



MAKING *CALCUTTA, I'M SORRY*: THE IDEA, THE PROCESS, THE COMPLETION

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ABSTRACT

*This article highlights the process of taking the germ of an idea inspired by real life and converting it imaginatively into a screen story and eventually as a full-length feature film. It also focuses on the writer-director and his early life in a small railway colony in South India. He grew up watching many movies by illegally entering a touring talkies near his home. He falls in love with the art of cinema and dreams of becoming a filmmaker one day. It took him almost fifty years to make his first film *Going Away* (2013). His second feature *Calcutta, I'm Sorry* (2022), a road film / emotional drama, was not easy to put together. He was lucky to find a producer who believed in his script and gave him a free hand to make his vision come alive. *Calcutta, I'm Sorry* has a big distinction: it is the first Indian film centered around Anglo-Indian characters written and directed by an Anglo-Indian. It is not a story about the Anglo-Indian community per se, but it brings out the essence of being Anglo-Indian and its core theme of redemption will resonate well with anyone from any community.*

"It's a wrap!"

No other words would be more satisfying for a film director to shout. For me, these words brought mixed emotions: I knew I was going to miss the cast and crew — they had become close friends, more like family, actually. But I also knew that all good things had to come to an end.

Everyone involved in making *Calcutta, I'm Sorry* (CIS) had to move on, eventually. These creative people had other assignments waiting for them.

So, when the final scene was shot in 2019 and I yelled "It's a wrap!", I had what everyone thought was a happy smile on my face, but to be honest I was a wreck inside. My CIS family will be going back home to their loved ones, and their lives... they're saying their goodbyes... I'm going to miss them. Terribly. I was sad to part ways, with only memories to remember this journey.

Yes, it was literally a journey – a long one: 2,140 kms to be precise – since it is essentially a road film, we had to travel from the Nilgiri mountains in the South of India to Calcutta in West Bengal – by road. We hired a 16-seater van and at certain points a couple of cars as well and followed Amanda Wright, the central character, braving the peak Indian summer, shooting wherever we could but sticking as far as possible to what the script demanded.

CIS tells the story of Amanda, an Anglo-Indian music teacher, who is content with her work and life in Coonoor in the Blue Mountains. When she is diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), a chronic illness that could eventually damage the nerves in her spinal cord and brain, Amanda is jolted out of her peaceful lifestyle. A powerful urge to hug her granddaughter, whom she has never met, overwhelms her.

Amanda makes up her mind to go to Chennai, where her estranged daughter lives. She can easily afford to go by bus, train or even by plane, but she decides to go by road, on her trusty bicycle!

Col. Ajay Varma, a friend who has a soft corner for Amanda, tries his best to dissuade her, but she says: "I always wanted to be a long-distance cyclist. I need to prove to myself I can do it! It's my way of making amends with my daughter and granddaughter..."

When she reaches Chennai, she has an emotional showdown with her daughter. She learns that her granddaughter lives in Kolkata. She pushes herself to continue her journey on her cycle to West Bengal, where a rude shock awaits her.

Even though Amanda is an Anglo-Indian character, her story of redemption will resonate with anyone in India and elsewhere. CIS is a simple road film with a touch of

emotional drama and can be summed up in a single line: "One woman's quest for a hug".

A friend of mine, who watched *CIS* at a special screening in Chennai recently, was fascinated by Amanda Wright. He asked me how I managed to pull off writing a well-rounded character, who has her flaws but is likeable at the same time. I had to tell my friend that Amanda was loosely based on my late Aunt Noreen MacLure. She was light-skinned and everyone who knew her well called her "Honey" because of the colour of her hair.

Honey loved cycling. When she came to spend time with us she'd suddenly go missing for hours, sometimes creating panic at home when someone would ask: "Where's Honey?" She'd be off on my sister's lady's bicycle, somewhere far away, alone and happy on the road.

My father, Honey's older brother, a simple railwayman, would take his cycle and go out looking for her, worried. This was when we were living in the Trichinopoly railway colony, like so many hundreds of Anglo-Indian railway families that also lived in the cantonment area of the famous South Indian junction and in Golden Rock, another huge suburb of Trichinopoly.

Honey's penchant for cycling and sometimes for getting lost on those lonely roads was legend. I can still remember her throwing a bottle of water, a flask of tea, a hand towel, and a packet of Parle-G biscuits into the wire basket fitted on the cycle's handlebar, waving to us as she pedalled away with a bright smile on her face.

Honey died a spinster in Bangalore a few years ago. She lived on her own – she preferred to be aloof – and was happy till her end came. Her only regret, she once told me, was that she didn't "do her dream". I asked her about her dream and she said: "I always wanted to go on a long-distance journey riding a cycle." She giggled. "From Trichinopoly to Jabalpure!"

