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the priest. Thakur asks why can't a sankalp (resolution) be a personal inner-driven affair? Similarly, the kanyabhoj at Amarkantak is a pooja involving girls of pre-puberty age. Young village girls, treated to abundant food, turn obese and drop out from schools. She feels devotees can't play with human lives in the name of Mata Narmada rituals. She also objects to the "culture of begging" perpetrated by parikramawasis. "Very rarely did the locals ask for money when we walked around the river. But nowadays children and women beg, rather brazenly."

With the increasing number of devotees, villagers in the Narmada vicinity host several annachhatra (food shelters). Food is offered liberally to the parikramawasis who walk through village settlements or main highways; Thakur is very sensitive to the food wasted by the devotees. Often, at short notice, tour groups from Maharashtra visit her at the Narmadalaya residential school at Lepa; they demand specific food on fasting days. "If they are treated to meals of their choice at a particular village, they don't bother to inform us about their change of route." Thakur has suggested that the MP government initiate budget homestays for the devotees on the parikrama route. That will streamline two aspects: first, it will discipline the food management at individual villages, second, it will create better toilet/sanitation avenues for the visitors. "Villagers need employment in the post-lockdown scenario. If they are allowed to host pilgrims at a decided rate, they will be enthused to maintain clean facilities. There will be a watch on households/hotels, which shamelessly pump the sewage pipes into the Narmada; also on parikramawasis who defecate in open areas."

The author feels the state government needs to hasten up its Narmada Bachao initiatives, because the pandemic-impacted world has brought new layers of complications in the Narmada parikrama. "The parikrama has become a getaway for the jobless, it is a solace for the lonely-isolated city dwellers; it is a haven for those consuming opium; it is a deposit box of senior citizens who are shooed away by their children," laments Thakur. Once she rescued an 86-year old aaji who fell ill during the parikrama. As the matriarch felt better, she requested Thakur not to transport her back to Pune; the family didn't expect an early return.

Thakur feels Narmada parikrama is a soul-satisfying walk. In today's times of ecological imbalance, it cannot be allowed to continue in its current irresponsible touristic avatar. In fact, the danger to the river, especially in the form of sand mining, is alarming. "If visitors can't become river protectors, they can at least not pollute the ecosystem with biscuit wrappers." Also if pilgrims throw seeds of seasonal fruits along the parikrama, she feels that the upcoming generations will also have a resplendent river route to follow.

Staying in good spirits

A Malayalam animated film by a Mumbai studio brings to life a raconteur's entertaining stories of characters that populate the afterlife

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

SURESH Eriyat, animator and founder of Mumbai-based Studio Eeksaurus is currently home in Kerala, the setting for his studio's latest offering *Kandittund!* (Seen It!), an animated black-and-white short, based on the thoroughly entertaining stories about Malayali ghosts narrated by his father PNK Panicker. These characters, replete with distinct looks and personalities, have a host of influences, from movies and Kerala's performing arts to folklore, urban legends and other hearsay, their descriptions and functions, fluid and ever-changing. There is Eenam-pechi, born when a pregnant woman meets an unnatural death, who collects fruits shed

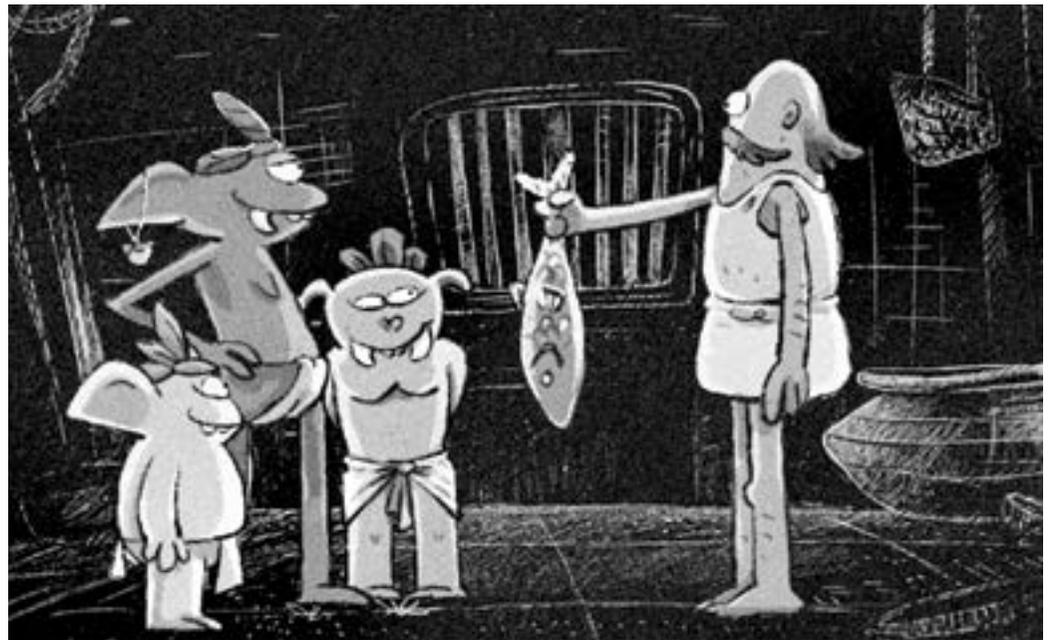
by cashew and mango trees and is terrified of men. There are also Arukola who howls and screams as he floats following people around at night, and Kuttichathan who helps to destroy one's enemies, among many more. "He gave us bizarre physical clues [like the fact that the spirit Aana-Marutha who visits temple premises around noon looks like a baby elephant that waddles along] which opened the spectrums of our imagination," says Eriyat, about the colourful and lifelong raconteur. For director Adithi Krishnadas who took on the film soon after graduating from the National Institute of Design, the characters were born of



