CHAPTER 6: THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF REPRESENTATION

The question of representation in the alternative documentaries of India throws up some important concerns. This study broadly categorizes these concerns as issues of ethics and issues of aesthetics. Any examination of the ethics in representation would need to address several issues like representation of the ‘other’, self-representation, location of the filmmaker, and the question of reflexivity in the alternative documentaries. The issue of aesthetics in the alternative documentary is related to reconciling form and content, which, in turn, manifests itself as the filmmaker/film-activist dichotomy. These concerns are explored in the study through the responses of the filmmakers and audiences.

Representing the ‘other’

The questions pertaining to the ethics of representation arise from looking at the alternative documentary as politically representing the marginalized sections of Indian society, with the right or authority to act on their behalf, as discussed earlier. By assuming the mantle of a spokesperson for the disadvantaged, the alternative documentary in India comes under a critical scrutiny and needs to clarify its position on the contentious issue of representing the ‘other’.

Representation has been the subject of much inquiry in the fields of literary, political, and cultural theory. Ethnography emerged as a method, which claimed to scientifically observe and record the lives and cultures of ‘primitive’ races. Indigenous and often ‘exotic’ tribes, un-influenced by modern lifestyles, were the focus of ethnographic research. Anthropology, a discipline focused on studying people, was
referred to as the ‘eldest daughter of colonialism’ by Jean Rouch (cited in Jayasankar and Monteiro, 2001), and this implied that exploitation is inherent in the anthropological quest of ‘knowing’ the other. These modes of gathering knowledge about the ‘other’ have come to be critically interrogated over the past few decades (Said, 1978; Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 1989). The notion of the third eye or the objective gaze, which can scientifically observe and document reality, is no longer tenable.

It is in this context that the documentary, whose origins were rooted in its ability to dispassionately and objectively capture ‘reality out there’, came under scrutiny as well. The ethnographic underpinnings of the documentary are very easy to deduce, from the first attempt made by Robert Flaherty to film the Inuit Eskimo in his Nanook of the North. The exotic ‘other’ was filmed for the audiences back home. And this pre-occupation is clearly evident even today, although in the alternative documentaries chosen for the study ‘exotic’ could be substituted with ‘marginalized’. And more often than not, it is this 'other-ness', which complicates the process of representation even more.

The ‘other’ in the alternative documentary manifests itself in a myriad of ways, and in complex forms. The duality between the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ gets reiterated in many ways, be it in the text or at the level of the filmmaker or the audience. Stereotypes are perpetuated in many of the alternative documentaries, as can be seen from the responses of the filmmakers and audiences interviewed for the study. The problems of the filmmakers stem from their efforts to represent reality. In seeking to re-present indexical images from the 'real' world, the filmmaker is caught between not doctoring unpleasant truths about the world for the sake of the film, and not reinforcing stereotypes. The issue
of representing problems in the historical world hangs, therefore, as a double-edged sword over the filmmaker,

**Un-Reifying Spectacular Oppressions**

To give you a very common example, in many of this social awareness advertising, this husband comes and beats up his wife. It is a very spectacular figure, which is like a stereotype. The feeling that it fills in me as an audience is that 'yeah, they do it in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, but I don't, we don't oppress our women or oppress our children'. What I forget is the fact that there are very civilized modes of oppressing our children or your wife. You don't have to get drunk and beat up your wife, but there are very, many subtle ways in which you can do it. But what it tells me is that sense of respectability and honour. I feel good. It insulates me in many ways. It immunizes me in many ways. But if I did point out very subtle modes, then it is threatening...(K.P.Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

The camera is not some kind of a mirror that can bring these spectacular oppressions to light. So I think, the question is one of the politics of representation so to speak, and how is one bringing these so-called spectacular oppressions to people, and is one implicating oneself in the process and is one implicating the kinds of audiences that would be seeing this. Or is it being shown as something that happens somewhere else to some other people and about which we should be very morally indignant about? (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

Many struggle-based documentaries seem to revolve around some ‘spectacular oppressions’. Several of the alternative documentaries examined for this study deal with visible uprisings of the marginalized people against a very visible oppression. Audiences whose life-situations are represented in these films can relate to the portrayal of life, while the middle-class or elite audiences may consider the same situations to be far-fetched and the locales to be as imaginary as those in a feature film.¹²

Bill Nichols writes that just as a feature film creates an imaginary world of fantasy for the viewer, the documentary creates a ‘gaze’ into the historical world (Nichols, 1991). The idea of ‘spectacular oppression’ can be examined in this context. If

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¹² Chapter 7 discusses how different audiences engage with the alternative documentary.
the alternative documentary provides a 'gaze' into a very visible oppression, then the 'privileged' viewer will engage with the film from a position of 'the fly on the wall', not in any way implicating himself or herself in the systemic process of unequal development. The cinematic strategies used in the alternative films that could privilege the elite viewer, are critiqued here.

Cautioning against ‘throwing the baby with the bathwater’, Jayasankar clarifies that such films also must be made as many of these extreme and visible oppressions do exist. But it is important not to reinforce the feeling of other-ness of the oppressed, which the filmmaker or the audience may be lulled into doing. In a discussion on representing the 'other', Jayasankar makes a pertinent observation that the more ‘spectacular’ the oppression being filmed, the more likely that the audiences might not empathize with the oppression. And the more likely it is that the images may be reduced to stereotypes. Many responses, especially from the 'urban' audiences bear out this argument. For instance, a group of computer engineers in the USA, who responded to Patwardhan's *A Narmada Diary*, tended to reinforce and reproduce the ‘otherness’ of the adivasis in the film. Their reading of the adivasis is totally oppositional to the filmmaker's agenda. The adivasi is constructed as an uneducated, emotional and naïve human being. As a victim of state apathy, the adivasi is thought of as incapable of making a rational decision, and so ill-equipped to know what is right for him/her as an individual and for the nation at large.

Even after 50 years of independence, still people are there in India who do not know how to read and write. So they don't understand anything. So they stick to what their instinct says. They are emotional. 'Yeah, I am emotional to my land. It is my right. My forefathers did something and we are just doing what they are doing.' See, it's like almost a blind faith. They just follow because they are not educated. They just don't know what is going on. So it is our government's failure... you just don't go and tell things to people who don't know the *ABCD* of *water...* for himself, he will think only that ‘oh, there is plenty of water for my daily ablutions and washing. Why do we need a
You know they *can’t* think beyond a point. They *can’t* think beyond because their environment itself is small, limited. Maybe to a few people, kilometers maybe. Beyond that they cannot think. So if you encroach in their two kilometers or whatever, they feel 'oh, somebody is coming and grabbing our land.' (Prabhu, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*),

The adivasis are constructed by the computer engineers as passive people, lacking in agency. One respondent even suggests that the resistance to the dam is not a spontaneous movement, but an unthinking following of someone they perceive as a leader.

They are just going on building the dam and the people don't even know what they are doing. These adivasis are uneducated. They don't know what is happening. They are just following one individual, Medha Patkar. Whatever she says is right...

If probably an educated lot were staying in that area... then probably you being educated can weigh the pros and cons and say yes or no. But here you have a set of people who don't even know what is happening there. All they know is how to protect their homes (Suresh, computer engineer, responding to *A Narmada Diary*)

These responses reflect attitudes that may have existed prior to the screening of the documentary, and which the film reiterates for them. The ‘binarisms of colonial discourse like self-other, civilized-native, us-them’ (JanMohamed,1995), are re-articulated by these computer engineers, as an oppositional reading of the text.

