

*Tribute to Sumitra Bhave*

**N. Manu Chakravarthy**

## A Tribute to Sumitra Bhave



**Sumitra Bhave (January 12th 1943 – April 19th 2021)**

**Beesu Suresha:** Welcome to this online discussion organised by Suchitra Film Society on this specific day, May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021, to pay tribute to a great film director and a great human being Sumithra Bhave. Today is the birth centenary of Satyajit Ray. We are happy to announce that the Suchitra Film Society has been honoured with the ‘Satyajit Ray Award’ instituted by the Federation of Film Societies of India, founded by Ray in 1959. He was the one who inaugurated the foundation laying ceremony of the Suchitra Film Society in 1979.

Sumithra Bhave, in her lifetime, made 17 films and many television films. Today, we have Prof. N. Manu Chakravarthy, a long-time associate of Suchitra Film Society and a very good friend of Sumitra Bhave, to talk about her. We also have Sunil Sukthankar, who made many films with Sumitra Bhave. Both of them together have made more than 16 feature films. First, I will request Prof. N. Manu Chakravarthy to speak about Sumitra Bhave.

**N. Manu Chakravarthy:** This talk is structured to create specific spaces of understanding of Sumitra Bhave’s cinematic texts. Except for *Dithee*, her last film, in all the films, she collaborated with Sunil Sukthankar. So, even at certain stages, if I say Sumitra Bhave, I would like you to remember that Sunilji was a full-fledged co-director. I have tried to put all my energy into my attempt only to let Sumitra Bhave’s thematic concerns, ethical positions, aesthetic choices and understanding. How the cultural understanding of this land emerged. I’ve tried to do it holistically. This tribute does not derive its analytical method by borrowing from abstract theoretical notions of form, style, and aesthetics that film theories, especially those generated in the West, tend to bombard us. More often than not, most film theories, especially of recent decades, tend to erase the cinematic text itself. Its theory on theory, meta-theory on meta-theory that the cinematic text itself disappears.

So, I’m trying to pitch my whole essay on this land’s cultural ethos, and I think this was central to

Sumitra Bhavé and Sunil Sukthankar. I do not go into the relative merits of Sumitra Bhavé's films by subjecting each film to a rigorous analysis of style and narrative structure. Not the technological content but in terms of the thematic designs, the narration, structures of narration in thematic terms. An analysis of technique, form, style compositional values. Well, I think it needs to be done, but this is not the occasion, so I don't do that.

Certain fundamental premises frame my attempt here. That is a cinema with its divergent practices. Divergent cinematic traditions have led to excellent theories, too, even as I say that specific theories and theoretical positions tend to erase the text. Nevertheless, some exceptional theories concentrate on the cinematic text, drawing theoretical positions from out of the cinematic texts. However, it is necessary, especially in our parts of the world, loosely called the third world, including India. Still, the third world is an expression of convenience, which itself is a problematic choice.

I think we should turn to our cultural narratives and ethos and look at a different narration. Indian cinema is built on narration, where our cultural imagination determines how we tell and structure a story. This is why I think it's very unprofitable, but it's beyond a point absurd to invoke the European and American film theorists, all who go in the name of film theory and film studies. Because I think we cannot have overarching categories, we cannot have categories that tend to eliminate and make certain contingencies, contingencies of culture disappear. So, we need to look at significant divergences, continuities within a cinematic tradition and certainly not be drawn into that vortex of an overarching film theory.

We should be interested in the element of heterogeneity, the principle of heterogeneity- it is for this matter that when we turn to films made in India, Africa, Bangladesh and Iran, we must try to evolve a different set of theoretical notions. Not even a different set, but different sets of theoretical notions and struggle to create our notions of a form and style. In the sense that Indian cinema displays a city and diversity in all our languages, which I think is as

essential heterogeneous and as varied complex rich as our musical traditions and literary traditions go.

When we deal with our musical traditions, we don't refer to Western classical music-theoretical positions. We have our notions, so the time has come for Indian film theory to see what constitutes the nature of a cinematic experience in the Indian context. The very design of storytelling, framing of characters, construction, the build-up of emotional content, the construction of images, composition lighting even when you turn to cinematography. So, I do not think we need to measure our notions of realism and reality to alien standards. This struggle has begun in many of us who write on cinema. Still, I think it needs to be nuanced and accentuated to see if one can arrive at an Indian theoretical position as far as cinema is concerned.

These are the premises, and in fact, these are the philosophical positions that I have adopted and not just what I have adopted now as I'm going to analyse Sumitra Bhavé and Sunil Sukthankar's films. Still, in my writings, I have struggled. How successful or not is a different matter to arrive at a certain kind of a cultural narrative of Indian cinema.

So, as I mentioned, except for *Ditheé* that Sumitra made in 2019, Sunil Sukthankar is a crucial aspect of Sumitra Bhavé's films. Suchitra Film Society screened six films, *Vastupurush*, *Devrai*, *Badha*, *Ha Bharat Majha*, *Samhita* and *Astu*. I shall be referring to these films but relation several other films because I think it's through them that it is possible to trace Sumithra's creative journey beginning with the first significant film *Doghi* made in 1995.

To conceptually comprehend her thematic concerns, the kinds of aesthetic choices she made, and, of course, her philosophical positions, I will begin with *Doghi* made in 1995 and analyse it with *Badha* made in 2006. My reading is that *Doghi* and *Badha* are to be juxtaposed with *Samhita* made in 2013. These three films, in very diverse ways, deal with the existential challenges and dilemmas of women.

Interestingly the first two films are deeply rooted in the feudal rural context, while *Samhita* is about women in modernity and the urbanised world.

