

Caste: still alive and kicking in the city

- Special Correspondent



TISS's new web archive seeks to inform and participate the debate around caste in Mumbai

In a cosmopolitan city, people like to say caste is a myth, ancient history, made irrelevant by the blurring of identities that a global city allows. Yet anyone who looks closely will see that cities often have their own interpretations and manifestations of caste, creating and reinforcing oppressive structures that segregate people and deny others opportunities and access to resources.

Castemopolitan Mumbai is a new multimedia web archive created by the staff and students of Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) that focusses on caste in the city, its pervasiveness and its effects. It will seek to contribute to the debates around the subject, with a special focus on Mumbai, the birthplace of Dr. Ambedkar's anti-caste movement. Featuring the work of various artists, researchers and activists, it will launch in early October.

The archive is the newest addition to of a family of online projects produced by TISS, called DiverCity. "As with the other archives that we have created — on remembering the 1992 riots and Giran Mumbai, on the city's now defunct mills — the spine of this archive is a series of documentary films made by our Master's students in the media and cultural studies department," says Professor K.P. Jayasankar who conceptualised the archive along with Professor Anajli Montero. The six student-made films in the archive explore the pervasiveness of caste in the areas of food, marriage, education, work, language and religion. "Going beyond that, the archive is meant to be a space which explores the way in which caste is omnipresent in the city though we think of the city as being a great leveller," Prof. Montero says.

Aside from these six documentaries, there is a whole range of supporting material designed to broaden the discussion. The different sections include films from TISS, films from other sources, interviews, poetry and songs, videos, writings and other clippings, as well as links to other research done on the subject. Prof. Jayasankar says it is an exhaustive repository, but there is scope for it to grow. He says that that there are several factors that make such a project important. "First, it is a one-stop resource for researchers who can learn about the subject and then perhaps produce further and add to it. Secondly, while documentary films often present a problem from one point of view, locating it among other texts and other materials allows for an interesting interaction between all of them and creates a larger context and a broader discussion."

Given that documentaries on subjects like these often find limited audience and circulation, sharing them through a web archive was also a way to escape various regimes of censorship that may otherwise be encountered.

Castemopolitan Mumbai *will be available at castemumbai.tiss.edu from October.*

Other TISS projects include Remembering 1992 (mumbairiots.tiss.edu) and Giran Mumbai (millmumbai.tiss.edu).

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