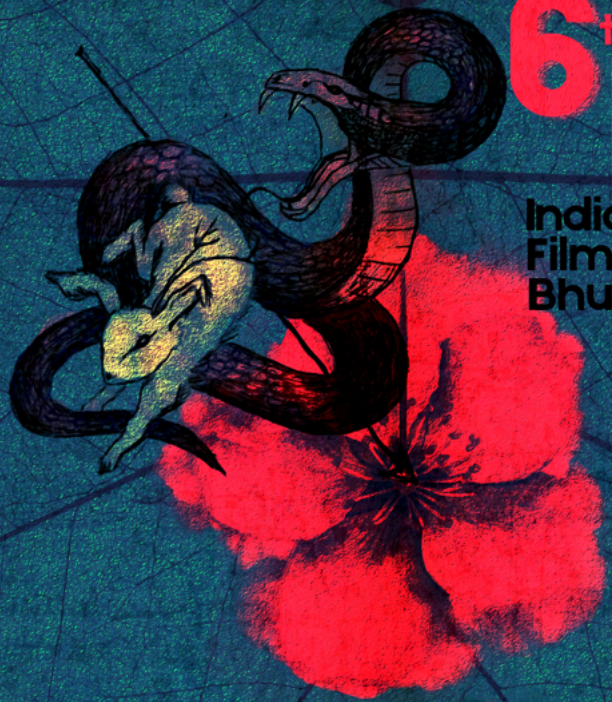
Film Society Bhubaneswar

presents

6th IDFFB

Indian Documentary Film Festival Bhubaneswar



6 September 25-28 th

Odissi Research Centre

IDFFB 2025

INDIAN DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL

CONTENT

ABOUT FILM SOCIETY BHUBANESWAR

Film Society of Bhubaneswar (FSB) has been in existence since 2004. FSB has focused on creating cinema literacy among its members and has screened over 500 films from across the world and conducted master classes with leading visual artists nationally and internationally.

Unlike major cities of India, Bhubaneswar does not have a proper film festival in the cultural calendar. Despite all obstacles, FSB has managed to survive with its membership base and continues its effort to take cinema to newer audiences, cineastes and students.

We have organised more than 20 festivals over the last two decades, covering *Asian and African Cinema (2007), Journeys and Migration (2010), Short films (2011), World Cinema (2012), Indian Film Festival (2018, 2019, 2020, 2023, 2024, 2025), Indian Documentary Film Festival (2018, 2019, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025), Ravenshaw University Film Festival (2023, 2024) and Children's Film Festival (2023, 2024, 2025).*

We have curated retrospectives on *World Cinema (2005), German Cinema (2007), Spanish Cinema (2008), Into the Darkness (2009), Yasujiro Ozu (2012), G Aravindan (2018), Anand Patwardhan (2018), Indian Masters Retrospective (2019), Mrinal Sen (2020), Satyajit Ray (2023), Mani Kaul (2024), Haobam Paban Kumar (2024), Girish Kasaravalli (2025).*

FROM THE FESTIVAL COORDINATOR'S DESK

The year 2025 brought images of Indian people shackled and manacled, deported back to India, from the Land of Green Card, flights landing away from the nation's capital, from prying eyes. These humiliating images sent the nation into reflecting on our dependence. Then we saw an elderly head of state having to mollycoddle a trillionaire's children and nanny, to get favourable access, to the global hegemon, to the humiliation of claiming credit of ending the skirmish across the border, to the 50% tariffs, to 40 times increase of new H1B visas - the insults seems to be mounting.

Nearer home, in the month of July, our province was engulfed by unbearable atrocities on young girls and women, violent ends, that shake us and question our notions of sanity. It seems, now, atrocities on women will be addressed by the rule of law.

We now get ready to welcome the Devi. Our great leader has exhorted us to look for internal sources to be Atmanirbhar. At the film society, we, have always looked at our internal sources to help support our members and young people - while organising screenings to film festivals. With the help of young members and their enthusiasm we bring the 6th edition of the Indian Documentary Film Festival.

The festival is bringing three documentaries of Girish Kasaravalli - one on UR Ananthamurthy, on Adoor Gopalkrishnan and the carnatic vocalist Venkateshkumar - each film explores certain questions in their body of work.

We bring three films from South-Asia (Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal), Roya Sadat's film shows the intrepid women leaders negotiating with the interim-Taliban leadership before the regime change of 2021, from Bhutan Arun Bhattarai's film captures a personal story of a data collector and the irony of happiness metric, from Nepal we have a meditation of loneliness, aging and the dark-side of development in Rajan Kathet's work.

Nine films on the 2024 election cycle covering the sub-continent from North-East to Kerala, demonstrating the diversity of challenges mounted by the extant regime and the resistance that is brimming across the country. From the civil society movement in Karnataka, the voice of Asauddin Owaisi, the sexual minorities' search for a political anchor - this series commissioned by the Centre of Modern Indian Studies (CEMIS), Gottingen is an example to emulate.

An important documentation of US farmers' situation post-american agriculture reforms provides a snapshot, of the looming future, for Indian farmers in Bedabrata Pain's work shot during the pandemic, made over an epic road journey across America.

Films covering subjects from Odisha - range from the struggle of indigenous people around the Simlipal National Park, to the struggle in preserving indigenous seeds in Dr. Debal Deb's work, to the documentation of Mahesh cycling 2,000 kms during the pandemic to reach his home in rural Odisha.

Films on Literary figures - Vinod Kumar Shukla, Partha chatterjee, Jayanta Mahapatra, UR Ananthamurthy bring to the audience a diversity of intellectual life.

The festival brings films covering music - from Bundelkhandi Rap, a look at the practice of noted Carnatic vocalist Pandit Venkateshkumar and a close look at the music practice of the Mirasi community.

We wish the members of the film society and the audience will have lots to explore, topics to share with their friends, discoveries and conversations that may open up new worlds.


FILMS AT


IDFFB
2025

Here Lies Makhfi

2025 68 mins Persian, Hindi, Marathi

Here Lies Makhfi is a portrait of the 17th century Indian princess *Zeb-un-nissa* who wrote Persian poetry under the nom de plume Makhfi (the hidden one). Daughter of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, *Zeb-un-nissa* is an enigmatic figure in Indian history and her poetry is our only window into her life. The film positions *Zeb-un-nissa*'s poetic expression within the extant zeitgeist of islamophobia, neglect and selective amnesia in India, tracing her work through three people.

Prachee Bajania is a filmmaker, editor and writer based in Gujarat. An alumna of NID, Ahmedabad and FTII, Pune. She has written and directed four short fiction films and eleven documentaries.

pracheebee@gmail.com

Editor Jyotirmoy Mazumdar

DOP Sandeep Gn Yadav, Aadhith V Sathvin

Sound Jikku M Joshi

IDSFFK

Beyond Boundaries

2024 54 mins Bengali

Sankhajit Biswas teaches editing at SRFTI, Kolkata and participated at the Berlinale Talent Campus 2010. Films edited by Sankha have been recognised at major film festivals including Berlin, Toronto, London, Busan, Rotterdam, IDFA, Asia Pacific Screen Awards, IFFI Goa, etc.

sankha2@gmail.com

The partition of India in 1947 along religious lines, resulted in the division of one of world's largest ethnolinguistic communities - the Bengalis. Fast forward to present day Australia, where immigrant Bengalis from Bangladesh and India, strive to bridge the divide by staging Rabindranath Tagore's famous play 'Achalayatan' that talks about the liberation of our fettered minds.

Editor	Sankhajit Biswas
DOP	Biswajit Mitra
Music	Santajit Chatterjee
Sound	Sourav Gupta

EIIFF, Film Southasia,
Kolkata People's Film Festival

Mic Drop

2024 27 mins Bundeli, Hindi

Kallol Mukherjee is a filmmaker from Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, based in Mumbai.

kallolm06@gmail.com

In a region where native language is often overlooked, a young Bundelkhandi rapper from Madhya Pradesh, India works tirelessly on his first album. As he faces financial struggles and a lack of resources, the question remains, “Will he be able to make it, and at what cost?”

Editor	Kamal Gupta
DOP	Yash Dubey
Music	Septune
Sound	Jahnab Roy

Doku Baku International Documentary Film Festival, Film South Asia, Kathmandu

Déjà Vu

2025 73 mins English, Hindi, Punjabi

Bedabrata Pain, a leading member of the team that invented CMOS digital image sensor technology - the technology that enabled mobile-phones to movie cameras - was a senior research scientist at NASA and Caltech.

bedabrata.pain@gmail.com

January 2021, as farm protests raged on against the Indian farm-laws, an unlikely team of Indians embarked on a journey through the America – a classic “back to the future” quest. Because, four decades ago, similar market reforms were ushered in USA. Who benefited? Who lost out? Farmers, consumers or the corporates? What happened with the removal of MSP? Through human stories of small farmers in America, Déjà Vu is a reminder that those who don’t learn from history are condemned to repeat it.

Editor	Bedabrata Pain, Debkanta Chakraborty
DOP	Rajashik Tarafder
Music	Johnny Wilson
Sound	Resul Pookutty, Vijay Kumar, Johnny Wilson

IDSFFK

A Tale to Begin with

2025 82 mins English, Odia, Bengali

Bishweshwar Das began his filmmaking journey with a 'A tale to begin with', his tribute to the grand old man of Indian Poetry, Jayanta Mahapatra.

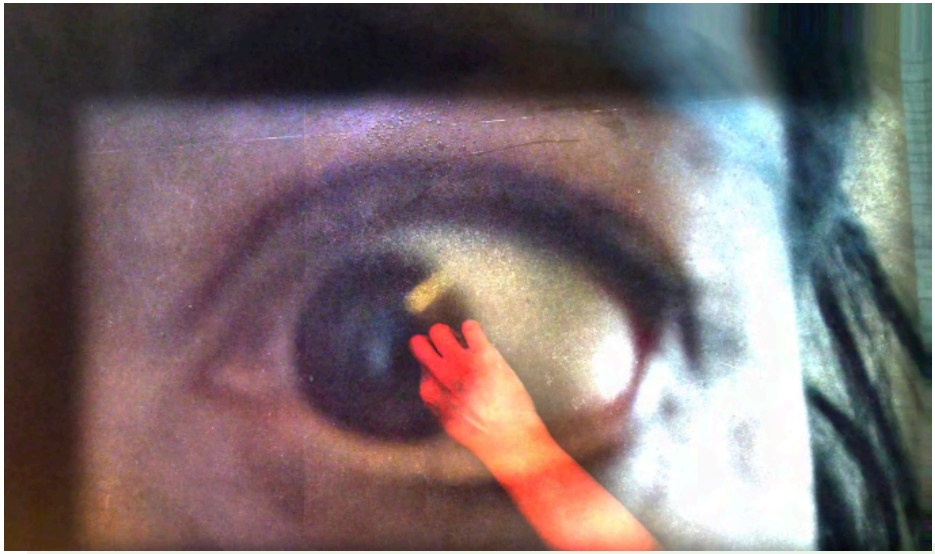
bishweshwar.das@gmail.com

Standing tall at 94, Jayanta Mahapatra - the grand old bard of Indian Poetry, finally gave the nod to be filmed for a documentary by Bishweshwar Das. JM as people fondly call him had once tinkered with analogue cameras and had ambitions of being a photographer, so when filming began JM slowly blended with his natural camaraderie and simplicity.

Editor	Nabin Roychowdhury
DOP	Sayan Das
Music	Imon Bose
Sound	Sabyasachi

The Night That Forgot to End

2025 22 mins English, Assamese, Hindi, Khotta Bhasha



Fragmented selves, the illusion of time, and a village's unseen elephants - five filmmakers confront invisible fears, like an untouched image of a tomorrow.

Nundrisha Wakhloo - nundrisha92@gmail.com
Surbhi Dewan - surbhi@paintedtreepictures.com
Rustam Mazumdar - rustam.mazumdar@gmail.com
Biswajit Das - basufilms2@gmail.com
Farha Khatun - farha.edit@gmail.com

Nundrisha Wakhloo - a documentary filmmaker (New Delhi).

Surbhi - independent film director, writer & producer.

Rustam - freelance film editor.

Biswajit Das - a documentary filmmaker & animator (Guwahati).

Farha - a filmmaker (Kolkata).

Chaar Phool Hain Aur Duniya Hai

2024 55 mins Hindi

Achal Mishra is a 27-year-old filmmaker and photographer from Darbhanga, Bihar.

achalchitra@gmail.com

With striking composition and a melodious play of light, Achal Mishra (Gamak Ghar, Dhuin) paints a meditative portrait of noted Hindi writer Vinod Kumar Shukla. Through fleeting glimpses into his personal world, the film unfolds as an essay on the beauty, depth, and poetry of everyday life.

Editor	Achal Mishra
DOP	Achal Mishra
Music	Tajdar Zunaid
Sound	Rohan Deep Saxena

DIFF

Cycle Mahesh

2024 61 mins Odia, Marathi, Hindi

Four years after cycling 2,000 km home during the COVID-19 lockdown, a young worker stars in a film about his journey. But where does he return to, when the shoot ends? This film-within-a-film blends fact, fiction, and cinema's cold gaze.

Suhel Banerjee is a filmmaker whose work blends nonfiction and fiction, myth and reality—mirroring everyday life in the Indian subcontinent. He lives in Goa and is currently working on his debut novel.

banerjee.suhel@gmail.com

Editor	Suhel Banerjee
DOP	Prateek Pamecha
Music	Vishesh Kalimero & Rahul Jigyasu
Sound	Bigyna Dahal

Yamagata, IDSFFK, IDFA

Music in a Village Named 1PB

2024 130mins Hindi

Surabhi is associate professor of practice at the Film and New Media program at the New York University Abu Dhabi, UAE.

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In a landscape of shifting sands, a community enclosed into grids with no name, just a number, rehearses its music in villages like 1PB, a dot in the Thar desert, at the Indian side of the India-Pakistan border. This landscape is home to Mirs, a muslim community who are the custodians of a timeless poetry, and practitioners of a music not bound to 'qawm' (religion) or 'desh' (nation). But the land has now degraded, boundaries have hardened and the music has become a whisper. This film gleans songs and poems to stitch a portrait of a group of musicians struggling to keep their inheritance of Islamic Sufi and Hindu Bhakti music alive.

Editor	Diksha Sharma
DOP	R.V. Ramani
Sound	Amala Popuri, Dhiman Karmakar

Amma Ki Katha

2023 21 mins Hindi, Urdu

Nehal Vyas is a filmmaker and programmer from India, currently based in Los Angeles. She is a member of the Bahía Collective.

nehalvyas@alum.calarts.edu

India, my nation, is being rebuilt. Her foundation is being laid on the imagined land that claims to be the birthplace of my grandmother's God. But today, through its many retellings and reimaginings, the tale is being used as a political tool. This film attempts to remember, as well as dream, a forgotten nation.

Editor	Nehal Vyas
DOP	Nehal Vyas
Music	Aahvaan Project
Sound	Nehal Vyas, Aayush Wykes

San Sebastián International Film Festival, International Documentary Association

Flanders Di Zameen Vich

2024 16 mins Hindi, Nepali, Punjabi, Urdu

Sachin is a Rajasthan-based filmmaker. He is interested in oral histories, folklore and community based indigenous knowledge systems.

sachinyaduvanshi11@gmail.com

While visiting Ypres, Sachin learns that 1.4 million Indians were conscripted by the British to fight on the Flanders Fields during the First World War. Using audio recordings, letters, songs and archives, he brings his anonymous ancestors back to life, like ghosts inlaid in an immovable winter landscape.

Editor	Sachin
DOP	Sachin
Music	
Sound	Aurelien Lebourg

Vision du Réel, IFFI , DIFF, MAMI

Only if the Baby Cries...

2024 15 mins Silent

Shadab Farooq is an independent documentary filmmaker and journalist from Bhaderwah, Jammu and Kashmir.

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In the secluded Himalayan village of Dhadkai in Jammu and Kashmir, many people can't hear or speak. Misra Khatoon and Mohammad Iqbal, a young couple in their 20's, brace themselves with fear, anxiety and hope as they approach childbirth, a fear for their newborn.

Editor	Shadab Farooq, Sahib Syed Goni
DOP	Sahib Syed Goni
Music	Dilbar Yousuf & Fareed Pahalgami
Sound	Caster Rinoy Gomez

Chennai International Documentary and Short Film Festival, Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema

Bombay Triptych - I

2025 21 mins Marathi, English

Elroy Pinto, is a filmmaker, programmer, researcher, and writer based in Mumbai.

elroy.el.pinto@gmail.com

Bombay Triptych I reflects on the nature of Indo-Catholic visual culture of Bombay through encounters with artists in the spaces and materials they work with. The first part analyses the form of labour involved in the creation process of religious figurines, statues and new churches through a meeting with Sr. Vimala, a nun from Kerala, from a family of traditional wood workers is a sacred artist based in Bombay working for the last four decades in a variety of mediums but particularly with architecture, stained glass, fibreglass and terracotta. She reflects on the process of Indo-catholic art through the intermixing of divine worship and material composition.

Editor	Elroy Pinto
DOP	Elton Pinto
Sound	Elton Pinto

Islands of Labour

2025 10 mins Marathi, English

The film focuses on the role of the local church as a community space through a personal narrative of a public school teacher, Hazel Pinto. Hazel grew up in the Bombay Improvement Trust Blocks at Agripada, a unique colonial architectural experiment in social housing, as a member of a working-class Catholic family in mid-20th-century Bombay. The film juxtaposes colonial missionary commentary, personal recollections of rituals, contemporary stills of the church, and archival footage of the industrial working class. It intertwines the personal with the political, examining gender, religion, and class shaping memory. The film advocates the preservation of untold histories, of the working class.

Director Elroy Pinto
Editor Elroy Pinto
DOP Antonello Sangirardi
Sound Elroy Pinto

Putulnama

2024 70 mins Bengali

Ranajit Ray, began his career directing fiction for Indian television before moving into documentary filmmaking.

rayranajit@gmail.com

Immersed in moving his puppets, make them dance, cry, laugh, Madhab has lost the grip over his realities. Now as he helplessly witnesses the fast fading popularity of his puppet theatres and his own team is nearly defunct, Madhab fears that he is heading towards obscurity. Putulnama (Dolls Don't Die) chronicles the battles and dreams of a man who is caught between the rugged realities and the ecstasies of a passionate artist.

Editor	Ranajit Ray, Ronnie
DOP	Ranajit Ray
Sound	Biswadeb Banerjee

IDSFFK, KIFF, EIDF Korea

Log Kya Kahenge

2024 40 mins Hindi, Gujarati

Rafina Khatun is a filmmaker and editor, based in Kolkata.

rafkhere@gmail.com

Gulnaaz engages with community radio to expose injustices and oppressions faced by marginalised communities, despite constant scrutiny and control by her family and community. Through her storytelling, she highlights narratives and advocates unity and harmony. Amidst her fight for social change, Gulnaaz grapples with her own struggles for freedom and autonomy. This is the story of a young Muslim woman dreaming in a patriarchal society determined to silence her.

Editor	Rafina Khatun
DOP	Priyanka Biswas
Sound	Sabyasachi Pal, Soumya Chatterjee

Indian Film Festival Stuttgart, Kolkata People's Film Festival, South Asian Film Festival of Montreal

PC: Calcutta New York Kolkata

2025 45 mins Bengali

Moinak Biswas teaches Film Studies at Jadavpur University, Calcutta, and writes on Indian cinema and culture. He wrote and co-directed the Bengali feature film Sthaniya Sambaad (2010), and created the video installation Across the Burning Track for the 11th Shanghai Biennale (2016).

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Historian and political theorist Partha Chatterjee worked in Calcutta and New York for 24 years between 1997 and 2021. Beginning with the Princely Impostor? (2002), all the books he wrote in the period drew something from the two cities. He taught a semester every year at Columbia University, but never left Calcutta to take up residence anywhere else. The film tries to capture in six episodes a thinker in relation to the cities he has inhabited, and to the place he calls his home. Its recurrent image is walking. The film talks about Chatterjee's books, but also refugees and football, friends and neighbourhoods.

Editor	Dattatreya Ghosh
DOP	Ronny Sen, Basab Mullik, Abir Barua, Sourav Dey, Dhritisundar Roy Chowdhury
Sound	Sukanta Majumdar

Our Land Our Lives

2024 14 mins Mundari, Odia

Telenga Hasa is an indigenous activist and filmmaker.

This documentary captures the plight of Munda Adivasis in Similipal Tiger Reserve in Odisha whose lives were turned upside down in the name of tiger conversation. It shows the people's everyday struggle, who have been forcefully evicted from their ancestral village.

Editor	Ajay TG
DOP	Telenga Hasa, Ajay TG, Laxmidhar Murmu
Music	Ramnath Munda, Durga Hasa, Telenga Hasa, Sau Hasa, Daman Ho

Seed Stories

2024 42 mins Odia, Kui, English

Chitrangada Choudhury is a journalist, documentary filmmaker and academic. She has been on the founding team of The People's Archive of Rural India, and is on the Editorial Board of Article 14 - exploring questions of knowledge, power, justice and marginality.

In a village in the Niyamgiri mountains of Odisha's Eastern Ghats, a heroic effort is underway: barefoot ecologist Dr. Debal Deb and his 3 member-team are conserving in-situ over 1000 endangered heirloom varieties of rice. Odisha's Eastern Ghats region is one of the world's surviving biodiversity hotspots, with Adivasi communities like the Kondhs possessing the knowledge of growing multiple crops with their folk seeds, evolved over centuries.

Editor Ajay TG

DOP Chitrangada Choudhary

Sound Asheesh Pandya

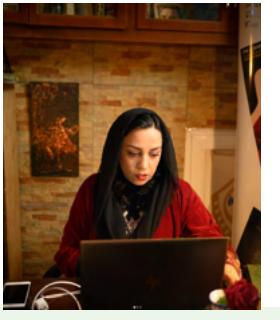
Kolkata People's Film Festival,
Festival delle Terre

SOUTH ASIAN LENS

The Sharp Edge of Peace

2024 95 mins Persian

Roya Sadat, a pioneering filmmaker from Afghanistan, has illuminated the world with her courageous storytelling. As the first female director emerging from the post-Taliban era, her films and television series boldly expose the oppression of women and human rights abuses globally.



pamela@limonerofilms.com

A powerful, revealing, and necessary political thriller, The Sharp Edge of Peace follows four courageous women on the Afghan government's negotiating team during this fraught time as they risk their lives to navigate the hard road to peace with a group of men historically committed to denying their most basic rights. The team's intelligence, resilience, and bravery in the face of an impossible situation are a powerful example of the unwavering determination and indomitable spirit of resistance shared by all women globally who continue to fight for true peace and equality.

Editor	Sara Maamouri
DOP	Aziz Dildar
Music	Dhruv Goel

Hot Docs Toronto, MAMI, Dokumentale, Hong Kong Asian Film Festival

Agent of Happiness

2024 94 mins Bhutanese, Nepali

anuranun@gmail.com

Arun Bhattarai is based in Bhutan.

Dorottya Zurbó teaches at the prestigious DocNomads Joint Master program in Europe.

How can you measure happiness? The country of Bhutan invented Gross National Happiness to do just that, and Amber is one of the agents who travels door to door to meet people and measure how happy they really are. He is still living with his elderly mother at the age of 40, but is nevertheless a hopeless romantic who dreams of finding love: a happiness agent who is in search of his own happiness. We embark with Amber on a cross-country road trip meeting citizens from all walks of life, reminding us of the fragility and beauty of our own happiness. No matter where we live.

