

# Why do South Asian documentaries matter?



The 9th edition of Film South Asia,<sup>1</sup> a film festival held in October of 2013 in Kathmandu (Nepal), created a row that came not entirely unexpected. The festival presented 55 documentaries that focused on Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Burma/Myanmar. Days ahead of the start of the festival, the Sri Lankan government asked the Nepali government to prohibit the screening of three films about Sri Lanka.

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THESE FILMS, *Broken* (2013) and *The Story of One* (2012) by Sri Lankan filmmaker Kannan Arunasalam, as well as *No Fire Zone* (2013) by UK-based filmmaker Callum Macrae, deal with the violent conclusion of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009, and its aftermath. Some of these films had already been banned from theatrical screenings in Sri Lanka. The Nepali government gave in to the pressure, and banned all three films.

The organizers of Film South Asia were obviously upset, and protested against “this unwarranted intrusion into the cultural sphere, an action that goes against the freedom of expression and the right of documentary filmmakers to exhibit their work”, as festival chair Kanak Mani Dixit was quoted saying in the press.<sup>2</sup> But rather than altogether cancelling the screenings, these were instead shifted to a ‘private venue’. As was to be expected, the ban generated even more interest in the films. In addition, the organizers created an ‘impromptu’ panel on ‘Censorship in South Asia’, which gave journalists and documentary filmmakers the chance to express their deep concern about censorship in the South Asian region. By moving the screening to a private location, which was accessible by ‘invitation’ only, the organizers of Film South Asia followed a well established strategy to evade censorship, which has been in existence in South Asia over the last three decades. Controversial documentary films have regularly been banned, but that didn’t stop people from seeing them in large scale private screenings. While filmmakers have vehemently, and usually eventually successfully, resisted such bans, these have generally generated more interest in their films and emphasized the partisan nature of their work.

The turmoil described above is indicative of the impact that documentary films can have in South Asia. Documentary footage, and the analyses based on it, can be highly controversial. This is certainly the case for the last months of the Sri Lankan civil war, of which the Sri Lankan government, a UN Fact Finding mission and Tamil groups have radically diverging readings. According to the Sri Lankan government, the last months of the war claimed about 7000 civilian lives, the UN puts that figure at 40.000, while Tamil groups estimate 147.000 deaths.<sup>3</sup> Where the Sri Lankan government spoke of a ‘clean war’, Tamil groups talked of ‘genocide.’ But documentary films do not need to focus on ‘high’ politics or topics deemed newsworthy in order to raise critical and challenging questions. These are often found in relation to culture and religion as well.

## Sponsorship, censorship and evasion of control

Below, I focus on the development of documentary filmmaking in India. Documentary filmmaking on the subcontinent started in the colonial period. During the Second World War, the government created a film organization, primarily to produce films in support of the war effort. After independence, in India, this government body transformed into Films Division. From the early 1950s onward, Films Division (based in Bombay) commissioned films that had to contribute, in one way or the other to ‘nation building’. Topics were diverse, ranging from urban planning and immunization campaigns to India’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage.<sup>4</sup> Producing up to

Above: Making a documentary in a South Asian village. Photo by author.

one film a week, with a length of about 20 minutes on average, Films Division quickly gained the reputation of being the world’s largest producer of documentary films. Until the early 1990s it was compulsory for movie theatres to screen a Films Division documentary preceding the main feature film, which ensured these documentaries of an audience.<sup>5</sup> Censorship practices that had applied in colonial times, were more or less continued in independent India, and documentary films could (and can) not be screened in public places unless they had (and have) been cleared by the Censor Board. Consequently, the documentaries produced by Films Division tended to avoid controversy. They would not explicitly critique the functioning of the state, nor would they contain materials that one community or the other might consider offensive.

Until the early 1990s, most documentaries were shot on ‘real’ film, which was very costly. Filmmakers dependence on Films Division implied that in a practical sense, the state controlled documentary film production. Since film projectors were seldom individually owned, but only available at ‘public’ venues, ‘real’ film technology also implied the regulation of film screenings.<sup>6</sup> When videocassettes and video recorders came onto the Indian market in the 1980s, these revolutionized the dissemination of documentary films, as they made screenings in non-public spaces possible. A circuit developed in which documentary films, whether they were certified or not, were screened at venues such as colleges and NGOs, attended by ‘invited’ audiences. Often, such private screenings took place in the presence of the filmmaker, and discussions with the filmmaker afterwards were part and parcel of these events, which they still are.

By the mid 1980s, India also saw the emergence of the first independent filmmakers; such as the iconic Anand Patwardan, whose films on, for instance, the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (*In the Name of God*, 1992) and on Hindu fundamentalism (*Father, Son and Holy War*, 1995) made waves in India and abroad. Many of his films were initially rejected by the Censor Board, but after lengthy trials they were eventually screened in public venues and on television.

