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MUMBAI NEWS

Caste aside: Exploring the issue of caste in Mumbai

A group of TISS students have created six short documentaries exploring the issue of caste in Mumbai through the lenses of food, marriage, education, religion, work and language.



Stills-from-Antar-Bhaasha

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A group of TISS students have created six short documentaries exploring the issue of caste in Mumbai through the lenses of food, marriage, education, religion, work and language.

Food. Marriage. Education. Work. Language. Religion.

Caste is a concept you might balk at, but even in Maximum City, it continues to define how people live.


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The slickly produced documentaries have been made by a total of 29 final-year students of the School of Media and Cultural Studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) and are 20 to 30 minutes long.

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"The middle classes often say that caste is not a problem. Or, caste is a problem for them because it reduces opportunity through reservations," says professor Anjali Monteiro, who co-mentored the project with fellow TISS professor KP Jayasankar.

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Disturbed by the denial of caste in the city and the growing silence around the issue, the project was designed to scrutinise attitudes and realities in what is arguably India's most cosmopolitan city.

Made over two-and-a-half months, the students and mentors first defined the scope of their individual projects. Some decided to peer into the issue of caste as it unfolded in their own backyards, exploring the biases inherent in the mid-2014 demand for a ban on beef and pork in the TISS canteen. Others decided to find pockets of caste conflict in unlikely spaces, such as Tamil Dalits in Dharavi and how they struggled to build a temple there.

"It is exciting to see that each film is thought-provoking and also intelligently explores how dominant culture overrides the concerns of Dalits and other minorities," says award-winning filmmaker Anand Patwardhan, who has himself explored communal and caste politics, in films such as *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011).

"Having often encountered the standard response in elite society that the real problem about caste is the country's reservation policy, it is refreshing to see here a diversity of approach covering often invisible discriminations caused by language, food norms, education, location and marriage. It's also interesting to see how much the technical standards have improved from the times when we began to make films decades ago."

Caste on the menu card

Focus: Caste and food;

Filmmakers: Ananyaa Gaur, 22; Anurup Khillare, 32; Atul Anand, 22; Reetika Revathy Subramanian, 25; Vaseem Chaudhary, 26



demanding that beef and pork be banned from the campus.

“We wanted to explore how certain choices are imposed on the masses, though staple foods are so different for different communities in the country,” says Chaudhary. “In the north-east, for instance, beef is a staple. And among the lower castes, meats such as pork are distributed on festive days as a mark of camaraderie.”

Eventually, both meats were banned on campus. And, earlier this month, consumption of most types of beef was banned across the state.

“Banning any food is an unhealthy practice, because it becomes reason for exclusion of a community on the basis of region, caste and religion,” says Chaudhary. “Banning a certain food practice takes away from that community’s existence in the city.”

Not Caste in Stone

Focus: Caste and religion;

Filmmakers: Firdaus Soni, 22; Keduokhrietuo Sachu, 25; Kritika Agarwal, 22; Prateek Shekhar, 23; Vaibhav B Sorte, 26

Café Madras is a tourist landmark but so is Dharavi. What else do they have in common? They both have large pockets of Tamils, but from totally different castes.

“In Matunga, people being served on banana leaves is part of the Brahminical culture,” says Soni. In the bylanes of Dharavi, she and her fellow students discovered another type of Tamil migrant, the Adi-Dravida community, with their own living space, temple and school.

Caste in Stone follows this little-known community, which migrated to Mumbai in the 19th-century, 25,000 families moving from Tirunelveli to Dharavi, fleeing casteist violence, discrimination and drought, says Maribhai (left), general secretary of Dharavi’s Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sangha. Here, they worked as tanners, labourers and drivers. In 1912, the Adi-Dravidas established a temple for themselves because “a village without a temple is unholy”.

“As we worked on the documentary, we realised just how clearly spaces in Mumbai are marked by caste,” says Soni. “There are no non-vegetarian restaurants in Matunga, and there are multiple statues of Ambedkar in Chembur. Because it is such a big city, we don’t even notice how present caste still is.”

