the responsibility of donning two of the most important ones in India's smallest state. He has been at the helm of affairs as the Chief Executive Officer of the Entertainment Society of Goa for the last year and a half and, since October 2020, he is also handling the all-important portfolio – during these pandemic times – as the Health Secretary for Government of Goa. He is also in charge of Urban Development, Transport, Science and Technology, Factories and Boilers, and is the nodal officer for Swachh Bharat Mission and Pradhan Mantri Aawas Yojana.

With the rollout of the Covid vaccine for frontline health workers in the state, he is busy coordinating those efforts while also being fully involved in getting the 51st edition of the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) underway.

With his staff waiting discreetly, if impatiently, holding some files for approval, he took a few minutes off to talk to *The Peacock* about his experiences this year.

"The circumstances changed drastically earlier this year and by now everyone has adjusted to the new normal, after COVID 19 struck. As a result, we have also incorporated all the safety measures and precautions possible," Satija said.

In consultation with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, a plan was mapped out this year for the festival, and the number of venues where activities were planned was reduced. "We have consciously avoided places where many people could gather. Last year being the Golden jubilee year of IFFI, we took cinema to different parts of the state, went all out to involve people into activities around the Campal promenade, and held exhibitions which received tremendous response. But this year, with the situation being different, we have restricted it to the core activity of films for delegates, with just two venues, Kala

Academy and the Old GMC precinct."

Satija also informed us that there will also be a break of about 90 minutes between films, in order to sanitize the auditorium. Following the MHA guidelines, only 50% or 200 seats, whichever is lower, will be allowed to be occupied – which means that even Kala Academy, with a capacity of around 900, will host a maximum of just 200 delegates.

"I would also like clarify about the hybrid format of the festival," he added. "You can register for the festival for in-person viewing or you can register for online screenings, they are two different things. The films shown in the two formats will also be different, some of the sections are exclusive," he clarified.

When asked how it has been for him personally to look after two high profile events, he said that they are used to handling multiple activities. "As the Health Secretary, it is an advantage because I am familiar with the protocols and measures, so there is no need for a special guidance from another

department. It is easier to coordinate the situation," said the 2008 batch IAS officer.

On the administrative front as the CEO, he has also been instrumental in the renovation of the multiplex, which will generate income for the government. "In the last couple of years, we have put in a lot of work and from being a revenue-sufficient organization, we have become a revenue surplus organization that will contribute to the exchequer and use the money for the promotion of entertainment in Goa," he said referring to the new contract with the multiplex where ESG will earn around Rs.54 lakhs per month with an increase of 5% per year. ESG also intends to reach out to other departments to help them organize events, since they have the expertise of organizing IFFI, which undoubtedly is the biggest annual event in Goa.

While parting, with COVID vaccinations rolling out across the country and IFFI getting underway, you could see that the young officer has a sense of professional satisfaction.



"This pandemic has been catastrophic."

KONKANI CINEMA CONUNDRUMS

BY SUYASH KAMAT

Indian cinema has always been over-represented by Bollywood. But away from the glitz and glamour of Hindi cinema lies the heart of Indian storytelling, its regional cinemas. Led early on by Marathi, Bengali and Tamil cinema, regional cinemas began expanding in all languages and dialects covering every corner of the country. Konkani had its first film in 1950 with *Mogacho Anvddo* directed by Jerry Braganza.

70 years since then, there's very little to celebrate. While the culture of cinephilia has always been largely absent in the state, the introduction of IFFI in 2004 created a few ripples but has largely remained restricted to that. What does it take to create consistently great work that can help shape the identity of 'regional Konkani cinema'? How does one create an environment which can help elevate our films, not just in terms of how many we make but how well we make them? *The Peacock* caught up with a few contemporary cinema practitioners in Goa to get their perspective.

"What we need at this moment is for the government to look at how film bodies have worked in other states to create a

support infrastructure in order to encourage our filmmakers", remarks Laxmikant Shetgaonkar, whose film *Paltadacho Munis* (2009) made waves at the Toronto International Film Festival among many others, and is hailed as one of the best to have come out of the state. 'Financial support is the core reason why we haven't been able to constantly churn out great films.' Drawing on the example of Marathi cinema, he believes, "We need to support the industry in its infancy stage until it can sustain itself. It took 60 years of government financing for Marathi cinema to be at the level where it is today".

