

*Insights Into the History of Independent Documentary Filmmaking in India:
Changing Narratives*

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Abstract

My paper will outline the development of independent documentary filmmaking in India. The Films Division (FD) and the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting adapted to the new genre of documentary filmmaking in the 1980s, and the first wave of activist documentaries was driven by a number of activist filmmakers who began to use "cinema as a pulpit" and leaned towards subjective arguments in their documentaries. Indian documentary filmmaking has a long history associated with social movements that have sought to draw attention to issues that need attention, to give voice to the marginalized. In a time of change and agitation, documentary film served as a means for filmmakers to express their point of view. During this time, documentaries were made that dealt mainly with the social, political, and economic problems of the nation and addressed them with passion and compassion. I intend to discuss the major documentaries that conveyed the idea of 'independent documentary filmmaking' in India during this period 1970s to 2000 by using discourse analysis. I will also discuss which are these documentaries and documentary makers which explored the idea of independent documentaries. The transition from traditional technology to video and to digital will also be discussed. I intend to provide different points of view on documentary filmmaking in India.

Keywords: Independent Documentary Filmmaking, Activist Filmmakers, Technological Shift

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Introduction (mid 1970s - till 2000)

The 1970s marked a significant chapter in the history of Indian documentary practice. The time period had witnessed social, political and economic resurgence and the filmmakers turned their camera towards it as a powerful medium to advocate change. Prominent filmmakers such as Anand Patwardhan, Deepa Dhanraj, Tapan Bose, Suhasini Mulay used documentaries as a tool of activism to create awareness among the audiences about the issues that were happening in the country. The activist filmmakers used documentaries as a pulpit to challenge the dominant discourse to create awareness among the people by propagating the idea of harmony, equality and social justice. And later in the 1990s and 2000s, the digital revolution incorporated several developments into documentary filmmaking and distribution. In this chapter, I will discuss the major documentaries that conveyed the idea of independent documentary filmmaking using discourse analysis and how the video turn of the documentaries enabled new narratives in India.

In April 1948, the Indian Government established the Films Division, which was tasked with producing and disseminating information films and newsreels." Accordingly, the Films Division distributed documentaries and newsreels through its own distribution system. The Films Division produced around 97 films which were dubbed in various regional languages during the time period, 1949-50. There are a number of important documentaries that emerged from the film division, such as 'Through the eyes of a painter' by MF Hussain (1967), 'The house that Ananda built' (1968) by Fali Bilimoria, 'I am Twenty' (1976) and 'Love in Action' (1976) by SNS Sastry.

Documentary films are financed, produced and distributed in India by the Government through the Films Division and regulated by Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). The Films Division was responsible for the production of the documentaries and CBFC was the regulatory body who was responsible for the censoring of the documentaries. Camillie Deprez, in her book, *The Films Division of India 1948-64* criticized the practice of the Films division. She stated "The Film Enquiry Committee stated that the 1951 report points out that the documentaries produced were often faced criticism by the Film professionals and the audiences as the documentaries made were being mere travelogs considered imperious and apprehensive to force the clear conclusion" (Deprez, 2013, p.158). She further claims that, despite fresh approaches by filmmakers, such as Jean Bhowmargary, P. V. Pathy, A. Bhaskar Rao, James Beveridge, and Paul Zils, the Films Division films began to resemble one another. The government and the press criticized the Films division for failing in their social responsibilities. When they were producing 150 newsreels and documentaries every year, quantity took precedence over quality. This was a period of expansion as well for the Film Division. Deprez further claims that "the film directors and the audiences were greatly disenchanted by the initiatives by Nehru and his ability to bring the transformation in unity, progress in economy and social change. The policies initiated faced a substantial challenges by the social, political and economic disruption, border tension between China and Pakistan, Hindu extremism, enduring casteism, marxist and tribal movements, communal affiliations, set back in agricultural industry and hardship set off by the Indian rupee crisis" (Deprez, 2013, p.159).

