
DIRECTOR INTERVIEW BY DILIP BARMAN

FILM: THE SARI SOLDIERS
DIRECTOR, YEAR: JULIE BRIDGHAM, 2008
LENGTH: 90 MINUTES
AUDIO WEBSITE: DILIP.INFO/AUDIO/SARISOLDIERS [ALL LOWER CASE]
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Nepal is a country that many people, even those from neighboring India and China, know less about than perhaps they would like to. It includes eight of the world's highest mountains, including Mount Everest, and is Buddha's birthplace.

Nepal had a 240-year-old monarchy that its legislature voted to abolish just a few months ago on May 28, 2008. Its nine- to ten- year civil war involved royalists, Maoist communists, students advocating democracy, and other groups. In June 2001, a few years into this war, King Birendra's brother Gyanendra dissolved the government and took absolute power after the Royal Massacre.

The Sari Soldiers is a documentary film released this year about this chapter of establishing democracy in Nepal, highlighting the powerful roles that Nepali women are playing. It opens with an undercover Maoist Commander, dressed in combat fatigues and hidden in a forest. She describes her perspective on government brutality, and benevolent communist protection of Nepali citizens.

Much to the film's credit, it doesn't take sides but goes on to depict others who are fighting for freedom and who have been themselves victimized by communist brutality. People in other villages are interviewed who are loyal to the monarchy and who feel it really has the commoners' best interests at heart. Six women are followed, including Royal Nepal Army officer Rajani, student organizer Ram Kumari, and human rights lawyer Mandira, as well as Maoist commander Kranti, rural monarchist Krishna, and Devi. Devi had witnessed her niece's torture and murder by the Royal Nepal Army; the army punishes her subsequent public outcry by abducting her daughter.



The matter-of-fact style of the film lends a sense of vicariously and objectively witnessing the tumultuous events in Nepal's recent history, leading to the historic ending of a centuries-long monarchy. It is a testament to the power of the individual, particularly

that of women working for justice. The film is beautifully shot in Nepal's mountains, jungles, villages, and cities, and the score nicely supports the story.

One minor criticism is that the film could have benefited from a stronger historical grounding, explaining more of the pre-civil war recent history, as well as the country's different relationship with the British from India in its colonial era. (That said, please see the discussion in the interview below on this topic.) I found some of the editing to be too abrupt. Parts of the film are emotionally difficult to watch, such as when the remains of a young woman, snatched away at night and "disappeared" by the army, are found and excavated after a three-year search. But I heartily recommend this important film for people interested in understanding this very recent history, as well as to reaffirm the power that we all can make as individuals.

The Sari Soldiers is produced and directed by Julie Bridgham, a Sundance Institute Documentary Fellow. For this film, she was awarded the 2008 Nestor Almendros Prize for courage and commitment in human rights filmmaking at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival. Over the past six years, she has lived for extended periods in Nepal where she produced and directed numerous documentaries including several for the United Nations (U.N.) and the Nepalese Youth Opportunity Foundation. She has produced and directed numerous global documentary series, including for the BBC, Discovery Channel, and TLC. She had previously worked in Costa Rica for a U.N. environmental project and in Bolivia as a researcher for a human rights organization.

Women Make Movies is the distributor of *The Sari Soldiers*. Established in 1972, it distributes independent films by and about women. Included in its corpus are a number of other films that may also be of special interest to South Asian viewers, including *My Daughter The Terrorist* (Beate Arnestad, 2007) that I reviewed in the April issue.



In late September, I had the opportunity to talk with Ms. Bridgham. The interview, edited for length and clarity, follows. The audio of the full interview is available online at dilip.info/audio/sarisoldiers.

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Dilip: Julie, thank you for sharing your film about Nepal, a country that many, even of South Asian origin, perhaps know little about. What has drawn you to Nepal?

Julie: I first became interested in Nepal when I was probably around six or seven years old, and my elementary school principle would share stories about her experience living there as a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1960s. I was so captivated - it just seemed like the most fascinating, beautiful place. I traveled to Nepal for my first time in 1993, and fell in love with the country. I finally had the opportunity to return in 2000, when I came back to make a few films for an organization working on children's issues in Nepal. I wound



up making several films for different organizations, with Nepal really becoming a second home to me.

Dilip: Could you please briefly describe other films that you have made about Nepal?

Julie: *At the Edge of Sufficient* follows two families of traders living in Humla (Nepal's most remote and isolated district) who have survived with caravans of hundreds of sheep and goats trading rice for salt in Tibet, as they struggle to maintain their existence with the advent of a new road to Tibet. *Indentured Daughters* is about one organization's efforts to put an end to girls being bonded laborers, providing other economic alternatives to their families and getting their daughters educated. *Children of Hope* profiles abandoned or orphaned children who are now provided new opportunities through education and care. I also made four films for the U.N. focusing on the World Food Program projects in Nepal.

Dilip: In *The Sari Soldiers*, how did you find and get access to the women like Devi (who saw her niece being murdered by the army), Kranti (undercover Maoist Commander), Krishna (anti- Maoist rebel), and others?

