

## **Introduction: why a special issue on women's cinema?**

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Two narratives dominate accounts of women's work in South Asian cinemas. The most parochial is wrapped around three directors born between the mid-1940s and late 1950s: Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair and Aparna Sen. Only one of these filmmakers works within an Indian cinema, Aparna Sen. That British director Gurinder Chadha is sometimes tagged onto this short list is indicative of the extent to which this narrative fails to say anything meaningful about women working in South Asian cinemas.<sup>1</sup> Yet for cinemas, television and even some festival programmers in the Anglophone world and Europe these are the women making films in South Asia today. They constitute the canon and the whole.

The second narrative can be gleaned from paying streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime and includes directors of a younger generation, born in the 1960s and 1970s: Leena Yadav, Farah Khan, Gauri Shinde, Zoya Akhtar, Reema Kagti, Kiran Rao, Nandita Das, Anusha Rizvi, Shonali Bose, Sabiha Sumar, among others. Although more abreast, this is no less insular an account than the first. It centres on India at the expenses of other countries in the region, including those, like Bangladesh and Pakistan, with substantial cinemas of their own, and it focuses nearly exclusively on India's dominant axis of production, Hindi cinema. Within that cinema, it endorses a particular kind of film, fictions made within the safety of a production system largely sealed off from the realities of contemporary India and, indeed, South Asia.

This special issue is a step towards mapping a different landscape. It features filmmakers from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Pakistan working in fiction and, in a few instances, documentary cinema, with feature-length and short

films. The focus and scope are resolutely contemporary and pan-South Asian, foregrounding directors who emerged from the early 2000s and where the term ‘regional cinema’ refers not, as is habitually the case in discussions of Indian cinema, to films in an Indian language other than Hindi, but to the variety of cinemas made in the countries that make up South Asia, as defined by SAARC and People’s SAARC. I use the term region here much in the way it applies in histories of Chinese, Arab, African or Latin American cinemas, to demarcate a geographical area that, while inhabited by diverse linguistic, ethnic and religious communities, shares a history of British colonial occupation. In this sense, regional cinema points to a cluster of national cinemas that have to contend with Hindi cinema’s invasive operation, both legitimate and pirate. However, as I hope it will become apparent from both the essays and interviews included in the Fieldwork section of this issue, neither Bollywood nor Hindi cinema delimit the channels which connect contemporary women filmmakers across South Asia.

Shifting the centre of historiographic attention away from mainstream Hindi cinema has been an important consideration from the start. The number of women directing films in Hindi cinema has grown significantly in the last decade, and India does seem to count more women directors than most countries, in South Asia and elsewhere. But the view from this window is nevertheless dispiriting. Many of the directors mentioned above (the second narrative) were born or married into Hindi cinema, directly or indirectly linked to more or less established industry figures (e.g. Javed Akhtar, Aamir Khan, Kamran Khan). Others came into Indian cinema as actors. While this is to be expected, given the historically family-based and star-led nature of the industry in India, it is also part of a narrative that perpetrates very problematic conceptualisations of women’s agency. The presence and operation of women’s work in film is confined within a web of personalised hierarchical ties that hinders insights into cinema’s relation to social change in and outside the region, buying instead into

recent media hype that has tended to confine women's position, operation and demands in the realm of cultural production to the terms advanced by the #MeToo movement.

These are not productive lines of historiographic enquiry. In his contribution to this special issue Ashvin Devasundaram argues that even within the circumscribed ground of Hindi cinema 'female-rated' independent films - a genre characterised by the presence of woman as director, scriptwriter and main actor - have mounted a strong oppositional narrative to the industry's status quo. Female-rated films tend to challenge Bollywood's patriarchal mechanisms, a propensity reflected in their conflictual positioning vis-à-vis religion-based politics, caste dynamics, conservative social mores enforced through the family and political censorship. For Devasundaram, female-rated independent films constitute an Indian cinema revolution that is neither accounted for by current histories of cinema in South Asia nor reducible to a side effect of the #MeTooIndia movement, which many of the Hindi films he discusses actually anticipated.

As Susan Watkins (2018, p. 5-6) has observed, #MeToo is only the latest in a string of women-centred mass events to erupt around the world since the stock market crash of 2008 - a feminist revival that culminated in 2017 with a manifesto for a 'feminism of the 99 per cent' (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2019). What does cinema afford these movements? Is this revival of militant feminism worldwide changing the limits within which South Asian women move in cultural production? Is it changing the ways in which they move within these limits? Research on the subject is incipient, prompting a wealth of attendant questions. Who are the women making films in South Asia today? Under which conditions do they work? What kind of films they make, and how do these circulate? This special issue started with the realisation that, contrary to what cinema programmers and streaming services would have us believe, many women from a variety of backgrounds make films in South Asia today. It is impossible to do justice here to even a small share of them. Above all, I have proceeded on

the principle that there is more to a history of films by women in present-day South Asia than adding a few or even many women's names to the canon of South Asian cinemas.

