Why do South Asian documentaries matter?

The 9th edition of Film South Asia, a film festival held in October of 2013 in Kathmandu (Nepal), created a row that came not entirely unexpected. The festival presented 55 documentaries that focused on Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Burma/Myanmar. Days ahead of the start of the festival, the Sri Lankan government asked the Nepali government to prohibit the screening of three films about Sri Lanka.

Erik de Maaker

However, much more important than their TV screenings (mostly late-night slots), the films enter the ‘private screenings’ circuit that has continued to flourish, and continues to be a preferred way for the socially-committed middleclass to engage with documentary films (and the filmmakers that produce these). Unfortunately, with an average of between US$ 800 to US$ 6000 per film, production budgets are modest even by Indian standards, and the equipment used is often of a lower quality than what Western broadcasters consider acceptable.

Winning the West?

Tailored as three films are to a South Asian audience, they often lack the kind of contextual information that a Western audience requires. Consequently, such audiences generally fail to understand what these films ‘are about’, and are often unable to appreciate their merit. As a result, these films rarely get selected for major documentary festivals such as IDFA. The disappointment is mutual, in the sense that South Asian documentary filmmakers often fail to see Western media committees of such festivals continue to prefer ‘orientalist’ documentaries that either emphasize South Asia’s mysticism, or its ‘communal’ violence. This also holds for smaller film festivals, such as the Amsterdam based ‘Beeld voor Beeld’ festival.

To tap into the rich potential of South Asian documentaries, European producers have to be willing to take risks. Some of these films, tailored to Western audiences, have been international successes. An example is (and was) (2008), a recent documentary by Nishtha Jain on her relationship with her domestic helper. For a South Asian middleclass audience, whose prime concerns are corrupt politicians, Hindu nationalism, and the country’s growing social inequality, this is not directly a topic that conveys a great Western appeal. However, the film provides valuable insights into the delicate balance between contract and patronage that characterizes so many social and economic relations in South Asia. The organizers of Film South Asia have from the outset recognized the importance of gaining more international exposure for South Asian documentaries. After each edition of their festival, the 15 most appealing films go on tour. Perhaps not surprisingly, Travelling Film South Asia has mostly been presented at film festivals in the UK and Europe, where there still is an audience for such films. The organizers maintain substantial centers for South Asian studies. So far, Travelling Film South Asia has come to a small European country like the Netherlands only once (in 1999).

Another increasingly popular way to make documentaries available, is to upload them in their entirety to video sharing sites such as YouTube. This is also an opportunity for the filmmakers which continues to be an issue for politically controversial films. Unfortunately, even online distribution cannot solve the problems of ‘content’. So far, too few of these films reach an audience in the world beyond South Asia. There definitely lies a task ahead for the programmers of major international film festivals. Rather than limiting themselves to the presumed tastes of their audience, programmers should – more than they currently do – screen films that have been made for circulation in South Asia, seeking to extend the referential framework of their audience. Documentary films can be even more extensively viewed, to inform global audiences about the major challenges that the South Asian subcontinent faces, and the radical transformations that its people are confronted with.

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References

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