

The ‘Dosa Hunt’ is more than just a search for New York’s best dosa. It’s a short film about the Indian community’s growth and search for cultural roots in the US

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The *Dosa Hunt*, very simply put, is a filmed quest by seven men to find New York’s best dosa. On another level, it’s about first-generation Americans of Indian and Mexican descent trying to find out who they are — through food.

In June 2011, music writer and now director Amrit Singh’s attention was cornered by a short tweet from American indie band Vampire Weekend’s guitarist and backing vocalist Rostam Batmanglij. “Eating a dosa,” wrote @RostamBatmanglij. Excited that someone else shared his love for the South Indian “crepe with a spicy potato filling”, he quickly replied asking where he was and which of the many dosa varieties was on his plate. A spicy Mysore? A classic paper masala? Batmanglij’s answered: arugula and jack cheese. Even though Singh is a Punjabi, he quickly suggested a few places which serve authentic, in his opinion, dosas to Batmanglij, who is of Persian descent. Himanshu “Heems” Suri, of the rap group Das Racist, jumped into the conversation and quickly threw his weight behind Queens as the place to get the best dosa in NYC. American-born South Indian Vijay Iyer joined in with a few recommendations of his own and soon the idea for *Dosa Hunt* — “the greatest hunt for South Indian food in NYC ever committed to film” was born.

“The tweet was definitely the catalyst,” Singh says from New York. “I’m a Punjabi and we didn’t have dosa at home. It wasn’t until I discovered dosa that I realised how little I knew about my culture, even about Indian food. My personal cultural curiosity about dosa is what prompted this little project,” he adds. Questions about cultural roots and identity were shared by the other six — Batmanglij, Das Racist’s Suri and Ashok “Dapwell” Kondabolu, jazz pianist Iyer, indie band Yeasayer’s Anand Wilder and Neon Indian’s Alan Palomo — and attempts to clarify notions and stereotypes are made in the film, which is essentially shot in a Dodge Sprinter decorated with disco balls, at two restaurants — in Manhattan and in Queens — and in the aisles

# DOSA IN DIVERSITY



**UNITED COLOURS:** The team attempts to clarify notions and stereotypes about aspects of Indian culture

scenes which make the movie like the shopping scene at the Patel Brothers supermarket.” In the scene, Heems of Das Racist walks through the aisles, and picks up Cinnamon Toast Crunch and Bisquick and tick marks them as the essential dosa ingredients, a la MTV Cribs style. It’s a scene, Singh says, that elicits laughs from Americans and silence from Indian audiences. “And that is perhaps very telling,” Singh adds.

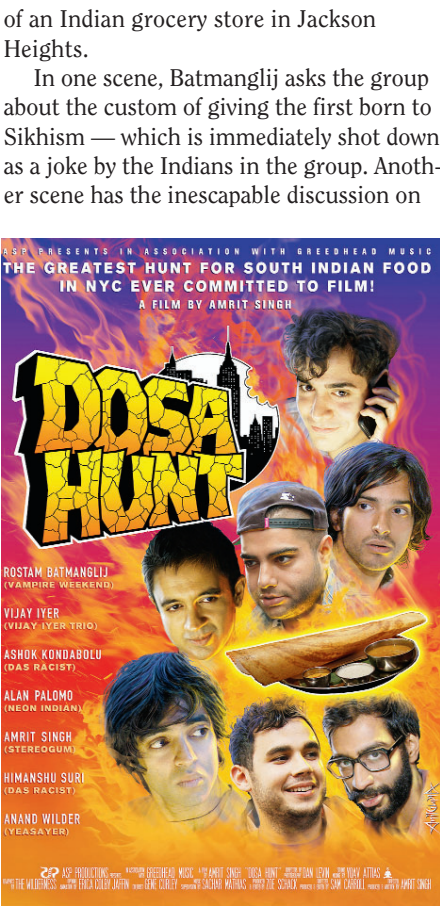
The presence of Palomo, the only non-Asian in the group, serves an important role. Palomo had never tasted a dosa before in his life before undertaking the dosa hunt that day in August. And in fact, the premiere at Williamsburg in October 2012, where guests were served a variant of dosa — kal dosa — was his first taste of dosa since the shoot.

