CHAPTER 8: A CONCLUSION

Representation in the post-colonial world has moved from exclusively focusing on the West’s representation of the East, to looking inwards at the inequities in one’s own society. Post-colonial criticism focuses on the ‘fluid, unstable nature of the personal and gender identity’ of authors, and their multiple allegiances and contradictions that manifest in their representations of the historical world. The texts, therefore, are sites where ideological struggles are carried out (Barry, 1995). My aim was to explore the alternative documentary in India along these lines.

This study of the post-Emergency, independent documentary in India is located at the interface between contemporary documentary theory from the West, and theories of an alternative development. While the word ‘alternative’ has been used to refer to these films, the study critically interrogates the alternative/mainstream dichotomy. Close readings of the 10 chosen films, in-depth interviews with filmmakers, and focus group discussions with different audiences, were the methods used in the text-author-audience approach to my study.

The exploration of the filmmakers’ agendas reveals their pre-occupation with the historical and systematic denial of rights to certain sections of the Indian society. The filmmakers see their films as opening up democratic spaces for marginalized voices. That video can be used as a weapon to address social inequities emerges as the underlying belief. The problematic of representation, in this attempt to marry art and activism, is highlighted. The examination of ‘representation’, in its multiple connotations, provides some critical insights into documentary realism and the truth-claims, which the
alternative documentary fosters. The recourse the films take to testimony in their agenda of persuasion is critiqued in light of audience responses. It is observed that realism, along with testimony, is instrumental in encouraging the viewer to look at the documentary as truth. By ideologically and politically representing the voice of marginalized people, the alternative documentaries present themselves as narratives of an unequal development. They critique the flawed developmental policies of the state, which systematically disenfranchise certain sections of Indian society. Big dams, polluting industries, violent population control policies, and state apathy towards an inhuman profession like human scavenging, these are some of the issues that these films deal with, to make a larger argument about the failure of development as envisioned by the state.

An examination of the contentious issue of representing the ‘other’, and the related concerns of stereotyping, self-representation, and location of the filmmaker, reveals the strategies that the alternative documentary in India deploys to argue its case. 'Caricature' emerges as one dominant strategy of the films. The focus group discussions reveal that by resorting to caricatures, the films could, unintentionally, encourage oppositional readings. Certain representational practices adopted by these films result in continuing the marginalization of their subjects and denying them any agency. Further research on this question is required to fully understand the ramifications of this statement.

I propose that empathy and realism are two distinct modes with which the audiences engage with the alternative documentary. Knowledge manifests as a nebulous concept, and correspondingly the notion of epistephilia, or pleasure of knowing, gets re-defined. I also suggest that objectivity and solutions are two demands that the audiences
make on the alternative documentary, conflicting with the filmmakers’ own positions on these issues. This break between the making and the reception of these films needs to be substantiated by farther research.

The large number of alternative documentaries being produced in the country is an indication that these issues are being constantly confronted and addressed by filmmakers, audiences, non-governmental sectors and students of communication. So while the production of the alternative documentary seems to be thriving in India, their dissemination leaves much to be desired. The issue of dissemination of the alternative documentary in India needs to be addressed, if the potential of the alternative documentary in India is to be fully exploited.

**Addressing dissemination**

The question of language, the question of really getting across, the question of knowing where your film is going... Though we sell so many copies, we don’t really have a clue as to who is seeing our films and what they are doing with it, and whether they are using it or not or whether they are stuck in some cupboard of some university libraries (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview).

It is an acknowledged fact that across the world, documentary watching is significantly less when compared to television programmes or fiction film. The differences in the scale of production, distribution and the infrastructure in place for mainstream, audio-visual material should be considered, while taking a critical look at the dissemination of the alternative documentary. The filmmakers and the focus groups interviewed for the study articulate the need for a wider screening of these films. The interviews with the filmmakers reveal that they are aware that their films do not reach adequate ‘numbers’. Two dimensions emerge in this problem of dissemination: lack of access to these films, and lack of interest in audiences to watch these films.
You have no choice but to reach out to people. Through the mainstream, narrowcasting, door-to-door selling of video cassettes, the internet, film festivals…you have to do it (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

The absence of an organized distribution network for these films is one of the main reasons why the screenings remain a sporadic activity. This issue is dealt with a little later in the chapter.

Finding an audience for the alternative documentary

While one can conceive of audiences for fiction films and specific television categories (like the soap-operas, or reality shows, or news, or documentaries on wild life or art), who exactly is a ‘natural’ audience for an alternative documentary? This important question has not been addressed yet in contemporary documentary theory. And it is the answer to this question that will allow for new strategies to emerge for a more widespread dissemination of these films.

