

Making Our Films: Re-inventing Entertainment

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At present there is hardly an audience for Fiji's filmmakers. Their situation is very similar to what was for Fiji's writers in the 1970s; they wrote with the hope of an audience. They simply had to persist in their craft, write their short stories, poems, plays and eventually their novels, optimistic that one day there will be a readership. Gradually the new literature that was evolving found a scattered audience mainly in the university campuses in Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii. Now there is a small local as well as a slightly more expanded international audience for Fijian literature. In the meantime the number of writers have grown, more avenues for publication have appeared, the writers are receiving feedback from reviewers, literary critics and dissertation writers. The filmmakers have much to learn from the experience of writers.

The writers wrote because that is what they wanted to do. Much of what they wrote can be classified as serious literature. A popular literature (romantic and crime stories) is yet to appear. The filmmakers, on the other hand, started with crime and romance. Nonetheless they have the same passion as the writers. The significant difference is writing is a more solitary art; the filmmaker must have a team. Because of limited opportunities for team effort, they find themselves writing the script, directing, editing, producing and acting in their own films. There are a surprising number of Fijians who have made films in this way: Michael Chinappa, Satish Rai, Vishwa Naidu, Anil Mani, Vimal Reddy, Larry Thomas, Vilsoni Hereniko, Anurag Subramani and Mohit Prasad. Fortunately the new technologies favour the lone filmmaker. Although the body of work is still small, their effort deserves critical attention to help them move forward, and discover the kind of film they can or should make to give their films a local identity. There is space in this article to review only three filmmakers. I hope this review will prompt more close analysis of film texts because without dialogue a film culture will not take root in Fiji.

Good cinema as a rule doesn't require introduction; it certainly in-

vites interpretation. However when I was asked to introduce Satish Rai's new film *Ek Pal; The Unforgettable Moment* at its premier at Casula Powerhouse, Liverpool, New South Wales in 2009, I readily agreed for two reasons: first, I admire Rai's audacity and persistence in face of public indifference; I wanted to draw attention to him as a filmmaker; moreover, I thought it would be a good opportunity to highlight what an artist like him represents in the Indo-Fijian diaspora.

Although Rai has made seven documentaries and three feature films--that's quite a substantial output by any standard--there isn't a single review article or essay on his films. I want him to be taken seriously as an artist, and there are sufficient moral and aesthetic issues generated by his films for an extended commentary. I hope that this brief exegesis fills that vacuum for the moment.

The first film of Rai's that I ever saw was his documentary *Once Were Farmers* based on uprooted families from the agricultural lands in Fiji. I knew immediately he was not only a competent filmmaker but also someone driven by social purpose. Although the documentary was overburdened with commentary and interviews, what struck me were the many faces of despair that he had managed to capture. They told the story more poignantly than any number of words. In my mind, that is what sets



Rai & Chandni Perera in *Ek Pal*...

him apart from other Indo-Fijians who have tried to make films: his passion and his film sense. And one more quality—his persistence: he continues to make films in spite of many setbacks. When he is not making films, he is engaged in doing television programs, writing his dissertation and seeking funds for new projects. He has immersed himself in film culture more than any other filmmaker.

Satish Rai's film *Ek Pal* is a basic text on how to make a satisfactory film with limited resources. In terms of finance, the troupe that played in the movie contributed towards making the film. It was just as much a labour of love for the actors as it was for the director of the film. Rai's players were carried forward by filmmaking excitement like I had noticed in Kerala (India) in late nineties, where making movies to me felt like a cottage industry. As for the selection of cast, it seems from the film that just one look and the director had found his perfect cast. The subject of love triangle—the spouses plus a lover—already a film cliché, can become fatuous (there is so much of it in Indian cinema with only occasional strong films like *Ye Raste Hain Pyar Ke* (1963) or *Arth* (1982) without depth of characterization or deft filmmaking. Somehow the actors in Rai's film are able to convey sincerity almost effortlessly.

There is certainly intensity in Chandi Perera's Kajal which comes partly from her forlorn sensuality in the important frames. But she has enough savvy as an actress not to depend solely on her physical charm to convey the character of the erring wife; she has range in her performance and that is why when she sobs or weeps the audience's heart goes out for her. But she isn't allowed to walk off with the film. That is because there are others who have given compelling performance in the film as well. None of the actors let you down. They all play utterly believable characters and work basically through instinct. The amateur, part-time actors Rai employs do not have the opportunity to live their character for too long. They have to bring their own personal idiosyncrasies and add a little of what is required in the respective roles. For instance, Harish Prasad as the solicitor Kishore Bajpaye is mostly himself—articulate, curt, legalistic—but he adds, consciously or unconsciously, a tinge of cynicism that works well in giving another dimension to his character. Similarly Anup Kumar: he can walk into a role without much fuss at any time. I have seen his workmanlike approach to a given role in other films by Rai. In this film, as the good-hearted friend-in-need he is a trifle too idealized. Sure there is change from his admonishing look to a more understanding expression in relation to Kajal but that is not enough; he has to be ruffled a little more to be humanized. When characters are humanized, shown in

their strength and flaws, the scenes become more energized. Anup Kumar is a steady friend in the film just as he is a steady performer.