I found out later why Jabalpure: Her older brother – one of my many uncles – lived there with his family. Her desire was simple enough, but easier dreamed than done!

An Anglo-Indian lady riding solo on a bicycle from Tamil Nadu to Madhya Pradesh? Cycling nearly 1,700 kms? No way! Any sane person would laugh at this whim and call it "insane".

After I wrote and directed my first film *Going Away* in 2013, that nagging childhood bug to make films took hold of me more strongly. I was constantly searching for a story idea that would translate well on screen – for my second film. Many ideas came to me but never stayed. The story ideas that persistently linger in my mind are the ones to watch out for and need developing.

Then one day in the shower it hit me – I don't know why but I always seem to get my better ideas while having a shower! Honey's love for cycling hit me with a bang. I realised that this idea of a character – that too a determined female character – who yearns to cycle long-distance with a bubbling "want" attached to her actions would make a visually-stimulating screen story. By the time I finished my shower – I remember I took a very long time to come out of the bathroom – I had worked out the beginning, middle and end of CIS.

Cycling all that way to see her brother and his family didn't exactly hit the spot. It was too tame. So I had to ramp up the want or the motivation for this crazy cycling trip. This is where imagination took over: Instead of Honey, we have Amanda; instead of Trichinopoly to Jabalpur, we have Coonoor to Kolkata; and instead of a brother, we have an estranged daughter and grand-daughter whom she wants to hug. And to give the whole fictional story a boost, I threw in the MS angle that makes Amanda's desire to do her dream ring especially true.

The biggest flaw in Amanda's character is that she has this desire to say she's sorry to her daughter for not meeting her for over fourteen years but doesn't do anything about it until she is diagnosed with MS. Only because of her medical condition, does she make up her mind to track down her daughter and granddaughter. This makes her realise she's not the good mother and grandmother she wanted to be.

The conflict in the story not only drives the film to its bitter-sweet conclusion but also keeps the audience engaged and invested in these dysfunctional characters – mother,

daughter and granddaughter. Three women with enough inner demons to make them extremely interesting and to hold the attention of young and old fans of family dramas.

FLASHBACK TO THE MID-SIXTIES

I began watching movies when I was very young. I must have been five or six years old when I became a movie addict, if I may use the word. In those days the only entertainment came from our old valve radio-set. Most Anglo-Indians had a radio or a transistor kept in a prominent place in their homes. The "cutie", as the radio was then called by our folk, always sat close at hand on a corner wooden stand or on a broad window sill. They were prized possessions of Anglo-Indians who enjoyed audio entertainment. Some had a Phillips or a Murphy. My father saved some money by doing overtime at work – he was a steam locomotive driver – and bought a Usha radio, which he was truly proud of. We loved to listen to all the latest songs by Cliff Richard, Engelbert Humperdinck, and the all-time favourite singer – Jim Reeves. Radio Ceylon used to be a preferred station, and everybody tuned in to its famous programme "Listeners Choice".

Only in an Anglo-Indian home, would one find it quite natural for a son or a daughter to suddenly – in a euphoric mood – take up his or her mum for a dance when there was a popular number being played on the radio. I've known many youngsters who learnt their first steps of the fox trot, jive or waltz from their mamas in the kitchen. While cooking the family meal, the ladies of the house had this uncanny knack for teaching their children how to dance. Come to think of it, this would make a great scene in a movie! Yes, we were surely living in the age of the radio. Then how come a seven-year-old boy like me became a movie "addict"?

Trichinopoly Junction at that point in time was a medium-sized railway town, not like what it is today – a bustling commercial city in the state of Tamil Nadu. There were cinema theatres around, but almost all of them screened Tamil movies. The Plaza Cinema Theatre was the only one that predominantly showed American and British films.

My father liked watching movies. Like other Anglo-Indians, he called them "pictures". On his day off, he took me to the Plaza Theatre, which while not often, I enjoyed every

picture I watched with him. But the Plaza Theatre wouldn't have been enough to make me crave to be a filmmaker. The credit should go to a 'Touring Talkies' that set up business almost overnight on the fringes of the *maidan* close to my house and the railway colony. The location was only a hop, skip and roll from my place. They opened with a bang: Loudspeakers blaring, drums beating, large-size film posters flying around, and temporary shops selling sherbet, snack food and toys; the touring talkies management even brought in a decorated elephant that blessed all the patrons who came to watch the first show – the queue to buy tickets was long and serpentine. For me, a small Anglo-Indian boy, it was as exciting as a magical mela.

