



Pearl of the Desert

A
FILM
BY
PUSHPENDRA SINGH

PRODUCED BY PUSHPENDRA SINGH, HEEJUNG OH
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY RAVIKIRAN AYYAGARI
SOUND DESIGN BY AJIT SINGH RATHORE
EDITED BY REEMA KAUR, PUSHPENDRA SINGH
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER ANJALI PANJABI, SIDHARTH MEER, SANJAY GULATI, AJIT SINGH RATHORE
PRODUCTION MARUDHAR ARTS, SEESAW PICTURES

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Pearl of the Desert

A musical journey to find where you belong

India, South Korea | 82' | Musical Documentary
directed by Pushpendra Singh | produced by Heejung Oh

Moti Khan, a musically gifted child from the lower caste Muslim Manganiyars of the Thar desert, is forced to sing and play music for their ancestral patrons in order to survive, even though he finds it humiliating. Sattar, his father, wants Moti to study and make a career outside music. But Moti aspires to be a successful singer so that he is treated respectfully. He leaves his village behind and sets out on a journey to discover his music.

<https://youtu.be/rP2JEswGqj8>

SYNOPSIS

An extended family of Manganiyars, a lower caste tribe of Muslim musicians in the Thar Desert, struggles to maintain their identity as hereditary musicians of their Hindu upper caste patrons. Moti Khan a musically gifted child in the family chaffing against confines of formal education and his traditional community takes a journey to follow his heart and art into the outside world. His father, Sattar struggles to find ways to sustain the family economically. The frequent droughts and the erratic rains have affected his limited farming. The family is forced to sing and play music for their hereditary patrons, to survive. But Moti finds singing for their patrons humiliating as they are still treated lowly. Sattar wants Moti to study and make a successful career outside music but Moti aspires to be a successful singer so that he is treated respectfully in the village. Sattar gives in to the perseverance of Moti to learn music and sends him to his maternal village- Barna to train and make a living out of singing. Mapping the lives of the three generations of the musicians through the eyes of Moti Khan, the film looks at the struggles and conflicts of the family and the musical tradition in the desert. The boy's journey from his remote village near the Indo-Pak border to the national stage to become popular is also a journey of a fast changing culture and its musical heritage against the tide of cultural tourism and globalisation.





DIRECTOR'S NOTE

In a world where democracies are becoming more and more about majoritarianism, cultures and communities which celebrate pluralism are at a danger of fading away. Manganiyars are Muslims who are professional singers to their patrons, the Hindu Rajputs. Tourism, digital technologies and the desire to make a modern living are forcing this age old oral tradition to adapt itself to the changes or extinct.

Moti Khan, an exceptionally talented child from the tradition represents the fears and anxieties of this plural culture, and yet wants to draw from it's rich heritage to make a living and name for himself. The film becomes a journey of Moti and the landscape which celebrates this music.

I have taken a formal approach to tell the story in continuation of my earlier works. The film then becomes as much about cinema as it is about music.

KEY CREW

Cast	Moti Khan Manganiyar
Director	Pushpendra Singh
Producer	Pushpendra Singh, Heejung Oh
Cinematography	Ravi Kiran Ayyagari
Editing	Pushpendra Singh, Reema Kaur
Colorist	Sidharth Meer
Sound Design	Ajit Singh Rathore
Production	Marudhar Arts, Seesaw Pictures





DIRECTOR

PUSHPENDRA SINGH

ASHWATTHAMA

2017, feature, 120 minutes

Busan International Film Festival, New Currents

THE HONOUR KEEPER (LAJWANTI)

2014, feature, 63 minutes

Berlin International Film Festival, Forum

Born in Rajasthan, Pushpendra Singh studied at the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune (where he is now also a visiting faculty member) and at the 2011 Berlin Talent Campus. He began his career as an actor under theatre guru Barry John in Delhi. He later played a lead role in director Amit Dutta's Venice award-winning film AADMI KI AURAT AUR ANYA KAHANIYA (THE MAN'S WOMAN AND OTHER STORIES, 2009).

