

Festival Review

Latika Padgaonkar

**IFFK – K R Mohanan Award**



National and State award-winner K R Mohanan who passed away in 2017, had chaired the State Chalachitra Academy (which runs IFFK) from 2006 to 2011. He was also the Director of the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) but known even more widely for his acclaimed films – *Purushartham*, *Swaroopam* and *Ashwathama*. In 2019, an award was instituted in his name at IFFK for the Best Debut Director from India.

This year, the 19 films that competed for the FFSI K R Mohanan award for the Best Debut Film Director at the 30<sup>th</sup> edition of the festival in Trivandrum, were of varied texture and intent. The winner – *Shadowbox* (Baksho Bondi) – directed by Tanushree Das and Soumyananda Sahi - also received the Rajata Chakoram (Silver Crow Pheasant), again for the Best Debut Director, this time in the

international competition , while Tilottama Shome, the film’s protagonist, received a Special Mention for her performance.

*Shadowbox* is a quiet, introvert, yet intense film of suffering and silence. But silence speaks, words are not needed in the ordinary course of the characters’ lives. This is a story of a husband, a wife and their teenaged son, the wife at the heart of things, the hardworking breadwinner and the emotional anchor of the family, the husband, suffering from PTSD after his retirement from the army and incapable of leading a normal life, and the son helping his father, driven by shyness and love. Maya, the wife and mother, handles different jobs with a quiet and pensive and often harassed look, works unendingly and with commitment, even as her husband gets implicated in a murder case.

The family bonds are strong, she does what she can to help him but there is no ‘end’ to the story, the case is not over and done with, and we assume that the characters will continue to help each other and keep their hopes alive after the film’s final shot. A superlative performance by Tilottama Shome - subdued and heartrending – who really gets under the skin of the character she plays.



The film was recognized “for an intimate and engaging portrayal of a strong, self-employed, working-class woman in the harsh urban environs of Kolkata. The film, by Tanushree Das and Soumyananda Sahi, depicts her struggle to remain the sole pillar of support for her family, especially for her husband who suffers from stress disorder and faces a murder charge.”

Some of the other films in this section also made a mark. *Hearth and Home* by Prabhash Chandra, raised questions that people face today – a long but solitary life but the end nowhere in sight.

There were films that dealt with infidelities and hypocrisies in marriage, dysfunctional families, migration, life in the forest, lives of tribals, male sterilization during the Emergency, a sweet, somewhat stereotypical family drama and one film, *Ambrosia*, a ghoulish fantasy that takes you to a medieval land of wretched slaves and contemptible masters.

As always, dense crowds awaited the screenings with enthusiasm. That is what IFFK stands for at all times. Crowd support.

**Dr Latika Padgaonkar is a member of FIPRESCI.**