Recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award

Adoor Gopalakrishnan

Screenwriter and Director of 11 feature films and roughly 30 shorts and documentaries; Adoor Gopalakrishnan is the founder of India's first film co-operative for production, distribution and exhibition of quality films. His contributions do not however, begin or end there. The recipient of the coveted British Film Institute Award for 'the most original and imaginative film' of 1982 for his third feature Elippathayam, he has won the International Film Critics Prize (FIPRESCI) 6 times for Mukhamukham, Anantaram, Mathilukal, Vidhneyan, Kathapurushan and Nizhalkkuthu.

Mr. Gopalakrishnan is the winner of the UNICEF film prize (Venice), OCIC film prize (Amiens), INTERFILM Prize (Mannheim) and his collection of essays, Cinemayude Lokam (The World of Cinema) was awarded the national award for Best book on Cinema in 1984 as well as the Kerala State award (2004) for best book on Cinema for Cinemaanubhavam (The Experience of Cinema).

International film festivals of Denver, Cairo and New Jersey have honored Adoor Gopalakrishnan with Lifetime Achievement Awards. In recognition of his contribution to international cinema, the French Government has bestowed on him the title of "The Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters' the top French honour for culture (2004). In 2005 he received the Dada Saheb Phalke Award, India's highest national honour for Lifetime achievement in cinema. The same year Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala conferred on him the honorary degree of D. Litt. In 2006 he received India's top civilian award, Padma Vibhushan for his contribution to the Arts (Cinema). In 2010 the University of Kerala conferred on him the honorary degree of D.Litt. In 2013, the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee formally inaugurated 'The Adoor Gopalakrishnan Film Archive and Research Fund' to preserve his films and encourage and promote the study and research of his work. In 2014 the Viswabharati University conferred on him the title of 'Deshikothama' (D.Litt). In 2015 the Assam Sahitya Sabha honoured him with the Dr. Bhupen Hazarika International award for Lifetime Achievement.
Adoor Gopalakrishnan is one among the few of the most outstanding filmmakers in Indian cinema. He has never compromised with market pressures or audience demands for mainstream entertainment. Yet, he has held on to his own language, style, approach, story and plot and is a name to reckon with on the map of International Cinema. He has made relatively few films during his long span as filmmaker. His first film Swayamvaram (1972) came ten years after he graduated from the FTII, Pune. It was the second Malayalam film after Chemeen to have won the National Award. Followed Kodyettam(1979), Elipathayam (1981), Mukhamukham (1984), Anantaram (1987), Mathilukal (1989), Vidheyan(1993), Kathapurushan (1995, Nizhalkuthu (2002), NaaluPennugal (2007) andOruPennumRandaanum (2008).

Adoor’s reluctance to identify himself with an ideology, his explorations of the individual, often on a one-to-one basis that spans several layers of the human experience, his insistence on the autonomy of the form in cinema, distinguish him from most of his peers, and often make him a subject of controversy, principally because he belongs to Kerala, forever a volatile political state with polarized agendas preached and practiced by a segmented audience.

“I interact with the medium of cinema by choosing a human being placed in a certain situation. It may be a village simpleton, a disillusioned political worker or a writer as the case may interest my creative instincts and me. It is their existential situation that my film explores. None of this can be summed up through a slogan,” he adds. Adoor insistently refuses to reduce any of his narratives to a cause-and-effect confrontation between the lily-white and the pitch-black. In a much understated way, his films deal with human ‘absences’ and sometimes, small ‘presences’ that mark that vital difference between Adoor and other filmmakers. Mathilukal for instance, has no female presence though the female character is very much present across the wall, with her sensuous voice breaking the barrier of the wall that separates her from her ‘lover’ on the other side. In Vidheyan, the Patel’s wife, played by TanviAzmi, appears briefly but leaves a strong impact. In Kathapurushan, through his absence, the affluence and the dictation of Kunjunni’s father are strongly underscored.
"I do not approve of direct political statements because they are one-dimensional. A metaphor offers me more potential to be creative. Through it, I can comment more effectively about the senseless violence around us today. My objective is to draw the maximum out of the film medium. This exploration does not presuppose a signification, though it does not exclude suggestions, gestures. If it renders itself to an identifiable social message, it is for the reader who may have read it. I did not mean it. If someone finds Mathilukal a plea for jail reforms, or Vidheyan a critique of the brutality of feudalism at its naked worst, I cannot help it. In my way of looking at things, all I can say is that they often mistake the incidental for the essential," he says.

