

Interview

Premendra Mazumder

Search for the Truth or Maya? A Conversation with Babusenán Brothers



(Babusenán Brothers- Satish and Santosh, have made six films so far: *The Painted House* in 2015, *The Narrow Path* in 2016, *The Lost* in 2017, *The Pretty Eyed Girl* in 2018, *Darkness* in 2018 and *Maya* in 2019. Satish did a BTech in Mechanical Engineering before going to IIT Bombay to do MDes in Visual Communication. Santosh did a PhD in film studies from the University of Kerala. In 1998 both of them left their successful careers in Mumbai with MTV, Fashion and Corporate Films and came back to their homeland Kerala. Then after 17 years of hibernation they started making films. On behalf of the E-CineIndia I met them on 23 June 2019 at their cozy residence at Thiruvanthapuram where they live in a joint family to know whether they are still searching for the truth through their films or they have concluded that the life is nothing but a MAYA!)

Premendra: You just have finished your last film MAYA. You said it as 'The Painted House 2'. Is it a sequel of your first film 'The Painted House' which you made in 2015? What's the issue you have dealt with in this film? And how is it related with the first one?

Satish: I'd like to think that each of us is a sequel of oneself. Time, that inescapable thing, transforms us continuously. Yes... MAYA is a sequel in two ways. While Part 1 explored 'self-recognition' as the possibility to find fulfilment, here in Part 2 we're exploring the idea of Happiness. We all know that most people are seeking happiness in one form or the other. Yet how many of us really find it? Then again, can it even be found? Those are the questions my brother and I asked ourselves. Is it possible that the very seeking after happiness is what derails one from oneself, and is that the cause of sorrow, we asked ourselves? MAYA tries to take the viewer through these ideas. The other reason why this film is a sequel is that Gautam, the old writer in Part 1, who idealised the character Nachiketas (in his writing) as the man liberated from concepts...Gautam who at the end of Part 1 vanishes into the darkness of death to perhaps claim a seat of leisure on the shore of a boundless, eternal ocean called Time (I am referring to the final shot of that film) strikes a close and discomfiting resemblance to The Fool in Part 2 who appears to Siddharth during his relentless run for his life. So yes, it is a sequel.

Santosh: Actually all our films are about freedom. All of us feel restless and tied up in varying degrees. What's called the existential problem. We usually cover it up by keeping ourselves busy or by doing things that make us happy. But the problem itself doesn't go away. It'll resurface when we're alone with nothing to keep us engaged. What we call boredom is just this uneasiness resurfacing. Our films are explorations of this and allied problems. The first Painted House basically says that we're all painted houses. Switching masks that we think will make us impressive or likeable to others. We think this will make us happy. But the movie says that this is a mistake and that it can only get us deeper and deeper into restlessness. The way out is to see that what we think of as our face is only a mask. We started out pretending to others but we've moved on to actually

pretending to ourselves. But we're quite unaware of this. The new film MAYA continues the same theme in a new story, new context and a new form.



Satish and Santosh at Work

P: Starting in 2015, you already have made six full length feature films in five years one after another. Chaayam Poosiya Veedu: The Painted House in 2015, Ottayaal Paatha: The Narrow Path in 2016, Maravi: The Lost in 2017, Sunetra: The Pretty Eyed Girl in 2018, Darkness in 2018 and then this last one Maya in 2019. Why are you in so hurry? Don't you think, making films in such quick succession may affect your creativity? Or you are overconfident?

Satish: Six films... yes, but why not?! We are in a hurry, I guess. When we made our first in 2015, I was nearly 50. Got to make up for lost time! Jokes aside, the moment we finish a film, we want to make another because we realise we should have done it differently. And no, I don't think this can affect one's creativity. Why should it? There is so much where all this comes from. The source of Creativity is abundant. If one does not stake ownership to the well, I guess the water will be abundantly available to anyone who wants to pull the ropes. As for being over confident, I don't know...I guess we can carry on as long as Nature permits, wishes.

Santosh: We're certainly not over confident about our talent or creativity. Fortunately, we haven't run into any creative blocks so far. And I think it's because we don't compare our films with those of other filmmakers around us. We sort of compete only with ourselves. Our aim is to make every film better than the previous one. One thing that excites us is experimenting with form. The way the story is told, what we could call the 'how'. The content being the 'what'. We've been trying out new things with the form in every film. Rather subtly, perhaps. But in the new one, Maya, we've gone a wee bit overboard. We're really excited about it and want to see how it comes out!

P: CBFC denied to certify your first film 'The Painted House' in 2015.



Darkness vs CBFC

You went to the court of law and finally got it cleared after a long legal battle. Then again after four years 'Darkness' faced the same problem. This time you got it cleared as the parliament election was declared. Do you think that you got the advantage of the zero hours of the democracy? Do you think, that at the present situation, it might have been difficult for you to get the censorship certificate without intervention of the court of law?

Satish: You may have hit the nail there, Premendra. 'The zero hour of democracy'... interesting indeed! So perhaps the timing of it all was providential. We told them that we would take them to court and that their objections would not stand in a court of law. Both parties had to do what each had to do. Their Chairman put us to the Revising committee which wanted us to delete a line which was not even there in the film etc. From the beginning we were clear that we would not give up the fight. We didn't.

Santosh: Yes, things could be rather difficult in the new environment. Maybe we'd have had to approach the courts for the certificate. I guess we were lucky to pull it off in time!

