CHAPTER 5: EXAMINING REPRESENTATION(S)

Representation involves one thing standing for another, an image or recorded sound standing for that from which it was "taken"...this taking is non-subtractive: the thing remains, imparting information to the representation...(Bill Nichols, 1991:149).

Bill Nichols suggests that it is useful to consider the multiple meanings of the word 'representation', in the context of the documentary (Nichols, 1991:111). This chapter examines 'representation' in the alternative documentary of India in light of the three connotations of the word, as suggested by Nichols,

Representation is understood most commonly as a ‘likeness, model or depiction’. The dynamic relationship between the observer and the observed invests meaning into a representation. There is a close physical bond between the image and its historical referent in the documentary. The visual and aural representations that a documentary offers are indexical reproductions of the 'real' world, and so are thought of as authentic testimonies of events in the historical world. The assumption that a documentary is a transparent means of seeing the world is inherent in the commonsensical understanding of the documentary. The realist style of documentary making is what roots the text in the historical world. This study problematizes realism in the alternative documentaries and views documentary realism as the catalyst that precipitates the truth claims in the documentary.

The word ‘representation’, according to the OED, would also refer to 'the action of placing of a fact etc before another or others by means of a discourse; a statement or account especially one intended to convey a particular view or impression of a matter in order to influence opinion or action'. From this perspective, the documentary can be examined as a case or argument about the historical world. The alternative
documentaries, as narratives of an alternative development paradigm, build their case around an informing logic or issue, and then place evidence before the viewer to argue their case. The films adopt distinct strategies to educate and persuade the viewer into accepting alternative world-views. Testimony in the alternative documentary is interrogated in this chapter.

Another meaning of the word ‘representation’, according to the OED, is ‘politically representing a group or class by standing for or in place of them with the right or authority to act on their account’. The 10 alternative documentaries chosen for the study are films that seek to articulate the voices of the disenfranchised sections in Indian society. How the films go about this agenda is examined here. Important concerns like identity, systemic oppression, notion of citizenship, state propaganda, the power of a collective, and empowerment addressed in these films, are examined here.

The documentary itself is the homogenous sum total of the representations of the filmmaker. However, the representations mean anything at all only in relation to the viewer, who makes meaning(s) out of the representation. Representation involves the agency of the one who represents. And inherent in this agency is the power vested in it to make the representation. In the case of a documentary, the filmmaker is the one who represents, along with all the trappings of power – economic, social and technological, which influence the representation. In academic parlance, this power dynamics has been broadly referred to as the ‘politics of representation’. The filmmaker, as the author of the text, is responsible for every representation made in the film. At every stage in the making of the film, from the conceptualization to the post-production, the filmmaker is constantly making choices. Consciously and may be unconsciously, the process of
inclusion and exclusion are being applied to every frame in the film. How important then is it to implicate the filmmaker in the much-critiqued role as a site of power? This is one question addressed by the study.

The agency of the audience comes into the picture to make sense of the representation in the text. A text is the site of multiple meanings, where meanings can be learned and unlearned by audiences. So a representation can take on any meaning, only in relation to its audience. Any understanding of the politics of representation, therefore, has to take into consideration the several, possible ways in which a viewer may engage with the text. So, it is also within this context that representation in the alternative documentaries is examined.

The interplay between the author, the text and the meanings that the audiences negotiate with the text through these representations, forms an important part of my study. Several interesting patterns emerge along this continuum of making and looking at a representation of the historical world in an alternative documentary. The concerns of the filmmakers, which lead them into making a particular representation and how various audiences respond to that particular representation, are juxtaposed with each other.

**Documentary Realism**

Definitely, all this happens. It is not simply a film. It is reality. It is truth (Satyavathi, welfare worker, responding to *When Women Unite*).

It shows the reality in those villages. And also in the cities. It is very good, especially the way untouchability is shown (Aruna, participatory video-maker, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

The currency of the real operates in the documentary. In the alternative documentary too, the indexical representations of the historical world is inextricably
linked to the film, because presenting ‘alternative’ realities is the bedrock on which the films are made. The duplication of the world can never be unproblematic, and the collapse of the sign and historical referent in the documentary is of particular concern (Renov, 1993:26). Audiences consider the sign (or indexical representation) in the film as 'real', and this invests the documentary with ‘truth’\(^\text{10}\).

Bill Nichols (1991) is of the opinion that realism is a style, employed in the documentary to create the illusion of transparency. Realism seeks to make a persuasive argument about the historical world. And the documentary itself is a personal point of view of the filmmaker about the historical world. Making a case for documentary realism vis a vis the realism of fiction, Nichols points out that realism in fiction serves to make an imaginary world seem real (prompting a suspension of disbelief by the audience). The realist style in the documentary seeks to represent for the viewer life as lived and observed everyday. It prompts the viewer to engage with the documentary world as though it is the historical world itself.

These observations about the realism in documentary seem especially true with respect to the alternative films being studied. These films, often located in a specific geographical space and seeking to capture a chronology of events related to a particular social movement, take extensive recourse to realism as a style. Peoples’ struggles or social movements in the historical world are represented in several ways, depending on whether the filmmaker seeks to focus on a particular localized struggle or more to use the struggle as a case in point for a larger global level argument. In turn, the form and narrative of the films reflect this too. Covertly of course, the responses of the filmmakers

\(^{10}\) How audiences engage with realism in the documentary is discussed in Chapter 7. Here realism as a style is examined.
do suggest that their intended agendas for these documentaries have to do with a much larger ideological canvas. While *Chaliyar*, *A Narmada Diary*, *Kis Ki Raksha*, and *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* seem to be more geographically specific, and more like case-studies of popular resistances, *Live in Behrampada*, *Something Like a War*, *When Women Unite*, *Lesser Humans* and *Tu Zinda Hai* use particular examples of systematic oppression to make a broader argument.

Representation of localized, bottom-up resistances depend heavily on capturing the actual footage of the struggle on camera. *A Narmada Diary*, *Chaliyar*, *Kis Ki Raksha* and *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* are four such films, which are clearly more like real-time chronicles of mass-based social movements at the grassroots level. While not necessarily spanning a continuous length of time, the chronology of events and their place in the narrative try to impart the same sense of urgency and immediacy in the viewer, by representing the struggles as the very same chronology of events that had occurred in real time in the historical world. The rallies of the people involved in the struggle, the shots of marching feet, flying banners and the rousing speeches are very typical and clearly reveal the propagandist function of these films. The narrative is heavily dependent on the real struggle in the historical world, in content and in form. All four films appear to be narratives, which are completely rooted in the struggle, and in a sense, of the struggle, by the struggle, and for the struggle.

That realism dominates these documentaries can be easily seen, if for example one would look at only the visuals employed in these documentaries, without the audio or the subtitles. This would temporarily divorce the argument or actual content of the documentary from the text as a visual collage. And the striking similarities in the way the
films employ realism would come to the fore. If *A Narmada Diary* chronicles the struggle of the adivasi against the building of the Sardar Sarovar dam in Gujarat, *Addo Miyad Ulugulan* deals with the adivasi struggle in the Chottanagpur area against the dam construction on the Koel and Karo rivers, *Kis Ki Raksha* is a struggle by the adivasis against the decision of the State to turn their village into a firing range for military practice and *Chaliyar* is about the struggle of villagers in Kerala against the polluting Grasim factory. These films typify a particular trend in Indian documentaries, those which Omji John refers to as struggle-based documentaries. The films are rooted in specific new social movements, which are mass-based protests against a visible, authoritarian developmental project. The local populace are affected by the project, but not taken into confidence by the state. Realism seeks to ‘show’ how the footage is real. Testimonies are used to argue the logic of the case. How these films seek to use particular strategies to persuade through argument is dealt with later in this chapter.

