Dear All,

This is our third and final issue for the year 2013. We are elated to share news of four successful shows of our travelling exhibition, ‘Lived Stories Everyday Lives’ and also present vignettes from the recently concluded Film South Asia, the biennial documentary film festival that showcases work from the region.

The first show of the Hri travelling exhibition opened in July 2013 at Punjab Kala Bhawan in Chandigarh. Travelling to the hinterland from the capital city it experienced a warm reception in Daudpur, a village in the heart of Ludhiana district. From Punjab, the exhibition travelled east to Kathmandu, and then to Dhaka. The exhibition witnessed more than six hundred visitors and our visitors’ book recorded more than 350 enthusiastic responses in English, Punjabi, Nepali and Bengali. Encouraged by the response, plans to host these exhibitions in other cities in Nepal and Bangladesh are underway. We are also planning to take this exhibition to Sri Lanka and Afghanistan in the coming months.

With the arrival of the new year, we hope to kick off the next phase of Archives Southasia and also begin work on new projects.

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July 2013 saw an interesting show come to Chandigarh in the form of *Lived Stories, Everyday Lives: Images from Private Collection across Southasia* held at the Punjab Kala Bhavan. The exhibition, a joint venture of the Hri Institute for Southasian Research and Exchange, Kathmandu (Nepal), and Panjab Digital Library (PDL), Chandigarh, showcased some 30 digital image reproductions of photographs, prints and artefacts from various private and institutional archival collections to present us with an idea of the range of archival enterprise coming into being in the region. Not only this, what the exhibition also sought to convey through its careful curation was the range of trajectories of Southasian histories captured in the images as well as of the inexhaustible potential of the archival idea to collect, collate and document virtually anything. A highlight of the exhibition was the selection of images exclusively dealing with life in Panjab brought in by the PDL, a pioneering archival enterprise in India dedicating to digitizing vast swathes of Panjabi history in print, the scale of which belies the fact that the archive is the labour of love of only a handful of passionately dedicated individuals.

Collision with history

To shape the infinite ideas that could inform archival practices, the curators focused on images that conveyed a sense of everyday lives from various parts of Southasia. This ‘everyday’ sought to be conveyed in the images however was not restricted to one register of life; not just the urban everyday but also the ‘timeless’ everyday of the Vedda in Sri Lanka from the Threeblindmen Collection, Colombo, or John Claude White’s famous photographs of the Tibetan everyday captured during the Younghusband Expedition to Lhasa at the turn of the century and much more. My personal favourite in this regard was an extraordinary photograph of a young Mukti Bahini (Bangladeshi Liberation Army of 1971) soldier gun in hand at dawn peacefully smoking away on the bank of river contemplating the day/life/history/destiny ahead. Suddenly history and the everyday collide in the most astonishing manner that leaves us wordless about the poetics of the sudden eruption of the ordinary in the extraordinary. At the other end of the spectrum, was the image of ‘Rehana’s vest’ from the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka which sought to convey the brutality of the everyday during the events of the Bangladesh Liberation War (Rehana, a daughter of Mukti Bahini warrior, had been killed by Pakistani soldiers). Here is when the ordinary can be continuously extraordinary.

A considerable part of the exhibition was dedicated to images from Southasian middle class lives archived mainly by the families themselves depicting rituals of childhood play or more centrally variants of that important rite-of-passage of social mobility in the colonial and early postcolonial period in South Asia – higher education, going abroad to study and women’s education. Such images form part of the ‘canonical’ narrative about modernity in Southasia – colonial or state-sponsored modernity aimed at creating ‘apt’ modern or
The Everyday Extraordinary

By Kaushik Bhaumik

national subjects through education. From within the ‘domestic’ or ‘private’ sphere of images a set of photos depicting Panjabi girls holidaying in hill stations in the c.1960s stands out for going against the ritual ceremonialism and formality of the other images. These images digitized by the PDL from a private collection catch the everyday in moments of leisure, gendered leisure, gendered exotic leisure that always carries with it a hint of romance and mystery. The images of girls holidaying in the hills move back and forth between the ‘forensic’ evidence of the ‘Real’ in the photograph on the one hand and the fantasy imagery of Bombay films of the 1960s onwards featuring many Panjabi girls holidaying and romancing in the hills on the other.

