

# Restarting Indian Documentary Film Festival Bhubaneswar (IDFFB) 2022 With a Bang!

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Worldwide, film festivals are slowly emerging in their physical avatars after the pandemic-induced break since 2020. Screening of independent documentary films in small cities had taken a backseat. In Odisha, one of the eastern states in India, Film Society Bhubaneswar (FSB) organized the 3rd Indian Documentary Film Festival of Bhubaneswar (IDFFB) from 14th–16th October 2022. FSB was launched in 2004, formed by filmmakers, artists, cinephiles and academics. The film society is managed by volunteers and has organised an independent documentary festival since 2018. It is the sole surviving film society in the province of Odisha (where the population is 46 million) and the city of Bhubaneswar (with a population of one million), where the festival takes place, is not known for its independent documentary scene. The organised distribution of documentaries is non-existent in India and even more so in Odisha. “The festival plugs the gap of access to contemporary independent documentary films.”<sup>1</sup> This is achieved by making independent films available to a physical audience and the viewing experience is further enhanced by post-screening conversations with the directors. Previously, the festival was supported by donations from friends and families, annual individual contributions of members (25 USD per person). The effect of the pandemic on membership was immense, and reduced it to just 40 members. Thus, the organising of the festival itself is a larger story that needs to be told. Emerging from the pandemic, working with universities and educational institutions this year’s festival attracted around 3,000 people over three days. All of the films screened at the festival were screened

physically for the first time in the province, with a live audience. The film screenings intended to provoke conversation – each work conversing with another preceding or succeeding work.

The festival had an impressive line-up including; *City Girls* (Priya Thuvassery, 2021), *In a Dissent Manner* (Ehraz Asmaduz Zaman, 2022), *A Night of Knowing Nothing* (Payal Kapadia, 2021) and *All That Breathes* (Shaunak Sen, 2022). The 2021 Cannes winner *A Night of Knowing Nothing*, and the 2022 Cannes and Sundance winner *All That Breathes* have not found a theatrical release in India. The independent festivals carry the voices of these films to their audiences across the Indian subcontinent. Highlights included audience interactions with the filmmakers from across India – Praveen Morchhale, Debalina Majumder, Sankhajit Biswas, Surbhi Dewan, Kasturi Basu, Lipika Singh Darai, Dwaipayan Banerjee and Sapna Bhavnani.

In total, 33 films were screened with discussions with the filmmakers present. Thematically, the films were organised into four categories: the first were films depicting the current socio-political milieu in India, especially from Kashmir and the North-eastern states of India, concerning the systematic marginalisation of Muslims and university students under the current regime and life during the pandemic; second were films showcasing marginal sections of society concerning gender and sexuality – ostracised tribal women in rural Gujarat, single women living in New Delhi, trans people in Kashmir and those belonging to the LGBTQ+ community in Kolkata; third were films about the environment, uneven development resulting in environmental degradation and climate change; and fourth were films that offer hope through collective action and organised resistance.



*Colours of Life*

## ***Socio Political reality: Muslims in India***

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At the festival this year, films by female directors such as *Ghar ka Pata* (Madhulika Jalali, 2020) and *Siege in the Air* (Muntaha Amin, 2022) brought out the nuances of the Kashmir conflict. Both are debuts, one feature length and the other short; one poetic, the other narrative, both dealing with memories – one on state violence and the other by a community. One looks at living in Kashmir and the other looks at Kashmir from the outside. In *Ghar ka pata*, Madhulika, an exiled Kashmiri Pandit woman, records her journey of rediscovering her roots as she travels to her hometown in Rainawari, Srinagar, in search of the home they were forced to abandon 24 years earlier. Conversely, in *Siege in the Air*, Muntaha and her friends compile their anxieties, reaction and coping strategies since August 2019 following the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, giving it special status that includes a separate constitution, a state flag and autonomy over internal administration, and the imposition of double lockdown<sup>2</sup> in the wake of the pandemic when people communicated via letters with their loved ones when other forms of communications were cut off, and the Kashmir valley was without cellular connectivity for nine months – one of the longest in the world.

