WAYS OF SEEING: RHETORIC AND REALITY

Report on the 7th IAWRT Asian Women's Film Festival, Seminar and Exhibitions
India International Centre, New Delhi
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International Women's Day connects and inspires both women and men to reaffirm their commitment to the global women's movement. It is, therefore, fitting that in our corner of the world, we host the IAWRT Asian Women's Film Festival every year around this time.

Often running to full houses, this year's event welcomed audiences to 42 short films, which included 30 South Asian premieres and 6 World premieres. The films ran the gamut from international favourites to artistic experiments along the fringes of the genre to community videos and amateur films made by university students.

Alongside the incredible audience attendance, a record roll-call of 34 filmmakers turned out to support the Festival... a storming success proving the wealth of talent and potential that Asian women bring to film as well as serving to educate audiences about the diversity in documentaries and short films. Each film expressed a unique point of view that led to thought provoking, and sometimes heated, post-screening discussions... a fitting tribute to the 100th year of International Women's Day.

The theme of the festival was WAYS OF SEEING: RHETORIC AND REALITY, an attempt to examine how women (as filmmakers and /or as protagonists) go beyond manifestation to question and express in a range of genres representing diversity in country, content and form.

The 7th edition of the IAWRT Asian Women's Film Festival began with a day-long seminar OTHER FRAMES: HISTORIES, IDENTITIES, STRUGGLES that was unique in its format. Combining films and academic presentations, it generated engaged and informed discussions between the seminar panelists, film makers, academics, activists, students and IAWRT members.

In her opening address, Jai Chandiram, Managing Trustee IAWRT India and Festival Director said, "History necessarily impacts homes but little is known about what women think and how they respond to these events. It is only recently that considerable excavation from dialogues and diaries have revealed how women have their own vision and interpret public events. We wish to celebrate the rich legacy from these women, and place it in today's discourse. We also want to analyze how media frames these 'other' histories, identities and struggles."

The seminar was conceived and moderated by Dr. Uma Chakravarti, eminent teacher and historian, who has written extensively on issues of caste, gender, labour and is active in the democratic rights and women's movements. Her many publications include Everyday Lives,
Dr. Uma Chakravarti said, "History is usually considered to be biographies of great men. The frame has remained 'male centered'. We need to democratize history to include the social dimension and to record the histories of 'failures'. The women's lens of history is moving, poignant and guarded.''

The brief overview was followed by a screening of her debut film *A Quiet Little Entry*, which vividly illustrated the points made earlier about the invisibility of women's histories because they are not documented or regarded as valuable. It is a film on exploring the margins in history, on little histories...

Subbalakshmi is an 'unknown' woman, who lived between the salt pans on the Cholamanadalam coast, Chennai and many unknown places in her mind; a woman who meticulously maintained a personal trunk, a diary and scraps of paper. Testimonies to the times... and to her reading, illnesses, alienation and bondings... Writing helped to push the boundaries and unblock feelings of being trapped. These thoughts are noted in a diary in a trunk which is finally excavated by her granddaughter.

The screening was followed by an intense discussion about the meaning of freedom, individual and collective... about the struggles of women to make space for themselves in a world often hostile to them, and their acts of resistance that refuse domination. It was felt that the failures of women are not failures to achieve records but actually the failure of historians to pay attention to their kind of achievement. Women have suffered marginalization, misinterpretation and neglect. It is important to not only restore 'invisible' women but also enlarge our picture of an era by moving their stories from footnotes to the centre of the historical narrative.

The second presentation was by Urvashi Butalia, recent Padma Shri awardee for her contribution to literature and education. Urvashi is the co-founder of Kali for Women, the first feminist press in India. She has also written on gender, communalism, fundamentalism and media. She has authored the classic *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. She is currently the Director of Zubaan, a feminist publishing house.

In *Writing A Life*, Urvashi elaborated on her own hesitation and dilemmas in her ongoing research on the life and times of the eunuch Mona. How much should she reveal about the violence and traditions of the community without jeopardizing Mona's safety and community protection? How not to make the life of the *hijra* exotic? When and how does Mona retrieve her male identity to use clout and power? The responsibilities of the researcher/ writer/ film maker towards her subject raise many ethical issues especially when the subject is a living one. How does feminist scholarship affect the writing of lives differently from other biographers?

After a welcome tea break, three short films were screened as part of a package sent by festival associate SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Centre). It is the only non-profit, artist-run centre in Canada dedicated to the development and presentation of contemporary visual art by South Asian artists. Their mission is to produce “innovative programs that critically explore issues and ideas shaping South Asian identities and experiences.”

*Untitled* by Ferwa Ibrahim from Pakistan depicts the attempt to fixate one's own shadow. In one and a half minutes, she makes a telling comment on the futility & sheer banality of pinning identities. *Tapestry*, by Sharlene Bamboot from Canada, is a light hearted look at the challenges of cultural continuity for a small, dispersed Parsi community living in the diaspora.

Tejal Shah's *There is a Spider Living between Us* creates a deeply disturbing and powerful narrative exploring queer female desire, traversing complex narrative styles, mixing animation,
poetry and fine art to construct a pastiche of turbulence, desire and enforced morality, all in conflict.

Challenging and experimental, the films offered new perspectives on the contemporary world, serving as an appropriate prelude to Now You See It, Now You Don't: Identities, Bodies, Politics, a presentation by Nivedita Menon, Professor of International Relations at Jawaharlal Nehru University. She has authored Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law and Gender and Politics in India apart from co-authoring several books.

