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## **Activism through Aesthetics: A Study of Dissent through Cinematic Apparatus in Selected Documentary Films**

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### **Abstract**

The genre of documentary films, though closely related with factuality is often a medium that represents an alternative way to articulate the voices which borders on margins. S. Sukhdev's *Nine months to Freedom: The Story of Bangladesh* (1971) and Pramod Pati's *Explorer* (1968) belong to a selected category of documentary films which presents a divergence in representing the subject as well as the cinematic technique. This paper focuses on a close analysis of the selected films and attempts to highlight the dissent at multiple levels such as representation of the subject and the use of cinematic technique in the representation of the subject. The films selected for the study belongs to two different genres. *Nine Months to Freedom* resembles a political documentary; *Explorer* is an experimental film with plethora of subjects. Through the help of Clifford Geertz's 'Thick Description' the paper attempts to study dissent and dialogue in the film through the help of cinematic apparatus.

### **Keywords**

dissent, montage, thick description

The genre of documentary films in India, especially Films Division of India, is one of the significant wings of the government which has played a pioneer role in the dissemination of information and knowledge. The number of films, made by Films Division of India, reflects its role in shaping the genre of documentary films in India and also assisting to form a bridge between the government and the people. The catalogue is representative of the role of Films Division in constructing an archive of cultural and social memory, also creating a rich archive of films depicting development, the sites of modernity and advancements. Though, often critiqued for the bureaucratic practices, Films Division of India, during the first two decades after the independence, through its films present a record of burgeoning modernity and the challenges which the country faced. Though these documentaries are largely associated with the project of development, the aesthetic and the artistic development needs a close analysis. In the current paper, the emphasis would be to analyse the use of cinematic techniques which were used to depict dissent and present an alternative to the standard representation.

Using Bill Nichols' classification of documentary film, most of the documentaries made by Films Division can be classified under the expository mode. The divergences (though few), refers to the cinematic style as well as the representation of the subject, are prominent and greatly assisted in shaping the genre in India. These divergences in documentaries were a combination of various techniques and it laid the foundation for a dialogue and also created the space for dissent using the aesthetics of the genre of documentary films. In the current paper the aim is to study the element of dissent and the use of the documentary form as well as aesthetics in representing not only the subject but turning the gaze towards the medium itself. Hence, the paper is also an analysis of various alternative methods which come to the fore.

Though, the genre of documentary films in general is associated with real but as Trinh T. Minh-Ha suggests in *Theorizing Documentary*

Documentary may be anti-aesthetic, as some still affirm in the line of the British forerunner, but it is claimed to be not less an art, albeit an art within the limits of factuality. (98)

The close association with factuality needs a close assessment. Certain filmmakers associated with Films Division critically analysed the relationship between factuality and documentary films both through their films as well as their writings. The voices of dissent manifest through

social, cultural and aesthetic form. The current paper seeks to understand the manifestation of dissent in the documentary films through a close study of the form as well as the subject of the documentary film. The filmmaker questions the relationship with factuality at multiple levels; it takes place at the cinematic level, also at the level of the subject, and questions factuality and often uses cinematic technique to rupture the discourses of linearity or the factual representation of the events.

Mention should be made of filmmakers like S.N.S. Sastry, S. Sukhdev, Pramod Pati who created a rich visual repository within the Films Division. These filmmakers followed the demands of the state institutions, and at the same time through the ingenious way swerved from the established practices and articulated an opinion which was often at variance with the opinion of the state as is also highlighted by Peter Sutoris. The films reverberate the initial voices of dissent shaping the cinematic apparatus and establishing a strong visually cinematic culture. To understand the dissent, the structure as well as the poetics needs a closer examination. Michael Renov in *Theorizing Documentary* stresses the importance on understanding the poetics of Documentary Films, he highlights

I state the four tendencies in the active voice appropriate to their role in a “poesis,” an “active making”:

1. To record, reveal, or preserve
2. To persuade, or promote
3. To analyze or interrogate
4. To express. (21)

Renov’s categorization points towards the relationship between aesthetics and representation of subject in a documentary film. A close analysis of these ‘tendencies’ as propounded by Michael Renov, the selected film has recorded and interrogated the subject and critically helped in aesthetic development of the genre. In the current paper, the emphasis would be on S. Sukhdev’s *Nine Months to Freedom: The Story of Bangladesh* (1972) and Pramod Pati’s *Explorer* (1968).

