

VAGHACHIPANI

Tiger's Pond

Director Natesh Hegde

Indien, Singapur | 2025

87 min. | Kannada, Malayalam with English subtitles

Screenplay Natesh Hegde, Amaresh Nugadoni. **Cinematography** Vikas Urs. **Editing** Natesh Hegde, Paresh Kamdar. **Music** Leo Heiblum. **Sound Design** Shreyank Nanjappa. **Sound** Shreyank Nanjappa. **Production Design** Jagadeep Hedge, Mallkarjun Shivalli. **Castings** Natesh Hedge. **Producers** Anurag Kashyap, Ranjan Singh, Natesh Hedge. **Co-Producer** Jeremy Chua. **Production companies** Flip Films (Mumbai, India), Kadalivana (Mumbai, India), Potocol (Singapur, Singaporer). **With** Dileesh Pothan, Achyut Kumar, Natesh, Gopal Hegde, Sumitra, Bindu Raxidi.

World sales Loco Films

Synopsis

The idyllic landscape of Vaghachipani conceals a fallen world under the sway of the tiger god. The secular lord of this domain, however, is Prabhu, a ruthless businessman trying to win a local election with the help of his faithful right-hand man, an immigrant known as Malabari. When Basu, a politically savvy, outcast worker, stands up to their intimidation tactics and ill-earned authority, the strict hierarchy and the feudal order of Prabhu's dominion threatens to come undone. Deepening the inquiry of his acclaimed debut feature PEDRO (2021), Natesh Hegde offers a sharp, simmering crime drama exploring the nefarious confluence of faith, caste and political power in Southern India. Set in a hermetic village ruled by fear and tradition, Hegde's film is a game of tigers and cows, a tale of structured oppression and spontaneous resistance around the figure of the mute maid, Pathi. The spectral camera drifts through this netherworld, registering its rocky terrain, its murky goings-on and its unforgettable faces in rapturous 16mm images. As it unmask the brutality beneath the serene beauty of the village, the still waters of **TIGER'S POND** begin to reveal their treacherous depths. (Srikanth Srinivasan)

Director and scriptwriter **Natesh Hegde** was born and brought up in Yellapura in the Western Ghats of Karnataka, India. He completed a masters in journalism at the Karnataka University Dharwad. PEDRO (2021), his debut feature film, was part of NFDC Film Bazaar Work in Progress Lab 2019 and had its World Premiere in Busan New Currents Competition 2021. It won the Roberto Rossellini award for Best Director at the 5th Pingyao International Film Festival and the Montgolfiere d'Argent at Festival des 3 Continents Nantes. His short stories have been published in major Kannada-language magazines.

Films: 2021: Pedro. 2025: Vaghachipani / Tiger's Pond.

Director's Statement

The Story Starts From a Space

Questions of existence condensed into a cinematic thought

I have always been troubled by the fundamental questions of existence. What is it to live life? Especially in an unjust world. Whether a troubling or a comforting aspect of life – it's an intense experience as well as a curious one. The characters in this film are exercising their agency and yet are trapped in the story. Much like our lives.

TIGER'S POND is an attempt to engage with these aspects through a personal cinematic language. Working with real people and their lived experiences helps me to grow into the story and its development. The imagining of the story starts from the space and the space dictates the de-sign of the film. Then come the characters and the plot. The story is then reiterated and reimagined during the making of it. The story, the characters, the cinematic design, and the shooting will all be used to convey a cinematic thought – one that explores the conflict between history, space, human existence and our weaknesses.

Natesh Hegde

Interview

Filmmaking as Farming

Natesh Hegde talks to Carolin Weidner and Srikanth Srinivasan about the real life inspirations for his film's characters and tragedy as resistance

Srikanth Srinivasan: Welcome, Natesh, and congrats on your new feature. Perhaps we could begin with the title of the film which is Tiger's Pond in English, and Vaghachipani in Kannada [the main language spoken in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, ed.]. Could we talk about the place that it is set in, also called Vaghachipani, which seems to be a fictional village, but also very strongly rooted to the region you come from?