Editor	Péter Sass
DOP	Arun Bhattarai
Sound	Rudolf Várhegyi, Tamás Bohács

Sundance Festival

No Winter Holidays

2023 79 mins Nepali

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sunir129@gmail.com

Two lifelong rivals Ratima and Kalima have been appointed caretakers of their empty village. Now in the twilight of their lives, they must forget their past and help each other survive a long and harsh winter.

Editor	Kiran Shrestha
DOP	Babin Dulal
Sound	Cyrus Tang, Dikesh Khadgi Shahi, Kishore Acharya

Rajan Kathet is a Kathmandu-based filmmaker working in both fiction and documentary. He is an alumnus of the DOCNOMADS European Masters program.

Sunir Pandey is a debutant filmmaker based in Kathmandu. In the past he has worked as a journalist in Nepal, and as a writer, translator, and editor for national and international organizations. 'No Winter Holidays' is his first film.

Sheffield Doc Fest, Nepal Human Rights International Film Festival, MIFF, DMZ International Documentary Film Festival

RETROSPECTIVE:

DOCUMENTARIES OF GIRISH KASARAVALLI

Born in 1950 (Karnataka), Girish made his first film 'Ghatashraddha' in 1976. A career spanning five decades, Girish has made 18 feature films and many documentaries. In this retrospective, we bring three of his documentaries on major figures in literature (UR Ananthamurthy), Cinema (Adoor Gopalkrishnan) and music (Pt. Venkatesh Kumar). Girish's works have been screened across the world, recently 'Ghatashraddha' was restored and screened at Venice Film Festival.

Naadada Navaneeta DR PT Venkateshkumar

2020 43 mins Kannada

girishkasaravalli@gmail.com

The film traces Pt. Venkatesh Kumar's career over four decades, with each phase of his life and music defined through the vachanas (spiritual poems) of prominent philosophers like Akka Mahadevi and Allama Prabhu.

National Film Award for Best Arts and Culture Film (Non-Feature Film category)

Ananthamurthy: Not a Biography But a Hypothesis

2013 75 mins English

Dr. U.R. Ananthamurthy, renowned Kannada writer and winner of the Jnanapeeth Award, is a thinker of international repute, also widely recognized for his social activism. This film foregrounds the vision of his fiction and his reflections on Gandhian thought, socialism and diverse cultural issues that are explicated by critics and thinkers who have been interacting with him for several decades.

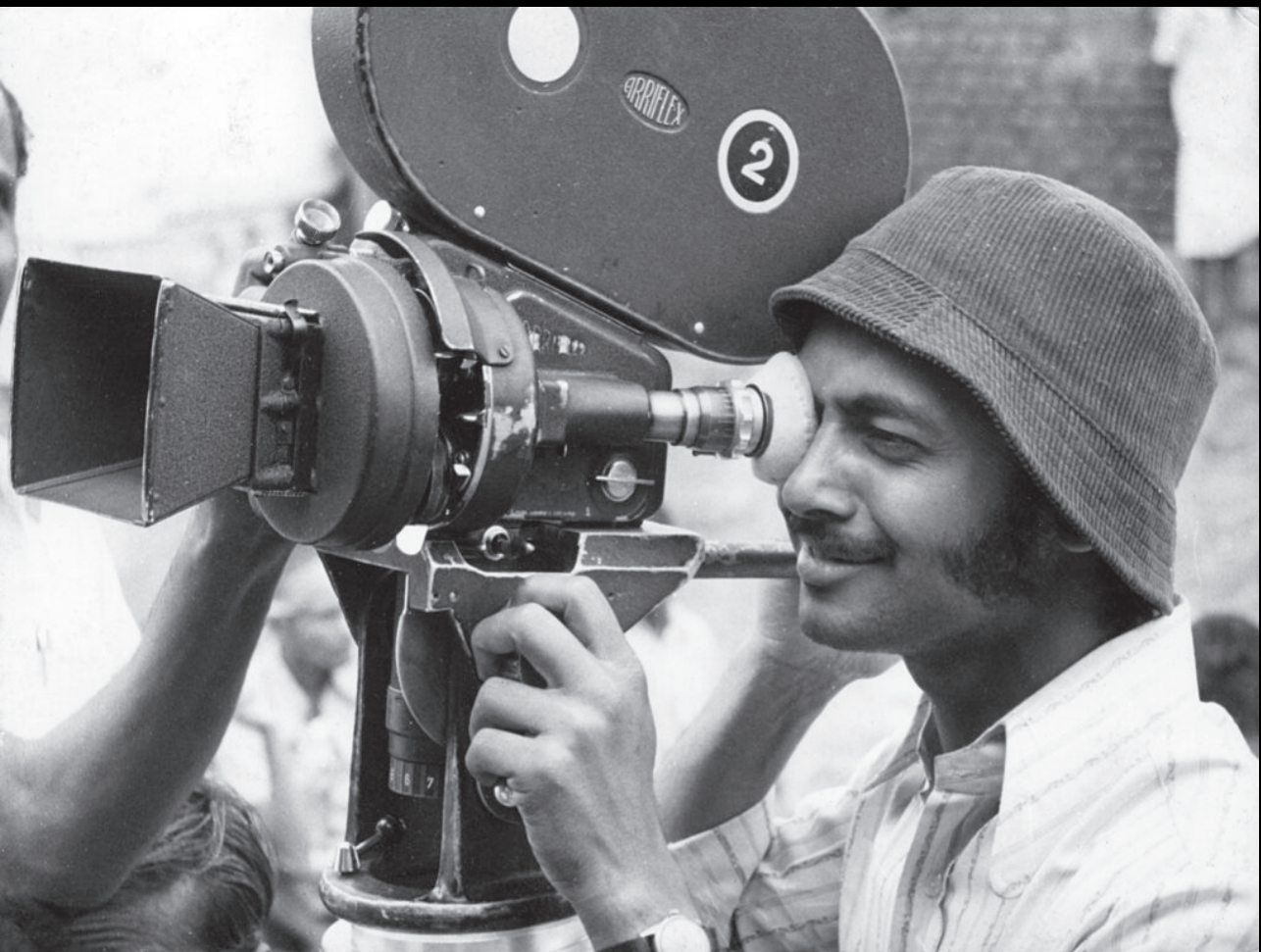
Editor	Mohan Kamakshi
DOP	G.S. Bhaskar
Music	Bindu Malini
Sound	Gokul Abhishek

Images/Reflections

2015 88 mins English

This film focuses on Shri Adoor Gopalkrishnan's film making style and idioms. This is achieved through the interviews and the clippings of his films. The film also brings into focus the relationship between folk arts of Kerala and films made by Shri Adoor Gopalkrishnan.

Editor	Mohan Kamakshi
DOP	Sunny Joseph
Music	Shrikant Prabhu
Sound	Gokul Abhishek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ELECTION DIARIES

The Battle Royale

2025 87 mins Bengali, English

The film follows the election campaign of member of Parliament from TMC Bengal during the 2024 general election.

Editor	Lalit Vachani
DOP	Lalit Vachani & Amit Mahanti
Sound	Rohit Bhalla

Encountering Hate

2025 48 mins Hindustani

Revolving around three case studies of hate crime in North India, the film follows human rights lawyer Akram Akhtar Choudhary as he provides legal help to his clients - victims of mob lynchings, vigilante violence and police encounter killings. The film is a frightening reminder of the precarity of Muslim lives in Hindu nationalist India.

Director	Lalit Vachani
Editor	Lalit Vachani, Rikhav Desai
DOP	Amit Mahanti
Sound	Lohit Bhalla

A Minuscule Minority

2025 74 mins English

Avijit Mukul Kishore, a Mumbai-based filmmaker, specialises in documentary and interdisciplinary moving-image practices.

It was the 77th year of India's independence. The general elections for the 18th Lok Sabha were held from April and June, 2024, and queer rights were not on any political party's agenda. A handful of parties made a token mention of queer rights on their manifestos, but none campaigned for them. "A Minuscule Minority" documents a crucial evolution in India's queer rights movement.

Editor	Avijit Mukul Kishore, Rikhav Desai
DOP	Avijit Mukul Kishore
Music	Simon Fisher Turner
Sound	Achuth Sahadevan

IDSFFK

Crescent in the Saffron Sky

2025 53 mins Hindi, English

Amid the dominance of majoritarian politics, Muslim representation in Indian politics has declined; yet, AIMIM leader Asaduddin Owaisi has expanded his influence. Seen by some as a champion of Muslim rights and by others as a polarizing figure serving the ruling party's narrative, his rise reflects the complex dynamics of identity politics.

Alishan Jafri, 27, is a journalist and documentary filmmaker based out of Delhi. He specializes in socio-political and environmental themes, with a strong focus on marginalized communities.

Omair Farooq is a director, cinematographer and editor with experience in documentary and fiction storytelling. He specializes in socio-political and environmental themes, with a strong focus on marginalized communities.

Editor	Alishan Jafri & Omair Farooq
DOP	Alishan Jafri and Omair Farooq
Sound	Vipul Kumar

Gola Dreams

2025 51 mins Hindi

Pankaj graduated from FTII Pune (1992), a curator and teacher. He has been making films since 1998 and is based out of Pondicherry.

kumartalkies@yahoo.com

Gola Dreams journeys into the heart of Gola Gokarannath, a "Choti Kashi" in Uttar Pradesh, during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Through the lives of Surendra, a Dalit reporter with a near-invisible YouTube channel; Imran, an idealistic auto driver; and the town's young army aspirants, the film uncovers stories of disenchantment, resilience, and hope. Against a backdrop of rallies, a defunct sugar mill, and a carnival-like mela, the film reveals a democracy both vibrant and broken. As rain floods polling day, Gola Dreams becomes a lyrical meditation on aspiration, marginalisation, and the fragile promises of India's electoral theatre.

Editor	Pankaj Rishi Kumar
DOP	Pankaj Rishi Kumar
Sound	Pankaj Rishi Kumar, Pritam Das

IDSFFK

Inside Out

2025 57 mins Khasi, English

Amit Mahanti is a filmmaker, cinematographer and editor who lives between New Delhi and Shillong. He has worked on films and video installations that explore questions of ecological transformation, culture and politics.

amit.mahanti@gmail.com

The 2024 Indian Parliamentary election in Shillong – the capital city of the northeastern state of Meghalaya and the parliamentary constituency for the Khasi and Jaintia Hills – was a contest between two main regional parties in the state – the ruling National People's Party and the nascent Voice of the People Party, a party that stood for 'clean' politics and the interests of the 'jaidbynriew'– an often-used word in the campaigns across parties in the 2024 elections –loosely translated as the Khasi/Jaintia race or tribe, the pride and essence of being.

Editor Amit Mahanti

DOP Amit Mahanti

Sound Amit Mahanti

IDSFFK

Our Symbol Is?

2025 51 mins Tamil

Greeshma Kuthar is an award-winning independent journalist and trained lawyer from Tamil Nadu, known for her work in India's most politically complex and underreported regions.

Manju Priya is an academician and researcher whose work intersects cinema, caste, gender, and political ideology.

As Hindu nationalism and other dominant ideologies seep into Tamil Nadu's political context, a cultural battleground takes shape where identity is contested, symbols are repurposed, and tradition is strategically redefined. Political parties compete to control narratives through appropriation, even as caste capital and social hierarchies remain firmly rooted. "Our Symbol is?" explores a state at a turning point: who defines its symbols, who benefits from their meaning, and in this struggle for power and identity, what will Tamil Nadu preserve and what will it leave behind?

Editor JV Manikandan Balaji

DOP Selva, Vicky, Greeshma, Gopi, Manoj

Sound ***Music*** Sukumaran S

IDSFFK

Sangama

2025 67 mins Kannada, Hindi, English

Sunanda's interest in non-fiction films is to explore people's lives against the backdrop of an intricate and stratified Indian society, while bringing in textures of landscape through layers of their existence.

songlinefilms@gmail.com

Sangama is a compelling portrait of democracy in action in a Southern Indian State. It chronicles the campaign of 'Eddelu Karnataka' [Wake-up Karnataka], as it unites citizens' groups nation-wide to fight the majoritarian force, that has ruled unopposed for a decade.

Editor	Sameera Jain, Vedant, Sunanda Bhat
DOP	Chidananda Geetha Lokanatha, Sunanda Bhat
Sound	Tapas Nayak

IDSFFK

State of Hope

2025 65 mins Malayalam

Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar retired as Professors from the School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, in 2020. They have been commissioning editors and mentors for over 100 documentaries by students and early career filmmakers and continue to teach and mentor young people.

State of Hope follows the 2024 Lok Sabha election campaign of Dr. T.M. Thomas Isaac, the Left Democratic Front candidate in Pathanamthitta, Kerala. Dr. Isaac has been working in Pathanamthitta since 2021, after two terms as the Finance Minister of Kerala. The film explores his election manifesto which focuses on employment generation, organic farming, women's enterprise, waste management, palliative care and other initiatives for people's empowerment.

Editor	Anjali Monteiro & KP Jayasankar
DOP	K P Jayasankar
Sound	KP Jayasankar, Anjali Monteiro

IDSFFK

Unstoppable

2025 72 mins Hindi

Prateek Shekhar is a documentarian based out of Delhi.

prateekshekhar.delhi@gmail.com

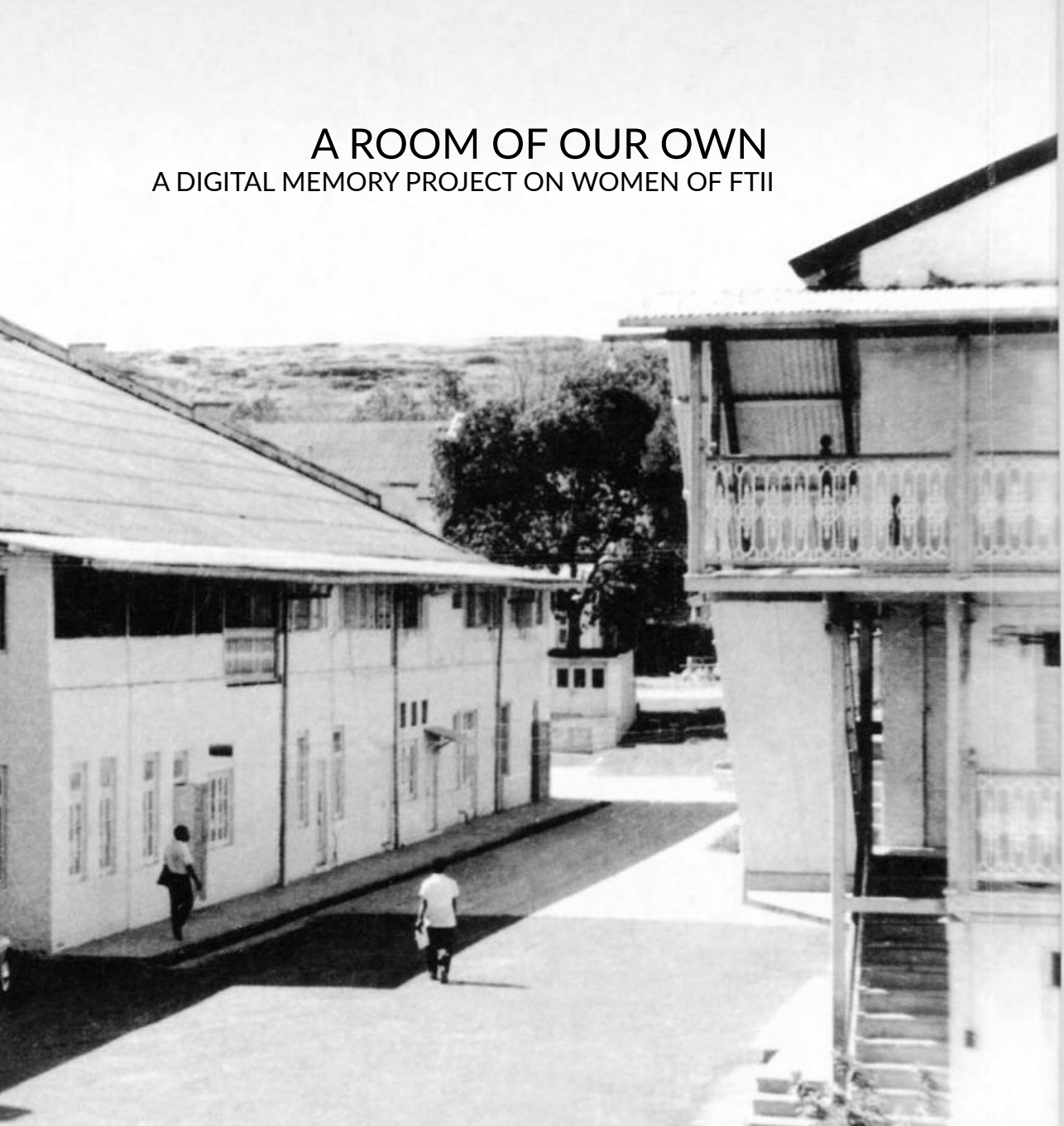
In Bihar's Nalanda, a young leader rises from the grassroots, challenging entrenched powers with limited resources but unwavering determination. His spirited efforts inspire hope and stand as a reminder that the contest for leadership is not merely about gaining power, but is a deeper struggle - a fight to have a voice and to reshape the future from the margins.

Editor	Prateek Shekhar
DOP	Prateek Shekhar
Sound	Nihal Kumar, Atul Anand, Lenin Bharti, Rovin Singh

IDSFFK

A ROOM OF OUR OWN

A DIGITAL MEMORY PROJECT ON WOMEN OF FTII



Chasing the Rainbow

2023 9 mins English, Hindi, Nepali

Shweta Rai, an FTII film editing graduate, excels in documentaries and fiction. Mentored by Kamal Swaroop, she edited acclaimed works like Battle of Banaras and Aamis.

shweta4all@gmail.com

A deeply personal exploration of connections and alienation, 'Chasing the Rainbow' is set against the backdrop of life at the Film & Television Institute of India. The non-fiction short weaves together themes of love, friendship, loss, and the politics of imagery as the filmmaker engages with her lover through intimate SMS/google chat exchanges.

Editor Shweta Rai

DOP Shweta Rai

Sound Gautam Nair

IDSFFK

S7 Girls' Hostel (Red door on the right)

2023 10 mins Hindi

Prachee Bajania is a filmmaker, editor and writer based in Gujarat. An alumna of the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad and the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, Prachee has been making films since 2011.

pracheebee@gmail.com

S7 Girls' Hostel (Red door on the right) is the quiet reflection of a wandering filmmaker at the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune. She uses dreamy archival material from 2016-2020, particularly of her hostel room at the institute, to remember a space that changed her in tiny, spectacular ways.

Editor Prachee Bajania

Sound Prachee Bajania

IDSFFK

A Room, A Life, My Second Home

2023 10 mins Bengali

Suborna Senjutee Tushee started her career as a journalist in Dhaka. She obtained a PG Diploma in Film Direction and Script Writing from Film & Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune.

FTII was more than just a school—it was my second home. In the quiet corners of the girls' hostel, memories linger—of shared laughter, silent struggles, and a room that became a sanctuary. *A Room, A Life* is an intimate reflection on my time at FTII, a place that held me through loss, illness, and self-discovery.

Editor Ashik Sharkar

Sound Sajib Ranjan Biswas

Poona Dilipi

2023 7 mins Bengali

1995-1996, director Fauzia Khan was in Pune. In those extremely busy days she felt an “OUTSIDER”, like *Mersault* in THE STRANGER, a novel by *Albert Camus*. Before departure from Dhaka one of her friends, Farida Hafiz, gifted her a diary. To fill up the massive vacuum within her, she used to write a diary. In *My Pune Diary*, the director shares a little from that diary.

Fauzia Khan is an independent documentary maker. Most of her work is focused on the issues of gender and sexuality, environment, history of liberation war of Bangladesh and mental health.

fauziakhanfilm70@gmail.com

Editor Fauzia Khan

DOP Millind Chhabra, Mazaharul Razu

Sound Fauzia Khan

IDSFFK

Room No 2 - S - 35

2023 10 mins English

Belonging to the Indigenous community *Ho* from Odisha, Lipika Singh Darai is a filmmaker and editor based in Bhubaneswar.

A personal film essay, woven through multiple images and layers of narration, reflects a filmmaker's time at film school — an experience that not only shaped her life but also became a home where she matured, both creatively and philosophically.

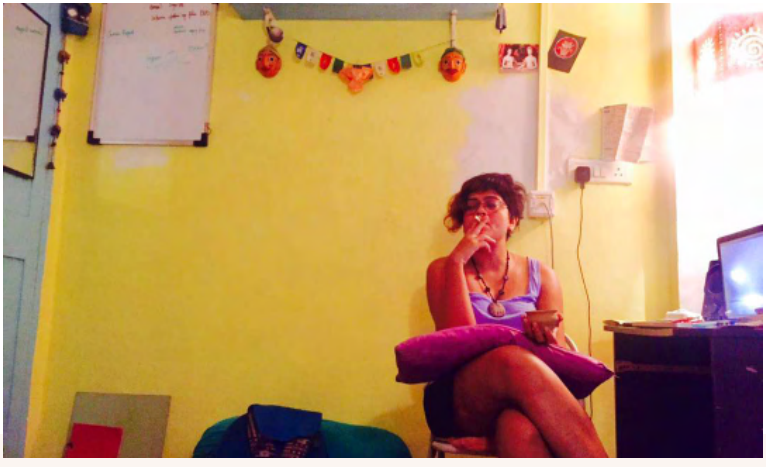
Editor Lipika Singh Darai

DOP Indraneel Lahiri, Lipika Singh Darai

IDSFFK

2S-33 C-BLOCK, Boys Hostel, Girls Floor

2023 8 mins English, Hindi



Koel Sen is a filmmaker and artist based out of Mumbai, India.

koelfilm@gmail.com

Filmmaker Koel Sen's coming of age of documentary, *2S-33 C-BLOCK, Boys Hostel, Girls Floor is* a personal film made solely using mobile phone footage as personal archives shot during her time as a film student at the Film and Television Institute of India.

Remembering To Forget

2023 11 mins Hindi, English

Purva Naresh is a playwright and a theatre maker living in Mumbai. She has the Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar, Safdar Hashmi Puraskar [UP Govt], and Ladli Media Award to name a few for her work in theatre.

purva_n@yahoo.com

A woman opens trunks preserving sarees of her grandmother and her mother to air them -and this triggers a series of recollections of her own journey as a woman. Through her journey we see the journey of three women and how cinema and FTII played a part in the stories of all of them.

Editor	Swabha Pal
DOP	Deepti Gupta
Sound	Abhijit (Tenny) Roy

IDSFFK

An Ode to the Saree

2023 4 mins Hindi, English

Parvati Menon is a widely travelled filmmaker who graduated from the Film and Television Institute, Pune. As a pioneering female director, she focused on purposeful entertaining cinema for young viewers. She was the Chief Producer of Children's Film Society India, having also held the post of Chief Executive Officer and International Film Festival Director at various times.

An Ode to the Saree is a reminiscence by the first lady student of FTII, Parvati Menon (Nayar), who specialized in Advance Direction, to take on her professional challenges clad in a sari.

Editor Syam Guggilappu

DOP Gobind Sahoo

IDSFFK

c/o FTII

2023 6 mins English

Dipti Bhalla graduated in Film Editing in1984 and has co-produced and edited over 50 films.

diptibverma@gmail.com

The film navigates the friendship of Mirana and the Director Dipti during their years at FTII. Photographs, sketches are the memorabilia against which glimpses of the story unfold.

