

# THE TAXI TAKES

## MEDIA PRESS KIT



BY  
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(India, 2009)

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## **TAGLINE**

What happens when people from different classes and faiths sit across from each other in a taxi and take a journey together? Can this setting provide fertile ground for a rich dialogue about modern terrorism?

## **SYNOPSIS**

*The Taxi Takes on Terror* (or in short, *The Taxi Takes*) is a documentary project based on conversations between taxi drivers and passengers in the taxis of Mumbai. The conversations are centered on the terrorist attacks that hit Mumbai on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2008, and address a host of related issues including gender, fear, faith and identity. The taxi is a public yet contained space where candid and spontaneous talks take place between people of all walks of life creating diverse perspectives on any issue.

**The Taxi Takes on Terror consists of several short films.**

One of them, **Women and Islam** is about a female taxi driver and the voices of her female passengers. At a time when the 'burkha' is being banned, 'Women and Islam' explores identity, faith and fashion from exchanges in a taxi, in a Nation that houses the third largest Muslim population in the World.

'Women and Islam' focuses on a female taxi driver who drives only female passengers around. Sameena is a young Muslim woman who, as a single

divorced mother, drives a taxi for a living. Because of their preconceptions about Islam, her female passengers are surprised that she was allowed to drive a taxi, being a Muslim woman. However, as the conversations continue she demonstrates that she chooses to provide for herself, and be her own boss. The talks confront the terrorist attack, Mumbai city and the state of Islam. In the course of the journey we discover that Sameena wears a burkha when she does not drive a taxi. Her life reveals several contradictions, that of being a pragmatic businesswoman and taxi driver in harsh Mumbai while wearing a garment that is being banned and is loaded with layers of repression and political rhetoric. Women and Islam reveals an individual that blurs the boundaries.

## **GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

*The Taxi Takes on Terror* aims to:

- 1) Create spaces of dialogue extending from the inside of the taxi to the global sphere of the Internet.
- 2) Increase discussion and awareness about terrorism amongst various faiths, in particular Hindus and Muslims, at a crucial juncture in the geopolitics of the Indian subcontinent.
- 3) Investigate and compile an account of perspectives about terrorism focusing on India, Pakistan and the US post 9/11.
- 4) Use the connectivity and power of new media technologies, as well as the innovative interplay of social intervention and mass media, to help public art aimed at discussion.
- 5) Gather data for what might eventually become a study in visual anthropology of globalization, nationalism and terrorism using the

tools of non-fiction documentary filmmaking, photography and the networking power of the Internet.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I filmed interactions between the Mumbai taxi drivers and passengers while driving around in the front seat with the driver. I then edited short issue based films and embedded them on a web site that allows people from all around the Globe to take a sneak peak inside the taxi and participate in the talks.

The project integrates documentary filmmaking, image making, recorded conversations and text on a web platform to create a larger global forum for the discussion of modern terrorism.

The strength of this approach is that it uses film to capture what might normally be a personal discussion and translates it onto the Internet for a larger global dialogue.

By bringing these terrorism-related video interactions from Mumbai taxis to cyber space, *The Taxi Takes on Terror* aims to create a global discourse on modern terrorism that spans geography and exists in public spaces like Taxis and the Internet.

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKER**

Vandana completed her MFA from Hunter College's renowned Integrated Media Arts program in New York City. In 2003 she graduated with a Masters in Mass Communication from Jamia's MCRC (Mass Communication Research Centre) in New Delhi, India.

Ms. Sood started her career as a camerawoman for the British Council film, 'My Sister My Self', made for the Health Ministers summit in Geneva. In 2004 she won the prestigious Commonwealth Vision Award for her short on Education, from The Royal Commonwealth Society. As a media Consultant at the India Centre Foundation, an Indo Japanese Non Profit focused on inter cultural communication, Vandana made several films to highlight the cultural legacy between the two nations and traveled to the Cannes Film Festival in 2005.

Ms Sood facilitated and taught filmmaking to under privileged children in New Delhi as part of Plan International's program, 'Children have something to say.' In the summer of 2006 Ms. Sood was a lecturer at The 'World of Knowledge', a UNDP program in Poland, delivering workshops on global issues. Vandana was the recipient of the '2008 Davis Project for Peace' for her project, 'Stretching Towards Peace' which focused on yoga and meditation as a counter to youth violence and aggression in conflict areas like Serbia. Vandana has also taught media as an adjunct teacher at Hunter College.

