

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY MARKED WITH 20TH ANNIVERSARY SCREENING OF 'BHAJI ON THE BEACH'



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International Women's Day was marked in true British Asian style with a special screening of the classic film **Bhaji on the Beach**. Hosted by **Tongues on Fire**, the annual Asian film festival celebrating women in film and **Asian Circle**, a network of professional women that work with Oxfam to support vulnerable Asian women in South Asia, the event saw the original cast of the film and director, Gurinder Chadha, come together to discuss women's issues in India.

Critically acclaimed director Gurinder Chadha made a special appearance to introduce the film and take part in a discussion with a specifically chosen panel after the screening. Speaking about the evening, Gurinder says: *"It was a great screening and bittersweet to see the film still resonates today. I wish we had broken through those issues we first raised 20 years ago but domestic violence is still a major issue in our community, as are mixed relationships. However it was great to mark how many women came out and supported the evening and all the wonderful groups who help support women in need around the country."*

The special screening of Chadha's highly acclaimed debut film **Bhaji on the Beach** was held at SOAS and marked the 20th anniversary of the film's release. In support of International Women's Day, all proceeds from the event were donated to Asian Circle and Oxfam projects in India to help end violence against women. The screening was followed by a Q&A session with actors, Shaheen Khan and Tanveer Ghani, director Gurinder Chadha and Shan Khan Director of the new film Honour. The debate was hosted by journalist Radha Bedi who was most recently seen in the BBC documentary 'India: A Dangerous Place to be a Woman'. The debate encouraged an animated discussion surrounding the issues of domestic violence in South Asian communities in both India and Britain.

Speaking about the debate, Shaheen Khan commented: *"It was great to see so much audience participation as we encourage all women to discuss issues affecting our society. When I look back at my career over 38 years, it's frightening how much of my work has*

themes of domestic violence in them, be it on film, in theatre or on radio. Things have improved but not nearly enough. It is an issue which must constantly be raised and discussed and I think education also plays an essential role. 'Bhaji on the Beach' pioneered discussions surrounding topics like domestic violence at the time of its release and I feel honoured to have been part of the film, playing a strong female character. The film really does encourage female empowerment which is also what International Women's Day and Oxfam's projects are all about."

Set within the framework of a heart-warming comedy, *Bhaji on the Beach*, released in 1993, was without doubt a ground-breaking film that tackled many of the cultural taboos and barriers faced by women within the community, including domestic violence and mixed marriages.

Actress Meera Syal, who wrote the script, sent a special message to the audience: "I was thrilled to see 'Bhaji on the Beach' screened as part of International Women's Day and also in partnership with the wonderful charity, Asian Circle. Through the film, we wanted to break the silence and bring into the open all the stuff that was happening in so many of our lives that was ignored or hidden and we wanted to do it with humour and honesty, to kick start the debate by creating Asian female characters who were as complex and flawed and funny as real women are. It's honest and unapologetic and unafraid to highlight issues that are still affecting many women today, a sober reminder that though we have come so far, we still have so much to do."

Commenting on the influence of cinema on South Asian communities, actor, writer and director Shan Khan said: "We must continue making films which open people's eyes to the problems our society face. It is our duty to use film to convey important messages and bring these issues to the front of people's minds. 'Bhaji on the Beach' is not only poignant for women but it is also a great opportunity to encourage men to take a self-reflective look at themselves and identify if they are consciously or subconsciously perpetuating women's issues. This is exactly what I wanted to achieve with my own film 'Honour'. Helping women is also about encouraging men to make a change."

The event was hosted by Michael Hutt, Professor of Nepali and Himalayan Studies, Director, SOAS South Asia Institute. Introduced by Pushpinder Chowdhry, Director of Tongues on Fire and Santosh Bhanot, Chair of Asian Circle, the event was a true celebration of South Asian women.

- **About Tongues on Fire:** Tongues on Fire is a not-for-profit organisation which provides a platform for independent film and arts with a link to South Asia.
- **About Asian Circle:** Asian Circle is a new creative network of UK based influential Asian Women with a united passion to support women in India and South Asia. The network includes leading business women, lawyers, financiers and celebrities all working with Oxfam to fight gender injustice and poverty.
- Asian Circle is an integral part of **'The Circle'** which was founded by the singer, Annie Lennox in 2008, 'The Circle' is a partnership of women who are passionate about women's rights, empowering other women and female leadership.

- **Oxfam:** A global movement of people working towards a world without poverty. We respond fast in emergencies, and stay to help people rebuild their lives. We work on long-term projects with communities determined to shape a better future for themselves and we campaign for genuine, lasting change. In 2010/11 alone, generous public donations helped us reach 6.5 million people affected by conflict and disasters. Oxfam has been working in India for more than 60 years, and Pakistan and Bangladesh for more than 40 years.