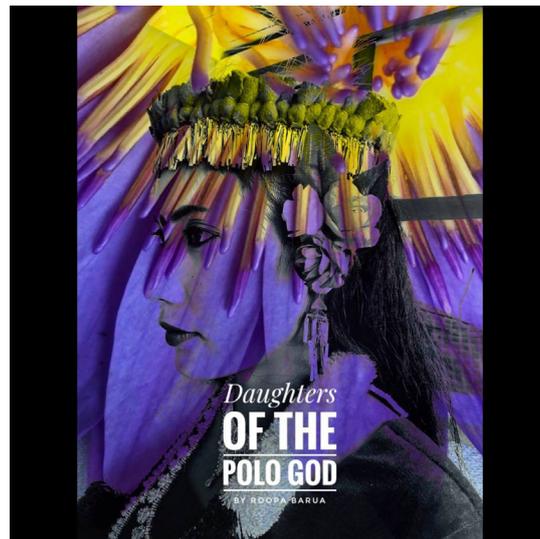


## 1st Busan International Animal Rights Film Festival



Daughters of the Polo God

A film festival today is the new age version of a poet or a writer's retreat. Cinema has become the window to the soul of society. Much like in the olden days when people waited with baited breath for what James Fitzgerald would publish after "The Great Gatsby", similarly in today's world, we wait with anticipation for the next look into society through the lens of a Lars Von Trier or a Wong Kar Wai. I have travelled to many festivals with my documentaries be they general purpose festivals, regional, short format, niche, sports etc. So, when I got the invitation to participate in the first edition of the Busan International Animal Rights Film Festival, I was thrilled.

On a cool November morning, seated, belted, luggage stowed on a Cathay flight, I was enroute to this festival in Busan. My film on the Manipuri pony *Daughters of the Polo God* was playing there as part of the opening ceremony. I would be at the inaugural edition of this festival held to celebrate the banning

of the infamous Gupo dog meat market. A market that had survived decades was finally brought down by the work of Era Kim and the Busan Korean Alliance for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (KAPCA). I had remembered going through social media celebrations of the closing of this market in the summer of 2019. Hazy memories of photos of cute dogs crying out in the cages, butchering practices, blood-stained ominous looking marketplaces were all coming back to me. My plane ride was filled with apprehension and eagerness to land in Busan and to see how they had managed to ban a tradition that was being carried on illegally.

The festival showcasing animals and their rights was a three day affair curated by the festival director Su Lee, a well known film programmer based in South Korea. Senior Indian film critic and journalist Manoj Barpujari headed the International programming as their International Board Member. Of partic-

ular attention that caught my eye was a film *The Camel Boy* (2018) directed by Chabname Zariab about illegal camel racing in the Middle East, *Summer* (2019) about animal rights in the days of capitalism and *Lights on the Road* (2019) by Ji Seng, about a family trying to survive and look for their lost dog in the De-militarized Zone (DMZ) between North

imal interaction. A slippage from human-animal interaction to human-animal conflict does not take very long. Interaction with the animal world runs the whole gamut from the tender and pristine world of the horse whisperer to the negative territories of slaughter capitalism and the savagery of animal farming – a range that is further exacerbated by rampant illegal



The Camel Boy (2018)

and South Korea. In a country where dogs were killed for meat till a few months ago, it was particularly delightful to see Ji Seng and his family looking for their dog even when they had lost everything they owned as their house was gutted by a fire and they were forced to live out of their truck in the DMZ. The visions of love and belonging were very precious in this avant-garde film that Ji Seng and his family created.

and banned practices. Mental and physical sufferings of animals killed for meat are especially at an all time high. As Professor Hee Jong Woo rightly observed in during the festival: “But humans and animals are emotional beings and sympathetic with others. Although there may be a difference in the degree of emotion, there is a debate on the difference, but it is not denied that animals are also subject to pain. Pain also included mental suffering and physical pain. It’s worth dividing into, and it’s more than if animals feel mental pain.”



Lights on the Road

Two of my documentaries *Riders of the Mist* (2015) and *Daughters of the Polo God* (2018) have been stories at the cusp of the human-an-

The Gupo market is one of the worst perpetrators of animal abuse. The grim reality of the recently banned dog meat market sank into me very quickly as I walked through the innocuous marketplaces complete with its massive seaweed and kimchi fresh stalls. The vibrant colours that are the hallmark of an Asian marketplace gave way to a blood-stained side

street. This was apparently where dogs were butchered. I saw vacant and abandoned industrial looking soup factories complete with cauldrons where dog soup was made. A former dogmeat restaurant owner asked us to leave, we irritated her it seems. This seemingly normal marketplace was the area of these heinous and ruthless acts against dogs and we were frozen in our tracks as we observed it all.

As my stay in Busan came to an end, and I boarded my flight back, visions of dusty dog soup cauldrons juxtaposed with lovely images of a family reunited with their pet dog in the tough landscape of the DMZ zone floated through my mind. I silently thanked Su Lee



With festival director Su Lee and Era Kim for a film and real world experience that was truly one of a kind. “Love Again”, I whispered to myself. There was no looking back.

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