



# NANDITA DAS MAKES INTREPID CHOICES

**S**he's extremely selective about her films and dislikes schmoozing in the celebrity world to acquire roles. Nandita Das is adored by audiences who seek meaningful cinema. Also an activist, Das has used her eloquence and compelling nature to voice many social issues. She was at the Toronto International Film Festival for Chitra Palekar's *Maati Maay*.

Amongst the multitude of celebrities, she was one of the few who lined up to watch films. And her filmography is expanding as Das has many upcoming projects lined up. Recently, she completed Jagmohan Mundhra's *Provoked* with Aishwariya Rai, where she plays a role much like herself - a social activist. Some of her upcoming films are Santosh Sivan's *Kerala* with Rahul Bose, KNT Sastry's *Karnil* and Suman Ghosh's *Padakkhep* with Soumitra Chatterjee (of Satyajit Ray fame).

Now in the process of working on her own script, Das hopes to find funding for her directorial debut. In an exclusive for *ANOKHI*, Nandita Das talks about her selective choices and her belief that cinema can affect social change.

#### What is it like being at the Toronto International Film Festival again?

This is actually my third time here. I came here for *Fire*, *Earth* and now *Maati Maay*. Even in between there was a Mani Ratnam film called *A Peck on the Cheek*, but I couldn't come. It's lovely to be here, this is one festival where my favourite films have come. I love it also because of the process and journeys of these films. Every film is a gamble in any case, but if you have a good experience doing the films, they are very precious. Three of my very precious films have come here. I think the festival has become much bigger and more spread out.

#### How does it feel to be screened on the same platform as *Never Say Goodbye* (*Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehana*)?

It's just like saying how does it feel to even be acting in small films? I think there's a space for everything, and I just wish there was more space for independent films from producers, distributors, audiences and people who believe in projects like that. These kinds of films do get platforms but then there are Hollywood films as well. Everything, unfortunately, has become about economics but the fact is that at least a festival like this has the space for documentaries, independent films and debut filmmakers, which is great. I think there's space for all of us, and we don't need to feel threatened by that.

#### Why have you chosen to work in selective regional films?

Not just regional, I would say films that I can relate to without putting them in labels like commercial and art. The hardcore commercial film is something that I didn't grow up with so I cannot relate to them. I have been misquoted as saying that I look down upon commercial films just because I don't do them. I don't even see that many commercial films to be honest. It is just that I am trying to do my kind of work. It is a choice I have made, which is both conscious and instinctive. I am not fighting inside me and saying 'I am being strong and not getting tempted'. I am trying to do the work I like.

**Also, you have made a choice of staying in Delhi as opposed to Bombay?**  
It's part of the whole thing. I haven't felt the need to move to Bombay. Often, regional films also have wonderful stories. There's talent in other parts of the country as well, and I think you can make less compromises.

#### Are you happy and satisfied with the kind of roles you are doing?

I am happy with the fact that I am able to do what I enjoy doing. But I am not happy with the choices that come my way. The choices are limited basically. It's a public domain world. You have to be out there, you have to be visible, if you are not marketable or financially viable even, good films don't come your way. So, you have to choose from what is available. If you want to be busy, there is lots of work. It's not the quantity of work, it is the quality.

#### Are you visible?

I am not. Not that I choose not to be visible, but it's just that the things that you have to do to be visible - be it interviews, photo shoots, going to parties or award functions - I don't want to play the game. I am not looking down upon it either, but it becomes very difficult if you don't play the game.

#### I am sure audiences would love to see you doing more films...

I'd love to see myself doing more films! I would be lying if I say I don't get frustrated sometimes, but the point is that I get sanity through these choices, peace of mind and a certain way of living. I also do other work with the social sector on human rights issues, and I am able to keep a balance.

#### There are other actors like Shabana Azmi who are doing social work along with films...

Everyone's done commercial films. Talented actresses like Tabu and Shabana Azmi and Smita Patel have all done commercial films. When I did *Aks* with Amitabh Bachchan everyone said, so you finally are doing a mainstream. When I did *Pita* with Sanjay Dutt, they said you are finally doing a commercial film, and they told Sanjay you are doing an art film with Nandita. It depends on your perspective. I'd love to do a comedy or a thriller; I'd love to work with directors like Vishal Bhardwaj, Sudhir Misra, Ram Gopal Varma, Mani Ratnam and Mira Nair. I am not viable enough, but there will be a time that we will work together, I am not giving up hope.

#### You believe that cinema is an instrument of social change; have you been able to affect that change?

I believe cinema can be an instrument for social change, yes. But social change doesn't happen in only one way. It's a lot to do with attitudinal change. It's not because of one leader or one great movement only. Culture is a very interesting and subtle way of changing mindset. Films can change mindset; there are films that have affected me and my thinking. Subconsciously, they do get stored in your mind, and I am happy to be part of that kind of cinema that at least attempts that.

#### How was the journey of making *Maati Maay*?

Chitra Palekar is a very passionate director. She told me about the film in 2004. It's taken a long while. It is a very powerful story by Mahasweta Devi. The story is really the backbone, and then if you have a passionate director who really believes in the project, then it's a truly amazing job. It's a very difficult character.

#### What was it like playing the role of a witch in the film?

It was interesting because she's not really a witch or a mad woman but she's been made into one. How someone can pressurize you to such an extent that you actually start believing, is the fascinating part. In many different ways it happens to all of us. If you are told again and again that you are dumb or you cannot do it, you lose your confidence. I think many women suffer from that, they are told, 'you cannot do that' or 'you are not independent'. It's interesting to see how social pressure and social ostracization can impact your psyche.

INTERVIEW PREETI THANDI

