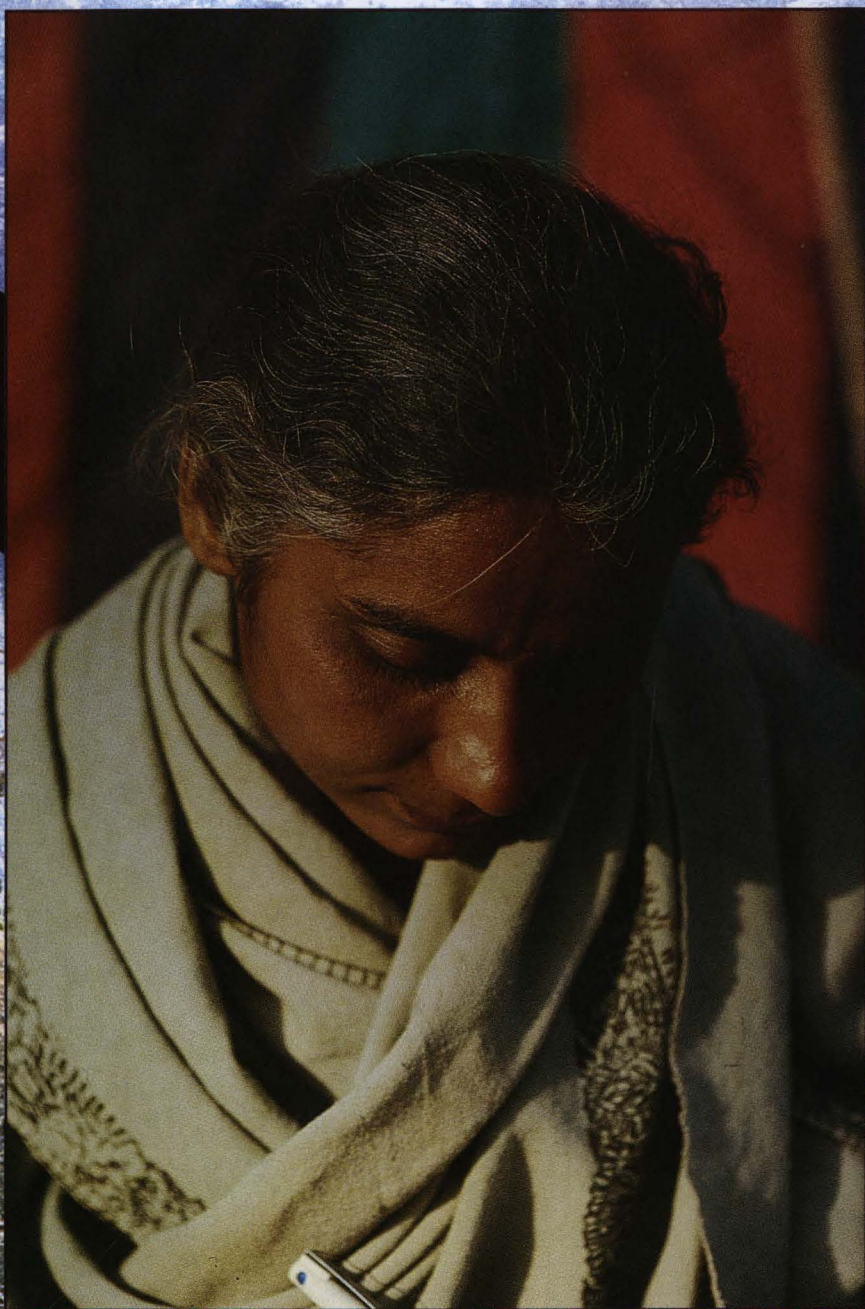
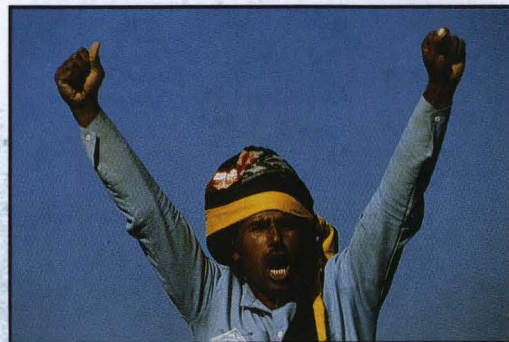


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Rungbh
A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment & Criticism



Film & Video Issue II

Ali Kazimi

*Narmada: a valley rises
documents truth and politics*

Shabana Azmi

Reflections on activism, politics and film

Julian Samuel

Current passages and recent videos

Beyond Destination

Construction of South Asian identity

The Bandit Queen

Controversy revisited



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Rungh

Volume 3, Number 2

RUNGH is an interdisciplinary magazine committed to the exploration of traditional and contemporary South Asian cultural production and its contexts. It is a project of the Rungh Cultural Society, an incorporated, non-profit society.

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Sheyfali Saujani is a Toronto-based media worker and writer.

being Shabana Azmi

*The celebrated
Indian actor reflects
on her films,
her politics
and her activism
with Ameen Merchant*



Illustration by Merz Roe

Shabana Azmi, one of India's pre-eminent actors, was in Vancouver (October, 1994) on the invitation of NRISAD (Non-Resident Indians for Secularism and Democracy) and the Pacific Cinemathèque, where a retrospective of her films was being held. In the following conversation with Ameen Merchant, she reflects on her film career, her politics and her experiences as a social activist.

Ameen This is something I've always wondered about. Does a successful actor ever stop acting? I mean, where does Shabana the person end and Shabana the persona begin?

Shabana See, I am a sum total of the parts that I play and I've always believed that acting is a two-way process. Every time I portray a character I learn something different, something new. So Shabana the person brings something to that character and simultaneously learns something about the character, a different way of comprehending the world, perhaps. I feel very strongly about this. Because, you see, the more I add to my experience as an actress who plays particular characters and gets involved in particular situations, the more enriched, I, Shabana the person,



Photo: Al-Qamar Sangha



Photo: Al-Qamar Sangha

become. Similarly the more aware I keep myself, the more open I am to life's experiences, the more it helps me in understanding a Lakshmi [the character in *Ankur*] or a Jeroo [the character in *Pestonjee*] or whoever. I think the problem with most actor-stars is that they start getting cut off from life. They have their own private make-up man, hairdresser, assistant and in the evening after wrap-up they attend the same kind of parties where everybody reinforces their view of themselves...and they get stuck. They are unable to travel by cabs or speak to a bhajiwali or interact with the real people they are supposedly portraying... It cuts off their greatest resource from where they should be getting their acting. So if you ask me who I am, I think that I am all these parts, but

my strength lies, I think, in the fact that I have not become cynical. I don't have all the answers and I am hugely curious and hugely interested.

Ameen So, who was the most difficult character to portray? Which do you consider your most challenging role to date?

Shabana You know, the one person that I was really surprised to discover in myself was Jamini, the character I played in Mrinal Sen's *Khandar*. To find Jamini, I had to go deep inside the recesses of my own being and, when I did, I was actually startled to discover that she actually existed.

Ameen How do you get in touch with someone who you think exists within you? How do you isolate this person? Is there a process?

Shabana The first time you hear a story is very important—whether it is narrated in three lines or as an entire script. The first narration is very important for me for something clicks during that time. Mrinal'da narrated the story to me in five lines—and something pulled me to that character and I said, "Yes, this could be challenging". What happened is that *Khandar* came immediately after *Mandi*. And for *Mandi*, I had put on weight and was very gregarious on the sets and it was one big *jhamela*...and in three weeks I was reporting for *Khandar*, set in these ruins in Shanti Niketan. And very subconsciously—it is only in retrospect that I am able to understand this—I decided that I was going to be by myself; no make-up man, no hairdresser, no nothing, just my books and my music. It was as though I had decided to withdraw from life's experiences. For with *Mandi* I had expanded the barriers of my own persona and I had to find the quiet, tragic but dignified Jamini from somewhere within. So it was a very reserved Shabana on those sets. Looking back, I realize that it also had to do with the ruins. You know, they do something to you. You really get affected by your environment.

Ameen What about a film like *City of Joy*? What kind of challenge did that pose?

Shabana Firstly, the chance to work with Roland Joffe. That I wanted very much. And when I met Roland, I saw that he was really concerned; that his heart was in the right

place. Regarding the film's reception, I feel that as Indians we tend to get very hyper about being seen in any kind of negative light, and we think that being shown as being poor is somehow wrong. You know, we should really be concerned with this issue and not try to hide it under the carpet all the time. And also this criticism about this American doctor teaching these Indians to stand on their own feet...Well, you should understand that a film like *City of Joy* is a huge commercial consideration—you have to accept that—without which the film would have never been made. Nobody in America is interested in a film about slum-dwellers from God knows where. People aren't interested. So, that's a concession you make. But in any case, I know—I work in the Bombay slums constantly—that whether it is a village or the city slums, you need a catalyst, you need somebody from outside who comes in and works and inevitably becomes a catalyst for change. In some cases, people from the same environment arise and become catalysts, but you need that kind of consciousness-raising. For instance, in Mijmawe where my father is working, had my father not taken on the role of being the social activist that he is, that village would have remained frozen in time. So, if *City of Joy* had an Indian doctor, say a doctor from Bombay, how would it have been different, except that *uski chamdi gori hai*?

Ameen But what about the media in the West, one that is saturated with negative stereotypes of India, and the ramifications such a film may have for the diasporic South Asian community—especially in North America? Doesn't the film consolidate such a discourse?

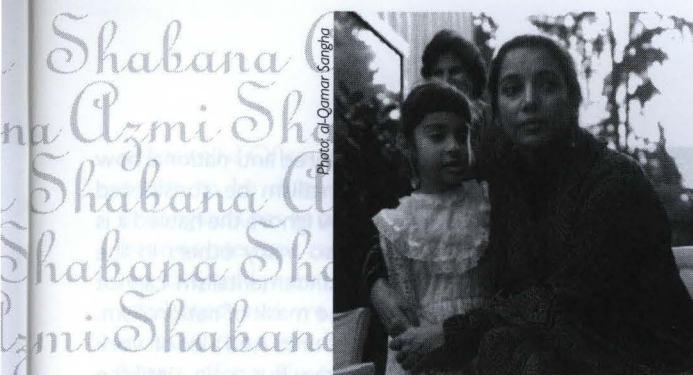


Photo: Al-Qamar Sangha

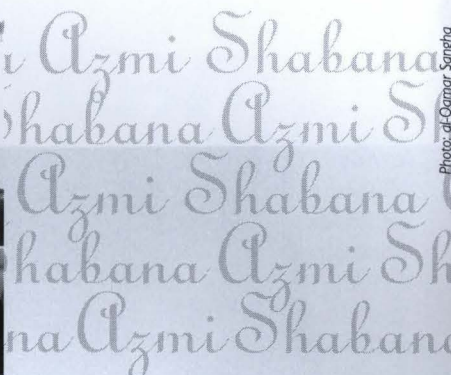


Photo: Al-Qamar Sangha

Shabana That's a different perspective and of course I'm aware of all this. But I personally think that there was too much self-flagellation in the film.

The doctor kept feeling like a piece of shit all the time only because his father had not been nice to him and, in coming to India, coming to the slum and getting to know the *rickshawallah*, he realizes that there are different values existing here, for Christ's sake, the family being the most important of them. Here the *rickshawallah's* family depends on his daily income and every decision that is made is not for the individual but for the whole family, which is completely different from the West where everything is for the individual. So, I see the film as portraying a learning experience both ways. I didn't think it was only Patrick Swayze playing God, in fact if anything, I think the film leaned far more heavily on the side of Om Puri and made him more angelic than was necessary.

Ameen What about the question of availability? There is this experience of a whole different value system that's available to the American that just does not exist for someone from that part of the world?

Shabana *Tho kya kare uska? Kya kare?*

Ameen Isn't it exploitative?

Shabana You know, Roland's heart would break if he heard this. These are pre-fixed notions that are now being imposed on the film. Because, if anything, he was seeking to do the exact opposite.

Ameen You can't overlook the colonial paradigm here. The white man goes to the East, confronts and constructs his identity in an exotic locale, and returns fully aware of himself. The piece about you in *The Vancouver Sun* was captioned: "A Passage to the Films of India"! Why flog these colonial clichés? Doesn't the film similarly set up the racial 'Us and Them' divide?

Shabana In fact, what the filmmaker attempts to do in *City of Joy* is that he tries to resolve this 'Us and Them' by saying that yes, there is the 'Other' most certainly, but the 'Other' and 'Us' can be celebrated without the need for subjugation. I think the film is about understanding each other. Of course, there is the divide, and when you use the colonial yardstick it is very easy to impose that structure on the film.

Ameen I think there is a difference between imposing and recognizing. For me, *City of Joy* was yet another film about India's poverty, filth and backwardness. There was absolutely no trace of a modern nation.

Shabana I really don't see the subject as a problem. But you're right, I too would have liked to see—which unfortunately could not be available within the context of the narrative—the contradictions of India. The fact that people live in several centuries simultaneously—we didn't get a glimpse of that. If we'd had a glimpse of that, then it would have been more interesting.

Ameen On that note of centuries, what are your views on the present-day communal situation in India?

Shabana See, it was the first time in my life that I had the word 'Muslim' hurled at me, either sympathetically or aggressively, but with a self-consciousness. It had never, never, never happened. And it brought into play this whole issue of 'identity.' And identity is based on so many things. If you ask me who I am, the first thing that I would say that I am a woman, then I'd say I'm an Indian, that I'm an actress, an activist, a Muslim, a daughter, a wife etcetera, etcetera. But in India it seems almost as though a systematic attempt is being made to push 'identity' into the narrow confines of the religion one belongs to, so that you become a Hindu, she becomes a Christian, he becomes a Sikh and I become a Muslim—and that's it! All the other identities are blurred. Now, that is the sharpest thing that is happening and it is very hard to deal with because obviously what you are doing is attacking India's composite culture, which is its strongest point. And for me it has been a very traumatic and extremely painful period, for it just slipped in so unobtrusively into areas where I sense this being a 'Muslim' all around me.

See, I come from a family where—left background *yeh woh*—we've celebrated Diwali, Holi, Idd, Christmas—all with the same fervour. Our family has been the centre for these things. Now, after the riots, Holi was the first festival to be celebrated—it came just immediately after the Bombay riots. And, palpably, in the air around me, I could sense a feeling of apprehension, even in my closest friends. Will they celebrate this year or not? And the fact that we did made them heave a sigh of relief. But that to me was the greatest tragedy. For here was something that I had always taken for granted as part of my composite culture and now it

had become a token of my secular credentials! I couldn't deal with it. Even as I tell you now it gives me gooseflesh: that just because I celebrated *Holi* you acknowledge me as a secular liberal? That was an eye-opener. And the divide is so deep along communal lines, particularly amongst the middle classes, the largest segment of the Indian population. The madness has, of course, died down but the tension is still there. The minorities feel very vulnerable and insecure.

Photo: Ameen Merchant



Ameen Is there any coalition building among the minorities to combat this divide?

Shabana Yes. For starters, the Muslim liberal—who did not want to get involved, perhaps for the fear of being called communal—and was too busy establishing his secular credentials when Muslims were being butchered in Muradabad, killed in Malyana, hounded in Bhiwandi—this Muslim liberal kept away. For whatever token reason, the Shahi Imam and Syed Shabuddin were people who took up the cause of the Muslims. Now obviously, the Muslim community began to regard these people as saviours as the Muslim liberal never spoke for the community. But when on Salman Rushdie and Shah Bano this Muslim liberal gets up and says: “*Meri baat suno, unki baat mat suno*,” the community says, “Go away! Where were you when my children were being killed? Where were you when my hut was being burnt? Why should I listen to you now? Go away from here!” Finally, after the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the massacre that followed, the Muslim liberal has woken up, and has decided to take charge, so to speak. Because in not doing, a lot has been done. So, for the first time there's an emerging Muslim leadership, and a different, committed voice is being heard.

