

## I FOR INDIA

DIRECTED BY: SANDHYA SURI

CELLULOID DREAMS

DVD, 70 MINUTES, 2005

Reviewed by Gwen Johnson



©2006 Sandhya Suri.

*I for India* documents the intimate, heart-breaking, and funny moments of an Indian family's forty-year immigrant experience in the United Kingdom, and explores the themes of identity, loyalty, cultural discrimination, racism, separation, and belonging. These themes resonate today as much as they did in 1966 when Yash Pal Suri, the eldest son of an Indian family, arrives in the United Kingdom with his wife and daughter in search of advanced medical education. Even though he has chosen to leave India, he

knows the tradition and obligations of a first-born son, and he vows to stay connected with his Indian family. He defies the geographic separation by purchasing movie cameras and audio recorders for himself and his extended family in India so that they can share each other's daily lives through film. Thus begins the very personal international correspondence that documents not only the intimacy of a divided family, but four decades of a changing world across two continents.

Loyalty to family—the sense of belonging to a group greater than oneself—is a powerful theme that runs throughout the documentary as Dr. Suri and his family search for the meaning of “home” and identity. Knowing the effect his move has had on his parents, especially his mother, he attempts to return to India to practice medicine, but finds it to be a negative experience. After nine months, he and his family decide to return to England, challenging the idea that “home” is more than just a geographic place where family, culture, and identity are inseparable.

Sandhya Suri, daughter and director of the film, cleverly navigates between the very personal story of her family's journey in their search for acceptance by their adopted culture and the larger questions of cultural assimilation and discrimination in a country that grew wary of the increasing number of “colored” immigrants making their home in the UK in the 1960s. To authenticate these growing tensions (and others throughout the film), she introduces archival BBC/TV programs to document the British mood from the 1960s onward including Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's nuanced reference in the 1980s to immigration as threatening British national pride and identity.

As Sandhya deftly and passionately presents her family's complex story based on her father's documentation, she reveals the difficult challenges they face living in a culture where others consider them “misfits.” At the same time, she shows how her family accepted the immigrant experience of “separation and belonging,” and how that changed their ideas of “home” and their own identity. As revealed in the film, identity is far more complex and intangible than just sharing living space and culture; it involves deeper and more sustained connections over time. For Dr. Suri, it was his eight-millimeter camera and

tape recorder that kept alive his dream to stay connected with his family in India. For his daughters' generation, webcams and emails provide connections of the heart. The documentary closes with Dr. Suri and his wife talking to one of their daughters, who has chosen to leave England for Australia. Through these conversations, her loyalty to family remains strong, but her will to find her place in a larger world context becomes paramount, as she searches for the meaning of home and identity for herself. It is a bittersweet continuation of an immigrant family's desire for “separation and belonging.”

This documentary is a jewel for educators on both the pre-collegiate and collegiate levels who teach world history, Asian studies, world literature, immigrant studies, and film and media courses. It offers a rich thematic approach to the Indian-English immigrant experience through the eyes of a divided family and their cameras, but its greatest value is in the universality of its message. ■

**GWEN JOHNSON** teaches World History and Advanced Topics Comparative Government at Scarsdale High School, New York. She has coordinated courses on Asian and World History for the Scarsdale Teachers Institute, worked on an Indian curriculum for the Asia Society, and was consultant for the high school text, *India, its Culture and History*. Recently she has worked with the East-West Center's AsiaPacificEd K-12 Program on various initiatives: teacher exchanges, summer programs in Southeast Asia, and NEH Pearl Harbor workshops. She is a member of the EAA Editorial Advisory Board.

## OUT OF THE POISON TREE

DIRECTED BY: BETH PIELERT

GOOD FILM WORKS

DVD, 57 MINUTES, 2006

Reviewed by Nancy Janus



Thida Buth Mam (one of the three sisters) in Cambodia. ©2006 Good Film Works.

