

## **What is the situation of cinema like in Afghanistan?**

Afghanistan's cinema has got fundamental problems in different ways:

1. It seems that the government of Afghanistan has neglected not only cinema, but also art in general in the large-scale management of cinema. Over the past 6 years, no actions have been taken by the government for the improvement of cinema. Unfortunately, as a result of the domination of an Islamic fundamentalist perspective in governmental bodies, under the name of democracy, there is still fundamental opposition towards photography, cinema and music. Private cinema centres and companies do not have enough capabilities to think of long-term objectives for Afghanistan's cinema. Some conservative cinema professionals accept this anti-cinema fundamentalist point of view and some who want to take some serious actions do not have enough facilities and capabilities to do so.
2. In terms of content, Afghanistan's cinema is fundamentally poor. The majority of people who are involved in the area of film production in Afghanistan are low literate and have poor knowledge about cinema and it does not seem that they are aware of the current anthropological and sociological issues taking place in Afghanistan. In this area, Afghanistan is like a blind horse that is heading forward in reliance on the evidences. The eyes of this cinema are blind to the fundamental social changes in Afghanistan.
3. Economically, it does not seem there is a budget in the process for Afghanistan's cinema. This cinema is dependent on the assistance of foreign NGOs and institutions. The money that comes from this channel cannot cover the living costs of cinema professionals and there is no budget allocated for Afghanistan cinema.
4. In terms of film screening, there are fundamental problems. TV channels are not interested in purchasing and distributing the films, there is no film screening theatre and the distribution system of films on DVD is systematically dominated by illegal Indian and foreign films and there is no copyright enforcement whatsoever in the film market.

## **How many and what kinds of cinemas exist and where are they located?**

I am not aware of the total number of cinemas in Afghanistan. Based on the statistics issued by Afghan Film, it is believed that there are seven operating cinemas.

## **Which films are shown?**

Over 95% poor quality Indian films are screened in original versions, the main theme of which is romance and war.

## **What kind of audience visits the cinemas?**

Cinemas in Afghanistan are not cultural places and because of this, their customers are always young unemployed males.

## **Do women and/or families have the opportunity to visit the cinema?**

No. There is not such possibility. There is only one cinema dedicated to women next to the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul. This cinema is currently not operating.

**What role does the sale of DVDs play?**

I think the market for cinema in Afghanistan is actually a DVD market. The majority of Afghan families possess a DVD player. But the films that are distributed in the form of DVD are not very high-quality. Most of the DVDs are actually Indian movies without Farsi or Pashtu subtitles, video clips, music and sometimes Afghan films. Afghan films are actually commercial films and poor copies of Indian movies. As I mentioned before in my replies, if the copyrights are reserved in Afghanistan, the DVD market would be the most important tool for distribution of films and a good contributor to the future of Afghanistan's cinema.

**Which films are available?**

Mostly second or third class Indian films, however, in a couple of shops in Share Naw in Kabul, you can find movies from other countries.

**Do Afghan people watch TV? Do they watch domestic or international TV channels?**

As you are aware, around 15 TV channels operate in Afghanistan. Additionally, there are some satellite TV channels in Farsi and recently BBC Farsi has joined them. I assume those who have satellite TV are able to watch international channels, and those who do not have this facility, only watch domestic ones.

**How widespread is national and international television? How do private and state television broadcasters differ?**

The state TV is considered as a rival for the other 14 TV channels. The state TV channel lacks innovation and is very conservative in terms of content and it seems it is influenced by the fundamentalist thinking of the state. Although there are serious issues regarding programme productions of private TV channels, apparently they are making efforts to produce cost-effective programmes and those favoured by the youth.

**What influence do they have on the production and distribution of cinema films?**

Unfortunately it did not have an obvious impact. The only impact was the fact that some filmmakers were recruited by these TV channels and received their salary and got involved in TV programme production, but they did not get enough in cinema and film production and distribution as much as it is expected from cinema.

**How did you personally learn filmmaking?**

Primarily, I used to write stories. I became interested in theatre and afterwards cinema. I studied cinema in Iran and now I am mainly involved in documentary film production and play a part in the preparation of film festivals inside and outside Afghanistan. But now that I have been making documentaries for more than eight years, I have not managed to achieve my goal of making a feature film.

**Where and how does one learn to make films?**

There is only one centre to teach cinema in Afghanistan, which is Kabul University. But the quality of cinema teaching is very poor and people who graduate from there are the most failed losers in the area of training. However, through film production in Afghanistan's Cinema Club, we are familiarising some students with cinema practically, but this familiarisation is not fundamental.

**What is university education in Afghanistan like?**

It's a disaster!

**What role do organisations such as the aid organisation AINA or the initiative of the Varan projects play in training?**

I, as the responsible person for the Kabul film festival, unfortunately have no idea about the existence of an institution named Varan. But AINA institution, except for in its beginning years when it trained some female filmmakers, is now more involved in commercial works and plays no role in Afghanistan's cinema.

**What opportunities do women have?**

Unfortunately there is no facility in this area. Except for a couple of organisations that started training some female filmmaker when Afghan women's issues were at the top of propaganda agenda. These girls have been left on their own now.

**What cinematographic influences are significant for your work?**

At the beginning, I was highly influenced by some Iranian filmmakers like Mr. Majid Majidi, Jafar Panahi, Abbas Kiarostami, Ebrahim Hatamikia, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and later became interested in some American, French, Polish, Japanese and Chinese filmmakers. But currently, I believe each of the filmmakers and cinemas have their own perspective, and I also must achieve what comes from my own perspective and point of view and stance.

**Whose films were important for you?**

Currently I am interested in works of Alejandro Gonzalez and really like his narrative style in films such as *Babel* and *21 Gramm*. Presently, I am not that influenced by these films but it was the case in the past.

**How do you finance your films?**

I finance my films through some foreign institutions, foreign TV stations and sometimes with my own budget.

**Malek Shafi'i**