

Some annotations on the film festival as an emerging medium in India

Pooja Rangan*

Department of Modern Culture and Media, Brown University, Providence, USA

Organized around an interview with the curator of the 2009 Ahmedabad International Film Festival in India, this article inventories a number of issues germane to future discussions of the film festival as an emerging exhibition venue in India. I examine some of the existing theoretical and critical models for analyzing film festivals, and argue that the film festival should be considered as a ‘medium’ that behaves as a productive constraint on both film production and spectatorship. Finally, I consider the unique relation between the spectatorial behaviors encouraged within festival settings and the narrative strategies of Indian popular films, so as to interrogate their impact on the cultivation of a critically-oriented Indian film audience. I conclude by evaluating the promises and challenges of the infrastructural limitations faced by Indian film festivals for the emergence of alternative cinema publics.

A prefatory note

Investigating the film festival in India presents a curious problem. One is confronted with an overabundance of archival material: catalogs, press clippings, posters, program notes, news stories, and interviews with jury members, filmmakers, and movie stars. Film festivals endlessly monumentalize themselves in architectural reams of media records, so much so that film scholar Daniel Dayan once proclaimed them to be impossible objects of study, since they are not only performative phenomena – scripts subject to reinterpretation by each participant – but also archival behemoths (see Dayan 43–52). The flipside of this is that there is very little theoretical or critical material written on film festivals in general (although this has been changing in the past decade), and as yet no definitive piece of writing on film festivals in India, even though film festivals themselves are on the rise. The last 20 years have witnessed the emergence of a number of new forums for exhibiting cinema in India, forums that are ushering in new forms of filmmaking, generic experimentation, and spectatorship. One major and very visible change across urban landscapes throughout the country is the sweeping entrance of multi-screen entertainment complexes, accompanied by the slow obsolescence of neighborhood single-screen theaters. The advent of multiplex culture in the mid-1990s coincides with the popularity of what Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Madhava Prasad have dubbed ‘Bollywood,’ an ambitious genre of films that address a transnational and upwardly mobile audience – together, these developments are argued to reflect new intensities in the global aspirations and imaginations of middle-class urban and small-town Indian audiences (see Rajadhyaksha 25–39; Prasad). However, alongside these shifts in mainstream film culture, there have also been a number of less conspicuous but nonetheless significant transformations in what we might call, for the lack of a better word, the alternative cinematic public sphere in India.

*Email: Pooja_Rangan@brown.edu

Key among these, and the focus of this paper, is an unprecedented proliferation and institutionalization of regional, genre-specific, and special-interest film festivals and film series all over the country in the last 15 years.

Since approximately 1995, a number of state-sponsored, independent, and corporate-funded film festivals have taken root in urban centers, displacing the monopoly of the Indian government's now 40 year-old IFFI (International Film Festival of India) over the province of the film festival. The Kolkata Film Festival was founded in 1995, and others soon followed suit – the Kerala International Film Festival (1996), Madurai Film Festival (1998), MIFF (Mumbai International Film Festival, 1998), Osian's Cinefan in Delhi (1999), Pune International Film Festival (2003), Chennai International Film Festival (2003), and Ahmedabad International Film Festival (2009). In addition to cultivating and showcasing independent films, foreign films, 'offbeat films,' regional cinema, and premiering select mainstream movies (often those on the fringes of the mainstream), several of these bigger-budget forums have dedicated themselves to providing exhibition opportunities for specific genres that do not receive wide theatrical release – documentary in the case of Madurai and MIFF; Asian and Arab cinema in the case of Osian's. A number of affinity-based smaller and co-op-style spaces have also cropped up in recent years, organized around political and genre interests. Examples include the climate-oriented Monsoon Film Festival (2005) and Vatavaran Environment and Wildlife Film Festival (2006), Experimenta International Festival for Experimental Cinema (2003), the Vikalp Film Series (2004; founded by documentary filmmakers to protest censorship policies at MIFF), Mocha (2003) and Shamiana (2009) Short Film Clubs, and Persistence Resistance (2008; a festival dedicated to social justice and activist films, organized by Magic Lantern Foundation, the only distributor of independent cinema in India). This list represents just some of the established annual film festivals and regular series. I have not even begun to inventory the more irregular, occasional, or one-time events, which would comprise a far longer catalog. Suffice to say that the film festival is now more than simply a new medium for the exhibition and advocacy of non-mainstream Indian films and international cinema – it has become a staple of urban experience in India, one whose spatial organization, temporal intensities, and rhetorics of generic celebration are instrumental in producing new architectures of film production and spectatorship in India.

While it may be too early to make any definitive statements about these developments, which are still relatively new, the changes they are engendering demand to be theorized. The film festival is still relatively unexplored in academic scholarship about cinema, despite an abundance of riches in terms of raw material – there is a rich and long tradition of film festivals in Europe and the USA, and a high degree of sophistication in popular discourses of the film festival, which is now a highly diversified form in the West. What scholarship does exist is very recent and often limited in scope. As I will detail in the sections that follow, research on the film festival tends to take film critical forms or follow in the revisionist-historicist tradition of Dutch film historian Thomas Elsaesser, and both kinds of discourses ultimately shy away from the task of engaging the film festival dialectically, as a medium that actively shapes and restructures not only the medium of film, but also what we understand as 'cinema,' in all of its dimensions, including spectatorship, questions of stardom, and cinema's own enduring cultural logic. Following are a brief set of annotations that attempt to address some of these problematics. My comments do not purport to fill the gap in the scholarship on film festivals in India or critique the state of scholarship on film festivals in any conclusive or authoritative sense – the absence of a conclusion to this article is deliberate – although I do hope to contribute to a conversation that is only just beginning. Most of all, I want to pose a set of

