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D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2024
Official Selection



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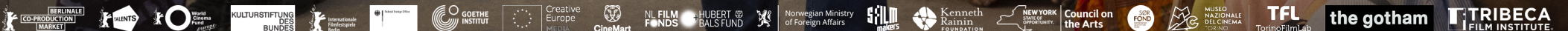
Official Selection
South Asia Competition
MAMI Mumbai Film Festival 2024



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POOJA, SIR

A FILM BY DEEPAK RAUNIYAR



A woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored shirt, is shown in profile from the chest up, looking towards the left. The background is dark and out of focus, with a soft, warm light source visible on the right side, creating a dramatic and contemplative mood.

Synopsis

When two boys are kidnapped in a border town in Nepal, Detective Inspector Pooja is sent from Kathmandu to solve the case. But when she arrives, the brewing political unrest and violent protests throw her off course, and she is forced to seek help from Mamata, a local Madhesi policewoman. By putting aside systemic discrimination and pushing through everyday misogyny, the women solve the case - but at what personal cost?

Inspired by real events which took place in Southern Nepal during the 2015 race protests.

Production countries

Nepal, U.S., Norway

Director's biography

Deepak Rauniyar's first feature film, "Highway" (2012), was the first film from Nepal to screen at a major global film festival, premiering at Berlinale and later playing at Locarno. His second feature, "White Sun" (2016), debuted at the Venice Orizzonti competition with rave reviews, with the Hollywood Reporter calling it "impressively accomplished" and The New York Times, which included Rauniyar among the "9 New Directors to Watch" list, writing that "White Sun" "captures a place that isn't seen much in movies." The film screened internationally at over 100 film festivals, including Toronto, Locarno, Rotterdam, New Directors/New Films, Sydney, and Golden Horse. It won the Interfilm Award at Venice and Best Film at the Singapore and Palm Springs Film Festivals. Nepal nominated "White Sun" for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 90th Academy Awards.



Selected Filmography

Highway (Feature, 73 min, Berlinale, 2012)

Nepal/ US – Co-production

White Sun (Feature, 89 min, Venice 2016)

Nepal, US, Netherlands & Qatar – co-production

Four Nights (Short, 16 min, Berlinale 2022)

US, Mexico, Nepal coproduction

Pooja, Sir (Feature, 117 min, Venice 2024)

Nepal, US, Norway coproduction



Q&A with Director Deepak Rauniyar

What was the inspiration for your film?

In 2004, I worked as an assistant director for filmmaker Tsering Rhitar Sherpa on his second feature, *Karma*. During this production, I met Asha, who would later become my wife and collaborator. She had a brief role in a single scene. Under normal circumstances, it would have been unthinkable for us to come together or get married. Asha is from the light-skinned Pahadi ethnic group, while I am from the dark-skinned Madhesi ethnic group. However, a shared love for cinema brought us together.

As we began dating, Asha was shocked by the daily discrimination I faced. At least once a day, someone would accuse me of sneaking into Nepal from India and taking opportunities from “true” Nepalis. When interviewing potential crew members for production, the first thing they wanted to confirm was whether I was Indian or when “people like us” started living in Nepal. I was refused service at restaurants, stopped by police for carrying a laptop, and getting basic ID documents was a nightmare. While these experiences were routine for me, they were a revelation for Asha. She would become agitated and argue with people, even during film shoots where I was the director, or at family gatherings in her hometown.

Nepal is a patriarchal society, and Asha also comes from a so-called “lower caste.” Despite being well-known in the theater world and performing leading roles in major plays, she wasn’t given opportunities in films. Her facial features didn’t fit the Nepali beauty standard, making her struggle even harder. She grew up confronting so many challenges in her own professional journey, but seeing your loved one insulted and discriminated against can be even more painful. Perhaps skin color is more visible than a last name, and being confronted by the explicit bigotry that I faced appeared to hurt Asha more.

Like so many societies, Nepal has a complex demography of languages, ethnicities, castes, and religions. As the peace process began after a decade-long civil war, a massive protest by dark-skinned Madhesis erupted in the southern Nepali plains in 2007. Thousands protested the new constitution, facing police brutality that resulted in several deaths, including children. Protests continued in 2008 and again in 2015, with the southern plains shut down for over six months. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets, resulting in more deaths and violence, including the deaths of seven police officers in western Nepal.

