

Indian Cinema, Postcolonialism, and Social Justice: An Interview with Nandita Das¹

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Introduction

Nandita Das (b. 1969) is one of India's most eminent filmmakers and actors, renowned in particular for her work in art cinema (or parallel cinema, as it is also called in India), the genre of pioneering filmmakers Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976), Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), Mrinal Sen (b. 1923), and Tapan Sinha (1924-2009). Das (Figure 1) has, in some respects, pursued an unconventional path into the Indian film industry, for it is not her first professional pursuit, and she does not hail from a film family (distinguished in their fields, her father, Jatin Das, is a painter; and her mother, Varsha Das, is a writer). Born in Mumbai and growing up in New Delhi, Das worked with NGOs for several years before entering the film industry, building on her Master's degree from the Delhi School of Social Work in the University of Delhi.



Fig. 1. Nandita Das at the Cannes Film Festival, 2017. Photo courtesy of Nandita Das

Perhaps this unconventional, even outsider's, path has informed Das's use of films to question the norms of gender, religion, caste, sexuality, class, and nation, among others. Her work has gained recognition and respect for its uniqueness, urgency, awareness, and authenticity. Known for her social justice advocacy, Das's national and international commitments span a range of issues, such as violence against women, children's rights, HIV/AIDS, poverty, and interreligious harmony. She has supported India's "Dark is Beautiful" campaign, which raises awareness about colourism, a form of prejudice and discrimination that devalues darker skin colours while privileging lighter ones. She has also served as Chairperson of the Children's Film Society of India. Das's work has earned her many distinctions, including serving on the main jury at the Cannes Film Festival in 2005 and on its *Cinéfondation* and short film jury in 2013; receiving the Government of France's *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters); and becoming in 2011 the first Indian inducted into the International Hall of Fame of the International Women's Forum in Washington D.C.

To make one's film debut playing a leading role in a same-sex relationship in a country as conservative as India—where any sexuality, let alone minority sexuality, is rarely discussed in the public sphere (the Supreme Court of India decriminalized consensual same-sex relations in September 2018)—would be considered bold and courageous. And that is exactly what Nandita Das has done.



Fig. 2. Shabana Azmi (l) and Nandita Das (r) in still from *Fire* (1996). Photo from www.indianexpress.com

Indian Canadian director Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) stars Das and another leading member of Indian art cinema, Shabana Azmi (Figure 2), as sisters-in-law and housewives named after Sita and Radha, who were consorts to the Hindu gods Rama and Krishna, respectively. Das plays the young, newlywed bride Sita, who is married to Jatin. Azmi plays Radha, wife of Jatin's brother, Ashok. The couples live in the same household, along with the brothers' mother and the family

servant. Sita and Radha gradually develop a multifaceted love and desire for one another, increasingly resisting the heterosexual and patriarchal norms of their joint family. Based on Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai's 1942 short story "Lihaaf" ("The Quilt") (see Chughtai), the film not only shows queer female fulfillment within rigid gender, heterosexual, religious, class, and national hierarchies, but also illustrates how that queerness can resist a religious (Hindu) nationalism that relies on circumscribed roles for women (Gopinath 635; Majithia 4-6). *Fire* is the first of Mehta's Elemental Trilogy, followed by *Earth* (1998) and *Water* (2005), the last about the plight of outcast widows in 1938 India as they eke out a living on the banks of the sacred Ganges river. In addition to *Fire*, Das has starred in *Earth*, adapted from Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* (1991), set in 1947 during Partition, the division of India on the basis of religion into two self-governing nations, India and Pakistan, that became independent from British rule. Das plays Shanta, a young Hindu nanny and maidservant who must navigate the competing affections of two Muslim men—played by Aamir Khan and Rahul Khanna—against the backdrop of a nation in violent turmoil. Das's performance earned her the best female debut award at India's Filmfare Awards in 2000.

Since her debut in *Fire*, and with a career that, to date, includes forty films in ten languages, Das has continued to give a rounded, humanizing portrayal of the marginalized, the vulnerable, and the oppressed, thus challenging the entrenched structures of power. In addition to her acting, Das's work as a director brings agency and diversity—and thus gendered and diverse empowerment—to a film industry in which the vast majority of directors are men. By giving cinematic visibility—as both a director and actor—to strong and multifaceted women characters, Das's work counteracts stereotyping and sensational discourses that, according to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, construct "Third World Women" as a homogenous group that is ignorant, powerless, exploited, victimized, and sexually harassed (Mohanty 337-338). In place of such constraining discourses, Das's work represents women's agency, an agency that we can understand through Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's feminist framing of agency as the power to express and exercise choice, autonomy, desire, and voice (Sunder Rajan, 2003: 117; see also Sunder Rajan, 1993).

