



Soul survivors Sam and Meenu in *Mindscales....Of Love and Longing*

Live to fight

Love, life and disability collide in these National Award-winning documentaries, says **Uday Bhatia**.

In Govind Nihalani's 1983 feature film *Ardh Satya*, telling use is made of the word "napunsakta" (impotence). Om Puri's honest but violent cop uses it as a metaphor for the frustrations that come with not being able to do one's job properly. The same word resurfaces, in English, as a metaphor of a different kind in *Mindscales...Of Love and Longing*. Vipul Goyal has had muscular dystrophy since he was 14 years old, but he's still, as he puts it, a "complete man", capable of "passion" and of producing a child. His is one of the stories in Arun Chadha's National Award-winning documentary, which deals with the romantic and sexual desires of people with disabilities.

Mindscales will be screened at the India International Centre this fortnight, along with *There is Something in the Air* and *A Drop of Sunshine*. All three have been produced by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust, and each won a National Award this year. Chadha's film started taking shape two-and-a-half years ago. "In the

beginning, I was wondering how I would do it," said the Meerut-born Delhi resident, who's been making documentaries since 1981. "The idea was very tricky. Disability is a taboo in this country, and sexuality is an added taboo." Funding was another concern. "In India, it's extremely difficult to get financing for films with subjects like this," Chadha said. "Luckily, around the time I decided I wanted to make this film, PSBT was opening up their slots." Chadha, who'd worked with PSBT before on his 2004 film *Swayam*, applied for funding, and his proposal was accepted.

Chadha then set out to find people who would not only talk about living with disabilities, but also discuss their sexuality. It was a slow process – the director spent weeks with individual subjects in order to gain their trust – but Chadha persisted and unearthed several remarkable

protagonists. There's Alok Sikka, a cerebral palsy patient who drives a rejigged scooter, blogs on cinema and bashfully relates how he fell head over heels in love, only for his "intellect" to tell him it was the wrong decision. Or Sujata Goenka, a middle-aged woman who's never

allowed a walking disability and a speech problem to let her feel that she can't lead a regular, independent life. As she said, "I can't run, I can't jump...so when I did have sex, I felt a part of normalcy."

In its gentle way, *Mindscales* keeps reminding us not to fall

into the trap of equating physical or mental disabilities with a lack of desire. As Sikka puts it, "The urge for physical needs is there, sometimes there's just no way to satisfy it". Chadha shows us people at various relationship stages; 21-year-old Down's syndrome patient Trisha Khandelwal, who wants a boyfriend who's "handsome, rides a bike

and doesn't drink anything except wine"; Samuel and Meenu Mani, wheelchair-bound, happily married and thinking of having kids; and the contrasting cases of Goyal and Goenka – the former finding fulfillment in family life, the latter happy to remain unattached and have her own sexual identity.

Identity issues also figure prominently in *A Drop of Sunshine*. Aparna Sanyal's film is about one Reshma Valliappan and her battle with schizophrenia. Ten years ago, Valliappan started hearing voices; she soon became withdrawn, violent, suicidal. The film focuses on her attempts to overcome her affliction with the help of "alternative therapies" like yoga, painting and confronting her delusions instead of avoiding them. Valliappan's spiky personality enlivens the film, even as it goes overboard at times in pushing the case for unproven, unorthodox treatments.

Iram Ghufuran's debut, *There is Something in the Air*, rounds out the trio. Like the other two films, it deals with people seeking solutions for a disability, but the similarities end there. Ghufuran's film is an elliptical, almost willfully elusive experience. We're never sure whether we're watching the film's subjects – women who visit the shrine at Badayun in Uttar Pradesh seeking a cure for the "affliction of the air" – or their hallucinations. "The cure is always within the afflicted, and manifested through dreams," the onscreen text says at one point.

The absence of a clear narrative and the dream logic of the images in Ghufuran's film challenge the notion that documentaries are supposed to look or unfold a certain way. Rajiv Mehrotra, Managing Trustee of PSBT, said this was something they encouraged in the films they worked on. "We're happy to support films that push the boundaries of the familiar," he said. He mentioned how more than 50 per cent of the films they commissioned were by first-time directors. "We feel they are the least likely to fall into stereotypes – both in terms of technique and subject matter," he explained. "Sure, 15 per cent of our films fail. But then this is our 34th National Award, and that wouldn't be the case if we didn't take risks."

PSBT Films 2011 is on **Fri May 4** at the IIC. See Other film screenings.

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