

**NARRATIVES OF DEVELOPMENT: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF
ALTERNATIVE DOCUMENTARIES IN INDIA**

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**BY
SRIVANI MULUGUNDAM**



**DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION
UNIVERSITY OF HYDERABAD**

**Sarojini Naidu School of Performing Arts,
Fine Arts and Communication
University of Hyderabad
Hyderabad - 500 046, India.**

AUGUST 2002

**Dr Vinod Pavarala,
Reader. Department of Communication,
University of Hyderabad,
Hyderabad -500046.**

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis **Narratives of Development: a critical analysis of alternative documentaries in India** is research done under my supervision by Srivani.M in the Department of Communication, S.N.School, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad. This thesis has not previously formed the basis for the award to the candidate of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or other similar titles. The thesis as a whole, in its approach to the subject, in its organization and treatment of the material, and its critical analysis and evaluation represents the independent work on part of the candidate.




Dr.Vinod Pavarala

Thesis Supervisor

Hyderabad

Date:02-08-2002.



August 2, 2002

DEAN
S.N. School of Performing Arts
Fine Arts & Communication
University of Hyderabad

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this work **Narratives of Development: a critical analysis of alternative documentaries in India** has been originally carried out by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Vinod Pavarala, Reader, Department of Communication, S.N.School, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad. This work has not been earlier submitted either in full or part for any other degree in any other University.



SRIVANI MULUGUNDAM

Hyderabad

Date: 2nd Aug. 02

for

my naanna and amma

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The study

This study focuses on a particular tradition of documentaries in India that seeks to challenge the hegemonic model of national development, promoted aggressively by the state in post-independent India, and absorbed into the collective unconscious of the educated Indian citizen. Various referred to as 'independent' or 'political' or 'committed' documentaries, these films¹ try to articulate marginalized voices in society and are committed to social equity. They offer narratives of an alternative development paradigm, calling for participatory, people-centered initiatives of development from the grassroots, while questioning teleological and ahistorical theories of development.

Development thinking in the post-War years resulted in the emergence of the dominant paradigm of development. This paradigm, which gained currency during the 1960s, called for a capital-intensive and economics-centered development of the masses. The mass media were hailed as the magic multipliers of development, which could have a powerful effect on a largely passive people. However, as the Western-style modernization project started running into trouble in the 1970s and 1980s, this dominant paradigm of development came under attack and an alternative paradigm of 'real' development(s) emerged. This called for a holistic and pluralistic approach towards development, with participation of the people. People were recognized as active agents of change rather than as passive recipients of development benefits. The role of the media too was re-conceptualized. The video emerged as a powerful tool for transporting local

¹ In this study, the terms 'documentaries' and 'films' are used interchangeably, unless specific mention is made of fiction film or short film.

experiences because it supported a high level of **participation**. And it is this tool that the alternative documentary in India seeks to exploit.

Historically, the documentary has been pre-occupied with depicting the 'real' world, rather than the 'imaginary' world of fiction film. Given the documentary's preoccupation with 'reality', contemporary documentary theory problematizes the notions of the fictional and the real. The history of the documentary film reveals its social motive. The status that the documentary occupies as a 'discourse in sobriety' (Nichols, 1991:3), and the ideological pedestal it assumes are critiqued by several theorists like Michael Renov, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Bill Nichols, Anjali Monteiro and K.P.Jayasankar. Among the important and contentious issues that emerge in this critique are those of definition, representation, self-representation, objectivity, reflexivity, and documentary desire. An understanding of the history of and trends in documentary making are vital in order to comprehend the constantly evolving position that the documentary occupies in the world of film.

India remains a prolific producer of the independent or alternative documentary, especially from the late 1970s. In keeping with the shift in the concept of development, the alternative documentary in India found its niche as the voice of the marginalized sections in society who were bypassed in the benefits of development. These films seek to be of, by, and for disenfranchised groups like the adivasis, the poor, women and the minorities, who are at the receiving end of an unsustainable paradigm of development.

This study critically examines alternative documentaries in India in light of contemporary documentary theory, as well as contemporary development theory. Any

understanding of these documentaries calls for a reconciliation of these two fields of study.

Bill Nichols (1991) suggests a framework to examine the terrain of documentary.

His three-pronged approach deals with the documentary as constituted by

- a) a community of practitioners,
- b) a corpus of texts, and
- c) a constituency of viewers

The current study adopts this text-author-audience framework to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of alternative documentaries in India. Two dominant concerns addressed here are: one, what is a documentary? And two, what are the various implications of using the word 'alternative' to describe the documentaries analysed in the study.

From an initial inquiry into the *raison d' etre* of these films to the kinds of meanings that could be drawn from the text, the study seeks to locate the alternative documentaries in India within the conceptual topographies proposed by various theorists in the field. Crucial questions of definition, agenda, representation, documentary desire, objectivity and reflexivity are examined from the points of view of the filmmakers and the audiences. In addition, by analyzing the texts, I seek to interrogate the label of 'alternative' itself, which is used to describe these films.

The documentary: a clarification

Documentaries are, as it is, outside the mainstream, as not many people are documentary watchers (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

Documentaries are considered a marginal province in the area of film studies. Theorists and practitioners acknowledge that the term 'documentary' is more often than not ridden with several stereotypical connotations, and is clearly constructed as something different from mainstream cinema. Various attempts have been made to understand and define this mode of filmmaking.

Definitions seek to isolate an essential characteristic that is common to all members in the genre. There have been many attempts to define the documentary, which continues to persist as a fairly distinct tradition in filmmaking from the early 1920s. But increasingly, there is a growing resistance to the pigeonholing of films into fixed and often synthetic genres. Postmodern theorists reject the imposition of artificial categories, which perceive the world as classified into rigid compartments. Eschewing the notion of the documentary as a genre in filmmaking, contemporary documentary theorists like Michael Renov, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Bill Nichols critique the practice or tradition of the documentary.

An understanding of how the documentary has been perceived historically is important for any attempt to re-conceptualize the documentary. The root of the term 'documentary' lies in the Latin *docere*, which means 'to teach'. It was in the 19th century that the term documentary came to refer to material, which could be used as evidence, as opposed to hearsay or opinion. The word documentary was first used as an adjective, casually by John Grierson, in his review of Robert Flaherty's film *Moana* in 1926 in the

New York Sun: 'Of course, *Moana* being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family, has documentary value' (cited in Ellis, 1989:4). Grierson's usage of the term was probably with reference to the modern meaning of the word 'document' as standing for a factual or authentic record. This connotation of the word finds resonance in the commonsensical understanding of the documentary.

Jack Ellis (1989) writes that the documentary idea as a technique and style of presenting the world in a sober and realistic fashion has its precursors in photography, radio and literature from the 19th century. Be it capturing photographic documentation of important world events, or analytical and informative capsules made for the radio or non-fiction literature or analytical journalism, the same philosophical principles that drive documentary film have been known to drive these other media too. However, the term 'documentary' in itself came to refer exclusively to the documentary film, and finds a place in the dictionary as the primary meaning of the word.

Early definitions

Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* made in 1922 is regarded as the first English documentary made. Frances Flaherty, who helped her husband make the film, refers to their work as 'the film of discovery and revelation' (cited in Ellis, 1989: 5). The primary concern was what the camera could discover and reveal, and Flaherty's films bear testimony to this. Even as late as in 1800, the Oxford English Dictionary spoke of the word 'documentary' as 'a lesson; an admonition, a warning'. And it is to this definition that John Grierson would eventually move on to talk about the documentary as the cinema that taught people and helped the cause of social democracy (Ellis, 1989).

Hailing the documentary as the cinema with a social purpose, early filmmakers like Dziga Vertov, John Grierson and Paul Rotha spoke of the documentary as the alternative to the escapist and fantastic spectacles called fiction film. So, the starting point for most of the early definitions is seeing documentary as non-fiction and non-narrative cinema. This came about largely because of the positing of documentary against fiction film. Dissociation from the Hollywood-style of high drama and glamorous make-believe seems to be one of the earliest distinctions, which many documentary filmmakers sought to emphasise. In several of the early references to documentary, the term non-fiction is used as a synonym for documentary.

Traditionally, 'actuality' was seen as the most important distinguishing characteristic between the fiction film and the documentary. One of the earliest definitions of the documentary is provided by John Grierson, who refers to the documentary as the 'creative treatment of actuality'. Paul Rotha, in a more elaborate definition of the documentary, refers to it as 'the use of the film medium to interpret creatively and in social terms the life of the people as it exists in reality' (cited in Ellis, 1989:5). So, whether the term used is actuality or reality, the emphasis is on distinguishing this body of work from the non-real or imaginary world of fiction film.

Calling the attempts at definition 'distressingly vague', Raymond Spottiswoode writes that the documentary

... is in subject and approach a dramatized presentation of man's relation to his institutional life, whether industrial, social, or political; and in technique, a subordination of form to content (cited in Platinga, 1997: 13).

The above definition sets the stage for debate on the anti-aesthetic in the documentary by suggesting that form is more important than content. This argument will

be examined in Chapter 6 of the study. This idea of the **documentary** is considered too prescriptive and excludes personal films and experimental films. However, it is one definition that is in synchronization with at least some contemporary definitions of the documentary. Bill Nichols, for instance, characterizes the documentary as a film that revolves around one informing logic, 'a representation, case or argument about the world, explicitly or implicitly' (Nichols, 1991: 112).

Documentary as not **non-fiction**

Documentary filmmakers since Flaherty's *Nanook* have frequently chosen to build stories around the heroics of larger-than-life figures plucked from their 'real' environs (Michael Renov, 1993: 6).

Debunking the traditional notion of documentary as non-fiction, Renov (1993) asserts that documentaries 'narrativize the real'. He says that history shows that the documentary consistently makes use of every cinematic device which fiction film is known to use. So, the documentary is as much a story, as much a cinematic construct, as a fiction film. He contends that whether fictional or not, the documentary is definitely 'at least fictive*' and takes recourse to tempering 'reality' with creative imagination. This view of documentaries as constructed stories just like their mainstream counterparts is a crucial turn around from the traditional definitions of the documentary.

This perspective will help to re-examine the philosophical basis of why and how documentaries are made and used. Hayden White reaffirms Renov's opinion by suggesting that the documentary like every⁷ other discourse constitutes those objects, which it purports to 'realistically' describe and 'objectively' analyze (cited in Renov: 1993). Inherent in this suggestion is the idea that the documentary attempts to represent the 'real' and to also 'objectively' analyse this reality. White goes on to

challenge these claims by saying that every mimesis or imitation can be distorted to describe the same phenomenon in several ways. And so the documentary, which is an audio-visual signifier, merely re-presents reality and does not represent it. And this re-presenting involves various choices made voluntarily and involuntarily, like the lens used, the shots, the language, the editing and so on. Similar to the choices made by a filmmaker for a mainstream film, a documentary too involves a process of selection and rejection. Both, therefore, are texts created by the filmmaker.

Central to this argument is an exploration of what is reality. Mainstream cinema is considered fiction because it is made up of stories fabricated for the screen, whereas the referent in a documentary is seen as a piece of the world. But this piece of the world is, as Renov puts it, 'plucked from its everyday context', decontextualizing the referent from its context (Renov, 1993).

Historically, claims were made to accord the photograph the status of scientific evidence, calling it a fully indexical sign of the 'real'. Correspondingly, the photograph was spoken of as verifiable evidence, like the reading of a barometer or thermometer. It is this claim that is called upon to legitimize documentary footage as real, and not fiction. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1993) opines that these claims, which attribute to the documentary the power to capture 'reality out there for us in here', have to be rigorously questioned on philosophical and political grounds. She challenges John Grierson's claim about the documentary 'opening up the screen on the real world' saying that whatever a documentary claims as real or the truth is, in fact, just a meaning, an interpretation of what is. So, the documentary is not more 'real' than a feature film.

In a significant understanding about the documentary, Nichols (1991) considers **the** documentary film as a 'discourse in sobriety', along with politics, economics, education and religion, all of which seek to 'effect action and entail consequences'. These **are** some of the systems, which assume the mantle of instrumental power and claim that they can and should alter the world as they see it. The idea is an important one as it implies a motive to the documentary and documentary makers. This serves as a point for rigorous interrogation in understanding documentary today. The documentary in the privileged status as a domain of truth is what needs to be critiqued. Believing in their ability to directly and transparently reflect the real world, the films assume the responsibility of making things happen, without taking recourse to 'make-believe' characters or situations. While the docu-drama or the fictionalizing documentary is here to stay, the crux of the argument is not so much whether the footage is 'real' or staged footage. It is the rooting of the documentary in the historical world, through its indexical representations and the truth-claims this fosters, that needs to be critiqued.

The thrust of contemporary documentary theory has been to resolve the position of the documentary *vis a vis* mainstream cinema. Documentary theory also explores the notion of documentary desire. Like film theory devotes much of its time to examine fiction films in relation to the spectator, the documentary too is critiqued in the context of **the** demands it makes on its audience and the expectations the audience makes of it. This **idea** is explored in Chapter 7 of the thesis.

Beyond definitions

Historically, the attempts to define art have been unsuccessful, and correspondingly so have the attempts to define the documentary. The elusive concept of

art defies any comprehensive definition. Plato's definition of art as 'an imitation of life' seems more a broad description of the essence of art and not so much a definition delineating its essential characteristics. Weitz (cited in Platinga, 1997) argues that art is an open concept, which has no essence and hence cannot be defined in a traditional sense. While one might find over-lapping similarities or 'family resemblances' among the members of the said art form, there is no inherent common essence or property, which can be isolated to define them. The boundaries are indeed blurred and increasingly so, with the very concept of a genre being challenged in the various fields of literature, music, and dance, as also in film. Cultural studies as a discipline has come to interrogate the validity and credibility of compartmentalizing art forms within fixed boundaries.

The documentary may also be thought of as being an open concept, one that resists any traditional attempt at definition. The impossibility of categorizing them under formal definitions comes to the fore, when the attempted definitions are subject to close scrutiny. Several attempts have been made to define the documentary systematically and within boundaries. Along with the understanding that traditional definitions would fail to comprehensively describe the documentary, it is also important to know that what makes the attempts at definition meaningful is that they serve to highlight the pattern of 'family resemblances' that documentaries might share. Understanding these attempts would help focus on important characteristics about the documentary, and also serve as interrogating factors to address commonsensical notions about the documentary.

Multiple topographies

While shunning definitive and formal definitions of the documentary, multiple topographies have been proposed by theorists in the field to facilitate a historical

understanding of **the** documentary tradition. In order to comprehend the terrain of documentary, it is important to understand its history, and the trends that have persisted within the documentary along the years.

Jack Ellis (1989) classifies the creative modes in film as the documentary, the narrative fiction, and the experimental avant-garde. In an attempt to define the documentary, he suggests that narrative fiction would refer to the feature-length entertainment cinema that grew out of literary and theatrical traditions, while the experimental avant-garde cinema would be the short film shown in **non-theatrical** societies and campuses or museums, grown out of the tradition of visual arts. And the documentary could be described as being different from the above two in terms of a) the subjects b) the purposes, points of view or approaches c) the forms d) the production methods and techniques, and e) the sorts of experiences they offer audiences.

These distinctions are particularly true *vis a vis* fiction film, according to Ellis. Documentaries are seen as films more pre-occupied with specific and factual public matters rather than private ones, and they deal with actual people, places and events, usually contemporary to the times of the documentary being filmed. In contrast, fiction film deals with the human relationships and individual actions. Attributing a motive to these filmmakers, Ellis asserts that they seek to record and interpret events in the actual world, so that the viewer may be persuaded to hold a specific attitude or take some action in relation to the subjects of the documentary. The filmmakers would also wish to further the understanding, interest and, in many cases the sympathy of the viewer towards the subjects, and hope to enable the viewers to live their lives 'a little more fully and intelligently' (Ellis, 1989:2). This motive attributed by Ellis to the filmmakers needs a

closer scrutiny. It takes the argument into the problematic realm of the intent of the filmmaker. Chapter 4 addresses the question of the filmmaker's agenda.

About the form of the documentary as another distinguishing characteristic, Ellis writes that documentaries are derived from and limited to actuality, and essentially are re-arrangements or re-creations of what exists rather than what is imagined. And this holds true whether the documentaries are spontaneous recordings of events or whether they are scripted in advance. About the production methods and techniques employed by the documentary, the use of non-actors stands out. Non-actors refer to 'real people playing themselves' rather than actors who are 'cast, costumed and made up to play roles' (Ellis, 1989: 3). Lighting and sets are not elaborately constructed to create an imaginary locale, but most of the shooting is on location and additional use of light of properties is mostly to make the result closer to what is actually present. The audience experience that the documentary seeks to provide is an aesthetic experience of some sort, and an effect on attitudes, possibly leading to action. The documentary aesthetic offers a beauty different and more austere than that in fiction films, and the tendency is to keep the form sparse and functional. The documentary offers the filmmaker a greater scope for a professional style rather than a personal one. And correspondingly, the viewer responds to the documentary not so much as an aesthetic visual text or the artist who made it, but more to the subject matter in it (Ellis, 1989).

This understanding of the documentary proposed by Jack Ellis would seem to interface well with the commonsensical notions of the documentary that one might have. All the observations comply with the often-observed characteristics one might associate with the documentary. While these observations would serve to further a general

understanding of the documentary, several of the propositions cannot be accepted uncritically. This is specially so in view of the postmodern critique of a 'genre' (as mentioned before) and the blurred boundaries between fiction and the documentary and as the avant-garde or experimental film. In fact, most of these defining characteristics would be invalid with the variety of work being attempted today in the documentary' tradition.

Instead of essentializing the documentary, Renov and Nichols refer to the fundamental tendencies and modes of representation, respectively, which can be seen in the documentary. These topographies throw open the understanding of the documentary text as seen in relation to the historical world, rather than through characteristics which can be isolated from the documentaries themselves. They are more open-ended in that a critique is built into them.

Renov (1993) proposes that aesthetic forms must be submitted to 'rigorous investigation as to their composition, function and effect'. He attributes four fundamental tendencies to the documentary practice, which are:

- a) to record, reveal, or preserve
- b) to persuade or promote
- c) to analyze or interrogate, and
- d) to express

Clarifying that these tendencies are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and nor are they required to be integrated into an ideal balance to make a good documentary, Renov says that these four functions operate as modalities of desire, or impulses which fuel the documentary discourse. History will reveal that the documentary has continued to

respond to these tendencies, and that each of them seeks to further an agenda. From the actualities of the Lumière brothers, which marked the beginning of film, to anthropology's attempts to capture on film the aboriginal 'other', the impulse of the documentary to freeze what it saw as the real world on film is evident. The documentary seems to have a strong motivation to exploit the power of the camera to capture the real world and preserve it.

The tendency of the documentary to persuade is clearly visible, be it in the 20th century work of John Grierson or any of the political documentaries made today seeking to mobilize public opinion for a particular cause. The social motive that is historically ascribed to the documentary bears testimony to the intrinsic tendency of the documentary to persuade or promote an agenda. The tendency of a documentary to analyze and interrogate stems directly from the earlier two tendencies. The documentary interrogates the cause and effect of a particular issue, and seeks to persuade the viewer with a rational analysis, which would hold a deep-rooted cerebral appeal to the viewer. In the context of documentary desire, analysis and interrogation remain as the crucial allies of the documentary'. Expression or the aesthetic is yet another tendency that fuels the documentary. Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, acknowledged as the first English documentary made, has a strong aesthetic, with both 'verbal and imagistic expressions'. Historically, it can be seen that in the documentary tradition, form has always been subservient to content. The 'Western' duality of art-science or truth-beauty has contributed greatly to the repression of the expression in the documentary. However the communicative aim of the documentary, as also its tendency to persuade, often calls for

more attention to its expressive dimension. The endeavor is to facilitate ' a pleasurable learning'.

Bill Nichols (1991) suggests the four modes of representation around which the documentary text is structured - the expository, the observational, the interactive, and the reflexive modes. These modes are basic ways of organizing the text in relation to certain patterns or conventions, which recur in a documentary.

a) *The expository mode*, which emerged as a reaction to the distracting and entertaining elements of fiction film, sought to unveil information about the real, historical world. It addresses the viewer directly and tries to persuade the viewer about an argument it is making about the historical world. At once romantic and didactic, the films of Flaherty and Grierson, among others, sought to use the voice-over (the so-called 'Voice-of God'), often masculine and authoritative mode of addressing the viewer, along with poetic narratives. A top-down, patronizing and moralizing attitude can be associated with this mode of representation. And the documentary seeks to impress upon the viewer he/she is receiving an objective and analytical argument. It is the argument of the commentary that propels the text, and the visuals serve as illustrations to bear out the argument.

b) *The observational mode* of representation could be seen as a response to advances in technology, such as more mobile cameras and synchronous sound recording equipment. The documentary filmmaker sought to unobtrusively capture the goings on in the real world, and those filmed did not directly address the camera or the viewer. Objectivity seemed to be the cornerstone, and the filmmaker sought

to dispassionately record the events unfolding in the historical world, so that the viewer could gain unmediated access into the real world. This limited the filmmaker and the film to one single event or moment in history and also brought about a sense of detachment from the event.

- c) A desire of the filmmaker to intervene with a subjective perspective prompted *the interactive mode* of representation. Seeking a more direct contact with the viewer, and yet unwilling to revert to the expository mode, documentary filmmakers incorporated an interactive mode of representation into their films. Aided by the growing advances in technology like lighter equipment, these films saw the evolution of interview techniques and on-camera interventions, which provided the viewer with real evidence, and rose above the authoritarian voice-over. Juxtaposition of archival footage came to stay with this mode, as also the testimony of experts and witnesses.
- d) *The reflexive mode* of representation challenges the claims of the other three modes to represent reality. It tries to question the process of representation itself. By operating in the awareness-mode, reflexive documentaries try to provoke the viewer into recognizing the various devices used in the film and the intended effects of those devices as well. Honing the critical faculties of the viewer to view the text is as important as the text itself. Nichols proposes two types of reflexivity in the text – formal and political. A discussion about reflexivity will follow later in Chapter 6 of the thesis.

Nichols cautions that although this topography seems to be in congruence with a linear chronology of the documentary, it should not be construed that the

documentary itself seems to be moving towards a greater degree of self-awareness and complexity. Every mode can be seen as dominating the documentary trend in a particular country in a particular historical era, but in the larger perspective, these modes of representation often co-exist and are suitably altered in any given documentary to further its agenda. As Nichols (1991:33) puts it, 'Older approaches do not go away; they remain part of a continuing exploration of form in relation to social purpose'.

Jayasankar and Monteiro (2001) provide a larger, historical perspective of the various authorial stances, which the makers of the documentary have occupied ever since the tradition came about. Historically, it is evident that the author has occupied several positions in the documentary film, and this is the basis for the topography proposed by them. Examining authorial stances might provide valuable insights into the authorial agendas, which are built into the films.

a) *The author as reconstructing the Authentic Other*

Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* reconstructed the exotic other, in this case, the Inuit Eskimo, and was probably the first ever ethnographic film. Notwithstanding the dangers the Inuits may have been subjected to, Flaherty captured on film, what he thought of as the spirit of the tribe. In retrospect, Flaherty has been criticized for romanticizing the 'noble savage'. Flaherty lives on as a powerful influence in filmmakers even today, especially in their choice of 'exotic' subjects, showcased for a mainstream audience,

b) *The author as Social Educator*

John Grierson and his films could be probably considered the most influential in defining the documentary's role as the social educator. The influence he wields can easily be seen

in the many attempts at social engineering by the state seeking to indoctrinate its citizens. He took it upon himself, as did several of his contemporaries, to educate citizens to involve them in a democratic, civil society. The social motive of the documentary reached its zenith and films were made on the lives and problems of the working class like health, housing and unemployment.

c) *The Author as a Reflexive, Roving Eye*

Dziga Vertov and his cinema-eye, 'Kino-eye', sought to challenge the illusion of cinematic reality itself, using the documentary. Seeking to make the 'invisible visible'¹, Vertov tried to provoke the viewer into questioning what is reality, and tried to make transparent the process of representation itself, by foregrounding the act of construction of the text. The documentary was introduced to the activists on the Left as a tool to usher in socio-political change.

d) *The author as Propagandist*

Leni Riefenstahl and her film *The Triumph of Will* probably testify best to the role of the documentary maker as propagandist. While the persuasive function of the documentary is well-accepted, her films glorified, and to a great extent mythologized the fascism of Hitler's Nazi Germany. The propaganda role of the documentary was never so visible as during World War II, when she used her films to publicize Hitler's cause.

e) *The author as a 'fly on the Wall'*

Direct Cinema of the 1960s saw the author as 'a fly on the wall'. The filmmaker and the camera claimed to be neutral observers, recording the unfolding events in the real, external world. Aided by the new technologies of light equipment and sync-sound, the documentary assumed the role of a scientific, objective eye. The filmmaker was the

unobtrusive observer, who presented **unmediated** reality to the viewer. With the whole notion of objectivity declared to be a myth, Direct Cinema then allowed for authorial subjectivity to stake its claim, but still vouched for authenticity. This sparked off the trend of exposes, investigating into hospitals, prisons and high schools, notably by Frederick Wiseman.

f) *The author as the fly in the Soup'*

Then came Cinema verite, or the cinema of reality, which spoke of the filmmaker as an *agent provocateur*. With this, it sought to side-step the criticism against objectivity. The author in cinema verite has been described by Henry Breitrose as ' a fly in the soup'. Situating the filmmaker as transparently as possible, this approach attempts to examine and redefine the **many-layered** relationships of power. However, cinema verite remained entrenched in the promise of the image as evidence. Most documentaries made today also are unable to throw off their dependence on the image as the indexical referent of the real world. This set the stage for the notion of reflexivity, which is at the forefront in the debate on representation,

g) *The Post-colonial 'other' as Author*

In the Post-colonial context, state-sponsored documentary, as in Cuba and India, sought to project the dominant agenda of modernity. Besides being top-down processually, these films also furthered the agendas of the state, be it in policies of health, welfare or population control. Over time, the independent Post-colonial author in the Third World began to **look** critically at larger political questions, and give voice to disadvantaged sections of the society.

h) *The Reflexive Author*

The Reflexive mode of filmmaking emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, in the context of several global and local movements in feminism, human rights, gay and lesbian rights, and new social movements in the Third World. The reflexive author ideally, would attempt to go beyond mere formal reflexive strategies and instead try to deal in earnest with alternative ways of engaging with the world. The challenge for a reflexive filmmaker would be to make reflexivity be borne out by the text, and in the engagement of the viewer with the text.

The documentary constantly grapples with its agenda to represent the historical world, and these topographies help to further this understanding. Though not by any standards exhaustive, they suggest various ways in which one can make sense of the documentary.

The evolution of the documentary from the time of Flaherty does reflect the formal and philosophical changes in the way reality has been represented on film. What is interesting, however, is that these evolving modes of representation are neither mutually exclusive and nor are the earlier modes absent today. In fact, it can be seen that despite the existence of this cinematic tradition for at least eight decades now', the documentary has been unable to shake off the stranglehold, which the notion of documentary has historically exerted on it.

Understanding development

The notion of developed nations and developing nations, spoken of as the First World and the Third World respectively, is unquestioningly accepted and used by people across the globe in daily conversations, the media and in almost all walks of life. The obvious disparities in the living conditions and access to resources between people of different countries would seem to be reason enough to warrant this distinction. However, the definitions of development, and correspondingly, the panacea to correct the disparity has undergone a sea change in the last few decades. The theory of Development of Nations has emerged as a new school of thought in the social sciences to systematically deal with the idea of development. In retrospect it can be seen how earlier ideas of development were flawed and ahistorical in their approach. The following pages are a brief attempt to examine the theory of development as it was first conceived of from the 1960s, to the changing perceptions of development into the 21st century.

The dominant paradigm of development

Through the late 60s, 'a dominant paradigm ruled intellectual definitions of development' and directed national development programmes. This idea of development was influenced by certain historical events like the industrial revolution, and the quantitative empiricism of the West, the colonial experience in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and economic and political philosophy of capitalism (Rogers, 1976; Melkote, 1991).

The rate of economic growth was central to the idea of development; and the level of development at any given point of time was the Gross National Product (GNP) or the

per capita income of that nation. Economic growth through industrialization was seen as the success formula for development. The modernization theory that lay emphasis on big developmental projects like dams and heavy industries, was essentially a universalistic, ahistorical, ethnocentric and teleological blueprint for the progress of nations, and it sought to incorporate non-western societies into this developmental paradigm.

The 'diffusion of innovations' theory propounded by Everett Rogers, stressed the importance of urbanization, literacy, and technological progress, so that development could trickle down from the scientists to the masses. The mass media were considered the key to this model and were thought of as the 'magic multipliers' of development (Schramm, 1964). These notions were reflected in the Communications Effects theory according to which, the mass media act as the 'magic bullet' or the 'hypodermic needle' that would have a uniform, powerful impact on the under-developed and passive masses. With a linear, top-down approach, the media would infuse the traditional, non-participant people with modern notions of development (Lerner, 1958). This was the dominant notion of development that began to be questioned on philosophical and political grounds in the early 70s, even by the very people who had proposed it.

The dominant paradigm: a critique

The unsatisfactory performance of the dominant paradigm over the years, led the very scholars who proposed it, to critique this notion of development (Rogers, 1976). The ahistoricity of the dominant paradigm stood exposed, when realization set in that the European nations were greatly aided in their socio-economic transformations by their exploitation of their colonies in Asia, Africa and Latin America. And now the newly independent states (erstwhile colonies) do not have any colonies to exploit. Further, the

faith of the Third World nations in that notion of development that led to war was greatly undermined. Development itself was seen as a neo-colonial discourse, which was trying to dictate its terms on economic and foreign policies to the developing nations in the garb of development. 'Where colonialism left off, development took over' (Kothari, 1988).

The center-periphery paradigm proposed by Raul Prebich, contended that the process of development and under-development is a single one, and that the disparities between the affluent center and the marginalized peripheries were reproduced by unfair international trade practices. The unequal world economic system allowed the center to internalize new technologies to develop an integrated economy, while the peripheries imported basic technologies and finished products at exorbitant costs, and exported cheap raw material to the center. This notion of an exploiting center and an exploited periphery can be extended to developmental disparities within a nation also. Andre Gunder Frank's (1969) idea of 'the development of under-development' argues that as the links of dependency are intensified, growth falters; and as they are loosened, domestic growth is enhanced. Dependency involves super-exploitation of labour in subordinate nations. Though the dependency school of thought successfully challenged the attitude of 'blaming the victim' inherent in the dominant paradigm, it ignores a nation's ability to generate and retain its surplus, and also the potential of its people to fight this exploitation. It over-emphasizes the vulnerability and dependency of the Third World nations, and reduces them to passive victims. So, the dependency critique gave rise to the idea of people's participation in their fight for development. Empowerment of the masses to fight their oppression became the buzzword of this new thinking. This idea gained

momentum and alternative perspectives on development emerged, and correspondingly, the role of the media too was reconceptualized.

Theories of an alternative development

The denigration of the dominant paradigm saw the birth of alternative perspectives of 'real' development. These models were holistic approaches towards a sustainable development, with an emphasis on basic needs and a clean environment. The economics-centered, capital-intensive and technology-driven notions of development were countered with the ideas of empowerment, participation and growth-with-equity (Rogers, 1976; Servaes, 1989). The need to assert regional, ethnic and local identities was at the core of this thinking, as opposed to Western ethno-centrism. Multiple centers of power, which were de-centralized and culture-specific, could be established to usher in a new development,

Paulo Freire's (1970) idea of 'conscientization' emphasized the need to sensitize people to their situations and urge them to aspire for growth. Conscientization involved praxis - to reflect, act and reflect again, which would empower people to attain self-realization. These new ideas were all about people-centered and people-initiated development. Jan Servaes (1989) proposed the multiplicity paradigm, an alternative premised in local needs, self-reliance and structural reformulations. The central idea was that development was relative and society-specific, and that no universal model could be an answer (Mody, 1990).

New Social Movements (NSMs)

Ponna Wignaraja says that in terms of development the North is the center. The First World countries are in control of their destinies, and are prosperous with resilient economies. And so they dictate to the developing South, which are Third World countries with a history of colonization and oppression behind them. They are bypassed by the benefits of progress and are weak and 'vulnerable to external factors' (Wignaraja, 1993). But their assets are their people, cultures, indigenous knowledge systems and natural resources, which must be harnessed. The affiliation of these countries to democracy and decentralization of power and economy are encouraging signs, which must be capitalized upon.

However, multi-faceted crises like growing poverty, environmental degradation, gender inequities, human rights violations and the ineffectiveness of the state to mediate these tensions are hindering the progress of these nations. And in response to these tensions, new reactions are emerging from the grassroots. New social movements (NSMs) are bottom-up movements from the grassroots, which are often spontaneous and voluntary reactions to lop-sided developmental policies. From micro-level initiatives to large, horizontal networking of like-minded groups fighting similar causes, the NSMs are democratic responses provoked by wrong policies by the state or international coercion. Some of these movements have a systematic organization, while some others are ongoing processes of political mobilization, with no definite end.

As a part of the continuum of political, economic and social change, the NSMs have temporal and cultural specificity to begin with. Sometimes they are planned agitations, and sometimes they are spontaneous responses by ordinary people, up in

revolt. They provide a number of lessons to the state and social science theorists to critique flawed developmental policies. NSMs also highlight the failure of the Euro-centric models of development to include human development and participatory democracy, and they concentrate on the harnessing of the creative potential at the micro-level. These movements range from a positive, collective developmental action or an agitation against a specific oppression, and reflect pluralistic and culture-specific realities. In an NSM, people are the subjects, in charge of their destinies and not pitiable objects or victims. As agents of change, the people seek to provide coalitions across the globe for similar causes. With consciousness and commitment, they seek to intervene in the existing status quo and build countervailing power from the grassroots. If networked effectively, the NSMs can be used to mobilize public opinion and precipitate action at the grassroots. Also, through conscientization, democratic spaces can be created and a collective consciousness can be nurtured.

Servaes writes of the women's movement, the peace movement and the environmental movement in the West, as examples of NSMs, and asserts that these movements are not 'primarily oriented to the problems that concern the distribution of material wealth', but are resistances to the colonization of 'life-world' (Servaes, 1996:92). The biggest challenge for the NSMs would be to re-establish traditional knowledge systems and local wisdoms, which have been subjugated by the modern, 'rational' West. In India, several NSMs have emerged and sustained in their quest for human rights, eco-friendly development, or gender equity. Some of the more well-known NSMs in India include the Chipko movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the

anti-arrack movement, which are localized struggles horizontally linked with similar movements.

Development communication: an overview

The 1970s saw the emergence of the term development communication, in lieu of using the media for development of society. The dominant paradigm focused on developing the poor masses by using expert opinion to dispel their ignorance. So people were subject to systematic and relentless media campaigns by the state (Melkote, 1991). India was among the first to use the mass media to regulate national planning and development, Rural radio forums and an ambitious satellite television venture were undertaken to broadcast developmental messages. Agricultural modernization and industrialization schemes were promoted to create wealth required for health, education and social development. These attempts were inspired to a great extent by the diffusion of innovations model proposed by Everett Rogers in 1962. The mass media were used in a big way to persuade people to adopt new inventions and technology, and also to mobilize public opinion for this cause, The trickle-down method, which was linear and top-down, was the favoured approach to disseminate information.

While the benefits of this kind of media use in a newly independent India is debatable, the emergence of alternative notions of development re-defined uses of the media for development. The monologic, top-down, and linear approach of the media gave way to a dialogic, bottom-up, and participatory approach in the emerging alternative paradigms. Communication is seen as having a liberating role, to which participation is the key.

The developmental communication model, of which participation is the base, believes in the contextual, situational, transactional and processual nature of communication. This can be used better to usher in real development and **reduce** the information and socio-economic gaps between the haves and the have-nots. Proposed by Nair and White (1993), the transactional perspective can be seen as ‘ the opening up of the dialogue with the source and receiver interacting constantly... **identify** ing developmental needs and acting upon **them**.’ The receivers are actively involved in the process of developing and delivering the message, which allows for an interface of top-down and **bottom-up** information flow. Participation is facilitated by a two-way dynamic interaction. The process will negotiate contradictions and aid complementarity too. Challenging existing status quo and hierarchies will come about as a result of the transactional process. These new ideas came to be reflected in the way the various mass media were used to suit developmental needs.

Video in development

Since access to capital-intensive communication technology remains the prerogative of the economically powerful, it is important to identify that media which can be accessible to the people at the grassroots. Appropriate media include the radio and the portable video. Video is a powerful tool for transporting local experience horizontally, and can quickly inspire constructive action. The flexibility and adaptability of video helps to put **illiterate** producers on par with their literate counterparts. Video supports a high level of participation, can be easily demystified and is very **user-friendly**. It also provides an audio-visual output immediately, and does not rely on extensive processing. It remains an ideal medium to promote audio-visual literacy for motivation, attitudinal change,

people's participation and entertainment. Many successful experiments have been conducted using the low-format video for **developmental** purposes. In Chile, thousands of farmers were trained, in Thailand family planning was promoted, the Banchte Shekha (a rural women's organization) experience in Bangladesh, and many other success stories in India like SEWA in Ahmedabad, prove the effectiveness of using video for development (Stuart and Bery,1996; Riano,1994; Kalima,1992). The excerpt provided below provides a glimpse into how video has resulted in the empowerment of women.

Since 1992, Bulu [a Bangaladeshi, rural woman] has used video extensively in Banchte Shekha's legal aid activities. She taped a village court case about a man who had disavowed paternity and refused to give financial compensation. In the village court, he reversed his position ad promised child support, rather than face a suit in the local government court. In another case of desertation, the mere mention that Banchte Shekha planned to make a tape...motivated her husband and his family to negotiate a settlement. They didn't want to be embarrassed in front of their neighbours. In Bulu's hand, the camcorder is a powerful tool which advocates human rights (Stuart and Bery, 1996: 198).

Video facilitates three kinds of learning depending on its use - horizontal or peer learning, vertical or formal learning and exchange learning or participatory learning (Mody,1990). While audiences for the mass media like television are anonymous and the reception of developmental messages is not guaranteed, when used effectively, video allows for extended interaction between the source and the receiver through narrowcasting.

Mody says that for effective developmental communication to take place, the audience-based method demands that one must 'listen first and speak next'. The process must begin and end with the audience. And this is possible while using video, and democracy can be introduced into the sender-receiver relationship. She asserts that the elite in the power structures 'have access to and use repressive state apparatus like the

judiciary, police and ideological apparatus like the education systems and mass media, to dominate'. Through hegemony, the people are 'co-opted into maintaining the status quo'. The NSMs and NGOs are some of the peoples' initiatives engaged in mobilizing counter-prevailing networks, bottom-up.

The documentaries chosen for the study are to be seen as narratives of an alternative development paradigm, one that demands rights for the marginalized sections in Indian society. As possible histories of grassroots realities, they seek to exploit the non-state and non-market spaces to make available alternative truths to the people.

Dissertation overview

The background of the study, as provided above, is the context within which several critical issues pertaining to the alternative documentary in India are examined. A brief outline of the chapters in the thesis is presented below.

In Chapter 2, I delineate the objectives of the study and the methodologies adopted to fulfill the objectives. The text-author-audience approach adopted in this study uses textual analysis of 10 alternative documentaries in India, in-depth interviews with 10 filmmakers, and focus group discussions with nine audiences.

In Chapter 3, I provide a world history of the documentary, and also a history of documentary in India, with special emphasis on the 'committed' documentary. This chapter examines the constantly evolving positions that documentaries have occupied along the historical continuum. The shifts in the position of the documentary from being an ethnographic film to social educator to objective observer to political weapon are laid out, along with the significant names and events from the world and India.

In Chapter 4, I explore the implications of the term 'alternative', used to describe the documentaries chosen for the study. While the study uses the term 'alternative' to facilitate the analysis of a particular trend in filmmaking, the alternative/mainstream dichotomy is explored from the filmmakers' points of view. An examination of the filmmakers' agendas reveals their preoccupation with the flawed notion of development that directed the nation-building agenda of free India.

In Chapter 5, I examine the multiple connotations of 'representation' with respect to the films chosen for the study. Documentary realism, use of testimony, and these films as narratives of an unequal development, emerge as the three axes along which the alternative documentary can be further explored.

In Chapter 6, I critically interrogate the ethics and aesthetics of representing the marginalized 'other'. Filming 'spectacular' oppressions, using 'caricature', and stereotyping are examined as strategies of persuasion. The location of the filmmaker, self-representation, and the anti-aesthetic emerge as important concerns in this context.

In Chapter 7, I explore the idea of documentary desire. Epistophilia or 'desire for knowledge' is examined with respect to the focus group discussions in the study. How different audiences engage with the alternative documentary is analysed, as also the demands that the audiences make of the film.

In Chapter 8, I provide an overview of my observations about the various issues explored in this study. In conclusion, I suggest that after 25 years of alternative filmmaking in India, it is time that one looks beyond the production of these films. I suggest that the emphasis should now be on the dissemination of the alternative documentary, which remains sporadic and limited.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Documentaries studies are a fairly new province in academic research in India. Even the world over, the emergence of the documentary as a specific discipline of study is quite recent. It is in the past decade or so that some theoretical insights into the documentary have emerged more conspicuously, seeking to address critical questions about the practice of documentary filmmaking, documentary texts and audiences.