Nivedita explored the constitution of 'cultural' and 'biological' identities through political practices in India, such that sometimes identity seems concrete and immutable, and sometimes, fluid and ephemeral. Because society tends to value male models of achievement and behaviour more than it values female models, a woman's gender may exercise greater control and restraint on the way her life evolves. Failing to consider this distorts or falsifies any accounts of her life. Even when a woman is unaware of or inarticulate about the effects of gender on her life, these conditions nonetheless affect her.

Nivedita's encounter with the government school staff doing census data collection was both humorous and telling of the kind of dichotomies that prevail within the system when it comes to dealing with gender and women's issues. For instance, one of the questions that the census form required to be filled was naming the head of the family. A woman teacher who was conducting the study found it hard to accept the fact that it was actually Nivedita who was, indeed, the real head of her household. With her quintessential dry wit, Nivedita brought to the table complex issues located within the domestic sphere and the inability of the system and the state to grasp them. She also spoke about other aspects of a woman's identity – class, race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality and region – which play critical roles apart from gender.

Kumkum Sangari is Research Professor of English Literature at the University of Wisconsin. She has published extensively on literature, critical theory, religious conversions, medieval devotional literature and contemporary gender issues such as personal law and widow immolation. She is the author of Politics of the Possible and has co-edited Re-casting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History and From Myths to Markets: Essays on Gender.

Speaking on Experience: Feminism and Documentary Cinema, Kumkum looked at the elements that are appearing in documentaries made by women. The documentary is a 'wavering register' reflective of social injustices and attempts to bring about change. Is oppression the principal theme in the writing of the history of women? In order to rescue from oblivion, women who have been agents of change or articulate critics of their societies and culture, hard decisions about the reconstruction, selection and inclusion of events or the analysis of motive and cause is needed. Enormous preparation is needed to understand the often multiple realms of activity and filmmakers drawing upon oral evidence must resolve dilemmas of authenticity, reliability and accuracy of witnesses.

Through the documentary we identify heroines, reaffirm our sense of faith and knowledge with the remark, “Oh we saw!” Interviews are necessarily to be seen more as an account of how a woman remembers her past rather than an account of how she lived it. There is also the 'framing' of experience through narrative and voice over.

She concluded that the patriarchal values embedded in traditions give women "limited equality". Her talk raised many issues such as how the “oppressed become oppressors” pitting “women against women”. It was also felt that by focusing on one person, the filmmaker might exaggerate the contribution of individuals to history but it is also essential to open the viewer's eyes to new eras, new ideas and new perspectives on life.
Kumkum showed extracts from the Pakistani documentary *Two Steps Forward* to illustrate many of her points. The film was also shown in the Main Auditorium on March 8. In 2000, over one million peasants started a movement in 10 districts of Punjab in Pakistan. Women acted as frontline fighters of the movement from 2001 to 2004. Their determination eventually left the military with no choice but to step back. Weaving together interviews, archival material and songs from the movement, Gulnar Tabbassum creates a stirring account of one of the most significant episodes in South Asian people's movements. Gulnar studied film in the UK and is a women's rights activist and researcher who has worked with Shirkat Gah Women’s Resource Centre in Lahore for more than six years. Her previous film *A Small Dream* was shown at the 2010 edition of the IAWRT festival.

This was followed by a unique celebration of the work of six IAWRT members from India and the Philippines, a part of their larger ongoing projects with training students, working with rural communities and in conflict areas. The session was moderated by Subi Chaturvedi, filmmaker, photographer and curator, currently working as assistant professor Journalism, Lady Shri Ram College for Women.

The first film was the World Premiere of *Ye Hai Dilli Mere Yaar (This is Delhi, My Love)* by Vani Subramaniam, one of a series of 10 video and 2 audio projects commissioned worldwide by IAWRT to generate awareness about women and violence. Using evocative stylization, the film maps the various kinds of vulnerabilities that women face in public spaces in Delhi. The film drew instant responses from the audience who could identify with many of the characters and situations in the film.

One time advertising copywriter, **Vani Subramanian** uses her films to draw attention to a range of issues and concerns from the political economy of food to primary education, culture, urban development, communalism and the politics of sex selection.

This was followed by another World Premiere *Where Have you Hidden My New Crescent Moon?* by prolific Delhi based filmmaker, Iffat Fatima.

Mughal Mase lived in Habba Kadal, Srinagar, Kashmir. On September 1, 1990, her only son Nazir Ahmed Teli, a teacher, was disappeared, never to be found again. The filmmaker spent a day with her in April 2009... Exploring issues of memory, violence and healing, the film is a tribute to Mughal Mase and her relentless quest for justice and redress.

Iffat has an ongoing project Half Widows, in collaboration with the Association of the Parents of Disappeared Persons in Kashmir (APDP). This is a collective of family members, mostly mothers and spouses of the victims of enforced disappearances in Kashmir, seeking information about the whereabouts of their disappeared relatives. Through the production of documentaries, the project seeks to create space for women whose voice is buried in the larger political and militaristic discourse. The Half Widows project is being supported by IAWRT. The discussion after the film became quite fiery and prolonged with the audience sharply divided about the situation in Kashmir.

