

# ZENANA SHOW 3

## INTERVIEWS OF WOMEN SPECTATORS



**LEELABAI SALUNKE**. 70 YEARS OLD. MAHAR CASTE. WIDOW. FORMER WORKER IN TEXTILE MILL. PRIMARY LANGUAGE: MARATHI. CURRENT RESIDENCE: CENTURY MILLS CHAWLS, LOWER PAREL

A few months back we were taken to Bharatmata for a free screening of Lalbaug Parel [bilingual film – City of Gold in English and Lalbaug Parel in Marathi, dir. Mahesh Manjrekar, 2010 – about the closure of textile mills after the general strike in 1982.]

Did you like that film?

How can you like that? Poor women and children made to look so miserable ... people committing suicide and what not ... it was awful! Okay, it is not a lie in a way, the mills closing has ruined many lives. But it doesn't make anyone feel good watching it on the big screen. First you destroy everything and then make a picture about it – is it good? In the film they keep showing all kinds of terrible things ... women mill workers going for prostitution, which is a complete lie. Women had to do hundreds of odd jobs like cooking, sewing, working as domestic maids ... but they never stooped to such a low level. There were 64 mills in Bombay, the wretched government should have taken care of the workers. Now they say that to get work you have to be educated. The mill workers were illiterate but they knew their job... They should have made sure that some other employment was available. It's okay for me, I am old – but there were many young people ... you should see how they are living now.

Once we had gone for Amar Sheikh's programme in the ground nearby. He was very good. He used to sing a song about a Mother. I have heard Shahir Sable and Shahir Amar Sheikh [Marathi poet-singers who were part of the textile workers' trade union movement and the communist-led Indian People's Theatre Association – IPTA; they played an important role in the popular Samyukta Maharashtra Movement for state formation based on the Marathi language in 1956–60]. There also used to be Bharud (folk performances) etc. in the neighbourhood, but I don't remember the names. Sable's songs were comic, like Vinch Chavala. But Amar Sheikh ... his songs used to make Marathi people cry. They used to sing exclusively for mill workers.

Now there is talk of demolishing Bharatmata Theatre?

It should not be demolished, it shows Marathi pictures. They want to demolish everything in Mumbai ... where will the Marathi people go? Bharatmata is very old – also Hindmata, Deepak Talkies, Jaihind. Even people older than me had been to these. In those days mill workers had Sunday off and so they would take their families to watch Marathi pictures at Bharatmata. Now they want to break everything – the mills, the chawls, the theatres; they don't want any old building. They want everything new.

**LORRAINE WOODMAN**. 62 YEARS OLD. ANGLO INDIAN. FORMER TEACHER. DISLOCATED FROM DADAR IN 1988. PRIMARY LANGUAGE: ENGLISH. CURRENT RESIDENCE: TAKHSILA, ANDHERI EAST

Dadar was full of cinema houses. Sometimes we used to go for Hindi movies, not always. Most of our friends acted as extras in the movies. Girls from our community – Anglo Indians, Christians, Goans ... and they were staying in our building, so we used to go to see them more than the movie. It was fun ... they used to be in the background doing the dancing scenes. I had a friend who told me she earned 300 a day to do these things, and I was a teacher who earned 300 a month! She thought I was really silly to work a whole month and earn 300 when she was getting it in one session.

Were you tempted?

Not a bit. I come from a very conservative background so we didn't see it as something nice. They used to actually laugh at me and say – you just have to come, we have fun times, we get lovely snacks and it's a good life, etc. But in the final count nobody has made it big in the entertainment industry. Of course you will get singers and all that from our community, but nothing big. Only in bands and groups like that, but those have gone another way.

Any memory of those bands? Till the 1970s bands were very important in Bombay.

