CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The study

This study focuses on a particular tradition of documentaries in India that seeks to challenge the hegemonic model of national development, promoted aggressively by the state in post-independent India, and absorbed into the collective unconscious of the educated Indian citizen. Variously referred to as 'independent' or 'political' or 'committed' documentaries, these films\(^1\) try to articulate marginalized voices in society and are committed to social equity. They offer narratives of an alternative development paradigm, calling for participatory, people-centered initiatives of development from the grassroots, while questioning teleological and ahistorical theories of development.

Development thinking in the post-War years resulted in the emergence of the dominant paradigm of development. This paradigm, which gained currency during the 1960s, called for a capital-intensive and economics-centered development of the masses. The mass media were hailed as the magic multipliers of development, which could have a powerful effect on a largely passive people. However, as the Western-style modernization project started running into trouble in the 1970s and 1980s, this dominant paradigm of development came under attack and an alternative paradigm of ‘real’ development(s) emerged. This called for a holistic and pluralistic approach towards development, with participation of the people. People were recognized as active agents of change rather than as passive recipients of development benefits. The role of the media too was re-conceptualized. The video emerged as a powerful tool for transporting local

\(^1\) In this study, the terms 'documentaries' and 'films' are used interchangeably, unless specific mention is made of fiction film or short film.
experiences because it supported a high level of participation. And it is this tool that the alternative documentary in India seeks to exploit.

**Historically,** the documentary has been pre-occupied with depicting the 'real' world, rather than the 'imaginary' world of fiction film. Given the documentary's preoccupation with 'reality', contemporary documentary theory problematizes the notions of the fictional and the real. The history of the documentary film reveals its social motive. The status that the documentary occupies as a 'discourse in sobriety' (Nichols, 1991:3), and the ideological pedestal it assumes are critiqued by several theorists like Michael Renov, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Bill Nichols, Anjali Monteiro and K.P.Jayasankar. Among the important and contentious issues that emerge in this critique are those of definition, representation, self-representation, objectivity, reflexivity, and documentary desire. An understanding of the history of and trends in documentary making are vital in order to comprehend the constantly evolving position that the documentary occupies in the world of film.

India remains a prolific producer of the independent or alternative documentary, especially from the late 1970s. In keeping with the shift in the concept of development, the alternative documentary in India found its niche as the voice of the marginalized sections in society who were bypassed in the benefits of development. These films seek to be of, by, and for disenfranchised groups like the adivasis, the poor, women and the minorities, who are at the receiving end of an unsustainable paradigm of development.

This study critically examines alternative documentaries in India in light of contemporary documentary theory, as well as contemporary development theory. Any
understanding of these documentaries calls for a reconciliation of these two fields of study.

Bill Nichols (1991) suggests a framework to examine the terrain of documentary. His three-pronged approach deals with the documentary as constituted by

a) a community of practitioners,

b) a corpus of texts, and

c) a constituency of viewers

The current study adopts this text-author-audience framework to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of alternative documentaries in India. Two dominant concerns addressed here are: one, what is a documentary? And two, what are the various implications of using the word ‘alternative’ to describe the documentaries analysed in the study.

From an initial inquiry into the *raison d’etre* of these films to the kinds of meanings that could be drawn from the text, the study seeks to locate the alternative documentaries in India within the conceptual topographies proposed by various theorists in the field. Crucial questions of definition, agenda, representation, documentary desire, objectivity and reflexivity are examined from the points of view of the filmmakers and the audiences. In addition, by analyzing the texts, I seek to interrogate the label of ‘alternative’ itself, which is used to describe these films.
The documentary: a clarification

Documentaries are, as it is, outside the mainstream, as not many people are documentary watchers (Anand Patwardhan, filmmaker, personal interview).

Documentaries are considered a marginal province in the area of film studies. Theorists and practitioners acknowledge that the term ‘documentary’ is more often than not ridden with several stereotypical connotations, and is clearly constructed as something different from mainstream cinema. Various attempts have been made to understand and define this mode of filmmaking.

Definitions seek to isolate an essential characteristic that is common to all members in the genre. There have been many attempts to define the documentary, which continues to persist as a fairly distinct tradition in filmmaking from the early 1920s. But increasingly, there is a growing resistance to the pigeonholing of films into fixed and often synthetic genres. Postmodern theorists reject the imposition of artificial categories, which perceive the world as classified into rigid compartments. Eschewing the notion of the documentary as a genre in filmmaking, contemporary documentary theorists like Michael Renov, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Bill Nichols critique the practice or tradition of the documentary.

An understanding of how the documentary has been perceived historically is important for any attempt to re-conceptualize the documentary. The root of the term ‘documentary’ lies in the Latin docere, which means ‘to teach’. It was in the 19th century that the term documentary came to refer to material, which could be used as evidence, as opposed to hearsay or opinion. The word documentary was first used as an adjective, casually by John Grierson, in his review of Robert Flaherty's film Moana in 1926 in the
**New York Sun:** ‘Of course, *Moana* being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family, has documentary value’ (cited in Ellis, 1989:4). Grierson’s usage of the term was probably with reference to the modern meaning of the word ‘document’ as standing for a factual or authentic record. This connotation of the word finds resonance in the commonsensical understanding of the documentary.

