CHAPTER 3: A HISTORY OF THE DOCUMENTARY

A world history

The Lumière brothers

The beginnings of the documentary can be spoken of as the beginning of cinema itself. In December 1895, the Lumiere brothers first screened their one-minute cinema scenes in Paris. The Arrival of a train and Workers leaving the Lumiere factory marked the first among the several films of brief events by the Lumiere brothers. Referred to as ‘actualities’, as their titles suggested, these films captured brief instances from everyday life. These films were shown to audiences the world over by traveling agents, and also by local people trained in this new medium called cinema. The draw of these actualities was seen to lie in the fact that audiences enjoyed familiar scenes from daily life when shown on the screen.

In the film Workers leaving the Lumiere factory, it is apparent that the workers being filmed are unaware of the filming and do not glance at the camera. The candid footage as captured in the first film ever made constitutes an important part of the documentary tradition as exists even today. L’Arroseur arrose is the first actuality seen as marking the initiation of the screen narrative into cinema. A little boy tricks the gardener into peering into the nozzle and then squirts water on his face from a hose pipe, possibly the first direct intervention by the filmmaker to influence the content of the film, or to create a film narrative. The element of fiction makes its first entry into what were hitherto fragments of actualities plucked from the real, historical world. Vaughan (1999) suggests that there might be two possible ways of filming this actuality: one, using a concealed
camera to capture a spontaneous incident, and two staging the episode with the complicity of both actors involved. However, the gaucheness of the performances by the boy and the gardener resolves any doubts one might have about the intervention by the filmmaker. The notion of spontaneity or the element of the unexpected is introduced for the first time, and lingers on in contemporary documentary.

By 1905, the actualities gave way to fiction and between 1910 and 1920, the one-to-two-hour long fiction film became the standard for films. However, the element of actuality reigned powerful in the films of these times. Most films sought to inter-weave reality and fiction. The city streets in the early comedies of Charlie Chaplin or the films of Griffith reflect this trend. This move of incorporating the fictional into cinema is seen as the 'seduction of the public into the world of fantasy and romance' (Warren, 1996:3). While Edward S. Curtis has been known to use the terms ‘documentary material’ and 'documentary works' in relation to moving picture non-fictions as early as in 1914, John Grierson is credited with having used the word ‘documentary’ in English, while reviewing Robert Flaherty's film Moana in 1926 (discussed in Chapter1).

**Robert Flaherty**

As 'documentary's first poet and itinerant photographer' (Renov, 1993:33), Robert Flaherty made short films on the unfamiliar, romantic subjects living with them for a while, learning about their way of life and capturing it all on camera. Often considered a pioneer of the documentary film, his first film, *Nanook of the North* (1922) was about the Inuit Eskimo. This was followed by *Moana* (1926), *Man of Aran* (1934) and several other films, concluding with *Louisiana Story* (1948), dealing with the Cajuns in the swamps of Louisiana. Essentially an explorer, Flaherty captured on camera the
exotic, unfamiliar, and often, dangerous lives lived by remote tribes and peoples. His subjects were at once very different and similar. Flaherty's preoccupation with the themes of the survival of these people against a hostile environment, 'the beauty and severity of nature, of the return to the past and of the importance of family' (Platinga, 1997:35) surface in all his films. In fact, Platinga asserts the pro-filmic element was so strong in Flaherty's films, that in today's context they would be referred to as docu-dramas or dramatic documentaries. For example, in *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty had the Eskimos engage in the dangerous Walrus hunt with harpoons, a practice that was non-existent at the time of the filming. Also the protagonists in his films were usually playing scripted roles. They were chosen to suit the story he wished to tell, albeit selected from among the people being filmed, a practice in vogue in the docu-dramas of today.

Flaherty's detractors are many. He has been accused of imposing himself on those before the camera, and getting people to do things they did not ordinarily do, making up stories, evoking, romantically, old ways of life' (Warren, 1996:4). The staging of the walrus hunt also endangered the lives of the Eskimos. These ethical questions of representation and the rights of those filmed remain at the fore of documentary theory today, and will be examined in later chapters.

Flaherty laid emphasis on the observational. For Flaherty, the film was created largely in the camera. His long and continuous shots try to capture the essential action, uninterruptedly. And while he relied heavily on re-enactment and staging of sequences for the camera, he never held editing to be the central creative act.
Dziga Vertov

Flaherty’s contemporary in the erstwhile Soviet Union, Dziga Vertov made classics like The Man with the movie camera (1929), Enthusiasm (1931) and Three Songs about Lenin (1934), all films about modern Russia. He was ‘a lover of modernity and the future, of machines, of fast editing in film, and altered motion and superimpositions’, and preferred to present actuality ‘to stimulate audiences toward a future consciousness' (Warren, 1996:5). Vertov’s films are all positive montages of a new, technologically advanced Russia emerging from the old. Working along with his brother Mikhail Kaufman as cameraman and his wife Elizeveta Svilova as editor, Vertov has come to be associated with the ‘artist-intellectual in revolutionary activity' (Waugh, 1984:4). His idea of filming ‘Life-As-It-Is’ and at the same time creating the 'Film-thing' - constructing film with realistic images and challenging the status of the visuals as real, using cinematic techniques - transformed reality for the viewer. After enjoying fame for about a decade, Vertov was branded a formalist and his reputation took a downturn under a hostile Stalinist regime. However, in the 1960s, after his death, Jean-Luc Godard reinstated Vertov among the cinema greats by naming his filmmaking group as the Dziga Vertov Group. Today Vertov's concept of the Kino-Eye or Cinema-Eye, as well as Kinopravda or cinema-verité occupy a central place in the history of world documentary.

Women and early documentary

Esther Shub was a contemporary of Vertov and made 'an art of finding old documentary footage and putting it together to make powerful films' (Warren, 1996:6). Her films are outstanding examples of committed documentary and she saw cinema as a 'constructivist enterprise', i.e., a montage structure composed of archival footage.
(Waugh, 1984). *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) remains one of the best examples of her work.

Of the other women who played an important role in the documentary movement of that time, the name of Helen Van Dongen stands out. She worked closely with Robert Flaherty on *The Land* (1942) and *Louisiana Story* (1948) and also with director Joris Ivens, helping with the planning, structuring and editing of the films.

Some other famous films of the times were Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a city* (1929), Jean Vigo’s *A Propos de Nice* (1930) and Luis Buñuel’s *A Land Without Bread* (1932), the latter two who worked both in fiction and the documentary films. The 1930s saw the emergence of the documentary with a social purpose, with the motive of educating the public. And it is this idea that lingers most strongly today. John Grierson’s name stands out in this context.

