

Conversation  
N Manu Chakravarthy

## Face to Face with Girish Kasaravalli



**Premendra:** Hello my dear friends, On behalf of the Federation of the Film Societies of India and the FIPRESCI -India, that is the India chapter of the International Federation of Film Critics, we welcome you all here today (31 July 2020) in this program “Face to Face with Girish Kasaravalli”. This session is a part of the ongoing film festival held by FFSI, where we are showing a retrospective of the master director. This conversation will be conducted by Professor N Manu Chakravarthy, eminent educationist, winner of National Award for the best writing on cinema and a member of FIPRESCI -India. We know that many of you are waiting eagerly to listen and you will have many questions, but we would

like to request you to shoot your questions after the conversation is over; otherwise, some questions may be lost. Thank you Girish for coming to this session and thank you Manu, You are a member of FIPRESCI -India, so this is our privilege to have Girish for this session, and the federation is also thankful to both of you. I am now leaving, and the entire floor is yours. Thank you very much.

**Girish Kasaravalli:** Thank you Premendra.

**N Manu Chakravarthy:** Thank You.

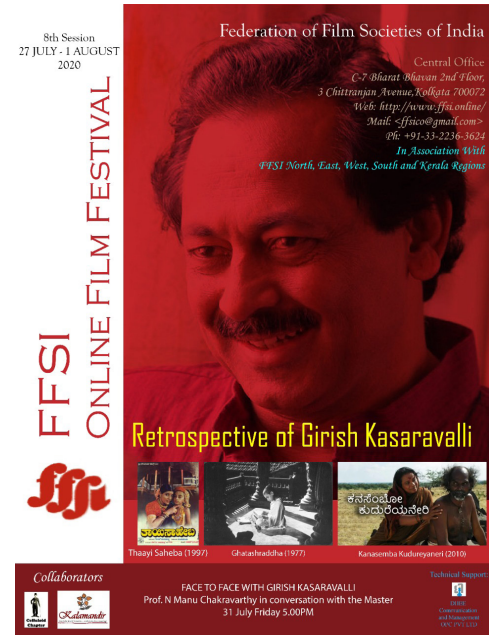
**Premendra:** Thank you.

**N Manu Chakravarthy:** Okay, I welcome Girish to this program and welcome all of you

here. I shall try to raise conceptual questions, and a master filmmaker like Girish is at liberty to answer these questions as he pleases. For that matter I do not raise questions in a conventional manner, but on the contrary would only be making some fundamental statements asking the master film maker to respond to them. I begin with the three films that have been featured in the retrospective, *Ghatashraddha*, *Thaayi Saheba* and *Kanasembo Kudureyaneri* (Riding a Stallion of a Dream) and then the other films too would figure.

Girish, let me begin with that phase when you made *Ghatashraddha*, when your exposure to Indian and international cinema had shaped your cinematic sensibility in many ways. When we come to *Ghatashraddha*, it was a wholly new kind of experimentation, discovery in relation to the ethos of Kannada. So, to begin with talk about those cinematic influences and how you were trying to weave your structures of experience, imagination when you made *Ghatashraddha*. Secondly, as an earnest student of Kannada culture, and especially of Kannada literature, the Navya ethos—the modernist phase and especially a writer-thinker like Ananthamurthy influenced you a lot. So, a certain kind of cinematic sensibility and a kind of aesthetic, literary creative sensibility from which you drew many things about Kannada culture, were two predominant influ-

ences. But to try to relate you to the Kannada cinematic tradition I would say that you introduced a sophisticated cinematic idiom in “*Ghatashraddha*”, I would say it was unique and in a very philosophical sense quite alien to the Kannada cinematic sense.



**Girish Kasaravalli:** I would like to start with the last shot of *Ghatashraddha*. Yamunakka, the main character in the film has been thrown out of the community, and is sitting under the tree, crying. Nani, who had developed a bonding with her, is leaving for his hometown with his father. The camera pulls back with him, and finally, at one stage Nani stops and turns to look at Yamunakka who is now merged in the shadow of the tree.

**NMC:** That's a long shot

**GK:** Yes. It epitomizes my cinematic journey. Through my films, I look back at my times and my society to understand and introspect on its strength and weakness. It is, in

a way understanding life through these cinematic representations.

You asked me about the cinematic influences. As you know, I am from a remote village in the Sahyadri belt of Karnataka. I was never exposed to national and international cinema until I joined the Film Institute in Pune.

I had just finished B. Pharmacy graduation with distinction and was hoping to do M. Pharmacy but instead joined Film Institute in Poona, as it was called then. What prompted me to take that decision? I cannot figure out even to this day. Before I joined Film Institute, I had hardly seen about twenty- twenty-five films, most of them being mythological and stunt films dubbed into Kannada which were screened in a touring talkie that visited the nearby town in midsummer. These films didn't impress me much. But my exposure to arts and aesthetics of cinema in Film Institute through the works of Indian, Asian and European masters initiated me to the cinema. The way how these masters used medium of cinema to reflect upon their social and political realities excited me. The fact that each one of them achieves it by developing one's own unique vision and idiom thrilled me even further. That strengthened my belief that Cinema is not merely a tool to affect emotionally but a process to reflect the larger issues.

**NMC:** So, a historical political, social contextualization of the Film...

**GK:** Contextualization is very important, and I always like to understand and evaluate films with that perspective. This insight that I gained at the Film Institute and the fervour that was there in Kannada literature and theatre of Karnataka of that time were the inspiring factors when I made my first film *Ghatashraddha* in 1977.

**NMC:** *Samskara* directed by Patabhi Rama Reddy had come earlier creating quite a sensation. And in 1975, *Chomana Dudi* a fairly well-organized film by B.V Karanth appeared for which you had worked as an assistant. There were also other significant cultural and political events that generated a new kind of social energy in Karnataka. Could you talk about how these shaped your creative consciousness then?

**GK:** Yes, I was the associate director for *Chomana Dudi*, not an assistant. That was the time when the art scenario in Karnataka was bubbling with new ideas and spirit. 'Navya', 'the new literary movement in Kannada, was in its peak, .B.V Karanth heralded a new movement in Kannada theatre, Samudaya, a group of committed left-leaning artists and activists touring the state sensitizing the people about various social, political issues. Dalit

and Bandaya (Rebel) were creating awareness through literature and other activities about various forms of subjugation and exploitation. At the national level, the new cinema movement had gained grounds, and many regional film industries in India have reciprocated it. Filmmakers, not just in Bengal but also in Malayalam, Kannada and Hindi, attempted to make films with an analytical approach. 'French New wave' film movement was losing its sheen and 'Political Cinema movement' of Latin America was gaining grounds.