Julie: We met each of the women through different circumstances. I wanted to follow the lives of these extraordinary women on different sides of the conflict, but initially wasn't sure if they would want to be filmed. Since we began our filming right after the Nepalese state of emergency was declared, many people were hesitant to speak to us. These women, however, already were putting themselves in the public eye and taking extraordinary risks in what they were doing, so they welcomed the chance to be filmed. Particularly because there were tighter restrictions on the media, they viewed this as an opportunity for their voices to be heard. Because each of them was really making such great impacts, I had become aware of them through their work.

Dilip: Did any of the people whom you filmed request that the film not be shown in Nepal or perhaps anywhere while the country was run by a monarch?

Julie: Because the situation in Nepal was so unpredictable, I had actually felt that it wouldn't be a good idea for the film to be shown in Nepal while it was still under a monarchy. It was important to all of us that the women felt comfortable having the film shown, and to wait to show it in Nepal until things were more stable. Amazingly, the political climate changed during the course of the filmmaking, and so we have been able to show the film in Nepal, and the women have been very supportive and encouraging of its being widely shown throughout Nepal.



Dilip: Did you meet any resistance in your efforts to make this film?

Julie: There were definitely challenges in the filming, particularly because of its being an unpredictable time with us right in the "heart" of where a lot of things were unfolding.

But, because we were filming each person's story over such a long period [the film was made over three years], we had a certain level of access that came over time.

Dilip: How do you think you were perceived in Nepal in your role as filmmaker?

Julie: I was very lucky to work on this film with my extraordinary co-producer, Ramyata Limbu. It was a really great team to have a foreign woman and a Nepali woman. I think there were certain things that may have been more possible at the time because I was a foreigner, and perhaps a certain freedom for people to share things with us because I wasn't coming with any Nepali political bias. It was also so beneficial to work with Ramyata, who provided a certain comfort and insight for people as a fellow Nepali woman.

Dilip: Did you return to Nepal to see how the lives of the women whom you had filmed have changed very recently, especially since the historic May 28, 2008 meeting of the Constituent Assembly?

Julie: I have not been back to Nepal since May 28th, but I plan to get back in December, and I am really looking forward to seeing how things have unfolded for the women in our film since then. I do keep in touch with them.

Dilip: Do you feel that the human rights lawyer, Mandira, is optimistic about the direction of her country?

Julie: I can't speak directly for Mandira on her feelings for the future, but I think that many Nepalese have hope that this new government will address many of the abuses that were committed during the ten-year conflict, and that justice will be done. Still, there are many cases, including Devi's, that have not yet been addressed, so there is still quite a long way to go.



Dilip: Clearly human rights are important to you and toward which you apply your talents. Based on your experiences in Nepal and South/Central America, how would you advise *Saathee* readers who want to make a difference in global human rights?

Julie: One of the great ways we can address human rights issues is to make sure these issues don't go unheard. As individuals, we can make a difference by making sure these issues are made public and that we pressure our governments to hold those responsible accountable. I really think that widespread exposure is a key element to making people accountable, but at the end of the day, we need to make sure that the courts follow through on the rule of law, as well as accountability.

Dilip: Did making this film help crystallize any new perspectives on how individuals with very different ideologies can effectively work together, united by love of place?

Julie: One of the things that was most moving for me was to experience how there *are* so many commonalities shared among people that may have very different political persuasions. For instance, I repeatedly heard from people in our interviews, on all sides of the conflict, how they felt that "we are all Nepalese" with a strong desire for peace. There is a real humanity that we all share, which I hope comes through in the film, that allows people to identify with each of the six women, regardless of our individual nationalities. I think ultimately if we spend the time to get to know someone and the world seen through their eyes, we can all find commonality.

Dilip: I'm glad that you grounded the film with a description of the 2001 Royal Massacre at the beginning. Did you feel a need to describe some more Nepalese history?

Julie: We chose not to go into a lot of history because we realized in test screenings that it is very complex to cover the history without distracting from the main story. We decided that we could either make a film about the history of Nepal or really focus on the powerful stories of these individuals, but that it would be overwhelming to focus on both; ultimately, these women's stories give "real" insight into Nepal that can propel people to delve further into understanding the country.



Dilip: What are your plans for new projects?

Julie: I am currently developing a few different projects right now, and look forward to beginning a new one next year. I am also very involved in the outreach for *The Sari Soldiers*, as we would like to get the film seen widely throughout the U.S., Nepal, and internationally, and to really use the film as a resource to create dialogue among people.

Dilip: Where can *Saathee* readers see *The Sari Soldiers*?

Julie: Women Make Movies [www.wmm.com, 212-925-0606], our distributor, can arrange screenings for organizations and can sell individuals the DVD. Nepal does not seem to be "on the radar" now, but the response that the film has had has been tremendous. We hope that a number of independent theatres will pick up the film; our website, www.sarisoldiers.com, will include future details.

Dilip: Thank you, Julie, for your film and time talking with me.

Julie: Thank you, Dilip!

[Listen to the audio interview at www.dilip.info/audio/sarisoldiers to hear the unabridged interview.]

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Dilip

Note for the editor:

- Women Make Movies high-resolution logo available from www.wmm.com/resources/publicity_materials.shtml
- Butter Lamp Films' high-resolution photographs sent separately via email
- Please note that the film was released in 2008 and not 2007, in spite of the erroneous reference at imdb.com