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Abstract

Understanding Indian documentary film as aesthetic practice and as a set of historical traditions has usually taken second place to political and ideological judgments about filmic significance. However these judgments usually refer to the Indian context exclusively, and ignore the wider global context. We can distinguish two broad trends in the history of documentary film, one that critiqued naïve realism and treated the cinema as a means of self-empowerment for the masses, and the other, that regarded the masses as the object of modernization practices. Both these trends have a shared history, of course, namely, the rise of the masses as a political force, which posed the problem of how the masses/“the people” should be represented, as subject or as object. Assumptions about realism flowed from the historical resolution of this issue in a given context, and changed quite slowly. In the Indian context, they provided the basis for a system where the funding and circulation of documentaries occurred within a complex web of identity and patronage. These assumptions are increasingly coming under scrutiny, due to the pressure of at least three developments: market forces that foreground popular appeal rather than verifiable fact; historical events such as the emergence of the Hindutva documentary that mobilize the presence of invisible worlds to political advantage; and the growing influence of global circuits of funding and exhibition, along with a proliferation of more diverse local spaces, that provide room for a greater range of artistic practice. This article, written as a conversation, discusses these developments and offers some arguments about the ideology and aesthetics of the documentary cinema.

Keywords

Indian documentary, documentary form, secular realism, aesthetic practice, postcolonial culture

Introduction

The two of us have been in conversation about matters mediatic for some time, and are involved in a project to compile interviews and essays on the Indian documentary film, a project assisted by a grant from the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA). One of us is an academic who has never made a film, and the other is both a writer and a filmmaker. We have tried to make our differences productive in what follows. We seek to crystallize some of the things we have been thinking about, and about which we broadly

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agree, as well as those issues on which we differ, sometimes quite a lot. What we present is an artifact of “mixed media”—a spliced email conversation occurring over some weeks re-staged as a real-time conversation, put on paper.

Two Histories of the Documentary Film: Parallel Realisms

Arvind

Let me start by saying that what was most important about the project of documentary filmmaking when it began is no longer so relevant, or at least, not in the same way. The *raison d'être* of the documentary was its distinction from the fiction film, and therefore, its claim to be mediating reality as it really existed. “Realism” was a weapon for the documentary in the early twentieth century, but in a very specific battle, which is not the same as we face today. In the social context that was taking shape after World War I, realism was a weapon not only against Hollywood and the impact of mass media, but also against the putative ignorance of the masses. Socialist realism of course became influential after the October Revolution, which artists used to show how capitalist habits of perception had turned people into things, and commodities into living persons. This was something filmmakers depicted in different ways; think of Eisenstein or Vertov.

So there were at least two key documentary traditions. One used cinema to mobilize the masses, and the other was a liberal tradition arising in the West, with filmmakers like John Grierson making documentaries to improve the condition of the masses. While both of these involved new forms of social control and behavior modification, they represent two broad trends in the history of documentary film. The former regarded the masses as the object of modernization practices, while the latter critiques naïve realism and treated the cinema as a means of self-empowerment for the masses. Both these trends have a shared history, namely, the rise of the masses as a political force with the French Revolution, an event that posed the problem of how they should be represented, as subject or as object.

This is a rough and ready characterization. My point is to try and indicate what socially influential ideas are at work, rather than provide an exhaustive account of historical facts. Hence I am highlighting the tradition against which filmmakers saw themselves to be working.

The dominant trend was one of treating the masses as object rather than subject, partly in reaction to the fear of socialist contagion. In this connection it is relevant that George Grierson, whose films and writing circulated widely in India, was influenced by Walter Lippmann’s book *Public Opinion* (1922), a book that was clear in its distrust of mass democracy. For Lippmann, since the masses were not equal to the challenge of democratic rule, well-educated intellectuals had to take up the slack. Grierson probably saw documentaries as a tool for elites to educate ordinary people and make them more fit for democracy. This would not have been surprising for an enlightened Englishman of his day.