Given the limited scope of audiences, commercial viability of a film is always a question for filmmakers who are liable to their financiers. But in recent years, a few films have enjoyed commercial success. Bardroy Barreto's *Nachom-ia-Kumpasar* (2014) led this movement with the film receiving both critical acclaim and public appreciation. "We started with the intention of not just making one film but starting a movement. I wanted to leave a footprint behind and give back to the state I come from. And in turn, inspire others while doing so". Devising an offbeat distribution approach of combining theater releases

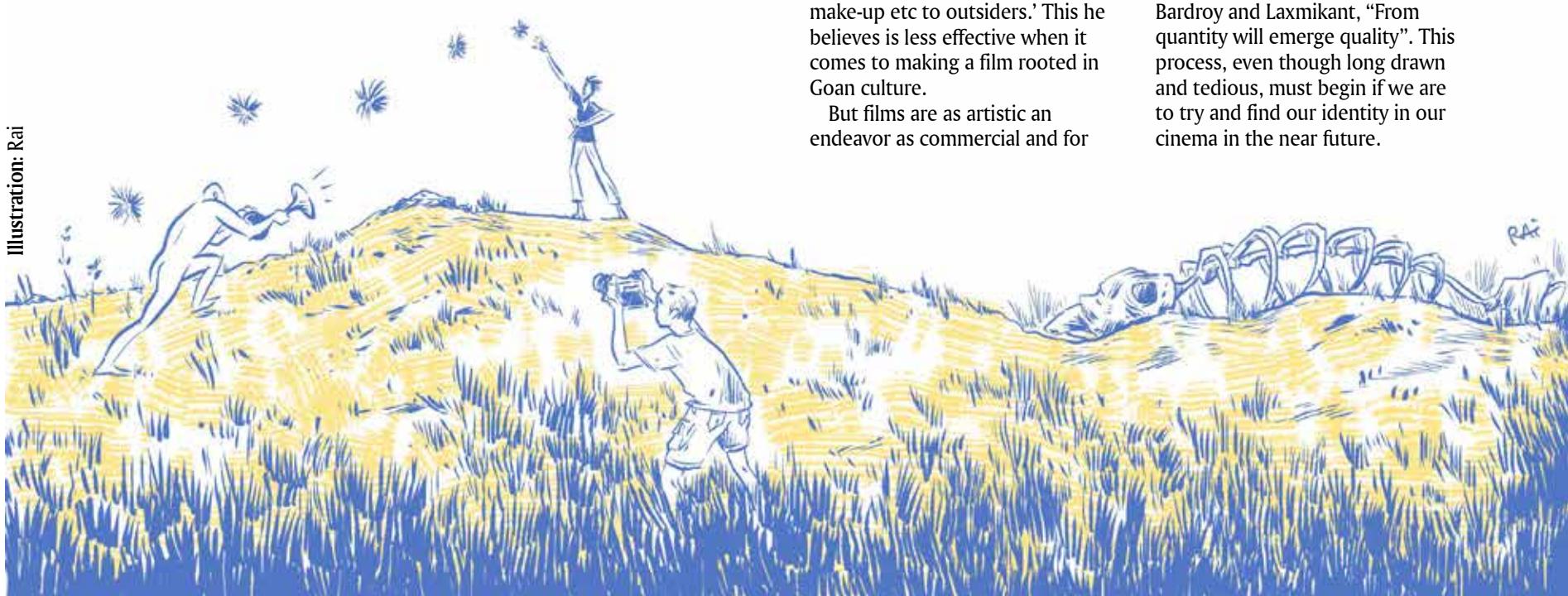
and more than 80 outdoor screenings in villages of Goa, the film has now become the face of contemporary Konkani cinema. He believes that it's not just the making of the film which needs support but also its exhibition. "The avenues for exhibition should be easy and accessible. Only then can young filmmakers dream of putting their films out there for the audiences".

