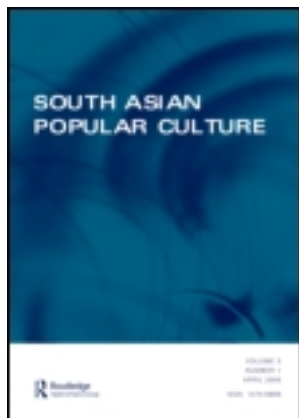


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Prostitution, pee-ing, percussion, and possibilities: Contemporary women documentary film-makers and the city in South Asia

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This co-authored article offers an analytical overview of contemporary women documentary film-makers and the latter's engagement with 'the urban' in South Asia. It shows how a proliferating range of women directors represent the city through their political positions and dialogic sensibilities; often using the lens of feminism, sexuality, power relationships, and diasporic experiences to reflect the vibrancy and vitality (alongside the despair and destitution) embedded in urban existence in South Asia. The article is written collaboratively by Sen (an urban anthropologist) and Thakker (a documentary film-maker). While Sen highlights the recent trends in documentary film-making and its impact on their audiences, Thakker offers a personalised account of film-making in Mumbai. Inspired by the symposium, 'Beyond Borders,' and also by a history of communiqué between Thakker and Sen, this co-authored article grapples with questions about the production and representation of feminine urban spaces through sound, multimedia content, and visual tracks.

'Lagat jobanwa mein chot, phool gendwa na maar . . .' (My breasts are wounded – don't throw marigold flowers at me). The mellifluous voice of Rasoolanbai teases the listener as it rings out of a dusty gramophone in a 1935 recorded version of this infamous *thumri*. In her documentary, *The Other Song* (2009), Saba Dewan follows the strain of this lost music. She travels from Lucknow to Varanasi to show how *tawaiifs*, the once powerful, passionate, and sexually provocative city courtesans who resisted conventional gender norms and conformist family lives, were omitted not just from the history of Hindustani classical music, but also from freedom and mobility within urban public spheres. Dewan laments that newly educated, middle class women like her grandmother, who desired access to the public sphere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, persistently devalued the role of *tawaiifs* and thrust the latter into the margins of the city. Stripped of their adoring audience, their intimate charm, their vocal talents, and their sources of sustenance, the former *tawaiifs* were compelled to lead a life of utter deprivation, barely surviving within the cracks and crevices of urban cultural centres. This documentary weaves a personal feminine history of the film-maker with the fading urban memoirs of a community of impoverished women; it sets a wonderful trend in the ways in which South Asian women in the director's chair attempted to represent the city, using the medium of film to express their subtle yet compelling creative styles, dialogic sensibilities and political positions.

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Dewan's film offers a compelling entry point into this essay, which springs from the dialogue between my academic research and the work of a contemporary woman film director in India. Between 1999 and 2001 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork among slum women and children in Mumbai, in order to try and unravel the web of power relationships between poor women and right-wing activism that had penetrated the urban fringes (this fieldwork was part of my doctoral project). In 2010, a few years after the release of my book (Sen 2007), Neha Raheja Thakker, a film-maker in Mumbai, wrote me an email: Thakker was moved by my monograph. She had recently completed her award-winning short film, *Erased* (2009), which tells the story of a child who sells flowers on the roads of Mumbai. Through touching and looking at women, and collecting valuables, the child grapples with his emerging sexuality and sustains his lust for a film star who becomes his paper goddess. The film marks the slow death of innocence in life on the streets.

Thakker's email triggered off a conversation between us about women, films, and cities – a communication that spanned two continents, two urban environments, and two women (an outsider and an insider to Mumbai) who used two different media to try and capture the lives of women and children negotiating the clefs and crannies of a mega-city. I had always lived in and loved cities. I grew up in Calcutta, and have spent long periods of time in Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, London, Brighton, Berlin, and Manchester. Yet my experience of violence, poverty, political entrepreneurship, love, community, and the spirit of survival in the slums of Mumbai gave me a glimpse of a world I did not encounter elsewhere in my urban universe. For Thakker, the everyday act of looking down from her high-rise apartment on the streets on her Mumbai, and her distance from the people who live, work, and die in the underbelly of the city, made her isolation within the urban ecosystem complete and jarring. Her films and video-art installations mirrored this painful separation.

