

IDSFFK 2024 | Lalit Vachani's moving portrait of a prisoner caught in Kafkaesque situation

Published - July 29, 2024 09:00 pm IST - Thiruvananthapuram



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A good number of the film buffs who walked into Kairali Theatre on Monday morning to catch a long documentary listed as part of the competition section at the 16th International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala (IDSFFK) were in for a surprise.

The synopsis in the festival booklet for Lalit Vachani's *Prisoner No. 626710 is Present* says the documentary is about a prison inmate waiting interminably for a bail hearing in court, while two friends awaiting his release reminisce and discuss the events and the circumstances that led to his arrest.

Even though the prisoner's number appears to be a random one, the face that appears on the screen is a familiar one, speaking from the heart about the ideals that he believes in. In the video that leads to his arrest, he speaks movingly of the values of Mahatma Gandhi, that are under attack in the current times. He exhorts the crowd listening to him to respond to hate with love. Not a word even remotely bordering on violence escapes his lips, on which a calm smile is visible, even when harsh words are hurled at him by television anchors with violent demeanour.

Filmmaker Vachani paints the absurdity of the situation perfectly when he plays in its entirety the speech, using which the person is made an accused, and juxtaposes it with the violent words of many others who are walking free, not having any case filed against them.

Since his experience is representative of many other undertrial prisoners, spending indefinite periods in prison while awaiting a fair trial, the act of not mentioning the name appears to be more than an act of subversion. Just his number would suffice as what he is going through could stand for many others who have lived through similar experiences too.

As his friend says, when asked about her hopes for his release, someone who is convicted has certainty about the day of release, but an undertrial has no such luxury.

His friend shows around the library that she set up at home with the books that he has read in prison over the years that he spent as an undertrial. The sheer variety of the books that he has read gives one a hint of a mind whose thoughts, now chained within four walls, could have added much value to our public sphere.

It also speaks about the times we are living in that a documentary could not be called what it ought to have been called.