CHAPTER 4: INTERROGATING ALTERNATIVE

In a completely catalogued world, cinema is often reified into a corpus of traditions (Minh-ha, 1993: 90).

Trinh T. Minh-ha (1993) argues that there is no such thing as documentary. The term itself cannot be used to designate any category of material, genre, approach or a set of techniques. She refers to what is commonly understood as the documentary genre, as the documentary tradition instead. As opposed to ‘Aristotelian’ categorizing, post-modern thinking or the Derridean deconstruction challenges the attempts to compartmentalize films into rigid categories, as if they are natural or irrevocable (Platinga, 1997). Still, to further any understanding on the distinct tradition of alternative documentaries in India, it is important to examine the context in which the filmmakers themselves see their work, and to explore the various implications of the word ‘alternative’.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, the documentary itself came about as a cinematic practice as an alternative to fiction/feature film, John Grierson’s famous definition of documentary as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ can still be applied to the prevalent connotations of the word ‘documentary’. The documentary is considered to be non-fiction, educative and as dealing with the 'real' world, and not the imaginary world of fantasy and fiction. While several of these notions have come under scrutiny in contemporary documentary theory, what cannot be denied is the very visible existence of documentaries i.e. films with a social comment and preoccupied with representing the historical world.
The focus of this study is the tradition of ‘alternative documentaries’, i.e., alternative to both fiction film, and to mainstream documentaries which deal with a myriad of subjects like art, wild life, biographies, geography etc. By calling the documentaries under study ‘alternative’, the study assumes that these documentaries challenge the economics-centered, dominant notions of development as envisioned by the state and the market. It also includes the fact that these films articulate marginalized voices from the grassroots, and reconceptualize development as being participatory and holistic, with an emphasis on human rights (as discussed in Chapter 1). In the following pages, my endeavor is to examine how the filmmakers of the alternative documentaries construct their films, and what are the agendas that govern the making of these films, as conceived by the filmmakers.

Why does a filmmaker make a documentary? Also implicit in this question, is the query, how would the filmmakers define their work? This question of definition is not a straightforward one, as the impossibility of formally defining their work and categorizing it is widely acknowledged.

Thomas Waugh (1984) writes of the committed documentary, which he defines as films rooted in ongoing political struggles, made about people engaged in these struggles, with them and by them as well. These films are committed to the goal of socio-political transformation, with the filmmakers engaged in activism or intervention in the process of change itself. In the Indian documentary scenario (as discussed in Chapter 2), the monopoly of state-sponsored documentaries was challenged in the mid-70s, during the Emergency era. What began mostly as a reaction to oppressive state policies, has since flourished into a vibrant tradition of independent or alternative filmmaking, which also
received a considerable boost with the advent of video technology (Kumar, 2000; Page and Crawley, 2001). Filmmaking became less expensive and more accessible. As the pioneer-filmmaker of the alternative documentary, Anand Patwardhan put it in a personal interview, ‘I think the video affords opportunities for filmmaking that didn’t exist before’.

The video-boom and also the burgeoning of non-governmental agencies, which fund and/or make the alternative documentaries, are two significant factors responsible for making India one of the largest producers of independent documentary films in the world. These films focus on the marginalized sections of Indian society, including the adivasis, dalits, women and children, who have been historically denied access to power and resources. Issues of caste, class, gender, patriarchy and environment often figure as part of the larger, global context and are given voice through films made on localized struggles some place in India. The taxonomy associated with such documentaries is varied, as varied as the documentaries themselves. They are referred to as ‘alternative’, ‘independent’, ‘committed’ ‘political’, ‘parallel’ or even ‘social’ documentaries. Whatever the adjective, clearly there does exist a particular tradition of documentary making within the broader tradition of documentary itself.

The films chosen for my study are what I call audio-visual narratives of an alternative development paradigm. Opposed to the top-down, teleological and capital-intensive paradigm of socio-economic development, they are non-statist narratives of bottom-up, grassroots movements. All the films seek to articulate marginalized voices and have a commitment to social equality. The study attempts to explore how some Indian documentary-makers see their films, and to understand their perceptions of their
work. Locating their views in the larger spectrum of documentary theory will enrich one's understanding of the alternative documentary in India.

Implications of 'alternative'

The study sees these films as narratives of an alternative development paradigm. Is this premise a valid one? Correspondingly, can the documentaries chosen for the study be termed as alternative, within the documentary tradition? The filmmakers interviewed for the study explore the possible implications of the term ‘alternative’. While their answers range across a wide spectrum, there seems to be a unanimous acknowledgement that their films deliberately seek to forward new agendas and question existing ones. It becomes evident that there exists a category of films, which are being made and distributed with deliberate and overlapping agendas. It is these agendas that the study seeks to understand and interrogate.

The filmmakers define their films as alternative vis à vis the mainstream. The mainstream, for them, is constituted by:

1) the ideology of the State,
2) the ideology of the Market,
3) the access to and reception by audiences, and
4) the channels of dissemination.