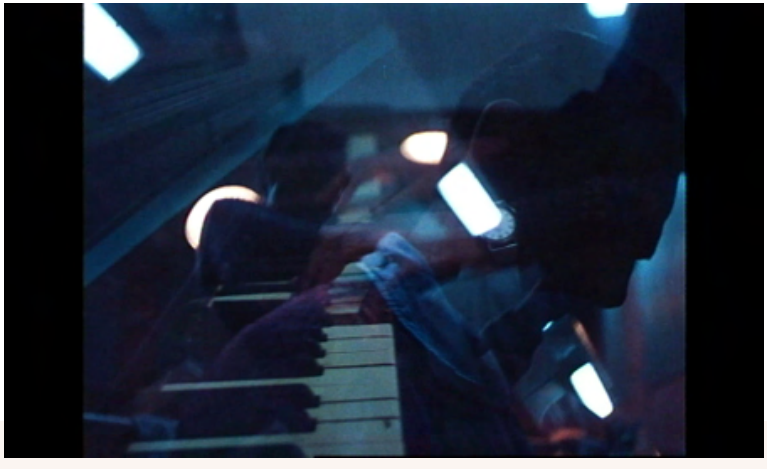
Editor Sonu Singh

DOP Sonu Singh

IDSFFK

Random Thoughts on a Sunday Afternoon

2023 12 mins English



Batul Mukhtiar studied Film Direction & Screenplay Writing from Film & Television Institute of India, Pune. She did her B.A. in History from Nowrosjee Wadia College, Pune. She works as an independent writer, director and producer in Mumbai since 1995.

bmukhtiar@gmail.com

A first person narrative of life at FTII and after, through the films we saw and made. *Random Thoughts on a Sunday Afternoon* is a film made entirely from found footage. The director uses clips from old camera practicals of students at FTII, student diploma films, her own diploma films and old photographs to narrate her personal journey as a young woman in the world of films.

Editor	Batul Mukhtiar
DOP	Avijit Mukul Kishore, Samiran Datta, Shanker Raman, Arun Verma, Vivek Shah, Saiful Islam
Music	Kedarnath Awathi
Sound	Suresh Rajamani

IDSFFK

Udang-ni Baar

2023 9 mins

Pinky Brahma Choudhury is a documentary filmmaker. A post-graduate in Film Direction from Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, she has been working as an independent filmmaker since 1992.

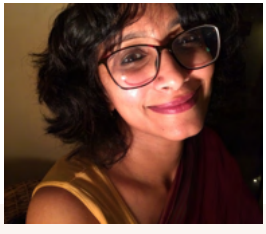
Reminiscence of my time in my alma mater, Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, way back in early 1990s; of how the atmosphere of an indiscriminate gaze in the institute healed my heart and helped me to accept myself as I am, to find joy and the freedom to be me.

IDSFFK

Unmixed

2023 8 mins English, Hindi

Amala Popuri studied Audiography at Film Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune. She is an established production mixer in Mumbai



amala.popuri@gmail.com

It's the encapsulation of the different stories and emotions of the time of my life as a student in FTII through sound.

Editor Amala Popuri

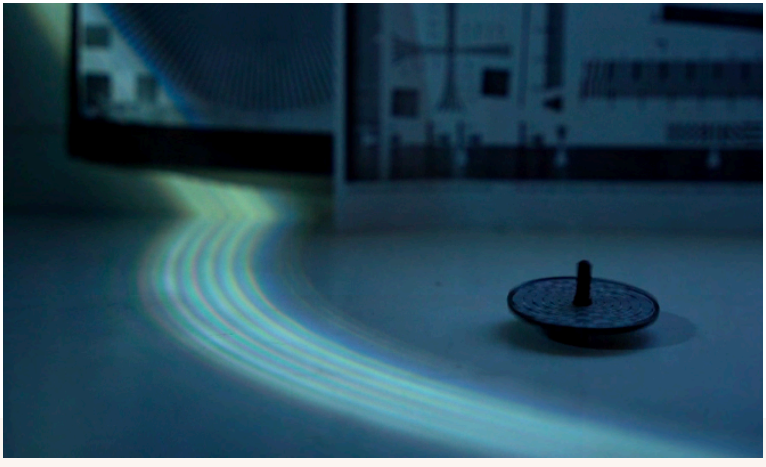
DOP Vipinkumar Waghmare

Sound Amala Popuri

IDSFFK

Finding Light-ness

2023 6 mins English



Maheen Mirza is a cinematographer committed to cinema that is born of collective practice. She is a part of Ektara Collective

A series of cinematography and lighting practical exercises reveal the underlying state of mind and emotions of a cinematography student while she grapples with the environment around her. As she navigates these moments, will the images she creates become an extension of her identity?

Editor	Fareeda AM
DOP	Narendra Singh Pardhi, Ayush Thudgar
Music	Sanjeev Shri
Sound	Bigyna Bhushan Dahal

IDSFFK

FROM CRITIC'S NOTEPAD

Aditya Shrikrishna is a Independent Film Critic from Chennai. Aditya's writings on cinema have appeared in *The Hindu, Senses of Cinema, Frontline, OTTPlay, Mint Lounge, FiftyTwoDotIn, The New Indian Express, The Quint, The Federal, Vogue and Film Companion among others.*

He is also the co-founder of The Other Banana, a podcast on South Indian cinema and an active member of Film Society of Bhubaneswar.

Four Decades Later, No City for Women Echoes the Enduring Impact of Yugantar Film Collective's Path-Breaking Documentaries

At the end of Dr. Rangan Chakravarty's documentary film No City for Women—a piercing look at modern day Gurgaon, its beginnings, and its growth into an unsafe concrete jungle—we see three women around a table. In the middle is the upper-class homeowner and employer living in one of the city's ubiquitous gated communities. Two domestic workers, both women, are at her side. The interviewer behind the camera asks, "Is there a new mindset in Gurgaon?"

The woman on the right nods and explains how there is an expectation and demand for domestic workers who dress well ("pant-shirt wale") and are smart and light-skinned. Their employer has a horrified look on her face. "To work?!" she exclaims. The woman on the right tells her, only half-jokingly, that one of her employer's friends is among them. "Are you serious?" the employer responds. "Whisper her name to me!" The woman bursts into laughter but does not divulge.

No City for Women premiered in 2023 at Beyond Borders Feminist Film Festival held in New Delhi. The film is not about domestic workers—it looks, instead, at the larger plight of women navigating the unsafe city of Gurgaon. But the concerns of the domestic workers and working-class women in the film harks back to Molkarin (Maid Servant), one of several short documentaries made by Yugantar Film Collective in 1981.

Molkarin documents the protests and unionizing efforts of domestic workers in Pune, and their demand for rights and better working conditions. The film exposes not just the low wages of these workers, but also hostile treatment by employers, lack of holidays, and everyday casteism in the workplace.

About four decades separate Molkarin and No City for Women. In the intervening period, India has gone through several churns: from the rise of Hindutva, economic liberalization, and an endless wave of free market capitalism, to the present state of dictatorial democracy dominated by BJP's Hindu right-wing government that actively works towards disenfranchising minorities.

India's first feminist film collective, Yugantar was founded in 1980 by filmmakers and activists Deepa Dhanraj, Abha Bhaiya, Navroze Contractor, and Meera Rao in Bangalore. It was the first documentarian effort that highlighted feminist discourse, underlining caste and intersectionality that permeates social, political, and economic transactions in India.

The period of Yugantar's foundation was an inchoate one of ideological shifts, since the country was coming to terms with the failure of the Nehruvian development model. It was marked by Indira Gandhi's Emergency (1975-1977), which occurred with the nascent Naxalite movement, protests in Gujarat amidst an economic crisis, suppressed student movements in Bihar, and the quelled strike of the railway employees' union. Movements like Nav Nirman saw women enter the protests in a big way, backed by the organizations they had formed. The post-Emergency period was colored by weary socialist leaders with neither drive nor popular support, and the opportunists who renewed their dreams for an India redrawn as a Hindu society.

It is a film movement that mirrored the reality of women entering public life in different roles and across demographics. Several women-led organizations came into their own for collective action during this period. For example, the Self-Employed Women's Association was established as a trade union in Ahmedabad in 1972. Other women's groups—like Progressive Organization of Women in Hyderabad, Stree Sangharsh, and

Mahila Dakshata Samiti—came together for anti-dowry movements in the late 1970s.

Rooted in this time, the collective made four short documentaries between 1980 and 1983, filmed on 16mm, that captured an Indian society seldom given the privilege of image-making. Apart from Maid Servant, there are Tobacco Embers/Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali (1982), Is This Just a Story/Idhi Katha Matramena (1983) and Sudesha (1983).

The documentaries blend fiction and non-fiction, with some rallying moments staged for recreation. In Maid Servant, Pune's domestic workers form a union, Pune Shahar Molkarin Sanghatana (Pune City Domestic Workers Union), and express their righteous indignation at how poorly they are paid and treated. Their demands are not only just, but also sprawling: increase in wages, two holidays without pay cut, no pay cut if they go on leave, one month bonus, holidays for festivals, and no caste discrimination.

The last demand covers a gamut of societal issues—a domestic worker talks about how there are separate plates and glasses for them where they work. Blatant casteism is pervasive within the Indian middle and upper classes, and manifests in more nefarious ways today. Maid Servant also shows three generations of domestic workers in a family, all women, questioning why and how housework is traditionally considered women's work and therefore undervalued.

In Sudesha, in the foothills of Himalayas far away from Maid Servant's Pune, we meet Sudesha Devi who is an activist in the Chipko Movement fighting against deforestation and timber traders. Forestry remains their livelihood, and women carry the burden of the family. The film tracks Sudesha and other women working the fields, collecting bushes, crushing grains, cooking and cleaning at home, and routinely and sarcastically wondering if the men of the household will return for dinner. They are also active participants of the Chipko Movement, putting their bodies between the axe and the tree, for which they have been jailed. Sudesha mentions how, with the shrinking number of trees, every year they need to walk farther into the forest for firewood.

These films are not without the moments of levity. Like the woman pretending to be her drunk husband in Maid Servant, even Sudesha packs in tongue-in-cheek moments. The women declare that men can do nothing but plow—something the women can do themselves—and how their two weeks in jail was truly the best of times, as there was warm food, no work, and plenty of sleep.

More recently, No City for Women focuses heavily on Gurgaon's gated communities: the upscale apartment complexes that are self-contained universes, with amenities for shopping as well as leisure. A resident jokes that a school inside is all that is needed. These gated communities are now present in every major city in India. Their proliferation has created two divergent worlds, one that is inside—insular, seemingly "safe" and disconnected—and the one that is outside, considered polluted and populated by the nebulous "other", namely the working class, who the "insiders" view with disdain, disguised as fear.

Even within the "inside" world, these communities have separate elevators for gig and domestic workers, and mobile apps that control and surveil everyone's entry and exit. The "inside" and the "outside" never mingle; this separation is desired. It creates a deeper class and caste divide that is more pronounced than the one we see in Maid Servant and Sudesha.

The Yugantar films from the early 1980s echo louder today, as the demands made by the domestic workers or the daily troubles of Sudesha sound almost quaint in 2024. Indian casteism has now made its way to diasporic communities abroad. Earlier this year, a Swiss court sentenced four members of the Hinduja family—one of the wealthiest families in the United Kingdom—to four years and six months in jail for trafficking and exploitation of their Indian domestic workers. State sponsored and endorsed targeting of minorities, coupled with violent suppression of dissenting voices, has emboldened the middle and upper classes in India to maintain their positions of power.

Yugantar began as an effort to separate documentary filmmaking from state funding, bringing it into the independent realm. This resulted in four important films that inspected fundamental fractures in Indian society, in which the subject-protagonists in front of the camera and the filmmaker-activists behind it were equal participants in a solidarity-building exercise.

Some of the sharpest political filmmaking in India today comes from documentaries. Yet, they lack reliable funding options and distribution networks, despite covering some of the most necessary stories. Films like Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh's Writing with Fire, Payal Kapadia's A Night of Knowing Nothing, Shaunak Sen's All That Breathes, and Vinay Shukla's While We Watched have faced challenges in funding as well as distribution within the country.

Watching Yugantar's films makes one thing clear: an independently funded and produced film movement like Yugantar, that advocates for radical collective organizations that sustain mobilizing efforts of resistance, is essential today more than ever.

By Aditya Shrikrishna
October 28, 2024

The article was orginally published in www.thepolisproject.com

Vinay Shukla on Ravish Kumar: 'A tired hero questioning his own relevance'

Vinay Shukla's new documentary, While We Watched, recently premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), where it won the Amplify Voices Award. It chronicles a period of dejection—which seems be getting worse every day—in the Indian media by getting up close and personal with NDTV India's Senior Executive Editor, journalist and anchor Ravish Kumar, his immediate colleagues and family. Shukla has previously co-directed with Khushboo Ranka An Insignificant Man, which charts the rise of the Aam Aadmi Party and Arvind Kejriwal.

These days, press freedom is under severe threat with private ownership and corporate sponsors working hand in glove with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, budgetary cuts, media toeing the government's line with propaganda and hate speech (the term "godi media" was coined by Ravish Kumar) and more importantly, the threat of incarceration, with more and more journalists and activists getting arrested under provisions like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. While We Watched is a searing look at what it takes to deliver news and talk truth to power —not just its political side but also its solitary, frustrating part.

To start with the obvious, how and why Ravish Kumar? A lot of journalists—independent and otherwise—do great work in India in different media, be it print or visual.

That's a good question. I have stopped watching news and when I talk to my friends in India and other parts of the world, they say the same. I did this to protect my mental health. I asked myself—what do people behind media and news enterprises feel? Do they feel the same loneliness I feel consuming the news? Ravish Kumar is very articulate. And his programmes go against the current news culture in India.

He is the only one engaging in fair criticism not only of newsmakers and politicians but also of the audience. He was telling the audience what and how to think about what was happening in the country. I found this contrast interesting. Ravish's thinking went, "even though nobody is watching, nobody is listening, let me tell you what I feel". It's a vulnerable thing to say. And a harsh thing to say. And he spoke in Hindi, which reached a wider audience than English. I wanted to understand what's happening in that stratum of society.

The first 30-40 minutes of the film move very fast. The editing is quick, scenes and locations transition fast from Kumar's office to NDTV India's office to his home and family. Did you want it to reflect today's news cycle?

Yes. Also, I am an impatient person. With my films, I like to move fast between things. I don't want anything to be told. One must be able to build a picture in their head gradually. I like letting the audience know that they must keep up. It doesn't work for some but that's okay.

I was wondering about that. I am from India, I have the context, don't need subtitles. What about others?

I completely understand. It's a choice to bring a certain breathlessness into my narratives. I am not here to make sure every person who watches the film likes it. I am okay if some people don't understand some parts. You won't see random shots of streets and people in my film giving a sense of what India looks like. Everybody knows that. I like to get to the point quickly.

Cinema is not about complete comprehension of every detail… If the experience resonates, if the emotional truth of the film resonates, everything is fine. Here in the festival, we watch films from across the world. There will be parts of a film specific to a culture that we may not fully understand. I think that's great. It means the filmmaker stayed authentic to what's happening in their country.

One of the differences between An Insignificant Man and While We Watched, according to me, is that the earlier film seemed optimistic while this one is more pessimistic about the future.

I would disagree. I think the film is even more optimistic than An Insignificant Man. Optimism is not cheap, right? If it wasn't optimistic, I wouldn't have made the film.

An Insignificant Man was about people starting up, being told that they cannot achieve something and then going ahead and doing just that. This one is about a tired hero, a person who's seen it all, who's seen better times and is questioning his own relevance. It reflects the realities for Ravish. I could have made a hunky-dory happy film about journalism in India, but most journalists would disagree. People are finding it harder to go against organisational diktats, and not just in journalism. It's difficult to work against the entire room you are in.

There is this beautiful film by Les Blank, Burden of Dreams, on the making of a Werner Herzog film. Every time there is a dream of India as a fantastic country—with better rights, fair representation, a better system—somebody must carry the burden of that dream. My film is about the cost of that dream. There is hope in this person, and in others like him. That hope is not cheap.

I was surprised by that scene when the editor

of a local newspaper calls up Kumar for advice on how to operate during these difficult times. Kumar has no advice, he says he shares the disillusionment and is asking the same question himself. That's brutally honest and vulnerable.

That's the challenge of sticking to the profession. Everyone wonders, is it worth it? Is what you are doing right? Ravish motors on. And the film speaks to that spirit. That's why it is optimistic.

The film is full of scenes where people cut cakes to mark a farewell or somebody getting a new job. Is this deliberate?

It is a bittersweet thing, this cake-cutting. Another person has left the system because it's unsustainable and Ravish understands that. It's like the Titanic: there were those musicians who continued to play the violin as the ship was sinking. The cake is reflective of that.

While We Watched gives the feel of a newsroom where different people, with different ideologies and beliefs, work together. Social media will have us believe that everything is black and white, but in the real world, adjustments and compromises have to be made. The film gets into the heart of that.

You are right. I tried to do that with the film. The newsroom is more diverse than the news would have you believe. How do we make sure diverse voices are contributing to the newsroom? News organisations need to talk about it.

Not just the newsroom. I think the film industry is one more place where people need to work together in these polarising times.

Exactly. The film is my effort to humanise journalists. They disagree with each other. They are scared and they are also inspired. They are figuring it out. Is our news reflective of who we are, is a question I ask constantly.

That brings us again to the issue of people moving to other channels, which might be specialising in propaganda. Is it a self-serving move or do they not have a choice?

People leave for so many reasons, sometimes they are forced. If you are not getting paid well enough, how do you continue? Or if the medium doesn't value you anymore? Those are doubts everybody lives with.

Kumar himself shows that disillusionment. How did you bring that conversation with him into the film?

He is one individual who lets that disillusionment show when a lot of people hide it because they have public personas. I did not have to bring that conversation into the film because he was having that conversation with the audience anyway. One day I was filming him, and he said this on air—"I am going to tell you something, you don't care about it but write it on a piece of paper and put it in your wallet. Someday

somebody will steal your wallet and they'll read it and their life will be better." This is such an indictment of your own audience! I got an insight into his process by filming him quietly. And then I edited the film for two years.

What was the editing process like—how did you decide on whatto carry and what to discard, especially regarding footage of other news channels?

It was a nerve-racking edit, which was made during the pandemic. A shout-out to my editor Abhinav Tyagi and his team. I wanted to find moments that reveal more about Ravish than the news does. So, I let my camera linger in places you don't see, capturing offhand moments.

Like his assistants under stress doing yoga or buying medicines?

Yes! Those moments are revelatory of what people were going through in their job. My story department was handled by Reshma Ramachandran, without her and Tyagi this wouldn't have been possible. They worked very hard on a narrative on paper and the film slowly got there. It reveals itself to you slowly. I didn't want to use much footage of other channels at first but then it looked like Ravish is worried about nothing. So based on fair use policy, I added the other news footage to give some context to how speech was spread in India.

What was the level of your access? I am sure it took some time to build.

It took a long time. For the first few months I only shot inside Ravish's office. I spent almost two years with him, his immediate colleagues and family.

And he has quite a modest office!

Yes. That's the thing that strikes you—his office or home doesn't seem as elaborate as you thought it would be. He drives himself, as you saw. He's not in some fancy house in GK. That's also the truth of Hindi journalism.It's not as money-laden or glamorous as English journalism. That's another thing to think about. How much do English journalists get compared to regional journalists or people who don't write in English?

That reminds me. In the film we see Sreenivasan Jain and other NDTV faces in the background. Were you ever tempted to pull them in? Or did you always want Kumar to be the focus?

I wanted to maintain a respectful distance from people whose stories I don't have complete visibility on. They probably deserve their own film; it would be unfair to barge into their office and say, I want to film you.

Indian documentaries have made waves in recent international festivals but the Indian public doesn't get to watch these films in

theatres or on streaming platform. Films like A Night of Knowing Nothing, All That Breathes and Writing with Fire are politically sharper than most fiction features, as is While We Watched. Will the public get to watch it?

In recent times, non-fiction films have made more relevant social commentary compared to mainstream Hindi films (though some fiction features from the South do talk about socio-political issues). Yet fiction films have a bigger market and wield power over people's imagination
while documentaries get reduced to their politics or social cause. Even if we don't like it, we end up watching at least two bad films in the theatre every month. But how many of us will show up for a documentary?

But you will release this film for the public?

I will definitely apply for a censor certificate for While We Watched. My last film got rejected, then we went to the tribunal, then it came out and ran for nine weeks.

By Aditya Shrikrishna
October 28, 2024

The article was orginally published in Frontline.

Kite Flies Like an Arrow

Dogs and crickets. Rats and centipedes. Ants and lizards. Crows and fishes. Tortoises and cows. Mosquitoes and owls. Squirrels and frogs. Kites. All kinds of fauna appear in Shaunak Sen's new film All That Breathes, winner of Sundance Film Festival's World Cinema Grand Jury Prize for Documentary. Sen wields lifeforms like a piece of performance art, his lens (Ben Bernard as Director of Photography and Riju Das and Saumyananda Sahi the cinematographers) captures them in media res, not in cinema but lifecycle, caught at their most guileless moment. The camera looks up at the Delhi sky and ambles to the right with a gradual decrease in altitude till, in a single take, it wafts in the essence of a landfill occupied by garbage and rodents, panning across the dump till it is too close to them for our comfort. Two lizards hunt, their shadows ahead of them and a man bats away mosquitoes with an electric bat. Impoverished cows walk the streets at dawn and centipedes escape over leaves as the water level shrinks. But Sen's chosen subjects are the kites of Delhi.

This is a film about kites and three men (two brothers and an enthusiastic, inquisitive young man) who volunteer and care for them in the skies and roofs of the capital. Self-taught and self-trained, Nadeem, Saud, and Salik work in the basement of their home where Salik brings boxes of injured kites for Saud to treat. They fix the birds, cage them till recovery and release the birds back into the sky. The film as the title suggests extends to the living and breathing biosphere. There is talk of evolution and inherent cruelty in nature. There are even class differences between rural kites and city kites. Delhi, a ballooning box of the most polluted air in the world, is an obvious candidate for conversation. Salik—ever the asker of necessary, uncomfortable questions—wonders how much garbage the kites consume, and Nadeem arrives at a number—15 tons a month, which helps reduce the landfills. "Otherwise, our landfills will reach the skies", they conclude. All That Breathes is a beautifully shot and masterfully rendered commentary on a system that is unsustainable and in dire need of oxygen.

