

# Film Notes - Season 2025-26

20th November 2025

## Santosh

Cert 15 | 2h 8m

Country: India, 2025

Director: Sandhya Suri

Stars: Shahana Goswami, Sunita Rajwar, Nawal Shukla

Language: Hindi (English subtitles)



### Synopsis

Newly widowed Santosh Saini inherits her late husband's post as a police constable in rural northern India through a compassionate recruitment scheme. Tasked with investigating the disappearance and subsequent murder of Devika, a low-caste teenager, she confronts systemic corruption, sexism, and caste prejudice within the local police. Her mentor, veteran Inspector Geeta Sharma, challenges the patriarchal order as they uncover institutional failures.

### Context and Craft

Originally conceived as a documentary about sexual violence, director Sandhya Suri pivoted to a focused, pared-down crime narrative after seeing images from the 2012 Delhi gang-rape protests. Known for documentaries – *I For India*, *Around India With a Movie Camera* – Suri's film is a gritty, minimalist neo-noir, with restrained, muted performances and stark visuals that reinforce realism. *Santosh* explores the intersections of caste, gender, colonial policing legacy, and communal violence.

### Critical Reception

Cannes 2024, nominated for Un Certain Regard prize; BAFTA nomination for Outstanding Debut; won Seville European Film Festival Best Screenplay. Selected as the UK's entry for Best International Feature at the 97th Oscars, and made the shortlist. Named in the National Board of Review Top 5 International Films 2024:

- *Variety*: "fiercely feminist empowerment saga...arias of religion and caste... deconstructs police power fantasy".
- *The Hollywood Reporter*: "clear-eyed, moving indictment of New India... subtle generational dynamic"
- *Sight & Sound/BFI*: "neo-noir... exposes systemic corruption... masculine predation"
- *IndieWire*: "master class in subtlety... assertion of power in stratified society".

### Conclusion

Sandhya Suri's *Santosh* melds intimate character exploration and sharp procedural realism to critique institutional injustices in contemporary India. Through Santosh's quiet internal struggle—between surviving as a widow, asserting authority in a male-dominated system, and confronting prejudice—the film highlights the paradox of empowerment within oppressive frameworks. Its director's history of documentary filmmaking lends it an unvarnished visual style and deliberate pacing that amplify its authenticity, making it a poignant meditation on power, caste, and gender.