

Miffed! or “Gasping for [Polluted?] Air”

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Abstract: A first-person reflection by a Canadian regular participant in the first two decades of the Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary, Animated and Short Films, founded in 1990 by the Government of India’s Films Division. The essay explores the historical trajectory contradictions of a state-funded and bureaucratic showcase of a genre traditionally devoted to social issues and advocacy within in an increasingly congested international festival industry.

Keywords: Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary, Animated and Short Films; film festivals; documentary film; India

If we need an object to encapsulate the history of the Indian documentary over the last two decades, one would need look no further than the trajectory of the Mumbai International Festival for Documentary, Short and Animation Films. MIFF was founded in 1990 (then known as BIFF—before the historical name Bombay yielded to the politically correct name invented by the Hindu right) by the Films Division (the Mumbai-based production agency, maintained by the federal government’s Ministry of Information and Broadcasting since Independence, originally inspired by the National Film Board of Canada). MIFF has been held every other February ever since. This capsule history would of course be an oblique one, since the festival has a contradictory relationship with the multilayer, multiform landscape of nonfiction film in India, but all the same it brings out, symptomatically perhaps, its rich and rocky paths. This twenty-one year history coincides of course with the flowering of India’s neo-liberal “opening to the world” and of globalization in general, and with the saturation of the Indian market with satellite and

digital global media. It also coincides with a widely perceived slump of Indian parallel/art cinema in the international festival market and the robust expansion of Bollywood beyond the borders of the nation state in terms of both markets and imaginaries.

MIFF was one of the early entries in what is now a glut of international documentary festivals within a larger proliferating industry of arts festivals in virtually every major city across the planet that James F. English, one of the smart voices in the new “festival studies” subfield, calls a “vast festal rhizome” characterized by “productive dynamism and limited efficacy” in “an increasingly congested field” (2011, 75, 68, 69). Even without MIFF’s relative poverty and a disadvantageous rupee conversion rate, and without its stifling governmental bureaucracy (in a bad year, delegate registration alone can take all day!), the Mumbai festival would scarcely be able to compete “for international visibility and esteem” with its approximately forty sister doc fests, from Mexico’s ambulatory “Ambulante” to Japan’s well-established and respected Yamagata, and from those boutique festivals rooted in every corner of Europe from Lisbon and Donegal to Warsaw and Istanbul to the major players of Amsterdam’s IDFA and Toronto’s Hot Docs—most of which have an edge because they are annual rather than biennial. Of course, with their well funded markets, “pitch culture” and subsidy competitions, the big fests offer the most intimidating presence for any rival.

One factor diluting MIFF’s market profile is the inclusion of short fiction and animation within its mandate: this characteristically odd grab bag of formats does however have a domestic logic, namely the “otherness” factor, that is their opposition to the smothering tentacles of Bollywood feature filmmaking centred on the other side of the same megalopolitan peninsula.¹ This shadow of Bollywood may be most visible in the symptomatic ceremonial presence of a

¹ For the purpose of this brief essay, I will not discuss further MIFF’s mandate in relation to short fiction and animation.

generic, overly made-up starlet each year to light the votive flame and then put it out ten days later without uttering a peep. But it is felt more ominously and deeply in such decisive areas as the sponsorship of the Indian Documentary Producers Association, a suspiciously thriving outfit in bed with Mumbai's other thriving image industry, advertising, clearly not a group eager to rock the boat, and in the key political problematic of jury constitution. This latter issue surfaced most egregiously in 2010 when one-time Bollywood diva Asha Parekh, more recently TV soap producer and chair of the Central Board of Film Certification (censor board) for three years 1998-2001 during the notorious BJP regime, without any known relationship to documentary whatsoever, presided alongside Trinh T. Minh-ha on the main jury! (Strange bedfellows indeed, and is it any wonder that my favorite in the 2010 short doc lineup *Rex vs. Singh* [John Greyson, Richard Fung, Ali Kazimi, Canada 2008], a frank, irreverent and risk-taking short essay that probed the intersection of anti-immigrant racism and queerbashing in British Columbia history, and offered for three seconds a witty visual rhyme of a human penis with a elephant trunk, joined two decades worth of bold and experimental foreign docs that vanished on awards night?)

Nevertheless, despite everything, and such sour griping and grapes notwithstanding, through eleven biennial renditions of the festival, MIFF has done an amazing job as a lively showcase for the achievements of Indian documentary, not so much of the state-subsidized or commercial variety paradoxically, as of the independent, honest and contentious variety. Prizewinners over the years have included veterans Anand Patwardhan and Sehjo Singh, the former the Mumbai-based pioneer of oppositional work during the dark days of "Emergency" dictatorship 1975-77, and the latter a Delhi-based spearheader of the feminist incursion into the field in the 1990s. Representatives of the upcoming generation also are refreshingly represented on the awards stage more often than not, for example Deepa Bhatia, the young director of the

prizewinning *Nero's Guests* (2010), an impassioned exposé of the so-called Green Revolution in terms of its toll of farmer suicides and a generalized agrarian catastrophe.