Jack Ellis (1989) writes that the documentary idea as a technique and style of presenting the world in a sober and realistic fashion has its precursors in photography, radio and literature from the 19th century. Be it capturing photographic documentation of important world events, or analytical and informative capsules made for the radio or non-fiction literature or analytical journalism, the same philosophical principles that drive documentary film have been known to drive these other media too. However, the term ‘documentary’ in itself came to refer exclusively to the documentary film, and finds a place in the dictionary as the primary meaning of the word.

**Early definitions**

Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* made in 1922 is regarded as the first English documentary made. Frances Flaherty, who helped her husband make the film, refers to their work as ‘the film of discovery and revelation’ (cited in Ellis, 1989: 5). The primary concern was what the camera could discover and reveal, and Flaherty’s films bear testimony to this. Even as late as in 1800, the Oxford English Dictionary spoke of the word 'documentary' as ‘a lesson; an admonition, a warning'. And it is to this definition that John Grierson would eventually move on to talk about the documentary as the cinema that taught people and helped the cause of social democracy (Ellis, 1989).
Hailing the documentary as the cinema with a social purpose, early filmmakers like Dziga Vertov, John Grierson and Paul Rotha spoke of the documentary as the alternative to the escapist and fantastic spectacles called fiction film. So, the starting point for most of the early definitions is seeing documentary as non-fiction and non-narrative cinema. This came about largely because of the positing of documentary against fiction film. Dissociation from the Hollywood-style of high drama and glamorous make-believe seems to be one of the earliest distinctions, which many documentary filmmakers sought to emphasise. In several of the early references to documentary, the term non-fiction is used as a synonym for documentary.

Traditionally, 'actuality' was seen as the most important distinguishing characteristic between the fiction film and the documentary. One of the earliest definitions of the documentary is provided by John Grierson, who refers to the documentary as the ‘creative treatment of actuality'. Paul Rotha, in a more elaborate definition of the documentary, refers to it as ‘the use of the film medium to interpret creatively and in social terms the life of the people as it exists in reality' (cited in Ellis, 1989:5). So, whether the term used is actuality or reality, the emphasis is on distinguishing this body of work from the non-real or imaginary world of fiction film.

Calling the attempts at definition ‘distressingly vague’, Raymond Spottiswoode writes that the documentary

... is in subject and approach a dramatized presentation of man's relation to his institutional life, whether industrial, social, or political; and in technique, a subordination of form to content (cited in Platinga, 1997: 13).

The above definition sets the stage for debate on the anti-aesthetic in the documentary by suggesting that form is more important than content. This argument will
be examined in Chapter 6 of the study. This idea of the documentary is considered too prescriptive and excludes personal films and experimental films. However, it is one definition that is in synchronization with at least some contemporary definitions of the documentary. Bill Nichols, for instance, characterizes the documentary as a film that revolves around one informing logic, 'a representation, case or argument about the world, explicitly or implicitly' (Nichols, 1991: 112).

Documentary as not non-fiction

Documentary filmmakers since Flaherty’s Nanook have frequently chosen to build stories around the heroics of larger-than-life figures plucked from their ‘real’ environs (Michael Renov, 1993: 6).

Debunking the traditional notion of documentary as non-fiction, Renov (1993) asserts that documentaries 'narrativize the real'. He says that history shows that the documentary consistently makes use of every cinematic device which fiction film is known to use. So, the documentary is as much a story, as much a cinematic construct, as a fiction film. He contends that whether fictional or not, the documentary is definitely ‘at least fictive* and takes recourse to tempering 'reality' with creative imagination. This view of documentaries as constructed stories just like their mainstream counterparts is a crucial turn around from the traditional definitions of the documentary.

This perspective will help to re-examine the philosophical basis of why and how documentaries are made and used. Hayden White reaffirms Renov's opinion by suggesting that the documentary like every other discourse constitutes those objects, which it purports to 'realistically' describe and 'objectively' analyze (cited in Renov: 1993). Inherent in this suggestion is the idea that the documentary attempts to represent the 'real' and to also 'objectively' analyze this reality. White goes on to
challenge these claims by saying that every mimesis or imitation can be distorted to describe the same phenomenon in several ways. And so the documentary, which is an audio-visual signifier, merely re-presents reality and does not represent it. And this representing involves various choices made voluntarily and involuntarily, like the lens used, the shots, the language, the editing and so on. Similar to the choices made by a filmmaker for a mainstream film, a documentary too involves a process of selection and rejection. Both, therefore, are texts created by the filmmaker.

Central to this argument is an exploration of what is reality. Mainstream cinema is considered fiction because it is made up of stories fabricated for the screen, whereas the referent in a documentary is seen as a piece of the world. But this piece of the world is, as Renov puts it, ‘plucked from its everyday context’, decontextualizing the referent from its context (Renov, 1993).

