

Sydney Film Festival—Part 3

Two perceptive Indian films

By Richard Phillips
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This year's festival included recent works by Aparna Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Mani Ratman and Buddhadeb Dasgupta, some of India's more intelligent and humane filmmakers. Consistently rejecting the escapist themes championed by Bollywood, the dominant sector of the Indian film industry, these directors have seriously attempted to examine different aspects of local social and political life.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has already commented on Ratman's *A Peck on the Cheek* and Dasgupta's *A Tale of a Naughty Girl*. Here we will review Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Shadow Kill* and *Mr and Mrs Iyer* by Aparna Sen.

Aparna Sen is the daughter of film historian, critic, and filmmaker, Chidanda Dasgupta. She began her movie career as an actress, first appearing in Satyajit Ray's *Sampatti* (1961), and starring in over 20 films before making her directorial debut in 1981 with *36 Chowringhee Lane*. Since then she has directed *Paroma* (1984), *Sati* (1989) *Yugant* (1995) and *Paromitar Ek Din* (2000).

Her latest film, *Mr and Mrs Iyer*, is a contemporary love story set against the background of anti-Muslim communal violence. It begins at a small bus terminal somewhere in the mountains of northern India where relatives, friends and holidaymakers are about to journey south. Those boarding the crowded bus constitute a cross section of Indian life—Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, higher and lower castes, middle class and poor. Most of the passengers cannot speak each other's native tongues and so virtually all of the dialogue is in English. A group of boisterous teenagers, who spend their time singing Hindi language pop songs, provide some light relief in the early part of the journey.

The two central figures—Raja Chowdhary (Rahul Bose), a Bengali wildlife photographer, and Mrs Meenakshi Iyer (Konkona Sensharma), a Tamil Brahmin woman travelling with her infant son to meet her husband—have never met before and would not do so under “normal” circumstances. The two, however, are thrown together by the eruption of ethno-religious violence.

While initial contact between the two is cool, Meenakshi appreciates Raja's help with her infant son during the hazardous journey out of the mountains. She begins to warm to his presence, until she learns of his Muslim background, and

pulls back.

Some time during the trip, however, the bus is stopped from entering a small town that has erupted in a wave of communal violence. Hindu extremist thugs, determined to avenge the murder of a local villager, discover the bus, climb aboard and demand to know the religious background of all on board. They seize an aging Muslim couple and are preparing to take Raja, when suddenly Mrs Iyer claims him as her husband.

The thugs eventually depart and early the next morning Raja, Meenakshi and some of the other passengers make their way to the town to seek some alternative transport. The place is in chaos, with Muslim houses destroyed and local police officers turning a blind eye to the communalist looting. Raja and Meenakshi maintain their new identity as husband and wife and take refuge for several days at an abandoned forest guesthouse outside the town, where they fall in love.

Raja and Meenakshi eventually locate train transport out of the area and reluctantly go their separate ways—Mrs Iyer planning to rejoin her husband and Raja returning to his job. While little has changed in the world around them, their short-lived relationship has given them a new sense of humanity. Some of their previously held religious and cultural confusions have been pushed back.

Although *Mr and Mrs Iyer* won a Best Director prize at India's National Film Awards this year the film is not a complete artistic success. While the performances by Rahul Bose and Konkona Sensharma are particularly strong and convincing, the film's message that love can somehow transcend ethno-religious bigotry is somewhat simplistic. Nor does the film provide any indication of the underlying causes of communal violence.

Nonetheless, the film is a sincere and healthy development and its portrayal of the crazed Hindu chauvinists and the destructive consequences of their pogrom is frighteningly real. Too few contemporary Indian filmmakers are prepared to acknowledge, let alone examine, the rise of religious fundamentalism and its impact.

In one media interview, Aparna Sen said she decided to make *Mr and Mrs Iyer* out of “deep concern” over the rise of Hindu chauvinism and added: “[T]he secularism that Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi stood up for is almost extinct.