provocations, which were in turn provoked by an interview that I conducted with filmmaker and curator Ajitpal Singh, the Director of Programming for the 2009 Ahmedabad International Film Festival (AIFF). AIFF held its first session this summer and, in Singh's own account, 'failed' as a festival. Singh's reflections on the difficulties of mounting, and furthermore, sustaining this fairly ambitious film festival led me to formulate a number of problematics that target some of the key issues that cluster around the film festival in India as both a practical endeavor and an object of study. These are certainly not the only methodologies through which to approach the topic, but they represent privileged sites of inquiry for me in that they are located at the nexus of theoretical concerns and the issues of feasibility addressed by Singh, which are in the last instance, issues of a cultural base. Importantly, I want to argue this is a critical and ripe time for making such a double-pronged intervention: AIFF may have 'failed' at an empirical level – mostly the result of a gap between the global scale of the festival organizers' ambitions and the nascent level of the actual infrastructure available to realize them – but this 'failure' bears a wealth of potential in that it opens up a rich set of issues for critical inquiry and reflection.

The interview with Singh is located at the end of the paper, and it can be read first or last, as the reader pleases – I refer to it often in my various annotations.

The festival that failed

After nearly two years of preparation, the Ahmedabad International Film Festival took place from 25 to 28 June 2009. AIFF featured films in three competitive sections judged by a jury composed of Indian filmmakers, television personalities, and stage actors: Independent Feature Films, Fictional/Live Action Short Films, and Documentary Films. In addition, the festival also solicited specially curated sets of films from the Berlin Film Festival and Tampere Film Festival, and included programs dedicated to the regional cinema of Gujarat, films dealing with AIDS, and children's films. Originally slated to be sponsored and hosted at Wide Angle, a local movie multiplex, the festival organizers had to seek a new venue a mere month before the event began – like many others, AIFF was caught in the cross-fire between multiplex owners and film producers that resulted in the famous multiplex strike in India from April to June 2009. Unlike their old exhibition partner, AIFF's new sponsor FullMarxx would not subsidize the cost of ticketing, so large numbers of spectators were turned away by the high price of tickets even though most screenings ran at far less than full capacity. Consequently the festival was poorly attended. The festival also featured a film market named the 'Independent Film Bazaar' – a separate space dedicated to fostering transactions between filmmakers and potential distributors, studio representatives, exhibitors, and TV executives. A guest speaker event was scheduled for each day of the festival, but other than that the Film Bazaar was a fairly unstructured space; although it was an active social networking site for the filmmakers and guest speakers in attendance, very few distribution deals were actually struck.

The black box and the white cube, or, the question of the medium

The account below by Ajitpal Singh is typical of discussions of film festivals, which invariably amount to a series of opinions culled together from personal recollection, autobiographical interlude, and anecdote. In addressing the synecdochic tendencies and highly confessional impulses that seem to emerge in response to the task of taking stock of the film festival, Richard Porton has remarked that accounts of film festivals are

‘intermittently gratifying, frequently maddening,’ and nearly always resemble a genre of travel writing (see Porton 1). There is a word for this kind of account. It is a cinephilic account – a chronicle punctuated by revelatory moments, but one that ultimately shies away from the task of articulating the particular to the whole. Specificity and the totality are called upon in alternation, but rarely dialectically. The proliferation of film festivals and screening spaces in cities across the world (and as Singh demonstrates, India is no exception) seems to trigger a mimetic impulse toward the proliferation of example and opinion in critique. The film festival seems to have become the purview of film criticism rather than film theory, with the result that there is a widespread avoidance of critical frameworks that attend to text *and* context – frameworks which would seek to attend to questions of the specificity of the film festival as a medium for producing an encounter between film texts and actors with various stakes in the films.

Film scholar Marijke de Valck – whose recent book *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia* has been publicized as the first ‘definitive’ book-length study of film festivals – advocates actor-network theory (ANT), developed by science studies scholar and anthropologist Bruno Latour, as a model that provides a global perspective on the stakes of film festivals in an era where global flows have replaced cultural-territorial segments. This, she argues, is a necessary ‘update’ to the earlier era of more traditionally anthropological film-critical work on film festivals by Danial Dayan and Kenneth Turan (see Dayan 43–52; Turan). De Valck argues that ANT attends to the ‘hybrid connections’ between the various ‘antagonistic and constitutive’ forces acting in film festivals (De Valck 29). Moreover, by rejecting the conceptual distinction between human and non-human actors, ANT moves away from the problematic dichotomizing tendencies of 1970s apparatus theory’s ideological schemas, and is able to account for the agendas of various entities that converge in the film festival, such as cinephiles, casual audiences, film industry professionals, government officials with business agendas and/or political purposes, programmers, and the press (30–31). The downside of adopting this ‘non-hierarchical’ model for analyzing film festivals, as De Valck admits, is that ANT is unable to address the ideological *stakes* of film festivals, or as she puts it, the ‘neo-colonial tendencies that persist in the new configurations’ (214).

De Valck leads us to a compelling problem: how do we theorize the ideological operations of the film festival given that the ‘black box’ of the theater experience has been exploded – not only by the arrival of video and television, but also by the film festival’s openness to a multiplicity of performances and agendas? In other words, how can we begin to talk about how the film festival functions not just as a medium in the sense of a channel, vehicle, or environment for the presentation of film, but as a medium in every sense of Foucault’s notion of a *dispositif* or apparatus? The theoretically oriented writings of art historians such as Rosalind Krauss, James Putnam, and Brian O’Doherty on the museum and the art gallery as mediums provide variations on a model that may be productive for thinking about the film festival (Krauss 3–17; Putnam; O’Doherty). This model has particular theoretical currency in that it points out that the content of art programming has become inextricable from its exhibition content. If we follow Krauss’s insights, we can see how in postmodernity, the spheres of context and content can no longer be considered separate or immiscible.

