

Interview

Premendra Mazumder

**In Conversation with Aruna Vasudev**

FIPRESCI-India felicitated its founder Ms. Aruna Vasudev on 2nd March 2020 at 12th Bengaluru International Film Festival. On 6th March she was honoured with the 1st Vijaya Mulay Memorial Lifetime Achievement Award by the 15th International Film Festival of Thrissur. On 12th March, this interview was recorded at Thrissur!

*Premendra: This is a big opportunity for the E-CineIndia, the quarterly film journal of the FIPRESCI-India, to talk to you to know the history of this organization and your contributions for the promotion and development of Asian cinema. FIPRESCI-India is basically your child. Please tell us how it all started?*

Aruna: That's a very moving introduction. Thank you so much. It just happened. I'll tell you how it started.

I had gone to New York when I was just twenty or twenty-one. I had been working even in college and just after college with the radio - AIR. And then TV started in Delhi. I got some small job in TV. They told me to do makeup. I said I don't know how to do it. It was in Delhi. That's where the TV began. It was

1957 or 58. I was just out of college. Then my parents moved to New York. And with my little experience with TV, I became very much interested in it. So, when we went to New York, I said this is what I want to learn. I got a little job first. And I did do some work. And then I joined the course at New York University. It was on radio, film and television and each student had to do work in all three. So, when someone else was making a film you had to be the editor – or something in the production. When you were doing a radio programme someone had to do editing or recording or something, with you. You had to do everything in every field. So, then in that course, one day I had to edit a film - I had to learn editing a film. And when someone made a film, I had to learn to edit it; if I shot something, someone had to edit it – and so on. I have the clear memory of when I put two shots together and then looked at them and I said, oh my God, it's amazing! Cinema can do this? I've got to learn cinema! I've got to do cinema. When that course was finished, I hung around New York for a little bit doing some odd jobs. Then I was told about the film school

in Paris and I told my parents I HAVE to go to Paris.

*P: How did you shift from Delhi to New York to Paris?*

A: My father took us there. My father was an engineer, he was in government service. After he retired from the government, he was offered this job at the United Nations (UN) in New York. So my mother and I went with him. My sister had already got married and she was living in Delhi. So I went with my parents to New York. And then, as I said, somebody told me about the Paris film school and I said, I don't really like New York. I want to go to Paris.



*P: You already knew French?*

A: I learned a little French, spoke a few words of French but not much. I went to Paris, and I went to the film school. But I got there a bit late because we had to go back to India with my parents on some family matters and then I came back to Paris. While in Delhi I got a little scared, I said 'Paris! I don't know anybody there. What would I do!' So I got a little late getting into the school – at that time it was IDHEC (Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinematographiqu). They said now I couldn't join the regular classes. I can attend classes but not as a registered student. I said, okay, fine, never mind. So, I went to all the classes.

*P: Had you got any introduction?*

A: Yes, to IDHEC by a French friend of my parents in New York. And was given a letter of introduction to Chris Marker by Mary Seton who wrote the book on Satyajit Ray. After I had been in film school for some time, I rang him up and he said, okay, come and meet me. And then I told him this story. He said,

would you want to do an apprenticeship with Alain Resnais who is shooting a film? I said OMG! And I got that as an apprentice. I just sat there during the shooting and they told me to do a little this and that, and basically watch the shooting. When they told me to run some errands, I would do that and just be there and just watch. It was such a wonderful experience!



*P: By then you had learnt French?*

A: Yes, by that time I had learnt some French. Not that good, but I was managing. When the shooting finished, I went back to classes at IDHEC. And then I got another similar apprenticeship with Claude Chabrol on film where three directors were doing half-an-hour each. And I was so lucky I got the apprenticeship with him. Can you imagine at that age doing something so incredible? I mean, how lucky I am! Then school was closed for the summer. I went back to New York to my parents. And then I got a job with the UN in the film department and I started editing.

*P: So you started your career as a filmmaker?*

A: If you want to direct films, you have to know either editing or camera. One of these two you've GOT to know. So, I got a job as an editor in the UN itself. That time UN was making short films, documentaries for TV. So, I became an editor. It was a wonderful experience. And I did this for six months or so. And then when the series of films the UN was making were finished and my job ended, I told my parents I want to go back to Paris - I didn't really like New York! And I luckily got a job as an editor with a company in Paris, which was an editorial centre. I was editing short films. Now my French was fluent. I did that for

a year. Then from there, I wrote a letter to Satyajit Ray saying, can I come and work with you? Because I had read that he was doing a film in English. He said, alright, come!



