

US documentarist explores Indian caste system

In India, the caste system exists at the 'subterranean level' of society, and while nobody wants to talk about it everybody believes in it 'at some level or the other', says a US-based documentarist who is in the country to make a film on the caste system.

Sipping water in a sun-washed makeshift shop in one of the lanes of south Mumbai, Chirstina Voros, a New York-based documentarist and cinematographer, says: 'The reality or should I say the worlds of reality hit me in the beginning of my visit. In my attempts to gather and understand the caste system, I have realized that it is more insidious than racism in the USA. Here it exists at the subterranean level of society and nobody wants to talk about it but everybody believes in it at some level or the other.'

'In India, every dot on the map is different. After coming to India I have been to seven 'different Indias'. Imagine a 'jogini' (one who is wedded to a village deity) in Andhra Pradesh has a surname of god affixed to her children,' Voros told IANS as the harsh sun glinted on the camera lens, capturing the shimmering slivers of light playing on the tin roofed shops dotting the dusty lanes of the south [Mumbai](#) street.

Voros, working with the New York-based Migrant Turtle Films, a production house specializing in making thought-provoking documentaries in the US, is at present in India to capture the caste system.

Along with colleague and director Sergei Krasikau, Voros has been trundling the rocky roads into the hinterland of Maharashtra to unravel the caste structures. The duo is also trying to film the angst of the joginis of Andhra Pradesh, whom the sociologists have termed as 'ritualized prostitution'.

Krasikau, of Russian origin, concurs, saying, 'It is really hard to reconcile with what one reads in the newspapers and then face the reality. The billboard on the street is totally dissociated from the reality that peeps out of the hurricane lamp-lit houses in villages. People cook on fire and they are not going to switch to gas stoves etched out on billboards - at least in the near future.'

'Unlike in the West, people here live for families and communities. While probing the caste system, we found that it is so entrenched, complex and structured that it translates itself into everyday actions,' Krasikau observes.

Both of them have been criss-crossing Maharashtra's Beed district, one of the caste-ridden districts of the state, and are also planning to include the recent tragedy of the gouging of eyes of two Dalit youths in Nanded district by some upper caste people.

'It is surprising that in major metros everybody believes in caste but none blinks an eye in the face of such happenings,' Krasikau says, adding, 'This is where I find so much of contradiction in this country. In Andhra Pradesh, we found that a woman is wedded to an entire village. It cannot be strictly classified as polyandry also.'

According to Voros, 'Jogini is ritualized prostitution. We interviewed three females, including a 14-year-old who did not even know what she was undergoing. It is different from the devdasi system prevalent on the Maharashtra-Karnataka border.'

'One striking thing we found is that a jogini has a right to property. But a sense of exploitation fills them. A 22-year-old jogini whom I interviewed said that she has been unable to accept her fate, taking care of her sister and seven children. All the children have surnames either from the mother's side or suffix it with the name of god. But they hate it,' Voros says.

Voros did find several joginis claiming to be 'authentic jogini' with pride but in most cases, she says, 'I found bitterness in their lives. Otherwise, one of them would not have killed her daughter so that she does not grow up to be a jogini like her.

'The argument given by the woman was that men will always manipulate social customs and norms to suit their needs and entrap women.'

The production house, which has won awards and citations for its documentaries in prestigious film festivals like the Chicago Film Festival, the Woodstock Film Festival, the New Orleans Film Festival and the Montreal World Film Festival, is currently focusing on certain social aspects of India.

(Prabhat Sharan can be contacted at p.sharan@ians.in)

Prabhat Sharan (© IANS / India eNews)