

Director/Cinematographer/Writer

Shashank Walia

Produced by

Reema Kaur, Sahil Saigal & Hansal Mehta

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Birds in the Dark

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BIFF

31st BUSAN
International Film Festival
6-15 October 2026

New Currents AWARD WINNER

뉴 커런츠상

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FILM

Birds in the Dark

〈어둠 속의 새들〉

DIRECTOR

Shashank WALIA

샤샹크 왈리아



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Songwon Vision Audience **AWARD (Asia)**

송원 비전 관객상
- 아시아

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JURY COMMENTARY

“

We were unanimous in awarding this prize to an ambitious debut charged with love and anger, at once brutal and romantic.

Through hushed, poetic imagery, the film brings distinct lives together in a shared struggle against caste, patriarchy and exclusion.

Both a work of slow cinema and a visceral survival thriller, it offers a profound reflection on dignity, resistance and our shared humanity.

”

SHORT SYNOPSIS

After the Muslim man he wrongly captured escapes, a police informer returns to his village, where his toxic ex-lover, a wealthy landowner, awaits. A stranger in his own home, he finds his childhood friend, a defiant woman, rallying landless farm labourers to reclaim the earth. When the man he had captured arrives searching for him, a revolution erupts—of queer love, caste resistance, and labour.

DIRECTOR'S INTENT

On the sixtieth day of the farmers' protest against pro-capitalist farm laws, I stood at the state border in the cold, camera in hand. The roads had been sealed with iron nails, cement barricades, barbed wires. And still, the tractors remained. Songs of resistance carried across the camps, flags moving in their rhythm. Where the state had tried to impose silence, the farmers had built kitchens, clinics, libraries. When the protest moved towards the city, the streets opened. Sanitation workers, street vendors, migrant labourers, junior teachers stepped forward in solidarity, supporting the farmers' resistance. That moment of solidarity took me back to my student days, when the state tried to bend the will of students, and in response, a new resistance took shape.

The protests stayed with me. Punjab was already waiting. The land my family had crossed during Partition, carrying whatever they could. A land of rivers and harvests, where the earth has long been both inheritance and battleground. I returned to it. Among farm labourers working land that would never be theirs, where ownership had already been decided long before their labour, the film found its ground. We stayed, living alongside them. They became collaborators, crew, conscience, sharing their labour, their defiance and their dreams. From their lives, and from the long memory of that land, emerged **Dilraj**—a farm labourer, organiser, marxist, resistance figure, friend, lover.

With Dilraj, this is also a story of two men, **Amir** and **Jagtar**, who love each other in a country where their love exists without name or law, where the idea of a shared future, a home, a family, a life seen fully, remains not just unrecognised but actively denied. While they find their way towards each other, Dilraj works land she does not own, tending to a crop while fighting to claim it. This story comes from somewhere personal, from a belief in the fluidity of bodies, gender and desire, and in the right of those who labour the land to own it. The characters' lives and struggles converge, and through that, solidarity, mutual aid and revolt emerge.

Like the river that runs through the film, its form remains fluid, ever expanding, connecting its characters and their struggles. Shot in black and white, the film stays close to the textures of land and labour, a people's film of queer life, love and resistance.

