

**THE PRODUCTION OF RESISTANCE:  
DECONSTRUCTING THE ACTIVIST DOCUMENTARY FILM**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
award of the Degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

*By*  
**L. SRINIVAS REDDY**



**Centre of Linguistics and English  
School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi – 110067  
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**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “**THE PRODUCTION OF RESISTANCE: DECONSTRUCTING THE ACTIVIST DOCUMENTARY FILM**”, submitted by **L. Srinivas Reddy**, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of the University, is to the best of my knowledge an original work and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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## **DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE**

This dissertation entitled **“THE PRODUCTION OF RESISTANCE: DECONSTRUCTING THE ACTIVIST DOCUMENTARY FILM”**, submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University.

  
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## INTRODUCTION

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The introduction is frequently the textual supplement to the work it seeks to preface. But it is a supplement that attempts to both justify and explain the premises of the work even before they are actually made. In these supplementary pages therefore, I seek to pre-state both the ideas that this work concerns itself with and the concerns that gave rise to it.

I seek to understand the tools by which the form of filmmaking that I call the 'activist documentary' constitutes its subjects and resolves questions of its own legitimacy as a genre. This analysis is part of an attempt to understand the emergence of media-spaces that are self-professed spaces of resistance to the hegemonies of dominant media discourses.

My objective here was to arrive at a possible understanding of the ways in which the activist documentary constructs itself as a narrative of resistance. This implies not simply an analysis of its filmic tools and narrative devices but a deconstructive exploration of the role the film itself plays within the very discourses of resistance that it constitutes and narrates. In other words, as the film defines itself as a narrative of resistance by being a documentation of subordination, my analysis would be an attempt to situate this definition within the context of the politics that such a documentation constitutes.

The first chapter is a broad attempt at arriving at a definition of what I call the 'activist documentary' film and at the determination of its location within the discursive constitution of filmic genres. I borrow from Nichols, Comolli and Narboni and Solanas and Gettino, to show that any attempt at classificatory location would fail if it does not account for the political situation of the films in question. In other words, to locate a film within a conceptual system of classifications, one has to take into account where the film situates itself politically. The determination of the political location of the activist documentary is made more problematic when one considers the

fact that this film exists with the conscious and express intention of itself constituting a new political context, and locating itself within this constitution.

'The politics that the activist documentary seeks to constitute is generally understood as the local micropolitics of the new social movements exemplified by the work of non-governmental organisations or NGO's. The first chapter continues its examination of the way this politics is enunciated and to place it within a historical overview of the evolution of the discourse of the 'alternative' and the emergence of our contemporary form of 'civil society.'

Also included in this chapter is an elaboration of the variously-defined technique or tool of literary criticism called deconstruction, following from the writings of Jacques Derrida. My aim here is to show how the discursive constitution of these films lends itself to deconstruction, and what such a critical process would entail.

In terms of understanding the role of the activist documentary within the politics that it articulates, I find Ranajit Guha's theoretical model of Domination/Subordination extremely useful. I attempt an explanation of this model and the ways in which the politics of the films can be interpreted using Guha's terms of reference. Finally, I draw heavily on the idea of 'hegemony' as defined by the Italian marxist Antonio Gramsci to arrive at a possible explanation of the role of the activist documentary's political discourse within contemporary politics. The first chapter concludes with an elaboration of this notion and its similarities with Michel Foucault's analysis of Power.

The second chapter is an attempt at a narrative description of the three films under consideration. While a translation of the filmic narrative into written language is an almost impossible task, my concern is not so much with the rendering of the visual and aural text into words, but the identification of elements in the films' overall discourse that I hope will be useful for my subsequent analysis. The first film, *A Narmada Diary* was made by Anand Patwardhan in 1995. It narrates the story of the movement against the Sardar Sarovar project, a series of dams on the river Narmada in Madhya Pradesh. The second, *Chaliyar: The Final Struggle* was made by C.



Saratchandran and P.Baburaj of the Third Eye Collective in 1999. This too is the story of a people's movement; against the pollution of the Chaliyar river in Kerala by the rayon pulp factories of Grasim Industries. Finally, Shriprakash and the Krittika Collective's *The Fire Within*, made in 2001 does not deal with a movement per se, but narrates the exploitation of adivasi communities in the coal-mining area of Jharkhand by Coal India Limited and the vicious 'Dhanbad mafia' of politicians and contractors.

In the final chapter, I begin with an account of the nature of phonocentrism as Derrida defines it in *Of Grammatology*, in order to understand the elements of phonocentric biases in the texts under study. I also find the discursive politics of the activist documentary similar in this respect to the philosophy and work of the Subaltern Studies Collective of historians, and I try in this chapter to trace the elements of this bias that I believe informs this similarity.

While Foucault's theorisation of the micropolitics of power seems similar to Gramscian hegemony, I argue that the similarity is deceptive because of the limitations of any kind of politics that hope to draw on Foucault's theorisation. I argue here that Foucault's politics would ultimately result in the same kind of logocentric bias that it ostensibly works against.

Finally, this chapter includes an analysis of the elements in the films that betray their phonocentric bias and thus place the films within the hegemonic binary opposition of dominant and alternative. While within the opposition of writing to speech, the films themselves constitute themselves as a metaphoric 'speech' of the subaltern against the 'writing' of the dominant, I seek here to show that the film too is 'writing', indeed any kind of discourse has to be 'writing', and that the speech/writing binary collapses once the structural discourse that informs the production of the film is considered rather than the film being seen as an isolated narrative outside the dominant matrix of hegemonic power. Writing as a metaphor finds its best theorisation in Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and other works, and I also attempt a brief explanation of what the metaphor of writing implies. I conclude with a problematisation of the notion of the 'alternative' as the way ahead for a progressive politics, especially in terms of media-ted discourses.

While an exploration of the possibilities of a truly progressive media is not my objective here, the rejection of the idea of any 'alternative' position within a dominant/alternative binary would be the first step towards such a possibility, since this binary opposition itself is the product of a dominant discourse and the most visible manifestation of its hegemony. Also, the media in themselves are not an system of independent discourses. Even a cursory analysis of the political economy of even the 'alternative' media shows its embedded nature within the dominant discourse that informs current relations of production, distribution and consumption. To be sure, there exist no blueprints of structural change that will act as a roadmap to a free media, and the relationship between media discourses and political and economic relations in any society is complex since both are mutually constitutive and are also enmeshed within other larger social structures. A rejection and a radical transformation of those underlying structures themselves would seem a necessary condition before we begin to theorise about the possibilities of a media free of the hegemony of dominant discourses and structures.

## CHAPTER I

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### Defining a Genre: The Location of the 'Activist Documentary'

The initial problem that arises in any attempt to analyse a group of films that have hitherto not been grouped before is the problem of definition – of defining those common characteristics that would both necessitate and justify any proposed analysis. In other words, one faces the problem of defining the *genre*. In this initial exploratory chapter and the next, I will attempt to arrive at such a definition and also to clarify some of the tools and methods that I will use.

#### I

A genre is of course more than just a simple enumeration of common characteristics shared by a group of works. The very act of defining such a group is itself driven by certain conscious *a priori* aesthetic or technical ends in mind. A genre itself is, first of all, a conceptual construction that has its roots in literary criticism. While it is not my intention here to trace the evolution of the idea of the 'genre' as a conceptual category to serve the ends of critical methodologies, a brief note of how it came to be applied to the analysis of films would be in order.

Genre criticism has a long tradition in film criticism, especially since the the initial 'criticism' in the study of cinema was directed at the early 'fiction film'. The fiction-film, or, simply put, the 'movie' as we understand it today developed its narrative strategies from the established conventions and forms of literature, more specifically the nineteenth century novel. The extrapolation of this tool of literary criticism to apply to the field of cinema was thus almost an inevitable development. Yet, the idea of the genre remains vulnerable to serious methodological criticism on questions of definition, selection, determining characteristics and historical progression. While the classification of films into specific genres might have seemed natural in the case of the early fiction films, such as the 'western' or the 'horror' film, given their place in the continuum of narrative strategies drawn from literature, ideas of classification have to be generated afresh when the task is to apply them to the documentary film.

The question 'what is the documentary film?' seems as impossible to answer as Bazin's 'what is cinema?'<sup>1</sup> While the documentary began with the first film itself - the Lumiere brothers' 'Train arriving at Station' - its constitution as a specific genre as opposed to the fiction-film, 'cinema', or the 'motion picture', can be dated to John Grierson's ethnographic account of Inuit life in 1922, 'Nanook of the North'. Grierson first used the term 'documentary' to refer to another ethnographic film of the time, Robert Flaherty's 'Moana' (1926) as a form "of filmed reality distinct and separate from other forms of actuality film such as the travelogue, newsreel, and the "topical"".<sup>2</sup> The original distinction that the definition of the documentary rested on was the distinction between 'fiction' and 'reality'. A line, never very clearly defined, was sought to be drawn between the 'fiction film' that narrated a story, and the 'documentary' which, it was thought, represented 'reality'. This distinction, of course, does not hold, since the documentary film since its formal beginnings has been a consciously selected, structured and constructed re-presentation of a subjective reality, much as the 'fiction' film is. Christian Metz, in his attempt to arrive at a 'language' and a 'semiotics' of the cinema discounts any formal distinctions between the fiction film and what he calls 'nonnarrative films':

'Nonnarrative films are for the most part distinguished from "real" films by their social purpose and by their content much more than by their "language processes". The basic figures of the semiotics of the cinema - montage, camera movements, scale of the shots, relationships between the image and speech, sequences, and other large syntagmatic units - are on the whole the same in "small" films and in "big" film. It is by no means certain that an independent semiotics of the various nonnarrative genres is possible other than in the form of a series of discontinuous remarks on the points of difference between these films and "ordinary" films.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bazin, Andre *What is Cinema?* French film critic and scholar Andre Bazin's seminal two-volume collection of essays is widely accepted as one of the most comprehensive critical overviews of the philosophy of European Cinema.

<sup>2</sup> Cowie, Elizabeth. 'The Spectacle of Reality and Documentary Film' <<http://www.city.yamagata.yamagata.jp/yidff/docbox/10/box10-1-e.html>> [14 January 2003]

<sup>3</sup> Metz, Christian. "Some Points in the Semiotics of the Cinema." *Film Language - A Semiotics of the Cinema*. Trans. Michael Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. p.94.

In an essay analysing the 'desire to see' that is at the root of the idea of 'realism' in any film, Elizabeth Cowie traces the development of the notion of 'realism' as a defining feature of the documentary film, as opposed to the presentation of reality as mere spectacle:

'...there is a concern with the meaning of the reality presented--it is an epistemological project, requiring that we not only see but are also brought to know...What arises here is a shift from actuality film as spectacle to the documentary as an epistemology. It is a question not of what we see but how this is put forward for our understanding. Although what was central to these debates and to the films in the 1920s which came to be defined as documentary was an opposition to the dominant mass cinema of fictional narrative, yet neither narrative, nor even fiction, were simply eschewed by these filmmakers, and the devices of filmic illusion were directly drawn upon.'<sup>4</sup>

In terms of thematic content too, documentary films cover as wide a range as the fiction film. The classification then shifts to the idea of stylistic components of the film, for this is where most documentary films share common characteristics and where they differ from the stylistic conventions of the fiction film. The American film theorist Bill Nichols attempts a fourfold historical and stylistic classification of the documentary in terms of the 'voice-of-god' films, *cinéma vérité* or 'direct films', the 'string-of-interviews' film, and more recent self-reflexive documentary films.<sup>5</sup> However, this classification does not really serve as the basis for a generic categorisation, since it distinguishes between the dominant fashions at various times in the history of the documentary only on the basis of the 'voice' in the film. The voice-of-god films have a "didactic impersonal, 'objective' narrator" who is outside the narrative that the film presents, *cinéma vérité* films were a reaction against this false and illusory objectivity and took the form of a 'direct' presentation of events as they unfold in front of the camera. The 'string-of-interviews' films also dispensed

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<sup>4</sup> Cowie, Elizabeth. op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> see Bill Nichols' seminal essay, 'The Voice of Documentary' for a fuller discussion of his fourfold classification of documentary cinema based on the 'voice' of the films.

with the narrator, or minimised the role, and depended on responses to the filmmakers' questions that were then strung together to form a coherent narrative. Finally, the self-reflective documentary as a reaction to the denial of the filmmaker's subjectivity in the film, depends on the narration of events with the camera, and the filmmaker, as active participant rather than observer. Thus, while Nichols' categories serve well as classifications of the role and evolution of the 'voice' in documentary films, they cannot be used as bases for generic definitions. However, documentary films are as much 'narrative' as fiction films, even in the strict sense of 'narrative', in that they invariably tell a story with a recognisable beginning and end in time, both in terms of 'real' time and in the 'filmic' time of the events in the film. The question that inevitably arises at this point is that if neither stylistic conventions nor thematic content can be taken as a basis for distinction and categorisation of the documentary, then what does the classification of the 'non-fiction' film depend on?

