

Vandana Kohli

The multitalented Trailblazer

By : Bipin Sharma

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Aclaimed Film Maker and Social Thinker Vandana Kohli needs no introduction. Despite her hectic schedule, she has unwaveringly devoted time for germane issues concerning the common man. An award winning filmmaker, her music will enrich your mind. An alumna of DPS RK Puram and LSR College, she majored in Film Editing at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), and later attended the Professional Program for Producers at UCLA, Los Angeles. She topped Delhi University and has continually brought laurels to her Alma Mater. That she is truly gifted can be gauged from the fact that she dons many hats that of a musician, photographer, writer, in addition to being an acclaimed documentary maker. With an excellent academic record at both school and college, coupled with her conviction that film makers play a pivotal role in bringing about social change, she forayed into the profession of documentary making. Vandana currently lives and works in Mumbai. She has scripted, directed and edited projects for clients that include The National Geographic Channel, The History Channel, Doordarshan (India's State Broadcasting National Network), various agencies of the United Nations and the Government of India. Vandana has released two instrumental albums of Indian Melodies on the Piano. She has been a fellow of the Salzburg Global Seminar and of the Georgetown Leadership Seminar and travels frequently.

As a filmmaker, Vandana "brings to her work passion and thought, and engages the viewer to reflect on the subject she presents. Her craft is sensitive, imaginative, and powerful in substance and form, and this has catapulted her to becoming one among the country's most talented filmmakers. She has won many accolades notable being the coveted RAPA Award for Best Director for 'INTO THE ABYSS: A Film on Major Depression'".

Filmmaker Vandana Kohli's documentary film 'The Subtext of Anger' received an overwhelming response. The film explores various facets of anger and stress. Vandana agrees that anger is an emotion so seeped in our urban reality, and has not been given due attention as it ought to be.

It was not an easy film to

make, and Vandana admits having her share of high and lows during the making of the film. A lot of research was done before it was shot. The film features a wide spectrum of experts, renowned neuroscientists, psychologists and sociologists from India and the UK and US, and all their research and areas of study had to be read. The film has screened publically and privately, with discussions in several spaces including schools with teachers, and parents, for primarily bringing the discussion on anger issues in our urban context into focus.

In a freewheeling chat with senior journalist Bipin Sharma, acclaimed Film Maker and social thinker Vandana Kohli (VK) talks about the challenges of our times, her new projects, and safety of women post Nirbhaya episode.





BS: What do you think are the three main challenges that the 21st century faces today?

VK: The first is Polarization. One of the founders of

the Internet, Sir Tim Bernes-Lee admits that the Internet doesn't have the requisite checks and balances yet to support moderate voices. The loudest, noisiest and most extreme views dominate discussion of all kinds. We can see that this is encouraging and feeding aggression, and unfortunately there are no limits to the damage unwarranted aggression can cause. How may we contain that? How can we make the internet what it was conceived to be – a forum for knowledge and opportunity and not the dark, unimaginably violent space it has become. That's the first challenge.

The second is health. We are built for activity. That's what keeps the body and brain going. Now, with us stuck to our gadgets, we can expect all kinds of ailments to persist, in body and mind. Children and adolescents are most at risk, since their mental and physical development can be hugely and irrevocably impacted by the addiction that comes from screens, especially phones. You take a phone or screen away from a child and he or she reacts like a drug addict being denied drugs! The 'great invention' of the 21st century is turning out to be our greatest malaise. More so, emotional trauma from aggressive interaction in the digital world is affecting millions of children all over. We are all at risk. Each of us has to recognize this and find ourselves a point or plane of balance.

The third, and greatest challenge to my mind, is for business to align itself with real progress. All that is 'new' or the 'latest' is not necessarily better! Is every advancement in digital, truly great progress? Self-driving cars are neither simpler nor more efficient. Our digital gadgets wreck havoc on the environment at every stage- in their production (rare earth minerals), their use (radiation) and their disposal. There





by supporting voices that are reasonable and compassionate around us.

BS: What were the challenges that you faced during the making of the 8 minute short anniversary film "WINGS OF GLORY: 75 Years" - A Platinum Jubilee film celebrating 75 years of the Indian Air Force?