But it is apparent to most filmmakers today, and to educated audiences, that the reality that media refer to is not external to the media; it never was. As such, both of the historical trends in the documentary need to be rethought. What we have are mediatic codes and conventions that help distinguish “reality” from “fiction,” but these have been deconstructed and exploited so much that they no longer have the same persuasive power. Maybe we can say that the extensive media manipulation during the two Gulf Wars—which inaugurated the end of the Cold War—marked the downturn of the career of old-style

realism. At any rate, it is doubtful whether documentary filmmakers can invoke realism in the uncontested way Grierson did. Documentary filmmakers could think of themselves as legislators then, saying what was what and telling people what they ought to think, but today they are more self-consciously interpreters.¹ They now have to indicate whose reality matters, and why. We usually decide between different versions of reality not simply by weighing evidence, but as well by using standards we are not always aware of. Hence, we look to documentary films to make us aware of the political implications of different aesthetic rules being used to judge reality. The question is, if the concept of realism can no longer be a weapon in the way it used to be, how should the weapon be refashioned? Or is such a concept-weapon not feasible any longer?

Paromita

Both these broad trends of the early twentieth century have had at least one common result: ironically, although the form of the documentary is supposed to be democratic, the context in which it is produced and circulated is frequently patronage-based. This patronage may come from many quarters—the government, other social or political organizations—but it exists outside the marketplace. Therefore, it also locates the documentary outside the marketplace and over time, that influences the practice of documentary quite strongly.

Although the Soviet tradition of documentary produced some powerful and landmark films, the most obvious example being Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), I think the Griersonian idea of the documentary as a tool for democracy has perhaps been the most influential idea in the history and practice of documentary film, globally and definitely in India.

Grierson was involved in setting up various propaganda outfits—in England at first and then at the National Film Commission in Canada (later the National Film Board) in 1939. James Beveridge, who was his associate for the latter, then came to India to help run Burmah Shell's documentary unit (1954–1958) and, later, to start the Jamia Millia Mass Communication Research Centre in 1982–1983, whose emphasis has been on the technical and political education needed for documentary production. Hence, the influence of his ideas has been rather direct.

There are three ways in which I think the Griersonian's understanding of documentaries being for a higher purpose and therefore, of higher value, than the fiction film, shaped the ideas and practice of Indian documentary—whether in Films Division or outside it in the “independent space” pioneered by film collectives like Yugantar, Samvaad, Odessa, Screen Unit and individuals like Anand Patwardhan,² among others, from the mid-1970s onwards.

First, Grierson's displeasure with discussions about aesthetics, his preference for actuality-based forms and his dislike of elements of the fiction film being brought into documentary, created a dominant idea of a/the documentary aesthetic. He called it the creative treatment of reality—but with not too much emphasis on creative! There was a stated dislike of what he considered an over-engagement with aesthetic ideas, something he saw as artistic self-indulgence and criticized the Soviet filmmakers for. A concern with aesthetics and form, he felt, took away from the documentary's *raison d'être*—social upliftment. To this end, the documentary needed to be strongly grounded in realism, avoiding the habits of fiction—for instance he felt that an “individual” person being shown in the documentary, reflected the tendency of fiction—having characters and protagonists—whereas people in a documentary should function more as representative of a class or group identity (Morris, 1987).

Second, leading from the idea of documentary having a higher purpose, there was the evolution of the documentary filmmaker, somewhat like a legislator as you have said, as a messianic or revolutionary figure authorized to speak about “reality”—usually assumed to be a higher or more urgent reality. Third, the removal of documentaries from market circulation—until the 1930s, documentaries in India circulated exclusively in the way fiction films did, and with the same unpredictable fate as fiction films. Grierson pioneered the non-commercial screening of documentaries in schools and colleges. His idea was that the films should be taken to the people, for they might not choose to see those films in cinema halls on their own. In Britain and Canada, these films were still shown in cinema halls alongside fiction films, as well as in non-commercial screenings, to increase their popularity.

But in India, the idea of “higher purpose” became conflated with the idea of nation building (hence legislative) and the non-commercial. So, starting with the compulsory screening of Films Division³ documentaries in theaters, to movement-sponsored screenings⁴ later from the 1970s, the documentary was always shown outside a mainstream or even niche market. True, cinema halls are a market setting; but the Indian Government’s Films Division documentaries were never announced in advance, so one never knew what one would see. In this sense, the contractual relationship between viewer and film, where one paid for—or at least chose to see—a given billed experience, was absent with documentaries.

