Reviewer

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'Before you make a film, have something to say'

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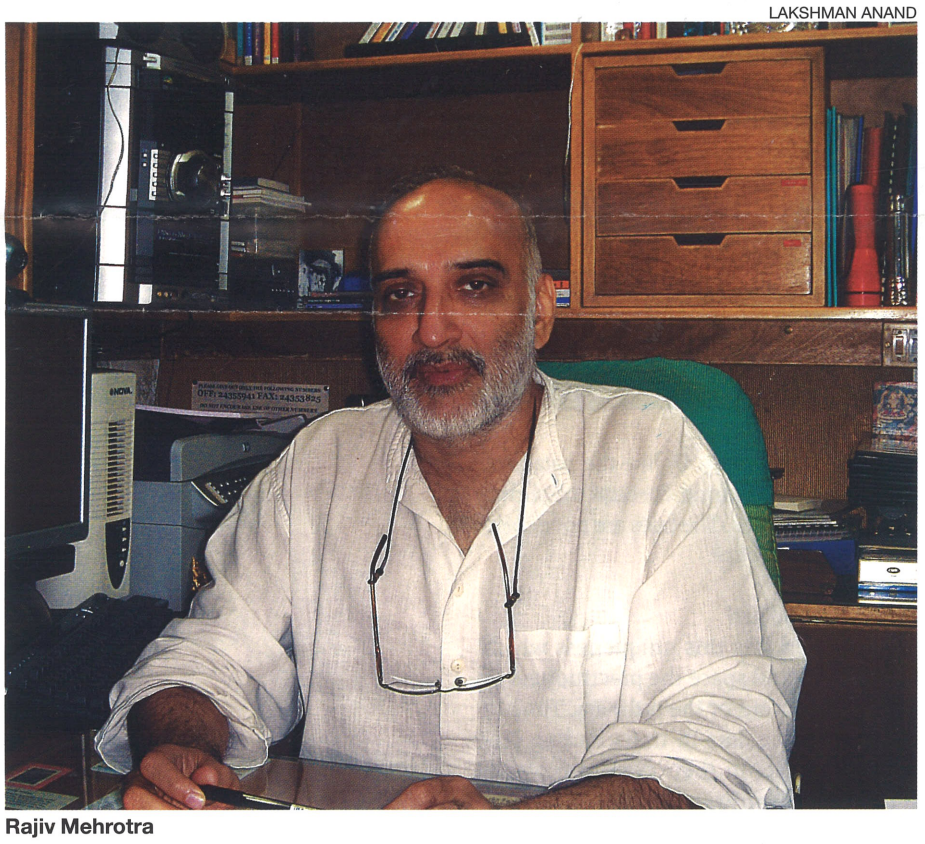
MORE documentary films are being made today in India than perhaps ever before. At least one news channel, NDTV 24/7, has a regular slot for the documentary. Many of the films have been winning awards. But does this mean the documentary as a genre has made a new beginning in India? How good are the recent films? How inspired is the film maker's command over story and technology? The documentary needs to be supported with both money and societal confirmation of its role in a democracy. Are such contemporary moorings in evidence?

The Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) was launched five years ago to encourage documentary film makers. It has funded close to 250 film makers. Rajiv Mehrotra, PSBT's director, says that while this is reason to celebrate, it is also worrisome that most film makers don't know how to tell a story and are unwilling to experiment with the craft of film making. Perhaps most worrying in the context of the documentary is that film makers don't have depth and rely on predictable social messages about secularism and so on. Excerpts from an interview with **Rajiv Mehrotra**.

LAKSHMAN ANAND



Rajiv Mehrotra

There is a sense that the documentary film has come into its own. A lot more documentaries are being made. You find documentaries on news channels. Can you provide a perspective to this?

There are, it appears, two key strands. One is extreme frustration, a sense of claustrophobia as it were, with commercially driven television. It is seen as serving only commercial interests and shutting out anything that does not serve consumerism. This has been juxtaposed, as it were, with the availability of low cost technologies, which have democratised the media. So, more and more people are being able to make documentary films.

Much like the Internet....