I could see the *kutchra* cinema theatre from one of our home's windows and hear the soundtrack – dialogues and songs – quite clearly while films were being screened. These touring talkies showed movies in tents or under makeshift thatched roofs following the age-old tradition of moving from one town or village to another every six months or so. But the one near my house stayed on for over four years in the same place; the owner must have bribed the local politicians to have his license constantly renewed.

A few days after they opened for business, I secretly identified a place at the rear end of the theatre where a thatched section could be moved aside, and I could let myself inside behind the screen. After watching a movie, I slipped out the same way without being seen, fixing the moveable thatched section back in its place. This way I watched hundreds of movies – free of cost! The only thing was I had to watch these moving pictures as flipped images. If a character in the movie was eating with his right hand, I'd see him eating with his left!

The touring talkies used to show Tamil films. I must add here that the films – shot in black and white – were made very well. The stories were mostly melodramatic but technically they were artistic. While the acting was at times over the top, the camera work, editing and continuity were of very high quality.

Who said I didn't go to film school? Yes, this touring talkies was exactly like a film school, if not better, for me. After a year of its existence, I got lucky. The management

of this touring talkies decided to run morning shows – Hollywood and British films were brought in and screened from ten to twelve noon on weekends.

No one detected my secret entrance. While other Anglo-Indian boys were preoccupied with hockey, kite-flying, tops and marbles, I made a beeline to the secret entrance of the touring talkies to watch films. I enjoyed Tamil, Telugu, sometimes Hindi, and English films. I also watched many Italian, French and Iranian films dubbed in English. One morning when I was totally engrossed in watching the American comedy *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, I saw someone come into my secluded space. A shadowy figure stood very still looking in my direction. A torch light came on. My heart flipped over and raced like a scene from the movie where a car chase was unfolding.

It was the manager of the touring talkies. He struck his torchlight directly into my frightened eyes. I thought my number was up. But to my happiness, the elderly man said in Tamil: "As long as you don't bring your friends with you, I'm not going to say anything." So, officially I was given permission to be a guest in the special space behind the screen. After that encounter with the manager, I didn't feel guilty at all. It was like getting a scholarship from an educational institution. And that's how I learnt filmmaking... by watching tons of movies.

I was sad when the touring talkies finally packed up and moved on to another town in the south of India. I remember sitting in a corner of our bedroom crying, and my mother trying to console me by saying: "Don't worry, my son, those pictures are only make-believe."

Learning from my experience, the advice I'd like to give young filmmakers would be: "Watch as many films as you possibly can. Even though the stories are only make-believe, they can shape your imagination and your life."

BACK TO THE PRESENT

Making a movie is like bungee jumping – jumping not once but several times at different scariest places on the planet. Filmmaking is not for the faint of heart. It involves lots of creative effort, time, hard work, and yes, money! Anything or everything

can go wrong. If you get it right, then you can have the satisfaction of being a good bungee jumper.

I never gave up on my dream. It took me more than fifty years to make my first film. *Going Away* was written and directed by me and produced by Nigel Foote of Melbourne.

The Anglo-Indian story has been one of emigration coupled with the pain of separation. Every story of emigration has been heartrending, most certainly from the aspect of the trauma of leaving loved ones behind. My story focuses on this theme. The film, *Going Away*, has gone down well with Anglo-Indians and others as well.

In early 2018, I was in the process of completing the first draft of *Calcutta, I'm Sorry*. I knew I had a fascinating cinematic story in hand: Inspired by my Aunt Honey's love for long-distance cycling, I had created Amanda Wright. After fleshing out her character and giving her an interesting back-story, I fictionalised the rest of the scenes that unfold with twists and turns throughout the script.

I then approached a couple of people who could have come in as producers, but somehow fate had other plans for my second feature film. I got in touch with my good friend Pran Amrith, who lives in the UK. We have known each other for a long time, ever since we started out as teenage bartenders in the hotel industry (yes, not all filmmakers live luxuriously...We had to take up all kinds of work to put food on the table!)

Over several phone calls, Pran and I discussed the possibility of making CIS, with Pran producing it. I happily emailed the script to him. Pran said he read it in one sitting; that even though it was a cold English night, he felt warm within – the feel-good story and complex characters made him glow and didn't allow him to sleep. The following morning, his mind was made up. He wanted to produce the film.

Pran has no previous frame of reference as a film producer, but I was over the moon to have him help me put the project together. By virtue of his passion for art and critiquing films for many years, I was truly glad to have him around, every step of the

way. Knowing he had it in him, I offered him the role of Col. Ajay Varma, a secret admirer of Amanda. He accepted it and I'm glad he did. He played his part so well that no one could believe he hadn't faced the camera before.

Once I knew the budget was in place, the onerous job of casting began. Signing on the right actors to portray the characters in the script is very important to any film. We were quite lucky to have some great thespians on board the CIS project.

