

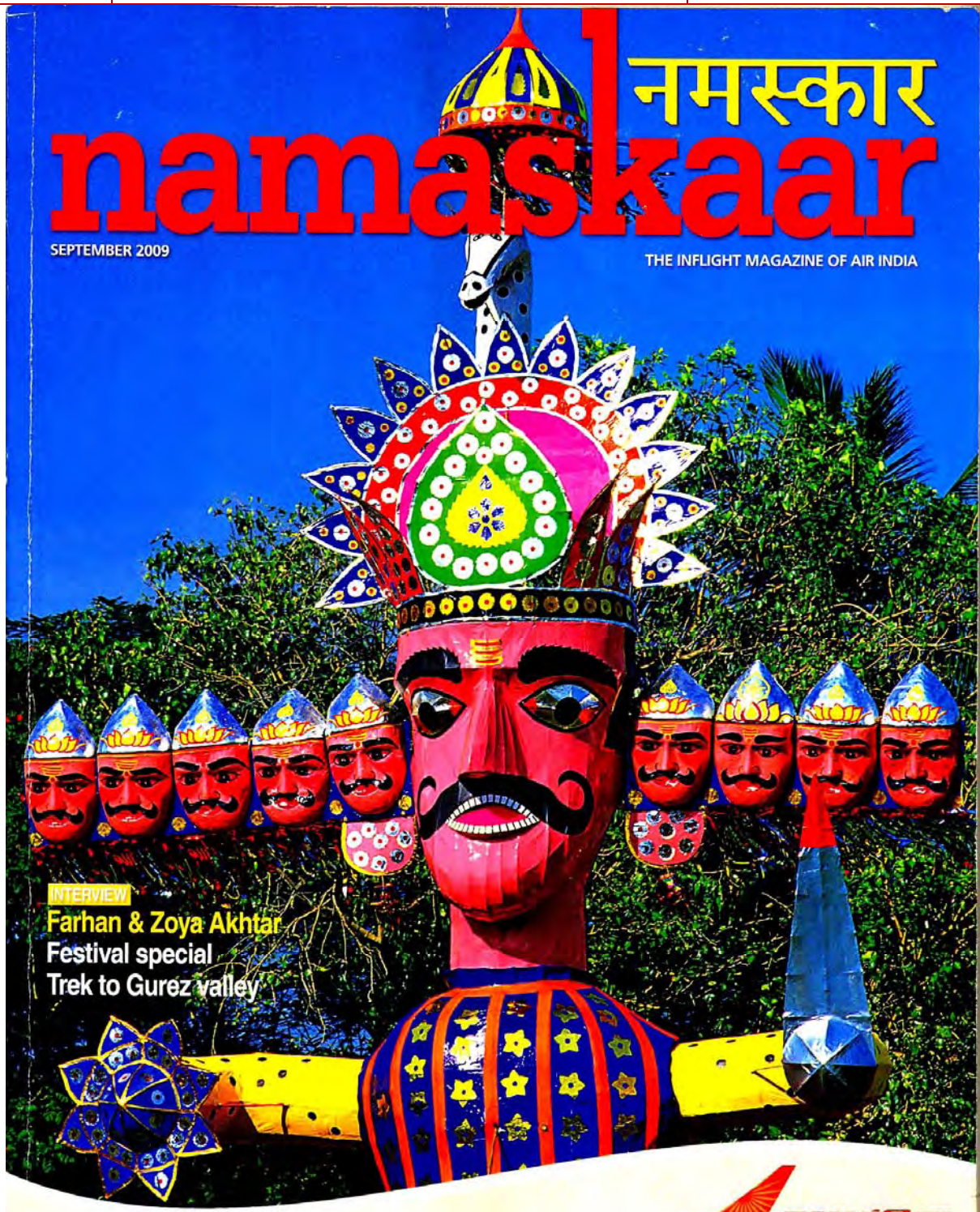
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INTERVIEW

Farhan & Zoya Akhtar
Festival special
Trek to Gurez valley





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Cinema paradiso

Young filmmakers in Leh are braving all odds to offer entertainment to locals in their own language. Not only this, they are involved in philanthropic activities too, finds out **ASRP MUKESH**

For over half-a-century, filmmakers have queued up in Ladakh while scouting locales. Be it to capture its austere mountains, miles and miles of a never-ending cold desert, the bouquet of flora and fauna or the determination of a people navigating their colourful lives through barren passes. Now Ladakhis are stepping out of the backdrop, tired of being exotic props, and choosing to direct their lives from behind the camera. A group of youngsters, who have grown up in the shadow of Bollywood, are now confident of telling their story as they understand it and making films for those who understand them. Understandably, their postcard treatment in traditional Hindi films has made them more conscious of their real identity. This coming-of-age effort has paid off. National Geographic has bought a documentary made by local filmmakers Tsering Zangpo and Stanzin Dorjai, *Living With Change*, on the impact of climate change and global warming in Ladakh and people's efforts to save their environment. A bit of social messaging perhaps. But then, don't we all

graduate from fables to novels? And isn't there reality in every story?

