

[Women Fighting for Women: India's Activist Film Directors](#)

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New York Film Festival Showcases Hard-Hitting Documentaries by South Asians

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In crowded Indian metropolises as well as rural outposts, there is a dark side to life that is often not talked about: the plight of women. Indian society has glorified the image of the woman as mother and goddess, but in reality women are devalued and discriminated against.

Over the last decade, a growing number of talented and fearless women directors have ventured into topics that were formerly taboo, filming the gender violence, bonded labor, dowry deaths and domestic abuse that is often the fate of a girl child in India. Their powerful films have been the voice of the voiceless, exposing the ugly truth of women's lives. Some of these thought-provoking documentaries were shown recently in "Women Directors from South Asia: A Film Festival" which was organized by Sakhi for South Asian Women.

Sakhi is a New York-based organization which works to foster self-reliance and empowerment of South Asian women. The word sakhi means a "woman friend" in several South Asian languages, and that is what Sakhi tries to be. It provides resources and referrals to individual women, engages in community education through cultural events and workshops, and lobbies through coalition efforts to promote the rights of immigrant and undocumented women nationally. Started by a handful of women five years ago, Sakhi has grown to involve many volunteers. Sakhi has been an advocate for hundreds of battered women and is now taking on the added challenge of ending the exploitation of domestic workers.

The nine-member film committee noted on the opening day, "As part of our on-going struggle, we are incorporating this year's film festival into an international effort to demand respect for women's rights- the `16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence Campaign.' As we bring forth the myriad voices of South Asian women through the videos and films screened here, we join the voices of women around the world to insist that all of us be accountable for the maintenance and protection of human dignity."

According to Prema Vohra, a coordinator at Sakhi, the films were very well received, with many of them playing to full houses. A large part of the audience was made up of young people, many of whom are studying in universities here in New York. Although there were many women, it was interesting to note a number of young men too. These are young adults who believe in the principles of social justice and equality of women.

Exposing the Ugly Truth

It is unfortunate that when immigrants come to this country they often bring along in their baggage outmoded stereotypes about women's roles. Not only does an immigrant woman have to face abuse at the hands of her husband and often her in-laws, but she also has to deal with a new and alien culture. Often under threat of deportation and economic hardship, these undocumented women have to toe the line at home. Many educated women, independent and affluent, are also experiencing ugly power conflicts at home. Women's advocacy groups often see women physicians and businesswomen who come to them with bruises and black eyes, and who have no control over their own paychecks.

Appropriately enough, the film which opened the festival was "A Life Without Fear" which was produced by Sakhi with local actors donating their services. This docudrama shows the relationship of Rohan and Sonia, a young Indian couple in New York, and how their marriage falls apart under the husband's constant suspicion, harsh words and physical violence. The woman finally gets the courage to approach Sakhi and walks out of the abusive situation. She finds a job and learns to live a life without fear with her young child.

This film is going to be shown by Sakhi in schools, community centers and

temples to alert the South Asian community to the dangers of domestic violence, and inform women of the help that is now available. Sakhi has already shown it in several locations, including a high school where both boys and girls were moved by it and had an animated discussion about domestic violence.

Two films showed that discrimination against women is a malaise in both India and Pakistan, in two totally different religious settings. Both deal with the burning of women alive. "Gift of Love" is renowned Indian filmmaker Meera Dewan's exposé on dowry deaths. By juxtaposing photos of the radiant happy brides on their wedding day with those of them horrifically burned over 90 percent of their bodies, she makes a powerful statement. Interviews with the brides' parents reveal that they gave everything from TVs to Godrej cupboards to gold to their daughters in dowry but it was never enough for the insatiable in-laws. As one heartbroken father, whose daughter was burned to death, observes of her in-laws, "I gave them everything, but I could not give them a heart."

The film broke new ground when it was used as the official statement of a young woman suffering from 90 percent burns. Until her story was recorded by Meera Dewan, she had been intimidated by her in-laws and prevented from making a statement to the police.

"Neither Coal Nor Ashes" is the first film made by a young Pakistani, Nadya Shah, who lives in New York. Her camera follows the horror and mayhem in the emergency ward of one general hospital in Lahore, Pakistan where the burn unit sees frequent victims of "stove deaths." Women who have been burnt over 90 percent of their bodies by dissatisfied husbands and in-laws cannot give testimony on their own behalf because they almost always die. Shah could locate only one survivor. These deaths are made to pass as accidental deaths caused by defective kerosene stoves, but the fact remains that such accidents cause only partial and frontal burns, whereas these women are burned over their entire bodies-which could only be caused by dousing them in kerosene and setting them afire.

The tragedy is that women, even when they do survive still do not testify against the perpetrators. The fear is that they will not be believed since usually there are no witnesses, and because of the larger fear that their children may be taken away from them by in-laws.

In "Gift of Love" a social worker angrily proclaims that she has no sympathy for the parents whose daughters are burned because by giving in to dowry demands these parents are devaluing their daughters and making them pawns in the hands of greedy in-laws. No matter how magnificent the dowry, it is never enough. Recently the Indian newspapers reported that a daughter of the Nehru family filed for divorce from the son of Ravi Tikoo, the multimillionaire shipping magnate, citing mental cruelty and abuse because her dowry had not been sufficient.

