

Dr. Padgoankar, Mr. Magdooom and friends, it is a singular privilege and honour to be invited to inaugurate this festival of independent Iranian's films tonight. At the outset, I request you to bear with a personal reminiscence.

I have been coming to the National Film Archive of India here in Pune on and off for the past fifty years and it would be amiss if I did not take this opportunity to acknowledge the late Mr. P. K. Nair, former Director of this hallowed institution, for his invaluable contribution to the dissemination of film culture in India. Cinephiles of my generation will always remember Nair saheb fondly for being such a steadfast friend of cinema all his life.

A passion for films is also evident in the eclectic country-centric and thematic retrospectives organized twice a year by the Pune International Centre under the guidance and curatorial expertise of Dr. Latika Padgaonkar. Thanks are also due to NFAI, NETPAC and Iranian-Independents for wholeheartedly supporting the ongoing festival.

My first encounter with Iranian cinema dates back to the International Film Festival, or Filmotsav as it was known then, at Trivandrum in 1988. Although I was vaguely aware of an earlier generation of Iranian directors such as Dariush Mehrjui, Sohrab Shahid-Saless and Bahman Farmanara, I had never seen an Iranian film before.

Naturally I knew nothing about the director or the film which was scheduled that evening in Trivandrum. Nevertheless I ventured into the auditorium for two primary reasons.

Firstly, I wanted to see how the country of my forebears was portrayed on film, especially since I had never been to Iran. I haven't still. More crucially, I wanted to hear the sound of the melodious language --- Farsi or Persian as it is more commonly known --- as spoken by the country's inhabitants.

Anyway I had also arrogantly presumed that the film-would not be worthwhile and that I would walk out after 20 minutes or half an hour. Of course, I did no such thing. Instead at the end of the screening I joined viewers in giving it a rousing ovation.

The film I saw that evening was *Where Is My Friend's Home* by Abbas Kiarostami. As Kurosawa did with *Rashomon* and Satyajit Ray with *Pather Panchali*, Kiarostami put his country on the cinematic map of the world with this film.

Over the next two decades, Kiarostami and a clutch of fellow filmmakers including Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi and Majid Majidi were at the forefront of the resurgence in Iranian cinema. Their films struck a chord with global audiences including festival goers in India who would rather see an Iranian film than one from any other country.

I am no expert and can only hazard a guess regarding the sudden rise to prominence of Iran's national cinema. Following the Islamic revolution of 1979, popular commercial pictures especially from America, Italy and France, were no longer allowed to be screened in the country.

Deprived of a familiar, albeit foreign, frame of reference, filmmakers reverted to telling stories rooted in their own milieu and drawn from their own experiences. Marked by a prodigious diversity, their movies captured the distinctive tenor of a specific time, place and people.

A statement by Giuseppe De Santis, the Italian neo-realist director of the 1950's, encapsulates a truism which has universal resonance. He said, "When I make films about my own people, I am understood by the whole world. But when I tried to make a picture about a certain abstract idea, I wasn't understood even by my own people".

Even half a century later, De Santis' assertion is as valid for the films of old masters like Kiarostami, as it is for new work by independent Iranian filmmakers.

Things became more complicated for Iranian directors after the mid-nineties when a new, more hard-line regime came into power. But encouragingly yet another generation of young independent filmmakers --- the post-new wave mavericks --- was determined to ensure, that even in the face of daunting odds, freedom of expression would not be suppressed.

Despite bans and house arrests, even veteran directors such as Jafar Panahi and Mohammed Rasoulof continued to make films, so what if they were only screened at film festivals abroad. In 2009, Bahman Ghobadi, the acclaimed director of *Turtles Can Fly*, made a film called *No One Knows About Persian Cats* which dealt with the vibrant underground rock music scene in Tehran, and in 2014 Ana Lily Aminpour made Iran's first feminist vampire western titled *A Woman Walks Home Alone At Night*. Both films, of course were never shown in Iran.

A representative selection of 13 films will be showcased over the next three days giving voice to the independent generation of Iranian filmmakers whose expansive powers of imagination will likely have a bearing upon the future of Iran and its cultural legacy.

Time constraints prevent me from going into the details of individual films but it is worth noting that the work of directors like Reza Dormishian, Shahram Mokri (whose *Fish and Cat* is an audacious formal experiment) and Mani Haghighi has garnered critical acclaim as well as prizes at various international film festivals.

I will, however, accord *Risk of Acid Rain* special consideration. A first feature film by Behtash Sanaeiha, it is a poignant meditation on loneliness and the interdependence - or lack thereof - in human relationships. Unusually for an Iranian film, it is also occasionally very funny.

But its salient feature is the casting of one of Iran's finest contemporary poets, Shams Langroudi in the lead role of the retired old man who travels to Tehran to search for a friend he hasn't met in over 30 years.

I was fortunate to meet and interact with director Sanaeeha and his charming leading lady Maryam Moghaddam at the Mumbai film festival last October. After the screening, I also Google searched Shams Langroudi and read some of his poems in English translation. One short poem, in particular, struck me as being as concise and eloquent as the best haiku.

Both director Sanaeeha and poet Langroudi who serves as his inspiration plead for a more tolerant, even light-hearted, attitude towards fellow human beings who have to not only contend with strife in some form or the other but often also with the sheer absurdity of daily living.

By way of summation I would like to read the above mentioned four line poem by Shams Langroudi.

“You are late Moses!

The miracle era has passed.

Grant your cane to Charlie Chaplin.

So we have some laughs”

Long may independent Iranian cinema and the Pune International Centre’s film initiatives continue to flourish.

Thank you.