

Interview: Filmmaker Prashant Bhargava Soars With Debut ‘Patang’

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CHICAGO – The exhilarating spectacle of kite flying holds a universal appeal. It allows mere mortals to experience the sensation of scraping the surface of the heavens. During the Uttarayan festivities in the Indian city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, a billowing canopy of color and movement hovers over the rooftops as citizens come together to participate in the country’s largest kite festival.

This annual event provides the backdrop for Chicago native Prashant Bhargava's visually arresting, marvelously vibrant debut feature, “Patang” (“The Kite”). Effortlessly blending non-actors with some of India’s most renowned performers, “Patang” tells the story of Jayesh (Mukkund Shukla), a businessman whose trip to reconnect with his estranged family turns out to be both nostalgic and bittersweet. He’s welcomed with open arms by his sister-in-law, Sudha (Seema Biswas of “Water”), but is unable to escape the deep-seated resentments of his nephew, Chakku (Nawazuddin Siddiqui).

Meanwhile, Jayesh’s daughter, Priya (Sugandha Garg), entertains the flirtations of a local man, Bobby (Aakash Maheriya), who takes to the skies like a kite-wielding warrior. Hollywood Chicago spoke with Bhargava about his background in graffiti art, his attempts to capture the personalities of the kites and his latest Chicago-set project, “Highlands.”

HollywoodChicago.com: Has your background in graffiti art influenced your work as a filmmaker?

Prashant Bhargava: Very much so. I began doing graffiti when I was 12 years old on the South Side of Chicago at Kenwood. I was a little bit shy in terms of tagging up, but I was known for my piece book in the city, and that’s where you do a lot of the drawing. I used to steal some spray paint and got caught a couple of times. I was also doing a lot of math, and it was through hip hop and graffiti that I started to get in touch with my own culture. It also sparked my interest in the arts. So when I went to Cornell, I did computer science as well as computer graphics and just continued mixing the technology and the artwork.

For the first ten, twelve years of my career, I was in New York and did a lot of commercials. I was focused on motion design, which involves the layering of images. If you go to prashant.tv, you can see my graphic demo reel. That was very graffiti-oriented in terms of how you would cut together colors, how the forms of those letters would come in and how you would layer the images. I find that in “Patang,” there’s an enormous amount of influence [from my graffiti art]. On one hand, the film progresses slowly like a European film, and on the other hand, how it’s cut and the use of visuals come from my upbringing here and the aesthetic that I got through hip hop and graffiti—the use of colors and the use of framing. It’s just part of me.



Director Prashant Bhargava

Photo credit: Khushi Films

HollywoodChicago.com: Was it tricky to fuse your impressionistic visual style with the realistic tone of the material?

Bhargava: I wasn't conscious of it when I was shooting, but in the edit, it was certainly a big consideration. The language emerged over time in terms of the intimacy of the close-ups and the rhythm of editing. It was very, very tricky because it can't be an [isolated] aesthetic. For a particular scene, like the kite battle, if you only do it there and you're not extending that aesthetic across the film, it feels out of place. So finding that balance was very tricky for me, in terms of preserving the naturalism and the connection to the people as well as staying respectful to the [location] and capturing the overall rhythm of how things unfold there, all the while doing something that's very stylized on top. That was a very tricky process that I discovered during the editing.

I edited the film myself in Chicago. We shot 200 hours of footage over two years, which was absurd, while working with non-actors. That was certainly an abyss of challenges. [laughs] As a director, normally you like some distance when you're editing. Because I took on both of those tasks, there were definitely long stretches when I was very pissed off that things weren't working. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: People who have worked with Terrence Malick have likened his process to that of a sculptor—chipping away at the footage until the structure emerges. Was your process similar on "Patang"?

Bhargava: Terrence Malick is one of my biggest influences. I look at his work and I'm in awe. The poetry and the naturalism of his process has given me a lot of inspiration over the years. As far as the script, and how it developed, I did three years of research on the ground there, living in [Ahmedabad] for a month to three months. My purpose during that time was at first to let go of my perspective of an outsider and really start to understand what was happening there. That came through a lot of interviews and observations, usually with the camera in hand, sometimes with the larger team. There was a progression during those three years where at first I was shyly navigating this space and by the last year, I was able to hold a camera two feet from somebody in the city and they would be themselves. The intimate style of working with actors and non-actors emerged from the research.

