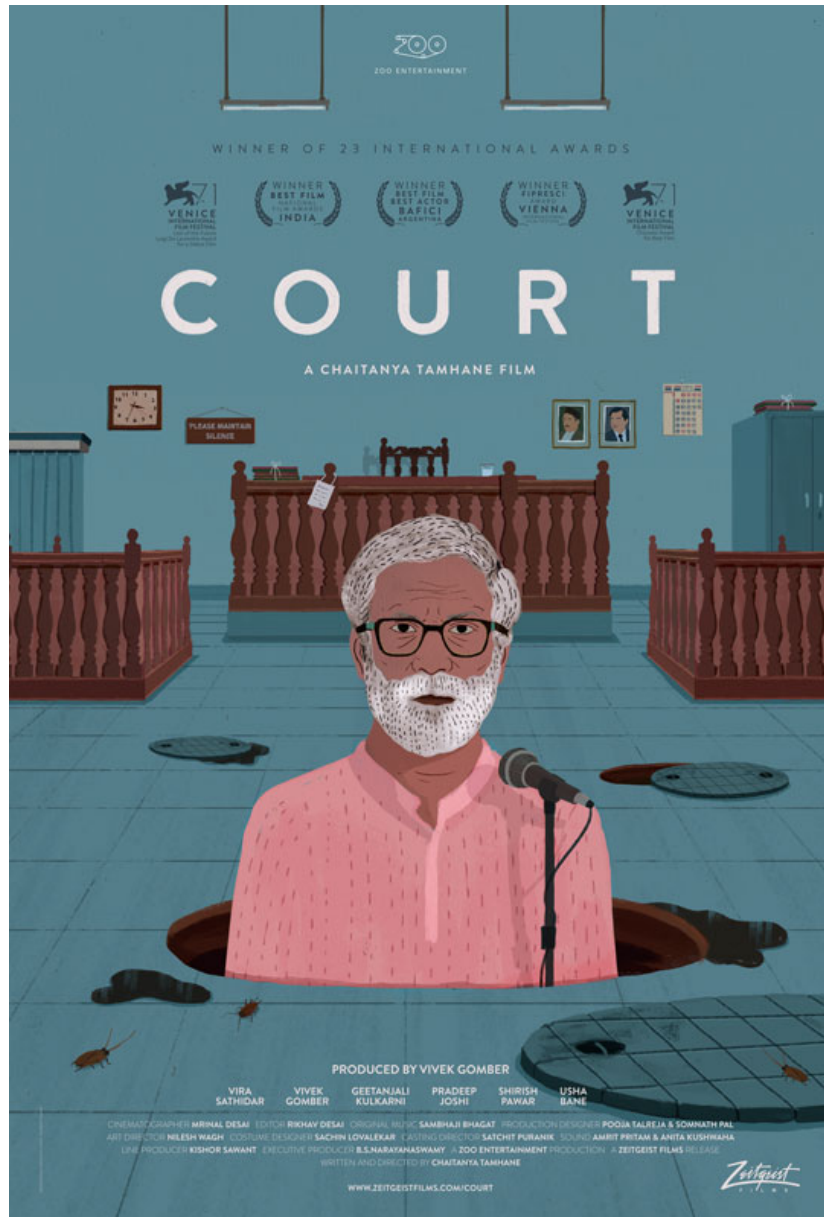


US PREMIERE AT NEW DIRECTORS/NEW FILMS MARCH 2015

**OPENS JULY 15 AT NEW YORK'S FILM FORUM
WITH NATIONAL RELEASE TO FOLLOW**



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COURT

A film by Chaitanya Tamhane

Winner of top prizes at the Venice and Mumbai film festivals, Chaitanya Tamhane's *Court* is a quietly devastating, absurdist portrait of injustice, caste prejudice, and venal politics in contemporary India. An elderly folk singer and grassroots organizer, dubbed the "people's poet," is arrested on a trumped-up charge of inciting a sewage worker to commit suicide. His trial is a ridiculous and harrowing display of institutional incompetence, with endless procedural delays, coached witnesses for the prosecution, and obsessive privileging of arcane colonial law over reason and mercy. What truly distinguishes *Court*, however, is Tamhane's brilliant ensemble cast of professional and nonprofessional actors; his affecting mixture of comedy and tragedy; and his naturalist approach to his characters and to Indian society as a whole, rich with complexity and contradiction. —New Directors/New Films