The other pole of such intimate domesticity is captured by the reproduction of fragments of a letter the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz wrote to his wife Alys from the Hyderabad (Sind) jail where he was incarcerated in the early 1950s for his role in Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case. As usual the trope of ‘man of history writing informally to family’ is invoked where the letter veers between Faiz speaking about history, never forgetting his role as man of historical destiny, and informal address to his near-and-dear ones. Here, the domestic is anything but leisured bearing the twin burden of historical fame and political tensions. Ironically, if Faiz is under the spell of the star of History, the girls, Punjabis like Faiz, are under the spell of another kind of stardom – both enchantments add a swagger to these diverse protagonists of modern Panjabi history.

Challenging hegemony

Beyond this, the exhibition is dotted with unusual gems. The one that caught my eye again came from Panjab – an advertisement about the appearance in Lahore of the female wrestler Veeran Bai and her claim to defeat all male wrestlers (the advertisement appearing in the Panjabi literary magazine Phulwari in its July 1937 issue). Read against some of the images mentioned above and against images advertising fashionable ladies footwear, film posters, of women graduating in higher education and Sikh masculinity in war and engineering an image such as this does end up providing us with glimpses of a very rich cultural matrix through which Panjab emerged into modernity in the early twentieth century. Parallaxes challenging hegemonic commonsense about cultural norms abound (for example, in the case of Veeran, between gender, profession, subalternity to name just three axes of identity amongst many others), but one thing shines through cutting across the Panjab images – the foci from which individuals with a sense of public presence and visibility-worthiness were emerging with full-on onset of modernity were many and challenged earlier grids of the ways in which individuals could accumulate public worth – gender-wise or otherwise.
And this then leads us to the crucial issue of an archival project such as the one undertaken by the Hri Institute to document private collections and institutional collections of a non-hegemonic nature – that in the presence of the images today, in the early twenty-first century, one cannot help but feel the launch way back in time, of trajectories of the desire to be seen and be considered worthy of being seen and appreciated. They might have remained hidden for so long but something tells us that such desires are fast breaking through the cracks of the ‘official’ vision of history and historicity and we are on the verge of being flooded by a tsunami wave of such desires coming our way from all directions.

One congratulates the curatorial team for the craft of their image selection which although relatively ‘superficial’ at first glance in that there is only a handful of images from each archive, they nevertheless manage to convey the richness of the particular collection, that of the richness of visual data available today for the diversities of Southasian histories as well as the rich veins of material that are still to come.

Kaushik Bhaumik is Associate Professor, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

READ ONLINE: http://www.hrisouthasian.org/initiatives/archives-southasia/403-the-everyday-extraordinary.html?section_id=&category_id=&article_id=403%3Athe-everyday-extraordinary-
Southasia comes to Daudpur

By Daljit Ami

The old, disused granary of my ancestral home buzzed with activity in the third week of July. Having long been lying empty and decrepit, a fresh coat of paint did wonders to the godown which suddenly became a gallery. The inauguration, with renowned artist Malkit Singh, was an event marked by respect for local elders and their wisdom. With the summer sun dancing on the images, stories of ordinary people from across Southasia came alive in Daudpur. The steady stream of curious visitors was ample evidence of continuing interest, with growing numbers converging on Daudpur, after the word went around.

The septuagenarian artist Singh pointed out that his generation aspired to take exhibitions to villages and with this initiative, it has become a reality. He stressed that this is an historic event happening in rural Punjab. Laxmi Murthy, Director, Hri Southasia for Research and Exchange and Davinder Pal Singh, Executive Director of Panjab Digital Library (PDL) pondered over the idea of bringing such exhibitions to rural areas. Laxmi said that Hri has desired to bring Southasia to common people and in Daudpur, it has succeeded in its pursuit. Davinder shared that PDL has organized different exhibitions in urban areas but this exhibition offered the opportunity to reach out to more people.

It was the first time that such an event was held in our village. Of course, there have been religious and political exhibitions on several occasions. With so many people keen to see it, we were asked to extend the time of exhibition. We screened three documentaries in the evening from 8:00 pm, and the audience made a beeline to the exhibition soon after the screening.

