



an **AkamPuram** production

# ALGORITHMS

Four Moves In, We Are All Blind

# *Algorithms*

(2009–2012)

In India, a group of boys dream of becoming Chess Masters, driven by a man with a vision. But this is no ordinary chess and these are no ordinary players. *Algorithms* is a documentary on the thriving but little known community of Blind Chess in India.

a film by  
Ian McDonald

produced by  
Geetha J.

India | 2012 | HDV | B&W | 96 mins  
English, Hindi, Tamil, Odiya with English subtitles

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India

## **Synopsis**

In India, a group of boys dream of becoming Chess Masters, driven by a man with a vision. But this is no ordinary chess and these are no ordinary players. *Algorithms* is a documentary on the thriving but little known world of Blind Chess in India.

Filmed over three years from just before the World Junior Blind Chess Championship in Sweden in 2009 to just after the next championship in Greece in 2011, it follows three talented boys from different parts of India and a totally blind player turned pioneer who not only aims to situate India on a global stage but also wants all blind children to play chess.

*Algorithms* travels with the chess players to competitive tournaments and visits them in their home milieu where they reveal their struggles, anxieties and hopes. It moves through the algorithms of the blind chess world challenging the sighted of what it means to see. Going beyond sight and story, this observational sport doc with a difference elicits hidden realms of subjectivity. It allows for the tactile and thoughtful journey that explores foresight, sight and vision to continue long after the moving image ends.

*Algorithms* is the first ever feature documentary on Blind Chess.

## Story

The story involves three talented boys, Darpan (15), Sai Krishna (12), Anant (16) and Charudatta Jadhav, a former chess champion turned mentor and organizer. Blind Chess includes totally blind players as well as visually impaired players. Darpan from Baroda is totally blind, Sai Krishna from Chennai is going blind and Anant from Bhubaneswar is totally blind. Then there is Charu Sir from Mumbai. Chess saved him when he went totally blind in his teens and he now wants every blind child to play chess. He is the leading and linking figure between the two world junior chess championships that form the narrative arch of the film.

The film opens with the qualifying tournament in Mumbai in January 2009. Here we meet the three boys. Surprisingly, Darpan, a player who has never lost to another blind junior, loses and Sai Krishna goes to Sweden for the Junior World Championship. Meanwhile Darpan recovers from the blow and goes on to become the youngest national blind chess champion. He competes against senior players in Serbia at the Senior World Championship. Anant however is struggling to balance his studies and chess even as his coach Durgaprasad urges him on.

The film takes us to different social and class milieus in different parts of India. As the countdown to the next world championship in Greece begins the challenge facing Darpan, Sai and Anant becomes clear. Passion and preparation for chess has to be balanced with the demands of academic studies for that alone can fetch a job. We visit their homes and listen to the poignant story each family has to tell. We meet the anxious parents and the frustrated coach of Anant, the small family of Sai including his blind elder sister, the totally dedicated parents of Darpan. We see the boys in their schools as successful students. Over the three-years, the three boys grow into young men. They develop their chess game as Charudatta analyses their game, strategises for them and motivates them on.

The match fever begins with the National B tournament in February 2011. Anant is knocked out. Of the fourteen players who qualify for the National A in May 2011, *three* are juniors. Darpan and Sai Krishna are taken aback by the appearance of a new junior who is ranked above them! Two will certainly go to Greece in September 2011. Sai Krishna comes third and is distraught. But Charudatta and the committee decide to send all three junior players to Greece. The final title-deciding match sees the players within grasp of winning a medal. Does Charu Sir realize his dream?

## Style

Chess is a mind game. This makes it the only game where the blind can play on par with the sighted. This blind mind game becomes visually rich as we watch the fingers tell the story of the game. *Algorithms* reflects this beautiful game on a ruminative note that leads us to think about 'seeing the world' and/versus 'being in the world'.