Ameen Have you personally been involved in any of these movements? How have you tackled this issue?

Shabana We, that's Nirvara Haq, the organization I am involved with, figured that communal harmony cannot be achieved by shouting slogans. It can only be achieved

by relating it to issues of social justice. And it is social justice we have been fighting for in the slums, and, in the process, making it amply evident to the slum-dwellers that their security lies in having a harmonious relationship with those around them rather than an antagonistic one. For instance, take the Shahi Imam. Who is he to issue a *fatwa*? But he does so occasionally and instructs Muslims to vote for so-and-so of such-and-such party. *Achcha bhai, agar uski itni* standing *hai* community *mein*, then that party should get the votes. But the fact is that most of the candidates whom he recommends lose even their election deposits! So, this shows very clearly that the Shahi Imam is not the leader of the community. The curious thing is that the media does not focus on this fact as much as it pretends to set-up the Shahi Imam as the sole spokesman of the Muslim community. Why does it not make the headlines that when he issued a *fatwa*, his candidates lost? This lie has to be exposed. But that's not happening. That's just the first fact. On the other hand, there are very strong secular Hindu groups that have been struggling sincerely to uphold secularism and democracy. They really need to be strengthened. Because see, what is Hindu Rashtra? Hindu Rashtra is the antithesis of Akhand Bharat and so if Sikh fundamentalism and Muslim

extremism are considered anti-national how can Hindu fundamentalism be considered national? How can you ignore the hatred it is expressing towards so many others in the country? So Hindu fundamentalism cannot hide its face under the mask of nationalism. That bogey has to be burst. And a lot of work is happening in the area. But again, until the silent majority gets up and speaks, not much headway is going to be made.

Ameen Now which is this 'silent majority'?

Shabana Oh, the silent majority is a lot of people who are not communal but who never get up and speak. The kind of people who think that, “*Bhai hum tho communal nahin hai tho*, why should we get involved in this whole *chakkar*?” But this time such apathy won't do. That's why it is very important that the secular liberals, like we call ourselves, have to stop preaching to the already converted. Please let's stop that and let's now get people who are sitting on the fence, the people who do not want to get involved, involved. And one of the strongest ways of doing that is through culture. Because you see, people are not interested in joining you for marches to raise their hands or, for that matter, taking on confrontational positions and demonstrating strong political attitudes. They want to keep away from all that. But yes, they are interested in culture. So that becomes a window through which you can definitely enter.

Ameen What do you mean by 'culture'? And how does this happen?

Shabana By culture, I mean dance, drama, theatre, literature, cinema—the whole works. *RSS ko dekho, no kya kiya hua hai*...RSS is one huge organizational success story, isn't

it, basically? Of course, the other thing that needs to be done is that this revisionist propaganda has to be countered. There has been a systematic campaign of hatred for the last sixty odd years that has been absolutely inculcated and we haven't realized how viciously propaganda can lodge itself in the hearts of people to replace information. Propaganda then becomes your information. And when it isn't countered, then it can have very, very dangerous consequences. For far too long the secular liberal *behat ke bhaiyya* has thought that propaganda is so obvious it doesn't need countering. It is because of such an attitude that things have come to such a crisis. Frankly, in my view, the fight is now between organization and disorganization. The secular liberal is not organized and the communal element is far more organized and has a much greater outreach.

I saw this for myself last year when I was in the USA. It was through celebrating the Vivekanand Centenary, organizing picnics for children, funmelas for women, camps for the older community members—it was through these activities that all these in-roads were being made into 'Hindu Nationalism' in inverted commas, 'Hindutva' to be more specific.

But you see, Hinduism is a very tolerant, all-encompassing religion. So how then can you say that the preachers of the 'Hindutva' are talking about the same Hinduism of Vivekanand or Gandhi? How do you come to terms with that? You have to burst that bogey again.

Ameen Yes. But then again, the very identity of the nation, 'Hindustan' as it is called, becomes a convenient rationale, don't you think?

Shabana Yes, that might be true. But on the other hand, the Muslim says, "I had a choice

to go to Pakistan and I didn't go as I believed that you were going to provide me security and secularism, here in India, for keeps. So why should I, who has chosen to stay back, and my children and my children's children constantly have to give proof of our loyalty to this nation?" We have to understand that this is happening because communalism is basically an ideological and political method. History is used inevitably as political rhetoric to catalogue a list of imaginary and real grievances in the past that require redress in the present. Thus it becomes the means for contemporary political mobilization—which is what the whole Babri Masjid issue did become. So, it's very important to make the common man see the design behind all this, for it is the common man who paid the price in the Bombay riots, not the people who designed this whole scheme. Let me

give you an example. You know the Babri Masjid was demolished on the 6th of December. On the 29th, my husband Javed and I were in a slum in Bharat Nagar, and we met a woman from the slum whose sister was killed in the riots. I asked her, I said "Why was your sister killed?" and she said, "Woh danga hua tha na," and so I said, "Why did that happen, that riot?" She thought for a bit and said "Woh koi masjid thi na kahin, woh thod dali Hindu

log ne." So I said, "Do you know where that masjid is?" She thought and said "Rajiv Gandhi ke muluk mein." And I said, "Rajiv Gandhi ka muluk kahan hai?" She hesitantly said "Nayi Dilli, shayed?" This was how far the issue of the Babri Masjid was from her reality and her understanding and yet she was paying with her sister's life for it! That is really the big tragedy.



Photo: Ameen Merchant

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Anand Patwardan

Documenting Truth?

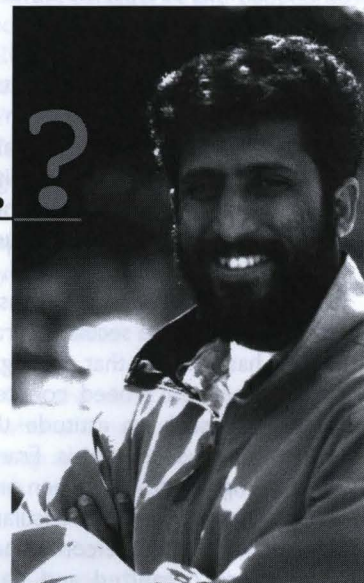


Photo: Albert Peres

Ali Kazimi

Documentary filmmakers
Ali Kazimi and
Anand Patwardan
speak about the
power of dissent
with **Hussain Amarshi**

Now that the world seems to be losing its head to the fundamentalists—owners of religious, economic, and technological truths—the need for voices of dissent, moderation and reason becomes more urgent. Anand Patwardhan, a pioneer of political documentary film making in India, has finished his third film on the anatomy of religious and political fundamentalism in India. *Father, Son and the Holy War* is a scathing critique of the madness of machismo and Hindu nationalism. Ali Kazimi makes his feature debut with a passionate, moving and empowering film on the consequences of economic fundamentalism; propagated by the likes of the World Bank and the IMF.

NARMADA: a valley rises documents the lives and struggles of the people of the Narmada Valley, the site for one of the world's largest dams that promises to displace 160,000 people, and their attempt to stop this development.

We meet Anand and Ali in the plush lobby of the Sutton Place Hotel, with a backdrop of deal makers, wheeler-dealers and movie moguls who take over Toronto every September during the Toronto International Film Festival, and settle down to discuss some old-fashioned subjects of truth, objectivity, audiences and funding for independent political documentary.

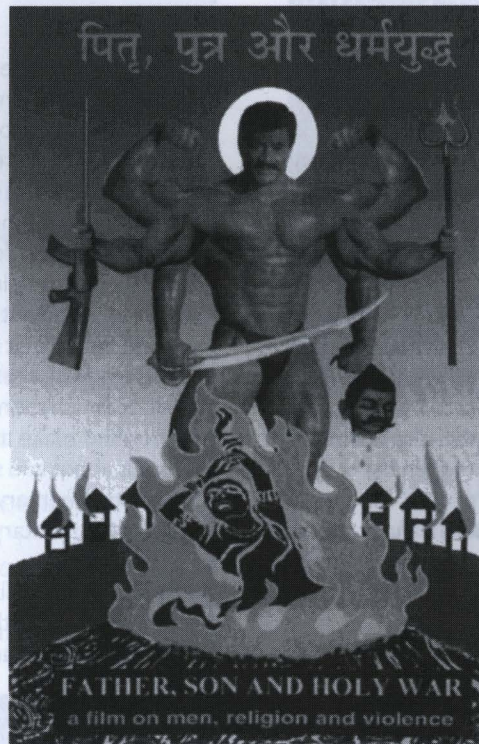
Hussain What is the role of political documentary in an age of fragmented politics, post-modern disjunctures and an overall nihilistic world order?

Anand [laughs] I can't say what is the general aim of political documentary but I can talk about my own films. Basically, my films are very specific about actual events. They are a contribution to the things that the subjects of the film—the films deal with actual struggles—are involved in. Hopefully, these films are tools in the hands of those people when they are needed. Beyond that, I also hope the films work outside their immediate context, that it's not only the people who are actually involved in the struggle who can relate to the films but people in other parts of India and around the world can also relate to the issues raised in the film.

Ali For someone coming from India, but having lived a third of my life here, I see myself as someone who can act as a bridge between the two worlds that I have lived in. In my film on Narmada, I wanted to deal with a universal issue but one set in a specific situation which, because of its specificity, could transcend those barriers and become more universal. There are several reasons for making films like that...to provoke discussion so that if someone asks at a screening what can we do, how can we change this, it makes me believe that I have achieved one of my objectives.

Anand I wouldn't like to look at it so mechanically, it's not like after seeing a film people should organise a demonstration with red flags and make a revolution. In the sixties, we liked to believe that films were revolutionary and, when shown, had the capacity to create a mass upsurge. I no longer have those illusions about the films I make. I think there have been times when films can have a direct impact on people and lead to direct action and this has happened with every one of my films. But I think that changes take place more subtly and not so visibly. For instance, when you read a book, what impact does that have on you? It takes years before it sinks in and changes the course of what you do. But it becomes a definitive part of your consciousness that you cannot escape from. I think that these kinds of documentaries have much more of a chance to leave a lasting impact on you than the kind of fiction films that are about political issues. Very often the mechanisms of fictionalization create this huge distance where people can compartmentalise what they see as some kind of entertainment and not deal with it.

Hussain Let me rephrase the original question. How do you respond to the 'slaves of objectivity' who object to the political bias/agenda in your films?



Poster for *Father, Son and Holy War*

Hussain Both of you have universalist aspirations of your audiences. Tell me, from your experience how does your work translate for, say a landless labourer in Bihar in contrast with an urban middle class audience in London...How does it work for different audiences?

Anand The films that I make, make sense to me and I'm a product of my class and conditioning, of having been abroad as well as India—just as Ali has for instance. The sensibility being created is one that is created out of all this travel, this multicultural background. At the same time, whenever I've travelled with my films all over India—and I've done this widely—showing them and having discussions with audiences, working class audiences, peasant audiences, with slum dwellers and with the urban elite the films work differently. People respond to different things in the same films, some will laugh at certain portions and another audience will keep absolutely silent at scenes that I thought were very funny.

Hussain How in your view has your work progressed over the years?

Ali I don't actually know. I don't know what the word 'progress' means in this context. I don't think that the films I make now are better than the films I made ten years ago, or anything like that. I don't think there's a 'growth' in the sense of better, there might be some things better. I have a better camera than I had before, the image might be a bit sharper or things like that. My camera work might be a bit better now than it was before. Obviously, you learn on the job after so many years. But I don't think very serious change has taken place in my ideological approach to the films that I make. I'm not very theoretical. I'm the classic anti-



Protestors on a historic march towards the Sardar Sarovar dam.
Still from *NARMADA: a valley rises*

intellectual, with all its bad things and positive things. The positive being that I can approach everything very innocently, and I can look at the situation and judge it for how it moves me and deal with it formally in that manner, rather than have any preconceived notion or even some kind of argument that I'm having with somebody else. I really don't let that kind of critique bother me, beyond a point. I might participate in a discussion with an audience, or with somebody who says, this is all one sided, or don't you think your films haven't grown over the years formally, in a sense you're still doing narrative? Yes, I am, I want to tell a story as I see it happening. I want people to understand what I'm saying. I don't want to confuse anybody beyond the point where I'm confused. Where I'm confused, I want to be honest about my confusion. I don't believe in the displacement theory, where you displace because in a sense you widen the scope of what the film is saying by being obscure and people can guess various different things and out of that maybe there's many more meanings than you intended. I'd rather have a much more simple direct relationship.

Hussain But aesthetically, your work has changed...

Anand With this film even, with almost all the films, there were moments, in fact, where I concretely sacrificed even my own sense of aesthetics in order to be more clear in what I was saying, more clear to the audiences that I really wanted to reach. There have been times when I've made films that, when shown to working class audiences, confused them. There were things that I thought were very clear but people absolutely didn't get the point. They got it after discussion, rather than immediately...

Hussain For instance, *Ram Ke Naam*?

Anand I'll tell you what happens in *Ram Ke Naam*. The sound track, as you know, is very crucial to the film. The projectors that we use in India are awful. So, sometimes, in large screenings, the audience sitting in the back or in the middle just can't get all the dialogue clearly. And we are not talking about subtitles on the screen so you can read the subtitles as well as hear the sound and can really get the point. We're talking about the Hindi version. I've had times when people saw all these fundamentalists with their orange robes and this and that flag and they really got scared, they really thought that the film was supporting what these fundamentalists were saying and the intercutting of it didn't clearly state that this film is actually critiquing their position. So I had to be really careful and use a heavy handed commentary in order to be sure that my point of view in the film gets reinforced. Now when I show the same film—because I'm not making two different versions for the world—it might be that for an audience here, some of it becomes simplistic. In my films, the interviews and the way they're cut tell you the whole story and you don't need the commentary to add something to that. The commentary is there because I don't want to take any risks about what has just happened.

Hussain I see a lot of new political documentary film makers emerging in India, what is your sense of their work?

Anand What I see happening is part positive and part problematic. There is more funding from groups like Channel Four and other institutions in Europe. Indian documentary film makers are getting budgets which were not accessible when I was starting to make films. This has resulted in so many more documentaries being made in India, but a majority of those documentaries, if you really look at them, are not being made for Indian audiences. They are really made for audiences outside India. This is probably contentious, but this is what I feel, that if you put these films together, string them up and see them, you will notice that a majority of them have been made only in English. I've fought with these film makers and I have said many times, "You've made so much money making these films can't you spend a little more money and make a Hindi version and take these films to the people who it is about and show them there so that they become a part of the Indian documentary tradition?" I don't consider these films a part of the Indian documentary tradition if they're not used in India.

Hussain Ali, I realize that you went through a number of problems getting funding for this film because it was not Canadian enough or not related to Canadian issues. It must be gratifying to have had such a warm reception at the screening of your film in *Perspective Canada*. Any words for your funders?

Ali I invited a lot of my funders, but only one of them came for the screening, which I found very interesting, disappointing actually, because I would have liked to have them there, because the audience was predominantly non-Indian. For me that was a validation, because the excuse about it not being of interest to Canadians was essentially just another barrier that was being used, conveniently at times, to deprive people of colour of funding. It's very subtle, somebody might take it at face value and say, "You're Indian, and why

should Canada put money in this?" I am now Canadian, so what's the difference between me going back to India to make a film, and a white film maker who wants to go to Haiti to make a film on voodoo, or a white film maker who wants to go to India to make a film on going back to the earth or some sort of mystical journey. Somebody spoke to me very candidly and said, "Now Ali, don't take this personally, but you have to realize that India just doesn't fit within the geo-political reality of the funders." So that is another barrier. All I can say to them is, "Come and see the film with a Canadian audience, and just see if it's a Canadian film." [Interviewer's note: *NARMADA: a valley rises* was not selected by the Vancouver Film Festival.]



