

Article

Elena Rubashevskaja

Indian Entries at the Golden Globes: Voices of Genders



The Golden Globes is a prestigious annual award celebrating “excellence in film and television.” Held since 1944, it brings the best worldwide productions to a selected group of international journalists, culminating in the earliest film award ceremony broadcast to 167 countries worldwide. It generally ranks as the third most-watched awards show each year, behind only the Oscars and the Grammy Awards. In 2022, several FIPRESCI members were invited to join the voting body to bring diversity to the decision-making process.

For three years now, I have been honoured to serve on the film category's voting committee. The Foreign Language Film subcategory always draws special attention, as it provides the opportunity to discover films that often don't get released in European countries and are sometimes even showcased at the festival circuit. Among movies presented in this subcategory, Indian

entries always stand out: vivid, diverse, and full of creative vigour.

In 2024, six Indian films were submitted for the Golden Globes voters' consideration. They were:

- *Aattam* (The Play) by Anand Ekarshi
- *All We Imagine Is Light* by Payal Kapadia
- *Lost Ladies* by Kiran Rao
- *Girls Will Be Girls* by Shuchi Talati
- *Santosh* by Sandhya Suri
- *Aadujeevitham* (The Goat Life) by Blessy

Despite the diversity of represented genres and topics, one unifying feature stood out: the ultimate dominance of gender-coloured perspectives. It was a female prism in five of six movies, while the last one reflected the male angle. This tendency was observant not only with Indian contestants: the whole array of Golden Globes films this year shouted out loud about the shifting gender paradigms of the societies worldwide, Africa to Asia, Latin America to the USA, EU

to post-Soviet countries. Both male and female directors mainly focused on women whose voices, perspectives, and gazes are still underrepresented in modern cinema. Though some are romantic and very moving, alas, most of them are tinted with tragedy. Those stories are statements of the oppressed and silenced, who finally raise their heads to speak up and bring equality for everyone.

One of the strongest films in that regard was, though not of Indian origin, having a key character played by an Indian actress. In the black feminist comedy *Wicked Little Letters* by Thea Sharrock, Anjana Vasan delivers an excellent performance as an adamant police officer, Gladys Moss, fighting for the unravelling truth during the historical period when the very fact of being a woman was enough for being accused. Officer Moss's stubborn attitude, not intimidated by the classic white male biases and threats, devotes herself to the cause of justice and succeeds, setting an inspiring example for women striving to make a career in traditionally male professions even in modern times. This motif intertwines interestingly and profoundly with one of the Indian contestants, *Santosh* by Sandhya Suri, establishing a dialogue not only between countries and cultures but throughout centuries, showing how much works we still have in front of us to reach absolute equality, be it in professional, social, or personal areas of life.

Let's have a closer look at Indian entries. These films kept the international film journalistic community up-to-date with the country's cinematic achievements, presenting a brief yet impressive overview of some of the most acclaimed productions of the past year.

Santosh by Sandhya Suri



Santosh is a story of a young widow who inherits her late husband's job as a police constable and has to investigate the case of a young girl's murder. In a society filled with injustice and indifference, she tries to find her place and be a catalyst for positive changes.

The most interesting character in *Santosh* is Geeta Sharma (Sunita Rajwar), an experienced female police officer who takes Santosh (Shahana Goswami) under her wing and guides them through the nuances of a tough, unpredictable, and psychologically challenging job. At first, Geeta seems to be exactly the role model that many young girls and women often lack: strong, confident, resolute, humorous and caring at the same time. Taking after her, Santosh transforms into a more knowledgeable and independent woman herself and evolves as a professional.

But as the story progresses, we observe how cruelty, considered necessary and unavoidable for the police officer's job and so organic for Geeta, springs its roots in Santosh. Her grief confuses her feelings and actions, yet unlike her older colleague imbued with cynicism and humbled by the system, she still can afford the benefit of the doubt. Her moral compass cannot meekly accept the reality, yet before she realises that, irreversible harm will be done.

Premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in the Un Certain Regard section, this film was also distinguished in the Director's Debut Competition at the Camerimage Film Festival of the Art of Cinematography.

***Aattam – The Play* by Anand Ekarshi**



The Play is a powerful Indian reincarnation of the acknowledged legal drama *12 Angry Men* (1957).

This film tells a complex, multilayered story, revealing the finest nuances of human psychology in a surprising, amusing, and tricking way. It plays with viewers' sympathies and opinions and provokes thoughts and analyses.

In the plot, twelve men and one woman are involved. They have known each other for many years, sharing the creative space where Anjali, the only female group member, practically grew up. Peace comes to an end when, one night, after a party, Anjali is groped by one of her colleagues. The investigation starts, and the unity of the collective is immediately challenged.

Though *The Play* is mainly spoken of as a feminist film, its primary virtue goes far beyond that. This story shows not only the threats and biases women face in modern society; it is also a prompt for delving deeper into various aspects of human relationships, both professional and personal. As the plot

unfolds, viewers can challenge themselves with uncomfortable questions. "Would I stay objective if someone dear to me ended up in a tricky situation?"; "Would I give up on ethical choice if offered a career opportunity I've always dreamt of?"; "If I got the chance to remove the competitor by being dishonest or simply silent, would I take it?" - these are a few questions we address while watching this film.

If any drawbacks could be pointed out in *The Play*, then maybe for those not speaking Malayalam, it would be the density and pace of the dialogues: of course, the very nature of the story suggests it, yet by the end of the second hour, following the emotionally saturated speeches could be a bit overwhelming.

Also, the very last scene of the film, *The Play*, is perceived as an overstatement. Even without it, the plot is holistic and delivers a message that doesn't need that vocal of an exclamation point at the end. However, these remarks do not diminish the value of the film for women and men, suggesting we revise our moral guidelines and ethics in daily life.

***All We Imagine is Light* by Payal Kapadia**



The winner of the Grand Prix at Cannes 2024, this reserved and intimate movie was

the first film from India to compete for the Palme d'Or since 1994. The high prize was followed by many others, including a few for Best Screenplay and Best Cinematography.

The story follows the nurses' routines in Mumbai. Each is different and has its challenges and responses to obstacles. They survive in the big city the best way they can, united by gentle female solidarity.

The cinematography by Ranabir Das creates a very introverted, secluded space into which we delve to savour the characters' seemingly simple yet profoundly human storylines. One more distinguished character in the film is undoubtedly the city itself: Mumbai is captured in a dreamy, romantic manner, with its bustle and rush being softened by the director's observant vision and relation of the perception of the city by the characters.

Despite gaining international acclaim, *All We Imagine is Light* wasn't selected as an Indian submission for the Academy Awards. The Film Federation of India's president stated that the selection committee felt "that they were watching a European film taking place in India, not an Indian film taking place in India". Director Kapadia was critical of the Indian committee as it was entirely male. Yet I must agree with the statement as it was my first intuitive perception of the delivery of the film. I thought it was similar to European dramas: centred on the individual, not hasty, keen on small details, profoundly personal and ever preferring subjective perspectives. Perhaps that is why it spoke so directly to the European audience and won its heart.

Sometimes, we cannot wholly eliminate clichés, and maybe *All We Imagine is Light* would not be the film I associate India

with as a first choice. But that's what is precious: one more perspective, a different angle, and, without a doubt, a distinctive director's style.

***Lapataa Ladies* by Kiran Rao**



Instead of *All We Imagine is Light*, this film was selected as the Indian entry for the Best International Feature Film category at the 97th Academy Awards, and it accurately delivers the spirit that an average viewer would expect from an Indian film.

