

Paper – 10, Module –19

Women Directors

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Description of Module

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name	Women's Studies
Paper Name	Women, Media & Films
Module Name/ Title	Women Directors
Module ID	Paper -10 Module-19
Pre-requisites	The reader is expected to have the knowledge of different Women Directors in Indian Film Industry, the challenges faced by them and what are the opportunities that women directors in India have.
Objectives	To make the readers aware about the various issues taken up by women directors and the changing perception of people towards women directors in the film industry.
Keywords	Indian Cinema , Directors, Path-Breakers, Consolidators, Innovators, Trailblazers , Challenges, Opportunities, Women,

	Filmmakers
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1. Objectives

This module is designed to introduce to you different women directors of Indian Cinema, their works and the problems they encounter in their profession. After studying this module, you should be able to:

- explain the works of female directors in India;
- describe the efforts the women directors have undertaken to establish themselves in the profession; and
- identify the problems faced by women directors in their profession.

2. Introduction

Cinema is the supreme medium to express yesterday, today and tomorrow with its own unique language. The contribution of females in different domains has helped the Indian film industry to reach new heights and women directors are no aliens to Indian Film Industry. In the last module, you got an idea about the professionalism and job orientation in film industry. This module is intended to acquaint you with a brief description of film directors and in particular women directors in cinema. This would assist you to understand the role of a director as well as the status of women directors in the country.

3. Director’s Job

The chief creative force behind any kind of films be it commercial, documentary, art, educational, etc., is the **director**. It’s an incredibly demanding job and requires creative vision, strong leadership and the ability to be an excellent storyteller. Bringing one’s vision to reality is the key mission of a director.

Let us now understand in brief as to what the role of a director is. A director is the head of the production unit — a crucial link among the production, technical and creative teams — responsible for translating the script into cinematic images. Visual images are complemented with sound compositions. We also need to realize that a director can’t handle everything alone so she/he is aided in equal measure by a host of creative and talented technicians, such as a director of photography, an editor, and actors. However, the entire visual language and the final say rests with the director. It’s the director’s distinctive interpretation of the story and of the characters expressed through an individual cinematic aesthetics that makes the director the torch-bearer of a film.

By now, you would have got an idea about a director's job in general. There is no difference between a male and a female director as far as role and responsibilities are concerned. The working is same, only the approach differs as gender changes. Writer V. Renee says in one of her articles, 'Maybe the toughest thing about filmmaking for women is not the actual making of the film, but having to deal with sexism, discrimination, and sexual harassment. Perhaps this could be playing a role in the low numbers of female directors -- women simply deciding that making a film is not worth being mistreated'¹. People in India still have some reservations about accepting a female leader in any job. However, with passing times we are finding a lot of transformation in this mind set; still it is a long way to go.

After discussing about the director's job, we will now outline the women director's evolution and their contribution in the following pages. We shall discuss in detail about the women directors who contributed in the film industry and left an impression in the minds of people in different phases.

4. Women Directors in Indian Cinema

The Indian cinema has undoubtedly been male dominated and male centric and woman as a director is difficult to acknowledge, yet there are several women directors who have contributed a lot in the industry and are still continuing to do so, breaking the barriers. All the way from Fatima Begum to the likes of Sai Paranjpye and Kalpana Lajmi, independent female directors have made their voices heard over the years. Though, their work has been neither seen nor talked about by the mass audience in general.

For a better understanding of women directors in Indian Cinema, we have divided their journey into three segments. Firstly we will discuss about The Path-Breakers who are revolutionaries as they were brave enough to bend the shackles and take their first step towards film direction, followed by The Consolidators who flourished in the second phase and carried forward the legacy and then we will discuss about The Innovators who are modern women directors coming up with a variety of themes in their films challenging the stereotyping in society.

Let us know more about The Path Breakers --- who they were and why we have clubbed them under this segment. Nowadays, there are many women who are well versed with the technique of filmmaking but there was a time when they were not imagined as something more than an actress, but then 'there is always a hero, in real or reel life,' in this case a heroine. There are three path breaking directors in film-making. They not only had to fight in their professional life but their personal life was not smooth either. They are truly the iconic figures in the film industry.

