

WOMEN MAKE MOVIES, INC.  
462 BROADWAY, 5TH FLOOR  
NEW YORK, NY 10013  
TEL 212/925.0606  
FAX 212/925.2052  
EMAIL INFO@WMM.COM  
HTTP://WWW.WMM.COM

---



# Don't Fence Me In

*A film by Nandini Sikand*  
1998, 55 minutes, Color  
Video

Against the broader backdrop of modern India's political and social history, this lyrical documentary tells the story of the life of Krishna Sikand, the filmmaker's mother, from childhood to maturity. A rich mosaic of memory and impressions, *Don't Fence Me In* captures the fragmented way in which we journey back through time. Evoking Krishna's earliest years in pre-independence Bombay as the daughter of a well-to-do Bengali family, the film also traces her post-colonial experiences—from marriage to a Punjabi army officer in the face of fierce family opposition, through the raising of two daughters and successful careers as an academic, small business entrepreneur, media consultant, journalist, and poet. Black-and-white photos of Krishna as a child and young woman are juxtaposed with clips from home movies shot by the filmmaker's father nearly thirty years ago, and recent location footage. Krishna's personal narrative is highlighted by her wonderful letters to her daughter and the poems that serve as milestones in her life.

- *PhilaFilm/ Philadelphia International Festival, Best Super8mm*
- *Chingari Film Festival, University of Wisconsin*

*"The film captures the triumphs, tragedies and the choices of an individual set against a larger social and political landscape."*  
— Lavina Melwani, *India Today International*



*"Don't Fence Me In is a rich and beautiful film and an exquisite and loving tribute of a daughter to her mother."*

— Marion Lear Swaybill, TV Producer

*"A cinematic tapestry that is part lyrical, part impressionistic, wholly cinematic"*  
— Riyad Wadia

# **DON'T FENCE ME IN**

## ***Background***

*...our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India's of the mind.*

*Salman Rushdie*

*Don't Fence Me In* is a coming-of-age story of a young woman in post-colonial India. Through the use of personal narrative, this 'documentary' seeks to recreate memory. It is an attempt to replicate the fragmented way in which we remember, and weaves together old home movies, poetry, photographs, letters and voice-over narration. *Don't Fence Me In* is the retelling of a personal history.

Krishna Sikund was born in the fall of 1938 and grew up in a country struggling for independence from the British. It was a nation, which was just beginning to develop a national identity. *Don't Fence Me In* is a story told against the backdrop of a political and social context, it is the story of Krishna Sikund's life, her choices and her personal battles, a personal narrative of a life that is poignant and humorous, ironic and passionate.

This film combines many different elements. It takes on the form of a lyrical documentary. Stylistically too, the film mimics how we remember - in layers. It is a pastiche of poetry, letters and visuals, which convey this notion of a fragmented memory. It is these shards of memory, which over time acquire the status of symbols. The film contains Super 8 mm home movies shot almost 30 years ago and juxtaposed with old black and white photographs of Krishna Sikund as a young girl and as a young woman. Visual elements of letters and home movies are woven into the film to create a rich mosaic of memory and impressions. As India celebrates over fifty years of Independence from British rule, this film will chronicle a personal story placed within that context. It is a retelling of a 'personal history' versus a monolithic 'History'.

The film also employs the use of poetry, written by Krishna Sikund, poems that serve as milestones for her life. For example, the following poem was written soon after Krishna's daughters left for the United States.

