CHAPTER 7: DOCUMENTARY DESIRE

The audience question is very valid and not so easy to answer. Women audiences, dalit audiences – these are very dubious categories. Who is a dalit audience? It is very presumptuous to try and understand this kind of subjectivity (Deepa Dhanraj, filmmaker, personal interview).

Complexities are inherent in trying to make sense of audiences and their readings of any media text. Polysemy or the production of multiple meanings out of the same text has gained currency in reception analysis. For a documentary too, the readings of different viewers could vary according to variables like class, caste, and gender, and the readings of even the same viewer may vary over time or circumstance. Subjectivity is inherent in every reading produced out of the text and more importantly, in the interpretation of every reading. It is with this understanding that this study discusses documentary desire.

The pleasures of non-fiction are every bit as complex as those attributed to fictional forms and far less understood (Michael Renov, 1993: 6).

In Film Studies, cinema is studied as a source of libidinal pleasure for the viewer. Central to this is the thought that a spectator, cocooned in the dark, womb-like confines of the cinema hall, indulges in a ‘willing suspension of disbelief while engaging with the fantasy world of fiction film. As opposed to this kind of engagement with mainstream cinema, William Guyun, in one of the earliest references to the documentary viewer, believes that documentary is ‘an object inappropriate to desire’ (cited in Renov, 1993:196). The basis for this statement was that documentary spectatorship demands a greater degree of vigilance from the viewer and so invokes the defense mechanisms of the ego. By focusing on the ‘real’, the documentary produces 'filmic displeasure' in the spectator, who is deprived of the libidinal cinematic pleasure afforded by fiction film.
These observations serve as a starting point to investigate documentary desire, for the first time, within a psychoanalytical framework. Theorists like Michael Renov and Bill Nichols challenge Guyun's, rather limiting and orthodox, construction of filmic pleasure. Throwing open the doors of the debate on documentary desire, they suggest other possible dynamics between the documentary text and its viewer.

Renov (1993) calls for a sustained and thorough investigation of documentary desire. He cautions that this interrogation must be in its own terms and not with reference to the filmic pleasures of fiction film. *Docere* in Latin means ‘to teach’ and this etymological root of the word ‘documentary’ is the starting point for the notion of documentary desire. The concept of viewing pleasure too is correspondingly re-defined. Renov writes that documentary desire resonates with the need for 'pleasurable learning', which feeds the viewer's desire-to-know. And it is this desire-to-know that influences the assumptions of rationality and conscious inquiry attributed to the making and reception of documentaries. In an allusion to what audiences might expect from an alternative documentary, filmmaker Anjali Monteiro, in a personal interview, maintains that alternative filmmakers cannot 'wish away' the fact that audiences seek pleasure, and that may be, audiences seeking to laugh at things, specially when there is already in place a huge entertainment industry, distributing itself through television, cinema and the Internet.

These propositions serve as a context within which the responses of the focus groups to the alternative documentaries are analysed in this study. It is pertinent we realize that these observations are made with reference to the documentaries and the audiences of the West. This understanding is important because socio-economic
disparities are much more glaring within a Third World country. And this difference gets reflected in how documentaries are made and received. In this study, documentary desire is examined through the responses of audiences and alternative documentaries of India.

What does 'knowing' mean for different audiences? And how does this 'knowing' re-define documentary desire in the Indian context? One interesting finding from the focus group discussions is how ‘knowledge’ itself is a nebulous concept and varies according to the educational, economic, social, and cultural compositions of the audience.

**Epistephilia and the ‘truth’**

In a seminal reference to the psychoanalytical dimensions of documentary viewing, Bill Nichols (1991) suggests that by dealing with social issues in the historical world, the documentary operates where the ‘reality-attentive ego and super-ego live’. It deals with rational and conscious choices that an individual makes in the 'real' world. He proposes that the documentary strokes the ‘epistephilia’ or the pleasure of knowing, in the viewer. By starting a social debate and building an argument to support it, the documentary appeals to the public, rather than a private, response from the viewer. The documentary appeals to the social imagination and the cultural identity of the viewer. In contrast, mainstream fiction cinema operates where the Id lives. It caters to private, unconscious desires, by encouraging the viewer to indulge in fantasy and daydreams. This Freudian analysis about the reception of the documentary is the basis of Nichols’s understanding of documentary desire.

In an insightful comparison of the viewing dynamics at play for a fiction film and a documentary, he writes that both are cinematic modes that create a 'gaze' for the viewer. Fiction film can be seen as creating a ‘gaze’ into a world of fantasy for the

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viewer, invoking the aesthetic, and the documentary creates a ‘gaze’ about the historical world by invoking the promise of epistephilia. Nichols suggests that what aesthetics is to fiction film, epistephilia is to the documentary.

