

## Narrating Actuality

Since the year 2013 is marked as the centenary year of Indian cinema it is also broadly accepted as the 100<sup>th</sup> year of Indian documentary. But that is far from being true. The 100 years, in this case, is measured by the introduction of editing in moving images, determined by the understanding that shifts in time and location facilitated by editing is pivotal to the structure of narrative films. But moving images on celluloid came into existence independent of editing technique. Those early moving images, without any cut and paste, were called 'actuality films' and later also as 'topicals' – direct recording of the real life happening which were exhibited as one film from camera on to camera off. The much talked about French pioneers Lumière Brothers shot and exhibited all over the world – *Train Arriving at Station*, *Workers Leaving the Factory*, *The Wall is being Demolished* and so on. In 1896 there were theatre, ballets and operas in Paris – but the Lumière brothers shot people performing chores and not actors performing roles. Georges Méliès, an illusionist and one of the greatest filmmakers of the silent era, who attended one of the Lumiere brothers' public shows in Paris, noticed that the audience was more engaged with the moving foliage or crushing waves or flying dust than the moving people in the frame. The audience had already seen human beings and their actions on stage, moreover in silent films the enactments by people appeared less realistic. But the novelty of animated scenery was what caught their attention – made it an 'actuality' show. These actuality shows then grew into many ways of dealing with realities and real life happenings and one of the avatars is documentary films.

The earliest unedited moving image that is shot in India or shot by an Indian is difficult to ascertain due to lack of proper record. *Train Arriving at Bombay Station* could be the first moving image shot on Indian soil. It was screened at the drama house Tivoli Theatre in Bombay in 1898. Not much is known about the film except that it was shot by a narcissist foreign entrepreneur/magician who named the device of capturing moving images after himself Andersonoscopegraph. In those uncertain years moving images were called by various local and improvised names.

The first actuality / documentary film shot by an Indian is generally credited to Save Dada Bhatvadekar of Bombay. In 1899 he shot *Wrestling Match & Monkey Dance in Hanging Garden*. Not only the Lumier brothers or Save Dada but most of the early filmmakers exclusively shot outdoor daylight sequences of high speed movement. The rudimentary facility of light control made it compulsory to shoot outdoor daylight but the obsession with catching up high speed movements, such as wrestling, monkey dance, running train etc., obviously had something to do with the newly found device of moving image recording. Later Save Dada shot some social events such as arrival of Wrangler Paranjpe from Cambridge in 1901. Around the same time in Calcutta Hiralal Sen begun his more consistent enterprise of recording moving images. But his works were mostly recording of dramas and operas that were already running in the city and so may not strictly fit into this essay on documentary. However, in 1905 he shot the nationalists' protest demonstration against the partition of Bengal at the Town Hall in 1905. This could be called the first newsreel footage shot by an Indian. Unfortunately, all of Hiralal Sen's works got destroyed in a fire in 1917.

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the exhibitor/entrepreneur, Jamshed Framji Madan was showing European (mainly productions of French company Pathe Freres) *actuality films* in tent cinemas in Calcutta. In 1905 he turned producer with Jyotish Sarkar's coverage of *Great Bengal Partition Movement: Meeting and Procession*. Then he went on to produce *Tilak's visit to Calcutta* (1906), *Goat Sacrifice at Kalighat* (1906), *Dancing of Indian Nautch Girls* (1906), *The fugitive Dalai Lama's Flight to Darjeeling* (1910) *Cotton Fire in Bombay* (1912) and so on. The films of Save Dada, Hiralal Sen, J F Madan and a few less prolific producers were commercially exhibited in tent cinemas and were exported to other city centres in India, Burma and Ceylon.

So by the time the first narrative film by D G Phalke, which we have enshrined as the birth of Indian cinema, got produced in 1913 the non-narrative films in India was already a developed genre as well as a commercial enterprise. The form of narrative films, initiated by *Raja Harishchandra*, made use of the the already developed conventions of recording dramas and operas, and shooting actuality films, but got consolidated by the use of editing as a primary tool for story telling in cinema. The editing technique could bring in the temporal elements – shift in time and location – to build the narrative. It is interesting to note that prior to Raja Harishchandra Phalke made a unique film by exposing one frame a day on a growing pea plant. This was his proposal for the elusive financiers on the possibility of moving image enterprise.

### **For, Against and Along with the British Raj**

Despite the new interest in narrative films, which then got further consolidated by the introduction of sound in 1931, the *topical* films managed to hold on to its share in the market till the second world war. In fact the three decades preceding the Second World War developed all the tendencies of non-narrative films that we witness even today.