*We came to this country armed to the teeth.*

*With all our attitudes and marketable goods which said, 'Made in India'.*

*Aggressively, progressively, regressively, it was a total oversell.*

*Maps, books, stamps, photographs, even exotic spices like snuff to be added when inhaled the cool air with each breath, to remind us of home, so far away, only the jet can traverse the distance in half a day.*

*And yet the mind's thief diamond spattered the windowpanes with rain.  
Rain that dripped, drizzled, drooled from the heavens and turned one maple leaf to russet red,  
truant red and the much-advertised new-England red, it reminded us of the flaming gulmohars  
in a hot and dusty country under a merciless sky.*

*Home is where the heart is.*

*Home is where night falls.*

*Home is where we three are.*

*Where the telephone wire binds us to the everlasting darkness of the womb,*

*Where we must burgeon, ripen and decay.*

There is a dire need to counter the scarcity of images of Indians in American film and television and correct the often-distorted portrayals of them in mainstream media. This can be done by including stories of our history and our heritage. This film helps to advance the understanding of the American minority experience, it is an attempt to tell stories of an underserved audience, stories which include and celebrate the experiences of a multicultural society. One way of doing so, is to begin at the personal and move towards the universal; therein lies understanding.

It is through this film and these experiences of our parents that we can finally mirror the worlds that we know only from stories, impressions and memories. We rarely see stories of our parents, parents who come from another world. As minorities, we are constantly negotiating two terrains and it is in knowing our past, we are able to better understand the future.

*Don't Fence Me In* was awarded a grant from the Jerome Foundation. Air India is a corporate sponsor for this project and has provided all international air travel. The Government of India Tourist Office in New York, the Government of India Tourist Office, New Delhi and Rajasthan Tourism Department have provided domestic travel and generous hospitality for the making of this film. The Standby Program provided funding towards post-production.

It was screened at the Tribeca Film Center in New York City in December 1998 and Chingari Film Festival at University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1999. It won the Best Super 8mm film award at Philafilm, The Philadelphia International Film Festival in 1999.

# ***DON'T FENCE ME IN***

## ***Crew's Bio***

### **Nandini Sikand, Producer & Director**

Nandini Sikand is a freelance television producer and filmmaker based in New York City. Nandini's previous film, *The Bhangra Wrap* (1995) has been selected to play at various film festivals around the United States. It was awarded a Certificate of Merit at the *Chicago Asian American Film Festival* (1995). *The Bhangra Wrap* is currently distributed by NAATA. *The Bhangra Wrap* is on the *Selected Films & Videos List*, which is put out by the Young Adult Library Services Association.

Her most recent film, *Don't Fence Me In* was awarded a grant from the *Jerome Foundation*. *Air India* is a corporate sponsor for this project and has provided all international air travel. The *Government of India Tourist Office* in New York, the *Government of India Tourist Office*, New Delhi and *Rajasthan Tourism Department* has provided domestic travel and generous hospitality for the making of this film. *The Standby Program* provided funding towards post-production. It was screened at the *Tribeca Film Center* in New York City in December 1998 and *Chingari Film Festival* at *University of Wisconsin, Madison* in 1999. It won the Best Super 8mm film award at *Philafilm, The Philadelphia International Film Festival* in 1999.

Nandini has worked at *MTV Networks* and on projects for *Channel Four, UK, The Story Channel, Ovation: The Arts Network* and *HBO*. She has also taught courses in Asian Cinema at Hunter College, CUNY. Nandini is currently working on *Amazonia*, a filmic poem which explores the myth of Amazonian women and its relation to breast cancer. She is also producing a documentary on Mahashweta Devi, the writer and activist.

### **Krishna Sikund, Coordinating Producer & Writer**

Krishna Sikund has had many successful careers. She has worked as a lecturer at *Miranda House, Delhi University* for over a decade and retired as Head of the English Department. She began a career as an entrepreneur exporting Indian handicrafts to several countries. Krishna now works as a media consultant organizing press conferences and coordinating public relations. She also works as a freelance journalist and has been published in the *Economic Times, The Times of India, Indian Perspective, The Indian-American, Discover India* and the *IIC Quarterly Magazine*.