While the protests achieved some gains, the national media often covered them in a one-sided way, and Madhesis like me faced increased antagonism in other parts of the country, including the capital. The relationship between the two communities grew even colder. It was then that Asha and I decided we had to do something. If we didn’t, no one else would. There were no other Madhesi directors in the industry who could address these issues. We briefly covered the protests and killings in *White Sun* through news segments, but it was time to focus directly on the southern plains and tell the story from that perspective.

Why did you decide to tell this story as a police procedural?

Even though I’m Madhesi by birth, I grew up in the hills. My adulthood was “comfortable” in the capital, or I lived and traveled abroad. My profession has afforded me some privileges. Therefore, it wouldn’t have been accurate to tell the story from an insider’s point of view, so we decided it should be an outsider’s journey. After all, the story was inspired by our marriage. It felt natural to bring an outside police officer into the narrative to experience the town and life of the Madhesis and understand the reasons behind the protests. Just as Asha discovered and was sensitized to my world, I wanted the audience to discover and experience the life of Saraswati or Mamata.

Why did you want to tell this story through the lens of a queer women (and women in general)?

Our writing process is deeply rooted in research, interviews, and first-hand experiences. Before becoming a filmmaker, I worked as a journalist for print, radio, and TV. This was before the internet became widely used. Later, I joined BBC Media Action, the charity arm of the BBC, where I wrote, produced, and directed radio dramas. Our work involved traveling across the country, recording dramas in actual locations, and collaborating with non-actors.

Given that the story is based on Asha's point of view, it was only natural that the main character would be female. During our research, as we followed and interviewed police officers of the same age group as our character, we discovered that many of them were queer. We found that very interesting and powerful. One officer, in particular, became a central figure in our study. From 2016 to 2023, we met with her multiple times and conducted several interviews.

The character of Pooja is a composite, reflecting Asha's personal life and relationships, the stories of the people we interviewed and followed, and one of Asha's relatives that she got to observe closely growing up. Similarly, Saraswati, the headmaster, and many of the other characters are also inspired by real life. Pooja's father's character is inspired by Asha's father, whom we lost during the film's development period! He became part of the script late in the process.

I treat my films as a kind of documentary, striving to capture the authenticity of the story I'm telling and to portray real characters in real situations. Although I start with a formal script, I do not strictly adhere to it but instead improvise with actors to find the truth. Dialogue is reworked through discussion with actors and rehearsals to ensure that both non-actors and actors speak as authentically as possible.

You make some insightful observations about being a woman in Nepal, can you expand on that?

When I was around 13 years old, I attended one of my cousin's weddings. We had gone to fetch the bride. In Madhesi tradition, the bride's family pays a significant dowry to the groom's family, reflecting their social status. My cousin received a substantial dowry, but even then, he started bargaining for more during dinner. It became unbearable for me, so I left. That night, I walked several miles home alone. I still remember how mad my father was with me.

Later, I grew close to my sister-in-law, and we exchanged letters. She was forced to marry before finishing school. Traditionally in our community, women lose their name and identity after marriage; they are referred to by the name of the place they came from. Growing up outside my community due to my parents' travels for economic reasons, I witnessed different lifestyles and freedoms. This exposure made me question how our society treats women, and these questions began to influence my work.

In 2008, I co-wrote my first film, a narrative short called "Threshold," with Asha, which we shot at the same location as "*Pooja, Sir.*" It was our first collaboration. We named one character "Pooja," and since then, I've included a character named Pooja in each film. This is because, as Hindus, we believe we respect and pooja (worship) our daughters. While it's true that we revere female deities, our respect for girls and women often only extends to when they remain silent and compliant, like goddesses on a wall. I use the name Pooja as a reminder of this disparity.

Nepal is one of the few countries in the world where a mother cannot pass on citizenship to her children; a man must certify it.

For this film, writing with Asha brought in her personal reflections, which deeply influenced the story. We incorporated characters and moments based on our experiences and observations.

