

**Festival Review**  
**Meena Karnik**

## **International Film Festival of Kerala: IFFK 2018**



*Zakariya Mohammed receiving FIPRESCI Award for his film Sudani From Nigeria*

When The International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK) concluded (6th to 13th December 2018), it never seemed like it almost got cancelled. In August 2018, devastating floods ravaged this southernmost state of India, causing losses worth billions of dollars. The entire country chipped in to help Kerala revive itself. But the damage meant the state government could not fund the International Film Festival. The Chief Minister of Kerala announced it in as many words.

But Kerala Chalachitra Academy (Kerala Film Academy) had other ideas. Founded in 1998 to help the government in formulating policies concerning film and television, the dignitaries on the board of the academy could not come to terms with the thought of cancelling a festival that has become an integral part of Kerala's culture when Malayalam (the language of the state) cinema was celebrating its 90th year. They began devising strategies to go ahead with it without seeking help from the state government.

One of their first decisions was to increase the registration fee from Rupees 650 (approximately 8 Euros) to Rupees 2000 (approximately 25 Euros). It was a significant hike. But they conveyed the reasons behind it to the people, and highlighted that this is not a permanent hike. The respondents too, made a statement. The attendance merely decreased to 9000 from last year's 10000, and the film festival kicked off in the state capital of Thiruvananthapuram. Some of the expenses, of course, had to be cut down.

The festival wasn't flashy, but the energy remained unbroken. In fact, the festival had more films than last year, ably applauded by movie buffs, as they queued up in numbers in front of the designated 13 screens.

The FIPRESCI juries' focus at the festival was Malayalam cinema. Along with Meghachandra Kongbam from Manipur and Premchand from Kerala the three of us judged films under the category "Malayalam Cinema Today". We watched 14 films; seven of those were debut directors. What stood out at the festival was the panorama of varied subjects explored by the filmmakers, who appeared to be influenced by a range of masters in the field. From Godard's *Breathless* to *Romeo and Juliet* and from Adoor Gopalakrishnan to the late Padmarajan; the inspiration in these films was hard to escape. Some of the movies had been released in theatres in Kerala, and had received popular acclaim. Each of these were technically slick, with overwhelming visuals. Some of the frames made us wonder if we are looking at a painting. The unapologetic use of drone camera to exhibit the beauty of God's own country, or Kerala, through its coconut trees, lush green outfields and incessant rains remarkably kept the audience hooked.

But what separates the great from the good is depth which was lacking in most of the films with a few exceptions.



Sudani From Nigeria touched our hearts like no other film did. First-time director Zakariya managed to strike a perfect blend of local story with a global appeal. It is a story of a poverty-stricken Samuel, who migrates from Nigeria to a small town in Kerala to play for its local football club. But the manager of the club Majid, is no less important to the plot. It talks about the emotional bonds forged between people who transcend geographical boundaries, and break language barriers, but through light humour. At the end, nobody's problems actually get resolved, but the film leaves you with a wistful smile. We had no doubt in our mind when we decided to honour it with the International Critic's prize.

Before Zakariya had been honoured in Kerala, his fellow Keralite, Leo Jose Perisari announced his arrival by winning the Best Director's award at the IFFI (International Film Festival of India) in Goa concluded a week before Kerala's festival. His film Ee. Ma. Yau or R.I.P., is about a man who is busy planning a lavish funeral for his dead father. His father had expressed such a wish, and the son is keen on fulfilling it, even if it means borrowing money he would find hard to repay. It is a black comedy that discusses the fallouts of the funeral, reminding us of our own helplessness at every moment. The international jury in Kerala too honoured the debutant filmmaker with an award.

Both the films delved into Kerala's culture, especially rural society and the everyday lives of everyday people. Unnikrishnan Avala, a teacher and a short story writer, took it a step further in his first feature film *Udalazham* or *Body Deep*, where the protagonist is a transgender tribal called Gulikan played brilliantly by Mani who was a child actor from *Photographer*, a 2006 movie with one of the stars of Malayalam cinema, Mohanlal.



*FIPRESCI Jury in IFFK 2018*

Trapped in a man's body with a woman's mind and desires, Gulikan is constantly trying to search for peace and finds violent men who rape him instead. He is married to a girl at the age of thirteen according to tribal customs. She understands Gulikan's suffocation but can't ignore her own sexual desires either. He falls in love with a man from the town but has to run away when others around him discover this 'unnatural' relationship. Gulikan is constantly on the run, trying to escape from his village, from his town, from his wife, from his life and from himself. It is a rare sight to have a tribal hero, let alone having a transgender one. Director Unnikrishnan deserves applause for the brave tragedy complimented with exceptional camera work.

Apart from the love for cinema, one of the major incentives to attend international film festivals is to get a glimpse of different cultures. For a country as vast as India, every state has a narrative of its own, and the honour of adjudicating Malayalam cinema was a deep dive into Kerala's grassroots, history and customs. *Bhayanakam*, or *Fear*, by director Jayaraj, is set in a small village. It depicts the times of the Second World War, in which several youngsters from the village get recruited to fight for the British, the then rulers of India. A postman is one of the central characters of the movie. He has seen the perils of the First World War. Delivering money orders sent by the sons fighting the war, he now has to hand over the news of their deaths. In the process, he becomes a man feared by all. It captures the futility of war, along with the contrast between the exquisite Kerala with the shadow of death that looms large over the village.

However, the Malayalam films didn't limit themselves to the rural contours. Gautham Surya's *Sleeplessly Yours* is a story of a couple that attempts to bring a little zing in their relationship by trying to keep awake for five days with the help of a drug. Things get horribly wrong when they start hallucinating. But they get worse when the boy passes out only to find his partner missing when he gets up after two days. What made this film stand out was the portrayal of a modern couple, willing to be in a relationship without the strings that come with marriage, which even today is not a norm in modern India. Malayalam cinema, by and large, has portrayed its female characters in a traditional way and that is quite surprising since the state has highest percentage of literacy. It was refreshing to see many female protagonists representing today's woman with strong individualistic minds. The young Muslim directors like Zakariya and Soubin Shahir (film – *Parava*, which means pigeon) have humanized their Muslim characters too, otherwise portrayed mostly as villains in mainstream Malayalam cinema, which has majority of elite, urban Hindu or Christian producers.

The humanization of Muslim characters when Hindu majoritarianism is growing in India was not lost on the audience. The attendees in Kerala were largely progressive, upholding the secular, inclusive polity that India claims to be. Just a few weeks back, The Supreme Court of India allowed the entry for

menstruating women in the Sabarimala temple in Kerala, which has caused a lot of unrest. The political party led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi currently ruling India is taking a stand against the decision. The festival went on in spite of the clashes, and not one spectator was seen to be siding with the protest against the Supreme Court.

Kerala's, and the festival's, progressive stand became evidently clear when the festival director Mr. Kamal in his inaugural speech, condemned the divisive forces that are threatening the fabric of secular India, and asserted why it was important to continue with the festival despite the floods. "Art forms like films play a major role in widening our horizons of understanding of the world," he said. "It teaches us to be more open and tolerant to the voices of others. Film festivals promote an atmosphere of dialogue and exchange of ideas. It helps us shed our baggage of preconceived notions and unfounded biases."

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