

A mirror on the reality of women's lives

Six documentary films that support the cause of women



A scene from *Motherhood: Women's Perspective*

KAVITA CHARANI

COMING up on September 25 and September 26 are six powerful documentary films by and about women. Many women activists believe that in our patriarchal society, women have a marginal role when it comes to decision making whether in society, family or even personal affairs. The forthcoming six women-centric films, being screened at the BIAM Foundation Auditorium, therefore, fill a yawning abyss. The films have been produced by the AV Centre of the NGO Steps Towards Development.

What's unique about this festival is that the films are a sensitive mirror on women's lives such as their participation in sports, motherhood and contribution to society. All the

directors and assistant directors are women, while in two films the videographer is a woman. Five films, barring one have been edited by women. In the words of Sameera Haque and Ommul Khaer Fatema, joint scriptwriters and directors of *From Strength to Strength*, "We want to get the women's perspective on their own lives and those of other women in Bangladesh."

The screening of the films follows on the footsteps of a two month workshop organised by the AV Centre of Steps Towards Development in March and April last year. Manzare Hossain Murad, advisor of the AV Centre, coordinator of the workshop and script and directorial advisor of the films, amplifies on the genesis of the films. To quote him, "One objective of the workshop was to train women filmmakers and

increase their participation in AV, particularly in the fields of direction, camera work and editing. The second aim was to capture a



Scenes from *Begum* and *Depannita: A Lady with Versatile Talents*

woman's unique perspective on reality."

To get a clearer idea of the forthcoming programme, let's look at *From Strength to Strength*. Sameera and Ommul have taken on an unusual subject--women's participation in sports. Among the issues they have brought in is the opposition to the first women's football tournament in Dhaka (in the first week of October last year). Though the film was independent of the opposition, it gave a new element to the work--the duo then sought to get people's perspective on the issue. Questions were also raised about the safety of sports-women in the context of such protests.

Sameera raises a pertinent question: "In a free country where women have played sports for over 50 years, how can anybody just out of the blue say that they shouldn't engage in sports? All the former sportswomen, organisers and parents that we interviewed were very keen that women should continue to play and very opinionated about why they should do so. That influenced our film to a great degree."

The co-directors believe that *From Strength to Strength* is the first visual document and also probably the first document on women's sports.

Among the five sportswomen interviewed in the film is former table tennis player Zobera Rahman Lina. She has bagged a record number of 16 national titles and features in the Guinness Book of World Records for this distinction.

Let's look at another hard-hitting film, titled *Motherhood Women's Perspective*. The research, script and direction are in the able hands of Nasrin Siraj Annie. The focus is on women's views on motherhood. Women in this film are treated as independent entities rather than just child bearers.

Other films to be screened are *Begum* (which chronicles the story of Begum magazine, the first women's magazine in Bangladesh), *Depannita: A Lady with Versatile Talents* (about the first tribal entrepreneur Manjulika Chakma), *In Quest of Life* (the story of a solitary woman media consultant with a passion for photography and a love for nature) and *The Beauty Worker* (which delineates the struggles of beauty parlour workers).

Those who choose to see these sensitive films will get a long overdue reminder of women's contribution to the nation. To the AV Centre of Steps Towards Development goes the credit for giving a voice to women and their concerns.

Home is where the heart is

Tête-à-tête with Milia Islam Sabed

CULTURAL CORRESPONDENT

The vivacious Singapore-based singer Milia Islam Sabed is set to go back after a stay in Dhaka. However her presence will linger on. The spotlight will be on her in various TV programmes: Ferdausi Rahman's *Bhalo basho more gaan* on ntv

plans to re-launch the album *Ekta kichu purchey*. She has sung for many other famous composers such as Selim Ashraf, Bashir Ahmed, Abdul Latif, Abu Zafar and Jalal Ahmed. Milia believes that Singapore as a "multi-racial and multi-cultural country" has much to offer to

of her school give performances attended by dignitaries from various countries.