Dowry deaths are the culmination of a lifetime of discrimination against women, and this abuse begins right in the womb when, through the process of amniocentesis, women often choose to abort female fetuses. At last year's Sakhi festival, director Mira Nair's documentary "Children of a Desired Sex" explored how amniocentesis is misused for sex selection, exploiting modern technology to perpetuate age-old prejudices. The film revealed some startling facts: in India there are just 935 women to every 1000 males, and as one activist in the film points out, the mortality rate of baby girls is "obviously due to neglect so the survival chances are few and due to discrimination in food and health care and even love care."

Those who survive the womb then face discrimination in material comforts and love. Asian culture places so much value on a male child that females are totally devalued: they are not counted, as they are another's property and will eventually leave for their husband's home. A son, meanwhile, is thought of as insurance in old age and sickness. So in rural and urban settings, little girls are looked upon as an unwelcome, extra mouth to feed. These daughters of farmers and laborers are profiled in a powerful film, showing how even at the age of five, they are already the little mothers of India. While their fathers and mothers toil in the fields or construction sites, these female children clean, cook and look after their younger brothers and sisters. Others by the age of five or six toil from dawn to dusk in sweatshops and makeshift factories, churning out matchsticks and papads (lentil wafers) for a pittance.

Even the Farms are Not Safe

Meera Dewan's latest film, "Patent Pending," explores yet another kind of exploitation: that of small farmers in India swindled by major transnational corporations who trade in seeds. The film shows the frustration of small farmers whose seed technology, gleaned over generations, is being appropriated by the large commercial corporations. The seed patent section of the GATT agreement will

force these farmers to buy back their own technology which they have voluntarily shared with fellow farmers for decades. The film highlights a non-violent farmers' movement which is protesting the control of seed technology by big companies in Karnataka. A scene in the film shows rural women in a powerful ritual, sitting face to face, each exchanging a fistful of seeds. When one realizes that it is these minute seeds which create the harvest which feeds them and keeps them self-sufficient, one can certainly understand the spirit that moves them. The film is based on the research by Indian environmental activist Vandana Shiva.

Widows and the Aged

The good news is that in India educated women social workers and activists are standing up for those women whose lives are mangled by poverty and illiteracy. Mediastorm is an active, volunteer women's video collective in India today that is making meaningful films. Based in New Delhi, the collective includes Sabina Kidwai, Sabeena Gadihoke, Shikha Jhingon, Charu Gargi and Ranjani Mazumdar. Founded in 1986, Mediastorm is dedicated to building an alternative media of socio-political significance. They have won awards for their documentaries on controversial topics such as Ayodhya and sati and have also incurred the wrath of vested interests.

All six members of Mediastorm are volunteers. They either teach film or work as freelance filmmakers. Through their films, they have exposed women's issues at international film festivals and have also shown these films in Indian schools, colleges and resettlement colonies, often leading to post-screening discussions.

"From the Burning Embers" is Mediastorm's powerful indictment of the custom of sati, where a young widow is burnt alive on the funeral pyre of her husband. It highlights the story of Roop Kanwar, a widow who was immolated a few years ago on her husband's pyre while thousands of people watched and celebrated the tragedy as a religious act. The film places the incident in the context of the increased strength of religious fundamentalism in India in the 1980s, and the government's cowardly passivity in order to gain votes.

An expansive and humane religion like Hinduism has been misinterpreted over the years by those who want to keep women weak and downtrodden. The meaning and intent of orally passed scriptures may also have been manipulated for political

reasons, for in the golden days of India, women were independent and valued human beings.

Discrimination against women continues into old age. The irony is that though there are fewer Indian women than men, they outlive men. So in old age, it is often the women who have to suffer ill-health and callous children. Gurinder Chadha, a London-based filmmaker, has gained a reputation for insightful films on the immigrant experience. In "Acting Our Age," she focuses on elderly Indians settled in the U.K. Cast aside by family members, many of these elders live in senior citizen homes. Chadha invited them to make their own video and the film is a humorous yet poignant look at how these aged men and women are delighted to be given something meaningful to do.

Men and women in their 70s hold the microphone and wield the camera, as they go about interviewing Members of Parliament, young Indians and Britishers on the question of aging. What one sees here is that timeworn Asians are having a harder time in London as children absorb Western values and often abandon elderly parents. In a radio talk show documented in the film, a man calls up to say he finds old Asians wandering on the streets, with older men often taking to alcohol to escape their problems. A young Indian woman calls up, enraged that Indian men are not looking after their parents, leaving the burden on their sisters. In anger she notes that these are the male children the parents wanted, and that such sons should have been drowned! Chadha's wonderful film, while showing the pathos of the aging Indians, ends on a cheerful note with the women doing a lively bhangra dance, recalling through song the troubles they underwent in Britain, with ruthless foremen in factories and equally ruthless in-laws.

A picture is worth a thousand words, and these images shot by women film directors put on celluloid the testimony of voiceless women and children, a powerful indictment of social, political and religious institutions which turn a blind eye to this human suffering. To safeguard our 5000-year-old culture, the warts have to be exorcised. Changes have to be made, one step at a time, by each individual, in the home, the temple and the workplace.

Address: Sakhi, P.O. Box 20208, Greeley Square Station, New York, NY 10001.
The video "A Life Without Fear" is available from them for US\$60.00.

Editor's note: It is the Mother Spirit manifesting through these women at this time. By bringing the stark reality of these problems to the screen, they intend to solve problems that men have failed to solve or, in many cases, even acknowledge.