But for many anxious young filmmakers, making films in Konkani is still a matter of risk. "When it comes to regional films, you can't depend on local small markets like ours. You have to either make it in low budget or you make it for the international audience, in which case the language becomes somewhat irrelevant" opines Miransha Naik, an alumnus of Whistling Woods whose debut feature *Juze* (2016) did the festival rounds all over and was widely appreciated for its stark realism, heartfelt authentic performances and its strong hold over the narrative. 'What we also lack is a good culture of actors. It's difficult to find good actors who can speak and perform fluently in Konkani'. Sighting similar lack of film culture, Siddhesh Naik, an editing alumnus of Whistling Woods stated that "when it comes to the crew, most of us want to be a director, DOP or actor, relegating other equally crucial departments like production design, hair and make-up etc to outsiders.' This he believes is less effective when it comes to making a film rooted in Goan culture.

But films are as artistic an endeavor as commercial and for

Yash Sawant, a young filmmaker whose short film *A Cold Summer Night* (2018) opened at the prestigious Locarno International Film Festival, the engagement with formal aspects of filmmaking are more intriguing. And yet, funding still remains a crucial element. 'My short film was entirely self-funded. I skipped college and used that money which luckily worked out well.' But going ahead, he believes we need to decondition ourselves from the clutches of traditional ways of approaching the medium. "I've been developing my own way of producing my current films, by limiting the number of crew and equipment, and investing in time rather than people".

So while the problems exist at both personal and systematic level, the solutions seem to come from seeing a complete overhaul across the board from the making, distribution and ultimately, creating audiences. It's not from the lack of creative talent but the lack of possible platforms to identify this talent and nurture these voices, in order to let the art become primary without the commerce dictating its viability. The medium of cinema has always been polarized between being entertainment and an art form. And what Konkani cinema needs is for both of these extremes to be made in abundance. As coincidentally stated by both Bardroy and Laxmikant, "From quantity will emerge quality". This process, even though long drawn and tedious, must begin if we are to try and find our identity in our cinema in the near future.



AN OPENING CEREMONY WITH A DIFFERENCE



BY IMPANA KULKARNI

Anearly empty auditorium, a grand opening ceremony with hardly any celebrities, a film festival's inaugural celebration with a greater strength of police force than film people – the 51st International Film Festival of India's opening ceremony will certainly be remembered! In ordinary times, these occurrences would have been appalling. But not this year.

With a pandemic and large-scale deaths looming over our heads, even conducting a Film Festival is a matter of great concern. In such a situation, a toned-down opening ceremony is commendable.

Chief Minister Pramod Sawant's entry kick-started the evening's line-up of programmes. Mrs Neerja Sekhar, additional Secretary of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, briefed the viewers on the list of films curated for this year. Many

actors and film-makers from the industry including Anupam Kher, Anil Kapoor, Vidya Balan and Ranveer Singh, sent in their wishes through video bytes – the only 'film-star experience' of the evening for most people at the auditorium, aside from the presence of Chief Guest Kiccha Sudeep and the event host Tisca Chopra. A heartwarming selection of Goan songs and dances followed next. Goa's much adored singer Sonia Shirsat filled the emptiness with her rich voice, accompanied by vibrant dancers all swaying to songs like 'Ge ge saiba'. Traditional folk dances like Diwli Naach, Ghodemodni and Goff had almost everybody in the audience humming or swaying, an audience almost entirely comprised of locals - staff and security. For performers to dance to cameras placed far away streaming live, but to an empty hall, must have been a different experience.

Though still a large gathering of people, with adequate social distancing and face-masks on, everyone working for this ceremony have certainly put in efforts to maintain the safety protocol, if not for their health, atleast to follow orders. The paucity of events through the pandemic left many people jobless – from venue owners, light and sound providers, and stage décor companies to performers, transport crews etc. An event like this will certainly help prop up many Goan families economically.

