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# Thamp̄ / The Circus Tent

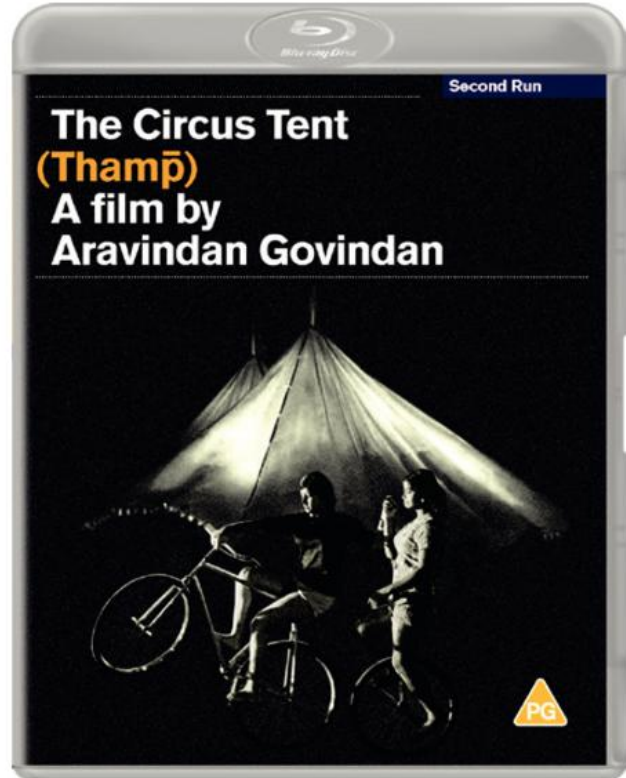
C. S. Venkateswaran

C. S. Venkateswaran is a consulting editor for *India Art Review*. A critic, filmmaker, and curator, he is the author of several acclaimed works on cinema and social affairs in both English and Malayalam.

*Thamp̄ / The Circus Tent* (1978) was Govindan Aravindan's third film and also his second – and last – black & white film (the other being *Utharayanam / Throne of Capricorn*, 1975). Made at a time when the Malayalam film industry was switching to colour, *Thamp̄* is a landmark film from its black & white era and one of the finest cinematographic works of Shaji N. Karun, who shot most of Aravindan's films.

*Thamp̄* is about a circus troupe that comes to a village and, after entertaining the local people for a few days, leaves again. Enfolded within this cyclical structure (something typical of Aravindan films) of arrival and departure are glimpses of life in both the village and the circus tent. The villagers' lives revolve around the river, the temple, and the tile factory, and the circus troupe offers a brief reprieve from their daily routines. The spectacles presented by the acrobats, jugglers, strongmen, buffoons, and animals enchant the villagers for a while, but, soon, the festival season begins, their fascination for circus wears off, ticket sales fall, and it is time for the troupe to move to another place. *Thamp̄* presents that brief interface between the nomadic showmen and the villagers: one in constant spatial move, and the other whose life is cyclical, temporally set to the swell and wane of the river and the seasonal rituals around the temple. Aravindan described it as a "location film".

