

Facts that disturb us Deepa Bhatia's Nero's Guests brilliantly portrays the Vidarbha farmer suicide issue

Towards the beginning of Deepa Bhatia's powerful documentary Nero's Guests, journalist P Sainath is heard speaking about the Lakme Fashion Week in Mumbai which brought over 500 accredited journalists to cover the event. The models on the ramp wore cotton clothes, he says. At the same time in Vidarbha, an hour by flight from Mumbai, farmers who grew that cotton were committing suicide at the rate of six to eight a day. There were families with two to three cases of suicides.

These are startling facts and disturbing as they sound in Sainath's voice. I have heard Sainath make these statements during his few talks that I have attended in New York City. But in the film, Bhatia uses actual footage of the fashion show with paparazzi flashing their cameras, and juxtaposes it with footage of Sainath, the rural affairs editor for The Hindu, visiting homes of suicide victims in the Vidarbha region.

Nero's Guests will be shown as part of the Human Rights Watch Film Festival at New York City's Lincoln Center, starting this weekend and running for the next two weeks. Bhatia, a film editor in Mumbai who has worked on projects ranging from Taare Zameen Par, Rock On and My Name is Khan has made a gem of a compelling short documentary.

One can read Sainath's reports about the hinterlands of Maharashtra, hear his mesmerising talks, but Nero's Guests really brings home the point. Sainath's words have never before seemed this real. It is perhaps, the first time that Sainath, the journalist and speaker is placed in his work environment, whether it is the villagers he visits trying to grasp the magnitude of the loss of every poor farmer's life or when he sits in his cluttered office space, staring at the faces of those who have died and their survivors.

"He is a tireless journalist, never losing sight of the story," Bhatia recently said talking about Sainath, her former professor at Sophia College. "He is emotional about his work and yet has the clarity needed to connect their (the farmers') lives and problems into a larger political and economic context." Bhatia followed Sainath for nearly four years – from 2005 to 2009 in Mumbai and within Maharashtra in villages around Yavatmal, Amravati, Akola and Wardha, sometimes travelling for a week at a time and visiting about 20 families during each trip.

Winning Sainath's trust was important to Bhatia. "I think Sainath is quite suspicious of all of us from the film world," she said. "I volunteered to film Sainath giving a talk at St Xavier's College, in 2005. Subsequently, I filmed him speaking at more than 15 venues around the country. I also started travelling with him into the countryside. Even then, there was no real plan to put the material together into a film. I enjoyed working freeflow, learning closely about both the issue and the person."

However, out of this four-year-long free-flowing shoot, Bhatia's end-product grabs the viewers and does not let go. We hear Sainath talking with confidence and conviction. And there is tremendous irony and compassion in his voice. In covering this story for a long time Sainath has become an expert at reading the minds of the survivors. He says he can tell when the surviving widows may also be contemplating committing suicide. At one point he directs the viewers' attention to a photograph of a young teenager dressed in his late father's clothes. The teenager's troubled eyes reflect the burden he faces of taking over the responsibility of his entire family. And Sainath asks us to look at his mother's body language

as she has resigned to a sense of hopelessness.

Again and again Nero's Guests points to this hopelessness. Farmers commit suicide to avoid the spiralling debt. Their surviving family members are overburdened after the loss of the earning family member. There is a sense of desperation. But Sainath and Bhatia do not want us to be like Nero's apathetic guests who had watched their cruel host burn prisoners to light up the night.



Surviving family members of a farmer who killed himself



Aseem Chhabra is a freelance writer based in New York, who has previously written for The New York Times, The Boston Globe, Philadelphia Inquirer and Time Out, New York