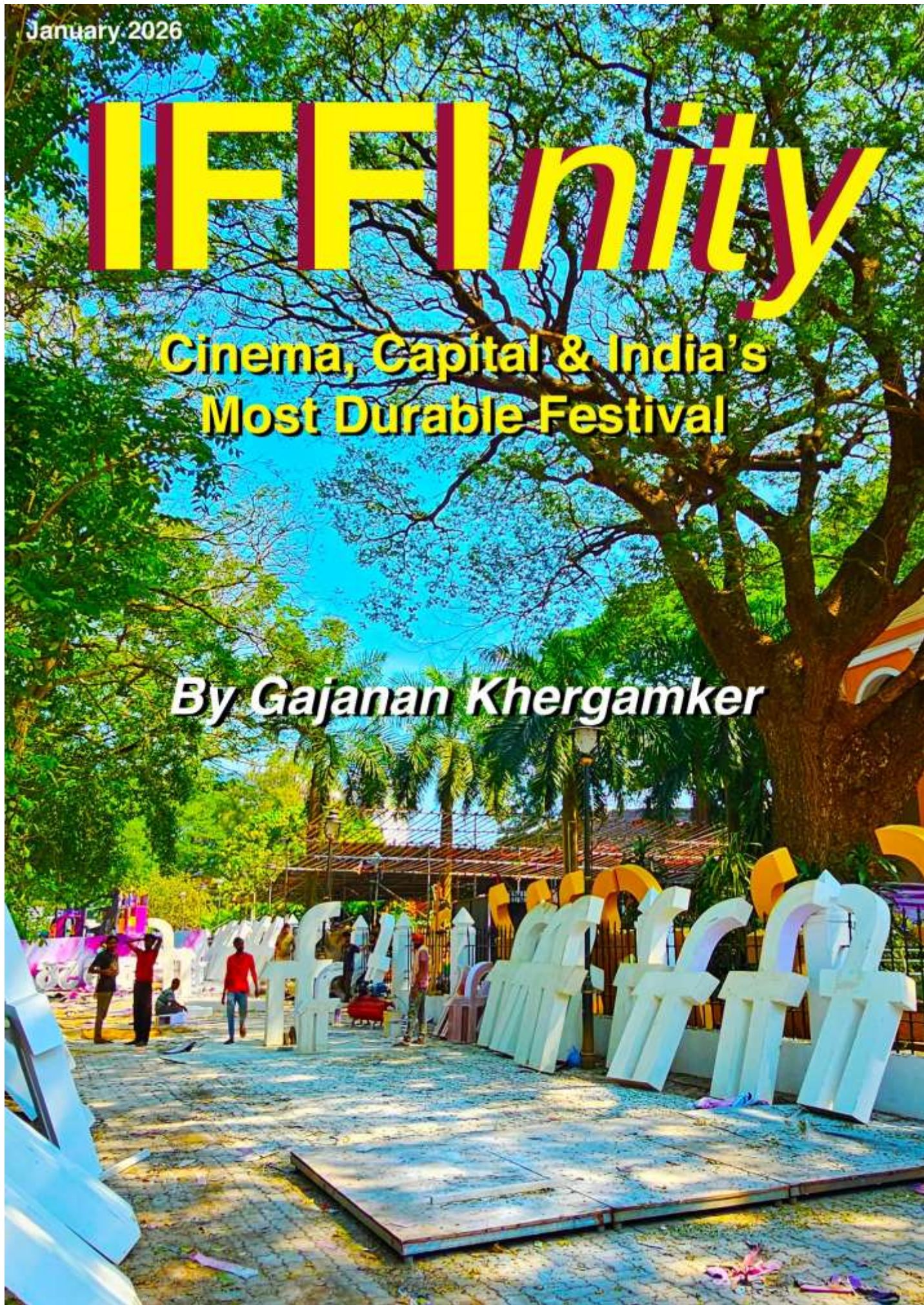


January 2026

IFFI *nity*

**Cinema, Capital & India's
Most Durable Festival**

By Gajanan Khergamker



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FOREWORD

THE FESTIVAL THAT REFUSED TO STAY STILL

There is a particular kind of institution that outlives every argument made against it. Not because the arguments are wrong, but because the institution proves, through the sheer stubbornness of its continued existence, that the need it serves is larger than the imperfections of its administration. The International Film Festival of India is that kind of institution.

IFFI has survived ideological pendulum swings, bureaucratic inertia, the economic convulsion of liberalisation, the technological disruption of the digital revolution, the displacement of celluloid by streaming, and the annual argument about whether Goa is the right city to host it.

It has survived the departure of its most famous awardees to more commercially lucrative festivals abroad, the long decades during which it refused the market and the shorter, sharper decades during which the market refused to wait. It has survived governance reviews, committee restructurings, directorial changes, and the persistent editorial suspicion of international film critics who have spent thirty years expecting it to disappear.

It has not disappeared. It has, in its 56th edition in November 2025, arrived at something more interesting than mere survival. It has arrived at relevance.

This book is an account of that journey. Institutions that receive only praise become complacent, and IFFI's history contains enough episodes of institutional complacency to sustain several chapters of honest examination. What this book attempts is a reckoning: with what IFFI was designed to do, what it failed to do, what it stumbled into doing, and what it has, after seven decades, finally understood about its own purpose.

Cinema, in over seventy years since the start of IFFI, has changed more than any other art form. The equipment that makes it has changed. The economics that sustains it have changed. The platforms that distribute it have changed. The audiences that receive it have changed. IFFI's evolution, tracked against these transformations, is less a story of institutional triumph than of persistent adaptation, pursued sometimes with grace and more often with the grinding reluctance of a system that knows change is necessary before it knows how to manage it.

What has not changed, across seventy plus years and 56 editions and the full arc from Bombay in 1952 to Goa in 2025, is the fundamental premise: that cinema matters, that its international circulation matters, and that India's place in that circulation is not incidental to its standing in the world. That premise has proved more durable than every administrative arrangement constructed around it.

The festival began as diplomacy. It became a sanctuary. It became a bureaucratic institution. It became, briefly, an embarrassment. And it has become, at last, a platform. Each of these transformations is examined in the chapters that follow, with the data, the context, and the critical appraisal the record demands.

IFFI today is not the festival India imagined in 1952. It is something more complicated, more commercially honest, and more strategically significant than the republic's founders, curating films as cultural emissaries in the first years of Independence, could have anticipated. The journey from there to here is the story this book tells.



