

Media and Practices of Mediation: Role of Activist Documentary Films in Indian Mediasphere

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Abstract: After the Second World War, there has been a significant increase in the production of documentary films. It comes under the category of non-fiction films, because it engages with the reality of the present time. Films in general and non-fiction films in particular have always been a popular source of communication. This paper explores the role of activist-documentary films in the present Indian socio-political environment. As a communication tool, it is well known that in the moment of social crisis; films, magazines, and television become a significant medium. Particularly, in the post-modern era, popular texts such as film, television and newspapers work as a mediating agency which reveals the system-supporting ideologies.

Keywords: activist documentary films, cultural texts, mediating agency, system-supporting ideologies.

The present paper deliberates on the intersection of cultural texts and social change through activist documentary films. Unlike the fiction films, an activist documentary film uses camera as a tool for social justice in terms of production, as well as, distribution. Its unique feature is the use of citizens as content and medium. It employs sound and image to capture and demonstrate strikes, protests, and harsh realities of the time. Consequently, it creates an organization of citizens into instrumental public—the mass audience.

What is a Documentary Film: The Definition?; A documentary film epitomizes the real world. Veracity is the crux of a documentary film. However, there has been a debate over the definition of documentary film, whether it is the 'creative treatment of actuality' as Grierson puts it. Grierson is believed to be the first one who used the term 'documentary' for the first time. John Grierson, in *First Principles of documentary*, states that 'the French who first used the term only meant travelogue (p.19)'. For Grierson the distinguishable point of documentary films is the natural material of which it is made. He defines the nature and functions of documentary in three ways: first is that documentary photographs the living scenes and the living story; second native actor and native scenes add up to the originality which further provides 'a greater fund of material; and the third is that 'the raw material' and 'spontaneous gesture' have more real and screen value. It seems that for Grierson camera occupies the central position. Nonetheless, this definition has been criticized and modified by the documentary scholars; it is one of the most famous definitions till date.

Dirk Eitzen in his very famous article '*When is a documentary? : Documentary as a mode of reception*' problematizes the very nature and definition of nonfiction, especially documentary. He draws his arguments on some very famous delineation of documentary films by scholars, such as, John Grierson, Bill Nicholas, and Carl Plantinga. For Dirk, Grierson's definition lacks some 'practical implications'. In fact, "it is impossible", he says, "because the boundaries of documentaries are fuzzy and variable in viewers' experience and in everyday discourse (p. 82)." He wishes to convey the idea that a documentary is how viewers perceive it to be. Furthermore, Dirk encapsulates Nicholas' definition of documentary "as the use of conventional means to refer to, represent, or make claims about historical reality (p. 84)." Dirk, is at variance with Nicholas' definition that "there are many fiction films" which "refer to, represent, or make claims about historical reality (p.84)" but they certainly cannot be called documentaries. He also finds Carl Plantinga's idea of documentary disputable. Plantinga, basically, says that a documentary like a fiction film proffers us a world for our deliberation and makes claims about it as well. However, Dirk finds a similar pattern in Nicholas and Plantinga's definition of documentary. But for him, documentaries are not:

...films that are perceived to make arguments or truth claims about historical reality, because they are not—at least not all of the time. It is more correct to say that documentaries are presumed to be truthful, even though considerations about the veracity of particular assertions may play little role in how viewers actually make sense of them. (p.88)

Bill Nicholas in his celebrated work *Introduction to Documentary* (2001) postulates that "documentary is not a reproduction of reality; it is a representation of the world we already occupy. It stands for a particular view of the world, one we may never have encountered before even if the aspects of the world that is represented are familiar to us (p. 20)." Besides, he has deliberated documentary film as 'discourses of sobriety' such as politics, science, economics and history. Further, Nicholas has identified six modes or types of documentaries: Expository, Poetic, Observational, Participatory, Performative, and Reflexive. Michael Renov in *Theorizing Documentary* (1993) talks about the poetics of documentary and offers four constitutive modalities of it. These are: 1. to record, reveal and preserve, 2. to persuade or promote, 3. to analyze or interrogate, 4. to express. Renov says that in some way or other one of these has been predominant in certain type of documentary. These four modalities, according to Renov, function as the "modalities of desire, impulses which fuel documentary discourse (p. 22)". These concepts will be dwelt upon later, when analyzing activist documentary cinema. Meanwhile the paper deals with Indian Activist documentaries, at this juncture I would like to discuss Angela J. Aguayo idea of activist documentary films. In her project on *Documentary Film and Social Change: A Rhetorical Investigation of Dissent*, Angela examines the potential of documentary film as a purveyor of social change. She argues that:

...mediated, politically driven and aesthetically dressed activist documentary film and video not only has the potential to be an act of political oratory but under the correct conditions can transform into a public communication between private people that has the potential for social change. (p. 7).