Perhaps, in order to define the documentary as a 'genre', one would have to ignore both the opposition that is sought between the 'fiction' film and the so-called 'nonnarrative' film, and also any attempt to specify particular characteristics for the documentary film as a separate genre of cinema. Since definitions of genres and the attendant classifications and categorisations are ultimately only tools to understand particular works according to certain predetermined conditions, the most useful definitions for the purpose of the present analysis would be those that look at the documentary, not as a separate kind of film, but as part of 'political' cinema; although with specific formal characteristics. In this kind of classification, one would classify films according to their political roles and ideologies. Rather than draw an imaginary line between two categories based on the tenuous notions of 'reality' and 'narrative' or based on thematic content or stylistic conventions, which are liable to change and can even be shared by films across genres, the present research would seek to analyse films in terms of the politics they represent, in terms of the ideologies of the filmmaker and in terms of the role that they play within society and politics. Thus, here one would not slot films into arbitrary categories of fiction and documentary, but rather see them in terms of their ideological and political roles. One can then have 'mainstream' fiction films as well as documentary films, and a whole variety of other filmic 'works' as well: commercial advertisements, music videos, video 'installation' art, news broadcasts and the vast quantity of other television 'products', domestic uses

of video tools including even the ubiquitous Indian sub-genre of the 'marriage video'. The list is vast but all these can be seen to operate within a singularly bourgeois ideological framework. Even their classification as sub-genres is fraught with potential inaccuracy since they may share technical, aesthetic and stylistic forms and conventions among them, and their mutual influences of one on the other would be painstakingly complex to unravel. Thus, seeing them again as watertight sub-genres within a larger hegemonic mainstream umbrella-genre would be self-defeating. Instead, they would have to be seen as a continuous and endless series of differences, both thematic and stylistic, and their analysis would have to involve the drawing out of the traces of one in the the others.

However, this kind of political classification would again seem to present its own problems. If filmic works exist only in their differences, then it would at first seem paradoxical to then draw the ideological lines that mark out films according their political roles. In other words, wouldn't all films then be bourgeois films, in that they would necessarily exist in a series of differences from all other kinds of films and none would be in separate pigeon-holed categories? This is a complex question, since one would then have to delineate the basis of what one actually means by politics. Rather than answer this question here in a generalised way, we will return to it in the course of the analysis of individual films. However, for purposes of clarity, and to define the basis for the selection of films, we will try to understand the ways in which these films are 'political' and the characteristics that enable us to group them together for analysis.

By the term 'political', I mean that these films have a conscious and self-declared intention of acting as a form of intervention within the discourse of what is understood as mainstream politics by forming part of alternative or counter-cultural political initiatives, articulations or discourses in various forms. In other words, these films are political in terms of the 'roles' that they consciously intend to play within political discourse. But as the editors of the French journal *Cahiers du cinema* declared in a manifesto of sorts in 1969 on the question of cinema's relation with ideology, "*every film is political*, in as much as it is determined by the ideology which

produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing).”<sup>6</sup> They go on to define both the role and objectives of the filmmaker, and the distinction between the two kinds of cinema, a distinction that depends on the films’ relation to the dominant ideology:

‘Cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself to itself. They constitute its ideology for they reproduce the world as it is experienced when it is filtered through the ideology...The film is ideology presenting itself to itself, talking to itself, learning about itself. Once we realize that it is the nature of the system to turn the cinema in to an instrument of ideology, we can see that the filmmaker’s first task is to show up the cinema’s so-called ‘depiction of reality’. If he can do so there is a chance that we will be able to disrupt or possibly even sever the connection between the cinema and its ideological function. *The vital distinction between films today is whether they do this or whether they do not.* (emphasis mine)’<sup>7</sup>

## II

In India, in our current context, one of the ‘alternatives’ in political terms is represented by what have been called ‘new social movements’, and the films in question are political in the sense that they exist solely as conscious and self-declared critical media interventions that form part of the alternative discourses of politics articulated by new social movements that seek to challenge the ideology and practices of the dominant discourses in politics, at least in part, which in this case is that part of the dominant ideology defined by the term ‘development’. Vibodh Parthasarathi, in his analysis of films that are part of the anti-dam movement in the Narmada valley, explains his rationale for his focus on films, to the exclusion of other forms of media such as street plays, poster art, pamphlets or songs:

“Firstly, they impact social movements by not only enabling its participants to reflect on their collective interventions but equally for others engaged in

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<sup>6</sup> Comolli, Jean-Louis, and Jean Narboni. “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism.” *Movies and Methods*. Bill Nichols, ed., Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993. p. 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25.



similar resource-conflicts to do so. This however, is only half the story as it does not address the specificity of the audio-visual mediums such as video. What needs to be recognised is that having emerged as an expression, as a documentation, of 'another' view of the NVDP [Narmada Valley Development Project], these films have been the most potent instruments for perceiving conflicts and resistance for those external to the movement. In other words, these campaign films screened and distributed across the country represent and construct "true pictures" of social conflicts and collective interventions being addressed by a variety of constituents of the anti-Narmada movement."<sup>8</sup>

There already exists a rather warily-defined field of critical media interventions within political discourse that is variously called the 'alternative media', 'independent media', 'tactical media' or 'media activism'. The origins of these media interventions can be traced to the concepts of 'development communication' that once informed debates about the mass media in the 1970's when the disagreements about development were of a different order.<sup>9</sup> In today's context, critical media interventions largely take the form of films that are used both as a form of reportage to counter the misinformation (and the lack of information) about political issues in the mainstream media, and also as campaign tools that act as a medium of propaganda for particular social movements or for particular ideological positions concerning specific political issues. The objectives of these interventions range from "simply documenting reality, to providing an argument for (or against) a political reality, to uncovering the historical context of a specific reality."<sup>10</sup> These objectives, in short, form the basis for my selection of certain individual films from many others under a common rubric for the purpose of analysis. In other words, my use of the term 'activist documentary' refers precisely to those films that consciously affirm that their

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<sup>8</sup> Parthasarathi, Vibodh 'Media Interventions and The Unmaking of Counter-Cultures'.  
<<http://ias.leidenuniv.nl/host/ccrss/cp/cp1/cp1-Media.html> > [6 November 2002]

<sup>9</sup> For fuller understanding of the kind of theoretical and conceptual frameworks that informed what came to be called the 'development discourse' see Andre Gunder Frank and Maria Fuentes' much criticised, but still seminal essay on the subject, *Nine Theses on Social Movements*. (Fuentes, Maria and Andre Gunder Frank, 'Nine Theses on Social Movements', *Social Movements and the State*, ed., Ghanshyam Shah, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002. pp32-55) and D.N Dhanagare and J. John's critique of the *Nine Theses* in the same book.

<sup>10</sup> Parthasarathi, Vibodh. op. cit.

role within social movements and the 'alternative politics' is determined and informed by the abovementioned objectives. The word 'activist' implies that these films are part of neither journalistic nor purely propagandist endeavours but that they are interventions by filmmakers in their role as participants who share the political views and beliefs of, and are actively involved in, the individual movements that their films deal with. I use the word 'documentary' to emphasise the fact that the films in question are, in terms of stylistic conventions, still part of the continuum of those peculiar formal elements shared by what Nichols classifies as the documentary, as opposed to the narrative fiction film.

Vibodh Parthasarathi defines these interventions as processes of 'alternative communication' that arise in an oppositional response to dominant or established media institutions and forms of communication:

'The notion of Alternative Communication draws attention to media practices which have come into being as a response to dominant institutions, be they those of the Communications Industry or those in the larger politico-economic sphere. Alternative Communication refers to media practices addressing or (re)defining political issues of the moment in a manner contrary to established social frameworks and ideological propositions.'<sup>11</sup>

These critical media interventions also draw on another tradition of 'alternative' media, which itself informed the debates around 'development communication' since the 1970's. This is the notion of the 'Third World Cinema' as a distinct form of mediated communication that would serve as a 'revolutionary' cinema and play a transformatory role as part of the struggles between imperialism and 'Third World' liberation. Influenced by Franz Fanon's analysis of the cultural effects of colonialism, filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino declare their visions of what they call the 'third cinema':

'The cinema known as the documentary, with all the vastness that the concept has today, from educational films to the reconstruction of a fact or a

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<sup>11</sup> Parthasarathi, Vibodh. op. cit.

historical event, is perhaps the main basis of revolutionary filmmaking. Every image that documents, bears witness to, refutes or deepens the truth of a situation is something more than a film image or purely artistic fact; it becomes something which the System finds indigestible.’<sup>12</sup>

Solanas and Gettino do not classify the films of the ‘Third Cinema’ any further, simply saying “pamphlet films, didactic films, report films, essay films, witness-bearing films – any militant form of expression is valid.” They do go on to define it through its objectives though:

‘Furthermore, revolutionary cinema is not fundamentally one which illustrates, documents or passively establishes a situation: *rather, it attempts to intervene in the situation as an element providing thrust or rectification.* To put it another way, it provides *discovery through transformation.*’<sup>13</sup>

The definition of the ‘political’, in terms of the proposed analysis too, depends largely on these two elements: the role that the film defines for itself within the movement, and the consciously stated objectives of the filmmaker vis-à-vis the film as a political tool.

The other major definitional question that confronts us, apart from that of classification is that of defining the ‘activist documentary’ film in and for itself. In other words, apart from the questions of where one places such a film and what it *does*, is the question of what *is* the activist documentary in itself? The editors of *Cahiers* in their manifesto pose the more fundamental question ‘what is a film?’ Their answer would give us clues to define the films in question with something approaching precision.

‘What is a film? On the one hand it is a particular product, manufactured within a given system of economic relations, and involving labour to produce – a condition to which even ‘independent’ filmmakers and ‘new cinema’ are

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<sup>12</sup> Solanas, Fernando and Octavio Gettino, “Towards a Third Cinema.” *Movies and Methods*. Bill Nichols, ed., Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993. p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p.56

subject – assembling a certain number of workers for the purpose...Because every film is part of the economic system it is also part of the ideological system, for ‘cinema’ and ‘art’ are branches of ideology.’<sup>14</sup>

While the above assertion seems at first to be overly economic, it does provide a useful starting point to critically discuss the nature of the activist documentary with respect to its stated objectives and its claimed positions. While the movements that they document and are part of lay claim to a politics that is meant to be transformatory, the films see themselves as affirmative interventions within a larger transformatory politics. While the extent of the films’ political influence and involvement within the ‘alternative’ transformatory politics can be discussed later, when we engage with the filmic texts in question in greater depth and detail, it would not be out of place here, in arriving at a definition, to critically examine the nature and evolution of the idea of alternative media interventions in the Indian context.

Since independence, the documentary film in India has been synonymous with the Films Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which still produces some 160 films a year and is one of the world’s largest film producing agencies.<sup>15</sup> While there have been several independent documentary films since the early 1940’s, the decisive break from the statist hegemony of the Films Division came with the imposition of the National Emergency in 1975. Anand Patwardhan’s film *Waves of Revolution* (1976) which dealt with popular and political opposition to the ruling regime was the first of the ‘new’ independent documentary cinema that has continued until the present in the form of activist documentaries. It set the tone both in terms of broad thematic content (popular struggles and people’s movements) and ideology (against the state and capital, favouring decentralised self-government, ‘grassroots’ knowledge and sustainable development) for all the films to follow. Tapan Bose’s *An Indian Story* (1981) on the blinding of 37 peasants by the police in Bhagalpur, Bihar was the next major film that followed.<sup>16</sup> This period between these

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<sup>14</sup> Comolli, Jean-Louis, and Jean Narboni. “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism.” *Movies and Methods*. Bill Nichols, ed., Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993. p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Kumar, Keval J. *Mass Communication in India*. Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 2001. p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> from Pendakur, Manjunath. ‘Cinema of Resistance’.  
<<http://www.city.yamagata.yamagata.jp/yidff/docbox/7/box7-4-e.html>> [12 January 2003]

two films also saw the beginning of most of today's active non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the institutionalisation of popular opposition to state repression in the form of civil rights organisations and various peoples' unions for human rights and civil liberties across the country. It is in this context that the rise of the documentary films dealing with social movements began in the 1980's. The opposition to the World bank's neo-liberal structural adjustment programmes since 1991 was also spearheaded largely by peoples' movements and NGOs in the absence of any mainstream political opposition to the 'reforms'. The films that I propose to look at also belong to this current phase of social movements.

The understanding, even if it is a cursory one, of the ideological and social context that underlies the production, distribution and the 'reading' of the documentary film as text is essential in the light of a political classification of the 'genre' (for want of a better word) that I have attempted. Once we reject the old generic distinction between fiction as narrative and the documentary as an objective representation of 'reality', what remains as an essential element that determines the form and content of the activist documentary is the filmmaker's *voice*. The development of activist documentary in tandem with and as a parallel part of new social movement has meant that most such films depend on the ideology of the movement to supply the *voice* of the film. While this can be seen as both natural and inevitable when the film itself purports to be a representative tool of a movement, the voice of the film too often is reduced to either the string of interviews with the 'people' or participants/leaders within the movement. The most powerful and dominant voice, that of the image is thus overlooked. The selection of images and the narrative structure of the film, instead of supplying it with a conscious subjectivity, are reduced to visual appendages to the verbal assertions of the participants. As Nichols explains,

'Far too many contemporary filmmakers appear to have lost their voice. Politically, they forfeit their own voice for that of others (usually characters recruited to the film and interviewed). Formally, they disavow the complexities of voice, and discourse, for the apparent simplicities of faithful observation or respectful representation, the treacherous simplicities of an

unquestioned empiricism (the world and its truths exist; they need to be dusted off and reported).'<sup>17</sup>

The proposed analysis will thus attempt to trace the voice of the film itself, as opposed to the voices of those who speak through it, by trying to understand how the film manufactures meaning through its images and narrative structure. Since documentary is as much or as little a representation of reality than any other kind of cinema, the essential element in any analysis would be this process of construction of the message. While this process is conscious, and indeed the very *raison d'être*, in the case of the fiction film, it occurs in spite of itself in the case of the documentary. Thus while the documentary film in many ways shares the same visual and aural conventions, technical and aesthetic rules and narrative strategies as fiction cinema, they have to be teased out in spite of themselves through an active deconstruction. Often, the adoption of conventions and forms of bourgeois cinema leads to a situation where politically oppositional thematic content is sought to be framed within dominant and established visual form. This dichotomy and its consequences for the meaning produced by these 'alternative' filmic texts is one of the main areas that the analysis will focus on.

