

When research, activism and art meet: A conversation with film-maker Somnath Waghmare



In advance of his documentary screening at the LSE later this month, director Somnath Waghmare speaks to LSE's Professor Shakuntala Banaji about his film, [Chaityabhumi](#), and the inspiration behind it.

Shakuntala writes: [Somnath Waghmare](#) and I met at a conference in Pune in 2018 and have kept in touch ever since. During October 2023 he visits the Department of Media and Communications at LSE, to speak about his recent film, produced with Pa Ranjith, [Chaityabhumi](#). To contextualise this work, it is important to hear him discuss his background and how he comes to be working on the topics and issues that he's now exploring, and why as a successful scholar, he has also chosen to communicate through film as a medium.

Somnath: I was born in a small village called Malewadi in rural Maharashtra, a state in western India. My Dalit-Buddhist family are from a caste formerly treated as untouchables. My mother worked as an agricultural labourer. Both my grandfathers were bonded labourers. I lived in the Dalit caste ghetto of my village for 22 years, with almost no resources. Without the unending work I've put into getting an education, surviving this life would continue to be extremely difficult. I now have a Bachelor's in Sociology from Shivaji University, Kolhapur; an MSc in Communication Studies from Pune University, and an MPhil from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, and am a doctoral scholar at TISS, working on the topic of 'Caste, Cinema and Cultural Politics in Maharashtra: A Study of Marathi Cinema', which is closely linked to the work of some of the [doctoral scholars](#) in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE.



After attaining my Master's, I worked for a year and a half as a contract employee at the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune and as an intern with Amnesty International in Bengaluru. At FTII, I developed an interest in documentary filmmaking. Despite limited social capital and money, I made two documentary films. '[I Am Not a Witch](#)' (2015) is about witch-hunting in an indigenous Adivasi community in the district of Nandurbar in northern Maharashtra, and my second film, '[The Battle of Bhima Koregaon: An Unending Journey](#)' (2017) is a documentary that contextualizes Dalit history and its role in contemporary Indian politics. My ongoing project is titled 'Gail and Bharat', a documentary biopic of a noted activist and academic couple from Maharashtra, the late [Gail Omvedt](#) and her partner Bharat Patankar.

In discussing his background, Somnath also explored why he finds [Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar](#) and [Chaityabhumii](#) to be fascinating subjects; the challenges he has faced; and what he hopes that audiences who engage will learn from his film.

Somnath: Generally speaking, art, culture, cinema and education may seem like different fields, but they have a lot to do with each other. Cinema is a very important tool when it comes to building, shaping and reinforcing public opinion and perception. In the name of cinema, Indian cultural elite filmmakers who have caste and class capital use the artform and platform to perpetuate dominant caste culture and values that have contributed to the perpetuation of the caste system. Many documentaries filmed in India follow the same pattern. They use Dalits and Adivasis as subject-matter and make films that misrepresent their lives. There is little social diversity in the Indian documentary field.



Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is an even bigger leader and thinker than Mahatma Gandhi and his legacy is strong amongst the mass of Indians, but it's sad that Bombay's so-called secular cinematic world (Bollywood) ignores Dr. Ambedkar and his people's [Dalit human rights movement](#). In 1982 Richard Attenborough made a biopic film about M. K. [Gandhi](#) and devoted not even a minute of space to Dr. Ambedkar, thus revealing the ignorance of filmmakers at that time; and of academia and the researchers who were a part of that film's research. My documentary Chaityabhumi showcases how organisations and individuals in the Dalit movement independently arrange commemorative events at Chaityabhumi and reclaim this public space in Mumbai, otherwise dominated by the city's upper castes. I try to bring to light the history and cultural politics of how people commemorate Dr. Ambedkar's death anniversary, December 6 at Chaityabhumi, and its relevance in contemporary India. It explores how the Dalit community comes together to honour this day and the political implications the event holds for their identity and empowerment. Ultimately, the documentary examines the complex interplay of caste and public space

politics in Mumbai city.

As for the challenges I've faced doing this, the major problem of all Dalit filmmakers who come without privilege is *acceptance* from the world of mainstream Indian cinema. Our films deal with the real issues of Indian society and mainstream Indian cinema is not willing to acknowledge how important this kind socio-political context is for society's development. OTT platforms (streaming services), too, ignore our stories.

The second problem is economic resources for film production. Again, whole film production houses are controlled by dominant caste groups and they are not ready to fund films on Caste issues. If OTT platforms like Amazon Prime, Netflix or MUBI were to adopt diversity policies for Dalit filmmakers in India, it would help us to make more good films.

Knowing that he has worked with renowned film-makers such as Pa. Ranjith, it was interesting to hear more about Somnath's artistic reference points.

Somnath: For nearly eight years I've been making documentary films on shoe-string budgets. The field of documentary filmmaking can be very exclusive and has, in the main, ignored the issue of caste and Dalit lives. I started filmmaking after watching [Nagaraj Manjule's](#) film *Fandry* and then I started following the film work of [Pa. Ranjith](#), [Neeraj Ghayawan](#) and some Iranian film directors. I like these filmmakers' assertive storytelling. And I feel this is the best medium to tell our own stories from our Ambedkarite cultural perspective. In my state, Maharashtra, there is already good work done by Dalit writers in literature. So writers such as Namdev Dasal, Baburao Bagul, Bebitai Kamble, as well as Dr. Ambekar's academic / journalistic writings, help me to develop my political understanding.

Maharashtra's Dalit movement has been present for almost a hundred years. Most of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's anti-caste and Dalit human rights movement began in this land. Ambedkar himself stayed in Bombay/Mumbai for most of his life, and when he died on December 6, 1956, his last rites were done near the sea at Dadar, where his followers later built Chaityabhumi. Every year, [lakhs of Dalit-Bahujan across the nation visit this place](#) and pay tribute to their revolutionary leader. But the city's media and elite Mumbaikars generally show disdain for this peaceful event. So my aim is to take this subject's cultural and social assertion to a larger audience through the medium of

cinema.

This post represents the views of the authors and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

With thanks to Sommath Waghmare for the images used.