



Questions for Kumar Shahani

by Aparna Frankⁱ

Kumar Shahani is an internationally renowned filmmaker, who studied under Ritwik Ghatak and apprenticed with Robert Bresson. He is a recipient of the prestigious Prince Claus Award (1998). His films have won several Indian Filmfare Awards and his film 'Khayal Gatha' won the FIPRESCI Prize at the Rotterdam International Film Festival in 1990. Mr. Shahani's essays have been published in the journals *Framework* and *Social Scientist* and he co-edited *Cinema and Television: Fifty years of Reflection in France* with Jacques Kermabon.

Aparna Frank: *In your many past interviews and essays, you have questioned simple definitions of "identity" and "culture", including the term "multiculturalism"; hence, I am curious, what does a phrase like "Indian cinema" mean to you?*

Kumar Shahani: The question of identity and culture was, as you know, the product of fascism, Nazism and imperial constructs. Right up to 1961, I remember filling up forms, which asked me not only what my nationality was, but also what my race, caste, etcetera were. Therefore, I have rejected these notions totally, fundamentally and I do not ever wish to build any ideology including that of multiculturalism upon notions that have brutalised millions of people. Corporate multiculturalism and state terror are the greatest threat to humanity—they work against the very ethos of individuation.

So, what does Indian cinema mean to me or to you, or to anyone else, who has fought for freedom, be it from one sort of hegemony or another? For me, and my gurus, Ritwik Ghatak, D.D Kosambiⁱⁱ, Jal Balaporiaⁱⁱⁱ and their gurus-Eisenstein, Einstein, Rahmat Khan^{iv}, anything with a geographical name like "Indian" meant self-liberation. The conflict that every move in the direction of self-liberation produces between self-realisation and social, political, and economic self-determination is there for everyone to see in *Char Adhyay (Four Chapters, 1997)* ^v. Its multivalence itself frees us even of the constraints of form, of literariness, of painterliness or any determinism in philosophy and praxis.

AF: *So, even though you reject the repressive forms of ‘Indian culture’ and ‘identity’, you defend and even redefine identity and culture as a mode of individual freedom. Is that what you mean when you say that the geographical name ‘Indian’ meant self-liberation for Ghatak and even Eisenstein?*

KS: Yes, I mean “Indian” or “Russian” in the sense of that which is opposed to global capital. Or, when Eisenstein was working on *Que Viva Mexico!*, he was ‘Mexican’ in terms of understanding that culture, immersing himself in that particular history. This does not mean that he was trying to impose a ‘Russian’ or a ‘Mexican’ view, but it was a self-liberating way of thinking, and it is actually very difficult to achieve. You call yourself ‘Indian’ or ‘Russian’ only so that you can realize yourself, not to restrict or imprison yourself. Names like ‘Indian’, ‘American’, etc., they themselves bind you into an identity, if they are used in a top-down manner, as from the perspective of a state—‘the Russian state’ or ‘American state’—which is ridiculous in that it can pit one against the other. This leads to the ‘other’ being ostracized, demonized.

AF: *You have written about the films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien (2008), studied with Bresson and Ghatak during your formative years (1963- 68), witnessed May 1968, interviewed Miklós Jancsó (1979)—therefore you have a rather remarkable engagement with diverse traditions in world-cinema. Is that kind of eclecticism something that you see happening within Indian cinema today?*

KS: I am sure that my younger colleagues will continue to engage themselves with diverse traditions in world cinema. Some of them, indeed, are happy to say that they have been inspired by the work done by my generation in combating the slots that we were thrust into as commodities on the international market. The engagement with self-realization is almost something instinctual, and I trust that my younger colleagues, my pupils and even those who at the moment aspire to make films, will continue to celebrate freedom.

AF: *In the essays you wrote during the Emergency^{vi}, published in Framework^{vii}, you express a strong skepticism toward any kind of institutionalization of film and art, which included realism, modernism and the avant-garde. Given that kind of critical*

distance, I am curious as to what, in your opinion, we are commemorating in the centennial of Indian cinema: its technological achievements, its consolidation as one of the largest film industries or its aesthetic contribution?

