

Politics of the visual

FL frontline.thehindu.com/arts-and-culture/cinema/article30177715.ece



IN "SAB LILA Hai" by Nirmal Chander, Ramlila is used as a prop to show how a plural society is compromised in two villages in Uttar Pradesh with the change of regime. - PICTURES: BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The PSBT is emerging as an important forum for film-makers with uncommon ideas to make films on contemporary issues.

IN an age when the social and political psyche is greatly shaped by the electronic media, the politics of the visual' has generated many debates on its relevance, functions and correctness. In India, the visual has to grapple with diverse themes that are not just a part of the political economy but are fundamental to existence as they belong to areas that are broadly categorised as identity issues. In almost all the contexts, the relationship between a moving and a still visual and the political' subject has become so complex that it is hard to point out which shapes what. The New Delhi-based non-governmental, non-profit Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) seems to be conscious of this dynamics. The Open Frame documentary festival organised by the PSBT in New Delhi every year in September is reflective of this. The subjects of the documentaries range from arts and crafts, culture and tradition, developmental issues and the environment to globalisation, religion, communalism and history. It goes beyond the passive viewing of films to an engaged discourse and exchange of ideas that inspire dialogue and change.

With a corporate race to institutionalise film-making going on, the PSBT is emerging as the most important forum that facilitates independent film-makers with uncommon and relevant ideas to make films on contemporary issues. The documentaries produced by the PSBT not only add dynamism to the understanding of the politics of the visual but also encourage film-makers to enter territories considered non-commercial by institutional movie business. The PSBT has produced more than 450 films by more than 325 film-makers between 2001 and 2011 in partnership with Prasar Bharati under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of External Affairs. The PSBT has won 15 National Film awards, and its documentary films have received 125 national and international awards. Film-makers Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal and Rajiv Mehrotra and the lawyer Fali S. Nariman, the actor Sharmila Tagore and the environmentalist Sunita Narain are its trustees.

In its own words, the PSBT seeks to cultivate discourse, create content and establish systems and practices that facilitate public access to the electronic media. We work to develop and sustain a credible space for truly independent, participatory, pluralistic and representative public service broadcasting, distanced from commercial imperatives and political agenda. This vision is reflected in the annual Open Frame Festival organised by the trust in New Delhi every September to screen the documentaries commissioned during the year.

"GHETTO GIRL" IS set in Jamia Nagar, also known as "little Pakistan", in Delhi.-

The 2011 edition was a mix of documentaries produced this year and some award-winning movies produced over the last few years. It dealt with subjects such as communalism, justice, gender and tradition and modernity. However, what was common in all the documentaries was a stream of thought that showed the protagonists as a part of a social unit negotiating their identities continuously vis-a-vis the social, religious and economic structures.

SAB LILA HAI

In these changing times, concepts such as communalism and secularism are shown to percolate down from the power circles and get negotiated in the local climate. In Sab Lila Hai by Nirmal Chander, Ramlila is used as a prop to show how a plural society is compromised in two villages located about 20 kilometres from Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh with the change of regime. In Rudahi, where mainly Hindus live, and Bargadi, where mainly Muslims live, the annual Ramlila was always staged together by the two communities with Muslims playing the main roles in the drama. In fact, contrary to the practice prevailing in the State then, even Dalits were part of the Ramlila troupe. This was supported by the Samajwadi Party, which was then in power. However, when the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) came to power, the local legislator brought in a professional upper-caste group to replace the traditional Ramlila troupe. In protest, the traditional troupe staged a separate drama but with much less fervour. The director remains a silent observer throughout, merely documenting the political upheavals in a harmonious society. In the process, the identities of the Muslim actors, the Dalits, the upper castes and

the political class are reinvented, all in the context of Ramlila politics. The powerful steer towards popular support and money, whereas the marginalised try to negotiate their loss either by joining a political party or by trying to get closer to the new power circles. The Muslims never speak openly against the Hindus but get polarised by default because of this exclusion. There are no riots or tensions, which could have been a possibility in U.P. politics, but as a result of what happened in the two villages, the concept of secularism had to continually reinvent itself in a traditionally secular society.

In Tales of Napa, Lalit Vachani documents the situation in Napa village in Borsad district of Gujarat. It is a remarkable story of a small village that resisted the forces of fundamentalism during the 2002 riots.

"EER. STORIES IN Stone" by Shriprakash depicts how tribal traditions in Jharkhand are upset by land acquisitions made by the government and corporates.-

The film investigates the role played by local Hindus and Muslims and their social institutions in maintaining peace, in the context of economic interdependence, communal harmony and syncretism. The fact that is noteworthy is that Borsad was one of the worst affected districts during the pogrom. Napa resisted all attempts of fundamentalists to enter its territory, and in doing so, its citizens became conscious of their progressive standpoint, which in turn has given their identities a new vitality.

In Borsad district, Muslims and Hindus have traditionally lived separately, with Muslims historically having been pushed into ghettos because of a large right-wing presence. In Napa, however, the concept of communalism had to reinvent itself continually in a traditionally communal geopolitics as the coexistence in the post-riots period did not remain natural.

Urban Space and Gender

Urban spaces and gender relationships have always had an uncomfortable relationship. The new wave of sexuality politics has brought with it a considerable degree of consciousness, which is reflected not only in the attire but also in the attitudes.

