Ali Kazimi

Filmmaker, media artist, author

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

In 2019, Ali Kazimi became the first Indo-Canadian to be honoured with the Governor General's Award for Lifetime Achievement in Visual and Media Arts for over three decade of ground-breaking work as a documentary and media artist whose work deals with race, social justice, migration, history and memory. His film *Continuous Journey*(2004), alongside his book, *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru* (2011), have played a key role in shedding light on the forgotten histories of early South Asian immigration to Canada.

Born, raised, and educated in India, Kazimi came to Canada to study film production at York University in 1983. Two decades later, after establishing himself as an award-winning independent filmmaker, Kazimi returned to York University. He is currently Associate Professor in the Department of Cinema & Media Arts, where he has also served as the Chair of the Department.

Kazimi's films have received over two dozen national and international honours and awards, been screened in prestigious festivals and broadcast nationally and internationally. His feature films include *Narmada; A Valley Rises* (1994), *Shooting Indians: A Journey with Jeffrey Thomas* (1997), *Continuous Journey* (2004) and *Random Acts of Legacy* (2016).

The University of British Columbia conferred a Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) to Kazimi in May, 2019.

PRAISE FOR ALI KAZIMI'S WORK

Random Acts of Legacy

"…gorgeous, multi-layered, … a haunting, essential document that, for all its specificity, comments on the universal human condition."
— Glen Sumi, Now Magazine, Toronto, April 26, 2016

"(A) masterfully crafted film… The filmmaker skillfully pulls a surprisingly rich and textured story from a relatively small cache of found footage. It causes us to pause and consider the ephemeral means by which we record and capture our most important moments and reminds us of the power of good, old fashioned celluloid film."
— Jury Citation, Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, 2016

"Through Ali Kazimi's deft command of the film-making language, a decaying collection of home movies is turned to an evocative, essential document of an experience rarely seen or heard from—a middle class Chinese American family in a 1930's America. Ali's creative design and approach enabled Silas Fung's footage that's personal, unique and specific, illuminate and comment on the universal human condition. For it's creative and evocative manner of giving nuance to our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world we live in, we give CAAMFest's Best Documentary award to Ali Kazimi's Random Acts of Legacy."
— Jury Citation, CAAMFest 2017

Continuous Journey

"….brilliant … rarely has a documentary been so beautifully directed and rendered, shot for shot, image by image, pan by pan, zoom by zoom."
— Peter Wintonick, POV Magazine

"Canadians often boast about the vibrancy and strength that flows from a multicultural society. But Canadian filmmaker Ali Kazimi's documentary, Continuous Journey, shatters any illusions that our nation-builders wanted it that way…. Once that story takes shape—through digital enhancement of photos and newspaper tearsheets, old newsreels and a clutch of interviews with historians and socio-political activists—the Komagata Maru episode becomes vivid. The strength of the film then rests in Kazimi's ability to relate it to systematic racism in Canada's early immigration policies."
— Bruce Kirkland, Toronto Sun, January 21, 2005

"Kazimi has gone at the incident from every angle…. (His) interviews with historians both in Canada and India provide a rich context for the fate of the 375 rejected immigrants."
– Susan Walker, Toronto Star, January 21, 2005

"Through archival footage, vintage photographic montage and inventive voice-over performance, Kazimi documents the story of the 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims and 12 Hindus held on the boat a half mile from Canadian shores without provisions for more than two months. Continuous Journey, is the work of an experienced storyteller and image-maker. Kazimi's own journey from India (which he recounts here and in his previous films) has been a fortuitous event for Canada."
— Leah McLaren, The Globe & Mail, January 21, 2005

"It's a complicated story, hinging on Canada's restrictive immigration policy and fears throughout the empire of (very real) Indian nationalism movements. But Kazimi makes a convincing argument that these people, like most immigrants, bore no ill will and posed no threat to their hoped-for new homeland.
— Chris Knight, National Post, January 21, 2005

"Kazimi does a good job of contextualizing the Maru tragedy and providing a potted history of Canada's immigration policies … and despite the lack of first hand sources, the film is never dull, jazzed up with atmospheric music, 3D photo montages and tricky editing techniques."
— Paul Issacs, Eye Magazine, January 20, 2005

Some Kind of Arrangement

"This charming documentary profiles three throughly western, second-generation Indo-Canadians who surprise themselves by deciding to embrace one of the most life-affecting traditions of the old world traditions: an arranged marriage."
— Tony Atherton, Ottawa Citizen

"…has wry humour and warmth as it captures the clash of cultures and the role the families bring to the dilemma of these three eligible candidates."
— Jim Bawden, Broadcast Week, Canada