Das's films are significant not only for their representation of women but, more importantly, for showing the diversity of lives within the large category of "woman." Das portrays women who, in addition to the marginalization of their gender, are marginalized by at least their sexuality, class, religion, and caste. In this focus on marginalization within marginalized groups, Das's work shares similarities with, and fascinatingly develops at a similar historical moment as, scholarly work on the theory of intersectionality, which analyzes and seeks redress for the unique identities and circumstances, from the personal to the social to the legal, of people at the intersection of multiple forces of oppression. Intersectionality was pioneered by feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who began by investigating the intersections of sexism and racism, examining in particular the

challenges faced by Black women in the US (see Crenshaw 1988, 1989, 1991; see also Carbado *et al.* and Cho *et al.*). More widely, we can historically and intellectually contextualize the cinematic work of Das as shaped by, helping to shape, and joining the diverse body of academic feminist thought about Indian and South Asian women, third world women, and intersectional feminism in general (see, for example, Abu-Lughod, Barlow, Collins 2000 and 2010, de Lauretis 1985 and 1990, Davis, Haraway, Hartman 1997 and 2007, King, McCall, Mernissi 1987 and 1991, Mies, Minh-ha, Mohanty, Mulvey, Naifei, Sangari, Spillers, Suleri, Sunder Rajan 1993 and 2003, Tomlinson, Williams).

Das's many national and international award-winning performances showcase the remarkable range of her work. In director Chitra Palekar's *Maati Maay* ("A Gravekeeper's Tale") (2006), Das portrays a lower caste woman, Chandi. After her father's death, Chandi is forced to take over his job as a gravedigger for young children. Chandi, however, refuses to continue her job when she becomes a mother, with the village then ostracizing her as a witch. The film is based on writer and social activist Mahasweta Devi's (1926-2016) short story "Bayen" ("Witch") (1971), which was adapted into a play in 1976-1977 (see Devi). In K. N. T. Sastry's *Kamli* (2006), Das plays the eponymous Kamli (Figure 3), a woman from the impoverished Lambada tribal community of south India.



Fig. 3. Nandita Das in director K. N. T. Sastry's *Kamli* (2006). Photo from www.ragalahari.com.

She is forced to sell her firstborn, a daughter, for adoption; her second born, a son, is swapped by the hospital for a girl. The film follows Kamli's fight to get her son back, and is inspired by Sastry's documentary *Harvesting Baby Girls* (2003), about the trafficking of baby Lambada girls for international adoption agencies (see Sastry). Mrinal Sen's *Aamar Bhuvan* ("My Home") (2002) depicts a poor

Muslim family in a Bengali village, with Das playing the role of Sakina. Her husband Noor leaves to work in the Middle East, where he re-marries. Meanwhile, Sakina marries Meher, Noor's cousin. Noor returns to Bengal, where he employs Meher in contract jobs so he can provide for Sakina and their three children. Mani Ratnam's *Kannathil Muthamittal* ("A Peck on the Cheek") (2002) takes place during the civil war in Sri Lanka, with Das playing Shyama, a Tamil villager married to Dileepan, a freedom fighter with the nationalist Tamil rebel group. Shyama attains refuge in south India, where she gives birth, only to abandon her newborn daughter to return to Sri Lanka in search of her husband. She too joins the Tamil rebel group, while her daughter, now adopted in Chennai, searches for Shyama. In Jagmohan Mundhra's *Bawandar* ("Sandstorm") (2000)—based on the true story of Bhanwari Devi—Das plays the lead role of Sanwari, a lower caste village woman in Rajasthan. Sanwari is gang-raped and must struggle through the power structures of her village, the police system, and the courts in her quest for justice.



Fig. 4. Nawazuddin Siddiqui and Nandita Das on the set of *Manto* (2018). Photo courtesy of Nandita Das.

