



DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Campus Rising

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Abstract

Universities are institutions of education and intellectual growth where young minds are nurtured in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom and debate. But many well-known universities in India in the last few years have been subjected to thought control, restrictions, and social discrimination by the administration and the current government. Unfortunately, much of this discrimination is meted out to students and staff belonging to India's marginalized communities, women, and those with liberal and left ideology - identities that the current ruling party and its ideologues have traditionally loathed. Persons with right-wing ideology have been appointed as heads of most institutions to curtail academic freedom while funding and scholarships are cut down for deserving candidates. But the students are not taking such fascism silently. They are protesting against the closing down of democratic spaces and the muzzling of voices in many universities. The prejudice against students of certain 'low caste' had been so drastic that a few students such as Rohit Vemula (Hyderabad) even committed suicide, giving rise to a further heat in the students' protest in many more institutions. Unfortunately, much of India's mainstream media, kowtowing the ruling party's line, has run campaigns to malign the protesting students. While the students' unrest continues in many cities, this film travels to some seven Indian universities (including Jawaharlal Nehru University, Hyderabad Central University and Banaras Hindu University among others) to record what the students and some teachers have to say about how their freedom is being curtailed, and how this movement will not die until they bring some change of perception about the rights of the underprivileged. The film also explores a general decline in the production of knowledge in Indian universities, as enumerated by eminent scholars such as Romilla Thapar, Irfan Habib, Vivek Kumar and Ashok Vajpeyi, among others.

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Campus Rising: Political Documentary Film in Today's India

Introduction

'Every student who attends college is expected by his or her parents, and the college administration, to simply study and prepare for a career. Anything other than studying, of course besides eating, sleeping, and some sports, is not what they are being sent to college for. Protest and politics! That is not the job of a student.'

This was a sarcastic comment made by a student from Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, when asked about the role of students in social movements. While a large number of students, especially those pursuing the job-oriented technical courses, would like to stick to the ideal expectation of their parents and the state, many others are breaking out of this expectation and finding the campuses to be ideal platforms for raising concerns about injustice, inequality, and corruption in India. Through the voices of many irate and revolutionary students, *Campus Rising* explores why and whether a student should get involved in the politics of the country at all. Having produced TV programs and documentary films since 1990, much of my work focused on themes of science, history, and the shared culture of South Asia. *Campus Rising (CR)* is my first film with political content—that is, showing a struggle of the students against ruling powers for their rights. One must unpack the reasons for doing a political film after almost 27 years of my career. And those reasons may also signify a need for political engagement by those who have so far kept themselves aloof from the politics of India.

Crisis of Higher Education and Liberalism in India Today

The 2014 election victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) brought India to a significant political turning. An almost totalitarian rule dominated by Hindu-Right ideology suppressed freedom of expression, human rights, and cultural diversity in various forms. In any case, India's educational institutions, and the society at large, have been known for the discrimination of people of lower Hindu 'castes,' minorities, and women for ages. Instead of trying to reduce this social lacuna, the present government only helped in worsening the social hierarchy and bigotry. Many individuals and institutions of academic and artistic pursuits have been concerned about the growing intolerance, prejudice, and public violence against minorities and the Dalits (lit. those who are broken or scattered). Besides suppressing the

marginalized, the ruling party and its allies have also attacked many Hindus who advocate for rationality, scientific thinking, and the rights of the poor. Individuals like Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, Gauri Lankesh, and M. M. Kalburgi have allegedly been murdered by Hindutva members since 2013 for their rationalist views, and many more are either being attacked or arrested (Chenoy 2018).

Universities are meant to be institutions of education and intellectual growth where young minds are nurtured in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom and debate. But in the last few years, many well-known universities in India have been subjected to thought control, restrictions, and social discrimination by the administration and the central government. Unfortunately, much of this discrimination is meted out to students and staff belonging to India's marginalized communities, women, and those with liberal and left-wing world views—identities that the current ruling party and its ideologues have traditionally loathed. Persons with right-wing ideology have been appointed as heads of most institutions to curtail academic freedom while funding and scholarships are cut down for deserving candidates. The teachers and other staff are expected to remain silent about the situation or else risk losing their jobs. Students, however, are not taking such attacks on their liberty and rights silently. They are protesting against the closing down of democratic spaces and the muzzling of their voices in many universities, a struggle that this film documents.