Yes, the Chic Chocolate band, Mickey Correa and Goody Servai. They used to play at all those five star hotels – Greens at the Taj, Catholic Gymkhana. All the five stars used to only have Christian groups playing in those days. They had some very good music you know, piano, the ukulele – those were the instruments used in those days. And the rock and roll, cha cha cha, twist and all those kinds of dances. There were also smaller bands called combos who played for weddings and private parties. They used to have what we called a crooner, and then the boys used to play the drums and the double bass. Then there was this group from Ceylon called Jetliners who came to India – they used to play at the Blow Up, a little disco in the Taj, and we would save up all our money and rush to see them. We wanted to look like them, dress like them – they were our fashion icons. So the Anglo Indians really enjoyed themselves.

Every Saturday we used to get a Saturday Date on radio – it had a lot of dancing music, and my father, mother and three of us sisters would put it on sharp at 8 in the night and dance with each other. It was at Winston Square, Dadar East. That big Swami Narayan temple that has come up next to the station on the east side, it was our building. It was an Anglo Indian colony with nice little houses. They broke down our building and sent us all here. They took our spot, that was a beautiful spot.

Some builder took it over and gave it to the temple?

The Swamis took it over themselves. We tried very hard. But the police commissioner himself said, please give up, if it's not the Swamis' trust then it will be some other builder. We lived there for 45 years, ever since I was born. So it was really hard to make that move, but circumstances drove us here. We were offered this alternative accommodation. When we came here everything was really alien. The suburbs and all was something we didn't identify with, it seemed so far away. In fact there was a lot of jungle outside, no bus routes and autos were very few to get. But after coming here I learned to speak in Hindi, broken Hindi. Marathi is not spoken here much.

Could you relate to Hindi cinema?

Only some singing and dancing ones because our Hindi is really limited. Then movies like *Sholay* and all of course we could understand and enjoy. But otherwise it was Elvis movies, Cliff Richard movies ... the Beatles. Sometimes in Hindi movies when the girl is dancing in short skirts and is like a vamp, often then she has a cross on her neck to show that she is Christian. That riles me. Or someone who is drunk is a Tony or a Johnny or whatever. That too riles me because all of us are not like that. We did have arguments with a lot of our friends in those days because they used to say you wear shorts, you wear skirts, it's not done. I would say, but we are open. We don't hide behind trees and gates or whatever and meet up with someone. So little differences were there but it was not something severe. I guess everybody is singled out at some time or the other.

**KAUSAR.** 30 YEARS OLD. SUNNI ANSARI. GREW UP IN MADANPURA IN CENTRAL BOMBAY AND THEN GOT RELOCATED TO THE DISTANT SUBURB OF MUMBRA. WORKS IN AN NGO FOR MUSLIM WOMEN. PRIMARY LANGUAGE: HINDI. CURRENT RESIDENCE: MUMBRA

In Madanpura we used to go out a lot – a couple of times in a week. We would go out for a stroll in Town, chatting and wandering about, we would end up at a theatre or reach Chowpati or Haji Ali. My mother was fond of old films. We were five siblings, then my grandmother and my Abba, we used to go together. Sometimes Mummy used to get mad at us – it's like a bloody battalion, how the hell will I manage all of you. But we continued going with her for movies. We used to make a train, one by one by order of height – my eldest sister then my brother then me then my sister and the youngest one would be in my mother's arms – cling on to each other and follow Mummy in a straight file! Even if it was a rotten picture or the tickets cost a bomb, Mummy would take us.

So how did you happen to come here?

Mummy sold that house. After Granny's death, many relatives turned up to claim it. There were threats and my mother felt insecure. Around the same time the 92–93 riots took place [communal riots against the Muslim community led by the Shiv Sena and other Hindu extremist outfits, after the Babri Masjid demolition on 6 December 1992], and there was a lot of violence and hostility. So Mummy sold off that house and shifted to Malad. From there we shifted to Mumbra and have stayed here since then.

Last year I saw a film here in Mumbra, in that theatre Alishan, 3 Idiots, on New Year's Day. I had never gone there before and never again. It is very bad, full of all kinds of bugs and insects ... and also ruffians. In Mumbra the only place one can visit is the hill, there is no other place. Now only when I go to Town with friends we make plans to watch a film, like somewhere in VT or at the Derby theatre on Sandhurst Road. If you have to buy only one ticket then it's okay. I don't tell anyone at home that I went for a movie, otherwise they will give me a hard time for enjoying all by myself.

