THE WORLD BEFORE HER
A FILM BY NISHA PAHUJA

STUDY GUIDE

TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES
The World Before Her presents two opposing forces in a rapidly modernizing India—that of young women who readily embrace change because of the opportunities that change promises to bring, and that of young women who support a more traditional outlook and way of life by embracing the Hindu fundamentalist movement, otherwise known as Durga Vahini. The themes that come across in the film include the struggle between modernization and tradition as well as the differing views of the role that women should play in Indian society.

Discussion Questions:

• What role do you think women play in modern U.S. society?
• How does the role of women shift in other less open or less equal societies?
• How are women portrayed in the U.S. media? Based on your experience, does their portrayal differ in other countries?
• What do women who otherwise may not have had access to an education or to gainful employment stand to gain from living in a rapidly modernizing society?
• What percentage of the world’s population do women make up? What percentage of the U.S. population? The Indian population? Is this percentage reflective of the role that women play in these two societies? Why or why not?
• What are beauty standards? Who defines these standards? Who is affected by these standards?
• How are women represented or depicted by the media? Do you think the way women are represented affects them positively or negatively? Explain.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

NISHA PAHUJA, DIRECTOR

Nisha Pahuja learned filmmaking while working as a researcher for some of Canada’s brightest documentary talents. She co-wrote and directed Diamond Road, which received the 2008 Gemini Award for best documentary series. Her Bollywood Bound was seen around the world and won a Gemini in 2002.

ABOUT THE FILM

The World Before Her dramatizes the tension between traditional and modern perspectives toward women in today’s India by juxtaposing the Miss India pageant against Durga Vahini, the women’s wing of the Hindu fundamentalist movement.

Initially representing the two threads as mutually exclusive worldviews, Pahuja ultimately draws surprising parallels in the way women are perceived and the opportunities that are afforded them at both extremes, convincingly depicting each as real sources of both oppression and empowerment. The World Before Her is a riveting, thought-provoking profile of the fundamental contradictions of a country in transition.

THE FILM IN CONTEXT

Q: What do you know about India?

Q: What is the role of women in a modernizing society?

Q: How does the emphasis society places on imposed standards of beauty impact women and young girls?
THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

The World Before Her presents a democratic society in which the role of women is constantly being redefined as a result of rapid modernization. While some women still fulfill the traditionally imposed roles of mothers and wives, some Indian women choose to pursue less traditional roles by embracing the opportunities that come with a career. The film presents a reality that women in India share with women living in the U.S. where women have juggled careers and motherhood for decades.

After watching the film, write your thoughts about the role of women in modern U.S. society. You can also use this topic as a conversation starter with your peers. Here are some questions you may want to think about as you write/discuss:

- What role do women play in today’s society? What roles have women played in the past? Give examples.
- How does today’s society enable women and young girls to thrive and remain independent while achieving their goals and pursuing careers?
- What do you think needs to change or improve in our society in order for women to further advance?
- In your opinion, do inequalities exist between men and women in the U.S.? Explain.
- How have women shaped the socio-political landscape of the U.S.?
- In your opinion, who are some of the most influential women in U.S. history?

STANDARDS OF BEAUTY

The World Before Her focuses on the Miss India pageant in which women who have been handpicked from different parts of the country endure a month-long grooming process prior to the competition. They are taught how to walk, how to look, how to talk, how to stand, how to dress, and go as far as bleaching their skin in order to compete. Consider how what is shown in the film mirrors the practices of the entertainment industry in the U.S, then write a response about how you would change the current imposed beauty standards. Here are some questions you may want to consider:

- What does beauty mean to you? What does it look like?
- How is beauty represented in the media? Do you have any issues with its representation? Why or why not? Have you or your friends been personally affected by these standards?
- Do you think that the media, through magazines, photos, ads, films and TV programs, has influenced your idea of beauty? Explain.
- Does beauty have a specific look and weight? Explain.
- Do the same standards of beauty that are imposed on women apply to men? Why or why not?
- What would you change about the way in which women are represented in the media?
CRITIQUE RESPONSE

TRADITION VS. CHANGE

What is the role of tradition and change in shaping society? Can a society hold onto its values and traditions while modernizing and moving forward?

