

## I understand Sindhi rootlessness: US-returned Maharashtrian actress

US-returned actress Smita Gondkar, who plays the main lead in 'The Awakening', a film about the Sindhi community, says she understands the trauma of rootlessness shown in the movie even though she is Maharashtrian.

In the film she plays a confused NRI girl, Sindhu Gidwani, who is brought up in the US and goes through an experience that turns her life upside down and sets her on a course to dig out her Sindhi roots.

Smita says she identifies with the inherent rootlessness of the Sindhi community - which was completely uprooted from its soil in Sindh, now in Pakistan - because she herself lived in the US and faced similar problems.

'It is common in today's world. I can understand this search for Indianness very well because I have worked abroad myself. The urge to know my country better eventually brought me back. Anybody who hasn't been living in India, which is so different from the West, will understand the ethos,' Smita told IANS in the capital a day after the special screening of the movie.

The film famously stars lawyer and MP Ram Jethmalani, who plays himself.

The story, scripted by Vinod Raman Nayar, is told through the eyes of Sindhu, who works as a researcher on the Indus Valley civilisation. She comes across her Mumbai-based grandmother, who clings to her Sindhi heritage, and stumbles upon her roots.

'There is a parallel track. The main storyline also takes in the pangs of partition when the Sindhi community left their province in Pakistan, landless,' Smita explained.

It is the reunion of different stories, which all happen at the same time and converge, the actress said.

Starring Smita, Vishal, Farida Dadi, Pankaj Berry, Gargi Patel and Jethmalani, the film will be released commercially in the first week of April.

Smita describes 'The Awakening' as a 'Singlish venture with English dialogues and Sindhi songs written and composed by producer Kosi Lalwani, a Sindhi singer of renown'.

'Do you know even after being thrown out of Pakistan, they (Sindhis) did not complain and adjusted well all over the world, but lost their culture along the way and today most of the youngsters cannot speak their mother tongue?

'There is a very touching and emotional line at the end of the movie where my screen mom tells me, 'Usually it's parents who introduce culture in their families, but in this case you have got me to the family.' '

Director Dharambir Kumar's film, says Smita, has managed to touch base with the family value system, the bulwark of the Indian social code.

'This family conditioning is an asset to all Indians. Now that we have more nuclear families, I don't want us to lose family values. We should have a lot of gratitude to them. People now work early, live separately, but we shouldn't let families break,' said the actress with a touch of desperation in her voice.

The movie, according to Smita, filled a vacuum in her life.

'That of a grandmother. Now, Farida dadi (on-screen granny) is a real grandmother to me. She showers so much love on me.'

Smita is a hotel management graduate and worked with Disney Cruiselines in Florida in the US for three years before she decided to vacation in India.

'I had this name tag which said Smita. And our passengers at Disney asked me all kinds of funny questions about India, about arranged marriage, cultures, its mores. It set me wondering and I wanted to know about my own country,' she recalled. That was two years ago.

She came to India on a holiday and dabbled in modelling which paved the way for film proposals.

Her first acting assignment was a Marathi movie, 'Basudev Balwant Phadke' about a 19th century Marathi revolutionary, followed by a comedy, 'Mumbaicha Dabbewala', and social drama, 'Che Sauka Mary Fernandes'.

'I have also played Kumar Gaurav's wife in a silent movie 'My Daddy Is Strongest' which is in the post-production stage. There are two more mainstream projects in the pipeline, but I will not talk about them now,' she laughed.

She is looking for 'characters of substance' like the woman she is - a judo champion, a kayaking trainer, a wine and liquor specialist and an event manager, besides being an actress.

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