

Tribute

**Shubhra Gupta**

**ARUNA VASUDEV**

**(1936-2024)**



There was a reason that Aruna Vasudev, critic, curator, editor, film festival creator, was called the Mother of Asian Cinema. And that was because no one before her had focused so singularly on the many splendored cinemas from Asia: when, in 1990, she founded NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asia Pacific Cinema), with support from UNESCO, it was the beginning of a weighty new chapter, and an acknowledgement of her eminence.

But it wasn't as if Vasudev, who had studied cinema in New York as a young girl, ever stopped being a student of the youngest, most vibrant art-form on the planet. Her PhD thesis from the University of Paris was turned into a book on censorship in Indian Cinema, titled 'Liberty and License'. After her return to India, she made several documentaries, and stayed invested in mentoring young Indian talent, even as she proceeded headlong into a lifetime of talking up Asian cinema, through her columns, which eventually turned into a pioneering journal.

In 1988, she started *Cinemaya* with her collaborators Latika Padgaonkar and Rashmi Doraiswamy (Indu Shrikent joined them later). The 'office' was in a room in her well-appointed Delhi room, and from there rolled out a quarterly journal which introduced us to little-known but deserving voices—filmmakers and writers-- from Asian cinema. In the late 80s, Satyajit Ray and Akira Kurosawa were about the only names from Asia that were known in the West, and even that knowledge was confined to ardent cinephiles. These were pre-internet times, and the enthusiastic editorial team spent a lot of its time trekking to the fax machine at the post-office to receive and send articles. And the fledgling but sound idea that local film writers and critics were the best equipped to write about their own cinemas grew into a journal which abounded with authentic view-points, unfiltered through extraneous lenses.

At a memorial meeting which was overflowing with Aruna's family (her older sister Uma Vasudeva was a leading journalist and author of the 70s and 80s, and one of the early biographers of Indira Gandhi; Aruna's daughter is married to politician Varun Gandhi), and a large network of close friends and colleagues, Doraiswamy spoke warmly of the times when they were working on *Cinemaya*, armed with laughter and determination.

That distinctive can-do spirit was very much a part of Aruna's personality, which was always larger than her small figure, which was almost always wrapped in lovely saris and Indian fabrics. She brought that single-minded focus into all her enterprises: soon after *Cinemaya*, there was the formation of NETPAC, and that culminated in the creation of *Cinefan*, a film festival that the Capital of India desperately needed. Given that the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) had shifted base to Goa, Delhi had been keenly feeling the absence of a world-class film event. And *Cinefan*, with its focus on cinemas of Asia, Africa and the Middle East, became a much-awaited annual coming together of film enthusiasts. Till it lasted, *Cinefan* provided us much joy and food for thought: in its last few editions, Mani Kaul was the festival director, and his vision and curatorial choices aligned with the spirit of independence that the festival was set up with. After it closed down, no alternative has filled its space. And with Aruna's passing, Asian cinema has lost one of its most vocal champions. She will always be missed.

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