Like your family, there must be more people who migrated from Town to Mumbra; what has changed for them, especially for the women?

In Town one could do any odd job and earn a living. Everyone could live their own life. Even at home no one would breathe down your neck. They knew you would hang around in the neighbourhood for a bit and come back. My father had a shop and so with him I used stay out till midnight, play with friends. But now it is not the same. Here it is very difficult to find work. When there is no employment there is no money, there is no money so people can't afford to go out. Besides, it is very difficult to travel. The places to visit are far away and one has to use the local transport. To reach anywhere from this point one will have to wade through swarms of people. The trains are never on time, so it is difficult to travel with the family.

**RADHIKA BHANSUDE.** 50 YEARS OLD. CHAMBHAR CASTE FROM THE GHATS. FORMER INDUSTRIAL WORKER. REHABILITATED FROM JARI MARI SLUM NEAR THE AIRPORT TO GOREGAON EAST NEAR FILM CITY AND SANJAY GANDHI NATIONAL PARK. CURRENTLY A DOMESTIC WORKER. PRIMARY LANGUAGE: MARATHI. CURRENT RESIDENCE: NNP COLONY, GOREGAON EAST.

Six years ... we were brought to this place six years back. We were living in Kurla, Jari Mari. They demolished our homes, to expand the airport, they said [rehabilitation scheme of the Slum Re-development Authority whereby slum dwellers are relocated

to high-rise buildings in deserted suburbs]. So, we were sent here. We had to face a lot of trouble because there is no job, nothing here. There I worked in a company, a paper company. Now I can't go there. To travel to that place you need lot of money...

Now we live in a building, the government has given us good houses. But ... it's not child's play living in tall buildings. To buy vegetables we climb down to the slums down there ... Santosh Nagar. We don't pay the water bill, so they cut the connection every couple of months. Old people can't climb 7 or 8 stories ... the lift is shut, we haven't ever paid the charges. It's our fault only, not government's. Government gave space in exchange for our space and a nicer one.

The pride of Bombay, Film City [the largest open air studio in the city, it is owned and managed by Maharashtra Film, Stage and Cultural Development Corporation Ltd., a government undertaking], is just next door. My son wants to work in the Film City. He keeps going there, but he will get his due only when God is with him. God is sleeping now ... a bird flies with its wings but only when it spots a tree can the bird rest. It has to find a branch to sit on. If the bird doesn't find a branch, then where will it sit?

So, do young people from here go to Film City looking for work?

Yes, I went a few times. But they don't give us work. They don't even let us go near the shooting. They shoo us away. We don't know anyone who got to work there. After we came here, people said 'Film City is here ... it's like this ... like that.' We kept going to that place the first two–three years ... just to see what shooting is ... who is the hero... But we don't recognize any hero, neither do we know one heroine from another ... just to see. What can we understand when we don't know anything in the first place, tell me? That is how it is. We have seen the Qualis [generic name for expensive cars] and all pass by, we can see that much only from where we are. No shooting or function!

Do you watch TV?

Yes, I watch TV. I got this TV around two years back. It's only been a couple of months that we got a cable connection. I don't watch Hindi programme ... only Marathi pictures, stories of grief only. My man is very old now. My father married me off to a 50-year-old man, my husband. There is a difference of 40 years between us ... it's been only misery since then. If I've been suffering all along how would I ever get to be happy, tell me? So, I watch only sad things ... I NEVER watch frivolous rubbish on the TV. I ask them to switch it off. Only a person who has suffered all along knows what sorrow is. Only a person who has drawn water from a well knows what pain is... I have dug wells, I have broken rocks, I have worked on farms, planted sugarcane, vegetables ... all types of work. There is nothing that I can't do...

