Interview
Narendra Bandabe

In conversation with Director Devashish Makhija on *Joram*

Joram (2023), directed by Devashish Makhija, has garnered critical acclaim since its selection at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam (IFFR). Now a theatrical release, it recently secured two Filmfare Awards for Best Story and Critics Awards for Best Film. Narendra Bandabe speaks with Makhija about the film's development and socio-political context.

NB: Devashish, congratulations on your success, from IFFR to your theatrical release! My first question: what inspired you to create Joram, which explores themes of nationalism, Naxalism, and the human stories intertwined with them?

DM: This material has disturbed and preoccupied me for nearly two decades – even longer. I engage with these themes across various mediums, film being just one of them. For instance, I penned children's picture books on similar themes, with one released this year ("We Are the Dancing Forest," which received children's literature awards). Three years ago, I wrote a young adult novel, "Oonga," on this subject. My unreleased debut film, "*Oonga*" (2013), was ultimately adapted into a novel. Additionally, I've

created several short films on this topic, the latest being *"Cycle"* (2021), which also travelled the festival circuit. In essence, I've consistently explored this material, seeking elusive answers. The questions Joram raises are ones I've grappled with for a long time; "inspiration" might not be the most accurate term. These concerns have resided within me for so long that, given the opportunity to tell a story in any medium, form, or for any audience, I would always prioritize them. In fact, these thought-provoking stories have always been my priority.

NB: In your film, the protagonist Dasaru (Manoj Bajpayee), his family, and the entire Adivasi community residing in the jungle are essentially victims of "development." In the name of progress, we often create social problems. The concept of development holds different meanings for us versus the locals, especially those living in the jungle. So, how did you approach this sensitive subject? What research did you undertake?

DM: As I mentioned earlier, I've been engrossed in this material for a long time. It deeply concerns me. I've dedicated a significant portion of my life to reading about it and actively engaging with the issue for many years. My travels have taken me to various tribal areas across Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, South Odisha, and North Andhra. Being from Bengal, I've strived to understand the ground realities faced by these Adivasi communities personally.

I appreciate your word choice – they are indeed "victims of development." However, most people tend to shy away from using these words together. The "development" being touted isn't theirs; it's

simply us extracting resources from land they've inhabited for millennia. We pursue our own development and then force this concept onto them, claiming they should desire it because we desperately do. It's almost as if we're saying, "If you don't want it, we can't justify taking from you anymore."

These concerns are deeply ingrained in me. A significant portion of my life is dedicated to researching and engaging with these themes and subjects. However, I acknowledge that I'm not an Adivasi. Before anyone accuses me of appropriation, I readily admit it myself. This narrative isn't mine to tell. I borrow it and strive to do so with utmost humility, recognizing that I'll inevitably make mistakes. Even if I dedicate my entire life to this, I can never truly achieve the insider's perspective. I'll always be an outsider.

All I can do is attempt to bridge the gap between myself and the insider's lens. So, I wouldn't say I "researched" it; it's always been integral to my pursuits. This specific story was actually written in 2014. Manoj read it in 2016, and we've been searching for producers ever since. Finally, Z Studio came on board in 2021. Stories like this rarely find easy backing, and this one's journey itself has spanned eight years.

NB: That's insightful. Your film portrays the complexities of development within the Adivasi community itself, with some segments favouring it and others desiring their traditional way of life. During your research and discussions with locals in the states you mentioned, how did they connect to these narratives? How do you reconcile contrasting experiences like launching rockets to the moon while people struggle for daily meals?

DM: While *"Joram"* travelled to various festivals this year, many critics lauded its complexity. Even ordinary viewers find it challenging to arrive at definitive answers. Imagine the immense difficulty within the affected communities themselves! This dialogue, debate, and conflict create a vast spectrum where individuals must find their place.
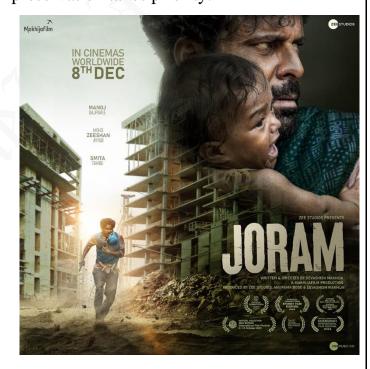
For a moment, put yourself in the shoes of an Adivasi living in a village for generations. Suddenly, someone demands your land, claiming it's rich in minerals. You've heard stories of entire villages refusing, but the state emphasizes national development needs. What choice do you have? Resisting risks being labelled anti-state or sympathiser, forcing relocation. Others, recognizing the inevitable narrative, choose to sell for some survival and "development crumbs." This creates two factions: insiders fiercely protecting their land and pragmatists prioritizing survival within national development.

Remember, this is a simplified version of a complex reality. Compensation fairness, religious influences (missionaries, RSS, etc.), and historical displacement all contribute to this narrative. The conflict isn't solely driven by development; it's a multifaceted issue. As an outsider, witnessing this confusion within the group itself is overwhelming. After years of trying to understand, I realized my role is to pose questions, not provide answers. Each story I tell attempts to spark audience reflection and encourage them to find their own answers.

NB: The film opens in Mumbai, depicting Dasru and his family starting their day in a queue amidst a stark contrast. As landowners displaced from their village and jungle home, they now find themselves working on a construction site building houses for others. How did you manage to weave these complex and contrasting realities into the narrative?

DM: This irony of homeless migrants constructing homes in big cities has long haunted me. It became painfully evident during the pandemic when migrant workers, primarily construction labourers, were forced to walk back home. We accept their presence while they build our homes, but they become "collateral damage" the moment self-preservation takes priority.

