DOCUMENTARY FILMS IN INDIA

CRITICAL AESTHETICS AT WORK

APARNA SHARMA

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Aparna Sharma
Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance,
University of California, Los Angeles, USA

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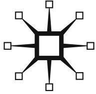

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dedicated to students, practitioners and
all who believe that the documentary impulse
exceeds the bounds of nations

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Preface

In many ways, this book traces its origins to the 2003 *Beyond the Theory of Practice* Conference convened by Dr Clive Myer in Cardiff, UK. The conference title referenced Noel Burch's seminal 1973 book *Theory of Film Practice* and it was oriented towards questioning the history and future of reflexive and critical film practice, asking how contemporary film pedagogies prepare students of film to raise the complex relations of theory and practice. This question assumes weight in quite a specific way for the field of film education. Often, given the capital-intensive nature of filmmaking, film education gets polarized into Film Studies as the scholarly pursuit, and Film Production as the creative and technical pursuit. These binaries are limiting. In contemporary times, film education is in need of a dialogue between practices and theories spanning Film and Critical Cultural Studies.

Film and Documentary Studies specifically need to assimilate interdisciplinary approaches that overcome a persisting cultural blindness in these fields. However, this move towards interdisciplinarity ought not to be reduced to an exercise in cultural inclusion or assertion. The impetus of Critical Cultural Studies in documentary is to foster appreciation for the ways by which makers negotiate complex realities and histories, institutional mechanisms and their own voices as practitioners – ways that may not necessarily be explicit or transparent to the untutored eye. Many times the efficacy of documentaries and documentary discourses from outside the European and North American contexts is confused with issues of decipherability. Documentary-makers across the world work in highly specific contexts. The roles they adopt and the postures they devise through their works are tied to the broader cultural, historical, political and technological contingencies and pressures those contexts present. Without appreciating those contexts, we are in a position of lack with respect to engaging with those documentary practices. To then impose criteria of decipherability alone as the measure of efficacy is to unknowingly dominate and dilute disparate documentary practices and agendas.

This book takes up three non-canonical documentary-makers from India and follows their oeuvres to plot the methodological, political, aesthetic and philosophical underpinnings of their works. My emphasis in this text is on placing these works within the context of broader

representational discourses operating in India and to which these works offer a counterpoint. This text is therefore an exercise in bringing documentary film analysis into conversation with cultural and political histories of the contexts in which documentaries are made. This approach seeks to deepen appreciation for the critical work documentary aesthetics perform. The aesthetic strategies devised and practiced by the filmmakers studied in this book constitute a theory of critical practice in which the philosophical and political motivations for filmmaking are suffused with questions of cinema's specificity and film forms. Through this, these documentary-makers offer interventions into thinking about the experiences of India as a modern nation specifically, and the dynamics of her numerous *living* cultures, more broadly.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due first and foremost to my teacher and fellow filmmaker, Dr Clive Myer, who encouraged in my thinking an appreciation for critical cinema and who, by his own example, taught me that the values with which we make and appreciate films are inseparable from the values by which we live our lives. I thank Dr Teri Brewer and Prof. Michael Punt for their unfailing support during my career as a student and filmmaker. Thanks are extended to convenors and respondents at the following conferences where key portions of this book were presented as research-in-progress: *Visual Cultures in Contemporary India* (Aarhus University, 2011), *Poetics and Politics of Documentary Research Symposium* (Aalto University, 2013) and *Film Philosophy* (Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis and Eye Film Institute Netherlands, 2013). I acknowledge the Hellman's Fellows Fund and UCLA Council for Research, whose grants supported research for this book.

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Thank you in particular to the anonymous readers whose attention, feedback and suggestions inform this book, despite the seeming 'idiosyncrasies' of this project at its start. Thank you to Chris Penfold, Felicity Plester, Christabel Scaife and all staff at Palgrave Macmillan who assisted with this project, and special thanks to Nick Brock for his suggestions and careful eye in copy-editing.

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I thank my mother for her Presence in my life, and my father, in whose *breath* I have heard that no matter the borders we are forced

to cross, or those we are compelled to draw, human connections and aesthetics transcend all barriers, speak across all dividing lines. This thought is at the core of this work.

Lastly, I thank Kumar, David, Sonal and Mriganka for working with me over the years as I composed this study. Your generosity in sharing materials – photographs, interviews, project designs, notes, and unpublished writings – deeply enriched my processes of learning and writing about your films. Most of all, however, I thank you for your pure and visionary documentary cinema.

