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## **Documentary Filmmaking: Notes on *Survey City* and the Need for Films that Concern Mass Social Movements**

*A Conversation Between Art and Activism*

Tarini Manchanda

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### **Abstract**

This article encapsulates a history of social justice filmmaking in India or South Asia more broadly with regard to what is being heralded as the Indian documentary wave since 2021-till date. It asks what role funding institutions and grant-making bodies play who tend to cater to their audiences more than the instincts of justice that tend to motivate filmmakers who pursue stories about underrepresented communities or social justice. The article complicates the discussion on the process of making social justice films, and delves into the complexity of form and content vs. addressing social issues, as well as the sociological aspects of a non-fiction film and its production.

**Keywords:** activism, social justice films, documentary, art, high art, activist films

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This is a reflection on the making of the film *Survey City* and the texts, images, and photographs that informed its production.

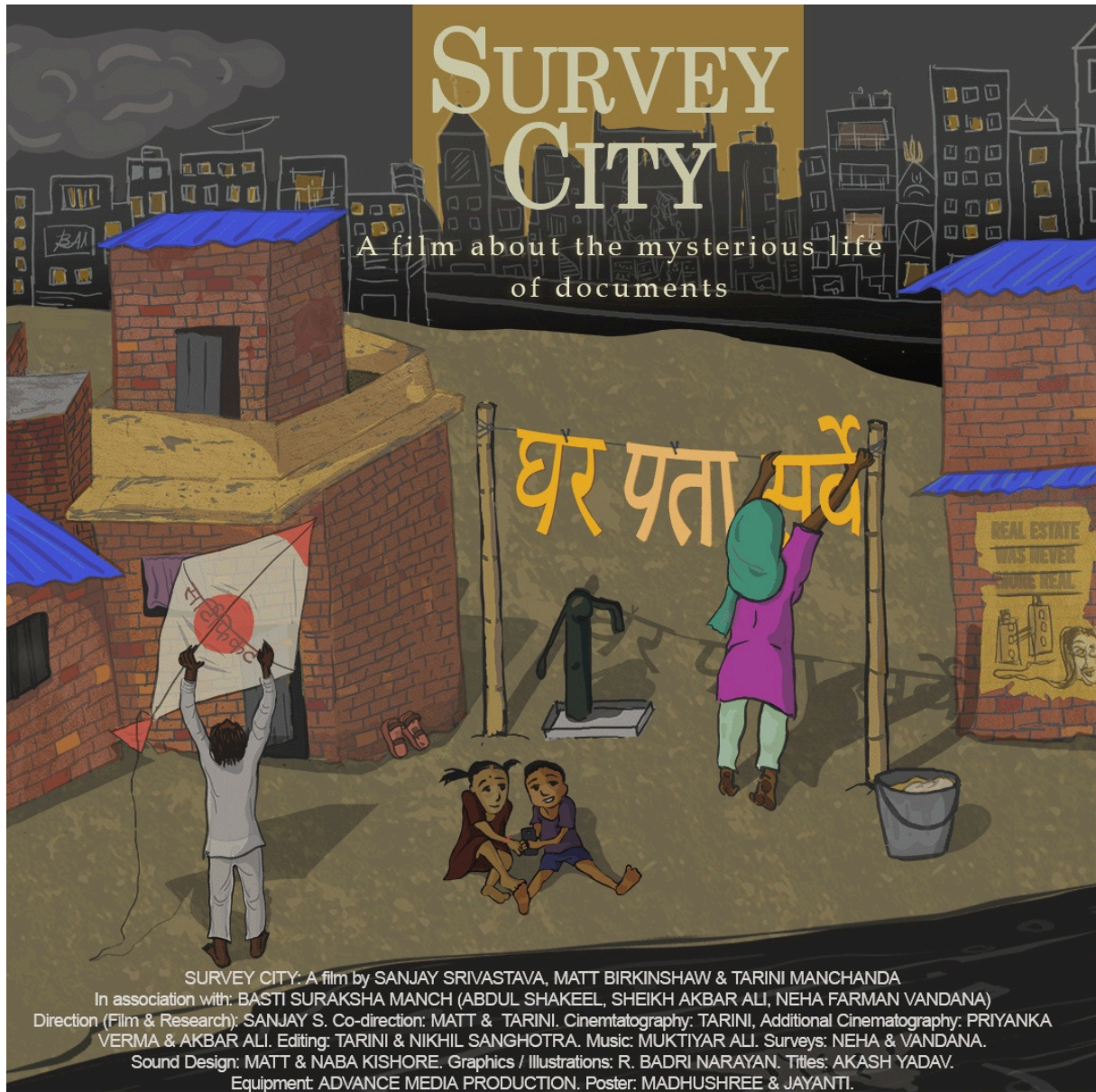


Figure 1:  
 Instagram post for *Survey City* created by Madhushree and Jayanti,  
 along with the film's credits. © Tarini Manchanda

In his master's thesis, 28-year-old Anand Patwardhan warned of "bourgeois" cinema that would dump the impulse to ask revolutionary questions by providing neat cathartic conclusions to social revolution via films. In a more extended discussion on the role of cinema in society, he describes the guerrilla cinema of Chile, where filmmakers lost their lives due to the political positions they had taken in their films. In the prologue to the reprint of his thesis, in the 2018 book titled *Towards a Peoples' Cinema*, Patwardhan questions his use of Marxist terminology in the 1970s, but largely stands by the arguments he made in his original thesis. He remarks that if films are to express solidarity with "the masses" for example those who protested against the measures introduced by Indira Gandhi during the 21-month long period from 1975 until 1977 that has become known as "the Emergency", they should avoid neat conclusions, as he had done at times in his film *Waves of Revolution* (Patwardhan 1975) that followed the events of the Bihar uprising with the JP movement of the 1970s. Patwardhan's thesis reflects on his filmmaking process (Patwardhan 1981).