Documentary convention spawns an epistephilia. It posits an agency that possesses information and knowledge, a text that conveys it, and a subject who will gain it...Knowledge...becomes a source of pleasure that is far from innocent (Nichols, 1991:31).

Implicit in epistephilia or the desire for knowledge is an urge to know the ‘truth’. The viewer is promised knowledge or ‘truth’ about the ‘real’ world. This truth-claim embedded in the alternative documentary is brought out by the responses of all the focus groups, albeit through different modes of understanding, as discussed below. The privileged status of the documentary as a domain of ‘truth’ gets reified because the audiences see the documentary as a knowledge-provider. Knowledge and ‘truth’ seem inextricably linked as can be seen from the responses of the audiences.

Nichols sees epistephilia as feeding into a distinctive form of engagement with the ‘real’ by the viewer. The physical distance from the ‘real’ world, which the documentary affords the viewer, facilitates this engagement. And from a ‘safe’ vantage point, the documentary provokes the viewer to confront an issue or event in the historical world. 'The irony of this distance' is that it supports the impression that the viewer has directly engaged with the historical world. This form of engagement with the 'real' world, albeit from a distance, prompts Nichols to suggest that epistephilia is an illusionistic mode of reception, precipitated by the use of realism in a documentary. This perspective provokes new questions about documentary pleasure, as also about documentary realism.
Modes of engagement and audiences

The alternative documentary in India, with the help of realism and testimony, argues the ‘truth’ of its case (as discussed in Chapter 4). This study proposes that the alternative documentary relies on a tripod of proofs – emotional, moral, and rational arguments, which the audiences use to arrive at the ‘truth’. The responses of the audiences can be understood along a linear continuum: they get ‘information’ from the documentary, then they ‘analyse’ the information, and finally, arrive at ‘judgment’ about the issue and hence the film itself.

'Knowing' emerges as an important cornerstone in the reactions of all the focus groups to the alternative documentary. The idea of a documentary as an educator or a provider of knowledge is reiterated by all the focus groups. This education happens because of the testimony operating upon the viewer, in the form of:

1) ‘realistic’ images, which offer emotional arguments about the miserable living conditions of the marginalized or stories of their oppression through interviews with 'real' people.

2) ‘moral’ positions, like juxtaposing the misery of the poor with the affluence of the elite or by projecting a villainous 'other' vis a vis the sensitive 'us' or interviews with activists, which reveal the ideological stance of the filmmaker.

3) 'factual' proof, including statistics and expert testimony like mass media clippings, committee reports, and interviews with scientists, doctors and other knowledge-elites.

Then, the information gathered from this testimony is subjected to analysis. It is interesting to note that what constitutes 'information' and how the 'analysis' takes place
varies across and even within the focus groups. The viewers’ response are influenced by one or more of the three proofs operative in the film.

I suggest that empathy and rational analysis are the two distinct modes in which the audience engages with the alternative documentary. Either one or a combination of the two modes helps the viewer to arrive at the final ‘judgment’ about the argument that the film provides. The 'judgment' could manifest as the viewer’s expectation of the documentary. Two dominant demands that a viewer places on the alternative documentary are 'objectivity' and 'solutions'. Further, the socio-economic position of the viewer, including education and ideological orientation, might play an important role in how a viewer might engage with an alternative documentary.

Broadly, the focus groups in the study can be seen as constituted by three types of audiences (as can be seen from their demographic profiles in chapter 2),

One, audiences who are, or who closely work with, the disadvantaged people in society. Rural women who are agricultural workers in Pastapur (women agricultural workers), a group of marginalized women in Ahmedabad empowered to represent themselves on video (participatory video-makers), and women employees of a grassroots welfare organization in Hyderabad (welfare workers) are three of the focus groups in the study. These audiences belong to or work with the lower socio-economic sections of India.

Two, audiences who, by education or by ideological affiliation, have been initiated into the discourse of alternative development. A group of feminists affiliated to a Hyderabad-based, research and activist women's group, students of social work from Mumbai, and post-graduate students of the theory and practice of development
communication in Hyderabad are three such focus groups, who could be spoken of as 'converted audiences', conversant with the notions of 'alternative' development.\footnote{The term 'converted' audience is used colloquially in discussions and even journal articles in the context of the debate that alternative documentaries often preach to the 'converted'. This is a reference to the screenings of the films primarily at film festivals, universities, and NGO circuits, whose audiences have been previously exposed to the rhetoric of alternative development.}

Three audiences, who by profession or ideological affiliations, are un-initiated into the alternative development discourse. The employees of an institute for environmental education in Bangalore (environmental scientists), young Indian engineers in the USA (computer engineers in USA) and students of a right-wing students' organization in Hyderabad (right-wing students) are the other focus groups in the study. While the group of environmental scientists does deal with environmental concerns, an important aspect in the idea of sustainable development, their discourse is not framed in the human rights paradigm that seems to be an indispensable part of alternative development.

