Inside Lipika Singh Darai's Cinema of Myth, Animism and Inquiring Gaze

By Disha Bijolia

Hindustani classical music has one of the most rigorous regimens of daily riyaz and guru-led training, which students devote years to before they can master the discipline. For Bhubaneswar-based filmmaker Lipika Singh Darai, the practice was a path to self-discovery. As a hypersensitive child with heightened sensoriality, she recalls being vulnerable, emotional and complex, which made her magnetic to people around her, but sometimes troubled her parents, especially her mother. When she was 6 or 7, she started learning classical music, and under her music teacher, who understood her better than most, she became aware of her inner world for the first time. Classical music, for her, was like searching — "because there is no physical address to any notes, and you look for the perfect tune, perfect pitch and perfect feeling," she says. A raga can be expanded through vistar, alaap and taan, and each performance changes according to the singer, the place, the audience, the mood and the moment in which it is sung, which she found quite experimental. But she learned soon that a rich inner world like hers would need another medium to actualise, which led her to filmmaking.

When she moved to Pune to study at FTII, Darai picked sound recording because it felt closest to her music practice. Coming from a small town in Odisha, she did not yet have the imagination to picture herself as a filmmaker, but sound she was familiar with. When she finished her training in audiography, she went back home to record her music teacher, Prafulla Kumar Das, only to find that he had passed away a year earlier. Although it was a great loss for the filmmaker, she still felt connected to him and decided to make a film anyway, about his absence, as a way to relive and preserve her relationship with him. "Detachment is not a word in my life," she tells me. The artist has an immense capacity to hold people, places and experiences within her and project them onto the screen. Over the years, it has become one of the most striking qualities of her cinematic language. Her first film, *Eka Gacha Eka Manisha Eka Samudra (A Tree a Man a Sea)*, was a material trace of her teacher through objects, memories, roads of Odisha and a single audio cassette of his voice, for which she won the National Film Award for Best Debut Film of a Director (Non-Feature Film category) in 2013.

In the same year, while going through a collection of videos and sound recordings she had made in Mumbai, she began to recall her village, where she spent many summer and winter vacations with her grand aunt. This sparked an imaginary conversation between them, which soon became the foundation for a series of letters written to her as personal essayistic films. In *Kankee O Saapo (Dragonfly & Snake)*, a poetic diptych of montages, she tells her 'Aai' about a dragonfly that has flown into her kitchen on the seventh floor, wondering how it got there. Through vignettes of life in the city and this little creature, her own longings for home and that there are 'no more summer vacations' come to surface. In *B and S*, she explores what people mean to each other and how belonging and a sense of home are cultivated in friendships. *Raati O Bhaya (Night and Fear)* is born many years later, from the unfinished, untold residuals of recorded material generated by the artist across her films and documentaries. After an accident that left her paralysed with a broken tailbone, it emerged from the fear that she might lose her ability to make films, and as a reminder of her personhood — "I had to reconfirm with myself — so many people have spoken to you, poured their hearts out to you, given you access to their lives… I've had such surreal, magical and beautiful moments! The letter made me rethink, how can a person who has experienced so much be so weak and die?"

Dragonfly and Snake (2014)

Darai's essay films are an investigation. A first-person cinema of thought, they are examples of an embodied subjectivity and reflexivity[1] that incorporate the act of reasoning itself into the text. Her inner processes of making sense of the world and her own life open up into a dialogue with the viewer while still situated in her framework of consciousness. Moving beyond logocentrism, the meanings of her essay films emerge from the interstices and liminal spaces between loosely linked images and thoughts, facilitating a more intuitive exploration of ideas. This cerebrality can be traced back to the psychoanalytic film theory which suggests that films too, like dreams, serve as a façade for a latent subtext[2]; of repressed desires and symbolic meanings, bypassing the logical ego to engage directly with the unconscious. Darai, who is a lucid dreamer, brings her intuitive associations and the porous movements between dream and waking life into her letters as well. Her vision for a film emerges as transmissions from her interiority instead of a script. She sees herself as a craftsman working with pieces, gathering materials, information and emotions until a calling comes, "and then a story erupts," she notes.

