

King, Lucia (2012) *Performance on screen in India: methods and relationships in non-fiction film production, 1991-2011*. PhD Thesis. SOAS, University of London

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# **Performance on screen in India**

**Methods and relationships in non-fiction film production, 1991-2011**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

‘Research with Practice’ category

Year: 2012

Department: Centre for Media and Film Studies

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

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**'Performance on screen in India; methods and relationships in non-fiction film production, 1991-2011'**

Lucia King

**Abstract**

This thesis, written by a filmmaker is motivated to discover why a relatively high proportion of filmmakers from India since the 1990's, have chosen 'marginal traditional performance cultures' as a documentary film topic. Examples of the cultures being investigated in the films are the (African-Indian) Sidis of Gujarat, the Punjabi Sufi musicians, the poet-saint Kabir's followers and the Baul bards of Bengal. Being foremost an examination of the methods and strategies of authorship applied by the filmmakers, it reviews works by Rahul Roy, R.V. Ramani, Nirmal Chander, Madhusree Dutta, Rajula Shah, Shabnam Virmani and Ajay Bhardwaj. A wider scope of filmmakers is called upon to indicate key developments in Indian experimental non-fiction cinema from the 1960's to the present.

The thesis is simultaneously an auto-ethnography of my own methods as a filmmaker when producing a film based on a Maharashtra pilgrimage of the *Warkari* (pilgrims) included with this document on DVD. Here, I sought a similar topic and set of working conditions as my Indian peers, the project becoming a comparator to their experience. Whilst my research informants and their contextual history lie in the field of documentary, my position in writing this text is an *artist-filmmaker* who is learning from, and critically appraising their practices. Textual analysis, the practical experience of filming in India and the gathering of testimonies from the filmmakers are the main modes of inquiry, each offering unique possibilities of discovery.

This project forges an interdisciplinary discourse between film studies, performance and cultural theory pertaining to India. The *encounter on the film set*

between filmmakers and filmed subjects is taken as a key nexus of observation, assessing how the social relationships and agents in production contribute to film genre. Also questioned is the value being attributed to the ‘traditional’ cultural groups by the filmmakers. Filmmaking is considered holistically through a complex prism of religious, political and social motivations that dovetail with creative industry demands. Specific modes of filmmaking are identified as revealing how their authors situate both themselves and the traditional artists within cultural and film discourses of the last two decades.

### **Synopsis and viewing instructions of the enclosed DVDs**

#### **Synopsis of *The Warkari Cycle* (2011)**

Shot, directed and edited by the author, this video installation was originally designed for art gallery exhibition. It is also the practical component of this thesis. It is a music and dance driven work consisting of one 48-minute film (see *The Warkari Cycle*, **Disc 1** enclosed) and three short films *Tukaram’s Dance*, *Pandharpur Photo Booth* and *Vitthal’s Line* (on **Disc 2**). It documents the Warkari, a community of around one million citizens of Maharashtra (and beyond) during their annual pilgrimage in 2010 across the rural Solapur district, celebrating the 800 year-old legacy of medieval Bhakti (Hindu) saints. Rather than offering an informational commentary, the films immerse the viewer into the event itself. Each of the eight vignettes in the long film explores one environment of the pilgrimage as a living choreography, sensing out locations that bind the pilgrims to this re-enactment. From the mass dances at the temple of the saint, Tukaram, to the small gatherings around singing bards (or vaghyas) dedicated to the cult of Khandoba, the pilgrimage is traced in many diverse tributaries. The short films show individual testimonies of pilgrims speaking about the significance of this event in their own words.

## Viewing conditions

Since viewers are likely to view this work on a desktop or home video device, the following describes its planned screening design. The main element of the installation (the 48-minute film) is projected onto a screen of 3.75m by 2.80m set at 25cm above floor level (lending the effect of being able to walk into the screen). The blacked-out room is furnished with minimal bench seating. The film was shot in 3:4 (aspect ratio) to accommodate the possibility of screening it in galleries in India or the UK where no wide-screen projection equipment is available. The projection runs on a continuous loop from a DVD player or laptop. The screening room has an entrance-exit whereby viewers may remain present with the video installation in their own time, either viewing all eight of the vignettes (before the cycle repeats) or just one or two.

The short films have been designed to be screened at the same time in a corridor or anteroom leading into the main projection room (as above). Each film plays back on a wall-mounted monitor running on a loop, equipped with its own sets of headphones. The rationale behind these two distinct screening formats is that the longer film has an epic quality: we see the pilgrimage as a compilation of mass dances and ritual activities mostly framed in slow, wide angle shots. The sort films are presented in an intimate fashion where the viewer has a one-to-one relationship with the subjects on screen (listening to their testimonies on the headphones).

The installation also has the potential of being presented in other site-specific forms. For example, a film festival screening of *The Warkari Cycle* was tested out at SOAS (University of London) in November 2011. I have commented on this in Chapter 5 (page 232). I also intend returning in future to screen this project at the pilgrimage in Maharashtra itself, projecting it onto the side of a truck that the pilgrims

use to transport their supplies. The Warkari are accustomed to seeing large-scale photographic posters of religious themes on the side of their vehicles, so a film screening would not seem alien in this context and would be instructive from an audience perspective. These examples are important to mention as some of the many ways in which *The Warkari Cycle* can be re-imagined.

## **Acknowledgements**

I will begin with the many filmmakers that I would like to thank for sharing their films and providing vital interviews and ongoing conversations that have formed the main spine of this research. They have also been personally generous in offering copies of their works and extending invitations to screenings and conferences within this vibrant professional community.

These filmmakers are Paromita Vohra, Madhusree Dutta, Surabhi Sharma, Pankaj Rishi Kumar, Sankalp Meshram, Anjali Punjabi, Kumar Shahani, Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar (all based in Mumbai). Also Gurvinder Singh (in Pune), Deepa Dhanraj and Shabnam Virmani (Bangalore), Ajay Bhardwaj, Rahul Roy, Saba Dewan, Shikha Jhingan and Nirmal Chander (Delhi) and R.V. Ramani (Chennai). Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar were in addition my institutional hosts during a short residency at the Tata Institute, Centre for Media and Cultural Studies in 2010.

I am particularly grateful to the filmmakers Rajula Shah and Arghya Basu based in Pune with whom a more sustained connection also led to a production partnership during my shooting of the video installation, *The Warkari Cycle*. Under moments of considerable pressure, they have been generous in sharing networks, professional advice and defending artistic concerns. The film distributor of Magic Lantern (New Delhi), Gargi Sen offered a valuable opportunity to showcase my work during the *Persistence/Resistance; Documentary Practices from India* Conference/Festival in November 2011, bringing together working partnerships with colleagues across four London universities. Some additional people to thank are the folklorist Dr. Molly Kaushal, the film historian, Gayatri Chatterjee, the musician Mukhtiyar Ali, and the curator and film studies scholar, Nicole Wolf.



I warmly thank my film production team in India, Uma Tanuku (Production Manager), Ketaki Desai (Marathi to English Translator), Prem Mishra (Camera Assistant) and Sushant Arora (2<sup>nd</sup> Camera Assistant) and in the UK, Morgan Davies (Sound Editor) and Margaret Dickinson (Editing Consultant).

For financial support towards the fieldwork and film, I thank the Central Research Fund, University of London and The British Council in India.

Mr. and Mrs. Damodaran, Nandini Bedi and Sankalp Meshram have kindly shown support and friendship during my stay in Mumbai, and Aref Makooi for his productive commentary and advice on the text structure. I also thank my family members, in particular Ursula and Anthony King and Maria-Victoria Revuelta de King (my Mother) without whom my research trip would have been much curtailed.

A very great thanks to my supervisor, Stephen Putnam Hughes for edging this project closer to my deeper concerns as an artist and researcher, for an empathetic encouragement, consistency and valuable guidance over four years. I have also been grateful to peer researchers at SOAS, especially Jacqui Daukes (in the Department of the Study of Religions) with whom I have shared many discussions about the Warkari of Maharashtra.

Last but not least, thank you Helena Goldwater for being at my side, contending with mood swings, long sporadic absences and loss of sleep that the nature of this type of intensive research necessarily brings.

[Lucia King, January 2013]

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## **Explanation of the code used for bibliographic referencing**

Every quotation cited in the thesis falls into one of the above five sections indicating different formats of data in the Bibliography. Therefore a small letter (a, b, c, d or e) included next to each citation (shown before the date of publication) signposts *which* section of the Bibliography the full reference can be found. For example:

(de Certeau, a1984: 13) can be found under section **a** for Books in the Bibliography beginning on page 264. [Photographs where unaccredited next to the image are by Lucia King]

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# Chapter 1. Definition of the Research

## 1.1 Introduction

During my four-year residency in New Delhi in the early 2000's as a film and performance director (with a background in Fine Arts), I became interested in the relationship that my peer artists in India have with their cultural traditions. Since at that time, I was regularly collaborating as a British born artist with Indian artists, I sought to deepen my understanding of what they imagined as 'traditional' art practice and how this was informing their creative methods. When in 2008, I was considering in research terms how to identify 'a traditional art form' as distinct from 'contemporary art' in an Indian context, I took the question one step further to ask, where can one look to find instances where they might converge and 'infect'<sup>1</sup> each other whilst also staking their differences?

Since New Delhi is particularly known for its documentary film culture, I was aware of a particular strand of filmmaking (across India) that was taking traditional artists as its subject matter. The filmmakers were not working exclusively on this theme, but seemed to be shifting in and out of a shared debate through their films. Some of the leading filmmakers to mention here are Ranjan Palit, Spandan Banerjee, Saba Dewan, Arun Khopkar, R.V. Ramani, Ajay Bhardwaj, Madhusree Dutta, Rajula Shah, Arghya Basu, Nirmal Chander and Shabnam Virmani. The traditions they have been filming cover a wide range including the Bauls (from Bengal), the *thumri* vocal tradition associated with Muslim courtesans, the South Indian puppetry traditions

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<sup>1</sup> The reputed theatre director, Veenapani Chawla (e2008) whose company *Adishakti* is based in Pondicherry, spoke of art as a form of mutual 'contagion' between audience and performer in the context of her performance productions and their reach.

based on the Ramayana, the Punjabi Sufis, the Sidis (African-Indians from Gujarat), the Lepchas (Tibetan-Indians from Sikkim) and the medieval *bhakti* traditions in which the poet, Kabir<sup>2</sup> stands central.

‘Traditional artists’ for the purpose of this research, refers to musical storytellers and dance-dramatists associated with religious festivals, travelling bards, seasonal rites as well as artists who sing and dance informally as part of their cultural community. [I will only be discussing ones that have been represented in the reviewed documentary films, and will give contextual descriptions as they arise]. To examine this film topic across a spectrum of filmmakers’ practices seemed not only personally relevant, but could offer findings to South Asian film and performance studies as a cross-disciplinary investigation.

