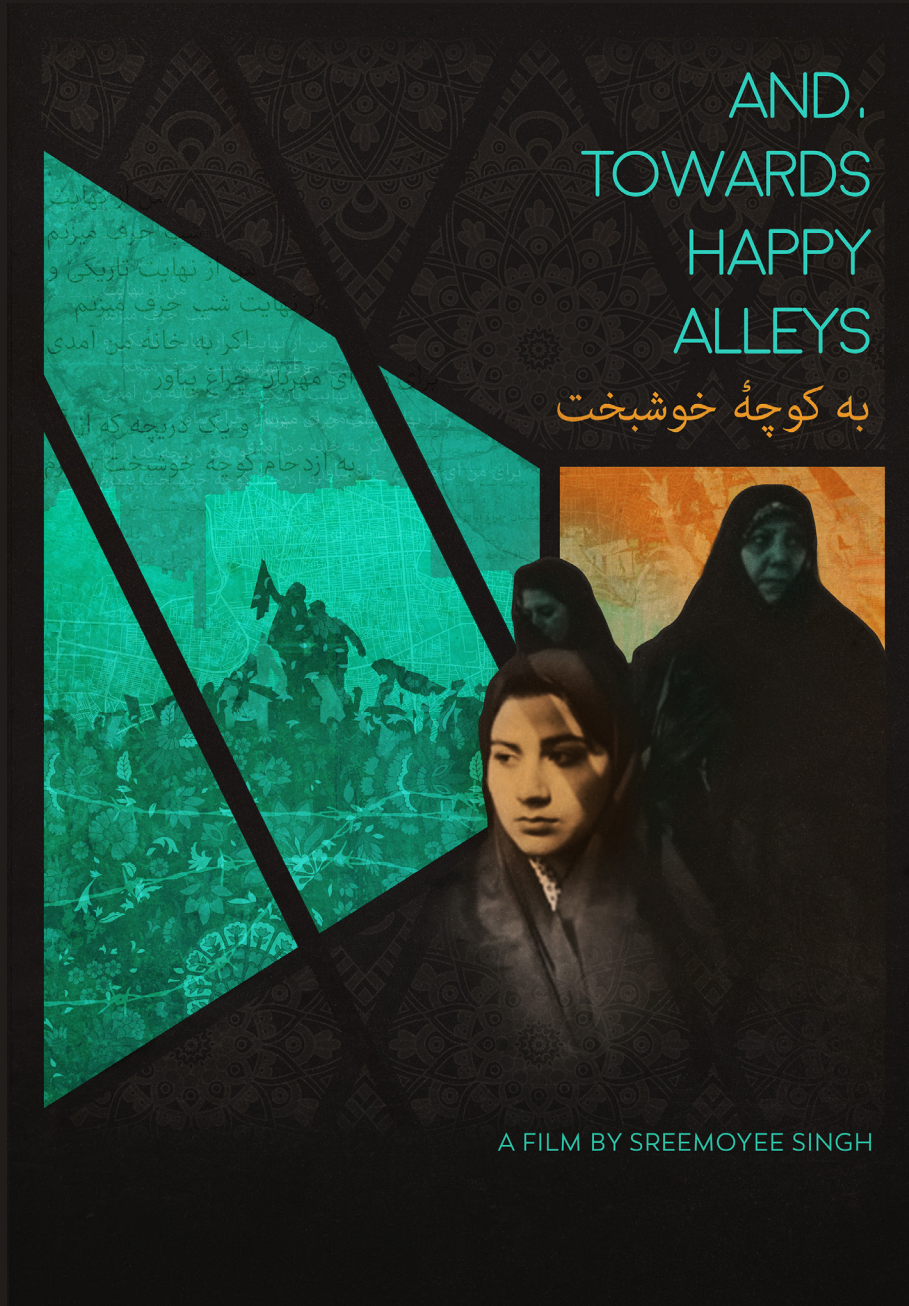





THESSALONIKI  
INTERNATIONAL  
DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL  
OFFICIAL SELECTION  
2023  
TiDF25