*P: In Hollywood?*

A: Hollywood gave him this assignment. He had written the script in Calcutta and he was planning to shoot it in Bengal. So, I came back. By then my parents had also come back. I dropped my suitcase in our house in Delhi and the next day I took a train to Calcutta. I went to meet Satyajit Ray and he said, you know, that film I was going to do in English has been cancelled. I said, Ohhh no! Why? Because they wanted him to shoot in Hollywood and he said no. Bengal or India, or no. So, he told me why don't you go back to Delhi, learn Bengali and come back and work with me? I said, okay! And I was back to Delhi and started doing some work in films here.

*P: In which year?*

A: Mid-60s. The film Ray had written for Hollywood was what became *ET*. And the Hollywood studio gave it to Steven Spielberg who made the film not knowing that the script was Ray's. Later Spielberg came to Calcutta to apologize to him. He said, they never told him that it was Ray's script. Anyway, Ray told me all that. Then I was in Delhi. I managed to make a short film. I asked all my friends to give me 10,000 rupees each. If I sell it, I'll give the money back, I told them. Through friends and a few other people, I managed to get just about enough, and I made that film. And then luckily, I managed to sell it.

*P: What was the film?*

A: Called *The Mughals*. 10 minutes. On the Mughals.

*P: Was it a documentary?*

A: It was an abstract film on the Mughal Empire. I don't even remember it now, but I managed to sell it to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and to a distribution company in Bombay. I returned all the money to everybody. And then I said, now what? Then I started editing. Then, what did I do? Oh, then I married my Swedish husband and kept coming to India regularly from Europe

*P: Was he from cinema?*

A: No, he was in the UN and used to be with Swedish television. He was in that field. I had met him in New York and a few years later, I married him and went back to Europe and to Sweden, but I said, no, I can't live in Stockholm! He said, why don't you learn Swedish? I said, I'm not going to learn a language spoken by just 6 million people which is the population of Delhi! But I managed to get a contract with Swedish television and made four films for them. Shorts and



documentaries, in India. Those were shown on Swedish TV. Then I decided I'm going to live in Paris. And there in Paris I worked and also got into the Sorbonne to work for a PhD in Indian cinema. Their system is that you attend some classes for a year, then present a 50 page synopsis for your thesis, go through an oral examination and only THEN can you work on your thesis and present it within five years. So, I did that and then my husband got posted to London. I went to London for a year, made a documentary for a Canadian organisation on India and then at some point I said, I can't live here. I don't like living in Europe. I'm going back to Delhi. Then we were not divorced. He came to Delhi, I went to London, then finally I told him I don't want to live abroad. I'm going to live



in India. Then I started working here in Delhi. I did a film for *Doordarshan*, little bits of things like that. Then I met my Indian husband - it was a long story. Then I married him. He was posted as the Indian Ambassador in Nigeria so I went there.



*P: When you did you do your PhD?*

A: While I had been in Paris, I had registered for PhD at Sorbonne University. To do your PhD there, you have to attend some classes. To some extent, not a regular thing. At the end of the year you do a synopsis of your thesis and then they will examine you, it's oral exam. They need your 50 pages paper and then at the end of it they tell you whether you can sit for the PhD or not. After all these they said, yes, you can do your PhD. I thought, oh, it's great.

When I went to live in Nigeria, my husband said, why don't you write your thesis now? We're going to be in Nigeria where you have nothing to do. I said okay. I took all my material from Delhi. I went to Chennai, I went to Bombay to Calcutta, collected all the material I needed, along with a large number of interviews, and sat down in Lagos to write it.

*P: Was it on censorship?*

A: Yes, it was. I spent the year in Nigeria in writing the thesis. I went to Paris, presented it, got my PhD. Then we came back to Delhi. He was an ambassador, a very senior ambassador. He was much older than me. And then my thesis was published as a book called 'Liberty and License in the Indian Cinema'.