Furthermore, emphasis is to understand the selected films through the methodological framework of Clifford Geertz’s ‘Thick Description’. Through the framework, the attempt is to understand the films which transcend the surface structures in the form of literal or journalistic or stereotypical representation. They create a deep understanding of the subject

as well as the form of the medium by applying the cinematic technique as well as through the representation of the subject. The selected films, through the cinematic apparatuses, construct a narrative which questions the prevailing social and cultural structures as enunciated by the dominant structure. On the other hand, through the help of visuals deconstructs the narrative of homogenization. Its manifestation in various forms is governed by various internal and external factors.

Both the films move towards the periphery and analyze the margins within the dominant structures where the film consciously or unconsciously becomes an activist voice, articulating against the form and questions the dominant structure. Hence, the role of documentary films in penetrating the boundaries of the marginalized requires a closer understanding. A careful study of the form as well as the subject clearly demarcates the idea present in the films.

Documentary films become one of the mediums to challenge the pre-constructed notions and attempt to create an alternative zone which has the spirit to break into this unchanging system. In India, the decades between 1950's and 1970's mark a unique period in the genre of documentary films, it was a period when the documentary films received a major impetus from the state owned Films Division of India, which nurtured the documentary movement in India. Forming a bridge between state and society, it created a unique meeting point for people and the Government, where it essentially paved a way for a smooth dialogue between the state and civil society. During this time, production, exhibition and circulation were primarily controlled by the state owned machinery.

As the majority of the filmmakers, within the fold of Films Division, followed the Griersonian model which emphasised the usefulness of documentary films, the selected films belong to a category of few films which was an amalgamation of aesthetic and the factual. The strand of activism is traced at various levels, the films presents a dialogue between the subject and the filmmaker, which also gets initiated between the film and the audience, and allows the audience to move away from passive consumption. Dialogue can further be analysed at multiple levels, for instance, it takes in the shape of interviews, where the voices of people become a medium to represent the views of people that is voices of people without the mediation of any external agency. Activism also can also be traced at the level of visuals where the film does not depend on any unified description but takes creating multiple perspectives dislodges the hierarchical structures.

The filmmaker manifests dissent, both at the level of subject as well as the form. By undertaking a critique of the discourse, the filmmaker tries to carve a space for the alternative way of perceiving the subject. The manifestation of the political through the aesthetic is the key element present in the films. Especially in *Nine Months to Freedom: The Story of Bangladesh* the inclusive participation of the filmmaker and the representation of the subject helps to trace an ethnography of the political where the films maps the ideological underpinnings and its consequences. Further, the film analyses the role of 'civil-society', state and non-state actors, a sustained study of subject, also bringing out the consequences and the impact.

Experiments, in documentary films refer to the acts of filmmakers where they have diverted from the standard practices, both at the level of subject and form. These three filmmakers have often turned sharply from their standard form and ruptured or presented an alternative way of representing the subject. Through a study of documentary films made during late 1960's and early 1970's, the impact of Films Division of India, and also a presentation or representation of nation, nationalism, can be charted through their filmographies. Sukhdev, and Pati, in their own unique way creates a space for critical inquiry into the meaning of these institutions, experiments also refer to an alternate way of perceiving the subject which in a covert manner dismantles, brings out the hidden reality, witnesses the ground situation or overtly support an institution which often hinges on the element of propaganda. These are the areas which are explored in this research paper.

In the hand of Sukhdev, camera became an essential instrument to disrupt the prevalent practices; his films come close to an ethnographic gaze on society where the lens zooms in to depict the microscopic aspects. His filmography reflects his engagement with society at multiple levels; the films are an attack on the status quo and do not refrain from taking a stand on the issue. Unlike the majority of the films which were immersed in the government's agenda of depicting progress and development, Sukhdev's films emerge as a critique of the dominant structures. The element of political is actively involved in his films, either striking social malady or critiquing the fabric of society which tilts the balance of the society towards people having sufficient means of livelihood.