Similar, this essay focuses on the process of producing a different sort of film at the height of a political struggle against the CAA and NRC.<sup>1</sup> This production, undertaken by university professors, engaged with civil society at the height of a critical moment in India's contemporary political arena. The film follows people whose lives are interrupted by one of many government-directed surveys.

In *Survey City*, a 32-minutes long film about the city as a social space and people seeking the security of tenure through documentation, the camera is not probing very far. It is entering a heavily studied space, in which people on the "periphery" of this city, in this case Dehli, are constantly at risk of becoming refugees (Mehra 2010). This film, while disconnected from Patwardhan's thesis, follows a trajectory in documentary cinema in which observations are made without drawing immediate conclusions. Instead, it works with questions and the exposition of what happens when a policy, much debated in public, is applied to the lives of the urban poor. It is about the social life of documents, but also seeks to inform about the ways in which a specific policy can impact society, on the kinds of unethical research techniques, on the consequences of unethical research, and the role of civil society. Thus, even as the film strives to humanize its characters, it is consequently humanizing civil society, which, as this essay argues, is an essential and now forgotten aim of documentary cinema.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2020, a series of protests took place across India. These were directed against the application of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), both legislations that would further facilitate the discrimination of Muslim citizens of India.



Figure 2:  
Ayesha, the film's protagonist, looks through the door of her home in Border Basti.  
© Tarini Manchanda

