

FAMILY TREE
A film installation by Shumona Goel

Proposal submitted to IFA
October, 2006

SURENDRA & MRIDULA

It is with a mission that you are going far away from your home, your kith and kin,—cutting across rivers and oceans, deserts and forests, mountains and valleys, countries and continents. Always keep that mission in mind and never deviate notwithstanding temptations and provocations.

We wish you a happy, pleasant and useful sojourn abroad and shall await eagerly and anxiously your return to your Motherland and among your nearest and dearest ones, after successful completion of your mission abroad.

May God shower His choicest blessings on you and always keep you safe and secure under His protective wings !

शुभास्ते सन्तु पन्थानः !

New Delhi, 12-6-70

Puris & Mahajans

The Executive Director
India foundation for the Arts
No L1, Tharangini, 12th Cross,
Raj Mahal Vilas Extension,
Bangalore 560080

11 October, 2006

Dear Mr. Vellani,

Re: Grant request under the Extending Arts Practice programme

As per the proposal attached and our discussions over the past few months, I am requesting you for a grant of Rs Five Lakhs Twenty Six Thousand Four Hundred Fifty Five for *Family Tree* under the Extending Arts Practise programme.

Family Tree commences on 1 November, 2006 and will last for one year.

Yours sincerely,

Shumona Goel
8 M.L. Dahanukar Marg
Bombay, 400 026

Signed copy faxed on 12 October, 2006 to Shai Heredia

Project description and extending my art practice

Economic hardships and opportunities as well as development methods have resulted in a migration explosion of both rural to urban and transnational varieties. As a result, people increasingly live and work in alien surroundings. My proposed project, *Family Tree*, is a film installation that explores the psychological consequences of migration, specifically, loneliness and melancholia, emotions that increasingly characterize the mobile world in which we live. I show how the overwhelming and distressing experience of migration affects migrants' capacities to participate in broader social and political change.

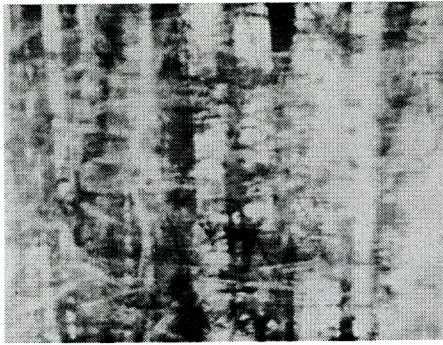
Family Tree is a film installation for public space. Formally, film is separated into its elements: photography, motion film, and sound. Seamless forms like documentary cannot capture the fragmented experience of migration. By contrast, *Family Tree* displays the film form in parts in order to emphasize the disruptive and incoherent migrant experience.

The installation fractures a single, solitary sense of self to demonstrate how migrants adopt or invent multiple and conflicting roles to cope with changing environments. I resist art galleries in order to favour an exhibition space which is defiantly haphazard, because the piece is, at least in part, about the struggle of migrants to carve out a space for themselves.

A family tree is a map people use to locate themselves in history. They draw branches to forge links to ancestors or roots. A family tree is linear; it assumes its members share traits of the same nature. However, this model is restrictive and is at odds with the experience of migrant families whose directions cannot be anticipated or directed. My project deforms family trees in order to consider 21st century family lives which are dynamic and constantly in motion.

Family Tree is concerned with the interior experiences of a migrant. It presents us with a broken, violent, spatially and temporally unstable world. I use the metaphor of a tree to imagine what a family or a person may feel like in motion or in parts. In one film loop, the camera moves violently through a forest. Branches in chaotic motion connote how migration disrupts interpersonal relationships while archival film footage reveals a forest of trees, suggesting society in its natural order.

The lack of a narrative arc favours a more poetic arc, and the mix of poetry, a few facts about migration, and a couple of well-placed utterances ("Sunday...Monday...Tuesday...") is laid over footage of immigrants eating, walking, and talking. A film loop of my mother returning home from a mental institution expresses the psychological decay and isolation many displaced people experience.



Family Tree, 2007

Stills from film loops



Installation

On another wall, found footage of raw home videos shot in the 1980s emphasize the unnatural juxtapositions of places and ideas migrants must automatically absorb. The viewer sees a television on which low-tech videos chronicle the personal history of Indian families in America. These home movies were shot in the 1980s and observe the banality and intimacy of birthday parties, wedding receptions, and Indian cultural performances in small town American parades. In one video, Indian immigrant women perform a fashion show for an American country club. With perverse humour and melancholy, I hope these raw and often outrageous videos resonate with unexpected poetry.

A third wall combines my parents' exchange of post cards with their family in India and family photographs. In a photograph, a family priest with long dreadlocks and saffron robes reclines on a quaint, suburban poolside chair. And in another photograph, a young Indian girl plays with her doll in a rural trailer park.

Meanwhile, an ambient soundtrack forces the exhibit viewer to experience anxious phone conversations between migrants and far - away family members. These personal exchanges fade into audible news reports, summaries of social interaction.

Family Tree points up the relationship between individual experiences of migration and the political--economic structures that compel it. An experiment with film and its form, it is inspired by my interactions with migrants from the countryside to Bombay. I link their experiences to my family's immigration to America in the 1960s and my own, more recent reverse migration to India. By exhibiting *Family Tree*, I hope to contribute to our empathy for the human condition in an era that hastily celebrates mobility and multiple identities.

My source materials are expressive, not literal. The idea is to make an installation that refers to me as little as possible but touches on the complexity of migration. *Family Tree* meditates on how it is possible to represent a person and her art. I believe this variety of material is partly derived from my background in experimental film but also represents a process of learning. I want to try out different media and give myself experience. I also want to leave the question of interpretation to the viewer.

Since 1997, I have been making films that explore cinematic styles and forms. My films are essentially personal statements or artistic expressions and their exhibition is in film festivals, outside of commercial film channels. *Family Tree* is a different approach to film and film art. It is an expanded cinema work. As an installation, *Family Tree* positions itself against the narrative expectations of film -- it transcends the restrictions of drama, story or plot. This project is my first attempt to fragment the classical narrative notion of beginning middle and end in order to privilege multi – layered examinations of migrant identity.

Project Goals

Family Tree refers to a range of art historical practices, popular culture references, and Indian influences. The project extends the category of Asian art and defies its definitive conceptions. With *Family Tree*, I aim to stimulate critical discourse and scholarship among artists, writers, and curators in order to evolve new modes of curatorship and increase support for transnational artists.

Although my formal film education focused on American and European avant-garde filmmaking, my perception of this tradition has changed dramatically. *Family Tree* derives its impetus from Western fine art traditions, but uses low-tech formats like VHS to also critique modes of elitist filmmaking.

Family Tree will provoke dialogue among innovative filmmaker and art communities. Finally, I hope *Family Tree* represents a new voice from India in Asian biennales.

By sharing the experiences of immigrant communities, which have been fragmented by dispossession and displacement, I seek to assert their dignity, elevate their morale, and contribute to their efforts to survive the present and construct new futures.

Schedule

CATEGORY	DETAILS	TIMELINE
Research	Genre specific film viewing; reading on installation art practices. Investigating and testing local facilities (equipment, labs, film stock)	November, 2006
Generate raw material	Identify footage for optical printing; optically print; source VHS material Processing and work prints; Identify negatives (stills) for printing; print Record sound (ambience and interviews)	December January February & March
Edit	Film editing Video editing	April & May June
Sound design		July & August
Sound mix/ final printing		September
Research	Investigate exhibition spaces and technical run	October
Installation	5 days (Bombay)	November

*This timeline is subject to receipt of grant agreement. It is also subject to change.