VK: I had worked on the research and script for National Geographic for a

ten part series on the Indian Air Force. So much research and reconnaissance had been done that I had Indian Air Force coming out of my ears! In the meanwhile, the IAF saw the 50th Anniversary film I'd made for my alma mater, Lady Shri Ram College. They liked it and commissioned me to make their Platinum Jubilee film. It was a challenge as the film incorporates all their roles from fighter pilots to maintenance and ATC, their strengths and their spirit! It was a privilege to do this film.

BS: As someone who has incessantly dealt with sensitive issues, what will you say regarding the safety measures in cities post Nirbhaya's gruesome murder?

VK: There's greater awareness about the issue of women's safety since then, but a lot needs to be done yet. The Justice Verma report put together measures that need attention and implementation.

Fundamentally, we need attitudes to change. We need, as a society, to understand that this isn't a women's issue. It impacts everyone – men, women, children, individuals, families, community, society. We saw that manifest during the rage and protests that followed the Nirbhaya case, when so

is a tremendous and detrimental social impact. Artificial intelligence and automation may be better for business but it will rip into jobs, livelihoods and communities. Can business enterprise be alive to such apprehensions, run with a conscience, and make a profit? I believe it can.

BS: How can women empowerment be achieved in the holistic sense, and in reality?

VK: Empowerment to me is about having choice – in how to live one's life and in what to pursue to be able to explore one's full potential. Too often, women's concerns and views are not heeded, not considered important enough and are therefore dismissed. This is true for other communities on the fringes as well, LGBTQIA for instance. This neglect impacts emotional-mental-physical health. The cost to the economy is incalculable!

World over we recognize women bring different skills to the table, in every sphere. We need to approach these strengths with more respect to better integrate these voices and skills within the main narrative. That will make the narrative whole. "Women are the soul of society" says Hissa Hilal. When you hear women, the soul of society has a voice.

Flexible work hours is important, not only for women but for men too. Somewhere we need to redefine success as well!

Last and not the least, I think safety and security are core issues. When a space is safe, it leads to happier women, children and men; happier people in general. Where individuals feel safe, creative as well as business enterprise prospers. Communities, of all kinds prosper, the state and nation prosper, in fact. Everyone wants peace in the deep recesses of their hearts, so that they can get on with life.

I think we can each begin





many people had come out in support of Nirbhaya, shocked by the violence of the incident and the insolence of its perpetrators.

Changing attitudes is the hardest but the most lasting impact we can bring about. I remember a few days after the case, a journalist from a prominent TV channel was standing at a bus stop and a couple of young men came in a car, drove close to her, and said something very inappropriate. When she reacted with anger and indignation, they laughed as they

drove away. That's appalling. It was terribly disappointing that even after such a gruesome case, young men were thinking this was fun and games! That's what needs to change and it has to begin at home, with the boys. In US schools they've begun to teach 'consent' to young boys. We might need to consider the same.

Apart from that, we still need better street lighting, more CCTV cameras, and training and sensitisation for personnel across the board. Law enforcement agencies need more facilities and training, and the justice process has to be made more enabling and responsive. On a fast track, the case still took six years for the verdict.

BS: Why did you decide to choose the profession of a film maker?

VK: My interests were and are research in varied subjects, and I like music, photography and writing. Film brings them all together! But I also had some early experience with the media. While in my first year in college, I'd begun working as a presenter for a youth programme on TV. After college, I assisted a well regarded documentary filmmaker, Rajiv Mehrotra and learnt some more on the job. He said I was good, but I needed professional training and suggested film school. "If you don't go", he said, "you will not know what you don't know". He was right!

But beyond professional training, filmmaking needs passion and precision, both of which I'm inspired to pursue. Film is probably the most powerful medium created and can deeply impact the viewer. I've seen that happen at screenings of *The Subtext Of Anger* and in the post screening discussions.

BS: You have been a Film Maker with a RAPA award to your credit, amongst others and a National Award for a project. Share more on the same?

VK: The RAPA award was for "Into the Abyss," a film on Major Depression. It was the first film on depression, in an urban, Indian context, and it captures the symptoms and manifestation of depression, as this young executive begins to experience it – what goes on with him – his thoughts, his energy levels, his dreams. It won for Best Director and that was a pleasant surprise, since the RAPA awards were very coveted awards at the time. The National Awards were for both the graduation films I'd edited at FTII. They won best sound design and best film.

