

**Festival Report**

**Meghachandra Kongbam**

**Mumbai International Film Festival 2024**



The curtains closed on June 21 at the 18th Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF) 2024, South Asia's oldest and largest festival dedicated to documentary, short fiction, and animation films. The week-long event featured screenings, film market activities, and scholarly discussions, attracting avid cinephiles, particularly young delegates. Both opening and closing ceremonies were held at the 1109-seater Jamshed Bhabha Theatre of the National Centre for Performing Arts at Nariman Point, Mumbai.

The grand event was inaugurated on June 15 by Dr. L. Murugan, Union Minister of State for Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, alongside Sudhir Mungantiwar, Culture Minister, Government of Maharashtra.

Underlining MIFF's role in bringing together filmmakers from all over the world, Dr L. Murugan said documentary films play a vital role in showcasing unique abilities, emotions, and human bonds in a true and natural way. He also highlighted

the efforts made by the government to make India a content hub of the world.

At the opening ceremony, renowned award-winning wildlife filmmaker Shri Subbiah Nallamuthu was conferred this year's coveted V. Shantaram Lifetime Achievement Award. Dr. L. Murugan, Union Minister of State for Information & Broadcasting, along with Sudhir Mungantiwar, Culture Minister, Government of Maharashtra, presented the award. The prestigious Dr V Shantaram Lifetime Achievement Award is presented in every edition of MIFF to filmmakers for their seminal contribution to documentary films and their movement in India. The award carries a cash prize of Rs 10 lakhs, a trophy and a citation. This award is instituted in memory of legendary filmmaker V Shantaram, who was closely associated with the Films Division as an Honorary Chief Producer during the 1950s. Shri Subbiah Nallamuthu dedicated the award to his parents and family, who supported him throughout his filmmaking journey.



Established in 1990 (originally as the Bombay International Film Festival), MIFF has evolved into a dynamic platform highlighting outstanding works from Indian and international filmmakers. Held biennially under the auspices of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, and administered by the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), MIFF honours the most exceptional documentaries, short films, and

animations with prestigious awards, such as the Golden Conch and Silver Conch, along with trophies and cash prizes.

Recognising the significance of the FIPRESCI Prize, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, has reintroduced this prestigious award starting from the 18th edition of the festival. The FIPRESCI International Jury, comprising three members, namely Meghachandra Kongbam from India, Axel Timo Purr from Germany and Alexandra Porshneva from Kazakhstan, was tasked with selecting the Best Indian Documentary from the National Competition section. In addition to the customary citation, the Ministry also presented the FIPRESCI prize winner with a trophy and a cash prize of 100,000 INR, acknowledging its exceptional contribution to fostering global film culture and cinematic art. We extend heartfelt gratitude to the Ministry for honouring FIPRESCI's efforts to promote cinema worldwide.

### MIFF 2024 in a nutshell

This edition of MIFF proudly showcased 314 films from 59 countries, presented in 61 languages. The festival featured an impressive lineup, including 8 world premieres, 5 international premieres, 18 Asia premieres, and 21 India premieres, highlighting filmmakers' global appeal and unique storytelling prowess worldwide.

In addition to the festival's main venue at the Films Division-NFDC Complex, Peddar Road in Mumbai, for the first time, this edition of MIFF spread its wings to other cities like Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai and Pune with parallel screening. This innovative move is driven by NFDC's commitment to making high-quality documentary filmmaking more accessible to a wider Indian audience.

A significant highlight of MIFF 2024 was the introduction of the Documentary Film Bazaar, a groundbreaking initiative that offered filmmakers an exceptional platform to engage with buyers, sponsors, and collaborators. This innovative event attracted nearly 200 projects from 10 countries, spanning 27 languages, fostering a vibrant exchange of ideas and opportunities.

Festival attendees were also treated to masterclasses by renowned filmmakers such as Alphonse Roy, Nemil Shah, Shaji N. Karun, Audrius Stonys, Santhosh Sivan, and Subbiah Nallamuthu. These sessions provided invaluable insights into the art of filmmaking, enriching the knowledge and skills of aspiring and established filmmakers alike.

Panel discussions at MIFF 2024 delved into contemporary and innovative topics related to documentary, short fiction, and animation filmmaking. Delegates explored new facets of filmmaking, promotion, and distribution, broadening their understanding of the industry's evolving landscape.

Additionally, a workshop on Animation and the VFX pipeline, led by a senior animator from Warner Brothers, captivated participants with its in-depth exploration of cutting-edge techniques.

The Open Forums, organised by the Indian Documentary Producers Association, sparked engaging and heated discussions on pertinent issues such as documentary funding, artificial intelligence, OTT platforms, and filmmaking in the era of social media. These forums provided a dynamic space for professionals to debate and share insights on the industry's challenges and opportunities today.

Special showcases included packages on Oscar and Berlinale films, animations, student films from prestigious institutes, and restored classics from NFDC-National Film Archives of India.

Additionally, 'Special Country Focus Packages' were presented in collaboration with seven nations: Russia, Japan, Belarus, Italy, Iran, Vietnam, and Mali.

