


INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL FEB 2017 BHUBANESWAR




January
22nd-28th

Odissi Research
Centre near
XIMB square 

13th INDIAN
FILM FESTIVAL
BHUBANESWAR
2024

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About Nabagunjara

The festival logo is inspired by *Nabagunjara*, *Naba* meaning nine and *Gunjara* meaning sound. It is depicted in traditional Patachitra painting as a composite figure of nine animals. The images of this creature are found in the paintings of the Himalayan Princely states and of South India. The written version of the story of Nabagunjara is found only in the Sarala Das (15th century) Odia Mahabharata. Lord Krishna is revealed to Arjuna in Nabagunjara form, to test his devotee. The depiction of the creature is found in the Jagannath temple, Puri. It is also depicted in Ganjifa cards. It is the king card and Arjuna is the minister card.

In the Nabagunjara, Krishna expresses the plurality of approaches to reality and methods to understanding it. Ultimate reality, Krishna teaches Arjuna that there is one ultimate reality which is subjective. Its interpretation depends

on a person's innate *swabhava*. The Hindu tradition is neither monolithic nor unitarian, but it is instead plural and multifaceted, where *multiplicity* rather than *uniformity* is the watchword and, therefore, approaches to this reality have also to be varied.

Therefore, we think this symbol of plurality could be a way to define the composite form of cinema. Nabagunjara not only represents the essence of acceptance and diversity but also a representation of different perspectives that cinema enlightens through. The entire idea of several animals unified through an eternal soul shows the unpredictable nature of cinema that keeps exploring and surprising the human mind through image and sound.



About FSB

Film Society of Bhubaneswar (FSB) has been in existence since 2004, as a non-profit organisation registered with the Societies Act of India (1860) and the Federation for Film Societies in India (FFSI). FSB has focused on creating cinema literacy among its members, and has screened over 500 films from across the world and conducted master classes with leading visual artists nationally and internationally. It has organized 10 film festivals over the last two decades covering **World Cinema (2012)**, **Asian & African Cinema (2007)**, **Journeys and Migration (2010)**, **Short films (2011)**. It has curated retrospectives on **World Cinema (2005)**, **German Cinema (2007)**, **Spanish Cinema (2008)**, **Into the Darkness (2009)**, **Yasujiro Ozu (2012)**, **Anand Patwardhan (2019)**. The now reworked festival calendar of the Society covers two annual events, **the Indian Film Festival Bhubaneswar (2018, 2019, 2020, 2023, 2024)** and **the Indian Documentary Film Festival Bhubaneswar (2018, 2019, 2022, 2023)**. Both these festivals showcase contemporary Indian regional cinema, in fiction and non-fiction respectively.

Unlike the other major cities of India, Bhubaneswar does not have a proper film festival in the cultural calendar. Despite all obstacles, FSB has managed to organize 10 film festivals and 10 major retrospectives, masterclasses, conversations with visual artists and filmmakers, with the continuing effort to take Cinema to newer audiences, cineastes and students.

Festival Coordinator's Note

While working to organise the 13th edition of the Indian Film Festival we got enormous support from independent film makers - Devashish Makhija, Parth Saurabh, Kamal KM, Lipika Singh Darei and friends from Kerala Chalachitra Academy. The solidarity with film makers and friends' sustain our festival - assistance in locating works that need to be screened, discussed and written about.

With increased polarisation and a focus on partisan film making, it is a surprise that independent films are being made although the ecosystem is under increased strain. The effort in this edition is to look at films touching on issues from across the sub-continent. The screenings are a mix of interesting debuts and experienced film makers working in the regional film industry, some of them nudging the space to become pandyaa films. The challenges of pandyaa films can be explored in our opening day special screening. We are screening Subas Das's Odia film "Eka Eka" which has not been screened before in our town.

Focus of the festival is on young film makers working in diverse areas of the country - from Kashmir to the North-east. There are debut films from diverse areas - Nainital, Darbhanga, Baroda - the films from these areas are interesting debuts (Opium, Bahadur, Mithya, Follower, It's all in your Head, Kayo Kayo Colour, Jhilli, Water Station, Whispers of Fire & Water), which have been recognised in international film festivals and won accolades for its treatment and presentation of stories rooted in their respective milieu(s). Water Station is a debut by noted theatre director Abhishek Majumdar, an adaptation of Japanese playwright Ota Shogo's eponymous play. Ishaan Ghosh's "Jhilli" is an examination of the discards of human society set in Asia's biggest dump yard. Aman Sachdeva's "Opium" takes a look at religion in contemporary times through an anthology. Diwa Shah's "Opium" is set in Nainital during the pandemic looking at a Nepali porter's life. Lubdhak Chatterjee's "Whispers of Fire & Water" is set in Jharia mines examining the dystopic landscape emanating from economic development practices. Shahrukhkhan Chavada's "Kayo Kayo Colour" looks at everyday struggles of a muslim family in an Ahmedabad neighbourhood. Harshad Nalawade's "Follower" looks at modern day extremist journalistic practices set in Belgaum.

We have interesting films from the North-east by Haobam Paban Kumar, Bobby Sarma Baruah & Rajni Basumatary that bring stories from a troubled region. Paban's new film "Joseph's Son" brings a touching human story from Manipur. Bobby's "Sikaisal" is in Tiwa and Rajni's "Gorai Phakhri" in Bodo are films that we do not get to see in these languages. Rajni's film was made with a predominantly female cast & crew.

The section on contemporary Malayalam Cinema brings to our audience - the stories of workers'

rights during the 1940s at Cochin port (Thuramukham), predators in families and expression around sexual oppression (Family). The films at the festival explore issues of migration, gender, uneven development, issues of geo-politics, environmental degradation, political & ethical questions.

The festival is holding a retrospective on Mani Kaul with a line-up that covers his work across the 1970s till 2000s. The films screened provide a view of his work spread over seven days - a body of work spread over four decades.

There will be post screening discussions with the film makers, the following film makers have confirmed their presence at the festival - Kartik Subbaraj, Subas Das, Haobam Paban Kumar, Harshad Nalawade, Aman Sachdeva, Rajni Basumatary, Don Palathara, Bobby Sarma Baruah & Devashish Makhija. There are sessions planned to explore the Artistic practice and working methods of the directors - an invaluable resource for students and members interested in the moving images.

Happy viewing and wishing you a calm new year ahead.

FILMS AT
IFFB 2024

OPENING FILM

Ekaa Ekaa

2011 134 Odia

A film about being alone in the world and a search for what it means to be a good human being, in the meandering flow of life in its ordinary everydayness. This is the story of Om, a filmmaker who strives to bridge the gulf between his art and life by finding a common basis for both in responsibility and concern for the other.



DOP Jugal Debata
EDITOR Reena Mohan
SOUND Namita Nayak

Subas Das came to filmmaking by accident. A student of Geology, his interest in still photography led to the discovery of his lifelong vocation. After making a few dozens of documentary, short & animation films, in 2003 he directed and produced his first feature film “Aw Aakare Aa” (A, B, She).



Dhuin


2021 50 Hindi, Maithili

Pankaj is a small-town theatre actor with dreams of making it big in Mumbai. But faced with obligations to his family, which is under a deep financial strain post the lockdown, he is forced to weigh his dreams and make a choice.



DOP Anand Bansal
EDITOR Achal Mishra
MUSIC Tajdar Junaid
SOUND Rohan Deep Saxena

Achal Mishra is a 25-year-old filmmaker and photographer from Darbhanga, Bihar. His debut feature film Gamak Ghar premiered at the 21st Mumbai Film Festival, and was awarded the Manish Acharya Award for New Voices in Indian Cinema. Dhuin is his second film.

 Mumbai Film Festival 2022, MoMA, IDSFFK, DIFF



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Family

2023 111 Malayalam

Religion, customs, and abuse collide when a respected mentor unleashes his evil nature on an unsuspecting village, entrapping the community in a blurred illusion of normalcy.



DOP Jaleel Badusha
EDITOR Don Palathara
MUSIC Basil CJ
SOUND Renganaath Ravee

Don Palathara grew up in the state of Kerala, before moving to Sydney. Here, he received a diploma from the Academy of Film, Theatre and Television. After directing several shorts, he made his feature film debut, Shavam, in 2015.

 IFFR, IFFK, Indian Film Festival of Melbourne



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Follower

2023 100 Marathi, Kannada

In a small town riddled with territorial dispute, a radicalized journalist, believes in exposing the atrocities committed against his community. But his beliefs are based on half-truths propagated by an extremist leader.



Harshad Nalawade is a filmmaker from southern India. He studied film at the Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication, Pune, graduating in 2012. Follower, selected for IFFR 2023, on a small budget with the help of crowdfunding.

DOP Saket Gyani
 EDITOR Maulik Sharma
 MUSIC Abhigyan Arora, Pranjal Gupta
 SOUND Piyush Shah

 International Film Festival of Rotterdam



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Gorai Phakhri


2023 95 Bodo

Set in the foothills of Bodoland in Northeast India, the story explores the lives of women in a patriarchal society recovering from decades of armed conflict. Their experiences of repression and fighting back are interwoven.



Rajni Basumatary is a script writer, director, actor and producer. She hails from Assam, India and strongly believes that culture and creativity can engender social change in communities.

DOP Chida Borah
 EDITOR Tinni Mitra
 MUSIC Avinash Baghel
 SOUND Amrit Pritam, MPSE, Debajit Changmai

 Vancouver International Film Festival



It's all in your Head


2023 83 Gujarati, English

The film focuses on one day in the life of six siblings, rural but americanised, living in Vadodara. It is an attempt to take an honest look at the inner working of the mind and lives of the Indian Middle-class youth in the internet age.



Dhruv Solanki has co-written and co-directed 'BLAH BLAH BLAH', an independent road comedy which is currently in post-production. 'It's all in your head' is his debut feature film.

DOP Jyotsana Rajpurohit
EDITOR Bonita Rajpurohit
SOUND Ketaki Chakradeo, Perna Tripathy

 Yellowstone international film festival, Hurghada
Youth Film Festival, Dhaka International Mobile
Film Festival



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Jigarthanda Double X

2023 172 Tamil

A notorious gangster is incited to transform into a film hero and opts for a filmmaker. Before long, their project descends into an emotionally tumultuous adventure, a scenario they had never anticipated.



Karthik Subbaraj is an Indian film director, writer and producer working mainly in Tamil cinema.

DOP S Thirunavakkarasu
EDITOR Shafique Mohamed Ali
MUSIC Santhosh Narayanan
SOUND Kunal Rajan



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Thuramukham

2023 174 Malayalam

The story is set in the backdrop of workers' struggles, and protests against the infamous 'Chappa' system of casual labour allocation and primitive "work guarantee" scheme that was practiced at the Mattancherry harbour in Kochi during the 1940s and 50s. The story further revolves around two brothers being on opposing sides, in the day labourers' epic struggle against dock bosses.



DOP Rajeev Ravi
EDITOR B. Ajithkumar
MUSIC K Shahabaz Aman, K Krishna Kumar
SOUND Subramanian KV

Rajeev Ravi graduated in cinematography from the Film and Television Institute of India in 1997. In 2013, he released romantic drama Annayum Rasoolum. The following year, he directed his second feature I Am Steve Lopez.



Joseph's Son

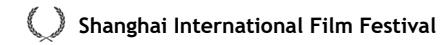
2023 90 Manipuri

Joseph, a musician reluctantly sets out on the long journey to look for his missing son. As he travels, his fear grows deeper: a fear born of constant conflict - past and present - to which a personal fear is added.



DOP Joydeep Bose
EDITOR Sankha
MUSIC Rewben Mashangya
SOUND Sukanta Majumdar

Haobam Paban Kumar is a prominent voice emitting out of the restive north eastern state of Manipur, India dabbling in both non-fiction and fiction storytelling.



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Kaathal

2023 114 Malayalam

The film is a poignant exploration of Mathew and Omana, a seemingly harmonious couple residing in the serene village of Teekoy in the Kottayam district of Kerala. The film explores the intricate dynamics of a marriage, the pursuit of justice, and the quest for personal fulfillment, set against the backdrop of a close-knit village community.



Jeo Baby is an Indian film director, scriptwriter and actor who works in Malayalam films. He made his directional movie debut through the Malayalam movie '2 Penkuttikal' which was released in 2016.

DOP Salu K Thomas
EDITOR Francies Louis
MUSIC Mathews Pulickan
SOUND Tony Babu



Kayo Kayo Colour?

2023 96 Hindi, Gujarati

Set in Kalupur, a neighbourhood in the old city of Ahmedabad, India, this slice-of-life film follows the daily life of Razzak and his family through an observational lens. Through a series of everyday events, the film uncovers the family's struggles, interpersonal conflicts, joys, and ways of life as they navigate through the intertwined yet unassuming layers of social and political influence.



DOP Shahrukhkhan Chavada
EDITOR Wafa Refai, Sanchay Bose, Shahrukhkhan Chavada
MUSIC Bigyan Dahal
SOUND Fahad Zuberi

Shahrukhkhan Chavada spent his formative years in Palanpur, North Gujarat, before relocating to Pune, where he learned the ropes in media, animation and filmmaking.



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Mithya

2023 98 Kannada

Mithya is a journey along-side Mithun, a 11 year old, who is coming to terms with the loss of his parents. We walk in step with his tottering feet, as they search for solid ground. Can a new house be home, can friendships be forged again or is it all just a search for something long gone!



Sumanth Bhat is a software engineer, turned entrepreneur, turned filmmaker. He is also an active member of the writing team at Paramvah. Mithya is his first feature film.

DOP Udit Khurana
EDITOR Bhuvanesh Manivannan
MUSIC Midhun Mukundan
SOUND Shreyank Nanjappa



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Nimtoh

2019 89 Nepali

In a mountain village of Darjeeling, ten years old Tashi and his old grandma live next to a family who helps them to fend their livelihood. Their job is to look after the cardamom orchard at night from the wild animals. An approaching wedding event at their patron's house finds Tashi excited and restless. The grandmother discourages Tashi of any hope of being invited, as they are merely workers. Will they be invited?



DOP Appu Prabhakar
EDITOR Jishnu Sen
MUSIC Lokesh Kanithi
SOUND Ankita Purkayastha

Saurav Rai followed Film Direction & Screenplay Writing at the Satyajit Ray Film and TV Institute. He believes in simplicity and takes a keen interest in the folk tales and mythology of his village life and tries to internalise these themes in his films.

DIFF, IDSFFK



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Opium

2022 77 Hindi

"Religion is opium," said Marx; this film, five short stories in genres from comedy to social issues and dystopian sci-fi, attempts to examine the religious situation in India from multiple perspectives.



Aman Sachdeva has directed over two hundred commercials with the most reputed agencies and clients from around the world. Seldom foraying into long format for meaningful work, Opium is his passion project. An anthology feature that promises powerful, moving performances with a diverse cast and crew.

DOP Sylvester Fonseca,
Sidharth Sreenivasan, Archit Patel,
Abhishek Modak

EDITOR Farooq Hundekar, Rachita Singh

 Tokyo International Film Festival



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Jhilli

2021 93 Bengali

When Bokul realizes that most of his friends are leaving him behind in the rubble of discards, he decides to change his life.



DOP Ishaan Ghose
EDITOR Ishaan Ghose
MUSIC Rajarshi Das, Soumajit Ghosh
SOUND Aneesh Basu

 KIFF

Ishaan Ghose is an Indian film director, editor, writer and cinematographer from West Bengal, India.



Sikaisal

2023 104 Tiwa

The path to Knowledge shown by Maheshwar Patar, becomes a beacon in Ulukunchi, his determination to educate his people makes way to his dream and purpose in life.



Dr. Bobby Sarma Baruah is a national and international award-winning Indian filmmaker, producer and screenwriter whose narrative content on socio-cultural issues in Assam and the Northeast India has been highly appreciated.

DOP Yuvraj Dhir
EDITOR Ratul Deka
MUSIC Bobby Sarma Baruah
SOUND Amrit Pritam



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Water Station

2023 80 No Language

The film is an adaptation of a play by Japanese playwright Ota Shogo, written in 1981. Inspired by Ota Shogo's childhood experiences of walking long distances with other refugees as his family migrated from China to Japan, the piece - having no spoken words - foregrounds 'slowness' and 'quietude' and was crafted through movement, sound, and silence across space and landscape.



Abhishek Majumdar is a playwright, theater director, and Scenographer. Currently he is the Artistic Director of Nalanda Arts Studio, Bangalore, and a Professor of Theater at NYU Abu Dhabi.

DOP Fowzia Fathima
EDITOR Vandana Menon
MUSIC Abhi Tambe
SOUND Abhi Tambe
8 & Halfilm Awards,
Fox International Film Festival



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Whispers of Fire and Water

2023 84 Hindi, Bengali, English

An audio installation artist visits the largest coal-mining region of Eastern India, plagued by depleting natural resources and a burning fire in its belly. However, he succumbs to the highly complex socio-political system and moves to a tribal village in a forest area, where water becomes the labyrinth for a personal quest for self.



Lubdhak Chatterjee is an independent filmmaker from India. While doing a post-graduate degree in engineering, he discovered a passion for still photography and filmmaking. Combining these with his love for Indian classical music and dance resulted in his documentary feature debut *Vaikhari* (2018).

DOP Kenneth Cyrus
EDITOR Arjun Gourisaria & Lubdhak Chatterjee
MUSIC Rohen Bose
SOUND Saugata Banerjee

Locarno Film Festival, IFFK, Third Eye Asian Film Festival,



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Bahadur

2023 83 Hindi, Pahari, Nepali

A nationwide lockdown is imposed in India during the coronavirus pandemic. While all Nepalese migrant labourers are boarding vans to leave for their country, Hansi sees an opportunity to earn more money for his ailing son in the emerging labour crisis when his brother-in-law, Dil Bahadur, offers him illegal work in a godown.



Diwa Shah is a filmmaker hailing from Nainital, Uttarakhand, initially aspired to be a full-time writer. However, the COVID-19 pandemic altered her trajectory. Returning to her roots, she observed the struggles of Nepalese immigrant workers in her hometown and channeled these experiences into her debut film.

DOP Modhura Palit
EDITOR Viraj Zunjarrao
SOUND Rakesh KJ, ThomasAjay Abraham, Jishnu Dev

San Sebastian Film Festival, Mumbai Film Festival, IFFK



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Joram

CLOSING FILM

2023 119 Hindi

A desperate man and his infant daughter fleeing a system that want them crushed at any cost, a cop giving unwilling chase, and a bereaved mother seeking ruthless vengeance, collide in a tense, breathless survival thriller across a brutal landscape of devastated forests, blind greed, rebellion, and the bloody aftershocks of 'development'.



