



THE PEACOCK

SATURDAY, 23 NOVEMBER 2024

Young At Heart At 99

BY DAMODAR MAUZO

Back In 2015, when I was on a visit to the United States, the great novelist and writer Amitav Ghosh invited my fellow Goan writer Victor Rangel-Ribeiro along with me to lunch at his home in Brooklyn. I was staying with a friend in New Jersey, and was quite oblivious to the transport system. Victor also lived in New Jersey, though a little distance away from where I was, and offered to give me a ride in his car. When I reached Victor's place, I was greeted by his daughter, Eva. My friend was already ninety then, and required a walking stick, and I had thought he would hire a cab or engage a driver, but then I saw him getting behind the wheel. I asked Eva if he could manage, and – true to her assurance – he turned out to be a proficient driver, who kept talking to me all the way through the bridges and tunnels to arrive at our destination in New York City.

Just after reaching Brooklyn, it turned out that we had missed the precise street. Victor asked a woman by the roadside for the address, to which she said, "I'm sorry, I can't help you." Victor in his usual humour replied, "But you don't look sorry." She too laughed aloud. As we moved along, he kept asking for clues but found himself returning to the same spot. After one more miss, he asked another woman, who gave him the correct directions. Here again, Victor's wit sprung up. He told her, "Be right here. If I go wrong again, I shall come looking for you!"

That beautiful day, we had a sumptuous meal specially cooked for us by Amitav, and the long drives back and forth to Brooklyn helped me understand Victor better. When in Goa, this long-time resident of the USA prefers to live in his ancestral home in Porvorim. He has even hosted writers' meets in this pleasant old family house. In fact, the very first time I met this living legend was at a writers' workshop organised

by *The Navhind Times* at the International Centre Goa, way back at the beginning of the current millennium. Though I had no intention of barging into Victor's workshop, a day before the event I got a call from him requesting me to join him in conducting the workshop, which I did. It was quite an enlightening experience for me.

It was during the following year that a few Goan writers met in Panjim at the insistence of Victor, where he mooted the idea of forming an intimate kind of writers' group that would discuss their writings online on a daily basis, while also meeting physically every month. The idea took shape with his close help and guidance, and has turned out to be a great success. Our beloved Goa Writers group has gone on to many strengths, and also curates the vibrant Goa Art and

Literature Festival, which is running into its 13th edition in 2025.

Like so many Goans, our Victor is multi-talented. He is also an impressive music maestro, and accomplished conductor. But above all, he is known for excellent works of short fiction as well as the fine novel *Tivolem*, which won the Milkweed National Fiction Prize in the USA in 1998. This distinguished man of letters is still engaged with his writing life at an incredible 99 years of age, with at least two books still in the works and expected to be published

in his centenary year. That must be a record, in and of itself, but you can certainly expect further achievements and acknowledgements.

For instance, I think *Tivolem* is a rich description of Goan life that would be a wonderful and authentic documentation of a bygone Goa if captured on celluloid. It can be a wonderful challenge to those film-makers who are interested in making a period film of those times in India's smallest state. Any takers?

Damodar Mauzo won the Jnanpith Award in 2022



Illustration: Pakhi Sen



I'm looking for good documentaries. Goa is a very good place for this festival; nice people, nice food, what's not to like!

Aleksandra Derewienko
Sales Agent
France



I'm looking for investors and producers. I'm here for young voices. This is one of the best places for young filmmakers to meet!

Alexander Leo Pou
Institute Director
Manipur



For Europeans, this festival is the most important one in Asia. It provides an avenue for collaboration between people in our very different markets.

Anna Saura
Producer
Madrid



I have my own festival, so I'm here to find films and fresh, new talent. I'm looking for stories that are gripping and movies that evoke strong emotions.

Amit Agarwal
Filmmaker
Delhi

“I understand the melodrama of Indian movies”

BY JANE BORGES

This is not the first time that Jill Bilcock finds herself in Goa. The celebrated Australian film editor, whose razor-sharp cuts have lifted the experience of watching Baz Luhrmann, Sam Mendes and Shekhar Kapur on the big screen, came here in the 1970s, fresh out of film school. “I was only 22 then,” she smiles, when we meet early on a Friday morning at her hotel in Panjim, “I was to stop in India for two weeks, as I had a job in London. But I loved it so much after I got up to Kashmir that I cancelled my tickets, and stayed back there for three months.”

Bilcock later made short trips to Delhi and Mumbai — then Bombay — before settling for some down time in laid-back Goa. “I got here by boat, and rented a little home in Calangute. People were welcoming. There was a well nearby, a beach, and lots of hippies. I used to travel by bus to Panjim to buy my vegetables. It was fun. I met some extraordinary people, all of whom were looking for something, even though they weren’t sure about what they’d lost.”

The Goa of Bilcock’s youth, she admits, no longer exists. “So many buildings now,” she says, “Shekhar [Kapur] wants to come with me to the place where I used to live. Everyone’s been telling me that it’s not so nice there anymore. But it will be interesting to be shocked by the absurdity of the change.”

Bilcock is part of the jury led by filmmaker Ashutosh Gowariker at the 55th International Film Festival of India (IFFI), and has been busy watching films in the race for the coveted Golden Peacock. Just a day before the interview, she’d seen a three-hour-long film. “I hate sitting through three hours, but I do love the intermission,” she jokes. More seriously, Bilcock says she looks at Indian films differently “because I understand the melodrama of it all. The song-and-dance may put other westerners off, but it has been a part of a lot of movies I have done,” she says, referring to some of Luhrmann’s early films that she edited. “I influenced Baz to come here after *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and see it for himself.” Not surprisingly,

Luhrmann’s next, the Nicole Kidman-starrer *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), paid tribute to Bollywood with a song sequence incorporating *Chamma Chamma* from the Hindi film *China Gate* (1998), and costumes inspired from closer home.

Bilcock’s trifling tryst with Hindi films is probably one of the reasons for her fascination for Indian movies. During her first visit to Bombay, she found herself on a movie set, because it gave her the chance to make a few extra bucks. “I remember sitting on a fence, waiting for a van to come past, to pick up all the hippies up to go to the set.” The 1970s was a time when Hindi filmmakers felt a rather obsessive need to plot hippies “and other decadent white people” drinking and smoking pot into their story lines. “My friends were quite happy to lie around on the set and dope,” she says.

In 2017, when Swedish filmmaker Axel Grigor made a documentary, *Dancing The Invisible*, on Bilcock’s illustrious editing career, Shekhar Kapur, she says, helped him find one of those films where she had a small role. “In the clip, I am in bed with some Indian at a party, wearing this tiny yellow dress. Terrible acting I must say, very embarrassing. Oh my God! If I could, I would have just cut myself out,” says Bilcock, “But honestly, I had a really good time. Like Shekhar says, ‘It was my destiny’.”

To make it to the top in a business that’s unfair, sometimes even ruthless, to its women is not lost on Bilcock. “I think I have never really had a man take a job that I should have got. And I have to thank my mother, Betty Stevenson, for that. She raised us as a single parent after my father ran off. She became the first female union leader of the country, and the first female principal of a co-ed college.” Because her mum raised Bilock and her two brothers to be independent and fearless, she says “it didn’t cross my mind that I was ever treated any differently”. “But I know many women who’ve struggled. It’s bad everywhere... in America, even in Australia. And that’s a disgusting and despicable thing.”

Women will have to keep fighting, she insists. “Even when you’ve achieved everything. Because if you don’t watch out, it all slips back.”



SHORT TAKES

Film Bazaar has gotten much bigger, creating more opportunities for filmmakers to interact with the market.

Batul Mukhtiar
Director
Mumbai



The festival is always expanding, and a good opportunity for us to stay updated with a constantly changing industry.

