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Written by: Editorial Team "Future Needs Remembrance " | Created: February 11, 2026

Flying Tigers – by Madhusree Dutta



Flying Tigers | Flying Tigers / Country: DEU, IND / Year: 2026 / Director: Madhusree Dutta / Image description: / Section: Forum 2026 / File: 202610591_1 / © pong film 2026

In the halls of the 2026 Berlinale, a unique form of cinematic resistance against forgetting and the rigidity of national borders is manifesting itself this year. With "Flying Tigers," Indian filmmaker Madhusree Dutta returns after a two-decade hiatus from directing, presenting a work that not only stretches the conventional boundaries

of documentary film but gleefully shatters them. It is a cinematic excursion that begins in the deeply personal and grows into a monumental cartography of global logistics, colonial ghosts, and human longing.

The film opens with an almost casual, yet deeply unsettling observation in a domestic setting. Dutta's mother, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, repeatedly speaks of tigers entering the house during her periods of disorientation. "Close the windows, the tigers are coming," she warns. What initially appears to be a sad symptom of a degenerative disease becomes, for Dutta, the key to a profound historical exploration. She begins to research what these tigers might mean in her mother's memory and stumbles upon the "Flying Tigers"—the legendary American air squadron that transported military supplies from Assam to Kunming in China over the "Hump," the perilous route across the Himalayas, during World War II.

This initial spark leads to a cinematic essay that connects northeastern India with the rapidly growing Chinese province of Yunnan. Dutta, however, does not limit herself to a historical examination of the 1940s. Together with media theorist Mi You and researcher Purav Goswami, she weaves a dense web of present and past. The film vividly demonstrates how the infrastructures of yesterday's war—the airstrips in the jungles of Assam, the old supply routes—form the blueprints for today's gigantic flows of goods. While weapons and fuel flowed then, today it is consumer goods and raw materials that circulate almost silently in a globalized world.

The political core of "Flying Tigers" lies in the stark contrast between these flows of goods and the increasing lack of human freedom. Dutta makes it clear that goods today cross borders more easily than the people who live in these border regions. The film gains a burning relevance, particularly in the context of current Indian politics, such as the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). The population of Assam, who for generations have lived in a fluid, ethnically and culturally hybrid reality, suddenly find themselves confronted with the rigid demands of a nation-state for complete documentation. Anyone who cannot prove their origins over decades faces statelessness. The film shows how the cartographic violence of nation-states crushes the lived reality of people who have always moved across borders in the mountains and forests between India, China, and Myanmar.

In a fascinating metaphor, Dutta follows the animals—the real tigers and the mules—who know no mountain passes and cross rivers like mountains, as if both sides belonged together. In these moments, the film becomes almost philosophical: If nature and goods ignore the border, why does it become an insurmountable obstacle for humans?

The formal execution is as heterogeneous as the subject matter itself. Dutta rejects a linear narrative. Instead, she employs a hybrid aesthetic, blending archival footage from the war years with contemporary interviews, artistic animations by Nina Sabnani, and even musical performances. There are scenes of children running through the forest—shots that, according to Dutta, were captured almost by chance and radiate a lightness that stands in stark contrast to the gravity of the political themes. A young woman from the region guides the director

through the thicket; she moves with an ease in the habitat of wild animals that has been lost to modern city dwellers. Here, the film demonstrates that coexistence between humans and nature, but also between different cultures, is possible if one overcomes the fear of the "other."

Of particular note is the collaboration with the camera crew, including Riju Das, Isabelle Casez, and Guligo Jia Yanan. The images capture both the colonial melancholy of the decaying airfields and the sterile modernity of Chinese logistics centers. Bo Wiget's soundtrack enhances this atmosphere with a blend of evocative sounds and references to local musical cultures, making the film a truly memorable audiovisual experience.

Dutta, who after a long time in Cologne is now working more intensively in India again, brings a decidedly feminist and postcolonial perspective without coming across as didactic. "Flying Tigers" is not a dry history lesson, but a vibrant, breathing document of research. In every minute, you can feel the filmmaker's thirst for discovery; she sees herself as part of the process and not as a neutral observer standing above it all.

In the Berlinale's Forum section, this film serves as an anchor point for discussions about the future of documentary filmmaking. It proves that cinema still possesses the power to make the invisible lines on our maps visible while simultaneously questioning them. Dutta shows us that memory is not a static state, but an active process – like the flying tigers' journey across the Himalayas, which never truly ended, but merely changed its form.

In the end, the image of the old mother and her fear of the tigers remains. But through Dutta's lens, this fear transforms into insight. The tigers are not merely intruders; they are border crossers, messengers of a world where the rigid categories of nation and identity could lose their power. "Flying Tigers" is an invitation not to close the windows, but to throw them wide open to let in the wind and the stories that come to us over the mountains. A clever, empathetic, and visually stunning contribution to world cinema, enriching the 2026 Berlinale and demonstrating that Madhusree Dutta remains one of the most important voices in Indian cinema.

Flying Tigers / Madhusree Dutta (Director, Writer) / with Madhusree Dutta, Mi You, Purav Goswami, Devika Hazarika / 105' / Germany, India / 2026 / Color / Bengali, English, Mandarin, German, Polish / Subtitles: English / World Premiere / Documentary / Berlinale 2026, Forum Section

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