India has been one of the most prolific producers of the independent or social documentary, especially from the 1980s. The post-Emergency era was a watershed in the history of the Indian documentary. Breaking free from the shackles of state-sponsored institutions like the Films Division, independent filmmakers made documentaries that challenged the Nehruvian agenda of development through big dams and heavy industries. From being just the top-down voice of the state, the documentary in India found its niche as the voice of the marginalized sections in society, and envisioned development as participatory and sustainable.

Film festivals, screenings on and by university campuses, non-governmental organizations and new social movements speak of the increasingly articulate presence of these documentaries in our midst. However, a closer look provokes as many questions as the documentaries seek to address. What is the space that the alternative documentaries occupy in India? What agendas govern the making of these films? What are the dynamics at play during their making and watching?

The issues are far ranging, from the mundane questions of funding and production of these films, to those of philosophical import like 'who speaks for whom and why?', to

how the audiences engage with them. This study is an attempt to examine **comprehensively** some of the important concerns that arise while trying to explore the *raison d'etre* of these documentaries, within the framework of contemporary documentary theory and development theory.

Objectives of the study

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

- a) To explore the various implications of the term 'alternative', with reference to the alternative documentary in India.

The study explores the various implications of the term 'alternative' with reference to the alternative documentary in India. It also investigates into the agendas that motivate the making of these films. The theory of development addresses questions of what is 'real' development and re-conceptualizes the role of the media to usher in a more equitable world. The emphasis is on the need for participatory, bottom-up initiatives from the grassroots and to bridge the ever-growing gap between the haves and the have-nots. The alternative documentaries in India are, broadly speaking, partners in this agenda. The concern is, to what extent and how do the films reflect this concern? The alternative documentary in India is also examined in the light of contemporary documentary theory, in an attempt to locate them along the historical continuum of world documentary and documentary in India.

- b) To analyze 'representation' in the alternative documentaries chosen for the study.

The problematic of representation has emerged as a central concern in the post-colonial cultural and political criticism. The alternative documentaries chosen for the study are analysed *vis a vis* the various connotations of the term 'representation', and

the study examines the various representational strategies adopted in the films. The questions of power and knowledge as discursive practices by the state are being constantly thrown up by postmodern scholars. 'Who speaks for whom?' is one central concern of the study. Embedded in this question are notions of power - social, economic, political and technological. As the addressers and the addressees respectively, the filmmaker who makes the representation, and the audience who makes meaning out of the representation, are both vested with the power of knowledge and agency, without whom there is no text. The multi-layered politics of representation in the alternative Indian documentaries is explored. Issues of representing the 'other', self-representation, reflexivity and aesthetics in the alternative documentary are critiqued.

c) To examine the idea of documentary desire.

The idea of 'documentary desire' is a recent entrant into contemporary documentary discourse. How audiences engage with the documentary lies at the heart of this thinking. Patterns in meaning generation are mapped from the responses of the groups of audience chosen for the study, and are juxtaposed with the concerns of the filmmakers about their audiences. The concept of 'epistophilia' or pleasure of knowing, central to the notion of documentary desire, is examined with reference to the focus group discussions in the study.

The above-mentioned objectives are umbrella issues, within which several related issues emerge. The overall aim of the study is to offer some theoretical insights into the tradition of **alternative** documentaries in India, and reconcile this tradition within a larger global context.

Research methods

There is no text without an author, and there is no text without an audience. And the text is the medium through which the production and dissemination of meanings take place. So, the media text, the author and the audience are organically linked to each other. A study of these three constituents is vital to any comprehensive understanding of any of the media. Recent writing on media research provides a rationale for supposing this essential nexus between the text, the author and the audience, and the current study is located within that debate within.

A text contains within it signifying mechanisms, which promote certain meanings and deliberately suppress others. The agenda-setting theory of the media suggests that the media do not tell us what to think, but what to think about (Cohen, 1963). The relevance of the authorial agenda is a much-debated issue, with Roland Barthes's assertion in 1968 about 'the death of the author' (Barry, 1995). However, endowed with the agency to represent, the author of a media text is the one who decides what the signifying mechanisms in the text will be. So the author is a site of power, whose role needs to be looked at critically. The new audience research assumes an active role for the audience, which generates meaning from a text. The hitherto held notion of the passive audience upon which an omnipotent media wield their power is no longer tenable. The idea of the 'effects' of the text 'on' the audience has been re-conceptualized as 'negotiation by' the audience with the text. The new thinking underlines the hegemony perpetuated on audiences by several ideological apparatuses, including the media. Also, the view that an audience created its own meaning from a given text and uses that meaning to empower itself, gained currency (Morley, 1992).

In a particular reference to the documentary, Bill Nichols (1991) points out that the practice of documentary is constituted by three major players

- a) a community of practitioners;
- b) a corpus of texts; and,
- c) a constituency of viewers,

A community of practitioners

In a reference to the filmmakers who make and disseminate documentaries, Bill Nichols writes of the documentary as an almost institutionalized practice with registered members, who choose to represent the historical world rather than an imaginary one. This mandate is self-imposed and involves encountering similar concerns professionally, and adhering to a common language and purpose in their work. Nichols opines that while filmmakers do experiment or deviate from established traditions, the changes are part of an ongoing dialogue within the documentary tradition and with the other members who make documentaries. So, this group is self-defining in one sense. Engaged in the practice of representing the historical world, these filmmakers adopt similar organizational procedures, distribution networks, and places of exhibition. Without any enforced rigidity, they seem to adhere to a specific discourse, especially with regard to their representational practices.

A corpus of texts

An informing logic is central to making documentaries. In their attempt to represent a concern in the historical world, the documentaries build an argument with an appropriate representation of a given problem. The narrative, more often than not, establishes the issue, provides the relevant background, examines the current status of the

issue, and builds a case to support the argument. Finally, the text arrives at a solution or a direction towards a solution. Typical documentaries establish the time and place, and continue the narrative in a chronological manner. The narratives assume the status of an observer and informer. The logic of the argument assumes great importance, and all the characters and what they say help to make the logic more convincing. The documentary depends a lot on the spoken word. Commentary (written and voice-over), interviews and reports heavily prop up the central argument. The documentary also invites the viewer to accept its footage as real by using visual techniques characteristic of the practice.

A constituency of viewers

The documentary viewer employs procedures of rhetorical engagement rather than procedures of fictive engagement that guide the viewing of classical narrative film (Nichols, 1991:26).

Generally speaking, the expectations that an audience carries along while getting ready to watch a documentary is very different from that of watching a fiction film. The text provides them enough clues for them to draw upon their past experiences, and then sets out to confirm, change, or negotiate their already existing thoughts, on some issue in the historical world. The audience would expect this information from the text. Nichols is of the opinion that for the viewer, the documentary image and its historical referent are congruent with each other. What is seen in the text is what the viewer would have witnessed in that situation, if present there. Realism is a hallmark of the documentary, whereas while watching a fiction film, it is assumed that the narrative was constructed to tell a story on the screen.

The study uses this three-pronged approach suggested by Bill Nichols to address the key concerns delineated in the research objectives. However, this study does more

than just examining his suppositions in the context of alternative documentaries in India. The data and analysis gathered from the films, the filmmakers, and the audiences will be used to see what the data throws up in relation to these important observations by Bill Nichols.

Corresponding to the three constituents being studied, three relevant qualitative research methods are used to gather data for the study. Textual analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions are undertaken to provide the data from the text, author, and audiences respectively. As opposed to empirical or quantitative methods, these qualitative methods are, by definition, subjective and interpretative. Philosophically speaking, they attempt not to provide 'real' meanings or numerical results, which can be replicated under controlled conditions. Instead they seek to explore complex questions about the production and generation of meanings. Qualitative methods emphasise not one 'meaning', but meanings. Not one audience, but audiences. Difference is celebrated, while homogeneity is critiqued. Subjective understandings are the key to unraveling the broader patterns that may emerge from the analyses.

The three methods adopted in this study and how the data was collected is elaborated below:

a) a detailed textual analysis of 10 alternative documentaries in India

This analytical procedure seeks to identify those 'directive closures' embedded in the text, which further the promotion of certain meanings and agendas (Morley, 1992).

The signifying practices in the text are examined closely, to provide insights into the preferred meanings² that the text may seek to highlight.

The 10 alternative documentaries chosen for analysis are *A Narmada Diary*, *Kahankar: Ahankar* (Storymaker: Storytaker), *Something Like a War*, *Lesser Humans*, *When Women Unite: The Story of an Uprising*, *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* (Another Revolt), *Live in Behrampada*, *Chaliyar*, *Tu Zinda Hai* (You are Alive) and *Kis Ki Raksha?* (In whose Defence?).

The films were chosen from various film festivals and film festival catalogues, workshops, and private screenings. All 10 films re-conceptualize development and are attempts to articulate the voices of the marginalized sections of Indian society. The fruits of development as envisioned by the rest of society have clearly by-passed the people who are the subjects of these films. And the films critique this inequitable development. The films included here have all been produced in the 1990s, and self-consciously interrogate the dominant paradigm of development. Some of the makers of these films are considered pioneers in alternative filmmaking, while others are products of new social movements asserting the rights of women and adivasis. I make no claims to representativeness, but I suggest that these films be seen as telling examples of the relatively new ferment in independent documentary filmmaking in India.

Brief summaries of the 10 films are provided here.

- a) *A Narmada Diary* (1995) is a film that chronicles a grassroots struggle by the adivasis in the Narmada Valley against the mammoth Sardar Sarovar Dam. A sporadic video record maintained for four years (from 1990) by directors

² Three kinds of readings by audiences of any media text are possible- preferred, negotiated and oppositional, as proposed by Stuart Hall (1993).

Simantini Dhuru and Anand Patwardhan constructs the history of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), and captures some major moments in their struggle against the dam. The NBA spearheads the fight of the adivasis against the displacement of 2,00,000 people and the submergence of 37,000 hectares of land by the dam's reservoir. The film questions that model of development, which has led to the adivasis being denied their basic human rights and amenities in independent India. Further, it tries to counter the state rhetoric of development by showing state propaganda throughout the film, and juxtaposing it with images of things are in the valley. The history of the NBA, police atrocities on non-violent activists, environmental degradation caused by the dam, the callousness of the politicians, and the apathy of the public are some of the issues highlighted by the film.

- b) *Kahankar: Ahankar* (1995), which translates as “Storymaker: Storytaker”, is a film about alternative histories. The stories and paintings of the Warlis in Maharashtra are oral histories of their oppression, their society, culture, and worldviews. Their version of the systemic subjugation they were subjected to is radically different from the ‘official’ version documented in archival records. The film, directed by Anjali Monteiro and K.P .Jayasankar, juxtaposes the Warli and official versions to problematize the notion of history. Self-avowedly, the video brings together 'a selection of stories and writings of the Warlis and some of the writings about ‘them’’. By examining the hierarchies present even within the Warli society, the film constructs oppression as a dynamic and multi-dimensional phenomenon with multiple centers of power. The humour and local wisdoms of

the Warlis are evident in the stories and reveal an indigenous knowledge system replete with 'experiential learning and intuitive insights', as opposed to the homogenizing modern knowledge, which is often undemocratic and exclusive (Wignaraja, 1989).

c) *Something Like a War* (1991) by Deepa Dhanraj deals with the family planning drive of the Government of India, whose 'target' approach unleashes state-sponsored violence on poor women. A misguided population policy, coupled with a disregard for basic human rights of the marginalized women, is responsible for the corruption and brutality of this programme. The film is structured around multiple, complex narratives - a group of rural women talking about their bodies, their aspirations and their fertility; the inhuman family planning camps being conducted by a Dr.Mehta on hapless, poor women; the sinister agendas of international agencies funding contraceptive research, which use unsuspecting Third World women as guinea pigs; the 'target' approach which puts pressure on government servants to ensure numbers, and the propaganda of the state through mass media to ensure population control, all these threads are interwoven in the film.

d) *Lesser Humans* (1997) is a film about the Bhangis in Gujarat, human scavengers who are among the most oppressed people in India. Engaged in the inhuman work of cleaning dry latrines and other sanitation jobs, the Bhangis remain politically, economically and socially exploited for generations now. The film, directed by K.Stalin, exposes the evils of caste, which denies them even the most basic dignity. The apathy of the state towards providing the Bhangis basic

education and health facilities and rehabilitating them in better jobs, even after 50 years of independence, are highlighted in the film. The film is a powerful expose into the cruel profession of human scavenging and the oppressive nexus of caste, class, and gender, which perpetuates evils like untouchability. The visuals of the Bhangis actually cleaning the latrines are in tight close-up, and shock the viewer into recognizing their inhuman profession for what it is.

e) *When Women Unite: The Story of an Uprising* (1996) reconstructs a spontaneous uprising by poor, rural women from 22 villages in Nellore, against the liquor policy of the state. In the words of the director of the film, Shabnam Virmani, the docu-drama explores/ the unique ferment of **feminism, politics and democracy**'. The spontaneous, leaderless, struggle was sustained for three years, and resulted in affecting a state policy on prohibition. The drama is a scripted story, recounting the various experiences of the women of Nellore, into one fictionalized narrative and is enacted by the activists who were part of the struggle. The drama is interspersed with documentary footage from the agitation and interviews with women activists, police, bureaucrats and liquor dons.

f) *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* (1995) translates as 'Another Revolt' and chronicles a 30-year struggle by the adivasis of the Chhotanagpur area against the construction of dams on the Koel and Karo rivers. The adivasis fight against their **displacement**, which the dams would cause and also against the disruption of their lives and livelihood. The identity of the adivasis are organically linked to their culture, and a destruction of their culture (which displacement would cause) would lead to the effacing of their identities. The interviews with the adivasis show that they are

aware of their exploitation, and also that their survival depends on their identity. Questions of appropriation of adivasi resources, notions of citizenship and rights are addressed in the film by director Shriprakash.

g) *I Live in Behrampada* (1993) is a film by Madhushree Dutta, which started off as an investigation into the communal riots in Bombay in 1993 (which followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya). However, as the filmmaker puts it, ‘more than the chronology of violence, people and their struggle to survive became our focus’. The film interviews the inhabitants of Behrampada, a minority-dominated slum in Bombay, with a dreaded reputation. What emerges from their stories is a story of survival and amicable living between Hindus and Muslims, now being threatened by outsiders keen to grab the prized land. The conflict between the slum dwellers and their middle-class neighbours are also explored. The film sets out to demolish the misconceptions about them and reveals the people of Behrampada to be law-abiding, respectable citizens of India,

h) *Chaliyar: the final struggle* (1999) by Sarat Chandran, is a film about the continuous pollution of the Chaliyar river in Kerala for the last 36 years. The Grasim Rayon Pulp factory, pollutes the river on a sustained basis, because of the toxic effluence channeled into the river. The incidence of disease and death from cancer and skin diseases is very high among the locals there, and the film investigates into the reasons for this. The history of the struggle of the people for the closure of the factory has been filmed, and also the hardships they face because of the pollution. The state-market nexus, which benefits from one section

of the locals who do not want the closure, is examined in the film. The film is part of an ongoing agenda to mobilize public opinion against the factory.

- i) *Tu Zinda Hai* (1995) is about the women activists of the Ekta Parishad, a mass-based women's organization working in 35 districts of Madhya Pradesh. The film, directed by Shabnam Virmani, profiles three women who challenge the traditional, patriarchal structures of domination, and survive in a hostile environment to achieve their goals. A tribute to the indomitable spirit of the women-activists, the film also narrates stories of the changing identities of these women, in their own words. The interviews also reveal the hardships faced by the women in trying to rebel against a coercive family and society, and their attempt to chart their own destinies. The film throws up issues of empowerment and the power of a collective, and critically looks at the conniving role of an ineffectual state, the exploitative landlord, the corrupt police, and other manifestations of patriarchy.
- j) *Kis Ki Raksha?* (1994), a film by Shriprakash, captures on video the agitation against the government takeover of adivasi land in Netrahat, South Bihar, for use as an army firing range. The adivasis, forced to choose between displacement or death from the stray bullets, fight against this state-sponsored tyranny. The spirit of the adivasis, who resist this forced eviction and also their concern to retain their identity and livelihood, are reflected in the film. The interviews in the film reveal that the adivasis are fully aware of the oppressive practices to which the state systematically subjects them.

The textual analyses of the films try to unravel the roles of the state, the market, the people, new social movements and often the filmmaker too, as envisioned by these alternative films. Notions of citizenship, identity and development, as constructed by the films, are critically examined in the light of the alternative thinking in development. The overt and covert agendas of the films are examined, by looking closely at specific representations in the films. As David Morley (1992) points out, textual analysis is necessarily interpretative and will produce a reading dominant in the text. The audio-visual techniques in the ten alternative documentaries are closely examined, including the various shots, the audio-track, the written word, and the camera movement.

b) in-depth interviews with 10 filmmakers

The in-depth interview is a useful method to elicit extensive responses from the interviewee on particular issues. While an open-ended questionnaire has a fixed and finite number of questions (which could limit the responses), the in-depth interview allows for an extended discussion of the topic being studied, and also for answers to any sub-questions that might arise from the main issue.

Ten directors of alternative documentaries in India were interviewed in depth about their views on the alternative documentary in general, and their films in particular. Their responses to various issues were recorded and analysed, A whole spectrum of issues was explored, ranging from their philosophical pre-occupations to the practicalities of film production and funding. The filmmakers were chosen from across the country, and were selected because they were directors of one or more alternative documentaries. The selection was also influenced by my knowledge of their work and my access to the

filmmakers. The various film festivals, workshops, and seminars I attended also facilitated my selection.

The interviews were conducted in Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Mumbai, depending on where the filmmaker was available to be interviewed. An interview guide was used to direct the interview (see appendix A). The interview guide helped to systematically elicit the opinions of the filmmakers on various issues. However, the interviews often extended beyond the guide, and extra questions prompted by particular responses were included. Many of the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed later. Due to the malfunctioning of the dictaphone or too much external noise, four of the interviews could not be taped. Those interviews were written down as they took place. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to three hours, and was influenced by factors like unexpected interruptions or a paucity of time for the filmmaker. The interviews were conducted in English, except for one filmmaker who responded in Hindi, and whose responses were translated.

The 10 filmmakers³ interviewed for the study are Anand Patwardhan, Anjali Monteiro, K.P.Jayasankar, Deepa Dhanraj, Madhushree Dutta, Omji John, Sarat Chandran, Shabnam Virmani, Shriprakash, and K.Stalin.

c) focus group discussions with nine groups of audiences

Focus groups discussions are group interviews in which a discussion is held to get the desired information from the group. Wimmer and Dominick (1983) write that the focus group technique involves a 'relatively free discussion' by a group, facilitated by a moderator. The aim of the discussion is 'not to build a consensus' but to understand the

³ The more acclaimed films of some of these filmmakers are mentioned in chapter 2.

opinion of every member of the group about the topic under consideration. They write that focus group discussions are like collective in-depth interviews, 'probes that are meant to find out how people think and act'.

Focus group discussions were undertaken to elicit the responses of various kinds of audiences to the alternative documentaries. The focus groups were chosen based on the potential ideological differences between them and were defined on the basis of their class, gender, profession, or ideological affiliations as evident from their membership in a particular organization. Logistic factors like the regional language in which the alternative documentary was available, the feasibility of getting together a focus group, and whether the members of the focus group did turn up at the chosen venue and time influenced the selection of the focus groups.

I wanted to choose different kinds of audiences, one difference being the exposure of the audience to the discourse of alternative development, and another, the difference in socio-economic status and also the level of education. Since it is a commonly held notion that the audiences for the alternative documentary are always those who go to film festivals, I conceived of audiences who were thought of as 'converted', and some audiences who had very little chance of being exposed to the ideas of alternative development⁴. Audiences for whom many of the filmmakers profess to make their films, the disadvantaged people themselves, constituted another kind of audience for me. Since one focus of the study was examining the representational practices in the films, it

⁴ my efforts to have as a focus group an audience comprising of IPS probationers, who are the visible sites of power for the state, and a group of doctors to respond to the critique of population policies of the state. However, at the last minute, these two focus group discussions could not take place, because of the difficulty of putting together the groups.

seemed imperative that I include one group of marginalized women empowered to represent themselves.

One of the alternative documentaries chosen for the study was screened for each of the focus groups, and the choice of the film was partially determined by the availability of the film at that particular time, and the language of the film. Before the screening commenced, the group was briefed about the study. In all the discussions, I was the moderator who guided the discussion, based on an interview guide (see appendix B). The respondents introduced themselves before the discussion began.

The responses of the group were then videotaped, with the exception of one focus group, when the video recording equipment mal-functioned. The discussion of that group was audiotaped, and later transcribed in full. The language of the discussion differed from group to group. Where required, translation was done by me, along with some outside help in some cases. The duration of the focus group discussions lasted for an average of one and a half hours, with the exception of one group (the poor, agricultural women of Pastapur). The respondents of this group walked out of the discussion abruptly, due to paucity of time, despite being briefed about the study.

The nine focus groups were:

1. Employees of an institute for environmental education in Bangalore (environmental scientists) – the seven members of this group were males and females, between 24 and 31 years of age. All of them had a post-graduate (MSc) degree in Environmental science, with a focus more on waste management than on the human rights aspects of sustainable development. By profession, they were involved in spreading environmental education to the people and sensitise them

about issues like bio-degradability, global warming etc. The group consisted of English-speaking, mostly urban-educated youth,

2. Women members of a Hyderabad-based women's research and activist group (feminists) – four feminist members of this organization, between the ages 25 to 35 were the respondents in this group. All the members had been variously involved with women's causes and activism. Academically, all of them were in various stages of their doctoral research, mostly in literary theory.
3. Indian engineers working in the USA (computer engineers) –the six members of this focus group were all employed as computer engineers, who were from India and working in the United States of America. English-educated and mostly city-based, they were all male and aged between 25 and 32 years.
4. Students of social work in Mumbai (students of social work) - the seven members in this group were aged between 22 to 30 years, and were a mix of postgraduate students and research scholars of social work. They were both male and female, and were mostly English-educated and urban, except for one woman who was Hindi-educated.
5. Members of a marginalized women's group in Ahmedabad empowered to represent themselves through video (participatory video-makers) – the six members of this group were a vegetable vendor, a house wife, a tailor, a head-loader, a screen-printer and a beedi worker, who were mostly semi-literate or non-literate, belonging to a lower socio-economic status. Empowered to wield the video camera as a weapon, these women can represent themselves and their problems, and often wage daily struggles against domination by the police,

politicians, municipality, etc. aged between 25 and 40 years, they were an articulate, politicized group who could speak for themselves.

6. Graduate members of a right-wing students' organization in Hyderabad (right-wing students) – seven male, graduate students constituted this group, and were activists of a right-wing, Hindu, national students' organization. While six of them were Hindus, there was one Muslim member in the group. All the students were aged between 17 and 23 years.
7. Women agricultural workers affiliated to a NGO working for empowerment of rural women in Pastapur village of Medak district in Andhra Pradesh (agricultural workers) - the five women in this group were rural, agricultural workers, who were illiterate and poor. They were between 25 and 45 years of age, and were members of an NGO working for their empowerment.
8. Post-graduate students of development communication in Hyderabad (students of development communication)– the six students of this group were both male and female, aged between 21 and 25 years, and were II year MA students of development communication.
9. Women employees of a state-sponsored welfare organization in Hyderabad, working as educators with marginalized groups (welfare workers) – the seven respondents of this group were employees of the state engaged in educating the children of marginalized sections like a leprosy colony, rickshaw pullers' colony, Muslim slum-dwellers, Lambada colonies, construction workers' settlements etc. Aged between 27 and 50 years, they were all literate, empowered women trying to empower disadvantaged groups in and around Hyderabad.

The descriptors of the focus groups given in parenthesis above, are used throughout the thesis to refer to the focus groups.

Scope of the study

Documentaries have not been the focus of academic research in India. The paucity of books and theoretical writings on Indian documentaries reflect this lack. By focusing on alternative documentaries in India, the study hopes to provide a broad framework for students and teachers of communication in the country, which can facilitate further research on the documentary in India.

The study explores the space that alternative documentaries in India occupy as ‘narratives’ of an alternative development. Besides locating these films in a larger historical and philosophical context, the study attempts to evolve a trajectory for these films, in their quest to usher in a more equitable world. The issues that dominate documentary discourse, and the alternative documentary are examined in the study using qualitative methodologies. The observations made in the study, while not exhaustive, do reflect the dominant trends in the making and receiving of alternative documentaries in India. The study also attempts to provide new insights to the teachers and students of development communication into alternative uses of video to further new social and political agendas.

Interactions with filmmakers who make these films, and the NGOs who fund these films often reveal their need to try and understand what the audiences do with their films. As part of the invaluable feedback between the source and the receiver, the study hopes to provide a perspective on the generation of meanings by audiences. The endeavor is also to supplement the personal experiences of filmmakers about audiences with

systematic observations about how different kinds of audiences engage with the alternative documentary in India.

Non-governmental organizations and funding agencies are some of the key players involved in the financing, production and distribution of alternative documentaries in India. The agendas of these organizations are critiqued, through the opinions of the filmmakers. The study hopes that some of the analysis it offers in the critique can help clarify some issues of representation, funding and dissemination.

The thrust of the study is to explore the dominant agendas within and across the selected alternative documentaries. Also, the similarities and differences in the opinions of filmmakers on various issues, and the patterns of meaning generation within and across focus groups supplement this analysis.

CHAPTER 3: A HISTORY OF THE DOCUMENTARY

A world history

The Lumière brothers

The beginnings of the documentary can be spoken of as the beginning of cinema itself. In December 1895, the Lumiere brothers first screened their one-minute cinema scenes in Paris. The *Arrival of a train* and *Workers leaving the Lumiere factory* marked the first among the several films of brief events by the Lumiere brothers. Referred to as 'actualities', as their titles suggested, these films captured brief instances from everyday life. These films were shown to audiences the world over by traveling agents, and also by local people trained in this new medium called cinema. The draw of these actualities was seen to lie in the fact that audiences enjoyed familiar scenes from daily life when shown on the screen.

In the film *Workers leaving the Lumiere factory*, it is apparent that the workers being filmed are unaware of the filming and do not glance at the camera. The candid footage as captured in the first film ever made constitutes an important part of the documentary tradition as exists even today. *L'Arroseur arrose* is the first actuality seen as marking the initiation of the screen narrative into cinema. A little boy tricks the gardener into peering into the nozzle and then squirts water on his face from a hose pipe, possibly the first direct intervention by the filmmaker to influence the content of the film, or to create a film narrative. The element of fiction makes its first entry into what were hitherto fragments of actualities plucked from the real, historical world. Vaughan (1999) suggests that there might be two possible ways of filming this actuality: one, using a concealed

camera to capture a spontaneous **incident**, and two staging the episode with the complicity of both actors involved. However, the gaucheness of the performances by the boy and the gardener resolves any doubts one might have about the intervention by the filmmaker. The notion of spontaneity or the element of the unexpected is introduced for the first time, and lingers on in contemporary documentary.

By 1905, the actualities gave way to fiction and between 1910 and 1920, the one-to-two-hour long fiction film became the standard for films. However, the element of actuality reigned powerful in the films of these times. Most films sought to inter-weave reality and fiction. The city streets in the early comedies of Charlie Chaplin or the films of Griffith reflect this trend. This move of incorporating the fictional into cinema is seen as the 'seduction of the public into the world of fantasy and romance' (Warren, 1996:3). While Edward S. Curtis has been known to use the terms 'documentary material' and 'documentary works' in relation to moving picture non-fictions as early as in 1914, John Grierson is credited with having used the word 'documentary' in English, while reviewing Robert Flaherty's film *Moana* in 1926 (discussed in Chapter1).

Robert Flaherty

As 'documentary's first poet and itinerant photographer' (Renov, 1993:33), Robert Flaherty made short films on the unfamiliar, romantic subjects living with them for a while, learning about their way of life and capturing it all on camera. Often considered a pioneer of the documentary film, his first film, *Nanook of the North* (1922) was about the **Inuit** Eskimo. This was followed by *Moana* (1926), *Man of Aran* (1934) and several other films, concluding with *Louisiana Story* (1948), dealing with the Cajuns in the swamps of **Louisiana**. Essentially an explorer, Flaherty captured on camera the

exotic, unfamiliar, and often, dangerous lives lived by remote tribes and peoples. His subjects were at once very different and similar. Flaherty's preoccupation with the themes of the survival of these people against a hostile environment, 'the beauty and severity of nature, of the return to the past and of the importance of family' (Platinga, 1997:35) surface in all his films. In fact, Platinga asserts the pro-filmic element was so strong in Flaherty's films, that in today's context they would be referred to as docu-dramas or dramatic documentaries. For example, in *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty had the Eskimos engage in the dangerous Walrus hunt with harpoons, a practice that was non-existent at the time of the filming. Also the protagonists in his films were usually playing scripted roles. They were chosen to suit the story he wished to tell, albeit selected from among the people being filmed, a practice in vogue in the docu-dramas of today.

Flaherty's detractors are many. He has been accused of imposing himself on those before the camera, and getting people to do things they did not ordinarily do, making up stories, evoking, romantically, old ways of life' (Warren, 1996:4). The staging of the walrus hunt also endangered the lives of the Eskimos. These ethical questions of representation and the rights of those filmed remain at the fore of documentary theory' today, and will be examined in later chapters.

Flaherty laid emphasis on the observational. For Flaherty, the film was created largely in the camera. His long and continuous shots try to capture the essential action, uninterruptedly. And while he relied heavily on re-enactment and staging of sequences for the camera, he never held editing to be the central creative act.

Dziga Vertov

Flaherty's contemporary in the erstwhile Soviet Union, Dziga Vertov made classics like *The Man with the movie camera* (1929), *Enthusiasm* (1931) and *Three Songs about Lenin* (1934), all films about modern Russia. He was 'a lover of modernity and the future, of machines, of fast editing in film, and altered motion and superimpositions', and preferred to present actuality 'to stimulate audiences toward a future consciousness' (Warren, 1996:5). Vertov's films are all positive montages of a new, technologically advanced Russia emerging from the old. Working along with his brother Mikhail Kaufman as cameraman and his wife Elizeveta Svilova as editor, Vertov has come to be associated with the 'artist-intellectual in revolutionary activity' (Waugh, 1984:4). His idea of filming 'Life-As-It-Is' and at the same time creating the 'Film-thing'¹ - constructing film with realistic images and challenging the status of the visuals as real, using cinematic techniques - transformed reality for the viewer. After enjoying fame for about a decade, Vertov was branded a formalist and his reputation took a downturn under a hostile Stalinist regime. However, in the 1960s, after his death, Jean-Luc Godard reinstated Vertov among the cinema greats by naming his filmmaking group as the Dziga Vertov Group. Today Vertov's concept of the Kino-Eye or Cinema-Eye, as well as Kinopravda or cinema-verité occupy a central place in the history of world documentary.

Women and early documentary

Esther Shub was a contemporary of Vertov and made 'an art of finding old documentary footage and putting it together to make powerful films' (Warren, 1996:6). Her films are outstanding examples of committed documentary and she saw cinema as a 'constructivist enterprise', i.e., a montage structure composed of archival footage

(Waugh, 1984). *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) remains one of the best examples of her work.

Of the other women who played an important role in the documentary movement of that time, the name of Helen Van Dongen stands out. She worked closely with Robert Flaherty on *The Land* (1942) and *Louisiana Story* (1948) and also with director Joris Ivens, helping with the planning, structuring and editing of the films.

Some other famous films of the times were Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a city* (1929), Jean Vigo's *A Propos de Nice* (1930) and Luis Buñuel's *A Land Without Bread* (1932), the latter two who worked both in fiction and the documentary films. The 1930s saw the emergence of the documentary with a social purpose, with the motive of educating the public. And it is this idea that lingers most strongly today. John Grierson's name stands out in this context.

John Grierson

Despite calling Flaherty the 'father of documentary', John Grierson objected to Flaherty's preoccupation with the past rather than the present, and also to his fascination with the theme of humans against nature. Envisioning a social purpose for the documentary, John Grierson heralded a new era in British and world documentary. For Grierson, the problems of a mass industrial society were far more important subjects to be dealt with in a documentary, rather than the beauty of nature or the culture of certain people, which he saw as sentimental escapism. Social analysis and truth-telling were seen as the legitimate functions of the documentary, according to Grierson, and several scholars of his time seconded this opinion. This use of the documentary as a social educator to inform and enlighten the public remains the cornerstone behind the making of

several documentaries all over the world, especially in the form of public message films and historical short films. Grierson's films like *Drifters* (1929), on Herring fishermen, and his several films for commercial and governmental agencies in England and later in Canada, reflect his bias towards propaganda and education. He tried to educate people about day-to-day social processes and the obligations of law-abiding citizens. The British Documentary movement also saw several excellent documentaries during that time in Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1935), Wright and Harry Watt's *Night Mail* and Humphrey Jennings' *Listen to Britain* (1942) and *A Diary for Timothy* (1945) after the end of the Second World War (Warren, 1996).

For Grierson, who spoke of the documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality', duplicating the historical world on film was less important than molding actuality for a social purpose. For him, the film was largely created on the editing table, to be used as an analytical means with an end in mind. In a reference to the 'first principles' of documentary-making, Grierson said that 'a documentary must be dramatic, and not merely instructional to promote a common thought or feeling among the audience members. Second and most important, the documentary is best used for propaganda' (Platinga, 1997:27). Grierson was also an advocate of the 'realist documentary' that would employ the aesthetic for a social purpose. Several of his directives can be seen to linger in documentary-making even today, specially the propaganda and social motive of the documentary, and also, realism as a style. In the United States also, documentaries as educational tools came to be made and used extensively like *The Plow That Broke The Plains* (1936) by Pare Lorentz and *The River* among others. Joris Ivens collaborated with

Ernest Hemmingway on *The Spanish Earth* (1937), a film on the Spanish Civil War, actually shot in war conditions.

World War II and the Documentary

World War II saw the harnessing of the potential of the documentary for propaganda purposes. Persuasion through the documentary reached its peak through explanations, rationalization, and emotional appeals urging people to war. In the 1930s, in Germany, Leni Riefenstahl made *Triumph of the Will* (1935) about a Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg. It provided an exhilarating and visionary hope in early Nazism, which, however disturbing, did exist. Her *Olympiad* (1938) is about the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, in which images of the Olympic sports have been inter-cut with the images of Hitler and his associates. Her films may horrify and disturb today, but their impact then was tremendous, and undoubtedly helped the Nazi regime with its propaganda.

In the United States of America, cinema was used extensively to educate the soldiers and the public on the need to fight. Frank Capra's forceful series *Why We Fight* helped the government to urge its soldiers to war. One important film, which was suppressed, was John Huston's *Let There Be Light* (1945), about shellshock invalids in a soldiers' hospital (Warren, 1996). The film was too realistic and did not suit the agenda of the then government. This kind of censorship holds sway till this day, and is a struggle waged by independent and committed filmmakers across the world.

In the aftermath of World War II, innumerable films were made on the inhuman concentration camps of Nazi Germany. The horror of the genocide of the Jews was filmed extensively. Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955) is one of the most remarkable documentaries to deal with this subject. *The Sorrow and the Pity*(1970) and *Hotel*

Terminus (1987) by Marcel Ophuls, and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) are some of the later films which deal directly or indirectly with the horrors of war. Chris Marker, a political activist and intellectual, is one filmmaker whose name stands out in the documentaries of the 50s. His films are based all round the world and all of them are pre-occupied with the Second World War. *Sundays in Peking* (1955), *Letter from Siberia*(1957),*Cuba Si*(1961), *The Kuominko Mystery*(1965) and *Sans Soleil*(1982) are some of his notable works.

The 1940s and the 50s also saw the rise of the neorealism movement in fiction film, especially in Italy, where real life settings and real life crises were portrayed on film, mostly dealing with the aftermath of the War. New movements in documentary films in the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Asia too were influenced by this trend. Dealing with current times and even mundane activities, these films were mostly docu-dramas like *The house on 92nd Street* (1945) by Henry Hathaway and *Call Northside 777* (1948) and Alfred Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man* (1957). In this era, both fiction and documentary film were influenced by the War.

Cinema Verite

The late 1950s saw an explosion of a new kind of filmmaking, a movement that is referred to as Cinema Verite. The term was first used by Jean Rouch in his famous film *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). A new realism that observed the everyday life of ordinary citizens and without any overt intervention became the new style for these documentaries. The advances in cinematic technology like lighter cameras and sync sound facilitated the cinema verite. Lindsay Anderson's *Every Day Except Christmas*

(1957) and *Les Maîtres Fous* (1955) by Jean Rouch are some other notable films of this movement.

Corresponding to cinema verite, a school of filmmaking referred to as Direct cinema emerged in the United States, as exemplified by films like Richard Leacock and Joyce Chopra's *A Happy Mother's Day* (1963), Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1967) and Albert and David Maysles' *The Salesman* (1969). Direct cinema and cinema verite used natural sounds during the filming, and preferred it to an outside commentary. Lengthy shots are used to convey a sense of little intervention on the part of the filmmaker and the camera is usually hand-held to give the shots a spontaneous and unframed feel, while following the events as they unfold. Editing is very minimal and these films bring the viewer very close to 'everyday, sordid reality...and also convey a certain delirious impression of reality floating by...' (Warren, 1996:13).

Cinema verite persists very strongly in almost all of the ethnographic films of the 1960s and after. Several of the films from the First World about the Third World like Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* (1986), shot in Benaras, India, and other films based in New Guinea reflect this ethnographic filmmaking. Frederick Wiseman's series of films on American institutions like the *Titicut Follies* (1967), *High School* (1968) and *Welfare* (1971) let the subject lead, so to speak.

The personal documentary, using the cinema verite style, came of age from the late 60s onwards. Filming personal events, sometimes with the filmmaker turning the camera on himself or herself, and the autobiographical and biographical films mushroomed across the globe. Experiments with form as well as intensely personal films came to be made. The widespread accessibility and affordability of video technology has

resulted in filmmaking becoming a less exclusive activity. Family videos and hand-held cameras have added several new dimensions to experimental filmmaking.

The Political documentary

However, the documentary with a social purpose has assumed many forms over the years. As opposed to the commercial, mainstream fiction film, the documentary has persisted with strong nuances of Grierson and **Vertov**, committed to specific social motives, and **even** radical political agendas. The revolutionary powers of the camera have been used mostly as a political weapon by the working classes in several countries like France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, Japan, and more recently in Latin America, Cuba and Asia. Most of these films and filmmakers do not find a place in the mainstream renditions of the world history of documentary.

Show Us Life (1984), edited by Thomas Waugh, is one of the few books which seeks to highlight the history of what he calls the 'committed' documentary. By committed documentary, Waugh refers to cinema used as a tool to further political agenda, mainly by the traditional left (Communist), the new left (Progressive, liberal) and also by the developing nations. Especially in the Cold War era, opinion was extremely polarized, and screenings were political too. In the form of newsreels and short films, cinema was used to mobilize mass opinion and precipitate action for political change. Guerilla or Militant cinema, as the name suggests, performed a revolutionary function to encourage mass-based uprisings against unpopular regimes. Films were made on the lives and agitations of peasants and the working classes by film and newsreel societies in countries like Japan – *The Funeral of Yamamoto, Earth* (1930), *12th May Day in Tokyo*

(1931) and the United States –*Road To Life*, *Cottonpickers Strike*, *Hunger 1932* and *Native Land*, Netherlands, France –*La Vie est a nous* and Germany.

As progressive strides were made in the women's movement, human rights struggles and mobilization of other marginalized sections in society, the new Left started using film to fight for social egalitarianism. *Make-Out*, *We Demand freedom*, *In the Event Anyone Disappears*, *The Woman's Film*, *Black Panther* and *Oil Strike* are some of the better known films made in the late 60s to early 70s in the United States, *The Nightcleaners* about women nightcleaners in Britain and *The Harlan County, USA* about the struggle by miners made in the 70s are well known examples of the use of the camera to make issue-based films. Feminist documentaries by women, ranging from personal narratives to women's struggles in a patriarchal world, were made, along with anti-war films. *Growing Up Female*, *Janie's Janie*, *We Are Alive*, *Rape* and *Taking Our Bodies Back* are some of the many films made to deal with various aspects of the woman question. Realism as a style dominates many of these documentaries. And this trend about making films about the rights of the minorities or the disadvantaged sections in society, or about social issues persists in a big way even today, both in the developed and developing nations.

Documentary in the Third World context has thrived for several historical and ideological reasons, and, of course, remains radical in varying degrees. Filmmakers in Latin America and Cuba tried to combat the hegemony of Hollywood by trying to find and reiterate their native identities. While today, the focus of their work is development, the documentary has served several radical causes for these countries. Santiago Alvarez is one of the notable names in Cuba. Spoken of as a **cine-agitator**, his films *Now* (1965),

79 Springtimes of Ho Chin Minh and *LBJ* (1968) have all served the cause of the struggle of the Third World people against US imperialism and underdevelopment. Many of his films are also responses to specific outrages by the US. *To Die for Your Country is to Live* (1976) is about the CIA bombing of a Cuban airliner.

The *Battle of Chile*, running four and a half hours and in three parts, stands out as one of the most influential documentaries made in Latin America. Made in the early 70s, the film symbolizes the commitment of the filmmakers to the struggle of the Chilean working class for socialist governance. One of the extreme moments in the film shows an Argentine cameraman filming his own execution, reiterating his commitment to the struggle. This epic film mobilized liberal and mainstream support in the West for the Chilean struggle.