Documentaries made without government support, from the mid-1970s, but especially after the mid-1980s, circulated exclusively in alternative circuits—colleges, arts spaces, film societies, NGO supported screenings—on the basis of this half-articulated idea of legitimacy associated with a “higher purpose.” This is still the primary mode of circulation for documentaries. For a number of these circuits, given their genesis, the documentary’s purpose is most clearly identifiable when related to a list of pre-determined progressive topics, rather than through a political approach open to self-criticism. Along with that it signals this political-ness via the form that is employed in the filmmaking. The form is of an activist, political documentary in which people represent their group identities, and the focus is on an “issue” or protest movement. There is a discomfort with presenting subjective material and individual, creative or poetic elements are avoided or minimized. This form of filmmaking, often proposed as a “people’s form,” therefore becomes significant in itself and becomes a badge of a politically higher purpose—a significant form.

For several decades these were the reality-based or agit-prop influenced forms, that were easily categorized as the political film. So while, as you rightly point out, this notion of realism as a political weapon and the related idea that artistic purpose dilutes political work, no longer goes uncontested, a certain unease continues to surround documentary films that use stylistic elements related to fiction and experimental or popular cinema. Even critics, at least in India, seem to be more reserved when responding to documentaries that foreground an aesthetic or artistic interest. Perhaps they feel that these are less easy to categorize because they do not meet familiar and established codes of the heretofore legitimate documentary aesthetic and require more active, maybe even individual, decisions about their political value.

This is the implicit context in which Indian filmmakers practice, and it is also the context—political, aesthetic and material—that a number of filmmakers strengthen, challenge, flourish in, struggle against and modify, seek to transform, via their choice of film form. That is to say, the ways in which filmmakers engage with realism—whether by altering its arrangement, undermining its verisimilitude through various interventions (fiction, animation, performance, narration, poetic styles) or through introducing various parallel layers of realism—reveals the refashioning of the concept-weapon of realism along with a constant reformulation of ideas of the political and how to influence it (or derive influence from it).

Secular Realism and Theological Realism

Arvind

Perhaps realism became familiar first of all as a kind of state speech, through photography and colonial surveillance, and later with cinematic truth telling during war-time. For example, there was the compulsory screening of documentaries as a practice that started as propaganda newsreels to boost morale. Such forms of communication would have been considered necessary during a national emergency when the whole population had to be mobilized to support the war effort. In fact, we can regard the era of state-led national development, which in my view began to wane in the late 1970s, as one long period of emergency, when leaders like Nehru argued it was vital that the government commandeer resources and curtail dissent to accelerate economic growth, and “catch up” with the West.⁵ As such the documentary in the post-Independence period in India might be seen above all as a kind of “emergency communication.” It would also account for their association with the performance of a civic duty, but one that was to be avoided if possible. Independently-produced documentaries usually preserved this sense of being an emergency communication even when they were critical of the state. The difficulty, as you indicate, was that it tended to discourage inquiry into what other versions of reality might be at stake.

A proper historical record would be important in any elaborate discussion of these questions, but the history of the documentary in India is mainly told through the somewhat slender second-hand accounts we have, and with little reference to the films themselves. Not only are the bulk of the documentary films made during this time (1947–the present) hard to find, the National Archives in Delhi have virtually nothing in their files for the post-Independence period. This is surprising because the investment in institutions relating to cinema was considerable—in addition to the Films Division, the National Film Development Corporation, and educational institutions like FTII (Film and Television Institute of India, based in Pune), there was the Department of Field Publicity, and the Directorate of Audio-Visual Publicity, both of which utilized cinema. It has to be said that this is a curious predicament for scholars when dealing with such a recent period, and with state institutions that take pride in their activities. Artists and intellectuals often identified with the state and its role in defining the task of nation building. For example, M.F. Husain drew Indira Gandhi as Durga during the Emergency, and Shyam Benegal made pro-developmental films like *Ankur*, *Manthan* and *Nishant* through the Emergency and beyond, mostly with NGO money, by the way. So even those on the Left thought the main challenge was to attack feudalism, which they assumed the state was also opposed to. State power was itself opposed but not analyzed, beyond regarding it as the tool of class interests. For documentary filmmakers, it was a blind spot.

Paromita

I think your last point has a strong bearing on perceptions around the documentary. This is to say that, until the 1990s, the primary engagement with politics did not really question or complicate the notion of nation building, or subvert the idea of issues of “national importance” even if these were addressed from a point of view alternative to the state’s or to give voice to those who were seen as voiceless in these debates. This may be why the documentary tended to follow some sort of pan-Indian template, which began to break down when independent film practice, which began in the 1970s, intensified and proliferated from the 1990s onwards, with the coming of video and later digital film. But there was an

implication of political legitimacy, which was connected to speaking about matters of national importance, and to an aesthetic that embodied this legitimacy.