Even a cursory look at the alternative documentaries would show that the concern of the filmmakers to establish their films as real-life happenings in the historical world is paramount. All the films begin with categorical statements about the specific, geographical locations, most often with the year or time when the footage was recorded. The rooting of the films in a specific, historical place is often done thorough visuals, voice-over and/or sub-titles, super-imposed on the text.

Establishment shots in the alternative documentary whether ‘Domkhedi village, Maharashtra, 1994’, ‘Sekhoba, Gujarat border, December 1990’ and ‘Manibeli’ in *A Narmada Diary*, or ‘Bastar, Madhya Pradesh, 1990’ and ‘Markatola’ in *Tu Zinda Hai*, seem to reassure the viewer that the sequence of events which would follow in the film
have taken place in real space and real time. The establishment shots include recognizable and authentic landmarks in the historical world, located in the village, town or city as indicated in the film. The market place in Raighad District in *Tu Zinda Hai*, the natural landscapes and Kursi *Nama* of the Jharkhand region in *Kis ki raksha* and *Addo Miyad Ulgulan*, the government buildings in *Something Like a War*, the *Mumbai* balloon factories in *Kahankar: Ahankar*, the drowning temple in *A Narmada Diary* and the fort in Ranpur, Gujarat in *Lesser Humans*, these are some examples of visuals used to tell the viewer that the documentaries are not a figment of the filmmakers’ imagination. The visuals are used as verifiable and authentic snapshots from the real world, where real-time shooting of the documentary took place. This actuality element can be traced to the very origins of the documentary (see Chapter 3).

‘Basically, it is that a picture speaks a thousand words…’

When compared to reading or listening about the issue, the visuals leave a strong impact on the viewer and persuade him or her into accepting the argument put forward in the film. Nichols’s opinion that realism in the documentary seeks to persuade is borne out by these responses from the focus group.

The picturisation was very good. It made you feel that the smell was coming from the picture only (Pradeep, student of social work, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

When you read the papers, you can assume so many things. But when you are watching a film, you see. Seeing is believing, somehow (Prabhu, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*).

Video is far more effective than writing about the issues in newspapers and pamphlets. (Shanta, participatory video-maker, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

The relationship between realism and alternative documentaries seems to be a more organic one, far exceeding the notion of realism as a documentary style. This brings
to question whether this dependence of the alternative documentary on realism has to do with the ‘truth-claim’, which Renov suggests is a defining condition within the documentary discourse. The alternative documentaries abound with such visuals, which seem to tell the viewer ‘this is the truth, this is not fiction’.

All the alternative documentaries chosen for the study reveal their preoccupation, in varying degrees, with capturing what can be called ‘live footage’ from the scene of action, as it were. In films like Chaliyar, Kis Ki Raksha, A Narmada Diary, Addo Miyad Ulgulan, I live in Behrampada and parts of Something like a War, the grainy footage, the hand-held quality of the images and the jerky frames are so excessively used, that it goes far beyond being used as a style. The technical quality of some of these visuals seems to be making a political point. The ideologies of the filmmakers seem to demand the use of realism in the films.

Several strategies serve to heighten the impression of the filmmaker's presence at the scene of action and capturing of the footage as it is. Whether as overt reflexivity on the part of the filmmaker or as an attempt to impart a sense of urgency to the viewer, the notion of filmmaker-in-the-film needs to be looked at critically.

The filmmaker-in-the-film is used alongside several other strategies in the documentary. In fact, from starting off as a reflexive element in films, it has evolved into a particular style of documentary making. In A Narmada Diary, the interviewer (may be the filmmaker) is visible or his presence is discernible many times in the film. The jerky camera movements in the office of the minister for environment, the spontaneous footage of the police atrocities on the NBA rally, or when the cameraperson is trying to follow

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11 The ‘truth claim’ operative in documentary desire is examined in chapter 7.
the World Bank president into a hotel and is being stopped by the security personnel there, these add a sense of urgency to the film. Realism at a certain level brings a sense of immediacy, fraught with uncertainties and anxieties. The viewer is unsure of what is going to happen next, and a momentum is built up, leading to a sense of climax. Of course it testifies to the authenticity of the footage too, as seen in the focus-group response given below.

It [the film] really educated me. To me it is authentic, I wasn't educated about all this. It is educative, very educative. ..the focus of the film is very good. It takes you down to the real people who are suffering. Or enjoying, what ever. The government is enjoying and the people are suffering whatever it is, it puts you really at the grassroots level. It takes you right into the problem (Suresh, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*).

*Something Like a War*, which can be called an *exposé* in parts, impacts tremendously with its *hard-hitting*, candid footage of the inhuman family planning camps set up for the rural women. This emerges as one of the most powerful narrative threads in the film. Realism (in fact, realisms) in its starkest form is used to bring home the message - the flawed population policies of the state and its allies.

The film was intended to create more of an outrage, intended to embarrass certain state agencies...the agenda was very clear. The target approach had to stop...the mass-contact programme by the state was funded by the World Bank and it was a very violent introduction. The film had to make visible... the state-sponsored violence against women (Deepa Dhanraj, filmmaker on her film *Something Like a War*, personal interview).

The horror that the film seems to want to evoke is effectively brought about by its use of realism. And in this process, realism transcends from being just a style to a much more organic part of the filmmakers' agenda.

This year I have done more than 2000 operations. Even in school classes, and in *Zilla* Parishad halls, in college rooms, I could do these operations, especially this particular operation. It is so easy, simple and *economical*. 
These words of Dr. Mehta, male gynecologist, and several other similar utterances accompany horrifying visuals and audio tracks in Dhanraj’s film. Visibly poor, rural women, with numbers tagged on their foreheads, with calloused feet, parched lips and exhausted looks are groaning with pain. The candid footage of these operations in process, conducted in mass numbers on masses of poor women, are accompanied by sound bytes from Dr Mehta. The juxtaposing of the oxymoronic video and audio tracks, seems like two realisms simultaneously experienced, and so makes it far more hard-hitting. This ‘live’ footage of Dr. Mehta, casually explaining his work and his objectives, provoked strong responses from a group of feminists, to which the film was shown.

It was not just a documentary surely. One actually sees the atrocities that were happening in the medical camps. Especially when that woman says ‘Bastard, get off my body’, I thought that was so evocative, no? One actually sees the plight in which these women are. They are clutching their stomachs, they can't walk two paces, and here is the doctor saying that they can be discharged in two hours, and how there are really no side-effects and how non-invasive it is. I think the sheer contrast of that might speak (Sharmila, feminist, responding to Something Like a War).

Something Like a War also offers several other parallel narratives in the film. The workshop with the rural women and some members of the urban, filming crew is the other strong narrative juxtaposed with Dr Mehta’s camps. The workshop comes across as the culmination of a series of interactions with the rural women, about fertility, reproductive rights, sexuality and the body. The focus group for this film, a group of feminists working with women and on women's issues, immediately identified with the workshop as something that they were familiar with.