While grappling with the question of how to define the films they make, the filmmakers explore the ideological concerns embedded in their work. The four criteria for supposing the mainstream/alternative dichotomy mentioned above, are examined at length in the following pages.
Anti-state as 'alternative'

Because the establishment exists, I believe that the alternative exists. The oppressive state of the apparatus is what the mainstream is all about. The alternative is constituted by people like us (Sarat Chandran, filmmaker, personal interview).

The oppressive apparatus of the state is constituted as the mainstream by filmmakers Sarat Chandran and Anand Patwardhan. The state is constructed as the oppressor, with the power and reach to manipulate the mass media to serve as their tools for propaganda- And it is this propaganda they seek to counter. Their films, Chaliyar and A Narmada Diary, respectively, reflect this perspective. The former film, based on the struggle of the people against the polluting Grasim factory, exposes the connivance of an apathetic state with the owners of the factory. A Narmada Diary exposes the falsehood of the state-propaganda for the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam, which would displace thousands of adivasis without them getting adequate compensation.

Mainstream documentaries, which get made and distributed by government agencies such as the Films Division and also those that get television exposure, are seen as government propaganda. As opposed to this, critical films about certain issues are not encouraged by the state. Most of the official channels have been closed for such films, and people are denied access to critical points of view. It was in the post-Emergency era of independent India that films challenging the lop-sided developmental policies of the state were first made.

So, is an anti-state ideology the defining characteristic of these films then? Most of the films that are made by these filmmakers would definitely seem to adhere to this agenda. However, it is not a clear-cut, anti-state agenda, which motivates these filmmakers. Traditionally, since Dziga Vertov, cinema has been used by the Left to challenge
structures of social domination. And the state is understood to be a hegemonic power, thriving on the exploitative mechanisms of capitalism. This groundwork for documentaries, laid out by classical Marxism, was pre-disposed to revolution. The organization, struggles and successes of worker unions and the ‘rank-and-file’ formed the bulk of documentary filmmaking in the Cold War years (Waugh, 1984). This radical leftist agenda for the documentary has been transformed by three important factors. The emerging role of an ‘enfranchised’ Third world in the geo-political scene, the role of the New Left in the First World, and the technological advancements which allowed for an explosion of cinema-verite. It is in this changed context, that the filmmakers in my study articulate the anti-state agenda. While acknowledging that these films are more often than not made to counter dominant ideologies of the state, the problems in simplifying (and reducing) their agenda to anti-state rhetoric are also addressed.

For filmmaker K.Stalin, whose film *Lesser Humans* is analysed for the study, the films need not necessarily be anti-state. Religion, private or organized citizen groups, and sometimes 'the psyche of the people themselves', may be the human rights violators. It is not always the state, which is responsible for all the atrocities. While the state figures prominently in many of Stalin's films as the oppressor, at other times its role is presented more subtly. This view goes beyond designating the state or the regime in power, as solely responsible for the social inequities. Various other institutions, which operate in the public and personal realms of the people, are also examined in an attempt to understand the existence of social inequities. As can be seen in Stalin's film *Lesser Humans* (a film on human scavenging), the state could play a conniving role in fostering
communal feelings through its policies, but even factors like religion, gender-based discrimination and class are extremely divisive forces.

Anand Patwardhan qualifies his anti-state agenda in relation to the fundamentalist nature of the state.

My films in the last 10 years have been directly against the state, I mean they are against communalism and the state is a communal one ... as long as it's a fundamentalist state, it's always going to be anti-state. I wasn't setting out to make an anti-state film, but they become anti-state because the state is not willing to accept any critique (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

Preferring to call his films independent', rather than ‘alternative', Patwardhan believes that independent cinema must remain independent not only in terms of how it is financed but also independent in terms of its political orientation. These films can be seen as attempts to provide space to those dissident and critical voices, which the regimes in power seek to stifle. By making films on the resistances offered by the people to these oppressive regimes, the filmmaker focuses on the alternatives.

As can be seen in the alternative documentaries chosen for analyses, the state is constructed as the main player in the stories of systematic oppression of certain, lower sections of society. However, the complexity with which each film presents its construction of the state varies – from conceptualizing the state as a monolithic, all-knowing, structure of domination to unraveling the many tiers that operate through the hegemony of the state (Barry, 1992)\(^6\).

‘Alternative’ to state/market

The advent and spread of globalization furthered the stranglehold of the market on a transforming Indian society. The ever-increasing gap between the ‘haves’ and the

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\(^6\) Chapter 5, which deals with representation in the alternative documentary, examines the construction of the state in these films at length.
‘have-nots’ in India are attributed to the policies of economic liberalization, incorporated into the socialist leanings of the Indian state. Economic liberalization in India was accompanied by the introduction of private, satellite television channels as well in 1991. The vast audiences in India held a fascination for the big, global advertisers (Page and Crawley, 2001). The monopoly of the state-owned Doordarshan, the sole television channel and the official medium for government propaganda, was replaced by many national and regional private television channels, whose bottom-line was profit of course. So, the role of the market as an increasingly influential force had to be reckoned with by filmmakers, who hitherto battled only the images on Doordarshan.