Many visitors had never seen such an exhibition. For me, it was truly encouraging that people from all sections visited, and the repeated visits of cattle-shed cleaners and dish washers was touching as they spent time with every exhibit. They made someone or the other read out the stories for them. The curiosity level of people cutting across ages was remarkable. Right from an octogenarian home-maker to young school drop-outs, it was an attraction which become the talk of the village. A particularly poignant connection forged was that of Navjot Kaur with Vidya Pradhan. Navjot, a graduate from the village, had few job prospects. She had come to the exhibition hall to mop and clean, and was struck by Vidya’s story of struggle for higher education.

For Daudpur, which has been somewhat prosperous but resembles a ghost settlement of fancy houses but sharply reduced population due to out-migration, it was a much-needed cultural boost. Once the traditional method of propaganda -- the Gurudwara loud-speaker came into use, people from nearby villages poured in to visit exhibition and attend screenings. Some travelled more than 100 kms to be part of the experience, which soon became a community effort. Chairs for the screening were contributed by the neighbourhood, and many people sat on cots. The second and third day saw some people standing in the courtyard and on an adjacent roof top. It seemed like the people of Daudpur could simply not get enough of Southasia.

Daljit Ami is a Chandigarh-based journalist, researcher, filmmaker.


[L] Navjot Kaur, a recent graduate, helping clean the venue against the image of Vidya Pradhan in the background, [R] Visitors at Daudpur
"Archivists do the thankless job of keeping the important resources available to researchers. Now it is time to acknowledge their role in knowledge production", said Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon, chief guest at the inauguration of Lived Stories Everyday Lives. Showcasing images from different private collections in Southasia, the exhibition Lived Stories Everyday Lives, brought together images captured by common people, others by amateurs, and some by professionals.

Jointly organised by Hri Institute for Southasian Research and Exchange, Kathmandu (Hri) and Panjab Digital Library (PDL), Chandigarh, the exhibition opened to an enthusiastic response at Punjab Kala Bhawan in Chandigarh. Prof Dhillon lauded the efforts of Hri at co-ordinating of archives in Southasia and PDL of digitization manuscripts and rare books. Remarking on the showcasing of the common thread of lives of ordinary people across Southasia, Prof Dhillon underlined the importance of sharing experiences as preserved in personal archives. He pointed out that history should also be understood beyond iconic events and personalities as common people need to be acknowledged for shaping our culture and lives. He added that archivists seldom come to the forefront as compared with historians, who enjoy the limelight.

Countries in Southasia not only share borders but also histories. Moving beyond borders, unique different images came together in this single exhibition. Over 25 images from different private collections in Southasia were showcased, along with a special section on Panjab, which was curated by the Panjab Digital Library. Through a series of pictorial and textual vignettes—be they graduation photos or studio portraits, post cards or holiday photos—this exhibition attempted to present an understanding of how the past around us. The events and the activities that have shaped our collective consciousness—the so-called big moments of history—are understood here in terms that are accessible to people in a language and framework of their own. This is a tiny effort to look at how everyday lives have been lived, and how they have been chronicled. It is the “small voices of history” that are sought to be brought to the fore here: people who have elided the ‘great’ narratives of history offered through history books, national dailies and the media. Here, postcards, advertisements, calendars, letters, family albums and studio photographs told the stories of everyday lives as well as extraordinary events in the lives of ordinary people.

Sarita Ramamoorthy is the Program Manager, Hri

READ ONLINE: http://hrisouthasian.org/initiatives/archives-southasia/400-archivists-take-centre-stage.html?section_id=&category_id=&article_id=400%3Aarchivists-take-centre-stage
A departure from the obvious
The Daily Star, Dhaka, Fri Oct 04 2013

The September 21-26 photo exhibition at the Liberation War Museum was air-conditioning for the eye, and if you are susceptible to history, the soul. It showcased an unusually interesting mix of photos, giving a sense of what museums and art galleries can do when they depart, even a little, from the usual. ... All these images are at once historical and contemporary—transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. ...