Another underreported truth witnessed firsthand but lacking concrete data is the lack of proper identification and safety protocols on many construction sites. To save costs, safety measures are often neglected, leading to worker deaths every week or month. Workers are forced to stay within unfinished buildings due to Mumbai's lack of space and face additional dangers. Without electricity connections, some have tragically fallen

through open shafts at night. To avoid accountability, builders often employ workers without proper documentation.

In this context, Dasru's attempt to hide his identity becomes an opportunity. In a space where no one asks for identification, he can easily assume another one. This adds a layer of complexity to the theme of identity. As an Adivasi fighting for your identity against the state and corporations, you may be forced to abandon it entirely and work anonymously, building homes for others who wouldn't care about your true identity.

NB: Your film *"Joram"* employs non-linear storytelling. What inspires your use of this narrative technique? Do you believe the non-linear structure enhances the audience's experience?

DM: My previous films, *"Aai"* and *"Bhosale,"* were entirely linear, serving as character studies. With "Jaram," I aimed to move beyond that format. However, I wasn't sure if a linear structure would effectively raise the questions the film explores. It could have felt overly preachy because the film tackles various social and political issues. I wasn't seeking to present explicit philosophical inquiries, but rather take the audience on a thrilling and engaging journey. While I don't like using the word "entertained," I hope the film keeps viewers captivated. To achieve this, I needed to create a sense of anticipation throughout the story's unfolding, even for the protagonist who himself is unaware of what's happening. Therefore, the non-linear approach allowed me to address social and political concerns while simultaneously raising narrative questions, ultimately making the film more engaging than a straightforward sociopolitical piece.

NB: Your films, including *"Aai"* and *"Bhonsle,"* are known for their vital visual elements. How do you use visuals to complement or enhance your unconventional narrative structures? In "Joram," for example, when Manoj returns home and finds everything changed, the visuals powerfully convey this shift. Can you tell us about your process of translating these elements into visually impactful storytelling?

DM: Across all my films, including *"Aai"* and *"Bhonsle,"* I strive to prioritise visual and sonic cues to convey emotions. I consider sound even more crucial than visuals in achieving this. This approach stems from my desire to avoid alienating viewers with explicit social and political commentary. Life is already complex, and I don't want to burden audiences with uncomfortable questions they might prefer to avoid.

From *"Aai"* to *"Bhonsle"* and now *"Joram,"* I've continuously explored and hopefully improved my ability to express myself through sonic and visual elements. I prioritise creating an emotional journey through sound and imagery in all three films rather than relying on didactic dialogue.

While I deeply admire the works of Shyam Benegal and Govind Nihalani, their frequent use of dialogue, even in seemingly subtle moments like parties or academic settings, was something I consciously avoided. Their reliance on writers like Vijay Tendulkar, while powerful for theatrical productions where the actor is central, didn't translate well to cinema, where actors are just one element. Recognizing that we live in a different era, I made a deliberate effort to find

visual and sonic cues to convey my social and political messages. Dialogue is reserved solely for those crucial emotional moments within the characters' journey.

NB: Let's discuss Mohammad Zeeshan Ayyub Khan's character Ratnakar, a cop, and his wife Mukta (Rajshri Deshpande) and their video calls in the films. Also, the use of mobile phones as a tool and character in the film itself in Joram and your other movies.

DM - I used an archetype – a cop chasing someone accused of murder. As the journey unfolds, the cop Ratnakar realizes the truth isn't what he was told. He becomes the audience's eyes and ears. While you subverted this by not making him instrumental in saving the protagonist (reflecting reality), you added another layer. We don't see it explicitly, but Ratnakar is a Dalit cop, placing him at the bottom of the social hierarchy, even within the police system. This creates friction with his wife, Mukta (Rajsri Deshpande), who reminds him of his responsibilities beyond work. Their three phone calls subtly showcase this tension, revealing his struggle amidst expectations. He chases Dasru reluctantly, yet understands the feeling of being powerless at the bottom. This complexity opens him to understanding Dasru's situation and the tribal world. By the time he arrives there, he's no longer at the bottom; there's someone lower. These layers enrich Ratnakar's performance.

Now, about the use of mobile devices. This was present in your early short films, but it plays a crucial role in the narrative. It serves as a news source, reveals a silent battle between Ratnakar and Mukta, and becomes a character itself. I have used it in other films, but here's an interesting backstory: My feature films faced setbacks for nearly ten years. Even "Oonga" was made but never released. In 2013-14, frustrated with this pattern, I used the sudden popularity of short films as an opportunity. With limited resources, I made six short films back-to-back, using smartphones. I observed how people viewed the world through these phones, finding their subjective perspective intriguing. Unlike traditional, objective cameras, phones offer a first-person POV, challenging cinematic rules about breaking the fourth wall. You saw people seamlessly consuming content this way, realizing that cinema rules were evolving. I experimented with this technique in my first few short films, like "Bhoomi and "Cycle," facing initial resistance from DOPs who feared audiences wouldn't accept it. However, I was confident that audiences accustomed to phone viewing wouldn't be bothered. This became my experimental voice, incorporated into my feature films and series. In "Joram," I use it during Ratnakar and Muktai's conversations, aiming to subconsciously immerse the audience in their experience as a Dalit couple. I don't want a detached view; I want the audience to become a proxy, directly engaged with their struggles. It's an experiment to offer a first-person experience of their reality.

NB: That's fantastic! Thank you for sharing your insights into *"Joram."* The film has had a remarkable journey from theatres to OTT, and it is generating great buzz. Best of luck!

✍️ **Narendra Bandabe is a Member of FIPRESCI-India. He is based in Mumbai.**