

Article

Aparajita Pujari

## The Quiet Spring of Love: Raga Marva at IFFK



Have you ever experienced molestation in your life? Have you ever physically or mentally been abused?

The above questions are so disturbing and provoke such darkness that hardly any person would prefer to confront them. Hardly any filmmaker or storyteller puts this interrogative sentence directly forward. Yet with the clips of the Epstein files floating around, those tiny, flickering visuals keep triggering questions that every civic person prefers not to prefer. The footage does not merely expose one man or one network - it excavates something far older, far more domesticated, far more democratically

distributed across societies that pride themselves on civilization, law, and progress.

Because the horror of Epstein is not its exceptionalism. Its horror is its familiarity.

Being a part of the 30<sup>th</sup> IFFK as a jury member, FIPRESCI, had been an engagement that was as humane as it was illuminating.

The International Film Festival of Kerala, this year, concluded on a jubilant and quietly assertive note, reaffirming its role as one of India's most vital platforms for independent and world cinema. In an ecosystem increasingly shaped by algorithms, instant gratification, and spectacle-driven narratives, IFFK 2025 stood its ground as a space for reflective, humane, and politically

conscious storytelling. As aptly observed by noted filmmaker Saeed Akhtar Mirza, who was honored at the festival's closing ceremony to mark his 50 years in cinema, "No place in India that has such a tremendous history of cinema as Kerala. When this State honors me, it means a lot to me.

Among the festival's assorted global offerings, two Malayalam (+ Hindi) language films - *If On a Winter's Night* (original title: *Khidki Gaav*) by Sanju Surendran and *Desire* (Moham) by Fazil Razak, emerged as some of the most discussed, and celebrated works among cinephiles.

Their recognition was not incidental. *Khidki Gaav* received the FIPRESCI Award for Best Film in the International Competition, while *Moham* won Best Malayalam Film by a Debut Director. At a moment when Malayalam cinema is emerging as a renewed phase of New Wave filmmaking within the Indian cinematic landscape, these two films add a decisive feather to its cap - not through novelty of subject alone, but through rigor of craft and emotional sincerity.

Spending nine eventful days at IFFK 2025 as part of the FIPRESCI jury inevitably prompted larger reflections. One question lingers insistently: what would become of independent cinema in the absence of film festivals? In an industry where theatrical spaces are shrinking and digital platforms privilege marketable familiarity over artistic risk, festivals remain among the last democratic sites where vulnerable, small, and uncompromising voices can be seen, discussed, and validated.

A second question follows closely. The films that won or deeply resonated this year

were not "absolute stunners" in the conventional sense. In a world where stories circulate endlessly at the touch of a screen, very little feels entirely new. What, then, moves us?? The answer lies not in the originality of the plot, but in the integrity of the vision. It is the craft, abstinence and sincerity of feeling that touch the audience- the human being behind the data profile, the so-called high-value customer of the digital universe.

Against a cinematic landscape dominated by superhero franchises and reverential biopics, *Khidki Gaav* and *Moham* stand out as quiet but towering beacons of radical empathy and technical grace. Both films probe the enduring and often brutal boundaries of social exclusion, examining the fragile antidotes required to heal a deeply toxic world.

At its core, *Khidki Gaav* taps into a narrative painfully familiar to Indian audiences: the migrant's or outsiders' (?) search for belonging in an unfamiliar city. This is not merely a story of economic hardship but an unflinching examination of cultural, linguistic, and visual discrimination, of how cities police belonging through accent, appearance, and unspoken social codes. The narrative becomes painfully relevant today, as the incidents of racial discrimination and bullying against three North Eastern women (dated February 2026) expose the systematic prejudice that continue to normalize,

The original title *Khidki Gaav* is itself a provocation. It functions as a metaphor for a society that peers through metaphorical windows- intrusive, vigilant, and steeped in conservative prejudice- habitually breaching the private lives of others. In this sense, the

film extends beyond personal struggle to comment on a culture of constant surveillance and moral policing. While the broad contours of *Khidki Gaav* echo earlier works such as *The Namesake* (2006) , *Minari* (2020) , *Citylights* ( 2014) and the art house classic *Gaman* ( 1978), the film's power lies in its execution rather than its premise.

Sanju Surendran's objective perspective is essential in this context. We sense what might be approaching in the narrative, yet the film resists melodrama. Instead, it anchors itself in production design and a tightly observed screenplay that compels the viewer to remain emotionally invested. Prejudice, societal pressure, and financial instability are not foregrounded as dramatic events but woven into the everyday texture of life. In this regard, the film evokes the spirit of Basu Chatterjee and Basu Bhattacharya- *Piya Ka Ghar* (1972), *Rajnigandha* (1974), *Anubhav* (1971), *Avishkaar* (1974)- where intimacy, routine, and small gestures carried profound social meaning. Yet *Khidki Gaav* remains distinctly contemporary, capturing the ruthlessness of present-day relationships while preserving tenderness through minute details of daily life: gestures of care, cycles of conflict and forgiveness, and the quiet spring of love under pressure. In one of the film's most affecting sequences, a worn-down Abhi finds himself beside a live musical performance, joins the band without premeditation, and lets the moment breathe. What follows is a brief but powerful pause- music becoming a balm that tunes itself to the complexities of modern love and emotional survival.

