Book Review
By Ritika Kaushik, University of Chicago


For a long time, the history of Indian documentary as a creative arts practice was subdued by documentary’s correlations to political ideology and its other functions as a medium of mass communication. This tendency persisted in spite of the proliferation of diverse methods, themes and formal practices brought forth by the emergence of independent documentary filmmaking in India. In the last decade, Indian independent documentary has garnered substantial scholarly interest—in relation to reflexive and personal documentaries (Kapur, 2003; Vohra, 2012; Gadihoke, 2012; Hariharan, 2014), histories of video (Battaglia, 2014; Tiwary, 2018; Kishore, 2016, 2017), and connections to historical-political events and film movements around the world (Waugh, 2011; Wolf, 2007; Kishore, 2016), to name just a few works on a growing and varied list. However, its study as a form of creative arts practice has remained scattered and supplemental. Three recent books engage with the subject of independent documentary marking a flurry of renewed interest in this still understudied field—Aparna Sharma’s *Documentary Films in India: Critical Aesthetics at Work* (2015), Shoma A. Chatterji’s *Filming Reality* (2015) and K.P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro’s *Fly in the Curry* (2016). Jayasankar and Monteiro, Chatterji, and Sharma take up the much needed task of apprehending documentary cinema through such overarching book-length studies and illustrate different approaches encompassing Indian documentary’s history and aesthetics.

*Fly in the Curry* is written from the multi-faceted purview of its authors Jayasankar and Monteiro, who are film practitioners, educators, and media scholars. Through the book, they aim to show how individual documentary film works are firmly grounded in the historical, political and aesthetic practice of documentary—the mixture they term the “curry.” The book designates the emergence of independent documentary in the 1970s, with the works of filmmakers like Anand Patwardhan, Tapan Bose, Utpalendu Chakraborty, and Deepa Dhanraj, who challenge statist hegemony in India. The authors show how these filmmakers devised unique aesthetic practices by working against the institutionalised documentary pioneered by India’s primary state institution of documentary film—Films Division of India (FD)—and its legacies of the Griersonian mode of documentary.

In a chapter on the works of independent filmmakers who rose to prominence during mid-1970s, Jayasankar and Monteiro examine close interrelations between filmmaking, the technological impetus provided by the video boom of 1980s, and the country’s political and social movements like the dissent against developmental projects, rise of women’s movements, and activism of marginalised communities. Other chapters in the book focus on the relations between realism and the image, reflexive relations in feminist film practice, and docu-
mentary’s place in the public sphere. Through these focal points, the book presents the diverse and dissident practices of independent documentary film as archives of histories, memories, and records of subaltern struggles that form heterogenous streams of counter-hegemonic discourse in India. Thus, the authors probe the different ways in which documentary filmmaking shapes and is shaped by collective praxis in India.

Within this paradigm, Jayasankar and Monteiro are also keen to explore their own roles as film practitioners and media scholars. In the chapter “Notes from the Curry,” they foreground their own subject positions in relation to the marginalised communities they encounter in their films. The author-filmmakers discuss their film *YCP 1997* (1997) that centers on five poets and artists living at the Yerawada Central Prison in Pune. In the film, the filmmakers focus on the ‘textures of their (inmates’) experience’ (Jayasankar and Monteiro, 161) by incorporating the inmates’ poetry and thoughtful reflections. Despite having the prisoners’ consent, they decided against including details about the prisoners’ crimes and their critiques of prison authority figures. Thus, for the author-filmmakers, the key ethical concern is the importance of protagonists’ lives and well-being outside of the films. The authors frame their own moral authority as filmmakers in terms of discourses of documentary film practice as social participation. The self-positioning of Jayasankar and Monteiro—as practitioners, pedagogues, and media scholars—is significant to their discourse of collective praxis. As flies in the curry themselves, they inform ongoing critical debates on ethics, reflexivity, and changing subject positions in the field of documentary film practice by bringing forward the dynamic roles of documentary as a creative arts practice intervening in the public sphere.