Historically, claims were made to accord the photograph the status of scientific evidence, calling it a fully indexical sign of the ‘real’. Correspondingly, the photograph was spoken of as verifiable evidence, like the reading of a barometer or thermometer. It is this claim that is called upon to legitimize documentary footage as real, and not fiction. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1993) opines that these claims, which attribute to the documentary the power to capture ‘reality out there for us in here’, have to be rigorously questioned on philosophical and political grounds. She challenges John Grierson’s claim about the documentary ‘opening up the screen on the real world’ saying that whatever a documentary claims as real or the truth is, in fact, just a meaning, an interpretation of what is. So, the documentary is not more ‘real’ than a feature film.
In a significant understanding about the documentary, Nichols (1991) considers the documentary film as a ‘discourse in sobriety’, along with politics, economics, education and religion, all of which seek to 'effect action and entail consequences'. These are some of the systems, which assume the mantle of instrumental power and claim that they can and should alter the world as they see it. The idea is an important one as it implies a motive to the documentary and documentary makers. This serves as a point for rigorous interrogation in understanding documentary today. The documentary in the privileged status as a domain of truth is what needs to be critiqued. Believing in their ability to directly and transparently reflect the real world, the films assume the responsibility of making things happen, without taking recourse to ‘make-believe’ characters or situations. While the docu-drama or the fictionalizing documentary is here to stay, the crux of the argument is not so much whether the footage is 'real' or staged footage. It is the rooting of the documentary in the historical world, through its indexical representations and the truth-claims this fosters, that needs to be critiqued.

The thrust of contemporary documentary theory has been to resolve the position of the documentary vis a vis mainstream cinema. Documentary theory also explores the notion of documentary desire. Like film theory devotes much of its time to examine fiction films in relation to the spectator, the documentary too is critiqued in the context of the demands it makes on its audience and the expectations the audience makes of it. This idea is explored in Chapter 7 of the thesis.

Beyond definitions

Historically, the attempts to define art have been unsuccessful, and correspondingly so have the attempts to define the documentary. The elusive concept of
art defies any comprehensive definition. Plato’s definition of art as ‘an imitation of life’ seems more a broad description of the essence of art and not so much a definition delineating its essential characteristics. Weitz (cited in Platinga, 1997) argues that art is an open concept, which has no essence and hence cannot be defined in a traditional sense. While one might find overlapping similarities or ‘family resemblances' among the members of the said art form, there is no inherent common essence or property, which can be isolated to define them. The boundaries are indeed blurred and increasingly so, with the very concept of a genre being challenged in the various fields of literature, music, and dance, as also in film. Cultural studies as a discipline has come to interrogate the validity and credibility of compartmentalizing art forms within fixed boundaries.

The documentary may also be thought of as being an open concept, one that resists any traditional attempt at definition. The impossibility of categorizing them under formal definitions comes to the fore, when the attempted definitions are subject to close scrutiny. Several attempts have been made to define the documentary systematically and within boundaries. Along with the understanding that traditional definitions would fail to comprehensively describe the documentary, it is also important to know that what makes the attempts at definition meaningful is that they serve to highlight the pattern of ‘family resemblances' that documentaries might share. Understanding these attempts would help focus on important characteristics about the documentary, and also serve as interrogating factors to address commonsensical notions about the documentary.

Multiple topographies

While shunning definitive and formal definitions of the documentary, multiple topographies have been proposed by theorists in the field to facilitate a historical
understanding of the documentary tradition. In order to comprehend the terrain of documentary, it is important to understand its history, and the trends that have persisted within the documentary along the years.

Jack Ellis (1989) classifies the creative modes in film as the documentary, the narrative fiction, and the experimental avant-garde. In an attempt to define the documentary, he suggests that narrative fiction would refer to the feature-length entertainmetn cinema that grew out of literary and theatrical traditions, while the experimental avant-garde cinema would be the short film shown in non-theatrical societies and campuses or museums, grown out of the tradition of visual arts. And the documentary could be described as being different from the above two in terms of a) the subjects b) the purposes, points of view or approaches c) the forms d) the production methods and techniques, and e) the sorts of experiences they offer audiences.

These distinctions are particularly true vis a vis fiction film, according to Ellis. Documentaries are seen as films more pre-occupied with specific and factual public matters rather than private ones, and they deal with actual people, places and events, usually contemporary to the times of the documentary being filmed. In contrast, fiction film deals with the human relationships and individual actions. Attributing a motive to these filmmakers, Ellis asserts that they seek to record and interpret events in the actual world, so that the viewer may be persuaded to hold a specific attitude or take some action in relation to the subjects of the documentary. The filmmakers would also wish to further the understanding, interest and, in many cases the sympathy of the viewer towards the subjects, and hope to enable the viewers to live their lives 'a little more fully and intelligently' (Ellis, 1989:2). This motive attributed by Ellis to the filmmakers needs a
closer scrutiny. It takes the argument into the problematic realm of the intent of the filmmaker. Chapter 4 addresses the question of the filmmaker's agenda.