In the same year that our e-conversation was unfolding, a curatorial partnership between Fareda Khan, Deputy Director of Shisha, the international agency for contemporary South Asian crafts and visual arts, and Ananya Kabir, Senior Lecturer in Post Colonial Literature at the University of Leeds, gave birth to a multifaceted project, *Between Kismet and Karma: South Asian Women Artists Respond to Conflict (BKK)*. I was invited to a symposium, *Beyond Borders*, organised by Khan, Kabir, and the project postdoctoral fellow, Daisy Hasan, which brought academics into dialogue with women artists from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, and in response to themes such as bodies, cities, conflict, borders, nation, artist, artisan, and activist. My exchanges with the workshop attendees, especially urban film-makers Paromita Vohra and Priya Sen, along with a call for an article from the workshop organisers, triggered this pursuit towards uncovering how women directors are bringing forth their perspectives on the city. The history of artistic and intellectual communiqué between Thakker and me gave birth to this co-authored article. While I offer a brief overview of what are, to my mind, some new trends in women's film-making, Thakker presents a collage of urban assemblages which informs her hunt for humanity in the city.¹

I

Contemporary women film-makers grappling with the urban in South Asia can be categorised into distinctive fields of production, traversing across specific cultural geographies. One set of film-makers prefers to make potent issue-based films addressing the tests and trials confronted by women surviving the city. Paromita Vohra, for example, has made a number of award-winning documentaries on quotidian challenges faced by

women; she points her directorial finger at a range of people creating and dominating the urban topography (from planners and officials, to protectors of class, caste, and cultural boundaries) who render women invisible as urban citizens. One of her documentaries, *Q2P* (2006), shows how the absence of sanitation facilities for girls' schools, and of public toilets for women workers in Mumbai and Delhi, contributes towards health disorders and hampers women's mobility within the reimits of the city. In another significant film (*Morality TV and the Loving Jihad*, 2007), she sheds light on the ways in which women's choices, sexual practices, and movement within smaller towns are policed in order to ensure female subordination within a rapidly modernising urban landscape (both films were shown as part of BKK's film programme at the Cornerhouse, Manchester). Some film-makers, however (such as Madhusree Dutta and *Memories of Fear* (1995), Manjira Dutta and *Rishte* (1995), Madhu Kishwar and *Six Short Films*, and Nighat Said Khan and *Islam and Feminism* (1991)), reject 'soft feminism' to exhibit the problems of women living in the shadow of rape, dowry, sexual harassment, adultery, female foeticide, and discriminatory legal systems. This group of film-makers, who are social activists and who played a pioneering role in creating a distribution market for women's films (Gupta), also illustrate the contradictions and complexities faced by organizations in supporting causes for the safety and dignity of women.

In contrast, new genres of film-makers are moving away from overt feminist debates towards representing the urban not as a category but as a process, with their films reflecting the ways in which their own changing subjectivities are mapped onto complex urban identities. This trend is scripted into a film by Priya Sen, *About Elsewhere* (2007), exhibited within BKK at the Leeds Art Gallery. Crossing over two cities, the film draws out aspects and images from the lives of queer people. It challenges the fixedness of urban identities and depicts the pursuit of desire as a journey through personhood and bodies, through time and space, and through many cities within a city. The film-maker eventually uses the analogy of the shell as she charts the bright and bleak city within her own self, sexuality, and susceptibilities. Likewise, in her short but vibrant portrayal of the streets of Dhaka, Yasmine Kabir (whose films *The Last Rites* and *A Certain Liberation* were exhibited within the BKK film programme), teams up with video singer Pothik Nobi to reflect the city as an astounding soundscape which is peculiarly normalised, and particularly lost in the bustle of everyday life. Capturing broad strokes of colour within surreal street art, smoke-filled streets, sweaty bodies, and sleepy faces, the director merges the animated city, the lively music of Pothik Nobi and Kabir's own take on urban energy, into a pulsating music video (released in 2007). 'Direct-direct' sings Nobi, his voice gliding across the fabric of urban existence in Dhaka.

In another noticeable trend, diasporic women film-makers often see the urban in South Asia through the lens of personal and familial journeys, preferring to turn the camera on their own lives instead of objectifying destitute communities. In her humorous documentary, *My Mother India* (2001), director Safina Uberoi reveals her unconventional, multicultural upbringing by a Sikh father and an Australian mother in the heart of Delhi. The documentary, however, becomes a commentary on the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in the capital which transformed and tore apart this quirky family. While the father decided to return to the purity of his faith, the anxious mother sent her children to live and study in Australia. The film offers a tumultuous tale of love, loss, and belonging sparked off by political events in postcolonial cities in India. Some other film-makers prefer to uncover and recreate the South Asian city within their diasporic lives, through inter-generational, illusionary, and culturally patterned sensory encounters (Shroff and Mitra; Naficy; Taussig). Born in Vancouver, Nisha Ganatra graduated from NYU's film school with an award-winning