This is your sixth time working with your wife Asha Magrati (3 features and 3 shorts), what is your process like?

Working with others brings out the best in me. I am more creative when I have someone to listen to me, discuss ideas, and challenge my thoughts. I am fortunate now that my collaborator is my wife, and I have access to her insights 24/7. We started our production company in 2008 by writing and producing a short film, "Threshold," together, in which she also acted. Like any couple, we disagree and argue, but we complement each other perfectly. Anyone who has watched our short film "Four Nights" might sense this: she is realistic, while I am more of a dreamer. She is my mirror, excelling at crafting dialogues and observing details, while I focus on themes, overall structure, and dramatization. She also thinks about casting and actors early on, allowing us to improvise scenes together. Even if she's not writing or editing with me, she doesn't hesitate to give me direct feedback. She is also my most valuable critic. Whenever I need to check something, she is my go-to person. Filmmaking can be a lonely process, so having a partner like her at home is a privilege.

On the acting side, she is a completely different person on camera and off camera. Her first takes are often the best and she is very good at improvising. But this film was tough. There were technical words and sentence structures that we couldn't let go of. The character was a police officer. She had to follow the lines as they were written. She was also going through a tough time because of her health. She had undergone three major surgeries and radiation treatment a month before, and she had lost her father earlier in the year. This naturally challenged our collaboration; there was uncertainty about how she would handle the pressure the film placed on her shoulders, especially in 110-degree heat. But what we pulled off together makes me very proud. She is incredible in the role of *Pooja, Sir*.

The film has such a strong visual style. What were your influences for the look of the film? How did you work with your DoP, Sheldon Chau?

A friend introduced me to Sheldon in November 2021 as I was preparing for a summer 2022 shoot. We connected over Zoom and quickly realized we shared similar tastes in films and had mutual friends we had worked with before, which added a layer of comfort. Thematically, we were on the same page for the film. Sheldon had recently shot a friend's film in Senegal (*Nafi's Father*), and I was looking for a DOP, either a person of color or a female, who could complement me. Sheldon felt like the right choice.

He visited me in North Carolina, where I was teaching at UNC Wilmington. Together with my students, we shot two scenes from the script, he spoke to my students, and we spent a week discussing different inspirations.

We talked about films like *Son of Saul*, *Cold War*, and *Zodiac*. *Son of Saul* for its ability to make the world feel bigger by showing less through a subjective POV, *Cold War* for its intentional yet unconventional coverage, and *Zodiac* for its use of top lighting. However, most of our discussions revolved around our film's characters, locations, and weather.

In Nepal, power cuts are frequent and can last for hours, so we discussed how much darkness we could embrace. This influenced our decision to shoot on the Sony FX6 and FX3, which excel in low light. We played with shadows, lighting specific characters with certain colors, and leaving others in darkness to subtly represent power and racial dynamics. Every character in our film is trying to be someone else: Pooja wants to fit into a man's world, Mamata wants to become a light-skinned person, and the Captain, from an Indigenous ethnic group, is trying to become a Brahmin, of the ruling

class. Race, gender, and police brutality are global issues, so we aimed to keep familiar information out of the frame and focus on a subjective camera.

The widescreen aspect ratio provides a specific yet subjective window into Pooja's internal mindset as she navigates a new world and its obstacles. Pairing the Sirui Anamorphics with the Sony cameras was not only budget-friendly but gave us a unique, high-value look. Extreme widescreen captures the human eye's naturally wide peripheral vision, but instead of focusing on objects, we kept the focus on the characters, surrounding them with mystery, tension, and uncertainty.

We wanted to embrace the vibrancy of the Madhesi people and their outfits, using the warmth of streetlights to convey both the heat of summer and the uncertainty of the investigation. My goal wasn't an over-stylized image but one that is true to the place and situation. Most Madhesi households use a single bare bulb to light their rooms, and we wanted to reflect that. We avoided a modern, trendy, and slick look. We also considered my style of filming, often shooting whole scenes in one long take, which influenced our lighting and production design.

While we may be consciously or unconsciously inspired by other films, our form, and style primarily emerged from embracing the truth and responding to our needs.