*Doghi* (Two Sisters) is about the misfortunes of Gauri, forced to become a prostitute in Bombay to save her family from annihilation and total collapse. Her return to the village with her sister about to be married raises a storm; even the mother initially refuses to acknowledge her, almost disowns her. Still, there is a shift, and this you see also constitutes the kind of social, political intervention that Sumitra was always interested in.

Let us not forget her training as a social scientist at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. We also look at certain transformations in Indian villages, with activists entering the village and seeking to liberate the villagers from their oppressive practices. It's not just feudal patriarchy that the film engages and concerns itself with but also mythological structures. Their belief in myths that, at the extreme, tend to become mere superstitious beliefs; in fact, the notion of the mother goddess is prominent in *Doghi*.

You see, with the activists, and what is interesting is that this is very important for us because there are modern theories dub the Indian context. They call it the third world, including leftist critics, somebody like Frederick Jameson. He refused to acknowledge that there could be sources of enlightenment and sources of protest within a structure generally regarded as rural despotism, oriental despotism, or dismissed as village idiocy. Now it's here that the possibilities of a new awakening, of a renaissance, shall we say, emerge within the feudal structure. Hence, if modernity should make inroads at one level, it's also possible for human beings, which comes out of their experiential depths. We cannot ever believe that only western modernity or colonial modernity brought an awakening in all of us.

If you look at the story of the last couple of centuries, there were radical interrogations from within traditional cultures indigenous cultures. If you have the activists at one level, you have Krishna, Gauri's younger sister. She stands by her sister and is prepared to walk out of the marriage and ensure Gauri gets her redemption and salvation. Redemption and salvation in a very secular temporal sense. *Badha* addresses the question of superstition, and again, we turn to the familiar pattern of rural and tribal societies

damning women as witches. So, all those associations of sorcery, black magic, witchcraft now go hand in hand with the plight of the Dalit woman, Sarjabai.

The questions of caste class conflict are very central to Sumitra Bhave's films. So, she's ostracised, Sarjabai, threatened that her house would be burned down. In this context, you begin to see that somebody like Sakubai, with traditional wisdom operating out of her own dense experiences of life who shows ways out and shows alternatives. Even on the one hand, if you have a particular context of oppression, the tyranny of brutality, it's deep out of that landscape that you begin to see alternatives emerging.

The narrative structure of *Doghi* and *Badha* is woven to resonate with the spirit of the land and time spirit. Because it's wrong to believe that time is frozen in one area, even if you move to tribal societies and what we regard as primitive or barbaric societies, it's utterly wrong to treat them symbolically and argue that they are all frozen in time. We need to turn to traditional and indigenous societies' dynamics and look at the complex processes that work because of modernity.

When we use the word modernity, we need to be careful. Our societies, indigenous societies. Do they only undergo a transformation and metamorphosis through external influences, or do such societies have dynamic cultural practices? These are fundamental questions, and whatever goes in the name of today, the well fashionable at one stage is not any more of what post-colonial theory means. Now is it only the intervention of the outsider, the modern modernity, western modernity that brings in changes? To give an example, if you turn to Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*, you have gone to the African tribal society, far more primitive than the society we are dealing with in *Doghi* and *Badha*.

Achebe's *Things fall apart* talks of colonial modernity entering; he does not disguise that tribal societies had their own cruel, barbaric practices. But when you look at those barbaric and brutal practices as if our modern societies do not have them, Achebe can show, going back to his ancestors, that there were areas that there were spaces of redemption salvation. One of the significant figures that appear in *Things fall apart* is a man of immense wisdom called Obirika.

Even if the tribal African society was masculine, celebrating masculinist values, there's also a feminine streak, a kind streak that may not succeed or triumph, but there are those voices.

Why is this important? This is important because there are two dangers when we turn to our so-called primitive, backward societies. Whatever terminology is used, one is to fall back upon the orientalist position of trying to valorise and glorify the past, a phenomenon that we have seen in recent years; the orientalist position and vision is to endorse notions of a glorious past and tradition. If that's one danger, it has its binary opposition, the occidental position of oriental societies as dark mythical, superstitious, barbaric, with no sources of hope. So are we to construct only two models and understand our notions of societies of the past, cultures of the past with only two lenses giving us some sight? Are we to see only through those lenses, and that's why you see *Doghi* and *Badha* become very important because there are no villains and no caricaturing?

Sumitra and Sunil Sukthankar do not embrace the orientalist position while trying to understand it; they acknowledge all those dirty, dark, hideous practices. But it also doesn't mean even as a social theorist Sumitra Bhave doesn't draw from notions of sociology, anthropology, cultural theory and cultural studies constructed in the West.

This is crucial when we turn to Indian cinema of this kind. When one turns to *Samhita*, 2013, one journeys into the world of women, but this world of women is through creative works. You have a documentary filmmaker asked to make a feature film and a creative writer who has written a story, so the existential predicament of women is examined, and this is very central. Through creative processes, not through theoretical models, we generally recognise the feminist theoretical models. Turn to Mahashweta Devi, our prominent Indian women writers in Hindi and Malayalam; the sources of understanding the sources of self-identity come through the processes of creativity.

You have in *Samhita* the stories of Shirin, whose husband, a filmmaker on his death bed, wants to fulfil her husband's desire of making a film. Revathi Sathe is a documentary filmmaker who wants

to make a feature film, and Tara Dyusker is the story writer. So, three stories of contemporary women through a story that Tara Dyusker wrote, almost forgotten; it's about the world of real women. The real world of real women now resonates with characters from the world of fiction.