Das's most recent film project is *Manto*, a biopic of the writer Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955). Written and directed by Das, *Manto* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2018, under the "Un Certain Regard" section and as the only film from India at the Festival. The film was released in Indian theatres on September 21, 2018. The title role in *Manto* is played by Nawazuddin Siddiqui (Figures 4 and 5), whose breakthrough performance was in Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday* (2004), which won the Grand Jury Prize at the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles. Das and Siddiqui had announced *Manto*, including first-look footage for prospective buyers, at the Cannes Film Festival in 2017. *Manto* explores the life and writings of Saadat Hasan Manto, who was born into a Muslim family in the village of Paproudi (district Ludhiana) in Punjab, India. Manto wrote in several genres, from screenplays to journalism to radio dramas. Among his searing, at times satirical, portrayals of sociopolitical truths, injustices, and hypocrisies, Manto's writings held a mirror to the violence of the 1947 Partition of India. India has always had a large Hindu majority, but Pakistan became envisioned by Muslim leaders as a nation for Muslims. Partition is one of the largest and most rapid forced migrations in human history: about twelve million people were displaced, about another million lost their lives, and approximately 75,000 women were subjected to sexual violence (Butalia 3; see also Hajari, Khan). Partition remains a source of conflict between India and Pakistan, with the two nuclear powers going to war four times since 1947. Other legacies include violence between Hindus and Muslims in India, with India implementing secularism in its constitution to ensure democracy, minority rights, and respect for all religions. In the aftermath of Partition, Manto (coming from a Muslim family) migrated from India to Pakistan in 1948. Manto is considered among the best short story chroniclers of Partition, with stories such as "Toba Tek Singh" (the name of a village in Punjab), "Thanda Gosht" ("Cold Meat"), and "Khol Do" ("Open It"). Manto was brought to trial six times on charges of obscenity, with six of his stories becoming banned. In colonial (pre-Partition) India, his banned stories were "Bu" ("Odour"), "Dhuan" ("Smoke"), and "Kali Shalwar" ("Black Trousers"). In post-Partition Pakistan, Manto was the first writer in the new state to be tried for obscenity, with the state banning his stories "Khol Do," "Thanda Gosht," and "Upar, Neechay, aur Darmiyan" ("On Top, Under, and In Between") (see Manto; Waheed).

Among the historical and cultural significance of Das's *Manto* is that it gives a human face not only to Saadat Hasan Manto but also to Partition, which helps us understand some of Partition's enduring impact across South Asia. In studies of Partition, examining literary works about Partition offers a nuanced human dimension that cannot be fully captured by historical facts (see Bhalla, Jain, Saint).



Fig. 5. Nawazuddin Siddiqui in official still from *Manto* (2018).
Photo courtesy of Nandita Das

Manto is one among many Indian films that have contributed to scholarship and understanding of Partition, with classics including M. S. Sathyu's *Garam Hawa* ("Hot Winds") (1973), which focuses on Muslims in post-Partition India, and Ritwik Ghatak's trilogy, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* ("The Cloud-Clapped Star") (1960), *Komal Gandhar* ("E-Flat") (1961), and *Subarnarekha* ("The Golden Line") (1962), which focuses on Partition's effects on Bengal (when West Bengal became a province of India, and East Bengal became a province of Pakistan). Not coincidentally, Deepa Mehta's *Earth* (1998), co-starring Das, was released around the same time that oral testimonies, as a component of social history, gained interest and importance as a source of Partition scholarship. Earlier Partition research had focused on what Asim Roy terms "high-politics" debates about the role, motivation, and significance of political parties, such as the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, and high-level leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru (Chakravarty 93). The recognition of and sensitivity to the history of ordinary peoples led to pivotal publications such as Urvashi Butalia's 1998 book *The Other Side of Silence* (see Butalia), and Ritu Menon's and Kamla Bhasin's 2000 volume *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (see Menon *et al.*). *Manto* joins recent scholarship on Partition that innovatively re-examines the catastrophe through categories such as citizenship, refugees and their rehabilitation, border studies, cities and urbanization, and gender roles (Chakravarty 98). As Das mentions in the interview, *Manto* is timely for South Asia and the globalized world of the late 2010s, given the crises and debates about refugees, border crossings, immigration, populism, and national belonging. In both content and spirit, *Manto* demonstrates one of Das's strongest social, aesthetic, and political commitments—secularism.

