

# Goa, India 2004

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## INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL OF INDIA, GOA 2004

Some people have described the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) as a 'travelling circus'. While it is true that the festival has been travelling all over the country, it would be irresponsible to call it a circus. Sometimes, local authorities do go overboard in adding-on sideshows, perhaps in an attempt to use the occasion a public relations exercise for their government. On other occasions, the local government has had strong film industry connections, so the display of razzle-dazzle and magnanimity was only natural. Nevertheless, there is always a generous serving of cinema from all over the world, including, of course, from the host country, which is the world-leader when it comes to the most number film produced annually.

India has been holding international film festivals since 1952, first on an ad hoc basis, and then more regularly. But unlike almost all other festivals, its annual fête is named after the country, and not the city where it is held. One only has to read the list of cities to understand the rationale behind the nomenclature: Mumbai (Bombay), New Delhi, Kolkata (Calcutta), Chennai (Madras), Hyderabad, Bangalore, Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) and now Goa!

New Delhi is the seat of the Indian government and its Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, under whose purview the festival falls. Naturally, the Directorate of Film Festivals too is located in the national capital. If convenience and politics were the only deciding factors, New Delhi, in the land-locked north of the vast country, would be the obvious choice as the venue for any film festival. Ironically, however, the national capital has no film industry to speak of. Mumbai, the commercial capital, located on India's west coast, is where most Hindi films are made. Films are produced in the other festival venues too, albeit largely in local languages.

From among the seven festival cities, Goa has the least developed film industry. Therefore, it came as a bit of a surprise when two new Konkani (Goa's local language) films cropped-up in the festival programme, much to the delight of the Goan community, and never mind the lukewarm response from other delegates. But the choice of the city as the festival venue has been a matter of endless debate, ever since it was announced at the 34<sup>th</sup> IFFI, New Delhi, 2003, that the next festival would be held there.

What did it have to offer that the others did not? "A multitude of beaches, clubs and pubs", are the obvious answers. While this meant that those looking for a good time had their prayers answered, the more serious cineastes among IFFI regulars questioned the logic of trying to "entice" delegates into Goa but away from film screenings. Thankfully, the loyalists managed to pack the halls, some of them dexterously balancing their cinematic agenda with irresistible tourist trappings.

In the hot seat at IFFI is a Director, usually drawn from the central government's media services. Most Directors have held the post for less than ten years. Some Directors have been reinstated, only to be moved out again, or to retire. At least three former Directors attended IFFI 2004: Urmila Gupta, Malti Sahai and Deepak Sandhu. Like these three, the incumbent is a woman too: Neelam Kapur, who took over from Sahai after 2002. Each has her persona, though Kapur seems to be less approachable, and least open to suggestions and feedback, than her predecessors.

More attendees complained of poor fare on offer at IFFI 2004 than at many previous festivals. I tend to concur. The percentage of really memorable films was probably down to 10-15% from a more acceptable norm of 20%. Who was to blame? Did the Directorate choose the wrong films? Did the better films have unaffordable price tags? Were some films not shown because IFFI was not attractive enough for the makers/distributors? Questions like these are never easy to answer.

As usual, there were sections and packages galore. An arts and theatre complex was converted as the main venue for festival screenings. The government built a multiplex just in time for the event and brought in a commercial partner to run it. That added as many as four screens. Well-equipped and well-furnished, these

mini cinema-halls could give you a crick in the neck if you happened to get some misplaced seats. Brave film-buffs put-up with this, and much more, for their annual dose of world cinema.

At IFFI, the competition section is restricted to Asian cinema. The Golden Peacock for the best film went to the masterfully crafted and deeply touching *Beautiful City* (Iran), which also earned a special jury prize for one of its actors. Thailand's *Beautiful Boxer* got the Silver Peacock. The jury was headed by south Indian filmmaker Mani Ratnam and included German Oscar winner Florian Gallenberger, Italian film critic Irene Bignardi, noted African artist and musician Moussa Sene Absa and popular Egyptian actor Mahmoud Kabil.

In their attempt to highlight the contributions of Indian directors and producers working in Hollywood, the organisers included an Ashok Amritraj package and allotted the pride the place, the opening film slot, to Mira Nair's *Vanity Fair*. Alexander was the closing film. Co-incidentally, both films received mixed responses. Often called 'the showman', Mumbai film industry's bigwig producer-director-writer Subhash Ghai used the occasion to promote his long-awaited period piece *Kisna* through various PR gimmicks. Two months later, when the film was released, disaster greeted it at the box-office and Ghai's public-listed production house plummeted at the stock exchange.

Some eyebrows were raised at the decision to honour commercial formula film-producer Yash Johar posthumously honoured with a tribute package, but sympathies were strong about the homage to David Lean, India's directorial genius Vijay Anand and comic legend Mahmood, who passed away in the US earlier in the year, after a long illness. Other components of the festival included retrospectives of Canadian, Egyptian, Taiwanese and Portuguese cinema, films made with help from the Hubert Bals fund, as well as individual retrospectives of Vittorio Gassman, Gaston Kabore and Jerry Stuhr. Also included a tribute to Nargis, digital shorts by Ashvin Kumar (whose *Little Terrorist* was another Indian entry at the Oscars).

The 11-day main event was preceded by press screenings that began three days ahead of regular shows. From November 29 to December 09, IFFI showcased some 200 movies under the Cinema of the World, Indian Panorama, Mainstream Cinema, Retrospective, Tributes and 24X7 sections. The category '24X7' was to encourage budding filmmakers. Youngsters below 24 were given just a day to make films, which could be of 24 seconds to 24 minutes in duration. Some of the results were indeed promising.

India's Oscar hope *Shwaas* drew more than capacity crowds, while cute little gems like Vinod Ganatra's debut-making feature, the children's film *Heda Hoda* (India) deserved a better response. Anup Kurien's *Manasarovar* (India) would have to wait for another month to attain glory, at the International Film Festival of Mumbai. Another Indian director Sudhir Mishra, who treads the experimental path, albeit carefully, within the broad milieu of the regular Hindi film format, showed great political maturity in *Hazaron Khwahishen Aisi*. *Fuse* (Bosnia-Herzegovina), set in a village in post-war Bosnia, where democracy has to be re-built in seven days, had some rivetting performances and outstanding story-telling, done with understatement and restraint. Some other memorable films were *Shouf Shouf Habibi* (Netherlands), *Celeste & Estrela* (Brazil), *A Man's Gotta Do* (Australia), *Villa Paranoia* (Denmark).

## References

### AWARDS

**Golden Peacock** (Rs. 500,000 / \$11,000)

*Shahre Ziba* (*Beautiful City*, Iran, by Asghar Farhadi).

**Silver Peacock** and Rs. 250,000 (\$5,500)

*Beautiful Boxer*, Thailand, by Ekachai Uekrongtham.

**Special Jury prizes**, Rs 250,000

*Old Woman*, Russia and Iranian actor Faramarz Gharibian for *Beautiful City*.

## **Author Information**

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