The question of whether there can ever be a 'form' or an aesthetic that is marked apart from dominant ideological hegemony and strives towards an 'independent' or 'alternative' film form is difficult to answer at this stage. What is certainly possible is the showing up of dominant ideas within what are ostensibly oppositional statements. The quest for a new aesthetic necessarily involves the constant exposure of the existence of dominant hegemonic forms within alternative discourses. Since all discourses are constructed and manufactured, any destabilising strategy has to begin by challenging their depiction of reality. This can be done, in this case, only through a critical interrogation of the filmic language of the documentary, so that a break between ideology and text can be effected. A contextual criticism of each film would enable us to understand the underlying ideological fabric which each film uses to construct meanings.

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<sup>17</sup> Nichols, Bill. "The Voice of Documentary." *Movies and Methods*. Bill Nichols, ed., Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993. p.261

### III

The other major concern of this analysis would be the process of construction of subjectivities within the activist documentary film. The 'voice' of the film is to a great extent constituted by the ways in which the voices of its 'protagonists' are re-presented through the narrative and visual forms of the film. The 'protagonists', in this case, the subjects of the film, also play their role in the film by virtue of their location within a site of political resistance and by their very real participation in the acts of resistance that the film narrates. The subjectivity of the film's 'protagonists' is thus constituted as such by their re-presentation within the visual and narrative conventions that the film employs. In this respect, such a constitution of subjectivity through narration mirrors a similar process within academic historiography that is exemplified by the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective<sup>18</sup>.

In ways similar to the Collective's positing of their own work as giving 'voice' to the subaltern<sup>19</sup>, that is, to the little narratives that would counter the hegemony of hitherto existing dominant historiography, the activist-documentary is meant to act as a 'little narrative' in what can be called an attempt at a 'historiography of the present'. It implicitly opposes itself to the 'grand narratives' of the mainstream mass media and the established Press, in a way similar to the Subaltern Studies Collective's own positing of its work as being in opposition to the 'grand narrative' forms of dominant colonial and nationalist historiography. Just as the Collective attempts to constitute a 'subaltern consciousness' and, by extension, a subaltern subject within academic historiography, the activist documentary also seeks to constitute another kind of 'subaltern subject' for its own project of a 'historiography of the present' that Cinema and the Media embody.

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<sup>18</sup> For a fuller discussion of the work of the Collective, which included historians, social scientists and scholars of literary criticism – Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Shahid Amin and Gayatri Spivak among others – and for a discussion of the debates within the collective around its work, see Guha's own seminal essay on the subject, "Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography", and Veena Das' contribution to the discussion, "Subaltern as Perspective", in *Subaltern Studies VI*, Ranajit Guha, ed., New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>19</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarti. "Can the Subaltern Speak?". *Marxism & The Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 1988.

Following from Ranajit Guha's formulation of colonial historiography as dominance without hegemony<sup>20</sup>, his investigation into the constituents of hegemony in colonial and post-colonial India is extremely useful in understanding the location of the activist documentary and other similar 'alternative media' products and practices within the hegemonic order that generates and influences contemporary discourses of the historiography of our own present. His rather clinical analysis classifies the operation of power as being constituted by Dominance (D) and Subordination (S), each category in turn being constituted through the inter-relation of two other forces. Dominance thus exists entirely in the interplay between Coercion (C) and Persuasion (P) while Subordination exists similarly within the matrix formed by Collaboration (C\*) and resistance (R). The continuous and dynamic interplay between these four elements or forces constitutes the networks of Power in each singular and particular context. For our purposes, Guha's analysis of the constitution and determination of the forces of Hegemony, (P and C\*) will be useful in arriving at an understanding of the role and location of these forces within filmic narratives and therefore within the discursive networks of contemporary politics.

The idea of 'Hegemony' of course has a long history within Marxian notions of the relations of power, but most of our current understanding derives from Antonio Gramsci's reformulation of Lenin's idea<sup>21</sup> of Hegemony. Gramsci theorised hegemony as essential in understanding how the ruling class could pre-empt the possibility of the revolutionary moment through the manufacture of consent to the contrary rather than through any form of coercion or force. Apart from Gramsci's notion of hegemony as the conscious creation of mass consent to existing social order, I also find it extremely useful to refer to his idea of the State, not as a monolithic political entity, but as a dynamic organism which is constituted by both 'political society' and what he called 'civil society', both existing again, not as disparate empirical entities but as theoretical devices that provide conceptual frameworks to understand political action. The reification of 'civil society' in our own time, and the fact that the texts under analysis are self-declared narratives that form part of the

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<sup>20</sup> Guha, Ranajit. 'Dominance Without Hegemony and its Historiography' *Subaltern Studies VI*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989

<sup>21</sup> See Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. and trans., Chennai: Orient Longman, 1996. pp.381.



discourse of 'civil society' make Gramsci's concepts and theoretical understanding a useful framework to understand the location of each film within a larger socio-political discursive field. Gramsci understood power to be exercised through both coercion by a ruling class but also through the active consent of the class that is dominated. This consent had to be consciously created and organised, not through political institutions such as the state, but through the autonomous institutions and networks that constituted civil society. Hegemony is thus not a political manifestation that originates in the state but a network of relations of power that locate themselves in the interweaving forces between social, cultural, economic and political institutions, organisations and individuals.<sup>22</sup>

Contemporary readings of Gramscian hegemony, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*,<sup>23</sup> draw parallels between Gramscian hegemony and Foucault's proposition of modern power as a productive enterprise and not just a repressive one. In other words, the understanding that power exists not just through oppression and coercion (Gramsci) or denial and suppression (Foucault) but also, and indeed mainly, through active willingness and consent (Gramsci) or the cultivation of desire and motivation through regulation and discipline (Foucault), is common to both Gramsci and Foucault, and is extremely crucial in understanding the existence and role of contemporary discourses of empowerment, development and the delegitimisation of political action through a discursive de-linking of the political from the social and of both these discursive fields from the economic. More specifically, for my own analysis, I will focus on the ability of the Gramscian idea of hegemony, and Foucault's theorisations of the

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<sup>22</sup> 'Hegemony', 'intellectuals' and 'civil society' are just a few of the concepts that Antonio Gramsci redefined to supplement and at times reformulate existing Marxist theories that attempted to explain the location of the State and the relations of power within society but which did not reckon with the emergence of hitherto unknown forms of the exercise of state power in the form of fascism. Gramsci's definitions of various kinds of hegemony occur at different places in his notes written in prison from 1926 to 1934 and published long after his death. See Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. and trans., Chennai: Orient Longman, 1996. pp.12, 261, 263.

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion, see Sangeeta Kamat's recent study of the hegemony of the discourses of 'Development' on Indian society and politics and of what she refers to as the consequent 'NGO-isation' of grassroots politics which she bases on the idea of Gramscian hegemony and Laclau and Mouffe's reading of the same (Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack, trans. London: Verso, 1985.) Kamat, Sangeeta. *Development Hegemony: NGO's and the State in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002. p.35.

operation of power within the Social, to elucidate more thoroughly the influence of the state and 'civil society' on the filmic texts under consideration and the cultural politics that is implicit in, and articulated through, the hegemonic discursive practices of 'development'.

#### IV

The textual analysis of the three films that follows borrows from that process/strategy/ interpretive technique/ method of literary criticism called *deconstruction*. While acknowledging the futility of attempting to *define* deconstruction in any meaningful way, I will however essay a brief description of how and whence it evolved, where it locates itself and what it involves. The futility of a definition arises due to the fact that the process of definition would involve asking the question: is there some *thing* called deconstruction? That is to say, is there a literary practice called deconstruction, or is there a form of critical interpretation called deconstruction, or even, is there a literary theory defined as deconstruction, and so on. Such an interrogation would contradict itself at the moment of its own articulation because it would involve locating the deconstructive process within the very categories that it seeks to undo or 'unbuild'. Moreover it would also imply the delimitation of a clearly bounded body of thought that can be classified as a reified and definite school.

What is generally known by the name of deconstruction in its various forms in the field of contemporary literary criticism owes mostly to the use of the term by Jacques Derrida and subsequently by his contemporaries at Yale University, such as Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man. Indeed, Derrida even sees this as an act of a "translation or transference between French and American."<sup>24</sup> Deconstruction itself is said to have become some *thing* because of this eternal translation, transference which "destines deconstruction to erring and voyage."<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Derrida himself, on occasion, detaches or removes himself from this institutional

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<sup>24</sup>Derrida, Jacques. 'The Time is Out of Joint'. Peggy Kamuf, trans., *Deconstruction is/in America: A New Sense of the Political*. Anselm Haverkamp, ed. New York: New York University Press, 1995. p.27

<sup>25</sup>ibid., p.28

practice of 'deconstruction' that has now been linked so definitely to his own last name. He says:

- 'I have never claimed to identify myself with what may be designated by this name [deconstruction]. It has always seemed strange to me, it has always left me cold. Moreover, I have never stopped having doubts about the very identity of what is referred to by such a nickname.'<sup>26</sup>

Deconstruction, far from being a reified 'school' or 'system' of philosophical practice, is, as Derrida also notes, simply one of the possible French translations of Heidegger's term *destruktion* which refers to an act of unravelling, of 'de-structuring' a text by exposing the structure of the text as a non-existent. In his *Letter to a Japanese Friend*, Derrida narrates how the word came up in his writings:

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'When I chose the word, or when it imposed itself on me - I think it was in *Of Grammatology* - I little thought it would be credited with such a central role in the discourse that interested me at the time. Among other things I wished to translate and adapt to my own ends the Heideggerian word *Destruktion* or *Abbau*. Each signified in this context an operation bearing on the structure or traditional architecture of the fundamental concepts of ontology or of Western metaphysics. But in French "*destruction*" too obviously implied an annihilation or a negative reduction much closer perhaps to Nietzschean "demolition" than to the Heideggerian interpretation or to the type of reading that I proposed. So I ruled that out. I remember having looked to see if the word "deconstruction" (which came to me it seemed quite spontaneously) was good French. I found it in the *Littre*.'<sup>27</sup>

Hillis Miller defines deconstruction as simply an act of 'good reading'. In other words, there exists no system, strategy or process of deconstruction, but simply various disparate *acts* of reading. Deconstruction in this sense would imply a reading that responds, by which Hillis Miller means "that aspect of the act of reading in which

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<sup>26</sup>ibid., 15

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, Jacques, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend'. David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, trans. *Derrida and Difference*. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, eds. Coventry: Parousia Press, 1985. p. 273.



there is a response to the text that is both necessitated, in the sense that it is a response to an irresistible demand, and free, in the sense that I must take responsibility for my responsibility and for the further effects... of my acts of reading."<sup>28</sup> A 'responsible' reading is thus nothing more or less than *responding* to the text, a response that is necessitated by the text. It also means taking *responsibility* for one's reading of the text, rather than abdicating it in the name of an institutionally approved 'system' of interpretation. Such a reading – a response to the text – is determined by each text on its own terms, by its own particular textuality which would overrun any categorical divisions or generic boundaries that one might have assigned to it. Deconstruction would thus involve resisting any single *theory* or *method* of reading and interpretation. A text, in Derrida's words, is "a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces."<sup>29</sup> Further, as Derrida clarifies,

'I am not sure that deconstruction can function as a literary *method* as such. I am wary of the idea of methods of reading. The laws of reading are determined by that particular text that is being read, This does not mean that we should simply abandon ourselves to the text, or represent and repeat it in a purely passive manner. It means that we must remain faithful, even if it implies a certain violence, to the injunctions of the text. These injunctions will differ from one text to the next so that one cannot prescribe one general method of reading. In this sense deconstruction is not a method.'<sup>30</sup>

Here, it might be useful to consider the following 'summary' of sorts of deconstruction by Julian Wolfreys who is responding to Hillis Miller's differing definitions of the term:<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Miller, J. Hillis. *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James and Benjamin*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, p.43; quoted in Julian Wolfreys. *Deconstruction•Derrida*. London: Macmillan, 1998. p.15.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, Jacques, *Living on •Borderlines*. James Hulbert, trans. *Deconstruction and Criticism*. Harold Bloom et al. New York: Continuum Books, 1987. p.84

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, Jacques. 'Deconstruction and the Other'. *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*. Richard Kearney, ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. p.124.

<sup>31</sup> Wolfreys, Julian, *Deconstruction•Derrida*. London: Macmillan, 1998. p. 14

- deconstruction is not the same every time; each reading differs from the ones already gone and those to follow.
- the work of one critic is not like that of another; there can be no deconstructive method, much less a school of deconstruction; de Man reads towards generalisation, Derrida reads towards the singular and idiomatic
- deconstruction transforms the text by imitating its every move, its every contour, doing so in such a fashion that, through the closeness of the reading, the alogical is unveiled
- deconstruction does not do anything; it only performs what is already done by and in the text being read; it does not take things apart, it is not an operation, it only reveals how things are put together
- what is performed is the absence of any ground, origin or centre, an absence which is not imposed by deconstructive reading but which is revealed as at the heart of the text through good reading
- one can never say what deconstruction is because deconstruction does not allow for such statements
- all conceptual, abstract or universal terms are self-contradicting because they have elements within their conceptualisation which make their final meaning or value undecidable.