The Indian political scenario too, was changing. The emergency had lifted. The anti-establishment attitude of the people had voted Janata party into power in the centre. There were new hopes, new aspirations, fresh disappointments, bitter anger at the systemic failures. All these were working on me when I made my first film in '77. Films that had appeared before I made *Ghatashraddha* like *Samskara*, *Chomana Dudi*, *Kaadu* and few others have made the launching of my film easier.

**NMC:** Let me ask you reflect on your experiences as a student at the Film Institute.

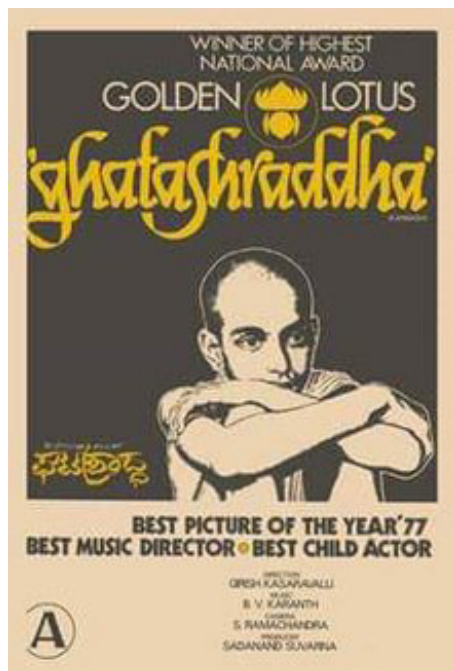
**GK:** I was a student of science till my graduation. So, the teaching practices at Film institute baffled me initially. Film theories would be taught to us, but in film practices,

we would be asked to find answers or arrive at a solution on our own by logic and reasoning. Professors didn't force their views on us. We were not provided with any fixed answers or solutions. That method of training helped me a lot as it allowed me to wander into the ocean of the world of cinema and discover its idiom, the philosophy, and the aesthetics. We didn't understand the idioms of German Expressionism or Neo realism as mere film technique but as a mode of expression necessitated by the tensions of the times. Searching for parallels in other forms of arts and ideas of that time had deepened that understanding. Prof Satish Bahadur, in his class of film analysis, would dissect a classic and explain how minute details of camera angle, lensing, movement, decor and the design play a role in crystallizing the emotions and in imparting the meaning. I wouldn't have gained these insights had I plunged directly into the field.

**NMC:** I think every movie of yours is based on some literary text, your preoccupation is already with the modes of transference of the written word into your visual image. I would say that there is a different kind of fidelity at work. That your loyalty is to the written text in terms of the visual image that the written word produces, so you are making a journey as you go into the written text you are making a journey into the visual images into the world



of metaphors and images. That's a different kind of fidelity. So, the literary text, my argument would be that you are not faithful but are transformative. You create a metamorphosis out of the written text, so if something doesn't match the book, there is, in fact, an enhancement. Ananthamurthy himself has said several times that *Ghatashraddha*, the story has become richer at your hands. The transference is to the visual image as you make a journey into the world of metaphors. You are also not bound to the thematic structures of the text.



I think equally important is craftsmanship; *Ghatashraddha* is a very organically related film uniting the thematic pattern, narrative structure and the images. There is also a certain austere quality to the entire film. How were you able to achieve this in your film which of course is a very creative adaptation of Ananthamurthy's story?

**GK:** Well, when I pick up a story for adaptations, I look for a couple of elements in it. Will the story lend itself to the cinematic expression effectively? Not all great works lend themselves easily to cinematic adaptations. In literature, one tries to create a concrete image through words which are abstract in nature, but in cinema, the images that are created are by default concrete. It is said that in literature comprehension engenders experience whereas in the case of visuals experience generates comprehension. Hence the filmmaker strives to find such images that transcend its mere physicality. Can I find such images in the story I have selected - becomes one of the considerations?

**NMC:** But there's always the relationship between the concrete and the abstract

**GK:** One can never make a film without these concrete images, but if the images only capture the surface details of the 'real' and not its soul, then there is no cinema, there's no art and no excitement at all.

**NMC:** In other words, your image should be real as well as strive to become metaphorical.

**GK:** The second consideration is this - Does the content resonate with the present time. A story can be set in any time- present, past, future, but it should transcend that time and resonate. Only then the film doesn't remain as a

mere documentation of the time or the event. And the third quality that I look for is the emotional vibrations that movements within the plot create. I relate to those stories which touch me on an experiential level initially and let out its conceptual ideas on reflection. I dare not take a story for adaptation that does not create emotional resonances.

**NMC:** Which also a way of culturing realism...of transforming what is merely realistic.

**GK:** Yes. I also look for possibilities in the story to make some interventions so as to bring my preoccupations into the film.

**NMC:** So, you have to create your own space.

**GK:** Yes, I need some pointers within the story from which I can culture my ideas.

**NMC:** Shall we say for your creative autonomy in the text

**GK:** Yes. *Ghatashraddha*, the story by Ananthamurthy had all the qualities that I was looking for. I found the ideational level of the story to be very strong, its emotional quotient to be intense and its analytical insight of the social evil profound. The story had an impeccable structure too. Yamunakka and Nani, two principal characters in the film can be seen as two sides of the same coin, a cubistic representation of the suppression. The religious structure of the society makes Yamunakka suppress her

natural desires whereas the social norms curb Nani's natural growth. Yamunakka is forced to go deeper into the abyss while Nani, to shield her, is forced to take on the role of an adult. Both of them lose their natural selves.

**NMC:** It only means then that there is a juxtaposition of their existential realities. Could you dwell a little more on how you were able to show these contrasting positions between the two characters?



**GK:** Yes. Whatever happens to Yamunakka is reflected metaphorically in Nani's life. Yamunakka, a widow, is pregnant and the fear that the society would penalize her for that, forces her to make decisions that have tragic consequences. Similarly, Shastri forces Nani to touch the serpent idols and then uses it as a ploy to subjugate him. Yamunakka's subjugation is societal in nature, whereas Nani's subjugation has overtones of religious beliefs. Yamunakka looks after Nani like a mother in the first half, and Nani assumes the role of an adult to protect Yamunakka in the second half.

**NMC:** it is also Nani's initiation into adult-

hood

**GK:** The story has many such layers that both converge and contrast the main theme and thereby elevates it. I wanted my cinematic idiom and my mise en scene to resonate the concepts in the plot in a similar manner. With that intention, I designed the visual style, sound scape and the acting style of the film

**NMC:** What is fascinating is that one doesn't see any high-pitched dramatization in the film. The acting is subdued and blends with the texture of the narration to produce a great meditative experience. Do elaborate this.

