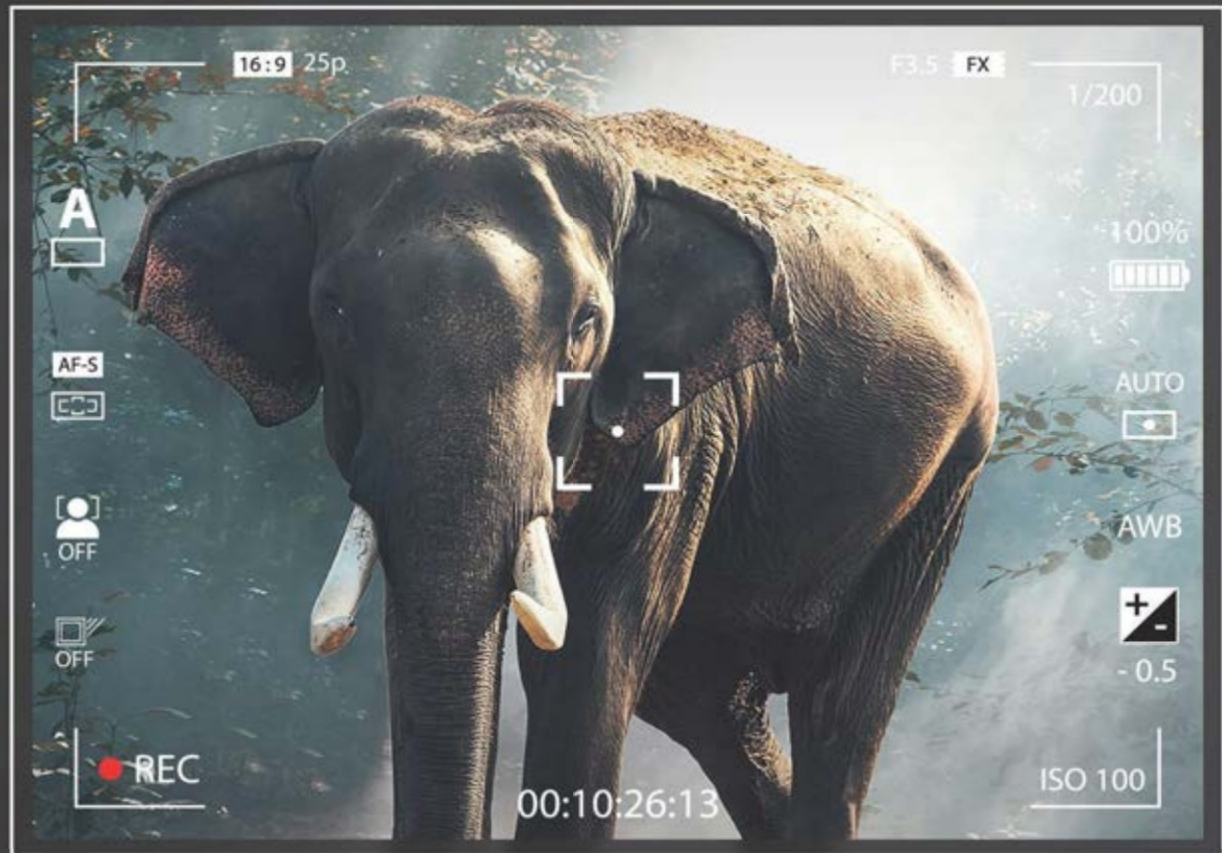


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The Journey

Has the documentary film, always a tool of dissent, finally come of age as a work of art?

Pawar play in Maharashtra

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Is political Islam in retreat?

