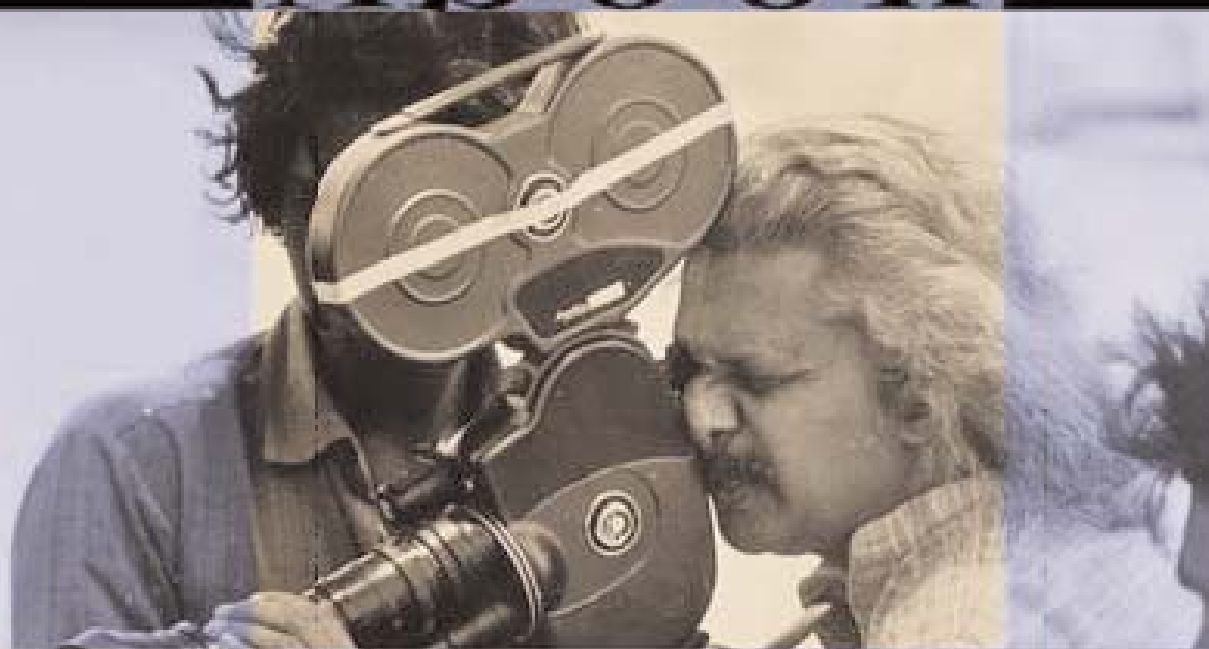


# A DOOF<sub>to</sub> ADOOR



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### ***Mukhamukham: The Man and His Image***

Sreedharan, the protagonist of *Mukhamukham*, is a stranger who walks into town one night and makes it his home. As a charismatic Communist trade union leader, he mobilises the local community to organize a strike at the tile factory. Following the murder of the factory owner, he disappears. This first section of the film ends in 1955 when the Communist Party in Kerala has made major gains and is poised to win the elections in 1957. When Sreedharan returns after ten years, the Party has split into two. The demoralised people turn to him for leadership, but this Sreedharan is only a ghost of his former self, incapable of leading them.

The schism within Sreedharan is reflected in the two-part structure which places the man in relation to his Other. But Gopalakrishnan makes this issue more complex by introducing as many as five narratives into the first section which all seek to answer the question, “Who is this man, Sreedharan?” While this section unfolds in the present, purporting to give us an “objective” account of the leader, it is frequently disrupted by the subjective narratives, which are recollections of those who knew him well. The flashbacks problematise both time and space, making it difficult for us to figure out the truth about the man. Thus Sreedharan comes across increasingly as an enigma which only confirms his essential otherness, long before we even meet the changed man of the second half.

As per some of the “facts” that surface in the first section, Sreedharan emerges as a strong and dedicated leader who has a gift for words which adds significantly to his charisma. His material and physical needs are few. When he’s brutally beaten by the police, he shrugs off the pain as if it were nothing. All through his hunger strike, he doesn’t falter even for a moment.

It is this larger-than-life public persona that will form the basis of his enduring myth. This is how people will remember him during his long absence. But as Gopalakrishnan sets up this “objective”



*Ganga and Asokan in Mukhamukham*

version, he simultaneously deconstructs it mainly through the multiple narratives. We find out, for example, that Sreedharan has a police record and that there are many complaints registered against him. We see him burn letters that could be Party circulars or relics from his hidden past. He drinks secretly and lives with a woman with whom he will later have a son. These facts all militate against his morally upright “clean” image. But, at the same time, we can’t be entirely sure that these facts are valid since most of them are filtered through unreliable memories. What we can be sure of is the fact that the truth about any individual is essentially unknowable. In Sreedharan’s case, both the man and his image remain elusive.

