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THE PEACOCK

THURSDAY, 28 NOVEMBER 2024



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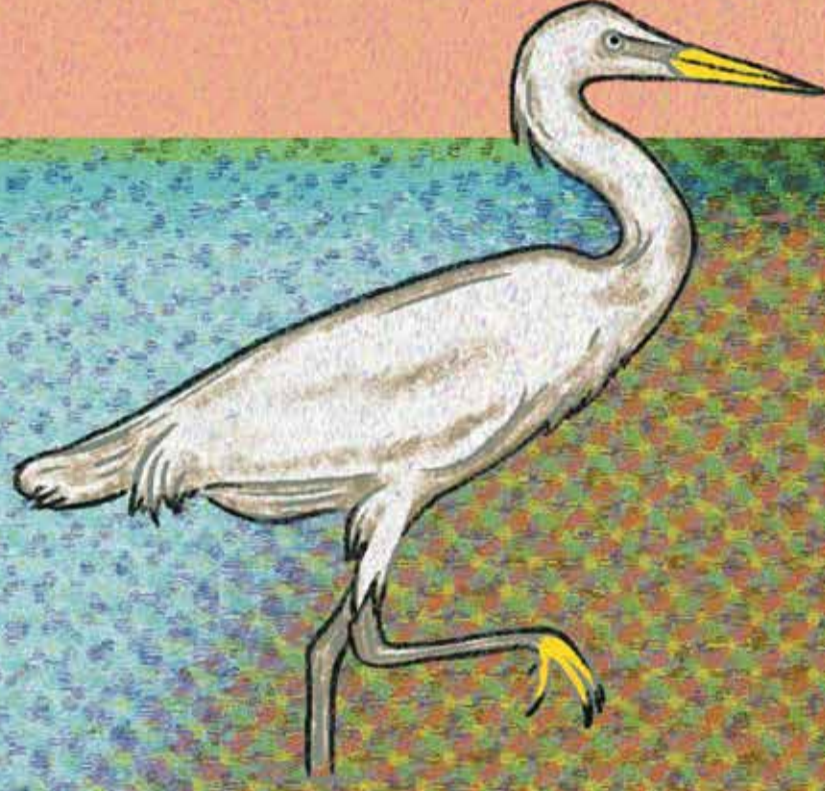


Illustration: Pakhi Sen

BY DAMODAR MAUZO

There is never any dearth of stories in the subcontinent. Kathasarysagar, Upanishads, Jataka-katha are our reservoirs that keeps inspiring our writers. I recollect how the Rajasthani litterateur, Vijaydan Detha, popularly known as *Bijji*, wrote his stories to give new meaning to our wealth of folktales. His *Bataan Ki Phulwari* (Garden of Tales) is an awesome 14-volume collection of stories drawn on Rajasthani folktales. The stories have such cinematic texture that many veteran filmmakers have been tempted to make films based on them. *Charandas Chor* (1975) by Habeeb Tanvir and Shyam Benegal, *Duvidha* (1973) by Mani Kaul, *Paheli* (2005) by Amil Palekar are a

few examples.

In Goa itself we have a number of tales surrounding our ancient ethnic Gods and Goddesses. The story of Seven Sisters that continues to prevail across ostensible sectarian divides is especially fascinating. The original deities of India's smallest state, believed to be a manifestation of *Maa Vasundhara*, are seven sisters named Kelbai, Mahamaya, Lairai, Mirabai, Morzai, Sheetalai and Adadeepa. They also have a brother called Khetoba. In one of the most fascinating and unique syncretic practices, two of the sisters are said to have converted to Catholicism along with so many other Goans in the 16th and 17th century. However, today, worshippers offer their respects to all of them, without any discrimination. We also

have a number of anecdotes surrounding the *Rakhondar* or *Denvchaar* who is believed to be a protector that comes to the rescue of the people who miss their way during the night, and escorts them safely to their destination. Even today, in rural regions, these stories continue to provide psychological comfort to the people.

But I am more interested to see how some of the tales help mould the minds of our children, and may also stir the instincts of film-makers. So, let me bring forth a popular Konkani tale, that demonstrates the circle of life. It is about an egret that lives near a lake. Come summer and the lake dries up. The egret is saddened as she would go without food. Hoping to find something, the egret notches the rock on the banks, and

finds a precious pearl. She becomes rich. Gets married. She gives birth to a little chick. The egret then gets old and dies of old age. By then the rains arrive and the lake is filled with water again. The chick is now a fully grown bird. This tale is told in a verse which I reproduce here for the benefit of our readers.

बकें

तळें सुकोलें, बकें म्हजें बाबडें रे जालें
तळें सुकोलें, बकें म्हजें बाबडें रे जालें.
खडप कांतय गो, बक्या म्हज्या मोती मेवतोले
मोती मेवतोकुच, बकें म्हुजे गिरेस्त जातोले
गिरेस्त जातोकुच, बकें म्हजें काजार जातोले
काजार जातोकुच, बक्याक म्हज्या भुरगें जातोले
भुरगें जातोकुच, बकें म्हजें जाण्टें जातोले
जाण्टें जातोकुच बकें म्हजें मरून वयतलें
मरून वयतकच तळें म्हजें परतून भरतलें

SHORT TAKES



This was my first time moderating a press conference. I felt like I was able to contribute to the film festival. It has expanded my horizons.

Gouri .S
PIB
Kerala



Film Bazaar has expanded a lot. I hope we continue to bring in more producers and independent filmmakers.

Keshav
NFDC
Delhi



The best addition we made this year was the inclusion of an award for best debut Indian director. This year the fashion show has also become more diverse.

Vrunda Desai
NFDC
Delhi



I've been managing around 52 screens, but my team helps make it easier. The highlight of this year is the students we've managed to bring in from Arunachal Pradesh.

Ritesh Taksande
NFDC
Mumbai

“Cinema Has Always Saved Me”

BY CHANDRAHAS CHOUDHURY

We go to film festivals not only to see films, but to meet and marvel at their makers. Those who eat, sleep and breathe movies, and embody the peculiar mixture of creativity, discipline, and derring-do that takes a film all the way from an idea on a piece of paper to a story with hundreds of inputs and contributors.

Anthony Chen, the Singaporean film director and a member of the jury for the International Competition for the Golden Peacock at IFFI 2024, is one such figure. At 40, Chen is a veteran, having already made four features (starting with his highly lauded debut *Ilo Ilo* in 2013, which won the Camera d’Or at Cannes that year). And that’s despite spending two years of his adulthood sidelined by the compulsory army conscription required of every male in Singapore. “In 2022 alone, I made two features, including my first English feature film and my first Chinese-language feature,” he beams, even as he dunks two teabags into his cup of tea at breakfast.

Chen’s cinephilia took off early, after his family took him to see Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* (1987) when he was four. “They thought it was a children’s film [the film is about the boy Pu Yi, the last emperor of China] and were very disappointed when it became clear it wasn’t. But a lot of that stayed with me. In the eighties, Singapore offered a very conventional diet of entertainment: Hong Kong cinema, Hollywood, Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger.”

“But soon I discovered that on Saturday afternoons, when television viewership dropped, there would be Chinese arthouse films playing on TV. I remember watching them – many of them were in rural settings – and for the first time feeling a sense of space, of the expanse of landscape. Even in those days, Singapore was so built up it was impossible to shoot the horizon!”

“Already I could tell that real cinema had a different colour, a different smell, a different texture.” Chen decided in his teens



Photo: Michael Praveen

to apply to the one film school then existing in his country. But the application required students to submit a short film. “So I went on eBay and bought a secondhand Camcorder for \$500. The next day I met this guy outside McDonalds and gave him the money and he handed me the camera and a number of tapes! From then on, I kept shooting footage of my friends at school, my family. I bought a book about editing and taught myself how to edit.”