They were a discerning audience, a learned audience. They knew what they were talking about. They knew their body, and were obviously not people who have been picked up, they have had conversations about it before. They were a politicized group. Obviously a politicized group (Sharmila, feminist, responding to Something Like a War).
Even the songs they were singing were feminist (Bindu, feminist, responding to *Something Like a War*).

However, it is a matter for speculation whether a non-feminist audience would have identified this realism. The workshop logically seems to appear as real, to someone familiar with the strategies for sensitization, which women’s groups might adopt. So, the visuals of the workshop might not seem so ‘real’ to other kinds of audiences. For one unfamiliar with the concept of sensitization or women’s workshops, the fact that a mixed group of rural and urban women sitting freely together and talking about taboo subjects like fertility and sexuality in such an uninhibited manner might seem incredible.

The realism of an alternative docu-drama would be different. A *docu-drama* would re-construct a happening in the historical world, in most cases. Of the documentaries being studied, *When Women Unite: the story of an uprising* is a docu-drama. While at the heart of this docu-drama lies a story, very like a fiction film, the philosophy behind creating this fiction is totally different. The agenda remains that of giving a voice to the marginalized, in this case the rural women of Nellore. The drama or the story follows a script, has enhanced visual effects like planned lighting, well-framed shots and an elaborate audio-track. *When Women Unite* is a story of a spontaneous struggle against arrack by rural women from 22 villages in Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh. It is the weaving together of several stories of oppression and revolt. The actual shooting was in Nellore, the actors and actresses were from the movement, as are the ‘hero and heroine and villain’, the script was written along with the women in the struggle and the songs were those written for the movement. And realism here is the true-to-life images enacted by the actual participants of the struggle in the historical world. The nuances of daily living in the villages of Nellore are part of the *film*, be it the
celebration of the Sankranthi festival, little children playing-house, or the cock-fight, which is a common feature in those villages of Nellore. The documentary makes it very clear that it is a true story being re-acted in the film. It is mentioned at the beginning of the film that “This story is not fiction. It brings together real-life experiences of 22 villages of Nellore district”. The drama is overtly a make-believe representation, with a hero, heroine, villains, humour, a story, a happy ending, all akin to a fiction film. The narrative of the drama is interspersed with documentary footage like interviews, rallies and analysis. How real is this realism for audiences?

...many rural women who saw this film in its Hyderabad premiere wanted to meet Kotamma [the protagonist in the film] at the end of it. They also asked me how I could have been in so many different places at the same time during the movement. In other words, they perceived the dramatic sections of the film as documentary (Virmani, 2000: 11).

I screened the film for a group of rural women of Pastapur village in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh, which was chosen as one of the focus groups for the study. The women were all agricultural workers (see Chapter 2 for a demographic profile of the focus groups). Their responses corroborate what Shabnam Virmani says in her article. Throughout the screening, the women were totally engrossed with the drama in the film, and identified totally with the characters in the film. Emotional responses like “poor Kotamma, how she is suffering” to outrage and incredulity at the scene when a drunk rapes his own daughter, blinded by arrack, and kills his wife when she tries to intervene. Many of the respondents laughed at the cock-fight and at the scene when the women of the village participate in the Sankranthi games like Kabaddi, after prohibition has been imposed by the state, and their lives are free from the evils of drunkenness. The empathy
the women felt for the protagonists in the drama typified their opinion that they considered the drama as not a story, but real.

Everything they show is true. Even in our village we faced a lot of problems because of arrack. Then we went and met the sarpanch, just like they did in the film (Lakshmamma, agricultural worker, responding to When Women Unite).

Members of another focus group, all involved in educating marginalized communities in Hyderabad, like the children of the basti (slum) dwellers or working in the leprosy colony were also of the opinion, that the film When Women Unite depicted reality.

Maybe those sitting in grand dining rooms in Hyderabad or in front of the dressing table combing their hair may think it is false. But we know it is true. They may dismiss it as insignificant, but it is very significant for us, because we see it day and night (Meherunnisa, welfare worker, responding to When Women Unite).

This observation by Meherunnissa sparks off the important debate of not just what is real, but the important question of what is real for whom?, explored in Chapter 7 of the thesis.

Realism as a style is used in K.Stalin's Lesser Humans, in ways different from the way other films use it. Realism is used to lend authenticity to testimony, which is central to the film. The film uses realism more to assert the authenticity of its argument and less as a witness to an urgent, unfolding struggle to be captured on frame. One reason for this could be that the film itself is a story of exploitation of the bhangis, human scavengers in Gujarat. It spans across the history of their oppression and transcends temporal and geographical specificity.

In Shabnam Virmani’s Tu Zinda Hai, the realism is symbolic and dramatized to reconstruct some experiences of the women activists profiled in the film. The black-and-white (symbolizing the past) slow motion of three young girls (Shraddha, one of the
protagonists, and her childhood friends), secretly learning to ride a bicycle, accompanied by a powerful sound track is one such dramatic reconstruction of Shraddha’s ‘real’ childhood memory, which she recounts.

This sequence invests ‘liberation’ into the symbol of cycling (mobility), and links Shraddha’s wish to study and her refusal of marriage, with her assertion of identity derived outside of home and matrimony, through her work with the tribals of Dhar district (Virmani, 2000:12).

Realism in the alternative documentaries serves as a kind of visual evidence to the argument being put forth by the films. The power of the camera to capture situations in the historical world is exploited, and the visuals are recognizably part of the audience's shared and lived experiences. Realism in the alternative documentary, along with testimony, is instrumental in encouraging the viewer to look at the documentary as truth.

**Testimony and the alternative documentary**

Testimony in the alternative documentary complements what realism effectively sets out to establish. The idea of the documentary as an argument about the historical world is borne out by the use of testimony to argue its case.

Testimony or evidence used to advance a particular argument is presented in the alternative documentary in several ways. The personal interview is probably the most common strategy used to put forward convincing arguments. This is personal testimony. ‘Expert’ testimony is also extensively used, where credible sources from the real world are presented as irrefutable evidence to argue the case. Newspaper clippings, footage from television channels, statistics from official reports, archival history, dictionaries, etc are some of the expert sources. Interviews with ‘experts’ are also used, where opinions of 'scholarship' are presented as evidence for the argument, like interviews with scientists.
and academics. And of course, as discussed above, documentary realism is used effectively as visual evidence to provide the authentic picture. The voice-over is perhaps the most unambiguous of all strategies to put forward the arguments of the filmmaker.

Interestingly, testimony is stood on its head, when the filmmaker seeks to subvert dominant hegemonic strategies, mostly of the state. Many of the films chosen for the study subvert the use of testimony by presenting contradicting testimonies or by using sarcasm or irony to off-set prevalent propaganda, again especially that of the state. And even more interestingly, several of these films resort to the same, ‘suspect’ sources to argue their case!

Personal testimonies of 'real' people are the building blocks of alternative documentaries. As films give voice to the marginalized sections of society, it would follow that these people speak in the films. Talking of the interview format as being indispensable to these films, Anand Patwardhan says that short of inviting these marginalized sections of society home, the next best thing would be to interview them and record what they have to say. Personal testimony as a tool of persuasion has been long associated with propaganda and advertising. In the alternative documentaries chosen for the study, testimonies from the marginalized people, in the form of interviews, are used extensively to offer firsthand evidence of the systematic oppression they have undergone. The interviews are their personal stories and experiences, articulated powerfully by the disadvantaged people. These interviews connect very well with the viewer, and prove that the subalterns can speak, if one tries to listen.
The ‘talking-heads’ format in the documentary, which is a result of excessive inter-cutting from one interview to another, is a manifestation of the dependence of the alternative documentary on personal interviews.

