

Kids with cameras

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

Zana Briski is a New York photojournalist who went to India in 1995 to document the plight of women in a patriarchal society. In 1998 she encountered the prostitutes working in the red light district of Calcutta. She moved in with them and got to know their routines.

She also got to know their children, who went to school sporadically if at all. This didn't bode well for the boys, who already had limited prospects, but it was even worse for the girls, who were merely being groomed to go "onto the line" as prostitutes themselves. The children—ranging in age from ten to 14—were fascinated by Briski's photography, so she bought a number of inexpensive cameras for them to use themselves. Briski also held classes in photography.

It was about this time that Briski got in touch with Ross Kauffman, a New York editor-cameraman, who traveled to Calcutta to help Briski record these remarkable children and their last-gasp effort at finding some meaning in their lives.

Born into Brothels, produced and directed by Briski and Kauffman, introduces us to these children and the photographs they took. It also records Briski's attempt to help them escape their dead-end lives. She pushed to get them into private boarding schools. The schools are hugely expensive, so Briski gave the children a lesson in capitalism by staging a show of their photos in New York City, hoping to earn the money needed to pay for school.

Meanwhile, the documentary follows the children around, both individually in the streets and as a group of burgeoning artists. A day at the beach is a welcome respite from the heat of the stifling neighborhood, while a trip to the zoo becomes a grim reminder of just how caged in and underfed creatures can be. (It hits too close to home to be enjoyed.)

The film also features the story of Avijit, a plump 12-year-old who exhibits exceptional talent with a camera. (He is the one with the most artistic background, having won school awards for his paintings.) His photos are so good he is invited to a Youth Photo Conference in Amsterdam to showcase his work. But his journey is jeopardized when tragedy strikes his family. Avijit's effort to negotiate his pain and his ambition—not to mention the vicarious longing of his fellow photographers—is at the core of this film.

There is much to appreciate in this Oscar-nominated (for feature-length documentary) film. Briski, who has a master's degree in theology and religious studies from Cambridge University in England, emerges as a caring soul who genuinely wants to help the children break free of their surroundings. Many of the photographs that come from their point-and-shoot cameras are nothing short of remarkable. (One of the photos ended up as the cover for Amnesty International's 2003 calendar.) Also fascinating is the long and winding bureaucratic journey Briski traverses (passports seem nearly impossible to get) to send Avijit to Amsterdam and the other children to school.

It's disappointing that the stories of the prostitutes themselves get lost in the shuffle. I would have liked to know more about their lives and their histories, and their relationships with their seemingly disposable children.

Those looking for an uplifting ending will be disappointed. The film never backs away from the realities of these lives in which dreams must take a back seat to the daily struggle to survive.