

The odd ones in!

FOCUS This year's four National Award winning documentary films remind us that there is life beyond the metros, says ANUJ KUMAR

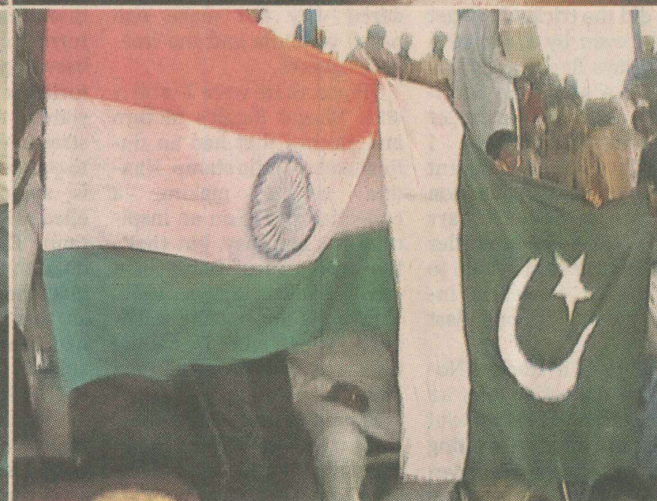
This Friday when your favourite news channel bombards you with quotes of Amitabh Bachchan and Saira after receiving the National Film Award, do spare a thought for four intrepid documentary filmmakers who will also share the same podium. They have dug out truths from areas which are far from the focus of popular cinema and do not make sense for the TRP-governed television. If there is one word that defines them all, it is whistle-blowers.

Interestingly, *The Whistle Blowers* is the name of the documentary that has won the award for the best investigation film. It probes into the presence of pesticides in bottled water and soft drinks. Director Umesh Aggarwal says, "The documentary tracks the investigation of CSE, whose report on pesticides in bottled water and soft drinks led to the formation of the first ever Joint Parliamentary Committee on a health issue." Umesh says the highlight of the film is that it is not judgemental and allows the soft drink giants to present their point of view. "Our stand is when they can provide zero-pesticide drinks in Europe, why can't they do it in India when they have the resources."

Colas as pesticides

The film also investigates the use of colas as pesticides in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh and the outcry against Coke for draining out the water resources in Kerala, affecting the crop produce in the process. Umesh says according to the law, once a person owns the lands, he owns the water resources as well. "But the High Court had ruled that this is true only when the water is used for domestic purposes, not commercial." As for the impact, Umesh says the government is coming up with a new Act setting some sort of standard for all the food items.

Then there is Sayed Faraz who has treaded the dusty lanes of death in the Shakarpur area of Gujarat. His film *The Way to*



MEANINGFUL (Clockwise from top left) Stills from "The Seedkeepers", "The Way To Dusty Death", "Wapsi" and "The Whistle Blowers"

Dusty Death is a moving account of the victims of silicosis, an occupational disease, in the Gulf of Cambay. The film has won the award for the best film on social issues. "Around twenty lakh people suffer from the disease in this country, but the government has yet to come up with a national policy simply because it doesn't reach the drawing rooms of the rich and famous, like AIDS. The electronic media doesn't show any interest either," laments Faraz.

Talking of the media, in *The Seedkeepers*, a film on the transformation of Dalit women through their involvement in ecological issues by Farida Pacha, the underprivileged have be-

come part of the medium. The village women shoot the process of change on the camera and have devised interesting names for the shots. The top angle shot is called the landlord shot, the low angle one is called slave shot and the eye level one is called sangam, the name of the self-help group that these women have formed in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh. Says Farida, "These women are into rain-dependant organic farming and are against the hybrid varieties of seeds that the government has subsidised and is advertising. They feel that the hybrid varieties soak up soil nutrients and require pesticides." The recent failure of BT cotton in Punjab

proves their point.

But all are not equally elated. Ajay Raina who has won the award for best narration for his film *Wapsi* feels he has been given a "safe award". *Wapsi* is essentially a travelogue with the Indian cricket team to Pakistan, but Ajay uses the opportunity to travel to minority-dominated areas, particularly their religious places in Pakistan, and comes out with some stark truths. "I asked for a visa to shoot a film in Pakistan but I was refused. So when this opportunity came, I applied as a cricket fan and I got the visa. I took along the smallest possible professional camera and shot at locations which have been traditionally out of bounds

for the Indian media. If I had been caught I would have been easily termed a spy." The film also focuses on how history is being distorted by the government of Pakistan. "The government wants to show that Pakistan's history starts from 744 AD." Ajay feels there is no space for those who take the middle ground in this country. "I have been told by my friends not to show this film for I would be taken as a right wing man or else the fundamentalist forces will get an opportunity to exclaim — 'we said so'."

All the films have been produced by the Public Service Broadcast Trust and can be bought online by visiting the site www.psbtr.org.