Invisibility is a problem for contemporary South Asian women filmmakers, and bypassing international film festivals' gatekeepers a struggle for all but the best connected. Often invisibility is a question of geographical perspective. For instance, although statistics on the number of women working in the Pakistan film industry hardly exist, there is little doubt that the trend is of acute gender bias: despite marked achievements in technology and diversity in recent years, Pakistani cinema remains a male-dominated field. As Zebunnisa Hamid argues in her contributions to this issue, however, Pakistani women filmmakers' options about financing and production are, in all cases, hardly the products of solely national film economics. 'Dual postcolonial displacement and postmodern or late modern scattering' are at work that, cutting across multiple and historically distinct patriarchies, lend the cinema of Sabiha Sumar, Mehreen Jabbar, Iram Parveen Bilal, Meenu Gaur, Afia Nathaniel and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy degrees of visibility they would not have were these directors to operate exclusively within the national film industry of Pakistan.

The situation varies enormously across the region. Sometimes, as the examples of Diana Saqeb in Afghanistan and Shin Daewe in Myanmar show, a functioning internet connection and a public pressed or simply curious enough to want to see are all it takes. Both filmmakers are well known in their country's independent cinema sector and circulate their films partly via open streaming services like Vimeo and Youtube. As I outline in this issue in my account of women directors in Myanmar, however, for Shin Daewe, as for other filmmakers in her country, networking internationally as much as nationally has been difficult until very recently. The political situation in Myanmar has been such that an open culture of film festivals and similar public events was allowed to emerge only from 2012. In contrast, by 2008 Diana Saqeb had been for some time part of a dynamic circle of

filmmakers, artists and activists that spreads from Afghanistan to Iran and northern Europe. Sandra Schäfer was also part of that network. Her visual essay for this issue of *BioScope* focuses on the women's cinema that began to be made in 2001 in Afghanistan, highlighting in particular the period between 2002 and 2009, when Schäfer worked in Kabul making her film *Passing the Rainbow* (2007, co-directed with Elfe Brandenburger) and co-organizing the film festival *SPLICE IN* on gender and society (2008).

The decision to include in this special issue a visual essay stems partly from the desire to explore the possibilities of modes of historiography less bound by the linearity of the written text and restrictions imposed by academic etiquette. The interviews, in the Fieldwork section, with three filmmakers based, respectively, in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Sri Lanka - and, in the case of Rubaiyat Hossain and Dechen Roder, increasingly prominent also internationally - are also intended to offer readers a more direct, unmediated view of what it may mean for a woman today to make films in these countries. Indeed, from the start what interested me in the idea of a *BioScope* issue on contemporary South Asian women filmmakers was less the (in)visibility of these women's work and more what happens to our historiographic apparatus when the mirror is cracked (Smelik, 1998). Amrita Chhachhi and Thanh-Dam Truong have noted that while early feminist research highlighting the invisibility of women 'gradually helped challenge the culturally specific assumptions of mainstream knowledge systems[,] a new generation of feminists [has since] pushed forward a research agenda aimed at the articulation of key concepts of gender analysis,' including notions of subjectivity and agency (Chhachhi and Truong, 2009, p. 4). Deploying such a feminist lens can effectively 'expand the ambit' of film historiography (Vasudevan et al, 2016, x). This is the spirit of this special issue, which is intended as much as a resource to complement existing historiography on the cinemas of the region as a catalyst for historical re-articulation,

an opportunity to rethink the historiographic model to whose inadequacy South Asian women filmmakers owe their alleged invisibility.

These are the facts. Many women make films today across South Asia. By far the majority - 'the 99 per cent' - do so outside the mainstream, within a so-called 'marginal' cinema that, in reality, constitutes by far the largest share of films made anywhere at any time. Most women filmmakers discussed here rely on funding, distribution and exhibition channels that are rarely solely national, if indeed national at all. Lastly, much women's work in South Asian cinemas embody what Patricia Torres San Martín called a 'symbiosis between filmic creation and social praxis' (1998, p. 44). Looking at South Asian cinemas through the lenses of women's work should thus enable us to shift the historiographic focus away from the Hindi mainstream, question paradigms of the national as deployed in much historiography, and revisit conceptualisations of the relation between film and historical change.