Across the decades, the documentary has found its niche as a weapon against social and economic inequities at the global, national and regional levels. In ways different from the documentaries in Cuba or Latin America, independent documentary in India has a history of resistance and struggle that it has embraced. The emergence of the independent documentary in India in the late 1970s has been dealt with at length in the following pages.

Documentary in India

The Firsts⁵

In July 1896, cinema came to India, barely six months after the first actuality was screened in Paris. The venue was The Watson's Hotel in Bombay, and for an admission price of Rupee one, six films by the Lumiere brothers were screened for 35 days for an enthusiastic public. Another venue, Novelty at Grant Road was added to the screenings and the admission prices ranged from eight *annas* to two rupees. The cinema fever caught on as, from 1897 onwards, film shows were held all over Bombay in makeshift tents, open spaces, theatres and institutes like the Framji Cawasji Institute, under the auspices of several interesting banners like Stewart's Vitograph, Hughes' Moto-photoscope, Professor Anderson's Andersonoscopograph and the Biuranal Optical Diorama. The touring showmen, mostly cameramen, screened the films throughout the country, they also began to capture what they saw as the 'exotic' loveliness of colonial India.

Cocoanut Fair and *Our Indian Empire* were two of the earliest films made and exhibited in India, the filmmakers of which are unknown. Several other untitled short films too were made during this time. In 1898, Professor Stephens shot a dance sequence from a Bengali stage opera *The Flower of Persia* and also *A Panorama of Indian Scenes*, which was exhibited in the Star Theatre in Calcutta. Around the same time, Professor Anderson filmed and included in his repertoire two Indian short films, *Train arriving at Bombay Station* and *Poona races '98*. It was around this time that the interest of several

⁵ The section on the history of documentary in India has been mostly informed by Narwekar (1992), Verma (1998), and Pendakur (1998).

Indians was awakened, and they began to participate as professionals in the entertainment business that was cinema.

The first among them was **Harishchandra Sakharam** Bhatawdekar, or Sawe Dada as he was better known, who was a still photographer, equipment dealer and exhibitor of films from abroad. By late 1898, he imported a **Riley** camera from London and shot his first film titled *The Wrestlers*, capturing a staged bout between two famous wrestlers. His next short film was on some monkeys being trained by their master, called *A Man and His Monkeys*. Both these films were screened in 1899. By 1901, Sawe Dada acquired the Lumiere gadget that was a camera, printer and projector. His film *The Return of Wrangler Paranjpye* (1902) was based on Mr. Raghunath Paranjpye, the first Indian who had returned from Cambridge after completing his Mathematical Tripos. His other actualities were *The Landing of Sir M.M. Bhowmugra* (1901) and *Atash Behram* (1901), a film on the renovation of a Parsi Fire Temple. Most of these early films were event-based and were newsreels in some sense. Also, some of them could be the first stirrings of the biographical film.

At around the same time, Hiralal Sen and his brother Motilal Sen, who started off as exhibitors of imported films, started making films under the banner of the Royal Bioscope Company. Their first film was *Moving Pictures of Natural Scenes and Religious Rituals, Calcutta*, made in December 1899, followed by several films like *Live Scenes and Sequences From Popular Stage Shows* (1901), which as the title suggests, captured scenes from popular stage plays like **Vramar**, **Doljatra**, **Buddha**, **Sarala**, **Alibaba** and **Sitaram**. *Scenes and Sequences on Indian Life and Events* (1903) and *Dancing Duo* (1903) soon followed. Hiralal Sen also made some of the first advertisement films during

1905, an **Anti-Malarial Specific**, one for **C.K.Sen's** Jaba Kusum Oil and a third for W. Major Company's Sarsaparila. These three films are regarded as the first ever advertisements made in India. **F.B.Thanawalla's** *Splendid New Views of Bombay* and *Taboot Procession* were made in this time, and screened under the banner of **Thanawalla's Grand Kinetoscope**.

The multi-cultural and colourful visuals that India offered enticed early filmmakers to capture interesting vignettes of Indian life across the country. J.F.Madan made *Opening and Closing of Howrah Bridge* (1905), *Royal Visit to Calcutta* (1906), *Parasnath Procession* (1906), *Goat Sacrifice at Kalighat* (1906) and *Dancing by Indian Nautch Girls* (1906). Topicals were a favourite with budding filmmakers, and were very popular with the audiences too. Jyotish Chandra Sarkar was a contemporary and a good cameraman who made *Anti-partition Movement Procession* (1905), a movement led by Surendranath Banerji. Some other popular filmmakers who made short topical films during this time were S.N.Patankar and Narayan.G.Deware in Bombay, R.Prakasa and C.Rangiah in Madras, and these films captured events like the coronations and weddings of Maharajahs and specific events like major disasters of fire etc.

One of the most famous names of the times was that of Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, or Dadasaheb. His film *The Growth of a Pea Plant* is considered as the first Indian documentary made. Dadasaheb planted a pea in an earthen pot and captured the growth of the pea plant over a period of one and a half months, one frame at a time using the time-lapse technique for the first time ever. It was a 200-foot film just about two minutes in length! It was first exhibited in an electrical shop and held the audiences spellbound. After having proved his credentials as a good filmmaker with this film, and with an

improvement in his financial condition, Dadasaheb began to make short mythological films like *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), *Mohini Bhasmasur* (1913) and *Satyawan Savitri* (1914). He also made several shorts including *Game of Matchsticks*, which is the first animation film ever made in India, *Handprints* and *Godavari Views*. Despite some setbacks financially due to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Dadasaheb continued making several short films, including comedies like *Soulana Rasa* and *Mr Sleepy s Good*, animated films like *Animated Coins* and *Vichitra Shilpa*, topical films like *Sinhasta Parvani*, *Kartiki Purnima Festival* and *Ganesh Utsav* and documentaries like *Glass Works at Telegaon*, *Bird's Eyeview of Bodh Gaya* and *Rock Cut Temples of Ellora*. He even made an educational film on film appreciation called *How Films are Made*.

The beginnings of cinema, especially the short film, drew its sustenance from Indian culture and religion. The vast treasures that India offered in the form of architecture, festivals and mythological stories, proved to be an unending resource to the early filmmakers. More so in the light of the excellent visual qualities that these resources possessed.

One other significant fact is that from the beginning, cinema in India has been a contemporary to the scenario in the West, though the idiom of cinema continues to be different. As a commercial industry, fiction film has always held a greater sway over audiences in India. Even to this day, India remains the largest producer of fiction films in the world. And alongside fiction, the short film has always existed, and has evolved through the years, in ways different from the evolution of the documentary in the West.

Early Indian documentary and the struggle for Indian Independence

While topical and newsreels flourished, the documentary as understood today failed to take off in a big way. After Dadasaheb Phalke's film, the next noteworthy documentary-maker was Mohan Bhavani. He made a two-reeler short named *Mysore-Gem City of India* and another short called *Keddah*, about elephant trapping in Mysore. Both these films had a limited showing, like many other documentaries of that time.

According to Bhavani, as recorded in *The Historical Survey* of the short film movement, his first commercially released short film was *Wrestling* and it featured the famous Indian wrestler Gama. The film went on to be a success but, Bhavani observes that this was a lone instance and that 'it did not mean that the documentary film as such had made any real impact on either the distributors or the public, or that it could initiate a regular flow of such shorts' (cited in Narwekar, 1992). Bhavani also made an experimental cartoon film called *Lafanga Langoor* in 1935, which is a first in that category.

The independence movement saw a new role being drafted for the short film in India. It was the topical film that continued to hold a powerful sway over filmmakers and audiences right through India's struggle for freedom. Topicals on the funerals of freedom fighters, like Devashankar's *Funeral of The Late Hon. Mr.G.K Gokhale* made in Poona and a newsreel on the funeral procession and cremation of Lokamanya Tilak were very popular. A feature-length film *Great Bonfire of Foreign Clothes* (1921) was filmed on the bonfire of foreign clothes called for by Mahatma Gandhi and covered for two days the entire operation of collecting of foreign clothes, the gathering of all famous leaders and setting fire to the heap. This film was a great success, and given the highly charged

political atmosphere at that time, the sponsors of the **film** remained anonymous! The topicals also included filming of the Annual sessions of the Indian National Congress by R.L.Shorey, who started it in Lahore, and others. Through the 1920s and 1930s, important political and historical events like Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March were all captured in the topical films of the time. And it is thanks to these films that events that are such an integral part of Indian history have been preserved on film for posterity.

The Aurora Film Corporation in Calcutta, established by Anadi Bose, gave birth to the first regular newsreel in India entitled *Calcutta Film Gazette*. Dr.P.V.Pathy, another noted documentarian of those times, collaborated with film producer and feature film director J.B.H Wadia of Wadia Movietone and **Burjor M.Tata** to bring out another regular newsreel *Indian Screen Gazette*, which did not survive for long. The first edition of this newsreel covered the Haripura session of the Indian National Congress, when Subhash Chandra Bose was president. Wadia also made several short films on the Indian navy and air force, and also many cultural shorts, shown before the feature film, a practice that persisted for long in Indian movie theatres. Wadia Movietone, along with Chicago Radio of the Motwane brothers (Nanik and **Harnam**), was very involved in sponsoring the films on the annual sessions of the India National Congress, the footage of which is available even today. They were mostly two-reel films and can be seen as the precursors to the realist documentary as exists today. K.S.Hirlekar was another pioneer in the attempt to organize the production of newsreels and educational films.

The potential of cinema as a tool for propaganda was **fully** realized during World War II. The then British Empire, which included colonized India, sought to use film to effectively mobilize opinion to support its declaration of war against Nazi Germany and

Fascist Italy. Guided by Desmond Young of the Department of Information in Delhi, the Film Advisory Board (FAB) was established with J.B.H. Wadia as Chairman and P.J. Griffith, Rowland Jones, **M.B.Billimoria** and P.N.Thapar as members. At this time, the anti-British feeling was gaining momentum. There was resentment against the unconditional support Britain expected for a war that had nothing to do with India. However J.B.H. Wadia, who was considered as much a patriot as anybody else, justified his chairmanship of the FAB by declaring that he believed in supporting the forces of democracy in their battle against fascism, and that the defeat of the Nazis would definitely lead to **independence** for India too. And as part of the war propaganda of the FAB, along with Alexander Shaw as Chief Producer, Wadia managed to produce many good documentaries totally unrelated to the War, like *Women in India* and *Industrial India*. This effort was aided by writers like Premila Rama Rau, Romesh Thapar and Aubrey Menen and by directors like Krishna Gopal and A, Bhaskara Rao. Shaw also had the support of Left-wing politicians, journalists, intellectuals and women's groups in the country, who saw the film as a new medium that could be used effectively. Among the films commissioned by the FAB to aid the war effort was *He's in the Navy* about a career in the Navy and *The Planes of Hindustan* about Fighter planes. Both these films were by cameraman-director Dr P.V. Pathy.

When Alexander Shaw left for Britain because of his problems with the bureaucracy in FAB, V.**Shantaram** took over for a short while, but resigned in response to Gandhi's 'Do or Die' call for Independence. Feature filmmaker Ezra Mir, who made *Road to Victory*, a much-acclaimed documentary, took over as Chief Producer.

The then government decided that film production and distribution must be **consolidated**, and established the Information Films of India (IFI) and the Indian News Parade (INP), and the FAB was shut down. An administrative structure was established to facilitate the distribution and exhibition of films. To boost war propaganda, the Government invoked the Defence of India rules, which made it compulsory for film exhibitors to show 2,000 feet of film approved by the government at every show. A modest fee was charged for showing these films.

Ambalal Patel, a self-taught filmmaker, started the Indian Movietone News, a newsreel series in 1942, which he continued till the birth of the INP. He also made over 250 short films for extensive exhibition in rural India, under government patronage. As Producer-in-Charge at IFI, Ezra Mir made several noteworthy films like *Whispering Legions* and *Voice of Satan*. He also made a series called *Our Heritage* on the vast cultural heritage of India.

Between 1940-46, the FAB and IFI produced a total of more than 170 films, apart from newsreels by the INP. In an article written for the 'Indian Documentary' written much later in 1956, references have been made by Dr Pathy even to 'attempts at animated films'. The year 1945 saw three noteworthy films being made, *Tree Of Wealth* by A.Bhaskar Rao, which went on to become the first Indian short film to win many international awards, *The Private Life Of A Silkworm* by Mohan Bhavani and *Bombay, The Story Of Seven Isles*, a two-reeler film by Paul Zils, a refugee from Nazi Germany. The Combined Kinematographic Services Film Production and Training Group (CKS) or the Army Film Centre was another major parallel film production house during these times. Headed by Major Navel Ghandy, a feature filmmaker, it also had as members

Captain **Ratan** Bachcha and Captain Tom Stobart. The CKS produced morale-boosting films for the three services of the Armed Forces, and also for the IFI. Even in Independent **India**, the CKS contributed a lot to the documentary movement in the country. While at the CKS, Dr Pathy made several films for the war effort, like *In Self-Defence* and *The Golden Grain of Bharatkhand* (1942).

Documentary in Free India

In 1946 an interim Government comprising of nationalists was established in India. The Budget Session of the Interim Government reduced the grant to the IFI to a token Rupee one! And so the IFI, considered by many as a tool of the British Empire, ceased to exist. It was a myopic move in some ways, because when India got her independence on August 15th 1947, there was no official institute of film to record the momentous occasion! Dr.P.V.Pathy and Ambalal Patel were instrumental in organizing two cameras and the necessary sound equipment to film the historic handing-over ceremonies at midnight, which saw the birth of a Free India. In the days following the Independence, three important films were made and distributed by independent filmmakers, and were provided free of cost to cinema proprietors to be screened in the theatres of Delhi, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. The films were *Mahatma Gandhi* by A.K.Chettiar of Madras and edited by Pathy, which comprised of footage of Gandhi from around the world, *15 August 1947*, jointly made by Bombay Talkies and Film Classics of Madras, and *India's Struggle for National Shipping* directed by Paul Zils.

Many in the new Government of Independent India believed that short film could be used as effectively in peacetime for the development of India, as it had been for propaganda during the war. The lacuna caused by the disbanding of the IFI was

addressed in December 1947, when a proposal was mooted to form a unit under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to produce and distribute short **films**. On the lines of the IFI and the INP, the rule making it compulsory to exhibit government-approved short films before feature film screenings was **re-introduced**. Initially called the Film Unit, it was officially renamed as Films Division in April 1948. Many of those who worked for the IFI and INP were recruited, and documentaries and newsreels (under the title *Indian News Review*) were produced.

Mohan Bhavani, a well-known feature and documentary filmmaker was appointed as Chief Producer (Documentaries), and Sarvottam L.Badami, also a **well-known** filmmaker was appointed as the Chief Producer (Newsreels). A.Bhaskar Rao, Krishna Gopal, Mohan Wadhvani and Kumarsen Sarnmarth were among others who held important posts in the Films Division.

Among the independent documentary filmmakers who opted not to join the Films Division were stalwarts like P.V.Pathy, Paul Zils, D.B.D.Wadia, **Harnam** Motwane, Ratan Barucha and W.H.Hese. These independent filmmakers produced several notable documentaries and **despite** the lack of sustained government sponsorship, kept the documentary alive and thriving.

Dr.Pathy made several 'river' films, revolving around the idea of the rivers as the shapers of civilization. *Along the Jamuna* (1946) traced the course of the river from the Himalayas to its **confluence** with the Ganga, narrating the history of Delhi, Mathura, Agra and Allahabad in 15 **minutes**. The United Artists distributed the film as a side-reel, making it the first Indian short film to be distributed by a foreign banner. Egged on by this success, Pathy did extensive research on the river Kaveri in South India, and the IFI

approved his script for *The Golden River*. Pathy shot the film in the scenic locas of Coorg, Mysore and Tamil Nadu, and also traced the course of the river from its birth in the Western Ghats to the Bay of Bengal Encompassing the past and the present, the film was at once 'a search for the fabled lost city of Kaveripoompattinam and an ode to the Mettur dam' (Narwekar, 1992). Pathy completed the film only to realize that the IFI no longer existed. The film was shelved and released many years later in 1956, by the Films Division. After wielding the camera for *India's Struggle for National Shipping* (1947), Pathy went on to have a successful collaboration with director Paul Zils for nearly a decade.

Paul Zils, one of the most acclaimed documentary filmmakers in pre and post-Independent India, is also considered as the man responsible for giving a direction to the documentary movement in the country. After brief stints with the UFA studios in Berlin and Hollywood, Zils, tired of the superficiality of feature film, turned to the documentary. After spending the war in a detention camp, Zils joined the IFI in India, and put together a very good documentary team in place. He made several acclaimed films under his banner, the Documentary Unit of India. After Independence, he made two films for big industrial concerns, *Kurvandi Road* for Ciba, the first Indian short film to be shown on television in the USA and *A Tiny Thing Brings Death* for ICI, an anti-malarial film. His other famous films include the three-reeler film *Ripening Seed* on unwed motherhood, and also *Mother, Child and Community*, sponsored by the United Nations. In 1949, Zils started on his most ambitious project based on Mino Masani's best-selling book 'Our India'. The film *Hindustan Hamara*, starred twenty leading Indian movie artists like Prithviraj Kapoor, Dev Anand and Durga Khote. The film was a socio-economic study

of modern India and covered six thousand years of India's history in a mere two hours' (Narwekar, 1992).

The formation of the Films Division and its ambitious agenda to produce and release 52 short films every year and enforce compulsory screenings in all theatres, led the independent filmmakers to feel insecure about their survival. Especially when the independent filmmakers often had to pay the exhibitors to screen their films. In February 1949, some of them met at the Cricket Club of India in Bombay to collectively ask for a fixed number of short films to be allotted to them. The Short Film Guild was formed, under the initiative of Paul Zils, and the independent short film thrived for the next decade or so. The Films Division allotted 16 films out of the proposed 52 for independent filmmakers, and sponsorships from various other quarters were available to them as well. Zils also wrote extensively about the documentary scenario in India, organized Documentary film festivals in Bombay, and set up the Indian Documentary Producers Association.

The Burmah Shell programme and the Technical Co-operation Mission (TCM) were two initiatives that provided an impetus to the short film movement in India, by providing the finance to make films. Jim Beveridge of the National Film Board of Canada was appointed as producer of the Films Section of the Burmah Shell Films in India. This initiative sought to produce and build a library of Indian films, including some in colour, on specific categories like Village Industries of India, Folk Dances of India and Life in India. Between 1954-58, 50 films were produced under this banner. The Burmah Shell programme infused a new life into the short film movement in India by providing

the required sponsorship for filmmaking. Several classics like Zils' *Ujala* (1954), Fali Billimoria's *A Village in Travancore* (1956), Hari. S.Dasgupta's *Weavers of Maindargi*(1957), V.M.Vijaykar's *Kabuliram* and Clement Baptista's *Look To The Sky* were produced during this time.

A Village in Travancore won several national and international awards. Billimoria was introduced to film by Zils and went on to become his cameraman and partner in the Art Films of Asia. His film *The House That Ananda Built* was the first Indian documentary to be nominated for the coveted Oscar awards.

Hari.S.Dasgupta's other well known films are *Panchthupi: A Village in Bengal*, considered to be a forerunner to Satyajit Ray's *Father Panchali*. Ray, probably the best known Indian feature filmmaker, used to be a scriptwriter for Dasgupta. *The Story of Steel*, sponsored by the Tata Group of industries and a biographical film on the singer Bade Ghulam Ali Khan are his other famous films. The music for Dasgupta's films were provided by maestros like Ali Akbar Khan (Sarod) and Pandit Ravi Shankar (Sitar).

Baptista and Vijaykar from the CKS, worked together in Hunnar Films, which include documentaries like *Destination Konkan*, *Kabuliram*, *The Tanners of Jharauta*, *The Lorry Driver* and *Look To The Sky*. They also made training films like *Spray For Better Crops*, *Earth*, *Water And Oil* and *Shelllubrication*. Homi Sethna, also from the CKS, was another of the acclaimed documentary makers of the 1950s, who made films like *Stop Rough Handling* and *Garam Safai* for Films Division, *Animal Diseases* and *Key Plan for Cattle Development* for TCM.

Rajbans Khanna made a feature-length documentary called *Gautama Buddha* (1956) for the 2500th anniversary of Buddha attaining Nirvana. A biographical-cum-art

film, **the** documentary went on to win a special award at the Cannes Film Festival, **and** was described by **the** Jury Chairman as “a marvel of marvels from the heart of hearts” (Narwekar, 1992).

The TCM facilitated the exchange of films between different countries and India, and also produced several short films in India on various social subjects. Notable among these were *The Etawah Story*, a film on community development, directed by Dr Pathy and *School (1956)* by Paul Zils about the secondary school education in India. The films were often translated into as many as 13 regional languages to reach bigger audiences. Educational films, instructional films, advertisements and publicity shorts were produced by several organizations in India. W.H.Hese, a German, set up the AMA Private Limited and was mainly involved in making training films for the UNSECO and TCM. His documentary, *Education for Life (1956)* was quite well known. The famous movie actress, Durga Khote also started a short film enterprise called Fact Films. Along with a few documentaries like *Deserted Women (1958)*, mostly publicity and advertising films for industrial clients like Mahindra and Mahindra and Hindustan Lever were produced. The National Educational and Information Films of India (NEIF) was started by the Aggarwal brothers, Goverdhandas and Chhotelal in the late 1940s, and, as the name suggests, it believed in education through films. The NEIF played an important role in the short film movement in India, by importing foreign films and dubbing them into Indian languages before distribution. Later, films were also made for the TCM and Films Division and the more famous films are *Wealth of Our Waters*, *Singing Punjabis*, *Adivasi* and *Getting Together*.

The Short Film Guild founded in 1949, and its magazine called *Indian Documentary* started by Pauli Zils as a rallying point for the documentary film movement and especially the independent films, folded up. But Zils continued to fight for a representation for independent producers, and eventually in 1956, the Indian Documentary Producers' Association (IDPA) was formed. *Indian Documentary* was revived by Zils, with Jagmohan as editor, probably the only chronicler of the documentary movement in the country. A film critic and documentary scriptwriter, Jagmohan organized the first IDPA documentary festival in Bombay and Delhi in 1958, spanning five days.

With Mohan Bhavani as the first Chief Producer of documentaries, the Films Division (FD) had the sprawling Gulshan Mansion as its first official premises. As the then Deputy Director of FD, Jagat Murari, wrote, 'There was never a dull moment at the Films Division. Everyday awaited a new experience, a new disco very... we were constantly on the move, searching and filming the soul of India' (cited in Narwekar, 1992:40). The films made by FD were released under the banner of Documentary Films of India, and dealt with India's traditional past and her Modern present. Some well-known films are Mohan Wadhvani's *Jaipur* and *Memories of Mewar*, K.L.Khandpur's *Holy Himalayas* and *Darjeeling*, Jagat Murari's *Mahabalipuram* and *Story of Steel*, V.R.Sarma's *Power For Tomorrow* and Krishna Gopal's *The Vital Link*. Films made by FD won several international awards since 1951. *Jaipur* was the first to win the First Prize at the Festival of Scientific and Documentary Films held in Venice. And *Mahabalipuram* won the first President's Gold Medal for a documentary in 1954.

In this period, the themes that dominated the Indian documentary, both independent and state-produced, were:

- the agenda of nation-building, as envisioned by Nehru, through industrialization, modernization, literacy, scientific temperament, and transforming traditional agrarian practices into modern, high-yielding ones.

'unity in diversity' which was perceived to be a much-needed integrating thread to hold together the erstwhile princely states. So the nation and nationalism had to be constructed in the minds of the people. The documentaries, therefore, laid great emphasis on presenting the various cultural identities and traditions of India.

- the agenda of reclaiming India's 'golden past' and the urge to establish a distinct identity for the newly independent country, as can be seen from the 'river' films, or the films on Indian temples, sculpture, culture, and history'.

medical themes like malaria, veterinary problems etc that could be seen as an effort aimed at re-orienting a whole country to accept another system of medicine. These films focus on the transformation of India into a 'modern' state along with its 'traditional' identity.

In 1950, FD covered the death of Sardar Patel and the homage paid by millions of people to the departed leader. The recording was processed and edited within a few hours and the silent newsreel, with a running commentary, was shown at Regal Cinema in Bombay the same evening. The dedication and professionalism of the FD staff gets illustrated in a small anecdote which has it that K.L.Khandpur even postponed his wedding date to accommodate the production of an urgently required documentary! Mohan Bhavani retired in 1955 after having established a strong FD, in infrastructure and

quality of film production. After this, Jean Bhowmagary worked as Chief Producer Incharge, and tried to adhere to Nehru's brief for FD, to foster nation-building, and a sense of citizenship and community in the people of India. Then Ezra Mir took over as Chief Producer, and in the five years of his tenure, FD produced over 400 documentaries, with Mir personally editing almost all the films.

This golden period in FD's history saw the making of several acclaimed films. Biographicals like V.Bedekar's film on Lokamanya Tilak, and Neil Gokhale's the *Story of Dr.Karve*, films on art and culture like Wadhvani's *Khajuraho* and *Radha and Krishna* by Bhowmagary, instructional films like *Nay a Paisa* and *Metric System*, social films like *Pause and Think*, tourist films like *Hill Stations of South India* and *Taj Mahal*. Alongside some good films that won coveted awards international awards, several documentaries that were mediocre in quality and content were also produced. The speed and quantity in which FD was expected to produce films for compulsory exhibition in all theatres in India could be one of the main reasons for the deteriorating quality of films.

The late 1950s saw the introduction of classroom films, as well as entertainment films for children. Dr. Gopal Dutt, and then Sankar.P.Gangooli went on to produce several audio-visual study aids on the physical and geographical features on India. The films produced included *Indo-Gangetic Plains*, *Deccan Tableland*, *Climate of India*, *Cycle of Evolution* and *Races of Man*. Around the same time, FD also set up a Cartoon Film Unit, and initially supplied 'animation inserts' to regular documentaries. In 1957, *The Banyan Deer* was directed by Ahmed Latif, which was based on a Jataka tale.

Disenchantment with the Films Division set in when people realized that the promises made by Nehru, and, therefore in the films by FD, remained pipedreams. The

films lost credibility and were seen as propaganda for the **government**. Many of the films were either travelogues or painted too rosy a picture of India, And almost all films began to look like each other. Communicators woke up to the fact that FD 'had failed to grasp the essentials of development in a democratic society' (Narwekar, 1992:48), **and** recognized the need to deal with the problems that beset free India. The mid-60s saw a change in the documentaries being made. *Face To Face* by K.S.Chari was the first film in the history of FD when the camera and the microphone was handed over to the common man on the street, for him to voice his opinion on film. These democratic voices paved the way for the films of that time. Chad's *Transition* was a film made on the 20th anniversary of India's independence to capture the feelings of the people on that occasion. S.N.S.Shastry, a contemporary of Chari, believed in jolting the viewer from complacency, by using jerky and flashy style of filmmaking, mixing beautiful visuals with harsh sound bytes. His films, including, *I Am Twenty*, *Jai Jawan*, *And I Make Short Films* and *This Bit of That India* probe beneath the surface.

Other important filmmakers of this time, who even explored the anti-establishment agenda to some extent were, Pramod Pati, K.K.Kapil and Sukhdev. All this was possible under the encouraging stewardship of Jean Bhowmagary, who was made Chief producer by the then Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Mrs Indira Gandhi. Bhowmagary steered the FD into a new era of successful filmmaking, which questioned and challenged. The controversial films of the times include *Report on Drought* and *Actual Experiences* (a critical, two-part series on family planning). N.V.K.Murthy produced pacy newsreels that gave a voice to the people on the streets on important political issues, instead of limiting them to the opinions of experts. Filmmakers were

encouraged to experiment with new subjects and styles of filmmaking. G.K.Gokhale's *Homo Saps*, *Pati's Explorer and Trip*, Sukhdev's *And Miles To Go* and M.F.Hussain's *Through The Eyes Of A Painter* were some well-known films that were produced at that time.

Several feature filmmakers also made an occasional documentary in the 1980s. For instance, Adoor Gopalakrishnan made *The Chola Heritage*, Aravindan, *The Seer Who Walks Alone*, Girish Karnad, *Kanaka Purandara*, B.Narsing Rao, *Maa Ooru* , Shyam Benegal, *Satyajit Ray* and *Nehru* and Mani Kaul, *Siddheswari* and *Dhrupad*. The length of the documentary too increased from about 30 minutes duration to double the time. Foreign funding made possible several films on wild life and the environment by the Bedi brothers, Naresh and Rajesh. Channel Four of the BBC was another avenue to get documentaries funded and exhibited. Biographical on scientists, political leaders, and musicians were also in vogue, as were films on art and culture in India.

Sukhdev, a brilliant filmmaker and an assistant of Paul Zils, and made his first film *The Saint and the Peasant* (1958), on the Bhoodan and Sarvodaya movements launched by Acharya Vinoba Bhave, sponsored by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission. Sukhdev was a pioneer 'determined to marry art to activism' (M.K.Raghavendra, 1997). He believed that the filmmaker must use his camera as a weapon to expose truths about his society. His *India '67* created ripples at the National Awards because of a few enacted scenes though he went on to win the award. But he extended the very definition of the documentary. His famous films include *A Few More Questions* (about the 1974 Railway Strike), *Behind the Breadline* (a critical film on the Public Distribution System), *After The Silence* (on bonded labour), *Nine Months To*

Freedom (on the liberation of Bangladesh), *Maa Ki Pukar* (on the futility of violence) and *Thunder Of Freedom* (on the pre-emergency situation in the country).

Sukhdev can be regarded as the pioneer of the political or alternative documentary in India. Sukhdev's powerful voice of dissent assumes even more significance, considering that it came out of the Films Division, an institution of the state. Anand Patwardhan is responsible for taking independent documentary in India to a new high, with his films made during and after the imposition of the Emergency in 1975.

The alternative documentary

The early 1970s brought home the realization that a free India had failed to address the aspirations of a cross-section in society. This led to disenchantment among the people, and the pre-Emergency period saw a wave of popular dissent against a corrupt and tyrannical state. Mass protests and acts of resistance by the media and the public sowed the seeds for voices of dissent to emerge in the form of documentary. The most significant documentary of that time was *Waves of Revolution* by Anand Patwardhan.

The film was made during the National Emergency, imposed upon an angry nation by the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi in June 1975. India bore this state-imposed oppression for two years, when all civil and individual rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution were withdrawn. Thousands of innocent people languished in jails and several lives were claimed in 'police encounters', a synonym for liquidating political dissent.

Anand Patwardhan, a young student, captured some of the massive student-and -peasant-led protests in Bihar in 1974, which precipitated the imposition of the Emergency.

Waves of Revolution was not conceived as a film until after the filmmaking process had already begun. Initially, footage was shot more as a record of police violence against non-violent demonstrators. The idea to make a more complete record of the movement came as a consequence (Patwardhan, 1984: 449).

Made against several odds like a hostile political climate, police brutality, inadequate equipment and furtive post-production and distribution, the film is an outstanding example of a guerilla film plugged into an ongoing revolution. While one print was retained in India for underground screenings, one print was cut into pieces and smuggled outside the country to mobilize support against the Emergency. Patwardhan's other films include *Prisoners of Conscience* (1977) on political prisoners of the Emergency, *Time to Rise* (1980), a film on Sikh farm workers in Canada, *Hamara Shehar* (Bombay, Our City) (1985), a film on the slums in Bombay, *Ram Ke Naam* (In the Name of God) (1992), on the spread of Hindu fundamentalism, *Father, Son and Holy War* (1994) which deals with the relationship between communalism and masculinity, *Fishing: In the Sea of Greed* (1998), a film which deals with the problems of fishermen and *War and Peace* (2001), a film exposing the horrors of nuclear proliferation. All his films try to subvert state propaganda and awaken the consciousness of people towards the ills plaguing society.

The years following the Emergency have witnessed many powerful, oppositional films that take a hard look at political events and social ills that plagued India. The video boom of the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a technology that is less expensive and more accessible. The alternative documentary in India thrives as a filmic tradition today. The broad agenda for these films is simple –to provide a voice to the disenfranchised sections of Indian society, like the adivasis, women, minorities and children. The issues they explore include environmental degradation in an unsustainable development paradigm,

state-sponsored atrocities in the name of development and human rights abuses like discrimination on the basis of caste, class, gender, sexuality and 'normality'. They are attempts to articulate an alternative paradigm of development, and are premised on the notion of social equity.

A few of the landmark documentaries of the last two decades, which have been influenced by and also influence the alternative documentary movement, are given below. *An Indian Story* (1981) by Tapan.K.Bose is a path breaking film that deals with the blinding of 37 jailed peasants by the Bihar State Police. The oppressive feudal power structure in rural India and the appalling lack of human rights for the rural poor are exposed in the film. After a long battle with the Censor Board and courts, the film could finally be released. *They Call Me Chamar* (1980) by Loksen Lalvani, about a Brahmin married to a dalit woman, is one of the first films tackling the issue of caste. *Gift of Love* (1982) by Meera Dewan deals with the evils of the dowry system. *Voices from Baliapal* (1988) by Vasudha Joshi and Ranjan Palit captures the grassroots uprising of people in Baliapal against a government plan to build a nuclear missile testing range in their area. Deepa Dhanraj's *Kya Hua Is Shehar Ko* (1987) deals with the communal riots in Hyderabad and *Legacy of Malthus* (1994) and *Something Like a War* (1991) exposing the flawed population control policies of the state and the violence unleashed on women by the state in the form of family planning are landmark films. *Bhopal: Beyond Genocide* (1985) by Suhasini Mulay and Tapan K.Bose is a powerful film on the victims of the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy. *Safdar* (1989), a film by Sashi Kumar, is a tribute to Safdar Hashmi, a well-known theatre activist and anti-fascist, who was murdered by hired killers while performing a play.

The ideologies that prompted these alternative documentaries were influenced greatly by the radical, philosophical shifts in political and economic thinking of development at the global level. The denigration of the economics-centered dominant paradigm of development, questions of inequity in international trade practices, unsustainable development, hegemony of knowledge and culture, questions of identity, the 'woman' question - all these issues were thrown up by the alternative documentaries.

An exploration of 'identity' was explored by many filmmakers. The gender question, or the indigene, or mass media images - the mechanisms that went into constructing these identities were focused upon. Alongside these concerns, the post-colonial filmmakers also grappled with questions of their own identities. Their location in the film and the question of reflexivity assumed importance, especially in the last decade. The question of women's rights is addressed in a big way by filmmakers like Deepa Dhanraj, Shabnam Virmani, Reena Mohan, Sagari Chabra, and Madhushree Dutta to name a few. Films on issues like rape, socialization of the girl child, beauty and sexuality are addressed, and films profiling women leaders, especially at the grassroots, who fight against injustices, were made. *Tu Zinda Hai* and *When Women Unite: A story of an Uprising*, both by Shabnam Virmani, *Now I Will Speak* by Sagari Chhabra, *Skin Deep* by Reena Mohan and *Memories of Fear* by Madhushree Dutta are some examples.

Anjali Monteiro and K.P.Jayasankar made films like *Odhni* (1995), *The Plot Thickens* and *Kahankar: Ahankar* (1994) and *YCP 1997*, critically looking at a host of issues like sexuality, representation, subaltern histories, and prisoners' rights. The rights of the adivasis form the mainstay of Shriprakash's films like *Kis Ki Raksha* and *Buddha Weeps in Jaduguda*, all of which are based in Jharkhand. Stalin's film *Lesser Humans*

(1997) is an expose on the plight of the bhangis, who are scavengers in Gujarat. Chellam Bennurkar, K.P.Sasi, Sehjo Singh, Gargi Sen, Manjusha Nair and Sarat Chandran are a few of the many other alternative filmmakers whose documentaries are widely circulated to provoke critical thought and dissent among the people of India.

As the descriptions of the films given above show, the focus of all these films are the marginalized sections in Indian society, those who do not or cannot make their anguish heard by mainstream India.

CHAPTER 4 : INTERROGATING ALTERNATIVE

In a completely catalogued world, cinema is often reified into a corpus of traditions (Minh-ha, 1993: 90).

Trinh T. Minh-ha (1993) argues that there is no such thing as documentary. The term itself cannot be used to designate any **category** of material, genre, approach or a set of techniques. She refers to what is commonly understood as the documentary *genre*, as the documentary *tradition* instead. As opposed to 'Aristotelian' categorizing, post-modern thinking or the Derridean deconstruction challenges the attempts to compartmentalize films into rigid categories, as if they are natural or irrevocable (Platinga, 1997). Still, to further any understanding on the distinct tradition of alternative documentaries in India, it is important to examine the context in which the filmmakers themselves see their work, and to explore the various implications of the word 'alternative'.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, the documentary itself came about as a cinematic practice as an alternative to fiction/feature film, John Grierson's famous definition of documentary as '**the** creative treatment of actuality' can still be applied to the prevalent connotations of the word 'documentary'. The documentary is considered to be non-fiction, educative and as dealing with the 'real' world, and not the imaginary world of fantasy and fiction. While several of these notions have come under scrutiny in contemporary documentary theory, what cannot be denied is the very visible existence of documentaries i.e. films with a social comment and preoccupied with representing the historical world.

The focus of this study is the tradition of **'alternative documentaries'**, i.e., alternative to both fiction **film**, and to mainstream documentaries which deal with a myriad of subjects like art, wild life, biographies, geography etc. By calling the documentaries **under study 'alternative'**, the study assumes that these documentaries challenge the economics-centered, **dominant** notions of development as envisioned by the state and the **market**. It also includes the fact that these films articulate marginalized voices from the grassroots, and reconceptualize development as being participatory and holistic, with an emphasis on human rights (as discussed in Chapter 1). In the following pages, my endeavor is to examine how the **filmmakers** of the alternative documentaries construct their films, and what are the agendas that govern the making of these films, as conceived by the filmmakers.

Why does a filmmaker make a documentary? Also implicit in this question, is the query, how would the filmmakers define their work? This question of definition is not a straightforward one, as the impossibility of formally defining their work and categorizing it is widely acknowledged.

Thomas Waugh (1984) writes of the committed documentary, which he defines as films rooted in ongoing political struggles, made about people engaged in these struggles, with them and by them as well. These films are committed to the goal of socio-political transformation, with the filmmakers engaged in activism or intervention in the process of change itself. In the Indian documentary scenario (as discussed in Chapter 2), the monopoly of **state-sponsored** documentaries was challenged in the mid-70s, during the Emergency era. What began mostly as a reaction to oppressive state policies, has since flourished into a **vibrant** tradition of independent or alternative filmmaking, which also

received a considerable boost with the advent of video **technology** (Kumar, 2000; Page and Crawley, 2001). Filmmaking became less expensive and more accessible. As the **pioneer-filmmaker** of the alternative documentary, Anand Patwardhan put it in a personal interview, 'I think the video affords opportunities for filmmaking that didn't exist before'.

The **video-boom** and also the burgeoning of non-governmental agencies, which fund and/or make the alternative documentaries, are two significant factors responsible for making India one of the largest producers of independent documentary films in the world. These films focus on the marginalized sections of Indian society, including the adivasis, dalits, women and children, who have been **historically** denied access to power and resources. Issues of caste, class, gender, patriarchy and environment often figure as part of the larger, global context and are given voice through films made on localized struggles some place in India. The taxonomy associated with such documentaries is varied, as varied as the documentaries themselves. They are referred to as 'alternative', 'independent', 'committed' 'political', 'parallel' or even 'social' documentaries. Whatever the adjective, clearly there does exist a particular tradition of documentary making within the broader tradition of documentary itself

The films chosen for my study are what I call audio-visual narratives of an alternative development paradigm. Opposed to the top-down, teleological and capital-intensive paradigm of **socio-economic** development, they are non-statist narratives of bottom-up, **grassroots** movements. All the films seek to articulate marginalized voices and have a commitment to social equality. The study attempts to explore how some Indian documentary-makers see their films, and to understand their perceptions of their

work. Locating their views in the larger spectrum of documentary theory will enrich one's understanding of the alternative documentary in India.

Implications of 'alternative'

The study sees these films as narratives of an alternative development **paradigm**. Is this premise a valid one? Correspondingly, can the documentaries chosen for the study be termed as alternative, within the documentary tradition? The filmmakers interviewed for the study explore the possible implications of the term 'alternative'. While their answers range across a wide spectrum, there seems to be a unanimous acknowledgement that their films deliberately seek to forward new agendas and question existing ones. It becomes evident that there exists a category of films, which are being made and distributed with deliberate and overlapping agendas. It is these agendas that the study seeks to understand and interrogate.

The filmmakers define their films as alternative *vis a vis* the mainstream. The mainstream, for them, is constituted by:

- 1) the ideology of the State,
- 2) the ideology of the Market,
- 3) the access to and reception by audiences, and
- 4) the channels of dissemination.

While grappling with the question of how to define the films they make, the filmmakers explore the ideological concerns embedded in their work. The four criteria for supposing the mainstream/alternative dichotomy mentioned above, are examined at length in the following pages.

Anti-state as 'alternative'

Because the establishment exists, I believe that the alternative exists. The oppressive state of the apparatus is what the mainstream is all about. The alternative is constituted by people like us (Sarat Chandran, filmmaker, personal interview).