**SAMLA PATHAK**. 35 YEARS OLD. LOWER MIDDLE-CLASS BRAHMAN. HOME MAKER AND WORKER IN HOME-BASED SWEATSHOP OF GARMENT-MAKING. MIGRATED FROM UTTAR PRADESH TO BOMBAY FOLLOWING HER HUSBAND. PRIMARY LANGUAGE: HINDI. CURRENT RESIDENCE: KANYAPADA, FILM CITY ROAD  
(INTERVIEWED ALONG WITH HER HUSBAND **VIDYASHANKAR** WHO HAS WORKED AS A JUNIOR ARTISTE IN A FEW FILMS)

SAMLA Before bringing me here all he said was that I'm taking you with me to Mumbai. And if you don't like living there I'll send you back to the village. But after coming here ... with time I settled in. You anyway feel good only, living with your husband.

Then that thing happened – he came home wearing a false beard, his hair coloured

and I couldn't even recognize him. You know the Film City that is behind our locality? He was coming down Gokuldharm Road and stopped to have paan. A director who was passing by spotted him and whisked him away. Later he called me and told me that he is at Film City. He said that I have come for shooting. I was taken aback and didn't believe him initially. It lasted for fifteen days ... if it had lasted for one day I wouldn't have believed him. They used to pick him up every day and drop him back in the car.

VIDYASHANKAR Mangal Pandey [dir. Ketan Mehta, 2005; bio-pic of a leader of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny; the film needed a large number of junior artistes to fill up the screen as Indian and British crowds] was the first ... with Aamir Khan, Rani Mukherjee...

SAMLA Yes. Rani Mukherjee was dancing and he was an angrez [Englishman] brandishing currency notes, with an alcohol bottle in hand. In another one he was dancing with a foreign woman, his hand on her waist ... then in another one he is serving water, a waiter in a hotel. So that went on for two years and then it ended. Even in those two years sometimes it was on, sometimes not. He was always an angrez only ... I mean his looks. It's not like foreigners are any different from the inside...

Have you ever gone for any of his shootings?

SAMLA No. Because I look like I'm from the village, no ... how can I be associated with an angrez! [Laughs.] Others would have made fun of him ... for me it's a big deal that I married an angrez, but for him people would have said how did your feet slip for a village woman! He said what will you do going there, what shooting will you see? Watch the film when it comes out. I finally saw it ... it was a good role... When I hadn't come to Mumbai he would watch three-three films in a day! He didn't visit us in the village for two whole years. He was hanging around here watching films.

VIDYASHANKAR First I used to watch in Sangam, Darpan; then in Ram Shyam in Jogeshwari, in Hanjar; in Goregaon there were Samrat Cinema, Topiwala, Anupam ... Malad had Sangeeta, New Era, Kasturba ... in Kandivali Milap and Savera, in Borivali also there was Jaya, then there was another one next to the vegetable market ... I have seen in all. In Grant Road also ... Grant Road West, next to the station.

SAMLA See how the truth is surfacing today. He never told me about all this. But after I landed here I only became the 'picture' for him! Now he doesn't open his mouth about going to the theatre.

VIDYASHANKAR There are two talkies in Kanjurmarg also ... Huma and Heena, there is a cinema hall in Bhandup; I have been to Dombivili, Kalyan... When she came here with me and I had to work for our daily meals, home expenses ... no time only for films...

SAMLA My dear, I have danced for him. It's not like he got over this obsession suddenly... I would sing and dance for hours. He would say, see what dancing so and so does on TV! So I would say, turn that off and I'll show you! You are a man and you go out to see a woman's histrionics and that only I am going to show you... Because now we need money, not histrionics. If I also behaved the way he did then today we would not even have the rented room. Earlier when men came from their villages they didn't bring their wives along. So they used to think let's go watch a film and eat in a hotel. Now every house has wives and kids, all of them asking for money, harassing the man, so how will anyone go to watch a film? Now he watches My Picture with a lot of interest!

Radhika Bhansude and Samla Pathak's interviews are sourced from the films Certified Universal by Avijit Mukul Kishore and Have You Dreamt Cinema? by Hansa Thapliya, respectively.