9th IAWRT ASIAN WOMEN’S FILM FESTIVAL

5-8 March 2013
New Delhi
The India chapter of IAWRT (International Association of Women in Radio & Television) organized the 9th edition of the IAWRT Asian Women’s Film Festival in New Delhi from March 5-8, 2013 in partnership with the India International Centre, Korean Cultural Centre, Goethe Institut (Delhi & Tehran), Public Service Broadcasting Trust and Sri Aurobindo Centre for Arts & Communication (SACAC).

Launched in 2005, it is a unique, one of its kind festival in the world that showcases works of Asian women directors in a range of genres—animation, documentary, experimental, short fiction and fiction feature. It is an annual celebration of International Women’s Day, and seeks to create an open and dynamic space for sharing and discussing films from a gender perspective.

In addition to the general program, the 2013 edition of the festival had a focus on films from Iran and South Korea, and a package of outstanding student films from India. From a record 230 entries, 44 films were selected. We had 3 World premiers, 19 South Asian premiers, and 11 Delhi premiers. The films dealt with diverse subjects such as gender, sexuality, parenthood, nationality, migration, urbanization and art. The screenings were held across three venues: India International Centre, Korean Cultural Centre and SACAC.

Leading up to the main festival, we had a series of curtain raisers in January and February in nine colleges and media/film schools in Delhi to encourage student participation. These were interactive sessions with the students in which we showed short films and excerpts from the festival films followed by discussions in which the students got a chance to articulate their thoughts. It was fascinating to see how they were relating the films to their own lives and to their understanding of the world around them. The institutions that participated were: Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Lady Shri Ram College (LSR), MCRC Jamia Millia Islamia, Miranda House, Ramjas, School of Planning and Architecture, SACAC, and Sri Venketeswara.

In recent years, one of the most important aspects of the festival has been the presence of filmmakers from all over the world. This year 29 filmmakers attended the festival and participated in post screening discussions with the audience. The film lovers of Delhi supported our effort by attending in good numbers. We were delighted to have with us a group of 12 students from SNDT Pune and 60 students from the Haryana State Institute of Film and TV, Rohtak who especially came to Delhi to be part of the festival.
Inauguration
5 March

The festival opened to a packed house on the evening of March 5 at the India International Centre. We began with the felicitation of Jai Chandiram, the Founder of IAWRT India who was also the Managing Trustee and Festival Director from 2005 to 2012. Aaradhana Kapur Kohli spoke with warmth and affection about the inspirational role Jai has played in the lives of so many women in media.

This was followed by the Festival Director’s address. Anupama Srinivasan spoke about what the 2013 edition of the festival has in store and invited the audience to embark on the exciting journey of viewing and discussing films over the coming few days.

The three special guests at the inauguration were Mr. Kim Kum-Pyoung, Director/Counselor, Korean Cultural Centre India; Mr. Ali Fouladi, Cultural Counsellor of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Ms Farah Batool, Programme Coordinator, Goethe Institut Delhi. Mr Kim Kum-Pyoung spoke about 2013 being the 40th anniversary of India-Korea diplomatic ties, and expressed his happiness at South Korea being one of the countries in focus at the IAWRT festival. Mr Fouladi traced the cinematic links between India and Iran in the early years, and spoke about the emergence of the new Iranian cinema. Farah Batool congratulated the organisers, appreciating their energy and passion for films.

The festival team, and all the participating filmmakers were then invited on stage for a group photograph. The audience greeted this gesture with a standing ovation.
The opening film was the much feted Iranian film *Facing Mirrors*, Negar Azarbajani’s debut feature. The film’s co writer, executive producer and production designer, Fereshteh Taerpour introduced the film. For the next hour and a half the 300 odd members of the audience sat in rapt attention as the drama unfolded on screen of an unlikely friendship between Eddie, a transgender and Rana, a deeply religious woman. The brilliant performances by the lead actors, Shayesteh Irani and Ghazal Shakeri, and the sensitive treatment of human relationships was much appreciated by everyone.

The film was followed by an intense discussion with the audience, with questions varying from how the film was received in Iran, how accepted alternate sexualities are in Iranian society, and how so many great films are made in Iran. Fereshteh said that for a ‘non-commercial’ film, it had done remarkably well in her home country. The main reason was that it chose to look at Eddie through the eyes of Rana, a warm hearted character who people could relate to easily. Just as Rana’s response to Eddie changes as they get to know each other, people who might have rejected a character like Eddie, start seeing Eddie as a human being and not as a freak. Fereshteh also spoke about the long scripting process which she and Negar undertook to get it just right.

