

“Hidden from History”: Imaging the ‘Subaltern’

Introduction

Independent film is alternative to mainstream cinema. It is counter-cinematic to the dominant ideologies of Hollywood, Bollywood or any hegemonies. The commercial realm of film making for ‘entertainment’ has the machinery of industry backing and distribution, thereby the power to present a certain reality that deliberately ignores the social complexities of life.

Working as an independent in the New Zealand sense* I seek to re-present the flip side of this from every angle.

By bringing attention to identities and realities ignored by established hegemonies, my work pushes the boundaries beyond the ideologies of the NZ film industry and television networks. With this comes isolation: there is no salary, the financial structures of support are not available to me, funding is difficult, I am responsible for marketing and distribution. This is difficult because theatrical outlets are controlled by capital. Alternatively, I am free from commercial pressures, censorship, and I get to own my own work. My main outlets are community and social work conferences, international film festivals, museums, galleries, and university classrooms...

“where film consumption can be challenged, and where different sensitivities and new forms of subjectivities and resistance are possible.” 1

My work is framed outside of institutions and seeks to redress social disparities. The films are personal statements, subjective relationships between art and society. English was not my first language. The films derive from a visual sense that became increasingly dominant in forming my aesthetic. While thinking in images, I wished to convey social and political meaning, to give visibility to those like myself whose ‘histories from below’ were silenced. My inspiration came from oral traditions of my people in India. The ancient wisdoms of my grandmothers and grandfathers. Our philosophies and histories and ways...

“Histories from below are usually written from above. A reminder of the enormous distance between the subaltern and the intellectual.”

“Insurrection of subjugated voices in the fields of feminism, black, gay and postcolonial studies has been led by marginalised groups...2

Within this body of work are fragmented voices resisting dominant discourses. Yet these fragments are a whole unto themselves, not defined by any other. I am excavating my own historical sites, informed by my lineage and the voices of subjugated others. Academic theory and ideas inform me as tools, not as dogma, but as strategies to empower me.

*"We can read ourselves against another people's pattern, but since it is not ours we emerge as its effects, its errata, its counternarratives. Whenever we try to narrate ourselves we appear as dislocations in their discourse."*³

By (re)presenting ourselves we resist being misread or being someone else's 'errata'. Within the discourse of my first film, "**Poonam**", is illustrated other people's reading of us as Indian women, but we speak to and for ourselves to address and narrate ourselves in our own context. We cannot be reduced to an idea of what an Indian woman is. We are defining ourselves out of the heterogeneous and multi-plexities of feminism.

In **Poonam** we subvert the expectations of the Hindu hegemony, especially marriage, by reconstructing subjects who are indifferent to it.

The women in **Poonam** have descended from various backgrounds: Anglo/Indian, European/Indian and Agricultural/village Indian. Their families have resided in New Zealand for 100 years or more. The women document why their families came to New Zealand.

Poonam translated means the fifteenth day of the moon. Noovratri, (nine nights), a festival meaning nine days of intimacy with the Mother Goddess, starts on the new moon. It finishes on the 15th, or full moon. This ritual was significant for rural/peasant people. Some agricultural people who came to New Zealand adhered to Earth/Goddessworship. They still carry on these rituals today, which is what you see in **Poonam**.

One woman tells of her great grandparents, the British Army officer and his wife, how they left India in the 1890's when exogamy was stigmatised, and being an officer and being British, was allowed to bring his wife and settle in the colony of New Zealand.

Another family identified as Anglo Indians left after Indian Independence, were considered hybrids, but were also British subjects, not Indian, were given British passports then chose to come to New Zealand.

In New Zealand there is an essentialising of Indians as "Hindoo", and I wanted to show we were not homogenous, nor were we all Hindu. A major museum in Wellington recently had an exhibition on Indian communities, dominated by that hegemonic group. The administration who had the exhibition have not understood that there has been 100 years of *other* Indians' history in this land.

Removed from an Indian context though, the women in **Poonam** are New Zealanders who have grown up here. A diasporic mix of identities developed in us from intellectual and political cross-overs. The underlying themes running through

Poonam contain signs of the women's movement. Yet feminism which as evolved in the women gives us liberty to carve out lifestyles which involve other cultural/ideological mixes.