### **Michelle Lippitt, Consulting Producer & Sound Technician**

Michelle Lippitt, a native of Oklahoma has been involved in television production since 1991. In New York City she has worked for ABC, NBC and PBS as well as various cable networks including *The Story Channel, Odyssey, The Food Network* and *Court TV*. Her positions have ranged from Director of Operations to Coordinating Producer. Michelle also pursues a career as an experimental filmmaker and has created several short films, which have been screened at numerous venues in New York City. She is a recipient of a grant from the *Experimental Television Center*. Her most recent film, *A Box for Keeping* was awarded third prize at the prestigious Locarno VideoArt/International Video and Electronic Art Festival in 1998.

# Nandini Sikand, television producer and filmmaker

By Kala Dwarakanath

**L**ooking to mainstream media, New York-based freelance television producer and filmmaker Nandini Sikand says she found few images that were close to her roots.

"The images we see around us as minorities that we can relate to, images of regular people, are very limited; most of the time, we see distorted portrayals of Indians in the media," she told *India in New York*. She became convinced that one way to redress the scarcity was to bring out stories of one's history and heritage.

So she picked up her camera and took off to India last year to document the life of her mother, Krishna Sikand, a typical, pre-independence, upper-class Indian girl blossoming into an individual. "It was her personal experience, something that most mothers and daughters could relate to," Sikand (who spells her last name differently) says of the resulting movie. "It's an honest film, from my heart; my mother has been a very positive influence in my life and the movie is meant to keep her legacy (alive)."

The film, titled "Don't Fence Me In," made with funding from several sources, including the Jerome Foundation and Air-India, was recently screened at the Tribeca Film Center in downtown Manhattan.

The story of Krishna Sikand may not be unusual or make for a compelling social documentary, but the film aims at being a lyrical journey through personal memories, set loosely against scenes that Sikand and consulting producer Michelle Lippitt shot during their three weeks of travel in India.

Sikand was named Krishna Mazumdar at her birth in 1938 into an influential and well-to-do Bengali family made up of upper class civil servants and business executives. With montages, clips and commentary, Sikand evokes her mother's childhood in pre-independence, cosmopolitan Bombay; her annual train journeys to Calcutta and her experience in being uprooted and transplanted to Calcutta by her father, who wants her to be firmly rooted in Bengali culture. So when she meets Jagdip Sikand, a Punjabi army officer, during a vacation to Delhi and falls in love with him, she faces opposition from her family. Yet with support from a grand-uncle, she marries him, settles in Delhi, and raises two daughters, Chandana and Nandini. Sikand has had many successful careers, such as a lecturer at Miranda House College in Delhi and retired head of the English department there. She has been an entrepreneur,



Nandini Sikand (Photo: Courtesy Michelle Lippitt)

neur, too, exporting Indian handicrafts abroad. She is now a media consultant and freelance journalist, with pieces in several publications, including *The Economic Times* and *The Times of India*.

Sikand, 30, came to the United States in 1989 to earn a master's degree in communications from Northern Illinois University. After her graduation two years later, she moved to New York to be close to her sister, who is studying urban planning. Before becoming a

*Working as a television producer and filmmaker, Sikand said, she battles a larger stereotype of Indians as being skilled only in technical fields.*

freelancer and starting her company, Maltese Cross Productions, she worked for MTV Networks and on projects for Britain's Channel 4, The Story Channel, Ovation, Arts Networks and HBO, and taught courses in Asian cinema at Hunter College, New York. She serves on the board of Women Make Movies, a distributor of

films by and about women. She told *India in New York* that her interest in the field of communications began when she was an undergraduate philosophy student at St. Stephen's College in Delhi; she enjoyed writing articles and poems for various publications. When she came to the U.S., she said, her interest turned to producing documentaries, rather than broadcast or print journalism.

"Behind the camera, I'd have more control over the content," she explained. "In documentaries, you have a chance to explore stories in a more in-depth way, whereas news is fast-paced and the assignments leave you feeling as if there is no reflection."

"Human beings are much more interesting than anything you can ever invent."