Shashank Jha
Producer
Delhi



Here you have the opportunity to get an idea picked up by anyone from anywhere in the world. Meeting eclectic people helps us become more open-minded.

Dipannita Sharma
Actor
Mumbai



This festival is too good; we see foreign movies we wouldn’t normally have access to. However, booking is overly complicated for seniors.

Chhajjuram Bajoria
Technocrat
Mumbai

“I Miss Black and White”

BY CHANDRAHAS CHOUDHURY

As the train pulls into Mumbai's Victoria Terminus, dozens of people, keen to gain a headstart over their fellow travellers, begin to spill out from its doors, like seeds bursting from a pod. They are followed by more people – and more – and still more, till they flood the entire frame, a sea of bodies pulsing in the same direction. Beautiful in their togetherness, rendered both anonymous and archetypal by the black and white image, they remind the viewer of the massed audience in a movie theatre. Except that here they face not the screen, but the camera, in a shot that runs for 55 seconds.

And that camera, watching them through a broken windowpane in VT station, was held by Apurba Kishore ("AK") Bir, the cinematographer of Awtar Krishna Kaul's iconic black and white film *27 Down* (1974), which screens at the 2024 International Film Festival of India next week. Backed by a sitar that runs ever faster as though keeping pace with a thousand footfalls, that unforgettable shot still brings tears to the eyes, capturing as it does the rhythm and speed of Bombay, the romance of train travel, and the unconscious urges seeded in the human body by modernity.

And it immediately marked out Bir, a debutant cinematographer fresh from the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune, as a true artist of cinema. More than half a century later, after a long and varied career as a cinematographer and director, Bir, a member of the Technical Committee at IFFI this year, sits in his chambers reminiscing in a quavering voice about

his youth in Bombay.

"70 per cent of the shots in *27 Down* are handheld," he says. "When AK Kaul came to me with the script – the story of a young ticket collector on the train who is seeking to find a meaning to his life as a drifter – I said that the only way to establish the authenticity and immediacy of the story was to use a handheld camera and to shoot really close to the actors using block lenses. But of course, if you shoot in that style in India, crowds immediately gather around the scene and you lose the sense of naturalness. So, for much of the shoot, we would cover the camera with a black cloth and only uncover it at the last moment. Often the crowd emerging from a train doesn't see what's right in front of them!"

In the film, the hero, played by MK Raina, falls in love with a woman he meets on the train. The role, of a middle-class girl working for the Life Insurance Corporation of India, was played by Raakhee. What was it like to shoot a low-budget movie with a rising star of Bengali cinema and Bollywood? "I said to Awtar, 'Please tell Raakhee not to wear false eyelashes or makeup for her scenes. She is a middle-class girl in the film, and we want the camera to capture her natural beauty. He said, 'Bir, why don't you go tell her that!'"

Bir recalls that "Raakhee was already a bit suspicious of me because of my unusual shooting methods. She said, 'Who is this boy who shoots a feature film with a handheld, and shoots in low light?' One day, she wanted to see the rushes we had shot. Although this is usually not done, I said to Kaul we should let her see them. After that, she completely understood what we were doing and

became a changed person."

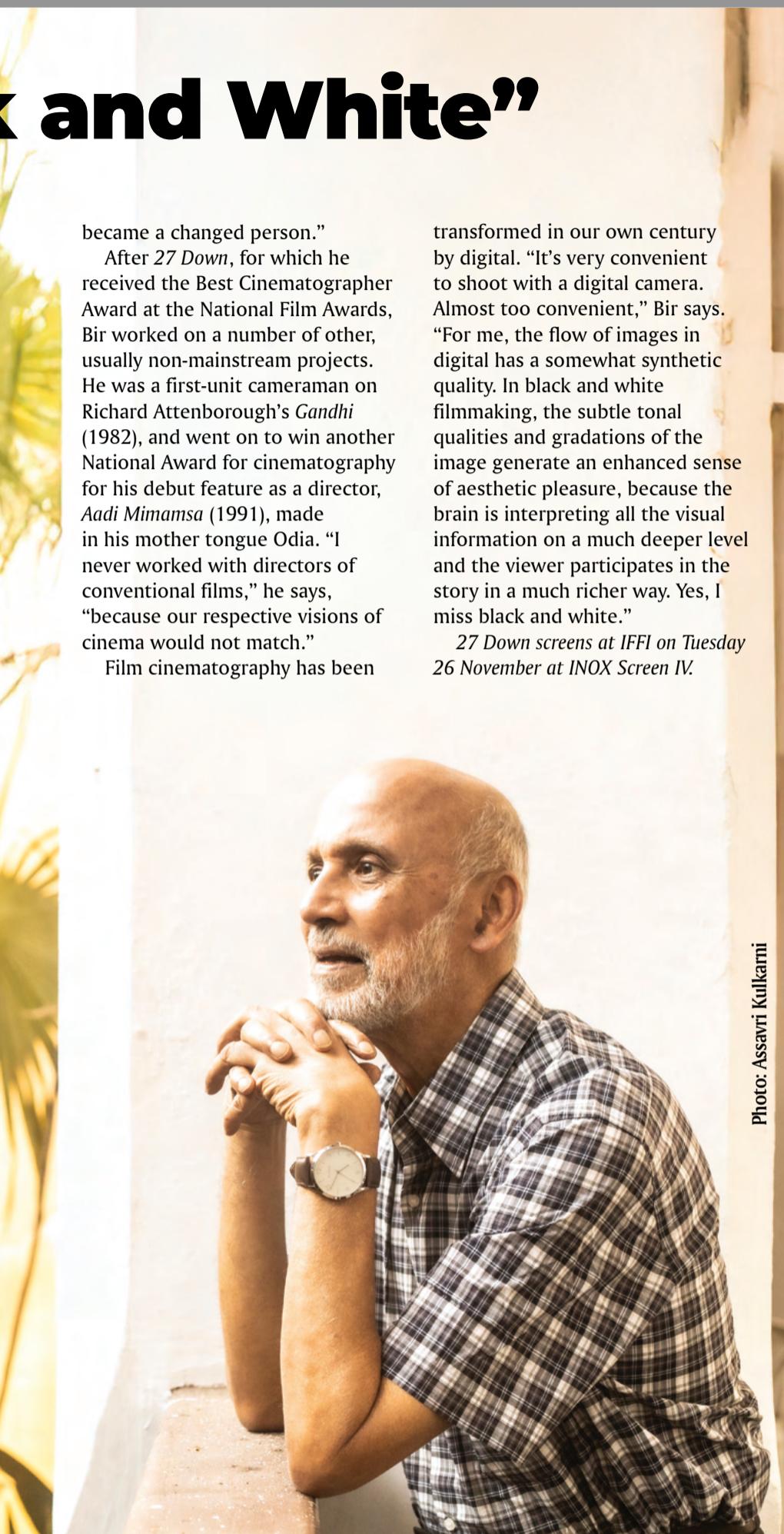
After *27 Down*, for which he received the Best Cinematographer Award at the National Film Awards, Bir worked on a number of other, usually non-mainstream projects. He was a first-unit cameraman on Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982), and went on to win another National Award for cinematography for his debut feature as a director, *Aadi Mimamsa* (1991), made in his mother tongue Odia. "I never worked with directors of conventional films," he says, "because our respective visions of cinema would not match."

Film cinematography has been

transformed in our own century by digital. "It's very convenient to shoot with a digital camera. Almost too convenient," Bir says. "For me, the flow of images in digital has a somewhat synthetic quality. In black and white filmmaking, the subtle tonal qualities and gradations of the image generate an enhanced sense of aesthetic pleasure, because the brain is interpreting all the visual information on a much deeper level and the viewer participates in the story in a much richer way. Yes, I miss black and white."