Fereshteh said that while in Iran sex reassignment surgeries have been legal since the early 1980s, social acceptance is still not there. The discussion went on to look at the situation in India, some people pointing out that the LGBTQ movement has made remarkable headway, while others speaking about the continuing brutalisation of those that do not fall into the slots provided by heteronormativity.

About the pressures of making films in a climate of censorship, she said that filmmakers have found innovative and clever ways to transcend the restrictions. So they do manage to make films they want to and take up issues that are controversial. Facing Mirrors is a great example of that.
Exploring issues around gender and sexuality continued on day 2 with the quirky coming out film from Japan Thus a Noise Speaks by Kaori Oda. It is a film that speaks of the self and the need for acceptance, made with a touch of wry humour. When the filmmaker, Kacchi visits home for the summer from abroad, she comes out to her family as a lesbian. Her mother and father react very negatively and cannot accept it. Kacchi decides to deal with the situation by making a film about the ‘coming out’. She asks her family to be the actors and tells them that the film is about a person who comes out to her family. The film highlighted the subtle relationships within the family. It combines sounds and images, displacing them to move back and forth in time, not to create drama, but a sense of disorientation. In many ways, the 2013 edition of the festival was a celebration of the work of young filmmakers—this complex and layered film was the 23 year old filmmaker’s debut as director.

Following this autobiographical docu fiction was a set of three short films from the Documentary and Experimental Film Centre (DEFC), Iran. Wakefulness by Noushin Meraji starts out as a film of a man with his young son on a jungle road, looking for his lost wife. The dialogues hint at marital discord, the boy blaming the man for the state of affairs. With minimal dialogue and in a short span of 12 minutes, the film manages to give us a sense of their lives together, and the twist at the end was impactful.

Next was Moones, a short fiction film by Afsaneh Mohtashami. It is a story about a young couple who seem disconnected from each other. The woman really wants to have a child but is not able to conceive and needs money for medical treatment. Towards the end, in a wonderfully evocative shot, her hand enters the frame to place a bunch of notes (her savings) next to her husband so that he can use it to repay a debtor who has been harassing him. The film follows the everyday rhythm of two lives, capturing the little details and creating a gently evocative piece.

The session ended with an unusual animation film called The Rock by Sara Namjoo. Sara was to attend the festival but unfortunately could not get her visa on time. The film was about a solitary man in a stark landscape praying to a huge rock. A mammoth machine enters the scene and changes everything. The film played with scale brilliantly—The rock that seemed huge in comparison to the man, looks like an anthill in front of the machine.
The machine destroys the rock and the man destroys the machine. The film ends with the man praying to the deformed machine. This minimalist piece was all the stronger for the multiple interpretations it opened out for the audience.

The second session for the day had two very interesting films, both looking at sickness—a student film from Hong Kong and an hour long documentary from Iran. *Sick by Chu Hoi Ying* was about a girl who sees her mother folding plastic bags in the middle of the night. Worried about this strange behaviour, she calls her brother, but he is not interested. In the discussion that followed the screening, the filmmaker said that the film was adapted from a short story. She spoke about the use of dark tones in the imagery to accentuate the brooding mood. A member of the audience expressed appreciation for the way in which the film succeeded in sensitively bringing forth the feeling of being sick, even if it was something as mundane as a flu. There were also comments on how well the sound of the rustling of plastic bags worked to create a strangely disturbing atmosphere.

We were transported to a different culture and milieu with Shirin Barghnavard’s personal documentary *21 Days and Me*. The film takes us through the 21 days leading up to a surgery that the filmmaker has to undergo to remove fibroids from her uterus. This was also around the period in her life when she feels a deep longing to have a child. Through the film she shares her dilemma of whether she should be a mother or not, discussing the issue with her friends as well as her husband who is quite clear that he does not want a child. Based in Tehran we see a side of Iran that is not often seen—a modern society in which women and men speak openly about sex, abortion and choices.

This film was followed by an intense discussion with the filmmaker who spoke about her own inner turmoil and confusion about whether to have a child or not. She shared that when she became 35, she had this urge to be a mother. Till then she had not given it much thought, and she and her husband had not discussed it. Then she started speaking to other women in her circle to know and understand their thoughts on motherhood. Meanwhile, she found out that she had fibroids in her uterus that were growing rapidly. The irony in her situation did not escape her or the viewers. When asked about her choice of including herself in the film, she explained that it had been her producer’s idea and she had decided to take on the challenge and experiment with it. This is one of the few documentaries in Iran in which the filmmaker is also the protagonist.
The afternoon session had in store for us two features, a fiction film from India and a documentary from South Korea.