By now the conference room was bursting at the seams. Despite more chairs being brought in to accommodate the growing numbers, many young audience members had to sit on the floor while others made do with standing at the back. The air conditioning was not working and windows had to be opened to let in fresh air. But this was no deterrent and it was more than
full house for an astonishing line-up of short videos by non-professional film makers, currently students of Delhi University - a signal, we hope, of a bright future.

The first was Why? Aap ko gussa kyon aata hai? Why do you get angry? This is the question the four young film makers asked the people around them and also themselves. The responses and reactions are sometimes funny, sometimes poignant, and often both. To a great extent the film makers catalyzed the action, braving the certain repercussions of their prolonged inquiry. The directness of the questions and the honesty of the answers help to create a remarkable portrait of the world the four young filmmakers inhabit, an edgy and disturbing exploration of a population on a short fuse.

Pushpa was the sole representative from her group handling questions with aplomb, and won over many hearts when she said she would like to pursue film making as a career. The film was made over two months in a workshop conducted by Anupama Srinivasan with four young children, as part of a United Nations project PARTNERS FOR PREVENTION: Working with Boys and Men to Prevent Gender-based Violence. Anupama has trained in cinema from Harvard as well as the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune. Her remarkable body of work has featured in several previous editions of the IAWRT Festival.

Another set of films produced by college students were Click, Colours of Ability and Hope in the Wall. All the 11 students who had worked on these films were present at the World Premiere and they talked at length about their experiences in film making. Their passion was euphoric and their creativity inspiring!

The films were made as part of a project called Our Neighbourhood, Our Films (ONOF) designed to enable young people to recognize contexts of rights violation and respond to them creatively. The films were very diverse in choice of themes, treatment and narratives reflecting the sensitivity of the student film makers. The project coordinator was Mahuya Bandyopadhyay, assistant professor in Miranda House and a filmmaker in her own right.

Shazia Ilmi’s P.O.418 Siyasat Kanpur poignantly examined the disappearance of Urdu language through the struggle for survival of a daily newspaper in Kanpur. This film draws upon the experiences of the staff and family associated with the Siyasat Jadid, and the Urdu speaking Muslim community living in its vicinity.

Shazia has 14 years of experience in electronic journalism and has produced and directed travel shows, current affairs programs, panel discussions and talk shows. This was the World Premiere of her debut film, followed by an eloquent and impassioned discussion drawing heavily on quotations from ghazals.
Video Advocacy Workshop graduate and IAWRT member from the Philippines, Jola Diones-Mamangun, recreated for the viewers a compelling chronicle of the struggles engendered by large-scale transnational mining in a grassroots community. The conflict portrayed in *The Real Gold* is reminiscent of similar struggles in India against Vedanta and other mining companies.

The formal inauguration was on the morning of 7th March with Justice Leila Seth as the Chief Guest. She was the first woman Chief Justice of a High Court in India, the first woman judge of the Delhi High Court and the first woman to top the Bar examination in London besides being the first woman on the Law Commission.

Festival Founder-Director Jai Chandiram said, "I'm delighted the festival has been such a resounding success this year. We're particularly thrilled by the number of impressive debut films by Asian women from across the globe which we hope is a sign of a great future... The first IAWRT Asian Women’s Film Festival was launched in 2005 to celebrate the spirit of independent film making by women of Asian origin, of diverse ages and backgrounds, navigating an increasingly complex world. We are concerned with women’s creative vision in film and want to see more of it. We are hopeful this will encourage the next generation to break new ground."

Justice Leila Seth read a section from her autobiography *On Balance* sharing with us the difficulties that a woman had to overcome in trying to practice law in the 1950s. She broke ground as a career woman competing in a profession traditionally considered a male preserve, choosing to compete with male colleagues in tax matters, constitutional law and criminal cases. The challenges of stepping into male terrain came early to her. In a girl’s school where everyone wanted to play Draupadi, she played the brave monkey god Hanuman. But she laments, "I think women always have to be equal plus before they can get anything. Even now, out of 600 judges there are only 10 female judges."

The first film of the morning was ten year old Mayuri’s *Dhanwarlo’o Avva* (A Grandma in Dharwar). Mayuri made the film two years ago as an 8 year old, following her grandmother as she worked in her fields. The discussion at the end of the film raised important questions about the practice of ecological agriculture, about growing up in village communities and about media tools being made more widely available. Mayuri answered the questions with great confidence with help from P. Satheesh of the Deccan Development Society that is collaborating with the community in Mayuri’s district. Justice Seth gifted Mayuri a copy of her book *We, the Children of India, The Preamble to our Constitution*.

As a tribute to Justice Seth, the next film was *Half Value Life* directed by 24 year old Alka Sadat from Afghanistan. It follows the life and work of Marya Bashir, the first Afghani female public prosecutor, working for elimination of violence against women. By doing so, Marya puts her life in serious danger. Such is the resistance against her from criminals, mafia bands and narcotics smugglers that one day she returns to find her house has been blasted.
At the age of 17 Alka assisted her sister, Roya Sadat, on the feature *Three Dots*, a low-budget 60 minute film shot on location. It depicts the struggle of a brave young widow coping with life’s realities amidst the booming drug trade in Afghanistan. Alka made her first documentary at the age of 18. Over the last seven years she has made ten more, all of which have received national and international awards.

There were many questions from the audience and some Afghan members in the audience enthusiastically volunteered to help translate. A special mention must be made of Heela who switched rapidly between fluent Hindustani, Pashtu and English.