According to Angela documentary offers a window to the world. The root of activist documentary can be traced into the early 1930s in American labor movement. For that matter she has studied the origin of activist documentaries in three waves. The first wave occurred during 1930s which has been famously identified by the Denning as "The Cultural Front." She quotes from the Michal Denning's book "The Cultural Front": "...writers went left, Hollywood turned Red, and painters, musicians and photographers were socially minded (p. xvi)." It is evident from the above statement that the very foundation of activist documentary is built on socio-cultural environment. Besides, this was the time when the cultural text intersected with the socio-political issues. That is when mass entertainment apparatus, documentary, for the first time was used for political and social critique. For the first time the marginal issues began to inhabit the center (p. 12-13). The second wave of activist documentary arose in the 1950s and continued till late 1980s. With the advent of low cost technology stimulated a new set of film makers. It eventually became a cultural tool to gather people around it and created a vernacular space which was utopian in nature (p. 18). Utopian here means that they negotiated the world on their own terms. Eventually, it concerned more with appearing in public and less on acting in public as a vehicle for social change (p. 22). The third wave began in 1990s and it has continued till date. Noted filmmaker Michal Moore is the influential and instrumental figure of this wave as Grierson is for the first. With the advent of internet and new technologies the public sphere has changed a lot. Angela further contemplates:

The texture of contemporary activist documentary film and video reflects the complications associated with the blurred boundaries between counter-hegemonic ideas, political dissent and commercial media (p. 65).

Indian Activist Documentary Films: The previous section offers a background of and basis for the present deliberation on Indian activist documentary films. Documentary films in general find its origin in the United States. Though no American theorist of documentary films talks about the Indian activist documentaries, it would be imperative to discuss them as it has a close resemblance in terms of treatment and design. In India, documentary films have never been a matter of such importance. Like most of the things, Indian documentary has also been associated been Mohandas K Gandhi. M K Gandhi's early Indian Independence movements (1920s and 1930s) were the first material of Indian documentary films. However, it never got an opportunity of screening. The colonial censorship of Indian Cinematography announced

censorship in 1918. After 1935 some degree of relief was given to the Indians which eventually lifted the embargo on documentaries. These were: *Mahatma Gandhi's March for Freedom* (Sharda Co), *Mahatma Gandhi's March*, *March 12* (Krishna Film Co), and *Mahatma Gandhi Return from the Pilgrimage of the Peace* (Saraswati) (Lal, *Travails of a Nation*, 2005). Vinay Lal, in his *Travails of the Nation: Some notes on Indian Documentary* regrets the fact that even after Independence the censorship has been a matter of great concern, especially for political documentaries. In fact the article discusses the politics of censorship in India particularly in documentary films. In the case of activist documentaries, he sees the censorship not as a government tool, but as a system inherent in the socio-political culture of the country. Paramita Vohra, a noted documentary filmmaker in her article *Dotting I: Politics of self-less-ness in Indian Documentary practice* discusses the general notion of documentary being left-liberal in inclination. Talking about the activist documentary in particular she states that in 1970s Indian film-makers drew their inspiration from Latin-American film-makers of 1960s. She sees 1975 emergency as a point of departure for Indian documentary from Film Division to the independent spaces. As a result these independent spaces provided the point of realization for activist and political films. Vohra states that:

... [b]etween the late 1960s and 1975, when the optimistic dream of newly independent nation has already gone sour and poverty, unemployment, and tremendous inequity were being protested. The repression, censorship, and political excesses of the Emergency which was declared in 1975 further strengthened these movements and the volume of related discussions. The dominant idea was that a people's cinema was needed – a complete rejection of the government; and although this also happened in the parallel fiction cinema of the time, it happened faster in documentary (because, perhaps, fiction films were also made with state funding, unlike documentaries),... an idea of a 'correct' style of film-making, which would function as 'the voice of the people. (p. 48)

