

Interview

**Narendra Bandabe**

**In conversation with Don Palathara**



**Narendra Bandabe:** Hello Don, *Everything is Cinema* (2021) is a kind of experiment in the Indian cinema space. How did you find the subject? Is it a product of lockdown, or was it pre-planned?

**Don Palathara:** I try and do new things in every film. I believe that budget constraints and lack of opportunities should not stop us. When we were forced to stay indoors during the lockdown, we didn't know when the pandemic would end, how we were going to do it, and how the world would respond. So, I decided to go with whatever I had. When we were stuck inside with the fear of the pandemic, it contributed to the making of *Everything is Cinema*. I was in fear, anxiety, and frustration reflected in the film.

**NB:** In the film, you have chosen two different perspectives of visual communication. While the

camera moved outside, it was shot in colour, and the conversation of the protagonists was in black and white. Was it purposefully done?

**DP:** Colour images reflect the pre-pandemic world; inside the room, there was uneasiness, sweetness, discomfort, and negative emotions. So, I used black and white to convey those emotions.

**NB:** Your characters talk about relationships in both your movies, *Everything is Cinema* (2021) and *Joyful Mystery* (2021). Have you drawn it from your real-life experiences, or is it imagination?

**DP:** It is partly imaginative and simultaneously inspired by real life. Not definitely in creating a situation, but instead creating characters. Because of lockdown, most relationships were stuck inside the rooms with their partners. It was a golden

opportunity. Lots of movies on this are coming from many parts of the world. I noticed they were relationship dramas. Because people were thinking about the relationships, how they perceive home relationships. I was also thinking on the same lines, contemplating lots of connections, on how we become inseparable partners or how our partners become inseparable. In Indian cinema, especially mainstream cinema, there is a tendency to over-romanticize a couple's relationship. I wanted to see the other side of things and the darker side. That's what I tried to do in both films.

**DP:** I see in many relationships, not only in romantic relationships but also in other kinds of relationships, like teacher and student, father and son, mother and daughter. Any relationship has a power dynamic attached to it. Especially when two people share the same roof, maybe they don't share their privileges. When they are living together, colliding, there will be a power struggle between them. I had these in mind while building these characters. They would have conflict when it comes to making decisions and deciding about the future with added social pressures. So, I had to consider all these different factors and simultaneously wanted to caricature the concept of the man and woman relationship in India in general. But I wanted them to be specific characters. We don't have characteristics. Cristen from *Everything is Cinema*, Jitin and Maria from *Joyful Mysteries* are different people. I didn't want them to be stereotyped; I wanted them to be very specific in their characters. So, it doesn't tell the story of all men and all women but specifically about these people.

**NB:** Your characters are primarily middle class or upper-middle-class; I would like to know your observation about these people in real life?

**DP:** I would not be able to comment on that as I said earlier that it's more about these specific characters. It was more about the mental status I was going through during the lockdown. It was more turbulent at the beginning, and whatever confusion we dealt with was reflected in the first film, *Everything is Cinema*, which naturally became violent. In that movie, I was trying to understand. I asked myself the nature of cameras, how wild cameras can be, or how they can be used as a tool or weapon of violence. That's why I created a very violent character and operated a camera as a weapon for his brutality. Even with off-screen violence, the way he looks at his wife is very violent. That violence is directed through this camera that I wanted to try out with the first film. In the second film, *Joyful Mystery*, the camera sits along with them, leaning toward one of the characters almost objectively traveling together. Taking part in their journey. Naturally, the language of the camera itself was more fascist more stick in a way, so

**NB:** But the conversations are not typical. They are continuously talking about their relationship. I would not say they are fighting, but it's an argument between male and female characters. How do you look at it from the argument point of view? There is offscreen violence between the characters in *Everything is Cinema*, and in *Joyful Mystery*, there is verbal violence; how do you look at it?



naturally, the way we look at the relationship also changes.

**NB:** In *Everything in Cinema*, your characters talk about pseudo-middle-class, feminism, capitalism. Was it part of the process of narrative building?

**DP:** It was written for the character; it's not all I believe in; it's character talk.

**NB:** Your character in *Everything in Cinema* is making lots of statements about the filmmaking process; one thing I liked is the Micro-Budget film, Cinema without capitalism; the second one is that unnecessary information hurts you. Have you purposely put it in the cinema?