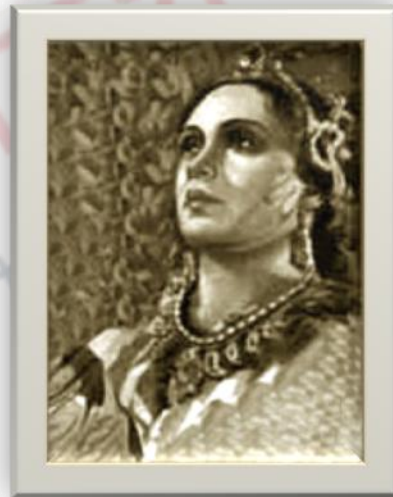
Fatma Begum, a name that changed the outlook of the Indian film industry. Before she came into direction it was assumed that women were made only to entertain the audience. In 1926, *Bulbul-e-*

¹ <http://nofilmschool.com/2013/05/female-directors-indie-film-hollywood> (Retrieved on 05.07.2015)

Paristan was released and she became the first woman director in the Indian cinema industry. Isn't it remarkable that when a majority of women on the Indian subcontinent were fighting a battle to watch films, she was directing them? The movie *Bulbul-e-Paristan* was a big-budget fantasy film with special effects set in a Paristan (fairylnd). She died in 1983 at the age of ninety-one.

Thiruvaiyaru Panchapakesa Rajalakshmi (TPR) was another woman director whose remarkable life was an example of strong determination and willingness to go through hardships in order to realize her potential. She was the first Tamil and Telugu film heroine, female director and producer in the South Indian cinema and second in Indian Cinema after Fatma Begum . She was a source of inspiration for P.Bhanumathi, Vijayanirmala, , Revathy , Jayadevi and V Priya , all women who have successfully handled the directorial baton in Tamil cinema. Rajalakshmi produced, directed, wrote and donned the lead role in her films *Miss Malini* which she edited too and *Madurai Veeran* in the 1930s .

Apart from being a director, Jaddanbai was a singer, music composer, actress and one of the pioneers of Indian cinema. Another crowning achievement was that she was the first female music director in the Indian film industry.



Fatma Begum

ImageSource:<https://whistlingwoodsinternational.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/begum2.png>

Let us talk about few Consolidators, who carried the directorial wand forward and emerged as tough competitors in a male dominated society. Kommareddy Savitri was an Indian film actress, director and

producer. She appeared in different language films like Hindi, Telugu as well as Tamil and Kannada. She died at 46 and her tragic death proved that there is lot of drama in real life as well. Vijaya Nirmala was another film maker who has directed 44 films in Telugu, and in 2002, entered the Guinness Book of Records as the female director to direct the highest number of films. Tanuja Chandra is known for frequently directing woman - oriented films where the heroines are the main protagonists of her films. Apart from them, Vijay Mehta, Revathy, Sadhna Nayyar, Suhasini Maniratnam, Tabassum Govil, Aruna Raje have also done their part to pave the way for more women film makers in India. It's only because of *The Consolidators* that more women are showing their interest in direction and coming up with brilliant films. Now we will move towards *The Innovators* which is the ongoing phase where women directors are more creative and versatile.

It is evident that in last few years the Indian film industry has seen the emergence of some critically and commercially acclaimed films made by some female directors appreciated well by all. Yet the film business remains dominated by their male counterparts. However, the scenario is bound to change soon as the indomitable spirit of women of the film world is taking 'meaningful' strides in every direction. *The Innovators* have aced the craft of filmmaking. One of the Innovators, Gurinder Chadha is a British film director of Sikh Indian origin. Although many of her films seem like simple quirky comedies about Indian women, they actually address many social and emotional issues, especially ones faced by immigrants caught between two worlds. Nandita Das is another Innovator known for her directorial debut *Firaaq* (2008), which has won a number of national and international awards. With *The Innovators* we come to the end of women directors in the Indian Cinema but this is not the end, it's a new beginning. Apart from them other serious women filmmakers like Meghna Gulzar, Zoya Akhtar, Rajshree, Farha Khan, Bhavna Talwar, Leena Yadav, Rupali Guha, Gauri Shinde, Madhumita, Nisha Ganatra coming into the frame, the future of female directors in Indian cinema seems to be touching a new high soon. With an increasing number of ladies getting behind the camera, the day is not far when "male-domination" is nothing more than an unpleasant memory.