P: What exactly are the issues of annoyance of the CBFC with your films? Are you bothered of that? Do you think that CBFC should have the right to dictate terms to the filmmakers? What is your stand on the Censorship of Cinema in India?

Satish: With the first film, it was nudity. I mean isn't it laughable that the naked human body when shown in art can be seen as obscene? Besides, what is obscenity, except what's in someone's mind? And who censors literature and painting and the other arts in the modern world? We are, as a nation – excuse me for the expression –

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The Painted House

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should stop just there. They don't have the right to tell a filmmaker to slice up his or her film and make it the way they wish it to be. My stand on censorship of cinema in India is clear. Censorship has no place and should be relegated to the Victorian era where the concept was introduced.

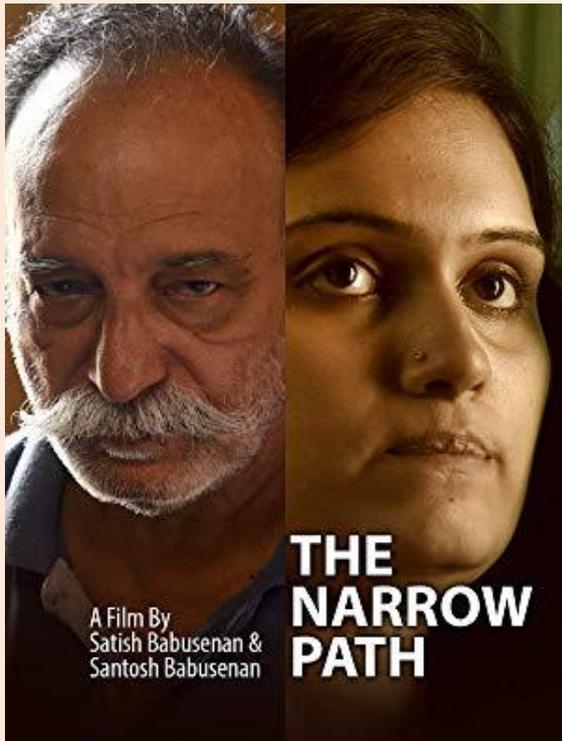
Santosh: Censorship is such a dated idea. We live in a world that craves for freedom. Let's not hang on to colonial vestiges! I think we have enough laws to take care of any problem that a film can throw up, just like in the case of literature. Time to grow up.

As for our run-ins with the CBFC, they wanted 3 nude scenes removed from The Painted House. The scenes were relevant to the

story and could not really be removed. After all, the film was about false morality! But that apart, our position is that nude scenes can exist in a movie even if they are completely irrelevant and extraneous. It's time we stopped being squeamish about nudity and sex. They're part of our life and we're not going to live without them any time soon. About Darkness, they wanted us to remove words like "beef eater", "saffronisation", "Maoist". They were being more loyal than the king! I guess their chairman in Mumbai realised that these recommendations wouldn't stand in court and so he referred the film to a revising committee himself, without our asking for the referral. And good sense prevailed, I'd say.

P: Darkness (2019) is a political film where you have straightway narrated how the state dominates over the free voice and finally does not care to stop that voice for ever if it goes against its interest! Don't you think that you could be in danger for making such direct political statements through your films?

Satish: We are all in danger, I'd say. Not just bro and me who made Darkness, but eventually each and every one of us. What's happening around us now is the muzzling of our freedom to express dissent. Dissent is an essential right we need to exercise so that we can be a healthy democracy. Isn't the world a wonderful place? It's wondrous. With millions of species of all kinds of life, amazing multitudes of things...and yet we have no place for differing ideas! You see, all of this arises from Fear. Fear of the other. It arises from our refusal to look within oneself for the cause of our disquiet. So there's the consequent displacement of this hate/fear (these are the same thing) to the 'other'. But I am hopeful. We've got a democratically elected government at the centre and so we have no one to blame except ourselves for the air of distrust and fundamentalist intolerance. The earth survived an ice age. Nothing lasts forever. Especially governments and ideologies. As for being afraid for oneself...no we're not. Life is always full of uncertainties and it doesn't make sense to hope for certainties. We are prepared for the uncertainties.



The Narrow Path

Santosh: We could be in danger, but what's the point living in fear? After all, all our films are about speaking one's mind and not resorting to masks!

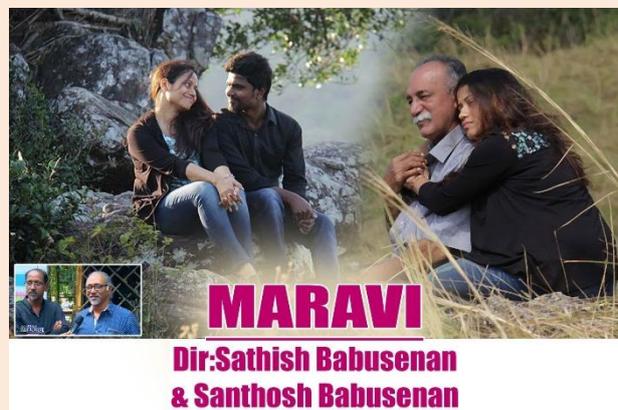
P: You are making films in Kerala - the state which still can provide a free space for the free voice in cinema. Do you think that such a film like 'Darkness' could have been made in the state like UP or Gujrat or MP despite your protagonist in the film advocates for the 'beef eaters' and 'maoists'?

Satish: Certainly. Such a film... I mean any kind of film can be made anywhere. All that's required is resolve. And difficulties are there for people to surmount, aren't they?

