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2018

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3427>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Radhakrishnan, Ratheesh: We need to talk about Indian Panorama: A report from the International Film Festival of India 2017. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 7 (2018), Nr. 1, S. 263–271. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3427>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://necsus-ejms.org/we-need-to-talk-about-indian-panorama-a-report-from-the-international-film-festival-of-india-2017/>

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We need to talk about Indian Panorama: A report from the International Film Festival of India 2017

NECSUS (7) 1, Spring 2018: 263–271

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/we-need-to-talk-about-indian-panorama-a-report-from-the-international-film-festival-of-india-2017/>

Keywords: festival, film, India

The enduring image from the 48th edition of the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), held from 20 to 28 November 2017, is of the actor Kannan Nayar angry, and waiting impatiently, outside the Inox multiplex complex in Panjim, Goa. He could be seen agitatedly talking to a group of people, to the media, and at times doing the rounds of the offices of the festival director and other officials. The Malayalam language film *S Durga* (Sanalkumar Sasi-dharan, 2017), in which Nayar played one of the protagonists, was one of the films selected in the Indian Panorama section of the festival. But the Information and Broadcasting (I&B) Ministry of the Indian government which organises the festival, whose team of programmers had selected the film in the first place, had refused it a screening.

The film has had a long history before its selection at IFFI. Initially called *Sexy Durga*, it had won the Hivos Tiger Award at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in January 2017, a first for Indian cinema. Before Rotterdam, it won the DI post-production award at Film Bazaar, organised annually by the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) as a side bar to IFFI, in November 2016. Since Rotterdam, the film travelled the world, screening at various film festivals and winning a few more awards. After being denied the necessary exemption from the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (I&B) to show the pre-censored version of the film at the MAMI Mumbai Film Festival in October 2017, the film was submitted for a censor certificate.[1] The Central Board of Film Certification of India (CBFC) gave the film a U/A certificate,[2] with the rider that 21 words had to be muted and the title to be changed to *S Durga*. Under this title, the film had its Indian premiere in Mum-

bai. Even though this should have settled matters, the I&B Ministry instructed IFFI to refuse the film a screening on the flimsy grounds that the film, when submitted for consideration, was uncensored. The filmmaker approached the courts and received a favourable verdict on the second day of the festival. Delaying the process, the Ministry reconvened the programming team, now reconstituted as a few had resigned in protest, to watch the censored version. The programming team, though divided, approved the film. By then it was the penultimate day of the festival. On the last day, CBFC announced that it had withdrawn its certificate. They claimed that instead of *S Durga* as they had demanded, the film's title appeared in publicity material as *SXXX Durga*. The festival ended without the film being screened.

This brief report, focussing on the 2017 edition of IFFI, attempts to think through its pasts and futures, in relation to the larger film festival ecosystem. While issues of censorship and government interference were much publicised, there were micro shifts in the positioning of the festival that mostly went under the radar. By the end of August 2017, it was clear that this edition of IFFI was going to be different from its previous editions. While the festival was always run under the tutelage of the government of India, this fact was never on the surface for a regular attendee to see. That appeared to be changing. The newly appointed I&B Minister, a member of right wing political party, the BJP, had taken the responsibility of running the festival away from the Directorate of Film Festivals (DFF), and had handed it over to NFDC. DFF was set up in 1973 for the purpose of running IFFI primarily, while NFDC[3] is an autonomous public sector undertaking under the government, set up in 1975 to financially support and oversee production of quality cinema. This sudden move, while it was the sign of things to come, was also the coming together of intensities set in motion at different points of time in the history of the festival.

Pasts: Finding a home in Goa

IFFI, set up in 1952, a few years after India gained political independence from Britain, was the first of its kind in Asia. Held intermittently in the first two decades, it was in 1974, after the setting up of the DFF that the festival became an annual affair. In 1978, a new section titled Indian Panorama, exclusively for films made in Indian languages, was added to the programme,

which already included sections such as world cinema, international competition (intermittently), and retrospectives. In an attempt to cater to the vast geography of India, the festival in its initial years travelled to the main cities, and from 1974 was held in the capital city of New Delhi every alternative year, with a different Indian city hosting it in the intervening year. In 2004, IFFI found a permanent home in Goa, one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country.