27 Down screens at IFFI on Tuesday 26 November at INOX Screen IV.

Photo: Assavri Kulkarni



If we find something close to our life problems—things we feel but are afraid to talk about—and then see it on screen, it feels like we're not the only ones.

Helene Haug
Festival Curator
France



I'm here to find Indian and international films to release in Taiwan. We will be releasing *All We Imagine as Light* next month.

Gene Yao
Distributor
Taiwan



It's my first time here; I'm looking forward to meeting all the industry people and I'll be keeping my eyes open for films to take back to our festival.

Jumana Naguthanawala
Film Programmer
Seattle



There is a lot of artistic courage in the film selection for this festival, but the organization needs improvement. Communication can be chaotic.

Georg Tiller
Film Director
Vienna



Photos: Assavri Kulkarni

BY KINJAL SETHIA

“More than any other artform, films use a language that unites people,” says the Indian-Australian film producer Mitu Bhowmick Lange. A hard-core Delhi girl at heart, Bhowmick was drawn to the movies at a very young age. “Cinema is the ultimate dream. Whatever country or faith you may come from; films evoke emotions that are universal. Festivals are the place where all these movie lovers come together and celebrate their love.”

This is not her first time at the International Film Festival of India. “As a student, I volunteered at IFFI when it used to be held at Sikri Fort in Delhi. Then there were no other channels, and this was the only way to watch movies from around the world. I was assigned the hospitality desk and I am surprised I was not fired, because I would always sneak away to watch films,” says Bhowmick. Life has come full circle for her now as the Film Bazaar at IFFI 2024. From being an IFFI volunteer, she studied

film and worked for some years directing TV shows in Mumbai, and then went to Australia with her husband (who is the son of David Lange, the former Prime Minister of New Zealand) to continue working in movies including founding the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne in 2010.

For screen writer and executive producer Mithila Gupta, the journey to Australia happened much earlier in life, at the age of four. “My parents moved from Jaipur to Melbourne to provide me with better opportunities. But Bollywood stayed with me. I felt an Indian at heart and watching Hindi films was my way of seeking an identity.” She told *The Peacock* that Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s *Devdas* (2002) changed her life. “This was the first Hindi film I saw in a cinema hall, and it felt like a milestone moment for me. It was such an emotional experience; I was crying through the climax. The next day, I woke up and the feeling washed over me again, the realization of watching an Indian film in Australia with a completely Indian audience.”

Gupta says “even though I live in Australia, I am very fluent in Hindi because I did not want to watch Shahrukh Khan with subtitles. I am obsessed with him. I like how he has created a love for love, and I am a massive romantic.” She studied communications at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and then she worked in an art department for a couple of years till a car accident forced her to a sabbatical. “I realized I was not upset about breaking my arm. That was when I realized I needed follow my dreams. I did a diploma in screen writing, became a trainee on the popular TV show *Neighbours*, and pitched a story about an Indian family. That is how the Kapoors became a part of an all-white television show.”

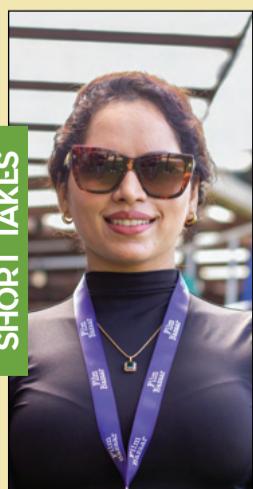
Bhowmick says her love for cinema also began with family. “Movie time was synonymous with family time. My father was a pharmacist and every Friday, after work, he would take us to watch the newest release. On the way back, we would discuss the story, the plot and the

characters. I think, that is where I got my love for this industry.” Later on, “I wanted to watch Indian stories on the big screen. Even my Australian husband enjoyed them. We would watch films like *Chak De! India* (2007) and *Dangal* (2016) as a family. But everything was very disorganized then, so we started a distribution house and partnered with some of the biggest chains. This seeded the idea of the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne.”

Gupta says that “cinema has been the access to my identity” and has allowed her to return to India more often. “The love for cinema in India is unrivalled. To come here and share this love is like coming back home. The India-Australia synergy over cinema should have happened a long time ago, but I am happy it is finally happening now. Both the countries are different, but similar in their core values, like their sense of humour. My whole dream has been to bring my two identities together, and now I am feeling very much at home here.”



**Kartika
Sadanandan**
Author
Chennai



SHORT TAKES

Cinema is a dedication. It's called a movie, but for me, it's much more than that—it's an all-encompassing craft.

Kanchan Awasthi
Actress
Mumbai



I'm here to review films. So far, I've enjoyed *All We Imagine as Light* and *Shepherds*.

Harpreet Singh
Screenwriter
Chandigarh



I am hoping to see some stuff you can't catch in our theaters usually. When I think of Goa, I think of this festival.

**Kartika
Sadanandan**
Author
Chennai



I am excited to meet legends and stars, like the director of photography for *RRR*. The festival has also shown me more of Panaji's art scene.