Set in the bustling city of Kolkata, *Hoi Choi* by Debarati Gupta took us into the lives of young people who get together to form a small independent theatre group. In her introduction to the film, Debarati was anxious to prepare the audience for a film that was not as ‘artsy as the others in the festival’ saying there were five songs in it. The film discusses the dilemma faced by actors—the love for theatre on one side and the lure of films on the other. The dynamics between the characters change, relationships form and fizzle out. All those familiar with Bengali theatre and films would recognize some known Bengali faces in the film.

Including feature fiction has been a fairly new aspect of the IAWRT festival, and *Hoi Choi* is the first Indian feature to be shown at the festival in the nine years of its existence. It is an area that is still very male dominated and we feel it is important to encourage emerging women feature filmmakers.

In the q&a session Debarati shared that it was her debut feature and was shot in 20 days. When asked about the predominant use of the long shot, she said that in general she preferred long shots to close ups, and especially in this film it felt even more appropriate considering that the film is about theatre. This also tied in with her approach in scripting—the film is not hero or heroine driven. In a departure from the norm, the film treats each of the four main characters with equal importance. Debarati said that the decision to make a film on a theatre group was itself unusual in the context of contemporary Bengali cinema. She added shyly that this was probably the first film with theatre as the setting since Ritwik Ghatak’s 1961 masterpiece *Komal Gandhar*. The producer, Dilip Choudhury was also present and he told us that they will be releasing the film soon in theatres.

The next film was *American Alley* by Kim Dong-Ryung. This much acclaimed South Korean documentary is about the lives of migrant women who live and work as ‘entertainers’ in G1 clubs in American Alley, a small village next to the US second infantry in Dongducheon area. Thousands of desperate Korean women used to serve the US soldiers to survive during and after the Korean War. But nowadays, it is women from Russia and Philippines who work as ‘entertainers’. Some of them choose to marry the U.S soldiers, and some get abandoned, some go to the United States with their husbands, and some get deported. Old Korean women who still live in this area talk about the past, while young migrant women continue on a similar life path by marrying, divorcing, and standing alone.

The evening session began with a refreshing film from DEFC, Iran, *Green Grey* by Laleh Barzegar. This was an experimental piece imbued with love and longing for trees in the urban jungle of Tehran. Images, words, memories and music flowed into each other creating a strong film. Without being didactic or informational, it emphasized the importance of trees in our lives.

This was followed by an Iranian animation, *A Woman Sings under the Ice* by Maryam Kalizadeh. The melancholic music drew the audience into the poignant tale of a father and son
living a lonely life. The little boy hears a woman singing every day. He wants to know, Who is singing? The animation technique had a playful and child like feel, but it was a chilling story of suspicion, murder and loss that unfolded.

The day ended with a powerful and disturbing documentary Self Portrait with Three Women by Mengqi Zhang. The film was 23 year old Mengqi’s own search as she delved into her life and that of her mother and grandmother—three women who grew up in very different times. Integrating video, performance and projection to create a layered and compelling narrative, the film was striking for the way in which the filmmaker used her own body to manifest the agony in her mind. Through the film she confronted her own fears and confusions, and questioned her mother about the regimented way she was brought up. The experimentation with film form was further testimony to her fearlessness.

6 March
IIC Conference Room I

The large number of exciting entries we received this year meant that we needed more days and more venues. On 6 March we had simultaneous screenings at the auditorium and Conference Room I at IIC.

This year there was a special section on Indian student films. We received over 55 films from across the country. A sparkling array of 16 short fiction films and documentaries from institutions such as the Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute of India (Kolkata), National Institute of Design (Ahmedabad), Sri Aurobindo Centre for Arts & Communication (Delhi), Tata Institute of Social Service (Mumbai), MCRC Jamia Millia Islamia (Delhi), Whistling Woods (Mumbai) and Srishti (Bengaluru) was showcased at the festival.

The morning session at the conference room started with a warm and wonderful student film from NID, Voyro by Aashini Shah. The film shows us three individuals in different stages of what could be called middle age, and how they find a new sense of purpose and enthusiasm in life through hobbies they take up. A grandfather takes up swing dancing, a woman takes up learning computers, and another starts learning English so she can connect better with her children.
This was followed by a student film from Hong Kong, *Assimilation* by Cheung Wai Yin. The film is ostensibly about a boy Britman, who grows up in Hong Kong with a British style education, and is having troubles in getting into secondary school. The popularization of Mandarin and simplified Chinese is confusing him, as he is only proficient in English and Cantonese. To make matters worse, Britman’s father and stepmother are going to have a child, making him feel that his status is threatened. Through the story, the filmmaker seemed to be referring to the confusion of language and identity in present day Hong Kong.

