



**CRAWLING ANGEL FILMS, MARUDHAR ARTS + ASR FILMS
Present**

ASHWATTHAMA

अश्वत्थामा

A FILM BY PUSHPENDRA SINGH

India - South Korea / 120 min / B&W/Color / Coming of Age / 1.85:1



SALES

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SYNOPSIS

After bandits raid their home killing his mother, 9-year-old Ishvaku is sent to his uncle's village to start a new life with his cousins. Still in shock and pain, Ishvaku tries to cope with his loss by entering an imaginary realm. But the difficulties and mysteries of reality won't let him go that easily.



INTERVIEW WITH PUSHPENDRA SINGH

What does the title ASHWATTHAMA mean?

Ashwatthama is a character from the famous Indian mythological story 'Mahabharat,' which most people in India consider to be true. Ashwatthama's blind, vengeful resolve to exterminate the Pandava clan led Lord Krishna to curse him with a doomed immortality, which would lead him to wander the earth suffering alone from his unhealing wounds for eternity. There are legends that he is seen wandering in the jungles even today. He wants to set free from the trap of his curse and keeps wandering from one place to another.

India has a strong connection to its ancient heritage, and myths are still considered to be the moral guides in the larger culture. So, the myth in the film is also connected to beliefs and rituals in life in the village. Ishvaku also feels trapped in the patriarchal set up of his family and imagines his freedom in a world among the myths.



This film is rooted in local beliefs and practices. What do you wish to convey through them?

ASHWATTHAMA is set in the region where I grew up. It is a region where life is rooted in local beliefs, rituals and practices. Myths and religious practices are intrinsic to their daily life. They not only seek solace in but

also draw inspiration from them. In that sense, I find myth and religion can be a source of peace or claustrophobia for some. I wanted to convey the same in the film.

Is there any cultural background you'd like to share that is relevant to the film?

Indian mythology is as diverse as the diversity of its people. There are thousands of gods and goddesses with defined roles according to beliefs in various regions in the country. The popularity of a particular god also varies from one region to another.

In Chambal, the harsh terrain, caste conflicts, and economic inequality have resulted in people turning into bandits and rebels. Local myths have developed around bandits, and fear of attack looms large over people. People even sleep with guns beside themselves. Revenge murders and looting to keep gangs strong are very common. People find solace in praying to certain gods, such as Lord Hanuman, the protector from distress and trouble. Lord Shiva, the god of destruction, is worshipped to avoid his wrath. He is also considered very generous and provides for the wishes of his worshippers easily. He is an ascetic who is surrounded by snakes and scorpions and various dangerous insects. Lord Krishna was born in the same region, so he is also very popular. His love legends are popular too and like the sufi tradition many devote themselves to him as his lovers.



What was the starting point for the film, and why did you want to tell

this story?

I have been fascinated with films of Victor Erice and the idea of the power of a story in his film SPIRIT OF THE BEEHIVE stayed with me. I also wanted to explore that from my own life. Memories, both acquired and real, inspired this film, which is in some ways autobiographical.

I was sent to a boarding school during my childhood and always wanted to run away and become free. During my winter vacations, as other kids in the village went to school, I felt lonely at home. My mom sent me to her village (the same one where I shot the film). All the characters in the story are from my own maternal family, and even some of the events are based on their lives. My elder uncle collected scorpions and worshiped different deities in his room. He once chased me, and out of fear I fell sick. I fondly remember the stories narrated to me by my cousin, aunts and mom during my childhood. Once I went to the school in Chambal with my cousins, and the walk through the ravines fascinated me. I have dedicated the film to the memory of my deaf and speechless cousin.



Why did you choose to shoot the film mostly in black and white with select shots in color?

I wanted to set the story in a timeless world which could give a feeling of once upon a time, a memory. I therefore went with the black and white aesthetic for creating that world. I feel that digital colour filmmaking gives an effect of immediacy. I used colour in parts to disrupt that world and delve into dreams and fears of the child. In India, religious colours play

such a huge part in our life. If the story has a sense of once upon a time, the dreams and fears connect not to something which is in the past, but to which is immediate and now. The fears in that sense represent not only fears of the child but of people even now. That is why I decided to use colour for those parts.

