

“I’m an accidental filmmaker.”

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Madhusree Dutta's film *7 Islands And A Metro* on the city weaves in art, theatre, says Meenakshi Shedde.

“Invisibility is a survival strategy in Mumbai,” says Madhusree Dutta, filmmaker and also director of Majlis, an NGO involved with multidisciplinary arts and legal work. She addresses the facelessness of post-globalisation labour in Mumbai, in her latest film — her tenth — *7 Islands And A Metro*. It is a 100 minute non-fiction work that takes in what seems like a lifetime’s concerns—globalisation, the closure of Girangaon’s textile mills, gender issues, migration, communal issues, outsiders/insiders, “vegetarian societies”—and the eternal optimism that drives its inhabitants. Dutta, who won two National Awards for *Memories of Fear* and *Scribbles on Akka*, also won the Filmfare award for her debut film *I Live In Behrampada*.

In *7 Islands and a Metro's* cinema verite, she playfully weaves in art, poetry, theatrical characters playing literary ones, and Bollywood-style shots. One of these has five jeeps on a rainy night, screech in on their quarry—job applications floating on rainwater. It’s a visual conundrum: a Bollywood haiku.

Exploring how invisibility seems critical to the “chutta people” on the fringes, she speaks of the bulldozer operator and the night coffeewallah who, embarrassed by their professions, prefer to remain anonymous. A bulldozer operator razing illegal huts, says with staggering matter-of-factness, “I was living in these two rooms and razed my home myself.” Says Dutta, “When I made *I Live In Behrampada*, a lady told me about her son, killed in riots: ‘Phir woh off ho gaya’. I wanted to capture her pain, but she was so casual—it was more poignant. Bombay has so little time and space for anything, even our emotions are sized accordingly. You just get on with it. It’s very easy to do a five-jeep crane shot, but much harder to interview a man who has razed his own hut.”

She uses actors playing Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai to tell the story of Mumbai. “Manto lived in Bombay and wrote a lot about it before leaving for Pakistan. Chughtai lived and died here, but never wrote about Bombay,” she says.

The film is divided into seven chapters dealing with issues like reclamation, construction and faith, with telling observations. In 1931, when maternity benefits were introduced, women and children were thrown out of the mills. But in the 1990s, with globalisation’s greed for cheap, unorganised labour, the number of women employees is rising again. The film also prides fascinating layers of the city, including its cemeteries for the Japanese, Italians, Jews and Chinese.

“I was 27 when I came to Mumbai. I grew up here; this city made me an adult,” she reflects. “I wanted to be an actress after going to the National School of Drama. But during the 1992-93 riots, my friends pushed me to make a documentary—I *Live In Behrampada*. So I’m an accidental filmmaker. Documentaries are boring, but non-fiction is liberating—you can use visual art, music and literature.”

Avijit Mukul Kishore imaginatively captures Mumbai’s fermenting underbelly. It is wonderful to see a documentary that plays with multiple art forms, but occasionally, its theatrics—and its length—tests your patience. Even so, the film is a valuable document of how the city’s past holds cautionary lessons for its future.

***7 Islands And A Metro*, by Madhusree Dutta, Y B Chavan Centre, June 2, 7pm.**