Photos by Siddhartha Lall & Michael Praveen



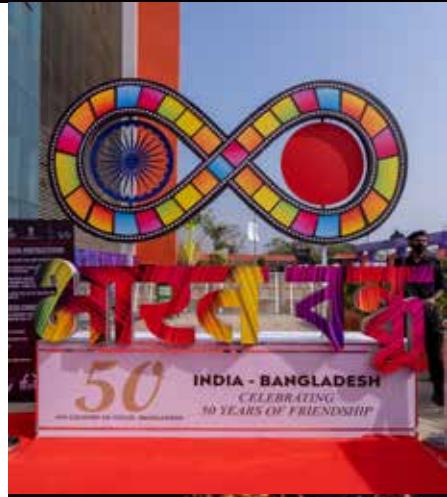
Our performances stopped due to the Pandemic. I am happy to perform after a long time.

— SONIA SHIRSAT,
Singer, Goa



Unlike previous years, this time we see individuals instead of families for the opening.

— LAUREEN
SEQUERA, Sub
Inspector, Goa



We had to practice using masks. The troop was uncomfortable but I insisted for safety reasons.

— DEVENDRA
SHEILAR,
Choreographer, Goa



It feels good to perform without a mask as if the Pandemic has ended

— NILA
MAHENDRA,
dancer, Mumbai



Performing during a Pandemic required us to sanitize the practice halls, venue and props as safety precautions.

— VINOD TALREJA,
Dancer, Mumbai



WESTERN SENSE AND INDIAN SENSIBILITY

BY DR. LUIS DIAS

“Like his films, the music of Satyajit Ray is a unique multi-layered blending of Western sense and Indian sensibility”, says the narrator of a 1984 NFDC (National Film Development Corporation) documentary, *Music of Satyajit Ray* (1984).

This year, the 51st edition of IFFI commemorates his birth centenary by screening several of his classic works.



Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) is a towering figure not only in Bengali but also world cinema. What might not be as well-known is what a consummate film-maker he was, immersing himself in all aspects of the creation of his films, including costume design and even writing, directing and recording his own scores.

“I was born into a musical family”,

he said in the documentary. His paternal grandfather Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury, apart from being a writer, illustrator, philosopher, publisher and amateur astronomer, was also a violinist and composer, who played the Indian flute and drum too. His maternal grandfather Kali Narayan Gupta was also a composer, and as he put it, everyone was a ‘natural singer’ on his mother’s side of the family. He grew up in an atmosphere of Robindro and Brahma Sangeet.

Significantly, Ray was also exposed to western classical music from a very early age. It developed into a more serious interest when a school-friend’s record collection widened his horizons. He read up on composers, their works and musical forms in libraries as he couldn’t afford to buy books.

In his 1955 classic *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*), Ray made Indian film history not only by using a Hindustani classical musician of the stature of sitar maestro Ustad Ravi Shankar, but also for employing the genre cinematically. Such collaborations with other stalwarts such as Ustad Vilayat Khan (sitar) and Ali Akbar Khan (sarod) created a new idiom of film music in India.

As such maestros were ‘often busy internationally’, sometime in the 1960s, Ray decided to take up composition himself. He was too much of a gentleman to say that both Shankar and Khan had differences of opinion with Ray on fitting the music to the film, which gave him the impetus to compose his own music. In the documentary he acknowledged having initial

difficulties, but “achieved some proficiency over time”, he added modestly.

Like many other film composers, Ray composed at the piano, using western notation. When he realized that his musicians weren’t familiar with western scores and used Indian, more specifically, ‘Bengali’ notation, he was unfazed. He learned to transcribe his music from one notation to the other; quite a feat.

Ray understood the power of silence and of natural sounds in augmenting the potency of a background score in his films. The musical accompaniment quite often can be very sparse, but this only serves to highlight it. Less is more. “I use music as discreetly as possible”, he stated.

He reiterated this point in his collection of essays titled *Bishoy Chalachchitra* (published in translation in 2006 as ‘Speaking of Films’), where he devoted a whole essay to ‘Background Music in Films’. “If background music is used without reason, it can only harm the film.”

“Ideally, the director should be aware where music would be needed in the film”, said Ray in the documentary, “assuming the director knows about music.”

