

In search of the diminished grays!

GAJENDRA AHIRE who made 50 films in 15 years, was felicitated here just yesterday. Wowww.... more than 3 films a year?? Is it just a coincidence that for the Zenith Asia award, the organizers thought of me who could make only 15 films in about 50 years?? Interestingly they also found someone like *KUMAR SHAHANI* the number of whose films are not even in double digits! Talking further about numbers, the festival brochure mentions 3rd December 1950 as my birth date – don't know where did they get it from??? If it's from the social media or Wikipedia, it must be true and I must be wrong, isn't it? In any case, thank you for making me younger by 6 years!

Before I consented to accept this award, my question was 'who is going to give it to me'? I felt relieved to know that they had chosen a comrade who didn't believe in the number game either! He was my director; he offered me a role of an industrialist in *TARANG* along with *Smita Patil*... that was in 1984 when my many films were already silver Jubilee hits! Despite my stardom, I chose to act in that film for "*savva rupaya*" since it was a low budget NFDC film.

I feel privileged to receive the award from the hands of a doyen who was one of the three identified by *Satyajit Ray* as the future of Indian cinema. *KUMAR* knew exactly what kind of cinema he wanted to make! He never compromised on even a small detail. On the very first day of the schedule, he called off our magic hour shooting because he did not like the shade of the suit that was designed for my character by the costume designer, *Bhanu Athaiyya*. There were few film makers who were away from, and out of the rut of making big budget films, or tailoring the films commensurate with the market demands, or assessing the success of the film from the box office collection.

I am proud to be one of those "few" who did not ever accept a film because of the money offered or its box office equations! The structural flow of the script always meant the world to me! The mainstream commercial cinema never attracted me; probably that's why I refused more films in my career than those I accepted. Unfortunately Bollywood is the face of National cinema of India. This perception has destroyed the significance of indigenous cinema in India. I

have been a staunch supporter of regional cinema. So, going against the industry norms, I accepted the offers and acted in *Bengali, Malyalam, Kannada* and of course, *Marathi* films.

I consider myself very fortunate to have dabbled in three different mediums - whether its painting or cinema or theater, I guess I experimented with the 'space' whether its 2 dimensional or 3 dimensional, and explored its visual possibilities. Space and visuals are like a circle and a center of that circle... non-existent without each other. When I shifted from painting to theater, the 3 dimensional space threw infinite possibilities of composition, lay out, lights, movement of live human presence and sound design. Staying away from the conventional verbose theater, I drew meaning of the words through the movement of forms that emerged from the text. Such trials conferred a surreal setting to my plays.

As a film director, the unlimited possibilities thrown at me because of the camera, presented yet another challenge of eliminating the unwanted clutter. I explored a different visual as well as a thematic palette in each of my films. Even in Hollywood films, female characters have always been secondary and superfluous; but almost all my films are female centric! I'm proud that I never depicted my female characters in submissive, docile or stupid roles.

Looking back, I can see that my career path was never defined and linear; however I always knew that I could never conform to the mainstream norms. Whenever I retrospect, I feel that *Camus'* words etch out through my 50 years' career: 'I rebel, therefore I exist'. I am inseparable from being an artist; probably that's my essence of life! I'm grateful to the audience, to all of you, for encouraging the artist in me and showering me with your genuine love and respect. I never spoon fed the audience since I had faith in their intelligence. I have always been sincere with them!

With the same sincerity, today, I am requesting the audience... all of us to be wiser and not believe in the world of black or white duality! I am appealing to all of us to accommodate a gray palette allowing ideological ambiguities, nuanced dissent and fearless dialogue. Creation of gray-friendly tolerance where seeming antithetical ideas will not be summarily thrashed without deeper analysis, is the need of our time!

Once this third spectrum is resurrected,

- it will accommodate people who can criticize *Padmawat* for being incorrect in portraying history while still respecting it as a work of art;
- it will welcome those who will protest against cancelling *T M Krishna's* concerts even if they may not like his idea of singing songs about Jesus and Allah;
- those who can continue to love and respect *Naseer* as a great actor even if they don't share his fear of violence;
- and also those who won't troll *Aamir* for playing *Krishna* in his *Mahabharat* project simply because he is a *Khan*.

As a socially responsible artist, in these times of extreme divisions, I am in search of the diminished grays!

Let's not succumb to the narrative of 'urban naxals'!

Let's agree to disagree!