Have a discussion with your peers about the importance of tradition vs. change using the core arguments presented in The World Before Her, and how the two forces impact each other in present day India. Questions to consider:

- How do you define tradition? What are the pros and cons of tradition?
- How do you define change? What are the pros and cons of change?
- What does a society stand to lose if it loses its traditions? What does a society stand to lose if it does not embrace change?
- In your opinion, is change inevitable? Explain by giving examples of change you have personally experienced in your lifetime.
- Can change and tradition co-exist? Give examples.
- How does tradition distinguish and set cultures apart from each other?

Consider holding a debate with your friends or classmates. One group will be responsible for coming up with a collective argument that is supportive of tradition. The other group will come up with an argument that is supportive of change. You can use the above questions in your debate.

RESOURCE GUIDE

FURTHER READING

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT SOME OF THE ISSUES PRESENTED IN THE FILM, CHECK OUT THESE BOOKS.

India After Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy
By Ramachandra Guha
An account of the pains, struggles, humiliations and glories of the world’s largest and least likely democracy, this is a breathtaking chronic of the brutal conflicts that have rocked a giant nation and the extraordinary factors that have held it together. An intricately researched and elegantly written epic history.

Desirable Daughters
By Bharati Mukherjee
Mukherjee follows the diverging paths taken by three extraordinary Calcutta-born sisters as they come of age in a changing world. Moving between generations, she weaves together stories of the sisters’ ancestors, childhood memories and dramatic scenes from India’s history.

Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India
By Ashutosh Varshney
This work examines how civic ties between Hindus and Muslims in different Indian cities serve to contain, or even prevent, ethnic violence.

Separate Journeys: Short Stories by Contemporary Indian Women
By Geeta Dharmanranjan
The stories included powerfully evoke Indian women’s lives in diverse settings, from urban to village to rural landscape. The collection of stories unfolds the complex interplay of gender, language, class and ethnicity characteristic of this part of the world, and runs from the passionate to the poignantly, from the personal to the universal. This selection of tales is a moving testament to the human spirit.

FURTHER WATCHING

IF YOU LIKED THIS FILM, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE SOME OF THESE OTHER FILMS.

Pink Saris
A film by Kim Longinotto
Sampat Pal, the complex protagonist at the center of Pink Saris, married as a young girl into a family that made her work hard and beat her often. She fought back, leaving her in-laws and eventually became a champion for beleaguered women in Uttar Pradesh, who find their way to her doorstep.

Jesus Camp
A film by Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing
The feverish spectacle of a summer camp for evangelical Christian kids is the focus of this fascinating if sometimes alarming documentary. As they begin to record their world, the kids awaken to their own talents and sense of worth.

Born Into Brothels
A film by Zana Briski
A portrait of several children who live in Calcutta’s red light district. Spurred by the kids’ fascination with her camera, Zana Briski, a New-York-based photographer decides to teach them photography. For most of the film, we follow a charismatic teacher, Becky Fischer, as she trains young soldiers in ‘God’s Army’ at a camp in North Dakota.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Media Awareness Network
mediaawareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women_and_girls/women_beauty.cfm
An article about beauty and body image in the media, from one of the most comprehensive collections of media literacy.

The Body Project
thefatproject.bradley.edu
The Body Project, created by Bradley University, is for women and men of all ages. Its mission is to increase awareness and acceptance of the human body in all its shapes and sizes.

GET INVOLVED

Speak out: Host a debate in your school or local community center where you engage your peers in a dialogue about the impact of imposed beauty and body image standards on today’s youth.

Donate: Enlist your friends, classmates and family in order to raise funds to aid women-run businesses or cooperatives in India. Visit kiva.org for more information on microfinancing.

Organize: Host a screening of The World Before Her in your school. After the screening, engage your peers and teachers in a discussion about the ever-changing role of women in modernizing societies like India.
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ABOUT TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES
This program provides NYC public school students and teachers with access to free, educationally-relevant and challenging films. Each screening is followed by a Q&A, study guides and supplemental educator materials are provided, and teachers are strongly encouraged to utilize films as part of their curriculum. This monthly-series strives to expose New York City students to independent films and help educators and students incorporate film-viewing into their classroom work. For more information about TFI’s youth programs, please visit www.tribecafilminstitute.org/youth or email youth@tribecafilminstitute.org

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The Tribeca Film Institute (TFI) is a year-round nonprofit arts organization that empowers working filmmakers through grants, professional development and resources, while also helping New York City students discover independent film and filmmaking.