K.Stalin’s *Lesser Humans*, which exposes the sordid livelihood of the bhangis, is another example where the otherness emerges sharply, not so much in the way the bhangis look or speak (as is the case with the adivasis), but in the perception of their profession, human scavenging. The shock of watching people actually cleaning human excreta with their bare hands, especially in the close-up shots, not only brings home the cruelty of their profession and their historical oppression, but it also starkly draws the division between 'us' the elite and 'them' the down-trodden. The responses from the focus groups who were shown this film reveal that the status of the filmmaker as the elite
’other’ is also very prominent in the film, and this is something that Stalin, the director of the film acknowledges as well.

The issue was very, very stark...there is no way I could have put myself into the film. There is no way. Because I am not that people. I can only identify with their hurt and emotions and all that. I am an outsider, and I have retained that (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview)

The focus group discussions reveal that opinion is divided about who the target audience is for the alternative documentaries. Some respondents perceive the marginalized ‘other’ as the intended audience, while an almost equal number of them categorically state that the target audience is the elite in India, especially the policy makers and politicians. A third opinion emerges that the films are made for all kinds of audiences, an opinion seconded by the filmmakers too. An example about this difference in perception can be observed from these responses across and within the three groups to whom Lesser Humans was screened – students of social work, participatory video-makers, and students of development communication. They also include the rationale that the respondents provided for their opinion.

Now, this kind of film should be made for them, because something can happen then. A social mutiny can happen, so that it can eradicate the whole thing. But that didn't happen. It was not made for them. It was made for people like us who are educated, not for people who are working like them. They [the bhangis] should know the rationale behind making such a documentary. They should come up with solutions. A revolution can take place here also, if knowledge can be imparted to them about their exploitation. But I think the creamy, educated mass was the target here (Pradeep, student of social work, responding to Lesser Humans).

No point in showing the film to the bhangis. What is the benefit? Show it to others who can help them overcome their difficulties. So that their lives can improve (Leela Ben, participatory video-maker, responding to Lesser Humans).

The film is for those who don’t do this work, and who don’t understand the agony of doing this. And for those who wonder, how can any human being do this dirty work...the bhangis already know their agony. What is the point in making the film for them? (Manimala, student of social work, responding to Lesser Humans).
There is no use showing it to audiences simply. Especially those who live in comfort and have clean sanitary facilities. They will only exclaim ‘how dirty, how dirty... how do these people do such work?’ and no solution will come out of it. This film brings home the reality, that when we can’t even see the bhangis doing their job in a film, imagine them actually doing it. So it is very important to go and show this cassette to the policy-makers again and again. Because the people who do this work and the people from whom we want to demand their rights... make them sit together and show this cassette. Then it will be more effective (Darshana, woman engaged in self-representation, responding to Lesser Humans).

These differences in perception persist because audiences are different. The stakes involved are different for different kinds of audiences. So those techniques in the alternative documentary that would serve to implicate a privileged audience, may be unsuccessful in trying to connect with those people about and for whom the film is made. Here, it would suffice to point out that the audience constructs the ‘other’ a propos to itself and the subjects of the alternative documentary. The audience as ‘us’ or ‘them’ depends on who the audience is. While the agricultural workers of Pastapur completely identify with the poor, rural women of the villages of Nellore who launch an anti-arrack movement, the computer engineers in the USA talk of the ‘emotional and uneducated’ adivasi as different from their ‘rational and educated’ selves.

Sociologically, this difference in the construction of the ‘other’ can be seen as ‘an expose of the euro-centric universalism’ which assumes the superiority of what is ‘rational’ West, and the inferiority of the ‘emotional’ East (Barry, 1995).

Caricature in the alternative documentary

Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar (1996) talk of how the alternative documentary envisages a flow of power from centralized and identifiable sources like the state, market, the elite etc, all of which, therefore are cast as the ‘villains’ in the film. These Villains’ oppress the marginalized people, who are constituted as ‘homogenous,
cohesive communities’. The alternative documentaries posit an unambiguous dichotomy between the ‘good (poor) guys’ and the ‘bad (elite) guys’. This simplistic and two-dimensional representation allows for larger-than-life caricatures, not dissimilar to those in feature films. At best, this caricaturing is naive and romanticizes the ‘victims’, and at worst, it would result in the film doing exactly the opposite of what it sets out to do. While the alternative documentary sets out to critique dominant notions of development for the viewer, the caricatures either allow the sympathetic viewer to escape the onus of feeling implicated in this unequal development or provoke the unsympathetic viewer into dismissing the film as a grossly biased, anti-state rhetoric. These two responses from the focus group interviews illustrate this point.

You don’t sympathise with the brutal guy, do you? Here the government is the brutal guy. You don’t sympathise with the government. I will never, ever give even one handful of my land to the government, because they are the worst guys (Suresh, computer engineer, responding to A Narmada Diary).

It is an elitist film. The film tries to show that there is this group of people called the bhangis, who do this work. And then there is some government bashing. That is it (Ravi, FG3, responding to Lesser Humans).

The lack of complexity in representation in the alternative documentaries chosen for the study needs to be interrogated. With the exception of Kahankar: Ahankar, all the other films resort to painting the issue black-or-white, in varying degrees. Tu Zinda Hai and When Women Unite are ‘feel-good’ success stories of rural women, who fight the tag of victim and fight for their rights, and filmmaker Shabnam Virmani acknowledges this.

There are complexities, there are problems. Definitely our films have been consciously feel-good, keeping the end-use in mind. But this can be critiqued. I think I myself am beginning to critique this view. I want to make films that make you feel good without necessarily ignoring the uncomfortable questions. I feel a need to take the rose-tinted spectacles off without wanting to be grim and only focusing on the negative. I always
focus on the positive because no matter how poor or exploited or oppressed a person is, that person survives with all kinds of resistance, all kinds of expressions that are positive and affirming (Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, personal interview).

The lack of complexity manifests in different ways in A Narmada Diary, where the adivasis come across as a homogenous, simple group of like-minded people. There is absolutely no tension in the construction of the adivasis or any hint that there exists any other opinion amongst them about the dam. And it is the same in Shriprakash's films, Addo Miyad Ulgulan and Kis Ki Raksha, where the adivasis come across as stereotypical, ‘good’ victims who are trying to battle their oppressors. Edward Said (1978) writes of how the ‘other’ is represented as a homogenous mass, rather than as individuals, which reinforces their difference from 'us'. In Something Like A War, this kind of homogenizing of the rural women is problematized by one of the focus group respondents.

All the women in the group had problems with contraception, all of them. I am not saying it should be an objective film or that both sides of the picture must be presented. But there should be an argument. What I am saying is that the sampling is such that all the women sitting around were saying how contraceptives were terrible, etc...but there is not a single woman who says 'no, I have not had a problem' (Sharmila, feminist, responding to Something Like a War).