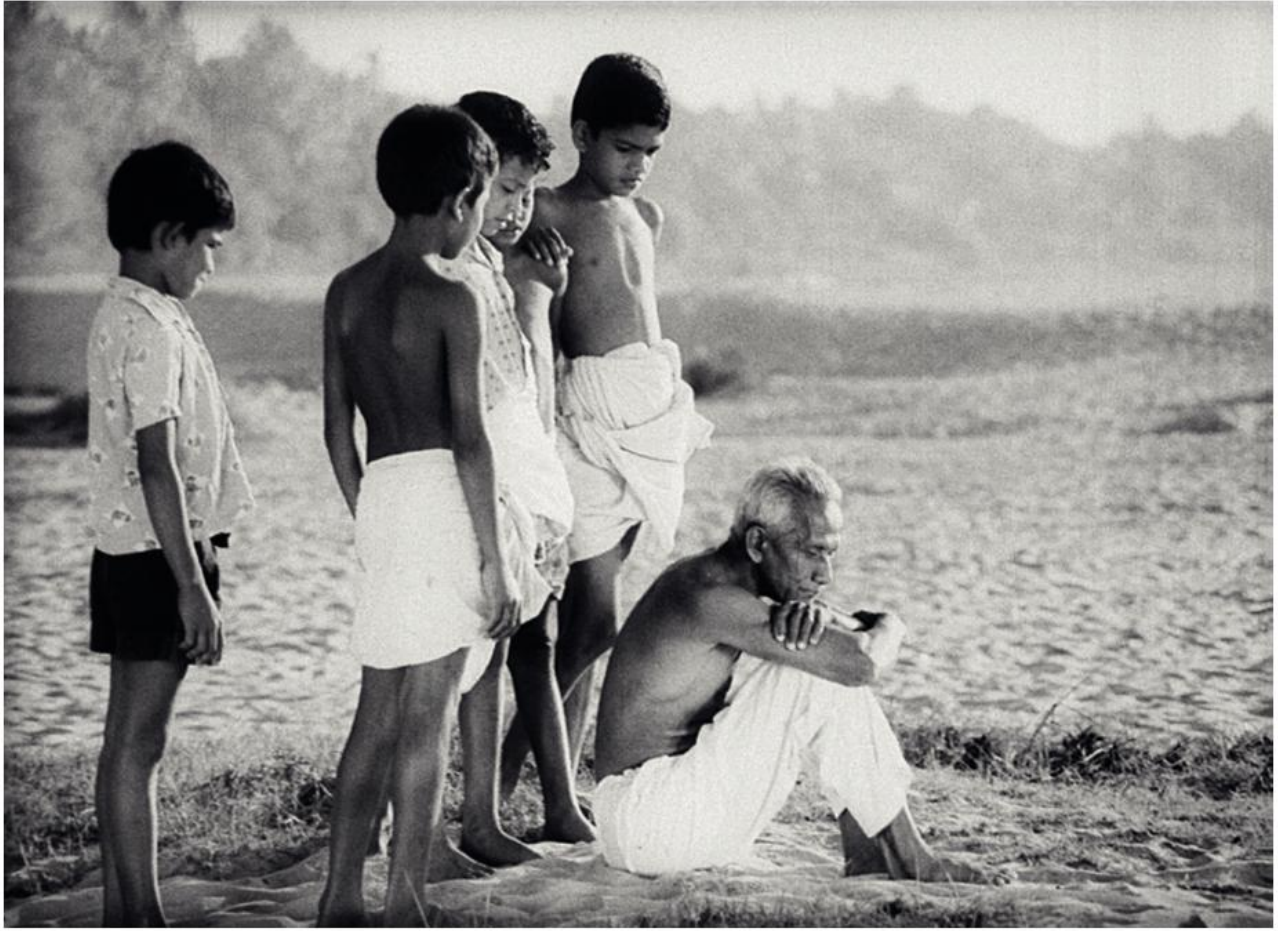
*We did not have a script, and we shot the incidents as they happened. What we did on the first day was to call all the villagers and perform a circus act for them. There were a lot of people who had not seen a*



*circus before. We shot their responses as they were watching. We did not ask them to do anything. After the initial hesitation, they forgot the lights and the shooting and completely got involved in the circus.<sup>1</sup>*

What strikes one immediately about *Thamp̄* is the all-pervading human presence: there are intimate portraits of the acrobats, cyclists, child artists, clowns, strongmen, manager, and trainers engrossed in their daily routines, practice, and performance. There are also vignettes from the village – the drunken sessions at the arrack shop, Menon's efforts to launch his new factory, incidents at his house, the musical encounters between his son and the temple singer, the silent, budding romance between the pump operator and the girl next door, the lorry driver's nightly visits to the sex worker, etc. Two contrasting humanscapes are juxtaposed.

1. From an interview with Govindan Aravindan by Chandradasan. The original Malayalam version was serialised over 13 issues of Kerala's *Film Magazine*. This extract is from the 1989 *Deep Focus* edited version, translated from Malayalam by George Kutty. <[https://www.academia.edu/9268227/The\\_Poet\\_of\\_Revelations\\_Filmmaker\\_as\\_an\\_Intuitive\\_Artist\\_Interview\\_with\\_G\\_Aravindan](https://www.academia.edu/9268227/The_Poet_of_Revelations_Filmmaker_as_an_Intuitive_Artist_Interview_with_G_Aravindan)>.



*Thamp* / *The Circus Tent* (Govindan Aravindan, 1978).

