

REVIEWS

People's cinema with people's support: a review of the 7th Kolkata people's film festival (Kolkata, India–January 2020)

The 7th Kolkata People's Film Festival ran from 23–26 January 2020 at Uttam Mancha, Hazra, Kolkata, India. The 7th edition screened 34 films across a wide range of compelling stories from India and South Asia. Organized by the People's Film Collective (PFC), the People's Film Festival is a people supported, independently organized, volunteer led cinema festival that showcases politically committed contemporary documentary and fiction cinema from the sub-continent. The festival brings together filmmakers, students, workers, students, artists, writers, journalists, as well as a wider cross-section of people to interact and form friendships and camaraderie over films and conversations.

The People's Film Collective has stated that while selecting the films, the screening committee had in mind that we are living in a time of increasing rise of home-grown fascists. While people of an entire valley (identify and explain the conditions of the Revocation of Status if you are referring to Kashmir) are caged into silence, entire communities are being othered and threatened to be stripped of their citizenship, as a two-nation theory rears its ugly head once again amidst ghosts of the Partition. Moreover, it felt very relevant for the time of deepening climate crisis, when even the seasons have visibly shifted patterns, causing immense distress to the ecology, agriculture and to the most marginalized sections of our people. At this juncture, the 7th Kolkata People's Film Festival was received as a space for renewed conversations between everyone committed to celebrate people's agency and their putting up cultural and political re-

sistance against the current national and state government.

The 7th Kolkata People's Film Festival showcased a variety of films screened under various sections: *Stories from India: Long Documentary and Short Documentary*, *Stories from Southasia: Documentary*, and *New Indian Fiction: Long Fiction and Short Fiction*. Several films had their Indian Premiere These features included Biju Toppo's *Jharia*, Leesa Gazi's *Rising Silence*, Matjaz Pinter's *Taking on the Storm*, Varun Sharma's *Darroj* or Sakshi Gulati's *Neon*. Several films had their Kolkata Premiere such as Pankaj Rishi Kumar's *Janani's Juliet*, Renu Savant's *Mod Bhaang*, Lalit Vachani's *Recasting Selves*, Naveen Tejaswi's *Bidugade (The Redemption)* or Atanu Mukherjee's *Wig*.

The opening day of the festival was marked by an Opening Keynote Address by Arundhati Roy. Roy commented that “the violence of inclusion and the violence of exclusion are precursors of a convulsion that could alter the foundations of India and rearrange its meaning and its place in the world.” Roy contended on how Islamophobia is normalised, and she expressed concern over the politics of “a tiered citizenship”, where there are a set of rules prescribed to decide what being a citizen is. She complained about the relevance of caste in contemporary Indian life and celebrated the possibilities opened by the popular initiatives and funding of the festival. The inaugural ceremony ended with the release of the seventh volume of the Magazine, *Protidiner Cinema*.

The closing film of the ceremony, *Rising Silence*, a powerful documentary by theatre actor and writer Leesa Gazi on the Birangona women of Bangladesh, drew a stunning response from the silence of the audience, who was moved to tears. It recounted the horrific real-life stories of



nine women who survived the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, Gazi takes a piercing gaze on the aftermath of war, where the women, who were rape camp survivors, were left to rebuild their lives dealing with violence, ostracization and stigma.

The concert of poetry, music and conversation by Amir Aziz and Moushumi Bhounik, aided by Tajdar Junaid, marked the closing ceremony of the festival that translated into a night of hope, memory and poetry. The 7th Kolkata People's Film Festival was uncompromising in its selection of films and documentaries and provided ample space for conversations

and discourses regarding the current political climate. Organized by a crew of volunteers and marketed without any additional table for cutting the biggest names, this edition of the film festival was headlined with the premieres and conversations that felt expansive in its growth and sustained optimism.

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