Whether we look at Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan or Sri Lanka, films made by women in these countries tend to be characterised by the perceived necessity, determination and, in many instances, the capacity to address actual communities while, at the same time, working against the imaginary coherence of both community and nation. It is a cinema that operates along with, and often against, Bollywood's supremacy, sometimes with an eye to the international festival circuit or streaming services, both on demand and free. Yet, while largely informed by globally shared concerns, none of the women filmmakers discussed in this issue assume a universal, multinational audience. The range of subjects they address is simultaneously very broad and very specific. As Sunila Abeysekera and Amrita Chhachhi (2015, p. 563) have said of Southasian feminism,<sup>2</sup> women's work in South Asian cinemas tends to be 'distinguished by [a] practice-based engagement with the intersectionality of gender with other axes of

difference and inequality' like class, caste or ethnicity. The films are rarely narrowly confined to only 'women's issues' or the family. Features and shorts as diverse as Meenu Gaur's *Zinda Bhaag* (2013, Pakistan), Anusha Rizvi's *Peepli (Live)* (2010, India), Diana Saqeb's *Mohtarama* (2012, Afghanistan), Rubayiat Hossain's *Under Construction* (2015, Bangladesh) and Thae Zar Chi Khaing's *Seeds of Sadness* (2018, Myanmar), to mention but a few examples, address a particular audience 'in its specific history of struggle and emergency' (De Lauretis, 1990, p. 17). Demanding that we shift historiographic focus away from the national while at the same time rubbing our nose in it, these are films that make it nay impossible to assimilate in our histories statist ideas of the nation. They urge us to factor into our analyses the resilience of the region's material culture, the continuing resonance of habits, affinities and patriarchies across borders policed by states often at war with each other.

Each of the essays in this issue thus point to the layered, specific yet interconnected industrial and cultural terrains within which women today make films in South Asia. Essays and interviews also map relations between nationally distinct groups of women filmmakers. In opposition to a nationalist historiographic narrative that demarcates the presence and operation of women's work in South Asian cinema within a logic of hierarchical ties dictated by blood, family and caste - a narrative that marginalises, when it does not entirely obliterate, the bulk of films by women - I invite readers of this issue to examine South Asian cinema by women through the lenses of what Jacques Derrida (2005) called a 'politics of friendship', 'the most comprehensive philosophical signifier for all those ... affective gestures that refuse alignment along the secure axis of filiation to seek expression outside, if not against, possessive communities of belonging' (Gandhi, 2006, p. 10). The example of BASA Film in Afghanistan, Dakinny Production and the Beskop Tshechu festival in Bhutan, the Yangon Film School in Myanmar, Khona Talkies in Bangladesh, or the theatre group of

Lanka Bandaranayake in Sri Lanka show that cinema by women in South Asia is sustained almost exclusively by more or less informal arrangements, associations and alliances based on individuated congruence and reciprocal support. Generally such arrangements are non-commercial, making these networks more akin, not to an industry but to a commons, understood as ‘an unstable and malleable social relation’, a ‘practice at the heart of which lies the principle that the relation between the social group and [the common resource]’, upon which the group’s livelihood depends, ‘shall be both collective and non-commodified - off-limits to the logic of market exchange and market valuation’ (Harvey, 2012, p. 73). For many women making films in South Asia today this is hardly a choice. Yet, while the non-commodified nature of the labour involved renders the life of such a cinema very precarious indeed, it also injects in it a radical potential which can have formidable impact on areas of life that have tended to be ignored by film historians, often inclined to focus, rather, on the industrial or stylistic dimensions of cinema.

The affective coalitions that enable woman’s cinema in South Asia are rooted in fundamental ways and draw from the local communities the filmmakers address, but often also overflow local and national receptacles. Many of the directors featured in this issue live and work miles apart, under disparate conditions, yet many have also met or seen each other’s work, sometimes at festivals, other times through personal connections and mutual interest. In this respect, much of the cinema made by South Asian women today is a cinema that is transnational,<sup>3</sup> with an aesthetic and a political imaginary that are simultaneously grounded in the local and de-territorialized, giving expression to knowledge produced through sharing women’s historically specific experiences of globalization, multiple patriarchies, religious fundamentalism, militarism and nationalisms of various persuasions. Journals issues like the present one can go a long way towards supporting this existing



network, promoting awareness, exchange and dialogue between women filmmakers across the region.