**John Grierson**

Despite calling Flaherty the ‘father of documentary’, John Grierson objected to Flaherty’s preoccupation with the past rather than the present, and also to his fascination with the theme of humans against nature. Envisioning a social purpose for the documentary, John Grierson heralded a new era in British and world documentary. For Grierson, the problems of a mass industrial society were far more important subjects to be dealt with in a documentary, rather than the beauty of nature or the culture of certain people, which he saw as sentimental escapism. Social analysis and truth-telling were seen as the legitimate functions of the documentary, according to Grierson, and several scholars of his time seconded this opinion. This use of the documentary as a social educator to inform and enlighten the public remains the cornerstone behind the making of
several documentaries all over the world, especially in the form of public message films and historical short films. Grierson's films like *Drifters* (1929), on Herring fishermen, and his several films for commercial and governmental agencies in England and later in Canada, reflect his bias towards propaganda and education. He tried to educate people about day-to-day social processes and the obligations of law-abiding citizens. The British Documentary movement also saw several excellent documentaries during that time in Basil Wright’s *Song of Ceylon* (1935), Wright and Harry Watt's *Night Mail* and Humphrey Jennings' *Listen to Britain* (1942) and *A Diary for Timothy* (1945) after the end of the Second World War (Warren, 1996).

For Grierson, who spoke of the documentary as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’, duplicating the historical world on film was less important than molding actuality for a social purpose. For him, the film was largely created on the editing table, to be used as an analytical means with an end in mind. In a reference to the 'first principles' of documentary-making, Grierson said that ‘a documentary must be dramatic, and not merely instructional to promote a common thought or feeling among the audience members. Second and most important, the documentary is best used for propaganda’ (Platinga, 1997:27). Grierson was also an advocate of the ‘realist documentary' that would employ the aesthetic for a social purpose. Several of his directives can be seen to linger in documentary- making even today, specially the propaganda and social motive of the documentary, and also, realism as a style. In the United States also, documentaries as educational tools came to be made and used extensively like *The Plow That Broke The Plains* (1936) by Pare Lorentz and *The River* among others. Joris Ivens collaborated with
Ernest Hemmingway on *The Spanish Earth* (1937), a film on the Spanish Civil War, actually shot in war conditions.

**World War II and the Documentary**

World War II saw the harnessing of the potential of the documentary for propaganda purposes. Persuasion through the documentary reached its peak through explanations, rationalization, and emotional appeals urging people to war. In the 1930s, in Germany, Leni Riefenstahl made *Triumph of the Will* (1935) about a Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg. It provided an exhilarating and visionary hope in early Nazism, which, however disturbing, did exist. Her *Olympiad* (1938) is about the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, in which images of the Olympic sports have been inter-cut with the images of Hitler and his associates. Her films may horrify and disturb today, but their impact then was tremendous, and undoubtedly helped the Nazi regime with its propaganda.

In the United States of America, cinema was used extensively to educate the soldiers and the public on the need to fight. Frank Capra’s forceful series *Why We Fight* helped the government to urge its soldiers to war. One important film, which was suppressed, was John Huston’s *Let There Be Light* (1945), about shellshock invalids in a soldiers’ hospital (Warren, 1996). The film was too realistic and did not suit the agenda of the then government. This kind of censorship holds sway till this day, and is a struggle waged by independent and committed filmmakers across the world.

In the aftermath of World War II, innumerable films were made on the inhuman concentration camps of Nazi Germany. The horror of the genocide of the Jews was filmed extensively. Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog* (1955) is one of the most remarkable documentaries to deal with this subject. *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1970) and *Hotel*
Terminus (1987) by Marcel Ophuls, and Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah (1985) are some of the later films which deal directly or indirectly with the horrors of war. Chris Marker, a political activist and intellectual, is one filmmaker whose name stands out in the documentaries of the 50s. His films are based all round the world and all of them are pre-occupied with the Second World War. Sundays in Peking (1955), Letter from Siberia (1957), Cuba Si (1961), The Kuomiko Mystery (1965) and Sans Soleil (1982) are some of his notable works.

The 1940s and the 50s also saw the rise of the neorealism movement in fiction film, especially in Italy, where real life settings and real life crises were portrayed on film, mostly dealing with the aftermath of the War. New movements in documentary films in the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Asia too were influenced by this trend. Dealing with current times and even mundane activities, these films were mostly docu-dramas like The house on 92nd Street (1945) by Henry Hathaway and Call Northside 777 (1948) and Alfred Hitchcock’s The Wrong Man (1957). In this era, both fiction and documentary film were influenced by the War.

Cinema Verite

The late 1950s saw an explosion of a new kind of filmmaking, a movement that is referred to as Cinema Verite. The term was first used by Jean Rouch in his famous film Chronicle of a Summer (1961). A new realism that observed the everyday life of ordinary citizens and without any overt intervention became the new style for these documentaries. The advances in cinematic technology like lighter cameras and sync sound facilitated the cinema verite. Lindsay Anderson’s Every Day Except Christmas
and *Les Maîtres Fous* (1955) by Jean Rouch are some other notable films of this movement.

Corresponding to cinema verite, a school of filmmaking referred to as Direct cinema emerged in the United States, as exemplified by films like Richard Leacock and Joyce Chopra’s *A Happy Mother’s Day* (1963), Leacock and D.A. Pennebaker’s *Don’t Look Back* (1967) and Albert and David Maysles’ *The Salesman* (1969). Direct cinema and cinema verite used natural sounds during the filming, and preferred it to an outside commentary. Lengthy shots are used to convey a sense of little intervention on the part of the filmmaker and the camera is usually hand-held to give the shots a spontaneous and unframed feel, while following the events as they unfold. Editing is very minimal and these films bring the viewer very close to ‘everyday, sordid reality…and also convey a certain delirious impression of reality floating by…’ (Warren, 1996:13).

Cinema verite persists very strongly in almost all of the ethnographic films of the 1960s and after. Several of the films from the First World about the Third World like Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* (1986), shot in Benaras, India, and other films based in New Guinea reflect this ethnographic filmmaking. Frederick Wiseman's series of films on American institutions like the *Titicut Follies* (1967), *High School* (1968) and *Welfare* (1971) let the subject lead, so to speak.

The personal documentary, using the cinema verite style, came of age from the late 60s onwards. Filming personal events, sometimes with the filmmaker turning the camera on himself or herself, and the autobiographical and biographical films mushroomed across the globe. Experiments with form as well as intensely personal films came to be made. The widespread accessibility and affordability of video technology has
resulted in filmmaking becoming a less exclusive activity. Family videos and hand-held cameras have added several new dimensions to experimental filmmaking.

