



Malli

Santosh Sivan

INDIA, 1999

90 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
 Production Company: **Children's Film Society, India**
 Screenplay: **Santosh Sivan, Ravi Deshpande**
 Cinematographer: **Santosh Sivan**
 Editor: **Sreekar Prasad**
 Music: **Aslam Mustafa**
 Principal Cast: **Swetha, Vanitha**

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There are a small handful of cinematographers who, through their astonishing manipulation of the cinematic image, have changed the way we look at the world. Storaro, Doyle, Nykvist and Almendros come to mind, of course, but one name you never hear is Santosh Sivan. Too bad. His collaborations with Mani Rathnam – *Roja*, *The Duo* – are milestones of Indian cinema. His previous film, *The Terrorist*, was hailed by the late David Overbey as “the most beautiful film from India in years (maybe ever).”

Malli takes his talent to an entirely new level. It is, for the small-minded, a “children’s film,” for it deals with the concerns and inner life of a child. But Sivan creates something very far from *Mary Poppins*. This is a surreal, often nightmarish world; the betrayals and fast friendships of childhood are set within tableaux of the magical countryside, a larger-than-life realm of hidden dangers and pleasures. Through its breathtaking imagination and directorial immediacy, it literally brings us into the mind of a young girl and her amazing relationship with the world around her.

Malli is the girl in question. She is ten-years-old and tries her best to help her poor parents collect firewood. Her hero is “Mr. Doctor,” a vet who takes in all kinds of sick animals from the surrounding countryside. Her best friend is mute, the daughter of a (much better-off) army officer. Malli has two wishes: a new dress from her absent father

and a legendary “blue bead” to cure her friend’s illness. (The “blue bead” story comes from Monu, a local witch). Through a complex series of circumstances, Malli receives a beautiful new dress and, ultimately, is able to call up the spirit that yields the “blue bead.” But everything is put at risk when she encounters a fawn, shot by cruel hunters, and when her best friend’s father moves his daughter away from the village.

■ **Noah Cowan**

Santosh Sivan is a renowned cinematographer, and has worked on 20 feature films and 41 documentaries, collaborating with India’s leading filmmakers. *The Terrorist* (98) won him international acclaim as a director. Selected filmography: *Halo* (94), *The Terrorist* (98) and *Malli* (99).

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