Even among the urban middle class and the upper middle class, the so-called educated, enlightened class, secularism is absent.” Sen’s sensitivity to the repudiation of secularism by a section of the middle class is significant. One hopes that she will begin to probe this phenomenon in the near future.

Shadow Kill (Nizhalkuthu), the latest feature by veteran director and screenwriter Adoor Gopalakrishnan, is set in 1941 in a remote village in the princely state of Travancore, today part of the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. Gopalakrishnan’s slow-paced, powerful and at times visually beautiful film centres on the tragic life of Kaliyappan (Oduvil Unnikrishnan), an aging state executioner and his family.

Kaliyappan, who was appointed to his position by the local maharaja, has hanged an innocent young man and is desperately trying to find a way out of the grisly profession. His employment, however, was given to his family by royal decree and he cannot escape it, unless he passes on the job to his son. In exchange for doing the state’s dirty work, the executioner and Marakatam (Sukamari), his long-suffering wife, are provided with a few modest privileges, including a house, some land and the hanging rope, which is especially created for each execution.

Local villagers have an ambivalent attitude towards Kaliyappan. On the one hand they regard him with contempt for doing the dirty work of the maharaja and the British. But they also believe that the death rope has healing powers and so bring their sick relatives to Kaliyappan to be cured of all their ills. In exchange for a small cash settlement, he burns a small portion of the rope, offers a prayer to the Hindu goddess Kali and sprinkles the ashes over the sick person.

Shadow Kill provides an accurate and disturbing glimpse of the state apparatus created by the British colonial rulers and their local Indian agents and the treatment of those at the bottom of the pecking order. Kaliyappan, who is at the beck and call of the local maharaja, is forced to live in a remote part of the state, close to the Tamil Nadu border and well away from the prison or the people he may have to put to death. The maharaja dictates who will live and die but Kaliyappan, who carries out his orders, is forced to bear all moral responsibility for the executions.

Whenever the maharaja gives orders for an execution, for example, he always has an official pardon ready. While Kaliyappan is directed to make the long journey to the prison and hang the condemned man, the maharaja can cynically wash his hands of any responsibility by issuing a pardon but sending it too late to stop the execution. The stay of execution always arrives just in time to be read out over the prisoner’s body, leaving the executioner to shoulder all blame for the barbaric act.

As the story unfolds, Kaliyappan, who seeks solace in heavy drinking bouts, becomes increasingly disoriented and disturbed as he awaits the next execution order. India is convulsed by political turmoil with opposition to British rule rising

throughout the country. Although the family is located far from the main centres of resistance, Muthu, Kaliyappan’s only son, becomes a strong supporter of the Quit India movement.

The executioner’s life is also complicated by increasing financial demands from his married daughter Madhavi and her unpleasant husband and the awakening sexual maturity of Mallika, Kaliyappan’s youngest daughter. Mallika falls in love with a local youth but is brutally murdered soon after.

This tragedy, which coincides with a new execution order from the maharaja, destroys Kaliyappan psychologically. He collapses just before the hanging, forcing his son to carry out the death penalty and take over his father’s macabre profession. Having previously backed the struggle against the British, Muthu becomes one of its instruments. His decision to become executioner could very well be a metaphor for those who took control when the British were forced out of India.

Shadow Kill is a dark and disturbing film with strong performances by its experienced cast. Oduvil Unnikrishnan as Kaliyappan is particularly noteworthy.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan has been making films for over 30 years and is one of India’s most thoughtful contemporary filmmakers. Explaining the film’s conclusion and Muthu’s decision to take over his father’s job, he said: “He is fighting for freedom, he is part of the whole Gandhian movement. But what exactly is freedom? Freedom from whom, and to do what? Examine his story: His father is a hangman; his father gets land, and other largesse, from the state. The son is against all this, yet he is dependant on his father’s lands and his income. In the end, he has a choice — to assume his father’s role, or to starve.

“Is that a choice? Freedom means, really, the power to choose. Does the son have it? The larger issue is, we have fought for, and got, our freedom, or independence. But is it real freedom? Are we really free? These are the questions I hope the audience ends up asking itself.”

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