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**CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGE OF DISTRIBUTION: WOMEN  
DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS IN INDIA**

**Dipti Gupta**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**The Department**

**of**

**Communication Studies**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts  
at Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

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## **Abstract**

### **Confronting the Challenge of Distribution: Women Documentary Filmmakers in India**

**Dipti Gupta**

Since 1980, Indian women have moved into documentary filmmaking in increasing numbers using film as a tool for raising consciousness and social change. Their work reflects an extensive variety of styles and genres, a comprehensive range of subjects, a broad spectrum of ideological perspectives - revealing the diversity that India represents. Yet, independent documentary filmmakers remain economically and politically marginalized in India and unknown in the international community.

This is a study of four Indian women documentary filmmakers: Jharna Jhaveri, Rinki Roy, Manjira Datta and Suhasini Mulay. At the center of this thesis are interviews with these four women which were conducted in 1996 and 1997. These interviews chronicle the practices of documentary film making and the struggles of these women to make space in the industry. The thesis acknowledges the role of women in documentary film making in India and the process of its production and distribution of documentary films. In conclusion the thesis indicates the need for a distribution network in India to promote and circulate the works of documentary filmmakers.

## Acknowledgments

The idea for this thesis was sown during the time I worked with Suhasini Mulay in New Delhi. I consider her my mentor and friend and dedicate this work to her. Working with her, I learnt to value documentary films and she challenged and inspired me to write about the work of women documentary filmmakers in India.

This project would not have been possible without the participation and encouragement of filmmakers like Suhasini, Jharna Jhaveri, Manjira Datta, Reena Mohan, Seemantini Dhuru, Rinki Roy, Sabina Kidwai, Ranjani Majumdar, Shikha Jhingan and Sehjo Singh. This thesis includes and focuses mainly on the work of only four of the mentioned filmmakers, but the rest of the material will be used in future projects.

During my time at Concordia, I've been fortunate to work with a stimulating and diverse group of teachers in the Graduate Program in Communication. I would like to thank Kim Sawchuk who saw me through the many times when I despaired of ever finishing this project. I thank her for her advice, guidance and friendship. Thanks also to Thomas Waugh for believing in this project and to Tilly Janowitz for her encouragement and support. Each of them, in their own ways, taught me a great deal and made this a learning process.

I thank Sheelah O'Neil and Sharon Fitch for their unconditional assistance. I would like to thank all the librarians - at the Webster and the Vanier at Concordia University who were always very kind and helpful.

No project is complete without unending support and encouragement from family and friends. There are literally too many to name but I will always be grateful to each one

of them. Nevertheless, I am grateful to my parents for the unending support and love always. I would like to especially thank Robyn Diner for editing my thesis and Raminder Singh for helping me to transcribe the interviews and guide me through my major computer problems. I thank Luvleen Mishra for joining me at the Film Festival at Bombay and encouraging me at every step with her wit and humor. I appreciate the constant support I got from my partner Rahul Varma to see through this project.

The Shastri Indo-Canadian fellowship provided me with both a travel grant and a research grant, allowing me to undertake research in India and conduct the interviews.

Finally, I am happy to say that my daughter Aliya was born at the time I was struggling to finish this project.



## INTRODUCTION

### *History and Context of the Study*

There are two main reasons why I initiated this study of Indian women documentary filmmakers. First, women directors of Indian origin have been generally ignored in academic film literature. Secondly, I wished to explore the question of documentaries and social change. With these two preliminary ideas in mind I proceeded. The task seemed quite simple: my approach was to conduct structured interviews and to do a textual analysis of social or educational documentary films. These explorations would take place within the rubric of a sustained development to understand the work of these filmmakers within an Indian context. However, as I progressed with the research I realized, that no documentation of the contribution of Indian women documentary filmmakers existed. As in any initial exploration, I found less of what I was looking for and more new directions to research. In the end, I did not really look at the films. Rather I concentrated my efforts on writing about the challenges that women face in this field.

Since August 1987, I have been associated with Cinemart Foundation, an independent group of documentary filmmakers based in New Delhi. The group was headed initially by Tapan Bose and Suhasini Mulay who have since left to pursue other interests. I was the second woman to join Cinemart Foundation. This was just the beginning of my exposure to an industry mostly dominated by men. During the following four years that I worked in that organization, I realized that there was a dearth of documentation on the contribution of women in the field of documentary filmmaking. For example, there was hardly any record of the work that women had done in the field and

most of the articles in journals and magazines focused on the development of documentary and short film in India, rather than on individual contributions.

Upon moving to Canada, and entering the academic sphere, my view was further confirmed. Many people were aware of the Bombay Film Industry and could discuss the "song and dance" aspect of Bollywood cinema.<sup>1</sup> Journals like Screen, Cineaste, Framework and others within academic circles have carried extensive articles focusing on different aspects of this industry. Yet, the movement of documentary filmmakers in the Indian sub-continent remains nearly invisible. In the past decade or so there have been only a few articles and some secondary literature that have featured the documentary scene in India. Hence, my peers expressed surprise that there were any women documentary filmmakers in India. In turn, I decided to write my thesis on the contribution of Indian women documentary filmmakers.

### *First, Second and Third Cinema: A Literature Review*

Cinema came to India within one year of its invention in the West. It started with short films on wrestling and the training of monkeys made by the pioneering filmmaker Sakharam Bhatwadekar.<sup>2</sup> Two tendencies emerged much later: the concept of film as an art form and the culture of short and documentary films.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> India's motion picture industry has been dominated by "commercial" or Bollywood films. Films made with mega stars like Amitabh Bachchan, Rajesh Khanna, Dilip Kumar, Salman Khan and others are widely known outside the country. This industry produces mainly popular and commercial films that are the mainstay of India's film industry. These films are popular with most of the people and are widely distributed within India and outside. They are quite popular with the Indian diaspora living outside the nation.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive history of the Indian cinema, see: E. Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, Indian Film, (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> "Out of Focus," Documedia: Federation of Film Societies of India, (Bombay: Filmotsav, 1986) iii.

There exists already a theoretically well developed division of the global film industry into First, Second, and Third Cinema. This division has developed over the past century in waves of reaction to and against the metropole-centred film industries of the colonial powers, or what is called First Cinema, the cinema of corporate profits, that requires massive capital investment. Second Cinema, the so-called "art cinema," is the cinema of the post-World War II European city exemplified by the neo-realist genre. Finally, Third Cinema is the radical/subversive cinema that developed in Third World countries with the intent to radicalize directly and call to action members of the audience.<sup>4</sup> While global cinema can be divided into these categories, my study in India indicates that these three categories exist within the geographical confinements of the country. Bollywood films are India's "First Cinema", films like Sholay (1975), Maine Pyar Kiya (1989), Agneepath (1990) are massive money makers and fall into this category.<sup>5</sup> These films also symbolize the national cinema of India. The Art films or the parallel films of India, which became quite prominent during the 1970s and the early 1980s, can be categorized as the Second Cinema of India. Films like Manthan (1976), Aakrosh (1980), Bhavani Bhavai (1980), Arth (1982), Mirch Masala (1985) fall into this category. Finally the documentary falls into the third category of Third Cinema of the country. This cinema is the "counter or radical" cinema of the country with the intention

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald M. Macdonald, "Third Cinema and the Third World," Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle: A Geography of Film, eds., Stuart C. Aitken and Leo E. Zonn, (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994) 28.

<sup>5</sup> Sholay(1975) directed by Ramesh Sippy, Maine Pyar Kiya(1989) directed by Sooraj Barjatya, Agneepath(1990) directed by Mukul S.Anand, Manthan(1976) directed by Shyam Benegal, Aakrosh(1980) directed by Govind Nihalani, Arth(1982) directed by Mahesh Bhatt, Mirch Masala(1985) directed by Ketan Mehta. Source: Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willeman, Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

of transforming the ideology of its audience. Thomas Waugh elaborates more on the position of this third cinema of India in his article 'Words of Command.'

This dynamic counter-cinema is in effect a domestic third cinema, a small but effective irritant in the flank of the elephantine first cinema, the crisis-prone Bombay-Madras industry, and the anemic second cinema, the prestigious state-subsidized art cinema that still monopolizes our attention in Western festivals and even in progressive periodicals like *Framework*.<sup>6</sup>

This "domestic third cinema" as Thomas Waugh calls it has had to battle for its survival against the first and second cinema of the country. As Waugh has stated, Indian documentaries are the "Third Cinema" of India. Originally conceived by the theorist Teshome Gabriel, the impetus of Third Cinema was and continues to be participatory and contributive to the struggles for the liberation of the people of the "Third World." At present, these struggles for the liberation of the peoples of the "Third World" where "the battles for history and around history" are ever more intensified, the original manifesto of the "camera as a gun" still holds.<sup>7</sup> "Third Cinema" in India is constantly competing against Bollywood films and the parallel/art cinema in India primarily for funding and audiences. Within this existing framework women filmmakers are struggling for space and recognition. The voice as well as the contribution of the women filmmakers in this "Third Cinema" are practically absent or unrecognized, yet their work primarily falls in this category.

Anand Patwardhan, a documentary filmmaker from India, has analyzed the position of the "dominant cinema" against the "documentary" in India eloquently in Show Us Life. He emphasizes the role of the guerrilla filmmaker.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Waugh, "Words of Command: Notes on Cultural and Political Inflections of Direct Cinema in Indian Independent Documentary," Cineaction, (Winter 1990-91) 28.

<sup>7</sup> Gabriel H. Teshome, Third Cinema in the Third World, (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982) 59.

Especially for audiences in the Third World where literacy is low, films are as much a source of information as of entertainment. The dominant classes have already created the cinema of entertainment and escape. It remains for the guerrilla filmmaker to create the cinema of reality and change.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, this term “guerrilla” is used mostly for men and the chapter does not include the role or contribution of women filmmakers from India. In this chapter, Anand Patwardhan primarily relates to the challenges he personally has faced in the field. The term “guerrilla filmmaker” relates to Anand Patwardhan and his style of filmmaking. It has never been used for female filmmakers in India, regardless of the types of films they make or the challenges they also face on the job. According to Patwardhan, the cinema of entertainment and escape serves the interest of the bourgeoisie. The purpose of this cinema is not merely money making in the immediate direct sense, but the propagation of a system that legitimizes the making of profit that it elevates to an ideal. It reinforces all the myths of the "Free World" such as the myths of "upward mobility," "equal opportunity," "racial harmony," "international goodwill," "freedom of speech" - in short, all the virtues of "democracy" as opposed to the evils of fascism, communism and backward pre-capitalist religion.<sup>9</sup> Anand Patwardhan further discusses that this myth that is presented by the "dominant cinema" to the illiterate people of India is a mockery and an illusion. It's a mockery because it often tries to (unsuccessfully) imitate the life of the poor on the screen; and it's an illusion because it portrays how the poor and the meek come out as winners in the end - raising false hopes and desires in the minds of the desolate. This portrayal contradicts the reality that the masses face in their daily lives.

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<sup>8</sup> Anand Patwardhan, "The Guerrilla Film, Underground and in Exile: A Critique and a case study of waves of revolution" Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary. ed. Thomas Waugh (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1988) 461.

<sup>9</sup> Anand Patwardhan, "The Guerrilla Film - Underground and in Exile: A Critique and a case study

Whatever appellation one chooses, "counter-cinema" has survived all odds. Counter-cinema may be defined as a film practice that works against and challenges dominant cinema, usually at the levels of both signifier and signified.<sup>10</sup> Since the 1973 publication of Claire Johnston's essay "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" filmmakers and critics have been concerned with the strategies of production, exhibition and distribution of independent feminist films. Claire Johnston argues that for feminist cinema to be effective, it must be a counter-cinema.

Any revolutionary must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film: the language of the cinema/depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is affected.<sup>11</sup>

Counter-cinema tries to question the dominant modes of cinematic representation and to challenge the stereotypes that dominant cinema illustrates. Johnston indicates the multiple challenges that counter-cinema has to face. For example, this cinema has to deal with how the films will actually be made; and how they will reach their audience. The challenges and hardships that women face in the west are also true for women working in the field of documentary filmmaking in an Indian context.

My research on the subject of documentary filmmakers in India indicates that even the most eloquent authors like Jag Mohan, Sanjit Narwekar, Thomas Waugh, Eric Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, have grouped all Indian documentary filmmakers together in a general category of Third Cinema. In this process they have created a perception of unity that does not recognize the distinct contribution of women

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of Waves of Revolution," M.A. thesis, McGill U, July 1981,4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," Notes on Women's Cinema, ed. Claire Johnston, (London, SEFT, 1973) 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

documentary filmmakers. However, such a standpoint need not imply a common point of view, experience, consciousness, psychology, or "nature" among women. Rather it acknowledges that, within patriarchal society, women tend to be excluded and subordinated. This is premised largely on the belief of most feminists that (i) we live in a male-dominated society, (ii) this is unjust and unnecessary, and (iii) it can and must be changed. It is clear that women filmmakers have made a specific contribution to filmmaking because of the way they have portrayed the role and status of women in India. For example, many issues like conjugal violence were never discussed through this medium. Quite often in mainstream cinema a woman is ill treated by her husband or in-laws and this has been an accepted form of behavior. Women have often been portrayed as meek, docile and usually non-assertive in the dominant cinema in India. Women documentary filmmakers have tried to break these stereotypes and give voice to women and women's issues through their documentaries. In a country like India that is unique for its diversity - geographically, politically, socially, it is important that one understands the distinct challenges women face.

There are several ways to look at the status of women in any society. One of the ways is to examine the common demographic indicators that give an overall picture of women's relative standing vis-a-vis men. According to the 1995 census in India, the sex ratio stood at 933 females per 1000 males. The literacy rate was 46.89 per cent for males and 24.82 per cent for females. Comparing these figures with the 1981 census data, one notices that the status of women has improved very little. In other words, they continue to remain a disadvantaged group.<sup>12</sup> According to Rehana Ghadially women face many

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<sup>12</sup> I wish to point out that India is a highly diverse country. It has a population of nearly a billion, with six main religions namely: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain. The country has 16

hurdles in the Indian society.<sup>13</sup> She writes that according to grassroots autonomous women's groups<sup>14</sup> rape is a major issue. The second concern of such groups revolves around women's oppression in the workplace. These groups demand equal wages for equal work, maternity benefits and creche facilities. They tend to also point out that working women need to form organizations to fight for these rights. The third issue that concerns these groups relates to representations of women in the media. They problematize portrayals of violence against women, along with the perpetuation of oppressive stereotypes of women that circulate throughout the mass media. A cluster of issues such as dowry deaths, organizing training camps for women activists, leadership training and sexual and mental harassment ranks fourth. The fifth set of problems according to these groups includes abolition of *devadasi*, providing water facilities in rural areas, alcoholism among men and analyzing the roots of women's oppression.<sup>15</sup> The final set of concerns includes wife-beating, training women for health care, participation of men in housework, setting up special courts for women, education of scheduled caste women and protest against the rise in price of food items. Demographic factors, the

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official languages spoken in the 25 states and 7 Union Territories. Each of the 16 languages possesses not only its own ancient and contemporary literature, its own newspapers, radio and television programs, and films, but also its individual script. It also has the classic language of Sanskrit. On top of that India has over four hundred other languages, some written, others oral. And of course, as the joint language of administration there is English, a language that Indians have made uniquely their own in more than two centuries of usage.

<sup>13</sup> Rehana Ghadially, ed., Introduction Women in Indian Society - A Reader (Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 1988) 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> There are many women's groups in India, to name a few: Janwadi Mahila Samiti, Manushi, Jagori, Saheli, kali and many others.

<sup>15</sup> An ancient practice prevalent in the South of India where girls were given away by the family to the temple to serve god. Later this practice was abused and the girls were treated as prostitutes by the temple priests or the royalty.



marginalization of women in the developmental process and an oppressive social reality highlight the miserable plight of women in India and the long struggle ahead of them.

Women documentary filmmakers have been struggling to raise these issues through their films despite the challenges they face to produce and distribute their films. Many questions emerge, but my focus for this study is to find out: How do Indian women documentary filmmakers make their films and how do they distribute them? I am interested in the pressing theoretical and political question of filmmaking, documentaries, and issues as articulated by the Indian women filmmakers themselves. For this study it is important to narrow down the queries.

### *Thesis Question*

According to Mary Ann Doane, the focus and effort of classical feminist studies is to recapture the past, and to "fill out" or complete the historical record. The underlying themes of such an approach are that women are "really there" or "did really do things," and that we can know in some direct or unmediated way what these things were. With respect to the documentation of the contribution of women documentary filmmakers from India, the existing material says little about the role of women in the industry in earlier times. It also often under-records or even excludes them altogether. Feminist film theory and criticism has been particularly resistant to the naive empiricism of this methodology.<sup>16</sup> My attempt in this study is both to introduce the role and contribution of women filmmakers from the Indian sub-continent and to understand the various processes filmmakers embrace in India. As I have emphasized earlier, I will study the objective,

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'Woman's Film: Possession and Address,' Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism, (New York: The American Film Institute, 1984) 67.

modes of production and distribution that these filmmakers adopt by listening to their own accounts of the process. The main point of this thesis is this: if women documentary filmmakers are to survive, they must not only produce films but they must exhibit and distribute them - for this is what connects the film to the audience. Insufficient attention has been paid to the issue of distribution.

### *Method*

In 1996, I traveled to India and met with a few filmmakers and attended the International film festival for documentary, short and animation films held in Bombay. I also tried to collect literature on the subject of women documentary filmmakers from the Pune Film Institute library and the archives in Pune, as well as from the Films Division library in Bombay. I soon realized that there was hardly any material on the subject. Hence I decided to interview a few women filmmakers in order to get the necessary information from them. These interviews were conducted between November 1996 - January 1997. The process was initiated much before the actual time the interviews were conducted.

Because of the lack of secondary literature, this thesis draws its analysis mainly from the interviews conducted with the filmmakers based in Bombay and New Delhi. These interviews allow the women to speak in their own voices. The interviews primarily explore the process of documentary filmmaking that women filmmakers adopt in India. Most of the theories pertaining to the documentary process emerge from western theorists. In order to understand the process in India, I depend and draw upon such existing theories. However, I have also based a significant amount of my analysis on the

interviews as they highlight the experiences of the filmmakers themselves. I conducted ten interviews for my research, but I have focused only on four for this project.

I emphasize that at this moment, the lack of information we have about women documentary filmmakers makes it more important to highlight the description of their practice. While I have drawn some comparisons and similarities from existing western theories when they have been applicable to the thesis, my emphasis is not on theoretical debates within documentary film spheres.

### *Key Sources*

The interviews that I conducted on a one to one basis with the filmmakers are my primary source of information for this thesis. The questionnaire mainly focused on the issues the filmmakers have dealt with through their documentaries, their methods of production and their methods of distribution. For the interviews, I had a pre-established questionnaire that influenced the direction of my work. All respondents received the same questionnaire. I offered the filmmaker/s the choice to read the questionnaire before the interview. Most of them briefly browsed through it and a couple of them were comfortable enough to go “with the flow.” Finally, they were interviewed face-to-face by me. Each interview was structured around the questionnaire.

While designing the interview, I was fully aware that I would be placing the filmmakers on the other side of the fence. Typically documentary filmmakers ask the questions. In this case I would be interviewing the interviewer. A couple of the filmmakers admitted that they were uncomfortable with this "new" position.

All of these interviews were recorded on either an audio or video format. I had my own mini tape-recorder for recording and I rented the video recorder from a local organization in New Delhi. Sometimes I borrowed a camcorder from friends. I would have liked to have all the interviews recorded on video but this was not possible with limited funds and the general unavailability of equipment at times in India. (Not to mention power failures!) There were a couple of incidents where I was not able to hire a camera at the opportune time and hence had to rely on my audio equipment to record the interview.

The secondary sources for this research are historical texts, newspaper articles, magazines and articles on the subject of "documentary filmmaking in India." Much of this historical material was gathered at the library of the Films Division office in Bombay that has a collection of newspapers and magazines. Other material was gathered from the Film Institute at Pune, a city near Bombay. The 1965 special issue of MARG has been helpful for this project.<sup>17</sup> The majority of the articles in this magazine (not surprisingly) were written by male documentary filmmakers/producers of that era. This issue clearly indicates the dominance of men in the documentary scene in India.

#### *Funding for the Project*

This project was largely funded by the Indo-Shastri Canadian Institute. The institute granted me a fellowship for a period of four months, which lasted from November 1996 to February 1997. This allowed me to base myself in India to do my research and field work. An initial trip was taken prior to this time, during which I did most of my preliminary research. This was through personal funding/savings.

### *Organization of the Study*

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the theoretical issues and the analysis of the ‘modus operandi’ of the filmmakers in order to understand their method of production, exhibition and distribution. Part II carries the transcription of the interviews with the four filmmakers. In my preliminary research three main topics emerged, which I elaborated on during my interview with the filmmakers. These three aspects are the focus of my study: (1) the objective of the filmmakers and their films, (2) the methods of production and (3) the methods of distribution adopted by women documentary filmmakers in India.