If we look at documentary history as the narrative of a dialectical relationship between a documentary aesthetic and political legitimacy, I believe it will generate very productive questions about democracy and how citizens and ruling elites invest in it.

We could pose several questions with respect to this:

1. If there is a legitimizing process, which allows films using what I referred to earlier as *significant* form(s) to claim documentary status and to circulate visibly, what does this legitimacy imply? What—or who—is it legitimizing? Does it set those who are making and approving the films apart in status from the audience?
2. Are there discernible groups using forms that are not purely reality-based or which do not conform strongly to the canon of progressive topics? If there are, then what sorts of groups are these and why do they choose to depart from the significant form(s)? Surely, it is not a binary of people with two sets of politics following two approaches to realism, but rather a range of engagements—across the political spectrum—with realism and the politics of truth-telling. For instance, we have seen a lot of feminist filmmakers use fictional or performative elements. Fictional and experimental film elements were widely present within independently-produced LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) films in the diaspora and later in India. Once the funding of films on queer issues began, however, these forms were soon replaced by more realistic and observational documentaries.⁶ And then of course there is the documentary universe of Jain TV/VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) videos made for the Hindu Right and specifically for the Ram Janmabhumi agitation, like *Bhaye Prakat Kripala*.⁷ The descendants of this particular aesthetic are India TV and Star News programs about supernatural phenomena and sex-scandal stings. What does this rather tangled web of stylistic connections say about what or who these groups are responding to, politically?
3. Conversely, are there discernible groups of practitioners uneasy with creative/imaginative treatments of reality? For instance there have been protracted arguments within the documentary film community along the lines of “we are activists, not artists” in the 1990s—an ongoing argument that seems to have arrived at some sort of uneasy resolution. In initial interviews with people who have served on juries and selection committees, there also seems to be some discomfort with decisions about films that do not conform to a more familiar convention of realism (and activism). What are the concerns and reservations of those who are uncomfortable with more individualistic forms—and is there something that binds these reservations?

Arvind

I agree the JK Jain videos made for the VHP, such as *Bhaye Prakat Kripala* (which translates as “The Merciful [Lord] Appeared”) are very interesting, and it is worth discussing why. These Hindutva campaign videos are probably the most widely viewed and popularly recognized films of documentary status in India, at least recently. They may not be recognized as documentaries by most filmmakers, but it is hard to know what else they should be called. For example, *Bhaye Prakat Kripala* has news film footage, and voiceover accounts of real events. It connects the past to the present, and reports what is claimed to

be injustice. However, it also shows things not usually available to viewers, such as images of the infant Lord Ram giving *darshan* to the watchman at the Babri Masjid in 1950. These events are re-staged, but that did not seem to compromise the film's authenticity.

These videos have the kind of opening graphics of the globe and the logo of the "reporting organization," in this case the Hindu swastika, and a banyan tree, symbolizing the VHP. The soundtrack contains the kind of fast-paced, quasi-martial music you find on television news shows, although without drums and bugles, that viewers would have become accustomed to from the time of World War I propaganda films onwards. And they contain authoritative male voices conveying the news.

In these videos the tropes of cinematic realism are used to mirror the masses back to themselves. We see crowds surging and battles being fought, against the Mughals and, "later," against the police around Babri Masjid. This has elements of agit prop, but a more direct predecessor is perhaps Soviet cinema, and its use of film for popular mobilization—something that most documentary filmmakers in India did not actually imitate. The difference is of course that the cinema is used to blend historical fact with Hindutva mythology to create a kind of theological realism. And the motif of "emergency communication" justifies assaults on Muslims and on the presence of Muslims in Indian history. The Left in India often assumes that the term "movement" belongs to it, but that is, fortunately or unfortunately, only their opinion. The Hindutva videos are graphically showing us a people's movement, and we know that these videos were in fact an important part of their campaign.

Paromita

It would seem that in overtly proof-driven, agit-prop influenced forms—whether *Bhaye Prakat Kripala* or *Ram ke Naam*—where filmed material functions as proof of a good or evil reality, and where the understanding from the film, or the understanding it seeks, is a conclusive one, the credulity of an audience is a foregone assumption. It is understood, by filmmaker and audience, that no one will doubt the veracity of what is being shown, as long as it is shown, even if old-fashioned discussions of objectivity and subjectivity still persist among audiences. While both these filmmakers—Anand Patwardhan on the one side and the VHP on the other—are involved in a similar exercise, they obviously employ very different methods of formal proof, arising from an understanding of their audience's relationship to belief.