The thrust of the independent documentaries of the 1970s and 80s was to counter, what they saw as the government propaganda unleashed by Doordarshan. Films like A Nannada Diary and Something Like a War position their arguments vis a vis the state propaganda, which runs as a parallel narrative throughout the films. But the opening up of the private television industry ushered in new realities. Suddenly, a slew of high-capital entertainment and other commercial programming flooded the Indian television. As is typical in a pro-capitalist economy, the ideologies of the advertising industry, which propel the global economy, represented the hegemonic influence, which the alternative films seek to expose and counter. So, if the state represents one dominant institution of power, the market came to represent another.

Television is a little reluctant to touch something that would hit out very directly at the state. Even though satellite channels may not be directly subject to the censorship of the state, some amount of self-censorship does take place. Also, finally the market becomes the bottom line. So, the censorship of the state is probably replaced by the censorship of the market. This limits the space that the alternative can find within the mainstream (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).
‘Safe issues and safe ways of looking at controversial issues’ are chosen by television, which makes it imperative that alternative spaces must be created, as these documentaries do. These films, which seek to facilitate socio-political transformation in the Indian society, now incorporate a global analysis of the new economic policies. This analysis would then seek to posit an alternative ideological worldview.

Alternative dissemination

The identification of the state and the market as two of the key institutions, which feed into and sustain the hegemonic power play, brings into focus the dynamics of the dissemination of the dominant media texts produced by the state and the market. The scale of dissemination of these dominant images is what determines the reach and power they exert on the minds of the people. To forward their alternative agendas, these films need to be disseminated in way that would ensure effective persuasion.

Filmmaker Shabnam Virmani sees a small group of people in the country using film differently, trying to give life to narrowcasting.

We are using film very differently. I think there is a small group of people in the country who are giving life to a word called narrowcasting. It is a very precious kind of experience because it is actually allowing for pluralism in expression (Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, personal interview).

Introducing narrowcasting as one significantly different way in which alternative documentaries in India operate, Shabnam Virmani articulates what several other filmmakers feel about showing these documentaries to the people. Broadcasting is usually a single-time telecasting of a programme over commercial and state-run media, whose reach is tremendous in terms of numbers. Narrowcasting allows for multiple and meaningful screenings for small groups of people. Narrowcasting, however, assures the filmmaker that the viewers have seen the film, and not surfed channels or switched their
television sets off, as could be the case with a broadcast. Also the audiences are not anonymous like the audiences for a broadcast. Narrowcasting is usually spoken of in the context of the dissemination of the alternative documentary, like broadcasting normally refers to television programmes. However, while filmmakers prefer small and effective screenings for a more meaningful interaction with the audiences, they recognize the power of broadcasting to reach out larger audiences. The problem of dissemination is a very complex and remains as probably the most pressing issue to be addressed in today's context.

‘Alternative’ reception

The way in which audiences receive these films is also markedly different, according to filmmaker, Sarat Chandran.

The mainstream media are consumed like a meal. They are relished and are consumed mindlessly. But alternative documentaries are different. They linger in the viewer's mind long after they are watched (Sarat Chandran, filmmaker, personal interview).

This 'consumption of mainstream' images comes across as inferior when compared to the more attentive viewing these documentaries demand. This presumed superiority is critiqued in Chapter 7 of the thesis.

Michael Renov (1993) writes that the reception of the documentary film responds to the intellectual requirements of rationality and cognitive inquiry. The epistemological root of the terra documentary is docere, ‘to teach’ in Latin, and the corollary could be that the audience learns. And this is the basis of the argument that audiences watch documentaries differently when compared to their viewing of mainstream films.

Filmmaker Madhushree Dutta, whose film / Live in Behrampada is analysed for this study, feels that a ‘cultural illiteracy’ is propagated by the state and the market,
through the bombardment of the audiences with stock visuals by the mass media. She opines that this media illiteracy has to do with the paucity of diversity in form and content in television programming. As a particular kind of imagery and content floods the audio-visual channels, these documentaries face the daunting task of having something different to say and also saying it differently. The differences in the scale of production and channels of dissemination, puts documentary viewing in a disadvantaged position.

Of course, the fight is not among equals. The choices available to people are directly dependent on the distribution and accessibility. Compare the reach and access of Star TV to that of our documentaries. The money involved is different. And there is no comparison in the scale of production and dissemination (Madhushree Dutta, filmmaker, personal interview).

This idea is clarified by filmmaker Stalin, who feels that these films could be labeled alternative, also because they are fewer in number and watched less widely. It would seem logical to assume that what is available more readily and in more quantity, is what is mainstream. And the number of alternative documentaries produced is quite insignificant numerically, and available less easily for audiences to watch.

