

4th Indian Documentary Film Festival, Bhubaneshwar (IDFFB) 2023 continues to attract film-lovers in a quaint Indian city

senses sensesofcinema.com/2024/festival-reports/4th-indian-documentary-film-festival-bhubaneshwar-idffb-2023-continues-to-attract-film-lovers-in-a-quaint-indian-city

Dr. Sneha Krishnan

January 19, 2024

With input from Subrat Beura

Several film enthusiasts in the city of Bhubaneshwar, Odisha warmly embraced several independent films screened between 22 – 24 September 2023 during the fourth Indian documentary festival, in its second edition in a post-pandemic world. Just like its previous edition,¹ this year, the Film Society Bhubaneswar (FSB) brought together filmmakers, artists, cinephiles and academics who volunteer and organise independent film festivals and screenings throughout the year.

In the welcome note for the festival, Subrata Beura the festival coordinator remarked:

*We have been thinking about contemporary documentary practices that we wanted to bring to our audience – specially to the question, what is happening in [the] Indian Documentary scene? Who after Anand Patwardhan? Where are our Guzmans, our Moores? Most of the films in our festival are by young filmmakers, they have a journey to make, but the promise is there. The questions of farmers, women, Muslims, sexual minorities, repressed histories, folk beliefs are explored in many of the films at our festival.*²

The festival showcased 25 films across multiple languages including; Hindustani, Mizo, Bangla, Odia, Punjabi, Kashmiri, Gondi, Madiya, Urdu and Pahari. There were 13 films by female directors presenting unique perspectives from diverse parts of India. This independent film festival had an impressive line-up featuring films such as Prateek Shekhar's *Chardi Kala* and Varrun Sukhraj's *Too Much Democracy*, which dealt with the Indian farmers' protest against the controversial farm laws enacted in 2020.³ Debalina Majumdar's new film *Beyond the Blues* explores the journey of Neel's transition from his birth assigned gender. Shaunak Sen's debut film *Cities of Sleep* (2015) was the spotlight film returning after the screening of *All That Breathes* in the previous edition.



Too Much Democracy

The Opening Film of the festival was Joshy Joseph's *With Quietude – To Nirad* (2015) a documentation on filmmaker Nirad Mahapatra's journey and method of working.⁴ The film delves into the challenges of making independent films in a cinema marginalised Odisha, which does not have a diverse filmmaking culture. Nirad was a torch bearer to set up the regional independent film scene, he worked with creating and running a film society from 1974-1983 to inculcate film literacy and to try building a new audience in Bhubaneswar.

Twelve directors and crew members were present and interacted with the audience after watching their films. For the ardent, independent film-loving audience of Bhubaneshwar, it was heartening to watch several films made by female filmmakers that brought to the fore unique experiences and witnessing changes in contemporary India. Some of the films dwelled on the question of resistance amid the deep polarisation occurring in India since 2014. These films touched upon the iconic farmers' protests, systematic marginalisation of Muslims,⁵ and police attacks on university students under the current regime. There were experimental films that touched upon lived memory and remembering an older generation of artists, archivists and a bygone era.

Holy Rights

There is no distribution channel for independent documentary films made in India. The few spaces available for public screenings are in film festivals that have spaces for documentaries, in the Indian sub-continent, those spaces are few – public television does not have space for critical documentaries. Post 2014, those spaces are shrinking fast, particularly for films that ask critical questions of the regime and its treatment of women, Muslims, and sexual minorities. There is hardly any debate or discussion around the majoritarian ideas of nationality, religious propaganda, linguistic chauvinism and the invocation of a glorious past which has been dominated not only through sensationalised news media reports but also led by extreme polarisation on social media platforms such as YouTube and WhatsApp.