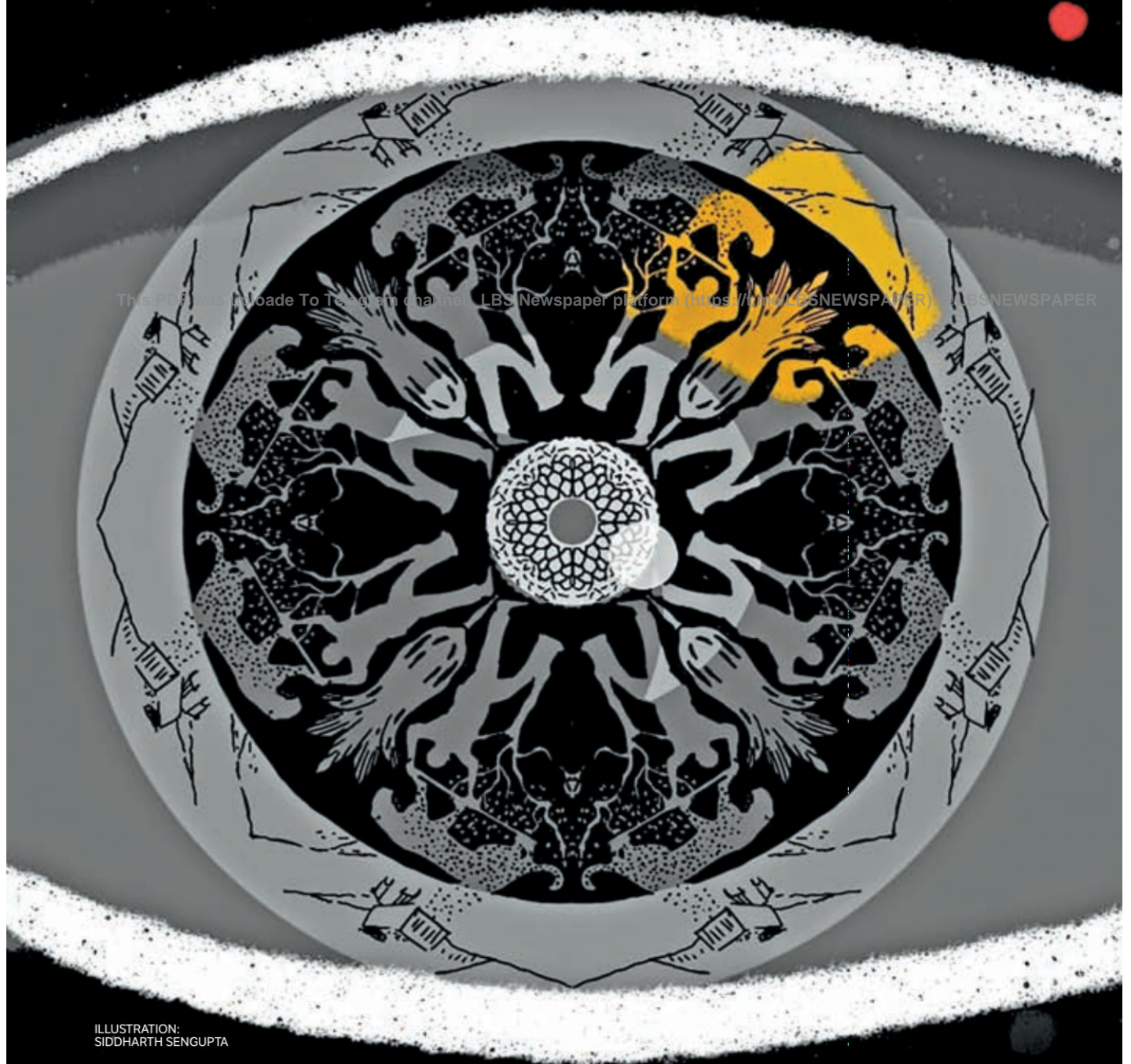
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The eye of the documentary