This typology of audience is, of course, not watertight or mutually exclusive. In fact, as borne out by the responses in the focus group discussions, some atypical members may exist in a group (alongside the inherent polysemy which exists). But as Wimmer and Dominick (1983) write, the aim of the discussion is not to build a ‘consensus’, but to examine the differences within the group too. The typology of the audiences suggested above is more to facilitate the analysis of the two modes of engagement as observed in the responses of the focus groups.

I hope to substantiate here my claim that the audiences who belong to disadvantaged strata, the audiences who work extensively with them and the audiences
who are familiar with the issues of unequal development tend to engage with the alternative documentary differently than those audiences who are unfamiliar with any notion of alternative development, and understand development only as envisioned for them by the state. The difference does not lie much in their sympathy for the disadvantaged as much as it does in their expectations from the film.

The difference in the modes of engagement reveals that ‘knowledge’ itself is a contested terrain, which is variously constructed by different audiences. For the ‘empathizing’ audiences, 'truth' is what they emotionally connect with as 'reality' in the documentary. For the audiences who rationalize, 'truth' is constituted by logic and statistics. So the idea of epistephilia, as proposed by Bill Nichols, itself gets redefined depending on who the audience is. Another important difference is how critical the audiences are of the film. The credence that different focus groups give to the emotional, the moral, and the factual testimony in the films determines the credibility of the film for them.

However, filmmaker K.P.Jayasankar’s idea about the dangers of audience stratification, as expressed below, aptly clarifies my position on audiences and their readings of the alternative documentary.

From whatever little research that we have done, I would not say anything like there is some creature called an urban audience. Even within urban audiences, there are such different readings based on gender and class and exposure and experience. I think these categories are very problematic. I think stratifying audiences as urban or rural and upper class or working class, can be a little dangerous particularly if you are using that in order to arrive at some kind of any broad generalizations about the way people read a film. But, it is true that there would certainly be patterns or ways of seeing ...(K.P.Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).
Empathy and ‘truth’

We had read so much in the newspapers and heard about this, but this is the first time we are seeing what happened. We felt that we were also part of the struggle and that we too were participating in the movement as women. We really felt involved in what was happening (Meherunissa, welfare worker, responding to When Women Unite).

Empathy as a mode of engagement with the alternative documentary is facilitated by an emotional identification with the marginalized subjects in the film. This is precipitated by the use of realism and ideological argument in these films, as can be discerned from the responses of the focus groups in the study. The rural agricultural workers, participatory video-makers, the welfare workers working with the marginalized groups, the post-graduate students of development communication, the students of social work, and the group of feminists, all accept the argument of the alternative documentary and connect emotionally with the 'reality' shown in the documentary. There seem to be two dimensions to this empathy – one, relating one’s own reality with the reality shown in the film, and two, accepting the film’s argument on moral or ideological grounds.

The audiences who are disadvantaged themselves and the audiences who work closely with the marginalized people (agricultural workers, participatory video-makers, and welfare workers) identify as their own, the reality shown in the film. The protagonists in the films, their situations, the locales and many other cultural nuances are realistically presented, and the indexical representations of a familiar world allows these audiences to accept as ‘truth’, the argument of the film. Responses from the three groups, like those provided below, bear this observation out.

She too is a woman we too are women. So the problems are the same. We understood the film very well. Whatever they showed is true. It happened in our village too, the same problems. (responses by women agricultural workers to When Women Unite)
We see it all the time, with our own eyes.
And that is the reality. In most places, it is the women who do all the work.
Whichever the place, whatever the work, it is the women who do the difficult work,
everywhere.
(responses by participatory video-makers to *Lesser Humans*)

All this happens. It is not simply a film. It is reality. It is truth.
Because we work with similar people with the same problems, we know how true the
documentary is. It has shown life as it is.
Just like they showed in the film, the little boy imitating to be the father, pretending to
be drunk and beating the wife...exactly what happens in real life.
(responses by welfare workers to *When Women Unite*)

The testimony presented in the films, *When Women Unite* and *Lesser Humans*,
through emotional scenes and dialogues strikes an emotional chord with these audiences.
The ensuing discussions among the audiences after the screenings, which forms the
analysis of the films, have less to do with facts and statistics (the documentary) and have
more to do with the narrative (drama or the interview). The characters and situations are
analysed as if they are ‘real’, in relation to their own lives. The group of rural agricultural
workers, who responded to *When Women Unite*, made extensive references to the
dialogues and characters in the dramatized portions of the film, during the screening and
the post-film discussion. ‘Poor Kotamma, how much she is suffering’, ‘She was crying
with sorrow. We can understand her problems’, are some responses that typify their
emotional identification with the people in the film.

