Indian eye-opener

Jai Bhim Comrade (2011)
Directed by Anand Patwardhan

Jai Bhim Comrade represents a 14 year labour of love and will by the documentary film maker Anand Patwardhan. This epic three hour film was given a rare screening at the Institute of Contemporary Arts on 20th March 2013 as part of this year’s Human Rights Watch Film Festival. It is due for a further screening at the Sheffield Documentary Film Festival in June 2013. As those who attended the Q&A session after the film was shown at the ICA will know, Anand Patwardhan is an unashamed socialist. He has made in this film an eye-opening account for those unfamiliar with India’s severe caste discrimination.

The film commences with the events of 1997 that led to the police shooting of 10 unarmed Dalit protesters in the Ramabai Colony in Mumbai. The Dalits are those from the oppressed caste known as the ‘untouchables’. The film goes on to shine a light on the socially destructive stratification of the caste system that has existed for over 2,000 years.

Patwardhan traces events that followed the 1997 shootings of the Dalit protesters which saw the suicide of the Dalit singer, poet and activist, Vilas Ghogre, who found the deaths of the protesters too much to bear. The film seeks to illustrate the dignity within the Dalit community. There follows compelling individual testimony and riveting footage as Patwardhan’s camera moves through the dusty alleys of the Ramabai Colony and into Maharashtra villages. Given the connection to Vilas Ghogre, there is a particular focus in the film on those musicians and poets who continue to pass on their songs of ‘upliftment’ and lament. The songs invariably urge their listeners to continue in their struggle for dignity as they blend dance, politics and humour.

The songs recorded in this film recall Dalit heroes of the past, most notably the political leader Bhimrao Ambedkar, also known as ‘Dr Ambedkar’. The incredible and progressive story of Dr Ambedkar forms a centre piece of the film. Disturbingly the memory of Dr Ambedkar and his significance is shown as being appropriated and subverted by right wing nationalist political parties seeking the Dalit vote.

Dr Ambedkar rose from the Dalit caste to gain PhDs from Columbia University in the USA and then the London School of Economics. He was also called to the Bar in England before returning to India to seek to represent and act as an advocate for his caste. He is perhaps the least well known of the three barristers, Gandhi and Nehru being the others, involved in India’s move to independence from the colonial rule of Britain. It is striking that Dr Ambedkar, a man from the lowest caste for whom it is deemed education should not be permitted, was chosen by Gandhi to write India’s new constitution. One of the memorable Dalit songs of ‘upliftment’ about Dr Ambedkar heard in the film will resonate with readers of this magazine ‘My barrister is coming home’.

The scope of Patwardhan’s film is stirring. In this respect it is reminiscent of similarly consummate and lengthy documentaries such as When the Levees Broke by Spike Lee and The Battle of Chile by Patricio Guzmán. The film is presently only being screened at film festivals such as in Sheffield. Patwardhan, who made the equally engrossing 1985 film Bombay Our City, seems presently content for his films to receive their main screenings and distribution within India. A wider release can only be hoped for.

Tim Potter

Race aware

Lives; Running
By David Renton
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After a year in which sport has been hugely prominent, most obviously through the London Olympics, Lives; Running is an unusual book which provides a deeply personal narrative of the author’s experiences of running both competitively and recreationally.

The descriptions of early expectations of – and indeed realised – success in middle distance running at school bring the reader into a private world where the joys of achievement and pain of injury impact heavily in a context where great emphasis is placed on sporting prowess, through peer and family culture. The author however interjects interesting facts and analysis of a sport for which he remains clearly passionate, most significantly of the oft-forgotten rivalry in middle distance running between Steve Ovett and Sebastian Coe that developed in the late-1970s and which reached its peak at the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

Fascinating detail is provided about those two individuals’ backgrounds and experiences and which in particular furthers a degree of insight into Coe’s trajectory from ungracious loser to Ovett in the 800m Olympic final, to Tory MP and then ultimately to crowned glory as the Chair of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) and beyond.

As the currently shallow discussion about the ‘legacy’ of the London Olympics proceeds, it is refreshing to read an account of sport by someone who was active in the important critique and attendant activism surrounding the Games.

The contributions of such individuals, as people passionate about sport but also about real accessibility and participation will be essential as the memories of London 2012 fade, the corporate Olympic juggernaut moves on and cuts in public funding for leisure services translate.

In essence however Lives; Running is a memoir of one individual’s relationship to sport and the power of the same to ultimately provide straight forward enjoyment, far from the madding crowd or otherwise.

John Hobson