

Editorial

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The impetus for this special issue (Indian Documentary Studies: Contours of a Field) came from a 2010 conference devoted to South Asian documentary, hosted by the University of Pennsylvania's South Asia Center.¹ In a striking departure from the previous two Penn meetings on South Asian cinema in 2006 and 2008, which involved more established scholars, last year's focus on documentary drew mostly graduate students. This skewed participation, showcasing fresh perspectives and voices, seemed to augur well for a still-nascent subfield within South Asian media studies, now pushing against established disciplinary preoccupations to secure its institutional footing.

The conference proceedings were skewed in another important sense: all the presentations focused exclusively on Indian documentary formations, extending, at best, to the diaspora. While the screenings included two works of Bangladeshi filmmaker Yasmin Kabir, and discussions brought up Sabiha Sumar of Pakistan or the seminal festivals organized by Film South Asia in Kathmandu, none of the papers took media from these countries as its primary concern. One hopes it is only a matter of time before critical scholarship turns to topics such as Sri Lanka's Government Film Unit and Lester James Peries, or the Pakistani pioneer Khalique Ibrahim Khalique.²

This special issue emphatically rejects the tacit hegemonic frame that keeps reducing South Asia to India while invoking a politics of token representationalism. A narrow focus on Indian documentary might strike some readers as exclusionary, but we believe it allows a more effective and in-depth conversation in the limited space here. Therefore, we leave the exploration of multiple documentary scenes of South Asia to future forums and volumes, reserving our invocations of the macro-region only to make generalizable points. However, our focus on India does not restrict us to a tidy sense of the "national." Rajagopal and Vohra's conversation stresses the necessity to acknowledge how the national has been a political frame structuring documentary languages; they note how this overarching frame might obstruct the consolidation of localized languages and elide the complexities in the evolution of specific aesthetics. But they pointedly desist from a call for essentialist definitions of an Indian or a South Asian aesthetic. Beyond the obvious problems of diaspora and transnational flows, the contributors to this collection point to a range of supra- and subnational nodes and channels, affinities and identities. Indeed, as the articles by Ghosh, Matzner and Mukherjee, and the interview with Dutta suggest, even when they foreground the materiality of experience, the scales "local," "national" and "global" are largely hermetic appellations without distinct or absolute ontologies.

We begin with a brief contextualization of the rising profile of Indian documentaries and the relatively young field of Indian documentary studies. Indian documentary forms and practices have not had the attention they deserve thus far, largely because of the allure that Bollywood and other regional

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commercial cinemas hold for lay viewers and expert scholars alike. Moreover, documentaries in India neither enjoy the credential of alterity reserved for “parallel cinema” (as Vohra points out in this issue), nor get included in discussions of Third Cinema (as their Latin American counterparts have been).³ Now, as India’s rise to the status of an economic powerhouse coincides with a global boom in documentary, works originating in the region have begun to garner intense interest at home and abroad—and not just among scholars. If international art networks and festival circuits are lapping up these works enthusiastically, US, European and Japanese television channels and media agencies have begun to focus on India as a source of and emerging market for documentaries. A proliferation of doc-festivals all over South Asia (from the very localized small scale events to the expanding Kerala Documentary and Short Film Festival), screening opportunities and cinephilia supported by online platforms and communities, and the infiltration of art and gallery spaces by documentary-mode works, have gone a long way to counter the dearth of space on state and commercial Indian television channels and the loss of an earlier “film club culture.”

Overall, the scope and range of documentary practices in South Asia appear to have been widening steadily since the 1980s, presenting fresh challenges and opportunities. The more affordable and accessible technologies of video and, later, digital image production and post-production have been central to this expansion. Nevertheless, questions concerning the “independence” of independent, freelance documentary filmmakers persist, now shifting focus from the terms of statist development agendas and their interlocutors (evident in the tussles over gender and sexuality during the 1990s), to the need for globally accessible narrative forms or the current flavors of arts circuits. The international funding and commissioning agents in attendance at Docedge Kolkata, a highly successful annual workshop organized by the Satyajit Ray Film Institute, push filmmakers toward greater standardization of length, tone, and address with an eye toward broadcast-compatible products. Matzner’s article in this issue presents a thoughtful discussion of such negotiations in the case of Raintree films. Interestingly, Amar Kanwar, now amongst the most celebrated Indian artists with a background in documentary, critiqued the appreciation of his work at the short film festival in Oberhausen, Germany, as being concentrated on content rather than its formalist explorations (Kanwar, 1998; Waugh, this issue). In a similar vein, Dutta argues in this volume that even to date experimental international circles and institutions are less open to “foreign” individual trajectories of style than forms that normalize “difference.”

