

main lead

They are individualistic, talented and cutting-edge in their creative pursuits in audio-visual productions. KANIKA MYER, Director, Bharat Bala Productions and 'KA' Films and SRILA CHATTERJEE, Executive Producer, Highlight Films, talk on career, the industry and life beyond to SAVIA RAJAGOPAL and AINDRILA MITRA

She's intelligent, instinctive and a visionary. Schooled in Chennai, Kanika credits her upbringing to having an open mind that never makes presumptions. Srila, on the other hand, was born and brought up in what she believes is the 'best' city of the world, Kolkata. She holds her mother, Ayesha, and her school principal, Sister Cyril responsible for her independent outlook. Kanika's tryst with films began with her communications course at Sophia's and later, in '96-97 she formed 'Bharat Bala Productions' with Bharat Bala, her spouse. Srila joined Highlight Films in 1989, the company set up by her husband, Mahesh Mathai and worked up the ladder to become the Executive Producer of the company. In an industry which is very competitive, these women have an enviable body of work behind them. Both of them are extremely upfront and mean business when it comes to their work. Srila is known to be impatient and aggressive and though she's often accused of being too aggressive, she prefers being that way. "I hate people who are passive," she confesses. Kanika too has that aggressive streak, and she believes there's a lot more for her to achieve. She says passionately, "I am always itching to do something bigger."

IF YOU MEAN BUSINESS, NOBODY MESSES WITH YOU...

KANIKA MYER

Director,

BHARAT BALA PRODUCTIONS (BBP) and 'KA' Films

LEADING THE WAY...

I didn't go to film school. But, I always knew I wanted to do something with films. Soon after my course in Sophia's, Mumbai, I joined filmmaker, Ayesha Sayani and then worked with Bharat Bala. My first ad that got noticed was the one for Nescafe with model Maushmi Udeshi. For me, being in this profession is about reaching people through a medium that can connect with an inner part of their being.

'KA' – HER OWN ENTITY...

When I joined to assist Bala, 'Bharat Bala Productions (BBP)' was known under another name. We formed BBP in '96-'97, around the time of Vande Mataram. Later, I formed my own entity called 'Ka' within BBP. 'Ka' is a name of Brahma in the 'Rig veda'. It is also that part of yourself which links to the higher source in terms of your creativity. Now, I do all my films under this name.

CREATIVE CHALLENGES...

I'm a person who develops concepts and not just someone who executes a film. Every project is a challenge. For example, I had to make a film on the Digboi oil refinery in Assam for the Indian Oil Corporation. To maintain a creative feel in a territory that's completely unknown was a challenge. Also, going to Siachen with the Indian Army for making the film 'Jan Gan Man' was a great learning experience.

EQUAL FOOTING...

I travelled with 400 sailors for 'Jaya he' — a film for the Indian Navy. When you're filming in a crew, you don't really want to be singled out. I think as long as you mean business and know what you're doing, especially when you're a woman; nobody messes with you. I was the first civilian woman to step onto a warship. I remember there were guys who were throwing up. But I was fine! I think you have to be a step beyond men.

RAISING THE BAR...

I'm always over critical about my own work. I never judge my work on whether it's good enough for India alone or not. To me, the world is the audience and anyone in the world should be able to watch the film and find it fantastic. It doesn't matter which part of the world you're from, or what language you speak or what colour you are — what touches people is the same universal truth.

REDEFINING ACHIEVEMENT...

I think my biggest achievement has been to be able to cross the border of what women can and can't do. To be involved in all my projects in crews of huge men and being recognised and respected for what I do — that's the biggest achievement for me. There's a lot more to achieve. But I felt good when 'Vande Mataram' won the New York Film Festival Award and then the 'Timeless India' at Cannes because it found universal acceptance.

SETTLING DOWN...

I started by assisting Bala, and later we became codirectors. What drew us together was having likemindedness in what we wanted to achieve. We wake up at three in the morning, sometimes discussing ideas! That we're both filmmakers is the most beautiful part. Now of course, we have our separate careers as independent directors. The funny thing is that we are completely different, yet we compliment each other. With respect to resolving creative differences, we believe too much in our films to let our personal egos or opinions to mess with it.

GLOBAL INSIGHTS...