Communal conflict in India. Photo courtesy of Anand Patwardhan.



Ali Kazimi was born in 1961 in Hyderabad, India. After graduating from Delhi University, he came to Canada in 1983, where he studied film at York University in Toronto. He has worked as a producer, director and cinematographer on many films, including the Genie Award-winning *A Song for Tibet* (1992). He is the past president of the National Independent Film and Video Alliance.

Anand Patwardhan was born in 1950. After receiving degrees in English literature from Bombay University and in sociology from Brandeis University, he received an M.A. in Communications from McGill University. He has been making political documentary films for over 15 years. Films include: *Prisoners of Conscience* (1978), *A Time to Rise* (1981), *Bombay Our City* (1985), *In Memory of Friends* (1990), *In the Name of God* (1992), and *Father, Son and the Holy War* (1994).



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NARMADA: a valley rises

H. Itwaru reviews

Ali Kazimi's profound and powerful
feature documentary film

Ali Kazimi's *NARMADA: a valley rises* is a profound work whose speaking has touched me, an outsider and stranger to India, in many ways. In it, Kazimi transcends the distancing inertia of the technically competent but cold and disempowering reportage that so many well-intentioned feature documentaries tend to be burdened with. This is empowering work. It affirms resistance to social injustice and adds its voice to the rising protest, now international in scale, which was begun in 1990 by the Bhils and Bhilalas, the original inhabitants of the Narmada valley in the heart of India. They are protesting against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat, deemed the world's largest development project. When completed, it will flood over 200 villages and towns, displacing over 160,000 people and engulfing thousands of square kilometres of their ancestral lands, their means of sustenance, on the shores of the sacred, legendary Narmada, Giver of Bliss, whose waters nurture some of Asia's richest farm lands and have given life to the peoples that live here for millenia.

Conscious of the violations often enacted by the ominous march of progress, Kazimi has dedicated this film to those who have paid the price of progress, and in a skilfully absorbing, visually compelling, and at times emotionally wrenching documentary, gives voice to the peoples of the Narmada valley. For this film, among other things, also resonates with the voices of the Bhils and Bhilalas, is a lament as well as a celebration of the dignity and strength of these peoples whose protest, after a walk of over 200 kilometres, was peaceful, despite the fact that they were not even consulted about the impending massive destruction

This film is also an indictment of the Gujarati pro-dam politicians' disregard for their fellow human beings. Their remarks are used as counterpoint to the filmed images of the events and the reasons they use against the non-violent protesters—whom the Gujarati police

and state officials are trying to intimidate by using violence and the threat of violence—demonstrate the clash of values between political chicanery and human need.

The protest, led by the dedicated Medha Patkar and supported by Baba Amte, the respected disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, also provides the occasion for confrontations on the Gujarat border which clearly demonstrate the State officials' self-serving violation of Gandhi's values of peaceful resistance, and their disregard of the plight of thousands who are to be sacrificed on the altar of development, exemplified by the water-intensive industrial requirements of an insensitive and cruel commercial greed. As Baba Amte, quoting from Gandhi, puts it, it is the eternal struggle between need and greed, with greed in this case having the upper hand in Gujarat.

Shots of the long walk towards the dam are intercut with clips from Gandhi's 1931 Salt March—black and white recollections of moments of independent India's most celebrated mythological figure merging with the full colour rendering of the current protest march—visually reinforce the fundamental relationship between Gandhi's esteemed principle of non-violence and the actions of the protesters. In this manner the astuteness of Kazimi's art intensifies the political importance of the drama being documented. This protest is informed by and follows in the footsteps of Gandhi's protest. The tragic difference is that this march is not against British occupation but



Medha Patkar, one of the leaders of the the Save Narmada Movement

rather against those Indian political officials who demonstrate how well they have been colonized in their aggressive and abusive pursuit of power—to the point of intending to destroy the livelihood of over 160,000 peoples and a way of life by flooding out 200 villages and towns.

The black and white clips of Gandhi's march are also a commentary on another, possibly romanticized, time in India, a past the full colour present contradicts. It addresses a present where the sandalled and barefoot walkers are threatened by the crunching menace of military boots, armed police and the wrath of the officials who have come with threats of death to stop the protesters. A present where Baba Amte's greeting—I have been waiting all morning for your love—is met with taunts and jeers from bused-in school children and university students bribed by the lure of getting higher grades in their school work, and by slogans screaming, GO BACK

"It is an eternal struggle between the Need and the Greed.
In Gujarat I see that greed has the upper hand.."

Baba Amte, social activist and spiritual leader

BABA AMTE! LEPROSY PATIENTS MISS YOU, and by adults similarly brought in with the lure of feasting and having a good time. As these people jeer, pro-dam organizer, Chuni Vaidya, unctuously talks of this massive displacement as being in the service of an allegedly higher national cause. A present which rejects Baba Amte's plea for peaceful and constructive discussion, and which strongly emphasises his observation that for every national problem there is a national solution but in this case the will to resolve the issues is lacking.

Kazimi's film points out the shocking contrast between the ruling elite and the peoples subjugated under its rule. Thus, this film is also about antagonistic values in the very way the land and living are perceived. For the dwellers in the Narmada valley the land is their mother and their father, the giver of sustenance, not a commodity to be owned, bought or sold. It is an ancestral sacredness to which the State, in loyalty to the destructive Western principles of domination-of-nature/scientific capitalism is hostile. This is pointed out several times, without any kind of didactic intrusions from the film maker—exaggeration would have diminished the significance of the occasion—and in a complex, sensitive and emotional matter like this, this restraint is in itself a commendable demonstration of Kazimi's sensitivity and competence in the medium through which he has chosen to speak.

In it, for example, the mounted parade of the State's troops commemorating India's independence is seen against protesting people asking the world's largest democracy to wake up to what it is doing. This is layered in contrast to the duped and dehumanized

residents of Malu, resettled from the Narmada valley. Their insultingly inadequate dwellings—the zinc shack boxes in which they are housed along with their cattle—make a devastating commentary on the promises of re-settlement. This effective contrast is also there in the devout Mrs. Urmilla Patel's (appointed to the Upper House of the Indian parliament in 1991) desecration of Gandhi's memory when she misuses his most loved *bajhan* to promote the State's intransigence towards the reasonable complaints of the threatened people of the valley. It is there too in her hostility to Baba Amte, an eminent Gandhi follower.

The resistant silence of the State calls forth the last resort measure of an indefinite hunger strike which Medha Patkar, one of the fasters, tells us is a life and death struggle, nothing less. But instead of slipping into maudlin sentimentality here, Kazimi turns this aspect of the protest into a celebration of the dignity and inner strength of the strikers, and of the growing strength of the people of the valley whose empowerment eventually stops the strike, already in its fourth week. In contrast to this courage the cowardice of the State's agents—agents who fled at the sight of camera lights—is juxtaposed, coming as they did in the darkness of night to abduct Medha Patkar on a trumped up charge that she is trying to commit suicide.

This film is also the story of the strength of the women of the Narmada valley as well as some of those elsewhere in India, (the survivors of the Bhopal disaster who joined the march towards the dam) of their determination in the struggle for dignity—and particularly of Medha Patkar who abandoned

her doctoral studies in Social Work, spending long hours and walking hundreds of kilometres across mountainous terrain to let the Adivaris know what has been planned against them, and to help organize the struggle for their lives. But it is also about Baba Amte, a former lawyer and film critic who cannot sit down because of constant spinal pain, who, in resistance to the dam, has decided to stay on the banks of the Narmada river and to die there if the State goes ahead with the flooding of the valley. But more, this is also about the struggle of peoples who want to remain farmers, who do not want to be turned into labourers for the wages of commercial greed.

The film's composition and its treatment of subject matter, the blend of classical Indian voices with the voices and the rhythms of the songs of protest, the layering of sound—at times haunting and dreamlike—the sequencing of each scene, the narration, all of these contribute towards making this film a work of art which is also a profound political act, an engagement in what Kazimi sees as a universal struggle. As part of its empowering quality this film invites reasonable peoples everywhere to help stop the destruction that would be enacted by the Sardar Sarovar dam project in India—and elsewhere where state/corporate greed pushes on in the name of inevitable progress, callously heedless of the consequences of its actions. This is a film all thinking persons should see.



NARMADA: a valley rises

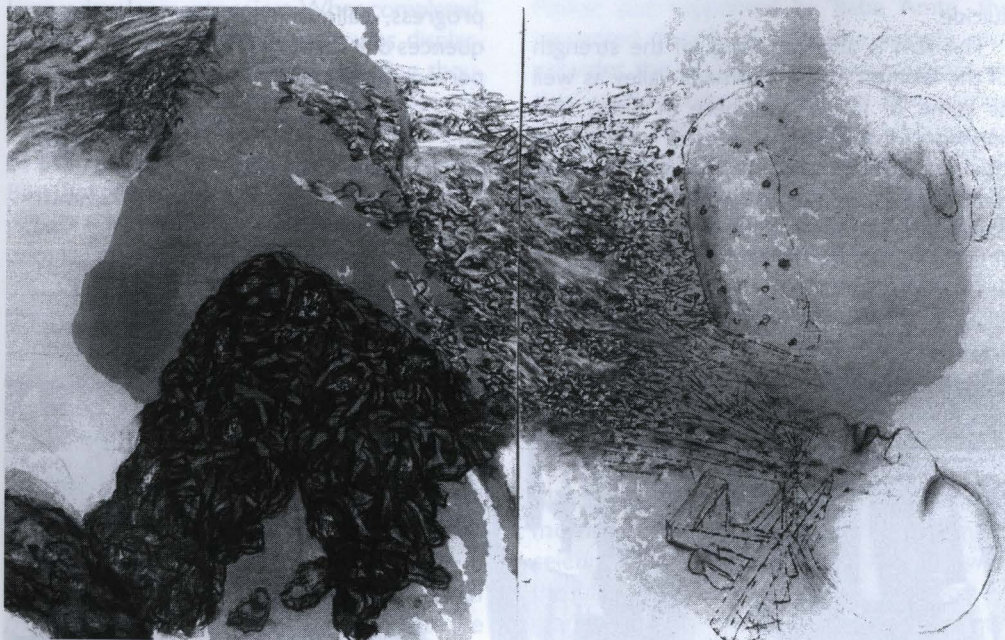
A feature documentary film by Ali Kazimi
Colour Canada 1994 89 minutes



Protestors take an oath
on the Narmada river.
Photo: Axel Krause

MATERIAL/ VOYAGES

International artist Vivan Sundaram explores oil, war, voyages, media and memory with Sourayan Mookherjea



Soldier of Babylon
Engine Oil and Charcoal:
Works on Paper, 1991

Engine Oil and Charcoal on Paper
30" x 44" (Diptych)

1 Engine Oil / Oil Film / War Shot

Vivan Sundaram was born in Shimla, India in 1943. He graduated with degrees in Fine Arts from the University of Baroda, a focal point of Indian Modernism. He subsequently studied at the Slade School in London. He is the founding member of SAHMAT (Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust) and a member of the Design Collective for *Hum Sab Ayodhya* a major national art exhibition celebrating India's secular and democratic traditions. He recently exhibited at the Oboro in Montréal and was Artist in Residence at the Western Front in October 1994. Vivan Sundaram lives and works in New Delhi.

Vivan In this series of works I used charcoal and used engine oil but there is some colour in them as well. They were done in 1991. It was my response to the Gulf War.

Sourayan The work we are looking at is called *Approaching 100,000 Sorties*.

Vivan Yes. Much of the work in this series tries to produce a feeling of looking at a landscape from great heights. It was a war from the air, but the world watching it on TV got a very strange sense of the intensity of the American bomb runs. What we were given to see was a depthless image, a low definition image quite unlike anything else before.

Sourayan We were given the numbers of sorties, fascinating images of airplanes, a grandiose rhetoric of logistical complexity mastered by a civilizational competence.

Vivan It seemed extremely important to me to be able to register that there was something really there being totally reduced to dust and death, that the bombs were falling not only on the name of a dictator but on a land, a people, a history, a very beautiful

civilization. So I used the engine oil as both a metaphor, because it was a war about securing access to oil, and then also the aspect of an oil stain which spoils the surface of the land completely. I mean here the oil spills from both sides, the burning of wells and the dropping of bombs that burned the landscape and destroyed the bodies in it. So the drawings have many kinds of references: to place, Mesopotamia, to ancient history, the Arcadian civilization. I use both proper names like 'Babylon' and common names like 'soldier' in the titles to fix this order of reference.

Sourayan And the tray of oil placed literally on the foreground of this drawing? As if it holds what the drawing leaks or bleeds.

Vivan And so it extends the frame of the drawing as well. They are little zinc trays of engine oil, in front of *Approaching 100,000 Sorties* and several of the other drawings in the series. The images have a particular quality seen at a distance. As one approaches closer, one's gaze is held by different shapes and volumes as various relations of foreground and background suggest themselves until one reaches a point where one sees one's reflection in it. You find you have somehow entered into what you were looking at, off in the distance. Somebody told me that Hitler used to have these little zinc trays which held models for playing war games with, so there's that association as well.

Sourayan I'd like to ask you about that sense of being suspended high above, looking down a great distance.

Vivan I think it's partly to do with having been born in Shimla, and I now have a place in a small hill station called Kesolé.

Sourayan In the Himalayas?

Vivan Yes. It looks down over Chandigarh and so over the whole plain of the Punjab. It's a spectacular 6000 foot drop. So, that aspect of an aerial view was very powerfully there to be drawn upon.

Sourayan You mentioned earlier on that you are interested in the particular visibility of the war, the war's use of specific visibilities and images. As you said, the war was waged at a distance and there has been a lot of discussion about the war being televised as entertainment. Now, of course painting itself is about visibility. How would you describe your investigation of that visibility

of the war? What is the relationship of this one kind visibility to the other? You would surely want to distinguish the aesthetic pleasure that a mountain panorama gives us from the kind of visibility the war produced, even if you want to say those images were entertainment and they were very capable of producing a rush of exhilaration. Your drawings seem to me to take one's gaze to some place in between.

Vivan That sort of panoramic overview from the mountain top, that's the nature of space, the nature of landscape that informs the framing. It includes a wide angle view. But in these works my attempt was to layer multiple views entering within the same frame. This has kind of been a preoccupation in my paintings and then it's been more strongly figurative before, with a narrative element in it as well. I did a series of charcoal drawings after visiting Poland and Auschwitz in 1987. Now, the drawings in this series were all far removed in every sense from my experiences, but what I was after there was the way the landscape has been just simply given body. There is much more a sense of a physical experience of things and materials underlying the landscapes, so they were fairly abstract. There were no actual figures in them. But you got a strong sense of a quality of suffering which itself has a long history of representation which comes right up to the Vietnam war. The Vietnam war produced those very powerful images of soldiers out in an absolutely horrifying situation which, as you know, played such a significant role in mobilizing the anti-war movements around the world. That televisual visibility involved a kind of detailed look, close up, at sheer, absolute destruction and human anguish and, in doing so, continued some of the visual ideology of the photograph, but I think also of the celluloid of film. So, as a method of documenting, television, was much more filmic than the journalists, for one thing, did not have video cameras, they took a film maker with them. So the quality of the image, the kind of depth relationship that it produced, was very different from what we were given to see this time in the Gulf War. We were given information and an endless surface of 'pool' videotape to look at and it was organized to be a subliminal message. But the actual description of a reality we could understand, the reality of the destruction of realities was never presented. Journalists couldn't even show you soldiers of the other side being killed. Unlike the photograph of that young girl running down a road in Vietnam, a good photograph that emotionally affected a lot

of people and that could be remembered vividly, these images were like how anaesthetics can produce a euphoric feeling. CNN had come into India by satellite and was being broadcast. And, after watching for a while, I realized that there was a whole kind of slippage to the low definition video image that was being exploited. I thought, well let me accept that this is the nature of the information I'm getting. So let me start with that and then see how can I intervene.

