

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR LIGY J. PULLAPPALLY

April 8, 2004

1. Tell us more about your film—the story for instance, and how it came to you, and when.

In 1997 I wrote, produced and directed my second short film, called “Uli,” in the U.S. The film’s back story was about two girls in love in rural Kerala and the tragedy that transpired when they were forcibly separated from one another. One was forced to marry, the other committed suicide by throwing her body into a torrent.

After the making of “Uli,” I left the field of film for some time, and focused my efforts on my career, that of a trail lawyer in the city of Chicago.

Then, on January 25, 2000 I received a forwarded email about a young woman at a university in Kerala. She and her girlfriend had fled the school, presumably under the threat of expulsion as a result of the rumors of their love affair with each other.

The women were recovered and sent back to their respective families. The next day, one of the young women’s body was found floating in the reservoir of a dam.

The email broke my heart. It had been forwarded repeatedly before it appeared in my mailbox. Each forwarding writer had written a variation of the question “what can be done?” I wanted to do something.

The story of the two Kerala university students bore a striking resemblance to the fictional backstory of my film, “Uli.” I began writing the story of two young Malayalee women in love, this time as a feature length film. I began earnestly, sincerely, but I was also practicing law at the same time, a phenomenally time consuming work. Scriptwriting was relegated to a few hours per month. It was slow going.

Then, in the summer of 2002 I was awarded the national Sunshine Peace Award, given to individuals who have made a significant contribution to American society in the area of social service. That recognition came with a substantial cash award. The award gave me the freedom to come to India and begin work on the film that I had wanted to do for over two years. I saw the film as another means of effecting social service.

At the same time, Satish Menon (award winning director of the feature film, *Bhavum*) was in India making the film. He invited me to join his team. It would be an opportunity to learn the intricacies of making a film in Kerala.

I spent eight months in India, working on other friends’ films, writing my script and looking at the feasibility of making my own feature film based on a story that was born six years earlier.

I returned to Chicago for a few months, but continued in organizing my film. I returned to India in October 2003 with the script for a feature length film and borrowed money.

On the night of January 26, 2004, exactly four years from the date I received that email about the drowned young woman, and nearly seven years after the making of my film short, “Uli,” I arrived in Ottapallam, Kerala to make the feature film, *Sancharam*.

*Sancharam* is the story of two young women, Kiran and Delilah, living in rural Kerala.

Kiran is the only child of Delhi-returned Malayalees, Priya and Narayanan. The family has come back to Kerala to take up residence in Priya’s grand ancestral tharavad.

Directly across the way lives Delilah, the fourth child and only daughter of Thressiamma, a widow.

The girls meet on an auspicious day, the day of Kiran’s arrival from Delhi, and the marriage of Delilah’s eldest brother, Jacob. They become fast friends. Joining the two friends is a neighboring boy, Rajan, who bonds with Kiran as well.

The friendship continues into adulthood, despite the fact that Kiran and Delilah are polar opposites. Kiran is a reserved, an intellectual, while her friend is a playful mischief-maker.

The story changes one night, when Kiran comes to terms with her changing feelings for Delilah.

Uncomfortable with her physical desire for Delilah, Kiran agrees to help Rajan in his bizarre scheme to win Delilah for himself. Delilah is unconvinced by Rajan’s efforts, and through a strange circumstance, discovers Kiran’s feelings for her.

What follows is a romance that improves both young women in many ways. But the relationship is discovered, and a both tragic and triumphant ending is triggered.

## 2. Why a treatment of this particular subject?

My film reflects a phenomenon that occurs all over India and many other cultures—I have heard this same story coming from Israel, China, and the U.S.--individuals meet and have gay relationships in young adulthood, but when it comes time to marry they either succumb to, or are forced into a marriage. Or, as is the case for some young gay people, feeling helpless and beyond hope, they commit suicide, jointly or individually.

## 3. Why a film in the Malayalam language, given that you have greater fluency in English?

I am entirely fluent in conversational Malayalam. However, the language of interviews, politics and poetry is far from conversational. For interviews, to make sure that there are no questions as to my intended meaning, I prefer English.

I made this film in Kerala in the Malayalam language because it is very much a Kerala story. Circumstances, like the one described in the story have happened time and time again in Kerala.

In another such story, two young women tied themselves together with a dupatta and threw themselves, together, into a rock quarry. These desperate stories are frighteningly abundant in Kerala. The stories are sometimes reported in newspapers, but most go unreported, as the surviving family members have an interest in keeping the shame and scandal fallout to a minimum. There is a watchdog organization in Kerala keeping track of the incidents, they are that frequent.

3. How long did the making take?

Pre-production lasted a year. The shooting schedule was less than three weeks.

4. We are talking about a rather not-so-well-explored subject, as far as Malayalam cinema is concerned. What are your reservations if any, about the audience reaction?

I expect some individuals to froth and say that these types of things don't happen here; some will jump around and say I have made an explicit, or adult, film; and some will simply watch the film, enjoy it, feel improved for having spent that time in the theater. Generally and in the main, I expect that the audience will empathize with the heroine, a lesbian.

5. How does this film sit within the context of the Deepa Mehta's film "Fire," which also dealt with a lesbian relationship.

I made this film for a number of reasons, among them is to respond to the Indian film "Fire." That film handled the subject of a lesbian relationship as well. I enjoyed that film, but found the idea of the women choosing to be with each other because they weren't satisfied with their male relationships, unconvincing. There appears to be a misconception that women become gay because of a lack of suitable men. My personal belief is that homosexuality has little to do with either the actions, or inactions of the opposite gender.