Alternative ‘politics of culture’

A cultural analysis of society is important and necessary, I think, because culture determines values, insights and prejudices of people. My films are rooted in cultures that do not exist for the mainstream society. It is the job of a filmmaker to intervene and that too with a cultural perspective. Of course, culture is also politics. I would call my films issue-based because they deal with alternatives to mainstream living (Omji John, filmmaker, personal interview).

Further differentiating between the kinds of documentaries made even within the ‘alternative’ tradition, the emphasis moves to the kind of analysis that society is subjected to in these documentaries. Those kinds of films, which believe in the 'reductionist, Marxist analysis of society, based on the base-superstructure mode of analysis' are not really alternative, according to filmmaker Omji John. At best they could be seen as
‘common and ordinary’ propaganda films, which seek to popularize or support a particular cause or struggle. There is no totality in that perspective and it is not an integrated world-view. Struggle-based films are different from issue-based films. Omji John challenges the notion of the documentary as simply a tool for countering the propaganda of the state and the market and sees this kind of ‘reductionist’ analysis as excluding a holistic world-view with all its complexities. If these documentaries are to provide truly alternative insights, it is important that the filmmakers hold up alternative lifestyles and value-systems for the world to see. This is possible through a cultural analysis of society. An ‘alternative’ agenda would include alternative cultures, value-systems, life-styles, medicine, rituals and habits of the indigenous people, of which mainstream societies are totally unaware.

This opinion is seconded by filmmaker Shripakash, all of whose films are made with the adivasis. He feels that those whom the mainstream societies consider as uneducated are, in fact, very knowledgeable. Indigenous people have sophisticated art forms and philosophies about love, relationships, nature and values. And these traditional knowledge systems need to be re-discovered for the 'mainstream' societies by these documentaries. When the need for culture-specific development initiatives are being voiced, it seems imperative that a cultural analysis be incorporated into the global thinking on development.

Much of the recent sociological and development theory has been focusing on the indigenous knowledge banks. Local wisdom is seen as an important tool to usher in real development at the grassroots. The question of indigenous knowledge assumes more importance when seen in the context of Foucault’s idea (1975) that ‘knowledge and
power are integrated with one another’. So any attempt at empowering the adivasis would need to reconstruct their systems of knowledge for the elite. *Kahankar: Ahankar* is one alternative documentary that seeks to do this, as mentioned in Chapter 2.

Making a counter-point, Anand Patwardhan talks of the importance of issue-based films in a country like India, which has so much injustice and inequity”. The fine line drawn between struggle-based and issue-based documentaries does not seem relevant to him. He is comfortable with the fact that his films are propaganda films (*self-admittedly*), which seek to counter the propaganda of the state.

**Alternative realities**

These are films that see beyond what you actually see, or investigating more of what you actually see. They are ways of looking into ourselves and our society, and interpreting that point of view (K.Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

These alternative documentaries are seen by Stalin as an investigation of people and society. As attempts to interpret and understand society, these films try to look beyond what one actually sees. Implicit in this understanding of documentaries, is the rigour of analysis that filmmakers bring to the everyday world in order to make sense of the obvious and *taken-for-granted* observations about society. Madhushree Dutta calls these films as ‘*protest* films’, just as there is protest literature and protest music. A protest against what is, and may be a protest for what ought to be, as well.

However, the term alternative itself is questioned by some of the filmmakers. And so is the implicit dichotomy it presumes. By definition, if these documentaries exist in an alternative space, logically it follows that to exist they would always need a dominant force, which they could then proceed to counteract, or they would need a problem to which they will seek to be an antidote. This literal connotation of the word ‘*alternative*’ is
a point of contention for some filmmakers, who see that ‘alternative’ would always mean ‘in opposition to a mainstream’.

The danger in calling something alternative is that the problems remain. So saying that alternative is something different from existing problems, closes options. While some of the films are committed to social concerns, some actually make the problems haloed (Madhushree Dutta, filmmaker, personal interview).

Along the same lines, Stalin opines that while he is not comfortable with the dichotomy between mainstream and alternative, it does exist, because of the differences in the way people think. A belief that an intervention on their part will reduce the gap between the elite and disadvantaged prompts them to intervene into things around them. Stalin suggests that whatever be one's profession, social awareness and sensitivity must be ingrained in people. And this sensitivity itself should not be institutionalized into profession, and must seep into the consciousness of every person. Stalin believes that the dichotomy must go, so that the ‘alternative’ tag does not remain restricted to a select few who are professionally trained and educated to be socially and politically correct. So while one has to accept that the dichotomy exists, its propagation itself could be one of the problems. Or, to put it differently, the endeavor must be to mainstream what is alternative now.

This allegation of 'exclusivity' attached to the alternative tradition needs to be critiqued. References abound in documentary theory to the ideological pedestal, which the documentary tradition and documentary makers are thought to assume.