### Capturing the chaos

In making this film, the cameraperson was asked to shoot during a “chaotic” certificate distribution ceremony in order to depict the chaos. To capture chaos, however, a camera must not move while its subjects are moving. As the ceremony took place, it had to be recorded according to its character. The ceremony involved a certificate distribution in what appeared to be chaos. However, the camera, a close and still observer, noticed harmony within the group of people convening in this space. It watched how everyone in the locality was familiar with or knew each other, so they could identify such details as who was missing, who was at home, and who had lost a family member and therefore lived by themselves. What appeared as chaos to an outsider, such as the camera, was rhythm and familiarity to the insider. In this space, the camera was not given much privilege. It was pushed, shoved, and even forgotten as the approximately one hundred people in attendance sought the piece of paper that, along with the Chief Minister’s photograph, promised them a home through the CMAY scheme, short for Chief Minister's Awas Yojana, a housing scheme for the urban poor. As they stood in line for the certificates that would guarantee rights to their home, their names were called out. People who were present in the queue received their documents. Upon receiving them, some people discovered mistakes in their documents, while others were entirely passed over. One thing they shared was the concern for their homes, their relationships with family members, how they would make their next meal, or the future of their children and families. The footage on the mirrorless screen of the rental Canon 5D camera was an almost mundane rendition of the meeting that took place despite all the pushing and movement. To depict chaos, the camera had been quiet, still, omnipresent, and shifting but uninvolved. Initially, achieving this did not seem entirely possible, because one was pushed around several times, and no one could get in the way of the dream of a home.

However, as time went on, and each time the camera was moved, I realized that some movement would be natural and leaned into it. While natural hand-held movements sometimes prevented the jerky alternative of a tripod being moved around, the frames achieved some stillness by guarding the tripod. In consequent constructions of the film, we interrogated the notion of a home through its various elements. A second camera person was hired, and she was given a set of ideas or notes to think with.

**Shooting notes to the cameraperson who worked on *Survey City* along with me:**

*Ayesha's home is a one-room two-storied place in Border Basti. The outdoors is often busy with people passing by. It would be important to capture a moment of calm and quiet in the exterior of the home. Maybe you can do this at the end of the shoot?*

*Within the home: What location indicates pain or strife between her and the family? Are there corners where the children play, or do they play in the center? How does food emerge in the space. Is it central or secondary? What are objects that seem to have prominence, if any?*

*What are signs of scarcity in the space? Where has it been neglected? Is there a sort of recycling of things within the space? The most important object is her cupboard, where she keeps the documents that indicate that she is a formal resident of the area. How is the cupboard placed? Is there something to demonstrate its importance, maybe by shooting corners and angles of the cupboard?*

The outcome of this shoot was a series of disjunct shots of a space. How could we depict the home without pitying or glorifying it? A structure was comfortably captured through the arrangement of the people within, flying bits of string, cloth, and the corner of a staircase. However, the most exciting aspect was that, after they had been captured, these shots, when put together, allowed meaning to emerge. Only when reviewing footage away from the mundane reality of the space, could the space become legible to an outsider.

As the camera captured Ayesha cutting a bitter gourd in her room, the viewer is invited to wonder about her emotional state. If she is perhaps bitter about her peripheral role in the city, the color green could be taken to signal hope or faith. In the consequent shots, we captured someone painting their home green, another indication of planting roots, home, and of all the elements signified by the certificate of approval provided by the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB).

Another technique we used in the film was to invert the gaze. As John Berger (1977) has noted, cinema often depicts women as objects to be viewed or looked at. Likewise, the historic photographs depict royalty in a similar way. However, members of the royal family do not look at the camera, but rather invite a gaze. Keeping this in mind, the project captured a similar situation revolving around waste removal workers stemming from an area known as "Border Basti", one of the many dwelling places of the urban poor. By placing them in positions similar to those adopted by artist during the early

days of photography, we attempted to undo the canonical ideas of photography: including, valorizing, and shining a light on the grand people of society. Instead, we allowed to give respect to marginalized members of society in the same way that was once reserved for royalty, and allowed them to gaze piercingly or critically at the camera as women in the media are rarely allowed to do. This is an act of defiance, to humanize the people we worked with through the medium of film.



Figure 3:  
Rabiya looks at the camera with confidence and some cynicism in *Survey City*.  
© Tarini Manchanda

In sharing this film and images, as in any other project, one is constructing a reality out of fleeting moments. These moments become sedimented into a longer time frame, perhaps defining the story of a place in a way that will never be entirely accurate. The story itself contains no revelatory moments. Ayesha dreams of a home but feels unsafe in the park; and the social environment constrains her work and life. In the visuals, however, we watch her child play with the dishes as she washes them, we watch her chat with a member of her community, and we walk through the space currently inhabited peacefully—despite its peripheral nature. The images thus speak to a more profound emotional truth and construct the affective dimension of characters or people in order to humanize those whose lives and existences are translated into survey numbers.