*Filming Reality* takes up a similar task of tracking the ways in which various documentary films tread the fraught political and social dynamics in the country, but it does so while adhering to specific auteurist attitudes, themes and genres. Through the authorial position of a journalist and a film critic, Chatterji presents an anthological account of Indian independent documentary for readers with a general interest in documentary film. *Filming Reality* focuses mainly on independent documentary films made after the mid-1980s, as individual filmmakers struggled to find their own artistic and critical voice while financing, distributing, and exhibiting films without sponsoring agencies. The book’s chapters are based on different genres and categories of films like biographical documentaries, ethnographic films, and films promoting sustainable development, along with a special focus on works of individual filmmaker Satyajit Ray. Its chapter on biographical documentaries in India begins with the biographical films produced by Films Division of India (FD) and then moves on to films made by independent filmmakers. Thus, the chapter draws formal and historical continuities between institutional and independent practices by presenting different iterations of biographical documentaries, as they are tackled by filmmakers inside state institutions and otherwise. While the book does not position itself as a historical exploration of Indian documentary, such categorisations allow it to form relations between filmic practices emerging at different moments that remain ignored elsewhere.

Departing from the rest of the book’s organising logic, Chatterji marks a separate chapter for filmmakers like Anand Patwardhan, Amar Kanwar, Sanjay Kak, Ajay Raina, Rakesh Sharma, and Joshy Joseph. Chatterji clubs them together as ‘milestone makers’ to signal the heterogeneity and dissidence in their practices. Being mindful that this gendered list of names makes documen-
tary film a “man’s territory.” Chatterji frames the next chapter through the works of several women filmmakers like Ananya Chakraborty, Suhasini Mulay, Deepa Dhanraj, Madhusree Dutta, Paromita Vohra, Reena Mohan, and Nishtha Jain. Thus, the chapter highlights the historically gendered division of filmmaking in the country. Feminist filmmakers have been the subjects of many accounts of independent documentary (Bandi, 2016; Wolf, 2007, 2018), but scholars have strongly cautioned against addressing feminist politics in cinema as a “sub cultural realm” (Wolf, 2007). By marking the films of women as being separate from those of the “milestone filmmakers,” these two sections of Filming Reality steer away from accurately accounting for the critical significance of the women filmmakers. Moreover, it reproduces the historically gendered division that it sets out to critique.

With an awareness of how these kind of categorisations fall short of charting the complex interweaving of historical-political movements with formal modes of independent documentary, Sharma uses a completely different methodology. Documentary Films in India avoids the anthology format in favor of a detailed study of three film practitioners: David MacDougall, Desire Machine Collective and Kumar Shahani. For Sharma, all three filmmakers approach documentary-making as a creative practice interested in its subjects’ experiences of being in the world. They address subjectivities as being “open-ended, in process and negotiating the wider axes of socio-cultural and political histories” (Sharma, 4). For instance, in the first section, Sharma focuses on the films on children’s institutions in India by MacDougall like Doon School Chronicles (MacDougall, 2000) and Gandhi’s Children (MacDougall, 2008). These films show the varying relationship of institutions with individuals, without attempting to resolve the issues that arise between them. Sharma concludes the section with a discussion of Gandhi’s Children (MacDougall, 2008), a film based on a destitute children’s home. By revealing the institute's bureaucracy and disdain towards the inmates, the film challenges normative middle-class sensibilities of welfare in relation to these institutions. For Sharma, the film offers a platform for the inmates to express themselves on terms exceeding the limited purview of the institutions. While the film’s subjects are unable to change their immediate situation, they nevertheless exercise a potent agency as the films show them questioning, critiquing, and engaging with their environment. Thus, Sharma argues that MacDougall’s observational films open a highly charged way through which the ordinary everyday practices of engaging with the world can shed light on the complex relations between society and the nation.

For Sharma, documentary is a process that intervenes in the world—interacting with the world from the inside and not from the outside. Sharma moves beyond the idea of documentaries as testaments and evidentiary practices and insists on this phenomenological definition of documentary as a way of encountering and intervening in the world. Consider the analysis of Kumar Shahani’s film The Bamboo Flute (Shahani, 2000), where Sharma steers away from the temptation to locate the episodic quality of Indian classical music as the film’s formal governing principle. Instead, she invokes Siegfried Kracauer’s definition of ‘episode film’ as the ‘permeability’ of physical reality of the film’s environment into the film—what he terms the “flow of life” (Sharma, 233-234). Sharma offers insight into the mise-en-scène in Shahani’s film to understand the porous quality between the material phenomenon of the setting of each frame as it interacts with sound and action in the film. Thus, Sharma excavates the ways in which the films’ sound and
music are interwoven with the flow of daily life and cultural practices. *Documentary Films in India* brings documentary-making processes and aesthetics into focus and analyses how they have evolved over time. It brings forth a model of film historiography that marries political and historical concerns with critical aesthetics and formal film analysis.