The socially oriented filmmaker is thus the almighty voice-giver (here, in a vocalizing context that is all male), whose position of authority in the production of meaning continues to go unchallenged, skillfully masked by its righteous mission (Minh-ha, 1993:96).
Trinh T. Min-ha writes of challenging the status that the documentary occupies as the historically privileged domain of truth. Her critical insight could be applied to ward off any misconception that these documentaries offer truth as an alternative to the misleading mainstream media.\(^7\)

**Questioning the divide**

One is not very comfortable with these totalities of mainstream and alternative. Because at one level, when you say mainstream, it is for the masses. And when you say alternative, it is for people like 'us'. So there is also inherent in that conceptualizing a kind of a division, dividing factors that need to be questioned at the same time. Looking at how these totalities are created and how audiences are created using these totalities. And how, for example, the alternative gets its reason to exist from the fact that there is a mainstream. We have been also trying to interrogate this dividing fact, which is an operational power, in the Foucauldian sense (Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

While acknowledging the presence of the mainstream-alternative divide, Jayasankar says that these totalities make him uncomfortable, and that accepting these totalities would mean that this divide is sustained and reinforced constantly. In a reference to Foucault's idea of ‘the inhibiting effect of global and totalitarian theories’ (Foucault, 1977), Jayasankar suggests that one needs to critically look at how these totalities are created and because of them, how audiences are created. Breaking down these totalities and seeking to demystify them are part of the bigger challenge, which the documentaries and the filmmakers must confront. This argument remains at the forefront of contemporary documentary theory.

Striking a middle path, Anjali Monteiro suggests that ‘the lines are increasingly getting blurred’ and that actually these categories are more a part of a continuum. While their existence could perhaps be justified a few years ago when state monopoly existed, their relevance might be reevaluated.

\(^7\) See Chapters 5, 6 and 7 for a more detailed discussion on realism, testimony and truth-claim in the alternative documentary.
now the mainstream and the alternative co-habit each other, especially with the advent of private television channels. She feels that increasingly many people who started off in the ‘so-called alternative’ are part of the mainstream and the language of the alternative has been incorporated by the mainstream media, especially the news channels. Several issues, which traditionally did not have a voice in the mainstream media, figure on private television channels.

Alternative spaces are not only created by making alternative films. Alternative spaces are also created when you get people to look, to change their relationship with the mainstream media (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

Anjali Monteiro and Jayasankar, who produce documentaries together, make a case for the need for 'alternative spaces', rather than 'alternative films'. They are both of the opinion that making audiences aware is the most important requirement. As media educators and filmmakers, they feel that educating audiences to critically read media texts is what is real empowerment. This thinking would complement much of what is being written about documentaries in contemporary theory. The understanding is veering around to the idea that documentaries are as much a construct as any other media text. And while the notions of documentary as non-fiction are being challenged, audience empowerment could very well be the way to challenge the hegemonic power of the mainstream media, as well as to look critically at even the alternative texts.¹

Talking of the need to empower audiences, Anjali Monteiro suggests that this would allow for the optimum use of the mainstream media, which is something that most people have access to and which occupies so much of their viewing time.

Why not use that material which is occupying so much of time of women or youth or whichever group, use that as a starting point for a dialogue? Why does it have to be

¹ See Chapter 8 for a detailed discussion on audience empowerment.
something that is lily-white and pure and ideologically correct? (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview)

Giving examples of mainstream media texts used to popularize alternative agendas, Jayasankar talks of a public hoarding which uses the catch-line of the Pepsico soft drink advertisement ‘Yehi hai right choice, baby’ to promote breast-feeding. So marrying the alternative with the mainstream sometimes gives interesting results, Anjali Monteiro points out that it also subverts the intended message, that the soft drink is not the right choice, and breast feeding is. She says that even the popular Hindi Song ‘choli ke peechey kya hai...’ was used in a similar campaign. So, to create alternative spaces, one must get audiences to change their relationship with the mainstream media. It is also important to understand that the prerogative of the alternative is not with the intellectual class. The definition of what is alternative, what is marginalized, and what is resistance must be loosened, so that a clearer picture emerges of the many people who struggle with alternatives and live out alternatives, in their everyday lives.

Giving a twist to the terms alternative and mainstream, filmmaker Stalin redefines them in terms of their relevance and prevalence. Subverting the use of these terms itself could be a first step in addressing these issues.

In any case, the issues that one is talking about are mainstream issues. I mean fashion, clothes and colours and towns and cities and lack of electricity in cities, are all alternate subjects actually. They are not mainstream subjects. Mainstream subjects are still caste and gender and inequities and land holdings. Those are our country's main issues (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

With reference to the Indian context, filmmaker Shriprakash feels that those who belong to mainstream India are different. And the filmmakers from urban India make films, which cater to the wants of this mainstream India. So they do not represent the real alternative. Critiquing the space that urban filmmakers, with their elite sensibilities and
‘Western’ education, occupy in the ‘alternative tradition’, Shriprakash reintroduces the alternative/mainstream dichotomy vis a vis the filmmaker’s socio-economic location.

