

AIFF: Festival Review

Latika Padgaonkar

Ajanta-Ellora International Film Festival



Latika Padgaonkar at the 10th Ajanta-Ellora International Film Festival, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, 15-19 January 2025

Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar in Maharashtra's Marathwada region may be modest in appearance but is aspirational in spirit. It boasts numerous colleges and universities, including MGM, one of the festival's organisers, along with the Marathwada Art, Culture, and Film Foundation, the Yashwantrao Chavan Centre, and the Nath Group. However, the town's ambitions extend beyond education. They are cultural,

too. And AIFF is a testament to the widening of this cultural sensibility. Aptly named the Ajanta-Ellora International Film Festival, the historic caves nearby lend the festival a distinct, alluring twist and a meaningful historical weight.

In its tenth year, from January 15 to 19, 2025, AIFF demonstrated that it has the will and the means to bring cinema to Maharashtra's hinterland. The films

themselves (features, documentaries, documentaries, and shorts) may not have been numerous (around sixty). Still, a zest for the festival was evident: panel discussions, master classes, the Lifetime Achievement Award, restored classics, special screenings and tributes, and Finland as the country in focus.

I start with the Padmapani Lifetime Achievement Award. A beautiful title – Padmapani, the Lotus Bearer, embodies the Buddha of Compassion. It is this famous image, Padmapani, holding a lotus that can be seen in several of the Ajanta caves. This year's recipient was the well-known veteran filmmaker, playwright and writer Padma Bhushan Sai Paranjpye, whose artistic journey has continued into her late years. In her speech, she accepted the award with deference and added, smilingly – naughtily, in her usual tongue-in-cheek way - “albeit a bit late!” She joined a list of eminent personalities, including Arun Khopkar, Javed Akhtar, Sumitra Bhave, Amol Palekar, and Girish Kasaravalli, who have been honoured with the award since its inception. Two of Sai's films, *Disha* and *Saaz*, were screened to great applause and heartwarming reception.

A Prelude Event before the Opening Ceremony- and a real treat – was the screening of D. G. Phalke's silent, 105-year-old classic, *Kaliya Mardan*, accompanied by a live orchestra. The unstoppable antics of little Krishna and the humour of the story left the audience enchanted.

From the shores of the Jamuna (where *Kaliya Mardan* was set) to the streets of Paris, where the Opening Film *Little Jaffna* (directed by Lawrence Valin) was filmed, from the irrepressible Krishna and his group

of adoring friends to a Tamil community in the French capital involved in separatist activities and an undercover cop trying to infiltrate the gang, was a challenging yet stimulating mental trek for the audience.

The regular screenings, well-attended by enthusiastic spectators, began the next day, and the crowd did what Festival Director Sunil Sukhtankar, a well-known filmmaker in his own right, had hoped it would do. “Let the power and magic of cinema liberate us,” he had written in his message in the catalogue. The spectators were present in large numbers. They applauded, discussed, appreciated.

Tributes always add depth to a festival. This time, the names were correct: a biographical film on the legendary Raj Kapoor, the great “Showman of Indian Cinema” by Siddharth Kak (alas, no other RK film was screened); Acharya Atre - a popular writer, playwright, journalist, social reformer, intrepid orator, filmmaker and one of the most respected personalities in Maharashtra who died fifty-five years ago. His film *Shyamchi Aai*, which dwelt on the intimate bond between mother and son, was screened and won two national awards in 1954. His other movie, *Mahatma Phule* (which was not screened), concerned the distinguished activist Jyotiba Phule and his wife, Savitribai Phule, who battled against caste discrimination, oppression, illiteracy, and poverty in the 19th century. This film, too, had won national awards in 1955 and was scripted by none other than B.R. Ambedkar himself. And thirdly, the man of our times – Shyam Benegal, who left us a little over a month ago. In the attractively designed festival catalogue, director and scriptwriter Jayprad Desai pays a handsome tribute to Benegal. “If anyone, after

Nehru, has attempted a Discovery of India', it was Shyam Benegal." AIFF screened "*Manthan*," a film about the milk cooperative movement led by Verghese Kurien. Incidentally, a restored version was also screened at Cannes last year.