GAJANAN KHERGAMKER
Editor-in-Chief, The Draft

CHAPTER ONE

1952 TO 1969: WHEN THE REPUBLIC DISCOVERED CINEMA AS DIPLOMACY

The International Film Festival of India did not begin as a festival in the modern sense of the word. It began as an idea shaped by the anxieties and ambitions of a young republic, still learning how to speak to the world in its own voice. When the first edition was mounted in 1952, India was barely five years removed from Independence. The scars of Partition were raw, the Constitution newly operational, and the country was engaged in the serious business of defining itself beyond the vocabulary of colonial inheritance. Cinema, in that moment, was not regarded as leisure. It was regarded as language.

The decision to curate and present international films alongside Indian works was not accidental. It was a deliberate act of positioning. India wished to be seen as culturally literate, artistically discerning, and capable of hosting a conversation that went beyond commerce. The festival was less about competition and more about communion. Films arrived not as commodities but as emissaries, carrying the intellectual climates of their nations in their frames and their silences.



Image for representational purpose only

This was a period when the Indian state still believed, with a certain earnestness that the decades ahead would complicate, that culture could be stewarded. Ministries mattered. Committees deliberated. Selection was an act of policy as much as taste. IFFI, in its earliest avatar, functioned almost like a cultural extension of the Ministry of External Affairs, even when housed elsewhere administratively. The political logic

was transparent and unselfconscious: a new democracy announcing itself to the world through the medium of the world's most democratic art form.

The early editions travelled. Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and Delhi shared the screenings in rotation, the festival's itinerant nature reflecting a belief that cinema, like democracy, should circulate rather than concentrate. Audiences in each city encountered Italian neorealism, Soviet cinema, Japanese masters and European modernists, often for the first time in their lives. Roberto Rossellini's postwar trilogy, Akira Kurosawa's feudal epics, the spare moral investigations of Ingmar Bergman arrived in Indian screening halls and quietly shaped an entire generation of Indian filmmakers and critics, even when the influence was not immediately visible on domestic screens.

Indian cinema, at the time, was itself negotiating identity. Popular Hindi cinema was consolidating the grammar that would define it for generations, while regional industries were asserting linguistic confidence with the particular vigour of languages that had waited long enough to be heard. Parallel to this ran a quieter movement of filmmakers who treated cinema as serious art rather than spectacle. The festival became their validation chamber, the space where seriousness was confirmed rather than apologised for.

Satyajit Ray's emergence was the period's most consequential cultural event, and IFFI's relationship with his trajectory illustrates precisely what the early festival was designed to do. Pather Panchali, completed in 1955 after years of interrupted production funded partly by the West Bengal government, won a special jury prize at Cannes in 1956. Ray's international reception fed back into how India saw itself, confirming that Indian cinema could converse with the world without explanation or apology. He was not simply a Bengali auteur. He was proof that the republic's cultural ambitions were not delusion.



Satyajit Ray was not simply a Bengali auteur ... but proof that India's ambitions were not delusion

The Golden Peacock, instituted as IFFI's principal award, was less a prize in those years than a gesture of institutional intent. Recognition mattered, but competitive rivalry did not define the event. The absence of aggressive commercial competition allowed films to be approached as texts rather than products. Critics wrote with patience. Viewers watched without the distraction of deal-making. The festival assumed, with a confidence that the decades ahead would test, that cinema deserved time.

What the festival achieved in these formative years was foundational in ways that only become visible in retrospect. It taught India's emerging film culture to see cinema as more than entertainment. It framed film as a carrier of ideas, values and aesthetics whose value exceeded box office numbers. It allowed Indian filmmakers to measure themselves against international work without the mediating pressure of commercial comparison. And it established, in the consciousness of the republic's cultural policymakers, the principle that international cinema was a legitimate object of government attention and public investment.

What it did not anticipate was the velocity of change. The assumptions underlying the early editions rested on a stability that the world was already beginning to dismantle. The assumption that the state would remain the primary cultural patron. The assumption that cinema would move slowly enough for bureaucratic oversight to keep pace. The assumption that audiences would gather collectively, in properly managed halls, to watch films unfold at the measured pace that artistic seriousness demanded. These assumptions held for a time. They would not hold for long.

The republic had discovered cinema as diplomacy. It had not yet encountered cinema as industry. That reckoning would come, quietly at first and then with the force of an economic transformation that the festival was structurally unprepared to absorb. But in the late 1960s, IFFI was a serious, credible, internationally recognised institution that had planted in India's cultural soil a seed whose eventual flowering would take several difficult decades to produce.

CHAPTER TWO

1970 TO 1989: THE FESTIVAL THAT REFUSED THE MARKET

By the early 1970s, the International Film Festival of India had settled into a rhythm that appeared, on the surface, to be reassuringly stable. The festival had acquired recognition abroad, reverence at home, and a small but devoted constituency of filmmakers, critics and cinephiles who treated it as an annual pilgrimage. Beneath this calm lay a decisive choice, one that would shape IFFI's character for nearly two decades and whose consequences extended well beyond the question of programming.

The festival chose distance from the market. This was not an oversight or an administrative failure. It was a position, held with conviction and defended with the vocabulary of artistic principle. In a cultural climate shaped by post-Independence idealism and reinforced by a broadly socialist policy framework, commerce was regarded with suspicion in the arts. Cinema, in official discourse, was still something to be protected from vulgarity rather than strengthened through investment. IFFI became the most visible expression of this protective instinct.



Image for representational purpose only

While major international festivals were beginning to integrate film markets, sales agents and distribution platforms into their ecosystems, IFFI remained resolutely insulated. Cannes had developed its Marche du Film into a global trading floor for cinema. Berlin's European Film Market had become indispensable to international co-production. Venice was evolving into a launchpad for Oscar campaigns with real commercial consequences. IFFI had screenings, seminars and retrospectives. There

were no structured spaces for negotiation. Films were celebrated, not circulated. The festival's role was to confer legitimacy, not longevity.

This insulation shaped behaviour across the festival's entire participant community. Filmmakers arrived seeking validation rather than buyers. Critics arrived to interpret, not to mediate between art and audience. Bureaucrats arrived to administer, not to facilitate exchange. The result was an event rich in discourse but poor in consequence, a festival where the conversation was sophisticated and the follow-through was absent.

The irony is that this period coincided with one of the most artistically fertile phases in Indian cinema's history. The parallel cinema movement, sometimes called the New Wave though its practitioners often resisted the label, gained momentum across languages and regions throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* in 1974 established that Hindi cinema could sustain social realism without compromising narrative engagement.

Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* had preceded it in 1969, demonstrating that state film finance, through the Film Finance Corporation, could produce formally adventurous work. Adoor Gopalakrishnan in Malayalam, Govind Nihalani in Hindi, G. Aravindan in Malayalam, Girish Karnad and Girish Kasaravalli in Kannada comprised a generation of filmmakers producing work that spoke to social realities with formal sophistication and moral seriousness that placed them in legitimate conversation with the European art cinema IFFI screened alongside.

IFFI became their sanctuary. It offered visibility without the compromise of commercial pressure. Films that struggled or failed at the box office found respect within the festival circuit, and IFFI's selection conferred a legitimacy that could sustain a career even in the absence of audience numbers. For a time, this arrangement seemed virtuous. The festival functioned as a moral counterweight to commercial cinema, reinforcing the idea that artistic seriousness required, and deserved, protection from profit motive.

The separation came at a cost that was invisible only for as long as the state remained willing to absorb it. Without access to markets, many of the parallel cinema movement's finest films remained trapped within a narrow circuit of festivals and film societies. International recognition at Locarno, Berlin or Rotterdam did not translate into domestic distribution. State subsidy provided initial finance but no mechanism for recovery or reinvestment. The Film Finance Corporation's support model created films without creating an industry capable of sustaining those films beyond their initial production.

IFFI did not bridge this gap. More significantly, it did not see bridging it as its responsibility. The festival's role was defined entirely within the logic of cultural exhibition, and that logic excluded the question of what happened to films after the screening ended. Whether a film reached audiences, found distribution, generated

revenue, or sustained the career of the filmmaker who made it were questions that belonged, in the festival's institutional self-understanding, to someone else's domain.

Globally, the 1970s and 1980s saw cinema becoming increasingly internationalised through mechanisms that IFFI observed from a distance without incorporating. Co-productions emerged as a standard industrial practice in Europe, allowing films to access multiple national finance systems and multiple national markets simultaneously. Film finance became more sophisticated, with equity investment, presales and broadcast rights deals combining to fund production budgets that no single national source could sustain alone. Festivals transformed into marketplaces of influence where careers were made and distribution deals signed. IFFI referenced these developments in seminars but did not translate them into policy.



Image for representational purpose only

By the late 1980s, the limitations of this approach were becoming plainly visible to anyone willing to look. A generation of serious filmmakers had accumulated respect but not security. Audiences for parallel cinema were shrinking as satellite television created new entertainment options. Film societies struggled for members. The gap between festival cinema and popular cinema had widened into a gulf, hardening on both sides into a mutual suspicion that served neither.

IFFI, once imagined as a bridge between India and the world, had become a closed circle. It spoke fluently to itself and less convincingly to the industry it purported to represent. The festival that refused the market had preserved something it called its conscience. In doing so, it had not preserved its future. The consequences of that choice would surface with particular force in the decade that followed, when economic liberalisation, private capital and global platforms forced Indian cinema into a reckoning for which its principal festival was structurally unprepared.

CHAPTER THREE

1990 TO 2003: LIBERALISATION OUTSIDE, HESITATION INSIDE

The economic reforms of 1991 altered the conditions under which Indian cinema operated with a speed and completeness that no cultural institution had been prepared to manage. Satellite television arrived, broadcasting Hindi films and music videos into living rooms that had previously had two state-controlled channels and cinema halls as their primary entertainment options. Private capital entered film production, dissolving the monopoly of the studio system and the state finance model that had defined Hindi cinema's economics for four decades.

Overseas markets, particularly the Non-Resident Indian diaspora concentrated in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and the Gulf states, reshaped narrative priorities as producers discovered that stories set partly abroad and featuring protagonists navigating identity between India and the West commanded premium ticket prices in multiple territories simultaneously. IFFI did not restructure. The festival observed the transformation of the industry it was designed to serve and continued operating according to the logic of the previous era.



Image for representational purpose only

This was not ideological resistance. The festival's administrators understood that the world had changed. The seminars of the 1990s discussed liberalisation with awareness. Papers were presented on the integration of market mechanisms into festival ecosystems. The vocabulary of change circulated through the corridors of Pragati Maidan and the screening halls of the National Film Archive in Pune, where editions of the festival continued to be mounted in the itinerant pattern inherited

from the 1950s. The vocabulary, however, did not translate into operational reform. The festival spoke the language of transition while practising the continuity of an institution that had not decided what it wanted to become.

The gap widened as Indian cinema diversified with an energy that the festival could not contain or direct. The 1990s produced Mani Ratnam's politically and aesthetically ambitious films in Tamil and Hindi. They produced the emergence of Aamir Khan as a producer-star whose choices demonstrated that commercial and artistic ambition were not mutually exclusive.

They produced the Malayalam industry's continued formal sophistication under directors including Adoor Gopalakrishnan, whose *Mathilukal* and *Vidheyan* won international recognition that IFFI acknowledged but could not convert into sustained global circulation. The decade produced Deepa Mehta's *Fire and Earth*, Canadian co-productions that used Indian subjects and Indian actors to navigate international markets in ways that domestic production had not learned to replicate.

International festivals demonstrated what IFFI did not, which is access to buyers. Structured markets where rights could be traded, territories negotiated, and financing assembled across multiple national sources. Institutional networking that connected filmmakers to the professionals who could advance their careers. Indian filmmakers began premiering significant work at Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Toronto not as an act of cultural aspiration but as economic necessity. The international festival circuit offered things IFFI could not, and the market voted accordingly.

The technological shifts of the 1990s exposed IFFI's rigidity. Digital post-production, non-linear editing and evolving exhibition formats such as multiplexes transformed filmmaking and film viewing, making high-quality production more accessible. However, IFFI's infrastructure and programming remained rooted in older production and exhibition models, treating these changes as background developments rather than drivers of transformation.

By the early 2000s, IFFI occupied an uneasy position in the cultural landscape it was supposed to animate. It was neither obsolete nor influential. It commanded a residual respect rooted in historical longevity rather than current relevance. Its cultural authority endured even as its strategic significance diminished. Its selection process was trusted as a mechanism for identifying serious cinema but not as a mechanism for doing anything with that cinema beyond the act of screening.

The decade left one key question unanswered. Could permanence compensate for irrelevance? IFFI's 2004 move to Goa addressed the logistical challenges of its itinerant past by providing a permanent home, stable infrastructure and institutional continuity. While the relocation solved operational concerns, it did not answer the more fundamental question of the festival's purpose and relevance.

