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Young Filmmaker Takes Hard Look At Immigrant Indians in America

By MICHEL W. POTTS

New York — The immigrant experience in America since the turn of the century has repeatedly proven itself to be powerful material for the filmmaker. Curiously, Indian cinematic artists as a group have largely ignored the subject. Fortunately, their default gave Mira Nair virgin territory to explore.

"So Far From India," her 52-minute color documentary backed by the New York Council for the Humanities, depicts two contrasting worlds: that of the newly-arrived Indian immigrant in which his anonymity ensures freedom from family obligations and social demands, and that of the protected, tradition-bound world where his new bride waits patiently in his ancestral home in a small Indian town.

Wisely, Nair chose to steer clear of the stereotypical well-to-do, well-educated Indians who have found success in America and concentrated instead on the newer type of immigrant who is less educated and who has defied Americanization, thus forming those small groups of immigrants who refuse to be integrated into the American mainstream. She also chose to focus on the complexities of one character, rather than having her story-line diffused by trying to accommodate numerous individuals.

After two months of researching and meeting Indian immigrants she met Ashok Sheth, who works on a subway newsstand. Not only did Sheth turn out to be totally unselfconscious and willing to reveal himself, but even his family, and more important his wife Hansa, threw open their doors when Nair's film crew accompanied Sheth back home in August 1981.



A domestic scene in Gujarat from "So Far From India."

"Getting the Indian end is very vital, because nothing exists in a vacuum," Nair told writer Sanjit Narwekar during her visit there. "The present always links up with the past and what Ashok left behind when he left for America (his wife, parents, sisters, apart from the material things) was equally important for me. Luckily for me and my film, Ashok was, at the time of the filming, going through a process of conflict and adaptation when he was in the States and a process of re-assimilating and critically looking at things when he returned to India."

The film's story-line is left deliberately unresolved, with Sheth once again leaving for the United States, promising to send for his wife and newly-born son. At this point the film's theme reveals itself in a situation where there are no winners, only victims. The wife Hansa has no options open to her but those presented by her husband, while Sheth, who has few options open to him, is a victim of his family rituals and social demands.

According to Nair, Sheth is representative of 15 to 20 per cent of the Indian immigrants who can neither go back to India nor fully integrate themselves into American society.

Nair herself left home in New Delhi at the age of 18 to major in the cinematic arts at Harvard University. "Jamma Masjid Street Journal," a 20-minute black and white film made in 1979 and what she calls "a personal impressionistic portrait of an essentially male-dominated Muslim area in New Delhi," was actually her thesis for her bachelor's degree. Since then, the film has been telecast on public television in the United States and in India, and was shown extensively on the American college campus circuit. It was also shown at the Museum of Modern Art and in a number of film festivals.

A year later, Nair moved to New York where she worked as an assistant film editor on the film, "Dadi's Family," sponsored by the University of Wisconsin and dealing with the position of women in the joint families of Haryana. It was from this film that Nair conceived her idea to do a film about Indian immigrants. She submitted a proposal to the New York Council for the Humanities, which aids the efforts of various minority groups in this country, and won approval.

Currently Nair is considering making a full-length feature film specifically for Indian audiences. Although she has neither a script nor funds at the moment, she has indicated that she may once again tackle and this time expand on the theme of immigrant Indians in America.