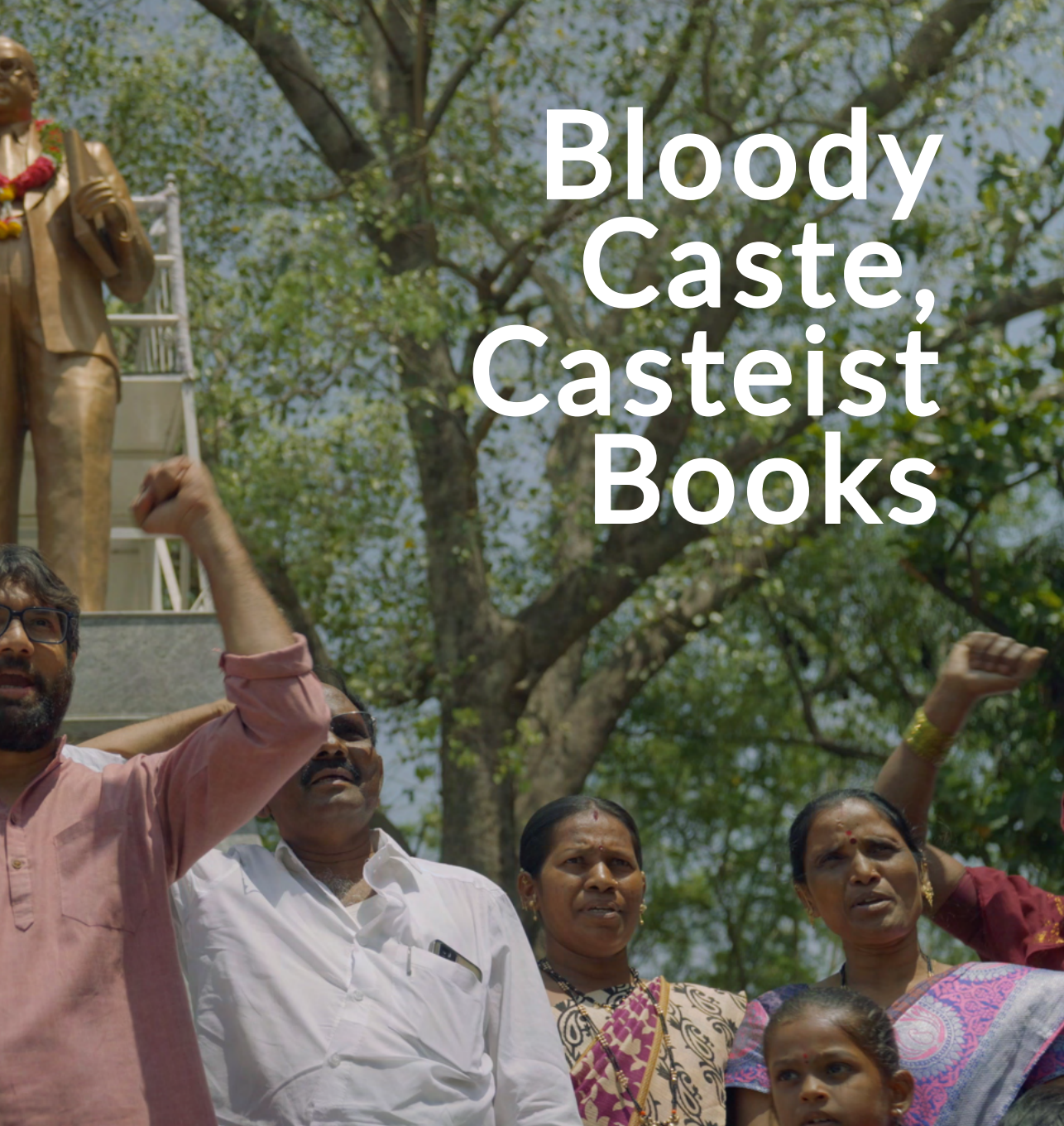
Kite flies like an arrow and fruit flies like a banana. That's a mere modification of the most famous example of syntactic ambiguity but Shaunak Sen's new film plays on the ambiguity and anonymity in nature and in lifeforms. The film is gentle in the way it places under the limelight that every organism in the evolutionary cycle plays its part. It doesn't throw down a gauntlet or set the sirens on high alert. But it is not so gentle in establishing that this is a family of Muslim brothers who have a tremendous amount of empathy for both fellow human beings and, arguably more so for the fauna and health of Delhi as a city. They regard themselves as more than just a cog in the wheel of the ecological cycle, citizens who

understand personal liberty and collective responsibility, and Sen nudges us towards the juxtaposition of his documentary and the time it was made—at the height of anti-CAA protests in November-December 2019 and the riots targeted against Muslims at the beginning of 2020 just before the Covid pandemic hit the larger world. Sen's roving eye catches intimate moments between the brothers—they swim across the river to save an injured kite— and between them and the birds. The exchanges within their family are quieter, breaking down profound subjects to their granular details—will they get disenfranchised due to a spelling mistake in a school transcript? What's the air purifier reading today? "If I die, will the kites eat me too?", Salik asks. "It's all flesh to them, what difference does it make?", Saud replies. All That Breathes uses single shots in gliding rhythms and patterns to both project the beauty and its deterioration in a once-thriving city. The unbroken shots make the brothers' home—small and claustrophobic—look like a larger space than it is.

The word metabolism is used in the context of the city imagining it to be an organism within and of itself, more like a paraplegic on life support. It superimposes the faces of the birds into the fabric of the city, an injured dying breed. But it survives despite the destruction and the state. It adapts and innovates much like Nadeem who wants to go abroad and study the techniques more elaborately to make their enterprising efforts better. All That Breathes shines a torch on things that we take for granted, those that we deem uninteresting or unconsciously neglect. It underlines the importance of the mundane, in the everyday act of breathing. In their makeshift basement clinic, there is a shot of a television showing footage from the CCTV camera in the next room, Salik playing cricket with the staff. It follows him walking out of the CCTV frame and moving to the right as he enters Sen's frame. It's an alluring moment that is light in the context of All That Breathes, a relatively uneventful part of daily life that is recorded in ephemeral footage of CCTV. Only life is ephemeral, lifecycle is perpetual the film says.

By Aditya Shrikrishna
Feb 02, 2022

The article was orginally published in www.cinemaexpress.com



Bloody Caste, Casteist Books

Caste in the IITs: Let's talk about Death, Divorce, and Dissent

"The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of stardust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living."
— Rohith Vemula (1989- Eternity)

This year in July, when a news portal on instagram posted about another suicide of a SC student in the premier Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi, many of the "General Category" peers from the university gathered in the comments section to highlight that it is the quota system that led to this death. Many of them echoed the similar set of concerns over the alleged inability of SC students to cope with the curriculum and institutional culture once they get admission because of the reservations. "…a student coming from reservations simply doesn't have what it takes to compete…" read one of the comments. Although it is no shocker to see savarna students go about life as if Vedas prescribe them anti-reservation chants five times a day, the fact that most of these peers chose to blame reservations even on the death of a student does surprise a little.

DEATH

What is a student death on campus — Is it an individual failure? Merely a suicide? A matter of mental health? The answer(s) could be more vast than one could capture but it is not singular. A life taken this way could be seen as emerging from an extreme state of loneliness and hopelessness, a state where all possibilities and dreams simply cease to exist. This state, however, is not an individual feat – this loneliness does not emerge from the individual, but is built around it consciously. It is a matter of space and the systemic unwillingness to safeguard it, the collective entitlement of the savarna over it. It is a matter of thousands of years of history that keeps trying to dictate who is deserving of the space and who isn't.

"You are asked about your JEE [Joint Entrance Exam] rank at every step of the way – while socializing, during the selection processes of projects and internships, often during placements. This is how one's 'category' [which is essentially caste] is judged and then their capabilities. Why should the rank of entrance exam matter more than the CGPA, if at all? People throw casteist remarks casually and it is hard to stand up to it many times because you are alone and you will

be outcasted immediately. After a point, you begin to feel anxious and start avoiding spaces where you will be asked your rank and be ousted as it directly impacts the opportunities and acceptance that come your way."

*– X, B.Tech Student, IIT Delhi**

Why then must an individual bear the responsibility of death; more so, why should reservations be blamed – which are one of the only systems in place to ensure that space? The burden of a student's death must lie with the university systems, administrative body, discriminatory practices of departments, teachers, peers, hiring companies and their collective failure to treat humans as humans— not just a category to be reduced to, but glorious minds made of stardust meant to expand; to facilitate those minds to make meaning, invent and re-invent, to grow. A student death on campus – and the rising statistics thereof – are a sign of a sick society, and a society that blames it on affirmative action – of a very dark age.

One wonders why this apathy exists — in living and in dying.

DIVORCE

For some reason, science and tech institutes in India are divorced from politics, and are particularly ignorant towards a pervasive issue that is ever present in that space – caste. Student groups are formed on the basis of caste; caste networks operate in full form within classrooms, college societies, project hiring and so on; Professors & students openly throw casteist remarks; marginalized students are dying – caste is very visible yet weirdly invisible at the same time.

"Campus elections here are generally dominated by undergrads. Their issues mainly focus on students' immediate concerns such as campus facilities, academic rules & regulations and so on. There is no place for caste in politics."

– Rahul Digamber Hajare, Masters Student & Leader, IIT Guwahati

This stands in stark contrast with many central Humanities Universities in India— at least in principle — where student politics engages with some depths of identity and ideological standpoints. Many savarna students in Humanities Colleges would even marry Marx and Ambedkar to say Lal Salam, Jai Bhim!

Why are Tech institutes paradoxically swinging between caste ignorance and caste based discrimination?

Is it because of an assumption that studying science does not allow one to explore the political side of things? Because JEE marks don't get you Marx if they get you big fat corporate packages? Or perhaps savarna students in tech, unlike Humanities, do not need social validation to produce work on Dalit bodies and to appropriate their works – so why acknowledge privilege – or reflect on it at all! Because there are 'important things' to talk about? Isn't a student death caused by institutional failure an important thing?

In an ideal world, the actual sciences (haha) wouldn't be an apolitical divorced partner of social sciences. Heck, in times of AI and Algorithms — when systemic discrimination and oppressive dominant narratives have made their way into big datasets, influencing mass knowledge and decision-making — tech is inherently political. It has always been.

DISSENT

But history stands as evidence that every time it has tried to dictate ownership over space, the echoes of dissent have challenged its claims. To say Tech institutes are apolitical is not to discount the big and small ways in which students come together to nurture a community, build spaces of assertion, of care, of shared pasts and the futures.

"I was at Chaityabhumi on 6th December, when I realised that I did not receive any commemoration mail from the institute – like we do for other occasions. I brought back blue flags with me back to the campus. After coming back, I got to know that the institute organises Ambedkar Jayanti only for the sake of photographs that have to be submitted to the ministry, that too not on 14th April and without any student participation. It is mostly attended by the security personnel who are dressed as civilians for the photographs… Thus, in order to end that malpractice, we began organizing to hold a celebration in the institute, 10 days before Ambedkar Jayanti, on 14th April. There were Blue Jai Bhim flags, photos of Babasaheb and Buddha. We invited Ashok Saraswati ji, who is an Ambedkarite leader from Nagpur, to deliver a speech. About fifty people, mostly from the community, turned up for the event."

– Rahul Digamber Hajare, IIT Guwahati

In spaces like the IITs, where the space itself is denied or snatched away from marginalized students, the threat of violence is such that the act of embracing Babasaheb Ambedkar — which is an act of celebration and community, also becomes an act of dissent.

"In 2014, there was the institutional death of Aniket Ambhore, a Dalit student in IIT Bombay. In 2015, APPSC [Ambedkar Phule Periyar Study Circle] was started with the aim to engage with the issues of caste on campus. Ever since, APPSC has been active in protesting fee hikes, harassment of SC ST students and so; in demanding justice… In recent times, there has been a lot of clampdown from the administration. There are strict guidelines to not organize on campus… We [APPSC] primarily function as a study circle. Once in two weeks, we take up readings or excerpts with subjects around caste – from different perspectives. Last to last week, we did Shahu Patole's Dalit Kitchens of Marathwada. We wanted to invite him but now having an event on campus is very difficult. We do not get to book rooms. In general, there is a severe clampdown of space and academic freedom inside the campus."
– Z, PhD Scholar, IIT Bombay*

TO END

Caste is a "division of labourers," as Dr. Ambedkar said. In the division of labourers, caste also creates a division of 'body' and 'mind' faculties – where mental reflections, ideations, big decisions are reserved for the dominant, and the manual, 'field' works are relegated to the other. This is what Gopal Gnuru describes as the Theoretical Brahmin & Empirical Shudra binary. Such a binary that disembodies oneself and in turn creates a division of labourers based on birth through a divine sanction is an unscientific division based on Vedic myth. It is a reflection of this hindu metaphysics that the contemporary society could have a majority of mechanical, manual labour from Dalit communities, but still won't accept them in premier engineering institutions.

So, What would a world – where science is political, and politics is scientific – would look like? Where our politics, our worldview isn't something we accept without a question or inquiry, and the horizons of what is scientific are ever expanding. Possibilities are endless, but I think of the Buddha, his Dhamma and the sangha. Buddha, for whom truth was what our sensations could bear witness to, not what has been revealed to us in the Vedas; for whom the mind and body did not occur as binary concepts but worked in consonance, united; who spoke of social good in the terms of Bahujan Hitaya, Bahujan Sukhaya. Perhaps that is why Dr. Ambedkar stressed on the "scientific", "rational" aspects of Buddha's Dhamma – even though the western conceptions of science and rationality came much later to Buddha. His vision of building a Prabuddha Bharat had embedded within it, a vision of building a science conscious society.

To be a science conscious society is to be rational. To be just. To promote equal opportunities and growth and not clamp down upon them. It is to not have science and society be divorced, or live in separate rooms. It is for them to go hand in hand, with love. It is to move towards freedom of mind — of glorious minds made of stardust.

**Name changed to protect identity.*

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Inherited Pain

How sickle cell reveals the intergenerational violence of caste

In conversations around structural violence in India, caste is often treated as a social artefact, historical, unfortunate, but supposedly withering away under the weight of modernity. The post-liberalisation imagination celebrates mobility, development, and access, even as the material realities of marginalised communities remain shaped by neglect, deprivation, and premature death.

What does it mean for a system of oppression to persist not only in memory or social customs, but in bodies?

What happens when centuries of exclusion begin to calcify, not just in landlessness, in hunger, in denied education, but in blood, in DNA, in inherited illness?

There are violences that do not announce themselves through lynchings or slurs. Some arrive quietly, through policy apathy. Through silence in textbooks. Through the normalisation of suffering. Through state indifference.

And some, we only begin to see when they appear at our doorstep.

Illness often arrives without vocabulary. We speak of fatigue, of pain, of the body's betrayal, but language rarely catches up to what the body endures. My cousin, a child no older than ten, moved through years of unnameable discomfort. Fevers that lingered.

Limbs that ached without reason. Days that seemed too heavy for his small frame. The explanations were fragmented, clinical, and inconclusive.

No one used the word "genetic." No one mentioned "inheritance."

In the weeks following his death, I found myself drawn almost obsessively to the internet. I typed "sickle cell" into the search bar without knowing what I was looking for. Without knowing, really, what I was grieving.

I read as if reading could undo something. Each article offered a new layer of vocabulary, but none could make sense of the silence that had preceded the diagnosis. Or the quiet with which we accepted it. Sickle cell, I began to realise, was not simply a medical condition. It was a condition shaped by everything we were never told. About the body. About history. About structural violence that chooses not to announce itself.

Understanding Sickle Cell Disease
Sickle Cell Disease (SCD) is a hereditary blood disorder caused by a mutation in the gene that encodes haemoglobin- the oxygen-carrying component of red blood cells. In individuals with SCD, red blood cells become crescent-shaped, sticky, and rigid. These deformed cells struggle to pass through blood vessels, leading to blockages that cause severe pain, organ damage, and increased risk of infection. It is a chronic, life-shortening illness, with no known cure outside of a bone marrow transplant- a procedure both expensive and largely inaccessible to most patients in India.

Classified by India's Ministry of Health as a major public health challenge, SCD primarily affects populations in central and eastern India, with high prevalence reported in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Jharkhand. However, what makes this pattern more than a geographical coincidence is its demographic specificity: over 70% of all reported cases are found among Scheduled Tribes, with Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes comprising a significant proportion of the remaining affected population.

This is not incidental. It is not random. It is patterned.

According to epidemiological studies, the SCD trait evolved thousands of years ago as a protective genetic response to malaria. Carriers of the sickle cell trait (those with one copy of the gene) were more likely to survive malaria in high-risk zones. Over time, this trait became concentrated in populations living in forested, low-lying, high-malaria areas. In India, these were, and remain, the regions inhabited by Adivasi and Dalit communities, either through traditional settlement patterns or caste-based spatial exclusion.

But the trait that once functioned as a form of biological resistance has, in a postcolonial, casteist state, become a slow death sentence.

A condition shaped by evolution now intersects with structural abandonment. And inherited pain becomes not only biological, but political.

Caste and Environmental Determinants of Health

The geography of caste is not incidental. It is deliberate, spatialised violence.

Historically, Dalit and Adivasi communities have been excluded from clean, resource-rich, and "upper-caste" localities, pushed instead to the peripheries of villages, into forest edges, floodplains, and malaria-ridden lowlands. These were not merely inconvenient

locations. They were zones of environmental precarity, lacking access to sanitation, clean water, food security, and healthcare infrastructure. What we now identify as “malaria-endemic regions” were, and remain, the forced homelands of the oppressed.

This spatial segregation was not merely economic.

It was caste-based and codified.

The presence of sickle cell disease among some Muslim populations in India is not an anomaly, but a further indictment of caste’s pervasive reach. Many among the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes historically embraced Islam in pursuit of dignity and personhood denied to them by the Hindu caste order. The gene did not convert; the body carried its history into another faith.

In Dr. Ambedkar’s analysis, caste operates as a mechanism of residential and occupational immobility: it fixes people into inherited roles, not only within the labour market, but within the physical and biological landscapes of India. Marginalised communities did not “choose” to settle in disease-prone areas. They were confined there. Denied safe spaces, decent housing, or any meaningful choice over where or how they lived, these populations became the ecological subjects of a caste state—made to survive in environments marked by contamination, exposure, and neglect. The adaptive emergence of the sickle cell trait among Adivasis and other oppressed groups is thus not a random evolutionary outcome. It is a biological footprint of structural violence.

This is the terrain where caste and health intersect: not as metaphor, but as geography. Bodies are shaped by landscapes. And in India, landscapes are shaped by caste.

Intergenerational Impact of Caste-Based Oppression

Sickle Cell Disease (SCD) is a hereditary blood disorder caused by a mutation in the hemoglobin gene. This genetic trait is transmitted from parents to their children, making the burden of the disease not merely individual, but familial and generational.

Just as radioactive fallout from Hiroshima and Nagasaki irreversibly altered the genetic futures of those exposed, and just as the Bhopal’s Union Carbide Gas Tragedy continues to shape birth defects and chronic illness decades after its occurrence, caste-based violence in India produces a slow violence- invisible, cumulative, and intergenerational. Sickle Cell Disease, when mapped onto the cartography of caste, reveals how historical oppression becomes biological inheritance. The consequences of being denied access to sanitation, nutrition, health infrastructure, and dignified habitat are not limited to those who endured them directly. They are inscribed into the bodies of their descendants, passed down like an invisible scar.

This is where Dr. Ambedkar’s warnings remain urgent. In his advocacy for constitutional morality, he argued that political democracy without social

democracy is hollow. Without addressing the deeply entrenched inequalities of caste and economic exclusion, the Indian state would become a shell, a republic of formal equality and lived inequality.

To Dr. Ambedkar, social democracy was not merely a question of tolerance or reform. It was a structural reconfiguration- a radical shift in how dignity, rights, and life itself are distributed. In this, Dr. Ambedkar anticipated many of the concerns that political theorists like Michel Foucault would later term biopolitics: the management of populations, the governance of health, and the use of state power to decide who lives, who dies, and who is left to die slowly.

Foucault's framework illuminates how the Indian state engages in caste-based biopolitics, not through direct violence alone, but through calculated neglect. The failure to screen, diagnose, treat, or even acknowledge the burden of Sickle Cell Disease among SC/ST/OBC communities is not a failure of capacity, it is a failure of political will. It is a form of statecraft, where the suffering of some lives is normalised, anticipated, and administratively absorbed.
These are not merely biological tragedies. They are political outcomes.

Challenging the Myth of a "Casteless Society"

The assertion that caste no longer exerts influence in contemporary India is not merely ahistorical. It is an ideological construct that functions to obscure enduring structures of social stratification and oppression. The prevailing discourse of a "casteless society" claims the nation has transcended caste through modernization, economic growth, and legislative safeguards. Yet, this narrative is premised on selective amnesia, privileging surface-level markers of progress while concealing the pervasive and systemic inequalities that persist.

Epidemiological data on the disproportionate burden of Sickle Cell Disease within Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes provides incontrovertible evidence that caste continues to determine life chances in profound and biologically embedded ways. These disparities are not accidental or incidental; they are symptomatic of entrenched patterns of exclusion that mediate access to healthcare, sanitation, nutrition, and dignified living conditions- social determinants foundational to health outcomes.

The rhetoric of caste obsolescence also rests on a fallacy of exceptionalism, where isolated instances of upward mobility are extrapolated to signify the dissolution of caste hierarchies. This selective narrative masks the broader structural realities in which the vast majority remain constrained by the institutionalized mechanisms of caste domination. It is a discourse that legitimizes the status quo by rendering invisible the systemic deprivation endured by marginalized communities.

Such denialism is not innocent. It performs a deliberate political function: to cleanse the conscience of the modern Indian state, to arrest the momentum for radical redistribution, and to ensure that the scaffolding of caste remains intact beneath the veneer of constitutional morality. It evades the fundamental truth that caste is not an archaic residue, but an organising principle of the Indian social order, structuring labour, access, dignity, and now, even the very biology of survival. It is neither an exception nor a deviation; it is the rule. So long as its presence is denied, its consequences will continue to be naturalised, etched into the bodies of the oppressed, transmitted across generations, and legitimised through silence.

To insist that caste is a relic is to participate in a wilful epistemic violence, a refusal to recognize how caste's legacies are inscribed onto bodies, environments, and opportunities. The myth of a casteless society must be dislodged if we are to confront the real, embodied consequences of caste and chart pathways toward structural justice and health equity.

Conversion, Education, and the Right to Health
If disease has become the hereditary burden of the oppressed, then emancipation must begin by rejecting the fatalism that has naturalised this inheritance. One cannot excise a gene, but one can dismantle the social order that imbues it with stigma, silence, and disposability.

As Babasaheb Ambedkar insisted, the path to liberation is not paved through endurance, but through rupture. "We do not accept your idea that we were born to suffer," he declared. Conversion- for Dr. Ambedkar- was not simply a spiritual act, but a categorical rejection of a social system that had dehumanised entire communities. In the context of sickle cell disease, this insight retains profound urgency. To reject caste is to reject the logic that renders certain bodies more exposed to pain, and less entitled to care.

Dr. Ambedkar's emphasis on education, likewise, was not limited to literacy or employability, but to the cultivation of critical consciousness. Public health must be reclaimed as political education: a domain where oppressed communities learn to read their bodies as texts of history, to interpret pain as political, and to demand collective redress. Medical interventions alone are insufficient. Without structural reckoning, healthcare becomes another terrain where caste reproduces itself, through unequal diagnosis, delayed treatment, and neglect.

Yet the struggle for health equity cannot proceed through isolated reforms. It must be forged in the crucible of social movement. Systems of oppression are not siloed; they intersect and amplify. Caste, gender, indigeneity, and poverty do not merely coexist- they co-produce vulnerability. A rural Adivasi child with sickle cell disease is not "just" a patient; she is the subject of multiple exclusions that converge in her very flesh. The SC or ST woman, doubly marginalised by

patriarchy and caste, often suffers in silence, misdiagnosed, untreated, and unheard. These are not aberrations but systemic failures.

Policy responses must therefore abandon the fiction of universality. The language of "access for all" masks the fact that not all bodies begin from the same place. Interventions must be deeply intersectional: sensitive to histories, geographies, and social positions. It is only through such an attuned approach, one that centres the lived realities of the most marginalised, that public health can become a domain of justice, not just charity.

The Grammar of Structural Violence

What sickle cell disease reveals is not only a failure of medicine, but a failure of memory, a wilful amnesia that refuses to confront how caste structures biological vulnerability itself. The gene does not circulate in a vacuum; it is inscribed into the bodies of those consigned to ecological abandonment, medical neglect, and political invisibility. This is not heredity alone- it is the afterlife of structural domination.

To speak of health without speaking of caste is to misname the crisis. It is to treat the symptom as isolated, when it is systemic. The language of public health must cease its retreat into abstraction; the violence is not theoretical. It is geographic. It is corporeal. It is caste made flesh.

Claims to a "casteless" society function not as aspirations, but as evasions. They enable a politics that is satisfied with optics over redistribution, with tokenism over transformation. In doing so, they foreclose any reckoning with the social conditions that continue to govern who falls sick, who is diagnosed, who is treated, and who is forgotten.

