



## Animating Sabarimala's Manikantan

The journey to Sabarimala is a pilgrimage that many Hindus perform every year. The tale that surrounds the deity has been put into animation and is ready for release this year reports Nikita Banerjee.

Indian animators have never been far from religious stories and texts. So the first full length animation film being made in Malayalam is on Kerala's Lord Ayyappa. The film, Manikantan, made by India Tales Media is the first feature length animated film to be made in Malayalam. It is also one of the most expensive Malayalam language film to be ever made with a budget of US\$ 10 million. The film is set in different eras and a major portion of the film is set in the present. As the film is seen through the eyes of a five-year old, it will also portray the formative years of Lord Ayyappa—right from how he was born on earth to how he grows and matures as a prince in his kingdom, to how he finally rids the world of the demon Mahishi, and finally how he comes to be revered as Swami Ayyappa from Manikantan.

Shailendra Vashisth, Commercial Director, India Tales, says "We chose a character based on mythology primarily for two reasons. The first being, historically the most successful Indian animation movies have revolved around mythological characters. Indian audiences never tire of stories pertaining to our culture and history and hence, mythology based movies are always popular. Second, India Tales is centered on taking Indian stories and folklore to a global audience. We are proud of our rich culture and we would like Indian culture to carve its place among the cultures of the world. Mythology is a great way to make this possible."

The idea to make an animation film on Lord Ayyappa struck in late 2007 when Nalin Singh, Managing Director, India Tales, saw a comic book on Manikantan created by then colleague Ravi Shankar and illustrated by famous cartoonist B Gujjarappa. "When Ravi came to me with the comic, I began researching on the Legend of Lord Ayyappa and was struck by the universal appeal of the story. It came across as a classic tale of good overcoming evil and one that would capture the imagination of audiences across the world," says Singh.

The film brings together eight different animation styles which is also a first for any animation film to be made in India. Manikantan has



a blend of traditional cel animation technique, cartoon animation, digital animation, clay-mation, toy art and illustrative art. The film also incorporates a new style of animation which takes after the Kerala Mural Art Style. This style is heavily inspired by the Kerala Temple Mural Art which has been practiced for centuries.

With the animation techniques in place, the character design process began. The characters in the film were classified into three categories -- primary, secondary and tertiary. Before the design process could begin, the director and the scriptwriter, Krishna Kumar, developed the traits of each of the primary characters. This brief was given to the character designer who then prepared rough sketches and handed them over to the art director to develop the colour charts.

Regi Syne, the director, says "When it came



to animating Lord Ayyappa, we looked at several sources and consulted several experts on Kerala folklore. Our scriptwriter is himself a PhD in Kerala folklore and mythology. He gave us invaluable inputs on how to create Lord Ayyappa. We also consulted the Travancore Devaswom Board and the Akhila Bharatiya Ayyappa Seva Sangha who are the official trusts looking after the Ayyappa temple at Sabarimala. We also received help from the Thantri, head priests, at the Sabarimala Temple and we even got historical references from the present ceremonial king of Pandaniam. All this was backed by a lot of research done by our team based out of Trivandrum."

During the preproduction of Manikantan, softwares like Adobe Photoshop to create the backgrounds, Adobe After Effects for compositing and to create special effects were used. Apple's Final Cut Pro was used for video editing, Adobe Flash for some scenes requiring special animation, Apple's Logic 8 for sound effects and Animo. Softwares like Flint and Flame were also used.

With a pre-production team of 45 members in Trivandrum and 200 animators based in Hyderabad, India Tales Media was able to wrap up the project in less than a year. But for a start-up company like India Tales, making a project on such a large scale posed many challenges. "We had to deal with limited availability of funds at the right time due to limited resources. We had to interact with over 20 partners and managing them and timelines," says Singh. Another challenge was to invent ways of animating temple mural art and Indian oil paintings. "These have never been done before. So we had to figure out an approach, methodology and then train the team for the task. This took enormous time and effort."

The post production of the film took place in Chennai and Mumbai. The film has seven songs composed by the maestro Ilaiyaraaja. Since the film is set in three different eras, the music in the film ranges from classical to contemporary. Manikantan will be simultaneously produced in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages. The film releases in summer 2009.