Another concern that was important to me was to discover what makes the filmmakers (that I have selected to review) artistically exceptional. My interest was in learning practically from their creative strategies, as well as identifying the cultural priorities informing them. I hoped that this would challenge my own thinking on methods of production both in my practice and for wider research purposes.

The signature film styles that caught my attention were that their compositions are ‘multi-textual’. What I mean by this is that their structures may arise from sources in poetry and literature, whilst also carrying a political message, and being ordered according to musical principles, all within one film text. The film may switch from auto-ethnography to ways of voicing several members of a collective, and so forth. This way of authoring leads to an intriguing blurring of stylistic boundaries that I was unaccustomed to seeing in non-fiction cinema from Europe. The dominant use of

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<sup>2</sup> Kabir born (circa 1398) as the son of a Muslim weaver, who lived in the outskirts of Varanasi, was a mystic poet-*sant* who is celebrated by Hindus and Muslims alike. He was critical of the intolerance of orthodoxies in both faith systems and a key figure of the *bhakti* movement.

hand held cameras also seemed to signal the desire for quick, fluid responses to the unpredictable outcomes that ‘on set’ encounters deliver. Additionally, I discovered that many of the filmmakers spent several years researching and engaging with the traditional artists in repeated visits. The filmmaking process thus made the relationship with the protagonists more burdened yet also more intimate. I hoped to learn why these and other creative choices were being made, and what cinematic forms were consequently emerging. Since film techniques articulate *people* in specific ways, to unpack the underlying narratives about ‘traditional artists’ through studying their films became an associated quest.

The next step was to ask myself how I as a European artist, could enter the debate about film production systems by making film alongside working on text-based analysis. I wanted to revise my own practice by investigating what Indians are concerned with in a cultural discourse that I saw as largely addressed to other Indians (though many of these films have been funded and distributed internationally). Deciding to produce a film on the Warkari pilgrims in Maharashtra as an example of a ‘traditional culture’, I believed I would come closer to the dilemmas faced by my peer filmmakers from India- whilst this would also reveal discrepancies in our approaches and thinking. Having worked for several years in India on creative collaborations in film and theatre with the dramatist Smita Bharti, and other established Indian directors such as Veenapani Chawla and Roysten Abel, such production negotiations were not new to me, yet the focus on traditional practitioners *was* new. My projects from 2004 to 2011 have been investigating performance-making in both Indian and UK-based theatre projects, in a poetic style that emphasizes the visual, musical and corporeal possibilities of film, but in India, these were often productions with urban

(English-speaking) creative directors in which our cultural differences were to some extent masked by a more internationally oriented approach.

The surge of documentaries made about *katha vachana*<sup>3</sup>, folk dramas and other forms of informal musical and devotional cultures, has intensified since the early 1990's for reasons this research will probe. The performances and wider cultural practice of these artists embody many aspects of religious, political and communitarian identities. They also have a history of being appropriated by government schemes, or exchanging currencies with popular entertainment cinema, urban theatre and non-fiction cinema in India, (see Krishnaswamy & Barnouw 1980: 72).

The period 1991-2011 has been bracketed for my research since it marks the beginning of a sustained liberalization and globalization of India's wider economy. The early 1990's marked a significant growth of an independent press, and the popularity of video as an emerging technology, coinciding with a slackening of Government control on media channels (Crawley and Page, 2001:66). The region's satellite channels then became commercial, global enterprises, having been previously restricted by Doordarshan, the centralized state TV network. Digital technology's<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Katha vachana*, meaning *that which is uttered*, was shaped by the 12th century Veerashaiva movement. Vachana poetry became an oral tradition transmitted by religious leaders, but also caste minorities. More generically, the term is used to describe traditional musical storytelling performance. A.K. Ramanujan's *Speaking of Siva* (1973) is a key text on Veerashaiva history. More recently, Molly Kaushal's *Chanted Narratives; the Living Katha-Vachana Tradition* (2001) provides an anthology of scholars investigating their significance in the present day, seen from a range of inter-disciplinary inquiries.

<sup>4</sup> Sony's digital video, first introduced commercially in 1986 (the D-1 format) replaced analogue media forms, primarily for TV broadcast and later Digi-Betacam. The first key digital video product running on PC's was *PACo*: The PICS Animation Compiler from the Company of Science and Art in Providence globalised in 1991. In 1992, Bernard Luskin, Philips Interactive Media, and Eric Doctorow, Paramount Worldwide Video, launched movies on CD, leading to DVD production. <http://www.motionworks.com.au/2009/11/cosa-lives> (Accessed 11.15.2009)



first exports to serve global film industries arrived in India in 1991, although small handy-cam cameras (popular with independent documentary filmmakers) such as the Hi-8 camera were available since 1981. Digital technologies upgraded to broadcast quality facilitated the rapid growth of small film companies with lower overheads than the celluloid-based industries and directly affected the social matrix of film production. These small-scale independent companies are the main focus of my survey.

When I was considering how creative authoring in ‘traditional’ (often devotional) practices vis-à-vis ‘contemporary’ filmmaking is attributed, it became apparent that state institutional patronage systems stake boundaries between the two. In this regard, to trace the origin of the concept of ‘heritage conservation’ and its relation to development policy also became relevant to my inquiry. One could rightly claim that the so-called ‘new media’ are deeply rooted in the aesthetics of the ‘old media’ such as painting, music and drama, and in some ways- to consider notions such as political resistance in art could be more fruitful than assessing this relational zone between practitioners. Yet the extensive intellectual discourse on how ‘the traditions’ have been historicized in India has fuelled a critical practice in documentary film that is intrinsically bound to this discourse, and therefore was one in which I had to engage.

Moving from personal motivations to the tenets of this thesis, the following sets out in summary form the research’s main agenda.

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## 1.2 Summary outline of the thesis

### **The Inquiry**

In this thesis, I set out to discover how the encounter that takes place on the film set between filmmakers and their filmed subjects in documentary production in India, generates the aesthetics of the resulting films. Narrowing my choice of filmed subjects to traditional artists who are performers, musical storytellers and dancers allows me to examine the relative perceptions of ‘practice’ between the traditional live media and lens-based digital (film) media. My research ultimately concerns the dynamics of authoring processes and how these are negotiated, including questions of how these relationships reach across assumed cultural divides. But just as important is the exploration of film poetics and how the agents involved in the production take account for themselves therein. If we wish to discover what is significant about these traditions in the eyes of the filmmakers, the on set encounter demonstrates *what they are making of them, and how*.

The aesthetic regime of a film not only concerns its style and composition but, particularly in the case of non-fiction filmmaking, it is an indicator of how the “living of life” of the filmed subjects and their cultural engagements depicted on screen, are given meaning for film audiences. Aesthetics therefore demonstrates ideological systems, since the filmmakers are re-signifying the live encounter through their intervention. The concept of an ‘aesthetic regime’ is drawn from Jacques Rancière, and my prioritizing of the on set encounter is inspired by Walter Benjamin, whose perspectives I will summarise. Benjamin, (a1968 [1936]: 233) talks of ‘technique’ in film production neither as its form nor content but the way in which a work engages

social relationships. 'Relationships' may refer here to spoken communications, but also to non-verbal interactions, in dance, music and physical gesture. The purpose in calling them 'relationships' rather than speaking of a 'dialogue' between filmmaker and filmed subject is that one cannot pre-empt the outcome; they might reach a state of 'dialogue', or they may not. Benjamin's precept foregrounds how the terms of spectatorship in film derive directly from the encounter between people during production, in the imagination of how the technology serves the 'idea' of the film. Alongside this, however, I agree with Rancière's qualification that:

There is...an aesthetics at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin's discussion of the 'aestheticization of politics' specific to the 'age of masses'. ... aesthetics can be understood... as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience...It is on this basis of this primary aesthetics that it is possible to raise the question of 'aesthetic practices'; ... Artistic practices are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing...(Rancière, 2006 [2000]: 13)

From this vantage-point, the space between camera technologies, their operators and those they are pointed towards 'on set' is one in which these '*a priori* forms' first reveal themselves, making it a crucial site to study. It is furthermore a site where the livelihoods of filmmakers and traditional artists directly compete, and where the filmmaking process alters the performance of both.

When certain dis-junctures occur in the filmmakers' and protagonists' claims upon the film-in-progress they are imagining, this also signals differences in what they consider important to be transmitted to their audiences. 'Transmission' is therefore an important concept through which the relative cultural priorities of the participants can be gauged. If a filmmaker is imagining what is relevant to shoot to establish a particular line of argument, this may privilege aspects of the filmed subjects' activities that they themselves find unimportant. Conversely, for example, in a ritual drama in which the spiritual aspect is significant, a filmmaker may 'secularize' it towards what they consider 'appropriate' for a documentary. Since my research ultimately concerns the dynamics of collective authoring processes, the encounter on set in particular throws up the ethical and communicative issues that arise en route.

In my inquiry I have relied largely on what the filmmakers themselves have reported to me about their encounters, since it was unfeasible to employ an entire network of investigators to observe activities on various film sets across the country. Yet the filmmakers' films combined with their interview testimonies do demonstrate what questions they have about the traditions, and what cultural critique they might be offering. To put the social dynamics of film authoring at the centre also offers film research a window into the volatile, situational and argumentative processes of film production that the syntactical analysis of the archival material of film would exclude.

## Two-fold analytic method

In tracing film aesthetics from on set encounters, my methods developed along two distinct trajectories. Having identified and viewed around 100 films that take traditional artists as their subject, I interviewed 19 established filmmakers whose practices reveals a range of motivations for choosing this theme. My questions to them were on how they experienced their relationships on set, and their directorial ambitions. In addition, I researched<sup>5</sup> and analyzed earlier examples from the history of documentary and non-fiction experimentation in India (on representations of traditional artists) to contextualize their practices, thus equipping myself to be able to offer a commentary.

Not wanting to divorce my analysis from the condition of being an artist and filmmaker myself, the second strand of my inquiry arises from entering the matrix of the ‘on set encounter’ in person, producing a film in India on a ‘traditional cultural group’. The choice to shoot a film (that resulted in a video installation called ‘*The Warkari Cycle*’) on the Warkari of Maharashtra, and their pilgrimage that celebrates the bhakti *sants*<sup>6</sup>, was related to my correspondence with a peer filmmaker from Pune, Rajula Shah<sup>7</sup> who had also

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<sup>5</sup> This involved visiting library collections of DVDs/literature/journals such as the Tata Institute’s *Centre for Media and Cultural Studies* and the Vikalp (CAC) Archive (Mumbai), The National Film and Television Institute Archive, the Delhi Film Archive, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Magic Lantern Foundation (Delhi).

