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CANNES 2023

AGRA

by Kanu Behl



Les Films de l'Atalante present

a production by
Saregama & UFO Production

AGRA

a film by
Kanu Behl

Fiction | 2023 | India, France | Length : 2h12
DCP 1.85 | sound 5.1 | ratio 1.85 | Couleur

FRENCH DISTRIBUTION

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SYNOPSIS

Guru, a young man in his twenties, works in a call center in Agra. In love with Mala, a work colleague, he stills lives with his parents, whose house is divided in two parts. Guru lives on the ground floor with his mother while his father is upstairs with his mistress. when Guru announces that he wants to marry Mala, and make the terrace of the house his future bedroom, nothing goes as planned. Frustrations, faults and family hatreds come to light, symptoms of an Indian patriarchal society with many taboos.

KANU BEHL

DIRECTOR

Interviewed by Emmanuel Burdeau, april 2023

There's a eight year gap between your first feature film, Titli, being presented at Un Certain Regard, and this year's selection of *Agra* at the Directors Fortnight.

Titli finished for me late 2015. That's when William Jéhannin and I started developing *Agra*. We wrote the draft and sent it to Cinémas du Monde. The French founding was pretty much in place by late 2016. But I knew early on that getting founding for a film like that in India would be a big battle. I made a short film called *Binnu Ka Sapna*, that premiered in Clermont Ferrand in 2019 and won the jury prize. I knew I wanted to make a film about sexual repression but I probably didn't realize at first what I was really biting my teeth into. I went to a residency in Italy run by Olivia Stewart, the Three Rivers Residency. My mentor there was Molly Stangard, the editor for Lars von Trier. Molly really encouraged me to go to the ugly parts, and I confessed to her that I was little scared. It took more or less two weeks at the residency to really decide to do it all the way, not matter how difficult it was going to be. That's when the script really started changing. It was a turning point for the film.

***Agra* begins in a very audacious and unexpected way : Guru, the main character, is fantasizing about having sex with a giant squirrel. Why did you want to start your film like that ?**

I wanted the first scene to be a premonition, to set up the bestial feeling of the boy and the whirlpool you're about to get into. During the film you see the squirrel in the cage, and in many ways Guru feels like that in his family's home, because of his desires and his inability to express his deep desire for sexuality to be equated with love. Guru is trying to find some form of purity, and I wanted to connect that with his bestial desire. Guru has seen his father lead his whole life with two women and now possibly with a third one. In his subconscious he's somehow understanding that beneath a sexual union there is some sort of a transaction. In his battle to talk about his sexuality and bring it out in this fucked up house, he's somehow rebelling against that and hoping that he can have a purer connection to sex and connect it with love. There's a complete innocence in him, as you can see later in the film when he jumps on his sister and tries to kiss her : it's a way for him to try to express his love, but he doesn't have the language or the grammar for it.

In his home, Guru's father lives with several women. Is it a common situation in India ?

The mother is downstairs, his mistress upstairs, and the father wants so sell the house to a third woman to have a bigger one. The father is a serial womanizer and a failed business man. He's not a good money guy. He uses his physicality and his way with women to elevate his class status get more in his life. In Northern India, it's a common

thing for a man to be living in the same house with a wife and a mistress. I've seen it growing up.

Why is the movie entitled *Agra* ?

The city of Agra – two hours away from the capital – is known in the whole world for the Taj Mahal. But not a lot of people outside India know that the largest mental asylum is also in Agra. People in India would immediately know why the film is called *Agra*.

One finds in *Agra* a theme that was already there in *Titli*, having to do with housing speculation and the desire for a family to have a proper house...

What is happening India now is happening all over the world : the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The divide is widening. The new generation cannot afford a house anymore. The desire is in the father to make do for everyone and take care of everyone, with a five story house... Guru finally says to himself : if we can't afford to have a house like that, we'll go and find a guy and let him have two floors in return for building us a bigger house. We won't get eventually all the space that we need but at least we'll have more space. Eventually the builder owns one floor and a half of the house, he owns the foundation, so the foundation is corrupt now. They make do for this amputation with three and a half floors. It's like cutting part of the body. The house is not whole anymore. They live on top of a false base.

And yet, when they are actually building the house, all suddenly seems peaceful and cheerful...

That sequence is the reason why I wanted to do

the film in the first place. In India, family structures are so important and the biggest dream for a family is to be able to make a house. I have a three year old son and we just bought a house. I was sixteen when my parents bought their first house and I saw them build it brick by brick. It always amazed me to see how so many of fragile dreams are invested by human beings in the act of constructing a house. And yet, underneath that the relationships are all complicated and wry... The biggest investment should be in people and relationships, the house should only be a medium for that. I found it interesting to explore this extended moment of making a house and really see how you can invest almost false emotions in the act of making a house. Almost like a token gesture or a ritual : underneath there's an emptiness... How could it be otherwise with the repression set inside this boy that has given up his original impulse to talk about all the sexual repressions within the family ?