His observations are often extraordinarily perceptive. In ‘Speaking of Films’, he writes, “It is risky to use the sarod as there is every chance that the twang of its strings will clash with the hard consonants used in the dialogue, thereby distorting the music.”

Charulata (1964) was Ray’s most satisfying experience as a music director, with musical links in its very structure. Ray believed that all film directors and composers should avoid

hackneyed formulas, worn-out conventions of mindlessly using a certain kind of music to denote happiness, another for sadness or suspense, and so on.

Inevitable comparisons have been made with Rabindranath Tagore and Ravi Shankar in Ray’s ability to combine Western and Indian influences to create his own trademark form, a path-setter for others to follow in his footsteps. No other film director has quite matched the command of music and score-writing that Ray had.

Apart from a few films such as ‘Shakespeare Wallah’ a 1965 Merchant Ivory Production, he chose to write background scores for his own films, for his own “personal pleasure” as he described it.

The celebrated French film composer and conductor Maurice Jarre (1924-2009) spoke admiringly of Ray’s music, terming it “haunting and soul stirring at the same time”. I think the commentator Anita Mukherjee in the NFDC film sums up Ray’s music even more succinctly, “imaginative, not melodramatic; balanced, not exuberant; functional, not decorative.” The same adjectives would have fitted just as well to his cinematography, further demonstrating how intertwined the aural and visual world were in the brilliant mind of Satyajit Ray.

Dr. Luis Dias is a physician, musician, writer and founder of music education charity Child’s Play India Foundation www.childsplayindia.org. He blogs at www.luisdias.wordpress.com.

FILMS IN GOA / GOA IN FILMS

DR. RACHANA PATNI

Goa has been such an inspiration to Bollywood and to the Hindi film industry. The story lines in them have in turn inspired innumerable trips of friend groups to Goa. Before that, there were the honeymooners, a gentler category of fun seekers who seek to begin their wedded bliss in Goa. *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd.* has interesting characters and storylines set in Goa and as with so many other films set in Goa, the focus is entirely on the experience of the tourists. Whether and how they interact with the landscape and relationships with locals is not investigated much. This has successfully created a situation where everyone feels they can come to Goa and do their own thing, in a vacuum, because they are here on holiday and have paid in order to be carefree. It has also festered some negative reactions from local communities.

Last month we were driving in a village in Goa and happened to have a car with a number plate from another Indian state. Despite being domiciled in Goa, having a Goan surname and my husband's fluent Konkani, we got caught up in a storm of hatred by the locals who had had enough. A new hotel

in their area generated many cars from elsewhere coming into their neighbourhood. That we had gone to meet a family there was not enough to calm the flames of passionate hatred toward tourists. We came away from there feeling sad for everyone, the tourists and the locals.

Bollywood's rendition of a great holiday in Goa started with the road trip sensation *Dil Chahta Hai*. The backdrop of exploring the fabulous terrain of Goa while also encountering their internal terrain of friendships made for landmark cinema. Chapora fort was never the same again after that. When selfie opportunities became part of the solemn oath of holidaying, it became even more important to go to all the same places and yet have your own uniquely unbelievable time in Goa. I often wonder about the condition of Chapora fort, and also about the metaphorical ways in which 'pugdundees' become highways over time when destinations get popularized. A little coconut-tree lined street in Parra has become a photo-shoot destination for selfies, bridal photos and group photos after *Dear Zindagi* brought even more underexplored areas into focus. It has become a traffic hazard and one that irks many locals. It is a narrow road where SUVs full of young adults waving in delight and inebriated joy have

to contend with those wanting to go and pick up their children from school or simply get to work.

When I was in Jamaica for a holiday, I found the spring break phenomenon a curious affair as Jamaica is one of those destinations where young Americans came to let their hair down and do all the things that they would not dare to do back in their own country. Goa seems to have performed a similar function in the lives of young Indians as it has that vibe of a place where anything goes.