student film, *Junky Punky Girlz* (1996). The story follows the trials of a young American-born Indian girl in New York's East Village who garners the support of her friends to pierce her nose. Her incapacity to attract the sympathy of a white woman in a body-piercing shop, and her lack of communication with a Hindi-speaking Indian nose-piercer, captures the isolation of a migrant girl trapped between two cultures. Produced by New Delhi Television (NDTV) Ltd, and directed by Natasha Badhwar and Radhika Bordia, *A Decent Samosa, Ya!* (2004) travelled from London to Birmingham filming performances in clubs, radio stations, South Asian neighbourhoods, and studio rehearsals; the film attempts to uncover British-Asians' experiments with multiculturalism. It features Hard Kaur's improvisations on rap music, Mohinder Bhamra and his pioneering Bhangra tunes, Johnny Kalsi of the Dhol Foundation, DJ Ritu's Bollywood remixes, musician Kuljit Bhamra, and Asian Dub Foundation's music activism. Through narrating the personalized histories of some upcoming and established urban Asian artists, the film offers an intimate story of diasporic South Asians redefining their identity through music.

'Documentaries are new Indian art. The consumers are insatiable.' In a conversation with Sen, a curator of films in London stated that the proliferation of women documentary film-makers in South Asia and the eclectic nature of their narrative streaks have also drawn the attention of a wide, international audience. A decade ago, film curators, festival directors, and galleries supporting resident artists from developing economies would have turned to the Middle East in search of city-based films, especially since they challenged the gap between 'the Orient and the Occident' while retaining their unique, urban legacies. In contemporary times, however, it is the summer of South Asian film-makers, and several documentaries about cities are finding their place in the sun (Gandy). The new breed of film-makers are able to embark upon and take the audience on journeys, often beyond the nation, even if they appear to be abstract, messy, and even pointless to some viewers (Rajadhyaksha and Willemsen). To resolve these discrepancies, various film associations are organising multiple screenings of Indian documentaries which are followed by talks with travelling directors who remain responsive to questions from an assorted, curious, and at times confused audience, the latter lacking knowledge about shifting gender politics in urban South Asia. Transnational funding bodies are increasingly open not just towards sponsoring film production but also towards organisations coordinating (not mainstream) film festivals in/about South Asia. Tongues on Fire, for example, an annual film festival celebrating the excellence and achievements of Asian women in cinema, is hosted at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) in London. The festival screens a number of acclaimed documentaries followed by master classes, thereby encouraging film directors, costume designers, camera aides, film technicians, and other support staff to interact with audiences. National and international media channels are also receptive to alternative and experimental films, and are offering airtime to documentaries instead of high-budget Bollywood entertainment. In a controversial turn in its content, Doordarshan, the state-controlled national channel in India (which has always remained conservative in its commitment to screening 'authentic culture' in South Asia), has started to air documentaries on cities, dealing with issues ranging from queer politics and same-sex love, to blatant failures of the state in improving the condition of cities in the region.

The popularity of women's short films (especially by women on women) from South Asia has penetrated transnational media research centres. Several university libraries are dashing to stock up on women's documentaries from the 'global South' to enhance academic curriculums. Faculty members and students from various disciplinary backgrounds (ranging from gender studies, to visual anthropology, to urban geography) are dabbling in film-making about non-western cities. Women directors from urban South

Asia are invited to 'guest-teach' on film courses, which in turn creates a fresh crop of film-makers who are keen to return to the city as the source of stark realities and blurry imaginations. Oscar-nominated film-maker Mira Nair, for example, arrived at Columbia University to instruct a class of students doing degrees in mass communication. She stumbled upon Sabrina Dhawan. Impressed by her creative potential, Nair eventually urged Dhawan to write a script for her next film. Fusing Hindi, Punjabi, and English, Dhawan wrote the multi-lingual script for *Monsoon Wedding* (2001). This film about chaotic urban family dynamics achieved enormous commercial and critical success, winning top honours at the Venice film festival. Dhawan went on to make her own short film, *Saanjh – As Night Falls* (2000), focusing on the anguish of a low-caste woman whose child dies in a middle-class compartment on a moving train near Delhi. She is forced by her fellow passengers to dispose of the dead body as the train rushes over the Ganges. This award-winning and chokingly dark film draws out the continuing superstitions surrounding caste and class discrimination in modern India.

