

GRAND JURY AWARD

NEWFEST

The New York
LGBTQ+ Film Festival

2024

AUDIENCE AWARD

NEWFEST

The New York
LGBTQ+ Film Festival

2024

**SLO
FILM
FEST**

WINNER
PIONEER AWARD
BEST
NARRATIVE
SHORT FILM
2025

SAN LUIS OBISPO INDEPENDENT FILM FESTIVAL

Audience Award - Best Short

Inside Out

Seattle LGBTQ+ Film Festival

2025

JURY NOMINEE
**AUSTIN FILM
FESTIVAL**
2024

AESHA SOHIL, KAMAL BATH, KUNDAN KUMAR, RICHABALYA, PAVNA DANDOKHAN
KABOOLI SHARNA, LALITA SAI, LEELA KUMAR, JYOTI KUMARAT, KETKUMA RASTRI, KIRAN CHHAR, PRANAV SAINI
DIRECTOR: RAJESH SHARMA, EDITOR: KALYAN KUMAR, PRODUCTION DESIGNER: KALYAN KUMAR, MUSIC: ADITI KAPUR
SOONER PRODUCTIONS, SHAKTI EPI ART PRODUCTIONS, KALYAN PRODUCTIONS, JULIAS GLOW, KARSHAKITAR, S. ELLIOTT RODI
PRODUCTION: KALYAN KUMAR, SHAKTI EPI ART PRODUCTIONS, KALYAN PRODUCTIONS, JULIAS GLOW, KARSHAKITAR, S. ELLIOTT RODI



LOGLINE

American teen Neelu feels like a fish out of water amidst preparations for her sister's wedding in Delhi until she forges a brief and unexpected connection with Zeyb, a quiet sari store clerk who moonlights as an internet drag queen.



SYNOPSIS

On a trip to India for her sister's wedding, young American tomboy Neelu feels out of place.

Her mother and sister prepare in a frenzy, poke fun at her boyish looks, and expect her to wear a sari like everyone else. When they shop at a Delhi sari store, Neelu encounters Zeyb, a quiet salesman who models saris on the floor for customers. Among the other salesmen, Zeyb is teased, withdrawn, and obedient, but every night before closing up he seems to steal saris from the store shelves. When Neelu is sent back to the store after hours on an errand, she stumbles upon the reason for his secret: Zeyb's leads a clandestine life as an internet drag queen. Neelu's shock gives way to awe and curiosity, and as she probes deeper, the two outsiders discover an unexpected connection that helps them better understand themselves.



JULIA S. GOUW SHORT FILM CHALLENGE

FOR ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER
WOMEN AND NON-BINARY FILMMAKERS

ABOUT THE PROJECT

“Zari” (pronounced ZUH-ree) is a cross-cultural, queer, coming-of-age short film set in and around a Delhi sari store amidst the preparations for a wedding. Written and directed by filmmaker Shruti Parekh, “Zari” was one of four winners of the prestigious [Julia S. Gouw Short Film Challenge](#) presented by [CAPE](#), an Asian American film organization in Hollywood, and [Janet Yang Productions](#), helmed by Janet Yang, President of the Academy of Motion Pictures.

WRITER/DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

“Zari” is a story of queer expression and kinship rooted in a quintessentially South Asian context. As an Indian American woman, I have long been fascinated by the workings of the typical Indian sari store on my trips back to India with family. The sari is a quintessential Indian woman’s garment, but Indian sari stores are almost always run by men. In these bustling spaces, gender norms are both upheld and, curiously, subverted as salesmen often drape the saris on their own bodies to show them off. Men modeling saris in these stores is a normalized phenomenon in a largely patriarchal and homophobic country—and yet, the sari store is also the site of frenzied wedding shopping, through which gender norms are stringently upheld. In this strange and liminal space, I wanted to explore the connection between two outsiders learning how to express their gender and be their true selves.

“Zari” was filmed on location in Delhi, India. This was of utmost importance, not only for the sake of authenticity, but because I felt an Indian cast and crew would best understand how to capture the nuances of Indian society. Here, queerness is stigmatized while being undeniably present, both through longstanding third-gender communities and a modern queer movement. I wanted to explore these contradictions from a uniquely cross-cultural perspective that embraces the complexity and shows the many little ways we learn to subvert norms, find our community, and be true to ourselves.