Sourayan So the memory of other kinds visibilities was layered onto that surface?

Vivan Other visibilities and also what would again be an imaginary construction. That, after all, is what this really diffused thing you're getting is. I could only work at it at in a playful sort of manner, but hoping that in play somewhere, something would appear to not concretize the dead, but just simply place them. So, it's in this playing that certain figures turn up in *Mesopotamian Drawing II*. There is obviously a dead man, a soldier, he has come home, a tree, his wife, his child, a camel. But, almost as if the child will not mourn but sort of rise onto the back of the camel and be the imaginary new warrior that will resist. But again, one cannot experience directly the suffering invoked, because there are no direct images for it. And so I want, in a very simple narrative way, just to say yes to this, to what you're not seeing and maybe through this mirage there will emerge some referent to some people who died. And there were tens of thousands of them. As you go through the sixty works, these sorts of images would come up and they would reach further back in terms of memory and history and invoke the living civilization of a place and people against a war and its technology of sight which attempts to destroy not only the present, but even the past.

Sourayan The knowledge of Iraqi society and culture will be very different in India, where you are drawing these, than here. For us, Iraq is in many ways just another character on a TV show, we know nothing of its history. So it's just a something that came along, just like how TV brings you something new every season.

Vivan And suddenly we have an evil character: Saddam Hussein who was, as you know, sort of produced as a comic book demon. It was a place where people lived that was being bombed, it wasn't just some desert anywhere. But there's also another factor to this, I had been to Baghdad two years before, in 1987.



Imperial Overcast
Engine Oil and Charcoal:
Works on Paper, 1991

Engine Oil and Charcoal on Paper
30" x 44" (Diptych)

Material Voyage

Sourayan So, you had personal memories to draw images from?

Vivan Personal memories and images of a big international art exhibition. They invited artists from all over the world, directly, not by invitations brokered bureaucratically through consulates and government agencies. But the main difference between India and the West, which was very interesting, was that in India the public did not take the pro-American stance on this. Also, for the first time you saw Muslim youth coming out into the streets all over India, and the rest of the people watching all this did not go into a panic about religious riots or communal threats. Here Saddam was a hero to them but their demonstrations also helped to mobilize the Indian people against the war. This was sort of watched and generally the masses of people understood that, whatever else Saddam Hussein is, this was a man from the third world and this was a country in the third world that was being destroyed. Demonstrations in support of Saddam Hussein were understood to be anti-imperialist and anti-American before being Islamic chauvinism. So there was this other sympathetic popular context for my work.

Vivan What I do is either pour the oil or apply it with a brush. This is used engine oil. It's been burnt in your motor, when you clean your engine out this is the dirty oil you throw out. So, here I drip the oil and then take this print. When the oil is thick it just sits on the surface of this hand-made paper so it takes half an hour to an hour to start soaking in. I would drip it and then I would take a print. As you can see, one would be darker and one would be lighter. And then from there I'd start drawing something. As I said, working with this used engine oil allowed me a new kind of freedom because I would, you know, sometimes just clean my hands on a piece of paper and then be able to use that later or I would drip the oil on the paper and allow it to take shapes more self-consciously. So the technique involves working on flat paper in just the way in which many artists have done for a long time now, like Jackson Pollock. I found that if I put two or three layers on with a brush, by letting it soak through before brushing more on and by just leaving the oil soaking for a longer time, I could get a whole range of tones. And then once it had soaked through, I found I could easily draw on it because it becomes absolutely matt. The charcoal can receive it as well, so when you do the drawing you can put the oil on it. So you've got this whole aspect of playing with these materials. The used engine oil is burnt and charcoal is also made by burning wood. So both the

materials used involve burning. But the oil, unlike the charcoal, has no associations in terms of art. So it's not like using Chinese ink or watercolour which have long traditions of practice in the history of art. So there is a neutrality of the stains and marks with regard to the institution of art which gave me another freedom to inscribe an image on.

Sourayan I understand what you are saying about the oil being a non-traditional art material. Since one kind of reference you're trying to recover has to do with a historical event, what significance does the use of a non-traditional art material have for your attempt to bring a historical event into the frame, into the expanded frame?

Vivan Yeah, yeah. The idea is, first of all, there is a strong aspect of topicality that I like to begin with. How I came to decide to use this burnt oil is difficult to say, but I did then connect it thematically. At a very physical level, I was using the very material that the war was about. So it's a material and then it becomes a metaphor.

Sourayan Because it is a new material to art some of the freedom is just from investigating what it can do, what it can't do.

Vivan Yes. Because it's thick and oily and you just drip it, and it's on the floor and on the paper and then a stain forms, you know, spontaneously, like a free thing. These are not images but, precisely, forms and then, from those forms you sort of discover that this one could be a face, just like in a Rorschach test; you place it and you find out what's there.

MEMORIAL:

'one of those figures then died'

"In all my work I just start with something very concrete, something specific or something topical and then it moves into almost something that you would not be able to place back at that point from where it began to develop into an abstraction."

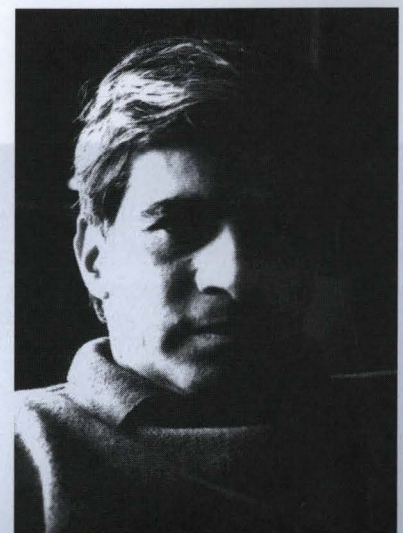
—Vivan Sundaram

Some of Vivan Sundaram's specific, topical points of departure for paths of transformation and abstraction have been the State of Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975 and the Gulf War in 1990–91. Perhaps this attention to contemporary events testifies most readily to the radical political engagement characteristic of Sundaram's work. Perhaps these 'referents' are held onto even more because of the force with which the most significant moments of the metropolitan modernist avant-garde (including the moment of its supercession and repudiation by the postmodern) animates Sundaram's reworking of Indian iconographic and painting traditions. This appropriation and re-structuring of metropolitan representational problems may well be evidence of the very cosmopolitanism which Antonio Gramsci took to be the sign of an intellectual alienated from the cultural traditions of his or her people. And indeed, Sundaram's art is as alien from the cultural vocabulary of India's proletariat and peasant masses (whom we in the West know only as "the poor") as it is from our stereotypes of third world art (either native craft or oriental classicism). Before one uses this fact to judge either Sundaram's art or politics, however, one has to come to terms with the context in which it is elaborated. In as much as alienation is a structural reality of all spheres of Indian society, the fact that Sundaram's work does not speak directly to the masses does not mean very much. His public, rather, would seem to be the political and intellectual institutions and cultural traditions of the Indian Left itself. In Canada, where the Left, as is characteristic of the First World, is much weaker and more dispossessed the only similar situation which can be compared to Sundaram's location would be that of a feminist intellectual who, out of practical political need, has to specialize in law or biotechnology or public policy. Sundaram's art practice proceeds along this edge between the eclipse of one historical figure of the artist and the emergence of cultural workers who are obliged to track and investigate material processes newly at work in the world and take voyages into their historical depths.

The installation *Memorial* opened at the AIFACS Galleries in New Delhi almost exactly a year after a 16th century mosque in the northern provincial town of Ayodhya, the Babri Masjid, was destroyed by cadres from political and cultural organizations of fundamentalist Hindu nationalism. In recent years, the Indian middle classes have been looking for people to blame for their relatively restricted access to the pleasures of consumerism in comparison with other middle classes around the world. Consequently, they had begun to affirm in ever growing numbers, the myth of a purified and potent Hindu India uncontaminated by foreigners. Led by the Bharatiya Janata Party and other organizations which bear chilling resemblances to European Fascism with regard to their nationalist ideology, vicious rhetoric, state-capitalist economic policy and their contempt for democratic institutions and processes, and spectacular processions appealing to Hindu pride demonised and scapegoated India's mostly poor Muslim minority during regularly staged pilgrimages to holy sites across the country. By the time the Babri Masjid was destroyed on December 6th, 1992 (because, the fundamentalists claimed, it was built over the Hindu god Ram's birthplace) several thousands had already been killed in violent clashes. After December 6th, brutal pogroms were carried out against the Muslim minority community. Several thousands were murdered, women were raped, and whole neighbourhoods burnt to the ground. This is the violent background to Vivan's Sundaram's installation *Memorial* which is a meditation on the events of that dark year in which India's progressive, secular political and cultural traditions seemed to have been completely swept off the public stage and Hindu Fundamentalism seemed poised to become a mass political movement beyond its specifically middle class appeal.

Indeed, the spaces in which the public gathers is itself one of the primary objects of Sundaram's meditation here. One enters the installation through a set of large, cold, crowd control gates. Sundaram's installations have always been interested in exploring the distances and intimacies between the concreteness of bodily experience and the gaze's powers of abstraction. As one moves through these gates one's eyes are immediately drawn to the surface of a strange, tent-like structure bearing an image quoting the Utopian promise of Russian Constructivism. Beyond it, another

structure captures attention, another gate, this time something that looks like a well known national monument, the India Gate in Delhi (made with coffins? trunks? piled on each other). A path made of paving stones takes you from where you are to both structures. As one approaches the painted tent thing, one realizes its sides are glass windows and inside a plaster human figure lies curled on its side. It is a mausoleum. But not for the body of a national leader lying perpetually in State, cosmetically dignified. Rather for the anonymous human figure in whose name Constructivism claimed to be able to see the future. We are then occupied by the several glass display cases mounted on floor stands and on the walls surrounding us. Now we encounter the work of transformation which Sundaram undertakes, the work of transformation that is meditation and memorial. The gutter of blood that crosses the paved path between the mausoleum and the India Gate is only one aspect of reality missing from the Times of India photograph of a riot victim. Sundaram tries to inscribe and construct it into an image that would have the density and weight of memory. In each of the glass cases the ephemeral photograph is subjected to a work of mourning, enshrouding and burial which would hold onto it (Sundaram drives nails through it, piles nails on it) against the flow of media images. Repeating this one particular image, just as the newspaper repeats this type of image, Sundaram's work proceeds on its voyage between the singularity of this man's life closed by his needless death and the abstract forces which shape our experiences and histories.



Vivan Sundaram

Passage to



Mozambique's leader, Samora Machel, addressing an audience in Zimbabwe, said approximately: "Those of you who were colonized by the British feel you have inherited brilliant parliamentary structures; those among you who were touched by the French flame of civilization know that you have remarkable intellectual traditions to lean on. But I—I was colonized by Portugal, the most backward country of Europe." The Zimbabwean audience burst into laughter.

"Sorry, I said I am sorry."
"Ca va, ça va, lentement, continue, continue." He touched her arsehole in a brotherly kind of way. They were sort of standing and with grind sensibility she pulled at his hips and troubled down into him, her other hand on his nuts. No sounds now. Just a cooing immigrant Christian inside a different mode, a different history. A thorn in the side of the French.



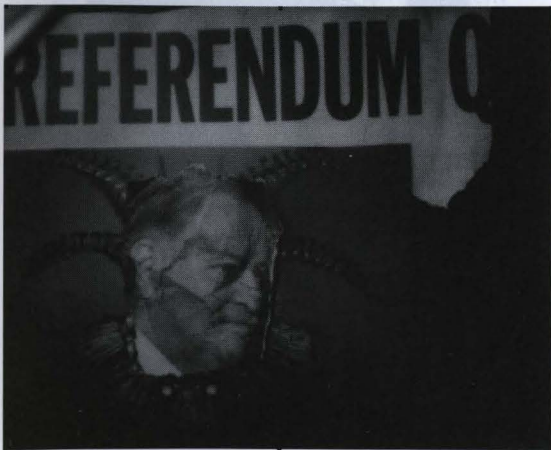
Green Line bus. The yellowing corn fields pull out into the distance as I move back to London Bridge, back to the safety of Hackney. The trees I used to play under remain unchanged. I remember the touch of the tree bark in 1986. Dogs barking in the cool damp distance, iron nails rusting in the tree, the same nails I put there when I knew England through a tongue that could not quite pronounce V as in vice. Boys at school thought it was funny. Wind in the grass in the sand dunes on Munora Beach, Karachi. My ear close to the hissing.

Fuel gushes into the engines. Propellers lopping up the lost souls of whatever country. He turns to the man with long fingers, nods; reports to the control tower once only, as he leaves the security vector. "Plan B active." Silence for hundreds of miles. Silly wars below dirty clouds. Too much cabin noise, too much cabin hiss—"these are all signs that the engines could have been better designed; imperialism with its faults—you call this modernism—bah! noisy airplanes!"

Years have gone by. Michael is now bedridden in a hospital on a hill somewhere where the 144 bus passes Pierre Elliott Trudeau's house on avenue des Pines. Transparent tubes of this and that with this and that amount of potassium, etc., regulated by an occasionally functional computer flow into his skeletal body. He is reluctant to eat. His parents have come to visit him. I sit beside him and beside a box of ridiculously optimistic chocolates. His mom has gone for a stroll down the fifteenth-floor hall to leave us alone for a few minutes. Old friends. A stunning bilingual-biracial Haitian nurse with blue eyes comes to fiddle with the beeping computer which regulates the flow of solutions.

The Warriors were starved out. Many of these communards, while under detention, had the shit kicked out of them by the Sûreté du Québec. Perhaps the Québec government will exile the Warriors to New Caledonia as the French regime did after 1871. This is my Québec.

"Tu dis Hubert Aquin? Mais oui—he is better than your Rushdie. Mais notre lutte pour l'indépendance, notre lutte, cher Julian, n'a jamais exclu les immigrants comme toi—pourquoi tu te sens en dehors de nos projets?"



Lahore

Excerpts by Julian Samuel

Begum Akhtar is slowly turning towards the screen, but I manage to pull her into our conversation. I keep her talking. I don't want to suffer the effects of Pakistani antibiotics alone. "Why do you sing Sufi music?" She could not say zamine but would say jamine, the Urdu word for ground. She replies in Urdu with what I confuse for a Lucknowesque accent. She cannot make the Arabo-Farsi influenced z'ah sound in Urdu. "I don't sing Sufi music, Julian—that is your name, isn't it? You aren't Moslem, are you? You see, I don't sing music, the music sings me, the poets make me."

There are many photographs of her in various stages of pregnancy, and judging by the way she dressed, she looks like someone who had adjusted intelligently between two cultures. Here she is in a dark-green sari on a chair with a sloping back. Prize of Lahore. Here she is in a white dress with a V-neck. There she is in a badly composed photograph, in a row-boat on the River Ravi smiling and pretending to be scared of alligators. His arm is around her. Here she is beside the first budding rose of their love on a clear thrilling inexorable winter morning, on the roof. Quite pregnant.

