

PART 1

Over the last 3 months, I had the opportunity to be part of 3 film festivals in 3 different venues:

International Film Festival of India 2010, Goa (IFFI)

Pune International Film Festival, Pune (PIFF)

Abhivyakti's Ankur Film Festival, Nashik

and I got thinking about the purpose of film festivals and my feelings about them.

At the very basic level, one goes to film festivals to watch films, right?

(In today's age, I guess this is no longer wholly true. People go to film festivals to 'network' and find new, important names to add to their Facebook friends' list.)

So, to watch films... Let me go back a little and mention some film festivals that have had a huge impact on me.

In my college days, I watched many European films with 'forbidden' scenes by sneaking into film festivals at the National Film Archives. Film festivals didn't have delegate passes with ID photographs at that time. There was only one projectionist-cum-caretaker one had to hide from.

These film festivals organised by the Alliance Francaise, Max Mueller Bhavan and the Archives themselves were my initiation into World Cinema, a widening of my world view.

Again in college, I watched a film festival called 'Larzish' on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender issues, which in a few hours, truly made me a gender- and sexuality- sensitive and a liberal for life. It was organised by a LGBT rights organisation in a tiny auditorium of a college with an old projector.

I attribute this impact not only on the films themselves but the entire atmosphere in which they showed themselves to me. The venue, my fellow film viewers, the projection, what came immediately before and after the screening... all these factors came together to produce a certain long lasting impression on my mind, which I hold dear even today.

Intimacy and Sincerity are the feelings I remember from the air of those times. People collected in the hall on time, mobiles didn't ring quite as often and were deeply frowned upon, if they did. After the lights dimmed, people waited patiently and respectfully for the film to start and the films were played right from the initial leader or black or colour bars and beep, giving the audience those crucial seconds to switch off from the outside world and enter the world of the film. I also remember a sense of free flow, personal freedom given to every member of the audience to silently come and go as they pleased.

Sometimes a discussion followed the film screening, at times graced by the filmmakers and the audience saw and heard the creators of the film they had just watched. They could relate once again to scenes and shots of the film by hearing of experiences and learnings during the making of the film. People stepped out of the hall, discussing the film, or in contemplative silence. The film remained with the audience longer than its actual duration, sometimes for days, sometimes even for life.

Later I got admitted into the Film Institute (FTII, Pune) and I went to my first IFFI in Goa and later PIFF in Pune. There we OD-ed on a minimum of 4 films-a-day and by the end of it, we could hardly remember which film a visual or sound memory was part of!

ON FILM FESTIVALS

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Admittedly, there was a certain thrill in rushing from screen to screen and absorbing millions of flashes of light and darkness. It also seemed to be value for money and time and a sense of pride, to be hardcore film students running in this film-watching marathon.

But, in retrospect, that was the end of something and the beginning of something else....

In subsequent IFFIs and PIFFs, the number of delegates became higher, food and drinks at festival stalls became costlier, lines became longer and security became tighter. More and more people were now clamouring to watch World Cinema and were also ready to spend tons of money for it. Wow.

But Celebrity appearances on the 'Red Carpet', crowds of photographers and media persons, LCD screens showing live telecasts of the festival, Music and Dance entertainment, invitees-only-parties and cheap beer.... how did they enter into film festivals, which until recently used to be attended only by badly dressed, artist-type people and senior citizens?

Go figure.

Personal interactions, genuine discussions and critique of films are now a thing of the past. There are Open Forums where everyone talks nicely and appreciatively of each other. The leaders and start marks from the beginning of films have disappeared, just like film trailers and end credits have disappeared from multiplex film shows. Technical problems have only grown inspite of State-of-the-Art projection equipment. Wrong projection gates, the Sound coming on late, out of focus, badly adjusted frames don't even disturb most people nowadays.