The Political documentary

However, the documentary with a social purpose has assumed many forms over the years. As opposed to the commercial, mainstream fiction film, the documentary has persisted with strong nuances of Grierson and Vertov, committed to specific social motives, and even radical political agendas. The revolutionary powers of the camera have been used mostly as a political weapon by the working classes in several countries like France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, Japan, and more recently in Latin America, Cuba and Asia. Most of these films and filmmakers do not find a place in the mainstream renditions of the world history of documentary.

*Show Us Life* (1984), edited by Thomas Waugh, is one of the few books which seeks to highlight the history of what he calls the ‘committed’ documentary. By committed documentary, Waugh refers to cinema used as a tool to further political agenda, mainly by the traditional left (Communist), the new left (Progressive, liberal) and also by the developing nations. Especially in the Cold War era, opinion was extremely polarized, and screenings were political too. In the form of newsreels and short films, cinema was used to mobilize mass opinion and precipitate action for political change. Guerilla or Militant cinema, as the name suggests, performed a revolutionary function to encourage mass-based uprisings against unpopular regimes. Films were made on the lives and agitations of peasants and the working classes by film and newsreel societies in countries like Japan –*The Funeral of Yamamoto*, *Earth* (1930), *12th May Day in Tokyo*
(1931) and the United States – *Road To Life*, *Cottonpickers Strike*, *Hunger 1932* and *Native Land*, Netherlands, France – *La Vie est a nous* and Germany.

As progressive strides were made in the women’s movement, human rights struggles and mobilization of other marginalized sections in society, the new Left started using film to fight for social egalitarianism. *Make-Out*, *We Demand freedom*, *In the Event Anyone Disappears*, *The Woman’s Film*, *Black Panther* and *Oil Strike* are some of the better known films made in the late 60s to early 70s in the United States, *The Nightcleaners* about women nightcleaners in Britain and *The Harlan County*, USA about the struggle by miners made in the 70s are well known examples of the use of the camera to make issue-based films. Feminist documentaries by women, ranging from personal narratives to women’s struggles in a patriarchal world, were made, along with anti-war films. *Growing Up Female*, *Janie's Janie*, *We Are Alive*, *Rape* and *Taking Our Bodies Back* are some of the many films made to deal with various aspects of the woman question. Realism as a style dominates many of these documentaries. And this trend about making films about the rights of the minorities or the disadvantaged sections in society, or about social issues persists in a big way even today, both in the developed and developing nations.

Documentary in the Third World context has thrived for several historical and ideological reasons, and, of course, remains radical in varying degrees. Filmmakers in Latin America and Cuba tried to combat the hegemony of Hollywood by trying to find and reiterate their native identities. While today, the focus of their work is development, the documentary has served several radical causes for these countries. Santiago Alvarez is one of the notable names in Cuba. Spoken of as a *cine-agitator*, his films *Now* (1965),
79 Springtimes of Ho Chin Minh and LBJ (1968) have all served the cause of the struggle of the Third World people against US imperialism and underdevelopment. Many of his films are also responses to specific outrages by the US. To Die for Your Country is to Live (1976) is about the CIA bombing of a Cuban airliner.

The Battle of Chile, running four and a half hours and in three parts, stands out as one of the most influential documentaries made in Latin America. Made in the early 70s, the film symbolizes the commitment of the filmmakers to the struggle of the Chilean working class for socialist governance. One of the extreme moments in the film shows an Argentine cameraman filming his own execution, reiterating his commitment to the struggle. This epic film mobilized liberal and mainstream support in the West for the Chilean struggle.

Across the decades, the documentary has found its niche as a weapon against social and economic inequities at the global, national and regional levels. In ways different from the documentaries in Cuba or Latin America, independent documentary in India has a history of resistance and struggle that it has embraced. The emergence of the independent documentary in India in the late 1970s has been dealt with at length in the following pages.
Documentary in India

The Firsts

In July 1896, cinema came to India, barely six months after the first actuality was screened in Paris. The venue was The Watson's Hotel in Bombay, and for an admission price of Rupee one, six films by the Lumiere brothers were screened for 35 days for an enthusiastic public. Another venue, Novelty at Grant Road was added to the screenings and the admission prices ranged from eight annas to two rupees. The cinema fever caught on as, from 1897 onwards, film shows were held all over Bombay in makeshift tents, open spaces, theatres and institutes like the Framji Cawasji Institute, under the auspices of several interesting banners like Stewart's Vitograph, Hughes' Moto-photoscope, Professor Anderson's Andersonoscopograph and the Biuranal Optical Diorama. The touring showmen, mostly cameramen, screened the films throughout the country, they also began to capture what they saw as the 'exotic' loveliness of colonial India.

*Cocoanut Fair* and *Our Indian Empire* were two of the earliest films made and exhibited in India, the filmmakers of which are unknown. Several other untitled short films too were made during this time. In 1898, Professor Stephens shot a dance sequence from a Bengali stage opera *The Flower of Persia* and also *A Panorama of Indian Scenes*, which was exhibited in the Star Theatre in Calcutta. Around the same time, Professor Anderson filmed and included in his repertoire two Indian short films, *Train arriving at Bombay Station* and *Poona races '98*. It was around this time that the interest of several

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5 The section on the history of documentary in India has been mostly informed by Narwekar (1992), Verma (1998), and Pendakur (1998).
Indians was awakened, and they began to participate as professionals in the entertainment business that was cinema.

The first among them was Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatawdekar, or Sawe Dada as he was better known, who was a still photographer, equipment dealer and exhibitor of films from abroad. By late 1898, he imported a Riley camera from London and shot his first film titled *The Wrestlers*, capturing a staged bout between two famous wrestlers. His next short film was on some monkeys being trained by their master, called *A Man and His Monkeys*. Both these films were screened in 1899. By 1901, Sawe Dada acquired the Lumiere gadget that was a camera, printer and projector. His film *The Return of Wrangler Paranjpye* (1902) was based on Mr. Raghunath Paranjpye, the first Indian who had returned from Cambridge after completing his Mathematical Tripos. His other actualities were *The Landing of Sir M.M. Bhowmuggred* (1901) and *Atash Behram* (1901), a film on the renovation of a Parsi Fire Temple. Most of these early films were event-based and were newsreels in some sense. Also, some of them could be the first stirrings of the biographical film.

