

Reality Bytes: Anand Patwardhan's Documentaries on Human Rights Issues

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Abstract:

Anand Patwardhan is one of the filmmakers who used documentary films as a powerful medium of political communication. He deals with the pressing issues such as housing problems of the urban poor, negative impact of globalization, violation of human rights, development-induced displacement, gender discrimination, communal violence and so on.

This paper attempts to analyse the documentary films of Anand Patwardhan with a view of ascertaining the role of activism and political communication. The study mainly focuses on the treatment and depiction of human rights issues in his documentary films. A critical review of the documentary films of Anand Patwardhan reveals that he is the great champion of human rights who uses documentary films as a powerful tool of political communication. Whether it is fundamentalism, gender justice, nuclear nationalism, portrayal of women, oppression of Dalits and Adivasis, or development-induced displacement, he makes his strong statements by using mighty camera.

Keywords

Anand Patwardhan, Documentary Films, Human Rights, Nuclear Nationalism, Development – Induced – Displacement, Portrayal of Women

Anand Patwardhan: The Man with a Movie Camera

Anand Patwardhan, by virtue of his documentaries that focus on political and social issues of India, has placed himself on a pedestal for the past four decades in the field of documentary making. Being political, his works have been criticized for the content and style that he adopted while addressing issues of social justice, human rights of slum dwellers, gender equity etc. His uncompromising presentation of matters of Indian politics has challenged the

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years-long establishments of the country. It has invited polemic remarks from various quarters and his legal battle with the state still continues in terms of censoring and screening of his productions (Waldman, www.patwardhan.com). Negation of human rights in any form concerns him the most: "Patwardhan is as unsparing in his criticism of the aggressiveness of the American military and nuclear machine as he is of the nuclear pretensions of India and Pakistan . . . and in his understanding of the sexual politics of resurgent Hindu communalism, Patwardhan remains India's most astute and daring documentary film maker and one of the country's most sensitive commentators" (Lal, www.patwardhan.com).

Anand Patwardhan's always attempted to articulate the voice of the voiceless, worked as an agency to empower the powerless. His documentaries travelled down the path of history to reflect on issues in the present. Eleven documentaries and five short films that he produced over a span of four decades invariably evolve out of his concerns over freedom of expression, communal conflicts, gender politics, treatment of migrant workers, ghettoization in cities, slum life, caste and tribe-oriented marginalization, sustainable development, etc. (Miriam Sharma, 2002). The issues and rights he fought for, he has with him the ultimate legal defense, the Indian Constitution. It will never be an exaggeration, if somebody calls him as a Messiah of human rights. Jagdish Chaitanya, while analyzing *Ram ke Nam* unreels the multitudes of subjects that Patwardhan addresses. According to the scholar, whereas the documentarian presents the atrocities of a municipal administration on people by evacuating them from their roots in one film, in another, he deals with the dissent voices of people of Punjab who are victimized to state-sponsored terror. At the same time his camera rolls over the communal and political conflicts caused by Sikh-sponsored militant groups (Chaitanya, 1993).

In an interview with Bijuraj for the *Mathrubhumi*, a leading weekly in Malayalam, Patwardhan questions the nation-induced fascism: "As long as those who are oppressed use the nationality issue for the temporary purpose of binding themselves into a cohesive resistance force, I am comfortable with the idea of nation. So I support the Black nation, the Dalit nation, the Adivasi nation. But the idea of nation showed not out live the oppression that gave birth to it. The Jews of Europe had reason to fight anti-Semitism and genocide during World War II but can we support the Jewish nation of Israel in its efforts to rob Palestinians of their nation? Muslims have reason to unite under Islam as a way to resist the US in Iraq but can we subscribe to the idea of a pan-Islamic state that uses interpretations of religious law to over ride basic democratic rights and procedures?" (Bijuraj, 2007). In his words and deeds, it is crystal clear that he will never compromise with the evils emanated from fascism even if they are initiated by the minorities or oppressed in the name of religions, beliefs and political ideologies.

Why Documentaries?

In 1970, Patwardhan made his entry into the world of documentaries while he was a freshman at Brandeis University, Massachusetts. The War in Vietnam had rattled the humanitarian consciousness of students there, and anti-war movements took over the momentum. Placed amid the war at a time when his university acted as the hub for anti-war rallies, students, including him, showcased their protests through various performances. Berkeley was the west coast one of the counterparts. Patwardhan becomes reminiscent of his entry into the world of politics making of political documentaries: “My entry into the world of the documentary began a means of political, social intervention and thirty odd years later this is still a primary motive” (Bijuraj, 2007). Patwardhan’s life philosophy is revealed in his own words: “I’m lucky to have stumbled upon a medium that gives me so much pleasure while sustaining in me the illusion that at least potentially; all this is for the good of the world.”