By the time he finished his second degree in filmmaking in England in his late twenties, Chen was ready to make his first feature. His prolific early years in the trade had already made him a known name – his *Grandma* (2007) had won a special mention at the short film competition at Cannes. This made it easier to raise money from Singaporean arts funding agencies as well as private investors. *Ilo Ilo* chronicled the complex relationship of a Singaporean family, the Lims, and their Filipino maid. Chen, who was raised by a Filipino maid between the ages of 4 and 12, channelled the memories of his own childhood in making it.

Ten years on, it’s clear that Chen is still on cinematic overdrive. But he admits to having had “a kind of existential crisis” in the last two years about the future of cinema itself, because of a general degradation in visual culture. “I’m a very quiet kind of filmmaker. I want people to appreciate my restraint, the subtlety of the design and details. Even the sound in my films is so carefully composed. Then I take the train and I see people watching a film on their mobile phones with the sound turned off – all they need is the subtitles! So I found myself questioning the state of my industry.”

“And then I told myself, whatever the general trend, I don’t want to be a part of it. I want to make films for the best kind of viewer. Every time in my life that I’ve felt really down, I feel like it’s cinema that’s always saved me... from heartache, from pain. Isn’t it wonderful that we can sit inside the cinema, watching a story together, all feeling that complex emotion in the same beat? I hope that as filmmakers we can continue to defend and champion that experience.” That’s a thought perfectly cut for IFFI.

SHORT TAKES



It’s the first time I’ve seen so many passionate people coming together to enjoy cinema. When there’s a problem, I just rely on my intuition.

Nisha Thakkar
NFDC
Mumbai



This is the first time we designed everything ourselves. The app and website are now well-integrated, but we will continue to improve their usability.

Tanmaya Shankar
NFDC
Delhi



As someone handling the press conferences, I got an insight into the story behind the movies and the storyteller’s perspective on their films.

Rini Choudhury
PIB
Kolkata



The favorite part of my job is managing the celebrities. This year we’ve had more premieres and new events - it’s been a lot bigger than the previous years.

Tarun Talreja
NFDC
Mumbai

Revelling in the Cliché



Photo: Assavri Kulkarni

BY PANKHURI ZAHEER

I moved to Goa in May 2023, intent on sidestepping every cliché tied to the move. Predictably, I've failed miserably—and I'm finally starting to own it.

First, there's the classic *Goa escape* cliché. The one where you flee your past, get serious about what you want for yourself in life and somehow end up with many beautiful Instagram reels and a Yoga teacher's training certificate. I've ticked every box, except for the Yoga training. I escaped Delhi. I couldn't breathe both literally and metaphorically. I found a job in Goa that gave me financial security for the first time in my life. And I rented a sweet one-bedroom apartment in Moira—large enough for me to dance around, small enough to not have to share it with anyone else.

Then there's the *mainlander-loves-sweet-Goans* trope. Yuck! My first friend here was a lovely guy called Jesus! Things only got better from there. I met Fernando on a dating app. We fell in love, and through him, I fell in love with Panjim city. Fernando is a history enthusiast, the kind of person who will casually ask, "Want to hear the story of Maganlal?" as we pass the iconic Magson's store. As I grow closer to him and his friends and family, I feel fortunate to have found a sense of belonging here.

Oh, and the food. *The food*. I come from Lucknow—a city that will be left with little else, were we to surrender our culinary and architectural egos, and yet, Goa's flavors have floored me. There is always some chouris in my refrigerator: an ingredient I didn't grow up with but now can't imagine living without. Premila, Fernando's aunt, once described the

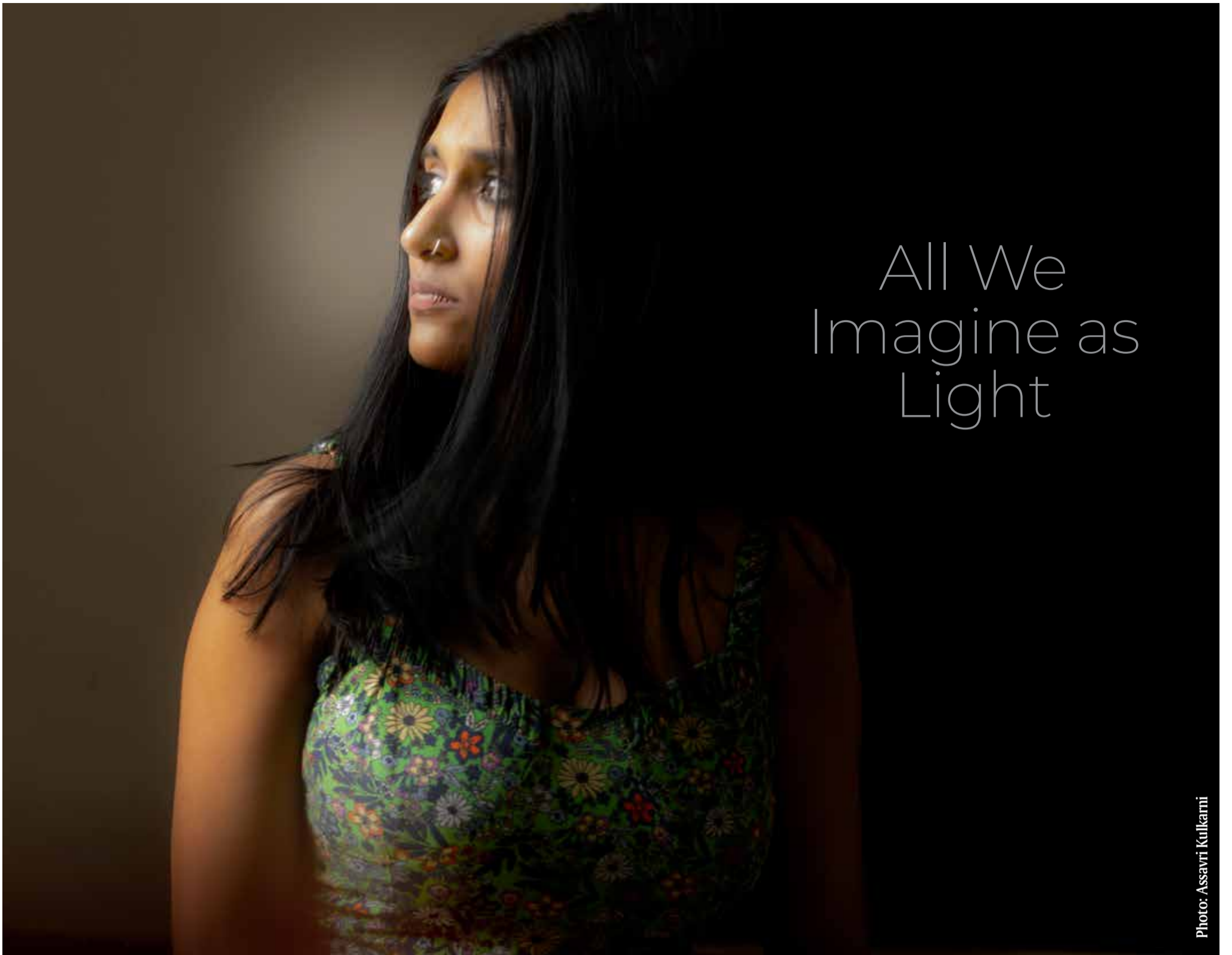
traditional Christmas sorpotel, rich with blood and offal, and I could practically taste the magic in her words. Then there is the endless list of pastries and snacks, one better than the other. This isn't just food; it's a revelation.

