

Resilient loves

by [Tom Aitken](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

In cinematic tradition, when far-flung families gather for a domestic celebration the air is pervaded with the sound of rattling skeletons. Scandalous revelations are made, suppressed feuds liberated. What really happened between grandma and granddad and the lodger from Poughkeepsie back in 1942 is at last exposed. For dramatic purposes, happy families are usually of little use.

Monsoon Wedding includes numerous such secrets, but they are ultimately contained within a life-affirming, cheerful story about the arranged marriage of Aditi Verma to Hemant Rai, an engineer from Texas. The Vermas are Punjabis living in Delhi, although some family members have scattered as far afield as the Gulf states and Australia. The film begins, significantly, in a television studio with a noisy debate on the rift between the modern world and traditional values. This debate is a general theme of the movie and central to one of the plot lines.

The debate is chaired by Vikram, a trendy media figure who is also Aditi's former boss and former lover. Aditi dropped him when she realized he would never leave his wife. On the rebound, she agrees to marry Hemant. She is then confronted with the worst fear of a traditional Indian bride--What if her husband and family discover that she has been less than virtuous?--along with the conscientious dilemma of a modern woman--Ought she not to confess the affair to Hemant on the grounds that he has a right to know about her past?

Aditi's cousin Ria carries the burden of a potentially more destructive secret. Motivated partly by doctrinaire feelings of independence from men, revulsion at Aditi's eagerness to accept an arranged marriage, and even more by what is happening between her rich uncle and a young relative, she decides to reveal how her uncle behaved during her own childhood. There are other, less important secrets. Aditi's mother, for instance, is a clandestine smoker.

No film can give a complete picture of India. Directed by Mira Nair, *Monsoon Wedding* focuses on one small, affluent, sophisticated part of that vast and various country. It celebrates Delhi, and the Punjabis who live there, who are both deeply

Westernized--cell phones, tobacco, alcohol, the stock market and the Internet are all part of their everyday lives--and devoted to traditional customs and a sense of family and hospitality.

The Vermas are not so modern as to eschew employing a lower-caste servant, Alice, who provides an uncomplicatedly romantic thread in the plot by attracting the attention of the tent-and-catering contractor, P. K. Dube. Dube, with his air of stimulatingly enjoyable panic, compulsive wheeler-dealing and ever-chirruping mobile phone, is a comic and sociological masterstroke. He is the brave new world which will one day ease the Vermas into the social margins. Meanwhile, he looks after his anxious mother, hangs his trousers carefully every night to preserve the creases, and falls head over heels for simplehearted Alice.

Another masterstroke is the modulation from frequently frothy comedy with lashings of music and dance to high drama as when Ria blows the whistle on her disgraceful uncle the night before the wedding. The celebrations, the ideas of personal respect, family unity and hospitality, take on a new perspective. Will Aditi's father act on his sense of what is incontrovertibly wrong or will he cobble together some simulacrum of family unity?

Made with more than a sideways glance at Bombay's "Bollywood" tradition of romantic drama, this is a captivating film, bursting with energy and human emotions--family love, romantic love, even arranged love--flecked with moments, carefully but delicately prepared, of horror, disgust, despair and anger. When the tumult and the shouting die, we are left with a sense of how tough and resilient those loves are.