**DP:** It's based on some of my thoughts, but it's not entirely me. The protagonist has some element of me, and I have some aspect of him when it comes to that. At the same time, some dialogues and monologues were chosen, which kept me a part of it and gave me personal gratification. It need not be politically correct or factually accurate. I think the purpose of art is to cause some agitation in the audience, and when I consider myself a viewer, I need to fill this particular feeling; that's how I put these words in character.

**NB:** In *Everything is Cinema*; you talk about many filmmakers like Andrei Tarkovsky, Krzysztof Kieślowski as your character is a director. Also, your filmmaking style is different, like that of Iranian filmmakers like Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, and Majid Maid in their initial days. Who is your inspiration for making films?

**DP:** There is no particular person; when I watched cinemas of all these masters, and while making my own, they were obviously on my mind. I thought, why we can't make films like these. Only aspects that I felt that I should take from everyone. The general element shared by all these filmmakers is honesty; that's why I was impressed. When they talk about human conditions, they talk about the human mind, the lives of people they live with. Honesty is a big

part of it. Each of them has different styles of filmmaking. For example, Tarkovsky's style is different from Abbas Kiarostami's. One thing they share that's honesty in their films. When I came back to Kerala in 2014 and started filmmaking, I didn't have a clear idea of the style of filmmaking I was going to follow; it naturally evolved, and I am not sure what kind of style I will be following in the future. I don't plan to stick to any school or any particular style of filmmaking. The film should be born first, then style or other aspects follow.



**NB:** Last week, I met Sanalkumar Sasidharan; he talked about micro-budget films or affordable cinema; you also promote this. Do you think there is a worldwide scope for such micro-budget films? And do you think capitalism influences cinema?

**DP:** Definitely, capitalism is running the world right now. Everything is controlled by the market & market needs. One must establish oneself as a brand. If you get recognized as a filmmaker and have a certain number of followers, you build your brand. Then you must make sure that you constantly produce certain quality films within a micro-budget. Then you start building an audience, and then you find a niche market outside the mainstream market. That is one way to look at capitalism and the current state of cinema. It is not easy to fight against or compete with big-budget films produced by big studios. With the arrival of OTT, different problems arose, like Netflix and Amazon controlling a considerable share of the market, more than 90 percent. They have specific criteria about the content they want to produce and distribute. They do not concentrate on niche audiences or niche markets. They focus on what can



be sold quickly, for instance, only popular content. We must find our method to distribute the film and create our audience for our films. But that's another tricky part because you are experimenting with the film form and will not make the same kind of movies every year. I hope a different distribution model will evolve, and it will eventually be able to sustain this kind of filmmaking. For instance, platforms like "Mubi" or relying on one or two platforms cannot cover all the costs. Even for micro-budget films, that budget is still required. It isn't easy to find that kind of money because filmmaking involves many processes. A better model needs to be invented. Distribution is still an issue. But we are very hopeful of finding one way or another.



**NB:** Do you think we need to start a movement to create an awareness to the audience and model to make micro-budget cinema?

**DP:** When any movie is made, many people are involved. There is a system of specialized people who work for it, like cinematographers, sound designers, etc. But it's not the case for micro-budget films. Independent filmmakers are doing all these things by themselves. With the arrival of social media and its evolving process, it would take time, and film

festivals help you somehow. One can bind his audience. But it is still not a straightforward path.

**NB:** How are people outside India responding to your films, especially the film market and audience. How is the Indian audience reacting to it? Would you please give me a perspective of both?

**DP:** I am not much of a businessman when selling or putting things on the market. When I make a film, I don't think about who my audience consists of but consider myself an audience. I will try to make a film that I would love to watch. One difference between the audience in Kerala and outside the state is that everything is very political in Kerala. As soon as you put content in public, the first thing they do is try and read the politics of the film and the filmmaker. They are constantly worried if the filmmaker is talking about their politics, and that's the first thing they check. All the subjective experiences come after that. People think about other elements, and they look at them after a while or never look at them at all. Outside India, they aren't interested in cinema politics, like India. They outrate the political context. Usually, they look at what and how they can connect with the cinema. There is some element of human nature where everyone can connect beyond the precise nature of culture. Everyone can connect for some parts, and those are the elements they look at when screened outside. For instance, for *Everything is Cinema* and *Joyful Mystery*, people are defensive about the nature of relationships. People reacted, saying the girl was portrayed as a little too aggressive. They are thinking about whether it is right or wrong. They are trying to weigh in on the moral scale. For me, that should be the least priority. That should come at the end, not in the beginning. The purpose of the cinema is not to weigh character on a moral scale, but more about the reflection of your own life or some aspect of your life.

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