Alka spoke about the difficulties for women in the specific context of Afghanistan’s recent political history and the need to tell stories such as that of Marya Bashir. She said, "I show three types of women in Afghanistan - some lead miserable lives and get desperate; others are aware of this misery but are party to it because of a passive attitude; the third kind are actively fighting against injustice. Marya Bashir is in a position of high responsibility that women are often considered incapable of carrying... The radio is the most common form of media in Afghanistan. In the film it is used as a symbol of submission and waiting. During the Taliban regime, women listened to the radio all day long, waiting for good news. People are still afraid to work, the government is weak, and there is no normal life in Afghanistan. In a way, our struggle is not over and International Women's Day is a celebration for very few women in my country."

Two more films by women from Afghanistan were equally significant and well received. Roya Sadat’s *Playing The Taar* is a short fiction film about Ay Nabaat, a 17 year old girl from an ethnic minority of Afghanistan, who is forcibly married to a man who already has three wives. When Ay Nabaat gets pregnant, her husband claims that the child is illegitimate as a way to avenge his hostilities against Ay Nabaat's father.

Visually poetic in its treatment, the film uses symbolism to bring out the pathos of Ay Nabaat's situation. The young girl has woven carpets since childhood and sees her entire life interlocked to carpet strings. The red colour of the wool and of the carpets is used repeatedly to suggest the underlying violence in the lives of the characters.

Roya said she was not able to attend school under the Taliban regime so she studied on her own by reading books and watching films. After the Taliban was overthrown, she completed her Bachelor of Arts in 2005 majoring in Law & Political Science. She also completed a Certificate Course in Film Direction from the Asian Academy, Pusan, in 2006.

She has several feature films and television dramas to her credit. In fact, she created *Secrets of This House*, Afghanistan’s first soap opera, which has over 50 episodes aired on Tolo TV, Afghanistan’s most popular television station. She is generally responsible for all the production aspects in her films including script, direction, lighting, cinematography, sound, editing and music.

The third film of the package from Afghanistan was *Bricks and Dreams*, one of a 5 part documentary series, exploring the lives of children in Kabul. The films were shot by five young Afghan filmmakers during production workshops held in 2007 and 2008 by Severin Blanchet, a French documentary filmmaker who made 30 trips to Kabul organizing classes for aspiring Afghan film makers. He was killed in Kabul in February 2010 during an attack on the hotel where he was staying.
Each film opens with an interview with the filmmaker sharing their stories (they have all experienced war and exile) and how they chose to treat their subjects. The director, Sediqa Rezaei, faced enthusiastic questions from the audience which was overwhelmed by the diverse images and voices coming out of the war-torn country. Sediqa said, "Afghanistan is trying to rebuild but there is so much left to do for its young people. Child labour is prevalent and girls are far too often unable to attend school."

Kamla Bhasin of Sangat South Asia generously sponsored tickets and hospitality for the three Afghan film makers.

Thanatphan Palakawong Na Ayutthaya travelled to Delhi to represent her short fiction film Winter Reminiscence. Since her ability to converse in English is limited, Thanatphan read out a short statement. "The film is based on a true story about love among my family members which has been transferred from one generation to the next. Doing something for people we love and to help them fulfill their dreams is a most precious thing."

She was accompanied by her uncle who has also acted in the film. This is Thanatphan's debut film and her talent was amply displayed in various departments. Apart from scripting and directing the film, she has done the art direction, camera and editing.

Old Heart is an 8 minute experimental film by Anocha Suwichakornpong. The film offers the premise that people find refuge in old temples and ruins much as they would relate to the elderly in their families - via relationships built on affection and feelings of comfort and solace. Anocha's thesis film Graceland became the first Thai short to be officially selected by Cannes Film Festival. Her feature debut Mundane History has won multiple awards.

This Way is a 5 minute depiction of the 14th of May, 2010, when people in Silom district were trying to find a way to escape because of a rumoured government crackdown against the red shirts. The director, Wasunan Hutawach, joined Electric Eel Films since its inception and has been doing all kinds of film-related activities from accounting to catering, from being an extra on the set to production manager. Apart from this, she also likes to act and make her own films.

My Father is a poignant and restrained exploration by Pimpaka Towira. In a small Thai village, a father is forced to quit his job as a train station janitor because of his protest letter to the authorities. He goes to Bangkok to join a mass rally but after the 19 May 2010 incident, he
returns home with a deep wound in his heart. An independent film director, screenwriter and film producer, Pimpaka is best known for her 2007 feature length documentary The Truth Be Told: The Cases Against Supinya Klangnarong profiling the Thai media activist and her legal fight against defamation lawsuits brought against her by the Shin Corporation, at the time owned by the family of Prime Minister.

**In Space** is a gentle reflection on the cycle of life and death by Visra Vichit-Vadakan. In her statement Visra writes, "For a Buddhist, karma guides all your movements and the movements surrounding you, linking you with people and places that have cycled and will cycle along a shared current, life after life after life. It is a beautiful approach, to take your situation as a connected one, and to see your life as a reflection of lives past. In Space is a meditation of this reflection of death, not as a finite moment but as an infinite cycle. It’s a link we can use to connect life and death, and life and death again. This film lives very close to my heart on many levels. Through making the film, I learned how to consciously and compassionately accept my own mortality and more importantly, the mortality and impermanence of my loved ones. I shared this journey with my own grandparents who are the lead actors in the film. Because I was able to connect on a deeper level of trust and love with my grandparents during production, the importance of the experience in actually making the film may far exceed the importance of the film itself in my own life. However, upon reflection, I realize that for me they are one and the same. My wish as a filmmaker is that my films are not just narratives in and of themselves, but they themselves are reflections of true moments past, present, and future. I hope that they capture not only what I am conveying as a director through story, but also what I am experiencing in that moment as artist."