What I think is interesting to explore is, which are the aesthetic tropes of realism or authority that the VHP video films and allied products take up, which we might usually relate to these significant forms of documentary? We might then talk to the producers about what the relationship of these choices is with the idea of an authoritative aesthetic.

Also, how, in the interplay of all these aesthetic strategies might we be able to isolate the equations of "realness" with authority, and imaginative treatments of reality (using elements of fantasy, myth or popular forms) with unreliability (either perceived by viewer or willfully suggested by filmmaker)? How are all of these really a debate about truthfulness?

Arvind

Indeed, how are we to disentangle authority from reality in the image? We can note a tension in our ideas about the truth of images. On the one hand, Anglophone debates are influenced by the Judeo-Christian

ban on the image (I am thinking of the Second Commandment—*thou shalt not worship graven images!*) shared by Islamic traditions. Truth cannot be shown, only heard or abstractly conceived, in this understanding. On the other hand, what we call Hinduism treats vision as a privileged means of access to the divine. What is represented and publicly shown is assumed to be inherently worthy, in this other understanding. The image therefore either exemplifies social norms or reminds us of the world above us, that has more power than anything visible around us. In either case, images do not bear a one-to-one relationship with the perceptible world. They embody social norms or extra-social, theological power. The documentary tradition of depicting reality, as such, including truths that may challenge prevailing norms, involves a third understanding of representation—I would call it secular realism.⁸ Probably most people would recognize it today in India. But it coexists with other functions of the image. Images can also show what is invisible, through the power of the artist. How can the documentary filmmaker treat the invisible creatively and remain in dialogue with secular realism?

Gharanas of the Visible and the Invisible

Paromita

Perhaps the question is, how can the understanding of documentary tradition expand to include practices which are interested in treating the invisible creatively, as much as or more than, practices interested in connecting visible evidence?

Perhaps tradition or lineage can also be retrospective rather than ordained—a sort of genealogy. While Indian cinema is part of a global story, I believe there is also a kind of Indian voice and style, influenced by things other than the received documentary tradition, or perhaps responding in specific ways to that tradition.

I felt this powerfully while watching the work of S.N.S. Sastry,⁹ a filmmaker who worked in Films Division in the 1960s, a time strongly influenced by Jehangir Bhowmagary, who served as a Chief Producer at FD in the mid-1950s and then went on to be the Chief Advisor on Films to the Information and Broadcasting Ministry until the late 1960s. Bhowmagary worked hard in his time to give filmmakers great creative freedom. One of them, Sastry, made films which combined diverse styles in his filmmaking, favoring what we would today call a remix style, as well as using the interview in ways I connected to strongly, and feel are also present in my work. Though I had never seen Sastry's work until more than half way into my working life, I would identify my work (and the work of some other filmmakers as well) as being part of that genealogy.

Similarly even if a filmmaker like Anand Patwardhan is not influenced by a filmmaker he overlaps with, like S. Sukhdev,¹⁰ we can see traces of the latter's approach in the former's work.

So perhaps it is interesting to trace these genealogies and speak about influence in a more diverse and diffused sense, an implicit *gharana*,¹¹ rather than in the sense of being a disciple-viewer. Eventually these *gharanas* can only be implicit, partly because documentary filmmaking has developed more as an individual art, not one practised within an industry, like television, or the studio system; partly because the history of documentary has made certain separations between those who worked before Indira Gandhi's Emergency (1975–1977) and those who made films later, which prevent or cloud a sense of

linkages between these generations of filmmakers; and partly because for a very long time political ideology and means of production, rather than formal practice, have been the categories through which the history of documentary has been traced and received.

Arvind

Cinema was obviously seen as a potent medium that could stir up trouble, and hence required strict controls. So the government was the certifying authority for quite a while in India (as in many other countries). The implications of this history of censorship are surely under-explored. The outcome of the decades-long sponsorship of those 20 minutes of Films Division (FD) footage before every feature film perhaps gave audiences a wary attitude about documentaries; on the other hand, many good films were made. Whether this “led” to the next generation, or the next generation was “generated” through more “global” circuits is worth asking. Anand Patwardhan’s influence is probably more than most Indian documentary filmmakers in recent times, but perhaps the influence of other filmmakers like Ritwik Ghatak¹² and Mani Kaul¹³ should also be inquired into; their interest in Indic modes of perception has surely created more subtle and long-lasting effects. Other filmmakers are also being rediscovered now, in the way that you suggest.