Besides having easy access to film collections in academic libraries, media centres and private archives, directors are also training their attention on emerging DVD, Internet and digital technologies which have made the making of documentaries far less cumbersome. The availability of online films has created a generation of film-makers who are able to watch, experience, and learn from old and new documentaries from across the world. A number of women's online networks, and conversations on 'cyberfeminist' websites which comment on South Asian women's films have also impacted and transformed the character of film-making (Gajjala). Internet sites such as YouTube allow independent film-makers to upload their films, being appreciated and critiqued worldwide even though they never appear at private or public screenings. Some of these films do not require heavy financial investment, since they use scraps of film, advertisements, photographs, and digital tools to highlight alternative forms of expertise and aesthetics in documentary film-making. Besides technologies made available in the living room, the proliferation of cyberlabs allows film-makers to experiment with media production using different kinds of sound, multimedia, and radio content as a medium for the production of visual tracks. Access to new forms of equipment, ideas, and creativity in design has also created a genre of experimental film-makers, who instead of using moving images use snapshots, fragmented sounds, pieces of writing to produce knowledge about the city. Shumona Goel's film *The Paying Guest* (2004) perceives urban alienation in gritty photographs, industrial noises, recorded telephone calls, scattered pages from women's magazines, and a few moving images of the city. The feelings of despair and loneliness, captured in static photographs of a young female student searching for a home in Mumbai, reflect the 'small struggles' of migrant women negotiating the clamour and clutter of cities in South Asia. According to Goel, 'This is where my voyage into Mumbai as an immigrant film-maker intersects with the voyage of the protagonist in the film' (Goel personal interview).

Does the nature and content of the films described above suggest they can be considered documentaries at all? Since the beginning of cinema, documentary traditions across the film-making world emerged not only as an artistic resistance to newsreels but also as a state instrument to 'document' citizenship practices and serve the ideological and political agenda of the nation-state (for example, Films Divisions productions in the context of India). Avant-garde film in contrast has consistently stepped out of the shadows of national and transnational documentaries and focused on blurring the boundaries between art and the radically transformative potential in human encounters. According to Nichols (583), who explores the modernist foundations of avant-garde film:

From the vantage point of the avant-garde (film), the state and issues of citizenship were obscured by questions of perception and consciousness, aesthetics and ethics, behaviour and the unconscious, actions and desire. These questions were more challenging imperatives than those that preoccupied the custodians of state power.

Even though the value of terminology and nomenclatures wither away before the gamut of creative enterprise displayed by women film-makers, it may be valuable to position the burgeoning range of films about South Asian cities within categories beyond 'documentaries.'

In the West, mainstream film audiences are disciplined in the theatre. Theorists have long argued that the rise of mass culture in the West has resulted in the loss of community and obliterated informal, inter-personal interactions (Adorno and Horkheimer). Scholars studying spectatorship in South Asia, however, show how the absence of strict guiding etiquettes allows film-going to be a collective, participatory and social experience (Dwyer and Patel; Nandy; Srinivas). However, most studies on cinema in South Asia focus on mainstream *masala* movies, their escapist texts and subtexts, and locate the consumers of these films in their social, sensual, and sexual context (Booth; Derne; Desai, Dudrah, and Rai; Kakar). Non-fiction films with little or no 'entertainment' value remain limited to a particular class and gendered audience, and this has widened the gap between studies on cinema and documentaries (Barnouw), especially in South Asia. Regular visitors to retrospectives and screenings of documentary films, disinterested in the friendly aspect of collective film-going, inhabit a small niche in viewing cultures (McGarry; Sobchack).

This niche quality raises the question of whether regional documentaries using a popular medium to represent the city can search for an indigenous spectatorship beyond the educated, urban audience with an analytical mind. Even the overseas consumers of South Asian documentaries tend to be restricted to open-minded, disciplined, aesthetic, and elite film-goers. Several Indian documentary film-makers, however, have entered the domain of full-length feature films with their 'non-formula scripts,' exploring the idiosyncrasies and grimness of contemporary urban themes. They have succeeded enormously in the commercial market. This trend has impacted viewing practices, especially in cities, where the audience is seeking out sympathetic, often intellectual experiences beyond the social and entertaining component of watching film. In the following section, film-maker Thakker offers autobiographical yet ethnographic snippets from life and film-making experiences in Mumbai; she speaks to that metropolitan audience desiring acceptance and integration into a larger urban community as a willing city-dweller, a worker and a woman.

II

Neha's Mumbai, Neha's film

The bubble

Members' Meeting, Brindaban Condominium, 23 April 2010:

'I had shampoo in my hair, I was in my towel and the maid was bringing me buckets.'

'A bucket bath sounds cool, it'll be like the good old days.'

'Those servants from the other building come and bathe here. Why?'

'They fill up the water when they are washing the cars'

'Could we get a bore well?'

'I know we should get a booster pump!!'

'Isn't that illegal?'

'Let's just get the pump!'