**GK:** I didn't want the film to be a tragedy that ends in catharsis. With the slow pacing and an austere rendering, I hoped to make the film self-reflective. A subtle, controlled and restrained acting gives enough space for the audience to intervene. Our intention was also to reach the audience with a different dramatic impact.

Now about the visual style: Since a ritual form the apex of the film, I wanted my cinematic style to be ritualistic. While I was discussing the visuals with my cinematographer S. Ramachandra, I broached this idea, and he endorsed it.

**NMC:** In other words, you aimed at a ritualized kind of filming that avoided any excess

of visual construction that would draw all attention to itself. You were trying to achieve a fine balance between thematic and visual experiences.

**GK:** You are right. Instead of getting into the action directly, we would start with the periphery and then get into the core as it is done in rituals. The movements of the characters and the camera in the film are the result of such a decision. One can see that design in the Scene in which Nani touches serpent idol or when villagers come to announce the decision of outcast Yamunakka. This pattern can be seen in many of the scenes. The series of 'trolley in' shots at the beginning of the film while Nani is accepted as a student in the Veda School and series of 'trolley out' shots at the end as Nani is being taken back home, in a nutshell, encapsulate the film with this design.

**NMC:** There is a difference between how *Ghatashraddha* as a story ends and the manner in which the film ends. There is also an aesthetic transference, a metamorphosis and also a thematic transference. If we look at Ananthmurthy's story, it ends with the young child spitting in disgust. When we turn to the film there is a look of compassion, understanding and empathy towards Yamuna, and therefore the possibility of a new future, suggesting a possibility of new journey the woman of the

coming generation is going to make.

**GK:** I contemplated a lot to arrive at the lost shot, which is very important in the film. Ananthmurthy ends the short story with Nani spitting in disgust when he learns that Udupa is marrying again. I didn't want to use that action as in film medium it would have made the meaning very explicit and direct

**NMC:** And also, it hints at the possibilities of alternatives, of looking for ways out of the situation

**GK:** Yes. A writer uses a 'certain' or 'a particular' gesture and action to enhance the impact of the story. If one transports the same into film medium, it may not have the same impact. Sometimes it might even spoil the impact. The reverse is also true. So, I express Nani's disgust differently. As he is being taken away by his father Nani turns to look at Yamunakka sitting under the tree crying. She is thrown out of her community and her head is shaven off. Deeply disturbed Nani looks at her compassionately yet helplessly. I end the film with that visual.

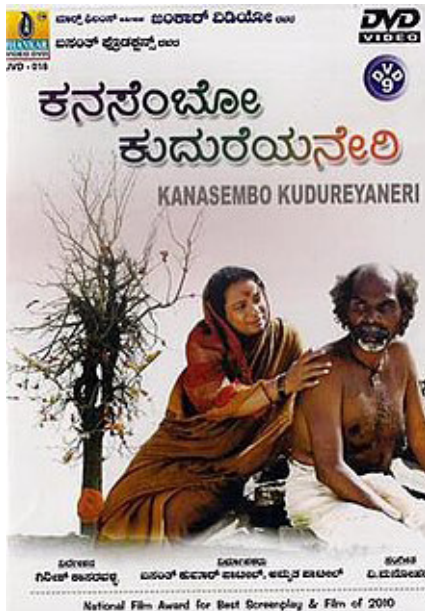
**NMC:** It is a kind of ambivalence. Let's turn to *Thayi Saheba*. By then you had already made *Akramana*, *Mooru Darigalu*, *Tabarana Kathe* and a few others. In *Thayi Saheba*, you capture a different sense of history. *Ghatashraddha* is rooted in the Agrahara (the en-

closed Brahmin quarters). But you turn to a different and broader history in *Thayi Saheba*. The film deals with the freedom movement, land reforms and Appa Saheb, the protagonist, as an idealist, trying to enforce land reforms by giving away his lands. All these give the film a public narrative. It is thematically very different from the novel. But there is also a journey into the existential reality and dilemma of Narmada. As a result, the film moves into the spectacular realm, thereby giving *Thayi Saheba* a kind of vertical structure and movement. A spectral quality enters the film as you operate with the larger forces of History. What was your sense of cinema and imaging as you dealt with larger historical structures? Talk about the journey of your making not just in thematic terms but also in terms of your cinematic understanding, the development and the shifts you made when it came to the visual narration. So, two statements, one, and the journey you make into larger forces of History and modern History, second, what shifts were you making as a filmmaker when you turn to visual narration and narratives.

**GK:** When I made *Ghatashraddha*, I was fresh from the Film institute. My approach to cinema, especially to its idiom, construction of mise en scene, was very Bazanian. One can see that in my negotiation of time and space and also in the acting style. Camera waited for



the action to unravel in a seemingly unaffected way. I have already explained why I used that approach. But the idiom and style change from film to film according to the demands of the subject, to suit the subject. While making *Tabarana Kathe* I was also reacting to the situations that were prevalent at that time-so incorporated a style where conflict forms the base. But the film *Mane* is about the couple who willingly uprooted themselves to an urban, industrial society but yearn for the composure that an agrarian society provides. This required a stylized, minimalist construction to drive home the irony. While working on the script of *Thayi Saheba*, I wanted to make it more self-reflective.



In a way, *Thayi Saheba* plays a major role in my cinematic journey. When actress Jaimala expressed her intention to produce a film, I suggested this novel by Ram. Sha. Lokapur. Like some of his other novels, this too is based on a court case.

That was in 1997, when India was celebrating 50 years of independence. I found in the story a space to reflect upon some of my concerns: What do we mean by independence? Which section of the society really got benefited? Did the political freedom we got in 1947 percolate down to the other sections of our society? I started developing the story to knit in these concerns. I made Appa Saheb a staunch Gandhian. The role of Venkoba was toned down from an evil man to a self-centred man who wants to keep the Zamindari system afloat. I made it a story of the awakening of *Thayi Saheba* and decided to locate the film in the first decade of Independent India, which is generally referred to as Nehruvian era. The film starts with the death of Gandhi and ends with the demise of Nehru. It was a defining era where India's social and economic fabric was remodelled. Zamindari system faced rough weather. Gandhian values had started corroding. The new social value system, both good and bad started emerging. But I don't show any of it happening on screen but record its reflection on the people and on the world of *Thayi Saheba*.

