

Madurai International Documentary and Short Film Festival - A Reflection

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OURS is a small, local, independent, inclusive and democratic film festival. It is small because it happens in a small town like Madurai with a small team and little budget. It is local because it uses locally available resources and people to conduct the festival. It is independent because it does not take money from big private or government institutions. It is independent in deciding the shape, content and style of the festival. It is inclusive because it does not reject films which are different in genre. It is democratic because it involves many people to select films and run the film festival.

Madurai City

Madurai is a small but historical town (more than two thousand years old) located in South India. It has a long history of intellectual excellence especially during the Sangam period (between 3rd century BC to 2nd century AD), where poets, thinkers and leaders debated and performed in public and were appreciated by both the Kings and the common people. It is also known as temple town as there are many Hindu temples in and around the city. There are churches and mosques as well. In a way, Madurai city is an example for communal harmony as people from different religions live together peacefully unlike other Indian cities. Agriculture is the main occupation here apart from textile and other small scale industries. Tourism is another attraction here as people from within and outside India visit to enjoy the rural as well as cultural ambiance of the town. Madurai also has many educational institutions both in humanities and technical sectors which attract many youth from nearby districts and states.

Madurai is known as a cultural capital of Tamil Nadu (a south Indian state in India) as it has very unique cultural heritage where people follow very particular traditions regarding marriage, architecture, agriculture, clothing, material culture, music, dance and of course food.

Madurai region is also very feudal in nature where (intra-Hindu) caste-based discrimination and violence against the people from lower caste Hindus is very common.

Cinema and Theater

Madurai has a long history of mythological as well as social plays, where ordinary people train themselves to sing, dance and act in regular and seasonal theaters. Madurai has a Town Hall which witnessed European dance, music, theater and cinema exclusively hosted for British officers in the early 19th century. When popular Tamil cinema started flourishing in 1950s Madurai became a center for cinema halls as any other towns in Tamil Nadu, where audiences thronged to watch their favorite stars on the silver screen.

Madurai also embraced modern art through the small circles of self-taught as well as trained painters, parallel cinema through film society movement, and modern literature through study circles in the 1980s.

Film Society Movement

Renowned filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benagal, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Ritwick Gatak and John Abraham played a key role in creating a platform called Film Society Movement across India in the 1970s to screen and watch serious or parallel films which were otherwise not shown in regular cinema halls that screen commercial Hindi, Tamil and Telugu films. The government of India, state governments and the embassies of foreign countries also supported this movement by sharing films with them in a non-profit basis.

Such film societies could bring together interested individuals who believed in meaningful, sensible and artistic cinema across India to screen as well as watch films. They also introduced film appreciation practices to their members and general public, which in turn facilitated creative filmmaking and film viewing.

Madurai also was affected by this wave of film society movement positively. I had the opportunity of watching a collection of Luis Bunuel films during one of their screenings in Madurai. I also got to watch many Indian as well as foreign films through these screenings organized by film societies in Madurai. The culture of small screenings without commercial motives

that was nurtured by these societies helped persons like me to look at cinema differently.

The Propaganda Films

British India and later the independent India believed in propaganda films to establish their kingdom in the minds of the common people. The Films Division of India, a government-run film production and distribution department, has been producing documentaries in India since 1950s. Those films were reflecting the agenda of the State such as inculcating ideas of patriotism, development, industrialization, pluralism, communal harmony, modern education and health facilities.

The films produced by the Films Division of India in those days always had a voice over, top-down approach and strong pro-State point of view. They were forcefully shown in all cinema halls prior to the “main picture” during every show. Documentaries introduced to the people like an inevitable medicine from the State always faced repulsive reaction from the audiences. Although the Films Division also made many artistic films with independent views as exceptions (films by Sukdev, SNS Sastry and others), they were hardly shown outside a few film festivals.

Activist /Political Films

Independent filmmakers such as Anand Patwardhan, Deepa Dhanraj, KP Sasi, Vasudha Joshi, Chalam Bennurkar and others introduced different kinds of documentaries in late 1970s and early 1980s outside the “compulsory” State machinery, reflecting ordinary lives and struggles of the people. Those films made in 16 mm format were shown through the film society movement across India creating a new political space around cinema, completely different from the mainstream fiction films. These political and activist documentaries talked about people’s rights, their resistance, and State repression and violations.

