

Spectrum

The Tribune

Sunday, February 27, 2011

A thinking man's director

Reviewed by Nonika Singh

Adoor Gopalakrishnan: A Life in Cinema

By Gautaman Bhaskaran.

Penguin/Viking.

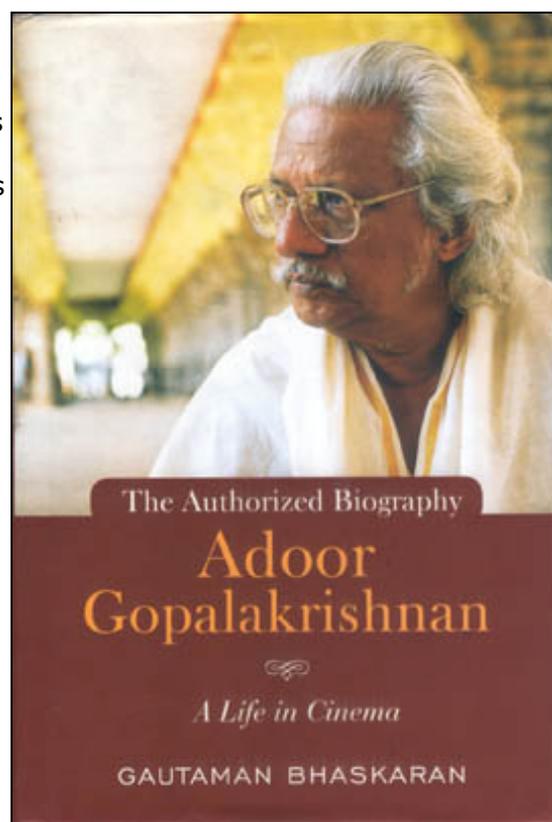
Pages 218. Rs 599.

FOR those fed on the Bollywood mainstream cinema, Adoor Gopalakrishnan is at best a cerebral film-maker and a thinking man's director. Beyond that an average North Indian is perhaps likely to draw a blank. And it's these blanks that Gautaman Bhaskaran fills with an incisive biography on the celebrated Malayam film-maker who is often considered in the same league as the likes of Satyajit Ray. What makes Adoor one of the finest directors that Indian cinema has seen and what are the elements that make his cinema fascinating and a cut above the rest are handled with a deftness rarely encountered in biographies, more so of living persons.

In an engaging manner, the book harks back to the day Adoor was born in a breech delivery, i.e., feet first, and then chronicles his life right from growing up scripting plays as well as listening to those written by his maternal aunt Kutty Kunjamma. But none of the tales are recounted in a linear fashion. Ingenuously, the writer goes back and forth in time providing a narrative that simultaneously straddles several grounds. So, on the one hand, you learn about how Kathakali may have impacted young Adoor's mind and just at the end of the same chapter, Adoor the celebrity who has no hesitation in standing in a queue for a bank draft or in sharing a meal with his driver, too, emerges.

If Adoor's cinema is a social document of the times we live in, rather in which the feted maker was born and brought up, so is the book. Yet, irrespective of whether it dwells on the finer nuances of Adoor's fantastic oeuvre or on social political milieu of Kerala, nowhere does it turn pedagogue. Instead, words easily turn into visuals. For those of us not privy to Adoor's fascinating cinema, the section describing his films is as good as watching them. Perhaps even more, for it is coupled with not only interesting anecdotes related to the making of a film but also underlines the subtexts. It conveys much that is unsaid in the movies of the man who not only employs silences in his films rather effectively but also a reluctant speaker (by self-admission) who doesn't believe in excesses of any kind, except perhaps of details, authenticity.

Without saying it in so many words, Bhaskaran underlines what makes Adoor's cinema an art. The extent to which he goes to find the right cast, the right ambience and even a pepper plant or a broken chair to give the authentic feel for his movies pulsates all through. Adoor the person reflects in funny incidents like the repartee "I don't think it is a compliment" to the steward's comment in the flight, "You look like Einstein". But more than personal details, he comes across as a man of conviction through the dovetailing of his cinematic journey. Indeed, Adoor's background, his family, his mother's illness, the separation of his parents, the years of growing up and his deep abiding interest in theatre which is what led him to the Pune's film institute in the first place are all accounted for. Often the line between his cinema and life is blurred. But then, it's not just the movie *Kathapurushan* that draws from his life, many of his movies have strong biographical undertones.



Witness to the decline of feudalism in his home state of Kerala, he has often portrayed the same on screen through his personal experiences, particularly in movies like *The Rat Trap (Elippathayam)*. In the end and only befittingly so, it is the film-maker that emerges tall, and quite effortlessly at that, for which the credit goes to the biographer who seems to have gone under the skin of the great film-maker's cinema.

The only thing that rankles about the book is that it ends with an insight into Adoor's film *A Climate for Crime (Oru Pennum Randaanum)* and his take on adapting short stories on celluloid screen, leaving one hungering for more. Perhaps vision or future plans of the maker would have been a more rounded climax. But then the Padma Vibushan recipient, who never gives definitive statements in his movies, is unlikely to make final proclamations in a book, even if it happens to be an authorised biography.

[**HOME**](#)

