

Santosh [15]

2024 UK/Germany/India/France 128 mins

UK released **21 March 2025**

Director **Sandhya Suri**

Screenplay **Sandhya Suri**

Cinematography **Lennert Hillege**

Music **Luisa Gerstein**

Cast **Shahana Goswami** (Santosh Saini); **Sunita Rajwar** (Geeta Sharma); **Sanjay Bishnoi** (Beniwal); **Kushal Dubey** (Vikram); **Nawal Shukla** (Thakur); **Pratibha Awasthi** (Priya)

Suri's film, the UK's Best International Feature Film entry for the Oscars, tells the story of this young policewoman as she bears witness to the corrupt judicial system in India, exploring the messy intersections of class, gender, caste and religion. It's a broad sweep of ideas, but when you set out to make a film on the police, you must address systemic corruption. Suri largely succeeds.

There is something rotten not just in the state of India, but specifically within the police system, which has its own caste order. The set-up is as British as it is Indian: the Indian Police Service of today is a direct successor to the Indian Imperial Police which the British established in 1861. No Indians were allowed to rise beyond the lower ranks until 1920, and British officers wore a badge to distinguish them from the Indian constables. For the British, the colonies were proving grounds for repressive policing techniques which they then took home. Policing is sold as a means to rid society of its crimes. But as *Santosh*, a British film made by a British-Indian filmmaker, shows us, it is a microcosm of human prejudice.

The early days of *Santosh*'s career are spent beating up unmarried couples under the supervision of a casually Islamophobic and sexist male boss, but things quickly change when a young girl – a Dalit, one of the so-called 'untouchables' in the Hindu caste system – is found dead in

a well. Santosh gets a new superior, seasoned policewoman Geeta Sharma (played to perfection by Sunita Rajwar), who has broad ambitions toward gender equality but doesn't mind pursuing a Muslim man as a suspect with no firm evidence. She feels equally at ease murdering a man and passing it off as suicide in custody. It's not for her to decide if it's good or bad; it's just the dharma, or the way, of her vocation.

Geeta and Santosh's relationship is the only site of fleeting affection amid intense violence and claustrophobic misogyny. The constant tussle for power between the two teeters on the edge of sexual tension – a theme the film would've done well to carve out space for within all the rabid masculinity. Geeta is presumably unmarried, and Santosh widowed; both are childless and therefore, in the eyes of their society, not performing their gender roles adequately; the two women are at once trying to transcend their gender while constantly being reminded of its limitations. Santosh saves Geeta's number on her phone as "Sharma MadamSir", highlighting the bind the two find themselves in. Geeta's "one of the boys" status is something Santosh aspires to, and yet both form a curious bond forged primarily by their sex.

Santosh ends with its protagonist left sleepless by the unscrupulousness her job demands. Perhaps in search of the contentment her name's meaning promises her (Santosh is the Sanskrit word for 'satisfaction'), she starts looking for a way out. Maybe then she can finally sleep.

Bedatri D. Choudhury, *Sight and Sound*, 19 March 2025 (abridged)

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