CHAPTER FOUR

2004 TO 2024: GOA, PERMANENCE AND THE LONG SEARCH FOR PURPOSE

Goa was chosen for reasons that were logistical before they were cultural, and the choice has been revisited, defended, and criticised in almost every subsequent edition. The infrastructure advantages were real: a coastal city with significant hospitality capacity, an airport with direct connections to major Indian cities and some international routes, a state government whose economic dependence on tourism gave it a direct interest in the festival's success, and a landscape that offered the combination of beach, heritage architecture and Portuguese-inflected urbanity that international festival delegates had been trained by decades of Cannes and Venice to associate with serious cinema.

What Goa offered that Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai could not was manageability. A festival that had scattered itself across four cities over five decades could, in Goa, be concentrated into a geography small enough for the density of encounter that festival culture requires. Films, panels, markets and networking happen best when they are proximate, when the conversation begun in a screening hall can continue over dinner and resume the following morning. Goa's compactness made that possible. The move was right for reasons that the policy documents that authorised it did not fully articulate.



The INOX complex in Panaji has become IFFI's primary screening venue

The early Goa editions demonstrated that permanence was a necessary but insufficient condition for relevance. Infrastructure accumulated. The INOX complex

in Panaji became the festival's primary screening venue, supplemented by the Kala Academy and other halls across the city. The Entertainment Society of Goa formalised its role as the state government partner, providing local administrative capacity and a degree of coordination between the national infrastructure managed by the National Film Development Corporation and the city-level logistics that determine whether delegates can move, feed themselves, and find screenings without organisational breakdown.

The Indian Panorama, the section dedicated to showcasing the best of Indian filmmaking across languages and regions, became the festival's most contested element. Every year, the jury's selections provoked argument. Films selected were challenged by films not selected. Regional industries accused the selection committee of metropolitan bias. Parallel cinema's heirs accused it of commercial accommodation. Popular cinema's advocates accused it of aesthetic snobbery. The Panorama was, in its perpetual controversy, performing a democratic function: it was the space where the question of what Indian cinema was and should be was fought out in public, annually, with the particular intensity that a national film festival lends to curatorial decisions.



The festival provides a unique opportunity to showcase Goan culture to the world

The festival's engagement with the Indian film industry's commercial dimensions evolved slowly and unevenly across the Goa years. Film Bazaar, the industry-focused component launched in 2008 by NFDC as a co-production and co-financing market, represented the most significant structural acknowledgement that IFFI needed to function as more than a screening programme. Film Bazaar created a dedicated space for pitch sessions, producer meetings, rights negotiations and the kind of commercial conversation that the festival's founding philosophy had

deliberately excluded. Its growth across subsequent editions, in terms of both participants and deals completed, demonstrated that the market had been waiting at the gates for decades, patient enough to enter when invited.

The Talent Campus, later known as the IFFI Film School, added an educational dimension that addressed one of the festival's most persistent structural gaps. For decades, IFFI had curated films without teaching filmmakers. The campus brought young directors, writers and producers into contact with established industry figures through structured mentorship and workshop programmes. The gap between a student screening international cinema at an IFFI retrospective and a filmmaker capable of producing work of comparable ambition was a gap that no screening programme alone could bridge. Mentorship, feedback, and professional contact were required, and the campus provided infrastructure for all three.

The period from 2014 onwards brought intensified political attention to IFFI's programming, particularly to the Indian Panorama selection and to the choice of international retrospectives and special screenings. The festival operates under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and ministerial oversight translates into programming sensitivity in ways that the international festivals operating under arm's-length artistic direction do not experience. Controversies over specific selections and deselections recurred across this period, producing annual arguments about the boundary between editorial judgment and political direction that the festival's governance structure was not designed to resolve cleanly.

The 55th edition of IFFI in 2024 received 1,811 entries from 114 countries, eventually screening 278 films from 81 countries, including 16 world premieres, 3 international premieres, 44 Asia premieres and 103 India premieres. These numbers represented the festival's genuine scale, demonstrating that the Goa infrastructure had produced an event of real international reach. What the numbers could not demonstrate was whether that reach was translating into the kind of consequence - career advancement, distribution deals, co-production agreements, financing relationships - that comparable festivals of comparable scale generate as a matter of institutional function.

The answer to that question, in 2024, was that IFFI was generating consequence more consistently than at any previous point in its history, but less consistently than its scale and ambition warranted. The Goa years had solved the permanence problem without fully solving the purpose problem. The festival knew where it was. It was still working out, with more honesty than in previous decades, what it was for.

CHAPTER FIVE

REMASTERING, MEMORY AND MONETISATION

Cinema's past has always been a fragile, flickering presence stored in celluloid canisters, analogue reels, and formats that degrade faster than the cultures they document. For decades, India's film archive existed in the condition that most national film archives in the developing world share: formally constituted, inadequately funded, operationally understaffed, and systematically under-prioritised relative to the production of new content. The National Film Archive of India, established in Pune in 1964, accumulated holdings that included priceless records of Indian cinema's first half-century while operating on budgets that routinely made adequate preservation impossible.

IFFI's engagement with restoration and archival cinema, which deepened significantly in the years preceding the 56th edition, represented a recalibration of how the festival understood its relationship with Indian cinema's history. Retrospectives had always been part of the programme. The festival had screened restored prints of international classics in special sections for years. What changed in the period leading to IFFI 2025 was the framing: restoration was reconceived from a curatorial gesture into a financial and strategic instrument.



The restoration project brought Sholay back to release in a form that met modern audience expectations

The logic of this re-conception runs from the economics of intellectual property. A film that exists only in a degraded print, inaccessible for contemporary exhibition standards, has limited commercial value regardless of its artistic importance. A film digitally restored to 4K resolution, with its soundtrack remastered and its colour

palette recalibrated, can be exhibited theatrically as a special event, licensed to streaming platforms for subscription or rental, sold to broadcasters in multiple territories, and used as the basis for merchandise, educational programmes, and branded heritage content. The same cultural asset, treated through the lens of restoration economics rather than archival preservation, generates revenue streams that the original production never anticipated.

Sholay's restoration became the paradigm case. Released in 1975, Ramesh Sippy's film had long occupied a unique position in Indian cinema history as simultaneously the highest-grossing Hindi film of its era and one of the most formally accomplished popular entertainments the industry has produced. Its cultural saturation was total: its dialogue, music, characters and sequences had passed into the common vocabulary of Indian popular culture in a way that no other film has replicated.