The oppressive apparatus of the state is constituted as the mainstream by filmmakers Sarat Chandran and Anand Patwardhan. The state is constructed as the oppressor, with the power and reach to manipulate the mass media to serve as their tools for propaganda- And it is this propaganda they seek to counter. Their films, *Chaliyar* and *A Narmada Diary*, respectively, reflect this perspective. The former film, based on the struggle of the people against the polluting Grasim factory, exposes the connivance of an apathetic state with the owners of the factory. *A Narmada Diary* exposes the falsehood of the state-propaganda for the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, which would displace thousands of adivasis without them getting adequate compensation.

Mainstream documentaries, which get made and distributed by government agencies such as the Films Division and also those that get television exposure, are seen as government propaganda. As opposed to this, critical films about certain issues are not encouraged by the state. Most of the official channels have been closed for such films, and people are denied access to critical points of view. It was in the post-Emergency era of independent India that films challenging the lop-sided developmental policies of the state were first made.

So, is an anti-state ideology the defining characteristic of these films then? Most of the films that are made by these filmmakers would definitely seem to adhere to this agenda. However, it is not a clear-cut, **anti-state** agenda, which motivates these filmmakers. Traditionally, since Dziga Vertov, cinema has been used by the Left to challenge

structures of social domination. And the state is understood to be a hegemonic power, thriving on the exploitative mechanisms of capitalism. This groundwork for documentaries, laid out by classical Marxism, was pre-disposed to revolution. The organization, struggles and successes of worker unions and the 'rank-and-file' formed the bulk of documentary filmmaking in the Cold War years (Waugh, 1984). This radical leftist agenda for the documentary has been transformed by three important factors. The emerging role of an 'enfranchised' Third world in the geo-political scene, the role of the New Left in the First World, and the technological advancements which allowed for an explosion of cinema-verite. It is in this changed context, that the filmmakers in my study articulate the anti-state agenda. While acknowledging that these films are more often than not made to counter dominant ideologies of the state, the problems in simplifying (and reducing) their agenda to anti-state rhetoric are also addressed.

For filmmaker K. Stalin, whose film *Lesser Humans* is analysed for the study, the films need not necessarily be anti-state. Religion, private or organized citizen groups, and sometimes 'the psyche of the people themselves', may be the human rights violators. It is not always the state, which is responsible for all the atrocities. While the state figures prominently in many of Stalin's films as the oppressor, at other times its role is presented more subtly. This view goes beyond designating the state or the regime in power, as solely responsible for the social inequities. Various other institutions, which operate in the public and personal realms of the people, are also examined in an attempt to understand the existence of social inequities. As can be seen in Stalin's film *Lesser Humans* (a film on human scavenging), the state could play a conniving role in fostering

communal feelings through its policies, but even factors like religion, **gender-based** discrimination and class are extremely divisive forces.

Anand Patwardhan qualifies his **anti-state** agenda in relation to the fundamentalist nature **of** the state.

My films in the last 10 years have been directly against the state, I mean they **are** against communalism and the state is a communal one ..**as** long as it's a fundamentalist state, it's always going to be anti-state. I **wasn't** setting out to make an anti-state film, but they become anti-state because the state is not willing to accept any critique (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

Preferring to call his films independent', rather than '**alternative**', Patwardhan believes that independent cinema must remain independent not only in terms of how it is financed but also independent in terms of its political orientation. These films can be seen as attempts to provide space to those dissident and critical voices, which the regimes in power seek to stifle. By making films on the resistances offered by the people to these oppressive regimes, the filmmaker focuses on the alternatives.

As can be seen in the alternative documentaries chosen for analyses, the state is constructed as the main player in the stories of systematic **oppression** of certain, lower sections of society. However, the complexity with which each film presents its construction of the state varies – from conceptualizing the state as a monolithic, all-knowing, structure of domination to unraveling the many tiers that operate through the hegemony of the state (Barry, 1992)⁶.

'Alternative' to state/market

The advent and spread of globalization furthered the stranglehold of the market on a transforming Indian society. The ever-increasing gap between the '**haves**' and the

⁶ Chapter 5, which deals with representation in the alternative documentary, **examines** the construction of the state in these films at length.

'have-nots' in India are attributed to the policies of economic liberalization, incorporated into the socialist leanings of the Indian state. Economic liberalization in India was accompanied by the introduction of private, satellite television channels as well in 1991. The vast audiences in India held a fascination for the big, global advertisers (Page and Crawley, 2001). The monopoly of the state-owned **Doordarshan**, the sole television channel and the official medium for government propaganda, was replaced by many national and regional private television channels, whose bottom-line was profit of course. So, the role of the market as an increasingly influential force had to be reckoned with by filmmakers, who hitherto battled only the images on Doordarshan.

The thrust of the independent documentaries of the 1970s and 80s was to counter, what they saw as the government propaganda unleashed by Doordarshan. Films like *A Nannada Diary* and *Something Like a War* position their arguments *vis a vis* the state propaganda, which runs as a parallel narrative throughout the films. But the opening up of the private television industry ushered in new realities. Suddenly, a slew of high-capital entertainment and other commercial programming flooded the Indian television. As is typical in a pro-capitalist economy, the ideologies of the advertising industry, which propel the global economy, represented the hegemonic influence, which the alternative films seek to expose and counter. So, if the state represents one dominant institution of power, the market came to represent another.

Television is a little reluctant to touch something that would hit out very directly at the state. Even though satellite channels may not be directly subject to the censorship of the state, some amount of self-censorship does take place. Also, finally the market becomes the bottom line. So, the censorship of the state is probably replaced by the censorship of the market. This limits the space that the alternative can find within the mainstream (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

'Safe' issues and safe ways of looking at controversial issues' are chosen by television, which makes it imperative that alternative spaces must be created, as these documentaries do. These films, which seek to facilitate socio-political transformation in the Indian society, now incorporate a global analysis of the new economic policies. This analysis would then seek to posit an alternative ideological worldview.

Alternative dissemination

The identification of the state and the market as two of the key institutions, which feed into and sustain the hegemonic power play, brings into focus the dynamics of the dissemination of the dominant media texts produced by the state and the market. The scale of dissemination of these dominant images is what determines the reach and power they exert on the minds of the people. To forward their alternative agendas, these films need to be disseminated in way that would ensure effective persuasion.

Filmmaker Shabnam Virmani sees a small group of people in the country using film differently, trying to give life to narrowcasting.

We are using film very differently. I think there is a small group of people in the country who are giving life to a word called narrowcasting. It is a very precious kind of experience because it is actually allowing for pluralism in expression (Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, **personal** interview).

Introducing narrowcasting as one significantly different way in which alternative documentaries in India operate, Shabnam Virmani articulates what several other filmmakers feel about showing these documentaries to the people. Broadcasting is usually a **single-time** telecasting of a programme over commercial and state-run media, whose reach is tremendous in terms of numbers. Narrowcasting allows for multiple and meaningful screenings for small groups of people. Narrowcasting, however, assures the filmmaker that the viewers have seen the film, and not surfed channels or switched their

television sets off, as could be the case with a broadcast. Also the audiences are not anonymous like the audiences for a broadcast. Narrowcasting is usually spoken of in the context of the dissemination of the alternative documentary, like broadcasting normally refers to television programmes. However, while filmmakers prefer small and effective screenings for a more meaningful interaction with the audiences, they recognize the power of broadcasting to reach out larger audiences. The problem of dissemination is a very complex and remains as probably the most pressing issue to be addressed in today's context.

'Alternative' reception

The way in which audiences receive these films is also markedly different, according to filmmaker, Sarat Chandran.

The mainstream media are consumed like a meal. They are relished and are consumed mindlessly. But alternative documentaries are different. They linger in the viewer's mind long after they are watched (Sarat Chandran, filmmaker, personal interview).

This 'consumption of **mainstream**' images comes across as inferior when compared to the more attentive viewing these documentaries demand. This presumed superiority is critiqued in Chapter 7 of the thesis.

Michael Renov (1993) writes that the reception of the documentary film responds to the intellectual requirements of rationality and cognitive inquiry. The epistemological root of the terra documentary is *docere*, 'to teach' in Latin, and the corollary could be that the audience learns. And this is the basis of the argument that audiences watch documentaries differently when compared to their viewing of mainstream films.

Filmmaker Madhushree Dutta, whose film *Live in Behrampada* is analysed for this study, feels that a 'cultural illiteracy' is propagated by the state and the market,

through the bombardment of **the** audiences with stock visuals by the mass media. She opines that this media illiteracy has to do with the paucity of diversity in form and content in television programming. As a particular kind of imagery and content floods the audio-visual channels, these documentaries face the daunting task of having something different to say and also saying it differently. The differences in the scale of production and channels of dissemination, puts documentary viewing in a disadvantaged position.

Of course, the fight is not among equals. The choices available to people are directly dependent on the distribution and accessibility. Compare the reach and access of Star TV to that of our documentaries. The money involved is **different**. And there is no comparison in the scale of production and dissemination (Madhushree Dutta, filmmaker, personal interview).

This idea is clarified by filmmaker Stalin, who feels that these films could be labeled alternative, also because they are fewer in number and watched less widely. It would seem logical to assume that what is available more readily and in more quantity, is what is mainstream. And the number of alternative documentaries produced is quite insignificant numerically, and available less easily for audiences to watch.

Alternative 'politics of culture'

A cultural analysis of society is important and necessary, I think, because culture determines values, insights and prejudices of people. My films are rooted in cultures that do not exist for the mainstream society. It is the job of a filmmaker to intervene and that too with a cultural perspective. Of course, culture is also politics. I would call my films issue-based because they deal with alternatives to mainstream living (Omji John, filmmaker, personal interview).

Further differentiating between the kinds of documentaries made even within the 'alternative' tradition, the emphasis moves to the kind of analysis that society is subjected to in these documentaries. Those kinds of films, which believe in the 'reductionist, Marxist analysis of society, based on the base-superstructure mode of analysis' are not really alternative, according to filmmaker Omji John. At best they could be seen as

'common and ordinary' propaganda films, which seek to popularize or support a particular cause or struggle. There is no **totality** in that perspective and it is not an integrated world-view. Struggle-based films are different from **issue-based** films. Omji John challenges the notion of the documentary as simply a tool for countering the propaganda of the state and the market and sees this kind of '**reductionist**' analysis as excluding a holistic **world-view** with of all its complexities. If these documentaries are to provide truly alternative insights, it is important that the filmmakers hold up alternative lifestyles and value-systems for the world to see. This is possible through a cultural analysis of society. An '**alternative**' agenda would include alternative cultures, value-systems, life-styles, medicine, rituals and habits of the indigenous people, of which mainstream societies are totally unaware.

This opinion is seconded by filmmaker Shriprakash, all of whose films are made with the **adivasis**. He feels that those whom the mainstream societies consider as uneducated are, in fact, very knowledgeable. Indigenous people have sophisticated art forms and philosophies about love, relationships, nature and values. And these traditional knowledge systems need to be re-discovered for the 'mainstream' societies by these documentaries. When the need for culture-specific development initiatives are being voiced, it seems imperative that a cultural analysis be incorporated into the global thinking on development.

Much of the recent sociological and development theory has been focusing on the indigenous knowledge **banks**. Local wisdom is seen as an important tool to usher in real development at the **grassroots**. The question of indigenous knowledge assumes more importance when seen in the context of Foucault's idea (1975) that '**knowledge** and

power are integrated with one another'. So any attempt at empowering the adivasis would need to reconstruct their systems of knowledge for the elite. *Kahankar: Ahankar* is one alternative documentary that seeks to do this, as mentioned in Chapter 2.

Making a counter-point, Anand Patwardhan talks of the importance of issue-based films in a country like India, which has so much injustice and inequity". The fine line drawn between struggle-based and issue-based documentaries does not seem relevant to him. He is comfortable with the fact that his films are propaganda films (self-admittedly), which seek to counter the propaganda of the state.

Alternative realities

These are films that see beyond what you actually see, or investigating more of what you actually see. They are ways of looking into ourselves and our society, and interpreting that point of view (K.Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

These alternative documentaries are seen by Stalin as an investigation of people and society. As attempts to interpret and understand society, these films try to look beyond what one actually sees. Implicit in this understanding of documentaries, is the rigour of analysis that filmmakers bring to the everyday world in order to make sense of the obvious and taken-for-granted observations about society. Madhushree Dutta calls these films as 'protest films', just as there is protest literature and protest music. A protest against what is, and may be a protest for what ought to be, as well.

However, the term alternative itself is questioned by some of the filmmakers. And so is the implicit dichotomy it presumes. By definition, if these documentaries exist in an alternative space, logically it follows that to exist they would always need a dominant force, which they could then proceed to counteract, or they would need a problem to which they will seek to be an antidote. This literal connotation of the word 'alternative' is

a point of contention for some filmmakers, who see that **'alternative'** would always mean **'in opposition to a mainstream'**.

The danger in calling something alternative is that the problems remain. So saying that alternative is something different from existing problems, closes options. While some of the films are committed to social concerns, some actually make the problems haloed (Madhushree Dutta, **filmmaker**, personal interview).

Along the same lines, Stalin opines that while he is not comfortable with the dichotomy between mainstream and alternative, it does exist, because of the differences in the way people think. A belief that an intervention on their part will reduce the gap between the elite and disadvantaged prompts them to intervene into things around them. Stalin suggests that whatever be one's profession, social awareness and sensitivity must be ingrained in people. **And** this sensitivity itself should not be institutionalized into profession, and must seep into the consciousness of every person. Stalin believes that the dichotomy must go, so that the **'alternative'** tag does not remain restricted to a select few who are professionally trained and educated to be socially and politically correct. So while one has to accept that the dichotomy exists, its propagation itself could be one of the problems. Or, to put it differently, the endeavor must be to mainstream what is alternative **now**.

This allegation of 'exclusivity' attached to the alternative tradition needs to be critiqued. References abound in documentary theory to the ideological pedestal, which the documentary tradition and documentary makers are thought to **assume**.

The socially oriented filmmaker is thus the almighty **voice-giver** (here, in a vocalizing context that is all male), whose position of authority in the production of meaning continues to go unchallenged, skillfully masked by its righteous mission (Minh-ha, 1993:96).

Trinh T. **Min-ha** writes of challenging the status that the documentary occupies as the historically privileged domain of truth. Her critical insight could be applied to ward off any misconception that these documentaries offer truth as an alternative to the misleading mainstream media.⁷

Questioning the divide

One is not very comfortable with these totalities of mainstream and alternative. Because at one level, when you say mainstream, it is for the masses. And when you say alternative, it is for people like 'us'. So there is also inherent in that conceptualizing a kind of a division, dividing factors that need to be questioned at the same time. Looking at how these totalities are created and how audiences are created using these totalities. And how, for example, the alternative gets its reason to exist from the fact that there is a mainstream. We have been also trying to interrogate this dividing fact, which is an operational power, in the Foucauldian sense (Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

While acknowledging the presence of the mainstream-alternative divide, Jayasankar says that these totalities make him **uncomfortable**, and that accepting these totalities would mean that this divide is sustained and reinforced constantly. In a reference to Foucault's idea of 'the inhibiting effect of global and totalitarian theories' (Foucault, 1977), Jayasankar suggests that one needs to critically look at how these totalities are created and because of them, how audiences are created. Breaking down these totalities and seeking to demystify them are part of the bigger challenge, which the documentaries and the filmmakers must confront. This argument remains at the forefront of contemporary documentary theory.

Striking a middle path, Anjali Monteiro suggests that 'the lines are increasingly **getting blurred**' and that actually these categories are more a part of a continuum. While their existence could perhaps be justified a few years ago when state monopoly existed,

⁷ See Chapters 5, 6 and 7 for a more detailed discussion on realism, testimony and truth-claim in the **alternative** documentary.

now **the** mainstream and the alternative co-habit each other, especially with the advent of private television channels. She feels that increasingly many people who started off in the 'so-called alternative' are part of the mainstream and the language of the alternative has been incorporated by the mainstream media, especially the news channels. Several issues, which traditionally did not have a voice in the mainstream media, figure on private television channels.

Alternative spaces are not only created by making alternative films. Alternative spaces are also created when you get people to look, to change their relationship with the mainstream media (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

Anjali Monteiro and Jayasankar, who produce documentaries together, make a case for the need for 'alternative spaces', rather than '**alternative** films'. They are both of the opinion that making audiences aware is the most important requirement. As media educators and filmmakers, they feel that educating audiences to critically read media texts is what is real empowerment. This thinking would complement much of what is being written about documentaries in contemporary theory. The understanding is veering around to the idea that documentaries are as much a construct as any other media text. And while the notions of documentary as non-fiction are being challenged, audience empowerment could very well be the way to challenge the hegemonic power of the mainstream media, as well as to look critically at even the alternative texts.⁸

Talking of the need to empower audiences, Anjali Monteiro suggests that this would allow for the optimum use of the mainstream media, which is something that most people have access to and which occupies so much of their **viewing** time.

Why not use that material which is occupying so much of time of women or youth or whichever group, use that as a starting point for a dialogue? Why does it have to be

¹ See Chapter 8 for a detailed discussion on audience **empowerment**.

something that is **lily-white** and pure and ideologically correct? (Anjali **Monteiro**, filmmaker, personal interview)

Giving examples of mainstream media texts used to popularize alternative agendas, Jayasankar talks of a public hoarding which uses the **catch-line** of the Pepsico soft **drink** advertisement 'Yehi hai right choice, baby' to promote breast-feeding. So marrying the alternative with the mainstream sometimes gives interesting results, Anjali Monteiro points out that it also subverts the intended message, that the soft drink is not the right choice, and breast feeding is. She says that even the popular Hindi Song 'choli ke peechey kya hai...', was used in a similar campaign. So, to create alternative spaces, one must get audiences to change their relationship with the mainstream media. It is also important to understand that the prerogative of the alternative is not with the intellectual class. The definition of what is alternative, what is marginalized, and what is resistance must be loosened, so that a clearer picture emerges of the many people who struggle with alternatives and live out alternatives, in their everyday lives.

Giving a twist to the terms alternative and mainstream, filmmaker Stalin redefines them in terms of their relevance and prevalence. Subverting the use of these terms itself could be a first step in addressing these **issues**.

In any case, the issues that one is talking about are mainstream issues. I mean fashion, clothes and colours and **towns** and cities and lack of electricity in cities, are all alternate subjects actually. They are not mainstream subjects. Mainstream subjects are still caste and gender and inequities and land holdings. Those are our country's main issues (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

With reference to the Indian context, filmmaker Shriprakash feels that those who belong to mainstream India are different. And the filmmakers from urban India make films, which cater to the wants of this mainstream India. So they do not represent the real alternative. Critiquing the space that urban filmmakers, with their elite sensibilities and

‘Western’ education, occupy in the ‘alternative tradition’, Shriprakash reintroduces the alternative/mainstream dichotomy *vis a vis* the filmmaker's socio-economic location.

I am angry with the filmmakers sitting in cities. With the arrogance of making something different, they want to fight the problems of the world. May be they have good intentions. Those who belong to mainstream India are different (Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview).

This exploration of the alternative/mainstream will help to position specific works within the documentary tradition in India. The varied opinions of the filmmakers suggest that traditional boundaries are fluid, and even irrelevant. The following section, examining the agendas of the filmmakers, throws some more light on the issues introduced here.

Exploring agendas

The agendas of the filmmakers warrant a closer look, if the implications of ‘alternative’ are to be comprehensively examined. As discussed in Chapter 1, the alternative approaches towards development imply certain ideological standpoints. So, it is with the understanding that these films share the broad agenda of articulating marginalized voices, and critique the dominant thinking on development, that this study further interrogates the agendas of the filmmakers. What motivates their filmmaking and what are their preoccupations while making their films? The answers to these questions help grapple with the problematic question of intent, one of the questions that seems to dog documentary theory.

Thomas Waugh (1984) is of the opinion that the specific political positioning of the filmmaker is as important as the film. In his definition of committed documentary, he

talks of two important elements, the ideological principle and the **activist** stance of the filmmaker.

By 'commitment' I mean, firstly, a specific ideological **undertaking**, a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-economic transformation. Secondly, I mean a specific political positioning: activism or intervention in the process of change itself (Waugh, 1984:xiv).

This is an especially important point to be addressed, as the documentary often comes under severe criticism for clinging on to its ideological pedestal. Through the question of agenda, I seek to examine the motivating factors behind the filmmakers and their films, as they see it. I explore the ideological affiliations and motivations behind their films, as also the direction in which they seek to further their work.

In an attempt to demystify the making and working of a documentary, it has been said that the documentary is shot with three cameras, according to Alexander Kluge (cited in Minh-ha,1993). One, the camera in the technical sense, two, the mind of the filmmaker, and three, the generic patterns of the documentary film. Though this observation could be quite true of any cinema, its relevance to the documentary is more pertinent, because of the reality claims associated with documentary. So while fiction film is overtly fictitious, the documentary is covertly so. And this is what makes the second camera, which is the filmmaker's mind and agenda, worth investigating. While the films chosen for the study reveal themselves to be preoccupied with certain socio-political concerns, the agendas of the filmmakers, as they see it, could be explored to place their films in a larger context.

What the films reveal is echoed by the filmmakers too. For Anand Patwardhan, it is almost always a human rights agenda, as clearly evident in the film, *A Narmada Diary*, co-directed by him. Talking of the Narmada Bachao Andolan as one of the several issues

he is involved in, the thrust of the film, for him, is not so much the technical arguments of siltation and water availability, as the rights of the adivasis to be displaced.

What right do you, the government, have to be on adivasi land and throw out people from their land, without them getting anything out of it? Who are you to appropriate these natural resources without asking the people who live there? (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

The moral right of the state, seen as appropriating people's resources, is under attack in the film, while the cost-benefit analysis is secondary. The underlying agenda is also to show signs of resistance by the people, to show that alternatives are there, despite the films dealing with terrible and difficult times. The films are a natural response to situations which bother him. A similar agenda, the opinion that for too long only certain sections of the society have talked, prompts filmmaker Stalin to make his films. This is coupled with the belief that there is a need to mediate between the media and those who don't have access to it. This mediation should, however, should not be a tokenism but an effort to give those denied sections that visibility and space, and allow them to say what they think and feel. And at the same time acknowledging to oneself and in the film, that it is from a position of power that the filmmaker is seeking to facilitate this. There is a very fine line between intervention and intrusion, and these documentaries must attempt to be positive interventions. Talking of her films as a witness to contemporary India, Madhushree Dutta says her films are attempts to work out relationships with society. Though not bound to make any particular kind of film or any particular agenda, she prefers to make films related to the times she is living in. / *live in Behrampada* is an example of the fluidity of her agenda. What started off as a **film** on destruction, an investigative film, it finally became a film on life, the making of a slum. So while everyone will have a **pre-conceived** agenda, the fluidity to change is very important.

Commenting on the film, in the catalogue of IVFest, '95 (a documentary film festival held in **Thiruvananthapuram**), Madhushree Dutta says:

More than the chronology of the **violence**, people and their struggle to survive became our focus. This shift changed the image of the Behrampada people from pitiable victims to respected citizens of India.

The participatory nature of these films comes to the fore. Communication as a two way process, where the source and the receiver, the filmmaker and the subject constantly exchange roles, to facilitate a dynamic and dialogic interaction. Agendas are not rigidly enforced, instead, they are constantly created and re-created.

Clearly, this resonates with the agenda of the new social movements, which seek to voice the protests of the marginalized subjects, who are active participants in the struggle for their rights. They may range from micro-level actions at the individual and collective levels, to horizontal coalitions across the globe. As agents of change, they seek to harness countervailing power at the grassroots levels.

When the agenda is to give voice to a collective expression, it encourages a sense of ownership about the film made, says Shabnam Virmani. There is a difference between making a film, saying this is '**my**' view on a particular issue, and using the medium to give voice to a collective expression. Participation takes on a whole new meaning, where the involvement of the marginalized group extends to help conceptualize the film, write the script, or make decisions on the editing table. Though a time-consuming process, this could be achieved through may be a series of workshops or involvement of local groups over the entire filming process. Filmmaker Shabnam Virmani opines that this process is very challenging and fulfilling, because it comes with a sense of belonging. Focusing on the positive is another conscious decision.

No matter how poor or exploited or oppressed a person is, a woman is or a dalit is, I think it is wrong to perceive that **person's** reality as purely negative. Because that person survives with all kinds of resistance, all kinds of expressions that are positive and affirming (Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, personal interview).

Battling the stereotype of the passive victim has been one major concern in the shift from the Dependency theory, propounded by theorists like Andre Gunder Frank, which lays too much emphasis on the vulnerability of the disadvantaged people. New theories of 'real' development emerged which highlighted the positive aspects of participation and empowerment. And the agendas of these filmmakers bear testimony to this thinking. These thoughts resonate with the writings of Michel Foucault, who warns against a uni-dimensional notion of power, as the monolithic 'eye of power'. Foucault suggests that people offer resistance to dominant relations of power in several ways, at micro-levels. Many of the alternative documentaries, especially the films of Shabnam Virmani bear testimony to this fact.

The politics of identity remains central to this agenda. Factors like class, caste, education and geography contribute to deciding the identity. Filmmaker Shriprakash asserts that the identities of those belonging to mainstream India have been long established now, whereas the very existence of indigenous people in India is thought to be in doubt, because their culture is fast disappearing and hence their identity too, according to. Without their culture they are lost, and so their identities need to be safeguarded. All Shriprakash's films, like *Kis Ki Raksha*, *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* and *Buddha weeps in Jadugoda* are based on the adivasis who live in Jharkhand, and their sufferings. The films **therefore** would need to belong to the adivasis in very fundamental ways, to be made with, by and for them.

I make films for those who suffer . . . I wanted to merge my identity with them - the adivasis. The moral and social structures of my mainstream identity were crumbling. The questions - who am I and where am I, began to bother me. So against injustice and for my own identity, I began to make films. May be it is selfishness (Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview)

Believing that culture is also politics, **Omji John** deliberately does not film struggles, which he thinks of as the product of a reductionist, Marxist analysis of society. Preferring to intervene with a critical, cultural perspective, though the agenda is philosophically the same, it is processually different. The films are always rooted in indigenous cultures, and *seek* to educate modern societies about cultures, which do not exist for them. The tribal cultures, which have a lot to teach mainstream societies, like living in harmony with nature, are invisible to them and so should be explored and brought to the fore by films, according to Omji John. The films could be made over a long period of time, by living with and participating in the daily lives of the tribals. Omji John's opinion, if it translates into ethnographic filming, should be examined more closely, for the problems of filming the 'exotic', unfamiliar 'other' for mainstream audiences have come under scrutiny since the days of Robert Flaherty, who made the first documentary on the Eskimos.

Sarat Chandran's agenda is to re-educate people about their realities, not with a condescending attitude, but to create support groups for their own causes. He believes that rural audiences, especially, can empathize with most of these films and believe what they *see*. So watching these documentaries will re-educate them and stir them to action. His agenda as a filmmaker, which is to make films about the sufferings of the people, coexists with his agenda as a distributor, which is to take these films around to rural audiences and empower them.

The agenda to simply highlight the sufferings of a disadvantaged populace is increasingly being critiqued. A whole new debate on reflexivity and representation in the documentary came about, as a result of this critique. And the critique came to be incorporated by several filmmakers in their work. The basic concern for the marginalized came to manifest itself in several philosophically different ways. For Jayasankar, more important than the ‘**spectacular** modes of oppression’⁹ around him, is the whole process of oppression, with the filmmaker and the audiences as part of it. Interrogating ‘normality’, and implicating the filmmaker and even the audiences to question their identities is the main agenda. If the agenda is limited to only filming extreme and shocking struggles against oppression, it could end up being morally indignant and also have a shock value, which could over-simplify the issue being filmed. In fact, Jayasankar talks of critiquing the agendas themselves, which a filmmaker might profess to have.

Everyone of us is a site of tension and we have conflicting subject positions... So you need to look at the various modes in which these agendas are now being reinforced. Agendas are being constructed, agendas are being set in many ways (Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

But, are these filmmakers also committed to going beyond just interpreting the world, to help change it? Are their films a tool in an attempt to intervene in changing the world? Are they film-activists or filmmakers?

This distinction is not considered as sacrosanct by many of the filmmakers interviewed. While Anand Patwardhan dismisses the relevance of this distinction saying that ‘It doesn’t matter to me what labels people put’, Stalin wonders if the two roles can be separated at all, and what the rules are for this double existence. He suggests that the field-work involved in researching the film would probably bring the activist to the fore,

⁹ See Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion on ‘**spectacular** oppressions’.

to identify and to analyse the issue to be filmed, to try and examine the different points of view involved and how the concerned people are dealing with their realities. There is also a constant awareness that the film, when made, will be a statement on that situation and will have some kind of an impact on the situation. And there is a concern for how best to maximize the benefits for the people affected. These are the concerns of the activist. But, once in the studio, after having completed the work on the field, the filmmaker-agenda emerges. The technical aspects of making an effective film are the predominant concerns. While deliberating on the pace of the film, the music, or how the film is shaping up, the filmmaker takes over completely. Even during the recording, the concern is limited to ensuring that the tape is rolling, and has no scratches on it. But besides an occasional suggestion to the cameraperson, what the subject has to say is all engrossing, according to Stalin.

The opinion that the two roles are interchangeable and not mutually exclusive is reiterated by Anjali Monteiro and Jayasankar as well. For most filmmakers, the important thing would be not demeaning or endangering the positions of the subjects involved, for the sake of a film. While one does try to respond as a sensitive human being to situations that arise as a film progresses, there is not necessarily any long-term relationship or engagement with the issue. Sometimes, situations could be handled as they come. And maybe a link up with organizations working on the issue, or making local language versions whenever possible could help to make the film useful for those with whom it was shot.

For instance, when we were making this film YCP 97 on prison-poets, in the course of that, we got involved with one of the cases of the prisoners and then we managed to get him out of prison. Now we have not gone in as prison activists or any such thing, but we managed to get him out. He was actually acquitted by the lower court, but the state had

appealed to the High Court. So for 10 years, he was in prison and his case had not come up. Every time it came up, it was adjourned and he did not have a lawyer, he didn't have case-papers, he was in a limbo. So we managed to get hold of his papers and get somebody to stand for him. Then the case came up and he was acquitted, after 11 years in prison (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

Reconciling the two roles of filmmaker and activist, Madhushree Dutta is of the opinion that nobody is separated from activism, and refuses to compartmentalize her films. There is no restriction, self-imposed or otherwise, to limit her filmmaking to films on women or violence.

Filmmaking is my profession. The way I deal with my film is based on my experiences as an activist. To find a cinematic solution to any problem is my job (Madhushree Dutta, filmmaker, personal interview).

But for Shriprakash, the distinction between a filmmaker and a film-activist is an important one, and an explanation for the film itself. He calls himself a film-activist and not a filmmaker, for whom the content is clearly more important than the film. All his films are based on the lives of the adivasis, and just like in their lives, in the films too, there is more struggle and few distractions. And despite film not being an indigenous cultural form, Shriprakash thinks that it can be used as a tool to counter the influence of television.

Shabnam Virmani refers to the 'magical' quality of the audio-visual medium, which can impact the viewer emotionally far more than any other medium. Cinema can transport the viewer and shake one up from within. The medium is understood by audiences across socio-economic strata, unlike the print medium which calls for a minimum level of literacy. Radio too is a very people-friendly medium, but arguably the impact of powerful visuals transcends that of the aural radio. This probably is one of the main reasons why video is seen as the ideal tool in activist circles. The sense of urgency

that the video imparts lends itself well to the task of inspiring constructive action somewhere else. And also, the many creative elements that make a **film**, music, visuals, story, and script make film an exciting medium.

Omji John sees video as a tool to fight the '**satan**' on its own terms, in a reference to the allure of the television.

Video can counter the dominating influences of the mass media, by being conceptually, theoretically and morally different (Omji John, filmmaker, personal interview).

Anand Patwardhan sees these documentaries as '**making democracy**', and that whatever the problematic that a film may pose, it is better that the film exists than it does not exist. At the least, they seek to '**provide a window**' into what is happening for those who want to see. Stalin, similarly, sees these films as in some ways creating future societies. S.Sukhdev, the first filmmaker in India to marry art and activism points out:

For an artist who is aware of his social roles and responsibilities, it is his duty to use cinema as a weapon to expose the truth about his society. He must tell the poor masses that they are poor because a **handful** of exploiters take away the fruits of their labour, that nothing shall free them from the clutches of poverty, unless they revolt against this exploitation (cited in **Varma, 1998**).

The idea of the alternative documentary revealing 'truth', as proposed by Sukhdev is being critiqued now. But the spirit behind his idea, that of cinema fighting against social disparity, is what drives the alternative documentary in India till today, along with a belief that the films can make a difference. As Rajani Kothari (1988) asserts that it is communications that must expose the hypocrisy of the international rhetoric on development, and expose those mechanisms, which systematically construct hierarchies of power and domination. On the same lines, the agendas of the filmmakers interviewed envisage a transformed, egalitarian society for those people who have been denied their rights as citizens of India for so long.

CHAPTER 5: EXAMINING REPRESENTATION(S)

Representation involves one thing standing for another, an image or recorded sound standing for that from which it was “taken”...this taking is non-subtractive: the thing remains, imparting information to the representation...(Bill Nichols, 1991:149).

Bill Nichols suggests that it is useful to consider the multiple meanings of the word ‘representation’, in the context of the documentary (Nichols, 1991 :111). This chapter examines 'representation' in the alternative documentary of India in light of the three connotations of the word, as suggested by Nichols,

Representation is understood most commonly as a ‘ likeness, model or depiction’. The dynamic relationship between the observer and the observed invests meaning into a representation. There is a close physical bond between the image and its historical referent in the documentary. The visual and aural representations that a documentary offers are indexical reproductions of the 'real' world, and so are thought of as authentic testimonies of events in the historical world. The assumption that a documentary is a transparent means of seeing the world is inherent in the commonsensical understanding of the documentary. The realist style of documentary making is what roots the text in the historical world. This study problematizes realism in the alternative documentaries and views documentary realism as the catalyst that precipitates the truth claims in the documentary.

The word ‘representation’, according to the OED, would also refer to 'the action of placing of a fact etc before another or others by means of a discourse; a statement or account especially one intended to convey a particular view or impression of a matter in order to influence opinion or action'. From this perspective, the documentary can be examined as a case or argument about the historical world. The alternative

documentaries, as narratives of an alternative development paradigm, build their case around an informing logic or issue, and then place evidence before the viewer to argue their case. The films adopt distinct strategies to educate and persuade the viewer into accepting alternative world-views. Testimony in the alternative documentary is interrogated in this chapter.

Another meaning of the word 'representation', according to the OED, is 'politically representing a group or class by standing for or in place of them with the right or authority to act on their account'. The 10 alternative documentaries chosen for the study are films that seek to articulate the voices of the disenfranchised sections in Indian society. How the films go about this agenda is examined here. Important concerns like identity, systemic oppression, notion of citizenship, state propaganda, the power of a collective, and empowerment addressed in these films, are examined here.

The documentary itself is the homogenous sum total of the representations of the filmmaker. However, the representations mean anything at all only in relation to the viewer, who makes meaning(s) out of the representation. Representation involves the agency of the one who represents. And inherent in this agency is the power vested in it to make the representation. In the case of a documentary, the filmmaker is the one who represents, along with all the trappings of power – economic, social and technological, which influence the representation. In academic parlance, this power dynamics has been broadly referred to as the 'politics of representation'. The filmmaker, as the author of the text, is responsible for every representation made in the film. At every stage in the making of the film, from the conceptualization to the post-production, the filmmaker is constantly making choices. Consciously and may be unconsciously, the process of

inclusion and exclusion are being applied to every frame in the **film**. How important then is it to implicate the filmmaker in the much -critiqued role as a site of power? This is one question addressed by the study.

The agency of the audience comes into the picture to make sense of the representation in the text. A text is the site of multiple meanings, where meanings can be learned and unlearned by audiences. So a representation can take on any meaning, only in relation to its audience. Any understanding of the politics of representation, therefore, has to take into consideration the several, possible ways in which a viewer may engage with the text. So, it is also within this context that representation in the alternative documentaries is examined.

The interplay between the author, the text and the meanings that the audiences negotiate with the text through these representations, forms an important part of my study. Several interesting patterns emerge along this continuum of making and looking at a representation of the historical world in an alternative documentary. The concerns of the filmmakers, which lead them into making a particular representation and how various audiences respond to that particular representation, are juxtaposed with each other.

Documentary Realism

Definitely, all this happens. It is not simply a film. It is reality. It is truth (Satyavathi, welfare worker, responding to *When Women Unite*).

It shows the reality in those villages. And also in the cities. It is very good, especially the way untouchability is shown (Aruna, participatory **video-maker**, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

The currency of the real operates in the documentary. In the alternative documentary too, the indexical representations of the historical world is inextricably

linked to the **film**, because presenting ‘**alternative**’ realities is the bedrock on which the films are made. The duplication of the world can **never** be unproblematic, and the collapse of the sign and historical referent in the documentary is of particular concern (Renov, 1993:26). Audiences consider the sign (or indexical representation) in the **film** as ‘real’, and this invests the documentary with ‘**truth**’¹⁰.

Bill Nichols (1991) is of the opinion that realism is a style, employed in the documentary to create the illusion of transparency. Realism seeks to make a persuasive argument about the historical world. And the documentary itself is a personal point of view of the filmmaker about the historical world. Making a case for documentary realism *vis a vis* the realism of fiction, Nichols points out that realism in fiction serves to make an imaginary world seem real (prompting a suspension of disbelief by the audience). The realist style in the documentary seeks to represent for the viewer life as lived and observed everyday. It prompts the viewer to engage with the documentary world as though it is the historical world itself.

These observations about the realism in documentary seem especially true with respect to the alternative films being studied. These films, often located in a specific geographical space and seeking to capture a chronology of events related to a particular social movement, take extensive recourse to realism as a style. Peoples' struggles or social movements in the historical world are represented in several ways, depending on whether the filmmaker seeks to focus on a particular localized struggle or more to use the struggle as a case in point for a larger global level argument. In turn, the form and narrative of the films reflect this too. Covertly of course, the responses of the filmmakers

¹⁰ How audiences engage with realism in the documentary is discussed in Chapter 7. Here realism as a style is examined.

do suggest that their intended agendas for these documentaries have to do with a much **larger ideological canvas**. While *Chaliyar*, *A Narmada Diary*, *Kis Ki Raksha*, and *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* seem to be more geographically **specific**, and more like case-studies of **popular resistances**, *Live in Behrampada*, *Something Like a War*, *When Women Unite*, *Lesser Humans* and *Tu Zinda Hai* use particular examples of systematic oppression to make a broader argument.

Representation of localized, bottom-up resistances depend heavily on capturing the actual footage of the struggle on camera. *A Narmada Diary*, *Chaliyar*, *Kis Ki Raksha* and *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* are four such films, which are clearly more like real-time chronicles of mass-based social movements at the grassroots level. While not necessarily spanning a continuous length of time, the chronology of events and their place in the narrative try to impart the same sense of urgency and immediacy in the viewer, by representing the struggles as the very same chronology of events that had occurred in real time in the historical world. The rallies of the people involved in the struggle, the shots of marching feet, flying banners and the rousing speeches are very typical and clearly reveal the propagandist function of these films. The narrative is heavily dependent on the real struggle in the historical world, in content and in form. All four films appear to be narratives, which are completely rooted in the struggle, and in a sense, of the struggle, by the struggle, and for the struggle.

That realism dominates these documentaries can be easily seen, if for example one would look at only the visuals employed in these documentaries, without the audio or the subtitles. This would temporarily divorce the argument or actual content of the documentary from the text as a visual collage. And the striking similarities in the way the

films employ realism would come to the fore. If *A Narmada Diary* chronicles the struggle of the adivasi against the building of the Sardar Sarovar dam in Gujarat, *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* deals with the adivasi struggle in the Chottanagpur area against the dam construction on the Koel and Karo rivers, *Kis Ki Raksha* is a struggle by the adivasis against the decision of the State to turn their village into a firing range for military practice and *Chaliyar* is about the struggle of villagers in Kerala against the polluting Grasim factory. These films typify a particular trend in Indian documentaries, those which Omji John refers to as struggle-based documentaries. The films are rooted in specific new social movements, which are mass-based protests against a visible, authoritarian developmental project. The local populace are affected by the project, but not taken into confidence by the state. Realism seeks to 'show' how the footage is real. Testimonies are used to argue the logic of the case. How these films seek to use particular strategies to persuade through argument is dealt with later in this chapter.

Even a cursory look at the alternative documentaries would show that the concern of the filmmakers to establish their films as real-life happenings in the historical world is paramount. All the films begin with categorical statements about the specific, geographical locations, most often with the year or time when the footage was recorded. The rooting of the films in a specific, historical place is often done thorough visuals, voice-over and/or sub-titles, super-imposed on the text.

Establishment shots in the alternative documentary whether 'Domkhedi village, Maharashtra, 1994', 'Sekhoba, Gujarat border, December 1990' and 'Manibeli' in *A Narmada Diary*, or 'Bastar, Madhya Pradesh, 1990' and 'Markatola' in *Tu Zinda Hai*, seem to reassure the viewer that the sequence of events which would follow in the film

have taken place in real space **and** real time. The establishment shots include recognizable and authentic landmarks in the historical world, located in the village, town or city as indicated in the film. The market place in Raighad District in *Tu Zinda Hai*, the natural landscapes and Kursi Nama of the Jharkhand region in *Kis ki raksha* and *Addo Miyad Ulgulan*, the government buildings in *Something Like a War*, the Mumbai balloon factories in *Kahankar: Ahankar*, the drowning temple in *A Narmada Diary* and the fort in Ranpur, Gujarat in *Lesser Humans*, these are some examples of visuals used to tell the viewer that the documentaries are not a figment of the filmmakers' imagination. The visuals are used as verifiable and authentic snapshots from the real world, where **real-time** shooting of the documentary took place. This actuality element can be traced to the very origins of the documentary (see Chapter 3).

