



WRITING WITH FIRE

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Table of Contents

About the Film	3
Film Synopsis	3
How to Watch the Film	3
Note from the Filmmakers	4
Screening Objectives	4
Relevant Themes	4
Potential Audiences	4
Content Advisory	4
About Indie Lens Pop-Up	5
Background Information	6
Discussing the Film	8
Framing the Conversation	8
Discussion Questions	9
Potential Partners	10
Engagement Ideas	11
Additional Resources	12
Credits	13

ABOUT THE FILM



Film Synopsis

In the midst of a crowded news landscape dominated by men, the reporters with *Khabar Lahariya*—India’s only all-female news network—are taking it upon themselves to uncover their country’s inequities with intrepid determination. Armed with smartphones, tenacity, and wit, these fearless journalists work in regions that still see no women reporters. *Writing With Fire* follows this ambitious group of Dalit (‘low-caste’) women, led by their chief reporter, Meera Devi, as the team pivots from print to digital in order to expand their reach. They harness the power of YouTube and other online media platforms to reach audiences far beyond the confines of the team’s social standing in order to become the voice of those rendered voiceless. Their awe-inspiring efforts, be it on the front lines of India’s biggest issues or within the confines of their homes, are redefining traditional notions of power.

How to Watch the Film

Indie Lens Pop-Up Screenings:

February 26–April 11, 2022

Independent Lens Broadcast Premiere (**check local listings**):

Monday, March 28, 2022

Stream online at video.pbs.org:

March 28–April 26, 2022

ABOUT THE FILM

Note from the Filmmakers

When most print broadsheets in the world were uneasily adapting to the digital medium, we were witnessing rural women strategise to grow digitally in a highly competitive dominant caste, male-dominated news landscape and in doing so they were redefining how Dalit women are perceived in Indian society. So the work of Meera and her journalists becomes even more phenomenal, almost a David versus Goliath narrative. In telling this story, we create a narrative that allows the viewer to see Meera's world from within, intimately and respectfully, and experience a unique yet universal story.

— Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh,
Co-Directors and Producers, *Writing With Fire*

Screening Objectives

The film *Writing With Fire* follows the stories of women change-makers in India who are using journalism to hold leaders accountable to the people in their community. The women in *Writing With Fire* use journalism as a tool and to create change in their communities.

For your screening event, we recommend inviting local investigative journalists, activists, media-makers, and other change-makers who are challenging systems of hierarchy. People who identify as Black, Indigenous, Asian, Pacific Islander, Latinx, immigrant, women, or LGBTQ may all be interested in speaking about their personal experiences as change-makers in the community and discussing the different tools they use, which may include art, protest, and education.

Screenings of *Writing With Fire* present an opportunity to demonstrate that the caste system, patriarchy, racism, and other systems of oppression that have shaped lives for millennia can be changed. Key objectives for a screening event are to:

- reflect on the importance of the free press and the potential for independent journalists to transform communities;
- discuss ways to address gender, racial, and class hierarchies that limit equal opportunities and foster violence against marginalized people;
- equip communities with the tools to create change, negotiate with others, and break down barriers that divide people.
- provide a platform for change-makers—especially women of color and other marginalized groups—to share their vision and their work with your audience.

Relevant Themes

The film includes the following topics relevant to your event discussions:

- Caste system
- Civic engagement
- Democracy
- Digital journalism
- Free press
- Independent media
- Local journalism
- Media-making
- Sexism and patriarchy
- Social media
- Solutions journalism
- Systemic racism
- Women's empowerment

Potential Audiences

We invite you to bring together local community leaders, including:

- Journalists and media-makers
- Activists and community organizers
- Educators and students, especially from journalism programs and student newspapers
- Women, girls, and people of non-conforming genders
- Immigrant communities in the United States, especially South Asian
- Black, Indigenous, and people of color

Content Advisory

This program contains content that may be upsetting for viewers, including stories of gender-based violence, rape, and murder. Viewer discretion is advised.

ABOUT INDIE LENS POP-UP



Indie Lens Pop-Up is a neighborhood series that brings people together for in-person and virtual film screenings and community-driven conversations. Featuring documentaries seen on PBS's *Independent Lens*, Indie Lens Pop-Up draws local residents, leaders, and organizations together to discuss what matters most, from newsworthy topics and social issues to family and community relationships. Make friends, share stories, and join the conversation at an Indie Lens Pop-Up screening: pbs.org/indielenspopup.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION



Help establish context for the film by reviewing some background information with your event partners and/or guests before the screening. Facts from the film can be used as social media content to help you promote the event.

