

FIRE *in the* MOUNTAINS



OFFICIAL SELECTION 2021
sundance
film festival

JAR
PICTURES
www.jarpictures.com

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY
AJITPAL SINGH


GOES TO CANNES
MARCHÉ DU FILM

NFDC
cinemas of india



A man and a woman are riding a blue motorcycle on a winding asphalt road. The man is in the driver's seat, wearing a black helmet, a patterned shirt, and a brown vest. The woman is seated behind him, looking forward. The road curves through a lush green mountainous landscape under a cloudy sky. The motorcycle has a license plate that reads 'UK32' and '2591'.

PRODUCTION COMPANY

Jar Pictures

PRODUCERS

Ajay Rai | Alan McAlex

CO-PRODUCERS

Mauli Singh | Amit Mehta

A mother toils to save money to build a road in a Himalayan village to take her wheelchair-bound son for physiotherapy but her husband who believes that a shamanic ritual (Jagar) is the remedy, steals her savings.

Director's Statement

In 2018, I heard about the death of my cousin sister living in a village of Punjab. She died because her husband did not take her to the hospital thinking she is possessed by a ghost. She was the first person to graduate in my father's side of family and I was the second. Education brought us closer but we lost touch after I moved to Bombay. I was deeply saddened by news of her death and felt guilty, maybe I could save her if I kept in touch. I kept thinking about the incident and slowly the idea of '*Fire In The Mountains*' was born.

Around the same time, I was learning not so nice things about myself. I realized, I was resistant to an advice given by women in my family and more accepting when the same advice came from a man. I consider myself a well-read person who respects women, yet I am biased. The idea of a woman being inferior to man is so deep-rooted that we need to question it every day, in every moment.

The protagonist Chandra is a rational voice in the film up against superstitious and patriarchal society, in part she is like my mother, who has always criticised irrational rituals despite being an illiterate woman.

Rural India is in flux, it's trying very hard to hold on to its traditional values. The arrival of modernity with its education, technology, availability of information on fingertips and reliance on money for work is breaking the fabric that has kept families together. *Fire In The Mountains* is the story of a family caught in the storm, between traditional beliefs and a modern future, which creates tension and conflict between individuals. The intention is to not to take a side, but to explore and question.

Ajitpal Singh

Ajitpal Singh is a self-taught filmmaker living in Mumbai. His debut feature as a writer-director *Fire In The Mountains (FITM)* is world premiering at Sundance 2021 in 'World Cinema Dramatic Competition' as the only film from South Asia among 10 films selected in the section.

Earlier titled *Switzerland*, *FITM* won best WIP project at 2019 Film Bazaar's Work-In-Progress Lab. The screenplay was selected for NFDC Screenwriters' Lab 2018-19 and was part of 2020 Marche Du Films' Goes to Cannes.



His short film *Rammatt-Gammat* won the 'Special Mention' at the prestigious Oberhausen 2018, and was selected in nearly 50 noted film festivals including Palm Spring Shorts Fest, Cinekid, MAMI and won 6 awards. His other short film, *Hummingbird* which travelled to many international film festivals, won a jury award for best short film in France.

Ajitpal's first screenplay was part of Sundance Screenwriters Lab 2012 where it won the Sundance Grant. His mentors were Oscar winner filmmaker Asif Kapadia (*Amy*) and Oscar Nominated screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga (*Amores Perros*, *Babel* and *21 Grams*), Michael Goldenberg (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*), José Rivera (*The Motorcycle Diaries*), Howard A. Rodman (*Savage Grace*) and Marcos Bernstein (Oscar nominated Brazilian film *Central Station*). His second screenplay was selected for NFDC Screenwriters' Lab. He was also part of Berlinale Talent Campus.

Ajitpal wrote dialogues for *Once Again* (Netflix), worked as an associate director for *Gurgaon* (Netflix) and as an assistant director for *Patang* (Berlinale). He worked on 16 international docs as a researcher and field producer.