Given how little we know about previous generations of the Indian documentary film, any historical account will be incomplete. The documentary form is a global form, and it is harder to provide an “Indian” history of it in the same way that one does for feature films. I am not saying that an India-centered story is desirable for the feature film industry either; just that there is a difference of degree that is significant.

Also, is it relevant that state sponsorship was so important for recognition as either a documentary filmmaker, or as a “parallel cinema” director? For example, someone like K. Balachander¹⁴ in the south was making films that would have qualified for NFDC¹⁵ funding. But he did not need it, because he made commercially successful films, and thus never came to the attention of Anglophone critics in India, for whom commercial success put a question mark against the quality or socially progressive character of a film or filmmaker.

“Parallel cinema” was not documentary, although some filmmakers like Mani Kaul did straddle the boundary. Mani Kaul himself did interesting things with the aesthetics of the image, using it against the voice, for example in *Siddheshwari*, so as to question where truth lies, and how it might be represented adequately.

Documentaries and parallel cinema shared two key features. First, the requirement that cinema needed to be a positive agent of social change, and second, state sponsorship. The government was thus associated with cinema that made strong reality-claims—and it is very interesting that such films were not only not usually profitable, but that this became a virtue: such films were not supposed to be economically viable. Is this a sign that the understanding of documentaries in India was bedeviled by a critical culture that was beleaguered, elitist and unimaginative?

Today when documentaries seem to have “taken off” in the Indian context, their audience is more global than ever before. The funding is certainly more diverse, and perhaps more global too.

Paromita

I want to address, first, the point you made about influence.

How does one develop a conversation about influence in a field that has, to date, documented and acknowledged traditions of practice so little? Whether in film criticism, film schools or, to a lesser degree, the film community's contextualization of itself, there is little sense of documentary history—almost a refusal of it. In other words, how do you discuss practice, when the history of the documentary as an aesthetic or arts practice is constantly obscured and the significance of a documentary is often judged by its relationship to political ideology?

Looking at the many threads of practice that have co-existed over the years, it is remarkable that even out of the very clouded history of filmmakers working within Films Division, which is not a history in strong circulation, the names of Pramod Pati¹⁶ and S.N.S. Sastry, experimental, personal, open ended and exploratory in style, although political in concern, are much less recalled (generally) than a figure like S. Sukhdev, who worked in various forms, but is usually connected with a more realistic, political statement-driven filmmaking about issues more definably related to development and politics. There is more literature devoted to Sukhdev than to other notable filmmakers who preceded the independent filmmaking of the late 1970s onwards.

I am not sure if we can extend these questions to the fiction films of the parallel cinema—although there too, a social realist aesthetic did dominate. But as an aside, I think it is very interesting that documentary and fiction films made outside the commercial mainstream were never thought of as together being a parallel cinema (which would have been accurate). In some way I think that definitely impacts how we look at the history of documentary, as not quite within the history of cinema.

Some of the context in which we receive these traditions includes the fact that the history of Indian documentary is not told as a global story—as you point out. So the primary form that is echoed and traced publicly is always through the fixed lens of certain ideas of revolutionary zeal or social change. A case in point would be the sudden rise in interest in Indian documentary within academia after the anti-censorship protest festival *Vikalp/Films for Freedom* which took place in 2004.¹⁷ While it was obviously an interesting moment for the community of filmmakers, it makes me curious that the history of this practice can only be told through this sort of frame—as being a political event, rather than (also) the frame of formal development. I am curious, also, about how this connects to the idea of censorship, rather than subversion, as a legitimizing factor. How does a documentary assume significance because it comes into conflict with the CBFC,¹⁸ something that is seen as a political event, an activity of the front lines—and almost never examined as an aesthetic issue or event.

Global and local circulation of documentaries has increased in the last 20 years, along with the production of documentaries. There are also a number of types of circuits—mirroring the diversity of practices and their relationship with legitimacy and politics I think. A question worth exploring is whether there are ways in which these local and global circuits are more intimately and intricately linked.

This can also be said for funding—that there are diverse sources of funding, both local and international, which value different documentary practices, and an increasing presence of European broadcasters funding Indian documentaries.