The three books together identify different iterations of independent documentary filmmakers as aestheticians, interveners, educators, activists, archivists, curators, editors, collaborators and participants, thereby positioning the emergence of independent documentary at the locus of debates around the function of cinema in the public sphere. They collectively expand the field of documentary studies in India by cataloguing films and filmmakers, and mobilising aesthetic categories, genres, networks, in relation to country’s socio-political movements. However, they sideline the longer trajectories of independent documentary in India that go back to the period before independence as well as the documentary film practice operating within institutional frameworks. There remains a need for documentary historiography in India to retroactively track continuities while moving beyond the identification of ruptures or monumental moments in formal aspects of filmmaking. As contemporary scholarship on documentary cinema explores the interconnected histories of political and social movements with the technical, infrastructural and aesthetic paradigms of the documentary archive, it instigates the need to devise new methodologies to look back at its trajectories. Maybe it is time to ask, how different would the genealogy of Indian documentary look if it did not privilege the emergence of independent documentary film at its center?

Ritika Kaushik

University of Chicago

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i Addressing the gaping absence of a sense of documentary history in India, Arvind Rajagopal and Paromita Vohra have argued that, “...for a very long time political ideology and means of production, rather than formal practice, have been the categories through which the history of documentary has been traced and received.” See Rajagopal, A. and Vohra, P. (2012). ‘On the aesthetics and ideology of the Indian Documentary Film: A conversation’. BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies I(7): 7–20.

ii The Griersonian mode refers to the traditions of film making styles and policies attributed to John Grierson who designed and fashioned the National Film Board of Canada. He is generally regarded as the father of the British documentary film. It has been argued that the conception, development of early Indian documentary was influenced by the Griersonian documentary film practice. See Deprez, C. (2013), ‘The Films Division of India, 1948–1964: The early days and the influence of the British documentary film tradition’. Film History: An International Journal, 25(3), 149–173.

iii Until recently, B.D. Garga’s *From Raj to Swaraj: The Non Fiction Film in India* (2007) has been one of the few book-length works to trace the development of documentary from colonial to post-Independent India. But, scholars are increasingly pushing against Garga’s linear history to further complicate histories of documentary films from institutions like Burmah Shell (Vasudevan, 2017) and Films Division of India (Jain, 2013; Sutoris, 2016; Kaushik, 2017; Battaglia, 2018).
iv A major attempt in this direction is Giulia Battaglia’s *Documentary Film in India: An Anthropological History* (2018) that revisits Indian documentary, through an anthropological lens, to bring out the legacies of the colonial period, independent documentary before the 1970s, the significance of institutional practices, alongside the independent documentary filmmaking that emerged after the mid-1970s. See Battaglia, G. (2017). Documentary Film in India: An Anthropological History. Routledge.
References


A History of Britain is a fifteen-episode series that tells the history of the British Isles. Each episode is about an hour long and goes into a different period of British history. The entire narrative thread of the documentary asks the question of what is next for the country, by examining the country’s past. Historian Simon Schama, who is the primary historian and presenter for this project, walks viewers through British history by visiting many important sites, and telling the story that connects modern Britain to its deep past. Historical re-enactments are used throughout the show to help tell Creative Documentary. Documentary Proposal. Rethinking Documentary. In a school setting, they use documentary films as an alternative teaching strategy for topics that are difficult to visualize. It serves as an instrument to see more than what we ought to see what their lives are about compared to the viewers. Documentary's ability to adapt to the demands of television (both public service and commercial) is testimony to this. According to Jane Roscoe, documentary films have been used to compare the reality and the truth. Hence, the documentary films are used by scholars even before to enhance ones knowledge about their particular topic. Documentary Film Making is one of the most emerging branches of today. Political ideology that considered the conflict of nations to be the driving force of history; marked by intense nationalism and an appeal to post-WWII disconnect. Fascist praised violence against enemies as a renewing force in society, celebrated action rather than reflection, and placed their faith in a charismatic leader. Violence against enemies, celebrated action vs reflection, faith in leader, condemned liberalism, feminism, parliamentary democracy and communism. Political science - Political science - Historical development: Analyses of politics appeared in ancient cultures in works by various thinkers, including Confucius (551–479 BCE) in China and Kautilya (flourished 300 BCE) in India. Writings by the historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) in North Africa have greatly influenced the study of politics in the Arabic-speaking world. At the same time, the philosopher Marsilius of Padua (c. 1280–c. 1343), in Defensor Pacis (1324; Defender of the Peace), introduced secularization by elevating the state over the church as the originator of laws. An early Italian patriot, Machiavelli believed that Italy could be unified and its foreign occupiers expelled only by ruthless and single-minded princes who rejected any moral constraints on their power.