Born in Punjab, Singh was 8 years old when his father, a farmer and ex-army man, ran a cinema hall in Bathinda which suffered huge losses and was shut down during insurgency. His family moved to Ahmedabad where his father took up a job of a security guard. Ajitpal grew up in a ghetto amidst poverty and violence and he faced a lot of discrimination due to anti Sikh sentiments in India at that time.

After studying chemistry, learning theatre and photography, he chose filmmaking as his calling. His greatest passions are writing, reading, cooking, cycling and travelling. He commutes by bicycle in Mumbai and uses an old-fashioned Nokia phone.

VINAMRATA RAI

as

CHANDRA




CINEMATOGRAPHER

Dominique Colin



An Alumni of National School of Louis Lumière Paris, Dominique Colin is known for his collaborations with auteurs like Gaspar Noë (*Carne, I Stand Alone*), Cédric Klapisch (*L'auberge Espagnole, Russian Dolls*), Alanté Kavaïté (Sundance prize winner, *Summer of Sangailé*), and more recently for Cannes Critic's Week Prize Winner, *SIR (Monsieur)*. Though based out of Paris, he has worked across continents and cultures on more than 50 feature films.

A photograph of a man with dark hair and a mustache, wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt and dark trousers, sitting on the ground. He is looking down at his hands. A black and tan dog is lying down next to him. The background shows a colorful, weathered wall with blue and red paint, and a doorway leading into a dark interior.

CHANDAN BISHT

as

DHARAM

PRODUCTION COMPANY

Jar Pictures

JAR Pictures founded by Ajay G. Rai and Alan McAlex in 2011 is an Indian motion picture production company based in Mumbai. They have produced award-winning films and commercially successful films in equal capacity. Their award winning films include, *Liar's Dice* (Sundance 2013, India and Official Entry to Oscar), *Killa* (Berlinale Crystal Bear Winner 2014), *Gurgaon*, *Moothoon*, *Luv Shuv Tey Chicken Khurana*, and many TV Series. Their recent feature project was selected for Berlinale Co-Production market 2019. Their commercially successful films include *Gangs Of Wasseypur 1 and 2*, *Dev D*, *Nil Battey Sannata* and *Qarib Qarib Single* starring Irrfan Khan.

PRODUCERS



Ajay Rai

Ajay Rai came to Mumbai at the age of 14, he began as a runner and rose to become the production head of UTV with his commitment, dedication and with an uncanny ability to sniff talent and good scripts. Insiders know Ajay as a maverick producer who bets his money on talented but new directors. He produced first feature film of Geetu Mohandas, Avinash Arun, Ashwini Iyer Tiwari and Shanker Raman. All these films were either a critical success or found love at the box office. In past three years Ajay has established himself as successful producer of Web Shows like *Final Call*, *A Simple Murder* and *Rangbaaz*, proving his acumen to look in directions for stories and storytellers, where no one is looking. He is always looking for writer/directors who dream big.



Alan McAlex

If Ajay has an uncanny ability to sniff talents, Alan has the coach like quality to nurture the talent, provide them the right environment and find audiences worldwide for their projects. Alan started as an assistant cinematographer but realised he has a natural ability to organise and mobilise, he became a line producer and quickly rose to become one of the best man to execute big budget projects like *Dangal*, the highest grossing Indian film as well as Amazon series *Made in Heaven*.

He is also the co-producer of BBC limited series *A Suitable Boy*, directed by Mira Nair and adapted from author Vikram Seth's eponymous book. His company Suitable Production is committed to nurture new talent that has fresh ideas and vision to make something unique for the world.