Of course, there's the *settler's guilt*. The uneasy awareness that, as much as I adore this place, I'm part of the problem. Outsiders like me bring mainland arrogance with us. Like that grotesque advertisement I saw on social media: "Delhi, Rulers of India, Now Conquer Goa." A property developer's bold (and neo-colonial) pitch to ruin everything that makes Goa special. It made my stomach churn. I am not a nature enthusiast, but even I know that Goa's mangroves, wildlife, and water bodies are treasures to be preserved, not paved over.

And finally, the cliché of being a *writer* after moving to Goa. Writing feels

inevitable in my family—my maternal grandparents and mother were writers and translators. To continue in their line and make this a *family trade* feels like a cop-out, to be honest. Yet every day for the past several months, I'd grumble to Fernando about work: "I don't want to go." He'd look at me, sleepy but patient as ever, and ask, "So what do you want to do?" "Write," I'd say, half-hoping he wouldn't hear it. But he always did. "Then write," he'd say like it was the simplest thing in the world.

And here I am finally, watching the best films at IFFI, attending talks, conducting interviews, and writing every day for the past eight days for *The Peacock*, surrounded by a team so talented they make me want to level up with every article. And for the first time in a long time, I feel like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be—not just in Goa, but in my own story.



All We Imagine as Light

Photo: Assavri Kulkarni

BY POULOMI DAS

Every January, over 50,000 people — filmmakers, actors, journalists, and cinephiles — from across the world descend on Park City, a quaint American ski town in Utah with an approximate population of 8,000, to bear witness to an inimitable celebration of independent cinema: Sundance Film Festival. The films are extraordinary, but the setting is straight out of a painting: winding slopes and snow-capped peaks stretch out everywhere you look; everything is swathed in a blueish tinge of white as you race toward a movie theatre — cheeks flushed — in minus-degree weather. The sun is all but a stranger.

The first day I arrived at Sundance in 2019, I remember being utterly besotted with the inviting landscape that stretched out in front of me. So much so that for the first time in my life, I started feeling a tinge of regret every time I remembered that I had practically flown to the other end of the world to be

inside a theatre — not outside of it.

I bring up this specific memory simply because that was the first time I looked at film festivals the way people usually think of vacations. For a week at Sundance that year, I planned my movie-watching schedule with surgical precision: gloomy, overcast days called for sadcoms, freezing evenings were earmarked for horror films and I'd allow myself coming-of-age dramas or comedies on the rare, sunny afternoons. The idea was to not just see films, but rather, curate my cinema experience in a way that was enhanced by the surroundings.

On my second trip to Sundance five years later, I'd forgotten about this little game I had invented until I found myself seated for the midnight screening of Brandon Cronenberg's *Infinity Pool* (2023), a batshit body horror film that creeps on you when you least expect it. As I walked back to my hostel around 3 am, the deserted, dimly-lit slopes seemed to almost add to the effect that the film had on me. On that eerie 10-minute walk

home, Park City looked straight out of a scene from *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* (2014), the Iranian horror set in a ghost town.

That night, I remember being so scared that I promised never to watch a horror film this late ever again. The morning after though, my tall promises gathered dust. I proclaimed to everyone I could muster that *Infinity Pool* was the most provocative, original work of horror I'd seen since Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016) — and that the best time to see the film was during the dead of the night.

Another gloomy day, I dragged myself out of bed at 7 am to watch Celine Song's *Past Lives* (2023), a sweeping star-crossed romance that rips you apart with the intensity of emotions — the desperate longing for human connection that consumes us all — it conjures up under a span of two hours. As I heard snuffles radiating through the theatre, my tear-soaked cheeks suddenly didn't feel like the odd one out. But really, it was when I stepped out of the theatre that the film's romanticism really stuck

with me on a personal level: here I was all alone, at the peak of American winter, reminiscing about the enormity of the past lives all of us accumulate, loving and losing people while trying to become the person we want to be. Would this feeling of endless yearning have hit me as much if I'd cozied up on my couch and watched the film with my partner? I'm not so sure. Would I have loved the movie still? A hundred times yes.

But that's the thing about watching a film at a film festival — it is so much more than just entering the darkness of a theatre. The setting becomes inextricable from the narrative and more importantly, your own feelings toward it. It feels like a secret only you share with a film, one that is impossible to access or replicate by anyone. I remember the emotional vignettes scattered across *Past Lives* as vividly as I remember the blueish tinge of the sky at Park City. On some days, I can't tell them apart. Perhaps, that's the thing about movies — they're made up entirely of the stories that we want to tell ourselves.

A Very Good Year

BY SACHIN CHATTE

The curtains are set to fall on this edition of the International Film Festival of India; however, the festival calendar is still open. The Kolkata International Film Festival (KIFF) and the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) are both scheduled for December, and I am looking forward to the IFFK - to serve on the jury and attend the festival, in a land that is known for cinephilia.

Film festivals hold a unique significance for cinema enthusiasts. While weekly Friday releases have their own importance, they often come with predictable outcomes that may not evoke much excitement. In contrast, festivals generate a sense of anticipation and thrill. Unlike the unpredictability of *Forrest Gump's* box of chocolates, one can generally expect quality offerings, particularly from established figures in world cinema, who typically do not disappoint. For instance, in 2023, notable filmmakers such as Aki Kaurismäki, Ken Loach, Wim Wenders, Hirokazu Kore-eda, Wes Anderson, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan all released films that met high expectations. At a festival, even if a film falls short, it provides an opportunity for discussion regarding its shortcomings.

Personally, the year 2024 proved to be fruitful for festival attendance. While being in Goa has its advantages, it also means missing out on the vibrant Mumbai and Delhi circuits. The year commenced with my role on the FIPRESCI jury at the Ajanta Ellora Film Festival, which takes place annually in January in Aurangabad, now known as Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar. This well-organized and compact festival was previously led by film critic and scholar Ashok Rane, who has now entrusted its direction to the well known filmmaker Sunil Sukhthankar. Having attended the festival on a couple of occasions, I was impressed by the organizers' commitment to enhancing the event, and the audience's enthusiasm. They knew their cinema and Kaurismäki's *Fallen Leaves* and Ken Loach's *The Old Oak*, both from 2023, had a full house.

The month of May also saw a trip to Cannes, the Mecca of all film festivals. The festival is surrounded by considerable hype, and it certainly lived up to its esteemed reputation. Maneuvering through an event that attracts nearly 35,000 participants can be quite challenging; however, much like The Beatles, I managed to get by with a little help from my friends. This year brought an added thrill due to the presence of numerous Indian films, starting with Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine As Light*. The competition featured works from prominent filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke, Paul Schrader, David Cronenberg, Paolo Sorrentino, Yorgos Lanthimos, and Francis Ford Coppola. Except for Lanthimos, the other directors were more of a miss than a must.

Payal Kapadia, however, made history simply by being part of the competition, and further distinguished herself by winning the Grand Prix. Any emerging filmmaker would be elated to receive recognition alongside such esteemed figures. Yet, it is important to remember that cinema serves as a great equalizer; regardless of one's status as a celebrated auteur, audiences will judge you based on the latest work presented.

All We Imagine premiered on the penultimate day of the festival, by which time considerable anticipation had built up. I had secured a booking for the press screening at the next door Debussy theatre, but this premiere was too special an opportunity to miss out. Thus, I resorted to some resourceful improvisation aka *jugaad*, which proved successful. Approximately an hour



Photo: Assavri Kulkarni

before the screening, I received confirmation of my ticket reservation. The evening screenings at the 2,300-seat Grand Theatre Lumiere enforce a strict dress code: men are required to wear black tuxedos with bow ties, while women must dress appropriately for the occasion, with heels. Notably, actresses such as Julia Roberts, Sasha Lane, and Kristen Stewart have defied this rule by removing their shoes on the red carpet. In 1953, Picasso famously wore a shearling jacket, and no one dared to turn him away. After all, he was Picasso.