Focusing on these topics, I have divided *Part I* of the thesis in three chapters. The first chapter overviews the history and major issues in documentary filmmaking and draws upon existing theories particularly related to the term “committed documentaries” as expounded by Thomas Waugh and Peter Steven. This chapter highlights some of the issues that early documentary filmmakers explored in India and draws links or comparisons with issues explored by contemporary documentary filmmakers.

The second chapter highlights three women filmmakers: Jharna Jhaveri, Manjira Datta who are based in New Delhi and Rinki Roy who is based in Bombay. It examines the objectives, the method of production and the distribution strategies adopted by contemporary filmmakers. Following the model and concepts developed by Julia Lesage, I study the format and modes of production and distribution that the filmmakers follow within an Indian context.

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<sup>17</sup> A quarterly published from Bombay that focuses on the Art & Cultural Aspect of India.

The third chapter highlights the work of one of the filmmakers - Suhasini Mulay - who has been active in the field since 1965. This interview highlights her recollection of her experiences and contributions to the field of documentary filmmaking in India. Amongst all the women filmmakers that I interviewed, Suhasini Mulay has been active in the field for the longest time and has made a significant contribution. This chapter closely examines the issue of distribution with particular emphasis on Suhasini Mulay's project. I attempt to understand the modes of distribution and its importance as outlined by Annette Kuhn, E. Ann Kaplan and other theorists who have extensively discussed the significance of distribution in a western context. Finally, I conclude by outlining the main points drawn from my research particularly focusing on the production, exhibition and distribution of documentaries in India, and I suggest future prospects for research in the field.

Part II of the thesis includes the questionnaire that was presented to the filmmakers, followed by the transcription of the interviews with the filmmakers. I have included a current filmography/videography for each filmmaker. It appears at the end of their respective interviews.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE EARLY FILMS, COMMITTED DOCUMENTARY AND WOMEN'S CINEMA

The principal characteristic of Third cinema is really not so much where it is made, or even who makes it, but, rather, the ideology it espouses and the consciousness it displays. The Third Cinema is that cinema of the Third World which stands opposed to imperialism and class oppression in all their ramifications and manifestations.<sup>18</sup>

Teshome H. Gabriel

#### *A Brief History of Documentary films*

The first "actuality" films were made in India in 1898 when Sakharam Bhatwadekar, filmed bouts of wrestling and the training of monkeys. Bhatwadekar had opened a photographic studio in Bombay around 1880.<sup>19</sup> Until 1902, there was only a sporadic production of some travelogues, coverage of political events and news items of the national Freedom Struggle on film. Even these meager efforts soon ceased as they were largely ignored by Exhibitors and the public. The exigencies and needs of the Second World War brought about the revival of short film production. The Government sponsored the Film Advisory Board that was later named the Information Films of India. This was the first organized encouragement given to the development of short films in India. This organization produced films mainly for war publicity and propaganda. It also produced some cultural shorts on Indian music and sculpture.<sup>20</sup>

During the Second World War, there was a compulsory exhibition of these films and the spirit of nationalism rampant in the country clashed and created a certain hostility

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<sup>18</sup> Gabriel, H. Teshome, Third Cinema in the Third World. (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982) 2.

<sup>19</sup> Erik Barnouw & S. Krishnaswamy, Indian Film, (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963) 6.

among the public towards the organization and its films. Information Films of India was closed down in 1946 by the Interim National Government but it was soon revived under the name of the Films Division of the Government of India in 1948. The history of the Films Division is often credited as the launching pad of short films in India.

In Documentaries: A History of Non-Fiction films, Eric Barnouw states that film units become an expression of nationhood, a chronicler of achievement. In India, the Films Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting kept the nation informed about new power plants, steel plants and dams.<sup>21</sup> Most of the films produced by the Films Division were shown in commercial theaters just before the screening of the main feature.

The Films Division held a virtual monopoly on the documentary film in India during the first four decades of Independence, fattened by a regimen of omnipresent and compulsory (but little heeded) theatrical screenings. These films were often a target for criticism by the viewers who got bored by this short film format. I distinctly remember that these "shorts" were never taken seriously by the audience. The people would be talking or walking in the hall while these "shorts" were being screened. During the screening some lights in the theater would be left on. When these lights went off, it was an indication that the "main" cinema was going to commence. This clearly indicated how dispassionate the audience was towards documentaries/short films. My own recollection of these films is that they had boring narratives and dealt with boring subjects which often highlighted the developments and the achievements of the government in power. One complaint was that too large a proportion of newsreel items involved activities of cabinet members. The members were featured cutting ribbons, laying cornerstones and so

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 200-205.

<sup>21</sup> Erik Barnouw, Documentaries: A History of the Non-Fiction films (Oxford University Press,



on. (No doubt this was partly a result of the readiness of ministers to cut ribbons and lay cornerstones). Another charge was that this predilection for the activities of cabinet members favored the party in power. The films were also criticized for their stodginess and sameness of format. They were also criticized for their tendency to ignore controversial issues.<sup>22</sup>

### *Early films - the subjects and contents*

Browsing through the digest of distinguished Indian documentary films produced during the period 1946 - 1960, it is interesting to see which subjects were dealt with in the early documentaries.<sup>23</sup> Quite a number of films were travelogues, describing the beautiful landscapes of India. Such films include: Along the Jamuna (1946), Rajasthan I (Jaipur) (1951), Rajasthan II (1951), (Memories of Mewar) (1951), Glimpses of Assam, Kumaon Hills, Mahaballipuram, Holy Himalayas, (1952-53), Darjeeling, Magic of the Mountains, The Golden River, Spring Comes to Kashmir, (1954-55). Many of these films were made on the picturesque landscapes of Kashmir and in the temples of India. Another subject which was quite popular was the life and achievements of freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and other political leaders of that time. After Independence (1947) there were many new hydro-electric projects and industrial projects which were initiated by the government of India. Many of these projects were documented by filmmakers as it was probably easier to find funding for such films. Most

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1974) 207

<sup>22</sup> Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, Indian Film, (New York and London:Columbia University Press, 1980) 204.

<sup>23</sup> The entire list is carried in the MARG issue, (Bombay, Marg Publications:Volume XIII, no.3 June 1960) 71-74. The list is compiled by Jag Mohan and Pyare Shivpuri.

of these films were produced by the Films Division and a few of them were produced by independent documentary producers.

### *The Independents*

Though the Films Division controlled most of the production of the documentaries, there were many filmmakers who preferred to survive on their own strength and produce their films by raising funds independently. Among them were Paul Zils, Dr. P.V. Pathy, Fali Bilimora, Clement Baptista, Vijaykar, Rajbans Khanna, Durga Khote. These figures dominated the movement throughout the 1950's and 1960's.<sup>24</sup> Except for Durga Khote all these filmmakers are male. The industry was clearly largely ruled and dominated by men.

According to Sanjit Narwekar, in the 1950's and 1960's there was no documentary which was longer than 22 minutes and documentary filmmakers faced many restrictions.<sup>25</sup> In the 1980's there was a small boom of independent filmmakers on the scene in India. Sanjit Narwekar attributes this to three trends. First, a large number of feature filmmakers turned to short filmmaking, which had become a taboo for feature filmmakers in the 1960's and 1970's. Many filmmakers from different parts of India experimented with form and technique and widened the subject matter of Indian films during this period. The second trend was that longer films were in vogue which meant a possibility of bigger budgets. This lured more filmmakers (feature and many non-feature). The third discernible trend was towards investigative filmmaking - using the

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<sup>24</sup> This information was noted from the Films Division display on the 'History of Short Filmmakers' at the International Film Festival held in Bombay in February 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Sanjit Narwekar, "Films Division and the Independent Documentary," The March of the Independents, (Bombay: Films Division, 1992) 63-65.

camera to examine social and political issues. This trend soon became popular world wide.

The 1970's and 1980's witnessed several political developments in India. Two were of major importance. One was the Emergency that was declared by the Indira Gandhi government in 1975. The other was the quantum leap made by Doordarshan (Indian Television) because of the Asiad (the Asian Games) in 1982. During the first development, a state of Emergency was proclaimed by Indira Gandhi in India on June 1975 as she knew that she would lose the forthcoming elections.<sup>26</sup> It lasted for twenty-one months. Throughout the Emergency leaders who opposed government policies, including elder dignitaries such as Jaya Prakash Narayan and Morarji Desai, were suddenly awakened in the middle of the night and taken to prison. The Emergency had devastating impact on the press. Both of these periods of Emergency as well as the Asian games affected the Films Division and the Independents.<sup>27</sup> During this period, the Films Division became a public relations firm for the new government and the filmmakers were instructed to glorify the Emergency, "to issue extravagant claims" and "ignore the objectionable."<sup>28</sup>

Many people protested against the Emergency. Several political groups sprung up within and outside India in response to the repressive Emergency. Many independent filmmakers like Anand Patwardhan, Tapan Bose, Suhasini Mulay, and others found it grossly offensive and unacceptable. Anand Patwardhan who had shot and completed his

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<sup>26</sup> In June 1975, Mrs. Gandhi evoked all democratic rights granted by the constitution of India because of a court ruling against her electoral practices.

<sup>27</sup> Jag Mohan, Documentary Films and Indian Awakening (Bombay: Films Division, 1990) 128.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 129.

film Waves of Revolution (1974) was not able to acquire a Censor certificate for it.<sup>29</sup> The film went underground during the Emergency and was shown in private and clandestine gatherings. Once the Emergency was lifted in March 1977, the filmmaker obtained a Censor's certificate for the film and was able to distribute the film more easily.<sup>30</sup>

The third trend that Sanjit Narwekar emphasizes is that of the popularization of investigative filmmaking which was quite apparent in the work of independent documentary filmmakers that emerged during and after the Emergency rule in India. Anand Patwardhan, Tapan Bose, Suhasini Mulay, Ranjan Palit, Vasudha Joshi and Manjira Dutta developed filmmaking activities that were an extension of their social concerns. These filmmakers are a group of "committed" documentary filmmakers. All of them have been engaged in the cause of fighting the systemic social injustice and practices that repress the oppressed class in India.<sup>31</sup> Thomas Waugh has narrowed down the term "committed documentary" which I have borrowed to explain, to some degree, my understanding of the expression.<sup>32</sup> By "commitment" Thomas Waugh means two things. First, he means a specific ideological undertaking and a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-political transformation. Second, he refers to a specific political positioning, a form of activism or intervention in the process of change itself. To

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<sup>29</sup> Waves of Revolution (1974) is a film documenting the Bihar movement of 1974, which was a student and peasant led mass movement that eventually became the pretext for the Gandhi government's imposition of Emergency rule.

<sup>30</sup> Anand Patwardhan, "The Guerrilla Film, Underground and in Exile: A Critique and a Case Study of Waves of Revolution" Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary, ed. Thomas Waugh, (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1988) 459.

<sup>31</sup> For more information, please look up the filmography of each of these independent filmmakers placed at the end of their respective interviews. All of them have largely spent their filmmaking careers to deal with a social or political theme through their documentaries.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Waugh, Introduction Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary. (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1988) xiv.

paraphrase Marx, a committed filmmaker is content not only to interpret the world but is also engaged in changing it.

This utopian ideal is expressed through very pragmatic applications by most of the filmmakers mentioned in an Indian context. For example, when Vasudha Joshi and Ranjan Palit were making their film Voices from Baliapal (1989) the main purpose was to stop the building of the missile plant in Baliapal, Orissa. Both the filmmakers got involved in the issue primarily before they began to work on the film. Similar examples are seen in the work styles of filmmakers like Anand Patwardhan, Suhasini Mulay, Tapan Bose and many others. Patwardhan's film Bombay Our City (1985) is about the plight and the concerns of the slum dwellers living in the city of Bombay. In the film, the director exposes the hypocrisy of the government that creates these slum banks to draw votes during the election and later gives orders to demolish them. Regardless of censorship policies, these independent filmmakers constantly dig out controversial subjects and question governmental policies and developments. Thus, the committed documentary seems best described as a type of political practice within the larger genre of documentary. The key issues center on the relations between makers and subjects and between makers and the social world they hope to change.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Peter Steven, Brink of Reality: New Canadian Documentary film and video, (Toronto, Between the Lines, 1993) 41

### *Distribution of the early films*

In India, until 1934 distributors hardly existed and many producers dealt directly with exhibitors.<sup>34</sup> In the sound era, distribution had grown in importance and developed a pattern. It had, like production of feature films become fragmented. In 1948 there were 887 distributors in India.<sup>35</sup> For the distribution of feature films the nation was divided into five major territories and the producer dealt with a different distributor for each territory.<sup>36</sup>

For documentaries the scenario was quite different. There was no main distributor. As most of the early films were funded by the Films Division, this government body also handled the distribution of the films. Most of the earlier films were funded either by the Films Division or by a government department and hence got shown to the particular clients or the specific audience they were produced for. There was not a large market for most of these films and they were stacked away in cans after a few screenings primarily due to the lack of a distribution networks or designated screening halls/theaters in India. Besides the difficulties of exhibition and censorship of non-commercial films, many foreign filmmakers found the difficulties of importing their films into India equally discouraging.<sup>37</sup> In the following chapters the question of distribution will be studied further and I will attempt to understand if the scenario has changed for the documentary filmmakers.

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<sup>34</sup> There were no distributor's during the silent era of films in India. This period lasted from 1913 to 1934.

<sup>35</sup> Report of the Film Enquiry Committee, 1949, 115.

<sup>36</sup> Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian film* (Columbia University Press, 1963) 145.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 191.

## *Herstory*

The history of women in documentary filmmaking in India is not new or even relatively recent. It is, however, an uncertain history, except for the documentation on Durga Khote who was perhaps the first woman documentary filmmaker in India. She entered the field in 1952 and later set up her own production unit in 1960 called Durga Khote Productions along with her two daughter-in-laws as partners. She scripted and directed most of her work. Her film 'Pariyakta' (1958) on deserted women and her short film on ancient and tribal methods of making iron made for the Films Division are well known. However, this history is largely unwritten, it is largely unknown; being herstory, it is typically left out of official accounts. But it exists nonetheless, a continuous presence that begs one to question why the talent, the diligence, and the achievements of women have not counted for more.

In India, women have been active in the field of filmmaking from the onset, yet not much has been written about their contribution. In this thesis, I do not attempt to trace the history of all women directors in India. Rather, I focus on the work of a select group of documentary filmmakers. As mentioned earlier my goal is largely to understand their objectives and purposes of making documentary films, and how they distribute their work.

It is essential to note the importance that the 1960's women's movement has attached to documentary film. This might be because the myths underlying film are the very myths underlying our society. But these myths are much more complex than the one-dimensional nature often presumed by Hollywood or Bollywood. For these reasons, film has been a tool for women to project a different image of women, a way to raise

consciousness, a means to document and study the society and its cultural systems more closely. The following chapter studies this process in relation to three women filmmakers in India.



## CHAPTER TWO

### FILMMAKING AND DISTRIBUTION: A CHALLENGE FOR WOMEN FILMMAKERS IN INDIA

Feminist filmmakers....have shown it is possible to reach new audiences - in women's groups, libraries, and public schools - with films that combine personal statement and political analysis with experimental and innovative means.

Jump Cut

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world: Indeed it's the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

#### *The Filmmakers: Their image and style of documentary filmmaking*

For this project, my task of choosing women directors to interview was simplified by circumstance. Due to lack of resources and time I could only interview women in Delhi, where I was staying with my parents, and then later in Bombay where I went to attend the *International Film Festival for Documentary, Short and Animation Films* in February 1995. In this chapter I outline the aims and objectives of these women who entered the field of documentary filmmaking as well as their methods of production and the modes of distribution that they adopt. I will attempt to elaborate on the links between the personal lives and the political concerns of the filmmakers. Given Lesage's framework of the feminist documentary as a genre, I will study how these filmmakers work within an Indian context.

As Claire Johnston has stated, feminist documentary filmmaking is a cinematic genre congruent with a political movement.<sup>38</sup> In India, there were many factors that

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<sup>38</sup> Claire Johnston, Introduction, Notes on Women's Cinema, ed. Claire Johnston, (London: Society

encouraged more women to join the field, including the rise and the momentum of the women's movement. Some of the main reasons that can be outlined were: the crisis of state and government in the 1970s going into the Emergency; the post-Emergency upsurge in favor of civil rights; the mushrooming of women's organizations in the early 1980s and the arrival of women's issues on the agenda. The mid-1980s were also marked by a fundamentalist advance. This fourth factor has affected the 1990s Indian state, as the political crisis has deepened with regard to state, government and society. Comparing the Indian situation with its western counterpart one finds that in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States, women's consciousness-raising groups, reading groups, and task-oriented groups emerged from, and often superseded, the organizations of the anti-war New Left.<sup>39</sup>

According to Julia Lesage, women who had learned filmmaking in the antiwar movement and previously "uncommitted" women filmmakers began to make self-consciously feminist films, and to learn filmmaking specifically in order to be able to contribute to the movement. The films that Margaret Lazarus, Renner Wunderlich, Joan Fink and others made came out of the same ethos as the consciousness-raising groups and had the same goals.<sup>40</sup> Lesage further states that many of the first feminist documentaries used a simple format to present to audiences (presumably composed primarily of women) a picture of the ordinary details of women's lives - told directly by the protagonists to the

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for Education in Film and Television, 1973) 2.

<sup>39</sup> Radha Kumar, Introduction The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990, (New Delhi: Indraprastha Press, 1993) xx-xvi

<sup>40</sup> Julia Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film" Issues in Feminist Film Criticism: ed. Patricia Erens, (Indiana University Press, 1990) 222.

camera. This included tales of their frustrating but sometimes successful attempts to enter and deal with the public world of work and power.<sup>41</sup>

This trend can be seen in most of the work by Indian women documentary filmmakers like Suhasini Mulay, Manjira Datta, Vasudha Joshi and Deepa Dhanraj who concentrate on feminist issues such as: women's health, literacy and female infanticide. It is important for these directors to present certain issues that affect women from a women's perspective. In a country like India where the majority of women do not feel comfortable discussing their problems with men, women filmmakers have been able to tap into and reflect the experiences and ordeals of women.

In India, the mid-1980s have been characterized by an onslaught on the existing rights of women through a harking back to 'tradition' and 'culture,' and to the positing of images which emphasize women's reproductive role as the only natural and historical one. The fundamentalist/revivalist face of dominant religious groups in India is directly opposed to the radical demands and upsurges of a variety of parties. These revivalist groups like the Bhartiya Janata Party, and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad are suppressing any progress the women's movement has made towards gender equality. Women's groups such as the Janwadi Mahila Samiti, Manushi, Kali for Women and others are trying hard to confront and challenge these revivalist movements. The filmmakers discussed in this chapter are part of this activist sphere. The women's movement in India is one of the many burgeoning efforts towards the reassertion of citizen's claims to participate as equals in the political and development process. This places it in a situation of direct confrontation with the forces of conservatism and reaction.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 224.

It would be wrong, ideologically and factually, to confine all of these women filmmakers into a single feminist framework. The first impulse - and for many, the continuing impulse - is an exploration of women's space in a patriarchal structure as it exists in India. The fact is that even today in India, there are many places and situations where women are denied even a modicum of dignity. Child marriages are still widely prevalent and education of the girl child is often regarded as a frivolous issue. Dowry deaths are as common as malarial deaths and the birth of a daughter is often considered a crime to be punished by infanticide.<sup>42</sup> Yet again it would be wrong to state that most women filmmakers deal or choose subjects relating to women only. That would be unfair to the multiplicity of voices that articulate many realities within the sphere of women's documentary filmmaking in India. However, there is a multi-hued feminist thread that runs through these films of vastly different styles and preoccupations.

This chapter will study the process and style of Jharna Jhaveri, Manjira Datta and Rinki Roy who are independent documentary filmmakers based in Delhi and Bombay. It will highlight the issues that are dealt with by the filmmakers interviewed as well as explore the challenges they confront to distribute their work.

### *The Filmmaker and her Politics of Filmmaking*

In the interviews I conducted, the women filmmakers stressed the importance of documentary filmmaking. Documentary filmmaking offers women the opportunity to communicate, to enter into conversation with other women who hear, listen and respond from their own experiences and needs. In speaking and representing they have given their ideas and experiences a validity that strengthens their inner consciousness, along with a

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<sup>42</sup> Times of India, Editorial, (New Delhi: October 14, 1996) 10.

public and political status that can, and often has, challenged established discourses of power. As Julia Lesage has pointed out

the self-conscious act of telling one's story as a woman in a politicized yet personal way gives....women's conversation.....a new social force as a tool for liberation.<sup>43</sup>

Most of the films made by the women interviewed demonstrate this in their work. For example, Rinki Roy's film Chaar Diwari (Behind Closed Doors, 1990) tells the story of battered women who belong to the upper, middle and lower classes of Indian society. In other words, for most of these filmmakers *the personal is right at the center of their politics*. Interviews with the filmmakers also brought forth the fact that for most of these women, documentary filmmaking is often not their "money earning" profession. Documentary filmmaking is taken up mainly because of their commitment to address a social or political issue through this particular medium.<sup>44</sup>

Rinki Roy's film Chaar Diwari, on the issue of conjugal violence, is a documentary that is circulated in academic circles as well as rural and urban surroundings. Much has been written against conjugal violence - a problem that transcends class, caste and creed in India and in other nations. I saw the film for the first time in a classroom of graduate film students at the Jamia Millia Institution in New Delhi. The filmmaker was present for the screening and later led the discussion. The film has many aesthetic faults - for example the sound track at times is out of sync, the picture quality is not very good and the editing is not very smooth. Yet it was very clear that the

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<sup>43</sup> Julia Lesage, "Feminist Documentary: Aesthetics and Politics." Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary. ed. by Thomas Waugh, (Metuchen, N.Y.: Scarecrow, 1984) 250-51.