Patwardhan’s Filmography [Courtesy: www.patwardhan.com]

Anand Patwardhan was born in Bombay in 1950. He graduated from Bombay University with a bachelor's degree in English literature in 1970 and then enrolled at Brandeis University in the USA to pursue his interest in sociology. Later in 1982, he completed his master’s degree from McGill University in Canada. While in the U.S, he became a stalwart of Anti-Vietnam movement. He is still active in various citizens’ right movements and has made the spirit of these movements the subjects of his documentaries for nearly three decades.

Patwardhan instrumentalised films as tools to address the South-Asian nuclear proliferation that unsettled the peaceful co-existence and affected prosperity of the region. The major works that problematize politics and communalism, religious jingoism, the disadvantages of globalization, environmental concerns, and caste oppression are as follows:

1. *Jai Bhim Comrade*

(2012, 182 mins)

Patwardhan’s political consciousness of caste oppression is evident in the film *Jai Bhim Comrade*. Atrocities showered upon the Dalit communities across the country on the grounds of age-old practice of untouchability are subjected to portrayal in the film. The film was made over 14 years after the music protest of Dalits in Maharashtra. Patwardhan had been personally affected by such demonstrations of protests. In an undesired incident, Ambedkar’s statue in a Dalit colony was defiled with footwear in 1997. People in the colony organized a protest against which police opened fire. As many as

ten colony residents lost their lives. Vilas Ghogre, a leftist poet and Dalit activist, who worked with Patwardhan in the documentary *Bombay Our City*, hung himself in protest.

Jai Bhim Comrade is a whiplash fallen on the back of superstitious beliefs and bigotry. It walks the audience down the path of both recent and ancient history and reveals the existence of the rationalist tradition among Dalits for a long time.

2. War & Peace / Jang aur Aman

(2002, 135 mins)

The documentary *War and Peace* presents before us peace activism in the light of danger and threat of nuclear war and global militarism. The film explores the costs of human lives in the name of nationalism both in India and Pakistan in the context of nuclear tests held. The documentary was shot over four years in India, Pakistan, Japan, and the USA after nuclear tests in the Indian subcontinent (Pokhran). “WAR & PEACE / JANG AUR AMAN slips seamlessly from a description of home-made jingoism to focus on how an aggressive United States has become a role model, its doctrine of Might is Right only too well-absorbed by aspiring elites of the developing world” (www.patwardhan.com).

3. Ribbons for Peace

(1998, Music video, 5 mins)

This music video unreels before the viewers the consequences of nuclear tests performed by both India and Pakistan. The music used in the video is a reinterpretation of a song sung by Kishore Kumar. It takes after the composition of “Imagine” created by John Lennon of Beatles. Popular Bollywood stars like Naseerudin Shah, Aamir Khan, Chandrachur, and Kittu Gidwani did their guest appearance in this video. The music video can be taken as a political response to another one released by a political party at the time.

4. Fishing: In the Sea of Greed

(1998, 42 mins)

Fishing: In the Sea of Greed is documentation of frightening abuse of the marine properties by industrial fishing practices of gigantic factory ships. Traditional fishing communities are starving and are in danger of being uprooted by these government-sponsored capital forces as the former handed over territorial waters to transnational corporations to meet debt obligations.

'*Fishing: In the Sea of Greed*' chronicles the local fishing folk's battles with the mighty corporates. It criticizes the "rape and run" attitude of such corporate industries toward fishing and fishing community. Those corporates attempt to establish monopoly in the area which finally will bring impacts on the livelihood of the fishing community in addition to upsetting their environment. The community's struggles are not directed only to safeguard their occupation, but at the same time, they are committed to protect the ecosystem. Towards this goal, they join various national and international organisations of fish workers and harvesters.

