

Grant Number: 2007-0-007

Grantee : Shabani Hassanwalia, New Delhi

Grant amount: Rs 5,00,000

Grant period : One year from August 1, 2007

Précis

This grant supports the making of a documentary film on the local Ladakhi film industry. The film will explore how and why the Ladakhi film industry emerged, how it sustains itself and where it wants to go. Grant funds will pay for pre-production, production and post-production costs, professional fees and an accountant's fee.

Grant Description

Four years ago, the first ever Ladakhi film was made for the screen by a Ladakhi, with Ladakhi actors speaking in Ladakhi. It was the story of a soldier falling in love with a Ladakhi girl. The film was a hit. Now, four years later, each winter sees the release of at least six to seven digital films produced and directed by local Ladakhi grocers, trek-guides and government officials. This grant will support Shabani Hassanwalia to make a documentary on the local Ladakhi cinema and its unique practice of direct to video feature filmmaking, with a view towards understanding how cinema as a contemporary cultural practice is steeped in tradition but also rebels against it.

“A Ladakhi man would thump his chest with pride because his neighbour told a story so well that he got teary eyed,” says Shabani. She is keen to explore how cinema was *chosen* as a form of communication and artistic expression in Ladakh as soon as technology became affordable. The key narrative concerns through almost all of these films are issues arising out of the lack of education, the fear of globalisation, inadequacies of a subsistence agrarian economy, and the entrenched class and caste system. Wrapped in fluff and melodrama, much like Bollywood, these films address notions of belonging and fractured personal and political identities.

Moreover, Ladakhi culture is of particular interest to Shabani because of the cruel geography and curious vulnerability of people to the elements. She feels that “their local cinema tells a way better story of the various tugs the society feels – of being 'globalised' and/or westernised, of a conflicted, disenchanting youth, which holds on to its roots as tightly as it tears away from them. Of a society, so much at odds with a world that is Leh, that it needs to find newer forms of expression to understand what it is feeling”. According to her it is this inherent cultural tempestuousness that the filmmakers and the audience are attempting to understand and negotiate through cinema.

Shabani is also interested in studying the different genres that seem already to be developing in this fledgling industry. Bollywood style love stories or ‘small budget fantasia’ that portray allegiance to the land and people and to being Ladakhi are the most widely viewed. As this cinema has gradually increased in popularity, strong aesthetic and political opinions have slowly been formed. Some films have been attacked with charges of ‘westernisation’ and ‘corruption of moral culture’ and others have been criticised for ‘the dilution of traditional Ladakhi folk style’. This protest, and a vehemently patriotic cultural guilt, has led to a new strand of cinema—straightforward retellings of folk tales using traditional folk songs and musical instruments. Though these films are not Ladakhi hits, they are promoted as vehicles for cultural tourism.

Besides these two strands, this fledgling industry has just seen the emergence of ‘art house’ cinema. One such recent film was about four friends in search of the meaning of life in the city of Leh. Imaginatively shot and edited by a bunch of amateurs, the film sank without a trace at the box office because it was released in summer at the peak of the tourist season and nobody turned up to see it. Winter is when film watching really becomes the main activity of the local Ladakhis. Every winter the theatre in Leh is packed as Ladakhi films are projected from a DVD player onto the big screen. Posters publicising the films all over the city usually have mug shots of the actors and the director against a picturesque Ladakhi landscape. If the film is a hit it runs for 2-3 months and if not, it comes off in 10-15 days.

A possible narrative structure for Shabani's documentary involves following an actor who first acts in a film produced by a local grocery store/production house. He then takes one week's leave from his job in a cab company to make a film with the Ladakh Vision group, a not-for-profit group of five filmmakers who use the profits from their films for work in rural education and health care. We then see the actor at a public screening of his own film. Nobody runs to him for autographs, but we are aware of his sudden intense need to be recognised and appreciated as an artist. Through the story of a non-actor we see both sides of this industry—the aspirations and the stresses.

Shabani is also particularly fascinated with how cinema has created 'artists', who prior to holding a camera had no such identity. They have been able to overcome basic infrastructural problems to build what is now a fairly profitable industry. How are they adjusting to their new identities as filmmakers/actors/producers and how do they see their future? Do they have overarching ideas of 'good cinema'? It is these questions that Shabani wishes to explore in her documentary. She emphasises that her own documentary is ultimately inspired and driven by the Ladakhi filmmakers driving need and passion to make cinema.

Budget

Professional fees	Rs 1,94,500
Production costs	1,68,350
Post-production costs	85,400
Pre-production costs	49,250
Accountant's fee	<u>2,500</u>
Total	<u>Rs 5,00,000</u>