

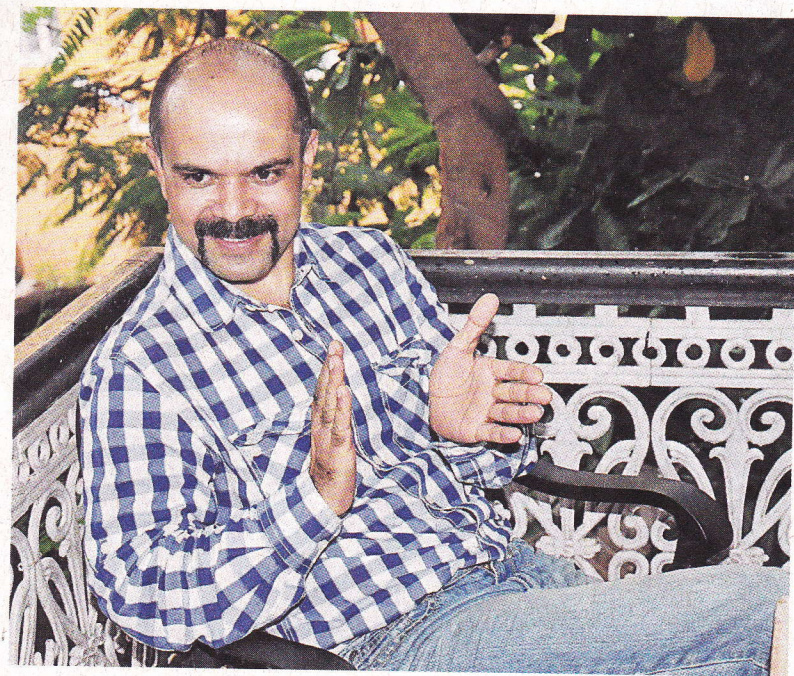
# Across boundaries

**CHAT** Parvez Imam talks about how psychiatry informs film-making and why he wants to make films without heroes.

**"T**he portrayal of mental illness in mainstream cinema is often based on the life of one exceptional person who happens to be disabled. That's not reality, it is exotic," says Parvez Imam, doctor turned film maker who was at Lamakaan, for a musical performance and the screening of his film *The Waterfall* which is based on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. "The focus is hardly on the illness but on the 'hero' and this leads to a much skewed perception of what these people really go through. I try to make films that don't have heroes," he clarifies.

Having left the medical profession to make films, Parvez often gets asked what prompted the shift but to the health professional-film maker, this was hardly a shift at all. "It was more of an expansion or an evolution. I always felt the need to communicate certain ground truths about mental illness and films are a way of doing that," he says. It began with his experience at the Central Institute of Psychiatry, Ranchi. "I met patients who had recovered from illness but have been stuck in the facility for decades simply because their families didn't come back for them. I began to question the system and write about it," he explains. Parvez wrote a series of articles, based on his interactions with patients, for *Illustrated Weekly* but unfortunately the magazine went out of publication before these could be printed.

In January, 1995 Parvez walked out of the medical profession. With a little help from family and friends he picked up on an old passion and began to direct short films and documentaries. Since then he has made over 15 films on various subjects including health and mental illness, and shot in four different languages – English, Hindi, Kannada and Marathi. He started out by doing films on commission for clients including The Resource Alliance, UK and the World Health Organiza-



**JUGGLING PASSIONS** Parvez Imam. PHOTO: K. RAMESH BABU

tion but his first independent venture was in 2001.

Films are not his only way of reaching an audience; Parvez is also a musician with a rhythm guitar and blues harp. As a film maker, Parvez is not bound by genre or technique, so his films are often experimental in nature. "I just think about what I want to say, how I want to say it and the funds I have," he says. His style – simplistic and experimental – is based on his understanding of the human psyche.

"My training as a doctor informs my direction. I know what to say and do in order to convey my message to the audience and it has also taught me how to make people comfortable in front of the camera," he explains, adding that *A dream somewhere* was shot in a village in Maharashtra with a cast of people who had never seen a camera up-close.

His film *Flight 208* featured a cast of 208 people from across the globe making a statement about suffering and human indifference to it. *Exploring madness* on the other hand is a six-part documentary series about mental illness in India. His other films are *The Beginning*, *Random Voices from Kashmir* and *A Dream Somewhere* (*Kuthe-tari ek swapna*), a Marathi film.

Parvez aims to make films that are not just interesting but also thought-provoking. The discussion following the film screening, which ranged from international diplomacy to Anti-Semitism, said enough about his success on this front. When he is not making films or playing the guitar, Parvez is skiing, trekking or scuba diving. He is also founder and CEO of Route Purple, a travel company.

**ZEENAB ANEEZ**