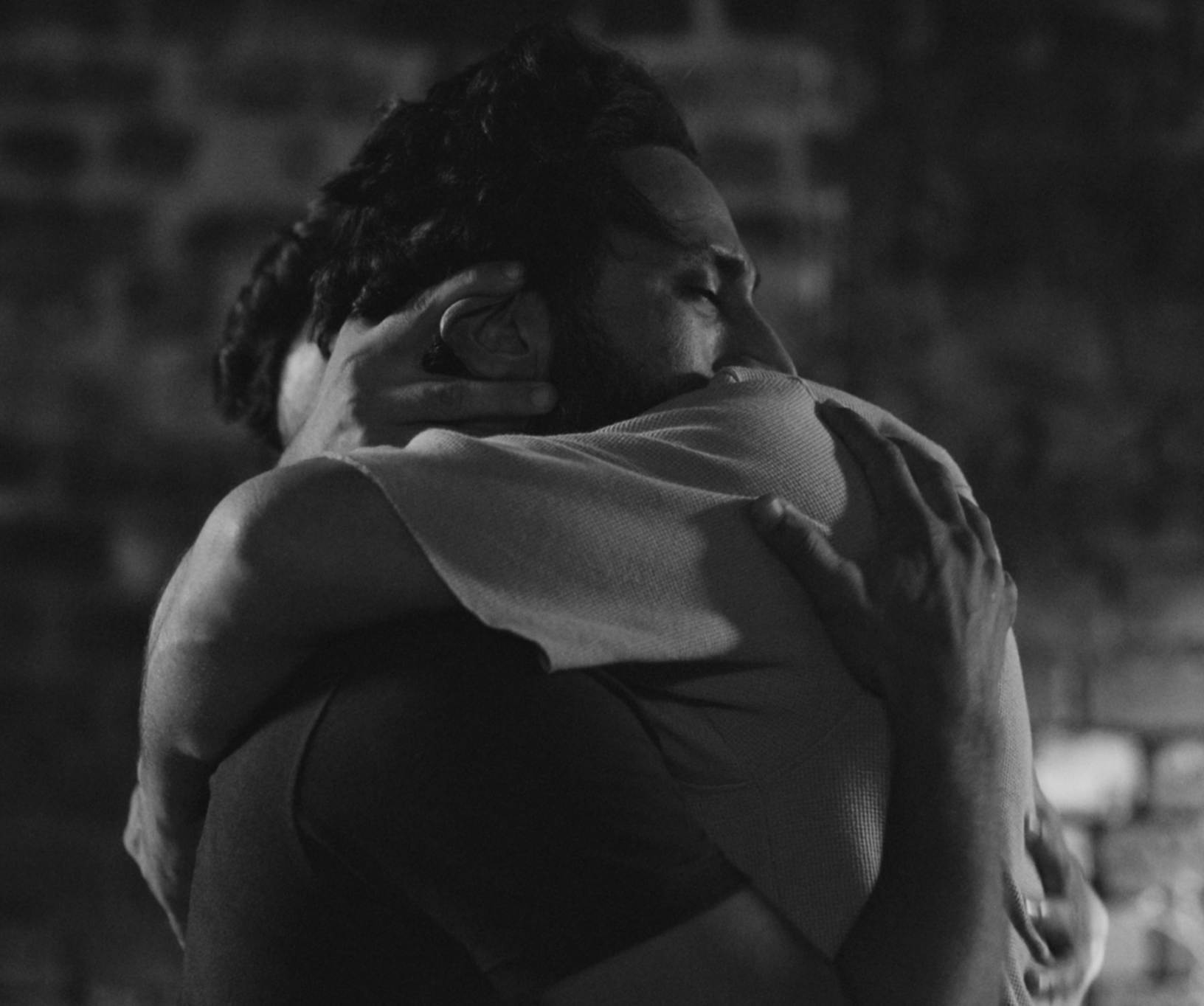
DETAILS

a Debut film
in Black & White
runtime 141 mins
aspect ratio is 1:66:1
language is Punjabi, Kashmiri & Urdu
narrative Fiction

THEMES

queer love,
caste & class,
gender & power,
land & labour,
intersectional film





DIRECTOR

Shashank Walia studied cinematography at the Film and Television Institute of India and Mass Communication at the AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia. His debut short fiction, *In the Month of Love*, which he wrote and directed, premiered at the International Film Festival Rotterdam and screened at festivals including Kyiv, St. Petersburg and Mumbai. He later directed the essay film *Somewhere Nowhere* for the Public Service Broadcasting Trust.

As a cinematographer, Shashank has worked with international broadcasters and platforms including NHK and Netflix. His recent cinematography credit, *Gurvinder Singh's Rehmat*, premiered in the main competition at the Locarno Film Festival in 2026.

Birds in the Dark is his debut feature as a writer-director.

PRODUCERS | TRUE STORY FILMS

Hansal Mehta is a National Award-winning filmmaker whose career spans over three decades across television, cinema and streaming, engaging with social and political realities through intimate, character-driven storytelling. His directorial work includes *Shahid* (2013), for which he won the National Award for Best Direction, *CityLights* (2014), *Aligarh* (2016), *Omertà* (2018), *Scam 1992: The Harshad Mehta Story* (2020), *Faraaz* (2023), and *Scoop* (2023), with *Scam 1992* and *Scoop* emerging as landmark works in India's streaming landscape. His latest series, *Gandhi*, a large-scale project currently in post-production, premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2025. Through his production banner, Mehta is building a slate of theatrical films and series in collaboration with platforms including Netflix, Amazon MGM Studios and Sony.

Sahil Saigal is a film producer working across independent cinema and streaming in India. He began his career with the series *Ranjish Hi Sahi*, and has since collaborated with Hansal Mehta on projects including *Faraaz* and *The Buckingham Murders*. This collaboration led to the co-founding of True Story Films, through which he is developing a slate of films and series. His current projects span platforms including Netflix, Amazon MGM Studios and Disney+ Hotstar, with a focus on character-driven stories rooted in contemporary realities.