The sole exception to the requirement of tuxedos and bow ties for attendees is their National dress. Fortunately, with a little advice from a friend, I packed a black kurta and pyjama as a contingency, which proved to be fortuitous. However, I was still singled out by a young volunteer who repeatedly exclaimed, "Non monsieur," while gesturing towards his neck to indicate the absence of a bow tie around my neck. Fortunately, a senior member of their team stepped in, offered her

apologies, and allowed me to proceed. Soon, I was on one of the best seats in the house, just a row ahead of the cast and crew. They made a grand entrance on the red carpet accompanied by a DJ playing popular Hindi music. While posing on the red carpet is typically a serious affair, the ladies, particularly Chhaya Kadam and Divya Prabha, were determined to own it and make it a lively occasion. They danced to "Kala Chashma" and "Daiya Yeh Main Kahan Phasi" from the film *Caravan* (1971), which is also featured in the movie. The crowds watching the red carpet outside, and the audience watching the live stream inside both loved it.

When the lights illuminated the Grand Theatre Lumiere after the screening, accompanied by a resounding eight-minute standing ovation, it became evident that the film would not go home empty handed. I felt fortunate to be in the right place at the right time to witness a film that will go down in the annals of Indian cinema.

Letting Your Book Go

BY JANE BORGES

This week, I did the unthinkable. After submitting my article for *The Peacock*, which I've thoroughly enjoyed writing for over the last week and more, I decided to go back to my hotel room and watch the Alia Bhatt-starrer *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022) on Netflix. Considering there's a bouquet of interesting movies being screened at the IFFI, it was an unusual choice on my part. But this film has eluded me for a very long time. And that's strange, because as much I hesitate saying it out loud, *Gangubai* is one part mine — the story was adapted from a chapter of my book, *Mafia Queens of Mumbai: Stories of Women from the Ganglands*, which I co-authored with S Hussain Zaidi back in 2011.

My motivation to watch the film now was spurred by a session I attended last Friday at Kala Academy. Celebrated filmmaker Mani Ratnam, who was in conversation with Gautham Vasudev Menon, while speaking about transforming literary masterpieces into engaging films, discussed his own approach when imagining late writer Kalki Krishnamurthy's historical Tamil novel *Ponniyin Selvan* for the big screen. "The book had everything calling to be made into a film," he told Menon. "It had scale, it had characters, it had adventure, it had horses..." Ratnam admitted that he held back from adapting the book because he was "afraid of how do it".

What many filmmakers don't realise is that authors, whose books are often picked up for screen, are equally afraid — their fear stems from their vision being taken over by another creator, and being crafted into something entirely else. The end result has sometimes left authors bitter and angry. A case in point is the late R. K. Narayan, one of India's most beloved writers, who felt humiliated by actor-director Dev Anand's adaptation of *The Guide* (1965). The Hindi film adaptation caused the author huge distress, especially because Dev Anand had plucked out his story from the southern heartland of Mysore — in the fictional town of Malgudi — and moved it to Jaipur. "By abolishing Malgudi, they had discarded my own values in milieu and human characteristics," he later wrote in his 1974 autobiography *My Days*.

Sidharth Jain, producer, The Story Ink, one of the country's largest book to screen adaptation company, says authors tend to be attached to their book, because it's a work that they — with editorial inputs, of course — alone create. "But the audio-visual medium by nature is collaborative. It's a collective vision involving the writer, director, producer, the studio, DOP etc. During the process of creation too, so many other factors come into play, like

trends, market, audiences." Lack of understanding about how the movie industry functions, often leads to greater disappointment among authors, he says.

Many of the concerns are now being addressed even before books are optioned. "But by no means is it guaranteed that the author of the book will have a creative role once the book is sold," shares Anish Chandy, founder, Labyrinth Literary Agency, who was instrumental in getting a book-to-screen deal for my debut novel, *Bombay Balchão* (2019). "An author's creative role will depend on a few factors — do they have

any screenwriting experience, does the director want the author to contribute, is there some technical matter in which he/she is an expert etc. The author or their representative can negotiate a defined role. However, that will also depend on how badly the producer wants to acquire the material. Some producers are open to it, while others aren't."

My own reasons for not watching *Gangubai Kathiawadi* came from a place of feigned indifference. I wanted to enjoy the freedom of not having an opinion about a film made on a character whose story I had pursued as a cub journalist.

Director Sanjay Leela Bhansali's larger-than-life portrayal of the brothel madam *Gangubai*, and the neighbourhood she lorded over, would be vastly different from the dismal-looking lanes of Kamathipura I had witnessed. Distancing myself from the film allowed these two worlds — one real, another creative — to exist without any feelings of resentment.

Giving up on this self-imposed detachment helped me reconcile with my own inhibitions. Let me say it now that I thoroughly enjoyed the film. Alia Bhatt is a stellar actor. She may have not looked the part — the Gangu I knew from the photos was not an enchantress — but Bhatt played to her character's strengths. She absorbed Gangu's grit and rage, and compassion too. Bhansali and team, on their part, fashioned a rich yet gritty world for cinema that was packed with hard-hitting dialogues. The film did have some semblances from our book, but still stood out as very original. Art that is borrowed, after all, has its own beauty. Like Ratnam said during the panel, "The closer the gap between literature and cinema, the better cinema will be."

In the process, I also learned a small lesson. While researching for this column, I came across a Wikipedia page on the film, which mentioned our book, but the name of only one author. Never having bothered to edit Wikipedia before, I attempted it for the very first time. I added my name. It felt good — to take ownership of my story.