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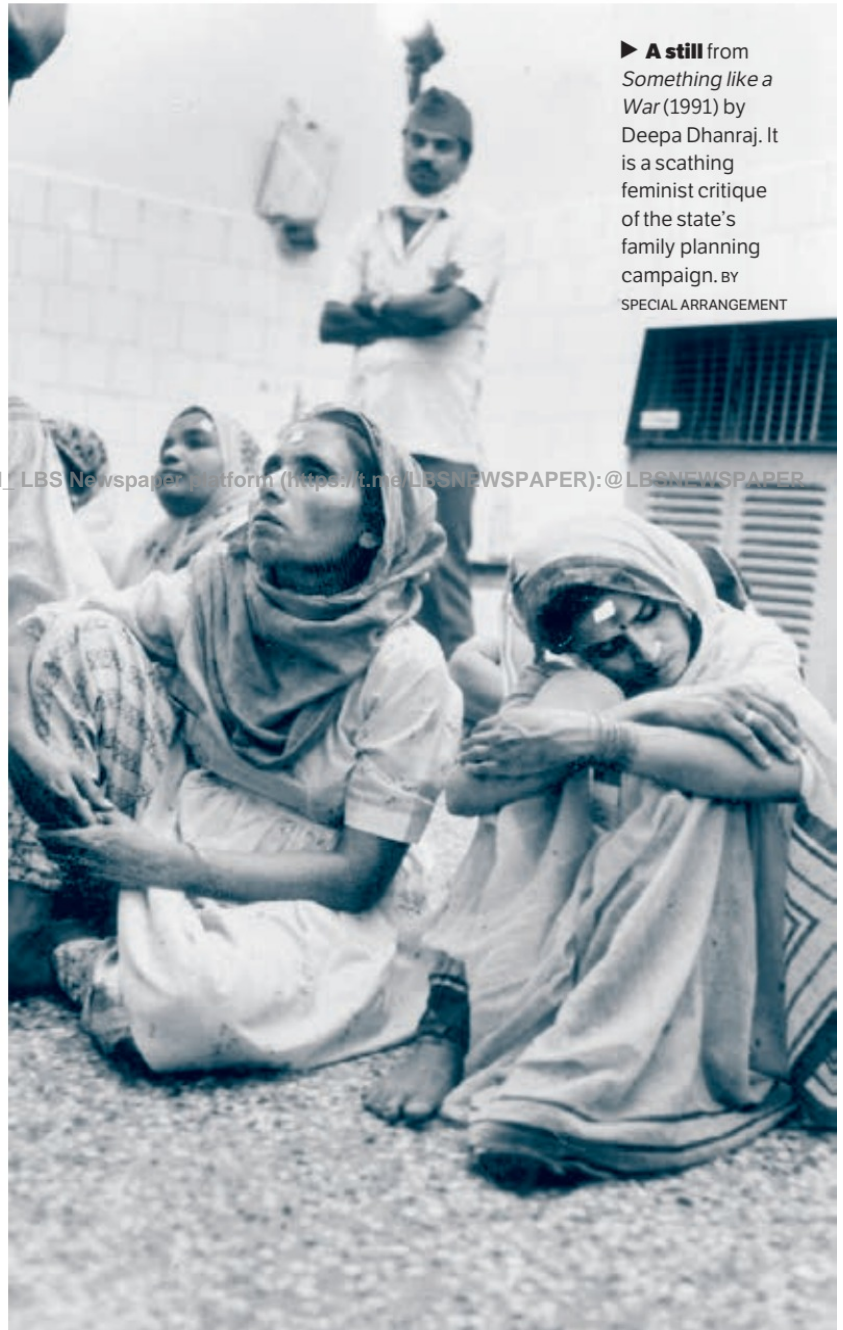
Gazing as a feminist

The emergence of feminist documentaries from the 1980s onwards brought a singular freshness and audacity to the somewhat restrictive format and language of the “political” documentary, along with newer ways of imagining the self and the other.

**ANJALI MONTEIRO
& K.P. JAYASANKAR**

The international acclaim and awards for Indian documentaries over the past few years has focussed media attention on a genre that has long been marginalised within film and popular cultures in India. Independent Indian documentaries first emerged in the post-Emergency period in the late 1970s and grew into a significant locus of critical energy that questioned the state and its dominant development paradigm. The contribution of women filmmakers to this genre has been phenomenal and not recognised adequately.

