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## It takes breaking to break free

**Breakin' Mumbai, a film by media students at TISS, was screened at the Clapstick International Student Film Festival at SRFTI Kolkata last week. The film follows the life of underground breakdancers in Mumbai and their struggle with a space-starved city that's shutting them out**

June 17, 2012

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What makes a bunch of teenagers head to Sion Fort and empty railway platforms at midnight to practise breakdancing? Love for the form, you'd naturally assume. And what makes a bunch of teenagers from lower income backgrounds do the same at midnight?

Aakriti Kohli, a 23 year-old student at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) assumed it had everything to do with angst, resistance and rebellion. As part of her media and culture studies project, Kohli, along with four group members, was filming a documentary on teenagers who breakdance in Mumbai. Kohli rolled the camera during the very first shoot and asked her protagonist, 21 year-old Mohammad Gani, which of the above mentioned emotions made him an underground breakdancer. Gani blinked at the choices he had to pick from. "None of those. I am not sad. My parents don't beat me. And I have a steady job, too." That's when Kohli and her group had to sit down and reconsider their ideas.



Breakdancers Aman Singh (right) and Akash Dhangar, are part of the documentary, *Breakin' Mumbai*.

"I must admit that we assumed a bit too much when we noticed that breakdancing was not being taken up by the upper and middle classes," says Kohli.

The documentary, called *Breakin' Mumbai*, won the best film award of the year and was screened at the Clapstick International Student Film Festival at SRFTI Kolkata last week. It traces the life of Gani who lives at Cheetah camp near Mankhurd and dropped out of school. He made bags with his father for a few years and now sells slimming oil in a call centre by day. By night, Gani is an underground breakdancer — and a brilliant one at that. *Breakin' Mumbai* tries to understand the relationship these dancers share with the city that has little space for their passion.

Gani and his friends, 18 year-old Aman Singh and 28 year-old Wasim Ahmed, are part of a break dancing group RocFresh and of a collective called Slum Gods (the breakdancer, says Kohli, hated the connotation the term Slum Dog, made famous by the movie, *Slumdog Millionaire*, had). "During the filming of the documentary, we made a conscious effort to take the protagonists' choices into account and attribute their motives and choices," says Kohli. The first thing

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Gani told the group, for instance, was that enjoying music is 'haram' in Islam. "But we didn't introduce him as someone who's going against his religion. Instead, we decided to let the narrative build up, let Gani have a fair chance at explaining himself. That bit comes much later in the documentary," says Kohli.



**Mohammad Gani (right) and a friend, who breakdance in Mumbai, are part of the documentary Breakin' Mumbai**

The documentary takes a close look at the venues dancers choose to breakdance in, and put up quite a struggle when the cops bully them and ask them to pack up and leave. "It happens all over the city — corners of Sion fort, Vashi, Juhu, Bandra, Khargar, everywhere you can imagine. They rehearse in balwadis, too. People often assemble around the dancers and think they are performing stunts. The cops, however, aren't impressed. Sometimes, ASI officials have asked them to leave Sion Fort, too."

Contrary to what most people think about the importance of breaking gear, flashy clothes and gelled hair, Kohli says she met dancers who barely cared for the glamour. And competitions — called 'battles' — are very important for most breakdancers. The money pumped into battles by college festivals and mall events keeps many breakdancers going. But not all, adds Kohli. There are many, like Singh, who break dance instead of playing cricket. "It's that simple for him," says Kohli.

What stands out in Breakin' Mumbai for Kohli is the incident when Ahmed was stabbed in a roadside brawl a day before his shoot for the documentary. "We met him after a month and he insisted on breakdancing despite the doctor's instruction not to. Ahmed just let himself go in spite of the pain. I think that's when I understood what every breakdancer was trying to tell me right from the start — it's not about pain and rebellion. Unhe bas achha lagta hai (They just like it)," says Kohli.

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