As Peter Sutoris in *Visions of Development* highlights:

Sukhdev seems to have succeeded in creating a zone of creative autonomy through which he was able to use government funding to make films that were not dictated by statist agendas. (176)

As highlighted by Peter Sutoris, Sukhdev's attempt to initiate a dialogue becomes a dialogue in the public sphere by including participation of people from various walks of life. Sukhdev's *Nine Months to Freedom: The Story of Bangladesh* depicts the brutality of the state which forces people to migrate from their homeland and the civil war which deeply affected the lives of the people. The juxtaposition of the shots, the genesis of the civil war and the brutality of the state machinery comes to the foreground in the film.

The element of dissent amalgamates with the aesthetic in the form of cinematic techniques. The dissent manifests itself at multiple levels, overtly at the level of the subject and minutely within the sequences as well as structure of the film. An analysis of the film is pivotal for understanding the dissent in the film. The film begins with a scene of people engrossed in their daily life juxtaposed with a scene depicting violence and death. The theme continues throughout the film and the opening credits which begin almost after two minutes and fifty five seconds further highlights the sombre theme.

The shot begins with a close up of a hand in a image and slowly the camera zooms out and presents the body of the dead man, symbolically representing the mother/state, who is blankly staring towards the camera. This scene is juxtaposed with another image where the body of both children and adults are shown to be hanging while the credits roll on the foreground. In the third shot, the filmmaker pans across the various faces of men staring at an object and the camera slowly reveals the object, which the viewer realizes is the representation of women, the entire section is shown in red. The opening credits become a vehicle to establish the violence which is present throughout the film. While the opening credits are rolling in the foreground the background sound plays 'Amar Sonar Bangla', a bleak portrayal of the nine months which led to the creation of Bangladesh. Moreover the use of audio and visual throughout the film is an integral part of the film.

Through the opening credit and the background images, Sukhdev puts the credits, which appear on the forefront as marginal and treats the subject as primary object by using images which forces the viewer to take the notice of the subject of the documentary film. The filmmaker in the beginning of the film reverses the hierarchy, where more than the credits, it is the subject which comes to the forefront. The song 'Amar Sonar Bangla' brings out the

inherent conflict and the pitiful condition of the people. Through the opening credits, the subject of the film is strongly established, and it is carefully presented in front of the audiences. The use of the aural and the visual plays an essential part in depicting the entire theme of the film.

The structure of the film comprises of interviews, recordings, archival images, voice over narration and the use of montage to depict the events. By not relying heavily on the expository mode of documentary filmmaking, Sukhdev moves away from the voice of God narration which explains the subject to the audience. The voice-over assists in filling the details of the event and highlighting the various events. The structure of the film is an amalgamation of the *Cinema-Verite* technique as well as the expository nature of traditional filmmaking. Instead of being a 'fly on the wall', Sukhdev prefers to be 'fly in the soup' whereby it is not an objective rendition of the subject but through the active participation, the film becomes a testimony of the civil strife. The filmmaker becomes an active participant where the political becomes personal; he refers to himself in the beginning and towards the end of the film. In opposition to the voice of God commentary where the filmmaker is not an active participant and maintains an aesthetic distance, the involvement of the filmmaker makes the audience an active participant in the subject. Two instances in the film where Sukhdev becomes active participant are:

We started filming in the month of August 1971. At that time we had called our film, The Year of the Vulture. (06:07)

On the day we were filming the return of the refuges... (1:03:29)

Furthermore, a closer analysis of the use of expository mode highlights that the voice over narration, establishes the facts and maps various social and cultural events. Referring to the use of voice, Carl R. Plantinga mentions, "I propose that, as a heuristic device, we consider a difference between what I call the formal, open and poetic voices of the non-fiction film (106). On the other hand, through the interviews of people, it not only records the events but brings out the response of the people also. Furthermore, through the use of visuals, the filmmaker creates a cinematic scape which exemplifies the turn of the events. The film begins with an analysis of the civil war and massacre of civilians and carefully examines the problem of migration. It closely analyzes the plight as well as the response of people at various forums. Tracing the issue of migration, the film moves on to the genesis of the war,

rise of the people's movement and concludes with the freedom of Bangladesh and the mass casualties inflicted on people.

Through the help of Montage, Sukhdev has captures the oppressiveness of the regime and carefully presents the victim and the victimiser. Montage plays a pivotal role; key sequences are represented through the use of the montage. Sukhdev uses the editing technique in constructing a visual archive of the traumatic events and deconstructs the role of various state actors and non-state actors. The structure closely resembles an intellectual montage where the faces of the political people are mixed with the victimisers which create a synthesis, giving a greater detail of the events. The opening scene depicts a rural household engaged in their daily chores; the silence of their daily activities is broken by the jarring music of guns and barrels, where the calm scene is juxtaposed with a montage of state brutality and oppression. Violence becomes a significant motif. Sukhdev does not deal with the violence at the literal level, but takes the viewer to the site and uncovers the violence in the form of bodies which are decaying and being eaten by animals.