At around the same time, Hiralal Sen and his brother Motilal Sen, who started off as exhibitors of imported films, started making films under the banner of the Royal Bioscope Company. Their first film was *Moving Pictures of Natural Scenes and Religious Rituals, Calcutta*, made in December 1899, followed by several films like *Live Scenes and Sequences From Popular Stage Shows* (1901), which as the title suggests, captured scenes from popular stage plays like *Vramar*, *Doljatra*, *Buddha*, *Sarala*, *Alibaba* and *Sitaram*, *Scenes and Sequences on Indian Life and Events* (1903) and *Dancing Duo* (1903) soon followed. Hiralal Sen also made some of the first advertisement films during
1905, an Anti-Malarial Specific, one for C.K.Sen’s Jaba Kusum Oil and a third for W. Major Company's Sarsaparila. These three films are regarded as the first ever advertisements made in India. F.B.Thanawalla’s Splendid New Views of Bombay and Taboot Procession were made in this time, and screened under the banner of Thanawalla’s Grand Kinetoscope.

The multi-cultural and colourful visuals that India offered enticed early filmmakers to capture interesting vignettes of Indian life across the country. J.F.Madan made Opening and Closing of Howrah Bridge (1905), Royal Visit to Calcutta (1906), Parasnath Procession (1906), Goat Sacrifice at Kalighat (1906) and Dancing by Indian Nautch Girls (1906). Topicals were a favourite with budding filmmakers, and were very popular with the audiences too. Jyotish Chandra Sarkar was a contemporary and a good cameraman who made Anti-partition Movement Procession (1905), a movement led by Surendranath Banerji. Some other popular filmmakers who made short topical films during this time were S.N.Patankar and Narayan.G.Deware in Bombay, R.Prakasa and C.Rangiah in Madras, and these films captured events like the coronations and weddings of Maharajahs and specific events like major disasters of fire etc.

One of the most famous names of the times was that of Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, or Dadasaheb. His film The Growth of a Pea Plant is considered as the first Indian documentary made. Dadasaheb planted a pea in an earthen pot and captured the growth of the pea plant over a period of one and a half months, one frame at a time using the time-lapse technique for the first time ever. It was a 200-foot film just about two minutes in length! It was first exhibited in an electrical shop and held the audiences spellbound. After having proved his credentials as a good filmmaker with this film, and with an
improvement in his financial condition, Dadasaheb began to make short mythological films like *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), *Mohini Bhasmasur* (1913) and *Satyawan Savitri* (1914). He also made several shorts including *Game of Matchsticks*, which is the first animation film ever made in India, *Handprints* and *Godavari Views*. Despite some setbacks financially due to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Dadasaheb continued making several short films, including comedies like *Soulana Rasa* and *Mr Sleepy is Good*, animated films like *Animated Coins* and *Vichitra Shilpa*, topicals like *Sinhasta Parvani*, *Kartiki Purnima Festival* and *Ganesh Utsav* and documentaries like *Glass Works at Telegaon*, *Bird’s Eyeview of Bodh Gaya* and *Rock Cut Temples of Elora*. He even made an educational film on film appreciation called *How Films are Made*.

The beginnings of cinema, especially the short film, drew its sustenance from Indian culture and religion. The vast treasures that India offered in the form of architecture, festivals and mythological stories, proved to be an unending resource to the early filmmakers. More so in the light of the excellent visual qualities that these resources possessed.

One other significant fact is that from the beginning, cinema in India has been a contemporary to the scenario in the West, though the idiom of cinema continues to be different. As a commercial industry, fiction film has always held a greater sway over audiences in India. Even to this day, India remains the largest producer of fiction films in the world. And alongside fiction, the short film has always existed, and has evolved through the years, in ways different from the evolution of the documentary in the West.
Early Indian documentary and the struggle for Indian Independence

While topicals and newsreels flourished, the documentary as understood today failed to take off in a big way. After Dadasaheb Phalke’s film, the next noteworthy documentary-maker was Mohan Bhavani. He made a two-reeler short named *Mysore-Gem City of India* and another short called *Keddah*, about elephant trapping in Mysore. Both these films had a limited showing, like many other documentaries of that time.

According to Bhavani, as recorded in *The Historical Survey* of the short film movement, his first commercially released short film was *Wrestling* and it featured the famous Indian wrestler Gama. The film went on to be a success but, Bhavani observes that this was a lone instance and that “it did not mean that the documentary film as such had made any real impact on either the distributors or the public, or that it could initiate a regular flow of such shorts” (cited in Narwekar, 1992). Bhavani also made an experimental cartoon film called *Lafanga Langoor* in 1935, which is a first in that category.

The independence movement saw a new role being drafted for the short film in India. It was the topical film that continued to hold a powerful sway over filmmakers and audiences right through India’s struggle for freedom. Topicals on the funerals of freedom fighters, like Devashankar’s *Funeral of The Late Hon. Mr. G.K Gokhale* made in Poona and a newsreel on the funeral procession and cremation of Lokamanya Tilak were very popular. A feature-length film *Great Bonfire of Foreign Clothes* (1921) was filmed on the bonfire of foreign clothes called for by Mahatma Gandhi and covered for two days the entire operation of collecting of foreign clothes, the gathering of all famous leaders and setting fire to the heap. This film was a great success, and given the highly charged
political atmosphere at that time, the sponsors of the film remained anonymous! The
topicals also included filming of the Annual sessions of the Indian National Congress by
R.L.Shorey, who started it in Lahore, and others. Through the 1920s and 1930s,
important political and historical events like Mahatma Gandhi’s Dandi March were all
captured in the topical films of the time. And it is thanks to these films that events that
are such an integral part of Indian history have been preserved on film for posterity.

The Aurora Film Corporation in Calcutta, established by Anadi Bose, gave birth
to the first regular newsreel in India entitled Calcutta Film Gazette. Dr.P.V.Pathy,
another noted documentarian of those times, collaborated with film producer and feature
film director J.B.H Wadia of Wadia Movietone and Burjor M.Tata to bring out another
regular newsreel Indian Screen Gazette, which did not survive for long. The first edition
of this newsreel covered the Haripura session of the Indian National Congress, when
Subhash Chandra Bose was president. Wadia also made several short films on the Indian
navy and air force, and also many cultural shorts, shown before the feature film, a
practice that persisted for long in Indian movie theatres. Wadia Movietone, along with
Chicago Radio of the Motwane brothers (Nanik and Harnam), was very involved in
sponsoring the films on the annual sessions of the India National Congress, the footage of
which is available even today. They were mostly two-reel films and can be seen as the
precursors to the realist documentary as exists today. K.S.Hirlekar was another pioneer in
the attempt to organize the production of newsreels and educational films.

