

FILM REVIEW

To Kill a Tiger: How to reclaim an ordinary life

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To Kill A Tiger, Executive Producers: Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Dev Patel, Mindy Kaling, Rupri Kaur, Director: Nisha Pahuja, Hindi, 2 hours 8 minutes, Oct 2023, Netflix release 2024

The best way to view a film is without expectation or prejudice; one's responses unframed by any prior judgment wafting in through conversations with those who have already viewed it. But in these hyperconnected times, it's hard to come by any cultural product without some sense of what has been said about it. So, that's my disclaimer. As I opened the streaming platform and clicked on the black arrow signalling "Play", I knew it would not be an easy watch. I was aware of the many glowing reviews, as also of the many red flags that had been raised around questions of consent, of representation, of intrusion.

I took a deep breath and tried to will away all those voices in my head as the film began to roll.

To Kill A Tiger, a documentary feature written and directed by Nisha Pahuja, a Canadian film maker of Indian origin, opens with an idyllic pastoral frame. Day breaks gently, somewhere in rural India. A woman walks a goat in the fields; a man works his hoe; two young girls wheel a bicycle down a dusty track between mud-brick huts; a man chews on a neem twig, staring balefully at the camera, as if to ask, "What are you doing here?"

As we approach the outer yard of a small hut, we hear humming in the background and approach the inside, where a young girl carefully, skilfully, braids a bright orange ribbon into her hair in an impossibly intricate arrangement. Her father's voice, in the background, recalls the joy he felt at the birth of his oldest child, a much-desired daughter. "Every day, I would

tell her to play, and come home at a certain time," says Ranjit. "That day I didn't."

The camera then pulls back to an aerial shot of the village as a newsreader reports that a 13-year-old girl has been gangraped in Bero, Jharkhand, and the three assailants, all young men from the village have been taken into custody. "The rate at which reports of violence against women keep coming in," the announcer continues, "it's time we ask ourselves, is there something fundamentally wrong with our country?"

Unfortunately, this is a question we are all too familiar with. But in *To Kill A Tiger*, Pahuja finds a small glimmer of hope in one family's response in the aftermath of violence.

For the next two hours, the film follows Ranjit's long and tedious struggle for justice, fighting not only the legal battle but the even bigger challenge of community resistance. The villagers, as well as the *mukhiya* (headman), would rather Ranjit compromise, and keep the matter within the village. "You belong to the community," he says. "You have to figure out how to remain a part of it." There is pressure to drop the charges and find a way to "save the honour of the village", with one suggestion being to have the girl married to one of the perpetrators.

Despite increasing hostility from the village, Ranjit and his wife, aided by a Ranchi-based NGO Srijan, decide to persist with the case. It involves multiple trips to the city, dealing with the bewildering bureaucracy and apathy of the district court system, often leaving his fields untended and incurring losses he can barely afford. There are times when the bottlenecks and bribes push him close to the edge of giving up, but his daughter's courage and will — and the persistence of the young social workers from Srijan — keep him going.

Pahuja and her director of photography, Mrinal Desai, work the camera like an invisible eye, capturing the everyday dynamics of family as well as the reflective moments of solitude — of the survivor (given the pseudonym "Kiran" in the film), Ranjit, and Jaganti, his wife. The crew remains an unobtrusive presence, with Pahuja's voice intervening only occasionally, and then faintly, to ask a question. There is one point in the film where a group of villagers enter Ranjit's home, where the crew is filming, and confront them, asking how long they will continue to come, demanding that they "stop all this" and "take your things and go". But this is clearly too important a story for Pahuja to stop documenting.

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As one Srijan worker notes, “A father fighting for his daughter in a rape case — this is no small thing. This is no ordinary family that has chosen to fight this.” Indeed, among the most remarkable elements in the film is the strength of the child and her parents, that comes through in their silence, in the way they continue with the details of living. Even as you listen to Kiran describe the horrible events of that night, you can hear her refusal to be marked by it. “It was like giving a final exam,” she says, after giving her testimony in court. “What will you do now?” asks Pahuja. “I’ll run around, I will eat mangoes,” says Kiran.

Pahuja and her team shot the film over three years after the incident occurred — between 2016 and 2018 — but waited another four years to complete the production. At the time of shooting, the survivor was just 13, but as noted in the opening frames, she is now 20, and it is with her consent that she was shown in the film. In these frames we are also asked not to record or share images of the survivor or other children shown in the film. Pahuja has been quoted in interviews with multiple media outlets that obscuring the survivor would perpetuate the very prejudices they were trying to address. However, this decision to show the survivor has received criticism from some child rights activists and media critics, on the grounds that the law explicitly prohibits revealing the identity of survivors of sexual violence. Section 23 of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POSCO) Act bars any disclosure of the name or image of the child, other than in special instances, with the permission of a special court “competent to try the case”. The law is ambiguous about the rights of the survivor to consent to her identity being revealed once she attains majority. On the other hand, the principle of “the best interests of the child”, a global legal framework adopted by UNICEF and other child-rights organisations, holds that children must be recognised as individuals, and their voices too must be taken on board

when making decisions affecting them. In this view, Kiran’s consent to being seen and heard may perhaps be understood as a way of claiming her space and her desire not to be marked as a victim

Arguably, the film’s impact draws in significant measure from Kiran’s presence; her girlish —indeed childlike — ways of painting her nails, doing her hair, and the ways in which she goes about her chores — making rotis, mashing potatoes, cleaning rice — allow us to see what it takes to reclaim the ordinariness of life in the wake of trauma. It also brings home to us — the city-dwelling middle classes — what the act of reclaiming ordinariness looks like without the trappings of privilege. This is not to say that there is no acknowledgment of the kind of deep trauma engendered by the experience of rape. At one point, Kiran talks about how she too would like to fall in love and marry when she grows up, and wonders how she will then talk about what happened to her.

Admittedly, Pahuja and her team could not have captured this kind of footage without developing a deep level of trust with their protagonists, even if this was mediated by the work of Srijan Foundation to begin with. While one may raise concerns about the manner in which consent was obtained to film the children — Kiran and her siblings — to begin with, in 2016/17, what has emerged is an account imbued with sensitivity and empathy.

By avoiding any overt commentary other than that folded into the narrative structure of the documentary, the film allows Ranjit and Kiran to remain central to their own story, and the story itself is about how resilience and courage can beat the most extreme odds, particularly in the face of entrenched social and cultural norms. In a country where a rape is reported every 20 minutes, we need such stories.