This mixed-up comedy is lively and bright, has an array of diverse characters, a somewhat naive yet moving love story, and, last but not least, an empowering message. Though two newlywed couples and their families are involved in the plot, the focus remains mainly on the brides. Through the commotion and chaos, they finally take their chance of discovering their true self, becoming independent, and following their respective vocations.

To quote Shubhra Gupta's review, "Kiran Rao's film is unapologetically message-y, but its strongly beating feminist heart overrides the broad brush strokes. Sometimes things need to be stated loud and clear."

Perhaps it is valid for a wide audience, and such films are bound to warm hearts, make people laugh, and sympathise with

relatable characters, disregarding their nationality and cultural features. They are simple people with simple lives, not too ambitious but kind-hearted and honest. A bit more active pace could have complimented this story, as it thrives on accessibility.

Various voices can deliver feminist messages, and *Lost Ladies* is an endearing example of how it can be presented in the comedy genre.

***Girls Will Be Girls* by Shuchi Talati**

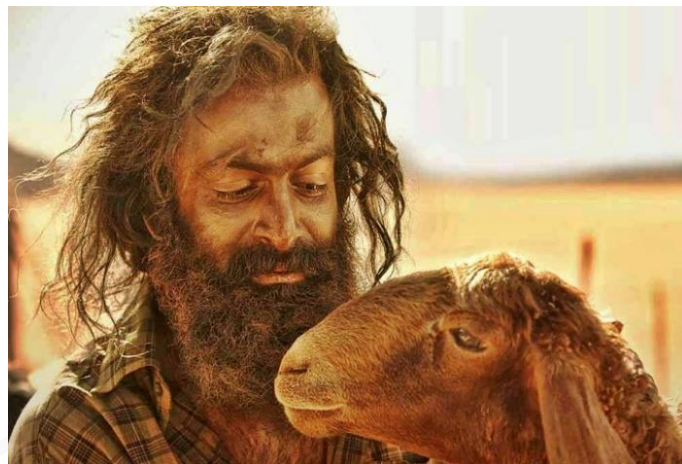


The boarding school at the Himalayas foothills unfolds a coming-of-age story of Mira (Preeti Panigrahi), a diligent student who discovers her femininity when a new charming boy joins her class. With her overprotective mother being ever-present in every aspect of the daughter's life, Mira must make an arduous journey towards self-growth, confidence, and acceptance.

Talati's debut feature, this sensual movie, was produced by a majority female crew to create a safe space where "girls could be girls." The festivals that it was shown at (among others, Sundance, Göteborg IFF, Karlovy Vary IFF, and Busan IFF) encompass many regions of the world, proving that the director managed to create a universal story that moved the hearts of girls in America, Europe, and Asia alike.

It is incredibly precious that Talati tackles the perception of two ages within one story, simultaneously narrating the storylines of both the daughter and the mother. The film also balances unique local details with universally understandable situations common to all teenagers.

***Aadujeevitham - The Goat Life* by Blessy**



The last Indian film presented for the Golden Globes voters' consideration was significantly different from the rest, not only in genre (survival drama) but the main character in focus. Unlike the other films, *The Goat Life* follows the man's fate. He is an Indian immigrant who sets out for the Middle East, hoping for a decent job and sufficient money to support his freshly established marriage. However, the brutal reality differs from the perfect picture he painted in his dreams, and he ends up as an enslaved person to a cruel Arab. To get free, he has to run through the treacherous, unforgiving desert, where chances of survival are nearly impossible.

Labour rights are a poignant topic that often stays underrepresented but for the thematic film festivals. Perhaps it's too unpleasant to be reminded of the fact that next to luxurious resorts, side by side with big city

entertainment, and in the middle of the most developed societies, there is still a violation of human rights going on, overlooked and unhindered by the authorities, functioning as an organised crime that contributes to the wellbeing of the developed societies involved. It is much easier to turn a blind eye to it, and that's why it's a challenging task for a director to talk on such a topic: to make it a starting point for a discussion rather than a manifest to point fingers, to show the complexity of economic, political, social causes and consequences rather than go into the direction of melodramatic victimisation.