De Valck’s reluctance to isolate the individual film text as a unit through which cultural meaning is produced argues the relevance of this problematic for contemporary discussions of the film festival. Questioning along these lines, we might ask: In what ways does the film festival structure the experience of film viewing, or rather, film consumption? What kinds of new relations to space and time are produced by the specific scale, seriality, and intensities of festival programming, as opposed to the more occasional and isolated

programming of special interest film groups and series? Is there a value in abstracting a general ‘script’ that film festivals follow, so that we might then investigate how this is re-enacted and transformed within various national and local configurations? Moreover, perhaps most significantly, how can we adapt these questions – without dismissing them altogether – for talking about the distinctly postmodern experience of the contemporary international film festival?

‘Darshan’: The auratic look in the Indian film festival

A well-known Indian documentary filmmaker I know recently posted a humorous post on her blog regarding a Freudian slip in a misspelled signpost at the Delhi office of the Indian Directorate of Film Festivals (co-sponsor of the International Film Festival of India). Caricaturing the sign, which reads, ‘Way to Office of the Film Print Unit, Directorte of Film Festivals,’ she suggests that perhaps this is ‘the government’s inimitable way of reminding filmmakers that you can’t have your torte and eat it too . . . it’s art or commerce baby; success or goodness.’ She continues, ‘Unless of course you go to another kind of festival altogether, and get some special boons,’ and includes a picture of a billboard publicizing a religious gathering.¹

This jestful comment revisits a conversation Walter Benjamin began nearly a century ago, in 1935, when he argued the disintegrating impact of the advent of film, as a technology of mechanical reproduction, on the status of art as a ritual object (Benjamin ‘Work of Art’). It did not take long for film to take the place of painting as the source of an auratic encounter – in 1955, Andre Bazin would describe the experience of attending film festivals in the journal *Cahiers du cinéma* as a spiritual experience resembling a ‘monastic retreat’ (Bazin 13–19, reprinted in Porton 1–10).

For film scholar Ravi Vasudevan, this quasi-spiritual capacity of cinema to weave a collective spell over its audience has a special resonance when it comes to Indian cinema. Vasudevan has argued that an aesthetics of frontality and iconicity (also found in Indian calendar art and religious tableaux) is more operative in Indian films than a fetishistic narrative coding of address (Vasudevan 310–12). Accordingly, in Indian cinema, the gendered structure of looking, *darshan dena* and *darshan lena* – the power to give the look, and the privilege of receiving it – is inverted in relation to Hollywood films, where the female body is the privileged object of desire (313). Prototyped in early mythological films, the *darshanic* is mapped at the level of visual codes onto the power relation between the male deity and the female devotee. These narrative codes have persisted in reproducing gendered authority structures (such as son–mother, husband–wife, brother–sister, father–daughter, and so on) within subsequent genres of film narrative, including the melodrama. Significantly, Vasudevan argues, these gendered familial structures also subtend other kinds of imagined communal relations – particularly the spectator’s identification with a national collectivity, or the motherland. The spectator’s relation with the *film* as a *darshanic* or sacred object is another cornerstone of this theory (318–19).

Singh’s comments in his interview reinforce the view of the blog post I just quoted: when it comes to the film festival, ‘it’s either art or commerce.’ Inevitably, commerce takes first place, so that something essential about the religious nature of the encounter with film seems to have waned in the era of the film festival and its attendant age of digital reproduction. In fact, the attraction at many contemporary Indian film festivals is less the (often unknown, obscure, and unrecognizable) films and more the possibility of being in the god-like presence of that world-famous celebrity, the Bollywood film, quintessential vehicle of Benjamin’s notion of the ‘false aura.’ Without becoming nostalgic about some

lost original moment when film was ‘purely art,’ how can we begin to address this shift that the film festival produces in the status of film? What kinds of new spectatorial relations do emerging genres of independent Indian cinema (documentary, short films, and fiction features) engender? How does the programming of such films alongside Bollywood films, retrospectives of older genres of Indian cinema, and contemporary world cinema shape the kinds of textual encounters that take place at the site of film? How best can we theorize the imperative for a Bollywood celebrity presence at Indian film festivals that aspire to an ‘international’ scale and profile? How is the space of the film festival articulated in relation to the space of the nation and the ‘world’? If the spectator of the kinds of films Vasudevan discusses is hailed to take up a position within a symbolic nation-space that is predominantly Hindu, then what kinds of new symbolic transactions do film festivals enable in relation to the day-to-day functions of the multiplex?

The cultural logic of the late-capitalist film festival

When asked to comment on the infrastructural obstacles facing film festivals in India, Singh responds without hesitation, ‘there is no market for independent cinema in India.’ The choice of the term ‘market’ rather than ‘audience’ is striking – as is the tendency to think of films not as texts but rather as assets, and of culture as a brand rather than a shared experience. Krauss argues that this kind of shift in the status of art as a cultural commodity is typical of the current late-capitalist moment, which is characterized by the penetration of industrial modes of production and consumption into spheres previously considered to be discrete, private, or outside the realm of capital including leisure, sport, and art. We can certainly observe the kinds of trends she observes regarding the ‘late capitalist museum’ operating within the film festival in India – the shift from public patrimony to corporate entity; the functioning of cultural products as assets rather than as ambassadors; the cultivation of a relationship with the mainstream, however reluctant; the increasingly centralized role of the curator as entrepreneur. This kind of logic is typical of late-capitalist cultural reprogramming, Krauss argues, where the imagined alternative spaces are ‘shaped somehow by the structural features of the same nightmare’ (Krauss 435).