“Having Alan there ended up being a great thing and I knew that I would have to be the narrator and intermediary, so that created a dynamic where we were being explanatory in a way that was organic and not just for the sake of the cameras,” Singh says.

The film also led Singh to make a few other discoveries, like how his tattoo guy just happens to be the son of one of India’s most famous Bollywood publicity designers. Anil Gupta, a famous New York-based tattoo artist, grew up watching his father C Mohan design Bollywood posters. One of Singh’s reference points for the *Dosa Hunt* poster was the 1970s blockbuster, *Sholay*, the very film that Gupta’s dad had designed posters for. The *Dosa Hunt* poster bears resemblance to the *Sholay* poster, in its font and use of orange flames.

While the subject of the 22 minutes, 38 seconds long movie is bound to generate some interest back home, it’s the music that viewers should also look forward to. Singh handpicked the OST himself, packing it with songs written by the cast members and their bands. “As a blogger, I was exceptionally aware of all their discographies. Yeasayer’s *Madder Red* opens and closes the film. No other song would’ve done. I had to keep in mind questions like, ‘If this was a documentary about Vampire Weekend, which song would you choose?’ But at the same time, for people who are not familiar with these bands and artists, *Dosa Hunt* is perhaps a great introduction to that music.” ■

*Dosa Hunt will be screened at the New York Indian Film Festival on May 3*



of an Indian grocery store in Jackson Heights.

In one scene, Batmanglij asks the group about the custom of giving the first born to Sikhism — which is immediately shot down as a joke by the Indians in the group. Another scene has the inescapable discussion on *Slumdog Millionaire*. “I’m biologically opposed to it,” quips Kondabolu. There’s also a charming conversation between Wilder and his mother, who’s a South Indian, on drumsticks and its Indian name. “I anticipated these sorts of questions. A quest about authentic food is always going to yield these questions,” Singh says of the exchanges in the van.

For Singh, who’s a qualified lawyer apart from being a musician, the project quickly became a “cultural artifact”. “Here is a compelling case of diversity, not just of cultures but also of us as musicians. There weren’t enough ‘brown’ guys to inspire us when we were growing up and as a music journalist I’ve written about bands like Vampire Weekend and Yeasayer and seen Das Racist and Vijay gain recognition. I’ve often felt that it must be so exciting to be a 16-year-old now to have these role models,” Singh explains.

One of the many challenges for this project was getting all seven members together for a number of hours for one day and it finally happened on August 25, 2011. Another challenge was editing the eight-and-a-half-hour footage to a short-film of acceptable duration.

“It took a lot of effort and time to trim it,” laughs Singh, “but I made sure to keep intact

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# Celluloid circus

‘Touring Talkies’ is a wacky film on the world of tent cinema where anything is possible — even morphed posters and scene mash-ups

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John Abraham tilts his head as if embarrassed by his flared denims, Sunny Deol has shrunk so much that his scowl feels like a grimace and Aishwarya Rai is caramelising under the harsh yellow lights. The sari-clad woman sitting next to Rai could be either Hema Malini or Jaya Bachchan, depending on your angle of vision.

Beyond this glamorous semi-circle, lies a colourful tent at Worli’s Jamboree Maidan. Inside, kids from the nearby chawls are busy shifting rows by climbing on to the plastic chairs as fairy lights flicker in anticipation around the movie screen. *Touring Talkies*, a Marathi film written and directed by Gajanan Ahire and shot in the scorching interiors of Satara, was shown to Mumbaikars at this air-conditioned tent last week.