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘*sant*’ is comparable with, but distinct from, the Christian concept of a ‘saint’. For a more detailed definition, see Chapter 2 page 58, footnote 37

<sup>7</sup> My first contact with Shah was in November 2008 when her film, *Word Within the Word* (*Shabad Nirantar*, 2008) was screened at the “India Express” festival at the Balie in Amsterdam. This film demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the Malwa community (from Madhya Pradesh) and its oral tradition in the poetry of Kabir.

produced films on the Kabir lineage in Malwa (Madhya Pradesh) and other devotional traditions in India. To work alongside her in a shared film shoot, albeit on independent productions, was greatly instructive and allowed me to observe how she established her production relationships, which I could then trace to her film composition. The project that I directed (*The Warkari Cycle*) forms the practical component of this ‘Research-with-practice’ PhD and is discussed both independently and in connection with the Indian filmmakers’ works.

### **Brief indication of the results**

I discovered that, particularly in the case of documentary practices from India, the on set encounter *is* a pertinent axis from which to study film aesthetics and production methods, because the majority of filmmakers rely heavily on improvisation and digressions that arise through interactions with their filmed subjects. Since human subjects can never be duplicated on screen indexically as they exist ‘in life’ (see Williams, c1991 on representational ‘excess’), the importance of the on set encounter is that the collective agency of authoring can be appreciated as a dynamic *movement*, where film is permanently suspended in a state of incompleteness in the sense of an ongoing argument. This creates a distance with debates on film’s ‘representative’ capacity, or its ‘representative paradigms’. Instead, cinema becomes a *continuous renewal* in each moment of its making and viewing. This more closely resembles the performative character of the traditional artists from India who are the subjects of the films I am reviewing. Research also proved that

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post-production editing processes contribute to film aesthetics in important ways beyond the on set encounter, as do the inscriptions of patronage and distribution, which have thus been accommodated in my investigation.

### **Preliminary implications**

From the perceptions of ‘practice’ that I observed in the India-based filmmakers, I explored the quality and implications of the ‘multi-textual’ aesthetics mentioned in the introduction. In some of the documentaries I reviewed, I saw how filmmakers were recycling the history of ways that traditional artists have been framed within a ‘salvage paradigm’<sup>8</sup> (Clifford, c1987) depicting the traditional art forms as ‘threatened’ cultures where implicitly the filmmaker would be ‘saving it from erasure’. The filmmakers who are more challenging in their works, however, are investigating their own personal/political relationship with the tradition of their focus in a more open-ended inquiry, including questioning the social conditions that have marginalized its practitioners. The very diversity of directorial approaches to the on set encounter proves that to bracket the filmmakers as a homogenous ‘movement’ is inadvisable, yet an attentive investigation of localized subcultures in one of India’s more directly political art forms, was common to all. In my own project on the Warkari, it exposed me to the vicissitudes of negotiating on set *and off set* production relationships experienced first hand in India. Whilst gaining knowledge about the tactics of my peer Indian

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<sup>8</sup> The ‘salvage paradigm’ in Clifford’s framing reflects a desire to ‘rescue something authentic’ out of historical changes that are assumed to be destructive. It is found in ethnographic writing and ‘in the connoisseurship and collections in the art world, in a range of familiar nostalgias’ (c1987: 160)

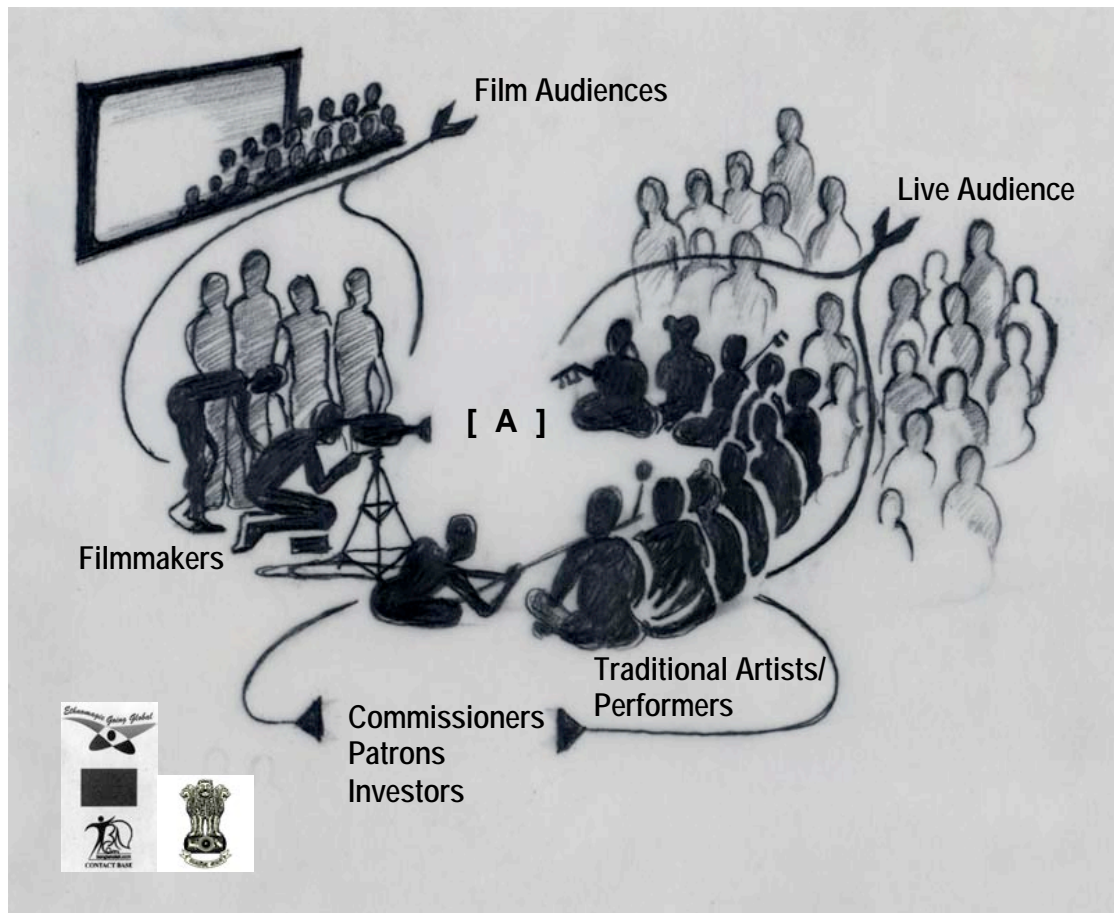
filmmakers, my own priorities developed at a tangent, recognizing the impact of having an outsider's relationship to the filming context. It did, however, present the challenge of re-aligning my practice and preconceptions about approaches to filming the Warkari community and their practices.

### **1.3 Research questions and chapter breakdown**

The three central questions around which I have framed my analysis are as follows:

- **How are the cited filmmakers from India imagining and directing the relationships on set with the traditional artists who are their subjects? (I subsequently address the same question to my own filmmaking practice).**
- **What specific claims about the traditional artists' practices are being made in the films and how do the filmmakers' techniques thus allocate them?**
- **What modes of filmmaking and aesthetic regimes can be identified in the filmmakers' films as a result of their on set encounters? (and my own)**





The above diagram demonstrates the moment of shooting a film, showing an imagined scenario of filmmakers and their crew on the left, and a group of traditional artist performers on the right. Its purpose is to demonstrate graphically how, during the collective authoring process in the ‘onset encounter’ (i.e. the space marked [A]), the imagined audiences of both the filmmakers and traditional artists, *and* the agendas of patrons and commissioners make their claims simultaneously on the filmmaking endeavour. [A] marks a zone of interaction and the negotiation between filmmakers and filmed subjects. The *virtually* present stakeholders in the same performance, as well as the *actually* present filmmakers, artists and live audiences all influence the way in which events are being recorded on camera, and what is prioritized for recording from the indeterminate and chance elements of the live event.

## Chapter breakdown

The chapter structure imitates the chronology of producing a film, beginning at the ‘pre-production’- and working through to the ‘distribution’ phase. This is so that the operations of film authorship can be traced through all the different episodes and conditions of a film’s realization.

**Chapter 2, ‘Pre-production’** covers four components: An **Introduction to my practice**, and an **Interrogation of research processes** in making *The Warkari Cycle*. [Here I introduce the Warkari (the devotional community in Maharashtra) that my video installation takes as its focus] My **‘Claims for Practice’** (a quasi-manifesto), and a **Film historical inquiry** follow. The latter investigates how non-fiction filmmaking concerned with the representation of traditional cultures has evolved in India, engaging issues such as the politics of representing ‘marginal’ cultural groups. This inquiry supports my critical and conceptual development as a filmmaker, and delivers a wider perspective of the regional conditions of practice required to contextualize the Indian filmmakers’ statements about their practices that will be debated across this thesis. I interrogate four films produced between 1967 and 1992 by the filmmakers, S. Sukhdev, Mani Kaul, Deepa Dhanraj and Reena Mohan where my inquiry allows me simultaneously to trace the political/historical developments from which these practices emerge (referencing the film historian, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 2009 among others). The films<sup>9</sup>, demonstrate how key issues (such as modes of activism, ethics, poetic fictionalization, and authenticity) have been addressed in these filmmakers’ pioneering techniques.

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<sup>9</sup> These are *An Indian Day* (1967) by S. Sukhdev; *Mati Manas* (1985) Mani Kaul *Something Like a War* (1991) by Deepa Dhanraj and *Kamlabai* (1991) by Reena Mohan.

**Chapter 3, ‘Methods and Strategies’**, is a primary source inquiry on the filmmaking methods and ways of imagining authorship drawn from eight filmmakers practicing today (who have taken traditional artists as filmed subjects). My questions locate their ‘on set encounters’ (during **the shoot**) as a common moment that they refer to, describing their directorial relationships with those filmed. Responding to a dearth of research materials on documentary practices since the 1990’s I use these testimonies to update theories on practices into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, developing alongside my commentary on *what the filmmakers are seeking-* and *what they assume* about the authoring process with their filmed subjects. The aim is to critically engage with the terms and conditions of production relationships and how these shape the films’ compositional priorities. The filmmakers selected are: **Ajay Bhardwaj, Rahul Roy, Nirmal Chander** (Delhi); **Madhusree Dutta** (Mumbai), **R.V. Ramani** (Chennai); **Rajula Shah, Arghya Basu** (Pune) and **Shabnam Virmani** (Bangalore) [Other interviews taken during my fieldwork<sup>10</sup> have contributed to the remaining chapters in this thesis]. I draw on Roland Barthes’ (a1977) and others to problematise the definition of ‘authorship’. Finally I apply (my own) argument of ‘possible modes of relationship’ that accounts for zone [ A ] in the diagram above. From all the above materials, I collate discoveries about how the conditions brought to the encounter by these filmmakers lay claims on ‘practice’ and documentary methods.