The IFFI move to Goa was part of what film theorist Ashish Rajadhyaksha has called the 'Bollywoodization' of Indian cinema.[4] He understands 'Bollywoodization' as the formation of a culture industry around cinema in the mid-1990s, but not consisting exclusively of cinema.[5] Bollywoodization of IFFI does not mean that the festival has been taken over by the mainstream Hindi film industry. Rather, the film festival was now imagined to be part of a larger industrial structure whose revenue model, while using cinema, was not about cinema. And unlike before, it was not part of a civil social engagement either, aimed at producing culturally-enlightened citizens. The re-imagining of IFFI, after a period of lull in the 1990s, integrated it into the ambit of tourism, turning it into a 'destination festival' unlike other film festivals in the country that are invariably 'local' to the city or the region – more Cannes than Toronto.[6] For almost 50 years of its existence, the *raison d'être* of IFFI was its implication in a development paradigm where good cinema was seen as a necessary tool for the formation of the modern citizen, as a pedagogic project.[7] The move to Goa was part of its redefinition, transforming the festival into a space of mediation between the Indian state's investment in cinema and the global art cinema complex. With this fixity in location and dates, the festival was easily integrated into the global film festival calendar. For Goa, this meant that the tourism calendar now opened almost a month earlier. As for the film festival, this was a makeover from being a Cold War institution[8] to one that is now integrated into the new art cinema market place. The replacement of embassies and high commissions by sales agents as the primary source of world cinema was one among the many changes that mark this shift. A few aspects of the festival changed while a lot did not. The space of the opening and closing ceremonies were now cornered by popular stars, there were red carpet events and even a few premieres of popular films. The Indian Panorama continued to showcase arthouse fare from all over the country but remained the aesthetically conservative and nationally authorising space that it always was. Programming of cinema from across the world

and retrospectives continued to be strong, with the latter increasingly shifting to restored classics in the last couple of years.

As would be evident from the thumbnail history provided, IFFI should be seen as a palimpsestic event that has been worked upon and reworked over time, but one that contains in it traces of its long history. The bureaucratic muddle that it exists in, ideological interests including that of changing governments, changing patterns of the market for arthouse cinema across the globe, the desire to monetise the festival within an existing service sector framework – the festival exists as a rhizomatic multiplicity without necessary integration. This makes IFFI a site of investigating the different layers of the relationship between film, state, and the market. The Bollywoodization impulse meant that a global art cinema market where value is generated through an industrial complex that includes global film festivals, sales agents, tourism, and so on and the desire of the State to keep a tight control over cultural practices, while seemingly opposed to each other, can co-exist.

We need to talk about Indian Panorama

In 2017, even before the 48th edition of IFFI began, the anxiety around the sudden changes in the top organisational structure of the festival and the denial of screening permission to two films, including *S Durga* (and Ravi Jadhav's Marathi film *Nude*), hung in the air.[9] For regular attendees, the announcement of a James Bond retrospective seemed to indicate the possibility that the festival was put together rather hurriedly. The programme appeared to be just a grouping of films without any structuring logic unlike before when films from across the world were shown in separate categories named variously as Masterstrokes, Above the Cut, and Cinema of the World. This time, apart from the James Bond retrospective, there was Cinema of the World – a huge basket of 82 films, and a 15-film International Competition, apart from a package of films from Canada (Country Focus), a selection from the Biennale College 2017 Venezia from the Venice Film Festival, a selection of films from BRICS countries, and a three-film retrospective of Atom Egoyan. The eight restored classics included films by Alfred Hitchcock, Andrei Tarkovsky, Fritz Lang, James Whale, Jean-Luc Godard, Luis Bunuel, Mrinal Sen, and Yasujiro Ozu. The highlight of the Indian cinema section was the Indian Panorama, which featured 26 films, including 5 mainstream productions. *S Durga* and *Nude* had been replaced.