The last film before lunch was a feature length documentary from South Korea, one of the two countries in focus at this year’s festival. *The Two Lines* by Ji-Min investigates the issue—Is marriage a choice in Korean society? Cheol and the filmmaker are a couple living together. One day they find Ji-Min is pregnant and get to confront another stage of life. The director questions the essence of marriage by telling her own story of having a baby as an unmarried woman.

The afternoon session on 6 March was dedicated to student films. Of the seven films, we were fortunate to have the directors of six of them and the camera person of the seventh. Filmmaker and writer, Samina Mishra who had curated the student films, moderated the discussion after each of the films.

The first section took us to a world of folk traditions, music and tales. Viveka Chauhan’s *Rup Rupantar* opened out the world of the Bahurupiyas. On the busy streets of New Delhi, a bahurupiya leaps about, performing as Hanuman. In a village, people make offerings to a bahurupiya performing as Krishna. As the film travels in search of Bahurupiyas in rural Bengal and Delhi, it presents the challenges they face in an increasingly technology-driven world. The film provoked a discussion on the place of folk traditions today and what that means for folk artists who are practising an inherited art.

The next film was a short fiction from NID, *My Grandfather’s Yakshi* by Anoodha Kunnath. This well crafted film marries the folk tale of a yakshi attempting to entrap a man to a contemporary setting where a young man, who has just lost his grandfather, remembers the story told by his grandfather. Playing with reality, memory and imagination, the film succeeded in absorbing the viewers completely. It drew comments from the audience members on how it takes the genre of the ghost story and gives it a dramatic treatment without becoming overly theatrical. Particular note was taken of the fact that despite being made in English, the film succeeds in creating a Malyalee milieu that rings true.
This was followed by another short fiction *Sawali*. Made by *Arya Rothe*, the film tells us the story of a young woman who can’t eat, smell or digest food. Her hunger creates a shadow that eats. The film’s experimental style of storytelling, especially its use of high contrast and long shadows, succeeds in creating a sense of unease, loneliness and alienation. In the discussion that followed, the filmmaker talked about the craft, particularly the use of black and white and special effects for the film.

*Dhadi: The Ballads of Punjab* by *Nupur Nijhawan* is a gentle documentary on Dhadi Kala, a musical tradition that has survived through centuries, but faces a loss of patronage in the modern socio-economic structure. Traveling through rural and urban Punjab, the film introduces us to musicians, listeners and preservationists. The highlight of the film is certainly the inclusion of a passionate government servant in a dusty government office, struggling to archive these ballads. By focussing on people who work at keeping these traditions alive, the film generated a discussion on heritage, culture and the need for preservation. Some members of the audience felt that for a film based on music, the audio recording should have been much better. The cameraperson, *Anushree Mathuria* represented the film.

The post tea section had three vibrant films starting with *Because* by *Neetole Mitra*. In this documentary, the filmmaker looks at three man-woman relationships including her own. The candid, home-movie style camera moves in the filmmaker’s world, among her friends and family, and conversations about relationships turn the everyday into a reflective space. There was an animated exchange between the filmmaker and viewers, centering on the negotiation in relationships. Many viewers were admiring of the director’s decision to turn the camera on to her self.

Next was *Sandhya Ramachandran’s* documentary *The Creeper, the Alien and Other Stories*, a portrait of a man who speaks obsessively about his life as a collector of objects. A maverick character, well-known in the artistic circles in Ahmedabad, Ashish Lakhia spent his life collecting anything and everything, from film posters to handcuffs to pottery. Stylistically, the film is notable for allowing Lakhia’s character to emerge gradually. Instead of turning him into an ethnographic subject, it allows his compulsive collection to open up ideas of culture, belonging, loneliness and loss. Much of the discussion after the
film centred around Lakhia’s persona and the filmmaker shared how Lakhia’s death had left a question mark on the fate of his collection.

The session ended with an exuberant documentary *Breakin’ Mumbai* by Aakriti Kholi, Gin Khan Siam, Sandeep Kumar Singh, Shweta Ghosh & Sumit Singh. The film explores the subaltern youth culture of beatbox dancing in Mumbai and follows a group of boys in their quest for practice space as well as success in competitions. Using the trope of beatbox dancing, the film manages to paint a complex picture of opportunity and aspiration among young people. The audience enjoyed the film a lot and the filmmakers shared how the film evolved over several months. The discussion focussed on the desire for artistic expression in a constricting urban landscape and difficult economic context.