<sup>44</sup> Here, allow me to identify my own dispositions. I am committed to the continued development of the documentary practice. I believe that documentary films provide one of the most powerful means we have to represent communities to one another and to address social issues and problems.

students appreciated that a documentary on the issue had been produced. Funding is scarce for documentaries in India so often the technical part becomes secondary. During the discussion following the screening, the students debated the issues more than the format of the film. Here the structure of the documentary became secondary, even for these film students. Because most of the students could relate to the issue, they discussed the impact and causes of conjugal violence in their personal lives and in Indian society. For Rinki Roy the making of Chaar Diwari also served a personal therapeutic purpose, helping her to make sense of the problems in her own life. Chaar Diwari illustrates how a very personal experience was translated into a political and collective experience. In this film, Rinki Roy has used the simple format of narration to present a complex problem prevalent in Indian society. Here Lesage would state that biography, simplicity, trust between women filmmakers and female subjects, a linear narrative structure, little self-consciousness about the flexibility of the cinematic medium - are what characterize the feminist documentaries of the 1970s in the West. But this format is also quite prevalent in India in the 1990s.<sup>45</sup>

Manjira Datta's film Rishte (Relationships, 1994) examines how in spite of many social reforms and struggles girls/daughters are discriminated against in a society like India. The film explores the death of Lali Devi who committed suicide because she bore only daughters. The film portrays how some segments of Indian society value sons over daughters and the pressures that this places on many women. The film traces the

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<sup>45</sup> Julia Lesage, "Feminist Documentary: Aesthetics and Politics." Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary. ed. Thomas Waugh, (Metuchen, N.Y.: Scarecrow, 1984) 250-51.

circumstances surrounding the suicide of the woman who failed to give birth to a male child.

In my interview with Manjira Datta, she explained that after she made her film Rishte an organization was formed in Mongolpuri in West Delhi to take up cases such as Lali Devi's. The film motivated people to form an organization to support women who are dominated and oppressed by these societal pressures. People feel comfortable knowing that there is a place/organization where they can go to get help. According to Manjira Datta, when she has screened the film spectators have walked up to her afterwards and told her that the film made them reflect on complicity in this system. She feels that if these films make people think and reflect - it is a great accomplishment, and the message will have been conveyed to the audience. In such a situation, the changes are brought about on an individual as well as a collective level.

As Jharna Jhaveri states

One of the important aims of the filmmakers is to raise consciousness through their films. Consciousness raising has always been seen as both a method for arriving at the truth and a means for action and organizing.

Despite this emphasis on problems particular to women, these filmmakers don't just make films on women. For Manjira Datta, who has directed a number of documentaries, it is important to explore a gamut of issues concerning humanity. She believes that she does not need to be ghettoized by dealing only with women's issues in her documentaries just because she is a woman. Manjira Datta does not agree with categories such as "woman's cinema" as she feels that each issue effects different communities and different groups in different ways. She elaborates by giving an example from her recent work.

Though Rishte was a film about a woman, there were hardly any women in the film, and it is really about male conflict and contradictions. It was interesting for me, because I have never before made a so-called woman's film, and in this film the contradictions among the male members and older women members of the family highlights what really is the problem with our traditional beliefs.

It is clear that the experiences of women, their preferences and choices are limited, defined and molded by the broader political and social setting. In turn they need to be studied and understood in such a broad context.

Upon meeting the filmmakers that I interviewed, it became apparent that most of them belong to a privileged cultural background, if not a very economically affluent one. Active participation in social issues is a privilege of this class. Despite the fact that most of the women filmmakers that I interviewed belong to a privileged cultural background, each of them had to struggle in different ways to enter the field of documentary filmmaking. For example, when Jharna Jhaveri decided to enter the field, her mother was horrified. Jharna Jhaveri was married at that time, and had to convince her parents as well as her husband and his family why it was important for her to make films. She recounts that this was a very difficult and tedious procedure. She remembers that the first time that she decided to go and work in the interiors of Bihar her mother cried as though she was going to war. This is quite a common experience of many women in India who enter a field such as documentary filmmaking. This is largely because there is no structure or fixed hours or time of work. This particular experience is not in any way restricted to a certain class of women in India but is apparent in varied degrees across the board.

For most of these filmmakers, making a documentary allowed them to explore a subject in its entirety through a medium extremely familiar with the masses in India. For



most people in India, an article on the issue probably would not have had the same significance or impact as a film due to the low literacy rate in the country.

As Manjira Datta states

Film is a medium which can make you think. In documentary film, the victory is in the frame. The filmmaker can totally manipulate the audience. It can make you feel charged up, happy, angry, frustrated.....it can be emotionally satisfying, intellectually uplifting.

According to Manjira Datta, film can motivate and politicize the audience on the subject or issue in question. It can also encourage women to articulate their experiences and collectively address political relationships and existing structures through the medium of film.

The topic or the subject of the documentary is extremely important to all the filmmakers. None of the filmmakers that I interviewed have made films that are not issue based. As Jharna Jhaveri emphasized, it is important to film the fact that the practice of *devadasi's* still exists in Southern India. When she observed the literacy movement and its success in Bihar she was instantly drawn to record the happenings. It is a coincidence that most of her work concentrates on issues relating to women. As Jharna Jhaveri puts it

I have never been able to see the women's movement in isolation of anything else that is happening around it. I don't see women's issues in isolation or alien to the rest of the issues. I think issues of caste, communalism, issues of poverty, oppression are common and women being the last in the whole hierarchy. My aim is to deal with women issues not because it sells rather because *I* am concerned about them.

Most of the issues that filmmakers deal with are integral to women. As Jharna Jhaveri has rightfully mentioned, in a country like India, one cannot study women's issues in isolation.

### *Process of Production and the Struggle for Funding*

Once a theme has been chosen the process of production is initiated. This "process" is explained well by Anand Patwardhan, who acts as a mentor for most filmmakers in India. For Jharna Jhaveri, Rinki Roy, Sehjo Singh, Seemantini Dhuru, Reena Mohan and many others in India, Anand Patwardhan has been extremely helpful in the initial stages of their career in documentary filmmaking. He gave his equipment to them, and he helped them to build their resources and networks. In his essay, "The Guerrilla Film, Underground and in Exile..." he elaborates on the process of making a guerrilla film. This process is common for making documentaries on controversial topics.

Once the theme has been chosen, it is discussed. A chain reaction of discussions takes place and the original idea is repeatedly modified. Every person who comes into contact with the idea, acts upon it and is acted upon it to one extent or the other.

The consciousness process has already begun. A rough script begins to be formed. A crew comes together. The making of guerrilla cinema is a political act and every production meeting is a political meeting. The meetings are secret or open depending on the circumstances prevailing at the time.

The number of people involved increases at each succeeding stage. From the person who types the script to the one who helps carry the equipment, all share a degree of involvement in the real-life drama they have chosen to participate in. In extremely repressive conditions, every person involved, even at the very periphery of the filmmaking process, takes a risk, and this conscious act of risk-taking transforms such a person into an activist.

The risk-taking does not end with the production of the film but continues, sometimes in much more acute form into the distribution process, where at times every screening of the film is a militant political act fraught with dangerous consequences if the screening is discovered by authorities.<sup>46</sup>

The quote above represents the particular experiences of a guerrilla filmmaker, but the female documentary filmmaker who makes a film on a political or social issue in

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<sup>46</sup> Anand Patwardhan, 'The Guerrilla Film, Underground and in Exile: A Critique and a case study of waves of revolution' Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary.

India faces similar ordeals. If the issue has a controversial meaning and it challenges the government's norms and objectives, the filmmaker struggles from the beginning to the end. During my research I found that most of the filmmakers interviewed picked controversial subjects. For example, Jharna Jhaveri's film on the Narmada movement is anti-establishment/government. This means that the film was shot while dodging the government officers or the local authorities, because of the constant fear of being locked up or of the equipment being confiscated. Manjira Datta's film Seeds of Plenty, Seeds of Sorrow (1992) got her into trouble with the policy makers in charge of the food policy between the north and the south. She had to shrewdly acquire the information from the officers who were partially funding the project. Quite often due to the social commitment and non-compromising attitude of the filmmakers certain projects like Suhasini Mulay's film on the Kashmir issue and Jharna Jhaveri's film on the Narmada remain incomplete due to a lack of resources.

For most filmmakers funding is the biggest constraint. Because they are not willing to compromise and they fear the Indian Censor board, most filmmakers try to look for foreign funding. One can be committed to a cause or an issue but if there is no money nothing can be accomplished. Quite a few of the filmmakers have often worked by raising money through friends and family or on very meager budgets which often amounts to compromising on technique and quality.

As Jharna Jhaveri puts it

You believe you want to do something - sometimes you don't know how and by the time you organize funds you lose focus or the drive. It can be very frustrating.

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(Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1988) 447-48.

As a result of the lack of funds, the crew is not very large for a shoot. Sometimes it is just the director, an assistant and a camera-person. Most of these filmmakers are also not professionally trained. In turn, they learn as they work. As I have previously mentioned, they are activists first and then filmmakers.

With the introduction of video technology things have become easier for the filmmakers. Video technology was introduced in India in the late 1980's. Before this period most of the documentaries were either shot on 16mm or 35mm which also meant battling the non-availability of raw stock, laboratories, sound facilities, editing tables and, worst of all, projectors in most rural and urban areas. Editing facilities were only available in major cities like Bombay, New Delhi, Madras and Calcutta. With the coming of video technology, the production costs were reduced and most filmmakers are now slowly able to buy equipment. This equipment is much lighter and more compact which helps to cut down the production costs. Editing facilities are also comparatively cheaper and more easily available. Filmmakers like Nilita Vachani have been able to set up editing suites and rent them out when they are not editing. This has become a lucrative side business for some filmmakers. But the earlier filmmakers constantly struggled with the non-availability of funds, huge bulky equipment, production and post-production hassles, the battle with the censor board and the strains linked to the distribution and projection of controversial documentary films.

### *Modes of Distribution*

India lacks an infrastructure to distribute its documentaries and all the filmmakers raised the issue regarding the problem of distributing their work. While the commercial

feature film industry controls its own distribution, documentary film remains the exclusive domain of the State, which controls both the Films Division (similar to but with far less autonomy than the National Film Board of Canada) and TV. The documentaries made for the Films Division or other government bodies are the only ones which find a channel for distribution in certain sectors. This is largely due to lack of funds and interest by government officials who are afraid to encourage an anti-establishment film. Another source of production and distribution of documentaries dealing with India is the foreign market. If a film has been funded by foreign investors than it has a better scope for circulation. Most filmmakers tend to look for foreign funding. Manjira Datta, Suhasini Mulay and others have found foreign funding in the past to support their projects. However, one of the major drawbacks of getting foreign funding is that the film must cater to a foreign audience by explaining to them the problems or the plight of Indian society. Finally, most foreign investors want films in their language. Most of the time the interviews and the text of these documentaries is predominantly in English, thereby only satisfying the elite in India. I strongly believe that the documentaries need to be in the local/regional language and should be shown within and outside the areas where a problem or social condition exists, if they are to serve as a tool for disseminating information and encouraging discussions.

Most of the filmmakers that I interviewed do not see filmmaking and distribution in India as two separate things as a film is not complete if it is not distributed. Some of the filmmakers have decided to circulate their work themselves by holding public screenings followed by a discussion with the audience.

Jharna Jhaveri and Manjira Datta mentioned that they often screened their friend's films besides their own in different cities or villages. As Jharna Jhaveri explains

I believe that you can't make films to show in festivals or stuff like that. You have to decide why you make films. If you want to make films because you really believe that this is an instrument for social transformation - one of the tools of social transformation, then you have to reach out.

Jharna Jhaveri says she has shown Anand Patwardhan's film Ram Ke Naam (1992) in different towns and villages more than fifty to seventy times and after each screening there were discussions and debates.<sup>47</sup>

It is interesting to note that without a proper distribution network, copies of films are distributed either by the filmmakers themselves or through the help of a few non-governmental organization. It would definitely help to have a distribution system in place. As Sehjo Singh, a Delhi based filmmaker retorted with frustration when I asked her how she distributed her films – “How do you expect me to do everything – I direct, produce, raise funds, finally I have to distribute my own films! *Do I work or network?*” This question led me investigate if any of the filmmakers or anyone in the industry had thought of devoting time to build an infrastructure to distribute these documentaries. If there is no distribution system – the effort of all these filmmakers will remain futile.

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<sup>47</sup> Ram Ke Naam(1992) directed by Anand Patwardhan is a film documenting the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in India. It portrays the ideologies propagated by the BJP and the nationalist forces and traces the reasons which led to the demolition of the mosque and the building of a Hindu temple on its site by Hindu fundamentalists on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992.

## CHAPTER THREE

### SUHASINI MULAY: FOCUSING ON DISTRIBUTION

It suits me to make pictures on celluloid....memory pictures....that make stories more interesting and exciting. With film, you are able to transpose these pictures of memory, imagination and reality, and make a [visual] story from them. It is, I think, a continuation of the oral tradition. That's how I see my work.

-Merata Mita

Suhasini Mulay is one of the few filmmakers who has attempted to build a distribution network. In this section, I will describe and analyze the work of Suhasini Mulay and examine her contribution to the field of documentary film in India. My information is recorded in an extended interview with her. Amongst all the filmmakers that I interviewed, Suhasini Mulay has been associated with the field of documentary filmmaking for the longest time. She understands the problems and obstacles in this field, and she has recently taken on the daunting task of trying to improve documentary filmmaking in India. Suhasini Mulay feels that this task of distribution has to be taken up by the filmmakers themselves. Despite various attempts and pleas made to the Ministry of Broadcasting, the Indian Documentary Producers Association and other groups, there has been very little change. Because Bollywood films draw such handsome revenues, the documentaries are shunted aside and little attention is paid to the fate of documentaries in India.

Documentary filmmakers - especially those whose work reflects a social and political commitment - are not often asked to describe their creative process. In this chapter, I will shed light on the process that Suhasini Mulay adopts. I will also describe

her intense commitment both to the field of documentary filmmaking, and to building a distribution network in India.

### *The Process of Production*

Having worked with Suhasini Mulay in India, I realized that work never ended. She was always very conscious of whatever was happening around her, imagining how a simple event could be translated and narrated on celluloid. From the woman who came to do the daily chores at the office and the gardener who maintained the small garden to her friends and colleagues - Suhasini Mulay took a personal interest in people's lives. I remember an instance where her sister's servant was suffering from tuberculosis and she realized that no one was taking care of the situation. She took it upon herself to get him proper medical attention. Similar sensitivity and care was taken while shooting and interviewing people for her films. Suhasini Mulay is committed to knowing her subjects extremely well before filming them. As a result most people are very comfortable talking to her and narrating their experiences.

Certain significant stories often find their way into Suhasini Mulay's films. The dialogues, narration and situations presented through her docu-fictional films feel realistic, because they emerge out of retold stories. For example, in her docu-fiction film Chitthi (The Letter, 1989), the whole idea of the film was sparked by a personal experience.

I lived in a place where there was no privacy and mail got opened - and this is very true of any Indian family - a letter arrives in the family and everybody wants to read it - because the family unit in India is much tighter knit. So I have always written two letters - one which talks of general things and the other a personal one. So the idea of this film came from there. The husband writes home two letters - one general letter for



the entire family and the other one a personal one addressed to his wife. But the woman has forgotten to read and both the letters get read publicly by the village school master. The message of the film was to promote adult literacy in the villages in a simplistic manner which people could relate to.

While most of her films begin with a translation of a real event, Suhasini Mulay is also of the opinion that all films are subjective as they are an interpretation of one's own understanding of the situation. She feels they reflect the filmmaker's personal opinions.

My films are totally subjective. The objective-subjective argument from my point of view, at least in film terms, is a lot of nonsense. The films are my response to a certain experience.

Grierson once defined the documentary as "the creative interpretation of reality."<sup>48</sup>

But the question remains: What is reality? When I discussed it with Suhasini Mulay she strongly stated that

It is a myth that documentaries portray reality. The fact that you are shooting something - you have already tinkered with the image - just the physical presence of the camera has changed the situation. The only thing a documentary filmmaker has to do is to be truthful to the subject.

Suhasini Mulay feels that just by the mere fact that the filmmaker has used a tripod and a camera to shoot, she "is tinkering with the reality." In other words, the entry of a foreign object and the people involved in the shoot changes the dynamics. People tone down and may become self-conscious by the mere presence of the camera.

This phenomenon is explored by Eileen McGarry in "Documentary realism and women's cinema." She points out that long before the filmmakers arrive at the scene, reality itself is coded "first in the infrastructure of the social formation (human economic

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Dyer MacCann, A Montage of Theories, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1966) 44

practice) and secondly by the superstructure of politics and ideology."<sup>49</sup> The filmmaker, then, is "not dealing with reality, but with that which has become the pro-filmic event: that which exists and happens in front of the camera."<sup>50</sup> McGarry argues that to ignore the

manner in which the dominant ideology and cinematic traditions encode the pro-filmic event is to hide the fact that reality is selected and altered by the presence of the film workers, and the demands of the equipment.<sup>51</sup>

E. Ann Kaplan takes this argument a step further in her "Realist Debate in Feminist Film."

While this is true to a certain extent (obviously any screen image is the result of a great deal of selection, in terms of what footage to show, what shot to place next to which, angle and distance from subject, what words to use, etc.) as we'll see the documentarist neither has control over the referent nor is she totally controlled by signifying practices. Paradoxically, what she does have more control over is precisely *ideology*.<sup>52</sup>

Suhasini Mulay's efforts to remain 'truthful to the subject' are practiced constantly as she keeps a permanent vigil on what is important in dealing with the subject or the issue as well as the person she is interviewing.

Kaplan tries to understand what makes a film "realistic" and suggests that such films arise from (1) their use of working class people and issues (i.e. this class, and its concerns, are somehow more "real" than the middle classes); (2) their focus on real-life events as opposed to made-up stories; (3) their use of real locations as opposed to artificial studio sets; and (4) their deployment of Italian neo-realism and its cinematic

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<sup>49</sup> Eileen McGarry: "Documentary realism and women's cinema," Women and Film, (vol. 2. no. 7, 1982) 50.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.51.

<sup>52</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, "Realist Debate in Feminist film", Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera. (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1983) 127.

techniques, such as the long take, which was assumed to prevent the meddling with actuality assumed in montage, etc.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the fact that documentary and fiction films begin with different material (fiction films with actors in a studio, and documentaries with actual people in their environment), once this material becomes a strip of film to be constructed in whatever way the author wishes, the difference evaporates.

### *On the Question of Female Aesthetics*

When Silvia Bovenschen in 1976 posed the question “Is there a feminist aesthetic?” the only answer she could give was, yes and no:

Certainly there is if one is talking about aesthetic awareness and modes of sensory perception. Certainly not, if one is talking about an unusual variant of artistic production or about a painstakingly constructed theory of art.<sup>54</sup>

In response to the question of female aesthetics, Suhasini Mulay explains that she has noticed that there are differences between a male director’s work versus that of a female director. She feels that in a country like India where quite often women are not comfortable talking to men, it helps if there are more women on the crew - especially behind the camera when a woman is being interviewed. She admits that the differences of framing a shot or composing an image are probably psychological. However, based on her experience in the field she can instantly know if the filmmaker or the camera woman is female or not.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.126.

<sup>54</sup> Silvia Bovenschen, “Is there a Feminine Aesthetic?” trans. Beth Weckmueller, New German Critique, ( no 10: Winter, 1977.)

Suhasini Mulay elaborates by giving an example which took place during the shooting of Likh Ke De Do (1979). Tapan Bose was maneuvering the camera when they were shooting a scene where they were trying to create the atmosphere of the loneliness of a woman after her husband has gone. Mulay broke a branch of a tree and hung the branch from the top of the window sill. The frame consisted of the window with a pot near the window sill and the branch hanging from one of the corners of the window. Suhasini Mulay felt that aesthetically the shot looked good but when Tapan Bose looked at the shot through the lens he did not understand how the branch came into the frame when the tree was so far above. Suhasini Mulay did not care about "cheating" as long as the frame appealed to her. She explains that often these kind of clashes used to take place between her and Tapan Bose and they could be attributed to difference of aesthetics, style or opinion between the two of them. Yet again, Suhasini Mulay feels that she can often tell when she looks at a frame if it has been composed by a man or a woman.

Certain techniques are very unique to Suhasini Mulay and her filmmaking style. Having worked with her on several productions I have observed and learnt from them. One of these techniques involves letting people in the film talk for themselves. She is careful never to prompt or suggest a point of view during the course of the interview. Usually the camera person is given a detailed briefing before the shoot and the camera person knows when to start his or her camera without letting the interviewee become conscious of it. In this way, the camera remains unobtrusive and the people are more at ease when they are being filmed.