The above paragraph gives the epistemology of the 'political documentaries' of India which may be also termed as the 'activist documentaries'. Its independent functioning and funding proffers it unique freedom. This paragraph also hints at the position of the activist documentary makers in India. For instance, in the process of critiquing and exposing the socio-political structure the film maker looks at environment both in the subjective and the objective way. To put it differently, any member of society is not born as a member of it instead "he is born with a predisposition towards sociality, and he becomes a member of society (p. 129)." That is why documentaries during the '70s, especially of Anand Patwardhan, partly can be seen as the maker's individual voice. This is unique in the case of India. Further, Vohra opines that "[i]n the post-liberalization of 1990s...documentary film practice

underwent a huge transformation...Indian documentary film underwent an upheaval and proliferating experimental (p. 49).” In fact this gave rise to political essay films such as, *Night of Prophecy and Lighting Testimonies*, by Amar Kanwar. She further elaborates upon her deliberation by claiming that in 2000's documentary films in India have become, more of a creative endeavor. This is true in the sense that a documentary like *Nero's Guest* by Deepa Bhatia is a purely creative endeavor.

Another notable work in the area of Indian documentary is *On the Aesthetics and the Ideology of the Indian Documentary Film: A Conversation* by Arvind Rajgopal and Paramita Vohra. This is purely a critical work on Indian documentaries. This article is singular of its kind-- “an artifact of the mixed media.” It is basically a compilation of conversation partly happened over email. The article opens with Arvind where he locates the Indian documentary in the universal trend of documentary film making. Arvind identifies two dominant traditions of documentary making in the world “[o]ne used cinema to mobilize the masses, and other was liberal trading...like John Grierson making documentaries to improve the condition of the masses (p. 8).” In the next part of the conversation Paramita is of the view that “...Grierson's idea of documentary as a tool for democracy has perhaps been the most influential idea in the history and practice of documentary films, globally and definitely in India (p. 10).” Indian documentary, as Vohra puts, have been shaped in three ways: 1. Grierson's idea of creative treatment of reality—where reality is the predominant element, 2. Documentary having the higher purpose, and 3. the removal of documentaries from market circulation. The third one is purely based on the Griersonian idea that documentaries should be screened exclusively in schools and colleges.

Parenthetically, Indian documentary practice operates in this above “implicit context”. It has its own idiosyncrasies. For instance, “the idea of higher purpose”, Vohra says, “became conflated with the idea of nation building” which eventually turned into a legislative and non-commercial scheme. This practice disappoints the whole idea of “contractual relationship” between the viewer and film. This is a case in point. For instance, recent activist documentaries like *Bood and Iron* by Pranjoy Guha Thakurta and *Jai Bheem Comrade* by Anand Patwardhan have been met with the same fate. Undoubtedly, they have fairly received a huge viewership but in a limited way. As a result documentary films in India, as Arvind regrets, are constrained by and govern through the state itself. This discounts the objective attitude on the part of documentary maker. There are several issues that the article debates which I would not like to peruse due to the thematic concerns of my paper. It would be a piecemeal attempt without discussing the role of feminist documentaries in Indian activist documentary. This has also its starting point from 1970s. Madhusmita Sinha, in her article *Documentary Cinema and Women's Movement in India*, notes that “[f]eminist documentaries emerged out of

desire to find solution for issues from a women's perspective (p. 367).” She, in a nutshell, says that “...it was an attempt to record and carry forward some of the agendas of the feminist movement (p. 367).” I think that Indian feminist documentaries in particular do not protest but chronicles the events. It shows the obvious. These documentaries in a way are part of the 'feminist public sphere' as Reita Felski put it.

Indian Mediasphere and Documentary Films: John Hartley coined the term *mediasphere*. This concept follows the notion of *semiosphere* which is the whole cultural universe of the system. The *mediasphere* is a subsphere within the semiosphere, and includes all the output of the mass media, both fictional and factual. I would like to analyse the position of the activist documentary within the Indian mediasphere. For instance, in today's era when we have abundance of electronic and print media then why do we need such mass medium? The fact is that Indian electronic media, especially private news channels provide every kind of news. They not only capture the event but follow it with discussion with the so called intellectuals. In fact, they often make documentaries on the controversial issues. On top of it they do have a wider reach.