Also, in Something Like a War, the difference between the rural women being filmed and the urban women interviewed gets reiterated in the text going by the way the women are differently framed. The way the camera shoots middle class, educated women, who are also victims of a cruel population-control policy, and how it frames poor, rural women who are victims of the same thing, erects the difference between the ‘us’ and ‘them’ quite easily. The urban, empowered women are framed individually or with their husbands, in a conventional mid-close up shot, with the right amount of headroom. The interviews are non-intrusive and the maintain requisite distance
and respect for the speaking **subject**. But the rural, poor women are captured either through candid camera or in group shots (like that of the Lambadas). Many times the camera invades the private ‘**space**’ of the poor women, even showing irrelevant shots like calloused feet, and intrusive shots like the women vomiting. Whereas, the **middle-class** woman would only ‘**say**’ in her interview that nausea was one side effect. It seems inconceivable that she would let the filmmaker show vomiting in the film,

The power dynamics inherent in the politics of framing are revealed. The question to be asked is whether the elite would ‘**allow**’ themselves and their problems to be represented on film, in the same way in which the filmmaker shoots the marginalized people, with or without their consent. Several other sequences in *Something Like a War* provoke this question. For instance, the shot of the sari of a poor woman being taken off her body in the family planning camp by a male medical assistant in the middle of a room full of people, is shown **explicitly**. The scene effectively conveys the de-humanizing indignities the poor women are subjected to in the family planning camps. But it also remains that the only reason the filmmaker has been able to shoot the scene so explicitly, and obviously without the permission of the woman, is for precisely the same reason, that the woman is poor, and helpless and cannot object to being represented that way. One of the respondents in fact, read a very different, positive meaning into this scene.

The emotional appeal of the film is very useful. In fact, in some scenes, like where the woman’s sari is taken off and she is led inside, is somewhat similar to a rape scene in a popular Hindi **film**, maybe that kind of analogy is deliberately introduced for audiences like this [management professionals and policy makers] (Rekha, feminist, responding to *Something Like a War*)

But the question of consent that I seek to raise is not so much why the filmmaker put in the scene or whether it worked for the audiences. Did that woman have
a choice to allow, or not allow, herself to be represented like that in the film? Does the filmmaker also, like the state, end up depicting the woman as a poor, nameless, faceless human being? I suggest that this aspect of representation in the alternative documentary needs to be addressed in future research, taking into account how the marginalized feel about being represented in a certain way. Films like *Lesser Humans, Chaliyar,* and *A Narmada Diary* too reveal some intrusive sequences, dubious in the means used in the films (representation) to justify their end (which might be effective persuasion).

In contrast, the films by Shabnam Virmani reveal a more ‘democratic framing’\(^\text{13}\), where an IAS officer and an illiterate, rural woman are both framed with equal care and deliberation. In terms of lighting, headroom, and camera shot, the space for the marginalized people is very well-defined in the film, and when they speak, the viewer is not distracted by anything else in the frame. It is not to suggest that Virmani does not provide the context within which these people survive. Technically and visually, however, her frames do not reproduce the socio-economic hierarchy of the different players in the films.

In all the documentaries screened for the focus groups, one very distinct ‘villain’ emerges in the form of the state, and occasionally the market or figures of authority (like the husband, the liquor baron, etc) responsible for the oppression. ‘I am constantly looking for heroes and heroines, while editing a documentary’, says filmmaker Stalin. That the filmmaker will choose the more articulate and expressive among the adivasis or the bhangis or the slum dwellers is an almost filmic inevitability. All editing is a process of putting together one hour of film from several hours of actual footage shot, and it is the

\(^{13}\) A discussion with Dr.Vinod Pavarala influenced this analysis of Shabnam Virmani’s films.
filmmaker who is responsible for the finished product. However, in the context of the politics of representation and within the context of the anti-establishment agenda of the filmmakers, the construction of the villainous ‘other’ assumes great importance. The audiences’ perceptions of these ‘villians’ reveal very fundamental ways in which the audiences engage in implicating themselves vis a vis the film.

The members of all the nine focus groups in this study denounce the state as the chief perpetrator of oppression against the disenfranchised people who are the focus of these films. The anti-state sentiment itself does not come as a surprise because traditionally, it is the state that is considered as the mainstay of all hegemony perpetuated in society. Bella Mody (1991) asserts that it is those in power ‘who have access to and use repressive state apparatus’ like the police, legal system, educational institutions and media, to co-opt the people into maintaining the status quo. However, the glib responses of the focus groups while voicing their anti-state rhetoric need to be looked into closely, as this could be directly related to the issue of representation in these films.

Some of the anti-state rhetoric by the focus groups are given below to bring home the point that the audiences see the state as the all-powerful oppressor.

Like they showed in the film, the government invited the Birlas to set up the plant. For the government, the profit comes first, and the people last. We can accept that pollution is a part and part of industrialization, but the apathy of the government towards its citizens is appalling. They must provide safety measures. As usual, the government is hand-in-glove with the businessmen, what else will happen? The people get looted in the process.

(responses by environmental scientists to Chaliyar)

We even had a minister who didn't even know what he was doing. He is the minister for environment. You ask him the conversion of a hectare he wouldn't even know that. As they show, India is being governed by some stupid politicians. Our government has failed completely. Even after 50 years of independence, still people are there in India who don't know how to read and write.
What about our politicians, who are making many more thousands of crores. You have like hawala, fodder, even a chaddi scam is there, right? They are making millions out of it. They have no right to even talk about development if these things are going to happen.

The government has to attract investors, OK? And they just messed it up. That's what this movie is showing.

(responses by computer engineers to A Narmada Diary)

I think all this is the work of political parties to keep their vote-bank. They are creating all the unrest. It is not a Hindu-Muslim problem.

Politicians and builders create arson like bomb-blasts to clear the slum. They want to acquire the land to build hotels and industries.

(responses from the right-wing students to I Live in Behrampada)

Foucault (1977) critiques this notion of the ‘panoptic’ state as the omni-present, omni-potent and monolithic center of power. The state ‘maintains surveillance, not by physical force or intimidation, but by the power of its discursive practices, which circulates through the body politic’. Power operates through multiple discourses and multi-tiered power relations in the family, school, or workplace (Barry, 1995:175). This critique needs to be incorporated into the alternative documentary, if it's agenda includes the un-masking of the mechanisms of oppression.

While the state is often the sole Villain' like in Kis Ki Raksha and Addo Miyad Ulgulan, sometimes it has an institutionalized accomplice in the form of industrialists, police, the fourth estate, the family, men or even the World Bank. Correspondingly, the perception of the 'guilty' other by the audiences is different. To drive home a point about the 'callous rich' or 'insensitive elite', some of the films construct larger-than-life 'villains', besides the state, who come across as ruthless oppressors. Some glaring examples of such caricatures are provided below.

In A Narmada Diary, the World Bank president, (who had refused to meet a delegation of the adivasis earlier in the day), is shown to be attending a fashion show in a
five-star hotel. The camera follows him there, and tries to force an entry into the hotel, despite protests from the staff. While understandably the World Bank chief is a figurehead of the oppressive establishment, the film coerces the viewer into believing that attending a fashion show amounts to callousness! The filmmaker forces a huge drama onto the audience in the process. In the words of Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar (1996), the filmmaker tries to play an ‘intrepid detective’ who exposes the machinations of oppression to an unknowing public. Testifying to the presence of the filmmaker at a hostile scene, this sequence tries to hoist onto the viewer a truth-claim, coupled with a feeling of urgency.

However, in an interesting mix of preferred and oppositional readings by the audience, the group of computer engineers in the USA, who responded to this film, read this sequence in an interesting way. The exchange from the focus group discussion is reproduced below to illustrate this point.