In **Chapter 4, ‘The Shoot’** begins with a diary-style **report** of shooting my own project, *The Warkari Cycle* in Maharashtra, developing towards **reflections** on how my pre-production tactics as a filmmaker were modified by the contingencies of

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<sup>10</sup> The following are filmmakers that I interviewed in addition: Anjali Monteiro and K.P. Jayasankar, Paromita Vohra, Surabhi Sharma, Pankaj Rishi Kumar, Sankalp Meshram and Anjali Punjabi (Mumbai); Kumar Shahani (Delhi/Mumbai), Deepa Dhanraj (Bangalore) I also interviewed Gargi Sen a leading film distributor; Dr. Molly Kaushal, a folklorist and film historian, Gayatri Chatterjee.

the pilgrimage event, and more broadly by working in the region. I trace relationships between of my own methods and strategies and those of the filmmakers reviewed in Chapter 3 and consider what role I have had in claiming a strategy for shooting this particular devotional tradition in the way that I did, explaining my reasoning.

Corresponding with Chapter 4, this consists of **2 x DVD discs** of *The Warkari Cycle* for the video installation; the main practical component of the thesis. It is recommended that the DVDs of *The Warkari Cycle* should be viewed after reading Chapter 4. This consists of one long (47-minute) film on **Disc 1** and three short films on **Disc 2**.

**Chapter 5, ‘Post-production’** tracks the **editing** and first **exhibition** phase of *The Warkari Cycle* justifying my creative choices and discussing the *modes of address* in this film installation’s composition. My approach as an artist/filmmaker differed in various ways from the Indian ‘documentary’ filmmakers examined in Chapter 3, (despite their heterogeneity) so I look critically at these differences. This leads into my proposal for a **cross-disciplinary exploration of “poetics”** that links my methods/strategies with theories put forward by Indian scholars and cultural historians, such as Sarah Joseph (a2006) as well as filmmakers (from South Asia and Europe/America). This engages cultural and media theory where these intersect with historiographies of India’s traditional cultures and the performing arts (on film). The second part of the chapter discusses poetics in the post-production phase of three filmmakers introduced in Chapter 3: **Madhusree Dutta, Rajula Shah and RV Ramani**. I now consider (as I did in my own project) how the relationships they established with their filmed subjects have become transformed into **film compositional elements** in the ways that their films are edited. I make use of Jacques Rancière’s theory of “aesthetic regimes”, analyzing how the traditions are being

allocated through the filmmakers' techniques. My own film also comes under scrutiny in relation to its situation of the Warkari tradition. Since the economy of film distribution and commissioning also shape film authorship in crucial ways, I consider the difference of my own production environment as a visual artist with my peer filmmakers in Indian documentary; the ways that they are negotiating their conditions that are regionally specific.

**Chapter 6** comments on how the filmmakers operating from India (including myself) are revising local discourses on traditional art forms by their re-signification as filmic statements. Our technical and narrative strategies illuminate certain aspects of these devotional art forms whilst silencing others. I will probe into what is being lost or transformed in the case of the practitioners from India, finding meaning in these omissions. There are also certain epistemic balances of power revealed in the practices of the filmmakers I have selected. Whilst these are not homogenous, I will draw out observations from across the examples quoted in the thesis as a whole, remarking on their differences and how they are imagining both their filmed subjects and the status of the traditions in Indian culture as a whole. The filmmakers I have reviewed inherit a legacy of debates on the traditions before they have even removed the lens cap of the camera. By the end of this document, I will demonstrate some of the their key motives for focusing on these artists and devotional movements, showing how their distinct approaches are contributing to a specific discourse within and beyond filmmaking. I will also reflect on my own experiences, shortcomings and discoveries in producing my project on the Warkari.

#### 1.4 Explaining ‘Research-with-Practice’ PhD methods

This thesis uses an analytic framework of a ‘Research-with-Practice’ PhD, a relatively novel format of research that requires explanation of how this format has been interpreted in my case. My intention in making *The Warkari Cycle* (from July 2010 to November 2011) was to challenge myself about what authority I am assuming when interpreting the ‘on set encounters’ of Indian filmmakers in this thesis. I also wanted to produce this 47-minute video installation as a work that could exist independently of the written research; a project for art gallery distribution in India and the UK. Having had a preview screening in 2011 at the ‘Persistence/Resistance Festival’ curated by Magic Lantern (New Delhi) in association with four London-based universities, I am currently developing a distribution strategy for this work.

Additionally, my aim was to link my methods of authoring with the larger historical framing of India’s traditions on film through this study, hoping that my work would benefit from studying the methodologies of my Indian filmmaker peers. Evidently, my production experience would not be ‘equivalent’ to theirs, since they are operating in their home environment and they make ‘documentaries’ whilst I am an ‘artist-filmmaker’. Yet it was important to expose myself to the region’s production contingencies first hand, and to understand these differences practically.

The Warkari tradition (on which the installation is based) is a *bhakti* subculture of Hinduism in Maharashtra. Its diverse practices include a 250-kilometer mass walk by approximately one million pilgrims over twenty-one days towards the temple of the deity, Lord Vitthal in Pandharpur. The pilgrims sing *abhangas* (the sung poetry transmitted as an oral tradition of their *sants*) and partake in various forms of performed discourse known as *kirtan*. Other events include satirical dramas called *bharuds* and the *ringan*, which is a ritual horse race. My research on the Warkari took

place in London as well as in Pune, India, shooting in the rural Solapur district of Maharashtra. I obtained a small grant from the British Council's "Connections through Culture" scheme, permitting six weeks<sup>11</sup> based in the region, and a 9-day shoot with a small 6-person crew. I returned to London with 30 hours of footage. What I sought was to explore the pilgrimage as a living choreography, a process that I will detail in Chapter 2, sections 2.3 to 2.5c.

The filmmaking experience would, I hoped, correct biases I might have about the filmmakers working in India when reviewed from a cultural distance based in London. In my own practice too, I have frequently resisted the hegemony of theorists who see fit to deconstruct my work, whilst unwittingly positioning the practice as subordinate to theoretic framings. In such cases, the theory is often couched in explanations, qualifications and grammars that are antithetical to the intellectual processes found in making music, visual art or film. I therefore consciously wished to avoid falling into the same trap, whilst wanting to let theory and practical operations inform and enhance each other.

It is perfectly feasible to review documentaries through the lens of interpretive science, looking at how certain signs are constituted historically and from there, to assess their socio-political impact. My priority instead was to see film as arising from experiential, sensory systems from which a direct relation to aesthetics can be traced. As Ellen Dissanayake<sup>12</sup> observes,

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<sup>11</sup> The total fieldwork period in India was five months, including other research agendas.

<sup>12</sup> Dissanayake is a scholar who investigates the philosophy of aesthetics in ethnology.

First and foremost, ...the arts are things that people do with their bodies. Human patterning and picturing grow out of natural dispositions to use the hands, just as singing and dancing arise from the elaborative (repeating, regularizing, exaggerating) movements of the vocal tracts and the body. (Dissanayake, E. a2000:178)

My method depends on reclaiming knowledge that is derived ‘in practice’ giving priority to the operational systems in production relationships. The ‘doing of the practice’ constitutes a world in itself that often holds internally contradictory orders, but that draws audiences towards the reality sustained by its aesthetic totality. Such ‘orders in the doing’ are mindful as they are discerning, but always exceed an entirely logocentric analytical method. By involving myself in making *The Warkari Cycle*, it provoked me to consider each phase of a film’s trajectory, phases that require knowledge of the related professional discourse. The experience also brought me closer to one specific ‘oral traditional practice’ in the Warkari, to discover its philosophies, its qualities and internal organization for myself. An important example, here, is that the Warkari’s narration of stories about the *sants* is one I came to understand- not as belonging to a historicized distant past, but as an everyday consciousness lived in the repetition and modification of the telling. This discovery seemed to compliment my desire to analyze film as a state of perpetual ‘becoming’.

### **1.5 Summary Literature Review on Documentary Practices in India**

When it comes to the naming of groundbreaking non-fiction cinema movements in India from the 1960’s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scholarship has variously referenced them as ‘alternative cinema’, or more generically, ‘experimental’,



‘political cinema’ or ‘social documentaries’. Other critics seeking to debunk the term ‘avant-garde’ in an Indian context have either drawn from the Latin American theoretical positioning of ‘Third Cinema’<sup>13</sup> or have introduced new terms such as ‘unpopular cinema’ (Das Gupta, a2008), and the ‘cinema of *prayoga*’ (Gangar, a2005)<sup>14</sup>. What has become apparent in my research is that these generic groupings in reality often consist of filmmakers who themselves are in disagreement about what practical methods match the terminologies. My approach therefore has been to draw out the arguments contained *within* these terminologies using primary sources where possible, rather than taking for granted how they have later become historicized.

Across the available literature, I have noted a dearth of scholarship that analyzes filmmakers productive in the last thirty years in documentary from India, particularly in two respects. There is very little material on women directors from the mid 1980’s to the present<sup>15</sup>. Amongst these are Suhasini Mulay, Deepa Dhanraj, Madhusree Dutta, Paromita Vohra, Shohini Ghosh, Kavita Joshi, Sameera Jain, Anupama Shrinivasan and Saba Dewan (a generation now in their 40’s and 50’s in 2012). Secondly, there is a lack of critical research material on the compositional aesthetics of non-fiction genres. *Indian Cinema in the time of celluloid; from*

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<sup>13</sup> The first manifesto of Third Cinema was penned by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino and the Grupo Cine Liberacion in Argentina that spread to Brazil, standing out against Euro-American auteur cinema modes and was ideologically anti-colonialist. See Dissanyake and Gunaratne (Eds) a2003.

<sup>14</sup> The term ‘*Prayoga*’ employs the Sanskrit term for ‘design, contrivance, device, plan application, employment (of drugs/magic etc.). *Prayoga* is also a practice or an experimental portion of a subject However the full justification for Amrit Gangar’s use of this term is best seen in its unedited account, since this is embedded in a wider discourse of its cultural appropriateness (Butler and Mirza, a2006: 24)

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Nicole Wolf’s forthcoming PhD publication is based on feminist political documentary, but was not yet available at the time of writing this paper.