Santosh: I guess it'll be quite difficult to make a film like that in a right-wing ruled state. Kerala is definitely a more progressive and liberal state. Here we can criticise the government and the chief minister without getting beaten up! And we hope it stays that way.

P: There is paradigm shift of the content from your earlier films to Darkness. Your favorite content 'the search for truth' is subsided and the present political situation of the country came in the focal point. What is the context of this shift?

Satish: We were upset about the changes taking place around us since the 2014 general election. The rising intolerance, religious divide, the effort to dictate what



Maravi The Lost

one should eat, wear and even think...we decided to make a film as a missive of peace in such troubled times. Ramdas the protagonist is a man of peace. He may appear to be a rebel or a revolutionary but if one looks deeper, one cannot fail to see that Ramdas, the left-leaning liberal thinker, is really a man of peace. He speaks his mind without fear and pays for it in the end but that does not concern him. He acts out of a kind of courage born out of Compassion. He treats others with compassion including the ones who threaten him and the fish in his garden. He is able to do this only because he has come to terms with his inner demons and so discovered the secret spring of compassion/peace/happiness which lets him speak and act without fear. With more people like him around, this world would be such a fine place for all living things.

Santosh: I don't see it that way. All our films are about freedom. The earlier ones were more about personal freedom. Darkness is about social and political freedom. It's freedom all the same.

P: What is your opinion about the present situation of the country in the perspective of the recent parliament election? Do you think that the filmmaker will be comfortable to express themselves freely in this situation? If not, why do you think so?

Satish: Things are going to get murkier. Freedom of speech, ideas, freedom to express dissent, criticize etc. are going to be sent for a toss. Actually some of this happens, perhaps, out of some simple-minded 'good intentions'. Someone once said something about the way to hell being paved with stuff like that. It's exactly that way here. Filmmakers who fiercely wish to stand up for their rights will face problems, I'm sure. The others will metamorphose into successful filmmakers of the times. The human mind is resilient and capable of adapting itself

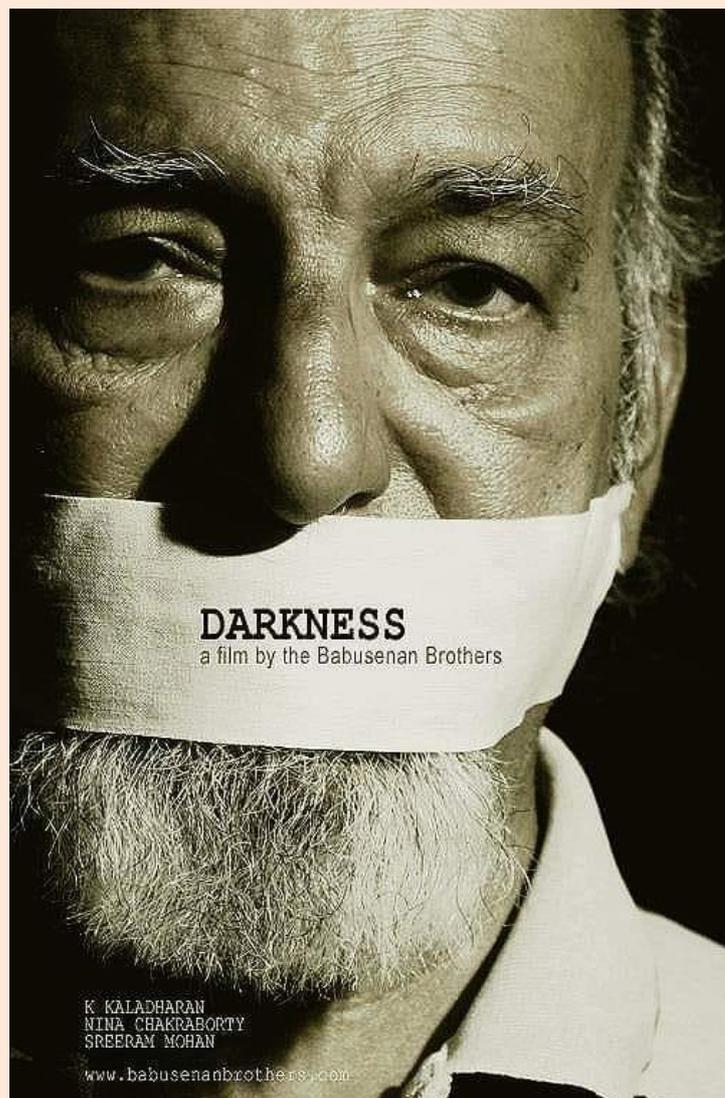


to suit the circumstances so I guess film-making will survive. Some filmmakers may not.

Santosh: We'll have to wait and see how the government deals with issues like free speech, secularism, personal liberty, etc. Their record in the first term hasn't been good at all. But I don't want that to prejudice me too much now. I'm willing to hold my breath and see if they'll look at things differently this time.

P: Many famous filmmakers, film and theater personalities jointly signed an appeal to the voters requesting them not to vote in favour of a particular political party in the last parliament election. People's mandate washed out that request of the celebrities. Do you think that those who appealed have got no impact on the common people? Or any other reasons are there behind it?

Satish: It's a Modi wave that we have seen. Deification is something we Indians are culturally built for. Suits our temperament I guess. Supporters and admirers of the PM deify him exactly like the believers and supporters of man-gods do all around us. Such blind admiration cannot be shaken by words of reason. Besides, reasonable people are always a very small minority. So what can a motley bunch of artists, activists and other intellectuals do? Nothing!