The process provides no neat conclusions. It is open ended, and the film explores a range of opinions and experiences around the survey. These reveal complexity instead of providing neat answers to well-worn questions. The visuals enable this by collating images that look closely at an otherwise neglected space, such as finding beauty in the ruins without justifying the dehumanizing nature of surveys. Through in-depth interviews with protagonists, the film attempts to capture their fatigue with surveys, surveyors, cameras, and all things that scrutinize. In an attempt to respect the protagonists' wish for privacy and as a protective measure, we only included select scenes in the movie, although other shots provided significant insights into the work taking place inside the basti, or makeshift dwelling, in which all kinds of waste is hand-sorted, recycled, and organized.

It is useful to pause and reflect on the current moment in nonfiction filmmaking, as a way of providing a broader context to documentary cinema. The years between 2014 and 2024 have been heralded in Indian nonfiction cinema as a “the new wave of documentary films” (Ramachandran 2024), in which a range of Indian nonfiction films have emerged in markets across the world. However, it remains to be asked whether these films serve the function of democratic filmmaking (if not guerrilla), whether they are driven by the market's involvement, or a bit of both. An unfortunate byproduct of this moment is, however, the demolition of the movement film. The politically motivated, social-issue movement film has emerged as the black sheep of the current social paradigm, and a safe *post-bourgeois* film (following Patwardhan's comment on terminology published in a series of essays titled *Towards a Peoples' Cinema* [Patwardhan 1981]) has become the darling of the web and nonfiction aficionados.

Another dimension of peoples' cinema is the range of films that emerged around the Narmada movement in the 1970s. Studied as a phenomenon in film, these works are observed and critiqued—often in a manner that remains hostile to the real displacement of people depicted in the movies. In her article, Ghosh (2009) seems to condemn the repetition of individuals across Narmada documentaries and she is critical of the tone and the agitprop nature of the films; but the analysis of these films fails to engage with the movement itself. This is the failure of people watching socially embedded documentaries with the interests of cinephilia. They cannot see the film's social dimension and instead paint it as a contrived portrait or propaganda due to their lack of social engagement and consequent distrust of the marginalized people depicted. As a way of explaining, I will share the example of my own experience as a filmmaker who has travelled to the sites and individuals affected by the construction of



the Narmada dam. I have noticed how the individuals chosen to represent a story are often suggested by activists and movement representatives, because they have taken a particular stand on the issue of the dam. One particular individual refused compensation for the demolition of his home, which was a rare choice to make given that several farmers chose to accept the government's terms and conditions. This person has often been interviewed due not just to his eloquence as pointed out by Ghosh, but also to his role in the movement that he is representing. The latter is crucial, because it points to the web of connections, injustices, and neglected social dimensions that documentary filmmaking has the potential to depict when they are public issues of social concern. It is unfortunately unable to do this when it is burdened with the expectation of entertainment, creative prowess, or a strong formal element (Ghosh 2009).

In a more recent admission of their complete disdain for social-issue films, filmmakers Mira Nair and Shaunak Sen have gone so far as to say that only some films are conceptually driven, while implying that others fall into a “blueprinty” category (Nair and Sen 2024). Unfortunately, the conceptual engagement with justice, social issues, sociology, and social movements is brushed aside in one stray statement by the filmmakers, in which Mira Nair is quoted saying that this type of filmmaking amounts to “agitprop,” even though they do not mention any specific films. This approach to social-issue documentaries can be hugely damaging, because it does not explicitly note any films that are doing a disservice to social issues, but instead tends to brush aside the very valid and deep concerns of people who have led, constructed, and emboldened the justice-related demands of social movements through films—which which are aesthetically pleasing in their own right and do not first of all aim at conveying a conventional sense of “beauty”—but films that address the heart of a social issue that is important to marginalized minorities, individuals, farmers, or people it represents.