5. Occupation: Mill Worker

(1996, 22 mins)

Occupation: Mill Worker documents the story of life and struggles of textile mills employees in Bombay. Textiles mills, once the crux of Bombay's economy, worst hit by neo-liberal policies of our country. Increasing real-estate prices, and foreign direct investment induced mill owners to dispose their mills rather than running them for menial margins. When land mafia ruled the roost, mill 'sickness' became an epidemic: "Occupation: Millworker" records the inspirational action of workers who, after a four-year lockout, forcibly occupied the New Great Eastern Mill" (www.patwardhan.com).

6. A Narmada Diary

(1995, 57 mins)

The documentary depicts the perennial issue of development-induced-displacement. The Sardar Sarover Dam in Gujarath has been criticized as uneconomical and unjust and severe threat to ecology and life of tribes. The benefits of the dam go to rich-elite-urban India at the cost of poor, oppressed and under-privileged. The documentary introduces the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the movement initiated by Medha Patkar to protect Narmada Valley. It has an initiating role in the protests against the construction of dam across the river Narmada: "With non-violent protests and a determination to drown rather than to leave their homes and land, the people of the Narmada valley have become symbols of a global struggle against unjust development" (www.patwardhan.com).

7. Father, Son and Holy War

(1995, 120 mins)

The film tackles the psychological factors that stimulate men to perpetrate violence on "the other". It perceives male insecurity as the root cause

of such violence. It also attempts to reveal the general false impression that “manhood” is constructed through such violence. The two segments of the documentary are titled "Trial by Fire" and "Hero Pharmacy." The first part “Trial by Fire” is allusive to Sita’s ordeal in Ramayana, and the fire has been pictured in it as communal fire that razed the communal harmony of India in recent years. The second part, “Hero Pharmacy” problematizes the concept of masculinity and manhood in relation to perpetrating violence on Muslims. In India, the stories of Muslim invaders having marauded Hindus, destroyed their temples and raped their women, are passed from generation to generation in order to communalise the people. As a result, extreme Hindus today want to revenge on the Muslim community. The men folk identifies “manhood” in avenging for something that happened centuries of years ago. Muslim men also find the same reason of masculinity to respond to the atrocities inflicted by avenging Hindus. They also want to be the “real men.” Finally, these false notions invite communal conflicts and carnage. This reality has been exposed in the documentary.

8. We Are Not Your Monkeys

1996, music video, 5 mins.

The five-minute long music video reveals the onslaughts of caste politics in India. The song was sung by Sambhaji Bhagat. The song retells the Ramayana mythology and unveils the hidden discrimination and subjugation on the basis of dovetailed religious stories and principles.

9. In the Name of God (Ram Ke Naam)

(1991, 75 minutes)

The controversial documentary exposes the religious extremism that destroys India's secular fabric after independence. It portrays how the communal propaganda of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) culminated in the destruction of the Babari Mosque, which was said to have built by Babar in Ayodhya in 16th century. According to the VHP, Lord Rama was born where the mosque now stands. An exhortation was made to demolish the mosque and build a Ram temple on the site. It inaugurated the communal polarization and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. The documentary captures the time before the demolition of the mosque where promulgation of communal ideas has been proliferated by Hindu militants who, in the days to come, would involve in the demolition of the mosque. It also documents secular aspects of India—secular Hindus’ efforts to combat this jingoism is visible throughout the work.

10. In Memory of Friends

(1990, 60 mins,)

The film portrays the violence instigated by Sikh fundamentalists in Punjab and its counter terror sponsored by a repressive government. It examines the real causes and trajectory of Chaos created in the late 1970s soon after the demand for Khalistan by Sikh separatists. The nationalistic exploits of Bhagat Singh have been portrayed in the film side by side with presenting the tumultuous political scenario of Punjab. Today, people of India see him as a daring nationalist while Sikh fundamentalists project him as the martyr of their cause.

11. Bombay: Our City

(1985, 75 mins)

This film also tells another story of development-induced- displacement in the name of urbanization and modernization. It narrates the life and struggle of 4 million slum dwellers in Bombay, who are the integral part of the city's growth and development. They are the workforce of Bombay and are denied basic amenities like food, water, shelter, electricity, and sanitation. Apart from the danger of contagious diseases caused by the unhygienic living environment, they are under the constant threat of eviction by city authorities in the name of beautification of Bombay.

12. A Time to Rise

Co-produced with Jain Monro

(1981, 40 mins.)

The film depicts the uprising of trade union and their fight against the oppression. The immigrant laborers from China and East India working in British Columbia resolved to formulate a labour party for themselves. It was inspired by the formation of the Canadian Farm Workers Union on April 6, 1980. It portrays the revolutionary possibilities of a labour party and the strength of workers. The film took four years to for shooting.

