



Sunday Special » People

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Directionless, director-less, and nobody cares

50TH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL OF INDIA, GOA

As the Festival by the Mandovi is set to celebrate 50 years of its journey, IFFI is nowhere near any of the major festivals the world over. Certainly, miles away from Cannes, the 12-day cinematic event on the French Riviera that some wished would be replicated at Panaji

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The early years of 2000 were a period of great excitement for the International Film Festival of India. They were also one of dilemma. Known as IFFI in its abbreviated form, the Festival ever since its inception in the 1950s had led a gypsy existence — alternating between New Delhi and various other cities. This arrangement obviously had huge flaws. One of the IFFI directors, Malti Sahay, used to lament that over 50 per cent of their energy and time and money went towards such camping outside New Delhi, where they had a permanent base. Also, IFFI found it a struggle to build a rapport with different

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state governments every other year. They had their own agenda.

So, a move began to find a permanent venue for the Festival, which was organised by the Directorate of Film Festivals, a wing of the Union Information and Broadcasting Ministry. Both Ravi Shankar Prasad and the late Sushma Swaraj, who headed the I&B ministry in succession, were keen on Panaji. They felt that one could turn the capital city of Goa into a Cannes.

In 2004, the Festival settled down in Panaji. The location was excellent with a theatre complex facing the gentle flowing Mandovi river. But brick and motor do not make a festival, and IFFI began its downward spiral. And 15 years later in 2019, as the Festival by the Mandovi is all set to celebrate 50 years of its journey, IFFI is nowhere near any of the major festivals the world over. Certainly, miles and miles away from Cannes — the 12-day cinematic event on the French Riviera that some wished and hoped would be replicated at Panaji.

What the best stand for

This May, Cannes celebrated its 72nd edition — a Festival that began just as World War II ended in 1945, and which has been steadily building its reputation through an excellent choice of movies and an administration that is almost unshakable. Its directors like Gilles Jacob have remained at the helm for a quarter century and more; the present director, Thierry Fremaux, has been in charge for almost 15 years now or more. He will remain probably for another 15 years, young as he is. Cannes believed in a certain permanence, and this came from the top echelons of the management.



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The Venice Film Festival has had its hurdles, its directors not staying long enough to get the 11-day event getting stronger. But when the dynamic Marco Mueller came on board in 2004, the Festival realised its folly. He remained in office for eight years, virtually lifting the Festival that was drowning in the Adriatic Sea. He saw to it that the Festival got just about every film as world premiere.

Mueller's successor Alberto Barbera, who is now the director, has been as able, pushing the Festival from strength to strength. Not just that, Venice has become a keen competitor of Cannes, acting as the launch pad for Oscar hopefuls. Several of the films that premiered at Venice — like Birdman, La La Land, The Revenant, Roma and so on — went to the Oscars. At 76, Venice — the world's oldest Festival — has indeed become a great festival, giving Cannes, often called the Queen of all, a tough race. And Venice could become that largely because the administration realised that a director must stay on for a long time if the Festival has to grow and shine.



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Where IFFI erred

IFFI, sadly, seems to have totally overlooked and ignored this aspect. After Shankar Mohan retired as the Festival director in 2014, the event has not been able to find a suitable replacement. It was widely felt then that Mohan should be allowed to continue – as he understood cinema well and was also a keen administrator. Unfortunately, that did not happen, and we have been seeing a shabby stopgap arrangement with one bureaucrat after another holding the post of director. If they know little about cinema (they are not supposed to, obviously), they are, frankly speaking, not even interested in the position.

But even when Mohan was the director, he did not have a great time. He was hardly allowed to travel to Festivals like Cannes or Venice or Berlin. When he was allowed to go, he was given just about three days in Cannes or Venice – festivals that ran for 11 or 12 days!

Worse, Indian bureaucrats trooped into Cannes year after year, clueless as to what they were meant to do there. If this was not an utter waste of public money with some of the bureaucrats travelling business class and staying in five-star luxury at Cannes, the fact that there was really none to select films was appalling. After all, IFFI is the biggest Festival in India. Any festival worth its name needs a director or programmers who can hop into Cannes or Venice or Berlin or Tokyo to pick titles and build a rapport with producers and helmers there. But IFFI did not believe in that!

What seemed sadder was that IFFI directors hardly had the kind of freedom which their counterparts elsewhere enjoyed. Maybe, they did not assert that! I remember an incident at Busan where the director stood his ground to screen a documentary *The Truth Shall Not Sink With Sewol* (2014) – which told us the tragic tale of a ferry disaster in which 300 people died. The local administration, which wanted to hide what the documentary said, tried its best to stop the screening. But the director remained steadfast in his decision. Of course, he was humiliated and harassed later, but the reputation of the Festival went up several notches.

But nothing of this gutsy sort can ever happen in IFFI.

On the contrary, some of most undesirable things are allowed to take place. I remember a year when I was part of the panel to select the Indian Panorama movies – a section which I have always considered to be the cream of the Festival. That year, the chairman hardly ever turned up for the screenings, and one member went away to London. But returned to cast his vote!

This has also been the bane of IFFI, gathering a set of jurors or panellists who are hardly interested in it. For years, IFFI has been criticised for including men and women on the jury who are incapable of selecting movies for the Panorama. The less said about the main jury set up for the competition titles, the better.

In comparison, the juries in Cannes or Venice or Berlin or Tokyo are top class

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with names to reckon with. Why, even Festivals in Dubai and Abu Dhabi had impressive juries. The three-year-old El Gouna Film Festival, headed by Intishal Timimi – formerly of Abu Dhabi – is run with clockwork precision and boasts of solid juries, and one can watch an excellent selection of Arab cinema there.

Finally, if a 24-year-old Busan International Film Festival can have several world premieres, if MAMI in Mumbai can have them as well — as we would be seeing later this month — why can't IFFI? The answer is simple. nobody cares, and with over Rs 20 crore as its budget (shared by the Centre and the Goa Government), it seems such a shame to let a Festival go to seed, directionless and director-less.

The writer is an author and movie critic who has been covering film festivals for three decades

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