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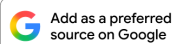
DIGITAL EXCLUSIVE

How the Indian Film Festival Bhubaneswar celebrates resistance through cinema

Showcased films challenge oppression, intolerance, and censorship, while filmmakers discuss struggles with state control and tyranny of OTT giants.

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SNEHA KRISHNAN

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A still from Subhadra Mahajan's *Second Chance* (2024). Shot in black and white, the film is a story of rebirth. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

Dibakar Banerjee never intended *Tees* to be semi-autobiographical, yet he finds himself perversely enjoying the situation surrounding the film. “If [Netflix](#) hadn’t pulled out, I would never have witnessed the collective spaces where films are nurtured and accepted. Our collective action will preserve the intent with which this film was made,” he told the audience after the screening at the 14th Indian Film Festival Bhubaneswar (IFFB) 2025. The film received a standing ovation.

The “collective action” Banerjee referred to is about the Film Society Bhubaneswar’s attempt to organise film festivals and screenings for the public. With 34 films screened, both recent features and classics, IFFB 2025 explored several themes, in multiple languages. But resistance, and its toll on the human mind—to state oppression, religious intolerance, or just bullies—was a running thread.

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And while they critique the camaraderie between the state and the private stakeholders, the journey of some of these films, from production to distribution, ironically reflect the oppressive thumb of production houses such as Netflix and Jio, who refuse to platform work.

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The Marathi *Ghaath* (2023), or “Betrayal,” by Chhatrapal Ninawe, is told in three chapters—“Jameen” (land), “Jal (water) and “Jungle”—and is the story of the intersection of three characters, Falgun (Dhananjay Mandaokar), ACP Nagpure (Jitendra Joshi) and renegade Maoist leader Raghunath (Milind Shinde). Set in the rich landscape of Nagpur, it unravels the inherent conflict between the state and Naxals, while Adivasis get caught in the tussle.

Ninawe spoke to the audience of the challenges the movie faced: first produced by Jio, the studio mystifyingly developed cold feet. As the film waits to get its due, the parallels between protagonist Raghunath's long struggle to receive amnesty and the filmmaker Ninawe's journey to get the film to its audience are striking.

Operation Ghost Hunt

In Vetrimaaran's *Viduthalai I & II—The Film* (2024) the confrontation between police and an ideological leader sees an entire village become collateral. Corrupt police officers brutally attack, mutilate and torture innocent women in the villages of Tamil Nadu.

Viduthalai, an extended adaptation of Jeyamohan's novella *Thunaivan* (The Companion) set in 1987, begins with a derailed train sequence, a single-take shot of lives devastated. Journalists and police survey the accident scene. Subsequently, the administration launches Operation Ghost Hunt to capture the culprit gang Makkal Padai (The People's Army), whose leader, Vaathiyar, played by a masterful Vijay Sethupathi has remained underground; in fact, nobody knows what he looks like.

Actor Soori makes his debut in the movie, playing police constable Kumaresan who is hired as a driver to the E-company stationed in the remote jungle. In his voiceover, reading out letters addressed to his ailing mother, Kumaresan introduces her to Vaathiyar's story and his comrades that his police squad stationed in the remote jungles of Tamil Nadu is out to capture. He encounters corrupt leaders and realises how villagers get trapped in the brutal encounters between police and the rebel groups.

Vaathiyar, (“teacher” in Tamil) transforms from a schoolteacher into the leader, Vaathiyar Perumal. As a vibrant soundtrack plays, a hunt, an escape and an eventual combat sequence take place in the mountains. There are possible

allusions to real life characters such as Pulavar Kaliyaperumal, a former **Naxal** leader in Tamil Nadu.

Censored: A Kashmiri cookbook

Tees (2024) follows a Kashmiri family. Anhad Draboo (Shashank Arora) is a writer and poet in 2042, when screens and metro platforms in Delhi are filled with posters of the Supreme Leader. In this dystopian future, Anhad's debut work, the eponymous novel *Tees* is banned from release. He then meets a blind date who encourages him to publish a harmless book that will pass without censor cuts. In a satirical scene, Anhad finds himself at a censor board meeting discussing 73 cuts in his submitted draft of a Kashmiri cookbook. Adjectives are removed denoting any identity or potential abusive interpretations: Kashmiri potato, *maa ki dal*, or *maa ka dil* (or "mother's heart," a lentil).

Rewind to 2019, and we meet Zia, a successful lawyer in Mumbai, struggling to buy a home for herself and her partner Meera because of their relationship but primarily because of her Muslim name.

In a third timeline, in 1989, Ayesha Draboo, essayed by the ethereal Manisha Koirala is the family matriarch. She works for a Kashmiri radio station and is navigating a fractured relationship with her childhood friend Usha played by the charming Divya Dutta, who is, as a Hindu, ruing the loss of land and identity amid rising militancy in Kashmir.

As the divisions in timelines collapse, common strands emerge: of the anguish, of not truly "belonging". The stories are chilling reminders of the **saffronisation** of these three cities: Delhi, Mumbai and Srinagar.



A still from Dibakar Banerjee's *Tees* (2024). The stories in the film are chilling reminders of today's realities and the saffronisation of three cities: Delhi, Mumbai, and Srinagar. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

Dhrubor Aschorjo Jibon (2024, "The Strange Life of Dhrubo"), a crime drama, directed by Abhijit Chowdhury explored individual aspirations that come into conflict with society's expectations of development, progress and growth. Dhrubo (Rishav Basu) and his friend Rinu (Ritwika Pal) who grew up in an orphanage live through multiple timelines to understand how their circumstances and individual choices play out in their pursuit of a better life. Dhrubo's decisions in parallel worlds—whether to steal, or forge paintings or investigate corruption as a police

officer—each come with dire consequences, not only for himself but for those around him. Each episode uses the work of an iconic artist ([Jamini Roy](#), Gaganendranath Tagore, Bikash Bhattacharjee and Binod Behari Mukherjee) to propel the narrative while offering a visual treat.



At a post screening interaction with Abhijit Mazumdar, whose debut *Body* (2024) explores the challenges to creative freedom in a post-pandemic world through the lens of mental health. | Photo Credit: Film Society of Bhubaneswar

Body (2024), Abhijit Mazumdar's debut, explores the challenges to creative freedom in a post-pandemic world through the lens of mental health. Manoj Sharma, a theatre actor is living in the aftermath of COVID-19 and struggles with the [mental health](#) consequences of bullying—both real and imagined. The only way he can cope with his crippling anxieties is to stay naked. The triggering incident occurred one evening, at a picnic, when one of his friends hid his clothes while he rested naked after a swim. After his desperate attempt to find his clothes, he finds himself roaming the streets naked as a slew of assaults rain down on him. Manoj struggles to lead a “normal” life, while juggling his relationship with his girlfriend, Khushboo (Khushboo Upadhyay), his theatre rehearsals, and therapy sessions. The film has a brooding pace that mirrors the character's inner life, with long takes and static shots. Mazumdar, in the post-screening conversation, revealed that he has been battling his own demons, and through this film, he was addressing the many layers of his own identity.

Film societies show us the power of the collective: To question and challenge regimes by encouraging alternative views and discourse, and by engaging ordinary citizens. Film Society Bhubaneswar has repeatedly stood for this power, creating a space for filmmakers and audiences to question and challenge dominant narratives.

Sneha Krishnan is a professor at the Jindal School of Public Health and Human Development, O.P. Jindal Global University. She writes on environment, gender, and cinema.