OFFICIAL SELECTION
Indian Film Festival in Berlin
Babylon, Berlin, Germany
August 2012

SPECIAL MENTION JURY
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Film Festival
December 2012

BEST DOCUMENTARY AWARD
Bangalore Short Film Festival
October 2012

BEST DOCUMENTARY AWARD
Bangalore Short Film Festival
October 2012

BEST DOCUMENTARY AWARD
Delhi Short International
Film Festival
October 2012

BEST DOCUMENTARY AWARD
at the Kolkata Short International
Film Festival
August 2012

**BODY
EMOTION**

**THE SUBTEXT OF
anger**

MIND EMOTION BODY PSYCHE SPIRIT

**MIND
PSYCHE
SPIRIT**

A FILM BY VANDANA KOHLI
DOCUMENTARY, 58 MINUTES
ENGLISH, 2012

BS: Are awards and accolades the only yardsticks of success for creative professionals?

VK: I think awards and accolades are reassuring and encouraging, but are certainly not a yardstick for success. My take away is everything I've seen, all the people I've met and all I've learnt on each subject I've made films on Law, Anger, Biotechnology, Music, Indian Railways, IAF, and many more. A filmmaker has to understand and know the topic of the film real well, to be able to interview experts for the film. The film I made on Biotechnology, for instance, as an overview of Indian biotechnology across the country, had to feature our leading scientists and researchers in the field. It had to include entrepreneurs in the business of biotechnology. So for seven months of the production, I read the subject. I had to understand it to be able to communicate it further to a lay audience.

It was the same when I made THE SUBTEXT OF ANGER which features some of the world's leading neuroscientist, psychiatrists, psychologist and other experts from Yale, Stanford, Harvard Medical School, Chicago and many more. I read their research and sent them questions for them to agree to an interview and the shoot. So really, that's the take away. That's my yardstick for success, to be able to understand and follow developments in different and diverse subjects from mental health to fighter jets. That's the kickback!

BS: How can we motivate the youth brigade of the country to contribute their bit towards nation building?

VK: We specifically need to address fundamental issues in our country – cleanliness and civility. Cleanliness teaches us to respect our surroundings; civility teaches us to respect others and ourselves. If our young people can honour just this 'Civil Code', all else will follow from their inherent dynamism and spirit of enterprise. We can motivate by example. If we can practice it, others may too.

BS: How do you see women playing a prominent role in achieving the mission of "New India"?

VK: Women are half the country. I don't think we should over emphasis gender roles. Women are already playing a prominent role in every conceivable sphere. We need to recognize and acknowledge their effort and their contribution. That's what is missing – offering credit where it is due.

BS: Who are the three Icons that you look upon as Role Models and why?

VK: My mum for the depth of her love and her compassion; my dad for all the challenges he's faced both inner and outward, and my mentor in college, Dr Meenakshi Gopinath, for her beauty of mind and intent. Also, my teachers in school, particularly Deepa Raghavan, for her steady encouragement and support.

BS: As a proud alumnus of DPS RK Puram, how do you see yourself playing a pivotal role in contributing your bit



to your Alma Mater?

VK: I believe the institutes we have studied at become a part of us. Whether we actively or consciously contribute to them or not, we inherently represent them in whatever we do or wherever we go. So if we do well outwardly or become better people with time, then that is credit to all the influences that have shaped us.

BS: What ambitious plans do you have in the pipeline?

VK: There are many things on concurrently. I've written a column on mind-body-emotion for five years and am in the process of writing a book on mental and emotional well being. As part of the Board of Governors of NIFT, I'm participate in and enhancing my understanding on education policy. On the personal front, I'm working on my own music, am learning to play the drums and have just begun learning Sanskrit.

BS: How do you see Music bridging the divide between nations especially during the times of escalating tensions?

VK: Music is above strife. That's its intrinsic power. Those who love music, love it irrespective of who the bearer is, and appreciate it if it resonates with them. Music has been and continues to be a unifying force all over the world, across age, region, strata and nations. Food does that too, in my opinion. Bring people together over a delicious meal and they forget their differences. Music is food for the Gods!