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Interview with ANJALI MONTEIRO & K. P. JAYASANKAR - Film scholars and filmmakers, Tata Institute of Social Sciences

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Short bio:

Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar are Professors at the School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India. They have made over 40 documentaries and their work has been screened at many film festivals across the world. Jointly they have won thirty-two national and international awards for their films, the most recent being the Basil Wright Award for *"Like Here Like There"* at the 13th RAI International Ethnographic Film Festival, Edinburgh 2013. They write in the broad area of

media and cultural studies, with focus on documentary film, censorship, critical theory and issues of media representation. They have been fellows and visiting faculty at several Universities, including University of Technology Sydney, Goldsmith's College, London, University of Western Sydney, Lund University, Sweden and University of California, Berkeley and have lectured at several universities in Australia, USA, UK, Asia and Europe.



1) Could you present your upcoming book on contemporary Indian documentary, coming out with Sage?

We are about to publish a book that mainly focuses on the subversive potential of the documentary form, on the question of the materiality of a certain type of social practice (i.e. documentary filmmaking). It covers the early political documentaries of Anand Patwardhn, but also Mani Kaul, up to the more recent works of Amar Kanwar, feminist documentaries, as well as our own films.

We look at the place of the documentary in the public sphere, and more specifically at the issue of censorship, the role played by the Vikalp initiative (of which we were part of).

We look at films that are political in content or form, or both. The book offers both our analysis as scholars and filmmakers, as well as the perspective of other practitioners through interviews, or secondary documents (existing interviews of Anand Patwardhan, Mani Kaul's talks on youtube etc.). The book looks at what links these different practices together. It is also a very dear project, as we felt there was no adequate literature available on the subject for our students.

2) Have some of early FD filmmakers caught your interest as documentary filmmakers?

We wanted to make a film based on Prem Vaidya's film *Man in Search of Man*, which we think is quite problematic, because of the colonial gaze the film casts on indigenous people. Eventually, this project had to be cancelled due to a lack of adequate resources. (The filmmakers have a personal interest in themes related indigenous peoples and have made films on this theme too).

3) What do you think is the contribution of FD to the development of the documentary film in India?

I recall going to FD in 2007 to get some material out. At the time, it was a very difficult task. It took me several months and a lot of persistence to get VCD copies (there were no DVDs available at the time). Yet, today, this institution has also offered a space to independent documentary films, as a project to reach out to the general public and to promote the documentary form. They also felt the urge to reinvent themselves, in a period when they were highly criticised or falling into oblivion.



4) As political filmmakers, how do you approach the issue of censorship?

The issue of censorship is also quite important in our work. The Censor Board has always been pro-government, whatever political party was ruling the country. Yet, today, its pro-BJP stand has become very obvious; it is out in the open. Even if the films under attack today are of poor taste, yet, we think one cannot ban a film on the grounds of its aesthetics. In the Indian context of censorship where the entire political spectrum is involved in acts of censorship (including the left wing parties), one has to support the freedom of expression.

5) What is your perception of the FD filmmakers of the 1960s, such as SNS Sastri, Sukhdev and the like?

Sastry, Sukhdev and the like:

We have an ambivalent relationship with FD films, including the works of Sastry, because of their uncritical acceptance of modernity as the norm, of the Nehruvian vision, and because of their middle-class gaze. Even the Communist Party, to which Sukhdev was close, was pro-modernist at the time. These films avoid being too political. If they show the contrast between the rich and the poor, they do not explore the power relations between them. The gap between these disparities as political terrain remains unexplored.

The dialectical montage they used in their films (which is often acknowledged as an innovative aspect of their practice, NDLR), in this sense, was often not political.

Also, some of Sukhdev's films such as *'India 67'* would show many places in India, presenting a sort of 'Placeless India'. This kind of representation could lead to typecasts, stereotypes, a sort of 'Incredible India' experience. The nuances only manifest in the representations of modernity versus tradition, but what about other nuances? Thus, these films were perhaps, part of the official 'Unity in Diversity' message.

FD films showcasing arts and folk traditions of different parts of India always did it from an outsider's point of view. That is why they tend to remain rather superficial in their treatment. This is why the gaze of *'Man in Search of Man'* is problematic.

Sastry's film *'The Burning Sun'* on the housing issue is both making fun of the bureaucratic response to this issue and reproducing the middle-class representations of what needs to be done for the poor. They all convey the same message of normal, secular modernity.

6) What is your perception of the experimental endeavor within FD, such the work of Pramod Pati and the like?

The experimental films work within a different register, such as Sastry's *'And I Make Short Films'*. They show that the whole fiction versus documentary divide is debatable. And hence, they worked towards opposing the idea of documentary cinema offering 'one' single truth.

7) It is quite difficult to access the films sponsored by private companies from the 1950s up to the 1960s. What do you know about the documentaries sponsored by the Tatas?

The Tata Archive in Pune opened 15 to 20 years ago. It is possible that they have some of the films, photographs or written documents of the films produced by the company over the years.

- Dr. Camille Deprez (2015)