



India Foundation for the Arts

Quarterly Newsletter - July-September 2006
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Editorial

Welcome to IFA's first newsletter which comes to you at an exciting point in our history. We have supported 174 projects across the country over the last eleven years and are ready to venture into areas new to us.

The core of our work remains grant-making, however, and in recent months we have continued to fund projects under the two unique programmes we launched last year - **Extending Arts Practice** and **New Performance**. More on these projects in the sections below. Many of them will eventually take the form of public events (performances, exhibitions and so on) that this newsletter will keep you informed about.

Meanwhile, our decade-old **Arts Research and Documentation** programme, which has a portfolio of 91 projects, underwent a review at the end of May. The review panel - made up of artists, teachers and research scholars - was unanimous in their appreciation of the achievements of the programme. They recommended, though, that in future we choose specific themes in arts research and documentation and invite proposals in response to these. Another suggestion was that we ourselves identify projects worth funding - particularly in the areas of research undertaken in various Indian languages and archive building in research institutions. For those of you interested in applying, the revised programme will be announced in October of this year.

In mid-July, scholars Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Dilip Chitre, Prabodh Parikh and R. Nandkumar met at IFA to report on and discuss their year-old project to document and edit selections of writings on the visual arts in Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati and Malayalam. The group will meet again early next year to decide on how best to compile and publish this rich and varied literature on art from the first half of the twentieth century.

Shai Heredia, curator of India's only experimental film festival -

Experimenta – moved from Mumbai in early July to join us, and now heads our Extending Arts Practice programme. She continues to be actively involved in showcasing experimental film and will be curating a package of experimental Indian cinema for an exhibition-cum-seminar on the city of Bombay to be held at the Tate Modern in London in mid-September.

And after eight years in grant-making, I have now taken charge of IFA's communications – an important wing of an organisation that is increasingly conscious of the need to make its work better known.

We have also realised lately that in addition to supporting specific projects *in* the arts, it might be important to strengthen the environment *for* the arts. How should we do this? What are the gaps in infrastructure and resources that IFA can help to fill? We have, for instance, been concerned about the poor state of documentary film distribution in the country. To begin with we are talking to others already working in this field – in the 'Point of View' section below, Ranjan De and Gargi Sen, of the **Magic Lantern Foundation**, describe what their organisation is doing for film distribution.

Coming editions of this newsletter will bring you more interviews and write-ups to do with support systems for the arts, as well as other arts-related issues.

Welcome to IFA!

Anjum Hasan
Communications Editor

New Work

A puppet theatre artist, a singer of the Sufiyana Kalam from rural Rajasthan, an NGO that wishes to introduce an arts-from-waste project to school children, and a research centre whose members study and document Kolkata's cultural history – these are just some of the individuals and organisations that have recently received IFA's support.

Our grants continue to cover a wide range of practices in the arts – from institutional projects that make the arts available to as many people as possible to individual undertakings that are essentially concerned with one person's practice. You can read more on recent grants in the Grant Profiles section of our website at the following link:

<http://www.indiaifa.org/grantprofiles.asp?inputtypebreadcrumb=grant+profile>

In the Public Eye

Many of the recent outcomes of our grants are of a documentary nature even as they are impressive works of art. Ramu Ramanathan's play on Mumbai's mill-workers documents their unique and now vanishing working class culture, just as Sandesh Bhandare's book on Tamasha is a valuable record of the form. Lalit Vachani's film on the street theatre group Jan Natya Manch is, similarly, a documentation of the group's vibrant political theatre.

Theatre

'Cotton 56, Polyester 84', a play on the history and culture of Mumbai's mill-workers, which was developed with IFA support, premiered in Mumbai in February 2006. Directed by Sunil Shanbag, the play was translated from English into Hindi by Chetan Datar. Since that enthusiastically received premiere, the play has been performed more than a dozen times and Sunil is currently on a second IFA grant to present the play to working class communities in Maharashtra and elsewhere.

Reviews of 'Cotton 56, Polyester 84' celebrated the play's authentic portrayal of chawl life, with one newspaper calling it "a gritty true-to-life saga".

