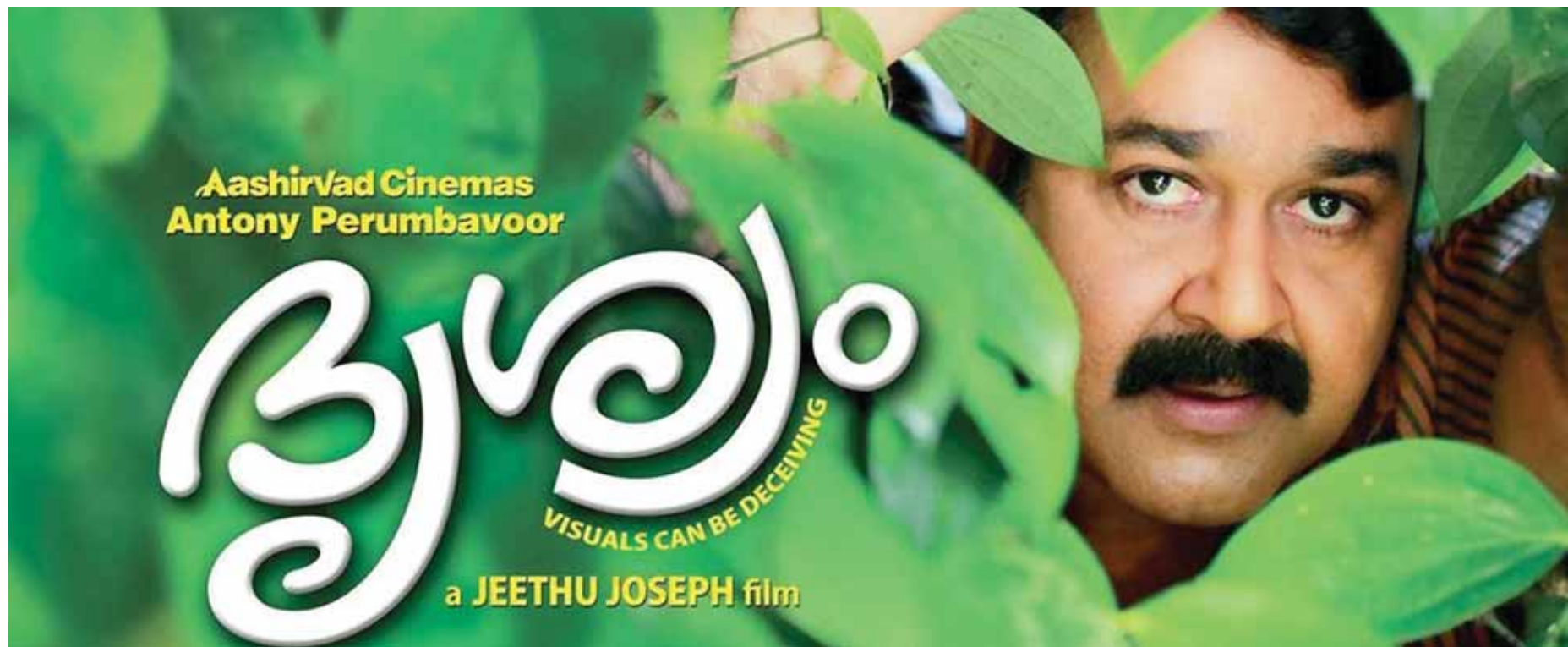




Goa film festival needs rethink



SELECTED: *Drishyam* is one of the movies that was part of the Indian Panorama at the IFFI.

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

The just-ended International Film Festival of India (IFFI) at Panaji in Goa is certainly the oldest of its kind in Asia, and one among an older lot in the world. Of course, Venice, Cannes and Berlin are ancient. And these are doing extremely well, even Venice despite the political interference — the last Director of Venice, Marco Mueller, did a splendid job, but was asked to leave after eight years. But Cannes does not do any such thing; it allows its Director to stay on and on. Gilles Jacob and now Thierry Fremaux are classic examples of this.

But in India, impermanence is the only permanence. For years, the IFFI — run by the Union Information and Broadcasting Ministry — did not formalise Malti Sahay's position as Director. And, three days before she retired, Sahay ceased to be Acting Director. What would you call this? Short-sightedness or cussedness?

It has not been very different for the present Director, Shankar Mohan — who completed 25 years in the Directorate of Film Festivals, the organisation that is a wing of the ministry and actually runs the 11-day IFFI. His position as Director was formalised only last year, although he has been in that chair for several years now. And this so-called promotion of his came a year before he retires at the end of this December.