Das's commitment to secularism is also present in her directorial debut, *Firaaq* (2008) (Figure 6), which in Urdu means separation or

keen desire. *Firaaq* is set in the aftermath of the anti-Muslim pogrom that devastated India in the state of Gujarat in 2002 and which claimed over two thousand Muslim and Hindu lives. The film begins by stating it is based on “a thousand true stories” and interweaves multiple stories from diverse genders, religions, classes, political leanings, and ages. *Firaaq* features Nawazuddin Siddiqui and two other prominent figures of Indian art cinema, Naseeruddin Shah (Figure 7) and Deepti Naval. Siddiqui (Figure 8) plays Hanif, who is married to Muneera, played by Shahana Goswami (Figure 8). Hanif and Muneera are a poor Muslim couple who find their home looted and burned, and who grow suspicious of their Hindu neighbors. Shah plays Kahn Saheb, an elderly Muslim vocalist who remains optimistic about Hindu-Muslim relations until he sees the destruction of an ancient Muslim shrine. Naval plays Arati, a Hindu housewife haunted by denying shelter to a Muslim woman trying to escape a mob, and with a husband and brother-in-law who attempt to bribe the police for the brother-in-law’s involvement in a gang rape. Other characters include a young orphaned Muslim boy (for whom Arati provides shelter), a Hindu-Muslim middle-class couple (who contemplate leaving the city), and a group of young Muslim men bent on revenge.

By showing Muslims as victims of majoritarian, sectarian violence, *Firaaq* shines a spotlight where few other films have ventured in a predominantly Hindu India (see Das, Haider 2010a, Haider 2010b, Kurian).



Fig. 6. Working still from *Firaaq* (2008). Photo courtesy of Nandita Das.



Fig. 7. Naseeruddin Shah and Nandita Das in working still from *Firaag* (2008). Photo courtesy of Nandita Das.



Fig. 8. Shahana Goswami (left), Nawazuddin Siddiqui (third from left) and Nandita Das in working still from *Firaag* (2008). Photo courtesy of Nandita Das.

Social realism has a special urgency throughout Das's work and informs *Firaag*, whose opening scene is the digging of a mass grave for Muslims. This urgency shows some of the challenges faced by a (postcolonial) cinematic realism. While such realism strives to represent violence, trauma, and prejudice, it must also negotiate contemporary pressures and (postcolonial) cultural memories that demand that such aesthetic realism should itself have moral and ethical sensitivity (for similar aesthetic and cultural challenges faced by filmmakers, see Bittencourt, Garcia, and Porton). With respect to that sensitivity, *Firaag* condemns violence not by abundantly and graphically depicting it, but by showing its pervasive impact on

diverse peoples. *Firaaq* won several major awards, including best screenplay at the Asian Festival of First Films, the critics' award for best film at the Filmfare Awards, the human rights in cinema award at the Istanbul International Film Festival, the special jury award at the Pacific Meridian International Film Festival of Asian Pacific Countries, the jury prize for best debut film at the Kerala International Film Festival, and the transcendence, or reconciliation, award at the Thessaloniki Film Festival.

The conversation that follows began at Das's apartment in the Mumbai neighbourhood of Bandra (home to numerous film, sports, and political figures) and ended at an exhibition launch where she was the guest of honour. I would like to share the circumstances that led to this interview for the glimpse they give into Nandita Das and her work. In July 2017, I delivered a TEDx talk in Canberra as part of the inaugural TEDx event organized by the Australian-American Fulbright Commission. The title of the talk is "Ten Ways To Become A Better Person" and is based on insights I have gained from students in a range of courses, from literary studies to postcolonial studies, under a broad rubric of global social justice. I e-mailed Das—whose films and interviews I often show to my students—with a link to my talk and was delighted to receive a response from her. In turn, I requested whether I could interview her, as I was researching in India at the time. Das agreed and asked whether I would be interested in attending the exhibition launch, as it would provide an opportunity to converse during the drive there (including across Mumbai's Bandra-Worli Sea Link bridge). Das's generosity of time and spirit, including her participation in the interview itself, signalled to me a consistency across the screen and life—of a fundamental respect, openness, and inclusiveness. She was a formidable interlocutor, speaking with conviction and integrity.

The interview is in three sections. In the first section, Das discusses how and why she became committed to social justice, including references to *Fire* and *Firaaq*. In the second, she discusses *Manto* and filmmaking for social change. Lastly, and in the spirit of responding to the urgency of the present, Das presents her views on the #MeToo movement, comparing the American and Indian film industries. In contrast to #MeToo's impact on Hollywood, there has been no similar impact and visibility in the film industry in India. Das addresses this fact in this first print interview where a member of the Indian film industry shares insights at length on #MeToo. We can be assured that Das and her work will continue speaking truth to power. This interview has been authorized by Nandita Das.