Deconstruction therefore, is neither analysis nor critique in the usual sense of the term. Even the word 'is' as in 'deconstruction is' would have to be used under erasure; since it is a term whose possibilities of meaning in this context have been exhausted. As Derrida writes, deconstruction, if it did ever *consist* of anything, would consist of "...deconstructing, dislocating, displacing, disarticulating, disjoining, putting 'out of joint' the authority of the 'is'."<sup>32</sup> Contrary to most interpretations of the deconstructive event, deconstruction is not a nihilistic or solely 'textual' process. It is not 'the unanswerable question but the question as answer'<sup>33</sup>. While some literary critics attempt to define deconstruction as the process of identifying and then

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<sup>32</sup> Derrida, Jacques. 'The Time is Out of Joint'. Peggy Kamuf, trans. *Deconstruction is/in America: A New Sense of the Political*. Anselm Haverkamp, ed. New York: New York University Press, 1995. p.25

<sup>33</sup> Wolfreys, Julian, op. cit., p. 59

undermining binary oppositions within a text, or showing how such oppositions cancel each other out<sup>34</sup>, such a definition involves taking one particular reading of one particular and singular text by Jacques Derrida and then extrapolating an entire general critical method from it. As Derrida makes clear in his *Letter to a Japanese Friend*,

‘...deconstruction is neither an *analysis* nor a *critique*...It is not an analysis in particular because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a *simple element*, toward an *indissoluble origin*. These values, like that of analysis are themselves philosophemes subject to deconstruction. No more is it a critique, in the general sense, or in the Kantian sense...Deconstruction is not even an *act* or an *operation*...because it does not return to an individual or collective *subject* who would take the initiative and apply it to an object, a text, a theme, etc. Deconstruction takes place, it is an event, that does not await the deliberation, consciousness or organisation of a subject...’<sup>35</sup>

## V

Finally, to consider the proposed deconstructive engagement with or reading of the three documentary films, one would first have to address the issue of the textuality of the films. Film exists as text, just as it exists as discourse. Film critics and scholars, including Alexandre Astruc and Andre Bazin, have long understood the textual nature of the filmic form as the basis of film theory and critique. Astruc’s notion of ‘camera-stylo’, which is a type of writing that carries the fluidity and semantic complexity of written text, and Bazin’s own theories that focus on film as mimesis, reminiscent of Aristotle, depend on the film having the same relation to the idea of textuality as language.<sup>36</sup> The textuality of each of these three films can be

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<sup>34</sup> Most notably Terry Eagleton in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), but also Richard Rorty, Frank Lentricchia and Christopher Norris among others, all of whom set up various straw men in the form of textbook-style ‘definitions’ of deconstruction, only to then criticize the ‘system’ of ‘deconstructive criticism’ or ‘deconstructionism’ as inadequate.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, Jacques, ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend’. David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, trans. *Derrida and Difference*. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, eds. Coventry: Parousia Press, 1985. p. 273-5.

<sup>36</sup> For a fuller discussion of the criticism of Astruc and Bazin, see Laura S. Oswald’s essay, ‘Cinema-Graphia: Eisenstein, Derrida, and the Sign of Cinema’ in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art*,

understood both through the use of filmic and general visual conventions or 'language', and also their own singular position and location within the larger political discourses of which they form a part. My own analysis that follows, however, is an attempt to break away from the excessive emphasis on the *frame* and the *image* that has informed most analyses of the film as text. The image on the screen is, as I will argue, only one semiotic category among the several elements that go to constitute the film as text. Implicit within each image is the 'act' of its production: the discursive event of 'writing' the image within the overall text of the film. The production, or writing, of the filmic image is itself constituted by several elements and depends on the existence and conscious use of certain textual practices of filmic writing and the exclusion of others. Also, as in a 'written' text (and perhaps even more so), the filmic image is also constituted as much by what it re-presents as by what it excludes from the 'frame' or the *parergon*.<sup>37</sup>

Derrida understands the *parergon* as the 'frame' around a painting. The frame is not strictly of the work, nor is it, properly speaking, outside the work. But, by framing the 'work', it actually constitutes the painting as a work of art. The *parergon* is thus not part of the 'work', but equal or parallel to it, yet it does not exist as a work on its own outside of what it frames. Instead it serves to situate the work by locating it within an identifiable context as part of a series of works and by excluding what is not part of the 'work' and is outside, in the world. The frame of the camera can also be understood as working in similar ways. More than in painting, the camera's framing function constitutes, even produces the work, the film. What exists as the film is thus not a mere representation of the world, but its active constitution through the process of framing. This framing, a process both inclusive and exclusive, and its function of exclusion results in the presence of traces of the outside in what it includes within it. The *parergon* of the camera is thus instrumental both in understanding the

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*Media, Architecture* Peter Brunette and David Wills, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>37</sup> Derrida, Jacques. 'Parergon'. *The Truth in Painting*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. Comprising four main sections, *The Truth in Painting* sees Derrida examine the major theories and philosophies of art through a consideration of supplementary and marginal features in painting. In 'Parergon', he examines questions around the idea of the 'frame'.

constitution of the filmic image and in the deconstruction of that image through an identification of the traces that remain of what it leaves out from the frame.



## CHAPTER II

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### Filmic Texts and Contexts: A Narrative Summary

The films that I will briefly summarise and contextualise in this chapter belong to the problematic that I have earlier categorized as the 'activist documentary'. While two of them are stories of people's movements, all three are attempts to problematise and call into question the Indian state's ideal of 'development'.

#### A Narmada Diary:

The first film, Anand Patwardhan's *A Narmada Diary* was made over a period of four years from 1991 to 1995. It is a narration of events that tells the story of the movement against the dam on the river Narmada between these years. This dam, part of a massive system of multiple dams and reservoirs called the Sardar Sarovar project, was initially a joint project by four state governments, the central government and the World Bank which funded the project through loans. This project was in line with the dominant ideology of the Indian state since Independence which visualised the creation of wealth and happiness through a large-scale application of technology especially for the generation of electricity that would in turn enable industrial growth, and for a planned system of large-scale irrigation that would, it was thought, enable the growth of agricultural production to sustainable levels. Big dams were seen as the best way to achieve these aims. In the case of the Sardar Sarovar project, the appropriation of large areas of land for the dam and its reservoir involved the displacement of the inhabitants, mostly adivasi, of the Narmada River valley in Madhya Pradesh. This displacement would have been one more instance of the violence of development directed specifically against adivasis, were it not for the crystallisation of opposition to the dam in the form of the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (the 'Save the Narmada Movement') or the NBA. This came into being in 1985 and by the time of Patwardhan's film, was widespread in the Narmada valley.

The NBA is in many ways the embodiment of most of the characteristics that are used to define and categorise new social movements. As Vibodh Parthasarathi explains, these include

“[the NBA] being a coalition of different groups, its integration with other non-party processes, its internal ideological pluralism which (at least in the short run) buttressed a unity of purpose; its means of struggle consisting of extra-parliamentary methods, parliamentary processes, legal activism, unionism and mass mobilisation in themselves as also in conjunction with the movement’s kinship with formal academia, independent research, urban activists, trade unions, NGOs, et al; its coalition building and networking at an international level providing wider support and legitimacy, which while necessitating an additional dimension to NBA’s internal communication processes has additionally catalysed specific media interventions.”<sup>38</sup>

*A Narmada Diary* opens with a clip from a Films Division-produced government propaganda film from 1971, ‘A Village Smiles’, which shows shots of the Nagarjunasagar dam in Andhra Pradesh while a solemn and sonorous voiceover intones the various virtues of this “new temple of modern India”. This is immediately followed by a television promotional spot on Doordarshan from 1994, which similarly extolls the Sardar Sarovar project. After these prefatory clips, the film begins with a group of men rowing across the water. The voiceover informs us that these are adivasis from Domkhedi village in Maharashtra who gather to celebrate Holi every year in the village. There follow shots of men dancing while playing drums. These are followed by scenes of a torchlight procession of villagers shouting slogans against the dam while the voiceover explains the genesis of the NBA, the figures relating to the dam’s finances and the nature of the opposition to it. After an interview with Medha Patkar who talks about the early years of the movement in the Narmada valley, which is interspersed with scenes of small processions of villagers carrying the blue NBA flag and shouting slogans against the dam while they wind their way across lush vegetation and through various villages. The interview is followed by a sequence depicting the conditions in the temporary resettlement site at Kantheshwar. The film then shifts to Manibeli village where a police operation is in progress to forcibly evict people from the village. This only results in the villagers surrounding the police in a circle dancing and singing while the policemen and women look on. After this act of

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<sup>38</sup> Parthasarathi, Vibodh ‘Media Interventions and The Unmaking of Counter-Cultures’. <<http://ias.leidenuniv.nl/host/ccrss/cp/cp1/cp1-Media.html> >

'defiance' fades out, the next shot to fade in is part of a short sequence that simply has several impromptu shots of the village, the lush and green country around it, villagers near the water laughing at one of them who slips and falls and ends with a boatman rowing off into the sunset.

Abruptly, the scene shifts to Bombay, to a demonstration outside the hotel where (as the caption informs us), the president of the World Bank is staying on a visit. As the voiceover explains the constitution of the Morse committee, which has recommended that the Bank pull out of the project, we see Medha Patkar leading several other activists in the lobby of the hotel. The sequence that follows unfolds somewhat like this: one of the Bank president's representatives tells the activists that the president is busy, Medha Patkar insists on meeting him, but is told that the activists can submit a written petition. After Patkar translates this to the representatives, one of them, Manglyabhai says that his message to the president is to tell him that people in his village were arrested and beaten when they protested against their forced rehabilitation and that the Bank is responsible. The subtitles read: "That is what our Indian government is like. They oppress us adivasis and yet you fund them. So stop these funds!" Then follows a brief shot of the scene outside the hotel, where the protest demonstration is in progress. Back inside the hotel, we see a man in a suit pushing the camera away then giving up and walking away. Next is an interlude with another man in a suit who explains that the fashion show that the Bank president is watching at the moment is a private function. We see the film crew sneaking in anyway, and then follow shots from the fashion show itself, before the camera is again pushed away while a caption tells us that the absence of cameras outside the hotel has led to a police lathi charge on the demonstrators and injury to two activists.

Next, the scene shifts to another village in Gujarat where a victory rally is taking place to celebrate the World Bank's withdrawal from the project. The rally is followed by scenes of groups of adivasis dancing.

The next scene is again a clip from a Film Division propaganda film that shows electricity pylons, power stations and transformers while the voiceover intones, "electricity is light, electricity is power, electricity can change your lifestyle,

electricity can condense the work of a century into a decade.” Then, back in the Narmada valley, we see villagers trooping into a hut and then one of them, Noorjibhai, explains that they do not need electricity, which is anyway good only for the government to run its factories. His interview is interspersed with the shot of a grindstone lying in a corner of the hut.

Next we see groups of women washing clothes in the river and carrying water in pots on their heads. Then we see men having their faces painted, and later dancing to the music of a pipe and a drum. There is no voiceover or caption. The next shot shows the dam site, while the caption tells us that it is the monsoons of 1993 and that the dam height is now 61 metres. One villager tells of the forced evictions in the village while we see a sequence of activists in a boat rowing through the water body that was their village while they point out landmarks like trees and a temple, the tops of which are still sticking out of the water before proceeding to stick the NBA flags on them. The slogans that they shout while rowing the boat merge into the slogans in the next scene which shows villagers marching through a street in Bombay. Then we see Medha Patkar addressing the gathering at a street corner meeting, and she ends with the announcement that she and another activist, Deorambhai, will be starting on an indefinite fast to force a stop to the construction. There follow shots of rallies, processions and posters while captions indicate that the fast has progressed to the 11<sup>th</sup> day. We then see police arresting and carrying away the strikers while the voiceover informs us that the government has promised a review of the project.

In the next sequence, the voiceover tells us that a month later there is no sign of the review and that Medha Patkar and other activists have threatened to drown themselves in the rising waters if the construction is not stopped. We see shots at night of police vehicles entering a village while the caption tells us that this a police raid. There follows an interview with one of the activists who is due to participate in the *jal samarpan*, Arundhati, who, in response to a question on whether it would be right to give up one's life when one can do much more alive, compares the Narmada movement to the freedom struggle and says that if there had been no sacrifices of lives during the freedom struggle, “you and I might not have been here now.” In the next scene however we learn that the government has agreed to another review, and the *jal samarpan* is called off. A brief sequence then shows Medha Patkar being

heckled on a street in Gujarat by a group of men who turn out to be workers from the ruling party.

The next scene shows Medha Patkar back in Manibeli, meeting villagers and addressing a gathering. Then the voiceover informs us that villagers in Akrana village have resisted attempts by officials to survey the village since surveying is generally a prelude to eviction. An interview with one of the villagers of Akrana follows where he explains how they resisted the police in the face of gunfire. Then they rushed to a neighbouring village, Chinchkhaddi after hearing that police firing there had killed one person. The villagers have planned a rally in Dhadgaon and Dhule towns. In Dhule, we see the villagers' procession, with banners and slogans in memory of the protestor who was killed, who, we later learn, was Rehma Vasave, a 15 year old boy. The procession is stopped by the police. We see scuffles between the protestors and the police and then a lathi charge, followed by an angry confrontation between several women activists, including Medha Patkar, and the policemen.