Since the late 1960's- more significantly during 1970's and 80's have seen the development and production of more social reality documentaries developed within and outside the Films Division which actually confronted the monopoly status of the Films Division. But it created the opportunities for the independent and activist filmmakers to develop their own style and

concepts into their documentaries. In the 60's and 70's a new generation of filmmakers such as S. N. S. Sastry, K. S. Chari, S. Sukhdev, T. A. Abraham and Pramod Pati started making documentaries on social inequalities and experimental films. Filmmakers started working on experimental movies but were not accepted by everyone. Indian documentary films reached their creative peak during the 1960s and were eventually replaced by longer films lasting longer than 10-20 minutes. During the 1960s and 1970s, a following generation of documentary filmmakers (often in association with the Films Division) contributed to the creation of more socially and politically engaged documentaries.

The Birth of Independent Documentary Filmmaking in India

Sweta Kishore opines that the independent filmmakers think the government's influence on the documentary could be used as a tool for the propaganda and paternalism and the filmmakers sought independence from it. The filmmakers made a deliberate choice to establish the documentary filmmaking practice outside the Film Division.

She stated “opting to establish their work outside of Films Division, Prominent filmmaker like Patwardhan claimed independence in the documentary filmmaking and later in the 1980s, filmmakers such as Tapan Bose, Manjira Dutta, Deepa Dhanraj, Suhasini Mulay, Seba Dewan, Rahul Roy, Vasudha Joshi, Ranjan Palit, K.P.Sasi and others claimed independence in industry from the itineraries of state propaganda and paternalism that plagued state documentary.

The term independent came to be authorized in subsequent years as a category of privately produced, politically conscious documentary films, financed and distributed through means alternate to the network of the state production, exhibition, financing and distribution” (Kishore, 2018, p. 13).

Vikrant Dadawala states, “Through the 1970s, both the FD and independent documentary filmmakers struggled with what Gunner Myrdal called the ‘paramount dilemma of the soft state’, a cruel and circular sociological impasse in which the narrow social basis of the Nehruvian elite meant that it lacked both the power and the motivation to take on the risks associated with dismantling rigid social institutions in the hinterland. Both pro- and anti-government filmmakers converged towards a kind of pessimistic activist documentary that helplessly railed against the modernizing state’s inability to reform society. There was a resemblances between the documentaries that were made such as Films Division’s film ‘Framework of Famine and After the Silence (1977)’ by S. Sukhdev, and independent documentaries like *Hungry Autumn (1974)* by Gautam Ghose and *An Indian Story (1982)* by Tapan Bose” (Dadawala, 2022, p. 9).

The social and ideological challenges faced by the Indian documentary filmmakers in the 1970s led to a shift towards the new critical style of filmmaking during the era which contributed to the evolution of documentary forms in India. Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar state that “From the late 70s onwards, there emerged a new kind of ‘independent’ documentary, produced outside the space of Film Division, that powerfully challenged the presiding dialogue of nationhood, bringing forward the voices of the oppressed and marginalized” (Jayasankar & Monteiro, 2015, p. 17).

Prior to this period in India, documentary filmmaking was largely dominated by Government institutions such as the Film Division, who was responsible for making the documentaries

that line up with the concept of nation building and the institution used the documentaries as a tool of propaganda. The dominant discourse of nationhood provided a discourse that is an idealized version of India which has overlooked the voices from the marginalized and subaltern. The independent documentaries aimed to shed light on the subjects and narratives that have been overlooked by the government. The independent documentaries provided an alternative narrative of the caste, class, political struggle, religious diversity and genre. The independent documentaries highlighted the topics that used to be a taboo in mainstream media and filmmakers used an immersive approach and let the subjects narrate the story without the portrayal of propaganda. The filmmakers who shifted from the Film Division faced many challenges like censorship, editing, funding, distribution, however, the commitment towards bringing the oppressed voices towards the public by challenging the mainstream made them persist in their work. The departure from the conventional narratives of documentary filmmaking the documentary makers could critique the prevailing social and political movements, grassroots movements and marginalized counters.