The tense relationship between the state funder and the independent stakeholders of the festival has been sustained as a productive standoff over the years (with one major exception that I will come to shortly), as if a “Don’t ask don’t tell” policy governed the relationship of politicians, the industry and the typically scrappy artistic and cinephile community for the mutual benefit of each. I vividly remember a symbolic reenactment of this relationship at one year’s award ceremony when a hard-hitting documentary about agriculture won some prize or other, and as some state minister or other, probably from the rightwing party in power in Maharashtra that year and most other years, walked across the stage to deliver his bombastic and illiterate speech of congratulations, a clip of the winning film appeared behind him on the screen with perfect timing, a shot of hogs feasting greedily at the trough! I cannot have been the only one to notice and gasp at this felicitous synchronicity, but no projectionist or festival director was fired... as far as I know.

Most documentary festivals on the international scene have government funds invested, but probably none so directly as MIFF. It is to MIFF’s credit that the festival has maintained its relative independence through several regime changes over the last two decades, fulfilling with diplomatic flair what English would call its “consecrational” role--all the more so in a political culture where the concept of “arm’s length” in relation to cultural agencies has an ambiguous valence at best. Indeed, given the inherent tension between social issue advocacy documentary and the state, it is surprising that only one major eruption happened during the two decades of its existence, and that not surprisingly during the aforesaid regime of the rightwing Hindu-

nationalist Bharatiya Janata Parishad, in power in Delhi from 1998 to 2004. Patwardhan recounts what happened with his usual narrative flair:

MIFF right through 2002 was a place where critical voices could be heard and applauded... Nobody called for the censorship of critical voices and it was taken for granted that film festivals were places where freedom of expression was guaranteed. Not only were many critical films selected in competition, many of them won awards. To cite just a few examples over the years, Ranjan Palit and Vasudha Joshi's *Voices of Baliapal* a film about local opposition to a missile site in rural Orissa won a Golden Conch (1990), Ali Kazimi's *A Valley Rises*, a film against the officially sacrosanct Sardar Sarovar mega dam on the Narmada River won a Silver Conch (1996), and in 2002 our anti-nuclear and anti-jingoism *War and Peace* won the Best Film/Video Award.

Under the BJP government in 2002, I had noticed the first signs of trouble after the festival ended. Award winning films were meant to be shown by the Films Division across the country. However that year saw a remarkable turnaround. The Government of India stepped directly into the picture: the BJP did not like our film and the official post-festival screenings were abruptly cancelled on the grounds that the film had not obtained a Censor Certificate. Next the Censor Board refused this certificate. A year later the Bombay High Court ordered that the film could be publicly screened without cuts.

Haunted by this experience and in anticipation of further anti-government and anti-Hindu-fundamentalist films, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting ruled that from MIFF 2004 onwards all Indian entries to the festival would first have to obtain an official censor certificate!

The film community in India and their well-wishers rose up in protest, supported by a national and international press that spoke out for freedom of expression and against obvious discrimination (foreign films had remained exempt from censorship as the Indian government was apparently only interested in controlling its own dissenting voices). Over 200 filmmakers signed a petition against the censorship clause. Moreover this major confrontation with filmmakers led to the birth of an alternate independent festival named Vikalp that year. Faced by the threat of a united boycott the government withdrew its censorship clause unconditionally. It was sweet victory. It did not last. The selection process for MIFF 2004 was grim. As filmmakers we had hailed the withdrawal of official censorship while adopting a wait and watch attitude to the selection process. We all feared that when the government gave in to our threat of boycott and removed the censorship clause, they had an alternative plan in mind. After all censorship was not introduced into the festival that year by accident. There was a pattern to it and an ideology that governed it. For example, until the courts ruled otherwise, the Censor Board had wanted me to delete from *War and Peace* all reference to the fact that Mahatma Gandhi had been murdered by a Hindu nationalist and that the RSS (backbone of the ruling party of the moment) had been banned after this act. Now there was more to hide that year: the government resented all analyses of the brutal mass murders and rapes in Gujarat in 2002 and the widely reported official apathy/connivance. Consequently, in the absence of official censorship, placing key appointees in the selection committee and circumventing transparency in the selection process could still ensure that sharply critical voices were suppressed.

The cat tumbled out of the bag. Several hard-hitting investigative films had been excluded from the 2004 festival obviously for the crime of displeasing the ruling elite. Rakesh Sharma's *Final Solution*, a passionate and meticulously researched exposé of the politics of hate and genocide in Gujarat was shockingly omitted. So was Sanjay Kak's *Words on Water* on the struggle against mega dams on the river Narmada, a film that won major international awards. American Sandi Dubowski's *Trembling before G-d*, another multiple award-winning film, had been excluded perhaps for the crime of dealing with alternative sexuality or because it is also a critique of religious fundamentalism. I'm citing just a few cases from amongst many.