This opinion was also seconded by filmmaker Shabnam Virmani. In an informal
conversation, in response to my observation about empathy as a mode of engagement,
she said that some women's groups who wanted to screen the *docu-drama When Women
Unite*, for rural women audiences, requested her to edit out the documentary footage from
the film, and give them a "pure-drama" version! 'I think I discovered quite simply that
drama had a greater appeal for rural audiences', writes Shabnam Virmani (2001). Her
Films are often made with, and are about women's struggles at the grassroots, and are circulated for horizontal communication with similar movements across the country, as well as for mobilization efforts. Making a case for narrative drama against an argument of reason using 'a rational deductive logic', she suggests that it could be the strong tradition of oral storytelling in India that enables non-literate and, sometimes, even educated audiences to connect better with drama. Dismissive of the notion of 'reality' as understood by educated, urban people, some of the rural women even wanted to meet Kotamma, the protagonist of When Women Unite (Virmani, 2001). So reality itself gets re-defined. The audiences are concerned not so much with whether the argument in the film is right or wrong. It is whether they can recognize as their own, the people and situations in the film. The three groups who respond this way to the film identify so much with the subjects of the film, that the film stands for 'truth'. 'Truth' for them is largely unmediated by rationality or a critical evaluation of the film or the issue.

Talking about his experiences with audiences, Sarat Chandran, a filmmaker and a distributor, reiterates this observation.

I am convinced of the positive impact that these documentaries have on people. Especially rural audiences to whom I have mostly shown them. Villagers readily believe what they see in these films. They are also influenced by the content of these documentaries. In fact I would even say that about 98% of them are convinced about what they see. Especially films like Lesser Humans, they can easily identify with. The responses the film evokes depends on the kind of audience. I watched a film on child abuse with an urban audience in Bangalore. The audience was elitist and displayed no anger at all. That too after watching a film like that. Basically, I think that the disbelief is because of a consumerist attitude (Sarat Chandran, filmmaker, personal interview).

Empathy is also prompted by the ideological argument of the film, and can be observed by the moral stances articulated by the audiences, especially those three groups
(students of social work, feminists, and students of development communication) who have been ideologically sensitized towards unequal development.

All developmental policies are made by the elite classes...developmental activities have only benefited those who have money and power, particularly political power. As the ending shows, even with modern, scientific technology, the plight of those lowest in society doesn't change. In fact it gets worse...the bhangis already know their agony, we are the ones who should do something.

(responses by the students of social work to Lesser Humans).

It is a film which makes you emote, no? You laugh with the women and you are horror-struck by the atrocities that happen, and it also theorizes women's experiences. I am not saying that we are in the same situation as these women, but the kind of power structure that is there will leave you in an absolutely helpless kind of situation.

(responses by the feminists to Something Like a War).

Throughout the film, I felt guilty. Look at me living a privileged life. A First World life in a Third World country...we need to be sensitized first. It is a fact that religion and caste always put the woman in a disadvantaged position. The film does want to make the point, one that I believe as a strident feminist, that it is women who do this kind of work more than men.

(responses by the students of development communication to Lesser Humans).

The analysis by the groups that are familiar with the arguments of the alternative development paradigm is mostly based on their ideological affiliations. Their empathy is brought about by a philosophical, and in many ways, moral understanding of the issue being dealt with, and may be aided by certain emotional testimonies in the film. That the emotional evidence offered by the film plays the role of an abettor, and not the primary reason, can be seen from their critical evaluation of the film. Unlike members of the focus groups who relate emotionally and uncritically to the marginalized people in the film, these 'converted' audiences accept the larger argument of the film about the unequal development, but do not uncritically accept everything that the film says or shows as evidence. Critical observations about the length of the film, the inadequacy of the information presented, the sampling techniques, and the despair that the film evokes, are
some indicators that these audiences use their cognitive faculties to ‘judge’ the film, something which is by and large absent in the audiences mentioned earlier.

Responses like ‘after a point it was monotonous, the same thing going on and on’, ‘I don't know whether to react to the documentary or to the issue it deals with’, ‘if it was of shorter length, it would have been more effective’, ‘the health aspect is very crucial here…from a cinematic point of view, it is a lapse’ — provide glimpses into the critical and cognitive faculties at work, alongside the basic empathy for the marginalized people. For these audiences, ‘truth’ is the ideology that propels the alternative documentary and knowledge is the unraveling of the oppressive mechanisms that are responsible for the socio-economic disparities.

