

Book Review

Fascinating Journey through the Life World

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A Fly in the Curry: Independent Documentary Film in India

Edited by K.P. Jayasankar & Anjali Monteiro;

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This is one of most impressive books in cinema studies. The work views the place of documentary within the Indian public sphere. The study stands as an accomplishment in terms of a number of aspects like being based on close textual analysis, conversations with documentary filmmakers and the sheer range and a number of documentary films that the authors have described and analysed. It takes the readers through the journey of the vision of the filmmakers discussed therein. Each of the chapters has opened up a different level of cinematic expression.

The present study captures the landmarks and ruptures of the complex and chequered history of the documentary in India. It brings forth the themes and positions in the context of Indian documentaries ranging from neutrality to reflexivity. Appropriately titled, the 'Fly in the Curry' work reconstructs the Indian documentary discourse in its all complex political and aesthetic cultural diversities and traditions. It doesn't run in completely neutral manner.

The book opens up with the introductory chapter titled 'The Flight Path' which explores the emergence of Indian documentary in colonial and post-colonial periods. Beginning from early actuality films which documented events such as wrestling, a monkey man, the great

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Delhi durbar this chapter focuses on the variety of issues like government interference, nationalistic discourse, education and cultural propaganda.

'Flying Solo' chapter in an interesting manner explores the 'independent' documentary that emerged in India from late 1970's onwards. It powerfully brings out the dominant discourse of nationhood of those decades which was illustrated in the works of filmmakers like Anand Patwardhan, Deepa Dhanraj, and Rahul Roy. The chapter serves as a useful guide for understanding the contours of the independent documentary in India particularly during the turbulent period of 1970's. It takes us through the making of the landmark documentary film like *Waves of Revolution* (1975). Here one can see the evolution of documentary film as a chorus of different voices. The link between filmmaking and activism has been traced. The rupture in terms of the production process of documentary film in India which challenged the dominant discourse of Films Division and the intervention of the state has been exposed in this chapter.

The chapter in an appealing manner unfolds the story of the watershed moments, documentaries in the country history as well as how the individual directors recorded and responded to these 'live in' experiences through their lens. It is made clear that the onset of the feminist wave of 1980's turned the documentary film into a political alliance between filmmaker and subject and eventually more participatory process. The reader can notice the radical shift in the language of Indian documentary from 'nobody spoke' stage to 'talking heads'. The role of technology like video which appeared in 1970's expanded the terrain of documentary production to include Non-Government Organisations to which authors themselves were witness to has been portrayed. One is convinced that many of the documentaries while chronicling subaltern struggles became a catalyst for evoking popular movements like *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save Narmada Campaign). The authors don't lose sight of the fact that the 1980's also witnessed the 'NGOisation' of documentaries. The chapter certainly is able to demonstrate in a dynamic manner the challenges and many uneasy moments posed by many of the Indian documentaries in the historical setting.

In 'Flying Images' chapter the writers examine the relationship between the documentarist and the narrative and the question of realism. It points out that the era of mechanical and
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digital reproduction has ushered in the multiple and contradictory articulations of documentary discourse in India. The world of dilemmas, strategies and critical questions that characterise the scenario of Indian documentaries has been put forth. The work of Mani Kaul (1944-2011) who redefined the field of cinema as the filmmaker has been investigated in this chapter. His documentary *Siddheshwari* displays the life through music and camera remains stationary, while *Uski Roti* uses the recurring motif of hands at work.

The authors are able to recreate the amazing world of documentaries through their pen instead of the lens though with certain limitations that the written word faces vis-a-vis images. The weaving of voice-overs in the main text as a part of the discussion of the documentaries has contributed life to the narratives. Like the diverse world of documentaries, the chapter brings to the fore the voices spread across time and space. The trends in the history of documentaries, the responses of the documentarists and the evolution of the makers in this ongoing process as if becoming curators have been highlighted. The example of Madhusree Dutta's work characterized by hybridity and open-mindedness has been cited as an illustration in this case. The wide range of ways of imagining the documentary text has been examined in this chapter.

'Flying into the Looking Glass' demonstrates the thorny issue of the power equations between filmmakers and their subjects, through the investigation of a fascinating body of work of feminist documentarists since the early 1990's. The chapter focuses on how gender becomes a site for subversion of fixed identities through films that contest ideas of ideal Indian womanhood. The films of Nilita Vachani, Reena Mohan and Pushpa Rawat and the challenges they faced have been discussed. These ethnographical films represented marginal and stigmatised voices and in this process turned out to be part of collective cultural memories. The authors have been successful in opening up new worlds which redefined the idea of the documentary. The chapter also unfolds the feminist filmmaking which involved a shift towards interweaving the personal with the political by first-time filmmakers and thereby transformed the life of everyone involved with it. In fact, these ordinary stories of human touch have been the highlight of this project.

The questions regarding the filmmakers' subject positions and the politics of representation have been explored in 'Notes from the Curry' chapter. The experience of film-making of the authors has been able to make a difference in the chapter and one is able to see their reflection through their filmmaking experiences related to Dharavi slums. The quotes from the other scholarly works of media studies have brought deep insights to the work.

The concluding chapter, 'From the Curry to the Cauldron', attempts to trace the working out of various relationships that documentary in India has had with the state and the market. The chapter provides the glimpse of the ways in which the censorship has impinged on documentary filmmaking and how the documentary community has contested it. It records the experiences and perspectives of the documentary makers including those of the writers in the context of the censorship. The role of technologies such as computers, cell phones, and projection systems in the expansion and democratisation of documentary practice has been elaborated. The chapter also highlights discussion on the funding issues and the international influence on the form and style of Indian documentaries and points out to the future possibilities.

Coming from the authors, K.P.Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro involved in media education, research and production of documentaries and whose work have been acclaimed at national and international levels, the work is certainly an engaging read. It opens to us the life worlds of films, filmmakers and that of the protagonists depicted therein. The YouTube and web portal links to the documentaries and the interviews of their makers will be valuable for as much for the researchers as much for the interested 'viewers'. The controversies and the other side of the stories depicted in the documentaries needed to be dealt in detail. Nevertheless, the book is an extremely useful and remarkable work for scholars and makers in the field of cinema studies, media studies, and cultural studies. It is effective in opening up spaces for discussion and reflection. It can surely serve as the guide to understand and analyse the world of the Indian documentaries. This scholarly work has been able to fill the gap in the case of the sparse writing on the documentaries in the contemporary India.