The next sequence shows the mourning ceremonies for Rehma, and has interviews with his parents and relatives. Then the voiceover tells us that it is January 1994 and the sluice gates of the dam have been shut, leading to submergence in the upstream villages. The scene shifts to New Delhi, where we see Medha Patkar and other NBA representatives in the office of the Union minister for environment, Kamal Nath. The sequence which unfolds sees Medha Patkar confront the minister in an argument about submergence and rehabilitation. Not satisfied by the minister's evasive replies, they leave the office. The next shot shows a newspaper clipping that says that Congress and BJP party workers had attacked an NBA office, defended by a party functionary as an accident. The penultimate sequence in the film shows the ashes of the recently deceased Chief Minister of Gujarat being immersed at the dam site, while the gathered politicians and party workers take a pledge to continue to work for the completion of the dam. Then we see another clip from a Films Division film about the Nagarjunasagar dam which shows a farming couple laboriously and manually irrigating their field, while the next shot shows the Nagarjunasagar dam, and the voiceover intones, "Traditional methods of agriculture must be discarded in every village. Speed and technology are the only answer." The next scene, back in Domkhedi village shows villagers dancing on the morning of the Holi festival. The

voiceover says, "March 1994, the festival of Holi. As dawn breaks on Domkhedi, demons are symbolically burnt." Against shots of the burning effigies, the final credits roll.

### **Chaliyar: The Final Struggle:**

P. Baburaj and C. Saratchandran's film, made in 1999, documents the movement that fought for the closure of a factory on the banks of the river Chaliyar in Kerala. This was a rayon factory that belonged to the Birla-owned Grasim Industries Ltd. This movement was one of the rare instances where a movement did meet with eventual success of a concrete kind when the factory was ordered closed in 1999, but without any real change in social and economic relations in the area. The film narrates the story of the movement in chronological fashion ending with the death of its leader and then the eventual success in the closure of the factory.

The film opens with a silent caption of a "Cree Indian saying" that runs: "Only after the last tree has been cut down/ Only after the last river has been poisoned/ Only after the last fish has been caught/ Only then will you find that money cannot be eaten." This is followed by another caption, a quote from the movement's founding leader, the "Late K.A. Rehman, Ex-Panchayath President, Vazhakkad" which says: "All I wish to see is my river come back to life just once. See the fish leap in the sun. And see that my people don't have to die any more like I will." After the opening titles, the film fades in to a protest demonstration in Mavoor on the 12<sup>th</sup> February 1999, according to the caption. As we see close-ups and longer shots of people marching, the voiceover runs: "This is not an agitation for material gains. Here is a community that is fighting for their survival. Their aim, to free their air, water and themselves from the highly toxic effluents of the Grasim Industries, a factory which has been poisoning their environment for the last 36 years. This film narrates the heroic struggle of a community who are no longer willing to be the victims of modern development." The film continues with long shots of factories, bare trees and effluents rushing in to river waters while the voiceover traces the history of the "big development" industries, "these celebrated temples of modern India", built along riverbanks in Kerala since the 1950's and their destructive effects on the natural environment.

The next sequence begins with shots of Mavoor, and as the voiceover describes a pre-1958 Mavoor, “an agrarian village of paddy fields and coconut groves” the shots include scenes of women gathering grain, a boatman on the river, and people getting on and loading a boat with produce, while a flute plays as part of the background score. The description of Vazhakkad follows similarly, as we see more shots of the river, boats, forests and a waterfall. The shot of a red flag is followed by archive photographs of politicians and the state legislature and Grasim factory from 1958, while the voiceover informs us about the 1958 agreement signed between the new Communist government in Kerala and Grasim Industries to build a pulp factory in the state. It goes on with the details of this and subsequent agreements which basically gave a free hand to the Birla-owned company to acquire as much bamboo forest it required in order to meet its production needs. In 1963, the factory began production.

The next sequence begins with long shots of the factory’s chimneys spewing smoke and the drainpipes letting out effluents into the river. These are followed by an interview with Chekku, secretary of the Chaliyar Struggle Committee who narrates how people stormed the factory when it began production, in protest against the large scale deaths of fish in the river, but turned back after assurances of action from the district Collector. Interviews follow with Damodaran, a “Vazhayoor villager”, and Chakkiyamma, also a “villager”, both of whom talk about the death of fish and the subsequent destruction of fishworkers’ livelihoods and the diseases that are caused by the dirty water. The voiceover fills in the details of the protest in 1966 against shots of archival photographs and newspaper clippings from the period. The protest was called off when the management announced the building of a new drain to carry effluents to the sea instead of the river.

The promise was not kept, and the protests were relaunched in 1967, led by the then panchayat president of Vazhakkad, K.A. Rehman. The sequence that follows has shots of old newspaper clippings, photographs and footage of Rehman addressing a meeting. Then, the voiceover informs, the new fibre unit of the factory began production in 1968 releasing additional effluents into the river. After another interview with Chekku and shots of effluents meeting the clean water of the river, we learn of the Ramanilayam agreement and the subsequent setting up of an effluent

treatment plant, which however did not solve the problem. The subsequent deforestation in the catchment area of the river then led to the effluents flowing upstream because of tidal effects in the summer months. Concerned about the upstream flow of dirty water affecting the factory's production, the management built a bund or dam wall to protect its daily intake of fresh water from contamination by its own effluents. Caught between the tidal pressure from the sea and the factory's bund, the effluent-filled river turned into a cesspool. Another interview with Chekku narrates how people broke the bund in 1979 and how the resulting flow of dirty water back into the factory forced it to stop production. The voiceover continues with details of this protest action and the subsequent building of a pipeline that drained the effluents near Chungapally, seven kilometres downstream, which allowed the factory to resume production. More interviews follow with Kali and Sreedharan, both "Vazhayoor villagers" about the dirty water in the river since then, and with Madathil Abubaker, also a "villager" about the decline of his livelihood since the fish in the river started dying.

The next sequence, against the background of shots of the factory and close-ups of the drainpipes explains how the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad's 1977-78 study of the region gave a "scientific base to the people's agitation". It continues with details from this study and others by the Chemistry department of the University of Calicut and the National Institute of Oceanography, all of which demonstrate that pollution in the river was dangerously high. This is followed by an interview with K.T. Vijayamadhavan, a "heavy metal expert" who elaborates the findings of those studies and concludes that to blame the "poor tribals in [the forests of] Nilambu who extract gold is... ridiculous", because the high mercury levels that the studies highlighted occurred only downstream from the factory. The voiceover then informs us that that the factory management initially refused to accept the findings of the studies but later conceded their factuality but said that pollution is an unavoidable part of development and asked the government to lease the Chaliyar river to the company in exchange for the creation of three thousand extra jobs. Following the shifting of the effluent discharge point downstream to Chungapally, the people of Vazhakkad withdrew their protest movement, but, continues the voiceover against the backdrop of shots of factory chimneys spewing smoke, could not escape the effects of air pollution by the factory.



The next sequence shows children at an orphanage in Elamarom village who were the earliest victims of diseases and blindness caused by the toxicity of the air around the factory. An interview with Chekku follows where he explains how the factory is situated in a low-lying thickly populated valley which makes the problem of air pollution worse. Sainaba Rehman and Salim, both “villagers” tell of their difficulties breathing and how they have to cover their food and drink and lock themselves in their houses because of the toxic air. More interviews, with a doctor at the Vazhakkad PHC and a ferryman, follow where we learn of the high incidence of cancer, lung diseases and asthma in the area.

The voiceover then narrates how the pipeline to Chungapally broke, releasing the effluents into village wells and fields. The protests grew and the villagers blocked company officials from repairing the pipeline unless it treated the water in the area. The company appealed to the High Court. The court dismissed the petition and the voiceover reads the judge’s pronouncement with a sonorous echo-effect. The voiceover continues, against shots of boats on the river, “this is the story of a river and her children, enslaved and exploited for the last forty years”.

The film then seems to shift in tempo. The sequence that follows has interviews with Salim and T.G. Jacob, an independent researcher, both of whom criticise the Grasim Rayons’ chairman, R.N.Sabu as personally responsible for the degeneration of the river, for his arrogance and irresponsibility. This is followed by a shot of C. Radhakrishnan, “scientist/novelist” speaking at a public meeting about the wealth that the “monster” has plundered for so many years. Against a background of newspaper clippings and trade union meetings Chekku tells us that the factory was locked-out in 1985 because of the workers’ demand for higher wages, but re-opened in 1988 with none of the demands met. Against shots of bamboo groves, the voiceover fills in the details: in 1988, the state government signed a new contract with the company agreeing to supply two lakh tonnes of bamboo every year, at an annual loss to the state of Rs. 550 million. Another interview follows with Prof. A. Achuthan, who explains how the factory pays nothing for the water it consumes daily, in quantities twelve times that of the city of Calicut.

The sequence that follows begins with shots of patients at the Medical Centre and PHC at Vazhakkad, while the voiceover tells us of the abnormally high number of deaths caused by cancer and respiratory illnesses. Interviews with a doctor at the PHC and with Abubaker, a cancer patient reinforce the message. Abubaker's interview shows him in front of his house, his crutches in the background, as he explains that his leg had to be amputated, and that the smoke from the Grasim factory is the cause. This fades out into a caption that tells us Abubaker passed away a few days after the interview. The tune of *Saare jahan se achcha* fades in over shots of Grasim Gwalior billboards, factory chimneys and effluents flowing into the river. This is followed by a shot of writer M.T. Vasudevan Nair speaking at a meeting, comparing the factory to an alligator in a fable. The camera pans over the volumes of several government reports indicting the company, as Chekku explains how the reports of dozens of committees lie forgotten. The voiceover then narrates how K.A. Rehman was diagnosed with cancer and how the movement gathered momentum again in the late nineties, this time fighting for the closure of the factory. K.A.Rehman died in 1999, with a dying wish that the struggle must continue.

The final sequences of the film begin with Chekku and Prof. Achuthan explaining that the loss of three thousand jobs which will follow the factory's closure has to be balanced against the regeneration of the livelihood of nine thousand fishworkers. The shots that follow show scenes from a hunger strike, protest marches and public meetings while the voiceover says, "The final struggle has begun. This struggle is against people dying of cancer. It is against the air that has become unbreathable. It is against the water that has become undrinkable. This struggle is for the right to live. And this struggle will determine the direction of a new development philosophy in Kerala." These scenes fade out into a caption that quotes K.A.Rehman: "This struggle is for the right to live. You can also take part in this struggle as a human being by sharing our concerns and helping us. We are confident that all the good people in the world are with us." More captions over stills of the factory narrate that the factory finally stopped production in May 1999 and laid off the workers, that the hunger strike by the protestors was withdrawn following the halt of production, that the Birlas finally closed the factory in August 1999 citing 'unviability' as the reason, that the workers unions tried to bargain but "economic wisdom of the capitalist prevailed over weak political manoeuvrings" and the workers had to accept the idea of a

retrenchment compensation. The shots that follow show groups of people painting a banner, while a caption tells us that they are “Greenpeace activists in front of the Government Secretariat, Trivandrum”. An interview with one of the activists follows where he says that local people must have control over their natural resources, and then we see the unveiling of a mock cheque indicating the amount that the state government has paid to the Birlas over the decades.

Finally, a series of captions inform us about the details of the retrenchment package negotiated by the workers’ unions, and that the Birlas sold the factory premises to pay for the compensation, that the “ideal of worker-victim unity against a common enemy did not materialise” as the workers rejected sharing of the compensation funds with the victims and their relatives, and, against the background of a still of K.A.Rehman, that Grasim Industries formally closed down its Mavoor units on June 30 2001, and that “the river Chaliyar has come back to life, its pristine surface reflecting the sun and the moon, the fishes leaping into the air, people bathing and frolicking on its banks.”

### **The Fire Within**

Shriprakash’s 2001 film *The Fire Within* deals with effects of the coal mining industries of Jharkhand on the adivasi communities of the region. The film begins with a caption dedicating the film to “all who are displaced from their roots in the name of development.” After the title fades out, we see women gathering fruits in a forest and an old woman, Phulo Majhi, explains how they lived by gathering food. We learn that this is Parej village in Hazaribagh in 1996. As the camera follows Phulo Majhi and another woman to the edge of the forest, she continues to talk about how all the fruits they used to get in the forest are no longer available now, and then the camera pans into the distance beyond the treeline of the forest where we see trucks carting away coal from a mine. The voiceover begins with a history of the tribals in the forests, and the beginnings of coal-mining in the area by the East India Company in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Then Phulo Majhi continues, saying that the land on which the mine is now encroaching is a sacred grove and that the mining company would have to face divine wrath. The scene cuts to deep inside the mine and we see only darkness punctuated by the lights on miners’ helmets, and the voiceover continues that the bulk

of the mines' workforce came from the tribal populations of the region, since the new land laws of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the creation of the zamindari system in Jharkhand led to the appropriation of adivasi lands by the zamindars. An interview with A.K.Roy of the Marxist Coordination Committee follows, where he talks about the migration of villagers to the coal mine areas and how while adivasis and dalits became miners and loaders of coal, the former zamindars and moneylenders became contractors and supervisors. Against shots of coal being loaded at the mine by cranes the voiceover continues that the common experience of oppression and near-slavery in the mines led to the emergence of what came to be called the 'adivasi' identity. After Independence, it continues, the only change was the replacement of the British officials by the 'Dhanbad mafia' of politicians, coal company executives and local moneylenders. As the scene cuts to a shot of people harvesting rice in lush green field, the voiceover narrates the emergence of the Tana Bhagat movement, one of the many movements of revolt against the British, which, it approvingly notes, later became different from the more violent movements and was 'Gandhianised' by adopting much of the philosophy and strategies of Gandhi's non-violent *satyagraha*. An interview follows with an old man, Khadi Tana Bhagat, where he narrates the history of the movement and its participation in the Quit India movement of 1942. The next few scenes show the Tana Bhagat 'flag-hoisting' ceremony, and an interview with Ram Dayal Munda, 'educationist and political leader.' who says that the independence struggle began with adivasis but adivasis have suffered since then, because the prevalent paradigm of development goes against the ethos and lifestyle of the adivasis. As the voiceover explains how there is still no national policy of rehabilitation of tribals who have lost their land, we see more shots of the mine. The next scene shows a group of women sitting under a tree in village Saraiya, in Chatra district. In turn they affirm that their livelihood depends on the forest and the land, and that a job may last a few days but their land will be there for generations to come.

