

IN CONVERSATION

Irrepressible metropolis

GOWRI RAMNARAYAN

Filmmaker Madhusree Dutta's "Seven Islands and a Metro" focusses on the invisible citizens who keep the city's wheels running.

"THE first Japanese to ply their trade in this port city were 200 prostitutes," the Japanese monk explains in Hindi at the last resting place of his countrymen. In the Christian cemetery, a burial service is lullaby to a vagabond asleep on a nearby grave. Overnight, a European graveyard is transformed into living quarters by a migrant Tamil community. Marbles stolen from Jewish graves are part of temples across the road. Little feet fly in and out through the window, from an unseen swing, behind a hereditary watchman of the Chinese cemetery.



FICTIONALISED NARRATORS: Khanna as Manto took care of the links and layering.

These singular images are from Madhusree Dutta's "Seven Islands and a Metro" (100 minutes) "non-fiction feature" on Mumbai. Nothing can stop life at full tilt in this city, not even death. The surreal cutting into the real is no stylistic device, but truth staring at you from the city's history and geography.

City's history

The seven goddesses of Bom Bahia (Bombay) have watched Arab traders, Portuguese conquerors, British colonisers, the rise and fall of the mills, the growth of heavy industry, mafia strangleholds, Bollywood pageants, political struggles, racial holocausts, and the seas swelled to cover the land.

Hordes swarm to the El Dorado, ending up on pavements, slums, underworld, mujra houses, bars, factories, construction sites. Few amass wealth. Fewer return home. The goddesses appointed the seas and hills to ensure that none took anything out of their terrain.

Says the poet, "My father came down the Sahyadris/And stood at your doorstep/With only his labour in his hands." But this is no dirge. He learnt to "fight for rights". Another exclaims, "Mumbai, my dear whore, I'll play with you!" The day labourer says, "You may wake up hungry in Bombay, but you won't sleep hungry."

Dutta's visuals and interviews capture this irrepressible rhythm of the city, unquelled by seaminess, rank destitution, or the miasma of indifference, oppression, neo-racism. From her multiple-awards winning debut with "I Live in Behrampada" on a Muslim ghetto during the 1992 communal riots, Dutta has made documentaries like "Memories of Fear" on domestic violence, "An Actor Prepares" on female impersonation, and "Scribbles on Akka" on the iconoclastic saint-poet Mahadeviyakka.

"Seven Islands..." is her most ambitious, and expensive, film so far. The research was easy. But how to condense the vast, unwieldy, multi-ravelled material? Narrativise the concept of a metropolis?

Fulfilling dreams

Dutta found her thread in motifs of arrival and departure. A graduate of the National School of Drama, hadn't she herself come to Bombay to fulfil dreams? Writers Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai as fictionalised narrators took care of links and layerings.

"Manto left for Lahore but wrote about Bombay. Chughtai died in Bombay but never wrote about it. Its constant shifts were superficial for her epics, but just right for Manto's short spins," Dutta explains.



Chibber as Chughtai.

Did Manto really leave? Did Chughtai really live here? The filmmaker wondered if a metropolitan epic had necessarily to be fragmented... Didn't Bombay choose not to be Venice, creating one metro out of seven isles?

Manto (Harish Khanna) is the night bird, while Chughtai (Vibha Chibber) claims the day in the segments — Check Naka, Construction Site, Pillion Riders, Chronology, Left Luggage, Reclamation and Faith. "Their dialogues are my tribute to Bombay filmdom, a reminder that Urdu culture is getting erased in this multilingual metro."

A single image tells us what Dutta is really after. A man walks on the highway, his wares hanging from both ends of the pole on his shoulder: the waif who survives in anonymity. The film is also about any globalised megalopolis, where gigantic cement mixers rumble in like military tanks. Fringe dwellers are her concern. The camera probes a slum to find Hema Malini's stuntwoman in "Sholay". "Show your face and you're paid Rs.1,000, don't show and you get Rs.2,000," she smiles grimly.

The nocturnal coffeewala, with his own tragic romance of cross-caste love, can vanish without a trace. Such invisible citizens keep the city's wheels running.

The Koli women spew fury on the immigrant bhaiyyas whose door-to-door vending affects their trade. But the same women are cowed when the worthy vegetarian denizens of the new high-rise block try to evict their market. Fishmarkets and Muslim neighbours are "against our values" for the upwardly mobile. Dutta sighs, "Intolerance is a class issue."

As Parsis, Pathare Prabhus and Pereiras join the Kolis in claiming bhumi putra status, Dutta unleashes the story of the Bombay Duck from Ramayana times. "Since most of the land was really sea, isn't this fish the original inhabitant?" she laughs.

Colour of red

"What is blood if it does not gush forth from the eyes?" the poet asks. Red recurs obviously in water, in a mujra clip, Chughtai's dupatta; and menacingly when a huge, glossy red shoe preens itself before a row of

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men, their backs to your gaze, facing shadows of racial memories flitting on the wall. Dutta sees them tyrannised by a firing squad of Adidas and Nikes.

The segment on communal riots (1992-93) is less convincing because it is more direct — cracked picture of Gandhi, burning kite, scattered blades, Manto's famous Partition tale... The eerie-blue finale has women in burqas pushing vendors' carts hung with maps of Mumbai. Unsatisfactory. But there's nothing contrived about Manto's writing his name on the visa form. He returns after all.

Dutta's love of the city shines through gusty wind and lashing rain, scorching sun and spooky night.

Is this a fringe filmmaker's vision? "Yes. In Mumbai the mainstream is so full that it keeps the fringe alive and kicking!"

To Dutta filmmaking is a subversive act, a note of dissent. "Remember the working girl who gets declassified as she hunts for a flat, and ends up in a slum? I was that girl."

The film is to premiere on June 2. Thereafter Dutta hopes for a multiplex release heartened by the success of Anand Patwardhan's "War and Peace".