May 2010. Along with the rest of Mumbai we faced a water crisis. In our suburban building society, with a 20 percent water cut, brown muddy water procured via tanker trucks from the outskirts of the city trickled into our marbled bathrooms. Our building society meeting that month was volatile. Tempers flew, old Sindhi men blew their fuse, and corporate executive types stormed out over being denied the basic luxury of taking a shower. Subjects debated included putting locks on water taps accessed by staff, cries promoting the joys of a bucket bath, appeals that Skodas and BMWs need not be washed every day, that servants need not bathe every day. The saner of these measures were implemented: cars would be washed twice a week, servants would not be denied a bath, and we would embrace the bucket bath as if it were our long lost friend. And, finally, the promised salvation would be the installation of an illegal booster pump. However, everyone had their own take on water conservation. Some intelligent chaps with Harvard business degrees instructed their chauffeurs to wash their cars every day with water from buildings across the street, and they frequented the neighbourhood club to get showers with optimum water pressure. As it turned out the promised booster pump did not resolve anything because all the buildings around us had the same idea; we were boosting pressure on the pipes below us, sucking each other dry. These well-travelled, global citizens could plainly see the economic ties of Mumbai to New York, but failed to see that the pipes in their homes were connected to the water supply of an entire city dealing with a water crisis. Water conservation meant conserving our building's supply and usurping it from someone else.

Parag Khanna in 'Beyond City Limits,' an article about the new age of unfettered urban development, says: 'Globalization allows major cities to pull away from their home states.' He refers to 'the massive and potentially dangerous wealth gap between city and countryside in second-world countries such as Brazil, China, India.' But we are so absurdly globalised that our world has shrunk even further to incorporate only that little space for me and maybe the guy who lives downstairs; let's just forget about the poor neighbours across the street.

My city, my Mumbai is beautiful yet fragile. I, like many others, live apart from the masses that are packed into slums and trains. We live alongside those sandwiched bodies, but need never inhabit the same space. Our painted world keeps us ensconced in the solace of our air-conditioned car, or the security of our home comfortably positioned on the tenth floor of a spindly residential high-rise, with a distant view of a hazy Arabian sea. With everything from our vegetables to our sanitary napkins delivered to us, we need never leave the cocoon of comfort, because it's like living in New York or London, except for that part where you enjoy stepping out of the cocoon.

The bubble bursts

Once on the street, the tenuous membrane goes 'pop,' and we are cruelly jolted out of the fairy tale. In the rough and tumble chaos of the city below our high-rises, I have committed an infraction. The auto-rickshaw driver screams for my blood as my BMW crushes the black and yellow cheapie metal of his fender. I am surrounded by a mob of frustration in a crumbling, bumbling city. They distrust me, I am an outsider. I am a woman, my family roots are in Sindh, I am fair, I am not a slum dweller, I don't use public transport. I am an intruder on the street, which is their home, their playground, their school, their auditorium, their dance floor, their club, their temple.

Mumbai is at the centre of India's rural-urban migration. In 1971, slum dwellers accounted for one in six Mumbaikars. Today, nearly 55 percent of Mumbai's population lives in a slum, and occupies only 12 percent of the land. During festivals like Ganpati or Ambedkar Jayanti, slum dwellers spill over into and reclaim the streets of Mumbai. At the height of festivities, a giant truck arrives carrying not merely a religious idol (which gets relegated to a small hand cart), but a music system, a DJ, giant booming speakers, flashing lights, and a disco ball. On the streets, young people gyrate late into the night to Bollywood tracks, and in recent years Shakira and Beyonce were added to the playlist. The scene resembles a nightclub rather than a religious festival. Roads are cordoned off, traffic diverted; the police hang around watching the melee as thumping music echoes and bounces off the apartment blocks while the mute statues of Dr Ambedkar or Ganpati Bappa look on. The disapproving and disgusted rich, like the men in my building, retreat further into enclaves of exclusivity – gated communities that have a garden, a pool, a gym, are patrolled by security guards and video surveillance; malls that forbid entry to people who don't dress like average middle-class consumers; clubs and hotels that display gold plated signs saying 'Rights of Admission Reserved.' Today we recoil into our protected sanctuaries by choice, but tomorrow we will live in them through force, through guns, and with fear.

A world that begins and ends at our doorstep is not sustainable, because it disregards the larger systems at work, the network of rich connections, and our interrelatedness to our ecosystem. When we live in denial of the other side, there can only be explosions, of many bubbles bursting. Yet we have grown accustomed to the multiplying force of violence that surrounds us. We live in a tinderbox. A look, a handshake, a drawing, a word ignites a spiral of looping violence.

Home?

In 1999, having studied architecture and photography, I extensively photographed and documented *chawls* and *wadis* all over Mumbai, from Girgaon to Vile Parle. I discovered courtyards of quietude in the midst of the din, and crumbling structures that have since been lost to the city's relentless redevelopment. I am drawn to these communities, of old structures and stories, because of the changing face of my city. For the first 15 years of my life, my Mumbai that used to be a Bombay, remained the same. The locations of my childhood memories remained unchanged. But today if I leave the city for a month, when I come back whole buildings have disappeared, a familiar road is no longer recognizable as a mammoth flyover cuts through it. And I wonder, is this the road to home?

