

REALITY FILM

Bahmian Buddha, Darfur and Nomads

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The Public Service Broad Casting Trust recently presented a week long documentary, reality film festival, in the art house circuit, at the major cities. Christian Frei's "The Giant Buddhas" (Switzerland, 96 mins colour, 2005) tries to explore as to who destroyed the statues of Buddha at Bahmian in Afghanistan. The film probes different time frames, and focuses on diverse individuals who have been caught up by the events. The film makers travel on rugged mountain roads to the post-destruction of Bahmian. The Buddha statues were erected in 632 AD, just after prophet Mohammad died. After the UN had intensified its efforts to curb the Taliban, in Afghanistan, in February 2001 the Taliban issued a decree, calling for the destruction of all non-Islamic statues in Afghanistan, including the Bahmian Buddhas. The villagers speak to the film makers.

There are scatterings of snow on the Bahmian valley. The villagers light firewood, and make hot tea and chapattis. Their forefathers lived in the same caves, seventy years ago. The Taliban despised the Taziks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, and wanted them to leave. 2000 years ago it was a transport station along the silk route. The sun brings the cliffs to life, and women walk to the mountain streams. Buddhist travellers were frequent since 625 AD. Goethe and Byron referred to the statues "as Indian beasts without any feelings". Hand held cameras and overhead shots capture the underdestroyed feet of the Buddhas. Ancient Buddha's face was painted with gold, had eyes of rubies and crowns with gems studded. Paintings and statues of Buddha still exist in the Bahmian cave temples, Sayeed recalls fleeing from fighting between the Tajiks and the Taliban. The Al-Jazeera TV correspondent remembers that it had snowed heavily in February 2001. The landscape was frozen with snow, when the Taliban issued its edict to destroy all non-Muslim edicts. TV clips from different parts of the world plea against blowing up the statues.

The Al-Jazeera correspondent states that by destroying the Buddhas, the Taliban were spitting on the world's face. Smoke engulfs when the statues get bombed. The caves shook as the statues were blown up. There were dozens of explosives and cries of "Allah-ho-Akbar". The entire ammunition from an ammunition depot was used. Holes were drilled on the head and limbs of Buddha. The final explosions were by Pakistani and Saudi Arabian engineers, as the Taliban had no idea how to blow up the statue. The international community had condemned the action. No reporters and photographers were permitted entry in the valley. There were truck loads of bombs and explosives. Artillery destroyed the 1500 years old Buddha Statues. The grand plan of the film shifts to the seventh century AD diaries of a Chinese Buddhist monk, Shinzuan, and letters written by the film maker to an Afghan friend, Nilofar, settled in Toronto, Canada. The script tries to imagine Shinzuan walking through the Gobi deserts. The deserted remains of man and beasts were left behind by the caravans. Shinzuan walked 16,000 kms in 16 years. He

reached the Hindu Kush mountains, on his way to India; and finally conceived the giant Buddhas of Bahmiyan in 632 AD.

Chants from a Sufi shrine are common on clichés. A calendar in Afghanistan of 2002, has a photo of the blown up statues. Are the iconoclasts against images, or the images of others? Nilofar in Toronto browses through her photo album, of photos of family members in Bahmiyan. The Buddhist temple in China's Xiam has old manuscripts written by monks, and sketches and drawings of the Bahmiyan statues. At Strasbourg University a professor lectures on ruby eyes of the Bahmiyan Buddha statues, gleaming at night. As on the silk route, Bahmiyan was chosen by the gods, Prof Tazsi, an Afghan archeologist excavates and searches for a sleeping Buddha. Though artifacts were looted by art thieves, the frescoes did not disintegrate in the cellars and caves. In Sichuan province of China, tourists visit a statue of a sitting Buddha. Early Buddhism prohibited pictures of the Buddha. The Chinese tried to replicate a copy of the Bahmiyan Buddhas in October 2001 but later abandoned plans of a reconstruction. Sayeed Mirza recalls the Taliban breaking doors, windows and ovens of cave dwellings. Bahmiyan valley always echoed with laughter and music. Nilofar travels by plane and car to Kabul. Images of destroyed buildings, cut to stone and clay artifacts of a museum, which are a symbol of existence. It is April 2001, three months after the destruction. Old graves are destroyed, and broken statues covered up. In 1970s, a few Australian tourists had made precision photos of the Bahmiyan Buddhas. These are plans of a virtual reconstruction, with 3-D photos.

The caves of Bahmiyan are empty, and the inhabitants have been relocated. At Bahmiyan, Nilofar stares at the empty statue spaces. The weaving of history, barren landscapes, images of destruction, and the diverse plot lines have a basic and frenzied interaction. The authentic images highlight the social conditions and the ordinary characters, living under extraordinary circumstances. The narrative structure on the horribly, violent destruction is never obvious and avoids fright. The politics of the times is always approachable. Yet the energy and freshness of the narrative declines with the camera pondering excessively on Nilofar. In the juxtaposition of history and bombed destruction, Peter Inders-grand's camera elegantly encompasses tragedy.

Camilla Nielsson's **"The Children of Darfur"** (Denmark, 24 mins, colour, 2005) ponders over the plight of two million refugees in Darfur of southern Sudan. More than 200,000 are dead from killings, hunger and famine. Children comprise more of the people of Darfur. Information and news are presented on title cards. A child draws village houses, and a helicopter dropping bombs on houses and a mosque. 27 girls and 18 boys were killed, when rebels attacked a school. There are outbreaks of dysentery and blood diarrhoea, due to overcrowding in the refugee camps. A doctor examines children, Trucks bring in supplies. Fifteen-year-old Somaya is, with her family, in the refugee village. Men on horse back attack and kill in the villages. Women are spared, and colour shifts to black and white footage. Snippets of TV news flash, Mass murders lead to mass graves. The refugees survive on UN supplies, and the money made in the camps. There are circular track shots of the refugee hovels. The women go to the woods, to collect firewood. Rape by the Janzarweed militias is common. It rains furiously in Sahara. The atrocities

continue in Darfur, while the world community debates. The off screen commentary describes the violence, and the calamity emerges in the images.

“Nomadic Village” (Niger, 25 mins, colour, 2005) by Mahaman Souleymane, presents Zemamin of Ngomidi village. The sand dunes arrive, and the villages disappear. Water and the village are dried up. Since water is life, the villagers leave with their cattle. The sand dunes drive the villagers west, nearly 30 kms. A new village is constructed with old name. As sand dunes keep advancing, there are worries about family, farm and community. The men of valour without arrogance, plant hedges to withstand the dunes. Spades are pushed, while the winds push the sand dunes. Some men migrate to Nigeria, Women plant vegetation and irrigate with buckets, thrown in to wells. There are no more millets, only vegetables. One of the two springs, throws brackish water. Men gather at mosque after prayers, People move further west to survive. Farmer Ari scratches for new areas to live. The search for water is westward, and hedges are planted again. When the desert pushes, directions are changed; and date trees and vegetation are grown again. The monologues of the villagers and the desert frames bring out the confrontation of human beings against nature, though not a battle. The normalcy of village life is most moving.

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