I am angry with the filmmakers sitting in cities. With the arrogance of making something different, they want to fight the problems of the world. May be they have good intentions. Those who belong to mainstream India are different (Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview).

This exploration of the alternative/mainstream will help to position specific works within the documentary tradition in India. The varied opinions of the filmmakers suggest that traditional boundaries are fluid, and even irrelevant. The following section, examining the agendas of the filmmakers, throws some more light on the issues introduced here.

Exploring agendas

The agendas of the filmmakers warrant a closer look, if the implications of ‘alternative’ are to be comprehensively examined. As discussed in Chapter 1, the alternative approaches towards development imply certain ideological standpoints. So, it is with the understanding that these films share the broad agenda of articulating marginalized voices, and critique the dominant thinking on development, that this study further interrogates the agendas of the filmmakers. What motivates their filmmaking and what are their preoccupations while making their films? The answers to these questions help grapple with the problematic question of intent, one of the questions that seems to dog documentary theory.

Thomas Waugh (1984) is of the opinion that the specific political positioning of the filmmaker is as important as the film. In his definition of committed documentary, he
talks of two important elements, the ideological principle and the activist stance of the filmmaker.

By ‘commitment’ I mean, firstly, a specific ideological undertaking, a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-economic transformation. Secondly, I mean a specific political positioning: activism or intervention in the process of change itself (Waugh, 1984:xiv).

This is an especially important point to be addressed, as the documentary often comes under severe criticism for clinging on to its ideological pedestal. Through the question of agenda, I seek to examine the motivating factors behind the filmmakers and their films, as they see it. I explore the ideological affiliations and motivations behind their films, as also the direction in which they seek to further their work.

In an attempt to demystify the making and working of a documentary, it has been said that the documentary is shot with three cameras, according to Alexander Kluge (cited in Minh-ha, 1993). One, the camera in the technical sense, two, the mind of the filmmaker, and three, the generic patterns of the documentary film. Though this observation could be quite true of any cinema, its relevance to the documentary is more pertinent, because of the reality claims associated with documentary. So while fiction film is overtly fictitious, the documentary is covertly so. And this is what makes the second camera, which is the filmmaker's mind and agenda, worth investigating. While the films chosen for the study reveal themselves to be preoccupied with certain socio-political concerns, the agendas of the filmmakers, as they see it, could be explored to place their films in a larger context.

What the films reveal is echoed by the filmmakers too. For Anand Patwardhan, it is almost always a human rights agenda, as clearly evident in the film, A Narmada Diary, co-directed by him. Talking of the Narmada Bachao Andolan as one of the several issues
he is involved in, the thrust of the film, for him, is not so much the technical arguments of siltation and water availability, as the rights of the adivasis to be displaced.

What right do you, the government, have to be on adivasi land and throw out people from their land, without them getting anything out of it? Who are you to appropriate these natural resources without asking the people who live there? (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

The moral right of the state, seen as appropriating people's resources, is under attack in the film, while the cost-benefit analysis is secondary. The underlying agenda is also to show signs of resistance by the people, to show that alternatives are there, despite the films dealing with terrible and difficult times. The films are a natural response to situations which bother him. A similar agenda, the opinion that for too long only certain sections of the society have talked, prompts filmmaker Stalin to make his films. This is coupled with the belief that there is a need to mediate between the media and those who don't have access to it. This mediation should, however, should not be a tokenism but an effort to give those denied sections that visibility and space, and allow them to say what they think and feel. And at the same time acknowledging to oneself and in the film, that it is from a position of power that the filmmaker is seeking to facilitate this. There is a very fine line between intervention and intrusion, and these documentaries must attempt to be positive interventions. Talking of her films as a witness to contemporary India, Madhushree Dutta says her films are attempts to work out relationships with society. Though not bound to make any particular kind of film or any particular agenda, she prefers to make films related to the times she is living in. *I live in Behrampada* is an example of the fluidity of her agenda. What started off as a film on destruction, an investigative film, it finally became a film on life, the making of a slum. So while everyone will have a pre-conceived agenda, the fluidity to change is very important.
Commenting on the film, in the catalogue of IVFest, ’95 (a documentary film festival held in Thiruvanathapuram), Madhushree Dutta says:

More than the chronology of the violence, people and their struggle to survive became our focus. This shift changed the image of the Behrampada people from pitiable victims to respected citizens of India.

The participatory nature of these films comes to the fore. Communication as a two-way process, where the source and the receiver, the filmmaker and the subject constantly exchange roles, to facilitate a dynamic and dialogic interaction. Agendas are not rigidly enforced, instead, they are constantly created and re-created.

Clearly, this resonates with the agenda of the new social movements, which seek to voice the protests of the marginalized subjects, who are active participants in the struggle for their rights. They may range from micro-level actions at the individual and collective levels, to horizontal coalitions across the globe. As agents of change, they seek to harness countervailing power at the grassroots levels.