While social realities have been addressed and marginalized voices have been amplified through the medium of nonfiction films such as *All That Breathes* (Sen 2022), it remains to be asked whether such examples serve the nuanced and crucial purpose of “guerilla” films discussed by Patwardhan. It is clear that they do not, in fact, address social realities with much engagement, but, instead, fall into a category that does not intend to be a witness of the current moment or to be critical of power, because what it seeks to do is provide catharsis in a moment of crisis, instead of leaving uncomfortable questions with the viewers—as art is often able to do. In equivalent

terms, the urinal in Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* provided an incomparable and much-needed discourse on art and its role in society. To dismiss it as a disservice to art would be to miss the point, which is what creative documentary seems to be doing when it is compared to social issue films.

Recent creative documentaries are not the concern of this essay. Instead, one is drawn to the social-issue films of the past: not the films nurtured by the Films Division of India, but those that came about in tandem with and as a result of social movements. In addition to the work of Anand Patwardhan, there is a wide range of films that have delved into questions of globalization in artistic ways and engage in a thick description of the changing times, but these films have often been met with academic skepticism, and held to high standards of social justice.

Over the years, my personal experience in nonfiction filmmaking has been that fiction filmmakers deem this work “*jhola* carrying” (associated with the activist bag and assuming a lack of some sort) or label it unimaginative for the form or methods used to depict contemporary issues of justice and injustice. “No one is interested” or “say something new” are thrown at me, expecting that although the story has not changed in real time, and injustice continues, the medium, form, and content will somehow lull our senses into compliance and catharsis. No one has the patience for discomfort, and despite the new wave, nothing has changed. On the other hand, I have found that injustice, while it is the instigator of curiosity, is also the site of much complexity and nuance. How does a place, a project, a movement, or time come to be defined as the social juncture of the annihilation of caste, for instance, or the representation of women beyond limited binary roles?

In the book titled *Salaam Bombay!* by Mira Nair and Sooni Taraporevala, there are segments that mention the drab “serious” Indian film without specifics but with a specific form of contempt. While no particular movie is discussed, it creates the sense that serious films are not interested in cinema. This disdain for the “boring” documentary is a common-sense understanding of the medium shared among several people in audiences across the world. However, it is necessary to examine what is being dismissed in the expression of this sentiment of condemnation, which, while not uncommon, is quite harmful. In condemning a particular type of activist filmmaking for its aesthetic limitations or other formal aspects, the medium of creative documentary appears to have remained as uncondusive to the political concerns of mass and social

movements as it was during the period of Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi alluded to earlier (Nair and Taraporevala 2013).

Because creative documentaries perform in a market-based feel-good economy, they pose as the firefighters of democratic India. A true verdict is yet to emerge, but this lends as much to the shrinking of democratic spaces as propaganda or agitprop, because these films claim to address social realities, and they provide catharsis without necessarily opening up debate and discourse or building a deeper understanding of the social conditions they address. The films often finish with a poetic end, a peaceful conclusion in most cases, perhaps suggesting that social justice, as inconvenient as it is, has been achieved.

### What is lost?

*As I began to shoot a film on the border of Delhi and Haryana, an activist colleague who had spent his life organizing the people affected by internal displacement within India due to the Tehri and Narmada Dams insisted that I should not follow the one character that I was enamored by. To me, the film was her story; the social media videos were her daily visit to the temple and her insistence on staying put in the rubble that was now her displaced home. Instead, Vimal Bhai insisted that I capture the people affected by the displacement. It was his intention that the film express solidarity with and the views of each displaced person so that it did not build up the story of any one person too much.*

