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FLYING RIVER FILMS
presents

VILLAGE ROCKSTARS

A FILM BY RIMA DAS

India / 87 min / Color / Coming of Age / 2.35:1



SALES

ASIAN SHADOWS

Isabelle Glachant : chineseshadows@gmail.com

Anne Sophie Lehec : anne@chineseshadows.com

Li Ya : lya@chineseshadows.com

chineseshadows.com



SYNOPSIS

In a small village in northeast India, 10-year-old Dhunu dreams of having her own rock band. Her vibrant spirit, imagination and self-assurance stand out in a world where girls are expected to be timid and submissive. With her gang of boys and the support of her widowed mother, Dhunu faces the struggles of her daily life and hopes for the day she can finally play on a real guitar.





INTERVIEW WITH RIMA DAS

What was the starting point of this film?

I grew up in a remote village called Chhaygaon in the state of Assam in northeastern India. VILLAGE ROCKSTARS is a tribute to this place and its people. After living in Mumbai for a couple of years, I went back to my village to shoot my first film (MAN WITH THE BINOCULARS) and realized what I was missing in Mumbai. Being with the children in the village, I decided to tell their story, a story which is also my own.

It is when I was shooting MAN WITH THE BINOCULARS in my village, that I first came across these amazing children playing fake instruments at a local gathering. I casually told them that I wanted to make a movie with them, and from then on, they wouldn't stop following me. I never went to film school, so while making my first film, I was under a lot of pressure. But I was so impressed with their energy and spirit that I started to develop the story from there.

I began capturing footage of the children informally. It was a long process of research and development as I got to know the children better. For six months, I lived with them and observed them closely. I didn't want to make an Indian film that highlighted or glorified poverty. I wanted to make a fresh and positive story that celebrates life and the possibility to dream.

To tell their story honestly, I felt I had to become one of them and really enter their world. I observed the way each of them behaved and

discovered their individual characters, and what later became their roles were based on their real personalities. Being with the children and villagers also brought back my own childhood memories. This helped me write the story.

At first, I was not confident with the camera, because the cinematographer for my first film MWB Ratnajit Roy did such an excellent job. So I was scared to shoot this film by myself. But I felt I had nothing to lose, so I started. And once I started, it never stopped. VILLAGE ROCKSTARS in the end took me 120 days, over the course of three years.

I did not think of this film as a coming-of-age story at the beginning at all. As we progressed during the shooting, I began to change the story, and added layers upon layers. My primary goal was to bring out what the children showed me while I was shooting: their intelligence, imagination, and ability to dream. I also wanted to show the way these children grow up. From the urban, privileged world, we see natural disasters, rural surroundings and other challenges as hostile circumstances, but for these children, this is simply their normal environment.

Why did you shoot for such a long period of time?

Firstly, I wanted to capture all four seasons of the year. Weather played an important yet time-consuming role during the shooting. Furthermore, as I was not relying only on natural lighting, sometimes we would shoot the same scene many days in a row to get the desired lighting effect. As you see, rainstorms and flood (which are out of my control) are key to the background and plot of VILLAGE ROCKSTARS. Waiting for these natural events to occur therefore took time.

Additionally, working with the children also meant that the shooting schedule had to be flexible around their commitments, and we would often shoot in the morning before they'd go to school, or otherwise have to wait until late in the afternoon.

In the beginning stages of developing and researching this film, I was also busy with the post-production of my first feature. So this contributed to the long process as well.



How did you cast the kids and work with them?

Everything happened in this film spontaneously. Interestingly, I cast the girl after casting the boys. I started working with the boys initially and then was struck by the girl (who happens to be my cousin) because she reminded me of my childhood. All the actors are nonprofessionals from my village, except the wise old man, who is a famous local actor. I chose the children before the other characters. I love to work with children so I was very confident about them. But I was less sure about the other characters.

We did workshops to improve their performances, and sometimes one scene would take as long as four or five days to shoot! Mostly I judged their acting by what I felt in their voices. I worked with only the camera monitor. So to choose the right takes, I'd decide by listening to the sound. This is how I could relate to their emotions.

Handling the camerawork and making sure to capture their performances at the same time was a challenge. But soon the children became part of the crew, they would help change the lenses and would handle the sound recording sometimes. My cousin Malika Das, who is in college, helped me in every department and was always an extra pair of hands.

Another challenge was that the children were growing fast. During the 120 days of shooting I saw that their faces and bodies were noticeably

changing. Therefore editing required a lot of time to make sure the kids' appearances remained consistent.

Then there was this fear of losing one of my characters during the shooting, due to the lack of support from their families. Although people in Assam have encountered film crews before, it was much harder for them to accept and understand a single woman making an independent film and seeing bunch of kids tagging along as her crew. Naturally they had doubts.

Is this village very different to other parts of India?

Villages in India are more or less like this one. Over 95% of India's population live in villages. Farming remains their primary means of income. There are some affluent villages in India, especially in the State of Punjab, for example, where there are well-irrigated farmlands, electricity, sanitation, and high food crop output. However, in the State of Assam, where I come from, this is not the case. Assamese farmers and villagers are used to facing harsh realities of untamed natural disasters like floods.

I decided to shoot VILLAGE ROCKSTARS here because of the children whom I encountered while shooting my first feature film MWB. I grew up here and was familiar with the surroundings and customs. I am very grateful to all my neighbors, the children, and the village community for their support during the shooting and the encouragement I got from them.



India is a country with a strong tradition of music, which is an important theme in your film. Why did you decide to have little background music in the film?

Yes, India has a very strong tradition of music. I see musical scores and soundtracks as features to enhance emotion and mood. My story is such that my characters' expressions and dialogues allowed little room for musical maneuvers. I found the natural sounds in the village beautiful and mesmerizing, and decided to use them to add to the mood where necessary.