‘Basically, it is that a picture speaks a thousand words...’

When compared to reading or listening about the issue, the visuals leave a strong impact on the viewer and persuade him or her into accepting the argument put forward in the film. Nichols’s opinion that realism in the documentary seeks to persuade is borne out by these responses from the focus group.

The picturisation was very good. It made you feel that the smell was coming from the picture only (Pradeep, student of social work, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

When you read the papers, you can assume so many things. But when you are watching a film, you see. Seeing is believing, somehow (Prabhu, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*).

Video is far more effective than writing about the issues in newspapers and pamphlets. (Shanta, participatory video-maker, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

The relationship between realism and alternative documentaries seems to be a more organic one, far exceeding the notion of realism as a documentary style. This brings

to question whether this dependence of the alternative documentary on realism has to do with the 'truth-claim', which **Renov** suggests is a defining condition within the documentary discourse. The alternative documentaries abound with such visuals, which seem to tell the viewer 'this is the truth, this is not fiction'¹¹.

All the alternative documentaries chosen for the study reveal their preoccupation, in varying degrees, with capturing what can be called 'live footage' from the scene of action, as it were. In films like *Chaliyar*, *Kis Ki Raksha*, *A Narmada Diary*, *Addo Miyad Ulgulan*, *I live in Behrampada* and parts of *Something like a War*, the grainy footage, the hand-held quality of the images and the jerky frames are so excessively used, that it goes far beyond being used as a style. The technical quality of some of these visuals seems to be making a political point. The ideologies of the filmmakers seem to demand the use of realism in the films.

Several strategies serve to heighten the impression of the filmmaker's presence at the scene of action and capturing of the footage as it is. Whether as overt reflexivity on the part of the filmmaker or as an attempt to impart a sense of urgency to the viewer, the notion of filmmaker-in-the-film needs to be looked at critically.

The filmmaker-in-the-film is used alongside several other strategies in the documentary. In fact, from starting off as a reflexive element in films, it has evolved into a particular style of documentary making. In *A Narmada Diary*, the interviewer (may be the filmmaker) is visible or his presence is discernible many times in the film. The jerky camera movements in the office of the minister for environment, the spontaneous footage of the police atrocities on the NBA rally, or when the cameraperson is trying to follow

¹¹ The 'truth claim' operative in documentary desire is examined in chapter 7.

the World Bank president into a hotel and is being stopped by the security personnel there, these add a sense of urgency to the film. Realism at a certain level brings a sense of immediacy, fraught with uncertainties and anxieties. The viewer is unsure of what is going to happen next, and a momentum is built up, leading to a sense of climax. Of course it testifies to the authenticity of the footage too, as seen in the focus-group response given **below**.

It [the film] really educated me. To me it is authentic, I wasn't educated about all this. It is educative, very educative. ..**the** focus of the film is very good. It takes you down to the real people who are suffering. Or enjoying, what ever. The government is enjoying and the people are suffering whatever it is, it puts you really at the grassroots level. It takes you right into the problem (Suresh, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*).

Something Like a War, which can be called an **exposé** in parts, impacts tremendously with its **hard-hitting**, candid footage of the inhuman family planning camps set up for the rural women. This emerges as one of the most powerful narrative threads in the film. Realism (in fact, realisms) in its starkest form is used to bring home the message - the flawed population policies of the state and its allies.

The film was intended to create more of an outrage, intended to embarrass certain state **agencies**...**the** agenda was very clear. The target approach had to stop...**the** mass-contact programme by the state was funded by the World Bank and it was a very violent introduction. The film had to make visible... the state-sponsored violence against women (Deepa Dhanraj, filmmaker on her film *Something Like a War*, personal interview).

The horror that the film seems to want to evoke is effectively brought about by its use of realism. And in this process, realism transcends from being just a style to a much more organic part of the filmmakers' agenda.

This year I have done more than 2000 operations. Even in school classes, and in **Zilla** Parishad halls, in college rooms, I could do these operations, especially this particular operation. It is so easy, simple and **economical**.

These words of Dr.Mehta, male gynecologist, and several other similar utterances accompany horrifying visuals and audio tracks in **Dhanraj's** film. Visibly poor, **rural** women, with numbers tagged on their foreheads, with calloused feet, parched lips and exhausted looks are groaning with pain. The candid footage of these operations in process, conducted in mass numbers on masses of poor women, are accompanied by sound bytes from Dr Mehta. The juxtaposing of the **oxymoronic** video and audio tracks, seems like two realisms **simultaneously** experienced, and so makes it far more **hard-hitting**. This 'live' footage of Dr.Mehta, casually explaining his work and his objectives, provoked strong responses from a group of feminists, to which the **film** was shown.

It was not just a documentary surely. One actually sees the atrocities that were happening in the medical camps. Especially when that woman says 'Bastard, get off my body', I thought that was so evocative, no? One actually sees the plight in which these women are. They are clutching their stomachs, they can't walk two paces, and here is the doctor saying that they can be discharged in two hours, and how there are really no side-effects and how non-invasive it is. I think the sheer contrast of that might speak (**Sharmila**, feminist, responding to *Something Like a War*).

Something Like a War also offers several other parallel narratives in the film. The workshop with the rural women and some members of the urban, filming crew is the other strong narrative juxtaposed with Dr Mehta's camps. The workshop comes across as the culmination of a series of interactions with the rural women, about fertility, reproductive rights, sexuality and the body. The focus group for this **film**, a group of feminists working with women and on women's issues, immediately identified with the workshop as something that they were familiar with.

They were a discerning audience, a learned audience. They knew what they were talking about. They knew their body, and were obviously not people who have been picked up, they have had conversations about it before. They were a politicized group. Obviously a politicized group (**Sharmila**, feminist, responding to *Something Like a War*),

Even the songs they were singing were feminist
(Bindu, feminist, responding to *Something Like a War*).

However, it is a matter for speculation whether a non-feminist audience would have identified this realism. The workshop logically seems to appear as real, to someone familiar with the strategies for sensitization, which women's groups might adopt. So, the visuals of the workshop might not seem so 'real' to other kinds of audiences. For one unfamiliar with the concept of sensitization or women's workshops, the fact that a mixed group of rural and urban women sitting freely together and talking about taboo subjects like fertility and sexuality in such an uninhibited manner might seem incredible.

The realism of an alternative docu-drama would be different. A **docu-drama** would re-construct a happening in the historical world, in most cases. Of the documentaries being studied, *When Women Unite: the story of an uprising* is a docu-drama. While at the heart of this docu-drama lies a story, very like a fiction film, the philosophy behind creating this fiction is totally different. The agenda remains that of giving a voice to the marginalized, in this case the rural women of Nellore. The drama or the story follows a script, has enhanced visual effects like planned lighting, well-framed shots **and** an elaborate audio-track. *When Women Unite* is a story of a spontaneous struggle against attack by rural women from 22 villages in Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh. It is the weaving together of several stories of oppression and revolt. The actual shooting was in Nellore, the actors and actresses were from the movement, as are the 'hero and heroine and villain', the script was written along with the women in the struggle and the songs were those written for the movement. And realism here is the true-to-life images enacted by the actual participants of the struggle in the historical world. The nuances of daily living in the villages of Nellore are part of the **film**, be it the

celebration of the Sankranthi festival, little children **playing-house**, or the cock-fight, which is a common feature in those villages of Nellore. The documentary makes it very clear that it is a true story being **re-acted** in the film. It is mentioned at the beginning of the **film** that “**This** story is not fiction. It brings together **real-life** experiences of 22 villages of Nellore **district**”. The drama is overtly a make-believe representation, with a hero, heroine, villains, humour, a story, a happy ending, all akin to a fiction film. The narrative of the drama is interspersed with documentary footage like interviews, rallies and analysis. How real is this realism for audiences?

...many rural women who saw this film in its Hyderabad premiere wanted to meet **Kotamma** [the protagonist in the film] at the end of it. They also asked me how I could have been in so many different places at the same time during the movement. In other words, they perceived the dramatic sections of the film as documentary (Virmani, 2000: 11).

I screened the film for a group of rural women of Pastapur village in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh, which was chosen as one of the focus groups for the study. The women were all agricultural workers (see Chapter 2 for a **demographic** profile of the focus groups). Their responses corroborate what Shabnam Virmani says in her article. Throughout the screening, the women were totally engrossed with the drama in the film, and identified totally with the characters in the film. Emotional responses like “ poor Kotamma, how she is suffering¹¹, to outrage and incredulity at the scene when a drunk rapes his own daughter, blinded by arrack, and kills his wife when she tries to intervene. Many of the respondents laughed at the cock-fight and at the scene when the women of the village participate in the Sankranthi games like Kabaddi, after prohibition has been imposed by the state, and their lives are free from the evils of drunkenness. The empathy

the women felt for the protagonists in the drama **typified** their opinion that they considered the drama as not a story, but real.

Everything they show is true. Even in our village we faced a lot of problems because of arrack. Then we went and met the sarpanch, just like they did in the film (**Lakshamma**, agricultural worker, responding to *When Women Unite*).

Members of another focus group, all involved in educating marginalized communities in Hyderabad, like the children of the basti (slum) dwellers or working in the leprosy colony were also of the opinion, that the film *When Women Unite* depicted reality.

Maybe those sitting in grand dining rooms in Hyderabad or in front of the dressing table combing their hair may think it is false. But we know it is true. They may dismiss it as insignificant, but it is very significant for us, because we see it day and night (Meherunnisa, welfare worker, responding to *When Women Unite*).

This observation by Meherunnisa sparks off the important debate of not just what is real, but the important question of what is real for whom?, explored in Chapter 7 of the thesis.

Realism as a style is used in K.Stalin's *Lesser Humans*, in ways different from the way other films use it. Realism is used to lend authenticity to testimony, which is central to the film. The film uses realism more to assert the authenticity of its argument and less as a witness to an urgent, unfolding struggle to be captured on frame. One reason for this could be that the film itself is a story of exploitation of the bhangis, human scavengers in Gujarat. It spans across the history of their oppression and transcends temporal and geographical specificity.

In Shabnam Virmani's *Tu Zinda Hai*, the realism is symbolic and dramatized to reconstruct some experiences of the women **activists** profiled in the film. The black-and-white (symbolizing the past) slow motion of three young girls (Shraddha, one of the

protagonists, and her childhood friends), secretly learning to ride a bicycle , accompanied by a powerful sound track is one such dramatic reconstruction of **Shraddha's 'real'** childhood memory, which she recounts.

This sequence invests '**liberation**' into the symbol of cycling (mobility), and links **Shraddha's** wish to study and her refusal of marriage, with her assertion of identity derived outside of home and matrimony, through her work with the tribals of Dhar district (**Virmani**, 2000:12).

Realism in the alternative documentaries serves as a kind of visual evidence to the argument being put forth by the films. The power of the camera to capture situations in the historical world is exploited, and the visuals are recognizably part of the audience's shared and lived experiences. Realism in the alternative documentary, along with testimony, is instrumental in encouraging the viewer to look at the documentary as truth.

Testimony and the alternative documentary

Testimony in the alternative documentary complements what realism effectively sets out to establish. The idea of the documentary as an argument about the historical world is borne out by the use of testimony to argue its case.

Testimony or evidence used to advance a particular argument is presented in the alternative documentary in several ways. The personal interview is probably the most common strategy used to put forward convincing arguments. This is personal testimony. '**Expert**' testimony is also extensively used, where credible sources from the real world are presented as irrefutable evidence to argue the case. Newspaper clippings, footage from television channels, statistics from official reports, archival history, dictionaries, etc are some of the expert sources. Interviews with '**experts**' are also used, where opinions of 'scholarship' are presented as evidence for the argument, like interviews with scientists

and academics. And of course, as discussed above, documentary realism is used effectively as visual evidence to provide the authentic picture. The voice-over is perhaps the most unambiguous of all strategies to put forward the arguments of the filmmaker.

Interestingly, testimony is stood on its head, when the filmmaker seeks to subvert dominant hegemonic strategies, mostly of the state. Many of the films chosen for the study subvert the use of testimony by presenting contradicting testimonies or by using sarcasm or irony to **off-set** prevalent propaganda, again especially that of the state. And even more interestingly, several of these films resort to the same, '**suspect**' sources to argue their case!

Personal testimonies of 'real' people are the building blocks of alternative documentaries. As films give voice to the marginalized sections of society, it would follow that these people speak in the films. Talking of the interview format as being indispensable to these films, Anand Patwardhan says that short of inviting these marginalized sections of society home, the next best thing would be to interview them and record what they have to say. Personal testimony as a tool of persuasion has been long associated with propaganda and advertising. In the alternative documentaries chosen for the study, testimonies **from** the marginalized people, in the form of interviews, are used extensively to offer firsthand evidence of the systematic oppression they have undergone. The interviews are their personal stories and experiences, articulated powerfully by the disadvantaged people. These interviews connect very well with the **viewer**, and prove that the subalterns can speak, if one tries to listen.

The **'talking-heads'** format in the documentary, which is a **result** of excessive inter-cutting from one interview to another, is a manifestation of the dependence of the alternative documentary on personal interviews.

/ live in Behrampada, Addo Miyad Ulgulan, Kis Ki Raksha and *Chaliyar* are films that use the personal interview extensively to tell the viewer about the issue being dealt with. The people affected by the situation, like the Muslim and the Hindu **slum-dwellers** in the Behrampada slum, the adivasis being displaced because of **state-sponsored** developmental projects, and the people affected by the pollution of the Chaliyar river speak out through the interview. They narrate their personal experiences of the problems they face, be it the communal frenzy, the lop-sided development policies of the government or the environmental degradation by the **Grasim** factory. These interviews, aided by real-life visuals, form the main narrative of the films, and every interview forms a building block along which the narrative proceeds. Technically, the interviewee maintains an eye-level contact with the camera, and is framed in an extreme close-up, close up, or mid-shot. Headroom is minimal, and the effect is one of a personal conversation.

The interviews in *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* and *Kis Ki Raksha*, both films by Shriprakash, are the testimonies of the adivasis about their lives and problems. Often, interesting glimpses into their social and personal lives are provided through the interviews. And while being rooted in a localized struggle, the films deal with larger issues of identity and social equity for the adivasis, and the interviews reflect this. The interviews build the straightforward narrative, and the emphasis is more on the spoken word than on the visuals in both the films.

Kis Ki Raksha is the story of the adivasis' struggle against the government's proposal to convert their lands into a firing range for the army. And this story is told by the adivasis themselves. Amidst **true-to-life** footage of the Fagua festival of song and dance and other rituals, shots of the surrounding landscape, and their traditional occupations like basket weaving, interviews are used to introduce their resistance to the building of a firing range in their land that would dislocate them. The testimonies of the adivasis span a wide range of emotional, political and economic arguments.

I am not going to leave this land of my fore-fathers. Where shall I go? (old adivasi man in *Kis Ki Raksha*)

The total number of us to be displaced is not clear, however according to a report by Brigadier IJ Kumar in a press meet in Ranchi, 27,853 people would be displaced...non-government sources say the figure would be between 1.3 to 1.5 lakh people (Peter Minz of Jan Sangharsh Samithi in *Kis Ki Raksha*).

...**maximum** we will be given 4,000 to 5,000 rupees. That will be spent on food itself. Nowadays we at least need 40,000 to 50,000 to build a house...we will have no land, no forest, no house, where will we live? **In** the name of **dams** and factories, so many people have been displaced in this region. We will also die like those people if we are shifted (adivasi in *Kis Ki Raksha*).

Interviews like these reveal the problems faced by the adivasis, beyond just the specific issue dealt with by the film. And the credibility of what is being said is enhanced by the fact that the adivasi himself or herself is saying it, within his or her real geographical and social context. In *Addo Miyad Ulgulan*, directed by Shriprakash again, the struggle is by a different people against a different oppression. The adivasis fight against the building of the **Koel-Karo** dam in Jharkhand. In this film too, the interviews with the adivasis are an organic part of the film's narrative.

Tu Zinda Hai by Shabnam Virmani deals with the issue of the empowerment of women. Women activists of **Ekta** Parishad, a mass-based network of people's

organizations are profiled in the film, which in the words of the **filmmaker**, explores **their** evolving ‘**self-perceptions** and identities as **women**’, while they try to organize villagers and tribals against oppressive structures. This film relies extensively on the personal testimony more than on true-to-life realistic visuals. The interviews of the profiled activists are lengthy and central to the type of narrative (personal stories) that the film adopts. But the narrative is propped up by a voice-over track in the film. The oral narration links the various interviews into a cohesive film, and also provides an interpretative commentary on the background and facts concerning the Ekta Parishad. The voice-over is a parallel voice, complementary to the interviews.

Lesser Humans uses the close-up and extreme close-up shots to interview the bhangis, the scavengers who are among the poorest of the poor in India. This for Stalin, the director, is an ideological choice.

For too long, the same people have talked. I wanted to give as much space as possible for the bhangis to speak, in close-up with no distractions for the viewers. They had to listen to what the bhangis were saying (Stalin.K, filmmaker, personal interview).

Particularly horrifying in *Lesser Humans* are the close-up shots of human excreta, shown repeatedly throughout the film. And for Stalin this was a very conscious decision, to keep the shock value till the end. His intention was to keep reminding the audience that this is the work that the bhangis do, ‘don’t forget’. And several responses from the three focus groups that were shown this film bear this out.

When the film first shows it, I could not even see it. I would avert my eyes. But the film forces you to see it. I think it forces you to think that if you cant even see it, imagine how they must feel doing it...this film dares to go very close (Vinaya, student of communication, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

In the film it is very clearly shown what the plight of these bhangis is. The interviews establish that these people are suffering in every way, and the various elements involved in this. Right from the panchayat to what the government has done for the last so many

years, everything is very well shown in the film. The discrimination that exists, their oppression...(Shanta, participatory video-maker, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

For the viewer, the documentary world is the real world and the interviews are true testimonies of people. So, while not all the audiences accept uncritically whatever the testimonies present as true, they definitely believe it to be information, which hitherto he/she did not have access to.

I think there are people like me who were not even aware that such a community and practice existed. It [the film] was presenting things to people who need to know that such a thing exists...as information
(Smitha, student of social work, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

Alongside the in-depth interviews with the bhangis, *Lesser Humans* uses 'expert' testimonies from various sources to further its argument. The film opens with a definition of a scavenger according to the Chambers 20th Century Edition dictionary.

Scavenger, one who cleans the streets; a person or apparatus that removes waste; an animal that feeds on garbage: one who deals or delights in filth (Chambers, 20th Century Dictionary).

The definition is super-imposed as a visual, against an audio track of retching and coughing, before cutting to a shot of pigs and finally a woman carrying human excreta in a basket on her hips. The definition, along with the audio track, establishes the mood of the film. It is an expert testimony of the definition of a scavenger, and also indicates the inhuman lumping together of a sanitation worker, waste-cleaning equipment and an animal which dwells in filth. So, the Chambers dictionary here becomes an expert, at once knowledgeable and insensitive. This subverted use of testimony was not observed by any of the respondents of the three focus groups, who reacted to the film. This could be indicative of the fact audiences may not respond to subtle strategies like sarcasm and irony in the films. Sometimes the viewer may not respond to a particular nuance, like in

the definition. But at some other times, subverted testimony may in fact be seen as testimony by the viewer. This is evident in some of the responses to *A Narmada Diary* and *When Women Unite*.

They did show the other point of view, the Nagarjuna Sagar... what the **government** is saying (Sashi, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*).

This was a response to an observation by one member of the group that the **film** showed only one point of view. The attempt made by the film to subvert the testimony presented by the state was seen as testimony itself, in fact, as an attempt at objectivity. Whereas the official propaganda of the state about the Sardar Sarovar Dam is used in the film to bring out the hollowness of the government's claims about big dams.

Maybe some audiences don't get the point. I have shown the government propaganda being done. I have shown it throughout the film (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

While responding to *When Women Unite*, two women in the group reacted negatively to a line in the film, which is intended to be an empowering or emancipatory thought. They did not offer the preferred reading of that particular line. In the film, the protagonist, Kotamma faints from hunger, waiting for her drunkard husband to come home to eat. Her neighbour and friend, who is also harassed by a drunkard husband, chides her saying ' why do you starve yourself? Starve your husband instead. Look at me, I eat so well...'. The intended meaning of this line would be to make the point to women not to subject themselves to further misery, and instead to take care of themselves. However, two rural women in the focus group at Pastapur, reacted strongly to this line calling the speaker '*a rakshasi*'(demoness) for starving her husband.

Look at her, shameless woman. She eats nicely and does not give her husband food (Lakshamma, agricultural worker, responding to *When Women Unite*).

And bad enough she is doing it, she is also asking **Kotamma** to be like that. *Rakshasi!* (**Narasamma**, agricultural worker, responding to *When Women Unite*).

Such oppositional readings to the films were offered by different respondents to other films as well. While it was a computer engineer in the USA who misread the irony in *A Narmada Diary*, it was two rural women who completely missed out on an intended meaning in *When Women Unite*. This indicates that education or social location need not be the decisive parameters that can determine the unraveling of signifiers and strategies in media texts.

The documentary realism in *Kahankar:Ahankar* operates in a very subtle manner through testimony. Some visuals, like shots of the Warlis who have migrated to Mumbai, and work in balloon factories or the landscape surrounding the Warli settlements and some interviews with the Warlis are real shots which root the film in the historical world. However, the Warlis' stories which are narrated orally and depicted through the Warli paintings, form the main narrative of the film. The stories and paintings are a testimony to that Warli history which does not find a place in the official records that are visible to and accepted as legitimate by the mainstream sections in society. The concern central to *Kahankar:Ahankar*, as mentioned at the start of the film is the existence of this parallel history, which is as real and as true as the official history, but a conflicting version. "To the Warlis, these stories represent their histories, their world view,..."

By juxtaposing official histories with the Warli's stories, the film attempts to provoke the viewer into thinking about these oral, unwritten histories of the Warlis. The sheer contrasting of what is accepted historical evidence with subaltern history brings home the story of the suppression of some histories and the privileging of others. The

notion of testimony itself is subverted in the film, by this juxtaposing of conflicting evidence. The **Warli's** stories can be seen **as** testimonies which have withstood the onslaught of several '**outsiders**' –like the Marathas, the Portuguese, the English and their oppressive histories. The stories can be seen as personal testimonies about the stories of their oppression. And furthermore, the stories reveal glimpses of local wisdom and socio-cultural nuances of the **Warli** tribe much more than any ethnographic study might reveal.

The archival material or the official evidence in *Kahankar: Ahankar*, is testimony subverted by conflict, but the irony is subtle and not as aggressive as in *Something Like a War* and *A Narmada Diary*. In all three films, multiple narratives are at work and so are multiple strategies of persuasion. However, *Kahankar: Ahankar* operates at a more subtle level, nudging the viewer towards critiquing history, and recognize the 'wise' voices from the grassroots. *Something Like a War* and *A Narmada Diary* are hard-hitting statements against the propaganda of the state. Their agenda to critique state policy is very direct and employs aggressive strategies of irony and caricature. In their attempts to subvert the propaganda of the state, the films constantly show excerpts from state-sponsored propaganda and then go on to subvert their value as evidence.

Montages from newspapers, magazines and committee reports are also a commonly used '**expert**' testimony. Almost all the films chosen for the study use headlines from newspapers to varying extents, to present '**facts**'. Shots of newspapers carrying references to a particular struggle or more elaborately (like in *When Women Unite* or *Lesser Humans*), where these reports play a more central role in the struggle. In *When Women Unite*, which is a **docu-drama**, the documentary part is fortified by the use of testimony, to argue the case being built by the drama. *Lesser Humans* uses various

reports by various governments down the years to make a statement about the inhuman practice of scavenging and the apathy of the state towards this section of its citizens. In one of the most powerful sequences in the film, realism and testimony (subverted) is used to bring out the horror of human scavenging and the mockery of state action against it. The inter-cutting between a bhangi woman cleaning a row of latrines and the chronological sequence of the utterances of the state are juxtaposed.

The sequence begins with the woman, cleaning a dry latrine with her nose covered, asking the filmmaker 'why have you come here?', a telling statement about the intrusive and unwanted presence of the filmmaker, deliberately retained in the film to problematize the filmmaker's location *vis a vis* the bhangis and the audience. As she cleans one latrine, very explicitly shown, the first official action of the government of independent India is revealed.

In 1947 on the 15th of October, a bill was introduced in parliament. In 1949, a central committee recommended the abolishing of human scavenging. In 1957, another committee recommended that the practice be abolished, not later than the Third Five-Year plan...and so on. Each piece of information about government inaction is juxtaposed with the visual of the woman cleaning yet another latrine, a very symbolic rejoinder to government policy and a telling statement about the plight of the bhangis, 'Nothing has changed in seven generations' says a bhangi woman, and this sequence is a testimony to this truth. Using the voice-over to sum up this state of neglect, the commentary says that 'after four enquiries, 634 recommendations, 5 bans and one rehabilitation programme, the government has failed to provide a real economic alternative to the bhangis'.

Representation in the documentary, as mentioned before, can be seen as presenting a fact in order to influence opinion. The alternative documentary takes recourse to realism and testimony to present evidence to the viewer. As Bill Nichols asks, the question is not so much whether what is shown is evidence or not? The important question is 'evidence of what'? And as can be seen, all these films offer evidence to reveal an unequal development, which has not improved the lot of certain disenfranchised sections of society. The alternative documentaries chosen for the study seek to articulate, self-avowedly, these marginalized voices.

Narratives of an unequal development

They attempt to act, to intervene – whether as gut-level calls to immediate, localized action, or as more cerebral essays in long-term, global analysis. They are all works of art, but they are not merely works of art... if films are to be instrumental in the process of change, they must be made not only about people directly implicated in change, but with and for these people as well (Waugh, 1984:xiii).

Thomas Waugh's idea of committed documentary can serve as a starting point from which I seek to problematize representation in the alternative films as '**politically** representing a group or class by standing for or in place of them with the right or authority to act on their account'. All the 10 films chosen for this study have as their focus the marginalized sections of Indian society, disadvantaged on account of their caste, class, gender or environmentally unsustainable development practices. These documentaries seek to give voice to the problems, struggles and aspirations of these people. According to Waugh (1984:xiv), committed documentaries adhere to the goal of a 'radical socio-political transformation', which would mean challenging the existing, inherited power structures of domination such as caste, gender and class. By challenging

the status quo, these documentaries, **explicitly or** implicitly, call for an egalitarian society and a transformation of the socio- political **and** economic milieu.

In all the 10 films, an attempt has been made to articulate an alternative paradigm of development that would redress the shortcomings of the dominant paradigm of development. They highlight the failure of the **economics-centered**, ahistorical developmental model to improve the lot of those at the end of the developmental chain. Drawing attention to '**an** endless list of those disenfranchised under patriarchal capitalism' (Waugh, 1984: xiii), Thomas Waugh says that the traditional left movements and the progressive mass movements of the seventies and eighties in the West have focused on the plight of women, minorities, environmental and peace groups, immigrants, the handicapped and homosexual groups as some of those who have been sidelined in the march of progress as envisioned by the western, capitalistic model of development.

The films seek to give voice to the adivasis, rural women, minority slum-dwellers, and the bhangis in India, who are economically, socially and politically some of the most disadvantaged sections of Indian society. In many cases, these people are doubly disadvantaged, suffering from caste, class and gender inequities. A close look at the documentaries will reveal their **pre-occupation** with the consistent denial of power to **certain** sections of Indian society.

All the films raise pertinent issues of a lop-sided development, within a historical and philosophical framework. The issues raised bear global and local ramifications for a more holistic and sustainable developmental paradigm. Philosophically rooted in the alternative development paradigm, the films highlight the ideas of empowerment,

sustainable development, local knowledge and participation (as explained in chapter 1). The notion of people as active agents in their path to progress, rather than as objects or victims of oppression is highlighted in the films in varying **degrees**. The politics of a collective identity over individual action is also an important issue thrown up by the films.

Three of the alternative documentaries in the study are an attempt to give a voice to the adivasis, who have long been denied a voice by mainstream India in general and **the media in particular**. *A Narmada Diary*, *Kis Ki Raksha* and *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* deal with the struggle of various adivasi groups across the country against huge developmental undertakings of the state, which would result in the mass displacement of the adivasis and threaten their very **existence**. Living on the periphery of Indian society and denied access to economic, political and social power, the adivasis have most usually been the hardest hit by the big developmental projects, like dams, power projects and heavy industries, undertaken by the state in the last five decades of independence. Displacement, economic and cultural deprivation are some of the serious consequences of these big developmental projects (Baviskar,1995). *A Narmada Diary* is the struggle of the adivasis in Gujarat against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam across the Narmada river, *Kis Ki Raksha* is the struggle of the adivasis against the construction of a firing range in Netrahat, Bihar and *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* is the story of an adivasi uprising against the construction of a big dam across the Koel-Karo river in the Chota Nagpur area. These films do not reduce the disenfranchised adivasis to pitiable victims of the flawed policies of the state. Instead, they show the adivasis to be a resilient people, who know of the injustices perpetuated against them and want to fight against them. Shriprakash's film *Kis*

Ki Raksha is a success story about an adivasi struggle against the government's move to convert their land into a firing range in Netrahat, Bihar. The adivasis started a satyagraha movement against their displacement, and eventually won.

My films deal with difficult and terrible times, but the films themselves are not depressing. They are always signs of resistance of people participating. They show what alternatives are there (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

The adivasis in India, as the name suggests, are the original inhabitants of India. They are tribals, spread across the country, with each tribe having a distinct cultural identity. Among the most disadvantaged sections of the Indian society, the adivasis maintain an organic and symbiotic relationship with nature. The duality between nature and the human, so much part of the modern thought does not exist, and their lives and livelihoods are intertwined with their ecology. Today the adivasis struggle for their dignity and identity, under the onslaught of an ahistorical and acultural modernity paradigm, with its emphasis on heavy industries and ecologically unsustainable development. And the three films reflect the havoc being played out in their lives at every level be it economic, cultural or emotional. The films show how their very identity and existence becomes threatened because of displacement. Once displaced, the adivasis are forced to work as menial labourers and are forced to live in slums. As the films show, the adivasis are aware of how important it is for them to retain their identity.

The basic element of a tribe is its organizational structure. Once that structure is removed, the countdown for their exile begins. Being organically linked with their land and forests, if they are disturbed, they become like fish out of water. Their culture gets disturbed (Bernard Minz of the Jan Sangharsh Samithi in *Kis Ki Raksha*).

After the HEC (Heavy Engineering Corporation), only a few were given jobs. The majority is jobless even today. **Ill-clad**, they pull rickshaws on the streets of Ranchi. Look at the condition of **women** and children, they are rag pickers today. They collect refuses of the HEC for a living. The fashionable hotels, motels and **lodges...whom** are they there for? Our tribal girls are sold there. Unemployed tribal girls are lured into the

flesh trade. If we are displaced, we too will end up in the flesh trade (adivasi woman in *Addo Miyad Ulgulan*).

The question of 'development for whom?'⁵ is being asked by several scholars in the field. Are the adivasis treated as 'citizens' in the true sense of the term, or are they only called upon to make 'sacrifices' for the nation? The denial of rights to the adivasis is addressed by them in the films.

Can they [the government] explain why some gain so much and we lose? Is the state blind? Why didn't they ask us, adivasis? We too have a right. We live here. The government is in the cities. We have protected this land for generations. The Satpura range, the forests belong to our fore-fathers. Why should we leave? Don't we have the right to live? (adivasi woman in *A Narmada Diary*)

These multitude of voices from the adivasis reveals a history of their synergy with nature, and also a history of oppression spanning several generations. And they know of their marginalization by mainstream India and their victimization in the name of development. All the interviews in the films show that the adivasis are not an ignorant lot who are unaware of the oppression to which they are being subjected.

In democracy, citizens are supposed to be rulers. For our development, so much destruction is done. But the irony is that we don't get any benefits, nor is it real progress...Till now we have been supporting this due to our patriotic feelings. Now it has started questioning our own existence, hence we are forced to stop this (Madho Bhagat of Dharti Raksha Vahini in *Kis Ki Raksha*).

In a way starkly different from the above-mentioned films, *Kahankar: Ahankar* is a film about the Warlis, an adivasi community in Maharashtra. It is not a struggle-based film, rooted in a specific mass movement. However, *Kahankar: Ahankar* (Storymaker:Storytaker) is a film in which the Warlis speak through their stories, through their paintings, through the conflicting 'official' versions of their history by the outsider, and through the philosophy of the filmmakers. The opinion that the history of colonial

India has been based on the **official** British records because of the inaccessibility to other non-official versions is not considered tenable by post-colonial historians. The prevalent view is that non-official sources are available in abundance and easily **accessible**, but these sources need to be recognized as **'legitimate'** by official history. *Kahankar:Ahankar* is an attempt to do just that.

Proposing the notion of multiple histories, rather than a monolithic history, the **film** presents the Warli stories as a testimony of their knowledge and wisdom, and their version of what, why and how things were in the past and are in the present. The film attempts to critique the outsider's stories about the Warlis and **'to read between the lines, as the stories themselves do'**, as the film proposes in the beginning.

The film begins with Kahankar and Ahankar going deep into the forest, and getting deeply immersed in their stories, and the stories unfold. At the end of the film, their wives go looking for them and eventually find their bones. Now who was Kahankar and who was Ahankar? The village head asks for their bones to be immersed in water. The bones of Kahankar, the **storymaker** who gave, were light and floated up. The bones of Ahankar, the **storytaker** who took, were heavy and sank to the bottom. The ending of the film is very powerful and raises several questions of appropriation and exploitation.

The Marathas, the **Portugese**, the British and the native settlers, all encroached on the lives and spaces of the Warlis, and obliterated their stories and wisdom. And the stories reveal this. With reference to one of the Warli stories, *The Rat'*, Anjali **Monteiro** acknowledges that they (the filmmakers) are rats with a camera too, trying to appropriate the Warli stories and paintings for their own use, and this responsibility cannot be abdicated. Like the male rat in the story conquers the adivasi woman, the outsider-

colonizer colonizes the Warlis, and the privileged filmmaker and audiences constitute them as 'objects of enquiry, objects of **curiosity**', according to Jayasankar.

The **context** in which the film was made was that **we** got the stories and the paintings about the Warlis and we thought about the process, why are we making this film about them and for whom? We wanted to violate this classical ethnographic enterprise of making films about them for us... How do we do this? Why do we want to bring these stories of these Warlis, at the end of the day you say '**how cute**', 'how **fantastic**', '**how profound**', and then you go away. So we thought we will make a film about us as well. Or looking at the interface of what we are and what they **are**...it kind of occupies the uneasy space between these. It is neither kahankar nor ahankar...If you looked at the film, what we have constructed is first of all this relationship or the space between them and us. And towards the end we have also looked at the relationships of power that exist among that society itself. Looking at the gender relations of **power**...To the west, we are also stories. The Indian people. We are stories. But we have stories about these people, and they have stories about us, about themselves as well. One is looking at this inverted pyramid of relationships of power...(Jayasankar.K.P, filmmaker, personal interview).

While challenging the notion of a history, the film also tackles one of the most relevant issues in social sciences theory, that of knowledge. Wignaraja (1989) says that modern knowledge 'distorts and is exclusive, and hence undemocratic', and it is indigenous knowledge systems that help to conceptualize culture-specific and alternative paradigms of development. The Warlis' stories reveal a wealth of local knowledge and wisdom, and the Warli is the 'indigenous intellectual' who knows. Replete with rich symbolism and humour, the stories unveil local wisdom which include several ideas, assumed to be modern, like feminism, empowerment, and a knowledge of the exploitative practices of the elite. Two of the six stories are described here to exemplify the spirit of the film.

In 'The Rat', the universal euphemism for a traitor, the history of a systemic subjugation of the adivasis is revealed. ' .. .the rat with a thorn in its tail, the rat with the sickle, the rat with the vegetables, the rat with the bullock became the rat with the adivasi's wife', a

telling story of how the outsider with a lack, a deficiency (a thorn), begged for help initially and then pretending to do the adivasis a favour, exploited them and finally ended up owning the adivasi woman. In 'The Headgear', the **Warli** man, insensitive to the grueling routine of his wife, realizes his mistake after switching roles with her for a **day**. The story ends very humourously, when the man ends up using his loin cloth as a headgear, when at dusk, he finally takes lunch for his wife, to the field, after trying to finish all the chores which she normally would finish in half the time!

All the six stories in the film, 'Mahadev and Ganga **Gauri**'; 'The Rat'; '**Jam**, the God of death'; 'The Headgear'; 'Thirty-six nakhras' and '**Kansari**' are oral histories of the oppression, the culture and society of the Warlis. The local wisdom of the Warlis, with its experiential learning and intuitive insights, is highlighted in the film.

The rapidly deteriorating environment of the earth has emerged as one dominant concern since the 1970s. Global warming, excessive deforestation, an alarming rise in the use of non-biodegradable materials like plastics and the possible extinction of several species of animals are all problems looming large in the minds of peoples across the globe. The notion of a sustainable development came to be articulated since the early 70s, which called for a holistic and eco-friendly paradigm of development, which opposed the modernization project of big and destructive developmental projects like **dams**, factories etc which resulted in loss of arable land and clean water and air. The films mentioned above deal with the issue of environment as well, while talking about the human rights of the adivasis. *Chaliyar* investigates the issue of the pollution of the **eponymous** river in Kerala, due to the effluence from the **Grasim** factory located on the river bank. *Chaliyar* talks of the impact of the pollution on the common populace and traces the history of the

people's movement against the Grasim factory for the last 36 years. The film probes the nexus between the state and the market, whose connivance puts the lives of the common people into danger. The film shows that the incidence of cancer is very high among the people living in the surroundings of the polluted river. The film is a powerful attempt at counter-propaganda for the closure of the factory, and it attempts to achieve this by its heavy dependence on realism.

Chaliyar has been used extensively to counter the propaganda of the state and the factory-owner, by focusing on the people's struggle against the Grasim factory. As in the other documentaries discussed, *Chaliyar* deals with the environmental and human rights aspects of the issue. The film gives voice to a struggle against a very visible and potent manifestation (a big factory) of a flawed developmental model of mindless industrialization.

Lesser Humans is about the bhangis in Gujarat, the scavengers, who as late as 1997 (when the film was made), still carried human excreta on the heads, from dry latrines. Ela Bhat, a social activist, says in the film that 'The bhangis are the poorest of the poor. They are the slaves of the slaves.'

In *Lesser Humans*, I was very angry. I was feeling very helpless. And I tried to retain that anger and helplessness for the film for one year... Because these people had been in the margins for a very long time, I was so sure that I would not frame the people, the community in long shots. I decided that in my film, they would be in close-ups. For two reasons, one, I am giving them that space, that tight space to talk and two when you are in close-up, it is difficult to avoid, for an audience. You have to listen to them. The agenda for me is I am going to show you what is happening, you have come to see my film for one hour and you better sit and see what is happening. That agenda was there, that frustration was there, that emphasis was there (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

Stalin, the director of *Lesser Humans* explains his rationale behind making the film and including several close-up shots of human excreta and the bhangis at work,

cleaning the latrines. The visuals shock and repulse, and shake **the viewer out** of **any** complacency. The extreme **close-ups** do not allow for any distraction outside the frame, and forces the viewer to confront the ugly reality of the **bhangi's** profession. During **the** screenings, the focus groups cringed with repulsion, and kept trying to look away from the television monitor, only to glance back to **find** similar visuals. So, by constantly throwing the horrific visuals, in tight frame, at the viewer the **film** tries to collapse the distance between the audience and the offensive profession of the bhangis. 'I would be sad if it has ceased to shock. Because that was not the intention. The intention was to keep the shock on till the end', says filmmaker Stalin. And most of the responses of the members of the three focus groups who were shown the film coincide with what Stalin set out to do.

It really hits the audience very hard. They could not just watch some parts of it. At some particular shots, people just turned away their faces. It was very effective. This brings home the reality, that when we can't even see the bhangis doing their job in a film, imagine them actually doing it (Darshana, participatory video-maker, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

The three focus groups who saw this film, the **social** work students, the women empowered for self-representation, and the students of development communication, respond with shock and disgust at the plight of the bhangis, except for one respondent who called the film '**manipulation**'. But the shock-value that the filmmaker wanted to retain throughout the film seems to have worked with the audiences.

When the film first shows it, I could not even see it. I would avert my eyes. But the film forces you to see it. I think it forces you to think that if you cannot even see it, imagine how they must feel doing it...this film dares to go very close (Vinaya, student of communication, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

This work is very **inhuman** and the film conveys this very effectively. It is such a dirty work that we can't even see it in a film. After seeing it once or twice we are

shocked...this is the primary aim of the film according to me (Manimala, student of social work, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

The film identifies caste as the main reason behind the systematic and generational oppression of the bhangis. In an incisive insight into how entrenched the notion of caste is, the film has an interview with an upper-caste woman who states very categorically that 'Each does what is assigned to them –the shepherd, the carpenter, the Bhangi. Each one must be proud of their **status**'. A statement that is as cruel as the profession itself, the film seems to say. Statements in the film like 'They want us to remain bhangis and never come improve', 'Our kids must do it next' show that the bhangis are aware of this caste-based cruelty. The film shows that the spectre of untouchability on a large and systemic scale haunts them everyday. The bhangis are treated as untouchables even by other scheduled castes.

