

**Parsipolis**By Nandini Ramnath | Time Out | March 06<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009

Little Zizou

# Parsipolis



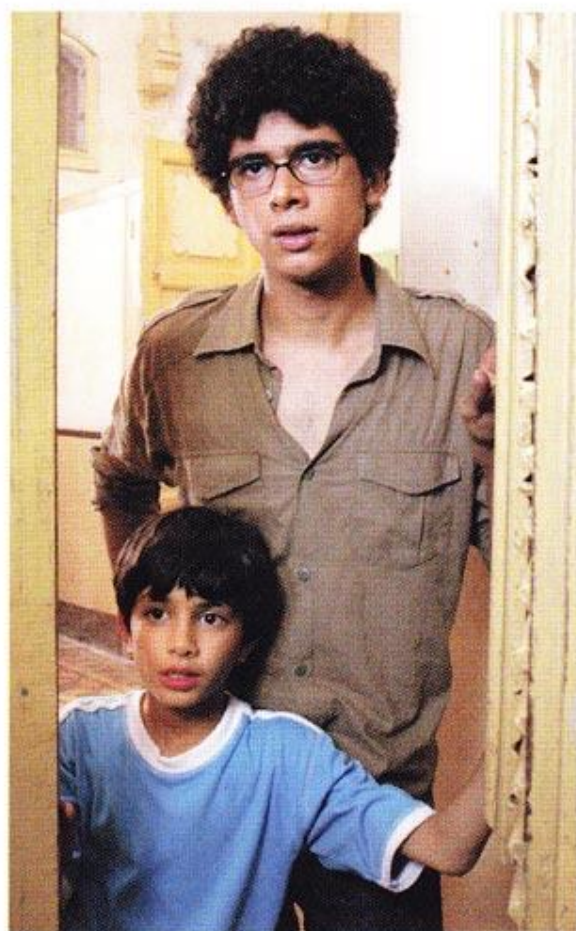
Sooni Taraporevala's *Little Zizou* laughs away the faultlines in Mumbai's Parsi community, reports **Nandini Ramnath**. Photograph by **Amit Chakravarty**.

When *Little Zizou* was screened at the International Film Festival of Kerala in Thiruvananthapuram in December, a critic from Bengaluru was baffled when he learnt that Sooni Taraporevala's first feature film was about Parsis. "Parsis? Who are they?" he asked in genuine puzzlement. "Where are they from?"

It seemed shocking that anyone could ask such a question about a community that has produced prominent lawyers, industrialists, the current air force chief and half a prime minister. But then, most Parsis live in Mumbai or have emigrated to the West, so you're more likely to find a Parsi in Toronto than in Chennai. Still, the critic's comment emphasised the growing lack of familiarity with one of India's most significant minority religious groups. The dwindling numbers – the 2001 census said there were only 69,601 Parsis in India – are a contentious issue that is causing schisms in the community.

One reason for the population drop is the low birth rate among the community: it records only seven births per year per 1,000 people. Though an average of 690 Parsis are born each year, 1,173 die during the same period. Precipitating the decline is the community's refusal to accept into the faith the children born to women who marry non-Parsis. Standing in the way of acceptance and reform are conservative leaders seized with the idea of racial purity. With *Little Zizou*, Taraporevala – an established photographer and a screenplay writer – has waded into the debate to wave her own flag in favour of tolerance. "I see a worldwide movement of fundamentalism and a certain kind of Parsi jumping on to that bandwagon," she said. "The film is about my outrage at what's happening, and I use the Parsis to make that point."

*Little Zizou's* gentle humour is likely to be lost on the fundamentalists, with whom 51-year-old Taraporevala has had runs-in in the past. In 2000, the publication of her coffee-table book *Parsis: The Zoroastrians of India, A Photographic Journey* caused a kerfuffle. In interviews given at the time, Taraporevala advocated that the community should accept children born to women who are married to non-Parsi men. She also supported conversion to Zoroastrianism, a practice now banned. One Parsi reader sent her copy of *Parsis* back to Taraporevala with an incensed note. "What alarmed me was how young she was," Taraporevala said. "You expect this attitude among old people." She suggests that Parsi intolerance echoes the



**Bava power** Xerxes and Artaxerxes (top); Miss Patel is the force behind Khodaiji's throne

nationwide inclination towards conservatism. She said that conservatism among Parsis – Zoroastrians who landed in Gujarat in the eighth century fleeing religious persecution in Persia – is a result of some people in the Westernised minority community adopting the attitudes of the majority community to try to fit in better. "If they can be offended, so can we," Taraporevala said.

Taraporevala's antidote to the anger stirred up by matters of faith is laughter. *Little Zizou's* framing story is the battle between Boman Pressvala, the editor of a liberal newspaper, and Cyrus II Khodaiji (Sohrab Ardeshir), a radical priest. Aided by his secretary, Miss Patel (Shernaz Patel), Khodaiji orchestrates a divisive back-to-the-roots campaign that brings him in conflict with Pressvala. The battle is seen through the eyes of Khodaiji's younger son, Xerxes, who is played by Taraporevala's son Jahan. Her daughter, Iyanah, plays Pressvala's daughter Liana. Even though they have never acted before, the kids behave like pros. "I wrote their lines around things I'd heard them say and do," said Taraporevala. "They hadn't

learnt a certain way of acting. There was no artifice and they're totally natural."