Yet one has to do what one can. That's part of the natural process, I guess.

Santosh: We're ourselves a little baffled by it. People were willing to ignore issues like economic slow-down and unemployment. I think the BJP succeeded in upstaging ideas like nationalism which went down well with the people. They also created a perception of being far less corrupt than the Congress and its allies. I don't know how long people will be captivated by perceptions. Sooner or later they'll start looking at economic growth, employment, upward mobility, etc. And the government will have to deliver. Another reason for the BJP's victory may be Modi himself. It's quite possible people voted for him to be Prime minister. They may not have been voting for the BJP at all. The subsequent local body elections in Rajasthan and Karnataka seem to support this.

Darkness

P: India is the highest film producing country of the world, but in all leading film festivals of the world Indian films are failing miserably. In most cases they are not selected and even if a couple of those are selected, do not get any prestigious award. This year in Cannes, there was not a single Indian film in official section of the festival. Even the B grade festivals do not care for the Indian films. Whereas Bollywood is getting much more popular in the commercial circuit worldwide. In many countries Bollywood is the main contestant of Hollywood. What is the reason behind it?

Satish: About Indian art cinema not making it big at the big festivals I think we filmmakers are ourselves responsible. We need to make better stuff. I am including the films Santosh and I make. We need to evolve in the art and not follow the fashion, the trend. We are mostly a country of mediocre 'followers'. We follow trends and seldom create them. When neo-realism came up in Europe we followed it. When the New Wave came up, we followed it. We proudly name ourselves after Hollywood, shamelessly calling ourselves Bollywood, Kollywood, Mollywood and what have you. I once had the pleasure of meeting a journalist from Hollywood who told me most kindly that Guru Dutt made such amazing films and can be called the Indian

Orson Welles. I was happy to tell him that it was a huge disavour to Guru Dutt who certainly made better films than Welles. I don't know if Dutt really did, but frankly I don't care (laughs heartily).

Santosh: I think there are two reasons for this. One, we may be telling dated stories in a dated style and for too long. We'll include ourselves in this group. The second reason is money. Art house filmmakers here are cash strapped. We're all working with puny budgets that are infuriatingly restrictive. This is primarily 'cos there's no market for art films here. No distribution channels at all. Theatres won't play art films. TV channels won't buy them. Online platforms like Netflix showed some initial interest in buying them. But they too seem to have wised up. They aren't buying them anymore! Governments aren't doing much either. With such paltry encouragement how can you expect Indian films to play up to world standards?!! It's not that individual filmmakers will start making wonderful films if more money were thrown at them. No, the idea is that a robust market will bring in more filmmakers, more competition and thereby improve the quality of the films in general. Bollywood's growth only vindicates this. So is the case with Indian cricket. They have more funds, more facilities, more openings and so they also deliver more.

P: Some of your films have travelled to some festivals. Got some awards as well. Are you satisfied with this appraisal? Or you think, your films are underrated by the festival circuit and you deserve much more applause?

Satish: True we've received some applause. But we've also been booed and hooted at. I think we don't really care about all that. Santosh and I have a valuation of our own cinema and we know where we stand. Abysmally low. Cinema as Art is amazing. We grew up watching some great stuff: Tarkovsky who baffled even the masterly Bergman, Parajanov who baffled nearly everyone, and so on and so on. We are trying to say things we believe are significant but we need to find a tolerably good form to say it in. We need to make more and more films and someday hopefully we'll be moderately good in our own estimation.

Santosh: We have no such complaints. I think we've been getting what we deserve. We're trying to make better films. Hopefully, we'll succeed and then may be the festivals will be kinder! But that's not our primary concern. We're more bothered about improving our filmmaking skills. Guess it takes time and a lot of sweat. Hopefully not tears and blood!

P: As the producers of your own films, how do you recover money you spend for your films? Do you think that your role as the producer and director sometimes clashes with each other? How do you solve that problem?



Satish and Santosh

Satish: Our production company is financed by 5 of us, all old college friends who set out in our twenties to make art cinema; but didn't have the money to do it. Besides bro and me, there's Doney Joseph, Sreekumar and Tommy John. We now put in whatever monies we can spare to fund our filmmaking. Couple of our films were sold to online platforms, some got awards with some good money...so we are able to continue. We will keep making films till the money runs out. So far it hasn't. So let's see... As for clash of interest, no. The fact that we produce our own films gives us the absolute freedom to make films exactly the way we want to. With absolutely no interference from

anyone else, not even the other three partners. So, if we're making mediocre stuff, we really have no one and nothing to blame but our own mediocre minds.

Santosh: We have three old pals Doney Joseph, Sreekumar and Tommy John who are partners in our production house Fifth Element. All of us jointly put in money for the productions and share the losses joyfully! We've managed to get some returns from Netflix, Amazon and a few awards. But not enough, really. We keep digging into personal funds to raise money for every new film with the hope that one of them will help us make some money and cover investments. So far the guys aren't complaining!

We write our stories with budgets in mind. Guess it restricts our imagination to some extent, but we aren't too bothered about it. We see the whole thing as a challenge! We set out to make movies in our early twenties. And now we've made six. Isn't that good enough to be happy about?

P: What's your academic background? Where you studied and what were the main subjects? Have you got any formal training of film making?