Her previous film, "Bhangra Wrap," made in 1995, was about young people of South Asian origin growing up in North America and their use of music to create a niche. The film was selected to be shown at various festivals around the U.S., and won a Certificate of Award at the Chicago Asian-American Festival in 1995. It is currently distributed by the National Asian-American Telecommunications Association (NAATA), the largest distributor of Asian-American film and videos in the world, Sikand said.

It has been licensed for a four-year period on Free Speech Television (FSTV) and, she says, is on the selected film and video list put out by the Young Adult Library Services Association.

She credits her family, including her husband whom she married two and a half years ago, Deep Parikh, a management consultant with the Ernst & Young accountancy, with being supportive of her career choice and the demands it places on her. "Even though he is in a corporate environment, he is a creative person," she said of him.

Her father, too, she said, has had similar interests. For a few years in the early 1970s, he was in London as a military attaché and took the opportunity to make use of his avid interest in photography. Many of his pictures, especially those of her family, now restored, found their way into her film, "Don't Fence Me In." Her father died a few years ago.

Sikand hopes that her films will help South Asian children gain a better understanding of the culture and environment in which their parents grew up back home. "Their conception of India is limited to stories," she said. "I'm trying to add some positive images in their minds and push the boundaries (of their understanding of India)."

Working as a TV producer and filmmaker, Sikand said, she battles a larger stereotype of Indians as being skilled only in technical fields.

As for barriers, she said: "They exist if you want to see them. Being in this field is frustrating enough, a lot of hard work. It may seem glamorous, but it doesn't pay very well."

And yet she would not trade it, she says, because "the freedom and excitement are very fulfilling."

W  
O  
M  
E  
N



# India Abroad

International Weekly Newspaper • 80 Cents • Regd. as Newspaper at P.O.  
Atlanta • Chicago • Dallas • Los Angeles • New York • Toronto  
Vol. XXIX No. 12 • New York Edition • Friday, December 18, 1998

## Cinema

### Ode to a mother: A lyrical documentary is screened

By JYOTIRMOY DATTA

NEW YORK — "Don't Fence Me In," a 55-minute documentary by a daughter about her poet mother's development from childhood to maturity, was screened at Tribeca Film Center in New York on Dec. 10.

New York-based producer and director, Nandini Sikand, weaves together scenes shot on location early this year in India with Super 8 home movies made 30 years ago, old black and white photographs and splendidly-preserved letters to evoke the story of the life of her mother Krishna Sikand, her choices and personal battles.

Krishna Mazumdar was born in 1938, to a family of upper-class civil servants and business executives from Bengal, with ties to all parts of the former British Indian empire from Bombay to Burma, as these were known then.

With montages, clips and commentary by her mother, the filmmaker evokes Krishna's childhood in pre-independence cosmopolitan Bombay, her annual overland train journeys to Calcutta by what was then the Bengal Nagpur Railway, and then her uprooting and transplanting in Calcutta by her father who wants her to be snugly rooted in her native in Bengali culture.

This high hope of preserving cultural purity is, however, dashed by her falling in love while on a vacation in Delhi with a man from the Punjab. With support from a granduncle, and in the teeth of opposition from her parents, Krishna marries Jaggi Sikand, and embarks on a life's journey that leaves many taboos by the wayside.

Though described as a "documentary," it is not so much a movie about social reality as a lyrical journey through personal memories, only loosely tied to the scenes shot by Sikand and her consulting producer Michelle Lippitt on their three-week journey through India in spring, 1998.

Nandini and Michelle did the photography and sound recording themselves, achieving some interesting color effects. They were able to record



Photo above, filmmaker Nandini Sikand.

(Photo: Michelle Lippitt)

Photo left, a still from the 55-minute documentary film, "Don't Fence Me In," that was screened at Tribeca Film Center in New York last week.

authentic Baul music in Bengal and Sufi music at Fatehpur Sikri. The effect of quotations from the poetry of Krishna Sikand is heightened by the music, including bhatialis by Sachin Dev Barman.