'Lived Stories Everyday Lives' on display at the Liberation War Museum
Dhaka Tribune, Dhaka, Sun Sept 22 2013

... The exhibit has on display, digital images, that are reproductions of photographs, prints and artifacts from various institutions and archival collections, from individual collections of common people, amateur and professional photography from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Tibet. The display is showcasing the history of the Southasian region. ...

Photos inspiring nostalgia
Republica, Kathmandu, Sat Sept 14 2013

... The photographs on display comprised of images taken of postcards, newspaper ads, letters, family albums and studio albums that tell the stories of everyday lives as well as extraordinary events in the lives of ordinary people. ...

Moving Images
Indian Express, Chandigarh, Sat Jul 13 2013

The past offers a glimpse into the present and the world appears to be a lot closer as the images reel out life in front of our eyes, without mysticism and mythology. A real world with real people is what best describes an ongoing exhibition ...

Vignettes of life
Hindustan Times, Chandigarh, Sat July 13 2013

Our everyday life subsumes many experiences that go unnoticed. The expression of joy on your parents’ face when you return home after a long time or sadness at the time of departure; going out with your friends to a restaurant; posing for the camera at the time of your graduation; or resting in the lap of your caretaker as a toddler — these are ordinary events in one’s life, but with no-less-ordinary importance.... The story of struggle is one aspect of the exhibition. There are images that celebrate ordinary people’s extraordinary achievements. ...
Young Southasian Dreamers

By Mallika Aryal

In Afghanistan, young women who have been locked up in women’s cell dream of better lives beyond the walls. In Myanmar a group of young girls find an unconventional mentor and try to make it big as pop stars in a country that is just opening up. In Nepal, young boys put themselves through many rounds of a grueling recruitment process so they can join British Gurkha and make their lives better. In India’s Haryana young women fight the (in)justice of the Khap Panchayats. In Pakistan women try to rebuild their lives after acid is thrown in their faces.

That was just a sneak preview of this year’s festival of Southasian documentaries, Film South Asia (FSA). Film South Asia received almost 400 plus entries this and 35 are selected to be screened in a regular Kathmandu cinema hall from 3-6 October.

This year FSA’s filmmakers have tackled subjects that are daring and fresh. They shock us, entertain us and move us. Every festival year as the selection committee sits and watches hours and hours of brilliant work produced in the region the committee members are looking for themes, trends. What was often difficult to spot in other festival years was crystal clear this year. This FSA is about young Southasia—their lives, their past, their hopes, their dreams and their future.

In the last few years documentary film production has flourished in some countries. There was a time when the festival organizers used to struggle to get the word out to Sri Lankan filmmakers to submit their work. As the war ended we expected this to change. It has taken a few years, but the number of films submitted from Sri Lanka increased by many folds this year. And the films that are being produced and submitted to film festivals from Sri Lanka are not just about the war. Similarly, Myanmar and Afghanistan entries have increased while Maldives remains a big black hole when it comes to their documentaries showing up in Kathmandu at FSA.

There has been an interesting shift in documentaries from India as well. Filmmakers are daring to make films that are about more diverse subjects. They are experimenting with various styles of documentary filmmaking. More films are being commissioned and pitched away from the obvious hubs—Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore and Ahmedabad and filmmakers are going to Imphal, Varanasi, Kashmir, the little known island of Char (between India and Bangladesh border), and a remote corner of Northeast India bordering Burma. Meanwhile Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan’s entries have suffered a hit this year. In the past, 100 plus films produced by Nepali, Bangladeshi and Pakistani filmmakers were submitted. Filmmakers from these three countries have taken the Ram Bahadur Trophy for Best Film home many times. However, this year there was a significant decline in the entries from both these countries. Docu-watchers of the region attribute this to more documentary filmmakers going into feature film production (in Nepal and Bangladesh) and TV news production (in Pakistan).
Film festivals have always grappled with the challenge of reaching everywhere—getting the word out there; attracting filmmakers who haven’t submitted their works before; courting filmmakers who have, so that they continue to produce; preparing the next generation of filmmakers who understand what good documentary is all about. FSA has never compromised on quality and craft and the festival has done a good job in maintaining that since its launch in 1997. Now the next challenge for Film Southasia and other documentary film production/promotion companies is try to understand why documentary filmmakers move away from documentary and what can be done to encourage them to stay in documentary world and continue to inform, shock, move, expose injustices to our community in a 16:9 frame.