Devashish Makhija has written and directed the multiple award winning short films.

DOP Piyush Puty
EDITOR Abhro Banerjee
MUSIC Mangesh Dhakde, Vinamra Pancharia,
Pratul Vishera
SOUND Dhiman Karmakar

IFFR, Sydney Film Festival,
Busan Film Festival



SHORT FILMS

AT IFFB

Nothing Grows under the Pine Trees

2023 32 Garhwali

A family begins to fix a marriage for one of two daughters as one rejoices meanwhile the other suffocates under the weight of a society divided by rigid caste lines.



Sachin Rana is a filmmaker, poet, photographer and multimedia artist hailing from Chamoli, Uttarakhand. He currently operates from Dehradun and Delhi.

DOP Asish Bahuguna
MUSIC Ankit Thapa, Nishant Ramteke
SOUND Ankit Thapa



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A Lullaby for Yellow Roses

2022 18 Hindi

A migrant working class couple, after losing their child to an ill-fated destiny, seeks friends in each other.



Rahul Roye have been working as an independent filmmaker and screenwriter since 2018. They advocate strongly against any agency of social suppression or segregation adhering to superiority fashion, especially concerning gender politics and norms.

DOP Enosh Olivera
EDITOR Arghyakamal Mitra
MUSIC Anam Cara
SOUND Anindita Roy, Adeep Singh Manki

DIFF, IDSFFK



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Shera

2022 20 Kumaoni

Monu's (11) obsession with sighting Shera, the elusive leopard living in the forest around his remote Himalayan village, is tested when his parents decide to migrate to the city. As the day of departure nears, Monu grows despondent but his friend RAJU is determined to help fulfill his wish.



Arun Fulara is known for Sunday (2020), Shera (2023) and My Mother's Girlfriend (2021).



DOP Rangoli Agarwal
EDITOR Vivekanand Daakhore
MUSIC Devraj Bhaumik
SOUND Devraj Bhaumik

My Mother's Girlfriend

2020 15 Marathi

Renuka and Sadiya, two working-class women in love with each other, enjoy their day out celebrating Renuka's birthday. After a fun-filled day, they head home to spend the night together. But unknown to them, Renuka's son, Mangesh, is around. He sees them together. The film is the story of what happens when these two relationships collide.

DIRECTOR Arun Fulara

DOP Rangoli Agarwal

EDITOR Vivekanand Daakhore

MUSIC Andreas Lucas



USN Sardinia Queer Film Festival, Muskoka Queer Film Festival, SiGNS Film Festival, GAZE International LGBTQ+ Film Festival,



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Bablu Babylon Se

2021 40 Hindi

In order to curb inflation, the dystopian 'Authority' has privatized all farming and plantation activities-banning common people from agriculture. When lonely, elderly Bablu is sent on an assignment by his employer Babylon-a leading corporate brand-he accidentally runs into a rebel group on a secret mission.



Abhijeet Sarthi is from the city of Raipur, Chhattisgarh. He has completed his graduation in Computer Science and Engineering. He is an alumnus of the Direction and Screenplay Writing course from SRFTI.

DOP Tarak P Tej
EDITOR Abhishikta Kaila
MUSIC Udit Prakash
SOUND



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A Ride in the Rain

2023 25 Hindi

Three strangers happen to take a taxi ride together through the streets of Kolkata on a dark, rainy night. As they exchange conflicting views about language, identity and trauma, the shadow of something sinister lurks in time. What follows is a little beyond suspenseful and dramatic.



DOP Debraj Naiya
EDITOR Rohit Gharami
MUSIC Ranajoy Bhattacharjee
SOUND Anindita Roy, Adeep Singh Manki

Utsab Ray is an Assistant Professor of English Literature by profession. He also works as a language teacher, translator, writer and a filmmaker.





Mani Kaul A Retrospective

Uski Roti

1970 110 Hindi

A desolate bus-stop on a highway... figure of a village woman - Balo, waiting to deliver a meal to Sucha Singh, the husband, a bus driver. He expects the traditional duties of an average Indian rural wife. Balo in turn accepts her husband's independent lifestyle. Balo hurries to the bus-stop. She is late delivering the meal, trying to save her younger sister, Jinda, from being seduced by the village rake.

DOP K. K. Mahajan
EDITOR Hemanta Bose
SOUND Narendra Singh



Dhrupad

1983 70 Hindi

The film explores Dhrupad music through the practice of Dagar Family - Ustad Zia Fariduddin & Zia Mohiuddin Dagar.

DOP Virendra Saini
EDITOR Ashok Tyagi
MUSIC Ustad Zia Fariduddin & Zia Mohiuddin Dagar
SOUND A. M. Padmanabhan



Aashad ka Ek Din

1971 115 Hindi

A literary film based on a play with in three acts, Aashad Ka Ek Din portrays the love of Mallika and Kalidasa, the renowned Sanskrit poet and dramatist. Vilom, a friend to both and interested in Mallika, is a passive onlooker for the first two acts. Kalidasa leaves his verdant mountain valley home for the splendour of far-off Ujjain where he wins fame. The action of the film/play is rooted in the village to which Kalidasa returns years later and finds Mallika married to Vilom and the mother of his child. Mallika sacrificed her love so that the poet could pursue his muse.

DOP K K Mahajan
EDITOR Madhu Sinha
MUSIC Jaidev Verma
SOUND Narendra Singh




Siddheshwari

1990 92 Hindi

The film explores the life of Siddheshwari Devi, a classical singer from Varanasi.

DOP Piyush Shah
EDITOR Lalitha Krishna
SOUND Rajat Dholakia

 Berlin, Locarno,
Toronto International Film Festival



Duvidha

1973 82 Hindi

A girl Lachhi, is married to a merchant's son, Kishanlal. He brings her to his village but leaves her immediately to go away on business. Lachhi is left to her own devices. Meanwhile, a ghost falls in love with her and assumes the form of her husband and begins to live with her. Soon she finds herself pregnant with a child. The husband returns... a dilemma arises... The film moves on two planes - inside-outside, dark-light, a structure that exists in the folk tales and myths the world over.

DOP Navroze Contractor
EDITOR Ravi Patnaik
MUSIC Saki Khan, Ramzan Hammu

 Venice, Berlin, Chicago, IFFR



Mati Manas

1985 92 Hindi

The film examines the art of Pottery in India. it documents the craft tradition of rural Indian Potters.

DOP Venu
EDITOR Reena Mohan
MUSIC Mangesh Desai, T.R Mahalingam
SOUND Farookh Patel, A.M Padmanabhan

 Festival des Three Continents



The Cloud Door

1994 30 Hindi

Cloud Door has been adapted from three sources: From Bhasa's Sanskrit play "Aimaraka" (5th-7th centuries) Malik Mohammed Jayasi's Sufi epic love poem "Padmavat" (13th century) and from an erotic Indian tale called "Suksaptiti".

DOP Anil Mehta
EDITOR Lalitha Krishna
MUSIC Fariduddin Dagar
SOUND Vikram Joglekar

 IDFA, Festival des Three Continents




Nazar

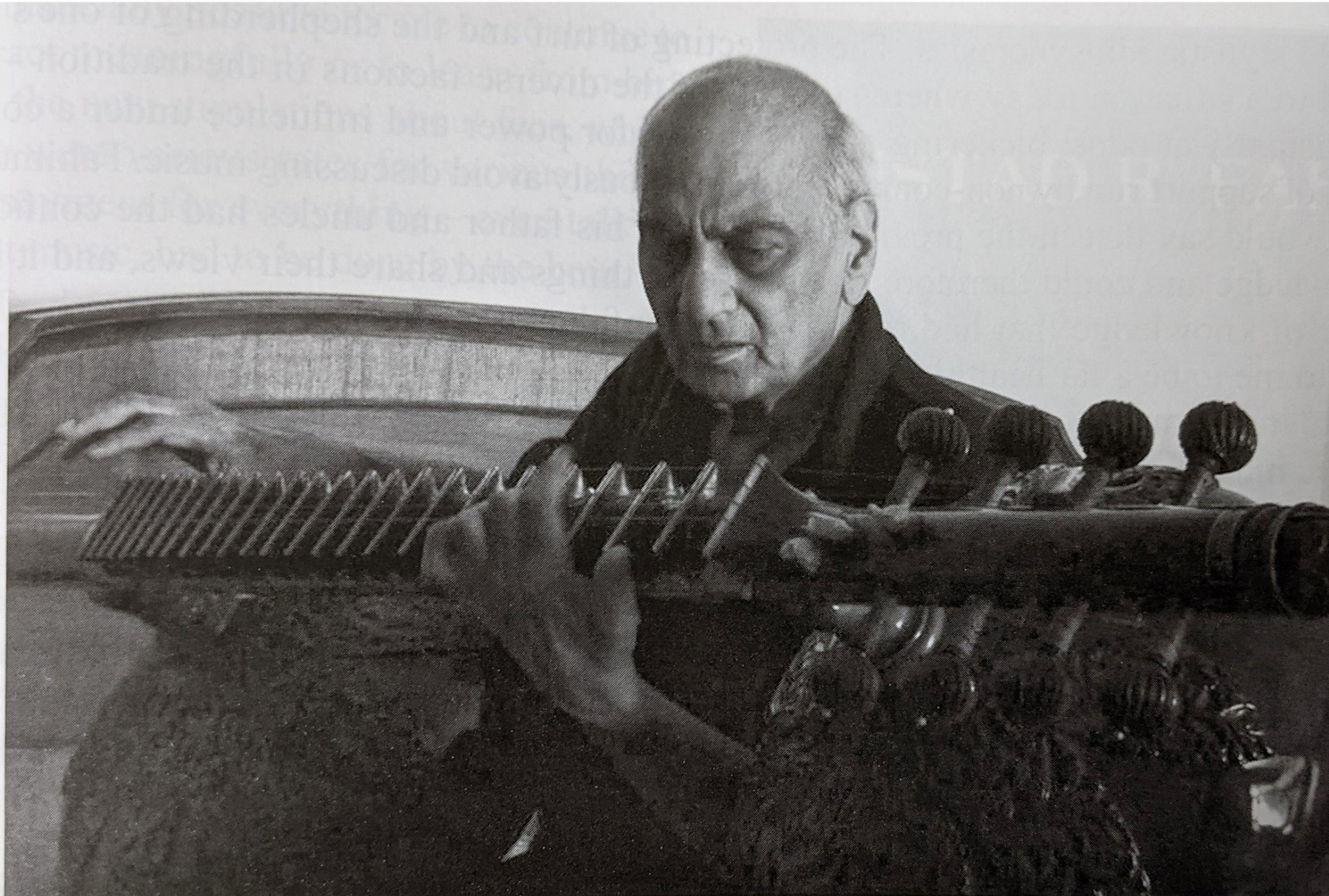
1990 124 Hindi

After his wife's death, the husband recalls their first meeting and marriage. She was much younger than him. She used to pawn some things to an antique shop to make a little money. The husband is increasingly intrigued by her mind-set. As things develop, he finds out that she was an orphan living with two aunts. The film explores their complex life in a manner unusual for Indian cinema.

DOP Piyush Shah
EDITOR Lalitha Krishna
MUSIC Vikram Joglekar, D. Wood
SOUND

 IFFR, Locarno,
Festival des Three Continents





courtesy: Randhan Ramnath

Communication

There is a kind of film-making being practised by a few filmmakers in India which, although having received critical acclaim within the country and without, has not been able to find any distribution outlet and has now seemingly reached an economic dead-end. This cinema, by acknowledging the true limitations of the medium was beginning to evolve newer relationships with other art forms. Cinema would not be merely parasitical on literature, theatre or music anymore. A film based on a three act play, instead of destroying the complexity and limited settings of the original form, would retain its intrinsic sensuousness and, thereby, by paradox, would be forced to discover itself, i.e., what could be truly cinema in the filming of a play. The moment cinema can lay itself parallel to any other more established art form; it will be able to free itself into independence.

The fact that the realistic image (and not line, shape, colour or harmonic sound) is the idiom of cinema determines to a considerable extent the film maker's attitude towards life. A shot of a wall in a film cannot be understood devoid of its social milieu—it must belong to a level of social living. As also in the construction of a scene, it is likely that a unit by itself may impart nothing quite significantly concrete. In Antonioni's *La Notte* (1961), the solid geometric textured formation of walls occupying a major area of the format with a small moving human figure, form a social observation on the Italian urban situation. It should be stated now that when this observation becomes literal or theatrical it fails in cinema.

These new brands of films face the severest criticism on the ground of lack of communication. But it is insufficient to harp on communication without analysing first where other film-makers, preoccupied with communication, have been led and the past historical as well as future repercussions of films on social life. Is communication merely to be understood as something reaching out to an audience without being boring? Is this commendable in itself?

All commercial films for decades now have communicated in this sense, only to the detriment of youth and values in this country. Their influence is so visibly apparent in the cheap hairstyles and 'hero' mannerisms of the young and the total apathetic frivolousness of the adult. In Tamil Nadu politics, for instance, the 'filmy' fiction of the hero on the screen has acquired a strange reality. The heroism on the screen of the character is completely identified with the actor (and political aspirant) playing the part. It is strange that the power of the cinema reflects negatively in obvious terms, whereas its positive contribution is not only limited but invisible.

Communication can only be assessed in terms of the quality of experience. The words 'quality' and 'experience' would imply that the one who communicates and the one to whom the communication is directed exist at different levels but that they fall within the bounds of a relationship. If the viewer fabricates a fantasy in his mind through contemplation on sensuous objects like the heroine's shapely legs (sexual) or the hero's imported car (economical) or the side-heroine's hysterical dilemma (moral), the cumulative effect of these titillations cannot be termed an experience. Neither can it be understood as communication.

All the *Brechtian methods of alienation* used by serious western film-makers are not meant to be startling gimmicks, but serve to warn the audience against identifying with the people and happenings on the screen. The characters and incidents instead of being an arrangement designed to invoke an experience, become, with identification, sensuous objects in themselves. Spurts of social violence do not necessarily emanate from the depiction of violence on the screen but rather, they arise out of aspirations that cinema and life, under its present system, provoke but cannot hope to fulfill at any time to come. Ideas also contain material energy. Ideas therefore can become purely descriptive of another reality or an idea by itself can become an object of sensuousness. One is only a little better than the other. Description attempts to reconstruct reality whereas the material to be reconstructed, which belongs to life, is so complex that it does not admit of the limitations of a word. The discipline of literature arises from universally understood meanings of words which are in themselves abstracted and not real.

The so-called realist evokes atmosphere or, much worse, a mood through details, completely giving up the entity of the word and thus fails to create a direct experience. The other extreme is where the word/idea acquires a sensuous identity of its own. Thus, ideas—sometimes even a progressive social idea—become like the legs of a slim or a fat heroine exposed for the consumption of the very class which the ideas themselves denounce.

Such ideas neither create a sharp-edged social consciousness that may bring about a change, nor do they lead life into an inertia where hidden internal contradictions grow unassuaged and may seek to resolve themselves in the progress of history. This is because the representation on celluloid is thoroughly romanticised through emotion as the only basis of a relationship.

At best, emotion is replaced by some form of intellectual sensationalism. Such ideas are successful quite obviously but such ideas are regressive in terms of social import. It is a strange truth that a really good revolutionary or social theoretician, when working at a time of no historical change, remains limited in his impact and that in more opportune times even ignorant, corrupt leaders flourish.

There is no need to lament the fact that a profound masterpiece of social comment like Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) can be reduced to a postcard; or that Godard should become a fad with the same rich European class that he himself holds in greatest contempt. This kind of contradictory relationship between socialist aspiration and decadent urbanism is not non-existent even in India where the filmmaker's life is at complete variance with what is proposed on film where radical changes are suggested under the cover of symbolism.

What would be more truthful is to present with clear verisimilitude the actual conditions of one's own individual life and its contradictions and its conflict with contradictions present in the collective life of the people. To be able to see the present and the conditions arising out of it is to witness a fact without the interference of one's desires or memories. This is not to suggest that 'document actualities' (i.e., documentaries) are the only valid form of film making.

The difference between fiction and document, as between abstract and concrete realities, as between desires/memories and facts is significant. Both can and do exist side by side. Only where superimposition takes place does confusion arise. A fact cannot appear in the form of an individual's desire or a phase of one's memory. Once it does that, even though it maintains a factual appearance, it must be termed a memory or desire. The inverse, where a memory or a desire is presented as if it were a fact, creates another form of lie.

The fact deals with the present or a condition of the present. This is as difficult to express as to experience, both for the filmmaker and the audience. The question of communication has reached a bottle-neck here. The industrial tradition of mass media, where the ideas of a filmmaker living in an urban centre have to be communicated to the whole of India poses an insurmountable problem. The facile solution of averaging the present conditions and thus exploiting the collective memories and desires of the audience in order to communicate, is the field of commercial and semi-commercial film makers.

Art theatres cannot be a solution for the serious filmmaker. Even if an art theatre movement succeeds, it only produces a 'hybrid' class of 'arty' folk, who appreciate films in order to put themselves a rung above the 'masses'. Besides, the maintenance of an art theatre with all its staff and taxes and a smaller seating capacity generally provide insufficient returns to the producer of low budget films.

It should be clear by now that I have purposely led the argument to a dead end—the so-called

successful filmmaker who communicates, fails and the so-called unsuccessful filmmaker, who does not communicate, also fails. The one who communicates survives either at the expense and ignorance of the very poor or, if he is 'conscious', by shifting his appeal from the vulgar to the intelligent. The one who does not communicate survives because of wide approval or disapproval of or, better still, a controversy between the critical sections of the press.

To move towards a form, towards limitations that are the means and discipline of that particular form, towards a cinematic idiom, is to move closer to the realism of experience. In fact, realism in a film lies in the truthful relationship between the social/individual sensibility of the filmmaker and the cinematic idiom. A director from the urban milieu who wishes to make a film on rural life will be respecting realism when he looks at the rural details with his urban sensibility and thus exercises adequate restraint on his performers; rather than if he attempts to force his actors to emote as if he himself came from that rural set-up and tries to inject his film with rural 'exotica'. The second situation would create complete falsehood.