Kundan Sad
Filmmaker
Mumbai

Cinema is Home

Northeast Rising

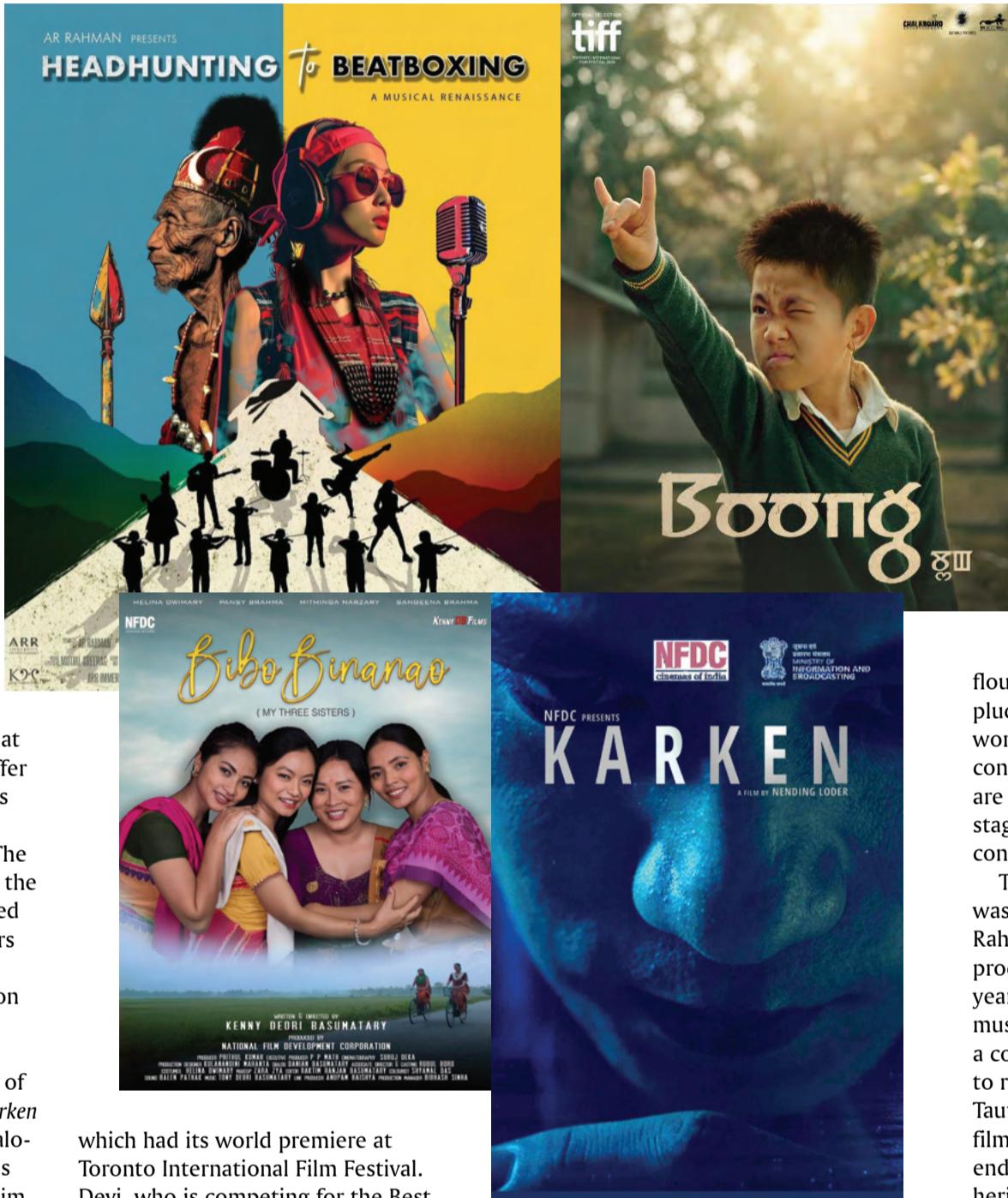
BY POULOMI DAS

Abodo-language dramedy about four sisters living in rural Assam. A queer chamber drama that follows a rural medical officer who jeopardizes his engagement, and risks his job for an acting audition in rural Arunachal Pradesh. A Manipuri coming-of-age story about a young boy's search for his missing father amid racial tensions and border skirmishes. A documentary that draws a vivid portrait of the musical renaissance in Nagaland.

The common thread linking these four narratives premiering at IFFI 2024 is their identity in India's varied and often-misunderstood Northeastern region, which comprises eight states. Varied in genre and form, reflecting an inherent diversity, these films subvert mainstream perceptions of that part of India. In fact, the narratives offer evidence of the rich cultural traditions of the region, by paying particular attention to their communal mores. The presence of these films also points to the inventive filmmaking language adopted by a younger generation of storytellers from the Northeast, whose voices — brimming with originality and ambition — counter assumptions about Indian cinema as a monolith.

One of the 25 titles playing as part of Indian Panorama, Nending Loder's *Karken* is a risky gamble that pays off. The Galo-language feature, which marks Loder's debut as a writer-director, and stars him in the lead, unfolds inside one room over the course of 24 hours. The plot, so to say, is relegated to the background in this economically staged drama. All we see of the "film" then, are close-ups of Loder's face as he is thinking, talking, drinking, arguing, and putting on makeup with a hundred different shades of psychological nuance.

Marking another debut is writer-director Lakshmipriya Devi's *Boong*,



which had its world premiere at Toronto International Film Festival. Devi, who is competing for the Best Indian Debut Director award at IFFI, is a notable name in the Hindi film industry. In the last decade, she has worked on several high-profile films and shows as assistant director, including *Lakshya* (2004), *Rang De Basanti* (2006), *Luck By Chance* (2009), *Talaash* (2012), *PK* (2014), *A Suitable Boy* (2020).

With *Boong*, Devi aimed to draw a politically alert picture of Manipur — the largest film-producing state in

the Northeast — through the eyes of her eight-year-old protagonist whose childhood innocence acts as a metaphor for the resilience of the state. Even when the film skirts around heavy themes, Devi never loses sight of sensitivity and humour in her storytelling. That she wrapped up shooting a week before ethnic violence gripped the region last year, makes the film's existence as a rare

contemporary Manipuri film even more significant. According to Devi, *Boong* is, in many ways, "the last documentation" of the unity that Manipur had.

Depicting unity is also what Kenny Basumatary was after when he was preparing to helm *Bibo Binanao*, his first Bodo-language feature. The Assamese filmmaker shot to fame overnight with *Local Kung Fu* (2014), a rousing martial arts comedy, which has till date spawned two sequels. Yet, Basumatary felt boxed in by the film's success. The decision to make *Bibo Binanao*, a dramedy about the lives of four sisters in rural Assam, was his attempt to challenge his own reputation. In a sense, *Bibo Binanao* marks Basumatary's growth as a filmmaker as he displays gentle flourishes while defining the degree of pluck and independence that these four women can afford to show within the constraints of domesticity. Interspersed are comic interludes that Basumatary stages with the precision of a music conductor.

The sound of Nagaland's music was on Oscar-winning composer A.R. Rahman's mind when he decided to produce *Headhunting to Beatboxing* five years ago. Directed by Rohit Gupta, the musical documentary profiles the Nagas, a community of tribes that are seeking to resurrect their identity through music. Taut in its storytelling and immersive in filmmaking, *Headhunting to Beatboxing* ends up as a meticulous record of sonic heritage and cultural traditions, letting viewers into a side of Nagaland that headlines habitually miss.

Karken, November 23rd, 4.15 pm, Magic Movies Screen II, Ponda

Bibo Binanao, November 23rd, 12.30 pm, Maquinez Palace-I, Panaji

Boong, November 27, 11.45 am, Maquinez Palace-I, Panaji

Headhunting to Beatboxing, November 27, 5.30 pm, INOX Screen-IV, Panaji



At the end of the day, a good film is one that is built on your gut instincts, your value system, and what you believe you want to share with the rest of the world.

Monisha Advani
Producer
Mumbai



It is amazing to see how much the festival has expanded in recent years. The quality of projects is very high.

Jon Tarcy
Producer
United Kingdom



I'm here with my film *O Believers*. It's about women's spiritual leadership. We're looking at how women priests are perceived in our society.

Nazia Khan
Director
West Bengal



Cinema is my life. Beyond being my bread and butter, it is what moves me.

K. S.
Ramakrishnan
Filmmaker
Chennai

Cinema Mon Amour

BY SACHIN CHATTE

In 2004, the International Film Festival of India made a permanent transition to Goa, prompting numerous inquiries and quite a bit of scepticism regarding the state's capability to host such a prestigious event. Doubts arose about whether Goa possessed a sufficient film culture to support India's most prestigious film festival, and how the event would function without the involvement of local delegates. In the initial years, a degree of uncertainty lingered about the festival's permanence in Goa, despite official assurances that it was here to stay. 20 years later, we know that they meant business.

The exceptionally talented Jaaved Jaffery once remarked, "Hum Hindustaniyon ko do baatein bahon pasand hain, ek hain maa aur ek hain cinema" (We Indians cherish two things, our Maa (mother) and cinema.) Regardless of the region in the country, cinema stands as the foremost form of entertainment, and Goa is no exception. Trends observed nationwide are mirrored in Goa as well. Although films were often screened in Goa with significant delays during the 1970s and 1980s—sometimes a year or two after their release in major cities—audiences have consistently flocked to the cinemas. The theaters in Panjim, such as El Dorado, Cine National, and Samrat-Ashok, (the twin theatres are still going strong and a part of IFFI screenings) were always filled to capacity. Regrettably, El Dorado has since been converted into a commercial complex but I have fond memories of that theater, as it was where I first saw Sholay (1975), during its re-run. Additionally, I recall the excitement at El Dorado surrounding The Burning Train (1980), a highly anticipated B.R.

Chopra production.

As a child, I witnessed long lines for movies at Cine National, which, regrettably, has now fallen into disrepair, with trees growing in, around and on it. As a film lover, there is nothing more disheartening and painful than the sight of a popular single-screen theater that is now in ruins. Each time I pass by Cine National, it feels akin to encountering a once-vibrant friend who now lies on the brink of death. The ruins serve as a reminder, as expressed in Hindi, "Khandahar kehta hain ki imarat kabhi buland thi" (the ruins tell us that there was a tall building here once).