Jag Mohan asserts that, “these films of the activists, who use the cinema as if it is a pulpit to criticize atrocities, and abomination deserves recognition and acknowledgement if the meaning of the word documentary is to be held in high esteem and not to be diminished” (Mohan,1990, p. 137). He emphasizes that the activist documentaries uphold its core value by providing the legitimate and factual content that could condemn the injustice and advocate for a social change, therefore the activist documentaries and documentary filmmakers are to be appreciated and recognised. Bhaskar Sarkar and Nicole Wolf state that “the scope and range of documentary practices in South Asia appear to have been widening steadily since the 1980s, presenting fresh challenges and opportunities. The proliferation of more affordable and accessible technologies such as video and digital, has played a significant role in this growth” (Sarkar & Wolf,2012, p.2). The progress in video and digital technology uplifted and emancipated the documentary filmmakers to embrace the technical aspects and sail across the obstacles that are related to distribution, funding and ethical considerations. The technological advancement made it easier for the activist documentary makers to reach the audiences presenting their narratives.

The shift of film to video technology accelerated in India in the 1980s and 1990s and the technological transitions brought significant changes in the documentary genre. After the advent of video technology, the documentary making became cost effective which allowed for a cheaper and more accessible production of the documentary. The video technology revolutionized documentary making in terms of cost, accessibility, flexibility and creative freedom of the documentary makers. The documentaries made by the government were very heavily censored before reaching the audiences. The advent of video technology created possibilities for the independent individuals to create their own work with artistic freedom by democratizing the medium.

Until the advent of video technology in the 1980s, distribution was the biggest obstacle for filmmakers because it was heavily controlled by the state. Before the arrival of video technology there were documentaries which were made on political and social issues but its production was not consistent and there was no distribution as it was heavily censored by the censor board. Only after the arrival of video technology, the situation changed drastically. It was due to the technological changes that Independent voices were able to emerge. Filmmaking was really expensive after independence so the filmmakers were heavily dependent on government sponsorship. According to Sweta Kishore, “independence seemed an ambiguous notion in the shifting counters of media production where filmmakers regularly

approached state and civil society institutions for financial support and for exhibition platforms. Historically and colloquially the practice of independent documentary filmmaking is entrenched in terms of social advocacy, activism and public communication rather than being seen as a cultural or artistic expression, collaborated with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) seems to reinforce the documentary form within alternately served pedagogical and practical purposes in the Indian context” (Kishore,2018, p.8).

Singhal and Rogers stated “the advent of the video technology created ways for the independent documentary filmmakers to engage in various media practices and created an avenue for the alternate production and distribution across India.” (Singhal & Rogers, 1989). “The accessibility and mass reproduction of the video cassettes granted the independent documentary filmmakers to work beyond the state control and regulations. In the contemporary history of documentary practice, the video turn documentary practice marked a legendary and revolutionary moment. The expansion of video technology diminished the Elitist upper-class tradition of independent documentary filmmaking and changed it into a middle-class phenomenon. Various individuals and organizations started using the medium of video technology, building on the already extant tradition of independent and socially and politically committed documentary film practices” (Battaglia, 2018, p. 75). The new video turn documentaries could bring aesthetically and visually pleasing treatment to the films and made the documentary narrative more engaging. Documentary filmmakers partnered with several NGOs and Collectives by using media to promote community development. CENDIT (Center for Development and Instructional Technology) played a significant role in promoting media aiming to create awareness among the societies . CENDIT expanded its production by providing aspiring filmmakers such as Gargi Sen and Ranjan De resulting in forming an organization called Magic Lantern, which further contributed to the development of independent documentary filmmaking in India. The influence of CENDIT extended to other organizations such as SEWA, Abhivyakthi, Drishti Media and student collectives such as Alcom (Alternative Communication) and Mediastorm contributed to the proliferation of independent documentary practice in India.