The contemporary expansion of documentary modes and practices beyond state initiatives and activist networks further complicates the “autonomous or propaganda machine” debate: as new sponsors (transnational media conglomerates, NGOs and public health foundations) and platforms (television channels, online websites, industry seminars and press junkets) help proliferate new nonfiction sub-genres (commercial “public service” works discussed by Ghosh in this issue, “specials” of “The making of the film...” kind, reality TV programs) and forms (varieties of re-enactments, remediations of found footage—including cutting and sampling, looping and layering). Case in point: Nasreen Munni Kabeer’s two-part documentary *The Inner/Outer World of Shah Rukh Khan* (2005): at once concert film, star hagiography, and publicity material (with the second part actually produced by Khan’s in-house production company, Red Chillies Entertainment).⁴

The prospect of Indian—indeed, South Asian—documentary studies establishing itself as a field arrives at this moment with a series of questions, intercessions and expectations.⁵ What is its relation to the history and current tendencies of documentary theory, itself expanding into promising interdisciplinary realms? How might its theoretical perspectives contribute to and transform the wider realm of documentary studies? How is it to engage and build on the gap in research on materials and frameworks

long ignored due to the privileging of Western practices? How, in other words, is it to move beyond a persistent belatedness and enter contemporary conversations on its own terms? At the same time, we cannot fall into a simple-minded search for indigenous and “authentic” difference; any discussion of the singularity of South Asian modes and practices must be qualified in terms of a high level of reflexivity about documentary’s ability to negotiate and produce actualities, veracities and political positions.

All the contributions here point, directly or indirectly, to very specific constellations that provoke diverse performances of the self, framed and inflected by Indian histories. What are the folds and textures of documentary articulations of subjectivity—of filmmaker, film subject, audience, even the funding body? How has the state-operated Films Division of India, developed out of the colonial Film Advisory Board (thus importing a documentary model *a la* Grierson), shaped the prevailing close relation between documentary and urgency/emergency? How do the evolving histories of class and caste hierarchies, systems of patronage, and struggles to rid oneself of the nation as a frame of reference coincide with performances of the self as political subjects and communities, artists and activists, victim and hero? As Mukherjee’s article suggests, emerging scholarship has a potential role in widening the range of documentary by engaging practices and idioms developed in locations away from the metropolitan centers of Mumbai, Delhi, and Kolkata, albeit maneuvered by centralized state politics. And as Ghosh demonstrates, while non-state media initiatives draw on biopolitical categories and institutions, the forms of risk communication they generate move well beyond calculable probabilities and state emergency alert systems to engage and orient diffuse quotidian practices and popular affect.

How do we estimate the role of statist film commissioning and distributing institutions, in terms of their regulations and their affordances? In his personal reflections on the state-run biennial Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary, Short and Animation Films (MIFF), Waugh points to the cumbersome bureaucracy and to censorship issues limiting regime critique. But Waugh also underscores MIFF’s significance as an off-market niche showcase for mixed and marginalized genres such as animation and shorts. Films Divisions’ rarely exhibited experimental works from the 1960s and 1970s, excavated by Shai Heredia and Amrit Gangar, have already contributed to a rethinking of documentary lineages (see Rajagopal and Vohra in this issue). Meanwhile, new traveling festivals such as *Persistence Resistance*, initiated and curated by the Magic Lantern Foundation of Delhi (which is a pioneer in distributing documentaries in India), must negotiate evolving conjunctions of the state, non-state organizations, and the market.⁶

The questions posed by Rajagopal and Vohra, as well as Dutta’s discussion of the reception of some of her performative documentary works, open up a fresh perspective onto what Nichols (1992) posited as dominant documentary modes (subsequently expanded and revised by himself and many others). The zealous guarding of particular modes by both state and non-state actors, and the attribution of authority to some forms and the dismissal of others, clearly ask for more research on film history, the broader political scenarios, and the stakes for subject formation. What role does a sanctified mode of political documentary perform, beyond presenting a point of view authoritatively? Does it not fortify and secure a movement, or perhaps the state, at the same time? Does it hide and protect the filmmaker in her process with the subject of the film? Is the audience shielded as well, even as it is confronted with issues of urgency?

The interplay between the melodramatic and documentary modes is a concern that several of our contributors explore. Documentary mutations in the Indian context unfold in the shadow of domestic commercial cinema’s gargantuan scale of production and audience reach, and its infiltration of nearly all spheres of life. To what extent does the nexus of music and memory in documentaries about tribal

displacement (Mukherjee's article) resonate with popular cinema's use of music, if at all? Ghosh's analysis of the fictional omnibus form's potentialities as media resource for HIV/AIDS activism, and Dutta's explication of her creative collision of the codes of melodrama and documentary, open out generative threads to think through the political charge of thoughtful and precise formal ruptures compared with the proven efficacies of well-defined modes.