Compared to full-length fiction films, these activist documentaries are very honest, brave, simple and unambiguous.

Video Projector - The New Tool

1990s in Madurai and India saw the fall of film society culture due to many reasons and the emergence of video culture which in a way brought in more people to watch and screen films locally. People like me who had started watching movies in 35 millimeter (mm) format through film societies, felt liberated as the technology became easier and cheaper. Arrival of VHS cassettes and video projectors opened up the field to others like me who were not from the film society movement. Sarat Chandran, a filmmaker and activist in Kerala (the neighboring state) started organizing small film screenings with his VHS cassettes and video projector. I happened to witness one of his screenings. I assisted him. We became friends right away. He agreed to travel to Madurai to screen films with us.

That was the beginning of our film festivals and screenings in Madurai.

Anti-nuclear Film Festival

When the Indian government tested nuclear bombs in Pokran in 1998 and when Pakistan followed up with its own testing of nuclear bombs, war hysteria filled with hatred and machismo engulfed the Indian subcontinent. Some of us who felt very disturbed by this hate wave and wanted to respond to it creatively. We organized a two-day anti-nuclear film festival with the help of Sarat Chandran. He supported us with his collection of films as well as video projector.

The response we got from the audience encouraged us to organize more film festivals. Sarat was always there to help us. It also motivated us to organize an annual film festival.

Madurai Film Festival

After the success of small film festivals in 1998 in video format, we decided to conduct an exclusive annual film festival for documentaries and short films. As Sarat Chandran, KP Sasi (another contemporary filmmaker and activist to Sarat) and I were interested in making documentaries, organizing a film festival for documentaries exclusively became a reasonable and viable option.

As the film society movement was showing interest in parallel fiction films, because they were truly parallel to commercial Hindi, Tamil and Telugu films, we the documentary filmmakers felt the need to have our own film festival for the even more marginalized form called documentary.

Non-competitive and No Theme

The Madurai Film Festival has been a non-competitive film festival since its inception. As we wanted to create a space for dialogue and discussion through films, we never felt the requirement for a competition. Winning a prize or an award should not affect the quality of the discussion, we thought. The festival should focus on quality films, sensible viewing and participatory audience.

The idea is to bring a set of films to Madurai. Bring some filmmakers too. Create a platform for both the audience and filmmakers/films to meet. Initiate a discussion around the films. Create a community and encourage people to plan some positive actions such as learning, travelling, reading, screening films, making films and joining some social or political or cultural group for direct action.

We also never wanted a particular theme for our film festival as we wanted a platform for contemporary films or recent films. We always have the retrospective of senior technicians and filmmakers to recall the old films. We also have special packages that would bring not so recent films. Besides we may have many film festivals now in India for documentaries; but when we started in 1998, there were hardly film festivals for documentaries or even film festivals for that matter.

Organizing a detailed, serious and curious film festival has been the aim. Thus we do not have a theme.

Film Festival Structure

Although we do not have a theme or focus for the films, we have been very particular about the films that we select/do not select, thanks to our Selection Committee members. Also, we have created an image about our film festival among the filmmakers and audience that we are more interested in activist films, the films that talk about human rights, social justice and people's resistance. The filmmakers themselves decide to send or not send their films to our film festival.

We generally approach like-minded people and request them to be part of the Selection Committee. Filmmakers, critics, journalists, teachers, scholars, writers and film society activists would be part of the Selection Committee depending upon their availability. We encourage the members to be more adventurous regarding the selection of films based on style. Films can have different styles: having a voice over, observational, personal, musical, direct and forceful, subtle and deliberately ambiguous, interview-based, very close to fiction, so on and so forth. We include all styles of films. As we are in a small town far away from big cities, we do not want to deny the opportunities to the audience by not selecting experimental or style films. It is our responsibility to introduce different styles to the audience of Madurai.

Regarding the content, we always request the Selection Committee members to reject films that spread hatred. We also urge them to keep in mind the local, national and international debates that are going on regarding civil rights, human rights, labor rights, women's rights and environmental protection. We want to be an international, modern, liberal and responsible film festival. We always keep the Selection Committee on the loop to make sure that we select the right films.