*P: Where was he posted?*

A: First he was in New York and then he came back to India because Mrs. Gandhi said he should come

back and take over as the head of Tourism. He said, I know nothing about tourism. She said, never mind, you come back and do that. So, he came back to India. That's where I met him. He was in India for five years. And then he got posted to Mexico and then to Nigeria, which was then a very important posting. Nigeria had just discovered money and every country wanted to go there to get a contract. India got the contract to do the railways in Nigeria – if I remember correctly!

Then we came back to Delhi and he took early retirement. His deep involvement was with the environment. I was very happy getting back to Delhi. I made two films for *Doordarshan* when we were in Delhi. And then my daughter was born. I said, no, I'm not going to make films again, running out of the house and busy all the time. I started writing. And my thesis got published as a book and then I became a writer. Writing in so many papers. Regular columns also, first in *Youth Times*, then a regular column in the *Hindustan Times*.



*P: All on cinema?*

A: Only cinema. *Hindustan Times* gave me lot of space, cover stories for the Sunday magazine section and a fortnightly column. And I worked on the other books.

*P: So, your journey is basically from film editor to a filmmaker, then film scholar and finally the film critic. Then how did you get interested in Asian cinema?*

A: I also wrote in many other papers and journals - I wrote about 500 articles over the years. Then I was invited by UNESCO in Paris to a UNESCO conference on cinema in Korea. I went there and saw Korean cin-

ema for the first time. I thought how beautiful this is! How wonderful! I didn't know Asian cinema at all.

I got very interested in it. I met many people at that conference and came back to Delhi. Then I got invited to a conference in Hawaii which also supported the Hawaii film festival. I went to the conference and saw some films in the festival. The director of the festival was an American lady - Jeanette Paulson. Jeanette and I became very friendly. There were many films from Asia and when I saw these films I was stunned. Cinema of Asia, which we knew nothing about - none of us knew I learned that there were only two festivals in the world, showing Asian films. One is Hawaii, and the other is Hong Kong. A young Filipino director I met there said to me, you're going back via Hong Kong? I had to stop overnight because there was no connecting flight. He said, why don't you go to meet Hong Kong festival people? I said, okay! He gave me a name. I said whether it is a man or woman? He said, I don't know. We were all so ignorant at that time! He just knew that there was a festival, but he was a young filmmaker. He didn't know much. When I stopped in Hong Kong, I went to meet them. The lady was a programmer. And I was so amazed. She said come back for the festival. This must have been November or December or so. The festival was in March or April. She said, we can give you part of your airfare and a hotel room. I said okay. Anyway, I managed to get a ticket within that amount. That time nobody had any money. I went, and I was blown away. I saw films from all over Asia. And I thought how come none of us know anything about this. This is just not possible. How can we not know! Chidananda Dasgupta was then living in Delhi. And I said to him 'Chitu, let's do something with Asian cinema'.



*P: How did you know Chidananda Dasgupta?*

A: I had known him for a long time. When I was living in Paris, I went to Bombay just to see the film world, and I met him and Bhagwan Garga - B D Garga. And both became my very close friends. Chitu told me: 'I am so interested in film but don't know how to manage; I started the film society in Calcutta, and want to work in film, but I can't give up my job'. Finally, he did give up his job and started writing on cinema. He became the editor of *Span* and was posted in Delhi. So, I used to see him a lot. And Garga was in Bombay. But I was very closely in touch with both of them. Both were much older than me, but they became very dear friends.



*P: How did your idea of the journal on Asian cinema get materialized?*

A: I said to Chidananda Dasgupta, 'Chitu, let's start a magazine on Asians cinema. I said that I thought of a name. – *Cinemaya*'. He said, beautiful name. But how to do it? I worked for two years with the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH). They were doing a series of films for *Doordarshan*. At that time Chitu had left *Span* and joined INTACH. The scripts were ready but *Doordarshan* was not clearing it. Pupul Jayakar was then the chairperson of INTACH. She was a wonderful person. So was Mapu who was head of INTACH. I took the scripts and went to *Doordarshan*. An old college friend of mine had just become the Director-General of *Doordarshan*. I went to see him to take this up with him – at that time I had not yet joined INTACH. I said, why aren't you clearing this? I was sitting in his office and he called someone and asked him to bring the proposal.

