

# Sabiha Sumar

## On Filmmaking

by Samhita Arni

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Sabiha Sumar's first feature film *Khamosh Paani / Silent Waters* won the Golden Leopard for Best Film, in addition to Golden Leopard for Best Actress (Kirron Kher), at the Locarno International Film Festival in 2003. Here, she talks about her lesser-known films – *Suicide Warriors* (1996, ChannelFour Television, UK) a film about women in the LTTE, and *On the Roofs of Old Delhi* (2007, ZDF/ARTE, Germany) a documentary on the life and aspirations of Gulnaz, a Muslim girl living in Old Delhi.

"Nobody in her right mind would have done it," she announces. It's an unearthly hour, and we've just returned from a difficult day shooting a documentary in Old Delhi. The crew is huddled together, supposed to plan the next day's shoot. Instead, we have digressed; Claire (the camerawoman) and Sabiha are reminiscing about their arduous experiences shooting.

"Dhiya had to come..." Sabiha pauses. There's a light tap on the door. She opens the door slightly, a wee finger's breadth. A nose protrudes through the gap, belonging to Sabiha's Sri Lankan Tamil husband, Dr. Sathananthan. They mutter seriously.

I look about the messy room. There's a still from Sabiha's latest film, *Dinner with the President: A Nation's Journey*, on the wall – it shows Sabiha herself, moping a sweating brow with a bright blue duppatta. She stands out in the image, looking worn, surrounded by hordes of Pathan elders, dressed in dull white salwar suits. She's travelled to the North West Frontier Province in Pakistan to meet a Jirgah, a sort of tribal Parliament. After spending hours arguing with them on interpreting the status of women in the Koran, she's exhausted – it's one woman against many, aged men. In her situation, I wouldn't be exhausted – I would be frightened.

Sathananthan leaves. "I was asking myself," she continues, "what am I doing taking a three-year old baby to a war-torn area?"

I'm fascinated. That takes guts. What possessed her to take a baby to LTTE-controlled Sri Lanka?

"I was so committed to that film at the time, that I didn't feel like going back. It was a very emotionally difficult experience. The Government of Sri Lanka, of course, kept blocking us. It took us five days of sitting outside the army headquarters in Colombo to get permission. And then, nobody was willing to go to that part of the country. We ended up having Satha drive us there, and Dhiya had to come along because there was no one to take care of her."

Ludo, Sabiha's Dutch sound recordist chips in. He's worked with Sabiha on three films over thirteen years. "I remember! We had to sleep in tents...And the tent was shaking. We could hear bombing in the distance, and I was trying to figure out – who was bombing whom? It was so close. I remember asking, what side are we on?" Claire continues, "I told him, if the army comes, we say - we're with the army...if the LTTE comes, we're with them."

They laugh. It's not just the black humour of a by-gone situation that provokes laughter, it's also relief - that they are still alive, ten years later, to talk about it.

"Why did you make this film?" I ask.

"I had seen a picture of an LTTE woman with her leg on the back of a dead IPKF soldier and a gun in one hand on an *India Today* cover. That picture inspired this film. When I looked at that picture, it was as if I wanted to get to know this woman. What makes her tick? Why is she doing what she's doing? Like everyone else, I went in with the idea that LTTE women must be brainwashed. How else would they blow themselves up, these sixteen, seventeen, eighteen year old women, who have their whole life ahead of them? How do they justify all this killing? I imagined them monstrous, not normal like us. I had created in my head a barrier between us and them."

Dhiya (the three year old who was taken to LTTE controlled Sri Lanka), now fourteen, knocks on the door, carrying Mizgha, Sabiha's four month old daughter. In the midst of teething agonies, Mizgha is crying. As Sabiha pacifies the baby, Dhiya waits, half-asleep, wearing pink pajamas, long hair falling over her face. Half-Sri Lankan Tamil, it's hard to imagine a girl of her age, with her distinctly Tamil looks, wielding an AK-47, dressed in combat fatigues.

Sabiha shakes her head, when I tell her this. She's met these girls, lived with them, grown attached to them. It's not hard for her to imagine.

"I found very normal women. I thought I was going to meet and discover all these macho women who I really couldn't talk to and would never be able to empathize with them. But it was really different. I found young women, very friendly, very happy, just their age; running around trees playing, cleaning guns at the same time, having midnight feasts - with their AK-47s.

In the morning they were brushing their teeth, plaiting their hair very carefully like any woman with a feminine sense... with a little mirror."

"At night, we were filming a scene with these girls sleeping in one room. As the lights went out, one very young girl said to a girl next to her, "Will you come with me to the bathroom?" The other girl said, "Go on your own." The young girl said, "No, but I'm scared of the dark." That really moved me because here they were sleeping with AK-47s, training to kill and to be killed and then she says, "I'm scared of the dark"."

We're all silent.

After a while Claire asks, "Did you keep in touch with any of the girls?"

"Charlie," Sabiha replies, "got killed because she joined Karuna's break away group in the east. She was killed. I don't know about the others."

Claire walks away. She looks...lost. Sabiha watches her.

Watching Claire, I ask, "How do you be objective? How do you draw yourself away from all of them? When somebody dies or something happens...the actual process of film making changes a person - at least that's what has happened to me..."

As Sabiha speaks, her voice dies down. "You feel bad. But, we move on as film makers. Because other things consume me, and when they consume me, they consume me totally for that time. Then, I have to move on. Because I know I can not do anything beyond making my film."

*Sabiha's latest documentary **Dinner with the President: A Nation's Journey**, funded partly by Robert Redford's organisation Sundance, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. The film explores President Musharraf's rise to power and the ongoing process of democratisation in Pakistan.*

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