*Mallika Aryal* is a print and video journalist and the former director of Film Southasia.
Southasian cinema, perhaps more than any other of the world’s great cinematic traditions, is inseparable from its music. Often the music seems to outlive, to transcend the films, with certain songs enduring in millions of minds and ears long after the movies they were written for are forgotten. These soundtracks are a large part of what makes Southasian film – Bollywood and beyond – distinctive. Yet for a music industry that matches the prodigious productivity of Southasian cinema, we have far too few icons.

In the centennial year of Southasian cinema, two films on the FSA 2013 selection try to do justice to this musical legacy. Director Rudradeep Bhattacharjee’s The Human Factor tells the history of the Lords family, unsung heroes of Bollywood music, and in the process uncovers the fascinating stories of people who shaped the sounds of black-and-white era Bollywood. What we find is a glorious mix of cosmopolitan and curious musicians who created a distinct new style by embracing the serendipitous arrival in Mumbai of new musical ideas and instruments from all over the world. It’s a perspective that encourages careful attention to the wealth of archival song sequences Bhattacharjee uses to illustrate this story, and also to the many songs presented in director Shivendra Singh Dungarpur’s Celluloid Man, an epic documentary history of Bollywood cinema that also features on this year’s programme.

But The Human Factor is not just a celebration. The title already hints that this is a film about the humans behind the music, about the large orchestras and complex compositions and sound technicians of a bygone age, and about how that human factor is being side-lined by the current fetish for synthesisers, digitised production and blaring dance hits.

Shazia Khan’s Sama: Muslim Mystic Music of India is a reminder of all the beauty that this current trend overlooks. Khan presents an hour-long series of full-length devotional songs by Sufi musicians in a staggering diversity of styles, spanning the entire length and breadth of India, all shot live on location with fine camerawork to create a trance of sights and sounds. Without voiceover or interruption, Khan lets the music speak for itself, and the story it tells is of the infinite variety and genius of human experience, both religious and musical, that offers hope against all the extremisms plaguing our days.

Perhaps the most important lesson that all these musical documentaries hold is that as the region’s popular music becomes increasingly frenetic and noisy, we need to make an ever greater effort to listen to the sounds that don’t often make it onto our TV and cinema screens.
Film Southasia (FSA) is a biennial festival that was set up in 1997 with the goal of popularising the documentary so that it entertains, informs and changes lives. In addition to the festival that takes place in Kathmandu every two years, FSA organizes screenings, discussions and workshops across Southasia to promote Southasian non-fiction within the Subcontinent and around the world. Film Southasia believes that film is a powerful medium that helps to not only in better represent the region internationally, but also contributes immensely in introspection and initiatives to bring change at the local level. Eight editions of the festival have been held to date.

TRAVELLING FILM SOUTHASIA

After each FSA festival, about a dozen films are selected to travel across the Subcontinent and the world as the Travelling Film Southasia (TFSA) package. This mobile campaign to promote and popularise Southasian documentaries stops at more than 50 international venues between the parent FSA festivals that are held every two years in Kathmandu.

The process is simple.

To host a TFSA package in your city, university, cultural center, you need to;

STEP 1: Buy a license (Full package is $800)

STEP 2: Organize local venue, publicity and other logistics

STEP 3: We will send you a set of DVDs accompanied by catalogues and ask you to send it back to us within 3 weeks of your event

*The TFSA package is often provided free of cost to students groups, film clubs, activist platforms in Southasia to promote the documentary medium and better understanding within Southasia.

*We are happy to introduce you to the film makers should you want to invite them to your event/s. To discuss details, please email us fsa@filmsouthasia.org
The Hri Team

Chair
Kanak Mani Dixit

Director
Laxmi Murthy

Programme Manager
Sarita Ramamoorthy

Researchers
Daljit Ami (Chandigarh)

Advisers
Hari Sharma (Kathmandu)
Kumari Jayawardene (Colombo)
Mitu Varma (New Delhi)
Ramachandra Guha (Bangalore)
Sadanand Menon (Chennai)
Salima Hashmi (Lahore)
Sanjib Baruah (Guwahati/New Delhi)