What is striking about Singh’s example of AIFF is not so much that the dominant notion of the film festival in India today is one that is more often than not identified as a space of commerce – this uneasy mix of aesthetic/political and commercial interests characterizes nearly all major international film festivals, including Berlin, Cannes, Venice, and so on. Rather, what is remarkable is that India seems to have bypassed an entire era in the history of the film festival, when the film festival was predominantly an avant-garde space for political struggle through art. Indeed as De Valck notes, the ‘energizing spirit’ of the 1920s and early 1930s European filmic avant-garde was responsible for galvanizing the earliest film festivals in Europe, whose models were later exported to the USA and beyond. For several decades, film festivals functioned as an agora, a radical alternative to Hollywood, offering

... non-commercial exhibition opportunities for all kinds of ‘artistic’ films from roughly 1919 onwards. The screenings were organized in order to nurture an intellectual vanguard and [to] more or less directly interfere in the film industry business by promoting alternative products and places of exhibition. (De Valck 25)

My point is not that such alternative or politically-minded festival spaces do not exist today in India – screening series such as Vikalp and Experimenta in Mumbai stand as testament to their existence, although they are relatively marginalized in comparison with the larger film festival events. Nor is it my intention to occupy the moral high ground and criticize the larger film festivals that envision and self-fashion themselves as markets for

independent filmmakers to sell their product. The importance of a healthy fiscal infrastructure for supporting alternative forms and genres of film production is beyond question, but at the moment such an infrastructure barely exists in India. With the exception of the small revenue made possible to some by Magic Lantern Foundation (at the moment the sole pioneer in independent film distribution in India), most independent filmmakers rely on foreign film festival bookings for exposure and generating cultural capital, and international screenings and sales for generating income. The question is whether the failure of film festivals as markets is a sign that steps need to be taken first toward cultivating an *audience* for alternative modes of film practice – or in other words, a cultural base of conversation, debate, participation, and critique.

New openings

Cyrus Dastoor, co-founder of Shamiana Short Film Club, which is currently virally inaugurating new club ‘chapters’ in various cities and townships across Maharashtra and Gujarat, was among the four guest speakers (a list that included me) invited to speak at AIFF’s market space, the *Independent Film Bazaar*. During his talk – which, like the rest of the bazaar, was attended mostly by young Indian makers of short films and some independent feature filmmakers – Dastoor suggested that the filmmakers use their short films as ‘calling cards to get funding for larger films.’ Not only did this simply not happen during AIFF – no short films received any kind of exhibition or distribution offers (not even on television, which is known to be notoriously exploitative of short-film makers) – but Dastoor’s comment was met with a substantial amount of disagreement from some of the attending filmmakers, who argued that more venues for the short film as a new form of art are needed, in addition to funding and support for more traditional feature films. With no distributors in sight to speak to, the filmmakers continued this discussion of the short film as an avenue of communication rather than a form of currency during my talk, which followed immediately after Dastoor’s. This then led to a very lively and engaged exchange on the film festival as a medium, during which several new and experimental models for improving the forum of the festival were proposed. Following this discussion, many of the filmmakers have remained in touch through an e-mail listserv, and now have a group on Facebook.

So perhaps another question we need to ask is: What if the failure of the market within the Indian film festival opens up space for new kinds of conversations about cinema and its futures? What are the possibilities, and the limits (channeling Singh’s pessimistic comment below that discussions at film festivals are tantamount to manifestos for stopping global warming – all talk and no plausible action) of the kinds of supports for social networking that extend the interactions that may begin within the fora of film festivals? If the film festival in Indian can function as a new public sphere, then how can we take seriously the new textual forms and encounters (rather than assets) that it structures, limits, and enables – in other words, how can we account for its productive failures?

Interview with Ajitpal Singh – Director of Programming, Ahmedabad International Film Festival 2009

Pooja Rangan: How did you become involved in the 2009 Ahmedabad International Film Festival? Was it the first time you curated a festival of this scale?

Ajitpal Singh: Yes, it was a first for me. My involvement in AIFF was through Milap [Milapsingh Jadeja – a partner in the sponsor company]. Milap knew

about my knowledge of world cinema and he knows that I am a regular at film festivals abroad. At the time, there was nobody who knew anything about film festivals. So he asked me to come on board.

We actually first tried to do a film festival in Ahmedabad in 2005. I went to Wide Angle [an entertainment complex and multiplex based in Ahmedabad] in 2005, and told them we wanted to mount a festival. I said, 'We'll invite films from all around the world... French films, Lebanese films, German films. Nobody has seen these kinds of films around here and I think there will be an audience for such films.' But Wide Angle wouldn't believe that somebody would actually come and watch a film from Iran, and Iraq. They asked, 'Why would people want to come and watch this kind of film?' So that was just the wrong time to approach them. And then things changed so much in four years

PR: What changed and how?

AS: Things changed mainly because of news channels – they started running news stories about Osian's Cinefan Film Festival, the Goa Film Festival, Berlin Film Festival. There are so many news channels in India now. They'll report anything exciting.

PR: So you think things changed because of the news media?

AS: Yes – there was so much coverage of film festivals in the media that people were suddenly aware on a different level about the phenomenon of film festivals.