Since 2006 Vandana has been based in New York City where she worked with PBS's 'In the Mix', The Manhattan Theatre Group, Beliefnet, MTV's Teen Mom and Alwan for the Arts. PEO International awarded Vandana with the honor of PEO Peace Scholar for two consecutive years and she was also part of the

Women's International Leadership Program at International House, New York. She successfully completed her second Masters in 2009. The Taxi Takes is her MFA thesis project.

## **QUOTES/ ACCOLADES FROM THE PRESS**

“Her chapter on Women and Islam was an absolutely intriguing and well rounded conversation about the burkha, including views of men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, and most fascinating, a Muslim female taxi driver who dons the burkha only when she is not working.”

– Women's Voices Now

“Sood says the festival (Women's Voices from the Muslim World) has provided filmmakers like her with a unique opportunity to present a different perspective about Muslim women.” – Voice of America

“The Taxi Takes on Terror looks at public opinion on terrorism through a series of interviews shot in Mumbai taxicabs”

- Worldfocus

“see just what is possible when a talented video-maker and digital artist – working in the aftermath of an epic act of terrorism — chooses the unique context of a taxi to explore matters of conflict, violence, hope, life, and death.” – Steve Gorelick on Media and Mayhem

Clearly, Sood's videos are mediums for social critique. Sood is intent on creating social change through her artistry and filmmaking." – News India Times

"Friend of Breakthrough, Vandana Sood, has a fascinating multimedia project, 'The Taxi Takes on Terror.' So, next time you hop in a cab, strike up a conversation. You might just learn something." – Breakthrough

"A project that goes beyond just academic requirements and is spilling into the Internet and videos."

-Wojtek Gwjazda of Masala Canada

"On the anniversary of the terror attacks in Mumbai, a New York City graduate student reflects on how the violence in India changed her."

– Beliefnet

## INTERVIEW WITH FILMMAKER (WORLDFOCUS)

Worldfocus spoke with Sood about her experiences producing the videos.

Worldfocus: Why did you select the taxi as the venue for your reporting?

Vandana Sood: Taxis are a space where interesting interactions take place. Where else can you have a conversation between a driver and a diamond merchant, an IT professional and a washer man? The public yet contained environment of the taxi acts as a meeting ground for people from a diverse cross-section of society.

Taxi drivers represent the working class — the Indian common man, aam aadmi. On the other hand, passengers usually belong to more educated higher socioeconomic groups.

In India, the fault lines based on caste, class, education and creed run deep. Hence it is important to find spaces where it is possible to have a dialogue that overcomes such divisions — especially when the discussion is about terrorism, which does not discriminate amongst its victims and affects humanity universally.

Worldfocus: What has changed in Mumbai in the year since the terrorists attacks?

Vandana Sood: Mumbai is as resilient a city as ever, having faced decades of communal violence and bomb blasts. In a sense, not much has changed in this urban space where people have no alternative but to enter the same train station where armed terrorists opened fire indiscriminately last year. For most people, the attacks (known as 26/11) is ingrained in their psyches. But Mumbai is still in flux — as vibrant and chaotic as before.

In Mumbai, there was an initial burst of activism, which appears to have made way for a more cynical attitude, which is unfortunate. At the same time, there are fewer war cries heard after the initial calls for revenge against Pakistan.

The slow judicial proceedings for Ajmal Kasab, the lone captured terrorist, have led to complaints about the government's lethargy and corruption. Most people hope that the Indian government has amended its security lapses and will be more prepared next time. The question is: can another 26/11 really be avoided?

Worldfocus: What did you see in the future for the Mumbai megalopolis?

Vandana Sood: The hard truth is that we will be hit again. The subcontinent has become a hotbed for several players like the Taliban, creating serious instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Indian government cannot deal with this matter in isolation but requires the cooperation of world leaders in formulating policies that do not have vested interests. As the financial center of a rising Asian power, Mumbai will have a shaky future in the world economy if these problems are not confronted.

## **FUNDING**

PEO International

Personal savings

Donations from friends and family

## **SCREENINGS**

JHPIEGO – John Hopkins Film Screening

Baltimore, U S A

August 2010

I View Film Festival

New York, U S A

August 2010

All Nations Film Festival - International House New York

New York, U S A

April 2010

Global Initiative for Social Change in the Arts GiSCA Palooza

New York, U S A

April 2010

Peace and Justice Education Conference, Columbia University

New York, U S A

April 2010

PEO International Screening

Brookfield, U S A

March 2010

Hunter College Show

New York, U S A

December 2009

Cineclub

November 2010

New York, USA

Humanity Explored Film Festival

Culture unplugged.com

January 2011

Voices from the Muslim World

Los Angeles, USA

March 2011