About the form of the documentary as another distinguishing characteristic, Ellis writes that documentaries are derived from and limited to actuality, and essentially are re-arrangements or re-creations of what exists rather than what is imagined. And this holds true whether the documentaries are spontaneous recordings of events or whether they are scripted in advance. About the production methods and techniques employed by the documentary, the use of non-actors stands out. Non-actors refer to 'real people playing themselves' rather than actors who are 'cast, costumed and made up to play roles' (Ellis, 1989: 3). Lighting and sets are not elaborately constructed to create an imaginary locale, but most of the shooting is on location and additional use of light of properties is mostly to make the result closer to what is actually present. The audience experience that the documentary seeks to provide is an aesthetic experience of some sort, and an effect on attitudes, possibly leading to action. The documentary aesthetic offers a beauty different and more austere than that in fiction films, and the tendency is to keep the form sparse and functional. The documentary offers the filmmaker a greater scope for a professional style rather than a personal one. And correspondingly, the viewer responds to the documentary not so much as an aesthetic visual text or the artist who made it, but more to the subject matter in it (Ellis, 1989).

This understanding of the documentary proposed by Jack Ellis would seem to interface well with the commonsensical notions of the documentary that one might have. All the observations comply with the often-observed characteristics one might associate with the documentary. While these observations would serve to further a general
understanding of the documentary, several of the propositions cannot be accepted uncritically. This is specially so in view of the postmodern critique of a 'genre' (as mentioned before) and the blurred boundaries between fiction and the documentary and as the avant-garde or experimental film. In fact, most of these defining characteristics would be invalid with the variety of work being attempted today in the documentary tradition.

Instead of essentializing the documentary, Renov and Nichols refer to the fundamental tendencies and modes of representation, respectively, which can be seen in the documentary. These topographies throw open the understanding of the documentary text as seen in relation to the historical world, rather than through characteristics which can be isolated from the documentaries themselves. They are more open-ended in that a critique is built into them.

Renov (1993) proposes that aesthetic forms must be submitted to ‘rigorous investigation as to their composition, function and effect’. He attributes four fundamental tendencies to the documentary practice, which are:

a) to record, reveal, or preserve
b) to persuade or promote
c) to analyze or interrogate, and
d) to express

Clarifying that these tendencies are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and nor are they required to be integrated into an ideal balance to make a good documentary, Renov says that these four functions operate as modalities of desire, or impulses which fuel the documentary discourse. History will reveal that the documentary has continued to
respond to these tendencies, and that each of them seeks to further an agenda. From the actualities of the Lumière brothers, which marked the beginning of film, to anthropology’s attempts to capture on film the aboriginal ‘other’, the impulse of the documentary to freeze what it saw as the real world on film is evident. The documentary seems to have a strong motivation to exploit the power of the camera to capture the real world and preserve it.

The tendency of the documentary to persuade is clearly visible, be it in the 20th century work of John Grierson or any of the political documentaries made today seeking to mobilize public opinion for a particular cause. The social motive that is historically ascribed to the documentary bears testimony to the intrinsic tendency of the documentary to persuade or promote an agenda. The tendency of a documentary to analyze and interrogate stems directly from the earlier two tendencies. The documentary interrogates the cause and effect of a particular issue, and seeks to persuade the viewer with a rational analysis, which would hold a deep-rooted cerebral appeal to the viewer. In the context of documentary desire, analysis and interrogation remain as the crucial allies of the documentary. Expression or the aesthetic is yet another tendency that fuels the documentary. Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North, acknowledged as the first English documentary made, has a strong aesthetic, with both ‘verbal and imagistic expressions’. Historically, it can be seen that in the documentary tradition, form has always been subservient to content. The ‘Western’ duality of art-science or truth-beauty has contributed greatly to the repression of the expression in the documentary. However the communicative aim of the documentary, as also its tendency to persuade, often calls for
more attention to its expressive dimension. The endeavor is to facilitate ‘a pleasurable learning’.

Bill Nichols (1991) suggests the four modes of representation around which the documentary text is structured - the expository, the observational, the interactive, and the reflexive modes. These modes are basic ways of organizing the text in relation to certain patterns or conventions, which recur in a documentary.

a) *The expositor’s mode*, which emerged as a reaction to the distracting and entertaining elements of fiction film, sought to unveil information about the real, historical world. It addresses the viewer directly and tries to persuade the viewer about an argument it is making about the historical world. At once romantic and didactic, the films of Flaherty and Grierson, among others, sought to use the voice-over (the so-called ‘Voice-of God’), often masculine and authoritative mode of addressing the viewer, along with poetic narratives. A top-down, patronizing and moralizing attitude can be associated with this mode of representation. And the documentary seeks to impress upon the viewer he/she is receiving an objective and analytical argument. It is the argument of the commentary that propels the text, and the visuals serve as illustrations to bear out the argument.

b) *The observational mode* of representation could be seen as a response to advances in technology, such as more mobile cameras and synchronous sound recording equipment. The documentary filmmaker sought to unobtrusively capture the goings on in the real world, and those filmed did not directly address the camera or the viewer. Objectivity seemed to be the cornerstone, and the filmmaker sought
to dispassionately record the events unfolding in the historical world, so that the
viewer could gain unmediated access into the real world. This limited the
filmmaker and the film to one single event or moment in history and also brought
about a sense of detachment from the event.

c) A desire of the filmmaker to intervene with a subjective perspective prompted the
interactive mode of representation. Seeking a more direct contact with the viewer,
and yet unwilling to revert to the expository mode, documentary filmmakers
incorporated an interactive mode of representation into their films. Aided by the
growing advances in technology like lighter equipment, these films saw the
evolution of interview techniques and on-camera interventions, which provided
the viewer with real evidence, and rose above the authoritarian voice-over.
Juxtaposition of archival footage came to stay with this mode, as also the
testimony of experts and witnesses.

d) The reflexive mode of representation challenges the claims of the other three
modes to represent reality. It tries to question the process of representation itself.
By operating in the awareness-mode, reflexive documentaries try to provoke the
viewer into recognizing the various devices used in the film and the intended
effects of those devices as well. Honing the critical faculties of the viewer to view
the text is as important as the text itself. Nichols proposes two types of reflexivity
in the text – formal and political. A discussion about reflexivity will follow later
in Chapter 6 of the thesis.