Another way that Suhasini Mulay records natural actions on the part of her screen characters is to accustom them to the camera, cameraman and sound recording devices

before filming. For example, on certain shoots where only women characters were shot in a rural background, Suhasini Mulay spent a few days in the village acquainting herself with the women prior to the unit reaching the place. This made the women comfortable and they could express themselves more easily once the camera unit arrived.

Thomas Waugh has documented how “collective talking groups” is a common phenomenon in Indian documentaries. People like to gather in groups in front of the camera and talk at the same time. Suhasini Mulay says that interviewing is much easier amongst women’s groups if women are present behind the camera. The interviewee is less intimidated, more at ease and the responses are more direct.

*From the written word to the moving image*

Adult literacy is a subject which Suhasini Mulay has been tackling since her first film Likh Ke De Do (Give it to Me in Writing, 1979). To date she has made three films dealing with the subject namely Likh Ke De Do (Give it to Me in Writing, 1979), Kagaz Ki Lekhi (The Document, 1988) and Chitthi (The Letter, 1989). She plans to make at least seven or a series of films on the same issue. These three films that she has made to date all have a docu-fiction format. Docu-fiction is a style where the element of story is predominant and yet there is a strong message based on empirical evidence woven throughout the narrative. The story component makes it more interesting to the audience. It also communicates an idea or a central point. For example, in most of the docu-fiction films on the subject of adult literacy that Suhasini Mulay has made, instead of giving statistics and boring details about the rate of illiteracy in India, she encourages her audience to be literate through a story-line that they can relate to. It is a conscious choice

that Suhasini Mulay has made to promote adult literacy through a docu-fiction format. She strongly contends that a subject like adult literacy cannot be "taught" by giving an educational speech or displaying statistical numbers to a group of people who are illiterate. This is going to make the audience more disinterested and inattentive. Hence, Suhasini Mulay affirms that the docu-fiction format keeps the audience involved and hopefully provokes them towards literacy.

Suhasini Mulay has many reasons for choosing to make these films in the docu-fiction format.

I think the reason why people in India would take a narrative format much more easily is because we are used to parables/stories as a form of teaching. Even the scriptures the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Koran, the Bible are in that form. We are used to that form of learning. Also with a literacy rate as low as 30% in India, I do not want to make a documentary giving statistics but rather tell a story to which people can relate to. Also, in a country like India - literacy is a luxury accessible more to the rich. Even our textbooks have material which alienates many a class. For example, our textbooks read A is for an Apple, if you don't have access to an Apple how are you going to associate A with an Apple? So, to the majority of the Indians you have to tell their story and tell it simply so it can have an impact.

One of the main problems that Suhasini Mulay has with the format of documentaries for subjects like adult literacy, health and other similar issues is that they become too verbose. As she made clear in my interview with her "they never use the image but rather are so heavy on voice-over and commentary."

Suhasini Mulay emphasizes that a "picture speaks a thousand words" and so filmmakers should use the image. As writer and filmmaker Louis Marcorelles explains

Thousands of bunglers have made the word (documentary) come to mean a deadly, routine form of filmmaking, the kind an alienated consumer society might appear to deserve - the art of talking a great deal during a

film, with a commentary imposed from outside, in order to say nothing and to show nothing.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, Suhasini Mulay states that quite often the “commentary or voice-overs talk too much and the picture too little.”

As mentioned earlier, for the three docu-fictional tales that she has scripted to promote literacy, Suhasini Mulay has chosen simple stories that the people can identify with. Quite often the ideas for story-lines may emerge from an incident or a story narrated/experienced by people in the villages. For example, in the story of Kagaz Ki Lekhi a villager puts his thumb impression over a piece of blank paper and is later harassed by the landlord. This is a situation experienced by the majority of innocent villagers throughout rural India. Landlords often take advantage of illiterate workers and make them sign blank sheets of paper or false documents that enslave the worker and his family for the rest of their lives.

Suhasini Mulay further mentions that one of the least powerful group in India is women; especially rural women. She remarks that in rural India - women rarely go out alone and are often afraid to speak. For this reason all her films on the issue of adult literacy target women by portraying characters such as the illiterate wives in both Likh Ke De Do and Chitthi. In both these docu-fictional films the story draws upon the experiences of the illiterate wives who are encouraged to read and write. In Kagaz Ki Lekhi the wife of the poor labourer also realizes the advantages of being literate. Suhasini Mulay has had a lot of success with these literacy films. They are all in Hindi - so they

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<sup>55</sup> Louis Marcorelles, Living Cinema: New Directions in Contemporary Filmmaking, (New York: Prager, 1973) 37.

are accessible to a large audience in India and they have been used as far as Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup>

For Suhasini Mulay, the audience is very important. She believes that for social change to take place a constant dialogue between the filmmaker and her intended audience is necessary.

The filmmaker can never be disconnected at any instance. From the making of the documentary to the showing of it - it is an involvement. If you believe in the subject or the issue you will want to hear the reaction of the people and take note of what worked or did not work in the film. There have been times when I have shown the film 25 times in the same village - at the very same place!

Feedback from the audience is key because, in the final instance, it is the audience who approve or disapprove of the work. They determine what really worked or did not work in the film. The question is: how does one get this feedback? Suhasini Mulay's strategy is that she shows the film to the rural or urban audience and studies their reaction. Often after she has shown the film to the village audience, she re-shoots or re-edits certain portions in order to integrate suggestions or questions that emerge from the audience.

Suhasini Mulay strongly believes that documentary is one of the vehicles to create social change. She also feels that the input and dialogue with the people determines the extent of the change that takes place. For example after she and Tapan Bose completed their film on the Bhopal mishap, she went back to the city to screen the film on the streets of Bhopal. A crowd of 10,000 spectators watched the film. When she went back to the city the next time, she heard people on the streets repeating the dialogues from the film -

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<sup>56</sup> Likh Ke De Do - the first of the literacy films was picked up by the UNICEF and promoted in a package for the literacy movement in neighbouring countries.



what the politicians or the representatives from the multinational company had said in the film - their hollow promises and vows to improve the situation in the city. The people had become very skeptical of the governments involvement and its agenda. This anecdote indicates some of the ways in which documentary films create an impact and leave lasting impressions on the spectators. As Suhasini Mulay stresses, in order for change to take place - "everyone needs to participate." She is also aware of the NFB Challenge for Change program and hopes that India will have the opportunity and the funds to initiate something on similar lines.<sup>57</sup>

### *A two year sabbatical*

After working for nearly eighteen years, Suhasini Mulay decided to take two years off from active documentary filmmaking. Presently, she is working as Media Advisor in CAPART where she reviews documentaries and is building a network to distribute the films according to the provincial or regional needs of the people.<sup>58</sup> This has led her to examine the system in India and to understand how a network of documentary

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<sup>57</sup> The Challenge for Change programme started by the NFB in 1970's in Canada was a community based project which provided film and video equipment to ordinary people upon request and which also facilitated the projects of independent filmmakers trying to examine the daily lives of the disenfranchised, those least likely to find a voice in the mainstream media. Many films grew out of the program, and it has often been cited as a model not only for the documentary cinema but for video as well. Source: Ron Burnett ed. Explorations in Film Theory, (Indiana University Press, 1991) 111-112.

<sup>58</sup> Right since the time of independence, the Government of India has been encouraging people's movement for development. While in the early years of independence, the voluntary sector depended largely on voluntary contributions or foreign funds through agencies like Freedom from Hunger Committee (which later became People's Action for Development (India), the Government of India did recognize the importance of his sector by providing relief for the contributions made to voluntary agencies by individuals as well as corporate bodies. It was with the Seventh Plan that the Government of India decided to exploit the potential of the voluntary sector in rural development . During this Plan, the allocation to the voluntary sector increased manifold. In order to channelize the large funds that had been earmarked for development activities through voluntary agencies and to give impetus to the movement, the Council for Advancement of People's Action and Rural Technology (CAPART) was set up merging the People's Action for Development (India) (PADI) and the Council for Advancement of Rural Technology (CART) in 1986.

filmmakers be established. Because of her past experience, Suhasini Mulay understands the need for documentaries and films that can lead to discussions and generate awareness about an issue in a formal or informal gathering. Yet, filmmakers have not had any mechanisms for the distribution and exhibition of their films on a large scale within India. CAPART provides her the space to explore and initiate the process.

During the interview Suhasini Mulay stated that her major concern was that due to lack of funds, filmmakers often produced and directed documentaries which they ended up selling to foreign channels and festivals outside the country. This brought back revenues which helped the filmmaker to fund the next project. It is important that these films build an audience outside the nation/province that they are produced in, yet, it is extremely important that they are screened and distributed within the country.

The fact that Doordarshan (Indian Television) does not have a designated channel or a time slot for screening the work of the documentary filmmakers is also a setback. Filmmakers have voiced their pleas at several film festivals. They have also taken the matter to the Ministry. However, their actions have not been met with concrete results. In the past, award winning documentary filmmakers like Anand Patwardhan, Ranjan Palit, Vasudha Joshi, Tapan Bose, Suhasini Mulay and others have had to fight court cases to get their films screened on Doordarshan.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Anand Patwardhan fought for the screening of Bombay Our City (1985) (about the slums and slum dwellers of Bombay city) at the level of the Supreme Court for nearly two years after winning several awards. The film was finally shown on Doordarshan in the 11:30 p.m. slot. This is a common practice by the government officials who sweep every issue underneath the carpet and have vested interest in keeping the masses ignorant.

### *The Project at CAPART*

The task at CAPART is still at a very preliminary level. Suhasini Mulay has begun to build a bank of the work of documentary filmmakers in India. CAPART collects the information about the film and simultaneously collects the information of various non-governmental agencies/organizations involved in diverse activities. The aim is to be able to distribute documentaries as per the requirements of the particular area and to channel them through the non-governmental agencies who would be responsible for screening their works. Also it is important that the documentaries be translated/dubbed in regional languages which increases the accessibility of the films. CAPART is involved in the task of dubbing the tapes according to the requirements of the community.

As the Media Advisor at CAPART, Suhasini Mulay monitors the quality and the choice of topics/issues dealt with by the documentary filmmakers. CAPART funds the projects partially/wholly and hence has a certain control over the projects. In the process CAPART has become a converging point for most filmmakers where their work is viewed critically/artistically and then distributed into the community.

Taking the NFB model, which concentrated on the issue of connectivity between production and distribution, Suhasini Mulay is attempting to build a data bank of the work of the filmmakers and the organizations that might be interested in purchasing and distributing the films. Along the way she collects information concerning the issues that need to be explored or tackled through the medium of documentary. Eventually this mechanism will have to be decentralized and regional centers will have to be built across India in an effort to build closer ties with the community. The task is daunting and multi-faceted but the seed has been sown.

Distribution of independent films has also been a challenge for feminist independent filmmakers in the west. For example, as Annette Kuhn stresses the need to build audience and exhibit films in non-commercial settings.<sup>60</sup> Similarly the filmmaker in India has to work and network to exhibit her work and build an audience that views the film and generates debate in her community.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter highlights the experiences of Suhasini Mulay in the field of documentary filmmaking in India. Due to her long association with the field, Suhasini Mulay has been able to identify certain problems associated with this profession, particularly the lack of a distribution system in India. While all the filmmakers interviewed have indicated the need for distribution resources, she is the only one who is working on the question of the distribution of documentaries in India. This is her top priority and she wishes to have some type of mechanism in place as soon as possible. The kind of audience, interest and market there is in India for the distribution of documentaries needs further study. As Suhasini Mulay mentions, documentaries need to be circulated in educational institutions, as well as in rural and urban settings in order to generate awareness and to create spaces for debate on a collage of issues. Given the diversity India represents, the task is quite a challenge.

Many issues emerge from the analysis of Suhasini Mulay's work in the field. One of the most important debates that emerges is the one on making documentaries in the docu-fictional format. This format is more acceptable to the Indian audience which is

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<sup>60</sup> Annette Kuhn, Women's Pictures Feminism and Cinema, (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1982) 191.

used to seeing Bollywood films. Most of the audience is not comfortable with the 'informational' style of documentaries. If this information is packaged in a fictional format it is more engaging. Yet this format is not feasible for filmmakers who wish to film actual political situations as they unfold in the moment. Suhasini Mulay has been involved in making both styles of filmmaking - the fictional and the non-fictional.

The key issue is the one of distribution. If documentary filmmakers have to survive, they must not only produce films but they must exhibit and distribute them. Funding is scarce, yet to increase the audience the filmmakers have to make sure that their work gets circulated. It is important to note that after 35 years spent working in various capacities in this field, Suhasini Mulay has taken a two year sabbatical to concentrate on building a network to distribute documentaries in India. The distribution issue has always been one of the major problems and drawbacks of the existing system. Suhasini Mulay does not have a specific model for distribution but she hopes to have some kind of basic infrastructure put into place before she returns to directing documentaries.

## CONCLUSION

### **THE FUTURE OF THE INDIAN DOCUMENTARY FILM: STRATEGIES OF PRODUCTION, EXHIBITION, AND DISTRIBUTION IN INDIA**

For a radical today, using one's skills making films might be, but does not have to be, a way of doing political work without directly facing or confronting a constituency. Two questions about one's work go a long way in keeping it from being an escape. "For Whom?" and "For What End?"  
Jump Cut.

This study focuses on the work of four women documentary filmmakers in India. I chose a small group to demonstrate the task of a few committed filmmakers and their frustration with the lack of an infrastructure for distributing their work within the country. The analysis of their work is followed by a transcription of interviews that I conducted with them. This is to demonstrate that there is not any one adequate theory that is applicable to an Indian context, rather many issues emerge and they need to be discussed and debated contextually. Theory never emerges as a pure timeless abstraction but always in relation to changing political, social and communication concerns and situations. An adequate theory on the method and style of the filmmakers will emerge only through constant debate and study of their practices.

Part I and Part II of the thesis illustrate that the Indian documentary filmmaker faces several constraints in terms of production, exhibition and distribution of her work. The practical and political issues facing independent filmmakers often seem to demand more attention than the final results of their work: the films themselves. For independent filmmakers, questions of relationships are vital: of independence and accountability between filmmakers and their subjects; of relations with audiences and of relations to the social movement that they are part of. These questions are not only political but

economic. The filmmakers interviewed for this study are primarily activists and explore a gamut of political and social issues within an Indian context.

Budgets and fundraising take up a good part of the documentary filmmaker's life in India as in the rest of the world. Most filmmakers have to rely on funding from the very system they oppose. Having made the films, directors in India have not had any mechanism for the distribution and exhibition of their films on a large scale. Showings have been by necessity and largely depend on the filmmakers determination to screen the films and lead a discussion in rural or urban settings.

The history of independent cinema, like commercial cinema, is governed by the economic relations in which the practices are embedded. One of the criticisms that emerge from the field is that most filmmakers who strive to raise the funds for their films, after producing and directing them are so exhausted that they end up reaching only a small and already committed audience. If they depend on government or private corporations for funding they end up paying a certain cost in compromising on form and content. For these reasons, it is essential to have a distribution network for the survival of documentaries in India - this would simplify the task of the filmmaker. As Annette Kuhn has stated, one of the reasons that commercial distributors rarely deal with independent films is because there is not much of an audience. She emphasizes that it is important to constantly build the audience. Work with audiences might therefore involve active efforts to make films available for distribution, to ensure that they are exhibited so that debates can be generated around the issues.<sup>61</sup> Kuhn also stresses the need to have non-theatrical screenings for independent feminist films because a large potential audience for feminist

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

films exists among women who rarely visit film theaters, and who would certainly not normally consider going to see films in non-commercial cinemas<sup>62</sup>

### *Filmmakers Intent*

All the filmmakers interviewed for this study have a definite purpose in producing and directing socially conscious documentaries. Most of them belong to a privileged cultural background, yet they are politically and socially conscious individuals. They have made issue based documentaries to generate awareness and consciousness that cuts across every class and caste in India. Their work usually does not generate an income, therefore most of them sustain themselves by secondary jobs. This is frustrating and affects the producer of the film. Furthermore, a lack of an infrastructure for distribution leads to poor circulation of their work. It is essential for filmmakers and activists to focus on the central question of distribution and to work towards building and improving the situation in order to reach the varied audience in India. This study indicates that despite the concerns of these filmmakers on the question of distribution, they haven't been able to come up with any model or structure of distribution. Except for Suhasini Mulay who has taken a two year sabbatical, most of the filmmakers carry on producing documentaries with the constraints of the system.

This research also indicates that all the filmmakers have differences and similarities in their working styles, hence I cannot make many generalizations about them. The only generalization that I make is that all are making documentaries because of their vested concern with injustices in India. Their goal is to portray the information to the best of their abilities. As some of the filmmakers expressed - it is impossible to be

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 193.



objective. Most of the filmmakers use the camera as a witness to experience, and through this experience the viewer as well as the filmmaker is forced to question his/her own beliefs and feelings.

### *Further Research Directions*

In this study I have not analyzed the films of the documentary filmmakers and I have not focused on audience perception or reception. Instead my research has been based on talking with key documentary filmmakers about the process of making and distributing their films. However, I do recognize that the filmmakers constitute a small segment of the spectators, but I believe it is more essential to understand the target audience for whom the films are made. Also, I have concentrated exclusively on documentaries made in India. Furthermore, I have only studied the contribution of a few women directors. Undoubtedly this work requires further analysis around film practices and methods of production and distribution. In other words, I have left myself many openings for further inquiry in the future and reminded myself yet again that this was just the beginning.

## **PART II: THE INTERVIEW WITH THE FILMMAKERS**

### **QUESTIONNAIRE**

*Questions for the interview with the women documentary film makers in India*

- 1) Let me begin by asking you why you began to make documentary films? When did you begin and what were the motivating factors?
- 2) What is the top priority to you when making a documentary?
- 3) Why did you choose documentary film making as your medium of expression?
- 4) Can you describe the process you follow when putting a documentary together? Where do you start? What format do you use and is there a particular reason for choosing that format?
- 5) What issues have you dealt with through your documentaries?
- 6) Do you visualize your audience? Who are they?
- 7) In what ideal context would you like your documentaries to be viewed?
- 8) What do you think is the best way for audiences to learn about your documentaries?
- 9) Are sales important to you? How do you distribute your work? What indicates to you that your documentary has been successful?
- 10) What motivates people to see documentary films?
- 11) What motivates you to see as well as make documentary films?
- 12) What is the biggest obstacle to getting people to see your films?
- 13) What kinds of actions can be taken to facilitate viewership of documentary films?
- 14) How are feminist concerns and feminist cultural politics actually written into different types of realist films?
- 15) What place do documentaries occupy in relation to Bollywood cinema? Has the situation become any better for documentary film makers?

## THE FILMMAKERS SPEAK

*Interview with Jharna Jhaveri - New Delhi, December 1996 at the filmmakers residence*

**Could you tell me a little about your background? How you got into documentary filmmaking?**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** I never planned to be a filmmaker. I never took any formal training. I was studying at Poona University doing Sociology. The film institute was very close to where I was, and I registered to do the Film Appreciation course where I saw a whole range of films - fiction and documentaries. Before this I had seen Bombay Our City - I think in 1987, which was a very impressionable time for me. At the institute I saw Cuban, Polish and many other films. I got very interested in what was happening, but I never thought I wanted to make films myself. I wanted to work with people but I didn't know how. Anand and many others came to give us lectures and I was greatly fascinated by documentary filmmaking. I think some pleasant accidents do take place. One of them was that I went to Bihar and was working in the interiors of Madhubani: Madhu Puran and Savechar, some of the most backward regions of the country as well. The literacy movement was on. I was involved with the initial process when a whole lot of women were incorporated into the literacy network. This was unthinkable because this was a whole area beyond the Ganga which was not even exposed to the general public during the independence. And there, to bring so many women out was something that most of us involved in the organization also thought was not possible.

You see, as a person educated in the urban areas and who had studied in the kind of environments you do, you have many ideas of what is happening. You want to

somehow make a difference. You want to put whatever you learnt into practice. I wanted to work with people. Like I was saying, I was raised in an urban environment. You are always expected to know what you want. And I didn't know what I wanted. I knew I wanted to be involved with people. Since I was woman from a privileged class and caste and religious status, I felt I had to give back. In the cities it is very difficult to make headway. On the one hand, you have this whole communalism, on the other hand, you have this whole liberalization and corruption and a whole gamut of things to battle against. How, where to go, where to begin... I remember when the Bhopal disaster happened, I used to dream of going to Bhopal station and just working. I don't come from a political background at home, so I didn't know how to do that. Well, I was lucky to have a whole lot of experiences that led me to going to Madhubani. It was a whole different world where all my concepts, all my education became null and void. All that I had learned somewhere, I had to unlearn in order to begin. Like women's equality, which one talked about amongst friends and in women's groups. I was involved with a woman's group, as well, in Ahmedabad; one realizes one can't put that to use because this was a culture where you had to address issues that concerned women without men's support because it was such an unequal kind of society. So, there one had to find newer ways to reach women. What I did was start talking about myself, start talking about how I began, that I was educated, I was married, how I had problems. Of my coming to Bihar and what my husband thought of it. How mother cried as though I was going to war. "Bihar! *Wahan ja kar kya karo gi.* (What will you do over there?) It can be so tough". But when one went there and related these issues, a whole lot of women could identify that it was not easy even for urban women to come out. All these apprehensions and doubts were

real, and they were as real for somebody from outside as for them. So that was a point of meeting with women there. Issues of discrimination were even felt by them, not only within the household, but within the villages, within the communities, and even outside of that, in terms of wages, in terms of how they were treated. Not all of them were very conscious about all these issues, but everyone felt it when one talked about it.

