



onglobalscreens

CINEMAS OF INDIA

FEB 2019 - APR 2019
VOL 2 ISSUE 1 ₹ 200


PSBT
PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING TRUST
nurturing the documentary

Prantik Basu's
RANG MAHAL



69th Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
**Berlinale Shorts
Competition**

Prantik Basu's 'Rang Mahal', his first film for PSBT heads for 2019 Berlinale Shorts Competition

A photograph of Prantik Basu, a man with dark, curly hair and a slight beard, smiling warmly. He is wearing a brown, textured button-down shirt and an orange lanyard around his neck. He is holding a black microphone in his hands. The background is dark with some blurred lights, suggesting a stage or festival setting.

Basu's 26-minute 'Rang Mahal' (Colour Palace) follows the Santhali tribe of India, whose rich oral tradition, until recent years, was the only means of preserving and passing on their stories and myths through generations. The film is perhaps the first in Santhali language to travel to an international festival.

An English Literature graduate, Kolkata-based Prantik Basu studied Direction at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune. His films have screened at festivals such as Rotterdam, Oberhausen, Rome, International Festival of India, and Experimenta India.

The director talks to **Uma da Cunha**
about his penchant for the documentary and short film genre

How did the idea for 'Rang Mahal' germinate?

While making another documentary in Purulia. During its recce, I came across *Khodi Dungri*, a colourful chalk-stone hill, where whole rocks are used by the local Santhali community to make murals and paintings on the walls of their houses. I proposed a short documentary film project on the subject of ecological art to the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT). They were kind enough to commission the project and were very open to the way in which the film shaped up, given that it is not in a conventional documentary format.

What drove you to working in the short film format?

I have always been a spaced out, introverted kid. My father was a Radio Officer for the Merchant Navy, and my mother and I would often accompany him on long trips. At times, we wouldn't see land for months, and there would hardly be anyone of my age to play with. Old VHS movies were my best friends on ships, and my interest in them continued through my school years. I would watch the same films again and again, and obsessively sketch images from them. During my graduation in English Honours, I would often bunk college, and instead spend hours at the nearby Seagull Media Resource Centre, watching rare foreign films from their archives. This is when I started making short films, in 2006, before the DSLR times, when filmmaking was not as accessible as it is today. A few media production houses in Kolkata would rent out camcorders. I freelanced as a scriptwriter for one such house and managed to rent a PD170 for a couple of days. I borrowed 7000 rupees (about US \$100) from my mother, which became the budget for my first short.

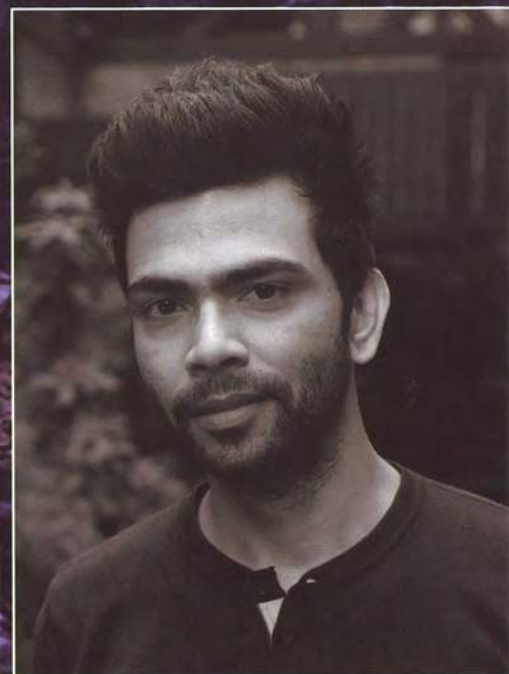
To be honest, I never set out to specialise in making short films. At that point, this was all I could do to express myself. But when I started travelling to festivals, I grew more interested in the format. There are things one can do or say in a short film which are unimaginable in a longer format, somewhat like the difference between a *haiku* and a long poem — both resonate differently.

Your cinematic style veers towards the elliptical, through images, fables, folklore. What makes you think and work this way?

I find viewing films merely as a tool for storytelling quite limiting, especially when they have a fixed narrative trajectory to induce the same emotion in every viewer. I find open ended films more engaging; they treat the viewer with more respect and allow one to participate intellectually instead of being a mute witness to the creators' own fancy.