There's a fascinating, complex juxtaposition in *Samhita*; that's why the documentary filmmaker Revati says when you make a documentary, you look at people on whom you are making the documentary, look at them through your eyes, look at the creative dimension of *Samhita*. In *Samhita*, she says when we write a script borrowing it not making a documentary but a creative film.

*Samhita* is about the process of making a creative film a fictional film. We look at ourselves through those fictional characters, so it's not a documentary that holds a mirror to reality; it is everything. When you enter the world of creativity, the world of fiction, the writer of fiction or the maker of a fictional film will also have to understand themselves through the characters they have created. So, there is a reverse process in *Samhita* where real women try to understand their '*asmitte*' their self-identity not regarding the world of reality but regarding two fictional characters.

And here, the most crucial concern is concentrating on a relationship, which is the relationship between a king and a musician Bhairavi and Satyasheel. Satyasheel is the king, and Bhairavi is the musician. A relationship is built on intuition, passion and unbridled love, which both of them experience spontaneously. So, the creative process is a mirror. *Samhita* is a very complex and exciting text because I think imaginary characters, imagined characters read us to understand by interrogating many of our existential realities. But to seek possibilities of different self-identities, the struggle is to overcome the fixed identity, the identity that I have, that I have lived with, and inherited, but how do I go beyond that? How do I transcend this? This is where a very complex relationship is established between the fictional characters-the world of imagination and reality. But even as it is done, one of the most subtle dimensions of the film is also about cultural inequality, without resorting to loud,



pompous theoretical positions. The writer says, but let's not forget, even as we understand the passion of men and women, let's also not overlook this element of cultural inequality between man and woman.

*Samhita* is a marvellous visual treat with extraordinary mountains, captivating images and rich in its thematic explorations. And *Samhita* is one of the exceptions because usually, the films of Sumitra Bhave and Sunil Sukthankar are austere, very controlled, with a lot of restraint, but there's a luxuriant quality to *Samhita* with its spectacular; it's in fact, an architectural spectacle. And therefore, I think it's important to understand the creative process of these two film directors by looking at how they create this notion of a script. So, as you're scripting, writers, musicians, painters gain self-understanding and self-recognition through their own work; through their pieces of sculpture for sculptors, through the characters they have created if they are writers of literature, litterateurs. So, *Samhita* is about scripting somebody's life and, in turn, scripting one's own self-identity.

I move on to the next segment if one carefully chooses ten Indian films as the most significant ones made in India during the last two or two and a half decades. If I'm asked to select them as outstanding representatives of Indian cinema, I will choose *Vastupurush*, 2002. And at this stage, I would say, and it's also an interesting comparison, we must look at the other very significant filmmaker Girish Kasaravalli, and it's very profitable to make a comparative study also to look at how their concerns are so different and varied. This is where you see the points of convergence of Indian cinema; they are also the points of divergence. It's very profitable to study, and I don't mean comparison at the lower levels.

*Vastupurush* needs to be studied with Girish Kasaravalli's *Thaisaheba*. In terms of aesthetics, the richness of texture, thematic concerns, the possibilities of awareness about specific historical contexts and individuals. So, I would choose instinctively speaking, *Vastupurush* and *Thaisaheba*. This is not the time to dig into the details of *Thaisaheba*, but I think it was imperative to mention it.

There are excellent socio-political dimensions, a very careful and sensitive viewing of *Vastupurush* will throw open a whole phase of Indian political and cultural history, and especially the post-independence phase and the post-independence phase would also be a little more specific to be a little more particular with the arrival dawn of independence. So, the word post-independence would mean 70 years now, but this film is situated in a newborn independent India. Though *Vastupurush* primarily and predominantly appears to be the reflections of an adult on his entire past, there's also a very complex narrative structure to the film; it's Bhaskar Desh Pandey who has just received the Magsaysay award.

At one level, the film is a journey into the past, his ruminations, reflections but through which a whole phase of Indian history is revealed; the politics and times through the autobiographical narrative of Bhaskar Deshpande. So, at one level, if you see it as an autobiographical journey, as images of memoirs, it's also a journey to recreate that Indian past and opening up very crucially several aspects of the Indian rural cosmos. There is a very sophisticated intertwining of the personal, historical, sociological and political. The historical phase of post-independence India is about questioning the principles of the Gandhian vision. When I say questioning the principles, it is to ask what have the visions of Gandhi come to in this new India, with the arrival of independence does Gandhism survive, do we practice? Because no philosophy, ideology and no value system means anything without its accompanying modes of practice.

In the film itself, in the texture built into the thematic pattern, the film's content is the mother. Again, one thing remarkable as in Girish Kasaravalli's films is the role, position, context and location of women. Here's the mother who asks her own husband, a freedom fighter, Gandhian who swears by Gandhian values; the film is about what we swear by in public life. You may be a Gandhian in public life, but do you practice it in the interior spaces of your own home. She asks, why did you not get your son married to somebody who belonged to the lower caste? Because this is about the brahmin

family, these are sharp interrogations that come from the mother.

This uneducated, illiterate woman asks, where are your Gandhian values and she refers to her brother-in-law and asks, why didn't you get him remarried? The question of remarriage crops up; this was the dichotomy that Gandhi himself struggled with. And as I make these statements, let me clarify we are not making simplistic value judgments, not moralising, not being puritanical. Still, there is also the moment when searching questions have to be asked of ourselves, what we believe in, and what we try to uphold in public life. Gandhi and Gandhi's conflicts within himself have happened to new India in the film context.