In a way, watching this film is like living a scene from Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* because the film itself is about tent talkies — nomadic troupes that travel from village to village on a truck that has a projector attached to its rear that beams movies into tents.

The 90-minute film is about the three and a half months its spunky producer and lead actress Trupti Bhoir spent touring with these nomadic talkies of Western Maharashtra and Vidarbha while trying to market her Marathi film *Tujhya Majhya Sansarala Ani Kaay Hava*. The film, *Tujhya...*, she admits, “bombed miserably” in cities but she was fascinated by the mela-like, if impoverished, world of travel-

ling talkies, the drunk announcers and morphed posters.

“People don’t judge films by reviews here but through posters and announcements,” says Bhoir, who replaced Sridevi’s face with her own in a poster of her film. Here, Sridevi was seen holding a sword and had a child on her back. Mithun’s face was also similarly replaced by the lead actor of *Tujhya*....

Bhoir even sat at the ticket counter to dispense tickets, a standard publicity measure at touring talkies. Whenever she would enter a room to change during her stay, there would be an unwanted audience of small kids peeking. “It was very embarrassing,” recalls Bhoir, who even exercised bladder control for a day and a half. This embarrassment finds its way into the film *Touring Talkies*. When a visiting heroine of



a Marathi art film asks for the loo, she is led to an open ground, handed an abandoned tyre and a mug. Two people hold up a huge poster of *Bodyguard* for privacy.

Bhoir narrated her experiences to Ahire, known for his realistic cinema. “I found the arid landscape backdrop full of colourful characters mesmerising,” says Ahire. Bhoir filled him in on the quirks of this dying culture that is over 100 years old.

The practice gathered momentum when a handful of farmers, lawyers and electri-

cians carted off second-hand Bauer projectors from a Parsi businessman who was selling them on a Bombay footpath. Bhoir’s stories include some gems. For example, to accommodate more shows during peak season, owners would pull the film reel so quick that it would turn Amitabh Bachchan’s baritone into a meek squeak. Besides, editing, in moffusil Maharashtra, could mean that you might suddenly chance upon a scene from a different film.

Also, there was the incident of women fighting for space inside these tents. “The screen side of the tents would be open so the women would sit on the other side and watch the film, where the image was reversed. But they complained to the sarpanch — the film was in Marathi but it looked Gujarati because the women’s sari pallus were now to the left,” jokes Bhoir.

In the film, the spunky Bhoir dons a boy’s haircut and plays the crossdressing owner of a nomadic theatre that she wants to win back. It calls for a fair bit of swearing which she found cathartic as a woman. Bhoir did not bathe for 22 days of the shoot and even drove a 50-year-old truck that had no brakes. She pulled this off by asking for a roadroller to be placed in front. “For all practical purposes, I am a man,” insists Bhoir, who even cooked on a *chulha* for her crew throughout the shoot.

The plight of these tent talkies recently moved AR Rehman enough to adopt one

tent for a year. Where there used to be 2,000 in 1985, only 30 remain. “There was a time we would mount the print on to elephants and go around the village,” says Anup Jagdale, whose tent talkies has been around for over 50 years and even boasts a 1930s projector model. Today, “we don’t have government subsidies, and we can’t insure our tents,” says Anup, who has to depend on private financiers for funds.

Also, periodically, Jackie Chan and Salman Khan come to their rescue. Old

**The practice gathered momentum when a handful of farmers, lawyers and electricians bought second-hand Bauer projectors from a Parsi businessman and carted them off**

Jackie Chan movies dubbed in Hindi draw in young audiences during the morning shows while a Salman movie equals Diwali for them. “We just have to erect a huge plywood cutout with lights around it for publicity,” says Jagdale, who has met all the Marathi superstars. He has a request. “We would be honoured if Salman could come down to our tent,” says Jagdale. ■



**ON THE ROAD AGAIN:** In the film, Bhoir (left) sports a boy’s haircut and plays the crossdressing owner of a nomadic theatre