The prejudice against students of 'low caste' origin had been so drastic that a few students such as Rohit Vemula (Hyderabad) even committed suicide, kindling further protest in other institutions (Shantha 2019). Rohit's suicide in 2016 triggered a series of protests on campuses all over India and brought the discrimination of Dalits in educational institutions into the limelight. Unfortunately, much of India's mainstream media, kowtowing the ruling party's line, has run campaigns to malign the protesting students.

While the students' unrest continued in many cities, I decided to document this movement through a film by traveling to some seven Indian universities, including the famed Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU, New Delhi), Hyderabad Central University (HCU, Hyderabad) and BHU (Varanasi) among others, to record what the students and some teachers have to say about how their freedom is being curtailed, and how the movement will not cease until it brings more rights for the underprivileged (Dasgupta 2017). Through *Campus Rising*, I tried to give space to students' voices who are often marginalized by the mainstream media.

When one makes a film on a topic like university politics, especially in the last couple of years in India, it is difficult to decide where to stop filming because students' struggle seems to be ubiquitous. Before one issue is over, another one starts at another university. Since this film has mostly been self-funded, I needed to ration my shooting trips to save costs. So after the initial few months, I decided at one point in time to stop shooting and start editing the film, even though the events still continued. This film is therefore not about the recent events only—it's more about the ideas that a university campus allows to grow. Instead of depicting only the slogan-shouting students, this film asks basic questions about education and freedom. What is the purpose of a university? How is a university different from other institutions such as a school or college? What does a student find in a university which is not available in other places? Are our universities fulfilling the dreams of young students?

Typically in India, there are many restrictions until students finish the 12th standard in school. In college or a university, they suddenly find a unique atmosphere of freedom—the freedom to study whatever they want, the freedom to make new friends, the freedom to dress the way they want, to eat whatever they want, and to attend whatever classes they want. Such freedoms are very important and essential for a young student's intellectual and physical growth. As shown in the film, students also find the right kind of atmosphere on campus to freely discuss and debate what they perceive to be the problems of their society. But do our universities and colleges provide that freedom to them today? When I began asking students this question, I found thoughtful answers—something that *Campus Rising* starts with. It then moves on to more serious issues such as discrimination based on students' identities—whether based on caste, religion, gender, or regional difference.

The film also explores a general decline in the production of knowledge in Indian universities, as enumerated by eminent scholars such as Romilla Thapar, Irfan Habib, Vivek Kumar, Ashok Vajpeyi, and others. One of the major concerns about higher education shared by many scholars is that there is too much emphasis on science, engineering, business management, and other job-oriented topics whereas social sciences and humanities are being discouraged or underfunded in most institutions as they don't appear to be 'lucrative.' This results in an entire generation of youngsters taking for granted that only sciences and technology provide solutions to life whereas social sciences have no direct relevance. Such a generation, especially if coming from the urban elite society, is pressured to pursue science and tech careers. After university is over, they get highly paid jobs, continue to improve the urban life and

economy, and more importantly, go abroad for further studies and IT jobs. But due to a lack of understanding in social sciences, history, and literature, etc., this generation remains mostly cut off from the harsh realities of rural and underprivileged India, where social hierarchies and caste-based discrimination is still rampant and does not allow millions of poor people to come out of their miseries, resulting in the widening of the rich-poor divide in India (Business Today 2018). This was discussed by several scholars and students towards the end of the film (*CR*, 1:09:15).

Here the film touches on another bone of contention between these elite or upper-caste Indians and the poor, 'lower'-caste and rural folk: a reserved quota in government jobs and admissions in educational institutions for certain 'scheduled' castes, tribes, and other backward classes provided by the Constitution of India to uplift their social status and livelihoods. While the need for such 'affirmative action' was strongly felt by the authors of the Indian Constitution in the 1950s, mainly Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, himself a big reformer, the reservation has always remained controversial. This is mainly because a large number of elites who do not come under this scheme complain that it discriminates against their hard work and merit and argue that everyone must compete equally and work towards improving themselves. However, the fact remains that most of these elites occupy powerful positions in the government as well as the corporate or business world. The reservation is the only provision that helps many marginalized students enrol in universities and pursue higher education. But even after joining elite institutions, the unfairness towards Dalits is not over, as the film shows. 'So far, the Dalits were untouchable,' points out a speaker in the film, 'and now when we come to the educational institutions, they've become *uneducable*—you cannot be taught, we are often told' (*CR*, 0:28:50).