He also acted in Maximilian Linz's German feature ASTA UPSET, which screened at the 64th Berlin Film Festival. His debut feature as a director LAJWANTI (THE HONOUR KEEPER, 2014) premiered at the Berlin Film Festival. ASHWATTHAMA (2017), his second feature, premiered at Busan International Film Festival in the New Currents Section.

His latest film MARU RO MOTI (PEARL OF THE DESERT, 2019) premiered at International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) and JIO MAMI Mumbai Film Festival.



PRODUCER

HEEJUNG OH

Seesaw Pictures

LASH | Yoon-suk Jung

In Production | Korea, Hong Kong

2018 IDFA Central Pitch

LITTLE NOMAD | Min-ji Ma

In Production | Korea, France

Broadcast on ARTE, confirmed

DOK Leipzig Co-Pro Market

DRAGON WOMEN | Frederique de Montblanc

In Production | Korea, Belgium

Venice Film Festival Gap-Financing Market

Broadcast on RTBF, VRT confirmed

FOR VAGINA'S SAKE (2017) | Bo-ram Kim

2017 Seoul Independent Film Festival

2018 London Korean Film Festival

2018 Paris Korean Film Festival

Heejung Oh worked at a global consulting firm helping European companies enter Asian markets. With her passion for film, she decided to build bridges between the East and West. She was a sales agent specialized in the Asian market and started producing feature documentaries in 2016. She has been working with strong Asian talents and has expertise in theatrical distribution as well as international co-production. Her first feature documentary *For Vagina's Sake* (2018) has won many awards in Korea, and other titles such as *The Plan* (2017), *Intention* (2018) had big box office successes. The latest title, *Pearl of the Desert* (2019) is selected for the feature-length competition at IDFA. She also produced video art installations at National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. She is dedicated to challenging the form of cinema and exploring various platforms to meet international audiences.

FESTIVAL HISTORY

2019 Jio MAMI Mumbai Film Festival | India Gold Competition

2019 IDFA | Feature-length Competition

REVIEW

Film on a Manganiyar musician traces how the folk tradition survives and adapts to the digital age

Scroll - Nandini Ramnath

"Pushpendra Singh's seductive Pearl of the Desert is as much about cinema as it is about music. Singh winningly meshes together fiction and non-fiction for a hybrid documentary about the Manganiyar folk tradition. Pearl of the Desert has observational footage as well as dramatised scenes that trace the journey of teenager Moti Khan Manganiyar and his place in an undated and uninterrupted conversation with the joys and mysteries of the desert."

Moti is the pearl of this film as well of the folk music style he represents. Moti is inspired both by his legacy as well as the sand and the vegetation around him, and through his character, Singh points to the ways in which Manganiyari music survives as well as adapt to the digital age.

The film revisits Moti's early preference for singing over his school lessons, his musical training and his career highlights, which include performing at international events. Moti re-enacts some of his previous experiences, and the feeling of sliding between fiction and documentary is enhanced when characters speak in rhyme.

Pearl of the Desert was on Singh's mind when he was making his directorial debut with Lajwanti in 2014. For the adaptation of the Vijaydan Detha story about a married woman and her encounters with a pigeon breeder, Singh took the help of noted performer Anwar Khan Manganiyar. That was when he met Anwar's nephew Moti, who would "follow us around and sing", the filmmaker told Scroll.in.

"I wanted to explore the oral traditions of the Manganiyars, how music was passed on from one generation to the next, how they cultivate their tastes," Singh added. Moti becomes the vehicle for Singh's quest.

Moti is both playing himself as well as a typical representative of the current generation of the Manganiyars, who once depended on royal patronage for their survival. Pushpendra Singh was sensitive to the exoticised manner in which the Manganiyars are often represented, especially in films and tourist videos. Moti is a symbol both of his own ambitions as well as "the dilemmas of the new generation", the filmmaker said.

"Moti still carries the old traditions, but because of digital technology and television, he is also grappling with newer practices," Singh added.

