



### Interview with Satyanshu & Devanshu Singh

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Satyanshu and Devanshu Singh's film *Tamaash* was awarded first place in the IAFOR FilmAsia Open Film Competition 2013 in the under forty minutes fiction category. The following interview was recorded in May 2014.

**Keywords:** Coming of age films, Indian cinema, Kashmir, Iranian cinema, Kiarostami, 2D vs 3D

**Tell me about yourselves and your paths to becoming filmmakers. Who were your greatest influences?**

We come from a middle-class family from a small town called Munger in Bihar, from a society where becoming a filmmaker would normally seem like a fantasy, not even a distant aspiration. However, our grandfathers encouraged us in different ways that today we feel contributed to our journey. Our maternal grandpa was a fine poet, musician, and used to put up plays that he wrote and directed. Our paternal grandpa encouraged us to learn music and to read, and every evening he used to tell us stories from Indian mythology. Plus, our Mum is a big film-buff and it was she who introduced us to the world of movies. Of course, it was limited to the mainstream Hindi films, but she has very good taste, and hence we learnt to appreciate films the way she did. We remember watching award ceremonies with her on TV, where we, little kids, used to predict the winners and thoroughly enjoy the show. Once that love affair with the movies started, films and filmmakers started influencing us in ways that were beyond anyone's imagination.

At first, Satyanshu pursued a conventional path and graduated to become a doctor while Devanshu graduated in Mass Media after moving to Mumbai, the city of cine-dreams. However, after finishing his studies, Satyanshu decided to let go of his job as an army doctor, because by then Devanshu had started working as an assistant director. Since July 2008, we have been based together in Mumbai, which we now consider our home, and have been living out our dream.

**Let's talk about the genesis of *Tamaash*. How did you conceive of the idea? Why did you set the film in Kashmir? Is the story autobiographical or personal on some level?**

When we decided to graduate from making amateur videos to making our first short film as directors, one of our friends, Omar, who is from Kashmir, suggested that we should film there. He promised to take care of the line production. Of course, it was an exciting idea. The very same night, Devanshu wrote a story about Anzar, a little boy who is not very good at his studies and who faces the unreasonable wrath of his peers. However, nothing happened with this for a couple of months as we got busy with other projects. Then one day, Satyanshu went to a screening of short films made by his students (at a Mass Media Graduation course), and that inspired both of us to go ahead with our film. The very next morning, Satyanshu came up with a magical twist to the story that turned it into a fable. By that evening the script was done, and more or less remained the same. Of course, the bond between the two brothers in the film, Anzar and Mufeed, is very much similar to the bond between us. We have always stood up for each other and have backed each other up even if it meant going against everyone else. A strong sense of companionship and mutual understanding is visible between the little kids in the film. We feel like we were pretty much the same, only, maybe, we looked more alike, almost like twins, unlike the two characters in the film. But the autobiographical connection ends there. That said, the theme, the importance of goodness and preserving innocence and fighting evil within, remains something both of us strongly believe in, and perhaps that was the guiding principle for us while making the film.

**Were you inspired by any classic childhood or coming-of-age movies?**

We were hugely inspired by the stories of Ruskin Bond. And of course, the influence of *Where is the Friend's Home* by Abbas Kiarostami is very visible in the film. We had also worked on Vikramaditya Motwane's *Udaan* (2010), which is also a coming-of-age film that also has a beautiful relationship between two brothers. So that did inspire us very significantly. But the specific influence ends here. A lot of people, after watching the film, say it reminded them of Majidi and other Iranian filmmakers, although it is possible that it is mainly the cultural set-up (Kashmir has a lot of similarities with Iran) that reminds them of those films. Cinematically, our Iranian connection begins and ends with Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's Home*, at least at the conscious level.