Occasionally, the dialogues and scenes from films I watched there replay in my mind. The queue for *Satte Pe Satte* (1982) extended well beyond Cafe Bhosle, located across the street. As a child, the phrase "chain kulii ki main kulii ki chain"

remains indelibly etched in my memory, as it does for many who have seen the film. Although the phrase doesn't have a meaning, it is used as a rallying cry by Amitabh Bachchan's brothers in the movie, to motivate him when he is down and out. Recently, a friend with whom I play badminton invited a few friends for dinner and casually introduced me to his father. "This is my dad, Vicky (Sahu); he has acted in a few films. You may have seen him in *Satte Pe Satte*." For a brief moment, I was taken aback. He was the actor who portrayed Shukra, one of the seven brothers in the beloved Bachchan film, and he also appeared in the classic

Khatta Meetha (1978) by Basu Chatterjee. He recounted numerous anecdotes from his career, with my favorite being that the line "chain kulii ki main kulii ki chain" was conceived by Amitabh Bachchan himself. I hold onto the hope that this rallying cry will resurrect Cine National one day.

At present, Goa boasts a significant number of serious film enthusiasts alongside those who frequent multiplexes on weekends. The Cinephile Club, which hosts weekly screenings at the exquisite Maquinez Palace Theatre, attracts between one hundred to two hundred members each week, who gather to enjoy a diverse array of films, including documentaries, shorts and feature films. I must add the disclaimer at this point that I curate films for the club. Despite the impressive turnout for these weekly screenings, I do wish that more young people would attend to appreciate cinema. But then as the The Rolling Stones said, you can't always get what you want.



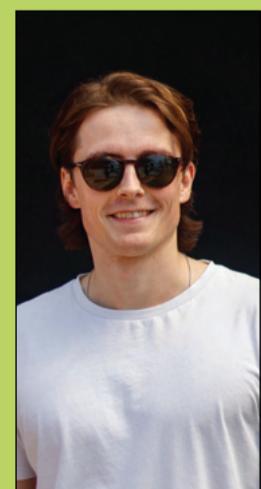
Illustration: Govit Morajkar



SHORT TAKES

Cinema gives an insight into human psychology, allowing us to learn and gain wisdom without living through those experiences ourselves.

Pooja Arora
Filmmaker
Mumbai



I feel profoundly moved by the commitment of filmmakers to storytelling as an artform. I am excited to meet local filmmakers and develop relationships.

Michael Yates
Sales Agent
United Kingdom



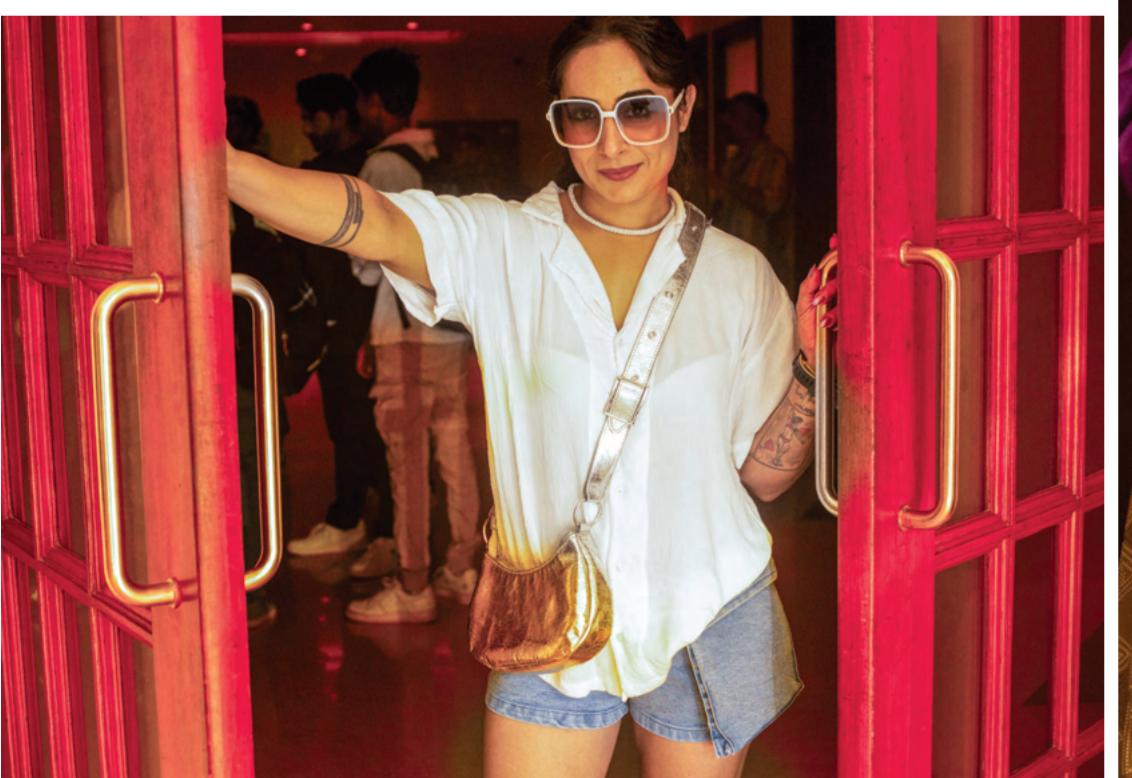
I am looking to get contacts in the film and animation industry, and looking forward to seeing relatable romance and comedy movies.

Vibisha
Satishkumar
Student
Coimbatore



To say something big, you must serve it in a way that entertains, and also plant an idea so powerful that it forces the audience to look deeper.

Rohit Arora
Filmmaker
Mumbai



Queering The Kiss

BY PANKHURI ZAHEER

Hindi cinema has long danced around the subject of same-sex intimacy, usually by cloaking it in innuendos that are easily missed, or masking it with comic relief. However, persistent activism and the unyielding determination of a few brave film-makers has begun to shift this narrative. Today, some storytellers are showcasing love that defies the heteronormative mould, but the question remains: is Indian cinema prepared to shed its inhibitions, and depict queer love as raw and realistic rather than a token side-spectacle?

For all its vibrant creativity, Hindi-speaking and -watching India remains steeped in conservatism. Take *Fire* (1996), Deepa Mehta's trailblazer that dared to depict two women, played by Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das, finding love and solace with each other amidst suffocating marriages. Though the censor board approved the film with minimal cuts, its theatrical run was marred by violent protests.

Two decades later, *Kapoor & Sons* (2016) subtly wove homosexuality into its richly crafted family drama. Fawad Khan's portrayal of Rahul, a gay man navigating familial expectations, was nuanced and dignified—a rare win. However, the film avoided explicitly labelling him as gay, and physical intimacy with his partner was conspicuously absent from the screen. Rahul's love life was kept off-screen, a shadowy online presence. For viewers from conservative families, where even acknowledging queerness is taboo, the film's climactic conflict could easily confuse, or even be entirely overlooked.

In recent years, *Shubh Mangal Zyada*



Illustration: Pakhi Sen

Saavdhan (2020) and *Badhaai Do* (2022) have taken bolder strides, using humor to address queer issues, and cleverly packaging their messages to appeal to mainstream audiences. Yet, they often skirt around overt expressions of intimacy. Queer characters remain wrapped in sanitized portrayals, and their romances become vehicles for moral lessons rather than authentic, lived experiences. One longs for films that offer an unvarnished look at queer desire and its emotional complexities, sidestepping the mainstream's tendency to reduce queer love to a teaching moment. Instead, the hope is for

stories that are authentic, fearless, and unapologetically queer. Stories that normalize all kinds of love, celebrate its everyday beauty, and showcase tender moments of physical intimacy that give audiences those warm butterflies in the stomach.

