

Festival Report

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Bengaluru International Film Festival 2023
A Race Against Time



In an incredible act of efficacy and speed, the Bengaluru International Film Festival (BIFFES) got its act together in a matter of 5-6 weeks. All the tough and innumerable facets of organising a festival – selecting and getting the films, permissions, guests, venue, funds, travel, hospitality, media, catalogue, programming, official teams, volunteers and much else – were a last minute job this year, following the late green signal from the state government. An ordinary compliment or hats off would hardly tell the tale of the stupendous work that went into the event crafted by Festival Director Ashok Cashyap and Artistic Director H N Narahari Rao.

Yet, the 14th edition had a good deal in store for everyone: some 175 films, guests and jury members from across the world, screenings in thirteen cinema halls and competitions in four categories – Asian, Indian – the FIPRESCI

competition, too, was from the Indian section – and Kannada.

The country in focus this year was South Korea with a clutch of seven films which were a mix of auteur cinema and works with social and political themes. The section on Wong Kar Wai, featuring five of his best works (*In the Mood for Love*, *Chungking Express*, *Happy Together*, *2046*), were, as expected, a hit with the audience. Meanwhile, a tribute was paid to African cinema's father figure, Senegal's Ousmane Sembene, on his birth centenary with the screening of five films.

The largest selection was Cinema of the World. The sheer variety of the fifty-five recent works from Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America drew large and animated crowds. There was also a nostalgia package of Indian classics – including films as old as 1936 (*Sant Tukaram*) and 1938 (*Gopal*

Krishna). And, naturally, there were films from Karnataka as well.

Apart from the films, BIFFES had eloquent speakers who delighted their audiences with their reflections and discussions on a slew of topics – cinematography, screenplay, sound design, including a few unusual themes such as “Transcendental Cinema” by Vimukti Jayasundera and “Capturing the Value of Metaverse in the Media Sector” by Thomas Kuruvilo. Master classes and round tables were held on “Future Trends in Distribution”, “Exploring and Exploiting the Boundaries” and “IP and Copyright in Cinema”, among others. All these were conducted by a collegium of industry and subject experts.

No one with some familiarity with Indian cinema can forget the outstanding camerawork done by V K Murthy, recipient of the highest honour in Indian cinema – the Dadasaheb Phalke Award, who passed away in Bengaluru in 2014. BIFFES paid him a tribute this year - the centenary of his birth. Murthy’s exceptional camerawork – particularly in the films of Guru Dutt – played a major role in the critical success of many of India’s epic Hindi films, especially *Pyaasa*, *Chaudhavin ka Chand*, *Saheb Bibi aur Ghulam* and *Kagaz ke Phool* - all of which were screened in Bengaluru.

BIFFES had an array of prizes, with a concentration in the Kannada competition section. *Naanu Kusuma* (Dir: Krishnegowda) won the Best Film Award. This was followed by the Second Best and the Third Best Films, two Special Jury Mentions, plus the Karnataka Chalanachitra Academy Special Mention.

Two films shared the Best Film Award in the Asian Competition – *Before, Now & Then* (Dir: Kamila Andini, Indonesia) and *Motherless* (Dir: Seyyed Morteza, Iran). There followed awards for the Second Best and the Third Best Films as well as a Special Jury Mention.

As for the Indian category, the winner was the Kannada film *Koli Esru* (Chicken Curry, Dir:

Champa Shetty). Based on a book, *Hucccheri Koli Esru* by K T Chikkana, the film tells the story of a determined and hardworking woman who endures the slurs of her perennially sloshed husband and the slights of her mother-in-law to finally throw off the family yoke and make her own way in life with her young daughter. And then, of course, there were the Second and Third Best Films too.

As for the FIPRESCI Prize, the three-member jury (Sadiah Khalid Reeti from Bangladesh, Manuel Halpern from Portugal and Latika Padgaonkar from India) unanimously awarded it to Anik Dutta for his film *Aparajito*. Dutta’s film, modelled on and inspired by real people and events but with fictional characters, is in fact about the making of Satyajit Ray’s *Pather Panchali*. But several narratives are blended together in this multi-layered work. These various layers emanate from an interview that Ray had actually given to All India Radio following the success of *Pather Panchali* in Cannes and New York, where he recalled the making of the film. Dutta reimagines this, then cuts to those bygone years – Ray’s work in an ad agency, his trip to London, his reading of the Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay’s novel and being enthralled by it. The film moves back and forth from the interview to Ray’s resolve to make a film based on it, to his wife’s immense support, to how he actually does it: script and dialogue-writing, storyboarding, search for locations, for actors and a technical team and finally putting all this together with ordinary equipment and amateur characters. The FIPRESCI jury stated that Anik Dutta had “captivated his audiences...with his homage to Satyajit Ray. The film is beautifully structured around a single interview and visualises the hurdles the maestro went through when filming his magnum opus...” *Aparajito* was recognised for the “mastery of the craft of story-telling through well-rounded characters, bringing to life a piece of history that will forever be a source of pride for Bengali and Indian cinema.”

Latika Padgaonkar is a Member of FIPRESCI-India. She served the FIPRESCI Jury in 14th Bengaluru International Film Festival (20-23 March 2023).