



## Born Into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids Discussion Guide

Directors: Zana Briski, Ross Kauffman

Year: 2004

Time: 85 min

### You might know these directors from:

Ross Kauffman: E-Team (2014)

BORN INTO BROTHELS is the directorial debut for Zana Briski.

## FILM SUMMARY

“Every day is like going to war, just dealing with the traffic and the pollution and the poverty and the animals, and the people wanting money from you,” director Zana Briski stated when asked about her time in India. But not even these hardships, along with the long list of physical ailments she suffered during her time in the world’s second most populous country, could keep her from completing the raw, touching tale of BORN INTO BROTHELS.

Initially setting out to document the plight of women in India, a trail of events directed her down the single lane to Sonagachi, Calcutta’s notorious red-light district. Against her initial instincts to photograph the prostitutes themselves, Briski became enamored with the children populating the narrow alleyways and multi-storied brothels. Through their eyes, she would shine a light on this oft-overlooked underbelly of society.

Connecting to eight children in particular, Briski bought them each a camera and taught them the power and potential of photography. Through once-weekly night classes, she encouraged them to capture their lives in imagery, to show her the color, detail, pain, joy, dirt, and glory of their daily existences. The children take to the task with great interest and involvement, and find their photos may be their ticket to something else.

BORN INTO BROTHEL’s details the destitute, dead-end conditions of life bound and defined by the sex trade, as told through the lens of those with access to its deepest, darkest nooks and crannies. This sometimes depressing, other times uplifting journey grants the viewer access to the seedy, often unviewed reality of a portion of Indian society. Armed with little more than a role of film, a simple camera, and a few fleeting remnants of childish innocence, the children of Saganachi grant BORN INTO BROTHELS an unfiltered, unedited beauty quite impossible to replicate.

## FILM THEMES

By enlisting the children of Sonagachi as the story's tellers, *BORN INTO BROTHELS* offers an insider's look at the world of the red-light district and the harsh reality of living life outside the law.

### FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Rather than keeping to the open streets, confining herself to the role of inquisitive foreigner, Briski infiltrated the alleyways of Sonagachi, even calling it home from time to time. Unable to truly become a resident of the red-light district, she put the storytelling device in the hands of the young inhabitants, allowing them the voice in their own tale while granting them a glimpse of an alternative life path. As these children are exposed to the gritty reality of a life in prostitution, their photographs had nothing to hide. The intoxication of men on the hunt, the despair in a fellow inhabitant's face, the hope in a pastel horizon, a silhouetted child against the jail-bar of a window. Their's is the inside story.

### CATCH-22

With so much holding the children of Sonagachi back, it is no wonder most of them simply trickle into the stream of their predecessors. Nothing is motivating them to do otherwise. When they seek help, the government proves to be a complicated and convoluted system that brings the children right back to where they began. As a life in prostitution is criminalized, the system won't offer children of criminals papers, and schools won't offer an education to paperless people, the vicious cycle reaches nauseating proportions. Illegitimate to their dying day, it demanded persistent pushing to realize an alternate solution.

### THE TRAPPINGS OF DESTINY

When suffering becomes matter of fact and life hangs on a thin thread between possibility and despair, the definition of destiny is put to the test. A highly superstitious people, Indians may be keeping themselves down by marrying themselves to notions of the pre-ordained. The grandmother who would not let her offspring leave for her one-shot opportunity at education, as it was an unlucky day for big decisions. The mothers who encourage their daughters to sell their bodies, believing it their fate to work the red light. Destiny becomes the excuse, as generations blindly hand down what they've known, never venturing elsewhere or otherwise. Destiny, the catch-all, the eternal trap.

### EDUCATION AS THE KEY

Although accused by some as playing saint amongst the needy, Briski's work in Calcutta is arguably more well intentioned than assumed. By taking the time to understand the complicity of life lived beneath the law and the implications for the children who were not yet allowed to decide for themselves, she concluded, "They have absolutely no opportunity without education." By offering education as an outlet, initially just in photography but then through offers of boarding schools, she placed the power in the children's hands. With the resources available to her, Briski carved the initial path, granted the children the tools, and then left the decision and ability to change their lives with them.

**"There is nothing called 'hope' in my future."**

Avijit Halder

**"One has to accept life as being sad and painful."**

Tapasi

**"Without help, they're doomed."**

Zana Briski

**"I like photography. I want to put across the behavior of man."**

Manik Das



## FILM FACTS:

- BORN INTO BROTHELS was granted many of awards, including an Oscar and an Emmy for Best Documentary, an Audience Award at Sundance Film Festival, and Best Documentary at Los Angeles Film Critics Association Awards, International Documentary Association, Bermuda International Film Festival, and the Bangkok International Film Festival. In addition, Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman were nominated for the Outstanding Directorial Achievement Award from the Directors Guild of America.
- Director Zana Briski discovered photography in a cousin's darkroom at the age of 10. She went on to study photography at both the University of Cambridge and the International Center of Photography in New York. Having first visited India in 1995 to document female infanticide, she returned over the years to chronicle more and more women's issues. Briski spent 7 months a year in Calcutta's red-light district over a period of 6 years, even renting a room there, which enabled her to make BORN INTO BROTHELS.
- Zana Briski founded Kids With Cameras in 2002, a non-profit organization aimed at educating and uplifting impoverished children through photography. The organization has programs in Calcutta, Haiti, Jerusalem, and Cairo.
- Avijit Halder graduated in photography from Tisch School of the Arts at New York University.
- BORN INTO BROTHELS grossed over \$3.5 million.
- After spending 10 years working on BORN INTO BROTHELS, Briski began a project entitled "Reverence." Initially inspired by a dream of a praying mantis, she spent 9 years photographing and filming insects around the world. The project focuses on inspiring people "to find a more harmonious way to live on the earth."
- Briski and director Ross Kauffman were in a relationship for 6 years before filming BORN INTO BROTHELS. Although they were no longer together, they shared a deep level of trust, which convinced Briski to involve him in the project. Kauffman had previously worked as a film editor, and has since continued working as a film director, photographer, and producer.
- Sonagachi, the name of Calcutta's red-light district, got its name from a Sufi saint (Sona Ghazi) whose tomb is located in the area. An estimated 11,000 sex workers live in its multi-storied brothels. The rates of prostitution in this area vary from \$5 to \$160 per night.
- An estimated 3 million prostitutes are active in India. Prostitution is legal in India per se, but it is a crime to pimp, solicit, own or manage a brothel, and many other prostitution-related activities. An estimated 1.2 million children are involved in prostitution in the country. Around 40 girls under the age of 15 are forced into the trade every day.
- India has the largest illiterate population in the world and an overall literacy rate of 74%.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film. Consider hosting a screening and follow it up by discussing your thoughts and feelings about the subject.
2. **Support** the [Cameras for Kids Foundation](#) that empowers underprivileged children through photography.
3. **Purchase** "Kids With Cameras: The Book", a collection of photographs from the children featured in the film. All proceeds go to the children and others living in the red-light district.
4. **Support** Apne Aap, an Indian charity working to get women and children out of sex trafficking by joining their [Cool Men Don't Buy Sex](#) campaign on Twitter or Facebook, or donate money or time to their cause.
5. **Learn** more about [Youth Spark](#) - an organisation that works to stop child sex trafficking.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

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They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**