

National awards rain on PSBT



Merajur Rahman Baruah's *Shifting Prophecy*

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THE Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) is a bit of a miracle. In an era where mainstream broadcast outlets hold sway, the organisation has taken less than a decade to emerge as an influential player on the Indian independent documentary filmmaking scene. It has created an effective and viable alternative platform to promote diversity of modes of expressions, highlight the concerns of a complex nation and empower independent documentary makers, especially those that are young.

Indeed, PSBT's relevance in the current scenario cannot be overestimated. In recent years, the Indian media industry has developed in leaps and bounds and its commercial returns have multiplied dramatically. But in the mad scramble for eyeballs and profits, the stories of real people that are crying out to be told have dropped out of the frame. PSBT has done much to rectify the situation thanks to the weekly slot that it has for its films on Doordarshan. So every year, it delivers 52 socially and politically relevant films to the national broadcaster.

Veteran filmmaker and Dadasaheb Phalke Award

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reflect both the diversity and the nature of the films that PSBT backs.

"Our aim," says PSBT managing trustee Rajiv Mehrotra, "is to cast the net as wide as possible and expand the pool of Indian documentary filmmakers." Risk-taking is something that he and his team encourage. "We let young filmmakers push the boundaries," he says. "The result might often be less than satisfactory, but we do not mind that at all. We always tell filmmakers to go ahead and try out new things without being afraid of failure."

But when a PSBT-backed documentary project does achieve success, it represents acknowledgment as much for the spirit of independence as for the parameters of excellence that the organisation actively pursues.

Poomaram, made by Kozhikode-based Vipin Vijay, who learnt the ropes at the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, Kolkata, is a perfect case in point. Inspired by Judy Grahn's *Metaformic Theory* as espoused in *Blood, Bread and Roses: How*

winner Shyam Benegal, a member of the PSBT board of trustees, had said a few years ago: "PSBT in less than five years achieved for the documentary film in India what other organisations have not been able to do in fifty." He wasn't exaggerating.

The slew of national and international awards and accolades that PSBT has won over the years bears testimony to its rapidly growing impact. As many as four PSBT films, each conceptually and stylistically distinct from the other three, have made it to the winners' list of the latest National Awards. PSBT's highest point came when at the National Film Awards for 2003 it walked away with half a dozen prizes.

PSBT is the result of a unique partnership between a private initiative and the state-controlled national broadcaster. Its board of trustees, apart from Benegal, includes two other Dadasaheb Phalke Award winners – Mrinal Sen and Adoor Gopalakrishnan.

In Adoor's words, "PSBT is the realisation of a bold and imaginative promise to the people of India... a promise from the community of image

Menstruation Created the World, the film explores the link between menstrual rituals and human culture. The National Awards jury lauded *Poomaram* "for its creative use of visual craft".

The winner of this year's National Award for Best Film on Social Issues, *Shifting Prophecy*, focuses on the struggle of rural Muslim women in Tamil Nadu to break free from patriarchal and religious shackles. The Best Film on Family Welfare, *Making the Face*, takes viewers to another end of the country. The film, which is, according to the jury's citation, "a multi-layered exploration of the issue of alternative sexuality in the politically troubled state of Manipur", narrates the story of a transsexual makeup artist.

Ayodhya Gatha, winner of the best narration/voiceover National Award for the director Vani Subramanian herself, probes the minds of common people in the Uttar Pradesh town where Indian politics took a tumble over a decade and a half ago when Hindu fundamentalists demolished the Babri Masjid. The battle of the bigots left a trail of bitterness that Ayodhya is still struggling to come



Vani Subramanian's *Ayodhya Gatha*



Vipin Vijay's *A Flowering Tree*

makers to the public, to create content that reflects the wealth of experiences, traditions and cultures that we are heir to..."

In eight years, the trust has lived up to its promise, having commissioned upwards of 400 films, of which 360 are already in circulation. Through the national broadcaster, its films reach 600 million viewers. That apart, these films have travelled to more than 350 major film festivals, winning over 70 awards.

But much more than the numbers, what sets PSBT apart is the sheer range of themes and concerns that the films in its steadily expanding catalogue addresses. More than 300 of PSBT's films are now in the US Library of Congress, which distributes them internationally.

The four National Award-winning PSBT films of the year – Vipin Vijay's *Poomaram* (A Flowering Tree), Merajur Rahman Baruah's *Shifting Prophecy*, Suvendu Chatterjee and Joshy Joseph's *Making the Face* and Vani Subramanian's *Ayodhya Gatha* –

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to terms with and Subramanian treads through this landscape with deep understanding and sensitivity, a hallmark of all the better PSBT films.

The catalogue of PSBT reality and documentary films is an eclectic mix of themes, visions, forms and regional perceptions. While it has established names like the Manipuri veteran Aribam Syam Sharma, Oriya auteur and film academic Nirad Mohapatra, and multiple Green Oscar-winning conservation and wildlife filmmaker Mike Pandey, besides a host of leading Indian documentary makers like Reena Mohan, Madhushree Dutta, Ranjan Palit, Arvind Sinha and Vasudha Joshi, its library is dominated by younger, lesser-known filmmakers.

It is pretty obvious that PSBT is not so much about the high-profile personalities that it has on board as about the difference that it is beginning to make in the sphere of Indian documentary filmmaking. It has to a great extent reclaimed access to the medium for its rightful owner – the public. There might be a long way to go yet, but the movement from here on can only be forward.