

Book Review | Mrinal Chatterjee

A Chronicle and Beyond

Book: Balancing the Wisdom Tree: Anthology of FTII's women alumni

Concept and Editor: Dr. Gauri D. Chakraborty

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Dr. Gauri D. Chakraborty, a FTII alumna who teaches Film Studies at Delhi based Benett University conceptualised and edited this beautifully designed and produced book which chronicles FTII's women alumni and their contribution to the world of cinema.

Early phases of film as well as theatre in India saw near-absence of women in its making. So much so that the first Indian film Raja Harishchandra had a male playing the role of heroine. This happened in film and television education too. FTII was established in 1961. There were no female student in the first two years. Parvati Menon was the first woman student, who joined in 1963 in 'Screen Play Writing cum Elements of Direction' course. She became the Chief Producer of Childrens' Film Society India (CSFI) and CEO and Executive Director for their international film festivals. Gradually more women joined different courses in FTII and made their mark in the industry. Rehana Sultana graduated in the Acting course in 1963, Rita Saluja in 1969, Jaya Bhaduri in 1970, Shabana Azmi in 1973. In 'Direction' After Parvati Menon and Bani Datta, Vijay Saxena graduated in 1974. She directed award winning documentary films and went on to become the Director of UP State Institute of Educational Technology (SIET). Aruna Patil graduated in 1969 at the age of 23 as one of India's first female technicians from FTII. She made critically acclaimed feature films. Anjuli Shukla became the first woman cinematographer to win a National Film Award. The list is long.

The book chronicles their journey to FTII, many of them battling heavy odds and their memories associated with their alma matter.

The book is divided into several sections like 'Prelims', 'Conversations', 'Reflections', 'Photo Essays' and 'Bio Notes'. The sections have been planned and crafted meticulously. 'Conversations'- in an interview cum tete-a tete form explores an intergenerational dialogue tracing the personal and professional showing the participation of women in Indian media and entertainment sector over the last six decades.

‘Reflections’ uncover personal memories that range from anecdotes of crazy moments to cross-border friendships, experiences with batch-mates and faculty, family, seniors and professionals from the industry. It shows life at FTII from a student’s perspective. It shows why FTII is such a hallowed and venerated institution, where dedication to one’s craft take the centre stage.

‘Bio-notes’ meticulously chronicles the details of the alumni, batch wise and course wise. This will definitely help future researchers in different areas.

‘Photo essays feature Rehana Sultan, Jaya Bhaduri, Shabana Azmi and Zarina Wahab, who have been among some of the most visible faces of FTII alumna in Indian cinema.

This anthology chronicles the life, times and contribution of women alumni of FTII. But in the process it becomes much more than that. It becomes a call for gender equality. It becomes a reminder of the contribution of women in the Indian cinema. It also becomes a motivational book to encourage more and more women to break the bondages, like many of its alumna have done.

After going through this fascinating book I can only echo what one of the interviewees said: I hope this book reaches those women who are dreaming of pursuing cinema and are not sure if there is a future to their dreams.

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The reviewer is Professor and Regional Director at Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIIMC), Dhenkanal, Odisha.

mrinalchatterjeeiimc@gmail.com