Master Classes were conducted by masters themselves: Tigmanshu Dhulia, director of *Paan Singh Tomar*, a multiple award-winning biopic on an army man who was also a sportsman and later became dacoit who fought against the system; Ashutosh Gowariker, AIFF's Honorary Chairperson, best known for three extraordinarily popular films – *Jodha Akbar*, *Swades* and *Lagaan* (in fact, *Lagaan* was among the only three films that were nominated in the Best Foreign Language Film category, the others being *Mother India* and *Salaam Bombay!*); award-winning actress Seema Biswas (who headed the Indian Competition Jury) best known for her powerful performance the dacoit Phoolan Devi in Shekhar Kapoor's *Bandit Queen* as well as for her role in Deepa Mehta's *Water* among innumerable others; Padma Shri Resoul Pookutty, the famous sound designer, sound mixer and sound editor who took home an Oscar for his sound mix in *Slumdog Millionaire* and who has done sound mix for countless films in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada and English. He has also made a film, *Otta*, his directorial debut, which was screened at AIFF. And then, yet another favourite, Farah Khan, the hugely popular, multi-talented director, writer, producer, actress, dancer and choreographer, has captivated audiences with films like *Main Hoon Na* and *Om Shanti Om*, which she directed.

A word about the seminar on Challenges of Indian Cinema Competing on Global Platforms organised by MGM's College of Journalism and Mass Communication on the University campus for us, the FIPRESCI jury members (G P Ramachandran, Siladitya Sen and myself). We place these 'challenges' within both historical and contemporary contexts, defining Indian cinema's trajectory from its early days, the great attraction it drew, and the reasons for its popularity in certain countries, as well as the forms and cinematic language that have evolved over the decades. The students listened keenly and asked pertinent and intelligent questions. The hour spent with them opened our eyes to the high level of understanding and information they had on the subject.

And one word yet again on the films we, the FIPRESCI jury, watched. These were the first or second films of directors, and frankly, the seventeen that were given to us were half a dozen too many for a four-day event. Most of the movies were Indian, many of which dealt with village life, poverty, social inequalities, exploitation, and their consequences. Following an intense discussion, the prize was eventually given to the first work of an Iranian director – Babak Khajepasha's *In the Arms of the Tree* (Dar Aqoosh e Derakht), a story of a family tangle between parents which threatens to destroy the lives of their two young boys. It was, as our Citation reads, a complex drama of fraught relationships that are on the verge of breaking down a family." The intimacy and compassion between the two brothers are portrayed in a remarkably human and realistic manner. Their bondage becomes a source of

solace in the troubled moments of the separation from their biological parents. The crisis addressed in the film is as universal as it is personal. The way the strands of the narrative are woven is subtle, suggestive, and even metaphorical.

The award ceremony was held in a not-too-large, cosy auditorium. In the Indian Competition section, Deepankar Prakash's *Shanti Niketan* walked away with the Golden Kailas for Best Film (his earlier film *Naanera* had won the same award here in 2023), as well as the Silver Kailas - Best Actor Award, presented to Neeraj Saidawat in the same film. There was a third prize for the film – Special Jury Mention (Actress) to Nanda Yadav.

Rima Das's *Village Rock Stars 2* (her earlier film, *Village Rock Stars*, had garnered several awards at home and abroad) took the Silver Kailas for Best Actress together with a Special Jury Mention for Nanda Yadav. At the same time, Subhadra Mahajan's *Second Chance* won the Best Script prize. The MGM

Short Film Competition was won by Janiv by Swapnil Sarode, while the Audience Choice Award was presented to *Savanna and the Mountain* by Portuguese director Paolo Carneiro.

Over the last ten years, AIFF has grown surely and steadily; in fact, it has come a long way, according to its Artistic Director, Chandrakant Kulkarni. "People from all walks of life – from entrepreneurs, businessmen and professionals to educational institutions and students have come together to support the festival." Adds Nandkishor Kagliwal, Chairman and Founder of AIFF: "I fervently hope that the Festival will become an inseparable part of the region's socio-cultural landscape."

A word of thanks to the gentle, supportive, and enthusiastic team of volunteers who helped us in big and small ways, making our stay easy and enjoyable. We all look forward to AIFF's growth. Padmapani will be with the organisers all the way.

Dr Latika Padgaonkar is a Member of FIPRESCI. She served as the Chairperson of FIPRESCI-India Jury in 10th Ajanta-Ellora International Film Festival (15-19 January 2025).