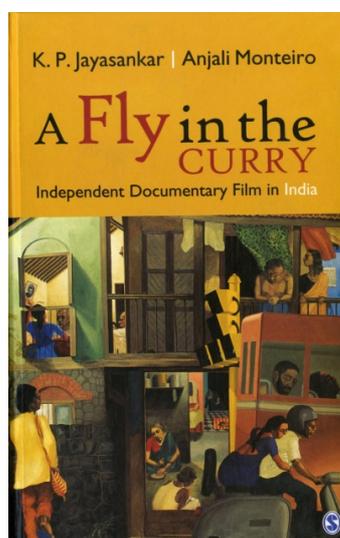


FRONTLINE

BOOKS

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Documenting India



- **Author:** K.P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro
- **Publisher:** Sage Publications, 2016
- **Pages:** 256
- **Price:** Rs.795

The book offers a refreshing take on the role of the documentary in Indian society and illustrates its claim on reality. By RAMESH CHAKRAPANI

A HEARTENING development in recent years is the growing body of literature on the Indian documentary film, depicting its transformational role in society and its place in the history of resistance to state brutality and the struggle against various interests intent on riding roughshod over citizens' rights to serve corporate greed. It also brings distressing stories from the darkest corners of society into our comfortable living rooms.

The book under review is the most recent addition to this library of scholarship. It has the twin advantages of being authored by two distinguished academics who are also established practitioners of the craft, having made over 40 documentaries and bagged numerous awards. The book thus brings a unique set of concepts and ideas to the reading table and, much like its subject(s), forces the reader to engage and grapple with an alternative perspective.

Mainstream cinema, on the rare occasion when it has not restricted itself to entertainment fantasy, has traditionally been a one-way top-down route of disseminating ideas and opinions, usually in the form of homilies and platitudes. Art house cinema emerged as a challenge to this set-up by depicting real-life stories, but documentary cinema goes one step beyond that. And this book, as Arjun Appadurai informs us in his insightful foreword, demonstrates that the documentary is "not just a frame for reality but is better seen as a claim on reality". Right off the bat, the book challenges the reader to think differently, to learn to perceive differently and to recognise the documentary for what it is and what it has done. And in doing so the authors help us understand better the vision of a wide spectrum of film-makers and the significance of their oeuvres.

This book makes no claims to being an all-inclusive, encyclopaedia like Shoma A. Chatterji's opus on the Indian documentary film is a comprehensive work ("Documenting reality", *Frontline*, November 13, 2015). Instead, it sacrifices breadth for depth by seeking to explore the "ruptures within documentary practice" and the role of the film-maker herself and the interplay between the medium and reality.

According to the authors, the title references Henry Breitrose's assertion that the film-maker in "cinema verite mode" is not merely a fly on the wall, an observer recording a happening, but a fly in the soup, an active participant whose presence leads to action. The book is thus an exercise in studying the documentary film-maker not as a chronicler but as an actor and participant and the relationships he forges with the subject and the audience.

Documentaries, more than any other genre of film-making, must be seen in their historical and social contexts. The authors unravel the significance in place and time of various films through an intense interrogation of their work.

The documentary does more to shake us out of our reverie than any other genre, and this book, in a way, performs a similar function by pulling us out of our cocoons, where we are surrounded by the contrived bromides of profit-driven cinema, to shine light on an alternative universe of light and sound.

It is imperative that we pay greater attention to the work being done in this space for the obvious reason of acquainting ourselves with social issues by learning about the stories of resistance, and also improving our sense of cinema and appreciation of the medium, as these films constantly push the boundaries and expand the possibilities of the craft.

No doubt there are players who have, in recent years, received more bandwidth than expected for exploring issues outside the realm of multiplex cinema, such as Dalit oppression and tribal struggles against mining conglomerates (Chaitanya Tamhane's National Award-winner *Court* and Devashish Makhija's Odiya film *Oonga* readily come to mind). But they are still few and far between, unlike documentaries which also enjoy the advantage of being shorn of allegory.

Perhaps the most important section in any of the six chapters in the book is the one titled “Resisting Caste Oppression”, not because other causes are less important but because these stories continue to suffer from a new-age untouchability. It is ironical that despite the huge advances in technology, which have enabled real-time reporting and instant telecasting of events and incidents to millions of viewers, the stories of Dalit life, their struggles and the oppression they continue to suffer remain largely invisible to newsrooms, mainstream cinema and prime-time television. Dalit murders are mostly covered as events before the nation’s attention is gently guided on to the next hot topic of the day or the week.

This chapter enlightens us on how a silent revolution is happening in the narration of the subaltern’s story, where film-makers like Stalin K. and R.P. Amudhan challenge the status quo by forcing us to acknowledge the social realities outside social media and far away from the cities, where a different India resides.

Stalin K.’s *India Untouched*, a distillation of 9,000 minutes of footage from the maker’s travels through eight States, has a sequence where a group of Dalit girls draw water from a well, an act that was performed for the camera but ended up breaking a social taboo that had been in place for centuries. This serves as a prime example of how the very act of shooting a documentary can lead to social change, however minor and fleeting thus reinforcing the power of the documentary.

Two recurring themes in the book, feminism and the city, offer fascinating insights into various films that tell a diverse range of stories and investigate the inspirations that drove the film-makers to document the untold stories of the marginalised and the dispossessed, in the process helping them articulate their thoughts, hopes, fears and aspirations.

The authors dip into a wealth of material and experience to organise an elaborate and impressive anthology of content, analysis and reflection on the history and significance of the documentary and make a compelling case for the need to nurture it.