I am drawn to these characters and stories that are a departure from my own life. In them I see the reflection of my own urban alienation. But while I am alienated from the theatre of the street, they are simply denied the right to a decent standard of living and are excluded from the larger discourse of ownership of the city.

Beyond the bubble

In 2006 I wrote and directed a short film, *Erased* (2009),² about a street child, as part of Dev Benegal's program '24 x 7: Making Movies.' Entries were invited for scripts dealing with the theme of 'Laughter and Terror.' Twenty-seven film-makers were selected for the program that extended over the course of two months, and involved film-making and script workshops.

The focus of my script was on the attempts of a street child to make connections with people while coping with violence and terror on the streets. To cast the protagonist of the film, 'Chiklu,' we contacted NGOs that worked with street children, and spent two months interviewing and auditioning over 40 children living in the slums and streets of Mumbai. My initial idea for the film dealt with a street child longing for a mother figure. However, through the process of meeting the children I realised that despite their love of *Tom and Jerry*, they were mature far beyond their years. These children would often shake my hand and their fingers would linger on my palms for a bit too long. The longing was definitely not for a mother's touch.

Before I began work on *Erased*, I had a simplified view of issues surrounding street children. Like most people I felt that they should be off the streets and in school; however, the children themselves had different views on the subject.

Street children can be categorised into diverse groups. There are the children from the slums who had a roof over their heads but spend most of their day on the street, either working or playing. Some of these children went to school and lead a somewhat structured life compared to the other street kids. Then there are the street children who arrived as runaways from all over India, often abandoned by abusive parents, or forced by poverty to earn a living. An NGO, Sadak Chaap, ran a centre for these children, in dingy concrete rooms by the railway tracks. They provided computer classes for the children, as well as a place to sleep. But there was no compulsion on the children to live in the centre. Most of the centres and groups that worked with children provided them with a flexibility to come and go as they pleased. The final category of street children is the most destitute: these are the drug-addicted children that used glue or brown sugar. I will never forget the eyes of an eight-year-old boy I met at Reay Road. As I asked him where he lived, paranoia set in as he was convinced I was going to steal the leftover *prasad* (food from a temple) from his hands.

The casting process took us to NGO centres all across the city from Churchgate to Dadar, from Marine Drive to Byculla, and from a neat school environment of the Salaam Baalak Trust, to the leaking, green, make-shift rooms of the Don Bosco Centre near the Dadar railway station. The NGO Childline operates out of Nair hospital and acts as an emergency tele-helpline for children in distress. In case of an emergency, the volunteers would offer crisis intervention and be by a child's side within an hour. At Childline we met Syed, a lanky 20-year-old volunteer, who neglected his official duties to serve as our guide through the slums, the main source of these distress calls. My assistant Hitesh, Syed, and I and held auditions in muddy alleys along sewage canals blocked with dirty plastic, in dusty playgrounds, and on crowded pavements.

During the auditions, the children regaled us with their *dhadkans* (heartbeat songs) from obscure Madhuri Dixit movies, to Hrithik Roshan's *Krish* impersonations, to folk songs and poems. The children from the Akanksha centre at a Byculla school used our video test to practice their newly acquired English language skills. The lovable rogues from Sadak Chaap peppered my script with their filmy dialogues. They strolled onto my screen like little men showing off their machismo, cracking crude jokes, and laughing hysterically at their own flippancy, while they cheered on each other's stellar camera performance. Wearing oversized men's shirts they threw their gangly limbs about as they tried to seduce my camera with their bravado. They claimed to have no fear of anything human, only of gods and ghosts. These little men often had no vision of a future. In the words of one eight-year-old: '*Khane ka, ghumne ka, jhagda karne ka, aur maar khane ka*' (To eat, to roam about, to fight and to get beaten). When these young *chai wallahs* (tea sellers), *chikki* sellers, or runaway *zari* workers did harbour ambitions, these ranged from returning

home to their village, to becoming a *saab* (a rich man), a policeman, a conductor, or a Bollywood hero.

The child who eventually played the main character in my film was 11-year-old Ansar who lived in Jeejamata Nagar, a slum behind Nehru Planetarium. In an upper level room, he lived with his mother, an extended family of aunts and uncles, and an older brother who played cricket all day and never worked. Ansar would spend his day alternating between fishing in the sea, selling books at the Haji Ali traffic signal, playing cricket, and praying at the mosque. He said he had been to school but did not like the teachers because they were too strict. He enjoyed the independence of life on the street despite its uncertainty and violence.