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**7 March**

**IIC Auditorium**

Day 3 started with a bang with a documentary from CMCS, TISS *Bharatmata ki Jai* by Amol Ranjan, Anurag Mazumdar, Arpita Chakraborty, Avadhoot Khanolkar & Shweta Radhakrishnan. The film looked at a 75 year old cinema located in Mumbai’s mill area, Lalbaug-Parel. Bharatmata Cinema, one of the few remaining single screen theatres that plays only Marathi films. Through the narratives of Kapil Bhopatkar, the owner, and Baban, one of the oldest employees of the theatre, the film explores the history and development of Bharatmata as a space for articulating the cultural identity of Mumbai’s working class and ponders on its existence and survival.

The discussions in the morning session were moderated by Radhika Khanna. She appreciated the historical and social backdrop the film managed to provide even as the focus remained sharply on the cinema hall itself. The interesting interview technique of having one of the filmmakers in the frame chatting informally with the projectionist drew praise. Shweta who was representing the film shared that they had filmed these conversations just for a lark, but during editing realized that these worked much better than the formal interviews.
This was followed by a short fiction film from NID, *Vanity Box* by Diksha Grover. Shot in a single small room, the film gives a glimpse of a few hours in a modest beauty parlour. As the clients indulge in beauty treatments, one reveals her true character and another coats herself with make up. The film succeeds in capturing emotions, portraying relationships and exposing the lies that characters try to hide behind. The filmmaker Diksha was present for a discussion and she said that she wanted to capture conversations, dialogues and the play of emotions in a beauty parlour that women visit regularly. The clever use of the show ‘Big Boss’ constantly playing the background and the sharp observations of human beings were particularly noteworthy in the film.

The next film was a national award winning documentary from SRFTI, *Boxing Ladies* by Anusha Nandakumar. As the name suggests, this film is about three women who are national level boxers. Zainab, Bushra and Sughr are youngsters from a working class background. The film is a story about this incredible family of women, of their strong will to survive in the society and make a mark. The audience kept wanting to cheer and clap for the characters. Inspiring, humorous and moving, the film highlighted social and cultural stigmas that these three sisters faced on a daily basis, and how they dealt with it. The best part of it was the lightness of touch that kept anything from being overstated.

What can one say in a film of four minutes duration? Apparently quite a bit. The shortest film in this year’s festival was *Colours* by Iranian filmmaker Naghmeh Dehghani, a film that impressed everyone with its precision. A child’s hand draws a picture, the picture changes as the home environment changes. On the soundtrack is the news on the radio telling us about the economic downturn and loss of jobs. In one continuous shot during which the camera does not move, the filmmaker captures the agitation of a child when she hears her parents fighting. What starts as a beautiful childlike sketch of a scenery soon ends with her scribbling helplessly.

The filmmaker, along with her husband Touraj Zahiri, was present for a discussion. Naghmeh spoke about her affinity for the short film and how she always tries to create a compressed, intense piece. She said that often we feel that children do not understand what is happening around them, and adults underestimate how their speech and behaviour affects the children around them. The viewers were taken aback by the build up and the impact of this seemingly simple film.

The session ended with the Iranian feature fiction *20 Fingers* by Mania Akbari. Many people know Akbari from her memorable performance in Abbas Kiarostami’s *Ten*. In *20 Fingers* we got an opportunity to see her in a double role, as director and lead actress. In seven long takes and with just two actors this brilliantly crafted film takes us through seven different man-woman relationships, set in varying stages in a marriage/relationship, and revealing the divergent views of women and men. Both the actors played the different characters to perfection, almost convincing the audience that they were not the same people.
The next three discussions were moderated by renowned feminist historian Dr. Uma Chakravarti. The session after lunch came to life with *My Sweet Baby*, a South Korean documentary by *Ryu Mi-Rye*. The film was an honest effort to understand motherhood—a process of discovering and taking care of the inner self. Ryu shot the film over ten years while bringing up her three children. She was a person who believed that she could never be a good mother, but the experience of being a mother helped her to understand her children and herself. The film raised very important issues around parenting even as it brought to the fore the energy, joy and confusions of childhood. Everyone enjoyed the film immensely especially the candid moments of the children tenderly observed by the filmmaker.

This was followed by a discussion with Ryu during which she shared that wherever the film has been shown she has received a wonderful response from women, but men have often expressed their bewilderment, saying they could not understand what the film was about! She said that in Korea many women are choosing not to have children because they want to concentrate on their careers and they cannot afford help. She believes that the responsibility of childcare should be that of society and not just that of the family. She has been using her films to help the cause of childcare centres that have been closing down. At the festival, she was accompanied by her oldest daughter, ten year old Yoo Haeun.