Our Partners

The credit for selecting right films should also go to the organizations or institutions or groups with whom we collaborate to organize the film festivals. The structure of the film festival also influences the kinds of films to be shown. We, as a film festival, do not want to centralize the activity by organizing the film festival at one venue or single location. We always have parallel screenings across the city or district or region to enable many organizations, institutions and groups to participate. Because we plan/organize parallel or multiple screenings, we always take our partners, who conduct/host those screenings into consideration.

We usually approach educational institutions, voluntary organizations, film societies, cultural groups and trade unions to associate with us and to host parallel screenings. The allotment of films to the venues is decided along with the host organizations. It is a collective decision. The idea is to strengthen them by catering to their intellectual, political and artistic needs.

Some venues have students as audiences, who might want short duration films, animation films and music videos. Some venues have activists

who would prefer straight-jacket activist films, talking about contemporary issues that affect the country or the world. Some venues have film fans, who would prefer to watch films that are more artistic and stylish. We keep everything in mind in programming and scheduling.

At the same time, we also push them to watch films that challenge their film watching practice. We do it by including films that are not their “type.” We convince the host organizations to take that “risk.”

A film festival cannot afford to screen only the films that do not challenge the audience. We too feel that we should introduce films to the audiences of Madurai that challenge them creatively, politically and aesthetically.

Post-screening Discussions

Right from day one, we have always looked at film screenings and film festivals as a tool for dialogue between filmmakers, between filmmakers and audience, and of course between audience members. We always allotted proper duration for discussions. We also invite either filmmakers or others (intellectuals, writers, journalists, teachers and others) to initiate discussions once a film gets over.

Such discussions always spill over the films, sessions and breaks. People become friends after these discussions and start continuing to work or interact later. Our festivals have brought many kinds of people together.

The character of the discussions varies between the venues and films. Some venues provoke debates on the style of the films. Some venues initiate thoughts on the content.

But we always use the opportunity to talk politics sensibly, calmly, in detail and in depth.

Experts who are invited to initiate the discussions also play a key role in moderating the flow of the discussions. The idea is to create an ambiance for the people to express themselves freely.

Parallel Activities

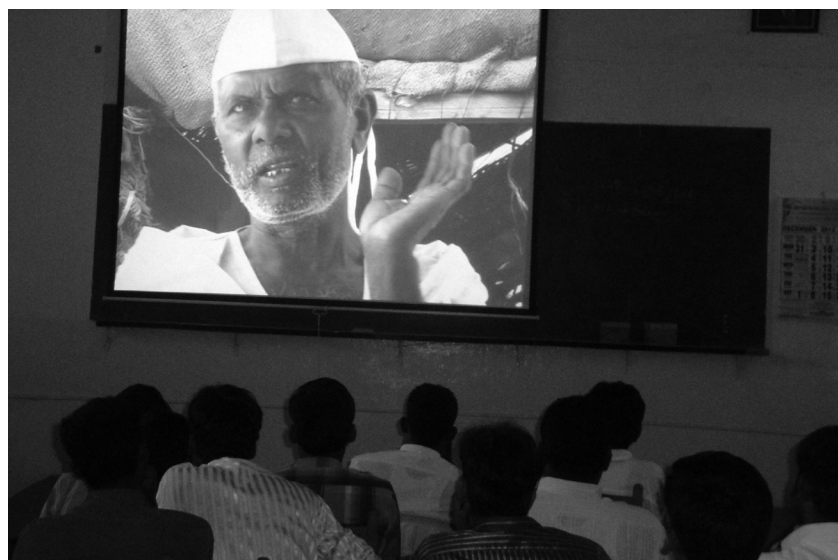
We have also experimented with the form of the film festival (in certain editions) by including parallel activities such as painting and photo exhibitions, poetry readings, interaction with writers and intellectuals, theater performances and other art initiatives. Such efforts have always brought in



more people as audience as well as performers. It also helped people to approach cinema or documentary films more as an art form. Filmmakers who participated in those editions could also appreciate the dialogue between different art forms. However, we could not continue those programs due to logistical reasons.