Nichols cautions that although this topography seems to be in congruence
with a linear chronology of the documentary, it should not be construed that the
documentary itself seems to be moving towards a greater degree of self-awareness and complexity. Every mode can be seen as dominating the documentary trend in a particular country in a particular historical era, but in the larger perspective, these modes of representation often co-exist and are suitably altered in any given documentary to further its agenda. As Nichols (1991:33) puts it, ‘Older approaches do not go away; they remain part of a continuing exploration of form in relation to social purpose’.

Jayasankar and Monteiro (2001) provide a larger, historical perspective of the various authorial stances, which the makers of the documentary have occupied ever since the tradition came about. Historically, it is evident that the author has occupied several positions in the documentary film, and this is the basis for the topography proposed by them. Examining authorial stances might provide valuable insights into the authorial agendas, which are built into the films.

a) The author as reconstructing the Authentic Other

Flaherty’s Nanook of the North reconstructed the exotic other, in this case, the Inuit Eskimo, and was probably the first ever ethnographic film. Notwithstanding the dangers the Inuits may have been subjected to, Flaherty captured on film, what he thought of as the spirit of the tribe. In retrospect, Flaherty has been criticized for romanticizing the ‘noble savage’. Flaherty lives on as a powerful influence in filmmakers even today, especially in their choice of ‘exotic’ subjects, showcased for a mainstream audience,

b) The author as Social Educator

John Grierson and his films could be probably considered the most influential in defining the documentary’s role as the social educator. The influence he wields can easily be seen
in the many attempts at social engineering by the state seeking to indoctrinate its citizens. He took it upon himself, as did several of his contemporaries, to educate citizens to involve them in a democratic, civil society. The social motive of the documentary reached its zenith and films were made on the lives and problems of the working class like health, housing and unemployment.

c) The Author as a Reflexive, Roving Eye

Dziga Vertov and his cinema-eye, 'Kino-eye', sought to challenge the illusion of cinematic reality itself, using the documentary. Seeking to make the 'invisible visible'¹, Vertov tried to provoke the viewer into questioning what is reality, and tried to make transparent the process of representation itself, by foregrounding the act of construction of the text. The documentary was introduced to the activists on the Left as a tool to usher in socio-political change.

d) The Author as Propagandist

Leni Riefenstahl and her film The Triumph of Will probably testify best to the role of the documentary maker as propagandist. While the persuasive function of the documentary is well-accepted, her films glorified, and to a great extent mythologized the fascism of Hitler’s Nazi Germany. The propaganda role of the documentary was never so visible as during World War II, when she used her films to publicize Hitler's cause.

e) The Author as a 'fly on the Wall'

Direct Cinema of the 1960s saw the author as 'a fly on the wall'. The filmmaker and the camera claimed to be neutral observers, recording the unfolding events in the real, external world. Aided by the new technologies of light equipment and sync-sound, the documentary assumed the role of a scientific, objective eye. The filmmaker was the
unobtrusive observer, who presented unmediated reality to the viewer. With the whole notion of objectivity declared to be a myth, Direct Cinema then allowed for authorial subjectivity to stake its claim, but still vouched for authenticity. This sparked off the trend of exposes, investigating into hospitals, prisons and high schools, notably by Frederick Wiseman.

f) *The author as the fly in the Soup'*

Then came Cinema verite, or the cinema of reality, which spoke of the filmmaker as an agent provocateur. With this, it sought to side-step the criticism against objectivity. The author in cinema verite has been described by Henry Breitrose as ‘a fly in the soup’. Situating the filmmaker as transparently as possible, this approach attempts to examine and redefine the many-layered relationships of power. However, cinema verite remained entrenched in the promise of the image as evidence. Most documentaries made today also are unable to throw off their dependence on the image as the indexical referent of the real world. This set the stage for the notion of reflexivity, which is at the forefront in the debate on representation.

g) *The Post-colonial ‘other’ as Author*

In the Post-colonial context, state-sponsored documentary, as in Cuba and India, sought to project the dominant agenda of modernity. Besides being top-down processually, these films also furthered the agendas of the state, be it in policies of health, welfare or population control. Over time, the independent Post-colonial author in the Third World began to look critically at larger political questions, and give voice to disadvantaged sections of the society.
h) *The Reflexive Author*

The Reflexive mode of filmmaking emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, in the context of several global and local movements in feminism, human rights, gay and lesbian rights, and new social movements in the Third World. The reflexive author ideally, would attempt to go beyond mere formal reflexive strategies and instead try to deal in earnest with alternative ways of engaging with the world. The challenge for a reflexive filmmaker would be to make reflexivity be borne out by the text, and in the engagement of the viewer with the text.