Satish: I did a BTech in Mechanical Engineering before going to IIT Bombay to do my MDes in Visual Communication. I went into Engineering with the full intention of becoming an inventor (laughs). My college had the biggest Technical Library in those days in Kerala and I entered it in my first year to go look for resources. The books were arranged in alphabetical order and so the shelves which hit me first were the ones on Art. I picked up a volume, then another and then another. I never reached the Engineering shelves.

Santosh: I did a PhD in film studies from the University of Kerala. Before that I'd done a masters in English literature. Also from the same university. No formal training in film making. Mostly trial and error, I'd say.

P: In 1998 both of you left your very successful careers in Mumbai with MTV, Fashion and Corporate Films and came to your home in Kerala. Then after 17 years of hibernation you came back with hyperactive spirit of film making which haunted you to make six films in five years! What is the mystery behind it? Have you succeeded to discover the mystery of creation in that 17 years of self-contemplation?

Satish: While working in Mumbai (it was still called Bombay I think) we were pretty successful, making quite a pile of money...but somewhere we felt that we were losing our soul. You see, both Santosh and I were inclined towards philosophical inquiry from our early years. A mild strain of lunacy which ran in the family, I guess like a bad case of genetics. Well to cut a long story short, the madness resurfaced in Mumbai and we decided we had to find our souls again. We packed our bags and one cold Thursday morning (not really, I just put that in for effect) we left. We returned to Trivandrum. Santosh was already married then and had a little daughter. I wasn't to marry until a couple of years later. We tried to delve seriously into the earlier journey which we had left off. To cut it even shorter, more years flew by. Then we decided to make *The Painted House* about how people are really painted houses and how each of us needs to look beyond the paint to see oneself. After that more films happened. They seem to be happening still.

Santosh: We were smitten by the existential bug in the middle of busy lives in Mumbai. And so we left Mumbai and came back to laid back Kerala where it's possible to live on minor monies. We were thinking about why people feel miserable at least occasionally. Is there a right way to live, how can we be happy, etc. Over the years we understood that we're making ourselves unhappy. Other people or external circumstances have nothing to do with it. We requite simply asking the wrong questions and looking at the wrong places most of the time. Quite like that Mulla Nasruddin story where the Mulla looks for his key under a street lamp where there's more light although he lost the key in the darkness near his home! We are usually asking philosophical questions when our problems are actually

psychological. Well, these questions are gone now and we're back in action. Our films are these thoughts and explorations in visual form.

P: Do you think that all filmmakers should undergo through such a process of introspection to find out the truth they are searching for through their films? Do you think that our film makers are serious about the philosophical aspects of the films they are making? Don't you think that in most of the cases, film making is just a 'project' to them, not a 'passion' at all?

Satish: Well, filmmaking is different things to different people. I don't think it is fair or even right to imagine that there should be a certain way for an artist to do his stuff. We all do what we can, or must. This world is big enough to contain everything and some more. For some, filmmaking is a passion, for others it's a project or even a business idea. Well, uniformity is boring and nature is certainly anything but boring.

Santosh: Philosophical or psychological explorations are just one of the many genres. People can make films about anything that concerns them and they're all equally valid. I think a filmmaker doesn't have to go through any kind of philosophical introspection to make good films. But such introspection can help with our lives. We can learn to be more free and happy in our everyday life. But that's certainly not a necessary component of filmmaking or art. In fact, some of the best artists have led extremely tortured and painful lives.

I think a filmmaker can make good films even if it's only a 'project' to him. He only needs to work hard. Passion doesn't guarantee quality. It's hard work that does.

P: Why you opted for making films jointly and how do you share the creativity, failure and success between yourselves? How do you resolve the difference of opinion?

Satish: Filmmaking is our way of sharing our ideas with like-minded people. The things we are trying to say through our films arise from stuff Santosh and I have gone through in the past. The journey is

shared experience. So making films jointly was a natural process. As for resolving differences of opinion, we have a rule. If one of us feels that an idea, a scene, a whatever stinks, the other will drop it immediately. We don't try to hold on to trash.

Santosh: Our explorations in both art and philosophy have been together. Over the years, we've struck a kind of resonance between us. So it was natural for us to also start making films together. Especially since we want to say almost the same things. If there's a difference of opinion, we usually drop that idea and find a new one. As for the failure or success of a film, we don't take it too seriously 'cos we're mostly focussed on making the next film better. We've been applauded and booed for our films. So we've sort of learned to take them both in our stride!

P: You live in a joint family with your parents, spouses and children all under the same roof with a single kitchen which is becoming very rare in modern urban Indian society. Do you think that this lifestyle has any impact on your films? If yes, how?