When the agenda is to give voice to a collective expression, it encourages a sense of ownership about the film made, says Shabnam Virmani. There is a difference between making a film, saying this is ‘my’ view on a particular issue, and using the medium to give voice to a collective expression. Participation takes on a whole new meaning, where the involvement of the marginalized group extends to help conceptualize the film, write the script, or make decisions on the editing table. Though a time-consuming process, this could be achieved through may be a series of workshops or involvement of local groups over the entire filming process. Filmmaker Shabnam Virmani opines that this process is very challenging and fulfilling, because it comes with a sense of belonging. Focusing on the positive is another conscious decision.
No matter how poor or exploited or oppressed a person is, a woman is or a dalit is, I think it is wrong to perceive that person's reality as purely negative. Because that person survives with all kinds of resistance, all kinds of expressions that are positive and affirming (Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, personal interview).

Battling the stereotype of the passive victim has been one major concern in the shift from the Dependency theory, propounded by theorists like Andre Gunder Frank, which lays too much emphasis on the vulnerability of the disadvantaged people. New theories of 'real' development emerged which highlighted the positive aspects of participation and empowerment. And the agendas of these filmmakers bear testimony to this thinking. These thoughts resonate with the writings of Michel Foucault, who warns against a uni-dimensional notion of power, as the monolithic ‘eye of power’. Foucault suggests that people offer resistance to dominant relations of power in several ways, at micro-levels. Many of the alternative documentaries, especially the films of Shabnam Virmani bear testimony to this fact.

The politics of identity remains central to this agenda. Factors like class, caste, education and geography contribute to deciding the identity. Filmmaker Shriprakash asserts that the identities of those belonging to mainstream India have been long established now, whereas the very existence of indigenous people in India is thought to be in doubt, because their culture is fast disappearing and hence their identity too, according to Without their culture they are lost, and so their identities need to be safeguarded. All Shriprakash’s films, like Kis Ki Raksha, Addo Miyad Ulgu lan and Buddha weeps in Jadugoda are based on the adivasis who live in Jharkhand, and their sufferings. The films therefore would need to belong to the adivasis in very fundamental ways, to be made with, by and for them.
I make films for those who suffer . . . I wanted to merge my identity with them - the adivasis. The moral and social structures of my mainstream identity were crumbling. The questions - who am I and where am I, began to bother me. So against injustice and for my own identity, I began to make films. May be it is selfishness (Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview)

Believing that culture is also politics, Omji John deliberately does not film struggles, which he thinks of as the product of a reductionist, Marxist analysis of society. Preferring to intervene with a critical, cultural perspective, though the agenda is philosophically the same, it is processually different. The films are always rooted in indigenous cultures, and seek to educate modern societies about cultures, which do not exist for them. The tribal cultures, which have a lot to teach mainstream societies, like living in harmony with nature, are invisible to them and so should be explored and brought to the fore by films, according to Omji John. The films could be made over a long period of time, by living with and participating in the daily lives of the tribals. Omji John’s opinion, if it translates into ethnographic filming, should be examined more closely, for the problems of filming the ‘exotic’, unfamiliar ‘other’ for mainstream audiences have come under scrutiny since the days of Robert Flaherty, who made the first documentary on the Eskimos.

Sarat Chandran’s agenda is to re-educate people about their realities, not with a condescending attitude, but to create support groups for their own causes. He believes that rural audiences, especially, can empathize with most of these films and believe what they see. So watching these documentaries will re-educate them and stir them to action. His agenda as a filmmaker, which is to make films about the sufferings of the people, coexists with his agenda as a distributor, which is to take these films around to rural audiences and empower them.
The agenda to simply highlight the sufferings of a disadvantaged populace is increasingly being critiqued. A whole new debate on reflexivity and representation in the documentary came about, as a result of this critique. And the critique came to be incorporated by several filmmakers in their work. The basic concern for the marginalized came to manifest itself in several philosophically different ways. For Jayasankar, more important than the ‘spectacular modes of oppression’ around him, is the whole process of oppression, with the filmmaker and the audiences as part of it. Interrogating ‘normality’, and implicating the filmmaker and even the audiences to question their identities is the main agenda. If the agenda is limited to only filming extreme and shocking struggles against oppression, it could end up being morally indignant and also have a shock value, which could over-simplify the issue being filmed. In fact, Jayasankar talks of critiquing the agendas themselves, which a filmmaker might profess to have.

Everyone of us is a site of tension and we have conflicting subject positions... So you need to look at the various modes in which these agendas are now being reinforced. Agendas are being constructed, agendas are being set in many ways (Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

But, are these filmmakers also committed to going beyond just interpreting the world, to help change it? Are their films a tool in an attempt to intervene in changing the world? Are they film-activists or filmmakers?