Funding for the film was provided by the

Jerome Foundation, Air-India, the Government of India Tourist Office, the Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation and the Standby Program. Sikand told *India Abroad* that "Don't Fence Me In" cost less than \$50,000 to make.

# Double Impact

With her docu drama *Don't Fence Me In*, Nandini Sikand, along with her mother Krishna, wants to counter the distorted portrayal of Indians in the American media

By Shaheen Parkar

SEVERAL young Indians are making a noticeable impact on cinema and television in the US. Nandini Sikand is one of them. She is a television producer and filmmaker based in New York.

Her maiden documentary film *The Bhangra Wrap* which she produced, directed and edited was screened at the San Francisco Asian American Film Festival in 1995 and was awarded an honourable mention at the Chicago Asian American Film Festival the same year. "Filming it was an experience in itself. I tried to chronicle how the *bhangra* dance and music is intricately woven around the lives of the Punjabis in the US. I also had Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo feature in it."

Sikand was in Mumbai last week shooting for her second docu film *Don't Fence Me In* which is a coming-of-age story of a young woman in post-colonial India. The film chronicles a personal story placed within the political and social context.

"Firstly," she points out, "it made sense dealing with such a theme in the 50<sup>th</sup> year of India's freedom from British rule. And,

secondly, there is a dire need to counter the scarcity of images of Indians in American film and television and correct the often-distorted portrayals of them. This can be done by including stories of our history and our heritage," feels Sikand.

In *Don't Fence Me In*, she has used the experiences of her Delhi-based mother Krishna Sikand as the main plot of the story. "It is the story of her life, her choices and her personal battle. It is poignant, humorous and passionate."

The film also employs the use of poetry, written by her mother. It will weave together memories, photographs, letters and interviews to create her story. It will combine different visual and cinematic elements to create a coherent body of work. The film will also look at the parallels between the life of Krishna in New Delhi and her daughters who live in the United States.

Says Sikand, "The film combines many different elements. It takes on the form of a lyrical commentary. Stylistically, the film mimics how we remember - in layers. It will contain Super 8 mm home movies shot almost 30 years ago and juxtaposed with old black and white

photos."

In Mumbai, Sikand shot mainly at the Oval, Kemp's Corner, The Gateway of India, Breach Candy where her mother spent her formative years besides shooting in New Delhi, Calcutta, Benares and Jaipur. "As for the title *Don't Fence Me In*" reveals Sikand, "it is from a song sung by Ella Fitzgerald and written by Cole Porter which happened to be the number to which my mother danced for the first time with my father."

After graduating in philosophy from St Stephen's College, New Delhi, Sikand moved to Northern Illinois University to do a masters in communication studies. "My sister was there so I stayed on," says Sikand who began producing news programmes for International Television Inc. She has also worked with the MTV Networks as a senior research coordinator and as a producer for The Story Channel in New York.

Though Sikand is slowly, but surely, making a mark in the field of cinema, she feels this is, after all, only the beginning. Feature films are next on the agenda.

"May be in the future, near future," she quips.



Krishna (left) and Nandini Sikand at a voiceover session for *Don't Fence Me In*

MIDAY 15/APRIL/1998.



# Film on Indian girl is screened at Tribeca Center

By Jyotirmoy Datta

The screening of "Don't Fence Me In," a 55-minute film about a typical, pre-independence, upper-class Indian girl blossoming into an individual, at the Tribeca Film Center in downtown Manhattan on Dec. 10, was followed by a reception at the Salaam Bombay restaurant hosted by the film's director and producer, Nandini Sikand, and her business management consultant husband, Deep Parekh.

Much of the conversation at the reception was about film courses at universities and which foundations to approach for funds for artistic scripts. Aspiring moviemakers referred to the advantage they reap from the Standby Program, a federally funded program that offers postproduction assistance to struggling and experimental New York filmmakers.

