

A portrait of India through traditional songs

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FELLOW 2005

A year ago I returned to spend a year in India after living 23 years in Britain to make a film about women and their songs.

HOW THE FILM CAME ABOUT

For a brief spell in London I learnt Karnatic music, the classical music tradition from the South and it was a pure pleasure. In the meantime my husband and I decided we would like to spend a year in India with our children. I decided it would be interesting for me to come back and make a film, to rediscover the country of my childhood and learn something of its musical traditions. Gradually the idea crystallized, and I found myself the proud recipient of a Churchill Fellowship embarking on a documentary about the songs women sing as they journey through life in India.

WHAT THE FILM IS ABOUT

I began by wanting to make a film about women's songs but actually my film is not just about singing or singing traditions. It's really an attempt to capture something of the spirit of the women I met during my travels and to understand something about their lives. How do I describe the beauty of a woman's smile, the rhythm and grace with which women walk here, the melody in their voices even when they are selling vegetables and the beautiful colours of the clothes they wear even when they are very poor, the dignity and strength in their faces. My film is a celebration of all that.

SOCIAL BACKGROUND - PAINTING THE PICTURE

It's important to first set the scene, against which my film takes place. In a film it's not always possible to explain the complexities of social relationships, so it's great to have an opportunity to set them down on paper, especially since my film has no dialogue.

When I arrived here I found that India is in the midst of huge changes, there is tremendous development going on in the cities, a burgeoning middle class, a rising world class economy. In the cities there are affluent women who ride around in big cars, go to the gym, whose standard of living and lifestyle is much the same as people in the West. Then there is the underclass of women who work in these rich women's houses for a small wage, but at least they have a roof over their heads and 3 square meals a day. Out on the roads are the women who work as labourers all day long in the hot sun to build the houses, offices and roads for these rich people. They come from the villages in search of better lives and end up in slums by the roadside. Their children grow up playing in the dirt and pretty much bring themselves up while their mothers work all day. They do not go to school and will grow up to have the same kinds of lives their parents have.

In the countryside life is very different . People work on the land and grow enough food to eat(as long as there is enough rain each year). While there is huge development going on in the cities, in the countryside life hasn't changed much for centuries and women still live in a very traditional way, They worship their gods and bring up their children. Their situation seems to me much better than the women in the cities.

APPROACH and STYLE

I've spent much of my working life so far making films for Channel 5 which have a prescribed format . In making this film I wanted to get away from all that, to try to tell a story using images from women's lives and sounds and songs to tell a story in a different way.

I didn't want to make a film about social problems and the sad story of women's lives in India. There have been plenty of films like that already.

I decided to go for a simple observational style and film people as naturally as possible. Since I have two little daughters who go to school it was not possible to travel for months at a time so I made little journeys sometimes with my children and sometimes without. In my travels I approached people and asked if they would like to sing a song. Some women were shy but most women enjoyed the chance to be on camera. Most women whether they live in the village or the city could remember the folk songs of their childhood. Some situations were difficult to get access to like the possession rituals , but for the most part it was not difficult.

STRUCTURE

My film follows women on their journey through life in many different situations, starting from birth and ending with death. I decided that I should film women in as many contrasting situations as possible to make an interesting film . I am writing this report in the order in which the scenes appear in the film, not necessarily in the order they were filmed.

THE FILM

BLESSING A BABY_ MUMBAI

I made contact with the hijrah (eunuch)community in Mumbai. I was interested in filming them because they live as a community and make their living blessing new-born babies through song, and it seemed like this could be an interesting beginning to the film. Although outsiders they have an accepted role in society which goes back centuries. I arrived in Mumbai a huge city teeming with millions of "strugglers" who come from the villages to earn a livelihood.

Lakshmi, the leader of the hijras wanted to meet me first before filming . I arrived at her office, (she heads a charity to help people from her community) it was the middle of a party, everywhere I looked there were gorgeous men/women dressed in extravagant clothes. I discovered that Lakshmi has been the subject of many films and a documentary about her has even been screened on Discovery. We arranged to film the next day. She took me to a neighbourhood outside Mumbai, an amazing location perched on a mountain slope where she is known and respected. She and her friends walked through the basti(neighbourhood) blessing the babies. She is very special, over

six feet tall, strikingly beautiful and proud of who she is because her family have been very accepting of her, an experience not shared by her other hijra friends. I felt very privileged to have been given access to her world.