Though the duo owns a filmmaking company today, 30-year-old Dorjai, who grew up in the remote village of Gya, 50 km from Leh, and his friend, 32-year-old Zangpo from Sakti village, had never watched television or films until a little less than a decade ago. Says Dorjai of his trajectory, "I studied till class VIII at my village school that hardly has modern educational tools. I migrated to Leh in search of a job and it was then that I understood the value of higher degrees and knowledge. My struggles evoked a sense of responsibility in me towards the children of my village, who were deprived of a good schooling system. Both Dorjai and Zangpo joined an NGO, Student's Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL) which was formed in 1988 by a group of young people, most of whom had returned to Ladakh after completing their higher studies. Their aim was to ensure the best teaching facilities for Ladakhi students, something they never had in their growing up years. "It was through SECMOL that we started gaining confidence to interact

pictureperfect

with the outside world. We could communicate in broken English and got oriented in social and development issues in the region," adds Dorjai. Raising community awareness was a major part of SECMOL's educational reform movement. Earlier, this was done through two magazines, *Ladags Melong* and *Rewai Odzer*, but they failed to generate the desired awareness as literacy levels were low. "We realised then that we had to educate people through the visual media as television had slowly started making inroads here and even those living in remote areas had access to DVDs and CDs," says Dorjai.

As SECMOL campaigned in various villages about the need for education, Dorjai and Zangpo worked upon the idea of using video films to send a social message. "We found it easier to communicate with the masses if the entertainment aspect was involved," says Zangpo. The two

we realised thousands of people would be watching our films, we felt more responsible and were determined to make the best of the medium," adds Dorjai.

What started as making documentaries on social issues gradually took the shape of feature films in the local language. Today, the two have a handful of documentaries and feature films to their credit with some of them having been selected for international festivals. "Whatever tricks of the trade we know have been picked up by watching Bollywood directors shooting in Ladakh," says Dorjai with a big smile. "As media is still new to this region, I've no support from anyone to pursue a career in it. Most people live on the traditional mindset that an educated youngster should only sign up for a government job. So, I foresee a lot of struggle in our lives."

Zangpo, on the other hand, had to pass through other

(Facing page) Aamir Khan shooting in Ladakh. (Below) A documentary being shot on global warming



soon set up a local media unit. "When we started working, we had no formal training. All that we had by way of experience was producing an in-house radio programme on an event at the hostel campus. We didn't have any digital equipment for editing, we used two tape recorders and depended on the analogue method wherein we had to link the audio and video tapes manually. Perhaps the show we produced impressed our director, so he gave us another opportunity. Thus began our filmmaking career," he recalls.

What followed was learning through trial and error, faltering along the way. But they soon advanced to making films with sophisticated equipment. "When we started out, we thought the camera was a fancy equipment. But when



Air India has frequent flights from Delhi, Jammu and Srinagar to Leh.

By Rail The nearest railhead is Jammu (690 km), which is linked to the rest of the country by express trains.

By Road There are two routes to the region — from Srinagar (open from June to October) and from Manali (open from July to September).

challenges after he lost the use of his left hand, paralysed as he was by an electric short circuit while on a school picnic in 1994. He was in class VIII then. Due to some unavoidable circumstances, he had to give up studies after class IX. "I worked as a helper at a cassette shop and then at a photo studio but life was never easy without one hand. I passed through a phase of inferiority complex but then a voice inside prodded me to do something exceptional to prove myself second to none," he says. The experience Zangpo gained from working at

the shop helped him develop an ear for music, so he decided on making some himself. He took a loan from a few close friends and produced his first album in 2002. The sales were good and Zangpo took off for a three-

month music course in Chandigarh. A couple of years later, he brought out his first video album, *Etches*. "This was also the time when the music video culture was beginning to flourish in Leh, so it worked a bit for me," he says. Today, he is not only a filmmaker but a producer, script writer, lyricist and music composer rolled into one. And like mature counterparts elsewhere, he is concerned about piracy denting the prospects of a nascent industry. "That is one thing that needs to be taken care of or else small-time filmmakers like me and Dorjai will never be able to make it big," he says.