5. Trailblazers



Image Source: http://zeenews.india.com/entertainment/celebrity/top-5-women-directors-in-bollywood_1603211.html

Women directors are taking over the industry by storm giving us some of the most memorable films in the past decade. Now we come to the next section, where we will discuss about women directors who are prominent filmmakers and we have termed them as Trailblazers. Till now we have discussed about the contributions of different filmmakers from the time they entered into film industry. We will now discuss in detail as to why they became the prominent figures in filmmaking.

Deepa Mehta

The Indo-Canadian director carved out a new path altogether and touched topics that no one ever had courage to address, at least in India. She made films on varied topics like homosexuality and partition. She had to face a lot of problems and controversies as the society didn't accept these subjects. Still she managed to handle those hurdles and the way she pulled them off was highly commendable. The extraordinary courage shown by her has made her films a fascinating artistic experience. The trilogy 'Earth', 'Water', 'Fire' gave a message to the world that India is changing. She received huge international acclaim for '1947 Earth' and 'Water'. These two films were sent to be nominated for the Oscars.

Deepa Mehta is an example of strong determination. She depicts the most depressing circumstance and tells it with such well developed characters, solid performances, and tight scripting that we walk away feeling satisfied despite being exposed to all the doom and gloom.



Image Source: http://zeenews.india.com/entertainment/celebrity/top-5-women-directors-in-bollywood_1603211.html

Kalpana Lajmi

Another trailblazer who has left her impression in filmmaking is feminist director, Kalpana Lajmi. Lajmi, who belonged to a culturally rich background, carved a niche for herself with a unique style of filmmaking. The Independent director has worked a lot on women issues and made realistic and low budget films which are known as parallel cinema in India.

In one of her interviews published in rediff.com the director said that "It's strange, I have never been consciously feminist." But this is difficult to believe considering the various issues that her films showed. *Ek Pal* depicted all about a woman's sexual expression outside marriage whereas *Rudali* talked about an oppressed woman in Rajasthan who belonged to a lower caste. Her next film *Darmiyaan* brought to screen the true life of an Indian woman in 1940s who shuns her only hermaphrodite child. Her next film *Daman* (2001) dealt with domestic rape among middle class women and gave a message of women empowerment. Kalpana Lajmi is a pioneer in Indian cinema bringing different challenges faced by woman in society.