To the extent Indian films have included queer intimacy—such as dramatic same-sex kisses—they usually frame such moments as spectacles that are designed to shock or make a point, rather than as organic parts of the narrative. Everyday intimacies that characterize “straight” love stories—tender caresses, stolen glances, and

quiet moments—remain conspicuously absent. Bollywood's reluctance to move beyond restrained comedy or sanitized storytelling reveals the lingering discomfort with fully embracing queer narratives.

Apurva Asrani, the writer of the path-breaking *Aligarh* (2016), told *The Peacock* that “we made the film three years after the 2013 criminalisation, and two years before the 2018 decriminalisation of homosexuality—we definitely feared backlash. But that didn't hold us back from telling the story the way we wanted to, and we have our extremely brave producers to thank for that.” Despite facing significant obstacles, including the ban of the film in the city of Aligarh itself, the film became a beacon of change and “the triumph of an evolving society.”

But what about the glaring lack of queer identities beyond gay and lesbian? Transgender and non-binary characters are almost invisible in mainstream cinema, and their stories are either ignored or relegated to outdated stereotypes. “I don't think anything finds adequate representation besides heteronormative narratives,” says Asrani. “We have only allowed for tragic, issue-based stories, and completely missed the beauty, the textures, the emotions, the colours that make up lives like my own. How then can I make a case for other minorities to find representation? It will take more queer voices. It will take more filmmakers to find the courage to come out of the closet, and tell their stories. The tokenism comes from the constant and continued othering. When we own our stories and tell them from the heart, there can be no tokenism.”



SHORT TAKES

I'm excited to be here, the setup is very different. I'm looking for women-oriented films and any film that looks at life from a different lens.

Pushpinder Chowdhry
Director
United Kingdom



A great movie makes you forget who you are, allowing you to fully absorb the character and the world being portrayed.

Sai Krishna
Producer
Hyderabad



Film Bazaar helps international filmmakers stay updated with Indian cinema, upcoming trends and new talents.

Rada Sasic
Director
Netherlands



Everyone is very cordial, and there are lots of potential partners to work with. It's an exciting place to talk, learn, and maybe do business.

Kanisha Shah
Creative Manager
Mumbai

“I want to become a part of the creative community in Goa”



Photo: Assavri Kulkarni

BY KINJAL SETHIA

“The basic bug of Hindi cinema got to me at a young age,” says actor and casting director Abhishek Banerjee, who hosted the Opening ceremony this year, and was also a part of the ‘Script to Screen’ panel at this year’s Film Bazaar. He says, “Amitabh Bachchan was a big inspiration in turning me towards the world of cinema. I grew up watching his films. Even at a young age, I knew I wanted to do something big with my career.”

He eventually forgot about this early dream, but remained a passionate cinephile, and it was while studying at Kirori Mal College in New Delhi, and participating in the theatre group there, that he remembered his childhood inclination towards acting. “It was at a film festival like this, that I was inspired to pursue my dream again. At Osian Cinefan Film Festival in Delhi, I watched Shoojit Sircar’s *Yahaan* (2005) and Navdeep Singh’s *Manorama Six Feet Under* (2007). These two Indie films

pushed me to throw myself into the thick of things and I came to Mumbai.”

Banerjee says that “working as a casting assistant or director was my way to remain connected with the industry.” Acknowledging some early difficulties, he started working as a casting assistant, or independently, for movies like *Dirty Picture* (2011) and *No One Killed Jessica* (2011). “Actors are mired in self-doubt, always questioning whether they are good enough. I am a professional, so I would do a thorough job as a casting director. The other side was I knew at the back of my mind, that my acting career was not taking off. All these people would be discussing characters and actors in a room; I would be sitting in a corner and think I could do this role. I was too embarrassed to ask them.”

It was then that he was approached by Devashish Makhija, and was cast in the indie film *Ajji* (2017). From here, he made his way to mainstream films like *Stree* (2018). Expressing the reason for his hesitation before he became

an actor, Banerjee says, “When you have not showed some work, and tell people you are actor, there is always a smirk. You may not see it on their face, but there is a mental smirk. Because in Bombay, everybody thinks they can act. Imagine, even now I am warned to not rely on acting completely, and to continue working with casting! I am sure I am going to continue as an actor for many years. But their warning shows the instability of our working life.”

Emphasizing the importance of indie films, Banerjee observes that “aspiring actors want to play leads in mainstream cinema. I understand that, but it is also important to realise that indie films are a good bridge to move from no-work to very-good-work. This happened even for Vivek Gombar who suddenly started getting noticed after *Court* (2014).”

Though it is his first time at IFFI, Banerjee empathises with aspiring film makers and actors. “Festivals bring cinephiles and creatives together. I see the young people here networking and trying to find opportunities. This is

exactly what I used to do. My friends and I would carry schedules, and watch films. The culture of film festivals facilitates young actors in their journey.”

One of the other reason film festivals are important, Banerjee says, “because theatricals provide an immersive experience. OTTs and other platforms are good because now they provide many opportunities and explore storytelling, but nothing can replace the cinema hall. OTTs are still more aligned to television, as they are still more episodic. You are not distracted by ringing doorbells or house help. It is a more intimate experience to watch a film in a dark hall. Nothing can match the charm of a celluloid.”

Banerjee comes to Goa often, and now he is hoping to visit more frequently. Hoping to become a part of the cultural community here, he says, “I am building a house here. I would love to be associated with the creative space here. The artistic space here is very deep rooted, and growing constantly. I want to become a part of it.”



SHORT TAKES

I attend every year and have developed lots of contacts. Important producers from all over the world are here.

Marianne Borgo
Actress
France



I enjoy indie films and folklore. I’m looking forward to watching *The Mehta Boys* and *The Wailing*. I’ve been selected for the Creative Minds of Tomorrow.
Dipanshu Mahakul
Filmmaker
Gujarat



It was overwhelming at first, but now I feel like I’m settling in. I’m here with my debut film *Raavsaheb*; I hope we are able to move people.

Rashmi Agdekar
Actor
Mumbai



If you have a project, this is a great place to meet all the right people under one roof. I hope Indian and Australian film industry members will collaborate.

Jesal Shah
Director
Mumbai



JARDIM GARCIA DA ORTA

The Water Fort

BY TINO DE SÁ

The World War II film *The Sea Wolves* was released in 1980, with an all-star cast that included David Niven, Gregory Peck and Roger Moore. Niven and Peck were coming together again two decades after they'd co-starred in another war-themed film, the blockbuster *The Guns of Navarone* (1961). Moore, of course, was at the time the face of James Bond, in between *Moonraker* (1979) and *For Your Eyes Only* (1981).

Filmed almost entirely on location in Goa, *The Sea Wolves* was based on true events. In WW2, Portugal was caught in a dilemma between its millennia-long alliance with Britain, and its own Fascist-leaning government, and chose to remain 'neutral'. Consequently, Goa, unlike British India, was not 'at war'. But then, German U-Boat submarines were found to be sinking hundreds of British merchant ships, and the source of their intelligence was traced to a spy-ship that was anchored in the Mormugao port of 'neutral' Goa. Unable to launch an overt attack, and thus risk forcing Portugal into the war on the side of the Axis powers, the British chose instead to launch a covert operation to identify and

blow up the spy ship. A fact of history is that in the final days of the operation the raiding party in its ramshackle barge used the Aguada Lighthouse to triangulate its position while finding its way around the Goa coast in secret.

