



la Biennale di Venezia

Biennale College
Cinema

La BIENNALE DI VENEZIA
present
Secrets of the Mountain Serpent
a film by Nidhi Saxena



LOGLINE

Caught between duty and desire, lonely, married women in a hill town find themselves drawn to a mysterious stranger who may be more than human.

Synopsis

In a small hill town in Uttarakhand, India, where young men from the mountains migrate to join the Indian army, an ancient folklore looms about an old snake residing in a river who waits for a promised bride. Centuries later, as the Kargil War rages in the backdrop, Barkha (35), a young teacher whose husband is away at war, finds herself increasingly dissatisfied with her life. This is not the story of just one woman but rather thousands of women, elderly and children left behind while the young men are absent fighting in the war. However the arrival of Manik Guho, an engineer and writer, disrupts the status quo, coinciding with strange occurrences. Women begin to see snakes in unlikely places, and many, including Barkha, feel a stirring of long-suppressed desires. As Barkha's attraction to Manik deepens, she questions her marriage, her desires, and her place in society. Other women in the town experience similar awakenings. The narrative builds to a surreal climax as the women of the town, driven by newfound courage and desire, enter a forbidden river. As they float away, they recite poetry that gives voice to their longing, desires, and newfound sense of freedom. It's left ambiguous whether Manik is truly the incarnation of the ancient snake, or if he serves as a catalyst for the women's collective awakening.





Director's Statement

Whenever war is spoken of, the spotlight falls only on those who fought at the borders. But what of those who were left behind? This story belongs to the women of a village emptied of its young men.

Emotionally, I see this film unfolding in three parts: loneliness, yearning, and desire. Every creative choice I've made moves in the direction of these emotions.

I tried to portray isolation and absence through melancholic compositions, using wide static frames and sound design. Towards the end of the film, when the women begin to feel free and experience a deep desire to be loved and seen, I started to move closer. In the beginning, we used straight cuts, but later, to convey sensuality and the urgency of desire, I used dissolves for shot transitions.

This film is deeply rooted in Indian soil. Like an Indian miniature painting, even the mythical feels real—breathing across the screen.

Even when the tones are muted, the colours remain—sunlight finds its place between shadows.

Nature here is not a backdrop, but a character.

Forests, rivers, birds, snakes—each is a living metaphor.

Desire wears many skins in the film.



Run Time : 107 mins

Language : Hindi

Aspect

Ratio : 16:9

Camera : Sony Burano

Zeiss Super Speed

Country : India

Italy

Sri Lanka

World : Venice International

Premiere Film Festival (2025)

Section : Biennale College

Cinema



Key crew

Writer-Director Nidhi Saxena
Produced by Vimukthi
 Jayasundara
Executive Producers Richa Chadha
 Ali Fazal
 Rahul Saxena
Cinematographer Vikas Urs
Editor Saman Alvitigala
Color Bridge Postworks
Sound Design Neeraj Gera
Production Design Avni Goyal
Lyrics Ram Kumar Singh

Cast

Manik Adil Hussain
Barkha Trimala Adhikari
Sudhir Pushpendra Singh

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Nidhi Saxena

Director

Nidhi Saxena is an Indian filmmaker whose work delves into human vulnerability and existential themes through a poetic, meditative lens. With a formal background in sculpture and fine arts, she transitioned to cinema after training at the Film and Television Institute of India. Her cinematic voice—deeply influenced by auteurs like Tsai Ming-Liang and Apichatpong Weerasethakul—often transcends conventional narratives to explore abstraction and the spiritual.

Nidhi is the first Indian woman director to receive both the **Asian Cinema Fund (Post-Production)** and a **grant from Biennale College Cinema**. Her debut feature, **Sad Letters of an Imaginary Woman**, premiered at the 2024 **Busan International Film Festival** and later screened at festivals across North America, Australia, India, and other countries. Her second feature, **Secret of a Mountain Serpent**, developed at the **Venice Biennale College Cinema Script Lab**, received production support and is set to premiere at the **Venice Film Festival** in August 2025. She is currently developing her third feature.

She has led several acclaimed independent projects and social storytelling initiatives, including a powerful program for the UN Population Fund, where she trained tribal adolescent girls in Rajasthan to become filmmakers and express their lived realities through cinema. As a writer, she has authored two children's books: **Chidiya Ud**, about a boy who believes he is a bird, and **Bulbul-e Paristan**, a poetic tale filled with wonder and longing. Both works reflect her deep love for imagination, memory, and the unseen worlds that shape us.



Vimukthi Jayasundara

Filmmaker • Producer

Vimukthi Jayasundara is a Sri Lankan filmmaker and **Caméra d'Or winner at the Cannes Film Festival 2005** for *The Forsaken Land*. Known for his meditative, visually poetic cinema, his films have screened at top international festivals: *Between Two Worlds* (Venice 2009), *Chatrak / Mushrooms* (Directors' Fortnight, Cannes 2011), and *Sulanga Gini Aran / Dark in the White Light* (Locarno 2015). His government-backed feature *Thundenek* (2018) explored post-war Sri Lankan identities through a triptych narrative.

He served on the **Berlinale GFFF Best First Feature jury (2022)** and is an educator—having been a directing mentor at **Busan International Film Festival's Asian Film Academy (2016)** and head of the **Colombo Film & Television Academy** in Sri Lanka.

As a producer, Jayasundara has supported bold cinematic voices, including Indian filmmaker **Nidhi Saxena**. He co-produced her debut feature *Sad Letters of an Imaginary Woman* (Busan 2024), and their second collaboration *Secrets of the Mountain Serpent* was selected for **Venice Biennale College Cinema 2025**. He also produced *The Red Suitcase* (2022), which premiered in the **Orizzonti section at the Venice Film Festival** and received international acclaim.

Jayasundara began as a writer and film critic, making three shorts before 17. His early works *The Land of Silence* (FID Marseille 2002) and *Empty for Love* (Cannes 2003) established him as a visionary filmmaker exploring memory, trauma, and existential solitude with experimental form and depth.



The End