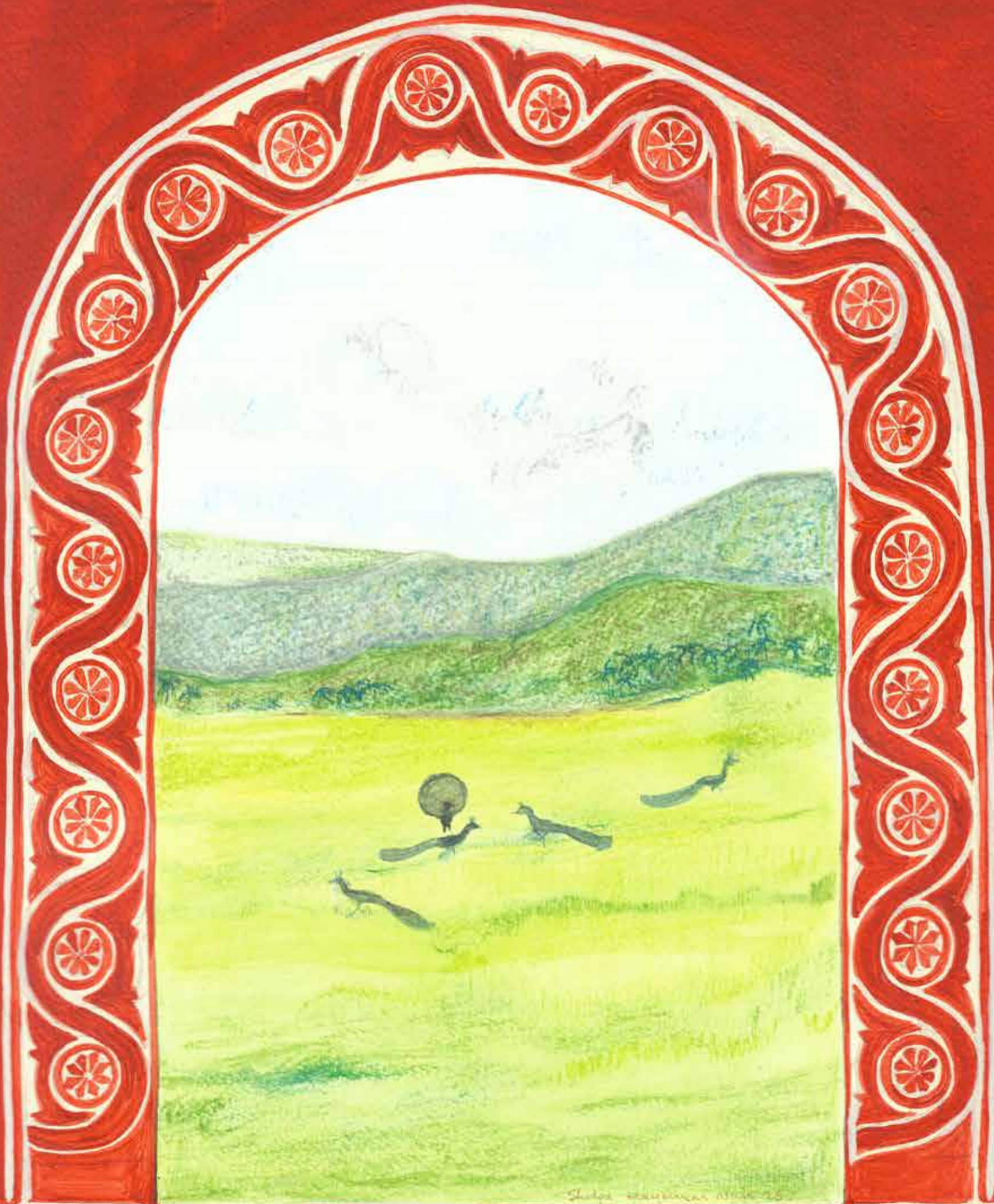


# THE PEACOCK

THURSDAY, 27 NOVEMBER 2025



# “Grace flows in the direction of the orphaned soul”

BY CHANDRAHAS CHOUDHURY

There are at least two stories in every film: the story that it tells, and the story of how it got made. The 15-year-long back-story of *Axis of Life* (2025), the spiritual coming-of-age film from Bulgaria (and with strong ties to India) that premiered at IFFI this year, really compels attention. The film has its roots in a book by the same name written by Swami Tirtha, a revered monk born in Hungary and initiated into the Gaudiya Vaishnav tradition in India. The Bulgarian businessman Victor Francess, is an Indophile and film buff who runs a telecom company called Excitel from New Delhi — “I believe I’m one of only two Bulgarians running a business in India” — and is a staunch disciple of Swami Tirtha.

