



Date:07/10/2002 URL: <http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mp/2002/10/07/stories/2002100700770300.htm>

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Documenting concerns

Dr Anjali Monteiro and Dr K.P. Jayashankar make documentaries that reflect their social concern and passion for filmmaking.



ON CAMERA: Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayashankar

MAKING A documentary involves more than a creative bent of mind. A passion for the cause and intensity of the subject goes a long way in authenticating the project.

Above all if two like-minded people come together in this venture, the result will most certainly be rewarding. An achievement Dr. Anjali Monteiro and Dr K.P. Jayashankar have been experiencing for the last 15 years.

"Documentary is a medium where our social concerns converge with our passion for painting, graphics and music," says Anjali. Dr Anjali and Dr K.P. Jayashankar, celebrated documentary filmmakers, were recently at the University of Hyderabad for a series of lectures.

"Documentary expresses at a sublime level, integrating feelings, words, and visuals," adds Jayashankar.

According to Anjali and Jayashankar, the genre of 'documentary' has undergone substantial changes.

Documentaries were expected to depict the grim and gloomy realities of the marginalised sections. The approach was then that of 'the fly on the wall'.

The camera was considered as a 'scientific tool' to capture the objective reality. Now, documentary filmmakers have realised that reality is elusive and have mastered how reality can be digitally doctored.

Today the approach is that of the 'fly in the soup', where one precipitates action. Improvement in technology has also played a significant role here. Technology has made documentary making economically more viable and is no more the bastion of a privileged few.

Anjali and Jayashankar have together made 25 documentaries in the last 15 years. They made their debut as documentary filmmakers in 1987.

Their first film, *The Young Labourers* addressed the issue of child labour. Over the years, the themes they have addressed and the forms they have adopted have varied from one documentary to another.

"Initially, we tried to appropriate reality and to look critically at political issues. Now our filmmaking has evolved into a self-reflexive effort, looking into our own space and every day politics. We make a deliberate attempt to challenge the dominant notions conceived by many," explains Anjali.

The Plot Thickens (1992) is a series of shots on media education. *Identity - the Construction of Selfhood* (1994) questions the notion of the self as a pre-given, primordial and purposive entity, and explores the gamut of modes in which identities are produced, circulated and consumed within the modern urban Indian culture.

It extensively makes use of animation. *Kahankar; Ahankar* (1995) is a narrative of indigenous people that unfolds through the juxtaposition of dominant discourse and folk stories.

Odhni (1995) addresses the power struggles in gender relations. *YCP 1997* is a story of poets and artistes who are prisoners at the Yerwada Central Prison, whereas *Jungle Tales* (1999) deals with ecological concerns. *Saacha* (2001) is a story of their city, Mumbai.

That they take extreme care about the music used in their films, is seen from the fact that in *Saacha*, to sing the *sulta dhot*, they hired the same band which played this song in the 1940s.

Interestingly, neither Anjali nor Jayashankar is trained in filmmaking. Anjali has a Masters degree in Economics and a PhD in Sociology.

She currently heads the Unit for Media and Communication at the Tata Institute for Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai. Jayashankar, who currently is a Reader at the Unit of Media and Communication at TISS, has a PhD in Philosophy from the IIT, Bombay.

There is no dearth of the laurels and accolades that have come the way of these self-taught filmmakers. Jointly they have won nine national and international awards for their videos.

Identity - the Construction of Selfhood won the Asia prize at Prix Futura Berlin International Radio and TV Festival in 1995. It also won the second prize in Education and Literacy at the Video Festival for Science. *YCP 1997* won the Certificate of Merit at the Mumbai International Film Festival in 1998.

In Jayashankar's opinion, the changing media environment in India hasn't benefited the documentary filmmakers. In the era before the channel boom , Doordarshan used to broadcast documentaries often.

But with the arrival of private channels, and the competition heating up, even Doordarshan has become more hesitant in broadcasting documentaries. Yet, in spite of the adverse atmosphere, documentaries have survived through alternate narrow broadcasting.

Documentary making is no easy job. At each stage, beginning from the conception of theme, the research that goes into the issue, the formalising of a structure, the actual making of the film, and its editing, the kind of strenuous effort that is needed cannot be exaggerated.

Yet, for this couple, documentary making is fun. "Documentary is like an entertainment and rest of the things are work for us. We complement each other in every sphere," remarks Anjali, while Jayashankar nods his head in agreement.

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