

Interview

Anna M.M. Vetticad

**“Sometimes, just telling a story is an act of resistance”
– Pradip Kurbah, Director**



Still from *The Elysian Field*

In a village in Meghalaya decades from now, only six inhabitants remain. The rest have left for greener urban pastures. This is the setting of Pradip Kurbah’s brilliant Khasi language film, *The Elysian Field*, that won the top prize, the Golden Saint George, and the Best Director trophy at the Moscow International Film Festival this April.

The multiple-award-winning director’s filmography includes *Onaatah: Of The Earth* that was also remade in Marathi – an uncommon achievement for a film from India’s North-east – and *Iewduh* (Market), which bagged the Kim Jiseok Award at the Busan International Film Festival 2019. In this interview with journalist-writer Anna M.M. Vetticad, Kurbah dives deep into the thinking behind his new film, and its socio-

political context. He also reveals an unexpected, unfortunate fallout of his victory in Moscow.

Q: *The Elysian Field* begins with a Christian hymn I’ve heard sung in church for decades, not in the original Latin, but as “Let us bow in adoration, to this sacrament so great.” Outside south India and the North-east, there’s little awareness in India about Christianity and Christian culture. So this song may not have a specific meaning for most Indians, beyond the beautiful music. Did you hope to achieve a particular effect on the audience by using it at the start?

A: Having choirs singing this hymn during loss or remembrance is a tradition. I wanted to set the mood of the region in which the film

is set, a place deeply rooted in Christianity. I also wanted to honour the culture here. When I open the window of my home, I see the church right across from where I stay. I hear these hymns.

The song is sung in Latin in the film. My team members said, ‘Why not subtitles?’ I said, ‘You don’t need subtitles for music. You just need to feel it.’ That’s why we recorded the singers on location. I said, ‘Just feel the space. We don’t need to go to a studio. Even if you go flat, it will work in favour of the film.’ Ultimately it did. It worked for me.

Q: The Elysian Field’s opening 10 minutes or so are devoted to the struggle to get a coffin to a person’s house. What point were you trying to convey with that?

A: The distance from the bus stop to the village was important. I wanted the audience to know what a struggle it is to reach the place. That automatically set the mood for them – they know the bus stop going to the city is very far.

Q: This is a political film, though not overtly so.

A: I never thought about it that way, but after we wrapped up, when the entire team watched it, my co-writer told me he feels it is subtly very political. My perspective is, let the audience decide. I haven’t made this film to make a statement. For me, it was just a story I really want to tell. It’s set in 2047. I want to make my people aware that they shouldn’t let this happen – don’t let urban migration take away your roots, your villages, your parents.



Pradip Kurbah

Q: Apart from urban migration, you also make a point about apathy. The character named Complete says he hasn’t voted for 10 years, Promise hasn’t voted for 20. They grumble because the system is now indifferent to them since their votes don’t count, but they’ve done nothing to influence the system.

A: I was sceptical about this scene while discussing it with the artistes, but Richard Kharpuri who plays Complete came up with a beautiful line. He said, “Change doesn’t come if we don’t say anything. 20 years of silence doesn’t make the world quieter – it makes the world more broken.”

Once upon a time, when Complete was the village headman, he never let outsiders come to the village. Now when they’re alone, he’s

also being blamed equally. He's told, 'Now you're talking about isolation and loneliness, but you were one of the persons stopping people from coming here.'

All this came from my experiences in the village of Laitduh where I shot the film. People in that village have come to a point where they are least bothered about elections, or anything for that matter. They don't care.



Q: The names of the characters in *The Elysian Field* took me back to my first visit to Shillong, when I met a man called Hilarious. If I hadn't ever come to Meghalaya, I'd have thought you were making up the names – Complete, Promise, Friday. But since I've been to Meghalaya, I know these are probably names of actual people.

A: (*He laughs*) All these names were picked from electoral rolls. Even this morning I met a person called Discovery. I asked him, "Who discovered you?" You won't believe some of the names. I met a woman from Jaintia Hills called Toilet. Her elder brother is Bucketful. A friend told me of a famous musician called C. Raji. C stands for Colgate.

At a funeral in West Khasi Hills I met a lady whose son is Gobinda. Why? Because when she was pregnant she fell in love with the Hindi film *Love 86*. I sometimes make fun of

my Mom. My grandma was Catholic, but my mother is called Marjina, because when my grandmother was pregnant, my grandpa saw a film, *Alibaba aur 40 Chor*, in which that was Hema Malini's character's name.

Q: But you will find Marjina and Gobinda in other states. I've also heard of Bose, Kennedy and Arafat in Kerala. You guess at the parents' political leanings from such names. Maybe a parent was pro-Palestine. But the other names from Meghalaya that you mentioned give tough competition to Shitto and Titty from Kerala.

A: I know brothers called Founder and Sounder from here. There's Morning Star. There's even an Adolf Hitler. And Latrine. Someone I know was trying to change his name. His Dad had called him Nirodh, as in, the condom. He didn't know what it meant till he saw ads.

Q: What does it tell us about the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills that they come up with such names? Is this their sense of humour on display?

A: It's mostly in villages. They get fascinated with words. If they see an interesting word in an advertisement, they pick that as a name for their child. And they're so happy about it.

Q: Getting back to *The Elysian Field*, how did this project develop?

A: The idea started from the character Lamare in *Market* – a dementia patient left behind by his children. Due to urban migration, children are moving out of villages, leaving parents

behind. What happens if just six people are left? There's isolation and solitude. But I felt, how about celebration in solitude? That's why in the film they drink, they dance, they're least bothered about what's happening around them. I didn't want to make a depressing film. I wanted to make a feel-good film.



