

## Writing with Fire

Bravery comes in the form of gently smiling women brandishing smartphones in the new documentary “Writing with Fire.” The film shows a fight against great odds: a determined group of female journalists maintain India’s only women-led news outlet, working in a social environment built to marginalize them based on caste and gender. The women of the outlet *Khabar Lahariya* (‘Waves of News’), all from the Dalit caste (“untouchables”), are shown preparing the transition of their newspaper from print to digital even though many of their reporters don’t even have access to electricity at home.

Armed with their new smartphones, Chief Reporter Meera Devi (an imposing presence) and her team of dogged investigative journalists take on some of India’s biggest issues – exposing the relentless discrimination against women in their country and magnifying the voices of those who suffer from the oppressive caste system. They also directly confront stodgy government officials and party mouthpieces in their aim to get truthful news stories out in dangerous regions of their increasingly polarized country. They do this serious work partly on the fly but with a wondrous spirit of collaboration and good humor, with giggles spicing their private moments.

Meera is the veteran, touchstone, and mentor for her team, and in the film she is ably seconded by two younger colleagues, Shyamkali Devi and crime reporter Suneeta Prajapati. After intensive training with Meera, they and other young women, already more attuned to new technology, are now more imbued with journalistic principles and techniques.

Indian co-directors Sushmit Ghosh and Rintu Thomas worked on the film over five years and pulled off a casting coup in finding its trio of fresh and unassuming stars. The filmmakers also prove that they have a great camera’s eye, introducing us to lively and colorful sketches of Indian sites and landscapes. The picture is the first feature-length film by the co-directors, who also produced and shot it, while Ghosh also edited it (and perhaps also handled catering on the set).

Though released late last year, “Writing with Fire” was seen in only a few US markets, but its Oscar nomination last month has brought it new critical raves and renewed attention, enough for it to be re-released in some parts of the country. It will be on digital platforms (Vudu) at the end of March and later will be available in cinemas. Its initial discovery came early last year when it won two major awards—the Audience Award and Special Jury Award at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival. It has also won awards at more than 20 international film festivals and competitions across the world.

If I wanted to characterize this picture with one word (one heard too little these days) I would say “heartening.” A winner.  
(*This film is unrated and runs 93 minutes*).

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