

## To Light A Bedside Blaze

A debut film looks inward to portray many Parsi attitudes

By Namrata Joshi | Outlook Magazine | March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009

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"At 50 years, mine must be the oldest debut as director," laughs writer-photographer Sooni Taraporevala. It's this easy sense of humour that permeates *Little Zizou*, her delightful first film, whose sutradhar happens to be an eleven-year-old soccer-crazy Parsi boy, Xerxes (played by Sooni's son Jahan Bativala), also known as Little Zizou because of his admiration for French footballer Zinedine Zidane. As Zizou fervently prays for his idol to come to Mumbai, his father Khodaiji (Sohrab Ardeshir), a self-proclaimed "protector of the faith", battles it out with the free-thinking newspaper publisher Pressvala (Boman Irani).

Sooni has been in a 20-year-long creative collaboration as a writer with filmmaker Mira Nair, beginning with *Salaam Bombay* in 1988. But she started playing around with the idea of her own film only recently, on the sets of Mira's *The Namesake*. "Mira was my sounding board, gave me valuable tips, allayed my fears, gave me insights on how to work with the actors," says Sooni.

*Little Zizou* doesn't just have Sooni's characteristic sense of humour—it also displays a distinctive sense of place and community, and a razor-sharp sense of politics as well. The film, co-produced by Studio 18 and Jigri Dost (Sooni's production outfit in partnership with Dinaz Strafford), was shot on location around May 2007, over 42 days, in Mumbai's Parsi enclaves. Having written and taken the photographs for the coffee-table book *Parsis—The Zoroastrians of India*, Sooni has now brought to life the Parsi world on screen. "It is the world I know best—in the last 20 years I'd written about everything but my own backyard," says Sooni.

She puts together a great ensemble of sharply-observed, quirky Parsi characters, among them a batty grandmother clinging on to her crumbling mansion, the PLO (Parsi Liberation Organisation) leader Yasser Arrathin, and Zizou's elder brother, who's an aspiring graphic novelist. The cast includes many well-known Parsis—from Boman Irani to Shiamak Davar, Cyrus Broacha to Cyrus Sahukar, Shernaz Patel to Mahbano Modi Kotwal, even squeezing in John Abraham, who happens to be half-Parsi. The only non-Parsi is Naseeruddin Shah's son Imaad. "But he is carrying forward the family tradition, his father must have played the best Parsi roles in our films," says Sooni.

The fable-like film takes strong potshots at fundamentalism, though the tone remains deceptively light-hearted. "I wanted to mock it, rather than dignify it by being serious," says Sooni. The issue had

been churning in her head for a long while: "The constant tussle between forces of fundamentalism and those opposing it is defining our world. It works on the principle of the exclusion of the other, and reflects the complete tribalism underlying our modern society," she says.

The film veers away from the usual Hindu-Muslim debate to locate the issue in the context of the dwindling community of Parsis, usually perceived as benign and peace-loving. "The Parsi community may not be identified with such forces, but the climate in the world is such that everyone is jumping on to the religious bandwagon. Among Parsis, the hardliners find other ways of expression, in the way they are so obsessed about the purity of their race," says Sooni.

She feels that all fundamentalists use much the same approach, no matter where they come from or which religion or culture they belong to. "They first create a sense of fear in their communities and then pitch themselves as the saviours," she says. "The Khodaiji in my film could then be anyone—Osama or Bush," says Sooni. We couldn't agree more.