

Interview

'I search for a different musical reading'

Madhusree Dutta, well-known documentary film maker, explains her choice of a pop idiom for the six songs in *Scribbles on Akka*, a film she describes as a musical

Madhusree Dutta looked at Mumbai's 1992-93 communal violence in her film *I Live in Behrampada* (Mani Ratnam made *Bombay* with the same subject). *Memories of Fear* was her examination of domestic violence against girls.

More recently, Madhusree shot a series of television spots for *Majlis*, which fights for the legal and social rights of women. Her latest film, *Scribbles on Akka*, is inspired by the Kannada poet Akka Mahadevi. She says every woman relives at least a part of Akka's experience, which raises ethical and gender questions with passionate honesty. That, and the poetic beauty of Akka's poetry, prompted Madhusree's docu-drama.

Madhusree feels *Scribbles on Akka* is a celebratory film because Akka expresses herself exquisitely without complaining about being oppressed. In a recent interview, Madhusree says her own feminism has matured because she can see the spaces women create for themselves, as for instance in Mumbai's suburban trains.

What does Akka mean to people across the country? Madhusree combined her Calcutta theatre experience with her filmmaking skills to produce the impressionistic hour-long *Scribbles on Akka*.

We asked her about her musical choices:

Why Ilaiyaraja, a commercial success, but not associated so much with experimental films and documentaries?

The film is structured to be a musical, in a contemporary sense. My intention was not to make the usual 'authentic' biographical film on Akka, but to explore whether her vachanas can still be relevant and survive among the younger MTV generation. Ilaiyaraja, in my assessment, is the right person for the job. He is comfortable in the present scenario, in fact a master of it. But, at the same time, he understands and responds to poems and possesses scholarly knowledge about bhakti. I had no trouble in convincing him to do the film and we shared a fantastic rapport. He initially agreed to do the film as he is conversant with Akka's vachanas and is her admirer. Later when I told him the scheme of the film -- its contemporary look and format -- he adapted to the idea quite easily.

Didn't you think of working with a music director who is closer to the Kannada sensibility, more familiar with the vachana tradition?

I did think of a few Kannada music directors, but not as an absolute necessity. If Kannada as a mother tongue were a pre-requisite for working in this film, I would not have ventured into making it. Akka, in my understanding, has transgressed many boundaries in her life and work. Now, after 900 years, we should not bind her with geographical borders. I learnt from her to break borders and venture into newer exploration. You talk of acquaintance with the vachana tradition. Needless to say, it is precisely this that I want to grow out of in this film. Anyway, this so-called tradition was created much later, in the 19th and 20th centuries, by bhakts and music gurus. I do not think anybody can claim in their right sense that they know how Mahadevi Akka sang. So those "traditional" tunes are made according to the form of their time. In the year 2000, while making this film, I search for a different musical reading. I suppose that is what my job ought to be.

How do you think Ilaiyaraja and Shantanu Moitra have enriched your film?

Ilaiyaraja entered the project early on and while he did work within the structure of the film I had envisaged, he also threw up fresh challenges. He musically questioned some of the old imagery and interpretations, forcing a greater fluidity into the film. He also succeeded in retaining the essential flow and metre of Akka's poetry. The task was tough because the demand was to do it in contemporary terms. Shantanu, on the other hand, stepped in when the film was nearly complete. His role was to enhance the already etched-out collage of images. He worked extra hard not only on the background music but also on developing a sound design. I specially think of a scene, at the end of the film, where all roles portrayed by Seema appear as images in mirrors. Using multiple layers of the same voice as a sound effect he created an audio equivalent of the resonance I wanted to project visually through mirrors. He personally felt it was a privilege to work in unity with a maestro like Ilaiyaraja. In the past he has attempted similarly to contemporise the classical with Shubha Mudgal in Ab ke Sawan. Ilaiyaraja and Shantanu started from two ends but have come together to create a rich trajectory of sound and music in the film. The film's essential fluidity and non-linearity made it possible for both to work in tandem.

Vachanas are sung in two styles -- the folk and Hindustani classical. But you have chosen a pop style.

Please consider the origin of Hindustani classical music, who practiced it and under whose patronage. And then consider who Akka wrote for. The elitism against which the bhakti movement of the 12th century worked had made a comeback through this school of singing of vachanas at a later stage. As for folk, by the very definition, folk changes from region to region and time to time. Folk means improvisation, non-codification, fluidity and access. I think in spirit my film is not against any of these qualities.

B Gautami