*Bollywood to the Emergency* (a2009) by Ashish Rajadhyaksha goes some way towards the more holistic appraisal I was seeking. His book cross-references movements in non-fiction, commercial fiction and other artistic practices simultaneously drawing on an extensive and committed body of research.

B.D. Garga's book *From Raj to Swaraj, The Non-fiction Film* (a2007) is essentially a description of socio-political contexts that have generated documentary practice from its origins in newsreel and current affairs genres from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 1980's. Citing the works of filmmakers like Hiralal Sen, J.F. Madan and Harishchandra Bhatwadekar (who pioneered the newsreel), Garga investigates the first non-fiction films such as Jyotish Sarkar's coverage of the anti-partition demonstration in Calcutta, 1905, and Charles Urban's film on the 1911 Delhi Durbar. The latter part of this book focuses on significant movements such as the Indian National Movement and the organization of trade union, and *Adivasi*<sup>16</sup> movements, but does not discuss the connection between these and the filmmakers' strategies that emerged as a consequence.

Erik Barnouw, a historian of radio, film and television with co-writer Subrahmanyam Krishanaswamy, (an eminent documentary film director) in their classic textbook, *Indian Film* (a1963) [revised in 1980] provide a comprehensive guide that links non-fiction and fiction cinema as production histories. Chidananda Das Gupta, one of the founders of Calcutta Film Society in 1947 is an acclaimed cultural/film critic, applying his sixty-year experience of the film industry to its intellectual history. His essay collection, *Seeing is Believing* (a2008) plots academic

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<sup>16</sup> This is an ethnic category referring to the 'original inhabitants' - colloquially, the 'tribals' of India though the term 'tribal' is not used in formal literature, due to its colonial repercussions. They account for circa 7% of India's total population. See online source for statistical details: <http://www.indienhilfe.ch/index.php?id=6&L=1> (Accessed 12.1.2012)

criticism in film studies and has usefully contested how core concepts in cultural discourse (such as the term, “humanism”) cannot be easily transferred from Western to South Asian contexts without a complete re-qualification of their terms.

Srirupa Roy’s first chapter in *Beyond Belief, India and the politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (a2007) brings insight into the history, politics and growth of the Films Division, tracking how this government commissioning agency was responsible for nurturing certain ideological biases in response to India’s changing cultural environment. An opposite biographical approach can be found in John W. Hood’s *The Essential Mystery* (a2000) that looks at a corpus of films whose directors emerged in the 1960’s and 70’s: Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Shyam Benegal, Govindan Aravindan, Buddhadeb Dasgupta and Govind Nihalani. (Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Gautam Ghose and Ketan Mehta are given less detailed mentions)<sup>17</sup>.

Commissioned by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Jag Mohan’s *Documentary Films and Indian Awakening* (a1990) is a conservative text that avoids investigating how film methods have altered across time. By contrast, Raqs Media Collective’s *Double Take: Looking at the Documentary* (a2000) takes the form of essays that offer fragmented but informative experiences of leading directors who are active today, detailing aspects of their practices. This way of historicizing the industry by anthologizing individual filmmakers’ testimonies also resembles Rajiv

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<sup>17</sup> Women directors are entirely absent in Hood’s account. In India, from the 1930’s onwards directors such as Fatma Begum and TP Rajlakshmi through to Vijaya Nirmala, Rao Saheb, Sai Paranjpye have gained prominence incrementally, especially in the case of documentary.

Mehrotra's<sup>18</sup> documentary reader, *The Open Frame* (a2006). His book also incorporates observations about the creative/technological milieu and institutional frameworks in which filmmakers currently operate, couching these as personal reflections of his career.

Acknowledging the absence of a broad-based up to date account of South Asian documentary that covers historical, political *and* contextual aspects of non-fiction practices, the India Foundation for the Arts has recently (late 2010) commissioned the Mumbai-based writer/filmmaker, Paromita Vohra to address this task. Perhaps because the early 1990's has ushered in such a complex and diversified set of practices, this task will be highly complex. What is needed is a feminist appraisal of the industry, perhaps drawing relationships between documentary, social/popular culture issues and commercial cinema. Judging by her recent essay, "*Dotting the I: The politics of selfless-ness in Indian documentary practice*" (c2011) Vohra is well placed to produce this review of recent documentary and non-fiction speaking from the subjectivity of being a well-networked practicing filmmaker.

Across my study of the above literature, one of the pitfalls of focusing on texts in the English language (as opposed to texts in the different Indian regional languages where the filmmakers are from) is the following. Whilst other researchers may have had different experiences, the film historians from India that I have encountered, prioritize cinema for its potential to revolutionize perceptions of citizenship, nationhood and political identity- priorities that in themselves cannot be criticized. However, when films become written as abstractions that are made to *illustrate* these agendas, it may lead to terminology being used to describe films such as, 'post Indian

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<sup>18</sup> Mehrotra is a writer, producer-director and Chief Commissioner of the Public Services Broadcasting Trust (Delhi).

Emergency defensive national modernism'.<sup>19</sup> In such '-isms', there is a danger of writing out other equally important aspects of film authorship that I hope to recover in this thesis. What is unique about cinema is that it is a *visual, acoustic, kinetic* and *performative* medium and therefore operates entirely differently than a written text or political manifesto would do. It was surprisingly difficult to find film critical texts that interrogated techniques whilst also debating the politico-historical arguments that the films themselves deliver. I therefore hope to recover the connection between these two aspects of film in my style of commentary.

### **1.6 'Traditionality' and 'contemporaneity' in an Indian context**

Since my approach to historicizing documentary is to draw from the filmmakers' methods and the on set encounter (concerning films on traditional artists) it raises the question of how distinctions in these practices are commonly perceived in India. To take a small example of the type of debate in film criticism that I found relevant in my research, Kishore Budha, identifies a symbolic order in how 'traditional performance' has featured historically, finding links between parallel cinema of the late 1950's to 1970's<sup>20</sup> and popular entertainment cinema of the 1980's. When the Congress party launched the *Festival of India* series in the mid 1980's for international tour, he describes how cinema imagined its folk heritage at a time when

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<sup>19</sup> This framing is attributed by Ashish Rajadhyaksha (a2009:254) when discussing tendencies in the arts and film and the dilemmas around authenticity in representative modes of this era that he directly connects with the trauma of retaliation from the breakdown of governance.

<sup>20</sup> "Parallel cinema" refers to a fiction cinema movement that was established in Bengal from the 1950's to 1970's that brought issues of social justice and critique into popular (fiction) cinema; filmmakers such as Bimal Roy, Satyajit Ray, Guru Dutt, A.K. Abbas, Adoor Gopalakrishnan among others. Lalit Mohan, L.J. (17.7.2007). "India's Art House Cinema" British Film Institute. (Accessed 2.6.2009).

cinema was beginning to appropriate folk culture to ‘re-imagine it in urban chic terms’:

An example of this is Reshma’s rendering of *Lambi Judaai for Hero* [Director: Subhash Ghai, 1983]...Though parallel cinema had attempted to work narratives centred around rural India, for example, *Mirch Masala*, [Director: Ketan Mehta, 1985] its very commitment to realism and authenticity returned Indian folk to its place within a symbolic order, where it was often associated either in terms of a romantic past (othering) or a symbol of backwardness/pre-modernity (for example, caste-based rituals); the re-working of folk culture in popular cinema allowed for its re-imagination in a form that suited a wider and rampant circulation. (Budha, c2008)

Budha importantly signals the *use being made* of cultural manifestations from one sector of society when appropriated by another. In my viewing, however, the film *Mirch Masala* is not ‘committed to realism’, but is deliberately romanticizing Indian village culture as a fictionalized historic drama, so a problem arises about who can legitimately claim that a film is striving to ‘authenticate’. Who’s ‘real’ is ‘more real’ than another’s? Secondly, the imagination of folk cultures as featured in popular cinema or in documentary is continually changing over time, and we need to observe parallel developments in the field of social/cultural theory, policy making, activism and debates from within the traditional practitioner groups themselves to gain a sense of how these are affecting film representations. That folk culture has historically been conflated with ‘backwardness and pre-modernity’ expands from cultural theorists like Partha Chatterjee (a1986) who also spoke of a complex dialectic between ‘indigenous’ cultural practices and ‘western’ conceptualizations of modernity, where India provides an exceptional case of the traditions persisting *within* the modern.

When people from the urban/business epicentres and ruling classes in India discuss those at the receiving end of their governmentality, the criteria for what is ‘traditional’ and what is ‘modern’ often becomes contentious<sup>21</sup>. Since India’s Independence, politicians and cultural analysts have made *time itself* assume an ideological cast and Prathama Banerjee begins to unpick some of the ways in which these artificial currencies of ‘the contemporary’ have been created:

In the colony, as we know, the ‘modern’ appeared as a time which did not and could not succeed the past, i.e. as an external- even though inescapable contingency. In the face of such a disruption of the past-present relationship, colonial modern acts of engaging pasts and traditions came to be pitched as acts of culture rather than acts of intellection, quite unlike the way in which, for instance, modern European philosophers habitually engage their own antiquity contemporaneously. For ‘culture’ is precisely that which is meant to persist irrespective of the contingencies of time and vagrancies of consciousness, both being the predicament of the colonial and the postcolonial subject. (Banerjee, c2011)<sup>22</sup>

Underscoring my entire research is the need to grapple with this sub-textual battlefield of ways of allocating ‘traditional art’ by theorists, cultural programmers, film funding organizations, government developmental policy and filmmakers. I have

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<sup>21</sup> See Kapila, K. (c2008) on the workings of constitutional reclassification for the distribution of state benefits or communitarian rights. She refers here to ‘a very particular concept of culture, one that is now considered outmoded within the discipline [of anthropology] but arguably increasingly popular within cultural politics, underlies the state processes of classification in India, which were themselves conducted by anthropologists’ (c2008:129)

<sup>22</sup> Banerjee’s article explores the changing conceptualizations of time in colonial modernity, exploring herein the allocation of certain peoples as ‘tribes’. Between *adivasis* and the modern middle classes, she considers how temporality itself is attributed to render them ‘other’.

decided to contain this struggle by observing the documentary filmmakers' ways of addressing and contesting such debates *in their films*, looking specifically at the relationships they describe with specific traditional artists they have filmed.

### **1.7 Other theoretical discourses implicated in the research**

Leading into the two decades of my research's time frame, in the 1980's to early 1990's Mulungundam (c2002: 85) remarks that the broad agenda of many significant documentaries of the time was to 'give a voice to the disenfranchised' - for example, the rural poor, the *Adivasi*, the dalits or working class Muslims. This consequently raises the issue of how 'cultural difference' is being attributed by the filmmakers. What should we understand by the term 'marginal' across the films I will discuss?