CO-PRODUCERS



Mauli Singh

Mauli Singh began her career as a film journalist in Mumbai. She launched Playboy Clubs in India as Corp Comm Head before starting her PR firm, 'Loudspeaker Media', with a passion to promote path-breaking independent cinema. She has promoted indie gems which have premiered at the top notch international and Indian film festivals and Oscar entries from India as well as film festivals (IFFI Goa et al), film markets (Film Bazaar, India Pavilion at Cannes), and film studios such as NFDC India, Drishyam Films, *The Lunchbox* director Ritesh Batra's Poetic License among others.

She also works as a film programmer/festival strategist and a researcher and field producer on international docs. She was instrumental in tracing a lost, iconic Somali film '*A Somali Dervish*' in the National Archives of India. Her first short film as a producer with Drishyam Films, *Rammatt-Gammat* won 'Special Mention' at the 64th Oberhausen International Film. *Fire In The Mountains*, her first feature as a co-producer with Jar Pictures, will be premiering at Sundance Film Festival 2021 in the 'World Cinema Dramatic Competition'



Amit Mehta

Based in Uttarakhand, Amit Mehta has line produced mainstream Bollywood films like *Kedarnath*, *Laal Kaptaan*, *Breathe Season 2*, *Ramaiya Vastavaiya*, *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan*, *Thank You*, *Nil Battey Sannata*. *Fire In The Mountains* is his first film as a co-producer.

You are making your feature debut as a writer-director at the age of 44. How does it feel to be a late bloomer?

Some days it really hits me that I am 44 and making my first feature film, then I read my diary and I know why it took me so long and I am okay with it.

The first part of it is to do with the circumstances. My childhood was spent amidst poverty and violence. We had to leave Punjab because my father suffered huge losses during insurgency. The proud man like my father who had served in the army and worked as a farmer, had to take up a job as a security guard in Kalol (Gujarat), where all of us were discriminated against for being Sikh, and even called terrorists. I have been beaten up and I have seen my father being beaten. I was a very bright student but had no friends while growing up. I spent most of my days either wandering or reading books.

During my college (Xavier) days, I became curious to explore, learn and understand. In our twenties, while all my friends were thinking of higher studies or moving to bigger cities to pursue careers, I was traveling in India and abroad as a documentary film researcher, translator and field producer. I would work for four months, earn enough money, pack my bags and go on my solo travels. That is how I spent my entire twenties and I didn't even realise when I turned 30.

I started thinking seriously about filmmaking only at the age of 33 and that's when I started writing my first screenplay which was selected for Sundance Lab in 2012.

Your first script was selected at Sundance in 2012 and it won the Sundance Grant? What took you so long to make your first film?

I am so tempted to give a spiritual answer and take all the blame for not making that film but that is not the truth.

I tried very hard to make my first film '*Man Who Broke The Mountain*', it is still my best written screenplay and I am sure when the film will be made, it will be an outstanding film. I wrote around 15 drafts of that script from the scratch, every time, I would delete the old draft and start afresh. I spent around three years writing it. I didn't study filmmaking so writing my first screenplay was a great learning process for me, I would watch my favourite films like *Pather Panchali*, *The 400 Blows* and *Climates* and write notes about them. I still have the 80-pager-note that I wrote while watching *Pather Panchali*. *Man Who Broke The Mountain* is just a 48-page screenplay but anybody who has read it, knows it's a labour of love.

There are many reasons why I couldn't make the film. One reason is because Ketan Mehta made the film on the same subject, it became very difficult for us to raise funds. And I was not experienced enough to navigate through the complex funding environment of the Mumbai film industry. Guillermo Arriaga, my mentor from the Sundance Lab and writer of *Amores Perros*, *21 Grams* and *Babel* is still trying to raise the money, so I am confident we will make the film one day.



Tell us about your cinematic influences.

My father ran a cinema hall in Bhatinda before we had to move to Gujarat due to financial losses. Even though I would sneak in to see films, it was not like *Cinema Paradiso*. I was not really a cinema enthusiast as a kid. I saw maybe four or five films a year.