The film highlights the duality of caste and gender oppression to make a case for the bhangi women as doubly oppressed and doubly silenced. They are dalits and thus marginalized socio- economically and culturally, and being women are subject to gender-based inequities and subordination.

A bhangi man in the film says of his wife 'She refused to do the work. I called up her brother and he put things straight for her...God knows how she does it, but we have to eat. I live like a king' and the complicity of her brother and husband, two bhangi men, ensured that she did this inhuman work. The woman says 'I hated it, but got used to it anyway. We clean kids, men smoke beedis and roam around'.

Lesser Humans is a hard-hitting film about the sordid reality of human scavengers, whose profession is shorn of even basic human dignity. As one respondent put it 'There can be no alternative viewpoint. No human being should do a job like this'.

Challenging the hegemonic notions of gender as an inherited structure of domination is one dominant concern of these films. All the 10 films give space and agency to women, in a world where an increasingly chauvinistic patriarchy tries to assert a supremacy at every **level**. Especially so for several women filmmakers like Deepa Dhanraj and Shabnam **Virmani**, whose films *Something Like a War*, *Tu Zinda Hai* and *When Women Unite* address the issue of **women's** rights and struggle in its many manifestations.

My work is very **linked** to the woman question. Not only the issue of human rights, but one step further, about how **patriarchy** operates and what is the women's **experience**...very broadly, very consistently it is '**women**'. Because once you start seeing society through the prism of patriarchy or caste or **class**, nothing is the same again. You will bring that question into anything you do. It's like a dye, you will be coloured by it...whatever issue I take up, it cannot be de-linked. It will always be foregrounded (Deepa Dhanraj, filmmaker, **personal** interview).

Something Like a War is a powerful voice about state-sponsored violence against women in the name of family planning. Completely denied her right to her body and fertility, the woman in India, more so the socially and economically disadvantaged rural woman, bears the brunt of a ruthless state policy and multinational agencies whose agendas are suspect. In the film, Dr Mehta stands for the dominant rhetoric of the state - 'a small family is a happy family'. His ideology, like that of the state, is instrumental in furthering repressive, anti-women policies. And the film shows all this very starkly. Alongside this narrative, is an interaction between rural women and the filmmaker, where issues of female sexuality and reproductive rights are discussed at length, interspersed with a lot of humour. The contrast between the rural women '**extremely** vocal and who know what they want' (Uma, Feminist, focus group), and similar women in the camps who are just statistics in a family planning camp, works very well for the viewer.

Shabnam Virmani (2001) writes of her films as a part and product of the **women's** movement in India, and her work as a response to '**women's** need to articulate, nourish and defend an identity that imbues their lives with meaning¹. The underlying belief is that video is a very powerful tool that can expose women to the actions of women struggling elsewhere and contribute in some way to the larger agenda of women's empowerment and the power of collective action.

For example, a powerful grassroots movement against liquor in Andhra Pradesh, in which women challenged the government, exposed the political economy of liquor, claimed public space in a **dramatic** and assertive manner and took collective action to deal with domestic violence and poverty. There was an active curiosity amongst women's groups in Gujarat and other Northern states, when they heard about this movement –to know more, to find out how rural women like them could have done such a **thing...that** was the impulse with which we produced a film on it (Virmani, 2000:7).

The two focus groups who responded to *When Women Unite*, identified totally with the women in the film, with a complete lack of skepticism or caution. Relating their experiences with the struggle against alcohol, the group of women agricultural workers from **Pastapur**, as well as the group of welfare workers from Hyderabad, connected with the film very fundamentally with the narrative of the film.

They say a woman is **Shakti**, the Goddess of strength, but whether divine or not, it is women who have the strength to change and reform **society**. while atchign the film, we also felt we are aprt of the struggle. This documentary must be shown in places where it can bring about a positive change (**Meherunissa**, welfare worker, responding to *When Women Unite*).

Shabnam Virmani's *Tu Zinda Hai* chronicles the experiences of women activists of Ekta Parishad, a mass-based women's organization in Madhya Pradesh. And both the films frame the women as strong and active agents involved in the process of their empowerment. The films are participatory in that they are rooted in the local, specific

organizations that deal directly with the women of the area. These films have been distributed widely to various women's groups and NGOs across the country.

For Madhushree Dutta however, the 'woman' question is not always central to her film. Her emphasis is also on rejecting the idea of people as victims, similar to thinking in the new social movements that people are not passive onlookers or victims, but active agents in creating spaces for themselves.

Basically, I am a filmmaker. I am not bound to make a particular kind of film. While / *Live in Behrampada* is what I call a war film, my next film *Memories of Fear* is about growing up as a girl. It is a **docu-drama**. The next film I have planned is about a 12th century saint in Karnataka called Mahadevi Akka. I make films on anything which interests me. It need not have to be a film on women or violence.

In / *live in Behrampada*, more than the chronology of the violence, people and their struggle to survive became our focus. This shift changed the image of the Behrampada people from pitiable victims to respected citizens of India (Madhushree Dutta, filmmaker, personal interview).

Her film / *Live in Behrampada* is a film about a Muslim slum in Mumbai. The film gives voice to the residents of a much-maligned slum in Mumbai, Behrampada. The opening sequence of the film shows how people talk about it as an evil place and something from which everybody must keep away. The film, which started off as an investigation into the Mumbai communal riots, takes the camera to the people who have been living in Behrampada for the last 50-60 years, and puts forward their experiences and perceptions about the slum. The early settlers talk about how there was initially only marshy land and nothing else, and how they slowly built small huts, and over a period of time it became the colony it is today. Interviews with both the Muslims and Hindus who live there, reveal that though predominantly a Muslim area, there has been a peaceful co-existence between them. If there has been a Hindu paan-shop owner living there for many decades, there is a Muslim who gave up his life trying to save a temple.

I showed this film to a group of graduate college students, who were members of a right-wing, pro-Hindu **students'** organization. The group also included one Muslim member. All the responses from the focus group show that the group saw the film as a commendable effort which exposed the nexus between politicians and businessmen. Many members of the group did not see the issue as a communal problem, and they **all** insisted that without the interference of the politicians, Hindus and Muslims would **live** together in peace. However, one student said that it is the lack of trust between the Muslims and Hindus which the politicians seek to exploit.

There is a political hand involved. There is no harmony between Hindus and Muslims, that is why anybody can come and light a fire between them, and then there is fighting. The main thing is that no one believes in the other (Srinivas, right-wing student, responding to *I Live in Behrampada*).

Hindus and Muslims live together peacefully, but everyone talks as if Hindus keep killing Muslims and Muslims keep killing Hindus. There is nothing to it. Only big businessmen and industrialists are getting together and doing this, so that they can get the slum removed and build huge offices or a five-star hotel... The communal reasons are simply created, land is the real **issue**...Also it is the maulanas and the pundits who brainwash people, they must be stopped (Anwar, right-wing student, responding to / *Live in Behrampada*)

The 10 films in my study seek to address the neglect and repression faced by several disenfranchised groups, who have remained at the margin of India's development initiatives. The underlying factors of caste, religion, class and gender, which have systematically subjugated these people have been explored in each of these films. The hegemonic power of the state-market polarity that actively contributes to their non-development are laid bare in the films. The fact that after more than five decades of independence, some people are denied even basic human dignity, and basic necessities in life is reason enough to take technology and media for them to articulate their voices.

Their identities are being effaced by denying them space and a voice in this saturated world of cliched images streaming from cinema-halls and television.

It is important to understand these films as **bottom-up** efforts in development communication, but to also critique several issues like self-representation, objectivity and reflexivity if their agenda of persuasion should be effective. The ethics of representation in these films need to be looked at critically, notwithstanding the larger agenda with which they are made. Romanticizing these films or placing them on an **ideological** high horse would defeat the very purpose they wish to serve. The next chapter addresses the question of ethics and aesthetics in the alternative documentaries in India. Reconciling the larger agenda of these films within specific problematics of representation is necessary for a comprehensive critique of the alternative documentary in India.

CHAPTER 6: THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF REPRESENTATION

The question of representation in the alternative documentaries of India throws up some important concerns. This study broadly categorizes these concerns as issues of ethics and issues of **aesthetics**. Any examination of the ethics in representation would need to address several issues like representation of the ‘**other**’, self-representation, location of the filmmaker, and the question of reflexivity in the alternative documentaries. The issue of aesthetics in the alternative documentary is related to reconciling form and content, which, in turn, manifests itself as the filmmaker/film-activist dichotomy. These concerns are explored in the study through the responses of the filmmakers and audiences.

Representing the ‘other’

The questions pertaining to the ethics of representation arise from looking at the alternative documentary as politically representing the marginalized sections of Indian society, with the right or authority to act on their behalf, as discussed earlier. By assuming the mantle of a spokesperson for the disadvantaged, the alternative documentary in India comes under a critical scrutiny and needs to clarify its position on the contentious issue of representing the ‘**other**’.

Representation has been the subject of much inquiry in the fields of literary, political, and cultural theory. Ethnography emerged as a method, which claimed to scientifically observe and record the lives and cultures of ‘**primitive**’ races. Indigenous and often ‘exotic’ tribes, **un-influenced** by **modern** lifestyles, were the focus of ethnographic research. Anthropology, a **discipline** focused on studying people, was

referred to as the **'eldest daughter of colonialism'** by Jean Rouch (cited in Jayasankar and Monteiro, 2001), and this implied that exploitation is inherent in the anthropological quest of **'knowing'** the other. These modes of gathering knowledge about the **'other'** have come to be critically interrogated over the past few decades (Said, 1978; Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 1989). The notion of the third eye or the objective gaze, which can scientifically observe and document reality, is no longer tenable.

It is in this context that the documentary, whose origins were rooted in its ability to dispassionately and objectively capture **'reality out there'**, came under scrutiny as well. The ethnographic underpinnings of the documentary are very easy to deduce, from the first attempt made by Robert Flaherty to film the Inuit Eskimo in his *Nanook of the North*. The exotic **'other'** was filmed for the audiences back home. And this pre-occupation is clearly evident even today, although in the alternative documentaries chosen for the study **'exotic'** could be substituted with **'marginalized'**. And more often than not, it is this **'other-ness'**, which complicates the process of representation even more.

The **'other'** in the alternative documentary manifests itself in a myriad of ways, and in complex forms. The duality between the **'us'** and the **'them'** gets reiterated in many ways, be it in the text or at the level of the filmmaker or the audience. Stereotypes are perpetuated in many of the alternative documentaries, as can be seen from the responses of the filmmakers and audiences interviewed for the study. The problems of the filmmakers stem from their efforts to represent reality. In seeking to re-present indexical images from the **'real'** world, the filmmaker is caught between not doctoring unpleasant truths about the world for the sake of the film, and not reinforcing stereotypes. The issue

of representing problems in the historical world hangs, therefore, as a double-edged sword over the filmmaker,

Un-Reifying Spectacular Oppressions

To give you a very common example, in many of this social awareness advertising, this husband comes and beats up his wife. It is a very spectacular figure, which is like a stereotype. The feeling that it fills in me as an audience is that 'yeah, they do it in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, but I don't, we don't oppress our women or oppress our children'. What I forget is the fact that there are very civilized modes of oppressing our children or your wife. You don't have to get drunk and beat up your wife, but there are very, many subtle ways in which you can do it. But what it tells me is that sense of respectability and honour. I fee! good. It insulates me in many ways. It immunizes me in many ways. But if I did point out very subtle modes, then it is threatening...(K.P.Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

The camera is not some kind of a mirror that can bring these spectacular oppressions to light. So I think, the question is one of the politics of representation so to speak, and how is one bringing these so-called spectacular oppressions to people, and is one implicating oneself in the process and is one implicating the kinds of audiences that would be seeing this. Or is it being shown as something that happens somewhere else to some other people and about which we should be very morally indignant about? (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

Many struggle-based documentaries seem to revolve around some 'spectacular oppressions'. Several of the alternative documentaries examined for this study deal with visible uprisings of the marginalized people against a very visible oppression. Audiences whose life-situations are represented in these films can relate to the portrayal of life, while the middle-class or elite audiences may consider the same situations to be far-fetched and the locales to be as imaginary as those in a feature film.¹²

Bill Nichols writes that just as a feature film creates an imaginary world of fantasy for the viewer, the documentary creates a 'gaze' into the historical world (Nichols, 1991). The idea of 'spectacular oppression' can be examined in this context. If

¹² Chapter 7 discusses **how** different audiences engage with the alternative documentary.

the alternative documentary provides a 'gaze'¹ into a very visible oppression, then the 'privileged' viewer will engage with the film from a position of 'the fly on the wall', not in any way implicating himself or herself in the systemic process of unequal development. The cinematic strategies used in the alternative films that could privilege the elite viewer, are critiqued here.

Cautioning against 'throwing the baby with the bathwater', Jayasankar clarifies that such films also must be made as many of these extreme and visible oppressions do exist. But it is important not to reinforce the feeling of other-ness of the oppressed, which the filmmaker or the audience may be lulled into doing. In a discussion on representing the 'other', Jayasankar makes a pertinent observation that the more 'spectacular' the oppression being filmed, the more likely that the audiences might not empathize with the oppression. And the more likely it is that the images may be reduced to stereotypes. Many responses, especially from the 'urban' audiences bear out this argument. For instance, a group of computer engineers in the USA, who responded to Patwardhan's *A Narmada Diary*, tended to reinforce and reproduce the 'otherness' of the adivasis in the film. Their reading of the adivasis is totally oppositional to the filmmaker's agenda. The adivasi is constructed as an uneducated, emotional and naïve human being. As a victim of state apathy, the adivasi is thought of as incapable of making a rational decision, and so ill-equipped to know what is right for him/her as an individual and for the nation at large.

Even after 50 years of independence, still people are there in India who do not know how to read and write. So they don't understand anything. So they stick to what their instinct says. They are **emotional**. 'Yeah, I am emotional to my land. It is my right. My forefathers did something and we are just doing what they are doing.' See, it's like almost a blind faith. They just follow because they are not educated. They just don't know what is going on. So it is our government's failure... you just don't go and tell things to people who don't know the **ABCD** of **water**...for himself, he will think only **that** 'oh, there is plenty of water for my daily ablutions and washing. Why do we need a

dam? You know they **can't** think beyond a point. They **can't** think beyond because their environment itself is small, limited. Maybe to a few people, kilometers maybe. Beyond that they cannot think. So if you encroach in their two kilometers or whatever, they feel 'oh, somebody is coming and grabbing our land.' (Prabhu, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*),

The adivasis are constructed by the computer engineers as passive people, lacking in agency. One respondent even suggests that the resistance to the **dam** is not a spontaneous movement, but an unthinking following of someone they perceive as a leader.

They are just going on building the dam and the people don't even know what they are doing. These adivasis are uneducated. They don't know what is happening. They are just following one individual, **Medha Patkar**. Whatever she says is right... If probably an educated lot were staying in that area... then probably you being educated can weigh the pros and cons and say yes or no. But here you have a set of people who don't even know what is happening there. All they know is how to protect their homes (Suresh, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*)

These responses reflect attitudes that may have existed prior to the screening of the documentary, and which the film reiterates for them. The '**binarisms** of colonial discourse like self-other, **civilized-native, us-them**' (JanMohamed,1995), are re-articulated by these computer engineers, as an oppositional reading of the text.

K.Stalin's *Lesser Humans*, which exposes the sordid livelihood of the bhangis, is another example where the otherness emerges sharply, not so much in the way the bhangis look or speak (as is the case with the adivasis), but in the perception of their profession, human scavenging. The shock of watching people actually cleaning human excreta with their bare hands, especially in the close-up shots, not only brings home the cruelty of their profession and their historical oppression, but it also starkly draws the division between 'us' the elite and 'them' the down-trodden. The responses from the focus groups who were shown this **film** reveal that the status of the filmmaker as the elite

'other' is also very prominent in the film, and this is something that Stalin, the director of the film acknowledges as well.

The issue was very, very **stark...there** is no way I could have put myself into the film. There is no **way**. Because I am not that people. I can only identify with their hurt and emotions and all that. I am an outsider, and I have retained that (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview)

The focus group discussions reveal that opinion is divided about who the target audience is for the alternative documentaries. Some respondents perceive the marginalized '**other**' as the intended audience, while an almost equal number of them categorically state that the target audience is the elite in India, especially the policy makers and politicians. A third opinion emerges that the films are made for all kinds of audiences, an opinion seconded by the filmmakers too. An example about this difference in perception can be observed from these responses across and within the three groups to whom *Lesser Humans* was screened – students of social work, participatory video-makers, and students of development communication. They also include the rationale that the respondents provided for their opinion.

Now, this kind of film should be made for them, because something can happen then. A social mutiny can happen, so that it can eradicate the whole thing. But that didn't happen. It was not made for them. It was made for people like us who are educated, not for people who are working like them. They [the bhangis] should know the rationale behind making such a documentary. They should come up with solutions. A revolution can take place here also, if knowledge can be imparted to them about their exploitation. But I think the creamy, educated mass was the target here (Pradeep, student of social work, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

No point in showing the film to the bhangis. What is the benefit? Show it to others who can help them overcome their difficulties. So that their lives can improve (**Leela Ben**, participatory video-maker, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

The film is for those who don't do this work, and who don't understand the agony of doing this. And for those who wonder, how can any human being do this dirty **work...the bhangis** already know their agony. What is the point in making the film for them? (Manimala, student of social work, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

There is no use showing it to audiences simply. Especially those who live in comfort and have clean sanitary facilities. They will only exclaim 'how dirty, how **dirty**...how do these people do such **work**?' and no solution will come out of it.

This film brings home the reality, that when we can't even see the **bhangis** doing their job in a **film**, imagine them actually doing it. So it is very important to go and show this cassette to the policy-makers again and again. Because the people who do **this** work and the people from whom we want to demand their rights...make them sit together and show this cassette. Then it will be more **effective** (Darshana, woman **engaged** in self-representation, responding to *Lesser Humans*),

These differences in perception persist because audiences are different. The stakes involved are different for different kinds of audiences. So those techniques in the alternative documentary that would serve to implicate a privileged audience, may be unsuccessful in trying to connect with those people about and for whom the film is made. Here, it would suffice to point out that the audience constructs the 'other' *a propos* to itself and the subjects of the alternative documentary. The audience as 'us' or 'them' depends on who the audience is. While the agricultural workers of Pastapur completely identify with the poor, rural women of the villages of Nellore who launch an anti-arrack movement, the computer engineers in the USA talk of the 'emotional and uneducated' adivasi as different from their 'rational and educated' selves.

Sociologically, this difference in the construction of the 'other' can be seen as 'an expose of the euro-centric universalism' which assumes the superiority of what is 'rational' West, and the inferiority of the 'emotional' East (Barry,1995).ⁱⁱ

Caricature in the alternative documentary

Anjali Monteiro and K.P.Jayasankar (1996) talk of how the alternative documentary envisages a flow of power from centralized and identifiable sources like the state, market, the elite etc, all of which, therefore are cast as the 'villains' in the film.

These Villains' oppress the marginalized people, who are constituted as 'homogenous,

cohesive communities'. The alternative documentaries posit an unambiguous dichotomy between the 'good (poor) guys' and the 'bad (elite) guys'. This simplistic and two-dimensional representation allows for larger-than-life caricatures, not dissimilar to those in feature films. At best, this caricaturing is naive and romanticizes the 'victims', and at worst, it would result in the film doing exactly the opposite of what it sets out to do. While the alternative documentary sets out to critique dominant notions of development for the viewer, the caricatures either allow the sympathetic viewer to escape the onus of feeling implicated in this unequal development or provoke the unsympathetic viewer into dismissing the film as a grossly biased, anti-state rhetoric. These two responses from the focus group interviews illustrate this point.

You don't sympathise with the brutal guy, do you? Here the government is the brutal guy. You don't sympathise with the government. I will never, ever give even one handful of my land to the government, because they are the worst guys (Suresh, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*).

It is an elitist film. The film tries to show that there is this group of people called the bhangis, who do this work. And then there is some government bashing. That is it (Ravi, FG3, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

The lack of complexity in representation in the alternative documentaries chosen for the study needs to be interrogated. With the exception of *Kahankar: Ahankar*, all the other films resort to painting the issue **black-or-white**, in varying degrees. *Tu Zinda Hai* and *When Women Unite* are 'feel-good' success stories of rural women, who fight the tag of victim and fight for their rights, and filmmaker Shabnam Virmani acknowledges this.

There are complexities, there are problems. Definitely our films have been consciously feel-good, keeping the end-use in mind. But this can be critiqued. I think I myself am beginning to critique this view. I want to make films that make you feel good without necessarily ignoring the uncomfortable questions. I feel a need to take the rose-tinted spectacles off without wanting to be grim and only focusing on the negative. I always

focus on the positive because no matter how poor or exploited or oppressed a person is, that person survives with all kinds of resistance, all kinds of expressions that are positive and affirming (Shabnam **Virmani**, filmmaker, personal interview).

The lack of complexity manifests in different ways in *A Narmada Diary*, where the adivasis come across as a homogenous, simple group of like-minded people. There is absolutely no tension in the construction of the adivasis or any hint that there exists any other opinion amongst them about the dam. And it is the same in Shriprakash's films, *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* and *Kis Ki Raksha*, where the adivasis come across as stereotypical, 'good' victims who are trying to battle their oppressors. Edward Said (1978) writes of how the 'other' is represented as a homogenous mass, rather than as individuals, which reinforces their difference from 'us'. In *Something Like A War*, this kind of homogenizing of the rural women is problematized by one of the focus group respondents.

All the women in the group had problems with contraception, all of them. I am not saying it should be an objective film or that both sides of the picture must be presented. But there should be an argument. What I am saying is that the sampling is such that all the women sitting around were saying how contraceptives were terrible, etc...but there is not a single woman who says 'no, I have not had a problem' (Sharmila, feminist, responding to *Something Like a War*).

Also, in *Something Like a War*, the difference between the rural women being filmed and the urban women interviewed gets reiterated in the text going by the way the women are differently framed. The way the camera shoots middle class, educated women, who are also victims of a cruel population-control policy, and how it frames poor, rural women who are victims of the same thing, erects the difference between the 'us' and 'them' quite easily. The urban, empowered women are framed individually or with their husbands, in a conventional mid-close up shot, with the right amount of headroom. The interviews are non-intrusive and the maintain requisite distance

and respect for the speaking **subject**. But the rural, poor women are captured either through candid camera or in group shots (like that of the Lambadas). Many times the camera invades the private '**space**' of the poor women, even showing irrelevant shots like calloused feet, and intrusive shots like the women vomiting. Whereas, the **middle-class** woman would only '**say**' in her interview that nausea was one side effect. It seems inconceivable that she would let the filmmaker show vomiting in the film,.

The power dynamics inherent in the politics of framing are revealed. The question to be asked is whether the elite would '**allow**' themselves and their problems to be represented on film, in the same way in which the filmmaker shoots the marginalized people, with or without their consent. Several other sequences in *Something Like a War* provoke this question. For instance, the shot of the sari of a poor woman being taken off her body in the family planning camp by a male medical assistant in the middle of a room full of people, is shown **explicitly**. The scene effectively conveys the de-humanizing indignities the poor women are subjected to in the family planning camps. But it also remains that the only reason the filmmaker has been able to shoot the scene so explicitly, and obviously without the permission of the woman, is for precisely the same reason, that the woman is poor, and helpless and cannot object to being represented that way. One of the respondents in fact, read a very different, positive meaning into this scene.

The emotional appeal of the film is very useful. In fact, in some scenes, like where the woman's sari is taken off and she is led inside, is somewhat similar to a rape scene in a popular Hindi **film**. maybe that kind of analogy is deliberately introduced for audiences like this [management professionals and policy makers] (Rekha, feminist, responding to *Something Like a War*)

But the question of consent that I seek to raise is not so much why the filmmaker put in the scene or whether it worked for the audiences. Did that woman have

a choice to allow, or not allow, herself to be represented like that in the film? Does the filmmaker also, like the state, end up depicting the woman as a poor, nameless, faceless human being? I suggest that this aspect of representation in the alternative documentary needs to be addressed in future research, taking into account how the marginalized feel about being represented in a certain way. Films like *Lesser Humans*, *Chaliyar*, and *A Narmada Diary* too reveal some intrusive sequences, dubious in the means used in the films (representation) to justify their end (which might be effective persuasion).

In contrast, the films by Shabnam Virmani reveal a more 'democratic framing'¹³, where an IAS officer and an illiterate, rural woman are both framed with equal care and **deliberation**. In terms of lighting, headroom, and camera shot, the space for the marginalized people is very well-defined in the film, and when they speak, the viewer is not distracted by anything else in the frame. It is not to suggest that Virmani does not provide the context within which these people survive. Technically and visually, however, her frames do not reproduce the socio-economic hierarchy of the different players in the films.

In all the documentaries screened for the focus groups, one very distinct 'villain' emerges in the form of the state, and occasionally the market or figures of authority (like the husband, the liquor baron, etc) responsible for the oppression. 'I am constantly looking for heroes and heroines, while editing a documentary', says filmmaker Stalin. That the filmmaker will choose the more articulate and expressive among the adivasis or the bhangis or the slum dwellers is an almost filmic inevitability. All editing is a process of putting together one hour of film from several hours of actual footage shot, and it is the

¹³ A discussion with Dr. Vinod Pavarala influenced this analysis of Shabnam Virmani's films.

filmmaker who is responsible for the finished product. However, in the context of the politics of representation and within the context of the anti-establishment agenda of the filmmakers, the construction of the villainous '**other**' assumes great importance. The audiences' perceptions of these '**villians**' reveal very fundamental ways in which the audiences engage in implicating themselves *vis a vis* the film.

The members of all the nine focus groups in this study denounce the state as the chief perpetrator of oppression against the disenfranchised people who are the focus of these films. The anti-state sentiment itself does not come as a surprise because traditionally, it is the state that is considered as the mainstay of all hegemony perpetuated in society. Bella Mody (1991) asserts that it is those in power '**who** have access to and use repressive state apparatus' like the police, legal system, educational institutions and media, to co-opt the people into maintaining the status quo. However, the glib responses of the focus groups while voicing their anti-state rhetoric need to be looked into closely, as this could be directly related to the issue of representation in these films.

Some of the anti-state rhetoric by the focus groups are given below to bring home the point that the audiences see the state as the all-powerful oppressor.

Like they showed in the film, the government invited the Birlas to set up the plant. For the government, the profit comes first, and the people last.

We can accept that pollution is a part and part of industrialization, but the apathy of the government towards its citizens is appalling. They must provide safety measures.

As usual, the government is **hand-in-glove** with the businessmen, what else will happen? The people get looted in the **process**.

(responses by environmental scientists to *Chaliyar*)

We even had a minister who didn't even know what he was doing. He is the minister for environment. You ask him the conversion of a hectare he wouldn't even know that. As they show, India is being governed by some stupid politicians.

Our government has failed completely. Even after 50 years of independence, still people are there in India who don't know how to read and write.

What about our politicians, who are making many more thousands of crores. You have like hawala, fodder, even a chaddi scam is there, right? They are making millions out of it. They have no right to even talk about development if these things are going to happen.

The government has to attract investors, OK? And they just messed it up. **That's** what this movie is **showing**.

(responses by computer engineers to *A Narmada Diary*)

I think all this is the work of political parties to keep their vote-bank. They are creating all the unrest. It is not a Hindu-Muslim problem.

Politicians and builders create arson like **bomb-blasts** to clear the slum. They want to acquire the land to build hotels and **industries**.

(responses from the right-wing students to *I Live in Behrampada*)

Foucault (1977) critiques this notion of the 'panoptic' state as the omni-present, omni-potent and monolithic center of power. The state 'maintains surveillance, not by physical force or intimidation, but by the power of its discursive practices, which circulates through the body politic'. Power operates through multiple discourses and multi-tiered power relations in the family, school, or workplace (Barry, 1995:175). This critique needs to be incorporated into the alternative documentary, if its agenda includes the un-masking of the mechanisms of oppression.

While the state is often the sole Villain' like in *Kis Ki Raksha* and *Addo Miyad Ulgulan*, sometimes it has an institutionalized accomplice in the form of industrialists, police, the fourth estate, the family, men or even the World Bank. Correspondingly, the perception of the 'guilty' other by the audiences is **different**. To drive home a point about the 'callous rich' or 'insensitive elite', some of the films construct larger-than-life 'villains', besides the state, who come across as ruthless oppressors. Some glaring examples of such caricatures are provided below.

In *A Narmada Diary*, the World Bank president, (who had refused to meet a delegation of the adivasis earlier in the day), is shown to be attending a fashion show in a

five-star hotel The camera follows him there, and tries to force an **entry** into the hotel, despite protests from the staff. While understandably the World Bank chief is a figurehead of the oppressive establishment, the film coerces the viewer into believing that attending a fashion show amounts to callousness! The filmmaker forces a huge drama onto the audience in the process. In the words of Anjali Monteiro and K.P.Jayasankar (1996), the filmmaker tries to play an ‘**intrepid** detective’ who exposes the machinations of oppression to an unknowing public. Testifying to the presence of the filmmaker at a hostile scene, this sequence tries to hoist onto the viewer a truth-claim, coupled with a feeling of urgency.

However, in an interesting mix of preferred and oppositional readings by the audience, the group of computer engineers in the USA, who responded to this film, read this sequence in an interesting way. The exchange from the focus group discussion is reproduced below to illustrate this point.

Phani: Who the hell cares about what Preston [World Bank president] does in his personal, private time? (Laughs)

Ravi: It was included because he did not give these people an audience...

Phani: Is it worthwhile, what they went for, for him to take a decision? He did come for an independent survey, to see if it is worthwhile. You can read it. He **didn’t** want to invest ok? Maybe he already had prejudice, ok? He had enough evidence to make his decision.

Ravi: But your **question** is why shoot Preston?

Phani: He got enough data to take his decision. Do you expect him to sit **down** and listen to these people say, in their language, how they grew up in this land?

Sashi: You mean, the film tried to show Preston in a bad light, when he is just a businessman kind of a thing?

Suresh: It shows that Preston has no feelings for these people. Let him go for a fashion show or a drink, but for him it is a job, for them it is life.

Bharath: The film puts in flashes of emotion that takes away credibility. Like the Preston case.

Phani: Mark Antony, exaggerator! Visual gimmicks like this dilute the film.¹⁴

¹⁴ How responses are related to a affinity among certain kinds of audiences to rational argumentation, is discussed in Chapter 7.

In the same film, there is a sequence in which a rich **industrialist** waxes eloquent about the benefits of migration. Sarcasm, which abounds in the film, is used to **illustrate** the fact that this rich person, sitting outside his palatial bungalow, is impervious to the oppression faced by the adivasis, and is insensitive to their eviction from the land of their birth. This man is yet another instance of a caricature being used to make a point, rather simplistically. While condemning the man, the audiences could fail to see that his lifestyle was probably like **theirs**, or if they identify with the caricature, it could also be counter-productive in that the audiences may see the film as condemning them too and reject the evidence.

In an analysis of how counter-productive caricatures could prove, filmmaker Jayasankar says that when a filmmaker shows a government person, representing the state, the preferred reading becomes very clear. The film tries to show 'what kind of a lie he is, which is very dangerous'.

The guys who do this, they should not appear as clowns. They are clever beings. That is where the problem lies. They have a very clear agenda. It's not as if they are just speaking. They are linked to larger forces and it has got a pattern in it. And if you are bringing these guys as caricatures, you are just defeating the very purpose of making that film by saying these are fools in the government. Hence if they are fools, it is easy to fight them. It is not really so. They are very **clever**...I think I would show them as very reasonable beings, and we need a lot of firepower to even attempt any resistance. For example communalism, or one film I saw on pedophiles, the pedophile was dressed like a tribal. There is a kind of a visual representation of dark skin, wearing a **langot**, and with feathers, **and**... and I think precisely that they might be wearing three-piece suits! That's the most dangerous part of it all (K.P.Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview)

In *Something Like a War*, Dr.Mehta is the larger-than-life villain of the story. Representing all the violence that the state has unleashed on poor, rural women through its family planning camps, he is the epitome of all evil The sinister politics of population

control, in which the reproductive rights of the women are trampled upon, is the central subject of the **film**. The camera captures the family-planning camps of Dr Mehta, who allows the shooting of the entire procedure, along with a detailed commentary on his work and operations, in the belief that the film would valorize him and his patriotic work, as can be seen from his statements like:

By 1990 March, I have finished 3,13,939 operations. This year, I have done more than 2000 **operations**...the government has made a rule that not more than 100 operations can be performed in one **day**...when an experienced person like myself wants to do some more work for the country, his hands are tied. Believe me, more than **150** million couples are already having more than two **children**... (**Dr.Mehta**, medical practitioner in *Something Like a War*),

However, the film subverts this footage of **Dr.Mehta's** surgery and commentary by juxtaposing it with visuals of rural women, being herded like cattle into the operation rooms, with their foreheads tagged with numbers. Graphic images of their cracked feet, post-surgery retching, frail, unhealthy bodies suffering from malnutrition, the callous way their saris are taken off in the open in preparation for the surgery, are shown throughout the film. And in the light of these horrific images, even what could be an innocuous remark by the doctor ' this is called a laproscopic operation for females. And it is called the no-exposure method...because there is no exposure of private **parts**' assumes demonic overtones. Among a group of feminists, chosen as one of the focus groups, at least two of them reacted critically to how the film dealt with a complex issue such as reproductive rights and contraception.

May be the film should be shown to gynecologists. One doctor I know told me that she has a grouse against feminist activists. 'Let them come to any government hospital and see how the scene is' she said. She also said that any side effect or pain these poor women may suffer is much less than what three babies in three years can do to them (Sharmila, responding to *Something Like a War*).

In fact, sometimes I wonder if Dr.Mehta will be seen as a caricature at all. There might be people who actually believe in what he is saying, and think 'oh, these feminist films. They are always saying things like this. What can the poor doctor do?' And that the doctor is right and these people are wrong (Uma, responding to *Something Like a War*)

This criticism of *Something Like a War* is specifically in the context of the larger-than-life caricatures that detract from the credibility of the film. But, filmmaker Deepa Dhanraj, while talking about *Something Like a War*, says that the film was intended to create an outrage and to embarrass certain state agencies. The agenda was very clear – the target approach must **stop**'. Asserting that her work is rooted in the cinematic tradition of Films Division, her films employ the same 'persuasion tactics' for a different agenda. 'The attitude to bully, browbeat and push the audiences into an area is very much the same'.

The filmmaker in the alternative documentary

I don't think we confront our class origins, I don't think we confront our location, I don't think we confront our funding or the politics of distribution (Deepa Dhanraj, filmmaker, personal interview).

For filmmaker Shriprakash 'who is making the film?' is a pertinent question. The country, society and family decide the identity of the filmmaker, and so for him the alternative documentaries should seek to question this identity. The urban-rural divide, the simplest of dichotomies, is inherent in his argument. The geographical location and socio-economic background of the filmmaker would influence how and why, and for whom the film is being made. Elaborating on this issue, Shriprakash suggests that, for example, urban filmmakers would want the adivasis to say what the filmmaker wants. And the culture of the adivasis, which has been denied for years because of the caste system, is now commodified because of these films. The adivasis now demand money to

be interviewed, and their oppression continues in another form. He is categorical about the **motives** of city-based filmmakers.

They need to make films. Theirs is a compulsion of money and their profession. They don't listen (Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview).

This argument can be related to the thoughts of Chuck **Kleinhans** (cited in Waugh, 1984). He calls for a sustained examination of the **taken-for-granted** ideas and behavior of filmmakers, if at all their work is to become genuinely liberating. He talks of examining the filmmaker's position - on the personal, political, historical and social fronts. In an upfront critique of the filmmakers, Kleinhans says that most documentary makers are intellectuals who belong to a specific class, who are concerned with the production and dissemination of ideas, analyses, images and information. And that mostly, their work consisted of manipulating information, without any regard for the larger context. More importantly, they do not **reflect** enough on whose interests are really served by what they do. Shriprakash seems to echo this view when he who says that in order to make an honest film, urban filmmakers must '**de-class**' themselves and go to shoot the **film** without a **pre-conceived** agenda.

Elaborating on the importance of making the film on, with, and by the people engaged in a struggle, Thomas Waugh introduces another crucial element into his definition of a committed documentary. And that is the rooting of these films within an ongoing, active political struggle. He calls this a subject-centered or contextual ideal. This would be one way of not talking from '**the balcony**' but instead working among the subjects involved (Waugh, 1984). **Shriprakash's** argument and the **urban-rural** polarity could be problematized within this argument.

Plugging the films into an active movement or struggle will give them a context at the micro-level and also serves as the means to horizontally link similar struggles, bringing in a global dimension to the intervention. In line with this premise, Shabnam Virmani acknowledges that using the **films** as a platform for lateral communication, between one oppressed group and another oppressed group, is an attempt to efface the authorial identity as much as possible. Though the film is made by **her**, in the ultimate analysis, the fact that the script is finalized with the participation of the women's group, helps to take it beyond her own, individual point of view.

We have started off being extremely uncomfortable with this paradigm of documentary filmmaking. Uncomfortable because it is an exploitative process. It is a one-way process where you go in, you use people's knowledge, ideas and experiences to make your films, which serve, which reap great rewards for you personally... We are the privileged. At best there is a sincere attempt to identify, relate, express and connect with the reality of people different from ours. So I am to express it with, portray it with a certain amount of honesty. Beyond that it is flawed. It is ridden with politics (Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, personal interview).

Reiterating the view that the filmmakers are the 'guilty privileged'¹, Anand Patwardhan counters Shriprakash's idea that urban filmmakers must 'de-class' themselves.

The filmmaker should be honest about where he comes from and make a film with all humility. I don't believe I can pretend to be a working class person or even if I stay with them for a month or two months or one year or five years, I still don't change my class. I still have all the privileges that I was born with or that I have access to. So there is no use pretending that that's not the case. Then, in fact, I use my privileges to contribute as much as I can (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, **personal** interview).

Making a case for free will, Patwardhan asserts that it is as true that one can change allegiances, irrespective of the class or caste one is born into. 'Life is not so deterministic that this change of allegiance is not possible at all'.

Anjali Monteiro and K.P.Jayasankar address the heart of the criticism levied against the filmmaker as the alternative 'fly on the wall' who documents the happenings in the real world. They reiterate that this positioning of the filmmaker is indicative of a **two-dimensional** relationship of power where A is exploiting B, and the filmmaker is looking at and documenting this relationship of exploitation. Oppression gets reified as a very visible and easily discernable phenomenon and stereotypes get perpetuated. In a comment on the role that documentary-makers seem to assume, Jayasankar says that the moral high **ground**, as well as the complacency that cloaks the struggle-based documentary, needs to be challenged.

As a filmmaker, I am residing in this comforting metaphor of somebody who is investigating, exposing these relations of power. I am not part of the **drama**. I am always in the wings, watching this unfolding of this drama (K.P. Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

Cautioning against self-righteousness, Jayasankar says that a little bit of humility and self-critique should show in the film. This self-critique would need to address the fact that the filmmaker too is 'part of a larger relations of **power**'.

We are not outside it in any case. We are not to say, that 'look here is this oppression taking **place**'. We are also part of that oppression in some ways. And it is not that one position, not one subject position that I have, I may have several subject positions... there are various modes in which I either collaborate, repeal or take stance *vis-a-vis* that relation, which is probably the sum total of that film (K.P. Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

The filmmakers interviewed for the study believe that it is more important that the text contains these self-reflexive elements, rather than some of the films in which the filmmaker locates himself or herself physically in the film, either in the beginning or in the end, and pleads guilty to being the outsider. This trend called 'filmmaker in the **film**' is tantamount to saying, '**by** this confession, we are now absolved of the onus of being the

outsiders'. This is no indication of the reflexivity in the film, and is more like a trick, passing **off** as **self-reflexivity**.

Bill Nichols (1991) talks of reflexivity as having two dimensions - formal and political. The formal manifestations of reflexivity could be 'a reference to the **off-screen** space of an image or an acknowledgement of the **filmmaker's** presence and power'. These formal elements of reflexivity could draw the viewers' attention by distorting standard norms and conventions. The political reflexivity would draw the attention of the viewer to the 'relations of power and hierarchy, between the text and the **world**'. Political reflexivity operates on a viewer's consciousness, and can be achieved by formal reflexivity also. This depends **on** the effects it has on a particular viewer or audience. Formal reflexivity can be achieved through various means like irony, parody and satire. Almost all the films **attempt** to unmask the lies of the state by showing state propaganda. Be it clips from the **state-run** television or excerpts from the Constitution or statements by political leaders, satire or irony is used extensively to forcefully argue about the failure of the state in *A Narmada Diary*, *Something Like a War*, *Kahankar: Ahankar*, *Lesser Humans*, and *When Women Unite*. These films do not comment directly on the lies of the state, but highlight the failure of the state by juxtaposing state propaganda with the voices of the marginalized. This juxtaposition creates a tension, and through the use of irony, argues the case. These are some examples of formal reflexive strategies employed by filmmakers in the alternative documentaries.

