



© Courtesy Drishyam Films

# Newton

## Amit V Masurkar

**Producer** Manish Mundra, Pramila Mundra. **Production company** Drishyam Films (Mumbai, India). **Director** Amit V Masurkar. **Screenplay** Mayank Tewari, Amit V Masurkar. **Director of photography** Swapnil S Sonawane. **Editor** Shweta Venkat. **Music** Naren Chandravarkar, Benedict Taylor. **Sound design** Niraj Gera. **Sound** Anish John. **Production design** Angelica Monica Bhowmick. **Costumes** Sachin Lovalekar. **With** Rajkumar Rao (Newton), Anjali Patil (Malko), Pankaj Tripathi (Atma Singh), Raghubir Yadav (Loknath).

Colour. 106 min. Hindi, Gondi.

**Premiere** February 10, 2017, Berlinale Forum

Newton is a stickler for principles – whether with respect to his unusual name or the not entirely orthodox way in which his arranged marriage has been handled. But because he doesn't immediately come across as a nit-picker, he's given the job of volunteer election worker and entrusted with a mission that demands the utmost flexibility if it's to succeed. Newton is flown by helicopter into the jungle. The village where he's to make sure that the election is carried out properly turns out to be a democratic stress-centre, where he must keep devious military personnel and oddball bureaucrats in check – even as the voters, the very people the whole thing is about, remain strangely absent. The Adivasi – as the indigenous people of India are called – are wise to keep their distance from this staged spectacle of democracy and put up resistance with a cunning game of hide-and-seek. Newton remains true to his principles. When a foreign election monitor arrives, the tide turns in his favour – but only temporarily.

With a feel for the special, multifaceted humour of his compatriots, Amit Masurkar succeeds in making *Newton* into a black comedy about the pale spectre of democracy in dark times.

*Dorothee Wenner*

## To find humour and order in chaos

When political discourse becomes dull, democracy is in danger. When I voted for the first time, I thought my job was done. I had surrendered my destiny to the hands of a stranger and expected him to bring about change. It took me a while to realise the difference between democracy and electioneering and to understand that true democracy will come only when people become political beings and not mere voters. *Newton* is a dark comedy about an idealist in a less-than-ideal world. India, which boasts about being the world's largest democracy, takes elections rather seriously, and in conflict areas, it becomes an opportunity for the state to show its 'tough love'. As *Newton* tries to find order in chaos, we find underlying elements of humour and absurdity. I have structured the film around *Newton's* three laws of motion – the film begins with inertia, develops momentum in the middle act, and ends with an equal and opposite reaction.

Amit V Masurkar

### „The conflict is helping displace people from their land“

*You had a very unusual starting-point for your story. Please tell us how it all began.*

**Amit V Masurkar:** One afternoon, I was typing random words into the computer, thinking something would trigger a new idea. One of the words was 'Constitution.' It caught my fancy and I downloaded the Constitution of India. The preamble itself is so beautifully written that I got gooseflesh. The gap between what is written in the book and how it is implemented in reality is huge. So I set out to write a film about democracy. But I didn't want to write about politicians. The only day a common person feels part of democracy is the day s/he votes. So the film was set in the polling booth on Election Day. To make it more interesting, the booth was set in a conflict area, where the conducting of elections itself was a challenge. And so the premise was born – a rookie clerk on election duty tries his best to conduct free and fair elections in a remote booth in the conflict-ridden jungles of Chhattisgarh in Central India, despite the apathy of others around him and the looming fear of a guerrilla attack.

*Most Indian filmmakers avoid political subjects, as it could mean trouble when the film is released, or mean having to battle an often-unreasonable film censor board. Why did you choose a political subject so early in your directing career?*

I chose to address a political subject because I feel deeply about it, and wanted to draw attention to the issue. In Chhattisgarh, where the film is set, a war has been raging for decades between Communist guerrillas, known as Maoists, and the Indian state. The indigenous people, the Gondi Adivasi, who live in this jungle, are forced to take sides between these two powerful entities or face the repercussions. They are not allowed to have a third view and their basic human rights are being violated every day. The discovery of minerals and iron ore in the jungle has intensified this struggle, as large mining conglomerates want the land where the Adivasis live to be vacated. The conflict is helping displace people from their own land. It was a challenge to show this through the film, especially because I didn't want to make an intense, politically charged action film, but a simple, accessible story

about chaos and order, with shades of dark humour. And I was lucky to meet Manish Mundra who, after a single meeting, decided to back the film.