The early 1980s witnessed feminist struggles across the country on the issues of rape, dowry, and violence against women; some of these struggles were in response to the patriarchal Supreme Court judgment on the



► **A still** from *Something like a War* (1991) by Deepa Dhanraj. It is a scathing feminist critique of the state's family planning campaign. BY

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Mathura rape case in 1979. This resistance to state and familial power found creative expression through street theatre, songs, posters, and photographs.

In 1980, Deepa Dhanraj, along with Abha Bhaiya, Meera Rao, and the late Navroze Contractor, formed the Yugantar Film Collective. In an interview, Dhanraj describes her political stance as an organic response to the Emergency and the Mathura rape case and an attempt to understand these events through a Marxist lens by “theorising from lived experience”. Dhanraj sees this focus on “ground realities” as a hallmark of her cinematic practice. Her interest in critically engaging with the sites of “the family, the state, law and health” has also endured.

YUGANTAR WORKED TOGETHER with other feminist collectives such as Stree Shakti Sanghatana in Hyderabad and Saheli in New Delhi. The collective’s first project was a series of films on the unionisation and struggles of women workers in the informal sector, including *bedi* workers in Nipani, Karnataka, and domestic workers in Pune. The initiative saw itself as working together with grassroots organisations and movements to reach out to audiences outside the ambit of theatrical distribution, in an attempt to focus on women’s struggles as a part of class struggles.

In a critical reflection on the body of work produced by Yugantar, Dhanraj points out that there was a process of “self-censorship” at work that led to a focus on issues of labour, eliding the issues related to the family and caste. Interestingly, when the group decided to focus on the family in their third film, they chose a fictional format, set in a middle-class location, which drew on a process of intense sharing and brainstorming among a group of women that included the filmmakers and the activists of Stree Shakti Sanghatana. The film *Idhi Katha Matramena* (Is This Just a Story?) was most successful, and evoked strong affective responses from large audiences of women across India.

Dhanraj sees her work over the years as a collaborative project with her subjects, involving discussion with them on the theme, the treatment, and other aspects of filmmaking. Once the films were made, they were first screened for the subjects and re-edited based on post-screening discussions. In many ways, this space for women’s voices and their agency was a radical shift

▶ **Deepa Dhanraj,**
documentary
filmmaker.

K. MURALI KUMAR

— On March 26, 1972, Mathura, a 16-year-old Adivasi woman, was raped by two policemen in Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra. The Supreme Court’s acquittal of the accused in 1979 sparked nationwide outrage and eventually led to the amendment of the rape law.



in the language of Indian documentary, particularly Films Division work, with its voice-of-God voice-overs, where, as Dhanraj notes, “nobody spoke”.

IN HER LANDMARK FILM *Something like a War* (1991), Dhanraj mounts a scathing feminist critique of the family planning campaign of the state in post-Independence India. *Something Like a War* is a significant film in many ways: for its intervention in public debates over population control and women’s reproductive health, for its courageous observation of the state’s brutal enactment of global imperatives around fertility control, for its assertion of feminist visions of desire, sexuality, and reproductive rights, for its affirmation of the logic of the poor for whom fertility control is not a numerical abstraction but a brutal violation of their bodies and lives, and finally, for how it pushes the envelope of documentary film language in the Indian context.

Through an innovative and multi-layered narrative, the film draws on interviews, group discussions, observation, archival material, and

**Films made by
the Yugantar
Film Collective**

Molkarin
(Maid Servant)
1981

**Tambaku
Chaakila
Oob Ali**
(The Tobacco
Smoulders) 1982

**Idhi Katha
Matramena**
(Is This Just
a Story?) 1983



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text, without the use of a voice-over. It complicates and brings to the fore the relationships of power that the filmmaker and the audience are a part of. This is unlike many critical documentary narratives of this period, which focus on oppression as a phenomenon “out there”, not implicating either the filmmaker or the audience.