Natesh Hegde: The film is shot in my hometown where I also shot my previous feature, Pedro (2021). I shot that film in the rainy season and this film in winter. The title comes from the name of a real village nearby. That name had always fascinated me. Also, in the film, there is the lurking presence of a tiger. I wanted to evoke that fear. So I thought this would be an apt title.

SS: The credits say that the film is based on the stories of Amaresh Nugadoni. What attracted you to his writings and what did you draw from them?

NH: The character of Pathi, the girl. I had seen one such mentally-challenged girl at the bus stop in the town of Sirsi, where I was doing my graduation. One day, I noticed that her tummy had suddenly bulged, and after some time, she disappeared. This character always intrigued me. What happened to her? How can

a society behave that way? Such a character was in Amaresh Nugadoni's writings. Then I rewrote the script and made lot of changes. Once a short story becomes a film, there is a shift of medium, where we are creating something else. So I took that as a starting point.

SS: The figure of Pathi is so striking, especially the actor, her unforgettable face and her screen-piercing gaze. How did you cast this actor and what were your directions to her?

NH: She's a mentally-challenged girl from my village. I couldn't direct her like other actors: explain a scene and make her act. She's there and I created the film around her. It's strange, but she started responding to me. The form of the film is derived from her being, instead of the other way around. It's absurd, but I feel like the celluloid wanted her, you know.

SS: How did you develop this character?

NH: I saw her as the central human figure around which there are all kinds of lust: lust for power, for money, for identity. She's the only pure figure, the only character not pursuing these things, not bothered about anything. She's just there, present.

SS: You create a parallel between Pathi and the village goddess that we see at regular intervals. Could you talk about the two deities that we see in the film? At the beginning, we see the goddess, who is celebrated during a festival and whom Pathi has a close relationship with. But this goddess is gradually consumed by the waters and replaced, in a way, by the tiger god, feared and worshipped by the villagers.

NH: The goddess is a folk deity known as Mari, usually created when a village is hit by tragedy, disease or some other affliction. The villagers craft this idol and install it outside the village so that the bad omen goes away; the next village does the same. Sometimes, this deity is created to honour someone who has been wronged, exploited or killed. The belief is that this person has now become God and will seek revenge. It's a cyclical practice. My idea was that this is what is happening with Pathi too. Maybe the goddess was created after someone like Pathi.

The tiger, known as Kshetrapala, is a guardian deity that protects the territory of the village. In a way, it's the conscience of Malabari, the character played by Dileesh Pothan in the film, his inner voice that tells him he has committed a wrong.

SS: The tiger god is also associated with Prabhu, the character played by Achyuth Kumar, who worships it and seeks its blessings.

NH: Other people in the village worship it too, but the god grants Prabhu his wishes. I'm questioning why. Why is the god helping him, if he is helping at all, even when he is seeing all his wrongdoings? This guy who is roaming free after all his deeds, winning elections and becoming the head of the village...

Carolyn Weidner: You mix professional actors and non-professionals in your cast. How did they interact with each other? And what was your role in that chemistry?

NH: I've done that in all my films. I cast my father in my first feature and he plays Basu in this film. I don't make a distinction between professionals and others. How can we call Pathi a non-professional actor? She's an actor like others.

SS: But with Achyuth Kumar, you cast an actor with such a strong presence already in mainstream Kannada cinema. So how does that work?

NH: For Prabhu, I always had Achyuth Kumar in mind. Maybe thanks to Pedro, I got access to him. Otherwise, I would have cast someone from the village. I don't see any difference. Even with

him, I have created my kind of film; I have not used his type of acting. You know, industry-standard acting. I don't like that.