Shooting Indians

"*Shooting Indians*… radically defines the role of place, public discussion and the meaning of place in Canadian documentary."
— David Hogarth, Documentary Television in Canada (McGill Univ. Press, 2003)

"Filmmaker Ali Kazimi is East Indian and started making this film about Native Canadian and American Indians years ago. As a foreign student in Canada he was fascinated by the difference between the Indians he had seen in Hollywood movies and those he met in Canada. He began documenting the work of Iroquois photographer Jeffrey Thomas and, with him, travelled the hard road to understanding what photography means. The result is a curious film, as much about the filmmaker's struggle and mixed emotion as it is about his subject's perseverance. It does raise many sticky issues about stereotypes and the power of the visual, but it doesn't simplify them."
– John Doyle's, Critical List, Broadcast Week, The Globe & Mail, July 11–17, 1998

"Taking a personal, reflective approach to the often-abstracted realities of aboriginal oppression, *Shooting Indians* practices the very message it carries."
– Jane Henderson, Dominion, February 3, 2004

Narmada: A Valley Rises

"Polished beyond its low-budget means, this film stands in the best tradition of committed film-making. For anyone worn down or cynical about social struggle, Narmada shows how it can be both effective and inspiring. Like most successful recent documentaries Narmada builds a narrative and introduces characters that carry an audience through a complex thicket of issues."
— Now Magazine, February 2–8, 1995, Canada

"In a brilliant, moving depiction of anger and discontent the inhabitants of the valley come to life in their struggle against a perverse, warped concept of development."
— Sunday Magazine, January 22–29, 1995, India

"The strength of Kazimi's documentation does not lie in the dehumanizing objectivity of a statistician. It lies in the filmmaker's commitment to humanism which makes the documentary not a transient social statement but a work of art which transcends time."
— The Hindu, January 8, 1995, India

>>> Random Acts Of Legacy

RANDOM ACTS OF LEGACY (Ali Kazimi, Canada). 77 minutes..

By Glenn Sumi

Apr 26, 2016

RANDOM ACTS OF LEGACY (Ali Kazimi, Canada). 77 minutes. Rating: **NNNNN**

Moving images from the early 20th century showing people of colour in the U.S. and Canada are rare. So when Ali Kazimi won, in an online auction, a cache of home movies about the Fungs, a middle-class Chinese-American family based in Chicago, he tracked down surviving family members to piece together a portrait of their lives.

The result is a gorgeous, multi-layered document not just about the extended Fung family, but also about immigration, integration, racism in pre- and postwar America and economic opportunities. Historian Henry Yu points out that the “normal” images we see often contradict those from Hollywood and the press.

The man behind the home movies is Silas Fung, a commercial artist who was obsessed with Chicago’s 1933 World’s Fair his wife, Edythe, sold insurance to Chinese immigrants, basically funding Silas’s home movie hobby.

Their surviving daughter, Irena Lum, brings a forthright personal touch to the film, and Kazimi keeps his own comments to a minimum, resulting in a haunting, essential document that, for all its specificity, comments on the universal human condition.

May 2, 9 pm, TIFF 3 May 5, 1:30 pm, TIFF 3 May 8, 4:30 pm, Innis

Tags

CRITICS' PICKSHOT DOCS 2016REVIEWS - HOT DOCS 2016

Glenn Sumi

Glenn started writing for NOW's theatre section in 1997. Currently, he edits and contributes to the film and stage sections. He sees approximately 280 live stage shows and 150 movies a year. His mother once described his job as "Seeing The Lion King"

Accessed on https://nowtoronto.com/random-acts-of-legacy

Writings / Reviews: George Elliott Clarke

- **Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru**
By Ali Kazimi
Toronto, ON: Douglas & McIntyre, 2012
176 pp. $40

Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru, a beautifully illustrated hardcover text, reminds one that good history is radicalizing. By documenting past injustice, we can be more alert to our current failures to uphold fair treatment.

Indian-born, Toronto-based filmmaker Ali Kazimi has garnered awards on three continents for his 2004 feature documentary about the Government of Canada's refusal to allow less than 400 South Asian prospective immigrants, arriving on the Japanese vessel the Komagata Maru, to make landfall at Vancouver, B.C., in May 1914.

In turning from the film medium to print, Kazimi, a York University film professor, has created illuminated pages that delineate, not only a crucial episode in Canadian support for white supremacy, but also the complex dynamics—machinations—of British imperialism.

In fact, the arrival of the Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu voyagers tested the principle that, as British Indians—as British subjects—they had as much right to enter the Dominion of Canada as any 'white' Briton—or Australian or New Zealander or South African.