The question of a film maker's own sensibility can be explained in terms of other art forms more easily. For example, it is inconceivable that a serious urban artist could suddenly begin to paint like a folk artist. We are aware of quite a few examples of this false declassing. The results have been invariably just exotic or 'cultural'.

This is not to suggest that an urban artist or a film maker has nothing to understand from a folk artist but only that this understanding should limit itself to abstracting principles from the other art form and reducing them to what is basic to human expression. Motif, colour, shape, line are particular to a very restricted area; in fact they are born out of a limited environment and its transportation can be hazardous. Paul Klee established modern abstract art through principles that were derived from Persian miniatures. Klee was so deeply inspired by Islamic art that he confessed that he would not be able to paint again as he had done. This kind of knowledgeable cultural exchange is essential for revitalizing the inertia-ridden historical art forms of a country.

It has been suggested that cinema belongs to the realm of mass-media, whereas painting (notwithstanding calendar/mythological art) and music (ignoring commercial film songs) and literature (not taking into account the cheap paper-back) can sustain themselves without a wide circulation, and therefore are capable of difficult experimentation.

The argument that immediately follows this stand is of economics. Certain highly placed film makers have stated that every film maker has a moral obligation to return the invested money to his financier. Even if the film fails financially, the film maker is exonerated if it is apparent that he has

kept his financial obligations in mind while making the film. When the film has been financed by the government, the accusation has been even more strident that the tax-payers money has been squandered.

It is obvious that the anxiety to see a film as economically viable emanates from a morality which is in the interest only of a certain class. There can be no other reason why these same critics can accept the situation created by the commercial cinema—the worst of filth is produced, a parallel black money system has been made prevalent and under the cover of entertainment, fantastic dreams, unreal sex/violence and perverted suggestions are dished out. In fact, it appears that for these moralists any inconceivable limit of providing distractions is commendable so long as the product returns the money to the investors.

The questions here are: who has created this economics? Who has capitalized on the gains of industrialization which has caused art to move away from a limited folk environment to become a powerful mass media? In whose interest is it to bring out. A monthly magazine full of lewd photographs and scandal? Why does cinema have to operate from three big commercial centres only and on such a large scale? Why do exhibitors and distributors run to buy films that combine vulgarity with frivolousness? Who stands to gain in allowing film stars to act in twenty films simultaneously and to quote fantastic terms?

Behind all these questions and more there is a businessman from the class of economically interested merchants who have turned the aspects of culture into sordid commerce. It is he who is repeatedly raising this question of - communication and making it a matter of mere speculation. There are several well-meaning film fellows who wish to communicate but they fail, not because they are incompetent, but because the whole market is now only a matter of speculation.

A new breed of film makers and critics profess to believe in a semi-commercial cinema but they have been seen to end up invariably in a commercial mess. Some serious film makers begin to work with 'stars', some are compelled to enter into an outright commercial proposition to meet an immediate economic crisis. In short, the question of economics and communication does not really belong to the film maker and the seemingly absurd statement made elsewhere in the article would have to be restated—that a correct film would have to be unsuccessful.

Under the feudal system, the artist was employed by a patron. The artist's expression was in tune with that of his master—what pleased him or what troubled him was his subject matter. In prehistoric times, art was magic. The cave man painted the bison, not because its shape or lines

pleased him but because it posed a threat to him and he wished to master it. The painting of the bison was a ritual, done to save the community from a collective hazard. Today, the artist is expressing his personal anguish within the discipline, of an independent aesthetic.

The question of communication, which never ever entered the picture earlier, is the result of this personal anguish and its personalized expression. Any work true to this form must fail to communicate. Even if the anguish speaks of a collective dilemma, its personalized expression makes it impossible to communicate widely.

Some film makers do succeed and are totally honest at the same time. But their impact has not been of great brilliance. Great works acquire a certain preciousness of being masterpieces, are stored carefully and are highly evaluated. The fact that cave paintings were sometimes super-imposed upon each other by the works of later painters displays the vital functional quality of the act.

The negative contribution of cinema towards deteriorating constructive values of a society is not only felt but widely known and analysed. Students imitating the cheap tricks of the 'heroes', stagnating moral issues of the middle class, total anarchy and frivolousness among the poor, creating superfluous bad and good taste, and all other issues of such obvious import can be directly related—a straight connection between a commercial film and the varying mental levels and reaction of the audience can be established. On the other hand, one cannot inverse the process and hope to create positive values in an audience by investing the construction of a film in a positive manner and spouting positive ideas.

The fact of a film working negatively on the audience is not caused only by a lack of quality in a film and the educational lack in the audience. It is the power of a well-entrenched system that falls in between the product and the consumer which determines the attitude towards the consumption of that product. A film with all credentials, in such a system, would have to fail by being ineffectual or inaccessible.

This system should be changed not by building art theatres and cultivating a 'tasteful' breed of cinemagoers, but by altering the system of exhibition. Art theatres would perhaps show better quality films but the problem to be tackled is the distance which separates the film maker from his audience. What the film maker should attempt is to form a more direct relationship with his audience.

If the audience could be made to participate in the making of a film, the resultant work would not

be just a display of communication, but the result of co-ordination between them to handle and comprehend problems. The beginnings of such an experiment would have to be made in the field of documentary and the elements of fiction, as understood today, would have to be completely dropped.

The film would have to begin with an impersonal problem: let us say the introduction of cattle breeding in a backward area. By this we do not mean an urban class-room exercise with explanations given in numerical order. Nor a film made during a visit of a fortnight to a backward area— realism of the locale thrown into an arty form. In one, the performers would be behaving as if they knew all about cattle breeding and were now performing certain tricks for the shooting of a film. And, in the other, the idiom of expression would be beyond the audience.

Instead, the film maker and his crew should stay in an area for four to five months when experts on the subject introduce the topic to the people. Then they would proceed to record what is really happening—the first reactions, the effort to understand, the attempts to implement, etc. Now film making has become a ritual; the ritual of trying to understand, in this case, cattle breeding. The ritual involves both sides, the film maker and the performers who are actually his audience. The element of fiction would be nominal in such a work. Fiction involves the memories and desires of the film maker and it is obvious in this case that the personalized aspect of the film would be automatically restricted. Certainly the conventional fiction born out of the literary narrative would have to be forsaken and, indeed, must be forsaken in order to rid cinema of its complete dependence on literature. As also, cinema's dependence on theatre would be completely eliminated, as this cinema would not expect any performance from the people involved.

When the film is freed from narrative, be it chronological or a reaction against chronology (where time is broken into non-sequential units) it would naturally find release from the necessity of performance. Having abandoned this position of being cushioned by both literature and theatre, cinema would proceed to rely more directly on the essential qualities of the cinematic medium. For example, the space/time relationship in theatre is restricted by the proscenium. Theatre requires the actor, by his performance, to break down the restrictive barriers and to carry the audience with his words and gestures into an experience of a different space and time. Cinema has reversed the need for itself. It begins with an endless space and endless time order. The linear movement of theatre is meaningless here. In fact, cinema requires the narrowing down or the re-organization of the endlessly particular and the varying space / time possibilities.

The word in literature is seen to connote more than its meaning— again the instrument (word) having been assigned a function (meaning) it is necessary that newer contexts create newer meanings. The word in theatre, on the other hand, belongs to the environment—it belongs to the openness of a lawn, to the noisy, closed up crowd of a restaurant, to the intimate and restful quality of a bedroom and so on. When it belongs to the environment it belongs to the actor and to the moment of presentation.

The elements of a cinematic moment comprise all images, sounds, actors, walls, chairs, etc. Sounds comprise the words of a character, the sound of a distant plane overhead, the sound of a tea-cup being placed on a saucer, etc. Movement comprises the movement within the frame, the movement of the camera and movements caused by the intervals of editing. All these units by themselves, i.e., within their own particular space /time relationship, have a limited meaning. But juxtaposed with each other in a new space/time relationship, they leap from particularity into abstraction. This leap need not take place through the development of a story or characterization.

All this would not be possible if the film maker did not live for a length of time with the people with whom he would be making his film! To take up a concrete project, and follow that as the basis of recording a human reality, is also essential. Without this, the film would result in the usual impressionistic generalized bunk or it would perhaps lead to some embarrassing or enjoyable sensational realism.

When film making becomes a ritual like this, the film maker has discovered an actual relationship with his audience. The object of the film would not be to show a success or a failure but to show things as they actually are. The project may end in failure which would also be faithfully recorded. In the process of filming a certain problem (which provides the basic discipline) the film maker may diverge into other spheres of the activity of the participants. The film maker and the participants both have a consciousness. An exchange must take place and both must emerge from the project at least a little transformed. The situation of the film maker coming to a rural environment, as much a stranger as a man from another planet, recording the rural details to sell in festivals abroad, and returning as soon as possible back to his urban environment, would no -more be able to exist.

It has been learnt through newspapers that the government is making efforts further to widen the scope and activities of innovative expression in the field of the cinema—by perhaps building a chain of art theatres and by enlarging the functions of a body like the Film Finance Corporation.

It would be appropriate now to suggest a scheme pertaining to this matter. Apart from the fact that the building or converting of halls into art theatres would be expensive, its returns would be limited due to lesser seating capacity. Even if the impact of the films shown in these theatres gains momentum the more vital sections of society like the students, the industrial workers and farmers would be completely excluded or only partially exposed. If the money, instead, could be spent on thousands of 16 mm projectors, and if the government could subsidize groups prepared to buy these projectors, many organisations (especially schools and colleges) in all parts of the country could come forward and begin exhibiting films.

Initially, these organisations should be supplied only with the national and international classics of the cinema, i.e., films that have developed the potential of the medium. The basic gap between the education of the film maker and the audience could be considerably bridged by this process. Film makers should then be encouraged to fan out to all parts of the country with specific projects; to live in areas for months; to work and live with the people there in the process of making a film. The films would then be supplied to the various organisations exhibiting 16-mm films. Thus, the film maker and the audience, instead of living in their own airtight compartments, would be able to discover an actual working relationship.

Mani Kaul, 1977

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Beneath the surface: Cinematography and Time

The object of this article is to provoke debate on a basic cinematographic contradiction: a plethora of films across the world continues to fashion awe-inspiring cinematographic spaces (stunning visuals), however, only a few are able to realize a simultaneous and direct experience of cinematographic time. With the current epidemic of special effects, the awe-inspiring space has taken a turn for the worse we appear headed for an immersion into an immaterial world.

As opposed to what has been presumed as the obvious (that space/time is an integrated vehicle that makes cinema move) space and time in cinema are separate entities, destructive of each other when one is absolutely privileged against the other; and often requiring a system of relay between them for the two to significantly come together.

A film unfolds in space but at the same time in time, too. It is, however, usual to think of cinema as a visual and not (also) an art in and of time, as a temporal art. The meaning and feeling in films centre on what is organized for the eyes and ears with what is seen and heard in a way that leads more to the production of space than to a realization of time. Time in such films is a thing just present there; intarsia entrenched available as a result of a progression of events, as a consequence of, as something absent and only directly experienced. It is rarely present and directly experienced as a revelation of multiple durations conscious in the way it's found in music.

Obviously cinema cannot aspire to the condition of music, which is primarily a temporal discipline. Cinema is an equal mix of movement and time. The question this debate hopes to raise is how movement and time have developed as independent elements in cinema and if they have sought a unique cinematographic resolution for every film.

How does cinematography figure precisely in this debate?

Movement (of the object being filmed or the camera itself) is in every respect a part of space. "Motion Picture" is nothing but a translation of spatial fragments that build an illusion of movement. Movement reinforces space - it is space.

Temporal elements such as "rhythm" in a narrow and "attention" in a broad sense, only serves

to impart specific shape to movement, they place movement in a time frame (for instance for a narrative). However, a movement that happens in a passage of time does not necessarily ensure a simultaneous, unhindered experience of duration. On the contrary, camera is often a slave to "action" that develops narrative/ non-narrative spaces and is rarely able to establish a life of its own it will not, for instance, tilt or pan away by a logic of its own independent rhythm and attention in relation to the whole film. At the most camera movement is meant to enhance features of "actions" in the narrative. The paradox is: tied to the action, the camera does not open the spatial field to an experience of time; freed from action, the camera damages the narrative itself.

Most films do not encourage a direct awareness of the passage of time. Such awareness alienates the viewer from involvement with what may be characterized as the emotional depth of the field of a narrative. The distance forces the viewer to look at and reflect upon the mode of the narrative—for instance, if the film is made in melodramatic idiom the viewer will be forced to look at the melodramatic mode of narration. Obviously, for that moment of alienation, the melodramatic movement of the film will not carry the viewer away into melodramatic emotions. For a "regular" mainstream film this distinction can be a disaster but for films that attempt a wider cinematographic perspective it is indispensable. There are number of examples in both mainstream and independent cinema where the extraordinary use of technique of alienation has opened the audience to the "times" the films were exploring. It is this temporal alienation that makes films self-reflexive precisely in the manner that a highly engaging theatrical performance becomes self-reflexive when the play, using (theatrical) alienation technique is suddenly seen as happening on the proscenium. The presence of alienation distances a narrative from its performance. In an ultimate sense, the way music is about music, theatre is about theatre, painting is about painting, and cinema is about cinema.

When nothing moves time does.

Again we have a paradox: it is only when the object and the camera are immobile (without motion) that we make an entire contact with duration. An immobile apple on an immobile table, filmed by an immobile camera offers an ideal situation for an experience of a passing of duration.

The material reality of life and cinema, is however, more complex than the ideal apple situation is able to illuminate. Experiments where the camera is held static upon an object for hours (refer to Warhol and others) will remain isolated as unrepeatable examples, but ones, that prove the position of our thesis. It tells us what lengthy takes in certain films do: a visual, however visual will

not sustain itself beyond the time required to "read" that visual. Beyond that read limit the visual stimulus embodied in the images is exhausted, after which it makes the viewer conscious not of space, i.e. visually organized but of a time shorn, visually resulting into a certain bland saturation in the head. The films that use prolonged takes are in effect attempting to introduce a direct apprehension of time by "killing" the visual. It appears to be a painful route to discover and employ time in cinema, a kind of cinematographic bloodletting. Unfortunately, it's a procedure that makes it "given", because it equally robs the cinematic moment of its fleeting sensuousness. Lay and even enlightened audiences find such subjection to empty time unbearable- they wait for its termination or remain disconnected to the film.

Ironically, shorter durations appear to help maintain the visual illusion (and, therefore, the excitement) and prevent a sequence of visuals from being sucked into the formidable black hole of time. Unfortunately, short durations are only able to sustain a series of distractions rather than grow into a mature attention. This is precisely how the contemporary consumerist campaigns operate where playful distractions battle with eternal absence of the real substance, where the consumer shall never realize that ultimate object of consumption. Advertising signs continue to beckon the consumer on to an unreachable horizon. As virtual technology takes hold of cinematography to control and manipulate visuals on an "inhuman" scale, we are set to enter into an age of dense, opaque and endless space.

The immobility of the object and the camera we spoke of in reality implies a state of neutrality between the two. In other words, if the camera and action of begins and objects retain (the intangible) neutrality despite their extensive/intensive dimensions, we should have a flow of duration seeping through an ellipsis between images and sounds. The word "neutral" may on one hand signify that which is not visually expressive, not sharply expressive and on the other hand also that which is expressive, even sharply expressive without hiding the fact of being so. Bresson described cinematographic image as empty or "ironed out", drained of intention. Jean Luc Godard and his cameraman Raoul Coutard, on the other hand, made their first film exuding breathless expressions but one that continuously carried out a police-convict chase in which nothing much happens.

In that case of Bresson, the empty shot does contain a sequence of action corresponding to a narrative moment but these actions do not do more than make a mechanism for a particular shot, or what he called a "fragment". A mechanism is a series of actions that non-actors go through following the fragmentation of the narrative development. Opposed to the technique of *mise-en-scene* where scene, scenery, set, setting and actor's movement relate to a whole intentional

environment (as in Eisenstein), Bresson's single shot present itself as fragment (often with only hands, feet, door, faces, bodies, etc.) of an intangible whole not displaying any particular intention. The players are required to perform these actions without an effort to interpret or impose content upon the mechanism. Bereft of "intention" (on the part of characters and the camera) the mechanism is not driven by facial or for those matter authentic psychological motivations. The mechanism itself contains no intention at all. It is the ellipsis between fragments, the difference between fragments which finally conveys a sense of intangible intentions. That difference becomes a specific relation between the two fragments when bridged in the head of a spectator. Not on the screen but in the head of the spectator, making him or her subjectively active participant. Cinema itself then appears a hub of multiple intentions in conflict with each other like music.

However, even with non-actors and non-acting it is hard to go through a series of actions without a trace of a personal incentive. Bresson, therefore, waited for an "accident" or an involuntary delivery of lines and gestures, for a moment that will happen by chance and not by design.

"The image must exclude the idea of image" (Notes on Cinematography, Bresson)

Cinematographically speaking a cameraman can only contribute to a film that strives for cinematographic time if he treats the objective reality as a reality of sensation, rather than a visualization of verbal descriptions, worse, conceptions. Sensation is a preverbal condition of cognition and speaks of no intentionality. A sequence of sensations and the difference between them certainly leads to meanings and conceptions. It would be unthinkable for instance to light up a scene for Bresson where the angle position and quality of light contain a deliberate or sharp expression.

Bresson evolved the technique of "fragmentation" in order to discard the traditional method of "representation". In a word, fragmentation meant the creation of unique fragments that produce meaning only upon juxtaposition whereas representation involved variations on the principle of mise-en-scene.

Whereas a fragment does not stand for a meaning on its own but lights up on contact with another fragment, the mise-en-scene of any kind builds a master plan and details through an execution of certain known and verbalized intentions within the framework of a master shot. The only intention that is a decision to place every fragment in a definite position in a given sequence of fragments. For purposes of cinematography, it would mean that the image achieves an emptiness

of a sensation through lightning and exposure, through contrast and diffusion.