Mukhamukham concerns itself with a political worker with a lot of fire in him who has an inspiring presence. He disappears one day, believed to have been killed, after ten years, turned into an alcoholic. The frustration, the embarrassment and the subsequent anger that builds within his followers culminates in his mysterious murder. But in death, he is resurrected as a hero. Set against the political history of Kerala between 1955 and 1965, this is a much misunderstood film. But essentially, it is about the frustration of masses set adrift by the inadequacy of the leadership both past and present. The film operates at three levels - memory, fiction and reality. The first part is memory, the second is fiction and the reality that evolves out of the first two segments forms a major part of the film’s denouement.

Adoor does not accept that Mukhamukham is a political film. But viewers feel that the film is a subtly handled political film. It is a subtle comment on the Marxist movement in Kerala. But Adoor says that it is neither a political film nor is it a value judgment on the Communist Party of India. "It is about the search for the self by a revolutionary, his transformation into an image and the ‘demands’ made on that ‘image’ by the people. This is a common truism in Indian politics. In an important scene in the film, I have used Lenin’s quotation: ‘The proletarian movement passes through several stages of growth. At every stage, a set of people stagger, stop and are unable to continue the forward march.’ The film depicts one such movement. There is a revolutionary concealed within every individual. At some point of time, this spirit vanishes. I thought it would be worthwhile searching for that spirit,” said Adoor.

Based on his story, for which Adoor also wrote the script and the dialogue, Kathapurushan offers a deep insight into a span of historical time in Kerala which saw a series of socio-political changes unfolding through the life story of a fictional character named Kunjunni, brought up totally without a father-figure in a Kerala village, under the protective affection of a strong grandmother. The mother is forever ailing, and so full of self-pity for the breakup in marriage that she fails to play mother, let alone, both father and mother to Kunjunni. He grows up in this predominantly
woman-dominated ambience (which includes the maid’s daughter, Meenakshi) trying to create his own space within the constraints life ordains for him.

The film reveals several layers of meaning while weaving the political history of Kerala over the past 50 years and its influence on the lives of its predominantly agrarian people. The changes that define Vasu’s life reflect the political changes in Kerala as it moves very definitely from post-Independence Gandhism to the Marxist Left to Mao to saffron asceticism used as a veil for the reality of materialism. Kunjunni’s father’s affluence and dictatorship are underscored with his very absence from the visual and narrative space. Kunjunni’s friends from his political space form a representation of the diaspora of the post-Independence young man.

Understatement in craftsmanship is one of the hallmarks of Kathapurushan. Low-key natural lighting blends the characters into their rural milieu. The cinematography (Ravi Varma) captures the richness of the Kerala landscape without making it a touristy picture of visual imagery. The backdrop becomes a part of the narrative as vehicles of transport from the bicycle to the scooter to Kunjunni’s father’s opulent car form visual metaphors of the industrial change on the one hand and class distinctions on the other. Adoor takes the fifty-year time-frame with excellently conceived flashbacks that jump over years in a single, smoothly edited shot. One is reminded of Orson Welles’ invention of ‘lightning mixes’ in which the sound continues, although from a different source, while the scene cuts or dissolves to a new locale or time. Adoor thus, releases the flashback from its conventional status of being an unwanted interruption of a smooth narration.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan’s Naalu Pennugal (Four Women) won the Swarna Kamal at the 55th National Film Awards in 2007. The citation said that the award was "for his delicate and subtle handling of gender issues in a conventional society. Four women of different marital status are trivialized and subjected to abject neglect by their immediate partners and family." The film is comprised of four stories by Thakhazi Sivasankara Pillai, one of the most noted and prolific authors in Malayalam literature.

