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Safar (Gran Bretaña, 2002, 30')

I for India (Gran Bretaña, 2005, 70')¹

Interview

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1. The origin and history of the project. Why did you decide to get involved in the project, how long it took.

So many interesting and moving documentaries document personal lives over time. Many of these film-makers spend years filming their characters' lives. In my case, it was all done for me!

Watching the Super 8 films my father used to take, and making them also, was a regular event growing up. It was only later that I discovered boxes of audio reels, which my father had recorded separately to the films. And the replies to these audio-letters from India. These documented a more complex, often darker picture of my family's experience of migration. The story arc was amazing and there was never a question of whether I should or shouldn't make it. It was clear to me that the story was fantastic and it had to be told.

While still at film school I used these audio reels and Super 8 films to construct a short film, *Safar*, documenting the beginning of this story. Off the back of a festival success from that, I was able to get a feature documentary funded by ARTE. All in all, the project began back in 2001 and ended five years later in 2006.

2. Your experience / feelings / problems about working with home movies. And about working with the home movies of your own family.

Working with home movies is interesting for me in two respects. Firstly, there are some general issues regarding the format. Subtitling Super 8, which can often consist very fleeting images, can be quite difficult as reading the subtitles and keeping up with the image changes is tough. Also, people often either love Super8 and all it embodies, or can't stand it. So it's an interesting starting point.

I fell in love with the Super8 of this film. Both myself and my editor knew every frame of that material. For me the greatest challenge and the greatest fear that I had was that I would make a whole, which was not as meaningful as the individual parts, which comprised it. Making something, which was faithful to my parents' story, which did not oversimplify, which contained all the complexities and nuances, was what was important to me. Super 8 is often about capturing a moment, so making all these fragments into a narrative whole was a challenge. In fact, it was mainly the audio reels,

¹ Available on DVD in USA and UK. More info about *I for India* at www.iforindiathemovie.com

which provided that narrative arc. The tapes were very intimate – recorded in private, to be heard in private, so for me, there was also some tension in listening to them and using them. Ultimately my family were happy for me to do so and they contributed a lot to the film, but like a lot of interesting documentaries, that tension between private and public will always exist.

3. How did you feel about the mixing or blending of the different materials: your father's home movies, your own "home movies" (so to speak, like the wedding of your sister) and the stuff shot thinking of the documentary (interviews, etc.).

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of making this film was the blend of different materials. I wanted to maximize the difference of tone and texture between them. For example, I knew that in this three act structure, the first third would be heavily Super 8, with its own feeling of nostalgia and magic. The second act (documenting when we returned to India) would need to be different, since there was virtually no Super 8 of this time, and the third act needed to be about my parents' lives now. For the reconstruction of our time in India, I chose to shoot in an evocative mood on 16mm, going for a romantic, dream-like feel. The footage all shot in England was shot in Digi-beta and colour-graded coldly, to contrast further with the Super 8 and 16mm. The trick was to balance all the material and not shock the audience with the change of form.

At some level, for me personally, I was always most drawn to the Super8 and the magic and authenticity of it. Initially I found it a shame to use interviews but having constructed the film and watched a rough cut, I realized how satisfying it was to be able to see the family speak now, in the present, to the viewer. Ultimately, the challenge of mixing so many types of material was a great creative one, which I feel gives the film its rich texture.

4. Editing – what to include, what to take out

In terms of the archive, we had a lot more audio archive than Super 8 material, 40 hours to be precise. Telling a man's story, a family's story, over so many years in just 70 minutes was a great challenge. In addition, being the daughter meant I felt very heavily the responsibility to tell my family's story honestly, complexly enough, not to simplify, diminish or accidentally distort the richness of their reality. Watching the first assembly of the film is always a very important moment. At that stage, it becomes clear what needs to go. Myself and my editor were often down on the floor with index cards, re-arranging the bits of dialogue and looking at the structure. Particularly for the first third of the film we were dealing with about 20 years in the same number of minutes. The key for me was choosing small moments, with a different emotional tone – the initial enthusiasm, the seeds of estrangement, growing roots, feelings of alienation etc. In the end it meant that there were many great, joyful, more fun moments, which we didn't use (such as all the relatives sitting round the recorder singing and playing different

instruments, my father's recordings of the moon landing off the television etc.) but it had to be all about a strong narrative.

5. Reaction of your family. Reaction of the public.

My father was over the moon to see his work out there, for the public to watch. More than anything I think it meant a lot to him to be able to share our experiences. Within the family, things were complex. At the time the film was premiering, my sister was still in Australia and growing more and more unhappy with being so far away from the family. I think seeing my parents' story of migration right next to hers brought the reality of her situation home to her and she was soon back in the UK. Showing it in India to my family resulted in a lot of tears. We had grown used to separation and were busy in our own lives. I think tears were shed at how close the family used to be.

What has been most touching for me is the amount of people who continue to write to me having seen the film. Even today, four years after completing the film, I receive many emails from people in all possible parts of the world, who have been moved by the film and related to it deeply. This is the most satisfying thing for me as a filmmaker.

6. *Safar* vs. *I for India*.

I am proud of both these films. In some ways I feel 'Safar' is a purer film although I know that it is not everyone's cup of tea. With 'I for India' I was able to reach a lot more people and tell the bigger story. I made 'Safar' at film school, as my graduation film. I remember everyone telling me that it was not a good graduation film to make if I wanted to get work after as it showed little of my skills as a film-maker. But I made it and the film did well on festival circuits. It was also a great calling card to get funding for 'I for India'.