**Public spectacles:** popularly known as durbar films of 1903 and 1911, a number of films were shot by assorted companies and independent cameramen of the events of crowning the British emperor in Delhi. In the case of 1911 durbar mobile processing laboratories were set up to facilitate immediate making of the prints to put them in circulation for commercial exhibitions. This could be termed as the predecessor of the current live coverage. Though there were mostly British, French and American companies who shot the durbar events many Indian cameramen worked for the foreign companies.

**Commissioned films:** J. F. Madan's Elphinstone Bioscope Companies produced short films for the companies producing steel, jute, cotton, tobacco and tea, and also for the Maharajas of the princely states since 1910 till mid-'30s. This corresponds with the current day convention of commissioned films by corporate houses.

**Political documentary:** In 1921 *Great Bonfire of Foreign Clothes*, a feature-length documentary was made on Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, Maulana Shaukat Ali and others leading a large number of protesters at Chowpatty and Rambaug maidan near Elphinston Mill in Bombay. The event was a follow up of the recent Karachi Khilafat conference and also marked to commemorate Tilak's death anniversary. The film ran in Bombay at West End Theatre and Globe Theatre for two weeks. Alas, this is a far cry from the contemporary state of exhibition for political documentaries.

In the decades of '20s and '30s, despite the crackdown from the Govt., all major film studios in Bombay and Calcutta made films on various events of the independence movement. Besides the big studios some individuals worked against all odds to make documentaries on Nationalist movement, remarkable among them were P. V. Pathy of Bombay and A. K. Chettiar of Madras.

**State censorship:** The Cinematograph act was passed in 1918, mainly based on four principles: moral, racial, religious and political. Police Commissioner of each city was given full autonomy to stop any screening under these principles.

In 1930, following the Dandi March of Gandhi, the city of Bombay saw a flurry of political activities that broadly came under Namak Satyagrah, the Salt Civil Disobedience Movement. The activities of the movement ranged from political rallies to the burning of foreign-made clothes and other goods, and, most importantly, to making salt out of sea water in defiance of the state imposed ban. In order to control the public euphoria the British police commissioner of Bombay banned and confiscated the footage of Gandhi's march shot by the city's leading film studios. But the banned films resurfaced again in 1937 after the Congress won election in eight out of the eleven provinces. In 1942, during the Quit India movement British Govt. confiscated and destroyed all the prints and negatives of films on independence movement.

The only images of the Dandi March and the ensuing police crackdown, which included the large-scale arrest of the satyagrahis in Bombay, that survived were those that some American newsreel companies managed to smuggle out of the country and released in theatres in America.

**The Ancillaries of the Wars:** By mid-1930s as editing and sound became widely accessible the novelty of recording *actuality* or *topical* footage waned out. Once the 'flying dust' and the 'crushing waves' settled down the spectacle of documentary needed another kind of high speed movements and wars supplied them in plenty. It is difficult to say whether the supply of war images created a market for the spectacle of confrontations or market needed adrenaline driven images and wars provided that. But how real the demand for such images was can be made out by an 1898 story in America.

In 1898 two cameramen of Vitagraph Company of America went to Cuba to shoot the Spanish-American war. When they came back they realized that they had not shot the most important part of the war – the Battle of Santiago Bay. The whole city was waiting to see the footage and admitting to not have shot it meant a huge loss of revenue. Street vendors were selling stills of that war. They bought pictures of the battle ships, made them float on a tub of water, put some gun powder on the top, attached some strings to activate them and made smoke out of cigars. The person who was smoking the cigar- wife of one of the men- was not a smoker and could not provide a continuous flow of smoke. So the battlefield did not look as dense as it should have been. Still they composed the battle scene, shot it and made it run in public screenings for months. That most probably was first instance of special effect cinema. **But that most probably was also the first instance of documentary's uneasy relationship with 'reality'**<sup>i</sup>.

In 1940, the Press Office of India under Ministry of Information London (MOI) produced in collaboration with the native studio Wadia Movietone *He is in the Navy* and *Planes of Hindustan*, and with Bombay Talkies *A Day with an Indian Soldier*. These films were dubbed in all major Indian languages and exhibited commercially all over India. Inspired by the success of these films, the MOI got into full fledged

documentary production in India by forming Film Advisory Board (FAB) with JBH Wadia of Wadia Movietone studio at the helm of the affair. He was later joined by the British documentarist Alexandra Shaw as chief producer. FAB roped in all leading film studios and distributors in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Lahore as members of the board and affiliated bodies. One of the remarkable films from this initiative was *Here Comes a Letter* (1941) – about letter from the home to the frontier.