[1] Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009), 36. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321941561_Laura_Rascaroli_2009_The_Personal_Camera_Subjective_Cinema_and_the_Essay_Film

[2] Thierry Kuntzel, "Film-work / Dream-work," *Communications*, no. 23 (1975)

Night and Fear (2023)

Abstraction is central to dream-work. Freud believed that our deepest fears and secret desires buried in the unconscious are too overwhelming to be reproduced literally in dreams. Hence, symbols became an intentional misdirection for the brain, shielding us from the uncomfortable truths hidden in our psyche. Cinema often uses the same mechanics to address complex ideas and the contradictions of life. In Darai's documentaries, the lived experiences of people she captures are granted a nuance and temporality that reject fixed truths. Vietnamese filmmaker and post-colonial theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha called this 'speaking nearby' — an ethical and formal position in documentary practice, where the filmmaker refuses the authority of speaking about a subject and works in proximity without speaking for, over, or in place of the people being filmed.

In *Some Stories Around Witches*, Darai documents the humanitarian crisis around witch-hunting in Odisha, told through three cases involving people who were accused, ostracised and tortured. Instead of resting the blame on tribal superstitions through her narrative, her empathetic lens looks at the socio-economic conditions and politics where greed, ignorance, fear, insecurity and power work together to produce violence. The film exposes the accusation of witchcraft as a social mechanism through which vulnerable people are punished, isolated and made disposable. In *Backstage*, the filmmaker looks at the ecosystem of Odisha's glove, string, rod, and shadow puppetry, including caste, privilege, survival, state involvement, appropriation and the burden of keeping a dying art form alive. From the labour around performance and bodies hidden behind the screen, to the thinning economies of folk art, the puppets become an entry point to questions on livelihood, cultural policies, and the hypocrisy of a system that values the art but not the artist.

Historically, Indigenous communities have relentlessly fallen victim to this process, where people become secondary to what they represent. Within the 'Anthropological Gaze,'[3] that constructs Adivasis as the 'exotic cultural other,' Indigenous and marginalised communities turn into repositories of culture. This gaze is interested in their songs, rituals, crafts, costumes, folklore, myths, and traditions, which become cultural objects of fascination, preservation, display, and study, while the people behind them disappear. From the position of modern knowledge and authority, they are looked at as specimens of tradition and primitiveness; we call them simple, pure, untouched by modern corruption — the 'noble savage'. Even their connection to the natural world is bastardized through an arrogant misrecognition of their epistemologies.

Many indigenous and Adivasi communities believe that people, animals, and plants are made of the same spiritual essence. It's a holistic and non-anthropocentric vision of the world — a way of being and knowing shaped by sacred geography, ancestral memory, and the inseparability of material and spiritual life. Among the Oraon, Munda, Santal and Ho tribes of the Chhota Nagpur plateau, a multifaceted pantheon of ancestral entities moves through the manifestations of nature and the cyclical alternation of the seasons. A superior divinity remains latent and abstract, while spiritual presence materialises through a differentiated multitude of spirits, or "people," each presiding over sacred places in the forest, along waterways and paths.[4]

Some Stories Around Witches (2016)

[3] Amit Prakash and Sarbeswar Sahoo, "Adivasis and the Anthropological Gaze," *Economic & Political Weekly* 50, no. 40 (2015) https://www.epw.in/journal/2015/40/perspectives/adivasis-and-anthropological-gaze.html

[4] D. Ghosh, "Rights and Coercion: Adivasi Rights and Coal Mining in Central India," in *Dipesh Chakrabarty and the Global South: Subaltern Studies, Postcolonial Perspectives, and the Anthropocene*, ed. Saurabh Dube, Sanjay Seth, and Ajay Skaria (London: Routledge, 2020), 93–104. https://dokumen.pub/dipesh-chakrabarty-and-the-global-south-subaltern-studies-postcolonial-perspectives-and-the-anthropocene-9780367189990-9780429199745.htmplayl

Backstage (2021)