Q: Barring Miss Helen and Complete, everyone in *The Elysian Field* is still young enough and strong enough to move to a city for work. They choose not to. How did it shift from the initial concept of parents left behind to this film about people *choosing* to stay behind?

A: Take Livingstone, Miss Helen's son. His children have left, but no matter what happened, he never left her. The inspiration for this character came from Laitduh. There's a man there who never got married and is still taking care of his ailing mother who's in her 90s. I brought that into the film – Livingstone keeps saying he wishes Miss Helen dies before him so that she doesn't suffer without him. There are young people like that in Laitduh. Whenever I asked why they don't move out, they replied: 'We can't. Our roots are here.' I wish almost everyone from that village was like that. So I wanted these characters to be an example for others.

Q: Did you have a finished script by the time you zeroed in on your location?

A: I started scripting in 2020, during COVID. I found the village in end-2020. Scripting continued throughout the shoot, because I was shooting in each season, and after one season, we'd watch what we had shot and write for the next season.

You remember the goat in the film? It was supposed to be there till the climax. But after the summer, right before we started shooting autumn, someone stole it. We couldn't find the same goat. So I added the its disappearance to the script. And it worked in favour of the film. So till the end, Complete is searching for the goat. He lives with the hope that he'll find it one day.

We had a finished script before we went into the shoot, but 80 per cent of it was changed after I started meeting people from the place.

I made massive changes while hearing their stories – although I didn't use any of their stories – seeing their struggle, the way they live. Some of them said they haven't celebrated Christmas in years. Hearing these small things, I felt the need to tell their story in my own way – like I said, without making it depressing.

Q: Is that why, though they said they hadn't celebrated Christmas for years, you showed so much celebration in the film, if not for a festival, then while characters are just hanging out?

A: I did that purposely so when I screen the film for them, I'll say, 'See, this is how you have to live life now.'

Q: What logistical challenges did you face due to the location, the topography etc?

A: We were just 18 people including the artists. We planned well and in such a way that we didn't have to walk for too long. And we didn't have huge equipment. We just had a camera because the film was shot with no lights.

But shooting in summer was challenging because it rained heavily, and anywhere you walked there were leeches, snakes. I purposely didn't show much rain in the film though, because in 2047, when the climate has changed, we might not have rain so much.

Q: Did you shoot this film over a period of one or two years?

Two years. I shot the climax in winter. It didn't work. So I had to wait another year to reshoot it.

Q: You have repeated actors who have earlier worked with you. (Note: Albert Mawrie who plays Livingstone, Baia Marbaniang who's Maia, and Kharpuri were in *Iewduh*. Merlvin Mukhim from *Onaatah* plays Promise.) Are they full-time professional actors?

A: No, no. We don't have actors as such here. Merlvin who plays Promise works in IIM. Livingstone has a business. Maia's a freelance photographer. Complete is a retired bank manager. Miss Helen is a retired teacher.

They're not full-time actors. This is their passion. Since they've been with me for long, we understand each other, and they believe in my vision, it's easier to work with them than newcomers. And they're dedicated. Livingstone kept that beard for two years. He put on weight for the film. Maia put on weight for the film, and as it progressed, she started losing weight.



Q: Why did you call it *The Elysian Field*?

A: We wanted a title that conveys a feeling of whether this is happening in heaven or on Earth. *The Elysian Field* fits. We've created a mystical, dreamy world. Some people in Russia asked me if the film is taking place in this world or in a different world altogether that I've created. I said, 'It's your call.' The Khasi title, *Ha Lyngkha Bneng*, means the same thing – a place between heaven and earth.

Q: *The Elysian Field* won the top award at Moscow. Has that helped its festival journey?

A: I thought the film will travel more because of the win, but it backfired. Due to the geopolitical situation between Russia and Ukraine, festivals in Europe that I won't name dropped my film after selecting it.

Programmers from these festivals told me off the record that this was the reason. Initially I felt bad about it. A film from Meghalaya, that has nothing to do with what's happening in Europe, has suffered. But it's okay. The film has its own journey. It's a good learning process for me too.

I was trolled on social media. I even got direct messages like, 'Oh, you went for a world premiere in a terrorist country. It seems like you're supporting a terrorist country.' Everything was fine when the selection for Moscow was announced, but the moment we won, the equation changed. It's difficult to understand. I'm a filmmaker, not an activist. I make films. I want to tell stories that resonate with the whole world. Some people in Russia who heard about this said, 'Forget about it, we have 200 festivals in Russia.' But when you make a film, you really want to travel, and show it to people.

Q: I'm sorry to hear this. I want to address the statement you just made though, that you're a filmmaker, not an activist. There are those who contend that all truth-telling art is a form of activism, especially at a time when an all-out effort is being made to suppress the truth.

A: I don't totally agree. Because for me art is what I speak from my soul, my dream for a better world. The politics you saw in *The Elysian Field* was not intentionally done. For me it was more about the people. It was about saying: don't let this happen. Now let's say

the Government of Meghalaya looks at the film and says, 'He's predicting there'll be no development.' Then prove me wrong. Don't let this happen. Let 2047 be the opposite of what I've shown.

All that came naturally, but if you say I'm behaving like an activist, then no, it's nothing like that for me.

Q: You said the film came from your soul, that you're showing people what you hope will not happen. Activists too speak from the soul, and caution people about what could go wrong. What's the difference?

A: I believe any honest art, art that comes from truth, from pain, from memory, can carry the same weight. Sometimes, just telling a story is an act of resistance.

I have immense respect for activists, but I see a difference between what I do and what they do. I see myself as an artist first. My way of contributing is by telling stories about the human condition. I believe in staying true to that.

Activism can be subtle. Art doesn't have to shout to be political. Sometimes, a quiet story, a single image, a moment of vulnerability can shake people more than slogans. If expressions and reflections steer something in the world, I feel art has done its job.