How did you cast the children in the film? What was your process of working with your actors?

I cast the children from the village where we shot the film. I observed the village children whenever I went there for recce and pre-production and finally shortlisted them on the basis of their looks and energy. I did a workshop for a couple of hours a day before the shoot to open them up. The schedule of the shoot was kept very light at the beginning to familiarize them with the process and how rigorous it can be. As we were shooting on location, we created real environments and situations (rituals for examples) that the actors just had to be and participate in. That way, they never felt that they were acting.



Where is the film made, and what was your experience filming on location?

The film was shot in the Chambal ravines near Agra district in Uttar Pradesh, just bordering the states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. I grew up in the area so the location was familiar to me.

Due to the terrain, I was afraid it would be very difficult to shoot the film there. But the people were helpful and even the administration helped. Luckily, there were local state elections at the same time and the security in the area was beefed up. That helped us in not worrying about traveling late at night sometimes. We scheduled our shoot keeping in mind the movement of people, and most of the scenes in the ravines were shot in flashes over different days so as not to draw attention to disturbing elements.

The villagers were very helpful. I knew they would be very curious, so I scheduled public scenes initially and they soon became fed up with the shooting rituals. Many were also cast in the film, and we adjusted our shooting schedules according to their daily routine. Villagers would finish their daily chores and eagerly participate in the shoot afterwards. Also, the setting was very real so they never felt they were acting. They were in fact grateful to us for organising the religious song events and participated with full devotion in them.

Your first film is very different from this one in some basic aspects: it's very colourful and half the length. Do you see the films as different or related, and how so?

Both. My first feature is based on a folk tale, and the aesthetic is centered around the romantic traditions from Indian art and folk culture. That is why the film is in colour. Ashwatthama is stylistically different and has both representational and presentational elements in the film. Memory is also a big part of it. In my artistic practice, I want to focus on the arts and culture of a locality along with the story of the film. In that sense, both my films share a similarity: they are rooted in the traditions of the places where I have shot them. I want to bring traditions of storytelling from India into my films too.

Do you have any upcoming projects in the works?

I'm working on a musical documentary for which I received the Asian Cinema Fund- Asian network of documentary grant from Busan Film Festival last year. This film should be ready by next year. I'm also adapting a folk tale by Vijay Dandetha on whose story I based my first feature. I intend to shoot it in the latter half of next year.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Pushpendra Singh studied at the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, where he is now also a visiting faculty member. 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 *THE MAN'S WOMAN AND OTHER STORIES (AADMI KI AURAT AUR ANYA KAHANIYA, 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 *THE HONOUR KEEPER (LAJWANTI, 2014)* premiered at the Berlin Film Festival. He is also working on his documentary *SHIFTING LINES OF THE DESERT* (a recipient of Busan's Asian Network of Documentary Fund) set in the Thar desert, Rajasthan, about an extended family of low caste Muslim musicians struggling to maintain their identity as musical inheritors of their Hindu upper caste patrons.



ASHWATTHAMA, his second feature, will premiere at Busan International Film Festival in the New Currents Section.

FILMOGRAPHY

ASHWATTHAMA

2017, feature, 120 minutes

- Busan International Film Festival, New Currents

THE HONOUR KEEPER (LAJWANTI)

2014, feature, 63 minutes

- Berlin International Film Festival, Forum

CAST & CREW

Cast

Aryan SINGH, Lovely SINGH, Sangita KUMARI, Chitra SHARMA, Pushpendra SINGH, Anju SINGH, Pravendra SINGH

Crew

Director	Pushpendra SINGH
Screenwriter	Pushpendra SINGH
DoP	Ravi Kiran AYYAGARI
Art & Production Design	Amrendra SRIVASTAV
Editor	Sanjay TUDU
Sound & Music	Ajit Singh RATHORE
Producers	Sanjay GULATI, Pushpendra SINGH, Ajit Singh RATHORE
Production	Crawling Angel Films, Marudhar Arts, ASR Films
International Sales	Asian Shadows

