

Article

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**GIFF... Towards Creating A Film Culture in The North East**

There are some extremely important, yet intangible issues related to cinema without which no government policy about film can live up to its expectation. These issues are extremely sublime and delicate, but they deal with the psyche of people and change their value system regarding their approach towards film as a form of Art. There are philosophies and collective aspirations behind Government decisions which otherwise always remain outside the periphery of public knowledge. As a career bureaucrat, we are always at the core of the mechanism formulating and processing such policies and decisions, but we never speak about them because they become a part of our day to day life, making them just another normal and mundane phenomena of our hectic schedule.

So, when Premendra Da asked me to write a piece about cinema, immediately I realized that having experienced the beauty and power of this art form as an organiser and planner for using it as a tool for cultural change and integration in our state I should

try to revisit my memory about the last international film festival that we have organised in our state for the first time and I should do an honest introspection about the decisions we took in incorporating film into the cultural almanac of Assam. Instead of talking about what we did in the festival, I should talk about the thoughts and philosophies that shaped our decisions in Guwahati International Film Festival. When I look back at GIFF I always feel that actually these are the issues and causes that kept us moving forward amidst all the hard work and hard times.

If we look at the promotional policies of the Government of Assam in the past, we can articulate them to have assumed a three-pronged approach. The state Government established a Film Studio named Jyoti Chitraban in the year 1961 to provide all possible technical support to the filmmakers of the region and since then Jyoti Chitraban has been instrumental in the production of almost all the films in the state. In a bid to address all the financial issues of the filmmakers Assam Film Finance and develop-

ment Corporation was established in the year 1974 and to create the technical and creative manpower for the entire North Eastern region DBHRGFTI (Erstwhile JCFTI) was established in the year 1999. Although this institute is fully run by the Assam Government, it has seats earmarked for students from all the other states and it has been attuned in the line of a purely regional academic institution. These were the approaches to address the gross or tangible issues of filmmaking in Assam.

With these three institutions Assam has been relatively successful in addressing almost all the tangible issues in the area of film making. Albeit small, it has an industry of its own, it is one of the few states in India a comprehen-

process of the creation of an audience for serious cinema. We knew that this would be a very complex and lengthy affair as we would be dealing with the slow but sustained process of changing the mindset of the mass people and hence we would be dealing with many of the intangible issues of the mindset of the population of a state which has comparatively less exposure of what is happening in the world of cinema.

So, the latest Government has chosen to deal with this extremely important aspect in their effort to create a film culture in the North East. GIFF was envisioned with the goal of creating a healthy and rich film culture in our region.



sive film policy for its people, students created by the state owned film institute is making their mark in the national and international arena, films made by these students is getting national and international awards, the state owned infrastructure is capable of providing technical support and manpower to any film crew coming from outside the state and wanting to have a shoot by exploiting the scenic beauty of the region and recently sufficient provisions has been made in the film policy to support all sorts of endeavours in the area of filmmaking.

But apart from all these tangible issues, there is one area which needs serious attention and without it all the above-mentioned policies would fall apart. This is the steady but slow

Prior to GIFF, the culture of watching serious films was confined to few film societies in the major towns, but most of these film societies were or still are active in the city of Guwahati only. Guwahati Cine Club and Assam Cine Arts Society are the two most prominent names in this aspect. So, it was extremely important for us to understand how the intellectual strata, the cineastes and the common people would react to the material provided by a festival of an international scale. The most difficult among the many significant objectives was to design a festival that would cater to the need and taste of a full range of audience starting from the people having the sensibility and exposure of international cinema, to the college students of the remotest areas who has never experienced a film in a conventional

cinema hall. An internal study was made after marathon discussions among the various coordinators of the festival and finally the wisdom of an excellent curator like Shrinivasa Santhanam resulted in a package which was 'just perfect' for the first edition of an international film festival in a society like us. We had a meagre budget, but it was ensured that every penny of the allocation is utilised wisely, we knew that with that budget we will never be able to get the best films creating ripples in the international festival circuit. Instead we were trying to capitalise on preparing a balanced package that would prepare our audience for the coming editions. Today, after organising the third successful edition of the festival we are happy to see that the bargain has yielded extremely beneficial dividends.

We were surprised at the generosity of the greats like Krzysztof Zanussi, Saji N Karun and Adoor Gopalakrishnan whom had instantly consented to grace our last three editions with their presence as the Chief Guest. Continuing that tradition we also invited the envoys and Ambassadors of the countries who presented their films in our Region of Focus/Country focus sections in our various editions.

Because of numerous infrastructural and logistical advantages Guwahati was the only choice for the venue. As we have vowed to popularise film as an art form, we felt the obligation of bringing the students from different places to the festival venue to expose them to this beautiful art form. I believe this is the only aspect that makes GIFF unique and stand out from all the film festivals in India. And this is the most significant factor that has impacted almost all the affairs of the festival, starting from the allocation and utilisation of the budget to the choice of the film package in each of its versions.

But I am proud to have been able to play host to nearly about 7000 students in each version of the festival. The idea was to create a new breed of cineastes in different parts of North

East, who will in turn sensitise the locals in their respective regions. Contacting these huge number of institutions and arranging the entire logistics for them was as huge a task as the festival itself. But the sense of accomplishment it has given us was my major take away from GIFF as the Festival Director, because it is so assuring that the festival would create a kind of resonance in the cultural mindset of the people in our place and Cinema will find a place in the cultural calendar of Assam.

This was easier said than done. But we devised strategies that would make it possible. We encouraged everybody, starting from the Minister of Cultural affairs to the Director of festivals, all would perform the ritual of giving the delegate fee, filling up of the delegate registration form and receiving the delegate card in his own name. We wanted the people to understand the pleasure and pride of going through the rituals and festivities of a truly international film festival. During the last GIFF I met one renowned academician on the inauguration day who came to meet me to express his regret that he would not be able to see the movies as he is off to Mumbai for his wife's treatment. But he insisted on getting his card which he wanted to have as a keepsake. I was not only happy to oblige him but also thrilled to realise that people have started showing a real sense of fondness and association with our festival.

When I look back at this journey, I can see some intentional and some chance happenings that has shaped GIFF to its present form. The best thing that has happened, probably, was the fact that Retd. IAS V. B. Pyarelal was the Addl.Chief Secretary. to the Govt of Assam in the Cultural Affairs Department and he was given free rein in choosing his battery of officials who could bring this dream to reality. Pyarelal Sir had the rare capability of hand-picking persons who were 'Just perfect' for the goal and then he would create situations for the team so that each individual can flourish to his best self as a performer. GIFF will

always bear the signature of his visions.

Whenever somebody asks me about my experiences as the Festival Director in GIFF, I think of one analogy (Probably being a woman helps me to understand this better)- ‘organising GIFF each time is like giving birth to a baby. The pain sometimes become so unbearable that one starts to swear that she doesn’t want more children...but once the pain is over and you have the baby in your lap, full of life and hope, again you start contemplating to have another child, again you are ready to taste the pride of motherhood’.

One of the most peculiar aspects of the life of a career bureaucrat is this- we give birth

to organisations, institutions and events, we raise them with our own hands but we give away our kid to our successors at the end of our term. I know GIFF too, has the potential to grow up as one of the major festivals in the world. In prospect, after 10 years I would like to line up with the delegates to see the movies, would like to rush from one theatre to another to catch my favourite movie in time, would like to indulge in endless discussions, gossips and debates, because I know GIFF secretly offers its real charm to its true lovers- the common cinema goers of this region.

I shall wait eagerly till I get a chance to explore that charm.

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