Introduction

Documentary films are made by being in the world. Documentary materials – images and sounds – chronicle histories and how histories are performed on the bodies, present or absent, of those who transact their motions. Based on such an understanding, this book examines how documentary films approach the nation. Nations, in modern times, have become crucial frameworks through which identities, histories and socio-cultural experiences are mediated. Yet, nations are not innate, immutable or absolute entities. A nation is an 'imagined political community', asserts Benedict Anderson (1994: 6). In the words of Ernest Gellner, nations and states are a 'contingency, and not a universal necessity' (Gellner 2008: 6).[1] Similarly, nationality, Tom Nairn suggests, lies not in the genes, 'but it is in the structure of the modern world' (1997: 206). Nations are constructed categories and documentary films, constructed works themselves, address them in multiple ways. Propagandist documentaries are known to celebrate the nation state and its efforts, say with regard to war or nation-building. Documentaries of a more critical persuasion investigate the efficacies of nations. They question national institutions and programmes; mobilize the voices of those who national apparatuses and discourses overlook or erase; and explore the nation as an idea based on specific ideologies, epistemologies and cultural values.[2]

While documentary's ties to the nation are both apparent and sensitive, the documentary and nation relationship has been sparsely studied in an organized way within the broader field of Documentary Studies. What complicates this task is that documentary filmmakers often rely on state funding and support. This poses an obvious challenge to understanding documentary freedoms and how documentary-makers negotiate state-based support. Further, documentaries do not always approach the nation

in direct or even conscious ways. The affinities and divergences between documentaries and nations are enacted through varied approaches, forms and voices – some more explicit and obvious than others in their takes towards the nation. To situate and historicize the interventions documentaries make in relation to the nation, it becomes necessary to examine the documentary-making processes, forms and aesthetics that documentary filmmakers use in different societies.

This book focuses on the documentary films of India. Documentary-making in India can be traced to the very early days of cinema and since then, documentary-makers have taken up multiple subjects through disparate approaches to documentary-making. This is attributable to multiple factors, including filmmakers' ideological positions and aesthetic preferences, trends in funding, the available technologies and the very tendencies of politics in India that, for the last hundred or so years, coinciding with the birth of documentary, have been quite tectonic, pressing upon the documentary field in very specific ways. Since the early days of documentary, the question of the nation has had particular valence for documentary-makers in India.

In raising documentary's relations with the nation my intention is not so much to assert Indian documentaries as constituting a distinct mode of cultural production and praxis. My aim in this book, rather, is to foster appreciation for the complex ways by which documentary-makers approach the question of the nation, without resolving it in any stable or decisive terms. I am specifically taking up how documentaries engage the nation in terms of culture: the cultures that nations perpetuate, imbibe, amalgamate, improvise, and even suppress or erase. My study focuses on select works from the oeuvres of three documentary practitioners working in India. These include ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall; northeast-India-based Desire Machine Collective (hereafter DMC) – a group of moving image artists mobilising documentary in the installation format; and India's acclaimed avant-garde filmmaker and film philosopher, Kumar Shahani. In bringing together these three practitioners I am galvanizing a field of documentary practice in India that critiques the nation, its epistemologies, apparatuses and their workings, and constructs competing cultural and political imaginaries. Through this, viewers are exposed to India's complex and intricately textured social, political and cultural fabrics and how those have been shaped by her historical experiences, particularly her encounters with modernity. The key questions that inform my study are: What avenues do the filmmaking methodologies of the documentary-makers under consideration offer in understanding the nation? What knowledges and

imaginaries do their film forms and aesthetics devise, and how do those advance our understanding of the nation and its experiences? These questions assume particular relevance in India whose trajectory as a modern nation has been rather complex.

Documentary and the nation: towards a subjective practice

While India's civilizations can be traced back thousands of years, her tryst with modern nationhood is about seven decades old, dating from when India gained independence from British colonial rule. India, in common with most postcolonial societies, was through the colonial encounter exposed to European ideals and tenets of modern nationhood. During colonial rule, nationalism as a will for cultural and political self-assertion had assumed an anti-colonial charge. After independence, the Indian state undertook a concerted project of nation-building rooted in modernization, scientific advancement and industrialization. Enlightenment universalist values, with their faith in modern science and rationalism, had formed the epistemic, cultural and political bulwark on which colonization was perpetuated. These were then mobilized in the nation-building project that included the production of documentary films.