- **Khabar Lahariya**, which means “waves of news,” began in 2002 as a temporary project funded by a nongovernmental organization to train village women to write a newsletter. After the funding ran out, the journalists continued—specializing in independent, ethical reporting on issues in Uttar Pradesh, a rural state in northern India that is one of the most populous, but economically underdeveloped states in the country. In focusing on the issues and concerns of one of India’s most marginalized communities, the journalists of *Khabar Lahariya* are questioning the systems created by caste and patriarchy to keep these communities invisible. As an editorial policy, they hire women from marginalized communities who have themselves faced decades of discrimination. These journalists report extensively on issues of rural development, corruption, violence against women, and local politics—all through a feminist lens. Their reports on the issue of violence against women come from an astute understanding of the gender and caste structures within which such violence is situated. In 2016, *Khabar Lahariya* made the transition to digital journalism. In the five years since, the organization has uploaded more than 10,000 news reports on its [YouTube page](#) and has garnered nearly half a million subscribers.
Source: theguardian.com/film/2021/jul/29/stop-patronising-me-and-give-me-an-interview-the-female-journalists-speaking-up-for-indias-poor
- The term **ethical journalism** refers to journalists’ commitment to following a code of ethics whenever they are reporting on a news story. The Society of Professional Journalists, for example, recommends four basic principles for ethical journalism. First, “seek truth and report it” in order to ensure accuracy of information and sources. Second, “minimize harm” to sources or readers. Third, “act independently” in order to serve the public instead of special interests. And finally, “be accountable and transparent” about journalistic choices.
Source: spj.org/ethicscode.asp
- The journalists of *Khabar Lahariya* regularly report on issues of **gender-based violence and sexism**—all while having to navigate these systems of oppression to produce their work. *Khabar Lahariya* also believes in diverse definitions of impact. Telling the story of a violence survivor who may or may not be able to obtain justice and telling the story of a victim of dowry murder are examples of the role that independent, feminist media can play. Sexism, or patriarchy, limits and controls opportunities for women, girls, and people who do not identify as male. In a patriarchal system, people who are not male have a difficult time finding justice for harms perpetrated against them, such as rape and domestic violence. Few even try to seek justice for

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

fear that they will face consequences for reporting the abuse. For example, in 2020, only 14.3 percent of survivors of domestic violence in India sought help, and only 7 percent reached out to a relevant authority—the police, a doctor, a lawyer, a social service organization—for help.

Source: thehindu.com/data/data-domestic-violence-complaints-at-a-10-year-high-during-covid-19-lockdown/article31885001.ece

- **India's caste system** is an ancient hierarchical social structure that ranks people into social classifications. Outlined about 3,000 years ago in legal texts about how society should run, the caste system has been used by various political powers in India, including the Colonial British, to divide and discriminate. At the top of the Indian caste system with the most privileges are the Brahmins (priests and teachers), followed by the Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), then the Vaisyas (traders, farmers, merchants, artisans), and at the bottom, the Sudras (laborers). Another group of people, the Dalit, are considered “untouchables,” so impure that they are not included in the caste system. “Untouchability” has officially been outlawed by the Indian constitution, yet it still shapes the everyday lives of Indian people, especially in rural India.
Source: Thapar, R. (2004), *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*, University of California Press.
- Women, girls, and other non-male genders who are born into a low caste have to navigate multiple **systems of oppression** to live their daily lives. Multiple forms of discrimination can intersect, compounding the negative effects on an individual's rights and opportunities. This concept is commonly referred to as “intersectionality.” For example, all Indian women face discrimination for their gender, and all Dalit people face discrimination for their caste. However, Dalit women experience some of the most restrictive and violent discrimination, more so than Dalit men or Brahmin women.
Source: womankind.org.uk/intersectionality-101-what-is-it-and-why-is-it-important
- Scholars in the United States have likened the Indian caste system to **systemic racism** in the United States. Isabel Wilkerson, author of *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* (2020), says the word *racism* is insufficient to describe the artificial hierarchy that affects people of color, especially Black people, in the United States. Racism in America, she argues, operates more like a caste system because “it determines standing and respect, assumptions of beauty and competence, and even who gets the benefit of the doubt and access to resources”
Source: npr.org/2020/08/04/898574852/its-more-than-racism-isabel-wilkerson-explains-america-s-caste-system
- India is the **world's largest democracy**, established when it won its freedom from British colonial rule in 1947. Nearly 900 million voters are eligible to cast ballots in India, and Indian elections go on for weeks in order to collect all ballots. First elected in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was re-elected in 2019 in a landslide victory. His political party—the Bharatiya Janata Party, commonly known as the BJP—supports the idea of Hindu religious

supremacy. In recent years, the country has witnessed growing support for Hindu nationalist ideals, as well as violence against religious minorities, especially against Indian Muslims.