The eventually court-backed refusal to allow them entry to what was termed "a white man's country," had international consequences, for it proved that British Indians were not equal subjects within the British Empire.

The spurning of the Komagata Maru spurred on Indian nationalism—and the independence movement that ended the British Raj in 1948. (Thus, Elizabeth II is Queen of Canada, but not Empress of India, and few in India rue the absence of the British Crown.)

Kazimi demonstrates convincingly “the global ramifications of local racism.” Indeed, the British used diplomacy and espionage to try to establish a delicate balance, permitting Canada to impose a head-tax on Chinese, restrict Japanese—quietly, and bar Indians—but not explicitly.

Japanese settlers had to be admitted because Japan was an ally of the British Empire—and, by extension, of Canada. (Kazimi notes that during World War I, “the Japanese Navy patrolled and protected the west coast of Canada.”) However, Japan agreed, secretly, to Canada’s request that it issue only 4oo emigration passports per year.

Because China was considered weak, racism was openly practiced against its migrants. (That Canada once boasted a bureaucrat whose title was “Chief Controller of Chinese Immigration” underlines the then-prevalence of anti-Asian sentiments.)

But Indians—British Indians—were a challenge for white supremacist Canucks: How to bar them from Canada without inflaming anti-British sentiments in India, the “jewel” of the Empire?

William Lyon Mackenzie King, then deputy minister of labour in Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier’s cabinet, proposed the solution: a regulation insisting that immigrants to Canada had to undertake a “continuous journey” from their homelands.

Any voyage from India could not be “continuous”; thus the regulation had the effect, without naming India, of reducing Indian immigration to almost nil. (This same provision was used to bar entry to Jews seeking refuge from Hitler’s Germany.)

Yet, while Canada was trying desperately to prevent South Asian and East Asian immigration (or citizenship), it was doing all that it could to attract Britons, Americans, Scandinavians, and Western Europeans, and, to a lesser extent, Eastern and Southern Europeans, who were also, as an incentive, given “free” land.

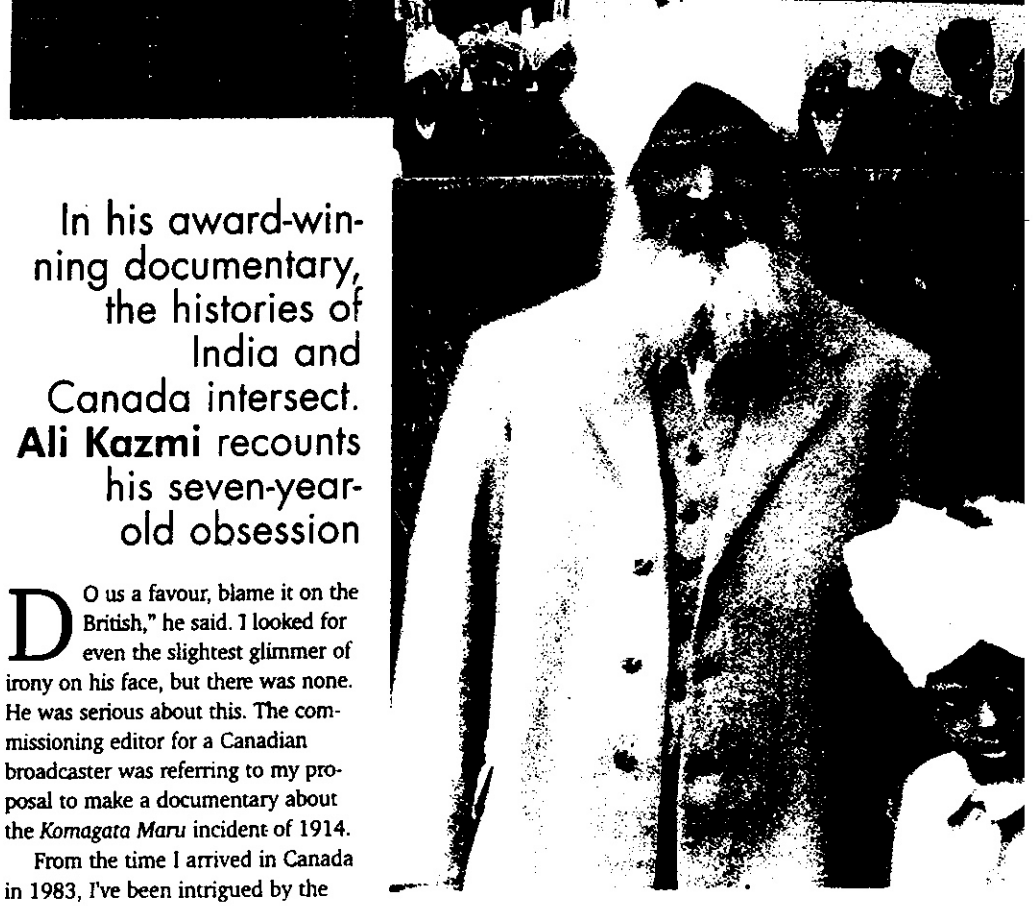
The policy was clear: northern North America, wrested from the First Nations, was to be wide-open for Caucasian Christian European expansion and exploitation, but closed to any substantial immigration from Asia and Africa.

