

Aravindan, film-maker of poetic vision, dead

By Khalid Mohamed

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THE eminent Malayalam film-maker, G. Aravindan — one of the most lucid and original minds in Indian cinema — collapsed and died after a massive heart attack in his

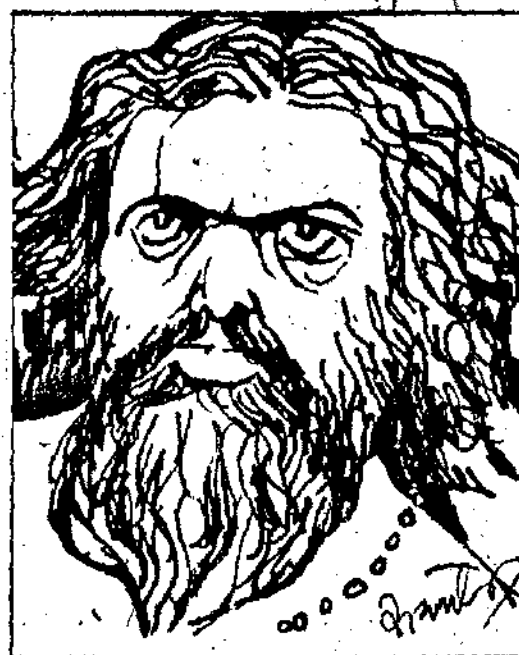
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Thiruvananthapuram home just after midnight on Friday. He was 55.

The news shocked film-makers and cinecastes here who condoled with each other over the telephone since early morning. In January, Aravindan was at the Madras international film festival and looked trim and in good health as he had lost weight. He had been advised by doctors to keep a watch on his diet and to quit smoking. Stroking his flowing grey beard, as was his wont, he had laughed, "I am finally looking after myself."

Ironically, the end came when he was looking for some medicine in the bedroom for his wife Kaumidi who suffers from asthma. His only son, Ramu, a student at the National Institute of Design, attempted to resuscitate him, but the doctors who arrived at 12.15 p.m. said it was much too late.

Aravindan had returned home around 11 p.m. after working at Chitranjali studio on a



A self-portrait by Aravindan

Doordarshan-commissioned documentary on the noted novelist, Thansankaran Pillai. At Madras, he had held previews of his new feature film *Vastuhara*, (*The Dispossessed*), a compassionate account of the no-exit situation faced by Bangladesh refugees in Calcutta. He had nurtured this project for 17 years.

"Did you like it?" he would ask shyly after one of his film's screenings, but would look away in embarrassment when the answer was in superlatives. Everyone who met him would remark on the self-effacing, gentle demeanour of the Kerala film-maker who with films like *Thampu* (*The Circus Tent*), *Esthappan* (*Stephen*) and *Chidambaram* excited worldwide interest in Malayalam cinema. He had become legendary for creating films of poetic beauty and power on shoestring budgets, quite often within the range of Rs 7 lakhs to Rs 10 lakhs, less than the sum frequently spent on one-minute ad films.

Winner of several national and Kerala state film awards, including one for his last film *Vastuhara*, and feted constantly at international film festivals, Aravindan completed ten feature films and four documentaries in a career spanning 17 years. He was honoured in 1984 with a retrospective of his work by the Cinematheque Francaise in Paris,

as well as in Canada. His films were showcased at film festivals in Berlin, London, Cannes, Mannheim, Locarno and Hawaii. However, at home he would sometimes have to contend with myopic juries, which kept his films *Marattam* and *Unni* out of the Panorama section of the international film festival. Moreover, his excellent documentary *Sahajah* (*Becoming*, 1988) ran into snafus with the Festival of India bureaucracy when it was to be shown in the Soviet Union. Aravindan's study of the Ardhanarishwara concept, or the androgynous role sometimes taken on by performing artistes, was considered far too unorthodox.

A film maker "by default," as he would describe himself, Aravindan was born in 1935 in Kerala. He graduated from University college, Trivandrum, in botany, which explains his fascination with nature in his films.