Phani: Who the hell cares about what Preston [World Bank president] does in his personal, private time? (laughs)
Ravi: It was included because he did not give these people an audience...
Phani: Is it worthwhile, what they went for, for him to take a decision? He did come for an independent survey, to see if it is worthwhile. You can read it. He didn’t want to invest ok? Maybe he already had prejudice, ok? He had enough evidence to make his decision.
Ravi: But your question is why shoot Preston?
Phani: He got enough data to take his decision. Do you expect him to sit down and listen to these people say, in their language, how they grew up in this land?
Sashi: You mean, the film tried to show Preston in a bad light, when he is just a businessman kind of a thing?
Suresh: It shows that Preston has no feelings for these people. Let him go for a fashion show or a drink, but for him it is a job, for them it is life.
Bharath: The film puts in flashes of emotion that takes away credibility. Like the Preston case.
Phani: Mark Antony, exaggerator! Visual gimmicks like this dilute the film.14

14 How responses are related to an affinity among certain kinds of audiences to rational argumentation, is discussed in Chapter 7.
In the same film, there is a sequence in which a rich **industrialist** waxes eloquent about the benefits of migration. Sarcasm, which abounds in the film, is used to **illustrate** the fact that this rich person, sitting outside his palatial bungalow, is impervious to the oppression faced by the adivasis, and is insensitive to their eviction from the land of their birth. This man is yet another instance of a caricature being used to make a point, rather simplistically. While condemning the man, the audiences could fail to see that his lifestyle was probably like theirs, or if they identify with the caricature, it could also be counter-productive in that the audiences may see the film as condemning them too and reject the evidence.

In an analysis of how counter-productive caricatures could prove, filmmaker Jayasankar says that when a filmmaker shows a government person, representing the state, the preferred reading becomes very clear. The film tries to show ‘**what** kind of a lie he is, which is very dangerous’.

The guys who do this, they should not appear as clowns. They are clever beings. That is where the problem lies. They have a very clear agenda. It’s not as if they are just speaking. They are linked to larger forces and it has got a pattern in it. And if you are bringing these guys as caricatures, you are just defeating the very purpose of making that film by saying these are fools in the government. Hence if they are fools, it is easy to fight them. It is not really so. They are very **clever**...I think I would show them as very reasonable beings, and we need a lot of firepower to even attempt any resistance. For example communalism, or one film I saw on peadophiles, the peadophile was dressed like a tribal. There is a kind of a visual representation of dark skin, wearing a **langot**, and with feathers, **and**... and I think precisely that they might be wearing three-piece suits! That’s the most dangerous part of it all (K.P.Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview)

In *Something Like a War*, Dr.Mehta is the larger-than-life villain of the story. Representing all the violence that the state has unleashed on poor, rural women through its family planning camps, he is the epitome of all evil The sinister politics of population
control, in which the reproductive rights of the women are trampled upon, is the central subject of the film. The camera captures the family-planning camps of Dr Mehta, who allows the shooting of the entire procedure, along with a detailed commentary on his work and operations, in the belief that the film would valorize him and his patriotic work, as can be seen from his statements like:

By 1990 March, I have finished 3,13,939 operations. This year, I have done more than 2000 operations...the government has made a rule that not more than 100 operations can be performed in one day...when an experienced person like myself wants to do some more work for the country, his hands are tied. Believe me, more than 150 million couples are already having more than two children... (Dr.Mehta, medical practitioner in Something Like a War),

However, the film subverts this footage of Dr.Mehta’s surgery and commentary by juxtaposing it with visuals of rural women, being herded like cattle into the operation rooms, with their foreheads tagged with numbers. Graphic images of their cracked feet, post-surgery retching, frail, unhealthy bodies suffering from malnutrition, the callous way their saris are taken off in the open in preparation for the surgery, are shown throughout the film. And in the light of these horrific images, even what could be an innocuous remark by the doctor ‘this is called a laproscopic operation for females. And it is called the no-exposure method...because there is no exposure of private parts’ assumes demonic overtones. Among a group of feminists, chosen as one of the focus groups, at least two of them reacted critically to how the film dealt with a complex issue such as reproductive rights and contraception.

May be the film should be shown to gynecologists. One doctor I know told me that she has a grouse against feminist activists. 'Let them come to any government hospital and see how the scene is' she said. She also said that any side effect or pain these poor women may suffer is much less than what three babies in three years can do to them (Sharmila, responding to Something Like a War).
In fact, sometimes I wonder if Dr. Mehta will be seen as a caricature at all. There might be people who actually believe in what he is saying, and think ‘oh, these feminist films. They are always saying things like this. What can the poor doctor do?’ And that the doctor is right and these people are wrong (Uma, responding to *Something Like a War*).

This criticism of *Something Like a War* is specifically in the context of the larger-than-life caricatures that detract from the credibility of the film. But, filmmaker Deepa Dhanraj, while talking about *Something Like a War*, says that the film was intended to create an outrage and to embarrass certain state agencies. The agenda was very clear — the target approach must *stop*. Asserting that her work is rooted in the cinematic tradition of Films Division, her films employ the same ‘persuasion tactics’ for a different agenda. ‘The attitude to bully, browbeat and push the audiences into an area is very much the same’.

**The filmmaker in the alternative documentary**

I don't think we confront our class origins, I don't think we confront our location, I don't think we confront our funding or the politics of distribution (Deepa Dhanraj, filmmaker, personal interview).

For filmmaker Shriprakash ‘who is making the film?’ is a pertinent question. The country, society and family decide the identity of the filmmaker, and so for him the alternative documentaries should seek to question this identity. The *urban-rural* divide, the simplest of dichotomies, is inherent in his argument. The geographical location and *socio-economic* background of the filmmaker would influence how and why, and for whom the film is being made. Elaborating on this issue, Shriprakash suggests that, for example, urban filmmakers would want the adivasis to say what the filmmaker wants. And the culture of the adivasis, which has been denied for years because of the caste system, is now commodified because of these films. The adivasis now demand money to
be interviewed, and their oppression continues in another form. He is categorical about the motives of city-based filmmakers.

They need to make films. Theirs is a compulsion of money and their profession. They don’t listen (Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview).

This argument can be related to the thoughts of Chuck Kleinhaus (cited in Waugh, 1984). He calls for a sustained examination of the taken-for-granted ideas and behavior of filmmakers, if at all their work is to become genuinely liberating. He talks of examining the filmmaker's position - on the personal, political, historical and social fronts. In an upfront critique of the filmmakers, Kleinhaus says that most documentary makers are intellectuals who belong to a specific class, who are concerned with the production and dissemination of ideas, analyses, images and information. And that mostly, their work consisted of manipulating information, without any regard for the larger context. More importantly, they do not reflect enough on whose interests are really served by what they do. Shriprakash seems to echo this view when he who says that in order to make an honest film, urban filmmakers must ‘de-class’ themselves and go to shoot the film without a pre-conceived agenda.

Elaborating on the importance of making the film on, with, and by the people engaged in a struggle, Thomas Waugh introduces another crucial element into his definition of a committed documentary. And that is the rooting of these films within an ongoing, active political struggle. He calls this a subject-centered or contextual ideal. This would be one way of not talking from ‘the balcony’ but instead working among the subjects involved (Waugh, 1984). Shriprakash’s argument and the urban-rural polarity could be problematized within this argument.
Plugging the films into an active movement or struggle will give them a context at the micro-level and also serves as the means to horizontally link similar struggles, bringing in a global dimension to the intervention. In line with this premise, Shabnam Virmani acknowledges that using the films as a platform for lateral communication, between one oppressed group and another oppressed group, is an attempt to efface the authorial identity as much as possible. Though the film is made by her, in the ultimate analysis, the fact that the script is finalized with the participation of the women's group, helps to take it beyond her own, individual point of view.

We have started off being extremely uncomfortable with this paradigm of documentary filmmaking. Uncomfortable because it is an exploitative process. It is a one-way process where you go in, you use people's knowledge, ideas and experiences to make your films, which serve, which reap great rewards for you personally... We are the privileged. At best there is a sincere attempt to identify, relate, express and connect with the reality of people different from ours. So I am to express it with, portray it with a certain amount of honesty. Beyond that it is flawed. It is ridden with politics (Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, personal interview).