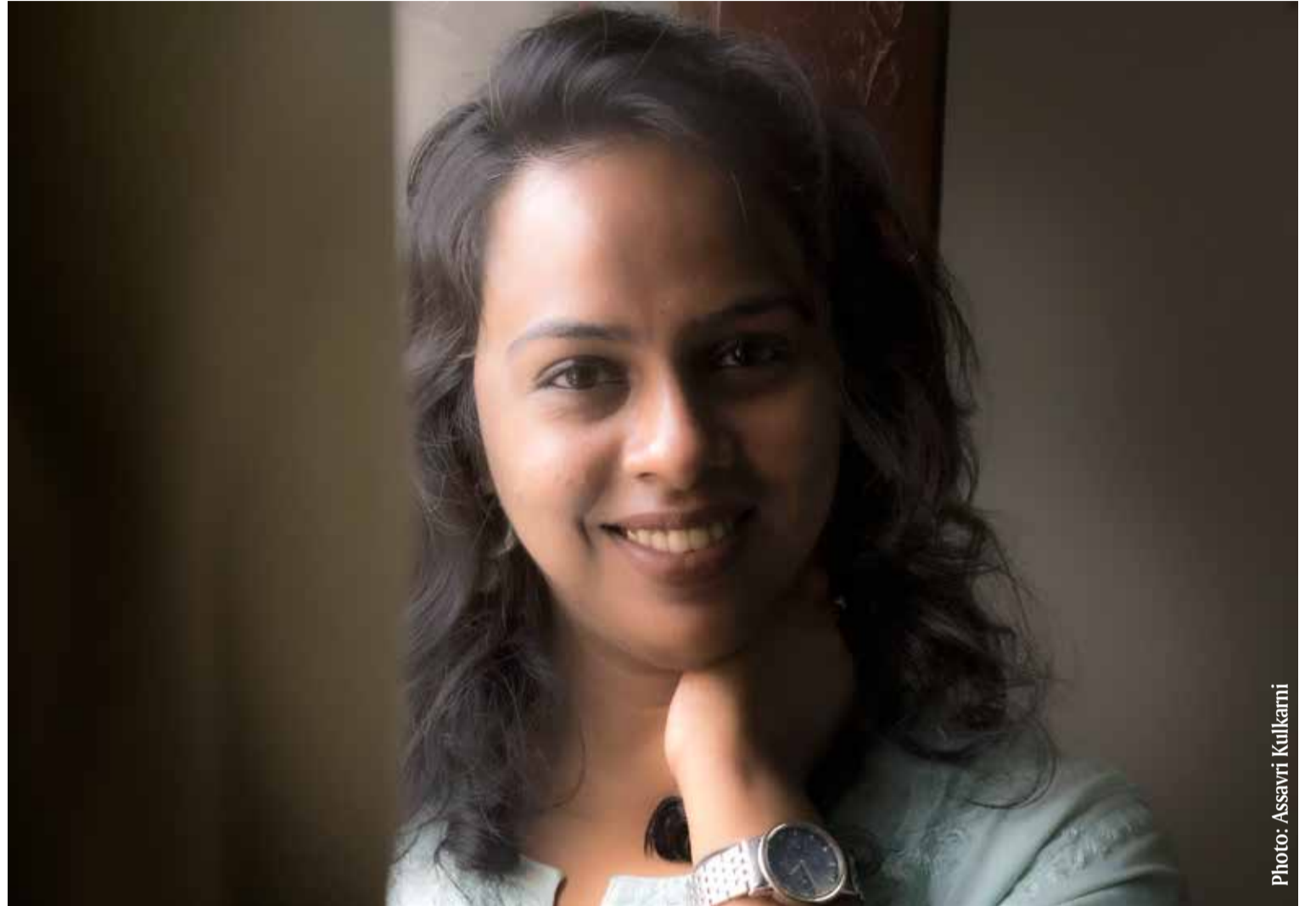
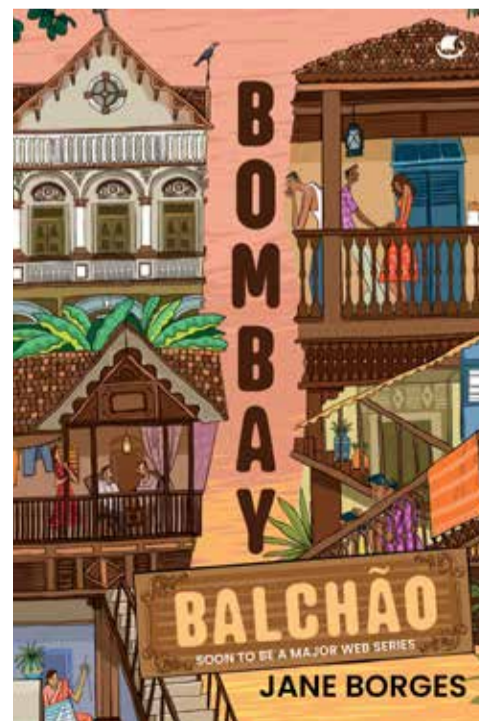
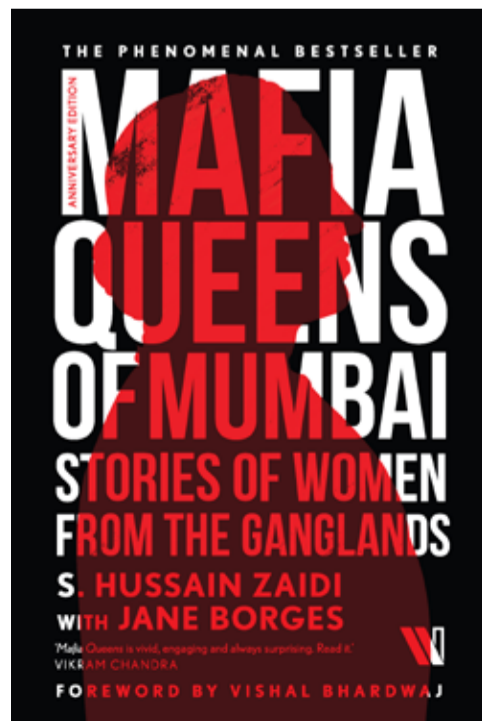


Photo: Assavri Kulkarni







Dowsing for Stories

BY KINJAL SETHIA

I am in my mother's village in Kutch. We come here for every Diwali vacation. Before dawn breaks over the neem tree in their courtyard, my grandfather comes with a handful of jowar seeds. He opens my little palm and places a few seeds on it. We both sit still, hands held straight out. He winks at me. Soon, a peacock cries from across the street, flies to our roof and down into the courtyard. The bird pecks at the jowar in my hand. I am thrilled and scared at the same time, ignoring the sharp of its beak on my skin.

I held this memory close as I walked into *The Peacock* office for the first time in 2015. I was assigned as an intern to the team by my teacher in Pune, who was helping me prepare for my civil service exams. I had failed to clear the Prelims, it was my third attempt, and he thought it would be a good idea for me to work in Goa, close to my parents. I had begun watching *Pyasa* (1957) more frequently than was good for me. The disillusionment and delayed success made me befriend the dejected poet. I still feel poetry is an aesthetic expression of sadness. But not the confessional kind, the kind that takes agency out of your hand. But at that time, a drunk Guru Dutt helped me feel less lonely.

I was nervous and intimidated as the morning meeting began. The editors assigned everybody a task for the day. These meetings have now acquired a sense of ritual. My training began from the outset itself. An introvert whose family often complained of reticence, I was thrown into the deep end by being assigned the task of Short Takes. I was to approach strangers, ask them questions, and request them to pose for a photograph. By the end of the first week, I had learnt a lesson. That it was fine to ask questions. That it was important to listen.

I joined the team again next year. I had learnt to listen well enough to take interviews, and write stories that others told me.

While I was listening, I was also questioning myself about a lot of things. All the films

screened at IFFI come from different regions and countries of the world. Every place has a story to tell. I watched films from Peru, Netherlands, New Zealand, Bangladesh, Assam, Kashmir, and many other places. Film makers came with cohesive narratives about something that had moved them enough to undertake the Herculean task of making a film. What was the story of Kutch? What was the history of my people? What was my story? Where does a Kutchi girl raised in Vasco and settled in Pune belong?

I am still searching for these answers. I was searching for them then too, when I missed working for *The Peacock* in 2017 because I was getting married that week. I came back the next year. I felt something inside me had shifted. The seeking of my own story had stirred me towards a deeper sense of self through writing. Writing no longer felt like work.

There is a verse in *Udaan* (2010) which says 'Meri tarah khud par hota zara bharosa toh kuchh door tum bhi saath-saath aate' (If you trusted yourself a little more like me, you too could have walked a little distance with me). I decided to stop pursuing a dream which felt I had been lent by an earlier self. Having worked at *The Peacock* a few years gave me enough confidence to pursue writing in earnest, study the craft of this art form.

Freelancing as a writer also helped me connect with a community of creatives in Pune. For the first time I had met my tribe. These were people who were also searching for selves through poetry and stories. Writing was no longer one of the options. It is gradually becoming a way of life.

This year, I am back at *The Peacock* after a pandemic-induced gap. I have been bestowed a space for a poem a day. I hope these poems have given you joy, entertained you, soothed you. I hope to learn to use words wisely. Because by now I know words on a page are not harmless, they are a weapon that can do many things if written well. I am still searching for my story, but I feel closer to having found a home.

