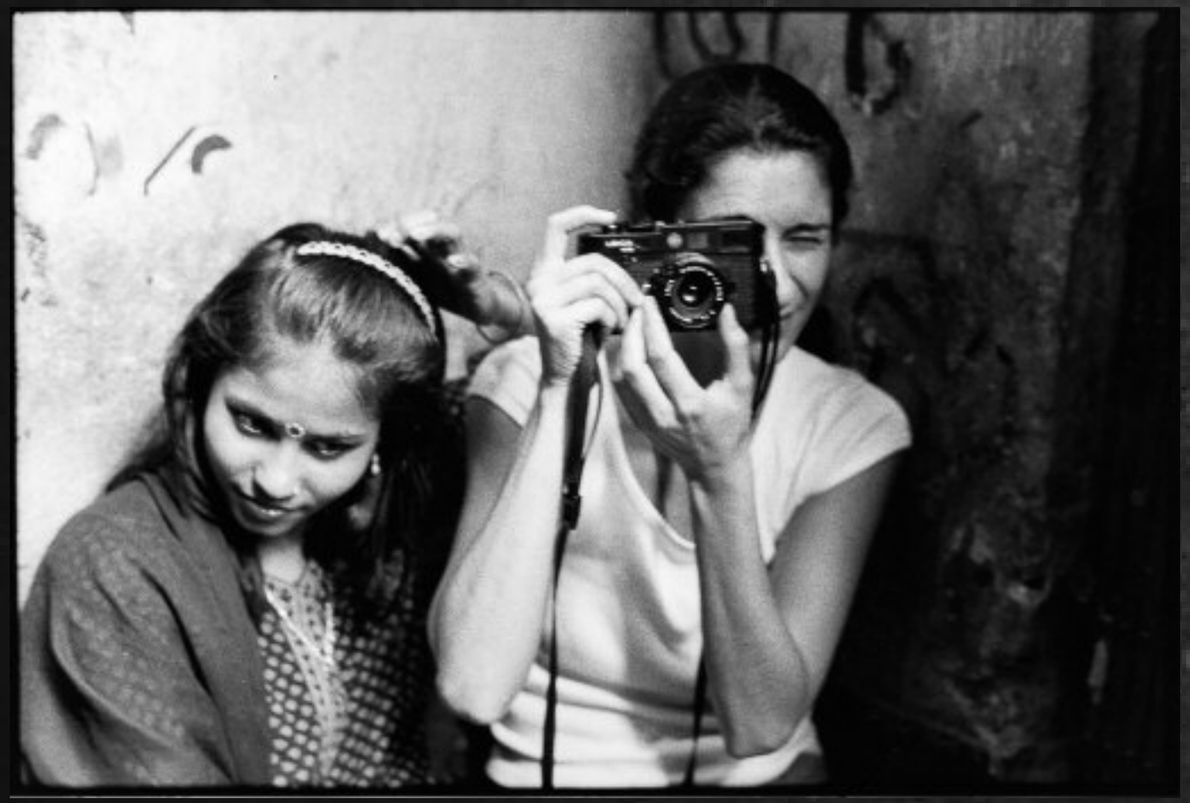

ZANA BRISKI

Zana Briski first traveled to India in 1995 with no idea of what lay in store for her there. Moved by the suffering she encountered, particularly among women, she began to document the ways in which the women she met dealt with the harsh physical and social realities they faced. Although New York City was her adopted home, India and this work kept drawing Zana back.

When a friend suggested a visit to Calcutta's red light district, Zana was overwhelmed by her immediate and visceral response to the place. "All I know is that when I stepped foot into the red light district, it was like being struck in the gut," she says. "I just knew that's where I had to be." Suddenly, she felt this was her reason for coming to India. "I wanted to understand the women, to live with them in a brothel," she explains. "I wanted to immerse myself in that world."

Zana spent months trying to gain access to the guarded and labyrinthine place, and finally convinced a brothel owner to give her a room. The women were naturally wary of her—a stranger, a foreigner, an interloper with a camera—but very slowly Zana gained their trust. She sat with them, waited with them, shared the tedium and the tension of their daily routines. And she photographed their lives, struck by the strength and beauty that emerged from the squalor of the place. "When I look at the body of work I have from the brothels, it's really about beauty in the midst of this hell," Zana says.

