

Sheffield/Doc/Fest: Interview – Inka Achte

[Andrew Young](#) chats to the director of a fascinating and inspiring selection from this year's festival

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Inka Achte is the director of *Boys Who Like Girls*, an optimistic and worthwhile film that showed at this year's Sheffield Documentary Festival. It showcases the work of the Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA) organisation in India, founded in the aftermath of the New Delhi gang rape. The film also shows the effect of the charity's work on teenager Ved as he comes of age in changing times. *Nouse* sat down with Achte to discuss her film and the documentary process.



Image: Sarah Harvey PR

Nouse: How did you come across this story?

IA: Back in 2012 I was reading quite a lot about the New Delhi gang rape; it's quite a violent, horrible case. I just found it really disturbing and I can't remember exactly how, but somehow by following the news I discovered that there is a kind of men's movement, where men are not only standing for women's rights, but also trying to prevent misogynistic attitudes from happening – talking about gender and what it means to be a man for younger boys. I found it really inspiring and I felt really grateful and happy as a woman – like “wow, there are some men who care about us”. So I contacted Harish and actually I tried to find something similar in Europe because obviously it would have been easier to make the film in Europe, but I didn't find anything. I thought this is amazing, this is really groundbreaking. Then I travelled to meet Harish and we sort of started working along together. We needed to find a teenager to follow...

Nouse: How did you decide how to focus the film, because it is marketed as being about Ved specifically, but obviously the film does focus on Harish and Aspar as well. So how did you decide that you wanted to focus it on a teenager as opposed to the movement as a whole?

IA: I think that there needs to be some sort of development and potential for somebody to change. The workshops and the programs are there for the potential to change a person, to change a boy. I thought then that it would need to be a teenager, because if you're an adult you are maybe more formed and it's harder to maybe change your views. A teenager is still under the influence of their parents, who might have a lot more traditional views, and that was indeed the case with Ved. His father is a very kind of authoritative figure and then there was other force, the more kind of progressive men in his life. So I was interested in that, in kind of being in between that and how does he grow up, what kind of a man he becomes.

Nouse: You don't see much of his family; was that a decision on your part or a case of not being given the permission to film them?

IA: Well the father that was both a practical matter because, well he probably wouldn't have approved of the way that his family were speaking about him. But he was also just never around. But I also felt like we don't need to see him; it's probably also fairer on the father that we don't show him. I also thought that it was quite fitting that there's just this like figure that everybody's afraid of that we never see we can only imagine what he's like, and it seemed to me sort of he manifests even a bigger issue in the society.

Nouse: I'm just wondering how's Ved doing now, how's the organisation doing now? Is there a way you can help?

IA: If you could include the link to the donation page that would be wonderful [see end of article]. They are still struggling. I mean there needs to be some kind of sustainable way of getting funding, because at the moment it is like completely hand to mouth and it'll get small individual donations or small individual funds and then by the end he can't run long-term projects because there's no long-term funding, so he's still struggling with that. Actually already because of the publicity that the film has received thanks to people like you, they've received donations from people in Europe. Ved's doing great; he's in college, he's still going to college and yeah he's doing great. He still volunteers at the theatre group studying.

Nouse: It reminds me of a film I saw earlier at the festival, Laila at the Bridge. Again it is positive social action. It is about heroin addicts in Afghanistan and there's a donation page for that as well. So you can see a trend in documentary films being used for positive social action. Do you as a documentary filmmaker see that as the purpose of a documentary?

IA: I think that a lot of films, particularly about women's rights, can be incredibly depressing and hopeless and you just feel really angry afterwards and I think that I wanted to, my intention was, to make a film first of all that doesn't exclude men from the audience, that invites men into the dialogue in conversation because it's my view that there's a kind of toxic masculinity that also harms men and there's a lot of men who are not like that like that and don't want to be like that and they don't accept it. So I wanted to create that kind of space, so that men and women can talk about it together. Patriarchy is the mutual enemy and I guess that's kind of my main wish, and of course I completely agree with Harish's sentiment that to fight misogyny we need to work with boys and men and I think sometimes those attitudes, for example that the boys in the film depict, it is not because they are somehow inherently evil or horrible, it's just the lack of understanding and then you can only understand through dialogue.

Nouse: It is a film about male feminists and you show as well when Harish goes abroad to try and secure more funding, the difficulties. Often, and quite rightly in some senses, people want the feminist movement to be led by women, rather than the 'male saviour' kind of thing. But also do you think it may be helpful to highlight just how important it is that we cooperate? Is there a balance perhaps?