Kazimi’s rich and fascinating study clarifies just how the Komagata Maru voyagers challenged this racism, becoming the first “boat people” to be turned away from Canada, to have their ship turned into a marine “Gitmo,” and to even have the still-new Royal Canadian Navy summoned to escort them back to international waters.

Really, they must be celebrated as exemplars of the ongoing struggle for racial and socio-economic equality for “migrants,” not only in Canada, but everywhere in this so-called globalized world, where capital “flows,” but labour “pools,” even being, at times, locked up in prisons—or drowned at sea.

George Elliott Clarke was born in Windsor, Nova Scotia. He is arguably one of Canada's most prolific and accomplished poets. He has published numerous groundbreaking verse and dramatic poetry collections and anthologies. He has won the Governor General Literary Award, the prestigious Portia White Prize, been honoured with many honorary doctorates, and inducted into the Order of Canada. He is E.J. Pratt Professor of Canadian Literature at the University of Toronto.

Accessed on https://www.mtls.ca/issue13/writings/reviews/george-elliott-clarke/7/



Homage to Komagata

In his award-winning documentary, the histories of India and Canada intersect. Ali Kazmi recounts his seven-year-old obsession

"Do us a favour, blame it on the British," he said. I looked for even the slightest glimmer of irony on his face, but there was none. He was serious about this. The commissioning editor for a Canadian broadcaster was referring to my proposal to make a documentary about the *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914.

From the time I arrived in Canada in 1983, I've been intrigued by the nationalistic Canadian ideal of a tolerant, inclusive and multicultural society. Canada is now on the road to achieving that ideal, but it hasn't always been like this. Until very recently, Canada was a country largely made up of people of European origin.

That took me to a place where the histories of Canada and India intersect. It was a place that I had to explore, to really understand why my presence in this land is based on a tragic absence. And so, the idea for *Continuous Journey* was born. On May 23, 1914, a chartered Japanese ship, the *Komagata Maru*, arrived at the Vancouver harbour carrying 376 immigrants from India. The ship was forced to anchor a kilometre from shore and the passengers became virtual prisoners. Two months later, with the guns of the Canadian Navy pointing at them, they turned back. The journey ended as they approached the Calcutta shore. A British ship cornered the *Komagata* and eventually killed everyone on board. The massacre defined Canadian immigration policy till 1948, and virtually shook the British Empire.

I wrote my first proposal for the documentary in 1996 and received grants from various arts councils. Like most film funding sources in Canada, the decisions at the arts councils are made by a jury of peers without interference from the government.

But it is always hard to go against the grain, to reveal histories that have been omitted by nationalist mythologies. In this case, it was no different. Very few people in Canada were aware of this slice of history. As far as most Canadians were concerned, there were no restrictions against immigrants from south Asia. As an academic pointed out, Canadian history is "a history without racism". So resistance to the film was predictable.

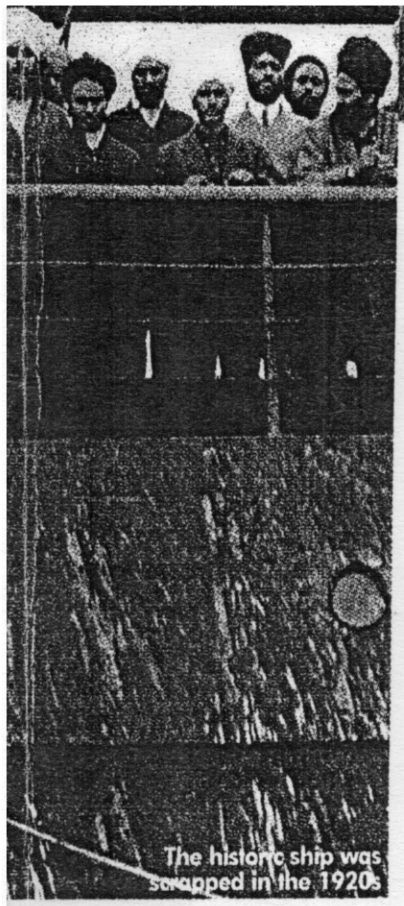
I got enough money to start the project, but without the support of broadcasters, getting completion money was a huge challenge, and it took me seven years to complete it.