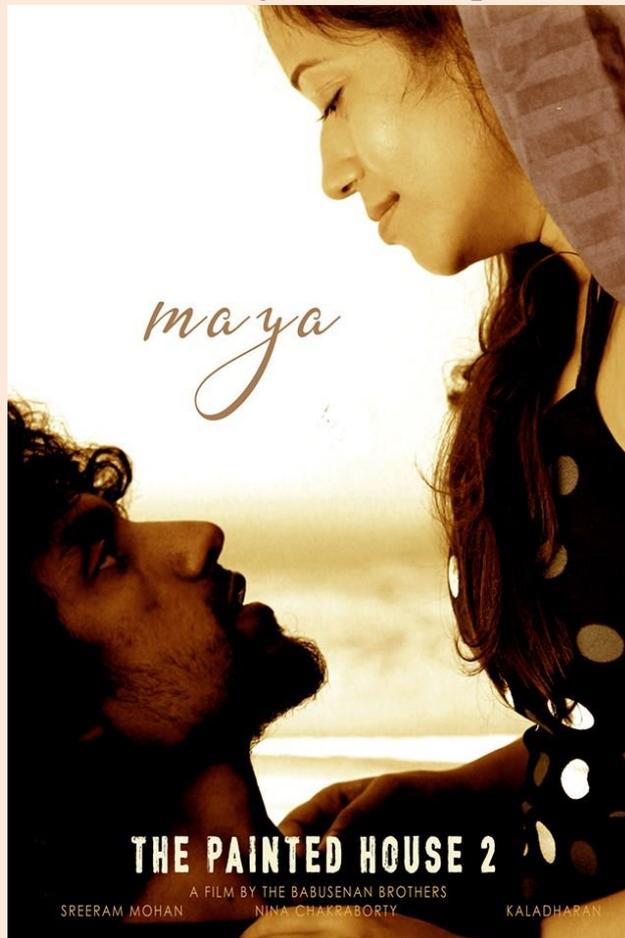
Satish: Certainly! It's a great feeling. We are really fortunate that both our parents are alive and healthy and close to us. Our mother makes amazing tea and still looks after us as if we were children. (laughs) Our dad is a very active writer and a man of compassion, much like Ramdas of DARKNESS. That aside, they always fish us out of the financial difficulties we land into in our reckless pursuit of cinema. My daughter has good role models in her grandparents. Santosh's daughter is our Associate Director. She is married and lives in Jodhpur now but comes down every time we make a movie, which is, often. Our spouses both have day jobs and don't eat our heads or pester us to go make money. What more do we need?! Life is good.

Santosh: It certainly has an impact on our lives. I don't think it has any effect on our films. We live together 'cos we all get along well. I don't think this is the right way or wrong way to live. If you can't get along in a joint household you better get away as quickly as you can!

P: Your father Mr. V. Babusenan is a Sahitya Akademi award winning writer who started writing after retirement from the service. Has it worked as an additional inspiration for you to start making films so late?

Satish: Yea, dad was in the Reserve Bank. He took voluntary retirement in the mid 90s and started writing books. It is amazing. He has written books on such varied subjects as Bertrand Russell, Biology, Genetics, the stories of Sherlock Holmes and so on. He is thoroughly organised in everything he does, unlike either Santosh or me (certainly unlike me). He goes to sleep at 10:30 sharp even if

there's a fire; dawn, reads his for a walk and amazing hot his brood to writes on his sleeps for hours after some more, internet for shows, listens YouTube on a speaker; all this young age of his mind, never grudge and own business midst of a is an



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Maya

managed to catch

Santosh: I'm not sure about that, but I must say that our father has never tried to put us on the straight and narrow. He has always let us do our thing. He supported our decisions when we quit our jobs early in life. He also supports us occasionally when we're hard put to find

production funds. ‘Occasionally’ may be the wrong word, ‘frequently’ is quite like it! I think he’s also a votary of personal freedom. Something like “live and let live”. He’s quite a compassionate person too. I think a ‘liberal humanist’ would be a good description. Looks like his years as a banker couldn’t blunt the artist in him. And some of it may have rubbed off on us. I mean art, not his other qualities.

P: Your uncle Mr. C P Padmakumar was a cult figure of the Malayalam cinema. Are you, in any way, inspired by him to make films?

Satish: Indeed. Uncle Pappan was uncompromising in his attitude to filmmaking. He made art films. In fact he was the one who created the air of cinema-as-art in granddad’s house when Santosh and I were growing up. Till those days cinema, to me, was merely entertainment. I remember him taking me to watch a Bergman film once. I may’ve been about fifteen then. The film was Cries and Whispers. It’s a Swedish film, come, you’ll like it, he said. I wasn’t so sure. I didn’t even know there was something called Swedish cinema. I saw Cries and Whispers and was hooked for life. I spent a whole week in a daze... Uncle Pappan was an affectionate uncle and he always hoped that we’d make art cinema some day. But we were busy making money in Mumbai. (smiles) He never compromised on his vision and so ended up making only two full length features but somehow he had a cult following. Maybe it was his charisma. He passed away suddenly, falling prey to a rare kind of cancer. People from far away cities came to his funeral...so many people loved him. Anyway, he was the man who introduced us to the magical world of cinema.

Santosh: Oh, certainly. He was the one who introduced us to good cinema. He took us to our first Bergman and Fellini. It was such a devastating experience. We hadn’t seen anything like that till then. It shattered everything we knew as cinema. Opened up a new world before us. In those days of celluloid film, production costs were rather prohibitive and he could make only two feature films. Both serious art

films, Aparna and Sannamohanam. Yes, he definitely was an inspiration.

P: You make films in very low budget and within a very short period of time. Can you share the basic principles of your production designing to motivate the indie film makers?

Satish: Sure, but certainly not to motivate or advice. Who wants advice anyway! (laughs) Planning, preparedness and multi-camera execution. These are the things that help us make films so fast and so cheap. We work on our screenplay thoroughly, edit and re-edit it till we are both satisfied with it and then we lock it. We send copies of the script to all our lead actors. They all come prepared to our rehearsals. Our rehearsals are rigorous. Everyone goes through the lines and actions several times until each person in the team – actors, associates and assistants – knows every bit of the movie even more than we ourselves do. We have a fine team of associates and assistants. They are all so hard working and so dedicated that we two oldies can take things easy. We often rehearse on locations too before the actual shoot begins so everyone is prepared spatially in their minds. Multi-camera-shooting is the third part. That way we get very good action continuity and once we light up for the master shot, we save on time for change of camera angles and lighting.