Notable Documentaries and Filmmakers

By discussing the pioneering filmmakers and their documentaries that conveyed the idea of independent documentaries that showcased the unfiltered and raw narratives could depict the significance era duly. The prominent filmmakers of the independent era used cinema as a pulpit and tried to bring personal arguments and perceptions to the documentaries. The documentaries which were made during this period contributed a lot to the development of the independent documentary practice in India. Documentary filmmakers like Patwardhan, Tapan Bose, Suhasini Mulay who were interested in passionately exploring the social, political and economic issues that were afflicting the nation by using the medium of documentary. The period became revolutionary because of various movements such as environmental activism, women’s right movement, caste etc and they could bring the ground reality of the country and try to give a voice to the marginalized. The arrival of compact cameras and portable audio equipment made the documentary makers venture and operate in remote working conditions and challenge the established dominance of the Films Division in the genre of documentary making. The documentary makers experimented in their form rather than going for conventional ways of making documentaries by the Films division. The documentary makers moved away from traditional and didactic form of documentary making and try to engage the audience in thought provoking thoughts. The documentaries made during this era had a pressing social impact and raised issues of awareness, sparked debates

and pushed the boundaries of the genre of documentary. Filmmakers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds came together and brought a unique perspective to the genre.

Several activist filmmakers emerged in India, each of the documentary makers focusing on different issues. A landmark in independent documentary film history, *Kranti ki Trangein (Waves of Revolution [1975])* by Anand Padwardhan was the first independent documentary product of that era. Jayaprakash Narayan's (JP) notion of Total Revolution is explored in the documentary through showcasing momentous rallies, testimony from ordinary people and JP's own testimony. The documentary serves as a powerful tool and compelling record of the critical period of Indian history, documenting and showcasing the courage of ordinary people of the country and powerful leadership of JP. The documentary throws light on the determination of the common people to resist the corrupt government. The documentary underscores the holistic approach in the movement calling attention to tackling the social, political, economic, educational and cultural problems the country was facing. Patwardhan brought the discussion of economic disparity, exploitation of laborers, unity and equality in the villages by breaking the caste inequalities, challenging the system of dowry and by transforming the religious practices. *Waves of Revolution* inaugurated the first independent documentary movement in India. Originally shot on Super 8, the documentary was projected onto a screen and reshot on 16mm. The sound was recorded on a consumer cassette recorder. Patwardhan's next film *Zameer ke Bandhi (Prisoners of Conscience [1977])* which was made right after the emergency period explores the testimonies of the brutal torture faced by the prisoners who were jailed during this period. The work of Patwardhan benchmarked what independent documentaries would be like in the 1980s and 1990s in the Indian context. The documentary examines the truth of political imprisonment and state repression during the emergency period in post-independent India. The documentary sheds light on the stark contrast between the age of freedom and prosperity and how this period is just an extension of poverty for many. The documentary focuses on the emergency period and the struggle and the torture had been endured by the political prisoners under the emergency rule of Indira Gandhi. The documentary features various testimonials and brutal treatments they endured during the imprisonment. The film also featured extrajudicial killings happened in the form of firing, raping and inhuman treatments of the people in various parts of the country. The documentary also emphasizes on how emergencies bring the taste of the medicine that poor have always known to the middle class people. The documentary illustrates the importance of civil liberties and raises concerns about the lack of accountability for those who were involved in the torture and murder of the people during the emergency period in India.

Patwardhan's *Bombay our city (Hamara Shahar [1985])* explores the injustice and challenges faced by the millions of slum dwellers in Bombay (Mumbai) and the documentary tries to be mindful of the factors which are accountable for these conditions. The documentary carefully captures the various facets of their livelihood and the challenges they face like demolition of their huts, police brutality, water logging, lack of education, lack of work, displacement and the basic facilities. The film exposes the frustration of the slum dwellers due to fake promises given by the government during election campaigns and lack of protection from the authorities and how their rights had been taken away because of the poor background. 'Bombay our city' portrays how slum dwellers display resilience and come together despite threats from municipal and police authorities to resist further demolitions. Throughout the documentary there is a focus on the alarming conditions of the people who live in the slum and the struggles of the roadside vendors, confiscation of their carts and the corruption of the police by taking bribes. The documentary emphasizes the solidarity and equality among the people of slum dwellers irrespective of their caste and creed. It is an eye