Reiterating the view that the filmmakers are the 'guilty privileged', Anand Patwardhan counters Shriprakash's idea that urban filmmakers must 'de-class' themselves.

The filmmaker should be honest about where he comes from and make a film with all humility. I don't believe I can pretend to be a working class person or even if I stay with them for a month or two months or one year or five years, I still don't change my class. I still have all the privileges that I was born with or that I have access to. So there is no use pretending that that's not the case. Then, in fact, I use my privileges to contribute as much as I can (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

Making a case for free will, Patwardhan asserts that it is as true that one can change allegiances, irrespective of the class or caste one is born into. 'Life is not so deterministic that this change of allegiance is not possible at all'.
Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar address the heart of the criticism levied against the filmmaker as the alternative ‘fly on the wall’ who documents the happenings in the real world. They reiterate that this positioning of the filmmaker is indicative of a two-dimensional relationship of power where A is exploiting B, and the filmmaker is looking at and documenting this relationship of exploitation. Oppression gets reified as a very visible and easily discernable phenomenon and stereotypes get perpetuated. In a comment on the role that documentary-makers seem to assume, Jayasankar says that the moral high ground, as well as the complacency that cloaks the struggle-based documentary, needs to be challenged.

As a filmmaker, I am residing in this comforting metaphor of somebody who is investigating, exposing these relations of power. I am not part of the drama. I am always in the wings, watching this unfolding of this drama (K.P. Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

Cautioning against self-righteousness, Jayasankar says that a little bit of humility and self-critique should show in the film. This self-critique would need to address the fact that the filmmaker too is ‘part of a larger relations of power’.

We are not outside it in any case. We are not to say, that ‘look here is this oppression taking place’. We are also part of that oppression in some ways. And it is not that one position, not one subject position that I have, I may have several subject positions... there are various modes in which I either collaborate, repeal or take stance vis-a-vis that relation, which is probably the sum total of that film (K.P. Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

The filmmakers interviewed for the study believe that it is more important that the text contains these self-reflexive elements, rather than some of the films in which the filmmaker locates himself or herself physically in the film, either in the beginning or in the end, and pleads guilty to being the outsider. This trend called ‘filmmaker in the film’ is tantamount to saying, ‘by this confession, we are now absolved of the onus of being the
outsiders’. This is no indication of the reflexivity in the film, and is more like a trick, passing off as self-reflexivity.

Bill Nichols (1991) talks of reflexivity as having two dimensions - formal and political. The formal manifestations of reflexivity could be ‘a reference to the off-screen space of an image or an acknowledgement of the filmmaker’s presence and power’. These formal elements of reflexivity could draw the viewers’ attention by distorting standard norms and conventions. The political reflexivity would draw the attention of the viewer to the ‘relations of power and hierarchy, between the text and the world’. Political reflexivity operates on a viewer’s consciousness, and can be achieved by formal reflexivity also. This depends on the effects it has on a particular viewer or audience. Formal reflexivity can be achieved thorough various means like irony, parody and satire. Almost all the films attempt to unmask the lies of the state by showing state propaganda. Be it clips from the state-run television or excerpts from the Constitution or statements by political leaders, satire or irony is used extensively to forcefully argue about the failure of the state in A Narmada Diary, Something Like a War, Kahankar:Ahankar, Lesser Humans, and When Women Unite. These films do not comment directly on the lies of the state, but highlight the failure of the state by juxtaposing state propaganda with the voices of the marginalized. This juxtaposition creates a tension, and through the use of irony, argues the case. These are some examples of formal reflexive strategies employed by filmmakers in the alternative documentaries.

By revealing himself or herself on camera, with all the resulting implications caused by this presence, political reflexivity is attempted in these films. Especially in some sequences in Lesser Humans, a film that captures the inhuman activity of human
scavenging, the hostile presence of filmmaker provokes a tension in the audience. Stalin asserts that he is constantly aware of the power of the camera, and seeks to retain as much of that in the film as possible because, according to him, probably the very power relations the film seek to question, is what is helping make the film. The outsider status of the filmmaker is real when it comes to making a film about the oppressed, and must be retained throughout the film.

The opening sequence of Lesser Humans, a dialogue between a Bhangi woman carrying a basket with human excreta on her hips, covering her nose. She comes from behind a wall. Many pigs loiter around. And there is a close-up of the excreta. The audio track of retching and coughing precede the conversation.

Filmmaker: What are you carrying?
Bhangi: Vada
Filmmaker: Meaning?
Bhangi: Meaning shit, meaning Narak(hell). Can’t you see for yourself?
Filmmaker: Where are taking it?
Bhangi: To throw it.
Filmmaker: Where?
Bhangi: Over there.

The filmmaker is off-screen. The camera follows the walk of the woman, and the questions begin. Very obviously, the woman is reluctant to talk. Her replies and expressions convey anger and hostility towards the filmmaker. The questions of the filmmaker seem to provoke her anger even more. The filmmaker persists with his questions.

Q: Why do you do this work?
Bhangi: For our stomachs. Now go away.
Q: Why?
Bhangi: Don’t make any trouble for me. You have shot enough.
The camera continues to follow the woman for a few seconds, before it moves onto the next shot. Stalin acknowledges that the wishes of the woman were overridden and says that the sequence was retained in the film to reveal the power play that the filmmaker can indulge in, given the power of the camera and a superior socio-economic positioning.

That is another reality of her and of me. What the woman meant was not so much ‘don’t shoot me’, she was more angry. ‘What the hell will you do after you shoot in any case? Several people have come and taken note of what has happened, people just come and give lectures and go away and nothing happens’. But even if she were to say ‘don’t shoot’ without this anger, I would have continued shooting it because the agenda overrode. I could have said ‘ok, sorry I will not shoot you and I will go shoot someone else’. I would have gone to another village and got another compliant woman to shoot. Big difference. I did not want to get into these dialectics. I continued doing it and also I kept it. I could have chosen not to keep that dialogue, but I have kept it to show that the reality is that she will say no and I can continue shooting. As an urban person, I have that power with my media to continue intruding into her life. And for me, I was seeing intrusion, and I wanted this dialogue to come in this film (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

Constantly being aware of and constantly trying to make the audience aware of the multi-layered power relations at play, within the filmed context can be achieved through these various reflexive elements. There can be no one formula to ensure formal or political reflexivity in a film. And the filmmakers seem to be aware of the need for reflexive elements in their films as well as the elusive nature of reflexivity.

**Third World images in the alternative documentary**

'It is all about how the West shows India, only slums, poor, lifeless...' - this was one observation made by Phani, a computer engineer who participated in a focus group discussion, while talking about a documentary he had seen on the NBC. This is another crucial point of interrogation of the alternative documentaries in India, given the focus of these films, the often poor, disenfranchised, struggling sections of Indian society. Battling
the image of India as a country of Maharajas, elephants and snake-charmers, as also the proliferation of the exotic Oriental images of the Kumbh Mela, of naked sadhus with matted hair and tridents in their hands, has been one long standing concern for several years now. So, how then should the images in the alternative documentaries be viewed? Are the films attempts to give visibility and a voice to those marginalized people in India who are conspicuous by their absence on mainstream television and fiction film? Or are these films, which are screened quite extensively in international film festivals and campuses, guilty of perpetuating stereotypical images of an impoverished and under-developed Third World societies? As in the case of most critical issues raised in this study, the responses to this question have been as varied.