In Ghetto Girl, Ambarien Alqadar tells her story. She is born into a Muslim family and stays in Jamia Nagar of Delhi, also known as little Pakistan. Yet, because of her modern grooming in a Catholic public school, her identity as a marginalised Muslim is less important to her in her childhood, when she wants to cross over to a posh locality in South Delhi. As she grows up, she is filled with nostalgic memories of her Muslim ghetto, and this brings her closer to her roots and she is simultaneously drawn towards the voices of the marginalised Muslim community in a Hindu-majority nation. Consequently, she swishes between her identities as a modern woman who does not approve of the purdah of conservative Islam and that of a Muslim who is contemptuous about other' Indians who call her a Pakistani, even within an elite neighbourhood. Her distancing from Jamia Nagar and her gradual empathies brought out by her political self is the story of her becoming. Here the concept of the marginalised is reshaped by the marginalised herself.

"APOUR TI YAPOUR. Na Jang na Aman. Yeti Chu Talukpeth" (Between Fence and Border and on the Edge of the Map) by Ajay Raina depicts how a temporary border disrupts people's lives.-

Alqadar's story can easily be the story of an elite Dalit, or an elite tribal person, or an elite Tamil in Sri Lanka. In these cases, the identities are not necessarily fractured but need negotiations because of their coexistence. Conflicts such as these continuously make a person more tolerant until they cease to be realised as conflicts.

In the award-winning *Morality TV* and the *Loving Jihad* by Paromita Vohra, there is a sharp criticism of right-wing forces trying to control expressions of love, and the supporting role of the instruments of the state and the media in the venture. However, what sets it apart from other such films is the all-pervasive and voyeuristic parallel narrative of hyper-sexual pulp fiction. This narrative serves as a commentary on the world in which such right-wing love jihads operate. In her interviews, she shows women approving of operations such as *Majnu*, where the police beat up couples sitting in a park in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. This gained popularity through simultaneous media coverage. The media footages show a policewoman leading a team of policemen in *Operation Majnu*, spouting anger and abuses at publicly affectionate couples. Here, the identities of the two women the victim and the oppressor are seen through the same lens, as both of them respond to their contexts in a very different way. One by daring to sit with her partner in a public place and the other, steeped in the pride of the uniform, punishing her for doing that. The contexts, however, remain the same of a fear of love, constant scrutiny, control of women's mobility and sexuality, a history of communal violence, and feudal mindsets.

Urban Identities

Similar conflicts in urban identities are shown in other documentaries such as *Vertical City*, which shows slum dwellers in a rehabilitated colony, or *Mera Apna Sheher*, set in Delhi, where the experience of a gendered landscape is shown through the elements of the male gaze, human surveillance, and the negotiations of the body that are present at all times.

In such a context, the often-debated tradition/modernity question gains new meaning and it is amply reflected in the anecdotes shown in the documentaries. In *Roots of Love*, director Harjant Gill shows the relevance and irrelevance of the turban in a Sikh society. Young Sikhs are giving up their turbans to different responses from the older generation.

A young Sikh, despite cutting his hair, feels that he is a Sikh but the older generation may not consider him a true Sikh. There are organisations, still, that attract turban-savvy youngsters to drape it attractively. Here, the turban is a fashion statement more than a Sikh identifier. Here, modernity incorporates the tradition. At the same time, the courts of the country declare that *Sahajadari* Sikhs (Sikhs without turbans) have the full right to be called Sikhs in response to a petition of a Sikh religious body that sought a contrasting decision.

"MERA APNA SHEHER", set in Delhi, shows the experience of a gendered landscape through the elements of the male gaze, human surveillance, and the negotiations of the body that are present at all times.-

As a result, tradition has to negotiate with modernist machinery, such as the courts and the state, thereby reinventing itself to retain some kind of structure, being fractured continuously by modern interventions. In the process, the definitions of modernity and tradition do not remain homogeneous.

Similarly, EerStories in Stone by Shriprakash depicts a tribal tradition in Jharkhand of installing epigraphic stones to commemorate the death of a community member. This is done randomly in various locations and not in cemeteries as the tribal people have historically remained mobile. But they go back to these stories in stones during festivals. It is not just an important source of history but is also an archive of oral traditions.

However, the new land acquisitions made by the government and corporates have upset this tradition. Here modernity not only contends with tradition but also takes into its fold the tribal way of life. The tribal people, as a result of this sudden occupation of their histories, keep swinging between the mainstream and their traditions.

Brokering News by Umesh Aggarwal shows the phenomenon of paid news in the corporate-driven media. News market in India is getting too crowded while the advertising pie is getting thinner.

IN "MORALITY TV and the Loving Jihad" by Paromita Vohra, there is sharp criticism of the right-wing forces trying to control expressions of love and also of the supporting role of the instruments of the state and the media in the venture.-

In the wake of the Radia tapes scandal, Aggarwal shows media houses engaged in furiously finding new avenues to generate money. As a result, the modern progressive profession of democratic journalism is compromised by aggressive modern capitalism. Here, the modern notion of journalism that originated as a progressive exercise outside the rubric of capitalism has to contend with another modern notion and more recent new-age capitalism.

The films shown at Open Frame are reflective of multiple identities in India that are in a state of flux, continuously changing and reinventing themselves. These processes not only operate within one's own self but also engage with the state machinery and the local political climate. It is a constant dialogue between many forces that shape one's identity.

Thus, you find a modern Muslim woman dressed in jeans in a Muslim ghetto to make a statement against the purdah system and the same woman wearing a hijab in elite Western localities to stress her religious identity. A compromise is reached as a self-exercise. In this case, the Muslim woman forfeits the short skirt in favour of jeans in order to avoid a sensation, and, at the same time, wears a hijab with a Western dress. Or a

communist worker, who is also a woman, fully aware of the historical marginality of women's sexuality, decides to work in a Dalit village dressed in traditional Indian dress, which has been considered to be an instrument to control a woman's body. Similarly, a Hindu protects a Muslim friend during the riots and vice-versa, or a religious Brahmin eats at a Dalit household.

Political consciousness makes a person more tolerant, and tolerance is what these documentaries tend to highlight through anecdotes from across India.