

Kavery Kaul's documentaries explore the shifting frames of culture, race, class and belonging.



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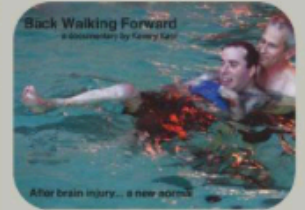
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Photographs courtesy: Kavery Kaul



# Stories That Cross Boundaries

By KIMBERLY GYATSO



With subjects like brain injuries, Calypso music, religion and Cuban art under her belt, filmmaker Kavery Kaul is a driving force in today's documentary world.

A graduate of Harvard University, Kaul has been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship, a New York Foundation for the Arts Artist's Fellowship, multiple New York State Council on the Arts grants and two National Endowment for the Arts awards. The Fulbright Fellowship gave her the opportunity to research and film her latest documentary, "Streetcar to Kolkata."

Kaul teaches at Columbia University in New York City, where her courses include works by people of different races, cultures, religions and genders.

Excerpts from an interview.

## What inspired you to become a filmmaker?

Every family has its own treasure chest of stories. I grew up with stories about India's fight for independence from the British and the partition that followed. And then, there were stories of life at the sometimes-challenging, sometimes-comic, always-memorable intersection of the India my family came from and the America we came to. For all of us, the stories we've heard shape our beliefs, our practices and our perspective of the world.

In my case, as a student at Harvard, I heard that a new and unusual course on the films of the Indian director Satyajit Ray was being offered by an Englishman on the faculty. How could I not be inspired by Ray's nuanced stories of the human experience in the face of overwhelming social and economic forces?

From top: Kavery Kaul with singer Lord Kitchener while shooting "One Hand Don't Clap" in Trinidad; Kaul with Cindy from her nonfiction feature "Long Way From Home"; Kaul with "First Look" actors and Cuban artists Eduardo "Choco" Roca and Nelson Dominguez; and posters of Kaul's award-winning documentary, "Back Walking Forward" and the film, "Long Way From Home."

In those days, I also frequented New York City's art-house theaters. There, I saw Sarah Maldoror's "Sambizanga," a film about the Angolan War of Independence against the Portuguese. It was such a strong, moving story of a struggle against colonial powers.

These stories held resonance for me. These directors made me want to be a filmmaker too.

**Cross-cultural themes are at the forefront of your work. Was "Long Way From Home" inspired by your experiences of the U.S. education system as an Indian American?**

My documentaries tell stories that cross boundaries to explore the shifting sands of culture, race, class and belonging. Like the girls in "Long Way From Home," I attended American independent schools and, later, an Ivy League college.

"Long Way From Home" was a return to that world to see what had changed since my time. I wish that in the research and development phase of that project, I could have discovered that there was no film to make. But progress is slow. And the fabric of our daily lives has changed very little.

The three girls in that film are profiles in courage in a world where they learn there's a big difference between who they are and who others think they are. But unlike most of the others in their schools, they learn how to move between different worlds. And they know that's an advantage. They're ready for tomorrow.

**Your upcoming film, "Streetcar to Kolkata," addresses the important issue of engagement between people of different cultures and faiths. What was your approach toward building a bridge of understanding in the film?**

"Streetcar to Kolkata" builds bridges between faiths at a time when we need those bridges more than ever.

My work is character-driven, about well-meaning people navigating through uncharted waters. I find these stories compelling because they go to the heart of the critical issues of our times.

"Streetcar to Kolkata" takes one woman on an extraordinary journey from America to India, from her Christian home in New Orleans in search of her grandfather's Muslim village near Kolkata. In this documentary, I spark a meeting of people who may not be so familiar or even comfortable with one another.

**How did being a Fulbright Fellow impact your experience of making "Streetcar to Kolkata?"**

I make films that require a great deal of location research and development. Usually, funders acknowledge the importance of process, but they won't support that phase because their eyes are glued to results. The Fulbright Fellowship was a tremendous gift. It made an extended stay in Kolkata possible so that I could do the necessary groundwork for my film.

While I was in Kolkata, the American Center invited me to give a talk about my work as a filmmaker with links to both India and America. I shared my films "Long Way From Home" and "Back Walking Forward," knowing the discussion would be lively because Kolkata audiences are well-informed, curious and enthusiastic. Their approach to any subject is nuanced and complex.

My official affiliation with the Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute (SRFTI) also gave me the opportunity to speak to future Indian filmmakers about my work as a director as well as their student projects. It's so important to build those relationships with the next generation.

When we went into production in Kolkata and its environs, two very talented students from SRFTI joined us as camera assistants. They worked with our veteran American cinematographer. That was another bridge we built.

**What advice would you give to young Indians coming to the United States to pursue a career in the arts?**

I'd say: You're about to embark on an amazing journey. Keep an open mind. Remember that America means Mark Twain and Toni Morrison, Junot Díaz and Jhumpa Lahiri. Take it all in. At the same time, hold on to who you are and the creativity that only you can offer as someone whose artistic vision stems from India, even as those roots mingle with your discovery of America.

Young people need to learn that there's a value to another point of view. We all gain from a richer, broader, more inclusive spectrum of films. This is the way of today's global society. It's what lies ahead for those who don't want to be left behind.



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