CHILDHOOD-Hyderabad

The childhood I spent in India was rather idyllic, I remember playing outside all the time, climbing trees to pluck fruit, going to the beach most weekends, my parents were well off and we had a comfortable life.

I filmed in a slum in Hyderabad- a little girl in a white dress looking after her baby sister. She didn't go to school. Her mother worked all day and she looked after the baby. Where was her childhood, her right to an education. ? What would her future be ?She sat on a swing, holding the baby and sang a song.

Two other little girls played hopscotch while their mother was at work. Around them their younger brothers and sister played in the dust. They will grow up to do the same thing as their mothers for they do not go to school.

CHILDHOOD –Kerala

I travelled to Kerala, to my husband's village .Kerala in contrast to Andhra Pradesh where I live has a literacy rate of 97%. Apart from Bengal it's the only Communist state in India . In the 1950's land was taken from the rich and redistributed amongst the poor. My husband's family although not poor also benefited from this redistribution. His parents have a farm with cows and chickens. They grow coconuts bananas , pepper, vegetables and all their own rice. My children play outside all day and have a wonderful time. Together with their cousin they make shampoo from hibiscus leaves and wash their hair. In the afternoons they shut themselves in the bedroom , put make up on and dance to music like little girls anywhere in the world.I filmed their cousin Aishwarya's bharatnatyam lesson in the village school . Its hard work, and takes years to learn. I love the innocence in the children's faces.

CHILDHOOD-The circus

A travelling circus came to Hyderabad. I met the manager who fortunately for me turned out to be from Kerala and co-incidentally was taught at school by Hari's(my sound recordists)sister. So although its usually very difficult to get permission to film in circuses I caught up with the circus in Mumbai and filmed some of the children practicing for the show. I am fascinated by the atmosphere of circuses, the slightly seedy glamour, the danger and the very real skill of the performers.

In India too as everywhere else circuses are not doing very well these days because people prefer television. This circus was the biggest I've seen as an adult and employed a thousand people. It had three kitchens. India being a caste society, the manager and his staff were supplied by one kitchen, the backstage people had another and the performers were fed from the third.

The children I filmed came from all over India . I could only film their rehearsal and was not allowed to see their accommodation. When I asked how they came to join the circus , the manager became rather vague and said they loved circus so they wanted to come . Hari told me afterwards that many children are sold to circuses by their families. I do not have proof of this but the possibility is really shocking.

WORK – GROWING FOOD

I have a maid , a young girl called Jyoti who helps me look after my children. She does not know how old she is and has never been to school.I think she is about seventeen . She is working to save money for her dowry. She belongs to a tribe called the Lambadis who settled in Andhra Pradesh around 50 years ago. They came to live in Andhra when they were offered land by the state.Jyoti's village is around 4 hours away from Hyderabad.

I travelled with Jyoti to her village and filmed the Lambadi women planting rice in the monsoon.They sing a rhythmic song while they plant which helps them to work They stopped their planting when they saw me with the camera and began to dance. They wore gold anklets on their feet and their feet churned up the mud in the field. They danced with great abandon.

WORK –STONEBREAKERS-HYDERABAD

I filmed a community of stone breakers camped on the edge of a road in little huts made of rags and sheets of plastic. The women wake up early and prepare the day's meal before they go to work. They work all day breaking stones to build the huge offices that make up Cyberabad or Hi – tech city as its known, outsourcing capital of India. In the evening they come home and drink and fight. That is their life, no pension, no benefits, their bare hands are their strength and have to support them. The women sang in a group- a melodious and rhythmic song from their village about planting crops. Their faces were amazing, strong and resilient, you could see they have been through a lot.

Work – POPPADOM LADIES

In Mumbai I heard about a women's co-operative where the women have come together to make a living out of making and selling poppadoms. They live together in the same community in a slum in Mumbai. The passageway between the houses is incredibly narrow and the houses are really tiny. They worship a freedom fighter who at the time of India's struggle for independence , tried to abolish the caste system. His name is called Dr Ambedkar. Their temple had a statue of him and I found this very intriguing. I filmed two women working in a tiny room making poppadoms for a living. They sang folk songs while they worked and told me that they supported their entire families through their work as their men didn't have regular work.

MARRIED LIFE

In a back street in Hyderabad I filmed a community of Rajasthani stone polishers , the women are veiled all day and do not go out of the house even to shop, their husbands bring the shopping home to them.I filmed a beautiful young bride who danced and sang for me with her veil on. When she lifted her veil halfway through a song and allowed me to film her face, it was like a very special gift. When women from this community marry they have to break contact with their families completely. They don't speak to them anymore. The close relationship with the family they grew up with is broken because they now have a new family.

