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PEOPLE, PLACES

News Vendor Comes Alive on Screen



Scene from Mira Nair's film.

It is a refreshing little film, the story of an Indian newspaper vendor in New York — the kind you rush past so often, during the desperate 8.05 dash to the subway — told with sensitivity and insight.

Called *So Far From India*, the documentary, directed by Mira Nair, follows the vendor from New York to his home in Gujarat, where he returns to visit his family, a wife he met for only twenty days before leaving for America three years ago, and a son he has never seen.

"It was America that did it to me," says the young director, who came to the country to study film at Harvard, and lives now in New York with her American husband, "because everyone here has a past that they have left behind."

True. America is the legendary melting pot, and much has been written about the plight of the immigrant in this country. Very little has been said though, about the Indian in America. And Nair's film, focusing as it does on the situations confronting a middle class, small

town Indian and his conflicts with the past that he left behind, is a pioneering venture in this direction.

The film shows us the routine of Ashok, the vendor, in New York, from his small crowded room, to his monotonous days behind the counter of the crowded booth, to his meals at small Indian restaurants, and then it follows him home on a visit to his family, and we see the difference between his two realities. The drama centers around Ashok's wife. She has stayed at home for three years, waiting for her husband to call her, and now, on this visit, she, and indeed, everyone in the family, wonders if he will take her, and his son, back with him. In the end he returns without her, promising, as before, to call for her as soon as he is more settled.

Nair is pleased that her film has no resolution, because, as she puts it, "Once you have made the choice (to leave your country) the cause and effects never stop. Situations do not have endings."

The film has managed to

capture the feeling of a middle class Indian home, and the poignancy and drama inherent in the situation, and that is its beauty. The characters come alive on the screen, they talk about themselves, about their feelings for America and for Ashok, they go about their daily routine, totally unaware of the camera in their midst. We feel with the wife when she wants so badly to go with her husband, but refuses to ask him if he will take her. "Why should I ask him what is on his mind, if he wants to tell me, he will. I am prepared to do whatever he decides," she says like the typical Indian wife, but in that we see her strength.

Nair hopes to sell her film to public television in India as well as in America. For now, she is pleased that it has been invited to the International Film Festival in India this winter, as well as to *Cinema Du Real* in Paris in March. "Although the film is about a specific situation, I think it has a universal identification," says its director, "I would be happy if it provoked people to think about themselves."

This is Nair's first major film, and now that it is complete, she is impatient to move on to the next one. She hopes now to do a fiction film. "I was an actress in India, and that will be a full circle," says she with enthusiasm.