

Evaluation of the projects submitted to IFA (2001-2).

In Search of Umrao:

In Search Of Umrao-, a proposal for research towards developing a script for a documentary film has the potential to fill in the gaps in the feminist historical renderings of the courtesan. The applicant's conceptual frame – as it unfolds in the proposal underlines the tawaif's art and lifestyle as resistance and as standing outside the norm of submissive womanhood. Such a frame suggests the celebration of pre-colonial spaces of female sexuality and the regulation of sexualities in 'modern' India. Such a frame needs to be interrogated via questions regarding the recruitment of the tawaifs (from particular castes etc.,) and the axes of stratification in the kothas themselves (especially in terms of age, patronage etc.). This could provide a check against a romanticised reading of the kotha as an autonomous female space. Similarly, while the applicant's arguments about the cleansing of kathak are well taken, the appropriation of the art forms by the middle classes need to be further worked over with an understanding of the relations between markets and arts. For instance, though the mythological as a genre saw the tawaifs being recruited into the cinema (of course there are incidents like Phalke's refusal to employ a tawaif as taramati) , the popularity of the kotha genre of films saw only the heroines from "respectable" homes playing the courtesan. The 'displacement' of the tawaifs into film extras, assistants to dance directors etc could be explored. The displacement of the tawaifs into performers of cabaret and at mujra parties needs to be also located more historically in the political economy of entertainment. The fusion (?) of the feudal and

capitalist forms of female performance in the private mujra parties needs to be looked at carefully.

The applicant explicitly mentions that exploration into the 19th C public and private space management of respectable and deviant female sexuality and performance. This concern should be carried through the text- for such a space management is a continued process. For e.g. the dancing school culture (first within the home then the public space for middle class women), the public space for ghazal opened up by the cassette culture and more for the 'wives of ghazal singers' than individual female performers etc. The point I am stressing is the need for further nuanced interrogation of issues.

The methodology of the project is well worked out and is in keeping with the proposed aims. The above mentioned issues are suggested as a checklist to the researcher's frame of 'tawaif's sexuality and performance as resistance'. The proposed film script covers a wide expanse from Umrao to 'Gudiya' (the collective effort of the tawaifs) and promises to be an important contribution to the project of feminist history. I do hope that this project will be considered for funding.

(Highly Recommended)

PROJECT II

Maharashtratil Tamasha Loknatya Parampara

The objectives of the proposed project on photo documentation of the tamasha are not clearly spelt out. The conceptual frame of the researcher – also remains ambiguous. It tends to reiterate the popular 'misconceptions' concerning the rural, working class audiences. The origins of the tamasha in Aurangzeb's military expeditions are stated as a certainty – and the debate about the origins ignored. In the absence of a historical

account of the popular form, the complexities of caste and gender remain unexplored. For instance the tensions between the *sangeet barees* and the *Dholki phad* tamasha centre around the relative respectability of *mang* women as against the “*kabnurkains*’ (free birds) of the kolhati caste. The photo documentation then remains only a ‘Hewlett-Packard photo Real Printer’ style research. It only displays the social life of the tamasha artiste ‘just as it is’ and as the advertisements say ‘only reality looks more real’

(Not Recommended)

PROJECT III

The Possibility of a popular Vernacular Culture: Performative traditions and changing Structures of Patronage in Nineteenth Century Western India.

The proposed project to investigate the links between the kirtankaars, lavani troupes and the natak in Western India has the potential of providing the often-missed link in the history of Marathi theatre. The conceptual framework of the project has been worked out well. However, in terms of the methodology, I am not sure if even as an ingenuous reading of the lesser known provincial publications and manuscripts will allow for conclusive links to be established. The researcher may have to proceed largely from oral sources and personal recollections and the proposal does not give a possible map of such sources (list of kirtankar gharanas, lavani troupes) and it is difficult to gauge the familiarity of the researcher with the ‘field’. As for the stated expected outcomes of the study, I do hope that the researcher will work these out further. Ways in which the findings could be integrated into mainstream departments and curricula (probably through workshops) need to be worked out as that the project may not be limited to an academic debate.

(Recommended- but would definitely give priority to projects that have something more than an academic intent.)

Project IV

Multiple Marginalities: Anthology of Dalit Popular Writings Of North India: A project Of Exploring Alternative Writings.

The proposed project on an anthology of Dalit popular writings would be an important contribution towards building a non- brahman historiography. However, the conceptual framework of the project needs to be worked out further. The project needs to be located within a frame of the dalit movements and dissent in the last three decades or more. The researcher rejects the 'mainstream dalit discourse' as been imitative of the western Indian dalit discourse and as sold out to big publishers. The popular booklets are seen as representative of a true subaltern discourse. The tensions- collusion between the Brahman mainstream and the dalit mainstream discourse and those between dalit mainstream and the more popular dalit discourse have to be spelt out further. In the absence of this spelling out the conclusions about dalit mainstream and margins seem hasty. To this end, the intra caste, tensions of class and the inter caste tensions (among the dalits) need to be located in the historical phases of dalit dissent in U.P and Bihar. In fact the linkages between the first generation of dalit writers (now probably Mainstream0 and the more popular writers need to be traced- in terms of ideological continuities and discontinuities. Methodologically, the criteria for selection of booklets will have to be better worked out. For the anthology, it may be better to focus on the booklets on a single theme, for e.g. cultural history. The introduction to the anthology would be crucial in outlining the

positions of the dalit mainstream discourse and that of the popular one. In the context of the saffronisation of history, such a project has academic and political significance.

The researcher would have to work out his/her analytical frame in the light of the on going debates on dalit epistemologies, new writings and cultural activism. The supporting material (Heroes, Histories and Booklets) draws conclusions about the discordance between western and Northern India through very selective and limited reading of the western Indian case. While the author is underlining the popular discourse in Northern India- in case of the western Indian case, he seems to draw upon the 'dalit mainstream writings'. Lastly, the title 'multiple Marginalities' needs further clarification' so that the researcher's own position may become apparent. There is in the present context a need to develop regional anthologies of non-Brahman histories so that a dialogue across regions could become possible.

(Highly Recommended)