The idea of the image is produced from the use of a pre-determined reading of the image, whereas an image, pure and simple, is one that is forming but not yet formed. For Bresson, just a fresh angle made things more visible than a whole lot of light and color and sound and fury. Only neutral images were able to create the "irrational interval" on juxtaposition, transform the two to make the intangible ellipsis between them speak. Bresson's image are radically different from "the rational interval of Hollywood and of Eisenstein's dialectical montage" Opposed to the popular conception that mainstream films must present graphic narratives in which the structure of events is fully and clearly explained and the broad premise of the film is firmly in place, there are innumerable examples of successful filmmakers who have dared to make the audience experience the mysteries of the uncertain, the unknown. Alfred Hitchcock's ***The Birds*** (1963) is one prime example of how the director repeatedly fought the temptation of succumbing to the compulsion of explaining the intention behind the central act of the film: the invasion by the birds. In a letter to Hunter (the screenwriter for the ***The Birds***) about his first draft (13 November 1961) Hitchcock writes, "I'm concerned whether anything of a thematic nature should go into the script. I'm sure we're going to be asked again and again, especially by the morons 'Why are we doing it'. And in a memo on the second draft (20 December 1961) he notes "People are still asking: 'Why do the birds do it?'"

It appears that there is till this day no definitive explanation as to why the birds in this famous Hitchcock film attacked the Bodega Bay community. Or even why they attacked the human beings at all? Whenever Hitchcock was offered explanations to authenticate the irrational bird assault, he was, in the end led to use his directorial eraser to wipe out every explanations, writes Bill Krohn. Hitchcock deleted all explanations that the writers, the producers and he battled in earlier draft versions of the screenplay. These have been detailed in the book *Hitchcock at Work*.¹

Among others, these explanations were: a) a minor suggestion in the Du Maurier story that the Russians may have (during and because of the Cold War) poisoned the birds, was dropped on; b) that Castro (and enemies of America) might have launched a "bird revolution" persisted until the second draft of the screenplay, and carried lines like "Birds of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your feathers"; was eventually struck out by Hitchcock in the third draft; c) the ornithologist, Mrs. Bundy's claim that mankind insisted on making it difficult for life to exist on this planet and Melaine's response, "May be they are tired of being shot at and roasted in ovens" was removed from the script at later stage; d) a scene in a church where a priest, moments before the first bird assault, quotes from the *Ecclesiastes* about vanity and vexations of the mind in all things and that nothing would last was present in the original synopsis but never made it to even the first draft of

the screenplay; e) the attack was a “natural thing” as the Da Maurier’s book briefly suggests, a blind instinct that raced through the whole species and took over the birds, was dropped after much debate. The last word: “It appears that the bird attacks come in waves with long intervals between (either ‘in between’ or ‘between them’). The reason for this does not seem clear yet”, was the only explanation the director was able to muster.

The fact that Hitchcock refused to explain the “why” of the bird assault led to a film that courted a series of events that were suspended in a state of being uncertain, undecided and even doubtful. Such mysterious situations evoke anxiety and apprehension and prepare the audience for an experience of fearful suspense that naturally follows. The compositions of a frame and movement in and between shots are not enough to create a suspended emotional condition- it is the experience of a duration abnormally contracted or equally abnormally expanded relative to its routine existential/empirical experience, which makes attention suspend itself in time. The duration spans across shots as something continuously present, as a whole curve in time, made of intangible materiality yet emotionally palpable. In this respect it is revealing that Bill Krohn also explodes the myth that Hitchcock was a stickler for following the screenplay and executing storyboards into cinema. Through extensive documentation available on his films and through his collaboration, Krohn is able to establish that Hitchcock was not the “control freak” he is made out to be; he never rigorously followed the pre-visualization techniques centering on the famous Hollywood storyboards; more often than not scenes were still being written as he shot his films; he himself admitted that the first rule of making cinema was “flexibility”; he never nailed down his cameraman to the storyboard drawings; and, that Hitchcock’s own claim of sticking to the script and storyboards, was a fashionable desire to protect an image of a perfectionist in Hollywood show business. Ironical as it may appear, the production company ordered a set of drawings to be traced from the production stills after the film was complete in all respects for the publicity of ***North by Northwest*** (1959).

To a filmmaker like Hitchcock, the storyboards would have been more useful in understanding the precise quality of juxtaposition between images and not in their visual power to conceptualize; the invisible inner path that rides the flow of duration and connects across shots to germinate a whole feeling, is the real source of creating tension in the unfolding of an event in a film.

The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in his books on cinema, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (1983) and *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (1985), was the first to discover Yasujiro Ozu (Japan) and Robert Bresson (France) as two modern filmmakers who explored the unknown realm of

“Time-Image” in cinema. Cinema before World War II was, according to Deleuze, dominated by “Movement-Image”.²

Not paradoxically, Ozu’s cinema finds its Time-Image through a denial of camera movement (of pan, tilt, zoom and later tracking) and an adoption of the static shot with the camera placed on the tatami. The camera lens faces characters from fixed angles and produced headlong or profiles or three-fourth views of face, torsos and bodies. The near symmetrical and, therefore, neutral frames are further marked by a clear (even if developing) geometry between colors and shapes, in the interiors and the exteriors. In terms of lighting, Ozu’s cameraman often creates a dark vignette around the frame (particularly for the interior scenes) where the visual surround (upper and lower regions of frame) shade off into darker tones. The result of this entire cinematographic regimen makes the actor’s movement gain a clear significance. The direction and the velocity of these movements, in characters an extraordinary humanity. Apparently, at the shooting script stages of a film’s production, Ozu often emphasized directions where he drew arrows at angles in which characters moved and interacted with each other.

Seeking a semblance of nature in cinematography making space “natural” does not reveal the nature of space we have in mind for the film. It indeed remains a mere semblance of nature rather than an unfolding of nature itself. Like natural acting, natural photography too appears rehearsed but at the same time posturing as unrehearsed and spontaneous. There are reasons to fear a future where galloping virtual possibilities of image-manipulation begin to posture as natural, as nature.

- Mani Kaul

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NOTES:

1. Bill Krohn, *Hitchcock at Work* (London: Phaidon, 2000).
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image and Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989)

Kamal Swaroop on Mani Kaul: 'A visionary and ahead of his time'

As 'Aashad Ka Ek Din' turns 50, it's time to revisit Mani Kaul's transcendental cinema and painterly minimalism.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Mani Kaul's **Aashad Ka Ek Din** (1971), undoubtedly one of the most radical films from the *Indian New Wave movement*. Mani's second feature still retains its austere power, and along with his **Uski Roti** (1970), **Duvidha** (1973), **Dhruvad** (1983) and **Mati Manas** (1985), is a perfect showcase of his economic style and painterly sophistication.

The historical romance, based on Mohan Rakesh's acclaimed play, unspools in three acts. Mallika (Rekha Sabnis) is in love with the poet-playwright Kalidas (Arun Khopkar). Kalidas has been conferred a state honour, but refuses the king's offer to travel to the capital Ujjayini. Mallika pushes Kalidas to leave for Ujjayini, but deep inside feels a tinge of sadness at the thought of her lover's imminent departure.

Vilom (Om Shivpuri), on the other hand, cannot wait for Kalidas to leave. He is vying for Mallika's affection and is Kalidas's nemesis. "You see your desire in my eyes", he tells Kalidas to remind him that they are, after all, versions of each other: "What is Vilom? An unsuccessful Kalidas. And Kalidas, a successful Vilom."

Lurking behind this love triangle is the theme of artistic rivalry, about which Mani knew a thing or two. In the 1970s and '80s, Mani was moving around in Bombay's artistic circles, and was aware of the circumstances in which great art was produced. He was privy to the ego battles, jealousies and repressed desires that artists hid from the public.

At one point, Mallika's mother Ambika explains her hatred for Kalidas by saying he is "self-centered". She could be talking about any artist. The envy that Mani captures between these two titans, Kalidas and Vilom, then, makes it deeply contemporary.

Who can say **Aashad Ka Ek Din** is 50? With its cinematic treatment, innovation and philosophical statements, it remains bracingly fresh.

Why do I say innovation? As a filmmaker, Mani was a visionary and ahead of his time. **Aashad Ka Ek Din** was an iconic play in its day. It was staged by nearly every playwright, from Ebrahim Alkazi to Satyadev Dubey. Mani was drawn to literature and paintings, but he wasn't rigid. He was adaptable to trends and new ideas.

For art filmmakers, the budget was usually a pittance. But Mani was adept at making use of whatever resources were available. He was not one to wait for ideal conditions.

The film was shot on the foothills of Himalaya in a rain-swept house in Kasauli. Since sync sound was expensive, Mani pre-recorded **Aashad's** dialogue track. His actors lip-synced the dialogue. The Himalayan outdoors gave a further natural feel to the film.

One of Mani's preoccupations was with composition, although he later famously pronounced that "the image is dead". He had made a mark with **Uski Roti**, his seminal debut in 1969, whose photography and spacing, were modelled on Amrita Sher-Gil's distinctly *post-Impressionistic* depictions of Indian womanhood.

Aashad Ka Ek Din was equally enamoured of art. This time, the influence was the murals and frescoes at Ajanta. Mani created some good close-ups of Rekha Sabnis. The mid-shots with the characters facing each other amidst out-of-focus background was also a device that worked well for the film's emotional impact.

Nearly every frame is painterly. Mani succeeds in creating a private world of artists and their obsessive and devoted lovers and at the same time, gave it a historical reach. We remember Kalidas and his greatness, but Mallika has been wiped out by history. Watching her today, you can imagine what a powerful, self-assured and eccentric heroine she must have been. She does not want the world to box her spiritual relationship with Kalidas by giving it a name or identity. Having made peace with her ignominy, she is far happier to be a metaphor than a person. She is forever immortalised in Kalidas's verses. Kalidas is the artist, she is his muse. Their emotional collision touched with sublime Himalayan beauty creates what we call "art".

Aashad Ka Ek Din delves into its characters' minds and motivations with clear and spare

precision. I recently saw a YouTube interview of Girish Karnad, who said good dialogue contains philosophy, backstory and conflict in just one or two lines. Therefore, the power of a play, he emphasised, lies not in its plot but in its dialogue and conversations.

By that logic, **Aashad Ka Ek Din** is a double success, as not only does it have an engaging plot but also dialogue and words full of reflection and psychological insight.

The style that Mani sought to emulate most was that of French filmmaker Robert Bresson. Like Bresson, many of Mani's films were literary retellings. They chiselled away at their source material until all excesses had evaporated. Both shared a passion for Fyodor Dostoevsky and an appreciative eye for *transcendental minimalism* as well. They had an obsession with filming time. Bresson's movies are activated by some kind of an accident – you might call it a *Christian sense of predestination* – whereas Mani was interested in exploring the spatial and temporal potential of cinema.

Ritwik Ghatak was vice-principal at the Film and Television Institute of India when Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani and KK Mahajan – who would later become influential figures in the *Indian New Wave movement* – were students. Ghatak became an influence on their work. This was a time in FTII when the Ray versus Ghatak divide was at its sharpest and ugliest, with many sympathising with Ghatak and his failed romanticism and being aggressive towards Satyajit Ray whom they mocked as bourgeois. Of course, time has proved both as greats in their own way.

Mani and Ghatak had nothing in common. They came from totally different backgrounds. Mani lacked Ghatak's ethnicity. He lived most of his life in Bombay and spoke in English though he was a Kashmiri with a Rajasthani mindset. What a strange but unique beast!

In marked contrast, Ghatak was a true Bengali, very local but also international. His craft and concerns were rooted in the Bengali ethos. He was from the theatre and hence, was a man of the people.

Ghatak did not have any direct bearing on Mani and Kumar Shahani. He may have inspired them towards achieving greatness in cinema, but he certainly wasn't an influence. I'd say Mani's major influence was not even Bresson or Ghatak. It was the late artist Akbar Padamsee, who was learning Sanskrit in those days. The Sanskrit teachings ultimately led Padamsee to the discovery of Kalidas. And, thus, his iconic metascapes born. It was Kumar Shahani, for example, who introduced Mani to the *Mahabharata*.

I was fresh off Richard Attenborough's **Gandhi** (1982) when I first met Mani outside the Nalanda bookstore at the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay. It was a heady time for all of us. Mani had just earned a commission to make a film on terracotta art. Having made Dhruvad, a documentary on classical music, Mani had found an audience.

Now, terracotta and pottery can be a dry subject. There was the fear that it would end up like any other numbing Film Division documentary. I was offered to help with the research, which I began by reading books on archaeology. Afterwards, with a Sony tape recorder, I travelled to Gujarat, Udaipur, Bikaner, Mathura, Kosambi, West Bengal and Banaras. I visited Bengali temples made from baked terracotta. I recorded stories of potters, their folks tales, legends and lore. These stories were extracted to form the script of **Mati Manas** (1985).

In **Ghashiram Kotwal** (1976), based on Vijay Tendulkar's play, Mani and I were co-directors along with K Hariharan and Saeed Mirza. I was the art director in the documentary **Siddeshwari** (1989). Working with Mani, I learnt how incredibly curious he was. A great student, his learning capacity and ability to keep pace with the times were admirable. His interests were varied, and that shows in the different films that he ended up making.

The great thing about him was that he would take any folk tale or novel but the final product absorbed everything and the source vanished. All that remained was the beauty of the form, the editing and the visuals, and the film itself. Mani transformed it into an experience.

Few filmmakers follow this style anymore. People like Anup Singh (**Qissa** [2013]) and Gurbinder Singh (**Chauthi Koot** [2015]) claim Mani as his mentor. I don't, because I was more of an *Absurdist* and *Surrealist*, and wanted to create my own niche. In fact, it used to irk some people that I liked everything and wasn't so doggedly ideological.

But Mani was open to my kind of imagination. More than anyone I know, as far as Mani's legacy is concerned, his true inheritor is Amit Dutta. For his experiments, Dutta keeps returning to sources like *Kathasaritsagara* and *Dictionary of the Khazars*, with which he builds myth and meditation. Payal Kapadia and Prantik Basu too seem to have cracked Mani's formula.

The primary audience for Mani and Kumar was the intelligentsia. Their films were cultural products, and their ideal markets were festivals and cultural centres. It's not like they didn't aim for theatres. They hoped to get Akashwani, a government-run theatre in Bombay, to show their films, but it didn't work out.

Art filmmakers had to vie with mainstream directors for Bombay's cinemas. And then there was middle cinema, which was fast becoming a headache. Basu Chatterjee's **Sara Aakash** (1969) opened a new market for this kind of cinema. I remember Mani and Kumar used to say, we are purists, they have opted for the middle path, they are corrupted.

Mani, in particular, was fond of describing himself as an "aesthete". As he grew more reputed, even he could not resist commercial temptations. He tried in vain to get a foothold in the mainstream. The challenge was to find a way to retain his style and still deliver a hit. At one point, there was a negotiation happening between him and Amitabh Bachchan. He almost cast Sanjay Dutt in **Ahmaq** (1992). He eventually ended up directing Shah Rukh Khan, who was an emerging star then.

Most filmmakers compete with other filmmakers. But Mani, who died in 2011, competed with art itself. He fought to be recognised as an artist and for his films to be known as "works of art". Mani, Kumar and Akbar Padamsee were all inspired by Andy Warhol and Susan Sontag, who had done a series of experimental films. They wanted to form an art group and replicate the *European Surrealist* scene in which Salvador Dali, Andre Breton and Luis Bunuel had synthesised art and cinema.

Fortunately, in the late 1960s, when Mani was starting out, he had avenues such as Lalit Kala Academy, the National Centre for the Performing Arts, the Film Finance Committee (later the National Film Development Corporation), Akbar Padamsee's Vision Exchange Workshop, and Films Division. He found good company in the Progressive Artists' Group and support from magazines like Sarika. Mani was happy to hang out with psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, painters, dancers and sculptors. These influences enriched his mind and gave his cinema an aesthetic principle.

All this knowledge probably made Mani hungrier on the one hand and humbler on the other. He was a very entertaining personality who made you feel fantastic about yourself. As much as that trait was commendable, it could be a little dangerous too for your ego. He gave everyone full attention and a big boost. But he was also given to petty rivalries. I remember Kumar and he had a messy race going on as they tried to outdo each other. If Kumar did something, Mani was sure to follow. However, Mani's faster speed was an advantage.

Ideologically speaking, while Kumar was political, Mani was totally apolitical. Kumar had a Communist background, because of which Bengal and Kerala loved him. Perhaps, Mani didn't see any benefit in being political.

In any case, the debate whether Mani was political or not makes no sense to me. Will you ever ask a musician why he/she isn't political? Why do the same to a filmmaker? Mani was offbeat and being offbeat by nature itself is a political act.

Today, reflecting on **Uski Roti**, **Duvidha**, **Aashad Ka Ek Din** or **Mati Manas**, I feel his movies have transcended time. In an age when streaming has rendered linearity redundant and made abstraction attractive – open any platform and you can switch between the past, present and future simultaneously – Mani Kaul's boundary-breaking films have proved to be both relevant and rewarding.

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Improvisations on a Scale: The Cinema of Mani Kaul

The films of Indian director Mani Kaul disrupted the debate between cinema as dream-fantasy and cinema as social realism.

Two events, seemingly unassuming and unrelated, that happened in the mid 60s were instrumental in shaping the cinematic landscape of India. J.S. Bhowmury was appointed Deputy Chief Producer for a second stint at Films Division in 1965, and Ritwik Ghatak moved to Pune to teach at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in 1966. The first resulted in experimental documentaries being made by the likes of S.N.S. Sastry, S. Sukhdev, Pramod Pati, M.F.Hussain and the second was the harbinger of what is commonly referred to as the *New Indian Cinema*, with Ghatak during his tenure at FTII acting as an influential figure for the likes of Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani and John Abraham. Leading to this point, the discourse around cinema in India was balanced on a fragile opposition, the dream-fantasies of the commercial-popular against the social realism of the state apparatus, conjoined with subscribers to the idea of cinema's eventual ambition of reproducing virgin reality.

The films of Mani Kaul disturbed this equilibrium and presented themselves as disruptive fissures in this cinematic landscape. His films shunned away all popular tropes and served in their therapeutic capacity against the parlance of realism, a dominant discourse that breathed uneasily in the confinement of a peculiar appropriation by the young nation state as a de facto stylistic alternative to the melodramatic, spectacular, externalised theatrical excesses of the national popular cinema, anchored by, but not limited to the Bombay industry. This state thesis of realism, which is more akin to be called naturalism for its fixation on resurrecting the illusion of social reality, was reflexively resistant towards any subjective reworking of space and time in relation to sound and image. It simply sought to flatten out the realms of the fantastic and magical to facilitate a seamless identification on the part of the huddled masses, demanding an empiricism that resists complicating the order of representation. Mani Kaul, along with his peer Kumar Shahani, revolted against this *modus operandi*, radically rejecting both the primacy and the manifestation of this trajectory.