_‘I live in Behrampada, Addo Miyad Ulgulan, Kis Ki Raksha and Chaliyar_ are films that use the personal interview extensively to tell the viewer about the issue being dealt with. The people affected by the situation, like the Muslim and the Hindu slum-dwellers in the Behrampada slum, the adivasis being displaced because of state-sponsored developmental projects, and the people affected by the pollution of the Chaliyar river speak out through the interview. They narrate their personal experiences of the problems they face, be it the communal frenzy, the lop-sided development policies of the government or the environmental degradation by the Grasim factory. These interviews, aided by real-life visuals, form the main narrative of the films, and every interview forms a building block along which the narrative proceeds. Technically, the interviewee maintains an eye-level contact with the camera, and is framed in an extreme close-up, close up, or mid-shot. Headroom is minimal, and the effect is one of a personal conversation.

The interviews in _Addo Miyad Ulgulan_ and _Kis Ki Raksha_, both films by Shriprakash, are the testimonies of the adivasis about their lives and problems. Often, interesting glimpses into their social and personal lives are provided through the interviews. And while being rooted in a localized struggle, the films deal with larger issues of identity and social equity for the adivasis, and the interviews reflect this. The interviews build the straightforward narrative, and the emphasis is more on the spoken word than on the visuals in both the films.
*Kis Ki Raksha* is the story of the adivasis' struggle against the government's proposal to convert their lands into a firing range for the army. And this story is told by the adivasis themselves. Amidst true-to-life footage of the Fagua festival of song and dance and other rituals, shots of the surrounding landscape, and their traditional occupations like basket weaving, interviews are used to introduce their resistance to the building of a firing range in their land that would dislocate them. The testimonies of the adivasis span a wide range of emotional, political and economic arguments.

I am not going to leave this land of my fore-fathers. Where shall I go? (old adivasi man in *Kis Ki Raksha*)

The total number of us to be displaced is not clear, however according to a report by Brigadier JJ Kumar in a press meet in Ranchi, 27,853 people would be displaced...non-government sources say the figure would be between 1.3 to 1.5 lakh people (Peter Minz of Jan Sangharsh Samithi in *Kis Ki Raksha*).

...maximum we will be given 4,000 to 5,000 rupees. That will be spent on food itself. Nowadays we at least need 40,000 to 50,000 to build a house...we will have no land, no forest, no house, where will we live? In the name of dams and factories, so many people have been displaced in this region. We will also die like those people if we are shifted (adivasi in *Kis Ki Raksha*).

Interviews like these reveal the problems faced by the adivasis, beyond just the specific issue dealt with by the film. And the credibility of what is being said is enhanced by the fact that the adivasi himself or herself is saying it, within his or her real geographical and social context. In *Addo Miyad Ulguulan*, directed by Shriprakash again, the struggle is by a different people against a different oppression. The adivasis fight against the building of the Koel-Karo dam in Jharkhand. In this film too, the interviews with the adivasis are an organic part of the film's narrative.

*Tu Zinda Hai* by Shabnam Virmani deals with the issue of the empowerment of women. Women activists of Ekta Parishad, a mass-based network of people's...
organizations are profiled in the film, which in the words of the filmmaker, explores their evolving ‘self-perceptions and identities as women’, while they try to organize villagers and tribals against oppressive structures. This film relies extensively on the personal testimony more than on true-to-life realistic visuals. The interviews of the profiled activists are lengthy and central to the type of narrative (personal stories) that the film adopts. But the narrative is propped up by a voice-over track in the film. The oral narration links the various interviews into a cohesive film, and also provides an interpretative commentary on the background and facts concerning the Ekta Parishad. The voice-over is a parallel voice, complementary to the interviews.

*Lesser Humans* uses the close-up and extreme close-up shots to interview the bhangis, the scavengers who are among the poorest of the poor in India. This for Stalin, the director, is an ideological choice.

For too long, the same people have talked. I wanted to give as much space as possible for the bhangis to speak, in close-up with no distractions for the viewers. They had to listen to what the bhangis were saying (Stalin.K, filmmaker, personal interview).

Particularly horrifying in *Lesser Humans* are the close-up shots of human excreta, shown repeatedly throughout the film. And for Stalin this was a very conscious decision, to keep the shock value till the end. His intention was to keep reminding the audience that this is the work that the bhangis do, ‘don’t forget’. And several responses from the three focus groups that were shown this film bear this out.

When the film first shows it, I could not even see it. I would avert my eyes. But the film forces you to see it. I think it forces you to think that if you can’t even see it, imagine how they must feel doing it...this film dares to go very close (Vinaya, student of communication, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

In the film it is very clearly shown what the plight of these bhangis is. The interviews establish that these people are suffering in every way, and the various elements involved in this. Right from the panchayat to what the government has done for the last so many
years, everything is very well shown in the film. The discrimination that exists, their 
oppression…(Shanta, participatory video-maker, responding to Lesser Humans).

For the viewer, the documentary world is the real world and the interviews are 
true testimonies of people. So, while not all the audiences accept uncritically whatever 
the testimonies present as true, they definitely believe it to be information, which hitherto 
he/she did not have access to.

I think there are people like me who were not even aware that such a community and 
practice existed. It [the film] was presenting things to people who need to know that 
such a thing exists…as information 
(Smitha, student of social work, responding to Lesser Humans).

Alongside the in-depth interviews with the bhangis, Lesser Humans uses ‘expert’ 
testimonies from various sources to further its argument. The film opens with a definition 
of a scavenger according to the Chambers 20th Century Edition dictionary.

Scavenger, one who cleans the streets; a person or apparatus that removes waste; an 
animal that feeds on garbage: one who deals or delights in filth (Chambers, 20th 
Century Dictionary).

The definition is super-imposed as a visual, against an audio track of retching and 
coughing, before cutting to a shot of pigs and finally a woman carrying human excreta in 
a basket on her hips. The definition, along with the audio track, establishes the mood of 
the film. It is an expert testimony of the definition of a scavenger, and also indicates the 
inhuman lumping together of a sanitation worker, waste-cleaning equipment and an 
animal which dwells in filth. So, the Chambers dictionary here becomes an expert, at 
onece knowledgeable and insensitive. This subverted use of testimony was not observed 
by any of the respondents of the three focus groups, who reacted to the film. This could 
be indicative of the fact audiences may not respond to subtle strategies like sarcasm and 
irony in the films. Sometimes the viewer may not respond to a particular nuance, like in
the definition. But at some other times, subverted testimony may in fact be seen as testimony by the viewer. This is evident in some of the responses to *A Narmada Diary* and *When Women Unite*.

They did show the other point of view, the Nagarjuna Sagar... what the government is saying (Sashi, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*).

This was a response to an observation by one member of the group that the film showed only one point of view. The attempt made by the film to subvert the testimony presented by the state was seen as testimony itself, in fact, as an attempt at objectivity. Whereas the official propaganda of the state about the Sardar Sarovar Dam is used in the film to bring out the hollowness of the government's claims about big dams.