PRODUCER | TWO BLACK SQUARES MEDIA

Reema Kaur is a producer and editor based in New Delhi and Chandigarh. A postgraduate in editing from the Film and Television Institute of India, she also participated in an exchange programme at La Fémis, Paris. She co-founded the art collective Two Black Squares Media in 2018. Her first production, the short film *In the Month of Love* (2019), screened at festivals including Rotterdam, Kyiv, St. Petersburg and Mumbai. She co-directed the essay film *Somewhere Nowhere* (2019) for Public Service Broadcasting Trust, which was broadcast on Doordarshan. As an editor, her work includes the feature documentary *Pearl of the Desert* (2019), which won Best Film at the Krakow Film Festival, *Dharna Mana Hai* (ZEE5), and the National Award-winning short *Aushadh*. Across her work as an editor, researcher and producer, Kaur focuses on developing independent films that engage with socio-political realities, gender and lived experiences.

CAST

Mauli Singh as Dilraj

Mauli is an independent actor, producer and film publicist, and the founder of Loudspeaker Media, a publicity agency dedicated to championing independent cinema. She made her acting debut in Gurvinder Singh's *Adh Chanani Raat* (2022). Her production credits include the Oberhausen-winning short *Rammat Gammat* and the Sundance-premiered feature *Fire in the Mountains* (2021). Alongside her work as an actor and producer, Mauli has been actively involved in supporting and promoting independent filmmaking.

Harwinder Aujla as Jagtar

Harwinder Aujla is an Indian actor with extensive experience across theatre and film. His recent work includes Gurvinder Singh's *Rehmat*, which premiered at the 79th Locarno Film Festival (2026). His screen credits also include *Border 2*, where he played Gurjeet Singh, *Kesari*, where he portrayed Daya Singh, and *Toba Tek Singh* as Mukhtar Singh. His work extends across Hindi and Punjabi cinema, television and digital projects, including *Jattu Nikhattu*. Theatre has been an important part of his artistic journey, forming a strong foundation for his work on screen.

Shahnawaz Bhat as Amir

Shahnawaz is a Kashmiri actor, screenwriter and researcher with over twelve years of experience across film, theatre and digital media. He is known for his performances in *Harud*, *Half Widow* and *Laila Aur Saat Geet*. His performance in *Harud* earned him Best Actor nominations at the Dubai International Film Festival and the New York Indian Film Festival. Beyond acting, Shahnawaz has worked as a writer, dialect coach, casting director and cultural consultant, bringing together his creative practice and academic research in language, theatre and performance.

Sapna Das as Rinku

Sapna is a professional artist based in Chandigarh whose work spans film, television and digital media. Her credits include *DAARO*, *SIM*, *Jublee*, *Laapta*, *Ji Janaab* and *Azaad*, alongside supporting roles in feature films such as *Soch Toh Paray*, *Mehar*, *Honeymoon* and *Parinda Paar Gaya*. A versatile performer, Sapna is also a skilled dancer and voice-over artist, bringing a range of performance disciplines to her work.

Navdeep Bajwa as Raman

Navdeep is an Indian actor and theatre artist with over a decade of experience across film, theatre, television and digital media. His film credits include *Nikka Zaildar*, *Khido Khundi*, *15 Lakh Kadon Aauga*, *Puaada*, *Jodi*, *Kudi Haryane Val Di*, *Sarbala Ji* and *Mehar*. His work also includes theatre, short films and digital projects, including the series *Pardhaan*, in which he plays Channi. Navdeep has also portrayed lead roles in several short films, including *Chitthi*, *Patwar*, *Sarpanchi Leni Hai*, *Living with a Stranger*, *Terror in the Suburb* and *The Half Glass*.

SCREENING SCHEDULE

Oct 9, 09:40 — CGV Centum City 7 (Press & Industry Screening)

Oct 10, 12:00 — CGV Centum City 3 (General Screening)

Oct 11, 16:00 — LOTTE CINEMA Centum City 8 (General Screening)

Oct 12, 19:20 — Busan Cinema Center, Cinema 2 (General Screening)

Oct 14, 10:00 — CGV Centum City 2 (General Screening)



INTERVIEW WITH SHASHANK WALIA

by Sarika Sharma for The Tribune

At the heart of 'Hanere De Panchi' ('Birds in the Dark'), a Punjabi film headed for the Busan International Film Festival, is a tiny village named Balad Kalan in Sangrur, and the epic struggle its landless Dalits have waged for reclaiming the common village land.