Poonam women opt out of the tradition of heterosexuality, the unspoken subjectivity is shown through signifiers pointing to 'subversion', queerness. Women-only spaces are documented throughout. This points to complex identities through self-definitions.

The film contains ethnic women made up of mostly friends, family, and the Indian Communities. The images of Indian women are validated through festivals, rituals, folk dancing, and Goddess Worship. The classical Bharat Natyam dance sequences strobed for effect are intentional cultural signs which illustrate the story of India from a hybrid translation. It reappropriates this ancient pre-Aryan dance form.

The song "**Eastern Dancer**" is about the women who live in New Zealand of Indian descent who are in the diaspora of the South Pacific: "under southern moon". The words depict a multiplicity of selves for these women whose families have migrated.

The Indian folkpoem, "**Poonam**" plays through the film, acknowledging this period of intimacy with the Goddess. It symbolises the women are on the threshold of new beginnings.

Poonam was shot on Super VHS (took camera to India) and made on a Lottery Grant of \$3000, for post production (subsidized editing suite and tapes). Cinenova in London distributed it to international festivals from 1994, and now MoMA (Museum of Modern Art, New York) is the overseas distributor.

II

Naya Zamana (Modern Times) is a documentary-style narrative, a short film shot on 16mm. It was written from my own subjectivity, giving an account from the perspective of the periphery. It is set in New Zealand, and is an illustration of transforming/translating into another culture the migrant, working-class family. What appears to be simple is the sparse, verbal discourse of the storyline, using mainly images and sound. It is located in culture, ritual, and gendered semiotics. None of the characters follow traditionally structured norms or that of Indian nationalism. The juxtaposition of images exemplify the contradictions and subversive pointers which confront the hegemony.

The film questions 'dominant narratives' through the characters: The young girl is independent of men, the brother hangs out with his mates all day, scoring dak, lives in a 'westy' subculture of the suburbs. The mother is a widow who is not controlled by men, is in her spiritual realm, but is a central character. The whiskey-drinking aunt from Fiji contradicts what she is there to arrange: traditional marriage. It is set against a backdrop of state housing and working class factory life.

The institution of marriage is central to the film. The aunty wants the girl to marry a boy from 'our caste'. This refers to the insistence in Hinduism upon endogamy. (Marrying one's own caste/class) The young girl in **Naya Zamana** resists her aunt's entreaties to arrange her marriage, and the story twists around to show the unexpected.

In writing **Naya Zamana** I challenge hetero sexuality in an attempt to expose the heterogenous nature of queerness, with the girl exhibiting both transvestism and lesbian behavior. By exhibiting these deviations from tradition I expected to bring out the surprise of some Indians/people who then face their homophobia. Also to validate/bring visibility to gayness within any community.

A percentage of people watching **Naya Zamana** were dissatisfied by it. It was expected to fit into one strict category, develop one identity further like working class, lesbian or traditional Indian. It was the first NZ Indian short film to play in theatres, and the pressure to represent all groups who saw it was not achievable in ten minutes. Nevertheless, I could understand the need for those *hidden from history* to see their own images.

Some men did not relate to it because it was women-dominated, there were "no men in it". Against the ideology of Bollywood *style* films, this short film had a subjective, female gaze. It brought out issues like poverty, drunkenness, drugs and homosexuality. Neither was there a resolve at the end.

*"There are expectations from the particular constituency of what your identity is supposed to represent... The burden of representation is thrust upon you...the critical reception that any piece of work that you make is seen in light of that particular identity.."*⁴

In the production of the film there was no pool of Indian actors, I used my family and friends. We used our own homes and vehicles, props and wardrobes. I did my own art and production design. It was shot on 16mm film and was subtitled into English. The equipment was begged, borrowed, or offered for token money. I had an Arts Council grant for \$12,000. This went on stock, cameraman, consultant, and editor. I had written the script in English and Gujarati. The two speaking performers were from Fiji, so it is a South Pacific diasporized Hindi being spoken.

In order to qualify for an arts grant, one had to have a consultant, another film maker. My consultant brought on a 'trainee producer', another woman. They were both under the guise of "feminists". Seen as a collaboration, during production their company began to usurp my work, pressured me to sign a contract giving them rights over copyright, plus editorial control. **Naya Zamana** was my artistic and cultural expression. It contained an urgent voice for my people which these women flagrantly ignored. As I refused to sign the contract, they confiscated my work for twelve weeks, after the shoot. As "feminists", they appropriated it as a "women's film". This project was turning into Hollywood-style moguls' vying for the rights of a short Arts Council film.