The films discussed in the essays and interviews that forms this special issue constitute a gendered regional lens that is largely discounted in existing film historiography. This is ostensibly because the films themselves tend not to have a tremendous impact at a film-industrial financial level; more likely because, in many instances, the films' primary objective is, for the industry, an intractable one: not the short-term accumulation of surplus, but the transforming of subjectivities, 'a molecular political process' that, as Chhachhi and Abeysekera (2015, p. 571) remind us, in the long-term 'subtly creates epistemic shifts.' This hardly makes films by South Asian women a 'peripheral' cinema, in the way that other type of small cinema, such as B-grade productions, are deemed by much film historiography. The direction of travel is clearly not the same. Cheap generic productions may hover at the margins of an industry, but their eyes are set on the centre-ground, to which they aspire. Not so many women making films in South Asia today. As Meena Pillai argues in her contribution to this issue, Malayalam cinema has seen two kinds of women directors, one who seeks to puncture the patriarchal logic of mainstream cinema from within, and a second who 'strives to be an "other" to the mythmakers of the phallic order.' Pillai uses the Marxian metaphor of the camera obscura, a hierarchical apparatus of ideological inversion, to analyse the films of the first type, proposing the metaphor of 'camera dentata' for the address and modes of representation embraced by the second kind, filmmakers who seek to topple the patriarchal and capitalist predispositions of the cinematic apparatus itself.

They are not alone. Many of the films discussed in the essays and interviews included in this issue engage in that molecular process causative of epistemic shifts that is the transformation of subjectivities by addressing woman as historical subject or, as Mexican film director Matilde Landeta put it, 'woman as thinker' (quoted in Rashkin, 2001, p. 1).

They grant centrality to female subjectivity through the act, manifest in the films' mise-en-scene, of 'transforming material that, in its untransformed state, leaves a woman no place from which to speak, or nothing to say' (Freadman, 1983, p. 162). As I show in my analysis of three films made in Myanmar, often this process of aesthetic transformation is the combined effect of the material conditions in which the filmmaker works and of the filmmaker's response to those conditions. Against an 'ethics of probability' (Appadurai, 2013, p. 299) and a politics of realism, filmmakers like Diana Saqeb in Afghanistan, Lanka Bandaranayake in Sri Lanka or Thae Zar Chi Khaing in Myanmar respond to the material and ideological limits imposed on their operation by practising an aesthetics of possibility, pointing audiences not to 'another world' - fantasies, be it of upward mobility or feminist utopia - but to the world as the filmmaker herself finds it, bringing along, from outside the apparatus, subjective coding that carries the markers of the filmmaker's encounter with the community she addresses. Sandra Schaefer's visual essay and the interviews with Rubaiyat Hossain, Dechen Roder and Lanka Bandaranayake show that, unlike Hindi mainstream cinema, this is a cinema that makes the presence of the filmmaker as historical-subject-woman felt, or seen - in the film-text as much as in the midst of the worldwide mass events that, since 2008, have opposed the economic diktats of the 1 percent.

It is this substantive (materially grounded *and* subjective) porousness - the flipside of its industrial precariousness - that makes South Asian women's cinema so fundamental to a new politics of film historiography. Largely forced to operate outside the secure and sealed off environment of an organised production system and without the constraints imposed by risk-averse investors, all the directors discussed in this issue make films knowing all too well that, beyond the certainties of 'affective gestures', networks of solidarity and friendship, very few things in their line of work are stable in time or place. Access to funding, equipment and post-production facilities, shooting conditions, even the few openings afforded them to screen

their films can and do change all the time at very little notice. To paraphrase Meaghan Morris, this is a cinema that seeks to bring about social changes while at the same time contesting, partly out of necessity, the bases of what constitute 'reality' and what 'change'. To do so, Morris contends, is 'to induce intense strain, almost a kind of overload, in historical articulation' (Morris, 1998, p. xv). Here we can begin by owing up to the fact that the conditions imposed on South Asian women's cinema are, in cinema at large, today, the norm rather than the exception, and that this calls for a different focus and new lines of historiographic enquiry.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As Amrit Wilson aptly put it, ‘to represent the “ethnic community”, where ethnicity is more than anything a sort of bland seasoning which can be sprinkled on as needed without

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detracting from the apparently wholesome and even nostalgic Britishness of it all.’ (Wilson, 2006, p. 138).

<sup>2</sup> Following *HIMĀL Southasian*’s 2011 declaration, Chhachhi and Abeysekera define Southasian feminism as ‘a political project in the making, which seeks to create a new space for democratic deliberation and the articulation of a new epistemic frame of Southasian citizenship that would restructure state-society relations within and across countries in the region, questioning notions of “sovereignty” and creating new subjectivities and sites of reflexivity’ (Chhachhi and Abeysekera, 2015, p. 554).

<sup>3</sup> Transnational here refers to films with an ‘international crossover market in mind’ but in which elements of ‘the national’ remain fundamental considerations. See Berry and Farquhar (2006), p. 214.