

Godmothers of The Namesake

By Craig Lambert | *Harvard Magazine* | March-April 2007

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Mira Nair '79 met Sooni Taraporevala '79 in the Lowell House dining room in the fall of 1976. The two women, both of Indian descent, became friends and, nine years later, began working together on the 1988 film *Salaam Bombay!*—Nair as director, Taraporevala as screenwriter. Later they collaborated on *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *My Own Country* (1998). But none of their movies so directly mirrors their own life experiences as this year's *The Namesake*, based on Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel. Having read the book en route, Nair arrived in Taraporevala's hometown of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) in March 2004 and bluntly told the screenwriter, "Sooni, we were born to make this film."



Courtesy of Mira Nair.

Sooni Taraporevala (left) and Mira Nair in Kolkata in 2005, on the rooftop where the final scene of *The Namesake* takes place

The reasons are abundantly clear. *The Namesake*'s protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, is a boy born to Indian émigrés in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1967. During the next three decades, he tries to inhabit the cultures of both the United States and India while not feeling at home in either. Nair and Taraporevala, too, have long straddled the cultures of India and America, and still have divided allegiances. Nair keeps homes in New York City and Kampala, Uganda; Taraporevala, after arriving at Harvard in 1975, spent more than half of the next 18 years in America—Cambridge, Newark, and Los Angeles—before returning to Mumbai to live in 1993. The screenwriter could easily empathize with Ashima, a female character in *The Namesake*. "Like her, I had 20 relatives who had come to see me

off at the airport,” Taraporevala says, recalling her departure for Harvard in 1975. “Like her, I had wanted to immediately turn around and go back. Like her, I adjusted and then stayed.”



Courtesy of Mirabai Films

*In a scene from *The Namesake*, Gogol Ganguli’s mother, Ashima (Tabu), tries on the shoes of her future husband, Ashoke, before meeting him for the first time.*

Taraporevala has been a screenwriter for 20 years, completing 20 commissioned screenplays for various directors, producers, and studios. Two of her non-Nair screenplays have been made into movies, both in India and both outside the mainstream. They took nine years and seven years, respectively, to complete. By contrast, her four movies with Nair each happened in a year or two. “I call it Mira magic,” Taraporevala says.

Even living half a world apart, the two friends worked closely together on *The Namesake*, thanks to the Internet. “I’d e-mail her scenes every few days,” Taraporevala explains, “while she read the book and marked out her selections—which coincided with mine. We were perfectly in sync.” That process produced the first draft, written in “an insane 11 days,” the screenwriter says, a schedule imposed by Nair’s agent, who needed to take the script to Cannes. Six more drafts followed, and now the finished film, shot in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) and New York, will open in theaters in March, when American audiences will absorb a story of several former Cantabrigians, both fictional and real.

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