When Swami Tirtha raised the idea of turning the book into a film, Francess decided to dip his feet into the unknown waters of film production. He engaged three screenwriters to turn the philosophical premise of the book into a dramatic narrative; they came up with the story of a spiritual master testing his three disciples on an arduous walk through the mountains to work out which one of them deserves to be his successor. Even so, the project stalled for several years for want of the right director. Then Francess ran into his countryman, the director Atanas Hristoskov, in an ashram in Vrindavan. After some early reverses in his career, Hristoskov had himself almost turned his back on feature filmmaking. Now he was persuaded to helm the project.

The resulting film, shot in the rugged mountains of Bulgaria on a budget of less than a million euros, is a triumph. Each of the film’s four “chapters” explores the personality and existential situation of one of the four main characters. The film is made in English (although the dialogue is sparse); the international cast brings together Bulgarian actors Aleksandar Aleksiev and Vladimir Mihaylov, who are very popular domestically, with the Danish actor Lars Simonsen (who plays the master,



Photo by Assavri Kulkarni

Vit), the Scottish actor Clive Russell, and the Italian actress Marina Suma.

“The production team had two units,” says Francess, “one for shooting the actors, and a second unit for shooting the other life forms of this world.” The narration also pulses with gorgeous sequences of grasses fluttering in the wind, lizards and ants climbing up the sides of trees and leaves, the moon rising above a mountain, water running over pebbles in streams. Everything seems alive and interconnected: a landscape watching four human beings pass by. “*Axis of Life* is a film about an archetypal journey,” Francess explains. “*Theek hai*, perhaps it is not for everybody. But in essence it communicates the message of the Upanishads — we all have a soul, and at root it is connected to the World Soul — in a more modern language.”

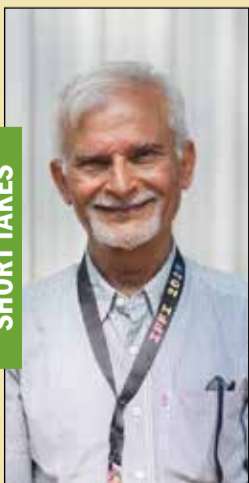
“Man is attracted to God,” says Vit to one of his disciples, who wonders how it is possible for someone who has never been loved to give love. “But God is also attracted to man. Grace flows in the direction of the orphaned soul.” You might hear dialogue like that in other kinds of drama, but here the flow of images generated by cinematographer Martin Balkansky, the meditative rhythms of the story, and the background music (composed entirely, says Francess, with traditional wooden instruments like the two-metre long flute called the *fujara*) reinforce the message.

There are no stereotypical character conflicts, usual in ensemble drama; the greatest battles in life are those we fight within. In one fine sequence, the fat, clumsy disciple Tomar, who is easily attracted to food and drink but also quick

to love and serve, agrees reluctantly to join the group on a three-day fast, but is unable to resist picking up an apple lying on his path. Repeatedly, he comes close to biting it, before he finally gives it away as an offering in a shrine.

The beauty of the images in *Axis of Life* means that it really is best understood when seen on the big screen. Francess is now seeking a theatrical release in India, where the philosophical roots of the story lie. Hristoskov supplied another fine gloss on the film in a short speech before the screening. “Today humanity has realized that it is no longer king of the jungle when it comes to intelligence,” he said, referencing the rise of AI. “But there is a territory we can still keep to ourselves, and that is the place of our feelings, our emotions. The film is about that universal power within us and between us.”

SHORT TAKES



I was really touched by the film *Khoya Paya*. I was inspired by the courage depicted in the film.

**Jogi Bhagat**  
Yoga Teacher  
Pune



As a designer, I think the costumes need to match their script; they’re an essential part of a film.

**Diana Linda**  
Designer  
Goa



In terms of the organisation IFFI has improved a lot. It’s a mature film festival, but I think it could have had a better selection.

**Rajiv D’Silva**  
Architect  
Goa



IFFI changes every year, and with more venues and screenings, it feels like we get the chance to watch so many films we never find in Madurai.

**Dr. Saleema Rabiya**  
Professor  
Madurai