

# A leisurely summer

New York-based Joseph Mathew-Varghese belongs to the new breed of filmmakers India is throwing up in recent years, the kind that wants an Indian story to tell to the world, going beyond the usual domestic-NRI audience that Hindi filmmakers remain generally contented with. His debut film *Bombay Summer* reflects this urge, as it refused to fall prey to elements of masala-style storytelling, instead adopting a minimalistic approach to tell the story of young people of a new India.

For Joseph, it would have been very easy to use elements of masala cinema, going by the character profile of his protagonists and the Mumbai setting of his story. But he stays away from such allurements, and succeeds in creating a visual world that does not intimidate with style and use of technological chutzpah. Instead, the world inhabited by the three lead characters of the film is real, like the one you and I live in, with surroundings we are familiar with.

It is only the journey of the characters that set them apart from their mundane surroundings. At one level a very personal story of a young, successful woman, her struggling writer-boyfriend and a commercial artist friend of theirs whose ways create problems for all of them, *Bombay Summer* eschews all the usual visual elements any Hindi film would have used of the city — the film is primarily in English and Hindi — and takes the viewer to a Mumbai that lives beyond the glitter.

In fact, it is the leisurely unfolding of the story that works for the film to a great extent, though some viewers might find it a little slacken-paced for this very reason. For those who like their stories told like the unfolding of a novel read sitting in the winter afternoon sun, Joseph's film would, however, be the perfect evening engagement.

Tannishtha Chatterjee, who wowed global audiences with her powerful performance in Sarah Gavron's *Brick Lane*, lights up the film with her performance as Geeta, a young graphic designer who loves to live her life.

US-based actor Samrat Chakraborti matches steps with her as Jaidev, Geeta's wannabe writer boyfriend from a rich family who is uncertain about the future, while FTII-graduate Jatin Goswami comes up with a convincing performance as Madan, the struggling commercial artist with whom the two strike up a friendship but later becomes the cause of trouble for them. Another FTII-graduate, Gaurav Dwivedi, also

performs creditably.

Joseph creates an almost languid scenario of Mumbai, a city that has often been depicted as a megapolis always in a frenzied race with itself. It is not surprising that wherever the film has been screened till now, it has been able to connect with the audiences through its story of troubled relationships in the backdrop of changing mores in the conflict zone of traditionalism and modernisation.

Joseph, who has earlier made several documentary films, including *Crossing Arizona* that premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, says the idea for the film had been in his mind for several years. "Having grown up in India, I always knew that I would eventually go back there to make films. Because of my experiences there, I feel I have a unique opportunity to tap into stories and a culture that an American filmmaker does not have access to. I am both an insider as well as an outsider. And I feel this gives me a different perspective and sensibility," he says.

He denies that the film's title is targeted to lure Western audiences more than Indians, and explains, "On the contrary, I feel it is a very Indian film and it is in India where the film needs to find its audience. Until now it has been playing in film festivals abroad. The idea was to create some awareness and buzz about the film so that distributors in India would be more open to releasing it. You already know about the challenges of distributing a non-mainstream film in India."

The director says there is a part of him in each character in the film. "I wanted to create well-rounded characters who possess both flaws and strengths." While he took around 18 months to complete writing the idea that was in his mind for a long time, Joseph could actually go forward with it only after Middle-East-based Johnny Kuruvilla came on board with required financial help.

"The characters in *Bombay Summer* are also searching for their identity in a society that is rapidly changing. I am still hopeful about finding distribution in India because the film is about youth culture in contemporary urban India. Also, it has got a fabulous soundtrack by French musician Mathias Duplessy," says Joseph.

Joseph deliberately gave the film a "minimalist and unhurried" look. "The idea was not to rely on the typical narrative arc but to invite the audience to go on this journey along with the characters," he explains. A pleasant journey, no doubt.

**UTPAL BORPUJARI**



**BEYOND THE GLITTER** Tannishtha Chatterjee in 'Bombay Summer'.