

Filmmaker completes his 'Journey'

by Niki Kapsambelis, The Associated Press

McMurray—When he was growing up in India, Harish Saluja longed to live in a world where artistry was respected as well as industry, where he could tell the stories accumulating in his mind.

He arrived in America in December, 1971, with a few hundred dollars, an engineering degree, and the belief that, in America, an artist can flourish "if you are willing to work hard and have delusions that you have talent."

A quarter-century later, he is trying to prove his theory by filming "The Journey," representing a dream that took a lifetime to realize.

"I haven't slept properly for a month," said Saluja, 50, between takes of the film on which he serves as writer, director and producer. "But I have stories to tell."

Art took a back seat for most of Saluja's life. After arriving in the United States, Saluja found a job in publishing, eventually becoming the CEO and co-owner of two technical magazines: Measurements and Control and Medical Electronics.

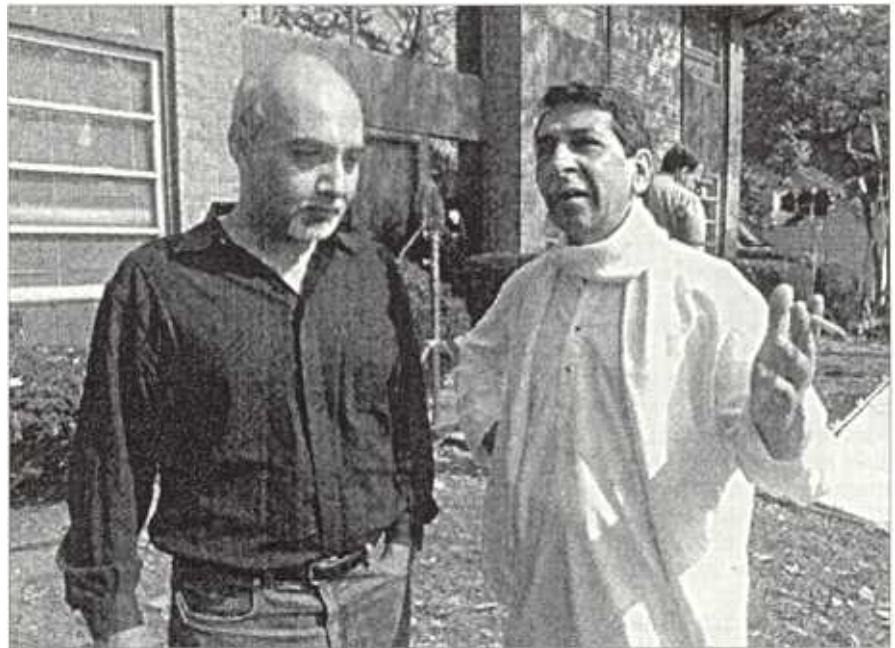
To his culture, his job was respectable in a way that moviemaking could not be. "In India, when you tell your parents you want to go make movies, what they hear is you want to go to Bombay and become a prostitute," said Saluja. "Life gets in the way of art."

He found creative outlets where he could: his abstract paintings have been exhibited locally and abroad; he hosts an Indian music show for WDUQ-FM, a National Public Radio affiliate; and he produced some small independent films.

But not until 1995, when he attended a directors' workshop at the Sundance Institute, did he find the courage to launch "The Journey."

He formed a production company, New Ray Films, honoring his hero, the late Indian director Satyajit Ray, who toiled in relative obscurity for years before winning an Academy Award for lifetime achievement in 1992. One month later, Ray died.

Saluja won't disclose the film's cost, except to say it is less than \$3 million. He cultivated a few investors from the Indian population around Pittsburgh, some of whom had heard his radio show. But he has kept his publishing job, opting to shoot the film during a three-week vacation.



Director Harish Saluja, left, and actor Roshan Seth during the shooting of *The Journey*.

Unlike most first efforts, "The Journey" boasts a few critically acclaimed actors in its cast, including Roshan Seth ("Gandhi," "Mississippi Masala") and Saeed Jaffrey ("My Beautiful Laundrette," "A Passage To India"). Its crew was hired from the local pool of professionals that has grown as more feature films are shot in Pittsburgh.

"The Journey" follows Kishan Singh, a recently widowed school headmaster (Seth) who travels from India to his son's home in America. Kishan's male chauvinism and peculiar Old-World habits cause tension in the family, but eventually, his poetic soul draws everyone closer together.

Antony Zaki, the Indian-born Briton who plays the son, said part of the role's appeal to him was that it offered the chance to play an Indian man who was not a caricature. Though he finds his work has broadened recently, at the beginning of his career, Zaki said he had to take some roles he found personally offensive because so few parts exist for Indian actors.

Seth said he was initially reluctant to take the part. But, like Kishan, he found Saluja's passion for his art infectious. "I was cornered by my desire to help a first-time filmmaker," Seth said.

Seth and Saluja clashed sometimes on how to play Kishan, an educated Indian man who thinks nothing of rinsing his mouth over the kitchen sink and is confounded by the mechanics of a vending machine.

Seth said he was worried that his character appeared too charmingly naive, a mystical Indian wise man with little connection to reality. But in the end, Seth said he capitulated to most of Saluja's ideas.

"He's been away from India long enough to idealize some characteristics in the Indian personality," Seth said. "Yet, he is close enough to realize that all isn't perfect in India."

Saluja hopes to screen *The Journey* at film festivals and would like to show it in New York in August to coincide with a celebration marking the 50th anniversary of India's independence.

If "The Journey" takes off, Saluja hopes to make more films that chronicle Indian life in America. "Who is going to tell our stories?" he said. "We should tell them ourselves."

**"Life gets
in the way
of Art"**

—Harish Saluja

Excerpted from the Observer-Reporter Nov. 25, 1996.