The NGOs placed upon the children the responsibility of their own education and livelihood, especially since the children had grown accustomed to autonomy and resisted a restrictive environment. In some sense they had outgrown their childhood, and were independent men supporting themselves. Additionally it was difficult to pin them down to a particular routine, schedule, or place. The children who lived in the slums had somewhat regulated lives, but despite our meeting, Ansar was difficult. I would have to do the rounds of places he would frequent: searching for him at the slum, the traffic signal, the mosque, and by the seaside, asking acquaintances where they had seen him last. The title of my film *Erased* referred to this loss of innocence, a loss of childhood that I encountered in the streets of Mumbai.

The 24 × 7 program involved rigorous pre-production over the course of two months and then shooting, editing and post-producing the film in a span of 24 hours. With Nehru planetarium looming in the background, and under the watchful gaze of a security guard, we held costume trials outside the slum. Ansar donned a ‘Superman’ shirt to play the hero of my film, Chiklu. At Jeejamata Nagar we also found Azhar, a plucky eight-year-old boy with twinkling eyes, who would play the part of Chiklu’s brother, Chhotu. The two boys lived in the same slum but had never met.

We shot the film from 8am to 8pm, and edited it from 9pm to 8am the following day. Like Ansar, who had a beat frequenting the different areas in his neighbourhood, my main character Chiklu had a routine – from his early morning bath at a drum of water near his pavement home, to walking through the busy market hawking his wares, to soaking in moments of aimless wandering, and playing marbles with his friends in a park.

Reviewing the film, Pooja Rangan, an urban film-maker and research scholar who explores the use of autoethnography to study subaltern subjects, writes: ‘*Erased* follows a street boy as he weaves an astonishing path across Mumbai, less interested in selling flowers than in seeking out small sensuous moments, nuggets of glitter and gloss that emerge from amidst the grime of his life on the streets’ (Rangan). The city, thus, is an important aspect of the film. Public spaces such as the streets, alleys, and parks are Chiklu’s playground, where he pieces together an identity that comforts him. These small markers serve as a means of defining home, and exerting his ownership and control over the places where he sleeps, works, eats and plays.

Bollywood entranced

The film locates the street child in the city as a character in isolation lost in an internal fantastical world. For most street kids ‘Bollywood’ epitomizes this fantasy world with its larger-than-life, glamorous film stars. It offers an escape from the grim reality of their lives. The premise of the script evolved from the question of how a street child would gain access to and possess a little piece of this magical world. The final script focused

on a boy's emerging sexuality, through his obsession with a poster of Sudhir Mishra's *Chameli*, a film featuring star heroine Kareena Kapoor as a prostitute.

Living in Mumbai, it is impossible to escape Bollywood. From newspapers to mainstream news channels to billboards for films and TV shows, you cannot escape your friendly, generally male, mostly aging, neighbourhood star beaming down upon you, selling everything under the sun all parcelled into the aura of his godhood. And I admit I am as star-struck as the average person. I am intrigued by how we obsess over our icons, how we assimilate them into our being, how we use the pieces of the escapist fantasies they offer us. Most people from all over the world have been exposed to it, from Raj Kapoor's enduring popularity in Russia to Shah Rukh mania on the streets of New York. However, my 11-year-old flower seller views Bollywood through a wholly sexual agenda. Rangan, in her review, continues: 'His saving grace? A poster of his Bollywood goddess Kareena Kapoor, which he returns to adorn with his meagre findings at the end of the day . . . the film captures a quality of survival that is nearly always effaced in documentaries about street-children – their sexuality' (Rangan). The city is discriminatory. We are always conscious of the handful that sit above and preside over us, as well as the millions below in what we perceive as the pits of hell. However, after my experiences with the children I could see beyond my own narrow perceptions of life on the street. My film, while it acknowledges the bleakness of the street child's life, celebrates the passion and the sensuality, of the pubescent desire bubbling in the cockfolds of a teenage boy.

Looking back at the film, *Erased* was inspired by someone we as children called 'mad woman.' She hung around in tattered clothes near the Hare Krishna temple in Juhu. All through our childhood we saw her in the neighbourhood, either by the small cross in the street, or sprawled on the road. We would stare, make cruel jokes about her appearance, or fearfully avoid her gaze if she caught us gaping into her manic eyes. It was this woman that my main character Chiklu would fetishise and attempt to connect with. However, unlike the street children, it was particularly difficult to cast for this character from among the women living on the pavement. They were shy and reticent; mothers and daughters too burdened with the responsibility of home, cowering behind giant male bullies – husbands, fathers, or brothers – who controlled their movements. I knew my next film would deal with these women who live on the margins of the city, and the ways in which they negotiate the everyday force of patriarchy.