If Guru Dutt would have walked on that Red carpet and come to the recent IFFI, he would have died all over again. His beloved *Kaagaz ke Phool* was screened with the reels mixed up. A shamefully silent audience, including myself, most of who I am sure had seen the classic before, sat through cinematic blasphemy being committed right in front of us and IFFI got away with it. Even creating a ruckus there would have only resulted in an apology by an over-courteous but clueless 'Volunteer' kid. It was useless. The sacrilege was done as was the *ras-bhang*. Thank goodness the esteemed cameraman of the film- 88-year-old V. K. Murthy, who was felicitated before the screening, didn't stay to watch it.

All this is certainly not any problem of resources or personnel, but seems to be an appalling apathy toward giving people a real cinematic or artistic experience, a blatant disrespect and disregard for the efforts that go into creating every frame of a film and a greed of cramming more and more 'Entertainment' into every moment and milking it dry of its 'commercial and publicity value'. This is apparent from both the organisers' and the audience's behaviour at these film festivals.

So, I told myself, times have changed and this kind of multiple bombardment of the senses was the celebration of Cinema today. People need to multi-task and don't care about old-world film- watching etiquette. Get over it. Get used to it.

Then quite by chance, I went to Nashik and got to experience Abhivyakti's Ankur film festival for a few hours....

PART 2

Most wonderful things happen quite by chance and Abhivyakti's Ankur film festival was one of these happy coincidences. My friend's documentary, which I had also assisted in, was selected to screen there. Both of us were in Nashik for some other work and decided to peep in.

The moment I stepped into the venue with the cloth banner of the festival, inviting One and All to the screenings, I knew I had come to a real film festival again, after ages. There were no security guards suspecting us of carrying bombs or coca colas into the hall. Instead, there was an open ground where various social organisations had set up their stalls, not selling, but giving out their information booklets and inviting everyone for conversations. There was also a space for people to sit informally in groups for open discussions. The absence of brands, advertisement hoardings and LCD screenings was soothing to the eyes and I didn't feel bombarded with 'entertainment' and updates.

We looked at the festival schedule. It didn't spill out grids of screenings, but also had a few hours of the afternoon kept for workshops and discussions between just 2 main screening slots. The bell rang for the start of the screenings and people bustled into the hall. I must admit that after IFFI at Inox, Goa, the simple hall with plastic seats and a large, white, cloth screen was a slight shock. The kind of people assembled and their open, noisy comments were also unexpected, to say the least. But when I saw the white mattresses laid out in *Bharatiya Baithak* style on the stage, I swear, tears stung my eyes.

This was not to be just a passive viewing of a collection of films- The scene was set for Interaction! And what an interaction followed! Never in all my life of watching films at festivals, had I attended one like this. It was honest, heartfelt feedback, straight from the horse's mouth, which could of course be scary as hell for a filmmaker, but was the purest test of one's work- the test of a feisty, responsive audience. If they liked it, they applauded. If it sucked, they showed their disapproval; never disrespectfully, but there was a perceptible vibe, a charge in the air which according to me is the most exciting and humbling experience for a filmmaker.

The technical apparatus consisted of a laptop with a DVD drive, a HDMI cable, a projector and speakers. It did have some hitches, which the audience was surprisingly patient about, but about the films- they were respectfully but openly critical. But at the end of the day, they were also indulgent and listened to all filmmakers with genuine appreciation for their efforts. One thing was for sure- there was absolutely no place for pretension. A filmmaker had to be real- really serious, really passionate, to get and hold the attention of these people, but that didn't mean one had to be grave or heavy. It was a daunting challenge.

This was a mixed and myriad collection of people- intellectuals, social activists, students, politically and socially active young people, NGO field workers, and everyday people from Nashik and all over Maharashtra and even other parts of India. I met people from Osmanabad, Satara and Kolhapur. My personal starstruck moment was meeting 2 filmmakers from the Malegaon film industry! Many from this audience were what the Mumbai-Pune elite would call 'the Masses'. But no one at this festival was here for populist entertainment or to jeer at anyone else. They were here to really really watch films and gain from them. Serious documentaries were seen with as much involvement as were quirky, short fiction films. Going beyond film viewing, people were here to talk and interact about real social issues and bring and share their personal experience

ON FILM FESTIVALS

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and insight into analysing every film. I felt ashamed of some of my highbrow discussions and prejudices back home. I had to wonder if my jadedness and I deserved the opportunities and technical education we had access to.