KS: I think that Realism and Modernism—including the avant-garde—more or less exhausted themselves with the immediate decade after the Second World War. In a sense, the United States and the Soviet Union—also India—put into question the very idea of a nation state because the new state was coming together if not in intention, certainly in reality of many different linguistic communities. There were new victories for women, for people of non-white origins, etc., preparing us for the postmodern situation across the globe in which the European Enlightenment and its corollaries were being gradually eroded. A new set of signs was beginning to appear from locations which did not necessarily have metropolitan centres in the imperial countries.

Technological achievements will always remain a question mark if they are not accompanied by social change of the sort that was brought about in 1771, 1789, 1917, 1947 and so on.^{viii} History and commemoration are absolutely necessary for any evaluation of aesthetic and therefore ethical development of the entire civilization process.

AF: *Can you describe this correlation between technological change and art further?*

KS: You see this in Kosambi's writings very well, where technological intervention in agriculture changes social relationships between men and women, the relationship between different professions, trade, and a reflection of that in art. When these changes are *internalized* in art, you have these wonderful innovations, as in Buddhist art—Ajanta is a fine example. Buddhist art is the finest expression of being extraordinarily inclusive—as any art should be. The individuation in Buddhist art is unmatched; each leaf, each *mudra* of the fingers, is treated with such care! It has its own individuality and it continues to do so, you see this even in Japan—the Lotus Garden. That is the kind of individuation that I aspire to.

AF: *Maya Darpan (Mirror of Illusion, 1972)*^{ix}, *often hailed as an 'Indian New Wave*

film', provides an eloquent, gentle alternative to the rhetoric of the films of May 1968 because it says that the necessity in "freedom is the recognition of necessity" is different from ideological or political necessities. What was the challenge for you, particularly because this was your first film, in terms of expressing this philosophical idea visually/cinematically?

KS: I will answer this question on a personal note. I met Jean-Luc Godard along with Jacques Kébadian who was Robert Bresson's first assistant. Very generously, Godard offered to Kébadian and to me an invitation to work on a film which he would put together of the viewpoints of immigrants in France on the nature of the post '68 European context.

I had loved the film that Chris Marker had made putting together the vision and practice of filmmakers from America and Europe in the context of Vietnam.^x However, the problem that loomed before us was that neither Godard nor the political economy of the world at that time, would have in the slightest allowed a non-Eurocentric viewpoint its full flowering from the location of Paris, or London, or New York. Therefore, I came back to India where I thought I would find the opportunity to go beyond any effort that I could have made elsewhere to elaborate upon freedom as being conscious of the suffering of others, as love and beauty and colour. Of course, I have never been part of any New Wave, anywhere, nor ever wish to be.

AF: *Why did the expression of a non-Eurocentric point of view seem difficult or complicated at that time? Were the reasons political or a matter of resources?*

KS: Not that they were not struggling to get a non-Eurocentric point of view, of course they were. It is just that I remember from the time I went to Paris there were demonstrations for Vietnam, and I used to think that they had so many problems of their own, why are they not talking about them first? It was as if the problems were in Vietnam and none existed within the Western world. I couldn't see why they didn't first of all identify the problems at home and see Vietnam as an extension of their own problems. Then suddenly the breakthrough did happen in May '68. Something did come out of it, in terms of pressuring de Gaulle to leave for Germany and that, in itself, is an achievement. And the backlash to May 68 also showed that it had an

impact. In terms of cinema, I have seen the works of the Dziga Vertov group but didn't think much about it.

AF: *Your interest in history is very specific and distinct in that it comes from Kosambi's Marxist anthropology, Debiprasad Chattopadhyay's works. Which film(s) of yours would you characterize as coming close to an embodiment of Kosambi/Chattopadhyay's works? Didn't you want to make a film "on Kosambi"?*

KS: I wish that Kosambi and Debiprasad Chattopadhyay^{xi} were alive and could actually answer this question. I believe that their work inspired both the sensuousness and the abstraction, the making of the sign in all of my films.

I did think of a film "on Kosambi" but of course, it would have had nothing by way of biography. It would have had a lot to do with life as he observed it and had asked me to "record" and create a montage thereof.

