

Essay

J. Geetha

My Praxis



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Run Kalyani comes out of a long journey of moving back and forth from theory to practice and practice to theory. This journey took me from political activism to film theory to film activism to film writing to filmmaking. And in filmmaking, from short films to documentaries and to my first feature length fiction film.

Fresh out of college, I was a founding member of *Prachodana*, the first autonomous woman's group in Kerala also known as the first feminist organization in Kerala. We imagined it would grow into a fierce socialist feminist political party. Such was our enthusiasm, and woefully, lack of activist experience! Kerala was not ready for Women's Liberation (as it was called then) let alone Feminism. But it made us what we all came to be!

I moved from Trivandrum to Kochi and

started my working-life as a journalist in Indian Express, becoming one of the first woman reporters in the field in Kerala. I was writing more on socio-political issues but my inclination turned to the cultural—dance, music, cinema. While Chintha Ravi encouraged me to write, it was T.K.Ramachandran who shaped my political consciousness and I began to see cinema differently. I left my job and began my doctoral studies in Calicut University. It is then that I entered the world of Feminist Film Criticism and I travelled to many prestigious libraries all over India hungry for more insights. Thus, my thesis became not only one of the firsts on cinema (from Kerala, maybe India) but also the first to attempt a feminist film critique of the complex and contradictory positioning of women in Indian culture. I also began publishing as a critic in The Hindu,

Deep Focus etc.

Even as I did my FA course (the film appreciation course) in Pune and was beginning to be approached for acting by young filmmakers, I never allowed myself to think I could actually enter the world of filmmaking. It was the double-edged sword of politics and domestics that prevented me from even thinking about it.

So, after my doctoral studies, I moved back to the Print and Visual Media. My first TV documentary was *The A(Miss) World* on the protests surrounding the staging of the Miss World Competition in India for Asianet. I was reading, writing, talking film (at many a remote film society in Kerala)! My interest in cinema never waned even as I joined to run the new Institute of Communication and Journalism at the Calicut Press Club, and later led a current affairs team in Kairali TV in my last full time job.

It was only later when I left Kerala and got the much-needed distance and got myself a video camera in 2003 that a secret desire blossomed! I returned and made my first independent film *Woman with a Video Camera* (2005). With Fathima E V, I went up and down the length of Kerala and shot women engaged in Work. The film was a juxtaposition of real women in front of a woman with a video camera and an imagined woman (excellently enacted by Jyothirmayee) in front of a (obviously man with a) Film Camera. It was a kind of juxtaposition of the Vertovian observational and Maya Deren-esque Psychodrama. And if

you look at the film now you will see how it foretells the violent problem that exploded in Kerala three years back!

I made a few more short films like *Akam/Inside* (2007) and *A Short Film About Nostalgia* (2006), but stopped, as it did not reach an audience. While in the last few years there is an awareness and encouragement of women's films when I was making films no one bothered. I remember *Woman with a Video Camera* was hardly discussed. Feminist filmmakers from around the world have expressed similar experiences. Erasing your work is the biggest weapon that the patriarchal Establishment has.

In 2008, I received a prestigious International Festival's Development Fund for my first script *A Certain Slant of Light* (2008), but there was no possibility for funds for a feature film about women for a woman filmmaker. I then got busy producing documentaries, including the multi-award winning Grierson nominated feature-doc *Algorithms* (2012) on young blind chess players of India by Ian McDonald. I collaborated with Ian across a range of forms and subjects - from *kalaripayattu* in Kerala to a gay football team in Brighton, from a South African artist to a veteran Indian Ham Radio Operator and so on. Our first work for the gallery space was *Freedom*, a four-screen film installation on the radical legacy of Martin Luther King exhibited in Newcastle, Brighton and London and the latest is *Who is Europe?*, a split screen documentary that questions what Europe is and who belongs to it. And

my involvement with documentary moved teaching too and I lecture at Film@CultureLab set up by Ian McDonald at Newcastle University. All this while, I was also writing scripts hoping that one day I would be able to make feature fiction films. Finally with the support of Ajithkumar B, Madhu Neelakandan and Ian McDonald, I ventured on to my first feature fiction film. Thus the ambition that was lit in 2008 flamed 10 years later when I shot *Run Kalyani*. I completed it in 2019.

Run Kalyani comes out of the tradition of creative and observational documentary and my slant towards a cinematic poetic-realism. It is a film about ordinary people in familiar if oppressive circumstances who manage to survive the everyday and keep hope alive. But through small acts of love and compassion for each other, they help each other to escape. In *Run Kalyani*, we see hardship, we see struggle, we see abuse, we see mortality, but

we also see labour, we see love, we see art, we see dreams. Talk about grief and grit, in 2018 when we were shooting we were hit by the floods, in 2019 when we were completing I suffered an inconsolable loss and in 2020 when we should be out there the pandemic has appeared. And yet Kalyani is running. No one can stop her.

Run Kalyani asserts that we all have agency. And I do too. As I finally made the film! But who will give me the lost years? The reason for not making a film for so long is mainly because I am a woman, but a good part is also because of the kind of films I wanted to make. This is where my theory and practice continue to have an osmotic relationship. But the overriding reason is the patriarchal Kerala society. But the same Kerala society is what made me make the film too. Will I be able to make more films – this time the full onus is on this society. I am ready!

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