This small festival opened me up to the fact that the supposed 'privileged, intellectual' class had better wake up and look around. Here were people from the far corners of the country, taking the audio-visual medium in hand, expressing themselves by whatever means they could. They had no formal training and no artistic baggage either. They did bother about things like format, picture resolution, chiaroscuro lighting, composition or edit points. Some of the filmmakers were from slums or 'field' areas, going through the process of filmmaking for the first time in their lives and they experimented freely, but with a purpose. This place was not a showroom of gimmicks and technical stunts. They just stood up and spoke out, loud and clear, in voices from their own worlds, in their own language(s). This democratisation of the audio-visual media was the real face of cinema, today and of the future. I was witnessing a revolution in process. And I wanted a part in it.

These films were alive. They spoke through their content, direct *Dil Se*. Watching these films, and infected by the enthusiasm of the people around me, I felt young again; rescued from jadedness. This was exhilarating, liberating and basically a lot of fun.

Back in Pune, there was a big award function of PIFF in Pune. I was getting an award, but I had to beg the bouncer-looking men at the venue gate and make a number of phone calls to organisers and officials, for my parents and friends to be let inside to watch me getting it. The function started an hour and a half late, while a large audience waited and volunteers dressed in 'traditional' costumes took photos of each other, presumably for their Facebook updates. When the function finally started, there was another long hour of ridiculous felicitation of the international jury with *Pagdis* and *Naths* (which kept toppling off heads and noses) and big bouquets of flowers.

There was no gender equality. Only young girls in 9-yard sarees brought the bouquets, mementos, certificates, trophies, shawls, *naths*, *pagdis* and whatnots from the stage wings (and took ages to do that, keeping the people on the stage waiting, smiling awkwardly at each other.)

A music system blared out some techno music in a loop, every time an award-winner came up on stage. I felt like I was watching one of those talent shows on TV. No one spoke anything of essence about the themes of their films or the process of making them.

I won an award for Best Director in the Student Film Competition Section. Of course, I was happy, but the only genuine thing about that event for me was the interaction with some people from the audience who came and talked to me after the show. It was very gratifying to know that they had actually watched and appreciated my film.

Parallel Cut with Ankur film festival:

The Q and A session that followed that set of screenings, must have been the most satisfying time for all the filmmakers involved and I found myself feeling really envious. I wished my film had been screened at this festival. The filmmakers were felicitated with books published by Abhivyakti. The discussions continued over a simple but delicious dinner of *kadhi-khichadi* coupons for which were included in the welcome kit.

There were so many small gestures over this one day from the organisers that made one want to be part of this set up always.

ON FILM FESTIVALS

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Unfortunately, we had to leave the next day, but I wished I could reallocate the time I had spent at other film festivals here. But I also realised that boycotting big, international film festivals was certainly not the answer. With their scale and resources, they had tremendous potential to become platforms for diverse voices from all over the country and the world. Rather, I wished these festivals could focus on creating such plural spaces and not just be a celebrity bash and a conveyor belt of film screenings.

With next to no resources, except the will to give people a pleasant and educative film experience, Abhivyakti's Ankur film festival had accomplished what big budget festivals like IFFI and PIFF completely miss: It went beyond film screenings. It moved people and brought them together and face to face with filmmakers and the filmmaking process.

Basically, it cared.

EPILOGUE

An old woman sitting next to me at the PIFF award function was a real sport. She watched the show attentively and cheered and applauded everything enthusiastically. She didn't seem to be the kinds to watch international films, but my prejudiced eye may be wrong.

It must have been a bit of a shock for her that the girl sitting next to her, suddenly got up and received an award. When I came back, she congratulated me profusely, shook my hand and gave me a packet of biscuits from her bag to show me her appreciation. It was the most touching and genuine gesture of that whole evening. The empty biscuit packet is now in my showcase, next to the PIFF award certificate.

In my opinion, any film festival is made up of these people and they should be given due respect and space and time. No scale should become too big for that.