

INDIA TODAY

PARVEEN NEGI



From left: Rita Banerji, a wildlife movie maker, feels passionately about environmental issues and feels time's running out to save valuable green cover; For Yasmin Kidwai, documentary making is her calling in life but she feels the funds crunch is limiting options; Samreen Farooqui's and Shabani Hassanwalia's search for unusual themes led them to discover the Ladakhi's passion for cinema and the fledgling film industry in the region

FROM REEL TO REAL: GIRLS UNINTERRUPTED



From left: Stills from *A Short Film on...* talks about how women perceive their breasts; *Out of Thin Air* traces Ladakhi film history; *Unlimited Girls* discusses chat room feminism; and *Where's Sandra* looks at the life of Anglo Indian women



Clockwise from left: Samina Mishra makes films on issues which she strongly feels about. Divya Sachar says that documentaries should be commercially released in theatres to make it more popular. Paromita Vohra says that there is a false perception that women only make movies on women's issues and it needs to be changed. Akhila Krishnan says many more women are taking up short filmmaking though funding is hard to come by.

tell one's story," says the NID alumnus, currently doing Masters in communication art and design at the Royal College of Art, London.

Besides technology, the fact that there's a new type of audience now which readily laps up off-beat, out-of-the-box themes helps. "Technology and the change in mindset is benefiting filmmakers like never before," sums up Vohra.

NOT SO UPBEAT

AMONG the other reasons why there are more women taking to documentary film-making, there's one that's not so upbeat: It's a small platform and therefore easier to

handle than big-budget Bollywood films. But then, a woman doesn't need a big platform since what she's fighting are everyday battles, feels Samina Mishra. Granddaughter of the late Dr Zakir Hussain, Mishra has used the medium to deliver strong messages, avoiding sermons. Putting names and faces to the alarming statistics on the plight of the girl child, Mishra brought out a series of documentaries entitled, *Stories of Girlhood*. And her other film, *The House on Gulmohar Avenue*, looks at the search for identity of people living in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood, including glimpses of her own multi-cultural family.

For wildlife filmmaker Rita Banerji, it's the feeling that she can make a difference to environmental issues that drove her to

set up Dusty Foot Production. Her documentaries, *Honey Hunters of the Blue Mountain* and *Earth Calling* dealt with commercialisation of green areas. "My initial exposure to wildlife and environment happened through my camerawork. The interest got deeper as it took me to remote places and I got to meet people who were working against all odds to conserve nature. There aren't many filmmakers focusing on environment, but time is a premium in this area as the green cover is disappearing fast," says Banerji.

MONEY WORRIES

AFTER making 20 short films, Yasmin Kidwai is often asked, "Why don't you make a Bollywood movie?" But for Kidwai, it's the documentary that is her call-

ing, she insists. Some of her popular works include *Chakkar* and *Purdah Hai Purdah*. "The film on *purdah* was complicated — I'm not fully finished with the concept as it's multi-layered. I might make a second part too," says Kidwai. *Chukker*, a film based on the history of polo, is close to her heart for many reasons — her marriage to a polo player and the birth of her first son during the shoot. But what exhausted her was the travelling the film required and raising the production cost of Rs 35 lakhs. "I got my money back as it was sponsored by a corporate house," says Kidwai, who is currently working on *Indian by Choice*, a movie on expats who've made India their home and second generation NRIs who came back.

But lack of funds is a sore point with most documentary film-

makers. "Making documentaries is expensive but there are hardly any funds available, and what is available is usually miniscule — it's barely enough to cover a fraction of the shooting costs," says Kavita Joshi, an independent filmmaker based in Delhi.

Joshi's work include *My Body, My Weapon*, a documentary on the nine-year-long fast-to-death of Irom Sharmila, demanding justice and human rights for Manipuris and *Tales from the Margins* — a film on women's protests and the conflict situation in Manipur.

"Had it not been for PSBT, I wouldn't have made *Purdah*," says Kidwai. "Funds are hard to come by," Hassanwalia agrees, adding that marketing and distribution take a backseat because of this problem.

NEED OF DOCUCULTURE

THOUGH exciting experiments are happening in the short film circuit, is the audience warming up to it? Views differ. "It's sad we still view Bollywood as the benchmark. What we need is a thriving documentary-watching culture," says Vohra.

However, Mishra feels complaints about the lack of audience for documentaries is baseless. "When I showed my movies in Hyderabad, Delhi and other cities, there was a good turn out and at the end of the show, I always had a healthy discussion with viewers," says Mishra.

Joshi, whose *Tales from the Margins* had over 100 screenings in India, feels there is an audience which wants alternatives to mainstream cinema.

After all, good art will always find an audience.

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