When you are showing the film, it does matter who is showing the film and under what circumstances it is being shown. Because they are not just films which you show and disappear and never come back and see the people again. If there are groups which are working with people, and then they are shown as one of the many things that they are doing, when there is an ongoing interaction, then these films are the most useful. Where organisations which are already working, say women's groups or whatever, there is ongoing contact with the people, where there will be follow-up, then these films will be most meaningful. Or in schools and colleges where some of the teachers are already talking about some of these issues (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interviews)

The more visible spaces where alternative documentaries are screened are film-festivals, colleges and university campuses, and by NGOs and grassroots organizations in their adopted villages or during seminars.

Film festivals are normally restricted to annual or bi-annual affairs, which means that the audiences there are exposed to a few documentaries, for a week or so, once or
twice a year. So they don’t make for a significant audience community in terms of numbers.

This opinion is seconded by responses from the focus groups like:

What happens with a film like this? Nothing. If we take a camera to these people and record what they say, how will it benefit them? It gets shown only in film-festivals. (Ravi, post-graduate student of development communication, responding to *Lesser Humans*)

But filmmakers consider the film-festival as only one of the avenues that is available to them to screen their films, but not necessarily the most significant. As filmmaker Stalin puts it:

I feel the only place that comes last for me is festivals. If you ask me to prioritize my preferences for screenings, I would put Doordarshan with all the cuts and the advertisements much before the single showing in festivals. Because I know that in festivals all my filmmaker friends, who are already oriented towards an alternative vision of development will watch the films. Some buyers who wish to take the film to Amsterdam or Germany will be there. Or maybe I will get some telecast royalty, and I will be able to make another film out of it, yes. But that is not my priority. I would much rather take the video and go to the villages and show it there. Show it to schools, colleges and groups like that. Show it to housewives' associations and my parents and people like that. And put it on TV. And then it is ok, if it also gets screened in a film-festival, I would put it that way (Stalin, filmmaker, personal interview).

That ‘numbers’ do matter is clear from filmmaker Stalin’s opinion about whom he wants his audiences to be. Be it privileged spaces like film-festivals, or international funding agencies, or mainstream spaces like television and classrooms, the filmmakers desire that as many people watch their film, as possible. However, the mainstream audiences or ‘unconverted’ audiences, are the ones they would prioritize over exclusive, ‘converted’ audiences.

In University campuses, keeping with Bill Nichols' (1991) definition of the documentary as a ‘discourse in sobriety’, disciplines concerned with literary, political and cultural theory might organize screenings of these films to supplement their courses or
for their seminars. So, the audiences in university campuses are students who have to watch the films as part of their course-work, or students who are already initiated into political theory. The audiences can be compared to the focus groups in the study for whom film screenings were organised. The audiences in the campuses too, come together to watch the film under the aegis of a particular educational system, and the watching is not on a continuous, informal basis, but is a more intermittent, formal activity. While the ‘numbers’ are fairly higher when compared to the film festivals, still they remain as few as, say, the readers of specialized books on political or literary theory. Filmmaker Madhushree Dutta is the only one of the filmmakers interviewed who opines that the alternative documentaries need to be seen as ‘protest films’, like there is protest literature or protest music. The difference in the reach of mainstream audio-visual material and the alternative documentary that a viewer has access ensures that ‘the fight is not among equals’. She conceives as her audience as anyone for whom the film ‘works’, and that it is a ‘cultural illiteracy’ being propagated by the state and the market, which doesn’t encourage a viewer to be interested in watching documentaries.

NGOs and other grassroots initiatives like women’s groups and NSMs use these documentaries for sensitization and mobilization purposes. But what has not been researched into is how regularly and extensively are these films being used. Several cynical views are expressed by focus group members and filmmakers about the use of these films by the NGO sector and other organizations. Filmmaker Deepa Dhanraj, in her interview, alludes to the fact that it angers her to see how some NGOs are using alternative films for post-dinner screenings.
So, finding and sustaining an audience for the alternative documentary emerges as one critical issue that needs to be addressed, if the scale of their dissemination has to increase. The absence of a well-entrenched distribution network is keenly felt by all the filmmakers, most of whom are disseminators of the alternative documentary as well.

Filmmaker Madhushree Dutta, among other filmmakers, rues the fact that there is no support structure that allows for a sustained distribution of these films.