"So rights in the occidental expression of the term appear to be the ethical by-product of imperialism. They are acquired rights which become naturalized in Western culture, and are inextricably glued to imperial expansion which continually overturns the rights of others to produce new rights, ethics, and freedoms. Farmers in India who had the right to grow a wide variety of food in the 1700s had to grow just cotton—cotton which was used to fuel the industrial revolution. 'Freedom of expression' is one of the rights that follows from the industrial epoch."

"Julian, they do an okay buffet here." Some perfumey Chinese beer arrives. John, the refugee-camp boyfriend, is due, joining us after a week in Hanoi. Penny is excited; she whispers, "Julian, I think he is fucking someone else." Moments later John arrives. "So how do you like it here?" I ask. "I love it here."

"John, you followed Penny here, didn't you?" "Yes, as a matter of fact I did." "What would you like to drink?" "Same as you, buddy—fuckin' Molson's, eh?" "How did you get the job?" "She told me about an opening." His hand reaches for her. "Hi, sweetie." "Oh, so you used her again."

"Again and again," he says. "And now, little hick is no longer a little Canadian of simple working-class origins. Tell me again how you jumped out of your class? McGill your ticket to freedom?" "Yeah, that and all that Penny did for me. You know, she took me to New York—first time I saw a subway with so many lines. I suppose I am more international because of her. I owe it all to her." I ask, "John, you had ice-cream before?"

"It's all right, John, you don't have to thank me—he's just playing with you." I say, "She tells me that you were frightened when she first took you to New York."

John is a nice Canadian.
Hockey. Beers. No sodomy.
A Christian relativity to analingus.

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Still from *The Raft of the Medusa*

Beauty in Complexity:

Julian Samuel's

The Raft of the Medusa

Into the European Mirror

The Raft of the Medusa: Five Voices on Colonies, Nations and Histories

Directed by Julian Samuel 1993 99 minutes

Into the European Mirror

Directed by Julian Samuel 1994 56 minutes

Both videotapes are distributed through 514/284.0431. A transcription of *The Raft of the Medusa* was published by Black Rose Books in 1993, edited by Samuel with Jocelyne Doray and augmented by an interview with Marwan Hassan and an essay by Charles Acland.

Veteran Montréal writer and video producer Julian Samuel has produced 19 film and video works since 1976, beginning with the 11 minute *Formation*, made while still a student at Trent University in Ontario, to the current documentary trilogy project which Samuel began in 1991. The 43-year-old Samuel's most recent works, *Into the European Mirror* (1994) and *The Raft of the Medusa: Five Voices on Colonies, Nations and Histories* (1993), form the first two parts of this trilogy which addresses primarily Muslim cultural history, both Arab and non-Arab, as seen through occidental eyes.

Born in Lahore five years after it became part of the new Muslim state of Pakistan and a bloody icon of Partition, Samuel moved with his family to Karachi and then England before coming to Toronto as an adolescent. He has lived and worked in Montréal since moving there in 1979 to complete Concordia University's graduate program in Fine Art.

When his two most recent videotapes are viewed, it becomes obvious that Samuel's use of cultural critics and historians Thierry Hentsch, Homi Bhabha, Rana Kabbani, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Ackbar Abbas, Sara Sulieri, Amin Maalouf and Dr. Chris Giannou reflects a particular approach that is both highly personal and vastly geopolitical, one that accurately mirrors Samuel's own history. Whew! Can these people talk. Initially this reviewer questioned Samuel's intent in making the tapes, when all the analysts are published writers whose views are more easily considered,

analysed and reflected on when read than when heard on videotape. So why not read their books instead of attempting to follow complex and lengthy discourse on screen?

Then a couple of realizations hit: the viewer is led through Samuel's own process of reading and investigating this discourse and the intellectual associations he arrived at, not through didactic voice-over, simplistic narrative or visual imagery, but through presentation of ideas—no conversation between the interviewees, just the occasional audio interpolation of Samuel during their monologues. Thus, Samuel has attempted to provide documentation of his own intellectual associative processes. The second realization developed from this reviewer's immense frustration when watching the tapes in not being able to talk with these analysts. Samuel has constructed a possibility of dialogue within the traditionally passive documentary genre which results in the viewer being dragged into the discourse on screen, despite the static and currently despised nature of the talking-head format.

This reliance on ideas and not imagery has been one of the criticisms of the two tapes, especially within video art critical practice. Samuel has, over the years of his experimental film and video work, positioned himself within contemporary art making, but in these two works discourse wins, with no concomitant emphasis on image-making. The 1994 *Into the European Mirror* is a considerably shorter (56 minutes opposed to *The Raft of the Medusa's*

Reviewed by Sue Donaldson

99 minutes) and more visually interesting work than the 1993 first portion of the trilogy. Samuel makes good use of Hentsch's monologues cited from inside Granada's Alhambra; the camera lingers on the formal water gardens there for a text crawl and, when Giannou is speaking of his medical work in Lebanon, there is a text crawl over his face of the names of Palestinians killed by Israeli occupation forces in one month.

Overall, *Into the European Mirror* is a substantially more coherent tape than *The Raft of the Medusa*. Although the breadth and depth of ideas encountered in *The Raft* are more exciting, Samuel undercuts their impact at times with, for example, alarming footage of Marlene Nourbese Philip where her statements are lost because of Samuel's decision to use foreshortened camera angles which imply something grotesque.

In a 1993 unpublished interview with Concordia film student Lina El Baker, Samuel defends *The Raft of the Medusa* against critics of its emphasis on discourse by noting, "...my work is not about to turn Western aesthetics upside down. The world is overcome with formal innovation for misguided reasons...the analytical depth I achieve in *The Raft* simply wouldn't work if I tried to imbed these ideas in gloriously, visually poetic rich scenes. For me, an over indulgence in visuals is a cop out."

Samuel's current trilogy project owes a great debt to the influence of Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. Just as Said requires a commitment on the part of the reader to engage with complexity, Samuel's videotapes demand the same of the viewer. As Marguerite Yourcenar complained shortly before her death, much of interest cannot be reduced to simple elements; there is great beauty in complexity.



In Nairobi with Meena Foyba

Sheyfali Saujani journeys home
and discovers the dark side
of race relations

Meena Foyba is a kind of aunt. My tranquil brother and I met her this past summer in Nairobi. She is bony, elderly and peaceful. After she got to know us, she would tease us, asking suspiciously, "How are you? Are you well? Sure?" As if we might be holding out on her—lacking for something we were too shy to ask for.

"Fine che? Sure? Chai joyech? Khavanu joyech? Sure che?"

"Yes, yes, we're fine. No, no tea, no food. Yes, yes, we're sure!" We'd finally laugh. She is the kind of classic Hindu woman who always puts others before herself: selflessness its own reward. But we paid with adoration. And everyone was protective of her. Especially Samson the 'houseboy', who made sure she never had to do any of the heavy work.

By asking us to call her Foyba—Aunt-who-is-my-father's-sister—she was exercising a kind of right. When my father was growing up in Uganda, Meena Foyba's father lent him some money so he could study in England. That was how my father became the only member of his large and rather impoverished family to acquire a college education. He also acquired a more open attitude and liberal values which he passed on to his children. Meena Foyba claimed him as a brother with the pride one takes in the achievement of siblings.

Her husband's family was similarly generous to my mother. In 1962, Mom, her twin sister and their uncle arrived in Nairobi in search of 'suitable boys'. Back then, Asians travelling in colonial Africa stayed with friends and family. One did not waste money in strange foreign hotels with food that was cooked who knew how. Hari Bhai's family had a reputation for hospitality, which they extended to my mother's entourage. Hospitality, generosity, selflessness and respect; these are the qualities we value in others and seek in ourselves.

When my parents visited Nairobi in 1992, after a long exile from Africa, Meena Foyba and Hari Bhai insisted that Mom and Dad stay with them in their modest two-bedroom apartment. It was cheaper and cleaner than any hotel could be with home cooked meals and Samson to take care of things like laundry. Besides, Nairobi had grown dangerous since the 60s. It was better that they stay with people who could take care of them and book them on safari at the rate reserved for Kenyan nationals, not the inflated price charged to foreign tourists.

By the time my younger brother and I finally visited Nairobi with Mom, we could not break this long-standing tradition. It would cause injury and offence.

Meena Foyba, Hari Bhai and all the members of their large extended family were generous with their time and hospitality. Some, like Meena Foyba, more than others. We stayed at their homes, ate their food, slept on their beds, and depended on the services provided by their black servants.

And yet, the time we spent in Kenya was intensely frustrating for me. All this wealth of hospitality, generosity, selflessness and respect was reserved exclusively for *aprawalla*. Our kind.



Illustration by Merz Rice

For their kind—*Ohloko*—there was none. *Their* kind—always said with a dismissive gesture— included any black Africans at hand, the flow of passers-by at an intersection, perhaps, or Samson bent over with the broom and dustpan.

It was appalling. Again and again we were barred, in the politest way possible, and for our 'own good,' from seeing or doing anything that might involve direct contact with black Africans. After all, we were foreigners and could not be expected to know better.

These decisions were taken not by Meena Foyba, who seemed only to want whatever would please us, but by people she deferred to naturally: her husband, the portly Hari Bhai, his brothers, their sons and daughters-in-law.

My brother and I wanted to hear live African music and see an African play at the Kenyan National Theatre. But when we stopped by the theatre, all we got was a look inside. It was full of black students attending a matinee. Suddenly, all plans for the evening became uncertain. Some people were probably coming by to see us. Wouldn't we like to meet them instead? We never came back. Sullen, we insisted on visiting the Kenya National Museum. But, "Why do you want to go *there*? There's *nothing* there."

We did go to *Bubbles*, a discothèque frequented by the young sophisticates of the Asian community. There, we 'bhangra-ed' the night away to the latest from Bombay, London and San Francisco. I went out for air. By the front door I heard an angry exchange between the doorman and a young black Kenyan woman. Was this a public disco or a private Indian club, she wanted to know? Why was the DJ only playing 'their' music? I didn't catch his answer.

And for a special treat, we went to *Basti*, a very chic dinner club. The music, the food, the diners, the owner and the head waiter were Indian. The sub-waiters and busboys were black. My brother tried to ask our busboy if they took credit cards. But he was interrupted. "Don't ask him," Hari Bhai said, "he won't know." Well, of course he *did*, but it was becoming unbearable.

I think it was hard on my mother—watching me seethe. I never said anything in front of anyone, that would have been unforgivable, but in private I raged. Small battles, waged in the back seat as we waited. "But they've been so nice to us!" she would protest. And more damningly, "You're too protected. Don't you remember how they kicked us out of Uganda? The terrible exodus!"

"Well, maybe now I know why they threw us out!" I hissed, bitterly irrational. The look on my mother's face left me wretched. What did my moral outrage matter? But I couldn't let it go.

“What shamed
me the most
was the echo of
that bigotry
resonating in the
darker recesses
of my own heart...
as much part of
my heritage as the
qualities I cherish
in Meena Foyba.”

"You haven't lived here, Sheyfali, you don't know what it's like." Then in the face of further protests, exasperated, "Yes, yes, you're right. Now be *quiet!* They're coming. *Please!*" And the other look, the one that said, "Have you no manners, no shame, no respect for people who have shown you such hospitality?"

How could I? Faced with the grim knowledge that what shamed me the most was the echo of that bigotry resonating in the darker recesses of my own heart, as much part of my heritage as the qualities I cherish in Meena Foyba.

The one black African we did meet was Samson. He has worked for Meena Foyba since he was a teenager, almost thirty years. She had trained him in the 'proper' way to scour pots, scrub floors and hand-wash the laundry. Their relationship was affectionate, bantering. They laughed together, with and at each other. Perhaps that explains why Samson seemed so much more cheerful than the other servants we saw.

Everyone we met had a 'housegirl' or 'boy' like Samson to do the heavy work. Every single day he cleaned the entire two bedroom apartment with an impressive thoroughness. We were told to leave dishes in the outside sink for Samson to scour. If I rinsed a spoon, I was reprimanded. That was Samson's job. He arrived at six and left at three. And the whole time, except for lunch, he worked.

Samson has children. I don't know how many or how old. And I couldn't really talk to him to find out. My brother's halting attempts at Swahili seemed to please him. I have forgotten the Swahili I once knew.

Lately, Samson has been wanting to retire. He injured his leg in an accident and the work is becoming difficult. Meena Foyba worries about how she will replace him at this late stage in her life. How can she train a new 'boy,' now?

Most of the time he worked quietly, efficiently. But sometimes I heard him, during his break or while hanging laundry outside on the communal patio, talking to the 'laundry girl' from the apartment below. I wondered what they talked about as they shouted back and forth in Swahili. Did they discuss their bosses? Did it hurt them to see us, the foreigners, come and go, add to their work and do so little ourselves? Did they despise us as I did?

One day, we were sitting at the kitchen table having our mid-morning *chai* and talking about the high cost of living, the weak Kenyan shilling and the double-digit inflation. Ordinary Kenyans, we were told, have to scrape to get by.

"But," said Meena Foyba in Gujerati, "even we are better off, it must be really hard for these poor people." The gesture towards through bars across the window Samsa, scrubbing at the the breakfast dishes in the sunlight, was gentle.



BANDIT QUEEN

One Tattered Umbrella and a Lesson in Dignity

A Review by Gitanjali

The Bandit Queen

Directed by Shekhar Kapur

35mm Colour 1994 119 minutes Hindi/subtitled

Distributed by Alliance Releasing, Toronto

Gitanjali Why did you want to do this film?

Shekhar I didn't want to do it.

Gitanjali OK. Why didn't you want to do it?

Shekhar I wanted to stay away from the lot. I was asked to do the film by Channel Four television and I wanted to make escapist cinema before this. It was very convenient, I was very successful as an escapist cinema maker. Why would I want to take on issues that nobody wants to take on? And I knew that I'm not a gentleman film maker.

Gitanjali What is a gentleman film maker?

Shekhar Have you seen the film?

Gitanjali Yes.

Shekhar OK. We have a street that we pass where we all live in the film business, and to go to the studios you have to pass a street called 'shit street' because it's near a slum. The women in the slum have nowhere to go. So there's a drain there and they all sit there. You know? So, as everybody passes by you turn up your window and try not to look as they expose all their private parts under their little black tattered umbrellas and hide their faces. Everything else you can see. Those two worlds don't want to meet each other. And if you're making a film that your gentlemanly film maker would, he would put his camera inside the car and roll up the windows... It made no sense to do this film from inside the car or to roll up the windows. I'd have to drag myself through those very drains and drag myself through the smells to really make my film....

"I wanted to brutalize people. I didn't want them to have any escape at all..."

Shekhar Kapur, Director of Bandit Queen



Seema Biswas as Phoolan Devi in *Bandit Queen*

When I initially heard that *Bandit Queen* was to be screened at the Toronto International Film Festival, I was quite excited and curious. It was an opportunity to see at least something of the remarkable story of an ordinary woman who has achieved a legendary status in India in her own lifetime. I don't want to elaborate on the skilful craft of this film, the cinematography which describes a striking relationship between the characters and a brutal, arid landscape, nor on the performance of Seema Biswas as Phoolan Devi, nor on the soundtrack by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan; I find myself not wanting to write a review of this film at all. Writing about a film, either in a positive or a negative way, is a promotion of that film. I do not want to lend my name to this film nor to the headline controversy that has promoted it thus far, but I know that questions need to be raised. This film is hard for South Asians in Canada to ignore: within the year, *Bandit Queen* will be released across Canada. It is one of, if not the first, film done in and about India by an Indian film maker to have mainstream release in Canada. An astounding fact considering the length and breadth of Indian cinema, one of the largest film industries on the planet.

Phoolan Devi's name translates as Goddess of Flowers. A professional outlaw and a leader of men, she carried guns and was not afraid to use them. She was wanted on many counts of

OPEN LETTER TO THE DIRECTOR OF THE TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL

September 7, 1994

Dear Director Sahib,

My name is Phoolan Devi. I cannot read or write. So I am asking a friend to write this to you.

