

# Smile Please

A FILM BY BAKUL MATIYANI



# Director's Biography

A photography enthusiast, daydreamer and rolling stone in his early years, Bakul found his calling while pursuing his post-graduate diploma in Marketing. A festering passion for images and story-telling led him to the Film & Television Institute of India, Pune (FTII) although he knew little about film-making; the program left him wanting to learn more about the field.

Bakul completed a course in Direction and another in Film Editing in 2007 and has been working in the Indian film industry as an editor ever since. Gaining extensive experience in editing, producing and writing over 14 years, Bakul has taken his first step to directing with the short film, **“Smile Please”**.

[www.imdb.com/name/nm4239044](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm4239044)



# Director's Statement

Try smiling, frowning, winking, smirking; it takes but a second. We don't need to think about it. We take it for granted that people will understand us by simply seeing us. But at times life is not so simple, because of both, what we see, and our inability to look beyond what is visible.

The most complex stories warrant the simplest story-telling. The emotions of a child are a perfect embodiment of this paradox.

“Smile Please” is an old cardboard box that holds within, emotions and relationships, with some space to spare for the audience to fill with their own experiences.

Smile Please is about family, friendship, belonging, empathy and most of all acceptance. Acceptance from those around us and of ourselves above all else.



# The question “Smile Please” asks

Smile please examines the idea of “normal”. Does the same measure of “normalcy” apply to all lives?

Can we rethink the binaries of “normal” and disabled? What does it take to not reduce a person to their disability?

If people, and systems are unable to accept and celebrate difference, where does the “impairment” lie?





# Synopsis

A young boy Ali suffers from Moebius Syndrome, to make matters worse his family is shifting from the only home that he has ever known.

As the family spends their last day in the house, Ali worries about acceptance in a new unknown place as he deals with the sorrow of having to leave behind his best friend, Rajan.

As the two friends make plans to enable them to stay in touch, for the first time in his life Ali must ask something of his father.



# The Writing

The writing was the most rewarding part of the filmmaking process next to seeing the final film on completion.

The core of the story and screenplay were written in a sprint of 5 days , after which there were constant modifications, additions and embellishments.

These continued till as late as the acting rehearsals and a segment of the actor's workshop found its way into the final script.



# The Crew

Having worked in films for years, we had the good fortune of having high quality professionals as supportive friends who were aligned with the central idea of the film and felt passionately about telling this story.

Schedules of course, played their part, but the process of bringing this crew together was guided by our ability to collaborate effectively, while being authentic in what each of our team members' brought to the table.

This helped us raise the quality of each other's work and to eventually try to do justice to the story we all set out to tell.

## **Writer, Director & Editor**

Bakul Matiyani

## **Producer & Director of Photography**

Neha Parti Matiyani

## **Production Design**

Sapna Chandra

## **Sound Design**

Sohel Sanwari

## **Casting**

Trishaan & Shubham Gaur

## **Costumes**

Shivangi Shrivastav

## **Music**

Oni - Adil



# Casting Smile Please

The casting directors, Trishaan and Shubham were the last of our crew members to come on board and yet the impact of their contribution to the film is immeasurable.

They understood the milieu that we were casting for and that made the casting process both easier and yet more complex due to the problem of plenty. Although the adult actors were not a point of contention, when it came to casting the two friends Ali and Rajan we were spoilt for choice.

It took us almost a week to audition all the child actors till we finally settled on Rishabh as Ali and Om as Rajan.

## CAST

### **Ali's Father**

Alok Chaturvedi

### **Ali**

Rishabh Karmakar

### **Ali's Mother**

Laxmi Rawat

### **Rajan**

Om Kanojiya

### **Senior Photographer**

Aseem Hattangadi

### **Junior Photographer**

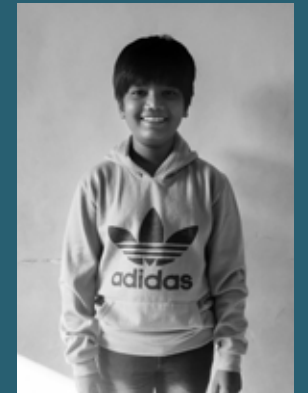
Neeraj Singh

### **Ali's Sister**

Tahura Mansuri

### **Rajan's Mother**

Usha Karmakar





# Visual Language

While the emotions we wanted to evoke were complex, the idea was to keep the storytelling as simple and unobtrusive as possible. The cinematography attempted to keep the characters' feelings in the foreground at all times. Our focus was to not let the cameras and other paraphernalia intimidate the child actors, Rishabh (Ali) was a first-time actor and that was one of the reasons for choosing him for the role of Ali. He was completely unaware of the film-making process and that brought an inherent sincerity with him. We needed to guard this quality as it was going to be the most important element of his performance.

The conversation between the two friends was one of the first things that were planned and it was always meant to be a single shot. The intention was to give the audience enough space for the friendship and its warmth seep through unimpeded and unobstructed. The conversation between the two friends was about nothing in particular and yet in a way it was about everything that mattered to Ali.



One of the most important filming decisions is also one of the least noticeable ones. Throughout the film, the “over the shoulder” shot is used only once. The humble OS shot has become cinemas’ version of “normal” but Ali’s situation is anything but normal.

Across cultures and most definitely in India, father son relationships are characterised by pressure, anxiousness and fear. The OS shot is used to “normalise” support as a facet of this relationship instead at the point where Ali and his father’s relationship takes its first step towards a “normal” father-son relationship. The hope was to use the scene where the son steps up and asks his father for help and despite the obvious tension of the situation, make them seem at ease with each other for the first time.