I still can't believe that I have spent time with living Nobel Laureates for the documentary 'Gurus of peace'. Every single one of them is an amazing human being. And in my personal interaction with them, there was tremendous learning of life itself. His Holiness Dalai Lama, has left a deep impression on me. I remember I took some Indian sweets for Nelson Mandela and he enjoyed it, ignoring protocol. While we were posing for photographs, Mandela said to me that 'I'm so lucky to be standing next to you!' [laughs] He's such a charmer with the ladies!

CUTTING EDGE...

I think the emotional aspect of the film and music is my forte. Also, editing comes naturally to me and I was not trained formally. Directing films is a big responsibility and I mostly shoot outdoors which is sometimes risky. I definitely enjoy direction. But I still have a huge connection with commercials. It's exciting so I try to do some every now and then to keep the excitement going.

IT DEPENDS ON HOW GOOD OR BAD YOU ARE AT YOUR JOB...

SRILA CHATTERJEE

**Executive Producer,
HIGHLIGHT FILMS****ENTRY INTO THE AD WORLD...**

My entry into this field was accidental. I met Mahesh (Mathai) when I was in the process of changing jobs. I was with Rediffusion, an ad agency, Mumbai, for a year when Mahesh asked me to join his production house. When I joined Highlight at the end of 1989, it became a different sort of company where we had a lot of directors on board. Besides, Mahesh doubled everything that I was drawing in my previous job and it became too good an offer to resist! [smiles]

SHOW CONTROLLER...

Well, as the Executive Producer, I run the company. Though Mahesh set it up, he's no longer involved with the operations of the company on a day-to-day basis. So, essentially I double up as a COO. I handle the daily activities of Highlight. My job entails me to head every single production of the company, even if I'm not the line-producer per se. I'm constantly involved in decision-making and solving problems.

TURNING POINT...

The obvious turning point came when I figured that organised corporate marketing wasn't something I wanted to do forever. I'm trained in marketing but I didn't exactly want something that was straight jacketed and did not allow me to think. When I got the Highlight offer, I realised that I'd rather be the boss of my own time. Also, in a production house, you're dealing with cutting edge people, not only from one field but various fields. Every job is unique and that prevents it from getting boring.

CREATIVE CHALLENGES...

One of the most challenging jobs I ever did resulted in a phenomenal film called 'Destination India' directed by Mahesh about five years back for the Indian Tourism. It was a 40-day shoot where the crew went from Ladakh, the deserts, the backwaters etc. Again, a very innovative commercial I've worked on was one for Ericsson which Praseem (Pandey) directed. The script was brilliant and it was executed cleverly. Also, the Director's Special Whiskey commercial directed by Mahesh was another great work because it was technically very challenging.

GROWING UP ...

I grew up in Kolkata. My parents were divorced by the time I finished school. My father was an architect and my mother, a teacher, was my pillar of strength. I schooled at Loreto House followed by college in St. Xavier's. Then I came to Mumbai and joined the Bajaj Institute of Management. It was an interesting phase of my life because it gave me direction.

SETTLING DOWN...

My meeting with Mahesh was actually set up! One of my work colleagues and his wife who knew Mahesh and me very well thought we should meet. So we met at a dinner organised in my colleague's house in 1987. And it was just one of those things that clicked right away. I'm not really into the 'marriage thing', but we tied the knot in 1991, three years after we started living together. Mahesh has had a huge influence in my life. He has the most unbelievable, limitless mind.

BEYOND WORK...

I was brought up in an environment where I was aware of every single minute of my life and made to understand that for every indulgence, I had to share it in some way with somebody who wasn't as privileged. That's how 'charity' crept in though I hate that word! I'd heard about Shaheen Mistry of Akanksha. Highlight has a policy whereby a certain percentage of all the money that we make goes into different things that people here support. But I thought we could do a lot more than just giving donations. So, started the Akanksha-Highlight School in 1994/95 where Akanksha attempted to educate street-kids. Unfortunately, the school had to be shut in 1998. It was Akanksha's policy decision.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES...

I've never been crazy about Mumbai. However, one of the things that really changed my attitude happened last year. I do appreciate the fact that it's a city that works for what I want to do and the kind of life I want to lead, but I thought it lacked depth. So I decided to put my money where my mouth was and got involved with the 'Kalaghoda Festival'. That was the time I realised that Mumbai is much more than just being celebrity obsessed. There's a tapestry of people who are valuable and interesting.

DISCRIMINATION OF SEXES...

This is one industry that can destroy every theory on the inequality of the sexes. I work sometimes in crews that have women majority. There are no allowances or privileges given to a woman. In my experience, it all depends on how good or bad you are at your job and not about your gender.





