

AN ANSWER TO BOLLYWOOD

Political commentary, erotica and homosexuality – strict censorship makes it for South Asian filmmakers almost impossible to make films about these subjects. In a film climate dominated by Bollywood and lacking proper training and financial resources, it's especially hard for independent and experimental filmmakers. At the IFFR, twenty young filmmakers from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan let themselves be heard. They found ways to screen their own movies uncensored. "It's difficult, but not impossible."



Vlnr. Sanjeewa Pushpakumara

Nadine Maas

Middle: Iram Praveen Bilal en Sidhart Srinivasan

It may be common knowledge that Bollywood, producing about 900 movies a year, is the biggest film industry in the world. Still, internationally there is little attention to the enormous production of short films and feature films that provide a counterbalance to the mainstream. Therefore it's important for young artists to screen their work in Rotterdam, IFFR programmer Peter van Hoof figured. His visits to Indian film schools and meetings with local directors resulted in a wide festival selection. "We wanted to show the diversity of South Asian film culture, from documentaries to narrative films, animation and experimental work. Even more so because directors often struggle with limited screening capabilities in their home countries." State censorship is one of the main causes for this problem. In India, for instance, it's impossible to distribute a movie nationally without a certificate from the Central Board of Film Certification.

For filmmaker Sidharth Srinivasan this is reason enough to go and look for alternatives. "My new film *Soul of Sand* is about social problems in New Delhi. I received good reviews of my film in New York and Toronto, but for Indian standards it is quite radical and violent. I am only permitted to screen it there when I cut out certain scenes. I think that's terrible, I absolutely do not believe in censorship. Film isn't a product, but a form of expression. Therefore I'm very pleased with my film being shown at international festivals. If you don't have big stars, huge PR budgets or a producer, it's your only publicity. I hope I can use the international attention as a

reason to screen it uncensored when I get back to India." Srinivasan already has thought of some other options in case this shouldn't work out." Then I'll just show my film at the Goethe-Institute and the Alliance Francaise in New Delhi and invite the press. Or I'll put my movie on a server abroad, so anyone can download it."

Indian director Natasha Mendonca even organized her own film festival in order to create possibilities for showing her work uncensored. Her festival even focused on gay, bisexual and transsexual films. "We showed pretty sexually explicit movies. The government wanted to shut us down, but couldn't, because we didn't organize regular viewings in a movie theater. India's censorship system has rules that you can work around, even if it means that your movie cannot be seen in regular theaters. My movies often contain such nudity. They will not be screened in India, but at international festivals. It's hard to make films, but not impossible."

Priorities

Having Iranian director Jafar Panahi's story as a poignant example, showing uncensored films in Asia seems quite a risky thing to do. Expressing social criticism is in some countries not just answered by display bans, but even by imprisonment. Keeping this in mind, it's even more extraordinary that a young generation of filmmakers is currently actively working to bend and change the rules. Sri Lankan director Sanjeewa Pushpakumara is one of them. In his first feature film *Flying Fish*, he shows what consequences the violent civil war in his country had for everyday life. "I have witnessed how people were oppressed and it frustrated me enormously. Making the movie was a kind of healing to me." For Pushpakumara making the film was so important that he took the potential consequences of the political sensitivity for granted. "In India the film is not being screened in theaters, so I don't know how the censors are going to react," he says carefully. "Still I'm glad I've told my story honestly. Some Indian directors censor themselves these days in order to get their films screened. That's terrible. Creating a movie means opening up your soul."

Apart from censorship, Pushpakumara mentions a lack of proper film education as a cause of low production and distribution of films in his country. "Sri Lanka has a film school, but only since 2006. There are not too many skilled filmmakers." In Pakistan, the situation is deficient as well. "There are media schools, but they mainly focus on television journalism," Pakistani director Iram Parveen Bilal explains. She found a solution to this problem in doing a film training in California, where she still lives today. "It made it possible for me to make movies about dance, a subject that is taboo in Pakistan. Moreover, from Los Angeles it's easier to access the international film circuit." Given the limited screening capabilities at home and lack of national film funds, many South Asian independent filmmakers more or less depend on international contacts for viewing possibilities. Still, Bilal thinks financial support from the government is far from obvious. "In countries where there is a lack of housing, food and drink, film is no necessity. Making a career in something that doesn't directly contribute to solving these problems is not being encouraged. I understand. A few years ago, Pakistan lost a whole generation during an earthquake and we've only just experienced terrible flooding. Sure, filmmakers can denounce these problems, but medical doctors provide immediate help. It's all about priorities." By finding own investors, getting cast and crew to work for free or cooperating with foreign funds such as the Hubert Bals Fund, many South Asian filmmakers ultimately find a solution to their financial problems.

A change of taste

A final problem for independent filmmakers is the limited market for their work in their own country. Bollywood is the most popular type of film in India and nearby countries, and experimental and short films hardly find a large audience. "People are accustomed to a solid story structure with a beginning, middle and end," Natasha Mendonca points out. This is especially true for Indian people living abroad, according to Sidharth Srinivasan. "In the United States, people expect 'typical' Bollywood films, while the young generation in India is ready for something new." This offers possibilities. Although it will still take some time before experimental and independent films are generally acceptable. "To improve our situation, we should not point our fingers to the government but to society", Iram Parveen Bilal thinks. "For decades, people have developed a preference for Bollywood, simply because they didn't get to see anything else. Now it's up to us to show that we offer something else: movies that are both entertaining and sending a message. If we stimulate demand, the supply will grow. Only then can we be taken seriously."

- Kim van der Meulen