Using Film to Inspire Advocacy: An Interview with Shalini Kantayya

Shalini Kantayya is a filmmaker, producer, advocate, and environmentalist based in Brooklyn. Moved by stories that inspire her heart, she uses her films to shine a light on some of the world’s most important issues. Her award-winning short film, A Drop of Life, explores the struggles of villagers in rural India confronted with water privatization. Set in a dystopian world in the near future, the film compels its viewers to question their assumptions on development and warns of the dangers that can arise when access to one of the world’s most precious resources becomes restricted. Ten years since it was first released, the film retains its relevance and its powerful message. It acts as a valuable educational tool around the world and an impetus to start the conversation on water rights, attracting more voices in the decision-making process of this critical resource. Ms Kantayya kindly agreed to talk about her short film and her motivations for sharing this compelling story with wH2O Journal’s D. Dalrymple, Mahvish Ilyas, and Siga Wu. Following is a transcript of Ms. Kantayya’s interview.
A Drop of Life illustrates the tremendous power those who control water wield and more significantly, it informs viewers of devastating consequences that can result once its access becomes heavily controlled. What was your inspiration for creating A Drop of Life?

None of my films are guided by politics, but by a story that moves my heart. In this case, I think I watched Blade Runner way too many times—I’m sort of a science-fiction fanatic. I was just thinking that in the future, there may be water meters and that people will have to pay for water even before they receive it. Later that year, I went to the World Water Forum and the World Social Forum in Mumbai and in the course of my research came to realize that these water meters—where people have to pay before receiving water—already exist in some countries across the world, including the United States. That inspired me to make A Drop of Life and what became the final film was inspired by a true story that happened in Orange Farm, South Africa, where the World Bank set up a scheme for people to pay for water. People simply could not afford it, so they went to a second source, and five thousand people died of Cholera as a result. The story is really about the privatization of water, that’s what inspired me to make this film.

The film paints a dystopian image of a world in which water is both heavily monitored and prohibitively expensive. Almost 10 years since the film’s release, how would you assess the current global outlook? Would you say we have made steps to move away from this nightmarish scenario or have we grown closer to making it a reality?

Honestly, if I can tell you the truth, we are moving so quickly towards a dystopian future. I have been working on water for ten to fifteen years now and predictions that I thought would take fifty years have taken ten. Just within the last five years, we’ve seen 300,000 people in West Virginia lose their water because of a chemical leak upstream, we’ve seen water catch on fire, we’ve seen Biblical-scaled droughts, and I am very disappointed about who is appointed to our US Environmental Protection Agency. We have someone now running our EPA that has spent his career attacking the very agency that he is slated to lead. So, I think that all of that would lead me to believe that we are on the verge of a crisis. For the first time in California, not too long ago, you had Americans being asked to ration water and I’m thinking, why is this not on the cover of every newspaper? I think that we are still in this sort of collective denial, but what I am hopeful about is this wave of citizen engagement and I think that’s what it’s going to take to fight for clean and accessible water for all.

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It is evident that women take the center stage in the film, being both the decision-makers as well as the ones most affected by the water crisis. In what way do women possess a unique role in managing water resources? How can women be a part of the solution?

In the developing world, it is largely women that are responsible for the fetching of water and have to walk an average of 15 kilometers a day. Many young women and girls are kept from an education because they are made to bear the brunt of collecting water for the family. You begin to see that if you are talking about gender equality, you are talking about water and if you’re talking about women’s rights, you’re talking about water. So this film is about two strong women who sort of butt heads.

Water access, although an important issue, is not a subject that gains a lot of mainstream attention. How did you manage to successfully raise awareness and interest in the film?

The success of this film has really shocked me. The fact that I made this film 10 years ago and that it still has relevance today is to my own amazement! And I made it out of sheer passion because I feel that we use the tools that we have and the talents that we’re given in pursuit of the things that we love and this
is what I did with the film. The film has and continues to be screened at colleges and universities and continues to be a tool to talk about local water rights. It’s also been used by Food and Water Watch, the African Water Network, and it was brought to 40 villages across Africa to talk about local water rights. I feel very grateful to have created a small tool that in 17 minutes, sparks a new conversation and that’s why those of us who make films.

For those that recently watched your film and feel compelled to do something to alleviate the world’s water crisis: What would you say to them? How can young people who want to make a change in the world get involved and be agents for change?

I spend so much time at colleges and universities every year because I believe deeply and remain committed to the fact that young people are the catalysts for change—it’s just what is. I think that everyone has to find their own talents and what they feel passionate about and find the space where they can make change. There are a lot of great local organizations—maybe your thing is water, maybe your thing is climate change—there are a lot of local groups doing great work. Really take time to explore and to find those things and to question where you think you can really make a difference.

Your other film, Catching the Sun, has also received tremendous attention and praise, recently being selected a New York Times Critics’ Pick, does this mean you are pivoting away from water issues?

What is your next step?

Oh, I will always be a believer in the interconnectedness of all things and therefore by default an environmentalist, but I have other ambitions as an artist and I hope to be making films that are not about the environment—that’s what I’m working on right now. I’m going back to my science-fiction roots.

Ms. Kantanyya’s latest project Breakthrough, a series for National Geographic showcasing some of science’s most cutting-edge advances, is scheduled to air this spring.