Primarily I viewed it as a story of the journey of *Thayi Saheba*. There are two kinds of journeys in the film. One is an outward journey which is physical and the other is an inward spiritual journey. At the beginning of the film,

Thayi Saheba wants to impress Appa Saheb with her physical charm and dresses up with beautiful sarees and ornaments. As the film progresses, Thayi Saheba begins to contemplate on the world around her and the inward journey begins. She realizes that it is not the external beauty that matters but the charm from within. Towards the end as a widow, she is seen in white saree. On the exterior, she has become colourless, but on the inside of her persona she has attained a level of maturity as a human being. The film's colour palette too, turns to basic colours



**NMC:** It also means that we need to see these not in a narrow academic sense but as a part of your cultural politics. Appa Saheb is influenced by the transformative politics of the times, which in post-colonial India was also the Nehruvian period, which ushered in a phase of modernity. Still, you see Narmada as Thayi Saheba not being educated and with no sense of history but is making a journey into history and also breaking caste barriers. That's why when she holds hands with a lower caste woman; she dramatically steps out of

the Wada, a fortress, which is also her movement into modern History. So, it's a different kind of visual experience. Thayi Saheba's evolution is not theoretical. Her experiences throw us open to stories of how different women have evolved very differently. So, you can even say that this is an overall experiential negotiation with modern History.

**GK:** Appa Saheb believes in Gandhian ideals but is not able to put it into practice. Thayi Saheba doesn't understand any of such ideals but through her actions achieves all that Appa Saheba wished to achieve. Appa Saheba is crippled and disappears towards the end of the film. Thayi Saheba, who is possessive at the beginning of the film, becomes more caring and compassionate later on. As you rightly pointed out, she accepts Appa Saheb's mistress Chandri and even tries to nullify the adoption.

**NMC:** Theoretical idealism

**GK:** Yes. Thayi Saheba's decisions are guided by intuition and feelings. And who is more successful- Thayi Saheba through her pragmatic achievements or Appa Saheba who merely holds great ideas? I also bring in Akka Saheba, who renounces this world which, in my opinion, can't be an answer. Thayi Saheba goes in a palanquin to meet Akka Saheb; goes to meet Chandri on foot and goes in search

of Appa Saheb in a private bus. This physical journey makes her spiritual, compassionate and more understanding. In the first half of the film, Thaiy Saheba is seen in the Wada all the time. It is her space but an imprisoned one. Later in the film, she comes out of the Wada with Chandri in search of her missing husband. I wanted this action- of coming out from the house to gain a metaphorical significance. Because it signifies the journey of all those women from the elite class who came out from their claustrophobic household and joined the mainstream. That is the reason why those shots have a celebratory tone.



**NMC:** In a sense you were dealing with the evolution of self-identities showing the woman's self evolves through her involvement with processes of history. It could also be argued that the film goes way beyond theoretical discussions on the agency of the woman. Thus, two motifs seem to emerge enhancing each other....

**GK:** When I was working on the script, I was looking for some characteristic details of the Zamindari class which can become a motif in the film, and I found two such details: One was the Wada (the mansion) itself, a house yet a confinement. The film starts with the confined space and ends with the open space. My wife Vaishali, who is from that part of Karnataka, suggested the second motif. Motif of Attar.

**NMC:** the fragrance

**GK:** I believe, the landed gentry in the northern part of Karnataka used Attar to differentiate themselves from the ordinary people

**NMC:** A particular class structure

**GK:** Yes, to suggest their class. It was a brilliant metaphor and used it throughout the movie. Nano's hideout, his affair with Manjari is revealed because of the Attar. Attar is not the natural body odour, but synthetic addition to suggest they are above the rest. But in the end, when drunken Nanu hesitates to meet Thaiy Saheba, she says "I accept it (the smell of the liquor) as well". It reflects her rejection of Wada culture and acceptance of life as it is. With that her transformation is complete

**NMC:** That's why Thaiy (Sister) Saheba also becomes 'Aayi'-mother. But it's not a mother in the patriarchal sense; it's a mother who

gives freedom to the individual getting married to an ordinary person. So, you have that magnificent shot of Nano trying to remove the fragrance of the Attar to get back to the earthy smell.

**GK:** She becomes a mother in the spiritual sense, one who empowers and energizes. She liberates Nanu from the clutches of the system and lets him live the life that he wishes to. I view the journey of Thayi Saheba as not merely a journey of an individual but a metaphor of the journey of the women of that period.

**NMC:** You know, it is her journey into the world of the commons, commoners. From the Wade which is like a fortress sealed off from the ordinary world

**GK:** She achieves this not through conflict, not through friction. We always believe only force can solve the disputes and win wars, whereas Thayi Saheba doesn't do any of that yet she wins. She achieves it through love, caring and forgoing certain privileges. Ashish Nandy calls it Gandhian way of winning over the resistance.

**NMC:** You are referring to Ashish Nandy's 'The intimate enemy' where he says the 'puruṣathva' the patriarchal masculine is given up and therefore the invocation of the Ardhanarishwara the androgyne, the feminist principle. After we arranged a screening of Thayi

Saheba for Ashish Nandy, he remarked that it was a very profound Gandhian film, because of the very Androgynous, the feminine, the mother image



**GK:** Gandhi used three methods a mother would use to win over any antipathy. By affection, by negotiation and by satyagraha. Ashish Nandi has thrown light on these methods in great detail, and I have used this insight into three of my films. Whereas Thayi Saheba wins the adversaries through affection, Nagi in *Dweepa* achieves it through negotiation and Hasina, the protagonist of my film *Hasina* through Satyagraha. These three films of mine which came in succession can be considered as a loosely knit trilogy,

**NMC:** There is also another critical dimension when you turn to *Dweepa*. It's not just about Nagi but you are also, in a Gandhian sense interrogating and critiquing the issue of modernity. When there was colossal develop-



ment, dams came into being. As we discuss this, we need to look at someone like Medha Patekar, and her role in Narmada valley project. I would even say this was the Gandhian influence on you critiquing major developmental projects which were dismissing communities, displacing Adivasis and tribal

**GK:** I have dealt with these themes in few of my other films too. My film '*Mane*' deals with modernization and...

**NMC:** and the loss of self, loss of individual identity

**GK:** You are right. In *Dweepa*, based on a novelette by Naa. D' Souza, the modernity, in this case, the construction of the dam, has not only displaced the people but caused submersion of their self-esteem, confidence etc. It created two worlds, one of the beneficiaries and another one of sufferers. Sufferers become islands. The villagers become islands in the beginning of the film, later the family. Finally, Nagi gets isolated, a *Dweepa*.