Satish Rai is fortunate in having all these talents around him. Take for example Anjula Ram: she makes a couple of brief appearances, she and her dog, and as Rani she communicates her quiet antagonism towards Kajal without requiring an extended script. She compels the audience to take note of her performance without over-dramatizing her role.

The film has its share of problematic characters. Is there no justice for Rajeev, the lover in the film, played by Vijay Jogia? Does he deserve to be a loser? He calls his impulsive moment with Kajal a mistake (they both do). But we don't believe him, and we are right because he later confesses he was in love with Kajal long before she was married. That adds a different slant to his character. Is he now the unacknowledged tragic hero of this cautionary tale? Jogia wears a melancholic expression, too much under the spell of Kajal; he remains part of the unresolved, loose end of the film. He has the potential to be turned into the hero of a tale of unrequited love.

A character who requires to be written in more in the script is Razia Sultan. In a film with limited number of characters there is opportunity for all of them to come alive as human beings. As Dr Shabnam she walks in and out like the proverbial postman in Hindi films. She begins unsteadily and grows in confidence, one might say over-confidence, when she begins to give her own brand of professional advice on how Kajal should be managed after her attempted suicide. This doesn't help as the suicide scene already borders on melodrama. The film ought to include a disclaimer on medical and legal procedures!

A film with a sombre subject like this one must have enough comic turns to keep the audience buoyant. Rai is aware of this, and thus introduced the drunken scene. Shafqat Nizami is one character in the film that can produce humorous moments. His Mahesh is created to carry the subplot with its parallel story of betrayal. Nizami's Mahesh has a self-mocking side that a wittier script could have exploited. In the drunken scene we're on the edge of laughter, but the laughter dies too quickly. Nizami is also given that 'I'll throw you out' line that evokes a few laughs but there isn't enough comic energy to make the film sparkle.

Harish Prasad's solicitor character is given the attitudinizing lines that express the film's social purpose; the solicitor says on the plight of the tramp, 'Well, he may be another victim of us living in a new country. I see these kinds of people everyday in my work. Domestic violence, drug abuse, etc.' This remark is supposed to function as an underlayer; unfortunately the rest of the film doesn't connect with that idea. What happens

to the couple in the film isn't really an outcome of 'living in a new country'. Unless we are to assume that a little bit of promiscuity is unavoidable to living in the diaspora. The theme that is announced through Harish Prasad's solicitor character doesn't find proper base in the unfolding social drama

The wonderful thing about this film is that the crosscurrents mentioned here generate sufficient moral and aesthetic tensions for serious deliberation. Sometimes a film with flaws is more useful for this purpose than a well-engineered, mechanically perfect cinema. And Rai had the courage to arrange a short symposium after the screening of the film to solicit comments. It showed he is genuinely interested in evolving as a filmmaker; that makes a review like this worthwhile, indeed necessary.

The final scene of the film acts like an epilogue, a set piece after the main thrust of the story is over. Filmmakers sometimes use this device to introduce one more twist to the finished story. The director obviously wants to avoid a conventional ending and give the film an original aesthetic design. The scene evokes a mixed reaction. After their reunion, three months later, Kishan is sitting on a bench in a park, and Kajal winds her way to him. There is a leisurely pace here to create a sense of anticipation. We know this is a disclosure scene. My friend next to me whispers in my ear, 'She's pregnant'. No, Kajal isn't pregnant; she's just won a role in a film. We're led to ask, how important is that to the film's overall purpose? Obviously Kishan's joy and support for his wife shows he has started to trust her again. Perhaps my friend was right: Kajal ought to have been pregnant. With a bit of editorializing of the time scheme of the film, Kajal's pregnancy would have started another round of doubt and recrimination. That kind of final scene greatly suits the temperament of contemporary audience that prefers more open-endedness or a telling twist in the tale.