I would here like to discuss Smita Gupta's article *Post-Liberalization India: How Free is the Media?* I have taken this article for the reason that it strikes the right chord in the status of Indian media. To make the issue more lucid she discusses the possibility of the new censorship which works covertly. What I derive from her discussion is that the Indian media in general and electronic media in particular is victim of covering the mainstream news. However, if they do cover the local or regional issues, they do not carry it with the same vigor. This media divide—Bharat from India—is enigmatic and irresponsible. Smitha Gupta postulates:

In a country where death, disaster and poverty are the staples of everyday life, the word was out in the newsroom. The emphasis was to be on feel good stories...death and disaster should figure only when the news was really big or sensational...in short if it had an 'entertainment component. Whether writing on films, sports and policies, the entry point had to be a personality, preferably glamorous—not issues, trends or ideas. (p. 292)

She elaborates further, that as a result the viewers or news readers are less informed in spite of media revolution. That is why we have activist documentaries by and about journalist such as *Blood and Iron* by Paranjy Guha and *Nero's Guest*—a documentary on a journalist who covered farmers suicide of Vidharbha. The former one is an expose by a journalist on an issue of which had been written about in the past in the local newspapers. This documentary brought the issue forth not only of illegal mining but the system through which these issues operate. She ends her article on a note which reflects the nature of present media sphere irrespective of print or technology. She quotes from Salzburg seminar in March 2004 on '*Decline of News Media's obligation as public trust and the effects of that Phenomenon on its obligations to civil Societ*'. She quotes:

Historically threats to freedom have been political in nature. At the start of 21st century, however a new kind of threat emerges that if continued, will endanger to the freedom guaranteed to the press and put at risk the sovereignty of the citizens. The nature of the press as the commercial enterprise has changed significantly. The emergence of media conglomerates and intense market competition are creating new organizational priorities in which profit growth is replacing public service as the principal mission (300, session 396, Salzburg Seminar Session series, 20-27 March, Salzburg, Austria).

The above paragraph seems a true reflection of the *Indian mediasphere*. The recent phenomenon of the paid news has even worsened the situation—it is different issue hence I would not like to peruse it further. In this kind of mediasphere activist documentary not only finds its true place but also bears a responsibility towards its citizen to inform and educate them about critical issues of the country. Differently put, the activist documentary operates in a 'counter public sphere' which socializes dialogues that reverberates with their own status, interests and needs. This in a way performs both internal and external communication. It gathers the citizen of the counter public to come together and have a discourse on the issue. In the process other group transmits the group's political agenda back to the public sphere from which they have been alienated. In the case of activist documentary it basically tries to raise the consciousness of the mass—mass here is different from the public as it actively participates in the issue.

Two Indian Activist Documentaries: An Analysis of *Blood and Iron* and *Jai Bheem Comrade*: The two documentaries which I propose to analyze here are *Blood and Iron* by Paranjy Guha Thakurta (2011) and *Jai Bheem Comrade* by Anand Patwardhan (2012). I have preferred these documentaries because they exemplify two different aspects of the activist documentary. They are also evocative of the recent Indian milieu and will correspond with the above deliberation on the *Indian mediasphere*. Moreover, the former is by a freelance well known journalist and latter is by a person who almost is a representative of the Indian activist documentary. Pragmatically, activist documentary characterizes the subsequent points: i) It functions as a vehicle for social change, ii) It transcends the boundary of mere consumption and presents a strong social movement, ii) It provides a space for criticizing the existing political and social set up, ii) It not only communicates the issue but becomes an integral part of it. So, My analysis of the select documentaries will revolve around the following points. Deliberating on the usefulness of the activist documentary as a media I would like to quote from Marshal McLuhan and Quentin Fiore's *Medium is the Message* (1967), “[s]ocieties have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication...it is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without the knowledge of the working media (p. 8).”

