

'Crossing Lines' Documentary Chronicles Identity Search

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CROSSING LINES. DOCUMENTARY. PRODUCED, DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY LEENA JAYASWAL AND INDIRA SOMANI. DURATION: 31:25. 2007.

Watch this documentary and give your kid a hug.

Especially if she is a girl.

This unassuming documentary is a simply told, deeply affecting story of an Indian American woman's search for her identity as she navigates through a challenging childhood and adolescence during which she was pulled in opposite directions by two very different cultures.

Its production values are modest, but its impact is not. Somani wisely allows her story to speak for itself with a minimalist, narrative monologue over footage of her travels to India. One of the film's charms is in the wealth of older archival footage and photographs that it uses.

If truth be told, Somani's tale is far from unusual. A big rush of Indian immigration happened in the mid-1960s, when Somani's parents came. As the bulk of Indian Americans came did in those days, they attended graduate school.

Pretty much all of them made a smooth transition to the job market and settled down into a middle class existence in America's leafy suburbia.

It looked like the American dream, but there have always been deep undercurrents of unhappiness, and South Asian communities have dealt with it with characteristic reticence, if at all.

Second-generation Indian American kids who grew up at that time went through a very difficult time. "The most painful memory for me is, you know, standing in the playground blacktop and these kids running around me in circles, saying 'aaaaaaa,'" Somani says as she talks of taunting kids in her elementary school in Springfield, Ill. "These kids didn't know there was a country called India."

Somani's description of growing up will strike a chord with many second generation Indians — the dual life, being Indian at home, with a mom wearing sarees on weekends, Indian food, and the outside lifestyle that was American — dancing, music, proms, dating. (For Somani, dating was absolutely off limits.)

Her father, a medical professor, was a no-nonsense patriarch, whose values were frozen in a time warp of the '60s in India.

Yet it was not a relationship devoid of affection. Far from it. This is the terrible dilemma for Indian Americans growing up: They seethe with frustration at the stern strictures of their parents who are often woefully insensitive to what their kids are going through, yet it is the same parents who are their emotional anchor in a sea of cultural hostility.

It has to be said that a girl child has a particularly rough time. Indian Americans are loathe to admit this but many households, have a definite sexist slant — father is boss, his word is final, and that is that. That's the Indian parampara, so deal with it.

Somani went through all that,

but that didn't mean her father didn't love her. He did, passionately. And so his death really shook her up.

"I felt like I lost my sense of security," she says in the voiceover. "There is so much that I never got to say to him while he was alive."

Somani took many trips to India since childhood. Her father took her to his hometown in Hingoli, Maharashtra, where he grew up in extremely modest circumstances.

Over the years, her trips to India helped her come to terms with her identity. She became a vegetarian, learned to do puja, and became a practicing Hindu, discovering a "spiritual sense with God."

"I finally felt like I learned to straddle both my Indian world and my American world," she says. "I was proud to be an Indian and I wanted my friends to know that I was Indian."

Her trip to India after her father's death was fraught with apprehension. Hers was a very traditional family, and here she was, a woman in her 30s, and single. She visited her relatives in Kolkata, Pune and Nanded. She went sightseeing.

As she travels, she is showered with affection by members of her far-flung family. After she meets her father's sister, she breaks down in tears as she reminisces about her father. Soon the two of them, aunt and niece, hug each other and weep, and the tears soothe the pain of loss.

In the end, as she leaves, Somani's eyes are not dry, but she appears to have found an emotional home of sorts.



Filmmaker Indira Somani in Kolkata in a scene from "Crossing Lines," a documentary film by Leena Javawal and Indira Somani.

"When I think of India, I think of the unconditional love that I have, I think of a very poor country, but not poor in culture, and certainly not poor in family," she says. "For once I was seeing India through my eyes, not my parent's eyes."

In addition to being a touching first-person account, the film is a valuable socio-cultural document of Indian American life, but some of it, thank goodness, is dated.

Thanks to the growing visibility of India in the world economy, most Americans know who Indians are, though there are probably remote swaths in this country that still find Indians a curiosity.

Over the years, the generation gap has tempered a bit, too, as parents have learned to adjust — cross-ethnic marriages, an absolute no-no some years ago, are not so rare or unheard of anymore, and parents are relenting on issues like dating. Indian Americans growing up in here, too, for all their complaining, have internalized to an astonishing degree their parents' preferences, and consequently South Asian student groups in colleges tend to double unofficially as dating

agencies.

That said, growing up Indian American continues to be a challenge, and films like these bring a much welcome focus on an issue Indian Americans tend to ignore.

The film has already been broadcast or will be broadcast in scores of public television stations across the country. It is scheduled for broadcast in KTEH in San Jose in October. It has already screened in KQED in San Francisco in September, and KCET and KLCS in Los Angeles in August 2008.

Among the many festivals to which the film has been invited are the following: 8th Annual Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council Film Festival, New York, New York in November; Fifth Annual GiRL FeST Hawaii Film Festival, Honolulu, Hawaii, November; Cross Cultural Film Festival, Los Angeles, California, October-November; and the Baltimore Women's Film Festival, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008.

Detailed listings and more information is available in at the film's Web site at: www.crossinglinesfilm.com.



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