Thakhazi was a powerful source because, says Adoor, "I grew up reading his short stories and novels. He wrote more than 400 short stories and over 40 novels. Chemeen was based on one of his novels. Most of his well-known works, such as Chemeen, have been adapted to films. Thakazhi wrote mostly about Kuttanad, an area of backwaters and rice fields where he was born and where he lived practically all his life. His writings are largely about this land and its people. They are true to life apart from being insightful. I re-read his works a couple of years ago with the idea of finding interesting material for a film. Instead of one, I found stories for two films. For Four Women, I have kept the stories independent of each other and at the
same worked on an internal thematic connection between them – that of a growing awareness among women.”

His Four Women are four short stories. The social comments evolve from within the women themselves. The prostitute is not allowed to lead a life of normal dignity because the police will not let her. In the Virgin, a young woman who is duped into marriage to an impotent man is deserted by him, leaving her to cope with her virginity in a sham marriage. The Housewife and the Spinster are simultaneous explorations of a woman's unfulfilled desires of lack of motherhood and lack of a normal sex life presented in two different ways. In these films, Adoor's mastery over the medium of cinema is an expression of his intense emotional attachment towards his chosen medium backed by his mastery over the craftsmanship it demands.

Adoor’s technique is brilliant, the most striking of which is his power of understatement and his ability to resist all temptations of surrendering to intellectual pretensions. In fact, like Kathapurushan, this film does not need any inner reading because it stands by itself by the sheer beauty of their quiet statement. Low-key natural lighting blends the characters into their rural milieu while the cinematography maintains the richness of the Kerala landscape without subjecting it to touristic, picture-postcard-like visual images.

His Oru Pennum Randaanum (A Climate of Crime) is based on Takhazi’s short stories. It is about crime in different contexts and situations. The first story is about a poor schoolboy, son of a thief, who encounters humiliation at school, and is desperate to make his father change his vocation. But he cannot because thieving is the only way the father can help the family eke out a hand-to-mouth existence. In the second story, two policemen conspire and frame a poor rickshaw-puller for a burglary he did not commit. The third is about a young student who is trapped by the unwanted pregnancy of his maid he had an affair with and wants her to abort the baby. Ironically, by the time the story ends, he decides to marry the girl and have the baby. The fourth is about an attractive housewife who never makes clear which of the two men, her husband and another man, she really prefers as partner. The two find themselves in prison. When they are freed and come to meet the woman, they find her nursing a baby, and there is a new man in her life. The third man, ordinary and timid, has given her what the other two could not – motherhood.

Adoor has remained loyal to the time, place and character setting of the original stories but has added his own inputs to the celluloid versions. The films reveal a mellowing of the simmering anger seen earlier such as Swayamvaram, Vidheyan, Mathilukal, and so on. The social comment in Elipathayam returns in Oru Pennum Randaanumand Naalu Pennugal in a soft, gentle manner, like a soft caress of the spring breeze against your cheeks, tears unshed, words unspoken, yet deep, intense
and scathingly incisive critiques about prevailing social conditions at that time. Interestingly, these comments are universal that cut across time, place and person. The films are character-centric.

All the eleven films he directed, from Swayamvaram (1972) to Oru Pennum Randanum (2008) won him several national and international awards. The National Award was bestowed on his films sixteen times, the Kerala Satte Film Awards seventeen times, and the British Film Institute Award for Elipathayam which dealt with the tragedy of an idle, lotus-eating man who exemplifies selfishness, personal failure and subtle violence in a way that destroys the lives of those he lives with. The film bagged the Sutherland Trophy at the London Film Festival in 1982.

He was bestowed the Dadasaheb Phalke Award for his rich contribution to cinema in 2004, besides the Padma Shri (1984) and Padma Vibhushan in 2006. He has also made over 30 short films and documentaries of which The Chola Heritage won a Special Jury Award at the National Awards (1980). In 1984, he won the National Award for Best Writing in Cinema for a collection of essays on cinema under the title Cinemayude Lokam.