Ladakh was declared a Union Territory in 2019 (as part of abrogation of Article 370) and is a trans Himalayan desert, its average habitable altitude ranging from 3,300 – 4,400 meters above sea level, separated from Kashmir administratively. Praveen Morchhale's film *Colours of Life* (2022) was shot during the pandemic and shows how the remotest villages continued to survive despite the harshest of living conditions – natural and human-made. As an homage to Abbas Kiarostami's Koker Trilogy – *Khane-ye doust kodjast?* (*Where is the Friend's Home?*, 1987), *Zendegi va digar hich* (*Life, And Nothing More* aka *And Life Goes On*, 1992) and *Zire darakhatan zeyton* (*Through the Olive Trees*, 1994) – Praveen revisits remote villages in Ladakh in 2021, five years after shooting *Walking With The Wind* with local villagers as cast members. The previous film travelled internationally on the festival circuit but the cast never got to see it. Ladakh does not have a single film theatre even though the region is populated with 300,000 inhabitants. Praveen navigates these villages and traces his old crew – some of them dead, some too weak – observing their life, customs, and philosophies, and invites them to watch their first ever film in Leh, as part of a film festival. These villagers, a majority of whom have never seen a film in their entire lives experienced something truly transformational – *to see themselves on a big screen* – in Leh.

The Assamese short film *Xenophobia* (Monjul Baruah, 2021) presents the story of 65-year-old Dulal Paul, who was declared a foreigner by a tribunal in 2017 and died while he was lodged in a detention camp. This short documentary compiles the newspaper and media footage following his death. Ashok Paul, his son, presents a first-person account of how his father was victimized and sent to the detention centre. He narrates how his father was sent to the camp without any notice, denied basic food and medicines and later abandoned at a hospital where he died in 2019.

This journalistic film situates the ongoing citizenship crisis in Assam (North-eastern India), examining the idea of identity and citizenship. The current National Register of Citizenship (NRC), an illegal migrant identification exercise that took place in Assam

between 2015–2019, rendered 1.9 million people stateless, with the burden of proving citizenship placed on the individual.<sup>3</sup> These people are reduced to non-citizen and non-human status. Another short film, *Small time Cinema* (Priya Naresh, 2022) juxtaposes two YouTuber groups – one from Balochistan and the other from rural Assam – dealing with the question of identity.

Rounding off the themes of Muslim identity, Sourav Sarangi's *Karbala Memoirs* (2020) delves into Islam's history by taking us on a journey to Iraq, looking at Hussain's martyrdom from the perspective of an Indian who accidentally happens to be in the ancient land. The film narrates incidences from the lives of Prophet Muhammed's descendants and the war waged in Karbala.<sup>4</sup> The narrator takes us through the journey of early Islam from Medina to Damascus to Kufa, to the contemporary times of manufactured war over oil. The film marries personal memory and political consciousness with a seething rage in witnessing the violence unleashed on the Muslim world by geopolitical actors over the last three decades.



*City Girls*

## ***Spotlight on women, LGBTQ+ and trans persons***

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The films in this segment were made by women, dealt with the isolation of people living on the fringe, women of different ages, classes, rural and urban divides; a focus on journeys of trans individuals and those who belong to the LGBTQ+ community. One of the films in the Special Focus segment was Priya Thuvassery's *City Girls*, about two young women, Umra and Kulsum, starting their professional lives in Delhi during the pandemic, hailing from small towns in North India. Through a feminist lens, we see how they navigate a city, live without their families, and learn to be independent within the harsh environment of a megalopolis. At the time of writing this piece, came the shattering news

of Umra Khan's death. Umra was the HR and admin lead at Chambal Media, a feminist media house run by urban and rural media practitioners. Unfortunately, besides a social media post no other information on the death was available.