Only one respondent, from the three groups, made an oppositional reading of the film Lesser Humans, despite being initiated into the alternative development discourse.

This film actually gives you some synthetic sensibilities. Then you start feeling about the matter and you cant do anything about it…It is a totally manipulated film, made with only one perspective in mind, that of gender inequity.

(Ravi, student of development communication, responding to Lesser Humans).

This response, as several of his other responses, reveal that rational analysis, and not empathy, was Ravi’s mode of engaging with the film. The ideological argument in the film, which the other members of the group identified with, is seen as a feminist rhetoric by the respondent, and tantamounts to ‘manipulation’ for him. As a future media professional, Ravi very categorically states that he would never make a film on rural people and their lives, because he doesn't know anything about 'them' and that he doesn not see himself as part of 'them'. This reading introduces the second mode of engaging with the alternative documentary that is through rational analysis.
Rational analysis and ‘truth’

It is educative, very educative.
It provides raw information, you can do your own processing.
(responses by the computer engineers, to A Narmada Diary)

Industrialization will cause pollution. What can be done to minimize pollution is important.
Most of what is shown, we already know. In such a project, problems and pollution are always there.
People must be educated about environmental degradation through films like this.
(responses by the environmental scientists to Chaliyar)

Finally, who did it, this the film did not show. The background of the problem was not clear.
You know the documentaries show reality, it is the true picture...
(responses by the right-wing students to Live In Bearampada)

These responses from across the remaining three focus groups (a group of computer engineers, a group of environmental engineers, and members of a right-wing students’ organization) who are un-initiated into the alternative development discourse, show that the ‘information’ provided by the alternative documentary is seen by the respondents as the facts of the case, based on which they would further analyse the issue.
In this case, the testimony offered by the film is not emotional footage or interviews, but ‘hard’ facts, which are verifiable. So, the audiences are not moved into taking a stand emotionally, but instead, rationally analyse the case. This 'intellectual' response to the alternative documentary is, however, accompanied by sympathy towards the marginalized people who are the subjects of the study. This sympathy is voiced by almost all the viewers, tempered with criticism about the alternative documentary screened, or the filmmaker or any of the Villains' in the film.

Though this film is lop-sided and one-sided from most of our perspectives, still the facts of the case remain... that the government was biased towards a certain section of the people (Ravi, computer engineer responding to A Narmada Diary?).
The cameraman is desperate to convince us. Tell me, how can I feel sad when a person says ‘I can't eat electricity, I can't drink electricity.’ I could feel sad that he is not educated. I am not blaming him. I am not defending the government (Phani, computer engineer responding to A Narmada Diary).

The responses from the group of computer engineers in the USA (including the two responses provided above) about the truth-claim in the film spanned a wide spectrum. None of the respondents denounced the film as manipulative or not authentic, but the group as a whole tended to respond with skepticism to the film as the ‘truth’, as typified by observations like ‘if we believe the statistics... .’, ‘I don’t know how much of it to believe’, ‘It is not an analytical documentary, it was factual’, ‘We have got some views about what is happening there actually and we have someone's interpretation done to us. It is for us to decide with whatever resources we have got’. Their propensity for logic, rational analysis and statistics led to the skepticism about the film as 'truth'. The pre-occupation of this group with the facts and statistics of the case, as well as rational thought, could very well be a result of their educational (scientific) background.

The construction of the uneducated, ‘emotional’ them and the educated, ‘rational’ us’ by the group has been discussed in Chapter 6 in the context of the alternative documentary reinforcing stereotypes. In the context of documentary desire, it can be seen that the respondents subject the argument of the film to rational analysis and very clearly construct the dichotomy of emotional/rational. Their responses indicate that by virtue of their education, they are empowered to think more 'rationally' and that thinking rationally is better than being emotional. The members of the group would rather get over with the emotional sequences in the film, and move on with the facts of the case. There is definitely sympathy, but not beyond ‘a certain extent’.
That guy saying electricity not giving him anything... that shows how much you can expect from that person's point of view or how rational his thought is. You didn't educate him, so he is not a valuable resource as far as you take a statistical opinion to... it is wrong to say they shouldn't have sentiments, but you can't get so much out of this sympathy. You can't sympathise beyond a certain extent. What I feel is he is trying to go on an emotional trip. He tries to show people dancing, people going in the boat, the colourful shots...show facts in between, but go on an emotional trip and make people feel bad about the issue. We should rationally judge. We should not go into emotional issues at all so much. He has taken us on an emotional ride.