(Due to some light fluctuations we take a break and begin again....)

**Jharna Jhaveri:** I was born in Bombay and brought up in Delhi, Bombay and Poona. I was ashamed that I had never seen a village. But I never could say that. Then, finally, I could go to Bihar. My parents were very terrified. My husband was also very worried, and he was skeptical. He asked - "What are you going to do?" and said that it won't make a difference. I wanted to go and see for myself. And there was this whole literacy movement. The literacy movement had taken a certain shape because the North Indian states need a different kind of input due to the whole caste system, the backwardness, the feudal system which existed there. The positive experiences from the South couldn't be translated in the North very easily. They had to make their own beginnings there. I was fortunate that during the same time when this whole thing was happening, I went to Madhubani. This whole CPM, CPI (marxist parties) network, the whole left front - they were doing work there. So I went there with all my notions, quirks...all the romantic ideas about a village, about working with villagers, working with women, talking and sharing ideas and stuff like that. I couldn't talk about all the issues that I thought were 'women's issues'. The contradictions within the men and women were so stark that you couldn't penetrate them. You couldn't talk about women's issues unless you first addressed those issues to men. I remember in one of the rallies there were about

5000 people, at which I was to give a talk and most of them were men. There was a very small section of women on one side with ghunghat (the veil) from which you could see their eyes. They were very keen to know who this woman who was talking was. So, I began by saying that one should educate women so they can run your homes better, they could bring up children better, which was something I didn't believe in, but if you wanted the men to be with you, you had to begin there, with what was acceptable to the whole lot. You begin by talking about health, children. I find this very difficult to accept, but the women still believe in the leftover plates of their husbands. It is not considered as something subordinate. So in such a society, to incorporate values of equality or talk about issues that concern a whole lot of women, in terms of say sanitation, having toilets and issues like that, one couldn't really talk about it immediately. So you begin like that. After that we would go to people's houses and the men would not allow us to talk to the women. *Aap humse baat kijiye*. (You can talk to us). But later women started to come out and joined in rallies. That whole process is not something you can talk about. You have to live it, you have to be there to see. They changed, they transformed, they became a part of a movement and it was not a political movement. What it did to me was tremendously different from what it did to other people there, but it was intense for everybody. All along that time I kept on thinking how wonderful it would be to capture this, to take it to a whole lot more people. I would have possibly wanted somebody else to do a film. But when I came to Delhi or Bombay and talked about it, it was lost. You cannot understand the lives there, the kind of backwardness, the difficulties people go through. I wanted to capture that and I got the opportunity. The organization agreed to fund the film and trusted me enough.

**Could you describe the organization?**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** The Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti which is a Communist Party Marxist outfit. Anurag, my colleague and myself teamed up and decided to go...Anurag had already done other films and I had liked what he had done previously. He would essentially do the camera work and we worked on it together. It was a very different and difficult experience to actually shoot. One had 10,000 experiences, and out of that one was probably able to capture one! I mean you had to set the camera, you had to put on the lights, you had to get the mike. All that I had lived through was very different from when I had to ask those women to talk about it. They were two completely different things, I had to come to terms with all that, as well, which was something I had not thought about. I couldn't feel passionate while I was working. I could get passionate about the issue later, but while I was interviewing, I wanted to get what was happening, in the most sensitive manner, disturbing as little, but it was still disturbing. It was still recreating a reality behind the camera.

So we went and made a film. As a fallout of the literacy movement, a whole women's movement arose under the banner of SAMATA. Samata stood for equality, justice and peace. This was about women. All those issues were taken up. Jatha's (rallies) were formed. Women rallies. Young girls were taught to dance and sing. They would go from village to village performing and talking about women's issues. We were able to capture what they were doing, and along with that capture what was happening in the villages as well. This was what the film was originally planned as. They were moving too fast, we couldn't keep up the pace. They didn't have the time (in Bihar). You don't have electricity. You have to hire a generator, but half the time the generators don't work. The

jeep would get stuck and we always feared that the Naxalites would come and steal the equipment. We had a whole lot of experiences like that. But it was a great learning experience.

**How many of you were there?**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** Anurag, myself and an attendant. The three of us. I was the person most familiar with the area. Anurag finally told me, you can't make it happen when you do a ten-day shoot. When you have Rs.2,500 to pay everyday for the camera and you are running from place A to place B. These things don't happen as we imagine them to happen. They happen at their own pace. You could only capture moments of it, and try and reflect the whole story. And one learned that it was so inadequate. If you see Anganmanch - the film we made - it is not even a drop in the ocean, but the fact that we could even capture that much was a great learning experience for us. One also realized that one felt committed to tell the women, all the people that we included in the film, what the film meant and where we wanted to take it. Right from there, one knew that the film was for them. We were very clear that this was (a) for them, (b) for Doordarshan (Indian Television network) and (c) for everybody else who wanted to see it. We were clearly addressing them, so we wanted to tell them the whole story before we started taking the interviews. I had learnt the language and being a woman I could reach out to them. It was not so difficult, I guess, because they already knew me. It is like an addiction (documentary filmmaking). You get into and you don't know where to stop.

I think money is the biggest constraint in the kind of filmmaking one talks about. You often lose focus because you don't know how to organize funds. But you need funds because it is an expensive medium. Either you have another job from which you get a



salary and you do just one film a year. Or you get funded. Who's going to fund your film - which are the organizations willing to fund you? What are the politics of those organizations?. What is your interest? Keeping all these things in mind - it was quite a learning experience for me.

**Where do you get your funding?**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** For that film, we did get our funding from the organization we were working with. It was an NGO (non-governmental organization). For the other films it has been a struggle. We made a film on Devadasis - a short film which was made as a pilot for a larger research film...

**Can you explain devadasis?**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** There is this oppressive system of dedicating young girls, of the lower caste, especially in the Karnataka belt and Orissa belt, to the goddess Yellamma. This has been happening forever and ever. The practice has been banned since the '70's, but it still continues. It's a whole flesh trade. Earlier the girls were dedicated to the temple. And they finally went to the zamindars (the landlords) of the upper castes of the village. The girls were from the lower caste - Yellamma is considered a lower caste goddess. In fact, she is considered the goddess of the prostitutes. She is worshipped in all red light areas, which was an eye opener to me. The practice of Devadasi which still exists in India - we wanted to see what the government was doing about it. Do parents willingly want to sacrifice their daughters? And what is it that pushes them? Is it just the socio-economics or the whole religious dynamics of it? It is a mixture of all this. Somewhere there is a pressure because they are of lower caste. For centuries they believed that if they did not dedicate their girls to the goddess, then horrible things would

happen to them. They dedicated one of their girls, who is initiated to becoming devadasis; they cannot sleep with one man, they have to sleep with a number of men. They can never get married. So, finally they either come to Poona, that is a whole route to Bombay, and become prostitutes in Bombay. 40-50% of prostitutes in Bombay are devadasis. Some are still with the temple. They used to be attached to one zamindar so they were looked after by one man. They were with one man for a long stretch of time. He looked after their security. Now it's not like that. We don't have the zamindari system as such. Nobody has that kind of money any more. So these girls have to get into the flesh trade. This is a way of religiously legitimizing the entire practice of prostitution in order to get many women to join the profession. The whole channel exists where the priests are involved, the police are involved and so is the pimp. And all of them have a nexus. So we made a film on that.

It was a very difficult thing to deal with an issue like that because however much one reads about it, talks about it or hears about it or sees it, it is very different when you actually go and meet them because they are real women. You eat with them and you realize that they are as flesh and blood as you. I think the biggest handicap I feel when making a film is that I can't be emotional about it. Because if you are emotional, you cannot work. You cannot ask them the questions because you feel that somewhere it is not fair to get into their lives. Somewhere you logically understand that this is for a larger cause. It was very traumatic for me to go through the experience and to make a film....First, we went to an organization, we told them we wanted to shoot. They wouldn't let us. Why should they? We were very clear that if they don't want us to take interviews we won't. Whoever does not want to talk will not be interviewed. We only wanted them

to talk to us if they were completely comfortable. A lot of women did talk to us. They began by saying that they actually did not want to talk about their life. We promised the organization that we would bring the film back, show it to the women who were involved. This was their film and we wanted to give it back to them. It is the least we can do. Other than, of course, the film being on television so that the issue can get national coverage. The organization asked us to give them back all the footage.

**Why did they not want to show it? Did they fear exploitation..**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** The women said they don't have a choice. They were skeptical about what we could give them. How do they get out? They had many questions. Where could they go to? There is no out. And how do you combat the system? Most of them are illiterate. 95% of the devadasis are lower caste. There are two organizations that are working with them, basically promoting awareness on AIDS and condom use. The government is funding these organizations. So some organizations are working with them. They have been questioning, raising issues. They simply say if they don't exist what is going to happen to the society? The understanding is there - one cannot assume that they don't understand the reality. They know exactly what it is all about. But they also believe that younger girls don't have to be trapped into it. Most of them have daughters, and they all say that they would not make their daughters devadasis.

We asked them if they feel that 'Yellamma will be angry if they did not sacrifice their daughters?' Very, very few believed that Yellamma has anything to do with this. It was amazing to see that in the devadasi chawl (poor residential area) on Fraser road, where the red light area is in Bombay, there is this devadasi niwas (rest-house), where we were shooting, most of the women who were there would say 'Hum apni laddkion ko

nahin banayen gai' (we won't allow our daughters to do this). And the truth is that they have never gone out of that area. They had never seen Bombay. They knew how to get back to their villages which they possibly went to once in their lifetime. It is horrible. You can't think about it beyond a point. You feel so helpless.

**You make films on women's issues. Is this a personal choice? Please comment.**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** It is very fashionable to make films on women's issues. Somehow, I have never been able to see the women's movement in isolation of anything else that has been happening around it. I think issues of caste, communalism, poverty and oppression are common and women are the bottom in the whole hierarchy. Just like the dalits (lower castes) and the muslims who suffer the most in this country.

**Most of these issues are interwoven anyway to some degree. Did you travel back with the devadasi film? Could you give me some details about that?**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** I don't see filmmaking and film showing as two separate identities. Firstly, you have to really identify why you make films. I would say I make films because I see it as one of the ways of communicating, of reaching out. I still believe that supporting movements that happen elsewhere from my home in Delhi - and I have an infrastructure here - that is my contribution as much as doing a film. Film is one way. Because it is glamorous and you can manage to get the right contacts because you are in this business - you must use these contacts for the gain that you believe in. You cannot get driven into the glamour of it and forget what it means to you. Somewhere, one has to be very clear about what your whole politics is about. If you are clear about that then whatever you do adds to that. I don't think I would have anything to say if I didn't do all that. I have to keep in touch with what's happening. It is not a question of compulsion. It's

a question of that's what I'm all about. I can't not do that because it means a lot. I get all my strength to survive, I can't get my strength from Delhi. It's a rotten city and I feel extremely alienated here. I know I have to be here. I cannot organize money in the class I belong to. I have to be here to do all that...networking as we call it, to organize money and to sustain myself. But I have always believed that filmmaking and film screening are part of the same exercise. Before I started making films, I had shown them and tried to sell them. And I have really believed in this.

**Please talk about distribution and networking.**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** As I mentioned earlier, I don't see filmmaking and distribution as two separate things. I believe that you can't make films and show them in festivals and stuff like that. So if you want to make films because you really believe that this is one of the tools of social transformation, then you have to be able to reach out. While we were working in Bihar, the BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party - a Hindu nationalist party) had managed to show their films right in the interiors, on videos, all around. One saw the power of being able to do that and one knew that if they can manage to reach many people.... the left movement hasn't been new either. Somewhere, somehow, we've (the left) missed out on being able to reach out. Somewhere we've not grown with the use of technology. In most interiors of villages, you'll have video screenings, where films are shown. They're ready to see anything, and you can make a world of difference. I have shown Ram Ke Naam at least 50 to 70 times myself. Like that, I've shown my film couple of times. I've shown a whole lot of other films. I've shown Ali's films in Narmada, Narmada: A Valley Rises. If you believe that your whole social commitment to use this medium, either as a filmmaker or otherwise, then you have to show films. There

is no way out. You have to reach people. And you have to find ways. You can always say ,“*Kaise dikhaoge? Kahan se video laoge?*” (How will we show it? Where will we get the video?) How do you organize? All those are there anyway. How do you get money to make a film, how do you get a subject? How do you get people? All of those are also there. We managed to pave our way through all that. Like Anand Patwardhan, who’s a mentor, and somebody can learn a hell of a lot from him. I’m glad that he’s there for us to look for. It’s easy to make films on political issues. Tapan Bose makes films on political issues, but they’re not political filmmakers. Anand is a political filmmaker because he also is actively involved when there is a rally, where there’s a dharna. His house is used as a place where all these things happen... meetings happen, phones are used. So one has learned from somebody like Anand to use all the infrastructure that is available for the same cause. For something that you believe in. And you see that filmmaking cannot by itself achieve enough. You have to show films. And not only your films. I think films by a whole lot of people have to be shown. Films on a whole lot of issues. We’ve been involved with the whole Narmada movement now for four years or more. Anurag longer than me. Whenever we go there, we’ve been showing films. Made by other people. I think it is a collective medium. I mean, I don’t feel a sense of competition with other filmmakers in that sense because your whole purpose of why you’re doing it is very different. I think Anil’s film or Narmada Diary or other films that are made... Avinash has made a film called Narmada Puran... there’s Narmada: A Valley Rises... there is the other one by Shashi and Ratna, the older film. All these films on Narmada together are a statement.

**Do you think they really do cause social change? What is the response you get?**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** The north of Bihar and south of Bihar are completely different. The south of Bihar is a tribal area. The north of Bihar is a non-tribal area. One is a very caste ridden, very, very feudal society. The other is an oppressed, exploited society. Balamore is a place south of Bihar. Some organization had organized a screening of our film, **Anganmanch**, there. There was a Muslim Basti there and Muslim women had come to see the film. They were very excited and they felt empowered by seeing it. They didn't have critical questions. They had something to add to it, they felt it was theirs. It was a reflection of what they wanted to say. You could feel it sitting there in the audience. All they were saying was "We want our men to see it." We organized another screening, the day after, and men and women were there. We went to their Bastis and showed it there. The men were skeptical. They said its nice but it's fiction. It doesn't happen like this. Then they argued. I didn't even need to speak. They (the women) said how can it be fiction? How can you have so many women walking on the streets of Madhubani as fiction? You know, they had this whole logic. And what was amazing is how they fought with the men, that if it can happen in Madhubani, it can happen here. I think that was what our films should do.

I think Ram Ke Naam has initiated a whole series of debates and discussions. I think one of the most significant examples of what a film can do is the death of Lal Das the priest who was murdered after the making of the film... it's a horrible example to give... He was taking the film himself to the villages to wherever he was and showing it. He believed that the film can make a difference. The point is how do we do it? How do we systematically make sure that we are able to reach out? I have this theory, that,

individually, me and Anurag or my organization, Janamadhium, know about 500 NGOs all over the country. Out of 500, let's assume 150 could buy. Like Ram Ke Naam, we made sure... I sold about 250 tapes myself. I got in touch with Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti, CPI, CPM and organizations like this and they have... each cassette has been shown at least 15 to 20 times to an audience of say 10-50-100 at least. This is very little. Thousands of copies of the BJP Jain video have been thrown all over the country. We cannot exactly compete with them because they have the whole infrastructure. They have the money and everything. But don't we have the people? I mean to make a copy of a 3 hour tape, it would cost 150 Rupees. That's not a hell of a lot of money. Chomsky talks about this in Manufacturing Consent. It's not a question of organizing money, it's a question of intention. What is really sad is that there are not many filmmakers or for that matter many professionals, many people who want to do this because they believe in changing the world for the better. And this changing the world for the better is not only for others. It's for yourself. I mean do we feel safe in this city? Do we feel nice breathing the kind of air we breath. I mean do we feel nice that we don't have choices? Just because we are privileged... We are unsure of all our futures. It's not a question of just doing this for somebody else. I don't think I do any of this because of somebody else. It's a completely selfish thing for me. I want a better world because I feel horrible to live in a world like this. Everyday you keep reading about murder in Delhi. I believe I live in a safe world I have all my securities and my finances organized, so I feel that I am safe. It's an illusion, no? And you can't change this order by just changing your own reality. It's a whole system that is unequal. You have to start somewhere.



Film is one way of doing it. I don't have the courage to do the kind of activism a whole lot of people can do. I don't have the energy or the courage or my circumstance or my own limitations don't allow me to be able to go to the villages and work for it. If I had to put it between 1 and 10, this (what I do) is minus and that (pure activism) is plus 10. Knowing that I can do this, I have to do it as honestly, as sincerely and as humbly as I can and not lose the focus. You can want to be popular and famous, part of the whole women's, whatever... You can carve a space like that. But that's not the whole game. Somewhere, I think we are countering that whole propaganda of making heroes out of human beings; on the other hand, most of us are running somewhere towards that. That's what one sees and that's the only alienating part that one feels with co-filmmakers. There are very few who feel that sense of commitment or are clear that, "OK I'm doing it for money." Fine. OK. I'm going to make films on women because that's what's selling this year, because the UN has an agenda on women or this year it is AIDS or the next year it's going to be whatever else... but then you're doing it for that. You are part of the industry and you can sell like everything else. But be clear about that. Don't try to promote yourself under the banner of doing it for people. People are so angry with filmmakers like that. When I go back to those areas, they don't want to give you interviews. They say, "*Woh ayethe. Bola tha zaroor wapis ayenge. Woh phir kabhi nahin aye.*" (They came. They said they would come back. They never came back, they never showed the film). They also misused the footage. You have to have some basic ethics. So if you do have that kind of a clarity then I don't see distribution/screening of films as a major problem. I enjoy showing my films. Mine or others. As much as making

them. It delights me to sit with an audience and watch Ram Ke Naam even now. I love it when they respond to all those things.

**And you always get into a discussion afterwards.**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** Yes of course. There's also the other side. It's not easy to make films like these because you don't get funding for them. Our Narmada film kept on dragging because we didn't get money. Various organizations said it's too sensitive, too political an issue. So we just had to keep waiting and editing is very expensive. We wanted to do a good job, so we became slightly ambitious. We shot something like 180 hours of footage. It was so difficult to think of editing it. We just kept working and working on it.

**That's what you're working on now.**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** Yes. That's what we've been doing for four years. You feel like it's never going to be over. I have, in the meantime, tried to survive and go on and do smaller things. Recently, we were at the Mussoorie Academy, the IAS Academy (Indian Administrative Services Academy). There is a person called Harish Mathur who is a very nice bureaucrat. Harish was very keen that we go there and do a training program with the probationers. We were, of course, very skeptical. Why do you need to show bureaucrats how to make films? They'll have another weapon to fight you, you know. We went with all that. Finally, I think it was a very nice learning experience for both. We did two films with them. They did the camera and everything, structure and everything. There were two groups. One with Anurag and one with me. One did a film on the riksha pullers. There are these hand riksha pullers in Mussoorie... The other was on the Tibetan refugee children. We acted as those who are not in the government or those who are talking from

the people's point of view and they acted as the government. These are not given absolutes or in isolation. They were the young people from the same society which we are all a part of. They need as much as we do to get sensitized to various issues. This whole process happened, and I thought that in itself was a part of this whole reaching out. Anurag has been taking training workshops with rural people, boys and girls, training them how to make films, how to use the video, things like that. So we believe that there are various segments', making films is one, distribution is one, training is another, going and showing a film and having a screening is another, showing it in a festival is yet another, because somewhere you need a legitimacy so you can get more money to make your next film. Or you show it in a reputed institute like ISC, where policy makers and such come. And we have this whole institute which is always ready to watch this, somewhere, to say we are a part of it. So why not use that for an advantage? If one is clear as to what one wants to do with it even if it's one small drop, one can use it very effectively.

**Do you intend to make fiction? Bollywood films? Comment.**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** NO, I don't know why. It's never fascinated me. I think I get all of my energy from people. It's very clear. And to capture that is a whole different exercise. To capture what is really happening in history is very different from recreating it. I didn't comment yesterday on Bombay. A feature film like Bombay is technically very well done, but politically completely wrong, completely on the other side. So subtly done, so beautifully done that you can't even know that it's done. Ordinarily you wouldn't know where to find a problem with it. It's the most disturbing film, as far as I'm concerned. If I had my way, I would ban it, because it's going to keep a history. 50 years

from now, what people are going to remember as the riots is, what they see as Bombay. What has really happened is not what is shown in Bombay. You have a Muslim mob going into a Hindu household. You have a close up of the Hindu household with the Hindu symbol written on it. You have Muslims hitting the Hindus. You can see the swords very clearly with the topi (the hats), back-shot, slashing, which is also a mid-close shot. When you have the Hindus attacking, you have long shots. You'll only have lathis (sticks) or you'll have the trishul, but it's a long shot or they're going in the aarti (prayer). Subtle, subtle, subtle things. We don't always notice things like that. But they can be extremely problematic.