De Certeau (a1984:15-29) indicates that cultural operations themselves articulate conflicts of dominance that both legitimize and control their own superior enforcement. 'Marginality' in this sense no longer rests with minority groups, but rather becomes universalized and the 'marginal' can paradoxically be understood as the 'silent majority'. To allocate a minority can encourage tensions, and even violence, for which symbolic balances and contracts of compatibility and compromise necessarily follow. Yet in the films of the filmmakers I am reviewing, such circumscriptions of 'marginality' *do seem* to prevail in their choice of groups being represented. In the next chapter I have therefore considered the conceptualization of 'subalterity' that underscores their authorship in the specific context of India.

Since 'traditional performance' arises from informal social infrastructures- that change with the fluctuating tides of popularism we may see how (for example) the medieval *bhakti* poet-saints or *sants*' verses are a popular currency amongst the



urban middle classes, even though historically its perpetrators belonged to ‘marginal’ devotional communities. The poetry of *sants* like Kabir, Mirabai<sup>23</sup> or Mahadevi Akka<sup>24</sup> is sung by devotees in the villages, but also reaches the formal education curricula of urban high schools and universities in India. In another direction, the martial arts -like wrestling- that are closely linked with the cult of the god, Hanuman passed down through a *guru-shisha*<sup>25</sup> relationship, can in some senses be regarded as ‘traditional cultures’, so a film such as Rahul Roy’s *Majma (Performance)*, 2001 that has a wrestling guru as its main protagonist will be embraced within my study.

Theorists like James Ponnaiah (in Pandikattu (Ed) 2008:77) have furthermore been useful in reconsidering the ritual-based dramas as spaces of the simultaneous activation of memory, creativity and self-identity, challenging the view that participants are passively inscribed by devotional acts. Another common misconception is that ‘traditional artists’ belong exclusively to rural societies, but Narayan (c1993:199) among others have challenged this stereotype of ‘authentic’ Indian folk traditions being village-based, bounded, untainted by outside influence and unchanging. The urban-rural divide in India is, however, one that the cultural theorist Ashis Nandy has problematized, as his following commentary demonstrates:

Indian civic sensibility bypasses the imagination of a village or tries to be its total negation. The village now makes sense mostly as a target of social

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<sup>23</sup> Mirabai (1416-1489) was a *sant* from Rajasthan born a Rajput princess in Kudki and the daughter of a warrior, Ratan Singh Rathore. She was a Krishna devotee and poet-saint whose verses remain intrinsic to Rajasthani folklore. (Flood, G. 1996:144)

<sup>24</sup> Mahadevi Akka was a *sant* from Karnataka who will be detailed extensively through her portrayal in a film by Madhusree Dutta in Chapter 4

<sup>25</sup> *guru-shisha* lit. meaning from Hindi is ‘teacher-mirror’ referring to a traditional mentor to student relationship in which a spiritual training is implied.

engineering, political reform and technological upgrading, but not as a way of life. Not even as a reservoir of cultural resources or as a baseline for social criticism of Indian urbanity. (Nandy, c2010)

I will therefore be considering the implications of this kind of dichotomizing on the filmmakers' relationships with their subjects, since the filmmakers almost all belong to- if not operate from, urban metropolitan contexts.

The Indian State's cultural institutions such as the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (M.I.B)<sup>26</sup>, have conceded that 'the traditional media of live, face to face performance before audiences, still hold an important place in the pattern of communication with the masses'<sup>27</sup> and it supports around 36,000 programmes of folk performance across India each year. Paradoxically, however, India's folk dramas equally arise as sites of resistance to Government development policy and its centralized framing of 'nationhood'. Their myriad forms across over 50 different language groups in many cases do not rely on governmental patronage, and since the same government is responsible for displacing many such groups from their land, or forcing their migration to the cities, the patronage is delivered within somewhat contradictory parameters of accountability for 'marginal' communities. This makes urgent the issue of why their archiving on film would be desirable when the traditions themselves are creating an independent discourse that is far more widespread and diverse than the documentary films depicting them could ever be. This is the type of

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<sup>26</sup> This ministry has founded its own "Song and Dance Division of India" Website, M.I.B: <http://sdd.nic.in/aimsobj.html> (Accessed 15.3.2011) Established in 1954 as a unit of All India Radio the M.I.B. formed an independent media unit in 1960, with a vast network of regional production centres across India.

<sup>27</sup> Citation from the "Aims and Objectives", from website reference, see footnote 26.

issue I hope to address by the conclusion of this document that has implications on the filmmakers' positioning of the traditions in cultural terms.

Before this can be done, however, I will enter the following research inquiry in the chronology of a film production process, beginning as announced with the contextualizing phase of 'pre-production' research. This involves, in the first instance, making myself visible as the author of this thesis before returning again to discuss the filmmakers from India.

## Chapter 2. Pre-production



A print from the Jñāneshwar Temple at Alandi showing Jñāneshwar (left) Tukaram (right) and Vithoba (centre), with pilgrims reflected in the glass of the frame. Photo, L.King, July 2010

## 2.1 Introduction

The central question for this chapter is: what was I seeking as an artist who makes films when setting out to film the Warkari - a 'traditional cultural group' from Maharashtra in India?

Before addressing the above, I briefly introduce my practice as an artist and filmmaker, and discuss the conditions and approach I am applying in relation to this specific working context. I explore those aspects of Warkari culture that were pertinent to consider in order to produce the video installation, *The Warkari Cycle* in 2010 to 2011 based on the pilgrimage and its surrounding events.

When thinking through my own pre-production process, a separate and parallel goal was to expand my knowledge of strategies used by filmmakers from India who have taken traditional artists as a filmed topic. My agenda in the chapter later broadens therefore, into a **Film historical inquiry** tracing a specific historical trajectory and set of filmmaking practices from the late 1960's to the 1990's exploring the following:

- The documentary filmmakers' methods in relation to socio-political contingencies of the industry and in Indian society across this time frame.
- How four examples of pioneering films might inform my methods as a filmmaker whilst also bringing insight into the regional histories of filming 'marginal devotional traditions' problematizing understandings of 'marginality'
- How these methodological approaches to documentary practice have contributed to the vocabularies of the filmmakers I would interview in my field research who are operating today.

Putting my own reasons for making the film that I produced at the centre, this then leads my inquiry organically into methods and practices that are relevant from a *practitioner's* perspective of documentary history in India. I also wished to uncover a diversity of motivations for filming traditional artists as distinct from my own. This knowledge, I hoped, would both help in defining my ambitions, as well as assisting my future inquiry into peer filmmakers in India whom I intended to interview on their personal strategies and methods.

## **2.2 Brief introduction to my practice**

My first discipline is as a visual artist (in drawing and painting), and this practice remains active alongside my filmmaking. I understand painting as a private performance occurring between the materials and the artist, the gradual emergence of an image that then performs for its audiences. My interest in filming performance has a direct link with this experience as a painter, intrigued by other artists who devise in a medium where *the body* remains intrinsic to the *transmission* of the work. Since my residency in India, I have been investigating through filmmaking the notion: 'how is 'performance' experienced by performers both corporeally and imaginatively?' By 'performers', I generally mean stage artists and contemporary dancers with whom I have collaborated in India and Europe. Their 'performance' is explicitly dialogic and the transformation of space-time created for their audiences occurs through the invocation of an image, emotions, and presence that I use my camera to track. This allows me to find connections between my private experience of making art, and the public aspect of other artists' art forms. My own body seems innately silent in that sense, its 'noise' becomes converted rather into visual form (line, colour, pictorial space in painting and drawing).

Having lived long term in three countries (Spain, the Netherlands and India) apart from where I was raised (in Britain), my geopolitical awareness as an artist has often fuelled my choices to re-locate in these voluntary migrations. My artworks have frequently offered a critique of the institutional frameworks of the artist communities I have occupied, drawing sustenance from artist subcultures in the cities in which I have lived (Barcelona, Amsterdam, New Delhi and London). In my practice I do not consider myself as being bound by geophysical conditions, rather my position evolves out of an argumentation with my environment. In both private and public life, I have often experienced a state of ‘doubling’ in spaces that define citizenship, and the demand for ‘difference’<sup>28</sup> to be rationalized in various ways is something I have always questioned (both institutionally and socially). So whilst the adaptive drive to meet different cultural contexts to which I migrated has always compelled me, I experience in parallel a certain *impossibility* in this, which is linked with the way that sociality can be experienced as being bounded by solidarities of class, gender, race or ethnicity that privilege separation over relationality<sup>29</sup>. This is a condition that

K. Anthony Appiah aptly signals in the following:

The politics of recognition requires that one’s skin colour, one’s sexual body, should be acknowledged politically in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and sexual body as personal dimensions of the self. And personal means not secret but too tightly scripted...Between the politics of

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<sup>28</sup> By ‘difference’ here I mean difference of sexuality, class, gender or ‘difference’ in terms of cultural self-identification/ allocation.

<sup>29</sup> In answer to this dilemma, Leela Gandhi in her book, *Affective Communities* (2006: 26) describes a journey towards acknowledging the ‘politics of friendship’ that served her development of cultural theory at an equivalent juncture.

recognition and the politics of compulsion there is no bright line. (Appiah a1994:163)

Yet in shuttling between this compulsive draw of (self/collective) separation, this distancing effect also acts as a trigger to consider the broader picture of what constitutes a transgressive act, or the public ‘performance’ of social reality.

My ‘home culture’ is my practice. My ‘argument’ exists between the cultures of India and Europe. Alternating between these selves, the challenge lies in replacing or reinventing what is lost of the absent culture in the form of films, artworks or research. ‘Home culture’ is therefore not a prospect of consistency for me, but is a *movement* that shapes its reality through filmmaking, painting or writing. My practice allows me to create self-made time zones from which I can critique my engagement in the performances that sociality demands. It is also a way of being able to digest (though not rationalize) its complexity. Another interest I have is in the impulse to generate alternate realities that can only be substantiated through art.

Before working on *The Warkari Cycle* my films were tightly scripted ‘docu-fictional’ portraits of the performers with whom I collaborated. The link with my earlier work is that I translate my subjects’ relationship with performance into a kind of ‘visual poem’ on film, the encounter thus openly including my interpretive capabilities. In discussions before the shoot, I seek to know what motivates the performers’ practice, connecting this with my experience of painting.

During my residency in New Delhi, when working with the dramatist/producer, (my colleague) Smita Bharti; our projects used verbatim



performance methods<sup>30</sup> in workshops that were funded by local and international NGOs and foundations, working with groups from across the social spectrum. ‘Performance’ in these projects was a tool for addressing civil rights and social issues, gay and lesbian representation, amongst other agendas. Some of these projects resulted in films, whilst others remained as performances and workshops. Alongside this, I worked as a set designer for both feature films and stage.