(responses by the computer engineers, to A Narmada Diary)

The rational analysis of the members of these three groups, were supplemented by a 'knowledge' they possessed, and they tried to reconcile with the 'knowledge' provided by the film. The other groups in the study also interpreted the alternative documentary screened for them, in terms of their own experiential insights or ideological affiliations, but the knowledge that the 'rationalizing' audiences draw upon is from their intellectual arguments about the 'real' world.

Because if you see the background, basically the whole world is talking of global warming. So we have one area where thousands and thousands of hectares of land just being smashed up for the construction of a dam (Suresh, computer engineer, responding to A Narmada Diary).

We would like to know what happens from the enforcement side. That is missing from the film. What is happening from their end? Sometimes things might look bad, but these are the by-products of industrialization and urbanization (Sharath, environmental scientist, responding to Chaliyar).

See, this is a valley. Why they have chosen this particular point and not any other point is because a valley forms a natural bucket, right? It can hold so much water. Nowhere else it holds. It has to hold so much water for everybody to use (Bharath, computer engineer, responding to A Narmada Diary).

There was an article on the number of criminal cases against legislative members, and the least number of cases was 32 against an MLA in Gujarat... Like everyone knows, politicians and riots go together. And Bombay is the commercial capital of India, where underworld dons like Dawood, who leads the muslim-dominated mafia. To counter this, there is the Hindu-dominated mafia...the only way to cure this is literacy (Rahul, right-wing student, responding to I Live in Behrampada).
These responses show that the audiences of the three groups negotiate the knowledge they get from the film with the knowledge they already possess from their education, exposure to mainstream media, and other such ‘knowledge’-providing activities.

Personal experience is yet another aspect which influences this negotiating of information. One computer engineer, while self-admittedly not overly concerned about the environmental aspects of building the Sardar Sarovar dam, argues that the adivasis must be duly compensated. He refers to a similar project undertaken by the government in his village, in which his grandparents lost a lot of land, and after many decades, still have not received the promised compensation. This personal experience was repeatedly mentioned by the respondent, while analyzing the film. A Muslim student member of the pro-Hindu youth organization (responding to / live in Behrampada) also categorically says that the Hindu-Muslim divide is more prevalent in cities than in villages and towns, according to his personal experience. The zonal president of the organization, a Hindu, also agrees with this, again based on personal experience.

All these problems are in the cities only, never in villages...even Ganesha immersion, I have done so many times. I come from Adilabad, where there is so much unity. Only after coming to Hyderabad, I realized the Hindu-Muslim feeling existed (Anwar, right-wing student, responding to / live in Behrampada),

Yeah, it’s true. I am from a small village in Mehaboobnagar district. A maximum of 1000 or 2000 people live there..and there was never this feeling. In Hyderabad, only Muslims celebrate Moharram, but in my village, we all celebrate it, even the Hindus (Om Prakash, right-wing student, responding to / live in Behrampada).
Objectivity and solutions in the alternative documentary

As people who watch this film, it is again our interpretation. We are like the judge. We have got some views about what is happening there actually and we have someone's interpretation done to us. It is for us to decide with whatever resources we have got, whether this is good or bad. We are in that state (Suresh, computer engineer responding to *A Narmada Diary*)

This response by a computer engineer to an alternative documentary typifies what almost all the focus-group members did with the documentary, i.e., sitting in judgment on it. This judgment could be a natural conclusion to the argument that the documentary puts forward about a particular issue. As mentioned before, the analysis of the focus groups' responses shows that the audiences make the two demands of objectivity and solutions on the alternative documentary. However, most of the filmmakers interviewed for this study are convinced that objectivity is a myth, and that providing solutions is 'prescriptive', the latter being something they consciously avoid doing. The difference in audience expectations and the agenda of the filmmaker reveals a break in the making and watching of an alternative documentary. If effective persuasion is the agenda of these films, addressing this break becomes important.

The juxtaposition of the filmmakers' opinions about objectivity and the audience demand for 'the other side of the picture' shows the differences in perspectives. That objectivity is a myth is accepted as a truism by postmodern scholars, and reiterated by every filmmaker interviewed for the study. The filmmakers are constantly aware that their films are subjective, interpretative constructs about issues in the historical world. This opinion is summed up by filmmaker Anjali Monteiro.