The potential of cinema as a tool for propaganda was fully realized during World
War II. The then British Empire, which included colonized India, sought to use film to
effectively mobilize opinion to support its declaration of war against Nazi Germany and
Fascist Italy. Guided by Desmond Young of the Department of Information in Delhi, the Film Advisory Board (FAB) was established with J.B.H. Wadia as Chairman and P.J. Griffith, Rowland Jones, M.B.Billimoria and P.N.Thapar as members. At this time, the anti-British feeling was gaining momentum. There was resentment against the unconditional support Britain expected for a war that had nothing to do with India. However J.B.H. Wadia, who was considered as much a patriot as anybody else, justified his chairmanship of the FAB by declaring that he believed in supporting the forces of democracy in their battle against fascism, and that the defeat of the Nazis would definitely lead to independence for India too. And as part of the war propaganda of the FAB, along with Alexander Shaw as Chief Producer, Wadia managed to produce many good documentaries totally unrelated to the War, like Women in India and Industrial India. This effort was aided by writers like Premila Rama Rau, Romesh Thapar and Aubrey Menen and by directors like Krishna Gopal and A, Bhaskara Rao. Shaw also had the support of Left-wing politicians, journalists, intellectuals and women's groups in the country, who saw the film as a new medium that could be used effectively. Among the films commissioned by the FAB to aid the war effort was He’s in the Navy about a career in the Navy and The Planes of Hindustan about Fighter planes. Both these films were by cameraman-director Dr P.V. Pathy.

When Alexander Shaw left for Britain because of his problems with the bureaucracy in FAB, V.Shantaram took over for a short while, but resigned in response to Gandhi’s 'Do or Die' call for Independence. Feature filmmaker Ezra Mir, who made Road to Victory, a much-acclaimed documentary, took over as Chief Producer.
The then government decided that film production and distribution must be consolidated, and established the Information Films of India (IFI) and the Indian News Parade (INP), and the FAB was shut down. An administrative structure was established to facilitate the distribution and exhibition of films. To boost war propaganda, the Government invoked the Defence of India rules, which made it compulsory for film exhibitors to show 2,000 feet of film approved by the government at every show. A modest fee was charged for showing these films.

Ambalal Patel, a self-taught filmmaker, started the Indian Movietone News, a newsreel series in 1942, which he continued till the birth of the INP. He also made over 250 short films for extensive exhibition in rural India, under government patronage. As Producer-in-Charge at IFI, Ezra Mir made several noteworthy films like Whispering Legions and Voice of Satan. He also made a series called Our Heritage on the vast cultural heritage of India.

Between 1940-46, the FAB and IFI produced a total of more than 170 films, apart from newsreels by the INP. In an article written for the 'Indian Documentary' written much later in 1956, references have been made by Dr Pathy even to ‘attempts at animated films'. The year 1945 saw three noteworthy films being made, Tree Of Wealth by A.Bhaskar Rao, which went on to become the first Indian short film to win many international awards, The Private Life Of A Silkworm by Mohan Bhavani and Bombay, The Story Of Seven Isles, a two-reeler film by Paul Zils, a refugee from Nazi Germany.

The Combined Kinematographic Services Film Production and Training Group (CKS) or the Army Film Centre was another major parallel film production house during these times. Headed by Major Navel Ghandy, a feature filmmaker, it also had as members
Captain Ratan Bachcha and Captain Tom Stobart. The CKS produced morale-boosting films for the three services of the Armed Forces, and also for the IFI. Even in Independent India, the CKS contributed a lot to the documentary movement in the country. While at the CKS, Dr Pathy made several films for the war effort, like *In Self-Defence* and *The Golden Grain of Bharatkhand* (1942).

**Documentary in Free India**

In 1946 an interim Government comprising of nationalists was established in India. The Budget Session of the Interim Government reduced the grant to the IFI to a token Rupee one! And so the IFI, considered by many as a tool of the British Empire, ceased to exist. It was a myopic move in some ways, because when India got her independence on August 15th 1947, there was no official institute of film to record the momentous occasion! Dr.P.V.Pathy and Ambalal Patel were instrumental in organizing two cameras and the necessary sound equipment to film the historic handing-over ceremonies at midnight, which saw the birth of a Free India. In the days following the Independence, three important films were made and distributed by independent filmmakers, and were provided free of cost to cinema proprietors to be screened in the theatres of Delhi, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. The films were *Mahatma Gandhi* by A.K.Chettiar of Madras and edited by Pathy, which comprised of footage of Gandhi from around the world, *15 August 1947*, jointly made by Bombay Talkies and Film Classics of Madras, and *India’s Struggle for National Shipping* directed by Paul Zils.

Many in the new Government of Independent India believed that short film could be used as effectively in peacetime for the development of India, as it had been for propaganda during the war. The lacuna caused by the disbanding of the IFI was
addressed in December 1947, when a proposal was mooted to form a unit under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to produce and distribute short films. On the lines of the IFI and the INP, the rule making it compulsory to exhibit government-approved short films before feature film screenings was re-introduced. Initially called the Film Unit, it was officially renamed as Films Division in April 1948. Many of those who worked for the IFI and INP were recruited, and documentaries and newsreels (under the title *Indian News Review*) were produced.

Mohan Bhavani, a well-known feature and documentary filmmaker was appointed as Chief Producer (Documentaries), and Sarvottam L. Badami, also a well-known filmmaker was appointed as the Chief Producer (Newsreels). A. Bhaskar Rao, Krishna Gopal, Mohan Wadhwani and Kumarsen Sarnmarth were among others who held important posts in the Films Division.

Among the independent documentary filmmakers who opted not to join the Films Division were stalwarts like P.V. Pathy, Paul Zils, D.B.D. Wadia, Harnam Motwane, Ratan Barucha and W.H. Hese. These independent filmmakers produced several notable documentaries and despite the lack of sustained government sponsorship, kept the documentary alive and thriving.

Dr. Pathy made several ‘river’ films, revolving around the idea of the rivers as the shapers of civilization. *Along the Jamuna* (1946) traced the course of the river from the Himalayas to its confluence with the Ganga, narrating the history of Delhi, Mathura, Agra and Allahabad in 15 minutes. The United Artists distributed the film as a side-reel, making it the first Indian short film to be distributed by a foreign banner. Egged on by this success, Pathy did extensive research on the river Kaveri in South India, and the IFI
approved his script for *The Golden River*. Pathy shot the film in the scenic locas of Coorg, Mysore and Tamil Nadu, and also traced the course of the river from its birth in the Western Ghats to the Bay of Bengal. Encompassing the past and the present, the film was at once ‘a search for the fabled lost city of Kaveripooppattinam and an ode to the Mettur dam’ (Narwekar, 1992). Pathy completed the film only to realize that the IFI no longer existed. The film was shelved and released many years later in 1956, by the Films Division. After wielding the camera for *India’s Struggle for National Shipping* (1947), Pathy went on to have a successful collaboration with director Paul Zils for nearly a decade.