There is also a sufficient indication of the corrupt practices that have entered Indian political life. The other very crucial central strand of *Vastupurush* is Gandhi figures to be interrogated and examined. So *Vastupurush*, please remember as I have been mentioning Bhaskar Deshpande making a journey to the past. These historical, cultural questions of ethical practices and cultural, ethical practices also emerge. The film is also about the new consciousness of untouchability and, therefore, Ambedkar figures. One of the film's significant historical and cultural dimensions is Ambedkar figuring the rise, the emergence of a new consciousness among the untouchables, depressed classes as they were called during Ambedkar's time.

To the credit of Sumitra Bhavé and Sunil Sukthankar, these questions do not convert *Vastupurush* into a sociological text. It's not a sociological treatise but all these questions about the caste system, practices, and corrupt practices that have already entered Indian political and public life through creative negotiations. *Vastupurush* is also a juxtaposition of Gandhian notions of self-purification. Gandhi's calls to the upper caste to undergo self-purification is juxtaposed with Ambedkar's call to the untouchables and depressed classes for self-respect.

So, there are these negotiations established in the film between Gandhi's notion of self-purification and Ambedkar's notion of self-respect. This is why the story Bhaskar Deshpande ties up with the nurse

Krishna dai, with his childhood friend, his classmate Sophana. We also see this new phase, this new India, feudal India transitioning into modernity. The collapse of the feudal world but juxtaposed with the emergence of a new caste order, the lower caste and the untouchables. There is also a particular swift reference which I don't think we should ever miss, and it's about our engagement with tradition, 'sampradaya' with our notions of Indian tradition. It's again the mother because you have the brothers-in-law digging for treasure; that's a metaphor, it works literally, but it's also a metaphor; they keep digging for the treasures buried by the ancestors. Metaphorically it's about the infinite richness of Indian tradition.

Is the Indian tradition so infinite, is the land a cornucopia, an Akshaya Patra that will keep on yielding that you dig; the metaphor of digging. Tradition can be converted into archaeological and archival material that you keep digging, and you believe tradition is inexhaustible. Is it so? This is when the mother says, (you see, this is this also a comment on our understanding of the tradition of ancient Indian tradition) she says tradition will become barren until modernity. Let's not forget she's a woman in the rural context, a homemaker as the expression goes nowadays who says tradition has to be replenished, recreated, reconstructed and revitalised by the present. Do you keep borrowing from the past, believing it will give you to an infinite degree?

Now, these, I think, are crucial to our understanding of *Vastupurush*; it's against this that you have images of a vast sprawling massive 'wade'. Again the 'wade' in *Thaisaheba*, crumbling, going into pieces. Do you invoke the *Vastupurush*, the spirit, the guardian spirit of the house, the guardian angel of the house that will forever protect the house? Do our guardian angels, the ancestors, always protect the house, or is it our duty, our ethical obligation to rebuild this body, to rebuild a tradition to reconstruct tradition and to revitalise it? So, we just can't fall back upon this silly nostalgia; there's also profound nostalgia where you construct the past and look into the past with very profound ideas and thoughts. But to simply gloat over the traditional past is only to

suggest that we haven't evolved, and this tradition is not going to evolve.

There is a critical dimension here if we are not careful; while watching *Vastupurush*, we are likely to look at Bhaskar Deshpande journeying into the past as flashbacks; it's not that. And I think we need to understand it with great subtlety and sophistication. The texture of the film makes it very clear that when Bhaskar re-enacts certain scenes, it's the present given an agency where we always, as all of us do, that we look and turn to certain pages and phases of our past and decide that we could change it. We would change it if only we could, so there are certain areas, childhood experiences and certain phases when Bhaskar, the adult today, looks upon the young Bhaskar and creates a sequence in the present. He creates and imagines a different past when he could talk to his brother and his mother or could change the past. This is not a flashback but a complex relationship that we consciously and unconsciously establish with our past. Almost like saying how I wish I could have changed, we know that we can't, but there is this impulse emotional, intellectual feeling, and none of us is exempt from this, and it's unnatural if we don't have such feeling. How I wish I could change, I wish I could alter it knowing that it can't be done.

This is the complex experience of Tolstoy's story, 'The death of Ivan Ilich' about to die awaiting his death, saying how I wish I could relive my life and how I wish I could recreate my life' so it's a very complex question of agency. The relationship between the past and the present is built on complex feelings and attitudes impulses; the impulse to change the past is an impulse that comes to people who have different desires and different dimensions of feeling and thought. Also, because we know very well if we are sensitive, we know that the traces of the past that the present carries can never ever be erased. We, at least in imagination, at least at the level of feeling, which is an essential dimension of human existence we are always trying to reconstruct the past. Not with regret or any degree of sentimentality but the mind asking us to change several things.

And this I think it is a fundamental existential experiential dimension that human beings carry, to

wish that many things of the past could be corrected so at several stages these journeys are made as interventions, like conscious and unconscious interventions only because of a certain ethical sense. What is the ethical sense if the past cannot be changed or altered, but it can be altered at a different level when we try to come to terms with the conflicts of the present? When we try to come to terms with the ugly dimensions of the present and say I will rewrite the past in the present by eliminating those traces, cultural traces that continue to harass, trouble and continue to create stories of misfortune for many untouchables. So, there is an ethical dimension, an ethical aspect to the kind of aesthetic structure, the kind of so-called flashback *Vastupurush* creates in its scheme and design.

Still, it's actually a journey into the past only to learn from the past. The lessons of the past to struggle to build a different future, a new future, are visions of an alternative India, which is why you see this story ends with Bhaskar trying to build a hospital, asking his son and American daughter-in-law to come here. But that's a different story, I think. I think we should look at all these.