Objectivity is an untenable view. If you looked at any discourse, objectivity has been put to question. So why do we, in social sciences or in the realm of art, need to even think about that question? That the camera never lies is one of the biggest lies. It
film) is a construct. All the time we are constructing reality and even where it could have had its run, like in physics, they are talking about various other modes in which you approach reality. I don’t think you even need to bother about answering that question. Objectivity is one of the biggest myths (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

However, the focus group discussions reveal that not all audiences are inclined to think this way, especially about the alternative documentaries that are more of an argument against popularly held notions of development as perpetuated by the state. This would include audience responses to A Narmada Diary, Chaliyar and Something Like a War, among the films screened for the focus groups. These three films challenge, respectively, the construction of a big dam, the pollution caused by a big factory, and coercive family planning measures, all of which have been constructed by the state as vital steps towards building a strong and prosperous India. So, when the hegemony of nation-building itself is challenged by these films, the audiences respond to the arguments in the films by countering them with questions from the dominant rhetoric of development. And when these questions go unanswered by the films, they pronounce their ‘judgment’ on the lack of objectivity in the films. Some responses that articulate this demand for objectivity are given here to substantiate this point.

What is the government's justification for having the industry despite the severe health problems for the people? This must have been included in the film. The film only portrays a 40-year old problem of pollution, nothing new. It should have investigated the reasons why the management and government continue to run the industry, especially if the locals are affected so much. (responses by the environmental scientists to Chaliyar)

They [rural women] were obviously a politicized group...The population sampling seems to be only those women who have come out with their problems with contraceptives. There seems to be a population which they [filmmakers] are ignoring. If they had got them in somehow, at least this façade of objectivity, which everyone seems to be hankering after, could have been there... 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 (Sharmila, feminist, responding to Something Like a War).
It just gives only this one perspective, there is no two-sided...probably, we must have something, a documentary which comes from the government's side also, listing their pros and cons on this issue. As of now, it is only this one aspect that we have seen. I feel he is being very selective in what he wants to put through. The guy has a viewpoint. He has shot only that and edited out what is not his viewpoint. (responses by the computer engineers to A Narmada Diary)

Since the agenda of nation-building has been thoroughly disseminated by the state, from the time of independence, a refusal to tackle this dominant logic may work against the alternative documentary. The interviews reveal that all the filmmakers are aware that people, by and large, have been indoctrinated by the hegemonic propaganda of the state. And that the filmmakers seek to counter this propaganda headlong, without addressing the common questions which audiences could throw up from within the dominant rhetoric.

Seeing their film as counter-propaganda, as an ‘antidote’ to the propaganda by the state, the filmmakers want to deny space to the dominant logic. There are people who are for the dam. If you go to Gujarat and show it, 99% or 95% of the people have caught the propaganda of the state. Any film against the dam and they will be against it. Ours is a counter-attempt to show the other side in Gujarat. A film like that will polarize the audience. It's the truth as I see it. It may not be that people who are fed with the other side will agree with...See, I do not do market research and make the film, I am not an advertising agent. If I were, I would do what they are doing and do audience survey and see what people like to hear and give it to them gently. I basically tell the truth as I see it. I make them very emotionally. I get involved with the issue and make the film. So in some cases, people do not get convinced and in some cases, they get thoroughly convinced (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

Among the questions thrown up by the computer engineers who responded to A Narmada Diary, were the notions of 'sacrifice for the nation' and ‘resources of the nation’ and ‘development of the nation’, all with the realization that the adivasis need to be adequately compensated. In fact, most of the responses offer a negotiated reading of the film. The respondents negotiate between their notion of development (through big
dams), and sympathy for the plight of the marginalized adivasis. Except for one respondent who calls for a ‘complete halt’ to the construction of the dam in light of the environmental hazards of global warming, all the other members agree that the film deals with the denial of rehabilitation of the adivasis.

Basically I am not opposed that the forest is being eliminated or whatever it is. I mean if development has to happen, you have to make some sacrifices. But things would have to be done in the right perspective instead of doing it in such a hasty fashion.

The purpose of the film is to tell us that they are not against the dam construction. But they are against the methods adopted to this complete process of evacuation, rehabilitation and showing them alternative ways of livelihood. Nothing has happened. Very clearly Medha Patkar, was saying in her very own words ‘hum yaha dam todne nai aaye’...’ we are not against the dam or breaking the dam. We have come here to see that things are...’ she has all the statistics about how various things are. All this makes you believe that it is the government that has failed in understanding the requirements or necessities of the people affected.

When there is going to be development, somebody is affected... (responses by the computer engineers to A Narmada Diary).

One of the respondents makes a very strong argument about the ‘sacrifice’ that a citizen of a nation is called to make for the sake of the nation. That this argument is state-induced is popularly accepted by critics of the dominant paradigm of development, and has been counter-addressed by the question about the lack of rights of the same marginalized people, who are called upon to make these sacrifices. Both these arguments are reproduced in the responses to A Narmada Diary.