The documentary constantly grapples with its agenda to represent the historical world, and these topographies help to further this understanding. Though not by any standards exhaustive, they suggest various ways in which one can make sense of the documentary.

The evolution of the documentary from the time of Flaherty does reflect the formal and philosophical changes in the way reality has been represented on film. What is interesting, however, is that these evolving modes of representation are neither mutually exclusive and nor are the earlier modes absent today. In fact, it can be seen that despite the existence of this cinematic tradition for at least eight decades now, the documentary has been unable to shake off the stranglehold, which the notion of documentary has historically exerted on it.
Understanding development

The notion of developed nations and developing nations, spoken of as the First World and the Third World respectively, is unquestioningly accepted and used by people across the globe in daily conversations, the media and in almost all walks of life. The obvious disparities in the living conditions and access to resources between people of different countries would seem to be reason enough to warrant this distinction. However, the definitions of development, and correspondingly, the panacea to correct the disparity has undergone a sea change in the last few decades. The theory of Development of Nations has emerged as a new school of thought in the social sciences to systematically deal with the idea of development. In retrospect it can be seen how earlier ideas of development were flawed and ahistorical in their approach. The following pages are a brief attempt to examine the theory of development as it was first conceived of from the 1960s, to the changing perceptions of development into the 21st century.

The dominant paradigm of development

Through the late 60s, ‘a dominant paradigm ruled intellectual definitions of development’ and directed national development programmes. This idea of development was influenced by certain historical events like the industrial revolution, and the quantitative empiricism of the West, the colonial experience in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and economic and political philosophy of capitalism (Rogers, 1976; Melkote, 1991).

The rate of economic growth was central to the idea of development; and the level of development at any given point of time was the Gross National Product (GNP) or the
per capita income of that nation. Economic growth through industrialization was seen as the success formula for development. The modernization theory that lay emphasis on big developmental projects like dams and heavy industries, was essentially a universalistic, ahistorical, ethnocentric and teleological blueprint for the progress of nations, and it sought to incorporate non-western societies into this developmental paradigm.

The 'diffusion of innovations' theory propounded by Everett Rogers, stressed the importance of urbanization, literacy, and technological progress, so that development could trickle down from the scientists to the masses. The mass media were considered the key to this model and were thought of as the 'magic multipliers' of development (Schramm, 1964). These notions were reflected in the Communications Effects theory according to which, the mass media act as the 'magic bullet' or the 'hypodermic needle' that would have a uniform, powerful impact on the under-developed and passive masses. With a linear, top-down approach, the media would infuse the traditional, non-participant people with modern notions of development (Lerner, 1958). This was the dominant notion of development that began to be questioned on philosophical and political grounds in the early 70s, even by the very people who had proposed it.

**The dominant paradigm: a critique**

The unsatisfactory performance of the dominant paradigm over the years, led the very scholars who proposed it, to critique this notion of development (Rogers, 1976). The ahistoricity of the dominant paradigm stood exposed, when realization set in that the European nations were greatly aided in their socio-economic transformations by their exploitation of their colonies in Asia, Africa and Latin America. And now the newly independent states (erstwhile colonies) do not have any colonies to exploit. Further, the
faith of the Third World nations in that notion of development that led to war was greatly undermined. Development itself was seen as a neo-colonial discourse, which was trying to dictate its terms on economic and foreign policies to the developing nations in the garb of development. ‘Where colonialism left off, development took over’ (Kothari, 1988).

The center-periphery paradigm proposed by Raul Prebich, contended that the process of development and under-development is a single one, and that the disparities between the affluent center and the marginalized peripheries were reproduced by unfair international trade practices. The unequal world economic system allowed the center to internalize new technologies to develop an integrated economy, while the peripheries imported basic technologies and finished products at exorbitant costs, and exported cheap raw material to the center. This notion of an exploiting center and an exploited periphery can be extended to developmental disparities within a nation also. Andre Gunder Frank’s (1969) idea of 'the development of under-development' argues that as the links of dependency are intensified, growth falters; and as they are loosened, domestic growth is enhanced. Dependency involves super-exploitation of labour in subordinate nations. Though the dependency school of thought successfully challenged the attitude of 'blaming the victim' inherent in the dominant paradigm, it ignores a nation’s ability to generate and retain its surplus, and also the potential of its people to fight this exploitation. It over-emphasizes the vulnerability and dependency of the Third World nations, and reduces them to passive victims. So, the dependency critique gave rise to the idea of people's participation in their fight for development. Empowerment of the masses to fight their oppression became the buzzword of this new thinking. This idea gained
momentum and alternative perspectives on development emerged, and correspondingly, the role of the media too was reconceptualized.