**Mani Ratnam was disgusted. Bal Thackeray edited the films in a lot of ways.**

**Jharna Jhaveri:** Bombay is a leap into his politics, what he wants to say about the whole fascist right wing political statement that it makes. It's so well done. Like Hitler's propaganda films. You couldn't question it. This is even more subtle because there is not a Hitler, somewhere. The whole BJP, the whole right wing is not so overt as the fascist movement was. For common people or people who are even sensitive, they cannot see these shades. It's so well done... It's OK to make Manmohan Desai blockbusters. I don't have a problem with Amar Akbar Anthony. I don't have a problem with Mr. Natwarlal. I don't have a problem with Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman. It's overt. The good guy and the bad guy are overt and it's very clear, but a film like Bombay is going to be a historical document of what happened. It's so slick. If you see the riot sequence, it's like a documentary. He's recreated riots and he's actually shot it like a documentary. He's not pre-planned the shoot. It's done through video camera. But you can make out that it's done like that, with that kind of mobility. So I'm saying that these

are two different genres of filmmaking: fiction and documentary - I think I have my statement to make in not recreating history, but trying to capture what is happening with my understanding, with my sensitivities. And if one can reach to as much through that, one should try and do it. And it's not like one against the other. They have two different roles. I don't agree with Prakash Jha's logic. I find it extremely disturbing when... I was never too fascinated by his films... where one reached a very large audience where one had a message in mind and stuff like that. It's, of course, wonderful to be able to reach a large audience. But that doesn't mean you make anything to reach a large audience. What you want to say and why you want to say it is the most important thing.

**Filmography/Videography:**

**{Jharna Jhaveri}**

**1991: Angan Manch:** A film on women and literacy in Bihar.

**1992: Devadasi:** A 30 minute documentary on the exploitative practice of religious sanction to prostitution.

**How did you get into this field of documentary film making?**

**Rinki Roy:** I think it was not a very conscious choice to be a documentary filmmaker. I must confess that. I wanted to take the issue of domestic violence on a wider scale. I felt that writing about it was not enough. I'd written about it for about 10 years, you know, agitated about it through groups, individually, given testimonials of my own life. But it came to a point where I felt I wanted to demystify the issue and that was possible only through this medium, where I thought that we could use the documentary format and if women were willing to come forward, talk about what had happened and fortunately for me, we located a couple of women who were not unwilling to talk about it before the camera. And that's how the whole thing started. This was 1988. Of course, getting funds was again a very big struggle.

**Why the documentary format?**

**Rinki Roy:** I thought this was a subject which would not have the kind of seriousness and impact through any kind of fiction. It had to be non-fiction. I could see that clearly. So that's why it had to be documentary.

**Why was this particular subject of interest to you?**

**Rinki Roy:** Because I was dealing with this issue on a day to day basis with my own situation. I was working with a fairly well known autonomous women's group here, in Bombay, called Nari Kendra or Women's Center. Every time I went, there were women who were victims of violence. What else could we do except, giving our own life situations, interviews. The best thing I thought would be to make a documentary and

keep it. Document the whole thing through a film process and show it wherever we could have viewings.

**Why does one make documentaries? What can one achieve through this?**

**Rinki Roy:** My personal view is that as a documentary filmmaker, I'm much freer. I don't have those constraints that other people working in the big cinema industry have to face on their creative freedom. I could choose whatever subject I want. There's no pressure on me to say, Okay add this kind of song or dance or have a star cast. Once you begin to compromise, then there's no end to it. So I feel that documentary filmmakers don't have to compromise on the creative side. We have to compromise on other aspects like the funding, where it comes from. For instance, when we made Chaar Diwari<sup>63</sup> (Behind Closed Doors), we went around looking for funders in a lot of corporate sections and they were... it's such a grim subject, there were no funds. So, that's a constraint to convince people that, yes, this subject deserves to be filmed or deserves to be documented. When I did Chaar Diwari, nobody was going to tell me that you have to have a woman who looks good or who is attractive or somebody who is watchable. I think that's where I find I am extremely fortunate.

**What kind of issues would you deal with?**

**Rinki Roy:** I am involved with any issues which are dealing with the environment or women's status, their powerlessness, their vulnerability. Despite various amendments and laws in this country, women remain where they are. At a great cost, they have achieved what ever they have. So success stories, failure stories concerning

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<sup>63</sup> **Chaar Diwari (Behind Closed Doors)** is a documentary on the issue of conjugal violence directed by Rinki Roy Bhattacharya and Gulan Kriplani.

real women. All these aspects of women's lives and which oppress women interest me very much.

**Where do you get your funding?**

**Rinki Roy:** I have made three films and all three have been funded by the government.

**Which part of the government?**

**Rinki Roy:** Well, Department of Women and Child is one and then Films Division is second.

**How does one go about doing it?**

**Rinki Roy:** Initially, it was a big struggle. You see, I had no track record. I was a journalist. Of course, I was quite well known as a journalist, and they knew that I was involved with women's organizations. So that was a good thing. Now, at least I have three films to show. So I hope it's not going to be that difficult. One needs to establish oneself. Initially, it is a big struggle to make one's first film. That I think will be less now, but of course it's going to be a struggle to get funds anyway.

**How do you manage to distribute your films?**

**Rinki Roy:** That is another question, you know, for documentaries which are funded by the government, they have their own distribution network, which is a good thing. For instance, this film that I've made, they're going to release it in all the theaters. So there I don't have to work hard at all. For the other two, the Department of Women and Child, they have a tie up with Doordarshan, so they get a slot, which is a horrible slot. It's like killing the film. Mine was shown at 11 o'clock in the night without any publicity. That was the first screening. I insisted on a second screening.



**Which film was this?**

**Rinki Roy:** Chaar Diwari. They don't publicize it. They could avail of the press. So these films just die. You just show it at any time. I've shown my films at colleges, at schools, British Council... For the first time, when I was in London last July with a small scholarship, I could show it in a proper theater. It was like a release. So that was a fantastic experience. In Manchester. I felt that one could show it in theaters', if one had the support, it would be very well received indeed.

**At the festival, it was film vs. video. In the larger context, it's commercial film vs. documentary. Comment?**

**Rinki Roy:** We don't even have that position. There's no competition at all. Unfortunately, nobody considers documentary films as a valid genre in this country. The other side is that I have been to fantastic documentary film festivals all over the world. Fortunately. I've been twice invited to be on a jury, so I could see an entire spectrum, a whole universe which is outside this country. And there are so many festivals which I've got to know. There are documentaries, videos, everything.

**As a journalist, which newspaper or group did you work with?**

**Rinki Roy:** I was a freelancer, but I had columns in Times of India, Economic Times, Indian Express, Midday, all the leading papers.

**It seems necessary to do other work to sustain yourself while making films. What do you do?**

**Rinki Roy:** I don't have any jobs. I don't even have a single job. So, for me, documentary is the only thing I do now. Occasionally, I do write, but that has become something very rare. I never write for remuneration. So, there's no other job I'm holding.

I feel that if I could have a job where I was not compromising, I would take it. So far I have not.

**With Chaar Diwari, did you have a particular audience in mind?**

**Rinki Roy:** No

**Just to make it for a general audience, to make them aware. What was your main intention behind that film?**

**Rinki Roy:** It was mainly to bring this issue into public debate, to show it at forums, wherever we could. We wanted to reduce that whole thing that what is political is personal, what is personal is political. We really wanted to show it to as many people as possible, a cross section of people, not necessarily only women.

**The personal is political. Could you expand on that?**

**Rinki Roy:** That's what I understood with my own life. I'll give you one instance. I used to work as a volunteer at the women's center. Those days, I was having tremendous trouble. I hadn't even started my divorce proceedings. So one good place to go and ventilate my anxiety was at the women's center where a lot of other victims used to come. We had a whole feminist network there. One day I met a woman who is very well known, a renowned scholar named Maria Mies. She was the woman who started the first refuge in Germany, in Cologne. She was just talking about the kind of issues they've dealt with and the situations they are recurrently having to deal with. She talked about a very well known person whose wife had come to the refuge. She was covered in bruises. She was trying to escape the violence at home. Maria Mies and all of them decided that this man is such a well known person, he's got such a fantastic public image that they have to do something. It's not enough just to support this woman; they have to somehow

make it public that in his private life he's a wife beater. So, overnight they had posters and all, giving his name. There was no anonymity. It was all out in the public. And I thought... that's fantastic. You know it started making me think, my husband's a very well known man, so why don't I do something like that? Before I knew, the editor of Manushi was here in town. All these women at the center became my friends. We worked very closely. The women from whose house the shelter was running, Sona Shukla,... she runs a feminist library... she was very concerned personally about my situation. She was very afraid I might be fatally wounded. It was very bad at that time. So she told Madhu that this is what is happening to Rinki and Madhu called me over and we did an interview which lasted from 8 to 10 hours on the tape recorder. I was an exhaustive interview on what had happened so far to me and how I was coping and what were my own perceptions about my life. Madhu took it back. That was in 1983. She was completely shocked about what was happening. She would put the tape recorder off. She just couldn't cope with what she was hearing. Well she took it back and we corresponded and she sent me the whole transcript. She told me... she said Rinki, it's your decision whether you want it out in press or you don't want it out. So I read it and reread it and edited the whole thing. I said fine.. I feel you should publish it. Again she wrote back... she said, Are you sure because once it comes out in print, you've got to face the consequences. Nobody has talked like this in the press. So I told her, "No, I'm ready for the consequences. I don't mind. I think I would like it to come out." I was getting over this whole isolation through talking and then I found tremendous support in the center. But of course, as Madhu had warned me, the moment this thing came out in press, there was a huge furor. There were pro-camps. There were people who were saying, "How could she

do this? How could she bring out this..” or commonly as they would say, wash her dirty linen in public and all this kind of nonsense. But I got very good feedback from a lot of people whom I respect; Satyajit Ray was one person for whom I left a copy of Manushi, and I got a fantastic letter from him saying that he had not read anything like this in Indian journalism. It sort of legitimized my whole struggle, so that’s how I connected. I thought that this is what one has to do even in documentary. Women find the connections. I’m not saying that the women we interviewed in Chaar Diwari are politically aware in that sense, except one of them who had worked with the center. But you see, women watching the film or anyone watching the film would make the connections. That’s how it happens. It sets off a whole process.

**When I saw your film with the Jamia students, very few people actually discussed the film. Everybody focused on the issue. And that is a total success.**

**Rinki Roy:** Yeah! I felt very happy showing it to the Jamia students because I found they were an evolved audience.

**I had a discussion with some students afterwards and I found the opposite. I was a bit sad because I felt it was to an already converted audience. This was a very pretentious environment, politically correct.**

**Rinki Roy:** This question keeps coming back wherever I show it. Usually the first question told me is “Women also do this”. You haven’t shown enough men. What about the men? So my question to them is “what kind of men do you want to see in this film?” So they say, “ what about the husbands.” Well, our choice is, we respected the choice of the women, firstly. And I also told them, I would’ve been very happy if we could interview one of the men, one of the husbands and even if they had said we haven’t done

it, that would have been quite transparent... the way they would say it. Because I know how abusive men talk, and how they defend themselves. I know that whole psychology. One of them said if you want to interview my husband, I'm not going to be there. So what was our choice? It was more important for us to talk to victims who had gone through this experience. I said what's the whole thing of having an honorary man there? What was he going to represent? He wasn't going to represent anything so I said there's no debate.

### **Is it a problem to get audiences for documentary films?**

**Rinki Roy:** Yeah, of course it's a problem. Documentaries are almost invisible. Where are you going to show? I have also been involved with the film society movement from my student days. That was a good forum to show documentaries. But the film society movement is almost dead in this country. We had to shut down the last film society I was involved with, a Bandra based one called Film Suburban, because there were no places we could show our films. In a film society, you can easily show documentaries. That is a big problem; we can never release it theatrically. What is the alternative? I think the only alternatives are pro-forums or maybe festivals.

### **What forums?**

**Rinki Roy:** Any kind of forum. Let's say there's an AIDS forum. You can show a documentary on AIDS. Or if there's a conference on violence. Recently, Chaar Diwari was shown at a conference at the National Center where they had a three day convention on violence. So Mallika Sarabhai did a special dance on violence and Anand's film, my film and another film were shown as part of this whole thing. So we do get exposure like that which is occasional, but we have to watch out for... or maybe create situations...

**Why haven't filmmakers got together to set up a place where these films could be shown?**

**Rinki Roy:** Well that's what the minister of culture promised us at the festival.

**This has been going on for the past eight years.**

**Rinki Roy:** But the only theater we could show at is shut down now. AIR theater, that's All India Radio theater. Of course, there are the mini theaters. I have been in so many movements. I used to get together all the top filmmakers in India, particularly Bombay based, and we used to take these issues to the film finance or NFDC that would help to show our films. I used to be the real cheerleader, call meetings, and initially it was fine when people were less busy. Filmmakers are so busy trying to get funding, get their films done.

**It's a one person show.**

**Rinki Roy:** That's right. That's the whole thing. So where do we have time to organize? We have this Forum for Better Cinema, which is an informal forum. So we may activate it. That may be one of the things. But then it's a lot of energy. There was a discussion yesterday that the women's movement is getting tired. But we need to infuse it with a lot of enthusiasm. One can do that also.

**Maybe advertising or getting sponsors for festivals.**

**Rinki Roy:** No, I don't think I would agree with that. I think it should not be taken away. They can't have the controls. I would not want anyone to have the control of the festival. Whatever it is, we can deal with the government, on our own level. Whether we are happy with the way they function or not. We still have some way we can at least have some control in our hands, right now as it is. They threaten to take the big festival

away, the Delhi festival. I've just signed a petition saying that we don't want it to go to the industry. Then we've lost it. Then we'll have to think of having some other festival. Then we'll be completely out. We can't compete with big money. I mean, the amount of money and infrastructure they have is enormous. We don't exist to them. Documentary filmwallas (wallas: makers) or filmwallas. They have this contempt for art filmwallas. It's a bad word. And they're very threatened by this whole thing.

**As a child, they would show short films before feature films.**

**Rinki Roy:** Those were only Films Division films.

**Promotional and farcical propaganda about the great India? Yet at the same time, they were shown in the theater.**

**Rinki Roy:** If you make a good film for the FD and you get that slot, then that's fantastic. Unfortunately, you cannot work and make a good film for FD if you have to do it as a part of the whole organization. So these are the contradictions. I don't think people would come just for documentaries if there were slots for that in the theater.

**People are thinking that maybe Doordarshan will give slots.**

**Rinki Roy:** Or something like a discovery channel, you know, where they show only documentaries. Something like that for India's documentaries. I think that would be fantastic. I think that would be the only option we would have probably getting it on some channel.

**Filmography and Videography: {Rinki Roy}**

**1990: Char Diwari (Behind Closed Doors):** A 45 min. video documentary on the issue of conjugal violence.

**1992: Ummidien (Hope):** A video documentary focusing on violence against women.

**1993: Janani:** A 5 min. short documentary celebrating motherhood.



*Interview with Manjira Dutta - New Delhi, January 1996 at her residence*

**How did you get into the field of documentary filmmaking? Please elaborate on your background. Did anything/anyone influence you to be drawn to this field?**

**Manjira Datta:** Originally I was a photographer, it was only when I came to this country and did not get a job that I got into video.

My background begins very strangely - abroad to do accountancy and, I think, finding that auditing, which is a part of accountancy, was changing my whole character. (laughs) In Edinburgh, and then in London, I think that became a major concern for me how an individual can change because of one's profession. So, at that point I decided that I would have to leave to do something else. An uncle of mine gave me one of these Kodak Instamatics for a Christmas present, and a couple of rolls of film. I took one roll of film and shot it to show the shadow and light playing in a one room house. I had not done photography before that. Another roll I shot in the exteriors and showed to a friend of mine with whom I was going out and to my uncle. This friend told me that I should get into a training college and get trained to do photography. Maybe this is what you would like to do - he said. I thought I had no skills and felt nobody would take me. But I just applied to a lot of colleges. And wherever I went I was exempt from the interviews and that was by showing these dinky post-card size photographs. People were coming with huge portfolios and all. I was given a scholarship. I wanted to get into filmmaking, I thought I wanted to go into cinematography. For the cinematography course I was too late - everything had been allotted. So they told me that I couldn't do it that year, I would have to lose another year. For me, that was impossible as I was on my own in England and money was a problem etc... So, Ealing college, London college, North London

Polytechnic offered me different things than what I wanted to do. None of them could give me what I wanted as I was late in applying for the admission. When I went to Ealing college, the principal who was a part of the interview committee, took me aside and told me that I had great promise and that I needn't sit through all the courses - he told me that they were offering me photography but it was a very flexible course. He said I could go from still photography to video....depending on how I could raise the funds. This was in 1972-73. So that's how I went in from zero.

I did some college team work where I began to explore. I did mostly still photography there. From third year onwards, I was working outside. Students were allowed to work as professionals outside. And then there were some video exercises that I wanted to get familiar with.

I really enjoyed working with small cameras - they give you so much more mobility. One of the major setbacks for me has been my eye problem, I have very poor eyesight - I couldn't do much cinematography, but I always felt that I can frame an image much better than a cameraman, that ability or talent is inside me.

In terms of influence, I always was very conscious and aware of my background and my surroundings. From a very early age, I knew that the girl who worked for my parents to look after me (the maid) was probably the same age as me but did not have the same benefits or any rights. I never understood why she was not allowed to do the things I did. Later, of course, I got more and more aware of the discriminations, the class and caste system in India, and wanted to fight all that.

Film is a medium which can make you think. In documentary film, the victory is in the frame. The filmmaker can totally manipulate the audience. It can make you feel

charged up, happy, angry, frustrated.....it can be emotionally satisfying, intellectually uplifting.

**Which was your first film? How did you fund it and distribute it?**

**Manjira Datta:** Raaste Band Hai Sub (All Roads Closed) was my first film. I made this film in 1986. It was done with hardly any budget....I used a bolex camera. The film focused on bonded labor and the prostitution of women in the Garwhal region of India. My second film was Sacrifice of Babulal Bhuiya (1988) which I made with the help of a friends parents. My friend got a loan from his parents and got Rs.50,000 and we started work on the film. Later the film also got partial funding from German TV and Britain's Channel Four. Later, my first film Raaste... was purchased by the German TV company. I have been fortunate that the money somehow keeps coming in without too much begging or marketing or lobbying. I am a hopeless PR person. I can never raise money for anything! I can only say I have been lucky that my films have constantly got funding and have been widely distributed - maybe I owe that to the subjects and issues that they tackle.

Quite a few of my films have been shown all over the world, but I have had the most problems showing my films in India. I often travel with my films and have taken them to remote areas of Orissa, Kerala, Bihar.....but it is always a struggle to show them there. There have been times when no one shows up for the screening because the local organizers were not in agreement with the contents of a film - it did not show the local government in a good light. This is one major reason why I feel that distribution of films is still at a very primitive level, and it still remains there because even activists are unaware that films will help activism.

**Would it be correct to say that you have been funded largely by foreign funders/organizations rather than any Indian bodies?**

**Manjira Datta:** My first film was largely through personal funding and after that most of my films have been funded by the BBC, Channel Four, German TV. Yes, I have been fortunate that I got a lot of funding from outside and usually it has come to me rather than me always tracking them down. Maybe, I have just been fortunate.

I was once asked by one interviewer why I always look for foreign funding. Well to tell the truth the local funders don't give much support. And if they do they want to fiddle with each word. Corruption in the Indian society is so widespread and is at every step. I remember once, I made an offer to Doordarshan (Indian TV) for a film called Ringmasters for a Current Affairs program. I made the film about the Hawala transition where most of the politicians were caught and exposed for taking huge bribes and hoarding money. When I began work on the film, Doordarshan said it would take care of the consequences and I optimistically believed that the system had finally changed. Once the film was finished, they gave me air time and fixed a date and all. But the film did not get shown that day. I stormed in their office demanding an explanation - they said - 'You want us politicians to lose our jobs for life? Everyone is being portrayed in such bad light in the film.' Finally, a watered down version was shown to the public. The truth was never shown the film was tampered with and I was blacklisted! After such an experience, who wants to work as a slave to the politicians wishes and whims?

**So what you are saying is that what gets shown is what they can easily digest?**

**Manjira Datta:** Of course. Look at the time slots most of the filmmakers are allotted who are dealing with issues showing the government or the politicians in a bad

light. They exploit and squeeze out life from anyone who ever questions them or is a threat to their power.

