

# 'NOTHING IS A MAN'S JOB'

MITU BHOWMICK LANGE is bringing India and Australia together through cinema, says APARNA BHALLA

Festivals are path-breakers for Indian films these days," says Mitu Bhowmick Lange, who has facilitated a concrete international platform for our industry, particularly the indie offshoots, by taking over the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne (IFFM) as its director. Mitu, who is also the director of Mind Blowing Films, is the first ever Indian to win a Jill Robb Screen Leadership Award. Over the years, with her ever-growing profile of work, she has emerged as a woman of substance with indomitable spirit. Now that the festival is reaching new heights, it is set for the eighth edition, which will kickstart on August 10. Mitu has also played a major part in bridging cultural ties of India and other countries, specially Australia.

**You've played a major part in taking Indian cinema to international platforms. What was your idea behind it and how did you convert it into a successful venture?**

When I first moved to Australia, Indian films were being screened at community centres. That too over weekends. There were no proper exhibitions or box office reporting. With support from key studios like Yashraj and UTV, we were successfully able to integrate Indian cinema to the mainstream and screen them through franchise chains across Australia. The market has grown wonderfully and now not only Hindi films but regional films are also enjoying successful runs. What started with faith in the cinema-giver, still continues to this day and we've never looked back as a company. We just happened to be at the right place, meet the right people, work hard and do it at the right time. That is exactly why it worked.

**You're a director, producer, funder and a sole Indian heritage awardee of Jill Robb Screen Leadership Award. How does it feel to be cobining so many roles?**

It is an absolute honour that I



was awarded the Jill Robb award. Especially as Jill was a path breaker in Australian cinema. Even if I can do 1/10th of what she has done, I would consider my life a fulfilling and successful one. It is because of women like Jill and directors all over the world who are changing the discourse that I do what I do. I am honoured that you think I am an inspiration. But I just truly do it for my daughter and her generation because my strong mother did it for me. She reminded me that nothing is a man's job. We are not women in a man's world, we are women taking over the world. So in even the smallest way possible one should work towards making their dream become reality, it might take longer but that shouldn't stop you.

**According to you, how important are film festivals for Indian content in establishing their outreach?**

Festivals are a fantastic way for Indian cinema to reach out to a non-Indian audience and blur lines and borders. Every movie festival, including ours, sees patrons from Australia, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Japan who absolutely love Indian cinema. They enjoy Bollywood song and dance sequences, the hard-hitting story lines, the documentaries and the

themes because either they relate to it or want to learn from it. If our festival does that in Australia, then this is surely the reaction all over the world. If it weren't for festivals, our film market would not have grown.

**Your love for Melbourne has always been eminent. What makes you so driven towards Australia?**

I moved to Australia 14 years ago, following my husband like a good wife, and this country soon became home. I worked in production houses before starting Mind Blowing Films and the city of Melbourne gave me new friends, allowed me to build a career and start a family. Anyone who has been to Melbourne knows it is a magnificent city with so many cultures. You can have Afghan food cooked by widows who migrated to the country, watch the midsummer night's dream at the town hall and enjoy an Iranian movie in an open air cinema. That is when Mind Blowing Films and Indian Film Festival came to being. This was my addition to the city and the country for being welcoming and respecting cultures that were different.

**How was the process of establishing a company based out of India that works towards growth of Indian movies in Australia?**

I knew Indian films needed to be pushed in the country and given the right platforms, right marketing and showcasing. It was difficult getting theatres to screen the films in the beginning because of red timelines but once we built trust and got the biggest theatre conglomerate on board, we knew we had to maintain their trust and we do to this day. From there the process became streamlined, we followed all the rules the film commission put in front of us and they never complained. Because Chinese, Japanese, French and Italian movies were already screening in the country, we wanted to ensure that the largest film-producing country in the world also had the right platforms for its wonderful films.

**You've line-produced a variety of prominent films which include Chak De India, Salaam Namaste in the past. Why don't we see your name on productions these days?**

Not too many films are being shot in Australia as other countries offer better incentives. However, I have been actively working with like-minded friends in producing documentaries. We made the Spice Girls of India — a wonderful documentary (part of the New India series) about seven sisters in Jodhpur who

run the biggest spice stores in Rajasthan — a few years ago. My dear friend Omir and Kate Savers and I just produced a film called Raising the Bar. It is about children and young adults with Downs Syndrome who are dancers and who travel from Australia to India for the World Down Syndrome Congress. It follows their journey and their friendships with their Indian counterparts. The film just premiered in India and has had a brilliant response. So, my focus has been on that film for the last few years. I have a few projects lined up, which I will take up slowly and keep doing projects that resonate with me.

**What all do you consider before formulating a theme for the film festival?**

The first thing we consider is the socio-political climate of the world. Cinema has always mirrored society and has been at the forefront of creating discourse and addressing issues through the form. Then we think of the people, what people want to see, what would pique their interest and how to bring about more discussions. We also look at the theme through what hasn't been discussed and should be definitely talked about.

**Can you tell us something about this year's edition that is supposed to be conducted in August?**

This year we've made it even more interesting and packed with more masterclasses, Q&As and panel discussions. Our aim is to let budding filmmakers, actors and producers get a chance to learn from the pioneers and non-conformists of the industry. As the theme is inclusion, we have curated movies around it. With over 60 films in 22 languages, this might be our biggest film catalogue yet. We will speak to directors and writers who make a conscious decision to talk about inclusion, even the underlying theme of our dance competition is inclusion. This year we are in more cinemas around the city, we've got more free events and

have a longer festival too. 2018 is going to be bigger, better and inclusive.

**Feminism has often been equated with male bashing instead of maintaining equality. Being a woman leader, what is your say regarding this?**

Feminism isn't about women hating men. It is about equal opportunity, getting a chance at a job, education and life on merit and not because of gender. I've worked with some amazing women and men and some awful leaders who were both women and men. I think people have to be honest and sincere and gender has nothing to do with it. As someone who works and hires women and men I need to know how they work. That's my first rule always. Sometimes I am a little protective of my girls because of their safety, but when it comes down to work, there is no favouritism. I'm still learning what makes a good leader but I know what doesn't. It is telling a girl she will be treated as less because of her gender.

**IFFM has been recognised by the Government of Victoria and has also been awarded for contribution to multiculturalism. How does it feel getting immense success within a span of eight years?**

We are still getting there but it feels amazing to be recognised and acknowledged by the people and the city of Melbourne and Victoria. What makes it worthwhile is when so many people start asking us in January itself what are our plans for the festival. Our success are these little things. We've had Australians message us asking when the catalogue will be out, grandmothers from the Indian community wanting to listen to singers live, some dancers driving all the way from Adelaide only to perform at the dance competition and cinema patrons having a discussion with a director for over an hour and leaving with the biggest smile on their face. Those successes are unmatched.