**NMC:** And also, the annihilation of cultural ecology. Let me turn to the third movie in the retrospective, '*Riding the stallion of the dream- Kanasemba Kudureyaneri*' It's a bizarre departure from the modern urban world and the questions and issues of history, you turn to a very mythical world, of the Siddha's. Did you find it necessary to turn to myths as

an ethical, cultural compulsion that we in the urban world being rational, scientific have not really understood community visuals, beliefs, faith patterns and schemes of faith of different communities. So, we do not know what myths all are about, and we do not understand the relationship between myth and History. So, my question is in '*Riding the stallion of the dreams*'-*Kanasema Kudureyaneri*, based on a short story, was it an ethical compulsion? Because you see these are days when in the name of third world literature and culture, people have become sensitive to the issue of mythology and mythopoeic imagination. So, were you just making an accidental journey? But my feeling is that you were making a very considered journey into the world of myths. The next question is that there are different versions within the film, Irya's dream, whether it's a dream or reality, whether myths take place or do they have a rational basis or not. It's very different because Kurosawa had done it differently in *Rashomon*, Alan Resnais in '*Smoking no smoking*', Tom Tykwer in '*Run Lola Run*' and Sham Benegal in '*Suraj Ka Sathvan Ghoda*'. But your take and position were different; you were offering cultural alternatives without privileging either the mythical or the modern. My reading of the film is that you're attacking the privileged position of the modern scientific world which begins to dismiss all these as superstitious. For the

scientific world the myth is unscientific, and therefore, those who live in a world of dreams and myths are stupid and primitive. So, I thought that was a very ethical creative intervention into the world of myths, mythology and what we would call the mythopoeic imagination. Could you deal with these?

**GK:** *Kanasemba Kudeureyaneri* (Riding the stallion of the dreams) is based on a short story by Amaresh Nugadoni. It's basically about three dreams, the dream of Irya, the gravedigger, and of his wife Rudri. And the third dream is a construct. What are dreams? We often look at dreams as something opposite of the real. What one has seen in the dream is real for that person, but for others it is unreal. Let us use the serpent and rope analogy here to understand the thin line between the dream and the real. The so-called "real world" has its logic, and the dreams have their logic. This is true of the mythical world with its logic. When Fellini, who began his career in Neo-Realism style, started using dreams and fantasy in his films people objected "How can you bring unreal things into a social realist film?"

**NMC:** especially in 'Eight and a half' {film by Fellini}

**GK:** His response to that criticism is very perceptive. He says "I consider the dreams, memory, fantasy hallucination a part of reality. We can add myths and mythology also into

this list. A look at myths, certain superstitions and beliefs from another perspective shows us a different logic. I had made a film before this, called '*Nayi Neralu*' (The shadow of the dog); based on a novel by Dr S.L Bhyrappa. In that film the main protagonist Venkatalakshmi feigns that she too, like the others in the village, believes that the boy, much younger to her, is her dead husband reborn and marries him.



**NMC:** And fulfils her sexuality, her sexual desires

**GK:** And also overcomes the stigma attached to widowhood. *Nayi Neralu* unfolds through three female characters. The absolute faith shows the path in Grandmother's life, whereas, for granddaughter, it is logic and rational outlook. But the mother Venkatalakshmi subverts both these outlooks to make decent life a possibility. She rebels against the orthodoxy by pretending to believe in the superstition.

**NMC:** So, the mythical imagination is context bound and there is no sweeping generalisation

about myths. Myths need to be understood in relation to the context in which they emerge and shape the imagination of the people who participate in them.

**GK.** In *Kanaseмба Kudeureyaneri* (Riding the stallion of dreams) I used a narrative technique that we see in Vikram and Vetala stories. Vetala deliberately hides some details while narrating his version to make it look illogical. Vikram fills up the narrative with missing details to make it cohesive. I used that narrative technique in my film for a different goal. There are three dreams in the film, and each dream is repeated twice. That means we have two versions of each dream. The first one is Irya's dream. Guru Siddha appears in his dream, which indicates that somebody is dead in the village. Irya tells everyone that the village chieftain, who was ailing for a while, is dead. He digs the grave, but when he reaches Chieftain's house, the caretaker in the house denies it. Everyone believes the caretaker but not Irya. This is because our belief is determined by the credibility we give to the narrator. No one trusts Irya because of his appearance, dishevelled looks, torn clothes and drunken behaviour. As opposed to him, Mathadayya, the caretaker of the Wada, belongs to the upper caste, dressed in white and talks in an erudite manner. So, villagers believe him. Wherever I screened the film audience too reacted in a similar way. But when the same story is re-

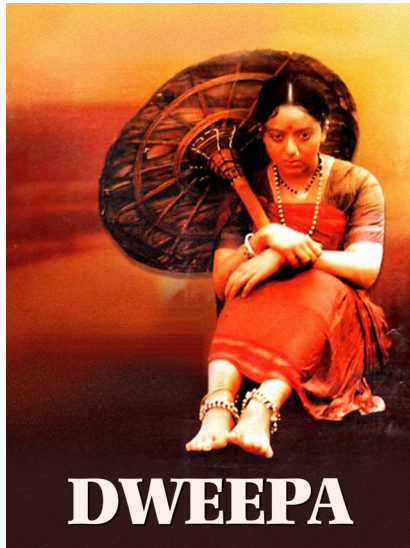
peated, we realize Irya is telling the truth, and Mathadayya is lying to hide the death of the village Chieftain. By this technique I want the audience to reflect upon their perception of truth and false

**NMC:** There are interesting twists and turns in the film when Rudri talks of Guru Siddha coming everyone is scared, the shopkeeper gives groceries and Mathadayya gives a generous donation to Rudri to ensure that they do not incur the wrath of Siddha. There is an inversion in the sense that Rudri and Irya lose faith in Siddha, and to that extent, the myth loses its power and significance. Second, Irya and Rudri lose faith in their mythical patterns and so, on the one hand, those who do not trust the man like Mathadayya, and others endorse the myth. There is an interesting twist towards the end of the film: Guru Siddha himself undergoes demystification and helps Irya begin a new way of life through agriculture. I want you to comment on this.

**GK:** Second dream is that of Rudri. She tells the villagers that Siddha has appeared in her dream to convey his wish to visit them. Everyone gives money, not because of any respect for her but because they are afraid of Siddha, the messenger of death

**NMC:** So, the myths are revitalized by those people

**GK:** They vitalize this myth to absolve them of their sins. That's why villagers and Mathadayya contribute generously. By that act, they help Irya to reaffirm his faith in Siddha myth. But the second dream doesn't come true because of Basanyappa, the man with the tiller.