PR: So what you're saying is that in 2005, although the artistic vision was there, the corporate institutions you approached to finance the film festival were not ready to invest in such a venture?

AS: I think even the audience may not have been ready at that time. Nobody really knew about film festivals in Ahmedabad. Nobody had any idea that there were other kinds of cinema apart from Bollywood and Hollywood... There are now two dedicated TV channels for foreign cinema in India [that came up in the intervening years]: NDTV Lumiere and UTV World Movies. So all this started and suddenly people were made aware that there are other kinds of cinema. Because of that, those people who could finance film festivals were suddenly ready to support something like that. When we pitched it again to Wide Angle a few years later, they accepted it. And that's how it happened.

PR: You said you thought the audience wasn't there in 2005. But haven't Osian's Cinefan and MIFF been taking place for over a decade now? Didn't the scene change with the emergence of Vikalp Documentary series and Cyrus Dastoor's Shamiana film club, which began as short film screenings at Café Mocha outlets around Mumbai? What's the difference between those venues and what you were trying to do?

- AS: Cities such as Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta have had film festival cultures and film societies for over 50 years, since Independence times. Because they are metros, bigger cities, and people there are aware of different kinds of cinema. Bombay happened to be the city of film. And Delhi has pretty much displaced Calcutta as the cultural capital of India. But in Ahmedabad, festival-style events are only ever held in NID [the National Institute of Design], and sometime the Alliance Francaise – but were really only attended by students from NID and IIM [Indian Institute of Management].
- PR: So film festival culture is mostly a student culture in such smaller cities?
- AS: Yes. And never a mainstream culture. So that was the reason Ahmedabad was not ready in 2005. And this is true of almost all second-tier Indian cities. Now smaller cities like Indore, Bhopal, and even Surat are doing film festivals.
- PR: Do you think this [reluctance on the part of audiences and financiers] is only about the international profile of the kinds of movies you show? Because on the one hand, there are the international films – the world cinema – that you’re bringing. But wasn’t the other main point of the AIFF to be a forum for independent filmmakers *in* India?
- AS: That’s true – all the film festivals are trying to support independent Indian cinema. Actually that’s the only way for a film festival to try to create an identity. Otherwise if they also show Bollywood films, there is no difference between Bollywood and the film festival. So film festivals don’t even have an option but to support independent cinema. Because if you don’t [support it], then how do you sell it [the festival]? [laughs]. Independent films and international films are only areas where film festivals can enter the market. That’s the only way film festivals can pitch the product as ‘different’ to financiers. We say to them, ‘People will come and watch these films and the media will talk about it, and your brand will get visibility in the media.’
- PR: What did you have to do in order to get the news media to pay attention to the AIFF? Did you have to get celebrities involved?
- AS: I think media in India is already interested in film festivals. India is going through a transformation in the cities. Globalization has come so far and the media are by and large the most aware people in society. They know what we lack – infrastructure, good education, and cultural activities. So whenever something like a film festival comes, the media is the first organization to support it. They want to catch on to and promote anything that they see as a sign of ‘changing India.’ So it’s not only about film festivals. If there’s a new flyover, there’s news about it in the papers and on TV. If a Metro system is built, they talk about that. Now in Ahmedabad, they have built a Rapid Transit System bus – it’s a mass transport system; there’s a special lane on the road only for these buses. It started functioning this month. This is something new that will [hopefully] improve the infrastructure and this is a sign of so-called ‘Rising India.’ You know? The media is hungry for this kind of news.

- PR: There's also the issue of cultural nationalism when it comes to the news media.
- AS: There's definitely a pervasive feeling of nationalism at the moment – it's a wave of nationalism.
- PR: But it's a weird nationalism, because it's a nationalism that wants to recreate India in the image of other 'global' cities, countries.
- AS: Everybody wants to make India look like Europe.
- PR: Or Shanghai.
- AS: So film festivals are also part and parcel of this whole scheme. Of making India look like a truly international country.
- PR: What role does independent Indian cinema play in this project of building an 'international' or 'global' image for India?
- AS: It's the awareness. When I speak with a German, I find he has traveled to almost every country in the world. He also knows about Japanese cinema, Korean cinema, Iranian cinema . . .
- PR: So the logic of placing contemporary independent Indian films alongside contemporary world cinema would be to foster a sense that India is at par with these other 'global cultures' of filmmaking?
- AS: Yes, that's the intention behind showing international films. But with independent Indian films, it's more about supporting the underdog. It's about saying, 'There's Bollywood, and that's fine. But there's also this independent film scene that's devoted to covering social issues, looking at life in detail, and bringing stories which are not from the metros, but say stories of poor people, the story of a Marathi person, a story from Kerala, a story from the slums . . . this sort of thing.'
- PR: Would you say the impulse toward this kind of independent scene is also about a similar desire for eclecticism as that which motivates the desire for the 'international'? The desire for the different, the marginal, for what's outside the norm?
- AS: Yes. But that [impulse] is slightly different from festival to festival. For instance in the MIFF, there's an aura of activism. They select mostly documentaries and social subject films. But when it comes to Osian's or even AIFF, the focus is more on storytelling from the fringes of society. Not necessarily activist/social oriented stories, but nevertheless filling a gap that Bollywood isn't interested in. Honestly, I don't think there is much exciting cinema coming out of India . . . and I think film festivals can make Indian cinema more exciting.
- PR: Who are the key players when it comes to festivals?

AS: Kerala film festival is really big, there's one in Chennai, there are 2–3 established festivals in Calcutta. There are many in Delhi – Osian's, Vatavaran Environment and Wildlife Film festival. There are many famous ones in Bombay too.