Perhaps the most popular film of the Thai package was **Bangkok Bloody Ramen** by Navarutt Roongaroon, an intriguing, light hearted look at family relations. Ken and his wife arrive in Bangkok as ordinary Japanese tourists. At each noodle shop, Ken tastes the soup and the noodles with utmost concentration. He then compares the soup with a brown stain on an anonymous postcard...

The director says, "I was born in Thailand and raised up entirely with Thai food. I still remember the first time I saw “Tampopo” in my film critic workshop. The film was so impressive and mouthwatering. Just right after the class finished, my friends and I ran out to find ramen noodle to eat. That was the first time I tasted Japanese cuisine... I had a chance to work with Japanese actor Ken Mitsuishi in 2005 and we became friends. He said he would like to be in my next project so I came up with the idea of a Japanese man who comes to Thailand to find something / someone. I tried to put together my fascination of food cultures (both Japanese & Thai), family bonds and modern-day sexuality into this comedy/drama film."

**The Value of a Tree** by Salisa Piencharoen is an incredibly beautiful four minute animation film cautioning us that the effects of natural disasters become severe and difficult to control when nature is being destroyed by increasing use of technology.

Another stunning animation film that won great applause was **Journey to Nagaland** by Aditi Chitre. This is a story of migration and inheritance. A girl is haunted by the ghost of a woman in a red shawl. Through a dream state and guided by a ubiquitous eagle, who turns out to be the carrier of the woman’s spirit, she travels to a distant land where the mystery of the apparition is solved by a woman who tells her a story. Woven into this tale are some ancient folk songs, practices and beliefs of the Ao Naga tribe, which are in
An animation artist based in Bombay, Aditi shared with the audience her desire to present Nagaland as more than the stereotype that news media often presents it as. She trained as a painter but soon discovered a passion for animation. Her debut film *The Mall on top of my House* has been screened at an earlier IAWRT festival. *Journey to Nagaland* is her second film.

One of the biggest hits of the festival was *Love Arranged*. In a country where love is not left to chance, but a carefully calculated choice, we share the humorous yet humbling journeys of Divya & Neha, educated, beautiful Indian women, taking the arranged marriage route, despite being children of love marriages. Unable to find prospective partners at bars or BBQs, they meet matchmakers, download grooms, are primed and positioned as commodities and paraded before suitors. Their struggle reveals a socio-cultural fabric stained with dowry, dogma, communal and color discrimination. Arjun and Abhishek, successful ‘suitable’ men, provide the male counterpoint.

Through this exploration, we witness the courage of two women who walk a cultural tightrope keeping their dignity intact. The film stirred much debate especially since both protagonists were present for the post screening discussion.

*Made In India* by Rebecca Haimowitz and Vaishali Sinha follows Texas natives Lisa and Brian Switzer as they attempt to conceive via an Indian surrogate. A very timely film as international surrogacy becomes popular while the rights of the surrogates – often poor and illiterate women from developing countries – are ignored by medical tourism companies and their own governments. Intense discussion followed the screening raising issues such as - Why don’t the Switzers adopt a child instead? Why would they take an Indian woman who they’ve never met especially someone who has a poor standard of hygiene? How ethical was it for the Switzers to move her away from her family to another flat so she could have better nutrition and rest during her pregnancy? What if the surrogate became attached to the child she’s given birth to and refused to give it up?

Vaishali said, "As an American and an Indian working together, we bring different perspectives to the film, a dynamic that has us both asking harder questions, digging into deeper emotional responses. As women deeply interested in issues of reproductive rights, social justice and global issues, the subject of ‘outsourcing’ surrogacy to India captivated us from the moment we first read about the practice. We aimed to create a film that goes beyond sensationalist headlines and uncovers the personal lives and choices of the surrogates and the infertile Americans involved."

Vaishali is hoping to raise funds to dub the film in various Indian languages and circulate it through health networks and women's groups. She is again filming in India for her next project *Kashmir* which is based on personal narratives of university students, on the brink of graduation, in the politically troubled Indian state.

Seven workers, all women... four free trade zones in four different Turkish cities. Surrounded by high walls and barbed wire fences, very much like a concentration camp, *The Zone* covers the working conditions of women in the free trade zones - their experiences, observations and their hopes for the future. The barbed wire fences not only surround the zones but also accentuate the captivity of the women workers. So much
so that the borders of the zone evade us, inside and outside is indistinguishable.

Most audience members were amazed that the film makers could shoot so openly inside the free trade zone. Co-director Guliz Saglam said they had no problems at all because no one thought that two women with a camera could be up to anything much! Guliz worked as assistant director for several feature films and is now an independent documentary maker, exploring issues such as migration, violence against women and women labour. Both she and co-director Feryal Saygiligil were involved in Filmnom Women’s Cooperative for a while.