AF: *Why the 'sign', as opposed to say 'symbol' or 'allegory'?*

KS: A sign can be elliptical; a sign can be persuasive and a sign can be interpreted. It elicits the viewer's own experience and it introduces a kind of proposal from the artist to the spectator, who is invited to accept the sign. Unlike the symbol, the sign is not tied to any absolute, fixed object or meaning.

One of the principles of the art forms and literature here has been named "vyanjana". I believe that it extends to other cultures as well. *Vyanjana* refers to meaning which emanates from the construction of an image or a phrase or the shift in the *laya* that deepens our experience in every way. I think the Chinese refer to it as 'indirection'. Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra^{xii} spoke about the same *ashtapadi* or icon or movement from perspectives that were in a sense the simultaneously existing layers of our civilization—Tantric, Buddhist, Vaishnav, Sufi.

AF: *In films like The Bamboo Flute (2000), Bhavantarana (Immanence, 1991) and Khayal Gatha (The Khayal Saga, 1988) you are engaged with various art forms.^{xiii} Can you talk a little about your collaboration with musicians, painters, and dancers?*

Do these arts bring out something that lies concealed in film?

KS: You know, I have also collaborated with artists over long periods of time and not realized those films...as yet. One of the longest such 'collaborations' is of course with Vivan Sundaram^{xiv}. My friendship with him and with Geeta Kapur^{xv} goes back to 1967. By working with Vivan, I explored the bridge between Europe and India all the more. I got to know his aunt, Amrita Sher-Gil^{xvi} better than any one I have known in my life! It was all like a reincarnation in Shimla, Paris, Budapest.

I had started working on films with Pina Bausch^{xvii} and with Anish Kapoor^{xviii} and the realization of those films would have, I believe, taken us all across to another horizon. I feel quite let down by the fact that Pina is no more and that there is no funding for the projected work with Anish. Akbar Padamsee^{xix} has been like a teacher and the collaboration with him was based on the greatest amount of mutual respect and freedom. Somnath Hore's^{xx} white on white work has seeped into every frame of *Char Adhyay* and into my often unspoken communication with K.K. Mahajan^{xxi}. He had bought a special exposure meter which could do the minutest readings of the million whites in Somnath's 'Wounds' series, and the million densities of Rabindranath Tagore's paintings.

In *Maya Darpan*, Chandra^{xxii} had first choreographed the dance sequence from her discipline of Bharatyanatyam^{xxiii}, but when she found that I was not quite happy with it, she erased it all and we found the right idiom in Mayurbhanj Chhau^{xxiv} after the shooting of the main schedule was done in distant Alwar in Rajasthan. Both Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia^{xxv} gave all of themselves to the vision of the films with an unparalleled generosity. I think, in our sangeet (composite of literature, music and dance), there is an ocean of unexplored movement, intervals that create themselves, even as they disappear. Isn't that true of both montage and modulation?

The point is, no film can be made on other arts as if it were some sort of a social scientific question. You have to transform and violate the other art to some extent; through juxtaposition and montage, you violate the unity of that particular work, and you have to, because unless you do that you cannot achieve a kind of

transcendence.

As Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra said of my film, it is not a film 'on' him, but something which goes beyond him and beyond gestures; it is an interpretation. So, I do plan in detail, but not on paper. It is more through dialogue with the people I work with and even the nature around me, which allows for a kind of revelation to occur in the shots. When it comes to the editing table, I need absolute attention and concentration, no distractions whatsoever.

AF: *Given your critical stance towards commercial cinema, do you see popular films, either Indian or Hollywood? Do you go to the movies, multiplexes?*

KS: From time to time, sometimes more intensively, so as to be able to cast a film's actors or discover some new relationships emerging because of economic or technological changes. I love it when a student asks me to look at any film or go to the theatre or an exhibition—particularly their own work. The technical quality of the average Indian film has improved much, but I don't know if it is going anywhere.

AF: *What do you think are the problems and challenges you are facing today as a filmmaker, compared to the challenges you faced in the 70s?*

KS: In the 1970s, finance capital was just beginning to bring down regimes and prop up dictators. That applied to both the First and the other worlds. After *Maya Darpan*, I had to wait for twelve years to make my second feature film *Tarang* (*The Wave*, 1984). Now, i.e. in the last decade, both finance capital and industrial capital are collapsing and I am sure that you are personally experiencing that collapse as every American citizen has to. Along with this collapse, there is a great destabilization in the relationships between one person and another, one word and another, one image and another, and the pixels that occupy our lives.

