

bollywood

Documenting India

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Strange as it may sound, the world's first movies were documentaries, not fiction features. Towards the close of the 1800s, the French Lumiere Brothers shot a puffing railway engine and workers trooping out of a factory, and played them on screen, creating, what is widely believed as, the first ever motion pictures.

Soon after, even before the century turned, India's Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatwadekar shot sweaty wrestlers in Mumbai's Hanging Gardens and the antics of monkeys. In 1901, he made the newsreel of a public reception for Ragnath Paranjpye, who had won a special distinction in math at Cambridge. This was the first time a newsreel was produced.

In 1917, Dadasaheb Phalke, better known as the father of Indian cinema, tried his hand at this genre of "factual film-making". His documentary, *Chitrapat Kase Taya Kartat* (How Movies Are made), showed him directing the cast, shooting and editing a celluloid work. In Bengal, Hiralal Sen shot Kolkata street scenes and bathers in the Hooghly river.

These first documentaries paved the way to what many of us later became familiar with: Indian Films Division newsreels, screened just before the main movie and which invariably put viewers to sleep. Often in black and white, they must be held singularly responsible for the distaste people developed for the genre. Not surprisingly, documentaries remained, and continue to remain, the poor, neglected cousins of feature films.

In India and even elsewhere, the documentary cinema has been struggling to find funds, dedicated directors, distributors, exhibitors and, finally, audiences. I can hardly think of one theatre in India that will allot a slot for a documentary.

It is in such a bleak scenario that S Krishnaswamy in Chennai has been creating one documentary after another for over 40 years. Unlike many others of his ilk, who have either switched over to features after being disillusioned or used the documentary as a mere stepping stone to fiction movies,



* A devotee in Bali, featured in S Krishnaswamy's documentary *A Different Pilgrimage*. The project will be shown at the Cannes Film Festival's Market segment this year.

Krishnaswamy has remained loyal to documenting and describing the actual.

His huge body of work is an amazing storehouse of knowledge on India and its neighbouring regions, and their histories, cultures, arts, religions, societies and political events. He covered the Operation Blue Star in Punjab with rare courage and insight as he has the bloody Sri Lankan ethnic war. At other times, he has frozen on his frame the ancient stillness of India's heritage on rock, or provoked us with his work on abuse of women and children, or traced the country's

magnificent contribution to south-east Asia.

Krishnaswamy, who first shot to fame with his *Indus Valley to Indira Gandhi* in 1976, a four-hour riveting creation on Indian history distributed by Warner Brothers, has now made a feature length documentary, *A Different Pilgrimage*.

Produced by his wife, Mohana Krishnaswamy, it explores a virtually virgin subject: ancient India's cultural and religious impact on south-east Asia. Having studied a history that was visualised and written by the white colonial masters, Indians have

hardly known about the unique ties that once bonded them with south-east Asians.

A Different Pilgrimage — well researched and marvellously photographed by celebrated cinematographer Madhu Ambat — fills this lacuna. The camera meanders along tens of locations in Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam trying to show us the phenomenally strong links that these nations shared with India, its tradition and civilisation — links that went far beyond Buddhism. "We exported much more than Buddhism to these places", Krishnaswamy avers.

A Different Pilgrimage will be screened at the Cannes Film Festival Market. The festival starts today and goes on up to May 23.

At 109 minutes long, the documentary brings alive Borabudur and Prambanan in Java, Angkor Wat and Bayon in Cambodia, Phimai and Pnom Rung in Thailand, Wat Phu Champasak in Laos, Mi Son and Po Nagar in Vietnam and Baisaki in Bali, where centuries-old temples and monuments keep alive Indian belief and folklore till this day.

Daily worship has gone on there without a break. And here are a couple of fascinating facets: the "Rajaguru" to the Thai King traces his ancestry to India and the temple town of Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu, and recites Tamil Bhakti hymns, while the "Rajaguru" of the Cambodian monarch performs Hindu rituals in the royal court.

What is as amazing is that some of the dance forms in south-east Asian countries have been inspired by Hindu mythology. The spectacular *Ramayana* ballet performed by 200 Muslim artistes every evening in Indonesia comes as sheer surprise, and affirms the kind of depth and spread Indian civilisation had.

Recipient of Padmashri and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the US International Film and Video Festival, Los Angeles, among various other honours, Krishnaswamy, hopes that *A Different Pilgrimage* will help spread the greatness of India at Cannes and among the people of many different nations who would assemble there for the 12-day festival.

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Sathyu not at the helm

The Karnataka film director, M S Sathyu, shot to national fame in 1973 with his brilliant *Garam Hawa*. Shot in Hindi, it was a moving, disturbing work on India's Partition. Sathyu has not made many movies since then, and sadly he has not been able to create something as remarkable as *Garam Hawa*.

Sathyu's latest movie, *Ijjodu*, is a devastating look at India's Devadasi system. Once a form of divine sacrifice by young women, who chose to serve God by staying away from familial ties, the practice degenerated into virtual prostitution. It is this that Sathyu spins into a story in *Ijjodu*.

Journalist Ananda (essayed by Anirudh) meets a very beautiful woman, Chennai (Meera Jasmine), in the course of his journeys in interior Karnataka, where he is photographing ancient monuments and writing about irrational rituals and customs. He is shocked to

learn that she is a "Basavi", a woman offered to the presiding village goddess to 'save' the superstitious locals from crippling epidemics. Like other "Basavis", Chennai ends up as a prostitute, obliged to entertain any man who steps into her house. Ananda resists her charm and tries to dissuade her from this shameful life. His logical arguments are finally met by a question from her: will he marry her?

Ananda hesitates, and lives to regret his moment of indecisiveness. Unfortunately, Sathyu fails to evoke the *Garam Hawa* magic in *Ijjodu*, and there are sequences that are boringly long or repetitive. For instance, the folk dance at the beginning of the film stretches almost endlessly.

At other times, performances and direction appear so amateurish that one wonders whether Sathyu was really at the helm of affairs on the set. If Jasmine seems satisfied with just looking pretty, Anirudh is awfully wooden. *Ijjodu* is a clear example of a good story being marred by indifferent style and effort.



* Meera Jasmine and M S Sathyu on the sets of *Ijjodu*.