My work has often been referred to as surreal but I think my films are quite realistic. It all depends on what we perceive as real. On the contrary, I find many popular Indian films to be much more surreal. In particular, folklore interests me for I truly believe that all great stories have already been told in the past. The other day, a very popular 80s Hindi romance called 'Maine Pyar Kiya' was on TV. It has a striking plot resemblance with the great Soviet master Sergei Parajanov's film 'Ashik Kerib' (1988), which is based on an Azerbaijani folk tale. The tone and the intention are completely different, but both films say the same thing with different effects.

"I find open ended films more engaging; they treat the viewer with more respect and allow one to participate intellectually instead of being a mute witness to the creators' own fancy"



Still from 'Rang Mahal'



Your time at FTII — how did it help your desire to be a filmmaker?

Those five years were like another voyage into an ocean of films. Apart from watching rare classics on print at the National Film Archive, we were the lucky ones, who got to work with 16mm and 35mm celluloid, and edit on the old Steinbeck machines. Our course was very practice driven. FTII provided us with an environment almost akin to a hermitage where we were free to evolve in our own ways and develop an individual voice. What's more, I made some great friends there who I continue collaborating with.

Who are the filmmakers you admire from India and abroad?

I admire the works of Sai Paranjpye, Mira Nair and Shekhar Kapur a lot, as well as those of Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul. When the Hubert Bals Fund announced their selection, it was a sheer fanboy moment to see my name alongside his, on the same page. For a moment, I was more elated about this than the actual fund.

"I would often bunk college, and instead spend hours at the nearby Seagull Media Resource Centre, watching rare foreign films from their archives. This is when I started making short films, in 2006, before the DSLR times, when filmmaking was not as accessible as it is today"

How has your journey been over a span of 12 years, presenting six short films which have reached festivals and won prizes?

So far, it has been great. Filmmaking, especially directing, is a rigorous act, not just intellectually, but physically and emotionally as well. It tends to wear you out, so I try to maintain a slow but steady working pace. There is no rush to produce mass work; I would rather create less but work that has a life of its own. The 2017 International Film Festival of Rotterdam's Tiger Award for 'Sakhisona' opened up a lot of funding and other avenues. Last year, my upcoming feature film project, 'Dengue' received the Hubert Bals Fund for Script Development.

There seem to be few opportunities for short filmmakers to make their work known and reach more people. Are times changing for the better because of the internet?

I am not sure yet. Revenues on these platforms depend on views, which depend on popularity, which in turn depends on reach and publicity. So it is a catch 22. What we need more is film education, sensitisation and openness to work of different tones and temporality. Only then will we have a more versatile viewing practice. But these are exciting times to work.

Can you tell us something about your upcoming feature 'Dengue'?

'Dengue' echoes similar concerns that have preoccupied me. But considering it will be a longer film, the form is quite different. It is romance between two men from different socio-economic backgrounds during a sudden summer rain. It is a love story but not in the conventional sense of the term. Along with stronger, empowered female characters in cinema, it is imperative that we create a more sensitive and vulnerable masculine in Indian cinema. Last year, I participated in the Three Rivers Residency where I worked on the script with a mentor. I am currently preparing for a project presentation at the EYE filmmuseum in Amsterdam, before heading to Berlin.

An edited version of this article first appeared on TheCitizen.in

"There is no rush to produce mass work, I would rather create less, if I cannot create work that has a life of its own"



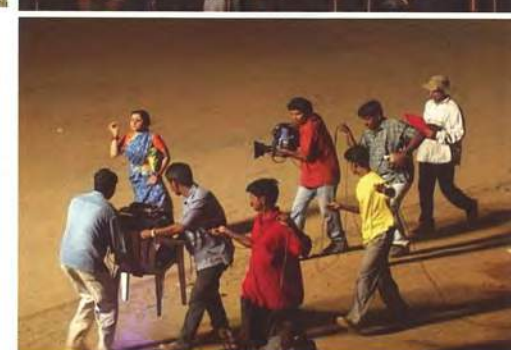
'Rang Mahal'



Not-for-profit PSBT, established in partnership with the national public broadcaster *Prasar Bharati*, works to empower independent filmmakers, democratising access to the media, and encouraging freedom of expression. Founded in 2000 through a tripartite partnership between PSBT, the Ford Foundation and *Prasar Bharati*, it is a significant stakeholder in the independent documentary movement in India, producing over 52 independent documentaries a year. PSBT has been a unique success story in mentoring, funding and empowering the production of independent documentaries, to critical global acclaim.