Source: npr.org/2019/04/14/709439733/with-indian-elections-underway-the-vote-is-also-a-referendum-on-hindu-nationalis

- **Journalists play an important role in democracy** by serving as a government watchdog. In recent years, increasingly bold authoritarian governments who do not like the scrutiny of journalists have rendered the profession ever more dangerous. Multiple human rights organizations determined that in 2017, 326 journalists worldwide were imprisoned for their work, a substantial increase from the previous year. During the last decade, 341 journalists have been killed in more than 40 countries while carrying out their work. Some were killed by cross-fire, but the vast majority were murdered in reprisal for their reporting. India, under Prime Minister Modi's administration, is considered among the most dangerous places to be a journalist, as are countries where authoritarianism reigns or is taking hold, including Turkey, China, Egypt, Mexico, Brazil, Pakistan, Russia, Hungary, the Philippines, and many more.
Source: theguardian.com/media/2018/dec/05/threat-journalists-highest-level-10-years-report; cpj.org/2004/12/the-toll-1995-2004
- As of January 2021, nearly 60 percent of the world's population had access to the Internet, and increased efforts to provide broadband connection to rural and low-income areas are narrowing the digital divide across populations. **Rapid Internet expansion has dramatically changed the way people access and share information** with each other, which has had a democratizing effect on the news industry. Now anyone with an Internet-enabled mobile phone can create and circulate information. News outlets, once reliant on costly infrastructure to produce and distribute stories, now compete in a sea of information sources online, and journalists historically excluded from newsrooms have more opportunities to share their work with the masses.
Sources: itu.int/hub/2020/12/more-urgent-than-ever-universal-connectivity-to-bring-3-7-billion-people-online; cjmd.com.um.edu
- **Social media has faced growing criticism** for its role in proliferating nationalist ideals worldwide, especially in India. In particular, Meta (formerly Facebook), along with its messaging app, WhatsApp, has been accused of promoting extremist content, hate speech, and misinformation to its Indian users. Meta has blamed the issue on a shortage of language-specific fact checkers. Others, however, criticize the company for being lenient with the Modi administration and its allies to avoid upsetting its relationship with the Indian government.
Source: npr.org/2021/10/23/1048746697/facebook-misinformation-india

DISCUSSING THE FILM



An audience discussion with a facilitator or guest speakers is a popular way to engage your local community in the film. These suggested tips and questions will help you plan your discussion.

Framing the Conversation

Your events are an opportunity to hear from local change-makers who are speaking truth to power. Inviting local activists, journalists, and media-makers will help your audience relate the stories of the *Khabar Lahariya* journalists to your own community. Reach out to women leaders, especially from immigrant, Black, Indigenous, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Latinx communities, to talk about their experiences in creating change and holding powerful people accountable.

Please note that the film contains stories of violence, rape, murder, and worker abuse. These are difficult topics to address, especially for those who have survived similar experiences. However, they are important to address in order to help audiences understand the reality of the people featured in the film. We recommend having local resources available for anyone who would like to contact free community support. You can also designate a few comfortable and quiet places in your venue for people to step away from the film if needed; if your event is virtual, invite participants to take breaks as needed. Some resources include:

- **National Sexual Assault Hotline:** call 800.656.HOPE (656.4673) or chat online with a trained staff member who can provide you confidential crisis support. Free and confidential.
 - Chat English online.rainn.org
 - Chat español rainn.org/es
- **StrongHearts Native Helpline:** call 844.7NATIVE (762.8483) or **live chat**. Free, confidential, and culturally relevant support for Native American and Alaska Native teens and young adults experiencing dating abuse and sexual violence. Available every day from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. CT.
- **(LGBTQ+) Youth Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention Hotline:** call 866.488.7386. The Trevor Project's trained counselors understand the challenges LGBTQ+ young people face. They will listen without judgment. All of your conversations are confidential, and you can share as much or as little as you'd like.
 - Text "START" to 678-678
 - **Chat with a counselor**

DISCUSSING THE FILM

Discussion Questions

You could invite a moderator to pose questions to the audience and facilitate a conversation or arrange for a group of guest speakers with relevant experience to respond to the questions. Here are some suggested discussion prompts.