**NMC:** He's also progressive

**GK:** Yes. He is a slightly rational thinking person in the film. He believes that if Irya and Rudri lose faith in Siddha, their outlook in life would change and become rational and proactive. But on the contrary, it demoralizes Irya even more. That's why I have brought in the third dream, probably the dream of many of us. As you rightly point out, in this dream, Irya and Rudri treat Siddha like one among them and not as any mystic. When Siddha demands food, Irya, who is working, tells him to wait until he finishes his job. He treats Siddha like an equal, a friend. Siddha too helps them in their work. Irya and Rudri have not abandoned their faith but use it to derive new strength. Keeping Siddha myth alive, they dig

the earth, not for burying the dead but to cultivate a new hope, a new life.

**NMC:** Now this is a question that takes us to the other films. Why is it that in various ways when we come to the modern structures and times of our society, you turn to myths more often and recontextualize them? If Kanasemba *Kudureyaneri* has one kind of mythical structure, *Nayi Neralu* turns to the myth of reincarnation and subverts it. But more critical is when you come to modern history, where in you invoke the myth of Koormavatara, Vishnu as the incarnation in the form of a tortoise—a Koorma to save the world. Why do you do so in the present context, when you deal with political questions as you do with Gandhi, (not the Mahatma but Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in his private life) as you look at the collapse of a democratic structure of Indian society and the rampant corruption therein. So, whether it is women and their mythical worlds and their realms or the socio-political context of our country as in *Koormavatara*, why do you as somebody who is a part of a very modern rational consciousness invoke myths? And for what creative reason do you establish an engagement, a juxtaposition between myths and modern histories? Whether they are the existential histories of women or of society in general, it's fascinating that you repeatedly turn to and use several processes of creativity by dealing with myths. What is



the relationship between myth and History predominantly when you deal with individual structures of beliefs or social structures of existence?

**GK:** We often tend to misread myths because we look at them from our radical, rational perception. There lies the hitch. Myths need to be understood from a different perspective altogether. The logic of action and reaction does not apply here.

**NMC:** Cause and effect

**GK:** Yes; cause and effect. Dr D.R Nagaraj, a man of great insights, had looked at myths and beliefs from a new perspective which has given me a fresh insight. More often than not, myths are used to express the anger, frustrations and resentment when the free expression of an individual or a community is forbidden or curbed. So, a different analytical look at myth would reveal the dissidence and protest hidden underneath. I have tried in my films to understand the sociological and political dimensions expressed subtly through myths.

**NMC:** I think at the present moment we need to turn to two outstanding films, outstanding for very different ethical, political reasons and I'm going to ask you to respond to these. One is *Haseena* based on Banu Mustaq's story the other based on Vaidehi's story *Gulabi Talkies*. The two films are of vital importance for our

times. They bring us face to face with the many crises that our society and culture have been going through. These two films tackle the crises in diverse ways. Girish, it's in *Hasina* that you turn to fundamental notions of ethics and values and raise important questions about Islamic jurisprudence. When we turn back to Shah Banu case and how every system, institution failed as far as the question of alimony was concerned you turn to a very different source of redemption for the Muslim woman. *Hasina* is a film that attacks the fanatics from within Islam who do not understand the notion of Islamic jurisprudence, do not know the Quran when it comes to divorce or Talaq or when it comes to alimony. So, *Hasina* attacks those fanatics who do not look at the liberated redemptions and the dimensions within the Quran. *Hasina* is a film that goes hand in hand with the remarkable studies of Islamic scholars like Ziauddin Sardar and Maulana Wahiduddin Khan who give a rereading of the holy Quran Sharief. It's a comment against the fanatics who deny the possibilities of redemption, second, it's also an answer, that's the ethical, cultural politics of *Hasina*. It's also people who dub the Quran and Islam as monstrous feudal structure always talking about the cruelties of the Shariat. So the outsider fanatic right thinkers, you have fanatics outside and fanatics within so if you look at the nuanced manner in which *Hasina* the film

unfolds you begin to look at the marvellous aspects of Islamic jurisprudence. Hence, it's a different kind of cultural politics, and for people who say there is no politics in your cinema, they must reconstitute their notion their understanding of what it is. Second is about "*Gulabi Talkies*", *Gulabi Talkies* talks about the construction of an enemy identity, and where the attack is against the media, against the corporate world which gives everybody a bad name and the context of the film it is a Muslim, so the Muslim becomes an outsider. 'Our own Gulabi' becomes 'the other Gulnabi'. With the shift in identity, communities are divided and fragmented, and the whole Hindu Muslim equation, is altered by hatred being manufactured and constructed. Therefore, in *Hasina*, it's all about revising notions of religious cosmology. Sara Aboobacker had also done it in her novel *Chandragiriya Thiradalli* translated into English as '*Breaking ties*'. This, I think, is a very radical kind of politics, and I would say the cultural politics that defines *Hasina* and *Gulabi Talkies* is fundamentally ethical. So, can you deal with *Haseena* first, what took you into the structures of Islam and then turn to *Gulabi Talkies* because *Gulabi Talkies* is about the modern world the manipulation of communities and the construction of communal identities.

**GK:** For obvious reasons, quite a few people want to put these two films in one basket and

analyse them using a similar yardstick. In my opinion, these two films are different from one another.

**NMC:** which I'm trying to point out

**GK:** Yes, you have articulated well. The film *Hasina* is set in a small, confined community. *Hasina*, so also the maker is trying to find justice within the confines of the community. I could have easily made her go to the civil court and seek justice, but I don't do that because I want to search for solutions that are available in that religious tenets. That's why I do not bring in other judicial systems available outside this community. Is there a way for *Hasina* to get justice within that structure was my search? Tenets of all religions are basically structured to liberate the humans from their mundane existence, but when they get institutionalized the people who are at the helm dogmatize it. This has happened with all religions. *Hasina* seeks justice through the tenets of Islam, but *Muthavalli*, the head of the institution is the spoilsport. Even in *Ghatashraddha*, there is this irony. What is *Ghatashraddha*? It is actually a ritual of emancipating oneself. The popular belief is that when a person dies, his or her male offspring performs shraddha (the last rites) so that they attain Mukti or salvation. If a person doesn't have a male offspring, then there would be none to perform Shraddha and the soul wouldn't attain Mukti. Such persons

perform shraddha on themselves while still alive with the belief that it would solicit Mukti to the soul on their death. But in reality, this ritual of emancipation has been turned into a ritual of suppression. A ritual of punishing the woman

**NMC:** who have transgressed, who have violated that code

**GK:** One can see such misuses in every religion.

**NMC:** the religious framework

**GK:** But in the film *Gulabi Talkies*, Gulabi's problem is altogether different. Gulabi lives on an island which has people from other communities as well. The religion isn't a deterrent there; hence she mingles with everyone. It is not revealed in the film whether she is religious or not. But towards the end, others force on her a religious identity. Thus, the base of the two films is different. Just because the protagonists of both these films belong to one community clubbing them together is unfair. I thank you for reiterating my view.

