

Cityscapes, dreamscapes

The Statesman, September 16, 2006, Chitralkha Basu



WHEN she is aiming at your solar plexus, Madhusree Dutta is not one who would pull her punches. So if a three-dimensional thermocol map of the seven islands on the Arabian Sea that make modern Mumbai are made to disintegrate and float on a tub of greasy water, like severed limbs, or hung from movable kiosks like barbecued chicken – the disturbing effect is deliberate.



The film is replete with such images. For example, the extreme contrast between the shrill fisherwomen who trade in the city's generic fish — the Bombay Duck — as they complain about loss of business and government apathy and a five-star chef twisting and twirling the slippery raw fish in his hands as he extols on the ideal way to prepare it for the connoisseurs' table. The two images, when put side by side, are almost obscene in terms of their heightened difference. There's more obscenity when a young, ostensibly educated, man from a

realtor's family brazenly declares that all of over a 100 flats in his building are occupied by vegetarians ("imagine what would happen if we allowed Mohammedans!").

While it would have been an easier and obvious device to highlight the extreme difference in the states of people living at either end of the social spectrum, the filmmaker has steered clear of the richie rich, the socialite, the business tycoon, the showbiz icon or the underworld don – the archetypes that are hard to miss in any major recent literary (Suketu Mehta's *Bombay*, Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*) or cinematic (Madhur Bhandarkar's *Corporate* and *Page 3*, Ram Gopal Verma's *Company* and *Sarkar*) work trying to profile the city. Instead, she has focused on the regular people — the coffee vendor, the demolition men on a building site, the out-of-work dance bar girl — the sort we see everyday but hardly ever notice. Interestingly she has used clips from mainstream Hindi films in which the protagonists — played by big-time stars, Shah Rukh Khan, Abhishek Bachchan, Rani Mukherjee — arrive in Mumbai from small towns with dreams of making a life for themselves as springboards to plunge into the lives of real people.

A documentary primarily concerned with migration and the consequent struggle to eke out a space in India's business and glamour capital also has a considerable amount of footage allotted to poetry. The pain of displacement, the longing for the land one left behind and the complex and layered relationship one develops with one's adopted country has inspired a huge number of Indian authors. The filmmaker has chosen and recreated two of the most acutely-sadder-and-wiser ones from among them — Sadaat Hasan Manto (played by Harish Patel) and Ismat Chughtai (Vibha Chibbar) — besides liberally quoting from a whole lot of other poets. Patel has an almost Van-Gogh-like morbid intensity about him, which is scary. Chibbar is both flirty and dead serious. You see her in a cheap flimsy sari in a late-night train, simpering and telling the world that it's really easy to make money in Mumbai and almost as difficult to take it out. Again you find her in a sophisticated diaphanous jacket, worn over a salwar kameez, conjecturing on why the smallest among Mumbai's seven islands was called the Old Woman's Island. Next she is in a regulation black burqa, visiting a mosque, or silken trousers flaring out from under the knees, lying with her head on a railway track.

There is too much death and violence in this film, although no such act is shown directly on the screen. From the rows and rows of militant women clad in red clamouring for their rights, to the middle-aged bank employee who recounts how she was casually asked to "go back to Pakistan" by a client because she was a Muslim, to the Parsi gentleman missing the tree full of chirping birds across his window – there's a sense of irrevocable loss that separates human beings from each other, even from themselves.