Hence, the manifestation of the subject becomes representation of the marginalised voices. The representation takes place at multiple levels. Unlike an ethnographic study of the site of resistance, the participation of different perspectives is a comprehensive element, making it an apt place to document ethnography of the political. The images of state brutality, repercussion of civil war are well documented. The impact of the civil war on people as well as the struggle of the ordinary people is mapped in the film. Through the depiction of violence, *Nine Months to Freedom* becomes a critique of the violent apparatuses.

*Nine Months to Freedom* creates an archive of state brutality through the use of violent visuals. Frequent recourse to the bleak situation emphasises the brutality of the 'Repressive State Apparatuses'. The film brings forth this brutality at regular intervals. Sukdhev amalgamates the sound with the visual, where the both are in synchronization with each other. The film lingers on the visuals of the bodies and brings out the plight of the people. Immediately after the opening credits are over the film again cuts to a scene depicting an animal eating the human corpse. Sukhdev uses the audio and the visual to enhance and elaborate the issue depicted in the film. In one of the scenes, the camera in a manner similar to a gun represents killing the people which is synchronized with the jarring noise of guns that give the semblance that the guns shooting down the people. The jarring mechanical

sounds of guns and bombs are further used by Sukhdev to depict the sombre mood of the film.

Geertz concept of 'Thick Description' assists in methodologically understanding the film, it is not only the subject but its ramification and the impact of the people which becomes forms an essential part. By not revealing the name of the victims, who come on the screen, it becomes a common plight. Throughout the film, Sukhdev refers to the victims as 'this women', 'this man' and does not reveal the identity of most of the people. This technique helps the filmmaker to create a general image and does not get into the subtle nuances. The film at a very subtle level exposes the hegemonic structures, which appears to be natural and not questioned directly or indirectly by any institution or organization.

The film brings forth various ideological apparatuses, is a study of the filmmaker's intervention and the film becomes a counter hegemonic act which has the potential to disrupt the flow of hegemonic structures. Though, the film brings forth the opinion of state and its policies, the filmmaker subvert it into a macroscopic study of violence and a critical study of how it gets manifested in many forms. Film becomes a tool to study violence where the filmmaker traces Social, Political, Economic and Cultural challenges which people had faced due to the civil war.

*Nine Months to Freedom* is one of those films that focused on the subject and at the same time, the aesthetic element forms an integral part of the film. The film combines both the elements and presents a strong document on the issue of civil war, its genesis and the impact. Though the focus of the filmmaker is on the plight of the people still the amalgamation of the cinematic technique forms a central part of the film. It is one of the few films that belong to the archive of the Films Division which was an expression of both, aesthetics as well as dissent.

On the other hand, *Explorer* made by Pramod Pati is an exploration into the changes emerging in the society. The film explores various facets of the society and creates a document which encompasses multitude of themes, perspectives and uses a plethora of cinematic devices. Through a series of rapid cuts, the film touches a large number of issues such as violence, censorship, youthful exuberance, to an extent the film a comment on existing norms with a reflection towards the blurred nature of cinematic apparatus. Soundscape, creates a unique amalgamation of mechanical sounds which are often interspersed with chants, hymns, use of musical instruments which creates a disjunction in

understanding. Through the cinematic techniques, Pati alters the sense of perception through the continuous use of rack focus, which not only disrupts the understanding but also evades a unified meaning or understanding of the film. Through this technique the subjects close to camera becomes distant, a technique which does not allow the gaze of the audience to settle and keeps on shifting the focus.

According to B.D. Garga the essential point of Pati's experimental work was that it was not an end in itself. He was always trying to find new and varied ways of extending the frontiers of his medium. The film, which begins in a crescendo of celebrations, is an indicative of celebration of various facets of life and the film moves on to explore these facets. The close analysis of the opening sequence reveals frequent cuts between young people and the religious symbols, further intensifying the gaze. Pati zoom's into the faces of people who appear to be reciting hymn, along with people who are moving towards the coming modernity, and exploring the new avenues. Pati's zoom's into the faces of the people where the people cease to have an identity and become a uniform whole which becomes difficult to distinguish.

