Introduction

The aim of Aurofilm is to use cinema as a tool for education and artistic and creative research. By organizing regular non-commercial screenings of high quality films, organizing a thematic film festival at least annually, and producing short films during the year, we wish to offer to the Auroville community a way to develop taste, discernment and openness towards a change in consciousness. This year we held our ninth “Panorama of Contemporary Indian Cinema” in Auroville.

Context

The films that are released in commercial halls mainly aim at the Indian market and Indian diaspora. The central theme usually runs between a traditional love story and episodes of action with some thriller elements. These films typically avoid possible controversies in matters of religion and politics, and avoid sex. Arguments from heroes and heroines normally move towards happy endings. For a few years now some films have been coming out that take up actual social issues, though they are still quite commercially made. Even with these films we find a lack of sincerity in approach, both thematically and cinematically.

We at Aurofilm look at presenting films that are genuinely produced (mostly regional, although they might originate from Mumbai, or Kolkata) and films that make a difference in terms of subject, treatment, expression, etc. Since the 1980s a great Indian film movement called the “New Indian Cinema” has shown the way to producing good films that are independent of typical commercial parameters. These are without the ostensible catchy and fashionable elements, and are aimed at viewers in India and other countries of the world. These often travel through different festivals and garner awards and mentions.

Preparing the festival

It is in this context that Aurofilm organizes a 3-day Panorama of Contemporary Indian Cinema in Auroville. This year we presented our 9th issue. It was held on February 10, 11 and 12 of 2017. The Aurofilm team started preparing for the Panorama while at the International Film Festival of India in Goa in November 2016. Surya, Gerard and Susanna went to watch many movies, to select the ones to be screened in Auroville, and to make and keep contacts in the film industry.

After the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium was booked for mid-February and the films were selected, we got in contact with the DFF, gathered texts and pictures for the brochures, and designed posters for this event in Auroville. As the festival time came closer, the last preparations were done such as buying flowers, preparing snacks for the audience and decorating the Auditorium.

The announced theme was that of “search for the self” and “oneness”. What predominated among the various productions were those of a social nature and with a more intimate tone, with themes like gender identity, integrity in artistic pursuit, and resolution of conflicts (in family, in society and culturally in general). Our Argentinean volunteer says here that it does not seem to matter which side of the globe one is on when it comes to social problems. This is because despite cultural differences in religion, customs, entertainment, food etc., India and Argentina are post-colonial peripheral countries that still live with their cultural, political and economic contradictions.
The festival event

At the festival a total of nine films were screened: six selected from the IFFI in Goa, two short films made in 2015, and a long feature film made in 2014. We also invited a film director and her music director.

The first film projected was from Jinu Thomas, our young Volunteer from Idukki, Kerala: “Agora”, a 4-minute energetic and colorful musical film (or music video). Then came a highly esthetic and meaningful long feature in Sanskrit language, “Ishti” (“Search for Self”) by Prof. Prabha from Kerala; and “Kaadu Pookkunna Neram” (“When the Forest Blooms”) by Dr. Biju, also from Kerala. The second day began with “Chitrokar” (“The Last Mural”) by Saibal Mitra, inspired by the life and work of Bengali painter Binode Bihari Mukherjee; and closed with “Harikatha Prasanga” (“Chronicles of Hari”), with a Yakshgana artist as the protagonist of the story, by Ananya Kasaravalli. Ms. Kasaravalli (daughter of internationally known film director, Girish Kasaravalli from Karnataka) was invited and presented her film – which is her debut film. There was an interesting question & answer session after the screening. Her music director, Ms. Bindumalini was also present.

The last day brought together three feature films and a short film. “One” by Jayendra Panchapakesan was the film that opened the last block, followed by the short “Asmad” (“Me”) by Prabhjit Dhamija from Chandigar, “Loktak Lairembee” (“Lady of the Lake”) by Haobam Paban Kumar from Manipur, and finally the family drama “Bastu Shaap” (“Cursed House”) by award winning Bengali director Kaushik Ganguly.

Over the nine film shows, many people came to enjoy these Indian films: Aurovilians, Newcomers, students and interns, volunteers, young and older people, Westerners and others, Indians from different regions and states of India. Tea and snack time between two films were times to exchange on Indian cinema and to get informed about the next film.

As in previous years, we organized introductions to the screenings. This year Surya was accompanied by Eva (our 20-year-young Argentinean volunteer) for the afternoon and late-afternoon films, and Aishwarya (our volunteer from Hyderabad) for the evening films. Our speakers had prepared short introduction speeches to prepare the audience to better enjoy and comprehend each film and their context.

A short film about the event has been recorded and is in the process of being edited. As often, we will prepare 2 versions: one of 7 and one of 10 minutes long.

Reflections

Here is what Eva wrote as a testimony after the event:

“The conclusion of the festival also concluded my visit to India; the last stop. Everything was a surprise, everything was magic, new. However, I never felt that these contradictions separated the realities of this country and Argentina. On the contrary, it was enriching to know from the cinematography the different visions of the world that come together and also build the culture. In this sense, visualizing, analyzing, reflecting on these productions allows us to bridge the gap between peoples where the only thing that really separates us is distance. Globalization should be synonymous with encounter and coexistence of cultures. Film is a weapon in our favor to create spaces of confluence that, far from losing cultural diversity, helps us to be more tolerant and inclusive.”

We feel Eva’s testimony illustrates well our endeavour with the presentation of such an event in Auroville.