Santosh: It's quite simple, really. We do a lot of pre-shoot rehearsals. Sometimes we even rehearse in the actual locations. On the shoot day, the actors know just what to do and that saves us a lot of time. Rehearsals also have other benefits. The actors would've learned all their lines and so can focus on the action and the emotion. By then, our assistants too are so thorough with the action and dialogue that they know what to do. This also speeds up things greatly. Perhaps, the most important factor is multi-camera shoot. We use two or three cameras while shooting. This saves us a lot of time by not having to re-enact scenes for close ups, etc. It also ensures very good continuity.

P: The lead male actor of all the six films you have made so far is the famous thespian Kaldharan Rasika. And the lead female actor of the

last four films is Nina Chakraborty who is a Bengali girl. Why do you repeat your lead cast continuously? Is it a superstition or obsession or the real demand of the characters which could not be replaced by any better option?

Satish: We are old fashioned fellows who love to work with friends. When we got a good band of actors together, we saw no reason to throw them away. These lead actors (Kaladharan Rasika, Nina Chakraborty and Sreeram Mohan) are top class performers. Why would we let them go, unless they themselves want to leave? Besides they know exactly what we need from them and give us lots more. They never ask us about their roles when we call them up for a new project. It's all a matter of trust, friendship and great good will. Difficult things to come by these days and we are lucky and happy to have these three performers working continuously with us.

Santosh: It is really the comfort level we share. We've worked together for several films and now the actors know what we want of them. We sort of know their minds and they know ours. So it's easy and comfortable for everyone. We really enjoy working with them. They too seem to think so, at least so far! Each film is like a few days of celebration. We love to have an ensemble of good actors and keep rotating them.

P: Your films narrate a very sketchy story? How do you select stories? Do you write those for your films or depend upon the well known literary works?

Satish: We start with the 'What'. What is it that we want to explore with this film... For example, with The Painted House Part 1, we worked on the theme of Self-Recognition; with the Narrow Path we chose Guilt being the cause of a difficult relationship. In MAYA, we are dealing with the pursuit of Happiness. Once we decide on the 'What', we work on the form: the story we need to use to explore this theme well. That is how the story comes into being. For example we wanted a very difficult and guilt ridden relationship for the Narrow Path and so we chose a father and son. To add to the tension we

decided to make the father bed-ridden and the son confined to their small one-room flat. Etc, etc. We write our own stories, yes.

Santosh: We always write our own stories. Sometimes the plot comes in a flash. Other times, we decide on what we want to talk about and then create a story that can communicate the idea. Our movies are almost always more focussed on the content than on the form. They are visualisations of our thoughts. And so we have to create the stories ourselves. We can't use somebody else's story to voice our thoughts. We also experiment with form in minor ways, but our new film gives a lot of importance to both content and form.

P: So far you have made all of your films in Malayalam language. Have you got any plan to make films in other languages as well? If yes, which language do you prefer most and why?

Satish: We're comfortable in English. So that is a good possibility. Hindi and Tamil too. I'd love to make a film in Russian! (laughs) I grew up on Russian cinema watching roughly 8 Russian films every month – that must be about 700 Russian films, Holy Babushka!!! - until the Soviet Centre near my house closed down.

Santosh: We use very ordinary spoken language in our films. We try to avoid rhetoric and embellishments. Of course, only a Malayali can know this about our films. I think we'll be comfortable in any language if we can make sure that the language and intonation are convincing and natural. We'll be comfortable with English, Tamil and Hindi 'cos we know all three language to some degree. And may be Bengali, 'cos we've come to develop a fondness for that state and its people.

P: What is your target audience - mass or class?

Satish: Certainly not the masses. Because we know we're not trying to entertain our audience. We are happy to make them think. That would be a huge disfavour to a mass audience.

Santosh: Our movies are basically meant to inspire thought. They're not meant to entertain. That automatically limits the viewership. However we also don't want to bore our viewers so much that they'll refuse to hear what we're saying. We're looking to find a form that can generate just enough interest to keep the viewer from getting up and leaving. By viewer, I mean someone who likes watching art movies.

P: If you are offered to make a big budget masala film, will you accept the proposal? If yes, why? If not, then why again?

Satish: Certainly not a masala film. No way! Bigger budgets? Sure, I'd love that! We want to pay all our colleagues lots more money and we'd like to have some money for ourselves too. So bigger budgets are fine. But we'll only make what we want. And the way we want to. So masala will have no place in our cinema. It'll have to remain in the beef fry.

Santosh: No, not a 'masala' movie. We're not averse to the idea of big budget productions. That will mean better production conditions, values and more monies to the artistes, technicians and us. That's surely welcome, why not! But 'masala'? Sorry, that's an emphatic no. We want to make films that say something we consider important whether the budget is big or small. As I said, entertainment is not our thing.

P: Who, according to you, are the great masters of Indian cinema? Are you influenced by any of them?

Satish: There have been good films made by some Indian filmmakers. But I would consider only Ray as a master filmmaker.