opening documentary that exposes the corruption of the government as well as the struggles of the slum dwellers in Bandra, Bombay. *The Narmada Diary (1995)* by Simantini Dhuru and Anand Patwardhan is a counter narrative to the notion of development. The documentary critically looks at socio-environmental impacts on the environment and the tribes living around the Narmada river and the efforts by Narmada Bachao Andolan to resist the dam construction. The filmmaker introduces the protest and point of views of notable activists like Medha Patkar and Baba Ampte, a veteran Gandhian. The protest scrutinizes the exploitation and deceptive nature masquerading as development and the unkept promises of the government in terms of rehabilitation and compensation for the land. The film highlights the issue of increased height of the dam and the impact it has on the communities residing in the area along with the persistence and resilience of the people to fight for their ancestral land as well as preserving their culture.

Father, Son and the Holy War (1995) is another documentary by Patwardhan which explored the idea of independence in practice. Throughout the documentary, the potential reasons behind the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 are discussed, which still remains a controversial issue today in India. The second part documentary looks at the concept of masculinity and its part in igniting sexual violence.

Bhopal: Beyond genocide (1985) directed by Tapan Kumar Bose and Suhasini Mulay, tells the story of the aftermath of the Bhopal gas tragedy which occurred on 3rd December 1984. The documentary was made in memory of the people who were killed by Union Carbide corporation, a U.S based company in Bhopal and in defense of those who survived and continue to struggle against the multinational. The documentary highlights that even after a year of the world's biggest industrial disaster, the Methyl Isocyanide (MIC) has become an evident nightmare for the people and left them with death, terror and panic. It exposed the corporate negligence of government inaction and advocated for accountability and justice for the victims through the documentary narration. The documentary critiques the lack of medical assistance to the victims and how they had to depend on mobile medical units. The profit motives of the pharmaceuticals in these adverse situations are also highlighted by the directors. The documentary gives us an extensive account of how union carbide entered India advocating high yield technology and crop varieties to the farmers in the 1960s. The directors reveal the unsafe practices at the Bhopal plant and how the management disregards the safety options. The documentary heavily criticized the government's inaction in providing adequate relief and support for the victims of the tragedy and failing to hold the management accountable for the disaster which took the lives of 2500 people and left thousands of kids and adults suffering from the aftermath of the gas explosion. The police brutality on those who helped the victims is also underscored. The documentary concludes by emphasizing on to hold the people responsible for the tragedy and not to dehumanize the society in the name of progress. Tapan Bose also created significant documentaries such as *An Indian story (1981)*, *From Behind the Barricade (1993)*.

The first feminist film collective in India, Yugantar, was founded in 1980 by Dheepa Dhanraj, Abha Bhaiya, Meera Rao, and Navroze Contractor. The collective made endeavors to build a platform for Women's struggles against oppression. Aiming to address issues facing marginalized women workers and domestic workers, the initiative tried to reach out to them. *Something like a war (1991)* is a documentary by Deepa Dhanraj, which provides a critical examination of family planning and population control policies undertaken by the government. The documentary begins by addressing the need of population control and is presented in a way to save the country from population explosion. The documentary employs

how a laparoscopic sterilization procedure is done through the perspective of a gynecologist. The director, Deepa Dhanraj emphasized the issues of child marriage, gender discrimination, societal taboos and restrictions associated with menstruation. Deepa Dhanraj put emphasis on women's rights, pleasure and the autonomy of women over their motherhood. The documentary also critically looks at the health risks associated with the women contraceptive methods imposed by the government and critiques the government family planning initiatives that does not care about the aftermath of the procedures. Target based approach by the government officials to reach the sterilization targets which also results in resorting to unethical practices had been heavily criticized in something like a war. The documentary highlighted the forced vasectomy on men and its repercussions on the electoral consequences for the government and how it resulted in shifting the practice on women has been underlined. It emphasizes how planning has harmed the poor instead of helping them to overcome poverty. The documentary calls on unethical practices surrounding these initiatives. *What happened to this city (1986)*, *The legacy of Malthus (1994)* are some of the other notable works from Deepa Dhanraj.

Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar made a documentary on the Warli tribe called *Ahankar: Kahankar (storymaker: storytaker) in 1995* by bringing together a selection of various stories, paintings and writings about the Warli tribe. These stories and paintings are central to the history of the Warli community and throughout the history various external forces including various nationalities such as the Portuguese, the Marathas, the British, the native settlers, they all tried obliterating the wisdom of the Warli tribal community. The documentary represents two key roles: Ahankar (story taker, the one who passes on the stories) and Kahankar (story maker, the one who creates the stories). The documentary brings our attention to the significance of preserving the indigenous culture and the stories, paintings are some of the important aspects that keep their heritage alive. The documentary portrays the struggles the community had to endure at the hands of those who are in power and their resilience. On the further side of the immediate context, Anjali and Jayasankar also point out the various struggles the community faces such as marginalization, economic struggles, education, infant mortality rate etc.

One Hundred years of drought (1992), *Identity: the construction of selfhood (1994)*, *YCP (1997)* are some of the other notable works from Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar.

Stalin K's '*Lesser Humans*' (1998) highlights the deep rooted and dehumanizing practice of manual scavenging. The documentary opens with distressing visuals of humans collecting feces by bare hands, devoid of any protective gear driven by the necessity for their livelihoods. The documentary highlights the deep rooted casteism in the country and how the caste based division of the labor assign the lower caste communities to do the menial jobs, cleaning and scavenging including the human waste. The 'Bhangis' who have been traditionally involved in this labor have been looked down upon and have been stigmatized by the upper castes. The documentary highlights the caste based discrimination and how people have been subjected to scavenging and reinforcing the marginalized status. The documentary states that over thirty two thousand manual scavengers are employed with the local government bodies and many employed at private homes. The workers who work in private don't get money, instead receive 100 kg of rice per year for one meal of leftover food or beg for a meal from the respective employers. The documentary underscores the violation of constitutional rights such as the right to life with human dignity and laws that prohibit forced labor. The director criticizes the untouchability practices, lack of food and education, and skewed government policies. The documentary ends with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's

perspective on untouchability “The only visible impact of the repeated attempts to eradicate manual scavenging is the denial of its existence. This inhumanity is faced only by a particular section of people. “Untouchability will vanish only when caste themselves unlearn their way of life which is sanctioned by religion. To change this way of life is to change their religion- Ambedkar.”

'Kali Kem Mari?/ Why Did Kali Die?' (1992), A Bundleful of Fear/ Ek Poltlun Beek Nu' (1992), 'These Forests are Ours/ Jungle Amaru Tantra Tamaru' (1994) are some of the major contributions to the independent documentaries by Stalin K.

Conclusion

The independent documentary filmmaking in India went through a journey of remarkable transformation with the aim of social transformation since the 1980s with the shift in advent of video technologies. The paper explored the significant documentaries which contributed to the independent documentary filmmaking in India during the period 1970-2000. Activist filmmakers such as Anand Patwardhan, Tapan Bose, Suhasini Mulay, Deepa Dhanraj, Anjali Monteiro, KP Jayashankar, Stalin K heavily contributed to the independent documentary filmmaking in India and found cinema as a pulpit to challenge the authorities and ongoing social, political, and economic issues. In order to democratize documentary filmmaking in India, the technological shift from film to video played a significant role by bringing a new narrative, reaching more audiences and allowing a greater creative freedom. It's important to recognise and acknowledge the contribution of the documentary filmmakers as we discuss the insights into the history of independent documentary filmmaking in India.

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