Since the state-own universities are funded through people's tax money, they must cater to the public at large, especially to the most downtrodden of the society. Hence the education and facilities provided by government-run universities are also highly subsidized so that the poorest students can afford them. In fact, at campuses like Delh's JNU, they made provisions to give extra marks or credits to the students coming from remote or underprivileged regions of India, especially supporting women. These provisions, however, do not always get respected and are often exploited to exclude the marginalized people from the facilities that have been constitutionally promised for them. When students witness such injustice on the campuses, they see them as a reflection of the larger injustice in the country. Thus, they find it imperative to raise their voices and become political while pursuing regular studies and research.

Political Documentary Film

The documentary film medium has been used extensively to support peoples' resistance movements (Gulati 2017). Since mainstream media platforms do not help to disseminate documentary film, film festivals and informal screening venues are some of the only places where people get to see films about people's struggles. After its completion in August 2017, *Campus Rising* was also screened before a variety of audiences at numerous national and international venues, such as Film South Asia (Kathmandu 2017), Madurai Film Festival 2017, and Mumbai International Film Festival 2018 among others. The purpose of showing it was not only to inspire the youth to raise their voice against injustice but also to make the general public aware of the larger goals of educational institutions. Since a large number of people in India support the ideology of the current government, some viewers complained that the film appears to be biased towards a particular kind of political ideology. Someone in the audience even suspected me of belonging to the Congress or the Left parties. Repeatedly I had to state that I do not represent any political party with this film, but I also agreed that the film is politically positioned.

One may expect a newspaper or TV news channel to be unbiased. A documentary film, however, is not a news bulletin or a newspaper headline. It is more like an editorial, an opinion column, or commentary on the ongoing events. It can even be seen as a personal or subjective statement by a filmmaker. A documentary film uses creative and artistic styles of storytelling to make a statement, unlike the newspapers that are supposed to point out 'plain facts.' While the impact of news is immediate and direct, sometimes even shocking, a documentary film, if done right, expects its audience to sit back and slowly reflect upon the film's issue. Any news gets old and stale immediately after being told or heard, whereas a good documentary film should be timeless.

Some viewers asked me if the problems being discussed in the film, i.e. caste discrimination and the curtailing of freedom, etc., have arisen only recently, that is, after the coming of the Modi government, or if they existed even earlier? In fact, many existed earlier too—JNU in Delhi, which spearheads most of the students' movements, has been politically active since the early 1970s when it was established. There were students' protests during the rule of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, especially during the 1975-77 State of Emergency. Many students were even arrested along with other oppositional politicians. According to some who witnessed the Emergency, however,

repressive measures were not as bad then as they are now during the Modi rule (Deeksha 2019). One of the underlying themes of *Campus Rising* is the students' anger against the current BJP government. The film is thus not only a documentation of the students' protests but also a tool that inspires them to revolt against suppression and discrimination anywhere.

Documentary Film in the Times of Information Capitalism

A trained and professional documentary filmmaker today is faced with many challenges. The video-making technology has become very affordable and easy to use—anyone with a smartphone can shoot good quality video and make it instantly public on the internet. This might be seen as a democratization of media or the empowerment of people who previously did not have the means to use media. However, the untrained video-makers and most of their audience today assume that you do not need training or special skills to make movies. Probably not having been exposed to great documentaries and world cinema, they also do not fully recognize the quality standards and extremely hard work and nuances that go into the making of professional movies. Many see the documentary film as an extension of news or journalistic reporting and do not recognize the artistic, creative, and conceptual possibilities of the medium.

Even surveillance camera recordings or amateur home videos of babies, pets, and cooking, etc. gather tremendous hits or become viral. Most of the viral videos are simply sensuous (appealing to the senses) rather than cerebral or thought-provoking, although that does not mean that such videos cannot be powerful or cannot motivate people to mobilize. Social media sites are full of amateur videos, often with false information, that polarize the masses towards a certain ideology or identity politics, even provoking them to act, often violently.