Almost every alternative documentary, especially the ones that rely heavily on ‘realism’, looks like the other. The images of the poor adivasi or rural women or the victims of pollution in Kerala look similar. The similarity could lie in the fact that the people mostly share the same class position and a marginalized social background. The seeming similarity could also be because of the fact that Indian society is constituted by very affluent classes, a huge middle-class and an extremely poor class of people. The poverty and living conditions of the poor are so stark, that any image of them in the documentary would typically be a Third World image of suffering.

*Lesser Humans* would perhaps be one stark example, where the visuals used to bring home the horror of human scavenging, would epitomize exactly what the developed world might like to believe of the ‘backward’ Third World. The film repeatedly shows people cleaning dry latrines and very graphically at that. Stalin had this to say about the
problem of perpetuating stereotypical Third World images for consumption by international audiences:

This is one issue where I am, frankly, a little uncomfortable myself. I am very, very aware of the global North-South dialectics. And the dirty politics that the North plays on the South, playing up their oppression and talking about exploitation and human rights violations in the Third World. But given all this, I have gone to the Western audience out of... I was again negotiating. The reality is that if the international human rights organisations take note of this issue, human rights bodies in this country and the government in this country are going to stand up and take notice. The pressure is there. I had two choices. One is not to fall and perpetuate that pressure relationship. And the other is that I compromise on that ideology for the time being, and for the purpose of this particular issue, I say I am going to fall into that pressure, I am going to perpetuate that relationship and yet do that same thing that I am against. I did it. It is not the first time I am doing this compromise. I have done it several other times. And I am not feeling bad. Because there are several positive things that have happened because of that. For example, there is a major funding agency, Swiss Development Corporation, which has now taken on the dalit issue, as a policy issue (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

This issue can also be foregrounded in the fact that 80% of the alternative documentaries produced in India in the last 25 years are on women and environment, according to Deepa Dhanraj. Since most of the funding agencies or NGOs that sponsor these films have international funding, the agendas of these agencies become suspect. Is there any agenda which influence the funding of these films and if yes, what would that be?

‘A lot of these films are going outside the country. What kind of images of India are they bringing to other cultures?’ asks Anjali Monteiro. She suggests that the international funding agencies do seem to be looking for a certain kind of documentaries, with certain kind of images in them. Typically, they would fund films from the Third World, which would talk of and show ‘poverty, exploitation and development’ and her experience has been that films that do not cater to this requirement are sometimes not even taken up for distribution by these agencies. All the filmmakers interviewed for the
study agree that the funding agency dictates the agenda for the film, to varying extents. They acknowledge that the funding agencies concentrate on a particular issue, like AIDS or women's issues maybe, and so will be willing to fund only films made on these issues. This would mean, therefore, that the filmmakers would need to invent ways and means of using the available resources to make the films they want. Filmmaker Omji John opines that the most crucial requirement to make truly independent films is financial independence.

An alternative filmmaker must own his equipment. Only then cinema can be freed. If the capital is with someone else, then the filmmakers have to compromise their objectives (Omji John, filmmaker, personal interview).

Shriprakash is one filmmaker who takes an extreme position on the role of funding agencies. As a filmmaker primarily working with the adivasis in the Jharkhand region, his strident outburst against the NGOs reflects the anger felt by several filmmakers.

These funding agencies corrupt the world, and then actually tell the indigenous people how to live with nature and how to do sustainable development. The most dangerous thing is that these NGOs and funding agencies make a safety valve against anger erupting. There are more NGOs than houses on paper, in some areas in Jharkhand. An NGO is a business in social welfare. Let me tell you an incident. In some adivasi area, people, especially children, died in many numbers because of dysentery of some kind. They rushed to the nearest NGO, which had established itself with huge banners and fanfare. Do you know what they said? Sorry we cannot help you. Our agenda is to create AIDS awareness only! This is what NGOs are. Of course, some NGOs are good. They work. My words to them are, don't teach us. Learn from us (Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview).

Deepa Dhanraj also expresses her reservation about the way some NGOs use the films that they sponsor, and says that mostly the screenings of the films would be a 'post-dinner affair'. Anjali Monteiro suggests that one interesting way to examine the representation of sordid realities on film would be to show the films to those people
whose lives are depicted in the films. In a reference to *Lesser Humans*, she suggests that the film should be screened for the bhangis, and their responses must be analysed. This might help to clarify the dilemma of representing them, to some extent.

I would be interested to know how the bhangis themselves react to the film. I will tell you why. When I first started making films, feeling like there is so much of oppression and one has to expose it. And at that time we were working on slides and I made a slide show on construction. I think it was on contract workers in Ahmedabad. And then we had showed it to another group in Bombay. And they were very angry after seeing it. They said you are rubbing salts in our wounds. We know that this is happening. Then why are you showing this to us? What is your purpose? For the first time I was shaken, you know. I began to think about why am I doing this and for whom am I doing this? (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview)

A similar self-reflexive turn has also come about in Anthropology, where the lives of the ‘other’ are studied and recorded, increasingly with the participation of the people at every stage (Clifford, 1980, JanMohamed, 1995). This came about as a response to the accusation that the anthropologist objectified the ‘other’, by turning an objective gaze onto him/her. So, ethnographers now routinely talk of sharing research results with their respondents and even co-authoring the study with them.

**Examining self representation**

The aforesaid observation by Anjali Monteiro sets the stage for another debate central to the alternative documentary in India, that of self-representation. Just like the politics of representation is beset with troubling questions, so also is the politics of self-representation, which is emerging as a whole new area in social sciences theory. An extensive analysis of the theory and practice of self-representation is beyond the scope of this study. A brief introduction to how video is being used for self-representation is provided here.
Indigenous groups like the Indians in the Amazon (River TV), marginalized women in India (Video-SEWA), rural women of the Deccan Development Society in Andhra Pradesh, poor women in Bangladesh (Banchte Shokha), and the Inuits in Canada, have been using small-format video to represent themselves, their problems and their culture. Video is less alien as a method of self-expression than writing, which requires a language. A user-friendly and fairly inexpensive technology, the video has been successfully used by marginalized groups, especially women, to articulate their thoughts. The political and revolutionary potential of the video has been long established, and is being used now by several indigenous societies as a tool to ensure their survival. Horizontal linkages with similar groups and sympathetic movements are facilitated by the use of video. One of the most significant characteristics of the video is that it erases the need for literacy, which would put ‘illiterate producers on par with their literate counterparts’ (Mody, 1991). While this observation cannot be accepted as a truism in every sense, it does introduce a non-linearity in the process of the use of technology for grassroots development. It does not require, for instance, that only after the marginalized people are as educated as the more privileged people, can they learn to operate the video. This thinking is the basis for participatory communication, which believes that ‘people should speak for themselves’ (Stuart and Bery, 1996). It is an attempt to decentralize the power of the production and dissemination of audio-visual images, and demystify technology for deprived sections of society. Empowerment of the marginalized is also one motive behind participatory communication.

