All We Imagine as Light director Payal Kapadia speaks with WSWS

Richard Phillips
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Writer/director Payal Kapadia, 39, spoke to the World Socialist Web Site *last month about her first fiction feature,* All We Imagine as Light*, which earned her the Grand Prix at the 77th Cannes Film Festival in 2024.*

All We Imagine as Light *is a deeply humanistic portrayal of three working-class women navigating life in a Mumbai hospital. The film focuses on Prabha and Anu, migrant nurses from Kerala, and Parvaty, a canteen worker from Ratnagiri, who bond over shared struggles in the megacity. The film has already won screen distribution deals in more than fifty countries and is available on several streaming services in the US.*

Richard Phillips: Thanks for speaking with us, and for *All We Imagine as Light*, and its characters. Why did you decide to set it in Mumbai and why three health workers, people who rarely get any attention in contemporary cinema?

Payal Kapardia: The simple reason is I'm from Mumbai and it's the city that I know most. I've always had a rather fraught relationship with the city and like any big city, it's full of contradictions.

Bombay, now Mumbai, was fundamentally created by the British East India Company, which lost its trading rights in Surat and had to build a new port. Prior to that the area consisted of a bunch of small villages on islands. The area was originally part of the dowry of King Charles II's wife, Catherine, who was the king of Portugal's daughter. The English king apparently thought that it was a piece of land in Brazil.

The city is fundamentally linked to that colonial imperial past and is a city that I feel has a lot to figure out. It was built by people who were not from there and developed by people invited to come from all over the country to live and work. In the past 20 or 30 years there's been an attempt to negate or erase that history, but it's a city which didn't exist before these people came to live and work there.

RP: And why focus on three health workers?

PK: For personal reasons, I spent a lot of time in hospitals when I started writing the film and long periods in the waiting rooms. You quickly see how hospitals operate, and that the nurses pretty much run these places. The doctors come along briefly, for a few minutes, and then vanish.

The people I was interacting with the most were the nurses and so I wanted to make a movie about the women who come to Mumbai to work. In India the nursing is now seen as a legitimate profession for a woman to leave her home state and move to a city like Mumbai.

The nurses provided me with the possibility of creating many-layered characters and to explore their external and internal lives. For the women in this profession the contradictions are even more pronounced.

As one of the characters says, "You can't show your emotions if you're a nurse." Prabha, the main character, uses this as a kind of shield to protect herself from having any kind of emotions.

Nursing is not a very nice profession—you're dealing with many body fluids and things like that— but the film gave me the opportunity to address a lot of different things.

Representations of nursing in Indian cinema has also been a bit complicated. If you've seen Satyajit Ray's *Pratidwandi* [*The Adversary*, 1970], which is part of his Kolkata Trilogy, you'll know what I mean. The nurse in that movie is represented as a loose woman because she lives alone and has a job.

RP: Your film gradually peels back the different layers and circumstances of their lives. Was there any direct involvement by the actors in the development of the film and its characters?

PK: Yes, the actors helped me a lot, once the dialogues were written. All of them are great artists and became very involved in their characters and introducing lots of little nuances.

Chhaya Kadam, who plays Parvaty, the hospital cook, is from Ratnagiri, south of Mumbai. Her family migrated to Mumbai just like Parvaty's did. Her father had a job in the cotton mills, much like Parvaty's husband. She was very well-versed in the history of this movement from Ratnagiri to Mumbai, and the mine owners sackings, and the loss of the homes of the workers in 1982 after they went on strike. [Known as the Great Bombay Textile Strike, it involved nearly 250,000 mill workers].

She added lots of nuance to her character even in the way she moved, and using certain words in the dialogue that were obviously lost in the translation. She had a remarkable way of giving a certain lightness to the difficulties facing her character and a kind of attitude that is very much part of the life of Mumbai.

RP: How many people came up from the south to work in the mills?

PK. It was all through the 20th century and during the 19th century under the British. After independence, the mills went into the hands of people who had worked for the British. A lot of the people came from Ratnagiri, which is in the movie. The identity of Mumbai, the nature of the food, the language, the dialect, and their way of speaking Hindi, is very much influenced by the Konkan region, south of Mumbai and where Ratnagiri is located.

RP: One of the voiceovers in the film says, "Mumbai is a city of illusions and the unspoken code in the city is that if you're in the gutter, you're not allowed to feel anger." Could you elaborate on this?

PK: Yes. People from Mumbai—Mumbaikars—are made to feel that whenever something terrible happens, like a flood, then they help each other to get through. We're told this is "the spirit of Mumbai," and it's used quite a lot in the official discourse.

People help each other in those circumstance because they have no other options. The state doesn't provide any sort of mechanism for people on a daily basis.

Whether it's the right to housing, water or electricity, these things are all in such a shambles that people have no choice but to help each other. This is what is glorified as "the spirit of Mumbai." But for me, and I think for a lot of people, we must look at this with a critical eye.

