

We see, but we in turn are not seen

Algorithms

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Facing a blind person is an unsettling experience in itself; it is akin to facing an icon that we can peer at but can't look back at you; we see but we, in turn, are not seen... It unsettles you because you are denied that entry through that 'window to the soul'. The blind person's soul thus eludes the grasp of our blinding vision, though our strategies too grow dark and blind after 3 or 4 moves. *Algorithms* by Ian McDonald is a film that follows three visually challenged boys from different parts of India – Darpan Inani (15) from Vadodara, Saikrishna (12) from Chennai, Anant Kumar Nayak (16) from Bhubaneswar; they are all chess wizards playing at the state and national level and have resolutely set their sights upon becoming a grand master in the world junior chess championship.

Their mentor is Charudatta Jadhav, a former blind chess champion who has sacrificed his personal chess career glories to dedicate himself to identify, encourage, nurture and promote blind chess players in the country. Their odyssey to the global arena along with Charudatta's dreams and despair about his talented wards, maneuvers and strategies he adopts to coax and cajole them to focus upon the goals, etc constitute the warp and woof of this film. 'Chess is a mind game, and so, we can surpass the non-blind', he reiterates. His task is not only to teach them strategies, hone their skills, and mould their attitudes; but also to counsel and sometimes wheedle the parents to believe in their child's talents and to facilitate them. With all the emotional, familial and psychological luggage on their backs, they travel together from the national level championships to the global arena. It is a heart-wrenching journey of hope and despair, thrills and throes.

Algorithms is thus a film that spans across space (from their small towns in India to global tournaments) and time; the film took around four years to complete (2009-12). As one travels with them sharing their yearnings and frustrations, we also become part of the narrative and begin to share Charudatta's dream and the boys' agonies.

For any documentary of this sort that closely watches its protagonists and follows their everyday life, there is always the temptation to either dehumanize by idolizing or objectifying them. *Algorithms* very assiduously stays away from it, by traversing that thin line between its protagonists' private and public lives, between objectivity and identification. There is always this temptation to leer at others' follies, falls and foibles. For instance, many a documentary on such themes love it when their 'prey' lose control themselves and break into tears or fall into a diatribe... Such violations on privacy is all the more easy and challenging, when you work with the visually challenged, as they are often unaware of camera positions, angles and movements. This documentary is exemplary in its attitude to its subjects, in respecting their humanity and not treading upon emotional boundaries... As the camera lingers over their nervous moves and movements, uneasy hesitations and sometimes what turns out to be fatal

decisions, other times the joyous exuberance of victory punctuated by the numbing despair of defeat, the viewer gradually become part of the emotional world the film weaves around us. It is this deep and gentle sense of humanity that marks this documentary from what could have been a clinically detached or melodramatically convoluted film.



Director Ian McDonald

Another factor that lends emotional complexity to the film is that all the three boys have different attitudes towards the game, world and life; they differ in their temperaments, reactions and responses; so too are their strengths and weaknesses. Darpan from Baroda is very cheerful and forthcoming and has a mother who is very supportive; he is a fighter who enjoys a tough game. Saikrishna from Chennai, on the other hand, has wavering moods even while he tries to articulate his frustrations and attempts to overcome them. At one point, he even breaks into tears when he loses a game. The third one, Ananth is different from the other two, as he comes from a very poor family that can't afford the luxuries of grooming a chess player. The way in which Charudatta conducts his mentoring is a feat in the subtle art of man management and motivation; he is equally at par with the parents and the young boys, sometimes scolding and warning, other times patting and lauding them. That is what makes his final despair heartrending to us, when his boys draw the game

between themselves and thus lose their final chance of winning the laurel, thus shattering his dreams of India making its mark in the global chess arena. He only knows too well that his chances are even more remote by the time the next championship happens, when more trained and mentored talents will come from all over the world dimming our chances further.

In mathematics and computer science, an algorithm is a step-by-step procedure for calculations. To use the same analogy, Charudatta, in the Indian context is working with algorithms that are highly randomized, where the transition from one state to the next

is not necessarily deterministic, but always vulnerable to chance events and inputs. For someone like him who always keeps his sights four moves ahead, it could be all the more depressing. But in the end, we find a resolute Charudatta eagerly hunting for new talents to realize the dream of his life...

This sense of exploration of the game of chess, blind players, visionary crusader as metaphors that organically develop with the narrative and its makers is evident in the words of the director Ian McDonald: "Initially, my concern was to capture this mind game as a game of equality for the blind and a metaphor for life. Chess demands patience and foresight that go with being blind. Four moves in, it puts the sighted on par with the blind. Blindness that emerged as 'difference, not lack' then went beyond to actually critique our ocular-centric world. Also, with one constant focus on the truth of the lives of the blind chess players, the slant shifted from the sociological to the philosophical.

"I began to understand the Indian verse: **sukha dukhe same kirtva** – that joy and sorrow, profit and loss, winning and losing are but the same; they torment us but we must treat them as same and engage in life. Finding hope in hopelessness and possibility in impossibility, the Blind Chess community moves



Top image: Anant Kumar Nayak
Bottom image: Saikrishna



Top image: Darpan Inani
Bottom image: Charudatta Jadhav (mentor)

Image courtesy: AkamPuram

forward, reminding us of the forgotten significance of touch and of the materiality of our social existence in an era dominated by the visual and the virtual."

The narrative of *Algorithms* can also be seen as a metaphor for post-globalization India. For one, chess is an ancient as well as universal game that is supposed to have originated from India. And so, the travails and struggles of these adolescent geniuses who make that epic journey from their small town margins to the global centre of world chess championship, their agonies and frustrations encountered all the way, the despair of their mentor Charudatta Jadhav - all in a way seem to resonate with the civilisational dilemmas of a nation in the cusp of global changes and globalised aspirations, local talents and globalising opportunities...