



## Karvaan

### Shadows in the Dark

**Pankaj Butalia**

INDIA/FRANCE, 1999

105 minutes ■ Colour/35mm

Production Company: **Vital Films/NFDC/**

**JBA Productions**

Executive Producers: **Anil Pandit, Pankaj**

**Butalia**

Producer: **Pankaj Butalia**

Screenplay: **Pankaj Butalia**

Cinematographer: **Ranjan Palit**

Editor: **Sameera Jain**

Production Designer: **Aradhana Seth**

Sound: **Indrajit Neogi**

Music: **Susmit Sen**

Principal Cast: **Naseeruddin Khan, Kitu**

**Gidwani, Subrata Dutta, Srivardhan**

**Trivedi, Ikhtlaque Khan**

Print Source: **Vital Films, B-26**

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Quite a few films have addressed the harrowing events around the partition of India and Pakistan recently. This may well be the best of them. It resolutely anchors the horrors of the time, which included mass slaughter and the largest migration of people ever recorded, in a remarkably personal and multi-layered treatment. Director Pankaj Butalia has an eye for the details of personal devastation; he especially addresses the less well-known after-effects of partition – particularly focusing on the lives of women and sexual non-conformists – and shows how the psychological damage of the time still resounds within the sub-continent today. For those who have seen Butalia's previous work, especially his lyrical, exquisite documentary on Bengali widows, *Moksha*, this profound sensitivity to the mechanisms of oppression will come as no surprise. But this accomplished documentarian's ability to craft a complex and satisfying narrative marks a new and very welcome voice to the feature film world.

Lajma is a middle-aged woman living in present-day Pakistan. She was raised during the fifties and sixties in India and only now has decided to revisit her former home there. She finds little trace of the past; her only surviving relative is an aunt. But returning evokes a deluge of memories, and the film then unfolds in a series of flashbacks.

Lajma's uncle escaped from Pakistan to Delhi and was forced to live alongside a resentful Muslim family under siege, while

Lajma and her mother moved in with him a few years later. Her uncle promptly engineered her mother's admission to an asylum, a fate not uncommon for women drummed out of either India or Pakistan after the rest of their family had elected to leave.

At the same time, Lajma's cousin, Gautam, begins acting on his attraction to the Muslim neighbour's son, Jamal, an alluring, reckless young man. Their nascent, taboo affair is nipped in the bud when Gautam discovers that Jamal has started an affair with none other than Lajma. This, and Lajma's continuing demonstrations of independence from her oppressive uncle and a society smothering her inner desires for love and work, get her expelled from the house, leading her to make a new life for herself.

■ **Noah Cowan**

**Pankaj Butalia** was born in Ambala, India in 1950. He taught economics at Delhi University for 20 years. Deeply involved with the film society movement in India, he has served on many international juries. Selected filmography: *When Hamlet Came to Mizoram* (documentary, 90), *Moksha* (documentary, 93) and *Shadows in the Dark* (99).

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