Reflecting on this moment, I faced the conundrum of producing, on the one hand, something that could potentially find meaning and purpose in the mundane, and resolve a more significant social issue of evictions in one character's emotions. On the other hand, however, the stories of almost 10,000 displaced families were equally important. Some were away when their homes were demolished, others had lost their partners, and even others faced persecution due to their minority identities. So many stories cropped up, and so did a consensus or argument that was collective, powerful, and in tandem with the aims of a social movement that seeks justice for the many individuals lost in the chaos of development and the discrimination inherent in social life. If I were to take the route of a creative documentary, perhaps I would connect better with the humanity of the people living in evicted landscapes. On the other hand, however, in following the direction of an activist, I find the films revealing unique forms of injustice, means of exploitation, or the sense of being wronged. As films, these cinematic endeavors may not fill theaters or achieve the mass appeal of larger



Figure 4:  
A shot from the evicted landscape of Khorī Gaon.  
© Nikhil Sanghotra

productions. Still, they capture the story of an otherwise insignificant person, encapsulate their worlds and memories, and consolidate their purpose as social and mass movements. The latter is as valuable as the former, but is no longer pursued or considered cinematically valuable, which is my concern in this essay. The role of films that do not make it to market circuits but circulate across universities, students, social movements, NGOs, and nonprofits tends to capture the conversations and thoughts of audiences as well as the filmmakers. Being sought by smaller film clubs, groups, and screening initiatives, the films tend to speak unspoken truths, shed light on injustice or taboo subjects, and create a parallel distribution network for social-issue concerns.

In 2023–24, several films and digital media pieces were produced in tandem with social movements such as the farmers' protests. Along with the unusual attention from a celebrity such as Rihanna who discovered the movement via social media, these films amplified the concerns important to the farmers' movement by speaking with the farmers and the women in the movement while expressing clearly the movement's demands. The role of these films was overshadowed by the voices of people such as Kangana Ranaut or celebrities who critiqued farmers on social media without context or research. The few social-issue films that emerged almost two years after the

movement did help to provide a space of understanding around the concerns of farmers, but even within these, there are shinier films supported by foreign markets and quieter ones that have mass audiences outside of festival circuits—namely, the works of ChalChitra Abhiyan and filmmaker Nishtha Jain, each unique in their modes of storytelling and concerns. While no filmmaker is to blame for this status, it is interesting for this essay to see that the guerrilla or social-issue film finds a space and reclaims its relevance as a medium of, for, and by civil society. This is why the farmers' movement provides an interesting area for potential further studies on this topic.

One example of a social-issue film that would otherwise not fall on the radar of more prominent publications is *Development Flows from the Barrel of a Gun* produced by Akhra (see India Water Portal 2024), a collective active in the mining regions of India that critiqued the exploitation of Adivasis and the disenfranchised. Connected with research made by collectives that expose corporate India's realities, the film indicates deeper trends in which communities are exploited for the benefit of corporations. When the state is dispossessing one group of their land, livelihood, or rights, films such as this one have served as a stage to amplify the stories of injustice against communities and to bring the disenfranchised some solidarity and support. Songs such as "Gaon Chodab Nahi" made by K. P. Sasi recall the agrarian resistance. They compound sentiment by expressing joy, anger, sarcasm, or creativity in unique nonmainstream forms and allow movements to connect with people experiencing similar injustices or finding humor in their struggles. Irrespective of the final outcome, it is because of the efforts of each person involved in a resistance movement (be they farmer, worker, satyagrahi, or leader) that social inequalities and injustices can be recorded, even if they cannot be brought to justice. "America Chodas" (Sasi 2024), a music video by K. P. Sasi has broad appeal and does not shy away from activism or formal innovation.

Without the support for socially driven films such as this one, the concerns of marginalized groups would remain unaddressed at policy or institutional levels. This is also particularly important, because while policymakers and research think tanks can fund their own studies that potentially perpetuate their own agendas and biases, independent films and media that are not funded by someone with a vested interest in the issue, such as crowd-funded films, provide a unique perspective on social concerns that can raise questions without self-censorship. Without the social-issue film, society is merely reveling in aesthetic feel-good politics in which we are led to believe that we are doing social good by watching a movie that plays against ideas of communalism

without addressing the systemic discrimination that stems from the same (Mamdani 2002).