On Influences, *Fire*, and *Firaaq*

MR: Throughout your films, you represent the marginalized and the oppressed, the people whose stories we don't normally see and hear. How did you become interested in social justice and speaking for the voiceless?

ND: Becoming a mother and observing my child grow up, I have come to realize what my own influences have been, and how those influences have impacted me. Looking back, I think it was because both my parents had a deep and intuitive sense of justice. While they did not use words such as “inclusion,” “feminism,” “secularism,” and so on, they lived by these ideals. I know these are not just “politically correct” words. They need to be taught to children, but living them is even better. That is why I am glad that in my formative years I saw my parents naturally being inclusive and fair. As a child, at times it irked me. For instance, if a friend and I had an argument or a squabble and I complained to my parents, they would first ask us questions to know who was in the wrong. They were never partial to me.

My father is a painter and my mother, a writer. So I grew up with their friends who came from all walks of life—writers, artists, musicians, photographers, and architects. There was never a judgment about their religion, class, region, language, or even sexual preference. Those traits were naturally accessible to me and so, equally naturally, I imbibed them.

MR: It seems as though inclusiveness and openness have emerged organically for you. How do they inform the choices and paths you have taken throughout your adult life and film career?

ND: Everything in my life has been spontaneous, whether it’s acting, directing, or even what we call activism (which is too big a word for someone like me; I am more of a social advocate). Right after my Master’s degree in social work, I worked with two organizations, Alarippu and Ankur, for five years, and at that time my activism was intense and total. In the last twenty years, my work has been more of an advocacy. I try to find opportunities to share my thoughts and concerns in the hope of raising more visibility about issues of social justice and human rights. We have to *speak* for the voiceless in whatever way we can. It’s a drop in the ocean, but then every drop counts.

I believe all our experiences impact our way forward. During college, at 17, I joined a street theater group called Jana Natya Manch. It was started by Safdar Hashmi, a theatre activist who was later brutally murdered while performing a street play. I worked with him for almost four years. I was full of idealism and used to think our one play was going to change things for the better. It is there that my political training began on issues of women, justice, secularism, and workers’ rights. I had never been to a factory or understood what the workers’ issues really were. At that age one just soaks in all the new experiences. Also, Sardar Patel Vidyalaya, the school I attended [in New Delhi], had the same values that I was taught at home. My creative side and that which inculcated the empathetic side were fostered both at home and school, while my sociopolitical training happened with my work at Jana Natya Manch and, later, with my

Master's in social work. It cemented my convictions and gave me the necessary vocabulary to express my ideas and values.

And then my first film, *Fire*, happened by default. It raised so many questions and made me aware of things I hadn't ever thought about. In a way, that was also the beginning of my understanding of how and why the *other* is created. I began speaking about homosexuality and the societal hypocrisy in which we lived. For the longest time, we had been shoving the subject under the carpet. We pretended it didn't exist in our country. *Fire*—and the conversations that it triggered—really made me think about identity. They made me think about how insensitive we are, as a society, about those who are marginalized, and what we come to call “normal.” These things happened very organically. *Fire* became a landmark film and suddenly it gave me many avenues to express my thoughts. I was actually doing *more* on the ground before, but I wasn't in the public domain. And later, when I did less social work and became more visible because of my acting, I got more invitations to speak on various social issues! Initially, I was angry with this irony. I was speaking on issues where I knew there were *much* better people who could be talking about them—people with *much* more experience, so I was bothered by this superficiality. But I gradually became more at peace with the situation and told myself, “let me use these opportunities to advocate issues that are close to my heart.”

MR: Why did you choose to act in *Fire* (1996)?

ND: People still say that *Fire* was a bold choice as the first film in my career. After all, this was back in 1996. But at that time, I did not even know there was going to be a second film. I did it because I thought it was an interesting subject, and, as I enjoyed performing in school and college, I thought it would be a fun experience. I remember when I was working with Safdar Hashmi, he would often coax me to join the National School of Drama. But as acting was not something I wanted to pursue, I did not take his advice seriously. But *Fire* did change my choices going ahead. *Fire* started my engagement with issues of discrimination, prejudice, and “othering.”

MR: And now you have an influential platform in India, as an actor, director, and public figure. How does this inform your sense of social responsibility?

