

*Festival Report*

**Narendra Bandabe**

**Busan International Film Festival 2025:  
Exploring Gender, Survival, and Resistance**



*Narendra Bandabe at the 30th Busan International Film Festival 2025*

The 30th Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) 2025, held in South Korea, reaffirmed its status as a cornerstone of global cinema. Beyond serving as a platform for film premieres, BIFF has evolved into a vibrant space for exploring emerging trends in Asian and Eurasian filmmaking. This year, the festival's Vision Asia competition, featuring eleven compelling feature films, stood out for its bold focus on gender, displacement, and contested territories. Additionally, the festival celebrated powerful individual stories, such as the Fipresci Award-winning film *On Your Lap* (Pangku), which offered a poignant exploration of Indonesia's 1998 IMF crisis. Together, these elements underscored BIFF's

commitment to amplifying diverse voices and challenging global cinematic norms.

**Vision Asia 2025: Gender, Resistance, and Reinvention:**

The Vision Asia competition at BIFF 2025 showcased emerging filmmakers from diverse regions of Asia and Eurasia, with Korean productions presented separately in the newly established Vision Korea section. This restructuring allowed Vision Asia to focus on non-Korean narratives, creating a platform for stories that interrogate the role of women, the complexities of gender dynamics, and the pervasive influence of patriarchal systems on personal and political spheres.

The eleven films, spanning genres from drama to action and comedy, were united by a shared inquiry: how women's bodies and marginalized identities resist, adapt, or reimagine themselves in contexts of oppression and transformation.

The curation of Vision Asia was deliberate and cohesive, weaving together narratives from varied geographies into a unified exploration of gender as both an aesthetic and political lens. Some films questioned the fragility of masculinity as a social construct, exposing its vulnerabilities in modern societies. Others highlighted the historical oppression of women while celebrating their resilience and acts of defiance. Across these works, the human body emerged as a powerful metaphor—a site where violence and struggle are inscribed, but also a space for envisioning alternative futures.

This curatorial approach positioned BIFF as a critical platform challenging the male-dominated and Eurocentric norms of the global festival circuit. By prioritizing stories that center women and dissident voices, the festival amplified fresh perspectives and cemented its role as a showcase for innovative storytelling. The Vision Asia section not only highlighted cinematic excellence but also sparked important conversations about power, identity, and resistance in contemporary Asian and Eurasian cinema.

### **On Your Lap: A Human Lens on Indonesia's 1998 IMF Crisis:**

Among the standout films at BIFF 2025 was *On Your Lap* (Pangku), directed by Indonesian actor-turned-director Reza Rahadian, which won the prestigious Fipresci

Award. Set against the backdrop of Indonesia's 1998 economic crisis, the film offers a searing exploration of the human toll of global financial policies. The crisis, sparked by the collapse of the Thai baht and exacerbated by the Asian financial meltdown, devastated Indonesia's economy. The rupiah plummeted, inflation skyrocketed, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed austerity measures—such as cutting subsidies on essentials like fuel and rice—that hit ordinary Indonesians hardest. Millions lost jobs, poverty surged, and social stability unraveled.

*On Your Lap* centers on Sartika (played by Claresta Taufan), a pregnant woman who arrives in a coastal village seeking a better future. Her journey embodies the desperation faced by countless Indonesians during the crisis. With no job, skills, or resources, Sartika represents the millions pushed into precarious circumstances by economic collapse. Her struggle to find work reflects the broader destruction of economic stability, which forced many into informal and often exploitative labor.

### **Exploitation and Survival:**

Sartika's survival hinges on taking a job as a "kopi pangku" (lap coffee) waitress at a roadside diner, where she serves male customers while sitting on their laps. The degrading nature of the work underscores the limited options available to women during the crisis. The IMF's austerity measures prioritized debt repayment over social welfare, leaving vulnerable groups—especially women—with few safety nets. Rather than judging Sartika's choices, the film portrays her resilience, highlighting her

strength in navigating a system stacked against her. This narrative mirrors the real-life experiences of many women who, out of necessity, took on low-paid or exploitative work to survive the economic turmoil. The diner itself becomes a microcosm of Indonesia's fractured society during the crisis. Sartika encounters both judgment and fleeting moments of kindness from customers, reflecting the divided responses of communities at the time. Some stigmatized the poor, while others offered small gestures of support. Her fragile yet meaningful connection with Arif, a compassionate truck driver, underscores the importance of human connection in times of hardship. Their relationship, though delicate, offers moments of dignity and hope in an otherwise unforgiving world.

#### **Migration and Global Inequities:**

On Your Lap also addresses the global dimensions of the crisis, particularly through the story of Arif's wife, who left Indonesia to work abroad. The economic collapse drove many Indonesians—especially women—to seek employment in countries like Malaysia or Saudi Arabia, often as domestic workers. These women faced grueling and sometimes abusive conditions, with many never returning or coming back with traumatic experiences. The film critiques the global labor system that exploits the poor from developing nations while benefiting wealthier countries. It also highlights how Indonesia's recovery relied partly on remittances from these workers, underscoring the unequal burdens placed on marginalized groups.

**Narendra Bandabe is a member of FIPRESCI-India.**

#### **A Broader Reflection on Resistance:**

Both On Your Lap and the Vision Asia competition share a common thread: the portrayal of resilience as a form of resistance. Sartika's story is not one of grand triumphs but of quiet endurance. Her daily struggle to survive poverty, humiliation, and loss reflects the experiences of countless individuals affected by the 1998 crisis. Similarly, the films in Vision Asia depict women and marginalized figures who persist in oppressive environments, using their bodies and voices to challenge systemic injustices. Whether through Sartika's determination or the diverse narratives of Vision Asia, BIFF 2025 celebrates the power of survival as a profound act of defiance.

#### **Conclusion:**

The 30th Busan International Film Festival demonstrated its enduring relevance as a platform for bold, thought-provoking cinema. The Vision Asia competition illuminated the complexities of gender, displacement, and resistance, offering a stage for emerging filmmakers to challenge global cinematic norms. Meanwhile, On Your Lap provided a deeply human perspective on the 1998 IMF crisis, showing how global financial policies ripple through individual lives. Together, these narratives underscore BIFF's commitment to amplifying marginalized voices and fostering critical dialogue about power, identity, and survival. By centering stories of resilience and reinvention, BIFF 2025 not only showcased cinematic innovation but also reaffirmed its role as a vital force in reshaping the global festival landscape.