I move on to the next phase and the three films, and again, to repeat the statement that I made at the beginning, I am not going to inquire into the relative merits of each film. So that's a different study, a different dimension for another occasion. But I'm only trying to point out the three films because they are the three openly political films, openly political in the accurate political sense. In fact, to a large extent, they move on the lines of a documentary, but they are not documentaries but fictional films rooted in certain phases of modern Indian politics. The three films and we are free to construct our understanding of the ideology of Sumitra Bhave and Sunil Sukthankar through these films. They are *Ek Cup Chya*, 2009 and more of a documentary interspersed with fictional elements, *Mor Dekhne Jungle Mein*, journeying into the jungle to look at the mor, the peacock, 2010, and *Ha Bharat Majha* 2012.

Interestingly, there is a particular understanding of politics in these films, so even when I say political films, it's only because they're rooted in certain socio-cultural geopolitical realities but this

politics. The politics of these films is through individuals, their explorations, journeys, and how they make different journeys through these socio-political, geopolitical realities. *Ek Cup Chya* is about a bus conductor Kashinath Savanth and his struggle because he gets a whopping electricity bill of seventy-three thousand. The structure of *Ek Cup Chya* draws from the Right to Information (RTI) Act; you have an activist there, an NGO worker, so these are all the documentary elements of the film. But what has worked out, the imaginary part of the film is about the aspirations of bus conductor with a very ordinary life and standard of living being relatively low.

The film is about the aspirations and dreams of people struggling to move up, struggling to liberate themselves from these areas of poverty. So, suppose you can read the film as a documentary at one level with all details about the RTI act. In that case, I think we should also struggle to see how it's also about the interior spaces, the inner realities and the internal struggles of individuals of a particular class. It is about a bus conductor who struggles with his family, his daughter's son and their aspirations and dreams. So, we also look into the private worlds of imagination, dreams, and desire of aspirations, but what concerns what the film unites is general questions.

These questions dominate in the public realm public sphere with specific questions that concern the struggles of individuals and each one with one's own (man or woman) with aspiration struggles for a better life. What do you do with individual dreams and aspirations? In my understanding, the film is also about what we do with the dream aspirations of the commons. And I think it's in this sense that *Ek Cup Chya* moves into the area into the realm of the commons. How does one sensitively understand the pulse of the commons man? We also move into the area of the commons in a culture.

*Mor Dekhne Jungle Mein* is a journey literally and metaphorically into the tribal areas. If you look at the politics of the film from the point of view of a documentary, this is a journey into tribal life, culture, customs, and tribal civilisation. We shall use the word tribal civilisation, indigenous civilisation in the face

of modernity, development, progress growth -the mantras of a globalised capitalist economy. A confrontation in the film lets loose the peacock's image, metaphor, and dance in a very subtle manner. I think this is the creative question we must engage ourselves with when we look at this film, the *Mor* film, the peacock film, the peacock trail, going in search of the peacock.

With all our questions, questions of reality, questions that come from economic forces brutalising centralised economic forces of a global world, of a capitalist world. And as we make our journeys, the primary question is do we lose a sense of certain primordial primeval aspects of nature. The most significant thing here is to look at the joy, and this is not a social realist political question that an ordinary documentary would show us for us. How to experience the joy and hear it, say about the peacock, do you create a civilisation, create an efficient, competent, competitive civilisation where you do not have nature. Nor the joy of animals, birds, and lost impulse to listen to the songs of birds or watch the peacock's dance, and this works at a metaphorical level. The film asks, what is it then that should keep this so-called competitive modern civilisation going. What would keep it going if it loses its sense of aesthetics that you forget that you erase, you don't erase just the forest and tribals, but you also erase the peacock. And this is the metaphor that comes up in the *Mor* film that you travel to the jungle you enter the tribal civilisation only to behold the pure spirit of joy that comes by watching the peacock's dance.

When you turn to *Ha Bharat Majha*, this film is about Anna Hazare's movement; let's look at the film's structure. At one level, it's India against corruption, the Anna Hazare movement, and the kind of idealism generated, especially among the young people of India and the middle class. A certain kind of idealism led by Anna Hazare, his journey his fast, his eventual arrest, release and the birth of the Aam Aadmi Party. So, at one level, it seems to indicate a kind of regeneration among the commons and, of course, a significant section of the middle class supporting Hazare's movement.

But what is crucial to our understanding of the film is that it moves into the world of middle-class



families from this public realm. The design and structure of the film is the journey with the TV images, news reports, news telecasts of the movement where Anna Hazare is fasting. It is again very carefully open, and the texture and fabric of the film tell us two stories; of the practices of our struggles as middle-class individuals.

So, a significant segment of the film revolves around the family of Sukhatni, a factory worker, but if you look at it, you must ask questions. It's so easy, perhaps comfortably easy, to ask others' questions and raise questions of integrity as far as others are concerned. But should you turn inwards, what about the compromises that we make in personal life? What about the compromises that the middle class make?

Again, let's not forget that these are not subject to severe puritanical judgments, value judgments are not made, and the imbalance that the middle class creates. And who are we to judge anybody. But we must understand this complex relationship even as we talk so much shout at times pompously about public values. How then do we look at our own compromises? They collapse us in our schemes of integrity only because we are also struggling. We make compromises because it's a world that demands compromises. Idealism beyond a point does not work-cannot work, so how do we generate our resources of hope? How did we create it because you cannot expect human beings to retain their integrity in a corrupt system? You do not ask for martyrdom; you don't expect martyrs unless there is a struggle, a concerted move to create a society where you have justice and equality. It's perhaps too much to expect individuals; that's why the film controls.