**Theories of an alternative development**

The denigration of the dominant paradigm saw the birth of alternative perspectives of ‘real’ development. These models were holistic approaches towards a sustainable development, with an emphasis on basic needs and a clean environment. The economics-centered, capital-intensive and technology-driven notions of development were countered with the ideas of empowerment, participation and growth-with-equity (Rogers, 1976; Servaes, 1989). The need to assert regional, ethnic and local identities was at the core of this thinking, as opposed to Western ethno-centrism. Multiple centers of power, which were de-centralized and culture-specific, could be established to usher in a new development.

Paulo Freire’s (1970) idea of ‘conscientization’ emphasized the need to sensitize people to their situations and urge them to aspire for growth. Conscientization involved praxis - to reflect, act and reflect again, which would empower people to attain self-realization. These new ideas were all about people-centered and people-initiated development. Jan Servaes (1989) proposed the multiplicity paradigm, an alternative premised in local needs, self-reliance and structural reformulations. The central idea was that development was relative and society-specific, and that no universal model could be an answer (Mody, 1990).
New Social Movements (NSMs)

Ponna Wignaraja says that in terms of development the North is the center. The First World countries are in control of their destinies, and are prosperous with resilient economies. And so they dictate to the developing South, which are Third World countries with a history of colonization and oppression behind them. They are bypassed by the benefits of progress and are weak and 'vulnerable to external factors' (Wignaraja, 1993). But their assets are their people, cultures, indigenous knowledge systems and natural resources, which must be harnessed. The affiliation of these countries to democracy and decentralization of power and economy are encouraging signs, which must be capitalized upon.

However, multi-faceted crises like growing poverty, environmental degradation, gender inequities, human rights violations and the ineffectiveness of the state to mediate these tensions are hindering the progress of these nations. And in response to these tensions, new reactions are emerging from the grassroots. New social movements (NSMs) are bottom-up movements from the grassroots, which are often spontaneous and voluntary reactions to lop-sided developmental policies. From micro-level initiatives to large, horizontal networking of like-minded groups fighting similar causes, the NSMs are democratic responses provoked by wrong policies by the state or international coercion. Some of these movements have a systematic organization, while some others are ongoing processes of political mobilization, with no definite end.

As a part of the continuum of political, economic and social change, the NSMs have temporal and cultural specificity to begin with. Sometimes they are planned agitations, and sometimes they are spontaneous responses by ordinary people, up in
revolt. They provide a number of lessons to the state and social science theorists to critique flawed developmental policies. NSMs also highlight the failure of the Eurocentric models of development to include human development and participatory democracy, and they concentrate on the harnessing of the creative potential at the micro-level. These movements range from a positive, collective developmental action or an agitation against a specific oppression, and reflect pluralistic and culture-specific realities. In an NSM, people are the subjects, in charge of their destinies and not pitiable objects or victims. As agents of change, the people seek to provide coalitions across the globe for similar causes. With consciousness and commitment, they seek to intervene in the existing status quo and build countervailing power from the grassroots. If networked effectively, the NSMs can be used to mobilize public opinion and precipitate action at the grassroots. Also, through conscientization, democratic spaces can be created and a collective consciousness can be nurtured.

Servaes writes of the women’s movement, the peace movement and the environmental movement in the West, as examples of NSMs, and asserts that these movements are not ‘primarily oriented to the problems that concern the distribution of material wealth’, but are resistances to the colonization of 'life-world' (Servaes, 1996:92). The biggest challenge for the NSMs would be to re-establish traditional knowledge systems and local wisdoms, which have been subjugated by the modern, ‘rational’ West. In India, several NSMs have emerged and sustained in their quest for human rights, eco-friendly development, or gender equity. Some of the more well-known NSMs in India include the Chipko movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the
anti-arrack movement, which are localized struggles horizontally linked with similar movements.

**Development communication: an overview**

The 1970s saw the emergence of the term development communication, in lieu of using the media for development of society. The dominant paradigm focused on developing the poor masses by using expert opinion to dispel their ignorance. So people were subject to systematic and relentless media campaigns by the state (Melkote, 1991). India was among the first to use the mass media to regulate national planning and development, Rural radio forums and an ambitious satellite television venture were undertaken to broadcast developmental messages. Agricultural modernization and industrialization schemes were promoted to create wealth required for health, education and social development. These attempts were inspired to a great extent by the diffusion of innovations model proposed by Everett Rogers in 1962. The mass media were used in a big way to persuade people to adopt new inventions and technology, and also to mobilize public opinion for this cause, The trickle-down method, which was linear and top-down, was the favoured approach to disseminate information.

While the benefits of this kind of media use in a newly independent India is debatable, the emergence of alternative notions of development re-defined uses of the media for development. The monologic, top-down, and linear approach of the media gave way to a dialogic, bottom-up, and participatory approach in the emerging alternative paradigms. Communication is seen as having a liberating role, to which participation is the key.
The developmental communication model, of which participation is the base, believes in the contextual, situational, transactional and processual nature of communication. This can be used better to usher in real development and reduce the information and socio-economic gaps between the haves and the have-nots. Proposed by Nair and White (1993), the transactional perspective can be seen as ‘the opening up of the dialogue with the source and receiver interacting constantly... identifying developmental needs and acting upon them.’ The receivers are actively involved in the process of developing and delivering the message, which allows for an interface of top-down and bottom-up information flow. Participation is facilitated by a two-way dynamic interaction. The process will negotiate contradictions and aid complementarity too. Challenging existing status quo and hierarchies will come about as a result of the transactional process. These new ideas came to be reflected in the way the various mass media were used to suit developmental needs.