Films on Human Rights and Civil Rights

Filmmakers such as Anand Patwardhan, Amar Kanwar, Sanjay Kak, Deepa Dhanraj, KP Sasi, Rakesh Sharma, C Sarat Chandran, P Baburaj, Meghnath, Biju Toppo, Gopal Menon, Dipu, Sreemith, RR Srinivasan, Leena



Manimekalai, Kombai Anwar, Divya Bharathi have made films on various issues dealing with human rights and civil rights from across India.

Their films deal with state repression, sexual violence, religious and caste violence, displacement and destruction due to development, police

atrocities, violations by security forces, industrial pollution, contamination of natural resources, ultra-nationalism, domestic violence, rights of sexual minorities, communal harmony, inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, welfare state, right to life and livelihood and social justice.

When the government and private-run media are controlled and biased, our film festivals become a space for dissemination of information, people to people interaction, region to region communication, inter-religious and inter-caste dialogue.

Our Funding

We do not take corporate or state funding as a policy. We deliberately spend less only to protect ourselves from dependency. We collect minimum donations from individuals and groups to avoid anyone's influence or control. We invite filmmakers to attend the film festivals on their own. We provide them basic hospitality. We invite our partner organizations or institutions or groups to look after the logistics as mutual contributions. We bring films and filmmakers. They provide hall, equipment and basic facilities. We jointly run the festivals. We share the coordination responsibilities. That's it. We have crossed two decades.

The Threat to Freedom of Expression

Not having a clear law on control/overseeing/regulation of film screenings and film festivals has caused problems in India. Till 2004, there was no interference in film festivals from the State. But the Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF) in 2004 saw new rules and restrictions. Suddenly the festival brought in new guidelines indirectly to restrict films that differ or criticize the governments in India. Some films were denied permission because of the new rules and restrictions.

Filmmakers opposed it. Some withdrew their films from the festival. They even organized a parallel film festival as symbol of protest right in front of MIFF venue. That created a movement called VIKALP (Alternative) across India which organized regular screenings and film festivals.

Such an initiative triggered alarm bells in the government circles that in turn brought in even more new restrictions.

Now festivals have to send the selected list of films (that do not have Censor Certificates) with synopsis and other details to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Union Government of India to get the temporary clearance certificate. Film festivals may have their own selection committee. They can recommend a list of films to be screened at the festivals. But we need to get permission from the big brother called Government of India.

Threat from Non-state Players

Apart from the government agencies, we have non-state players who can also stop screenings. Despite getting censor certificates or clearance certificates, political parties, cultural groups, social watch agencies can also barge in and attack the festival organizers, break the projectors and furniture, beat up members of the audience, and escape happily without being touched by the law. State authorities will only file a case against the festival organizers for creating social unrest. The attackers will be left free.

Patriotism, national security, Indian culture, caste pride, regional right and linguistic representation, etc., can be the reason for anyone to get angry about any film. They always inform the media before attacking. The attacks are only used to create publicity for them. They openly attack. They justify the attack. The political parties also soft pedal on them. It is slowly getting dangerous to make films, to show films and to organize film festivals in India.

Our Strategy

Some film festivals like ours do not get permission for any screening. They also operate quietly. They also create a public support system to create a security network to protect the film festivals. Going to court or police station would not help. Consistently working with the local organizations, communities, grassroots groups and audiences is the only way out. Not giving up our right to freedom of expression has been our focus.

We do not organize our film festivals secretly. We publicize the event. We do press meets. We invite well-known people to the event and create a festival mood around it. We avoid sensational statements. We have crossed nineteen editions. We have not had any major problem from either State

or non-state players so far. Probably we have not made major noise. But we have worked with the filmmakers, teachers, scholars, students, intellectuals, activists, writers, journalists and others for over two decades consistently to create an ambiance for documentary filmmaking and free thought.

That has encouraged many small film screenings, film festivals and film-related activities in and around Madurai. We also have many new filmmakers such as Divya Bharathi in recent times from Madurai region.

That is our contribution. And we are very happy about it.

Our Future

We want to continue to organize film screenings and film festivals. We want to organize film-making workshops. We also want to create a cooperative of filmmakers. That is the answer to counter both corporate and state power.