I tried looking for money in the Indian community, but here too, the attitudes were surprising. "Go to the Sikhs, it is their story" was a common response. While three books were written on the subject in India and Canada, I wanted to come to my own conclusions. I spent a lot of time in the National Archives of Canada, going through documents that presented damning evidence of carefully crafted systemic racism. Co across repeated references t of a "white Canada", I was the almost complete absenc ple of Asian and African de photographs and films.

Along the way, during m self-doubt, something woul to energise me. I would me dants of key people who sh important insights or find o links. While on a different s Vancouver, I came across *Th Lion*, the very tugboat that mandeered by the authoriti attack the *Komagata Maru*. idea that the boat had survi day. The *Komagata Maru* its scrapped in the 1920s.

I was also struck by the that Canada was the startin the revolutionary Gadhar Pa ment, which, in turn, was o places where the idea of a s democratic India began to e But the biggest find was yet I kept looking for the missin

I was driven by a belief t events of July 23, 1914, we



dramatic to not have been filmed, even though film technology was barely two decades old at the time. A Canadian warship was brought alongside the *Komagata Maru* that day, with its guns aimed at the passengers. Hundreds of militia were ready on shore with fixed bayonets. Tens of thousands of people lined the Vancouver shore to watch the drama unfold. Film archivists all around the world told me that the footage had been lost, destroyed or didn't exist at all. I was convinced that it did.

Then one day it happened. I was watching bits of footage from the 1910s when random shots suddenly jumped out at me in a reel marked The Governor General's visit to Victoria. There it was: the *Komagata Maru* and its Indian passengers.

It came at a time when I was certain that I could not make the film. It was a sign for me that I could not stop. The timing also proved to be fortuitous. I went back to the provincial public broadcaster in Ontario, and they were finally interested and came on board.

The challenge now was to construct the film. Nearly 300 pages of research had to be distilled into an hour and a half. I started to shape the film with the help of a colleague, Susan Martin, who has decades of dramatic film experience in Hollywood and Canada. Characters with personalities and motives were shaped, a dramatic storyline began to emerge.

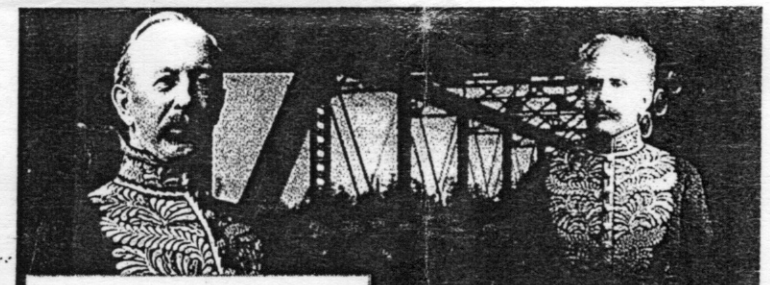
The fact remained that for most of the key characters I had one image, at best a photograph, in other cases photocopies of photographs and some sketches. Fortunately, with cutting-edge digital technology in film production, it was possible to do a lot on a simple desktop. My editor Graeme Ball suggested a radical approach of using cut-outs of the photographs and creating new ones. We started to push this further by adding movement and depth, then layering with moving images. Finally, we used everything at hand: home movies, old stamps, letters, telegrams, newspapers, along with footage of contemporary Canada.

To complement the visuals, award-winning composer Philip Strong came on board. He worked collaboratively with a number of South Asian artistes living in Toronto, including ghazal singer Kiran Ahluwalia and *qawwal* Shahid Ali Khan. I gave them both lines from one of the many powerful Gadhar poems written at the time. (The soundtrack eventually won awards and was released as a CD.)

The film's first screening at the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival got a fairly diverse audience with only a few South Asians, but when the credits rolled at the end, the audience was on its feet.

But the next phase of struggle began when it was time to get the film screened. In spite of the acclaim, the broadcaster baulked at screening the full 87-minute version. For them, the connections I was making with contemporary Canada were too contentious. They could not ask directly for cuts, but agreed to screen only a one-hour version, and I was left with no option but to pare the film down. This meant losing some of the links I was making.

Finally, the film did have a limited theatrical run in Toronto and received strong reviews. Even the most right-wing newspapers in Canada have not been able to deny or challenge the facts presented in the film. This is the hardest film I have ever made, and I feel quite proud of what has emerged out of this struggle. After watching the film, a number of film-makers are trying to make feature films based on the story, which is a compliment, I suppose, in a back-handed kind of way.