Unlike writing fiction, filmmaking is team work. There must be creative support from co-workers as well as financial backing from the community. Satish Rai has too many things to negotiate to give total attention to his craft. He is not only the film's director but also the main camera man, and the main protagonist; he even wrote the lyrics, and one of them turns out to be the most original items in the film-- the song *Sawariya hum ho gaye barbad* rendered soulfully by Shelly Mishra. We know Rai is the key inspiration behind the film; without him there will be no film. However when a filmmaker takes on so much, many things can go wrong. Instead of experimenting with an appropriate visual language for his film (trying out some of the modernist techniques like dissolve, split

screen, slow motion, freeze frame, montage—there are possibilities for these in various situations in the film), his attention is drawn to other matters. Rai's performance as an actor is also uneven; he is least convincing in the tramp's role—he looks too slick and well-fed to be credible as someone who lives off the street. In the tramp's role he is playing against his grain. Later when he is convalescing, and is shown coming out of a room, he is very much a man who has returned from the edge.

It is as a filmmaker that Satish Rai can lay claim as an evolving artist. He maintains a careful control of the narrative, and allows it to move at a measured pace showing good sense of proportion and design. Perhaps he should have allowed the camera to linger a little more to create breathing spaces and to incorporate a little bit of lyricism—Sydney is such an attractive city with exhilarating sights to make films. The sense of place is necessary to give anchorage to a film. *Ek Pal* is a significant achievement nonetheless: out of meagre resources Rai made a watchable film.

At the end of it all, one is led to ask what could Satish Rai possibly gain from these projects? There is no commercial benefit, and his community will give praise only grudgingly. Perhaps he keeps going because he has a dogged nature. Whatever it is, we're grateful he is there making his films. What he stands for in his community is something immensely valuable: he represents an alternative set of values to the common pursuit of material success. Filmmaking as an art is always on the side of beauty, truth, love and fraternity. We need artists like him in our migrant communities to remind us of the nobler values of life. But we also want our artists to be materially well-off so that they can go doing their work. Satish Rai has done the necessary apprenticeship work; he is ready for an important break. He has to go on searching for that larger emotion, and discover a cinematic language to express it in, so that he can win that place as a recognized filmmaker of the South Pacific.

Sydney-based Anil Mani was in the country in 2010 with his film *Jodi* shot at various locations in Fiji with local actors. The Fiji National University organized the film's premier at its Lautoka Campus. The film ought to have generated useful discussion on local filmmaking. It did not. This topic of entertainment industry has been raised in the media, even by the government, from time to time over the years; however no concrete development has really taken place. We have heard it being said often enough that Fiji has all the potential for a vibrant film industry: everyone in Fiji is interested in movies, the climate is perfect for outdoor filming with enchanting locations, and Fiji's multi-ethnic cultures provide all the conflicts and tensions for drama. And there is an abundance of talent, and

technical know-how is also there, as evident from Anil Mani's film, and other films made by Fiji people. A film industry is a potential growth area and can provide employment to hundreds of citizens as filmmakers, actors, musicians, technicians, script writers.

In the last couple of years fresh interest in filmmaking has been prompted by visits of cast and crew from the US and India, even China. Both Americans and Indians have been turning to Fiji for exotic location and also for the tax rebate amounting to 47% (those who really need financial help are the struggling local filmmakers). The so-called 'movie boom' which produced insipid Bollywood flicks like *Table No21*, *Warning* and *3G' A Killer Connection* will not really help Fiji's film industry; colourful locations don't help us to find real Fiji or discover local creative potential. A truly Fijian film industry will come into being when we start to make films that depict real Fiji and exploit our local creative talents. Filmmaking, like writing, must emerge from inside.

Meanwhile certain concrete developments have taken place with the establishment of a film studies program at the Fiji National University and the appointment of experienced technicians from the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune. There is now a Chair in film making as well. All this is basic groundwork that is necessary to lend support to local talent. The fact that academics at Fiji's universities are trying their hands at filmmaking is likely to infuse thought and intelligence into filmmaking. However, so far, the important impetus in filmmaking has come from the Fijian diaspora.

Anil Mani ought to be lauded for the sustained effort of making a reasonable movie. It's obvious, like many of us he is hooked. This is the sort of passion that led to Michael Chinappa making his film (*Kalank*) in the early 1970's. The credits show that, like Satish Rai, Anil Mani has been behind all aspects of making the film—producing, directing, script writing, and acting. Most filmmakers find themselves in similar situation. Of course it is something that they must avoid in the future so that there is greater infusion of talent and expertise, and more attention is given to details of filmmaking. Because the energy of the filmmaker is dissipated, *Jodi* suffers from numerous flaws: the sound jars at the beginning (gains in quality later), the characters speak a Hindi no one speaks in Fiji, there is a major editing problem (the protagonist's search for his girl friend becomes a little tedious, and the night shots don't help), the hero Arjun is a Bollywood warrior who kills and maims most of the cast, and the use of song to enhance romance, in Bollywood fashion, is also out of place. The bland script, without wit or humour, adds to the tedium. Such passion for

filmmaking, and deployment of difficult-to-find resource for this purpose, in the end, achieve so little.