One Hope by Yuli Andari of Indonesia follows the life of a poor forest worker who uses her small profits for daily food and for her son’s education. The film raised significant questions from the audience about women’s work and collective mobilization; about the craft of biographical filmmaking and gaining access to people’s lives. Yuli was helped in the discussion by Hendra Henny Andries, Minister Counsellor of the Embassy of Indonesia, who translated from Bhasa to English.

Yuli’s began making films in 2005 after she participated in a documentary workshop for beginners. In 2007 her third documentary Crescent Moon over the Sea was selected in New Asian Currents of The Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival. With Yuli’s help, we soon hope to have a package of Indonesian films at the IAWRT festival.

The student films were refreshing, diverse in theme and treatment, and extraordinarily accomplished. Tresa Ponnor, a graduate of the Australian Film Television and Radio School, accompanied her film Sosefina about a young girl who dreams of escaping her big loud Samoan family and their rundown house to living in a large display home. Tresa spoke about her own experiences as an Indian migrant in Australia wanting to be accepted in her adopted country which have influenced this story. She also emphasised the need to use a heightened colour palette that would be striking and fun to attempt rather than simply shoot in ‘natural’ colours. Tresa has re-located to London for work hoping to gain wider exposure and experience.

In contrast Light Falling On White Flowers by Sandhya Kumar is a tribute to Isadora Duncan using pastels to create a unique evocative quality. The film was shot in the city of San Francisco in the spaces that had been special for the legendary dancer. An independent filmmaker currently based in New Delhi, Sandhya graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute, and has chosen to work on documentaries and experimental shorts.

Top Spin by Mina T. Son and Sara Newens follows a young table tennis champion as she works her way to the top. From her father, Michael, who strategizes with her before each tournament to her mother, Xin, who helps scoop up balls during practice, theirs is as much a story about a family coming together as it is about raising one of the best junior table tennis players in the world. The film was recently selected as a 2010 Student Academy Awards Regional Finalist. Both film makers are currently receiving an M.F.A. in Documentary at Stanford University.
This year’s selection also included several experimental films - passionate, enlightened & charged, they were a treat for the audience. **Titli Udi (Flight of the Butterfly)** is about a young woman who tries to find her story, which eludes her like a fluttering butterfly. She digs into her past, both personal and the past of her nation, in the hope of discovering her own voice. She finally meets the Indian Goddess Santoshi Ma who grants her a wish. The past, personal and national, are inspiration in this colorful and eclectic piece. The film was directed by Payal Kapadia, a young film maker and visual artist of great promise, whose work deals with issues relating to identity, memory and Indian myths. Payal has studied film making at Sophia Polytechnic, Mumbai, and is currently enrolled in the MFA program in Film, Video and New Media at the Art Institute of Chicago.

**Metruk (The Abandoned)** tells the story of abandoned homes left alone for self destruction. They are disappointed, upset but still proud. Worn by the weather and the aging of stillness, the homes have no more to offer as they once did. The film uses a meticulously detailed sound track to evoke the past and contrast it with the present. The filmmaker, Orkide Ünsür, has worked as a reporter, script writer, director and producer in national TV channels and production companies. She has directed promotional films and also worked in short films as an art director and an actress.

Shakuntala Kulkarni's **Is It Just A Game?** is a chilling 5 minute experimental short. Kabbadi is a game the film maker played in her childhood for pure fun. Now as a grown up, she asks "Is it just a game?" The film is an attempt to address and challenge issues of power versus victimization, violence and viciousness, within the politics of gender, caste and race the world over. Trained as a painter, Shakuntala works on multi disciplinary, interactive and collaborative projects which have been exhibited in solo shows all over the world. She was awarded the Prince Claus Fund in 2002.

Nurjahan Akhlaq's **Death In the Garden of Paradise** deals with the film maker's return to her home in Lahore after the murder of her sister and father. This video is a meditation on a dream-like tragedy that transcends mere tribute to honour a family legacy. Every visual effect serves to unsettle – jerky hand held camera, eerie music, colour filters – turning the paradise of the title into a city of foreboding. Familiar sights become strange, shopkeepers and passing pedestrians become suspects, and sound is fragmented and distorted. Architecture and haunted spaces, deserted gardens, photographs and paintings are both metaphors and physical locations in this elegant elegy to mortality.

**Coolie Gyal** by Renata Mohamed is a moving 8 minute coming out story. An honest and sincere letter is read out from a daughter to her parents, filled with the expectations and anxieties of a young woman who fears her reminiscence of an idyllic childhood is in danger of being threatened.

A heartwarming debut was **Kelkkunnundo (Are You Listening)** a short fiction film in Malayalam by Geethu Mohandas, a leading actress in Malayalam cinema. **Kelkkunnundo** played at Birds Eye View Festival, London in March 2011 as part of an IAWRT package.
Little Ammu is a four year old girl who is visually blind since birth. Her mother is a maid and drops her off every morning at the local garage in the care of the workers. While sitting on her designated chair, Ammu's only source of entertainment is the sounds of other children at play nearby. Her zest and fascination for life is communicated through a fly and a cat that are part of her imaginative world.

Another moving tribute to the human spirit was *Beating Time*, a hugely inspirational documentary from Israel on the struggle to find a cure for ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis). When Avi Kremer, 29, finds out that he has only four more years to live, he decides to do the impossible. An M.B.A. student at Harvard Business School, Avi musters all his know how and sets out in search for funds to find a cure for the disease he has been afflicted by. Shot over four years, the film traces the efforts of Avi and his friends to locate investors and researchers who will join him in the race.