Most captivating moments in the film are the scenes of villagers of all ages and classes watching the circus: the camera tenderly captures the awe and wonder, excitement and exhilaration in their faces. Here, cinematic experience becomes the act of watching another set of people watching: we, the film's spectators, watch the circus spectators watching the performance. Two kinds of spectating merge here.

There are also moments when the fictive and the real, actor and character, merge or coalesce, when the film pulls off the veil of fiction and reality bursts into the narrative. During a birthday celebration in the tent, a drunken clown begins to "perform" in front of the gathering. Irritated, the manager slaps him, and the clown falls down. Suddenly, the camera zooms into his face, and he starts speaking directly to us: "My name is Krishnan, Nirkoli Krishnan, born in Vayalalath at Thalassery. I got trapped in the tent at the age of 8. I'm past 67 years now. To feed my

family, I play the fool, the buffoon, every day, dying every day." In another scene, we see the same thing happening with Lakshmi, the acrobat, who stares straight at the camera and tells us about her life.

The film juxtaposes the idyllic village and the mobile circus, the placid rural life and the nomadic lure of the circus, the age-old tile factory and the new industrial unit the nouveau riche Menon is building, the music of the temple and western music at Menon's house, and so on. In the end, what "belongs" to the village remains, and what comes from outside – the circus – departs. But it leaves fond memories behind and takes with it the village "outsider" – the young man lured by the call of the beyond. The circus leaves for its next destination, and the villagers busy themselves with the temple festival.

But these juxtapositions – of the village and circus – do not mean opposites: both are open to flux, flow, and change. *Thamp* pre-

sents life itself as a passing show, where people arrive, play their parts, and leave. In many ways, the circus appears like a microcosm of the world, and the village like a circus tent. In both, life is played out within an imaginary ring, punctuated by moments of joy and sadness, exultation and disappointment. Despite everything, the show goes on, or must go on.

This digital restoration of *Thamp̄* assumes great significance as almost all the negatives of Aravindan's films are lost (Film Heritage Foundation have also restored his *Kummatty*, 1979). For someone who has watched *Thamp̄* in its celluloid and DVD formats, this Blu-ray really brings to life the visual feel and tonalities of the original. From the rich variety of visual imageries in the film – of landscapes, people, village roads and structures, interiors and exteriors – two telling examples stand testimony to the close attention given in restoration to optical details and audio elements: the visuals of the river at different times of day, and the delicate skin tones and fleeting expressions of the villagers.

One hopes that this restoration will invite the attention of cineastes across the globe into the magical world of Govindan Aravindan.

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*Thamp̄* (*The Circus Tent*) est un film emblématique de la période noir et blanc du cinéma malayalam. Une troupe de cirque visite un village, divertit les habitants pendant quelques jours et repart. Nous est montrée la vie à la fois sous la chapiteau et dans le village, l'une en mouvement constant dans l'espace, l'autre sur un mode cyclique, rythmé par les crues et décrues de la rivière et les rituels saisonniers autour du temple.

La restauration de la Film Heritage Foundation est importante, car presque tous les négatifs des films de Govindan Aravindan ont été perdus. Et elle rend pleinement justice à l'original.

***Thamp̄ / The Circus Tent* (1978). Milestone region-free Blu-ray (A/B/C), from an HD transfer of a new 4K restoration by Film Heritage Foundation, and with newly translated English subtitles. 130mins. Additional features: Interview with photographer Ramu Aravindan, son of Govindan Aravindan; interview with Shivendra Singh Dungarpur and actor Jalaja by writer and broadcaster Anupama Chopra for *Film Companion* about *The Circus Tent* at Cannes; a 24-page booklet with new writing by Shivendra Singh Dungarpur.**

es

*Thamp̄* (*The Circus Tent*) es un hito de la era Malayam en blanco y negro. Una compañía de circo visita un pueblo, entretiene a los lugareños durante unos días y vuelve a marcharse. Hay destellos de vida tanto en la carpa de circo como en el pueblo, uno en constante movimiento espacial, y el otro cuya vida es cíclica, temporalmente ajustada a la crecida y el menguante del río y a los rituales estacionales en torno al templo.

La restauración de la Film Heritage Foundation es significativa, ya que casi todos los negativos de las películas de Govindan Aravindan se han perdido, y hace plena justicia al original.