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I was surprised by my urge to explore the Indian judiciary. After all, so much has been done and said in the genre of courtroom dramas. But when I attended a nondescript lower court in suburban Mumbai, the sheer lack of drama, and the casualness with which life and death decisions were being made, was what sparked my imagination. Every face has a story of its own; the stenographer who disinterestedly types away all day, the peon who runs errands for a small bribe, the inarticulate lawyers reading out long, technical passages from outdated law books, the appellants who have probably spent years waiting for their case number to be called out. Amidst all this theatre, are the hopes and fears of ordinary people, who cling on to every word they can understand, as their fates are decided.

Although the film is set in very peculiar sub-cultures of Mumbai, the attempt is to explore the invisible fabric of a collective. The characters are constantly acting upon the invisible triggers of caste and class politics, patriarchy, and feudalism. The challenge for me was to lend dignity and humanity to these people, despite their flaws.

ABOUT CHAITANYA TAMHANE

Born in Mumbai in 1987, Chaitanya Tamhane is an English literature graduate. *Six Strands* (2010), his first short film, was screened at various international film festivals including Rotterdam, Clermont-Ferrand, Edinburgh, and Slamdance. In 2012, he was selected for the Berlinale Talent Campus at the Berlin Film Festival. *Court* is his first feature film. The film was awarded the Hubert Bals Fund from the Rotterdam Film Festival.

A CONVERSATION WITH CHAITANYA TAMHANE

What inspired you to tell the story of a trial in Mumbai, and how did you manage to craft a representation of the Indian court system?

The judiciary is an authorised but violent institution that metes out life and death judgments. It's one of those platforms, where otherwise bracketed people from across class and cultures, interact and entwine.

I was curious to explore the figures of authority involved in a trial: the judge, prosecutor and defence lawyer, who are themselves slaves to rules, protocol, and hierarchy. I very soon realised that these people come from the same families, the same socio-cultural context that the rest of us belong to. The only difference is, that they happen to be in a position of power. So in that way, the film also became a study of the society, the collective.

I started out by interviewing a lot of lawyers, activists, and academics. Their insights about the judiciary became the foundation of the script. I was also inspired by the trials of cultural activists across the country, who were persecuted for their ideologies rather than their actions. Apart from spending many hours in courtrooms, I referred to a lot of news articles, law books, and research papers, while writing the trial sequences of the script.

When it came to shooting these scenes, we wanted to maintain a certain distance and objectivity. Instead of fiction films of the genre, which often aim for a subjective experience, we referred to documentary footage of actual trials. Since you cannot get permission to shoot in an actual courtroom, we had to build a set, which recreated the atmosphere of a lower court. No photography or documentation is allowed in the courts, so the production designers had to work from memory and rely on the notes they had made secretly while attending trials.

Instead of drawing inspiration from other films or literature, I found the experience of attending actual trials in the lower courts of Mumbai far more enriching. Some of the stories unfolding in those rooms are indeed stranger than fiction. What made these stories unlike anything I had seen on screen was the unique cultural milieu of Mumbai they were set in. In that sense, COURT is almost a subversion of the classic courtroom structure as seen in films. Here, the documents are misplaced, the witnesses are vague, and everybody wants to get out of that courtroom as soon as possible.

The city of Mumbai is itself an important presence in the film. What does Mumbai mean to you and to the story you wanted to tell?

Mumbai is the city of mill workers, trade unionists, communists and socialists, migrants,

academics, journalists and teachers. I was born into a family, who you would call, 'the original inhabitants' of the city. In that sense, COURT is an insider's perspective of Mumbai, and especially the Maharastrian culture. This naturally guided a lot of our choices in terms of the costumes, casting, sound design, and the way we shot the film.