It may be an overstatement, but there are periods when imaginative, idiomatic forms flower and periods when more reality-based or classical forms again become prominent. It is not that one is supplanted by the other, but rather that these two formal approaches co-exist with different intensity and visibility. In addition, it seems, each dominates the other in alternation. For instance, you see the 1960s

as a time when formal approaches multiply in Films Division under Bhowmagary. These then lose traction and are replaced by *verité* and agit-prop forms, searching for a cinema that will be “a voice for the people.” With the coming of video, and then digital formats, you see again a proliferation of forms using fictional elements, which then give way to an emphasis, currently fueled by European broadcaster funding, on character driven, observational documentaries which will have the seamlessness of pure fiction while being made up purely of documentary material. Why does this happen and what makes it happen?

Also, connected to your example of K. Balachander, though tangentially, is a question that is important to explore. Why is there not more localized, creative documentary activity especially in local languages—or if there is, why do not we hear much of it; why, even if a documentary pertains to a local issue, is it always seen in pan-national or international terms?

Arvind

Okay, but rather than swing between two artificial poles of pure Indianness and pure globality, can we say that the documentary has always had a more cosmopolitan character in India, in terms of its funding and audience, and that this has increased of late. This is even true of the documentaries produced by FD and NFDC—they may not have been popular, but they were not as culturally specific as, say, the song and dance-laden feature films.

So some questions in this context:

1. What can we learn by thinking about Indian documentary as a global artifact rather than a national one? To regard it as global fills in what are gaps in a more nation-centered narrative, and we need not strain so much to connect the earlier filmmakers with the present-day ones perhaps. Efforts to bring in the wider context should not assume “globalization” began just a few years ago, or that the colonial, national and neoliberal-global phases are so neatly separated from each other.
2. Today it is the market at least as much as the government that certifies “documentary” status. What difference does this make, or has this made? There are no simple answers, no doubt, but it is worth discussing how this might inflect ideas of the “creative treatment of actuality.” It can also provide critical reflection on the era we have left behind.
3. For whom is the category “documentary” most useful today, given the widespread blurring of genres in mass media? One sees slices of dramatized reality in feature films which can be pretty punchy, e.g., references to contemporary politics and culture (as in recent Hindi films such as *Page Three*, directed by Madhur Bhandarkar, 2005, or *Dabangg*, directed by Abhinav Kashyap, 2010), whereas those films billed as documentaries gain their biggest audiences in India via TV and get assigned sub-prime time-slots. Is the category popularly perceived as distinct from news and journalism?
4. And then we have the explosion of news channels, and the growth of sting videos—should we say that these are developments that help to give the genre of the documentary visibility in India, given that the idea of film as recording actuality did not necessarily have wide purchase here?
5. “Creative treatment of actuality” has greater traction in a visual cultural context such as India’s, where value-neutral objective representation has limited appeal at best. Reality continues to be the

scene where the gods battle each other; *there is no monotheism of representation*. Multiple standards of signification compete with each other, and there is no purely epistemic means of adjudicating between them. In the era of more copious state sponsorship this awareness was repressed, probably. What has the lifting of the earlier era of censorship led to? How are new forms of censorship exercised?

Paromita

I would add the following questions as well:

1. What is the practitioner's understanding of how to use "reality-based" material in a climate where fiction film is the primary film form consumed by the public and the primary mode in which the public relates to film images as art—as has been true until the late twentieth century? How does this practice alter in response to the hyper-reality that now surrounds us, where the intensity of reality on film is all around: from the streaming Indymedia footage of the Seattle protests to Youtube home videos to the highly mythologized narratives of Reality TV and the documentary-inflected fictions of *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008)? Also, we see a growing production of documentary-like advertisement films—how do the makers of these films view this "power of reality" as an influential aesthetic?
2. I am not sure it is the market that certifies the documentary—so what are the modes by which this certification occurs? What might be indicators for this—parallel spaces of circulation, media coverage, selection in international festivals, sales?
3. I agree, looking at the Indian documentary as a global artifact helps to explain some gaps. What bearing does that have on the creation and development of a local market for these films in terms of production as well as exhibition? As of now, though films are shown on TV, they are not produced by TV, barring PSBT (Public Service Broadcasting Trust) films for Prasar Bharati.

An exploration of these and related questions might open up ways of understanding how the Indian documentary is part of the larger narrative of global documentary history. They can help to open up further taken for granted assumptions about cinematic form that underlie the creation, circulation and ongoing discussions around the documentary.