The link is an interview with the director which takes you to know her better

<http://www.rediff.com/entertai/2000/aug/30kalp.htm>

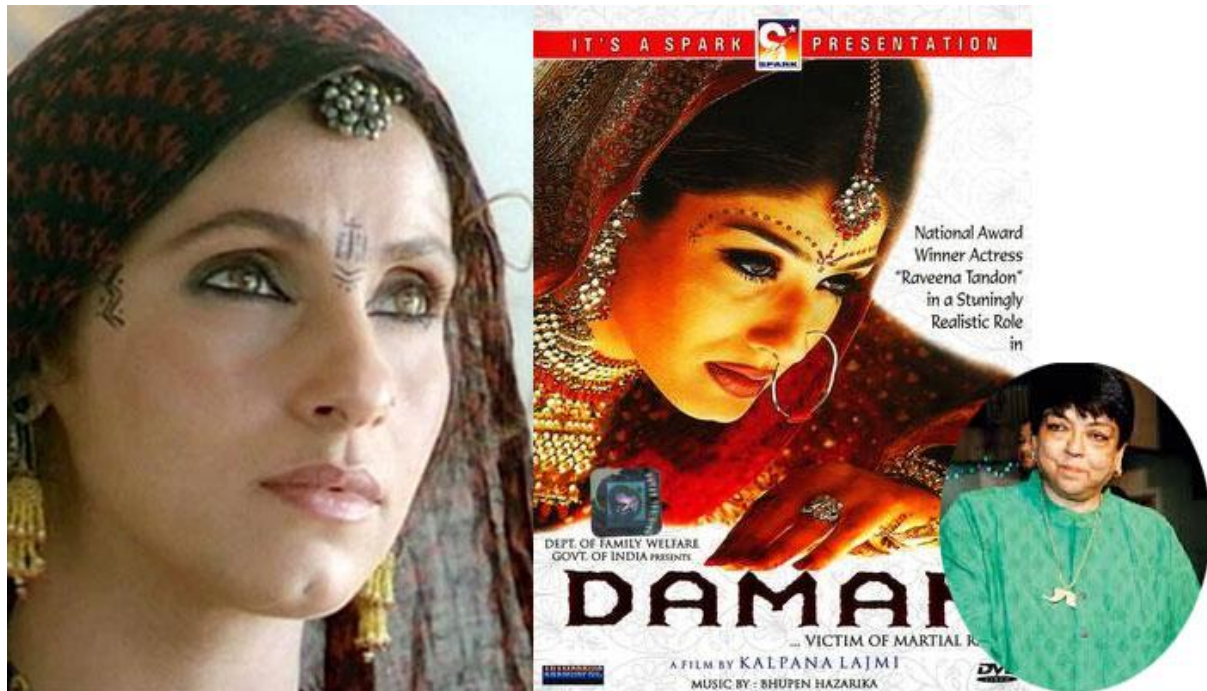


Image Source: : http://zeenews.india.com/entertainment/celebrity/top-5-women-directors-in-bollywood_1603211.html

Aparna Sen

Another trailblazer about whom we will discuss now is one of India's finest and critically-acclaimed filmmakers. Aparna Sen has not only done wonders in commercial cinema but in regional cinema as well. Her works in parallel cinema made her a renowned director. Herag Halli said of her as, "She is to movie direction as Tagore was to poetry...her direction is sheer poetry in motion as in "Mr and Mrs. Iyer." She is the female counterpart of Hrishikesh Mukherjee."



Image Source: : http://zeenews.india.com/entertainment/celebrity/top-5-women-directors-in-bollywood_1603211.html

Sai Pranjape

The next trailblazer about whom we are going to discuss is about Sai Pranjape. She entered the industry in 80s, a time when there were hardly any women filmmakers in the Indian film industry and made a trend setting impact. She is a woman of sparkling wit and humour. She moved from writing to theatre, television to films, and back-and-forth². She has straddled many mediums with assurance. While her children's stories have enthralled generations of young people, her TV serials have become household names and her films have wooed audiences and critics in India and abroad.

The most well known of many films is 'Sparsh' which went on to win three National Awards as well as three Filmfare Awards dealt with the issue of relationships with the visually handicapped. The film revealed the emotional and perception divide between the world, the "blind" and the "sighted", epitomized by the characters. In 1981, she directed a film which remains a classic today as well. Romantic comedy buddy film 'Chashme Baddoor' was a silver jubilee hit and remake version of it was

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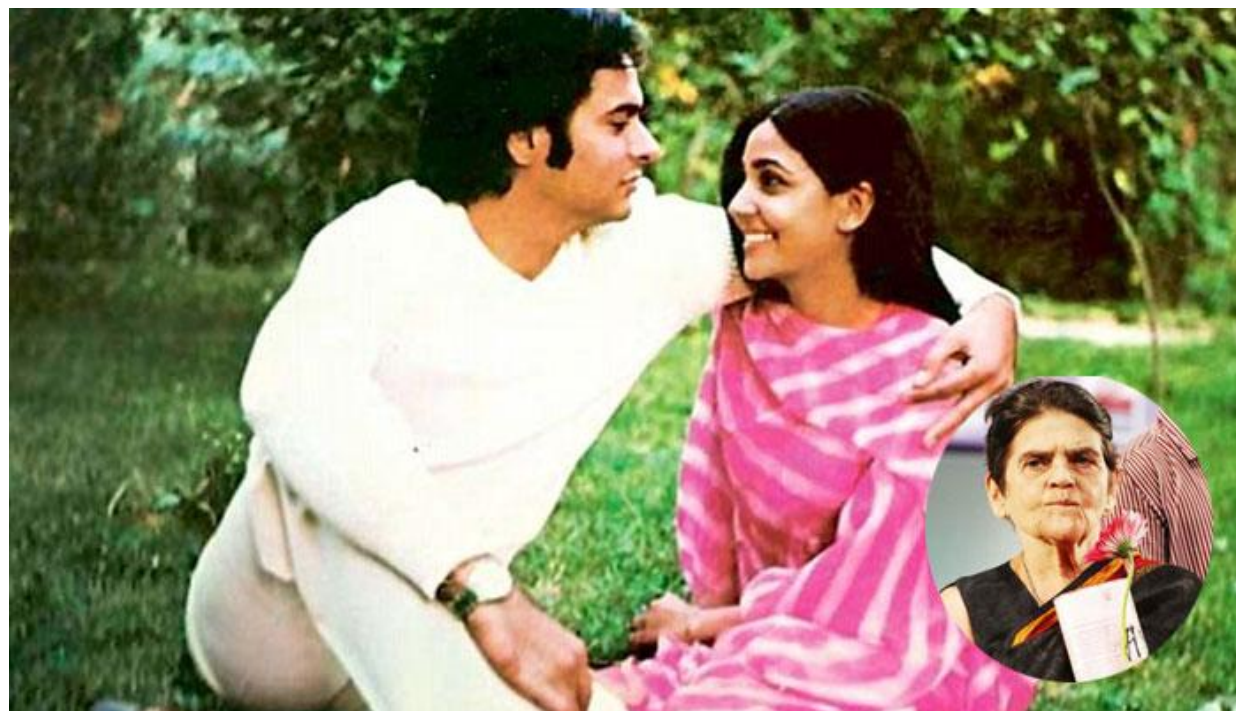
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(Retrieved on 20.6.2015)