I have been told that at your festival you are showing a film called *Bandit Queen* that is supposed to be the story of my life.

I have never met the people who made the film, and I have not been shown this film. I have asked them to show it to me, they have refused. They have given everybody the impression that I am being contradictory and that I did not want to see it. This is totally untrue.

I have been told that the main theme of this film is about how I was raped and how many times. I have never once spoken of my rape. To anyone.

I would like to ask you sir, you and your audience what you would feel if you knew the most private and humiliating moments of your life were being screened for other people's entertainment? Without your permission, without you having been shown the film.

If this film had been about the rape and humiliation of your daughter, or your wife, your mother or your sister, however well made the film was, would you have shown it at your festival? Would you sell tickets for the show? I think you must be a man. Just as the makers of this film are men. I cannot imagine that a woman would do this to another woman. Anything else, but not this.

My humiliation and my shame is not for sale. Not for any price. While you watch this film about me, while you enjoy my misery, I want you to know that I will fight this for as long as I have breath in my body.

Tomorrow an Indian judge at the Delhi High Court will hear my plea. As soon as I can find the money to hire a lawyer abroad, I will sue you and your festival and everyone else that is party to this shameful exploitation.

I request the public of Toronto not participate in my humiliation. I would not go and watch you being raped, if I knew that you didn't want me to. Please don't go and watch this film. At least not until I have seen it.

Please try and understand that whatever I may have done, I am a human being. Not an animal. I have feelings. I have a family. I have spent eleven years in prison. I am 32 years old, and have a life ahead of me.

Phoolan Devi
B99 Gulmohar Park
New Delhi, India



Seema Biswas as Phoolan Devi in *Bandit Queen*

murder and kidnapping and for killing 30 Thakur men in the famous Behami massacre, all of which brought her instant celebrity with masses of low-caste and poor people, as well as a huge price for her head. She became India's most famous and feared outlaw. For several years, she kept the entire Uttar Pradesh police force confounded and high-caste government officials quaking in their boots. When she was finally persuaded to surrender to police on February 12, 1983, it was before a cheering crowd of 10,000 fans. She was in jail for 12 years and was recently released on parole in February, 1994 by order of the Supreme Court of India, after a change in government. She has still not been proven guilty of leading the Behami massacre.

Shortly after her release, *Bandit Queen*, a film which is supposedly based on her life, was released to the world. The screenplay was written by Mala Sen, who wrote the book, *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi*. Devi is accusing the film makers of exploiting her story, saying that the film is largely built on factual errors, but that the scenes which are particularly traumatic to her show how she was supposedly raped. She told the Toronto Sun, "I wish they had killed me before they made the film." Her letter to the Toronto International Film Festival states her reasons why, simply but clearly.

The film makers claim that the film takes a sympathetic view of Phoolan, that they are helping her public image and promoting her "cause." Indeed, there is a grain of truth to this as the Indian press, previous to Mala Sen's book and the film, generally made her out to be a reckless monster, murderer, scourge of the high castes and the rich.

Granted, the Phoolan Devi depicted in the film is a woman who is moving towards her own dignity. However, her situation is not much different from that of the other low-caste women in her village and millions of women elsewhere who have endured myriad forms

of exploitation and brutality in India. As portrayed on the screen, every time Phoolan makes a move towards her own dignity and the dignity of her family, she is met with wrongful accusations, physical brutality, rape and ostracism. It is not that she is a character who won't conform in a conformist society, it is just that she can't. What the film does not elaborate on is that her personality is what sets her apart. This woman talks back (in swear words) when faced with injustice. If the woman projected in the film is anything like the real Phoolan Devi, I am not surprised that she would campaign against this film that has been made about her.

It seems to me that this sophisticated version of the story is as riddled with fantasy and distortion as the early media hype. The opening credits claim the film as a true story. Indeed during my conversation with Mr. Kapur the word 'truth' came up more than once. Nevertheless, the sensationalism and simplification of complex issues comes through, even to someone with my western perceptions.

The film makers have gone the easy route, creating an attention-grabbing action thriller where rape and retribution have become the main forces in the story. The action is set mostly in the bandit world, in and around the ravines surrounding the Chambal river. The strongest scenes and plot points are either when Phoolan is raped or when she gets revenge on the men who have raped her. This makes watching the film a mind-numbing experience, as the plot wanders from one violent act to another. But where is this women's sense of justice, her growing celebrity amongst millions of low-caste people, and the growing threat of her presence to an entire government? These only appear as sketchily drawn sub-plots.

The film focuses on the abuses of the caste system and thus seems tailored for a Western audience which, it can be assumed, has little knowledge of the caste system or of Indian

“The most stereotypical ‘male’ reaction to a woman’s rape is to immediately find ways to punish the perpetrator, it is rarely to restore the dignity of the woman or to give comfort and safety.”

Photo courtesy of Alliance Releasing



Shekhar Kapur, Director of *Bandit Queen*

women. The director, however denies this: “I thought of Western audiences only in the fact that I didn’t think of Indian audiences. In relative terms, I thought less of Indian audiences... I thought of a general audience... Only in the terms that I didn’t pander to their terms of commercial Indian cinema with songs and dances. I was just making the film.”

His remarks, however are contradicted by a report in the Vancouver Sun, of Sunday, October 8, 1994 which says; “According to Arun Datti, (a researcher on the Devi case) this focus on the caste system is tailored to suit the Western audience but doesn’t tell the real story. The minute you go to Canada or England and say something about caste oppression, those white people, their eyes bleed over and their tongues start clucking... without knowing

the difference between a Thakur and a Mala and a hole in the head. In reality it was not the caste system that transformed Phoolan Devi into a Dacoit bandit. The real story is an old story. It is a story of poverty and greed, pitting brother against brother and child against child.”

I asked Mr Kapur about the process he went through to make the story and what he chose to highlight. “What happens is that you start choosing in context and then you have to make sure that you are not too prejudiced about that context. But there are certain contexts that you can’t be prejudiced about enough. So there is the general story, which is that of the caste system and somewhere, I am not able to put it very well, a sub-conscious choosing of her personal life, those things that have nothing to do with the caste system. I am unable to actually say, except that, because we made this film without wanting to draw any conclusions, we said, we’ll do it instinctively, and hopefully at the end a pattern will emerge... My instructions to my actors were, ‘We’ll talk this to death then trust yourself, trust that whatever we have talked about has soaked into your sub-conscious and on the set it’s you and not your character. If you are at that moment you are uncomfortable, you are uncomfortable. It’s you, your interpretation, it’s not even mine any more. All I am looking for is moments of truth, your truth, not the general truth. *At that stage it does not matter if the interpretation didn’t come through* (my italics). It’s your truth! I didn’t know if I was for her or against her...”

Gazing under the tattered umbrella, he didn’t look the woman he saw in the eye, as human beings. It never occurred to him to ask why these women would want to hide their faces. He does not seem to get that the woman he made the film about is a real human being, still alive, with feelings, desires and a future ahead of her. Perhaps the worst part of this story is in the film maker’s depiction of Phoolan’s rape. It is common knowledge that women who are survivors of rape and abuse need to have

STATEMENT FROM THE DIRECTOR OF THE TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL

September 9, 1994

Attached you will find a letter from Phoolan Devi. Her story was the source of the film *Bandit Queen* which we are showing at this year’s festival. We are obviously concerned by the accusations she makes in her letter.

I have talked to the producers of the film, Film Four who are based in London, England, and the director of the film, Shekhar Kapur. They have an arrangement with Phoolan Devi and she was paid a fee. The film is based on testimony which she gave to a prison warder. Mala Sen wrote a book based on this testimony. Her screenplay is based on her book. Phoolan Devi has publicly gone on record regarding her rape. She has also met the people who made the film. I have been reassured by them that the film attempted at all times to be faithful to her story. Indeed, it is a sympathetic treatment of her life which finally celebrates her release from prison. *Bandit Queen* has also been shown at two other major international film festivals.

The film has recently been banned in India for reasons of content. The nudity and language depicted exceed the codes established by the Indian censor board. They have asked the director Shekhar Kapur to make approximately ten substantial cuts to the film before the will allow it to be passed.

We are very concerned about images which denigrate women, and indeed any images which can be construed as racist, homophobic or misogynist, or which celebrate needless violence. We do not feel that *Bandit Queen* condones any of the above.

We have therefore decided to screen the film as announced.

Piers Handling
Director
Toronto International Film Festival
Toronto, Ontario Canada

control over the disclosure of that abuse and rape. It is an integral part of the healing process. Devi has been denied this right on a massive scale. It is one thing to enact rape scenes with a purely fictitious character and quite another when the story involves a real person. Phoolan publicly denies she ever told anyone about being raped or gave her permission to have her story used. The decision was made for her, apparently because the film makers wanted to get the point across.

Kapur said that he wanted to make his audience feel angry. "I wanted to brutalize people. I didn't want them to have any escape at all... And then I wanted them to understand, because this is what an art film is all about. I wanted them to experience for two hours what it must be like to be a low-caste woman. And those attitudes can be brutal, most of the film is designed to affect your subconscious. So that when you see the gang rape, the idea was to make the viewer feel thoroughly disgusted, not fascinated with the back lighting and all of that. There was hardly any skin in it. So, yes, I went out to get the viewer immensely upset. If enough viewers are angry enough something might be done about it."

The rape and retribution theme has been used before in Indian cinema (*Zakhmi Aurat*) and also in the West (*Thelma and Louise*). While both of these films are popular with many women that I know, it is still obvious to me that they are made by men. The most stereotypical 'male' reaction to a woman's rape is to immediately find ways to punish the perpetrator, it is rarely to restore the dignity of the woman or to give comfort and safety. It is more about the protection of property than real indignation. Men seem to think that punishment solves everything. It's any easy way out.

It reminds me of an underground comic book character from the US called *Hothead Paisan, the Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* who is obsessed with cruelly dismembering rapists and abusers of women. When I read this comic I remember feeling, despite my pacifist leanings, a kind of perverse satisfaction. But, ultimately, what the *Hothead* comic does (and the film doesn't) is to take this line of thinking further by questioning the ultimate goals of these actions, somehow without invalidating the altogether livid feelings of the character. Apparently the film makers also did not consider the nature of their Indian male audiences. Anand Patwardhan's film *Father, Son and the Holy War* describes how men will

jerk off at rape scenes at films. Is this what Kapur means by brutalizing his audiences?

A lot of film makers have a saying that you keep making the same film over and over again during your life, just in different ways. I asked Kapur what this film had to do with him, an upper-middle class Indian man and how he related it to the other films he had done, a weepy upper-middle class family story and a fantasy adventure. "Yeah, I grew up with this film... and as I said, I knew how not to shoot the film but to shoot it I had to get in touch with myself. And when you get in touch, then you face the question of how to shoot." In some ways I can see the portrait he has made of himself in this film, his own 'truth'. I think he assumed his audience would be men like himself and this film is his righteous reproach to them.

What might be more interesting in this case and more telling of women and the caste system in India would be to have a sequel to *Bandit Queen* which outlines what happens when a strong character like Phoolan Devi comes out of jail on parole and exposes to the entire world the private parts of the Indian and international film industries. A woman who, as she moves towards her own dignity, serves up to a massive popcorn-munching audience an action-packed thriller where all the women who have been raped by the film industry can have their retribution... To me Phoolan's story remains a mystery. Someday, I hope to hear more directly from her and women like her about their stories, as they might want me to hear them, because it is rare for Indian cinema to deal with caste and gender issues at the same time.

The only happy ending to this story, for me, is that this film and the controversy surrounding it have raised to profile of the issues of caste and gender in India and abroad and the depiction of the same issues within the cinema. A multitude of feminist groups, women's groups and progressive groups in India are all active against the film.

I asked Kapur what will happen to her now. "I hope she survives this jungle. The urban jungle is the meanest of all. She is a rising political star. A lot of people are jumping onto her bandwagon, and she may stand for the elections. But it's a dangerous place for her, if she doesn't handle it right she may go back to jail!"

My hope for Phoolan Devi is that someday she can get a peaceful night's sleep.

ADDENDUM

Since last fall I have been watching the Indian feminist response to this film as well as the mainstream coverage in Toronto since its release. There have been some interesting new developments to add to this saga. Channel 4 and the producers of *Bandit Queen* are now insisting to the Western press that they were "... always willing to hold a private screening for Phoolan Devi anywhere and any time. She has also been invited to all public screenings." (*Metro Word*, March 1995). The 'truth' is that it took nine months and an order from the Delhi High Court for her to finally see this film.

Shekhar Kapur has been hailed by *Time Magazine* and mainstream western media as an 'untouchable' in his own country for speaking out against the caste system. He has told the western media that Devi, in her case against the film, has turned her back on her low-caste past and her family. Phoolan apparently has another version of the 'truth'. In her suit she has accused the film makers of invading her sexual privacy by restaging her rapes for commercial gain, of prejudicing her trial (after which, if found guilty, she could be hanged) by implicating her in a mass murder that she denies having committed; of endangering her life and the lives of her family by grossly distorting caste politics in a way that sets them up as sitting ducks for retributive caste killings. Aradhana Seth, film maker at the UN Women in Media Conference said, "The film makers have appealed to the Supreme court claiming that as a public figure, Phoolan Devi has no right to privacy." The good news is that three judges in two different courts have not yet been able to prove her guilty of the massacre at Behami.

Perhaps the saddest player in all of this is Mala Sen, who originally wrote the *Bandit Queen* biography in which she, in loving detail, describes the process by which she gained Phoolan's trust. *India Today* (December, 1994) states, "Til such time as Phoolan Devi's own version is published, Mala Sen's book remains the most thorough and honourable work on Devi's life. For the irony is, that although Sen is now a defendant in Phoolan's case against *Bandit Queen*, it is in her role as the film's screenplay writer and not as the author of the book on which the film is based. The accusation against the film in Phoolan's petition is that the film is not faithful to the book, thereby acknowledging the book's authenticity."



Editor's note Since this article was written, the film has been released in India after some edits. Channel Four has paid a fee to Phoolan Devi and she has dropped her law suit. The film had a limited release in North America. Publication of this article was delayed through no fault of the author. I wish to thank Sheila James for her tea, support and input into this article

"In reality it was not the caste system that transformed Phoolan Devi into a Dacoit bandit. The real story is an old story. It is a story of poverty and greed, pitting brother against brother and child against child."

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Trashing "Coolies"

Shiraz Dossa

takes Neil Bissoondath to task

for selling out in

Selling Illusions:

**The Cult of Multiculturalism
in Canada**



Selling Illusions:

The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada

by Neil Bissoondath

Toronto Penguin 1994

Settling in other lands is intrinsically hard, it tears up migrants invisible and ineffable ways that the uncultivated eye of the prosaic observer can rarely discern. For the first generation living in the interstices of a settled national community it is unnerving and intimidating, even when the host populace is uniformly welcoming. If the migrants were escaping from economic harassment, racial hatred, civil war or escalating instability, or if they are older and wiser, their level of anxiety remains high.

Young Turks with adventure in their blood have a much easier time, particularly if they moved to "make it", to be successful in the market place of the North. But the older ones usually have rougher rides on the cultural highways and byways of their new nations, for they carry with them memories of their toxic histories, their experiences in turmoil and humiliation. Uprooted by fate and superior power, they exude anxiety and fear even as they are eased by their hosts into an appreciation of their legal rights and of the opportunities that lie before them.