Photography & Literature

Also in Mumbai, playwright Vijay Tendulkar released, on March 31, photographer Sandesh Bhandare's IFA-supported book, *Tamasha - Ek Rangadi Gammal*. The media coverage of the book launch and of Sandesh's work (in both the English language and Marathi press) has been extensive.

The book is a rich visual encyclopaedia of Tamasha. Its 250 photographs and the accompanying text in Marathi illustrate and describe the different forms of Tamasha alive today and the nomadic lifestyles of its performers. Sandesh has succeeded in capturing the form's most animated elements: the expressiveness of its performers, the enthusiasm of its audiences, the lively domesticity that is found backstage and the continuing vitality of the form.

Film

Meanwhile, *Natak Jari Hai*, Lalit Vachani's IFA-supported film on the country's best-known street theatre group, Jana Natya Manch, premiered in July and August at the 17th Marseille International Documentary festival in Marseille,

France, and at the India International Centre, Delhi and Max Mueller Bhavan, Kolkata.

Frontline magazine's full-length article on the film called it "a clear-eyed, gently intimate look at the history of the group as also the diverse backgrounds and ideologies of the people that comprise it".

Visual Arts

A scooter converted into a glass-topped table, a rocking chair embedded with nails and papered with images of Delhi street life, and a jack-in-the box idea combined with a shadow puppetry one - these were some of the ingenious artworks on display as part of the exhibition held on June 14 in the studios of the Khoj International Artists Association in Delhi. The exhibition marked the culmination of this year's edition of Khoj's IFA-funded annual artists' residency for recent fine arts graduates - PEERS. This year's PEERS brought together fresh graduates from art schools in Baroda, Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Shantiniketan and Delhi. More on the day-to-day excitement of PEERS 2006 can be read on the following blog (<http://peers-ki-khoj.blogspot.com/>).

Our Events

Sitting at two ends of a simply designed stage, Shabana Azmi and Javed Akhtar brought to life Shaukat Azmi's memoirs and the letters she exchanged with her spouse, Kaifi Azmi. **Kaifi Aur Main**, performed in Bangalore on July 29, drew a large audience - the 1000-seat St. John's Auditorium was packed almost to capacity. The media response was positive too, with reviewers calling the performance "...a theatrical collage of some memorable moments in the life of Kaifi Azmi and wife Shaukat..." and "a cathartic, enriching experience... for all those who gathered to know more about a man who etched a lightening path between a *mandir* and a *masjid*".

Kaifi Aur Main was the latest in a series of events we have been organising since 2002 to generate funds to support our work and to help in the spread of cultural events from fields like music, dance, and theatre.

Point of View

The last ten years have seen a blossoming of documentary filmmaking in the country. In fact 'documentary' as a category for films made outside the mainstream film industry has itself become a limiting term, given that such films now cover a very broad spectrum - from short fiction films to abstract,

experimental works to records of cultural or social practices to issue-based documentaries to personal explorations of life in contemporary India. The 18 films that IFA has supported, for instance, testify to the range and energy that now characterise this field.

The opportunities to view these films – through film festivals and independent screenings – have also increased alongside but what is still needed is an effective marketing system that will take the dozens of films made every year to shop-shelves or on-line stores.

The Delhi-based trust Magic Lantern Foundation (MLF) has over the last three years been involved in setting up and running a film distribution system. IFA talks to **Ranjan De** and **Gargi Sen** of MLF about what this system implies for the future of film marketing in India.

What are you offering to Indian filmmakers and to the potentially huge audience for 'non-commercial' Indian films in India and abroad?

There are hundreds of films being made today that are of very good quality, tell compelling stories, or exist simply as experiment with form. Some have the ability to touch the audience with questions or expressions, while some take people on an exploration of other arts: the range today is truly wide.

However, once the film is made, a few screenings are organized in some auditoriums (usually in cities), and it is entered in a few national and international festivals. Then the filmmaker has to move on to something more, something different, something new.

Also not all filmmakers make films that are supported by funding. For these filmmakers, apart from screening the film to as many people as possible, it is also important to sell copies and recover costs. It is very difficult, if not impossible, for a filmmaker to both make films and take them around. Of course some filmmakers have been doing that for years due to the lack of any alternative, and must have done it quite successfully, but it may not be possible for every filmmaker to do that. That's when we began to think about the distribution initiative.