PSBT's mission is to create and sustain a credible space for storytelling through the moving image, which is independent, participatory, pluralistic and democratic, distanced from commercial imperatives and state/political pressures.

PSBT commissions and mentors films driven by personal passion and social relevance, enlarging the scope of documentary practice and its potential for affecting change. It respects the independence of the independent filmmaker. Occasionally, PSBT works in partnership with not-for-profits to develop films for their non-commercial use, and to strengthen their civil society interventions.



PSBT's Methodology

- Two-thirds of its filmmakers are starting out talents, and half are women
- PSBT invites proposals from all over the country striving to equitably represent the diversity of India
- The mentoring process provides filmmakers with an empowering and congenial context, in which they can explore their ideas and creativity

PSBT's Impact and Recognition

- 305 awards - 1 for every 2.5 films; 1,750 film festival selections - 2 for every film
- 700 independent documentaries commissioned, 500 filmmakers mentored and supported
- 53 National Awards from the President of India for its films
- 32 National Awards (in 31 years) as Director/Producer, to its Managing Trustee, Rajiv Mehrotra
- 70% films by first time/starting out filmmakers; US \$5000 modest grants for half hour films

The PSBT Team

- Managing Trustee/Commissioning Editor - **Rajiv Mehrotra**
- Trustees - **Adoor Gopalakrishnan** (Chairperson)
Shyam Benegal, **Kiran Karnik**, **Fali S. Nariman**, **Sunita Narain**, **Sharmila Tagore**, (Late **Mrinal Sen**)
- Mentors and Evaluators include its Trustees and **Ajit Duara**, **Ayesha Kagal**, **Bina Paul Venugopal**, **Sabeena Gadihoke**, **Shohini Ghosh**, **Sudhir Tandon**, **Suresh Chabria**, **Uma da Cunha**
- Production **Tulika Srivastava**, **Ridhima Mehra**, **Anjali S**

Every September, PSBT organises the annual Open Frame Documentary Film Festival in New Delhi, presenting a sampling of its recent films - an exciting and important line up of new voices, conversations and workshops.



India at the 69th Berlin International Film Festival

February 7 – 17, 2019

The Berlinale lives up to its claim of being “a unique place of artistic exploration and entertainment with its eclectic programming of over 400 films across genres, lengths and formats, including big entertainers and new discoveries alike; and titles across disciplines with space for experimental and art cinema”. With its intensive events, discussions and panels, it is among the world's top five film festivals. It also leads as a conscious support of the female filmmaker. Notably, 63% of credentialed press members at this year's festival come from under-represented groups. Alongside, it is a major destination for film trade and funding with forums such as the European Film Market, Co-Production Market and World Cinema Fund.

India's strong presence at the 2019 Berlinale is marked by a selection of five distinctive films, an exhibition, three archival restorations from the country's first feminist collective, as well as two projects in development. Berlinale's wide selection palate presents the diversity of Indian voices.

Berlinale Shorts Competition

PRANTIK BASU'S **RANG MAHAL** (COLOUR PALACE)



Basu's 'Rang Mahal' follows the Santhali tribe of India, which until recent years did not have its own written language. Their rich oral tradition was the only means of preserving and passing on their stories and myths through generations. Each narration is unique and has a distinctive form, akin to the varied hues of the rocks of a nearby hill. A woman from the community, heard but not seen, narrates a tale on the origin of creation and the building of their first house. The film is produced by the PSBT and screened at its 2018 Open Frame Documentary Film Festival in New Delhi.

English Literature graduate, Prantik Basu, studied Direction at FTII, Pune. His films have screened at leading festivals such as Oberhausen, Rome, International Festival of India, and Experimenta India. Among them, 'Ek, Do' was awarded the Jury Prize at the Mumbai International Film Festival, and his latest short 'Sakhisona', won the Tiger Award for Short Films at the 2017 Rotterdam Festival. Basu's debut feature film 'Dengue' is being developed with support from Rotterdam's Hubert Bals Fund Script and Project Development scheme (more on page 22).