Dhanraj continues to make significant documentary films that are related to her work as a feminist, educator, and political activist. Notable among these are *The Advocate* (2007) on the contribution of K.G. Kannabiran to human rights struggles; *Invoking Justice* (2011), which looks at the dynamics of an all-women *Jamaat* established in 2004, in Tamil Nadu; and *We Have Not Come Here to Die* (2018), on the scholar and activist Rohit Vemula at the University of Hyderabad and the subsequent student movement that his struggle inspired.

VIDEO TECHNOLOGY FIRST made its appearance in India in the early 1970s, in the context of social change and development, with the participatory video work of CENDIT (Centre for Development of Instructional Technology) in New Delhi. In the 1980s, in collaboration with feminist activists Kamla Bhasin and Sushma Kapur, CENDIT organised a series of short duration workshops in video production for women activists from South Asia. Many

of these activists (including one of the authors of this piece) went on to make documentary films in the years to come, though they were not formally trained in film schools.

The most important fallout of video technology was that it facilitated more informal encounters between filmmakers and their subjects, as the equipment was compact, with synchronous sound, and could be managed by a small crew (even a single person, in some cases).

It also laid the ground for participatory video experiments such as Video SEWA, initiated in 1984, where women with little or no formal education were able to use the medium to tell their stories for advocacy with planners and policy makers and for horizontal communication with each other, thus creating new models and institutional mechanisms for alternative image production and distribution.

AS FILMMAKER MADHUSREE Dutta observes: “The 1980s was the great decade of the feminist movement in the country (...) Videos made the shooting units small and unobtrusive and that was essential to gain access to ordinary women who are mostly confined to dingy indoor spaces. So domestic workers, sex workers, survivors of domestic violence, girl child, women artists, etc., could invade the screen space. Thus, the feminist filmmaking in India has been as much a by-product of the women’s movement as it was part of the technoscapes of the time.”

This period also saw the emergence of Mediastorm, a feminist media collective formed in 1986, consisting of six alumni of Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia: Shohini Ghosh, Sabeena Gadihoke, Sabina Kidwai, Ranjani Mazumdar, Shikha Jhingan, and Charu Gargi. They made the films *In Secular India* (1986), on the Muslim Women’s Bill; *From the Burning Embers* (1988), on the resurgent practice of sati; and *Kiska Dharm Kiska Desh* (1991), a critique of the Hindutva mobilisation around Ayodhya. The last film won them the Chameli Devi Jain award in 1991, for outstanding work by women media professionals.

Shohini Ghosh recalled in a conversation with Ravi Vasudevan: “We were beginning to understand the shortcomings of the particular form we had chosen for our documentaries. Many of our political assertions—that Dalits, workers, and women would rise against Hindutva together—

▼ **A still** from *Idhi Katha Matramena* (1983), a Telugu film which evoked strong affective responses from large audiences of women across India. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Also read



The CENDIT Story

Feminism, with its affirmation of the personal as political, created possibilities for rethinking both the filmmaker's relationship with their subjects as well as the authorial presence within the text.

proved to be wrong. The films seemed too polemical, too replete with certitudes. Much of the work we all did later emerged from a critique of our own work." This is a hallmark of much of the feminist documentary work: an openness to critically interrogate its own language and the position of the filmmaker.

THUS, THE SOMEWHAT restrictive format and language of the "political" documentary in the 1970s and 1980s was first made plural with the emergence of feminist documentaries in India. Feminism, with its affirmation of the personal as political, created possibilities for rethinking both the filmmaker's relationship with their subjects as well as the authorial presence within the text. Nilita Vacha-



▼
The Other Song
(2009)
by Saba Dewan

▼
A still from
SheWrite (2005)
by Anjali Monteiro
and
K.P. Jayasankar
YOUTUBE SCREENGRAB

ni's path-breaking film *Eyes of Stone* (1989) has been an inspiration to other feminist and ethnographic documentary work in India. *Kamlabai* (1991) by Reena Mohan; *Tales of the Night Fairies* (2002) by the filmmaker, scholar, and teacher Shohini Ghosh; *SheWrite* (2005) and *Our Family* (2007) by Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar; and *The Other Song* (2009) by Saba Dewan, though widely separated in time, all deal with the presence of women in public spaces, non-normative women performers, sex workers, singers, feminist poets, trans-women, and courtesans—who through their very screen presence challenge the construction of the "good" Indian woman and the safe gendered space of the spectator.