**NMC:** When we turn to *Ghatashraddha* and *Thayi Saheba* and especially a film like *Mane* there is a symbolic quality underlying the narrative structure. When we look at your narrative style and structure, one seems to think of it as your cinematic preoccupation. Your concern seems to be with form. As an earnest stu-

dent of cinema, I want you to respond to this comment of mine that in *Kraurya* and other later films the structures become rather simple and loose, loose in a very positive sense which means, from an exacting preoccupation with form you seem to move towards creating a cultural discourse that resonates the diverse imaginative and existential patterns of cultures such as ours. Even your imaging, especially when one turns to the opening shots of *Gulabi Talkies* your approach seems to be very different. Am I right in saying you are moving towards local cultural discourses, expanding the nature of your sense of form? Especially in *Gulabi Talkies* are you attempting to recover and shape an Indian sensibility? You can also see such a thing being attempted in the film "*Kanasemba Kudereyaneri*",

**GK:** When I made *Mane*, the form is decided not just by its content; I was also introspecting on my previous film "*Tabarana Kathe*. Based on a story by Poorna Chandra Tejasvi, it is a story of a municipal employee who is caught in the bureaucratic system, a legacy of the British Raj of which he is one of the admirers. We used elaborate Mise en scene filled with details so that the film doesn't become judgmental. My intention was to give the narration an autonomy and to let ideas generate from within. I followed this method in some of my other films too. But the subject of *Mane* had an allegorical tone to it. So, I decided to

be minimalist. The colour palette and art decor were formalistic so that the viewers can relate to the allegorical meaning. After *Mane*, I moved away from that kind of formalism too. In my later films, I see to it that my idioms are not explicitly visible to the viewers.

Let me explain with an example. I use the colour palette of Red, Green and white in the film *Nayi Neralu*. In one scene Mother in law asks widow Venkata Lakshmi to wear green colour saree instead of red one. (in the traditional Brahmin family, the widows wear only red sarees) There are a few scenes with hanging white dhoti as the backdrop. (The male members of the Brahmin society always wear white) Now, these colours get codified. I play with this colour palette right through the film, but nowhere is it as explicit as in *Mane*. These colours act as thematic constants.

**NMC:** frozen ideas

**GK:** Red and other colours of the same family are the dominant colours in *Mane* and *Nayi Neralu*. They suggested the same meaning throughout the film as thematic constants. But in *Kanasemba Kuderaneri* I decided that colours should not be used as thematic constants. Instead, Colours signify different meanings visa vis different characters. For Irya, red denotes humiliation. A lady insults him by splashing the red colour on his shirt, Shivanna, son of the Chieftain, the red car

is his pride. In the case of Hema, his wife, who is left behind in the Wada much against her wish, it suggests captivity. For Pinki it's a playful colour, and Siddha, with his red attire, suggests hope for Rudri. Colours always evoke certain emotions in the viewer even when the filmmaker doesn't use it consciously. But if used consciously, the colours get a character of their own.

**NMC:** can we open to questions because we have gone on for quite some time.

**Premendra:** Mr Srikanth is asking sir how you see the role of film societies, film society movement in Karnataka specifically during the '70s concerning the paradigmatic shifts in Kannada cultural sensibilities and articulation.

**GK:** The film society movement was active in the '70s, but it is not so now. I presume Kerala and Bengal are exceptions. It is said that in Kerala, during the '70s there were more than a hundred film societies. Around the same time there were about ten film societies in Bangalore alone and many more in other cities of Karnataka. But today sadly the film society movement is lost its vigour. There are many reasons for this. I won't merely blame the organizers but blame the audience participation and the availability of films. The easy availability of DVDs of national and international classics and contemporary films in the mar-



ket and the net were the major reason for this. But the online film festival can be a substitute. FFSI has organized my retro in their online film festival now, and I believe the response is quite encouraging. I guess it can re-energizes the film society movement. What do you think, Manu?

**NMC:** I think such retrospectives should communicate the seriousness with which films are made and the passion with which people like us comment. And I don't think we can reduce cinema to something that can communicate easily. In fact, it has been quite a struggle talking about films, and I think such attempts Fipresci- FFSI should rejuvenate cinema as culture as part of our cultural landscape. I think it's a significant contribution, so we need not be despondent or melancholic, and we need not be afraid if people say this is too serious. How can the common man understand this, and I don't understand the notion of the common man itself who is the uncommon man who is the exceptional man there? I think Fipresci-FFSI hereafter using digital technology- two organizations have worked together, and I believe some outstanding work and many webinars have been conducted. And I have participated in the webinars on Malayalam cinema, North-eastern cinema. I think as Girish pointed out well, in this world, and thanks to the epidemic we need to make use of our technological resources and come

to terms with serious cultural issues and an intense, passionate manner. It's very easy to be dismissive about popular cinema and about the kinds of films that people like Girish make saying who will understand, how many will understand and what will the common man get out of it? No, I think we need to go beyond these superficial questions and statements, and I must congratulate as Girish said, Fipresci-FFSI for arranging such a discussion.

**Premendra:** There's another question for Girish sir, you have taken eight years for your upcoming movie can you enlighten us on your new film?

**GK:** The new film is ready now, and it has yet another structural device. It has two components. One is the story of Young Naga and another when he is grown up. One is the reversal of the other. My preoccupations continue even here. I keep asking questions about my time and about my society and its people. The title 'Illiralare Allige Hogalare' - "Can neither be here nor move beyond" has a reference to a popular composition by the 16<sup>th</sup>-century saint-poet Purandardasa in which he talks about the eternal dilemma of the human mind. It's ready now, and once the pandemic is over, it will see the light

**NMC:** in fact, if I might intervene and say it's about the transformation of the rural structure because that world is facing a crisis. There's

a sense of loss of identity in the rural world today due to many historical forces. So those who are there want to migrate, and one part of the film is about migration, urbanization and looking for fortunes in the urban world. Especially the second part of the cinema is complementary. It is about people stuck in the urban metropolis with loss of personal identity and the need to go back to their roots. So there are cross migrations of those wanting to make it big and looking for opportunities in big cities because they cannot endure the feudal structure and of those who have a loss of identity and of self-selfhood in cities who want to return to their roots. So, they are complementary stories of people who can neither stay here nor journey beyond.

**Premendra:** Here is a question from Shomendu Bhattacharya, how can an independent filmmaker proceed in this world of big-budget and social connection to fight and reach the audience and the festivals market.