PR: Do you distinguish between film festivals and film series like Vikalp?

AS: There's a big difference. Film series are mostly based in activism, I feel, most of the time. Vikalp for instance is more of an effort to change society, and show documentary films that are very critical of various social issues. Shamiana is focused only on short films. And then the other big difference is that the audiences for film series are small and contained. And it happens almost every month. In contrast, film festivals happen once a year, they're competitive, and bring films that don't necessarily focus on social issues, but other aspects of life too. Film festivals also bring filmmakers and the audience together. Film societies do that too, at some level, but film festivals play the role of trying to make a transactional link between independent cinema and the market, the distributors. So film festivals are trying to become a sort of market for independent cinema, which film societies and series cannot be. Osian's, IFFI are now trying to follow the model of Cannes or Sundance by integrating a film market into their structure.

PR: Was AIFF trying to follow this model too, by setting up an Independent Film Bazaar?

AS: Yes, but we were very unsuccessful in our first year! [laughs].

PR: Why do you say so?

AS: It didn't work – it was bound not to work. Because you need to have worked out so many logistics, and to have *networked* so much before you even think of mounting a film market. So you can't just think you want to do a film market and make it happen, just like that. It takes years of work. Osian's has been doing it for years and it's still not successful. IFFI's film market too, even after 14 years of experience, is still not a great success. Even that is just a beginning – it will take another 5–10 years before such film markets can become successful in India.

PR: Why do you think it's not catching on?

AS: Because there is no market for independent cinema in India. The distributors are still the same folks who have been in the film industry for the past 40–50 years and their mindset is very different. They think that in order to sell, films need to have songs, good music, stars, dancing, and all that. It's not easy to change that mindset.

PR: Do you think that the film festival has a potential to play a role in changing that? What needs to happen? Or let me rephrase that – in order to create a market for selling independent cinema, don't we need a culture of

independent filmmaking and viewing first? Does the film festival play a role in that process?

AS: It should go both ways, but unfortunately at the moment it's a one-way street. We have more and more film festivals, but less good cinema. There are so many film festivals in India now, but not so much good cinema.

PR: What do you mean by good cinema?

AS: I've been watching a lot of films from Bengal, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu recently. And it's always the same story – if the script is good, then the production values are really bad. If the production quality and the script are both good, the acting is really bad. So there is always something missing in our cinema. On top of that, other world cinemas, international film cultures, have the name of a master attached to them. For instance, for Chinese cinema or Hong Kong cinema, you have Wong Kar-Wai. For Japanese cinema you have a Takeshi Kitano or a Takashi Miike. So also for Korean cinema's Park Chan-Wook. And Iran's Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Abbas Kiarostami, so many masters. Now tell me, when I say Indian cinema, do any masters come to mind?

PR: Yes, but they're all in the past! Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, even Guru Dutt – there are several from an earlier era.

AS: Nobody recent! It's really ironic – I don't know why it's happening, but it's just a fact. So this is a big problem with Indian cinema at the moment.

PR: Is that what's making it difficult to brand independent Indian cinema – that there are no 'masters'?

AS: Yes, certainly, in my opinion.

PR: One thing I noticed which really made the film festival suffer in Ahmedabad – and this is the case not just with AIFF but also Osian's and IFFI – is that there's a Bollywood celebrity presence both on the jury and among the compères who conduct the proceedings. This makes the atmosphere *filmi* in a way that seems contrary to the aims of the film festival, and blocks dialog from happening. Can you comment on this phenomenon?

AS: I am conflicted on this point, really. I'm not able to form a point of view on whether or not the celebrity presence is a good thing. If you look at the Cannes Film Festival, the media in India and the international media in general cover it because of the red carpet. Celebrities from all around the world come to Cannes. And still Cannes manages to screen the most experimental cinema. So they are able to create a buzz *and* maintain an independent film culture.

PR: But then in Cannes, all of the non-mainstream film gets relegated to the sidebars. Isn't it widely regarded that Cannes is focused more on the mainstream market while smaller scale, lower-tier – but still quite big –

festivals like Telluride, or the Vancouver Film Festival, or the Buenos Aires International Film Festival are really more adventurous/experimental in their programming?

AS: But as one of the biggest film festivals in the world, Cannes is doing quite a decent job. Even if it doesn't fully support new independent cinema, at least it promotes the work of established off-beat directors. Berlinale recently invited Shah Rukh Khan to attend the festival, and I think that his presence there was really important in terms of generating the international audience's interest in Indian cinema. Similarly, people in India have their guard up about 'boring' world cinema or art cinema. They also assume independent cinema will be 'boring.' Celebrities are helpful in luring people to a film festival, in lowering their defenses. At the same time, there is definitely the risk that the event will become about them, and the focus will shift to the celebrities. So as I said before, I am on the fence on the issue of celebrities.

PR: What do you think is the role of the programmer/curator in a film festival?

AS: It should be just curating the films and not handling all the other details. [laughs]. But that's not how it worked out with AIFF! I don't even consider myself a good curator because I don't have the experience and skill required to be a festival curator. I should not have been asked to do this job – but unfortunately there was simply no one qualified for it in Ahmedabad at the time. In general, my feeling is that we don't have good curators in India. Those who do it tend to be really biased about one kind of cinema. So there is no sense of balance. That's the first thing that you require for a film festival to work – a good balance of films: heavy films, light films, comedies, action, social issue. There should be a mix of interesting themes and styles too. Curating films is very similar to organizing an art exhibition. The curator needs to be really aware of the history of cinema, the theory of cinema, and what's happening in the contemporary world of cinema. S/he needs to be able to articulate – or at least sense – what makes a particular film or set of films special. I have no clue about all this!

