

All We Imagine as Light [15]

2024 France/India/Netherlands/Luxembourg/Italy

118 mins

UK released **29 November 2024**

Director **Payal Kapadia**

Screenplay **Payal Kapadia**

Cinematography **Ranabir Das**

Music **Dhritiman Das**

Cast **Kani Kusruti (Prabha); Divya Prabha (Anu); Chhaya Kadam (Parvaty); Hridhu Haroon (Shiaz); Azees Nedumangad (Dr Manoj)**

All cities are crossroads, transitory beacons of artificial light which attract visitors and those who stay forever but who will always remain visitors. Mumbai is its own special case; something that Payal Kapadia - a talented documentarian (*A Night of Knowing Nothing*) making her fiction debut - eloquently pleads in *All We Imagine as Light*, the first Indian film to play in Cannes Competition in three decades. It's a light for audiences to surrender to, a realist-infused story of three women broadly representing three generations in a city where their hold is fragile, where their breaths barely leave a mist of a trace.

Mumbai lives and breathes here too – the monsoon rains pour tears into a place “that isn't real...[where] you could vanish into thin air” – and when the film's protagonists leave the city for a trip to a beach-side village, it weighs on their actions: their sense of fate, agency, and, ultimately, freedom.

Prabha (Kani Kusruti), a senior sister, and Anu (Divya Prabha), her more junior colleague (and room-mate), work at a Mumbai hospital specialising in women's health. Prabha is serious and sad, overly-responsible, kind, cautious and desperately lonely. After a brief, arranged marriage, her husband moved to Germany to work and hasn't contacted her for a year. Anu is flighty, irrepressible, yet essentially good-hearted. She borrows her rent money from Prabha and is secretly seeing a Muslim boy named Shiaz (Hridhu Haroon). The women's two strong performances root the film.

A third character, the hospital cook Parvaty (Chhaya Kadam), embodies the reality of their Mumbai: evicted from her shanty house after two decades, she could be their future. Right now, however, she's their present, as she returns alone to her home village after a life on the margins of a city which, as Kapadia's roaming camera shows, is always on the move. From a long opening tracking shot down a street, accompanied by voice over testament of the city's residents, Mumbai is swollen and surging, its train doors opening and disgorging and filling again.

The focus here is female. At the hospital, women deal with women, while life in Mumbai deals with women in its own particular way. Always present is the understanding of just how difficult it is for these independent women to have a hold on their own lives, to get a rooted place in a modern India which is so concerned with how they conduct themselves. Arranged marriages can't be left. Hindu and Muslim can't be in relationships. Widows can't have papers. Yet *All We Imagine As Light* is not absolute: its men are vulnerable too, from the kind-hearted Dr Manoj (Azees Nedumangad) to the besotted Shiaz. Everyone makes their way around Mumbai in the rain, all these workers uprooted from their villages and uprooted again in India's relentless modernisation: in the village, though, the India from whence they all came, there's stability – and possibly some hope.

Fionnuala Halligan, *Screen Daily*, 23 May 2024 (abridged).

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