Yes. You know the time I went to film school, making a film required training, cameras, infrastructure, equipment. But that isn't so now. So, both these things have created the demand push and supply push as it were. I think audiences are also looking for authenticity and passionate vision and people who are creating documentaries are doing so because they feel the need to express themselves in this way. So I think it is this synergy that has led to the revitalisation of the documentary genre.

At PSBT in the past five years we have supported some 350 films by 250 independent film makers, many of them first-time film makers. So, at one level there is a sense of excitement at having been able to facilitate a movement in a truly empowering context. PSBT was really born out of the frustration of not finding that empowering context in which to make a film. And what is that context? It is to be able to go and make a film that I really want to make. And to have someone fund it in a supportive and objective manner. To mentor it without insisting that I make the film that the funder wanted to make, but instead to allow me to make the film that I wanted to make. And that is really what we are doing with the film makers that we work with.

But I have to say that there is both satisfaction and disappointment. The disappointment is that we are really not seeing the path-breaking, cutting edge documentaries with the level of intellectual rigour and pushing the boundaries of form that we would have liked to see. So we are seeing a lot of personal passion. We are seeing a lot of integrity, but I don't see them pushing the boundaries of creativity, new forms, new techniques, new narrative structures.

But what you are seeing in the case of documentaries is in keeping with the larger environment: what is happening in print media and cinema. I don't think we are achieving that kind of depth, sensitivity, that nuanced approach in any of our arts. Sometimes we reassure ourselves that Indian art and cinema are on the world stage. Actually I think they are nowhere if you look at the global map.

Has this got anything to do with the independent funding that other societies have a lot of?

Absolutely. But I'm not sure it is just funding. Of course at one level funding is

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Before you make a film...

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extremely important. But perhaps it is also a reflection of our culture which tends to be much more inner-directed than reaching out to external expression. But looking at the documentary film I certainly do feel that while our own films get critical acclaim abroad, they do not tend to score on areas of craft or film form. They really tend to get noticed because of sensationalism (and I don't mean this in a negative sense) of the content or the story.

So it is the story that makes people stop or feel shocked.

But there again I don't feel we have mastered the art of documentary film story-telling. The simple story just told is not happening. On the one hand it is very encouraging. So many people are making films. So many points of view are being expressed, but the other dimension that desperately needs to be explored is that the voices of the disempowered and the disenfranchised do not find expression unless mediated by people of our class.

Is it then a question of a certain class not being able to reach a certain level of creativity?

It is more an education aspect of being able to manage and handle the technology. It calls for certain levels of sophistication. And yet you know I think the few attempts that have been made by very few people to go out and try to empower rural communities or children to produce content has sometimes had very, very starling and moving results.

They may not be elegantly produced, they may not have the vocabulary of cinema, but ultimately it is what you have to say that is truly important. Before you set out to make a film, you should really have something to say and that something should be nuanced and deeply understood. And if you have that you will communicate despite poor language, bad camera work and lousy editing. The starting point is having enough to say.

So you don't have enough of the starting point. You don't have enough of the form either. And this is because, like it is in print, the people involved are circumscribed by their own experience.

Their own experience and for whatever reason and I really don't want to hypothesise about it, they are very, very reluctant to experiment. We keep saying to film makers go out and make an honest effort and if you have made an honest effort I promise you we will give you another film. But if you make a lazy, lousy film we never want to hear from you again. I'm afraid that happens a lot of the time.

There is also the obligation that film makers feel that in order to get funding or an award or whatever there must be a social message, something that must be good for society. But this in itself is not enough.

What is the role of the documentary?

The role of the documentary is the manner in which the film maker chooses to use it and find gratification. It is like art. In the early stages in India, during the setting up of the Films' Division there was this impression of the documentary being an agent of social change, empowering the development process etc. etc. That mindset hasn't left many of the institutions that have managed and funded democracy. Now with efforts such as ours and private funding, scarce as they are in relation to the larger picture, there is hope of a new approach. We have found some of our most exciting films have been made by first time film makers who haven't been through institutions and training etc.

They just go and make a film

We tell someone who has an idea or a passion to go and make a film and not worry too much about whether the camera shakes or not.