

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. ■

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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