*Moham*, on the other hand, is structurally and tonally unpredictable. Where

*Khidki Gaav* derives strength from restraint and familiarity, *Moham* thrives on uncertainty. The film unfolds like an emotional chase, refusing the viewer narrative comfort. We move with Amala- played with haunting understatement by Amrutha Krishna Kumar- through fractured memories, PTSD, and longing. Her performance stands out in the Malayalam competition for its subdued physicality, water-brimmed eyes, and sustained vulnerability. Amala does not demand empathy; she earns it through silence and endurance.



Contrast is the defining grammar of both films. In *Khidki Gaav*, Sara (Bhanu Priyamvada), a pragmatic professional, is paired with Abhi (Roshan Abdul Rahoof), an easy going and endearing artiste. In *Moham*, Amala's fragile interiority collides with Shanu (Ishak Musafir), a volatile, vengeful presence. These contrasts generate situations that oscillate between tenderness and

recklessness, intimacy and danger. Importantly, neither film reduces its characters to moral binaries. Instead, they inhabit flawed, contradictory human spaces.

The denial of anticipated narratives sets apart *Moham*. The viewer is compelled to surrender control, following Amala as she follows the motorbike through roads, memories, and the darkest recesses of desire. The trio- Amala, Shanu, and the bike - becomes a moving metaphor for compulsion, escape, and emotional inertia. The film's power lies in this surrender, in asking the audience not to judge but to accompany. Though one can discern a subtle echo of Sridevi's iconic performance in *Sadma* (Moondram Pirai, 1983) within the emotional architecture of *Desire*. In *Sadma*, Sridevi's childlike attachment to the puppy, Hari Prasad - an image that came to symbolize the film's romanticized portrayal of amnesia-served as a fragile emotional refuge. Similarly, Amala's fixation on riding the motorbike in *Desire* functions as a psychological anchor. In both films, desire is not indulgent but therapeutic, operating as a coping mechanism that offers fleeting relief from intense anxiety and emotional rupture.

Now let us return to the Epstein case - a transnational saga of abuse and systemic complicity that remains disturbingly relevant across contemporary societies. Its relevance is echoed in India's own landscape. According to recent National Family Health Survey data, nearly 30 % of Indian women aged 18-49 have experienced physical or sexual violence at some point in their lives and most survivors never seek help, pointing to deep-rooted patterns of interpersonal harm. Additionally, research on child maltreatment suggests that a

large proportion of Indian children are exposed to physical, emotional, or sexual abuse within homes or communities, often by people they know, revealing how violence is woven into social relations as a structural reality rather than an exception. Moreover, studies found that around 78 % of respondents across six metropolitan cities believed physical appearance was the primary reason for prejudice, with offensive language and hate incidents reported across Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Pune.

The referred assault in *Khidki Gaav*, does not arrive with the dramatics of a villain's entry. It seeps in - carried by widespread ignorance that has fermented into conservative prejudice, which is itself a prime architect of class division: a class defined not merely by money but by culture, by caste, by the inherited grammar of who deserves dignity and who does not. The village does not see itself as an oppressor. It sees itself as a custodian. That is the most dangerous kind of violence - the kind that sleeps soundly at night.

Amala of *Moham*, is an acute patient of PTSD and marital violence. Her husband does not understand that he has destroyed her. More precisely, he does not believe destruction has occurred. In his cosmology, she belongs to him the way land belongs to whoever holds the deed. He has put her through a hell of systematic erosion - of her voice, her body, her memory of who she was before him -and still he arrives at her door with the unshakeable conviction of ownership. The audacity is not personal. It is structural. It has been rehearsed across generations.

And then there is Shanu.

Here is where the story earns its tragedy. Shanu, who had been emotionally predatory toward his former lover, who could not digest her leaving - who confused possession for love in that very particular way that patriarchy teaches men to confuse, this same Shanu develops a genuine, unperformed affection for Amala. He sees her. He wants to rescue her. And in the climactic irony that the narrative quietly constructs like a slow-building raga, Shanu looks at Amala's husband and recognizes something unbearable. He sees his own reflection. The man who believes he has the right to own a woman, the woman he has broken is not a stranger.

This is the tragic paradox that you discover going through the shock of the twist -the kind of fate that does not announce itself with thunder but arrives in a whisper of self-realization (Atman).

These deep-rooted conditions are not aberrations; they are minor, domestic reflections of a societal patriarchy that is

simultaneously triggered by caste and class, sustained by religion and custom, and normalized by silence. The cases like the mentioned Files disturb us precisely because they rip away the geography of evil -we can no longer quarantine abuse inside the bodies of the poor, the rural, the uneducated. It lives in penthouses also. It lives in Khidki gaav. It lives in the husband who weeps in front of the neighbors', the society, at the police station claiming love, and certifying being protective when he or 'they' forces her to wear the ghunghat (*Laapata Ladies* -2023).

Together, both *Khidki Gaav* , *Moham* and other films of IFFK underscore why festivals like IFFK matter. IFFK strengthened my belief in cinema and the passion I carry for. The films selected remind us that cinema's relevance today lies not in scale but in sensitivity. Precisely, some stories do not shout for attention; they whisper, linger. They reaffirm cinema's oldest promise- to make us see ourselves, and each other, with greater clarity and compassion.

**Aparajita Pujari is a member of FIPRESCI.**