Paul Zils, one of the most acclaimed documentary filmmakers in pre and post-Independent India, is also considered as the man responsible for giving a direction to the documentary movement in the country. After brief stints with the UFA studios in Berlin and Hollywood, Zils, tired of the superficiality of feature film, turned to the documentary. After spending the war in a detention camp, Zils joined the IFI in India, and put together a very good documentary team in place. He made several acclaimed films under his banner, the Documentary Unit of India. After Independence, he made two films for big industrial concerns, *Kurvandi Road* for Ciba, the first Indian short film to be shown on television in the USA and *A Tiny Thing Brings Death* for ICI, an anti-malarial film. His other famous films include the three-reeler film *Ripening Seed* on unwed motherhood, and also *Mother, Child and Community*, sponsored by the United Nations. In 1949, Zils started on his most ambitious project based on Minoo Masani’s best-selling book 'Our India'. The film *Hindustan Hamara*, starred twenty leading Indian movie artists like Prithviraj Kapoor, Dev Anand and Durga Khote. The film was a socio-economic study
of modern India and covered six thousand years of India's history in a mere two hours' (Narwekar, 1992).

The formation of the Films Division and its ambitious agenda to produce and release 52 short films every year and enforce compulsory screenings in all theatres, led the independent filmmakers to feel insecure about their survival. Especially when the independent filmmakers often had to pay the exhibitors to screen their films. In February 1949, some of them met at the Cricket Club of India in Bombay to collectively ask for a fixed number of short films to be allotted to them. The Short Film Guild was formed, under the initiative of Paul Zils, and the independent short film thrived for the next decade or so. The Films Division allotted 16 films out of the proposed 52 for independent filmmakers, and sponsorships from various other quarters were available to them as well. Zils also wrote extensively about the documentary scenario in India, organized Documentary film festivals in Bombay, and set up the Indian Documentary Producers Association.

The Burmah Shell programme and the Technical Co-operation Mission (TCM) were two initiatives that provided an impetus to the short film movement in India, by providing the finance to make films. Jim Beveridge of the National Film Board of Canada was appointed as producer of the Films Section of the Burmah Shell Films in India. This initiative sought to produce and build a library of Indian films, including some in colour, on specific categories like Village Industries of India, Folk Dances of India and Life in India. Between 1954-58, 50 films were produced under this banner. The Burmah Shell programme infused a new life into the short film movement in India by providing
the required sponsorship for filmmaking. Several classics like Zils’ *Ujala* (1954), Fali Billimoria’s *A Village in Travancore* (1956), Hari. S.Dasgupta’s *Weavers of Maindargi* (1957), V.M. Vijaykar’s *Kabuliram* and Clement Baptista’s *Look To The Sky* were produced during this time.

*A Village in Travancore* won several national and international awards. Billimoria was introduced to film by Zils and went on to become his cameraman and partner in the Art Films of Asia. His film *The House That Ananda Built* was the first Indian documentary to be nominated for the coveted Oscar awards.

Hari. S.Dasgupta’s other well known films are *Panchthupi: A Village in Bengal*, considered to be a forerunner to Satyajit Ray's *Father Panchali*. Ray, probably the best known Indian feature filmmaker, used to be a scriptwriter for Dasgupta. The *Story of Steel*, sponsored by the Tata Group of industries and a biographical film on the singer Bade Ghulam Ali Khan are his other famous films. The music for Dasgupta’s films were provided by maestros like Ali Akbar Khan (Sarod) and Pandit Ravi Shankar (Sitar).

Baptista and Vijaykar from the CKS, worked together in Hunnar Films, which include documentaries like *Destination Konkan, Kabuliram, The Tanners of Jharauta, The Lorry Driver* and *Look To The Sky*. They also made training films like *Spray For Better Crops, Earth, Water And Oil* and *Shell lubrication*. Homi Sethna, also from the CKS, was another of the acclaimed documentary makers of the 1950s, who made films like *Stop Rough Handling* and *Garam Safai* for Films Division, *Animal Diseases* and *Key Plan for Cattle Development* for TCM.

Rajbans Khanna made a feature-length documentary called *Gautama Buddha* (1956) for the 2500th anniversary of Buddha attaining Nirvana. A biographical-cum-art
film, the documentary went on to win a special award at the Cannes Film Festival, and was described by the Jury Chairman as “a marvel of marvels from the heart of hearts” (Narwekar, 1992).

The TCM facilitated the exchange of films between different countries and India, and also produced several short films in India on various social subjects. Notable among these were *The Etawah Story*, a film on community development, directed by Dr Pathy and *School* (1956) by Paul Zils about the secondary school education in India. The films were often translated into as many as 13 regional languages to reach bigger audiences. Educational films, instructional films, advertisements and publicity shorts were produced by several organizations in India. W.H.Hese, a German, set up the AMA Private Limited and was mainly involved in making training films for the UNSECO and TCM. His documentary, *Education for Life* (1956) was quite well known. The famous movie actress, Durga Khote also started a short film enterprise called Fact Films. Along with a few documentaries like *Deserted Women* (1958), mostly publicity and advertising films for industrial clients like Mahindra and Mahindra and Hindustan Lever were produced. The National Educational and Information Films of India (NEIF) was started by the Aggarwal brothers, Goverdhandas and Chhotelal in the late 1940s, and, as the name suggests, it believed in education through films. The NEIF played an important role in the short film movement in India, by importing foreign films and dubbing them into Indian languages before distribution. Later, films were also made for the TCM and Films Division and the more famous films are *Wealth of Our Waters*, *Singing Punjabis*, *Adivasi* and *Getting Together*. 
The Short Film **Guild** founded in 1949, and its magazine called *Indian Documentary* started by PauliZils as a rallying point for the documentary film movement and especially the independent films, folded up. But Zils **continued** to fight for a representation for independent producers, and eventually in 1956, the Indian Documentary Producers’ Association (IDPA) was formed. *Indian Documentary* was revived by Zils, with **Jagmohan** as editor, probably the only chronicler of the documentary movement in the country. A film critic and documentary scriptwriter, Jagmohan organized the first IDPA documentary festival in Bombay and Delhi in 1958, spanning five days.

With Mohan **Bhavani** as the first Chief Producer of documentaries, the Films Division (FD) had the sprawling Gulshan Mansion as its first official premises. As the then Deputy Director of FD, Jagat Murari, wrote, ‘There was never a dull moment at the Films Division. Everyday awaited a new experience, a new disco very... we were constantly on the move, searching and filming the soul of India’ (cited in Narwekar, 1992:40). The films made by FD were released under the banner of Documentary Films of India, and dealt with India’s traditional past and her Modern present. Some well-known films are Mohan Wadhwani’s *Jaipur* and *Memories of Mewar*, K.L.Khandpur’s *Holy Himalayas* and *Darjeeling*, Jagat Murari’s *Mahabalipuram* and *Story of Steel*, V.R.Sarma's *Power For Tomorrow* and Krishna Gopal’s *The Vital Link*. Films made by FD won several international awards since 1951. *Jaipur* was the first to win the First Prize at the Festival of Scientific and Documentary Films held in Venice. And *Mahabalipuram* won the first President’s Gold Medal for a documentary in 1954.
In this period, the themes that dominated the Indian documentary, both independent and state-produced, were:

- the agenda of nation-building, as envisioned by Nehru, through industrialization, modernization, literacy, scientific temperament, and transforming traditional agrarian practices into modern, high-yielding ones.