SITES OF CONFLICT: REPRESENTATION AND REALISM

Kaul's rejection of the realist-representation finds curious overlap with the the post-'68 situation and the ensuing transition of narrative cinema. According to him, the transformation of a social object into a cinematic one is facilitated by a certain mode of spatio-temporal intervention that rejects the possibility of a degree zero transition from the social to the cinematic (where the job of the filmmaker is limited to recording reality), this he refers to as the process of de-naturing. Though not using the same nomenclature, Kaul in essence theorises on the fundamentals of representation (the transition of a social object into a cinematic one). Like the *Cahiers du cinéma* group emerging out of the political landscape of 1968, Kaul from his own ideologically agnostic standpoint speaks of alienating cinematic space-time from socio-political space-time. The cinematic space-time thus emerges from the subjectivity of the artist, his own way of seeing or extending himself into the camera. Hence for him, dominant narrative modes are a way of asserting socio-political space time of a given object as cinematic¹

It might seem that Kaul's argument did not have the ideological edge to interpret what he refers to as socio-political space-time, or the perception of it, as the enforcement of dominant power structures. An integral aspect of *Cahiers du cinéma's* postulates and the cinema of Godard around 1968 was to deconstruct the order of representation. For them, a representation that sought to reproduce the world as it is resulted in a collaborationist aesthetic already compromised to the service of the ruling class by validating its repressive structures. Kaul's ideas did not have such a political urgency but as later discussed, he takes to a historical understanding of these relations, one where countering the prefiguration of perspective takes precedence and where ensuing ideological paradigms are displaced. In what marks a significant divergence between Kaul and Shahani, Kaul sees ideology as a quasi-static knowledge system evolving over time. In *Towards a Cinematic Object*, he wrote:

"No ideology in itself is absolute but it definitely knows change only slowly and painfully. These systems of knowledge qualify themselves into being disciplines for cinematic use only when they treat reality totally (thereby providing a totalizing mechanics in practice)."

The overlap with the post-'68 moment lies in the deep distrust towards dominant modes of convergent spatial organization within a frame and temporality that is subservient to linear narrative progression in relationship to sound and image. Annette Michelson writing about Godard said²:

"Godard's increasingly violent attack on cinema is not, as in the case of Americans wholly focused on the constitution of a filmic ontology; rather, its deconstruction of the codes of sound-image relationships is aimed at the creation of a foundation for another, oppositional cinema, a militant cinema destructive of bourgeois ideology."

The same can be said about Kaul, minus the persuasive ideological thrust, embodied by his unmitigated devotion towards deconstruction of dominant sound-image relations to create a different cinema which he referred to as *Shastriya*. The complex meaning of the term *Shastriya* in relationship to Kaul's cinema is taken up in a subsequent section of this essay where his association with traditions of pre-cinematic art forms is explored. It needs to be stated here, though, that the Cahiers group's relationship to 'realism,' their very understanding of the term is less particular than that of Kaul who primarily limits the project of realism to naturalism. There is also another significant link with the '68 moment that ushered the imagination of a cinema free from the shackles of traditional production-distribution system. Drawing upon Ghatak, who spent five years among the people of the Oraon tribe while working on two documentaries commissioned by the Bihar Government (*Adiwasiyon ki Jeevan Srot/The Life of the Adivasis* [1955] and *Bihar ke Darshaniya Sthan/Places of Historic Interest in Bihar* [1955]) before he completed his second feature *Ajantrik (The Pathetic Fallacy)*, 1958), Kaul wrote in 1977³:

"... Filmmakers should then be encouraged to fan out to all parts of the country with specific projects; to live in areas for months; to work and live with the people there in the process of making a film. The films would then be supplied to the various organizations exhibiting 16-mm films. Thus, the filmmaker and the audience rather than living in their own airtight compartments, would be able to discover an actual working relationship."

Though Kaul along with Shahani relied mostly on more traditional forms of financing for sustaining their project of *Shastriya cinema*, he came closest to realizing this vision of a collective actualization of a film in *Mati Manas (The Mind of Clay)*, 1984).

Michelson's observation on Godard and the distinction she makes from the exponents of *New American cinema* also lays the important groundwork to estimate the problems involved in confining the dialectical possibility of 'anti-representation' within the deconstructionist paradigms of Kaul's cinema. Michelson is able to rid us of the often assumed false division into two avant-gardes, namely the political and the formal. If at all there were to exist two separate avant-gardes, like in the case of Godard and proponents of New American cinema, the distinguishing factor

would have to hinge on their fundamental approach to sound and image. Kaul's filmmaking slants towards Godard's approach. Important monographs such as those devoted to Straub-Huillet⁴ or Fassbinder⁵ among others, underline this specific approach by engaging with the complex dislocations of representational indexicality within a similar deconstructionist vein. However, theoretical impetus gained from *Structural-Materialist* film theories like those articulated by Gidal⁶ (the only valid representation is the representation of the cinematic apparatus; the means of production) expands the dialectical horizon of this oppositional stance thus necessitating a prior qualification of the representational relationship between a filmmaker and his world.

THE PARADOX OF DUAL INFLUENCE: RITWIK GHATAK AND ROBERT BRESSON

Film society activist and a close friend of Kaul, Amrit Gangar once recalled a conversation in which Kaul said, both Ghatak and Bresson helped him cure the sickness called realism. These twin figures of acknowledged (cinematic) influence for Kaul present a certain degree of intrigue because of almost contrasting ways in which they approached cinema. The influence of Bresson on Kaul is more obvious, one that is linked to an austere approach to making films, flattening out of the crest and trough that are characteristic to the expressive idioms of the dramatic form, frequent use of non-professional actors, a shift from narrative events to the autonomy of gestures, fragmented actions that exhume chaste and devotional religiosity and a restoration of faith in the rhythm, tone and sensation of sound before its teleological determination. Kaul borrows from Bresson in terms of cinema's constitutive elements that which Giorgio Agamben refers to as mediality, and gestuality as its purest form of exhibition.⁷

The extension of a hand to catch a falling fruit, a woman resting a hand on the shoulder of her husband, the formal elegance in ascending the stairs, the potter's hand at work, hand bracing the wheel of a sewing machine, the utterance of someone's name—each acting neither as a means of communication nor as symbolic articulation suggestive of a transcendental invocation, but are medial states, concrete and self-fulfilled, the state of *being-in* language becoming language itself.

The influence of Ghatak is more elusive. Kaul was a student of Ghatak during his years at the film school in Pune. For Kaul, Ghatak via his epic form presents the opportunity to challenge a fundamental tenet of the narrative-dramatic, a convergence towards a conclusion for the narrative, that he identifies as a derivative of European perspective art emerging from the period of Renaissance. Kaul in the future minutely explored other art forms such as the Mughal miniature paintings and structures of Indian classical music to further confront the ideological dominance of perspectival illusion of convergence. While Bresson is known for his rigid fondness of the 50

*Uski Roti* (1970)*Duvidha* (1973)*Mati Manas* (1985)*Siddeshwari* (1989)

mm lens, Kaul like his mentor Ghatak was more given to experimentation with lenses, assigning them a key role in exploring the margins of realism. Ghatak often favored the wide angle lens as a means to explode the expressive potential of a particular shot, by creating sharp contrasts in his way of meeting the characters in front of the lens. Ghatak, from around the time he was teaching at the film school, expresses in some detail⁸ the deployment of various grades of lenses, their distortive effects and mobilizing these distortions as formally expressive means for dramatic/historical/emotional emphasis in relation to his own filmmaking practice. Ghatak's filmmaking was not so dedicatedly combative towards the Renaissance aesthetic; he closely studied painters such as Sandro Botticelli and Michelangelo Buonarroti. In ***Uski Roti***, Kaul contrasts the use of 28 mm wide angle lens for portraying the protagonist Balo's surroundings with an extreme telephoto 135 mm lens to shoot the dream sequences, without actually having a specific association of lenses with the perceived duality of dream/real conveyed through the images. He writes⁹:

"...confining the film to two lenses (28 mm and 135 mm) and making them represent the actual and the mental life of the waiting wife in the beginning of the film—I mean, the wide angle provided a universal focus or the extra actuality of the cinematographic image and the long focus a critical range of sharpness or a certain dream quality. Having faithfully established this as a norm, the lenses were gradually freed of the strict representation—they were crossing each other in the middle of the film where the distinctions were blurred—until in the end the representation was reversed, with the result that the actual return of the husband almost appears as a hallucination (without my resorting to any gimmicks or theatrical devices). This slight edge of disbelief in the reality of an actual return of her husband gives rise to an ambiguity, almost necessary for a scene to redeem itself of the physical covering and reveal the conceptual meaning."

The temporal dimension of Kaul's films vary radically from both Ghatak and Bresson and is informed by the notion of *Shruti*, a metric for tuning, borrowed from Indian classical music that explains the prominence of temps mort in his films. While not coming from a thespian background like Ghatak and being in tune with Bresson on the subject of decisively extricating cinema from photographed theater, Kaul like Ghatak nonetheless was interested in the diverse confluence of various narrative forms and visual allegories in his adaptation of Ghashiram Kotwal as part of a collective. Kaul's indulgence in the Dostoevsky adaptation ***Nazar*** (1990) is piqued by the novel's thematic flux, mimicking the labyrinth of life, intertwined, elliptic, convoluted passages that tease without fulfilling the promise of redemption, and is sustained by Bresson's adaptation of the same text, a film Kaul particularly liked.

Kaul continues to grasp and deflect these arches of influence to arrive at his own subjectivity. He does not believe that imitation is feasible, with regard to Bresson he writes¹⁰:

"The natural incapacity to imitate someone else perfectly leads to a realization of your own inner and original strivings."

RENAISSANCE ART, PERSPECTIVE AND OTHER ART FORMS

Kaul's response to the question of representation and its aesthetic and political prominence is keyed to a sense of historicity. What might seem as a lack of an ideological edge is suitably substituted by a close study of Renaissance aesthetics, in particular, the sense of reality imported to two dimensional paintings by adding depth and by converging towards a vanishing point. This he identifies as the guiding force behind *Western epistemological traditions* in art. Kaul distances his style, the transitional space in-between the social and the cinematic object, from the political urgency called upon by the immediate social environment. Kaul's exploration of various art forms had this one underlying quality, his sustained preoccupation to challenge the dominance of a single perspective of an object. The linearity of the narrative plot in cinema according to Kaul comes from this way of seeing. Hence in Ghatak's epic form Kaul sees the unhinging of a linear narrative progression, fragmentation of the central narrative schema, or even the diffusion of a dominant theme. Speaking on ***Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*** (1973) for a Channel 4 broadcast in 2006, Kaul said:

"In the case of Titas, it includes shots of boats, the rain, nature, the archetypes of mother, the form of Mother is Bhagvati, even the main character is referred to as Bhagvati by the fishermen when they bring her back to her husband's village. When the dramatic form is not just unfolding but also spreading out, the form obviously becomes more difficult to follow."

Kaul's interest in pre-cinematic art forms also rests on how perspective is multiplied on their respective spatial and temporal planes. In ***Uski Roti***, Kaul framed the women in a way that distinctly recall paintings of young women in pre-partition Punjab by Amrita Sher-Gil. Another prominent painter and someone curiously placed in the history of Indian small-gauge collective filmmaking, Akbar Padamsee collaborated and assisted Kaul while working on two projects, namely ***Duvidha*** and ***Forms and Design*** (1968), the former based on the folkloric writings of Vijaydan Detha and the later commissioned by the Films Division. ***Duvidha*** in particular helped



Duvidha (1973)



Nazar (1990)

Kaul sustain his emergent interest in non-urban polyvalent artistic practices after his initial tryst with the urban-modernist writings of Mohan Rakesh, the most prominent name associated with the '*Nayi Kahani*' (*New literature*) movement. In ***Satah se Uthata Aadmi (Arising from the Surface***, 1980), a film that contains multifarious visual, temporal and narrative styles, Kaul takes up the elliptical poetry of Marxist poet Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh. This film showcases Kaul's lingering interest in confronting the two dynamic aspects of cinema, fiction and documentary, an interest that shaped Kaul's liking towards Roberto Rossellini's landmark film during his sojourn in the country, ***India: Matri Bhumi*** (1959). He unburdens the impetus of the film from being about a figure of interest, where the film shadows the figure, limiting the attention it draws on itself. Kaul's approach is to affront the text and biographic elements of the life of Muktibodh with an adequate cinematic form that is laced with narration, conversation, contemplation, reading of poetry, the written text as a self-sustaining narrative device and musical compositions by Ustad Zia Fariduddin Dagar, all the while allowing for suitable interplay between the text and the image, deploying landscape as a means to delineate or fragment any semblance of linear progression. In ***Siddheshwari***, another loose artist-profile film on the Hindustani Thumri singer from Varanasi, Siddheshwari Devi, Kaul soaks the film's body in intersecting timelines and texts using theatrical and musical devices along with the transmuting quality of light on the banks of the river Ganges (a quality noted by Stan Brakhage while viewing *Forest of Bliss* (1986) with Robert Gardner). The saturated color schema as often with Kaul stems from a sustained interest in pre-Mughal and Mughal schools of miniature paintings, he also uses archive footage to explore the liminality of both documentary and fiction film each extending well into the other to the point of indistinguishability. In many ways, the culmination of Kaul's experiments with modalities to subvert the perspectival dominance happens in ***Naukar ki Kameez (The Servant's Shirt***, 1999), a film based on a novel by Vinod Kumar Shukla, Kaul instructed his cameraman to set up shots without looking through the camera pinhole to arrest the appropriation of the space framed, to resist the segmentation of space into Renaissance categories of sacred and profane.

This brings up the question of *Shastriya cinema*, Kaul once half jokingly remarked that ***Uski Roti*** should have a special slot on television like those assigned to classical music. The evening slot where the film was shown was usually reserved for potboilers. On the one hand, the term *Shastriya* for Kaul, commonly translated to classical, has more of a structural/grammatical connotation than a temporal one. On the other hand, Kaul identifies the differentiating element between the composition of ***Dhrupad*** and cinematographic art with regard to the use of the term. Improvisations on any scale still functions within the imposition of a specific set



Duvidha (1973)



Ghashiram Kotwal (1976)



Dhrupad (1983)



Mati Manas (1985)

of notes acting as structures, cinema does not need to abide by any predetermined structure as such. In the temporal realm, Kaul is not so much interested in carrying forward any form of cinematic legacy, in fact he deems it impossible, but his interest lies in an active engagement with classical pre-cinematic art forms, to study them closely on coordinates of representation, spatial politics, movement, rhythms and gestural dynamics. The scale of this polymorphic concern can be estimated as much from his body of work as from an essay he wrote in 1991 titled *Seen From Nowhere*¹¹.

Kaul's cinema was, like most modern artists at the turn of the 20th century, oppositional to the order of perspective. Though variant in their literal, historical and teleological interpretation, Kaul's articulation finds resonance in some of the practices by Stan Brakhage. Writing about Brakhage, R. Bruce Elder observes¹²:

"Brakhage's hostility towards Renaissance perspective is not motivated simply by his belief that this form of visual representation is not natural to the eye or it represents visual thinking that has been influenced by society, as it is generally thought to be (and as Brakhage himself proposes in the opening section of Metaphors on Vision. Rather, I believe, his anti-perspectival rhetoric is also fuelled by his belief that images that employ Renaissance perspective depend on rectilinearity and imposed a geometric grid fixed upon the world".

While Brakhage confronted the Renaissance mode of spatial organization by directly expressing into the camera the infinite visions of an unrestrained eye, Kaul re-worked the framed space by often allowing architectural constructions to intervene the symmetric rectilinearity of the perceived space. This he achieved by framing bodies and landscapes through various architectural passages like doors and windows.

THE MUSICAL INTERFACE

Kaul identified himself as a painter and a musician. Trained under the tutelage of Ustad Zia Mohiuddin Dagar and Ustad Fariduddin Dagar for a period of ten years in *Dhrupad*, a north Indian classical music form with its roots set in the 13th century, the interference of music in his life was lasting. During the last years of his life, Kaul continued to teach music in Rotterdam. While Kaul's references to filmic narrative structures and the analogies they share with *Dhrupad* can sometimes seem well exaggerated, what nonetheless remains fascinating is the interplay between improvisation and grammatically imposed structures in both music and films, less deterministic in



Dhrupad (1983)



Arrival (1980)

case of the later. For Kaul, the improvisations that extend the compositions beyond their formulaic construction is what presents them with a distinguishing characteristic. In a very Bressonian way, what is achieved in *Dhrupad* via the tonal variations in *Raag* (a framework for composition identified with the Indian Classical music), is achieved in film through persistence with repetition of the ritualistic mode of filmmaking until an accident occurs thus injecting a signature into a repeated formula. The uniqueness of a performed *Raag* thus corresponds to a non-improvised realization of a figure. He wrote¹³:

"Like the two sides of a coin, Dhrupad is made up of tone and silence. It might seem strange to suggest that one should go to a musical concert to listen to silence. But that is the truth of a Dhrupad experience; its fullness will be appreciated only if one begins to relate to both tone and silence, particularly to a kind of pervasive and a whole silence that stands above the tonal expression. A togetherness of tone and silence carries the listener to the figure of the being of a raag. This idea of figure is crucial to my films, and in order to adapt it to cinema I have for a long time unsuccessfully fought the requirement of writing scripts for film productions. I have had trouble raising money for films because if you don't have a script, you simply don't get the money. I wrote scripts and went against them as the film found its own shape. The method of working towards a figure is different from that of working towards a construction."

POSTSCRIPT

It is worthwhile to lend our attention to some of the shorts Kaul made during his career, namely ***Forms and Design*** (1968), ***The Nomad Puppeteer*** (1974) and ***Chitrakathi*** (1977). ***Arrival*** (1980) presents itself as some sort of dialectical mirror to these films. In these films leading up to ***Arrival***, Kaul diligently explores localized, popular but vanishing ethno-musical, ethno-theatrical and ethno-epic traditions, the narrative polymorphism imbibed in them. There is a dystopian sense that aligns itself with urban migration, a nightmare which amplifies and resonates through the skin in ***Arrival***. Like *The Storyteller* for Walter Benjamin, the cottage industry weaver, the puppeteer of Rajasthan, and the semi-nomadic fishermen community for Kaul are not mere vestiges of the pre-modern. Kaul understands that the modern human condition risks the diffusion or even complete obliteration of the variegated narrative structures in their cultural fold. These shorts form the spinal column for two of his most complex films in the 1980s, ***Desert of a Thousand Lines*** (1981) and ***Mati Manas***.