WORK - SELLING FOOD

I filmed in a market in Hyderabad where the poor people come to buy vegetables on Sundays, their day off .The women trying to sell, shout out their wares in a very rhythmic way. Other women come freshly bathed with flowers in their hair dressed in

their Sunday best to buy their provisions for the week. It's a colourful sight and the sound of them calling is like music.

CELEBRATION

I went to Jyoti's village for the festival of Dusserah when they celebrate the festival of the Goddess Lakshmi – the goddess of wealth. This was my third visit to the village and the women were by now quite comfortable with me filming.

Everyone including the women were pretty drunk and had a fantastic time singing and dancing for the camera.

DEATH

After the dancing I went for a walk through the village taking stills. I rounded a corner and suddenly came upon a group of women wailing and singing at the same time. It was an eerie sound. Somehow I knew at once that someone had died. I filmed from a distance feeling that it was not the time to intrude with a camera. A woman had lost her husband to tuberculosis . He had been working in Mumbai and got sick. She brought him to the village to die. She did not know how she was going to support her 3 daughters.

I never expected to be able to film something like this although I had written about it in my original plan .

POSESSION

I travelled to Karnataka after hearing about a festival in which thousands of women gather to become possessed by the local goddess Siri. Karnataka is interesting because it has been cut off geographically from the rest of India by mountains and so a lot of traditions that have their root in animism and Dravidian , pre-Hindu culture have survived. The story of Siri is fascinating . Siri was born in an areka nut flower. Through her life she suffered many travails at the hands of men. The story of her life is a story of women's fight against oppression.

On the day of the festival, thousands of women gather at the Siri temple . With their hair unfettered they run down the temple steps and take a collective bath in the temple tank. Then they don red saris , enter the inner sanctum of the temple where there is a tiny icon of Siri.They pray to the Goodess holding the areka-nut flower in their hands. Thy flay themselves with the fronds of the flower,dance sway, and become possessed laughing, shrieking and singing. Once they become possessed they become an oracle for the Goddess and people come to them with their problems. There is a procession where all the women dance together. The Siri festival seems like a great opportunity for women to escape the confines of their everyday lives.

The Brahmin priests who run the temple have tried hard to stamp out this ancient practice but it seems to play an important role in people lives because so far they have not managed to eradicate it.

I filmed an old lady, one of the last in her village who can sing the Siri epic. The song takes seven nights to sing and is sung in the temple on the night of the festival.

She sang me some of the story and also a beautiful lullaby for her grandson.

PROSTITUTES –MUMBAI

Asha Mahila Sangha is a women's co-operative in Mumbai run by prostitutes and former prostitutes. They work together to try to improve their situation and that of others like them, which is quite perilous. The women often come to Mumbai in search of work, and finding none turn to the only option left to them, to sell themselves. Once they become established in the trade, they cannot return to their families. In India, family is everything, without a family you are nobody and so these women's lives are very tragic. The organization becomes their family helping them seek medical help when needed as Aids and other sexually transmitted diseases are a big problem. Their children are sent to boarding school away from the stigma attached to their mother's profession. One of the most touching conversations I had was with a young girl whose mother and grandmother were both prostitutes. She herself broke the mould, got educated and came back to help the organization. The women enact street plays in the red light district and they sang me some of the songs they have improvised.

THIRUVADURA -KERALA

On the night of the full moon in January, I filmed a group of old women in Kerala singing and dancing to celebrate Parvati's birthday. She is the wife of lord Shiva the God whose cosmic dance keeps the world turning. Although she was very beautiful, he was immune to her beauty. She won him through penance and abstinence. Their marriage is a celebration of the equality between men and women, together they make a balanced whole. On the night of her birthday women all over Kerala gather together to celebrate. They stay up all night dancing and singing songs under the full moon.

CONCLUSION

As I said at the beginning, making this film has been an amazing journey. I hope I have managed to share something of this experience in my film.

ITINERARY

April 2005	Possession ritual	Karnataka
July 2005	Planting	Lambadis
August	Stone cutters	Hyderabad
August	children	Hyderabad
October	Hijras	Mumbai
October	circus	Mumbai
October	Prostitutes	Mumbai
November	Dusserah	Lambadis
November	death scene	Lambadis
November	rajasthani bride	Hyderabad
January 2006	bharatnatyam	Kerala
January 2006	tiruvadura	Kerala