

## **Not Caste in Stone**

Filmmakers: *Firdaus Soni, Keduokhrietuo Sachu, Kritika Agarwal, Prateek Shekhar, Vaibhav B Sorte*

### **Director's Note**

This film is a part of our Masters coursework in School of Media and Cultural Studies. Like every year the class decides upon a theme, groups are made and everyone works on the same theme. We realized that in so many years there had been close to no engagement directly with the issue of caste in the student films made in the department. Some of us felt that since these films are located in Mumbai and also become a part of archiving the city, it is important to engage with the experience of caste in the city. After several heated deliberations over the issue we all set out to work on this theme for our films.

In our group we discussed about looking at temple spaces as sites of power and sites where caste most visibly plays out. Following these discussions and suggestions by some friends we decided to look at Matunga's temple area as a possible site as it would also allow us to speak about the violence of caste and the sense of entitlement from the location of an upper caste space, as a space marked by tamil Brahmins and Jains. A neighborhood famous for filter coffee and butter dosas, with not a single non vegetarian restaurant or meat shop in the vicinity. A space clearly marked out by caste practices.

At the same time we also came to know about another temple in Dharavi. A 100 year old temple constructed by the Adi-Dravid Samaj migrants from Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu. We were confronted with two stories. One of upper caste tamil migrants in Matunga and another of dalit community tamil migrants in Dharavi. Both these communities with their respective temples and stories of migration.

We realised that these two temple spaces uphold very different histories, values and meaning. While for one community seemed to be replicating and reproducing the caste privileges that had been left behind in the village, for the other the temple was about survival in Dharavi and a production of a new history that would liberate them from the burden of caste that they had run away from in the first place. Bhau Korde, an activist working in Bombay, guided our first trip to Dharavi. As we entered Dharavi he pointed out the various neighborhoods, marked by their caste, region and community identities. (For example as we entered the area, we saw a huge statue of the congress leader Kamraj. In this area the main residents were the Nadar community from Tamil Nadu, K. Kamraj being the ex-CM and famous congress leader of their community.)

Bhau Korde introduced us to the newly elected temple committee chair of the Adi dravid temple; Maari Bhai. He told us in detail about the history of their community's migration to Mumbai more than a century ago to escape the drought and caste atrocities inflicted upon their people. These people mainly worked in the leather tanneries in Dharavi and over the years established

themselves as residents of Dharavi and Mumbai. The temple came up along the way, there are many stories about the coming up of the temple which is as old as the community, we get to listen to these stories in the film. It is a Ganapati temple, with a school on one side and a wall with Ambedkar's and Buddha's painting on the other.

The time when we shot the film was the time of the Ganesh festival. This added another layer to the narrative and in the background of the preparations for the Ganesh festival the history of the temple and the journeys of these people gets told in the film.

The film highlights the relevance of caste identities in lives of people in urban setups, The occupations that people get access to, their relationships with other communities, the importance of grand public celebration of Ganesh festival etc. everything gets marked with caste among other identities. One of the most thrilling experiences during the film was when the Ganesh procession of the Adi Dravid samaj passes through Matunga. The tensions and the assertion of this community can be felt when one is moving along with the procession through Matunga.

The film attempts to understand and capture the way in which marginalities are negotiated and the relevance of identities in that situation. We started off with the understanding of the temple as a site of caste violence but we ended up confronting a very different and complex reality as well.

The shooting was an overwhelming experience. We continuously visited the place and interacted with people before shooting the interviews. It took us a good amount of time to mix with the surroundings and the camera's existence was slowly forgotten by the people. Shooting then was not a problem. Also, we realized at an early stage that since the film stipulated to the area around temple, we would need a range of visuals to make it look interesting. So we went almost every day during the Ganesh festival to get as much as material. We shot the whole Ganesh procession to and fro which became the opening of the film.

One thing that nagged us during the process was the lack of discussion with women in the community and the neighborhood. Though finally we did manage to get some interviews, from which we used a voice over of two women and one interview, though we could have done better on that front.

In the end, personally for everyone the film has been an immense learning experience, in terms of the topic as well as the process of making a film itself. The film does not seek to offer anything conclusive but opens up spaces for questions and further discussions.'