Dr. Ambedkar did not demand inclusion into a poisoned system. He demanded its reconstitution. The insistence on conversion and education was never about assimilation, but rupture- an ethical refusal to accept a world that normalises suffering for some as the price of comfort for others. That remains the demand: not healing within injustice, but healing through its dismantling.
There can be no health equity in a caste society. There can be no justice without memory. And there can be no future unless the structures that made us sick are named, confronted, and dismantled, not gradually, but fundamentally.

The annihilation of caste is not an ideal. It is the only cure.

Footnotes-

- Inherited disease & intergenerational violence

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- Ambedkar on caste as inherited violence / immobility

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Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables. In Writings & Speeches, Vol. 9. Government of Maharashtra.

- Ambedkar on conversion as rupture / refusal of suffering

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The article's phrasing ("We do not accept your idea that we were born to suffer") is not verbatim in published volumes but the speech at Deekshabhoomi relates the same idea/spirit as the quote.

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Foucault, M. (2008). The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979. Palgrave Macmillan. (Extends biopolitics into neoliberal governmentality.)

- Epistemic violence (concept & source)

Term coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay: Can the Subaltern Speak? (1988). In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

See also: Spivak, G. C. (1999). A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present. Harvard University Press. (For elaboration of epistemic violence and silencing in postcolonial context.)

Saumya Barmate

The article was orginally published in www.theambedkarianchronicles.in

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Actor’s Studio Screenings at Bocca Cafe.

Notes from FSB

The Act of Killing (2012)

Indonesian / Colour/ 115 mins
(Documentary)

Widely seen as one of the most extraordinary documentary films of recent times, *The Act of Killing* tells the stories of members of the Indonesian death squads who tortured and killed over one million people throughout 1965-66. The film made in 2012, was eight years in the making. Joshua Oppenheimer was born and brought up in USA. He has a BA (Bachelor of Arts) in filmmaking from Harvard University and a Ph.D. from University of Arts, London. He has been making films since 1997 and currently lives in Copenhagen.
In 1965, the Indonesian government was overthrown by the military. Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, founder of the non-aligned movement, and leader of the national revolution against Dutch colonialism, was deposed and replaced by right-wing General Suharto. The Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which had been a core constituency in the struggle against Dutch colonialism, and which had firmly supported President Sukarno (who was not a communist), was immediately banned. On the eve of the coup, the PKI was the largest communist party in the world, outside of a communist country. It was officially committed to winning power through elections, and its affiliates included all of Indonesia's trade unions and cooperatives for landless farmers. Its major campaign issues included land reform, as well as nationalizing foreign-owned mining, oil, and plantation companies. In this, they sought to mobilize Indonesia's vast natural resources for the benefit of the Indonesian people, who, in the aftermath of three hundred years of colonial exploitation, were, on the whole, extremely poor.

After the 1965 military coup, anybody opposed to the new military dictatorship could be accused of being a communist. This included union members, landless farmers, intellectuals, and the ethnic Chinese, as well as anybody who struggled for a redistribution of wealth in the aftermath of colonialism. In less than a year, and with the direct aid of western governments, over one million of these "communists" were murdered. In America, the massacre was regarded as a major "victory over communism", and generally celebrated as good news. Time magazine reported "the West's best news for years in Asia", while The New York Times ran the headline, "A Gleam of Light in Asia", and praised Washington for keeping its hand in the killings well hidden.

The following are excerpts from the Director's Notes by Joshua Oppenheimer

By the time I first met the characters in *The Act of Killing* (in 2005), I had been making films in Indonesia for three years, and I spoke Indonesian with some degree of fluency. Since making *The Globalization Tapes* (2003), *Christine Cynn*, fellow film-maker and longtime collaborator *Andrea Zimmerman* and I had continued filming with perpetrators and

survivors of the massacres in the plantation areas around the city of Medan. Moving from perpetrator to perpetrator, and, unbeknownst to them, from one community of survivors to another, we began to map the relationships between different death squads throughout the region, and began to understand the process by which the massacres were perpetrated. In late 2004, Amir Hasan began to introduce me to killers up the chain of command in Medan. Independently in 2004, we began contacting 'veterans' organizations of death squad members and anti-leftist activists in Medan. These two approaches allowed us to piece together a chain of command, and to locate the surviving commanders of the North Sumatran death squads. In early interviews with the veterans of the killings (2004), I learned that the most notorious death squad in North Sumatra was *Anwar Congo* and *Adi Zulkadry*'s Frog Squad (Pasukan Kodok).

During these first meetings with Medan perpetrators (2004 and 2005), I encountered the same disturbing boastfulness about the killings that we had been documenting on the plantations. Our starting point for The Act of Killing was thus the question: how had this society developed to the point that its leaders could – and would - speak of their own crimes against humanity with a cheer that was at once celebratory but also intended as a threat?

When the government of Indonesia was overthrown by the military in 1965, Anwar and his friends were promoted from small-time gangsters who sold movie theatre tickets on the black market to death squad leaders. They helped the army kill more than one million alleged communists, ethnic Chinese, and intellectuals in less than a year. As the executioner for the most notorious death squad in his city, Anwar himself killed hundreds of people with his own hands. Today, Anwar is revered as a founding father of a right-wing paramilitary organization that grew out of the death squads.

The Act of Killing is about killers who have won, and the sort of society they have built. Anwar and his friends have not been forced by history to admit they participated in crimes against humanity. Instead, they have written their own triumphant history, becoming role models for millions of young paramilitaries. The Act of Killing is a journey into the memories and imaginations of the perpetrators, offering insight into the minds of mass killers. And The Act of Killing is a nightmarish vision of a frighteningly banal culture of impunity in which killers can joke about crimes against humanity on television chat shows, and celebrate moral disaster with the ease and grace of a soft shoe dance number.

In their youth, Anwar and his friends spent their lives at the movies, for they were "movie theatre gangsters": they controlled a black market in tickets, while using the cinema as a base of operations for more serious crimes. In 1965, the army recruited them to form death squads because they had a proven capacity for violence, and they hated the communists for

boycotting American films – the most popular (and profitable) in the cinemas. Anwar and his friends were devoted fans of James Dean, John Wayne, and Victor Mature. They explicitly fashioned themselves and their methods of murder after their Hollywood idols. And coming out of the midnight show, they felt "just like gangsters who stepped off the screen". In this heady mood, they strolled across the boulevard to their office and killed their nightly quota of prisoners. Borrowing his technique from a mafia movie, Anwar preferred to strangle his victims with wire.

In The Act of Killing, Anwar and his friends agree to tell us the story of the killings. But their idea of being in a movie is not to provide testimony for a documentary: they want to star in the kind of films they most love from their days scalping tickets at the cinemas. We seize this opportunity to expose how a regime that was founded on crimes against humanity, yet has never been held accountable, would project itself into history.

And so we challenge Anwar and his friends to develop fiction scenes about their experience of the killings, adapted to their favorite film genres – gangster, western, musical. They write the scripts. They play themselves. And they play their victims. Their fiction filmmaking process provides the film's dramatic arc, and their film sets become safe spaces to challenge them about what they did. Some of Anwar's friends realize that the killings were wrong. Others worry about the consequence of the story on their public image. Younger members of the paramilitary movement argue that they should boast about the horror of the massacres, because their terrifying and threatening force is the basis of their power today. As opinions diverge, the atmosphere on set grows tense. The edifice of genocide as a "patriotic struggle", with Anwar and his friends as its heroes, begins to sway and crack.

Most dramatically, the filmmaking process catalyzes an unexpected emotional journey for Anwar, from arrogance to regret as he confronts, for the first time in his life, the full implications of what he's done. As Anwar's fragile conscience is threatened by the pressure to remain a hero, The Act of Killing presents a gripping conflict between moral imagination and moral catastrophe.

We had developed a method in which we open a space for people to play with their image of themselves, recreating and re-imagining it on camera, while we document this transformation as it unfolds. In particular, we had refined this method to explore the intersection between imagination and extreme violence. In the early days of research (2005), I discovered that the army recruited its killers in Medan from the ranks of movie theatre gangsters (or preman bioskop) who already hated the leftists for their boycott of American movies – the most profitable in the cinema. I was intrigued by this relationship between cinema and killings, although I had no idea it would be so deep. Not only did Anwar and his friends know

and love the cinema, but they dreamed of being on the screen themselves, and styled themselves after their favorite characters. They even borrowed their methods of murder from the screen....This was such an outlandish and disturbing idea that I in fact had to hear it several times before I realized quite what Anwar and his friends were saying. He described how he got the idea of strangling people with wire from watching gangster movies. In a late-night interview in front of his former cinema, Anwar explained how different film genres would lead him to approach killing in different ways. The most disturbing example was how, after watching a "happy film like an Elvis Presley musical", Anwar would "kill in a happy way".

In 2005, I also discovered that the other paramilitary leaders (not just the former movie theater gangsters) had other personal and deep-seated relationship to movies. Ibrahim Sinik, the newspaper boss who was secretary general of all the anti-communist organizations that participated in the killings, and who directly gave the orders to Anwar's death squad, turned out to be a feature film producer, screenwriter, and former head of the Indonesian Film Festival.
In addition to all this, Anwar and his friends' impulse towards being in a film about the killings was essentially to act in dramatizations of their pasts – both as they remember them, and as they would like to be remembered (the most powerful insights in The Act of Killing probably come in those places where these two agendas radically diverge). As described, the idea of dramatizations came up quite spontaneously, in response to viewing the rushes from Anwar's first re-enactments of the killings. But it would be disingenuous to claim that we facilitated the dramatizations only because that's what Anwar and his friends wanted to do. The thing that most fascinated us about the killings was the way the perpetrators we filmed would recount their stories of those atrocities. One had the feeling that we weren't simply hearing memories, but something else besides – something intended for a spectator.

More precisely, we felt we were receiving performances. And we instinctively understood, I think, that the purpose of these performances was somehow to assert a kind of impunity, to maintain a threatening image, to perpetuate the autocratic regime that had begun with the massacres themselves. We sensed that the methods we had developed for incorporating performance into documentary might, in this context, yield powerful insights into the mystery of the killers' boastfulness, the nature of the regime of which they are a part, and, most importantly, the nature of human 'evil' itself. So, having learned that even their methods of murder were directly influenced by cinema, we challenged Anwar and his friends to make the sort of scenes they had in mind. We created a space in which they could devise and star in dramatisations based on the killings, using their favorite genres from the medium.

We hoped to catalyze a process of collective

remembrance and imagination. Fiction provided one or two degrees of separation from reality, a canvas on which they could paint their own portrait and stand back and look at it.

We started to suspect that performance played a similar role during the killings themselves, making it possible for Anwar and his friends to absent themselves from the scene of their crimes, while they were committing them. Thus, performing dramatizations of the killings for our cameras was also a re-living of a mode of performance they had experienced in 1965, when they were killing. This obviously gave the experience of performing for our cameras a deeper resonance for Anwar and his friends than we had anticipated. And so, in The Act of Killing, we worked with Anwar and his friends to create such scenes for the insights they would offer, but also for the tensions and debates that arose during the process – including Anwar's own devastating emotional unraveling.

This created a safe space, in which all sorts of things could happen that would probably elude a more conventional documentary method. The protagonists could safely explore their deepest memories and feelings (as well as their blackest humor). I could safely challenge them about what they did, without fear of being arrested or beaten up. And they could challenge each other in ways that were otherwise unthinkable, given Sumatra's political landscape.

Anwar and his friends could direct their fellow gangsters to play victims, and even play the victims themselves, because the wounds are only make-up, the blood only red paint, applied only for a movie. Feelings far deeper than those that would come up in an interview would surface unexpectedly. One reason the emotional impact was so profound came from the fact that this production method required a lot of time – the filmmaking process came to define a significant period in the participants' lives. This meant that they went on a deeper journey into their memories and feelings than they would in a film consisting largely of testimony and simple demonstration.

Different scenes used different methods, but in all of them it was crucial that Anwar and his friends felt a sense of fundamental ownership over the fiction material. The crux of the method is to give performers the maximum amount of freedom to determine as many variables as possible in the production (storyline, casting, costumes, mise-en-scene improvisation on set). Whenever possible, I let them direct each other, and used my cameras to document their process of creation. My role was primarily that of provocateur, challenging them to remember the events they were performing more deeply, encouraging them to intervene and direct each other when they felt a performance was superficial, and asking questions between takes – both about what actually happened, but also about how they

felt at the time, and how they felt as they re-enacted it.

Most interestingly, Anwar and his friends discussed, often insightfully, how other people will view the film, both in Indonesia and internationally. For example, Anwar sometimes commented on how survivors might curse him, but that "luckily" the victims haven't the power to do anything in today's Indonesia.

Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer (b. 1974) Cinematography by Carlos Arango de Montis & Lars Skree; Film Editing by Niels Pagh Andersen, Janus Billeskov Jansen, Mariko Monpetit, Charlotte Munch Bengsten, Ariadna Fatjo-Vilas, Erik Andersson; Sound by Gunn Tove Gronsberg, Henrik Gugge Garnov, Elin Oyen Vister & Karsten Fundal

Build my gallows high: Joshua Oppenheimer on The Act of Killing

In The Act of Killing, the perpetrators of the massacres of millions of alleged communists in mid-1960s Indonesia re-enact their crimes – with extraordinary results.

Here Oppenheimer talks about outing genocide, and the miasmic horror that binds us. From July 2013.

Criminals at large rarely volunteer their crimes for the camera; similarly, perpetrators of political atrocity tend not to make the kind of song and dance about their misdeeds that might constitute evidence for the record. (Statues, salutations and the smell of fear are usually adequate to their needs.) It seems safe, then, to call Joshua Oppenheimer's The Act of Killing the world's first self-indicting genocide musical, featuring as it does a cast of smiling gangsters who recollect and re-enact – with increasingly outré cinematic licence – their roles in Indonesia's barely acknowledged anti-communist bloodbath of 1965-66, following General Suharto's coup, when leftists and ethnic Chinese were slaughtered by the million, with the arms and connivance of the West.

Still, these feats of historical illumination, political agitation and aesthetic innovation are but half of the film's accomplishments, which also dig deep into the ironies and ambiguities of human self-image. The film is an eye-opener for Anwar Congo, the film's silver-haired principal, who cooperated most intimately with Oppenheimer to revisit old killing scenes, re-rehearse his methods, faithfully render the movie's recreations and give wing to its expressive flourishes. (He's helped in much of these by his fat, cross-dressing sidekick Herman Koto, and to a lesser extent by his more sober blood comrade Adi Zulkadry, who takes his leave once he's digested what the film is likely to do.)

As he watches himself on playback (inviting his grandsons to come see him playing one of his torture victims), Anwar peers at himself critically: is his hair colour inaccurate? Is something else not right? Introspection comes reluctantly to such men, but in bringing us close to them, the film also asks us to let down our defences and recognise something of ourselves.

Nor does it spare its own medium, holding up a mirror to the movies themselves, and our use of them. In Marxist terms, cinema gave Anwar and his fellow cinephile gangsters both a base economic impetus for their violence (the Communist Party of Indonesia had supposedly

threatened quotas on the Hollywood movies which they touted), and a superstructural disposition: Anwar shows us how he used to dance his way across the street from the cinema, high on Elvis musicals, to the office where he did much of his killing.

And what else was it all for? Oppenheimer gives us passing glimpses of modern Indonesia's hardly exceptional culture of enduring gangsterism – dominated by men richer and nastier than Anwar; of fear, corruption and vacuous consumer capitalism.

Oppenheimer hails from America – land of guns, movies and 'freedom', which seems to have given him an early pass to his subjects – though he has since relocated via the UK to Denmark. He previously gained some acclaim for his 1996 'fictional documentary' The Entire History of the Louisiana Purchase, and with co-director Christine Cynn (who also co-directed The Act of Killing) came to North Sumatra at the turn of the century to make The Globalization Tapes (2003) in concert with unionised plantation workers.

The Act of Killing has taken him around the world, seemingly winning awards wherever he goes; I spoke to him by Skype from Warsaw, where he'd had an hour's sleep after flying in from Tel Aviv (and was due in Sydney a week later). He nonetheless managed to hold forth at length about the film's genesis and inspirations, his anonymous Indonesian co-authors, how Errol Morris and Werner Herzog embraced the film as executive producers and why he has two different edits of the film (a 115-minute standard and 159-minute director's cut) on release. What follows is a light edit of that extended conversation.

Nick Bradshaw: The film makes horribly clear that history is written by the winners – it reminded me of that counter-factual strain of fiction in which we live under the dominion of, say, the Nazis. And then you remember that you don't always have to reach for fiction for examples of nightmarish regimes, though perhaps it's easier. But there are a number of countries in which the killers have won, and here, remarkably, is a documentary from one.

Joshua Oppenheimer: And we in the West depend for our everyday lives on exactly those regimes to make everything we buy cheap, by using a terrifying history to intimidate the people who make it so that the human cost of its production is not included in the price tag. So on the one hand it seems like an alternative reality; on the other hand it's an integral part of our reality – the underbelly of it.

And at the same time we tell ourselves stories about how the Nazis were defeated and the killers got their comeuppance – which I think primarily serve as escape from the reality that behind everything we consume there's been mass political violence, and the perpetrators have won and have built a regime of terror on the basis of that victory, [with] men like Anwar and his friends keeping people afraid.

And for viewers who have the courage to identify even a tiny bit with Anwar at some point during the movie, the cold dichotomy between good guy and bad guy inevitably collapses, and the film becomes a dark mirror held up to all of us, not just the Indonesian regime. We see ourselves in the film, and how it's not just Anwar who is damaged by what he's done, but that we are also damaged by the way that we are perpetrators.

It's what philosophers call alienation. This may sound abstract, but what the film tries to do is a kind of phenomenology of alienation: what is the experience of alienation? And I think that's where the film is most devastating for viewers who aren't coming at it as a big political documentary, but just as ordinary viewers.

What were your feelings working with Anwar and his friends through all those years? Did you see them as evil? Insane? Products of their situation? Not so different from us? How close or separate did you keep them?

My feelings evolved. I began this project working closely with survivors, trying to film memories of the horrors of 1965 and to document the regime of fear and violence built on the celebration of killing. But every time the survivors and I tried to film together we would be arrested and stopped.

Finally the human rights community, and the survivors themselves, said, "Film the killers: they will talk, and not just talk, they'll boast. And the audience, seeing people who killed hundreds, thousands of people, and boasting about it, will see at once why we're so afraid, and taste a little bit the nature of this regime."

And [from then on] I felt I was entrusted with a work of historical and moral importance, exposing a regime of impunity through its celebration of killing. At that point I think I saw [killers like Anwar] as the people who killed my friends' relatives and were keeping my friends afraid. But inevitably I became close to them. It was a very intimate journey: I think to make a good film with anybody you have to get very close, be willing to be intimate. I went looking for embodiments of pure evil, but found ordinary people.

And in order to understand how these ordinary people live with what they've done – how they want to be seen by the world, but also how they see themselves – it became hateful and haunting and difficult in a whole other way. You can't go into a situation where a million people have been killed and people are celebrating it, and come out clean – unless you lie about it, or about your position. If you want to look at the most important questions – what is the nature of this regime? How do we do this to each other? Okay, these men are boasting about what they've done: why and to what end? And what are the effects on the whole society, first and foremost, and on them personally? – you can't remain pure and clean, because it's a terrible situation you've waded

into and you're getting very close to it.

There's a section in the longer version of the film which shows the evolution of how Anwar comes to play the victim. It was a truly harrowing passage: a week of filming these film noir re-enactments which got more and more brutal. He would oscillate between remorse and self-pity, and the self-pity would make him sadistic and then he'd feel more remorse, and it would cycle downwards.

Shooting that was just awful: it was terrifying, it felt filthy, and I had nightmares and couldn't sleep because I was afraid of the nightmares. I'd sleep two hours, not at all the next day, then crash and sleep ten or 12 hours, and then it would start again. It went on for six months like that, really horrible insomnia. It was hard.

I have an Indonesian co-director who gave eight years of his life to make this film, knowing he could never put his name to it. During the shoot he was my assistant director, my production manager, my second cameraman, my main creative sounding board when we hit a dead end. He lightened the journey; I think we both had nightmares but we supported each other a great deal.

Did Anwar and friends understand you were making a film above and beyond what they were directing with you?

Absolutely: they were never making any other film, and they knew that from the beginning. I think that's something that viewers sometimes forget, particularly watching the shorter version of the film. Because I think they're so into what they're doing that we assume they must be making their own separate work, or think they are. But they're not.

Anwar was the 41st perpetrator I filmed, and the first 40 were equally open and boastful. I started in a village of survivors, and worked my way up a chain of command until I met people well above Anwar. He was along the way.

And the people I filmed all, within minutes, volunteered not just to tell me what they'd done but to take me to the places where they killed, show me how they did it and bring along machetes to use as props, friends to play their victims. At the start I was primarily trying to understand what happened in 1965; swiftly I started to ask myself 'What is going on now?", that these men thought it was appropriate to dramatise what they'd done, even in rudimentary re-enactments, which is how it began.

Anwar, the very first scene I shot with him is where he goes up to the roof and dances the cha-cha-cha at the beginning of the film. By the time I met him I was proposing the following to the people I met: I would say, "Look, you've been involved in one of the biggest mass killings in human history, your whole society is based on it, your lives are totally shaped by it, and I want to understand what it means to you and what it means to your society. You evidently want to show me what you've done and tell me about it: show me, in whatever way you wish; I will film it, and I will also film the process of your planning the re-enactments, choosing who to bring, what to show and what not to show.

"I will combine this sort of making-of material with the re-enactments themselves, and so create maybe a new form of documentary" – I did not yet know it would be so surreal, that the dramatisations would become stylised in the way they ultimately did. But a new form of documentary that combines re-enactment with its preparation "as a way of showing what these events mean to you and your society, a kind of documentary of the imagination rather than a documentary of everyday life."

And I said "I don't know if this will work, but let's try." And indeed I didn't know. But I felt it was important. And I guess I thought it was the right way to address the situation that I was encountering. And so they were told from the outset that there's no other film, and indeed the opening text of the film says that, it says in response to their openness we asked them to create scenes – scenes – about the killings, in whatever ways they wished.

And that's what they're doing. There was no deception or luring involved, if you see what I mean. The whole method was a response to their openness, an attempt to understand why are they so open, and what is achieved for them through this openness? What are they doing by boasting? There was no inveigling them to tell me what they've done, pretending to have a different agenda than what I had. I was simply able to ask "What do you do for a living?", and within five minutes I'd get these horrible stories of cutting people's heads off with a knife. And not just from one killer but from every killer I met.

How much exposure did they imagine or contemplate the film getting?

None of us imagined the film getting the exposure it's having. Adi, the other killer, says very openly in the film, this film: if we succeed, is going to totally turn the story around 180 degrees. They're wrestling with those questions throughout the film. Adi warned Anwar about this many times before he quits the film – you only see it once because it would have been repetitive, but in fact he warned him multiple times.

And Anwar continued – I think because his fundamental goal is not to make himself look good. I think Anwar is trying to somehow run away from his pain, to use the filmmaking process much as he used Elvis Presley movies at the time of the killing to distance himself from the act of killing. He would watch an Elvis movie, feel like Elvis, dance his way across the road and kill happily, and in that way dissociate himself somehow from what he was doing.

I think in the same sense he hopes – as he says in the longer version of the film – if he can make a beautiful family movie about mass killing then he can somehow put it right and make it okay for himself. He's drawn to the pain, to the most horrifying memories and to re-enacting them, because somehow he's trying to replace the miasmic, shapeless,

unspeakable horror that visits him in his nightmares with these contained, concrete scenes. It's like he's trying to build up a cinematic-psychic scar tissue over his wound.