To the children of the brothels, Zana was a curiosity. Their fascination with her camera very quickly overrode their mothers' suspicions, and the kids adopted her as a playmate. Soon they were begging to hold her camera, to look through its lens, to take pictures of their own. It wasn't long before Zana decided to buy point-and-shoot cameras for the kids to experiment with. She realized they would need basic instruction to use them, and the idea for the Sonagachi photography workshop was born.

No one could have predicted how far those cameras would take a handful of brothel kids. Zana gave up her own photography to devote herself full-time to working with the children, who had begun not only to make amazing photographs, but to imagine new possibilities for their lives—to dream bigger dreams. Aware that something important was happening in and to the group, Zana bought a video camera and, having only ever shot still photography, began to film the kids during workshop sessions, on class trips, in the brothels and out on the streets.

Zana knew she couldn't make a documentary film by herself, and turned to Ross Kauffman for help. She knew that Ross, an accomplished film editor, had the expertise she lacked, and she knew she could rely on him not to violate the fragile trust she had established with the residents of the brothels. "I needed somebody who would really respect me when I said it was time to turn off the camera," she says, and Ross was that person. She also knew he would fall in love with the children, as she had done.

Reluctant to get involved at first, Ross could no longer resist once he'd seen the video footage Zana sent him of the kids. Still, Zana recalls, he was worried about what the story of the film would be, especially because Zana likes to work without following a script, without setting up a scenario. "I told him to wait. The story would reveal itself," she says. "And it did."

MAMONI

Even when she was very new to photography, Mamoni's pictures were beautifully composed and full of energy. Sometimes the intensity of color or emotion is so forceful her subjects seem to burst out of the frame. Mamoni looks and looks at the world, and in looking she deeply feels what she sees.

"When I have the camera in my hand," Mamoni says, "it tickles me and I must take a picture right away."

Before she moved and could no longer attend photo class, Mamoni often had to leave class early, or sometimes couldn't come at all, because of her household responsibilities. But none of that stopped her from taking pictures.

"Mamoni gets beat up every day," Manik says. "When somebody bothers me," Mamoni says, "I tell my mom and she beats me instead. I'm afraid that she might make me do bad things. She may all of the sudden want to throw me out. I have been afraid of this since I was young."

In her self-portrait, Mamoni poses as Kali, the fierce black-skinned warrior goddess, terrible and wise in her necklace of skulls, her red tongue lapping up the world's flavors. On the class trip to the ocean, the camera never leaves Mamoni's ticklish hands. She shoots and shoots through the windows of the bus, tasting each new thing as it rolls into view. Knee-deep in the waves, she squeals with excitement and snaps away.

"I think the photography class will help me in the future," Mamoni says. "I want to study, to answer all their questions and become a doctor."

"When I have a camera in my hands, it tickles me and I must take a picture right away."

MANIK

From the brothel rooftop where children play while their mothers work, Manik tosses his homemade kites into the close sky. Sometimes he catches an up draught and takes to the air. “It’s a lot better to fly a kite in the evening,” his sister Shanti observes.

At the zoo, Shanti helps Manik load film into his camera. She uses her skirt to wipe dust away from the film spool before showing Manik how to advance the leader. “At first, I didn’t really get it,” Manik admits. “But then Zana Auntie said ‘Come on Saturday,’ and I went and saw a camera for the first time.”

One of Manik’s photographs was published on the front page of the most widely circulated newspaper in India. He could hardly believe his eyes. He sat back hard in his chair like he’d had the wind knocked out of him. “World famous!” Shanti said, her voice hushed almost to a whisper.

“When they beat Manik, he gets mad,” Puja says. “He never bothers anyone.” When they tear up his kites, Manik goes to his father for a new sheet of newspaper to make another.

Now Manik says he likes photography more than kites. The workshop has been an adventure, showing him things he’d never seen before, like the ocean. “I was amazed,” he says. Of his world-famous photograph, Manik says, “When I was taking the picture, Shanti came and put her hand in front of the light. And so her hand came into the picture.”

“Zana Auntie said ‘Come on Saturday,’ and I went and saw a camera for the first time.”