Muslims in India, a 200 million community, are the third largest in the world. Starting in 2014, the regime has been antithetical to Muslims, inciting lynch mobs through the bait of beef eating, segregating their economic life and marginalising their presence in electoral politics by denying any representation in state and parliamentary elections. There have been outrages committed against students, the humiliation heaped upon the people of the Northeast, the designation of citizens as ‘termites’ and ‘vermin’ by the highest officials in the land, and even the open calls for genocide by some Hindu leaders – all this being done with utter impunity and without the slightest remorse of the part of the perpetrators of these crimes.⁶

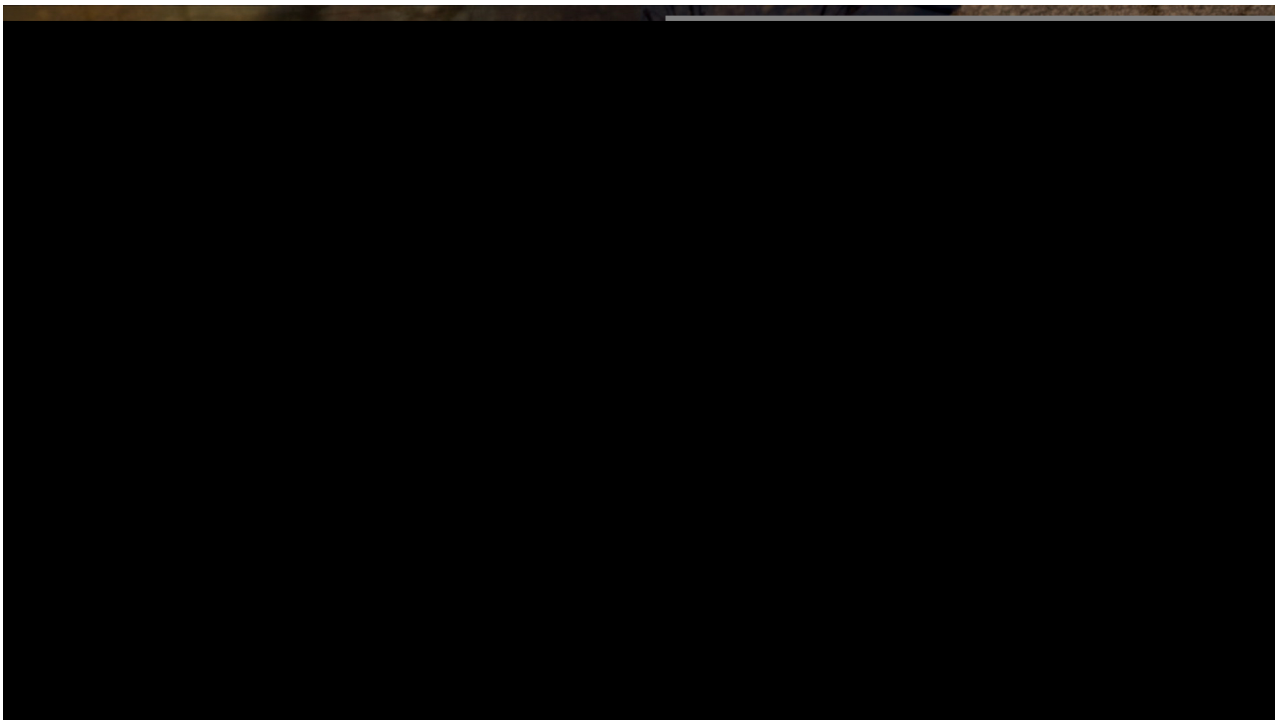
Living on the fringes

Several films were at the intersection of being a minority in an increasingly authoritarian and majoritarian nation. Films highlighting the stories of Muslim women in India, such as Farha Khatun’s *Holy Rights* (2020) focuses on *Qazi* (religious scholar) Safiya Akhtar, who advocates for women’s rights within the Muslim communities. Often due to scriptural

ignorance, women are subjugated under the Triple Talaq,⁷ whereby men continue to reap the benefits of their rights as per the Quran and Islamic law. By following her journey, Khatun chooses to highlight the anxieties, atrocities and trauma that several groups of women go through as they are divorced by their husbands, in the streets or over a phone call.