The move to Goa, as indicated, pointed to the aspirations of the festival to engage with the global film festival market. This aspiration was the cornerstone of IFFI programming from 2004 to 2016, even though one could ask questions about its success in achieving its goal. The 2017 edition foregrounded the fact that the move from a state-centred imagination to a film market imagination is rife with underlying tensions. This was occasioned by the emergence of a stridently muscular Hindu right wing government at the helm of the state – one that combines a majoritarian cultural nationalism (with strong opinions about what ‘correctly’ represents India) with a desire to stitch the nation into the workings of global capital.

Until the mid-1990s, IFFI was a specialised event, the internal dynamics of which was not of popular interest. This was shaped by a post-independence imagination of the film festival as a site of high culture, of the cultural bourgeoisie, who were assumed to have the taste to engage with cinema, even of the risqué variety. Once it was refashioned as an event that addressed a global culture industry, the festival was opened up to the possibility of its scrutiny as a national(ist) event. Such an opening turned out to be the nodal point for the new nationalist imagination that, in its disciplined understanding of ‘culture’, could re-imagine the status of the festival. In the larger political field, it also engendered a suspicion of taste and of high culture as potentially detrimental to national interest. Seen in this light, the refusal to screen *S Durga*, despite and perhaps because of its global credentials, was a way to perform nationalist might in a global field, outside the logic of censorship of content that is ultimately about the local market. *Sexy Durga* had managed to bypass the nationalist sieve as it moved through the IFFI sidebar Film Bazaar, which had been an independent space that the Indian state had provided, to reach the global film festival circuit. The film’s selection at IFFI became the occasion for the rabidly nationalist government to perform to the world its might. Unlike past editions of IFFI, especially prior to its Goa avatar, this show of might is being performed in a global field and is made possible by the festival’s desire to integrate itself into the global festival market. It needs noting that the Indian Panorama has never been a place for the discovery of local talent. Rather it has always been imagined as a showcase of films that are already on the horizon, many of them past their international or even Indian premieres. In the past, the event addressed its own citizens as ‘[A] periodic demonstration by the State of organised efficiency and technological spectacle, with much media coverage’.[10] While the impulses of the Cold

War formed the background of the structuring of the international programming of the film festival until two decades ago, the Indian Panorama has, in the present, become the new battleground. The international sections are given up to the global film market (the Venice package in IFFI 2017 is indicative) and marginally to new diplomatic frontiers, while Indian cinema is retained within state control.

Futures: Indian cinema and the film festival circuit

One of the films that was screened at IFFI 2017 was a portmanteau film *Where Has Time Gone?* (2017), a collaboration that was initiated at the BRICS Film Cooperation Forum, a diplomatic initiative. Four of the five filmmakers who contributed were well-known arthouse names – Walter Salles, Alexey Fedorchenko, Jahmil X.T. Qubeka, and Jia Zhangke, with Jia Zhangke as the principle producer. The fifth director was Madhur Bhandarkar, who is a mid-dling mainstream Indian filmmaker who has been vocally sympathetic to the current right wing regime. According to media reports, the initial choice from India was director Anurag Kashyap, incidentally a vocal critic of the right wing government, and one of the most successful Indian directors in the global festival market, with his films premiering at Cannes, Venice, and Toronto over the years. If Bhandarkar's choice is an indication of things to come, the attempt appears to be to sever the networks that independent Indian films such as *Sexy Durga* have with global arthouse film markets and to introduce a different kind of cinema in its place. Speculations are rife since the 2017 edition of IFFI about the possibility of closing down or a radical re-fashioning of the sidebar event Film Bazaar, a market for films that incubated most of the recent Indian successes in the global arthouse market. This was a space that enjoyed a considerable amount of independence by design even though facilitated by the Indian state. It had over the years provided Indian cinema a route to the global film market. The films that found global success through an association with Film Bazaar include *The Lunchbox* (Ritesh Batra, 2013), *Chauthi Koot* (Gurvinder Singh, 2015), *Thithi* (Raam Reddy, 2015), *Court* (Chaitanya Tamhane, 2014), *Lady of the Lake* (Haobam Paban Kumar, 2016), *Village Rockstars* (Rima Das, 2017), *Balekempa* (Ere Gowda, 2018), and of course *Sexy Durga*.