Then and there he signed it. Cleared it immediately. I got back to INTACH and said 'Chitu, it's on'. Then I joined INTACH and I worked with Chitu on a series of thirteen films. He directed the first film and I directed the last film. Thirteen films on environment by different directors – Rajiv Mehrotra, Pramod Mathur etc. Then Chitu said, now I am leaving; I am moving to Calcutta. Last two - three films were not yet completed but people were working on them. Chitu had made the first film and I made the final one for that series. All were shown on *Doordarshan*.



Meanwhile, I was thinking about the magazine. Determined to do it, I talked to my friend Latika Padgaonkar and we got the cover of the magazine prepared with a rough layout. The new Minister of the I&B Ministry called a few people to talk to them about cinema industry and so on, in Delhi and I was also called by them - there were not so many people in Delhi involved with cinema in those days. My husband suggested that I should take my sample of *Cinemaya* with me. And after I talked to the Minister about what was happening and what could be done about supporting the cinema, he asked me what I had in mind. I took the sample of my magazine out of my bag and said, this is what I want to do. He said, 'what a good idea! Asian cinema! People don't know about Asian cinema'. I said, that's why I'm very keen to do it. I told him I had given it to the National Film Development Corporation. Their chief was in Bombay. I had talked to her, given her a sample, and she said yes, we will give you the money for the first edition but that was not happening. He called her up immediately and said to give us the money. They gave me one lakh for one issue. Meanwhile I had talked to Latika Padgaonkar who was then working half-day with the UN and

I was working half day with INTACH. She said, what a great idea! I said we both working in the morning so let's meet in the afternoon. This was long back, before her husband Dileep become editor of the *Times of India*. This was 1983-84. Then Rashmi Doraiswamy was still doing her MA at JNU. She said she wanted to join. I said, come. Her husband, Madan Gopal Singh, I used to know well. So Latika, Rashmi and I started the magazine and first issue of *Cinemaya* came out and we did a big launch at India International Centre. The Minister of I&B was there. It was a wonderful opening. And then we thought 'where do we get money for the next issue?' We spent all that we had got on the first issue. I was determined that the magazine would be of an international standard, we were not going to compromise! I started talking to old college friends who were now holding high jobs in various companies. I asked some whom I had not even talked to since we finished college! I asked for their support to give us advertisements. Some friends helped and somehow we managed. Then slowly it just grew.



*P: How long did it go on for?*

*A: Sixty issues. Four issues per year starting in 1987.*

*P: How the idea came for organizing the Asian film festival?*

*A: After one year of the publication of Cinemaya, UNESCO sent me a mail saying 'you organize a conference on Asian cinema'. I knew them from when I lived in Paris. Their head of the culture, I knew him. They'd seen Cinemaya and they said me to organize a conference on Asian cinema. I said, why?*



They said, you have brought out *Cinemaya* and you like to encourage Asian cinema. You're the one who knows most about Asian cinema. So, we organized the conference in Delhi. UN Office in Delhi gave us the money and we held the conference in their hall. We managed to get a little more money because what UNESCO gave us, one thousand dollars, was not enough. And again, my husband said, if you are doing a conference, don't just call filmmakers and journalists. What will come out of it at the end? I said, so what do I do? He said call the institutions, people who can change things in their countries. So, we started to look into whom to invite. Then we invited the head of the film archive in Thailand and head of some other institutions. One of them was Kim Dong-Ho, the head of the Korean Motion Picture Corporation in Seoul. I had met him casually when I went to there for the UNESCO conference. I invited him to come for this conference together with other institutional members from different Asian countries, a couple of journalists from Europe, and Jeanette from Hawaii - 25 people from all over Asia and a few from other countries. But mainly one representative from each country.



*P: This conference was hosted by your journal Cinemaya?*

*A: Yes. Because UNESCO asked us to do it. Then we decided to start a mission for the promotion of Asian cinema all over the world. How to do it? Whether we would do face to face conferences? Better let's do some Asian cinema programmes in all other countries. People from every single Asian country said that is a great idea. Carry it forward! Then Indu Shrikent also joined us who, over the years, beautifully handled a lot of the administrative work - and then slowly a couple of others – Shantanu Ganguly and Indrani Bose - and my right-hand man, from the start, Ram*

*Prakash Sharma.*



Soon after our meeting in Delhi, the Yamagata documentary festival in Japan said they could do a conference next year in Yamagata. So, we did that in Yamagata. There I came up with the idea of the name NETPAC: Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema. Everyone accepted it. And we started NETPAC. From each country at least one person was at the conference. That's how it all started.