Would you say that sexual repression is particularly topical in India these days ?

There was a very famous rape case in Delhi thirteen years ago. A girl late at night is returning home with her boyfriend. A bus comes with five people. They invite them to come in and drop them somewhere. They brutalize the girl very badly, they stuck a iron bar inside her vagina when they are done raping her one by one. They nearly kill the boy. Eventually the girl dies in the hospital. It was a huge case : Delhi was called the rape capital in the world. Several cases like that in the Northern Belt kept popping up. My question is : where is this repressed anger coming out of ? My attempt was to try and get inside the character of Guru and try to understand his repression deeply and make you experience what it is to be this troubled. I wanted to take this frustration and this violence and connect it

with larger economic cultural factors that are probably contributing to feelings like this for a young man who's not freely able to express himself sexually. We are a closed society. We're supposed to be the land of Kama Sutra but that has long been forgotten.

It's amazing to see how, in both of your films, *Titli* and *Agra*, relationships are brutal : shouting, calling names, even fighting. There is even a scene where Guru tries to strangle the doctor with his legs...

Shouting and calling names is very normal. Titli was about a gang of criminals, so that's a special case. The sequence with a doctor, that sort of chaos and violence is very common. My father passed away a couple of years ago : he used to beat me with his slippers... We had a very difficult relationship. It doesn't represent all of India, but there's that strick of undertones of physical violence in 50% of the household. Definitely in the Northern Belt there is aggression in everything.

How did you find Mohit Agarwal, the actor playing Guru ?

We looked for about a year for the right person. We were casting in Bombay, Delhi, Agra, other cities, and eventually we found Mohit outside of Bombay. He had done a little bit of theater but wasn't used to the kind of performance we wanted for the film. We did a three months workshop in order for him to get inside the character. In his real life Mohit is the opposite of Guru, he's quite the ladies man. Since this is a film about sexuality, I told him I wanted to know everything about his sexual life. We had long conversations for four days. In order for him to be empathetic with the character we need to have a semblance and he needed to feel that frustration.

Why did you not choose someone closer to the part ?

From early on I knew it was a difficult part to play and a difficult character for an audience to empathize with. So I needed a face which was slightly gentler, softer, to be able to cushion all the acts that he was going to do in the film. There is a very thin line between watching a guy who's repressed and feeling for him and watching a rapist. It was very important to have this physical quality, the correct height, the soft face and the slight build. I'm fully aware that a lot of people can simply reject Guru. But if you chose to make a film about sexual repression you cannot play safe and stay outside of the character. If you do that you put the difficulty at distance. If we really want to understand sexual frustration and all of its implication, if we want to live in a world with no sexual repression we need to understand it completely from the inside, every step of the way and travel on that journey and see where it takes us.

Another thing that is both audacious and unexpected is Guru's love interest, Priti, a young woman owning a cybercafé that has a severe limp.

There's a specific reason why I wanted Priti to be physically damaged, even if it might not be the right way to put it. Guru is mentally damaged. Or at least the world looks at him that way. For him it's a meeting of equals for the first time. Guru finds a certain kinship in her and she finds a certain kinship and a certain trust in him. They are two kindred souls who in their empty halves are trying to find some sort of true relationship. They feel that together than can form one potent whole. As far as Priyanka Bose, the actress playing Priti, is concerned, again it's like a reversal from what she normally does. Priyanka usually plays a sexy siren. She's relatively well-known in India, she did *Lion* with Dev

Patel, where she plays his mother. Throughout her career Priyanka has been comfortable with nudity. I wanted her to know that this time it was not gratuitous, that this was a film about sexuality where sex is not for the sake of it.

Is there a chance, according to you, that one day Guru becomes a happy man ?

At the end Mala, his imaginary girlfriend, comes back. So the root repression has not been addressed, it will no go away. There is a deviant in all of us. Some of us just do a better job of hiding it. Guru still has a long journey ahead of him. Maybe a few years down the line he will be able to get out of his cage.



KANU BEHL

BIOGRAPHY

Kanu Behl studied at the Satyajit Ray Film and TV Institute, where he got a degree in filmmaking. His first documentary, *AN ACTOR PREPARES* (2006, produced by SRFTI, India) was in competition at the Cinéma du Réel in Paris in 2007.

He then produced and directed three other documentaries for NHK in Japan, ZDF and ARTE in Germany : *FOUND HIM YET ?* (2007), *THREE BLIND MEN* (2008), *OVER THRESHOLDS* (2009).