I work on distribution of films as well. I network with colleges and show around some films. I conduct workshops as well. But it is a huge task. Because showing one or two films is not enough at all. Discussions must follow the screenings. And even extended screenings are not enough. Because to sustain their interest, the screenings must be a regular feature. Actually, the culture of film watching must change. This is very important. It is a very prolonged task. So a supporting system must emerge for the filmmakers. It should include networking and taking around documentaries on a sustained basis (Madhushree Dutta, Filmmaker, personal interview)

Narrowcasting and broadcasting

The importance that filmmakers give to dissemination can be seen from the fact that they invest a lot of time and energy into screening their films. Sarat Chandran shows alternative documentaries to people in the villages of Kerala. The method he employs is that he screens a feature film, a classic, for which the audience has to pay a fee of one rupee. Before the main film is screened, the alternative documentary is screened. Or sometimes, a traveling documentary festival is organized and tours from village to village. This is similar to the video-jathas that filmmaker Anand Patwardhan organizes, where the main focus is to screen the alternative documentary in as many places as possible. This kind of dissemination, a form of narrowcasting, requires very minimal and mobile infrastructure. But the reach it might have may be limited, as recognized by the filmmakers.
I did it [video jathas] myself sometime and then along with other people like the KSSP in Kerala, the Tamil Nadu science forum and the BGVS, literacy movement. They are mostly fun. They are very concentrated screenings, 4 to 5 locations in one day. Screenings followed by discussions over a period of 10 days or two weeks. So it is covering quite a spectrum.

I don't want to exaggerate about the numbers we are reaching. They are still very small. I think all my films are terribly under-utilized. Because there is only so much...I mean, I am making the films as well and I can't spend all my time showing them. And there are not enough groups taking this job seriously, of showing them (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

While narrowcasting itself is spoken of as a more effective means of communication and a more satisfying experience of relating to audiences, the filmmakers acknowledge the power of the mainstream mass media to reach those big 'numbers'.

Talking of his film Ram ke Naam, shown on prime time television, as a case in point, Patwardhan opines that:

When Ram ke Naam was shown on television, finally after winning the court case and they had ratings which were published later. They had 18%. Now 18% for a documentary is higher than most of the serials, because nowadays there are so many channels and to get 18% of the people watching one programme without switching it off. That itself is unusual. Now multiply that 18 with the number of television watchers in our country and you get a huge number. I could never reach that figure taking my projector and showing that film. I could live for a thousand years and not reach that kind of audience (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

As with other totalistic dichotomies critiqued earlier in the thesis, from these responses of the filmmakers it can be understood that in the debate on dissemination, it is not a question of broadcasting versus narrowcasting that needs to be addressed. The dichotomy is not recognized by the filmmakers in the study as sacrosanct. Their willingness to exploit any avenue available for them to screen their films is evident from the interviews.
The focus group discussions reveal that the respondents, by and large, agree that these films should be shown extensively if at all any perceptible change should come about in the attitudes of people.

Please do something about showing the film, mainly it should be showed to students. Even if the views in the film are conveyed precisely and correctly to a single audience at a time, it will be very good. Please make such films and show them to everybody.

(responses by the right-wing students to *I Live In Behrampada*).

These responses by a group of right-wing graduate students to a film dealing with a sensitive issue like the Hindu-Muslim, post-riot situation in a minority locality should be encouraging indeed for the filmmakers, and shows the potential that the alternative documentary has for effective persuasion. The audiences who empathized with the films articulated the strongest opinions that alternative documentaries needed to be shown to as many audiences as possible, and the responses that substantiate this are provided below.

The members of the welfare group, employed in educating children in leprosy colonies, rickshaw pullers colonies, minority institutions, etc were unanimous in their opinion that films like *When Women Unite* (which was screened for them), should be shown to the women in these colonies, because the women would identify closely with what is shown in the film.

It is very important to show the women in our colonies such films. There are twenty members in my savings group, they will like to watch such a film. In fact, if you can bring the TV and VCR, we promise you that we will arrange many groups of women and children to watch it. They will all come. We will take the responsibility. Of course, they may not tell the men what the film is about. They might just say, a cinema is being shown. The men will feel threatened if they say it is a film about what the women did in Nellore. They will be scared that these women may also do it!

(responses by the welfare workers to *When Women Unite*).
This seems to support filmmaker Shabnam Virmani’s aim to use her films for horizontally linking with grassroots women’s groups across the country, and to build coalitions for similar causes. It also echoes the opinion that filmmakers hold about the potential of the documentary to help empower audiences to take control of their lives.

The group of feminists in my study, speculated how an audience, ideologically different from them, like a group of doctors or a group of management professionals, would react to a film like Something Like a War, which challenges the dominant rhetoric of population control in the Third World. Other responses about whom the alternative documentaries are meant for, reveal a whole range of suggestions, from the marginalized people themselves to the urban, educated strata, to politicians and policy makers. The ‘target audience’ of a documentary often became a point of debate among the members of a focus group.

