

INDIAN INDEPENDENTS

Bard grads make challenging films in the shadow of Bollywood

By Sarah Neilson '94

In February 2004, I visited Bombay and caught up with some old friends from Bard: Ashim Ahluwalia '95, Shumona Goel '97, and Vishwas Kulkarni '96. All three are Film and Electronic Arts Program graduates creating independent film in this Bollywood-dominated city. We discussed film, art, and Bard's influence on our lives.

In the West we hear about the swirl of Bombay: a hectic, dangerous, and glamorous city, crowded even by Indian standards. Bombay is the postcolonial crossroads of New York, Los Angeles, and outer space: simultaneously familiar, glittery, and otherworldly. Bombayites are tough, generous, and accommodating. They live in a jam-packed, commercialized city where fortunes are made and lost every day. Bombay's intensity creeps under the skin, urging filmmakers to record its strange impact.

To create independent film in this setting is challenging. Funding from government or private sources is scarce. Audiences are committed, but small. Living in Bombay is expensive. Working in a developing country adds fresh complications.

Each filmmaker uses a different format: Ashim works in digital video and 35mm, Shumona combines film with photomontage, Vishwas uses found footage and new media. Each filmmaker's subject matter and method reflect a unique relationship with and interpretation of Bombay.

Ashim Ahluwalia

Ashim's documentary film, *John and Jane*, examines the human impact of the "call center" phenomenon. He says the idea for the film came after he read "news articles and business reports in India about this great call center boom and how terrific it is for the economy. But nobody seemed to be asking questions about the call agents with fake American names. They sit in front of computers for 12 hours every night, trying to sell products to, or recover debts from, people in the United States."

John and Jane explores the lives of call center agents in suburban Bombay, who are "trained to speak and think like Americans but go home to very Indian existences," Ashim says. What happens when thousands of young, educated, English-speaking, Indians change their accents, pretend to be someone else, sleep through the day, and talk on the phone through the night, leading continually jet-lagged lives?

Ashim's choice of luxurious 35mm film, rather than video, transforms cubicle offices into gorgeous Yasujiro Ozu-esque compositions that glow in the twilight. "I was interested in a film that was less 'real' looking, more dreamy—the quality of a tropical sci-fi film," he says. "When you shoot 35mm, it immediately feels 'fictional' even if the content is documentary. Film also has grandeur, which felt appropriate for shooting the massive call center spaces, 'technology' parks, and sprawling industrial landscapes of Bombay."

Ashim formed Film Republic, a production company, in 1998. His award-winning first documentary, *Thin Air*, looked at the lives of three Bombay magicians. He has directed documentary films for the Discovery Channel and made television commercials. As a DJ, he cofounded Bhavishyavani, a Bombay-based collective promoting electronic music.



Shumona Goel

After graduating from Bard, Shumona received an M.A. in the anthropology of media/Asian cinema from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. In Bombay, she works with Ashim and Film Republic as a director and producer. Her 20-minute film, *Atreyee*, had its world premiere at an experimental film festival in Bombay in March 2004, and has since been shown at festivals in San Francisco, Seattle, and Turin.

Atreyee documents the experiences of a young Bengali woman who leaves Calcutta for a new life in Bombay. In a series of still photographs, the film records her daily routines. Eventually, she returns home to marry. More than a straightforward “girl-grows-up” film, *Atreyee* is a meditation on the difficult process of breaking out of predictable life patterns.

Shumona and the film’s subject, Atreyee Sen, were friends at SOAS, and Shumona had arrived in Bombay intending to make a documentary about Atreyee’s Ph.D. research on women who participated in the 1993 Bombay riots. Because Atreyee hadn’t started her research yet, Shumona turned the camera on Atreyee herself.

Atreyee, it turned out, was one step ahead of Shumona. According to Shumona, Atreyee “had a Walkman, a Dictaphone, a still camera—equipment that I didn’t have as a filmmaker. People are already documenting their lives, not necessarily waiting for a filmmaker to come and do that for them.”

While the film chronicles Atreyee’s migration, it also touches on Shumona’s experience as an Indian-American arriving in Bombay. For Shumona, “Coming to Bombay was more of a culture shock than going from Pennsylvania to Patiala [her parents’ hometown, in Punjab].”



A still from John and Jane

Vishwas Kulkarni

Vishwas Kulkarni founded The Fabulous Laboratory, India’s first “out” production company, which experiments with film, video, new media, literature, and “urban extracurricular” activity. FabLab’s website, www.fabulouslab.com, offers a glimpse into a strange world where a bra strap represents the mystery of Indian womanhood, or Santa Claus resolves an underworld scuffle.

Post-Bard, Vishwas returned to Bombay, pursued filmmaking and new media, and made short films for music television. He developed an aesthetic he calls “the emotionality of kitsch.” For Vishwas, kitsch and low culture are avenues for pure expression. “A lot of it is my reaction to aspirational gloss within the media in India, where everything has to be slick and shiny, in an advertising way,” he explains.

Vishwas’s most recent film project, *Main Shaayar Badnaam* (A Defamed Poet), consists primarily of found footage. Splicing sections of government farming programs, family planning shows, Independence Day parades, and German gay pornography, the film critiques nationalism and masculinity in contemporary India. The use of television footage invokes the government-run channel, Doordarshan, India’s only channel until the early 1990s. Because of its pornographic imagery, *Main Shaayar Badnaam* was banned from India’s first queer film festival, but was shown in July at Outfest 2004, a Los Angeles gay and lesbian film festival. The film will also be shown at the British Film Institute’s London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, and at festivals in Melbourne, Manila, and Turin.

Vishwas’s current project, *Zeenat: The Wife and the Widow*, is the story of a former Bollywood star, told entirely in footage from her films. Another project, *Khachra* (Garbage), combines film footage found in garbage bins and other unsavory locations. Vishwas’s emphasis on found footage is a comment on India, where most of the population lives in poverty that many Americans can barely comprehend and raggickers comb through garbage to find scraps of material to sell for reuse. Found footage is the cinematic parallel to this economy. “There’s a spartan approach to art that comes from being Indian. I think it shows that low culture can be seen as both a genre of necessity and a genre of choice,” Vishwas says.

Sarah Neilson '94 completed an M.A. in South Asian studies at the University of Washington in 1999. She lives in Chicago, where she manages outreach programs at the University of Chicago's South Asia Language and Area Center. She visits Bombay as often as she can.