The urban spaces in countries like ours are the only places that really provide work. It's important to have cities, but the infrastructure is still not being provided for the people who come to live and work there. Cities do have this kind of utopia of possibility, which, of course, isn't really

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there.

When we went to shoot in Ratnagiri, which has such a long history of migration to Mumbai, there was such a serious lack of infrastructure—access to hospital, roads and so on. People had to come to Mumbai, there weren't any other options. It's complicated but is something that I feel very frustrated about and wanted to have that frustration expressed in the film.

RP: We've just seen wildfires in Los Angeles—another a city of illusions—and the infrastructure there was completely inadequate. Whenever there are bushfires and floods in Australia, the population is told how wonderful that people come together and help. It's called "the Ozzie spirit," but it's simply justification for governments to do nothing.

PK: Yes, exactly as in India.

RP: Can you talk about the love affair between Anu and Shiaz, and for Western audiences, say something about the anti-Muslim hysteria and "love-jihad" conspiracy theories?

PK: There have been several films—fiction movies—about this in India which have driven this into the national discourse.

Marriage is a very important part of one's life in India and it really rests on caste and religion. It becomes a big issue if you marry out of your caste or out of your religion and especially because of the very strong Islamophobic zeitgeist now in India.

The marriage of, or the love between, a Hindu woman and a Muslim man is officially frowned on, and in some states, they're trying to pass laws criminalising Muslim men for this sort of marriage.

It's very difficult for young people who are truly in love because their parents are not going to agree and so they must elope, and if they elope it's called love jihad.

Navigating this space is especially difficult for a young couple so it was very important that my film didn't reduce them to their immediate identity, which is pretty much what happens in the official political discourse.

I wanted the couple to be so wonderful and cute and relatable that you are rooting for them. If you're Indian, of course, you don't need an explanation because even their relationship creates a feeling of fear in your heart knowing how hard it is going for them to be just themselves.

RP: All the characters, in one form another, are dealing with the different prevailing taboos. All three women are facing economic problems and other pressures and although you don't make it explicit, these taboos are being undermined. They are living in a world of mobile phone, modern communications and other changes. The final part of the film is filled with hope. Could you say something about that?

PK: It's a kind of a utopian moment of the sort of camaraderie between these women. It is an understanding that being there for one another, even though each of their personal journeys has a long way to go, they find solace and comfort in each other.

When it comes to people coming together in India, and really everywhere, the different cultures, languages and identities often come in the way of that unity. I wanted to bridge that gap in my little moment of unison between them and to say that even if they don't speak the same language or are of the same caste and religion, friendship and camaraderie are possible ways of supporting one another.

RP: And it's a question of class. They all have common class interests.

PK: That's true.

RP: You've received good responses and critical accolades for the film internationally, what's been the reaction in India itself? Have you had screenings in the districts where it was filmed or with health workers?

PK: We've had a lot of screenings with health workers, especially in Kerala, which is the language of the film. We also had some special screenings for women working, not just in health but different sectors of the economy.

The movie has also been released on a streaming website, one of the most accessible, which most people have a subscription to because it screens cricket. People who don't go to the cinema now can watch it in on their devices with subtitles in all the different languages, so it's accessible all over the country.

We had some free screenings for a lot of women in different cities, which was a good learning experience because some people also scolded me. I think it's very important for a filmmaker to learn from your audience, who will point out different things or suggest things that could have been taken in a certain direction. Parvaty's story has a lot of other segments that I didn't put in the film, and could have, and so I have some regrets.

RP: Your movie has won several international awards, including at the Cannes festival last year, but it wasn't selected by Indian film authorities for inclusion in the foreign-language category for the forthcoming Oscars.

The president of the Film Federation of India reportedly said that the selection committee "felt like they were watching a European film taking place in India, not an Indian film taking place in India." Do you have any comment on that?

PK: Somebody will have to define what is Indian because I'm confused now with what they mean. I'm Indian and, yes, it is an Indian movie, so I don't know what they were trying to get at with that.

RP: Satyajit Ray once said that great cinema has "the ability to leave its regional moorings and rise to a plane of universal gestures." *All We Imagine as Light* certainly achieves this.

PK: I also feel it is important though to think about the language of cinema in India, which is very specific to our subcontinent. Western aesthetics need to look at our aesthetics as part of the overall cinematic discourse. The performances in Indian movies, the songs, are all very much part of our daily life. It's crucial that multiplicity and diversity exists in cinema.

RP: Yes. One final question, what's your next project?

PK: The next project is always a tricky question. I did two movies simultaneously over the past four or five years—*A Night of Knowing Nothing* and *All We Imagine as Light*—and have just started developing two more scripts. These are also based in Mumbai, so I'm trying to see if these can be a triptych about people who live and work in the city.

I do a lot of research, which takes time and is almost a documentary process because it involves meeting people and a lot of interviews. I enjoy and appreciate this process very much and learn a lot from it.

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