This is the first film on the *Komagata Maru* incident. Film-maker Deepa Mehta's next is inspired by the same

NO ENTRY

The first immigrants to Canada from British India arrived in 1904. Within a few years, there were 6,000 "Hindoos", as they were then known. Like Chinese immigrants, only men from India were allowed to enter.

In 1908, Canada created a regulation to stop the flow of immigrants. A seemingly neutral policy, it required all immigrants to make a continuous journey from their country of nationality.

At the same time, Canadian Pacific was forced to shut down its lucrative passenger ship service between Vancouver and Calcutta. Immigration officers were secretly told the regulation was to be applied only to immigrants from British India. The regulation was a resounding success. Immigration from India came to a virtual standstill.

(Ali Kazmi is a Toronto-based film-maker. His **Continuous Journey** *recently won the Golden Conch at the Mumbai International Film Festival, 2006)*

These Indians here have Runaway Grooms

Indo-Canadian filmmaker Ali Kazimi has taken a shot at everything – from saving a river to poignant immigrant tales.

Firdaus Ali

TORONTO: He's taken a shot at everything — from saving a bleeding river to poignant immigrant tales. Ali Kazimi is an avant-garde, Indo-Canadian filmmaker who has the conviction to film what he believes in.

This time around, the ace filmmaker has received accolades and rave reviews for his recent film Runaway Grooms — a dramatic new documentary, co-produced and aired by the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), which exposes the disturbing trend of thousands of brides being abandoned in Punjab after being married to men settled in Canada.

Runaway Grooms vividly explores this culture of patriarchy, shame and honour and puts a human face to this growing problem by profiling the painful stories of two abandoned brides — Namita Jain of Delhi and Sonia Kaur of Ludhiana.

Through them we come to understand the myriad ways that social structures, customs and Canadian laws make it possible for these women to be so horribly exploited. Kazimi also confronts Sonia's husband, now in Vancouver, who sees not his bride, but himself as the hapless victim and injured party.

Runaway Grooms was screened at the Indian International Film Festival of Los Angeles last month and won the audience award for the best documentary and an honorary mention from the jury.

The film has also been nominated for the best social/political documentary and for best original score (Mark Korven) for the Golden Sheaf Awards at the Yorkton Short Film Festival. The film was screened on Discovery Times cable network in the US in mid -March.

Kazimi went to India and came across an increasing number of families who had been victimised by scam marriages involving NRI grooms from the west.

"I decided to tell the stories of two women, both urban, middle-class working women. Both had similar stories and had been defrauded by men from the west. The pattern of betrayal in both cases was amazingly the same," says Kazimi.

Accessed on https://www.dnaindia.com/world/report-these-indians-here-have-runaway-grooms-1028875

PHOTOS BY JEFFREY THOMAS

Tina Hahn Interviewed Ali Kazimi about his filmmaking...

Ali's work includes the award-winning (and Genie nominated) *Narmada: A Valley Rises*, *Shooting Indians: A Journey with Jeffrey Thomas*, and his most recent work, *Some Kind of Arrangement.*

I work intuitively. A documentary starts with an idea. It can be viewed somewhat as a "thesis" but it is more appropriate to regard it as a "framework". You need to be really open and allow things to happen. Not that I'm saying the process is unstructured. You are constantly making decisions. You have to use your entire life experience. In many cases there is only one crack at a shot ... there are no second takes.

The entire process challenges you to be completely focused and open. This is important since unanticipated things happen. If you are not too rigid on what you intend to do, you can constantly incorporate things as they unfold. It allows for moments of irony and humour, the quirkiness of everyday life. It is the unexpectedness that differentiates documentary from drama. In order to record the unexpected, one has to be open to receiving it. In drama one can say this is exactly what I want, and get it.

These differences are not that rigid. I have shot drama, and sometimes things happen. A good filmmaker will always sieze the opportunity to grab those moments. These moments go towards making a documentary more filmic. For example, documentary allows you to use visual layers in terms of people's expressions and events unfolding.

There is another kind of openness needed as well: the openness to let go. You can spend a lot of time and resources on a sequence that ultimately does not do much for the story. For Passage From India, we filmed a poet over a morning, it was a half day in a five day shooting schedule, and we couldn't use it. Even if you have spent valuable resources on a scene, it is the story that needs to come first.

pg>21

Narmada was a process film about a struggle unfolding. The first shoot was over 32 days, and in the end, I shot 110 hours of footage. Why so much? Well, I didn't know what would happen. But when you shoot so much, you need to factor in the time to screen and search through the material in the editing process.