The dark underbelly of Goa has been the subject of films such as *Go Goa Gone* and *Dum Maro Dum*. Drug addiction, rave parties, being sloshed, bedding strangers, child trafficking, prostitution and commercial sex-work are all part of the backdrop in which tourists in groups seek to create their own share of fun memories in Goa. Date rapes, spiked drinks and other such horror stories abound too. However what is distilled in the tourist's imagination is of the blissfully carefree time in Goa. Yet, Goa feels so safe to Indian parents who send their children on their first trips away with friends. Finding drugs, rock and roll, alcohol, sex and crime are all easier here and yet it is considered safe. It is a wonder how this happens and it is important to note that it does.

How do these things impact our wellbeing? How can films be involved in creating a different kind of responsible fun? These are the kind of questions we were asking Bollywood in the 1980s when every second film had a lavish rape scene picturized, leaving cues about 'how to rape' and leaving nothing to imagination. Yet, there is a lushness to Goa that no matter how much it changes to a lesser version of itself, when people first arrive here, they have never seen anything like it, and they have never met themselves so relaxed.

In all these films relationships happen in the backdrop of a Goan landscape or seascape. These 'scapes' are important containers for what may emerge if we honour the places we go to as tourists. Picking up our garbage behind us is just one way in which we may do this but becoming more conscious that we holiday in spaces where daily lives are being lived may inject a different quality of joy in the tourists and the locals. A joy in which we may all be more connected.

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.





THE MASQUERADE OF LIFE

BY VIVEK MENEZES

This year at the International Film Festival of India, you need more than just an official pass and reserved ticket to access the stunning cinematic banquet that is the specialty of Asia's oldest event of its type. You have to be properly masked up: for your protection, as well as ours, and all the rest of the festival-goers in our unprecedented pandemic predicament.

Masks are actually an intrinsic element of the theatrical. Those who are old enough – and this certainly excludes the 90% of Team Peacock who are digital natives of the millennial generation (and even younger) – will recall the two masks that were standard accoutrements to every auditorium or cinema hall: one cast in the rictus of grimacing, and the other beaming with mirth. These date back to ancient Greek theatre, the ultimate ancestor of cinematic playacting, and represent the classical muses.

"Life is a masquerade," said Oscar Wilde, "everywhere you look people are hiding behind masks." He meant artifice, and role-playing, as people pretend to be what they are not, and the great Irish poet and playwright knew exactly

what he was talking about because he himself bore the secret of his homosexuality (before being exposed, humiliated, persecuted, and jailed for it). That "unmasking" was his ruin, undoubtedly counting heavily towards his extremely premature death at just 46.

Our 21st century tryst with masks during the Covid-19 pandemic has roller-coastered wildly with both comedic and tragic peaks and valleys. When the "novel coronavirus"

emerged into our consciousness in the first few weeks of 2020, there were many adamant declarations and proscriptions against the use of surgical and N95 face protection. It turns out this was overt misinformation, that aimed to stockpile protective gear for medical personnel. It failed: the epidemic multiplied rapidly, and took hold with fearsome mortality in many countries.

Meanwhile, the countries which ignored the WHO and other pontifications, and immediately developed mass mask usage across their populations, managed to control and then essentially vanquish Covid-19. Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, South Korea have all handled the pandemic notably



better than other parts of the world which failed to take elementary precautions. Those populations – notably the USA and UK – where mask usage became politicized, struggled and have largely failed. What about India? We are in

between. Many people who wear masks do so perfunctorily: sometimes on the chin, very often below the nose. In this way they risk themselves, and compromise the rest of us too.

Listen up loud and clear, at least while you're here in Goa for IFFI. Wear your mask, so that the rest of us can enjoy the movies too.

PEACOCK PICKS



The Big Hit/Un Triomphe (2020)

Director : Emmanuel Courcol
105 min. French
6.45pm, Kala Academy

Little Girl /Petite fille (2020)

85 min. French
Director : Sébastien Lifshitz
3.40pm, Inox Screen 3



Naked Animals Nackte Tiere (2020)

Director : Melanie Waelde
83 min. German
12.30pm, Kala Academy

Kaliya Mardan/Lanka Dahan/ Raja Harishchandra/Shri Krishna Janma

Director: Dadasaheb Phalke
81 min
3.10pm, Maquinez Palace



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