Today following our challenge, by and large status quo is restored and the success of MIFF now depends on the particular director and the team that runs it. A government that calls itself "secular" is currently in power [2011] and while it often betrays the authoritarian streak common to those who lack ethical fibre, it is also perhaps easier to embarrass than those who never had secular democratic pretensions. All in all, MIFF still is the best window for filmmakers of the region and elsewhere to air their work, and the staff puts in an enormous amount of thankless work to make it happen.²

It could be argued that the 2004 eruption and the subsequent Vikalp protest festival ultimately strengthened MIFF in its capacity to bolster independent cinema and its oppositional voice, to "guard the democratic vitality of the system and to preserve the very right to 'talk back,'" as English has aptly described this key festival role. By 2006 the BJP had been voted out of office, and the festival as if in penance mounted a very interesting and substantive seminar on

² This narrative is a collage of Patwardhan's 12 May and 15 June 2011 emails to the author and his 2004 text written in the heat of the struggle, published in *The Hindu* 26 December 2003 and on the artist's website <http://www.patwardhan.com/index.shtml> (accessed June 11 2011).

ensorship, entitled “Who decides what is fit to be seen?” assembling Patwardhan with art cinema auteur Shyam Benegal, radical lawyer Lawrence Liang, a representative from the censorship board, and yours truly (among others). The national network of dissenting documentary presence that Vikalp launched has maintained its presence—unevenly admittedly—in several centres: most visibly in Bangalore but I am told that Mumbai has regular Vikalp screenings at Prithvi and the Alliance française, Delhi has created an accessible archive hosted in the private home of a filmmaker, and a few documentary festivals have developed since then, most predictably in Kerala, namely the annual International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, and the ViBGYOR Documentary film festival in Thrissur, both of which were held most recently in 2011. In general, then, the momentum from Vikalp’s important precedent of unity, resistance and public discourse around “what’s fit to be seen,” has not been forgotten either by the MIFF festival administration nor the body politic nor the arts communities, whether regional or national. Of course this precedent cannot ensure dynamic and innovative national or regional infrastructures for the circulation and use of documentary work, as each successive biennial rendition of the festival dramatically and repeatedly underscores. But it’s salutary at least to have this gap dramatically foregrounded festival after festival—or as English would put it, to expose the festival’s “cover or alibi for zones of the most egregious dispossession.” Festivals are no substitute for distribution infrastructures, but as we stand by for the returns from bold ventures in DVD sales, targeted community screenings and internet dissemination, festivals are all we’ve got—in India as elsewhere, and they are increasingly taking on the role of substituting for “real” distribution in the 21st century global culturescape.

National political and cultural struggles aside, MIFF has been less than successful over the years in its international mandate. Few would argue that it has consistently attracted the cutting edge of international documentary, however that may be defined, in part because as a competitive festival hampered by its governmentality it cannot compete with the better financed, more efficiently run international documentary festivals in the West (as of this writing, seven months before opening night of the 2012 MIFF, there is nothing on the website, no dates, no call for submissions, nothing). All the same, several of the canonical hits of the international circuit have shown at MIFF and won awards over the years, from the 1992 epic *The Manufacture of Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* by the Canadians Peter Wintonick and Mark Achbar, to most recently in 2010 the international digicam hit, Anders Østergaard's *Burma VJ*. Such hits are snagged no doubt because MIFF submissions are not obligatorily exclusive and there's no emphasis on premieres (of course the website of latter Danish film about India's neighbour's political struggles symptomatically and impolitely brags about its Sundance and IDFA awards but not its MIFF nod). Over the years for obvious reason MIFF has had a special relationship with diasporic makers like Canadian Ali Kazimi, twice awarded. In short one of MIFF's roles has been to serve as a kind of clearinghouse/hub for what is now a global "docuscape" whose resources and imagination (whether in London or Toronto) sometimes outpace those available on the subcontinental mothership.