In addition, "Fire" is an English language film in an urban setting. I made my film to reflect the more traditional gay experience in India. My characters are unapologetically gay and speak a regional South Indian language.

6. Does this film have a social agenda?

India has a great deal of room for progress in offering civil liberty and community acceptance to its gay citizenry. Given the cultural mandates to marry and produce children, it's pretty likely that the vast majority of Indian gays are shuffled into arranged marriages. In addition, and Indian law, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code is frequently used to harass and

intimidate young gay men, and generally acts as a pall over the lives of gay people living in India.

There are a number of simple minded individuals who are rabidly, feverishly, and frothily focused on the physical aspects of homosexuality, but I find the issue to be a simple matter of emotional freedom. And for the most part, I find that such an unrelenting focus on the physical intimacy occurring between other adults is usually a glaring indicator of the critical individual's own personal perversion. My personal belief is that we should focus on the happiness of the people in our own households and lives, we should be kind and respectful to fellow human beings, and improve the world in which we all dwell by living lives that are an example in dignity and tolerance.

To sum it up, my social agenda is this: I hope my film helps young gay people consider the option of moving forward with their lives, instead of taking that devastating step that will resonate for years within their own families and communities, suicide.

7. Tell me about the cast? How did you select the actors?

I auditioned for three months, meeting with perhaps 40 young actors. I had in mind what the characters looked like when I was preparing the script. In the end it was a close call between several actors, but I chose the actors best able to carry the complex characterizations.

8. When you did the ground work for the movie, like choosing the location, the crew and technicians, what were the reactions this English speaking, young woman just back from America, got from different quarters?

I had no problems working with people as a non-resident Malayalee woman. I found my experience very professional, very positive. If a crew member is comfortable speaking English, I will speak English to them. If they are not comfortable with the language, or do not speak it, I spoke Malayalam. In fact conversations between several of my key crew members occur only in Malayalam.

9. Do you see a difference in approach to cinema, in the treatment of the subject etc., when the filmmaker is a woman?

How can there be a generalization on this subject. It would be simplistic to say men are adept at action films, and women at relationship films. It would be very much realistic to say that the genders have been relegated to these disparate genres in the past. I, myself hope to be directing science fiction films ultimately. Can it even be said that women uniformly tell women's

stories best? I don't know—Tennessee Williams, a much lauded male American playwright, characterized his female subjects with great subtlety.

I believe that filmmakers like Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, Gurinder Chadha and Jane Champion have brilliantly revealed feminine insight in many of their films. But as to how to describe that insight, well, it is a slippery thing. I leave the answer to your question to the viewer's hearts and minds.

10. You have another side to your life...the lawyer who stood and fought for women's issues, tried to secure justice for domestic violence victims.

At the time that I left the practice of law to join films, I was the Litigation Director of an agency serving the needs of abused women, Vice President of the Indian American Bar Association of Chicago, and a member of the Executive Board of Directors of Apna Ghar, a social service organization offering assistance to South Asian domestic violence victims.

I was a trial lawyer and I represented women who were abused by their spouses in matters like divorce, child support, maintenance and immigration. Before that I worked in the field of public interest, providing free legal representation to individuals who could not otherwise afford a lawyer. I strived to give the best legal representation possible to my clients. And given that most of their legal issues involved basic human needs, like housing, food, social security, freedom from violence, I knew how important it was to win the case for my client. I admit I worked very hard, and got my clients justice.

Working in film is a change, but it still incorporates qualities I had learned as a lawyer, and supervisor of other lawyers: direction, vision, and the ability to work with diverse people.

12. After giving ten years to social service, your life took a curious turn. But do you honestly think you have made the right choice, in terms of a new career? (Not by its success but by the personal satisfaction it gives you.)

I was recognized by the United States for the work I did in women's issues when I received the Sunshine Peace Award in 2002. I know I did my work well, and it satisfied me. But I believe that there are plenty of others who could as well, or better in my field. There are plenty of talented young women and men lawyers in the world.

Besides that, no one is just one thing. Meaning, I have spent ten years with a social service agenda, but I am also an artist. In fact, before I came to an understanding of the needs for social justice, I was an artist. From the age of four I began sketching. When I learned to read, I

became a voracious, nearly compulsive, reader. It was around age 10 I began to write. I wrote, directed, produced and starred in my first theatrical production at age 13. I won a Chicago Young Playwrite's award at age 19. After that, social service took over my life. Now I have returned to what I once was, an artist.

11. Almost 3 films old now, what is the space you occupy in the larger context of movies?

I believe I bring a unique perspective to movies as a women's activist, a South Indian and an NRI.

12. Do you think your movie has the power to stir the emotions or the intelligence? Where do you aim, at the intellect or the emotions?

My movie is aimed at both facets of an individual, like most good movies.

13. When is the movie opening and where? Or do you intend to stick to a festival opening rather than a commercial one?

My movie will likely open in May in Kerala, and though the film will make the rounds of the festival circuit, I would like to show it in Kerala in commercial venues.

14. What are your other passions besides movies?

Writing, reading, visual images, dance, running.

15. And what are Ligy's plans 10 years from now?

To continue to improve on the loving relationships I have with my family and friends. To be proud of my creative output. To continue to work towards equal justice for all people.

16. Your favourite movie?

Casablanca. To Kill a Mockingbird. Matrix.

17. Your kind of book?

I have too many favorite books...a couple are Creation, by Gore Vidal, The Dispossessed by Ursula LeGuin and My Story by Kamala Das.

18. A person you truly admire.

It's a tie, Arundhati Roy and Isaac Asimov.