Anand Patwardhan asserts that he does not make films for any ‘target audience’. His films are aimed at ‘all of India specifically and the rest of the world incidentally’. Filmmaker K.P.Jayasankar suggests in his interview that the whole terminology of ‘target audiences’ itself is problematic. What is more important is to understand how different audiences read media messages, irrespective of who they are. He believes that ‘all kinds of people, at all kinds of level’ offer resistance to dominant relations of power in several ways, and one needs to identify these resistances and strengthen them. Anjali Monteiro seconds his opinion that even the so-called mainstream material has subversive potential, including soap operas and advertisements. On the flip-side, the so-called alternative images get appropriated by the mainstream television channels for their own. These two factors call for a renewed interrogation of the mainstream/alternative divide.
Mainstreaming the ‘alternative’

Documentary as a form is getting redundant... we have to acknowledge this. It’s already happening in the West. Networks have taken over, there is no funding. There is no space, audiences are disinterested. In a sense, we are embattled, besieged. Till a few years ago, we were lucky there was no cable TV. Now audiences are in a consumption mode, whatever they see, it is for that moment, they consume it. We cannot make films, educate audiences and get them to see it (Deepa Dhanraj, filmmaker, personal interview).

Filmmaker Deepa Dhanraj’s opinion, expressed above, provides the context for the question ‘what is really alternative’, in today’s world. One needs to address the reality of a global village subsuming every ‘alternative’ space, especially in the light of rapidly evolving communication technologies, economic liberalization and the opening up of private television channels in India. This makes the contemporary media scenario in India a totally different historical reality than it was 25 years ago.

Clarifying the issue of disinterested audiences, an opinion held by filmmakers and the focus group respondents, filmmaker Jayasankar mentions that ‘strategies’ need to be invented by the filmmakers of the alternative documentary to maximize the ‘limited spaces’ available to show the film.

The spaces for showing them [the audiences] your film is very limited. When you do show it to them, how do you get them to watch it? We need to invent strategies. I don’t know what type of strategies. The other thing which has to co-exist with this initiative is some kind of media education, to get people empowered to view these images critically. (Jayasankar, filmmaker, personal interview)

Addressing the question of media education, filmmakers Anjali Monteiro and Jayasankar emphasise the need to empower audiences to look critically at media messages, alternative and otherwise. They make the pertinent observation that media education is probably the most required tool, which will help audiences to say ‘no’ to
certain kind of images. And this media education must be systematically imparted in classrooms, through schools and colleges.

A large part of alternative media has to be media education, and critiquing the so-called mainstream, as well as the alternative. Not just the mainstream, necessarily. But looking critically at media images, reflecting on what they are doing to the viewer, reflecting on how one is using them, reflecting on how they relate to the larger power relations that are in place...the process of looking at them as constructions and not as reflections of reality. It is very important to institutionalize this and have media education on the curriculum of schools and collages. But unfortunately, that is not something that people are talking very much about (Anjali Monteiro, filmmaker, personal interview)

Along with audience empowerment and invention of new strategies that would get the audiences interested in watching the alternative documentaries, I suggest that the making and distribution of these films need to be organically and systematically linked, especially in the light of my proposition that the alternative documentary in India has no claims to a ‘natural’ audience. Since every screening of any alternative film would involve bringing together an audience, the dissemination networks need to be organized formally and through pre-existing infrastructure like schools and colleges, involving teachers, campus fraternities and, as is being attempted already, grassroots organizations.

While this suggestion does not in any way imply that the making and dissemination activities are divorced now, it is quite evident that the scale of this kind of dissemination is sporadic and inadequate. However, it seems a tall order to expect filmmakers to be involved in the making of these films, educating the audiences, and getting them to watch the films. What would be the way out of this impasse? The break between the making of these films and their distribution is indeed vast. Concerted efforts in the past like those by Odessa in South India or Netwaves in Bangalore haven’t been too successful in sustaining regular and systematic dissemination of the alternative documentary. Now, after more than 25 years since the alternative documentary in India
was pioneered by Anand Patwardhan, it wouldn't be too soon to say that the objective of persuading people to rethink development through film cannot be fully achieved without ensuring proper dissemination of alternative documentaries.

By focusing on the alternative documentary of India, this study has tried to examine some questions of ideology, representation, identity, aesthetics, and meaning, with respect to a select sample of films. Like the films themselves, this study too might seem to raise more questions than it answers. However, it stands as an exploratory attempt to dissect the tradition of alternative documentary in our country.