

Tribute

Latika Padgaonkar

Aruna Vasudev



Her avatars were many, her passion singular. Critic, author, editor, painter, sculptor, maker of documentaries, Trustee and member of numerous panels, committees and advisory boards, Aruna Vasudev was, above all, a torch-bearer of Asian cinema. Founder-editor of *Cinemaya: The Asian Film Quarterly* and founder of Cinefan, The Festival of Asian Cinema, Aruna had a zest for life and friends and an appetite for the arts, literature and travel. She has been showered with numerous national and international awards throughout this trajectory. That she could pack so much into every day and still make ample room for friends, spare time for her family, remain a bon vivant, be a gracious and generous hostess, keep an open house and mentor and nourish young minds – all these were special attributes that

added rich hues to her years even as they touched the lives of those who were by her side in her journey.

Whatever Aruna did, she did with conviction and smiling self-confidence. Once possessed of an idea, she didn't let go. That is how her pet projects – the Asian Cinema magazine, the Asian Film Festival and the Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema (NETPAC) were born. Invariably, the idea came first; it was supreme. The rest – funds, publication, distribution, etc – would come later. Aruna's persuasive powers, her ability to helm projects, her never-say-die attitude, and, happily for all of us, the 'right' moment saw the birth in 1988 of what was to be the first magazine devoted entirely to Asian cinema.

Perhaps the most enjoyable part (for us, her colleagues) of putting all this together was the sense

of fun and laughter behind which lay the seriousness of intent. The work environment was discovery, surprises and occasional bewilderment before languages and cultures we did not understand as we initially grappled with the magazine's content. Still, invariably, we worked in an atmosphere of conviviality and sharing.

The aim of *Cinemaya: The Asian Film Quarterly* (launched in 1988), of which Aruna was the founder-editor, was to make Asian cinema known internationally at a time when only a few Asian directors were familiar names in the world – and even, ironically, Asian - film circles. But it was a moment when Asian cinema was on the rise, needing only a platform to boost it. This is where Aruna stepped in – big in ambition but modest in means (or, as Dileep Padgaonkar would jokingly say, “it had Madison Avenue ambitions but worked on an Oxfam budget!”). *Cinemaya* examined the general trends and the specific issues in nearly every Asian country. To be sure, Western film scholars had written about the cinemas of Japan, China, and India, among others, and *Cinemaya* did turn to them occasionally. However, to be as authentic as possible, the magazine invited film historians and critics from those Asian countries to contribute. The year 1989 was a landmark one. At the Locarno Film Festival, all three major awards were won, for the first time, by Asia: Bae Yong-kyun’s *Why has Bodhi Dharma Left for the East* (Golden Leopard); Shaji N Karun’s *The Birth* (Silver Leopard) and Abbas Kiarostami’s *Where is my Friend’s Home?* Aruna was a member of that jury.

Way before Cinefan was launched in 1999, Aruna’s idea was to present new Indian films, offer packages on special themes and countries, and organise film appreciation courses. In 1989, UNESCO asked *Cinemaya* to hold a conference on Asian cinema, and it was out of this conference (1990) that NETPAC was born. *Cinemaya* became its official journal, and Aruna became its Founder and President.

Today, NETPAC International is a mature 33-year-old network with a sturdy record. For over 20 years – through Aruna’s energies - a NETPAC Award for the Best Asian Film has been presented at 30 festivals worldwide, while the annual APSA-

NETPAC Development Prize is given away by APSA (Asia Pacific Screen Awards) in Brisbane every year to an emerging Asian talent. Books on Asian cinema have been published and co-published, at least six conferences on Asian cinema have been held, and special packages of Asian films for international festivals have been created. We also have the Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival, which was launched in Jogjakarta in 2007. Then, there is Asiapacificfilms.com, a digital film library that streams artistic and culturally essential films from this region.

In 2002, *Being and Becoming: The Cinemas of Asia* (edited by Aruna Vasudev, Rashmi Doraiswamy and Latika Padgaonkar) became the first book to offer a comprehensive overview of the history and aesthetics of around 30 Asian countries. NETPAC was involved in the publication of *Kenji Mizoguchi and the Art of Japanese Cinema* by Tadao Sato (translated by Brij Tankha and edited by Aruna Vasudev and Latika Padgaonkar), the first book in English that gives the reader an insider’s view into the oeuvre of this great master. And then came *Asian Film Journeys: Selections from Cinemaya* (edited by Rashmi Doraiswamy and Latika Padgaonkar), a collection of pioneering articles that *Cinemaya* had published before it went over to Osian and eventually ceased publication. Aruna piloted all these projects.