Shaw was trained under British pioneer John Grierson, the self proclaimed modernist and pedagogue. Wadia was a follower of radical humanist M. N. Roy. Though both of them were committed to anti-fascist thrust of the war they were not particularly geared towards war propaganda. As a result the FAB could make some subversive productions along with the standard war propaganda in the next three years and the series was called India Today. Most of the India Today films were mainly anthropological and ironically, asserted the prevalent notion that Indian society is primitive and in need of development through the colonial rules. In 1942, the young Turk of Indian cinema, V Shantaram, was appointed as chief producer of FAB. He had already made his acclaimed films for Prabhat Studio – Sairindhi, Manooos and Duniya na Mane. In his tenor FAB productions acquired much finesse. Stalwarts such as Ezra Mir and K. A. Abbas worked for FAB in this phase.

But for more direct task of training the newly recruits in the armed forces and to keep the morale of the force documentaries were made by the Army Film Centre. This unit produced 170 films in 1943 and 290 in 1944. Most of the directors and the technicians who would later serve in the Films Division of independent India were first trained in this outfit. Following the escalating popularity of the independence movement and the strategic war alliance with the US, British Govt. disbanded FAB and initiated Information Film of India for war interest and India News Parade for sociological and anthropological purpose. Films produced under India News Parade were made to screen by all the exhibitors in the country under the Defence of India Act. The American newsreel companies had long been publicizing the independence struggle of India and in the process faced much hostility from the British authority. But after America joined the allied force it became difficult to control their access to events taking place on Indian soil. To counter this phenomenon the British Govt. accelerated their own newsreel productions and screened them forcefully.<sup>ii</sup>

In 1944 at Victoria Dock in Bombay a spectacular accident took place. An anchored British-American cargo ship carrying cotton bales, ammunition and gold bars caught fire and exploded, destroying 27 ships, killing around 800 people and raining gold into obscure households in distant areas. The military officers confiscated the footage shot by independent cameraman Sudhish Ghatak (brother of Rwitik Ghatak) and the official coverage by Indian News Parade was widely distributed instead. Moreover, in order to safeguard their own newsreel production during the war years the govt. imposed restriction on the use of film raw stock by private productions. Facing the resource crisis the number of private studio productions fall considerably and that made the studios stop production of newsreels and documentaries.

Each war displaces a whole lot of people but sometimes also replaces certain people in a most unexpected ways. Paul Zils, a young German filmmaker, was arrested by the allied army in Indonesia in 1940 while working on a commissioned project for American studio Paramount. When Japanese army

came close to Indonesia the German POWs were shipped to a prison camp in Bihar. Noticing Zils' inherent artistic skills the British Govt. released him on the condition that he would work for Information Films of India. After the war Zils stayed back in India and went to become a major figure for the non-state sponsored documentary filmmakers in independent India. He was the first president of Indian Documentary Producers' Association in 1956.

### **Documentary of the Independent Nation**

When India became independent there was no state infrastructure to document the ceremony on film. In the weeks following 15 August 1947, three documentaries made from assorted footage shot by private initiatives of the Independence Day ceremony were released in Delhi, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. The legendary 'Tryst with Destiny' speech on film was later acquired by the state from private producers. This could happen because the central legislative council, while taking charge in April 1946, demanded to close down Information Films of India and India News Parade, as they were mainly tools of British interests. But soon after independence Jawaharlal Nehru realized that the newly formed country needed a mechanism to reach out to the vast population who were multi-lingual, multi-cultural, unaware of the notion of the nation and state, and mostly illiterate. He took special interest in reviving the set up the former India News Parade. The Films Division (FD) started in 1948 with a mainstream film producer Mohan Bhavnani as chief producer. As if to compensate for the slip on the independence day all state functions, public announcements and social initiatives in the '50s and '60s were documented and circulated by FD with missionary zeal, most famous among them, of course, was Nehru opening the Bhakra Nangal dam in 1955.

Films division was set with the mandate to produce one film per week, with its own battery of technicians, producers, equipments and laboratories. The majority of the films were formally a combination of erstwhile war films and colonial anthropological films. Trained in Griersonian pedagogical film through Alexandar Shaw, military footage shooting through the army initiatives under MOI London, investigative journalism through private American and European newsreel companies and armed with nationalist rhetoric, the new producers of documentaries in independent India begun to travel to the remotest corners of the country and shot the subjects, the *other* people within the Indian state. The trajectory was fixed - the vast, top angle shots of the land, where the human beings are part of one linear category- made so popular by the war films and the close shots of detailed picturisation of the alien customs and people – an anthropological-ethnographical device- were held in alternative shots. The wide top angle shots for the authenticity of the locales that are not part of the mainland. The closer shots are for anthropological curiosity, presenting a few chosen details of the *others* who exist outside the normative practices. A *god's voice* as commentary helped the audience read through the images. The Mizo drum, the Rajasthani colour, the Kathakali costume, the Kashmiri landscape, the Banjara attires – and the benevolent state. The first set of films was made in English, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil and Telegu.