No doubt Anil Mani has worthy intentions—the film wants us to 'say no to drugs'—but even here the drug mafia shown misrepresents how drugs are actually trafficked in Fiji. (The film would have gained by showing iTaukeis in the drug business). We have the feeling that Anil Mani has got the wrong person in the girl taking drugs. Besides the educational objective, however laudable, has to be presented unobtrusively; it cannot be thrust upon the audience blatantly. The most serious flaw comes down to the fact that the film is not properly anchored in a socio-economic context; the hero has a large wardrobe and lives in a luxury apartment—to what does he owe his livelihood? Does he have an existence beyond his search for the girl? The audience doesn't care about the hero, or his girlfriend who is missing, partly because of lack of attention to such details. What adds to this lack of audience identification is that though the film uses attractive locations, the story floats in a no-man's-land, and we are never seriously engaged in the problems of the characters. There is a whodunnit plot, but does it really matter who killed the hero's jodi? The title of the film itself sits uneasily, as 'jodi' in Fiji means buddy, referring mostly to juvenile male companionship.



Anil Mani and Bhavana Kumar in *Jodi*

Filmmakers like Anil Mani will benefit from lessons in dramaturgy, reading commentaries on films and having conversations with and critics like Sudesh Mishra who has written on Hindi films, or Mohit Prasad who has actually made a movie using local history. To make ‘our film’ the subject has to be selected discriminatingly. There is nothing wrong with a crime story; Fiji has numerous unsolved crimes for a genuine thriller awaiting a filmmaker with nerve to tackle it. Here Anil Mani simply turns to Bombay-made disposable formula story. Although Fiji hasn’t made any serious contribution to world’s cinema, it has given to Indian cinema a ground-breaking book on the subject—Vijay Mishra’s classic work on Indian cinema, *Bollywood Cinema: Temple of Desire* (2002) has become a useful reference book. It is the sort of exchange that is being suggested here that allowed small filmmakers in Bengal and Kerala to re-imagine entertainment. The filmmaker in Fiji doesn’t have to work in the dark.

Vijay Mishra’s book is essentially about a Fijian’s response to Hindi cinema. But the most creative cinema made in India did not come from Mumbai; it emerged from West Bengal and Kerala as a result of a group of film lovers, intellectuals, artists getting together, seeing intelligent films, talking about them and then trying to make their own films. Fiji’s filmmakers can derive a lot of inspiration from them. The first thing to learn is that big budget is not essential to making great films. It is a well known story how Satyajit Ray made his first film out of a shoestring budget and became world famous. In Kerala they make Malayalam movies for their own community. That films by Adoor Gopalkrishna and Shaji N. Karun went on to bring a lot of fame to Indian cinema highlights the fact that good cinema will find its own route to success. Most of our filmmakers, including Anil Mani have tried, consciously or unconsciously, to emulate Hindi commercial cinema; they could never hope to achieve the gloss on which it depends for its success. When our first filmmaker, Michael Chinappa, used the Bollywood style of song and dance routine in his story, it was acceptable because he was the first, and his *Kalank* was made long time ago now, in 1976. The new filmmakers have to move on and find a style or an idiom of movie making that is our own. The films of Larry Thomas and Vilsoni Hereniko are bold experiments in this direction. Their work requires another essay.

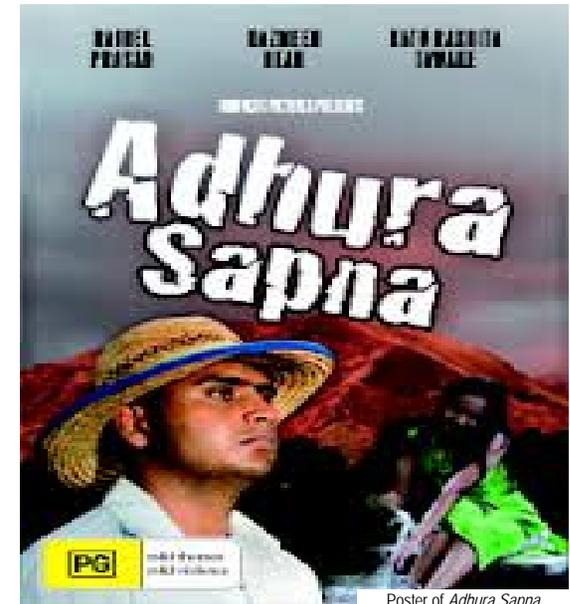
Anil Mani has been given serious attention here, and we should see his film essentially because he had the daring to fulfil his life-long dream of making a movie, and in doing so he has become a part of the evolving tradition of filmmaking in Fiji.