I was more drawn to books from a very young age. I loved reading literature. It started with Premchand but slowly I was reading Chekhov, Manto and Kundera. I felt this deep urge to tell stories and I tried to write but I soon realised that I had no command over any language. I went to a Hindi Medium school, spoke Punjabi at home, Gujarati with friends. The medium of instruction in college was English. As a result, I didn't have a proper understanding and vocabulary to be a novel or short story writer in any language.

That was the time I saw *The 400 Blows* at a film festival in Ahmedabad and it struck me that a story can be told with images, I don't have to master a language. And then I started watching films, the filmmakers that influenced me earlier were Francois Truffaut and Satyajit Ray. As I started digging deeper, I discovered Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Bruno Dumont, Kim Ki-duk, Dardenne Brothers, Michael Haneke and Alfred Hitchcock. And more recently, I have been in love with Asghar Farhadi's cinema.

Were there any films that were inspirations for FITM?

Yes, *A Separation* by Asghar Farhadi. I really like what he does with the characters, he introduces a secret and puts all the protagonists in a pressure cooker like situation and watches their true-self reveal itself. That's something I wanted to do.

Why did you change the title from *Switzerland* to *Fire In The Mountains*?

Switzerland with 't' missing is the name of the homestay that Chandra runs in the film. It was the original title, but the final film doesn't really revolve around the homestay so we felt that we should change it.

The film is shot on a hand held camera in a difficult Himalayan terrain, why?

At the writing stage itself I knew that I wanted the audience to experience the film as if they are sitting next to Chandra, so I was always open to handheld. When our DOP, Dominique came on board, I shared this idea and he said let's go handheld. I was sceptical initially but it was a pleasure to see him work effortlessly with the handheld camera in such a difficult terrain. He is a master of movement.

SONAL JHA

as

KAMLA



Why did you set the film in a remote village of Uttarakhand? Were there any challenges?

I travelled across Kumaon region for two months, in a Maruti Alto with a driver. When I reached Sarmoli village in Munsiyari, it felt the right setting for my story. I had imagined a woman who lives in a remote village with no proper road and runs a homestay. The village with unpaved roads and breath-taking view of the Himalayas, is famous for homestays run by 20 women. The love and warmth of women of Sarmoli was also one of the main reasons.

The main challenge was that it's too far on the border of India, Nepal and Tibet, you can get cut off for days due to frequent landslides. My cinematographer said something wonderful – 'nobody will ask you whether it was easy or difficult to shoot in Munsiyari, they will either like the images or not'. Hence, we decided to go the difficult way'. And the landslide did happen, our lights were stuck for two days, but we managed to shoot a few other scenes without light



INTRODUCING

MAYANK SINGH

as

PRAKASH

HARSHITA TEWARI

as

KANCHAN

CREW

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Dominique Colin

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Parikshhit Jha | Simon Price

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IMDB: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt12312912/?ref=fn_al_tt_1

REVIEWS

VARIETY - The Story of a Headstrong Rural Woman Battling Tradition Has Quiet Power.

<https://bit.ly/3hoYK8V>

INDIEWIRE - A mix of heavenly landscapes and desperate lives, Ajitpal Singh's debut feature is like if Apu in "Pather Panchali" had TikTok.

<https://bit.ly/3eLG2qp>

ROGER EBERT - With a scorching final act, Singh questions the ignorance that leads some to disregard common sense.

<https://bit.ly/3hqol1a>

ANUPAMA CHOPRA - Fire In The Mountains Is A Powerful Portrayal Of The Load Women Carry

<https://bit.ly/3ff708Z>

ANDREW KENDELL - It's a striking work of searing emotional heft turning domestic drama into cultural critique.

<https://bit.ly/33OoxiJ>

FILMTHREAT - Western audiences are offered the prospect of seeing a part of the cinematic world that we rarely get to savor. Singh captures a place and time that places us far away, yet in the center of action that is entirely universal.

<https://bit.ly/33IE83q>