Silence please!

Focus: Caste and education;

Filmmakers: Elisha Walia, 22; Faebitha Rahiman, 27; Nevin Thomas, 25; Shubhra Dixit, 28; Smita Vanniyar, 22

Caste is a small paragraph in history books,” says Keerthana (last name withheld), a Class 11 student at an elite high school in Matunga. “It’s a thing of the past,” adds another student.

It was this ‘gap’ in the teaching of caste equations that the documentary’s makers set out to explore, interviewing 15 students at a municipal Marathi school in Vashi (above) and at the



there is no connect to the present.

As a result, by the time a child is in Class 11, at the cusp of making decisions for herself, she is already dismissive about reservations.

“SCs comprise a little more than 16 % of the population, and have a reservation of 15.5%. Reservations are always given in proportion to population. But most people don’t even know this,” says Simantini Dhuru, director of the Avehi Abacus Project, which develops educational material.

Jaat Baaja Baarat

Focus: Caste and marriage

Filmmakers: Ashwin Nag, 30; Aditi Maddali, 23; Priyanka Pal, 24; Alia Sinha, 22; Robin Zutshi, 26

Marriage holds the institution of caste in place,” says Nag.

This documentary offers a peek into the lives of two inter-caste couples in the city — Chandrashekar Sankaran and Shanti Patel, an OBC from Kerala and an upper-caste woman from UP; and Rajesh and Bhavana (who go by only their first names), a Tamil Christian and a Maharashtrian upper-caste woman.

Both couples had married against their parents’ wishes because of the difference in caste, or perceived caste (since Christians are believed to have largely been lower-caste Hindus before their conversion).

In both cases, the two partners grew up in the same socio-economic class, but had to negotiate different customs after marriage.

In Mumbai, class takes precedence over caste in most cases, says Nag. Sugandhi Francis of the All India Democratic Women’s Association adds that cases of ‘honour killings’ still occur, such as one in Panvel in 1999 and another in Vasai in 2004 — highlighting the bipolar nature of the city.

Mula Vimutti (Pali for ‘Deliverance from Roots’)

Focus: Caste and work

Filmmakers: Deepti Murali, 25; Disha KR, 22; Kshitij Katiyar, 23; Nishajyoti Sharma, 28

This documentary follows Dalits Prakash Gaikwad, a research consultant, and Anita Pagare, a corporate social worker, who migrated to Mumbai from rural Buldhana and Nashik respectively, determined to reinvent themselves. They gain new identities and live in the city without the baggage associated with their lower castes.

“While Anita grew up in a Dalit village, giving her a secure identity, Prakash faced considerable discrimination while in a local college near his village, with other students asking him his name specifically to determine his caste or ‘put him in his place’,” says Sharma. “For both, Mumbai

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that identity completely. For now, both Gaikwad and Pagare take heart in the fact that others who have come to Mumbai like them have gone far and succeeded well.

Gaikwad already has a Masters in social work from TISS and plans to do a PhD; Pagare takes pride in the fact that there are now Dalit IAS officers.

Antar Bhaasha

Focus: Caste and language

Filmmakers: Ankita Bhatkhande, 22; Dinesh Mahapatra, 25; Eleanor Almeida, 23; J Vualnam, 23; Shuaib Shafi, 23

As a child, I was often told, speak 'pure' Marathi and not like a lower-caste child," says Bhatkhande, a Maharashtrian Brahmin. With a team made up of Keralites, Maharashtrian Catholics, Manipuris and Odiyas, the idea of exploring caste and language became intriguing.

The documentary traces how schools teach the upper-class or upper-caste versions of regional languages, leaving lower-caste students demoralised, implicitly excluded.

"Very valid questions were raised during the shoot, like who decides the standard... and why," says Bhatkhande.

She speaks of her own classroom experiences too. "In my college, there was a reserved post that was constantly being vacated, as one lower-caste professor after another left," she says. "In that sense, we wanted to show how we all contribute to the caste hierarchy."

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