We conclude this brief introduction with the question of *participation* in social and political life via documentary practices. We submit that the answers are not self-evident, even "committed" media-making initiatives must face rigorous interrogation as to the underlying politics, without habitually falling back on archaic notions of resistance and complicity. Moreover, for participation to remain pertinent, documentary tactics need to evolve in the context of emerging media platforms and social realities. Documentary modes in India, as elsewhere, have to negotiate the precarious relation between experiential evidence, mediation, and the political. Since evidence remains a core element of the documentary impulse, we note that its implications extend beyond the juridical; it not only *proves* (what is or has been), but also *potentiates* (what might be). To document is not only to record, preserve, and authenticate, it is also to project, provoke, and mobilize. Indeed, whatever impact documentary testimonials from Gujarat over the past decade may have had, has been outside the realm of law. The realization that in situations of social conflict, "evidence" becomes a thoroughly politicized issue, has led to the search for more effective languages and forms.⁷

What complicates an Indian, South Asian or even a Global South perspective on participation is the set of contingencies peculiar to postcolonial worlds. For instance, in spite of greater access, the so-called "digital divide" remains a material reality: participation and democratization in Asia, Africa or Latin America proceed along lines that frequently confound the norms and expectations of (global) civil society and bourgeois law. While urban middle class activism (evidenced in the anti-reservation and anti-corruption movements of recent years) with their civil idioms (hunger strike, candle light vigils) are important signposts of popular participation, documentary filmmakers and scholars cannot be—are not—in thrall of these licit and legible forms alone. As the gap between legality and legitimacy grows, it becomes necessary for documentary practitioners to record and make legible more liminal—even "grey"—forms of participation for wider audiences, and to forge broad political coalitions.

With a strong history of political documentary filmmaking and vibrant discussions on the politics of documentary form during the last 10–15 years—moving from the caustic view that formalist discussions are a luxury which India cannot afford, to critiques of formal orthodoxies⁸ and varied explorations of the personal, performative, essayistic, poetic, dialogical or fictional—a fertile ground already exists to pose difficult questions and push for bold articulations. The many individuals engaged in the field in multiple capacities—as filmmakers, theorists, curators, distributors, activists and educators—will no doubt ensure fecund cross-inflections of practice and thought. As more scholarly work comes forth, we hope this still-nascent field will enrich itself by drawing on relevant interdisciplinary paradigms (science and technology studies, archive studies in the wake of the digital revolution, global studies, performance studies, public health, political theory of mutant democracies, and legal studies, to name only a few) and developing new insights into the constitution of citizens and publics.

Notes

1. Our heartfelt thanks to Suvir Kaul and Ania Loomba, the gracious organizers of the Penn conference and engaged interlocutors, who first suggested this special issue with a view to consolidating an emerging field. We thank all

- the participants, especially Anuja Jain, Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai, and Priyadarshini Shanker for their inputs. We would also like to acknowledge the editors of *BioScope* for their help in putting this issue together, especially Rosie Thomas for her sustained involvement, editorial help and thoughtful advice in shaping the issue's contents. And a final word of gratitude goes to the contributors, the blind referees, and to Nitin Govil, Lucia King, and Alisa Lebow.
2. The biennial Film South Asia Festival in Kathmandu is a unique event that allows filmmakers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, India as well as, though considerably fewer, from Afghanistan and Burma, to meet for viewing and discussing their films—an aspect which alone deserves study. The popular Kara Film Festival in Pakistan, which selects a good number of South Asian and international documentaries, had to be deferred since its last edition in 2009.
 3. A more in-depth discussion of the relations between Latin American Third Cinema and Indian documentary (specifically from the mid-1970s to early 1980s, commonly taken to be the founding years of a state-independent documentary movement) is beyond the scope of this introduction. However, the explicit references in Anand Patwardhan's M.A. thesis, published as "The Guerilla Film, Underground and in Exile: A Critique and a Case Study of Waves of Revolution" in Waugh's book (1984), as well as the actual or discursive overlap of Third Cinema and documentary cinema during that period, stand next to endeavors of widening Third Cinema beyond its Latin American origins via, in the case of India, evoking the films of Ritwik Ghatak and other parallel cinema filmmakers (Kapur, 1989; Rajadhyaksha, 1989), or later arguments for Indian popular cinema as Third Cinema (Dissanayake, 1993). While both threads of argumentation have been apt and crucial, they also left Indian documentary practice within a realm of developmentalist or activist filmmaking, where sheer content—set around achievements and crises—trumps filmic and discursive considerations. See also Kapur (2008), where A. Patwardhan's affiliation with Third Cinema is recognized.
 4. We are inspired by Priyadarshini Shanker's ongoing research on these documentaries, which she presented at the Penn conference.
 5. This special issue locates itself next to a series of publications that are in the making as we write: Shohini Ghosh's forthcoming edited volume, Rajagopal and Vohra's handbook on Indian documentary based on conversations with filmmakers, or Wolf's monograph *Make it Real. Documentary Politics and Feminist Thought in India*.
 6. Heredia started Experimenta, a festival of experimental film, in 2003. Run by volunteers, the festival takes place intermittently. Magic Lantern also founded Under Construction (in 2005), the first distribution centre for documentary films in India.
 7. Case in point: Amar Kanwar's recent work on the fallout of state-condoned violence in India, the eight-screen video installation, *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007), also released as a two-hour single screen version.
 8. One early discussion of the explicit and implicit definitional constraints on what constitutes "political film" in India can be found in a published conversation between filmmaker Deepa Dhanraj and activist Madhu Bhushan (Bhushan, 1988).

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