ND: The platform has come by default, again! The more you speak up and engage with issues and concerns, the more people invite you, as they see you as a good mix of a “celebrity” who can also speak! But it's not to be taken too seriously, in times as these, when a lot of things are very superficial. Also, all of us play *such* a small role, such an insignificant part. And yet to give purpose to your own life, more than anything else, you say to yourself, “I'm going to take these little opportunities that I'm getting as seriously as I can. If anyone's going to hear it, I'm going to say things that matter.” It's also a good

reminder to oneself. It's not just that you are saying it to others; you are also finding an opportunity to recommit to the things that you believe in. And I think that came through in your TEDx talk. I felt like here is someone who has that same intent and concern for wanting a better world and is trying to trigger some dialogue and stir the mind. Otherwise, all of us can get so absorbed in our own little worlds that sometimes we forget that this is not what we started out to do.

I know that we are all connected at some level because our work is not only part of our audience's journey but also our own. I have grown through the characters that I have played and through the talks that I have given, as they often remind me how I need to give more time to issues that I care about. I feel that to engage is the only choice I have, as cynicism is often an excuse for being lazy!

MR: Could you give an example of such engagement from your life?

ND: In 2008, I directed *Firaaq*, about the 2002 Hindu-Muslim violence in Gujarat, including the role of the police and the state government. The film was meant as a mirror to our lives and our own prejudices. The same politics have grown manifold since then, so one might doubt the effectiveness of speaking out. But because things are getting worse, we should speak out even more, and continue doing such work. Had these conversations, protests, and voices not existed, we don't know how much worse conditions could be right now. Therefore, wanting that sense of purpose also keeps me motivated to push boundaries and to speak for those on the margins of society.

Now that I am the mother of a seven-year-old, I sometimes shudder to think of the world we are leaving for the next generation. I have my moments of pessimism, but my outlook is mostly optimistic. It is not even a conscious choice: it is the instinct of doing the best I can. When we speak of people in need of social justice, it is as if we place them outside ourselves and fail to see them as human beings. This is akin to Stalin's view that one person's death is a tragedy, while the death of one million is a statistic. We should make social justice issues more personal and see them as injustices against each of us and not just accept them as a "sociopolitical" phenomenon. They have to become everyone's problem. A problem that requires empathy and compassion.

MR: A major theme in your films and wider work is how you re-humanize people who are dehumanized and disempowered.

ND: The marginalized are now the numerical majority. The privileged, a much smaller group, have dominated all the positions of power. We are left knowing very little, if anything, about what people on the margins think and feel. For instance, the pages in the media dedicated to rural stories and to stories of Dalits have diminished over the years. Similarly, with literature in a country which has so many languages, much more effort could be made to make regional, vernacular, and oral

literatures more accessible through translations. We are blind to so much.

On *Manto*

MR: How did you become interested in Saadat Hasan Manto and his work?

ND: I first read Manto when I was in college. A few years later, I bought the complete original works in a collection called *Dastavej*, in Devanagari [the script of many languages in South Asia, including Hindi, Nepali, and Sanskrit]. I was struck by his simple, yet profound, narratives and the way he insightfully captured people, politics, and the times in which he lived. He wrote as he saw, as he felt, without dilution, and with a rare sensitivity and empathy for his characters. For years I thought of making a film based on his short stories, even before I made my directorial debut, *Firaaq* (2008). In 2012, when I delved deeper into his essays, they helped the idea expand beyond his stories. Today I feel equipped, both emotionally and creatively, to tell this story that so needs to be told.

What drew me to the story of Manto was his free spirit and courage to stand up against orthodoxy of all kinds. He was irreverent and had an irrepressible desire to poke a finger in the eye of the establishment, often with sharp humor. As I plunged deeper into Manto's life, I wondered why he seemed so familiar. Soon I realized that it felt like I was reading about my father, an artist. He too is intuitively unconventional, a misunderstood misfit, and whose bluntness is not too different from my protagonist's.

MR: Could you tell me more about your father and his influence on *Manto*?

ND: My father is an artist and has been painting for over fifty years. He is a maverick who speaks his mind and is, therefore, often judged. He has never been part of the art market, which has now become more about business than art. Even though he is a senior painter and has received the Padma Bhushan, one of the highest civilian awards in the country, he has remained outside the art market forces, which doesn't make one sellable enough. He is one of the most honest and sensitive people I have met, and I am trying to be as objective as I can be. But he can also be blunt, to the point of being rude. Money has never been a motivation or a priority for him. He is generous to the point of being foolish. Given all these uncanny parallels, I felt as though I grew up with a Manto. I had always wanted to do a documentary on my father but couldn't. This film is an homage to all those who are mavericks and truthful, deeply sensitive and unique. All those who have a *Mantoiyat*, or "Manto-ness," in them.

