

Festival Report

Latika Padgaonkar

Bishkek International Film Festival



Dr Latika Padgaonkar (India) with FIPRESCI jury colleagues Manuel Halpern (Portugal), and Israa Radaydeh (Jordan) at the 4th Bishkek International Film Festival, Kyrgyzstan, 7 – 12 June, 2026

Bishkek International Film Festival in Kyrgyzstan (BIFF, 7-12 June 2026) was just four years old this year, but there was a wealth of both motivation and ambition. Clearly, the country wanted to take its cinema beyond its own borders and the borders of Central Asia. And it also wanted to go beyond the mere screening of films. Now, it is in the process of becoming a platform for producers, critics and industry professionals, and equally for the promotion international co-productions.

The number of films screened in the competitive sections were not too many (9 in the International Competition section – from Montenegro, China, Italy, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Turkiye, Sakha Republic, India, one Indonesia-Saudi Arabia and one a China-Malaysia-Canada-Switzerland co-production); Central Asian Cinema – 9 – mainly Kyrgyz, but there were also Kazakh, Uzbek and Tajik; the KyrgyzBox

Competition also had 9 and there were a handful of others



Samik Roy Chaudhuri in Bishkek

The Indian film in the international competition section was Samik Roy Chaudhuri's *Maya Satya Bhram*. Two characters suddenly disappear in the course of the narrative: one, a little boy Totoro, son of a Sub Inspector; and a Swedish researcher who is in Kolkata who vanishes after interviewing the enigmatic Trilokedarshi Baba, a man who seems inhabit the real and unreal/mythical worlds. And he has a a swathe of followers but there is more than just saintliness in him.

The Opening and Closing ceremonies were glamorous and visionary: fanciful songs and dances and a well-choreographed, colourful spectacle. The famous French actress Audrey Tautou was the star of the day - the recipient at BIFF of the Lifetime Achievement Award in World Cinema. This year marked the 25th anniversary of Jean-Pierre Jeunet's internationally acclaimed film *Amelie* (2001) in which Tautou plays the lead role. It is considered to be a path-breaking work which introduced Audrey Tautou to the world and made her a symbol of subtle charm. Her other roles have been complex and dramatic – from the Hollywood blockbuster *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) to her role as

Gabrielle Chanel in *Coco Before Chanel* (2009).

An Honorary Award for Outstanding Contribution to World Cinema went to Kyrgyz actor Dokhdurbek Kydyraliev, regarded as one of the greats of his country's cinema and nicknamed "The Flying Kyrgyz". Tolomush Okeyev, the famous Kyrgyz director cast him in his famous film *The Descendant of the Snow Leopard* (1984) which won the Silver Bear in Berlin. *The Fall of Otrar* was another cult film – a Kazakh one) in which Kydyraliev played a lead role. But never did the glory of awards and recognition overshadow his love of painting. He was as much as artist as an actor.

The International Competition section had one Indian film – *Maya Satya Brahm* by Samik Roy Choudhuri. Others were from Asian and European countries. In Samik Roy Choudhary's film, two characters suddenly disappear in the course of the narrative: one, a little boy Totoro, the son of a Sub Inspector; and a Swedish researcher in Kolkata who vanishes after interviewing an enigmatic character - Trilokedarshi Baba, a man who seems inhabit the real and unreal/mythical worlds. He has a a swathe of followers but there is more than just saintliness in him.

The FIPRESCI jury (comprising Manuel Halpern from Portugal and Israa Radaydeh from Jordan and myself) watched films from Central Asia – Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – as did another jury for this section. I was struck by two factors that seemed to define nearly all the chosen films – the presence of land and nature (including animals) on the one hand, and family relationships on the other. Land appeared to me to have a singular presence of

its own, whether in the foreground or the background, whether it was the vast steppe region or the majestic mountains and the evergreen meadows. *The Final Stretch* by Avtandil Batyrbekov (Kyrgyzstan) was all about a wounded mare being treated and healed (of course there was more to it than just the horse); in *Kaskaldak* by Yernat Sabitov (Kyrgyzstan) in the words of the festival catalogue, “the contrast between the vast freezing landscape and the quiet, intense battle over a single bird...”; while *Restart* by Duman Erkimbek (Kazakhstan) has a more complex plot, its story is located in a village near a dam which finally bursts with unbelievable ferocity; and gulps down homes; Kenzhebay Dyussebayev’s *Karabuzhyr* (Kazakhstan), a serious family feud erupts in the countryside in the midst of stately mountains and valleys.

This film also focuses on another aspect of the Central Asian films which we saw – family feuds, misunderstandings, tensions. *Only Heaven Knows* by Nurzhamal Karamoldoeva (Kyrghyzstan0USA) is a relationship gone sour between an inveterate gambler and his wife; the same happens in Nusarat Khusanov’s *Shamsiqamar* (Uzbekistan) but in a different context – a pregnant woman’s medical test shows the fetus has Down’s syndrome. So....to abort or not to abort is now the central question over which there are family disagreements. And *Fate* by Dastan Madalbekov (Kyrgyzstan) is a complicated tale of a father-son duo which devastates the son but ends in forgiveness.

The one film – *Backstage Madness* by Amanbek Azhymat (Kyrgyzstan) that took a different route – a satire, a withering comment

on creativity versus commerce and the fickleness of it all.



Another Birth

The FIPRESCI winning film in the Central Asian section - *Another Birth* - was from Tajikistan (actually a Tajikistan-US coproduction) directed by Isabelle Kalandar in which family ties and nature – even the mystical – come together as two little girls search for Pari, a spirit, among the mountains surrounding their home even as the poems of Iranian poet Farough Farrokhzad are recited on and off the screen. The jury’s citation captured the film’s essence: “...for its fusion of myth and reality in which two little girls search for Pari, a mythological symbol in a female-centred world draped in poetry.”

Central Asian Grand Prix – selected by the other jury went to *Restart*,

Central Asian Best Director Award went to Nurzhaman Karamoldoeva for *Only Heaven Knows*. And in the International Competition section, the Grand Prix went to an Indonesian film *On Your Lap* by Reza Rehadian and Best Director Award to Ariobarzan for his film *The Divine Ideal of Killing* (Iran). Interestingly for the audience, every film was followed by a Q&A with director and most deftly and intelligently handled by prominent film scholar and critic, Sultan Usualiev.

Besides these, several short films at different venues. The festival has joined MIOB (Moving Images Open Borders}, a network of European film festivals supported by EU's Creative Europe Media programme, uniting festivals from Austria, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Lithuania and Serbia. The alliance focuses on supporting young talent and encouraging cultural dialogue.

And more: a Script workshop led by international mentors to support Central Asian story-telling. And to add to its outreach, BIFF has launched a project called CAF Pitch (Central Asian Film Projects Pitching) for films which are in the development stage. These pitching projects centred on identifying new talent and supporting debut works by young directors. Cash awards were presented

by three official partners to selected films-in-the-making or even rough cuts.

Then there was Bars in Progress, an industry platform meant to promote feature-length narrative films in their post-production stage. The selected works were shown to international film professionals to get their feedback. All this allowed for the development of co-productions, expansion of distribution opportunities and the enhancement of international cooperation.

As Central Asia opens up (yet another festival is round the corner in Baikonur, Kazakhstan, next month), the cinemas of our neighbourhood will gradually become part of our understanding of this region of the world, moving from the periphery to centre stage. Much to look forward to. There is a whole world there, waiting to show itself to us.

Dr Latika Padgaonkar is a member of FIPRESCI