

Fipresci-India Discussion:

Documentaries to Forefront: Role of the Critics

24th June 2019 Monday 3-5PM, Kairali Theater Complex, Thiruvananthapuram

12th International Documentary and Short Film Festival Kerala

Organised by: Kerala State Chalachitra Academy

INTRODUCTION

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

First of all, I would like to thank the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy for providing the Fipresci-India this platform in the 12th International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala for holding this discussion on the topic 'Documentaries to the Forefront: Role of the Critics'. I'm sure Fipresci-India's mission to establish better and closer relations between the film critics to create a tighter network for further collaborations will be successful through this discussion.

India is the largest film producing country of the world which now produces more or less 2,000 full length feature films in a year for theatrical release only. Right now we have only 10,000 single screen theaters and 3,000 multiplex screens which are not at all sufficient for such a highly populous country of 1.35 billion people. Still on an average 2.5 billion movie tickets are sold in a year in the country's domestic market placing India as the largest film market of the world. Unfortunately documentary film has got a very insignificant share in this huge network of film market in India. Very recently two documentaries were released by Nandan, the film Centre of West Bengal in Kolkata, and both ran successfully for two weeks! Box office collections for both the films are quite satisfactory. Still no important daily newspaper of the city, which ritualistically publish the film reviews every weekend, cared for it.

Let's see where the film criticism stands in this perspective. Film criticism in India could be classified in three major categories: popular, academic and propagative. The first one is the journalistic film criticism abundantly found in the daily newspapers, tabloids, magazines, television channels, online portals and other mass media outlets which mainly serve the popular purpose. Social media is a new addition with very popular acceptance as well. Academic

criticism done by the film scholars, teachers and students of the schools of film and media studies in different universities and colleges, are generally published in the academic journals. In between these two, another category of propagative film criticism prevails prominently for propagation of film culture promoted by the film society journals and other similar publications with lucid contributions of the film enthusiasts evaluating cinema as a serious text.

Film criticism is a popular content for the print and electronic media of India and both of which are very huge in size. We have more or less 70,000 newspapers and 1600 satellite channels all over the country. Moreover, there are journals and magazines of different types. As on 31 March 2018, there were over 100,000 publications registered with the Registrar of Newspapers for India. We are the second-largest newspaper market in the world, with a combined circulation of 240 million copies daily. Most of all the dailies and popular periodicals publish filmy gossips, stories about the stars and their personal lives to cater the popular demand! Some of the daily newspapers and periodicals published by the big houses generally have the film critics in their payroll but most of them depend either upon the freelancers or retainers or guest critics. Some popular publications even assign the celebrities of different fields to write film criticism. Mostly the film journalists, engaged to write the tit bits of the film industry are assigned to write film criticism. Obviously film journalism and film criticism gets mixed up in most of the cases and the film criticism loses its essential intellectual credential and turns to be a mere journalistic review only. They even rate the newly released films by giving points or stars out of five or ten to motivate or demotivate the potential viewers as per policy of their houses. Same thing happens in case of the electronic media where the contents mainly emphasize on the gossips, box office collections and trivial issues to increase the TRP of the channels.

Authentic film criticism is available only in some very high profile publications, especially in the periodicals brought out by the serious publishing houses; academic journals, published by the educational institutions where film studies is there in the curriculum; film society journals brought out by the pioneer film societies and some other serious film journals published by some organizations working for the propagation of film culture. Though this segment is very small in comparison to the huge size of the media, still these are the most reliable and authentic source of film criticism in India.

But unfortunately, like the mainstream media, these specialized film publications also deal mainly with the fiction films, to be very specific, the full length feature films. Documentary, though the most original form of cinema, is not there in the popular agenda here in India. So, neither the theaters are interested to showcase the documentaries in their regular screening schedule nor the print or electronic media takes interest to provide space to cover the criticism on documentaries. Some documentaries like Anand Patwardhan's *Ram Ke Naam*, Rakesh Sharma's *Final Solution*, Stalin K's *India Untouched*, Leslee Udwin's *India's Daughter*, Sanjay Kak's *How We Celebrate Freedom*, Sridhar Rangayan's *Purple Skies*, Paromita Vohra's *Q2P*, Sohini Ghosh's *Tales of the Night Fairies*, Deepti Kakkar and Fahad Mustafa's *Katiyaabaz*, Nidhi Tulli's *Ladies Special*, Asvin Kumar's *Inshallah Kashmir* and others which become controversial for their content get importance of the media and thus come into the notice of the film lovers. But such number is very few. Most of the documentaries remain unnoticed to the majority of the people as media is not interested to give due importance to them. And there lies the responsibility of the film critics to bring Documentaries to the Forefront.

This is mostly unknown to the majority of the film lovers that our master filmmakers have made many remarkable documentaries. How could we forget Satyajit Ray's *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961), *Sikkim* (1971), *The Inner Eye* (1972), *Bala* (1976) and *Sukumar Ray* (1987); Ritwik Ghatak's *Amar Lenin* (1970) and *Ramkinkar Baij* (1975); Mrinal Sen's *Moving Perspective* (1964), *Tripura Prasanga* (1982), *City Life – Calcutta My Eldorado* (1990), *And the Show Goes On – India Chapter* (1996)? Shyam Benegal, who has made about 25 feature films has made about 40 documentaries including the National Award winning *Satyajit Ray, Film maker* (1982) and *Festival of India* (1985). But again these documentaries are not so sought after by the audience like their feature films. Here also lies the responsibility of the film critics to bring Documentaries to the Forefront.

India has a very vibrant and independent documentary film making community which has carved a niche for themselves with their hard works and creativity to make films on different issues like human rights, gender equality, sexual identity, communal politics, censorship, tribal issues, individual liberty, white atrocities, black laws, environmental issues, nature and pollution, art and

culture, heritage and traditions and many others. Advent of digital technology revolutionized the technique of making documentary films. Role of the film critics is to give due importance to these documentaries in their writings to bring those to the notice of the potential audience so that they get motivated to watch these documentaries and thus the exhibitors get interested to showcase those in their regular screening schedule. Satyajit Ray used to believe that good audience is the primary necessity for survival of good cinema. With this mission he founded the film society movement in India long back in 1947, eight years before his *Pather Panchali* (1955) was made and remained at the helm of affairs of the movement till the end of his life. In 1965 he wrote “Today, when film-making is undergoing such enormous and rapid changes, and new experiments are being made virtually everywhere, a critic must keep his senses alert at all times in order to make an objective assessment of new methods and new styles.” This advice is equally important today for the role of the critics to bring Documentaries to the Forefront!

Thank you all for your patience, hearing me for such a long time! Please take part in the discussion and kindly suggest us what should be the Role of the Critics to Bring Documentaries to the Forefront!

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Thiruvanthapuram