A dilemma that has far-reaching implications for the cultural life of India can be discerned in her experience of modern nationhood. Even though India contested colonial rule, in her nation-building process she mobilized the very values that had been the basis of her subjugation. Partha Chatterjee explains this, stating that while national liberation and nation-building are marked by a legitimate will to break from the alien, colonizing culture, yet that break cannot be predicated on traditional values that are often 'inconsistent with the conditions of historical progress' (Chatterjee 1993b: 18). Traditional cultures, their knowledge and meaning systems, their practices and overall values do not integrate neatly with the mechanisms of modern nationhood, which is based on the political-economies of modernity. Chatterjee adds that the conditions of modernity make 'cultural homogeneity' a requirement, 'an essential concomitant' of modern nationhood based on industrial society (1993b: 5). The idea of a shared culture that is deemed as forming the basis of the nation as a political unit and as a community makes the processes by which nations and their cultural narratives are constructed, highly selective. Following Homi Bhabha, we know that narratives of the nation mobilize certain pedagogies, symbols, narratives, meanings and rhetoric to the exclusion of others

(1990). The emphasis on cultural homogeneity that first arose in India as she embraced industrialism has only deepened in the post-industrial context. Modern nationhood has been a deeply problematic experience for India, a land of vast cultural diversity, and this lends to the question of documentary's approach to the nation a quite forceful charge. What are the limits and scope of documentary in relation to the nation, a construct based on values tied to modernity and colonialism that compromise, if they do not fully erase, culture's multiplicities and diversities?

The three practitioners in this book focus on varied themes, following bodies, subjects and cultures that are innocuous, marginal, absent or spectacular in India's national discourses and imaginations. MacDougall's documentaries study children's experiences in institutions of education and shelter; DMC's documentary-installations focus on the absented memories and traumas suffered by the peoples of India's northeast region; and Kumar Shahani turns to the field of classical arts, creating poetic renditions of these forms that dwell on how they have been contemplated within India's multiple schools of thought and expression. What unites these filmmakers is that they approach documentary-making as an intersubjective and creative practice, through which subjectivities are evoked, explored and expressed.

These documentary-makers are committed to presenting the subjects of their films as agents who embody knowledges, reasonings and experiences that may be overlooked or suppressed in national imaginations, but that are evoked, articulated and preserved through documentary. These practitioners are particularly interested in how the subjectivities of the participants in their films manifest, interact and evolve through documentary-making processes. Their documentaries are, in this sense, reflexive, for the camera is used as a tool for exploring subjectivities, registering subject-experiences and articulating the evolving, intersubjective dynamics shared between all documentary actors, including filmmakers. Here, the conception of the documentarist as the scrutinizer of truth, exercising an authoritative and validating gaze is fully abandoned.

The documentaries studied here present subjects and subjectivities as forming and unfolding through experiences of being-in-the-world. These films follow memories, desires, traumas, hopes, aspirations, personal and intimate conversations, modes of self-comprehension and expression, embodied knowledges and cultural epistemologies – giving us a sense of how subjectivities are open-ended, in-process and negotiating the wider axes of socio-cultural and political histories. In following subjectivities as forming and evolving, not fixed or foreclosed, these

practitioners open up dimensions of experience and understanding that exceed the terms by which nations and their institutions rationalize subject positions. A contrast surfaces between how the subjects we encounter in these films are constructed in and by them, and how their identities are streamlined and simplified by the institutions or apparatuses that contain and shape them. This contrast can be likened to Paul Willemen's eloquent distinction between subjectivity and identity:

> Subjectivity always exceeds identity, since identity formation consists of trying to pin 'us' to a specific, selected sub-set of the many diverse clusters of discourses we traverse in our lifetimes, and that stick to us to varying degrees. Subjectivity, then, relates to what we may think and feel to be the case regarding 'our' sexuality, kinship relations, our understanding of social-historical dynamics acquired through (self) education, work experience and so on. Some aspects of our subjectivity may be occupied or hijacked by the national identity modes of address, but there always are dimensions within our sense of 'subjective individuality' that escape and exceed any such identity straitjacket. (Vitali & Willemen eds. 2006: 30–1)

Evoking subjectivities and following subjective experiences that escape and/or exceed the national, the documentary-makers in this study exemplify a critical move beyond normative national discourses. The turn towards the subjective has been understood as a recent development in Indian documentaries. Sabeena Gadihoke contextualizes this in relation to India's economic liberalization and the rise of attendant identity politics that she attributes as having led documentary filmmakers to address urban, middle-class subjectivities. Gadihoke links the *subjective voice* in documentary to the *personal*, articulated through autobiographical, semi-autobiographical or biographical approaches. She notes:

> A variety of approaches mark the ways in which the self appears in the Indian documentary today. These include the openly autobiographical films, those that approach the autobiographical through biographies of others and films that use autobiographical elements to interrogate the nature of the filmic encounter. (Gadihoke 2012: 146–7)