'unity in diversity' which was perceived to be a much-needed integrating thread to hold together the erstwhile princely states. So the nation and nationalism had to be constructed in the minds of the people. The documentaries, therefore, laid great emphasis on presenting the various cultural identities and traditions of India.

- the agenda of reclaiming India’s ‘golden past’ and the urge to establish a distinct identity for the newly independent country, as can be seen from the 'river' films, or the films on Indian temples, sculpture, culture, and history'.

medical themes like malaria, veterinary problems etc that could be seen as an effort aimed at re-orienting a whole country to accept another system of medicine. These films focus on the transformation of India into a ‘modern’ state along with its 'traditional' identity.

In 1950, FD covered the death of Sardar Patel and the homage paid by millions of people to the departed leader. The recording was processed and edited within a few hours and the silent newsreel, with a running commentary, was shown at Regal Cinema in Bombay the same evening. The dedication and professionalism of the FD staff gets illustrated in a small anecdote which has it that K.L.Khandpur even postponed his wedding date to accommodate the production of an urgently required documentary! Mohan Bhavani retired in 1955 after having established a strong FD, in infrastructure and
quality of film production. After this, Jean Bhownagary worked as Chief Producer Incharge, and tried to adhere to Nehru’s brief for FD, to foster nation-building, and a sense of citizenship and community in the people of India. Then Ezra Mir took over as Chief Producer, and in the five years of his tenure, FD produced over 400 documentaries, with Mir personally editing almost all the films.

This golden period in FD’s history saw the making of several acclaimed films. Biographicals like V.Bedekar’s film on Lokamanya Tilak, and Neil Gokhale’s the Story of Dr. Karve, films on art and culture like Wadhwani’s Khajuraho and Radha and Krishna by Bhownagary, instructional films like Nay a Paisa and Metric System, social films like Pause and Think, tourist films like Hill Stations of South India and Taj Mahal. Alongside some good films that won coveted awards international awards, several documentaries that were mediocre in quality and content were also produced. The speed and quantity in which FD was expected to produce films for compulsory exhibition in all theatres in India could be one of the main reasons for the deteriorating quality of films.

The late 1950s saw the introduction of classroom films, as well as entertainment films for children. Dr. Gopal Dutt, and then Sankar.P.Gangooli went on to produce several audio-visual study aids on the physical and geographical features on India. The films produced included Indo-Gangetic Plains, Deccan Tableland, Climate of India, Cycle of Evolution and Races of Man. Around the same time, FD also set up a Cartoon Film Unit, and initially supplied ‘animation inserts' to regular documentaries. In 1957, The Banyan Deer was directed by Ahmed Latif, which was based on a Jataka tale.

Disenchantment with the Films Division set in when people realized that the promises made by Nehru, and, therefore in the films by FD, remained pipedreams. The
films lost credibility and were seen as propaganda for the government. Many of the films were either travelogues or painted too rosy a picture of India. And almost all films began to look like each other. Communicators woke up to the fact that FD ‘had failed to grasp the essentials of development in a democratic society’ (Narwekar, 1992:48), and recognized the need to deal with the problems that beset free India. The mid-60s saw a change in the documentaries being made. *Face To Face* by K.S. Chari was the first film in the history of FD when the camera and the microphone was handed over to the common man on the street, for him to voice his opinion on film. These democratic voices paved the way for the films of that time. Chad's *Transition* was a film made on the 20th anniversary of India's independence to capture the feelings of the people on that occasion. S.N.S. Shastry, a contemporary of Chari, believed in jolting the viewer from complacency, by using jerky and flashy style of filmmaking, mixing beautiful visuals with harsh sound bytes. His films, including, *I Am Twenty, Jai Jawan, And I Make Short Films* and *This Bit of That India* probe beneath the surface.

Other important filmmakers of this time, who even explored the anti-establishment agenda to some extent were, Pramod Pati, K.K. Kapil and Sukhdev. All this was possible under the encouraging stewardship of Jean Bhownagary, who was made Chief producer by the then Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Mrs Indira Gandhi. Bhownagary steered the FD into a new era of successful filmmaking, which questioned and challenged. The controversial films of the times include *Report on Drought* and *Actual Experiences* (a critical, two-part series on family planning). N.V.K. Murthy produced pacy newsreels that gave a voice to the people on the streets on important political issues, instead of limiting them to the opinions of experts. Filmmakers were
encouraged to experiment with new subjects and styles of filmmaking. G.K. Gokhale’s *Homo Saps*, Pati’s *Explorer and Trip*, Sukhdev’s *And Miles To Go* and M.F. Hussain’s *Through The Eyes Of A Painter* were some well-known films that were produced at that time.

Several feature filmmakers also made an occasional documentary in the 1980s. For instance, Adoor Gopalakrishnan made *The Chola Heritage*, Aravindan, *The Seer Who Walks Alone*, Girish Karnad, *Kanaka Purandara*, B. Narsing Rao, *Maa Ooru*, Shyam Benegal, *Satyajit Ray* and Nehru and Mani Kaul, *Siddheswari* and *Dhrupad*. The length of the documentary too increased from about 30 minutes duration to double the time. Foreign funding made possible several films on wild life and the environment by the Bedi brothers, Naresh and Rajesh. Channel Four of the BBC was another avenue to get documentaries funded and exhibited. Biographicals on scientists, political leaders, and musicians were also in vogue, as were films on art and culture in India.

Sukhdev, a brilliant filmmaker and an assistant of Paul Zils, and made his first film *The Saint and the Peasant* (1958), on the Bhoodan and Sarvodaya movements launched by Acharya Vinoba Bhave, sponsored by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission. Sukhdev was a pioneer 'determined to marry art to activism' (M.K. Raghavendra, 1997). He believed that the filmmaker must use his camera as a weapon to expose truths about his society. His *India ’67* created ripples at the National Awards because of a few enacted scenes though he went on to win the award. But he extended the very definition of the documentary. His famous films include *A Few More Questions* (about the 1974 Railway Strike), *Behind the Breadline* (a critical film on the Public Distribution System), *After The Silence* (on bonded labour), *Nine Months To
Freedom (on the liberation of Bangladesh), Maa Ki Pukar (on the futility of violence) and Thunder Of Freedom (on the pre-emergency situation in the country).