Milia certainly has come a long way since her early days when she sang a Sinhalese song and represented Sri Lanka in the first SAARC Summit in Dhaka Stadium



Milia (L) performing in a musical programme *Bhalobasho more gaan*

(September 24), ATN's picturisation of four songs by Milia, performances in *Gaaner Bhela* and *Prothom Ontora* on BTV, besides a few songs for Channel 1. And that's not all. She is also busy with her new albums (with Alauddin Ali as music director) in addition to recording two songs composed by Bappa Majumdar by the end of this month.

Explaining her forte, Milia says, "I sing modern Bangla songs. I also love to sing old Hindi songs such as

Tum na jane kis jahan mein kho gaye and *O bachpan ke din bhula na dena*. I like to sing Asha Bhosle, Lata Mangeshkar. Some of my hit songs are *Angulo Katia Kolo banaia*, composed by Alauddin Ali, *Bandhu keno ailo na*, *Ekta kichu purchey* (the album was composed by Tansen Khan, with lyrics by Nuruzzaman Sheikh) and *Mone mone haraley*, among others." In memory of the late Khan and Sheikh, Milia has

artists like herself. Among those Bangladeshi artists who have stopped off at Singapore, she points out, are big names such as Shahabuddin, Shakila Zafar, Kanak Chandra, Samina Chowdhury, Abeda Sultana, Baby Nazneen, Sadya A Mallick and Fatema Tuz Zohra. Recently, Indian singers Jagjit Singh and Asha Bhosle also gave performances, while AR Rahman is slated to come on September 24.

Milia is in the thick of Singapore's cultural life as coordinator of a Bangla language school called Bangladesh Language and Cultural Foundation (BLCF). Special Bangladesh days such as December 15, March 26 and February 21 are observed with song, drama and dance performances along with art competitions.

The Bangladesh embassy in Singapore is also very active culturally. On March 26, the children

(in the mid-1990s) and BTV. A Voice Major from the California State University (from where she graduated in 1981), she is a first soprano. Her Italian aria on BTV's *Biswa Sangeet* enthralled the viewers some years ago.

Milia has her hands full. She plans to release four more albums within the next few months: Alauddin Ali's composition, mixed modern songs by various composers, Nazrul Geeti and *Purano diner gaan*.

A popular vocalist in the Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and local Singaporean community, she will continue to sing old Hindi melodies. She is encouraged by the warm reception accorded to her performance in *Golden melodies of yesteryears* in Singapore.

Milia takes with her fond memories of her month-long visit to Bangladesh, both on the personal and professional front.

Vignettes of a reluctant politician

A film on Sonia Gandhi

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

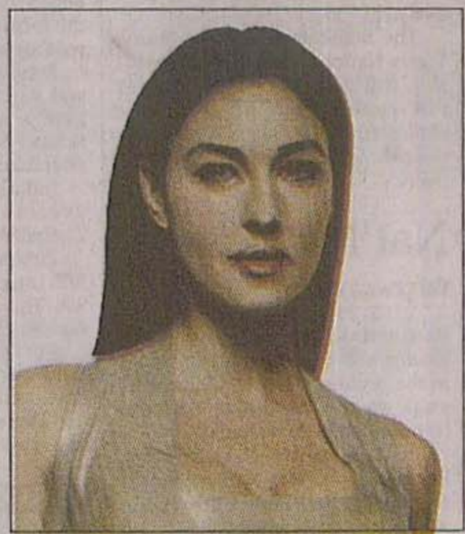
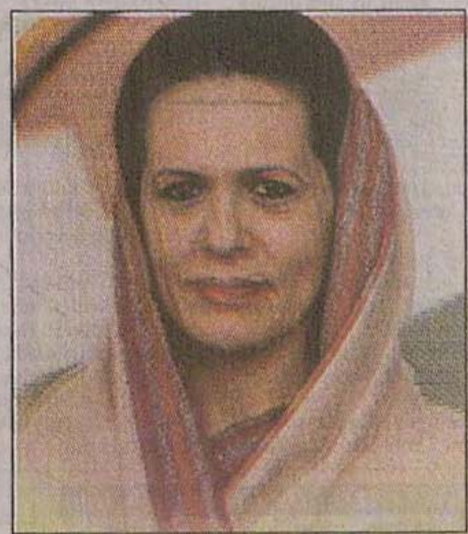
It is seldom that a feature film is based on the life of a leading politician during his or her lifetime in India. India's Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi, first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru or Vallabhai Patel films on them have been made

for the role of Rajiv Gandhi.