PR: Perhaps it's naïve to think that a festival curator should only be cognizant of films on the aesthetic and thematic level. A curator also needs to be an entrepreneur nowadays – Neville Tulli [director of Osian's Cinefan] is an excellent illustration of this. Part of the job is having to network with buyers, sellers, sales agents. Someone once told me it's not about which film you want for the festival, but which film you're *allowed* to get, since sales agents obviously want their films to premier at the most high-profile, top-tier festivals.

AS: Yes, it's very true that the less glamorous aspect of the curator's job is to build a network, build good relations among film festivals, other curators, filmmakers, distributors, and the audience. The other thing is that nobody understands what this job entails, especially within the organizational team – I don't think people appreciate what a delicate and tough job it is to curate films. The thing with curating is that everybody believes they can do it. Their

mindset is like this: ‘We have 20 films, we’ll divide them up into groups according to the available time, and screen them! It’s that simple!’ But of course good film festivals don’t work like that. I hope that with emerging film festivals, good curators will also be nurtured in India.

- PR: One other difference between the film festival v. film series issue you mentioned before is that film series are based around creating viewing communities – communities that care about and have a stake in what films do and how they work in society, and film festivals by and large back away from that task. The focus of film festivals tends to be less on the *relation* between the audience and the film and more on films themselves. So the film becomes a god you go worship in a dark place, cut off from the rest of the world!
- AS: The other difference between the two is that film series screen very interesting films and a lot of interaction happens. But the film festival – and this isn’t yet happening in India at the scale at which it’s happening elsewhere – is the only space where the *development* of cinema can be discussed among filmmakers, critics, and the audience. The flipside of this is that sometimes films are revered only for their form, not their content.
- PR: What I’m hearing you say is that film festivals are a unique medium in that a large and varied group of actors (filmmakers, critics, the media, spectators, distributors, sales agents) assemble together. But do they really talk to each other, much less discuss the developmental issues in cinema?
- AS: In AIFF it didn’t happen, but in IFFI it happens to some extent, and in Osian’s it happens nicely sometimes. They have special discussion forums, panels, roundtables and seminars with experts themed around various topics. And I’m sure you’ve been to international film festivals where it happens a lot.
- PR: What’s interesting to me is how film festivals shape, limit, and structure the kinds of interactions, conversations, and transactions that can take place. There seems to be a sense that film festivals are spaces totally ‘open’ for all kinds of encounters, but even those spaces which imagine themselves as being an agora of sorts are ‘closed’ in ways that would be very interesting to discuss. I’m thinking for instance of the Flaherty Film Seminar that’s held in New York every year, and features the work of emerging filmmakers alongside more canonical works. The program is not publicized beforehand, so there is the conceit of ‘non-preconception,’ or the idea that the audience should experience the film in a state of total innocence. Each screening is followed by an hour-long discussion. So the Flaherty Seminar is not a traditional ‘film festival,’ but since it is attended by several well-regarded programmers and distributors – albeit in their ‘private’ personas and not in their official capacity – it is definitely a forum through which relatively unknown work gains in both cultural and economic capital. And even in this setting – of a week-long immersive ‘camp’ for adults, which allows for deep-interaction, and immersing yourself in not only the films but in the group of people – the structuring of the event and of the long-form audience discussions is such that conversations/interactions settle into predictable and problematic patterns.

- AS: My experience is that film festivals are not a platform where you start a discussion and reach its conclusion. You can almost compare film festival discussions to the discussions of global warming at the international level – be it in the news media or in more casual or critical settings. A lot of talk, a lot of projections, blueprints, what to do in the next 30 years – but in the end, nothing happens. [laughs].
- PR: Can you talk a little bit about your experience at any recent festivals abroad that you have attended, and say something about what ‘worked’ and why?
- AS: I recently attended the Munich Film Festival – the way Munich is structured, you take part in some discussions, and nothing happens in those discussions themselves, but you always end up meeting good people who have the same sort of point of view, or a similar interest in cinema, and sometimes you stay in touch with them. I stayed in touch with a few people from Munich, and we met again in Cologne and Berlin to talk about cinema – and in the future we might be making a film together. So in that way, such a film festival connects like-minded people and helps to foster the making of a certain kind of cinema – a synergy – which might never have come into the world without this platform.
- PR: So the film festival can be a networking space, a space where future conversations and projects get started.
- AS: Yes.
- PR: What needs to be put in place in order for that to happen in India? Or maybe: What about that model would you change? Does the fact that we’re just getting started in India make it a good setting for experiments?
- AS: I’ll answer the first question! [laughs]. The second one is harder. I think in order for it to happen in India Let me put it this way: the biggest problem in India at the moment – with any form of art – is that in India if you go with your work to someone, be it photography, or painting, or film, or poetry, or literature, or art, or whatever . . . your work doesn’t matter so much. What always matters is *who sent you*. Or which family you belong to, or whom do you know. This needs to change first.
- PR: Would you say that this kind of nepotistic, or aristocratic, or ‘old boys network’ structure of society, rather than a meritocracy, is bad for art and politics?
- AS: Yes. What I see around me all the time is that there are so many good artists who don’t have good networks – they don’t come from wealthy families or intellectual families. And they don’t know anyone. And nobody asks them to show their work. So what happens when they reach near 30 is that they realize that they’ve been focusing on improving their skill or their art or their craft, on immersing themselves in the process of creating something beautiful. But those other people who invested 10 years in networking are the ones who get much further ahead of them. When they look at their work and compare it to those people who invested time in networking instead of

art, they realize they are doing better work, but nobody knows about them. And this realization breaks the spirit of most independent filmmakers and independent artists.