Each character in the film belongs to a different, and culturally peculiar reality of the city. These cities within a city co-exist in a densely packed metropolis and yet, they never overlap with each other. The film tries to depict these gradations whenever we see people outside of the courtroom. In fact, when we decided to show the public prosecutor's personal life, we tried to recreate a Mumbai that was part of my childhood memories, from the 1990s. And this is a Mumbai that does not exist anymore. The pace of transformation and so-called 'development' is so rapid here, that certain people and their Mumbai will soon become extinct. A few of the old chawls (the traditional tenement buildings that house the working class) that we shot the film in, were razed just two months later in order to make place for new high-rise buildings. So for me, COURT is also an attempt to capture the memory of some of these people, as they struggle to survive.

Beyond Mumbai, your film represents some of the defining realities of modern India, in particular the perseverance of the Caste system...

Caste is an invisible, unsaid force operating throughout the film. India's caste system is a little too complicated to be explained in this space, but let's just say that there is a constant game of surnames that's unfolding in the film. Surnames that represent the social stratification of the characters.

The communication breakdown and lack of comprehension that I experienced while attending trials, became an integral part of the court scenes. Although in theory, the Law of the Constitution is supreme, the official language of discourse during the proceedings is so arcane, that it is outside of the purview of most people.

Food also became an important metaphor for me to explore the caste and class divisions. Where people live and what they eat became an important tool to understand their place in society.

Can you tell us more about protest folk music in India?

Protest music in India was born as a reaction to British colonialism, and later became an offspring of the communist parties. In the last hundred years, Mumbai has been an arena for protest politics. Since the 1930s, artistes have sung protest songs and staged agit-prop plays.

The poet in the film belongs to the 'Dalit' community, a group that has been traditionally regarded as the 'untouchables'. His is a history of thousands of years of oppression and marginalisation. His character is based on the protest singers of the Dalit Panther movement of the seventies and part of a radical anti-caste movement.

Today, all these groups and the movement inhabit a diminished space. All forms of resistance (legal and cultural) are being neutralised and under constant state surveillance.

How did you find your actors, and how did you work with them?

I was very clear from the start that I did not want any faces in the film that audiences had seen on screen before. And non-professional actors also lend a certain sense of realism and truth to the characters, which was essential to this narrative. We had to bring the city of Mumbai to life, and we thought who better to do it than the actual inhabitants themselves. So apart from the two lawyers and the cop, the rest of the cast is mostly comprised of non-actors from Mumbai.

We auditioned about 1800 people from different walks of life, who had never faced the camera before. From teachers and railway workers to drivers and waiters, we met just about anyone who was interested in being in a film. After six months of intensive auditions, we shortlisted about 150 people who fit the parts in the script. Among them we found our final cast, and the interesting faces that did not fit any of the speaking parts, got cast as background actors. To make the non-professional actors feel comfortable with each other and with the lines of the script, we rehearsed extensively. We would also shoot only one scene a day, with an average of 30 takes per scene. On some days, we even went up to 60 takes.

Playing the part of the protest singer is Vira Sathidar, a democratic rights activist, who had never faced the camera before. Pradeep Joshi, a music teacher in a school for specially abled students, plays the judge. Usha Bane, who is the widow of a manhole worker, and has been subjected to many court proceedings during her husband's death, plays the manhole worker's wife.

COURT

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CAST

Narayan Kamble **Vira Sathidar**
Vinay Vora **Vivek Gomber**
Public Prosecutor Nutan **Geetanjali Kulkarni**
Judge Sadavarte **Pradeep Joshi**
Sharmila Pawar **Usha Bane**
Subodh **Shirish Pawar**

CREW

Writer & Director **Chaitanya Tamhane**
Producer **Vivek Gomber**
Cinematography **Mrinal Desai**
Editing **Rikhav Desai**
Music **Sambhaji Bhagat**
Production Design **Pooja Talreja and Somnath Pal**
Costume Design **Sachin Lovalekar**
Sound Design **Anita Kushwaha and Amrit Pritam**

India — 2014 — 116 mins — DCP
In Marathi, Hindi, English & Gujarati with English subtitles



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