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released in 2013. Her another memorable film was ‘Katha’(1983) which was about daily lives of people living in Mumbai Chawl.

Sai Paranjpye reveals her life journey, both personal and professional, to filmmaker Sridhar Rangayan in this interview. So click the link to know her more closely.

<http://www.southasianist.ed.ac.uk/article/view/128/1015>



Image

Source: http://zeenews.india.com/entertainment/celebrity/top-5-women-directors-in-bollywood_1603211.html

Mira Nair

The last film director whom we are going to discuss is not the last one but possibly the most well known female director from India in the international circuit. Mira Nair’s production company, *Mirabai Films*, specializes in films for international audiences that act as "native informers" on Indian society, whether in the economic, social or cultural spheres. She is truly a trailblazer as she made her own road which led to international fame. Her specialization is the human touch that she brings out in every film. Her films generally portray human stories in a big screen.

Her first film 'Salaam Bombay' in 1998 which chronicles the day-to-day life of children living on the streets of Bombay was successful in putting her on the map. Her subsequent works only strengthened her position as one of the best filmmakers India has ever produced. 'Namesake' in 2004 explored many of the same emotional and cultural themes as Jhumpa Lahiri 's Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, which it was based on. In 2001 *Monsoon Wedding* was released, which depicts romantic entanglements during a traditional Punjabi Hindu wedding in Delhi.

To know more about her personality click <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/film/the-reluctant-controversialist-mira-nair-interview-8559351.html>

Till now we have discussed about various women directors in Indian cinema, their work and achievements. We dealt with a few of them in detail as they brought varied issues to the silver screen that led masses to think about them seriously instead of just ignoring and accepting them as traditions and customs. Let us move to the next section where we will talk about the various challenges that a woman director faces. Opportunities are generally the outcome of the challenges faced, so we will discuss opportunities as well.

6. Challenges for Women Directors

We will now discuss the challenges and opportunities for women directors in the film industry. The unequal number of male and female directors is a feature throughout the world. A three-year study commissioned by the Sundance Institute and Women in Film found that the ratio of male-to-female directed movies in competition at the Sundance fest from 2002 to 2014 was about 3 to 1³. By contrast, for the top 1,300 highest-grossing pictures released from 2002 to 2014, the ratio was a little more than 23 to 1⁴. The study of the marketplace for female directors has found that women are far more likely to work in independent film than on mainstream studio pictures. Nearly half of the film industry surveys believe that female-directed films appeal to a smaller audience than films directed by men.

We have divided the challenges into three parts for a better understanding.

Upsetting

The word itself reflects a lot of difficulties and is disheartening. Upsetting means how the women directors are demoralized in the funding part. Getting a financier for her film is the biggest challenge for a woman film-maker. Reality is that because of this crisis many creative women have been discouraged to come into film direction. Directors like Sai Paranjpaye, Aparna Sen and Kalpana Lajmi - who did

³ <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/female-directors-study-sundance-institute-women-in-film-1201477330/> (Retrieved on 17.06.2015)

⁴ <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/female-directors-study-sundance-institute-women-in-film-1201477330/> (Retrieved on 17.06.2015)

dare to call the shots - getting into the mainstream of Indian cinema also faced a lot of difficulty. They were mostly working on tight budgets and their films were not marketed well.