And he doesn't really care how it makes him look; in fact he's drawn to the pain of it, because that's the thing he's trying to deny. And in that sense the film is not a psychodrama; it's not leading him towards redemption. I'm trying to document their dramatisations as instances of the celebration of genocide as a way of exposing a regime of impunity on behalf of survivors. He's trying to run away from what he's done.

There's a curious tension; these two projects are not in opposition, there's a peculiar synergy between them, but they're in tension at the same time, and I think that's the motor of the film. Anwar is trying to run away from what he's done, only at the end to realise no matter how much storytelling he's done he'll never be free to shake off the damage that he's done to others and to himself. He'll never be able to replace the horror with the fiction, never bridge the gap between his fictional self and the reality of what he's done.

And I think what's causing that dry heave in the end is the growing terror: he's choking on the terror that comes when you look at the abyss between yourself and your image of yourself. And I think that's the horrible conclusion of the film… maybe it's terrible or not terrible to you, but when we face our own mortality we do the same thing: there's this yawning gap between what we tell ourselves about our lives and the reality that we're headed in one way.

And in that last scene, his realisation or remorse is almost involuntary: his body catches up with the truth before his mind will.

There's one line that's not in the short version. He stands on the roof, and in both versions says, "This is where we captured, tortured and killed people. I know what I did was wrong, but I had to do it. And then he chokes. And then there's a cut in the shorter version, because the scene becomes too long without the cut for the rhythm, because it has a different rhythm.

But in the longer version we have a rhythm where the scene can be all in one take, there's no cut. And he pulls himself together and says "Why did I have to do it? My conscience told me they had to be killed." So he's still articulating the same rhetoric, even in a simple form, that he was at the very beginning of the film; he's not consciously able to change; it's just that the filmmaking has provided a safe space for his feeling to come out.

It was a terrible moment to film, because when he starts choking the second time, I wanted to say this stupid thing that Americans say, which is "It's okay." You know, put my hand on him and say "It's okay." Of course when you're filming such a scene, before you do that you're aware of the impulse to do it.

And it was an awful moment; I'll never forget this feeling of, "Oh no, of course, he's choking now because it's not okay. And there's nothing I can say that will make it

okay, it's simply not okay. He's choking on the realisation, even if it's unconscious, that he's destroyed. It's like he's trying to vomit up the ghosts that haunt him, only to discover that he is the ghost. He is his past, and nothing will come up, there's nothing to come up; he'll never escape himself.

There's also a final shot in the longer version which is different. In the shorter version he walks out; in the long one he just stands on the landing, which is a very telling moment. Before he left he just went halfway down to a landing and stood there, and it was like this unconscious acknowledgement that he will never leave this place. You'd think you'd want to get the hell out of there, but he's in a kind of purgatory.

It's something Werner Herzog said when he saw the film: "You know, these men have escaped justice but they've not escaped punishment." I think it's true. I'd rather be dead than live as either Adi or Anwar. And I'm afraid of death.

And now the film is wrapped? Has he stuck this up in his attic, or watched it?

Haman and Anwar have watched it. The political leaders in the film who have cameos, smaller roles, have not seen it. I know they're powerful enough to act against the distribution of the film in Indonesia, so I've not shown it to them and I assume they'll feel betrayed and hope they do.

I didn't say much to them. They participated in the film because Anwar was making it with me; I didn't have any access to them independently of Anwar. But I think they must hate the film and if they don't there's something wrong with it. I'll understand if they do.

Adi hasn't seen the film because he's quite powerful and he understands exactly what the film will do. While he's in the film he leaves it knowing what it will do, fighting with me about that in the car. You know, he says "this film will change the way we appear 180 degrees"... actually he says 360 degrees, but we'll take that as an error on his part.

Herman saw the film and loved it. I think Herman along the way discovers acting and an actor's loyalty to the truth – the poetic truth, if not the moral truth; maybe both. And he plays an important role in the film guiding Anwar back to the truth when Anwar sort of gets cold feet and starts to retreat into fantasy.

Anwar saw the film – I'll never forget it; it was a really painful, tough day. While I was finishing the editing I was telling him "It's getting done, do you want to see it? Can I show it to you? I'll come to screen it to you." And he would say this thing, in Indonesian, "maybe later", which was a way of saying "No." And I think it was because he understood exactly how painful the film would be.

Then I said "Look, it's going to come out, Anwar. If you don't want to see it, at least let me tell you what's in it and make sure you really understand what's coming, so if a paramilitary group is angry with you I can somehow know about it, and if we need to help you so you're not scapegoated by them for making the film", because he shouldn't be, "then we can." So I had this series of conversations around the time of Toronto and Telluride [the film's festival premieres], explaining to Anwar what the film is.

Then when it came out in Toronto it became very big news, and he asked to see the film because he was suddenly at the centre of a big story. But then it was no longer safe for me to go to Indonesia, and we didn't think he'd necessarily be able to travel abroad, although that's proved incorrect: he still goes on golfing holidays with Anith, the guy with the very limited crystal.

So we took him to a place where there was good internet access and I could be with him the whole time on Skype, with a good resolution. And he watched the film, and sat in silence for a long time afterwards.

You can't love this film if you're a person in it; if it's about you. But he was very moved, he was touched, he said "This film shows what it's like to be me; I knew this was the film you were making. And I will be loyal to the film." Those were his words. First he cried, left the room, pulled himself together and came back and said that.

And he has been loyal to the film. And he and I have been in touch pretty regularly ever seen, every couple of weeks, and it was this amazing moment when we sat in silence for a long time, kind of gazing. I felt like I was sitting next to him on this fishing platform, staring out into the darkness [a scene in the film]. It's his darkness but really all of our darkness.

What precedents did you have in mind for the film? I can think of a couple of Cambodian documentaries that involve catching up with killers and recreating their acts…

I'm a big admirer of S21 and I really also like Rithy Panh's work in general. Normally when we hear from perpetrators they either deny what they've done or they apologise for it. And that's because by the time you address them as perpetrators, as opposed to serving military officers or prominent politicians, they've been removed from power and their acts have been declared criminal, so they deny or they apologise.

I think this film is fundamentally different from either S21 or Enemies of the People. Here, because the killers have won and remained in power, the whole film is an attempt to understand the imagination of a regime of impunity – and what happens to our humanity when we build our normality on terror and lies, and we use storytelling to deny the most awful parts of our reality, not to see it for what it is.

So I would say that while S21 was a milestone film for me, it was more by way of contrast.

I've written about S21 and The Act of Killing – it wasn't called that then, it was called Free Men: My Work with Perpetrators – in order to contrast them in a PhD I did as a way of keeping my UK visa for as long as I could, before I became a citizen of the UK. So I've thought a lot about that film, but think it's fundamentally different.

I would look to Jean Rouch as a precedent for me, [particularly] his films like Moi, un noir, Jaguar, Petit à petit, where he understood that every time you film anybody you're creating a reality with that person.

I think it's a great pity in the Anglophone world that we conflate cinéma vérité and Direct Cinema; they're in fact ontological opposites. In Direct Cinema we create a fictional reality with characters and pretend we're not that.

If I film a little boy going to school, the big event in the boy's day is being filmed, and we pretend that it's school. And we tell stories about the film, and I don't think this is a problem, but like any fiction it requires a certain suspension of disbelief. And we tell stories about the work in order to encourage that suspension of disbelief – namely, that the filmmaker's a fly on the wall, that the characters are totally used to the camera, which is almost always a fiction, a story told so the audience can suspend disbelief and appreciate it for the way a film needs to be appreciated in order for it to have meaning.

I think in cinéma vérité, by contrast, it was all about giving people the space to perform on camera, to imagine, to stage themselves on camera as a way of documenting how they see themselves and make sense of their world. In that sense I think cinéma vérité is trying to do something fundamentally more profound than Direct Cinema. I think Direct Cinema's trying to be insightful by looking at reality in a very close way, while in fact much more is staged than we like to think. In cinéma vérité it's about trying to make something invisible visible – the role of fantasy and imagination in everyday life.

So I would say precedents for me have been Rouch's work, but also Kidlat Tahimik's Perfumed Nightmare, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Mysterious Object at Noon and, this a weird example, but Werner Herzog's Even Dwarves Started Small, where improvisation is the delirium of that movie. Those are my true inspirations.

People sometimes say this isn't a true documentary, particularly when they see the longer version, because the editing is a little slower and you get immersed in the evolving nightmare. The surrealism that you have in both versions is, in the shorter version, a bit more the surrealism of their project and the characters' strangeness, whereas in the longer version it takes over the form of the movie.

I would say the film might not be a documentary in a conventional sense, but it's a non-fictional film. It's inspiring to develop a method that gives us a deep insight into the most important and pressing questions in this situation, and I think that's the responsibility of us as filmmakers: to identify the most urgent and pressing questions in the situation and go however far we need to go to dig into those questions.

And I think when you have questions that are as big and important as this, it demands a lot of time, maybe years, a lot of commitment. So this has taken me seven and a half years to make. And that's why you also have to be very careful to make what films you choose to make, if you're going to go as far as you really need to go to address what's most important.

Did you know you would be in for anything like such a long haul?

I didn't. I remember in 2007 there was a shoot which kept me awake at night in panic over how much we were shooting – 650 hours of material. And it was one of only five shoots.

We talked – is there a way of shooting less? There wasn't. And by then we'd been shooting for a couple of years, so my cinematographer and I would sit there and I would talk with my anonymous co-director: how can we do this more economically? Because this is going to kill us.

It was hard to keep my confidence over all those years. When I started this Indonesians were barely using mobile phones; by the end everybody was on iPhones and BlackBerries, using Facebook and Twitter, and I thought "Indonesia's moving on, why aren't I?" And I thought nobody would care about this. Who cares about the 1965-66 massacres? My insecurity blinded me to the fact that of course time is what's made it possible for people to really address this. It's not just that the film is strong, but a younger generation of Indonesian is trying to make a life; they see this film and they don't want to end up like Anwar or Adi.

The editors of Temple magazine – Indonesia's biggest news magazine – saw the film at a closed screening in Jakarta last year. They were so upset and moved they said "We can't stay silent or lie about this [genocide] any more, we have to be honest, say it happened and really start investigating." And they sent 60 journalists all around the country, to remote regions and places where they didn't even know the killings had taken places, to gather their own evidence that would justify the breaking of their silence.

Everywhere they went there were perpetrators, gangsters the army had used to carry out killings and rewarded them with power – and they were still in power and boastful, much like Anwar and his friends. And all over they found The Act of Killing was not just some unique thing that I've done, and not specific to North Sumatra, but applies to the whole country.

And sickened by this, they redacted down hundreds of pages of testimony to 75 pages, and there's another 25 pages of pictures, and maybe 25 pages of coverage of The Act of Killing – reviews, essays, so forth. And they published this special double edition on 1 October, headlined "Stories from 1965's executioners", and that set the whole tone for the Indonesian media. And now the country's leading historians, filmmakers, artists, writers, educators, intellectuals, journalists and human-rights activists are saying "We have to deal with this." So… how did I come onto this? This is the problem with getting one hour of sleep…

It was so thrilling when this started happening, and people really cared. And it came to Indonesia like the little kid in the Emperor's New Clothes, saying "Look, the king is naked," and everybody knew it, but had been too afraid to say it.

But here it was shown so powerfully – and by the killers themselves, by the men who should be enjoying the fruits of their victory but instead are broken, destroyed by what they've done or utterly hollow and empty, morally and culturally. I think it's a devastating image in this dark mirror, and that has meant people really care and take steps, at least in their own lives, as members of Indonesian civil society, not to travel the same path as the men in the film.

I was going to ask you what you hope the film will accomplish, but that's a pretty good answer already…

One thing I can say very concretely: I hope the film will ultimately help lead to a presidential apology, to a truth commission, then reconciliation – because you can't have reconciliation without truth first. A kind of commission that also delivers a verdict on the key architects on the killing.

That could include someone like the newspaper publisher in the film (Ibrahim Sinik), who's the top anti-communist militia in north Sumatra, which is a very big region. But it maybe wouldn't include the executioners, like Anwar and Adi, of whom there must be 10,000 across Indonesia. Because if you were to indict 10,000 killers you could have a civil war.

And I think there needs to be a presidential apology, a truth commission, then a reconciliation process, then some kind of judicial process that returns what happened to the realm of the forbidden. There needs to be a thorough rewriting of the nation's history, its history curriculum in the schools. They need to close all the museums and monuments that celebrate the genocide, and turn those into exhibits in a much larger network of Indonesian holocaust museums.

Then you start having some really difficult

goals. You need to have a redistribution of the nation's wealth from men who get it illegally and from terror, like [Haji] Anif, who's stealing from their victims, to the millions of families who were subject to political apartheid and systematically impoverished over the decades. Because the relatives of the victims were discriminated against: they weren't allowed access to the same schools, jobs and so forth. They were extorted in every encounter with officialdom: they had their land taken.

And also you need a movement against corruption in politics. That's difficult because Indonesia's politicians are corrupt, and that's why they go into politics.

You need to have a movement against the use of gangsters by business, by corporations and politicians. That's difficult because thugs are a major part of their arsenal. It's how they achieve and maintain their power and wealth.

So there are some very difficult long-term goals that I hope the film, in its reflection on contemporary Indonesia, not just the past – how the past is alive in the present, how it is misused in the present – will help achieve. At least, I hope that the discussions which could lead to those movements could begin to happen partly in reaction to the film.

Some of these goals are so far-reaching that they bring us back to questions about the international order and the West, not to mention other injustices and genocides for which there's been no restitution.

Yeah, the UK is built on the British empire, right? The United States is built on the holocaust of slavery and then more than a hundred years of segregation, and continued economic segregation and imperialism abroad.

When people ask, "What can the West do about this?", which is a question I often get in Q&As, I have to say, look, we first must understand that the genocide, and military dictatorship which followed, the rule of gangsters that Western corporations also used to break strikes and clear land, that is the West's vision for Indonesia. The West continues to support that vision.

People also ask me this other question: when you were filming, didn't you feel like you wanted to escape, like you'd just had enough and wanted to go home? And I quickly understood that there was no escape: like I said, this is an integral part of our reality. When you go home to England, or Copenhagen, where I now live, you're not escaping anything. Denmark is one of the most equal and fair societies in the world and yet we still depend on men like Anwar and his friends to terrorise everybody who makes everything that we buy. We still depend on the reality that we see in The Act of Killing, even in relatively just and humane Scandinavia.

Also, one anecdote. The first killer I met who offered to show me how he killed in the place where he did it, he took me to a riverside with

a fellow death-squad member and showed me how every night he received busloads of victims from the army, took them down to the river and one by one cut off their heads.

And after showing me how he went about it he took out a little stills camera from his pocket and asked my sound recordist to snap pictures of him and the other death squad member, and indeed me, posing for his scrapbook. I absented myself from the scene as quickly as I could, but he had us take pictures with the river flowing behind us, and he was giving the thumbs-up and V-for-victory signs in this spot where he'd helped kill 10,500 people.

That was in February 2004, and I got home to England, very much feeling relieved to be out of there – it was a horrible thing to film, the first time I'd filmed anything like it. I started going through my footage, and in April 2004 photographs appear in the world's media of American soldiers in Iraq giving the thumbs-up, V-for-victory signs while torturing people. And I made this film contemporaneously with this evolving nightmare, where my own country was not just practicing and condoning torture but celebrating it across much of the political spectrum, saying torture's too good for these people, with army interrogators at Guantanamo getting methods of torture by watching Jack Bauer, just as Anwar was getting methods of torture watching gangster movies. This is really about all of us, and it's not just about the impunity and the banality of evil; it's also about the insistent fascination of evil, in which we also all implicated.

And that's not to say that violent movies cause violent behaviour. If you look at the movie that Anwar cites in the film as using to help him kill, it's an Elvis Presley musical. He says he'd watch it, dance his way across the street and kill happily. So maybe the real problem – because Elvis Presley musicals are not violent, they're just a little stupid – is escapist entertainment and storytelling, our use of stories to escape from the brutal reality of our lives, or the reality of our lives, even when it's not so brutal.

What did Errol Morris and Werner Herzog tell you when they became executive producers?

They came on board at different stages. Errol Morris saw clips, roughly edited scenes that we'd made to show people [early on]. I went to his office to go over the chapter in the book [Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence, co-edited by Joram Ten Brink and Oppenheimer], but I was hoping he'd be interested and look at the material, and he said "sure", because he's very nice, generous guy.

He watched it and I think he said he'd never seen anything like it, and [other] things maybe a bit more muted than what he said on record when he saw the final film. I don't remember

his exact words, but I remember feeling it was an amazing moment having him sit there watch it: I remember rising up above and seeing myself there with Errol watching my material and thinking "Oh my gosh, this is so exciting."

Werner saw the film once the long version, the director's cut was done. He wrote me an email that said what he has said on the posters – it's too embarrassing for me to repeat, but it said a lot. That was in the first email he wrote, and it was an amazing moment to receive such an amazing email. I mentioned earlier his Even Dwarves Started Small, but Stroszek, even more… those are two of my very favourite films in the world. So it was a very thrilling moment.

He's been such an advocate for the film since it's been completed, too. And of course he said "You can't cut it down. What are you doing cutting such a film down?" And I said "We actually promised a 90-minute version for broadcasters. And I think there's a chance if the film gets theatrical distribution that a lot of distributors will take the 90-minute version." And he said "Okay, then let me look at rough cuts, just so you have my feedback, because you must be so blind after cutting such a film."

So he watched rough cuts, and we found that distributors were indeed going to take a 90-minute version, because to take such a gamble, even with Werner's endorsement, on a two-hour-40-minute film about a genocide that no one's ever heard of – a film that's very dark and may or may not succeed in festivals – was unlikely.

But after seeing the 90 minutes – which works; I think it's a strong version of the film – I felt we should at least lengthen it to the length it could bear. The cutting-down process was relatively quick. It took three years to make the director's cut, three months to bring it down to 90 minutes, and three weeks to expand it to two hours.

Now of course [with two different versions of the film about] the problem will be people getting used to a dramaturgy in which not much time has elapsed. People will be used to one dramaturgy, one structure, and expect it to end and it's not ending yet, and people who've seen the long version will think really important things are missing in the shorter version.

It depends. I guess most people who have seen both like the longer version better. At least, that's what they tell me. But as the maker, I would say it's my [choice]. Otherwise it wouldn't have existed and it would have been set aside as another rough cut.

Writings from Actor's Studio Screenings

In the lead-up to the 2024 American election cycle, Film Society of Bhubaneswar organised a series of film screenings on the history and culture of American society for its young members. The screenings were primarily documentaries that gaze at the American socio-economic fabric to assess the reach of American hegemony. These films featured the voices of ***Errol Morris, Michael Moore, Oliver Stone, Alison Klayman*** *and others – screenings were spread over 12 weeks (Sundays) and prolonged discussions. Each film helped us examine a cornerstone of American life and reflect on its dominant presence in our own lived experience.*

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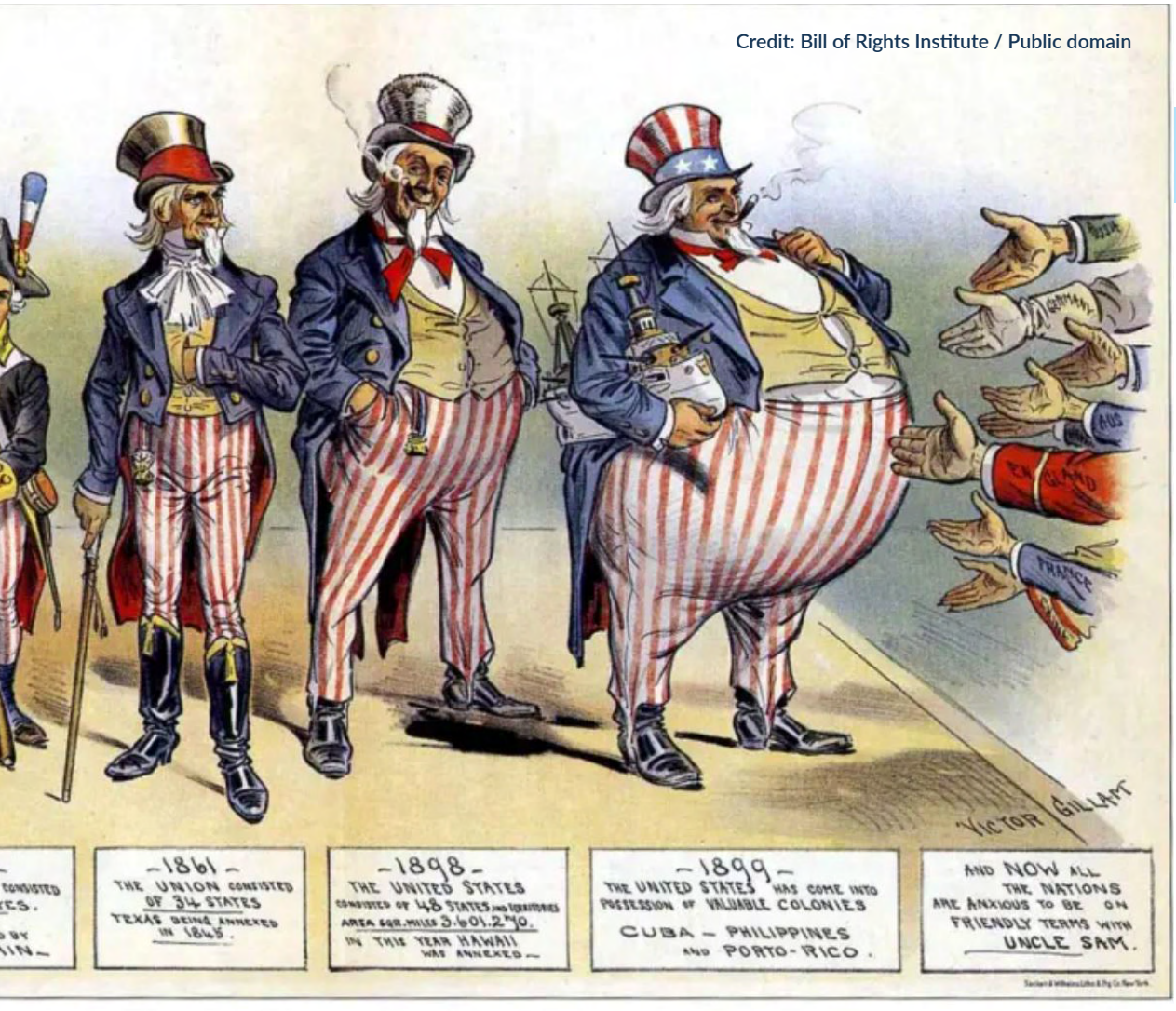
Posters for Actor's Studio Screenings:
Sachit Patnaik

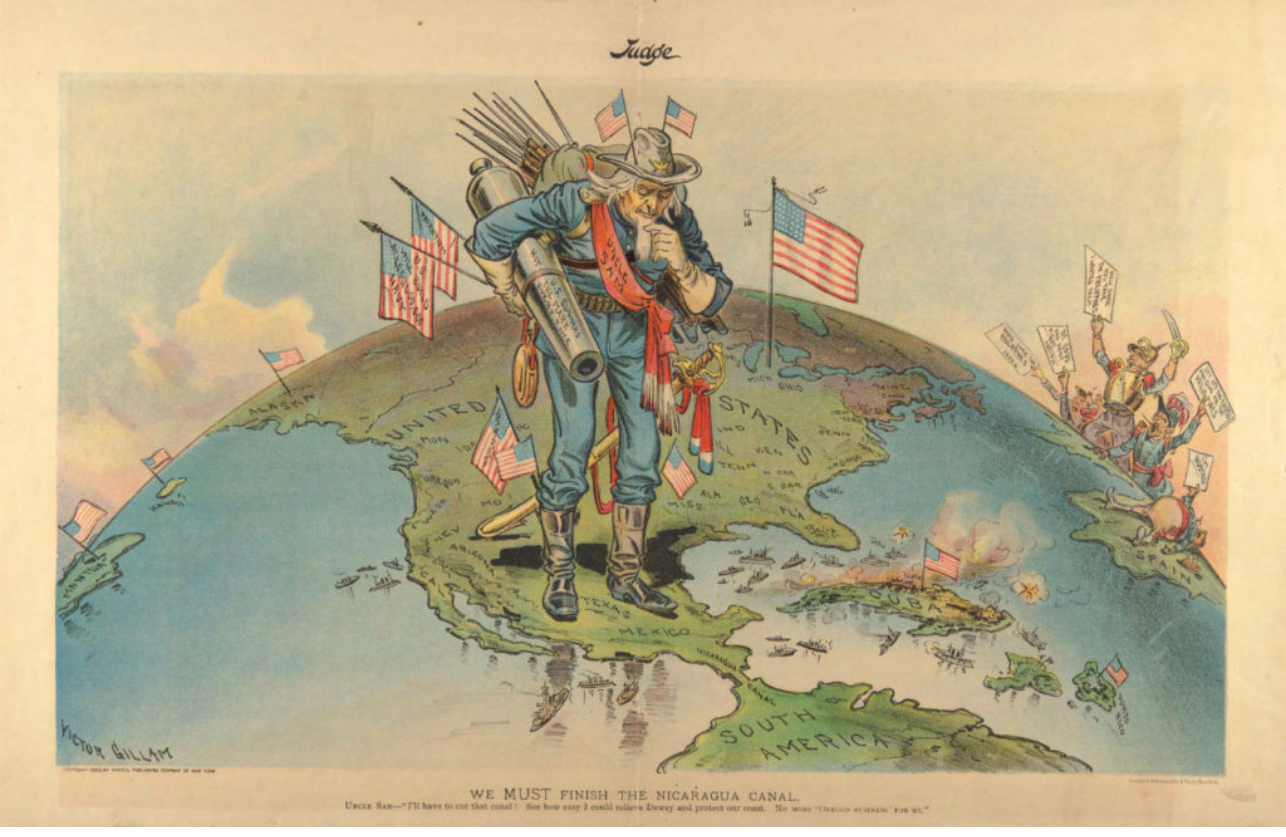
Credit: Bill of Rights Institute / Public domain



"A LESSON FOR ANTI-EXPANSIONISTS."

owing how Uncle Sam has been an expansionist first, last, and all the time."

