

Open Frame plays on

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September 20,
2019



[A still from Sudha Padmaja Francis' 'Ormajeevika', part of the 2019 Open Frame festival.](#)

3 min read . Updated: 20 Sep 2019, 01:14 PM IST **Uday Bhatia**

- PSBT's annual festival, one of India's top documentary showcases, opened this week in Delhi
- This year's Open Frame lineup is, as usual, eclectic and thought-provoking

No sooner has Sushmit Ghosh and Rintu Thomas' *Kings Of Horror* begun than it lands a jab. We see the censor certificate for the Ramsay brothers' 1984 film *Purana Mandir*, and a title card reads "We are indebted to Mr Pahlaj Nihalani for his invaluable assistance in this project". This joke arrives a little late—Nihalani was replaced as the Central Board of Film Certification chairperson in 2017—but its import is clear: The unapologetically lurid *Purana Mandir* is unlikely to have escaped the censors during his tenure.

This is the sort of fleet-footed cultural criticism that's rare in our fiction films, but which comes easily to documentary. Yet, films like *Kings Of Horror* struggle to reach a fraction of the audiences guaranteed to even the most stultifying fiction film. Non-fiction films are lucky if they get a streaming release (there's a lot more short fiction online) and they almost never land up in theatres. Festival screenings are a lifeline, though even these have dwindled to a handful.

Open Frame, organized by Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT), is one of India's longest-running documentary festivals. The 19th edition, which began on 20 September in Delhi, has 42 films, including new releases and retrospective titles. In one respect it's notably pared-down: Workshops and masterclasses—for which a couple of days are usually set aside—are down to a single session.

This might be because PSBT today finds itself in a delicate position. Established in 2000 in partnership with the Ford Foundation and Prasar Bharati, it has been a vital engine of the documentary scene, awarding grants for non-fiction features and shorts, animation and experimental work. "They are the only ones who invite open calls," says Ghosh, whose 2012 film with Thomas for PSBT, *Timbaktu*, won them a National Award.

PSBT subsists mainly on five-year grants from Prasar Bharati. The previous grant ended last year. Managing trustee Rajiv Malhotra tells us on email that they are "between grants" and "in conversation with Prasar Bharati about a new one". Since last September, the PSBT hasn't commissioned new work—an unprecedented situation, and an ominous one for non-fiction practitioners in the country. Over the phone, documentarian Anjali Monteiro says that PSBT's grants were vital to a non-fiction scene forever in need of funds. "If they aren't backing you," she says, "the only other option is international funding, which comes with its own riders."

This year's Open Frame lineup is, as usual, eclectic and thought-provoking. *Kings Of Horror* is a brief but blissful look at the Ramsay universe. Though they dealt exclusively in schlocky horror, their admirers span the artistic spectrum: Directors Anurag Kashyap, Sriram Raghavan and Ashim Ahluwalia and author Jerry Pinto all offer tributes. A similarly affectionate portrait, albeit of a film career of a very different kind, is on view in *Starring Sharmila Tagore*. Director Umang Sabarwal mixes split screens, collages and archival footage with interviews of the actor and her collaborators. At a breezy 55 minutes, the film reflects the blithe spirit Tagore brought to everything, from *Aranyer Din Ratri* to *An Evening In Paris*.

The most exciting new release at Open Frame this year is Amit Dutta's *Notes On Guler*. Dutta is the country's premier experimental film-maker; apart from a host of festival awards, retrospectives of his work have been shown at the International Short Film Festival, Oberhausen, and Cinéma du Réel, Paris. Here he focuses his gaze on territory he covered partly in his film on the painter Nainsukh, who was from Guler, once a culturally rich principality, now partly submerged by dam waters. Shooting, editing and scoring himself, Dutta examines, in a manner at once wry and engaged, the architecture, painting and literature that Guler once produced.

It says something that Dutta, with all his acclaim, seeks PSBT funding just as first-time directors out of film school do. *Guler* is a typically rich work, but if you want an example of the kind of film that the PSBT (and almost no one else) makes possible on a regular basis, seek out Sudha Padmaja Francis' *Ormajeevikal (Memory Beings)*. It's a simple idea,

exploring the attachment to old music of the residents of Kozhikode, Kerala. Much of the 26-minute film is just people sitting around listening to scratchy records. Yet it's captivating, a warm light shone on something specific.

Open Frame is on till 24 September at India International Centre, Delhi. Visit Psbt.org for programme details.