The next two films dealt with the issue of migration. *Presence* by Yashaswini B.R. & Ekta Mittal was a film from India about stories of ghosts narrated by migrant workers who inhabit a city in transition. With stunning visuals and disembodied voices narrating surreal stories, the film had a haunting effect. In the words of the filmmakers, “Landscapes shift, people move from place to place—time passes and spaces evolve. Through this metamorphosis, new things try to replace the old. Some remain and linger and some go missing and disappear. We remember and we also forget. Between this, we encounter the invisible. *Presence* is an encounter with the unknown or invisible.”

This was followed by a documentary from Iran by Mahvash Sheikholeslami called *Where do I Belong?* The film was on Afghan refugees who marry Iranian women and live on either side of the Iran-Afghanistan border, exploring notions of discrimination, love, acceptance and cultural identity. The film was notable for some very strong moments, for example the opening sequence in which the children from these mixed marriages are being photographed for their identity cards; and the interview with a young man who appeals to people saying that
“we are all humans, why should we be treated badly?” The use of frontal long shots for the interviews was quite striking. It managed to move beyond just a conventional question and answer session to present a more complete picture of their lives—a small room, carpet, a small door and a window and the family who lives in that house.

The discussion began with Dr. Chakravarti congratulating the filmmaker on keeping the narrative within the space of communities and real people, rather than that of two nations. Mahvash said that the idea for making the film had come from her own observations of Afghan refugees in her neighbourhood and she had wanted to make a film that was not about nationality but humanity. While making the film, she had felt that it was important to film in Afghanistan as many Afghan-Iranian families lived in Herat. There were questions about that section of the film and about the condition of women there, to which Dr. Chakravarti replied that the condition of women was difficult the world over, Afghanistan being no exception.

The last film for the day was a strong South Korean documentary called *The Girl Princes* by Kim Hye-Jung. This film looks back at the traces of female Gukgeuk, a type of Korean musical with an all-female cast, which enjoyed a golden age during the 1950s, and it shows the current situation of the actors and their fans. One of the most interesting aspects of the film was the fact that each of these female actors was above the age group of 80 and they were fighting to save the roots of the Korean musical. The film was made with women who dressed up as men, women who were left by their families, women whose husbands passed away and how they found their ‘calling’ in this form of dance.

The director Kim Hye-Jung told us that as a feminist she has been interested in women’s history and women’s art. Her first feature length documentary, *The Girl Princes* came about as a result of a chance discovery of Gukgeuk a few years back. She had not heard of it before and was surprised at how big it had been in the 1950s. For three years she attended the monthly gatherings of the Gukgeuk Lovers’ Society and tried to get a sense of their art as well as their daily lives. She was intrigued by the fact that for them being a man or woman is flexible and is a performance. When asked about the reasons for the decline of this art form, she shared that the establishment did not consider it high art or worth supporting.

8 March
SACAC

On 8 March we shifted location to Sri Aurobindo Centre for Arts & Communication for day long screenings. Daljeet Wadhwa, Director, SACAC welcomed the students and other guests and expressed her happiness at this new collaboration between IAWRT India and SACAC.

The first session moderated by filmmaker Subasri Krishnan was a celebration of short films—fiction, documentary, animation and experimental.

The day started out with a perfectly paced short fiction film *Uss Paar* by Arati Kadav of Whistling Woods. Speaking of loss and hope, the film had Bollywood star Jackie Shroff playing the role of an ordinary ticket...
collector sharing chief acting credits with a little girl. The story is of the girl’s wait for her father at a railway station. It is the time of the Ganesh festival and she wants her sculptor father to make an idol for her, but he has migrated to Mumbai as a taxi driver. She is sure that her father will not let her down. The adults around her are cynical, but in their hearts they are rooting for the little girl.

This was followed by *Station* an animation film from DEFIC Iran by Nahid Samadi Amin. Using a technique that gave the figures a very life like quality, the film told the story of two men living in a station in the middle of nowhere. One of them exits the station on a train and discovers a larger and different world. The film captured the sense of time moving slowly and the frustration of the younger man very well.

*Taana Baana* a student film from NID was inspired by Dostoyevsky’s first novel “Poor Folk”, Made by Priyanka Chhabra, it unfolds as a dialogue between two characters—a young woman and an older man. The girl is curious about her sister’s ways, and the old clerk lives the same life everyday. They write letters to each other, sharing memories, little gifts, maybe more, till one day an opportunity opens up for the girl—a chance to escape. The cinematic quality in the images impressed everyone. Priyanka shared that she was keen to make a film with old film songs playing an important role, evoking a mood and a time gone by.

