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FILMS that go beyond the screen

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Documentary filmmakers K. P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro on their book, which talks about the challenges of filmmaking in India



Whether documentaries have the power to change, inspire and educate is debatable. When it is usual for documentary filmmakers to make a film and then move on to new themes, two filmmakers K. P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro believe in going beyond the films, going back to the people, the places they film and remain connected with them.

Jayasankar and Anjali have made over 30 films in a career spanning nearly 30 years and have jointly won a clutch of national and international awards. Interestingly, both of them are not trained filmmakers.

Anjali has a Masters in Economics and Doctorate in Sociology, while Jayasankar a PhD in Philosophy Humanities and Social Sciences from IIT, Bombay, and both of them teach,

produce and research at the School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai.

They have recently published an engaging work that explores independent documentary film in India as a site of resistance. *A Fly in the Curry: Independent Documentary Film in India*, (Sage, 2016), looks at how independent Indian documentary film reworks the relationship between film-makers, their narratives, their subjects and their audience, challenging the dominant idea of documentary as a discourse of the real.

“The book does not aspire to be either an encyclopaedia or a history of documentary in India. It does not attempt to construct a comprehensive chronology, an evolutionary, teleological narrative that bears witness to the changing space of documentary film practice. Rather, it seeks to explore certain tropes within independent documentary film, arising within specific circumstances that have challenged dominant definitions of the documentary in the Indian context: as fundamentally a discourse that provides evidence of the real, often with the intention of bringing about behavioural changes in less powerful others,” says Jayasankar in an e-mail chat. Jayasankar did his schooling in Kochi and graduated from Maharaja’s College.

Jayasankar goes on to explain the premise of the work further.

“We have brought together the work of films and filmmakers by not in a purposively evolutionary account, which moves from the simple to the complex, but juxtaposing work emerging from different time periods and spaces, in order to understand moments of resistance that offer contestations. We are deploying the idea of ‘archaeology’ from Michel Foucault—archaeologists dig deep to find several sedimented layers that offer clues to the prevailing cultural and political ethos of a particular era (though each layer may not have a logical linear connection with the preceding and the succeeding layer). More than a historical trajectory, what appears significant are the layers of sedimented practice, often discontinuous, yet bringing forth certain common themes and positions, indicating perhaps the need for archaeology in independent documentary practice.”

Does the title look at the premise metaphorically? Anjali explains the use of the title thus, “*A Fly in the Curry...* is a humorous take on the provocative formulation by Henry Breitrose of the documentarist in the cinema verite mode as a ‘fly in the soup’, in contrast to the neutral ‘fly on the wall’. In other words, the documentarist is never a neutral observer. It is common knowledge that the moment you put on a camera, the ‘reality’ around it begins to change. This poses the question of reflexivity within documentary film. Reflexivity involves subverting the aspiration of the documentary film to be a transparent carrier of ‘actuality’ and instead seeks to make the construction of this actuality available to audiences. This allows viewers to critique their own social realities as well as the cinematic image that represents it.”

In a dedicated chapter the authors examine their own films critically. “Since reflexivity is one of the key metaphors that we use to unpack the idea of documentary, we thought it is important to look critically at our own work too. By no means was it easy, as it was extremely difficult to maintain a critical distance from one’s own work and at the same time, engage with it,” says Jayasankar.

Jayasankar and Anjali have made a series of films on *Kachchh* that represent the voices of the marginalised pastoral communities – their wealth of culture, oral traditions and story telling.

Apart from teaching and mentoring they are currently working on three films set in *Kachchh*. “We are building on our earlier work on the music of the marginalised communities in the region.

The three projects are on women’s work and knowledge, transmission of oral traditions and music between generations and on love in the work of the medieval Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai. We are also working on an edited volume on the convergence of the local and the digital,” explains Anjali.

Documentary filmmakers in India are stalked by innumerable hurdles. The authors touch upon them in the last chapter. Despite all these years, despite all this talk of freedom of expression, there still exists issues that filmmakers struggle to surmount. Attitudes have not seen a sea change.

“Censorship and threats to freedom of expression continue to be a spectre that haunts any creative enterprise. This is not only a major difficulty that is faced by the documentary film fraternity, but also by feature filmmakers, artistes and writers, among others. While online spaces and new film festivals are emerging which show exciting new work, at times it becomes very difficult for a filmmaker to screen their work on the ground,” feels Jayasankar.

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