By revealing himself or herself on **camera**, with all the resulting implications caused by this presence, political reflexivity is attempted in these films. Especially in some sequences in *Lesser Humans*, a film that captures the inhuman activity of human

scavenging, the hostile presence of filmmaker provokes a tension in the audience. Stalin asserts that he is constantly aware of the power of the **camera**, and seeks to retain as much of that in the **film** as possible because, according to him, probably the very power relations the film seek to question, is what is helping make the film. The outsider status of the filmmaker is real when it comes to making a film about the oppressed, and must be retained throughout the film.

The opening sequence of *Lesser Humans*, a dialogue between a Bhangi woman carrying a basket with human excreta on her hips, covering her nose. She comes from behind a wall. Many pigs loiter around. And there is a close-up of the excreta. The audio track of retching and coughing precede the conversation.

Filmmaker: What are you carrying?

Bhangi : Vada

Filmmaker: Meaning?

Bhangi: Meaning shit, meaning Narak(hell). Cant you see for yourself?

Filmmaker: Where are taking it?

Bhangi: To throw it.

Filmmaker: Where?

Bhangi: Over there.

The filmmaker is off-screen. The camera follows the walk of the woman, and the questions begin. Very obviously, the woman is reluctant to talk. Her replies and expressions convey anger and hostility towards the filmmaker. The questions of the filmmaker seem to provoke her anger even more. The filmmaker persists with his **questions**.

Q: Why do you do this work?

Bhangi: For our stomachs. Now go away.

Q:Why?

Bhangi: Don't make any trouble for me. You have shot enough.

The camera continues to follow the woman for a few seconds, before **it** moves onto the next shot. Stalin acknowledges that the wishes of the woman were overridden **and** says that the sequence was retained in the film to reveal the power play that the **filmmaker** can indulge in, given the power of the camera and a superior socio-economic positioning.

That is another reality of her and of me. What the woman meant was not so much 'don't shoot me', she was more angry. 'What the hell will you do after you shoot in any case? Several people have come and taken note of what has happened, people just come and give lectures and go away and nothing happens'...But even if she were to say 'don't shoot' without this anger, I would have continued shooting it because the agenda overrode. I could have said 'ok, sorry I will not shoot you and I will go shoot someone else'. I would have gone to another village and got another compliant woman to shoot. Big difference. I did not want to get into these dialectics. I continued doing it and also I kept it. I could have chosen not to keep that dialogue, but I have kept it to show that the reality is that she will say no and I can continue shooting. As an urban person, I have that power with my media to continue intruding into her life. And for me, I was seeing intrusion, and I wanted this dialogue to come in this film (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

Constantly being aware of and constantly trying to make the audience aware of the multi-layered power relations at play, within the filmed context can be achieved through these various reflexive elements. There can be no one formula to ensure formal or political reflexivity in a film. And the filmmakers seem to be aware of the need for reflexive elements in their films as well as the elusive nature of reflexivity.

Third World images in the alternative documentary

'It is all about how the West shows India, only slums, poor, lifeless...' - this was one observation made by **Phani**, a computer engineer who participated in a focus group discussion, while talking about a documentary he had seen on the NBC. This is another crucial point of interrogation of the alternative documentaries in India, given the focus of these films, the often poor, disenfranchised, struggling sections of Indian society. Battling

the image of India as a country of Maharajas, elephants and **snake-charmers**, as also the proliferation of the exotic Oriental images of the **Kumbh Mela**, of naked sadhus with matted hair and tridents in their hands, has been one long standing concern for several years now. So, how then should the images in the alternative documentaries be viewed? Are the films attempts to give visibility and a voice to those marginalized people in India who are conspicuous by their absence on mainstream television and fiction **film**? Or are these films, which are screened quite extensively in international film festivals and campuses, guilty of perpetuating stereotypical images of an impoverished and under-developed Third World societies? As in the case of most critical issues raised in this study, the responses to this question have been as varied.

Almost every alternative documentary, especially the ones that rely heavily on ‘realism’, looks like the other. The images of the poor adivasi or rural women or the victims of pollution in Kerala look similar. The similarity could lie in the fact that the people mostly share the same class position and a marginalized social background. The seeming similarity could also be because of the fact that Indian society is constituted by very affluent classes, a huge middle-class and an extremely poor class of people. The poverty and living conditions of the poor are so stark, that any image of them in the documentary would typically be a Third World image of suffering.

Lesser Humans would perhaps be one stark example, where the visuals used to bring home the horror of human scavenging, would epitomize exactly what the developed world might like to believe of the ‘**backward**’ Third World. The film repeatedly shows people cleaning dry latrines and very graphically at that. Stalin had this to say about the

problem of perpetuating stereotypical Third World images for consumption by international audiences:

This is one issue where I am, frankly, a little uncomfortable myself. I am very, very aware of the global North-South dialectics. And the dirty politics that the North plays on the South, playing up their oppression and talking about exploitation and human rights violations in the Third World. But given all this, I have gone to the Western audience out of... I was again negotiating. The reality is that if the international human rights organisations take note of this issue, human rights bodies in this country and the government in this country are going to stand up and take notice. The pressure is there. I had two choices. One is not to fall and perpetuate that pressure relationship. And the other is that I compromise on that ideology for the time **being**, and for the purpose of this particular issue, I say I am going to fall into that pressure, I am going to perpetuate that relationship and yet do that same thing that I am against. I did it. It is not the first time I am doing this compromise. I have done it several other times. And I am not feeling bad. Because there are several positive things that have happened because of that. For example, there is a major funding agency, Swiss Development Corporation, which has now taken on the dalit issue, as a policy issue (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

This issue can also be foregrounded in the fact that 80% of the alternative documentaries produced in India in the last 25 years are on women and environment, according to Deepa Dhanraj. Since most of the funding agencies or NGOs that sponsor these films have international funding, the agendas of these agencies become suspect. Is there any agenda which influence the funding of these films and if yes, what would that be?

‘A lot of these films are going outside the country. What kind of images of India are they bringing to other cultures?’ asks Anjali Monteiro. She suggests that the international funding agencies do seem to be looking for a certain kind of **documentaries**, with certain kind of images in them. Typically, they would fund films from the Third World, which would talk of and show ‘**poverty**, exploitation and **development**’ and her experience has been that films that do not cater to this requirement are sometimes not even taken up for distribution by these agencies. All the filmmakers interviewed for the

study agree that the funding agency dictates the agenda for the film, to varying extents. They acknowledge that the funding agencies concentrate on a particular issue, like AIDS or women's issues maybe, and so **will** be willing to fund only films made on these **issues**. This would mean, therefore, that the filmmakers would need to invent ways and means of using the available resources to make the films they want. Filmmaker **Omji** John opines that the most crucial requirement to make truly independent films is financial independence.

An alternative filmmaker must **own** his equipment. Only then cinema can be freed. If the capital is with someone **else**, then the filmmakers have to compromise their objectives (Omji John, filmmaker, personal interview).

Shriprakash is one filmmaker who takes an extreme **position** on the role of funding agencies. As a filmmaker primarily working with the adivasis in the Jharkhand region, his strident outburst against the NGOs reflects the anger felt by several filmmakers.

These funding agencies corrupt the world, and then actually tell the indigenous people how to live with nature and how to do sustainable development. The most dangerous thing is that these NGOs and funding agencies make a safety valve against anger erupting. There are more NGOs than houses on paper, in some areas in Jharkhand. An NGO is a business in social welfare. Let me tell you an incident. In some adivasi area, people, especially children, died in many numbers because of dysentery of some kind. They rushed to the nearest NGO, which had established itself with huge banners and fanfare. Do you know what they said? Sorry we cannot help you. Our agenda is to create AIDS awareness only! This is what NGOs are. Of course, some NGOs are good. They work. My words to them are, don't teach us. Learn from us (Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview).

Deepa Dhanraj also expresses her reservation about the way some NGOs use the films that they sponsor, and says that mostly the screenings of the films would be a 'post-dinner affair'. Anjali **Monteiro** suggests that one interesting way to examine the representation of sordid realities on film would be to show the films to those people

whose lives are depicted in the films. In a reference to *Lesser Humans*, she suggests **that the** film should be screened for the bhangis, and their responses must be analysed. This might help to clarify the dilemma of representing them, to some extent.

I would be interested to know how the bhangis themselves react to the film. I will tell you why. When I first started making films, feeling like there is so much of oppression and one has to expose it. And at that time we were working on slides and I made a slide show on construction, I **think** it was on contract workers in Ahmedabad. And then we had showed it to another group in Bombay. And they were very angry after seeing it. They said you are rubbing salts in our wounds. We know that this is happening. Then **why** are you showing this to us? What is your purpose? For the first time I was shaken, you know. I began to think about why am I doing this and for whom am I doing this? (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview)

A similar self-reflexive turn has also come about in Anthropology, where the lives of the 'other' are studied and recorded, increasingly with the participation of the people at every stage (Clifford, 1980, JanMohamed,1995). This came about as a response to the accusation that the anthropologist objectified the 'other', by turning an objective gaze onto him/her. So, ethnographers now routinely talk of sharing research results with their respondents and even co-authoring the study with them.

Examining self representation

The aforesaid observation by Anjali Monteiro sets the stage for another debate central to the alternative documentary in India, that of **self-representation**. Just like the politics of **representation** is beset with troubling **questions**, so also is the politics of self-representation, which is emerging as a whole new area in social sciences theory. An extensive analysis of the theory and practice of self-representation is beyond the scope of this study. A brief introduction to how video is being used for self-representation is provided here.

Indigenous groups like the Indians in the Amazon (River TV), **marginalized** women in India (Video-SEWA), rural women of the Deccan Development Society in **Andhra Pradesh**, poor women in Bangladesh (Banchte **Shekha**), and the Inuits in Canada, have been using small-format video to represent themselves, their problems and their culture. Video is less alien as a method of self-expression than writing, which requires a language. A user-friendly and fairly inexpensive technology, the video has been successfully used by marginalized groups, especially women, to articulate their thoughts. The political and revolutionary potential of the video has been long established, and is being used now by several indigenous societies as a tool to ensure their survival. Horizontal linkages with similar groups and sympathetic movements are facilitated by the use of video. One of the most significant characteristics of the video is that it erases the need for literacy, which would put 'illiterate producers on par with their literate counterparts' (Mody,1991). While this observation cannot be accepted as a truism in every sense, it does introduce a non-linearity in the process of the use of technology for grassroots development. It does not require, for instance, that only after the marginalized people are as educated as the more privileged people, can they learn to operate the video. This thinking is the basis for participatory communication, which believes that '**people** should speak for themselves' (Stuart and Bery, 1996). It is an attempt to decentralize the power of the production and dissemination of audio-visual images, and demystify technology for deprived sections of society. Empowerment of the marginalized is also one motive behind participatory communication.

One of the focus groups in the study is members of Video-SEWA in Ahmedabad. Video-SEWA is one of the first and most enduring efforts to get technology into the

hands of the marginalized people and facilitate their turning of the video-eye onto themselves. In the words of **Leela Ben**, a member of **Video-SEWA**:

I was a vegetable vendor, and used to sell vegetables from morning to evening at the Manik chowk. The traffic police would trouble us a lot. They took away our things and demanded money. So I joined SEWA, a sanghatan with about 360 people in 1984. We had no resources. We didn't even have electricity. Ela Ben and Martha Stuart, who was from America, said they can train us, even if we were illiterate. They trained us to shoot using video cameras. Many women in SEWA were trained. That's how **I** became part of Video-SEWA- We made a film on the police atrocities. We had been selling vegetables for the last 20–40 years. And the police and the municipality had been constantly harassing us. They wanted us to stop selling vegetables. But that was our livelihood. So we made the film on all the troubles we were facing. We fought for our rights and even showed the film in court. Then we were given licenses to sell vegetables. From then we have been using video to fight against injustice and problems. We do the entire process ourselves. The shooting, the editing, the replays, the logging...we make the complete film (Leela Ben, participatory video-maker, Video-SEWA)

The group responded to *Lesser Humans*, a film in which perhaps the question of self-representation would seem most pertinent, given the subject matter of the film. Even in this group of empowered women who used video for self-representation, conflicting opinions emerged to a question by the moderator on the question of self-representation and *Lesser Humans*. And these differences persist in the responses of the filmmakers too.

We can see in the film, that so many people wanted to say so many things. There was so much anger in them. But I felt, they could respond only to the questions asked by the interviewer. The philosophy of SEWA has been that whatever be the work, if the shooting is done by one of the women among them, then the **impact** is very good. So I believe that if one of us, who is a little educated, could have been asked to make the film, because we know the work inside out. And so, it is much easier to film it and show how things really are. In that sense, I feel it is better if one of the women made the film, and that it would be more effective. In a film like this you **will** reply only to what is asked. But actually, there could be something else, something more in your mind, which you want to say. Maybe there is something more about their oppression or situation, which they would like to talk about. But maybe they would not get a chance or opportunity to say it. So maybe if someone from their community had made the film, maybe they would be more sensitive to what really takes place and so it might be a better film (Darshana, participatory video-maker, responding to *Lesser Humans*)

It is not possible for the bhangis to talk about their work and think about what they are doing. But when they see an outsider shooting a film like this, then they get a chance to

see the work they are **doing**. These people who said so much about themselves to the outsiders who made the film, I think if one among **them** had made the film, it would not have been so effective. Because, those people would have said '**our** lives are like this only. This is what we do **always...our** routine. Till we die, this is what we are going to do. What is there to show in our lives?' and the film would reflect this. But when an outsider makes the film, they say our lives are like this and this and **this...they** say everything with so much anger and passion. If one of their own wants to make a film, they could probably say 'you already know what our lives are like. Why do you want to take a video of it?' (Neelam, participatory video-maker, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

The various arguments proposed by the filmmakers on the issue of self-representation are reproduced in brief below, in their own words. As in the case of several arguments in this study, Shriprakash provides one extreme viewpoint (along the axis of which the opinions of other filmmakers are positioned), one that **Omji** John concurs with, calling it '**the ultimate goal**'.

Adivasis should make films about themselves. Women should make films about themselves. Dalits should make films about themselves. The outrage that the urban people feel is different from what they feel. That is why they should make films about themselves. Only the adivasis know their problems...(Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview).

None of the other filmmakers buy into the **either-or** arguments of who **should** make the films. They are of the opinion that all kinds of interventions should co-exist, and in the words of Jayasankar, there is no choice to be made between a philosophical treatise and a washing machine manual! He says that 'every discourse has its function within the domain in which it exists'.

While agreeing with Shriprakash about the importance of **self-representation**, Anand Patwardhan has this to say in a more practical vein:

The ideal situation would be that people who are oppressed, who are suffering the injustice, they make films about themselves. If that was possible, then probably the injustices wouldn't be there no? If people living in the slums were able to make films about themselves and had the means to do it, then probably we would be **half way** there towards solving the problem. I am saying that it might be the ideal situation where the

people oppressed make films about themselves (**Anand** Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

While all of them agree that self-representation is the ideal, various factors like the quality and use of the finished product, and the technical feasibility is critiqued by the filmmakers. Stalin argues that while the SEWA model is very good, it is not a replicable one, **because** the economics of film production makes it unfeasible to continue production on a sustained basis. Saying that one needs to problematize even this **'putting** the camera in the hands of the people', Stalin suggests that the reach of these videos is very limited and most of them are utilized only internally.

If a dalit scavenger was to make this film, *Lesser Humans* would have been a different film. If a woman, would have made that film, it would have been different. A dalit - **non-dalit** would have made that film, it would have been different. Agreed. That is more desirable, this is less desirable, I don't know (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

His thoughts are echoed by Shabnam **Virmani** who sees these films getting marketed for their political correctness.

When the only thing that the product or the process has to say for itself is its political correctness and this whole wonderful thing of putting technology in the hands of the people, there is a different thing happening which I want to critique. I think the process of having the media in your own hands to say your own thing is empowering and important, but let us not ignore the fact that the product is shoddily made or that it does not necessarily communicate as well as a **well-crafted product...there** should be some respect for craft also (Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, personal interview).

Reiterating Shabnam **Virmani's** opinion, Anjali Monteiro asserts that the whole process of putting the camera into people's hands needs to be problematized and that **'it** cannot become a position of smugness from which you cut down anything else'. Raising the question of a film language, she opines that all filmmaking involves the use of a grammar or creating a new grammar, and that this issue existed no matter in whose hands the camera was.

Aesthetic and anti-aesthetic in the alternative documentary

Michael Renov writes of the presumption that formal beauty and historical representation are 'irreconcilable'. This synthetic polarization of 'truth versus beauty' in the West has contributed to the **anti-aesthetic** in the documentary. The onus, therefore, according to Raoul Ruiz, lies with the documentary to 'produce a pleasure of the text, capable of merging intellectual inquiry and aesthetic value' (cited in Renov, 1993: 24).

Historically and philosophically, the documentary came about as an oppositional response to the fantastical spectacle called fiction film, which lured the viewer into a Utopia of romance and beauty. So just as the aesthetic in fiction film was all-pervasive, the anti-aesthetic in the documentary came to dominate the documentary. The term 'documentary' conjures up images about the 'real' world – images that are jerky, urgent and have a seal of authenticity about them. This perception of the documentary is precipitated by several documentaries that tried to present 'unmediated' reality. Unlike earlier filming equipment that were cumbersome and very expensive, new technologies which are smaller, lighter and less expensive, allow for more of on-location shooting and could follow events in the historical world uninterrupted, along with sync sound as well. This served the cause of the documentary to provide as much unprocessed footage as possible in the form of lengthy pans and tilts by the camera, 'live' action captured in all naturalness and the filming of other 'real' elements like the context surrounding the event, the sights and sounds. Realism and not beauty ruled the documentary, and this is responsible for the anti-aesthetic in the documentary.

However, the history of the documentary will reveal that the first documentary-maker, Robert Flaherty did make aesthetically beautiful films. In his earliest documentary, *Nanook of the North*, the shots of the sweeping snowscapes of the Arctic, and the 'exotic' Inuit Eskimos prompted Renov to call Flaherty 'documentary's first poet', for his use of poetic images and verbal expressions (Renov, 1993). Even Grierson and Vertov believed in the use of creativity to achieve their socio-political agendas. But the coming to age of cinema-verité, direct cinema, and political documentary (as discussed in chapter 3) laid emphasis on capturing the historical world in its likeness. Documentary started relying on depicting reality by using indexical images from the 'real' world.

The question of aesthetics in the alternative documentary in India is polarized within a debate of form versus content. As can be seen from the responses of the filmmakers, this dichotomy is an artificial one, and the roles are not mutually exclusive at all.

Only Shriprakash makes a case for content over form, and asserts that he is not a filmmaker, but a film-activist.

I am not a filmmaker. I am a film-activist. That is why there is not much creativity in my films. Struggle is a part of the adivasi's lives, so in our films too the struggle is more and art is less. In fact, visually there is no need for words. Both oral and written. Even the visual effects in films are to repair a lack...I make films for those who **suffer**. For me content is more important, not my film (Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview)

While ideologically this may be a choice he seeks to make, his films do reveal a filmmaker's eye for visual detail. An instance would be his long pans capturing the sweeping landscapes of the tribal areas where his films are shot. Lingering and well-composed shots of cultural snippets of adivasi life like basket-weaving or shots of

gurgling **brooks**, etc make his absolute claim contestable. However, the anti-aesthetic intention is most visible in his films than in those by any of the other filmmakers chosen for the study. For Anand Patwardhan too, form takes a secondary place.

Frankly, I don't do experimentation for its own sake. It's not my cup of tea. It's not what excites me. I make films as simply as I can. Tell the story as straightforwardly as possible. So experimentation would certainly not be consciously done. There maybe experimentation that happens in the natural course of events that I am filming or editing, if something **strikes** me while trying to juxtapose this with that. I try it out. I would not set myself the task of doing some innovation for the sake of doing it (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

Activism can be reformulated in terms of the filmmaker's concerns that impinge on the film. It cannot be separated from the physical task of shooting or editing a film. Every process in the production of an alternative documentary, right from the choice of subject, to post-production, would be influenced by the ideological convictions of the **filmmaker**. And by definition, the agenda of the filmmaker is, broadly speaking, an agenda of social equity. The question of aesthetics would involve the translation of this agenda onto **film** and the cinematic choices that the filmmaker needs to make for this **translation**.

Film making is my profession. The way I deal with my **film** is based on my experiences as an activist. Nobody is separated from activism. But like I said earlier, I will not limit my **film** making to rigid compartments. To find a cinematic solution to any problem is my job (Madhushree Dutta, filmmaker, personal interview).

While many filmmakers in this study assert that filmmaker/ film-activist is untenable, a closer look at their work reveals their preoccupation with post-production aspects of filming like editing, music, subtitling etc. There clearly is an attempt to arrive at a finished product that is carefully constructed out of the footage. All the filmmakers talk of a film language or grammar or craft, while referring to the importance of making a documentary. Careful attention is paid to music –the background scores as well as songs.

While *Lesser Humans*, *Tu Zinda Hai* and *When Women Unite* are carefully choreographed films even at the filming stage, the narratives in *A Narmada Diary*, *Something Like a War*, *Kahankar: Ahankar*, and to some extent *Chaliyar* and *Live in Behrampada*, emerge on the editing table.

Shabnam Virmani exploits the docu-drama form to the fullest in her film *When Women Unite*, and partly in *Tu Zinda Hai*, in parts. Both these films are atypical, if one expects documentaries to be pedantic. Music and songs are an integral part of both these films. The frames in the films are well planned, and lighting is controlled as well in adherence to a pre-conceived script with a shot-break-up. Even the voice-overs do not give these films the feel of a typical documentary, as they are unobtrusive. And the filmmaker's personal conviction about the importance of craft is well reflected in all her films.

A lot of NGO and activist circles feel what they are saying is so important that how they say it is not important. That's why they are losing out in this market place of idea propagation, where advertising and the Hindi films of Bollywood hold greater sway on the imagination of the audiences. Because they feel that their issue is on the pedestal and you don't have to worry about the aesthetics or the craft or the 'how' of how you communicate. And that I totally disagree with (Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, personal interview).

Lesser Humans is an interview-based film, interspersed with graphic visuals of human scavenging and some location shots. However, the interviews are far from being the spontaneous, unprepared opinion taking. The bhangis are framed in tight close-ups and a lot of attention has been paid to the lighting and shot preparation. In fact, the shots are so well orchestrated for a subject like human scavenging, that it provoked a disbelief in several members of the audiences!!

Sometimes I got the feeling that they were asked to dress up or something. They looked too nice and too clean. Probably they are and I am looking at them from my elitist point of view, but **that's** why I need to know how they live.

(Vinaya, student of development communication, responding to *Lesser Humans*)

This response typifies an elitist attitude that expects audiences to look and live a certain way. And any effort by the filmmaker to break out of stereotypes, may detract from the credibility of the film. The question of what is real for whom is again thrown up in this context.

Form in the documentary has been dominated by the **'talking-heads'** interview format visually and the **'voice-of-God'** (usually male) voice-over commentary. A typical example would be *A Narmada Diary*. This film along with the 'real' footage, jerky and grainy, of rallies and police atrocities and interviews, is accompanied by an all-knowing, ominous male voice-over, filled with foreboding. But as mentioned before, several formal reflexive strategies have been attempted in the film like satire and irony. While being politically effective, *Chaliyar*, *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* and *Kis Ki Raksha* are three other propaganda films that do not aesthetically rise to be more than atrocity-tales against the state.

Something Like a War and *Kahankar: Ahankar* deal with representation in totally different ways, but are both richly textured in terms of multiple, complex narratives and formal reflexive elements. The former unambiguously narrates a story of oppression, by interweaving several, different narratives into a cohesive film - like the workshop with rural women talking about their sexuality, Dr. Mehta expounding the virtues of the family planning camps, interviews with the **'agents'** who are forced to generate cases for these camps, and the propaganda of the state, the medical community and international donor

agencies to hard-sell family planning. Formally, the film is a path-breaking attempt away from the struggle-based or **heroine-oriented** films.

Kahankar:Ahanakar deals with the subtleties of how histories are constantly being created and re-created, and gently nudges the viewer and the filmmaker into questioning their identities. 'We are there all through the film. Being laughed at, Because most of the ethnographers are us. We are the ones who are doing the camera and we are being laughed at throughout the film'⁹ (Jayasankar, filmmaker). The film posits archival records of the 'official' history of the Warlis and the vibrant, oral histories in the **Warli** stories and paintings in an aesthetically pleasing manner, interspersed with interviews with the Warlis.

Then what is the difference between a newscast and a documentary film? I think you need to respect and evolve some ways to engage with the **audience**. The audience has to, in some ways, take cognizance of what you are saying. I am not saying there is any recipe for it, but this applies to any aesthetic pursuits, including writing. You need to, at least, take into account certain kind of universe in which that particular discourse functions (K.P.Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

Films like *Kahankar: Ahankar*, *Tu Zinda Hai*, *Something Like a War*, *When Women Unite* and *Lesser Humans* show that the aesthetic can take precedence over the **anti-aesthetic** in the alternative documentary. In these films, expression operates as a 'modality of desire' (Renov, 1993), and manifests through the importance the filmmakers give to form.

This discussion raises the question of the 'politics of aesthetics'. What is beautiful is itself a problematic issue, especially if it implies ignoring culture-specific and traditional ideas of 'beautiful'. In a globalized world with increasingly homogenized notions of beauty, this question acquires political dimensions. One needs to explore

further how notions of aesthetics may be differentiated along lines of class, caste, and gender.¹⁵

Questions of power, knowledge, and multiplicity dominate contemporary critical discourses. Post-colonial theorists focus increasingly on how power is reproduced at multiple and micro levels, how a certain kind of knowledge acquires **legitimacy**, and how subjective differences exist in the production of meaning. The concerns addressed in this section about the ethics and aesthetics of representation should be seen against the background of these perspectives. The idea of the documentary as a provider of 'knowledge' is critiqued in the next chapter, with respect to audiences of the alternative documentary.

¹⁵ My discussion here about the 'politics of aesthetics' is informed by comments made by Dr. Vinod Pavarala in several academic forums.

CHAPTER 7: DOCUMENTARY DESIRE

The audience question is very valid and not so easy to answer. Women audiences, dalit audiences – these are very dubious categories. Who is a dalit audience? It is very presumptuous to try and understand this kind of subjectivity (Deepa Dhanraj, filmmaker, personal interview).

Complexities are inherent in trying to make sense of audiences and their readings of any media text. Polysemy or the production of multiple meanings out of the same **text** has gained currency in reception analysis. For a documentary too, **the** readings of different viewers could vary according to variables like class, caste, and gender, and the readings of even the same viewer may vary over time or circumstance. Subjectivity is inherent in every reading produced out of the text and more importantly, in **the** interpretation of every reading. It is with this understanding that this study discusses documentary desire.

The pleasures of non-fiction are every bit as complex as those attributed to fictional forms and far less understood (Michael Renov, 1993: 6).

In Film Studies, cinema is studied as a source of libidinal pleasure for the viewer. Central to this is the thought that a spectator, cocooned in the dark, womb-like confines of the cinema hall, indulges in a 'willing suspension of disbelief while engaging with the fantasy world of fiction film. As opposed to this kind of engagement with mainstream cinema, William Guyun, in one of the earliest references to the documentary viewer, believes that documentary is 'an object inappropriate to desire' (cited in Renov, 1993:196). The basis for this statement was that documentary spectatorship demands a greater degree of vigilance from the viewer and so invokes the defense mechanisms of the ego. By focusing on the 'real', the documentary produces 'filmic displeasure' in the spectator, who is deprived of the libidinal cinematic pleasure afforded by fiction **film**.

These observations serve as a starting point to investigate documentary desire, for the first time, within a psychoanalytical framework. Theorists like Michael Renov and Bill Nichols challenge Guyun's, rather limiting and orthodox, construction of filmic pleasure. Throwing open the doors of the debate on documentary desire, they suggest other possible dynamics between the documentary text and its viewer.

Renov (1993) calls for a sustained and thorough investigation of documentary desire. He cautions that this interrogation must be in its own terms and not with reference to the filmic pleasures of fiction film. *Docere* in Latin means 'to teach' and this etymological root of the word 'documentary' is the starting point for the notion of documentary desire. The concept of viewing pleasure too is correspondingly re-defined. Renov writes that documentary desire resonates with the need for 'pleasurable learning', which feeds the viewer's desire-to-know. And it is this desire-to-know that influences the assumptions of rationality and conscious inquiry attributed to the making and reception of documentaries. In an allusion to what audiences might expect from an alternative documentary, filmmaker Anjali Monteiro, in a personal interview, maintains that alternative filmmakers cannot 'wish away' the fact that audiences seek pleasure, and that may be, audiences seeking to laugh at things, specially when there is already in place a huge entertainment industry, distributing itself through television, cinema and the Internet,

These propositions serve as a context within which the responses of the focus groups to the alternative documentaries are analysed in this study. It is pertinent we realize that these observations are made with reference to the documentaries and the audiences of the West. This understanding is important because socio-economic

disparities are much more glaring within a Third World country. And this difference gets reflected in how documentaries are made and received. In this study, documentary desire is examined through the responses of audiences and alternative documentaries of India.

What does 'knowing' mean for different audiences? And how does this 'knowing' **re-define** documentary desire in the Indian context? One interesting finding from the focus group discussions is how 'knowledge' itself is a nebulous concept and varies according to the educational, economic, social, and cultural compositions of the audience.

Epistophilia and the 'truth'

In a seminal reference to the psychoanalytical dimensions of documentary viewing, Bill Nichols (1991) suggests that by dealing with social issues in the historical world, the documentary operates where the 'reality-attentive ego and super-ego live'. It deals with rational and conscious choices that an individual makes in the 'real' world. He proposes that the documentary strokes the 'epistophilia' or the pleasure of knowing, in the viewer. By starting a social debate and building an argument to support it, the documentary appeals to the public, rather than a private, response from the viewer. The documentary appeals to the social imagination and the cultural identity of the viewer. In contrast, mainstream fiction cinema operates where the Id lives. It caters to private, unconscious desires, by encouraging the viewer to indulge in fantasy and daydreams. This Freudian analysis about the reception of the documentary is the basis of Nichols's understanding of documentary desire.

In an insightful comparison of the viewing dynamics at play for a fiction film and a documentary, he writes that both are cinematic modes that create a 'gaze' for the viewer. Fiction **film** can be seen as creating a 'gaze' into a world of fantasy for the

viewer, invoking the aesthetic, and the documentary creates a 'gaze' about the historical world by invoking the promise of epistophilia. Nichols suggests that what aesthetics is to **fiction** film, epistophilia is to the documentary.

Documentary convention spawns an epistophilia. It posits an agency that possesses information and knowledge, a text that conveys it, and a subject who will gain it...**Knowledge...becomes** a source of pleasure that is far from innocent (Nichols, 1991:31).

Implicit in epistophilia or the desire for knowledge is an urge to know the 'truth'. The viewer is promised knowledge or 'truth' about the 'real' world. This truth-claim embedded in the alternative documentary is brought out by the responses of all the focus groups, albeit through different modes of understanding, as discussed below. The privileged status of the documentary as a domain of 'truth' gets reified because the audiences see the documentary as a knowledge-provider. Knowledge and 'truth' seem inextricably linked as can be seen from the responses of the audiences.

Nichols sees epistophilia as feeding into a distinctive form of engagement with the 'real' by the viewer. The physical distance from the 'real' world, which the documentary affords the viewer, facilitates this engagement. And from a 'safe' vantage point, the documentary provokes the viewer to confront an issue or event in the historical world. 'The irony of this distance' is that it supports the impression that the viewer has directly engaged with the historical world. This form of engagement with the 'real' world, albeit from a distance, prompts Nichols to suggest that epistophilia is an illusionistic mode of reception, precipitated by the use of realism in a documentary. This perspective provokes new questions about documentary pleasure, as also about documentary realism.

Modes of engagement and audiences

The alternative documentary in India, with the help of realism and testimony, argues the 'truth' of its case (as discussed in Chapter 4). This study proposes that the alternative documentary relies on a tripod of proofs – emotional, moral, and rational arguments, which the audiences use to arrive at the 'truth'. The responses of the audiences can be understood along a linear continuum: they get 'information' from the documentary, then they 'analyse' the information, and finally, arrive at 'judgment' about the issue and hence the film itself.

'Knowing' emerges as an important cornerstone in the reactions of all the focus groups to the alternative documentary. The idea of a documentary as an educator or a provider of knowledge is reiterated by all the focus groups. This education happens because of the testimony operating upon the viewer, in the form of:

- 1) 'realistic' images, which offer emotional arguments about the miserable living conditions of the marginalized or stories of their oppression through interviews with 'real' people.
- 2) 'moral' positions, like juxtaposing the misery of the poor with the affluence of the elite or by projecting a villainous 'other' *vis a vis* the sensitive 'us' or interviews with activists, which reveal the ideological stance of the filmmaker.
- 3) 'factual' proof, including statistics and expert testimony like mass media clippings, committee reports, and interviews with scientists, doctors and other knowledge-elites.

Then, the information gathered from this testimony is subjected to analysis. It is interesting to note that what constitutes 'information' and how the 'analysis' takes place

varies across and even within the focus groups. The **viewers'** response are influenced by **one** or more of the three proofs operative in the film.

I suggest that empathy and rational analysis are the two distinct modes in which **the** audience engages with the alternative documentary. Either one or a combination of **the** two modes helps the viewer to arrive at the final '**judgment**' about the argument that **the** film provides. The 'judgment' could manifest as the **viewer's** expectation of the documentary. Two dominant demands that a viewer places on the alternative documentary are 'objectivity' and 'solutions'. Further, the socio-economic position of the viewer, including education and ideological orientation, might play an important role in how a viewer might engage with an alternative documentary.

Broadly, the focus groups in the study can be seen as constituted by three types of audiences (as can be seen from their demographic profiles in chapter 2),

One, audiences who are, or who closely work with, the disadvantaged people in society. Rural women who **are** agricultural workers in Pastapur (women agricultural workers), a group of marginalized women in Ahmedabad empowered to represent themselves on video (participatory video-makers), and women employees of a grassroots welfare organization in Hyderabad (welfare workers) are three of the focus groups in the study. These audiences belong to or work with the lower socio-economic sections of **India**.

Two, audiences who, by education or by ideological affiliation, have been initiated into the discourse of alternative development. A group of feminists affiliated to a Hyderabad-based, research and activist women's group, students of social work from **Mumbai**, and post-graduate students of the theory and practice of development

communication in Hyderabad are three such focus groups, who could be spoken of as 'converted audiences', conversant with the notions of 'alternative' development¹⁶.

Three. audiences, who by profession or ideological affiliations, are **un-initiated** into the alternative development discourse. The employees of an institute for environmental education in Bangalore (environmental scientists), young Indian engineers in the USA (computer engineers in USA) and students of a right-wing students' organization in Hyderabad (right-wing students) are the other focus groups in the study. While the group of environmental scientists does deal with environmental concerns, an important aspect in the idea of sustainable development, their discourse is not framed in the human rights paradigm that seems to be an indispensable part of alternative development.

This typology of audience is, of course, not watertight or mutually exclusive. In fact, as borne out by the responses in the focus group discussions, some atypical members may exist in a group (alongside the inherent polysemy which exists). But as **Wimmer** and **Dominick** (1983) write, the aim of the **discussion** is not to build a '**consensus**', but to examine the differences within the group too. The typology of the audiences suggested above is more to facilitate the analysis of the two modes of engagement as observed in the responses of the focus groups.

I hope to substantiate here my claim that the audiences who belong to disadvantaged strata, the audiences who work **extensively** with them and the audiences

¹⁶ The term '**converted**' audience is used colloquially in discussions and even journal articles in the context of the debate that alternative documentaries often preach to the '**converted**'. This is a reference to the screenings of the films primarily at **film** festivals, universities, and NGO circuits, whose audiences have been previously exposed to the rhetoric of alternative development,

who are familiar with the issues of unequal development tend to engage with the alternative documentary differently than those audiences who are unfamiliar with any notion of alternative development, and understand development only as envisioned for them by the state. The difference does not lie much in their sympathy for **the** disadvantaged as much as it does in their expectations from the film.

The difference in the modes of engagement reveals that **'knowledge'** itself is a contested terrain, which is variously constructed by different audiences. For the **'empathizing'** audiences, 'truth' is what they emotionally connect with as 'reality' in the documentary. For the audiences who rationalize, 'truth' is constituted by logic and statistics. So the idea of epistophilia, as proposed by Bill Nichols, itself gets redefined depending on who the audience is. Another important difference is how critical the audiences are of the film. The credence that different focus groups give to the emotional, the moral, and the factual testimony in the films determines the credibility of the film for them.

However, filmmaker **K.P.Jayasankar's** idea about the dangers of audience stratification, as expressed below, aptly clarifies my position on audiences and their readings of the alternative documentary.

From whatever little research that we have done, I would not say anything like there is some creature called an urban audience. Even within urban audiences, there are such different readings based on gender and class and exposure and experience. I think these categories are very problematic. I think stratifying audiences as urban or rural and upper class or working class, can be a little dangerous particularly if you are using that in order to arrive at some kind of any broad generalizations about the way people read a film. But, it is true that there would certainly be patterns or ways of seeing ...**(K.P.Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).**

Empathy and ‘truth’

We had read so much in the newspapers and heard about this, but this is the first time we are seeing what happened. We felt that we were also part of the struggle and that we too were participating in the movement as women. We really felt involved in what was happening (**Meherunissa**, welfare worker, responding to *When Women Unite*).

Empathy as a mode of engagement with the alternative documentary is facilitated by an emotional identification with the marginalized subjects in the film. This is precipitated by the use of realism and ideological argument in these films, as can be discerned from the responses of the focus groups in the study. The rural **agricultural** workers, participatory video-makers, the welfare workers working with the marginalized groups, the **post-graduate** students of development communication, the students of social work, and the group of feminists, all accept the argument of the alternative documentary and connect emotionally with the 'reality' shown in the documentary. There seem to be two dimensions to this empathy –one, relating one’s own reality with the reality shown in the film, and two, accepting the film's argument on moral or ideological grounds.

The audiences who are disadvantaged themselves and the audiences who work closely with the marginalized people (agricultural workers, participatory video-makers, and welfare workers) identify as their own, the reality shown in the film. The protagonists in the films, their situations, the locales and many other cultural nuances are realistically presented, and the indexical representations of a familiar world allows these audiences to accept as ‘**truth**’, the argument of the film. Responses from the three groups, like those provided below, bear this observation out.

She too is a woman we too are women. So the problems are the same.
We understood the film very well. Whatever they showed is true.
It happened in our village too, the same **problems**.
(responses by women agricultural workers to *When Women Unite*)

We see it all the time, with our own eyes.
And that is the reality. In most places, it is the women who do all the work.
Whichever the place, whatever the work, it is the women who do the difficult work everywhere.

(responses by participatory video-makers to *Lesser Humans*)

All this happens. It is not simply a film. It is reality. **It is truth.**
Because we work with similar people with the same problems, we know how true the documentary is. It has shown life as it is.
Just like they showed in the film, the little boy imitating to be the father, pretending to be drunk and beating the wife...**exactly** what happens in real life.

(responses by welfare workers to *When Women Unite*)

The testimony presented in the films, *When Women Unite* and *Lesser Humans*, through emotional scenes and dialogues strikes an emotional chord with these **audiences**. The ensuing discussions among the audiences after the screenings, which forms the analysis of the films, have less to do with facts and statistics (the documentary) and have more to do with the narrative (drama or the interview). The characters and situations are analysed as if they are 'real', in relation to their own **lives**. The group of rural agricultural workers, who responded to *When Women Unite*, made extensive references to the dialogues and characters in the dramatized portions of the film, during the screening and the post-film discussion. 'Poor Kotamma, how much she is suffering', '**She** was crying with sorrow. We can understand her problems', are some responses that typify their emotional identification with the people in the film.

This opinion was also seconded by filmmaker Shabnam Virmani. In an informal conversation, in response to my observation about empathy as a mode of engagement, she said that some women's groups who wanted to screen the **docu-drama** *When Women Unite*, for rural women audiences, requested her to edit out the documentary footage from the film, and give them a "pure-drama" version! 'I think I discovered quite simply that drama had a greater appeal for rural audiences', writes Shabnam Virmani (2001). Her

films are often made with, and are about women's struggles at the grassroots, and are circulated for horizontal communication with similar movements across the country, as **well** as for mobilization efforts. Making a case for narrative drama against an argument of reason using '**a rational deductive logic**', she suggests that it could be the strong tradition of oral storytelling in India that enables non-literate and, sometimes, even educated audiences to connect better with drama. Dismissive of the notion of '**reality**' as understood by educated, urban people, some of the rural women even wanted to meet **Kotamma**, the protagonist of *When Women Unite* (Virmani, 2001). So reality itself gets re-defined. The audiences are concerned not so much with whether the argument in the film is right or wrong. It is whether they can recognize as their own, the people and situations in the film. The three groups who respond this way to the film identify so much with the subjects of the film, that the film stands for 'truth'. 'Truth' for them is largely unmediated by rationality or a critical evaluation of the film or the issue.

Talking about his experiences with audiences, Sarat Chandran, a filmmaker and a distributor, reiterates this observation.

I am convinced of the positive impact that these documentaries have on people. Especially rural audiences to whom I have mostly shown them. Villagers readily believe what they see in these films. They are also influenced by the content of these documentaries. In fact I would even say that about 98% of them are convinced about what they see. Especially films like *Lesser Humans*, they can easily identify with. The responses the film evokes depends on the kind of audience. I watched a **film** on child abuse with an urban audience in Bangalore. The audience was elitist and displayed no anger at all. That too after watching a film like that. Basically, I think that the disbelief is because of a **consumerist** attitude (Sarat Chandran, filmmaker, personal interview).

