



Conversation with
Kavery Dutta and Luis Francia

1990

What do you see as the greatest difference(s) between Asian and Asian-American filmmakers?

The hyphen that makes Asian-Americans experience and absorb the other American cultures surrounding us. For me as an Asian Indian that means not only Bach and Coppola, but also Coltrane, salsa and other non-Indian Asian experiences, whether it's food for the mind like a Lino Brocka film or for the stomach, like a rich and varied dim sum.

My own films reflect that bicultural experience. *One Hand Don't Clap* is about Caribbean calypso music to which I have easy access as a New Yorker (since New York is the center for calypso recording) and as an Indian (since Indians make up half the population of Trinidad, the island home of this music).

What accounts for this differences(s)?

The context we live in. On our turf of origin, identity gets narrowed down to specifics that become meaningless to outsiders. It's the old they all look alike to me.

If I grew up in Calcutta, I would be seen as a Bengali woman director. In the U.S., I join forces with the larger Asian (and Third World) experience because we share an identity of the diaspora which is no more the same as that of my birthplace.

Do you perceive Asian-American films to have certain unstated priorities?

The greatest priority, and it's not unstated, is that room has to be made for our vision. As directors, producers, actors, writers, we have stories to tell that can be of value to non-Asian American audiences as well...

Say I spoke of a film about big city labour organizers who descend on a tiny rural area to convince the local people to fight big business. If I said the title was *Norma Rae*, it's seen as a film of universal appeal. If I said it's Shyam Benegal's *Manthan*, it's not. What's going on here?

Why does the question of identity figure so prominently in Asian-American film, especially in documentaries?

Identity figures prominently in all films. Kramer vs. Kramer was about a woman's search for identity. Drugstore Cowboy was about a junkie's reassessment of his identity. So it's natural that we as Asian-Americans are also concerned with this age-old theme of who are we? Where are we going? Where do we fit in?

Cultural identity is important to us (and other Third World-Americans) because that's the soul of a people, the source of our dignity.

In our films, we are writing our own history. No one else is going to do it, and if we were so foolish as to leave it to others, thousands of years from now, future generations will think we were nothing but Suzie Wongs and Sabu the Elephant Boys.

What effect does the fact of Asian filmmakers, unlike Asian-Americans, not being minorities in their own countries, have on their films?

This is really a question for them. I would guess that perhaps in their films, Asian directors take their identity as a given whereas we have to constantly explain and assert ours. I suppose it's as if the graffiti on their wall reads, We are here. But on ours it reads, Hey, we are here too.