SS: Let's talk about his character, Prabhu, who is the head of the cooperative mill. He comes from a very feudal, wealthy background, lives in this large ancestral mansion and wields a lot of power in the village even without having to win the election.

NH: For me, Prabhu's power is also his tragedy. He leads that kind of life because of the system, because of what he inherits. I feel for him in some ways. Maybe he is committing a crime. It's tragic that he has become such a guy. Throughout India, you can see this kind of people abusing power and roaming free. That is the danger.

CW: We sometimes see Prabhu drenched in red and green lights. It feels like the film's characters are associated with a certain colour palette or a lighting scheme.

NH: We had a colour scheme for the film in general: the look of a coin that is corroded or retrieved from a pond. We wanted the film to feel like it was discovered from somewhere. The narration is also that way: not very concrete, elliptical and a little absurd. So we felt we could go for red/green lights inside Prabhu's old car. We didn't have to care about realism. Fassbinder also influenced me a bit.

SS: You used 16mm for the first time in this film. How did that happen?

NH: We wanted to shoot Pedro on film stock, but didn't have the courage. I never went to film school, so no one would have given me money to shoot my first film on celluloid either. After Pedro, we were sure about shooting on 16mm, not just because of the texture or the look and feel of it. The very practice of making films on celluloid is different. I wanted that kind of practice. I don't want to do the coverage-driven filmmaking in practice now. I really don't like that. We were sure that we would build the film like a house, brick by brick. Every shot is a brick for me. I wanted that clarity about the design of it.

SS: Did the choice of 16mm change the way you worked compared to Pedro? Because now you have to plan your shoot with limited stock.

NH: No, we made Pedro the same way; just that there was a digital camera. We didn't shoot extra or coverage shots. Whatever we see in the film is what we shot. With this film too, we didn't have extra shots. Initially, for a couple of days, it was all very sacred: we handled the film stock like a flower. But eventually we got used to it. Then it was a camera, just a camera.

SS: But you also achieve celluloid-specific effects. For example, the flare at the edge of the frame when the goddess appears.

NH: Oh, that was a mistake. There was a light leak from the edge. We are struggling to restore it. But yeah, we knew that there will be... it's a photochemical reaction. It's not like digital. And we wanted that, that's why we wanted to shoot it on film stock. It's a living thing for us. I really like rough films. I don't like very neat films. As human beings, we make mistakes and we are a package of good and bad. I want my films to be like that.

SS: You have a sophisticated style of constructing your scenes, with prominent camera movements. You may begin a scene directly with a close up, without an establishing shot or without going from a master shot and so on, or end it as sharply. Do you kind of storyboard your film?

NH: I feel like the camera is a creating tool, not just a recording tool. That may be why I move the camera so much. I don't storyboard, but I write the film the way I see it in my mind. The script is very brief, some twenty-five pages, but I write it as

though I'm seeing the film. That includes camera movement, particular lights and particular sounds.

SS: The musical score, by Leo Heiblum, is also an integral part of your film. It has an understated quality, but also an eerie undertone. How did you go about deciding the score for this film?

NH: I had never used music in my films before, so I was a little hesitant. But I wanted a fable kind of quality to this film, and that determined the music, which features instruments such as percussions and violin or scratched strings. I wanted the music to have the quality of Pathi. That was the brief.

SS: Some filmmakers, when they are setting their films in a particular geographic location, want their music to reflect sounds from that region as well. But you take the opposite direction, where you're using markedly Western instruments in your score.

NH: We don't have to be slaves of realism. The idea that we have to use sounds from the place the film is set in, I don't want to do that. I treat music and sounds the way I treat the images; together they evoke something universal. We don't have to be region-specific. And we never say: this actor is from somewhere else; he doesn't behave like that particular village guy. It's a constructed reality, and we can construct anything.

CW: In this reality, your characters watch TV, and there is this particular film they watch. What is it, and why did you choose this one?

NH: That's a very pulpy Kannada film song. I enjoy those songs by [music composer] Hamsalekha. It's a guilty pleasure.