Its commercial life, however, had been complicated by rights fragmentation, format obsolescence, and the absence of a master print capable of meeting contemporary exhibition standards. The restoration project that brought Sholay back to theatrical release in a form that met modern audience expectations was a demonstration that archival intervention could produce commercial returns at scale, not merely critical appreciation from film historians.



... and so did Nagarjuna's iconic film Shiva

The broader implication for IFFI's programming was that restoration represented a vertical whose economic logic was distinct from both new film production and conventional archival preservation. Films restored using advanced digital techniques re-enter circulation, generate revenue on streaming platforms, find new audiences in territories and demographics that their original release never reached, and become cultural assets with balance sheet presence rather than museum pieces

with no financial identity. IFFI's curatorial embrace of this logic, fully visible by the time of the 56th edition, positioned the festival not merely as a venue for exhibiting restored cinema but as an active participant in the ecosystem that makes restoration economically viable.

The restoration discussion at IFFI also surfaced a legal and institutional problem that the Indian film industry had not systematically addressed: rights clarity. Many of India's most significant films from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were produced under contractual arrangements that did not anticipate the digital formats, streaming platforms, and international licensing structures of the twenty-first century.

Rights to individual elements that include the underlying screenplay, the music, the performance rights of actors who had died and the physical negative were distributed across estates, production companies, and in many cases institutions whose records were incomplete. Restoration required resolving these rights questions before a frame could be digitised, and the process of resolution required legal expertise, institutional cooperation, and patience that had not previously been applied systematically to India's film archive.

The engagement of technology companies in the restoration process introduced a new category of participant into the IFFI ecosystem. AI-assisted restoration tools, capable of repairing damaged frames, removing artefacts, stabilising shaky footage and upscaling resolution at speeds that manual restoration processes could not approach, brought technology firms into conversations that had previously been conducted exclusively between archivists and film historians. The convergence of these communities that comprised technologists, archivists, rights holders, financiers and filmmakers at IFFI panels and market sessions produced a quality of cross-disciplinary exchange that the festival had not previously facilitated.

What restoration demonstrated, above all else, was that the boundary between cultural preservation and commercial activity was permeable in ways that the festival's founding philosophy had not accommodated. The early IFFI had insisted on keeping culture and commerce in separate rooms. The restoration economics of the early 21st century demonstrated that the most effective preservation of cultural heritage was the preservation that generated the revenue to fund its own continuation. Culture, in this framework, does not need to be protected from commerce. It needs to be structured to benefit from it.

CHAPTER SIX

IFFI 56: WHEN CINEMA STOPPED PRETENDING IT WAS ONLY ABOUT CINEMA

There are festivals that celebrate films. There are others that celebrate filmmakers. A smaller, more self-aware group quietly celebrates itself. The 56th International Film Festival of India, held at Goa from November 20 to 28, 2025, did something more audacious than any of these. It acknowledged, perhaps for the first time without institutional embarrassment, that cinema had ceased to be a standalone art form and had become an industry entangled with capital, code, platforms, policy and power. The acknowledgement was overdue. Its arrival was significant regardless of its lateness.

Two hundred and forty films from 81 countries were screened across the nine days of IFFI 56. More than fifty of those films were directed by women, a proportion that represented a genuine shift in curatorial priority rather than a statistical gesture. The international competition attracted entries from across the spectrum of global art cinema, including several of the season's major award contenders from Cannes, Berlin and Venice, a programming achievement that benefited from the hiatus of the Mumbai Academy of Moving Image festival in 2025, which left Goa without its most significant domestic competition for Indian premieres.



IFFI has played a pivotal role in transforming cinema from a standalone art form into a thriving industry

The Golden Peacock for Best Feature Film was awarded to *Skin of Youth*, directed by Ash Mayfair, a Vietnam-Singapore-Japan co-production set in 1990s Saigon following two young people navigating love and identity in the decade of the city's transformation. The Vietnamese win was a reminder that IFFI's jury, when

constituted and insulated from external pressure, is capable of producing verdicts that speak to cinema's universality rather than its diplomatic convenience. The Silver Peacock for Best Director went to Santosh Davakhar for *Gondhal*, a Marathi film whose presence in the international competition signalled the Indian Panorama's growing confidence in presenting regional language cinema to international audiences without protective qualification.

The full awards slate demonstrated the range that IFFI 56 achieved in its competition. Ubeimar Rios won Best Actor for the Spanish film *A Poet*. Jara Sofija Ostan won Best Actress for the Slovenian film *Little Trouble Girls*. The Special Jury Award went to *My Father's Shadow* by British-Nigerian director Akinola Davies Jr., a UK-Ireland-Nigeria co-production whose selection reflected the festival's increased attention to African and African diaspora filmmaking. The Iranian director Hesam Farahmand and Estonian director Tonis Pill shared the Best Debut Feature prize. Karan Singh Tyagi won Best Debut Indian Feature for *Kesari Chapter 2*.

Rajinikanth's lifetime achievement honour brought the closing ceremony its most watched moment, the superstar's fifty years in Indian cinema celebrated with a felicitation that reminded domestic and international audiences simultaneously of what IFFI can do when it brings the gravity of its institutional age to bear on the weight of individual careers. The closing ceremony at the Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Indoor Stadium in Taleigao also featured Ranveer Singh's appearance, and tributes to legendary actor Dharmendra, whose decades-long career was acknowledged by Goa CM Pramod Sawant.



Superstar Rajinikanth's Lifetime Achievement honour was IFFI 56 closing ceremony's defining moment

The parallel programming of IFFI 56 was where the festival's genuine transformation was most visible, to those paying attention. The presence of structured market conversations, formalised pitching forums, policy-linked panels and technology-driven demonstrations was not incidental to the programme. These elements were central, visible, and conducted with the directness of people who had stopped believing that commercial conversation was a compromise of cultural purpose.

Artificial intelligence arrived at IFFI 56 not as a spectacle but as an infrastructure discussion. There were no theatrical proclamations about algorithmic creativity or machine-generated scripts. Editors spoke about AI-assisted rough cuts that had reduced assembly time from weeks to days. Restoration experts described machine learning tools that had repaired damaged negatives from the 1940s and 1950s in timescales that manual frame-by-frame restoration could not approach.

Subtitling professionals explained how language models had reduced multi-lingual release turnaround times in ways that made simultaneous release across territories economically viable for productions that previously could afford only sequential release. Producers discussed predictive analytics that modelled audience cluster behaviour before a film was picture locked.