The Garden of Borrowed Dreams

a dark room sliced with light / a mother sees her son choose to die / a girl in Vietnam helps a young boy find his mother / they cross a river but the mother dies / a man claustrophobic in Iran learns to fly / his mother's skin become his wings / a father travels to the mountains where the sky is unacidic and clear / a husband takes his wife to Rome before she forgets everything / even him / cowboys fly through a scrubland, wings tied to their waist / two boys burn a cactus to send a signal / a girl tames a horse / a broken car helps a man to live again /

i come back to an empty room, close my eyes.
borrowed dreams under my eyelids. did you see
their broken paths and salvaged stories?
did you hear a whisper amidst the noise?
did you see? will we learn to dream again?

- Kinjal Sethia

Goa Calling

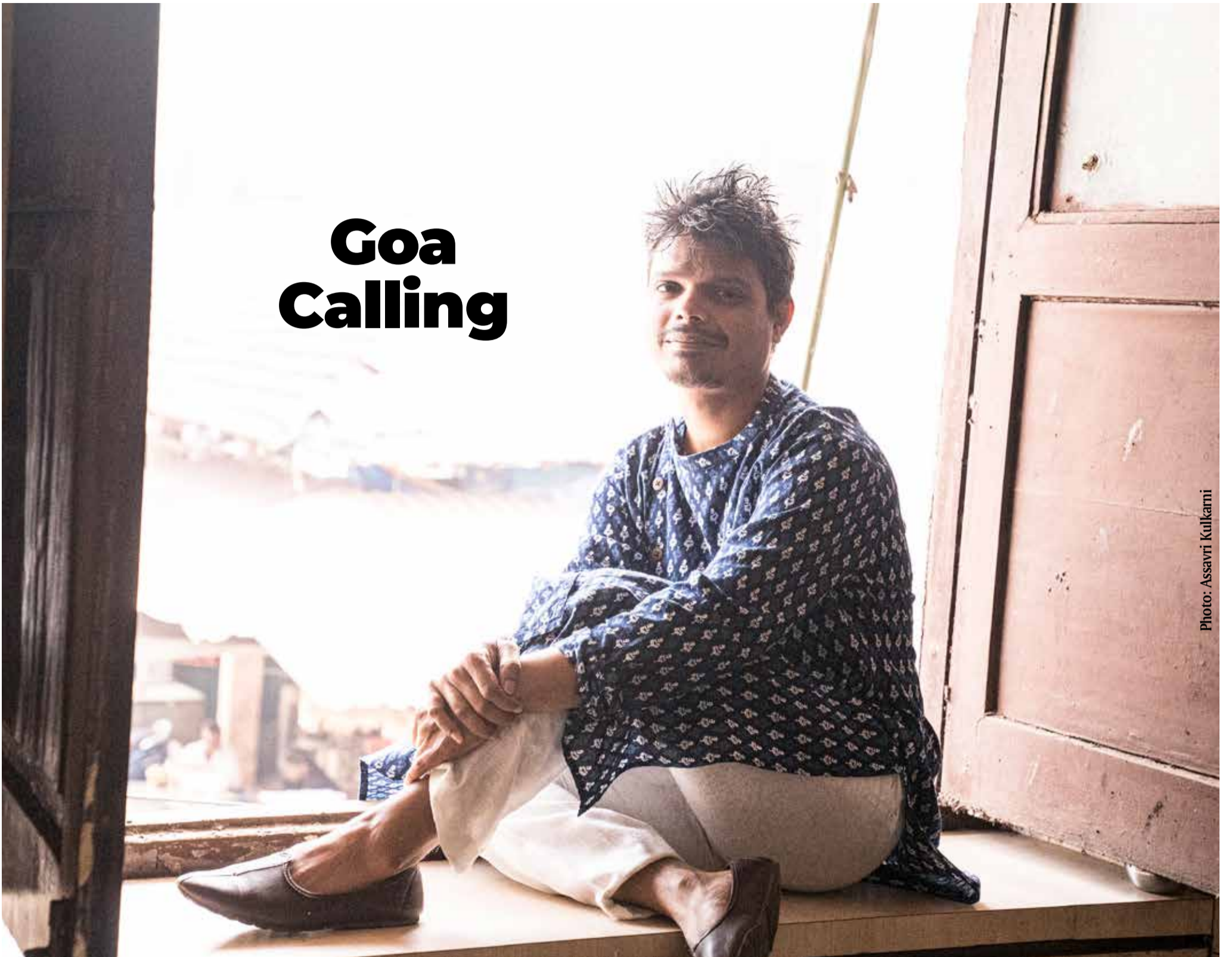


Photo: Assavri Kulkarni

BY OMKAR BHATKAR

My love affair started with the libraries. More than a decade ago, I came to Goa in search of a book called *Sahyadri Khand* and several other books that speak about *Vetal*, *Kaal Bhairav*, and *Tarini* (The Goddess in a Boat). Over the years, I kept coming back to document stories of *Vetal*. My friend Sunil Noronha often accompanied me. The iconic *nagdo* sculpture of Loliem mesmerized me and I kept returning to different times of the seasons to document him via photographs. I've no reason to explain why these Goan deities are my subjects of interest. I've never found the answers to such questions, and probably I never searched for them. I am content with the understanding that Goa has its mystical calling, and I keep responding to it.

IFFI is that time of the year when you can meet other members of the tribe who, too, feel such a connection with Goa. During the Movie Marathon, I asked my friend, "Diana, what is it about

Goa that makes you feel at home here?" We both contemplated for some time, and concluded that "it's hard to put into words what makes us feel at home in Goa". Diana Linda gave up Paris for Mumbai, and, after living in Mumbai for about 14 years, eventually settled in Goa and won't be moving anywhere else. I always wanted to settle in Goa, but was never able to. However, Goa kept calling, and I kept coming back again and again.

My first documentary film is on the murals of the Trinity Chapel in the Convent of Santa Monica. In a fortunate accident, I landed in the Trinity Chapel, and transfixed my eyes on these early 17th-century murals by unknown artists. At that moment, out of nowhere, I responded to this effervescent desire that I would like to document these murals for a film. I've never made a documentary film, and docu-film isn't my natural genre, but the desire was so strong that it manifested into a 90-minute poetic documentary, *Painted Hymns: Chapels of Santa Monica*. The Convent of Santa Monica, the Museum

of Christian Art, the Chapel of Weeping Christ, the St. Augustine Ruins, and the Royal Chapel of St. Anthony on the *Monte Santo* in Old Goa became my places of pilgrimage. My first novella too is the testament of my love for that holy hill. I never made the effort to publish it, and it sits on my computer in a folder called 'untitled novella'. Documentaries and novellas aren't my genres of work, but Goa resides in the soul of both of them.

My Spanish love story began in Goa, continued to Mumbai and eventually concluded in the Andamans. Whenever I go to Anjuna now, I click a picture of the sunset and send it to Spain as a memory of the past. José Saramago in his 1998 *Small Memories* says "Memory is the only paradise from which we cannot be driven out". Goa is that paradise of memories for me. At Miramar, there was a Nescafe joint; it holds some precious memories that will never come back. A few years back, when I was taking a walk at the beach, and to my shock, Nescafe was missing, and a fancy restaurant had come up in its place. I pranced back and forth

only to realise that 'Nescafe' was gone - the place which held some poignant memories of my life was no more there'. I walked back home with moist eyes, and spent a sleepless night.

My Dad once said to me that our ancestors come from a Goan village called Bhatti. I asked him, "how do you know?" He simply replied that he dreamt about it. While watching Jayan Cherian's film *Rhythm of Dammam* at IFFI 2024, it evoked my childhood conversations with my father. In the film, the child is visited by the spirit of his recently deceased grandfather, narrating the journey of Siddi ancestors who hail from Africa. My ancestors may have come from Goa too, and like my father says, the tombstone of the first man of the family is in Bhatti. And Bhatkars emerged from Bhatti. My dad wanted me to trace the family tree, and find my Goan roots. Without taking this direct quest, my soul returns to Goa's calling, and I reverently respond to it by reflecting in my artworks, plays, poetry and film. Maybe a few years later, I will be settled here, who knows!