Across the bay from Campal, visible quite clearly from the Panjim waterfront, is the strategically located fort of Aguada, with its iconic lighthouse. Along with Gaspar Dias and Reis Magos, the three forts formed a formidable triangular guard, preventing any invasion of Goa by sea from the Dutch or the French, who threatened the Portuguese possessions in the 17th and 18th centuries. Aguada, built in 1612, is the largest of the three fortresses, and because of its magnificent vantage point, was the most prized.

Aqua is the Portuguese word for 'water', and the fort gets its name from a perennial freshwater spring in its confines – a spring so abundant, that it was sufficient to feed an underground cistern with a capacity of almost three million gallons of water, one of the largest in all of Asia in its time. Ships of many nations – for a hefty fee, of course – would dock at Aguada and replenish their supplies of drinking water.

Aguada had 79 cannons atop its mighty bastions, a moat to protect the citadel, and a hidden underground escape tunnel. About a century and a half ago, in more peaceful times, as marine traffic increased, a lighthouse was erected to guide passing ships. The lighthouse became a beacon for fishermen returning with their daily catch to the string of beaches on the Tiswadi and Bardez coastlines – Dona Paula, Caranzalem, Miramar, Sniquerim, Candolim, Calangute, and even Baga. The lighthouse still functions, and its flashes with regular periodicity each evening is a pleasure to watch, especially from across the bay in Campal.

Early in the 20th century, the fort was converted into a prison, and many valiant freedom fighters, struggling to end colonialism in Goa, were confined in it. Aguada was recently renovated, and today houses a museum to Goa's liberation struggle, much like the Cellular Jail museum in the Andamans.

Lighthouse at Aguada

The wounded evening bleeds
its life

into the sky-end
on the sea's brim.

Soughing branches
sigh: Farewell.
The lifting wind –

Flashing lighthouse and men's homes.
Briny spray and

all of darkness,
intermittent.

-- Tino de Sá



Illustration: Govit Morajkar

Riverside Reveries

BY VINCENT D'SOUZA

Goa's nippy weather at dawn has encouraged me to go on walks. Not long walks. Clocking about 5000 steps.

I am currently tented in a room in Campal, and since I let the pre-dawn light stream into my room, with the window curtain drawn aside a wee bit, I always beat my alarm that is set for 6.50 a.m.

The straight and perpendicular streets, all tree-lined, offer just the walkways that a 5000-plus steps walker like me would welcome. There is dew in the air which is thick, and stifles my affected lungs. I must now remember to throw my monkey-cap into my travel bag.

Anyway, a day ago, the walk got very exploratory. I stopped to admire every beautiful old mansion and bungalow that Campal is proud of; in colours of yellow, white, pink and brown; in some families reside, some have been turned into heritage hotels and restaurants and homesteads. Others are offices. There is also a pet clinic, the large backlit board

promoting itself well from a corner.

That morning, I walked across the main road and into the campus of the Goa Forest Department, where its nursery was holding and selling medicinal plants. I then noticed the waterfront walkway, populated with people of all sizes and shapes. Just when I took a few steps to head there, ahead of me, two dogs stood up and began to bark, weakly and then severely, and finding that they were not in a mood to let me walk up, I chose a different path and found myself on the waterfront.

I am a water person. I reside in a water city. And I am sure, if you are also a water person, you are at peace by the sea or a river or in a pool. Or you like the rain fall, on you, or outside your bedroom window, or in a rage.

South of Campal, there are spots where Goa's traditional fishermen tap the sea. There are occasions when one lot of fishers have a massive catch: they send a SOS to their brothers who reside in colonies across the busy main road, to come to their aid, pull the bountiful nets and take a share in the riches.

I got introduced to fishers when I accompanied my Dad to the market. I was in junior school then and a memory that remains is of Dad asking the fish hawkers to open the gills of the fish on sale, the colour of the blood indicating the freshness of the catch.

It was as a freelance journalist that I met fishers time and again, in Ramanad and Rameswaram during the Sri Lankan refugees influx, and the reign of Sri Lankan Tamil militants on the coast; fishers in Nagapattinam when the tsunami hit our coast, fishers in North Chennai on my Heritage Walks.

It was while researching for one Heritage Walk that I sat down with Jothi of Royapuram who is an artist, and senior stuntman for movies. Jothi told me a dozen stories of the life and times of at least three or four seaside colonies, which sank when the extensions of the Madras Port and the Fishing Harbour happened. A cinema hall, a small rice mill, a playground besides lots of houses are perhaps still on the seabed here.

When I walk by the Mandovi waterfront in Goa, I turn away from the stark whites of the casino ships looming like bloated ghosts, which become the playrooms of the rich and reckless after dusk. In them is a parallel world which I fantasise to be Satan's many dens.

Imagine a deluge is at hand; imagine these floating gambling dens turning out to be Goa's Ark, and thousands of us swimming across the Mandovi, hoping to be saved. Imagine!

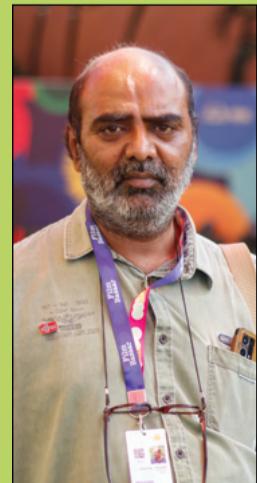
Vincent D'Souza edits and publishes a neighborhood newspaper in Chennai, and has been a journalist for over 40 years.

Illustration: Sayali Khairnar



If we are able to touch someone's life and make a difference to that person, then the whole experience of making movies becomes meaningful.

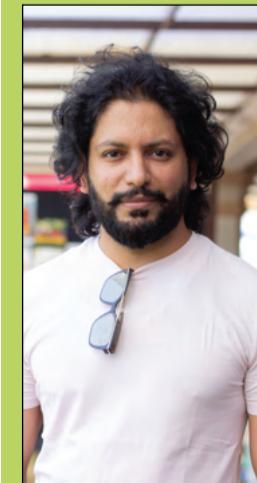
Ramira Taneja
Producer
Mumbai



Realistic dialogue and situations make films more convincing and impactful. Therefore, I prefer art house films over commercial films.
Vidyasagar Adhyapak
Filmmaker
Kolhapur



The people here are very creative and diverse, you can feel it by hearing how they see and think about different aspects of their work.
Varnika Singh
Project Manager
Indore



Interactive technology is the future of film. I am working on technology that helps turn movies into shared experiences.
Arjun Nittoor
Tech Entrepreneur
Bengaluru

SHORT TAKES

Amchem Australia

BY VIVEK MENEZES

It is just about 10,000 kilometres from Sydney to the Mandovi, but there's a distinctive Australian flavour to the 2024 International Film Festival of India nonetheless. We have over 50 delegates from "down under" here, with nine films being screened, plus an enthusiastic outreach from the Australian High Commission, which adds up to the most impressive impact of any Country in Focus in IFFI's long history.

To be sure, these kinds of efforts can be short-lived, a flavour of the day that disappears as quickly as it arrived. But here in Goa, our interest in "Oz" endures, because of our relatively sizeable and significant Aussie diaspora, which includes the newfound singing sensation Reuben de Melo, who was born in Curtorim and just won The Voice Australia television singing competition, and Zaneta Mascarenhas, the ebullient young Labor Party star politician who represents Swan in the Australian House of Representatives.

Goa has also given Australia several important artists and writers – please look them up – led by Roanna Gonsalves, whose 2018 short story collection *The Permanent Resident* (it was published in India as *Sunita de Souza Goes To Sydney*) is an acute portrayal of Goan migrant life, and won the NSW Premier's Literary Award Multicultural Prize. Earlier this week, I wrote to this inspirational Goan-

Australian to ask what she thought about this unusual IFFI focus on her two homelands.

