



100-year-old 'love story' between two cultures in Waikato

Slice of life film depicts Indo-Maori bonding



Mandrika Rupa is an Auckland-based social worker who switched to filmmaking as a way of creating greater awareness of the cross-cultural issues facing Indian migrants

By Dharmendrasinh Chavda

A new film by Mandrika Rupa that portrays the close bond that existed between

her Indian ancestors and Maori over a 100 years ago and how it has evolved down to present time, may help new migrants blend and adapt to cultural realities here.

If you called it simply a work of history or anthropology, the Auckland-based filmmaker will say it is more than that. "It is a love story between two cultures, Indian and Maori," Ms Rupa says of her documentary, *Taamara Sangam* (meaning coming together, or joining of two people in Te Reo and Hindi), due for a premiere at the Capitol Cinema in Balmoral on May 9th (see advertisements in the Herald for subsequent screening dates).

The marriage of the two cultures began in early 1900s, when Ms Rupa's great-grandfather along with a group of men from India arrived and settled in a tribal area in the Waikato, living with the people of the Tainui.

Though coming from a completely different culture, it did not take long for Ms Rupa's great-grandfather and other men to gain acceptance by the Maori people. "The early Indians migrants were very close to the people of the land. They were embraced by Maori," explains Rupa.

"My great-gandfather was a hawker selling goods on horseback to the Maori people, who soon offered him a place to store his goods," she says. "In return they (Indians) were not shy to help with anything on the marae, be it a death or birth or to serve Maori people."

The bond only grew stronger with time and matured into a relationship that reflected

mutual acceptance. For instance, the film shows a 'kaumatua' (Maori elder) singing an Indian love song. "The maori whanau have a beautiful song or 'waita' for our clan, which says: come under our wing we will shelter you!" adds Rupa.

"In time some Maori men even learned to make a good Indian curry for special occasions and some of our men knew how to put down a traditional Maori 'hangi' (cooking under the earth)."

Using a rich texture of images shot both in India and New Zealand, the hour-long film tries to convey a simple message: We are capable of loving each other despite the obvious cultural differences.

But the simplicity of the message is only matched by the bold conviction in it by the filmmaker. "Now there is separatism movement worldwide. Everyone rushes off to their own little corners but I don't identify with this. I believe we are capable of loving each other."

Besides pointing out the obvious differences between the two cultures, the film also zeroes in on the surprising similarities the two share in their rituals, for example in burying the placenta and other important rituals like marriage and funerals. Both cultures believe in arranged marriages, both have 'whanau' (extended families) and both consider land as something very sacred and inalienable.

Though the film's focus more or less is Ms Rupa's family, she insists that the experience is not limited only to her. "This history is not unique to me," she says. "Indian families that have been here for a long time go through the same process," she added.

And though the migrant families evolve a different culture over a period of time, the integration into another culture does not mean leaving behind your own, she emphasises. "It is not about losing your identity. My daughter is a senior dancer for a classical Bharat Natyam dance company."

Besides, the film is also about joining the two cultures. "We are who we are, but we also have this love and understanding for the people of this land too."

Ms Rupa received a grant from Creative New Zealand's Screen Innovation fund to subtitle the classical Maori used in the film into English. Westpac Trust sponsored the theatrical release for the film.

The film is a collaboration between Maori (Miki Apiti and Claudette Hauiti) and Ms Rupa. Her other works include *Poonam*, *Laxmi* and *Naya Zamaana*.