Festival Report

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Third Bhubaneswar Film Festival 2026

A Festival Finds Its Voice

For four days in June 2026, Bhubaneswar became a meeting ground for filmmakers, actors, writers, cinematographers, scholars, students and audiences brought together by a shared belief in the enduring power of cinema. The third edition of the Bhubaneswar Film Festival (BFF), held from 25 to 28 June 2026 at Jayadev Bhawan, reaffirmed that a film festival is not merely about film screening. It's a space for learning, dialogue, preservation of cinematic heritage and the celebration of diverse artistic voices.

Now in its third edition, the Bhubaneswar Film Festival has grown into an important cultural platform dedicated to meaningful Indian cinema. Unlike competitive festivals driven by awards and accolades, BFF remains firmly committed to the idea that cinema deserves to be experienced through thoughtful viewing, informed discussion and meaningful interaction between filmmakers and audiences. The festival encourages appreciation rather than competition, dialogue rather than spectacle, and understanding rather than consumption.

This philosophy shaped every aspect of the 2026 edition. Over the four days, audiences encountered films from across India representing multiple languages, cultures and cinematic traditions. Alongside the screenings, masterclasses, scholarly publications, panel discussions and filmmaker interactions transformed the festival into an immersive learning experience that celebrated cinema not only as entertainment but as an artistic, cultural and intellectual practice.

The festival presented 20 carefully curated films across 11 Indian languages including Odia, Hindi, Kannada, Bengali, Assamese, Malayalam, Marathi, Gujarati, Dimasa and Urdu along with five short & documentary films. More than 3,000 to 3,500 people attended film screenings during the four-day festival, while nearly 170 participants engaged in specialised masterclasses conducted by some of India's leading film practitioners. The steadily increasing audience, culminating in the largest turnout on the festival's concluding day, reflected the growing enthusiasm for meaningful cinema among Odisha's audiences.

Beyond the numbers, however, the true success of the festival lay in the conversations it initiated. Throughout the four days, filmmakers exchanged ideas with students, audiences questioned artists directly, scholars reflected on cinema's evolving role in society, and young aspirants discovered new ways of understanding the craft of filmmaking. The Bhubaneswar Film Festival demonstrated that cinema flourishes most meaningfully when films become the beginning of conversations rather than the end of them.

Opening the Third Chapter

The festival commenced on the 25th June with the celebration of both Odia cinematic heritage and of the broader landscape of Indian cinema. The first day was carefully designed to showcase Odia and Hindi classic to rejuvenate our cultural roots with the great Indian cinematic traditions.

The day's screenings showcased Odia cinema through films such as *Laxmi*, *Lahari*, *MaguniraSagada* and an award-winning Urdu film called *White Snow*, presenting audiences with stories rooted in regional experiences while addressing universal human concerns. The evening concluded with Bimal Roy's timeless masterpiece *Do Bigha Zamin*, marking the beginning of a special retrospective dedicated to one of India's greatest filmmakers.

The inaugural ceremony that followed was notable not merely for its scale but for what it represented. For perhaps the first time in Odisha's recent cultural history, five distinguished personalities from Hindi cinema shared a common platform in support of a film festival devoted to serious cinema. The ceremony brought together eminent cinematographer Anil Mehta, distinguished filmmaker Tigmanshu Dhulia, acclaimed actor Neeraj Kabi, ace filmmaker Amit Rai, veteran Odia filmmaker Sabyasachi

Mohapatra, alongside scholars, artists, filmmakers and cinema lovers from across the country.

The festival was formally inaugurated by Suryabanshi Suraj, Honourable Minister of State for Higher Education, Sports & Youth Affairs and Odia Language, Literature & Culture, Government of Odisha.

Welcoming the gathering, Festival Director Sanjoy Patnaik articulated the philosophy that has increasingly defined the Bhubaneswar Film Festival. He observed that the festival was never conceived merely as an exhibition of films. Instead, it seeks to cultivate a sustained culture of cinema appreciation through screenings, discussions, masterclasses, publications and educational initiatives that encourage audiences to engage with films critically and thoughtfully.

