

Nargis - When Time Stopped Breathing: Lyrical Documentation of a Disaster

By [Utpal Borpujari](#) | Thursday, February 16th, 2012

It's quite easy to shoot a post-natural disaster region – just go there, aim your camera, and start recording the miseries of the people affected, and how the relief and rehabilitation is happening, or not happening. But it's not easy to create cinema out of it, giving those little sensitive touches that would lift it above television features. *Nargis – When Time Stopped Breathing*, the 90-minute documentary on the impact of the devastating Nargis Cyclone that hit the Irrawaddy Delta of Myanmar in 2008, scores exactly on that front.

The film, shot stealthily by its makers as the military Junta had banned entry of any outsider into the cyclone-hit region, probably to hide the real impact of Nargis (which estimates say killed 1,40,000 people and left 2.4 million homeless), does not even give the real names of its directors in the credits, lest they are persecuted by the government.

But that does not lessen the visual sensitivity of directors KyawKyawOo & MaungMyintAung (both pseudonyms). The film starts at a point seven days after the cyclone that hit the Delta on May 2, 2008, the day when the film crew could reach the region evading government restrictions. As evident from the film, they did not face much problem in shooting the film, moving from one ravaged place to another, clearly since there is not much official structure present – either to offer relief to people or to implement its own restrictions effectively! And wherever there was any potential danger, they had to avoid shooting...as the voiceover says at one point, "Some pictures we could take with only our eyes...eyes were everywhere."

The film is basically a recollection and recording of people's memories about the devastation that has happened around them, and of stories of personal loss and grief, interspersed with sparse narration that lends a philosophical touch to the impact of nature's fury. Despite the gloomy scenario, the filmmakers are able to present a story of hope, as character after character interviewed stoically speak about their personal loss with a calmness that can probably come from either their religion, Buddhism, or from a realisation of the fact that it is not the time to mourn, but to be calm and rebuild on whatever strand remains of one's life. At one point, one of the survivors quotes a Buddhist thought about five enemies of a human being – fire, water, thieves, hateful people and the ruling class – and the need to be careful when they are in proximity.

Indeed, the film's success comes from the fact that it is able to present the incident as one of human perseverance rather than one of human tragedy. *Nargis* is an important film as it is perhaps the only visual documentation of a humongous natural disaster the extent of which otherwise would have remained unknown to the outside world as the military Junta prevented anyone from going into the region and even rejected humanitarian aid from other countries, thus practically putting a tough iron curtain around the Delta.

The landscape captured by the camera would have surely looked ethereally pleasant at any other time, but when the images were captured, it was twisted trees, ragged paddy fields, destroyed houses all around. At certain points, it seems unreal that those affected by the tragedy are so stoically calm and cool all throughout the film's journey from one place to another – whether it's a couple who is rebuilding their house with their bare hands after losing all their children, or a 10-year-old who is surviving at a tent with some other children after having lost all his family members. The only visible relief in the film is through the Buddhist monks, who are seen going from one place to another providing food and clothing to the victims.

In the film, neither the places shown nor the people interviewed are ever identified. For the viewer, it remains a story about humanity and hope, and not a story of some individual faces in a far-off, unknown place. It is a courageous film with a lyrical beauty that transcends beyond the drama of politics, society and people.

(*Nargis – When Time Stopped Breathing* was awarded the FIPRESCI international critics award at the 12th Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary, Short and Animation Films – MIFF – held during February 3-9. The author was a member of the 3-member FIPRESCI jury.)