**The documentary film person in India has to be an all rounder - it seems it is a one-person show. Could you comment on that?**

**Manjira Datta:** That is absolutely right. I am always working on budgets, on negotiating, on distribution, working with an accountant who knows nothing about films, meeting with financiers, with TV companies - which is absolutely overwhelming and frightening. My background in accountancy does help at times....but I don't negotiate beyond a certain point. I am not a good negotiator. I think that's been a failure on my part. As I mentioned earlier, often things have come to me easily but I know other filmmakers who struggle much more and today the competition is so much greater.

**You deal with very diverse issues and not just 'women issues'.....**

**Manjira Datta:** The issue of women is always integral, but my films definitely do not just deal with 'women issues.' I remember once I was showing my film on the Circus artists, and Seeds of Plenty, Seeds of Sorrow, and I later met a woman who was the producer with Satyajit Ray at that time. She commented, 'women can also make films that have nothing to do with women?...' I was shocked...how can anyone feel that women should make films about women's issues - that is so ghettoizing!

My recent film, Rishte (Relationships), was filmed in Delhi. It primarily tells the story of Lali Devi, a mother of five daughters, who poisons herself and two of her children. The film portrays how some segments of Indian society value sons over daughters - often with devastating consequences, as in the case of Lali Devi, who because she bore only daughters, became so distraught that she took her own life. I got interested

to do this film after coming across an article in the Pioneer newspaper about Lali Devi. Though it was a film about a woman, there were hardly any women in the film, and it is really about male conflict and contradictions. Funding for this project was provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, one of the largest private philanthropic foundations of the United States.

After we made the film, a small organization was formed in Mongolpuri (west Delhi) which was started with very little funding and I helped to set it off - it is mainly a CPI setup - a woman's organization where people can go to learn about their rights.

**I find that in your films you use a lot of repetition of shots - to emphasize a point - is there any particular style that you stick to?**

**Manjira Datta:** I have used repetition in quite a few of my films, particularly Babulal Bhuiya. But I don't want to be associated with 'a' particular style. Every film can't be cinema verite. I am a multi-faceted person and I make all kinds of films. I am willing to see all kinds of style and people have to grant me the freedom to work in any way I want. I hate categories, ghettoization of any kind. As I said earlier, I don't want to be known as a filmmaker who is recognized as doing only "women's issues", or a filmmaker who has a particular aesthetic and so on... I don't want to be known just as an activist, or just as a filmmaker - I have many interests and am multi-faceted.

**How do you judge the success of your film? What has been the most satisfying experience?**

**Manjira Datta:** My films have travelled widely and often I do try to carry my films for different screenings. There have been many great experiences but recently after one of my screenings of my last film, Rishte (relationships), a young man came up to me

and apologized for not clapping at the end of the film. He said he had liked the film a lot, but it made him think. He said it affected him and some of his friends, and raised many questions for them. I was happy and assured him that I often did not understand why people clapped after a screening. I was so glad that it made him and his friends question the fact that he was a male in a patriarchal society - his role and so on. That is the power of film. It is the greatest satisfaction when people take the film out of the theater, take it with them - to think about, to act upon.

### **Filmography and Videography:**

**{Manjira Dutta}**

**1986: All Roads Closed:** A 55 min. 16mm film on Bonded Labor and prostitution of women in the Garhwal region of India.

**1988: Sacrifice of Babulal Bhuiya:** A 63 min. documentary film for Channel 4 UK and ARD Hamburg, Germany. A film on the many memories about the death of a worker in a community which recycles coal waste.

**1989: Khilti Kaliyan:** A 26 part, 20 min. each, Drama serial for UNICEF and Directorate of Adult Education.

**1990: Ringmasters:** A 40 min. Current Affairs film for Doordarshan about the use of money and muscle power in elections.

**1991: Democracy in Crisis:** A 52 min. 16mm film on the political crisis and changes in India between Jan 1990 and August 1991.

**1991: Portraits from a Dream Show:** A 52 min. 16mm film on the inside and outside world of Indian world of Indian Circus artists.

**1992: Seeds of Plenty, Seeds of Sorrow:** A 52 min. 16mm on the conflict in food policy between the North and South.

**1993: Ek Aur Nagma:** A 25 min. video film on adult literacy.

**1993: Ayodhya:** A video program for BBC for the World this Week to reflect the celebration of Indian Artists as organized by the group SAHMAT.

**1993: Power of Partnership:** A 20 min. video documentary on Labor and Management inter-action for Tata Steel.

**1994: Rishte - Relationships (The Preferred Sex):** A 25 min. documentary on male preference for the Population Conference in Cairo. Funded by MacArthur Foundation, Chicago.



*Interview with Suhasini Mulay - New Delhi, January 1996.*

*This interview was conducted at Suhasini Mulay's CAPART office where she was working as the Media Advisor.*

**FOREWORD:** I have worked with Suhasini Mulay for nearly five years in the company called 'Cinemart Foundation' which she ran along with Tapan Bose and later I continued to work with her in her company called 'Suhasini Mulay Productions'. The following interview has been recorded on video and I must add that it was a pleasure to interview her. Suhasini Mulay expresses her ideas very well and has clear ideological cohesiveness about the work she is doing. I hope to be able to edit the video for circulation.

Her mother, Vijaya Mulay often visits Montreal in the summer and I hope to interview her soon as she has a lot of information about the documentary scene in India. She is over 70 years and has been closely associated with the film industry.

*AT THIS TIME SUHASINI MULAY IS ALSO WORKING AS THE MEDIA ADVISOR AT CAPART (COUNCIL FOR ADVANCEMENT OF PEOPLES' ACTION & RURAL TECHNOLOGY)*

**Suhasini, how did you get into the field of documentary filmmaking? How did you start your work in this field?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** Well, the thing is that I have been associated with films not filmmaking largely because my mother was a film buff and before one could understand what film or cinema was all about one was already immersed in the New French Wave. I remember I saw my first Kurosowa film at the age of 10-12 years and most of it went over my cranium anyway, but certainly there was a fascination for cinema - the medium. I

guess it was more chance than anything else that I drifted into acting. And this is Bhuvan Shome<sup>64</sup> made in 1968. One was in front of the camera - the film did extremely well -that had to do more with the timing of the film and less with my acting - it was shown all over the world but what it did to Indian cinema was more important than what it did to world cinema because in world cinema it may/may not feature but it was, I think, the first 'quote' 'unquote' "art" or "parallel" kind of film. It became popular - it was a successful, financial film - it also began to encourage other people who were dissatisfied with the kind of films (feature films) being made in India to begin to think that this was a financially viable proposition -so just after Bhuvan Shome you had a whole rash of filmmakers with Shyam Benegal, Basu Chatterjee, Govind Nihalani came much later - Jabbar Patel - this whole lot who came after/around the early 70's. For myself after having acted in Bhuvan Shome - I went to study at Montreal - first studied at McDonald college studying Agriculture and then switched over after finishing my CEGEP to McGill where I met Dr.Grierson. Dr.Grierson was a Calvinist - and his Calvinism extended to the Documentary filmmaking field. If anybody can be held responsible for me falling in love with documentaries as a format - it was the old man - he had this incredible ability to seize you by the throat and not let you go. So, I got seized and came back to India having moved from agriculture technology to communications of some variety. So when I came back to India, I had mentally geared myself to join Television here and be able to work in the field of rural development. I had this romantic notions of serving the country - I do not know if that romance is over yet or not. So I came to India, and as it happens with most filmmakers - and especially in India where there is no funding available- at all-

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<sup>64</sup> Bhuvan Shome was the first 'art film' made in India. It was directed by Mrinal Sen in 1968. Suhasini was around 14 years of age at that time.

there are no grants, there are no systems set up where films can be produced so you begin your life by hustling for a film.

And so I hustle for a film. And one of the first few people that I met - a very, very well known Indian filmmaker called Sukhdev. I was essentially a camera woman first and then a filmmaker. He had this incredible quality to actually make "one picture speak a thousand words" and he had produced some incredible documentaries that I have seen - and so because of that association also I became interested in documentaries and documentary filmmaking as opposed to feature films which is the main trend in India - at least in the past, now T.V. has taken over. I got into documentaries and as luck would have it for some reason - in the enacted format - the first film that I made was in fact an enacted docu-drama kind of film. It was made with hard earned money and aided by my mother, friends, Romans and country men! who came and helped out - like it happens with everyone's first film. Surprisingly it turned out to be a good film.

**Which was your first film?**

**Sahasini Mulay:** The name of the first film was Likh Ke De Do - literally translated in English as 'Give it to me in Writing' or 'Write it out for me'. That is the theme of the film and it is a light hearted attempt of making the subject of adult literacy and adult education because the problem in India with literacy is that one does not have to be literate in order to survive - but you can live happily in India - do trade, go from 0 to X number of years and not need the written word in order to survive. There are enough systems that let you do without it. So people living in rural areas - find literacy rather a bit of a luxury and do not see why they should take away from the basic problem of survival - so I thought of a whole series of films on adult education - seven of them - I

have only made three - the other four are still to be made. The first plunge into film or filmmaking was in fact not documentary in the traditional sense of the word - but it had more to do with an enacted kind of presentation. After that one did move on to making other documentaries - other hard hitting kind of films - I also teamed up with an ex-filmmaker (winks after saying this) - a filmmaker - Tapan Bose and we worked in quite a few projects together - more are left unfinished than finished - but some of them are really path breakers. I actually have now and then seriously wanted to make a feature - more for tactical reasons than for interests frankly. The feature filmmaker has - the real name, the real money - the person who has all the fame and glamour. Face it - all filmmaking or any creative arts is as linked with fame or recognition if you will of somebody's work as it is with making money. And both of them tip to the feature filmmakers. And there are some subjects that lend themselves to one particular kind of treatment - there are some subjects that cry for documentaries - some that cry for a feature - but by and large the bulk of the subject matters of 'cinema' can be captured in either formats depending on what is it you want to say and how much skill you have in saying it. I hopefully will make a feature but I am still not convinced that is a better format. Documentaries in India especially have a very, very large scope in terms of actually being able to contribute to change - in some way- change attitudinally. While I also believe that a film director however he/she is will always frame the picture - it will always look pasted in a feature film. The faces you get in a country like India are very telling. Very few actors are from the poor segment - so the actors are limited. So when you are showing a poor person - he or she is not really a poor person - she is dressed as a poor and a poor person can tell the difference from a well fed and a non well fed face. Also the

aesthetics: the way they stand, the way they move is very, very different. So, in a country like India you need to use documentaries much more you need to really show - not contrive. And so one is hooked to this medium.

**Is that happening though?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** Showing of documentaries? In a very small way. Certainly it is not as systematically worked out - the distribution systems in India does not exist. A lot of films get made that don't get shown. In India, we have not organized the distribution network - we haven't organized it for two reasons: like in most places it is a matter of funding and unlike Canada or America we do not have a channel like PBS. We don't have a University distribution system where a whole circuit caters to the University - even though there is a big constituency in India - and in spite of the large population of India we do not have any organized system - because there is no funding or money available for it. In India it doesn't pay at all to distribute documentaries. There are some schemes for distribution in India but they are all geared for feature films. Documentaries were shown in theaters in the 60's and 70's but we had a documentary agency called the Films Division that produced the films, because the theater owner was told to show them before the feature film - sixteen minute of documentaries. So they wanted one documentary every week to feature in the theater every week! Now no independent documentary filmmaker is able to guarantee one documentary per week of 15 minutes in 25 different Indian languages. And so that task was taken over by a department of the Government of India called Films Division which for the most part has produced the most putrid kind of cinema that one comes across. So the net result is that Indians threw out the 'baby' with the bath water which was that they threw out the format of documentaries from our

lexicon of film and filmmaking. We have seen such lousy documentaries all our life. Even today if you watch documentaries produced in India including mine - we tend to talk so much - we are constantly verbose - and the reason is that we all got trained in illustrated audio programs. The bulk of Indian documentaries are in fact illustrated audio programs. I am having a problem here in CAPART (refers to the organization she is presently working for) in this capacity sitting behind the desk - where now I am a producer for a government organization trying to get filmmakers that I know personally to make films that are different. They can't do it. I have had 2-3 filmmakers writing a script and I keep saying - get away from the words - 'SHOW!'. Partly it is a matter of budgeting but partly it is here (points to her head) they can't do it! So it is bad material that is produced. In any case people are not interested in this format. There is no system or any support system - so we don't have a distribution system.

**You talk about the change - about working behind the desk - why have you moved on to doing this??? Working at Capart as a media advisor rather than making documentaries for the past year?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** I think there are three reasons. The first of them is that I have now spent 18-19 years of my life making documentaries but largely banging my head against the wall because the money in documentaries in India is with the Government of India and they are not interested in making films - they want to talk about their own programs - they are not interested - in cinema of change - or cinema of revolution, or cinema of experimentation. They want program X being carried out in place Y to be shown in place Z. That's the basic think format of it. And yet I honestly believe that if you know how to work the system - you may not be able to make anti-establishment

documentaries because not many government officials have the guts to give money for it which they sometimes give or not give. There is a whole gamut or range of human experience out there to tap. Your client never knows what they want. So I decided that one thing to do was to move away from making the kind of films that people paid me for. I really want to get into what is called 'developmental communications'. I think that is where the future of documentary filmmaking in India is, or probably filmmaking anywhere - but definitely in India. By developmental communications I mean where people are making changes. You see in 1967-68 in India there was a very large political upsurge called Naxalbari and many fine people that joined it, my generation, died fighting for a revolution. This happened around the same time as the May 1968 movement in France and then there was the hippy era and so on and so forth. Those who survived are now my age and they are all (at least most of them) are working in small, small pockets making little, little changes. And we Indians are such lousy historians there is nobody to record all this. I agree that in the large population that India constitutes, it is a small section, nevertheless these people are changing the lives of thousands, hundred thousands as opposed to hundred millions as we need to. And they are in dire need of material to show, to exchange information, to find out what is happening in one part of the country into the other. Because experiments are being tried. And we never learn from them because they are never documented. I really want to get into that area of work. So I decided to enter the NGO (non governmental organization) sector. Because the NGO sector in India has just boomed. There are two industries in India that have really boomed: one is the NGO industry and the other is the media industry. And I happen to be sitting in both. I decided that maybe this was one way to get to know, get to learn what

this particular area of work was doing and to get paid for doing that at the same time. The second reason why I joined this was that I was fed up of hustling. I hustled for 18 years for getting in film. So I have taken a sabbatical for two years which will now end in ten months time. And then I am back to hustling - I don't think I am going to change the history of the world or the history of India. But now that I sit behind this desk, I see the tremendous potential that something like this has. If you are in films - you are stuck with the discipline of shooting, cutting, editing a film. So you follow it all the way through and the lousiest thing is to do the accounts afterwards - yet we do it. This is the discipline of this particular medium so I am doing it. And the one thing that I hope to be able to achieve is to in fact set up a distribution network. Come a full Circle!

But that's one of the first things I have attempted to do in this organization called CAPART which is the acronym for Council for the Advancement of Peoples' Action and Rural Technology - the name is very big - the aim is to promote voluntarism in India - whatever that means! Hopefully by the end of the two years that I am here we will have some more funds to pour into the distribution system concerning documentaries.

**Do you recognize yourself as one of the pioneers in this field. When it comes to women entering the realms of documentary filmmaking in India?**

**Subasini Mulay:** Yuck!! I do not think I can call myself as one of the pioneers - that is probably overwhelming. I unfortunately do not have the arrogance of saying so but I kind of doubt it. Women filmmakers have been in India since 1921 - very very few though. But they have been there. Hmm.. probably one of the dinosaurs of the era - YES.



At the time when I had entered the field I think there were around 14-15 on the outset that I can count - there may have been more- but I don't think so. And now you can't count them!

So in the sense of numbers pioneering - alright - in any other way - I don't know. Yes- one of the early women/specimen who went into filmmaking - one of the early specimen who went into the technical - behind the camera part of filmmaking. When I was working as an assistant for Ray (Satyajit Ray) in an industry of 5,000, I was the only woman behind the camera - on the technical side, as there were a lot of women hairdressing and in other jobs.

**You have made Likh Ke De Do, Chitthi, Kagaz Ki Lekhi - which were all promoting adult literacy. These were commissioned by the Directorate of adult Education?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** Nope they weren't.

Likh Ke De Do was funded by yours truly and mother and friends and countrymen. And yes, the others: Chitthi and Kagaz Ki Lekhi were funded by the Directorate of Adult Education.

**Before that you made Bhopal Beyond Genocide<sup>65</sup> with Tapan Bose and Salim Shaikh...In terms of Impact which one amongst: An Indian Story, Bhopal: Beyond Genocide or the Literacy films - as documentaries which were more receptive?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** Surprisingly enough, the film that got shown the most was my first film called Likh Ke De Do. It got shown because UNICEF picked it up. I met an Afghan the other day who saw Likh Ke De Do in Afghanistan. He had seen it as they had

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<sup>65</sup> This film was finally passed by the censors in 1987 and documents the year-long and agonizing search for a cure by the victims of the deadly poison Methyl Isocyanite (MIC). The gas was released into the Bhopal atmosphere by the Union Carbide Corporation at 2 a.m. on the 3rd of December 1984. This has been the world's biggest industrial disaster. Beyond Genocide exposes the manipulations of this giant multinational.

made it as a package of the literacy movement there. It was one film which was made with a lot of care. It was one film that I made, I took it back to the village where it was shot. Of course to show it to the people and those who had helped and those who had helped me to make that film. But then one did take it to other places and change it a little bit. I did not have money to reshoot it but whatever could be changed in the audio tracks was changed to suit the questions that came back because what people asked and what I thought the film might convey. It was sometimes quite different - but they obviously liked it - so I am not complaining. The film was in Hindi so it reached a large audience.

About the questions being different: well, it is a simple story - it is a story about a woman who is completely illiterate, who doesn't want to be literate and whose husband works in a factory who unlike other male members in India would like to have his wife to be literate.

The husband plays a trick with his wife who is not interested to learn to read or write and sends a letter through a friend which is addressed to him. The wife does not know this and suspects her husband. She does not give the letter to her husband but rather enrolls herself for the literacy classes given in the village. When she finally reads the letter it is addressed to her and written by her husband who had derived this method to provoke her towards literacy. But what they like about the film was what I had hoped they would like. That the message of literacy was not being thudded on their heads. It was a story that was told in a simple manner - all the messages that I had to ask in the end had come through. They liked the film. In fact, if I remember in one village we had 25 shows that I got so fed up of seeing my film that I said I am going home - enough is enough!

**What form works more...has more impact....**

**Sahasini Mulay:** This film worked and that gave me encouragement and made me work on the same lines with Kagaz Ki Lekhi and Chitthi. Again the format was the same - and I think the reason why people in India would take a narrative format much more easily is because we are used to parables as a form of teaching. By which I mean - if you read any of the scriptures - the Koran or the Bible - it is an older form of communication where you tell a story of the prodigal son - you tell a story about the son but you talk about many other things which leads to tell the story. Though in terms of what I call the 'straight documentaries' I think An Indian Story was a more successful film, was better understood, was better received. Even though it was not really made for the people. You know when you start talking about things statistically, like 60% of this and 35% of that - it means nothing. Like in India you say that 3% of children who are born are affected by polio - for most 3 in a hundred means nothing. Of course when you multiply that with the population of India and you are coming up with the largest country affected by polio in the world!

Statistics doesn't make sense to people over here. It is not a society which is literate - essentially it is an illiterate mind that we have to address. It was a film that was made by the filmmakers, I was only the producer but even the filmmaker who made it - we did not think about an audience - one was so horrified at the fact that in a country like India which at that point had a 30 - 35 years of democracy behind it - there were still cases where people could be blinded in a police station by pouring acid in their eyes. And it was because we were completely shaken from that basic fact that An Indian Story was made. The question is not how horrible they are but why are they so horrible - because equally horrific things happen in other societies. And so one set off on a journey to try

and answer that question. That how could the police in a small police station have enough courage - get the help of a medical doctor to gouge out the eyes of 27 people and pour acid in their eyes. It is completely brutal - completely inhuman. And I think that is why that film works because it asks those pertinent questions.

**After you made the film - about how these 27 people were blinded - did the film help them to get justice by the fact that the issue got exposed by you through your film?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** I think it did. Again because of the film per se. Though the film was shown to the people and the families that were involved in this - the groups that were involved. The thing with all these 27 people was that they were all under-trial prisoners. They were all people who came from lower middle class or poor families in Bhagalpur (a village in Bihar). And one or two of them were really quite horrible criminals. One of them I remember was called 'Botti' which means 'a chunk of meat' in Hindi. He used to kill people by slicing their toes and working upwards. So there was very little sympathy for these people locally - these were habitual criminals, the people who had terrorized the place - some of them were like that - and out of that 13 were completely innocent. Completely innocent! Because once the blinding started then the people began to pay to blind someone they wanted to fix or settle the score with. So as usual, with our creativity (says it sarcastically) in India - the police managed to make this into a money making proposition as well. That is when the uproar started - but by which time people had already been blinded. But you can't blind 27 people in one day and in one police station it was done in the course of period of time. It was that part of pre-meditativeness (if you will) of this that got conveyed through the film and there was a lot of press about it. Again completely incidentally - and that had to do with the fact that

eventually the censors didn't pass it and thus there was publicity about the film began because the film was banned. Look at the irony of it - it had nothing to do with the 27 poor people who had lost their eyes for the rest of their lives. It had to do with the fact that two filmmakers if not very well connected but from a well educated background had produced a film - I think I can quote - they had "challenged the basic fibre of democracy" or some such rubbish like that and had the film stuck at the censor board - and that story drifted back and then the film got shown to more and more and more people! So, that reportage again helped in reviving the case, in getting people there - the fact that there was very little rehabilitation there etc. ....But only in that context.