His remarks reflected the evolution of BFF itself. In just three editions, the festival has expanded from being an exhibition platform into a cultural institution seeking to strengthen Odisha's relationship with cinema.

In his inaugural address, Minister Suryabanshi Suraj expressed confidence that Odia cinema would reclaim its deserved prominence in the national landscape. Assuring continued support from the State Government, he reiterated the importance of institutions such as the Bhubaneswar Film Festival in nurturing creative talent and strengthening the cultural ecosystem necessary for the growth of regional cinema.

The inaugural evening also revealed another defining characteristic of BFF. Rather than focusing exclusively on celebrity appearances, the festival consistently highlighted cinema as a collaborative art form—one created not only by actors and directors, but equally by cinematographers, writers, editors, sound designers, costume designers, technicians and producers whose contributions often remain invisible to the wider public.

A Journey Through Indian Cinema

The key principles of curation that the Bhubaneswar Film Festival follows rests upon a simple yet significant belief—that India's cinematic identity cannot be represented by a single language or industry. It emerges instead from the remarkable diversity of stories being told across the country's many regions.

This belief was evident throughout the festival.

Across four days, audiences travelled through an extraordinary range of cinematic landscapes—from the Himalayan mountains to the forests of Northeast India, from rural Odisha to metropolitan India, from intimate family dramas to socially engaged narratives, from documentaries to restored classics.

The second day opened with the Kannada feature *Kandeelu*, followed by Ranjeeta Kaur's documentary *A Story That Refused to Die*, an intimate account of the difficult journey behind the making of

Tigmanshu Dhulia's acclaimed film *Paan Singh Tomar*. The documentary became one of the emotional high points of the festival.

As the film concluded, Tigmanshu Dhulia reflected upon the extraordinary struggles involved in making *Paan Singh Tomar*. Speaking about his collaboration with the late Irrfan Khan, the filmmaker became visibly emotional while recalling the actor's artistic commitment and remarkable generosity.

The interaction transformed the screening into something far deeper than a film presentation—it became an intimate conversation about perseverance, friendship and artistic conviction.

The day's screening continued with the Bengali film *Konttho*, the Hindi feature *Wo-Man*, before concluding with Bimal Roy's *Bandini*, continuing the festival's retrospective devoted to one of India's most influential filmmakers.

The third day further broadened the festival's cultural horizon with screenings of Semkhor, recognised as the first feature film made in the Dimasa language, alongside the Marathi film *Sabar Bonda*, the Gujarati feature *Jagat*, the Odia film *Baida* and Bimal Roy's *Sujata*.

Actor-director Aimee Baruah, speaking about *Semkhor*, described the film as an attempt to preserve a language, a landscape and an entire cultural memory through cinema. Her reflections underscored one of the festival's recurring themes—that regional cinema is not merely an alternative to mainstream filmmaking but an essential expression of India's cultural diversity.

The final day continued this journey with screenings of the Assamese film *Juiphool*, the Odia films *Lal Odhani* and *Aa Akare Aa*, the acclaimed Malayalam film *Ullozhukku* and finally the beloved Odia classic *Bhai Bhauja*, which replaced the originally scheduled *Amada Bata.*

Together, the films took audiences across India's many languages, regions and cultures. They explored themes such as identity, resilience, family, artistic freedom, history and social change. By bringing these diverse stories together, the Bhubaneswar Film Festival celebrated the richness of Indian cinema and highlighted the many voices that shape it.

Revisiting a Master: The Bimal Roy Retrospective

Alongside the contemporary films, the festival presented a special retrospective of legendary filmmaker Bimal Roy.

Across four evenings, audiences revisited four landmark works by the legendary filmmaker: *Do Bigha Zamin*, *Bandini*, *Sujata* and the concluding retrospective screening.

Far more than a nostalgic tribute, the retrospective encouraged younger audiences to rediscover a filmmaker whose influence continues to shape generations of Indian directors. Roy's humane storytelling, social

realism and quiet visual poetry provided an illuminating counterpoint to many of the contemporary films screened during the festival.

