

Sydney Film Festival

A critical look at aspects of life in contemporary India

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Two films from India— *The Lady of the House*, written and directed by Rituparno Ghosh, and *The Throne of Death* by Murali Nair—were shown at the Sydney festival. Warmly received by festival audiences around the world, these well-crafted films—the first about a lonely spinster, the other about the frame-up and execution of a peasant labourer—take a critical look at aspects of life in contemporary India.

The subject matter of these films is significant. The extreme right wing Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), which heads India's coalition government, is acutely sensitive to any artistic work exploring the plight of women or the lower castes. Hindu communalist forces, encouraged by the rise to power of the BJP, have harassed artists, filmmakers and writers who dare to challenge the government's political agenda or artistically explore the reality of social life in India.

In January this year, Indian born director Deepa Mehta, came under attack, in particular from the fascistic Rastriya Swayangsevak Sangh, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Shiva Sena and the Kashi Sanskriti Raksha Sangharsh Samithi, because she attempted to make *Water*, a film about the plight of widows in India in the 1930s. Mehta's set was destroyed by rioting Hindu chauvinists and the BJP state government in Uttar Pradesh banned production of the film claiming she was responsible for provoking the riots. Mehta, who plans to resume production at another location later this year, was subjected to death threats, denounced as anti-Hindu and falsely accused in the media of plagiarism.

This is the situation confronting serious artists today in India. It is commendable therefore that the relatively young directors of *The Lady of the House* and *The Throne of Death* have refused to be intimidated and produced films that attempt to examine important social issues. Hopefully their work will encourage others.

The Lady of the House (Bariwali), which was made on a shoestring budget and released in February this year, is Ghosh's fourth feature film and regarded by many critics as his most accomplished work. The film deals with several weeks in the life of Banalata (Kiron Kher), a lonely middle-aged woman. Banalata, who is intensely shy, has never recovered emotionally from the unfortunate death of her husband-to-be years earlier. The young man died after being bitten by a snake, the night before the couple was to be married.

Banalata has never married, had little contact with men and as the years have rolled by, become more and more withdrawn. She is cared for by a loyal family retainer and rarely leaves the house. She has so little self-confidence that even Malati (Sudipta Chakraborty), her cheeky maidservant, bosses her around. Banalata cannot afford to properly maintain the rambling old house in which she lives, but an

opportunity for some income, and perhaps a change in her life, arises when a film crew offers to rent the property as a movie location.

The house is soon filled with cameras, lights and glamorous actors. Banalata, who previously insisted that the house be partitioned to restrict contact between householders and the crew, becomes infatuated with Deepanakar (Chiranjeet Chakraborty), the director, and gradually becomes involved in the production. Although Banalata knows that Deepanakar is married and that one of the actresses is attempting to re-establish a relationship with him, she cannot stop herself being drawn towards him. He seems to represent the sort of man she has dreamed about—worldly, charming and cultured. And when the director persuades her to play a small role in the film, she begins to dream of a new dawn in her life.

These aspirations are dashed when shooting ends, the crew departs and the crumbling old house and Banalata's life resume their quiet, monotonous existence. Banalata's letters to the director remain unanswered and any hope of “discovery” through her small role in the film is crushed when she learns it has been edited out of the movie. The manipulative Deepanakar, having extracted what he required from Banalata for the film, has moved on to other projects.

The basic plot line of *The Lady of the House* sounds rather commonplace, almost banal. But what might appear to be a fairly simple story about Banalata's life becomes a sensitive and moving exploration of the loneliness of a middle aged unmarried woman. Although Banalata is not formally defined as a widow because she never married, she is still subject to social conventions that make her a second-class citizen. In India today, poorer widows and unmarried middle-age women are looked upon as burdens on their families and it is not unusual for some to be forced out of their family homes to eke out an existence as beggars.

Banalata is not poverty stricken but she is not taken seriously by those closest to her and has little authority in her own home. Her vulnerability to high-profile films stars and to Deepanakar's demands, and her shy, solitary existence are not personality traits but legacies of the oppressed position of widows in Indian society. Ghosh's film, which is clearly influenced by the work of Satyajit Ray, one of India's greatest directors, subtly alludes to these social pressures.

Throne of Death (Marana Simhasanam) by 34-year-old Murali Nair is a disturbing 57-minute film about class oppression and political manipulation in Kerala, India. This darkly ironic film, which tells the story of the frame-up and execution of Krishnan, an agricultural labourer, graphically captures the soul-destroying poverty and backwardness that confronts a large proportion of the state's

population. The film's real achievement, however, is its biting portrait of the complacent and cynical functionaries and careerists of the Stalinist Communist Party of India [Marxist] (CPM), the party which has governed Kerala on and off for decades.