1. *Writing With Fire* tells the stories of women using journalism to create change in their community. How did it inspire you to create change in your own community?
2. How is *Khabar Lahariya* different from other media organizations? How would you describe their mission? What do you hope other media organizations learn from them?
3. How did the journalists in the film hold powerful people and institutions accountable to the members of their community? How do you promote accountability in your own community?
4. What did you understand about the caste system in India and how it shapes the lives of Dalits (labeled “Untouchables”) in the system?
5. Does the caste system in India relate to systemic racism in the United States? What are some similarities and/or differences in these systems?
6. How do the experiences of Dalit women within the caste system differ from those of Dalit men? How do sexism and caste intersect to affect the everyday lives of the women featured in the film?
7. What did you hear Meera and the other working women in the film say about the pressures to stay home instead of advancing their education or career?
8. How did the journalists describe their work? Why was it important to them?
9. “I believe journalism is the essence of democracy,” Meera says. What does her statement mean to you?
10. How would you describe Meera’s negotiation style? What makes her an effective reporter?
11. In one scene, Suneeta interviews the family of a woman violently murdered. Two male journalists are also there covering the story. What differences did you observe in how the two news organizations approached the story?
12. What opportunities does the switch to a digital medium present to the journalists? What are the drawbacks of digital media?
13. How do you see violence against marginalized groups represented in news media? What are the effects on society of these representations?
14. What examples of mentorship did you see in the film? How does mentorship have the power to change someone’s life?
15. What have you heard about social media being used to recruit nationalists online? When extremists use a company’s product for recruitment, should the company be held responsible? If so, in what ways?
16. Meera says in the film: “I tell my daughters [that] their caste identity will always follow them. This is how our society is structured. But it is important to keep challenging the system.” What do you tell children and youth about the systems that affect our lives?
17. Can you relate to any of the experiences of the journalists in the film? If so, which ones? What did you learn from watching the film?
18. After watching the film, do you agree that diverse representation among newsroom staff is important? If so, why?

POTENTIAL PARTNERS



Many change-makers rely on media to help communicate their theory of change to the community, and *Writing With Fire* screening events offer local change-makers the opportunity to speak about their work. In exchange, you can ask them to invite their followers to the event. We recommend connecting with two to three strong partners to help you build your event.

- Invite **independent journalists** to discuss their work reporting on community issues and government accountability. You can connect with local journalists or search journalism associations, especially serving women and people of color, including:
 - Find your community in the Solution Journalism hub: solutionsjournalism.org/hub/find-your-community
 - Check out regional chapters of Pen America: pen.org/pen-across-america
 - Connect with the National Association of Hispanic Journalists: nahj.org
 - Reach out to the National Association of Black Journalists for local members: nabjonline.org
 - See the Native American Journalists Association for Indigenous-led news sources: najnewsroom.com/about
 - Get in touch with the Newsmedia Alliance to see if there is an expert located near you: newsmediaalliance.org/about-us
- Change-makers from **women's empowerment and human rights organizations** can speak about their work to liberate people from oppressive systems, like the caste system, racism, and sexism. They can help to localize the stories in the film, and provide additional tools about how to create change in the community. Search your personal networks for recommended local leaders or connect with some national networks that may help you find change-makers near you:
 - See if there is an Amnesty International chapter near you: amnestyusa.org/about-us/who-we-are/activist-groups
 - Local women's organizations or leaders from organizations such as Women for Women would be especially relevant: womenforwomen.org/about/our-team
- Ask **students and professors from journalism schools** at a nearby university to share their perspectives on the power of journalism and to participate in a discussion about the future of journalism. Consider asking professors to invite their students to attend the event for extra credit. High school journalism teachers and students may also be interested in speaking about their introduction to the profession.
 - Review the Council of Affiliates at the Association for Education of Journalism and Mass Communications (AEJMC): aejmc.org/home/about/council-of-affiliates
 - Check out the PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Lab to find high schools with journalism programs: studentreportinglabs.org/schools

ENGAGEMENT IDEAS



Incorporating an activity into your event can help make it more memorable. Any of these suggested engagement activities would be a good complement to an audience discussion.