In 2007, he moved into feature films by becoming Dibakar Banerjee's assistant director on the hit film *OYE LUCKY ! LUCKY OYE !*.

In 2010, they co-wrote *LSD: LOVE SEX AND DELUSION*. The film was unanimously praised by the critics, and made him known as a promising screenwriter.

TITLI marked Kanu Behl directorial debut and was selected in 2014 at the



Festival de Cannes in the section Un Certain Regard. It received the best Foreign Work Award from the Critics' Union in 2015.

AGRA is his second feature film.

KANU BEHL

FILMOGRAPHY

DIRECTOR & SCREENWRITER - CINEMA

- 2023 AGRA | *Quinzaine des cinéastes, Festival de Cannes 2023*
- 2019 BINNU KA SAPNA (CM) | *Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival, Jury prize*
- 2014 TITLI | *Un Certain Regard, Festival de Cannes 2014*

SCREENWRITER

- 2010 LSD : LOVE, SEX AND DELUSION | by Dibakar Banerjee
- 2008 OYE LUCKY! LUCKY OYE! | by Dibakar Banerjee

PRODUCER & DIRECTOR - TELEVISION

- 2009 OVER TRESHOLDS | Diffusion on ARTE
- 2008 THREE BLIND MEN | Diffusion on ZDF - Germany
- 2007 FOUND HIM YET | Diffusion on NHK - Japan



MOHIT AGARWAL

LEADING ACTOR - GURU

2023 AGRA | by Kanu Behl (character : Guru)

2021 TAKE 37 : POKER FACE | Director

2020 BAAT KAR - FARIDKOT | Director

2010 THE FILM EMOTIONAL ATYACHAR | Producer

Mohit Agarwal is a director, actor and a musician based in Mumbai. He began his journey as an actor training from the National School of Drama, Barry John's Acting Academy and Anupam Kher's Actor Prepares.

He has directed about 25 music videos and his short film as a director was a one-take dance musical based on

Shakespeare's *MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*.

He has also been part of the Mumbai theatre circuit for the last 10 years and has directed 3 plays out of which 2 are musicals.

He did his first movie as an actor playing the lead role in Kanu Behl's *AGRA*.



PRIYANKA BOSE

LEADING ACTRESS - PRITI

- 2023 AGRA | by Kanu Behl (character : Priti)
- 2021 THE WHEEL OF TIME | Produced by Prime Video
- 2019 PAREEKSHA | by Prakash Jha
- 2016 LION | by Garth Davis
- 2010 GANGOR | by Italo Spinelli
- 2012 NHIRBAYA | de Yael Farber

Priyanka Bose is an international theater and film actress. Best known for her work in the films *GANGOR* (Italo Spinelli, 2010), the oscar nominated film *LION* (Garth Davis, 2016) and an award winning play in *NIRBHAYA* (Yael Farber, 2012).

She is currently starring in *THE WHEEL OF TIME*, a TV show created by Rafe Judkins and produced by Amazon Prime Video. A self learning actress, graduated in sociology in Delhi, where she was also raised.



SAREGAMA & YOODLEE FILMS

Saregama, the erstwhile HMV India, has been in the entertainment business for over a hundred years. It is the oldest music label in India with the biggest music repertoire across all genres and languages, and also a leading producer of fiction content for Indian TV channels.

Yoodlee Films is the studio arm of Saregama. Since its inception in 2016, it has produced over 25 feature films in various languages including Hindi, English, Tamil, Malayalam, Punjabi and Marathi, many of which have made their way to numerous festivals of repute, including Busan (BIFF), Rotterdam (IFFR) and Tallinn Black Nights. Closer home, Yoodlee has won three National Film Awards - two for *Hamid* (2019) and one for the Tamil film *KD* (2020).

Yoodlee Films has stormed through the regional markets and is working with the biggest stars in the Malayalam, Marathi and Punjabi industries. In 2022, they released 4 big films namely,

Zombivli, (Marathi) *Padavettu*, (Malayalam) *Oye Makhna* (Punjabi) and *Kaapa* (Malayalam). The films performed well at the box office and now are available to stream on OTT.

The Yoodlee brand of «fearless filmmaking» has found favour with audiences and critics alike with 14 films on Netflix, 4 on Disney+ Hotstar, and 3 on Zee5

Yoodlee has now entered in web shows with Hunter- Tootega Nahi Todega starring Suniel Shetty on Amazon MiniTV and United Kacche starring Sunil Grover on Zee5. Both the shows have pleased the audience and entered the top 5 streamed shows of the week in the first week of release.



UFO PRODUCTION

After the creation of UFO Distribution in 2008, in order to distribute films that stood out for their uniqueness, UFO Production was created in 2015 to support filmmakers starting at the writing stage of their project.