Any format is just a tool. As long as you know the limitiations, you can use it to its maximum effectiveness. Narmada was shot on Hi8 which was a untested format in 1990.

The process for Some Kind of Arrangement and Passage From India was very different. A sense of storyline already existed, but you have only limited time with the subjects. *Some Kind of Arrangement* had 80 hours of footage, *Passage From India* had 12.

Some Kind of Arrangement seems at first that it has no narrative. But that does not make it any more objective or real. Since I am tracking reality creatively, everything is decided from the shots to the juxtapositions. It was a composite story of three people going through the process of an arranged marriage. The three stories work collectively as a whole, even though the people have never met and may not ever meet each other ... but they are organically connected.

In deciding which characters to use, one needs to think of the chemistry between each story and how each story contributes to the other. Where are the redundancies and complimentaries and at times the contradictories?

Documentary filmmaking is a leap in the dark. When you have to go into a situation with all your senses and experiences highlighted and be willing to trust yourself. In some ways a good documentary is about looking at the world with a fresh eye.

A week of revolution, war and peace....

CINEMA with M. Shamim

Every once in a while a society faces its day of reckoning. For us it was the day we decided to build the Sardar Sarovar dam over the Narmada, one of the sacred rivers in the country. Dams are built on the basic principle of greatest good for greatest numbers — a gift of democracy. In a country where the population is soon going to touch the 100-million mark, progress is bound to become the keyword in human affairs. So in an age of dam-building, inaugurated by Pandit Nehru with Bhakra Nangal, dam-bashing, if not busting, may go against the decorum observed by nation-builders. A hundred thousand people after all have no business to stall progress which will affect the quality of life of at least 500 times more of that number.

Yet two persons, Baba Amte and Medha Patkar, were crazy enough to pose that fundamental question: Does progress have a right to uproot man against his wishes from his habitat and transplant him in an alien ambience? Two visionaries who now seek a revision of our attitude to progress. They were not unnerved by the enormity of numbers. Why should the meek disinherit the Earth, fewer though they might be than those who have sold their soul to progress — as we know it, that is? Baba Amte is an old Gandhian who believes in man and nature living in total harmony. But it is Medha Patkar who has finally brought the meek together — the tribals living in more than 300 villages.

"Narmada: a valley rises" by Ali Kazmi visually captures the long march of the people of the valley and their supporters to the violent human conflict and the inevitable evaluation of material progress. The concept is not new. Prophet Muhammad is said to have observed that God does not forgive the city wherein even one man sleeps hungry. And if a society is to be adjudged it will not be by the richest but by the poorest of its members. The Sardar Sarovar controversy raised by Medha Patkar has to be looked into more carefully. Ali Kazmi's documentary gives us some of its sharp contours. His camera records the emotive truth of the movement which at times gets submerged in all pervasive politics, washed ashore by callousness of administrative machinery or dimmed by the personal predicament of the principal performers in this drama of social conflict.

If necessary, Kazmi's camera cuts through the layers of political chicanery. It leaves us in no doubt about the kind of role the Congress Chief Minister of Gujarat played in stopping the Narmada Valley marchers who wanted to prevent construction of the Dam. Gujarat stood to gain more than any other State from the Sardar Sarovar Project. By the time the meek of the earth march up to the boundary of the State, the issue acquires such political overtones that it almost ceases to be a question of human rights. It becomes a battle of wits between crafty politicians and an apolitical Gandhian, Baba Amte. Nothing describes the tone of exchanges better than a poster captured by Kazmi's ever alert camera. It says: "Baba Amte go back. Your leprosy patients are missing you!"

The strength of Kazmi's documentation does not lie in a dehumanising objectivity of a statistician. It lies in the film-maker's commitment to humanism which makes the documentary not a transient social statement but a work of art that transcends time. What can be more moving than a man's challenge to the might of a system that tends to ignore his presence — now or ever?

Kazmi's film is already doing its round on the international circuit. It was shown at the Torento Film Festival in 1994 and received a lot of attention from many, including director Mani Ratnam who paid handsome tributes to it during a press conference. Kazmi is from Delhi's St. Stephen's College who has migrated to Canada where he is now making his films.

Vale of tears

Ali Kazimi's film movingly documents the agitation against the Narmada dam

It's a film which angers, frustrates, brings forth an occasional smile and even moves you to tears. Ali Kazimi's debut film, *Narmada: A Valley Rises*, is a 90-minute tribute to the people in the movement against the biggest dam in the world, in the heart of India.