Gonsalves reminded me that most historians believe Indians had ancient connections with the indigenous First Nations communities many centuries before the "white" colonisation of Australia. Then, for several generations, she says, "we had the same colonisers, and many who served in India were posted to Australia, bringing their Indian servants and their attachment to Indian customs and food. This is one of the themes of my forthcoming novel. Today, Indians are the second-largest migrant population in Australia, and of course, Indian students are an important income stream for the education sector [but, in addition] so many non-Indians I talk to here will note their connections with India, either through a grandfather who was born in India during

the British Raj or a sibling who has married an Indian, or a neighbour who is Indian. The growing number of Indians in Australia creates the impetus to further strengthen these connections."

There is much to appreciate in the nuanced approach Gonsalves takes to the question of belonging to Australia, with its settler-colonialist history and famous "whites only" immigration policies that persisted into the 1970s. "Australia was founded on the dispossession of Aboriginal people," she says, "and sovereignty was never ceded. That wound has not been addressed, and so there has been no healing. It is no wonder the shadow of the White Australia policy still affects all non-white immigrants in different ways. The warm ties with India are, of course, because of access to the large Indian market, but also, at some level there is a genuine desire to support people-to-people connections in the arts, such as the Maitri Grants which have led to exciting projects such as the First Peoples Exchange between Adivasi writers from India and First Nations writers in Australia."

Gonsalves says "it is wonderful that Australia is the IFFI focus country this year. I would love our people in Goa to know more about Aboriginal people, and their very rich culture and knowledge. I think Goans would see kindred spirits amongst them, with a shared love of singing and of performance, and a shared recognition of the importance of being connected to each other, to family, and to the world."



Illustration: Sayali Khairnar



Illustration: Sayali Khairnar

Songlines

The coordinates of my home
are etched in an anthem.

They search for a prayer,
tapping the grounds like a dowser.

Here the groves are sacred. Somewhere
an arboreal dream scares you awake.

A skin stretched mother sings
a lullaby. The baby speaks a strange tongue.

An aboriginal takes long strides, leaps
across continents to create songlines.

Songs that will remind you that a home
is not found on a map, but strung into a harmony.

- Kinjal Sethia

THE PEACOCK

55th International Film Festival

Schedule - 23rd November 2024

| | | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|--|---|
| INOX PANJIM - AUDI 1 | 2:15 PM BASSIMA'S WOMB | 6:00 PM AIZ MAK'A FALEA TUKA HANGING BY A THREAD | INOX PORVORIM AUDI 1 10:00 AM RED PATH | INOX PORVORIM AUDI 4 10:45 AM CU LI NEVER CRIES | INOX MARGAO - AUDI 3 10:30 AM SLEEP STILL WITH YOUR EYES OPEN |
| 9:00 AM FAMILIAR TOUCH | 5:30 PM PUNE HIGHWAY | | 1:00 PM BOUND IN HEAVEN | 1:45 PM BURY YOUR DEAD | 1:30 PM THE FOURTH WALL |
| 12:00 PM TRANSAMAZONIA | 8:15 PM DEAL AT THE BORDER | 8:45 PM JÍKURI: JOURNEY TO THE LAND OF THE TARAHUMARA | 4:00 PM LOVEABLE | 4:45 PM SIMON OF THE MOUNTAIN | 4:30 PM THE SLUGGARD CLAN |
| 2:45 PM FEAR & TREMBLING | 10:45 PM THE MOOGAI | KALA ACADEMY | 7:00 PM Batto Ka Bulbula | 7:45 PM DEVADASU | 7:30 PM KHARVAN |
| 4:45 PM CRICKETS, IT'S YOUR TURN | INOX PANJIM - AUDI 4 | 11:00 AM FROM SMALL SCREEN TO BIG DREAMS: THE INSPIRING JOURNEY OF SIVAKARTHIKEYAN | INOX PORVORIM - AUDI 2 | INOX MARGAO - AUDI 1 | INOX MARGAO - AUDI 4 11:00 AM PAPER FLOWERS |
| 7:15 PM PHANTOSMIA | 9:45 AM BOBO | 12:30 PM STORIES THAT TRAVEL | 10:30 AM CLARICE'S DREAM | 10:00 AM THE DOG THIEF | 2:00 PM THE DARK CASTLE |
| INOX PANJIM - AUDI 2 | 11:45 AM KASHMIR - FIGHTING FOR PEACE | 2:30 PM ART OF CINEMATOGRAPHY | 1:30 PM Level Cross | 1:00 PM MILK TEETH | 5:00 PM HARD SHELL |
| 9:30 AM Mo Bou, Mo Gaan | 1:45 PM WAITING FOR DON QUIXOTE | 4:30 PM POWER OF FAILURE | 4:30 PM HUNTERS ON A WHITE FIELD | 4:00 PM MANAS | 8:00 PM BOUND IN HEAVEN |
| 6-A Akash Ganga | 4:30 PM VIKATAKAVI (Series) | ASHOK AUDI | 7:30 PM Jigarthanda Double X | 7:00 PM SUNFLOWERS WERE THE FIRST ONES TO KNOW | MAGIC MOVIEZ PONDA AUDI 1 1:00 PM LAZARO AT NIGHT |
| 12.45 PM Google Matrimony | 9:00 PM YOUTH (HARD TIMES) | 11:00 AM THE FRIENDS | 10:30 AM EASTERN ANTHEMS | 10:15AM Ghar Jaisa Kuch | 4:00 PM BE-QAYAAM |
| Rador Pakhi | MAQUINEZ PALACE AUDI 1 | 2:30 PM FLATHEAD | 1:30 PM JAAIYE AAP KAHAN JAAYENGE | 1:15 PM Karken | 7:00 PM PAPER FLOWERS |
| 4.30 PM Chanchisoa | 9:00 AM HANU-MAN | SAMRAT AUDI | 4:30 PM JACKSON HALT | 1:15 PM Jigarthanda Double X | MAGIC MOVIEZ PONDA AUDI 2 1:15 PM PORTRAIT OF A CERTAIN ORIENT |
| Karkhanu | 12:30 PM BIBO BINANAO | 11:00 AM CINÉMA LAIKA | 5:00 PM Batto Ka Bulbula | 5:00 PM Roti Koon Banasi? | 4:15 PM Karken |
| 8.00 PM Kalki 2898 AD | 3:15 PM LOONIES | 2:30 PM SANATORIUM UNDER THE SIGN OF THE HOURGLASS | 7:30 PM Gharat Ganpati | 7:15 PM Level Cross | 7:15 PM GANDHI - A PERSPECTIVE |
| INOX PANJIM - AUDI 3 | | | | | |
| 9:15 AM MEETING WITH POL POT | | | | | |
| 12:00 PM GULIZAR | | | | | |



For today's 16-page special edition themed on Australia, the Country in Focus at IFFI 2024, *The Peacock*'s brilliant cover artist Sagar Naik Mule – the foremost exponent of Goa's ancient indigenous Kaavi art – has adapted his signature soil-based painting style to pay tribute to the vibrant artistic legacy of the First Nations communities of the Aboriginal peoples (who, many historians surmise, originally came "down under" from the subcontinent).



FT. ASEEK KAUR | PARADOX | WHEN CHAI MET TOAST | THE YELLOW DIARY
ANUMITA NADEEN | CHOR BAZAAR | REUBEN DE MELO | THE SPINDOCTOR | TSUMYOKI | THE GOA TRAP CULTURE



Cinéma Laika



Simon of the Mountain



Fear and Trembling
14:45
INOX Screen-I Pangai