



West side story

A film on India's premier city Mumbai holds up a mirror to the trials and tribulations of living in an increasingly urbanised world, says Ranjita Biswas.

A coffee vendor, once a country bumpkin but now street-savvy, cycles through the lanes of the city, selling coffee to night fairies and clients alike; a glass pane cleaner looks down from his great height on a city he loves- but only from above as the slums he lives in is but a dot; Koli fisherwomen string Bombay Ducks and hangs them high on the racks to dry by the seaside; the newly-arrived queue up with job applications; a girl from Punjab and newly employed in the city, searches for a flat with some modicum of comfort while the highrises look down pitifully on the toiling mass down on the street; gravestones disappear from derelict burial grounds as unrelenting migrant colonies spring up.

Which is the real Mumbai or Bombay, the commercial hub of a fast emerging world economy? In a way, they are all true, facets that have grown and merged with each other through the years from the seven non-descript islands on the Arabian Sea, Bom Bahia -a gift of the Portuguese to the English. Madhusree Dutta's evocative documentary *Seven Islands* and a *Metro* catches the nuances of the city that never sleeps in a chiaroscuro of images.

Stringing the narrative, which the director rightly calls "non-fiction feature" because the effect is no less, are the fictionalised characters of two well-known writers who made the city their own, Ismat Chughtai and Sadat Hasan Manto. Their penetrating observation brings alive the humour and the sadness, the desperate and the optimist, the heartline suburban trains in a way that makes the city a character by itself, as in a feature film.

But Madhusree's portrayal of Mumbai, the growing urban migration and its effect on people who come looking for their El Dorado, can be the story of any city in a developing world today as the clash of industrialization and struggle for livelihood recurs regularly. Something that is not surprising as the prospect of 'at least not starving' pushes people from the backwaters to the city constantly and the border of a city to devour more areas, more villages. Mumbai could be Rio De Janeiro, Manila, Beijing.

Historically, cities have been the driving force in economic and social development in every civilisation. But today, for the first time in this history, more people are living in cities than outside of them. Planners predict that the rate of urbanisation will only increase in the near future and soon one third of the world's population will be living in urban centres. Understanding cities, a Discovery Channel production looked at this phenomenon and the strains this puts on city's resources.

Even India with its largely agricultural populace living in rural area is slowly changing its profile with widespread migration. A statistical look vindicates this trend well enough. At present approximately 307 million Indians live in nearly 3700 towns and cities spread across the country. This is 30.5 per cent of its population. At the time of Independence only 60 millions (15per cent) lived in urban areas. During the last 50 years the population of India has grown two and half times, but Urban India has grown by nearly five times.

About one-third of Urban India (71 million) lives in metropolitan cities (million plus). Out of the total increase in the country's urban population of 58 million between 1981 and 1991, 44 million were added to Class I cities alone. 28 million persons were added in metropolitan cities.

Statistics look dry but they also hold in their womb the story of countless human beings, the displacements, the poverty and the intolerance towards 'others' which simmers underneath, and, as it has been witnessed increasingly, ready to burst forth in violence at the slightest provocation. In Madhusree's film seemingly modern youths of strict vegetarian families justify not letting out flats in the gleaming apartment block to non-vegetarian people because one has to go by "certain values".

The changing urban face and its effect on 'values' has figured in numerous other films. Being the most modern of the arts, cinema is bound to reflect a changing society and individual's response to it . One remembers the scene in Satyajit Ray's Mahanagar when Madhabi Mukherjee throws away the lipstick her Anglo-Indian friend gave her to add to her appearance as a salesgirl but which her middleclass unemployed husband looks with suspicion. Or Bimal Roy's Do Bigha Zamin where rickshawalla Balraj Sahni tries, to cope with competition, a metaphor for the struggle of the rural in the urban jungle.

But just as Madhusree is not judgemental about viewpoints of the different Mumbaikars and some of the city's facets which at times would seem cruel to an outsider, one cannot dismiss urbanisation as an unmitigated evil with one stroke, particularly not today when it's a reality. At best, it can only hold up a mirror to the varied possibilities of human existence and endeavour.

Rain song

Madhusree Dutta on her film: 'Seven Islands and a Metro'

The film gives a feeling of both an outsider's look as well as an insider as if you know every nuance of the city. I've lived in Mumbai for the last 18 years. Yet, in some sense, I'm still an outsider. That gives an angularity. Angularities are important when making a film like this. For example, if I make a film on Kolkata, my native city, it'd be too smooth, too linear because of my experience of growing up there.

What made you take up the subject? We are used to seeing with subjects with feminist interpretation. Is it your tribute to the city?

If you see my filmography from I live in Behrampara to last year's Made in India every film has an urban angle . In a way, this film is a sequel to I live... The many nuances of the city, its many facets are fascinating and of course, my involvement with Majlis organization which gives legal support to women in need has also influenced many of my works.

Your Mumbai often looks quite lonely though it bustles with people and is often rain-soaked . Yes, I tried to look at the city when it's by itself, devoid of people. As to the monsoon shots, it's because I like a little distance between myself and the city and a shield of rain gives that effect. In fact, we shot

the film through three monsoons. I was asked to make a three-minute film on the city by a film festival organiser; it just needed one-day shoot. We went to a textile factory and then suddenly I felt there was a bigger story there, of the people, how they look at the city and the idea was born.

It's also disturbing the way the city is losing out to divisiveness. Every community feels it's their own city and the others are outsiders.

True. Though the city has grown with each wave of migrants from different parts, once they settle down they feel it's their city and the others are outsiders.

You also seem to focus on the dehumanising effect of urbanization.

It's an irony that as more people congregate together in a place the more isolated they become. My seven islands are not just meant geographically but as metaphors of humans as islands. Identities lose their individualisms in the melee of making a living. As the stunt woman from Bollywood 'doubling' for the heroine in hits like Sholay, Sita aur Gita etc., sums up: hume muhn chhupane ka 2000 milta hai aur muhn dikhane ka 1000. (We get Rs.2000 for hiding our face and Rs.1000 for showing it).