Notes

1. The distinction is from Bauman (1989).
2. Anand Patwardhan is a pioneering figure of Indian documentary, especially the political documentary. He made his first film *Waves of Revolution* in 1974 on Jayprakash Narayan's movement and went on to become internationally famous for films such as *Prisoners of Conscience* (1978), *Bombay, Our City* (1985) and *Father, Son and Holy War* (1995) among others.
3. The Films Division of India is the national film producing unit of the Indian government, headquartered in Mumbai. It was constituted in January 1948 by re-christening the erstwhile Information Films of India and the Indian News Parade set up in 1943, primarily for war coverage. The mandate of Films Division was to communicate to the public, matters of national importance and the government's endeavors to build and foster the new Indian nation's identity. The Cinematograph Act of 1918 was adapted and thus Indianized in 1952, which made the screening of documentary films produced by Films Division compulsory throughout the country.

- Since 1949, Films Division has been releasing a documentary, news-based short film or an animation film every single Friday for the theaters spread across the country, in 15 national languages.
4. Non-commercial screenings of documentaries were frequently organized by political organizations, voluntary groups or NGOs, particularly if they were seen to be related to the issues these organizations might be engaged with.
 5. While the post-Independence period has had two periods of declared “national emergency,” when civil liberties were suspended on grounds of threats to the country’s security, state-led economic development was in fact treated as an emergency situation, justifying constraints on political rights. For further discussion, see Rajagopal (2011).
 6. Discussed by Shohini Ghosh in her unpublished paper, “Camp, style and testimony: The emergence of the independent queer film.”
 7. See Jain (1990). The video, *Bhaye Prakat Kripala*, was in two parts. Part I: History of the struggle of Hindu people from the Mughal invasion until today: Miracle and invasion scenes. Part II: Documentation of Ram Shila Pooja in Ayodhya in 1989. *Bhaye Prakat Kripala* was part of Hindutva campaign videos during the movement that demanded the Babri mosque in Ayodhya be recognized as the birthplace of the God Rama and be handed over to build a Hindu temple.
 8. I have discussed the term in Rajagopal (2007).
 9. S.N.S. Sastry joined Films Division as a cameraman and started directing films in 1956. Sastry made his mark with *I am Twenty* (1967), a film made to commemorate the 20th year of Indian Independence, consisting of interviews with people born in 1947, the year that India was formed as an independent nation. The quality of ambivalence in the film was new to the Indian official documentary. Sastry later made several other notable films like *And I Make Short Films* (1968), *On the Move* (1970), *Yes It’s On* (1972) and *Burning Sun* (1973), all at Films Division.
 10. S. Sukhdev worked as cinematographer and director of documentaries both within and outside Films Division, from the 1950s to 1970s. Although he experimented with collage and re-enactment in some documentaries, he is most famous for films which had angry social and political commentary such as *And Miles to Go* (1965) and *Nine Months to Freedom* (1972).
 11. *Gharana* is a system of social organization linking artists by lineage and/or apprenticeship, and by adherence to a particular style. A *gharana* also indicates a comprehensive ideology. This ideology sometimes changes substantially from one *gharana* to another. It directly affects the thinking, teaching, performance and appreciation of the art.
 12. Ritwik Ghatak, Bengali filmmaker worked from the 1950s to the 1970s, is known for his fiction films largely dealing with the migrant experience after the partition of Bengal; his most famous being *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and bringing together documentary realism with stylized theatrical form.
 13. Mani Kaul, pioneering experimental filmmaker equally famous for fiction and non-fiction films which he mostly made with state funding, starting with *Uski Roti* in 1969. He was deeply interested in Indian aesthetics, such as those drawn from classical music, as a basis for film form, and in dissolving boundaries between fiction and non-fiction as in his famed 1990 documentary *Siddeshwari*.
 14. In 2010, Balachander was given the Dadasaheb Phalke Award by the Government of India, the highest award for lifetime contribution to Indian cinema.
 15. National Film Development Corporation, the government body for encouraging good cinema, which began as the Film Finance Corporation in 1960 and became NFDC in 1975.
 16. Pramod Pati was an eminent filmmaker working in the 1960s, at Films Division. He became famous for his poetic, experimental documentaries and animation films.
 17. See Tilottama Karlekar’s forthcoming doctoral dissertation thesis from New York University’s Department of Media, Culture and Communication.
 18. The Central Board of Film Certification is the national and regional censor body. Without censor certificates, films cannot have public screenings.

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