Judge, Arkell Publishing Company, New York, 1899 [artist: Victor Gillam]



Credit: Bill of Rights Institute / Public domain

American Society & Hegemonic Power

We began with *The End of Poverty* (Philippe Diaz, 2008), which takes us back to 1492 to ground the U.S. economic order in its imperialist origins. By linking conquest, colonialism and slavery to modern poverty, the film reminds us that wealth is always political — first through land and empire, later through markets and capital. This history feels topical, when the richest people in the U.S. (and by extension the world) are not only shaping markets but installing their own kind into political office (remember Elon Musk buying Twitter for 44 billion dollars to help install Trump as the US President). The billionaire class has become both sovereign and subject, ruling as oligarchs while presenting themselves as

populist saviours. Closer home, we see how India's '*Billionaire Raj*' may be more unequal than the British Raj, as wealth concentration grows hand in hand with authoritarian politics, evident in *Thomas Piketty's* research on inequality.

From there, *Merchants of Doubt* (Robert Kenner, 2014) and *Starsuckers* (Chris Atkins, 2009) brought into focus the industries of persuasion that sustain neoliberal power. These films show how advertising, public relations, and celebrity culture transform politics into spectacle. Citizenship dissolves into consumerism, while public opinion is engineered not by deliberation but by distraction. The convergence of corporate media and political theatre is now impossible to miss: leaders emerge less as representatives and more as brands, avatars through which neoliberal capital speaks. This is why political charisma is increasingly indistinguishable from celebrityhood, and why campaigns around the world resemble product launches.

Layering this further with *The Corporation* (Joel Bakan & Harold Crooks, 2003), we encounter the central institution of modern life. By granting corporations the legal rights of 'persons' without the responsibilities of citizens, modern capitalism has birthed an entity that dominates every sphere: healthcare reduced to profit margins, education commodified and the environment plundered. The documentary lays bare what we now see playing out daily: the Oligarchs of the 21st century preside over a system where populism and fascism function not as contradictions but as complements — one distracting, the other disciplining, both preserving capital's rule – using corporation as an entity to organise and control.

In *American Dharma* (2018), *Errol Morris* dissects the project of Steve Bannon, a political strategist, who weaponised cinema itself to craft narratives of resentment, paranoia, and messianic nationalism. Here, the Right's objective becomes clear: to manufacture an "enemy within," to cultivate conspiracy as a form of common sense, and to channel public misery into racialised violence. *Errol Morris* demonstrates how Bannon and his network use mass and social media tools to manufacture a worldview based on fear and hate. This culture of fear has travelled far beyond America. *Alison Klayman's The Brink* (2019) follows Bannon in his daily life, meetings, and his briefing with global leaders - *Nigel Farage*, *Georgia Meloni*, *Viktor Orban* and other luminaries of the far right spectrum across the world. The eerie moment in the film is when Bannon remarks why muslims own so many businesses in London – remarking about banks running on the principles of Islamic finance. Bannon as a phenomenon is examined and the intricacies of the American right wing ecosystem and its linkages to the reactionary international is brought to the fore.

In India too, the 'Other' is constantly invoked, every year the harshness has increased post 2014 whether in campaigns against minorities or in the rewriting of history

books, even as structural crises of debt, unemployment and hunger deepen.

Other films — *Michael Moore's Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), *Charles Ferguson's Inside Job* (2010), and *Robert Reich's Inequality for All* (Jacob Kornbluth, 2013) — show the American Dream collapsing under the weight of financial crises, corporate corruption, and historic inequality. They remind us that when bubbles burst, when recessions hit, it is always ordinary people who are left to pay. The echoes in India are unmistakable. The 2024 election season, electoral bond revelations showed mining giants like Vedanta and billionaires like A***i & A****i underwriting the ruling party's dominance. The nexus between capital and politics is no longer hidden; it is flaunted. What is sold as an entrepreneurial free market is, in reality, an incentive structure for greed, rewarding monopolies while dismantling welfare states and democracy alike.

These lessons are not abstract. In Odisha, Adivasi families excluded from food security schemes continue to battle hunger (close to 80% of our population is dependent on food aid); some have resorted to eating poisonous mango kernels last year and losing their lives. Unemployment and distress migration persist in the face of glossy narratives of development. Farmers and workers, recognising their shared dispossession, mobilise together against a state that increasingly serves corporations rather than citizens. The neoliberal script of endless growth has only deepened our vulnerability to cyclones, famines, and displacement, while our political parties — regardless of colour — protect the billionaire class as guardians of 'progress'.

Globally, the patterns repeat. Reports speak of Elon Musk and Nigel Farage plotting new alliances in Britain, of Trump preparing his second act with McCarthyite zeal, of tech billionaires strutting into the corridors of power from Silicon Valley to Brasília. Commentators describe this as a 'new era', but the films we watched remind us that the script is an old one: wealth seeks power, power manufactures spectacle, and spectacle justifies inequality. What changes is only the mask.

The documentaries viewed and discussed in this series sharpen our sight. They help us connect dots between the streets of Wall Street and the paddy fields of Odisha, between the disinformation campaigns of American elections and the hunger of Adivasi villages. They reveal that neoliberalism is not just a global order but an intimate one: present in our ration shops, our universities, our debt traps, and our silences. And they leave us with a pressing question: if citizenship is reduced to spectatorship, how long before the moment passes us by?

This viewing also becomes a collective meditation on how Odisha's position within India mirrors India's position within the global economy—marginal, extractable, dispensable, yet constantly being told that it can be more if it just integrates better, reforms faster, competes harder. And here too, we find the

cultural scaffolding of the empire: the illusion of democracy in an atmosphere of spectacle, the hollowing of institutions, the constant framing of dissent as chaos. Watching these films from this landscape made it impossible to treat them as warnings for elsewhere. They are a grammar we already speak, often without realizing it. They map how consent is manufactured, not just through state repression but through images, aspirations, and everyday forms of forgetting.

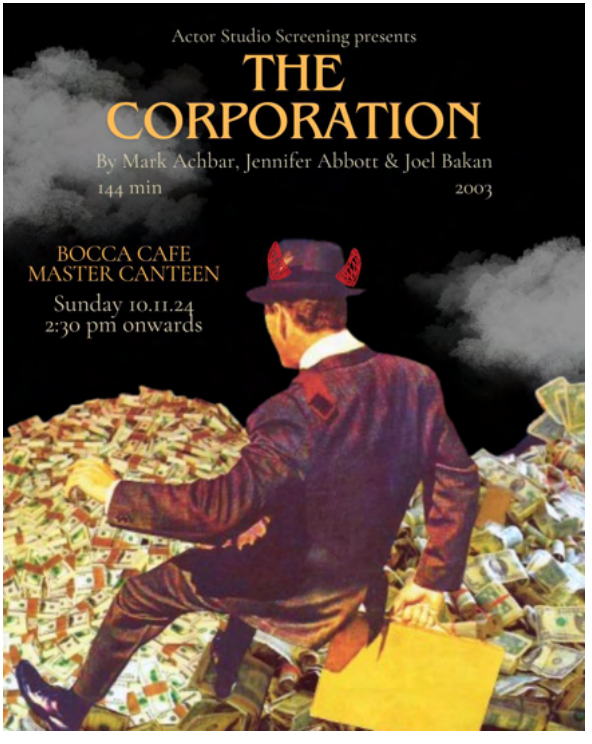
In a time where cynicism is easy and forgetting is encouraged, this act of collective watching, remembering, and naming felt quietly liberating. It allowed us to not only trace the routes of power, but to locate ourselves within them—not as passive observers, but as those who must imagine, and fight, for another world.

Akanshya Mahapatra

Should the Corporation show *Kaagaz*?

Dir. by- Mark Achbar & Jennifer Abbott

2003| 165 mins



The Corporation emerged as a legal 'person' in the mid-1800s. With a 'personality' driven solely by self-interest, the corporation rose to prominence throughout the course of the following century. The Corporation is a 165-min long documentary based on *Joel Bakan's book, The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* that explores the nature and the exponential rise of corporations in the modern world and delivers a critique of corporate behaviour through a psychological lens, categorizing the corporation as a psychopathic entity. The film includes interviews with 40 prominent executives and critics of the corporate world – including *Noam Chomsky, Milton Friedman, Naomi Klein, Michael Moore, Howard Zinn, and Vandana Shiva*. Using case studies ranging from *Union Carbide's 1984 Bhopal disaster* [1] to Monsanto's environmental controversies, the film meticulously documents how corporations have inflicted harm, exploited workers, and degraded the environment.

The interesting thing about the film is the way it is structured. A corporation was deemed an independent legal 'person'. The film plays with this narrative and brings in a satirical turn. The corporation is put on the psychiatrist's couch in the film and is asked *"What kind of person are you?"* A checklist that uses the *World Health Organization's* diagnostic criteria as well as the standard diagnostic tool used by psychiatrists is used to evaluate the 'personality' of the corporate 'person'. The corporation's operating principles make it an anti-social 'personality': corporations display traits such as a lack of

empathy, deceit and a disregard for the well-being of others. Driven by a legal mandate to maximize shareholder profits, corporations behave in ways that would be deemed morally reprehensible and broadly psychopathic if performed by an individual.

The filmmakers gather perspectives from over 40 individuals. *Milton Friedman's* unapologetic defence of profit maximization as a corporation's sole responsibility provides a stark contrast to the critiques of activists like *Vandana Shiva*, who highlights the devastating effects of globalization on small farmers.

Meanwhile, figures like *Ray Anderson* (former CEO of Interface Inc.) offer an extenuating perspective, sharing how he transformed his company into an environmentally sustainable enterprise after a personal moral awakening. We hear *Sam Gibara* (Former CEO and Chairman of Goodyear Tire) say,

"If you really had a free hand, if you really did what you wanted to do that suited your personal thoughts and your personal priorities, you'd act differently."

This diversity of voices lends the film credibility and nuance, allowing viewers to hear directly from those who defend corporate practices and those who challenge them.

The film also examines the privatization of public resources- the case of *Bechtel's* control of Bolivia's water supply which led to mass protests and public outrage [2]. The mass protest is covered in *Paul Laverty's* written & *Iciar Bollain* directed film *Even the Rain (2010)* screened at FSB, couple of winters ago. These stories effectively highlight the real-world consequences of unchecked corporate power.

Another interesting aspect of the film is its visual aesthetic. Archival footage, advertising clips, and news reports are interwoven with interviews and narration which do not let the audience be a passive viewer. The editing of the film manages to juxtapose moments of corporate triumph with the high-price that people have to pay for it.

For instance, gleaming skyscrapers and upbeat corporate slogans are contrasted with harrowing images of crammed shops, polluted rivers, and community protests. The editing and scripting of the film is also done in a way that it uses irony to underscore its points, such as showing the absurdity of corporate branding through segments on Coca-Cola marketing in remote, impoverished areas.

Mark Achbar is a Canadian filmmaker, producer, and writer best known for co-directing *The Corporation (2003)* with *Jennifer Abbott*.

Achbar has a strong background in documentary filmmaking focused on political and social issues. He co-directed and co-produced *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media (1992)*, a highly influential documentary exploring media bias and propaganda. His work often critiques corporate and governmental power structures, advocating for greater awareness and activism.

His documentaries have received critical acclaim and numerous awards worldwide. *Jennifer Abbott* is a Canadian filmmaker, editor,

and activist specializing in documentaries that explore social justice, environmental issues, and corporate ethics. She co-directed *The Corporation (2003)*, which became one of the most successful Canadian documentaries of its time. Abbott also directed *The Magnitude of All Things (2020)*, a deeply personal documentary about climate grief. Her editing and storytelling techniques focus on weaving emotional narratives with hard-hitting investigative journalism.

Music- Leonard J. Paul; *Cinematography*- Mark Achbar, Daniel Conrad, Rolf Cutts; *Editing*- Jennifer Abbott; *Sound*- Hennie Britton, Jeff Carter

1. The Bhopal disaster, commonly referred to as the Bhopal gas tragedy, was a chemical accident that happened at the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) pesticide facility in Bhopal, India, on the evening of December 2–3, 1984. Methyl isocyanate (MIC), a very hazardous chemical, was released into the tiny communities surrounding the facility, exposing almost 500,000 residents. Although the official number of immediate deaths is 2,259, estimates of the death toll vary. It is regarded as the worst industrial disaster in the world.

2. In 1999, a Bechtel-led consortium, Aguas del Tunari, gained control of Cochabamba's water supply, leading to significant price hikes and widespread protests known as the "Cochabamba Water War," which ultimately forced Bechtel out of the country.

Sushree Rajlaxmi

Socialized Losses, Privatized Profit

Dir. by- Jacob Kornbluth

2013 | 110 min

Inequality for All is a 110-min long documentary anchored by former U.S. Labor Secretary *Robert Reich*. The film dissects America's growing income inequality and its broader implications on democracy, social stability, and the very idea of the American Dream. The film shines a light on how the yawning gap between the rich and the rest threatens not only economic health but the foundational principles of society that values justice and equality.

The film follows Reich as he travels, lectures, and explains—in a lively and accessible manner—the historical and structural forces behind the widening wealth gap in America. Reich becomes the narrator of the film: a brilliant economist with a keen sense of humour, despite his academic credentials. He breaks down complex economic phenomena—outsourcing, deregulation, declining unionization—into digestible facts that one can understand.

We hear Reich say in the film, "Something happened in the late 1970s." The film uses footage from Reich's classes in Columbia university, he mentions how access to public university has been made expensive as a political process to control dissidence, with expensive education, students will be servicing debts rather than protesting on streets. 1970s was the watershed where the ruling class enabled tuition fees hikes across public universities. I wonder when we will have some debates and courses on inequality in our university, where we pine for the presence of teachers in our classrooms.

The film is structured around one central idea: that inequality is not an inevitable by-product of capitalism but a political choice. Through interviews, animated graphs, historical footage, and poignant individual stories, *Inequality for All* shows how the richest 1% in America have amassed unprecedented wealth, while the middle class shrinks and the poor struggle to survive. In India, income and wealth inequality has surpassed the British Raj era - in Odisha 80% of the population is dependent on monthly food aid of 5 kg rice - and educated unemployment is at an all-time high as evident from the crowds hopeful to find menial jobs in Public sector units.

What distinguishes *Inequality for All* is how deeply it humanizes the economic argument. It's not just numbers or policy jargon; it's about families who can't afford healthcare, college students drowning in debt, and workers holding down two jobs but still unable to make ends meet. We meet a former manufacturing worker now working at a *big-box store*, earning a fraction of what he once did. We see a couple struggling to maintain middle-class status, not due to laziness or lack of effort, but because the system is stacked against them.

The reality of the central idea of the film is not a foreign concept in our state, Odisha. The youngest son of the richest person of India had a five-month long wedding ceremony that cost upwards $600 million. Many famous national and international 'stars' including the prime minister of India attended the celebrations. Meanwhile in Odisha's Kandhamal district, tribal women died after eating Mango Kernel gruel. Only one local daily (OrissaPOST) reported while national media was preoccupied with Anant-Radhika wedding fever. This points towards the deeply entrenched systems of inequality where accountability fails and the poor struggle to stay alive. It forces one to think of an alternative imagination where social security- food, water, housing, electricity, healthcare, and education- are nationalised and become basic amenities accessible to all.

The director *Jacob Kornbluth*, to his credit, doesn't rely on anger or despair to drive the film's message. Instead, he uses empathy, logic, and the compelling presence of Reich to show us what's at stake. The film doesn't villainize the rich as individuals—it criticizes a system that has allowed such disparity to flourish unchecked. And through it all, *Reich* makes a case for change, not just because it's fair, but because it's smart. A strong middle class, he argues, is the true engine of economic growth. Although that is not something every viewer has to agree with, one can see sense in criticising oligarchy with compassion provides rational and implementable results. That much the film manages to convey.

Visually, the film is clean, functional, and focused. *Kornbluth* uses infographics and animated charts creatively to break down data. The design is playful yet purposeful—bright colours, simple motion, and dynamic transitions make even the most complex numbers feel

approachable. Interviews are shot in intimate, personal spaces, adding emotional weight to the testimony of ordinary citizens. The pacing is brisk, the score subtle and non-intrusive, allowing *Reich*'s voice and the stories of everyday Americans to take centre stage. There's nothing flashy in the camerawork, but it works precisely because the subject matter is so urgent. The visuals serve the message without distraction.

Watching the film in today's context—over a decade after its release—is both sobering and infuriating. The issues *Reich* raised have only become more acute. In 2025, with inflation, housing crises, precarious employment, and rising student debt defining the lives of millions globally, the film feels prophetic. While set in the American context, its core message applies to any nation, especially countries like India, that are grappling with the ghosts of colonialism along with consequences of neoliberal capitalism and the erosion of welfare state. *Ambedkar* has highlighted that political equality without economic equality is a recipe for social unrest.

The film also raises an urgent political question: who is the economy for? If the system disproportionately serves the ultra-wealthy, then we must rethink our policies, redistribute resources, and reconstruct a more humane economic architecture. We need governments that prioritise education, healthcare, and labour rights over corporate profits. *Jacob Kornbluth* and *Robert Reich* have given us a vital tool of resistance and awareness. *Inequality for All* is a film every student, policymaker, and citizen should watch—not just to understand the problem, but to feel compelled to change it. In an era when the divide between the haves and have-nots threatens to fracture societies irreparably, this documentary stands as a beacon of clarity, compassion, and courage. It tells us, unequivocally: a more equal world is not only possible—it is necessary.

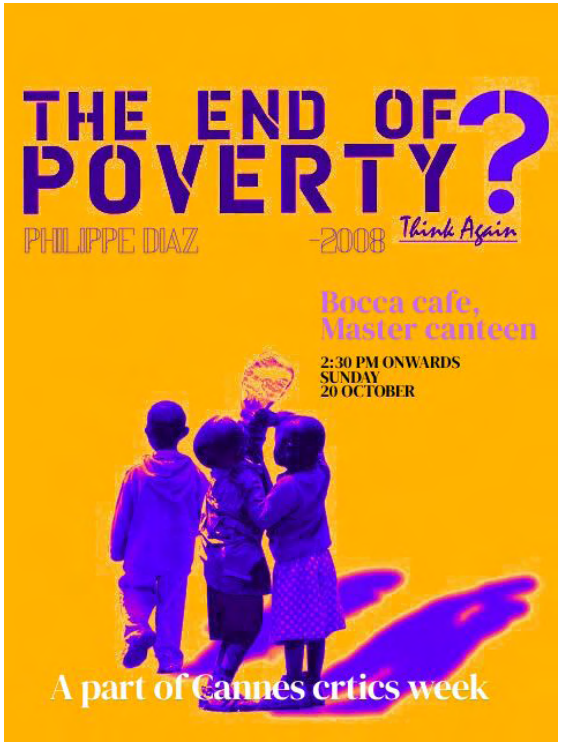
Cinematography- Svetlana Cvetko, Dan Krauss; *Editing*- Kim Roberts, Miranda Yousef; *Sound*- James Austin, Christopher Barnett

Sushree Rajlaxmi

Does 'Eat the Rich' ensure End Of Poverty?

Dir. by Philippe Diaz

2008 | 104 min



End of Poverty is a documentary on the neoliberal logic of political economy that currently pervades the world. The film aptly builds up one's understanding of the global apparatus that underpins modern-day capitalism by following a nuanced meditation on land, labour and socio-political structures. Interlaced throughout this historical evolution of neoliberal capitalism, we explore the focal points of shifting geopolitics that dictate our local/planetary realities.

What kind of society is wrought out of 'free-market' economy?

The documentary unfolds with the arrival of conquistadors in the New World in 1492; Columbus lands in America, confusing it to be India & thus begins the process of domination. At this point, we can view the "explorers" as agents of a specific philosophy & worldview imposing themselves by the virtue of their technology of war & rampant violence - the origin of a Christian gunboat diplomacy.

An initial sequence of the film has a native Masai comment that two kinds of Europeans came to their land,"One with guns to kill and steal the land, and ones with bible to deceive". From this beginning of European Imperialism we see how land & labour was robbed across continents, creating the poverty we witness today. The documentary spans back & forth across poor neighbourhoods of Africa & Latin America, depicting families barely surviving in decrepit homes as people toil hard under

gruelling conditions to receive a minimum wage. We witness jarring statistics - 32% of global wealth is hoarded by the wealthy 1% of the world while billions are living in slums - a statistic which has only gotten worse; the current Oxfam analysis reveals that the world's top 1% own more wealth than 95% of humanity put together.

As we meet Nobel Laureates, experts & historians such as Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz, John Perkins, Susan George & others the sharp contours of poverty falls into place - we did not get here by accident or our own lack of hard-work. Control of commodities - Gold & Rubber in the Congo, Silver in Bolivia, Sugar plantations in Haiti to craft technology theft in Indonesia & India - imperial policies were manufactured that led to famines, hollowing of the earth & widespread destruction of natural economies & culture. It is no coincidence that international bodies such as IMF or WTO sit next to each other in Washington, dominating the economic policies around the world, the Washington Consensus is just the excuse to dominate the world after the fall of USSR in 1989. The entire world that needs capital needs to follow the diktats of Washington – simply put on sell all the resources to American companies.