I feel that the funding bodies should be aware of this to ensure consultants never abuse their power or cross the boundaries of emerging artists' films. The ideology of feminism needs to resolve that women are not a homogenous group. We need to present our artistic and cultural expression free from the risk which allows it to be hidden from history.

Barry Barclay reminds us that every individual within a culture has a right and a responsibility to express his/her culture and have artistic control over his/her own images. When the film, **Naya Zamana** was stolen for 12 weeks, an indigenous producer mediated its return to me. If it weren't for the struggle of indigenous artists having been familiar with this debacle, I may have lost this work. The experience affirmed to me my right for artistic control and the ownership and copyright of my own art.

Two years later, a feminist academic from the film department published a high profile text, on New Zealand women film makers. She stated in the introduction that in her research she tried to avoid *misrepresentation*, as male writers and critics are often guilty of, when speaking of/for women. I was represented in the book, but was never contacted to be interviewed. In another section she interviewed one (Greek) woman to speak about bi-culturalism and multiculturalism, on behalf of *all* immigrant women. This perspective was limited to personal grievances and politics.

These feminists need to know that multiculturalism does not address indigenous issues nor does it take into consideration disparities within migrant groups. And the author of the text needs to know that one woman cannot speak for all ethnic women.

*"Who is more entitled than whom to decide how feminism should be represented?"*⁵

Without having spoken to me, the author (mis)represented me, including a statement made about me, which she misquoted, having to do with my allegiance to 'Third World Cinema', when it was actually 'Third Cinema' that she meant. There are political repercussions with this misconception although these terms are often used interchangeably when it is not strictly correct. If we cannot represent ourselves, leave us out. We become someone else's 'errata', again "hidden from history".

An image from one of my films was also used, exoticizing it with a heterosexual gaze. It so happened to be the punchline of the film's ending. When I addressed the publisher as to the legality of using the image, he said to me that in the next publication "they would leave me out altogether". The unauthorised use of the image was in direct conflict with the Informed Use Of Consent as stated by the Broadcast Standards Authority. It is a legal offence which is also a sueable offence.

III

Laxmi (Goddess of Fortune) was recently invited to an Asian Queer film festival in San Francisco for its west coast premiere. A twelve minute film on 35mm, is from the perspective of a little immigrant girl, and though there are multiple readings, the girl's gaze can be read as 'queer'. Her mimicry and detailed observations can be read as voyeuristic to an extent, and have a slightly 'camp' style.

One of the reasons I made **Laxmi** and set it in the time period of the Second World War was there were no images of Indian people in the archives nor indication Indians were in New Zealand at that time, so I wanted to validate it for historical reasons. I grew up with many stories around this era of when the American soldiers were here. Some viewers were baffled and upset by the depiction of the white men but they were chosen to reflect the tensions within the Indian family, and the disparities between them and the Indian men. But the subtext of the film which had to do with caste oppression.

The parallel time period in India saw much civil disobedience, led by exponents of Gandhism. **Laxmi** posits emigration as an alternative choice for some who were "excluded from history", who did not fit into an elite nationalism which did not speak for everyone:

"There were vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people which were never integrated into their hegemony" 6

Throughout the film the father character experiences the *price of home*. This phrase to me includes the emotional, material and spiritual price of obligations to family back in India, and the toll it takes on new immigrants. The stress on all the characters comes out as the film progresses. It ends in overwhelming grief, but the little girl has a revelation, it strengthens her. *The price of home* also gives insight into *why* they left the oppressiveness of home, even though they experience prejudices in the new land.

When I first wrote **Laxmi** I applied to the Film Commission Short Film Fund. Their rejection was based on the idea that it was not really a kiwi film because it depicted two subgroups and had no white New Zealanders in it. (I should have got it in writing). Later, one exhibitor said, "it does not make the American men look too good!" They said it was too ambitious because it was a period piece. So instead of making it on \$85,000 I applied to Creative New Zealand and received \$25,000, which was spent on equipment and film stock. The remaining process, including blowing it up from Super 16mm to 35mm, and adding subtitles, took two years. This was facilitated by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who took it on as a work-in-progress in their permanent collection. If it hadn't been for the generous moral support from people overseas at Universities where I showed it as a work-in-progress, it would never have been completed. This arduous road with **Laxmi** also included not having an exhibition space for it when it was finally completed. Why do we in New Zealand need to clarify, for funders, panels and exhibitors, the presence

of other sensibilities and genre's within Indian films, other than Bollywood-style or cliché-ridden stereotypes?