**GK:** It's a fear bothering all the filmmakers. Ideally the new technology should have made it easier for filmmakers to reach out to their audience, but it hasn't happened. I can't understand why only Indian filmmakers are facing this problem. In other countries the digital platforms and the OTT platforms support sensible films made with a small budget

**Premendra:** Our next question is from Mana-

sha Manjunatha and addressed to Girish sir, why is it so difficult to obtain high-quality collectable editions of your films? Many people interested in purchasing your film collection all over the world we hope there will be something done to resolve the issue.

**GK:** I am aware that a lot of people, who have seen my films on screen and appreciated their high quality, are a bit disappointed with its DVD reproduction. All my films are made in the celluloid format and I haven't been able to raise enough money to get them digitized from the negatives. What you are seeing are the copies made from the positive print which has affected the quality even more. Now the labs have closed their shutters, all my negatives are kept in some godown rotting. To shift them to some film archives and to get them digitized involves an enormous amount of money. The producers are not willing which is understandable. To digitize all my fifteen films, we need huge money which seems impossible. Now I hear that the negatives of Tabarana *Kathe*, *Mane* and *Kraurya* and few others are lost forever. And *Dweepa* and *Thaayi Saheba* negatives are on their way out. I only hope I will be able to retrieve remaining ones

**Premendra:** Another question from Mahantesh he wants to know in your film *Gulabi Talkies*, two old grandmothers watch switched

off TV what does it mean?

**GK:** In cinema, images speak for themselves. Doesn't it indicate our fascination for technology? The old ladies hope to see their favourite TV program on an abandoned TV which is not even connected to a PowerPoint. It's a comment on the over-reliance on new technology and new media.

**Premendra:** Mr Nagendra Prashant has said "while watching your movies sometimes I could relate to something the movie characters may not be dealing with some friends which leaves it up to the imagination of the audience. Do you intentionally leave it to the imagination of the audience, enhancing a wholesome interactive movie watching experience?"

**GK:** Yes. I do not explain everything in my films. Instead, I leave it to the imagination of the viewers. That way, I hope to make them participate creatively. I firmly believe a film that explains everything conclusively numbs the sensibilities of the viewers and make them passive. I raise questions and provide some clues. So, the answer the audience discovers becomes his as well as mine

**Premendra:** Ramesh wants to know "it was a wonderful insight into your filmmaking. Does the new normal COVID bring OTT more accessible to viewers than the big screen? Does it even mean change in filmmaking to video

films?"

**GK:** Filmmaking has already moved from celluloid to digital. In one sense it has democratized filmmaking. Many youngsters are making films with fresh ideas and idioms. Since the result can be seen immediately, many filmmakers venture into experimenting. There is a lot more freedom, -one needn't worry about the film stock, can work with untrained artists, needn't have to fear to work under difficult terrain and situations. In my latest film I've worked in digital format.

**Premendra:** Sridhar, he wants to know that most of your films are women-centric; they are the mothers without children; this has been a repeated dimension of your movies. Is it intentional or accidental?

**GK:** I have faced this question quite often, but it is factually incorrect. Of the fifteen films that I have made only eight are women-centric, rest are male-centric. But I am baffled every time such a question is asked. What is wrong if someone makes films that deal with issues relating to women? Even masters like Bergman and George Cukor had to face similar questions about women characters dominating their films. But filmmakers who give prominence to male characters never had to face the question "Why only men"? Do we still think that talking about men are natural, but about women unnatural?

**Premendra:** Another very interesting question, You cannot deny the fact that a discerning audience tuned to serious films and is picking up a run of the films; My question is with the onset of new generation and their technology do you think they have the sensibility and patience to engage with the meaningful films you dabble with.

**GK:** May I ask Manu to respond to that question

**NMC:** Well the position would be this, If on the one hand, I watch the so-called highbrow serious cinema from all over the world, I'm also lumpen in the sense that there is no dishum-dishum film in Hindi or Malayalam or Kannada that I have not watched. But my point is, what does one do with culture, how does one take it seriously, and deal with the economics and politics without being contemptuous. Because these are the days one can be very dismissive about serious cinema saying it's not real, does not represent the aspirations of the ordinary people and is made in a rarefied manner. So, contempt can be mutual, disparaging comments be made about every film and every genre of film. My position as somebody who would call himself as a serious student of cinema would be, I look at the politics, values and imaginative schemes that the so-called non-mainstream cinema would use promote. What does it uphold and offer? And what's the

direction that the so-called popular commercial box office cinema what are the courses these films are taking. For anybody seriously interested and concerned about our social attitudes our values political formations, I think we would realize that both genres are different, both orientations and perspectives are different. Still, it has something to do with the direction in which our popular cinema and so-called serious cinema are moving and are moving in different directions. And therefore if there is somebody fun-loving, lapping it up with the lumpen element, I would also with great respect, and when I say with great respect, it doesn't mean I endorse everything that is coming up. I have problems, and I raise questions so I must be serious about it. So how do I balance and take the two together because I would see them as the products of culture and politics of my time, I am interested in the manner in which society is moving. So, what if you have people who are only interested in this murder mystery suspense thrillers. Now isn't that an essential aspect for me to look at the choices people are making. I would not look down upon it, and I would also fight for the kinds of attempts made by people like Girish Kasaravalli. And therefore, for me, it's an earnest study into the nature of our society, our societies rather. If you look at the underworld films, turn to Tamil cinema of recent times, Malayalam cinema many films about the un-



derworld. Still, there is a lot of authenticity to it. Therefore, I would be open to the possibilities of analysis possibilities of understanding and keep them separate and not be dismissive. So those who are the champions of popular culture can brush serious cinema aside, and those who are very serious about the so-called non-mainstream cinema can be very dismissive. My position because Girish has asked me to respond to this is, is that I would take everything seriously and raise fundamental questions about the nature of the choice of our film-going public, and the composition is heterogeneous. It is not homogeneous.

**Premendra:** Girish you are looking exhausted so let us finish it now it has already been two hours since we have talked. Thank you very

much for agreeing to be here with us in this session. I think it will be beneficial for those who couldn't listen to you directly that it will be available in our Fipresci's YouTube channel. There is a Fipresci India YouTube channel free of charges. There were so many other questions, but two hours are over and Professor Mau Chakravarthy, we are very thankful to you for coming and sparing the time for this delightful conversation. On behalf of the Federation of Film Societies of India and behalf of Fipresci India, we are very thankful for this session. Thank you. Thank you for coming.

**NMC and GK:** Thank you.

*Transcribed and edited by Ms. Bhagyalakshmi Makam who holds a Masters in English Literature, based in Bangalore.*

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