*P: So after Cinemaya, your second step was NETPAC. Then how came the idea of your festival?*

*A: Then we started showing a few films, the Asian films, just one or two somehow. We weren't really showing that many films, but we said we ought to show them. We were looking at ways of how we can show some more films from Asia. So, at the 10th anniversary of *Cinemaya* we did a festival of Asian films. That was *Cinemaya Festival* at the India International Centre. At the end of it we said, we have got to start our festival now and the India Habitat Centre in Delhi gave us their hall free. Then from 11th anniversary of *Cinemaya* – in 1999 - we started *Cinefan: Festival of Asian Cinema*.*

*P: How could you manage to get the money?*

*A: Sheila Dikshit was the Chief Minister. I went to her and she said okay, take 10 lakhs.*

How would we be managing in 10 lakhs? But Habitat Centre gave us the entire hall free and they gave us a central space to have coffee. They made there a café for the delegates. And that's how it started. We got little money from here and there. People gave us advertisements for *Cinemaya* and then we got a sponsor, and then we managed.



*P: As the Cinefan Festival how long did it run?*

A: I think, we ran for six or seven years. But it was getting too difficult. As everybody from all over the world wanted to come. FIPRESCI Jury was there also. But we could not raise that much of money. Sheila Dikshit was still there. I again asked for more money. But when she left it became impossible to manage. Nevil Tully had been coming to me for two years, saying, join us, let's do something together. Finally, I said, okay, you take over this festival. He said, but only if you stay as the director. So, I stayed for three years as the director.

*P: So, it was renamed as Osian's Cinefan Festival for Asian and Arab Cinema. How long it ran?*

A: Five years, I think. After I left, it ran for two years. Then Latika Padgaonkar and Indu Shrikent became the joint directors. I brought in Raman Chawla, then Sudhir Tandon also to Osian's.

*P: You also started a Buddhist film festival?*

A: That came later. After Osian's, I started doing my painting and did my painting exhibitions – and organised a couple of very big international conferences on Asian Cinema.

*P: How did you think about bringing FIPRESCI in India?*

A: When I had been living in Europe, I met Klaus Eder the directorial head of FIPRESCI. He became a very good friend. I went to Munich and here and there to many festivals. I was on the FIPRESCI jury at some festivals. I met Derek Malcolm, the FIPRESCI President, a lot of times at different festivals. That



time when I was still living in Europe and was also coming to India, and they were coming to IFFI in Delhi. At one of the festivals (IFFI) they were sitting there both very sad. They said we've been trying and trying to get FIPRESCI in India but it's just not happening. I said, you never said this to me. So, I went off to meet the Secretary of I&B Ministry. I don't remember who was there at that time. Then I went to DFF and Film Department. I said, how can you not have the FIPRESCI in India? Come on, it's a major international organization. They said, okay, send the proposal. Derek and Klaus were so happy. That time Derek was the President and Klaus is still running the organization. I cleared everything with the ministry and then from the following year FIPRESCI started in IFFI. I said Chitu will be President and Chitu said, no, not me. He had moved to Calcutta by then. He said, 'you will be the President'. I said 'in no way. How can I be when you're there? It has to be you'. So, we made him the President. There was a meeting, three four years later, where I was not present. And then he announced that Aruna will be the next President. I said, I've got my *Cinemaya*, I have got my *Cinefan*, so I can't. He said, 'You made me the President so now I am making you the President'. This was how FIPRESCI-India started.

Then after long time I started the Buddhist Film Fes-



tival in Delhi. First, I did it in ICCR, then at the Alliance Francaise, then last year at the National Museum but that was not a good idea. I am not sure if I'm going to be able to carry on with it. Getting funding for it is not easy but I hope something will work out. Last year we did it with the full support of the International Buddhist Confederation, so hopefully, it will carry on.

*P: Thank you Aruna for spending your precious time for E-CineIndia. This will be a valued document for the future film scholars. We are highly obliged!*

*A: So, I've told you my entire life story. Hope the readers will enjoy it. Thank you, dear Premendra!*

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***Ms. Aruna Vasudev is the Former President and present Honorary Member of FIPRESCI-India.***

***Mr. Premendra Mazumder is the Secretary of FIPRESCI-India and Editor of E-CineIndia.***