*Hridoye Basat (A Home For My Heart, Sankhajit Biswas, 2021)*, narrates the story of Suvana Sudeb, a transgender woman who undergoes gender affirmative surgery despite the resistance from her family and who is looking for love. The film, which was in the making for couple of years, draws out the intricacies of Suvana's life, her ability to lead struggles facing the Queer community, which resulted in the revocation of article 377, decriminalising consensual sexual conduct between two adults of the same sex, and her family and community accepting her. Surbhi Dewan and S.A. Hanan's *Trans Kashmir (2022)* highlights the plight of Kashmir's transgender community narrating the isolation, hardship and challenges. It showcases the stories of elderly members who adopt a fluid identity to navigate social spaces – as matchmakers, singer-dancers and carpenters. The basic human right for identity<sup>5</sup> remains elusive to trans people in Kashmir, whose travails worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Trans people are continuously discriminated against across the country, living in precarity. This film, made during the pandemic, is one of the few documents available of the trans community from the trouble stricken valley. In this state, cinema halls were shut from the 1980s, some of them were used as interrogation centres, and only recently have they been opened in the valley (in only two districts) with the mandate to screen only educational documentaries.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, Debalina Majumder's *Gay India Matrimony (2022)* turns the camera towards three friends in Kolkata, including herself, who are exploring their same-sex marital prospects. The film is constructed in a humorous vein – imagine a city where it is hard to find a house for Queer people, the question of same-sex marriage raises many uncomfortable questions within the families of the characters. Filmed over a period of five years, this work raises structural questions about the nature of matrimony, private property, and how the notion of marriage needs to be challenged for a better society.

Sachin Dheeraj's *Testimony of Ana (2020)* is the riveting tale of Anaben Pawar, an elderly tribal woman accused of witchcraft in rural Gujarat, based on an incident from 2017. The film exposes the malpractice of witch-branding which exists across India despite multiple legislations, bringing to the fore the complex factors that hinder social change – of patriarchy, caste, class and uneven development. Most of the reported cases of witchcraft involve indigenous and Dalit people. Stylistically, the film acts as testimony for Anaben, recording her experiences such that it almost feels like a legal document. The film also continues the trajectory laid out by Lipika Singh Darai's *Some Stories Around Witches (2016)* set in the tribal heartlands of Odisha.



*Backstage*

## ***Cultural, Environmental and Urban narratives***

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Several films made commentary on folk traditions, cultural flux and environmental issues that beset rural and urban India. *Backstage* (Lipika Sing Darai, 2021) was the opening film of the festival, an Odia film that researches the lives and times of puppeteers of Odisha, India.<sup>7</sup> The film traces the vulnerability of puppeteers who belong to the lower castes, and they question their appropriation by experts and researchers. The film chronicles the attempts to revive a dying art form.<sup>8</sup>

Environmental films *Dukho Majhi* (Somnath Mondal, 2022), set in rural Bengal, *Meiram -The Fireline* (James Khangenbam, 2022) set in Manipur, *Hatibondhu* (Kripal Kalita, 2022) set in Assam, around the theme of conservation and tree plantation depict the struggles of those who love nature and other living beings. Nitin Bathla's *Not Just Roads* (2021) focuses on urban expansion and transformation of rural hinterlands into highways outside Delhi. The film approaches the narrative via multiple perspectives – the digger, the cow, the tree, the birds, and the middle class elderly couple who explicate the political economy of real estate – before the credits roll, bringing out the big picture of Anthropocene. *Ek tha Gaon (Once Upon a Village*, Srishti Lakhera, 2021) another debut, looks at a handful of families living in a deserted mountain village of Uttarakhand, where people flee for better options in the cities. The film stylistically captures the rhythms of the village, the colours, the changing seasons and the magic of changing light across landscapes – situating the human actors within the larger play of nature.

Lastly, the closing film of the festival – Shaunak Sen's internationally acclaimed *All that Breathes* (2022) – shot in old Delhi, tells the story of a Muslim family who run a hospital dedicated to rescuing injured black kites (Milvus migrants), South Asia's commonest raptor. The film is a statement on the relationship between humans and non-humans

situated in a landscape that is socially and environmentally fraught. Shaunak has managed to give agency and voice to nonhuman actors and to highlight the interdependencies between species. The title of the film is poetic and invokes a realm of collective healing for all beings.