Among the guests were filmmakers Rebecca Williams (independent) and Brent Owens (HBO), freelance TV producer Marion Swaybill (formerly

year in India with Super 8 home movies made 30 years ago, old black and white photographs and splendidly preserved letters to evoke the story of mother Krishna, her choices and personal battles.

Krishna Mazumdar was born in 1938, to a family of upper-class civil servants and business executives from Bengal, with ties to all parts of the former British Indian empire from Bombay to Burma, as these were known as then. With montages, clips and commentary by her mother, the filmmaker evokes Krishna's childhood in pre-independence cosmopolitan Bombay, her annual overland train journeys to Calcutta by what was then the Bengal Nagpur Railway, and then her uprooting and transplanting in Calcutta by her father who wants her to be snugly rooted in her native in Bengali culture. This high hope of preserving cultural purity is, however, dashed by her falling in love while on a vacation in Delhi with a man from the Punjab. With support from a grand uncle, and in the teeth of opposition from her parents, Krishna marries Jagdeep Sikand, and embarks on a life's journey that leaves many taboos by the wayside. It is not so much a realistic social documentary as a lyrical journey



Photo left, filmmaker Nandini Sikand, left, with management consultant husband Deep Parekh at the party at the Salaam Bombay restaurant to celebrate the screening of Sikand's 55-minute film "Don't Fence Me In" at the Tribeca Film Center in New York on Dec. 10. (Photo: Jyotirmoy Datta) Photo right, the audience at the screening. (Photo: Deep Parekh)

of PBS), photographer Claudia Mann, clothes designer Rohina Lulla, dancer Andrea Veranes, art collector Nell Yperifanos, and Randi Taylor of Women Make Movies. The focus of attention, however, was Krishna Sikand, the filmmaker's poet mother whose life is the subject of the film.

The screening was attended by more than a hundred invitees at the small but cosy, and busy auditorium which is booked for screening round the clock. The Tribeca Film Center is part of a complex which includes a restaurant, the Tribeca Grill, and a bakery, owned by a group headed by actor-director Robert DeNiro, whose recent hits include "Ronin." Although described as a documentary, "Don't Fence Me In" is a lyrical tribute by the filmmaker to her poet mother. The New York-based producer and director weaves together scenes shot on location early this



Krishna Sikand in a still from "Don't Fence Me In."

through personal memories, only loosely tied to the scenes shot by Nandini and her consulting producer Michelle Lippitt on their three-week journey through India in spring, 1998.

Nandini and Michelle did the photography and sound recording themselves, achieving some interesting color effects. They were able to record authentic Baul music in Bengal and Sufi music at Fatehpur Sikri. The effect of quotations from the poetry of Krishna Sikand is heightened by the music, including *bhatialis* by Sachin Dev Burman.

Funding for the movie was provided by the Jerome Foundation, Air-India, the Government of India Tourist Office, the Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation and the Standby Program. Nandini told *India in New York* that "Don't Fence Me In" cost less than \$50,000 to make.

Volume II No. 25

New York, N.Y.

December 18, 1998

India in New York  
"For and about people from the subcontinent"



SPOTLIGHT

## BEING FREE

It's tough being a freelancer, especially so if you are an Indian in fast-laned New York city. But television producer and filmmaker Nandini Sikund doesn't believe in poly-ethnic cultural pressures. Or so it seems. Her current project, a film which she's producing and directing, is a half-hour, coming-of-age story of a young woman in post-colonial India. *Don't Fence Me In* is about many things: Nandini herself, living



Nandini (top right) and a publicity still from the film: time to take stock



and working in New York; her mother—a writer and poetess—who has seen the British leaving India and the country coping with post-colonial realities. It's also about Indians in the US and their notion of culture in an aggressive multiracial society. The film was awarded a grant by the Jerome Foundation.