IA: Yeah I think there needs to be balance. I really hope that now, let's say that after the 'MeToo' movement and all that, that there is a...I feel like the conversation is shifting in that direction and that people are recognising that men and boys need to be included in this. This is not just the women's issue and I don't know, I feel quite hopeful. Hopefully I'm not just being naive, but I do feel quite hopeful that there will be that kind of development in the future and people will get what Harish is trying to do.

Nouse: This movement came in the wake of the New Delhi gangrape and the #MeToo movement coming after all the allegations in Hollywood as well, do you think that for social progress like this, we need a tragedy in a sense. Is there enough goodness in people without that?

IA: I don't know maybe people need to be shaken a bit before they react. Yeah, I'm not sure. It's kind of depressing to think that maybe it's like that.

Nouse: You say about it being hopeful as well, and on the opening and closing credits there's these splashes of colour that you don't see all the time. Was this intentional? Did you try to create a tone that was hopeful? Bed faces some difficulties and trouble, but did you try to make it with a celebratory tone to it?

IA: I think it is a positive film and of course the graphics and all that need to reflect that. Maybe it's a bit of a cliché but it's actually really true that if you travel to India, I think the striking thing is that you will have like grey walls and then all of a sudden there'll be like a bright pink bucket or an incredible lime green sari and that for me is the visual landscape. So I think for me when I think of being in India, I think that it's colourful. I know it's a cliché but it's true. I wanted those colours to somehow be there.

Nouse: Most people don't know a lot about filmmaking in general, but documentary filmmaking in particular isn't a very well-known craft. Could you explain a bit about the process of making a documentary. You're filming these subjects but you don't just put a camera there, it is structured and has to be coherent.



Image: Sarah Harvey PR

IA: So the workshop scene for example, before going in there and shooting I would try to talk to Harish and Aspar as much as possible to get detailed information as possible. What will this look like? If you do this kind of workshop what am I going to see? They would try to explain to me what it looks like and if they had photos of similar workshops that they'd done, and then I would be like, 'Okay that doesn't look interesting, or that does look interesting...that will make a good scene, for example it's a lot more boring to watch somebody like Harish doing a lecture in a lecture theatre and then the others just listening. That just can easily make the audience feel like they are being lectured at. So choose things that are like some kind of action, and similarly let's say that I knew that Ved is trying to pass his exams so then on Thursday let's film when you go and study for your exams and I would say okay, because he was really struggling to find motivation for the studies, so I would say, 'If you're bored, you're bored; you don't have to study for us. If you want to look at your phone instead of reading a book then do that.' So I guess things like that you have to... and there's no resources for me to just hang around and wait for something to happen. You have so many things, like I knew that the mum was really distressed about Ved not studying properly and

was worried that he's going to end up like his dad, so I would say, 'I know that this is your concern why don't you talk about it and we film it.

Nouse: Obviously we are at a documentary festival and documentaries aren't as mainstream as other films and aren't as widely distributed. Is there a way to increase the exposure of documentary filmmaking? Online perhaps?

IA: I feel like documentaries actually are quite popular these days, thanks to maybe Netflix, and there's been a true-crime boom. Because reality TV... I mean a lot of documentary filmmakers hate reality TV, but I personally have a kind of guilty pleasure of watching a lot of reality television and in some weird way I think it helps. Let's say 20 years ago people didn't accept real-life stories, that they could be entertaining and engaging and moving. So in a way it helps, and I think a lot of the online viewing platforms as well, that's great for watching documentaries. People maybe don't want to pay for a cinema ticket to see a documentary at the cinema, which is a shame, I mean I personally love that, but some people won't but they will pay for the Netflix subscription or the Amazon Prime subscription.

Nouse: So you think that that development in streaming has been an overall positive thing for documentaries?

IA: I think so, [to the film's producer Liisa Juntunen] what do you think as a producer?

LJ: I think it's good that documentaries are more easily available to the digital audience, because once they grow accustomed to watching them they will go to watch them on different platforms as well. So it's really important. As a source of income, it's meaningless practically, at the moment, but that will change hopefully. But I think that it is important that they are available and that people learn to watch them because at the moment reality [TV] has kind of taken over that genre and, for example, younger people, they recognize reality [TV] and associate it with documentary and it is really a very different kind of format and way if watching film and content. So I think it is very important that we are there where the big audiences are.

Nouse: What's next for you?

IA: We are working together on a project about a Finnish-Somalian family who have lived in Finland for 25 years and are now returning to Somali land to rebuild the country, and they have also discovered that the land of the family is full of gold and coppers so they are starting a gold mine.

If you want to help MAVA raise more funds, then you can donate at <https://www.bitgiving.com/umangbymavamumbai>



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