Another aspect that is very upsetting is the branding of their films as "alternate cinema" forcing them and their films to remain at the fringe. Some films made by women directors have been denied even a commercial release and have not been screened outside film festivals.

Definitely the scenario is changing and more space is being given to them compared to the last decade but still the basic problem remains like getting a good male lead for the film. For example, Ms Meghna Gulzar had no problems signing two of the top actresses for her film *Filhaal*, but getting a male cast of her choice was a problem⁵.

Exasperating

Yes, it's exasperating every time when people presume that a woman director makes a feminist film only. Many women directors have shared that for them it's always an uphill task to cast the male characters. Sometimes the directors end up signing someone who is uncomfortable in front of camera like well-known male model or a pop singer or upcoming actors or those on the downslide. Tanuja Chandra is one of the examples as in the three films she directed - *Dushman*, *Sanghursh* and *Yeh Zindagi Ka Safar* she managed to cast Bollywood's topline actresses but her leading men were not the best ones.

In the present decade, still people define the women directors' work by gender. Though the modern female directors are exploring unusual themes and have stronger women characters in their films but that does not mean they are feminist filmmakers. Despite being typecast, the women directors have not lost hope and are making efforts to cross all the barriers. Their efforts have started paying rich dividends as a number of successful women filmmakers have cropped up in the recent years.

Funding Crisis

The pre-conceived notions about woman directors have hindered the women directors' commercial success. A filmmaker raises a question, "male directors have always been making films about both men and women. Then why aren't female directors attributed this flexibility?"⁶ (sic)

Film distributors are not so excited about selling films made by the female directors as they think their films will only address a limited section of the society. A few filmmakers have somewhat changed this notion. Zoya Akhtar, Tanuja Chandra, Farha Khan were not only funded by big film financiers, but also marketed and distributed their films well.

⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1832430.stm> (Retrieved on 25.06.2015)

⁶ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1832430.stm> (Retrieved on 25.06.2015)

Some say this has been possible because of the changing attitude towards women in the Indian film industry. Others attribute it to the backing they have received from well-established names within the industry.

Whatever the case, it is the beginning of a process that may encourage other women to take up film direction and change the way the industry perceives them and their films.

7. Where does the path lead?

Kathryn Bigelow has made history by becoming the first woman to win an Oscar for directing. Is this a new era for women filmmakers? Female directors have been a rare commodity in Bollywood despite women's success in front of the camera. But it seems this is finally changing. For a long time the industry has been a male dominated domain. The women have at best contributed in the industry by way of acting, scriptwriting or singing for films. But the last two to three decades have seen women working behind the cameras, directing and producing films. And what is more, several of them have won laurels for their films at national film festivals in India as well as at international film festivals abroad. The Oscar winner makes us optimistic that soon there will be more Kathryns in the industry. There is no lack of female directors but there is a huge lack of people willing to give female directors opportunities. Anyways the filmmakers are now learning the knack of converting their chances into awards. Gender discrimination doesn't have discrepancy between Hollywood and Bollywood but women now know how to handle the problems..

Keeping in line with the information revolution many women have been opting for courses in film making, script writing and other aspects of direction and production. An important thing to be noted is that most of the films and documentaries being made by Indian women filmmakers are on socially relevant themes which strike an instant chord with the audience. All in all, Indian women filmmakers are doing their best to show their talent and ability to entertain and educate the masses. The changes overturning current business and artistic processes are opening up new opportunities for women film directors who are determined to make the most of these.

8. Let Us Sum Up

Now Let us sum up all that we have learned so far. We learnt about the work of a film director in detail. Then we learnt about the women directors in Indian Cinema by dividing them into three groups. We initiated our discussion from the first filmmaker Fatma Begum to the recent ones like Nandita Das, Tanuja Chandra and so on. Seeking to redress the imbalance between male and female film directors, we also tried to explore inspiring work appearing in India highlighting emerging women directors alongside ground-breaking pioneers who inspired them. We discussed in detail about the five outstanding female directors work that we termed as Trailblazers. We talked about their contributions in the industry and how the people's acceptance is increasing in society. We then talked about the

challenges that a woman director faces and how they are converting those into the opportunities. Finally, we assessed the changing scenario which is moving towards positive direction as the acceptance of women is increasing in society.

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