Nair begins his film, which has a simple folk tale quality to it, with a series of tightly framed shots of Krishnan (Vishwas Njavakkal) preparing the land for rice planting. Within a few minutes the film provides a rich portrait of the difficult situation confronting Krishnan, his wife and young son.

While Krishnan works the fields, the landowner lounges on a porch sipping tea and complaining that the planting is taking too long. Krishnan and his wife (Lakshmi Raman), who have suffered years of hard work and a semi starvation diet, look old enough to be the boy's grandparents. After a sparse meal Krishnan complains there is never enough money to live and decides to steal some coconuts from the landowner's property. He is caught red-handed and humiliated by the landlord, who sends him to jail the next day.

Krishnan's wife attempts to secure his release but learns that he is being accused of an unsolved murder and other crimes. She visits the landlord, now regretful of his actions, who explains that it is election time and suggests that she approach the local Communist party branch to secure its support. The officials make some assurances and some days later call a rally to protest the labourer's arrest. A local party leader (Suhas Thayat) demagogically declares that the party will fight fearlessly for Krishnan's release. It will be a long battle, he explains, but the Indian people have a proud record of fighting colonial oppression and will succeed.

The Throne of Death takes a sharp turn when party officials discover in the local newspaper that Kerala, assisted by World Bank loans, will soon be equipped with an electric chair. This, they declare, "would be a leap towards the 21st century" and of great benefit to the state. The Stalinist officials do not discuss how the possession of an execution machine will assist anyone, let alone the workers and rural poor they claim to represent. And in line with the introduction of other World Bank "aid projects" these officials feel no obligation to justify their actions. All questions are brushed aside with phrases about the march of progress.

After hearing this news, party officials, who, like Krishnan's landlord spend most of their time sipping tea, decide that the campaign to secure Krishnan's release should end, replaced with demands for the labourer to become the first Indian to die in the electric chair. The film's satiric tension intensifies even further when a party official begins a hunger strike to demand Krishnan's execution. Naturally the government agrees and Krishnan's disoriented wife is reluctantly brought in by officials to urge the hunger striker to end his fast. With breathtaking gall officials compare Krishnan to Mahatma Gandhi.

Krishnan, who is told that the new technology will provide him with a blissful departure to another life, is overjoyed with the decision. His life is so miserable that the promise of a new heavenly existence is something to look forward to, his feelings reinforced by the fact that his wife and son will be provided for by a government pension.

The villagers are informed that the execution is another clear indication that the government is bringing electricity to the region—something desperately needed. Krishnan's death, according to party officials, is a worthy and necessary sacrifice in this process and one that will ultimately benefit everyone. Krishnan's wife is suspicious and confused. She knows there is something deeply wrong but is defenceless. She has no answer to the arguments and is dragged along

in the wake of this horrible agenda. Life is so unbearable for the villagers and they are so desperate for any relief that, no matter how terrible the cost, any prospect of a change for the better even if very slender and distant appears attractive.

The family are given a sumptuous meal, Krishnan's last, and a victory rally and public execution organised. His wife is hailed as a woman of great courage and carried through the village on a cart decorated in red banners. A senior government official is brought in to carry out the execution. "With this new tool of the 21st century, more and more people will have an easy death," the official says. "Our nation," he continues, "is making great progress and the village and Krishnan will achieve international fame."

The Throne of Death, which has minimal dialogue, concludes with Krishnan's execution. A voice-over explains that Krishnan is now regarded as one of Kerala's great heroes for his "contribution" to progress in the state and that a film is planned about his life.

Nair's low-budget film resonates precisely because it draws attention to the cynicism of the CPM bureaucrats and the ease with which they are able to espouse the struggle against imperialism one day, only to drop their rhetoric and declare that the demands of international finance capital are progressive and have to be introduced, the next. In fact, the film simply highlights the modus operandi of the CPM, which regularly proclaims to the oppressed masses its opposition to the profit system while convincing them to accept programs and projects that destroy their very lives.

Nair studied communications in Bombay before working in television and as an assistant to director Mani Kaul. In 1993 he achieved international recognition for his documentary, *Tragedy of an Indian Farmer*, based on a poem by the poet Changampuzha Krishna Pillai. *Coronations*, his next film, explored the impact of advanced military technology on an Indian town and *A Long Journey*, made in 1996, uses the story of a group of people on a bus journey to depict the impact of communalisation on Indian society.

While Nair has been decidedly vague about his own political outlook, avoiding journalists' questions on the subject, *The Throne of Death* is a clear protest against the CPM and the powers-that-be in Kerala. And like Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*, which includes a damning portrait of a CPM functionary in Kerala, Nair's film is an expression of the contempt felt by wide layers to this ossified and corrupt political apparatus. *The Throne of Death* won the Camera D'Or prize at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival. It deserves the widest audience.



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