After more shots of trucks and cranes at the mine, an interview follows with Jagdev Tana Bhagat of Piparwar in Ranchi district, who explains how his family has lost 36 acres of ancestral land. As Jagdev leads the camera through what used to be his land, the voiceover explains the exploitative nature of land acquisition by the coal companies and the meagre amounts of compensation. Sanjay Oraon, of Sidpa, in Chatra district, another dispossessed landowner waves his land documents in front of

the camera and talks about how expensive it is to go each time to the courts and how the district officials harrass him. Then we see M.N.Pathak, project officer for the mine at Uri in Hazaribagh who says that private companies may be exploitative but as a government official he always ensures due compensation. The next interview is with Fudgi Tana Bhagat of Piparwar who narrates how their land was acquired and their house was demolished without notice. A series of interviews follows with many other adivasis whose land was acquired without adequate compensations and who were forced to move. Sanjay Tudi of Urimari, Hazaribagh explains how the company hires a few men from each village as agents to convince the others to leave. Later, we see a village meeting, where Meghnath, a 'social activist' explains to the assembled villagers how the company tricks people, with liquor and promises of jobs, into handing over their land. Then we see footage of a confrontation between residents of a village and the project officer of the Turitola mine, where Vineet Mundu, a 'tribal activist' explains to the officials the nature of the damage to houses and injuries to people because of blasting in the vicinity. The voiceover explains that this is a new strategy of the company to force people to leave, by planning deliberate blasting activity very close to the village. Abruptly, the scene cuts to a group of women walking with flower-decked pots on their heads through green fields singing songs and later painting the walls of their houses. The caption informs us that this is the *Karma* festival; in the monsoons of 1998 in Hazaribagh. As a long shot shows the village and the mine in the distance, Jemma Mendis of the Chhotanagpur Adivasi Seva Samiti explains how women are especially vulnerable when the mine begins production because of the arrival of large numbers of outsiders in the area and because they have to walk long distances for water as the water table goes down and wells dry up. Against shots of the trucks going in and out of the mine, the voiceover informs us that only 25 percent of the two and a half million people displaced by mining have been rehabilitated since independence. More interviews with village residents, activists and an economist follow which explain the financial transactions involved in the parallel economy that is run by the 'Dhanbad mafia', and the ways in which unemployed adivasis are forced to 'illegally' mine small quantities of coal from the mine and sell it to middlemen. We see a series of shots of adivasis carrying their coal on bicycles as the mine's trucks drive past on the highway. Abruptly again, we see more shots of the *Karma* festival ceremonies: of people bowing down and placing offerings in front of trees.

Against shots of miners inside the mine, the voiceover explains the nature and extent of corruption in the erstwhile Bihar because of the Dhanbad mafia. Then, we see a shot of the polluted Damodar river, as a train passes on a bridge over it, and the voiceover continues with details about its pollution because of the coal-based industries in the area. We see men walk in and pick up handfuls of black sludge from the river water.

Then, as we see a white ambassador car drive through the gates of the Parej mine project office, the caption informs us that this is a visit of World bank officials to the mine and we see the officials being welcomed by local union leaders and officials, as the voiceover explains how the new economic regulations since the early 1990s have led to the increased participation of large private corporations and World Bank-funded mining projects, and we see a minor argument between an activist and the officials about the lack of replanting of trees in the forests that have been destroyed, and later another confrontation between the displaced people and the Bank officials mediated by the activists of the Chhotanagpur Adivasi Seva Samiti interviewed earlier. The voiceover continues with the story of an adivasi family in Turitola village who were tempted to move out with the promise of a job as loaders at the mine. The other families who refused to move were forcibly evicted with help of the police and the village was demolished. All this we learn against the background of shots of the remains of the village and bulldozer tracks in the mud. Then we see the cell-like rows of the resettlement shelter buildings and we learn that no other permanent accommodation has been provided. A song follows, against more shots of people loading and unloading coal and the demolished houses in Turitola: "My heart quivers with tears/ But this no one can see/ The forests and mountains are on fire which everyone can see/ I am orphaned from my roots/ But can they see the fire within me?" After another shot of a meeting with the Bank officials where we learn that instead of jobs the Bank wants to provide loans for self-employment, there follow more shots of men carrying their stolen coal on bicycles on the highway. The voiceover explains how modernisation of labour processes in the coal industry and the loss of lands has left retrenched miners with little choice but to steal coal from the mine and sell it themselves. An interview follows with Ramnika Gupta of the National Coal Organisation Employees Association, who explains how earlier protest movements against the exploitation in the coal industry were broken as various

interest groups bargained for their benefits, and also as murder and police intimidation demoralised protestors. As we see people scavenging in the black waters of a coal washery looking for small amounts of coal in the slurry, one of the activists explains how coal mining has completely destroyed the earlier lifestyle, community and social structure of the adivasis. Against shots of factory chimneys spewing smoke, the voiceover tells us that coal mining is still an expanding industry since demands for electricity are growing fast and nuclear and hydroelectric power projects meet with stiff resistance from environmental movements. An interview follows with A.K.Roy where he says that humans should be cautious when dealing with nature, otherwise both society and nature will be destroyed. After shots of buffaloes grazing in a meadow as a stream flows nearby, another interview with Phulo Majhi has her declaiming that the loss of the sacred lands will mean that there will be no place for the *Karma* festival the next year. After shots of the Tana Bhagats' tricolour fluttering on a bamboo pole, Jagdev Tana Bhagat says that he feels like killing them all but doesn't out of a respect for the law. We see a shot of a wall with graffiti deriding the false independence day of August 15<sup>th</sup>, painted by the underground Maoists in the region. Jhuba Oraon says that after a point, tolerance becomes impossible and anything can happen if the exploitation continues, and that they are not afraid to die because they have nothing to lose now anyway. Then we see the burnt out office of the Purnadhih Coal Mine project, as the voiceover narrates how the people of the village, who had heard stories of the displacement in other villages refused to move unless they were given jobs in the project. The company refused, and in retaliation the people ransacked and razed the project office. A caption informs us that the project has been temporarily stalled in the face of protests. More captions follow informing us of among other things, the creation of Jharkhand in 2001, the withdrawal of the World Bank from the Parej project, the pulling out of the US government from the Kyoto protocol and the spread of underground Maoist groups in the area. Then, in the final interview, with Jagdev and Tajo Tana Bhagat, Tajo, in a quivering voice echoes the words of the song heard earlier, "I am crying inside, everyone can see the fire on the mountain but can you see the fire within me? What do you have to say?" Her face fades to black and the final credits roll.





## CHAPTER III

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### Alter-Natives: Dominance and Resistance within Logocentric Discourses

In this chapter I propose to trace those elements within the films described earlier that I believe betray an implicit phonocentrism, the 'bias of the ear'<sup>39</sup>, and its attendant logocentrism that pervades most discourses that are self-defined as 'alternative'. The alterity that these discourses posit for themselves, and in which they see themselves located, can be understood in two ways: as a reaction to a perceived 'graphocentrism' of the dominant (within this binary of the dominant and the subordinated alternative other) which then proceeds to its extreme without actually transcending the boundaries of logocentrism that surround and inform both discourses; and secondly, it can also be understood in terms of a Foucauldian notion of a pervasive power which necessarily produces both the dominance of the state's discourses, and also the obverse, the other, the 'alter'native discourses of resistance to power. This phonocentric bias is shared by both alternative and dominant media discourses and by academic discourses such as subaltern historiography.

#### I

According to Derrida, the elevation of the voice and humbling of writing is the most salient characteristic of Western metaphysics. This (in *Speech and Phenomena* and *Of Grammatology*) he calls '*phonocentrism*,' the chief mode of the manifestation of logocentrism. His first argumentative task is to find evidence to support this claim. He finds the inaugural suppression of writing in Plato's *Phaedrus*. The material medium of writing is seen as a substitute for living, spoken messages and memory. A message needs the presence of its author to protect it, and memory needs exercise, not external marks. Plato saw the technology of writing as an external threat. It was a threat to the importance of human memory. In the *Phaedrus*, he says, "Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on

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<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the ideas of phonocentrism, graphocentrism and logocentrism, see Daniel Chandler's online publication *Biases of the Ear and Eye*. Chandler, Daniel (1994): '*Biases of the Ear and Eye: "Great Divide" Theories, Phonocentrism, Graphocentrism & Logocentrism*' <<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/litoral/litoral.html>> [12 March 2003].

writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of on their own internal resources.<sup>40</sup> In Aristotle, Derrida considers the treatise *On Interpretation*. Here spoken words are the primary symbols of mental experiences, and written words in turn the symbols of spoken ones. Spoken words are taken as the primary symbols because the relation of voice and mind is seen as essential and immediate. The voice is taken as a direct mirror of mental experiences, and writing as a derivative and deficient operation<sup>41</sup>

‘Phonocentrism’ thus refers to the privileging of the spoken word over the written. This paradigm continues to dominate even contemporary linguistics and philosophy of language. Derrida argues that the difficulties philosophers and linguists have in recognizing writing as an independent semiotic entity is part of a larger pattern of exclusion that is implied by the term ‘phonocentrism’. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida discusses how Saussure and other philosophers and theorists of language prescribed linguistics to be a study of speech alone, rather than speech and writing<sup>42</sup>. From the beginning, phonocentrism has been an intrinsic part of the Western history of ideas: the dismissal of writing as an appendage, an auxiliary technology, a mere secondary representation that has function and meaning only in so far as it is a transparent symbol of the spoken word. Derrida suggests that phonocentrism is not just a linguistic project but the symptom of a deeper tendency of priority and exclusion. He relates phonocentrism to logocentrism, the belief that the first and last entities are things like the *Logos* and the Divine Word, Spirit and Mind.

This bias, first by positing such an original *logos* (thought leading to speech) and a binary opposition and then by privileging one unit of this binary over the other, leads to similar biases wherever any such *logos* or an originary metaphysics of presence is assumed to exist. Thus, for instance, the local is associated with the aural, the rhythmic, the natural, the spoken word, while the extra-local becomes a reflection

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<sup>40</sup> Chandler, Daniel (1994): ‘Phonocentrism’. In *Biases of the Ear and Eye: "Great Divide" Theories, Phonocentrism, Graphocentrism & Logocentrism*  
<<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/litoral/litoral2.html>> [12 March 2003]

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976. p. 11

<sup>42</sup> see Chapter 2, ‘Linguistics and Grammatology’ in Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976.

of writing, of order, of technology and in general of the outside. In similar ways, the spoken word becomes emblematic of the community, of the village, of immediacy and of the metaphysics of place, while writing comes to be an element of the individual, of the urban, of distance, separation and space. In so far as the spoken word comes to be associated with the 'natural', and writing with 'technology', phonocentrism also translates into a bias against what is represented by technology, and in favour of 'nature' as a reified essence – a bias which informs most ecological and environmental movements and politics. It is this extended bias that, I will argue, also informs the categorisation of the 'alternative' as *logos* with the privileges of the spoken word while defining the dominant in terms of the attributes of writing.

However, this does not mean that there exists a simple oppositional line drawn between the graphocentric discourses of the dominant in the form of the State and the phonocentrism of the alternative discourses that are in resistance to it. A phonocentric bias is evident in almost all dominant discourses of the contemporary Indian State. Its classification of the 'natural' and the non-natural, of the rural and the urban, and by extension of the 'adivasi' and the 'mainstream' Indian, of the traditional and the modern; all betray a phonocentric bias at work. The setting up of these binary oppositions itself implies an essentialised perspective that necessarily privileges one element of the binary over the other.

## II

The tracing of the evolution of these essentialisations in the discourses of the state would involve a complex historical analysis, which is not my objective here. Their existence however is testified by even a cursory analysis of all the operational apparatus of the state, the official discourses of its bureaucracy, the electoral discourses of political parties, the cultural discourses of its media texts and the economic discourses of its various corporations, banks and financial institutions, etc.

This bias of phonocentrism is also evident in the academic historiographical discourses of the Subaltern Studies Collective. By positing a category of the 'subaltern' as a resistant subject, a subaltern essence and a subaltern consciousness is sought to be discursively constituted. The subaltern subject thus emerges as the

essence of the rebel, the insurgent, and the peasant who resists the technologies of the dominant, the State. The subjecthood of the subaltern is constituted within a discursive act of *history-writing*, which aims to enable the subaltern to find a *voice* and thus to *speak*. The only discourse here is a history, the discourse of the *writer* of histories, of the metropolitan academic. What is posited as 'discourse' however, is the *speech* of the subaltern, which has not been heard heretofore and which the writing of *historiography* aims to represent. Subaltern historiography, or the work of the Collective, is defined by them as a representation of the speech of the subaltern subject that is attempted to be made *audible* through its long due *visibility*, i.e., through its writing. The paramountcy of what is posited as the subaltern's speech obscures the discourse that actually occurs: that of academic *historio-graphy* and its constitution of a subject of resistance through an act of writing. This implicit phonocentric bias raises only that inevitable question, "Can the subaltern speak?"<sup>43</sup> instead of the un-asked "Can the subaltern write?" Even where a subject is being *written* into history (history as an academic discipline), the discourse at issue remains one of the subject's speech. Writing, in this case is understood as a tool, a technology, that seeks to re-present this speech.