Films made by female directors

The range of topics and diversity of languages and regional focus of films made by female directors indicates the potential that independent filmmaking is offering younger female filmmakers to develop their ideas, present marginalised lived experiences, as well as bring to the fore stories of survivors of abuse, kidnapping and sex-trafficking. Female directors are also vocal and reflexive about the silencing of university students, the exploration of urban spaces in three-tier cities with a gendered lens, as well as revisiting horrific and violent pasts of the nation's acts of religious pogrom in Assam.



Night and Fear

Lipika Singh Darai's *Night and Fear*, a short that premiered at IFFR, was screened on day one of the festival. It uses recorded material generated by the filmmaker over a decade of her filmmaking practice, that has acquired new meaning with the passing of time. Having a twofold interior, *Night and Fear* is a personal essay addressed to the filmmaker's great aunt, but it is also a reflection on the impact of making films, on the filmmaker herself, and on society.

In *Land of my Dreams*, Nausheen Khan, a young student from Jamia Millia Islamia, a world-renowned university in New Delhi, was a witness to the brutal atrocities that the students faced, initiated by the Delhi police who forcefully entered the campus and rampaged through the library, girls hostel and other open spaces. Using viral footage and tracking the student protests, Khan's rage and disappointment is channelled into

documenting how the state continues to repress dissidents by arresting student leaders such as Umar Khalid and PhD student Sharjeel Imam, who were incarcerated for three years from 2019. Khan's camera follows the anger and frustration of students which spilled over across the nation when Muslim women and several others came together to have the largest sit-in protest in Shaheen Bagh in 2019 and 2020, ending in the Delhi riots during President Trump's visit.⁸ The film brings about Khan's own journey as a Muslim woman and what it means to be a Muslim in today's India. This is Khan's first film, and her work brings out the injustice meted out by the regime on the Muslim community since 2014. It finally came to a head during the passing of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act leading to that state supported pogrom in the Delhi Riots.⁹

In a similar vein, Miriam Chandy Menacherry's *From the Shadows* explores the potential of art to generate awareness over missing girls across India. The film's journey begins with visual artist Leena Kejriwal, who painted murals in public spaces of women's silhouettes that triggered conversations about the incidences of women who go missing from families due to illegal sex trafficking. This follows the recent case of Samina who was rescued by the Impulse NGO Network and the legal case that has been fought without verdict for the past seven years. As the case went sub-judice the director, who was present at the festival, mentioned that they had to ensure that Samina's face could not be shown as part of the film, so they relied on additional footage that did not reveal any personal identifying factors to protect Samina's identity. Several such women rescued from South India were sent back to their homes in bordering countries like Bangladesh and Nepal by Border Security Forces and supported to restart their lives by either remarrying or obtaining livelihood skills support to earn income through weaving and other activities. This film goes to show that art, in combination with social activism and legal support, is necessary to bring justice for women rescued from trafficking across Eastern India.

Priyanka Chhabra's *Ikrarnama (The Agreement)* explored the contested territories of 'refugee', and 'migrant' while the brutal Nellie massacre of 1983 is covered in Subasri Krishnan's *What the Fields remember*, where close to 3,000- 4,000 people were killed in Nellie, Assam.¹⁰ It led to the Assam Accord and the disbanding of anti-foreigner agitation by AASU (all Assam Students' Union) – the families of victims still await justice against the perpetrators of violence. Many who had taken part in the killings are themselves political leaders enjoying protection from legal prosecution. In light of the Citizenship Amendment Act, this film portends the decade-long struggle that citizens within Assam face to continuously prove their identity and belongingness to the nation. This constant othering has only further debilitated their access to job opportunities, education and basic services as the survivors narrate their agony of being stuck in a vicious cycle of othering.

