

## Mirandan Mira Nair :A suitable force

“If we don’t tell our stories, no one else will,” filmmaker Mira Nair said, accepting an Award for creating media of Impact at the *Toronto International Film Festival* September 2020 last month. The magic wand of her storytelling has let the world experience India through films like *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), about a family celebration disrupted by dark secrets; *The Namesake* (2006), a story of loss and fractured identity based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri; and *Salaam Bombay* (1988), her stunning feature debut, which traced the life of a child growing up in the slums of Bombay.

*Monsoon Wedding* **won at Venice**; *Salaam Bombay* was India’s official entry to the Oscars. Mira’s latest, the six-part BBC mini-series *A Suitable Boy*, closed this year’s TIFF(2020). It is based on the epic novel of the same name by Vikram Seth, a saga that follows five families through a layered look at the politics of love and marriage in a post-Independence, post-Partition India that is also struggling to define itself.

“We decided it wouldn’t be a period piece alone, but **a mirror to Indian society today**,” said Mira, 63, speaking from her New York home days before the India release of the series October 23. “A beautiful mirror to what we have left behind, *the world we should never forget*. Because the roots of so much of the politics we see in our country today were planted then. And still the Hindu and the Muslim community were interwoven in our culture, relationships. **It was a syncretic society**; I wanted to highlight that.”



**Mira Nair**

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Film Director Producer and Writer  
BA SocioHonsMH

Before getting to work, Mira spent four days with Vicky Seth in his home in England, recalibrating. “Making sure we had all the nuances that I wanted to be careful of.” She also consulted him on the casting as “his happiness is important to me”.

There were 105 roles to fill. The first actor cast was Tabu (who was also in *The Namesake*); here she plays a courtesan named Saeeda. Ishaan Khattar is Maan Kapoor, the young male lead; and the star, Tanya Maniktala, was an ad copywriter until her audition for the role of Lata. Mira calls her a “dew drop in action, innocent, feisty and intelligent”.

Mira grew up in Odisha, Kolkata, Shimla and Delhi, and now splits her time between her homes in New York, Kampala in Uganda, and New Delhi. But her father grew up in **Lahore before Partition**. “I grew up listening to ghazals. *Music was going to be the oxygen of this whole series*. So I took the poems in the novel to [the sufi singer] Kavita Seth, who composed the ghazals and is also Tabu’s voice. **Anoushka Shankar** is the voice and embodiment of Lata.”

Period elements notwithstanding, Mira and Tabu have both said they see the tale, and series, as universal. “These characters could very well exist today in any part of the world, in any country,” Tabu said in a BBC interview. “As human beings, we all have societies that define us and that we are a product of. We have love and we have separation.”

Hindustan Times 18.10.2020 *adapted*