To our eternal good fortune, Priscilla Corner fitted the description of Amanda Wright perfectly. I called her up and gave her a brief run-down of the story and she was hooked. She wanted to read the whole script before agreeing, which was understandable. I sent her a bound copy of the script and within a few days, she got back to me. She was excited to play the role of Amanda. She was in! She loved the idea of her cycling all the way from South India to West Bengal searching for her granddaughter.

Pran and I travelled to Kolkata and met with Priscilla in person to firm up dates for our shoots. Supremely fit for her age, she is a much-admired and successful businesswoman and is the joint owner of the June Tomkyns Chain of beauty salons in Kolkata. Other cast members included Arpita Banerjee, from Mumbai, a multi-talented actress and a qualified Bharatanatyam dancer who played a key supporting role to the central character. Gillian Pinto, also a Mumbai-based stage and screen actress had a small but pivotal role. She astounded everyone with her intense visceral performance.

Delhi-based Andrew Hoffland is a versatile actor; he played a role written specifically with him in mind. He added a touch of humour to his character and pulled it off with panache. Jaravis Dee (aka Sivaraj D), a Chennai-based actor, played the quirky truck driver called Elumalai (Seven Hills) and managed to carry it off admirably. He also acted in *Going Away* and *Split*, a short film I wrote (titled *Pilavu* in Tamil and is available on YouTube).

Tehzeeb Katari, Sriranjani, Ameera D'Costa, Gilliam Williamson and a few others also played their small roles to perfection. Their talent lent immense credibility to the family drama.

Nicholas Moses, a Chennai-based young Anglo-Indian cinematographer, shot and edited the film with great enthusiasm. He has also done the camerawork and editing for the 10-part documentary series called *The Anglo-Indians of Madras* which was written and directed by Richard O'Connor and produced by *Anglos In The Wind*.

Chennai-based Ganesh Ramanna composed and arranged the background music for CIS, and also composed three melodious songs for the film. "One Day Above the Clouds" was performed by Priscilla Corner; "Riding Solo" was performed by Gillian Pinto, and the last song "A Journey's End" was sung by Monali Bala in Bengali. I wrote the lyrics for these songs, and the last number was translated into Bengali by Dr. Jyotirmay Basu.

Working with Priscilla and all the other actors and hand-picked technical team members proved to be a Director's and Producer's ultimate dream come true. It was never a tense shoot. We made it appear to be a picnic. We enjoyed the food and the journey.

My working style was very simple: I gave copies of the script to everyone, even to the actors who had small roles. I requested them to read and understand the story in its entirety and to learn their dialogues. Yes, we did have those moments when actors did a bit of improv, but mostly they stuck to the script. I gave them my interpretation of the scenes and how characters could behave. There were times though when some of our main actors interpreted their characters in a better way than I'd envisioned, and I embraced the enhancement.

Luckily we wrapped up shooting – done in four schedules over a period of a year and a half – before the Covid-19 pandemic struck the world. Unfortunately, though, post-production on our film took a severe beating – everything came to a complete standstill, including film studios in India. CIS was delayed by over two years. We finally completed the film, after crossing many hurdles, only in 2022. It was a harrowing waiting game. It still is.

We need to do a little polishing work to reach the international standards and then obtain the all-important Censorship Certificate from the government of India. Even though CIS has no adult or defamatory content, bad language, gore or political insinuation, it's still going to take its course with the Censorship Board. Only then can we expect it to make its rounds at film festivals and attract the attention of potential OTT (Over The Top) platforms like NetFlix, Amazon Prime, Disney Hotstar and others. When I yelled "It's a wrap!" many moons ago, little did I realise that we were in for a lesson in patience and waiting. As you will know, India is one of the largest producers of films in the world – more than 1,600 every year! Hopefully, the Board will understand there is nothing to censor in our family entertainer and give us a clean chit without further delay.

Meanwhile, I'd like to go back to the bathroom for a long shower: I need a high-concept idea for my next film!

THE END

Harry MacLure is a Chennai-based writer, comic book illustrator, cartoonist, playwright and screenwriter. He edits a 24-year-old international magazine for Anglo-Indians called *Anglos In The Wind* and is the founder-editor of Anglo-Ink Books. He is the co-author of *The Anglo-Indians: A 500-Year History*, published by Niyogi Books (2014). His articles have appeared in various publications in India, and four of his short stories have been published in anthologies in America. His plays *Good Heavens* (2004), *...And Sunshine Follows the Rain* (2006), and *Uncle Willy's Ghost* (2008) were staged successfully in Chennai, Bangalore and Delhi. He wrote and directed his second feature, *Calcutta, I'm Sorry*, completed in 2022. He can be contacted via email: harrymaclure@yahoo.com