Flood is important in the film. It is the reason why the family lost the father and why they may not be able to afford a guitar. How is climate change affecting the situation of Indian villagers?

In my village in Assam, people do not know about global warming, fossil fuels, melting glaciers in Antarctica, and rising sea levels. During the monsoon seasons, Assam experiences huge rainfall and the Brahmaputra River (one of the five largest rivers of the world) becomes uncontrollable and floods the plains. My village happens to be on its annual target of destruction year after year. During the making of the film, I realized that the villagers unfortunately take this yearly phenomenon as their "karma," and they have learned to cope and live with it.

This year, Assam's floods were the worst they have been in many years. Is

this because of climate change? I do not have the knowledge to comment on it. But it pains me to see that people who are affected by floods do not care about factors contributing to climate change. For them, it is about salvaging whatever is left behind, moving on, and building dreams.

How do you view the status of women in India? Why did you decide to have such a strong female protagonist?

It's a hard life for a widow, and if you are poor, it is even harder. This is a reality everywhere. I have seen and observed these characters in real life from my childhood days in the village. I have seen these amazing women somehow shape their life and raise their children and move on. This attitude and ability to "move on" really attracted me. It is only when one faces a terrible situation that one begins to take control of one's destiny. I dedicate this film to celebrate the mother and her perseverance.

As for the child, I had to have a strong lead, because I wanted to show that it is possible to achieve your dreams despite harsh realities and circumstances.

What is it like to be a female director in India?

It must be different from individual to individual! Making a 'different' film in India is never easy. Making an independent film is doubly tough. Making an independent film as a woman in a country with deep patriarchal mindsets is a triple disadvantage.

I am very fortunate to be brought up by my parents who nurtured an environment of learning and discipline in me from an early age. Northeast India is quite liberal towards women compared to other parts of India. This shaped my creative thinking and allowed me to explore my potential. Facing problems as a female director has just made me more determined to work harder. I am just starting my career with two feature films, and I have much more to explore. People are supportive, and I want people to see me beyond the label of a woman filmmaker. I want them to see my work as a filmmaker, as a human being. I plan to keep on improving my work to achieve creative satisfaction.



You are your own producer. How did you manage to do everything by yourself?

Necessity I guess. I ran out of all my savings while making my first film, *MAN WITH THE BINOCULARS*. But my love for cinema and my camera, and the idea I had while observing the children meant that there was no time to waste. I could either wait for financing and lose the opportunity in the meantime, or pick up my camera and start shooting. I choose the latter, and so I ended up doing everything on my own.

I was also adamant not to have external producers. Being a new filmmaker, I was not only possessive about it, but I also knew I needed the freedom to follow my vision without compromising my script—a situation that only self-funding could provide.

I don't even know how I managed to do everything. Even when I look back, it surprises me. My independent nature and drive to create something helped. My personal and emotional attachment with the characters also helped me make the film alone. Mostly I wanted complete freedom to make *VILLAGE ROCKSTARS*.

How did the making of your first film help you do your second?

I consider both films as a sort of film school for me, since I have no formal background in filmmaking. On my first film, I had a crew, which made certain things a lot easier. I learned from that experience how important it is to have a cinematographer who you really connect with and who understands the vision for the film. For VILLAGE ROCKSTARS, the process was totally different. It really changed my life. I was experimenting fully and taking a huge risk. I found that things which at one time went really wrong could turn out to be a success.

Any plans for a new film?

I have some script ideas in my mind and I've started writing. Some ideas I know I cannot do alone. But for my third film, which I'm now shooting, I will work alone again. I definitely want to be more organized and structure the script more systematically so that I can complete it in a shorter period of time. It's a teenage love story also set in my village. So we won't have to wait for flood and rain this time. But working again with young people, I'll want to finish it soon, as they change so fast.

In the future, I'd like to make all different kinds of films. Each film is an opportunity to learn and try things out. I don't want to be limited by what people think or what I've done in the past.



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Rima Das is a self-taught film writer, producer, and director. Born and raised in a small village in Assam in northeast India, she is now based in Mumbai and Assam. Her first feature **MAN WITH THE BINOCULARS (ANTARDRISHTI)** premiered in the First Feature Competition at Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival 2016 and at MAMI Mumbai Film Festival. In addition to writing and directing feature fiction and documentary films, she also manages a film production company called Flying River Films in Mumbai, which supports local, independent filmmaking in the region. **VILLAGE ROCKSTARS**, her second feature, will have its World Premiere at Toronto Film Festival and will be in the New Directors Competition in San Sebastian.



FILMOGRAPHY

VILLAGE ROCKSTARS

2017, Feature, 87 min, Coming of Age, Color
- Toronto International Film Festival, Discovery
- San Sebastian Film Festival, New Directors

MAN WITH THE BINOCULARS (ANTARDRISHTI)

2016, Feature, 100 min, Drama, Color
- Tallin Black Nights Film Festival, First Feature Competition
- Jio MAMI Mumbai Film Festival

PRATHA

2009, Short, 10 min

CAST & CREW

Cast

Bhanita Das
Basanti Das
Boloram Das
Rinku Das
Bishnu Kalita
Manabendra
Das
Bhaskar Das



Crew

Producer
DOP
Co-Producer
Editor
Sound Design
Music
Colorist

Rima Das
Rima Das
Jaya Das
Rima Das
Amrit Pritam
Nilotpal Borah
Nuttacha Khajomkaitsakul

FLYING RIVER FILMS

303, Bridge, 3rd cross lane,
Lokhandwala, Mumbai
400053, India
+91 7506310048

flyingriverfilms@gmail.com
rima.films@gmail.com

www.rimadas.com
villagerockstars.com