The Indian state has hinted at a radical re-visioning of IFFI for the 2018 edition. This re-imagination appears to be part of an attempt to reorganise

the infrastructure that was put in place by the post-independence Indian state, roughly between 1950 and 1970. Well integrated into the global film market, IFFI would not find much cause for concern regarding its international programming, apart from for the now well-recognised challenge posed by streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. Plans of an India release of *Toni Erdmann* (Maren Ade, 2016) and *Happy End* (Michael Haneke, 2017), though unrealised, resulted in their absence from the film festivals in India; an exception more than a rule, but one that could indicate future changes. The replacement of the Retrospective section with Restored Classics would mean a near total reliance on the fast emerging global markets for restoration that function as sites of curating film history, as opposed to film archives – often state supported – across the world. While the international programme's integration into the global market appears to be seamless, how the Indian state uses its diplomatic power to regulate the global visibility of Indian films is yet to be seen.

The institutional refashioning that is underway follows from the recognition of film as an industry that was announced in 1998, by which the Indian state hopes to capitalise on the rough and ready national and international infrastructure that popular Indian cinema has managed to cobble together on its own and without state support over decades. Slogans of the current government such as 'Make in India' proposed by the right wing regime retains enough nationalist timbre while allowing for national and multinational private capital to flourish. Indian Panorama, it appears, will be transformed as the regulatory ground for the negotiation between nationalist imagination and global aspirations. Indian cinema's integration into the annals of world cinema through its arthouse fare could be sacrificed for the success of Indian cinema as a marketable commercial product founded on its 'difference', with either Bollywood productions and blockbusters from various language industries in India or a new kind of Indian arthouse cinema finding favour. What happens in the Indian Panorama will be worth attending to, to understand the future of IFFI's singularity. November 2018 might provide us with some indications of that future.

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Notes

- [1] Films screened at film festivals were automatically exempted from censorship laws in India. In 2004, the Mumbai International Film Festival (different from MAMI Mumbai Film Festival), a festival of short and documentary cinema organised by the Films Division, the propaganda machine of the Indian state, demanded that all films to be screened should have a censor certificate. This led to a mass boycott of the festival and the organising of a parallel festival called Vikalp: Films for Freedom. A new rule that uncensored films need a special exemption from the Ministry to be screened at a festival, passed in 2005, was an outcome.
- [2] For commercial screening in India, films should be submitted to the CBFC for certification. There are four certificates that are handed out: unrestricted public exhibition (U), parental guidance for children below age 12 (U/A), adult (A), and viewing by specialised groups (S). The Board is empowered to demand cuts and changes and are even known to refuse certificates citing various grounds, leading to court battles. See Mazzarella 2013.
- [3] NFDC inherited its mandate from the Film Finance Corporation set up in 1964, among others.
- [4] Radhakrishnan 2016.
- [5] Rajadhyaksha 2003.
- [6] Lucy Mazdon has suggested that the choice of Cannes as a location indicates that the festival cannot be read merely as a national project, and emphasises the significance of global leisure economy as one its anchors (Mazdon 2007, pp. 15-16).
- [7] This imagination goes all the way back to the 1950s, when the post-independence Indian state under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru invited Marie Seton to India to travel the country and report on cinema's potential in aiding national development. Marie Seton's 1956 pamphlet titled *The Film as an Educational Force in India* became the foundation for the establishment of the discipline of Film Appreciation in India and further to the emergence of film societies. See Seton 1956.
- [8] There was a great interest taken by the USSR and the USA in IFFI as it was held in 1952. The presence of American filmmaker Frank Capra at the festival was a direct consequence of Cold War anxieties. See Govil 2015, pp. 162-163. Marie Seton's influence, aligned with Nehru's and later Indira Gandhi's socialist disposition, resulted in the Indian state's global vision of cinema to be primarily centred around Eastern Europe, for decades.

- [9] The denial of permission to the two films should not be reduced to state censorship of sex. This is clear from the fact that *S Durga* did get a censor certificate before IFFI began, and *Nude* was given a censor certificate by the CBFC at first sitting (news reports claimed that the Board members gave the film a standing ovation). So refusal for exemption points to a larger structural change in the Indian state's relationship to its cinema's global presence as this report would go on to suggest.
- [10] Rajadhyaksha 1985, pp. 147-148.