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SUMAN GHOSH’S DIARY FROM THE BUSAN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

On a crisp cold dawn in December last year, I sat on a footpath of Raja Manindra Road in Paikpara (north Calcutta), staring at the streetlights. I was surveying the location for my forthcoming micro-budget film. I distinctly remember the tea stall-owners and the flower vendors looking at me in amusement and bewilderment. I was waiting to see the exact time when the lights are switched off at dawn and to assess the light conditions.

Cut to 10 months down the line, I was watching the world premiere of Shyamal Uncle Turns Off The Lights at the Busan International Film Festival (BIFF) in Korea (between October 4 to 13).

When I started the film I didn’t know whether the film could be completed at all, given the experimental nature of the shoot and the fact that I was working with an entire cast of non-actors. Such is the marvel of filmmaking that ultimately it gives me a load of satisfaction that not only was it completed but it world-premiered at one of the top film festivals and the most important one in Asia.

Busan is a picturesque beach town 200 miles from Seoul where during the 10-day long festival, hundreds of delegates from all over the world descend for revelry with cinema. Red carpets, premieres, parties, film seminars and the Asian Film Market, which acts as a clearing house for hundreds of films, take centre stage at the festival. The official programme is divided into various sections where our film was slotted in the ‘A Window on Asian Cinema’ section. It was for the first time in my film career that I was honoured to be in the same section with the who’s who of world cinema. There was Abbas Kiarostami, a living legend in cinema; the Thai sensation Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Palme d’Or winner in Cannes; the Japanese maverick filmmaker Kiyoshi Kurosawa and the brilliant Brillante Mendoza of Phillipines, amongst others.

Surprisingly, our film was quite a craze at the festival after Cahier du Cinema, the venerable French film journal,
I think the craze was more because of Vincent Malausa’s comment that the film reminded him of Kiarostami’s best work. Rather than enjoy the encomium, I was under pressure and honestly quite embarrassed. People from different countries asked, pointing towards me ‘Shyamal Uncle?’ I didn’t object to the fact and clarify that Shyamal uncle is actually 80 years old, since directors are supposed to take on the identity of their most recent film. This is not always satisfactory though, particularly when your film is titled *Nobel Chor*.

So in this case ‘Shyamal Uncle’ was fine. Anyway, the good thing about the craze was that the screenings were sold out and we had very engaging Q&A sessions.

My producer Arindam Ghosh, who flew in from Washington DC, was also there for the events. The Indian contingent at the festival was well represented by Habib Faisal (the director of *Ishaqzaade*), the *Barfi!* gang of Priyanka Chopra, Ranbir Kapoor and Anurag Basu, film critic Uma Da Cunha and Vikramjit Roy of NFDC. The other feature films from India were *Gangs of Wasseypur* (I & II), Musa Syeed’s Sundance winner *Valley of Saints* and *I.D* by Kamal K.M.

The most exciting feature of such festivals is gorging on the latest sensations in world cinema. The films that stood out were *Barbara* by Christian Petzold (Germany’s Oscar entry); *Pieta* by Kim Ki-duk (which won the Best Film in Venice this year) and *Rhino Season* (from the uber talented Bahman Ghobadi of Iran).

Ghobadi’s film is being presented by Martin Scorsese and it is a tale of love in the time of political upheaval in Iran but what is striking about the film is the narrative design. The way the film meshes the real and the imaginary and how it weaves in 20 years of history through the narrative style is just mind-boggling.

Kiarostami’s film *Like Someone In Love* is a wonderfully scripted humorous film which plays on the concept of ‘identity’, much like his previous film *Certified Copy*.

After seeing this spate of films, one is really humbled by the multifarious ways in which world cinema has changed in recent years.

Next stop for Shyamal Uncle... is the Mumbai Film festival where it will be screened in the India Gold competition section.