*Out of the Poison Tree*, written, directed, and produced by Beth Pielert, details the return to Cambodia of three sisters in search of information on the death of their father at the hand of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. This magnificently photographed film introduces the viewer as much to life in modern-day Cambodia as it does to the horrible history of the 1970s genocide.

The film begins with the three sisters at home in California planning their trip to Cambodia and includes the viewer with them as they travel from urban Phnom Penh, to their father's rural village where he

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### FILM REVIEWS

was last seen, to Angkor Wat's beautiful temples. The sisters interview survivors who still feel the pain of their losses and others who believe that Cambodians simply need to forget and get over being angry. We meet Cambodian people like a former Khmer Rouge soldier who is filled with regret for what he did, explaining that he was trapped by the political situation and fear, and a landmine detonator who has created a museum of his finds. A novice monk teaches us his Buddhist perspective on genocide—that even if a person does not have bad karma from a former life, he or she should forgive and forget in this one so that the war does not go on.

The film is complicated, following the sisters on their quest and simultaneously teaching a history lesson to those unfamiliar with the Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia. For a person well versed in Cambodian history it is not difficult to follow, but the history lesson is not linear and can be confusing. For example, we see horrifying video of the American planes carpet-bombing the eastern sections of Cambodia while Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger assert that peace is at hand. These images are juxtaposed with historical footage of Phnom Penh devoid of inhabitants, but there is no explanation as to why or any orientation about the Khmer Rouge ideology. For classroom use, students will need some background information on Cambodian history before showing the film.

The viewer does not really get to know the three sisters in this film very well, but the Cambodians who are interviewed are amazing studies in character. Each one is allowed to tell his or her story in full with what appears to be very little editorial cutting. A perfect example is the village widow sharing the story of her husband's disappearance. The pain the woman feels as she tells how she watches every car drive by, hoping against hope for his return to her, is agonizing. In a later scene, a high school girl of sixteen dissolves into tears as she tells why it is important to have the Khmer Rouge Tribunals in order to avenge the deaths of her own relatives whom she never knew. As a people, Cambodians tend to keep a stiff upper lip and try to put painful memories out of their minds. These interviews open the window for their stories to pour out, and they are very real and moving for the viewer.

*Out of the Poison Tree* has the political agenda of communicating how important the Tribunals are to purging the Cambodian people of their thirty years of pain. The film dates itself as it tells us repeatedly that the trials will soon begin, and that only Comrade Duch, the director of the Toul Sleng S-21 torture prison, will be tried. As of this writing, in September 2009, the trials have gone on since March, and after six months on the stand, the testimony of Comrade Duch just ended. The remaining perpetrators, reported in the film as having made deals with Prime Minister Hun Sen in order not to stand trial, await trial in prison with Comrade Duch.

The utility of this film depends on its purpose in the classroom. As a record of contemporary Cambodia and the ways that the Khmer Rouge experience continues to affect the people thirty years later, it is excellent. As a vehicle to teach about the genocide, the Hollywood production *The Killing Fields* may be more useful. A third choice for teaching the history, although it is very difficult to watch, is the French film, *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. This movie provides a detailed window into exactly how the Khmer Rouge dealt with its victims and reveals the lasting pain that many members of the former Khmer Rouge army feel today as they look back over their crimes.

Finally, *Out of the Poison Tree* offers a set of brief video clips on the menu screen called "Gems from the Cutting Room Floor." The clips are photographically lovely but very short and probably of limited utility to the teacher. The menu also offers a study guide in pdf format. Unfortunately, even with the included instruction this reviewer was unable to open it, although it is available online at [http://distribution.asianamericanmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/study\\_guides/OutPoisonTree\\_studyguide.pdf](http://distribution.asianamericanmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/study_guides/OutPoisonTree_studyguide.pdf). ■

**Editor's Note:** A link to the study guide will be posted on the EAA Web site.

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