This is your second film in Venice, after your acclaimed film *WHITE SUN*, how does it feel to be back on the Lido?

The journey of making "*Pooja, Sir*" has been a rollercoaster. Twice, our shoot was canceled—first due to the pandemic in 2020, and then in 2022, just as crews and actors from around the world were about to fly in, we were hit with devastating news. Asha was diagnosed with three different cancers within a month, one of which was rare. We had to relocate to New York for her treatment.

As her treatment concluded in April 2023, we chose to go to Nepal and shoot the film. However, we had no money. Investors had disappeared, and grants had been withdrawn.

Many things could have gone wrong. We were shooting in the extremely hot summer during peak monsoon season in a flood-prone city. But it didn't rain unless we needed it to. I was worried about how Asha would cope, but her health held up. Locals could have been upset as we recreated traumatic scenes, but during the protest scenes, I found locals distributing water to our crew and cast, thanking us for making the film. I realized then that we were creating something special, not just for Asha and me, but for hundreds, if not thousands, of others. It was truly a product of love and compassion.

Considering all this, our standing here in Lido feels very special and deeply moving. I am genuinely happy and grateful to be back "home" in Venice. The announcement of our selection has brought joy to hundreds of people. Thank you, La Biennale.

Key credits

Directed and produced by

Deepak Rauniyar

Producers

Asha Magrati, AADI FILMS (Nepal/ US)

Rambabu Gurung BAASURI FILMS (Nepal)

Alan R Milligan TANNAUSER GATE (Norway)

Executive producers

Joslyn Barnes

Dayahang Rai

Niraj Shrestha

Purna Sing Baraili

Dr. Pratap Das

Susan Rockefeller

Mainram Pokhrel

Min Bham

Co-producers

Jeremy Chua

Tang Yi

Screenplay

Deepak Rauniyar

David Barker

Asha Magrati

Cinematographer

Sheldon Chau

Editor

J. Him Lee

Alex Gurvits

Production designer

Aki Thekpa

Costume designer

Janaki Kadayat

Sound

Samrat Khanal

Leandros Ntounis

Music

Vivek Maddala

Main cast

Asha Magrati

Nikita Chandak

Dayahang Rai

Bijay Baral

Aarti Mandal

Reecha Sharma

Ghanshyam Mishra

Parmeshwor Kumar Jha

Gaumaya Gurung

Pashupati Rai

Niraj Shrestha





OFFICIAL TEASER

https://youtu.be/1yYgrQNV6yU?si=kA-vzLRRF3_GNOKU

POOJA, SIR, IN THE NEWS

Nepal's 'Pooja, Sir' Defeats Cancer to Make Venice Debut

<https://variety.com/2024/film/news/nepal-pooja-sir-venice-cancer-1236119303/>

"'Pooja, Sir' is a film that takes us right to the heart of its intrigues, culture, and landscapes. In that respect, it is unexpected and fascinating. We are delighted to present it to audiences in France," said Michèle Halberstadt of ARP.

<https://variety.com/2024/film/news/venice-pooja-sir-sales-teaser-1236119220/>

Pooja, Sir presents a unique blend of social realism and Hollywood thriller aesthetics. Told through the eyes of a queer policewoman... a tense police procedural, is an accomplished examination of power.

<https://joysauce.com/nepals-pooja-sir-is-a-vital-social-drama-in-the-body-of-a-crime-thriller/>

Deepak Rauniyar's third feature is a thriller of byzantine complexity headlined by a queer police detective, set amidst Nepal's 2015 ethnic-minority movements... Pooja, Sir has the feel and crisp visuals of a commercial thriller(-lite)... forget momos and Mount Everest: this is your mini crash course on the Nepal of today.

<https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/466149>

The close proximity camerawork employed by Sheldon Chau, coupled with the fact that the frame is often reduced by foreground intrusions, lends Pooja, Sir an intense and often claustrophobic feel. The ensemble performances from the cast, including Dayahang Rai, are strong, and the central case plays out with style.

<https://www.eyeforfilm.co.uk/review/pooja-sir-2024-film-review-by-amber-wilkinson>



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