From impersonal headlines and bare numbers to making up a crowd of demonstrators, the tribals of the Narmada Valley acquire an identity all their own; living, breathing persons who are willing to lay down their lives in their fight against the dam because it takes away from them everything they have.

That is also one of the film's strong points. Instead of detailing the environmental and technical aspects of the dam project, Kazimi chooses to make his point by focussing on the famous 1990 Ferkuva agitation. The filmmaker painstakingly documents the December 1990 march by 6,000 tribals and farmers to the dam site in Gujarat and their day-to-day struggle after the marchers were stopped at the Gujarat border by hundreds of securitymen and forced to sit on *dharna* for weeks.

Strangely, the film which takes an uncomfortably close look at the blockade of four years ago, still retains a sense of urgency. Four years later, the situation remains much the same as far as the movement is concerned. The Sardar Sarovar dam has gained in height but the tribals and farmers of the valley, led by Medha Patkar and Baba Amte, are still struggling to be heard.

The power equation between then and now hasn't changed. Kazimi's camera cleverly moves on both sides of the border — juxtaposing the quiet desperation of the bare-footed tribal who has left his home and family, with the well-dressed smugness of the pro-dam Chamber of Commerce official from Gujarat; the weakened, tired faces of the hunger-strikers with the enthusiastic picnickers brought in buses, queuing up to get their packets of food; the quiet, dignified *satyagraha* with Urmilaben Patel's (the late Chimanbhai Patel's wife) facile rendering of *Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram* — Gandhiji's favourite *bhajan*.

In a brilliant, moving depiction of anger and discontent the inhabitants of the valley come to life in their struggle against a perverse, warped concept of development

The filmmaker from Delhi University, who has settled down in Canada, has a powerful camera. The images linger long after the film is over. The misty beauty of the river. The marchers queuing up to get their hands tied to face the line of fire ringed by gun-toting securitymen. The sinister darkness broken by floodlights when the police swoop down on the demonstrators in the dead of the night and carry them away kicking and screaming.

The film records the plight of those farmers who took the government's word at face value, gave up their land and accepted alternate sites. Today, those families are living in squalid tin hutments with no water, instead of the rich, fertile land they have left behind.

One criticism being levelled against Kazimi is that he has concentrated more on the stars in the scene — Medha Patkar, Baba Amte and other activists from Delhi and elsewhere — than on the tribals. But the valley people do come to life and their struggle against a perverse, warped concept of development has been well-documented. And, Kazimi, who premiered his film in the Toronto Film Festival and is now seeking to show it on Star TV or Doordarshan, does not mince his words.

Or his visuals.

Of course, Kazimi would do well to update his titles. B.D. Sharma, for instance, is no longer commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the correction comes only in the last scene of the film.

Other than that, however, Kazimi makes sure that your attention does not waver even for a minute. The Narmada agitation is not just one of ministers and activists wrangling in air-conditioned boardrooms or hunger strikes at the drop of a hat. There is more to it than that — Kazimi shows you just how much. •

Minu Jain/New Delhi

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REEL COMMITMENT

NARMADA: A VALLEY RISES, written, produced and directed by Ali Kazimi, at the John Spotton Cinema, (150 John). Friday (February 3) at 8 pm, February 4 and 5, 7:30 and 9:30 pm. $4, students $3. 651-1714. Rating: NNNN

Ali Kazimi's Narmada: A Valley Rises reminds us that despite recent feature-film hysteria, Canadians still excel at documentaries. Polished beyond its low-budget means, this film stands in the best tradition of committed filmmaking.

In the late 80s, the Indian government and the World Bank started plans to dam the huge Narmada river, flooding its valley and displacing 160,000 people. Kazimi, who emigrated from India 12 years ago, went to the valley in 1990 to film the conflict between nonviolent resisters and money-greased government flacks. The film doesn't just document the struggle, it joins it.

Like the most successful recent documentaries, Narmada builds a narrative and introduces characters that carry an audience through the complex thicket of issues.

Baba Amte, the Save Narmada movement's spiritual leader, looks like an aging movie star and talks with the steel charm of the truly disciplined. (He was once a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi.) Medha Patkar is much younger and just as beautiful — she drives the movement on pure will and adrenaline.

Kazimi manages to create portraits of two compelling people, but keeps them within the context of a large-scale people's movement. Narmada is shot (Kazimi), edited (Steve Weslak) and scored (Mychael Danna) with a craft that makes it look like an expensive epic instead of the on-the-fly event that it was.

For anyone worn down or cynical about social struggle, Narmada shows how it can be both effective and inspiring. The World Bank pulled out of the project, the people of the Narmada valley were honoured worldwide and, even though the Indian government is continuing with the dam, the story isn't over yet. ●