The gentle, caressing way in which cinema can be used to tell apparently simple stories with depth and power is perhaps being seen after a long time since Ray’s Apur Sansar. The love of the filmmaker for his medium, his craft, the stories and the characters within them come across through these films so eloquently and softly that they keep haunting one much after the film is over.

Address at the first screening of Mukhamukham in Mumbai in December 1985.

**Interview with the author on July 31, 2012**

**Dr. Shoma Chatterji**

Dr. Shoma A. Chatterji, has been writing prolifically on cinema for the past 35 years. A Lifetime Achievement SAMMAN awardee (2012), she is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author based in Kolkata. She won the ‘Best Film Critic Award’ (1991) and the Award for ‘Best Book on Cinema’ (2002). She won the Bengal Film Journalists Association’s ‘Best Critic Award’in 1998 and the ‘Bharat Nirman Award’ for excellence in journalism in 2004. In 2009-2010, she won a Special Award for ‘consistent writing on women’s issues’ at the UNFPA-Laadli Media Awards (Eastern region).

In 2010, she was bestowed the ‘Kalyan Kumar Mitra Award’, for her remarkable work in film scholarship and contribution as film critic. She won a senior research fellowship from PSBT for research on the portrayal of women on television and another post-doctoral senior fellowship from ICSSR, Delhi for research on The Working Woman in Bengali Cinema between 1950 and 2005, an analytical exploration of ten feature films.

Dr. Shoma Chatterji is one of the senior-most film critics in the country and has been on the jury at film festivals in India and abroad. She has authored 21 published, single-author titles of which a major slice belongs to Indian cinema. Three more books on different aspects of Indian cinema are currently under publication. As an independent freelance film critic, she contributes regularly to around ten print media publications and a number of online publications across India.
**Face to Face** *(Mukhamukam)*  
India | 1984 | 107 min | Colour

**Synopsis**
Mirroring the fortunes and debacles of the Communist Party of Kerala, the film depicts Sridharan, a small town revolutionary, who successfully unites industrial labourers to fight for their rights. Eventually, in Sridharan's absence, some of the leaders of this labour union form the ruling political party. In the second-half of the film, one sees Sridharan, who had gone into hiding for ten years return to his town. However, he is no longer the torch-bearer for society who had once been a source of inspiration to many. He returns as drunkard and a wastrel. Sridharan is in fact a projection of the people's own selves and thus an inconvenient and embarrassing revelation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Adoor Gopalakrishnan</td>
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<td>Screenplay</td>
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<td>Awards</td>
<td>FIPRESCI Award for the Best Film, International Film Festival of India, New Delhi, 1985</td>
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<td>Kerala State Awards for Best Film, Best Direction, Best Cinematography, Best Audiography and Best Editing</td>
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**Shadow Kill (Nizhalkkuththu)**
India | 2002 | 90 min | Colour

**Synopsis**

Set in pre-independence India of the 1940s, Shadow Kill is the story of a hangman, Kaliyappan. In the southern princely state of Travancore (a constituent of present day Kerala), as elsewhere in the country, death by hanging is a prevailing penal practice. The executioner is unhappy due to the guilt attached to his means of earning income. He realizes that the executions that he often carries out are a result of politics and not justice. To cleanse himself of the guilt, the King issues a pardon in the form of a clemency order, which deliberately arrives a few minutes after the hanging. However, Kaliyappan has no way to absolve himself from the guilt. He takes to drinking and consoles himself by the thought that Goddess Kali makes him carry out her wishes.