That said, if any aspect of MIFF's mission has been to raise the profile of Indian documentaries on a global scale, it cannot be said that it has succeeded. Amar Kanwar, the current decade's hottest Indian documentarist among foreign tastemakers, may well have won one of his first awards for his *A Season Outside* at MIFF in 1998, but his success owes little to this honour. Rather it has been constructed, in my opinion and paraphrasing a recent critique

from John Greyson (participant in MIFF 2010), by the corrupt economy of the “biennale” video installation--an economy which rewards filmmakers like Isaac Julien, Chantal Akerman, Amar Kanwar, Shirin Nishat, and Harun Farocki, etc. for *withdrawing* from traditional cinema audiences—for creating “cinema” works that are hard to see and limited to exclusive metropolitan venues and elite audiences, even those shaped by single-channel film practice that would thrive in the tradition audience-screen configurations of MIFF and other populist festivals (email correspondence, June 2011). The relationship between the MIFF phenomenon and the failure of Indian documentary to sell itself abroad is too complex to delve into here, but the paradoxical untranslatability of this largely English-language phenomenon for the world’s screens defies easy understanding. IDFA 2010 offered only one film listed as from India, a Channel 4 production by Briton Kim Longinotto! Hot Docs 2011, despite Toronto’s huge diasporic audience, offered only two works shot in India, multinational co-productions directed by foreigners. What is going on?

As a devotee of Indian cinema and documentary in particular I have been fortunate enough to have been able to attend seven of the eleven MIFFs to date, and am a complete convert to this festival that is as sprawling and bulimic as any international festival but still absolutely unique. Rather than impoverished by its distance from the tastemaking epicentres of Amsterdam, Paris and Toronto, MIFF’s global marginality creates opportunities, allowing it to plug into the grass roots energies and unknown makers of the rich and diverse Indian documentary scene and connect with the passion of local audiences. The big festivals are often constrained to leave behind the “local” genius of documentary, but MIFF keeps its finger on this pulse, despite the centralizing impetus evident in the English lingua franca of the event, and the ambiguous segregation between the “national” competition and the “international competition.” I

have followed MIFF's peripeteias with great ardour, its growth from a tentative experiment intended to shore up a moribund and anachronistic public institution to a biennial celebration of the vocation of cinematic creation, independent voice and political cinephilia in the public sphere. Although MIFF is regrettably not a public festival like Hot Docs, with its audience limited to delegates, it feels like one: one breathes in the infectious energy of ardent fans, activists, artisans, students, critics and crews from across the diverse nation. Its curating of special sidebars is imaginative, wide-ranging and impeccable: I have a permanent memory of dozens of young fans who had just discovered Joris Ivens, at 1994's major retrospective of the late Dutchman's work, mobbing Ivens's widow/collaborator, septagenarian Marceline Loridan, whose flaming red bouffant coiffure-tower was all that was visible above the madding crowd consisting largely of delegates from Bengal and Kerala, two crucibles of a remarkably lively left film culture in India.

And in the darkened theatres, the palpable groundswell of spontaneous documentary energy across a whole generic spectrum from ethnography to nature films to biopics to arts films to advocacy—and most recently to self-reflexive autobiography. As an example, several films from Kerala documenting local battles against the depletion of groundwater resources by multinationals (read Coca Cola) have screened in the current decade, allowing festival regulars to follow the ups and downs of an epic struggle, and in 2008 the latest one *Thousand Days and a Dream* (P. Baburaj and C. Saratchandran), finally a feelgood film that detailed a provisional victory on the part of these angry but articulate village matriarchs, received special jury recognition. And my interest in sexual/gender diversity, which some Indians might cast as an extrinsic if not orientalist imposition, has never gone unfulfilled: a few foreign queer films have been awarded over the years, such as Canadian Elle Flanders's Palestinian/Israel doc *Zero*

Degrees of Separation (2006), but the small and brave national films are always present, whether about AIDS or transgender or metropolitan male sexworkers, only slightly under the radar, and in 2008 a fine Tamil film about a hijra community *Our Family* (K.P.Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro) received special certificate of merit.

In wrapping up this personal view of MIFF as a skewed capsule of the last two decades of the trajectory of documentary within the world's most vibrant cinematic culture, it befits me to borrow the voice of another, one of many friends I have met at MIFF over the years, in fact a documentary directory-producer. Sehjo Singh, who was herself honoured twice at MIFF for her quiet but surefooted feminist voice (in 1996 for *Sonamati—A Very Ordinary Gold* and in 1998 for *Kol Tales*) sums things up in an articulate and critical if diplomatic manner:

MIFF marked a watershed in the growth of Indian Documentary, I would say, or rather signified a coming of age. The spending of government money and handsome awards showed that documentary was finally recognised as an art form significant enough to receive state patronage of any kind. Even when there was a protest or a boycott of the state on issues of censorship, the protest activity got space, focus, and an access to the international community as in the launch of Vikalp. Documentary and short film are and will continue to be the poor cousin of the film industry in India, yet at the same time it is the first means by which any first time film maker, amateur, professional would express themselves. Such a festival seems a tangible and achievable goal that spurs activity among thousands, it seems like a small light at the end of the tunnel, a two year long tunnel, but a light nevertheless. To me it used to seem like some time to come up from the deep, gasp for some air, even if polluted, and then go back to the grind. Of course the

real win would be if it gets more and more autonomous and makes a name for itself through excellent curating and judgment. (email message 8 June 2011).

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