*Clinic* by Ishanee Sarkar was another student film from NID. A short experimental film in black and white, it was set in a surreal space—an institution where people were being trained to be ‘good’. The subversive nature of the film led people to ask if it had been a statement against authority. Ishanee disarmed the audience by saying that when she was watching the film she was herself taken aback by the multiple interpretations that it lent itself to, and it took her a few moments to remember that she was the filmmaker. When she had conceptualised the film, she had wanted to make something ‘opaque’ in which “what you see is what you get”. Perhaps it was the rigour with which she implemented this vision that led to the creation of something quite exceptional.

Next was Shambhavi Kaul’s experimental piece *Scene 32* mapping “the terrain that lies between a beloved place and the things that represent it” (Kaul). It uses both High Definition video and hand processed 16mm film to examine the salt fields of Central Kutch. The varied and strong textures that emerge go beyond the specificities of time and place, evoking a prehistoric geology.

The session ended with a documentary *Flying Inside my Body* by Sumit Sharma, Rintu Thomas, Sushmit Ghosh and Ajeeta Chowhan from MCRC Jamia. The film was structured as a series of conversations with well known photographer Sunil Gupta and explored how the form of the body can become a powerful physical language to express dissent over societal norms and conventions.
The film was stylishly shot, beautifully combining text, stills, ambient sounds and the photographer’s voice. The filmmakers shared with us what a wonderful and fun experience the shoot had been with Sunil being completely open and welcoming despite his ill health. There was a lively discussion on self censorship - The filmmakers had chosen to blur the image rather than show the nude photographs as they were. They said that for them it was more important to raise questions in the audience’s minds about this choice of the filmmakers, than just show the photographs in their original form.

The four films in the afternoon session looked at the issue of women’s rights but using diverse cinematic forms. Discussions around them were moderated by filmmaker and visual artist Iram Ghurfan. The first film was a short documentary from Pakistan titled Journey of Two Women by Risham Waseem, Rabia Arif & Ghazala Remat. The film documents the experiences of two young women who decide to explore gender discrimination in their city. Through interviews and observations they try to find out what the person on the street feels about the issue. They also speak to social workers and activists. What was interesting was that the film was punctuated with their own comments and feelings on each situation. Although naïve, the film seemed to be an honest effort of young filmmakers who are at the beginning of their journey to understand the complex world of discrimination on the basis of gender.

Risham had managed to get her visa at the very last minute and was able to be with us for the screening. She shared that they had deliberately kept the tone of the film light hearted so that it will be accessible to the younger generation. She also said making the film had been a huge learning for them in terms of the issue. There was a discussion on segregated spaces as the film had a mention of different canteens for men and women in one of the universities. Members of the audience said that such segregation was not peculiar to a religion or country, but exists in India as well.

The next was a student film from NID, A Pinch of Skin by Priya Goswami. It was a documentary on the practice of female genital mutilation in India. Practised by a particular sect, it is not spoken about much even within the community. In the film we heard multiple voices from the community, all women, having different points of view—some endorsing the practice and others saying it’s a violation of the woman’s body. We do not see the faces of any of the interviewees, but we see the hennaed hands of one woman, the silhouette of another. There is a strong presence of the individuals in these carefully selected visuals.
In the discussion that followed Priya spoke her motivation in making the film. She said for her it was not about a particular community, but the larger question of religious repression of women’s sexuality. She said she had spoken to women in various cities and towns in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, and she won their trust by saying that whatever their view was, she would include it in the film without tampering with it. There was a question about how the film will bring about change in the community. Iram pointed out that maybe we need to reflect on looking at ourselves first, and the film could be a good starting point for opening out the issue of religious and cultural practices that suppress women’s freedoms.

The only fiction film in this segment was Saba by Roqiye Tavakoli. It was about a young woman Saba whose sister passes away. She begins to take care of her niece, spending a lot of time with her. When her brother in law shows an interest in Saba, her mother gets worried. The film uses shots and cuts with a great deal of economy and precision, conveying much with a few words and gestures. This was also a film that paid tribute to the glorious Iranian landscape with beautiful shots of the arid windswept region.

The discussion began with senior Iranian filmmaker Mahvash Sheikholeslami stepping in as the interpreter for Roqiye. Mahvash complimented the filmmaker on making “the perfect short film”, saying that it was a difficult task and she had managed to do it brilliantly. People in the audience were impressed with the characterization of Saba and of the technical quality of the film. Roqiye said she had shot it in Yazd in a village near her hometown. She shared that the film had been very well received in Iran and had recently won an award.