MR: Do you see the film as encouraging *Manto*iyat? How would it reach people who feel they have no sense of *Manto*iyat, or who might disagree with *Manto*iyat?

ND: The aim of the film is not to put Manto on a pedestal, but to see him as an inspiration despite his contradictions. In fact, it is to encourage us to bring out our own *Manto*iyat. I think we all have it in different measures. We all want to be more honest, truthful, and to speak our minds. Manto's writings clearly reflect a great empathy and understanding of the marginalized and the underprivileged. I hope the film will give rise to a collective *Manto*iyat which inspires people to speak out. In turn, this can inspire someone else to speak out, creating a ripple effect, as is happening in the Harvey Weinstein controversy. While this is what a film tries to do, it does not create a revolution.

At the end of the day, *Manto* is a fictional film. It needs a story that will engage audiences. I did not want it to be high-handed and didactic. Personally, I do not like to see films that are emotionally manipulative, that tell audiences how and what to feel. Each person will take from it where he or she is through their experiences. My intent is to recognize that there are Mantos around us, but that we systematically exclude them and do not give them visibility, perhaps because they have not learned the language of this world and are not worldly-wise.

MR: Does *Manto*iyat absorb different "isms," such as secularism?

ND: Manto defied the narrow identities of religion and nation, which have plagued not just India, but the world, as clutches that people use to define themselves. We do not choose to be born into a certain gender, race, skin colour, nation, or religion. These are given identities, and yet people can be made to feel proud or ashamed of them. What we should be proud of or ashamed of are aspects of ourselves over which we have some choice, such as our thoughts, words, and actions.

MR: Could you discuss the timing of the film? Why now, in the late 2010s?

ND: When I started writing in 2012, I was hoping to do the film in 2015, but later it became 2016. The date kept getting pushed back as raising funds for a period film is difficult. *Manto* is more expensive than many a small independent film. At the same time, it is not a Bollywood film. It worked out because I felt that now was the right time for it, not just in India, Pakistan, and South Asia, but globally, especially given the film's meditations on identity and displacement (the film covers the two years before and the two years after Partition). Manto chose to go to Lahore despite being in love with Bombay. The film relates to contemporary global issues of migration and refugees. It raises the question of what it means to belong to a certain place. Do we belong to a country, the place where we are born, or the place that has embraced us? What do people go through when they leave the place

where they belong? It also examines freedom of expression and the absurdity of censorship.

MR: Could you reflect on any trajectories that you notice from *Fire* to *Manto*?

ND: My journey from *Fire* to *Manto* is part of an organic continuity, with *Firaaq* coming somewhere in the middle. They all deal with identity, prejudice, and the desire to be oneself. Looking at *Manto*, I now realize there is a connection between *Firaaq* and *Manto*, but that was not a conscious one. The genesis of *Firaaq* started when I began talking about “identity and the notion of the ‘other’.” The conversations that followed were often polarized, especially around religion and identity. This made me feel that I should do a film and reach out to a larger audience. Sometimes talks can seem didactic and preachy, whereas through a work of fiction, one can talk about issues through stories and characters that find a way into our subconscious more easily. There is no better way to communicate with and engage an audience than through highly personal stories.

MR: How do you view the relationship between local stories and global stories in your films, or in films in general?

ND: Films should be rooted in the local. When people say, “foreign audiences will not understand,” how do they know? What does “foreign audiences” mean? Which one? We do not think alike even in one neighbourhood, let alone in one country. When I watch a Japanese or a Spanish or even a south Indian film, I do not understand every reference, nuance or context, and that is fine. If the film is true to its local context, I will slowly enter that context. The characters might be different from me, but if they are complete and layered, I will believe them and I will journey with the film. But first I must believe. If I make a film for a “world audience,” then I am making it for nobody, because I do not know what constitutes a world audience.

There is a scene in *Manto* in which a young man says, “your stories are so depressing and nihilistic that somebody could kill themselves.” Manto responds, “you do not know how others feel, so only speak for yourself.” Beyond a point, we cannot know how others feel. We can only think like ourselves and we should be true to ourselves. At the same time, we have to believe that our work will resonate with others. A film director should have the freedom to tell his or her own story truthfully and in ways that are embedded in the local and the personal.

On #MeToo

MR: You and your films are committed to social justice. In that context, what is your take on the Harvey Weinstein controversy?