Maybe some audiences don't get the point. I have shown the government propaganda being done. I have shown it throughout the film (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

While responding to *When Women Unite*, two women in the group reacted negatively to a line in the film, which is intended to be an empowering or emancipatory thought. They did not offer the preferred reading of that particular line. In the film, the protagonist, Kotamma faints from hunger, waiting for her drunkard husband to come home to eat. Her neighbour and friend, who is also harassed by a drunkard husband, chides her saying ' why do you starve yourself? Starve your husband instead. Look at me, I eat so well...'. The intended meaning of this line would be to make the point to women not to subject themselves to further misery, and instead to take care of themselves. However, two rural women in the focus group at Pastapur, reacted strongly to this line calling the speaker 'a rakshasi' (demoness) for starving her husband.

Look at her, shameless woman. She eats nicely and does not give her husband food (Lakshmamma, agricultural worker, responding to *When Women Unite*).
And bad enough she is doing it, she is also asking Kotamma to be like that. *Rakshasi!* (Narasamma, agricultural worker, responding to *When Women Unite*).

Such oppositional readings to the films were offered by different respondents to other films as well. While it was a computer engineer in the USA who misread the irony in *A Narmada Diary*, it was two rural women who completely missed out on an intended meaning in *When Women Unite*. This indicates that education or social location need not be the decisive parameters that can determine the unraveling of signifiers and strategies in media texts.

The documentary realism in *Kahankar:Ahankar* operates in a very subtle manner through testimony. Some visuals, like shots of the Warlis who have migrated to Mumbai, and work in balloon factories or the landscape surrounding the Warli settlements and some interviews with the Warlis are real shots which root the film in the historical world. However, the Warlis' stories which are narrated orally and depicted through the Warli paintings, form the main narrative of the film. The stories and paintings are a testimony to that Warli history which does not find a place in the official records that are visible to and accepted as legitimate by the mainstream sections in society. The concern central to *Kahankar:Ahankar*, as mentioned at the start of the film is the existence of this parallel history, which is as real and as true as the official history, but a conflicting version. "To the Warlis, these stories represent their histories, their world view,..."

By juxtaposing official histories with the Warli’s stories, the film attempts to provoke the viewer into thinking about these oral, unwritten histories of the Warlis. The sheer contrasting of what is accepted historical evidence with subaltern history brings home the story of the suppression of some histories and the privileging of others. The
notion of testimony itself is subverted in the film, by this juxtaposing of conflicting evidence. The Warli’s stories can be seen as testimonies which have withstood the onslaught of several ‘outsiders’—like the Marathas, the Portuguese, the English and their oppressive histories. The stories can be seen as personal testimonies about the stories of their oppression. And furthermore, the stories reveal glimpses of local wisdom and socio-cultural nuances of the Warli tribe much more than any ethnographic study might reveal.

The archival material or the official evidence in Kahankar: Ahankar, is testimony subverted by conflict, but the irony is subtle and not as aggressive as in Something Like a War and A Narmada Diary. In all three films, multiple narratives are at work and so are multiple strategies of persuasion. However, Kahankar: Ahankar operates at a more subtle level, nudging the viewer towards critiquing history, and recognize the ‘wise’ voices from the grassroots. Something Like a War and A Narmada Diary are hard-hitting statements against the propaganda of the state. Their agenda to critique state policy is very direct and employs aggressive strategies of irony and caricature. In their attempts to subvert the propaganda of the state, the films constantly show excerpts from state-sponsored propaganda and then go on to subvert their value as evidence.

Montages from newspapers, magazines and committee reports are also a commonly used ‘expert’ testimony. Almost all the films chosen for the study use headlines from newspapers to varying extents, to present ‘facts’. Shots of newspapers carrying references to a particular struggle or more elaborately (like in When Women Unite or Lesser Humans), where these reports play a more central role in the struggle. In When Women Unite, which is a docu-drama, the documentary part is fortified by the use of testimony, to argue the case being built by the drama. Lesser Humans uses various
reports by various governments down the years to make a statement about the inhuman practice of scavenging and the apathy of the state towards this section of its citizens. In one of the most powerful sequences in the film, realism and testimony (subverted) is used to bring out the horror of human scavenging and the mockery of state action against it. The inter-cutting between a bhangi woman cleaning a row of latrines and the chronological sequence of the utterances of the state are juxtaposed.

The sequence begins with the woman, cleaning a dry latrine with her nose covered, asking the filmmaker 'why have you come here?', a telling statement about the intrusive and unwanted presence of the filmmaker, deliberately retained in the film to problematize the filmmaker's location vis a vis the bhangis and the audience. As she cleans one latrine, very explicitly shown, the first official action of the government of independent India is revealed.

In 1947 on the 15th of October, a bill was introduced in parliament. In 1949, a central committee recommended the abolishing of human scavenging. In 1957, another committee recommended that the practice be abolished, not later than the Third Five-Year plan...and so on. Each piece of information about government inaction is juxtaposed with the visual of the woman cleaning yet another latrine, a very symbolic rejoinder to government policy and a telling statement about the plight of the bhangis, 'Nothing has changed in seven generations' says a bhangi woman, and this sequence is a testimony to this truth. Using the voice-over to sum up this state of neglect, the commentary says that 'after four enquiries, 634 recommendations, 5 bans and one rehabilitation programme, the government has failed to provide a real economic alternative to the bhangis'.
Representation in the documentary, as mentioned before, can be seen as presenting a fact in order to influence opinion. The alternative documentary takes recourse to realism and testimony to present evidence to the viewer. As Bill Nichols asks, the question is not so much whether what is shown is evidence or not? The important question is 'evidence of what'? And as can be seen, all these films offer evidence to reveal an unequal development, which has not improved the lot of certain disenfranchised sections of society. The alternative documentaries chosen for the study seek to articulate, self-avowedly, these marginalized voices.

**Narratives of an unequal development**

They attempt to act, to intervene – whether as gut-level calls to immediate, localized action, or as more cerebral essays in long-term, global analysis. They are all works of art, but they are not merely works of art... if films are to be instrumental in the process of change, they must be made not only about people directly implicated in change, but with and for these people as well (Waugh, 1984:xiii).

Thomas Waugh’s idea of committed documentary can serve as a starting point from which I seek to problematize representation in the alternative films as ‘politically representing a group or class by standing for or in place of them with the right or authority to act on their account’. All the 10 films chosen for this study have as their focus the marginalized sections of Indian society, disadvantaged on account of their caste, class, gender or environmentally unsustainable development practices. These documentaries seek to give voice to the problems, struggles and aspirations of these people. According to Waugh (1984:xiv), committed documentaries adhere to the goal of a ‘radical socio-political transformation’, which would mean challenging the existing, inherited power structures of domination such as caste, gender and class. By challenging
the status quo, these documentaries, explicitly or implicitly, call for an egalitarian society and a transformation of the socio-political and economic milieu.

In all the 10 films, an attempt has been made to articulate an alternative paradigm of development that would redress the shortcomings of the dominant paradigm of development. They highlight the failure of the economics-centered, ahistorical developmental model to improve the lot of those at the end of the developmental chain. Drawing attention to ‘an endless list of those disenfranchised under patriarchal capitalism’ (Waugh, 1984: xiii), Thomas Waugh says that the traditional left movements and the progressive mass movements of the seventies and eighties in the West have focused on the plight of women, minorities, environmental and peace groups, immigrants, the handicapped and homosexual groups as some of those who have been sidelined in the march of progress as envisioned by the western, capitalistic model of development.

The films seek to give voice to the adivasis, rural women, minority slum-dwellers, and the bhangis in India, who are economically, socially and politically some of the most disadvantaged sections of Indian society. In many cases, these people are doubly disadvantaged, suffering from caste, class and gender inequities. A close look at the documentaries will reveal their pre-occupation with the consistent denial of power to certain sections of Indian society.