While first-person, biographical or autobiographical films are explicitly personal and subjective, the subjective documentary is a broader category of practice. The three filmmakers in this book hold documentary-making as a subjective process and from this position their approaches are not

necessarily or explicitly biographical or autobiographical. They approach subjectivity and subjective experiences as socio-historically and culturally constructed. Through their films, they are interested to explore the social and cultural dynamics that shape subjectivities. Sensorial renditions of being in a particular place at a particular time make up the complex and textured force-field that MacDougall, DMC and Shahani's documentaries dwell upon and contemplate. This is a phenomenological approach wherein subjectivity is understood as co-extensive of environment and place. Here place is conceived most broadly to include dwelling sites, constructed communities, any-spaces-whatever, and India's numerous, little cultural landscapes. In this phenomenological schema the body is an instrument of being-in-the-world: it navigates and interacts with place, is impacted by it and responds to it. As Merleau-Ponty states:

> The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be intervolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them. (2006: 94)

The body actively makes meaning by being-in-the-world, co-creating experience and subjectivity in it. Merleau-Ponty adds:

> The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions necessary for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through a core of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world. (Merleau-Ponty 2006: 169)

While the documentary-makers studied in this book follow distinct approaches to documentary-making, they each hold documentary form and aesthetics as crucial in evoking and articulating the subjectivities they follow, the critiques and distinct imaginaries their works propose. This stems from a deep understanding that documentary films are mediated texts, not simply passive, objective or total records of reality. For them, documentary-making is an unstable and delicate process that commands immeasurable possibilities of meanings and forms. They hold that documentaries, the art of record,[3] emerge from the plenitude

and seeming chaos of the world and go on to explore and provoke meanings, map impressions and associations, and stir ideas, often unspoken and only implied. This approach to documentary-making coincides with the more contemporary turns towards subjectivity and intersubjectivity in the field of Documentary Studies.

The collapse of grand narratives and the growing appreciation for subjectivities, subject-experiences and histories as multiple, fragmented and indeterminate has unsettled the quest for total and stable truths through documentary. Poststructuralist and postcolonial thought have particularly contested the deposition on documentary of a scientific prerogative to represent reality and/or truth, objectively. What has come about in the documentary field is a growing move away from understanding the documentary-maker as an authoritative interpreter, *capturing* and communicating singular or determined meanings and rationalizations of things. Bill Nichols has termed this recent turn in documentary as constituting a shift of 'epistemological proportions', in which documentary has turned to subjective experiences and embodied knowledges through film forms that are increasingly characterized by 'incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective construction' (Nichols 1994: 1).

The growing recognition of subjectivity in documentary bears particular value in the context of postcolonialism. Approaching documentary as a subjective and incomplete practice problematizes the will to speak totally or authoritatively about an *other,* and it ascribes validity to the multiple perspectives from which *others* speak. A most significant figure whose oeuvre has inaugurated this political and subtly poetic move in documentary is Trinh T. Minh-ha. Through theoretically informed films and writings that dialogue back and forth, Minh-ha has disputed documentary's very pursuit of truth as a hermetically sealed category. Her critical stance is most clearly articulated through the reflexive words with which her 1982 film in Senegal, *Reassemblage* opens:

> *Scarcely twenty years were enough to make two billion people define themselves as underdeveloped.*
>
> *I do not intend to speak about*
> *Just speak near by*
>
> (Minh-ha 1992: 96)

In a double-edged move this position to 'speak near by' confronts colonialism, whose ethnographic knowledges principally objectified and

spoke *about the other*; and it disassembles documentary's unreflexive claims to objectivity, veracity and authority. Minh-ha's move to 'speak near by' implicitly acknowledges that documentary is **positioned in** the world; it is not constructed from any omniscient, total and therefore objective position. Documentary's position in the world, as the opening words of *Reassemblage* so finely suggest, is tied to the socio-cultural and historical factors that inform a documentary-maker's encounter with the world they document. This, in turn, highlights the impossibility of certain ventriloquist documentary agendas, to *speak for* or *on behalf of* documentary subjects. In her writings Minh-ha goes on to call for inscribing a disparity between *truth* and meaning in documentary. She argues that:

> There is no such thing as documentary – whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques. This assertion – as old and as fundamental as the antagonism between the names and reality – needs incessantly to be restated despite the very visible existence of a documentary tradition… Truth and meanings are likely to be equated with one another. Yet, what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than a meaning. (Minh-ha cited in Renov 1993: 90–2)

Interventions such as Minh-ha's have shaped contemporary documentary research and discourses advancing the emphasis on subjectivity in documentary into the realms of intersubjectivity and dialogical mediation. This growing recognition of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in documentary should, however, not be confused with bias.[4] Approaching documentary in these terms facilitates understanding that documentaries are constructed representations of reality that embody the ideological motivations, understandings and the wills of their makers and subjects.