Red Carpet moments are a big hit among attendees at IFFI

What was notable about the AI conversation at IFFI 56 was the near-total absence of the anxiety that the same conversation generates in Western film industry contexts. The Indian filmmakers and producers engaging with these tools were less interested in philosophical questions about authorship and more interested in practical

questions about efficiency, scalability and competitive positioning. AI was positioned not as a threat to creative identity but as an infrastructural assistant that could reduce the friction between creative ambition and commercial viability. That framing, whether instinctively accurate or strategically convenient, allowed the festival to have the AI conversation without the paralysis that the conversation produces when conducted primarily as a cultural anxiety.

Film Bazaar, the market component running parallel to the festival, recorded its highest participation and deal activity in its history at the 56th edition. The combination of MAMI's 2025 absence and IFFI's growing reputation as a serious market destination produced a concentration of buyer interest that had not been achievable in previous editions. Co-production discussions involving Indian producers and international partners from France, Germany, South Korea, Japan and across the South and Southeast Asian region were conducted with a specificity - exact budget figures, territory splits, delivery schedules - that distinguished market conversations from the networking conversations that had characterised earlier attempts at market-building within the festival.

The Best Web Series award, won by *Bandish Bandits Season 2* directed by Anand Tiwari, acknowledged the festival's formal recognition that the boundary between theatrical cinema and streaming serialisation was no longer a useful frame through which to organise Indian audiovisual culture. The decision to incorporate web series into the competitive programme was contested by purists who argued that a film festival should screen films. It was defended by those who argued that the creative talent, production investment, and audience engagement involved in premium streaming series exceeded those of many theatrical features, and that a national film festival unable to engage with the dominant format of contemporary Indian storytelling was a festival disqualifying itself from contemporary relevance. The award's inclusion in the programme suggested that the latter argument had prevailed.

IFFI 56 will not be remembered for a single defining film or a singular critical verdict. Its significance lies in its aggregate behaviour. It marked the edition at which the festival stopped being defensive about change and began curating it, stopped treating commercial conversation as a concession to vulgarity and started treating it as an acknowledgement of how cinema actually lives in the world. That acknowledgement was overdue. Its expression at IFFI 56 was unambiguous and unhesitating, and those who have watched the festival across its previous decades found the unhesitating quality the most significant thing of all.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IFFI ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

The phrase 'cinema as diplomacy' that framed IFFI's founding acquired new precision and new complexity at its 56th edition in ways that the republic's cultural policymakers of 1952 could not have anticipated. Then, cinema as diplomacy meant presenting Indian films alongside international ones as evidence of cultural sophistication. In 2025, cinema as diplomacy means something structurally different: the exercise of soft power through the convergence of artistic credibility, technological capability, and financial infrastructure, conducted simultaneously and legibly, in a manner that positions India as a global cultural authority rather than a regional one seeking international acknowledgement.

Delegations from over eighty nations converged on Goa for IFFI 56. Their presence reflected the festival's accumulated credibility but also reflected a specific geopolitical moment in which India's soft power projection had expanded with the same confidence that its economic weight and diplomatic assertiveness had expanded across the preceding decade. The countries represented at IFFI 56 were not merely sending films for the competition. They were sending cultural delegations to engage with an ecosystem that their own cultural ministries had identified as consequential to the future shape of global cinema economics.



Cinema serves as diplomacy in action at IFFI where filmmakers from across the world converge

Country-specific showcases were programmed not as diplomatic courtesies but as market-oriented presentations. South Korean cinema's showcase was accompanied by panel discussions on the Korean Wave's international distribution model, specifically the mechanisms by which Korean producers had systematically built global audiences for domestic content through a combination of streaming platform relationships, subtitle strategy, and deliberate cultivation of online fan communities. The Indian government's interest in this model was explicit: Korean cinema's penetration of South Asian, Southeast Asian and diaspora markets represented a template that Indian cinema should be capable of exceeding.

The co-production treaty discussions that ran through IFFI 56's market sessions addressed the regulatory and financial architecture that makes international co-production practically viable rather than aspirationally attractive. India has bilateral co-production agreements with seventeen countries, including Italy, Germany, the UK, France, Brazil, Canada, China, New Zealand, Poland and South Korea.



Delegates from over eighty nations attended IFFI 56

The agreements provide co-produced films with access to both countries' finance systems and both countries' subsidy mechanisms, while reducing the regulatory friction around talent movement, equipment import and rights management. IFFI 56's market sessions examined why the utilisation rate of these agreements remained lower than their potential and identified specific procedural barriers such as clearance timelines, bank guarantee requirements and IP registration procedures that the relevant ministries could address without legislative change.

At IFFI 56, retrospectives of Indian cinema fulfilled a cultural diplomatic role with the authority of history. The restored 4K screening of Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy attracted a diverse international audience, including Japanese critics, French cinephiles and young Indian filmmakers experiencing the landmark work in its finest visual form for the first time. The coexistence of AI-driven co-production showcases and Ray retrospectives at IFFI 56 captured the festival's vision: Indian cinema's global standing rests equally on its rich artistic legacy, revitalised through restoration, and its growing technological and industrial prowess at the forefront of cinema's next evolution.

The festival's engagement with the FIAPF, the International Federation of Film Producers' Associations that recognises and regulates competitive international film festivals, has deepened across the Goa years in ways that matter for India's position in global cinema governance. FIAPF recognition places IFFI in the same category as Venice, Berlin, Cannes, Locarno and the other festivals whose competitive awards carry international currency. Maintaining and strengthening that recognition requires demonstrable compliance with FIAPF's quality and governance standards. The 56th edition's programming quality, jury composition and market infrastructure represented a contribution to that compliance that IFFI's previous decades had not consistently achieved.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BEYOND 2025: THE FUTURE OF IFFI AND INDIAN CINEMA

IFFI 2025 closed not merely as an event but as a marker of transformation whose significance will be legible in retrospect more clearly than in the moment. Every institution has inflection points - editions or years or decisions that, when examined from a sufficient distance, appear to have changed the direction of travel in ways that contemporaries did not fully register. The 56th edition has the characteristics of such a point, though the full confirmation of that judgment will require the evidence of several subsequent editions.

The trajectory that IFFI 56 established suggests the following for the festival's future development. The integration of AI tools into the festival's programming, restoration and market activities will deepen rather than stabilise. The tools available to filmmakers, editors, restoration specialists and distributors in 2025 were primitive relative to those that will be available by 2030, and IFFI's decision to treat these tools as standard infrastructure rather than novelty ensures that the festival's ecosystem will evolve with them than being disrupted by them. This is the correct institutional posture. The festival that waits for AI to become unavoidable before engaging with it will spend years in remedial catch-up. The festival that treats AI as a current operational reality will spend those same years building competitive advantage.