All the films raise pertinent issues of a lop-sided development, within a historical and philosophical framework. The issues raised bear global and local ramifications for a more holistic and sustainable developmental paradigm. Philosophically rooted in the alternative development paradigm, the films highlight the ideas of empowerment,
sustainable development, local knowledge and participation (as explained in chapter 1). The notion of people as active agents in their path to progress, rather than as objects or victims of oppression is highlighted in the films in varying degrees. The politics of a collective identity over individual action is also an important issue thrown up by the films.

Three of the alternative documentaries in the study are an attempt to give a voice to the adivasis, who have long been denied a voice by mainstream India in general and the media in particular. *A Narmada Diary, Kis Ki Raksha* and *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* deal with the struggle of various adivasi groups across the country against huge developmental undertakings of the state, which would result in the mass displacement of the adivasis and threaten their very existence. Living on the periphery of Indian society and denied access to economic, political and social power, the adivasis have most usually been the hardest hit by the big developmental projects, like dams, power projects and heavy industries, undertaken by the state in the last five decades of independence. Displacement, economic and cultural deprivation are some of the serious consequences of these big developmental projects (Baviskar, 1995). *A Narmada Diary* is the struggle of the adivasis in Gujarat against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam across the Narmada river, *Kis Ki Raksha* is the struggle of the adivasis against the construction of a firing range in Netrahat, Bihar and *Addo Miyad Ulgulan* is the story of an adivasi uprising against the construction of a big dam across the Koel-Karo river in the Chota Nagpur area. These films do not reduce the disenfranchised adivasis to pitiable victims of the flawed policies of the state. Instead, they show the adivasis to be a resilient people, who know of the injustices perpetuated against them and want to fight against them. Shriprakash’s film *Kis*
*Ki Raksha* is a success story about an adivasi struggle against the government's move to convert their land into a firing range in Netrahat, Bihar. The adivasis started a satyagraha movement against their displacement, and eventually won.

My films deal with difficult and terrible times, but the films themselves are not depressing. They are always signs of resistance of people participating. They show what alternatives are there (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

The adivasis in India, as the name suggests, are the original inhabitants of India. They are tribals, spread across the country, with each tribe having a distinct cultural identity. Among the most disadvantaged sections of the Indian society, the adivasis maintain an organic and symbiotic relationship with nature. The duality between nature and the human, so much part of the modern thought does not exist, and their lives and livelihoods are intertwined with their ecology. Today the adivasis struggle for their dignity and identity, under the onslaught of an ahistorical and acultural modernity paradigm, with its emphasis on heavy industries and ecologically unsustainable development. And the three films reflect the havoc being played out in their lives at every level be it economic, cultural or emotional. The films show how their very identity and existence becomes threatened because of displacement. Once displaced, the adivasis are forced to work as menial labourers and are forced to live in slums. As the films show, the adivasis are aware of how important it is for them to retain their identity.

The basic element of a tribe is its organizational structure. Once that structure is removed, the countdown for their exile begins. Being organically linked with their land and forests, if they are disturbed, they become like fish out of water. Their culture gets disturbed (Bernard Minz of the Jan Sangharsh Samithi in *Ki Raksha*).

After the HEC (Heavy Engineering Corporation), only a few were given jobs. The majority is jobless even today. **Ill-clad,** they pull rickshaws on the streets of Ranchi. Look at the condition of **women** and children, they are rag pickers today. They collect refues of the HEC for a living. The fashionable hotels, motels and lodges...**whom** are they there for? Our tribal girls are sold there. Unemployed tribal girls are lured into the
flesh trade. If we are displaced, we too will end up in the flesh trade (adivasi woman in *Addo Miyad Ulgulan*).

The question of ‘development for whom?’ is being asked by several scholars in the field. Are the adivasis treated as ‘citizens’ in the true sense of the term, or are they only called upon to make 'sacrifices' for the nation? The denial of rights to the adivasis is addressed by them in the films.

Can they [the government] explain why some gain so much and we lose? Is the state blind? Why didn't they ask us, adivasis? We too have a right. We live here. The government is in the cities. We have protected this land for generations. The Satpura range, the forests belong to our fore-fathers. Why should we leave? Don't we have the right to live? (adivasi woman in *A Narmada Diary*)

These multitude of voices from the adivasis reveals a history of their synergy with nature, and also a history of oppression spanning several generations. And they know of their marginalization by mainstream India and their victimization in the name of development. All the interviews in the films show that the adivasis are not an ignorant lot who are unaware of the oppression to which they are being subjected.

In democracy, citizens are supposed to be rulers. For our development, so much destruction is done. But the irony is that we don't get any benefits, nor is it real progress...Till now we have been supporting this due to our patriotic feelings. Now it has started questioning our own existence, hence we are forced to stop this (Madho Bhagat of Dharti Raksha Vahini in *Kis Ki Raksha*).

In a way starkly different from the above-mentioned films, *Kahankar: Ahankar* is a film about the Warlis, an adivasi community in Maharashtra. It is not a struggle-based film, rooted in a specific mass movement. However, *Kahankar: Ahankar (Storymaker:Storytaker)* is a film in which the Warlis speak through their stories, through their paintings, through the conflicting ‘official’ versions of their history by the outsider, and through the philosophy of the filmmakers. The opinion that the history of colonial
India has been based on the **official** British records because of the inaccessibility to other non-official versions is not considered tenable by post-colonial historians. The prevalent view is that non-official sources are available in abundance and easily **accessible**, but these sources need to be recognized as '**legitimate**' by official history. **Kahankar:Ahankar** is an attempt to do just that.

Proposing the notion of multiple histories, rather than a monolithic history, the **film** presents the Warli stories as a testimony of their knowledge and wisdom, and their version of what, why and how things were in the past and are in the present. The film attempts to critique the outsider's stories about the Warlis and ‘to read between the lines, as the stories themselves do’, as the film proposes in the beginning.

The film begins with Kahankar and Ahankar going deep into the forest, and getting deeply immersed in their stories, and the stories unfold. At the end of the film, their wives go looking for them and eventually find their bones. Now who was Kahankar and who was Ahankar? The village head asks for their bones to be immersed in water. The bones of Kahankar, the **storymaker** who gave, were light and floated up. The bones of Ahankar, the storytaker who took, were heavy and sank to the bottom. The ending of the film is very powerful and raises several questions of appropriation and exploitation.

The Marathas, the **Portuguese**, the British and the native settlers, all encroached on the lives and spaces of the Warlis, and obliterated their stories and wisdom. And the stories reveal this. With reference to one of the Warli stories, The Rat', Anjali **Monteiro** acknowledges that they (the filmmakers) are rats with a camera too, trying to appropriate the Warli stories and paintings for their own use, and this responsibility cannot be abdicated. Like the male rat in the story conquers the adivasi woman, the outsider-
colonizer colonizes the Warlis, and the privileged filmmaker and audiences constitute them as 'objects of enquiry, objects of curiosity', according to Jayasankar.

