Festival Report

Anna M.M. Vetticad

Films, Conversations and No Easy Answers

FIPRESCI-India Jury Members Anna M.M. Vetticad, Minakshi Dutta, and C.S. Venkiteswaran giving the Award to Anuparna Roy

A journalist, an academic and a film scholar – that was the composition of the FIPRESCI-India jury at the Ajanta-Ellora International Film Festival (AIFF) 2026 held in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar (earlier Aurangabad) this January-February. C.S. Venkiteswaran, Minakshi Dutta and I, all three of us members of the India chapter of FIPRESCI, were required to assess a slate of nearly a dozen films that included Indian and international productions. From these we had to pick the winner of the FIPRESCI-India Jury Prize at the festival.

Aurangabad is a historic location, home to Bibi Ka Maqbara, tomb of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's wife Dilras Banu Begum, while on its outskirts lie the stunning Ajanta and Ellora caves, both of which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. It is fitting therefore that the film festival's name is a bow to the city's greatest tourist attractions.

AIFF is a comparatively new festival, and we were attending its 11th edition. As a jury member, I noticed a common thread running through the films competing for the FIPRESCI-India Jury Prize. Each story, in one way or another, dealt with escape from an undesirable status quo – escaping poverty, escaping persecution, escaping a socially

imposed gender identity, escaping conservatism, escaping loneliness.

The international ventures in competition happened to be dominated by the French language. Writer-director Marie-Elsa Sgualdo's *À Bras-Le-Corps* also known as *Silent Rebellion*, a French film set in Switzerland during World War II, is about a poor young woman who is raped by a purportedly progressive, wealthy man, and subsequently subjugated by her purportedly kind husband who belongs to her own socio-economic class. *Silent Rebellion* had its global premiere at the Venice International Film Festival 2025. In *Les Filles Désir* (The Girls We Want), a group of youth hanging out together in Marseilles in France find their lives disrupted by the return of a free-spirited acquaintance, the most affected among them being a chap who thought he had a grip on himself until then. In a world far removed from theirs, in Louise Courvoisier's *Vingt Dieux* a.k.a. *Holy Cow*, a teenager in France tries desperately to establish himself in the dairy farming and cheese-making business, resorting to theft and deception to compensate for his lack of experience and funds. The German film *Jenseits Der Blauen Grenze* (Beyond the Blue Border), set in East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall, is an account of a sportswoman determined to make a career and a home for herself in a democratic nation.

Among the Indian productions in the programme were a couple of high-profile films in a collection dominated by indies. The Hindi-Assamese feature *Songs of Forgotten Trees* is set in a flat in Mumbai where the leads develop a friendship fuelled by their encounters with prejudice and suffocating social restrictions. The film earned the Best Director Prize for debutant Anuparna Roy in the Orizzonti section at the Venice International Film Festival 2025. Varsha Bharath's Tamil film *Bad Girl* has made news in India since it was unveiled at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam 2025. Its defiant representation of a girl resisting conformist expectations placed on young women has raised eyebrows and tempers in the real-world community in which the protagonist is situated. Director Abhay Sharma's Hindi film *Chingam*, set in rural Himachal Pradesh, is about a romance in a society where gender segregation is the norm, and the impact on a relationship between a young man and woman when he leaves the village to fulfil his professional ambitions. Director Shubham Sanjay Shevade's Marathi venture *Magazine* features a man returning to his ancestral village to overcome his restlessness and find a deeper meaning to his existence. In the Kannada film *Parajya* directed by Mahadev Hadapad, another restless youth comes to terms with being perceived as different from the norm in terms of gender identity, while eventually discovering community and acceptance. In Jayanta Madhab Dutta's Mising language film *Yakasik Omede* (Yakasi's Daughter), a woman battling impoverished circumstances and the vagaries of nature dreams of a better life than the one her mother suffered.

AIFF's organisers were a warm hospitable group of people – led by festival director Sunil Sukthankar, the National Award-winning Marathi filmmaker – who did not once allow our jury to feel the strain of viewing so many films back-to-back over a

short period. This left us free to figure out our approach to our work.

Through our deliberations, the FIPRESCI-India Jury Prize winner that we chose was *Songs of Forgotten Trees* for its gentle exploration of friendship in a physical space that is as restrictive as the society in which the leads live. We were struck by Roy's writing and Debjit Samanta's camera, which made astounding use of the flat where the action is largely set, to portray the progression of the relationship between the leads. A smart inversion of the conventional gendered gaze on human bodies on screen, the metaphorical reference to the erasure of women in traditional marriages and the open-endedness of the final moments of the film are evidence of Roy's clarity of thought and assured vision, making her one of the most exciting voices to emerge on the world cinema stage in the past year.

We also decided to give a Special Mention to *Silent Rebellion* with its unique juxtaposition of Nazi Germany's enduring notoriety in world history against the class and sexual oppression of now-long-forgotten women in 1940s Switzerland, serving as a stark reminder of the many Holocausts this world has witnessed – including those not acknowledged in those terms in news archives. We felt that Sgualdo distinguished herself by effectively rubbishing the mountain nation's long-running claims of being politically neutral and socially egalitarian, in addition to displaying an acute understanding of the meaning of consent.

The FIPRESCI-India jury also spoke at a seminar at the city's MGM School of Journalism on the theme "How Critics Nurture Good Cinema". Personally, I believe that contrary to popular perceptions of the social media era, there is still a vast readership for insightful, even long-form reviews of both mainstream and off-mainstream cinema. Unlike those who have given up on humankind by assuming that we are a species now plagued by short attention spans, I think there exists a sizeable section of the public that values depth and the written word. With this in mind, I spoke to attendees about an area of concern in Indian film criticism, namely, the limited diversity among Indian critics who write reviews in English, in particular the absence of Dalit critics in mainstream publications and the dramatic fall in numbers of critics who belong to religious minorities.

Like the films we selected for the FIPRESCI-India Jury Prize, the purpose of the seminar too was to initiate a conversation without presuming to know all the answers to the tough questions that confront us.

Anna M.M. Vetticad is a member of FIPRESCI.