

CINEMA

Their hearts take over when the camera stops

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K.P.Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro make documentaries, but unlike some others, they keep going back to their subjects

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K. P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro are documentary filmmakers who believe in going beyond where their camera stops rolling. It is a medium through which their social concerns are voiced. For them documentaries are the best way to integrate feelings, thoughts, words and visuals.

Making one film and moving on to the next is not what they do. Whether documentaries have the power to move people, demand change, inspire and educate is still debatable. But Jayasankar and Anjali believe in going back to the people, the places they film, and stay connected with them.

“Well, maybe this is what most of today's filmmakers do. After a thorough research we usually spend a lot of time at the place or with the people we intend to film. Our first audience is the people on whom our films are based. We do this regularly. Often we also do a follow up, like in the case of our films on the rich heritage and culture of Kutch. And in some cases we try to stretch out and help,” says Jayasankar, who is professor at the Centre for Media and Culture Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai.

The two filmmakers have now completed the second in a three-part docu-series on Kutch. “We have been going to Kutch since 2008. The first in the series, ‘Do Din Ka Mela’ was on the folk music of the place based on the lives of and songs of Mura Lala Fafal and his nephew Kanji Rana Sanjot. Our latest, the editing has just been completed, is on Osman, a truck driver who taught himself to play and make his own ‘surando,’ his cousin Mustafa who sings and their cousin Haji Ummer, farmer-Sufi scholar. The third film will have Padmaben as protagonist. She is the sister-in-law of Mura Lala and mother of Kanji. Padmaben is an earthy, powerful woman, who does wonderful interior decoration, ethnic of course, and embroidery,” informs Anjali.

Marginalised communities

This series, like most of Jayasankar-Anjali films, is an attempt to give voice to marginalised communities, their wealth of culture, traditions and heritage. They turn into genuine archival material that will turn priceless for generations to come. The duo have made around 25 films in a career spanning nearly 15 years and jointly won 23 national and international awards for their films. And interestingly both of them are not trained in filmmaking. Anjali has a Masters in Economics and Doctorate in Sociology and heads the unit of media and communication at TISS, while Jayasankar has a PhD in Philosophy from IIT, Mumbai.

Anjali was making her first film ‘Paani Panchayat,’ when she met Jayasankar. “I was interested in films. You know it was that time when one grew up with the ‘art’ and middle of the path films. Anjali was there at TISS giving her film the final touches. And I used to be there watching...’ Jayasankar is interrupted “And he was of immense help. We then decided to go into it together from then on.” Their first film together was ‘The Young Labourers,’ on the issue of child labour. They have since then trained their camera on various issues in their documentaries.

“We have had some very humbling experiences. Like, when we were at the Yerwada Central Prison (YCP), Pune, for the making of ‘YCP 1997,’ there was this award-winning Nigerian poet Harrison Cudjoe, a prisoner there, who first refused to be filmed. We were trying to share the work and lives of six poets and artistes who were prisoners in YCP. Rather than exploring their personal life histories and their crimes, we were seeking to present the human condition as articulated by them. Harrison told us there was nothing different between him and us. We were only inmates of a larger prison, while he was one of a smaller

prison. This really hit us. Later Harrison did cooperate with us and we did our bit to secure his release,” remembers Jayasankar.

Making films that was considered a ‘big thing’ has become so much easier today. Technology has made documentary making economically more viable and is no longer a premise of only an exclusive few. But documentary films in the country still struggle for a screening and most are sadly mutilated by the harsh censorship laws.

No support

“Documentary filmmakers are always pushed to the margins. It is tough finding a place to screen films and establishing a dedicated audience. Vikalp, a network of documentary filmmakers and others interested in the issue, was started to ease some of these problems. It provides a platform to defend freedom of expression and resist censorship. It seeks to support independent documentary movements and to promote alternative ways of seeing. We have a core group of around 300 people, a horizontal collective, who discuss, share films and ideas. We also have venues in Mumbai and elsewhere for regular screening of documentaries,” explains Anjali.

And when they are not making films Jayasankar and Anjali are engrossed in media teaching, production, research and dissemination at TISS: An extension of their creative work.

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