No Cut Film Collective's "*A Rifle and a bag*" explores the life of Somi and her husband, former Naxalites, as they try to integrate into society. Miriam Chandy Menacherry's "*The Leopard's Tribe*" unfolds the challenges of conservation in Mumbai through the Bhoir family's struggle to save "wagh deva" the leopard god. The indigenous people led by the Bhoir family launch a successful campaign to save the forest where the leopards leave –

in the midst of bustling Mumbai. The film is a motivation to lot of conservation groups to work out the forms of collective resistance. This film was made during the pandemic induced restrictions but Miriam seems to have worked out her filming schedules despite all obstacles.



Beyond The Blues

Understanding gender identities through films

Interestingly, Debalina Majumder's *Beyond The Blues* traces the life and journey of Neel's gender transition, discussing ideas of gender dysmorphia and struggles with the acceptance of family members to undergo gender reassignment surgery. It challenges the traditional narrative that expects children to blindly follow the desires and ambitions of their parents at the cost of personal choice and individual freedom, especially when parents and society continue to use identity as a means of control over their children's bodies. It draws attention to the stark reality of accessing medical and emotional support through the painful process of these surgeries that Neel has to undertake to feel one with their physical body and overcome the mental agony of not feeling freely themselves. The film showcases Neel's inner strength and the support received from networks such as Sappho for Equality based in Kolkata. Filmed over a span of five years, this film raises structural questions about the nature of matrimony, private property and how the notion of marriage needs to be challenged for a better society.

Urban ecological narratives

A remarkable 3000 km walk along the banks of Ganga by Sidharth Agarwal, observes the situation of the riparian communities and is the subject of Sridhar Sudhir's *Moving Upstream: Ganga*. The film unravels the rampant development projects that have been created around the river plains irrespective of environmental impact. Industrial lobbies have ensured that environmental costs are ignored and the results are there for all to see in the recent floods in the Himalayan watersheds.¹¹ The film is a remarkable experiment to record the long walk to trace the origins of the river Ganga, while documenting human lives and the disasters that loom ahead.

Shaunak Sen's debut film *Cities of Sleep* is set in the capital, New Delhi, following the lives of the urban poor – the homeless and migrants – who sleep on the streets. The stories of these people are never talked about unless there is an accident of drivers killing the sleeping people on the roads. The film brings out the politics of sleep and how it is controlled by the *sleep mafia* who charge homeless families to sleep in shelters and even on pavements. Several of these shelters are brimming with people who are in need of a bed to rest during harsh winters and heavy monsoons.



The Volunteer Archivists

Experimental films exploring themes of memory and reminiscence

Local histories of Bhubaneswar are explored in Nikhil Patnaik's work with *Srujanika*, a local non-profit focusing on scientific research and education. *Srujanika* have worked heroically to digitise Odia manuscripts, in essence making them available for future generations, which is chronicled in Subhashish Panigrahi's *The Volunteer Archivists*. The

villages of Satabhaya in Himansu Khatua's *The Sea and Seven Villages*, have witnessed the impacts of climate change within the Bhitarkanika National Park, one of the largest crocodile sanctuaries in India.

Nundrisha Wakhloo's *Brair Kani* explores an ancestral house located in Srinagar, Kashmir. Using the attic as a site of reflection, the film navigates the relationship between space, belonging and personal history. Inhabiting the attic, the house spirits exist simultaneously as carriers of collective memory and as manifestations of the emotional landscape.

The ideas of memory and associations are invoked by films based on Nirad Mahapatra as seen in Joseph's *With Quietude – To Nirad* and the films of *Aribam Syam Sharma* from Manipur. Nirad Babu was associated with the film society movement throughout his life; he was involved at Film Society Bhubaneswar's screenings and festivals, and his association with our film society educated many young filmmakers and film activists in the state.

There are experimental elements to Mrinmoy Nandi's *Somoyer Janalaguli (Windows of Time)* made during the bleak times of Covid-19, using the window as a frame from 23 different people, observing their daily lives from different parts of the country, where lockdown ensured a particular uniformity. A similarity of sounds, patterns, and rhythms observed from our windows emerges. Twenty-three plus the filmmaker's own window makes it 24 frames that create the narrative of the film.