Women's bubbles

Imagine a police *chowki* in the city. A policeman's moustache wiggles as he sits behind his desk rubbing his generous potbelly.

Police man: Name?

Woman: Shikha.

Full Name?

Shikha Pandit.

Husband's Name?

I don't have a husband.

Father's Name?

I don't use my father's name.

But you must have a father!

I don't use his name.

One minute madam, then there must be a husband.

No. There isn't.

Then give me your father's name. I have to write something in this report.

Can't you just use my name?

Madam I will put your father's name.

But, I have not used it for 25 years.

Then whose name did you use?

My husband's.

I thought you said you didn't have a husband!

I don't. I am divorced.

You lied to me!

No I did not. He is not my husband anymore.

Still you lied!

I've been divorced for seven years now.

So what? He was your husband. Admit you lied.

Just put my name.

You liar! Father's name?

It's just Shikha, Shikha Pandit.

Madam! See you are making me very angry no. All the lying. Shikha what Pandit.

Ok, please don't get upset, it's Mangaldas.

See that was so simple Shikha Mangaldas Pandit.

At a police station, a woman cannot register a complaint without providing her father's or her husband's name. It is essential that she have a male 'guardian,' as a divorced, unmarried, or single working woman is still an outcast in a patriarchal society. Most contemporary middle-class women living in the city are independent, and in a position to look after their home as well as support themselves. Urban educated men are proud of their progressive values; unlike their fathers, they permit their wives to work. While the urban Indian woman has stepped into the workplace, the Indian man has yet to step into the kitchen. Even cosmopolitan professional men are acutely homophobic and uncomfortable with the feminine. Women remain equally complicit in perpetuating masculine myths. We are indulgent of their attitudes and laugh away their inadequacies putting it all down to genetic programming. As if housework was beyond their DNA. Even in twenty-first-century urban India, the larger narrative, the back slapping, the louder voices are all male.

Like most women in India, I too was supposed to be born a boy. My sisters were also conceived in the hope of the prodigal son. But thankfully I was one of three girls, so I never had the experience of being treated differently from a male sibling. However, I am surrounded by men who would not let me forget my gender. At our building society meetings, for instance, middle-aged men delegated the meeker, more 'feminine' jobs of beautification to the women.

During my teenage years, as a reaction to being violated by the male gaze, I would dream of a gadget that was triggered by my thoughts and would send an electrical pulse straight to the testicles of lecherous men. In India thousands of women are violated each day. Thus women's vigilantism has emerged as a strong voice from different regions – from the Blank Noise project in Bangalore protesting eve teasing on the street, to the Gulabi Gang in northern India where rural women are learning to master the *lathi* (stick) to secure their rights, to the Shiv Sena's women's wing that secures justice for abused wives – protest is everywhere. Women have appropriated male violence and are using it to empower themselves in public spaces, in public memory, as well as within the family. There is a shift in women's roles as she plays the bully, not the victim. However,

I sincerely hope for a future when we as women would not feel the need to resort to violence to be heard.

As a film-maker, I am drawn to such stories about (both) men and women. I like to be identified as a *woman* film-maker: I feel there are perspectives of women and narratives about women that have not yet been told. But above all I am always conscious of segregation; of the inequalities of 'male' and 'female'; of the norms and moralities of femininity; of being at constant play and engaged in the implicit and explicit reinforcement of power relations; of towing lines between acquiring status, money and power, and having a measured conscious response to class hierarchies. And as a storyteller, I feel responsible to tell other women's stories. I am sensitive to issues concerning the city, the dynamics of the street, class barriers, as well as violence, from the physically overt to the more subtle language of words and gestures. I aspire to use the narratives of my fictional stories to discover new worlds, reveal insights, humanize the marginalized, and instigate debate.

III

In this essay the authors have tried to show how the contemporary city has emerged as a fascinating subject of research and remuneration for South Asian women film-makers. Meandering through a vast plain of topics and technologies, modern documentary films have materialised as a crucial meaning-making mechanism within the realm of urban visual media within and outside the region. New documentaries are transforming the nature and culture of film-making, screening, and viewership, and also impacting the ideas and identities of the directors themselves. To sustain her commitment to the urban, to womanhood, and to making film, Thakker often finds solace in Arundhati Roy's words: 'To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To *never look away*. And never, never, to forget' (*To Love and the Rise of Hope*). In this essay the authors bring forth this directorial spirit of remembering, reviving and representing the city in South Asia.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Mumbai-based film-maker Shumona Goel for her comments on this article.
2. To watch the film link visit <http://vimeo.com/cuttingstories/erased>.

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