The final film of the session was Cassandra’s Gift by Payal Kapadia, Cassandra was locked up in a casket for having the gift of prophecy. Artist Nalini Malani’s studio represents a casket where she makes her video shadow play, ‘In Search of Vanished Blood’ based on Cassandra’s myth. The film weaves together the images, texts and sounds that constitute Malani’s artwork for the dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel. The artist talks about her ideas and the struggles that go into making this complex work, and we see how she realizes them inside the four walls of her studio. Filmed with care and competence, this piece engaged with Malani’s work and brought it to us in all its richness and depth.

The final session of the 2013 edition of the festival had three films and was moderated by film editor and Selection Committee member Anupama Chandra. The first was a two-minute animation film from Iran,
**Baran** by Mehrnosh Khoram. The film was a joyful rendition focusing on the power of illusion and the freedom that a child enjoys in her dream world.

The next film was a documentary from China called **Back to Huamulin** by Li Xinmin. The 21 year old filmmaker returns to her village after seven years, but now with a video camera. She tries to film the life that she had lived there and explore her relationship with the village. Holding the camera she sits in front of the village elders listening patiently to narrations of events from decades ago. It was a beautifully simple film that observes life and imbues it with gentleness even as it reveals a dark passage in the country’s history when people died of starvation.

From rural China we moved to rural India with **Cotton for my Shroud** a powerful documentary by Kavita Bahl and Nandan Saxena. The film rigorously investigates how the multinational company Monsanto manipulated Bt Cotton field trials in India, enticed gullible farmers with lies about yields and reduction in pesticide use, and how Vidarbha in Maharashtra has become a bloody battleground in the ongoing global war between corporate greed and the people’s ‘Right to life’. The strong images and the unhurried pacing contribute to creating a disturbing piece that goes beyond reportage.

In the discussion that followed the screening, the filmmakers shared what a long and arduous journey it had been to make the film, and how they had fallen into depression during the edit because of the nature of the subject and what they had witnessed on the field. They also spoke about how some responses to their film (such as ‘So how does this affect us?’) showed the disconnect between people in the cities and the realities of rural India. They said they had wanted to make a film that is accessible and that clearly brings out the nexus between the state and the multinationals, and how it affects the farmers. Anupama pointed out that considering that the film was such a sharp indictment of the government’s policies, it was ironic and yet important that it had received a National Award.
Thanks to the support of the Koran Culture Centre, two of the South Korean filmmakers, Ryu Mi-Rye and Kim Hye-Jung were able to attend the festival. As a special gesture repeat screenings of their films were held at the newly inaugurated cultural centre. My Sweet Baby and The Girl Princes played to a packed house at the KCC auditorium with many students attending the screenings and the discussion that followed. The discussion was moderated by Dr. Uma Chakravarti.

In Conclusion

For the organizers the four days of the festival made the eight months of work preceding it worthwhile. The purpose of the festival is to celebrate the creativity of women and the fact that we were able to bring so many films, filmmakers, students and film lovers together was indeed satisfying.

One of the important themes that emerged in this year’s selection was a sharp questioning of heteronormativity with films from Iran, Japan and South Korea bringing up issues of gender and sexuality in different ways in Facing Mirrors, Thus a Noise Speaks and The Girl Princes. Another common concern was parenthood that was the central to films like My Sweet Baby, 21 Days & Me, The Two Lines and Moones. There were also a significant number of films with an autobiographical strain in which the filmmaker includes herself in the film like Self Portrait with Three Women, 21 Days & Me, Thus a Noise Speaks and Because.

Many of the student filmmakers had been nervous about the q&a, but were surprised at how smoothly it went and how they were able to answer the questions with aplomb. In fact the discussions added a lot to the festival with filmmakers using this as an opportunity to share the process of making the film and the
main concerns they wanted to raise. The presence of filmmakers meant more opportunities for dialogue between directors from different countries and backgrounds. What was also heartening to see was how many informal conversations took place in which filmmakers, volunteers, curators and students got a chance to interact with each other, animatedly discussing and critiquing films.

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Festival Director
ANUPAMA SRINIVASAN

Festival Co Director
UMA TANUKU

Selection Committee, General Programme
ANUPAMA CHANDRA, ANUPAMA SRINIVASAN, UMA TANUKU

Curator, Films from Iran
ANUPAMA SRINIVASAN

Curator, Films from South Korea
UMA TANUKU

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