And there is her work for FIPRESCI, whose India chapter was founded by Chidananda Das Gupta (President) and Aruna Vasudev (Vice President) in 1992. The chapter has broadened its activities to include awards for Indian films, film appreciation courses, festivals, and lectures. It conferred the first Satyajit Ray Memorial Award for Outstanding Contribution to Writing on Cinema on Aruna in 2021

And they were possible thanks to her one major strength: an ability to make friends easily and stay in regular touch well before the days of the Internet. Normal friendships proved to be enormous assets, not just in themselves but equally when contributions to the magazine and the book were needed, or guests and films had to be invited to the festival. It is tough to decline what a determined Aruna offered – or required.

Cinemaya might have taken up much of her day, but Aruna always had time to write and edit. At least half of the 13 books she edited or co-edited and one which she translated from French into English (Jean-Claude Carriere's *A la recherche du Mahabharata – In Search of the Mahabharata: Notes of Travels in India with Peter Brook 1982-1985*) were done side by side with her work on the magazine. This, quite apart from the many lengthy essays she penned on cinema for books and publications in India and abroad, from her extensive jury work at national and international film festivals, and from the time spent as a member of prestigious national cinema and television bodies.

A PhD from the University of Paris II, Aruna's thesis on "The Legal, Political and Sociological Aspects of Censorship in Indian Cinema" was published as a book, *Liberty and Licence in the Indian Cinema* 1979. She also authored *The New Indian Cinema* (1987), *The Role of the Cinema in Promoting Popular Participation in Cultural Life in India* (a study for UNESCO, Paris, 1981) and *Communicating with the Masses - A Delphi Study in Multi-Media Choices, 2000 AD* (an 80-page study for the Futurology Panel of the Department of Science & Technology, Government of India, 1981).

For a year in the 1960s, Aruna was a student at IDHEC (Institute of Higher Cinema Studies) in Paris. She went on to work as an apprentice assistant to two distinguished French directors - Alain Resnais for *Muriel* and Claude Chabrol for *Les Plus Belles Escroqueries du Monde*, before moving to New York where, in the United Nations Department of Public Information, she served as Programme Assistant, researcher and film editor on the UN television series, "International Zone". Back in Paris, she edited short films and television programmes for French TV at Antegor, an editing studio, and Madeleine Films, a production company.

As a director and producer of documentaries, she has some 20 films to her credit. These were made between 1967 and 1979 for Swedish Television, the Canadian International Development Agency,

Belgian Television, War on Want, London, and in India for the Films Division and Doordarshan.

On her return to India in the early 70s, her field enlarged considerably. She lectured on cinema at the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, Jamia Millia Islamia's Mass Communication Centre, Sophia College (Mumbai), and the Film Appreciation courses held at the National Film Archive of India in Pune. As Joint Director of Communication at the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), she co-produced (and directed the last episode of) a 13-part series entitled "Viraasat" for national television on the natural environment, conservation and heritage issues.

In 2016, with filmmaker couple Pramod & Neelima Mathur, she set up Utsah Toli, a Community Cultural Centre for children in the mountain village of Naukuchiatal in Uttarakhand. It was designed to give young people in the mountain areas a place to meet, learn and give expression to their creative talents.

The indefatigable Aruna had no time to retire. In 2017, she – with Teamwork Art - launched another annual event in New Delhi that brought her a sense of fulfilment: "The Inner Path: A Festival of Buddhist Films, Art & Philosophy".

It was a most rewarding lifetime course that Aruna carved for herself, at whose heart lay the vision of taking Asian cinema to the world. When she first encountered Asian films, she felt (in her words) she was "looking through the keyhole of a closed door, getting tantalising glimpses of untold wealth. I felt I had to open that door and see, feel, and touch those treasures." And she did—both the treasures and their makers. We, the viewers, were introduced to directors beyond Kurosawa, Kiarostami, and Satyajit Ray.

As she grew older, though, Aruna gradually turned inwards. She enjoyed withdrawing into herself, paintbrush in hand, and she painted steadily fine, delicate Japanese brushstrokes, startlingly lovely pictures of leaves and trees and mists and hills, where she found peace.

You have found your eternal peace now, Aruna. We will forever remember you.