During that research time, I was working with my co-writer, James Townsend, who is more of a Hollywood writer, to try and take this naturalism and put it into a story context. Eventually, we had a 95-page script that only three out of the forty cast members read. Nawazuddin Siddiqui, who played the wedding singer, Chakku, is a very well-known actor in India now. Seema Biswas is renowned there for doing "Bandit

Queen,” and Sugandha Garg did a lot of Bollywood films. With those three actors reading the script, when we were onset, there was a lot of improvisation based on the script. My purpose was to find the other non-actors who were truly those people in real life, whether it was the grandmother or the 19-year-old kid or even the father who came from out of town. I was trying to find those people whose backstory resembled that of the characters, so the way in which they speak and move would already be natural to the characters. Then what I would do is give them either purely physical objectives or, if they were more open, more emotional objectives. “You want to seduce her playfully, you want to come in slyly, [etc.].” The eventual film resembles the script in a lot of detail, which is surprising to me. It certainly changed as it went on, but about 90 percent of the script is in the final film.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did the footage that you shot over that three-year period ultimately serve the final cut?

Bhargava: The kite footage [in the film] was captured during the two months of the shoot, and there was some pick-up shots that were taken the next year. The hundred hours of documentary footage that was shot during that research period was used for my storyboards. I cut together a 20-minute sequence that I’d share with people to show them what sort of film I’d love to make.



Nawazuddin Siddiqui stars in Prashant Bhargava's Patang.

Photo credit: Khushi Films

HollywoodChicago.com: Was it challenging to capture enough footage for a festival that takes place over a single day? Did you ever have to re-stage parts of the festival?

Bhargava: The festival actually runs for another day where they do the exact same thing. We had two cameras going. I shot about 40 percent of the film myself, while my director of photography [Shanker Raman] shot the rest. When we were shooting, we would stage as much as we could during the festival itself. An exception that occurs is when Bobby and Jayesh are in that big kite battle. One thing that's very hard to do is isolate certain kites battling when you're in the real festival, so we did another day's shoot where we were flying our iconic kite and would repeatedly fly a black kite or a kite of another color next to it. The only effects in that sequence are some lighting tweaks and the addition of some strings on those kites. For the most part, we managed to get a good amount of character interaction during the festival itself and when the family was eating on the rooftop. It was actually the day of the festival when Bobby was teaching Priya how to fly a kite.

HollywoodChicago.com: How were you able to predict the movement of the kites while keeping them in frame and capturing their personalities?

Bhargava: That came through a lot of flying on my own because then you can understand how someone would move with a kite. It's great that you noticed the personalities of the kites. For example, when Chakku briefly flies a yellow kite, it's much more abrupt in the way that it's moving, whereas when Bobby flies his, it has a different type of grace. I was trying to bring in those subtle layers. After flying a kite yourself, you can predict where the kites will move. My director of photography also put a couple kites in his hand in order to feel the same way.

HollywoodChicago.com: Were the heightened sounds during the kite battle inspired by the actual sounds of the kites?

Bhargava: No, that was more surreal and magical. I worked with Dig It Audio, which has done “Half Nelson,” “Man Push Cart,” “Inside Job,” “Twelve and Holding,” a lot of naturalistic films. They were amazing in that they would sit me down and squeeze every little thing that I could actually hear during the film. The overall sound design was more about choosing specific sounds from this very dense landscape and highlighting those. For that kite battle, I was inspired by sequences in “300,” as well as an adidas World Cup where there were big whooshing sounds. It felt like there was a big war happening. I gave them these sequences and the sound designer was also inspired by a gladiator fight. She used sounds of swords slashing and bombs blowing up during that sound design sequence. It was far more elaborate than what actually transpires during the festival.

HollywoodChicago.com: The film's use of symbolism is especially effective because of its subtlety.

Bhargava: I was inspired by “Red Balloon and “Red Violin” where you have these inanimate objects that serve as metaphors. There is a suggestion throughout the film that the iconic kite—the condition of it and how it's being treated—is reflected in the characters' journeys. There

are some skipped beats in the film, but you still get a sense of the overall movement of the characters. When you see Priya kissing the boy, the fireworks are going off and the kite is flying high with the lanterns above. I was subtly trying to parallel everything and I'm so happy that you felt that it was light enough and suggested enough to empower you as the audience because that was a big consideration. I didn't want to hit someone over the head too much with it, but there was a lot of thought in trying to suggest a lot of things.

HollywoodChicago.com: I was struck by a line late in the film when Sudha talks about the choice of holding on to the past with either sadness or happiness. To me, the kites represent the duality of family. It can anchor you and keep you grounded but also allow you to soar without getting slashed.

Bhargava: Yeah, I'm so happy you got it. That one section of the dialogue is, for me, what I was really trying to communicate throughout the film. That was the message for me.



Seema Biswas stars in Prashant Bhargava's Patang.

Photo credit: Khushi Films

HollywoodChicago.com: What's the meaning of the film's dedication card that reads, "For our parents"?

Bhargava: That was really special, not only in terms of the message that was trying to be communicated in the film, but also in terms of the journey as the cast and crew and the communities in the city came together. That particular city has been affected by a lot of religious violence and natural disaster. I didn't want to focus on those aspects, and by the end of the film, we were all dancing together on the rooftops. It was truly a kind of family affair. So much of my own family had supported the investment. My mother and father and sister were actively involved throughout the film, and there are many others who contributed in the same way. The message, the process, how we were able to come together—it was all about family, so that felt very appropriate.

