

Cultural Daily

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Where are the Indian Women Filmmakers?

Suchita Bhhatia · Wednesday, May 21st, 2014

Jane Campion, Cannes Film Festival jury president, notes that only 7% of the 1800 films submitted to the Cannes Film Festival were directed by women. "It does feel a little bit undemocratic," she said. "Time and time again we don't get our share of representation. It's not that I resent the male-directed films but there is something women are thinking of doing we don't get to know enough about." With that in mind, Cultural Weekly's Indian cinema correspondent asks: Where are the Indian women filmmakers?

Imagine sitting at a coffee shop waiting for your girlfriend. You order her favorite iced cold coffee; you anxiously wait with flowers and a neatly wrapped gift. And finally you see her walking in with that smile on her face, the smile that you love. She cozily sits next to you. You both look into each other's eyes while drinking the same cold coffee, from the same mug, with the same straw.

You walk out of the cafeteria hand in hand. Suddenly you hear a scream. At a distance few men are burning a woman alive. It doesn't bother you. It's not affecting your life. You keep walking. Love overflowing.

Just when you are about to enter the restaurant, a woman gets beheaded in front of you. Blood springs out of her neck, just the way we see in Tarantino films.

No big deal!

You guys sit on a table and order your drinks. You check out the couple sitting in front of you, around you. And you see something is not right. You keep staring at them, at all the women rapidly one after the other. Suddenly a realization dawns on you that the women are not real, they are robots. Every single women sitting in the restaurant. You look at your girl friend. You stare at her smile. The smile that you loved!

And the most daunting reality pierces your heart.

Wouldn't you thank God that this is just a story!

Although, this could have been a reality if somewhere on the timeline of human history, men and women with vision hadn't stood up to make the world more egalitarian.

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The Indian film industry churns out an 900 films a year. Only 10 percent of them are successful at the box office. The rest of them tank without trace. Only two or three films, out of 900, are made by Indian women filmmakers.

Is this because women filmmakers don't have enough talent or is it because the 21st century Indian film industry is still reeling under gender bias?



Ajita Suchitra Veera, one of the prominent women filmmakers, whose first feature film *Ballad of Rustom* got shortlisted for Oscars 2014, says, "I don't want to define myself as a 'woman filmmaker.' My primary identity is that of an Artist and craftsman and I don't make women centric films. In fact, my feature film *Ballad of Rustom* has 6 male protagonists. Nevertheless, on some occasions I did face challenges and I do even now regularly, when the first thing people see is you as a woman and don't want to think beyond that. But the truth is that we all have emotions and intelligence and we all have immense potential for creativity and we are constantly evolving and we need to break the pattern of social conditioning once we enter the world."

But how does one break the social conditioning? Today women might not be burnt alive, but we still live in a country that has rampant female infanticide. How do we separate our culture from our films, the city life from the village life, my life from your life, when everything is so tightly knitted together?

The brilliant Shonali Bose, currently in post-production of her second film, *Margarita with a Straw*, says she hasn't faced the slightest gender bias as a working professional or as a woman controlling the sets. But where she has faced gender bias is on the kind of stories: a male protagonist versus a female protagonist. For a filmmaker like her who believes in making women-centric films, the challenge is huge, mainly because the finances lie with men and one can't deny their domination. And the story, which has a male protagonist, with action or comedy or romance, gets most of the nods.

"Surprisingly, all my films have the female protagonist negotiating space and her independence with a man and I guess that is because I come from a culture that is patriarchal. It's not a handicap, but it does color my cinema and my expression. I don't try and balance it out. I accept it and work with it and use it to tell my story," says Aparna Malladi while doing post-production on her second feature *The Anushree Experiments*.

Cate Blanchett urged producers in her Oscar speech to notice that films with women protagonists do make money.

Producer-director Junaid Memom doesn't quite agree with Cate Blanchett. Giving examples of some of the earlier women filmmakers, he feels they mostly make issue-based social films, which nobody in India is interested in watching. After all it's about economics at the end of the day. He also feels that women as filmmakers are seen differently in India perhaps because of the conditioning of the society and the culture we live in. For women filmmakers to be entrusted with huge amounts of money, they need a benefactor or guarantor. He cites examples of women filmmakers who have been able to make films only because they had a husband or a father by their side. Of course that does not undermine their talent but that is how the industry perceives it. Also, typical Indian producers prefer male directors because of the compatibility and understanding level, he honestly adds.

Men are more comfortable doing business with men. And this is not just in India but the world over.

“It is definitely a boys club out there,” says Aparna. But it’s also purely about economics. But besides money ruling the roost, women as filmmakers are important because they give a different point of view. Not having that point of view will make for a biased artistic expression in the world; that is dangerous because we will then view society and ourselves only through men’s eyes, adds Aparna prophetically.

Men see through two different hemisphere of the brain, that function independently of each other. But women connect everything together because the two hemispheres of the brain are connected. That gives a different dimension to storytelling.

Leo Tolstoy said, “Women hold the key to the opinion in the world,” and that opinion is very important because that defines our lives, our future. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a man, stood up to ban the custom of Sati, in which women were burnt alive.

Women have a better place today because of such men.

Writer-producer Mohinder Pratap Singh, who directed his first feature film *Bhujang* for CFSI, adds to the thought, saying that “because women are wired differently, a woman director brings an altogether different perspective. Also, a filmmaker is a filmmaker. Tomorrow we will differentiate between a Muslim filmmaker and a Hindu filmmaker. And as far as a benefactor or a guarantor is concerned it applies to men as well. If you have a famous father you can make your films faster, but then you still have to prove yourself. The system should essentially be there to create opportunities. Though I would still say that system should create EQUAL opportunities.”

EQUAL opportunities! But how does one create them in a system that is predominantly in the hands of men? Are they listening?

In Hollywood a bunch of women producers came together to form a film fund only for women filmmakers. Sandra Schulberg, a powerful woman producer, created funding and distribution systems like Sundance and IFP.

Where are the powerful women producers of India?

“The first limitation for women is more often their own mindset—women need to break out of this whole limited framework that ‘I am a woman’. I shall give the beautiful example of astronaut Kalpana Chawla. She was an astronaut—the only woman during her time in a college full of men. The sex ratio even now is horribly skewed in that part of the country with 600 girls to 1000 boys. Female infanticide and host of other gender biases dominate Punjab even now. But you had a fantastic woman like Kalpana emerging from there.” adds Ajita.



Kalpana Chawla

“The impetus for change always comes from the person who feels the disadvantage, the burden is on us. It was women who fought to get voting rights. Men did not wake up to it. As more women enter the arena and as time goes by things may not get balanced but it will not feel so unbalanced as it is today,” Aparna voices.

“Vidya Balan became the first Indian actor to get as much opening of a film as a male actor. You have to have the grit and determination and stick to your original stories without compromising and things will organically open up for sure,” adds Shonali.

“Give me Kathryn Bigelow or a Farah Khan and I am game to place my money,” says Junaid.

“I have heard that world history is being written again from the POV of woman. I am sure, we will be able to see history in a new light after this,” says Mohinder.

John Keating, in the brilliant film *Dead Poets Society* directed by Peter Weir, emphatically speaks, “I stand upon my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way.”

And standing up and looking at things in a different way is not just important now, but 1000 years from now when we will sit on the timeline of human history and be questioned for our choices and our stories and for the world that will have been created because of us.

Top image: Indian director Ajita Suchitra Veera

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