There is a certain quality of restraint that we cannot be too harsh on middle-class people, not that they should be exempted from criticism. But then ask the very fundamental and challenging question, and the most important thing is to ask difficult questions of oneself. How do we create a public realm, a public sphere and space where it's unnecessary to undergo personal corruption? Let us not forget that answers to very complex social and historical problems do not come easily. They do not come overnight; no such revolutions occur; it's unhistorical to believe so, but to be very sensitive to our own compromises, the

compromises that we make for survival and to sustain our aspirations. This is the openly, fairly open political comment that emerges through these films; there's a crucial phase to the films of Sumitra Bhave and Sunil Sukthankar.

Here we enter at one level the world of illness, mental illness, especially psychological disease. The disease is not a good word; let us say mental deviations or a milder word like mental disorders. Three films at one level. *Dahavi Fa*, which was made in 2002. The whole film, and my point of interest, is at one level to be understood as a critique of the colonial education system. In fact, the famous victim Thomas Arnold, the father of the great cultural critic Matthew Arnold that was when the famous expression came "spare the rod and spoil the child" if you don't want to spoil the child, don't spare the rod, use the rod, cane the children. Especially in the 19th century, if you go through the works of Charles Dickens, the schooling system, especially in 'Hard times, the notion of punishment, obedience, discipline as necessary steps, steps to be taken; that cannot be avoided to create better citizens.

So, it's indispensable and inevitable to use the rod to terrorise the student, to make the student behave. In fact, if we turn to John Stewart Mills' autobiography, he talks of the kind of death, the kind of suicide he almost attempted because of this discipline-James Smith and says it's only the freedom, the spontaneous joy that came to him when he read Wordsworth. This is in John Stewart Mills' autobiography; it's the joy that gave him the release, not the oppression of the schooling system, the establishment.

So, in *Dahavi Fa*, as my reading of the film goes, there is a critic of this oppressive educational system that we have built. Do you make the child behave, or do you make the child act with love and responsibility? For me, the film resonates with what Bhishmacharya says in the *Mahabharata*. He says during education, the preceptor must impart knowledge to the young learners with 'vatsalya', an untranslatable word. Still, it would mean love, compassion, endearment, tenderness, caring. So *Dahavi Fa* is crucial because today, the kind of oppression that the entire educational system built on

and models of colonial modernity have oppressed made students dumb and unimaginative. That's why I gave the example of Sir Thomas Arnold and John Stuart Mill.

There are two other films I want to address after *Dahabi Fa*, and before that, a philosophical statement is necessary. Even in the western philosophical tradition, in a certain elevated sphere of western psychoanalysis and psychiatric practice, there has been this argument that deviations of the mind cannot be understood totally through clinical methods. The psychiatry psychoanalysis practice depends on a certain kind of assumption or depends on medicine, but there is this sustained argument. And some great philosophers argue not to say do away with medicine, not to say do away with the psychoanalysis, but there is a greater realm. We know that you have a whole school of anti-psychiatry already with RD Lane and others. But let's turn to the philosophers who say that deviations and delinquency must be seen philosophically and surprisingly enough, whether among children or adults. The argument is that it must be understood at a mystical level.

In fact, William James has a book, *The varieties of religious experience*, Martin Heidegger's book *Being in time*, many draw from this. Say we must turn to disorders of the mind, and that's the soft expression I can use disorders, deviations of the mind that need to be approached with a sense of healing, with mystical awareness. Therefore, we cannot adopt punitive measures or disciplinary measures when dealing with and come across certain deviations in human behaviour, *Devrai* 2004 and *Kaasav* 2007.

*Devrai* means god's forest- the forests of the gods-divine forest. So, it deals with schizophrenia. There is certainly schizophrenia, but who is this schizophrenic individual? He has a sense of the sacred, the sacred grouse; it's an ecological, environmental question. He wakes up and has a split personality, but do you understand it merely at the clinical level subjecting it to all your psychiatric and psychoanalytical practices or do you invoke other forms of healing. The film suggests that the curse of modern civilisation, one of the curses among many, is that we have lost our sense of the sacred as far as

nature is concerned. The struggle is to recover the sense of the sacred and transcendental and, therefore, to approach disorders, sicknesses of our society to be seen as social malaise or social disease. It's another kind of an epidemic, a pandemic as the word is being used today. How do we look at different behaviour patterns, at people who do not behave as we expect them to? How do you come to terms with letting us use the word now abnormality? What do abnormalities in individuals suggest? Is it a personal problem, a personal disease, or do you see it as a civilisational problem?

*Kaasav* is about a mentally disturbed boy; it is about turtles that come to lay eggs, to understand certain abnormalities and abnormal behavioural patterns in certain individuals as individual sickness as disease or do you try to create a civilisational discourse. If you read Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment*, you think of the birth of the clinic. In fact, certain civilisational people trust certain aspects of our civilisation choices; these choices create imbalances within us. Some sensitive individuals succumb to these. So *Devrai*, *Kaasav* are films; if *Dahabi Fa* is about little children and they need vatsalya, we have to do away with measures of punishment and discipline. *Kaasav* and *Devrai* ask us to look at abnormalities with a mystical sense and understand modern civilisation's great sins.