TEAM BIOS



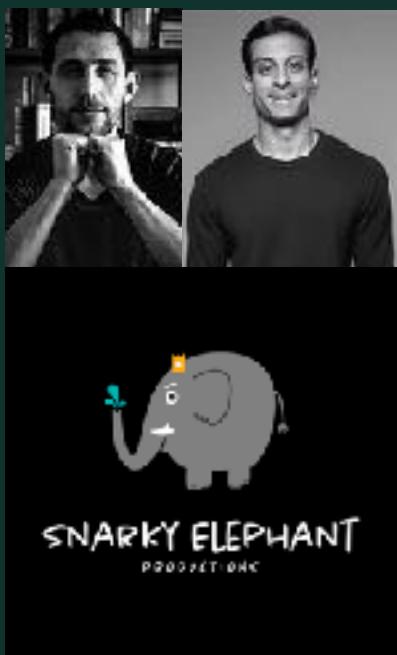
SHRUTI PAREKH Writer, Director, Producer

Shruti is an Indian American filmmaker who tells intimate and incisive stories of life on the margins of society. Her award-winning work spans fiction, documentary, journalism, and animation. Most recently, she won the prestigious CAPE/Janet Yang Productions Julia S. Gouw Short Film Challenge to produce her short film "Zari." Shruti's previous short film, "Esperanza," won Best Narrative Short at the Portland Film Festival, Best Student Short at Ojai Film Festival, and Best Screenplay at Reel Sisters of the Diaspora Film Festival. Shruti has a BA from Brown University and an MFA in Directing from UCLA, where she received the Jack Nicholson Distinguished Student Director Award and the Edie and Lew Wasserman Film Production Fellowship.



KAJRI AKHTAR Producer

Kajri is an LA-based filmmaker with over a decade of experience in leading Indian and international film projects. From cinematography for projects like *Satyamev Jayatey* and UNICEF to working on Bollywood films, Kajri's lens captures deeply resonating stories. As a producer, she collaborated with industry luminaries like Spike Lee, Bharat Sikka, Manish Arora, and Larry Smith, working on campaigns for brands such as Google, BMW, and Coca-Cola. Kajri founded Icchi the Cat, a production company that negotiates space for women in film with impactful stories and content for global brands like Apple, Pepsi, and Huawei. Her films have premiered at the Cleveland Film Festival, Seattle International Film Festival, DOC NYC, and CAAM Fest.



ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS Neal Ludevig and Vishaal Reddy, Snarky Elephant Productions

Neal and Vishaal are founders of Snarky Elephant Productions, a USA-based company focused on producing scripted and unscripted content about and by groups underrepresented in the film industry. Together, they created the acclaimed queer web series, "Insomnia," currently on Revry and featured on Elle India. Their upcoming feature film *Rangoli*, about a drag queen who must contend with his estranged mother, is an SFFilm Rainin Grant Winner, a participant in the LES Film Festival's The Stay Indie Project, and was a finalist for the 2022 Sundance Producers Fellowship as well as the Tribeca Film Festival's "Untold Stories" grant.



LINE PRODUCER

Pranav Sahni, India Take One Productions

Pranav Sahni is a partner at India Take One Productions (ITOP) and his journey spans over a decade with expertise in international feature films, documentaries, and commercials. Pranav leads the charge at ITOP, striving to establish an unrivaled platform for foreign producers, production houses, and studios to film in India. Pranav's repertoire boasts a string of iconic projects—from "Lion" starring Dev Patel to "The White Tiger" with Priyanka Chopra to Ava DuVernay's "Origin" Pranav has been an indispensable force at ITOP, earning immense acclaim and recognition worldwide.



SANJEEV MAURYA

Casting Director

Sanjeev Maurya is an acclaimed Casting Director from India. He has worked with renowned directors like Ava DuVernay, Peter Weir, Mira Nair, Ryan Murphy, Maneesh Sharma, Ramin Bahrani and Pan Nalin. He started out working as an Associate on Hollywood films including 'Eat, Pray, Love' and 'The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel.' He further collaborated with the renowned Casting Director Dilip Shankar on such films as Life of Pi (2012), Angry Indian Goddesses (2015), The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2012), and A Suitable Boy (2021). Sanjeev went on to become Casting Director for "Origin" (2024), "Trial By Fire" (2023), "Class" (2023), "Gulmohar" (2023) and "Skater Girl" (2021).