In Darai's cinematic universe, this personification of nature comes in different forms. In her short film *The Waterfall*, made for children through LXL Ideas' School Cinema project, the character of Bilua Nayak refers to the waterfall as his friend while he plays himself on screen. Nayak was the 'mahasardar' (spokesperson) of multiple villages in the Sundargarh district of Odisha, who led a protest against multi-million-dollar mining and industrial projects threatening the Khadadhar Falls. "How can you consume so much?" Nayak asked Darai after one of his visits to the city, surprised by how people spent every waking moment eating, buying, or watching something on their phones. "What is your life? When do you get time to think?" he wondered. From a grand-aunt who could look at the dragonflies and predict when it would rain, to 42 years of her own life on this planet without ever having bought plastic furniture, Darai comes from the same indigenous epistemy that has reverence for the natural world. However, she's also attuned to an astute self-awareness that questions her position navigating different worlds. Is she the tribal daughter of the wild that has an animistic relationship with the teak tree outside her bedroom window? Or is she the city-dweller who will reap the benefits of all the products that the multi-million mining project will create, destroying Bilua's friend, the waterfall, in the process?

Darai has learned to cherish these contradictions and give them space to play out in her films. She's currently working on her feature *Birdwoman*, in which she aims to touch upon themes of identity, nature, and the supernatural through magical realism. The story centres on a protagonist who believes she can fly, something Darai has often dreamt of. It also examines the contrast between the expanding city and the divided forests of Bhubaneswar, incorporating gender fluidity and the blurring boundaries between species — all rooted in indigenous world-making.

However, the project she's most excited about right now is a creative documentary implemented by the India Foundation for the Arts about *Sita Bibaha*, the very first film of Odisha, directed by Mohan Sundar Deb Goswami. There are no surviving prints of the film since all its moving-picture and audio reels were destroyed in a fire decades ago. *Sita Bibaha* came out in 1936, the same year Odisha became the first state in India to be carved out on a linguistic basis, uniting Odia-speaking regions under a single administrative unit during the British Raj. "The film seeks to trace over eight decades of history through the quest for a lost print. Its archival approach shapes the narrative, weaving together oral histories, musical discoveries, photographs, texts, and elusive milestones connected to *Sita Bibaha*," notes[5] IFA. But as in any other project within Darai's filmography, she aims to go beyond the film, engaging with what its existence means to her, the socio-cultural conditions in which it emerged, and how time has transformed it 90 years later.

[5] India Foundation for the Arts, 'Lipika Singh Darai' https://indiaifa.org/grants-projects/lipika-singh-darai.htmdisconnectAprivilegecross-sectionHowcross-sectiondavasil

Sita Bibaha chronicles the wedding of Lord Ram and Sita, as well as the events leading up to it. When Ram, Sita, and Lakshman leave Ayodhya for exile, they reach the riverbank, where the boatman or 'Kevat' is asked to ferry them across. He refuses to let Ram step into the boat immediately because he had heard about Ahalya, who had been turned into stone and was restored to human form by the dust or touch of Ram's feet. Worried about his boat being transformed, the Kevat asks to wash Ram's feet before letting him on board. This story is universally institutionalized as a profound demonstration of *bhakti* (devotion). It becomes a tale of Ram's divine benevolence and grace who "allows" a socially marginalized individual from a lower caste like the Kevat, to touch his feet, hence, reinforcing the same hierarchy it claims to dismantle.

But Darai's reading of the story comes from hermeneutics of suspicion instead. What does the Kevat who has nothing but his boat care about Ram's divine kingship? He's just trying to protect his livelihood! "I resonate with the boatman. The boatman is my person," she says. The artist grapples with a deep personal conflict over celebrating *Sita Bibaha* as Odisha's first film — a cultural milestone associated with the erasure of her own heritage. Darai comes from the Ho tribe. Yet, she never learnt to speak and write in Ho, with Odia being the primary language in schools. As Odisha was getting its statehood, her language was being stolen from her and her people. This disconnect is not unlike the encroachment of tribal land happening across the country today. To the adivasi community fighting for the survival of their home, grand promises of tech infrastructure and AI futures mean absolutely nothing.

Finding herself at the cross-section of politics and privilege, Darai wonders how she can be in service of her community as a storyteller. Finding a kinship in the Kevat, the filmmaker is unmoved by the heroics and ideas of cultural prestige, asking herself instead, "how would the boatman make the Ramayana?"

Backstage (2021)