The 'subaltern' as a notion, as a conceptual structure, is one that the Collective is said to have borrowed from Antonio Gramsci's formulation of the 'subaltern classes'. Gramsci's use of the term however, which he borrowed from military terminology, reflected a twofold concern. In the first instance, it was a way to get past prison censors who would object to the use of the word 'proletariat' in his prison writings<sup>44</sup>. The word itself however carried a more nuanced meaning than an orthodox Marxist conception of the proletariat as a revolutionary class. The Gramscian notion of the subaltern was linked to his idea of 'hegemony' wherein the subaltern classes are always subject to the power of the ruling class, even at the moment of rebellion against the dominant groups. The Collective's work on the other hand does not involve this sensitivity to the *operation of power* within the act of resistance (and consequently, the inescapable link between the two) that Gramsci's, and later Foucault's, theorisations do.

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<sup>43</sup> This is the title of Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay on the philosophy of the Collective's work. See 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. *Marxism & The Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. London: Macmillan, 1988.

<sup>44</sup> See the preface in Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. and trans., Chennai: Orient Longman, 1996. pp.xii-xiv.

The phonocentrism that informs the work of the Collective is similar to the bias that we observe in the films described earlier. First, the rejection of the 'grand narratives' of colonialist and nationalist historiography leads the Collective to the constitution of the 'little narrative'. The little narrative is a consciously local, immediate history of specific and particular historical events that draws material not just from oppositional readings of official records but from folk narratives, popular literature, 'rumour', oral traditions, and so on. This historiography calls itself into being as the self-declared 'other' of the dominant meta-narrative of history; it becomes the 'alternative' history.

### III

The same bias continues in critiques of the Nehruvian state after Independence. The discourse of 'Development' that was the dominant ideology for several decades since the 1950's came to be associated with the grand-narrative scheme of things, located in the same conceptual categories as the totalising meta-theory, the grand narrative and the metropolitan core. The critique of this development discourse explicitly valorised this system of binary oppositions and then proceeded to locate itself within the space of the oppositional element of the binary. In other words, within Guha's D/S model<sup>45</sup> mentioned earlier, the 'S' was appropriated by the critiques of what came to be called the Nehruvian paradigm of development which was then categorised as the element of dominance or 'D'. The Nehruvian phrase 'temples of modern India' was taken as emblematic of the misplaced enthusiasm of the development discourse, and this phrase is invoked in both the films that portray social movements, *A Narmada Diary* and *Chaliyar*, and both times as an instance of irony.

Against the discourse of 'Big development', the critiques posited the ideology of the local in the domain of the material: the use of local resources, goods that were locally produced, distributed and consumed, of local systems of agriculture using locally generated and available tools and products. This inevitably leads to a

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<sup>45</sup> Guha, Ranajit. 'Dominance Without Hegemony and its Historiography' *Subaltern Studies VI*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.

valorisation of the traditional and the essentialisation of the community. By defining the *locus* that informs their understanding of what is local and what is not, the place that happens to form such a *locus* is set up as a unit, as the oppositional secondary element within the D/S binary. The people who are located within this place then constitute a community. The community becomes the element that signifies resistance to the dominant discourse of development. The praxis of resistance is then conflated with the preservation of the essence of the community within its specific location.

The metaphysics of place that results is yet another instance of the phonocentric bias at work within discourses of resistance. By reifying resistance to dominance as being outside the matrix of power relations that constitute that dominance, the discourses of the 'alternative' ignore the fact that resistance and dominance are elements of a binary opposition that is constituted by relations of power. Foucault's categorisation of power as productive<sup>46</sup>, as leading to the creation or production of both dominance and its other in the form of resistance, is extremely useful in understanding the effects of power in discourse and in locating the discourses of 'resistance' within this constitutive matrix.

What we usually call 'domination' and 'resistance' thus both involve power, both involve forms of knowledge, government of action, strategies, defining what has to be done, defining options for the future. Domination and resistance are connected in Gramscian terms (coercion needs consent) but Foucault enables us to overcome the fault many Gramscians make in defining resistance negatively, as that what exists in the spaces untouched by power, that what remains after we bracket power. Domination is effective and real when it brings forth resistance – resistance is the *proof* that a power relation exists. But obviously, power relations are unequal, that is, those 'in power' can define and prescribe more than those 'under power'.

However the limitations of Foucault's definitions of power become apparent whenever one attempts to formulate a *politics* based on it. While acknowledging the specificity of power relations, Foucault's characterisation of power as all-pervasive still appears too much of an essentialised category, in spite of his focus on its

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<sup>46</sup> Foucault, Michel. 'The Subject and Power'. *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 – Power*. Ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others. London: Penguin. 2000. pp.326-348.

specificities. 'Power' here seems to be agentic, to act upon individual and collective subjects. This tends to obscure the fact that power is always a subjectively constituted entity. It needs an agentic subject in order to exist. In other words, it has to be exercised by a specific and particular person or group for certain specific ends. Its existence lies only in this exercise. Foucault of course says as much when he asserts:

The exercise of power is not simply a relationship between "partners", individual or collective; it is a way in which some act on others. Which is to say, of course, that there is no such entity as power, with or without a capital letter: global massive or diffused; concentrated or distributed. Power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action, even though, of course, it is inscribed in a field of sparse available possibilities underpinned by permanent structures.<sup>47</sup>

Secondly Foucault says that power can only be exercised on free subjects, since only the freedom of the oppressed to revolt determines the characterisation of power.

...there is not a face-to-face confrontation of power and freedom as mutually exclusive facts (freedom disappearing everywhere power is exercised) but a much more complicated interplay. In this game, freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power (at the same time its precondition, since freedom must exist for power to be exerted, and also its permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance power would be equivalent to a physical determination).<sup>48</sup>

Foucault thus characterises power not so much as an open confrontation between two opponents as a "permanent provocation", a system of "mutual incitement and struggle". Thus, rather than speaking of a relationship of antagonism between the dominant and the subordinate, Foucault uses the neologism 'agonism'<sup>49</sup> to refer to it, drawing from the Greek *agōnisma*, the word for a combat or a match.

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<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p.340.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p.342.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p.342.

Every power relation implies at least in potentia, a strategy of struggle, in which the two forces are not superimposed, do not lose their specific nature, or do not finally become confused. Each constitutes for the other a kind of permanent limit, a point of possible reversal....The strategy of struggle also constitutes a frontier for the relationship of power, the line at which, instead of manipulating and inducing actions in a calculated manner, one must be content with reacting to them after the event. It would not be possible for power relations to exist without points of insubordination that, by definition, are means of escape... In fact, between a relationship of power and a strategy of struggle there is a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal.<sup>50</sup>

The parallel between Gramscian hegemony and Foucault's theorisation of 'power' and its relationship to knowledge is rather misleading at times. The foucauldian microphysics of power concerns itself with the minutiae of the existence and operation of power in society. Power is held to be discursive rather than structural, a reified entity in itself rather than a sign of the varied, multiple and indefinite manifestation of social iniquity. In context, power has to be seen as operating within a structure of domination and subordination. The historical specificity of each context of domination gives us the nature of the operation and effect of power in that context. Foucault's concentration on the microphysics of power tells us nothing about the structural bases whose manifestations take the form of the exercise of power. A reification of power as a thing, as some thing that can be historically analysed and understood without reference to its structural context leads us no closer to answering questions of how and why power exists in society, apart from a Nietzschean explanation of the existence of an ostensibly unavoidable 'will-to-power', yet another reified essence.

While Foucault's work does give us radically new perspectives on the evolution of institutions and processes such as academic knowledge, madness, punishment, medicine and sex, his understanding is limited and ultimately reductive since it in turn sets up each of these institutions or processes as a unitary reified entity to be studied and its evolution traced. In other words, the 'prison', the 'clinic' and

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p.346.



sexuality, to take just three such categories, do not exist a priori in isolation for the historian to seize upon for analysis. They are indefinite aspects of larger interlinked social structures. To ignore these structures within which power exists as a means and a manifestation of dominance is to reinforce the essentialist categorisations of institutions and process as local and specific. On the other hand, Foucault's characterisation of power as omnipotent and omniscient (albeit with contradictory qualifications to the contrary<sup>51</sup>) leads to an all-encompassing narrative of the operation of power. As J.G. Merquior notes in his critique of Foucault's politics,

“...one of the peculiarities of Foucault's anatomy of power is its pancratism: its tendency to sound as a systemic reduction of all social processes to largely unspecified patterns of domination. ...to say that power is suffused all over society, or even that some form of power permeates all major social relations (two rather plausible propositions) does not mean that everything in society, or even anything significant therein, bears the imprint of power as a defining feature.”

Foucault's characterisation of power also depends on its definition as existing not in a structure that is outside society but “rooted deep in the social nexus”. As strategies of resistance, Foucault believes that resistance to power also has to occur in the same minute and pervasive manner. The politics that follows from this would therefore imply that resistance has to be concentrated at a specific locus of power, since any kind of grand alliance of resistance would fail to effectively challenge a power that exists not as a unitary entity or structure or system but is “rooted in the whole network of the social”<sup>52</sup>. This localisation of resistance agrees with the phonocentric critiques of modernity that reject the meta-theories and discourses of emancipation and liberation, and valorise instead the struggles that are themselves rooted in the issues of the local and the immediate. In other words, Foucauldian politics potentially implies a rejection of the global and a consequent privileging of the local, and by extension the valorisation of the spoken word over the written. This politics of the ‘grassroots’, of an essentialised *locus*, forms part of the same kind of phonocentric discourse that informs most ‘new social movements’ that are aimed not

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<sup>51</sup> see J.G. Merquior's critical analysis of Foucauldian notions of power in Merquior, Jose Guilherme. *Foucault*. London: Fontana Press. 1991. pp 108-118.

<sup>52</sup> Foucault, Michel. *op. cit.*, p.345.

at capture of power but at a state of permanent resistance to it. This politics of phonocentrism rejects the idea that local power relations are constituted by global, transnational phenomena, and aims at a challenge to power at the level of the essentialised specifically located community.

This possibility of a phonocentric politics can be better understood in terms of Gramsci's idea of hegemony. Gramsci conceived of the state, not as a politico-juridical entity, not just the "apparatus of government" but the "private apparatus of hegemony or civil society" and that the State therefore equals "political society + civil society, in other words, hegemony protected by the armour of coercion"<sup>53</sup>. The use of force thus depends to a large extent on the assurance of willing consent while the threat of violent repression always exists in the background. The structures that constitute the state thus cannot be understood as distinct or discrete from those that constitute civil society. In other words, the structures that exist for the articulation of opposition and resistance to the power of the state are part of the state itself. As Sangeeta Kamat explains,

Certainly grassroots organisations constitute part of civil society, distinct from the state, and whose relation to the state has been discussed mostly in terms of domination. However, Gramsci's analysis of state and civil society, as imbricated in one another, and not as separate distinct or necessarily as oppositional forces, offers a critical point of departure for the study of grassroots organisations. Gramsci's theoretical formulation of state and civil society as 'one and the same' makes it possible to analyse grassroots organisations in India (and elsewhere) as articulated with the consent and legitimization functions of the state, rather than as an autonomous political tendency of civil society.<sup>54</sup>

Understanding resistance itself as implicated within the structures and systems of domination enables us to understand the location of the discourses of resistance vis-à-

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<sup>53</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. and trans., Chennai: Orient Longman, 1996. p. 263.

<sup>54</sup> Kamat, Sangeeta. *Development Hegemony: NGO's and the State in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002. p.33.

vis dominant discourses. The differences between the dominant and the subordinate then appear in the form of binary oppositions rather than confrontations or struggles for power. The activist documentary film, in so far, as it defines itself as an alternative media text, as part of the discourse of resistance, is implicated in this binary opposition in two ways.

- One, the text of the film can be deconstructed to show that by reifying and essentialising the local and hence the spoken word, it acts as a legitimising text for other 'mainstream' discourses.
- Second, the production, distribution and reception of this media text are part of the hegemonic structures of the state that enables opposition to it to be manifested within its own framework.

Of these *media-texts*, in the former case, it is the *text* which is implicated, while in the latter it is the *medium* itself. Thus oppositional content forms part of a dominant structural form. Since dominant structures are largely extra-local, technological, metropolitan and *written* (in terms of writing as a metaphor within the binary opposition with speech) and since resistance cannot be articulated without the dominant ideological or material framework, these films, it can be argued, are products of the state's hegemony over discourses of resistance.

#### IV

*A Narmada Diary* (1995) opens with the clip from the Films Division film on the Nagarjunasagar dam. While the clip is emblematic of the state's propaganda films of the period – solemn and serious intonations of the virtues of big dams, electricity, industrialisation, mechanised agriculture, in short of 'progress' – its inclusion in the film is meant to signal an irony. The irony occurs in the obvious and evident contrast between this clip and the film's own narrative which begins with the nature of popular opposition to the Sardar Sarovar project. This opening also sets the scene in the sense of defining the film's own self-location, in direct opposition to the paradigm of development that the Films Division film clip symbolises. However, what must be

noted is that the film does not comment on the clip at all. The irony is assumed as obvious. The clip's voiceover and the shots of Nagarjunasagar dam are seen as sufficient signifiers of the violence and failure of the development discourse. It is as if their very presence is enough to signify their attributes: technological, metropolitan, non-local, modern, regulated and rational, therefore violent.