Since my return to the UK, I have retained my connection with Indian performance, notably in a collaboration with Veenapani Chawla and her company, *Adishakti* in Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu. My questioning of performers is directed at understanding what the performance process demands from them; what it looks like and feels like as it is becoming formed. On screen, my images of performers emphasize their physicality; the architecture of their movement. I strive to create a suspense between this sensuous and the ineffable nature of performance. In taking on the project with the Warkari however, I was leaving behind my association with ‘performance’ in a theatrical context, and moving into a study of ‘performativity’ in devotional manifestations in public life, explored through filmmaking.

### **2.3 Questioning the research process in making *The Warkari Cycle***

Given that a ‘pre-production’ process is about preparing oneself for the eventuality of producing a film in a new and unfamiliar context, I will set out to reflect on what would make me hypothetically ‘unprepared’ for the experience of shooting the pilgrimage of the Warkari people across Maharashtra’s muddy plains in

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<sup>30</sup> This is a method whereby scripting makes use of ‘real life’ experiences and ways of articulating the testimonies of people who are not trained actors, but citizen performers.

the mid monsoon season of 2010. Here I am examining what ways of acquiring knowledge and entering the project are ones I considered ‘appropriate’.

The word ‘research’ implies a systematic investigation of materials and sources for the purpose of establishing a persuasive thesis or authoritative reading of – in this instance- the Warkari as a devotional cultural group, which was not really my intention. To investigate data about the cultural, social and religious practices of the Warkari would certainly broaden my general understanding, but my priority was to *enter into a relationship* with the Warkari *without prescribing where it might lead*. I also faced the dilemma that, during the writing of this research text, I went through several phases of reassessment about who I am myself in relation to my ‘protagonists’ or co-actors in this project (the Warkari pilgrims).

A recent viewing of the Chennai-based director, RV Ramani’s film, *My Camera and the Tsunami* (2011) brought home an important realization. Ramani’s film exemplifies the use of filmmaking to establish his ‘home culture’ argumentatively, taking his immediate family and local traditional community (in Tamil Nadu) as well as his circle of filmmaker friends (in France, Holland, and Japan) as protagonists in his auto-ethnographic film collage. But his subjectivity in the film hovers between what constitutes his ‘sameness’ with his protagonists (through affection, proximity, bonding, familial relationships) and ‘being a foreigner’ to them or indeed himself. I mentioned above my resistance of the demand for ‘difference’ to be qualified and accounted for, and my struggle with the ‘privileging of separation over relationality’ in the imagination of social and/or filmmaking encounters. Like Ramani, I also see myself as having a multi-stranded, unstable and cosmopolitan positioning as an artist. In de Certeau’s words for this condition,

It is ... the position which consists of being a foreigner *at home*. (...) The fact remains that we are foreigners on the inside- but there is no outside' (de Certeau, 1984 : 13-14)

By dispensing with the binarism of being an “insider” or “outsider” in cultural terms, this complicates the agenda of making a study of the Warkari as a way of preparing myself to make a film about ‘them’. For every pilgrim I might meet in Maharashtra has the capacity (as I do) of being a foreigner to him/herself, as well as belonging to- identifying with- and reciprocating the ‘sameness’ of others from their community. Amongst the pilgrims I knew there would be tourists from across India as well as a small number of non-Indians, so on what premise can I claim to be ‘different’ from the pilgrims, which might motivate my ‘research’? The possibility of experiencing myself as an outsider gazing into ‘alien’ Warkari lives, is unrelated to my indigeneity to the studied group, whether I join the pilgrimage for a few days or a lifetime. There is no originary claim to ‘being-with’ the Warkari in terms of my identification with them.

I came to realize with hindsight that the conventionality of my approach to what is meant by ‘research’ in some ways limited my consideration of the Warkari’s *likeness* to myself. My point can perhaps be illustrated by imagining the absurdity of demanding that the Warkari pilgrims should prepare themselves before having an encounter on camera with me by educating themselves about Londoners, about my cultural/social/political and religious beliefs. Would this guarantee a more meaningful exchange, and what data would be relevant for them to know? So whilst I did acquaint myself with the Warkari’s social and religious practices according to broadly ‘ethnographic’ investigative conventions, I remained sceptical about what aspect of this could be relevantly applied to my project.

The above dilemma made me ask myself, what basic conditions of ‘practice’ do I require in this shoot with the Warkari? And the following quasi-manifesto is what emerged in response.

## 2.4 Claims for Practice

I demand of my work a sense of playfulness and eroticism in the ‘doing’ of filmmaking. I envision this as evolving in the same way that an improvised dance happens. This playfulness is one that I assume carries its associated risks and fallibility of exposing myself to the unknown. Like the cameraman, Ranjan Palit, (introduced later in this chapter) non-acquisitiveness in the filmmaking process is important to me<sup>31</sup>. Neither am I greatly attached to the technology I am using, not that I wish my camera to become invisible or to pretend that it has no impact on those that I film. Rather it is important to *think* of it as being immaterial. Many male cinematographers attribute the camera as if it were a phantom limb or an extension of their own bodies and selves<sup>32</sup>. My ideal camera, rather, is a camera that resembles my breath. Once it stops being connected to my consciousness, it has no intrinsic or magical powers. The camera serves to re-combine narratives and incidents from my everyday experience. It is about my consciousness ravelling itself around another’s (my filmed subjects’) by communicative means. Cameras are important only in so far as they invoke presences, places and beings, just as paintings, music or other creative media do so with the aid of their respective techniques and apparatus.

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<sup>31</sup> To quote Ranjan Palit, “I know when I put on my camera, lives break down into images, images will disappear into memories to be forgotten” (Palit, first person voiceover from his film, *In Camera*, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> In *My Camera and the Tsunami*, when his camera was destroyed by the Tsunami, R.V. Ramani enacted a ritual cleaning of the sand filled camera whereby it acquired supernatural significance, and he wounded himself by trying to salvage it during the flood.

When I am filmmaking, there is a desire to integrate myself into the time-space of the events being filmed; ‘being with’ the environment. This is not to deny the possibility of mis-understandings, impasses, separateness or voyeurism between my filmed subjects and I. But this ‘dance of potentialities’<sup>33</sup> indicates the site of mutual response in which everydayness is transformed into the aesthetic principles of a film (or a performance). What is more, in this dance, *actors* become inseparable from their *actions*. In a certain strand of Indian “non-dualistic” philosophy, ‘what goes on *between* actors are the same connected processes of mixing and separation that goes on *within* actors’ (see Marriott, in Kapferer (Ed) a1971: 109 on the notion of *karma*). Causation and the results of a particular action are seen as one in the same thing. This Hindu philosophical tenet cannot be claimed as universally ‘Indian’, but this Bhakti pilgrimage is a context in which such conceptualizations are applicable. Warren Linds (a2006: 14) furthermore comments on how Boal’s ‘dance’ (see previous footnote) is borne out of Plato’s concept of ‘*metaxis*’<sup>34</sup> a name for the spirit realm between humans and gods where the spirits act as mediators, a universally binding movement that enrolls the “in-between-ness” of potentialities becoming. In *metaxis*, we can belong completely and simultaneously to two autonomous worlds, ‘the image of reality and the reality of the image’ (Boal, a1995: 43).

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<sup>33</sup> I am borrowing this term from theatre director, Augusto Boal who, describing his process of working with citizen performers (as opposed to trained actors) called it a “dance of potentialities [in which] different powers take the floor at different times. Potential can and diminish, move into the foreground and then shrink into the background again- everything is mutable. Our personality is what it is, but also what it is becoming”. (Boal, a1995:39)

<sup>34</sup> Etymologically, ‘*metaxu*’ (in Greek) means “between + in, in the state of in the middle, in the interval, neither good nor bad’ (Linds a2006: 114 from lexicon by Liddell, S. 1996:1115) The film theorist, Ágnes Pethő” (a2011, has also explored a similar axis of inquiry in her book *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between*.

Transposed to filmmaking, *metaxis* not only happens through the simultaneity of these two worlds, but occurs between the actors of a filmmaking encounter who each imagine the directorial process according to where they stand as crew members, director(s) or protagonist(s). The ‘self’ in this sense is not an object, but rather a cluster of capabilities that find meaning as we adjust ourselves to the mediatory experience. In this co-enacting principle of self/environment, I agree with Linds (a2006: 116) that it is not enough to understand the physiological characteristics of these actors’ existence. One must also consider the immediate environment in which ‘I’ and ‘they’ awake each morning. This environment is not merely as a backdrop but rather it is a condition that belong to us; a power to affect and be affected by our respective worlds.

In the abstract of this thesis, I framed my filming of the Warkari as a ‘comparator’ in the task of researching the Indian filmmakers’ methods of filming traditional cultural groups. Indeed, the research context anticipated my decision to make a film on the topic of pilgrimage. The film did not precede the research. But by comparing my practice with the Indian filmmakers, I fully acknowledge that they are operating within cultural conditions to which they belong, whilst I am an outsider. Yet in the ‘cluster of capabilities’ that makes up our creative ambitions, there are clearly commonalities between us. This became evident in my correspondence with my production partner, the filmmaker Rajula Shah, in our many discussions and sharing of ideas about how to interact with, and film the Warkari. In my association with her and later with the Warkari themselves, we came to know and feel our differences, but we also ‘borrowed habits and hence identity without either body being reducible to the other or to itself’. (Diprose, a1996: 258).

I did not experience an all-inclusive undifferentiated body-to-body transmission between the Warkari and I when shooting. Nor was the intellectual exchange between Shah and I always ideally harmonious, especially amidst the pressures of low budget filmmaking without the luxury of a mediating producer. But we managed conflicts that arose from assuming that our ambitions with the project were unanimous, though these conflicts didn't ultimately threaten the realization of our work (that after all consisted of two films made alongside each other, rather than one collaborative film). We shared an interest in visual poetry as filmmakers and my learning from observing Shah on set has certainly nourished my analysis of her methods and other filmmakers in this study, and my own practice. In relation to the Warkari that I filmed, furthermore, I follow Sara Ahmed's recommendation - that,

We need to complicate what it means to be 'with' so that 'with-ness' is a site not of shared co-habitation but of differentiation...in other words in the inter-bodily movements that allow bodies to be formed...*bodies are also touched by some bodies differently from other bodies*. (Ahmed, 2000: 48 her italics)

Observing the negotiation of assumed 'difference' of cultural background between Shah and I in our communication with the Warkari, the *degree* of difference (in the sense that I am European) was more obvious in my case than in Shah's. Shah was raised in Madhya Pradesh and trained at the Film and Television Institute in Pune where she now lives, but she has a longstanding research interest in Bhakti philosophy, poetry and culture. I therefore benefitted from her considerable knowledge whilst hoping to bring my perspective as an artist filmmaker concerned with corporeality in cinematography. Detailing the microcosm of our exchange as creative practitioners also recalls the fact that every filmmaker whose practice I have questioned in this thesis follows his/her own 'claims for practice', which- unlike

mine- may not necessarily be so concerned with the ethics of subjectivity in film authorship. This was a challenge in my inquiries about their practices, to be open to new themes that my interviewees themselves considered central to their work.