The sharp commentary on inequality by so many experts interlaced with the narration by actor-activist Martin Sheen feels like a retrieval of history. A sobering weave of events that explain the deeply entrenched hierarchies formed as a result of a violent economic principle and its destruction that has left the world in tatters by destroying peoples' lives by ensuring that basic amenities – healthcare, sanitation, food, education – is beyond the common people after privatisation of utilities.

It was as if the film is asking what kind of a society is wrought out of 'free-market' economy? And the film's answer is one that is violent, myopic & validates death at its centre.

The 'image' of development & democracy

A powerful aspect of the image-making practice of American institutions is hitching their bandwagon to the idea of democracy. The usual rhetoric employed to support US invasions & their expensive wars.

My central question that builds up in the process of this documentary is how does one go about practising the principles of democracy if our modern-day socio-political institutions are so economically compromised? How does one enact the will of a people if the social contract itself is structurally anti-demos? The economic imperialism of the West & the consequences of its centuries of accumulation & dispossession in recurring cycles is finally catching up to us in the form of climate change & its accompanying poly-crisis.

Perhaps a conversation has to be had regarding the double consciousness we inherit from centuries of subjugation & how it makes us vulnerable to modern myth-making from those who control our modern modes of production.

Now is the time to resist this form of economic myth-making by revisiting

Indigenous worldviews & epistemologies that offer possibilities to regenerate our ailing earth & restore the inherent value of life that was robbed somewhere along the way. A conversation that must transcend social boundaries & build solidarities - across class, caste, ethnicities, race, gender & nation-states.

Akankshya Mahapatra

Credit: Bill of Rights Institute / Public domain

explode

A Way of Not Seeing: Merchants of Doubt

Dir. by Robert Kenner

2014 | 96 mins

Understanding the PR Rabbit Hole

Merchants of Doubt is a documentary based on an eponymous book by historian & climate scientist Naomi Oreskes & Erik M Conway, that traces the operation of propaganda in American society. It's a fascinating descent into the rabbit hole of corporate PR that effectively reveals the absurdity of claims historically made by these industries. We witness how the country with the maximum resources for world-leading scientific research ironically seems the most insular to its insights.

As the documentary progresses, it is made clear about the use of an elaborate propaganda playbook, manufactured by these industries, explicitly, working to manage public opinion. We learn how the tobacco industry denied & delayed legislation & the regulation of nicotine for decades before safety regulations were implemented.

How did they pull it off?

Fabrication of doubt, subverting ethics of science & misdirection of public concerns; a triad of principles that goes on to become the PR playbook for other industries. Snippets of internal reports from tobacco industries as far back as 1969 read "Doubt is our product. If one goes looking for these reports, along the same vein one will find Fred Panzer, a PR executive at the Tobacco Research Institute stating the industry's three-pronged marketing approach as "creating

doubt about the health charge without actually denying it, advocating the public's right to smoke without actually urging them to take up the practice & encouraging objective scientific research as the only way to resolve the question of health hazard ". The last statement is absurdly perverse when we contrast it with the scientific history of tobacco & cancer.

Siddharth Mukherjee, in one of his seminal works on the history of cancer, explains the work of an advisory committee set up by the Kennedy administration in 1961: "The relationship between smoking & lung cancer was one of the strongest in the history of cancer epidemiology." We see American history littered with these industrial tactics that continue to this day. As Naomi Oreskes realises in the documentary, the subset of people who attacked scientific evidence on tobacco were the same set who went on to attack the science on acid rain, ozone depletion & climate change.

This insidious behaviour pattern of industries has far-reaching consequences for societies beyond the American public, given the globalised nature of the poly-crisis wrought by them.

The Modern Public Psyche of Doppelgangers

The same tactic of doubt & misdirection helps create a partitioning in the public psyche about fossil fuel & climate change. The early robust research on global warming being dismissed by the cloak of doubt with the rhetoric of "We need more proof" or "We don't know if this is caused by humans" touted by scientific doppelgangers. This cloaking is what fascinates me the most. Because even as it predictably morphs under corporate logic, the doppelganger effect of this phenomenon is more universal & all-pervasive. A phenomenon I feel that hints at the deeper decay of our world.

What is this doppelganger effect?
A mechanism of doubling that goes beyond the idea of the individual "evil twin" or "shadow self" as explained by Carl Jung or Freudian psychology. I feel the idea of the "double" is consistently unveiled in this documentary; a mirrored reality that is manufactured to create horror at a subconscious level. These feelings are echoed by Michael Shermer in the film when he explains the Twilight Zone experience of attending climate change conferences hosted by climate change deniers. We see images of IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) documents pinned against those of NIPCC (Nongovernmental Panel on Climate Change), it's ridiculous in its seriousness & seriously ridiculous. Same framework, same layout & same language but insidiously opposite claims- the play of the image consultants.

We see a Fred Singer - Princeton-trained physicist - & Fred Seitz - Former President of the National Academy of Sciences - going against the global scientific consensus on the issue. Their history of association with tobacco & oil might explain the financial incentive underpinning their actions, but as Naomi explains this went beyond simple

money motives. Fred & Fred were both Cold War physicists with an extreme hatred of anything that smacks of socialism.

Here, the narrative makes a crucial pivot.

Climate change is not a scientific debate. Naomi believes it's a political debate. A debate of mimicking effects that cleverly lends to a polarising of the public. I feel the arguments about belief systems & scientific rationale, public interest vs corporate stakes, and scientific ethics vs free market logic are the textures of this issue that go far deeper than these obvious binaries. This is not to state that economic influence does not overpower our realities but to say this doppelganger effect alludes to a collective decay stemming from the materialist philosophy of capital.

When we see lobbyist-owned think tanks & groups masquerading as experts & citizen groups, we realise this constant making of the hall of mirrors is an all-consuming way to not see. I disagree with Michael Shermer in the film when he diagnoses this refusal to see as tribalism or groupthink of a politicized public.

I feel their refusal to face the truth ultimately leads to a multiplying of selves, evoking existential horrors in our conception of reality & who is in it. Succinctly explained by Naomi Klein in her book on Doppelgangers, "They say we live in a 'clown world' are stuck in 'the matrix' of 'groupthink', are suffering from a form of collective hysteria called 'mass formation psychosis' (a made-up term). The point is that on either side of the reflective glass, we are not having disagreements about differing interpretations of reality - we are having disagreements about who is in reality & who is in a simulation".

This doubling of reality reminds me of philosopher Emilio Uranga's term called "Zozobra"; a mode of being that incessantly oscillates between two possibilities, between two affects, without knowing which one of those to depend on. Uranga feels this two & fro leads to a wounding of the soul & untold suffering.

Can we not think Zozobra is happening to the collective soul of societies? We are constantly in battle with our double; a mirage that helps us escape from what we do not want to see. In mythology & non-western cultures, the doubles are warnings of ignorance - in that sense, it boils down to following the double to understand what is it we have fragmented in our Self.

An Ecological Surplus of Self

How is the West refusing to see the planetary catastrophe they have significantly contributed to? Living in these mirror realities, Western societies are in a trance of the Doppelganger effect. This is a cultural clash that leads me to a reframing of the polycrisis of climate change. This documentary makes me realise that while scientifically, climate change is a crisis

of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, societally it is more than this glitch of the climatic systems. At a more visceral experience of our realities, climate change is a crisis of surplus.

Maybe the answer lies in unselfing. Iris Murdoch spells it beautifully, evoking indigenous wisdom when she says to step outside of the Self, is to recognise the infinite beauty held in nature; to realise blurring of our boundaries is a way to be part of a larger more beautiful whole; a paradigm of unselfing that evokes joy instead of horror at seeing ourselves in others.

Closer home, postcolonial societies like India are locked in a trance of Maya & Bhakti as the public debate remains largely absent on such existential threats. We have put on the mask of growth & development as our coastlines are ravaged by storms & mountains are dying in landslides. As recent as September 2024, the union government is ready to ravage a million trees in the rainforests of Nicobar Island under the Great Nicobar Project which intends to build Rs. 35,000 crore - 72,000 crore worth of international trans-shipment ports, airports, power plants etc. An eco-cidal exercise that would not only annihilate the biodiversity of this region but also displace the Indigenous Shompen & Nicobarese of the island.

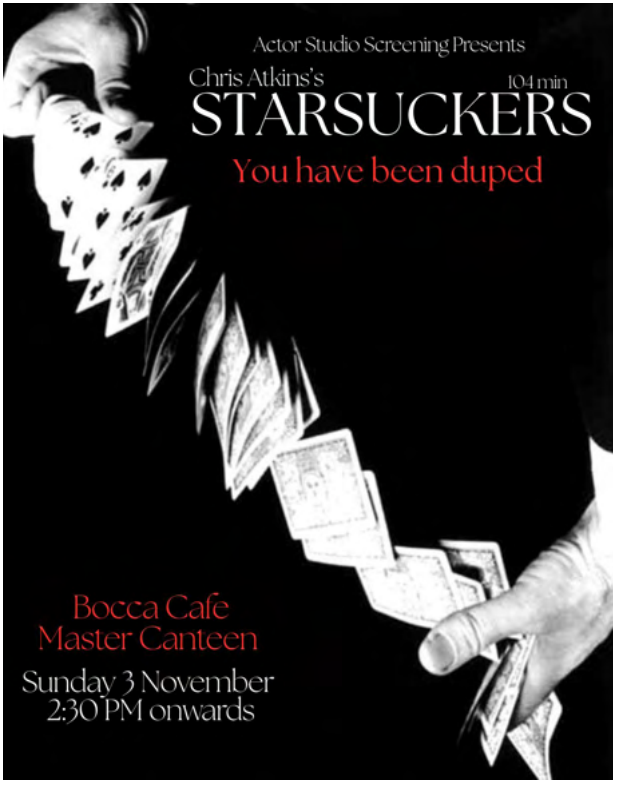
While corporate media languishes in silence, our public remains glued to our own cultural mirroring of realities, leading to religious violence & its accompanying euphoria.

Akankshya Mahapatra

The Stench of Fame: Starsuckers

Dir.by Chris Atkins

2009 | 103 mins



The film is attempting to understand how celebrity culture operates. It begins by showing us how American media is created to capture the imagination of children at all levels - creating reality TV & entertainment industries that mushroom in their devotion to TV. This is a historical exercise that goes back to the creation of 'Studios' in American society. We learn from experts how these industries prey on peoples' neurological biases for fame to create conditions of addiction, so that an entire culture is in the pursuit of fame rather than improving their lived realities. We also learn how these neurological biases have an evolutionary underpinning for group behaviour that is exploited, going into the nuances of how group behaviour increased chances of survival & therefore helped those genes get passed off.

I am not entirely convinced by this line of reasoning was the best to explain our neurological rewiring by media ecosystems to fame. Assuming group behaviours to be strictly hierarchical & discussing these traits in the context of alpha males that passed off these genes is a bit outdated theorizing in evolutionary biology.

For one, it assumes group dynamics always unquestionably involve hierarchies for group leaders & somehow these 'leaders' are 'alpha males' & women are the ones who 'choose' from a hierarchy of men to mate with; as if they are just vessels to create an evolutionary mosaic of genetic complexity fully on display in male genomes. Another bad reasoning is

the tricky understanding of how traits are defined & selective pressures explained. There is no way for us to explain evolutionary offshoots of current behaviours other than to theorise or compare our behaviour to our closer evolutionary cousins, but since what we study is so hard to pin down genetically, we can't apply simple inheritance models for complex traits. The entire point of having this tangential discourse on hard-wired urges is to emphasise that the phenomenon of addictive behaviour has a densely complex evolutionary history & its cultural conditioning in recent times might be a more reliable explanation than resorting to alpha males giving away their “famous-urge” genes.

For instance, understanding the play of images that gives rise to the image of the 'celebrity' is a far more credible explanation of how such urges might emerge. We’re fundamentally pattern-seeking creatures. This translates into inclinations for stories, which is what the celebrity is. An image. A story. A story whose function is to sell.

We move to another layer of complexity in seeing the creation of rumour mills in UK and the U.S. To understand the rise of tabloids both in print & the 24-hour news cycle, an ecosystem that runs on ludicrous claims rather than truth & can be used as a useful tool to keep reporters busy from engaging in any actual journalism. Here is where we see how journalistic ethics are tossed out the window as people can print almost anything as long as it ends with phrases like 'sources said', 'friends claimed', 'informer explained', etc. Not only this cleverly removes any burden of responsibility but also perpetuates a harmful culture that throws the very celebrities it makes under the bus; as happens with an actress raped in a drug party.

This harm continues unabated due to the tenets of market logic, such as 'self' regulation which consists of these news-media owners making their own codes of practice & committees. The net effect is an almost free-reign atmosphere to keep tabloids running & in cahoots with PR executives. It was horrific to see the ease with which Max Clifford described his protection tactic for rich clients who like to 'grope' 17-year-olds. The way he trades harmful rumours to keep his clients safe from tabloids; how he uses his own theatre company & lawyers to make sure they are safe from any public scrutiny or accountability whatsoever. He is called a poacher turned gatekeeper for his clients, and that explains a lot about the shrewd & ruthless psyche conditioned for these 'fixers' in news media ecosystems.

The final culmination of this celebrity-Induced PR-orchestrated media is to merge itself with the great corridors of political power. As we see, celebrities in Lithuania become MPs in parliament, creating their own majority party. It was chilling to see one Lithuanian MP confess that since they are in parliament, it’s more likely people like them will enter parliament, the entire world over. A trend that is global, according to him at the time. An accurate foreshadowing of the rise of Donald Trump-like figures who dominate American politics today – a reality TV star dominating the world affairs and many more TV anchors

and shady characters in the current regime in the US.

Not surprising given the amount of theatre & persuasive flair required to engage in political systems based on democracy. A deep vulnerability we face in our practice of democracy is that of populism/ majoritarianism. Market logic has exploited this vulnerability full throttle with its media-PR empires. An elaborate arsenal of puncturing public will, such media as we see in the documentary (the SUN, Daily Express, US reality TV, Lithuanian TV anchors, etc) is more of a Trojan horse than a fourth pillar of democracy.

Perhaps this is what we should examine about the democratic apparatus. How these vulnerabilities are an inherent part of its architecture & how we might reimagine safeguards around it. I think the safeguards can't be strictly of an electoral logic but have to do with the philosophy of democracy as practised in its socio-economic planes; how the practice of democracy still needs to borrow from Buddhist notions of maitreya or indigenous notions of interdependence.

The Masquerade of Celebrity-Philanthropy

We also see instances of where celebrities come together to create a masquerade of philanthropy for their own brand appeals & government interests such as the Africa-Aid concerts of Bob Geldof that was full of A-lister celebrities such as John Milton, Mariah Carey & backed by the British Government - an attempt to create good PR for the famous at the actual cost of an impoverished Africa. Not only did these philanthropy efforts largely fail in addressing issues it professed to care for, but it also obfuscated a key march to end poverty by a coalition marching to the G8 summit, where such philanthropic hogwash was announced.

The film ends with our narrator explaining why celebrities enter into global geopolitical power structures – to maintain their hegemony on culture – as we pan back to the child star Ryan, who was auditioning to be a 'star' for various media platforms - this is where I again digress with the documentary. I don't think this is about maintaining cultural hegemony for celebrities. I think celebrities are carefully crafted illusions that ultimately consolidate economic power of the 'market', which is to say, they are a tertiary layer of complexity for our current geopolitical order. It has less to do with celebrities themselves wanting to remain relevant in the psyche of their audience & more to do with securing the current power dynamic of the rich. An elite which is historically grounded in colonialism, slavery & cultural genocide.

Hyperobjects of Reality

Corporations that create the phenomenon

of celebrities have moved much further than altering our brains. If we take this documentary as a focal point to analyse our landscapes of reality, there are strong interweaving threads that offer some shape to the hyperobjects of media we inhabit today. A term I borrow from eco-philosopher Timothy Morton, who coined it to explain concepts like climate change & relativity. Quite rightly, he says, “The time of the hyperobjects is the time of hypocrisy”.

Within this hyperobject, if I attempt to make sense of my political realities, it feels like I am grasping at the dark from a location of extreme myopia. Just like the scores of children in this documentary, my childhood was full of consumerist entertainment meant to manufacture a specific system of values. The distance between these children from the economic empires of the US/UK & us is so unflinchingly close, it makes one realise how concretely globalization has created incomprehension for us.

Our socio-political consciousness is increasingly marked by the 'lack' of concreteness manufactured via the evolving mediascape. Moving images that move us away from our place in the world. When the documentary alludes to the illusion of moving images that birthed cinema to the current illusions of reality TV that gave rise to a celebrity culture, I felt this displacement most acutely.

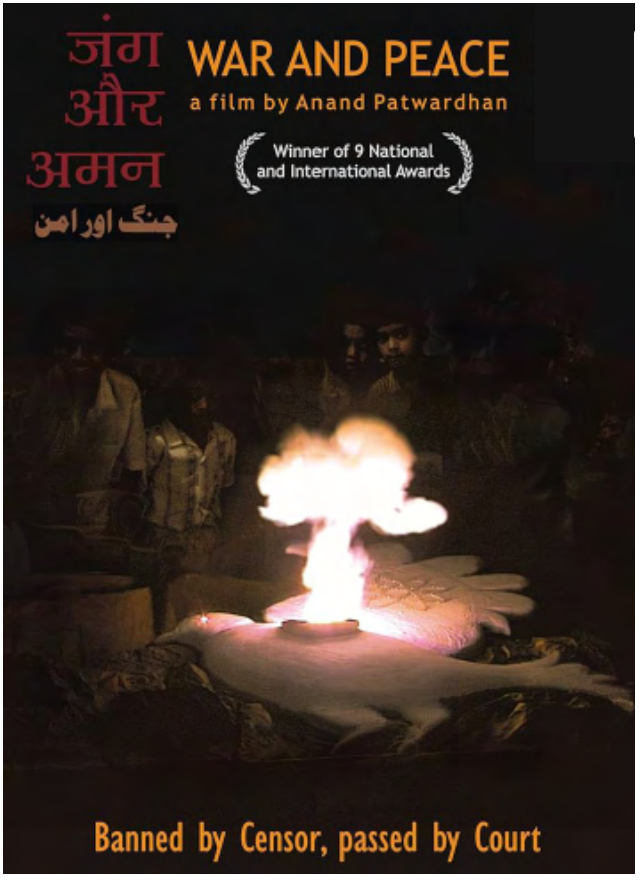
The entire time we see kids conditioned & addicted to fame, we notice the atrophy of social consciousness. The rise of Disney, the making of One Direction & other reality TV make sure an entire generation grows up knowing nothing about its socioeconomic planes of existence. This documentary was made in 2009, a year after the global recession, when the effects of climate change began to bear heavily on the world, yet in the documentary we see scores of people obsessed with media-manufactured 'stars' & the possibility of publicity. In my social circle, I have friends who need google map to reach their homes in the small town of Bhubaneswar.

While the US & its allies waged their war in Iraq, news of a baggage handler supposedly fighting terrorists was all the news in the UK. When he falls from grace with negative press coverage, he says there’s no such thing as bad press. Once again, this reiterates how the media hijacks our behaviour, creating mass consumption conditions that make it impossible to stay removed from its theatre of celebrity.

This reminded me of 2016 when India was amidst demonetisation, my cousins were ushering in 'selfies' into their lives & debating why Shilpa Shetty thought Animal Farms was about teaching children to care about animals. A world of post-truth had just been born as Twitter entered our virtual landscape. No wonder we no longer cared for newspapers or news as Arnab Goswami hollered into existence on TV screens.

Akankshya Mahapatra

Rage Against the Machine



Little Boy and *Fat Man*, atom bombs were dropped on Hiroshima on August 6th, and Nagasaki on August 9th, 1945. Immediate deaths numbered between 2,10,000 to 2,80,000, mainly civilians, with many suffering from radiation sickness, chronic illnesses, and trauma for decades. The hibakusha (survivors) carried scars that were both physical and psychological. Nuclear Radiation contaminated soil and water, lingering in unmeasurable ways in the atmosphere. For decades, the impact of nuclear radiation on human health was not revealed. Eighty years later, the shadow of Hiroshima and Nagasaki lingers on.

At a film society screening, Anand Patwardhan's *War and Peace* (2002) on the 10th of August, made the film, feel, all the more urgent. The film covers the nuclear tests conducted in 1998 by both India and Pakistan, it shows the accompanying nationalist rhetoric in both countries. Anand opens up conversations by exposing uncomfortable truths; such as how nationalism is frequently disguised as patriotism – particularly in the scene with young girls in a Lahore school. A week later, watching *Shadow World* (2016) by Johan Grimonprez, the film based on the eponymous book by Andrew Feinstein, certain connections became apparent.

Anand's method of making a claim and then contradicting it was evident from the beginning. Rather than treating events in isolation, the pattern of cause and effect emerged almost like Newton's third law. Although the film was

made 23 years ago, it is still topical. Whether it is the amplification of war in mass media, or manufacturing of hate against minorities, these issues fester. What resonated, however, was the idea of non-separation of humans from machines, a mechanistic mode of thinking.

Our school education lacks an interdisciplinary approach, inculcating a rigid, individualistic, binary way of thinking. Curiosity is stifled leading to rigidity in thought. Creating what can be tagged as 'war machines'- a mindset that perpetuates growth for the sake of growth, a scalar quantity bereft of ethics. Lives are reduced to numbers, enemies de-humanised into statistics. What stayed from the film was the detachment of scientists from the human cost of their bombs, witnessed in the interviews, post the nuclear tests. Their distance from ethical consequences mirrored the apathy of development. One striking moment in *War and Peace* was the *Tehelka* sting operation montage, politicians accepting bribes for defense deals - the sting revealed a system where war serves private interests.

Seen together with *Shadow World* (2016), Johan Grimonprez's exposé on the global arms trade, Anand's message takes on an even acute meaning. Anand presents how nationalism and nuclear pride in India and Pakistan are manufactured to sustain militarism, Johan shows the next step: war as an international business where profits are reaped by keeping conflicts alive. We witness private military companies, DynCorp, operating with governments, profiting from warfare while escaping public scrutiny.

Both films delineate the business of war and the spectacle of violence – the military industrial complex. Johan demonstrates how Western 'wars on terror' are framed, as moral crusades, to mask the business interests behind them. One film showed how people are taught to accept destructive ideologies; the other showed the system that operates it, showing how profit ensures militarism remains current.

The phrase 'precise attacks', emphasized in *Shadow World*, resonated strongly with *Operation Sindoor*. We witnessed a surgical strike against militants, independent verification was lacking, as evident during the recent parliament debates. Civilian casualties on both sides were barely acknowledged. This amplification of 'precision' demonstrates how media and governments frame violence within nationalist narratives, often obscuring the human cost.

If *War and Peace* unsettled by exposing how empathy is blocked in our society; *Shadow World* showed - the realities of powerful governments that speak of democracy - complicit in monetising death. Together, both films demonstrate, war is not an isolated tragedy but a Mobius Strip; it is manufactured, packaged, and sold, using national pride or corporate contracts.

In conclusion, both films leave us with a reminder. Peace does not fail because people do not want it; it fails because powerful interests extract their profit from war.

Aashee Das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Index

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Subha, Sankalp, Subrat, Rajlaxmi, Sriya, Sankalp T. Jena, Pulia Bhai

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Special Thanks to
Parth Saurabh, Sneha Krishnan, Aditya Srikrishnan, Lipika S Darai, Surbhi Dewan

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