

Indian Panorama

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Panorama at the Goa International Film Festival of India (Nov/Dec,08) presented heartbreaking images from the contemporary currents of Indian feature and non-feature films. Adoor Gopala Krishnan follows the shadows of shortages and unemployment cast by the Second War in Europe on India, in "Oru Penum Randaanum—A Climate for Crime" (Malayalam, 115 mins, colour). With food, clothing, kerosene and petrol scarce during the 1940s in the princely state of Travancore, the poor and the rich indulge in crime. In "The Thief", when Kunjunni (Amal Jose) breaks the news in his village school classroom, that his father has returned, his classmate Kurien (Brolin) scorns that it would not be long, for another arrest, as he was a thief. A scuffle occurs between Kunjunni and Kurien, and the headmaster canes the hands of both the boys. Kunjunni returns home crying, and he is picked up by his father, Neelantan (MR Gopa Kumar) in arms. Neelantan Mathai sits around a fire in the woods.

There are rumours in the village. Kurien's father, Pannikar (Indran) and his mother, Maryamma (Leela) place all metal utensils in a safe room, under lock. Under Pannikar's dictation, Kurien writes a letter to the police inspector that all the farmers fear Neelantan, and they apprehend more thefts. Names of tax paying citizens are also added for signature. Kunjunni reads aloud from a book to his father, Neelantan. Soon two policemen, arrive to escort Neelantan to the police station. At night, over dinner, Kunjunni enquires of his mother as to how they manage. Mother and son visit Neelantan in police custody. Kunjunni's mother, (Seemaj Nair) seeks help from an old friend, Appacham, who declines as old ties were in the past. Kunjunni feels guilty that his father went to jail again, due to a quarrel with a classmate. Kunjunni's mother chops dry coconut shells in the day time. When she offers rice grill to her son, Kunjunni tells her to convey to his father to steal is wrong, and he should not steal again. Some time late Neelantan returns, and police make enquiries. Neelantan is locked away for two years. News breaks that valuables have been stolen from Kurien's house. Kunjunni infers that his father must have stolen again, as soon as he stumbles on a packet of shirts and trousers. The episode is unsentimental and delicately observed, portraying the resilience of the thief's son.

At Alapuzha police station 1945, in "The Police", when a new inspector takes charges, there are seven unsolved cases of theft, out of eight; and suspicious are on head constable, Pillai (Jagannathan) for corruption. The theft cases have not been solved owing to criminal negligence, and bribes. Pillai and Maathu (Nudu Venu), who was earlier suspended for harsh treatment of an accused, are given seven days time to settle the cases. Later while drinking at a bar, they spot a customer, Avutha (Krishna Kumar), wearing soiled clothes, opening packet of currency notes. The police constables grab Avutha's wrists, who explains that the money was for purchasing a rickshaw. They seize Avutha's money, and put him in lock-up for being under suspicious circumstances with stolen money. Avutha explains that the money was for his lawyer and bank manager, who had given the bank loan. The constables are firm that the money would be returned on release from jail. At court false witnesses depose against

Avuthu, and describe him as a shady character loitering around for six months. Thressiya (Priyanka), a girl witness claims marriage with Avutha for six months, and the Rs 400 seized was ill gotten money. Avuthu remains astounded and does not have any questions. There are charges of stealing Rs.400 from a merchant, and Avuthu is sentenced to six months severe imprisonment. While the corruption and hard knocks are pessimistic, the episode maintains respect for the protagonist.

Krishnakutty, (Sudhish), a college student is distressed in "Two men and a woman". At the district court, he meets his lawyer friend, in the lawyer's chamber, and relates his woes. He has been having an affair with a maidservant, of the lodge, and the maid is pregnant. A rich uncle has been financing Krishnakutty for higher education, with an understanding that Krishnakutty would marry the relative's daughter. Krishnakutty is faced with end of studies, or abortion for the maid. He feels guilty that a girl's life has been ruined. The lawyer reminds that foeticide is a crime. Next day when Krishnakutty visits the house of lawyer, (Jagdish) he finds the lawyer sweeping the floor to avoid maids and domestic maid problems.

Crossing a river at night Krishnakutty and the lawyer go to another village, in search of a quack who performs abortions. The boatman recalls that he was married before age 21, and now had three children. The quack terminator is drinking and provides Krishnakutty with four doses of medicines for a washout. Krishnakutty pays Rs 5 as advance for the cost of the drugs. Next day Krishnakutty tells the lawyer it was false alarm, and the maid was not pregnant. He still feels the girl was innocent. Again, after a few days, the girl is pregnant. When the maid's parents want Krishnakutty to marry the girl, he agrees. The episode with easy solutions never topples into melodrama.

An old man, Rama Kurup (Ravi Vallabhdhol) is in love with beautiful Panki (Praveena), in "One Woman, Two Men". Even before marriage he has given his entire estate to the girl. Panki puts on the gifted yellow dotted blouse. Kurup even collects hay for Panki's cow. One day finding Panki with another man, Kuttam Pillai, (Manoj K Jayan), Kurup stabs Pillai in the stomach. Pillai is unconscious in hospital, and Kurup is arrested. Panki enquires about Kurup from the police havildar. Pillai recovers, and Panki sings from a book. Pillai visits Panki and shows her the stab wounds, and regrets that Panki did not visit him in the hospital. They hug.

Attempted murder is not a small crime, but soon Kurup is out on bail, and returns to the village crossing a river, on a boat. The boatman informs that it was lucky that Pillai did not die. Kurup meets Panki, and after an oil bath, eats a sumptuous dinner. He has lost his faith in the police. During a temple festival, there are riots amongst two groups. For paying lawyers, Kurup now is keen on selling an acre of land, earlier gifted to Panki. He opens the steel safe and pulls out the court documents. Panki demands rights as wife. The court case will now depend on wife's deposition, that it was out of love that Kurup had stabbed. Panki is briefed on not being indecisive in court, and Kurup and Pillai are given jail sentences. Falling in love with the same woman, the two men now perform hard labour in the mud and rice fields. On release from jail, Kurup and Pillai visit Panki. They find another man on Panki's verandah, and a child with Panki. She explains that the stranger is the father of the child. Full of humorous turns, the episode is paced with romance, crime in a passion, village violence, justice, and a woman's desires.

Gopalakrishnan builds a straight forward document in the four episodes, on rural life, the district legal system for the community, and the powerlessness of the protagonists. Without any metaphors or reveries, the film contemplates on the brutality of corruption and poverty, and love-affirming sentiments. M J Radhankrishnan's camera deftly captures the rough sketches full of irony and pathos. Performances abound in realism. Just as the recurring motif of a river and a boat, Gopala-krishnan's narrative depicts the diverging paths of life's course. □□□