



LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

# To Kill a Tiger

+ Q&A with director Nisha Pahuja and guests

## To Kill a Tiger

Directed by: Nisha Pahuja

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Executive Producers: Andy Cohen, Anita Lee, Atul Gawande, Andrew Dragoumis, Nisha Pahuja, Cornelia Principe

Producers: Cornelia Principe, Nisha Pahuja, David Oppenheim

Post-Production Coordinator: Pranay Nichani

Creative Consultant: Andy Cohen

Executive Consultant: Priya Doraswamy

Written by: Nisha Pahuja

Story Editor: Manfred Becker

Research: Nisha Pahuja

Archival Research: Erin Chisholm

Director of Photography: Mrinal Desai

Editors: Mike Munn, Dave Kazala

Assistant Editor: Pranay Nichani

Original Score: Jonathan Goldsmith

Music Editor: Jordan Kawai

Location Sound Recordist: Anita Kushwaha  
Canada 2022

125 mins

**Please note: This film may trigger those who have experienced physical child abuse**

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## Director's Statement

*To Kill a Tiger* actually started off as an entirely different film. That film, called *Send Us Your Brother*, was a more pointed and direct exploration of Indian masculinity. The focus of the original work was Mahendra Kumar, the women's rights activist who has a key, albeit minor, role in *To Kill a Tiger*.

Mahendra was leading a large-scale program in Jharkhand, where he and other activists worked with men and boys to change their ideas on gender. One of the men enrolled in that program was Ranjit.

As Ranjit's story unfolded, I began to feel that his odyssey could serve as the spine of the film, and that Mahendra's work and his personal life would add a larger context. Particularly compelling was the impact his work was having on two young boys – Ashish and Karan.

These storylines, with their own inherent richness and complexity, were meant to decode the 'why' behind the tragic rape at the centre of the film – a rape echoed over and over again in headlines that continually and numbingly come out of India. It's a 'why' that I've been grappling with as a filmmaker for over a decade. To understand how men and boys are created, specifically in Indian culture, was a way for me to cast light into shadows.

Letting *Send Us Your Brother* go so that this film could emerge was a gradual process. Editors Mike Munn and Dave Kazala and I felt strongly about the original approach, as did producers Cornelia Principe and David Oppenheim.

Eventually, however, we showed a five-hour assembly to two filmmakers we trust immensely – Manfred Becker and Nick Hector. Both agreed we had more than one film in the material and that Ranjit's story was far too dramatic to share space with the others.

To pivot after years of work was difficult but also liberating. The beauty of the new approach was its simplicity. By focusing on one story, we could paint a fuller picture of the other figures involved, namely the Ward Member, Ranjit's wife, Jaganti, and, most significantly, his daughter 'J.'

Although she's undoubtedly the victim of a brutal crime, 'J' is so much more. Her 13-year-old body is the battleground upon which an epic and age-old battle is being fought, one that has to do with power, honour, community and justice.

In demanding her legal rights from her country, in effect she demands change, and she asks for the restoration of a much deeper moral order rooted in the precept of 'do no harm.'

Unpacking the layers of this precept and understanding how to achieve its obvious and more nuanced meanings is perhaps a life-long study. But suffice to say, to uphold this order, the law necessarily plays a part, simply because it must – for, as people, we are all blind, albeit to varying degrees.

I would be remiss to bring up morality and not touch on the ethics of filming a rape victim, and what's more, a child. When I first heard about what happened to 'J', I decided to never ask her about that night. I also decided to not show her face – partly because that is what Indian law demands, and partly because it was the right thing to do.

Very early on, however, I realised that obscuring her while filming wouldn't be possible given our vérité-driven approach. I also didn't want to add to her

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**LIFF Opening Night: UK Premiere:**

**The Storyteller + Q&A with director Ananth Mahadevan**

Thu 22 Jun 18:00

**Too Desi Too Queer + Q&A**

Fri 23 Jun 18:00

**New Brit-Asian Shorts + Q&A**

Sat 24 Jun 20:20

**UK Premiere: Max, Min & Meowzaki**

Sun 25 Jun 15:00

**UK Premiere: Amar Colony**

Mon 26 Jun 18:10

**European Premiere: Call Me Dancer**

Tue 27 Jun 20:30

**Preview: The Effects of Lying + Q&A with**

**director Isher Sahota and producer Jon Tarcy**

Wed 28 Jun 18:00

**UK Premiere: To Kill a Tiger**

Thu 29 Jun 17:50



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sense of shame by resorting to more traditional ways of masking identity. So I decided I'd find a meaningful way to define her presence in the film in post, ideally through animation.

As I got deeper into the story, though, it became clear that both Indian *law* and Indian *culture* were united in seeing the rape as a 'shame' or 'loss of honour' for the victim. And so, the idea of hiding her face became abhorrent to me. I felt that by *not* showing her, I was in fact perpetuating the very prejudice I was critiquing. But who was I to impose this view on a child, and especially a child from an incredibly vulnerable community?

In the edit we tried several techniques to hide her face: different kinds of animation; a simple yet artistic blur; and even giving her a new 'face' through the same technology used in *Welcome to Chechnya*. None of these felt right. And how could they? Each one of them, as beautifully executed as they were, extinguished a bit of her humanity.

And so, I started bringing up the idea of revealing her identity, first with her parents, then slowly with her. We all felt however that the final decision had to be hers and hers alone. A few weeks later, Anita Kushwaha, intrepid sound recordist, flew to Ranchi and showed the family the fine cut of the film.

They Zoomed me once it was over, and as soon as I saw their faces, I knew. The film was a record of a very painful time in their lives – but it also captured the immense love and strength of an exceptional family who had nothing to be ashamed of, and nothing to hide. And so, 'J' agreed to be seen and to have her first name used in the film. By now, she was 18 years old.

Her decision was deeply moving for all of us who worked on *To Kill a Tiger*. I knew, however, that India might not be ready for such a bold statement from a young woman. In a country where more than 90 percent of rapes are unreported and less than 30 percent are successfully prosecuted, her decision to come forward was an especially brave choice. I wanted to make sure we pre-empted any possible fallout from that choice.

So, as a final act of caution, I am heeding the advice of Indian activists and asking the media and members of the public to refrain from using 'J's face or her name until the Indian release of the film – a release that will be planned carefully and strategically with the women's rights movement in that country. It's my hope that once you see the film, the desire to guard her privacy beyond the film's confines will feel like the absolute right thing to do.

*To Kill a Tiger* took eight years to make. It represents the amalgamation of many people's creative talents and commitment to the story – composer Jonathan Goldsmith, music editor Jordan Kawai, assistant editor Pranay Nichani, story editor Manfred Becker, executive producer Anita Lee and producers David Oppenheim and the formidable Cornelia Principe.

To the NFB I owe a deep and abiding gratitude for supporting this long and jagged journey and for their faith in me as a filmmaker. Thanks must also be given to our executive producers – Andy Cohen, Drew Dragoumis and Atul Gawande and to Mala Gaonkar – for their generosity, creativity and never saying no to watching a cut!

Lastly however, I must acknowledge four people on the team – editors Mike Munn and Dave Kazala, sound recordist Anita Kushwaha and my husband and DP Mrinal Desai. Their belief in this film and what it could be never wavered. We were given a gift and we knew that we owed Ranjit and his family our very best as creators and as people.

Nisha Pahuja, August 2022