## The liberalization of media space

The 1990s saw a speeding up of the gradual liberalization and deregulation of India’s ‘controlled’ economy, and one of the sectors on which this had an immediate impact was the media. The compulsory documentary screenings in cinema halls came to an end, and television, previously the exclusive domain of state broadcaster Doordarshan, was ‘opened up’ to commercial channels. In a few years, scores of new channels entered the market. Most of these are dedicated to soaps, music videos, sports (cricket!), Hindi movies and news, but they rarely program documentaries. The Indian state broadcaster, with its popularity rather dramatically reduced, gained new importance for the documentary circuit when it became the channel to air documentary films produced by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust, which works with government funding.<sup>7</sup> Since 2001, it has commissioned more than 500 documentary films, mostly from independent filmmakers.<sup>8</sup>

However, much more important than their TV screenings (mostly late-night slots), the films enter the ‘private screenings’ circuit that has continued to flourish, and continues to be a preferred way for the socially-committed middleclass to engage with documentary films (and the filmmakers that produce these). Unfortunately, with an average budget of €4000 to €6000 per film, production budgets are modest even by Indian standards, and the equipment used is often of a lower quality than what Western broadcasters consider acceptable.

## Winning the West?

Tailored as these films are to a South Asian audience, they often lack the kind of contextual information that a Western audience requires. Consequently, such audiences generally fail to understand what these films ‘are about’, and are often unable to appreciate their merit. As a result, these films rarely get selected for major documentary festivals such as IDFA. The disappointment is mutual, in the sense that South Asian documentary filmmakers often fail to understand why the selection committees of such festivals continue to prefer ‘orientalist’ documentaries that either emphasize South Asia’s mysticism, or its ‘communal’ violence. This also holds for smaller film festivals, such as the Amsterdam based ‘Beeld voor Beeld’ festival.<sup>9</sup>

To tap into the rich potential of South Asian documentaries, European producers have been working with South Asian filmmakers. Some of these films, tailored to Western audiences, have been international successes. An example is *Laxmi and Me* (2008), a reflexive documentary by Nishtha Jain on her relationship with her domestic helper.<sup>10</sup> For a South Asian middleclass audience, whose prime concerns are corrupt politicians, Hindu nationalism, and the country’s growing social inequality, this is not directly a topic that conveys a great sense of urgency. For a Western audience though, the film provides valuable insights into the delicate balance between contract and patronage that characterizes so many social and economic relationships on the subcontinent.

The organizers of Film South Asia have from the outset recognized the importance of gaining more international exposure for South Asian documentaries. After each edition of their festival, the 15 most appealing films go on tour. Perhaps not surprisingly, Travelling Film South Asia has mostly been presented at US, UK and Australian universities that maintain substantial centers for South Asian studies. So far, Travelling Film South Asia has come to a small European country like the Netherlands only once (in 1999).

Another increasingly popular way to make documentaries available, is to upload them in their entirety to video sharing sites such as *vimeo*. This is also a way to evade censorship, which continues to be an issue for politically controversial films. Unfortunately, even online distribution cannot solve the problems of ‘context’. So far, too few of these films reach an audience in the world beyond South Asia. There definitely lies a task ahead for the programmers of major international film festivals. Rather than limiting themselves to the presumed tastes of their audience, programmers should – more than they currently do – screen films that have been made for circulation in South Asia, seeking to extend the referential framework of their audience. Documentaries from South Asia deserve to be more extensively viewed, to inform global audiences about the major challenges that the South Asian subcontinent faces, and the radical transformations that its people are confronted with.

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## References

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- 2 See: <http://tinyurl.com/srilankanfilms> accessed on 14 Mar 2014.
- 3 Harrison, F. 2012. *Dubbing Sri Lankan Conflict as ‘war without Witness’ is Simply not True* (web publication) <http://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/6482>, accessed on 14 Mar 2014.
- 4 For an overview of documentary films produced, see: <http://filmsdivision.org>
- 5 Rajagopal, A. & P. Vohra. 2012. ‘On the Aesthetics and Ideology of the Indian Documentary Film: A Conversation’, *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 3:1, 7–20.
- 6 Battaglia, G. 2014. ‘The Video Turn: Documentary Film Practices in 1980s India’, *Visual Anthropology*, 27:1-2, 72-90.
- 7 Mehrotra, R. 2006. *The Open Frame Reader*, New Delhi: Rupa & Co.
- 8 For an overview of documentary films produced by PSBT, see: <http://www.psb.org>
- 9 See for example: Bedi, N. 2013. ‘Orientalism Today: Alive and Well’, *Anthrovision* [Online], 1:2; Online since 2 August 2013, <http://anthrovision.revues.org/645>, accessed on 14 Mar 2014.
- 10 See: [www.lakshmiandme.com](http://www.lakshmiandme.com)