In all these films, the presence of the filmmaker is reflexively marked, whether through their interaction with their subjects on screen, the insertion of their voice, their perceptions, or their own stories. In *For Maya* (1997) by Vasudha Joshi; *Sita's Family* (2001) by Saba Dewan; *Bare* (2006) by Santana Issar; and *Nirnay* (2012) by Pushpa Rawat and Anupama Srinivasan, the filmmakers turn the gaze directly on themselves and their life worlds. These films bring to the language of the documentary a singular freshness and audacity that is productive of new ways of imagining the self and the other.

FILMMAKERS HAVE USED various strategies to subvert the voyeurism inherent in the project of representing marginal and stigmatised voices. *Tales of the Night Fairies* by Shohini Ghosh celebrates the dignity, beauty, and power of its sex worker protagonists and invites the viewer to challenge the normality of their everyday spaces. The gaze of the camera (and the filmmaker) is intimate and affectionate, subverting dominant notions of morality and making a powerful case for recognising sex work without slipping into a binary, polemical rhetoric. Apart from the warm and inclusive ways in which the spaces and subject positions of the sex workers are rendered through image and sound, the non-heteronormative persona of the filmmaker puts to question the viewer's notions of insider and outsider, spectator, and actor.

Paromita Vohra locates her work in the interstices of a political and performative rewriting of gender. She chooses to deploy her own subject



A positive fall out is the solidarity among women writers



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position within her cinematic text, using a variety of devices to signify the presence of an imagined self that is shifting, mercurial, urbane, at times bordering on the melodramatic and the sardonic. In *Unlimited Girls* (2002), the filmmaker adopts the persona of “Fearless”, a presence that is tantalisingly faceless, yet present through various traces. Fearless takes the narrative, and the viewer, across different spaces, from the Internet chat room to the wall where the “archaeology” of the feminist movement is being tenuously assembled, encountering “real” and “fictional” subjects who begin to personalise and resist the narratives of “Indian” feminism as a singular, intelligible, and cohesive journey.

L IPIKA SINGH DARAI’S *Some Stories Around Witches* (2016) is a sensitive and empathetic portrayal of the complexities surrounding the practice of witchcraft in indigenous communities in Odisha. In her latest film *Night and Fear* (2023), Darai uses an essay format with a first-person narrative and material from her personal archives to reflect on her experiences as a filmmaker. Darai’s work brings to the fore the gendered relationships of power which a filmmaker must negotiate in their practice.

The films discussed here, and many other films, have contributed to redefining the idea of

▼
Tales of the Night Fairies

by Shohini Ghosh celebrates the dignity of its sex worker protagonists and invites the viewer to challenge the normality of their everyday spaces.

YOUTUBE SCREENGRAB

the “political” documentary. These feminist gazes continue to inform and inflect documentary narratives in India, with many more women filmmakers working on themes as varied as labour, caste, ethnic and gender violence, displacement, the city, and other issues, notable among them the work of Manjira Datta, Madhusree Dutta, Divya Bharathi, Surabhi Sharma, Nishtha Jain, Priya Thuvassery, and Miriam Chandy Menacherry, to mention a few.

Feminist documentaries have done much to open out discussion on female desire, queerness, and identity. They question notions of Indian womanhood that are tied up with the idea of the nation. They also question a modernist vision that would conflate liberation and modernity, and see the possibility of resistance also in the spaces of tradition. One could perhaps regard these critical feminist documentaries as strategic contributions to struggles that have redefined Indian feminism, allowing for a critical self-reflection on its elitist and modernist underpinnings and its relationship with the state. ■

Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar are documentary filmmakers, educators, and researchers. More about their work at <https://www.monteiro-jayasankar.com/>. This piece draws from their book *A Fly in the Curry: Independent Documentary Film in India* (Sage, 2016).