My role here is not to comment on the work of artists who have produced the new wave of films. It is only to address the limited role such films can play in that they can express only so much as the grant-giving agencies, markets, and funding bodies allow.

Tropes of good Muslim–bad Muslim or the individual who made it out of their social conundrum and overcame the odds; these films alone cannot address the broader questions, and they need not do it. In the case of broader issues, civil society can retain its strength and build an atmosphere conducive to social-issue films only if it allows for aesthetic imbalances by sincerely addressing the uncomfortable questions of discrimination.

The documentary can shed light on the injustices faced by working class or disenfranchised groups, and it can critique companies playing havoc with lives, even if these films do not make for a comfortable or entertaining watch. However, the Bollywood hangover in India has compelled big budget films to play to the gallery instead of engaging with social movements. As beautiful and poetic as they are, and as much as they dwell in the gray areas, “creative documentary” as a genre cannot address the core of social issues, and it need not do so. On the other hand, however, it’s supposed artistic superiority must not overshadow the social-issue film.

Earlier, when films were produced for social movements through donations, they were also made in tandem with a movement, be they films about the Narmada movement, working class struggles, the women’s movement, or peoples’ cinema. While similar movements are appearing around struggles for the Hasdeo Aranya forest, the documentary wave celebrated in the media is now primarily concerned with creative documentaries. It is against what is deemed as “the social-issue film,” and this lends to a dearth of support for media concerned with articulating injustice, especially at specific political moments.

The hierarchizing of films and makers can lead to discrepancies in how social issues are addressed, and this can cause problems for democracy. The farmers’ movement was already at full strength before films about it emerged. In contrast, films such as Akhra’s have been known to reveal realities that the media could not reveal in the past. If subtlety and quiet dissent are somehow considered superior to the drama of emotion felt by someone disenfranchised, it further marginalizes voices of those experiencing pain. This is part of the problem, because it contributes to the squashing of dissent in

a democracy. Unlike Alexis de Tocqueville's ([1835] 2004) democratic public spaces for discourse, the creative documentary is converging discourse around the feel-good, commercially sellable moment, and this is a loss to the disenfranchised. It does this by identifying a limited number of characters as protagonists of the creative documentary. By capturing their realities in modes that are often reserved for fiction, such films tend to promote notions of resolve, that there is a narrative arc to the complexity of our social conundrums today, and that social issues are not sellable enough unless they can be solved with a neat end, just as in the creative film. The unfortunate nature of this extreme engagement with craft is that the movie can muddle the potential for social critique on ideas of secularism, nationalism, religiosity, and much more. By limiting social critique to an artistic preference for subtlety, thereby adding barriers to the production of films that could address more significant crises, it adds to a downfall in academic or journalistic freedom that is already in decline (Porecha 2024).

Films are crucial in bringing social injustice to light in academic environments as well. The historic social issue film may not be concerned with entertainment, but it can inform students of subjects that do not find space in their curricula. It was due to the screening of the film *Tawaifnama* by Saba Dewan on my university campus that many of us were able to learn more deeply about women's movements and concerns while doing a master's program in sociology. Without such films, we would lose insight into social complexity.

Additionally, the writings of academics such as Bishnupriya Ghosh (2009) focus on a critique of mediators of Adivasi issues. Tending to blame activists for social realities such as the police's differential treatment of *Adivasis* versus antidam activists, she finally accepts that the films, which often interview up to fifteen individuals in meetings around the Narmada movement, capture loss in evocative, affective ways, allowing audiences to relate much better to the dam-affected communities. This latter part of nonfiction films continues to inspire, irrespective of the mode of the film. It is the aspect of documentary that remains of concern to a robust civil society.