It's now that we must return to assume *Astu* is again about dementia, Alzheimer's disease, and that's Chakraphani Sastri, but you see there are multiple narratives in the film. They are not just about dementia or Alzheimer's disease or about Shastri going missing. These do work, but that's the plot of the film. Still, what are the thematic patterns that we need to construct out of the plot, which is why you see as we watch a film at one level, we certainly need to concentrate on the plot. Still, we just cannot be content with an understanding of the chain of sequence events or episodes. We try and have to get those thematic, philosophical concerns out of the plot, then what is this about? 'Astu'- So be it from which we also say 'Tatastu' – 'let it be, so it's a benediction, a blessing but what does the film suggest, there are enough structures, many segments in the film which show the film is not all about it. But it's not all about

Alzheimer's and dementia; it's about the journey into a particular state of mind, a specific state of being. Shastri, a scholar who quotes from the Gita, Upanishads, Vedas, a Sanskrit scholar but much before he is afflicted by dementia when he is talking to his daughter Ira, and that for me is the central concern of the film. What is knowledge? What does knowledge what does epistemology what do the various epistemologies mean? You may be a scholar in several areas, you may handle different epistemological schemes, but what is the meaning of knowledge beyond a certain point.

Something that resonates in the film is what he tells his daughter. He quotes from the zen text from Taoism and says, "there is no past, there is no present, no future; whatever is so to let it be so and the zen statement is 'everything, is provisional everything is transitory, everything is ephemeral, everything fades away. The Madhyamika school of Buddhism says everything fades into *shunya* because everything is *shannika*. The great struggle is also the struggle to reach a state of nirvana-mindless to state it differently. Yet beyond the mental state that you go to, that's one of the cardinal principles of the yoga sutras. What is real yoga? If it is bending and physical exercise that's Hatayoga, yoga would also mean '*Chitta vruthi nirodaha*' the vruthi-the transactions of the mind of this consciousness, nirodaha- to stop it.

In this sense, *Astu* is a journey, and there was one magnificent great philosopher who understood that we reach a state of silence. Ludwig Wittgenstein, especially towards his second text, talks of silence as the ultimate, the Maha Mauna or *nirvana*, so you can make an analysis valid to a large extent about Alzheimer's dementia loss. Still, there comes a stage when perhaps your knowledge means nothing. Because it moves into an area of nothingness which is why our great scholar Shastri is as important or less important. Or to reverse this statement, the graceful elephant woman Chanama who perhaps is an illiterate, uneducated woman who mothers him, somebody as old as her own father perhaps older; so eventually it's a state of wisdom. It's a journey into a state of wisdom where with all your knowledge, with all this scholarship, you move into an area where you accept whatever exists without simplification. And

this acceptance of this truth that everything moves into nothingness is not in a vague, amorphous position. It comes after you have made the journey through life; you don't skip any phase of existence, you don't feel a skip, you don't hop beyond, take a leap beyond the rigours of daily life, but beyond that, you make a journey into a state where you accept everything, and you say 'Astu'-so be it.

In 2019 when Sumitra Bhave made *Dithee*, which means seeing a vision, there is a spiritual question, but underlying the spiritual question, there is a political position here. And I think the film should be understood as a severe scathing critique of all our institutionalised interpretations of religion and spirituality. Again, it's a scathing critique of all our institutionalised forms and notions because all our religious or so-called centres of spirituality have incorporated us and have given us only stereotypes, and we stick to them.

*Dithee* makes a journey into the oral traditions and their wisdom, a journey into not the world of the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad-gita, the Vedantic texts but to the cosmos of the Varkari tradition. Simple pilgrims walking all the way to pandarapur to meet their Vitta Ila. No knowledge or epistemology, no textual tradition or textual practice, no rituals, simple faith, not blind faith but a simple submission to a sense of god, your sense of the omniscient to your sense of the omnipotent. So, drawing from this oral tradition, *Dithee* is about a man filled with hatred and anger towards his daughter-in-law because she doesn't give him a baby grandson, as he wants his dead son to be reborn as a male grandson.

The kind of spirituality that the film deals with comes through a very ordinary day-to-day physical life when he helps a cow give birth to a calf. There are no constructions here. *Dithee* does not depend on constructs of the classical kind, constructs that our understanding of tradition but comes from the wisdom of folk traditions, of oral traditions, so how do you contextualise spirituality? What is spirituality in the little things you do in the small things you do, in the manner in which you treat human beings, how you relate to each other, and how you treat a human being? Whether you treat human beings with contempt, anger, resentment, bitterness

or with love and simple love. And how you live life is the only valid spiritual position that perhaps Vittala could accept. So, if *Vastupurush* deals with vatsalya, if the films dealing with mental disorders, so-called mental disorders or about healing, a mystical understanding of deviations and deviance.

*Dithee* is about the kind of vision that India needs to celebrate. What spirituality do we talk about of killing people and murdering people with communal instincts that you talk of spirituality, that you talk of a profound religious experience? And you generate hatred and create this notion of the enemy within your own tradition and talk of a glorious tradition based on killing, based on masculinity or do you talk of spirituality, or you do talk of the cosmology of religious traditions through the language of love through the language of compassion?

As a human being, Sumitra Bhave lived such a life, struggled to live such a life and completed her cinematic journey with the kind of vision she had. This was her saying. Her vision and *Dithee* encapsulates all that.

**Beesu Suresha:** Dr Mohan Agashe, one of the regular Sumitra Bhave's films, is here with us, and of course, Sunil Sukthankar is also here. I request Dr Mohan Agashe to add anything that he wishes to the tribute for Sumitra Bhave. We at Suchitra Film Society were really privileged to have Sumitra Bhave with us in June 2019. We showcased her six films then and had a long and exhaustive discussion with Sumitra Bhave.

