

■ NOW SHOWING ■

Indira's crossing

Arthur J Pais on a Diaspora film that reaches across oceans and continents

Indira S Somani has watched second generation Indians across America struggle with identity issues for many years. Like thousands of young desi men and women, Somani — now a journalism professor at Washington and Lee University, Virginia — led 'an American life' but at home, her world was Indian. This was mostly so because of her scientist father Satyanarayan M Somani's abiding love for Indian culture and traditions.

"I did not realize how much I had taken from him," she said, adding that it was mostly after his death that she realizes how conscious he had made her of the heritage she had inherited. "My mother too added to my knowledge of India," she continues. "She named me Indira because of the admiration she had for Indira Gandhi."

Her efforts to stay connected to her father's memory, by visiting India after his death and meeting his extended family in Nanded, eastern Maharashtra, is, in part, the genesis of a moving and intriguing documentary she wrote, produced and directed along, with another Indian American, Leena Jayaswal — *Crossing Lines*.

The documentary had actually been brewing for four years when Somani and Jayaswal, who also teaches film and media arts at American University, met in an academic milieu and became friends.

They first thought of making a film on second generation Indian-American women wearing different hats. "We wanted to show them as daughters, sisters, mothers and citizens of the larger world and how these women negotiated their place in the two cultures," Somani says.

But as the two kept on thinking, they thought it could be better to concentrate on three women and how they balanced the American and Indian worlds. "And that would be Indira, another friend and I," Jayaswal remembers. "Indira had learned how to connect the Indian and American worlds. I was struggling with that idea. And our friend who had migrated from India was just learning to do it and was having a lot of problems."

But at one point Jayaswal, who is also a successful filmmaker and photographer (she has worked with the legendary Mary Ellen Mark), found Somani's story so engaging, she urged her friend to consent to making the film about the journey of the two Somanis.

The journey of Satyanarayan Somani was an especially compelling, poignant story. Indira could never forget her father's accounts of growing up in utter poverty in rural Maharashtra and how his struggle had inspired him to be a community activist.

Her father, who died in November 2002 aged 65, was a professor of pharmacology at Southern Illinois University where he had become an expert on Gulf War chemical exposure and testified before Congress on the Gulf War syndrome.

In his late fifties, Professor Somani, who lived in America for over four decades, had begun studying integrative medicine, and was exploring ways on how Ayurveda could be used with the Western medical regime. Establishing an educational trust in Hingoli in Maharashtra, where he was raised, was something he was most proud of. 'Giving back to the community is very much an Indian tradition,' was his mantra, Indira says. He would add: 'It is a good American tradition, too.'

"I visited Hingoli for this documentary," she said. "The trust still gives out scholarships and it reminds me that my father never forgot where he came from, and how he had struggled against innumerable odds."

Apart from the scholarship program he established in 1981 through the Tulsabai Somani Education Trust in Hingoli, he also established in 1999 a sister relationship between SIU School of Medicine and the University of

Health Sciences in Andhra Pradesh, India.

"I was continually learning things on my trip [to India] that followed his death, and my lifestyle began changing. I had become a vegetarian during my previous visit partly because of my interaction with the family in India which like my father was vegetarian. My visit after his death made me even more conscious of the importance of yoga and meditation and a vegetarian life."

From 1971 to 1974, her father taught at the University of Pittsburgh. During that time he co-founded the first Hindu temple in Pittsburgh. 'Dad went door-to-door to the homes of all the Indians in Pittsburgh raising money to fund the construction of the temple,' she wrote in an essay. 'My parents even took out a second mortgage on their home to help with the financing, and dad supervised the construction of the temple. Dad's vision was simple — he wanted to help build the Indian community.'

Dr Somani was one of the first Indian immigrants to exhort fellow Indians to be politically active. But much more than anything else she remembers and that is distilled in the film was the father's great love for his children.

'Since dad grew up without a father, he played an active role in his daughters' upbringing. Dad came to every piano recital, as many tennis tournaments as possible, and was always there to help with homework,' she wrote in her essay.

'I remember struggling through chemistry at Springfield High School, and dad would stay up with me to study for a test. If I didn't do well I was easily discouraged, but he would lift my confidence. Dad hoped that my sister or I would become a doctor, but neither of us followed that path. I went into journalism. While Dad thought it would be a difficult field to break into because ten years ago there were hardly any Indians in newsrooms, he also had faith in me that taught me to believe in myself.'

Indira, who has worked in television for over a decade as a news producer, mainly at CNBC and whose dissertation studies for her thesis was on the effect of satellite television on the Asian Indian community in the United States, says, "The documentary falls in line with Indian Diaspora issues," adding that it also uses archive footage of the family that serve as snapshots of early Indian immigrant experiences in America. "It encompasses my life, having been born here in 1970 and the efforts of my father and my mother Shipra in trying to teach me everything about India while raising me in the Midwest. What you will see in it is a unique story of the relationship of an Indian father and his American-born Indian daughter."

The documentary stirs you the way a feature film could. As the work progressed, Jayaswal, whose films have been screened at festivals across the country and won awards, realized how challenging it must have been for Indira to let her soul exposed. "I believe it is courageous for anyone, regardless of the subject, to let inhibitions go and open up," she said. "I think she was unprepared for what she was getting into. She is indeed courageous and it comes out in the film."

Somani and Jayaswal do not want anyone to think that their work was inspired in any way by the Mira Nair film *The Namesake* which the two admire.

"Our story comes from real life," Jayaswal said. "It is the story of specific individuals and we have been fighting to make this happen for a long time."

Indira Somani says she has never stopped wondering how someone from such modest means could have such vision and rise to be a self-effacing community leader. "He was 65 years old and was still working at the time of his death," she added. "I feel his work should continue. I feel the young students in Hingoli ought to know more about him and should continue his work. I certainly would love to."

Crossing Lines was shown on over 100 PBS stations recently; the 30-minute documentary has also been shown at more than a dozen film festivals across the country. The film, which was picked up by the National Education Telecommunications Association, is expected to be shown several times in the next three years.

The documentary has also received praise from many journalists and filmmakers. "It was a delight to experience *Crossing Lines* and to share in Indira Somani's journey," wrote Peter Bhatia, the executive editor of the Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper, *The Oregonian*. "The film is very moving and intimate, and to any of us with an Indian family (or a Volkswagen Beetle in our past) it makes a powerful connection. Indira's story is different from mine (my father was from India), but it rings true to the immigrant experience of any American family. And her wonderful, poignant and personal story is one that like so many American stories reaches across oceans and continents in search of our family histories and truths." ■



■ Indira Somani and Leena Jayaswal in India for the shooting of *Crossing Lines*