# INDIA JANUARY 18, 1999 TODAY INTERNATIONAL

NORTH AMERICAN SPECIAL ♦ CINEMA

## To Mother, with Love

Memorabilia makes for memorable cinema



PERSONAL TO UNIVERSAL:  
Sikand (above) and a still  
from *Don't Fence Me In*



**O**LD, SEPIA-COLOURED FAMILY photographs, personal letters and home movies are often stowed away in attics. But filmmaker Nandini Sikand has brushed the dust off hers and transformed them into a film, *Don't Fence Me In*. The 55-minute film is a lyrical tribute to her mother, Krishna Sikand. "It is the experiences of our parents that mirror the worlds that we know only from stories, impressions and memories," says the 30-year-old New York-based filmmaker.

A comfortable upper middle-class life doesn't always make for high drama, but Sikand, by juxtaposing commentary, clips and photographs from the past along with scenes from the present, weaves a story that engages viewers.

The film captures the tri-

umphs, tragedies and the choices of an individual set against a larger social and political landscape. It had a special screening last month in New York at the Tribeca Film Center. Working on a grant received from the Jerome Foundation, Sikand shot *Don't Fence Me In* in several Indian cities at a cost of about \$50,000. Sikand, who produced, directed and edited the film, also tried her hand at photography and sound co-ordination along with Michelle Lippitt, who is also the consulting producer. Her mother, who retired as head of the English department in Miranda House college, Delhi, doubled up as co-ordinating producer and writer.

As part of a minority, Sikand has always been intrigued by cross-cultural influences. Her maiden venture, *Bhangra Wrap*, explored the issue through the medium of music. The film won an honourable mention at the Chicago Film Festival. In her new movie Sikand wants the audience to see the familiar in the unfamiliar and to realise that people, despite their differences, are really the same. She says: "To begin at the personal and move towards the universal: therein lies understanding." —LAVINA MELWANI

# The Indian Express

Wednesday, December 23, 1998

## Set Me Free

Riyad Wadia

The new Tom Hanks/Meg Ryan movie *You Got Mail* opened across the USA, this weekend. A soppy sentimental rehash of several older pictures, repackaged with new technology, this film will no doubt reap in megabucks for the studios, as well as for America Online, the internet service provider, whose messaging service announcement makes the movie's title contemporaneous.

Last week, another film dealing with mail premiered in New York. This was India born-US based Nandini Sikand's hour-long lyrical documentary *Don't Fence Me In*. And while this film will probably not be playing in a Cineplex near you, it has a far more interesting story. In January 1996, Nandini fell in love with Mumbaikar Deep Parikh, and six months later, they decided to get married. Her mother, Krishna Sikand, couldn't make it to the US for the wedding but made her presence felt through a series of letters. These letters from a mother to a daughter provided Nandini the germ of an idea. Six months later, when she visited India for her formal wedding, she decided to use the letters and her wedding ceremony as the touchstone to tell the story of her mother's life.

Krishna is a poet, writer, and teacher of English. A mistress of the beauty of language, she agreed to her daughter's request to participate in this film and over the next few months holed herself up in Calcutta's Bengal Club and wrote a series of stream of consciousness chapters detailing her thoughts, experiences, and inherited culture. This, Nandini edited into a linear thread and interwove it with old

family photographs, damaged Super-8 footage and specially-shot location sequences to create a cinematic tapestry that is part lyrical, part impressionistic, wholly cinematic.

The film is about an ordinary life yet charmed in the ways all such lives are. "When I first came to study and then make films in America, I was made aware of how South Asian experiences are not fully represented in American cinema," says Nandini. "Through efforts like this documentary I am keen to advance the understanding of the American minority experience – through stories that celebrate the experiences of a multicultural society. One way of doing so was to tell a personal story and move it towards the universal."