By the time the second section of the film unfolds, we are not entirely surprised to find that the “new” Sreedharan has become what we glimpsed earlier — his repressed Other. The man, who didn’t care for his physical needs, now drinks himself stupid; he, who could be charismatic with words, is now almost entirely silent; he, who was scrupulously honest, steals from his wife; finally, the great leader, completely dedicated to the cause of the workers, is now totally apathetic.

The return of this Sreedharan generates anxiety and panic among the people who desperately try to match the man of the image — the myth they had forged — with the reality before them. Since the Party split, leaving them divided and disillusioned, they have failed to unite and act decisively as a group with a new political agenda. Instead, they have pinned all their hopes on the second coming of Sreedharan. They have invested in his image, in an intangible dream that is ten years old.

What especially unsettles them is the fact that the broken man actually mirrors their own abject condition. His pitiful state reminds them of their failings, their confusion and defeat. Thus the fiction the men invent proves to be the truth — the reality — about themselves. There is, then, only one solution: to destroy the man and replace him with the original image which they had nurtured all these years. In Sreedharan’s murder, this final wish is fulfilled.

Both factions unite and take out a funeral procession in which a portrait of the leader, before his disappearance, is borne aloft. The image reigns supreme and erases from memory the reality of the second Sreedharan. And it brings about, ironically, the union of the two parties — at least for a day.

### ***Kathapurushan: The Agent of History***

*Kathapurushan* encapsulates Kerala’s transition from feudalism to modernity, focusing on a land-owning family. It chronicles, among other things, the decline of that family due to political changes in Kerala (and India) from about 1937 to 1980 — a period of nearly 45 years. The scale of the film is thus epic as it ranges over some of the key historical events that helped forge modernity. Although the family is at the centre of the film, the protagonist of *Kathapurushan* is Kunjunni. The film charts his emotional and psychological growth from birth to adulthood.

In particular, the film stresses the evolution of a somewhat timid and sensitive boy, who, although raised in a feudal family, becomes an active agent in the making of history. Kunjunni

learns to do battle with systems and ideologies that are inimical to the rights of the individual as well as to the quest for justice and equality. This is no Unni or Patelar but a man who consciously seeks to reject the system that has moulded him and which history has rendered obsolete. In the process, he defines himself as an outsider.

While in college, Kunjunni turns his back on his class by embracing Communism. However, he's deeply affected when a friend accuses him of harbouring a die-hard feudal inside. To purge himself from the dregs of such a reactionary ideology, he opts for a more direct form of political activism. He participates in the movement that leads to the 1957 Communist electoral victory. Subsequently, we see him support the Land Reforms Bill of 1959 which effectively ends the power of the landlords by giving away land to the tiller. Kunjunni's family, already facing hard times, stands to lose the most from the passage of this bill. But for him, it's the right step in the creation of a just society. When the Naxalites stage their uprising in 1968, he subscribes to their radical agenda for change. Arrested for murder, he serves time before being acquitted. Later, he takes up political writing, and his book *The Hard Consonants* is banned by his old friends, the Communists, who have been in power since 1980. For Kunjunni, therefore, the fight must go on. He sees it as his duty to challenge all systems, once they become oppressive and retard human progress. Thus there is a continuous negotiation, on his part, with the forces that history unleashes. What matters more than success is the fact that he aligns himself to history and participates in the making of a better world.

A key issue in the film is Kunjunni's relationship with the servants in his feudal home. As a boy, he's very conscious of this social Other employed by the family and inhabiting a different space. However, his grandmother — the family matriarch — does not believe in a rigid hierarchy and treats the servants with respect and affection. This enables Kunjunni to find ways of moving freely between the two worlds. He's especially close to Veluchar, who, in the absence of his father, almost takes on that role. And his playmate and best friend is Meenakshi, daughter of the cook. But despite the fluid nature of these relationships, he is aware of the lines that separate him from "them." Meenakshi, for example, defers to him as *yejamanare* (master).

Kunjunni knows full well that any form of political activism — if it is to succeed — must begin at home. Accordingly, he takes his grandmother's liberalism much farther than she could have imagined by marrying Meenakshi after he's released from jail. He thus draws the Other into his own space. Shortly after, he sells the feudal mansion to none other than Veluchar. The old servant, in a neat reversal, comes to occupy the space which one defined him as the outsider. The hierarchies, with which Kunjunni grew up, are finally dismantled in keeping with his enlightened vision of a world without dividing walls.

### **Anantaram: Fact and Fantasy**

*Anantaram* is, conceptually and formally, perhaps Gopalakrishnan's most ambitious film about the outsider in which he seeks to describe the inner world of a schizophrenic who can't separate fact from fiction. The film is structured as a pair of parallel narratives that are authored by the protagonist Ajayan, a college student in his early twenties. He tells us the story of his life through