Video in development

Since access to capital-intensive communication technology remains the prerogative of the economically powerful, it is important to identify that media which can be accessible to the people at the grassroots. Appropriate media include the radio and the portable video. Video is a powerful tool for transporting local experience horizontally, and can quickly inspire constructive action. The flexibility and adaptability of video helps to put illiterate producers on par with their literate counterparts. Video supports a high level of participation, can be easily demystified and is very user-friendly. It also provides an audio-visual output immediately, and does not rely on extensive processing. It remains an ideal medium to promote audio-visual literacy for motivation, attitudinal change,
people’s participation and entertainment. Many successful experiments have been conducted using the low-format video for developmental purposes. In Chile, thousands of farmers were trained, in Thailand family planning was promoted, the Banchte Shekha (a rural women’s organization) experience in Bangladesh, and many other success stories in India like SEWA in Ahmedabad, prove the effectiveness of using video for development (Stuart and Bery, 1996; Riano, 1994; Kalima, 1992). The excerpt provided below provides a glimpse into how video has resulted in the empowerment of women.

Since 1992, Bulu [a Bangaladeshi, rural woman] has used video extensively in Banchte Shekha’s legal aid activities. She taped a village court case about a man who had disavowed paternity and refused to give financial compensation. In the village court, he reversed his position ad promised child support, rather than face a suit in the local government court. In another case of desertation, the mere mention that Banchte Shekha planned to make a tape…motivated her husband and his family to negotiate a settlement. They didn't want to be embarrassed in front of their neighbours. In Bulu's hand, the camcorder is a powerful tool which advocates human rights (Stuart and Bery, 1996: 198).

Video facilitates three kinds of learning depending on its use - horizontal or peer learning, vertical or formal learning and exchange learning or participatory learning (Mody, 1990). While audiences for the mass media like television are anonymous and the reception of developmental messages is not guaranteed, when used effectively, video allows for extended interaction between the source and the receiver through narrowcasting.

Mody says that for effective developmental communication to take place, the audience-based method demands that one must ‘listen first and speak next'. The process must begin and end with the audience. And this is possible while using video, and democracy can be introduced into the sender-receiver relationship. She asserts that the elite in the power structures ‘have access to and use repressive state apparatus like the
judiciary, police and ideological apparatus like the education systems and mass media, to dominate'. Through hegemony, the people are ‘co-opted into maintaining the status quo’. The NSMs and NGOs are some of the peoples’ initiatives engaged in mobilizing counter-prevailing networks, bottom-up.

The documentaries chosen for the study are to be seen as narratives of an alternative development paradigm, one that demands rights for the marginalized sections in Indian society. As possible histories of grassroots realities, they seek to exploit the non-state and non-market spaces to make available alternative truths to the people.

Dissertation overview

The background of the study, as provided above, is the context within which several critical issues pertaining to the alternative documentary in India are examined. A brief outline of the chapters in the thesis is presented below.

In Chapter 2, I delineate the objectives of the study and the methodologies adopted to fulfill the objectives. The text-author-audience approach adopted in this study uses textual analysis of 10 alternative documentaries in India, in-depth interviews with 10 filmmakers, and focus group discussions with nine audiences.

In Chapter 3, I provide a world history of the documentary, and also a history of documentary in India, with special emphasis on the ‘committed’ documentary. This chapter examines the constantly evolving positions that documentaries have occupied along the historical continuum. The shifts in the position of the documentary from being an ethnographic film to social educator to objective observer to political weapon are laid out, along with the significant names and events from the world and India.
In Chapter 4, I explore the implications of the term ‘alternative’, used to describe the documentaries chosen for the study. While the study uses the term ‘alternative’ to facilitate the analysis of a particular trend in filmmaking, the alternative/mainstream dichotomy is explored from the filmmakers’ points of view. An examination of the filmmakers’ agendas reveals their preoccupation with the flawed notion of development that directed the nation-building agenda of free India.

In Chapter 5, I examine the multiple connotations of ‘representation’ with respect to the films chosen for the study. Documentary realism, use of testimony, and these films as narratives of an unequal development, emerge as the three axes along which the alternative documentary can be further explored.

In Chapter 6, I critically interrogate the ethics and aesthetics of representing the marginalized ‘other’. Filming ‘spectacular’ oppressions, using ‘caricature’, and stereotyping are examined as strategies of persuasion. The location of the filmmaker, self-representation, and the anti-aesthetic emerge as important concerns in this context.

In Chapter 7, I explore the idea of documentary desire. Epistephilia or ‘desire for knowledge’ is examined with respect to the focus group discussions in the study. How different audiences engage with the alternative documentary is analysed, as also the demands that the audiences make of the film.

In Chapter 8, I provide an overview of my observations about the various issues explored in this study. In conclusion, I suggest that after 25 years of alternative filmmaking in India, it is time that one looks beyond the production of these films. I suggest that the emphasis should now be on the dissemination of the alternative documentary, which remains sporadic and limited.