And now what? There have been advertisements in newspapers calling for a candidate for the Director's post. Will they find a suitable person to run the event? I have my doubts. An easier option will be to extend Mohan's tenure by at least three years. Most people who have followed the Festival will agree that Mohan has done a good job, given the kind of handicaps and hiccups he had to face.

One of them has been the Ministry's refusal to give Mohan a free hand in travel plans. Now, the whole world knows that Cannes is the most important movie festival

on this earth. But Mohan was not allowed to go to Cannes in 2013 and 2014. While just about every festival director or programmer is at Cannes to select films for their festivals, Mohan is not to be found there.

Instead, we have Indian bureaucrats — three or four of them this year and also in 2013 — marking their presence at Cannes, spending public money. In fact, one of them stayed at a plush five-star hotel at Cannes, where top Hollywood stars are put up!

And these bureaucrats know nothing about cinema. They are not expected to. So why ask them to go to Cannes? Why not Mohan? He could have certainly picked some good cinema from Cannes and scheduled them for IFFI. I have never been able to understand this logic, if one can call it logic at all.

Despite these constraints, Mohan has been putting up a decent show, has been managing to get a fairly good package. Which could have been much better if Mohan had been allowed to travel more often to pick movies and get celebrities over to Panaji. This year, IFFI had Iranian helmer Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Hong Kong auteur Wong Kar-wai. Last year, the Festival had Susan Sarandon. But IFFI could have gotten an Angelina Jolie or Steven Spielberg or a Ken Loach or a Keira Knightley.

In the end, one hopes that better sense will prevail and Mohan will be allowed to remain Director for some more years. And with Goa finally being declared the Festival's permanent venue (it took 10 long years for this to happen!), some kind of continuity can be expected. Mohan must be part of this process.

Indian Panorama

When the Quentin Tarantino jury at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival gave the top Palm d'Or for Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* — a scathing documentary on the Bush administration — a lot of people were unhappy. They said that this was a political decision of a jury that was as opposed to President Bush as Moore himself. The people felt that there were many other entries, notably fiction features, which merited the prize. But, there were no public protests

against the jury's verdict. No morchas at Cannes.

However, in India, things do go overboard. Some days ago, there was a protest at IFFI by all those who were grieved that their movies had not been chosen for the Indian Panorama — a section that showcases the cream of Indian cinema and is often viewed as one of the most prestigious sections at the annual event.

This year, there were about 180-odd films that had been sent up for possible inclusion in the Panorama. A 13-member jury, headed by the renowned cinematographer-director, AK Bir, watched the movies over 23 days to pick 26. Not an easy task for any jury.

Cannes, for instance, works for three months to pick 40 works or so from close to 3,000 submissions. The same is the case with Venice or Berlin. Obviously, most of what comes in has to be rejected. But there are no public protests. Private cribbing, well yes.

But in India, all those who have been given the go by in the Panorama make a hue and cry over it. They seldom accept the jury's choice with grace. Sometimes, they go to court and make it messy for the Directorate of Film Festivals, which organises IFFI.

Also, most moviemakers do not care to understand that the Panorama is meant to exhibit the best of Indian cinema — irrespective of language or budget. One of the members of this year's Panorama jury, Ganga Raju Gunnam, a producer-writer-director from Andhra Pradesh, was bombarded with questions when he went back home to Hyderabad. Why is it that not a single Telugu film had made it to this important section, he was asked time and again. "Because there was no Telugu movie worth a berth on the Panorama," he quipped and quipped.

Sadly, like much else in India, we are still parochial. We still think in the confines of language, religion, caste and so on. And we bring these factors into play when we choose films for the Panorama, forgetting that this is not a Panorama of Telugu or Tamil or Bengali or Assamese or Hindi or Oriya movies — but a Panorama of Indian cinema, and the best of Indian cinema at that.



There is another kind of prejudice at work. Must a big-budget and big-star picture like *Drishyam* be part of the Panorama — which it was this year? Why not? Must a film, however wonderfully made, be kept out of Panorama just because it was made on a big budget? Does it not deserve to be seen by a world audience? Also, must *Drishyam* be out of the Panorama race, just because it has superstar Mohanlal in it?

A similar example would be Venu's *Munnariyippu* — which has Mammootty playing a convict, and what a great performance, and what a great film as well.

It is time producers and directors realised that the Indian Panorama is not one of those areas guided by some kind of reservation policy.

One young director, whose debut work was not selected for Panorama, lamented that he was poor, had used his last penny to make the movie and Panorama was his last chance to plough back something he had invested. Surely, this cannot be a reason.

Also, the young man must understand that a jury's decision is final, and questioning it can only be futile.

NEXT WEEK: GEMS OF IFFI

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