- Coordinate a **workshop** to teach journalism, media literacy, or change-making skills, such as community organizing and how to negotiate with others. We recommend partnering with an educator or trainer that has experience hosting short skill-building workshops. Ask your journalist and activist partners for recommendations. You can also share resources before and after your event to help equip people with tools to make a difference. For ideas, check out the library curated by [Witness](#) and this [one-page guide](#) to media literacy from the Association for Media Literacy (NAMLE).
- Audiences can take meaningful action by **diversifying their news sources**. The film shows how important followers are to the work that journalists are able to do to hold powerful people accountable. Ask your audience members to follow, watch, and share work by journalists that are underrepresented in mainstream media. Challenge your guests to take stock of where they get their news and seek out the voices that are missing from their news feed. To follow the work of journalists in the film, subscribe here: youtube.com/c/KhabarLahariyaDigital.
- Help **fund change-making** by donating to nonprofit organizations, buying subscriptions to independent journalists, and placing paid advertising in publications. Your money goes a long way toward helping change-makers get the supplies they need to continue their work. Learn more about becoming a sponsor of *Khabar Lahariya* here: khabarlahariya.org/partner-with-us.
- The **mentorship** that the *Khabar Lahariya* journalists provide each other is transformative for the women and their careers. Encourage your audiences to become mentors themselves to support new change-makers in creating an impact. Mentor can help connect you to opportunities to mentor youth, mentoring.org, and Digital Women Leaders provides mentoring especially for women journalists, digitalwomenleaders.com.
- **Create media** about a local change-maker to help share their work with the larger community. For example, you could make a short film about a local change-maker to play before the screening of *Writing With Fire* or its broadcast on public television leading up to your event. You could also coordinate an exclusive interview with a change-maker and a local radio or television host. Post any media you create online with the hashtag: #WritingWithFirePBS for the filmmakers and film participants to view.
- When journalists of color, women journalists, and journalists from marginalized communities post their work online, too often they receive negative and even abusive feedback from online commenters. Be part of a positive movement for change by **adding a supportive comment** or an encouraging message to their posts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Learn more from organizations and media that relate to the film *Writing With Fire*.

Media

- pbs.org/independentlens/documentaries/writing-with-fire – The PBS *Independent Lens* website for the film contains more information about broadcast and Indie Lens Pop-Up screenings.
- khabarlahariya.org/category/english – The *Khabar Lahariya* website has an English-language page with recent stories from journalists in the film.
- pbs.org/independentlens/documentaries/storm-lake – *Storm Lake* is a film presented by *Independent Lens* that also focuses on the issue of the changing news media industry.

Organizations

- iwmf.org – The International Women’s Media Foundation offers safety training, reporting trips, and byline opportunities tailored to female journalists.
- amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/freedom-of-expression – Amnesty International is a human rights organization that defends journalistic freedom of expression.
- cjr.org – The Columbia Journalism Review covers the journalism industry.
- spj.org – The Society of Professional Journalists is dedicated to promoting the free practice of journalism and high ethical standards.

Credits

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GUIDE ADVISORS

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Co-Director, Producer, *Writing With Fire*

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Co-Director, Producer, *Writing With Fire*

Dr. Aishwarya Nair

Consultant, *Writing With Fire*

INDEPENDENT LENS

Independent Lens is an Emmy®

Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00

PM. The acclaimed series, with Lois

Vossen as executive producer,

features documentaries united by

the creative freedom, artistic achievement,

and unflinching visions of independent

filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the

series is funded by the Corporation

for Public Broadcasting, a private

corporation funded by the American people,

with additional funding from PBS, the John

D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation,

Wyncote Foundation, and the National

Endowment for the Arts. For more visit

pbs.org/independentlens.

Join the conversation:

With #WritingWithFirePBS at [facebook.com/independentlens](https://www.facebook.com/independentlens)

and on Twitter

[@IndependentLens](https://twitter.com/IndependentLens).

ITVS

ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit

organization that has, for over 25 years,

funded and partnered with a diverse range

of documentary filmmakers to produce and

distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates

and co-produces these award-winning films

and then airs them for free on PBS via our

weekly series, *Independent Lens*, as well as

other series through our digital platform,

OVEE. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for

Public Broadcasting. For more information,

visit itvs.org.

CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private, nonprofit corporation created by Congress in 1967, is the steward of the federal government's investment in public broadcasting. It helps support the operations of more than 1,500 locally owned and operated public television and radio stations nationwide. CPB is also the largest single source of funding for research, technology and program development for public radio, television and related online services. For more information, visit cpb.org, follow us on Twitter [@CPBmedia](https://twitter.com/CPBmedia), [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/CPBmedia) and [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/cpb) and subscribe for other updates.