**Mohan Agashe:** I'm so glad that I listened to Manu and have read his interviews, and I must be honest with Manu; I'm still trying to find out the simple language to communicate to the masses. Sumitra has converted complex things simply to communicate to ordinary people, maybe because she came from a sociology background, from Tata Institute. I came from a medical background, psychiatry, mainly, was not satisfied with the way things are. And she, too, was not satisfied with the way things were there, and we found some common threads. I experienced it the first time I worked with her in *Devrai*; until then, I knew of her, and probably she also knew of me, but we never worked together. You don't really come to

know a person really as much better as when you actually work with the person. So, all our myths, imaginations and ideas about the person get limited, and that's basically how it started. She is the only filmmaker probably in the world who has made outstanding and meaningful films about five illnesses with a high stigma.

*Zindagi Zindabad, Devrai, Nital, Astu, Kaasav* and of course *Badha*. *Badha* doesn't come under disorders but under superstitions. I find these films extremely helpful to teach my academically swollen friends what empathy and compassion are and how they can change when we can't change reality. Suppose there is a chronic source of delusions and everything that you can't change if you change your attitude, things change, and Sumitra has done it extremely simply.

As Manu said, she isn't forthright about it, but the way she has juxtaposed the daughter of Shastri and Chanamma, both women, both caregivers. One is engaged by an analysis of his behaviour; one is motivated by the acceptance of it. Accepting the contradictory position that this man probably is very deserving, she doesn't know anything; he looks like a very learned man, that's why she thinks of him as a god, but still, he needs to be looked after like a child. Well, even in our rituals, we bath the deities of god in daily routine nobody has gone to analytical things about it but these things I found very interesting and used. I have made efforts to communicate like for literature you have Shakespeare or some novelism, and it is taught these films need to be sometimes taught like a complex novel.

I will end with a small note when we migrated from oral to written tradition and orators were replaced by writers, what actually happened? The world became an orphan like in a Jatra, and the word lost its parents, lost its image or lost its sound. There was sound and image to the world when there were orators, and that world became an orphan. So, whosoever adopted him interpreted his life and everything, but when the radio came, it was like suddenly finding the lost mother, All India Radio. When cinema came, the father also came, though father and mother had met, the child met both the



father and mother; when talkies came, the whole family came together.

And what gets communicated through image and sound before even language and word came. Because image and sound are older than the language spoken or written right and in this digital world, the whole family has found an affordable house and come together. And Sumitra has used all three very significantly, so neither she went after the artistic non-comprehensible to ordinary artistic people. That is more important, so I do my films like paintings, to entertain. But what is ignored under my last sentence is that film transcends conscious boundaries, goes directly to the subconscious and unconscious, and gives you passive information like a smoker gives you passive smoking. And unfortunately, cinema came into the hands of commercial people who used it primarily for business, which is why the dangers of passive information are worse than smoking. Smoking can damage the body; this passive information can damage the mind, shown by the stigma of all these illnesses. Sumitra Bhave has successfully used the same weapon to combat stigma, so I find them very handy for me to understand issues beyond medical, and there's a simple line a language. You can read a novel of 1000 pages in one day; why can't you read a textbook in one day, which is 1000 pages, because textbook does not have subtext and life is full of subtext which within understood thank you.

**Sunil Sukthankar:** Thank you, Manu Ji, for analysing all the films. I always love to listen to you because actually, you know, I would like to say that we understand our own films more when we listen to you. And it's not a humble statement because you have various tools of analysis to analyse the text and subtext, as Dr Agashe said. Similarly, I now keep realising that Sumitra was a combination of two different persons. One was the social researcher who believed in analytical tools, and she was an intellectual and philosopher who analysed things. Still, when writing the scripts, the artist used to

overpower that, so she internalised her own analysis and research and everything into her personality. And the artist in her would instinctively express into a kind of intuitive expression, so the expression was never dry or loaded with analysis. There is a structural analysis and her understanding of society, caste system, tradition, illness, depiction, human relationships and psychology. When it came to expressing it, it was an artistic aspiration, so that was a fascinating combination. Her personality, which I understand, had both these sides and again and again, I keep realising that it was a unique combination in one person, so that was a great thing I remember about her. Thank you so much, and as I said, I remembered *Zindagi Zindabad*, then *Nital* and *Gho Mala Asla Hava* two-three other films. Someday I would really love to listen to you at length and let's sit together for one or two days. Thank you so much for categorising all these films in various exciting ways. That was totally new to me.

Working with her was a fascinating kind of collaboration, a man woman collaboration, a different generation collaboration. Still, I think she could become a friend crossing the barriers of gender and age difference. So that's how it happened, and actually, right from my college days, I started working with her, even before I went to the film institute, so it was a collaboration. We just started working together, and slowly, the unwritten rules of collaboration and the division of creative labour started happening, slowly as we started making films. So, in a way, we grew together as filmmakers, so in a way, it became our collective identity; it was not a difficult thing to work together.

**Beesu Suresha:** Suchitra Film Society would like to thank N Manu Chakravarthy for discussing Sumitra Bhave extensively. I wish to thank Mohan Agashe and Sunil Sukthankar for joining us at Suchitra. On the whole, would like to thank everyone who has participated in this online discussion.

▲ **Mr. Beeshu Suresha is the President of Suchitra Film Society, Prof. N. Manu Chakravarthy is a Member of FIPRESCI-India, Dr. Mohan Agashe is an Actor, and Mr. Sunil Sukthankar is the Co-Director with Sumitra Bhave. Text of the Talk transcribed by Ms. Bhagyalakshmi Makam.**

► **Courtesy: Suchitra Film Society, Bangalore.**