The above statement espouses the nature of activist documentary. Simply put, issue may change according to the time and place but activist documentary as a medium will remain the potential message in itself. *Blood and Iron* (2011) is a documentary expose of the influential Reddy brothers from Bellary in Karnataka. The documentary exposes the Reddy Brothers, who are accused of amassing vast amounts of wealth through illegal mines in Bellary district of Karnataka and Ananthpur district of the Andhra Pradesh; the film targets to underline the fashion in which fraudulent businessmen, ministers and bureaucrats conspire to exploit natural resources. The documentary features the historians, activists and opposition politicians. This documentary comes with a shocking revelation about the Indian public sphere. They were so influential that even allegations from the Lokayukt (people's ombudsman), the Ministry of Mines as well as Supreme courts of India, Reddy brothers repeatedly derided the system and continued with the illegal mining. In a telephonic interview Paranjay Guha expressed his views about his concerns with the reasons where are naturally rich. In fact he has made a couple of documentaries on this topic-- *Hot as Hell: A Profile of Dhanbad* is on the coal mining of Dhanbad district of Ranchi. He answers that:

The subject has been of interest to me for a while now: why is it that resources, which are meant to belong to people, never really benefit them? Why do they instead become a curse, rather than a blessing? To me, in a sense, what has gone wrong with the way India has developed is epitomized in this paradox: that the richest lands are where the poorest reside. (Interview by Jaydeep Sen, Ore mongers, October 27, 2011)

Over a telephonic interview when I asked him: "Why did you arrive with the idea of a documentary on the subject when we have a media which is so pervasive and critical"? He said that in spite of the constraint in the media and government the potential of the documentary as a medium is immense. Eventually, after the release of the documentary the public pressure mounted and Reddy brothers got arrested. *Jai Bheem Comrade* (2012) is an epic documentary. Singular of its kind, it took fourteen years in the making, the three hours and 20 minute long film explores the history of Dalit activism in Maharashtra in the aftermath of the killing of 10 activists in Mumbai in 1997. The movie opens with a clip from *Bombay Our City* featuring singer, poet and activist Vilas Ghogre singing a song. Incidentally Ghogre hanged himself in 1997 after the police shooting of 10 Dalits protesting against the damage of a monument of Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956), a farsighted leader who himself was a Dalit. He was a dear friend of the film maker. His death moved Patwardhan to such an extent that personal grief became public. The documentary starts with the suicide of Ghogre. Through the movie Patwardhan constructs a discourse which has a larger implication on the Indian public-sphere. Notable fact is that a fourteen year saga covers every aspect of Dalit politics and poetics of India. In an interview given to The Hindu Patwardhan says: "... [t] he intellectual class in India laps up and

understands every political nuance of the developed world, but the reverse is not true. We like to be spoon-fed with over-simplified clichés, and that concession I have refused to make (*Priyanka Borpujari, A Film with a Difference, The Hindu, Jan. 28, 2012*).” A self-taught and self-styled documentary film maker Patwardhan has always been engaged with the socio-political issues of India. The interesting point about his documentaries is that the issues on which he makes a documentary is a well familiar one to the audience. But we often ignore them in our daily lives. He doesn't expose but puts the issue on the face of public which shakes the conscience. I would like here to quote from Miriam Sharma's *Review of Three Patwardhan Documentaries (2002)*. It is an interview given to the Sri Lankan Sunday Observer and quoted by Miriam Sharma:

There are no scripts—no arduous briefings. You film people. You ask them what they think and they tell you. You get on film what is happening—the reality of the moment as it is. In documentaries there is no acting. The difference between documentary and fiction film lies here. If you say something once and I ask you to repeat it—the second time is acting. My style of documentary filming is simple—you just film the truth(*quoted in Miriam Sharma, Review of three Patwardhan Documentaries, p. 286*).

In sum, it can be argued that activist documentaries basically work as a mediated agency between the elite and the marginalized—it may be cast, region or any socio-political, socio-economic issue. To put it in MacLuhain way in the case of activist documentary medium is the message. Basically, these documentaries are issue based and deal with a purpose. To go back to the point of activist documentary as mediating agency, it is a known fact that these are always screened at educational institutions, at NGOs and at Film festivals. Additionally, the general audience at these aforementioned places is elite class or may be 'great Indian middle class' who is mostly engaged with the routine issues of everyday. So, it works as a mediated agency between this great divide. Moreover, it can be said that activist documentaries works as the *safety-valves* in the Indian society in particular and the world in general.

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