In 1949, the independent government too made exhibition of minimum 1000 feet of 'approved documentaries' compulsory under the Cinema Licensing Rule. In addition, Censorship categories, 'A' for Adults and 'U' for Unrestricted, were introduced and Censorship is brought under central jurisdiction.

1948-56 Central government announces freeze on construction of movie theatres as part of a move to curtail construction of 'non-essential buildings' due to shortage of cement and other building material. On the other hand the unaccounted money accumulated in the port cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras got pumped into feature film industry prompting a collapse of the studio system. With the death of the large studios non-state newsreel productions by the independent filmmakers came to an end. In 1957 Film raw stock was declared an essential commodity and came under the control of the state. Through all these developments the mainstream film industry and their audience (who were already fatigued by the war propaganda) got into an antagonistic relationship with the state. And documentary came to be known as a state apparatus. In 1954-55 Compulsory exhibition of approved documentaries was held unlawful by Andhra Pradesh High Court and Supreme Court. But the state did not withdraw the mandate.

But within the state mandate certain subversive voices started arising in the late '60s. As the disillusion over independence settled in some FD filmmakers such as S N S Sastri, S. Sukhdev, Pramod Pati and others overshot the overtly nation making mandate and produced some critical films. In their works the various tendencies in independent documentaries that would be developed in later decades could be traced. It can also be said that they finally took the FD *gharana* out of the newsreel mode and to the documentary format. However, this burst of independent energy within FD came to an end in the face of emergency in 1975 when the entire organization kowtowed the fascist regime. After that phase FD fell into insignificance both within the state and the public.

Besides the in-house films there was a scheme of producing works of independent filmmakers under the banner of FD. Within this scheme eminent filmmakers such as Mani Kaul, Kumar Sahani, Satyajit Roy, G. Aravindan, Shyam Benegal; film historian Chidanand Dasgupta, and visual artists such as Tyeb Mehta and M. F. Hussain made films for FD in late '60s to late '80s. These films are broadly regarded as the phase of avant garde in Indian documentaries. But documentary was not the primary interest for these filmmakers and thus their contributions to the field remain sporadic. Similar films were also produced by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of Govt. of India and later by Doordarshan. Most of these films were either biographical and/or on visual and performance art forms. Though the participation of these eminent filmmakers brought some credibility for FD it could not help bring down the rising political opposition to its blatant state propaganda. But on the other hand, these films entered the emerging arena of film institute and film society curriculum and induced a greater awareness towards the politics of forms and aesthetics choice for the next generation of filmmakers.

### **Documentary and Language of Politics**

Along with the political upheaval of the '70s another phenomenon helped in building the repertoire of political documentary in India – the access to film technology. Smaller models of 16mm camera and the possibility of smuggling in raw stock made it possible for filmmakers to venture into non-institutionalized filmmaking. Soon after the notion of Nation-State was significantly challenged by the Naxalite movement and other organized political formations of left and left of center ideologies independent political documentaries of the region were born. Famine was shot, so was homelessness, state atrocities, migration, women victims of domestic and sexual violence, issues of land ownership etc.

became pivotal themes. Gautam Ghosh, Utpalendu Chakravarty, Anand Patwardhan, Meera Nayar, Suhasini Mulay, Tapan Bose etc. were some of the significant names of that era. They all came from a certain political background. They knew their subjects, their terrains. They wanted to make the films in order to prove and disseminate what they already knew as truth. In the process of the film they laid out facts in front of the audience in order to build public opinion. They had the kind of confidence in their arguments to hold a mid shot of the interviewees for minutes. These films were mainly edited on the dialogue tracks – polemics being supreme.

The myth of the benevolent state was duly shattered. But these films did something interesting to the aesthetics of documentaries, as well as the way that people viewed them. They revisited the issue of authenticity. In a way it was a war of authenticities. As against the classical anthropology of the Films Division, a genre of political anthropology began. But the format and the aesthetics remained broadly the same. In some sense this genre depended heavily on the aesthetics of the very ideology that it had set out to oppose. Framed differently, this genre of filmmaking made a new practice of anthropological subjects: away from the alien people of the exotic land, it was the **victim** of the nation-state who came under the lens. The Griersonian model of factual and pedagogical cinema, where an individual is only a prototype of his class and the audience is only a passive pupil, still prevailed. There was always a triangle: of the filmmaker who collates and presents the facts, the protagonist who is the fact and the audience who receives the fact.