The festival also provided a dedicated platform for student filmmakers from diverse film schools across India. It featured a selection of NFDC home productions and a special student film package from Konrad Wolf Film University of Babelsberg, Germany. Over 40 short films were showcased to delight film aficionados and enthusiasts alike.

The festival kicked off with the Indian premiere of National Geographic's documentary *Billy and Molly: An Otter Love Story*, which enchantingly captivated the audience with its heartfelt narrative. In the midst of the festival,

Daniela Volker's "Commandant's Shadow," offering a fresh perspective on the Holocaust, garnered critical acclaim during its screening.

Drawing a record-breaking attendance of 12,000 delegates, the grand event concluded on a resounding high.

During the closing ceremony, *6-A, Akash Ganga*, directed by Nirmal Chander Dandriyal, was honoured as the best Indian documentary, while the top international award went to *The Golden Thread*, directed by Nishtha Jain. The FIPRESCI prize was awarded to Sreemoyee Singh for her documentary *And, Towards Happy Alley*.

As a juror, I gained invaluable experience delving into a wide array of topics such as child abuse, child trafficking, wildlife conservation, cultural heritage, adventure, challenges faced by the physically challenged, human rights, biographical sketches of eminent personalities, blind faith, and natural calamities. I was captivated by the compelling narratives presented in all 30 documentaries competing in the national competition, each offering a unique perspective from diverse regions of the country, rich in culture and language diversity.

In her debut documentary *And, Towards Happy Alley*, Sreemoyee Singh fearlessly captures the daily struggles of Iranian women within their own country while exploring Iran's vibrant film culture and the feminist poetry of Forough Farrokhzad. The poignant verse of Farrokhzad—"I speak out the depth of night, out of the depth of darkness I speak. If you come to my house, friend! Bring me a lamp and a window to look at the crowd in the happy alley." This illuminates the screen as the young filmmaker endeavours to shed light on the bustling life within the happy alley. The citation says, "This is a unique film by a young filmmaker who has crossed cultural, linguistic and political boundaries to show, without anger but with passion, how to survive as an artist in a country ruled by harsh regulations. It shows an Iran usually hidden from Western eyes, the complex daily lives of filmmakers and women, and how they manoeuvre through the existing depths of darkness. She transforms the film into exactly what the Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad wrote: "Bring me a lamp

and a window through which I can see the crowd in the happy alley”.

Miriam Chandy Menacherry's *From the Shadows* vividly depicts the plight of child sex trafficking survivors in India, a profoundly complex and unresolved issue. Social activist Leena Kejriwal adds her voice through a poignant campaign where she spray paints black silhouettes of girls on walls, marked with the hashtag #MissingGirls. This artistic protest serves as a powerful call to action, aiming to bring attention and resolve the pressing issue.

Nirmal Chander's *6-A Akash Ganga* delves into the life of a legendary but intensely private figure in 20th-century Hindustani classical music: Annapurna Devi, a renowned *Surbahar* player. Daughter and disciple of Sarod maestro Ustad Allaiddin Khan and sister to Sarod virtuoso Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, she was also the first wife of Pandit Ravi Shankar, with whom she had a son, Shubhendra Shankar, a noted artist and Sitar player.

The documentary's title, '6-A Akash Ganga,' refers to the Mumbai home where Annapurna Devi resided. In the mid-1950s, she solemnly vowed to cease public performances to preserve her marriage to Ravi Shankar, who struggled with her growing acclaim. Through the intimate insights of her disciple, Nityanand Haldipur, the film poignantly unravels the myths surrounding her life, weaving a deeply touching narrative.

In his directorial debut documentary *Life in Loom*, Edmond Ranson showcases the rich tapestry of Indian handloom traditions with meticulous detail. Serving as cinematographer and editor as well, Ranson explores diverse cultural threads across India:

from the intricate *Patan Patola* of Gujarat in the west to the bark cloth fabrics of the *Bonda* tribes in Odisha's coastal regions, from the iconic *Banaras sarees* of Varanasi in central India to the luxurious Pashmina of Ladakh's nomadic *Changpa* tribes in the Himalayas; and from the fine muslin fabrics of West Bengal in the east, to the silk fabrics of Assam in the northeast, and the elegant *Kanchipuram sarees* of Tamil Nadu in the south.

Spanning 100 minutes, this finely crafted film traces the historical significance of textiles in human civilisation and charts the evolution and challenges of the Indian handloom industry. Through its storytelling, *Life in Loom* seeks to inspire and instil hope among handloom weavers, navigating an industry increasingly dominated by mechanised looms.

These few remarkable films captivated me from among those in the competition.

During the closing ceremony, the Festival Director and Managing Director of the NFDC, Pritul Kumar, expressed his satisfaction with the enthusiastic response to this year's MIFF. "The exceptional turnout reflects a dedicated audience's increasing interest in documentaries, shorts, and animation. The success of MIFF can be credited to its strong programming, which sets new benchmarks for future editions."

MIFF 2024 has once again affirmed its status as a premier platform for global cinematic exchange, fostering creativity, collaboration, and the celebration of diverse storytelling traditions from around the world.

**Meghachandra Kongbam is a member of FIPRESCI-India.**