One of the focus groups in the study is members of Video-SEWA in Ahmedabad. Video-SEWA is one of the first and most enduring efforts to get technology into the
hands of the marginalized people and facilitate their turning of the video-eye onto themselves. In the words of Leela Ben, a member of Video-SEWA:

I was a vegetable vendor, and used to sell vegetables from morning to evening at the Manik chowk. The traffic police would trouble us a lot. They took away our things and demanded money. So I joined SEWA, a sanghatan with about 360 people in 1984. We had no resources. We didn't even have electricity. Ela Ben and Martha Stuart, who was from America, said they can train us, even if we were illiterate. They trained us to shoot using video cameras. Many women in SEWA were trained. That's how I became part of Video-SEWA. We made a film on the police atrocities. We had been selling vegetables for the last 20–40 years. And the police and the municipality had been constantly harassing us. They wanted us to stop selling vegetables. But that was our livelihood. So we made the film on all the troubles we were facing. We fought for our rights and even showed the film in court. Then we were given licenses to sell vegetables. From then we have been using video to fight against injustice and problems. We do the entire process ourselves. The shooting, the editing, the replays, the logging...we make the complete film (Leela Ben, participatory video-maker, Video-SEWA)

The group responded to Lesser Humans, a film in which perhaps the question of self-representation would seem most pertinent, given the subject matter of the film. Even in this group of empowered women who used video for self-representation, conflicting opinions emerged to a question by the moderator on the question of self-representation and Lesser Humans. And these differences persist in the responses of the filmmakers too.

We can see in the film, that so many people wanted to say so many things. There was so much anger in them. But I felt, they could respond only to the questions asked by the interviewer. The philosophy of SEWA has been that whatever be the work, if the shooting is done by one of the women among them, then the impact is very good. So I believe that if one of us, who is a little educated, could have been asked to make the film, because we know the work inside out. And so, it is much easier to film it and show how things really are. In that sense, I feel it is better if one of the women made the film, and that it would be more effective. In a film like this you will reply only to what is asked. But actually, there could be something else, something more in your mind, which you want to say. Maybe there is something more about their oppression or situation, which they would like to talk about. But maybe they would not get a chance or opportunity to say it. So maybe if someone from their community had made the film, maybe they would be more sensitive to what really takes place and so it might be a better film (Darshana, participatory video-maker, responding to Lesser Humans)

It is not possible for the bhangis to talk about their work and think about what they are doing. But when they see an outsider shooting a film like this, then they get a chance to...
see the work they are doing. These people who said so much about themselves to the outsiders who made the film, I think if one among them had made the film, it would not have been so effective. Because, those people would have said ‘our lives are like this only. This is what we do always…our routine. Till we die, this is what we are going to do. What is there to show in our lives?’ and the film would reflect this. But when an outsider makes the film, they say our lives are like this and this and this…they say everything with so much anger and passion. If one of their own wants to make a film, they could probably say ‘you already know what our lives are like. Why do you want to take a video of it?’ (Neelam, participatory video-maker, responding to Lesser Humans).

The various arguments proposed by the filmmakers on the issue of self-representation are reproduced in brief below, in their own words. As in the case of several arguments in this study, Shriprakash provides one extreme viewpoint (along the axis of which the opinions of other filmmakers are positioned), one that Omji John concurs with, calling it ‘the ultimate goal’.

Adivasis should make films about themselves. Women should make films about themselves. Dalits should make films about themselves. The outrage that the urban people feel is different from what they feel. That is why they should make films about themselves. Only the adivasis know their problems...(Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview).

None of the other filmmakers buy into the either-or arguments of who should make the films. They are of the opinion that all kinds of interventions should co-exist, and in the words of Jayasankar, there is no choice to be made between a philosophical treatise and a washing machine manual! He says that ‘every discourse has its function within the domain in which it exists’.

While agreeing with Shriprakash about the importance of self-representation, Anand Patwardhan has this to say in a more practical vein:

The ideal situation would be that people who are oppressed, who are suffering the injustice, they make films about themselves. If that was possible, then probably the injustices wouldn’t be there no? If people living in the slums were able to make films about themselves and had the means to do it, then probably we would be half way there towards solving the problem. I am saying that it might be the ideal situation where the
people oppressed make films about themselves (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

While all of them agree that self-representation is the ideal, various factors like the quality and use of the finished product, and the technical feasibility is critiqued by the filmmakers. Stalin argues that while the SEWA model is very good, it is not a replicable one, because the economics of film production makes it unfeasible to continue production on a sustained basis. Saying that one needs to problematize even this 'putting the camera in the hands of the people', Stalin suggests that the reach of these videos is very limited and most of them are utilized only internally.

If a dalit scavenger was to make this film, Lesser Humans would have been a different film. If a woman, would have made that film, it would have been different. A dalit - non-dalit would have made that film, it would have been different. Agreed. That is more desirable, this is less desirable, I don't know (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

His thoughts are echoed by Shabnam Virmani who sees these films getting marketed for their political correctness.

When the only thing that the product or the process has to say for itself is its political correctness and this whole wonderful thing of putting technology in the hands of the people, there is a different thing happening which I want to critique. I think the process of having the media in your own hands to say your own thing is empowering and important, but let us not ignore the fact that the product is shoddily made or that it does not necessarily communicate as well as a well-crafted product...there should be some respect for craft also (Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, personal interview).

Reiterating Shabnam Virmani’s opinion, Anjali Monteiro asserts that the whole process of putting the camera into people's hands needs to be problematized and that ‘it cannot become a position of smugness from which you cut down anything else’. Raising the question of a film language, she opines that all filmmaking involves the use of a grammar or creating a new grammar, and that this issue existed no matter in whose hands the camera was.
Aesthetic and anti-aesthetic in the alternative documentary

Michael Renov writes of the presumption that formal beauty and historical representation are ‘irreconcilable’. This synthetic polarization of ‘truth versus beauty’ in the West has contributed to the anti-aesthetic in the documentary. The onus, therefore, according to Raoul Ruiz, lies with the documentary to ‘produce a pleasure of the text, capable of merging intellectual inquiry and aesthetic value’ (cited in Renov, 1993: 24).

Historically and philosophically, the documentary came about as an oppositional response to the fantastical spectacle called fiction film, which lured the viewer into a Utopia of romance and beauty. So just as the aesthetic in fiction film was all-pervasive, the anti-aesthetic in the documentary came to dominate the documentary. The term ‘documentary’ conjures up images about the ‘real’ world – images that are jerky, urgent and have a seal of authenticity about them. This perception of the documentary is precipitated by several documentaries that tried to present ‘unmediated’ reality. Unlike earlier filming equipment that were cumbersome and very expensive, new technologies which are smaller, lighter and less expensive, allow for more of on-location shooting and could follow events in the historical world uninterruptedly, along with sync sound as well. This served the cause of the documentary to provide as much unprocessed footage as possible in the form of lengthy pans and tilts by the camera, 'live' action captured in all naturalness and the filming of other ‘real’ elements like the context surrounding the event, the sights and sounds. Realism and not beauty ruled the documentary, and this is responsible for the anti-aesthetic in the documentary.
However, the history of the documentary will reveal that the first documentary-maker, Robert Flaherty did make aesthetically beautiful films. In his earliest documentary, *Nanook of the North*, the shots of the sweeping snowscapes of the Arctic, and the ‘exotic’ Inuit Eskimos prompted Renov to call Flaherty ‘documentary’s first poet’, for his use of poetic images and verbal expressions (Renov, 1993). Even Grierson and Vertov believed in the use of creativity to achieve their socio-political agendas. But the coming to age of cinema-verité, direct cinema, and political documentary (as discussed in chapter 3) laid emphasis on capturing the historical world in its likeness. Documentary started relying on depicting reality by using indexical images from the 'real' world.

The question of aesthetics in the alternative documentary in India is polarized within a debate of form versus content. As can be seen from the responses of the filmmakers, this dichotomy is an artificial one, and the roles are not mutually exclusive at all.

Only Shriprakash makes a case for content over form, and asserts that he is not a filmmaker, but a film-activist.