The cinema of Mani Kaul in India has been historically met with cold skepticism, the films were always shy from being a fertile ground for postmodernist signification, their ambitious deconstructivist impulse with regard to dominant sound-image relationships in films resisted an easy alignment with *Parallel cinema*; at best, they were a labored exercise that demanded intense

attention, and at worst they were inert formal exercises. This general attitude towards his films recalls the reception of the films of Straub-Huillet. It is not only the analogous interests in Mughal miniatures and Cezanne's paintings, in *Dhrupad* and Bach's compositions and performances, in the nature of historical landscapes of Kashmir and Venice that one finds loquacious possibilities within their individual body of work, it is also reflected in the encompassing desire to invent the liberated spectator. They both share a resolute quest for a redemptive historical view and struggle for an appropriate cinematic form to realize this view.

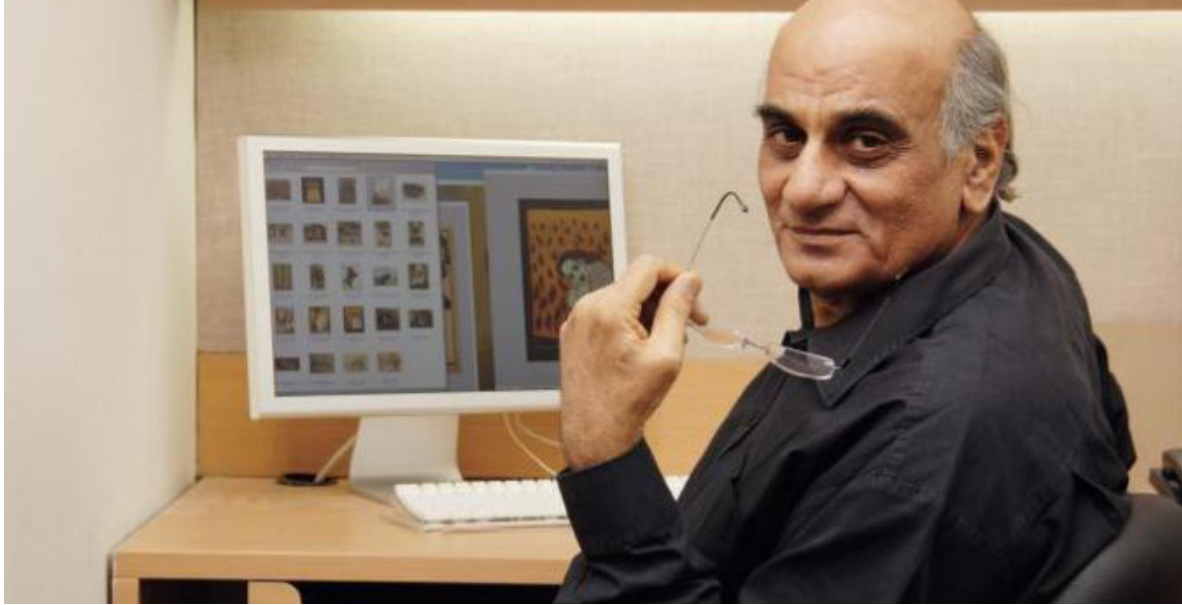
Arindam Sen

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3. *Part of the Symposium on THE CINEMA SITUATION*, Mani Kaul, 1977.
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Requiem For A Vision



For those who had been close to Mani Kaul (1944-2011), it is difficult to make him the subject—of a newspaper article, an obituary, a talk. His visions, for they are overwhelmingly various, have infused our work as writers, cinematographers, directors, musicians, actors; they have infused our ways of seeing. I worked with Kaul on his feature film **Nazar** (*The Gaze*, 1989), for which I wrote the screenplay. Perhaps it was chance that this was the film through which my friendship and learning with him began, because it is above all his gaze that was profound. If it was chance, it is the kind of chance or accident that Kaul believed in. He welcomed it in the work, in the making of a script, the gesture of an actor and in the many random things that could occur when he was shooting. As a film director, his singular ability was to include the unexpected. As a result, he was utterly calm when actually shooting a film, because he was never executing something he had already planned. Only the gaze never faltered.

Nazar was based on a masterful story by Dostoevsky, *The Meek One*. We adapted a screenplay from it in which each event was true to the original, but was opened up and stretched by Kaul's own sense of time. As we read and reread the story, he came up with a deeply original idea. Everything that in the story was interior monologue should in our screenplay be turned into dialogue. Cinematically, this was a masterstroke. It immediately exposed the subterranean movements which would otherwise have been hidden, and gave a heightened inwardness to

everything on screen. He asked me to write a screenplay to reflect the way we both had understood it in this case, and I wrote it as a series of very short prose texts, an evocation, in his words, "of the ebb and flow in the film, a poetic ensemble of words that is at once visual and internal". I felt then, when I was much younger, as I do now: that I gave little but received so much.

When **Nazar** released, it was, of course, by and large rejected, ignored. Much has been made of the "slowness" of his films, and **Nazar** was no exception. Perhaps now that he is gone it can be said that those who feel this way are unable to enter into his sense of time, his rhythm. This, in itself, could still be a matter of taste. But what's more is that those who feel this way have always been unable to engage with him, differ with him, in cinematic terms. Those who have criticised him have not brought to the criticism a critical mind. "A film should not replicate the rhythms of daily life," he would say, "it should create its own rhythms." He believed that to be out of step with an ordinary pace was crucial to our seeing into things. Watching a performance by Kelucharan Mohapatra with Kaul at Delhi's India International Centre, he took me through the dancing in meticulous detail. "Look," he said, "he never puts his foot down on the sam, but a little after."

Kaul's extraordinary vision encompassed music, painting, dance, the study of ancient Sanskrit texts. He was for many years a student of the great rudra veena player, Ustad Zia Moiuddin Dagar. He achieved enough mastery of the tradition to become later on a teacher in his own right. Bahauddin Dagar, the son of Ustad Zia Moiuddin, said to me the other day: "No one knows yet how much he gave to our music." He painted and sculpted as well. And while watching Kelucharan, he said to me: "I would have loved to have been a dancer you know." What is significant in all of this is it was not simply about an interest in all the arts, or a misty sense of being moved or inspired by them. His creative intellect was so prodigious that all these art forms were refracted through his own philosophy and practice, finding expression in his cinema and his wide ranging insights.

He would always say to me when reading my work: "You know, I'm quite illiterate." Yet, his own responses and suggestions became one of the central supports in my writing, and he was himself to become a source of great sustenance in my own writing life. He believed in those of us, much younger than him, who were trying to chart our own paths, he knew the arduousness of the task—he had come that way himself—and his strength was given with the knowledge of what he himself had come through, and what he knew, perhaps better than us, we too would have to face.

The papers are filled with descriptions of Kaul as an iconoclast, as fearless. The deeper truth behind these labels is in what he once said to me. "One goes in a certain direction because that is the only direction one can go in. You cannot ask why. Perhaps you can ask for the source of the cause, if there is one." This is key to understanding an artist like him, for he was not opposing anything through his work, he was not trying to stand for anything. He was, simply put, one of the most original minds of our time—original in that he came from his own source. Kaul said of Satyajit Ray, who was one of his harshest critics, "Ray opened up reality, a truth of a certain kind, which was not an escape, or an illusion. Cinema in India moved forward from that truth." Kaul despised the middle of the road art cinema because he thought it was morally and aesthetically false. He preferred Bollywood because it had no pretensions, and did not produce a should or a prescription in its attitude towards the world, which middle of

the road cinema did. His brilliance lay in having found the pulse of his own aesthetic, and his ethics lay in never having compromised it. "An artist is a strange, individual birth," he said.

In his lifetime, it gradually became more and more difficult for him to raise funds for his work. The general response to his great body of films—from **Uski Roti** (1970) to **Naukar Ki Kameez** (1999) and including more than



11 feature-length works as well as many shorter ones—has kept his films from being restored and preserved. It is the continuing irony of our culture that only after his death is there so much discussion about him and his work. I don't recall a single retrospective of his films in the last 20 years, or books, or even thoughtful investigations into his cinema, except the poet Udayan Vajpeyi's *Abhed Akash*. This travesty is balanced by only one thing - that those who worked with him, and learnt from him, carry inside them and in their work fragments of his visions and, most of all, the sense of daring that he embodied. He seeded work not only in all aspects of cinema, but also in literature, in music.

Kaul was a stunning intelligence, but he was also as joyous, always filled with laughter, immersed in a kind of celebration and praise of things, a superb raconteur, a drinker, a good cook who loved to make a meal for his friends. In 1994, he had been commissioned to make a short erotic film, funded by a German producer. The film was called **The Cloud Door**. One day he was telling me how different directors all over the world had been commissioned to work on this project. He showed me the brochure, which was a huge paper heart on which were printed the names of the other directors. "I don't really know any of these names," I said hesitantly, thinking I had not been seeing enough world cinema of late. "Oh, I know," he replied. "They are the Mani Kauls of their countries," and burst into laughter. When

certain filmmakers called him experimental, the sub-text being that he was difficult and esoteric, he would say, laughing, "My films are not experimental, because I know what I'm doing. They are experimental, they don't know what they're doing."

There is no one thing to be said about the complex body of films that he has left behind. If I had to talk about one attribute at this moment—other times would surely yield different descriptions—I would talk of his cinema as having a centrifugal force. This force moved outward from the centre, creating a spaciousness in which the watcher could walk into the vastness of his or her own self. In **Aashad Ka Ek Din**, after having stayed indoors at all times, the camera suddenly moves outwards at the end to reveal the mountains; in *Satah Se Uthata Admi* he creates not the reality but the feeling of a dead small town, its flat, brown, dusty landscapes, and a set of stairs leading nowhere; and at the end of **Dhruvad**, the camera flies over tiled roofs and buildings and cars down below, rising and falling like the music, and in one stroke joining time past with time present. The distinction between fiction and non-fiction become meaningless in his work, and he himself did not believe there was one. "The problem is actually seeing, being there," he said. "What else is there to do?" This opens up so much ground for even others to walk on, be it in cinema or literature. His work cannot be reduced to its material means, or its categories, like fiction and non-fiction; these are simply his matter, which he made his own through a rigorous involvement with the medium, giving cinema itself a new voice.

Recently, looking at the spate of writing on him, I found mention of what viewers see as his "habits", the slow turning of an actor's body, or the "lavish colours" in his frames. I would like to say here that the one thing he was not doing in his films was repeating elements easily or habitually. What seems like only a slow turn of the body will reveal, if watched with more attention, a relationship between that turning, the camera's movement which is often not one with the turning, and the actor, the plant, the half open window, the bright blue of the curtain, the light that enters through it, in fact between each single thing in the frame. Kaul's camera sought and found an equality between the human and the non-human. "In shooting, the interest is in an image, not in a character," he said. The democracy of elements extended to everything he had as his tools, too many to enumerate. "There is no such thing as a correct exposure," he said, "only a preferred exposure, and an emotional relationship with that exposure."

When someone asked him where they could find his films, he once said: "It's good you haven't seen them, but heard about them, you know; as time goes by the negatives of most of my films, which are in very bad shape, are getting worse, and there are very few prints anyway that are still alright... so, as I get more and more known, fewer people **Naukar ki Kameez** (1999) is the story of a low-level clerk in a government office. There will be a time when there won't be any work left, and I will be gone, and people will be saying, 'Mani Kaul, Mani Kaul,' and he would make a gesture with his hands following the words, as if it were a resonating call.

Few filmmakers leave behind such a rich oral aura, and despite the great pain that his own self-deprecating remarks hid, he embodied the joy of the immediate, the improvisatory, the spontaneous meeting. He is one filmmaker who could look our profound oral, classical tradition in the face, and he made cinema its newer breath of life.

Learning from him meant spending days with him, talking, listening to dhruwad, watching Pahari miniature paintings. This was the way he gave, passed down his knowledge, brought you to a point and left you to take it forward yourself. Walking with him some years ago in the Lodi Gardens in Delhi, I asked him a question. I very often asked him questions that had been inside of me for a long time, and refused to go away. He said in reply: "What you ask me is not a question, so what I will give you is not an answer. It is not a question, only a certain unresolved modulation of your voice. And what I say will be a figure that develops from that."

Working with Kaul and being with him were one and the same thing. Very often the months of preparation and discussion before the actual shooting of a film meant that the small group would move at the end of the day from an office space to his home on Bombay's Altamount Road where he lived with his wife of many years (though they would later part), the film editor Lalitha Krishna and his two children Shambhavi and Ribhu. He loved working especially with younger people; he said they were not jaded like his contemporaries. So writers, cinematographers, sound designers would enter his spacious living room, sitting around a large, low wooden table over whiskey and rum, and the conversation would turn to Matisse, Meer Taqui Meer, Deleuze, a particular lens or food. We did come away intoxicated. Lalitha Krishna had not only edited many of his films, she had also worked on all aspects of the films and, most importantly, provided a partnership without which it would have been very hard for him to achieve as much as he did. The mechanics of 35 mm filmmaking is such that the support that is needed is as much material as it is metaphorical.

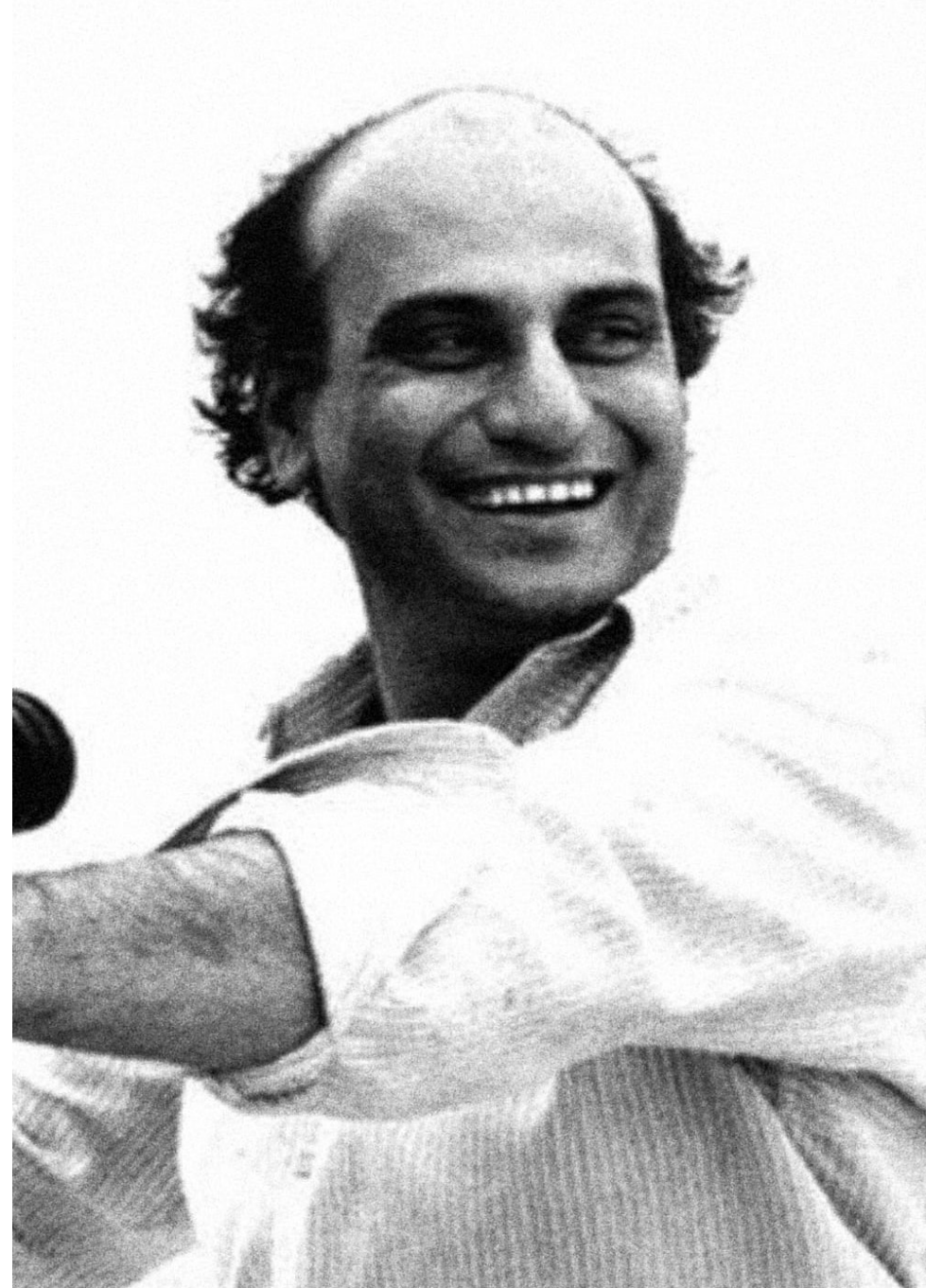
Modernity feels threatened by the absence of criticism. It is deeply suspicious of praise. It sees truth, if not as clearly negative, then at least as an attempt towards balance. It is not subtle because it does not realise that everything does not have to be expressed, that insight has nothing to do with balance. When speaking of such an original artist as Mani Kaul it will not matter how he may have fallen short—of himself, not anyone else—it will matter that the length and breadth of his vision will continue to be immeasurable.

The question I asked him in Lodi Gardens was this: I wanted to know what the difference was between creating—in film, literature, music— and living. Here is what he said: "The artist is always awake, he never forgets. The living man is often forgetful."

The living man must also pass away.

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Jigarthanda Double X: The Accidental Filmmaker

*On Karthik Subbaraj's latest film and saying its
quiet part loud*

In Satyajit Ray's **Nayak (The Hero)**, 1966), Uttam Kumar's Arindam Mukherjee, a celebrated actor and star of commercial cinema, is stalked by demons from his past. Confronted by the straight-talking journalist Aditi Sengupta played by Sharmila Tagore, Arindam begins to reevaluate his life even if during the brief train journey. The pressure to remain a hero in the eyes of the public haunts him and takes different forms—his mentor from village theater days, a senior thespian, and his old friend Biresh. Biresh, an activist fighting for the working class, sees a tool in Arindam's voice during his inchoate years and later wishes to summon the newfound gravitas of Arindam the star to give voice to the plight of the laborers. Arindam refuses and declares that he cannot come up with a coherent explanation because it's all too complex. He cannot begin to comprehend the baggage that comes with the tag of a star.