*Newton's central irony suggests that democracy can be implemented only by force – whether by the earnest clerk Newton, or the practical commandant Atma Singh. How did your script evolve?*

Democracy appears to be a better form of governance than the others because it makes us feel that we are in charge. But in reality, we are not truly free. If any government, anywhere, wants to make your life a living hell, there is nothing you can do to stop it. Both *Newton* and *Atma Singh* are pawns of a system that will eventually use them and throw them aside. I wrote the initial screenplay in English, intending to send it to script labs, but it was not selected by any script lab. After my co-writer, Mayank Tewari, and I researched the film in Chhattisgarh, we reworked it together, and he rewrote it in Hindi, reshaping the film, apart from the dialogue. We were in the NFDC Film Bazaar's Co-Production Market [in Goa, India, -Ed.], but that was after Manish Mundra's Drishyam Films was prepared to come on board with the full budget, so it was useful for the contacts, including sales agents, and we hope to finalise one soon.

*What were the biggest challenges of shooting in the jungle and with tribal groups?*

We shot the film in and around the mining town of Dalli Rajhara, on the fringes of the Maoist-controlled jungle. Since we had a large army of actors in camouflage, carrying fake guns, there was always a danger of getting mistaken for the real paramilitary and getting ambushed. We were very careful to make it known that we were a film crew and had no other agenda. There is a scene where a journalist asks one of the Adivasi voters whether he believes his life would change after the election. The answers weren't planned and the voter replied that it wouldn't. The calm, innocent and assured way in which he answered made me choke as I watched the scene on the monitor, and I couldn't control my tears. It pushed me to work harder to make this film.

*How did you teach yourself to make films?*

I started in 2002, when I was twenty. Since I had no mentor, I have seen the emergence of the Internet age of filmmaking. Mine is the first generation that used the web to learn about filmmaking, download movies, blog, make contacts. Digital technology has made filmmaking more accessible and this is the best time for anyone to make films. The audience for indie films is certainly growing in India. The producers have made their money on the low-budget *Sulemani Keeda* [Masurkar's feature film debut from 2014, -Ed.] through Netflix and other web-based platforms.

*For someone who hasn't been to film school, your evolution from your debut feature Sulemani Keeda to your second, Newton, is tremendous. In between, you wrote for lowbrow TV and films like the Great Indian Comedy Show and Murder 3, as well as for well-regarded directors like Shoojit Sircar and Shashanka Ghosh.*

I became a screenwriter because I wanted to direct, and no one else would write a script for me. All the scripts I wrote with those directors never got made! Since I was an outsider in the Mumbai film industry, I did what I had to in order to

survive. I am grateful to people in Bollywood who hired me to work on these projects. When I realised that I was banking on other directors and producers to realise my dream of making films, I decided to take matters into my own hands. Inspired by Robert Rodriguez, I made a list of friends who would help me, and locations I had access to, and wrote a film around it.

*What are the some of the films you find inspiring?*

Werner Herzog's *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* is one of my favourites, and it was the reason I always wanted to shoot a film in the jungle. Francois Truffaut's *Pocket Money* is another film I have enjoyed several times. I also like Indian art-house films of the 1970s and 80s, like *Arvind Desai ki Ajeeb Dastaan* (directed by Saeed Akhtar Mirza), *27 Down* (directed by Awtar Krishna Kaul) and *Om Dar-B-Dar* (directed by Kamal Swaroop). Lately, I have grown fond of American mumblecore films like Joe Swanberg's *Drinking Buddies* and Aaron Katz' *Quiet City*.

*Interview: Meenakshi Shedde, January 2017*



© Sunil Borkar

Amit V Masurkar was born in Bagalkot, India in 1981. He studied Engineering at the Manipal Institute of Technology in Karnataka, India from 1999 to 2002. He then worked as an assistant director on films made for television, before writing comedy sketches for TV and film screenplays starting in 2003. From 2003 to 2006, he also studied History at the University of Mumbai. *Newton* is his second feature film.

## Films

2014: *Sulemani Keeda/Writers* (89 min.). 2017: *Newton*.