Few among this pioneering generation of third worlders, the majority among migrants, can or do slip into the mainstream. Fringe, marginal life is the historical destiny for most migrants in this category in Canada: their minds and bodies were shaped and disciplined in culturally different, colonial settings in the South. To fail to grasp this diffuse sense of worry and estrangement in the hearts and minds of the newcomers is to miss one of the most crucial things about them: it reveals abysmal ignorance about the puissance and authority of the past, about the invasive efficiency of colonial culture and history.

Neil Bissoondath misses nearly all of this, not because he is malicious or unfamiliar with the migrant condition, nor for that matter because he is a highbrow who scorns the migrant smells and voices on the streets of Montréal or Toronto. Far from it, there is little in his book, *Selling Illusions*, that could be read as the product of a classically trained and informed mind. His pose of detachment has everything to do with his biting contempt for the culture of his home land and his cloying embrace of the liberal mythology: absolute freedom; pure imagination; full personal growth; and unlimited

liberty to make and remake oneself. These and other myths appear with such regularity in journalistic and scholarly discourse that they have acquired the status of common sense.

To challenge this ideology of "commonsense", this anthology of entrenched, mystical fables is tantamount to committing treason. It is deemed to be as unthinkable and as deluded as to claim that there is such a thing as a rational, dispassionate, *practicing* Muslim. In the liberal universe, no such creature is conceivable intellectually or morally. Bissoondath's slant on third world migrants is identically confident: their histories and cultures, Caribbean in particular, are barren, vacant, execrable, their pasts are best forgotten and consciously elided, they have virtually nothing to contribute to the culture and the conversation of the modern world.

According to Bissoondath, multiculturalism is a huge mistake because it takes seriously the unattractive and unworthy practices of myriad tabasco cultures. As a legally sanctioned Canadian policy, it is even more culpable because it says to immigrants: "Officially. Legally...you do not have to change. Here, you could—indeed it was your duty to—remain what you are...you do not have to adjust to the society, the society was obligated to accommodate itself to you."

In a word, this constitutional doctrine authorises us to construct our ethnic tenements, wallow among our own kind, and Canada will finance and help us flourish even if it kills her. Bissoondath has no doubts that multicultural Canada will be the death of the real Canada.

None of this is literally or even metaphorically true. Multiculturalism was invented neither to eviscerate Canada nor to weaken its cultural foundations to such a degree that it would collapse into the conquering arms of third world immigrants. In practice multiculturalism as led to nothing of this sort, even though it has produced, in the form of equity legislation consistent with the Charter's (of Human Rights and Freedoms) commitment to equalise opportunity and lessen discrimination, a number of casualties in the process. Young white males in particular have paid a price in the public and private job market. To notice and lament this consequence is necessary but to depict multiculturalism as the cause of the dissolution of Canada is to display the kind of ignorance that may well be beyond remedy.

To live—in fact to survive, to work or do business, to be entertained, go to school or

university, to encounter and deal with the law, to communicate in the public realm—requires immersion and acquiescence by immigrants in liberal culture, liberal law, languages, market rules and the meaning and logic of individual rights. Not only is there no "duty" to remain "as you were"; it would be logically impossible to do so even if it was desired. Relocating in one way or another radically changes migrants.

The idea that Canada has or intends to supplant her rule of law or her standards in education or in other departments of Canadian culture *specifically* for immigrants is patent nonsense. If there is a trend towards relaxation of the meritocratic principle in education, jobs and social policies generally, and there is, the impetus has come from community activists and their persistent claims to accommodate single white mothers, lesbians, gays and other disadvantaged groups on feminist terms. Black and brown immigrants (some of them), assimilated into this cluster of marginals, have gained from the less stringent policies, but they were not, and were not intended to be, the primary beneficiaries. Multiculturalism has at best allowed a paltry minority of immigrants to piggyback on this policy.

VS Naipaul's malevolent dismissal of third world "bush" societies is never too far beneath the surface in his nephew, Neil Bissoondath's fevered views. Trinidad serves, in this plagiarised recycling of his Uncle's wisdom, as the exemplary third world culture: hot, torpid, reeking of stifling communalism, hostile to free thought, jealous of individual success and neurotically drawn to ethnic ghettos. What Bissoondath finds far more troubling, though, is the tendency of these cultures to overrun and sap the inner vitality and liberties of clean democracies like Canada. Multiculturalism is the insidious wedge that has legitimised the third world assault on Canada.

Bissoondath is blithely oblivious to the fact that his take on multiculturalism is substantively identical to that of Preston Manning's Reformers and William Gairdner, and a slew of *Mein Kampfers* who make up the lethal periphery of the racist fraternity. His liberal attacks on their positions and those of his radical critics (nicely exposing his "liberal" hypocrisy), fail to obscure the basic postulates he shares with the Right. His "reasons" may be different, but the enabling cultural assumptions and political values, the legitimating ideological framework, are essentially the same. For them all, third world immigrants are a problem because of the

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cultures they come from and the values they bring with them. Multiculturalism is fueling the fires of division, hatred and destruction.

Selling Illusions is unabashedly in tune with the pop psychological verities of the times in its focus on the personal and the intimate as the basis of reality and analysis. Bissoondath starts off anecdotally detailing a clutch of his private emotions, feelings and hopes as he arrives in Canada, he records his disappointment with his fellow Trinidadians, resolves to expand his horizons, pairs up with a French-Canadian woman, fathers a daughter, learns to relish the snow, publishes a couple of books and makes himself at home in Montréal and Québec.

Having made it by sheer effort and will (no concessions to fate, chance, fortune or Uncle Naipaul), Bissoondath realises that he has become a Canadian without any help from the State. In his bones and flesh, he feels the pride of Tarzan: independent, successful, recognized—and a writer to boot. As he surveys the landscape, he sees too many third world Janes, still trapped in their ethnic skins, begging the bureaucrats to make Canada congenial to their hot tempers, communal values and carnivals. The white political elite, eager for ethnic votes and a little guilty over their part in the colonization of native lands, joins with these Janes in articulating and entrenching a new ethic in constitutional law—equal respect for all cultures.

Bissoondath is embarrassed by this new, post-colonial Canada: it reminds him too much of the Trinidad and the Trinidadians he despises; it provides a legal warrant for them to invade the public space; it allows them to be who and what they are by birth and history and it makes a mockery of his Canadian dream which does not include a niche for Trinidad or Trinidadians.

Selling Illusions is his candid riposte to the multiculturalists who have so thoughtlessly violated his snowy vision and liberal aspirations. To 'grow,' to 'evolve,' to be 'free' is to grow beyond, to be free of Trinidad and the humidity of the third world. VS Naipaul and Shiva Naipaul accomplished this distancing with celebrated acumen, Bissoondath is the next standard bearer in this civilizational struggle to keep the 'coolies' at bay.

In this book, Bissoondath parlays his sense of betrayal into an intemperate assault on the proclivities and passions of the multiculturalists. In his view, multiculturalism is the benighted vessel that shelters a profusion of contemporary ethnic evils: female circumcision; racial separation; cultural divisiveness; reverse racism; dependence on the state; censorship; the endless parade of victims; political correctness in the academy; muffling of free speech;

growth; evolution; and progress. If his assertions seem bizarre and a little mad, it is because they are indeed a little outlandish.

Finding new homelands, living in novel cultural spaces, settling into the new channels of life—these are traumatic and confounding events, in the precise sense, in particular for third world migrants whose old homelands have become hellish. The desire to find a place, to attach oneself to new ideas and liberties, to visualize a new fulfilling life, is innately human and rehearsed in the writings of numerous transplanted citizens: Edward Said and George Steiner instantly come to mind. Bissoondath's sense of trauma or even betrayal is not by any means a historical first. These attitudes are par for the course, especially in this century of upheaval and displacement.

But Bissoondath's foray into this terrain is unusually troubling because it is so intellectually thin and so obviously pretentious. Audacity and arrogance are permitted to those who can sustain their bold claims, not to those who wilt and die page after page by their own words, by their own formulations that neither heaven or hell can rescue from their fatuous tedium. For instance, multiculturalism may cross paths with the discourse of victimology and political correctness in the hands of the less thoughtful, but it is not intrinsically allied to their ideological analysis and agenda: the latter discourse stems from the triumph of vulgarised Freudian psychotherapy in the intellectual and moral life of the modern West.

Selling Illusions offers neither sustained analysis nor a plausible argument: it is a gossamer, threadbare screed, unclouded by compelling research or adequate knowledge. For a man whose profession is writing, Bissoondath writes very badly. His preferred idiomatic form is incapable of yielding insight, his literary style is early K-Mart: plastic, unsubtle, shallow, hyperbolic, Harlequinish in its penchant for caricature and over statement. His book is full of the kind of sentences that suggest both literary and intellectual limitations:

"Too often in this country...we are suspicious of debate..."

"Canadians were struggling with self-definition...The soul of the country seems to be up for grabs. Ethical decisions must be made..."

"How much to follow, how much to lead?"

"Laws in a democratic society are engendered by events..."

"Nowhere have I felt myself a stranger..."

"The brain is a remarkable instrument..."

"Personal knowledge and sensitivities are media for growth."

"I am no longer a Trinidadian. I have not been a Trinidadian for many years."

A world in which brains are instruments, all laws follow events, personal knowledge is a medium, the past can be severed from memory, is not a world informed by reason, erudition or common sense. Far too often, what Bissoondath says in his peculiar way is either unintelligible or trite.

As the US philosopher Richard Rorty has recently remarked, multiculturalism, "...started out as one more attempt to get white middle-class males to behave better to people they enjoy shoving around: black and brown people, women, poor people, recent immigrants, homosexuals. It hoped to encourage these groups to take pride in themselves, rather than accepting the derogatory descriptions which the white males had invented."

In Canada, multiculturalism is principally driven by the same humanist impulse.

Bissoondath's assertions notwithstanding, multiculturalism is about outlawing irrational prejudice in liberal societies, it is about keeping liberalism honest and fair, it is about making liberals and liberalism live up to their professed ideals of equal rights, respect, autonomy and dignity for all citizens. Multiculturalism is not about supplanting the core cultural and political values of white liberal societies; its aim is to lay the foundation for the eventual acceptance of its third world immigrants as full citizens.

For many immigrants, multiculturalism supplies a cluster of symbolic anchors, familiar themes from the past, mirrors in which they can see a bit of their old selves as they are willy-nilly refashioned and remoulded by the very act of living in Canada. To be Canadian is to be a legally recognized member of our state, to be a citizen with rights and obligations. How this political status is articulated culturally, how it is represented in the public arena, liberalism leaves to individuals and groups to resolve as they see fit within their own geographical, socially relevant locales across Canada. Multiculturalism has merely added an array of distinct cultural flavours to this mix of spatial and value pluralism that sustains all versions of liberalism.

In an essay written in 1943 on the problems and dilemmas faced by immigrants and refugees, German-Jewish political theorist, Hannah Arendt, commenting on the behaviour of a certain Mr. Cohn, noted that, "...he certainly had beaten all records. He is that ideal immigrant who always, and in every country into which a terrible fate has driven him, promptly sees and loves the native mountains." Arendt's point is that the temptation to do as Cohn does is immensely powerful among the despised and displaced in this world, but it is undignified and

degrading because it thrives on contempt for one's cultural and spiritual origins.

Bissoondath has much of Mr. Cohn in him, even though he was not driven to come to Canada by a terrible fate. Like Cohn, he reveals an unctuous eagerness to be accepted by the host society and to quickly dispense with his past attachments. Yet Cohn's compromises are more understandable: he was, after all, fleeing a legally sanctioned order for the murder of all Jews, his life was on the line. For Bissoondath much less is at stake. He was substantially free to choose, and his choice in *Selling Illusions* is to invent a deadly image of multiculturalism—an image that serves as the perfect foil for his counter-image of a snowy Canada with mountains in full view and undefiled with the smelly clothes, bodies and ideas of Trinidadian and other 'coolies'.


Bissoondath knows what Canadianism is all about and he has little sympathy for the legions of ethnic hold outs who espouse the scourge of our fair land: the cult of Multiculturalism. Manning (no pun intended) the outposts of multiculturalism, these 'coolies' and their cohorts refuse to bury their pasts, they are divisive and destructive, their affiliations and attachments alienate white Canadians and sabotage national unity. His description of his encounter with a citizenship judge succinctly captures both Bissoondath's clichéd ignorance and insolence:

"He was a man of dignity and a certain friendly charm, but there was a problem: his Italian accent was so heavy one could hardly begin to guess at the pearls of wisdom he was trying to transmit to us... This man was supposed to be swearing us in. For all we knew, he might have been simply swearing."

Funny accents, incomprehensible speech, lack of attention to protocol at public functions, very colourful attire—these sentiments are the common coin of literally hundreds of commentaries and opinions on the odd ways of those less gifted in their command of the languages and manners of the 'civilized'. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, describing the blacks he sees on the shores of the Congo river, voices both his despair and cultural pride when he says, "The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?" Bissoondath's last sentence in this passage tactlessly reproduces Conrad's imperial impatience and contempt for the other. This arrogance of attitude and language is as odious now as it was in Marlow's narrative.



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Beyond Destination is a bold and imaginative contribution to the on-going debate surrounding what is meant by the term 'South Asian'. This 12 piece collection of single channel video and installation work grapples with a variety of issues ranging from intimately personal question of 'making sense' of the many roles and identities expected of us, to the celebration of recoding conventional Eastern and Western imagery. Rather than reproducing western expectations/representations of the unknown, exotic East, the visual artists in *Beyond Destination* have attempted to challenge the commonly held belief that there exists an easily knowable 'South Asian' identity.

The exhibition was commissioned by the IKON gallery (Birmingham, UK) and curated by Canadian writer, Ian Iqbal Rashid, as part of the larger South Asian Visual Arts Festival held in the West Midlands, UK (September to November, 1993). The strength of this body of work lies in its active attempt to avoid a natural or commonsensically defined formal, thematic or representational strategy. Instead, what emerges is a mixed bag of strategies which challenges orientalist assumptions, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of what constitutes 'legitimate' membership in the South Asian diaspora.

If there is some underlying theme to the exhibition, it is one of journeying and change. The exhibition explores the ways in which cultural identities are always in the midst of being made or, in Himani Bannerjee's words, 'being and becoming'. The playing out of this theme begins with the I, as participant/viewer, placing, watching and rewinding the various video tapes. The I shifts to images and sounds of India and Toronto in Gitanjali's *New View*, *New Eyes* as she grapples with the tension of her position as Indian or as tourist. The sense of journeying is captured in a more formal film sense in Alia Syed's *Fatima's Letter*, in the images of moving subway carriages on the London Underground and people in the midst of daily travel. The ultimate manifestation of this theme of journeying and change stems from the recognition that this collection of work by British, Canadian and American artists will be screened in far away places such as Australia and Japan.

Many of the pieces in *Beyond Destination* draw on the notion of space and the ways in which images, bodies and communities attempt to achieve a presence while in motion. In Tanya Syed's *Salamander* and Sher Rajah's *Forever and Ever*, the visual images of hands serve as metaphors for this sense of presence in motion. Through the exchange of cards, glances and kebabs, Syed's film explores the way in which people collide, cross paths and move on. The piece holds together through an interweaving of very disparate sounds and images, capturing the sense of the contingency and brevity of human encounters and exchange.

In Maya Chowdhry's *Monsoon*, Indu Krishnan's *Knowing Her Place* and Meena Nanji's *Voices of the Morning*, the emphasis is very much on the body and the ways in which our physical being is able to 'fit into' the spaces we occupy. Through the use of very conventional documentary techniques in *Knowing Her Place*, Krishnan allows the viewer to share in a woman's painful search for identity. We travel with Vasu as she moves between New York and India, revealing along the way her schizophrenic experiences in playing the role of mother, wife and daughter, American and South Asian. In the end we watch empathetically as Vasu attempts to position her body in relation to the various expectations of others within the variety of social spaces she occupies.

