

My husband and I recently visited Rajasthan a few weeks after the one-year anniversary of the Nov. 26, 2008, terrorist attacks in Mumbai.

The country was on a high alert and a good friend of ours, who is with an international news agency, warned us the company had closed its Mumbai office and asked the staff to lie low; the local police and government security agency were abuzz, fearful that terrorists would strike again. Thankfully, India proved safe during our visit.

However, the widespread and tightened security, along with chat among locals about terrorist threats, were an instructive education in comparing how the country has responded to and thinks about 26/11 in relation to post-9/11 America and even England after the July 7, 2005, London bombings.

Vandana Sood, a Mumbai-born and New York-based film director, has exported Mumbai's story of modern-day terrorism abroad for the world to benefit. In her short videos titled "The Taxi Takes on Terror," Sood acts as a mediator between taxi wallahs, or cab drivers, and their passengers who conjecture, discuss and debate the causes of the 26/11 terrorist attacks (www.thetaxitakes.com).

Three months after the attacks, Sood filmed and facilitated conversations within the taxis. And why is the taxi the space in which she decided to direct this dialogue? According to her, it is the public space where "people of various socioeconomic backgrounds and religions meet."

In a recent conversation, she explains further: Globally, taxi drivers and passengers have spontaneous and candid interactions in taxis.

A taxi driver is a mobile new-age guru who navigates the streets and has a pulse on what is ticking in a city.

Cabbies are also links of exchange and contact between people from various backgrounds, constantly conversing with people on the street and uniquely positioned to sense the atmosphere in a city or town. They understand the cities they traverse and are sensitive to political upheaval, given that it directly affects their livelihoods.

Most of the drivers picked for "The Taxi Takes on Terror" were on the roads of Mumbai when the terrorists attacked. Hence they witnessed the carnage and have a personal experience with terrorism.

Also, in particular, within a taxi in India, the passengers in the backseat usually belong to a higher class than the taxi driver. So, interactions between cab



**Kavita
Ramdya**

Taxi wallahs take on terror

Globally, taxi drivers and passengers have spontaneous and candid interactions in cabs. New York-based Vandana Sood captures these discussions in post-26/11 Mumbai in a series of four short videos



drivers and passengers allow us to engage in a conversation that breaches formidable class and caste divides - conversations that might not occur without the intervention inside the taxi space.

The environment of the taxi, a public yet contained space, also provided the perfect conditions amenable for filming.

"Welcome To The Taxi Takes On Terror," which begins with an ironic 1960s-era paean to Mumbai, is the first installment of the four-video series.

In the video, taxi wallahs contrast the opportunity, wealth and innovation of Mumbai with its intrinsic poverty.

One taxi wallah describes how Mumbai's streets are "paved with gold" yet there is "nowhere to sleep," pointing out the discrepancy between the city's opportunities for wealth and advancement with the homeless beggars who are also part of the city's landscape.

Sood films passengers and taxi wallahs as they discuss what makes Mumbai great (shopping, industry, development) and conjecture why the terrorists targeted Bombay.

"Who is to Blame?" conveys Delhi's inhabitants' suspicion of Pakistan and its madrasas in organizing the Mumbai attacks. In light of President Obama's recent criticism of lapses in White House security, the taxi passengers also blame India's security and local police for their inability to detect and prevent the attack.

"Women Taxi Drivers" is perhaps the most interesting of the four short films. I was surprised to learn that Mumbai has two women's taxi services, companies that teach women how to drive taxis and self-defense skills such as karate in order to exclusively serve female passengers.

Sexual harassment remains an issue in India and drinking and driving among young, male taxi wallahs at night is a concern.

Now that women are working longer hours and spending their expendable income on late-night movies and evenings out with friends, there is more of a demand for female drivers to take women passengers home.

Supriya Surve, a 23-year-old taxi driver, is wise beyond her years. When asked what she enjoys about driving a taxi, she responds with "I get to meet new people ... you learn. You get to know what kind of people live in the city. You find out about people and their behavior" before answering her mobile phone with a resigned yet professional voice; business is good.

The final installment "Women and Islam" stars a female Muslim taxi driver, Sameena. This video focuses on

the issue of whether Muslim women should be allowed to wear a burka.

Sameena's mother suggested her daughter learn how to drive a taxi because she would "earn depending on how hard she worked."

Sameena, like all the other thousands of taxi wallahs in Mumbai, expresses an entrepreneurial spirit when she describes how by driving a taxi versus taking a more traditional women's job she is "not anyone's slave" and is, instead, her "own boss."

It is later revealed that Sameena is a young divorcee who was held a prisoner in her own home by her ex-husband. She describes herself as sitting around and doing embroidery when she was married, "like an illiterate." It was only by divorcing her husband that she was able to work and earn her own income.

The first half of the video is of Muslim women passengers and Sameena discussing identities as Muslim women whereas the second half of the video takes a more insidious turn when Sood records taxi wallahs and their male passengers discuss the Taliban and issues such as "honor killings." Clearly, Sood's videos are mediums for social critique.

When asked about her ambitions for her films, she responds: I aim to work on socially conscious media focused around spirituality, intercultural communication and human rights. Even though my focus is on nonfiction media, I am interested in fiction and have been working on a feature-length screenplay centered on the burka and cross-dressing.

I have a background in the area of community media education and the concept of empowering people with the tools of communication motivates me.

I aim to work on projects that mobilize the interconnectedness of the Internet and its Web 2.0 tools to create greater awareness and explore new ways for people to learn from one another.

Like so many expatriate artists today, Vandana Sood is intent on moving back and forth between her home country, India, and her adopted one, America.

And like her socially conscious colleagues, Sood is intent on creating social change through her artistry and filmmaking. Shabash!

Kavita Ramdya is author of "Bollywood Weddings: Dating, Engagement and Marriage in Hindu America" www.bollywood-weddings.com