ND: Let me begin with a story from my college days, more than twenty years ago. I had just completed my master's degree, and I attended a workshop at the National School of Drama led by a woman from England who was half-English and half-Indian. She began her session with an experiment. There were twenty of us, ten men and ten women, and she divided us by gender. To my group, she said, "I want you to talk about people you have known who have abused you in some form or another." To the young men, she said, "I want you to talk about the abuse that you have seen in your families and friends, somebody you know, who has been involved in it."

It was the first day, and we did not know the other participants. Every single woman in our group shared a story of abuse. Those stories instantly bonded us. Some of us were crying, some were angry, and some just went numb. Meanwhile, the men were angry, for they believed, "here is a white woman telling us that we, Indian men, are abusers. These things only happen in the lower classes and never in educated families like ours." At the end of the day, when the two groups met, we women were surprised at the men's complete denial of the reality. They, in turn, were shocked to hear our stories, and while they could not outright refute them, these stories made them very uncomfortable.

Abuse is rampant. We have learned to keep silent or negotiate through it, because so much shame shrouds it. Considering I come from a very liberal, educated family and have been part of many women's movements and organizations, and have conducted workshops on sexual abuse with young adolescent girls, these last few months have been moments of deep reflection for me.

It is troubling to see that hardly anyone from the mainstream Indian film industry has spoken up. There are many open secrets. It is not for me to say, "I have heard this or that." This silence is tragic. So many people in Hollywood, despite the same pressures, have come forth and shared their personal stories. It is not just about them but about protecting hordes of other women and men. It has become a question—a moral question—of whether one should keep quiet. If we do keep quiet, are we not complicit in some ways? I am amazed at how everyone here is talking about it in generic terms, but so few are speaking openly and publicly about it. Yet, one cannot be judgmental about it as the pressures on women are enormous and, unlike in Hollywood, they would not get much support from the Indian film fraternity.

I came into the film industry comparatively late, with *Fire*. And after twenty years and forty films, I am still not a part of Bollywood, primarily because of the kind of abuse and the hierarchies that exist behind the scenes.

MR: What is your position on law student Raya Sarkar's crowdsourced Facebook list of male academics (mostly in India, but also in the US and Europe) accused of sexual harassment?

ND: There is abuse in every field, and, sometimes, the line between an abusive and consensual relationship is so fine that it becomes even more difficult to combat. As film personalities are often seen as role models, they have a greater responsibility to speak up. Their word will be taken more seriously. But often female actors are at the lower end of the power structure, as the world of film still remains a male-dominated industry. So they are often fearful that they will lose work and support if they speak up and refuse to comply. Some say that it is transactional, so why is it seen as abuse? At least these debates have fostered a more nuanced conversation in the public space.

MR: In response to Raya Sarkar's list, a group of feminists in India stated on the Kafila blog that due process should be followed, no matter how harsh and biased that process.

ND: In India, the word "feminist" is considered a bad word. The image it evokes is of some flag-bearing feminist who is anti-men and is out to tarnish their reputation. I think it is threatening when women come out with names of men. It is acceptable to speak in generic terms, but when you take names, there is no place to hide. There is a palpable sense of fear among men, which is unfortunately giving rise to a backlash where they want to hire less women, with the fear of being accused. I think for sensitive men who are far from being predators, it must be an uncomfortable situation to be in. They must feel guilty for no fault of their own and, hopefully, will join the movement, along with the women, in bringing more awareness to this lopsided equation that men and women have in our society.

I am all for due process, as there is always a fear of trial by media or someone misusing law, however rare that may be. But in India it is well-known that courts take a very long time, and there are hundreds of thousands of cases still pending. In any case, why would a woman take on her world, threaten her reputation, and speak up about an abuser if it is not the case? Should good laws or good action not be followed because of the very few instances where it might be a personal case of vendetta? For instance, if dowry is criminalized, it is largely to empower women to come out when such things happen, and there are some cases where it is misused, but isn't that true of many laws?

I have not followed the list of accused men, but I imagine there are more people who would either doubt the veracity of the claims or say, "these are well-known academics, how can one list their names when the allegations have not been proven to be true or false?" The point is that this has a lot to do with believing people and giving them courage, not shaming them. Indian society does not empower women or encourage them to come out. Otherwise, more women would have probably come forward. Instead, by vilifying women, you are in effect intimidating and silencing them.

MR: That's a powerful point. Your insights have given much to reflect upon and consider. Thank you for your time.

ND: Thank you as well.

Notes

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