Unlike Satish Rai who used the overworked love triangle as his plot,

and Anil Mani the exhausted form of crime and detection, Vimal Reddy found a well-thought-out, original plot in Raymond Pillai’s *Adhuraa Sapna* (the author began writing the play in 1977, published in 2001). Thus Reddy begins with an edge over Fiji’s other filmmakers in turning to literary material for his film. In world cinema, Satyajit Ray sought details of plot in Rabindranath Tagore and Bibhutibhusan Bondopadyay novels, writers he admired and had affinities with. Similarly, Akira Kurosawa turned to Akutagawa’s fiction (1915) for *Rashomon* (1950). There is clear advantage in employing plots from literature, and there is also the great challenge of transforming words into images. Fiji’s literature provides a sure way for filmmakers to make ‘our films’.

For admirers of Raymond Pillai’s writing, Vimal Reddy’s film is a serious letdown. Since the film borrows the title from Pillai’s play, we would expect him to be loyal to the writer’s language and plot structure. Of course he is free to interpret and allow the filmic mode to take over the material. That does not happen in this film. Within seconds of the opening scene the film’s tone falters. Not only is the conversation between the father and son stilted in language, the land issue and girit experience they talk about obtrusively is also poorly romanticized. These are huge topics, too important to be handled ineptly.

Vimal Reddy however is more at home in the grog drinking and talanoa sessions in the film. The humour evolves effortlessly both through characterization and dialogue. Without these scenes, the film would have amounted to very little. Ratu Rakuita Tawake and Parvati Reddy bring not only spontaneity, wit and humour but also, importantly, realism to the film. Neither of them has



to try too hard to perform; their characters come alive effortlessly. This is shrewd casting on the part of the director. Mrs Parvati Reddy is the more restrained of the two. Ratu Rakuira Tawake knows he is putting up a splendid show and is ready for an encore. The director needed to hold him back a little. Because he is so dominant in the scenes, the others in the talanoa session remain mere shadowy figures; they needed to evolve a little more for the scenes to have greater impact.

One of the characters in the background in the talanoa sessions could have easily been a more convincing Sambhu than Rajnel Prasad. Prasad is chosen mostly because the director needs someone with hero-potential looks. Sambhu is meant to be a worried man, and Rajnel broods through most of the film. But he is not Pillai's Sambhu. Nor is Tania Naazmeen Dean the author's Minla. She is in the film mostly for her flushed good looks. She delivers her lines in a laidback fashion as if she is on the casting couches rather than performing a role on the sets. Rajnel would be a perfect village schoolmaster and Tania his wife. They're not farmers.

Amongst the disconcerting parts are where the film tastelessly exploits Tania's bodily assets in the water scene, and in the romantic interlude in Suva where the genre shifts from social realism to masala kitsch, a bit like the Hindi filmmakers who set out to make a serious artistic film, suddenly wakes up to the reality of the box office, and make clumsy, artless compromises to popular taste. The Suva scenes appear like crude photo sessions for the tourist bureau.

To wean away an audience that has insatiable need for extravaganza, to alter its taste, requires extraordinary skills and imagination. Fortunately Vimal Reddy has no box office to worry about. This is his freedom. To be creative in that freedom he has to think out of the box and not succumb to conventions of prototype commercial Hindi cinema. In the context of our discussion, Vimal Reddy comes closest to making, what we have called 'our film'. His film has multi-ethnic cast, distinctly Fijian humour, strong literary base, and local language; with intelligent rewriting and editing out of influences of Bombay cinema and the ungainly parts, he would be on his way towards inventing a different kind of film. In the end, Vimal Reddy's *Adhura Sapna* is just what the name suggests, an unrealized dream. It is an earnest but failed attempt to bring to life the work of Fiji's most cherished writer.

Any Fijian filmmaker following recent developments in Hindi cinema will be genuinely excited to see the calibre of films being made by young first-time artists. This development is bit like the emergence of parallel or alternative cinema during 1950's-80's. While in this phase there were on-

ly a handful of auteurs and a select group of artists who performed in these films; now there are so many new directors and players and they are boldly trying out new subjects and, in my opinion, re-defining entertainment in Indian cinema. It is a development worth following.