Progress and the AI Paradox

BY SANSKAR SAHU

The democratization of media is a bold promise: leveraging technology to break down barriers, amplifying diverse voices, and making storytelling accessible to all. However, even as startups like Janata Cinema, PostMyAd, and Pocket Films materialize this vision in India, the growing influence of generative AI poses new challenges to the livelihoods of creators.

Janata Cinema, a pioneer in this space, embodies the ethos of media democratization. Addressing the lack of affordable cinema in rural India, the platform bridges the gap with low-cost movie distribution and exhibition systems. Speaking to the Peacock, a representative explained their goal: "Our mission is to bring cinema to places where traditional setups either don't exist or are unaffordable. By providing low-cost solutions and offering equipment where needed, we ensure that regional and independent filmmakers can reach audiences in smaller towns and villages. This approach gives these creators access to markets that were previously out of reach." More than just expanding accessibility, Janata Cinema provides a lifeline for regional filmmakers, enabling them to showcase their works



Photo: Assavri Kulkarni

in communities eager for local stories. In doing so, the platform fosters a sustainable ecosystem for independent creators in an industry often dominated by big-budget productions.

Speaking to the Peacock, Lavanya Naudiyal of PostMyAd emphasized how their platform addresses a critical challenge for small businesses: the prohibitive cost and complexity of advertising. "Many MSMEs struggle with the high costs of advertising and the complexity of choosing the right billboard or screen for their audience. This inspired us to develop a billboard advertising platform designed to cater to everyone—from small jewelers to major brands. Our mission is to revolutionize the Indian advertising space by making it both affordable and accessible, empowering small businesses to compete on equal footing with larger corporations." By leveraging technology,

PostMyAd democratizes digital out-of-home advertising, enabling businesses of all sizes to access spaces traditionally reserved for industry giants.

Meanwhile, Pocket Films has carved out a unique niche as a champion for independent creators, particularly those working with limited resources. With a repository of over 5,000 short films across various Indian languages, they provide emerging filmmakers with an essential platform for visibility. Beyond distribution through social media and their newly launched OTT service, the company has also ventured into production. Sharing with evident pride, a representative remarked, "We were always there for individual creators. We've started taking baby steps into production as well, with over 50 short films completed in a span of two years." This dual focus on distribution and production ensures that independent creators not only find an audience but also receive the support necessary to refine their craft.

Yet, amidst this progress, generative AI introduces challenges that threaten to disrupt the already precarious balance. While it mimics human creativity, and may make content creation more accessible to some, it also floods the market with algorithm-driven content that often lacks depth and nuance. Compounding this

issue, the artists whose works are used to train these models go uncompensated, deepening existing inequities. In Goa, where government initiatives strive to attract artists and cultivate a vibrant cultural ecosystem, this contradiction becomes particularly glaring. AI tools may empower some, but often do so at the cost of marginalizing others and undermining the value of authentic artistry.

Even so, democratizing media remains a promise worth fighting for. Startups can show the way to how technology can empower creators, uncover stories, and connect audiences with diverse perspectives. However, this progress must be safeguarded against some of the potential risks posed by generative AI. Transparent practices, fair compensation for artists, and policies that prioritize human creativity are essential to ensure that mediademocratization remains a force for inclusion, not exploitation.

The future of media lies in balancing innovation with integrity. Celebrating platforms that champion accessibility and diversity while simultaneously addressing challenges posed by generative AI. Only then can we create a truly democratized media landscape: one that empowers creators, preserves authenticity and ensures their voices remain at the heart of the stories we tell.

Crowdsourcing Content Curation

BY ROHAN MENEZES AND SANSKAR SAHU

The age of streaming and social media has brought unprecedented access to information, but also new problems; it is difficult to pick what to watch.

When streaming took off during the 2020 pandemic, Rohan Jacob was bombarded with requests for film and show recommendations from his friends and family. As a film enthusiast, he tried to give personalized recommendations to each, creating a constantly expanding Google sheet of content, each with a personal review. That was how Nokia began.

With no technical background, Jacob is an unconventional member of the start-up community. He prides himself on building Nokia on "human intelligence," to be as friendly to the end user as possible.

Nokia provides personalized content recommendations — from films to shows to web series — using your own social circles. You can see which movies are rated highly by your friends and family, while also allowing you to follow unrelated users and see what they think. Users can choose which people

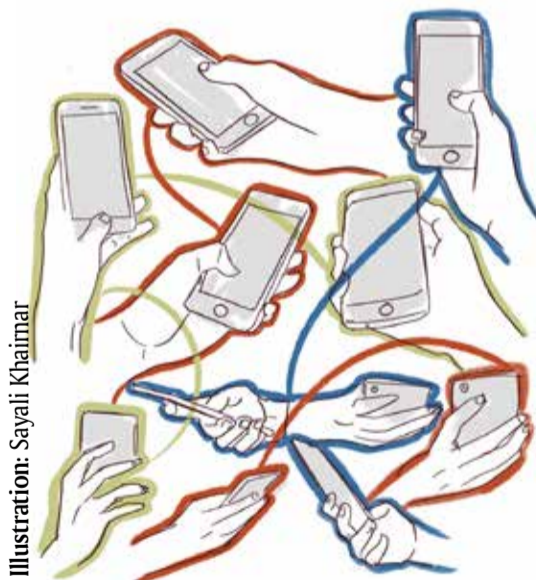


Illustration: Sayali Khaimar

they follow belong to either category, and can visualize recommendation lists provided by each separately. Overall, Jacob insisted that "we will never make recommendations; you know what you like, and which people to listen to."

Separating feeds for your friends and influencers Nokia allows you to hit pause on the infinite scroll, with no endless "more like this" options. With its database officially licensed from IMDB, Nokia provides the ability to review and hear what others think of the vast

majority of content in existence, from films to TV shows to web series.

Nokia even provides an avenue for social networking; users can form group chats to discuss certain media or genres. "Unlike whatsapp groups, media recommendations [on our groups] are metadata tagged, so you never lose them." With a few clicks, one can view a list of recommendations from each group, and who the recommender was.

With an upcoming website and TV operating software, Jacob hopes Nokia will soon provide a "complete ecosystem" where users can seamlessly use it on any device to view recommendations, book tickets, or even open a chosen show or movie on the relevant platform.

The founder also emphasized data privacy, promising to "never sell user data," despite currently being personally financed. Speaking to his business goals, in addition to seeking out angel investors from tech and business, he hopes to create a monetizable dashboard from user generated data to help creators better understand their audiences. While noble, this pre-emptive restriction of his potential revenue streams may impact the platform's future viability, as this is the primary

source of income for most similar applications. However, the emphasis on privacy may be attractive to users who are accustomed to surrendering their data to access basic online services.

In the age of generative AI, Nokia is a refreshing reminder of that missing human touch. By using entirely user-generated data, the recommendations offered by this company escape the often-impersonal ones generated by probabilistic algorithms. Relying on users to curate content for each other, Nokia removes itself from the equation, where most algorithms crunch endless amounts of data in hopes of potentially predicting something you might like.



Photo: Assavri Kulkarni

Becoming IFFI

BY VINCENT D'SOUZA

How do you make a festival your own?

With the good, the pedestrian and the odd-balls?

I do it this way, wherever I go. Be it to the Kala Ghoda Fest in Mumbai, International Theatre Festival in Thrissur or my Puducherry-based friend-musician's rag-tag music fest called Freedom Jam.

I keep an open mind, even if it is my third time there. And I hug; not physically or avenue trees, but in other ways that is best left to imagine.

