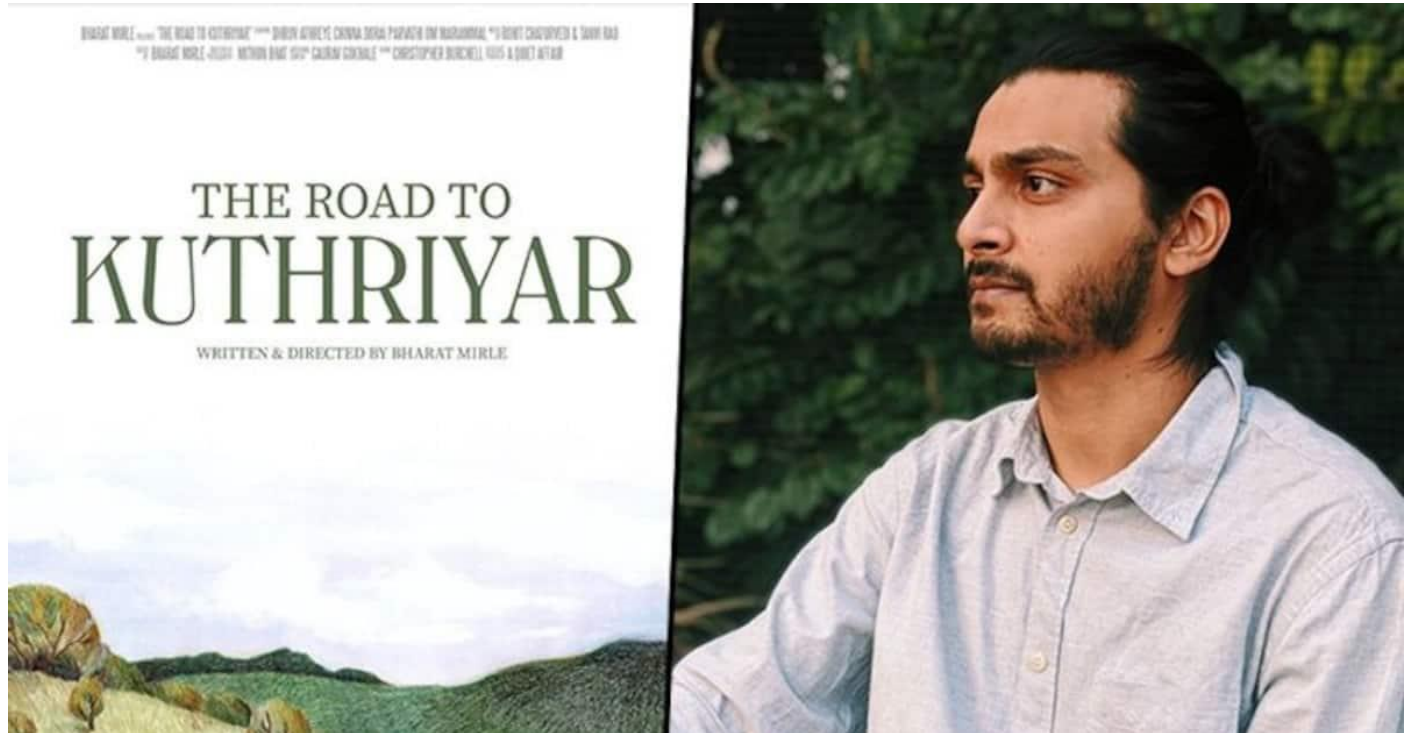


Critique

N. Vidyashankar

The Road to Kuthriyar

Bharat Mirle is a young filmmaker who is literally going places. This self-taught, award-winning filmmaker from Bengaluru is the winner of the Sundance Short Film Challenge at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival for his short documentary “175 Grams” and his first short fiction made in 2017 *Vaahana*, was the winner of the 2018 Jakarta International Humanitarian and Cultural Award and was part of the official selection at the New Jersey Indian International Film Festival and the Bangalore International Short Film Festival. His debut feature film in Tamil *The Road to Kuthriyar* had its world premiere at the prestigious Busan International Film Festival, South Korea in 2021. That’s not all. His involvement with film making is very comprehensive and all pervasive. The interesting profile on his personal website presents his creative role in collaborated documentaries, commissioned films in addition to his writings and illustrations for an international visual project under the theme of

“Imagining water”, an issue of deep public concern. He has navigated different roles as a Director, Producer and Editor. His networking capabilities with regard to creative content, Economics of cinema and technical values are stupendous and amazing. Almost every film of his has a significant presence in international forums.

