

OUR HOT NEW DIRECTORS

At the Osian's-Cinefan Film Festival in Delhi, Bangkok-based film writer **LEKHA SHANKAR** talked to a fresh crop of Indian talent about their brave new films.

After a three-year absence, the Osian's-Cinefan Film Festival of Indian, Asian, and Arab Cinema made a comeback, creating a mega stir in New Delhi a few months ago. This year, there were 176 films from 38 countries and a particularly arresting package from Thailand: Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Headshot*, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Mekong Hotel*, debut director Wichanon Somumjarn's *In April the Following Year, There was a Fire*, which won a Special Jury Mention, and transgender director Tanwarin Sukkhapisit's *It Gets Better*. But Thai submissions aside, what was especially exciting was the unmistakable presence of bold, young Indian directors and their daring films, covering taboo subjects and showing a great deal of promise from the coming generation of Indian cinema. Here, we speak to some of these emerging filmmakers.



AJITA SUCHITRA VEERA

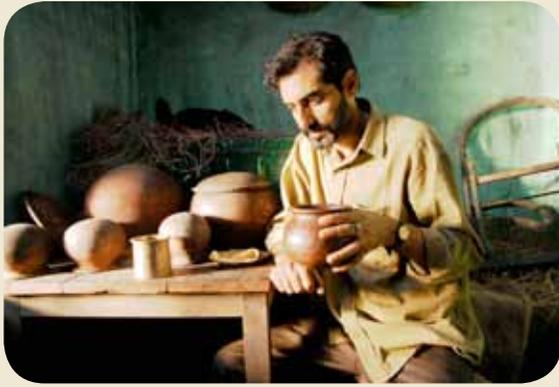
The only female filmmaker in the Indian Competition section, Ajita Suchitra Veera won the Best Director award for *Ballad of Rustom*. The film follows telephone linesman and amateur scientist Rustom through his humdrum life in a small office where his colleagues take bribes for setting up phone. Set in a lush countryside and juxtaposing reality with fantasy and memory, the film is ambitious both in style and subject matter.

Why is the film called *Ballad of Rustom*?

Ballad of Rustom, like *Song of Rustom*, the famous poem, is crafted like a cinema-poem, which evokes through human experiences, emotions, dreams, and memories.

What were the challenges in making your first feature film?

I spent almost four years making this film. It took a year to finalise the right location for the film. I deliberately shot the film on 35mm, even though it was expensive, and used a special process called bleach bypass to create a different colour palette for the Indian countryside. I was art director, editor, music director all rolled into one.



How would you say the film is different from the usual Indian films?

It's a novel cinematic experience. Although I shot the film on 35mm film stock with live sound, I was also untraditional in the sense that I did not have a regular narrative or plot. Instead, I created a human experience via associations, emotions, and philosophy.

As a woman director, did you face any problems in making a film without compromises?

I've always wanted to work as an individual artist. I've never believed in an identity based on gender. However, that conditioning of society has been a recurring issue when I work. Most of the characters in my film are male, but they are all versions of me as a writer and director.

UMESH KULKARNI

He is the young, Marathi filmmaker who has created waves with his short films and features, both in India and other countries, including Thailand. Set in a backward village without running water or electricity, *Deool* features a clash between rationalist social workers and superstitious villagers when a man has what he believes to be a divine sighting. Umesh Kulkarni uses humour to decry the misuse of religious faith in the country and depict the collision of modernisation and commercialisation in small towns in India.

You are one of the few regional filmmakers who have become national names. Has it been easy?

It was so difficult to make our first feature film *Valu*, though I studied at the [Film and Television Institute of India, Pune], and my diploma film won the President's Gold Medal. I borrowed money from all my friends to make it, but we were lucky the film did well at the box office and was selected for the Rotterdam and Karlovy Vary film festivals. My second film *Vihir* premiered at the Berlin Festival, and *Deool* won the National Award.

How have the international film festivals helped in your career growth?

When a film is selected for an international festival, it's a positive sign that what we are making is not language-specific. It's very interesting to see the reactions of foreign audiences to films that are rooted in our culture.

How tough is it for a regional filmmaker in a country where Bollywood reigns supreme?

It's very tough. The key problem is the distribution. A regional film has to compete not only with Bollywood films but also the other regional films. Do you know that we make at least 100 Marathi films every year?

AJAY BAHL

His debut feature has won two top awards at the festival, a remarkable achievement for a young filmmaker who was a college dropout and a former cricket prodigy. More impressive was the fact that his film *B.A. Pass*, which deals with a young man's experience with male prostitution and an affair with an older femme fatale, managed to win over Indian audiences.

How important are these awards to you?

They are really special. Firstly because this is one of the most important film festivals in India and truly independent in spirit. Secondly, the film was shot exclusively in Delhi, so it is great to win an award here. Thirdly, my whole extended family lives in Delhi, and they all got a chance to see the film.

How did you convince your cast to act in the daring bedroom scenes?

When it comes to filming [sex] scenes in India, as a modern society, we are still in the process of evolving. We storyboarded the sequences, so the cast knew what exactly was expected of them. But once the actors were convinced of my intentions, they went headlong into the scenes, and the storyboard went out of the window! If the scenes have worked so well, it's because the audience's mind is busy analysing the power structure between the two people rather than their bodies.

Wouldn't a film like this cause a controversy among the conservatives in India?

The excessive reportage and the media bang has really desensitised us in India. Nothing shocks us anymore, not even politicians caught surfing porn in the parliament! In any case, I'm asking for an 18+ certificate.

Who is your target audience?

For me, target audience is just a market-driven term. Any film that is engaging enough will find its own audience.



MANAV KAUL

The acclaimed Kashmir-born theatre director generated buzz when *Hansa*, his debut film about a small-town man who abandons his family and a teenage daughter who goes in search of him, won two awards (Audience Award and the Fipresci Prize). It could not have been a better cinematic break for the modest but extremely talented Manav Kaul, whose plays have made him a cult figure in Mumbai.

You must be happy to get two important awards like this for your first feature film?

It's unbelievable! I'm so excited by the great response to my first film that I've already completed the script of my next film.

Why did an established theatre director like you decide to become a filmmaker?

I love the art of storytelling, and this is just another medium. I've always written my own scripts, experimented with my own style in theatre, and I did the same in my film, too. I'm glad that it has worked well in both mediums.

How difficult was it to make your first feature film?

All I can say is that it was a miracle. I had only Rs 12,000 in my account. I took six months to write the script. Then, I went with my theatre group to a remote village in Uttaranchal to shoot the film. We did a workshop for a week with kids from the area, and they were amazing. I suddenly got help from everywhere, including camera equipment to shoot, and before I knew it, I had completed my shooting in 17 days!

How did you conceive the simple but moving story of this girl in search of her father?

They were all from my personal observations and experiences. Every character in the film is real, and every incident is true.