**The shots of Kashmir are extremely beautiful, but the indoors sequences are even more vivid. Tell us about the technical aspects of the shoot and edit that made this possible. What technical obstacles did you encounter shooting in such a remote location?**

Thanks for using such kind words about the film. To be honest, we feel we could not do justice to the beauty that was around us. Since the film was made with a lot of limitations (money, human resources and time) we could not capture Kashmir the way we wanted to. However, we are more or less happy with the way the indoor sequences appear in the film. The credit for that goes to our DP, Sahir Raza, who did a phenomenal job. All indoor sequences, except a few shots here and there, were shot at night, using artificial lights. At first, Sahir was horrified at how old and obsolete these lights were. But in Srinagar, that was the best we could do. And hiring lights from Delhi or Mumbai was beyond our budget. So it was Sahir's imaginative lighting that saved us. We also had no camera equipment except for a monopod. All the shots in the film, including the long tracking shots, running with the kids etc., were shot using that one monopod. Also, we were shooting on a very tight schedule and there were times when location scouting, setting up, and all other decisions relating to art design and props were done on the day of the shoot. We would shoot at one location while searching for the next. After finishing at the first, we quickly moved to the next, and then Devanshu would do the art design within a couple of hours as Sahir set up the lights. If it were not for the enormous and unconditional support of the locals (and we thank Omar for that), we could not have achieved such a beautiful visual design. Later, while editing the film, we knew that we had a "good looking" picture in our hands. But as we all know, during the edit you are so concerned with getting the right notes out of performances and crafting an impactful story that we hardly cared about the visual aesthetic of the film. Only when people started responding favourably to the rough cut, did we again start noticing the visual design of the film and the colours of the landscape.

**Was this your first experience of directing children? What challenges, if any, did this present? Did you encourage the children to improvise?**

The biggest challenge, of course, was that the actors were speaking in Kashmiri, a language we didn't understand. But ultimately this worked in our favor. Like most audiences for this film, we had to rely on the facial expressions of the actors, the mood they created with speech without necessarily understanding the words they

were saying. So, it was a boon in disguise not to know the language. Devanshu reached Kashmir prior to the shoot and did the casting of the kids, mainly with the help of Mr. Ashraf Nagoo, the actor who plays the father in the film. He trains young kids and he brought Zahid to us, who became our Anzar. Devanshu is very good with kids and he bonded with them really well, doing workshops and training them. Satyanshu met the actors for the first time on the set, because we had decided that Devanshu's decision would be final.

During the shoot, Satyanshu played the "bad cop", the hard taskmaster, while Devanshu took care of the kids. Bonding with them was so special that soon the little actors became our biggest source of entertainment, especially the little one playing Mufeed, who became everyone's pet. These kids stayed with us in the same hotel and by the end of the shoot they were more saddened than us by the fact that it had ended. They had tears in their eyes as they bid good-bye to us. That moment, when they could not even say "bye" because of their choked voices, will remain one of the most beautiful memories of our lives. It is because of special and unforgettable joys like this that working with kids, despite all the challenges, remains wonderful. However, we regret the fact that due to a lack of manpower and resources we could not really take care of the kids, and the other actors, in the way that we wanted to. We really hope, in our subsequent films, that we will be able to make things more comfortable for our actors.

**To what extent is the story a true portrayal of the lives and problems of Kashmiri children? Or is it more of a universal fairy-tale about childhood antics and fears? Is there any particular symbolism associated with the Tamaash and the "devil man" that non-native audience may not get?**

The film is very much a universal fable. As there is no specific Kashmiri connection, we do not think non-native audience miss out on anything. We, also, consciously stayed away from any political connotations. In fact, while shooting we made sure that not a single barbed wire is seen in the frame. However, we have also been criticised by some for that – for being consciously apolitical. On the other hand, some people have interpreted it in political ways and have surprised us with their reading of the film. We know that this is one pleasure afforded by the movies – to have audiences of different kinds react to the film in their own ways, and we do not mind that at all. It is amusing and inspiring. However, we feel that staying apolitical in this film was important for two purposes. First, the thematic thrust of the film is the insistence of goodness. Any distraction would have harmed this simple and universal emotion. Second, almost all films set in Kashmir are political. We asked this question – why can't a Kashmiri film be just a beautiful story? And hence we decided to try to do just this. We unapologetically accept that this film could have been set anywhere.

