

Two Indian works at Dhaka Film Festival impress

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A scene from *There's Always Tomorrow*. Right: A screen grab from *Pathemari*.

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By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The recently concluded Dhaka International Film Festival's 15th edition, despite poor screening facilities, did manage to show some riveting cinema. And there were two Indian movies that I quite liked. I am not saying they were brilliant, but they managed to make an impression. Salim Ahamed, who gave us *Adaminte Makan Abu* some years ago, presented his latest, *Pathemari* (Dhow), in the Festival's 23-strong competition category. Much like *Adaminte Makan Abu*, which paints the sorrow and suffering of an old Muslim couple whose dream to go on Haj always finds itself facing an impregnable wall, Malayalam superstar Mammooty's travails in *Pathemari* as an illegal immigrant in Dubai during the 1960s when Indian labour helped the desert transform into sheer modernity, is a story of disappointment and dejection.

Driven by his family's grinding poverty, a young Narayana (his older version is played by Mammooty) risks his life to get on to a small boat to cross the sea and enter Dubai. It takes several weeks for Narayana and his fellow travellers to sight land – a huge rock on the Gulf shore providing them shelter from the police before they disappear into the city – which was then really a mere desert.

While Narayana's back-breaking labour helps his family of his aged mother, wife and children to steadily improve their living standards, the avarice of his relatives keeps pushing him down every time he thinks he has reached his goal. In the end, Narayana finds himself as a tenant in his own house, and fails to improve his work status. He remains a janitor, while he finds some of the others around him rising to impressive heights.

More than this, Narayana begins to realise that it is only his position as a bread-winner in Dubai that keeps even his immediate family happy. There is one significant scene when he tells his wife (played by Jewel Mary) that he has had enough, and that he will like to stop working. "But that will lower my status as the wife of a Gulf earner," she looks perturbed. And his grown up sons do not even want to talk to their father when he calls long distance, longing to hear their voices. A life driven by loneliness must have been painful for Narayana having lived away from home for decades.

Ahamed has this ability to move us with a kind of realism that places his cinema much above the mundane fare that is so common in India. And Mammooty sinks himself into his character with such ease that tells us that he is not just a star, but an actor par excellence. Someone else in his place might not have been able to justify Ahamed's script and story – which, above all, seeks to remind us, and maybe the rulers in Dubai and other parts of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), that India's contribution in helping the region fulfil its great dream has been huge.

Pathemari also comes at a time when there is a move to change the demographics in the UAE. The Indian labour is slowly being replaced by that from other nations – a turn that can have far reaching consequences in Kerala. Ahamed told me soon after his film was screened that "time was when every family in the State had someone in the Gulf, and a lot of boom that happened in Kerala could be attributed to the money that came from Dubai and other neighbouring areas".

Pathemari ran in Kerala for 125 days, a "fact which proves that the subject is very close to the average Malayali. He or she can identify with it. Also, although the Gulf prospects may be fading today, many people still remember the sacrifices which their fathers and grandfathers made to support, sustain and lift their families from penury. There have been instances of full boatloads of Indians sinking on the high seas". We see that even now in different parts of the world where refugees running away from despotic regimes and famines suffer and even die.

Ahamed said that the prosperity "we see today in Kerala – social, cultural, educational and financial – may well be because the Malayali man went to the Gulf in the 1960s to earn in the face of extreme hardship so that his family will have food on the table".

There was a period "when the total budget of the Kerala State was less than what the Malayali expats as a whole were sending from places like Dubai".

Ahamed made extensive research – for more than a year – before he began writing the story and script. "My Narayana is real. There have been men like him in Kerala, and the boatman you see in the movie actually existed – a boatman who risked his life to transport men across sometimes dangerous waters so that they may find a better life."

In short, Pathemari is a poignant picture of one Narayana, who was part of a whole generation in the 1960's (and later), who helped Kerala bridge that wide chasm between dream and fulfilment, between desire and success.

Shilpa Krishnan Shukla's *There's Always Tomorrow* (Pularum Iniyum Naalekal) in Malayalam and English – also screened at the Dhaka International Film Festival – is a short and sweet story of a man and a woman who meet at an Abu Dhabi cafe and spend an afternoon together. Once, they were lovers.

Shukla's movie did remind me of Richard Linklater's *Before* series – where Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy play two characters who meet in Vienna and spend a passionate night together in *Before Sunrise*. Their paths cross again nine years later in *Before Sunset*, and this time it is Paris. He is a writer and married, and she has a boyfriend. But he misses his flight or that is what is conveyed, and they spend time together again – only to part and meet yet again in Greece. This time, they become a couple.

Shukla's film has her protagonists, Anthony (Balaraman Kunduvara) and Durga (Gayathri Gopal), married to different people – but the writer-director holds herself back from letting them run away with their feelings. Once they were together, but split, and the accidental meeting in Abu Dhabi helps them walk down the memory lane. Their marriages do have little pinpricks, which the two discuss on that lazy afternoon as they make a little tour of the Arab city. There is a beautiful scene of them sitting on the sand dunes as the night falls – a perfect setting for a romance, which does not happen, though.

Shukla thus steers her movie from the predictable. Anthony and Durga do not get back into being lovers – even for a brief afternoon. In the course of a conversation with me here after the film was screened the other day, Shukla says, "I really wanted to avoid that kind of a cliché of lovers wanting to get back..."

As Anthony and Durga while away their afternoon in splendid locations at Abu Dhabi, we understand that they were deeply in love and wanted to elope (because their families were opposed to the union). But she does not turn up, and he leaves after a long wait – an incident which reminded me of a shot from *Casablanca*, where Humphrey Bogart's Rick desperately waits for his love, Ingrid Bergman's Ilsa, at the train station. But she never arrives that day – only to walk into his cafe in *Casablanca* years later with her husband.

"But I have never seen these films," Shukla avers. But one supposes that artists have this uncanny ability to think alike.

"However, what is important is that I wanted to show that Anthony and Durga have moved on with their lives. They have found love with other people. There is no remorse or regret or negativity in them.... They have fairly good marriages."

So, this was the mood of the two former lovers when they meet. One presumes that in such a case there could not have been any scope for them to get into bed together. Anyway, Anthony and Durga are not even allowed to get indoors. Shukla's story and script keep them outdoors – cafes, heritage village, camel farm, desert and so on. And while the title, *There's Always Tomorrow*, may sound misleading in a certain sense, Shukla is not quite perturbed by this. Maybe, a sequel may come.

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