Subversion takes at many levels, Pati dislodges the hegemony at different levels, at the level of aesthetics, through the use of collage of images, it becomes difficult to deconstruct with steady gaze, bombarding the viewer with plethora of images. This deconstruction, when carefully studied becomes an important technique where the same images repeat at different junctures where the filmmaker ensures that the images are registered but for a brief period as other images also takes shape in due course of time. This technique becomes one of the important leitmotifs in the film; Pati challenges the notion of stability, though devoid of narrative and structure, Pati ensures a flow, which does not allow the gaze to divert away from the subject.

*Explorer* through various techniques brings forth an exploration of the structures which exists both within and outside. Though, experimental in nature, the use of multiple cinematic techniques and its amalgamation projects multiple themes in a short span. Through the technique *Explorer* oscillates between the coming modernity and the society which is still rooted in traditions. Though experimental in nature, Pati helps to avoid the supremacy of either the visuals or audio. Not only it is difficult to maintain a fixed gaze but through a sustaining amalgamation of the sounds with noise, the hierarchy is displaced.

Throughout the film, through rapid editing, the film does not allow the gaze to settle on any particular frame or scene. As a result, the film is able to cut through multiple themes and bring forth an analysis. In a brief sequence, which begins at 02:38 and ends at 03:11, the film cuts to one of the persons who is seen to be meditating, in the next shot the filmmaker closely zooms into the face of the person and breaking the pattern of rapid editing, the camera stays on the face of the person for few seconds. In the next few shots, the film rapidly cuts to various images of violence depicting arson and repression. The next scene cuts to a long shot where the camera zooms in to the figure and alternatively cut to the abstract symbols and images. Furthermore, the sequence depicts archival images and other people. Towards the end of the sequence, Pati cuts the sequence by zooming the eye and moves forward. The soundscape of the sequence is as varied as the visuals of the screen during this sequence. As highlighted earlier, the lack of synchronization and the absence of uniformity of the soundscape assist in the lack of linear unity as is visible through the images.

Hence, the use of sound in the film requires a closer examination. For instance, in the beginning Pati amalgamates the sound of typewriter along with sounds of Indian musical instruments and the pattern repeats very often. By experimenting with the sound, Pati is able to experiment with the structure of the film as both visuals and the audio depict multiple facets of society at multiple levels. Pati reverts the gaze inwards where the confusion resides, in a symbolic image, Pati depicts a serene face of a man but with the help of the camera represents the chaos and confusion further an element of instability. Again the discourse of filmmaker whether he consciously or unconsciously seizes the opportunity and represents the chaos within the society is a crucial element of the film.

Dissent establishes a key component where the filmmaker critiques the system from within, the filmmaker does not confront the issues directly but directs the gaze of the audience towards critical issues. Pati makes covertly overt references but does not confront or directly assist in any confrontation with the dominant structures. Within a short span of 7 minutes, it manoeuvres with the gaze of the audience. Unsynchronized sound and visuals is another element which becomes a tool for the filmmaker to exert new meanings to the visuals. For instance, the chant of mantras is juxtaposed with people dancing in frenzy, the cry of child is juxtaposed with the face of a person who appears to be chanting something. Hence, the film takes on meanings at various levels, and a minute study of the film brings forth the hidden element which evades the eye even after repetitive viewing. Through the help of rapid cuts from one situation to another (*Explorer*) as well as through the extensive

use of space and depth, Pati manoeuvres the understanding of the standard practices and brought a new approach to documentary films in general and experimental filmmaking in particular.

Hence, both, the films are an apt study of the presence of dissent at the level of the cinematic apparatus as well as the subject of their study. The manifestation of dissent can take place at the level of visuals as depicted by Sukhdev's use of montage which reveals multiple ways in which the subject can be represented. On the other hand, *Explorer* presents a study in the experimental way in which the subject can be represented. Dissent can be mapped at the cinematic level as well as the level of the subject; the films bring forth the divergences, and through the cinematic representation, bring alternative way of representing the subject.

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### Films

*Explorer* (Director) Pramod Pati, 7 minutes, 1968.

*Nine Months to Freedom: The Story of Bangladesh* (Director) S. Sukhdev, 71 minutes, 1972.