Several visiting filmmakers acknowledged this influence. Director Amit Rai, attending the Bhubaneswar Film Festival for the third consecutive year, fondly recalled watching *Do Bigha Zamin* during his childhood and described it as one of the films that inspired him to pursue filmmaking. His reflections highlighted the enduring ability of classic cinema to shape new generations of storytellers.

By placing Roy's films alongside contemporary regional cinema, the Bhubaneswar Film Festival affirmed an important curatorial principle: the future of Indian cinema is best understood through a dialogue with its past. The retrospective therefore became not merely an exercise in remembrance but an invitation to younger audiences to rediscover the artistic foundations upon which contemporary Indian cinema continues to build.

Learning the Language of Cinema

While the carefully curated film screenings formed the heart of the Bhubaneswar Film Festival, its educational initiatives gave the festival its distinctive identity. Throughout its three editions, BFF has consistently maintained that a meaningful film culture cannot be built through screenings alone. It requires spaces where knowledge is shared, ideas are exchanged and young practitioners engage directly with those who have shaped Indian cinema.

This commitment was reflected in four masterclasses conducted over the course of the festival, attracting nearly 170 participants, including students, aspiring filmmakers, actors, cinematographers, writers, designers and cinema enthusiasts.

The series opened with an engaging Masterclass on Cinematography by renowned cinematographer Anil Mehta, whose work on films such as *Lagaan*, *Hum Dil De ChukeSanam*, *Veer-Zaara* and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* has helped define the visual language of contemporary Indian cinema.

The session offered aspiring filmmakers, cinematographers and students an opportunity to engage with one of India's foremost cinematographers as he shared insights into visual storytelling, cinematographic practice and the creative processes behind some of his most celebrated work. The interactive session witnessed enthusiastic participation from attendees, reflecting the strong interest among young filmmakers in understanding the craft of cinematography.

The second day shifted the focus from the camera to performance with an immersive Masterclass on Acting conducted by acclaimed actor Neeraj Kabi. Rejecting conventional lecture formats, Kabi transformed the session into an interactive workshop where participants explored movement, observation, memory,

concentration and emotional truth through practical exercises.

His ability to connect with participants made the session one of the festival's most memorable learning experiences. Reflecting on the festival itself, Kabi remarked that Odisha had long deserved a platform of this nature—one where audiences and artists could engage seriously with cinema beyond its commercial dimensions. His observation echoed the aspirations with which the Bhubaneswar Film Festival was founded and reaffirmed its growing significance within the cultural landscape of eastern India.

The educational journey continued on the third day with a Masterclass on Screenplay Writing led by acclaimed writer SaiwynQuadras, whose screenplays for *Mary Kom*, *Neerja*, *Parmanu* and *Maidaan* have earned both critical acclaim and popular appreciation.

Drawing upon his own creative process, Quadras unpacked the architecture of cinematic storytelling, discussing structure, conflict, character, dialogue and emotional rhythm. The session provided aspiring writers with valuable insight into the discipline, patience and craft required to develop compelling screenplays.

The final masterclass brought together National Award-winning costume designers Divvya Gambhir and Nidhhi Gambhir, along with acclaimed production designer SukantPanigrahy, for an engaging exploration of Costume and Production Design.

The session highlighted the invisible yet indispensable role played by visual design in filmmaking. Through examples from their own work, the speakers demonstrated how costumes, colours, textures, architecture and objects silently communicate character, history and emotion long before dialogue begins.

Equally encouraging was their response to the participants. Both Divvya and Nidhhi Gambhir expressed their admiration for the remarkable curiosity and eagerness displayed by Odisha's young filmmakers and students, describing the enthusiasm they encountered as one of the defining impressions they would carry back from Bhubaneswar.

Taken together, these four masterclasses reflected one of the festival's greatest achievements. They transformed spectators into learners and aspiring filmmakers into active participants in the creative process, reinforcing BFF's commitment to nurturing the next generation of cinema practitioners.

Conversations Beyond the Screen

If the screenings celebrated cinema, the conversations surrounding them revealed why cinema continues to matter.

One of the festival's most significant initiatives this year was the introduction of Talking Cinema, conceived as a pre-festival intellectual platform where filmmakers, scholars, students and audiences could engage

with cinema beyond the experience of watching films.