The context in which the film was made was that we got the stories and the paintings about the Warlis and we thought about the process, why are we making this film about them and for whom? We wanted to violate this classical ethnographic enterprise of making films about them for us... How do we do this? Why do we want to bring these stories of these Warlis, at the end of the day you say ‘how cute’, 'how fantastic', ‘how profound’, and then you go away. So we thought we will make a film about us as well. Or looking at the interface of what we are and what they are...it kind of occupies the uneasy space between these. It is neither kahankar nor ahankar...If you looked at the film, what we have constructed is first of all this relationship or the space between them and us. And towards the end we have also looked at the relationships of power that exist among that society itself. Looking at the gender relations of power...To the west, we are also stories. The Indian people. We are stories. But we have stories about these people, and they have stories about us, about themselves as well. One is looking at this inverted pyramid of relationships of power...(Jayasankar.K.P, filmmaker, personal interview).

While challenging the notion of a history, the film also tackles one of the most relevant issues in social sciences theory, that of knowledge. Wignaraja (1989) says that modern knowledge ‘distorts and is exclusive, and hence undemocratic', and it is indigenous knowledge systems that help to conceptualize culture-specific and alternative paradigms of development. The Warlis' stories reveal a wealth of local knowledge and wisdom, and the Warli is the ‘indigenous intellectual’ who knows. Replete with rich symbolism and humour, the stories unveil local wisdom which include several ideas, assumed to be modern, like feminism, empowerment, and a knowledge of the exploitative practices of the elite. Two of the six stories are described here to exemplify the spirit of the film.

In 'The Rat', the universal euphemism for a traitor, the history of a systemic subjugation of the adivasis is revealed. ’.. .the rat with a thorn in its tail, the rat with the sickle, the rat with the vegetables, the rat with the bullock became the rat with the adivasi's wife', a
telling story of how the outsider with a lack, a deficiency (a thorn), begged for help initially and then pretending to do the adivasis a favour, exploited them and finally ended up owning the adivasi woman. In The Headgear', the Warli man, insensitive to the grueling routine of his wife, realizes his mistake after switching roles with her for a day. The story ends very humourously, when the man ends up using his loin cloth as a headgear, when at dusk, he finally takes lunch for his wife, to the field, after trying to finish all the chores which she normally would finish in half the time!

All the six stories in the film, ‘Mahadev and Ganga Gauri’; The Rat’; ‘Jam, the God of death’; The Headgear’; ‘Thirty-six nakhras’ and ‘Kansari’ are oral histories of the oppression, the culture and society of the Warlis. The local wisdom of the Warlis, with its experiential learning and intuitive insights, is highlighted in the film.

The rapidly deteriorating environment of the earth has emerged as one dominant concern since the 1970s. Global warming, excessive deforestation, an alarming rise in the use of non-biodegradable materials like plastics and the possible extinction of several species of animals are all problems looming large in the minds of peoples across the globe. The notion of a sustainable development came to be articulated since the early 70s, which called for a holistic and eco-friendly paradigm of development, which opposed the modernization project of big and destructive developmental projects like dams, factories etc which resulted in loss of arable land and clean water and air. The films mentioned above deal with the issue of environment as well, while talking about the human rights of the adivasis. Chaliyar investigates the issue of the pollution of the eponymous river in Kerala, due to the effluence from the Grasim factory located on the river bank. Chaliyar talks of the impact of the pollution on the common populace and traces the history of the
people’s movement against the Grasim factory for the last 36 years. The film probes the nexus between the state and the market, whose connivance puts the lives of the common people into danger. The film shows that the incidence of cancer is very high among the people living in the surroundings of the polluted river. The film is a powerful attempt at counter-propaganda for the closure of the factory, and it attempts to achieve this by its heavy dependence on realism.

*Chaliyar* has been used extensively to counter the propaganda of the state and the factory-owner, by focusing on the people’s struggle against the Grasim factory. As in the other documentaries discussed, *Chaliyar* deals with the environmental and human rights aspects of the issue. The film gives voice to a struggle against a very visible and potent manifestation (a big factory) of a flawed developmental model of mindless industrialization.

*Lesser Humans* is about the bhangis in Gujarat, the scavengers, who as late as 1997 (when the film was made), still carried human excreta on the heads, from dry latrines. Ela Bhat, a social activist, says in the film that The bhangis are the poorest of the poor. They are the slaves of the slaves.’

In *Lesser Humans*, I was very angry. I was feeling very helpless. And I tried to retain that anger and helplessness for the film for one year... Because these people had been in the margins for a very long time, I was so sure that I would not frame the people, the community in long shots. I decided that in my film, they would be in close-ups. For two reasons, one, I am giving them that space, that tight space to talk and two when you are in close-up, it is difficult to avoid, for an audience. You have to listen to them. The agenda for me is I am going to show you what is happening, you have come to see my film for one hour and you better sit and see what is happening. That agenda was there, that frustration was there, that emphasis was there (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

Stalin, the director of *Lesser Humans* explains his rationale behind making the film and including several close-up shots of human excreta and the bhangis at work,
cleaning the latrines. The visuals shock and repulse, and shake the viewer out of any complacency. The extreme close-ups do not allow for any distraction outside the frame, and forces the viewer to confront the ugly reality of the bhangi’s profession. During the screenings, the focus groups cringed with repulsion, and kept trying to look away from the television monitor, only to glance back to find similar visuals. So, by constantly throwing the horrific visuals, in tight frame, at the viewer the film tries to collapse the distance between the audience and the offensive profession of the bhangis. ‘I would be sad if it has ceased to shock. Because that was not the intention. The intention was to keep the shock on till the end’, says filmmaker Stalin. And most of the responses of the members of the three focus groups who were shown the film coincide with what Stalin set out to do.

It really hits the audience very hard. They could not just watch some parts of it. At some particular shots, people just turned away their faces. It was very effective. This brings home the reality, that when we can’t even see the bhangis doing their job in a film, imagine them actually doing it (Darshana, participatory video-maker, responding to Lesser Humans).

The three focus groups who saw this film, the social work students, the women empowered for self-representation, and the students of development communication, respond with shock and disgust at the plight of the bhangis, except for one respondent who called the film ‘manipulation’. But the shock-value that the filmmaker wanted to retain throughout the film seems to have worked with the audiences.

When the film first shows it, I could not even see it. I would avert my eyes. But the film forces you to see it. I think it forces you to think that if you cannot even see it, imagine how they must feel doing it...this film dares to go very close (Vinaya, student of communication, responding to Lesser Humans).

This work is very inhuman and the film conveys this very effectively. It is such a dirty work that we can’t even see it in a film. After seeing it once or twice we are
shocked...this is the primary aim of the film according to me (Manimala, student of social work, responding to *Lesser Humans*).

The film identifies caste as the main reason behind the systematic and generational oppression of the bhangis. In an incisive insight into how entrenched the notion of caste is, the film has an interview with an upper-caste woman who states very categorically that 'Each does what is assigned to them—the shepherd, the carpenter, the Bhangi. Each one must be proud of their status'. A statement that is as cruel as the profession itself, the film seems to say. Statements in the film like/They want us to remain bhangis and never come improve', 'Our kids must do it next' show that the bhangis are aware of this caste-based cruelty. The film shows that the spectre of untouchability on a large and systemic scale haunts them everyday. The bhangis are treated as untouchables even by other scheduled castes.

The film highlights the duality of caste and gender oppression to make a case for the bhangi women as doubly oppressed and doubly silenced. They are dalits and thus marginalized socio- economically and culturally, and being women are subject to gender-based inequities and subordination.