13. Prisoners of Conscience

(45 minutes / B & W/ 1978)

Prisoners of Conscience sketches the socio-political and individual state of affairs during the Emergency period of India, i.e June 1975 to March 1977. How media rights crumbled during the time is portrayed in the film. As many

as one lakh people had been detained and many of them were imprisoned. The creative work of art is steeped in the politics of Emergency. Also, it throws light upon a fact that political prisoners had been there during the period and they continue to exist even after Emergency.

14. Waves of Revolution

(30 mins, 16 mm, 1975)

The documentary narrates the uprising of the JP Movement initiated by the students of Bihar in 1974-75. Jayaprakash Narain, a veteran Gandhian Socialist, was one of the leaders of the mass movement. It also is a narrative on Emergency, and was shot during the period in secret by making use of outdated stock and equipment.

Patwardhan Genre

Anand Patwardhan has set new trends in the field of film making and documentary creation. Most of the production works were carried out by himself in the same way some international documentary makers like Dennis O'Rourke and Molly Dineen adopt. They carried out different roles in their production like that of a camera man, or editor. Being a self-taught film maker, Patwardhan had his own styles and ways when it came to camera, sounds, and editing. He produced films on a minimum budget, and the amount he raised from the contributions offered by his well-wishers. He gives an account of his ways of filmmaking in a conversation with the *Sri Lankan Sunday Observer*: "There are no scripts—no arduous briefings. You film people. You ask them what they think and they tell you get on film what is happening—the reality of the moment as it is" (Miriam Sharma, 2002). Patwardhan had no pre-production plan. The content determined on the style and way of shooting.

Patwardhan's creations are marked for their non-linear way of making. He has always given priority to sympathetic figures that feature before his camera. He has let them speak at length. He does not say a cut on them to disrespect them by interrupting their words: "I tend to stay on that person for longer because that person has other dimensions from the immediate dimension of what is being said and that has a visual dimension. It's a way of saying that we don't want to leave you right now but we have to do something else" (Akomfrah, 1997).

In the making of philosophy and theory of cinema, Anand Patwardhan has been immensely influenced of Fernando Solanas, Patricio Guzman etc. Influences of Latin-American films are visible in his films of political protests, especially of the ones revolving around Liberation Movements in the sixties (Akomfrah, 1997). In another conversation, he concedes that He was a massive

fan of Michael Moore's determination to stand out.: “He has managed to push his films and books – and through them, his ideas – right into the mainstream. He had the guts to stand up on Oscar night and denounce the US Invasion of Iraq” (Bijuraj, 2007). Miriam Sharma, (2002) opines that Patwardhan is not pretentious and does not direct his efforts to be objective while depicting the banality of evil.

The Treatment of Human Rights Issues in Patwardhan’s Documentaries

A critical review of the documentary films of Anand Patwardhan reveals that he is the great champion of human rights who uses documentary films as a powerful tool of political communication. The spark inherent in him as an activist helps him a great extent. Whether it is fundamentalism, gender justice, nuclear nationalism, portrayal of women, oppression of Dalits and Adivasis, or development – induced displacement, he makes his strong statements by using mighty camera.

Communalism and Fascism

According to Bijuraj (2007), Anand Patwardhan has never compromised while documenting communalism or corruption. He also adds that the documentaries have acted as warning voices on people. Miriam Sharma opines that Patwardhan was well aware of the role of history of communal politics and any sort of compromise in that regard would make those fundamentalist more into extremism (2002).

In a straightforward style, each movie addresses a pressing problem that millions of individuals in this nation face. The hypocrisy of individuals who claim to speak in the name of a religion or a country is exposed in every documentary “as shields to promote discrimination, separatism and blood shed” (Miriam Sharma, 2002). Patwardhan’s documentaries have daringly depicted fundamentalism of all religions. Whereas it is Sikh extremism that features in *In Memory of Friends*, fundamental Hindus and Muslims have been lashed out in *Father, Son and Holy War*. He has not left out the interrelationship between violence and the faulty interpretation of masculinity. The film *Father, Son and Holy War* presents the male identity crises arising out of this relationship between communalism and masculinity (Bharucha,1995).