Organised in the weeks preceding the festival, the inaugural edition comprised two thematic sessions. The first explored "Construction of Identities and Stereotypes in Indian Cinema," examining how films shape social perceptions, cultural identities and collective memory. The second session, "Building a Resilient Film Industry: Odia Cinema @ 90" reflected upon the history, achievements and future challenges of Odia cinema as it approaches an important milestone.

By extending discussions beyond the festival dates, Talking Cinema signalled an important evolution in BFF's vision. It demonstrated that the festival aspires not merely to organise an annual event but to foster an ongoing culture of cinematic discourse throughout the year.

This commitment to dialogue continued during the festival through filmmaker interactions and thematic discussions.

Among the most thought-provoking conversations was the panel discussion titled "Fabrics, Identity and Cinema." Bringing together filmmakers, costume designers, scholars and practitioners, the discussion examined how costumes and textiles function far beyond visual ornamentation. Clothing, participants observed, shapes identity, communicates social relationships, expresses emotion, preserves cultural memory and often becomes a powerful narrative device.

The discussion also explored the possibility of cinema serving as a platform for promoting India's regional handloom traditions, demonstrating how visual storytelling can contribute to cultural preservation while enriching cinematic expression.The panel featured National Award-winning costume designers Divvya Gambhir and Nidhhi Gambhir, Richa Maheshwari, Smt. Rupa Roshan Sahu, IAS, and Sabyasachi Satpathy, with Festival Director Sanjoy Patnaikmoderating the discussion.

Preserving Knowledge, Honouring Legacy

Cinema survives through memory as much as through creation. Recognising this, the Bhubaneswar Film Festival has consistently sought to preserve both the intellectual and artistic heritage of Indian cinema.

An important expression of this commitment is the festival's annual scholarly publication.

Each edition of BFF is accompanied by the release of a carefully curated volume dedicated to Indian cinema, contributing to research, documentation and critical engagement with the medium. More than commemorative books, these publications have gradually become valuable records of India's cinematic and socio-cultural history.

The 2026 edition witnessed the release of *Cinema: KalAaj Aur Kal*, bringing together contributions from filmmakers, scholars, critics and academicians from across the

country. The publication reaffirmed BFF's belief that cinema deserves to be studied, documented and debated with the same seriousness accorded to literature, theatre and the visual arts.

Equally significant was the festival's continuing tradition of honouring those whose lifetime contributions have shaped Odisha's film industry.

The inaugural ceremony recognised seven distinguished veterans representing diverse fields within filmmaking—including acting, direction, cinematography, lyric writing, lighting and film production. The gesture reflected the festival's understanding that cinema is fundamentally collaborative, built upon the dedication of countless artists and technicians whose contributions often remain unseen.

The inaugural ceremony honoured seven distinguished veterans for their lifetime contribution to cinema and culture: veteran actress Saraswati Devi, fondly known as *Sara Apa*; lyricist and dialogue writer Shirshananda Das Kanungo; celebrated comic actor Braja Singh; veteran cinematographer Dilip Kumar Ray; veteran lightman Pitambar Sahu; acclaimed filmmaker Sisir Mishra; and eminent producer and organiser Sitakanta Mishra. Among the evening's most touching moments was the felicitation of Sisir Mishra. Unable to come to the stage due to ill health, he was honoured in the audience itself as dignitaries descended from the dais to present the award. The spontaneous standing ovation that followed became one of the defining emotional moments of the festival, reflecting the deep respect that BFF extends to the pioneers of Odia cinema.

Remembering Dilip Ray

The celebratory atmosphere of the festival was interrupted by a profound moment of collective grief on its third day.

Veteran cinematographer Dilip Ray passed away on the previous night, prompting the festival to begin the day's proceedings with a one-minute silence in his memory.

For decades, Ray had remained one of the most respected cinematographers in Odia cinema, contributing to more than seventy Odia films and fifteen Bengali productions. His work on films such as *Chaka Bhaunri*, *BidhiBidhana*, *BastraHarana* and *Laxman Rekha* established him as one of the industry's finest visual storytellers. He also created history by becoming the first Odia cinematographer to receive the Odisha State Film Award for Best Cinematography on five occasions.