The colour palette of the film is realistic with natural light and colours; this pattern is only broken by the superhero posters in Ali's room. The characters on the posters have vivid and exaggerated expressions, an obvious contrast to Ali's situation that mirrors his desire to be able to smile and express.



# Unlearning, Rehearsing and Relearning

We had 20 days in the middle of a covid relaxation window within which we had to explain the condition “Moebius Syndrome” and to get Rishabh (Ali) and Om (Rajan) to understand and imbibe the physical nuances they had to bring through in their performances.

The chemistry between the two friends needed to be tangible, so much so that you could reach out and touch it. We started out on this journey rehearsing with both the boys playing the game the boys are eventually seen playing on the terrace. The game was only meant to be a rehearsal tool which was not a part of the original script, but the sheer transparency of emotions between the boys while played the game during rehearsals eventually led to the game being written in as a scene in the final script.

Both boys had to unlearn basic actions and behaviours of day-to-day life and then relearn to do those things just a bit differently without giving away too much at any stage.





For Rishabh we broke things down into parts; practised everyday tasks like talking, brushing and drinking water with restrictive facial movement. There were days when he brushed his teeth 8-9 times a day and it was quite inspiring to see that kind of commitment from a first time performer.

There was a conscious attempt to not make a big deal about the disability of the characters, either in action or in dialogue. The hope was that these aspects of their characters will permeate through by the time the story reaches its conclusion instead of trying to convey them when you see them for the first time. This slight departure allowed Ali and Rajan to surface as characters without the audience being overwhelmed by their disabilities, and at the same time easing the “normalcy” of their inner world and experience into the story.



# The Sounds of Smile Please



We wanted to create an aural world that went beyond what was seen within the frame and add to the density of the overall of the world that Ali was leaving behind. Our soundscape was built around both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. We amalgamated sounds from where our characters lived and used them to identify the socio economic milieu and time of the day.

One particular colloquial sound that we needed was a “twang” of the string on the tool used by hawking cotton beaters to fluff cotton and refurbish old mattresses and also alert clients of their presence outside their homes. The closest parallel to this from the west would be the music of ice-cream trucks in America.

# Making the Music

The music composition stage had to be replanned due to covid restrictions but we lucked out with an amazing duo of composers who understood what the film score needed.

Music is what feelings sound like, and it was always going to be our way of conveying and sharing feelings with the audience. It took us a couple of days of tinkering to arrive at the instruments we wanted; the nylon guitar, cello and the piano. Classical and familiar sounds were used to compliment the comfort between characters and spaces. Like the film, the instruments and the compositions needed to be simple and yet enable the audience to empathise with Ali's complex situation.

The process of creating music brought together all the independently moving parts of the film and transformed them into a whole, at least that is what it felt like at the time and we hope that the audience feels the same way.



# Technical Specifications

Written on Final Draft 11

Sound designed and mixed on Pro Tools

Edited on Avid Media Composer

Duration 22 minutes (including credits)

Graded on Base light

Shot in colour

Aspect Ratio 16:9

Shot on Arri Alexa XT with Zeiss Master Prime lenses

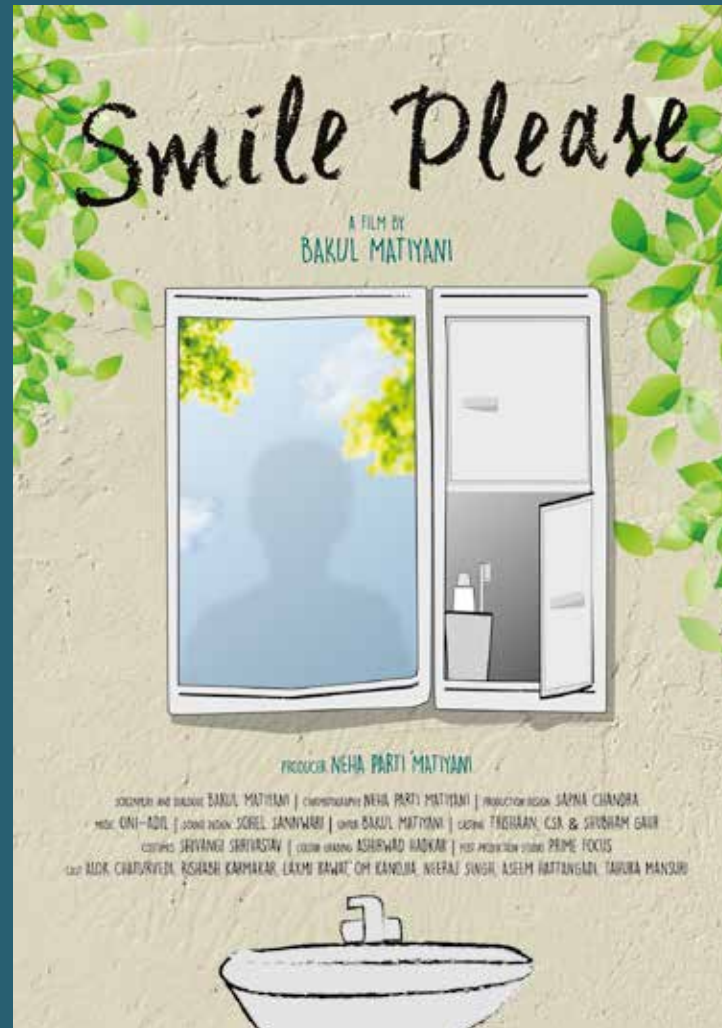
Shooting days - 3

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