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CINEMA OF RESISTANCE

FILM CIRCULATION AND CREATION OF SPACES FOR RESISTING NARRATIVES

Fathima Nizaruddin

Cinema of Resistance (COR) is a cultural initiative in India, which focuses on creating spaces for interaction around socially relevant issues through film screenings. The practices of COR offer interesting insights about how, in the context of independent Indian documentary, circulation becomes a site where audience members are invited to become participants in a shared struggle for social change. Since 2006, COR has been organising film screenings and film festivals mainly in villages and towns across North India that do not have much exposure to non-mainstream cinema and especially independent documentaries. The work of COR can be placed alongside the efforts of groups like *Odessa*, a film collective which travelled across the state of Kerala during the 1980s to take non-commercial cinema to public venues through free screenings. In contemporary India, along with *Cinema of Resistance*, groups like *Pedestrian Pictures*, *People's Film Collective*, *Marupakkam*, among others, carry this lineage forward.¹ In terms of commercial exhibition, itinerant practices of film screening including that of *Bioscopewallahs*, which transformed spaces of everyday activity into theatrical spaces of screening², have a long history in India. The advent of video in the 1980s made widespread non-commercial screenings of independent documentary films possible. In contemporary India, the arrival of digital technology has certainly brought down the cost of non-commercial film screenings and groups like COR have been able to utilise the opportunities offered by digital technology. COR does not accept any kind of corporate sponsorship and its screenings and festivals are funded through community and individual donations. Though the collective also screens fiction films, its main focus is on the independent documentary practice in India. The films which are part of COR screenings generally contain narratives resisting mainstream discourses on a variety of topics ranging from caste, majoritarianism and development to state-violence.

10th Gorakhpur Film Festival © Cinema of Resistance

As Shweta Kishore argues³, in the context of independent documentary films in India, apart from the content of individual films, the nature of their circulation which often does not follow the logic of mass media distribution also contributes to the emergence of 'involved publics' around such films. In her work Kishore mentions the circulation practices of *Cinema of Resistance* as well. I would argue that in the case of COR, face to face interactions and embodied contact play a key role in sustaining its circulatory networks. Conversations and interactions which happen at screening venues often lead to collaborations resulting in the formation of COR screenings at new locations. Hard drives, phone numbers and email IDs get exchanged and they lead to an expansion of the screening circuit. Such exchanges do not follow the trajectory of consumption of mainstream commercial films. The exchange of films is never indiscriminate. Although technological advancements have made it easier to conduct non-commercial screenings, the censorship regulations in India make the public screening



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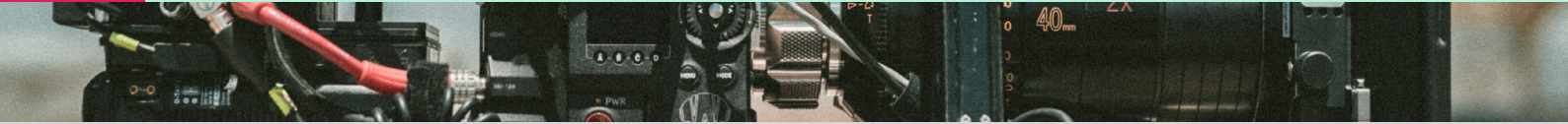


Second Nainital Film Festival © Cinema of Resistance

1 BASU, K. & BANERJEE, D. (2018). TOWARDS A PEOPLE'S CINEMA: AN INTRODUCTION. IN K. BASU & D. BANERJEE (EDS.), *TOWARDS A PEOPLE'S CINEMA: INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY AND ITS AUDIENCE IN INDIA* (PP. 1-12). GURGAON: THREE ESSAYS COLLECTIVE.

2 MAHADEVAN, S. (2010). TRAVELING SHOWMEN, MAKESHIFT CINEMAS: THE BIOSCOPEWALLAH AND EARLY CINEMA HISTORY IN INDIA. *BIOSCOPE: SOUTH ASIAN SCREEN STUDIES* 1(1), 27-47.

3 KISHORE, S. (2018). *INDIAN DOCUMENTARY FILM AND FILMMAKERS: INDEPENDENCE IN PRACTICE*. EDINBURGH: EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS.



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वीरेन डंगवाल और एम एम कलबुर्गी की याद में चौथा नैनीताल फिल्म फ़ैस्टीवल



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of films without the prescribed censor certificate a potentially risky affair. Another reason for avoiding indiscriminate sharing is that many filmmakers provide their films to COR because they support the collective's principle of free non-profit screenings. Any commercial use of such films can break the understanding that the collective has with filmmakers who have contributed their films. As a result, the interactions which happen at the screening venues became crucial to determine the manner in which the films are shared for further circulation. Generally, films are exchanged when there is a promise of free community screenings at a new location.

Is it possible to link the practices of groups like *Cinema of Resistance* with an older history of circulation in South Asia? Bruijn and Busch have written about how circulation of cultural material, especially through embodied contact and travel works as “an engine of conceptual change”, which prompts “artists, poets and religious practitioners” to move beyond their usual ways.⁴ They also argue that exposure to new people and places can alter the meaning of cultural products. This argument is made in the context of circulation of cultural material in early modern India. If we extend Bruijn and Busch's ideas, it can be argued that the arrival of cultural practitioners and new cultural material has the potential to influence the places and people who encounter them as well. For example, film workers and filmmakers who are part of COR screenings rely on local

resources and hospitality. So, close attention is paid to the response of the audience to the films which are screened. Curating practices often undergo changes as a result of interactions with audience members. Similarly, COR film screenings produce new spaces of interaction at diverse locations where they take place and these spaces could have a lasting impact on those who encounter them. The expansion of such spaces through the circulatory practices of COR could contribute to a strengthening of narratives which resist state and corporate discourses on issues such as caste, majoritarianism, gender or development.

About the Author:

Fathima Nizaruddin is an academic and documentary filmmaker. Her last film *Nuclear Hallucinations* (2016) which emerged out of her practice-based PhD at the University of Westminster has been screened at various festivals and academic spaces across the world. She is an Assistant Professor at AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.



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⁴ DE BRUIJN, T. & BUSCH, A. (2014). INTRODUCTION. IN T. DE BRUIJN & A. BUSCH (EDS.), *CULTURE AND CIRCULATION: LITERATURE IN MOTION IN EARLY MODERN INDIA* (PP. 1–20). LEIDEN: BRILL.