The stories of the characters in *Little Zizou* intertwine and overlap to make the film a community portrait rather than a campaign film. Imaad Shah plays Artaxerxes aka Art, Jahan's elder brother who is a cartoonist in love with Liana's elder sister, Zenobia (Dilshad Patel). New York-based actor Zenobia Shroff plays Pressvala's wife Roxanne, and Mahabanoo Mody-Kotwal shows up as Roxanne's eccentric mother who owns a beach-facing hotel in Udwada in Gujarat. The hotel shown in the movie is inspired by real life, as is much else in *Little Zizou*. "When we were kids, Majestic Hotel in Udwada was the place to go to," Taraporevala said. "The woman who owned it lived there alone with all her dogs." Majestic Hotel has since been sold.

The naturalism that marks the performances of most characters is contrasted with the theatrics of Khodaiji and Miss Patel. In *Little Zizou's* world, there is no redemption for fundamentalists. "I wanted to make them cartoon characters," Taraporevala said. "I didn't want to dignify them by treating them as serious characters."

While Taraporevala managed to cast all her actors of choice, some people wrote themselves into the script. Tknow Francorsi plays Tito Fellini, an aviation geek who is building a mock cockpit inside an old building along with Art. Taraporevala spotted the half-Parsi, half-Italian musician at a party and was so taken that she wrote a part for him. Tito Fellini is Taraporevala's tribute to one of her favourite filmmakers, Italian maestro Federico Fellini. She described *Little Zizou* as a "Felliniesque look" at her community. Taraporevala said, "I've always felt close to Fellini's characters because they felt like Parsi characters in their look, their behaviour and their eccentricities."

Taraporevala brings to *Little Zizou* over 20 years of writing experience, mainly for Mira Nair. Taraporevala wrote her first screenplay for Nair's debut movie, *Salaam Bombay*, in 1986. Taraporevala met Nair while studying at Harvard. Taraporevala wrote the screenplays for Nair's *Mississippi Masala* and *The Namesake* alongside working on Sturla Gunnarsson's adaptation of Rohinton Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey* and Jabbar Patel's *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar*. The process of watching others shoot her scripts came in handy when Taraporevala set out to make her own movie last year. "I've always known about economy" in filmmaking, she said. "Direction made me realise how much I could cut."

For Mumbaiites, *Little Zizou* has a lived-in feel, especially because of its use of familiar locations, including the Dadar Parsi Colony, the Parsi Lying In Hospital in Fort and the colony in Gowalia Tank where Taraporevala grew up. Taraporevala and her producing partner, Dinaz Stafford, pulled in every

favour they could to complete the movie.

Some of the movie's best jokes also came from friends. Taraporevala had initially wanted to name the organisation that Khodaiji sets up to further his cause the Parsi Sena, after a fringe group that sprung up in the late 1980s to protect the interests of the community. Former MTV head Cyrus Oshidar suggested naming the group the Parsi Liberation Organisation. Boman Irani came up with a few jokes of his own, including "Yasser Arafat and Arathin". A sequence in which he pops Viagra before hitting the sack was also his idea, even if it meant admitting to a lack of sexual prowess. "I'd actually wanted to do a typically feminine lovey-dovey scene, but he didn't want to go there, so he suggested Viagra instead," Taraporevala said.

*Little Zizou* opens on Fri Mar 13 and has been reviewed in Film.

## Fire in the belly

Other films and books about Parsis.

### Being Cyrus

Based on a short story by Kersi Khambatta, Homi Adajania's movie *Being Cyrus* is a murder mystery about an insular community that turns on itself.

### Bombay Time

Thrity Umrigar's 2001 novel is set in an apartment block populated by Parsis. The title is a reference to the fact that clocks in Mumbai's fire temples tick on Bombay Time, which is 38 minutes behind Indian Standard Time due to a discrepancy between the way Zoroastrian priests and the Indian government mark time.

### Doongaji House

Cyrus Mistry's 1978 play is about the decline of a house and the Parsi family that lives in it. Mistry's first novel *The Radiance of Ashes* was published in 2006. It revolves around a case of mistaken identity set against the backdrop of the 1992-'93 riots in Mumbai.

### Percy

Pervez Merwanji based his directorial debut on a short story by Cyrus Mistry. *Percy* explores the plight of lower middle-class Parsis whose existence belies the opulence and social status generally associated with the community.

### Pestonjee

Imaad Shah's inclusion in the *Little Zizou* cast has an added layer of meaning for viewers who've seen his father, Naseeruddin Shah, playing a socially challenged Parsi in Vijaya Mehta's *Pestonjee*.

### Tales from Firozsha Baag

One of the great chroniclers of all things Parsi meditates on the community from far-away Ontario. Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry's short story collection is set in a colony that resembles Colaba's Wadia Baag. His novels *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters* further explore Parsiness.