I have not been able to complete any film (or even begin many that I have researched on) in the last ten years!

AF: *What are your thoughts on digital filmmaking?*

KS: I have made a digital film *As the Crow Flies* (2004) with Akbar Padamsee. It takes a lot of time in post-production, and I would be interested in making more works digitally. I do want to discover what the aesthetic possibilities of that medium are. In this film itself, there are some indications of what the aesthetic possibilities might be, but it is just the beginning. One of the important aspects for me is about bringing individuation or that kind of 'accident' as it were, that takes place all the time, into digital film. You have to fight against how color, texture, form can get reduced into a sameness. At the same time, what a pity it is that the fantastic potential of the digital image has been reduced to imitating the world, or the cinema as it existed before. An exercise, a hegemony for an unnamed class of scoundrels. I am waiting for the day when this wonderful technology will fulfill its promises.

AF: *What films should the occasion of India's centennial celebration of film prompt us to revisit and restore?*

KS: Like Henri Langlois, I think that every frame ever shot anywhere on celluloid should be preserved. And now, there is a proliferation of images in emerging media. Those images are also worth preserving. How? I do not know. The great thing about anything that is photographed or recorded is that each moment, each event, is unique. In cinematography and imaging thereafter, Buddhist and Sufi art becomes the very fundamental principle for all practice: the celebration of the world in flux, each living moment in transformation allowed to find its own individual fullness and annihilation.

AF: *In one of Mani Kaul's interviews, he recalls with tremendous affection how the two of you were so inseparable at the Film Institute. Can you talk a little about your friendship with Mani Kaul?*

KS: During our last year at FTII, we didn't have a place to live. We moved around a lot, shared living space with others. We formed a kind of late-risers association because we couldn't find a place to sleep. And all the stray-dogs became our friends. It was quite wonderful in its own way! I remember my last meeting with Mani when he had gotten very ill. We talked at length about signs, signals. This was a kind of

preoccupation for us in films too, say the juxtapositions in Eisenstein or even in music. Mani was definitely more on the side of metaphysics, whereas I was interested in Kosambi.

AF: *This seems to be a ritual that is quite common in popular film journalism, but I want to subject you to it only once on this special occasion: What are your favorite films?*

KS: *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925), *Broken Blossoms* (D.W. Griffith, 1919), *Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Dreyer, 1928), *The Gold Rush* (Charlie Chaplin, 1925), *Sant Tukaram* (Vishnupant Govind Damle and Sheikh Fattelal, 1936), *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1960), *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1973), *Pather Panchali* (Satyajit Ray, 1955), *La prise du pouvoir par Louis XIV* (Roberto Rossellini, 1966), *Au hasard Balthazar* (Robert Bresson, 1966), *L'Argent* (Robert Bresson, 1983), *Ivan the Terrible* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1944 and 1958), *White Nights* (Luchino Visconti, 1957)...

(Interview conducted through electronic mail and phone, November 2013 and March 2014)

Select Filmography:

1972 *Maya Darpan (Mirror of Illusion)*
 1984 *Tarang (The Wave)*
 1989 *Khayal Gatha (The Khayal Saga)*
 1990 *Kasba*
 1991 *Bhavantarana (Immanence)*
 1997 *Char Adhyay (Four Chapters)*
 2000 *The Bamboo Flute*
 2004 *As the Crow Flies*

ⁱ I thank Dr. Rimli Bhattacharya for her help in the transcription of the interview.

ⁱⁱ D.D. Kosambi (1907-1966)—renowned Marxist anthropologist, numismatist and mathematician, author of *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1956), *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture* (1962) and numerous other works—was one of Kumar Shahani's mentors.

ⁱⁱⁱ Late Pandit Jal K. Balaporia, famous musician, and teacher in the Gwalior style of Khayal music.

^{iv} Ustad Rahmat Khan was one of the leading exponents of the Gwalior gharana.