The very next sequence, which shows the adivasis celebrating Holi in Domkhedi, attempts to create a visual and aural contrast that serves to emphasize this opposition between the 'people' and the totalizing grand narrative of the State, and is symptomatic of all the other depictions of adivasis in this film and the others. The sequences all show adivasis in the lush green environment of the villages in the Narmada valley, rowing boats, washing clothes, dancing and singing. This seems to translate naturally into their participation in the NBA's movement, in rallies, in processions and demonstrations. The few instances where they are shown in the city, in Bombay and New Delhi, the depiction is one which only serves to emphasize the otherness of the participants, and the sheer unreality of the situation. Another instance, of the meeting in a hut, has one of the villagers affirm that they do not need electricity, and the sunlight streaming in through the openings in the walls and the shot of a grindstone that is interspersed with this interview appear to emphasize the idea of the self-sufficiency of the village if left to itself and to the resources of 'nature'. This interview immediately follows another clip from a Films Division film extolling the virtues of electrical power. This Gandhian ideal of village self-rule is followed later by another explicit reference to the Freedom movement, when one of the activists, a participant in the *jal samarpan* that is due to take place, asserts the link between the sacrifices of the NBA activists as similar to those of the participants in the freedom struggle. The dominant ideological framework that underlies the foundations of the nation and the state remain unquestioned throughout the film, which remains at the level of a challenge to the inequality inherent in the processes of development in general and the injustice of the Sardar Sarovar project in particular. The scene showing the confrontation between the NBA activists and the environment minister in Delhi is certainly vividly dramatic but the argument again constitutes not an opposition to the state and the ruling groups, but a demonstration of anger at the state's refusal of its duties.

The constitution of the 'adivasi' subject is something that runs as a common thread through all the films, and indeed through many other films of that deal with similar issues. *Chaliyar – The Final Struggle* while addressing the problem of the destruction of a river by a Birla-owned factory focuses on the inhabitants of mainly one village downstream. In its interviews, however, the references to the "poor adivasis" who live upstream contain a notion of the innocence of an aboriginal people. *The Fire Within* deals explicitly with the issue of exploitative coal mining in an adivasi-inhabited area in Jharkhand. While the emergence of the adivasi as a political identity in the Freedom struggle is explored through its interviews which trace the emergence of the Tana Bhagat movement, an adivasi resistance struggle against the British which later adopted the Gandhian ideal of the *satyagraha* as a non-violent means of resistance. Its depiction of contemporary adivasi identity however is premised on the same kind of discourse of 'otherness' that shows adivasis as typically engaged in well-defined role-activities, living mainly through food-gathering before the violence of the coal mining industry destroyed their lifestyle. The notion of development as an aberrant discourse that introduces new disruptive elements that are seen as foreign to the oral, local, 'natural' life and traditions of the adivasi subject is definitive of the film's depiction of its subjects. This implicit phonocentrism consequently assumes the existence of an adivasi essence that is continuous and coherent through space and time and that is disturbed through the violent intervention of an exteriorised development. The adivasi subject is thus always the other of the nation's dominant discourses. These films of course do not carry on the older statist characterisation of the adivasi as the 'poor, simple, innocent tribal' yet the subtext of the *originary* character of the adivasi identity remains. In a doubly essentialising gesture, the life of the adivasi is first posited as being 'natural' and then consequently this 'natural'ness is taken as an unquestioned given.

In some ways, this gesture is similar to the Subaltern Studies Collective's constitution of a subaltern 'consciousness' which is taken as existing a priori before the subaltern subject is duly constituted to fulfill the existence of this consciousness.

This question of an originary essence is also reflected in another noticeable strand that runs through the films. This is the idea of a unique *past* time – before the disruptive 'violence' of Big Development – which is linked to the reification of the



adivasi essence. This is especially noticeable in *A Narmada Diary* and *Chaliyar* where the river in question is itself identified and set up as a personified essence. In the *Narmada Diary*, the Narmada becomes a discrete and individual being, an almost-human, almost-divine unified entity. The time before the Sardar Sarovar project is understood as a time when the river was 'free', and consequently the dam is seen as an undesirable foreign element that now controls and hence imprisons the river, destroying its earlier freedom by disrupting the unity of its essence. Technology is thus identified as the foreign other that enslaves what was free and 'one' in what is then posited as a pre-technological time. This, it can be argued is an extension of a perspective that seeks to distinctly identify what is 'natural' and what is technological – in other words, what constitutes speech and therefore the other of the 'technology' of writing.

This perspective of course deconstructs itself if we understand film as an extension of writing, rather than of the spoken word. The idea that the activist documentary, by virtue of its self-definition as part of a discourse that is opposed to the dominant discourses of the mass media, is a kind of 'voice' of the subordinate against what is set up in opposition as the faceless totalizing 'writing' of the State, of the dominant discourse and of ruling groups in society is the result of this phonocentric perspective that informs their production. Apart from the difference of particular content and domains of influence, both kinds of media are ultimately 'written texts'. A film is by definition a text that needs a specific technology of production. That technology is, in our current context, a product of certain specific metropolitan industrial practices, multiple cultural influences and a system of power structures that determines flows of information and technology. These include that matrix of ideas, influence and material that includes the videotape, film, the camera and its codified systems of use, editing practices, economic and social structures in place that enable its production, distribution and exhibition and the socio-cultural belief systems that influence its patterns of reception, understood both as the 'consumption' of a manufactured product and as the negotiated 'readings' of a text. The film is a product of a technology that exists only in a literate metropolitan society. Its production demands another kind of literacy on the part of its authors, a filmic literacy which is primarily visual. The notion that a specific technological and cultural form can be somehow taken out of its social context to then act as an opposition to

that very context implies a rather simplistic perspective of a society and the ways in which it is constituted by its own technologies. This perspective, informed again by the notion of binary oppositions, fails to understand and engage with the complexities of a cultural form that go beyond its simplistic classifications as belonging either to writing or to speech, either to the dominant or to the subordinate.

By 'writing', as I have explained earlier, I do not refer merely to what has been called the 'literacy episteme'<sup>55</sup> in history, or the rise of the primacy of written forms of human communication as part of the operative structures of state power. Literacy in its strict sense is by itself a small part of the paradigm referred to as 'writing'. The new theorizations of the broadcast media, especially television, since the 1960's, following from Marshall McLuhan's analyses<sup>56</sup> may lead to a belief in the end of the 'written' and the rise of the 'visual' as a medium of human communication. However, the passing of the 'literacy episteme' from history has little to do with what I refer to here as 'writing'. Derrida's conception of 'writing' is a figure or a metaphor which names, as Gayatri Spivak writes in her preface to *Of Grammatology*,

“an entire structure of investigation, not merely... 'writing in the narrow sense', graphic notation on tangible material...Derrida's choice of the words, “writing” or arche-writing” is thus not fortuitous. Indeed,...no rigorous distinction between writing in the narrow and general senses can be made. One slips into the other, putting the distinction under erasure.”<sup>57</sup>.

Derrida writes as much in the section, 'The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing':

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<sup>55</sup> For further discussion see Jens Brockmeier's online article, 'The Rise of the Literacy Episteme'. Brockmeier, Jens. 'The Rise of the Literacy Episteme' <<http://lsn.oise.utoronto.ca/Rliteracy/Spring98.html>> [23 March 2003]

<sup>56</sup> see McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

<sup>57</sup> Spivak, Gayatri, Chakravorty. 'Translator's Preface', in Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976. p.lxix.



“Now we tend to say ‘writing’ ...to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible: and also beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself. And thus we say writing for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical and sculptural ‘writing’. One might also speak of athletic writing, and with even greater certainty of military or political writing in view of the techniques that govern those domains today. All this to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected with those activities but the essence and content of those activities themselves.”<sup>58</sup>

Derrida’s aim is not simply to set up writing as an opposition to the phonocentrism that produces the privileging of speech, by reversing the binary opposition. Instead his notion of writing attempts to show how it is just as implicated in the structures that govern and produce thought as speech is. Consequently what exists is not a binary opposition between writing and speech but a series of differences. The oppositional values of terms are only apparently oppositional; one term always informs and serves to determine the other, each term containing the trace of the other in terms of its identity. As Derrida says in an interview, “it is impossible to reduce the couple outside/inside as a simple structure of opposition. This couple is an effect of *différance*...”<sup>59</sup> Thus *all* concepts perform as writing, as writing effects or structures, their meanings articulated on the basis of their difference from other terms and concepts. As he argues in another interview in *Positions*,

The play of differences involves syntheses and referrals that prevent there from being at any moment or in any way a simple element that is present in and of itself and refers only to itself. Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. This linkage means that each ‘element’- phoneme or grapheme - is constituted with reference to the trace in it of the other elements of the sequence or

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<sup>58</sup>Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. p. 9

<sup>59</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994* ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. p.33.

system. This linkage, this weaving, is the text, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of differences.<sup>60</sup>

Meaning can therefore never be finalised: there is no 'closure', no point at which meaning is established once and for all. Derrida coins the word '*différance*' to mean both 'difference' (French *différence*) and the deferring of the closure that an essentialisation or an establishment of meaning brings; the play on the word only works in writing since there is no difference between *différence* and *différance* in spoken French.

Thus 'writing', for Derrida, implies a set of possibilities that extend beyond the empirical definitions of the term. As Christopher Johnson notes in *The Scene of Writing*,

Derrida's conception of writing defamiliarizes the customary distinctions made between speech and writing, life and death, presence and absence, the human and the animal, the human and the technological, and emphasises instead their necessary co-implication and continuity. The various (logocentric) philosophies of presence which prioritise the living, human, individual (intentional) consciousness and treat as simply secondary and derived any of its external mediations, precisely require such distinctions and demarcations in order to maintain their fiction of the pure and integrally self-conscious subject that is commonly called 'man'.<sup>61</sup>

Deconstruction, however, involves not simply the reversal or overturning of binary oppositions but their displacement. As Spivak writes in her preface, "...*Of Grammatology* is not a simple valorization of writing over speech, s simple reversal of the hierarchy, a sort of anti-McLuhan. The repression of writing in the narrow sense is a pervasive symptom of centrism..." Similarly the aim here is not to argue against the phonocentrism of alternative discourses in order to overturn them, but to

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<sup>60</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, Christopher. *Derrida - The Scene of Writing*. London: Phoenix, 2000. pp. 50-51.

show that the oppositions themselves are discursively constituted. The very attempt to constitute an essence of the discourse of 'resistance' – the attempt to demarcate the domain of the 'alternative' from an ostensibly dominant 'mainstream' – implies a participation in the logocentric structures that classify and set up in opposition the dominant and its other, the 'alternative'.

## V

The second aspect of these films' implication as legitimising discourses of the state's hegemony is the nature and context of their production, distribution and consumption as media products. The distinction between form and content is another instance of a binary opposition at work. Transcending this binary would involve the recognition that the materiality of the film's production is as much part of its constitution as its textual content. The usage of the word 'text' to refer to the film's content proceeds from the assumption that the film is, in many ways, a 'written' text, in the sense that its conditions of production depend on the existence of all those attributes that are characterised as being associated with 'writing' as opposed to speech. These include the metropolis, technology, absence, order, and so on.

This brings us to the question of the *role* of the activist documentary within the alternative discourses of resistance to the dominant, discourses that it itself attempts to both constitute and narrate. Here, the declared goals of the films appear to be clear, to act as tools of information and of campaign. The activist documentary attempts to play a role similar to the mass 'media', that is to act as the medium, as the middle, the in-between. To explain further by using the same system of binaries, one could say that its conditions of production are the social movements and 'grassroots' struggles around various issues of oppression and dominance. Its conditions of 'consumption', on the other hand are metropolitan spaces in the form of public screening events, other non-governmental organizations, universities, film festivals, film archives, metropolitan meetings of activists, and so on: in short, the spaces of what is generally called 'civil society'. The films attempt to straddle the two, as the medium between them, with the ostensible intention of eventually reconciling them.

However, the role of the activist documentary can be understood better as something quite different from its stated intentions if one understands 'civil society' in its Gramscian sense: as the legitimizing discourse of the State. Civil society and hegemony are thus implicated within each other. The hegemony of the state can be understood as the creation of consent through a discursive constitution of individuals as free subjects. Since, in the domain of power relations, the existence of free subjects is a precondition for the exercise of power, this discursive freedom is what makes dominance possible. This freedom is constituted, as Foucault writes, by the possibility of escape from power,<sup>62</sup> in other words, of resistance to dominance. This power/resistance dyad can be understood as the way in which hegemony comes to be realized in contemporary society. Power needs resistance in order to exist and vice versa, since power is exercised not through coercion but through consent and this consent takes the form of the right to resist. In the same way, resistance depends on the exertion of power. It therefore acts as a tool that preserves structural power rather than as an act that transcends it. It is in this sense that resistance that is premised on the 'alternative' can be understood as hegemony, as the creation of consent to structures of power by defining itself in the same terms and within the same frames of reference as those structures, albeit as their negation, their other, their obverse side.

Movements of resistance cannot therefore be understood without reference to the dominant structures of power. By positing the local and the immediate against the 'national' and 'global' of the State and capital, such movements operate within the same conceptual boundaries of the dominant, and, by so doing, act as the tools of legitimization of the structures of power that engender both. The activist documentary thus becomes an instrument for the manufacture of consent, since it does not go beyond the logocentric discourse that constitutes the dominant in our time.

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<sup>62</sup> Foucault, Michel. *op. cit.*, p.346.

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