In 2016, the production of the film *IN THE REALM OF PERFECTION* by Julien Faraut was launched. This documentary had been selected and awarded at the 2018 Berlin festival, then released in cinemas in July 2018.

In 2017 began the production of the documentary *THE STATE AGAINST MANDELA AND THE OTHERS* by Nicolas Champeaux and Gilles Porte, selected at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival, in the Official Selection out of competition, and released in cinemas in October 2018.

The collaboration with Julien Faraut continued with the production of the film *THE WITCHES OF THE ORIENT* in 2021, presented in Big Screen competition in Rotterdam. It was released in French cinemas in July 2021.

Kanu Behl's second fiction feature film *AGRA* was selected at the 2023 Cannes Film Festival, in parallel selection at the Quinzaine des cinéastes.

UFO Production is developing several projects in parallel:

In documentary, the series *10 IN AMERICA*, in co-production with Films Hatari and directed by 10 French-speaking filmmakers (including Alice Diop, Sophie Letourneur, Hassen Ferhani, Joel Akafou, Virgil Vernier), is currently in financing.

Julien Faraut's next film *Eyes shut*, centered on the mental preparation of athletes, is scheduled for the 2024 Olympics.

Animation feature film wise, the first film directed by Ariane Ascaride *PARIS RETROUVÉE* is in writing.

Oerd Van Cuijlenborg - who had created the animation part of the film *THE STATE AGAINST MANDELA AND THE OTHERS* - is finalising the graphic design of the film *DUST*.

In fiction, the comedy *GIGOLO*, the first feature film by Gautier Navet and Florimond Debove, is in financing, while the project *UNE JEUNESSE* by Julien Charpier is in writing.



UFO PRODUCTION

FILMOGRAPHY



2018 IN THE REALM OF PERFECTION

Directed by Julien Faraut / Documentary
Berlinale 2018 - Section Forum - Public prize
French theater release : July 2018



2018 THE STATE AGAINST MANDELA AND THE OTHERS

Directed by par Nicolas Champeaux and Gilles Porte / Documentary
Coproducer : Rouge International
Festival de Cannes 2018 - Sélection officielle
Durban International Film Festival - Public prize
French theater release : October 2018



2019 THE STATE AGAINST MANDELA AND THE OTHERS

Directed by Nicolas Champeaux and Gilles Porte / TV 52'
Coproducer : Rouge International
Diffusion on ARTE - 08/25/2019



2021 THE WITCHES OF THE ORIENT

Directed par Julien Faraut - Documentary
Rotterdam - Big Screen Competition
French theater release : July 2021



2023 AGRA

Directed by Kanu Behl - Feature film
Coproducer : Saregama India Ltd and 028 Films
Festival de Cannes 2023 - Quinzaine des cinéastes

CASTING

GURU	MOHIT AGARWAL
MUMMY	VIBHA CHIBBER
DADDY	RAHUL ROY
AUNTY	SONAL JHA
MALA	RUHANI SHARMA
CHHAVI	AANCHAL GOSWAMI
PRITI	PRIYANKA BOSE
PULKIT	ADHIRAJ SHARMA
SUNDAR	DEVAS DIXIT
ASHOKE	BABLA KOCHAR
BABITA	GAYATRI
DR. LOVINDER	SUDHIR GULYANI
DEVENDER	MANOJ SHARMA
LUSTY GIRL	CHARU
PRIEST 1	SHRAVAN KUMAR DWIVEDI
DR.KHANNA	RAJESH AGARWAL

CREW

DIRECTOR	KANU BEHL
SCRIPTWRITERS	ATIKA CHOCHAN KANU BEHL
FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	AVIJIT KHANWILKAR
SCRIPT	SNEHA RAJGURU
CASTING SUPERVISOR	PRASHANT SINGH
CINEMATOGRAPHER	SAURABH MONGA
SOUND OPERATOR	GAUTIER ISERN
ART DIRECTOR	BHASKAR GUPTA
PRODUCTION DESIGNER	PARUL SONDH
COSTUME DESIGNER	FABEHA SULTANA KHAN
EDITORS	SAMARTH DIXIT NITESH BHATIA
COLORGRADING	YOV MOOR
ORIGINAL SCORE	KARAN GOUR
SOUND MIXERS	PRITAM DAS PHILIPPE GRIVEL
PRODUCERS	VIKRAM MEHRA SIDDHARTH ANAND KUMAR WILLIAM JÉHANNIN KANU BEHL
PRODUCTIONS	SAREGAMA INDIA LTD UFO PRODUCTION O28 FILMS
COPRODUCER	SAHIL SHARMA

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