**Director** : Adoor Gopalakrishnan

**Screenplay** : Adoor Gopalakrishnan

**Producer** : Adoor Gopalakrishna Productions

**DOP** : Mankada Ravi Varma, Sunny Joseph

**Music** : Ilayaraja

**Editor** : Ajith Kumar

**Cast** : Oduvil Unnikrishna, Sunil, Reeja, Sivakumar, Murali

**Awards** : FIPRESCI Award for Best Film, Mumbai International Film Festival, 2003 National Award for Best Regional Film
Rat Trap (Elippathayam)
India | 1981 | 121 min | Colour

**Synopsis**

Unni is a middle aged greying man, who represents a disintegrating social order, a feudal society, no longer relevant. Unni's vestigial attitude makes him a misfit in a rapidly changing society. Unni is a head of a decaying joint family, which has long lived on the fruit of other people's labour. He has three sisters. Janamma, the assertive elder sister is away, married. A mother of grown-up children, she fights for her share of crops and property. At home with Unni are the two younger sisters, Rajamma and Sridevi. Rajamma is obedient and self-effacing, her late thirties, she is unmarried, and an inarticulate victim of her brother's insensitivity and outdated values. Sridevi, the youngest, is neither submissive nor weak. She has been exposed to the world outside, and is defiant and practical.

**Director** : Adoor Gopalakrishnan
**Screenplay** : Adoor Gopalakrishnan
**Producer** : Ravi, General Pictures
**DOP** : Mankada Ravi Varma
**Music** : M.B. Srinivasan
**Editor** : M. Mani
**Cast** : Karamana Janardhanan Nair, T. Sarada, Jalaja, Rajam K. Nair
**Awards** : British Film Institute Award for the most original and imaginative film of 1982
National Awards for Best Regional Film and Best Audiography
Kerala State Awards for Best Film, Best Cinematography and Best Audiography
**The Servile (Vidheyan)**
India | 1993 | 112 min | Colour

**Synopsis**

This parable about good and evil charts the dark landscape of the human spirit, terror going hand in hand with servility. The guileless labourer Thommi with his wife Omana manage to lay their hands on a small piece of land which they then till. Not long after that, he comes into contact with Patelar, a degenerate and fickle landowner who will not leave him alone. The man rapes Omana. Thommi feels deeply humiliated, but his will to survive takes precedence over his fury. Patelar gives him a job as waiter and one evil day he becomes an accomplice to the crimes committed by Patelar. Thommi's impotence eventually leads to him complete capitulation to Patelar.

**Director** : Adoor Gopalakrishnan

**Screenplay** : Adoor Gopalakrishnan

**Producer** : Ravi, General Pictures

**DOP** : Mankada Ravi Varma

**Music** : Vijaya Bhaskar

**Editor** : M. Mani

**Cast** : Mammootty, M.R.Gopakumar, Sabita Anand, Tanvi Azmi

**Awards** : FIPRESCI Award for Best Film, Singapore International Film Festival, 1994

Inter-film prize, Manheim Film Festival, 1994

National Awards for Best Actor and Best Regional Film.

Kerala State Awards for Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Story
**The Walls (Mathilukal)**
India | 1989 | 117 min | Colour

**Synopsis**
A prisoner, Basheer befriends his fellow-inmates and a considerate young jailor. One day, Basheer hears a woman's voice from the other side of the wall – the women's prison. Eventually the two jailbirds become lovebirds. They exchange gifts, and their hearts, without meeting each other. Narayani then comes up with a plan for a meeting: they decide to meet at the hospital a few days later. But before that, Basheer is released, unexpectedly. For once, he does not want the freedom he had craved for.

**Director** : Adoor Gopalakrishnan  
**Screenplay** : Vaikom Muhammad Basheer  
**Producer** : Ravi, General Pictures  
**DOP** : Mankada Ravi Varma  
**Music** : Vijaya Bhaskar  
**Editor** : M. Mani  
**Cast** : Mammootty, Ravi Vallathol, Thilakan, Karamana Janardhanan Nair, P.C.Soman  
**Awards** : FIPRESCI Award for Best Film, Venice International Film Festival 1990.  
UNICEF Prize, Venice International Film Festival 1990.  
Ecumenical Prize, Amiens Film Festival, 1990  
Awards for Best Film Best Direction, Auberville Film Festival for Youth, 2003  
National Awards for Best Direction, Best Actor, Best Audiography and Best Malayalam Film.