Shashank Walia was in the final year of film school in Pune in 2015 when he, along with friend Reema Kaur, received preliminary confirmation from the Films Division to make a documentary film. Born in Delhi, both wanted to go back to their roots and travelled across villages, towns and cities to look for folk artistes. A visit to Balad Kalan, which had only a year earlier raised a battle cry against landlords manipulating auctions for common village land, opened up new horizons for him.

That film never got made because the funding stopped, but "their stories, their courage and their generosity stayed". That is where 'Birds in the Dark' really began for director Shashank, who is in Mumbai these days, finalising the film.

Land is at the centre of Balad Kalan's phenomenal fight for equality, dignity, livelihood. Land is the leitmotif of the film as well. Shashank says the film holds two very different relationships to land. **"For the landowner, it is possession, ownership and capital. For the landless farm labourer, it means dignity, agency and the ability to shape one's own life. To be landless is not simply to not own land. It is to be placed in a particular relationship to labour, livelihood and power, where economic inequality is deeply shaped by the structures of caste."**

Shashank had identified with the protest in a personal way, too. Actively involved in the FTII protest, he knew what it takes to stand up. Five years down the line, as he documented the farmers' protest, he realised what people's power could achieve.

He says when the landless farm together, they gain greater agency over their own labour and create a space for sharing, cooperation and collectivity. **"People can make decisions together and have a greater say in their own livelihoods."** Balad Kalan has proved that, having inspired reclamation of 4,210 acres of panchayat land in 162 villages.

However, as much as the film is rooted in labour, it is also centred around queer love. Shashank says the film explores how queerness extends beyond the story itself, into the way love is imagined and explored. **"It asks whether love can exist outside the ways in which society has taught us to understand and define it, and whether it can become a location for solidarity and mutual aid."**

The darkness in the title, the 'hanera', thus carries both "oppression and uncertainty, as well as the possibility of hope". "Under the night sky, with the stars as their guides, our birds seek new meanings and definitions of love. In times of constraint and uncertainty, love can become a space where new alternatives emerge. A new horizon."

In doing this, the film traverses various trajectories like caste, gender, land and class. Shashank calls it a difficult film to write, and tells that the pandemic provided him that quiet to write it. Define difficult, we say, and he insists that the difficulty lay not in the intersectional nature of the film traversing trajectories like caste, gender, land and class, but something else. **"As filmmakers, we practise all aspects of the craft: developing the plot, shaping the narrative, building a universe, composition, light and sound. But all these formal elements have to be in the service of the people whose lives it engages with, and not simply the narrative we want to express. People and their conflicts cannot just become material for a film. To really know people, to understand their hopes, ambitions and struggles, and to approach them with simplicity, is much harder. For me, that sehejta, that simplicity, is perhaps the most difficult part of filmmaking."**

Now based in Punjab, Shashank dons the hat of writer, director and cinematographer here. Interestingly, director Gurvinder Singh saw some parts of the film and asked Shashank to collaborate as the cinematographer on 'Rehmat', which was screened at the Locarno Film Festival recently.

Shashank says 'Birds in the Dark' changed his relationship with cinematography. **"Writing and directing made me think deeply about what I can do with the camera and how cinematography can become part of the film's larger language."**

Set in the vibrant countryside of Punjab and narrating an equally vivid story of people's struggle, Shashank has chosen to tell the film in black and white. This finds root in his keen interest in abstractionism. **"As much as I am interested in telling a people's story, I am equally interested in exploring the abstraction that images can reach, and the space they can create within the subconscious of the viewer."**

Taking away colour helped him create a layered sense of reality, where the actuality of a place could coexist with its evocation through images. **"The poetic space the narrative reaches for, and the harsh realism the film is grounded in, could arrive together through black and white. It brought out the textural nature of the land and the crops, and let the film move between emotional planes without over-stylising the image. The image could move between the real, and sometimes the imagined, without having to choose between the two."**

'Birds in the Dark' will be screened at Busan's Vision Asia, a competition section. Shashank says for an independent Punjabi film, it means a great deal to have its practice with the medium recognised.

"This really feels like a moment that belongs to all of us. To the crew and cast who gave so much of themselves to the film, and to our friends in the villages who opened their homes, lives and stories to us, and without whom this film simply would not have been possible. To see the film travel to South Korea is, in some way, to carry all of them with us."





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Birds in the Dark
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