PR: Do you feel the situation of film festivals elsewhere, say Munich, is something to aspire to in this regard?

AS: I don't think things are perfect in Europe or in the US – I think there too everything hinges on networking and whom you know. But at least because of grants and institutional support, funding, and sponsorship, if you are doing good work – even if you are 'no one' – you can get a small amount of recognition. You don't have to struggle for 20 years. In India, this period of struggle [for artists who don't start out rich] is just too long. There are simply no grants. That needs to change if we want to change something about Indian cinema. I don't know how, but we have so many internationally acclaimed filmmakers now: Shekhar Kapur, Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta. What are they doing for Indian cinema?

PR: Do you think these diasporic filmmakers are interested in doing anything explicitly 'for' non-Bollywood Indian cinema beyond 'branding' it?

AS: If I were in their position I would try to do more – I would try to create some sort of support system for people who don't start out having one, who aren't already connected. Like Berlinale's 'Talent Campus' [a six-day symposium retreat for emerging filmmakers including discussions, workshops, and lectures with industry professionals]. It can take different forms – I can't tell you what can be done [laughs]. But there are already so many models in the world that you can take. You can make a lottery fund. You can take 5% of your film's profit and put it into a lottery fund, and finance the film of a first-time director who has made a nice short film.

PR: Given that you are a filmmaker yourself, do you think festival directors and programmers have a responsibility too, in terms of fostering particular kinds of relationships between filmmakers and the audience, and funders/distributors?

AS: Yes. Film festivals need to provide a forum for conversation about the films – so I think Q&A or discussions after films are important. But first, they need to take on the role of educating people about the history of cinema. So that audiences can actually appreciate something that is new and experimental, where the director has tried to break rules and norms to make something wonderful. But that can happen only after years of watching films, no? Not just after one night of watching films. And in India you can't be overly optimistic about people suddenly being able to appreciate what is good and bad cinema. You also need to keep this in mind – that this is something new that is happening in cinema. It's going to take time. You can't be so aggressive, and ask, 'Why are you not able to tell that this is good cinema? Why are you not asking questions?' They're not used to it. Films in India are something that people go to watch either with their

families – where you can eat popcorn and laugh – or that they go to watch on television or in a theater because they're tired with the day's work, and they want to escape somewhere. These are the only two reasons to watch film in India, so you can't expect these people to suddenly go and start discussing cinema. It's not going to happen easily – it will take years.

PR: So what you're saying is that film festivals have the capacity to produce a change in people's relationship to cinema in India – but that this cannot happen in a vacuum, a whole infrastructure is needed to make this happen.

AS: Absolutely, absolutely. It needs to happen at the level of schools. In Europe and US, film studies is a part of the curriculum, and film societies are active in schools and colleges, where films are shown, discussed, and experts are called in to talk with students. We don't have all that.

PR: To end, what did people tell you about the AIFF when you returned after it ended? [Singh had to leave AIFF on its very first day to attend the Munich Film Festival]

AS: Everybody is annoyed, everybody. No one who worked for the film festival is happy. I didn't meet a single person who said they were really happy after working with the film festival.

PR: Why do you think this was so?

AS: Because everything was so chaotic, so disorganized, so manipulative, that people got tired. But then the nice thing is that the best thing Dorothy [Dorothy Wenner – Berlinale curator who attended AIFF as a Jury member] said when I met her in Paris: she said that only after doing the first version of a film festival does one learn how to do a film festival. [laughs]. So the next time it will be much better. Because there are just so many parameters that you just aren't aware of before doing it. It really looks easy to do it on paper. It looks even easier after downloading the BFI guidebook on 'How to set up a Film Festival.' We all read it and thought, 'We can do it!' Now we *actually* know how to do it.

PR: What did you feel about the Jury selections for winners?

AS: I didn't like any of them [laughs].

PR: After the jury announcements were made, some of us drove back to the hotel with Kajal Ojha, one of the jurors. She was talking about the winner of the short film category, '88 Keys to Happiness,' and asked us repeatedly if we had seen this 'great film.' We told her we had found the film very melodramatic, and that it was a bit like a cross between a Bollywood film and a Hallmark commercial. Her response was: 'But it is an *Indian* film! That's why it won.' It was interesting – and a bit depressing – to hear that (a) independent films from India are judged based on whether they convey

an essence of Indianness and that (b) Indianness = melodrama + sentimentality + an aesthetic of commerciality.

AS: [laughs] We don't have good curators or adequate jury members.

PR: Will do you the festival again next year?

AS: I would participate again if I was asked to. Everybody put a lot of work into it, and at the end, even though there is a lot of bitterness all around, some things are bigger than personal ambition or hurt. So putting those feelings aside, I'd do it again . . . The first thing we'd change is to eliminate the market – the Independent Film Bazaar. And second, we'll do it at a smaller scale, and focus on the films.

Note

1. <http://parotechnics.blogspot.com>.

Notes on contributor

Pooja Rangan is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. She has a background in documentary filmmaking, which she now combines with her interest in biopolitics, ethnography, and technicity. Her doctoral dissertation, titled 'Automatic Ethnography: Otherness, Indexicality, and "New" Visual Media,' investigates the emergence and persistence of autoethnography, as a visual technology for governing beleaguered social subjects (the subaltern, the indigenous native, the child, the animal, the refugee), and as an idiom that illustrates the limits of contemporary speculative models of politics. Rangan's work has been published in the *SARAI Reader* and is forthcoming in *Camera Obscura* and the *Oxford Guide to Postcolonial Studies*.

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