### Market forces in the last decade

Funding plays a big part in determining the democratic spaces available to makers interested in learning and researching the diversity of subjects and people within India. Public film funding bodies encourage young filmmakers to tell stories. In the last ten years, the Public Service Broadcasting Trust has not only cut funding for documentary

films but also started mentorship programs for young filmmakers as it disburses funds. With this, a handful of filmmakers are deemed artistically superior, irrespective of the nature of the content that they have produced. While the value of a mentor and the Guru-Shishya tradition is common in India, filmmaking is a subjective art form. To deem one filmmaker superior based on constrained ideas of aesthetics or ideas inherited from both the independent or commercial film industries is to stifle the democratic potential of films that do not follow the norms set by mentors. Simply put, so-called bad films, considered inferior by curators or practitioners hired to mentor, have had different aims in the past. Allowing young filmmakers to receive grants and develop their own voices, networks, and sociopolitical sensibilities was a more democratic way of running the public funding bodies, even if the films produced did not always achieve aesthetic goals. As granting bodies change their structures, mentors are limited to people who may have film school experience but lack experience in social movements, sociology, and research that could inform the work of filmmakers more deeply.

If the exclusionary nature of high art is brought into the practices of funding bodies, where those who are already privileged by the filmmaking system are getting to decide who is a filmmaker of repute and worthy of attention and who is not, the type of stories being accessed is also limited. It lends to a stifling of complexity and nuance regarding the subjects chosen and the approaches allowed. In contrast, if films are produced without externally allocated mentors, they could engage with activists, social movements, and people experiencing social realities, as in the case of SPS Media or the Ektara Collective.<sup>2</sup> In this way, filmmakers and films can develop democratic formal practices out of the spaces that they engage with. In the current system, the aims of public films shift with mentorship programs—constrained by the aesthetic preferences of the mentor.

People who lived at the time following India's independence often remember the FD documentary playing on the big screen before every major Bollywood blockbuster. These films, telling stories commissioned by the Films Division, had a plethora of goals and aspirations. Academic studies (Sutoris 2016) have examined the anti-state nature of these films, their creative prowess, and the fact that they set a precedent for documentary cinema. Another wave, however, emerged in the 1970s and 80s. The movies of this time were the beginning of social-issue documentaries, and their

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<sup>2</sup> The two collectives mentioned operate in rural and urban Madhya Pradesh. They engage with filmmakers with indigenous and marginalized identities. Their films have circulated across numerous festivals and been well received by diverse audiences.



concerns were just as separate from those of state-funded or supported films as they were from fiction (Basu and Banerjee 2018).

## Conclusion

“Social-issue” documentary is an endangered genre; it is often almost a reviled text, perhaps as part of a larger trend in which dissent in the country is stifled. However, these films have much to tell us about democratic practices and must be given the support they lack to enhance the diversity of Indian nonfiction.

While the new way of telling stories may be equally political, there is a loss when the latest codes, conventions, and methods prioritize a very particular kind of creative documentary in India. The loss concerns the role of documentary as a medium of democratic expression for those not otherwise well represented by the social and political paradigm. Documentary filmmakers focusing on social issues are given forums at national and international universities to educate students on contemporary and historic fact that is neglected in mainstream media, news, or in academia. Independent film clubs that spawn off to support activist filmmakers grow a world and an ecosystem to support the documentary form, because it functions as a tool of expression for mass-based social movements and people who have experienced injustices at the behest of powerful players who otherwise control the media.

Can market-funded “impact producing” even address the social complexity of water scarcity, climate change, farming, women’s issues, or rights-based struggles? The movement against genetically modified foods could communicate farmers’ struggles through films that focus on the pros and cons of genetic modification. Science communication does the same. Informative films are essential, and their significance in bringing change or social understanding must not be undermined.

## Bio

Tarini Manchanda makes documentaries based on her interest in visual expression, training in Sociology and Environmental Policy. Tarini's films and projects have been taken to several residencies, communities, festivals, and universities in North America, Europe and South Asia. Her interest in filmmaking stems from a desire for social change through observation. Tarini's films ask questions even as they capture a quiet bout of rain.

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