**Your film is polished and professional in terms of narrative and visual aesthetics. Was this the desired effect, or a "necessary evil" given the demands of contemporary movie-goers? (I.e. in a world with no commercial constraints, would you be more inclined towards avant-garde or experimental aesthetics?)**

Avant-garde and experimental cinema is very important and we deeply respect the courage and conviction of filmmakers operating in this space. However, both of us feel inspired to tell meaningful and entertaining stories, and believe that the form

should be based on the demands of the content, to make it most effective. Perhaps, we will always make films in the same way – by selecting a story that inspires us, that we feel will connect with every person in this world, and then find the aesthetic that best suits that story. Perhaps this is the reason why the film won awards like Audience Award at the River to River Film Festival and Children’s Jury Award at the International Children’s Film Festival India. Also, we prefer showing this film to a large audience, because we see them react to it collectively and strongly. Nothing is more fulfilling than seeing hundreds of people forgetting everything and laughing and enjoying the film you have made. Ironically, in India we face a completely different question. Since we made a short children’s film in Kashmiri, they ask us if we are going to make a mainstream film one day. But we completely understand their perspective, as we understand yours. In summary, we would say that we aspire to entertain and move people without selling our soul. All other classifications – avant-garde or mainstream, art or commercial, children or adult – are only incidental.



Satyanshu and Devanshu Singh on set in Kashmir.

**Did you screen the rushes and/or the final film to the actors? Did they respond favourably?**

All our actors are such humble and sweet people that they keep saying kind words to us. It seems all of them are happy to be part of this film. They have not seen many Kashmiri films that look like this. The kids are surprised – they never thought the film would shape up like this. But they do not care about the awards. Everytime we talk to them, they are only concerned about inviting us over to Kashmir. “When are you coming back?” they ask. “Now even the snow is melting away!”

**Congratulations on the many awards that you have won for *Tamaash*. Is this recognition important for future endeavours? What are your future plans and projects?**

When we made the film, it was mainly to learn filmmaking and convince ourselves and others that we can direct. Back then, we hardly thought that it would bring us so many awards. The IAFOR award at Osaka was the first we won. It was followed by the Children's Jury Award at Hyderabad. That award was special for two reasons: one, it was awarded by a jury comprising of children and two, there were sixteen films from all across the world in competition, including some big names like "The Amber Amulet" (winner at Berlin) and the Oscar nominated "Buzkashi Boys." A few weeks later we won the Audience Award at the River to River Florence Film Festival, followed by special screenings in Rome and Milan. Then, in February, Mumbai International Film Festival screened our film in seven different cities in India. We were competing with eighteen other films in the National Short Fiction category and we won three out of four awards (Best Cinematography, Best Sound, and Best Film). We were more than happy with these awards and thought *Tamaash* has earned enough appreciation, but perhaps the best was yet to come. In mid-April, the Government of India announced the National Film Awards, which are the highest honor for filmmakers in India. Our film achieved a Special Jury Mention in the Non-Feature Film category. We received the award from the President of India on the 3rd of May. We really hope that winning this award for our very first film will open doors to more opportunities for us and enable us to keep making the films we want to, because honestly, being able to do what one wants to is the greatest and the biggest reward one can hope for.



Satyanshu receiving the Special Jury Mention Award from President Pranab Mukherjee

**How do you feel about the current state of cinema, in particular the art film, in India and beyond?**

The current state of cinema in India and beyond is a very vast topic. We really hope that the lines separating art film and commercial cinema will blur – this will help everyone. As of now, we would say that, despite piracy, the decreasing attention span among viewers, competition from TV, the Internet, and new forms of entertainment, we believe and hope that cinema, in the form we have known and loved it, will survive, with its head held high.

**Finally, I see you have an interest in 3D filmmaking. Is this a positive development for filmmakers?**

We are definitely among those few directors in India who understand the fundamentals of 3D filmmaking, thanks to a program we were part of in 2011. However, we feel that 3D is only another tool to help tell your story. The 2D vs 3D debate is very similar to the colour vs black and white, or 16:9 aspect ratio vs Scope arguments. Even today, some exceptional black and white films are being made

around the world. We feel that 3D cinema will stay and get bigger. But it will only go beyond the status of a technological gimmick when its use begins to serve films' content. *Life of Pi* and *Hugo*, in our opinion, benefitted from the 3D revolution in deeper and long-lasting ways than the typical blockbuster. Films such as Wim Wenders' *Pina* have given 3D more credibility as an artistic tool and we look forward to more 3D films by masters and avant-garde filmmakers. We hope that one day we too will be able to afford to make a 3D feature film, whose content will show that 3D can go beyond technology and become an intrinsic part of a work of art.