For the audience, as I mentioned earlier, it is useful to find a large number of films on various themes, stories told in different styles, some that throw you off your seat, while some make you think, all under one roof. And if you go through the range of films we have got together, almost 70 films from all over the world, their range is amazing - from imperialist foreign policy of the US to Mariammal, a Dalit woman who spends her days cleaning shit from the streets of Madurai;

from an exploration of an artists workshop where the line between the filmmaker and the artists become blurred, to a journey through Gujarat in 2002, where this precise delineation is very sharp indeed; and many such extraordinary films. We will continue to add to this collection.

What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced?

Several. For example, right in the beginning, when we decided to do something about distribution, the very first challenge was to convince ourselves that we could venture into something like this. Because we have never really handled anything that required any kind of business acumen. Whenever we attempted to, I don't think we did it too well.

However, when we felt we would go ahead, several challenges came up, which were more to do with functional aspects. To begin with, we needed to draw up a contract with filmmakers with all the terms and conditions. We went to a number of lawyers and discussed with them, but failed to arrive at a consensus. Here we were talking about a non-commercial distribution mechanism, which was very different from how large scale commercial distribution happens, and all legal frameworks are built around the latter. Simply, the issue of who has how many rights itself took a long time to settle. So it took a lot of effort to come up with the kind of contract we have today, which we feel is fair to both parties.

Pricing the films was a big challenge and something that we are still not too happy with. 'Reaching out' may sound like two little words, but it is not easy. To cut a long story short, there were many functional challenges simply because we had never operated in this realm of business, market and commerce and we had to reorient ourselves accordingly. And newer challenges keep cropping up every day.

What is most important, the biggest challenge could have been to actually get films to distribute. In that respect, I must say we have been really lucky. We got a tremendous response from the filmmakers, many of whom just gave us their films completely on trust, even before we had finalized the legalities or were still struggling to put the whole thing together. Also, many foreign filmmakers, who had very little interaction with us, trusted us with their films, even though we didn't have a system of paying them royalties in place. They mostly knew us because we had organized two film festivals during the two World Social Forums, one in Mumbai and then in Porto Alegre. This response really gave us a lot of encouragement.

Are there other bodies - educational institutions, funders, film collectives, film festivals - that you think could play a role in film distribution? Are there ways in which you would like them to collaborate with you?

All of them can play a very important role in this entire initiative. Take educational institutions. We have found students to be the most motivated viewers of the kind of films that we are dealing with. These are people who are open to a diverse range of thoughts and ideas and they have tremendous energy to organize events to screen such films. Many of them already have film clubs in their colleges that are looking for material. From the commercial angle, universities and colleges can support this initiative by buying films for their students. In fact, university sales are a big support for the independent films made abroad, especially in the USA. Funders, film collectives and festivals can all be excellent media to spread the word around. Film collectives can actually help in creating the discerning audience who would prefer to watch something different, something more meaningful and thought provoking, than the usual stuff dumped on us by TV or commercial cinema.

Finally we need to build an audience because for whatever reason, the terms 'documentary', 'non-feature' or 'educational' give rise to a feeling that these are 'boring stuff'. It is not that the same news stories appearing in every single news channel or the same actors playing the same characters in every other serial or film, or the same film songs playing on every single channel, whether TV or radio, or the same ads appearing everywhere, are very exciting alternatives. But for whatever reason, this slotting has happened. And it will require a lot of effort to break this tag and build up an audience, and all these actors can play a very important role in this direction.

Do you think an effective distribution system can in the long run help to subsidise the cost of filmmaking in India or is distribution only a way of ensuring that films reach their audiences?

People keep asking us this question, as if we have really thought the whole thing through with projections and all the corporate stuff. Honestly, we don't have a convincing answer. We feel very strongly that it has the potential to do both, reach films to their audience - that is the first necessity - as well as support independent filmmaking, not only by subsidizing or recovering part of the cost, but actually raising enough resources to fund independent productions. But it won't happen in a day or two. It will take a lot of hard and sustained work, but we can see it appearing in the horizon, slowly and steadily.

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