In Karthik Subbaraj's **Jigarthanda Double X**, S. J. Suryah introduces himself as Ray Dasan, an assistant to Satyajit Ray. It's 1975 and Ray, real name Kirubakaran, is an accidental filmmaker. A convict and before that an aspiring policeman, Kiruba is one among four prisoners chosen by the ruthless police officer Rathna to eliminate gangster Alliyus Caesar (Raghava Lawrence) and his cohort. Alliyus Caesar and his cabal around Madurai including Karmegam, a member of the ruling party, is a threat to Jeyakodi (also Rathna's brother), fellow party man and star actor with huge fan base and chief ministerial ambitions. It is Tamil Nadu. It is the 1970s, the world of Tamil cinema is a thin veil of smoky haze in front of electoral politics. Jeyakodi commands a pull with the people and the party would like to convert that into votes. The timid Kiruba chooses cinema as his weapon of choice to kill Alliyus while he pretends to make the gangster's biopic and introduce him as the first dark skinned lead actor in Tamil cinema. That gives the film the spiritual sequel status to Karthik's sophomore work **Jigarthanda** (2014). Kiruba as director Ray gets Alliyus to reconsider his past like Nayak's Arindam, and, going a step further, urges the gangster to rewrite his narrative.

This is where form meets Karthik's story; **Jigarthanda Double X** is a genre bender that moves seamlessly from a gangster saga to a screwball parody to a distinct, melodramatic political film that's at once autocritical. Yes, it talks about art and its role in larger society but it also questions its authenticity. It parades cinema as a tool to take on authority but before that it wonders aloud about how that authority is captured in the first place. Early in the film, there is a mention of "pan Indian film" that Alliyus jokingly mispronounces as Pandiya film. It's anachronistic, while states shared studios, productions and there was active exchange of talent between different language industries, the phrase "pan India" did not exist in its present form in 1975. Ubiquitous today, it is the tent-pole film headlined by a male actor, testosterone addled with violent imagery assembled to gather the masses into rooting for that one male star. In the world of **Double X**, the pointedly named Jeyakodi is that star who is looking to gain political mileage using his fans. This is the story of MG

Ramachandran and NT Rama Rao and the teasers over several decades from Rajinikanth and, as of today, Kamal Haasan and Vijay. It's also a time when the "political film" is not only a genre by itself in mainstream cinema but also makes business sense and the anti-caste films, as seminal as they are, require a willing male actor to headline them for the nuanced polemic of the filmmaker to reach a larger audience.

This is not lost on Karthik Subbaraj, and it is apparent from the casting of this film. He has choreographer turned actor Raghava Lawrence play the gangster Alliyus and a director turned actor SJ Suryah play the pretend director. Neither of them is a star but have demonstrated considerable popularity. If Karthik had gone for an A-lister or two, **Jigarthanda Double X** would become a different beast, a film that would require quotes between words like politics and commentary. The baggage that comes with a bonafide star would have weighed the film down heavily and defeated its very purpose, the things it attempts to critique. Having the definition of pan India explained to Alliyus and how that requires a certain kind of hero is not only Karthik commenting on what's come to define the star vehicle but also his most self-deprecating moment as a filmmaker having made a film with his idol Rajinikanth only a few years prior. Later in the film, Kiruba as Ray tells Alliyus that simply bashing his enemies or fellow gangsters and exacting revenge is not enough for the award worthy cinema that Ray is going for. Still in a bid to somehow arrive at a circumstance where he can kill Alliyus or have the gangster murdered by his own folly, Ray tells Alliyus to raise the bar and realize the power of cinema, one that can change his story as well as those of million others.

Karthik Subbaraj the filmmaker is at his most assured in **Jigarthanda Double X**. With his cinematographer Tirru, he employs every tool at his disposal in this meta-text on cinema. The camera dances around talking faces in a single take as it pulls away to a wide shot revealing a larger conspiracy. He shoots a fight sequence in a desecrated cave of tree roots and trunk and makes it look like we are living inside a camera's viewfinder. The film recreates the man vs animal conflict both literally and metaphorically. The dolly zooms play with our eyes, complementing the multiple personalities of almost every character—Alliyus and Alliyus Caesar, Kiruba and Ray Dasan, Jeyakodi the actor and the politician, the scheming Chief Minister and Rathna the larger oppressor masquerading as the protector. Like in cinema, nobody here is who they claim to be and every Kiruba discovery is accidental or coincidental. His turn of fate, an SI posting to an accused in quadruple murder. The chance to redeem himself and his ambition. The meeting with Alliyus. Chancing upon what everyone believes to be a killing weapon but is a humble Super 8 camera. The story behind Alliyus's lack of empathy and eventual return to his roots. Kiruba needed a faceless,



one-dimensional villain (for the kind of film Alliyus wanted) and an apolitical storyline for his hero and he finds that in the clay covered, speechless, shapeless Shettani, the poacher in Alliyus's home in the forests, and a threat to his tribe. What he discovers there is a different villain, more powerful with the loudest voice and biggest canvas. His disingenuous claims about cinema and the star bring him to a point where he's the only active documentarian of an oppressive regime. Karthik follows the quote he begins the film with—art chooses you—and the real-life director becomes the reel hero.

Karthik is self-aware about this point in history where cultural capital of the hero is bargained

for returns on the political capital. Kiruba's film bears witness to a genocide and documents the historicity of Alliyus and his tribe. **Jigarthanda Double X** considers cinema powerful but within its text lies the duplicitous ways of the people who wield this power. The cyclical nature is reflected in how the naive everyman transposes as the main character and is eventually turned into a gangster figure himself. Another Jeyakodi in the future will emerge to assume the role of Alliyus and become the hero to bring an injustice to light. It recalls Pier Paolo Pasolini's notorious quote that he sides with police because the police are children of the poor while the protesting students belong to the bourgeoisie. Alliyus and Kiruba ruminate about the futility of killing a few innocent policemen for a seeming greater good, they are after all just another tool of the state. The intangible power that gives orders to the police is unimpeachable unless they chronicle their own destiny and attempt a last stand at restorative justice. The filmmaker then takes the microscope and forges to the cinema of the state. It is the cinema that made leaders out of its heroes. The leaders under whom and in whose name numerous atrocities and crimes were committed. It is the same cinema that also questions the same leaders using the heroes of today. A politico-film nexus where the producer, creator, exhibitor and profiteer are all in cahoots is a tenuous position. The nexus works towards the preservation of every stakeholder's image and if possible, turn some of them into crusaders for justice.

In **Nayak**, Arindam's mentor rubbishes cinema. Arindam disparages the village plays and remembers the voice of conscience in those plays as nuisance. The conscience hangs heavy in Karthik's writing here. The line from the trailer about holding the pen tightly echoes long after the film is done. Karthik wants us to grapple with these questions just as he grapples with Tamil mainstream cinema, the disproportionate power it accords the masculine hero and how it's very nature as a self-fulfilling capitalist force is difficult to reckon with today. The one-man guerilla filmmaking of Ray Dasan, the bare bones **Man With a Movie Camera** (1929), one that bears witness and does no more, is an unbelievably powerful medium. But what of the mass produced, commercial film that can take all forms at once—pan Indian, political and documentarian? **Jigarthanda Double X**, a commercial film itself and therefore contradictory in nature, leaves us with more questions than answers. But that's also Karthik Subbaraj's greatest achievement.

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Remembering the Valiant Workers' Struggle of Mattancherry, Kochi



Front page of Deshabhimani newspaper on 16 September 1953, with the headline (on the right) "Police fires at workers in Mattancherry; the shootout was for having protested against the arrest of [trade union] leaders; two dead, one injured". (Courtesy: Deshabhimani.)

The historic workers' struggle of 1953 in Mattancherry, Kochi is a relatively less documented episode in the history of the working class movement in Kerala.

15 September 2023 marks the seventieth anniversary of the police firing at Mattancherry in Kochi, Kerala against striking workers of the Cochin Port. The police atrocity was the culmination of a

landmark struggle waged by the workers at the port – three workers were martyred in the firing and as a result of torture by the police.

In spite of the presence of a powerful communist movement in Kerala, academic studies on workers' struggles and labour history in general in the state are far from adequate. The Mattancherry workers' struggle is one such episode which had largely been forgotten.¹

The basic issue that triggered the struggle sounds remarkably relevant even today – the dock workers of Mattancherry who were working at the Cochin Port were casual labourers, and they demanded regular jobs. The specific method that was used to choose them for work was an intensely degrading one. The method, which also existed in other parts of the world, was known as "calling-on" in London. A description of this process can be found in Henry Adolphus Mess's book *Casual Labour at the Docks* (1916)²:

"The foreman stood on the raised ledge of a warehouse and eyed the crowd all over as if it were a herd of cattle. Then very deliberately he beckoned a man with his finger, and after a considerable interval a second and a third, until he had taken ten in all. There was an evident enjoyment of a sense of power, understandable enough as human nature goes, and the whole proceedings were horribly suggestive of the methods of a slave market. It is during the latter stages of a heavy call that disturbances are most frequent. The men begin to fidget and to push; those who are small and weak are shoved aside by the more burly, and sometimes a struggling mass of men may be seen elbowing and fighting to get to the front, and to attract the foreman's attention's... The foremen mount into booths, not unlike pulpits in appearance, and from them they distribute the metal tallies which are the token of engagement. The spectacle of some scores of men struggling violently is by no means infrequent here. Occasionally, a foreman will toss a tally to a man at the rear of the crowd, just as a morsel of food might be thrown to a dog. Towards the close of the call all hands will be lifted in competition for the foreman's attention, and stretched forward to secure the coveted tally. The men complain bitterly of these scrambles, in which clothes are torn, and kicks, scratches and even bites are received."

A similar system was followed in the major ports in India as well.³ In Cochin⁴, it came to be known in the name of *chaappa*, the Malayalam term for the metal token that was given to workers who were chosen for work on any given day. TM Abu, one of the leaders of the Mattancherry workers' struggle, would later write in his book *Smrithipathangalil [Down the Memory Lane]* (1997)⁵:

"Something called chaappa was used to recruit labourers to work in ships at the port. Chaappa was a metal coin with the emblem of the concerned stevedore contractor engraved on it. The mooppan [literally "elder" or "leader of a tribe", but used to refer, in this case, to a kind of intermediary who supplied and/or supervised workers] appears at a point with these chappas in his hand, like a stack of silver rupees. When? When the whistling of the ships, like the burping of the sea, wakes up the shores of the sea and the lake. Everybody who is somewhat well-built would start running towards the point, and surround the mooppan. "Mooppaa, dear mooppaa! One chaappa, please! Look, let Allah bear witness! Let Jesus bear witness! It's been three days since we cooked rice at home!" The mooppan wouldn't be moved by any of these entreaties. He would hand over the chaappa to those who bought him toddy and fish-head the previous night, or to those who are connected to him in some other way. He would hold the remaining stack of chaappas above his head and throw them around. The scramble to grab those chappas is beyond description."

"Workers were treated like slaves," B Hamsa, who has been a trade unionist working among port



workers in Kochi for more than half a century, says.⁶ The Mattancherry workers' struggle was the struggle of those who worked in ships to load and unload cargo. They were known as batta tozhilaalikal. They were workers who worked in the cargo holds of ships. They would be taken to the ships in machuvass (small passenger boats), and they would load or unload cargo, onto or from the ships. Large cargo boats known as tonis were used to transport cargo to and from the ships, as the ships did not berth at the port, but at a distance from the port. It was a time when road transport was not well-developed. Much of the cargo such as food grain used to be transported in tonis and kettuvallams⁷ to and from Kochi, the route extending to Munambam to the north, and to Kollam to the south.⁸ Hamsa recalls that TK Pareekutty, who would go on to become a noted film producer, was the owner of a large number of tonis. Pareekutty was earlier a toni worker, and later rose to become a toni owner.

The modern port of Cochin was built in the 1920s by the British colonial rulers. A part of Cochin, known as British Cochin, was part of British India's Madras Presidency, while the surrounding regions were part of the princely state of Kochi. Workers from neighbouring villages, and migrant workers from various parts of Kerala and even other parts of the country formed the skilled labour force at the port. Most of these workers settled in Mattancherry and nearby backwater islands.⁹ British Cochin and Mattancherry were neighbouring, twin town-centres, and Mattancherry bazaar emerged as a major commercial centre in the southwest coast of India by the 1940s.¹⁰

The Demand for Ending the Chaappa System and for Decasualisation

The years from 1946 onwards saw an intense struggle in Cochin-Mattancherry demanding an end to the chappa system, end to the dominance of the contractors, and the decasualisation of port workers. These demands were raised under the leadership of the Cochin Port Cargo Labour Union (CPCLU), founded on 12 May 1946 and affiliated to the communist-led All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). The office-bearers were leaders of the Communist Party: George Chadayammuri was the union's president, TM Abu was elected secretary, P Gangadharan was vice-president, CX Antony was joint secretary, and Stalin Kunhumammad was treasurer.¹¹

Similar struggles were taking place elsewhere too. The Bombay Dock Workers' Union led a strike of dock workers from 15 November 1947, demanding the abolition of the "*toliwalla system*" (toliwallas were the contractors who were called upon to supply the necessary amount of labour), and demanding the direct employment of workers. The very same month, the government introduced a bill to regulate the employment of dock workers.¹²

The bill was passed as the Dock Workers (Regulation of Employment) Act ,1948.¹³ The legislation empowered the central government to devise a scheme “for the registration of dock workers and employers with a view to ensuring greater regularity of employment and for regulating the employment of dock workers whether registered or not in a Port”. This meant that port labour would be “decasualised” and the terms and conditions of their employment, including rates of remuneration, hours of work, conditions as to holidays, etc. would be regulated. The scheme would “prohibit, restrict, or otherwise control the employment of dock workers to whom the scheme does not apply and the employment of dock workers by employers to whom the scheme does not apply.” Inspectors would be deployed to ensure that the provisions of the scheme are complied with. In order to administer the scheme for any port, a Dock Labour Board would be established with equal number of members representing the government, the dock workers, and the employers of dock workers and shipping companies.

While the scheme envisaged by the legislation was implemented in other major ports such as Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, the old, barbaric system continued to operate in Cochin port. Workers’ resentment continued to fester.

To begin with, the CPCLU gave letters to the stevedores (the agents of ships that came to the port with cargo) in the port, demanding that the central legislation should be implemented in Cochin. Workers would then have to be muster-rolled and paid wages stipulated by the central government. The Dock Labour Board would replace the intermediaries (who were called mooppans or tandelans). Decent wages and working conditions would be a reality for dock workers, as the intense exploitation by intermediaries would end. These intermediaries used to take a big share of the wages that companies used to give them to pay to the workers. Such practices would also end with the formation of the DLB.

As union activities intensified, it became more difficult for the employers to continue the unbridled exploitation of dock workers. The book *Adayaalam* (2020)¹⁴ by Abdulla Mattanchery on the Mattancherry workers’ struggle describes the tactic used by the employers to divide the workers – they claimed that communists are god-deniers, and that it was sinful to associate with such people. This tactic did have some impact on workers. It was in this context that another union was formed, in December 1948, by those who were opposed to communists – the Cochin Thuramukha Thozhilaali Union (Cochin Port Workers’ Union, CTTU). It was Congress leaders who led the effort to form this union.



B Hamsa, former General Secretary of the Cochin Port Labour Union

1950, and its leaders went underground due to the repression. Given the adverse situation, CPCLU leaders advised union members to join CTTU, which had been registered as an independent union.

The influx of communist and communist-leaning workers strengthened the CTTU and the resistance it led, infuriating the employers. More workers in CTTU also now demanded decasualisation. But then the employers adopted a new tactic. They proposed to give the chaappas to the union, which could then distribute the chaappas to the workers. The CTTU accepted this proposal in 1951. Now the workers began queueing up in front of the union office to collect chaappas.

The CTTU demanded that the contract system be ended, and that the responsibility to allot work to workers should rest with the union. The demands for decasualisation and formation of DLB were not of importance to the CTTU.

Soon the situation became increasingly difficult for the CPCLU. The Communist Party was banned in 1948, and consequently, there was a crackdown on communist-led trade unions as well – the major unions affiliated to the AITUC were banned.¹⁵ Offices of AITUC-affiliated unions were encroached upon by the police, their records were destroyed, and many of their activists were arrested.¹⁶ The CPCLU was banned on 1 January

The ban on the Communist Party was withdrawn in 1952, and as leaders who were imprisoned or gone underground returned, the CPCLU became active again. The demand for decasualisation was resurrected. CPCLU began an agitation demanding that workers in Kochi be paid the same wages as workers in other major ports.¹⁷ Workers who had joined CTTU began to return to CPCLU, which worried the CTTU leadership. The CTTU changed the colour of its flag from tricolour to red in response to the communists' argument that workers' flag is red in colour and that workers should organise under the Red Flag.¹⁸ CTTU's adoption of red flag annoyed GS Dara Singh, a Congress leader. He demanded a return to tricolour, but that demand went unheeded. He then got some Congressmen together to form the Cochin Port Thozhilaali Union [Cochin Port Workers' Union] (CPTU), founded on 31 January 1953 and affiliated to the Congress-led Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). The CPTU was inaugurated by Abid Ali Jaferbhai, the Union Deputy Minister for Labour, on 31 January 1953.¹⁹

Dara Singh began bargaining with stevedores, pointing out to them his connections with the central government. Thus, the stevedores agreed to give CPTU a share of the chaappas. CPTU also remained silent about decasualisation.

Faced with a setback, the CTTU opposed the sharing of chaappas with the CPTU, and sought the help of the CPCLU. The CPCLU made support conditional on CTTU's support to the demand for decasualisation.²⁰ Thus the two unions came to an agreement, leading to many workers leaving CPTU to come to the CPCLU-CTTU fold.

In the end, Dara Singh was forced to join the other two unions in demanding decasualisation, and a joint action committee of the three unions was formed.²¹ This committee gave notice for a strike demanding decasualisation and the formation of the Dock Labour Board. As the employers refused to respond, workers began strike on 1 July 1953.

Though the strike began in connection with cargo-handling work in ships, the agitation drew in the support of many other sections of workers and their unions – such as the boat workers' union, the headload workers' union, small traders, beedi makers, coir workers, fish workers, rickshaw workers, etc.²²

As the strike dragged on, hunger stalked workers' homes. The committee leaders put pressure on the government, but the port administrator sided with the employers. Some of the employers were funding agents of the Congress.²³ Therefore the Congress government of Travancore-Cochin²⁴ was

reluctant to force a pro-worker settlement.