SS: Why was it important that Malabari be an immigrant from the state of Kerala? Can you talk about this character and what went into it?

NH: Because that makes him very vulnerable. He is dependent on this landlord/employer, Prabhu, for his daily bread. He doesn't speak the language they speak. He's not from this place, so he faces the pressure of having to fit in. That's his struggle and that's what drives his behaviour. I was very particular about that character being an immigrant.

SS: He is also a mechanic who runs a gambling racket in his garage. We're curious about this peculiar form of gambling.

NH: It's a form of gambling called Gudgudi. I have lost money in it as well! I like this chart they use, people throwing money, the colours of it. It's a memory from my childhood: there would be these Yakshagana performances happening in the village, and whenever a gambling call came from afar, all the people would abandon the Yakshagana performance to go to that gambling game in the middle of the night. I wanted to re-create that.

SS: Why did you cast Dileesh Pothan, who is himself an acclaimed filmmaker, as Malabari?

NH: I liked his presence in his previous films, Lijo Jose Pellissery's *Ee.Ma.Yau.* (2018), for instance. I wanted him initially because of his size. He has an imposing build, but he is very soft spoken. There is a contrast in his personality, and I wanted that. Here is a well-built guy, but in a vulnerable position in front of Prabhu, who is not a big guy, but he is making him do things. Then I discovered that Dileesh is a very good actor with a great potential that no one has seriously tapped into. His presence is overwhelming.

SS: You play the character of Venkati, Prabhu's timid young brother, yourself. He is part of the feudal family, but also terrorized by his brother. What was your idea of Venkati and why did you cast yourself in the role?

NH: Venkati was a very fascinating character for me. I wanted to develop the character without showing his past. He had to carry

the trauma of being Prabhu's brother. He is the only character in contact with everyone else in the film, a connecting link. He is also, after Pathi, the most exploited or tragic character. My friends convinced me to play him myself. It was fun, it was stressful.

CW: What finally happens to Pathi is quite sad and horrific. Did you ever have hesitations going that way?

NH: What happens to her is a fear I have myself. I don't want it to happen. That fear pushes me to create this. It's bleak, but I'm hoping that people will be a little warmer to each other, more considerate to people like Pathi.

SS: Both in Pedro and in this film, you end the story on a very bleak note. We're curious where you get this taste for tragedy from. Is it a resistance to the triumphalism of mainstream cinema?

NH: Yes, resistance is part of it. And also, the things happening around us. The starting point for this film is the image of police officers burning a girl, a real event that happened in... I don't want to mention the name of the place. But that particular image pushed me to make this film. As for Pedro, my father had experienced a similar kind of tragedy. Luckily, he survived, but he burnt his back, his finger. When I saw that incident, I began to think about how a human being can commit that kind of a crime. So maybe I'm concerned, that's why I'm creating this story.

SS: Your films seem to originate in events that provoke outrage. But the films are themselves not very angry.

NH: I believe that you have to rebel with a soft voice. You don't have to shout; take Gandhi or Mandela, for example. They rebelled with a soft voice. I love that. And I believe that. You don't have to shout to be a rebel.

SS: How does that translate into filmmaking? You don't tell the audience what precisely to feel about a character or about an action. How do you see the place of the viewer in your films?

NH: I really don't feel I'm superior to the audience. Me and my audience together create the story. I want the audience's help to create this story. I'm not creating this story alone.

SS: Finally, making films from a relatively remote place as you do, away from centres of cultural production – is that an advantage or disadvantage?

NH: I see only the advantages. It's like growing banana trees in my field. That is the way I want to create my films. If I feel it has become a job, I'll definitely stop. I don't want to conceive of this as job. As long as the land is fertile, I'll try to grow something. Then, I'm done.

SS: May the land be forever fertile for you. Thank you for your time.

NH: Thank you. My pleasure.