This 'surface reading' brings me to the incident when I finished **Naya Zamana** two years earlier. I took it to the Moving Image Centre, a government-funded organisation for emerging artists like myself, and they would not accept it in their festival. A remark was made in explanation of it being "too simple". Yet, at MoMA, in 2000, it was recognized as one of the five outstanding short films of the International Short Film Festivals. It also won other awards in Europe and played at over 25 festivals.

These incidents seem to have resulted from ideologies that are close-ended perspectives which lead to dead ends, excluding too many people. The Film Commission is government funded and seems to be competing with film makers instead of working with them. The Film Commission only promote the films they fund, and the New Zealand International Film Festival is dependent on an exclusive, small committee, with its own narrow perspective.

It is not common in New Zealand as an independent film maker to release one's own work in a public cinema. After submitting **Laxmi** to the festival the organiser told me the film was "too ambitious", so I decided to screen it anyway, because the 'Grand Master' of Clermont-Ferrand, who works at MoMA, took it as a 'work-in-progress' before it was even finished. I worked on getting a private sponsorship, and with **Taamara/Sangam**, played both films at the Capitol in Auckland. This process took time away from my work and entailed the machinery of a big production, two premiere's including a 'season' of seven screenings. This process was necessary, as I knew there was a diverse audience that included many ethnic and marginal groups. We achieved this regardless of the short sightedness of the 'institutions' who did not recognize its relevance.

IV

Taamara Maori language/ **Sangam** Indian language (**A Joining of Two Peoples**)

Shot on betacam 58 minutes in classical Maori with English subtitles

A collaboration between Claudette Hauti of Front of the Box Productions-Executive Prod.

Miki Apiti- Director of Maori language Waka Huia, and Mandrika Rupa-Writer and Producer

Funded by Te Mangai Paho- TV 1 Screening 2002 in Maori Language programming
Screen Innovation Fund Creative New Zealand Post Production Fund- English subtitles

Theatrical release at Capitol Cinema, Auckland May 2003

The documentary explores how the Indian group came to New Zealand, how they lived and worked with Maori, who then became their whanau. It is told from the perspective of Maori Kaumatua who relate personal stories of the first Indians. Most of the interviews are with elders who were children at the time the Indian men arrived and lived with them, at Aramiro. They speak of their ancestors and of the descendents, whose interaction with the Maori whanau continues to this day. Some research and interviews were done in India, in Gujarati. In New Zealand the script was written, and all interviews took place, in English. Later, when filming these scripted personal stories, they were re-related in classical Maori for the camera.

The original 1907 men were hardy like other immigrants at the time who left behind kith and kin to establish a way of life here so their families could enjoy a type of social freedom they would never know in India. These men fled the caste system- a facet of life which pitched them at the bottom of the human chain. Because of their own lineage, these men were able to relate to the injustices happening to Maori, like the land confiscations, the prohibition of the Medicine Man and the use of their language. The Indian men recognized similarities of spiritual suffering, of having their culture usurped. These aspects drew them to these people and to the small settlement at Aramiro in the Waikato.

During my interviews in English the Kaumatua related that these Indian men were readily accepted and embraced because of their relationship to the land and their sense of whanaungatanga. Their core spiritual values ran parallel to the Maori. These people had no religious dogma separating them. They did not infringe upon each other's spiritual essence. The significance of this being a joining together of two distinctly different peoples from vastly varying cultures to portray a connectedness.

The spoken language can be the essence of an ancestral clan. My first language was Gujarati and my grandmothers spoke an ancient form of this language which is used in **Laxmi**. It separates out those that speak it, as a particular lineage. It relates through nuances of social and cultural capital. Every person has a right to practice their culture because that is their inherited right, a strategy for survival. Cultures evolve with language changes when a people emigrate. But those who stay back in India, like the indigenous cultures, look after the land, and are the keepers of the fire

and the seabeds. They are tangata whenua. They speak the *hidden* tongue of the land, water and air.