In this book I follow how the documentary aesthetics and forms of the selected documentary-makers enact the motivations, subjectivities and dialogues between makers and subjects. For this, I turn to the field of documentary aesthetics that facilitates a deeper probe, beyond documentary contents, into the processes by which documentaries get made, and the contracts documentary-makers devise between the 'realities' they depict and the audiences they address. For a long time in the history of documentary, questions of representation disregarded the role of aesthetics. Contested and disputed, documentary's processes of aestheticization

were – and to some extent, continue to be – considered as contaminating the very core of the documentary impulse, its perceived 'unmediated' depiction of reality. There has persisted what Stella Bruzzi terms an 'inverse relationship between style and authenticity'; wherein the more rough-edged and unpolished a film, the greater its credibility (2006: 9). With the turn towards the subjective and intersubjective, the terms of debate in documentary are shifting and questions of aesthetics, say stylization through choices of cinematography, narrative devices and montage, are now more integrated into the discussion of the scope and the very life of documentary films in the world.

I use aesthetics to mean the approaches to documentary practice, say verité, observational or poetic, and the intricacies of film forms or vocabularies through which documentary meanings and interventions are constructed with a degree of coherence. It is in this field of aesthetics that the work of ideologies, political postures, creative preferences, the subjectivities of documentary actors and the dialogues and intersubjective transactions between them – all those subtleties that inform and shape documentary's negotiations between the 'real' and the constructed, the visible and the invisible or implied – takes place. By focusing on documentary aesthetics in this way, the disparate methods and forms by which documentary films negotiate reality and through that, the question of the nation, are highlighted.

In order to better situate and appreciate the interventions of the documentary filmmakers studied in this book, I start with a brief overview introducing how documentary as a practice has evolved in India. This overview seeks to exposit how documentary film forms have shaped in relation to: one, the changes in Indian society in general; and two, the evolving understandings and discourses surrounding documentary practice in India. The history of documentary in India is closely entwined with India's construction as a modern nation and two broad tendencies towards the nation can be discerned in Indian documentaries. There is, on the one hand, the affirmative tendency of institutionalized documentary that is mobilized to enforce the Indian state's ideologies and cultural discourses. Then there is the oppositional tendency of what art critic Geeta Kapur terms as the 'new' Indian documentary, based on an activist agenda and constituting a dialectical critique of the nation state (Kapur 2008: 50). Both these approaches, the institutionalized and the oppositional, devise very specific forms of film that I will illustrate are based on particular understandings of documentary materiality and the benefits of a realist aesthetic.

Documentary's tendencies towards the nation: the institutionalized documentary mode and the oppositional documentary

Documentary in India stands in marked contrast to the commercial, fiction film industry. Documentary films study the social and historical worlds; they are geared to understanding the workings of society, its histories, hierarchies and the advantages and disadvantages those engender. Documentary films in India are funded by diverse sources from within India and abroad (Rajagopal & Vohra 2012: 16).[5] Documentary films are exhibited at select avenues such as film festivals (domestic and international), television networks, film collectives and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The documentary field in India is characterized by a diversity of forms that have emerged at different moments of documentary history.[6] They range from the activist and verité-influenced forms such as those of acclaimed Indian documentarist Anand Patwardhan on to ethnographic[7] and experimental films. Given a large mass media industry, television documentaries are widespread and these extend from a journalistic approach that is event-centered and adopts an interpretive or investigative modality.

While there is widespread documentary production in India, India's documentary histories have not been documented in a serious way. As Paromita Vohra observes: '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 to it' (Rajagopal & Vohra 2012: 16). Documentary films have also not been included in the canon of Indian national cinema, which is understood as principally composed of India's parallel and mainstream commercial films.[8]

There has been active production of documentary in some form in India since the very beginnings of cinema. Around the time of the first Lumière Cinematographe Exhibition in Mumbai in July 1896, cine enthusiasts in different parts of India were accessing and/or devising apparatuses and making moving pictures. Harishchandra S. Bhatvadekar, who had run a photographic studio in Bombay since 1880, is credited as the first Indian filmmaker for his shooting of a short actuality, a wrestling match staged in Mumbai's Hanging Gardens in 1897.[9] Short actuality films or topicals, as this genre came to be called, flourished in the first decades of the twentieth century.[10] These were short films of actual, real-life events and are considered to be the forerunners of the documentary film in India.[11] As India's freedom movement intensified,

topicals became more news-based, focusing on such events as the Bengal Partition (1905), floods and famines across India, and events associated with Mahatma Gandhi such as the *Dandi March*. In the 1930s the production of topicals receded, leading to a differentiation between newsreels and short documentaries that focused on specific subjects like industry (textiles, sugar, iron and steel), travelogues and profiles of institutions such as the Royal Indian Air Force and Navy.