So I came to Goa, my first at IFFI, in that frame.

In the middle, I do it a bit differently too. I relate to people who may seem to be on the fringes. But are people who make a festival

Take Gowri. Maybe she was Selvi. The campus attender in a uniform and braided hair, large pottu and wide smile. The Gowri who spoke in Thamizh to her colleague, drew my curiosity, led me to a conversation. The Gowri I spotted again, keenly video recording on her smartphone, the group of folk dancers from Tamil Nadu performing in the Inox quadrangle one evening, even

as she moved her body to the music of the nagaswaram and the parai.

She became the heroine in my impromptu video that went on my social media page.

Take the Four Mundu Mallus from Vadakkara. The softest Mallus I have got to meet in recent times. The men and women from Kerala perhaps make the majority at film festivals, and they must have at IFFI.

I am told, at one festival here, some of them even had a news-sheet in Malayalam that was circulated over a few mornings - news, reviews and buzz on IFFI and the movies.

This time, I had bumped into a few familiar faces, made friends with strangers but with these Four Mallus, I even got myself into their selfie. Perhaps they warmed up to me because I recognised Vadakkara (more so because one of Madras/Chennai's best-known freewheeling video and photographer of the performing arts, Mohan Das Vadakkara is an old friend).

They have encouraged me to be at the IFFI to be held in Thiruvananthapuram in early December. And suggested I wear a mundu.

Take this Little Lady Usher. I just did not ask her name. She was

mannning Inox Screen I. Sometimes Inox Screen II. She had a beautiful smile that broke out if you smiled. Three smiles later, I asked her for directions. Three screenings later, she insisted on screening my bag but did it with a smile. IFFI's ushers and the volunteers who targeted their lasers at our ID cards were efficient, warm though tired and chirpy when the queues ran out.

What impressed me first at IFFI? The Festival App.

I found the team sharing office space at *The Peacock*. Its members worked ceaselessly and in quiet, much of 24 hours. And their Boss, of Kalenda Systems, which has its office in the Czech Republic, had a real smart, smooth and easy-flow info and booking system. I think the App oiled this festival and the volunteers at the gates eased our passage.

What energised me at IFFI?

Young, wanna-be film makers and artistes.

One mid-day, wandering at the Film Bazaar at Hotel Marriott, less tempted to laze in the upper lobby facing the river/sea, and looking for some table space to work on an assignment, I

found myself in a hall where

the final hours of the Film Challenge was on. Some 100 young men and women were dipping into large Mac monitors as they rendered their short films for this contest. They were given themes, they were given 48 hours and some equipment / accessories and they were assigned to five teams of 20.

At the countdown to the end of 48 hours, the teams roared and cheered and took a final look at their films before submitting them to the jury.

I wove my way to a young man whose team was given the theme 'Smartphones and Relationships'. He told me they worked on a script that had a young man, who nourished his friendship with daily calls to his friend, and one evening, while by the bay, dropped the phone in the waters and had called a beach-goer to help him locate the phone. And how, as they laboured the search, a new friendship grew.

I wondered - How did 20 people, strangers till the day before, work together across 48 hours, to script, plan, shoot and produce a film that may well give them a break in cinema?

This hall in the Marriott proved it was possible. The power of cinema. Fuelled by dreams, desires.



Photo: Assavri Kulkarni



Photo: Assavri Kulkarni

BY TINO DE SÁ

I grew up, quite literally, in the lap of cinema. My father's business was the exhibition of films, and the family had one of the oldest picture houses in Central India – *Linda Talkies*, built in 1936 in Bhusaval, a dusty little railway town, where we lived. *Linda Talkies* was renovated and transformed into *Amardeep Cinema* in 1965, opening with, I recall quite clearly, though I was all of eight, the Shashi Kapoor-Nanda starrer, *Jab Jab Phool Khile*. The theatre featured three shows of Hindi movies a day, and Sunday mornings were reserved for an English film. Our house shared a wall with the theatre, and the sounds of the late-night show seeped through. This played hell into the slumber of visiting relatives, but with us it was the opposite – if perchance a show was cancelled (like when a political leader died – yes, that happened in those days), the eerie silence kept us awake, so used were we to the hum and whirr of celluloid dialogue, and the muffled lilt of song-and-dance.

I loved films, and I loved writing. But with my selection to the IAS, a career in the civil services intervened, much of it spent in the utterly beautiful state of Madhya Pradesh and among its wonderful people. Stints with the central government and the United Nations took me to Delhi and Bombay, and many other parts of the world. My writing was mostly file-notes and briefs and reports, but also included about a dozen or so 'middles' published in the Times of India and the Indian Express, and a clutch of poems, one of which, on forgetfulness, won a prize from the Alzheimer's Society of the UK, and a few others that found their way into anthologies of the Poetry Society of India and Delhi Poetree. That was it.

Then, the year after I retired as Chief Secretary of Madhya Pradesh, I sent in a story to the Times of India National Short Story

Competition. To my delight, it won the first prize, awarded by a jury headed by Anand Neelakantan. This led to the publication of my first collection of short stories, *The Disrobing of Draupadi* and *Other Stories*. I was keen on writing a set of stories focused on women and set in Goa. This led to my second collection, *One For Sorrow, Two For Joy*. Another first prize in the TOI competition the following year, awarded by a jury headed by Amish Tripathi, resulted in my third collection, *The Day Nehru Died and Other Stories*, which is in the process of being published. In between, I wrote a mystery novel for older children, *The Curious Case of the Nandikote Nawab*, while a bound copy of my PhD thesis on the built environment sits reproachfully on my book shelf asking to be edited and published.

Three years ago I moved to Goa, the land of my ancestors; this has allowed me to more easily indulge in my passion for its history and heritage. I joined Goa Writers, a group to which it is a delight and a joy – and a privilege – to belong.

Last year I was asked to write for *The Peacock* during IFFI 54, but I could not because I was travelling. This year, despite the renewed invitation, I was rather apprehensive; much as I love to write, I am notoriously useless at 'writing-on-demand' as it were. I was filled with trepidation at the prospect of drying up in the face of sudden and looming writer's block. But the editors were persuasive. We discussed the possibilities, and liked the idea of combining history with poetry in a daily column. We called the column Prasang, because it provided a 'context' to the IFFI venue and some of its films, within Panjim and Goa, and also because the text of the

column provided a context to the poem. Over its run, it has been illustrated by the extraordinarily gifted Govit Morajkar, whose stunning Ponnjekar illustrations figured on the opposite page each day, frequently providing an added context to my piece. Researching and writing the articles were not so difficult, but producing a poem each day on the same theme was challenging – a challenge that I am grateful to have accepted, creating poems that rhymed and those that didn't, blank verse, a rondel, a cinquain, haiku, and even a sonnet.

That, then, is the 'prasang' – the context – of my column in *The Peacock* these past eight days, which I have so very much enjoyed writing. Here's a farewell cinquain (a five line poem of 22 syllables, in the 2-4-6-8-2 format) which I wrote decades ago in the charming hill-station of Pachmarhi early one morning, when I stepped onto the Circuit House verandah to sip my coffee. I dedicate it to my amazingly talented colleagues on Team Peacock:

Peacock

See that
Peacock gliding
In the rain! Where does its
Tail end, and where does the rainbow
Begin?

प्रसंग



Photo: Assavri Kulkarni

Illustration: Govit Morajkar

Is this the End?



Illustration: Sayali Khaimar



28 नवंबर, 2024	28th November, 2024
दोपहर 02.30 बजे	02:30 pm.
ऑडिटोरियम 1 & 2, आईनॉक्स मल्टीप्लेक्स पणजी, गोवा	Auditorium 1 & 2, INOX Multiplex Panjim, Goa

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