As a poetical document **Taamara/Sangam** could only have been told in classical Maori.

The ancestors in Aramiro, where the Indians first came, are the Kaumatua in the documentary. This story is their first hand recollection and account of the inter-relationship of the Peoples. Also my great grandfather, Jaga Rupa, came to this language of the Tangata whenua. He heard it and he communicated in this voice in the early 1900's.

After the documentary was completed it was translated into English. The translation was done in order to provide understanding for audiences other than speakers of classical Te Reo. I had several consultants from my Maori families for the translation and worked closely with the script to catch the poetry and nuances of the spoken proverbs. The English translation reveals the journey of these families over time as the language spoken in New Zealand. In reaching a wider audience this film aims to break the silence of this group, who for over 100 years have had no archival reference in New Zealand. It is a collective story of Indian immigrants who came to the South Pacific earlier than common migration to other western countries. It is the mapping of a piece in the jigsaw of Indian culture around the world, a piece that is still evolving with indigenous people.

Indian Diaspora/related issues

The peoples that first arrived from India 100 years ago, as depicted in my films, are from the poorer, 'subaltern', or subordinate class. They left in search of social and political freedoms, and when they settled they learned the languages of New Zealand, which were mainly Maori and English. They did away with exclusivity because in India they were used to being on the outskirts of villages, isolated by strict Hindu codes, including endogamy (marrying within one's own caste). Mixing with other races and classes, their culture and language evolved over time to include a 'transglobal' hybridity which this open exchange afforded them, ensuring their survival and success.

N.R.I.'s or non-resident Indians, are a different kind of diaspora, dominated by elite nationalist Indians who seek monetary gain, taking jobs overseas with multinational and IT companies. N.R.I. housewives complain, "we had cooks, drivers, and maids in India but their wages are too high here". In the host country they tend to separate themselves off, being oversensitive to *differences*, seeing Indian culture and caste identity as their only identity, denying that the process of inclusion, in time, will give them 'transcultural' identities. Fearing the loss of structures they are used to, which uphold their status as the privileged castes, those that come to a new country are primarily in search of economic and social *power*, and are intent upon conserving their hegemony. By consuming Bollywood and other propaganda they are exclusivist and myopic. In not mixing with other cultures due to the fear of being "polluted" they

exhibit caste prejudice. These 'purist' attitudes are perpetuated towards earlier diasporic Indians, as well as to indigenous peoples. A close -ended 'racial thinking' results, leading to divisive conflict.

As a *body* of work, my films affirm a *touchability*, biography and subjectivities shape and engage me, as a film maker locate me within and beyond the Indian diaspora. My new work will explore the roots of diaspora from India to the South Pacific, examining the 'subaltern' relating and finding familiarity with other sub groups, pointing to "inter-racial interdependence".⁷

End Notes and Bibliography

* The New Zealand sense of the word 'independent' means I work outside the film and television networks, which cater for the commercial industry. Programs are made to fit into that framework. I also work outside the policies and ideologies of the New Zealand Film Commission, which requires a certain perspective. Screen Innovation has given funds on some of the work, for subtitles and blow ups, and being part of the Film Commission one is required to put their logo on it for token funds.

(1) Trinh T. Minh-ha **Framer Framed** Routledge, London and New York 1992

(2). Ania Loomba, **Colonialism/PostColonialism**, "Situating Colonial and Postcolonial Studies,Routledge, London 1998 (speaking on Ran Greenstein)

(3) Pratibha Parmar on Edward Said in "That Moment of Emergence" in **Queer Looks**, Routledge, 1993

(4)Pratibha Parmar in "Filling The Lack in Everyone Is Quite Hard Work, Really" in **Queer Looks**, Routledge, New York, 1993

(5) Trinh T. Minh-ha, **Framer Framed** Routledge, London and New York 1992

(6) Ania Loomba **Colonialism/Post Colonialism**, "Challenging Colonialism" p.201

(7) Isaac Julien, "inter-racial interdependence" referring to Tracey Moffatt's films. "Only Angels Have Wings" in **Tracey Moffatt:Free Falling**, New York, Dia Center for the Arts, 1998.