Shilpika Bordoloi's fresh short *Mau: The Spirit Dreams of Cheraw* explores the folk beliefs around bamboo in Mizo society. Films in the Mizo language are rare as the Mizo people do not have a film industry. This is Bordoloi's first film, and she comes from Assam where independent filmmaking is a struggle. She is trained as a dancer and seeks to find a form that brings together movement, bodies and therapy. Her work is immersed in folk practices and stories around the Brahmaputra riverine community.

Raat: Night Time in Small Town India by The Third Eye Learning Lab explores nights on camera in small towns through the eyes of women. The effort is interesting to get small town practitioners exposed to cinema through using mobile cameras to tell their own stories and create a narrative during the pandemic. More so, when women from these small towns come out and try to talk about their world – small details that go unnoticed – it foregrounds different worlds, where small steps bring big changes.

Amit Mahant & Ruchika Negi's Polish film *Two Autumns in Wyszogród* raises questions about memories, particularly in societies where fascists try to control all aspects of human life. The film is set in the Polish town of Wyszogród and undertakes an archaeology of memories – particularly around the Vistula River when a Second World War plane is recovered from the river bed – from Soviet times and how that period is being painted over under the influence of ultranationalist politics in present day Poland.

An imaginative exploration of Shahi A.J.'s debut work *Letters Unwritten to Naiyer Masud* was the Closing Night Film at the festival. Shahi A.J.'s film takes on the myth of Naiyer Masud, Professor of Persian at Lucknow University, and deals with notions of space. Most of Masud's work was written in a house, which the film explores, tracing various motifs in Masud's work and examining his literary landscape through drawings, paintings, poetry and animated sequences.

Through the various explorations of themes and relevant takes on current affairs and their historical underpinnings, filmmakers across India are breaking new grounds in form and content in independent documentary films. While a select few get support from production houses, many interesting films and filmmakers never get to screen their work outside of the major film festival circuit. This small and independent film festival, Indian Film Festival, Bhubaneswar, takes a few steps each year to bridge the wide chasm between the stories that need to be heard and the storytellers with the audience that will find inspiration and diverse perspectives through which to understand life, politics and their own space within the country, community, family and individual journeys.

Endnotes

1. Sneha Krishnan, "[Restarting Indian Documentary Film Festival Bhubaneswar \(IDFFB\) 2022 With a Bang!](#)", *Senses of Cinema*, January 2023 ↵
2. Subrat Beura, Festival Note, Festival Coordinator, October 2023 ↵
3. Srivas, A Interview: "[A Level-Playing Field for Farmers Can Only Come Through an MSP Regime](#)" *The Wire* 21 September 2020 ↵
4. Mohapatra Nirad, "[Maya Miriga](#)", *The Making* 10 October 2012 ↵
5. Mia Swart, "[Does CAA comply with India's human rights obligations?](#)", *Al Jazeera*, 30 March 2020 ↵
6. Ganesh, Devy; Tony Joseph; Kavy Korisettar, *The Indians* Aleph Publications, India, p. 549 ↵
7. Farooquee Neyaz, "[Triple talaq: India Muslim women in limbo after instant divorce ruling](#)" *BBC News*, 14 September 2022 ↵
8. Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "[Delhi rocked by deadly protests during Donald Trump's India visit](#)", *The Guardian*, 25 Feb 2020 ↵
9. Khan, Aiman, Chakrabarty "[Why the 2020 violence in Delhi was a pogrom](#)", *Al Jazeera*, 24 February 2021 ↵
10. Krishnan, Subasri, Thirty-Two Years Later, the Nellie Massacre Remains All But Forgotten *The Caravan*, 18 February 2015
<https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/thirty-two-years-later-nellie-massacre-remains-all-forgotten> ↵
11. Mona Chettri, "[Who is responsible for Sikkim's glacial lake outburst flood?](#)" *The Frontline*, 25 October 2023 ↵