You have to understand what are the benefits that the nation gets. It is the nation. That is important. It is not you the individual or us or a few hundred or a few thousands of people. You are talking about a whole nation. There are people who lose their lives in war. They fight for the nation. People give sacrifices for the nation in many ways. This is something your nation requires. Your nation requires your life at this moment. You have to die. The nation requires your land at this moment, you have to give that (Phani, computer engineer).

It again comes to what do they get from the nation (Bharath, computer engineer).
The viewer's expectation of objectivity conflicts with the filmmaker's rationale against objectivity, as can be seen from one instance illustrated below. This makes it all the more imperative that the agenda of persuasion that an alternative documentary furthers needs to be clarified within the context of audience desire.

What happens from the enforcement side? We would like to know what happens from the enforcement side. That is missing from the film. Sometimes it might look bad. But even the viewpoint of the industry should have been there to balance things out. *(Sharath, environmental scientist, responding to Chaliyar)*

I don't think that the films should try to provide the other point of view... regarding the state or the management's justification of the factory, I deliberately did not include them. I did not want to give them space in my film. I did not want to make my film objective. My film is for the suffering people there who are fighting to get the factory closed.

*(Sarat Chandran, filmmaker of Chaliyar)*

Like the differing views of the audiences and filmmakers on the issue of 'objectivity' in the alternative documentary, their disagreement on providing solutions to the problems raised by the films are also divergent. All the focus groups demanded that the film provides the 'solution' or 'alternative' to the issue being problematized.

I don't want to be top-down and actually want people to think about these issues. And that's why the film raises lot more questions than it answers. Because I think that the answers will come from people thinking about these issues. The solutions are there in the film. But you have to search for them. There has to be an active engagement of the mind with what is being said on the screen. It is not being told in the narration, 'now you do this'. There is no prescription in my film. I think people can see it as a viewpoint of some person. Whether they agree with it or not agree with it, it will add something to their thought process.

I don't want to make a prescriptive *film*, where people come and get a blue print of what is to be done. That would be very presumptuous on my part. Who am I to dictate to people what they should do with their lives? But it's just the kind of a worldview, which comes from watching the films that could trigger off something in somebody, or a recognition of something they are already feeling *(Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview)*.
The focus group members, however, ask for solutions, and see the lack of alternatives as a flaw.

What is the alternative they are asking for, that he has not dealt with a little too. What is the alternative that they are asking? There is no solution given. There is no perspective given at all.
(response by a computer engineer to *A Narmada Diary*)

Maybe it could have provided some alternatives as well, as to what we can do about it. After a while it seemed monotonous. Maybe if the alternatives were shown, it would have been better.
(responses by the students of social work to *Lesser Humans*)

Most of what is shown in the film, we already know. Like in projects like these all this pollution and problems are there. But ultimately what happens?
The problem of the last 40 odd years is being shown in the film, what about the solution?.
Everybody is complaining about the problem, but what about the solution. What is to be done about it? That is more important.
(responses by the environmental scientists to *Chaliyar*)

The despair felt by several members of the audiences, especially in response to Stalin's *Lesser Humans*, could be one reason that prompts the demand for solutions. ‘For me, again the same sense of despair. I can’t do anything about it. That is disturbing’, ‘What can and should be done about the issue? Some arguments should have been there. It was an absolute dead-end. Like this is how it is and this is how it will be. The despair. That feels very bad. It will lead to despair among those who do this work'- responses like these reflect that the feeling of despair and helplessness seem to swamp the audience, who convert this into a demand for solutions from the films. However, the filmmakers' agenda of sensitization, a non-tangible and often, non-verifiable agenda, precludes the onus of providing solutions in their films.  
I don't know whether the film can always provide solutions or answers or always give hope or give a direction to any kind of action. I think if it is a starting point to make you think or question or makes you a little more sensitive to certain situations, I think even that is something. But I would be interested to know how it is being used in the area
itself and what people there think about the film (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

One tends to attribute lots more power of behavioural change to film, I don't know for what reason. For instance, one does not raise the question, what is the purpose of reading this poem? Ok, you have read me this poem, what do you expect me to do now? Why don’t they ask, what does the MTV expect us to do? So they have a feeling that the film is supposed to do something to them. Probably they expect that hard-core development communication expects you to change your behaviour. If you don't, then something is wrong with the film (K.P.Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview).

Filmmaker Jayasankar’s opinion about the expectation of the audiences of the alternative documentary to provide solutions, affords a context within which this demand of the audiences can be located.

How could these two diametrically opposite opinions be reconciled? What is the possible interface between the filmmaker's agenda and the viewer’s demand? These questions remain unexplored as yet, while the notion of documentary desire itself is just beginning to be talked about in contemporary documentary theory.