The tribute carried an especially poignant significance. During the festival's inaugural ceremony, Dilip Ray had already been selected for a Lifetime Contribution Felicitation. Although illness prevented him from attending, the recognition became one of his final public honours.

The silence observed by the festival community transcended ceremony. It became a collective acknowledgement that cinema

advances because each generation builds upon the vision, labour and artistic courage of those who came before.

Building a Culture of Film Appreciation

Perhaps the most encouraging achievement of the third Bhubaneswar Film Festival was not measured in numbers alone but in the quality of participation it inspired.

Across four days, approximately 3,000–3,500 people attended the screenings, with audience numbers increasing steadily each day and reaching their highest point on the festival's concluding evening. Packed auditoriums, lively post-screening discussions and enthusiastic participation in educational sessions suggested that a discerning audience for meaningful cinema is steadily emerging in Odisha.

Young viewers formed a particularly visible presence throughout the festival.

Student Shreya Kiran Bhuyan, reflecting on the screenings of *Kandeelu* and *A Story That Refused to Die*, remarked, *"If you want to love life, you need to watch films."* Her words captured the emotional impact that thoughtful cinema can have upon younger audiences.

Cinema enthusiast Antaryami Mishra described *A Story That Refused to Die* as one of the festival's most moving experiences and emphasised the importance of festivals such as BFF in bringing meaningful cinema to local audiences.

Professor Mohinikanta Mishra observed that platforms like the Bhubaneswar Film Festival are essential for nurturing film culture and expanding cinematic horizons.

Similar sentiments were expressed by actor Jagannath Seth, actor-producer Swastik Choudhury, filmmaker ParthaSarathi Ray and literary figure Choudhury Jayaprakash Das, all of whom recognised the festival's growing role in encouraging audiences to appreciate diverse forms of cinema.

These voices collectively affirmed that BFF is gradually cultivating not only filmmakers but also informed viewers—a foundation upon which every vibrant film culture ultimately depends.

Looking Ahead

The concluding evening reflected the spirit that has always distinguished the Bhubaneswar Film Festival.

Before the final screening of the festival, Bhai Bhauja, a simple valedictory ceremony brought together those whose efforts had quietly sustained the four-day event. The stage belonged not to celebrities but to the organisers, founding members, Festival Director, coordinators and volunteers whose collective commitment had transformed an ambitious vision into reality.

As the audience applauded the festival team, the moment symbolised something larger than appreciation for successful event management. It recognised the countless hours of planning, coordination and dedication required to build a meaningful cultural institution.

In their concluding remarks, the organisers looked beyond the success of the third edition. They expressed confidence that the Bhubaneswar Film Festival would continue to grow in scale, ambition and national significance in the years ahead, while acknowledging that such growth ultimately depends upon the continued support of audiences, filmmakers and the wider cultural community.

That sentiment perhaps best captures the identity of the Bhubaneswar Film Festival.

Its greatest achievement is not merely that it screens films, hosts celebrated artists or organises master classes. Its greater accomplishment lies in bringing together filmmakers and audiences, established practitioners and young aspirants, scholarship and storytelling, heritage and contemporary voices within a shared cultural space.

With each edition, the festival continues to strengthen Odisha's place on India's cinematic map. It is helping cultivate informed audiences, inspiring future filmmakers, preserving cinematic memory and creating meaningful opportunities for dialogue across languages, regions and artistic traditions.

As the curtains fell on the third edition, the Bhubaneswar Film Festival concluded not with an ending, but with a promise—a promise that the conversations it has begun will continue to grow, inspiring new stories, new filmmakers and new audiences for years to come.

For over two years, Bhubaneswar Film Festival has remained committed to one simple belief: Good Cinema for everyone. Celebrating local cultures, introducing audiences to regional & national cinema, embracing new technologies, and creating opportunities for emerging talent, BFF has become much more than a film festival. It is a platform where stories created, cultures connect, careers begin, and the future of cinema is shaped.

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