Sukhdev can be regarded as the pioneer of the political or alternative documentary in India. Sukhdev’s powerful voice of dissent assumes even more significance, considering that it came out of the Films Division, an institution of the state. Anand Patwardhan is responsible for taking independent documentary in India to a new high, with his films made during and after the imposition of the Emergency in 1975.

The alternative documentary

The early 1970s brought home the realization that a free India had failed to address the aspirations of a cross-section in society. This led to disenchantment among the people, and the pre-Emergency period saw a wave of popular dissent against a corrupt and tyrannical state. Mass protests and acts of resistance by the media and the public sowed the seeds for voices of dissent to emerge in the form of documentary. The most significant documentary of that time was Waves of Revolution by Anand Patwardhan. The film was made during the National Emergency, imposed upon an angry nation by the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi in June 1975. India bore this state-imposed oppression for two years, when all civil and individual rights guaranteed by the Indian Constitution were withdrawn. Thousands of innocent people languished in jails and several lives were claimed in 'police encounters', a synonym for liquidating political dissent.

Anand Patwardhan, a young student, captured some of the massive student-and -peasant-led protests in Bihar in 1974, which precipitated the imposition of the Emergency.
Waves of Revolution was not conceived as a film until after the filmmaking process had already begun. Initially, footage was shot more as a record of police violence against non-violent demonstrators. The idea to make a more complete record of the movement came as a consequence (Patwardhan, 1984: 449).

Made against several odds like a hostile political climate, police brutality, inadequate equipment and furtive post-production and distribution, the film is an outstanding example of a guerilla film plugged into an ongoing revolution. While one print was retained in India for underground screenings, one print was cut into pieces and smuggled outside the country to mobilize support against the Emergency. Patwardhan’s other films include Prisoners of Conscience (1977) on political prisoners of the Emergency, Time to Rise (1980), a film on Sikh farm workers in Canada, Hamara Shehar (Bombay, Our City) (1985), a film on the slums in Bombay, Ram Ke Naam (In the Name of God) (1992), on the spread of Hindu fundamentalism, Father, Son and Holy War (1994) which deals with the relationship between communalism and masculinity, Fishing: In the Sea of Greed (1998), a film which deals with the problems of fishermen and War and Peace (2001), a film exposing the horrors of nuclear proliferation. All his films try to subvert state propaganda and awaken the consciousness of people towards the ills plaguing society.

The years following the Emergency have witnessed many powerful, oppositional films that take a hard look at political events and social ills that plagued India. The video boom of the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a technology that is less expensive and more accessible. The alternative documentary in India thrives as a filmic tradition today. The broad agenda for these films is simple—to provide a voice to the disenfranchised sections of Indian society, like the adivasis, women, minorities and children. The issues they explore include environmental degradation in an unsustainable development paradigm,
state-sponsored atrocities in the name of development and human rights abuses like discrimination on the basis of caste, class, gender, sexuality and ‘normality’. They are attempts to articulate an alternative paradigm of development, and are premised on the notion of social equity.

A few of the landmark documentaries of the last two decades, which have been influenced by and also influence the alternative documentary movement, are given below. *An Indian Story* (1981) by Tapan K. Bose is a path breaking film that deals with the blinding of 37 jailed peasants by the Bihar State Police. The oppressive feudal power structure in rural India and the appalling lack of human rights for the rural poor are exposed in the film. After a long battle with the Censor Board and courts, the film could finally be released. *They Call Me Chamar* (1980) by Loksen Lalvani, about a Brahmin married to a dalit woman, is one of the first films tackling the issue of caste. *Gift of Love* (1982) by Meera Dewan deals with the evils of the dowry system. *Voices from Baliapal* (1988) by Vasudha Joshi and Ranjan Palit captures the grassroots uprising of people in Balialpal against a government plan to build a nuclear missile testing range in their area. Deepa Dhanraj’s *Kya Hua Is Shehar Ko* (1987) deals with the communal riots in Hyderabad and *Legacy of Malthus* (1994) and *Something Like a War* (1991) exposing the flawed population control policies of the state and the violence unleashed on women by the state in the form of family planning are landmark films. *Bhopal: Beyond Genocide* (1985) by Suhasini Mulay and Tapan K. Bose is a powerful film on the victims of the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy. *Safdar* (1989), a film by Sashi Kumar, is a tribute to Safdar Hashmi, a well-known theatre activist and anti-fascist, who was murdered by hired killers while performing a play.
The ideologies that prompted these alternative documentaries were influenced greatly by the radical, philosophical shifts in political and economic thinking of development at the global level. The denigration of the economics-centered dominant paradigm of development, questions of inequity in international trade practices, unsustainable development, hegemony of knowledge and culture, questions of identity, the ‘woman’ question - all these issues were thrown up by the alternative documentaries.

An exploration of ‘identity’ was explored by many filmmakers. The gender question, or the indigene, or mass media images - the mechanisms that went into constructing these identities were focused upon. Alongside these concerns, the post-colonial filmmakers also grappled with questions of their own identities. Their location in the film and the question of reflexivity assumed importance, especially in the last decade. The question of women’s rights is addressed in a big way by filmmakers like Deepa Dhanraj, Shabnam Virmani, Reena Mohan, Sagari Chabra, and Madhushree Dutta to name a few. Films on issues like rape, socialization of the girl child, beauty and sexuality are addressed, and films profiling women leaders, especially at the grassroots, who fight against injustices, were made. *Tu Zinda Hal* and *When Women Unite: A story of an Uprising*, both by Shabnam Virmani, *Now I Will Speak* by Sagari Chabbra, *Skin Deep* by Reena Mohan and *Memories of Fear* by Madhushree Dutta are some examples.

Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar made films like *Odhni* (1995), *The Plot Thickens* and *Kahankar: Ahankar* (1994) and *YCP 1997*, critically looking at a host of issues like sexuality, representation, subaltern histories, and prisoners’ rights. The rights of the adivasis form the mainstay of Shripракash’s films like *Kis Ki Raksha* and *Buddha Weeps in Jaduguda*, all of which are based in Jharkhand. Stalin’s film *Lesser Humans*
(1997) is an expose on the plight of the bhangis, who are scavengers in Gujarat. Chellam Bennurkar, K.P.Sasi, Sehjo Singh, Gargi Sen, Manjusha Nair and Sarat Chandran are a few of the many other alternative filmmakers whose documentaries are widely circulated to provoke critical thought and dissent among the people of India.

As the descriptions of the films given above show, the focus of all these films are the marginalized sections in Indian society, those who do not or cannot make their anguish heard by mainstream India.