As India's freedom struggle entered its final stages with the launch of the Quit Movement in 1942, and the threat of a Japanese attack in South Asia during the Second World War became imminent, the British colonial establishment undertook a concerted effort in war propaganda. The Film Advisory Board (FAB) was formed in 1940, later replaced by the Information Films of India (IFI). These bodies produced war films to build confidence in British war efforts and to recruit Indian soldiers. IFI also promoted instructional films chronicling India's crafts and cultures for Indian audiences.[12] Both FAB and IFI recruited Indian documentary-makers and film companies to produce documentaries.[13] In 1946, a year before India's independence, IFI became inoperative. Together, IFI and FAB produced close to 170 films. While IFI is widely criticized for promoting war propaganda, some documentary commentators credit the organization for bringing to India recognized British documentarists who trained Indian filmmakers in the practices of professionalized documentary-making.[14]

In December 1947, a few months after India's independence, a new organization modeled on IFI was formed to promote documentary film production and distribution. First termed the Film Unit of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, in 1948 it was renamed the Films Division (FD). It recruited many officials who had previously worked at IFI to undertake documentaries and newsreel production. Besides production, the Films Division was charged with commissioning and distributing finished films contracted from film production companies.

The 1950s and 1960s had been marked by a sense of euphoria and optimism surrounding the nation-building project that had been inaugurated following India's independence. During this time documentary came to be valued for its instructional potential. A dominant sentiment was that in a country with literacy levels as low as those in India, documentary would serve in educating and informing citizens, and building a sense of community.[15] India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, described documentary as a tool to 'build the nation, build a sense of citizenship and community' (cited in Narwekar 1992: 42). The Films Division undertook extensive production, around 200 documentaries

and short films per year, making it one of the world's largest documentary producers at the time (Rajadhyaksha in Nowell-Smith ed. 1997: 683). It focused largely on the production of instructional and educational films that were rooted in IFI's approach. In the late 1950s it also started two new arms, the National Education and Information Films Ltd and the Cartoon Film Unit. With its active production of films, the Films Division devised an institutionalized form of documentary representation.

I draw here on Noel Burch's concept of the Institutional Mode of Representation (IMR) that he uses to classify cinematic codes of mainstream film.[16] Burch's discussion pertains to classical cinema that he argues as interpellating the viewer as a 'voyeur', an incorporeal individual with no affective relation to what they see or hear (1990: 250). I find Burch's concept of the IMR applicable to the institutionalized documentary form perpetuated by the Films Division. This institutionalized form of documentary, which continues to some measure in the contemporary moment, is principally instructional and expository in a very prosaic way. Its formal elements include an informative and verbocentric narration based on the voice of an authoritative, often western-accented male speaking over images that are purely understood as evidence, illustrative of facts and information.

A clear persistence with the instructional approach of the FAB and IFI documentaries from the war years is evident in the FD's work. The FAB and IFI films made extensive use of Indian music for background sound; approached shots in the spirit of giving a flavour of things; and were predominantly verbocentric, narrated in the voice of an often essentialising, white male figure. This voice structured documentary discourse in terms of deciphering and interpreting India,[17] which was portrayed as a foreign land with very particular ways of living. The FD institutionalized this style through which viewers, in a manner quite like the classical cinema Burch critiques, became incorporeal entities who documentary informs and educates in a quite unilinear and pedantic way. Commenting on the bases of the FD's institutionalized style, film historians Barnouw and Krishnaswamy note that:

> From the very beginnings of the system, the films were under the control of ministry [Information & Broadcasting] representatives with little or no film background. Some were men of considerable education, products of a highly verbalized culture. To them, it was quite naturally, the words in the narration that counted. The pictures – subsidiary, in their view – that would accompany those words could safely be left

> to others. The typical Films Division film has had constant narration, crowded with information. (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980: 201)

The Films Division promoted broadly two kinds of films, both at the service of India's nation-building agenda.[18] The first kind emphasized the benefits of modernized development. They focused on such themes as industrialization, the building of dams, and the spread of hygiene in villages – depicting a whole gamut of public programmes and public sector utilities in affirmative terms and often deploying Nehruvian iconography of industrialization. The second kind of films, follow from IFI's films on India's crafts and cultures. They have been loosely termed as ethnographic documentaries that take up subjects including folk arts, crafts, India's festivals and numerous communities. These ethnographic films celebrate India's cultural diversity, visualizing in celebratory terms India's national dictum of 'unity in diversity.' They are not grounded in any serious visual ethnography research principles. Film historian B.D. Garg has critiqued these, stating that:

> A favourite subject of the Films Division has been the exploration of peoples of various regions and linguistic areas, with the intention of bringing about an emotional integration. But the temptation to do so has been more often aesthetic than sociological. It is the colourfulness of the costumes, the pageantry of festivals and rituals rather than the socio-economic, as well as the more fundamental problems that have been touched upon. The result is a sort of Tourist office pamphlet and not any serious, profound and realistic study of people or situations. (cited in Narwekar 1992: 47)

In its early years the FD had supported important filmmakers who experimented with documentary aesthetics, including P.V. Pathy, Mani Kaul, Satyajit Ray, Sukhdev and the painter, M.F. Hussein. But as the aesthetics of their films challenged the FD's institutional documentary form, experimentation was cast in a negative light as being excessive and flippant, and it was steadily curbed. Commenting on the aesthetic implications of FD's institutionalized documentaries, the eminent Indian film critic Amrit Gangar notes that:

> The FD's virtual stranglehold has another fall-out besides a definite 'distaste' for documentaries it has been successful in creating among the minds of the people. The more serious fall-out is that the FD has also eventually muffed up the voice of documentary—the voice

> largely in the sense of stylistic expression, its various possibilities and alternatives. This government outfit makes its films largely by risking aesthetic issues… (in Chanana eds. 1987: 36)

Most problematically, however, the institutionalized mode of the FD documentaries reveals a very particular understanding of the masses, both as subjects of the films and as audiences. The masses are depicted in need of development that is projected as an ordering and disciplining mechanism. These films, quite like the colonial enterprise, project state-led modernization and development as the means for transforming largely illiterate peoples into fit citizens of a modern nation. A hierarchy is instituted wherein the documentary-maker is the bearer of information and discourse, enlightening the masses. Audiences are reduced to passive recipients who through documentary are being, as it were, doctored into modern citizenship.

From the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s documentary filmmakers started to critique the Films Division style and distanced themselves from the institution. Sanjit Narwekar notes that there was growing appreciation among documentary filmmakers of how complex the fabric of democracy in India was and they felt that documentary films of the Films Division style could not grasp the intricacies and complications of Indian society (1992: 48). Though the Films Division continues to operate, its significance has diminished and it is not the body associated with the active and radical field of Indian documentary.[19]

During the late 1960s and the 1970s documentary filmmakers began to venture into independent filmmaking.[20] The emergence of synchronous sound recording and video provided further impetus to documentary and a new generation, including filmmakers such as Sukhdev, S.N.S. Sastry and Anand Patwardhan, emerged on the documentary scene. The growth of Indian television from the 1970s onward encouraged the paradigm of mass communication and documentary got attached to this. It was increasingly understood as an extension of journalism and prestigious educational programmes such as Jamia Milia Islamia University's AJK Mass Communication Research Center were formed for documentary training. Understanding documentary as a mass communication medium, independent documentary-makers increasingly turned to political events and issues, both within India and globally, while maintaining their distance from statist documentary outfits and agendas. Though this move towards the political has styled documentary as an oppositional practice, this oppositional documentary, like the institutionalized documentary practices, has persisted with an emphasis

on a certain form of realism, albeit enacted through disparate formal approaches and techniques. The emphasis on realism in documentary can be contextualized in relation to the appeal of realism in Indian cinema more broadly, where it has been understood as the means for facilitating a confrontation with 'change' that has been the hallmark of India as a new nation.[21]

Documentary realism in India is specifically influenced by Griersonian realism, first implanted through exposure to British documentary during the Second World War. After independence, the Griersonian influence persisted through figures such as James Beveridge, John Grierson's associate from the National Film Board of Canada, who had worked at Burmah-Shell's documentary unit between 1954 and 1958 and who was associated with the AJK Mass Communication Research Center during the 1980s. Deriving from Grierson, documentary in India is understood as serving a social purpose, as custodian of civil society and committed to social upliftment. Paromita Vohra elaborates three ways by which the Griersonian influence has informed Indian documentaries: one, Grierson's perceived displeasure with aesthetics has led to an emphasis on realism over creativity and experimentation; two, the documentary filmmaker has been styled as a 'messianic or evolutionary' figure who authoritatively speaks about 'reality' and three, documentaries have been removed from the circuits of market circulation (Rajagopal and Vohra 2012: 10).