Empathy is also prompted by the ideological argument of the film, and can be observed by the moral stances articulated by the audiences, especially those three groups

(students of social work, feminists, and students of development communication) who have been ideologically sensitized towards unequal development.

All **developmental** policies are made by the elite **classes**...**developmental** activities have only benefited those who have money and power, particularly political power.

As the ending shows, even with modern, scientific technology, the **plight** of those lowest in society doesn't change. In fact it gets **worse**...**the** bhangis already know their agony, we are the ones who should do something.

(responses by the students of social work to *Lesser Humans*).

It is a film which makes you emote, no? You laugh with the women and you are horror-struck by the atrocities that happen, and it also theorizes women's experiences.

I am not saying that we are in the same situation as these women, but the kind of power structure that is there will leave you in an absolutely helpless kind of **situation**.

(responses by the feminists to *Something Like a War*).

Throughout the film, I felt guilty. Look at me living a privileged life. A First World life in a Third World country...**we** need to be sensitized first.

It is a fact that religion and caste always put the woman in a disadvantaged position.

The film does want to make the point, one that I believe as a strident feminist, that it is women who do this kind of work more than men.

(responses by the students of development communication to *Lesser Humans*).

The analysis by the groups that are familiar with the arguments of the alternative development paradigm is mostly based on their **ideological** affiliations. Their empathy is brought about by a philosophical, and in many ways, moral understanding of the issue being dealt with, and may be aided by certain emotional testimonies in the film. That the emotional evidence offered by the film plays the role of an abettor, and not the primary reason, can be seen from their critical evaluation of the film. Unlike members of the focus groups who relate emotionally and uncritically to the marginalized people in the film, these '**converted**' audiences accept the larger argument of the film about the unequal development, but do not uncritically accept everything that the film says or shows as evidence. Critical observations about the length of the film, the inadequacy of the information presented, the sampling techniques, and the despair that the film evokes, are

some indicators that these audiences use their cognitive faculties to 'judge' the **film**, something which is by and large absent in the audiences mentioned earlier.

Responses like '**after** a point it was monotonous, the same thing going on and on', 'I don't know whether to react to the documentary or to the issue it deals with', '**if** it was of shorter length, it would have been more effective', 'the health aspect is very crucial **here...from** a cinematic point of view, it is a lapse' — provide glimpses into the critical and cognitive faculties at work, alongside the basic empathy for the marginalized people. For these audiences, 'truth' is the **ideology** that propels the alternative documentary and knowledge is the unraveling of the oppressive mechanisms that are responsible for the socio-economic disparities.

Only one respondent, from the three groups, made an oppositional reading of the **film** *Lesser Humans*, despite being initiated into the alternative development discourse.

This film actually gives you some synthetic sensibilities. Then you start feeling about the matter and you can't do anything about it...It is **a totally** manipulated film, made with only one perspective in mind, that of gender inequity.
(Ravi, student of development communication, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

This response, as several of his other responses, reveal that rational analysis, and not **empathy**, was Ravi's mode of engaging with the film. The ideological argument in the film, which the other members of the group identified with, is seen as a feminist **rhetoric** by the respondent, and tantamounts to 'manipulation' for him. As a future media professional, Ravi very categorically states that he would never make a film on rural people and their lives, because he doesn't know anything about 'them' and that he doesn't see himself as part of 'them'. This reading introduces the second mode of engaging with the alternative documentary that is **through** rational analysis.

Rational analysis and 'truth'

It is educative, very educative.

It provides raw information, you can do your own processing.

(responses by the computer engineers, to *A Narmada Diary*)

Industrialization will cause pollution. What can be done to minimize pollution is important.

Most of what is shown, we already know. In such a project, problems and pollution are always there.

People must be educated about environmental degradation through films like this.

(responses by the environmental scientists to *Chaliyar*)

Finally, who did it, this the film did not show. The background of the problem was not clear.

You know the documentaries show reality, it is the true picture...

(responses by the right-wing students to / *Live In Bearampada*)

These responses from across the remaining three focus groups (a group of computer engineers, a group of environmental engineers, and members of a right-wing students' organization) who are un-initiated into the alternative development discourse, show that the 'information' provided by the alternative documentary is seen by the respondents as the facts of the case, based on which they would further analyse the issue. In this case, the testimony offered by the film is not emotional footage or interviews, but 'hard' facts, which are verifiable. So, the audiences are not moved into taking a stand emotionally, but instead, rationally analyse the case. This 'intellectual' response to the alternative documentary is, however, accompanied by sympathy towards the marginalized people who are the subjects of the study. This sympathy is voiced by almost all the viewers, tempered with criticism about the alternative documentary screened, or the filmmaker or any of the Villains' in the film.

Though this film is lop-sided and one-sided from most of our perspectives, still the facts of the case remain... that the government was biased towards a certain section of the people (Ravi, computer engineer responding to *A Narmada Diary*?).

The cameraman is desperate to convince us. Tell me, how can I feel sad when a person says 'I can't eat electricity, I can't drink electricity.' I could feel sad that he is **not** educated. I am not blaming him. I am not defending the government (**Phani**, computer engineer responding to *A Narmada Diary*).

The responses from the group of computer engineers in the USA (including the two responses provided above) about the truth-claim in the film spanned a wide spectrum. None of the respondents denounced the film as manipulative or not authentic, but the group as a whole tended to respond with skepticism to the film as the '**truth**', as typified by observations like 'if we believe the statistics..', '**I don't** know how much of it to believe', 'It is not an analytical documentary, it was factual', 'We have got some views about what is happening there actually and we have someone's interpretation done to us. It is for us to decide with whatever resources we have got'. Their propensity for logic, rational analysis and statistics led to the skepticism about the film as 'truth'. The pre-occupation of this group with the facts and statistics of the case, as well as rational thought, could very well be a result of their educational (scientific) background.

The construction of the uneducated, '**emotional them**' and the educated, '**rational us**' by the group has been discussed in Chapter 6 in the context of the alternative documentary reinforcing stereotypes. In the context of documentary desire, it can be seen that the respondents subject the argument of the film to rational analysis and very clearly construct the dichotomy of emotional/rational. Their responses indicate that by virtue of their education, they are empowered to think more 'rationally' and that thinking rationally is better than being emotional. The members of the group would rather get over with the emotional sequences in the film, and move on with the facts of the case. There is definitely sympathy, **but** not beyond 'a certain extent'.

That guy saying electricity not giving him anything... that shows how much you can expect from that **person's** point of view or how rational his thought is. You **didn't** educate him, so he is not a valuable resource as far as you take a statistical opinion **to...** it is wrong to say they shouldn't have sentiments, but you can't get so much out of this sympathy. You **can't** sympathise beyond a certain extent.

What I feel is he is trying to go on an emotional trip. He tries to show people dancing, people going in the boat, the colourful **shots...show** facts in between, but go on an emotional trip and make people feel bad about the issue.

We should rationally judge. We should not go into emotional issues at all so much. He has taken us on an emotional ride.

(responses by the computer engineers, to *A Narmada Diary*)

The rational analysis of the members of these three groups, were supplemented by a '**knowledge**' they possessed, and they tried to reconcile with the 'knowledge' provided by the film. The other groups in the study also interpreted the alternative documentary screened for them, in terms of their own experiential insights or ideological affiliations, but the knowledge that the '**rationalizing**' audiences draw upon is from their intellectual arguments about the '**real**' world.

Because if you see the background, basically the whole world is talking of global warming. So we have one area where thousands and thousands of hectares of land just being smashed up for the construction of a dam (Suresh, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*).

We would like to know what happens from the enforcement side. That is missing from the film. What is happening from their end? Sometimes things might look bad, but these are the by-products of industrialization and urbanization (Sharath, environmental scientist, responding to *Chaliyar*).

See, this is a valley. Why they have chosen this particular point and not any other point is because a valley forms a natural bucket, right? It can hold so much water. Nowhere else it holds. It has to hold so much water for everybody to use (Bharath, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*).

There was an article on the number of criminal cases against legislative members, and the least number of cases was 32 against an MLA in Gujarat... Like everyone knows, politicians and riots go together. And Bombay is the commercial capital of India, where underworld dons like **Dawood**, who leads the **muslim-dominated** mafia. To counter this, there is the **Hindu-dominated** mafia...the only way to cure this is literacy (Rahul, right-wing student, responding to *I Live in Behrampada*).

These responses show that the audiences of the three groups negotiate the knowledge they get from the film with the knowledge they already possess from their education, exposure to mainstream media, and other such ‘**knowledge**’-providing activities.

Personal experience is yet another aspect which influences this negotiating of information. One computer engineer, while **self-admittedly** not overly concerned about the environmental aspects of building the Sardar Sarovar dam, argues **that** the adivasis must be duly compensated. He refers to a similar project undertaken by the government in his village, in which his grandparents lost a lot of land, and after many decades, still have not received the promised compensation. This personal experience was repeatedly mentioned by the respondent, while analyzing the film. A Muslim student member of the pro-Hindu youth organization (responding to / *live in Behrampada*) also categorically says that the Hindu-Muslim divide is more prevalent in cities than in villages and towns, according to his personal experience. The zonal president of the organization, a Hindu, also agrees with this, again based on personal experience.

All these problems are in the cities only, never in **villages**...even Ganesha immersion, I have done so many times. I come from Adilabad, where there is so much unity. Only after coming to Hyderabad, I realized the Hindu-Muslim feeling existed (Anwar, right-wing student, responding to *I live in Behrampada*),

Yeah, it's true. I am from a small village in Mehaboobnagar district. A maximum of **1000** or **2000** people live **there..and** there was never this feeling. In Hyderabad, only Muslims celebrate Moharram, but in my village, we all celebrate it, even the Hindus (**Om** Prakash, right-wing student, responding to / *live in Behrampada*).

Objectivity and solutions in the alternative documentary

As people who watch this film, it is again our **interpretation**. We are like the judge. We have got some views about what is happening there actually and we have someone's interpretation done to us. It is for us to decide with whatever resources we have got, whether this is good or bad. We are in that state (Suresh, computer engineer responding to *A Narmada Diary*)

This response by a computer engineer to an alternative documentary typifies what almost all the focus-group members did with the documentary, i.e., sitting in judgment on it. This judgment could be a natural conclusion to the argument that the documentary puts forward about a particular issue. As mentioned before, the analysis of the focus groups' responses shows that the audiences make the two demands of objectivity and solutions on the alternative documentary. However, most of the filmmakers interviewed for this study are convinced that objectivity is a myth, and that providing solutions is 'prescriptive', the latter being something they consciously avoid doing. The difference in audience expectations and the agenda of the filmmaker reveals a break in the making and watching of an alternative documentary. If effective persuasion is the agenda of these films, addressing this break becomes important.

The juxtaposition of the filmmakers' opinions about objectivity and the audience demand for 'the other side of the picture' shows the differences in perspectives. That objectivity is a myth is accepted as a truism by postmodern scholars, and reiterated by every filmmaker interviewed for the study. The filmmakers are constantly aware that their films are subjective, interpretative constructs about issues in the historical world. This opinion is summed up by filmmaker Anjali Monteiro.

Objectivity is an untenable view. If you looked at any discourse, objectivity has been put to question. So why do we, in social sciences or in the realm of art, need to even think about that question? That the camera never lies is one of the biggest lies. It [*the*

film] is a construct. All the time we are constructing reality and even where it could have had its run, like in physics, they are talking about various other modes in which you approach reality. I **don't** think you even need to bother about answering that question. Objectivity is one of the biggest myths (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

However, the focus group discussions reveal that not all audiences are inclined to think this way, especially about the alternative documentaries that are more of an argument against popularly held notions of development as perpetuated by the state. This would include audience responses to *A Narmada Diary*, *Chaliyar* and *Something Like a War*, among the **films** screened for the focus groups. These three films challenge, respectively, the construction of a big **dam**, the pollution caused by a big factory, and coercive family planning measures, all of which have been constructed by the state as vital steps towards building a strong and prosperous India. So, when the hegemony of nation-building itself is challenged by these films, the audiences respond to the arguments in the films by countering them with questions from the dominant rhetoric of development. And when these questions go unanswered by the films, they pronounce their 'judgment' on the lack of objectivity in the films. Some responses that articulate this demand for objectivity are given here to substantiate this point.

What is the government's justification for having the industry despite the severe health problems for the people? This must have been included in the film.

The film only portrays a 40-year old problem of pollution, nothing new. It should have investigated the reasons why the management and government continue to run the industry, especially if the locals are affected so much.

(responses by the environmental scientists to *Chaliyar*)

They [rural women] were obviously a politicized **group**...**The** population sampling seems to be only those women who have come out with their problems with contraceptives. There seems to be a population which they *{filmmakers}* are ignoring. If they had got them in somehow, at least this **façade** of objectivity, which everyone seems to be hankering after, could have been there... I am not saying it should be an objective film or that both sides of the picture must be presented. But there should be an argument (**Sharmila**, feminist, responding to *Something Like a War*).

It just gives only this one perspective, there is no **two-sided...probably**, we must have something, a documentary which comes from the government's side also, listing their pros and cons on this issue. As of now, **it** is only this one aspect that we have seen. I feel he is being very selective in what he wants to put through. The guy has a viewpoint. He has shot only that and edited out what is not his viewpoint. (responses by the computer engineers to *A Narmada Diary*)

Since the agenda of **nation-building** has been thoroughly disseminated by the state, from the time of independence, a refusal to tackle this dominant logic may work against the alternative documentary. The interviews reveal that all the filmmakers are aware that people, by and large, have been indoctrinated by the hegemonic propaganda of the state. And that the filmmakers seek to counter this propaganda headlong, without addressing the common questions which audiences could throw up from within the dominant rhetoric.

Seeing their film as counter-propaganda, as an '**antidote**' to the propaganda by the state, the filmmakers want to deny space to the dominant logic.

There are people who are for the dam. If you go to Gujarat and show it, 99% or 95% of the people have caught the propaganda of the state. Any **film** against the dam and they will be against it. Ours is a counter-attempt to show the other side in Gujarat. A film like that will polarize the audience. It's the truth as I see it. It may not be that people who are fed with the other side will agree **with...See**, I do not do market research and make the film, I am not an advertising agent. If I were, I would do what they are doing and do audience survey and see what people like to hear and give it to them gently. I basically tell the truth as I see it. I make them very emotionally. I get involved with the issue and make the film. So in some cases, people do not get convinced and in some cases, they get thoroughly convinced (**Anand Patwardhan**, filmmaker, personal interview).

Among the questions thrown up by the computer engineers who responded to *A Narmada Diary*, were the notions of 'sacrifice for the nation' and '**resources** of the **nation**' and '**development** of the nation', all with the realization that the adivasis need to be adequately compensated. In fact, most of the responses offer a negotiated reading of the film. The respondents negotiate between their notion of development (through big

dams), and sympathy for the plight of the marginalized **adivasis**. Except for one respondent who calls for a '**complete halt**' to the construction of the dam **in** light of the environmental hazards of global warming, all the other members agree that the **film** deals with the denial of rehabilitation of the adivasis.

Basically I am not opposed that the forest is being eliminated or whatever it **is**. I mean if development has to happen, you have to make some sacrifices. But things would have to be done in the right perspective instead of doing it in such a hasty fashion.

The purpose of the **film** is to tell us that they are not against the dam construction. But they are against the methods adopted to this complete process of evacuation, rehabilitation and showing them alternative ways of livelihood. Nothing has happened. Very clearly Medha Patkar, was saying in her very own words 'hum yaha dam todne nai aaye'...' we are not against the dam or breaking the dam. We have come here to see that things are...' she has all the statistics about how various things are. All this **makes** you believe that it is the government that has failed in understanding the requirements or necessities of the people affected.

When there is going to be development, somebody is affected...
(responses by the computer engineers to *A Narmada Diary*).

One of the respondents makes a very strong argument about the '**sacrifice**' that a citizen of a nation is called to make for the sake of the nation. That this argument is state-induced is popularly accepted by critics of the dominant **paradigm** of development, and has been counter-addressed by the question about the lack of rights of the same marginalized people, who are called upon to make these sacrifices. Both these arguments are reproduced in the responses to *A Narmada Diary*.

You have to understand what are the benefits that the nation gets. It is the nation. That is important. It is not you the individual or us or a few hundred or a few thousands of people. You are talking about a whole nation. There are people who lose their lives in war. They fight for the nation. People give sacrifices for the nation in many ways. This is something your nation requires. Your **nation** requires your life at this moment. You have to die. The nation requires your land at this moment, you have to give that (**Phani**, computer engineer).

It again comes to what do they get from the nation (**Bharath**, computer engineer).

The viewer's expectation of objectivity conflicts with the filmmaker's rationale against objectivity, as can be seen from one instance illustrated below. This makes it all the more imperative that the agenda of persuasion that an alternative documentary furthers needs to be clarified within the context of audience desire.

What happens from the enforcement side? We would like to know what happens from the enforcement side. That is missing from the film. Sometimes it might look bad. But even the view point of the industry should have been there to balance things out.

(Sharath, environmental scientist, responding to *Chaliyar*),

I don't think that the films should try to provide the other point of view... regarding the state or the management's justification of the factory, I deliberately did not include them. I did not want to give them space in my film. I did not want to make my film objective. My film is for the suffering people there who are fighting to get the factory closed.

(Sarat Chandran, filmmaker of *Chaliyar*)

Like the differing views of the audiences and filmmakers on the issue of 'objectivity' in the alternative documentary, their disagreement on providing solutions to the problems raised by the films are also divergent. All the focus groups demanded that the film provides the 'solution' or 'alternative' to the issue being problematized.

I don't want to be top-down and actually want people to think about these issues. And that's why the film raises lot more questions than it answers. Because I think that the answers will come from people thinking about these issues. The solutions are there in the film. But you have to search for them. There has to be an active engagement of the mind with what is being said on the screen. It is not being told in the narration, 'now you do this'. There is no prescription in my film. I think people can see it as a viewpoint of some person. Whether they agree with it or not agree with it, it will add something to their thought process.

I don't want to make a prescriptive film, where people come and get a blue print of what is to be done. That would be very presumptuous on my part. Who am I to dictate to people what they should do with their lives? But it's just the kind of a worldview, which comes from watching the films that could trigger off something in somebody, or a recognition of something they are already feeling (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

The focus group members, however, ask for solutions, and see the lack of alternatives as a flaw.

What is the alternative they are asking for, that he has not dealt with a little too. What is the alternative that they are asking? There is no solution given. There is no perspective given at all.

(response by a computer engineer to *A Narmada Diary*)

Maybe it could have provided some alternatives as well, as to what we can do about it. After a while it seemed monotonous. Maybe if the alternatives were shown, it would have been **better**.

(responses by the students of social work to *Lesser Humans*)

Most of what is shown in the film, we already know. Like in projects like these all this pollution and problems are there. But ultimately what happens?

The problem of the last 40 odd years is being shown in the film, what about the solution?.

Everybody is complaining about the problem, but what about the solution. What is to be done about it? That is more important.

(responses by the environmental scientists to *Chaliyar*)

The despair felt by several members of the audiences, especially in response to Stalin's *Lesser Humans*, could be one reason that prompts the demand for solutions. 'For me, again the same sense of despair. I can't do anything about it. That is disturbing', 'What can and should be done about the issue? Some arguments should have been there. It was an absolute dead-end. Like this is how it is and this is how it will be. The despair. That feels very bad. It will lead to despair among those who do this work'- responses like these reflect that the feeling of despair and helplessness seem to swamp the audience, who convert this into a demand for solutions from the films. However, the filmmakers' agenda of sensitization, a non-tangible and often, non-verifiable agenda, precludes the onus of providing solutions in their films.

I don't know whether the film can always provide solutions or answers or always give hope or give a direction to any kind of action. I think if it is a starting point to make you think or question or makes you a little more sensitive to certain situations, I think even that is something. But I would be interested to know how it is being used in the area

itself and what people there think about the film (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

One tends to attribute lots more power of behavioural change to film, **I** don't know for what reason. For instance, one does not raise the question, what is the purpose of reading this poem? Ok, you have read me this poem, what do you expect me to do now? Why **don't** they ask, what does the MTV **expect** us to do?

So they have a feeling that the film is supposed to do something to them. Probably they expect that hard-core development communication expects you to **change** your behaviour. If you don't, then something is wrong with the film (K.P.Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

Filmmaker Jayasankar's opinion about the expectation of the audiences of the alternative documentary to provide solutions, affords a context within which this demand of the audiences can be located.

How could these two diametrically opposite opinions be reconciled? What is the possible interface between the filmmaker's agenda and the viewer's demand? These questions remain unexplored as yet, while the notion of documentary desire itself is just beginning to be talked about in contemporary documentary theory.

CHAPTER 8: A CONCLUSION

Representation in the post-colonial world has moved from exclusively focusing on the **West's** representation of the East, to looking inwards at the inequities in one's own society. Post-colonial criticism focuses on the 'fluid, unstable nature of the personal and gender identity' of authors, and their multiple allegiances and contradictions that manifest in their representations of the historical world. The texts, therefore, are sites where ideological struggles are carried out (Barry, 1995). My aim was to explore the alternative documentary in India along these lines.

This study of the post-Emergency, independent documentary in India is located at the interface between contemporary documentary theory from the West, and theories of an alternative development. While the word 'alternative' has been used to refer to these films, the study critically interrogates the alternative/mainstream dichotomy. Close readings of the 10 chosen films, in-depth interviews with filmmakers, and focus group discussions **with** different audiences, were the methods used in the text-author-audience approach to my study.

The exploration of the filmmakers' agendas reveals their **pre-occupation** with the historical and systematic denial of rights to certain sections of the Indian society. The filmmakers see their films as opening up democratic spaces for marginalized voices. That video can be used as a weapon to address social inequities emerges as the underlying belief. The problematic of representation, in this attempt to marry art and **activism**, is highlighted. The examination of '**representation**', in its multiple connotations, **provides** some critical insights into documentary realism and the truth-claims, which the

alternative documentary fosters. The recourse the films take to testimony in their agenda of persuasion is critiqued in light of audience responses. It is observed that realism, along with testimony, is instrumental in encouraging the viewer to look at the documentary as truth. By ideologically and politically representing the voice of marginalized people, the alternative documentaries present themselves as narratives of an unequal development. They critique the flawed developmental policies of the state, which systematically disenfranchise certain sections of Indian society. Big dams, polluting industries, **violent** population control policies, and state apathy towards an inhuman profession like human scavenging, these are some of the issues that these films deal with, to make a larger argument about the failure of development as envisioned by the state.

An examination of the contentious issue of representing the 'other', and the related concerns of stereotyping, self-representation, and location of the filmmaker, reveals the strategies that the alternative documentary in India deploys to argue its case. 'Caricature' emerges as one dominant strategy of the films. The focus group discussions reveal that by resorting to caricatures, the films could, unintentionally, encourage oppositional readings. Certain representational practices adopted by these films result in continuing the marginalization of their subjects and denying them any agency. Further research on this question is required to fully understand the ramifications of this statement.

I propose that empathy and realism are two distinct modes with which the audiences engage with the alternative documentary. Knowledge manifests as a nebulous concept, and correspondingly the notion of epistophilia, or pleasure of knowing, gets re-defined. I also suggest that objectivity and solutions are two demands that the audiences

make on **the** alternative documentary, conflicting with the filmmakers' own positions on these **issues**. This break between the making and the reception of these films needs to be substantiated by farther research.

The large number of alternative documentaries being produced in the country is an indication that these issues are being constantly confronted and addressed by filmmakers, audiences, non-governmental sectors and students of communication. So while the production of the alternative documentary seems to be thriving in India, their dissemination leaves much to be desired. The issue of dissemination of the alternative documentary in India needs to be addressed, if the potential of the alternative documentary in India is to be fully exploited.

Addressing dissemination

The question of language, the question of really getting across, the question of knowing where your film is going... Though we sell so many copies, we don't really have a clue as to who is seeing our films and what they are doing with it, and whether they are using it or not or whether they are stuck in some cupboard of some university libraries (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

It is an acknowledged fact that across the world, documentary watching is significantly less when compared to television programmes or fiction film. The differences in the scale of production, distribution and the infrastructure in place for mainstream, audio-visual material should be considered, while taking a critical look at the dissemination of the alternative documentary. The filmmakers and the focus groups interviewed for the study articulate the need for a wider screening of these films. The interviews with the filmmakers reveal that they are aware that their films do not reach adequate '**numbers**'. Two dimensions emerge in this **problem** of dissemination: lack of access to these films, and lack of interest in audiences to watch these films.

You have no choice but to reach out to people. Through the mainstream, **narrowcasting**, door-to-door selling of video cassettes, the internet, film **festivals...you** have to do it (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

The absence of an organized distribution network for these films is one of the main reasons why the screenings remain a sporadic activity. This issue is dealt with a little later in the **chapter**.

Finding an audience for the alternative documentary

While one can conceive of audiences for fiction films and specific television categories (like the soap-operas, or reality shows, or news, or documentaries on wild life or art), who exactly is a '**natural**' audience for an alternative documentary? This important question has not been addressed yet in contemporary documentary theory. And it is the answer to this question that will allow for new strategies to emerge for a more widespread dissemination of these films.

When you are showing the film, it does matter who is showing the film and under what circumstances it is being shown. Because they are not just films which you show and disappear and never come back and see the people again. If there are groups which are working with people, and then they are shown as one of the many things that they are **doing**, when there is an ongoing interaction, then these films are the most useful. Where organisations which are already working, say women's groups or whatever, there is ongoing contact with the people, where there will be follow-up, then these films will be most meaningful. Or in schools and colleges where some of the teachers are already talking about some of these issues (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interviews)

The more visible spaces where alternative documentaries are screened are film-festivals, colleges and university campuses, and by NGOs and grassroots organizations in their adopted villages or during seminars.

Film festivals are normally restricted to annual or bi-annual affairs, which means that the audiences there are exposed to a few documentaries, for a week or so, once or

twice a year. So they **don't** make for a significant audience community in terms of numbers.

This opinion is seconded by responses from the focus groups like:

What happens with a film like this? Nothing. If we take a **camera** to these people and record what they say, how will it benefit them? It gets shown only in film-festivals. (Ravi, post-graduate student of development communication, responding to *Lesser Humans*)

But filmmakers consider the film-festival as only one of the avenues that is available to them to screen their films, but not necessarily the most significant. As filmmaker Stalin puts it:

I feel the only place that comes last for me is **festivals**. If you ask me to prioritize my preferences for screenings, I would put Doordarshan with all the cuts and the advertisements much before the single showing in festivals. Because I know that in festivals all my filmmaker friends, who are already oriented towards an alternative vision of development will watch the films. Some buyers who wish to take the film to Amsterdam or Germany will be there. Or maybe I will get some telecast royalty, and I will be able to make another film out of it, yes. But that is not my priority. I would much rather take the video and go to the villages and show it there. Show it to schools, colleges and groups like that. Show it to housewives' associations and my parents and people like that. And put it on TV. And then it is ok, if it also gets screened in a **film-festival**. I would put it that way (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

That '**numbers**' do matter is clear from filmmaker Stalin's opinion about whom he wants his audiences to be. Be it privileged spaces like film-festivals, or international funding **agencies**, or mainstream spaces like television and classrooms, the filmmakers desire that as many people watch their film, as possible. However, the mainstream audiences or '**unconverted**' audiences, are the ones they would prioritize over exclusive, '**converted**' audiences.

In University campuses, keeping with Bill Nichols' (1991) definition of the documentary as a '**discourse** in sobriety', disciplines concerned with literary, **political** and cultural theory might organize screenings of these films to supplement their courses or

for their seminars. So, the audiences in university campuses are students who have to watch the **films** as part of their course-work, or students who are already initiated into political theory. The audiences can be compared to the focus groups in the study for whom film screenings were organised. The audiences in the campuses too, come together to watch the film under the aegis of a particular educational system, and the watching is not on a continuous, informal basis, but is a more intermittent, formal activity. While the **'numbers'** are fairly higher when compared to the **film** festivals, still they remain as few as, say, the readers of specialized books on political or literary theory. Filmmaker Madhushree Dutta is the only one of the filmmakers interviewed who opines that the alternative documentaries need to be seen as 'protest films', like there is protest literature or protest music. The difference in the reach of mainstream audio-visual material and the alternative documentary that a viewer has access ensures that 'the fight is not among equals'. She conceives as her audience as anyone for whom the film **'works'**, and that it is a **'cultural illiteracy'** being propagated by the state and the market, which doesn't encourage a viewer to be interested in watching documentaries.

NGOs and other grassroots initiatives like women's **groups** and NSMs use these documentaries for sensitization and mobilization purposes. But what has not been researched into is how regularly and extensively are these films being used. Several cynical views are expressed by focus group members and filmmakers about the use of these films by the NGO sector and other organizations. Filmmaker Deepa **Dhanraj**, in her interview, alludes to the fact that it angers her to see how some NGOs are using alternative films for post-dinner screenings.

So, finding and sustaining an audience for the alternative documentary emerges as one critical issue that needs to be addressed, if the scale of their dissemination has to increase. The absence of a well-entrenched distribution network is keenly felt by all the filmmakers, most of whom are disseminators of the alternative documentary as well.

Filmmaker Madhushree Dutta, among other filmmakers, rues the fact that there is no support structure that allows for a sustained distribution of these films.

I work on distribution of films as well. I network with colleges and show around some films. I conduct workshops as well. But it is a huge task. Because showing one or two films is not enough at all. Discussions must follow the screenings. And even extended screenings are not enough. Because to sustain their interest, the screenings must be a regular feature. Actually, the culture of film watching must change. This is very important. It is a very prolonged task. So a supporting system must emerge for the filmmakers. It should include networking and taking around documentaries on a sustained basis (Madhushree Dutta, Filmmaker, personal interview)

Narrowcasting and broadcasting

The importance that filmmakers give to dissemination can be seen from the fact that they invest a lot of time and energy into screening their films. Sarat Chandran shows alternative documentaries to people in the villages of Kerala. The method he employs is that he screens a feature film, a classic, for which the audience has to pay a fee of one rupee. Before the main film is screened, the alternative documentary is screened. Or sometimes, a traveling documentary festival is organized and tours from village to village. This is similar to the **video-jathas** that filmmaker Anand Patwardhan organizes, where the main focus is to screen the alternative documentary in as many places as possible. This kind of dissemination, a form of narrowcasting, requires very minimal and mobile infrastructure. But the reach it might have may be limited, as recognized by the filmmakers.

I did it [video jathas] myself sometime and then along with other people like the KSSP in Kerala, the Tamil Nadu science forum and the BGVS, literacy **movement**. They are **mostly** fun. They are very concentrated screenings, 4 to 5 locations in one day. Screenings followed by discussions over a period of 10 days or two weeks. So it is covering quite a spectrum.

I don't want to exaggerate about the numbers we are reaching. They are still very small. I think all my films are terribly under-utilized. Because there is only so **much**...I mean, I am making the films as well and I can't spend all my time showing them. And there are not enough groups taking this job seriously, of showing them (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

While narrowcasting itself is spoken of as a more effective means of communication and a more satisfying experience of relating to audiences, the filmmakers acknowledge the power of the mainstream mass media to reach those big 'numbers'. Talking of his film *Ram ke Naam*, shown on prime time television, as a case in point, Patwardhan opines that:

When *Ram ke Naam* was shown on television, finally after winning the court case and they had ratings which were published later. They had 18%. Now 18% for a documentary is higher than most of the serials, because nowadays there are so many channels and to get 18% of the people watching one programme without switching it off. That itself is unusual. Now multiply that 18 with the number of television watchers in our country and you get a huge number. I could never reach that figure taking my projector and showing that film. I could live for a thousand years and not reach that kind of audience (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

As with other totalistic dichotomies **critiqued** earlier in the thesis, from these responses of the filmmakers it can be understood that in the debate on dissemination, it is not a question of broadcasting *versus* narrowcasting that needs to be addressed. The dichotomy is not recognized by the filmmakers in the study as sacrosanct. Their willingness to exploit any avenue available for them to screen their films is evident from the interviews.

The focus group discussions reveal that the respondents, by and large, agree that these films should be shown extensively if at all any perceptible change should come about in the attitudes of people.

Please do something about showing the film, mainly it should be showed to students. Even if the views in the film are conveyed precisely and correctly to a single audience at a time, it will be very good.

Please make such films and show them to everybody.

(responses by the right-wing students to *ILive In Behrampada*).

These responses by a group of right-wing graduate students to a film dealing with a sensitive issue like the Hindu-Muslim, post-riot situation in a minority locality should be encouraging indeed for the filmmakers, and shows the potential that the alternative documentary has for effective persuasion. The audiences who empathized with the films articulated the strongest opinions that alternative documentaries needed to be shown to as many audiences as possible, and the responses that substantiate this are provided below.

The members of the welfare group, employed in educating children in leprosy colonies, rickshaw pullers colonies, minority institutions, etc were unanimous in their opinion that films like *When Women Unite* (which was screened for them), should be shown to the women in these colonies, because the women would identify closely with what is shown in the film.

It is very important to show the women in our colonies such films.

There are twenty members in my savings group, they will like to watch such a film.

In fact, if you can bring the TV and VCR, we promise you that we will arrange many groups of women and children to watch it. They will all come. We will take the responsibility.

Of course, they may not tell the men what the film is about. They might just say, a cinema is being shown. The men will feel threatened if they say it is a film about what the women did in Nellore. They will be scared that these women may also do it!

(responses by the welfare workers to *When Women Unite*).

This seems to support filmmaker **Shabnam** Virmani's aim to use her films for horizontally linking with grassroots **women's** groups across the country, and to build coalitions for similar causes. It also echoes the opinion that filmmakers hold about the potential of the documentary to help empower audiences to take control of their lives.

The group of feminists in my study, speculated how an audience, ideologically different from them, like a group of doctors or a group of management professionals, would react to a film like *Something Like a War*, which challenges the dominant rhetoric of population control in the Third World. Other responses about whom the alternative documentaries are meant for, reveal a whole range of suggestions, from the marginalized people themselves to the urban, educated strata, to politicians and policy makers. The 'target audience' of a documentary often became a point of debate among the members of a focus group.

Anand Patwardhan asserts that he does not make films for any 'target audience'. His films are aimed at 'all of India specifically and the rest of the world incidentally'. Filmmaker K.P.Jayasankar suggests in his interview that the whole terminology of 'target audiences' itself is problematic. What is more important is to understand how different audiences read media messages, irrespective of who they are. He believes that 'all kinds of people, at all kinds of level' offer resistance to dominant relations of power in several ways, and one needs to identify these resistances and strengthen them. Anjali Monteiro seconds his opinion that even the so-called mainstream material has subversive potential, including soap operas and advertisements. On the flip-side, the so-called alternative images get appropriated by the mainstream television channels for their own. These two factors call for a renewed interrogation of the mainstream/ alternative divide.

Mainstreaming the 'alternative'

Documentary as a form is getting redundant.. we have to acknowledge this. It's already happening in the **West**. Networks have taken over, there is no funding. There is no space, audiences are disinterested. In a sense, we are embattled, besieged. Till a few years ago, we were lucky there was no cable TV. Now audiences are in a consumption mode, whatever they see, it is for that moment, they consume it. We cannot make films, educate audiences and get them to see it (Deepa Dhanraj, filmmaker, personal interview).

Filmmaker Deepa Dhanraj's opinion, expressed above, provides the context for the question 'what is really alternative', in today's world. One needs to address the reality of a global village subsuming every 'alternative' space, especially in the light of rapidly evolving communication technologies, economic liberalization and the opening up of private television channels in India. This makes the contemporary media scenario in India a totally different historical reality than it was 25 years ago.

Clarifying the issue of disinterested audiences, an opinion held by filmmakers and the focus group respondents, filmmaker Jayasankar mentions that 'strategies' need to be invented by the filmmakers of the alternative documentary to maximize the 'limited spaces' available to show the film.

The spaces for showing them [the audiences] your film is very limited. When you do show it to them, how do you get them to watch it? We need to invent strategies. I don't know what type of strategies. The other thing which has to co-exist with this initiative is some kind of media education, to get people empowered to view these images critically. (Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview)

Addressing the question of media education, filmmakers Anjali Monteiro and Jayasankar emphasise the need to empower audiences to look critically at media messages, alternative and otherwise. They make the pertinent observation that media education is probably the most required tool, which will help audiences to say 'no' to

certain kind of images. And this media education must be systematically imparted in classrooms, through schools and colleges.

A large part of alternative media has to be media education, and critiquing the so-called mainstream, as well as the alternative. Not just the mainstream, necessarily. But looking critically at media images, reflecting on what they are doing to the viewer, reflecting on how one is using them, reflecting on how they relate to the larger power relations that are in **place...the** process of looking at them as constructions and not as reflections of reality. It is very important to institutionalize this and have media education on the curriculum of schools and colleges. But unfortunately, that is not something that people are talking very much about (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, **personal** interview)

Along with audience empowerment and invention of new strategies that would get the audiences interested in watching the alternative documentaries, I suggest that the making and distribution of these films need to be organically and systematically linked, especially in the light of my proposition that the alternative documentary in India has no claims to a 'natural' audience. Since every screening of any alternative film would involve bringing together an audience, the dissemination networks need to be organized formally and through **pre-existing** infrastructure like schools and colleges, involving teachers, campus fraternities and, as is being attempted already, grassroots organizations.

While this suggestion does not in any way imply that the making and dissemination activities are divorced now, it is quite evident that the scale of this kind of dissemination is sporadic and inadequate. However, it seems a **tall** order to expect filmmakers to be involved in the making of these films, educating the audiences, and getting them to watch the films. What would be the way out of this impasse? The break between the making of these films and their distribution is indeed vast. Concerted efforts in the past like those by Odessa in South India or Netwaves in Bangalore haven't been too successful in sustaining regular and systematic dissemination of the alternative documentary. Now, after more than 25 years since the alternative documentary in India

was pioneered by Anand Patwardhan, it wouldn't be too soon to say that the objective of persuading people to rethink development through film cannot be fully achieved without ensuring proper dissemination of alternative documentaries.

By focusing on the **alternative** documentary of India, this study has tried to examine some questions of ideology, representation, identity, aesthetics, and meaning, with respect to a select sample of films. Like the films themselves, this study too might seem to raise more questions than it answers. However, it stands as an exploratory attempt to dissect the tradition of alternative documentary in our country.

Appendix A

Interview guide for filmmakers

This interview guide directed my questions during the in-depth interviews with the filmmakers. The guide comprised of two sections - issue-based questions and film-specific questions. Several sub-questions were thrown up by particular responses, and addressed by the filmmaker.

Issue-based questions:

1. Do you think the alternative/mainstream dichotomy is a valid one, especially with reference to documentaries in India?
2. How would you define your work?
3. Is there is a specific agenda which motivates your work?
4. What do you have to say about the politics of representation in the alternative documentaries?
5. How do you conceptualize objectivity?
6. Would you consider the socio-economic location of the filmmaker as a critical issue that needs to be addressed?
7. What are your ideas about reflexivity in the alternative documentary?
8. How would you position yourself in the content versus form debate? Would you call yourself a filmmaker or a film-activist?
9. What do you think about the role of video in development?
10. What are your impressions about the audiences for 'alternative' documentaries in India?
11. What have been your experiences with various audiences, while showing your film?
12. How would you respond to the opinion that these films often 'preach to the converted' in film festivals and universities?
13. How adequate is the dissemination network for these films?
14. What do you think about the narrowcasting versus broadcasting debate?
15. That funding decides the agenda of the film, is one prevalent opinion. How would you react to this statement?
16. Can you share some of your experiences with NGOs and funding agencies?

Film-specific questions:

This section included questions about the particular film, by the filmmaker being interviewed, chosen for textual analysis. It included questions on the context within which the film was made, particular representational practices in the film, where the film has been screened and audience responses to the film.

Appendix B

Guidelines for the focus groups discussions

This interview guide helped me direct the focus group discussions in the study.

Before the screening of the film:

1. Introduce the study, the moderator and expectations from the audience, after the screening.
2. **Introduce**, in brief, the film and filmmaker.
3. Explain that the post-screening discussion will be video/audio taped, and the responses will be used purely for **academic** purposes in the study.
4. Inform the audiences that their real names will not be used, if so desired by them.

After the screening of the film:

1. Could you please introduce yourselves, and provide a name, occupation, age and any other details you would like to?
2. What would be your first reaction to the film?

After starting the discussion by asking for the initial reactions of the respondents, the moderator (in this study, me) guides the audience to explore the issue of unequal development, objectivity, authenticity, truth, reality, effectiveness of the film, 'target' audiences, documentaries, etc, with reference to the film screened. The discussion is built on the initial observations that the various respondents make about the film.

Pointers for the moderator (after the screening of the film)

1. Do not dominate the discussion.
2. Make sure the members in the group are at ease with you and with each other.
3. Ensure equal participation by all the respondents, and do not allow a few leaders in the group to dominate the discussion. Draw out responses from those members in the group, who may be introverts or reluctant to voice their opinions.
4. Try to avoid leading questions, and urge the members to articulate their opinions at length, and not in monosyllables.
5. Provoke a direct discussion between any members who may have conflicting opinions,
6. Jot down notes during the discussion, and make a note of any distinctive body language or attitude.
7. Thank the respondents for their time and co-operation.

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