



Curiosity is a filmmaker's greatest tool, not camera: Sanjeev Sivan at MIFF 2026 Masterclass

Mumbai, 19 June 2026

National Award-winning filmmaker and documentarian Shri Sanjeev Sivan urged aspiring storytellers to place curiosity above technology as he delivered a masterclass on "The Cinema of Social Advocacy: Turning Issues into Narratives and Bringing Them to the Frontlines" at the 19th Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF) on Friday.



The workshop, held as part of the festival's ongoing masterclass series, Sivan offered the participants a behind-the-scenes look at how real-life issues can be translated into impactful cinematic narratives, drawing extensively from his career spanning more than 75 documentaries, over 30 short films and several feature films.

"I think the most important instrument you should have is curiosity, not cameras," Sivan said, adding that compelling stories emerge from observation, research and genuine engagement with people rather than expensive equipment.

Sharing anecdotes from his filmmaking journey, Sivan traced the evolution of several of his acclaimed works. He recounted how a chance encounter with an Ouija board in the United States sparked his curiosity, leading first to a 15-minute documentary and eventually to the Malayalam feature film 'Aparichithan' starring Mammooty. "The movie was first a documentary but later became a feature film," he said, explaining how a single idea can evolve across formats.



Throughout the session, Sivan reminded the aspiring filmmakers that documentaries are ultimately about people rather than subjects. "If you're making a documentary on fishermen, the story is not about fishing. It is about survival. If you're making a film on a village, it is not about geography but identity," he said.

He also stressed on the importance of building trust with documentary subjects. "People need to be comfortable before they open up. That can take days, months or even years," he said.

Addressing ethical responsibilities in nonfiction filmmaking, Sivan cautioned against sensationalism. "When you are doing a documentary, there is a responsibility. You cannot show or narrate wrong things just to make it dramatic," he said.

The veteran filmmaker also discussed his works such as 'Little Women', which explored the lives of women rebuilding their lives after trafficking and prostitution, the biographical documentary 'Decoding Shankar' on musician Shankar Mahadevan, and projects undertaken for the Indian Navy. He also revealed how his documentary 'After Life' eventually inspired his award-winning Malayalam feature film 'Venalodungathe' (Endless Summer), demonstrating how documentary observations can serve as the foundation for fiction.



Encouraging young filmmakers to embrace the opportunities created by digital platforms and OTT services, Sivan said that filmmaking has become more accessible than ever. "You don't need a large crew. You should have good live sound. Beyond that, you don't need more than three people to shoot a film," he said.

Concluding the session, Sivan returned to the theme that has guided his career. "There is a story everywhere, in every person you meet. Make your story and strategically showcase them at reputed international film festivals to enhance visibility and secure distribution opportunities", he said.

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