



Dominique Jacob (left) and Vincent Detours

CHIRODEEP CHAUDHURI

Healing touch

Nandini Ramnath meets the sensitive twosome behind *Dr Nagesh*.

A documentary that explores the deadliness of HIV runs into hurdles from the word go: this is one problem you can't put a face to. In their documentary *Dr Nagesh*, Dominique Jacob and Vincent Detours deftly handle the need to protect patient confidentiality while still obtaining emotionally powerful footage by placing a camera behind patients and training their lens on the healer instead. *Dr Nagesh* is the story of HIV positive patients at the Salvation Army centre in Byculla and of Dr Nagesh Shirgoppikar, a gynaecologist and obstetrician who provided free counselling there to poor patients for ten years. We only see the backs of patients' heads, their feet and hands, and their facelessness underscores the finality of HIV/AIDS. An emotionally moving work, *Dr Nagesh* explores the destruction of the body and spirit that is a result of HIV, especially among the poor and disenfranchised.

Dr Nagesh has been screened only once before in Mumbai – at an event at Bhupesh Gupta Bhavan to mark

the Communist Party of India's anniversary in December. The film returns on March 24, with a screening at the Alliance Française (the two filmmakers were born in France, though they now live in Belgium). Detours and Jacob were school mates, and first worked together in 2000 for *Mr Scie*, an exploration of old age through the story of an 80-year-old man. *I Am Alive Today*, on the anti-HIV drug cocktail AZT, followed two years later, and out of this investigative documentary on the unaffordability of HIV treatment flowed *Dr Nagesh*.

Detours works as a research scientist at a cancer research institute in Brussels. Jacob trained in biology and genetics, but became a cameraperson instead, and he shot *Dr Nagesh* with a camera with middle and long lenses, crouching in a corner of a makeshift cabin at the Salvation Army HIV/AIDS Counselling Centre (Detours did the sound). They filmed Shirgoppikar and his patients for a month in 2004 without understanding a word of what was being said. Neither of the directors speaks any Indian language, and their grasp over English is shaky. The real work lay in getting several hours of conversation – at least four hours for

each day shot – translated. "It took us three weeks just to translate the material," says Detours. *Dr Nagesh's* charm, then, lies as much in its editing as in its camerawork.

The documentary opens with Shirgoppikar counselling a former nurse who has been diagnosed as HIV positive, and who's convinced that a patient, rather than her husband who left her a few years ago, is the transmitter of the condition. Shirgoppikar impassively listens to the nurse, scribbles notes in his file and gently tells her, "I'm sure your husband must have been HIV positive, that's why he left you". The moment is as quiet as a falling



Dr Nagesh Shirgoppikar

feather, and as powerful as an upper cut. "You learn about the truth the same minute the patient does," remarks Detour.

Shirgoppikar has been interested in HIV since 1992, at a time when the government didn't appear unduly worried about the virus. "This research was being done in India for the first time," he said in an e-mail interview from Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, where he is on a two-year assignment for an HIV/AIDS project run by the United Nations Development Programme. "This was the time when HIV testing kits were scarcely available and medical professionals were denying treatment to HIV patients because of fear." He says that for the first five years from 1992, "the government was in denial, and didn't believe that they had a problem with HIV. They said it was Africa's problem." Only recently has the government helped improve access to anti-retroviral therapy, he says.

After 1995, Shirgoppikar "totally devoted" himself to "the HIV/AIDS cause". Among the NGOs he worked for was the Indian Health Organisation, and Forum Against Drugs and AIDS. Between 2000 and 2006, he says, "I dabbled around with my private practice in HIV-related management" before he was recruited to work in Guyana.

The doctor met the filmmakers as they were attempting to crack the puzzle of "making a film on people who couldn't be shown on screen", says Detours. The filmmakers decided to make Shirgoppikar the camera's focus. "He became an intermediary," says Detours. "You also see the issue from the point of view of patients facing the doctor." A section of patients refused to be filmed, discreetly or otherwise.

Detours and Jacob run the risk of individualising a large issue by naming the documentary after one person. *Dr Nagesh* includes footage of two other counsellors at the clinic. "It was so difficult to name the film," Detours explains. "We were impressed with the doctor right from the start. He's a hero, he's been taking [HIV positive] patients way before we filmed it. It made sense to call the film *Dr Nagesh*."

See Screenings and workshops for event details.