Maquinez Palace in Panjim is synonymous with the International Film Festival of India today

The co-production and financing architecture that Film Bazaar began building in 2008 requires further formalisation to reach its potential. The bilateral co-production agreements India holds with seventeen countries generate a fraction of the co-

productions they could support if the procedural barriers identified at IFFI 56's market sessions were systematically addressed. A dedicated co-production facilitation office, operating year-round rather than only during the festival's nine days, with the regulatory mandate to accelerate clearances and the institutional relationships to mediate disputes, would convert aspirational treaty provisions into operational production pipelines. The investment required is modest relative to the economic activity it would generate.

The restoration programme will need to address a question that IFFI 56 raised but did not resolve: ownership. The commercial potential of India's restored film heritage cannot be realised without rights clarity across a catalogue whose provenance is, in many cases, deeply complicated by decades of informal production arrangements, incomplete documentation, and the deaths of original rights holders. A systematic effort to establish clear legal ownership of restoration rights across India's significant pre-1990 film catalogue - conducted by the National Film Archive of India, the Film and Television Institute of India, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the private sector interests involved - would unlock commercial value at a scale that individual rights holders cannot capture alone.



The vibrant colours symbolising diversity at IFFI

The Indian Panorama will continue to be the festival's most contested element, and that contestation should be understood as a feature rather than a problem. The fights about which Indian films are selected and which are not are the fights through which Indian cinema's self-understanding is annually renegotiated. A Panorama selection that produced consensus would be a Panorama that had stopped being meaningful. The institutional challenge is to ensure that the selection process is governed by aesthetic criteria whose application is transparent and defensible, that the jury composition reflects India's regional and linguistic diversity without becoming a quota exercise, and that the relationship between political direction and

curatorial independence is managed with the honesty that both the festival's credibility and the republic's cultural health require.

The web series question will not go away, and the festival should not try to make it. Premium streaming serialisation is the dominant format of Indian storytelling in 2025 by every relevant metric - investment, viewership, critical attention, talent engagement. A festival that treats theatrical feature film as the only legitimate form of cinematic art is a festival defining itself into irrelevance at the precise moment when its institutional authority could be most productively applied to the future of Indian audiovisual culture.

IFFI's relationship with the international festival circuit should be pursued with the strategic intentionality that commercial considerations alone cannot generate. The festival's value as a diplomatic instrument based on its capacity to convene, to position India in global cultural conversation, to articulate through programming choices the vision of Indian cinema's place in the world is a value that the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the Ministry of External Affairs, and India's cultural diplomacy apparatus should treat as a shared responsibility. Festival diplomacy is not soft power at the margins of India's international engagement. It is, given the scale of Indian cinema's global audience, soft power at its centre.



Open-air screenings at Miramar Beach are part of the festival

The demographic reality that Indian cinema confronts is both challenge and opportunity of the first order. India's population has crossed 1.4 billion. Its median age, approximately 28 years, is among the youngest of any major economy. Its smartphone penetration, combined with the rapid expansion of affordable data access across the country's interior, has created an audience for Indian content whose scale dwarfs any previous moment in the industry's history. The question of

whether IFFI, as the republic's principal film festival, can serve that audience - not by competing with the commercial entertainment that the audience primarily consumes, but by connecting the best of Indian and international filmmaking with an audience that has not previously had access to it - is the question the festival's future programming should be structured to answer.

Cinema in 2025 stands at a crossroads whose precise coordinates are disputed but whose existence is acknowledged by everyone within the industry. Technology is unavoidable and accelerating. Platforms are dominant and increasingly influential in financing decisions. Audiences are fragmented across formats, devices, languages and attention spans. In this climate, festivals can retreat into the purism of theatrical exhibition as the only legitimate form of cinema culture, or they can evolve into platforms of negotiation between the past and the future of the art form they exist to celebrate.



A cultural performance captivating crowds during the festival

IFFI chose evolution at its 56th edition. The choice was overdue. It was also correct. The republic's most durable film festival, having survived over seven decades of ideological pendulum swings, budgetary constraints, governance controversies and technological disruptions, has arrived at a moment of genuine strategic clarity. It knows what it is. It knows what it can do. It knows what it has failed to do and has begun, with the pragmatic honesty of an institution that has earned the right to be honest, to correct the failures.

What the future holds for IFFI depends less on the festival than on the decisions made around it. Decisions about India's co-production architecture, about the National Film Archive's restoration budget, about the Film Bazaar's year-round institutional presence, about the relationship between political oversight and curatorial independence. These decisions are made by ministries, not by filmmakers

or critics, and their quality will determine whether IFFI 56's trajectory continues upward or flattens into the comfortable complacency that has claimed the festival before.

The institution has demonstrated, over seven decades, and against the full force of the structural difficulties those years contained, that it can survive. The more important demonstration, which the 56th edition has begun to provide, is that it can lead. Whether that beginning becomes a sustained direction of travel is the question whose answer the republic's cinema culture, and the festival it has maintained through every difficulty, is now positioned to provide.

CHAPTER NINE

HOW PIB KEEPS INDIA'S PREMIER FILM FESTIVAL IN FOCUS

The story of the International Film Festival of India is, in many ways, the story of India's own cinematic awakening to the world. What commenced in 1952 as a modest travelling showcase of international cinema, carrying reels across cities and exposing Indian audiences to narratives born in distant cultures and unfamiliar landscapes, gradually transformed into something far greater than a mere festival. It became a cultural institution. The caravan that once moved from one urban centre to another introducing audiences to global storytelling eventually found permanence and purpose on Goa's shores, where it evolved into Asia's oldest and one of its most enduring celebrations of cinema.

Its origins were firmly rooted in the post-Independence vision of a nation seeking engagement with global artistic movements. The inaugural edition, organised by the Government of India's Films Division in Mumbai, reflected a belief that cinema could serve as a bridge between societies, ideologies and cultures. More than seven decades later, that vision has expanded considerably.



Senior officials from the organising team at IFFI (Pic: PIB)

Today, the festival stands as a collaborative enterprise jointly steered by the National Film Development Corporation, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Entertainment Society of Goa, each institution contributing to a platform that has grown in stature, influence and international recognition. The 56th edition of IFFI represents not merely another chapter in the festival's chronology but a testament to its remarkable evolution. What began as a state-sponsored cultural exercise has

matured into a globally respected arena where artistic excellence, technological innovation and cinematic experimentation converge. It is a space where established masters and emerging voices engage in a shared dialogue, where stories transcend borders and where the language of cinema often succeeds where politics, geography and diplomacy struggle. Underlying this vast and complex enterprise is an often less visible but indispensable communication architecture, one anchored by the Press Information Bureau (PIB). Functioning as the festival's official communication nerve centre, PIB assumes the critical responsibility of ensuring that every announcement, policy decision, programme update and institutional development reaches the media accurately, consistently and within time.