Observational in style, the documentary captures the struggles of Charudatta to use chess to empower his blind 'brothers and sisters' and to raise India's profile in blind chess. But as we become immersed in this unique journey through the algorithms of the tactile world of blind chess, it takes on a meditative tone. The compelling narrative of Charudatta and boys provokes us to reflect about touch, foresight and eyesight.

In the course of this understated and nuanced film, it becomes clear that blind chess is both a manual for the blind and an osmotic metaphor for life. Foresight is essential for Chess. While touch provides the blind players with a vision of the board as it is, foresight gives them the ability to see beyond the immediate and calculate probabilities of future actions. And this they do every day, day in day out. With patience. A must for Chess. Is it any wonder then that Charudatta feels that with proper infrastructure and training the blind can surpass the sighted in chess.

The film maintains a gentle and subtle approach to the various emotional and intellectual signs of the world it offers. The depth of the black and white image draws you in to this enclosed and intense world matched by the sounds and music of chess and India.

Chess is a loaded signifier, both cinematically and in terms of sport. While the story is obviously a sporting one, a competition story of hope and ambition, friendship and rivalry, parents and teachers, *Algorithms* goes beyond this to encompass further layers of meaning as Charudatta and the young chess players of India take us on a journey into the algorithms of Blind Chess.

## **The Filmmaker**

Ian McDonald

Ian McDonald is a sport sociologist and documentary filmmaker. Having always used the camera to support his research on sport and physical culture in UK and India, Ian's move to documentary filmmaking benefits from a seemingly effortless 'way of seeing' that has resulted in documentaries with a difference on art and sport, especially of the 'sporting outsider' - the one who is seen as 'different' by a 'normal' society. His documentaries have been screened at film festivals, conferences and campaign meetings around the world.

### Filmography

Inside the Kalari (2007/20mins)  
Brighton Bandits (2007/40mins)  
Shame (2009/5mins)  
Out of Our Hands (2009/9mins)  
Melancholic Constellations: The Art of William Kentridge (2010/55mins)  
Willem Boshoff: Reflections of a South African Artist (2010/25mins)  
10-11 Pavilion Parade (2011/15mins)  
Justin (2011/30mins)

### **Filmmaker's Statement**

Chess is an ancient and universal game with origins in India. When Geetha and I began this project in India in 2008, we knew what we were encountering was unknown, complex and beautiful. Then began a journey that challenged our perception of ability and disability, of sight and vision. The paradox of using a visual medium to image those without sight that weighed heavily on us lessened with the complete trust we gained by being with the community through the years. Four years later and with over 240 hours of footage, we began to compose the first ever feature documentary on Blind Chess.

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 kritva* – 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 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.

### **AkamPuram**

[www.akampuram.net](http://www.akampuram.net)

Geetha J.

Writer-director-producer Dr Geetha J. founded AkamPuram, an independent production company, after years of experience as a journalist, film critic and television presenter / producer in Kerala and a film activist and academic in England. She received wide critical acclaim for her very first documentary, *The (A)miss World*, on the protests surrounding the staging of the Miss World Competition in Bangalore in 1996. Geetha turned to filmmaking with *Woman with a Video Camera* in 2005 hailed as a unique and objective look at the subject and subjective look at the object, *woman*. Later, she received the Göteborg International Film Festival's Fund to work on her first feature script. She was also selected for the Berlin Talent Campus in 2009. Geetha's experience as a producer includes twelve films apart from ten years in the television industry. AkamPuram's distinctive slate of documentaries and short films include *Woman with a Video Camera*, *A Short Film About Nostalgia*, *Akam/Inside* as well as *Inside the Kalari* and *Out of Our Hands*. All these films have been to several international film festivals. *Algorithms* is AkamPuram's first feature-length project. It is also developing its first feature fiction by Geetha.

## **Main characters**

### **The Chess Players**

#### **Charudatta Jadhav**

Charudatta Jadhav from Mumbai is a champion player turned pioneer. He discovered the game of chess soon after he went blind in his teenage years. It gave him confidence and a purpose in life. Convinced of the power of this game, he has dedicated his life to develop chess for the blind. A highly successful IT professional, Charu is a man of great drive and ambition, and he aims to situate India in the top five countries for Blind Chess.