Another key role in the proposed film that of Sonia's mother-in-law and former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi--is likely to be essayed by Bollywood actress Perizaad Zorabian who shot into fame with her debut in Subhash Ghai's *Joggers Park* two years ago opposite veteran actor

educated Manmohan Singh to take over.

The story will then recount how Sonia, the girl from a small village in Italy, met Rajiv in Britain, fell in love with him and married him, her arrival in India, adjusting to the life in this country and as a member of Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and her close ties with Indira Gandhi.



only after their death.

Now moves are afoot to shoot a new feature film on India's ruling Congress party President Sonia Gandhi depicting her as a leader who reluctantly took a plunge into politics only to fulfill the dream of her assassinated husband Rajiv Gandhi she loved so much.

Los Angeles-based Jagmohan Mundra is set to direct the movie *Sonia* for which he is now in India scouting for locales and some members of the cast of the project which is estimated to cost about US\$ 6 million.

The film is being shot in Italy, India and Britain. Expected to be completed by April next year, it will be in English. It is likely to feature Italian actress Monica Bellucci or Indian Preity Zinta in the title role. Mundra plans to rope in an Indian actor

Victor Banerjee.

It may be recalled that legendary actress Suchitra Sen had played the role many consider that of Indira Gandhi in the famous Hindi feature film *Aandhi*, also featuring Sanjeev Kumar, in the '70s.

The film is based on the book *Sonia: A Biography* by Indian journalist Rasheed Kidwai. "I am sure they will stick to the spirit of the book. The real challenge will be to make the characters as real as possible," said the scribe.

Mundra says the film will open with Sonia Gandhi's dramatic renunciation of the post of India's Prime Minister after the Congress emerged the single largest party in parliamentary polls in May last year, paving the way for Oxford-

The film will also show how destiny played a role in Sonia joining politics she had once disliked seven years after the killing of her husband by a suicide bomber in May 1991.

According to Mundra, the movie will also feature how Sonia had not quite approved of Rajiv's entering politics after the death of his brother Sanjay in 1980 and his becoming the Indian Prime Minister in 1984 following the death of Indira Gandhi.

For seven years after the death of Rajiv, Sonia had been behind the iron curtains before she was goaded to take charge of the 120-year-old Congress in 1997 to revive its flagging electoral fortunes. The film will also trace Sonia's coming of age as a politician--from being a housewife to the chief of the country's oldest party, Mundra said.

Positive Bangladesh

Through Bibi's eyes

CULTURAL CORRESPONDENT

Celebrated fashion designer and Goodwill Ambassador of UNESCO, Bibi Russell will host a new entertaining TV show *Positive Bangladesh*, based on fashion and development. The main concept of the show has been developed by poet Russell Ashequi. Directed by Ashequi, the show will feature different issues including indigenous and handloom clothes, psychological growth of children, interior decoration, herbal treatment, women empowerment, folk songs and contemporary issues. The programme includes skits, interviews, fashion shows and roundtables.

The theme song of the 30-minute programme *Hajoro dukkher majhey* has been rendered by promising singer Rupam. Under the banner of Acexcel Media, the fortnightly programme will be broadcast on BTV and BTV World coming October.



Chittagong Theatre Festival gets rolling

DWAIPAYAN BARUA, Chittagong

A week-long drama festival, titled *Sharot Natya Sandhya-1412*, began here on Wednesday last.

Eminent social scientist Dr Anupam Sen inaugurated the festival, organised by Ritu Bhittik Natya Mela Parishad, at the Laboratory Theatre Mancha of Theatre Institute of Chittagong (TIC).

The festival includes staging of six plays, comprising two world classics, a council meeting of theatre activists and a discussion meeting on different topics.

Five theatre troupes of Chittagong, Tirjak Natya Dal, Nandikar, Kathak Natya Sampradaya, Uchcharan Natya Sampradaya, Mancha Mukut Natya Sampradaya and Dhaka-based Dhaka Theatre will stage the plays.