The festival featured several documentaries that are personal journeys of the film maker "exploring self, identities and dreams" as Jai put it, expanding on themes that ensured the solitary struggle of the protagonist / film maker becomes part of a shared story for women elsewhere. For almost a decade, Saba Dewan has been working on a trilogy of films focusing on stigmatized women performers. *Delhi–Mumbai–Delhi* (2006) on the lives of bar dancers was the first film of the trilogy; the second was *Naach (The Dance, 2008)* that explores the lives of women who dance in rural fairs. The third and final film of the trilogy is *The Other Song* (2009) about the art and lifestyle of the courtesans and has been screened widely.

In 1935 Rasoolan Bai recorded for the gramophone this thumri, "*My breasts are wounded, don't throw flowers at me.*" Never to be sung again, the song eventually got lost. Seventy four years later, the film travels through Varanasi, Lucknow and Muzzafarpur in search of the forgotten song. This journey brings the film face to face with the enigmatic figure of the *tawaif*, courtesan, *bai ji* and the contested terrain of her art practice and lifestyle. To find the lost other song, the film must understand the past and present of the courtesan and unravel the significant transitions that took place in India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries around the control, censorship and moral policing of female sexualities and cultural expression.

A promise, an old destroyed horse head violin and a song believed lost, lead singer Urna Chahar Tugchi back to Outer Mongolia. Her grandmother was forced to destroy her violin in the tumult of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Only the violin’s neck and head survived with some engravings of the ancient song of the Mongols *The Two Horses Of Genghis Khan*. Now it is time for Urna to fulfill the promise she made to her grandmother.

Urna hands over the broken parts of the violin to Hicheengui, a renowned craftsman, who will build a new body for the old instrument. She then leaves for the interior to look for the song’s missing verses, only to be disappointed. None of the people whom she meets know the old melody of the Mongols. The horse head violin, the *morin khuur*, embodies the
national identity of the Mongols. Symbolically it stands for the divided country, the separated brothers of Inner and Outer Mongolia. Due to the rapid pace of development the world has mutated into one large entity, where cultural identity and diversity have receded. In the same way that Urna searches for the song believed lost, she is also searching for her people’s lost customs and traditions.

We are extremely grateful to festival partners, the Goethe Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan New Delhi, for a grant that allowed us to bring both the film and the director across. Robin Mallick and Malavika Venugopal, in particular, saved the day when it seemed likely that Byambasuren Davaa would not get her visa easily on time. A special mention also has to be made of Ritu Khanna who not only did a remarkable translation for the post screening Q and A but also for Byambasuren’s interview at Lok Sabha TV.

"I am the child of both victim and perpetrator in this conflicted history." So begins the narration in Memories of a Forgotten War. In the Philippine-American War of 1899, more Filipinos were killed by US troops than by the Spanish during their 300 years of colonial rule. Directed by Sari Dalena and Camilla Benolirao Griggers, this experimental documentary combines archival photographs, turn of the century film (like US President McKinley announcing his intention to "educate, uplift and civilise the Filipinos"), digital video and 16mm film to create memories of a forgotten history, the agony of a nation held under martial law for over a decade.

A contemporary Filipina-American narrator says, "It's hard for me to tell this part of the story, the part that's personal," but she does not hold back. Later she describes a dream in which her American father and grandfather are walking towards her, "They were carnivorous, flesh eating, predatory. I realised they were wolves." The film leaves little doubt about the real predatory forces: the ones whose occupation consumed the lives of 1 million Filipinos between 1899 and 1913.

The closing film of the festival, it played to a packed auditorium and ended with thunderous applause. Many in the audience moved to the gala dinner under a starlit sky at the Rose Garden of the India International Centre. Enveloped in the warmth of new friendships, Roya and Alka Sadat declared they would be putting up a similar festival in Kabul later this year.

A few days after her return to Kabul, Roya wrote to say:

Dear All friends that Work in IAWRT film festival.
I don't tired, you do successful work during the festival.
you know I participated more then 20 international film festival around the world.
But I see here in your festival very good feel and I don't know what can I say in English.
I am as woman from Afghanistan want say you your festival is the best for me.
I hope we can be your part and we can give this festival to Kabul.
I hope we can have you with us in Kabul.
all the best and have a good time
roya sadat

Tresa Ponnor wrote from Kerala where she had gone to visit family:

I really did enjoy the festival and felt it gave loads to think about and reflect on. It was amazing meeting the other filmmakers especially hearing from the Afghan women. Also it was a very good experience to answer questions and speak about the film. Thank you very much for the opportunity and your hard work.
Yuli Andari from Indonesia sent a 9 page report, an extract of which is reproduced below:

The informal dialogue and information exchange about women's issues in various countries filled the air. It was an honour for me to be there and watched films made by women directors in the festival that so intimate and warm... The films screening was explored various issues such as access to education for women, land ownership, environmental issues and natural resource management, women's politics of the bodies, access to employment for women, and so forth. These issues are very close and experienced by women in developing countries that mostly populated the Asian continent...