#### **Darpan Inani**

Darpan Inani from Baroda is the most talented and highest ranked totally blind player in India. This idiosyncratic, confident and highly intelligent teenager is focussed on what he wants to achieve in chess, and in life. Darpan possesses a wisdom that belies his young age. He is a topper in his sighted school and wants to be the first blind entrepreneur of India.

#### **SaiKrishna S.T.**

SaiKrishna S.T. from Chennai is the ambitious rising star of blind chess in India. He is fun-loving, gregarious and makes friends easily. But as a partially sighted boy faced with the possibility of going totally blind, there is a lot more steel to Sai's character than at first appears. Sai studies in a blind school and is again a topper. He wants to be the first blind journalist of India.

#### **Anant Kumar Nayak**

Anant Kumar Nayak from Bhubaneshwar is a promising new talent. He is a gentle boy with an endearing if slightly eccentric personality. With a strong sense of moral duty and responsibility, the totally blind Anant struggles to balance his commitment to chess and studies. Anant has come second in training exams for IAS and hopes to be a rare blind IAS officer of India.

## The Crew

### **Ian McDonald**

Director, cinematographer, editor

Having made many documentaries in the last five years both in UK and India, Ian has earned a distinctive reputation for genre-defying works. *Algorithms* epitomises his holistic approach in that he believes that direction, camera and editing are all part of being a filmmaker in documentary. Getting to know his subject over many years through his camera and taking a year to carve out an understanding of that world, Ian has created a challenging documentary that goes against the grain of popular notions of sport documentaries.

### **Geetha J.**

Producer

Keen on yoking theory and practice, Geetha has done pioneering work in the media, academia and film activism. Her move to filmmaking heralded an era of digital expressions by women in Kerala. Her experience as an independent producer includes six docs in UK as well as six shorts in India, apart from many years in the television industry. Attentive to the creative sweep as well as the nitty-gritty details, Geetha has been a hands-on producer, nurturing a nascent idea into *Algorithms*.

### **Ajithkumar B.**

Editor

Award winning editor and an alumni of Pune FTII, Ajith has edited numerous feature fiction films and documentaries. He has been a great champion of documentaries and has a much bigger role than credited on most projects. Combining a rare command over the technical and the aesthetic, Ajith has not only brought a critical eye to the final edits of *Algorithms*, but has been a constant advisor on various aspects of its post production. Ajith is based in Trivandrum.

**Prasanna**

Composer

A pioneer in performing Carnatic music on the guitar, Prasanna is also an internationally acclaimed guitarist in Jazz, Rock and Blues. His composition for Film includes an Oscar winning short documentary. For *Algorithms*, Prasanna has drawn on his Carnatic roots, vast musical exposure and his own experience as a chess player. His evocative guitar is supported by a team of renowned Carnatic musicians. Prasanna is based in Boston, USA and Chennai, India.

**Harikumar N.**

Sound Engineer

With more than thirty years experience in audiography, Harikumar is also the Studio Manager at Chitranjali Studio, Thiruvananthapuram. He has won several National and State awards for best audiography through the late 80s to the present. His unassuming control over sound mixing and complete dedication to his craft makes him invaluable to a three-year live sound project like *Algorithms*.

**Razi**

Colour &amp; Titles

An alumni of Baroda Fine Arts College and Pune Film Institute, Razi has worked in different areas of film and theatre like art direction, stage design, graphic design, animation and illustration. Razi brings his inimitable artist-eye to all his work be they fiction or documentary and has embarked on a bold look for *Algorithms*. Razi is based in Trivandrum.

**Jason R Moffat**

Colourist

Jason has worked with images for over twenty years, moving from restoring fine art prints and colour work on fashion to various award winning international films that have featured in BAFTA awards, Cannes and Sundance Festivals. Jason explores both the aesthetic and technical possibilities of the look and in *Algorithms*, he creates a fine and subtle sense of visual harmony. Jason is based in London, UK.

## Contact

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