

## Rima Das about BULBUL CAN SING

### “I can teach you how to dance in a car!”

Bulbul is a joyful teenager, living in a small Indian village. She can sing like a nightingale, although not in the presence of others. Her best friend Bonny has an even more beautiful voice. And then there's Suman. His classmates call him 'Ladies' but to two young girls exploring their identity, he is like the perfect friend. One day Bulbul finds out she has a secret admirer, who writes her poems full of affection. But strict moral codes are putting a permanent pressure upon the three teenagers.

Rima Das is a unique one-woman-band. There's nobody on the set but her and the actors. *“Just one camera, one lens and one woman... which is me.”* Shot in the rural province of Assam, in the villages where Das grew up, films like VILLAGE ROCKSTARS and BULBUL CAN SING are showcasing a splendid beauty and a breathtaking visual elegance.

#### How good are you at singing?

Rima Das: I'm singing really well and dancing like crazy. Maybe not in pub-

lic, but in the bathroom, in the open field or in a car, I'm excellent. Driving my young actors on those bad roads in my brother's big old car, we were singing and dancing all the time. I can teach you how to dance in a car!

**In the film, it seems like the singing and dancing mainly happens to channel other things, like physical energy and lust.**

Das: In the villages in Assam we have a rich musical tradition. My actors are from that region, singing and dancing runs in their genes. Teenagers are going through times of physical and psychological change, as hormones are going crazy. Through dancing, they will explore their bodies and might carefully explore love.

**They're so careful about all things physical, they should not kiss in public, but at the same time there's a lot of physicality there, in a brother and sister kind of way.**

Das: It is socially tolerable to get physical with a friend, until you cross a certain line. There is a constant friction.



Even boys and girls holding hands will not easily be accepted, let alone kissing in the open. The subtleties depend from one family to another, but in general any form of physical contact in public is not acceptable. Of course some young people do rebel against these customs.

**Does this moral code keeps youngsters safe from oversexualising, sexting, etc.?**

Das: Not at all. Such codes can ruin a person's life, like it happens to many young people. In my youth, this caused one of my best friends to take her own life. One thing I found out traveling: even if Indian women seem to be less liberated than others, the psychological and moral codes for

women around the world are about the same everywhere.

**In BULBUL CAN SING, one boy is wrestling with his sexuality more than all others.**

Das: Suman is confused, not even aware of what is going on with him. In the villages, people in general don't think homosexuality really exists. Nicknaming him 'Ladies' because of his feminine manners is just a way of making fun. Many boys like Suman will get married, and for the rest of their lives they'll struggle or have secret affairs. There is no open communication about it yet.

**When making VILLAGE ROCKSTARS, you were hanging out with the kids.**



**For BULBUL CAN SING, you were hanging out with the teenagers.**

Das: Which was much more complicated. Children are easy and transparent. I found those teenagers moody, and far from transparent. Still acting like children somehow, but with a different temper. I had to learn how to handle their difficult characters.

**Like for instance ... ?**

Das: Since I don't work with a crew and I use very basic lighting equipment, I always shoot during the 'magic hours' of the day, in the early morning. In the east of India, sun rises around 4.30 AM. Around 7 AM those magic hours are over already. My actors found that difficult to understand. They also had a kind of collective arrogance. So I included that in the film! Looking at Bulbul, you'll find her moody and arrogant. My main heroin is not a sweet teenage girl, but I love her the way she is.

**Who do these girls have as role models? Do they even know who is Justin Bieber?**

Das: Maybe in the city they do, but I wouldn't count on it in the villages. I don't even know if they have role models. Sometimes they might follow local artists or actresses.

**Maybe you could be their role model, through the way you've been developing your career.**

Das: I suppose I was for some of them. After VILLAGE ROCKSTARS, many girls and boys wrote to me about how I inspired them. There is this fixed idea that, if you want to make a movie, you need to go to Mumbai and you need a big budget. VILLAGE ROCKSTARS broke this mindset. Suddenly young people found confidence to do things in another way. You don't need to be a part of an industry, you can do it yourself. This I find very important.

**What is it like to be a man in those villages? What is expected from them?**

Das: The only expectation for a man is that he takes responsibilities: getting married, taking care of his family, bringing food to the table. Other moral or social complexities are mainly ignored. In the villages, 90% of the women are housewives. In Assam we don't have the dowry system – whereas a girl is getting married, the family has to bring in a large sum of money. This helps Assamese people to be so laidback.

**Is there a downside to that easy living?**

Das: I think throughout your entire



life, you shouldn't stop growing, evolving. People in the villages are not very ambitious. At a young age they'll get married, have children, and after a while life might feel like its slipping through your fingers. People are not going to restaurants with their family, they don't go out to the park or on a trip. Within a family, that companionship doesn't exist. Moreover earnings are very small, like 3 or 4 Euros per day. It's all about basic survival.

**What makes your films really stand out is their visual qualities, your unique eye for graphic beauty. Did you work in the same way for BULBUL CAN SING as with VILLAGE ROCKSTARS?**

Das: I made both films in the same

village. But the lives of teenagers are more complicated, which speaks from the framing and editing. Using the perspective of a teenager, my eyes, and therefore my camera work differently. This happens automatically if you're authentic to your characters.

**But how exactly, that seems difficult to explain.**

Das: It is like asking Da Vinci to explain why the Mona Lisa looks the way she does. It is about intuition. I just visualize things, and then they take their own shape.

–  
Gert Hermans