

FINANCIAL TIMES

Amar Kanwar: 'If the work has meaning, it will connect'

A trilogy of the artist's films considering histories of conflict and power relations across the Indian subcontinent is coming to London

By Cleo Roberts-Komireddi (September 19, 2026)



A still from Amar Kanwar's film 'Such a Morning, 2017 © Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

History is being made in Delhi when I meet Amar Kanwar. The heat is oppressive and the air acrid. But the administrative heart of India's sprawling capital is besieged by young protesters, led by the Cockroach Janta Party, whose weeks-long agitation against the country's deteriorating education system culminated in late July in a ministerial resignation — one of the few concessions made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi since coming to power 12 years ago.

Kanwar is quietly absorbing the intensity of the civic action as he welcomes me into his studio. It is set in a repurposed flat on the floor below his home, in a residential colony bordering a park. Its tranquil atmosphere mirrors the calm pace of his films, which study their subjects with slow, languid shots that are frequently interwoven with text. His works are acclaimed for their storytelling, which obliquely and often metaphorically considers histories of conflict, power relations and political conditions across the Indian subcontinent.

The space is deceptively compact and can be transformed into a screening room using the range of high-spec equipment he keeps, along with his archive, in a specially designed roof-top storage unit. We sit underneath a hanging projector, where tape marks left from the scenographic planning of his forthcoming solo exhibition at London's Serpentine North Gallery ornament the walls.

"I do my best to do less," Kanwar tells me. Not that the filmmaker, now in his early sixties, lacks a work ethic. It's just that his process — which he describes as akin to "slow cooking" — requires long, empty stretches of time. He lingers on thoughts and lets them take root. He reads, "potters", calls his academic and activist friends. "I talk to everybody. I could go and buy cigarettes and spend an hour talking to the shopkeeper."

The topics to which he is drawn — ecological injustice and sexual violence, for example — demand a lengthy investment of his energy. "Nothing that I make is easy, it takes a lot out of me," he says. It can take years for a film to come to the boil. *The Charcoal Man* (2026), which will premiere at the Serpentine alongside two older works, has been playing in his head for "three to five [years] ... I was holding on to it." Such self-determination and sufficiency enable him to make and meander between research, writing, filming and production, irrespective of funding and commissions. That freedom, Kanwar says, is "the only thing I've wanted in life".



A still from 'The Charcoal Man' (2026), a digital video installation over seven screens © Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

His route to this artistic fulfilment was circuitous. After completing a history degree at the University of Delhi, he entered occupational health research, compiling reports from coal-mining areas in Madhya Pradesh and textile mills in Mumbai. He later worked with an NGO in Gujarat that supported India's disenfranchised and remote communities, and produced films for a now-defunct educational television department connected to Jamia Millia university, where he had received a master's in filmmaking.

Making these pedagogical films sounds like it was a gift, with no expectation of delivery dates and a remit that could be stretched to Kanwar's whims. "The only catch was it was about 3,000 rupees per film [around £23 at the time]. I was foolish enough; that's what I did for some time," he chuckles. "I made a film on 'Why does the sky turn red at twilight?'."

All around him, big money was pouring into the commercial film industry, which, high on India's economic liberalisation, was uninterested in Kanwar's esoteric poetics. He felt pushed to the precipice of quitting, which emboldened him to make what can be considered his first art film, *A Season Outside* (1997). "I decided ... since I'm going to sink, I might as well do it exactly the way I want."

The film, an effort to comprehend the violent history surrounding India and Pakistan's independence and made on the military border in Wagah, altered his trajectory. After taking it on the road for screenings in villages and schools across India and receiving multiple awards, including a MacArthur Foundation grant for another film, it was included in Okwui Enwezor's Documenta11 in 2002. At this prestigious quinquennial exhibition, it drew the attention of the gallerist Marian Goodman. "She wrote me a two-line email saying, 'I saw your film and I really liked it. I would like to work with you.'"

It is the kind of storybook discovery artists yearn for. "I'm a bad example," Kanwar says of his pathway and approach to the art industry. He has never felt the need to push or participate in the annual tornado of art world events. "If I were to start going on the circuit, I would be finished. There would be nothing left of me."

His reclusiveness extends to his own international engagements. At the opening of his solo exhibition at Palazzo Grassi in Venice earlier this year, he was in and out. Five days away from India is his travel limit. "It makes more sense to just focus on the work," he explains. "And if the work has meaning, it will connect."

For all Kanwar's immersion in his homeland, and his deep tracking of the sources of its social and political divisions, his work also makes broader observations on human impulses. In his interlinked films *The Peacock's Graveyard* (2023) and *The Charcoal Man*, for instance, a series of modern fables that feel passed down through generations will play out in plain text across a constellation of seven screens.



From 'The Peacock's Graveyard' (2023) © Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

These narratives are synchronised with archival newsreels from around 1947 when British India was partitioned and clips of old Bollywood cinema, all accompanied by the notes of a sparse piano raga. The loop of materials, projected in darkness, creates a disorientating experience reflective of today's freewheeling and unhinged reality in which, Kanwar acknowledges, "everything is intermingled — the truth, fact, fiction and myth".

The film does not proffer any absolute resolution and "there are numerous subtexts ... you can ride any or none as you feel", says Kanwar, though the parables circle, predominantly, around desires for vengeance. "This desire ... is in us all," he says. Viewed more broadly, the film could be a meditation on how rightwing politics exploits and lends political force to these basic human emotions, perhaps particularly in India under the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's Hindutva ideology that regards the country as a Hindu state.

Kanwar is attentive to the ways in which nationalist politics construct a "mythical, imaginary past" to fire up and legitimise contemporary grievances and acts of violence. As he sees it, "we are playing out the past in the present for the future".