We know from the history of documentary that Grierson's take on aesthetics has remained contested. The Griersonian tradition is rooted broadly in realism, but it is not as averse to documentary aesthetics or creative approaches to documentary as certain Griersonian followers in India make it out to be. In *Claiming the Real*, Brian Winston points out how the Griersonian tradition negotiates questions of aesthetics and creativity, stating that:

> Within the legitimation provided by the realist aesthetic, Grierson and his followers can locate these arenas of creativity—cinematography and editing (and later sound)—as the specific sites of both the mechanical reproduction of what Grierson called 'the living article' *and* imaginative work… It [documentary] is a painterly tradition that allows for 'poetry' rather than, say, 'essay' or 'belles-lettres', which might at first seem more apposite alternatives to fiction in such an analogy. (Winston 1995: 25)

Reading in Grierson's emphasis on actuality a distaste for aesthetics, institutional and oppositional forms of Indian documentary have filtered

the Griersonian position in a limited way. The emphasis on realism at the expense of questions of aesthetics has led to an understanding of documentary as a principally expository and evidentiary practice mostly steered by verbocentric discourse. This certainly serves political documentary of a certain ideological persuasion. However, the emphasis on documentary as an evidentiary and expository practice, besides being creatively limited, reveals an understanding of realism that is unreflexive in that the mediation processes – socio-historical and technological that shape documentary meanings remain unrecognised.

The oppositional or political documentary from India is perhaps the most visible of documentary forms from India today, exhibited at international film and art festivals. The unreflexiveness of this form is thinly recognized in the limited scholarship on Indian documentaries, even though such scholarship has attempted to situate a subjective prerogative in contemporary Indian documentaries. I am thinking here particularly of Geeta Kapur's essays where the politically committed form is termed as the 'new Indian documentary.' In her 2005 essay 'Tracking Images' Kapur posits 2003–04 as the years when the Indian documentary movement named itself. According to her, two convergences shaped this moment. The urgent upsurge in documentary production following the 2003 Gujarat riots, a right-wing government supported pogrom targeting the Muslim community. The upsurge in documentary production was upheld by the proliferation of digital video across the subcontinent. The culminating moment was the birth of the anti-censorship movement in 2004 – *Vikalp: Films for Freedom*. For Kapur, this upswing in documentary production represented a dialectical move geared to register the reactionary ideology, fascistic brutality and neoliberal economic agenda of the then right-wing government. In her discussion Kapur noted a correspondence between video-based documentary and an opposition to the nation state:

> Is there an unstated correspondence between the 'deconstructed' technology of the video-medium and what is now perceived and debated to be the already disassembled nation? It is the mood of the moment to foreground these issues in disregard of/in opposition to the mediating institution of the State. (Kapur 2005: 106)

In her following essay *A Cultural Conjuncture in India: Art Into Documentary* (2008), Kapur expanded her propositions. She argued that the critique against the nation state embodied by *Vikalp: Films For Freedom* had been rooted in the politically interventionist

documentary practice of earlier decades, specifically those decades when the democratic ethos of the Indian nation state had been threatened. The decades in question were: the 1970s, marked by the Emergency between 1975 and 1977;[22] and the 1990s, which saw the political ascendance of the Hindu right in India.

Against this backdrop, an activist agenda was implanted into what Kapur terms the 'new Indian documentary'. This agenda, she notes, is in line with a global upsurge in documentary films following the establishment of a unipolar world after the collapse of the USSR in 1989 (Kapur 2008: 50). Kapur's rationale runs thus:

> While the documentarist cannot, perhaps, answer to the overtaken ideal of a 'people's culture' in the socialist sense of the word, it may be possible to hypothesize, on the basis of a worldwide documentary upsurge, a common culture of the 'multitudes' with a 'be against' slogan in the manifestos of hope that the new global empire supposedly yields—in the form of a nemesis or, indeed, as a demonstration of a dialectic. This claim postulates that cultures of protest find spontaneous communicability across and beyond communitarian and national boundaries. (Kapur 2008: 51)

Kapur holds the new Indian documentary as a tool aligned with struggles for social justice against global capital with which nation states such as India are increasingly complicit. A key protagonist for Kapur in this scenario has been Anand Patwardhan, whose documentaries have confronted a whole range of issues, including the 1975 Emergency, the slums of Mumbai, the people's movement against the Narmada Dam Project, India's caste politics and the links between Hindutva fascistic ideology and the crisis of Indian masculinity. Patwardhan's essayistic-investigative form has focused consistently on the intensifying cleavages in Indian polity and society, those undercurrents that set ablaze in the confrontations between citizens and state apparatuses. Kapur goes on to note how the documentaries of the younger filmmaker, Amar Kanwar on subjects such as ethnic and tribal minorities, environmental degradation and the India–Pakistan partition constitute an alternative, a generational advance over Patwardhan's essayistic documentary form. The notable distinction between the approaches of the two documentarists – the former historical and probing at the level of discourse; the latter more subjective, open-ended and vulnerable – according to Kapur, references a 'generational change in the nature and pursuit of politics itself' (2008: 45).