ADITHI KRISHNADAS



Suresh Eriyat with his father PNK Panicker whose stories of Malayali spirits have inspired his award-winning short film *Kandittund!*



some playing around so that they fit seamlessly into their rural environment. "I drew them in a way that they made me laugh".

Although concerned with the afterlife, the film is laced with a humour that stems from the personality of its protagonist and narrator Panicker. Eriyat's design-driven production and content creation studio, geared towards bringing local stories, most self-initiated, has several award-winning short films to its credit. But this is his first attempt at filming his father's stories, says Eriyat. "For my other films, his stories could have played a part because they are within me."

Eriyat did an audio recording of his father back in 2015 when he was 85, toying with the idea of a whimsical documentary for a while, while aware that he would need to work with Malayalis to keep the subject's regional essence intact. These stories were an integral part of his early years, he says, and his years away from home studying at NID and then working in Mumbai made him realise how unique they were and the necessity of their documentation. "The plan was to use him in the film and fill it up with animations whenever he is talking about mystical creatures," he says, the idea being to give it a scrapbookish quality where elements from his stories would take the form of photos, scribbles and animations. While the idea of using his father as a caricature had initially filled him with doubt, Krishnadas's rendition ultimately convinced him that they were doing justice to his stories.

Forty four at the time of Eriyat's birth, PNK Panicker has always been a playful and chatty man, indulgent unlike other fathers and always eager to share a real or imaginary story of a ghostly encounter with his children and grandchildren, to strangers in chai shops and old Kerala bakeries. Panicker is also emotional, admits his son, a fact he attributes to him hardly seeing his father who passed away when he was two,



The film's characters, replete with distinct looks and personalities, have a host of influences, from Kerala's performing arts to folklore, urban legends and other hearsay, their descriptions and functions, fluid and ever-changing; PNK Panicker is the film's protagonist and narrator introducing viewers to the various spirits

and being brought up entirely by women. "His voice is also like that of a woman," laughs Eriyat. "He carried a village essence with him, and was constantly making things, like plucking coconut leaves and making whistles out of them for us," he adds. He also fondly recalls their evening walks, where he would sneak him into non-vegetarian restaurants, the act almost sacrilegious for their strictly vegetarian household. "At 91," smiles Eriyat, "he is as dramatic as ever".

The need to bring out his personality with all its associated charm, was what was challenging says Krishnadas, who only had an audio track and a few video recordings for reference. At the same time, it was this detachment and

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Suresh Eriyat

objectivity, believes Eriyat, that allowed her to make the film which has already had 35-odd official selections and picked up several international film festival awards, including at the Swedish International Film Festival, the Kolkata Shorts International Film Festival and the Dumbo Film Festival. In Kerala, it is immensely popular. "People have come up to my father to ask him how to exorcise a spirit," laughs Eriyat.

These stories of encounters with characters from the afterlife have also dwindled with time, he says. He recalls that his father would often say that with increased urbanisation, the ghosts were made to flee. "This was another way of saying that the fear of the unknown was disappearing slowly. We are not isolated anymore, there is light and noise everywhere, and little scope for imagination." These were also cautionary stories. There were many, for instance, he recalls, about walking along ponds at night. "They were just a way of cautioning people not to walk by ponds, especially after a few drinks which were an evening ritual," he says. Moreover, the stories remain with members of the older generation, who were once central to social gatherings but have now become "funny".

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