I do not reject amateur videography and cell phone footage—after all, local news and unusual events are being reported now via personal phones. Many media activists have also involved local communities in South Asia to produce videos using mobile phones depicting the daily lives in their localities or settlements, making them a tool of empowerment. In the cases of people's or students' movements such as protests and rallies that get curbed or muzzled by state forces, the participants' video recording and the footage itself becomes a very powerful tool of resistance and its documentation, as we have seen in the recent cases of political movements such as

the 2011 Tahrir Square protests in Egypt (Baladi 2016). CCTV and mobile footage are regularly presented as evidence in the court of law to settle cases. Of course, the images and footage are also often being photoshopped to alter reality to suit political ends. It needs to be mentioned here because in the case of protests carried out in Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2016 and later, video footage of some slogan-shouting people was used, even doctored somewhat, to claim that anti-India and pro-Kashmir slogans were raised in the campus by a set of left-leaning student activists. This is something that has been featured in this film as well (CR, 0:11:48).

With this scenario of popular videography, the next challenge for a documentary filmmaker is to find professional work and clients who are able to fund such films. They cannot always hope to get documentary projects from TV channels and often have to take on odd video jobs for smaller clients or institutions. Most new clients today, when they look at a proposed production budget, ask, 'Why do you need so much money for this? Can't you just shoot and edit it on your iPhone?' Many of the less experienced videographers today are ready to charge much less to get work compared to what a senior or trained filmmaker did. The conceptual quality (maybe not the technical quality) of the videos made by videographers with less training would differ from a professionally produced film. But very few of the new clients care for or recognize the difference. One client, who wanted me to make a film about the career of a senior human rights lawyer told me, 'we want a film which should grab the attention of YouTube visitors in its first 30 seconds.' It didn't matter if the audience sits through the rest of the film or not.

The creative treatment of audio and visuals in a film is also something that many business-minded clients may not fully appreciate. To many, an 'informational' film has to simply preach the facts in a linear and literal manner. For instance, the images must correspond to what is being said in the commentary, etc. Any deviation or mismatch between images and sound may look like an error to some unless they are open to diverse interpretations. A couple of scenes in *Campus Rising*, for instance, use a counterpoint or an almost sarcastic juxtaposition, which an attentive viewer can catch. One example is when the film actor Anupam Kher, who is sympathetic to the BJP government, explains in a speech at JNU that, 'Instead of only highlighting the negative aspects, one should show what good things the government is doing all over India.' Simultaneously, the film depicts a map of India, pinpointing the incidents of mob-lynching of Muslims or Dalits carried out by violent cow vigilantes who got protection from the government (CR, 0:19:12). Similarly, while an activist mentions that the

students must decide what the education budgets should be, a graphic animation shows how military budgets are soaring while education budgets are being reduced (CR, 0:52:48). Such a sarcastic juxtaposition of audio and visuals is possible in a political or independent documentary and probably not in a 'corporate-type' work produced for a client.

Conclusion

A documentary filmmaker is at a crossroads today, at least in South Asia. The extremely hard work that s/he goes through while learning the skill and making good quality films is only appreciated by a minority. There is still no standard platform where all sorts of documentary films can be found and watched (unlike a published book that can be found in a library or a bookstore). Even a scholar of documentary film has to struggle a lot to find most of the films that have been made in India. Due to this lack of access, only a few books have been published on Indian documentary films (Kishore 2018, Battaglia 2018). Even the internet is far from representing most Indian documentaries. Independent filmmakers can only access popular platforms like Netflix or Amazon Prime Video with difficulty to show their content. Thus, many Indian documentaries with great content do not reach large audiences.

In terms of competing with younger filmmakers, I feel that the great world cinema, the experimental documentary and the art videos that I or my peers were used to watching while we learned filmmaking in the late-1980s and early 90s, which gave us a better understanding of the visual medium and cinema, has not been part of the education of the 'millennial' generation. Originality, copyright, plagiarism, and the exclusivity of what you create have a very different meaning today. The latest technology and gadgets of high definition, Ultra HD, and so on have many times surpassed the limited means with which the filmmakers worked until the early 2000s. But the aesthetics today are all about creating a glitzy and sharp image and mind-blowing effects, with little thought or thought-provoking content that can make an impression on the thinking of the viewer.

Campus Rising, for instance, does not use any attractive or superficial effects to heighten its message—it simply expects the audience to listen to the voices being portrayed in the film. The concluding clips of the students in the last few minutes show hope and inspiration for the youth to rise and revolt against a government and a system that suppresses freedom and discriminates socially (CR, 1:14:00). In any case, the

bigger question that the film's screenings raises is: does the documentary film merely document a social movement or can it also inspire social change?

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