Nuclear Nationalism

War and Peace is a fierce polemic against shoddy patriotism and nuclear nationalism. Patwardhan becomes vociferous about the deterioration of values that bound the country into a single feeling. In an interview with BBC, he openly expresses his concerns over the future of the country: “In the last two decades I watched my country sacrifice all the principles that one made me

proud of our independence. Non-violence, secularism and egalitarianism were replaced by venality, religious sectarianism and militarism. Mahatma Gandhi became hopelessly out of place and out of date. The film 'War and Peace' was born out of depression" (www.Patwardhan.com). "Smiling Buddha" was the codename for the first nuclear testing. "On Buddha Purnima in 1998, the day that makes the enlightenment of the Buddha, the Buddha smiled again and again in Pokhran as India conducted three underground nuclear tests there in 1998" (Chowdhury, www. Patwardhan.com).

Patwardhan exposes hypocrisy of some political and national icons that invariably supported nuclear nationalism. He caught the bytes of Pramod Mahajan, the then BJP spokesman. Highlighting the standpoints and statements of Pramod Mahajan as well as nuclear scientist A.P.J Abdul Kalam, Patwardhan criticizes the unholy nuclear alliance of India with the U.S and he retorts to the statement made by the former soon after India's nuclear test that now no Indian has to show his passport in this way: "We have a love hate obsession with America." He continued by saying that Pakistan and India have been compared to two wives vying for America's attention. (Chowdhury, www.patwardhan.com).

Portrayal of Women

A close inspection of Patwardhan's documentaries would reveal that women play a crucial role in them. Further, most of these women are from economically and ethnically weaker sections. Through most of his documentaries, particularly in *Father, son and Holy War*, Patwardhan attempts to expose the gender discrimination.

Patwardhan has been political in the casting of his characters also. The roles of female characters of his works are performed by women from economically and ethnically marginalized sections. It is evident in the casting of Godavari, and another woman in the film *Father, son and Holy War*. The same politics can be witnessed in documentaries like *Ram ke Naam, Bombay: Our City*, and *A Narmada Diary* (Sajna, 2006).

Development–Induced Displacement

Displacement on various grounds, especially due to developments, evicts people out of their original land. By this mode of evacuation, people become bereft of shelter, tradition and traditional occupation. It is another form of forced migration. Of all development-induced displacements, displacement caused by the construction of three Gorges Dam in China is a classic example.

A deeper analysis of Patwardhan's documentaries uncovers that most of the victims of development induced displacement are downtrodden people.

This was supported by the excerpts taken from the documentaries like *Bombay Our City*, and *A Narmada Diary*. A woman forced to migrate to footpath and a disabled man caught interviewed. Both from the documentary *Bombay Our City* substantiate this argument. In the documentary, *A Narmada Diary*, a man interviewed at Kantheshawar resettlement site, another man speaking to Patwardhan nearby dam site and a large group of Adivasis gathered in a house to perform the death rites of an Adivasi youth, are all representing the down trodden and under-privileged. In contrast, the proponents of the dam project who appear in the documentary are rich and elite.

In general, human rights issues like vicimisation of communalism, gender inequality, oppression of Dalits and Adivasis, threats of nuclear nationalism and the problems of development-induced displacement are the central themes of Patwardhan's documentaries. They are interrelated in most of his films. He has long been the voice of voice less and the power of the power less. With his simple camera, he has proved that he is the ardent champion of human rights.

Conclusion

Anand Patwardhan's documentaries and films are marked for and charged with political overtones channelized to bring out in bold relief the underlying social, cultural and political issues. His works are attempts to sensitize the general masses against the unresolved and perennial issues like casteism, communal conflicts and corruption. Patwardhan instrumentalised art to articulate the voice of the voiceless, and mobilise power for the powerless. His documentary films have consistently attempted to expose the different forms of oppression.

Anand Patwardhan is a "self-taught" filmmaker who handles most of the production tasks, including camera, sound, and editing. He typically operates on a tight budget, and most of his income comes from modest contributions from well-wishers. Majority of his films were shot in a non-linear manner. Anand Patwardhan adopts the so-called "Imperfect Cinema"—the political theory of Patricio Guzman, Fernando Solanas, and other Latin Americans—as the foundation for his cinematic philosophy and theory. A critical review of the documentary films of Anand Patwardhan reveals that he is the great champion of human rights who uses documentary films as a powerful tool of political communication. Whether it is fundamentalism, gender justice, nuclear nationalism, portrayal of women, oppression of Dalits and Adivasis, or development-induced displacement, he makes his strong statements by using his mighty camera.

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