The trend of shooting in Ladakh took off with Chetan Anand's masterpiece depiction of the Sino-Indian war in

Haqeeqat in the 60s. Though there was a lull in contemporary filmmakers started capturing Ladakh on celluloid when Mani Ratnam shot *Dil Se*. JP Dutta picked it up with *LOC*, Farhan Akhtar with *Lakshya* and now Raj Kumar Hirani's soon-to-be-released *Three Idiots*. Until 2002, the local industry didn't even exist. That was when the first feature film, *Satsams* (Border), was produced by an NGO, Face of Ladakh. It was lapped up instantly and as a result, it encouraged a few others in the region to get into production and direction. Enthusiasts even formed an NGO, the Ladakh Vision Group, to promote filmcraft. A motley crew of teachers, monks, homestay owners and taxi drivers came together six years ago to sign up self-taught actors, story writers and directors. Suddenly, film-making became a community pursuit, a reason to bond creatively. Today, a sizeable number of registered film societies are functioning in Leh. From November to May, Ladakh is quiet and experiences the harshest winter on Indian soil. But it is also a time, for the past six years, when a local film is released and runs to packed halls.

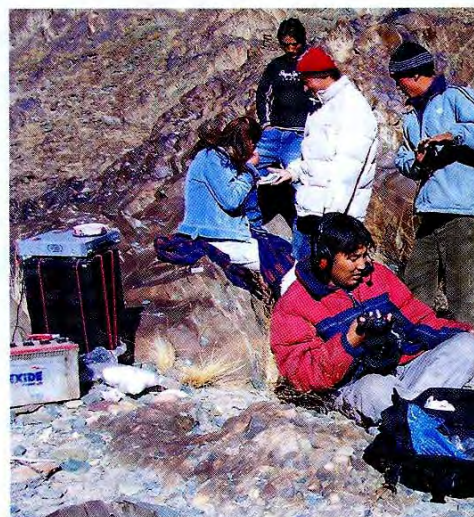
Before 2002, the local industry didn't even exist. That was when the first feature film, *Satsams* (Border), was produced by an NGO, Face of Ladakh. Today there are many film societies. And they all plough back the returns to community projects

Stanzin Dorjai (middle) with friends





Ladakhis making film posters and getting a grip on outdoors



feed this demand, everybody gets busy canning for the next season. Since summer is a busy season for everything, from agriculture to tourism (and everyone has a day job) filmmakers must adjust. So if the hero has exams in Jammu, the shooting schedules must work around them! The themes are always not about serious introspection and philosophy. There's also the boy meets girl, momentary tragedy and a happy ending. But the essence is completely Ladakhi.

Ladakhi films make economic sense. An average film made on DVCAM has a budget of Rs 5 lakh. A hit could run houseful for three months in Leh's only hall: Three shows a day, with 250 people paying 50 rupees a ticket. It's a tidy sum. But the producers have a common objective: To support a humanitarian project from the revenue generated through their films. Tsering Wangdus Lonpo, who has written and directed several films produced by the Ladakhi Vision Group, says the money has supported a few heart and kidney patients, provided infrastructure to a few private and government schools and helped promote winter sports in Ladakh. "We keep aside Rs 300 per show from the income earned from all films. This is then redirected to the Red Cross, handled by the district administration," says he.

However, most filmmakers like Lonpo are sceptical about the sustainability of the industry in Ladakh due to the lack of infrastructure and limited audience base. "A quality film can only be made if you have a sound financial background. Otherwise it is difficult to even recover the

The landmarks

■ *Tsondus* (Effort), an educational film by SECMOL Media Studio, was released in 2003. Apparently, this is the first ever feature film to be shot, digitally edited and produced by Ladakhis. Today, *Tsondus* is available in DVD format with English sub-titles. Similarly, many other films are also available with English sub-titles.

■ *Delwa*, a love story produced by the Ladakhi Vision Group, was released in 2004 and has been perhaps the most popular movie so far in Leh.

■ The Ladakh Vision Group is promoting its latest film, *Lasdel*, for the state film festival organised by the JK Academy of Arts, Culture and Languages in Jammu.

expenses incurred during making Lonpo. Agrees experienced filmmaker Rigzin Kalon. "For the sustenance of Ladakhi film industry, it is important to maintain originality or else there are chances of losing out on our unique cultural backdrop." He is saddened by the fact that there's a dearth of encouragement for filmmakers in Ladakh. "We put in a lot of hard work but no credit is given to us."

Given the dearth of good theatres in Leh, the films are shown in government-owned auditorium. There were some objections against allotment for film shows to begin with. The LAHDC (Ladakh Autonomous Development Council) allowed it provided the films were cleared by local censor board. This has

representatives from various religious organisations headed by an additional deputy commissioner. If they find any scene offensive or objectionable during production it has the authority to instruct the producer to remove it. Kalon's film, *E-Mitse — The Present Life*, had to be released after a few scenes were dropped. Only when the censor board gave a final go-ahead was he allotted an audience. Nevertheless, the young brigade easily takes such challenges in its stride.

This year, three feature films — *Dhangs*, *Lasdel* and *Sems-Duk* — have already been released in Leh and managed to draw big crowds. Filmmakers hope the industry continues when *Khorwa* (The Cycle of Life and Death) film on AIDS and *Las Gyudas* (The Fruit of Deed) are released later this year.