Kathak Natya Sampradaya staged Rabindranath Tagore's *Shasti* on the opening day. Ahmed Iqbal Haider directed the play. Manchamukut and Nandikar will stage two world classics, Sophocles' *Antigone* and Leo Tolstoy's *Fruits of Culture* while Tirjak and Uchcharan will stage Michael Madhusudan's *Baro Shaliker Ghare Ro* and Tagore's *Achalayotan*. Besides Dhaka Theatre will stage *Binodini*.

Director of TIC and coordinator of the festival Ahmed Iqbal Haider said they had been arranging theatre festivals for over 12 years in order to usher in each season. "This time we are welcoming the season Sharot (autumn)," he added.

The organisers asserted that they would arrange a council of theatre activists of Chittagong to discuss ways of promoting theatre activities in the port city.

China: Captivating destination for TV serials

CULTURAL CORRESPONDENT

Fast emerging as a tourist destination, China is a filmmaker's delight. Bangladeshi director AR Montu was in China with his shooting unit to produce his latest drama serials *Shat Jon Jatri* and *Ek Akasher Nichey*. These are the sequels to his successful flicks *Pathor Gola Srote* and *Je Shohor Ghumia Achey* which were shot in Mauritius and received acclaim both from the critics and audience.

The cast of the drama serials *Shat Jon Jatri* and *Ek Akasher Nichey* include Touqir Ahmed, A.R. Montu, Litu Anam, Shams Sumon, Pallab, Dipa Khondakar, Rumana, Mahbuba Isam Shumi, Mukti and others.

This was for the first time a Bangladeshi drama serial was shot

under the China Tourism Board. The shooting sessions are expected to take more than 27 days.

The shooting locations include the Great Wall, World Heritage Park, Temple of Heaven, Forbidden City, Summer Park, Bamboo Park and Sculpture Park in Beijing. Scenes in the serials also offer a panoramic view of China's skyline.

Prioritor of the Winner Telefilm production, AR Montu gave a glimpse of his shooting experience in China, "Beijing is a very happening place, spick and span. So I thought it would be wonderful to shoot there. Besides, the viewers will also get an opportunity to view modern cities."

Montu adds, "However, the expenditure involved in shooting abroad is quite high."



Shumi, AR Montu and Romana in *Ek Akasher Nichey*

Like a phoenix from the ashes

Mariah Carey soars top charts

Three years ago pop diva Mariah Carey was the butt of music industry jokes. After signing a US \$80 million deal with Virgin -- the biggest record contract ever -- in 2001, she experienced a very public personal and professional meltdown that included rambling, suicidal messages on her web-site; an appearance on MTV's *TRL* where, clad only in a T-shirt, she handed out popsicles to the audience. Last but not least, the stupendously awful movie *Glitter* and its attendant soundtrack (which was also her Virgin Records debut) bombed.

Following these failures, Virgin and Carey parted ways early in 2002, with the label paying her US\$ 28 million. That spring, she found a new home with Island/Def Jam, where she set up her own label, MonarC Music. In December, she released her ninth album, *Charmbracelet*, which failed to become a success. Everyone was ready to write Mariah off as a 'has been.'

But the minstrel wasn't ready to give up. Although she took nearly three years for a follow-up, Mariah is now riding high on the US pop charts with her comeback album, *The*

Emancipation of Mimi. She is also leading the field of nominees for the American Music Awards (AMA) with four nominations for the album in both pop/rock and soul/R&B categories. *Mimi* has sold more than 3 million copies in the United States since its release in April. The single *We belong together* recently ended a 14-week run atop Billboard magazine's Hot 100 chart.

However, success is not an unfamiliar phenomenon to Mariah. She was the best-selling female artist of the 1990s through best-selling albums like *Music Box*, *Daydream*, *Butterfly* and *Rainbow*. She rose to superstardom on the strength of her stunning five-octave voice; she moved to effortlessly from glossy ballads to hip-hop numbers she earned frequent comparison to rivals Whitney Houston and Celine Dion, but did them both one better by composing all of her own material. According to Columbia Records and Universal Music, Carey has sold a total of 150 million records worldwide.



Compiled by Cultural Correspondent