There was another problem. As far as the private screening was concerned, the opportunities were rare and far between. Besides, the ordinary people, after being exposed to compulsory viewing of inane documentaries of FD, got allergic to the word documentary. Hence only a privileged/elite/politicized audience viewed the documentaries of 70's and 80's. Some filmmakers, though, traveled around the country with a film projector and cans of films on their shoulders. But every filmmaker could not be that militant and thus got lost in the oblivion. By the '80s the film society movement became very popular in India. But even their members strongly resented documentary films for being lesser in aesthetics and being didactic.

### **The Other Films of Ours**

The next phase began in late '80s. In a deliberate attempt to move away from the polemics of the state a genre of documentary has evolved that prioritizes the chronicle of a protagonist over the testimony of a victim. There have been distinct attempts to place the ordinariness of an ordinary individual into the centre of the argument. The protagonists of these films are not the FD (Film Division) models - subjects of the benevolent state, nor are they simple victims of state oppression. Instead they are portrayed as active citizens of the nation around myriad issues of violence, identity, shelter, sexuality, creativity, rights, migration, development, hunger, fringe existence, and so on.

One prominent trend in this genre has been to give a lot of space to the protagonist and not try to capture her/him in some fleeting moments of absolute truth. In this genre there is a candid recognition that what we are seeing is also a kind of performance, on the part of the protagonist. The text to read is

not what the protagonist is, but how s/he desires us to conceive her/him. The validity of the protagonist and the authenticity of the films do not come from the proven actuality but from the artistic blending of these people's memories and desires. In some senses it displaces the 'fact' for the sake of the 'truth' which emerges through a person's performance of his /her 'self' in front of the camera. Allowing the protagonist to do that and allowing the audience to see through that is part of the formal development in this phase. So there is a distinct shift from the 'victim' narrative to a proactive role in constituting the 'citizen' – the citizen who is constantly being made in interaction between the memory of the past and desire for the future. The audience is invited to participate along with the filmmaker to constitute the 'citizen' out of these dense and playful interfaces between document and performance.

Many of these filmmakers are women; an overwhelming number of the protagonists are also women. But it has quite smoothly and non-aggressively surpassed the confines of the domestic space while portraying the female protagonists. Once out of the need to prove the validity of the choice by establishing the victim status of the protagonists (a common phenomenon in the '80s and earlier times), the filmmakers could place the gender issue at the centre of the map of the nation/state and citizenship.

### **As we talk...**

Since the advent of video in the '90s and then the digital technology the number of documentary filmmakers is rising by the day. The films, in general, display all of the above mentioned tendencies and ideologies. The finance for these films range from foreign television channels, Doordarshan-Public Service Broadcast Trust, development agencies, dedicated documentary funding from developed countries, universities and other academic institutions, museums and art establishments, and self financed.

In 1992 Films Division surfaced again but not as producer in any significant way but as the organizer of MIFF (Mumbai International Film Festival of Short, Documentary and Animation). The biannual festival, barring a serious protest against the state control during the BJP regime in 2004, has managed to gain the trust of the independent filmmakers. For the first time, a sense of community among the disperse set of filmmakers has developed through watching each other's films and also through exposure to other international trends. This was followed by the Film South Asia in Nepal beginning in 1997 and Kerala Short Film Festival in Trivandrum in 2007. In 2004 against the insidious state intervention into the selection of films for MIFF the independent filmmakers got together to initiate a platform Vikalp – Films for Freedom. Currently Vikalp editions in many cities hold regular public screenings at borrowed venues.

With the digital facility MIFF could be replicated in various sizes and forms all over the country without much institutional support. And suddenly by the middle of the next decade there are documentary festivals in Gorakhpur, Srinagar, Calicut, Patna, Madurai, Udaypur, Shantiniketan, Pune, Chandigarh... and we are counting. These festivals have replaced the former film societies in the community life.

A common question that every documentary filmmaker is asked during the post screening QnA is – who watches your film? Over the years I have learnt to reply – as many people read a good book.



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<sup>i</sup> 'Taking the Camera to the War' by Albert E. Smith in *Imagining Reality: the Faber Book of Documentary*, eds. Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins, Faber and Faber, London, 1998

<sup>ii</sup> Information on Film Advisory Board (FAB), Army film Centre, India News Parade and Information Film of India is sourced from *From Raj to Swaraj: The Non-fiction Film of India* by B. D. Garga, Penguin-Viking, India, 2007