Meanwhile, in Alnoor Dewshi's *Latifa and Himli's Nomadic Uncle*, Shaheen Merali's *Going Native* and Shani Mootoo's *Wild Women of the Woods* the focus is very much on communities of people and their particular relations to space. In Mootoo's *Wild Women of the Woods*, there is a subversion of the submissive Asian woman stereotype through the recoding of white, butch signifiers. In her search for 'true love', Mootoo leads us through a snowy adventure filled with swirls of colour and Indian mysticism, arriving at a final moment of jubilation. *Wild Women of the Woods* speaks from the position of a strong, South Asian lesbian community whose presence is mapped against the backdrop of some very Canadian landscape. What emerges is the sense of a strong community of women shouting loudly, "Look at how we're here, look at how we're Queer. Get used to it!"

A key strength of *Beyond Destination* is its ability to capture as well as rupture the fine line between local and global forms of identification. Within the collection there is a definite sense of movement/tension between conventional Western cultural forms, styles and images and sounds and languages more usually associated with the East. The sense of recoding very localized metaphors is captured in Sutapa Biswas' installation piece, *Murmur*. By fusing images of a South Asian woman canoeing on a lake in the Canadian Rockies, Biswas opens the very Canadian theme of 'Survival' to new perspectives or 'ways of seeing'. Similarly, in Khaled Hakim's *When I Was Just a Little Girl*, the familiar image of a mother's sadness at her child's wedding is juxtaposed with the melodic, yet haunting voice of Doris Day. This juxtaposition results in a rupturing of the familiar image of a South Asian mother's tears when positioned against the sounds of a very white Doris Day. Although filmed in Birmingham, UK, *When I Was Just a Little Girl* captures images which could just as easily have been situated in Karachi, Vancouver or New York. This ebb and flow between the local and global within the exhibition captures in its wake a real sense of the movement and flow which is very characteristic of the South Asian diaspora itself.

But what about South Asian identity? Where does all this shifting and moving leave me as a member of this 'Brown' diaspora? How does this exhibition deal with the real fears and impact of racist tendencies which I experience, living in the West? While *Beyond Destination* provides no obvious solutions to these personal notions of space/presence, what it does succeed in doing is to state that we as members of the South Asian diaspora have a place in the West and we will not simply be reduced to nice submissive images of the 'Other'.

As members of the South Asian diaspora, we need to shift our own understandings of South Asian identity from certain stable assumptions surrounding what it really is, into a recognition of its essentially social, cultural and politically constructed nature. In this sense South Asian identity becomes what Stuart Hall has referred to as a 'New Ethnicity'. By this, Hall is referring to the social processes of making an identity, as opposed to simply accepting some natural or primordial notion of a 'true' identity. As a result, the projection of a South Asian identity is always 'new', for it is always in the process of being made, and always changing.

From this perspective, then, South Asian identity functions very much as a cipher through which we can understand social processes which are at work within our immediate living contexts. Furthermore, South Asian identity becomes a way in which we can comment on our real homes in the West. We are not members of some peripheral experience/condition, but living examples of contemporary life in Canada, the UK and the US. *Beyond Destination* provides us with a breadth of very different South Asian identities, all of which are 'real' and 'true'.

If there is a weakness in *Beyond Destination*, it is that the exhibition presently only exists within the walls of certain select galleries. Although the South Asian Diaspora is very much alive through videotape—many of our parents are avid fans of Bombay cinema—the exhibition falls short in reaching out and accessing its single channel potential. There is a need for our parents to experience the work in *Beyond Destination*, if only to inform them that our generation of diasporic subjects are creating spaces from which to stand and project our politics.

Although the IKON Gallery should be applauded for its attempts at 'creative' outreach and at targeting a younger South Asian audience, access to the exhibition is still an issue. Recently the exhibition has been transferred into a self-contained single channel video format. The challenge which remains for film distributors, festival curators and community events organizers alike is in making use of the familiarity of the video format to reach a broader, more diverse audience.



Beyond Destination is available for home/group viewing by contacting:
London Video Access (LCA)
5-7 Buck Street, Camden
London, England, NW1 8NJ
Phone 71 284.4323

Photo: Sean Halligan



Going Native Shaheen Merali
Video Installation, 1992-3
S. Merali is an artist, curator, teacher and co-founder of Panchayat Arts Education Unit in East London. He recently co-curated *Crossing Black Waters*, an exhibition of Post-colonial art from India, Pakistan and the UK. He has exhibited widely in the UK, as well as in Canada, Cuba and Italy.

Asian and Asian Diaspora Programme FLAHERTY FILM SEMINARS

Asian and Asian Diaspora Programme

reviewed by *Ian Iqbal Rashid*

curated by L. Somi Roy
Flaherty Film Seminars
Wells College, Aurora, New York
August 6 – 12, 1994

The 1994 Flaherty Documentary Film Seminars marked the 40th year of the now legendary annual event. This year's Seminar featured both a retrospective programme, curated by film maker Eric Barnouw and writer and lecturer Patricia Zimmerman, and an Asian (in the broadest sense of the term) Diaspora programme curated by L. Somi Roy.

Roy's programme was challenged by the immense geographical terrain which he had to traverse to make his selection. And also that for many of the delegates at the seminars the term Diaspora was clearly a problematic definition: the existence of Diasporic cultures assumes a pure culture somewhere else, the idea of a collective sense of source, the mythical homeland. For those of us living in the West, these places exist in the collective imaginary, as notions of authenticity disguised as home. Caught in the bright glare of this projected illumination of authenticity, many in the Diaspora find themselves wanting; another kind of difference is assigned; and we enter yet another form of colonisation.

But Roy handled this problem by making it organic to the format and content of his programmes. Instead of a dualist East-West, Homeland-Diaspora duel, the work featured proposed that, as cultures become increasingly globalised, the East lives inside the West and vice versa, and Homeland and Diaspora often exist only as fictions.

The work was programmed thematically, not as a kind of linear progression from Third World to New World. As a result, the films of Nick Deocampo (Philippines), and Go Takamine (Japan) were featured alongside the experimental video work of American Yau Ching and Canadian Shani Mootoo. Roy also chose to by-pass the usual suspects that materialise in discussions of Asian cinema and feature instead many artists whose work rarely gets screened in the West, including emerging artists and frankly—and for the most part delightfully—some rather oddball eccentrics.

The highlight of the programmes was the brilliant work of Indian film maker Mani Kaul.

Kaul has been described as a formalist. But the term does not do justice to the intense emotional stories that reverberates from the images that make up his interpretations of myth, music and architecture—although often they are more like collaborations with those cultural practices and forms. He defies categorisation: to call his work non-narrative does not account for the detailed and complex narration that his camera work offers within any single scene. Even to call him an Indian film maker does not seem useful since Kaul refuses to locate his work within national or cultural subjectivities. But in *Uski Roti* (1969), *Dhrupad* (1982), *Siddeshwari* (1989) and *The Cloud Door* (1994), Roy revealed to many of us for the first time, the range and development of a master film maker whose work has rarely been screened in the US.

Roy selected a lot of exceptional video work as well. Highlights included the witty, feminist parables of Japanese artist Mako Indemitsu; the elegant video and video installations of the Korean American, Seoungho Cho; the razor sharp collage work of Yau Ching; and the premiere of Shani Mootoo's new piece, *Her Sweetness Lingers*, a moving and erotic video poem which had to be screened twice to satisfy audience demands.

But the most interesting aspect of this year's Seminars was the juxtaposing of the Asian and Asian Diaspora programme alongside the retrospective programme—which itself offered a rich and satisfying selection of both the seminal and the irreverent from previous seminars. One programme, screened after a viewing of contemporary Japanese and Asian-American work, featured Eric Barnouw and Paul Ronder's very moving *Hiroshima/Nagasaki* (1945), provided—particularly after just having viewed programmes of contemporary Japanese and Asian American work—an intriguing way of measuring time and distance in the histories of documentary film practice.





Her Mother's Ashes

and Other Stories by South Asian Women in Canada and the United States

*Her Mother's Ashes
and Other Stories by South Asian Women
in Canada and the United States*
Edited by Nurjehan Aziz
Published by TSAR Books Toronto 1994

A Review by Sheyfali Saujani

Ever since I discovered TSAR Publications, I've followed their book publishing activities with anticipation and interest. This is a house that has slowly built its reputation and expanded its activities. And its work is important. This latest collection of short stories, like its other efforts is a largely satisfying blend of successes mingled with some disappointments.

As Arun Prabha Mukherjee points out in her excellent introductory essay, although 'South Asian' women are a diverse and disparate group, they do, however, possess many commonalities which make such a collection both meaningful and coherent. You don't have to be Parsee, say, to appreciate the difficulties of facing scheming parents with the awful revelation of a somewhat different sexual preference than the one they are eagerly pressing upon you. Nor do you have to be gay or lesbian. The particular guilt wrung by South Asian parents who sacrifice their all is pretty well universal throughout the sub-continent and its diaspora.

But even so, there is much to discover for readers of South Asian and other backgrounds in this collection. The only constraint has been the decision to include women who make their homes in English North America. This puts most of the writers into the very fascinating position of writing from the perspective of the outside—fertile ground for many of these stories. As such, they are often sad and fiercely angry. In Farida Karodia's *Crossmatch* a young actress from England balances her need for independence against a desire to protect her South African parents from the reality of her chosen lifestyle. And fails painfully. In Uma Parmeswaran's *Freeze Frame* a supportive feminist gathering in Winnipeg is disrupted by a young woman's ambivalence about the end of a marriage and the loss of a connection. Chitra Divakaruni writes about an American woman's frustration with her aunts' superstitions while on a pilgrimage to India. There is pain in these dislocations but there is also strength, drawn from within and from the past, as in the title story by Geetha Kothari.

There are some happier tales, like Bapsi Sidhwa's gentle satire on a visit to New York by a pair of newlyweds recently arrived in America. And Yasmin Ladha's *Circum the Gesture* is a rewarding, if more difficult experimental excursion.

Some of these stories are less successful, the writing less accomplished, the authors too self-consciously political to be really interesting. But they don't detract from the value of the collection.

And it is a valuable collection. Mukherjee's lucid essay (and story) is one of the real pleasures of the book. Likewise, Nurjehan Aziz's informative appendix describing the contributors is enormously helpful, making it worth flipping to the back as you read. The biographical information is brief but useful. What you will find is a collection of women whose accomplishments are impressive and whose literary activities invite further exploration.



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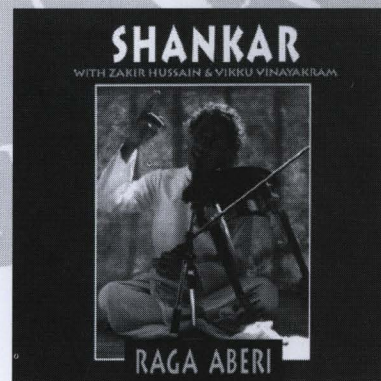
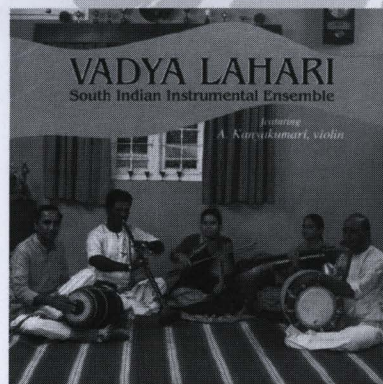
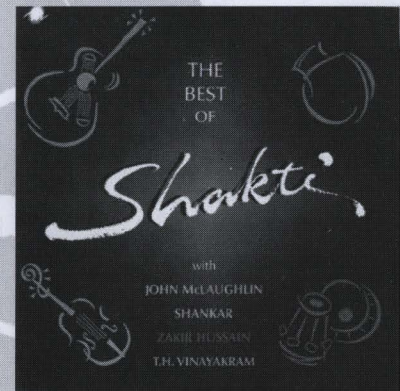
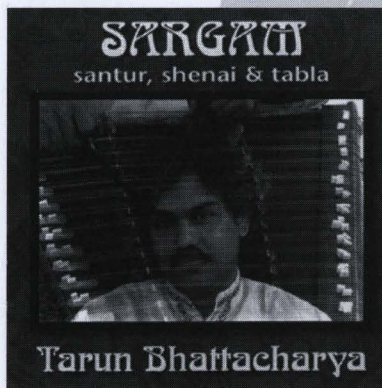
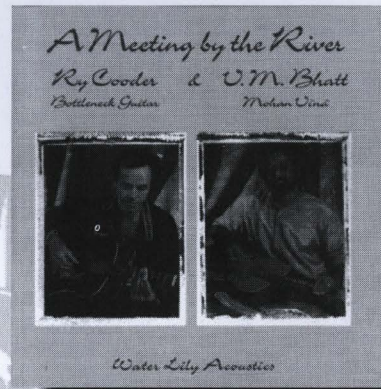
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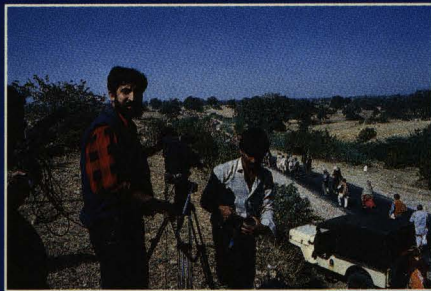
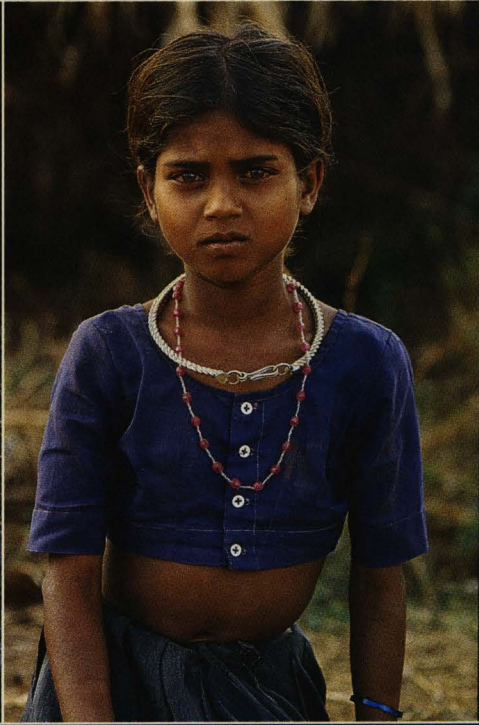
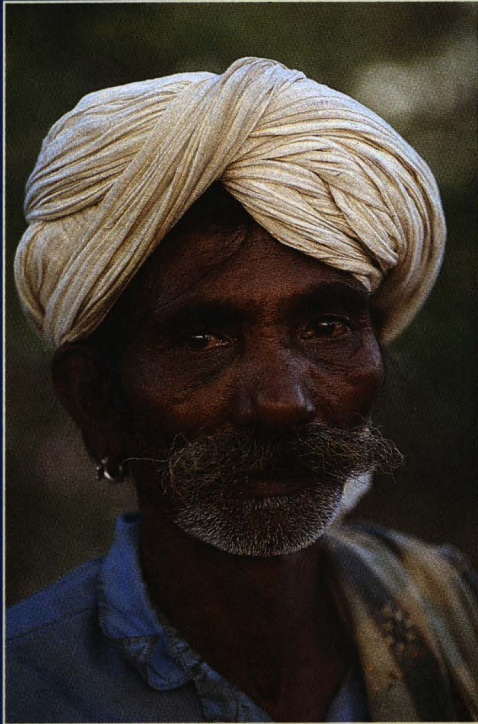


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