Nandini cut her teeth as a film-maker with a film on Fatehpur Sikri, while still a student. She then went on to work in television as a researcher and production consultant. In 1994, she made *Bhangra Wrap* which attempted to examine how diasporic South Asians felt a need to appropriate their musical heritage to find a voice of their own. Sikand's talents are already being appreciated by the film fraternity and she is excited about new projects in the wings.

That *Fire* is due back in Indian cinema halls is news that will be greeted with jubilation by many New Yorker-Mumbaikars. Over dinners, drinks and coffees, each and every expat in this city has been telling me about how worried they are about what's going on back "home". News of extortion rackets, murders, societysuicides, armed-guard weddings, homophobia and horror of horrors – Shiv Sainiks in VIP Frenchies was enough to believe that Nostradamus' prediction of the end being nigh was sadly coming true.

Yesterday, I went on a nostalgic, conducted tour of Manhattan nightlife titled 'The Speakeasy Era'. It was a fascinating tour for it brought home to me the similarities between what New York society went through in the 1920s and '30s and what Mumbai is going through in the 1990s and sadly seems fated to suffer for another decade or so. It was *deja vu*-esque to visit the existing old nightclubs where the tour guide showed us the doors with little peep holes where bouncers would vet the customers and let in only the connected, the trusted, and the rich. He then



took us to the back alleys and described the way cops would be paid off on one side and bootleg booze would be transferred in from the other.

It was all quite reminiscent of my own voyeuristic past, 10 years in Mumbai – the nights at Tiger Tims, Black Orchid, Ghetto, Voodoo Bar, Copa Cabana and Fashion Bistro. Nights when you may decide to leave at two am but have to wait another 30 minutes inside the bar because the police van was outside the bar. Nights when you had to wait an extra 10 minutes for your vodka because a special order of drinks was being prepared for the coppers outside. Nights when the 18-year-old son of a well-known right wing politician was snorting cocaine worth five times his father's official monthly salary through a rolled up new "Gandhi" note. Nights when you would be stupid to watch an old Edward G Robinson film on TNT when you could vicariously live it at your neighbourhood bar. Nights you would be scared to acknowledge in daylight hours. Nights that become your days. Nights that are your days because the days are no longer your own.

Now for a Cole Porter song: *Gimme hope . . . lotsa hope / Don't fence me in.*

*Riyad Wadia, avant garde film-maker, is currently at home in New York.*

Copyright © 1998 Indian Express Newspapers (Bombay) Ltd.

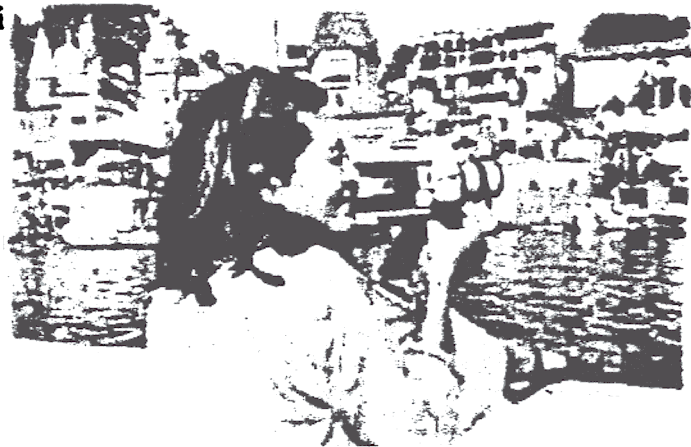
# Reel Life

By Lavina Melwani

Indian performers crack the big time.



**Nandini Sikand on location in Varanasi in *Don't Fence With Me*.**



Nandini Sikand's earlier film *Bhangra Wrap* won an honorable mention at the Chicago Film Festival and her new short film *Don't Fence Me In*, based on her mother's life, has also been shown at various festivals. Sikand, who directed, produced and edited the film, received a grant from the Jerome Foundation for this film.