In an era increasingly susceptible to fragmented narratives and misinformation, its role extends well beyond dissemination. PIB actively shapes the festival's public discourse through structured media engagement, carefully coordinated press interactions, official releases and facilitated access to filmmakers, industry leaders and policymakers. In doing so, it not only safeguards the festival's credibility but also amplifies its cultural, commercial and artistic outcomes across audiences in India and abroad.

The relationship between IFFI and PIB, as Director General of PIB West Zone Smita Vats Sharma points out, stretches across decades and has acquired a continuity that mirrors the festival's own journey. She says, "PIB has remained deeply involved in managing the festival's communication and media interface. The preparations begin months in advance, often as early as May and June, when teams are assembled and operational plans initiated in coordination with the Entertainment Society of Goa."



PIB West Zone Director General Smita Vats Sharma speaking to *The Draft*

What appears externally as a seamless media operation is, in reality, the outcome of extensive planning and collaboration involving NFDC, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, PIB headquarters and multiple regional units spread across the country. The scale of this effort is reflected in the composition of the festival's communication machinery itself. This convergence of talent from across India's media ecosystem transforms IFFI's communication operation into a microcosm of the country's own diversity, where regional experiences and institutional expertise combine to present a unified narrative of the festival to the world.

The communication ecosystem has continued to evolve alongside the festival. "Since 2025, PIB has operated its own dedicated media accreditation portal, streamlining the registration process for journalists covering the event. Its responsibilities extend across multilingual and multimedia communication, encompassing press releases, press conferences, exclusive media interactions, red-carpet coverage and comprehensive documentation of the festival's many dimensions."

The Film Appreciation Course designed for accredited media personnel has emerged as another noteworthy initiative, enriching journalistic engagement with cinema itself. "During the 56th edition, more than 800 accredited media professionals documented screenings, masterclasses, panel discussions and the increasingly popular 'In Conversation' sessions, ensuring that the festival's reach extended far beyond the auditoriums," notes PIB Mumbai Director Sayyid Rabeehashmi.

What emerges from Sharma's observations is the portrait of a remarkably cohesive team assembled from PIB offices nationwide, alongside personnel from Doordarshan, Akashvani and the Central Bureau of Communication. During IFFI 2025, the team undertook assessments of exhibition stalls and documented the festival's contribution to the local economy and self-help groups, highlighting the broader developmental impact that often remains overshadowed by discussions centred exclusively on cinema. Such initiatives reflect a recognition that major cultural festivals are not merely artistic events but economic and social catalysts influencing communities that host them.

That spirit of constant innovation continues to define PIB's engagement with IFFI. Each edition of IFFI presents an opportunity to refine processes, introduce new ideas and expand the scope of media outreach. However, amid technological upgrades, evolving communication strategies and expanding institutional responsibilities, one constant remains. As Sharma emphasises, the media fraternity itself continues to be PIB's most valuable partner. It is this collaborative relationship, built over decades and strengthened through successive editions of the festival, that enables IFFI to communicate its stories, celebrate its achievements and sustain its position as one of the most influential cinematic gatherings in the world.

POSTSCRIPT

THE PEACOCK HAS NOT FINISHED DANCING

IFFI 2025 did not conclude with the familiar sense of an event drawing to a close. For me, it ended with the feeling that something larger had found affirmation. Across its final days, what became evident was not merely the success of another edition of India's flagship film festival, but the validation of an idea whose foundations have been quietly taking shape over decades. The journey from a travelling showcase of world cinema to a sophisticated institution capable of convening conversations around creativity, technology, finance and cultural diplomacy has finally begun to reveal its full design.

The tensions that once appeared irreconcilable have not vanished. They have found structure. Cinema today sits at the crossroads of imagination, capital and code. Stories are conceived within financial ecosystems, developed through evolving technologies and sustained by platforms that reward continuity and scale. The challenge before institutions such as IFFI is not to resist these realities or surrender to them, but to create a framework within which they can coexist without diminishing the artistic impulse that remains at the heart of every meaningful film.

What I carried back from Goa is the recognition that cinema's future belongs to those who understand its entire ecosystem. Narrative and craft remain essential, but so do questions of rights, preservation, discoverability, financing and technological adaptation. The filmmaker of tomorrow cannot afford to remain insulated from the structures that determine whether a story survives beyond its first screening. Equally, as artificial intelligence and fintech become ordinary infrastructure rather than headline attractions, the value of human judgment, intuition, empathy and cultural understanding will only grow. These are the qualities that distinguish cinema from the endless stream of content competing for attention.

IFFI's responsibility in this emerging landscape is significant. It must continue creating access to knowledge, systems and opportunities that allow Indian cinema to engage confidently with the world, while simultaneously protecting the space where creativity remains central rather than decorative. The festival has become both a mirror and a lighthouse, reflecting the complexity of India's cinematic journey while illuminating possible futures.

What began as a young nation's cultural gesture has evolved into an architecture of influence. IFFI no longer merely exhibits films. It increasingly shapes the conditions in which they are imagined, financed, preserved and understood. It is no longer only about cinema. It is about the frame that holds cinema together and projects a nation's stories forward with confidence.

As I close this chapter, I do so with deep gratitude. The inaugural edition of **IFFinity** became possible only because of the remarkable efforts of *Team Draft*, whose commitment, patience and belief transformed an ambitious idea into a living publication. Every page carries traces of collective labour, conversation and conviction.

My special thanks to Editor-in-Chief Gajanan Khergamker for entrusting me with the opportunity to shape and curate this first edition. Such opportunities are rare, and I remain grateful for the confidence reposed in me throughout the process.

That this endeavour was undertaken entirely pro bono - without any sponsorship, advertising revenue or external financial support - lends it an even greater sense of purpose and significance. It stands as a small but sincere contribution by *The Draft* to the larger ecosystem of cinema, film culture and creative discourse.

If **IFFinity** succeeds in documenting, interpreting and extending the conversations that define contemporary cinema, it will have fulfilled the purpose with which it was conceived.

The festival may be over. The conversations it has set in motion are only beginning. Here's to several editions to follow.



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