Employers put pressure on Congress trade union leaders to end the strike, but the latter were afraid to withdraw from the strike, fearing the further growth of communists. The Congress leaders calculated that when workers grow tired due to hunger, they would withdraw from the strike.²⁵

But the striking workers remained defiant. A strike support committee was formed to aid starving families, and aid began reaching the committee from different parts of Kerala. Thus it became certain that the strike couldn't be defeated easily. The committee also



The martyrs' column at Mattancherry, commemorating CX Antony, Saithali, and Said.

campaigned on the importance of the strike at traffic junctions.

The stevedores and steamer agencies were determined to crush the agitation, and they enlisted the support of the Congress government of Thiru-Kochi.²⁶ Congress leader AJ John was the chief minister, and TM Varghese was the Home Minister.

Fighting at the Barricades²⁷

On 14 September 1953, the 74th day of the strike, the cargo ship SS Sagar Veena belonging to the steamer agent Africana reached the Cochin port. The stevedore of the ship was a Gujarati, Bhanji

Jevat Khona (BJ Khona).²⁸ The right to give chaappa for the work in that ship was given to INTUC. That was part of the tactics of the employers and the government to divide the workers.

In response, the workers decided to blockade the office of the stevedore (BJ Khona) at the bazaar. The strike site was moved to the front of the company. The situation turned explosive. Large numbers of police and Malabar Special Police (MSP) personnel had already been assembled in the area.²⁹ The MSP, a paramilitary unit, had become notorious from the time of India's freedom struggle for its atrocities against freedom fighters and communists. R Prakasam says: "Many trade union activists in Malabar had been shot dead by MSP during 1948-51. Many others were taken to camps and tortured to death."³⁰

The port administrator MS Venkitaraman called union leaders for negotiation. MK Raghavan, AA Kochunni, KH Sulaiman (all three from CTTU), GS Dara Singh (CPTU), and TM Abu (CPCLU) took part in the negotiations.³¹ Both sides reiterated their already-stated positions, with the employers stating that the chaappa could be given to the union to distribute to workers.

At this stage, Dara Singh announced that he is withdrawing from the strike, deciding not to waste the chance to hog the whole chaappa.³² As the negotiations dragged on till midnight, the port administrator took CTTU leaders aside and talked to them. He told them that there were directions from the Congress's national leaders, and requested them to withdraw from the strike. Lakhs of rupees of goods are lying idle in godowns, and people are suffering as grains were not being transported. He asked them to take into consideration the "nation's interests". He then put forward another proposal – the chaappas would be divided among the CTTU and the INTUC. The government will "take care" of those who still continue the strike. "There is no other way", he said as an ultimatum.³³

CTTU leaders came to the assessment that there's no hope left to achieve success by moving forward with the strike, which had already passed 74 days without resolution. Gaining control of work and workers by getting the right to allot chaappas would not be a bad outcome, they thought. So they also decided to withdraw from the strike.³⁴

As the CTTU announced the decision at the negotiation, TM Abu exploded. "This is deceit, it cannot be accepted", he said. Abu leaned out of the window and told the workers waiting below, "Comrades, they betrayed us. They decided to share the chaappas. Our demand has not been accepted. We will continue the strike, even if we fall down and die here."³⁵ The workers were

shocked and deeply disappointed.

When the leaders came down after negotiations, workers shouted slogans against them. We won't withdraw from the strike, the leaders can leave, the workers said. They raised slogans and moved towards BJ Khona's office.

CTTU leaders MK Raghavan and AA Kochunni went to the CTTU office, but before they could sleep, workers surrounded the office and raised slogans against the leaders.³⁶ As dawn came, more workers who had gone home the previous day also came to the office.

The workers dragged Raghavan and Kochunni out of the office. They were given Red Flags to hold. The workers marched to the stevedore's office, with Kochunni and Raghavan walking in front repeating the slogans raised by the workers.³⁷

The workers' march blockaded the BJ Khona office. The central labour officer came to the spot and called union leaders for negotiations at the BJ Khona office. The workers did not trust Raghavan and Kochunni³⁸, and made it clear that they would not accept any negotiation without TM Abu, who had gone to sleep at the party office.

Union activists went to call Abu, who then went to the BJ Khona office.

The police were waiting for Abu. As soon as he arrived, he was arrested and pushed into the police van. Workers were furious, and stopped the van. As they realised that workers wouldn't spare them if Abu was taken without them, Raghavan, Kochunni, and Dara Singh entered the police van and secured themselves.³⁹

But the workers refused to allow the van to move, and the police began lathi-charging the workers. In defence, the workers started throwing stones at the police. The police and armed forces then fired at the workers. The workers, however, did not disperse. They put up barricades by overturning carts used to transport cargo, and continued to throw stones. Two workers were martyred in the firing. Twenty-two-year-old Said, a machuva [a small passenger boat] worker, and who hailed from Chavakkad, was the first one to be killed. Twenty-three-year-old Saithali, a toni [a kind of boat used to transport cargo] worker and a native of Thuruthi in Fort Kochi, was the second. Many of those injured were taken to the hospital in carts.

There was one more martyr in the struggle – 21-year-old CX Antony, a winch worker, joint secretary of the CPCLU and a native of Fort Kochi. When Antony learned that TM Abu, the union's secretary, had been taken into custody by the police, he ran to the police station to meet Abu. But when Antony reached the police station, he was also taken into custody and brutally tortured. He was released so that it wouldn't appear that he had died in police custody. He returned home extremely exhausted and physically shattered. The family was too poor to seek expert medical care, while neighbours were too afraid to provide adequate aid. Already in dire straits, Antony soon also contracted small pox, and died at home.⁴⁰ Three years after his death, his mother Cicily died due to starvation.⁴¹

Many others remained as living martyrs due to the injuries sustained during the firing and the subsequent police witch-hunt. Many were taken into police custody and tortured. About 100 people were made accused in the case. The police made everybody who sought medical care at the Fort Hospital at Fort Kochi accused. Many people avoided going to hospital, afraid that they would also be made accused. Many workers from Malabar and Travancore took the first train available and left.⁴²

Among the main accused were the office-bearers of CPCLU (AITUC). TM Abu was brutally tortured by the police.



The TM Aboo Road and the old Post Office at Mattancherry. Saithali was shot dead near this post office.



The old Post Office at Mattancherry. There were bullet marks on the walls of the post office as well.

CPCLU continued the agitation demanding decasualisation and formation of the Dock Labour Board. Abdulla Mattancherry says that as Congress leaders were exposed as having betrayed the struggle, CTTU was also forced to demand decasualisation, although they were not ready to go on an agitation. They merely wanted to prevent the further exodus of workers from the organisation.⁴³

After the firing, the CTTU went on a campaign asking, "Did the police fire, or were they forced to fire?", insinuating that the communist trade unionists, rather than the police and the MSP, were responsible for the atrocity.⁴⁴ MK Raghavan, AA Kochunni, and GS Dara Singh testified in court against the workers, as prosecution witnesses (approvers).⁴⁵ The special court sentenced three of the accused for two years imprisonment each. But all were acquitted on appeal at the sessions court.⁴⁶ A large chunk of the proceeds from the performance of the Kerala People's Arts Club's⁴⁷ famous play 'Ningalenne Communistaakki' (You Made Me a Communist) was used to meet the legal expenses of the case. The workers of Mattancherry received solidarity from across the world. The World Federation of Trade Unions condemned the police firing, and working class organisations in France, Germany, Spain held demonstrations in solidarity with the workers of Mattancherry.⁴⁸

After nine years of struggle, the workers won their demand, with the coming into being of the Cochin Dock Labour Board on 5 November 1962. About 12,000 workers registered themselves with the DLB. Stevedores would inform the board of the required number of workers, and the board would allot workers on the basis of priority list. Workers began to be paid decent wages. Later when the DLB was made part of Cochin Port, it came to be known as Board Labour Division.

DLB was entrusted with the responsibility of thousands of workers who handled the cargo at the port. Its tasks were to make workers available as per requirement, stipulate work, and ensure the safety and welfare of workers. DLB would determine the wage and working conditions of the workers from the time when they are recruited till retirement. The Board was supposed to ensure 21 working days per month for every worker. If that could not be ensured, the worker was to be paid minimum wages for every day for which work (up to the minimum guaranteed days of work per month) could not be provided. The Board made a number of benefits available to the workers, including housing loan, medical care, educational benefits, cooperative society canteen, provisional store, recreational facilities, family welfare scheme, death benefit scheme, special ex gratia for serious diseases, and other financial aid.⁴⁹

The Mattancherry workers' struggle to win regulated working time, wages, and benefits was thus successful.

The spirit of the struggle was most famously captured by the renowned theatre activist and actor PJ Antony,⁵⁰ in the form of a *padappaattu* [literally "war song", historically a kind of poem in Arabi Malayalam literature]⁵¹:

*"Kaattaalanmaar naadu bharichee
Naattil teemazha peytappol
Pattaalatte pullaayi karutiya
Mattaancherry marakkaamo?"*

[When savages ruled the land
And fire rained upon the country,
Here, armed forces were treated with contempt:
Can Mattancherry be forgotten?]

The Aftermath

After the chaappa system was discontinued and the Dock Labour Board was formed, workers who handled cargo in ships came under the Board. But various kinds of jobs (such as stacking, loading, unloading, blending of tea, coffee, etc., and packing) at warehouses at the port were not under the Board. The exploitation of casual workers who were engaged in such jobs continued in a different form as a section of union leaders⁵² took charge of the labour contract for large companies. These intermediaries took a substantial cut of the wages that should have gone to the workers. Those who opposed such exploitation – such as Santo Gopalan, a leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] – were violently dealt with⁵³. This system was finally ended in 2008, when PK Gurudasan was the Labour Minister in the Left Democratic Front government of 2006-2011 led by Chief Minister VS Achuthanandan. This was made possible by bringing the workers under the purview of the Kerala Headload Workers Welfare Board.

The unions which were part of the historic strike of 1953 continued to exist. The 1964 split in the Communist Party, however, weakened CPCLU. Another union, the Cochin Port Labour Union – which was originally formed by some leaders of the Kerala Congress⁵⁴ – eventually came to be dominated by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), associated with the CPI(M). MM Lawrence was elected as its first General Secretary, and V Viswanatha Menon became the first President. CPLU organises labourers working at warehouses, shipping companies, at the offices of stevedores and steamer agents, etc. Within the Cochin Port proper, another union affiliated to



The Mattancherry Bazaar

the CITU – the Cochin Port Employees Organisation – is active. The Cochin Port Staff Association, associated with the Congress, is another union that is active in the port. The CTTU, affiliated to the Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), continues to be a major presence among port workers. The CPTU has weakened substantially.

The advent of containerisation has been a major setback to workers at the Cochin Port. The use of containers significantly reduced the need for workers at ports across the globe, and the same trend affected the Cochin Port as well. This transformation accelerated with the construction of the International Container Trans-shipment Terminal (ICTT) at the island of Vallarpadam to the north of the existing Cochin Port. With the shift of most of the business of the port to the ICTT (built,

developed, and operated by the global terminal operator Dubai Ports World), a large number of jobs disappeared. This led to the economic decline of Mattancherry, where workers used to live and where large numbers of warehouses and trading houses used to operate.⁵⁵

Many of the workers who used to be registered with the DLB were forced to take “voluntary retirement”. More casual labourers were employed in their place. Union activities are practically non-existent at ICTT.⁵⁶ This, and the massive reduction in the number of workers at the port, have led to the weakening of trade unions at the port.

The ICTT was constructed with the claims that it will provide a huge boost to the business of the port, leading to much higher economic growth for the entire region and the state of Kerala. Such hopes have been belied⁵⁷, union leaders testify. The terminal today handles only a fraction of the number of containers it was expected to handle. In brief, the much-trumpeted growth in trade at the port has not occurred, while jobs have disappeared.

Prolonged and determined struggles by the organised working class managed to win the demand for decent work at the port, and the workers managed to retain this success for a few decades. But the headwinds of neoliberal globalisation have posed unprecedented challenges, making the path ahead for the port workers of Kochi a very uncertain one.

(All photographs, except the Deshabhimani archive image, are by the author.)

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ENDNOTES

1. Earlier this year, the release of the Malayalam film *Thuramukham*, directed by Rajeev Ravi, brought the Mattancherry workers' struggle to the spotlight.
2. HA Mess (1916), *Casual Labour at the Docks*, G Bell & Sons, Ltd., London.
3. Shubhankita Ojha (2014), “Regulating Work: Decasualisation of Dock Labour in Colonial India”, *Social Scientist*, March-April.

4. Cochin is another name for Kochi; Cochin became the official name during colonial times; Kochi became the official name from 1996 onwards. The port in Kochi is governed by the Cochin Port Authority.
5. TM Abu, *Smrithipathangalil [Down the Memory Lane]* (1997), Prabhath Book House, Thiruvananthapuram.
6. Personal Interview with B Hamsa, 15 May 2023, Chullickal, Kochi. B Hamsa was the General Secretary of the Cochin Port Labour Union (CPLU) from 1994 to 2022, and as of May 2023, is serving as the Vice-President of the union.
7. A kettuvallam is a houseboat, with thatched roof covers over wooden hulls. They were traditionally used to transport cargo, but these days they are used mostly to take tourists around backwaters in Kerala.
8. Interview with B Hamsa (2023).
9. Justin Mathew (2015), "Port Building and Urban Modernity, Cochin, 1920-45", in Sathese Chandra Bose and Shiju Sam Varghese (eds.), *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition*, Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad.
10. Ibid.
11. George Chadayammuri and P Gangadharan were active in the trade union movement in the Cochin Port from the 1930s onwards, when trade union activities at the port picked up as a result of the enthusiastic work of Congress Socialist Party activists, says R Prakasam in his 1979 book *Keralathile Trade Union Prasthaanathinte Charithram [The History of the Trade Union Movement in Kerala]*, published by Prabhath Book House, Thiruvananthapuram.
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13. http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=51953, accessed on 8 May 2023.
14. Abdulla Mattanchery (2020), *Adayaalam [The Sign]*, Pranatha Books, Kochi.
15. Deshabhimani (2023), "Annu Kochi Thuramukham Chorayil Mungi; Pakshe Thozhilaalikal Keezhadangiyailla" [That Day, Cochin Port Was Drenched in Blood; But the Workers Did Not Surrender], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MLgXKzHUPE>, accessed on 7 May 2023.
16. R Prakasam (1979), *Keralathile Trade Union Prasthaanathinte Charithram [The History of the Trade Union Movement in Kerala]*, Prabhath Book House, Thiruvananthapuram.
17. Mattanchery (2020).
18. Ibid.
19. Prakasam (1979).
20. Mattanchery (2020).
21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. The state of Kerala had not been formed yet. After India won independence in 1947, the princely states of Travancore and Cochin merged in 1949 to form the Travancore-Cochin (Thiru-Kochi) state. Travancore-Cochin and the Malabar district were merged in 1956 to form the state of Kerala based on the common language Malayalam.
25. Mattanchery (2020).
26. John Fernandes (2013), "Mattancherry Marakkaamo" [Can Mattancherry Be Forgotten?], Deshabhimani, September 15. <https://www.deshabhimani.com/articles/general-news/352450>, accessed on 7 May 2023.
27. This section, on the incidents of 14 and 15 September 1953, draws heavily on the description provided in Abdulla Mattanchery's book *Adayaalam* (2020).
28. Mattanchery (2020).
29. Deshabhimani (2023).
30. Prakasam (1979).
31. Mattanchery (2023).
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Interview with B Hamsa (2023).
39. Deshabhimani (2023).
40. Deshabhimani (2023) and Interview with B Hamsa (2023).
41. Mattanchery (2020).
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Interview with B Hamsa (2023), and Interview with KJ Antony, former Opposition Leader of the Municipal Corporation of Kochi, 16 May 2023, Ernakulam.
45. Interview with B Hamsa (2023).
46. Ibid.
47. KPAC, associated with the Communist Party.
48. Mattanchery (2020).
49. Ibid.

50. PJ Antony was a distinguished theatre activist, playwright, actor and director who worked with the KPAC. He also wrote a play titled *Party Card*, based on the last days of CX Antony who was martyred after being tortured by the police during the Mattancherry struggle. PJ Antony would later win a National Film Award for Best Actor in 1974 for his performance in the film *Nirmaalyam*.
51. Baiju Chandran (2023), "Pattaalatte pullaayikkarutiya Mattaancherriyum PJ Antony-yude 'Party Cardum'" [The Mattancherry That Treated the Armed Forces With Contempt and PJ Antony's 'Party Card'], *Deshabhimani*, <https://www.deshabhimani.com/special/p-j-antony-memory-of-mattanchery-martyrs-baiju-chandran/1079630>, March 14. accessed on 7 May 2023.
52. These were leaders of the CTTU, according to B Hamsa.
53. Interview with KJ Antony (2023).
54. Kerala Congress – a regional party which is not to be confused with the Kerala unit of the Indian National Congress.
55. Interview with KJ Antony (2023). Antony mentions the song 'Kaayalinarike, Kochikkaayalinarike kodikal paratti kuthichu pongiya kampanikal' [The companies which grew up, their flags fluttering, near the Kochi Lake] (written by Meppally Balan, a Cochin Port employee, and composed and sung by the renowned musician H Mehboob) which talks about the many trading companies that used to be active in Kochi. While Mehboob passed away in 1981, the song was resurrected three decades later in the 2013 Malayalam film 'Annayum Rasoolum' [Anna and Rasool]: <https://youtu.be/fz0lrFSZK9I>. Shahabaz Aman, who sang 'Kaayalinarike' for the film, describes the song as a working class blues song.
56. Interview with B Hamsa (2023); and Neethi P (2016), *Globalization Lived Locally: A Labour Geography Perspective*, Oxford University Press: "... the drive for voluntary retirement was given a push after the arrival of DPW [Dubai Ports World] in 2005... DPW was engaging in a practice of dismissing any of their private, non-permanent workers who joined a union."
57. Anto T Joseph (2021), "How India's First Container Hub Terminal Failed," *Fortune India*, March 12, <https://www.fortuneindia.com/enterprise/how-indias-first-container-hub-terminal-failed/105292>. Accessed on 30 May 2023.

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