The Goat Life rather chooses the second option. The film starts almost lyrically, showing us the past life of Najeeb (Prithviraj Sukumaran) back in India. Abundant nature, hard yet honest labour shoulder to shoulder with fellow villagers, and simple yet happy family life. However, as the village is full of talks about the Middle East and its opportunities, Najeeb starts considering a venture to this Eldorado of our age, a fabulous land to gain fortune and ensure financial well-being once and for all.

Many of the workers coming to the Middle East don't even speak the language, neither English nor Arabic. Unaware of the customs and laws of the countries they go to, they often fall into the trap of unfair schemes. Those schemes are also implemented with the participation of fellow countrymen who earn tremendous fees on gullible slaves-to-be, promising to arrange visas and work contracts and then vanishing into thin air.

Everyone who has ever travelled to the Middle East can guess how the story will turn. On one of my first journeys there, I couldn't help but have the following first impression:

while the customs officer courteously welcomed me, the group of Asian female workers were rudely herded to the side with batons and yelled at. Did they come willingly? Were they given a choice? What future awaited them? Those are the questions I ask myself to this day, and the movie vividly stirred the memory, as Najeeb is subjected to the fell attitude from the very arrival.

The film's exposition works well and gives us plenty of insights and threads to ruminate on. However, from the moment Najeeb is kidnapped by the kafil [Arabic Sponsor], as he addresses him, the whole story turns strictly black and white. The protagonist is exposed to a strange, exotic, and cruel existence on a farm lost in the endless desert. His documents are destroyed, and an inhuman attitude and exhausting labour soon challenge his dignity. And though we could perfectly believe plenty of workers end up in such a situation, the scenes of *The Goat Life* are repetitive in leading us through the reality the protagonist is experiencing.

Many a time, he would beg his new master to pity him; many a time, the Arab would react in the same way, yelling, beating, and humiliating his slave. There is not much development in the worker and none in the master. What would be interesting to follow is the emotional path of the kidnapped person, from denial to anger and then acceptance, yet we, as viewers, are deprived of it. The main focal point, the fight of the human spirit against the violation of human rights, gets overshadowed by the constant emphasis on the sheer blatant cruelty of the oppressor and the meek innocence of the victim.

This one-sided approach, unfortunately, leaves no chance for

discussion. As it is, it's hard to imagine having the film screened in the Middle East (in fact, both the movie and the book it's based on are still banned in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia). And though in India its release was successful, it would be interesting to have this meaningful story more sophisticated and less one-sided, thus helping to invite the other side for a sincere talk and maybe even starting to mend the harm.

Afterthoughts

To sum up the impressions of this year's India representation in the Golden Globes, both male and female directors preferred to work with less usual and more controversial characters. Those characters are far from perfect; they are not classical "heroes" in the old-school understanding of this word. They can be weak and make mistakes. They explore the world and their reactions to it. They are often lost and in doubt.

Most of the leading characters are women. Men are often absent or act as supporting figures to better reflect the female gaze. Women are not shown as strong but enduring and persistent, growing their hidden powers as they develop in the face of obstacles.

Most of the films can be called "introverted". They deal with deeply personal, often intimate matters, feelings, and perceptions, with characters not aiming to transcend and fix society but instead trying to keep balance in the individual, everyday fragile existence. It leaves a simple yet profound aftertaste: if each one of us knows our true self and manages to build peace within our minds and souls, and if we grant each other a bit more kindness and understanding than we usually do, maybe, after all, we could make this world a better place.

Elena Rubashevska is a Film critic, FIPRESCI Vice President and Editor-in-Chief. Member of the Golden Globes voting committee and The Critics Award for Arab Films Commission. Author of a book about Ukrainian Poetic Cinema.