ADITYA KAPUR

Director of Photography

Aditya Kapur is an accomplished cinematographer from Kolkata who has worked on a wide range of films, long form series, music videos and commercials. Credits include Netflix's "Choona" and "Masaba Masaba," music videos for the popular Indian musician Prateek Kuhad and indie pop band Parekh & Singh, and commercials for Facebook, Cadbury, Masterchef India and more. Aditya is based in Mumbai.



MAUSAM AGGARWAL

Production Designer

Mausam is an Illustrator and Production Designer with a BFA in Applied Arts and a Masters degree in Art Direction and Production Design with over five years of experience working in the Indian film industry. She has worked on many short films and six feature length films, all from diverse regions in varied languages. Many have had their world premieres at prestigious festivals, including "Fire in the Mountains" at Sundance Film Festival in 2021 and "Nasir," which won an award at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam. Mausam was selected as a participant of Berlinale Talents 2024.



LEAD CAST BIOS



AESHA SONI
“Neelu”

Aesha is a young Indian actor based between New York City and Ahmedabad, India whose portfolio spans genres ranging from horror, action, coming of age, and culturally significant narratives. At 16, she achieved notable recognition, winning Best Performance, Audience Choice, and four other awards for “Wendigo” a self-produced short film submitted to New Hampshire film festivals. She recently played the lead role in an independent post-apocalyptic feature film called “Jagi,” now in post-production. Aesha is currently in production for her upcoming project, where she takes on a supporting role in a Hulu series pilot titled “Open Gym.”



KAMAL BATRA
“Zeyb”/“Zari”

Kamal is a Mumbai-based Indian actor and screenwriter. For over three years, he performed and explored film acting with the veteran Indian actor Bhupesh Kumar Pandya in a tight-knit actors' group first formed in 2018. He harbors a distinctive passion for cinematic realism. In 2021, he initiated his writing career by assisting Siddharth Chauhan and ultimately co-writing the screenplay for one of Siddharth's upcoming features. He hails from Haryana, India and is an arts graduate in Philosophy Honors from University of Delhi.



CAST

NEELU
AESHA SONI

ZEYB/ZARI
KAMAL BATRA

RITA
RICHAKALRA

PREM
KUNDAN KUMAR

LALITA
PADMA DAMODARAN

NANDITA
HARRDEEP

CREW

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY
SHRUTI PAREKH

PRODUCTION DESIGNER
MAUSAM AGGARWAL

MUSIC SUPERVISOR
SONNY SINGH

PRODUCED BY
KAJRI AKHTAR
SHRUTI PAREKH

COSTUME DESIGNER
HUMA Z. KHAN

LINE PRODUCER
PRANAV SAHNI,

INDIA TAKE ONE PRODUCTIONS

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
CAPE
JANET YANG PRODUCTIONS
JULIA S. GOUW
KAJRI AKHTAR
SHRUTI PAREKH

CASTING DIRECTOR (INDIA)
SANJEEV MAURYA

1ST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
CHARUL PATIL

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS
SNARKY ELEPHANT
PRODUCTIONS

CASTING DIRECTORS (USA)
RYAN MAHARAJ
KEERTANA SASTRY

EDITORS
RAJDEEP MITRA
SHRUTI PAREKH

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
ADITYA KAPUR

SOUND RECORDIST
LOHIT BHALLA

RE-RECORDING MIXER
AJ PYATAK, TUNNEL POST

HAIR AND MAKEUP ARTISTS
ALIYA DEBBARMA &
PALLAVI KAPOOR

COLORIST
SIDHARTH MEER,
BRIDGE POSTWORKS

MUSIC COMPOSER
DAVID SHARMA



AWARDS & NOMINATIONS

- Grand Jury Award & Audience Award, NewFest
- Best Narrative Short, Ojai Film Festival
- Excellence in Short Filmmaking, iSAFF Canada
- Best Director, Kolkata Shorts
- Audience Award, San Luis Obispo Film Festival
- Audience Award, Inside Out Toronto
- Honorable Mention, Woodstock Film Festival
- Nominated - Best Narrative Short, Austin Film Festival

PRESS

- [Deadline: Year 2 Julia S. Gouw Challenge Winners](#)
- [IndieWire: NewFest Announces 2024 Awards](#)
- [SF Bay Times - LGBTQ+ Films at CAAMFest](#)
- [New India Abroad: Interview With Director + Producer](#)

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Runtime: 19:16 mins

Aspect Ratio: 1.85

Countries of Production: USA & India

Language: English & Hindi with subtitles

CONTACT INFO

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