I am not a filmmaker. I am a film-activist. That is why there is not much creativity in my films. Struggle is a part of the adivasi’s lives, so in our films too the struggle is more and art is less. In fact, visually there is no need for words. Both oral and written. Even the visual effects in films are to repair a lack…I make films for those who suffer. For me content is more important, not my film (Shriprakash, filmmaker, personal interview)

While ideologically this may be a choice he seeks to make, his films do reveal a filmmaker's eye for visual detail. An instance would be his long pans capturing the sweeping landscapes of the tribal areas where his films are shot. Lingering and well-composed shots of cultural snippets of adivasi life like basket-weaving or shots of
gurgling brooks, etc make his absolute claim contestable. However, the anti-aesthetic intention is most visible in his films than in those by any of the other filmmakers chosen for the study. For Anand Patwardhan too, form takes a secondary place.

Frankly, I don't do experimentation for its own sake. It's not my cup of tea. It's not what excites me. I make films as simply as I can. Tell the story as straightforwardly as possible. So experimentation would certainly not be consciously done. There maybe experimentation that happens in the natural course of events that I am filming or editing, if something strikes me while trying to juxtapose this with that. I try it out. I would not set myself the task of doing some innovation for the sake of doing it (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

Activism can be reformulated in terms of the filmmaker's concerns that impinge on the film. It cannot be separated from the physical task of shooting or editing a film. Every process in the production of an alternative documentary, right from the choice of subject, to post-production, would be influenced by the ideological convictions of the filmmaker. And by definition, the agenda of the filmmaker is, broadly speaking, an agenda of social equity. The question of aesthetics would involve the translation of this agenda onto film and the cinematic choices that the filmmaker needs to make for this translation.

Film making is my profession. The way I deal with my film is based on my experiences as an activist. Nobody is separated from activism. But like I said earlier, I will not limit my film making to rigid compartments. To find a cinematic solution to any problem is my job (Madhushree Dutta, filmmaker, personal interview).

While many filmmakers in this study assert that filmmaker/ film-activist is untenable, a closer look at their work reveals their preoccupation with post-production aspects of filming like editing, music, subtitling etc. There clearly is an attempt to arrive at a finished product that is carefully constructed out of the footage. All the filmmakers talk of a film language or grammar or craft, while referring to the importance of making a documentary. Careful attention is paid to music – the background scores as well as songs.
While *Lesser Humans*, *Tu Zinda Hai* and *When Women Unite* are carefully choreographed films even at the filming stage, the narratives in *A Narmada Diary*, *Something Like a War*, *Kahankar: Ahankar*, and to some extent *Chaliyar* and *Live in Behrampada*, emerge on the editing table.

Shabnam Virmani exploits the docu-drama form to the fullest in her film *When Women Unite*, and partly in *Tu Zinda Hai*, in parts. Both these films are atypical, if one expects documentaries to be pedantic. Music and songs are an integral part of both these films. The frames in the films are well planned, and lighting is controlled as well in adherence to a pre-conceived script with a shot-break-up. Even the voice-overs do not give these films the feel of a typical documentary, as they are unobtrusive. And the filmmaker's personal conviction about the importance of craft is well reflected in all her films.

A lot of NGO and activist circles feel what they are saying is so important that how they say it is not important. That's why they are losing out in this marketplace of idea propagation, where advertising and the Hindi films of Bollywood hold greater sway on the imagination of the audiences. Because they feel that their issue is on the pedestal and you don't have to worry about the aesthetics or the craft or the 'how' of how you communicate. And that I totally disagree with (Shabnam Virmani, filmmaker, personal interview).

*Lesser Humans* is an interview-based film, interspersed with graphic visuals of human scavenging and some location shots. However, the interviews are far from being the spontaneous, unprepared opinion taking. The bhangis are framed in tight close-ups and a lot of attention has been paid to the lighting and shot preparation. In fact, the shots are so well orchestrated for a subject like human scavenging, that it provoked a disbelief in several members of the audiences!!
Sometimes I got the feeling that they were asked to dress up or something. They looked too nice and too clean. Probably they are and I am looking at them from my elitist point of view, but that’s why I need to know how they live.
(Vinaya, student of development communication, responding to Lesser Humans)

This response typifies an elitist attitude that expects audiences to look and live a certain way. And any effort by the filmmaker to break out of stereotypes, may detract from the credibility of the film. The question of what is real for whom is again thrown up in this context.

Form in the documentary has been dominated by the ‘talking-heads’ interview format visually and the ‘voice-of-God’ (usually male) voice-over commentary. A typical example would be A Narmada Diary. This film along with the 'real' footage, jerky and grainy, of rallies and police atrocities and interviews, is accompanied by an all-knowing, ominous male voice-over, filled with foreboding. But as mentioned before, several formal reflexive strategies have been attempted in the film like satire and irony. While being politically effective, Chaliyar, Addo Miyad Ulgulan and Kis Ki Raksha are three other propaganda films that do not aesthetically rise to be more than atrocity-tales against the state.

Something Like a War and Kahankar:Ahankar deal with representation in totally different ways, but are both richly textured in terms of multiple, complex narratives and formal reflexive elements. The former unambiguously narrates a story of oppression, by interweaving several, different narratives into a cohesive film - like the workshop with rural women talking about their sexuality, Dr. Mehta expounding the virtues of the family planning camps, interviews with the ‘agents’ who are forced to generate cases for these camps, and the propaganda of the state, the medical community and international donor
agencies to hard-sell family planning. Formally, the film is a path-breaking attempt away from the struggle-based or **heroine-oriented** films.

*Kahankar:Ahanakar* deals with the subtleties of how histories are constantly being created and re-created, and gently nudges the viewer and the filmmaker into questioning their identities. ‘**We** are there all through the film. Being laughed at, Because most of the ethnographers are us. We are the ones who are doing the camera and we are being laughed at throughout the film’ (Jayasankar, filmmaker). The film posits archival records of the ‘**official**’ history of the Warlis and the vibrant, oral histories in the **Warli** stories and paintings in an aesthetically pleasing manner, interspersed with interviews with the Warlis.

Then what is the difference between a newscast and a documentary film? I think you need to respect and evolve some ways to engage with the **audience**. The audience has to, in some ways, take cognizance of what you are saying. I am not saying there is any recipe for it, but this applies to any aesthetic pursuits, including writing. You need to, at least, take into account certain kind of universe in which that particular discourse functions (K.P.Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

Films like *Kahankar: Ahankar, Tu Zinda Hai, Something Like a War, When Women Unite* and *Lesser Humans* show that the aesthetic can take precedence over the **anti-aesthetic** in the alternative documentary. In these films, expression operates as a 'modalitiy of desire' (Renov, 1993), and manifests through the importance the filmmakers give to form.

This discussion raises the question of the 'politics of aesthetics'. What is beautiful is itself a problematic issue, especially if it implies ignoring culture-specific and traditional ideas of 'beautiful'. In a globalized world with increasingly homogenized notions of beauty, this question acquires political dimensions. One needs to explore
further how notions of aesthetics may be differentiated along lines of class, caste, and gender.\textsuperscript{15}

Questions of power, knowledge, and multiplicity dominate contemporary critical discourses. Post-colonial theorists focus increasingly on how power is reproduced at multiple and micro levels, how a certain kind of knowledge acquires legitimacy, and how subjective differences exist in the production of meaning. The concerns addressed in this section about the ethics and aesthetics of representation should be seen against the background of these perspectives. The idea of the documentary as a provider of 'knowledge' is critiqued in the next chapter, with respect to audiences of the alternative documentary.

\textsuperscript{15} My discussion here about the 'politics of aesthetics' is informed by comments made by Dr. Vinod Pavarala in several academic forums.