

No country for young girls?

Directed by Napur Basu

Reviewed by Kelley Sams and Arnaud Kaba

No Country for Young Girls? Directed by Napur Basu. 2008. Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films. DVD.

Nupur Basu's twenty-seven-minute film *No Country for Young Girls?* presents the struggle of Vaijanti, a poor Indian woman rejected by her husband's family after refusing to terminate her second pregnancy with a female fetus. In this film, we follow Vaijanti as she decides whether to make it on her own as a single mother to two young girls or return to her husband. The film was partially funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and released in 2008 with Hindi and English language versions. It targets both a general international audience and audiences in India to launch discussion around sex-selective abortion. Serving as an excellent introduction to gender and abortion issues in India, its use in the classroom could be enhanced with critical consideration of social and economic factors that contextualize the situation. Together with a facilitator's guide (Unnithan-Kumar 2010, 153) to frame community discussions, the film is nevertheless an important introduction to sex-selective abortion in India, making it appropriate for undergraduate classrooms and for advocacy networks alike.

Although this film is nine years old, it remains relevant in its exploration of women's health. With US President Donald Trump's recent reinstatement of the 'gag rule' blocking US funding to any overseas organization involved in providing abortion care or counseling, the importance and difficulty of supporting women's reproductive health remains a critical public debate. Linked with this is the issue of support for women who choose not to terminate pregnancies in spite of economic and social pressures.

The case of twenty-seven-year-old Vaijanti allows viewers to reflect upon sex-selective abortion, and more broadly upon the gendered aspects of social disparity in India. Having fled her marital home after refusing her husband's pressure to abort, she returns temporarily to her parents' home with her two daughters, filing charges against her husband and in-laws while she decides what to do next. Viewers follow Vaijanti as she struggles economically and socially to move forward in this new future as a single parent.

The film positions itself within a perspective of hope for the neoliberal economic development of India, characterized by great optimism about the power of individual choice. The director explores questions related to Vaijanti's future, as well as the future of her daughters, by taking her from her modest home in Agra on a trip around India, where she is introduced to women from different social situations. Through these meetings, which occur in places like an upscale shopping mall in New Delhi, we see that social pressure to produce sons exists on all socioeconomic levels. The film also brings Vaijanti to meet women who are successfully raising daughters on their own, such as a widow to whom she is introduced in a nightclub, or a nurse in Rajasthan who, against the wishes of her husband and his family, chose not to terminate her pregnancy with triplet daughters.

Beginning in 1991, when the Indian economy began liberalization, the country experienced a period of fast growth and development often referred to in the media optimistically as the rise of 'India Shining'. The neoliberal model of development and a seemingly blind belief that the trickle-down effect would benefit the lower strata of society have provoked strong criticism. This context, absent from the film, is important to mention here, as we believe it impacts the perspective of the filmmaker as well as how Vaijanti is expected to negotiate the social and economic constraints that she faces.

What matters too, of course, is Vaijanti's gender identity as a woman, as gender inequality is an important issue that was not resolved during the period of dramatic growth. Gender inequalities in the subcontinent remain salient, especially among the lower classes where the dowries paid by the families of brides pose a heavy burden on household economies. Infanticide and selective abortion of female fetuses are common; the sex ratio of girls to boys in India has been steadily declining over the past fifty years, especially in the southern states and urban areas.

We review these developments in order to problematize the film's introduction of Vaijanti's story and to highlight the increasing divide between the rich and the poor being caused by globalization. The British male narrator claims that the poorer people, living on the fringes run the risk of being left behind 'unless like one young woman, they make some awkward decisions'. However, Vaijanti's decision is not a simple matter of individual preference, but

rather involves carefully negotiating many external constraints. It is important to also consider the challenges that someone with her low level of education, lack of employable skills, and social capital faces if she decides to raise two daughters on her own.

It appears to us that Basu's film is trapped in the middle- and upper-class dream of 'India Shining', and does not fully take into account the fact that the rural poor working in the bottom of the economy were never part of that India, and will probably not be in the near future (Breman 1996). The elite women presented to Vaijanti as role models have managed to navigate a dominant structural framework that discourages women from raising girls by engaging their economic, social, and cultural capital. We are not shown how someone like Vaijanti, without this capital, could realistically succeed on her own. These are topics that are rich for discussion and could be reflected upon in detail after screening the film.

This failure to take into account women's class position almost presents being embedded in traditionalist and women-unfriendly poor rural Indian communities as a choice rather than a fate. Socioanthropological studies of the Indian working classes have shown that it is not because of badly made awkward choices – despite the narrator's claim – that some people are left behind in Shining India. The poor, as a group, are often if not always left behind, and, within this group, women like Vaijanti are often in the most vulnerable position, especially when raising daughters alone.

Despite our critiques of this film, we found it to be an interesting catalyst for reflecting upon factors that influence women's health and sexual rights within the subcontinent. While the purpose of the film is not to produce a comprehensive critical analysis of the structural, domestic, and gender-based violence that impact Vaijanti's reproductive decisions, the viewer is introduced to the environment that contextualizes her reproductive health. This film would be best used to launch a discussion about some of these issues, which could then be complemented by additional materials on the topic.

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