Santosh: Actually, I don't have any personal favourites. But I'd say Satyajit Ray is the great Indian master. He made movies which combined good content and form. His movies had a formal quality that could match the European masters. Something that Indian filmmakers are struggling with even now. But I don't think we're

influenced by him 'cos our movies are about our own thoughts, about the things we want to say. And I don't think they're similar to his in anyway. So, how can there be any influence in the telling? But that certainly doesn't rule out unconscious influences and echoes from all the films and filmmakers we've loved watching.

P: What are the top 10 Indian films according to you?

Satish: Ray's PatherPanchali and Aravindan's Marattom; can't remember more.

Santosh: Charulata and PatherPanchali by Ray, Elipathayam by AdoorGopalakrishnan, Rushyashruna by VRK Prasad, Maarattom by Aravindan, Death of Insane by Sanal Kumar Sasidharan. Can't remember more. There're a few other films I liked when I saw them years ago. Not sure if I'll like them now.

P: What is your opinion about the mainstream Indian cinema, especially Bollywood?

Satish: Some of the mainstream filmmakers are brilliant. Sanjay Leela Bansali for one. There are plenty of others too. But personally I prefer art cinema. To make and to watch.

Santosh: People need entertainment. They don't have to be thinking and pondering all the time. Mainstream cinema is meant to entertain and it's doing so quite well. They're making a lot of good mainstream films in Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam. I don't follow them much, but once in a way I watch a Malayalam film and find it quite entertaining.

P: What is opinion about the film criticism in India? Do you give importance to the criticism of your films?

Satish: I believe it is the film critic's duty to educate society on the art of cinema. We all know that all the other arts have two streams: the artistic and the entertainment/mainstream. No one can confuse between Painting as art and Commercial Art for advertising. Same

goes for literature. Lee Child is an amazing writer but you shouldn't be putting him in the same box as a Marquez or a Grass. And no one does. That's because literary critics and art critics have helped educate us on the varying definitions of what is considered art. Unfortunately such a thing is not happening in cinema. Except for a small and committed minority, most film critics are merely reviewing films. Reviews are for mass consumption and the platforms which carry these reviews (newspapers, online portals, glossies etc) make this a commercial necessity for the reviewer. Perhaps. With the result that people no longer know an elbow from a donkey (read ass) in cinema. (laughs) I would love it if serious film critics stopped reviewing Bollywood, Mollywood and all the other woods and got down to helping society see the importance of art in an otherwise mass-entertainment based medium. This might also help art filmmakers take themselves seriously and not wander off into one of these 'woods'. The woods are lovely, certainly, deep and dark but each of us has promises to keep. To ourselves. As for serious criticism of our films (not subjective opinion, but what stands to reason) we take it seriously and are always grateful for it.

Santosh: I think there aren't enough journals or magazines that publish serious film criticism. What we see are mostly film reviews. There are several serious and knowledgeable critics but there are very few magazines or journals or even e-journals that care to publish serious studies or critiques of cinema. With more universities and colleges offering courses in film studies, this could change for the better. At least, I hope it will.

We take criticism of our films seriously. We listen carefully to both viewers and critics and try to discern between their personal views and more objective comments. We keep the latter in mind when we proceed to the next film.

P: What is opinion about the film society movement in India? Are you, in any way, influenced by this movement?

Satish: I might not have become a filmmaker if Film Circle, a film society formed by the KSFDC of Kerala and the National Film

Archive had not shown the most amazing art cinema from across the world in Trivandrum. I was in my early twenties at the time. What an amazing time that was! 'Chalachitra' screened only art cinema (I watched Cries and Whispers there!). Unfortunately they no longer screen movies. Banner Film Society today, run by committed art lovers like MF Thomas and Biju has taken that position now. Prohibitive costs for screening spaces has killed many societies. I know of a film society called 'Open Frame' in a remote town called Payannur which shows the finest art cinema (and only that) from across the world every month. In a ramshackle, abandoned movie theatre. Run by Nandalal, Premachandran and others, this society actually subtitles every movie they screen into Malayalam. Painstaking work as one can imagine. But the result is obvious. Payannur has one of the most cinema-literate audiences I've ever seen anywhere. Yes, art filmmakers like us have everything to thank the film society movement for. So we always give our films to any society anywhere who wants to screen our films. We appreciate the personal sacrifices each of its workers makes to spread the love of cinema as art in India.

Santosh: We're avowed beneficiaries of the film society movement. Kerala had a good number of film societies screening the great masters almost every week. It is these screenings that introduced us to Bergman and Tarkovsky and Fellini and Parajanov and the other greats. So, we can safely say that but for the movement, we wouldn't be making films now!

P: What are the next films you are planning to make?

Satish: A film about a killer discovering Compassion...but one never knows. We do what comes to us when the money peeps at the window.

Santosh: There're a few more ideas festering in the kitty now. When the monies are ready, we'll pull out one and start working. Not sure which one. I think that'll depend on the budget at our disposal.

P: If you decide to quit film making then what are the alternatives you may like to opt for?

Satish: Oh nothing. I am already doing what I love most. I listen to music, I read, I sing for fun, I have fun times with my daughter, I go play badminton, I eat, meet friends, spend time with people I love, accompany Archana and our daughter to see some really awful films sometimes, have a big mug of good coffee before I go to sleep... Yes I make films too. If that stops, why shouldn't the rest go on!

Santosh: I don't want to quit filmmaking yet. I'm enjoying it very much now. I also enjoy sitting at home and idling. So, if I quit filmmaking, I'll probably sit quietly at home doing nothing in particular, reading an occasional book, spending time with the family... Life's good!

Premendra Mazumder is the Secretary of Fipresci-India.