HollywoodChicago.com: What are your views regarding the depiction of India in American films such as "Slumdog Millionaire"?

Bhargava: It's a little bittersweet when I see these films. On one hand, it allows American audiences to gain a nice awareness of what India is from a familiar perspective and a familiar cinematic language, whether it be "Slumdog Millionaire" or "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel." It certainly creates an awareness and without those films, even getting at a film like "Patang" would be tougher, so it's a blessing in that way. I always say that "Slumdog Millionaire" is like a greasy chicken and ["Patang"] is my mom's home-cooked samosa. There's a certain humanity and universality that people, whether they are rich or poor, can find [relatable]. When I show the film throughout the world, whether it's in Germany or Mexico, I'm really struck by how much people relate to it. What I'm excited to see is the independent movement of Indian cinema, where there's a lot more naturalism and expression from this point of view. The stories are very local and pay attention to small details. The people from [Ahmedabad] see "Patang" and say, "This is mine, this is my anthem, this is my story." For me, it's really important to create stories that the people you're making it about can champion and feel proud of.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your next film is "Highlands," which is set around Chicago's Jackson Park golf courses. What is the status on that project?

Bhargava: Right now, we're in development. I have two writers working on it with me. One is James Townsend, who collaborated with me on "Patang." It's the story of a 19-year-old kid who comes from one of the rougher neighborhoods and is holding his talent very close to him. He's not very comfortable sharing it with the world. He works at a wireless shop and also works at the driving range picking up buckets. There's an older hustler in his mid- to late '40s who has a beautiful, manipulative personality. Everything he does enables him to stay in the flow of the game and make a little cash. He starts to have an interaction with the kid. Meanwhile the kid's mother, who's still in her mid-'30s, is trying to find the right man.

So on one hand, there's a little bit more of a popular theme and structure to it, but it's important for me to preserve how I worked on "Patang," mixing non-actors and actors to make something that's an anthem of the South Side of Chicago. I want to make a film that's the opposite of other pictures trying to depict these communities, such as "Precious," where the drama is heightened to a sensational effect. I like to find those moments where the mother and son express their genuine love for one another. It's been an educational process for me to see

how distributors reacted to "Patang." I've asked myself, "What are the core things that I refuse to change?" I like the cinematic language and the way that I approach things. I thought it was time for me to bring that approach back home.



Sugandha Garg stars in Prashant Bhargava's *Patang*.

Photo credit: Khushi Films

HollywoodChicago.com: Are you drawing on your own experiences on the South Side for inspiration?

Bhargava: Oh yeah, I played golf in Jackson Park while growing up. I probably can speak the lingo of the South Side of Chicago a little smoother than I speak Hindi. But the story is pretty far from my own. These three characters have elements of me, but they're not as close to me as the characters in "Patang." I enjoy that because I can [explore] their story from a dramatic distance, which helps in efficiency.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your father has been good friends with Roger Ebert, who has been a vocal supporter of "Patang." How did they meet?

Bhargava: Roger used to teach classes at the University of Chicago where he would pick a topic like silent films or films by Martin Scorsese for an entire semester, and they would watch all of the films and discuss them. My father had taken the class for 17 years and sat next to Roger. My father would often fall asleep, but they always sat together, and their friendship developed. We lost touch with Roger when the illness came on. He stopped teaching and my dad wasn't taking the classes. But Roger's such a generous man and I was blown away that he had really gotten the film. I was so touched by it all. I personally find that his struggles right now have brought a different kind of humanity to his writing. When I went to Ebertfest, it was pretty magical to have my film shown in the Virginia Theatre. It's the nicest venue that I've ever been in, and I'm comparing it to Berlin, and all of that. It had 1,600 seats and such a huge projection. It was done really well. He has such courage in the films that he chooses because they're coming from all sorts of different directions. He's pushing his audiences to experience new things. It was such a warm festival, it was really about the love of film, and the audiences were very educated and open. It's rare in America to come across that [reception], especially in a place like Champaign. I wouldn't have expected it.

HollywoodChicago.com: Is it true that your father has taken up acting, and if so, would you cast him in a future project?

Bhargava: Definitely. We actually did a short with him and Seema Biswas and Siddiqui. Two years ago, I suggested to my dad that he participate in the arts, so I got him one class at Act One Studios and he's taken 25 since then. He was on a special that I think was on CNBC about a guy who was caught for insider trading. So he's really at it, and to see him at 72 now, the roles reverse a little bit. He's looking to me for some wisdom, which is pretty cool. He's just getting younger doing it.

'Patang' stars Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Mukkund Shukla, Seema Biswas, Sugandha Garg, Aakash Maheriya and Hamid Shaikh. It was written by James Townsend and Prashant Bhargava and directed by Prashant Bhargava. It will be released June 15th at AMC River East 21. It is not rated.



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