As a festival with specific audience, I impressed on how everything is so warm, intimate, and made simple. At the end of every screening, each director shared a social context prevailed in their country, and the main reason why they made this film. Partisanship and vision in fighting for women's aspirations become a common ground for these directors to make their films. Audience has their chance for interactive dialogue with the director. Nearly none of the technical inquiries was questioned here, but bigger, related to the issues, interests, endorsement, and what was trying to be delivered on the issues raised by film makers. The creation of a dialogue between filmmakers and audiences, supported by the punctual event execution made me bore so many fruits out of this festival.

A package of IAWRT films was screened at Birds Eye View Film Festival 2011, London. Another one is to be presented at the 4th International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala, 2011. A two day event at Pondicherry University on March 15 and 16 was a huge success. As a student said, "The selection of films portrays Asians in a unique and authentic way which is new for us. It would be great if some of the film makers who came to Delhi were to come to Pondicherry." Yet another comment was, "We would like it to be held over a weekend the next time so that we don't have to bunk classes." The Film Club at Auroville has requested that they also be included for the 2012 travelling package.

A mention must be made of the two exhibitions courtesy Zubaan. The first was Seven Sisters and the City by Uzma Mohsin which tries to encapsulate the experiences of Delhi that the women in the pictures shared with her. Uzma's note accompanying the exhibition reads, "A big city usually provides possibilities of integration into modern society free of social structures and prejudices. The anonymity it offers not only empowers but also enables the evolution of one's identity and dreams. But this is not true for the majority of the women from the North-East. To come and live in the city is an ordeal that they say robs them of their 'dignity', where belongingness to a metropoli is stolen by their distinct looks, always caught up in labels - 'exotic', 'chinky' or 'available'. They live in constant fear of being targeted as the 'other'. A lack of knowledge about their culture further compounds matters. The photographs provide a glimpse into the spaces where these women from the North East feel safe, free to be themselves and other spaces, where they feel threatened and trapped by their distinct looks." Uzma graduated from the National Institute of Design, specializing in graphic design and has worked for the print media since 2000. She is pursuing her keen interest in photography, in the form of several independent projects.

The second was called Painting Our World – Poster Women II showcasing traditional women artists depicting socially relevant issues in their art (embroidery, scrolls, tribal paintings and so on). In recent times folk expressions have taken on a different form that
includes communicating socially relevant messages such as dowry, HIV/AIDS, child marriage, the devastation of the tsunami and globalization. This material provides a different and alternative narrative, not necessarily of the women’s movement, but of the kinds of things women are thinking about, and of the reach and power of feminist messages. It is perhaps also a reflection of how widespread social movements have been in India.

Finally a big thank you from IAWRT India to all our participating filmmakers who have flown in after adjusting shooting schedules and at their own expense. We are HUGELY GRATEFUL for without your presence the festival would not have had this vibrant atmosphere.

our festival partners - the India International Centre, the Goethe Institut/ Max Mueller Bhavan New Delhi and Sangat South Asia

our festival associates - Thai Film Foundation, South Asian Visual Arts Centre, Toronto and Birds Eye View Festival, London

His Excellency Gautam Mukhopadhaya, Ambassador of India to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and his staff, in particular Mr. JP Singh

N. Pushpamala in Bangalore and Sagartika Sundaram in Dubai for helping to cast the net wide for this year's programming.

our audience whose excitement and enthusiasm keeps us going - whether they are joining Kamla Bhasin and Runu Chakravarti in a stirring rendition of songs from the women's movement or continuing the lively discussions from the auditorium to the cafeteria

the Indian Council for Cultural Relations and in particular the Director, Mr. Goel, for supporting the seminar

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Dr. Uma Chakravarti for conceiving, coordinating and moderating this year's seminar

for the programming from Afghanistan - Taran Khan, Siddiq Barmak and Alka Sadat

for the programming from Canada - Haema Sivanesan and Srimoyee Mitra from SAVAC

for the programming from Thailand - Chalida Uabumrungjit, Jit Phokaew, Lawan Jirasuradej, Sanchai Chotirosseranee, Som and Varsha Nair

for the programming from Turkey - Cuneyt Cebenoyan and Filmmor

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Purnima Rao for the poster which is really a collector's item this year
RAL/ Nippo and ICCR for sponsoring the Closing Night Dinner
Shahnaz Hussain for gift hampers for the participating film makers
Zubaan for the incredible exhibitions as well as gifts for the participants
Our deepest thanks to IAWRT International for a grant for the festival... and to all our IAWRT volunteers – Uma Tanuku for handling the biggest share of responsibilities this year (the blog, hospitality, press and publicity) with her customary cheer and good humour; Aradhana Kohli for her persistent efforts towards arranging support for the seminar; Shazia Ilmi and Jai Chandiram for the hospitality extended to visiting film makers; Anupama Srinivasan for sharing her workshop experiences in an insightful and thought provoking report; Samina Mishra and Subi Chaturvedi for moderating; Iffat Fatima for her camera; Renuka Sharma for managing a paltry budget with aplomb; Vani Subramaniam who writes great letters of encouragement; and Kiron Bansal and Ratnabali Mitra for being there.
And to our families, friends and well wishers who contributed in all sorts of wonderful and unique ways to making the 7th IAWRT Asian Women's Film Festival 2011 an unparalleled success. In particular Anwar Jamal, Aruna Vasudev, Indu Ramchandani, Ranjana Mohan and Rita Vachani.

*With inputs from Samina Mishra and Subi Chaturvedi*

**Jai Chandiram**  
Managing Trustee, IAWRT India  
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