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Film-maker Aravindan dead

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From 1961 to 1974, he sketched a regular cartoon strip called *Cheriy Manushyaram Valiya Lokavum* (*Small Men and the Big World*), commenting on everyday foibles in the widely circulated weekly, *Matrubhoomi*.

He would trace his interest in the arts to his father, M. N. Govindan Nair, who initiated the Writers' Co-operative in Kerala. Aravindan's uncle was a cartoonist. "I wish I could have painted," the film-maker would say, admitting disarmingly, "but I didn't have a strong colour sense. I wish I could have become a singer but my training in Carnatic vocal music was stopped abruptly because my teacher left Kottayam, where my family lived for many years."

However, he would often compose music. The widely-applauded film, *Piravi*, directed by his favourite cameraman Shaji, had music by him. So did "Aro Oral" directed by Pavithran.

Aravindan did a stint as a journalist with the magazine, *Kerala Bhushanam*, and also immersed himself in the Kerala theatre movement, organising a group named "Thiravarung," promoting folk and classical drama. To earn a regular income, he joined the Rubber Board, a post he held for 22 years even while making films during his months of leave.

As an officer he stayed in a hotel room in Calicut, which soon became a salon of sorts for writers, artists and free-thinkers. It was after a conversation with the writer, Thikodian, that he was inspired to make his first film

Uttarayanam (*The Turning Point*, 1974), dealing with the gap between the pre-and post-Independence generations. Made with money borrowed from friends, the film, he would often recall, "was shot essentially on instinct. I knew nothing about camera lenses but that was no handicap. The images arose the way I had imagined they would." His debut film won him two national awards and six state awards.

Next came *Kanchana Sita* (*Golden Sita*, 1978) relating stylistically a passage from the Ramayana. "Unfortunately a controversy arose because I had cast tribals. They have classical features and are marvellous actors. Yet I was accused of blasphemy," he would say incredulously. The following year, *Thampu* filmed in stark black-and-white while focusing on circus life symbolised the transient bond between a remote village and rootless artistes.

In 1979, *Kummatty* (*The Bogeyman*) narrated a fable for children. The bogeyman isn't as wicked and ugly as myths make him out to be, was Aravindan's affectionate plea. It won the best children's film award and the director was to say later, "I would like to make more films for kids. But where is the finance?" His *Esthappan* (1979) trailed a wanderer who could be either a saint or a madman, and revealed the film maker's fascination with the mystic and the ambiguous.

In *Pokkuvayil* (*Twilight*, 1981), he probed the mind of a young man on the brink of insanity. The result was a visual masterpiece with passages of sheer poetry when the camera lingered on the landscapes at sunset, reflecting in

a way the protagonist's anxieties. *Chidambaram* (1985), featuring Smita Patil, dealt with the intervention of the artificial in nature. "I have this reverence for nature," he said, "and that's why in the film I criticised the very thought of a hybrid rose garden."

On a more playful note, there was *Oridath* (*And There was a Village*, 1986), which looked at the comic effects of the arrival of electricity in a remote village. His subsequent films were *Marattam* and *Unni* (1989). He made the documentaries *The Seer Who Walks Alone* on J. K. Krishnamurthy (1985), *Contours of Linear Rhythm* (1987), *Anadi-Dhara* (*The Unending Flow*, 1988) and *Sahaja*.

Although his themes were always contemporary, no one ever described Aravindan as "modern." He dared to be deliberately stately in an era when razmatazz is worshiped. He was never as interested in jazzy technique as in the subtlest feeling that could be expressed through the human face staring at the camera. He was therefore less a dramatist than a portraitist, gifted with a metaphysical urgency and implacability. His gallery of wanderers, the mentally troubled and the adulterous, never became a rogues' gallery, simply because he saw the torments of his characters in terms of a world still governed by an unknown force. For Aravindan, man, not the medium, was the message.

The body of Mr Aravindan was cremated at the electric crematorium.

(Additional reporting from Thiruvananthapuram by V.R. Mani)