^v *Char Adhyay (Four Chapters)* made by Shahani in 1997 is based on Rabindranath Tagore's 1934 novella of the same name.

^{vi} The 'Emergency' refers to one of the most violent chapters in Indian history, when then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency under controversial and dubious

grounds of “internal disturbance”. During this period, civil liberties were threatened, dissent suppressed, and the press censored. The ‘Emergency’ lasted from 26 June 1975 until 21 March 1977. See “India from Indira Gandhi’s Emergency”, by Munmun Jha in *Encyclopedia of Human Rights*, David P. Forsythe (Ed.) (Oxford University Press, 2009): 5-16.

^{vii} See the dossier on Kumar Shahani in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 30/31, 1986: 68-100.

^{viii} References to 1771 (Battle of Alamance, American Revolution), 1789 (French Revolution), 1917 (October Revolution), and 1947 (Indian Independence).

^{ix} *Maya Darpan (Mirror of Illusion, 1972)* Kumar Shahani’s first feature film, won the Filmfare Critics’ Choice Award for Best Movie.

^x *Far From Vietnam*, ([Alain Resnais](#), [Jean-Luc Godard](#), [Agnès Varda](#), [Claude Lelouch](#), [Chris Marker](#), [Joris Ivens](#), [William Klein](#), 1967).

^{xi} Debiprasad Chattopadhyay (1918-1993), Marxist philosopher, author of *Lokyata* (1959), *Indian Atheism* (1969) and numerous other works.

^{xii} Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra (1926-2004), legendary dancer and teacher in the Odissi style.

^{xiii} *Bamboo Flute*, *Bhavantarana (Immanence)*, and *Khayal Gatha (The Khayal Saga)* are Shahani’s films on the history and practice of various art forms such as the flute, Odissi dance and Khayal music respectively.

^{xiv} Vivan Sundaram, leading contemporary painter, sculptor and video installation artist whose works have been shown at *Group Exhibition*, New Delhi (1974), *Pictorial Space*, New Delhi (1977), *Six Who Declined to Show at the Fourth Triennale*, New Delhi (1978), *the Second and Fourth Biennale*, Havana (1987 and 1991), *the Second Asia-Pacific Triennale of Contemporary Art*, Brisbane (1996).

^{xv} Geeta Kapur is a well-known theorist and historian of Indian art. She is the author of *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (2000).

^{xvi} Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941), one of the most prominent and influential modern artists. Her renowned paintings include, *Haldi (Turmeric) Grinders* (1930), *Young Man with Apples* (1932), *Group of Three girls* (1935), *Brahmacharis* (1937), *Woman on Charpoy* (1940), and *Elephants* (1940).

^{xvii} Philippina "Pina" Bausch (1940-2009), celebrated performer, innovator and teacher of modern dance. Founder of Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch.

^{xviii} Sir Anish Kapoor, renowned sculptor and installation artist, whose works include *Cloud Gate* (Chicago’s Millennium Park), *Sky Mirror* (Rockefeller Center, New York, 2006), *Leviathan* (Grand Palais, 2011) and *The ArcelorMittal Orbit* with Cecil Balmond (Olympic park, London, 2012).

^{xix} Akbar Padamsee, contemporary artist, sculptor and founding figure of Indian modernism. His famous works include *Lovers* (1953), *Jesus and Judas* (1955), and *Metascape* series (1972).

^{xx} Somnath Hore (1921-2006), reputed printmaker and sculptor, known for his *Wounds* (1971) series and *Mother with Child*, bronze sculpture (1974).

^{xxi} K.K. Mahajan (1944-2007) was one of the most innovative cinematographers who worked closely with Shahani in almost all of his films.

^{xxii} Chandralekha (1928-2006), modern dance choreographer composed the dance sequence in Shahani’s *Maya Darpan*.

^{xxiii} Bharatyanatyam is a classical dance form that originated in Tamil Nadu (Southern India).

^{xxiv} Mayurbhanj chhau, practiced in Orissa is a subcategory of the folk, martial dance called ‘Chhau’, also performed as ‘Chho’ in West Bengal.

^{xxv} Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia, acclaimed flautist and composer.