*A Bid For Bengal*

### ***Collective political action – Gathering Resistance***

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A running theme in this section was the resistance against majoritarian forces in public universities across India and a pertinent study of right-wing politics in the state of West Bengal (which has a population of 97 million – almost four times the size of Australia). Kasturi Basu and Dwaipayan Bannerjee's *A Bid for Bengal* (2021) traces the political trajectory of Bengal from the 1940s to the present time, covering a span of seven decades using their own family histories to excavate the trajectory of right-wing politics and the current rise of Fascism. The film documents the massive protests against the contested CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) – which discriminates against Muslims – to mobilising citizens through collective action against the fascist forces in the state elections of 2021.<sup>9</sup> Both of the filmmakers are actively engaged in the community, working on the ground against fascist forces using documentary films to provoke discussions.

Ehraz Asmaduz Zaman's first documentary film, *In A Dissent Manner* (2022) documents the police brutality unleashed on 15 December 2019, in Aligarh Muslim University, one of the oldest public universities of India. The students were protesting the contentious CAA legislation, recently enacted in parliament. One of the worst cases of police brutality in recent times, this film lays bare the experiences of the students. Most of the mainstream media did not cover this violence.

Payal Kapadia's *A Night of Knowing Nothing* (2021),<sup>10</sup> winner of L'œil d'or at Cannes, covers the incidents at FTII (Film and Television Institute of India), Pune, where one student, in a voiceover, reads out letters to her lover, from whom she is separated. One layer is of dreams, the other is of the waking state. The film covers the protests of students in public universities from 2015, a period of five years, raising issues of systematic weakening of humanities research, fellowships, increased marginalisation of Dalit and female students, and hatemongering to the contentious Citizenship Act passed into law in December 2019. The students have been at the forefront in asking questions of power and are unafraid of the consequences in taking on the wrath of the state.

This handful of films showcases the power of collective action and socio-political realities as played out across multiple forms of filmmaking. While *Bid for Bengal* and *In a Dissent Manner* are brutal in a narrative style, *A Night of Knowing Nothing* is presented in the form of love letter and via voice-over (that of a young student to her now missing boyfriend). These stylistic differences are notable and help audiences to engage with issues in a humanistic manner. Such a festival is an ode to these filmmakers who continue to tell the stories of the lives around them, despite economic, political, and other challenges. Undoubtedly we need more such avenues to screen these films, so that more audiences can view them, engage with the makers, and find the courage to tell their own stories as well.

## **Indian Documentary Film Festival Bhubaneswar 14 – 16 October 2022**

### **Endnotes**

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1. Interview Subrat Beura, Festival Organiser, October 2022
2. Khan, A.M, "In this time of COVID-19, Kashmir endures a 'double lockdown' over India's warmongering". *Washington Post*, 18 May 2020
3. Sagar, "Case Closed", *The Caravan*, 6 Nov 2019  
During the 1997 electoral revision, around 370,000 individuals were marked as doubtful voters, and nearly 200,000 among them were referred to Assam's Foreigners Tribunals. These tribunals are quasi-judicial bodies that draw their power from the Foreigners Act, 1946 and the Foreigners (Tribunal) Order, 1964. On 30 May 2019, the Central Government amended the 1964 order to allow state governments to constitute their own Foreigners' Tribunals but, at present, they continue to be a body unique only to Assam. As of April 2019, according to the home ministry, the state's tribunals had declared 117,000 thousand individuals as foreigners.
4. Tariq Ali, "Winged Words", *London Review of Books*, Vol 43, No. 12, 12 June 2021
5. NALSA Judgement – in 2014, a landmark decision was made by the Supreme court where transgender persons were given the right to gender expression and self-identification of one's gender identity.
6. Bhakto, Anando, "There is collective participation: Sachin Kumar", *The Hindu*, 6 Oct 2022



7. Odia – one of the 16 constitutionally recognized languages of India, spoken predominantly in the province of Odisha. Odisha has a population of 46 million people and Odia is the language spoken by most of the people in the province.
8. Shyamhari Chakra, 'Backstage,' a film on the life and struggles of Odisha's puppeteers', *The Hindu*, 28 October 2021
9. "Citizenship Amendment Bill: India's new 'anti-Muslim' law explained" *BBC News*, 11 December 2019
10. Debashree Mukherjee, "A Night of Knowing Nothing: Cinema, Love, and Collective Struggle", *Film Quarterly*, September 01 2022