Above all, it is his distinct understanding of Cinema that makes his oeuvre interesting and significant, particularly in the Indian Film context. The cinemas we have inherited, in all its manifestations, whether of the cultural or entertainment variety or of the personal Art House variety or documentation, depend heavily not on the nature of the relatively new medium but on the content drawn from traditional forms with emphasis on aural impact and emotional catharsis. Even the visual experimentalists had very limited success, mostly limited to influencing the discerning filmmakers, critics and the academic domain. The

Word and the Dramatic Arts which encompasses Music and Dance have complete sway over Cinemas in India. For filmmakers to liberate themselves from this tradition and still make a significant contribution is a challenging task. Bharat has tried to break free from the clutches of the Indian film making tradition and still be relevant. He does not attempt to convert a story into visual form which is the norm, but is creating a story through the visual narrative.

The Road to Kuthriyar could draw attention of the discerning audiences for multiple reasons and more probably for its dynamic form. It starts as a Road movie and soon transports into a Docufiction and ends as a discursive narrative film. It treads on rough and not so travelled paths both physically and psychologically. Its range of discourse traverses ecological concerns, anthropology, natural order and evolution of manmade social orders, impact of displacements from one environ to another, cultural categorisations and above all the unsustainable nature of the modern idea of progress. The subtle political statement indicts the State of shifting the people from one marginalized situation to another and denuding them from their traditional natural camouflage exposing them to harsh realities and hierarchies of modern lifestyles, with additional costs for them. This in fact benefits the already privileged class with Economic, cultural and social capital who empower the State which in turn further privileges them.

There have been many films dealing with the agony of people on account of displacements, migrations and forced exodus. Most of them are scripted to present highly volatile socio-political situations and emotionally distraught state of the suffering populace to create empathy for the characters in the film. That has been the standard methodology for even the Documentaries and Reality shows on the new media providing instant moral redemption for the audiences. But then Bharat's choice lies in avoiding this trap and leave it to the sensibilities of the viewer to respond to it rather than provoking them to empathize.

Does the filmmaker succeed in realizing such variety of noble ambitions? In terms of formal expression he does make significant contribution to new Indian cinema. He presents a counter point to excessively used theatrical format and emotional fatigue the mainstream cinema creates in the audience which even the artistic expressions in cinema of socio-cultural endeavour is guilty of. The conscious effort to avoid intellectually loaded metaphors and dwell on simple visual narratives focused on the lives as they are lived is quite interesting. Sometime during the later half of the film there are some extraneous interventions. The social commentary and analysis of tribal societies by a Professor who is outside the film narrative trying to make a distinction between customary lifestyle and modern civil society practices appears to be straight from a sociology textbook which does not fit into the context. The film by then had already familiarized those concepts to the viewer. After all, any migration from any environs to another creates dysfunctional characters either in terms of habits or lifestyles whether it is in the form of Alcoholism or Drug Addiction or sexual preferences or Gastronomical indulgences. It does not require theorization in a semi fictional narrative of this kind which consciously shuns overt intellectual interventions. The comments on the State Excise policy by the protagonist also appears to be an extraneous observation trying to rationalize the condition of the community in a world alien to their natural habitat.

In the end, what really emerges is a new formal experiment in the context of Indian regional cinema which is relevant for its content and distinct as a creative expression.

The Road to Kuthriyar

Director: Bharat Mirle

Language: Tamil, English

Year: 2021

Country: India

Duration: 115 mins

Mr. N. Vidyashankar is a film critics, festival director and a Member of FIPRESCI-India, based in Bangalore.