I think that where we were able to intervene or we learnt a lesson from, was the Bhopal film. We took the Bhopal film from India all the way to America to show in Justice Keenan's court - where the case was being tried before it was sent back to India - to say that the case should be tried in America. Union Carbide kept saying that the incident had happened in India, the victims are in India, the judges are in India - where the legal system is very solid (raises eyebrows) so why should it be tried in America? Because the film was shown to Justice Keenan he ruled that the case be tried in U.S. because the Indian govt. was looking for punitive damages. And so in that sense we were able to make more direct intervention with that film. But you know the history of the Bhopal case of what happened - we had made a film earlier than Bhopal: Beyond Genocide which was shown in Hindi - that in fact had a greater impact in Bhopal itself. As it was produced and finished three months after the Bhopal incident and it was shown bang on the gates of Union Carbide and unfortunately I was not able to be there for the screening of the film as I didn't have enough money to fly down with it - and so the film

was couriered. But I was told there was an audience of 10,000 - Steven Spielberg can still wait! An audience of 10,000 for one screening and I assessed the impact of that film when I went to Bhopal a week later, it was very amusing (Beams) - we had portions of the documentary/commentary - portion of the interviews being spoken - like the way you know kids speak the dialogues from Hindi films - and we actually heard that - and we had a good laugh. But it obviously helped people a lot in the catharsis partly but, it did something more important - you see what happened in Bhopal as it happens anywhere where disaster strikes - everybody has their own little tales and their own experiences to talk about and so nobody has an overall view of the incident as you are so caught in saving yourself. And because this film crystallized all the issues or most of the issues about how the accident happened. We actually animated the bit about water entering the tank and the way the explosion took place - and how the gas spread over the city. And the photographs had an impact - photographs of dead people, injured or animals affected and so on. This was immediately after the disaster so the people were able to assimilate and to externalize a lot of the trauma that they had faced. I think the film did go a long way in that particular area but less so in other places in India.

**Would you prefer one style of documentary-filmmaking over another -I mean the docu-fictional over the 'straight-documentary' as you call them?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** As I said I refuse to say that one style is better as it really depends on the subject matter! Some subjects cry for a story some for documenting as it is.

**As a filmmaker which technical format do you prefer? Do you prefer to work on 16mm or the video?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** Preference is nothing to do with efficiency - I like to work on a film format because I like the feel of celluloid - I like the smell of it and of course the picture quality is very good - picture quality would be far better on discs. I learnt filmmaking by counting lengths (points to her hand) like this and this is the right size of a shot - than from going to 20.22 to 20.33 or whatever that is! It is also a matter of usage - if it is a film that is going to have an impact over a long period of time it is stupid to make video films. Videos decay fast. But if you are not going to use it for very long - if it is an incident, of an happening that needs to be recorded, caught and than disseminated - than I don't see why we should spend time, energy and money on celluloid. That is being stupid. I in fact end up working almost equally in both. One has one set of limitations technically and the other has another set of limitations - like in video special effects are a treat to do - in film special effects are a pain and such other things. And this goes all the way down the line. And of course film is much more expensive!

**Do you have an audience in mind before or during the time you are conducting research for your films? Who are your target audience - who do you have in mind - is it a specific audience that you work towards usually?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** Yes, I think every film has a targeted audience. Every film has 'a' group of particular people that it will make maximum effect on. But then there is a ripple effect - it is not just that it is made for one person or one particular audience. What effects one person will affect another differently maybe not as intensely - but surely there are ripple effects from any kind of film. Till now I have made three films on the subject all targeted for women: women and women literacy - I was very clear that it is a very narrow band of the education system which is called literacy...

### **Any reason for choosing that "narrow band"?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** Well, there is an age old saying that "information is power". And the one group that is actually powerless in this country is women: especially rural women - most women across the board - but definitely rural women. A large part of the lack of power has to do with lack of information. And in a country like in India which is multi-lingual, multi-cultural and every other kinds of cross currents you can throw into it - the fastest and cheapest way to information and power is the written word. Now there are lots of experimentation's and alternative materials, materials that sense to rural people. neo-literacy material, there is work going on in that - but the bulk of what you can pick up in the book shop today, is a middle class addressed material. When those material become textbooks - than you have an alienated class of people who are trying to read and write. The problem for example is that like it is written A is for apple - if you don't have access to an apple how are you going to associate A with an Apple! Once you are capable of your horizons beginning to open and questions begin to get asked - you already have opened the lid of the Pandora's box a little - Resistance to that happening is really amazing! I research my audience. In fact most of the stories I have picked up are stories that potential audience have told me. It is clubbed in with other things and fitted in with personal experiences. For example the whole idea of Chitthi (the letter) - the whole idea was sparked off from a personal experience - I lived in a place where there was no privacy and mail got opened - and this is very true of any Indian family - a letter arrives in the family and everybody wants to read it - because the family unit in India is much tighter knit - I have always written two letters - one which says - how is your mother, father..type.. and another a personal letter - and so the idea came from there. The idea



came from there where somebody sends a letter to his wife - one which is a personal/official letter addressed to his wife and the other a general one for the entire household which is an unofficial letter - the woman can't read - so both the letters get read publicly! So, that one was pulled out from one's own experiences but the family, the people, the position the whole interplay, the pressures of the father-in-law and the mother-in-law is typical of any Indian family.

One needs to target the audience and see what the target thinks and believes. There is an incredible gulf between the very aesthetics of what somebody like me or you or anybody in the middle class of India thinks like - I am not just talking about thinking - but the aesthetics of body language, of how you sit. These things one is not even aware of initially. It took me a long time to realize why I was threatening somebody else. You are sitting perfectly quietly and drinking a cup of tea and you realize that you are the only woman in the whole tea-shop because all the women are sitting over there under the tree because they don't even have the courage to walk into the tea shop and drink tea! So, I target the audience, I research them because if I ever use a woman in a tea-shop drinking tea, she has to be urban you do not use a rural woman. A rural woman does not sit in a tea-shop unless accompanied by her husband - he will sit towards the door and she will sit away etc, etc... So if you are doing a documentary and you are not artificially creating and pulling out elements and putting them there - than you have to be very careful.

**You said that women always have to struggle and the larger majority of women in India are powerless or have to struggle to some degree - as a woman and being in the field largely dominated by men - what are your experiences?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** I can give you one very clear example - in order to be a part in order to be accepted as a part of a technical team at the age of 20 or 21, I learnt to swear. I stood in front of a mirror and took every piece of breaking my upbringing and say 'Fuck' for the first time. The men especially in Delhi or around Delhi - in Harayana and Punjab there is a swear word that says - 'Fuck your sister'...and they don't even know they are saying it... but a woman is taught not to swear. So I stood in front of a mirror and taught myself to swear - not that this has to anything with filmmaking but it is part of being a part of the culture. When I came to India was at that point I was working as an assistant to Satyajit Ray at that time and after a days shoot is over you sit and do a postmortem - I would get excluded from that postmortem because I didn't drink. So, if I wanted to learn and sit down with the camera man and analyze how the lighting was done why something was placed as it was - there are lots of people who do not drink - but in those days and even today you have to work twice as hard, know twice as much, technically I have to know twice as more as an assistant director, as a female assistant director, than the guy who is next to me who is also an assistant director but is a male because you are challenged so much more. And the challenge is not necessarily verbal not necessarily sarcastic or snide or getting to you - it is inbuilt, it is inbuilt into the men, it is inbuilt into the women.

**You have worked with men crews mainly....**

**Suhasini Mulay:** All the time.

**Have you ever thought of joining or forming a women's group involved in documentary filmmaking? Is it important to you who you hire?**

**Subhasini Mulay:** No! If I find a good technician whether it is a man or woman - the person has to be good. I don't think there is any virtue in picking up a woman camera person who is not as good and not pick up a male camera person even though he is slightly better.

But I am very sure I would not work with an all woman team.

**Why?**

**Subhasini Mulay:** Because it is too much power - it is too alien looking to walk into a rural situation unprotected! It's a sad commentary on what we are but the sight of five or six women looking as alien as we are with all this technical gizmo- we would alienate people. Villagers are not willing to accept women technicians - city people are not able to accept women technicians. It will happen - I am sure - given the way things are shaping now - with more women working as camera people now - maybe in 15 years down the line.

**You did not have any problems while working with men?**

**Subhasini Mulay:** With the men on location?? Maybe once or twice. I think all men are oppressive towards women. You walk into a government office and they will say (very patronizingly) 'Madame, what do you do?' Well, I say - 'I script, I direct, I use the camera....' So they say 'Camera is a very difficult job, no?' So I reply - 'It is as difficult as being director - No?!' They can't get into their brains that there is a woman who does all this.

**Do you feel there is a difference between films made by men - in terms of their style, the issues that they deal with in relation to women filmmakers? Do you think there is a difference of aesthetics as perceived by men and women?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** It is very hard to pin point what it is exactly but yes, not in all women filmmakers do you find this difference - I think yes, there is a difference in the interpretation of an image - of how a woman sees a problem. There is a male point of view to the problem and there is a female point of view to the problem.

I find that when you are interviewing women in India and you have a woman behind the camera or in the crew. There is a difference in the response if it was an all male crew.

I know there is this whole business about the female aesthetics and I have had this experience a few times when I have been shooting with Tapan and I would frame a frame in a particular way and he would look at it and frame it differently. I would go back and look through the camera and say - 'That is not my frame' and shove it back to where it was previously. And he would go - 'Why, this looks good' - and I'd go - Yeah - but it ain't mine.

**And it was a docu-fictional and so could be construed to some degree?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** This whole business that fiction is unreal and documentary is real is junk.

**Yeah, Okay.**

**Suhasini Mulay:** It is unadulterated junk. The fact that you are shooting me in this (points to her framing) or this or whatever your frame is - has nothing to do with reality! You have already tinkered with it - you have put a camera, what the physical presence of a camera is doing is a different ball-game. You are not showing reality. So why go around with these dumb notions. The only thing that a documentary filmmaker

has to do is to be truthful to the subject as they see it. that is the only thing you can commit yourself to. Afterall truth is a many faceted entity.

There is a difference, but you see we get so bombarded with the dominant aesthetics that one tends to pick up ideas of composition, ideas of light, what goes with what and all that, and that learning is so sub-conscious, that unless you go back and start analyzing it. After all, when you are composing a frame - you don't sit and wonder at that time if it is aesthetically feminist or not. I tend to link it more with the manner in which the subject is treated. The manner in which a woman will make an argument. And so the way a woman tackles an argument is very different from the way a man tackles an argument. You will find very often, women will give their own examples, men very seldom do that. You will often find a woman placing herself in discussions and will bring there own examples, Like a woman would say this is what happened to me and what if you were in my position how would you react and so on....while men do not like being dealt like that.

There is a difference - maybe the difference is as much psychological - maybe it is as much as to with the idea that men are supposed to be strong and women are supposed to be weak and all those classical images that the male and the female in this society have stuck in their brains. You do not find that in other walks of life in India for example it is the woman that carries the firewood but in Europe it is the man that carries the firewood not the woman. Because here the woman in the lower classes are used to working - they are used to working 18 hours a day - the men are used to working 8 hours a day! The women do the weeding which is really a back-breaking work in the fields, men do the ploughing. Ploughing is tough but it is nowhere as tough as weeding. But ploughing is

considered more skilled, therefore more taught, requiring more investment by the family to teach the child and hence the division in sexes, gender. You go to the hills - I don't know if it has to do with the latitude, the altitude or what... but men will not work. I have never known a more lazy set of workers than hill men. The women will go down one kilometer, bring it one kilometer up and the man will sit and have a bath with hot water! The first time I saw it - it blew my mind. I told these women why do you do it - don't do it. The woman was 30 years old but looked older than me. She said she had to get up five in the morning - she had to get water- that meant 12 trips before 8 in the morning that woman had walked vertically up and down approximately six miles! With water. Then she went to the forest, picked the firewood, then she cooked looked after the family. Huh! In the season where male labor was required they would work in the field with them and then the women would come back and do the winnowing and then sit down and then cook the evening meal. So, in the lower class of the society while men say that they are stronger - I don't find that kind of division of labor. It is more to do with the upper middle class where when a tyre goes bust, a woman stands at the side of the road and the man is supposed to fix the tyre. It has often happened with me that I know more about cars than the guy who is a passenger next to me.

**What are the issues that you would like to tackle or you want to deal with through your films?**

**Sahasini Mulay:** Oh dear! I think the final bee in my bonnet is the fact that no movement in the world works if the women are convinced it works! Women are much harder to move - much more conservative - not open to change - they are the ones - at least in India - that keep the orthodoxy going. The citadels of orthodoxy in the family is

the woman. But once they are moved - than the men actually become redundant within the social fabric. There are so many things that are happening in India right now - for example you have the agitation against ARAK - the local country alcohol and the woman one day just got fed-up of the men going out, blowing up the money, coming home drunk, beating them up - and so the domestic violence scenario - which in India maybe marginally more than the rest of the world. And so it started off in two villages, of women getting together - unmotivated by any voluntary agency or any outside forces. Going one day to the local booze joint and breaking the bottles. They broke the bottles and warned the shopkeeper to get out of the village or they would bun the shop. And this then swept all of South India. You know what has suddenly happened that all these agencies of change have realized that if you can get to the women you can get to the hand that rocks the cradle. And that is where change will begin. And I think that is why I want to get more and more into developmental communications. I think it is time we looked at these issues at a much more low level feminism than what has been so far done in India by the middle classes. Rather than the aggressive feminism that one has seen so far in India, it is time we began talking about women, women's movement, of what they can do, how they affect the basic fabric of society. But I want to do that at a rural level. I think both the city and the villages need to be mobilized. And there are people working in the cities and there are also people working in the villages. My initial thrust would be towards villages and that is where I want to go into more and more.

See I don't want to do political films - I do want to take up political issues, because I don't think women's issues are women's issues only - there is this whole myth. When I am talking about women's issues or taking up these projects about women, it is

not that I am not talking about anybody else. **We have so far, so solidly ignored the woman's point of view in any given issue.** That one should start to tilt the balance - for example one of the things I would like to do is to do a film on Kashmir. The structure that I would like to work on is to look at the Kashmir problem from the point of view of three women from three generations. Men are actually daft - they never use the help of women for militancy. So the women, being women, stay at home and they look after their sons who come back home bleeding - patch them up and send them back. Initially in Kashmir, the militancy had a lot of support. I remember when I went in 1987-88 to Kashmir - I was pushed around and told 'Indian dogs - go home'. The people later in 1990 when I went back, began to differentiate between the state/government of India and the people of India. Now the situation is such that people are getting fed up by the militants because the militants themselves are fighting amongst themselves. And also what happens in a situation of militancy is that - there is no one kind of agency that is monitoring the situation. All the malaise of a militant movement has crept in now, some injected by the Indian government, some injected by the Pakistani government - who knows! People are getting fed up. I want to interview three generations of women, the women are much more forthright. Because the thinking is basic and more off the earth - the reactions are much more real. One woman who has been active in the whole Sheikh Abdullah movement, who actually fought to keep Kashmir within India - the second woman who went through the period of disillusionment that Kashmir went through alright - and the third is a woman who has either joined the militancy or stood against it or maybe all four variations. I have been often told by Kashmiris - why are you interviewing women? And I say the problem with men is that they talk a lot but not do much. The other problem with



men is that they tend to look at a problem in terms of saying what is going to happen to the globe, what is it going to do to the world. While women are more direct and say how it has affected their personal life. It is much more a one to one kind of statement - which in terms of camera works much better. And I am being a film person there, I think that a statement made which is spontaneous about themselves or something they want to be seen is more powerful than somebody saying in the year dot...So I am thinking of structures like that which is not to say that is not a political film. Nobody has bothered to ask the Kashmiri women what they think about the bloody militancy! If anybody is going to change it, it is going to be the women - because the reason is very simple - when a militant runs into your house - it is the woman who feeds him, gives him tea, not the man. If she does not want to make food for the militant - it will not get made. Alright. If she sends her daughter out to fight - she is investing much, much more because for a woman to leave a traditional role and step out takes a hell of a lot more than it is for a man. That's why if we start looking at these issues - you promote it as a quote - unquote feminist film - well forget it I am not interested in it. Enough of the bra burning variety of feminism - I don't think it works in India. It may have been correct with the cultural ethos when it happened in the States. But I don't think that is the kind of militancy we can look at over here we have to find our own language.

**Do you think in India we need a set up to promote women's work the way in Canada they have the Studio-D? Do you think that would help, be very advantageous?**

**Sahasini Mulay:** Sure, we require a Studio-D for men as well. We produce such lousy movies - yuck! The kind of work that Studio-D does in terms of given them support in scripts, support and that kind of guidance. We have nothing here.

**That kind of infrastructure...**

**Suhasini Mulay:** No infrastructure - one there is the problem that filmmakers never give their scripts to be looked at. Women will probably do it more than men will. In fact I saw this film the other day made by this woman filmmaker - she would kill me if she knew - it is a film by Madhushree Dutta - called 'Memories of fear' - and it is a film interviewing women who have faced domestic violence of one variety or the other....and the film stinks, and it does so for a very simple reason - she tried to play with structure. Which I think is damn good, it is good to play with structure and one has to experiment and one has to try. But she deals with enacted formats and mixes them with interviews. If we had a support system like the one in Canada, I think it would help tremendously. And have a support system for the men as well. (Smirks)

**Amongst all your works which do you feel very passionately about?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** Let me ask the question differently, which is the one I really liked? Alright. Strange enough is that I liked my first film. I think it happens with everyone. The first film has a freshness - I can't describe it. Later on you may get more skilled and more polished and one gets better - but the film that I am really in love with is the film I will make next!

**Whose work do you really admire amongst the Indian filmmakers?**

**Suhasini Mulay:** Tons of people. Amongst documentaries: I love Sukhdev's films - even though he has compromised a lot on the subjects he picked - I admire his work in terms of sheer technical skills. In terms of scene beauty.

**You learnt a lot from him as you worked with him when you began work in the field of documentary filmmaking.**

**Suhasini Mulay:** I learnt a lot from him but I wish I even had one fifth of his talent. He had a way of looking at images which was incredible. His films for a large part were completely biblical - they may have been on a 500 thermostat or something on nylon pilling or something - he had incredible vision to shoot that.

You know there are very few filmmakers who have a body of work right now. Well we've got Tapan, whose work I have worked with a lot but I have fought with everyone of them. Some very good films, some very bad films and lots of unfinished films. But then every filmmaker in the documentary world has made one or two very good films. I think that is the sustaining part of documentary as opposed to looking at a body of work as you look at the body of work of Ray or Mrinal Sen or you look at Bergman, you find that there are lot of people making some very interesting work. Most exciting thing about documentary in India is that there is a whole generation of young filmmakers doing very exciting and interesting work. Excellent stuff. I went to this festival in Trivandrum and it was very heartening to see 19 year olds and 20 years old - I must admit I felt very old - some of the work they are producing is very bad but most of it is quite wonderful. You know they are there. It is great to be in India now and see this next generation coming. I hope they make better stuff then we did.

### **Filmography and Videography:**

**{Suhasini Mulay}**

#### **Films made as Director:**

1976: Vigyan Ki Padhai No:2 (Co-director with Mrinal Sen).

1977: Vigyan Ki Padhai No:8 (Co-director with Tapan Bose).

- 1977: Simurg & Jadu Ki Kitab: Two films based on Uzbek folklore in collaboration with National Puppet Theater of Uzbekistan, U.S.S.R. Co-director with Tapan Bose.
- 1979: Likh Ke De Do: Docu-drama on Adult Literacy.
- 1979: A series of video programs on health for ISRO, Ahmedabad.
- 1988: Bhopal: Beyond Genocide: (Co-directed with Tapan Bose and Salim Sheikh): A 16mm documentary on the manipulation of the multinational company after the gas disaster in the gas plant of Bhopal in 1984.
- 1988: Jana Shiksha Nilayam: Documentary on Adult Literacy projects in Rajasthan.
- 1988-89: Chitthi: Docu-drama to promote literacy amongst women in the villages.
- 1989-90: Fluorosis: Educational documentary investigating the problems and effects of the disease fluorosis - common in certain regions of India.
- 1989-91: Ek Naya Ujjala: Documentary promoting literacy.
- 1989-90: Azaadi: Four part documentary on Kashmir.
- 1991-92: Three part series on Communalism used during the elections in India.
- 1992: Makan Ho To Aisa: Documentary on the housing and development in rural sector of India.

**Films made as Producer:**

- 1981: An Indian Story: Documentary investigating the blinding of 27 under-trial prisoners in Bhagalpur (a village in Bihar) by police officials.
- 1983: Workers on the March.
- 1987: Technology for Change: A four part video series for CAPART on appropriate technologies developed by the voluntary sector for rural development.

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