This distinction is not considered as sacrosanct by many of the filmmakers interviewed. While Anand Patwardhan dismisses the relevance of this distinction saying that ‘It doesn't matter to me what labels people put’, Stalin wonders if the two roles can be separated at all, and what the rules are for this double existence. He suggests that the field-work involved in researching the film would probably bring the activist to the fore,

1 See Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion on ‘spectacular oppressions'.
to identify and to analyse the issue to be filmed, to try and examine the different points of view involved and how the concerned people are dealing with their realities. There is also a constant awareness that the film, when made, will be a statement on that situation and will have some kind of an impact on the situation. And there is a concern for how best to maximize the benefits for the people affected. These are the concerns of the activist. But, once in the studio, after having completed the work on the field, the filmmaker-agenda emerges. The technical aspects of making an effective film are the predominant concerns. While deliberating on the pace of the film, the music, or how the film is shaping up, the filmmaker takes over completely. Even during the recording, the concern is limited to ensuring that the tape is rolling, and has no scratches on it. But besides an occasional suggestion to the cameraperson, what the subject has to say is all engrossing, according to Stalin.

The opinion that the two roles are interchangeable and not mutually exclusive is reiterated by Anjali Monteiro and Jayasankar as well. For most filmmakers, the important thing would be not demeaning or endangering the positions of the subjects involved, for the sake of a film. While one does try to respond as a sensitive human being to situations that arise as a film progresses, there is not necessarily any long-term relationship or engagement with the issue. Sometimes, situations could be handled as they come. And maybe a link up with organizations working on the issue, or making local language versions whenever possible could help to make the film useful for those with whom it was shot.

For instance, when we were making this film YCP 97 on prison-poets, in the course of that, we got involved with one of the cases of the prisoners and then we managed to get him out of prison. Now we have not gone in as prison activists or any such thing, but we managed to get him out. He was actually acquitted by the lower court, but the state had
appealed to the High Court. So for 10 years, he was in prison and his case had not come up. Every time it came up, it was adjourned and he did not have a lawyer, he didn't have case-papers, he was in a limbo. So we managed to get hold of his papers and get somebody to stand for him. Then the case came up and he was acquitted, after 11 years in prison (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

Reconciling the two roles of filmmaker and activist, Madhushree Dutta is of the opinion that nobody is separated from activism, and refuses to compartmentalize her films. There is no restriction, self-imposed or otherwise, to limit her filmmaking to films on women or violence.

Filmmaking is my profession. The way I deal with my film is based on my experiences as an activist. To find a cinematic solution to any problem is my job (Madhushree Dutta, filmmaker, personal interview).

But for Shriprakash, the distinction between a filmmaker and a film-activist is an important one, and an explanation for the film itself. He calls himself a film-activist and not a filmmaker, for whom the content is clearly more important than the film. All his films are based on the lives of the adivasis, and just like in their lives, in the films too, there is more struggle and few distractions. And despite film not being an indigenous cultural form, Shriprakash thinks that it can be used as a tool to counter the influence of television.

Shabnam Virmani refers to the 'magical' quality of the audio-visual medium, which can impact the viewer emotionally far more than any other medium. Cinema can transport the viewer and shake one up from within. The medium is understood by audiences across socio-economic strata, unlike the print medium which calls for a minimum level of literacy. Radio too is a very people-friendly medium, but arguably the impact of powerful visuals transcends that of the aural radio. This probably is one of the main reasons why video is seen as the ideal tool in activist circles. The sense of urgency
that the video imparts lends itself well to the task of inspiring constructive action somewhere else. And also, the many creative elements that make a film, music, visuals, story, and script make film an exciting medium.

Omji John sees video as a tool to fight the ‘satan’ on its own terms, in a reference to the allure of the television.

Video can counter the dominating influences of the mass media, by being conceptually, theoretically and morally different (Omji John, filmmaker, personal interview).

Anand Patwardhan sees these documentaries as ‘making democracy’, and that whatever the problematic that a film may pose, it is better that the film exists than it does not exist. At the least, they seek to ‘provide a window’ into what is happening for those who want to see. Stalin, similarly, sees these films as in some ways creating future societies. S.Sukhdev, the first filmmaker in India to marry art and activism points out:

For an artist who is aware of his social roles and responsibilities, it is his duty to use cinema as a weapon to expose the truth about his society. He must tell the poor masses that they are poor because a handful of exploiters take away the fruits of their labour, that nothing shall free them from the clutches of poverty, unless they revolt against this exploitation (cited in Varma, 1998).

The idea of the alternative documentary revealing 'truth', as proposed by Sukhdev is being critiqued now. But the spirit behind his idea, that of cinema fighting against social disparity, is what drives the alternative documentary in India till today, along with a belief that the films can make a difference. As Rajani Kothari (1988) asserts that it is communications that must expose the hypocrisy of the international rhetoric on development, and expose those mechanisms, which systematically construct hierarchies of power and domination. On the same lines, the agendas of the filmmakers interviewed envisage a transformed, egalitarian society for those people who have been denied their rights as citizens of India for so long.