A bhangi man in the film says of his wife ‘She refused to do the work. I called up her brother and he put things straight for her...God knows how she does it, but we have to eat. I live like a king' and the complicity of her brother and husband, two bhangi men, ensured that she did this inhuman work. The woman says 'I hated it, but got used to it anyway. We clean kids, men smoke beedis and roam around'.

*Lesser Humans* is a hard-hitting film about the sordid reality of human scavengers, whose profession is shorn of even basic human dignity. As one respondent put it 'There can be no alternative viewpoint. No human being should do a job like this'.
Challenging the hegemonic notions of gender as an inherited structure of domination is one dominant concern of these films. All the 10 films give space and agency to women, in a world where an increasingly chauvinistic patriarchy tries to assert a supremacy at every level. Especially so for several women filmmakers like Deepa Dhanraj and Shabnam Virmani, whose films *Something Like a War*, *Tu Zinda Hai* and *When Women Unite* address the issue of women’s rights and struggle in its many manifestations.

My work is very linked to the woman question. Not only the issue of human rights, but one step further, about how patriarchy operates and what is the women’s experience…very broadly, very consistently it is ‘women’. Because once you start seeing society through the prism of patriarchy or caste or class, nothing is the same again. You will bring that question into anything you do. It’s like a dye, you will be coloured by it…whatever issue I take up, it cannot be de-linked. It will always be foregrounded (Deepa Dhanraj, filmmaker, personal interview).

*Something Like a War* is a powerful voice about state-sponsored violence against women in the name of family planning. Completely denied her right to her body and fertility, the woman in India, more so the socially and economically disadvantaged rural woman, bears the brunt of a ruthless state policy and multinational agencies whose agendas are suspect. In the film, Dr Mehta stands for the dominant rhetoric of the state - 'a small family is a happy family'. His ideology, like that of the state, is instrumental in furthering repressive, anti-women policies. And the film shows all this very starkly. Alongside this narrative, is an interaction between rural women and the filmmaker, where issues of female sexuality and reproductive rights are discussed at length, interspersed with a lot of humour. The contrast between the rural women ‘extremely vocal and who know what they want’ (Uma, Feminist, focus group), and similar women in the camps who are just statistics in a family planning camp, works very well for the viewer.
Shabnam Virmani (2001) writes of her films as a part and product of the women’s movement in India, and her work as a response to ‘women’s need to articulate, nourish and defend an identity that imbues their lives with meaning’. The underlying belief is that video is a very powerful tool that can expose women to the actions of women struggling elsewhere and contribute in some way to the larger agenda of women’s empowerment and the power of collective action.

For example, a powerful grassroots movement against liquor in Andhra Pradesh, in which women challenged the government, exposed the political economy of liquor, claimed public space in a dramatic and assertive manner and took collective action to deal with domestic violence and poverty. There was an active curiosity amongst women's groups in Gujarat and other Northern states, when they heard about this movement—to know more, to find out how rural women like them could have done such a thing...that was the impulse with which we produced a film on it (Virmani, 2000:7).

The two focus groups who responded to When Women Unite, identified totally with the women in the film, with a complete lack of skepticism or caution. Relating their experiences with the struggle against alcohol, the group of women agricultural workers from Pastapur, as well as the group of welfare workers from Hyderabad, connected with the film very fundamentally with the narrative of the film.

They say a woman is Shakti, the Goddess of strength, but whether divine or not, it is women who have the strength to change and reform society. While attaching the film, we also felt we are apart of the struggle. This documentary must be shown in places where it can bring about a positive change (Meherunissa, welfare worker, responding to When Women Unite).

Shabnam Virmani’s Tu Zinda Hai chronicles the experiences of women activists of Ekta Parishad, a mass-based women's organization in Madhya Pradesh. And both the films frame the women as strong and active agents involved in the process of their empowerment. The films are participatory in that they are rooted in the local, specific
organizations that deal directly with the women of the area. These films have been distributed widely to various women's groups and NGOs across the country.

For Madhushree Dutta however, the ‘woman’ question is not always central to her film. Her emphasis is also on rejecting the idea of people as victims, similar to thinking in the new social movements that people are not passive onlookers or victims, but active agents in creating spaces for themselves.

Basically, I am a filmmaker. I am not bound to make a particular kind of film. While / Live in Behrampada is what I call a war film, my next film Memories of Fear is about growing up as a girl. It is a docu-drama. The next film I have planned is about a 12th century saint in Karnataka called Mahadevi Akka. I make films on anything which interests me. It need not have to be a film on women or violence. In / live in Behrampada, 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 (Madhushree Dutta, filmmaker, personal interview).

Her film / Live in Behrampada is a film about a Muslim slum in Mumbai. The film gives voice to the residents of a much-maligned slum in Mumbai, Behrampada. The opening sequence of the film shows how people talk about it as an evil place and something from which everybody must keep away. The film, which started off as an investigation into the Mumbai communal riots, takes the camera to the people who have been living in Behrampada for the last 50-60 years, and puts forward their experiences and perceptions about the slum. The early settlers talk about how there was initially only marshy land and nothing else, and how they slowly built small huts, and over a period of time it became the colony it is today. Interviews with both the Muslims and Hindus who live there, reveal that though predominantly a Muslim area, there has been a peaceful co-existence between them. If there has been a Hindu paan-shop owner living there for many decades, there is a Muslim who gave up his life trying to save a temple.
I showed this film to a group of graduate college students, who were members of a right-wing, pro-Hindu students’ organization. The group also included one Muslim member. All the responses from the focus group show that the group saw the film as a commendable effort which exposed the nexus between politicians and businessmen. Many members of the group did not see the issue as a communal problem, and they all insisted that without the interference of the politicians, Hindus and Muslims would live together in peace. However, one student said that it is the lack of trust between the Muslims and Hindus which the politicians seek to exploit.

There is a political hand involved. There is no harmony between Hindus and Muslims, that is why anybody can come and light a fire between them, and then there is fighting. The main thing is that no one believes in the other (Srinivas, right-wing student, responding to I Live in Behrampada).

Hindus and Muslims live together peacefully, but everyone talks as if Hindus keep killing Muslims and Muslims keep killing Hindus. There is nothing to it. Only big businessmen and industrialists are getting together and doing this, so that they can get the slum removed and build huge offices or a five-star hotel... The communal reasons are simply created, land is the real issue... Also it is the maulanas and the pundits who brainwash people, they must be stopped (Anwar, right-wing student, responding to I Live in Behrampada).

The 10 films in my study seek to address the neglect and repression faced by several disenfranchised groups, who have remained at the margin of India's development initiatives. The underlying factors of caste, religion, class and gender, which have systematically subjugated these people have been explored in each of these films. The hegemonic power of the state-market polarity that actively contributes to their non-development are laid bare in the films. The fact that after more than five decades of independence, some people are denied even basic human dignity, and basic necessities in life is reason enough to take technology and media for them to articulate their voices.
Their identities are being effaced by denying them space and a voice in this saturated world of cliched images streaming from cinema-halls and television.

It is important to understand these films as **bottom-up** efforts in development communication, but to also critique several issues like self-representation, objectivity and reflexivity if their agenda of persuasion should be effective. The ethics of representation in these films need to be looked at critically, notwithstanding the larger agenda with which they are made. Romanticizing these films or placing them on an **ideological** high horse would defeat the very purpose they wish to serve. The next chapter addresses the question of ethics and aesthetics in the alternative documentaries in India. Reconciling the larger agenda of these films within specific problematics of representation is necessary for a comprehensive critique of the alternative documentary in India.