*I speak out of the depth of night  
out of the depth of darkness I speak.  
If you come to my house, friend  
Bring me a lamp and a window through which  
I can look at the crowd in the happy alley.*

*-Forough Farrokhzad, excerpt from the poem *Window*, 1963*

*«The film is a testimony to the power of cinema, and how it can revolutionise lives of people across borders.»* Mohsen Makhmalbaf

*«And Towards Happy Alleys doesn't aspire to be streetwise, seasoned filmmaking but one with a lot of heart which is powered by a disciple's guileless personal reverence for the subject and a woman's gentle, feminine way of seeing.»* Namrata Joshi, Cinema Express

*«... 'And, Towards Happy Alleys' is the generous, resolute gesture that we need today. It returns us to the unique films that do not congratulate us on our cynicisms, but lead us back to our yearnings by a gesture so rare in any other cinema: the simple gesture of sharing.»* Anup Singh

*«...the film transforms into a double-edged cry of protest and longing to be free.»* Santanu Das, Hindustan Times

# LOGLINE

Inspired by Iranian cinema and the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad, a young director from India journeys to Tehran to witness how resistance becomes a daily act of survival in Iranian society. Despite stringent censorship of the Islamic Regime, the director collects a series of eloquent and candid interviews with filmmaker Jafar Panahi, activists and Iranian women. Over six years, these conversations with the camera capture the simmering anxieties, fears, hopes and dreams of a nation on the brink of revolution.

# SYNOPSIS

Fascinated by Iran's film culture and the poetic works of the feminist poet Forough Farrokhzad, Indian filmmaker Sreemoyee Singh sets out in search of the protagonists of Iranian cinema. The numerous interviews she conducts over a period of six years with filmmakers Jafar Panahi, Mohammad Shirvani and human rights activist Nasrin Sotudeh, among others, show the precarious situation in which critics of the regime find themselves, including the constant threat of imprisonment and being banned from practising their profession. With a keen eye for unusual situations, she documents the effect of the Islamic Republic's strict and omnipresent censorship on the daily lives of Iranian women whose uncompromising struggle has put them at the forefront of the protests that are currently rocking the country.

And, Towards Happy Alleys is a passionate declaration of love for the cinema and poetry of Iran which also provides a frank view of daily life, and bears witness to a fearless generation raising its voice and implacably demanding its civil liberties.



Jafar Panahi and Aida Mohammadkhani, Tehran 2016, photo by Sreemoyee Singh **6**

# CHARACTERS



## JAFAR PANAHI

One of the most important filmmakers of the Iranian New Wave (*The White Balloon*, 1995, *Offside*, 2006, *Taxi*, 2015, *No Bears*, 2022) was banned from making films officially for 21 years when he participated in the Green Movement in 2009. The film charts the struggles of how he comes to terms with his verdict and paints a humane face of a filmmaker who rises from the tyranny of the repressive censors and devises ways of continuing his resistance, championing freedom of expression, and dignity of living in the Islamic regime. Panahi was arrested once again in July 2022 and has been in prison serving a



## FOROUGH FARROKHZAD

An Iranian feminist poet and filmmaker who inspired a generation of New Wave filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi to employ the indirectness of poetry to their cinematic language to evade stringent censorship. She died on 13th February 1967 at the age of 32. The film resurrects Forough's voice that gives space for articulation of feminine desire and resistance. The filmmaker visits her resting place in Tehran, and accidentally finds her in the most unexpected places.



## NASRIN SOUTODEH

The scarf protests of 2018 saw women stage desperate non-verbal protests against compulsory hijab. Most of them were imprisoned. Nasrin, lawyer and human rights activist, took over their defense in court. She was arrested on the 11th of March 2019 and sentenced to 38 years in prison.





# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

AND, TOWARDS HAPPY ALLEYS is my first feature length documentary as a director and producer. The journey began in 2012 when I became captivated with the relationship between Iranian cinema and Persian poetry. As an artist and student, I was deeply inspired by the poetic, life-affirming stories told by Iranian filmmakers - their layered narratives were stark rebukes to the stringent censorship of Iran's Islamic Regime. As my determination to understand Iranian cinema grew, I began an intensive PhD research project that led me to relocate to Iran and learn Persian so I could film the stories of these filmmakers to get a deeper access to the culture. Due to strict surveillance and censorship regulations, Iranians are wary of any interactions with fellow Iranians, the media, or the world outside. As an Indian woman researcher and filmmaker, learning Persian strengthened my position as I was perceived as someone who reciprocated the passions of the Iranian filmmakers and established a dialogue of solidarity with them. This allowed me intimate access to their lives. I built deep creative relationships with the directors, writers, and regular people I filmed. The filmmakers I sought to meet instantly trusted me because of my careful readings of their films, and through work, a new understanding of their histories and their social and creative struggles.

My access to music also cemented my bond with the people I met in my journey. Growing up in the culturally rich area of eastern India, Bengal, I grew up with a special access to singing and music. Expressing myself through music came naturally to me and I found myself learning Persian through popular songs. Filmmakers like Jafar Panahi would often urge me to sing Persian songs everywhere I went. Only later did I realise that they did this because they had not heard a woman sing publicly in Iran since the Revolution in 1979. Iran's Islamic Regime prohibited women from singing. The absurdity of suppression is surpassed only by its cruelty. At first my project was intended to record testimonies of filmmakers and artists and understand creativity in the face of deep censorship; but as a woman I was drawn to the experience of fellow women, and the film began exploring their roles, identity, womanhood and navigating the complexities of femininity in the Islamic Republic of Iran. A historic struggle - led by women - for freedom of expression and justice is taking place in the streets of Tehran now. The nation-wide protest is a struggle to remove the people of Iran from the tyrannical grip of the Islamic regime and restore existence as free human beings while reclaiming basic human dignity.

AND, TOWARDS HAPPY ALLEYS stands as a long-term study of cinematic creativity in Iran, a record of life at a critical juncture in Iranian society and an appeal of solidarity to the international world to amplify the struggles of a community who are on the verge of liberation.

## ARTISTIC APPROACH

The film's structure interweaves the magical world of cinema, poetry, and music with the harsh reality of everyday life in Iran. The film visually juxtaposes the reality of censorship and the world of imagination. The mood is poetic, lyrical, and self reflexive. The film is an intimate quest, where the filmmaker herself becomes a part of the story as her fluid and free flowing camera traverses the landscape of Iran and the mindscape of its inhabitants. Uninterrupted, long takes soak in the backdrop of Iran where characters reveal their habits, peculiarities, and inner motivations while in conversation with the camera. The approach toward shooting regular people, mostly women in public life, in buses, metros and streets is observational, where the camera gradually moves from its hidden existence toward the consensual. The approach in filming the stories of artists, filmmakers and friends on the other hand is intimate, friendly, and conversational. Long takes as a form were not planned but adopted intuitively as through the uninterrupted interaction between characters and their external realities, moments of unmediated time flows out. Music interplays throughout the film. Songs that appear in the film are meant to break the grimness of despair and sometimes songs themselves speak of freedom.



# SREEMOYEE SINGH

Director / Producer / Cinematographer



Sreemoyee Singh completed her PhD on “The Exiled Filmmaker in Post-Revolution Iran” from the department of Film Studies in Jadavpur University, Kolkata in Feb 2022.

In 2015, she travelled to Iran for the first time inspired by masters of Iranian cinema like Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who remain an inspiration. This journey led to the filming of her first feature length documentary *And, Towards Happy Alleys* (Be Kucheye Khoshbakht). For this, Sreemoyee learnt Persian from Dekhoda Lexicon Institute and Center for Persian Studies in Tehran. Her in-depth research about the cinema of Iran and her knowledge of Persian gave her unique access to Iranian filmmakers, artists, activists, and women who are otherwise wary of interaction with the media outside. Sreemoyee also worked as Assistant Professor of Film Studies at St. Joseph’s University, Bangalore and a Guest Lecturer at New York University, Abu Dhabi (NYUAD).

# CREDITS

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CINEMATOGRAPHER Sreemoyee Singh

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