Among Singh's inspirations was Mani Kaul's 1981 documentary *A Desert of Thousand Lines*, about rival music clans in Rajasthan. The initial title of Singh's film was *Shifting Lines of the Desert*. *Pearl of the Desert*, translated in Rajasthani as *Maru Ro Moti*, is the more apt title that captures the vision of both the protagonist and the filmmaker.

Singh drew on his formative years in Rajasthan for *Pearl of the Desert*. The Marudhar Arts and Seesaw Pictures co-production was screened in the Indian competition section at the recently concluded Mumbai Film Festival and is now headed to the prestigious International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam (November 20-December 1). *Pearl of the Desert* will be screened in the competitive feature-length section at IDFA.

Meanwhile, 41-year-old Singh has already wrapped up his next feature film, which explores folk storytelling traditions in the Bakharwal community in Kashmir.

<https://scroll.in/reel/941094/film-on-a-manganiyar-musician-traces-how-the-folk-tradition-survives-and-adapts-to-the-digital-age>

Pearl of the Desert

Shorted - Nimish K Sharma

“Pearl of the Desert is a documentary film set in the beautiful barren expanse of the Thar desert and is about a community of lower class Muslims Manganiyars. Historically marginalised and forced into depending on their patrons for sustenance, Manganiyars are musicians and are mostly found in weddings and other ceremonies, playing to an indifferent crowd.”

The Manganiyars cut their crops (opium usually) while singing songs passed down from rich oral traditions, while their children play kabaddi and sing Bollywood songs. It is clear as day that the traditions are endangered, of either being stunted or being forgotten. However the film does not take such a simplistic stance on the subject. Instead, it is focused on Moti Khan, a gifted young kid determined to make a career in music, despite all the social injustices and systematic oppression that afflicts the community.

The masterfully made film begins with Moti's mesmerising voice against the visual of a seemingly endless desert. He practices his singing with his father. Early in the film, he skips school to sing, only to be scolded by his father (in perfect meter and immaculate rhythm.)

The cinematically shot film would almost make you forget it is a documentary, and perhaps, it is not one in the traditional sense. It uses non-actors and employs interviews between them, but the camera itself is one of the most potent storytelling devices in the film. It regularly walks off to explore the surroundings, much like a Terrence Mallick film, enhanced further by an incomparable musicality.

The sound design of Ajith Rathore builds an unparalleled narrative out of rustic, folk tunes with shots of sceneries that must have inspired them generations ago. Pushendra Singh understands the community deeply, their conversations that happen in meter, their sensibility and their art. The intimacy created is one thoroughly earned. A good example here would be its gut-wrenching portrayal of a music school for the community, along with its sage-like caretaker, that runs without funds in Berna.

The scenery is sketched across the screen as potently as the music and poetry that ties up the film together. Loosely bound by a narrative and interesting title cards, the film explores with an austere discipline. Stories coalesce to form a narrative of the Manganiyars. There is no right way to protect a culture. The Manganiyars desperately keep the traditions alive through their own sheer will. Moti refuses to go to school to pursue music, despite his father's apprehensions, while his uncle plays at wedding ceremonies. The school at Berna tries to preserve age old songs in books as the text threatens to fade away from their yellow pages.

The film also explores art in freedom and art as a performance. Moti is an immaculate singer in the open, under the sky sitting on a mound in the desert but he sings off key in ensembles and studios. Pearl of the Desert's story is ultimately about music, and how it affects the Manganiyars.

They believe themselves to be destined to be subservient. Pride is a taboo for them, like many other artists. Perhaps it is so ingrained in them that they will never change their art, never revolutionise it. It may have preserved the art, but the artists never quite grew as much as they should have. And that is the quiet tragedy of the film.

<https://shorted.in/films/pearl-of-the-desert-manganiyar/>



**SEESAW
PICTURES**

Seesaw Pictures is a boutique company based in Seoul that produces and distributes artistic factual contents, closely working with young and seasoned filmmakers. The CEO, Heejung Oh has worked on feature documentaries that have strong track record both in domestic box office and prestigious international festivals. Seesaw Pictures participated Eurodoc 2018 and IDFA 2018 Central pitch to present its works and specializing in international co-production with European countries. Today, they are actively developing projects that appeal to wider audiences in the world.

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