

# books



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## Adoor: The man and the auteur

### Staff Reporter

One of the most critically acclaimed auteur-directors after India's iconic Satyajit Ray, Adoor Gopalakrishnan creates cinema out of conviction. Not compulsion. He has made just 11 feature films in nearly four decades. One of the pioneers of the New Indian Wave, which unveiled a meaningful alternative to sensational, coincidence-ridden and plot-driven formula fare, Adoor made movies that were rooted in his native Kerala and told touching tales about real people and real issues. Born in 1941 at a time when feudalism was dying and along with it the joint family system as well as the matrilineal institution, he has been studying the community and the larger society through a microscopic examination of the individual.

Adoor shows us how clinging to feudal vestiges could ruin men like Unni in *Elippathayam* (The Rat-Trap) and Bhaskara Patelar in *Vidheyam* (The Servile). *Kathapurushan* (The Man of the Story) documents the history of the period it is set in, and we see social and political developments through the eyes of the film's protagonist. *Mathilukal* (The Walls) takes us into a jail during the British Raj, and a canvas of relationships between the prisoners and the police and among the inmates themselves is presented in its stark reality.

Adoor's characters are extraordinarily varied. A couple living in defiance of society, trying to make ends meet; a rootless, rustic simpleton unaware of his responsibilities; an ex-revolutionary wasting himself, sleeping and eating and drinking, much to the disgust of his old comrades; and a prostitute discovering love only to be separated from her lover by the guardians of society.

Adoor's cinema manages to frame details that often escape our everyday glance, turning the mundane into the magical, the commonplace into the startling. Yet, very little is known about the auteur.

In *Adoor Gopalakrishnan: A Life in Cinema*, the first authorised biography of the Dada Saheb Phalke Award winner, film critic and *Gulf Times* columnist Gautaman Bhaskaran traces the ebbs and flows of the life of this enigmatic director. From his birth during the Quit India Movement to his lonely childhood at his uncles' house; from life at Gandhigram, where Adoor studied economics and politics, to his days and nights at the Pune Film Institute; and from his first film, *Swayamvaram* (One's Own Choice), to his latest, *Oru Pennum Rantaanum* (A Climate for Crime), Bhaskaran's lucid narrative tracks the twists and turns of Gopalakrishnan's life, finding an uncommon man and a rare auteur. An excerpt from the book ...

As his camera rolled, panned and tilted, Gopalakrishnan embraced some ideas, forsook some others. He has made about thirty shorts and documentaries on various subjects, but since the past three decades he has been consciously training his camera on Kerala's performing arts, studying and savouring them to document their magnificent past, their exciting present and their hopefully bright future.

'In the beginning, I made documentaries on any subject,' Adoor says and there were reasons for this. 'I had to survive, and the institution I set up had to. Chitrallekha needed work, because there were many who depended on it to live.'

But I suppose a time came towards the close of the 1970s when he found that his association with Chitrallekha was beginning to weigh on him like an albatross. Much like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's

poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), where an albatross following a ship is first seen as a good omen, but later as evil and is shot, Chitrallekha began impeding Gopalakrishnan's professional progress. His dream turned into disillusionment, and what gave him so much joy led to sorrow later.

His impending exit from Chitrallekha signalled his new resolve to concentrate on the performing arts. 'I enjoyed doing these documentaries because I loved learning about the arts. I did my own research, and I discovered so much about our past in the process,' Adoor tells me.

For instance, a Sanskrit theatre like Koodiyattam is the oldest living theatre in the world. How many people know that? It is some 2000 years old. One of Kerala's tenth-century rulers, Kulasekhara Varman who developed Koodiyattam into its present form wrote two plays, *Subhadradhananjayam* and *Thapathi Swayamvaram*. It also finds mention in the 1500-year-old Tamil classic, Ilangoan's *Silappadikaram*—the story of Kovalan, his wife, Kannagi and his lover, Madhavi.

In 2001, Koodiyattam won a rare honour when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared it a masterpiece of human heritage to be protected and preserved. There were thirty-one other art forms from all over the world that year vying for this privilege, and they included Japan's Nohgaku theatre, China's Kunqu opera and Spain's Elche play, but it was Koodiyattam that stole the show.

And Gopalakrishnan was the man who in his genteel manner drew the attention of the UNESCO jury in Paris to Koodiyattam. The members saw just fifteen minutes of a three-hour documentary on Koodiyattam by him, and were floored. This was the first time ever that UNESCO was conferring a heritage status on an oral tradition. Koodiyattam certainly deserved it, but had it not been for Gopalakrishnan's brilliant documentary, scripted and assisted by Sudha Gopalakrishnan (a scholar on Koodiyattam), the Paris jury might have never understood the enormous significance of this theatre, and the need for it to live and flourish.

But to make that documentary, the man had to fight, first of all to carry his camera inside a koothambalam. Literally, it means temple for theatre—a marvellous structure, perfect in acoustics and exclusively used for staging Koodiyattam—and is part of some grand Hindu temples in