I would now like to return to the conceptualization of self ‘as/with’ environment (mentioned at the beginning of this section) by linking it with *Advaita Vendanta* (non-dualism) as first propounded by Adi Shankara<sup>35</sup>, a concept also expanded upon in *bhakti* oral culture that draws upon debates in the *Bhagavad Gita*. *Advaita-sadhana*, which could be described as ‘self realization’ (through the arts and spiritual practice) is often mistakenly conceived of as a ‘turning inwards’ to reflect on the self as a principle isolated from the world. T.M.P. Mahadevan qualifies, however, that it can be imagined as follows, which can equally be applied to the actors in filmmaking relationships:

By ‘self’ is meant the underlying unitary consciousness that all beings have in common. Once this is intuited, there can be no feeling of separateness from others and the welfare of the so-called others becomes the welfare of oneself. (Mahadevan, a1981: 20)

Acknowledging the above, however, we can also distinguish an *empirical* self at work, reaching towards what is after all a promise more than a fact of ‘unitary consciousness’. This empirical self acts and has agency by identifying itself with the geo-political differences that are part of our social reality. That is to say, there are obvious ‘differences’ between the Warkari and I in our language, ethnicity, faith, livelihood and political status. So whilst I was making my film about them, I was

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<sup>35</sup> Adi Shankara (788CE-820 CE) was a sage from Kerala whose teachings formed the foundation of the *nirgun* tradition of *bhakti* that I will come to discuss. He was a major philosopher who established his conceptual precepts by drawing from the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the Vedic canon. (See William Indich, a1995 [1980] )



always conscious of stepping into their immediate conditions and environment, questioning my own subjectivity. I was similarly aware that my European notions of ‘tradition’ (in cultural linguistic terms), would necessarily be challenged by an Indian perspective of the same. In this regard, it was helpful to explore a range of cultural theorists from India and their debates around tradition, as evident in Chapter 5.

Returning to my filming of the pilgrimage, my aspiration was to explore ways of engaging with the Warkari pilgrims that emerge from a vocabulary of actions, gestures, walking, music and the body in our meeting. The advantage of choosing a pilgrimage as my film topic is that I could not only ‘be with’ but also *move with* the Warkari whilst filming, participating in the unfolding of everyday actions in practical terms. This context embraced the mobility of spaces for devotion, storytelling, social and music/dance activities. *Moving with* the pilgrims enhanced the use of multiple qualitative methods including visual and kinetic/corporeal participation. In *Mobilities* (a2007: 40) John Urry (the social scientist) discusses the importance of assessing societal conditions by moving with the groups concerned, which might involve walking with them in order to sustain a connection with their worldview. With hindsight, I note that the Indian filmmakers I spoke to during my fieldwork (in their home cities) also ‘travelled out’ to film the traditional artists they chose as subjects.

Having viewed a large number of Indian documentaries prior to shooting my project, I remarked that a great number of them were driven by ‘verbally-intensive’ narrative formats. This inspired me to imagine a film project that differed from this style, largely because of my primary focus as a visual artist. I wanted to get closer to what happens to the body and to corporeal communication when pilgrims partake in the pilgrimage over this 21-day mass gathering. Furthermore, I linked my focus on this bodily approach to the devotional significance of the pilgrimage itself. In this way

I hoped to replicate for my audience my experience of being in the crowds in Maharashtra, where I was thrown together with vast numbers of pilgrims in an event that seemingly had no beginning, middle and end; a mass improvisation that is at the same time a recurrent ritual. This led me to produce a non-linear cyclical video installation project as opposed to a linear ‘documentary’ narrative, as I later detail.

To conclude, I found both strong affinities and points of departure between the filmmakers of my survey and myself. Indeed these comparisons and contrasts exist between peer filmmakers in India whose practices resist being homogenised within a ‘national’ identity. The juxtaposition of self-scrutiny concerning my filmmaking whilst reflecting on my peer filmmakers is, however, crucial to this thesis. I found this to be an important way of cross-referencing theory and practice in direct relationship whilst at the same time openly revealing my biases (as an artist-filmmaker). Whilst formulating the above ideas, however, I recognized that a certain kind of contextual investigation was necessary to *be with* the Warkari in respect to the specificity of their history as a collective. For the pilgrimage itself is also a kind of living ‘manifesto’ that is greatly significant to the pilgrims I would be filming.

### **2.5.a Contextual research related to the Warkari**

To understand the basic tenets of Maharashtrian *bhakti* and the practices of the Warkari, section **b, Warkari Research Materials**, in the Bibliography (page 275) lists the literature I have consulted. The following pages synopsise the type of ‘facts’ about the Warkari that I saw as generically relevant to my project.

The Warkari belong to a Hindu *bhakti* movement that dates back to Maharashtra of the mid 13th century, spanning both Vaishnavite and Shaivite spiritual practices. The devotees are mystics as much as being followers of any externally

identifiable god or guru, believing in the concept of the supreme god that is conceived of as beyond human qualification (a quality known as *nirguna*). The *nirguna* tradition is associated with North Indian religious traditions whilst the '*saguna*'<sup>36</sup> lineage crystallized as a mid nineteenth century sect related to Maharashtran Vaishnavas, consists of a coherent body of *sants*'<sup>37</sup> teachings and follows a particular trans-generational transmission system known as the *sant parampara* (Dhere, b1984; Vaudeville, b1987). The four founding Warkari medieval *sants* are Jñaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram, in whose lifetime Maharashtra fell under Islamic rule for three centuries. By the mid-seventeenth century, the military Raja Shivaji Maharaj reclaimed the regions known as the Desh and the Konkan, but the Mughals invaded Maharashtra again in 1681. The core religious principles of the Warkari are closely associated with this early medieval period in which other religious movements in India (like Sikhism) also advocated for the 'devotee as householder' rather than the more uncompromising discipline of the *sanyasi* who gives up all comforts and family bonds for god.

For Maharashtran *bhaktas*, the god Vithoba (also called Lord Vitthal or Vitthalai) and the sacred land (the *Pandharpur kshetra*) where he first appeared to the devotee, Pundalik stand central. The commitment to undertake the pilgrimage, and the *sants*' teachings are important keystones of the faith. This deity is believed to be a

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<sup>36</sup> Vaudeville (b2005:224) states that the object of *bhakti* is the 'qualified' 'saguna' aspect of the Lord described as *nama rupa* 'name and form' and as far as the cult of the Name is concerned, this is open to all practitioners including the *Shudras*.

<sup>37</sup> '*Sant*' (a cross-frontier Hindu/Muslim term) denotes a person in a devotional community recognize as having an advanced spiritual practice that he or she transmits in sung poetry, which is the keystone of *bhakti* popular worship. Transmission is essential in the tradition, since *bhakti* does not rely on religious authorities to legitimate it. The term *sant* has come to refer to the early non-sectarian poet-saints of northern India and Maharashtra, sometimes also the Vaishnava poets of Karnataka considered 'liberal' Vaishnavas (Vaudeville b2005: 242).

spontaneous manifestation (a '*swarupa*') of Lord Vishnu-as-Krishna and narratives about him overlap with Krishna-Gopal the god of Mathura. The popular sung verses in Marathi known as *abhangas*<sup>38</sup> communicate the faith to followers and are performed in a great variety of formal and informal settings, interpreted by esteemed classical musicians such as Kishori Amonkar<sup>39</sup> as well as in informal gatherings. (Vaudeville, b2005: 199). The lyrics of these songs also importantly express a form of resistance against caste oppression towards 'lower' castes by the Warkari *sants* and their followers who were historically excluded by the Brahmin priests from certain sites and forms of devotional practice.

There are also large *Adivasi* belts in Maharashtra whose myths (since the era of their pre-colonial kingdoms) are intrinsically woven into the Warkari *sant* narratives. Having migrated from traditions in the Deccan there are bards known as *vaghyas* that sing as a form of *puja*<sup>40</sup> at the fort-temple of Khandoba on the pilgrims' route at Jejuri, their music. The *vaghyas*' parents (customarily) commit them under religious oath at birth to a life-long practice of honouring the deity, Khandoba<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> An *abhang*a (in Marathi meaning 'unbroken') refers to devotional poetry sung in praise of Lord Vitthal that can be performed in any public space or in ritual worship. Sometimes *abhang*a groups of different styles meet in domestic settings. They also feature on television slots on Doordarshan, where experts in the tradition narrate stories of the *sants* (Ramnarayan, cited in *The Hindu* newspaper, Chennai, November 6, 2010)

<sup>39</sup> I have used an *abhang*a attributed to the female *sant* Janabai called *Jani jay Paniyaasi* sung by Amonkar in my last scene of *The Warkari Cycle* at time code: 40:52

<sup>40</sup> *Puja* refers to ritual in honour of the gods, performed either in domestic shrines or in sacred sites such as temples as a Hindu practice.

<sup>41</sup> Khandoba is a 'master of robbers and one of the manifestations of Shiva who returned to earth as a rural king, echoing the god, Rudra from Vedic literatures'. (Sontheimer, b1991; 231-253)



Warkari resting on route to Jejuri from a Palkhi associated with the *sant*, Tukaram. Photo L.King, July 2010

Historically, the popularity of stories about the *sants* relates to the democratization of religious philosophy by their translation from the original Sanskrit into vernacular local languages, permitting circulation that was formerly reserved for Brahmin priests. (Marathi was used in the Warkari's case. (See Schomer and McLoed, b1987: 23). Generations of poet-bards have since re-interpreted concepts from the *Bhagavad Gita* to the early Vaishnavite tradition, making these ideas approachable to those without formal education or literacy. Musical storytelling, then, is not just a form of devotional expression, but continues this philosophical discourse as an ongoing argument across centuries in which devotees contribute their understanding.

On the basis of the above type of inquiry, I was aware that the knowledge I was acquiring was important but still far removed from the living conditions and practices of the Warkari. Writers such as the Marathi scholar, Irawate Karve, (b1988)

and the poet, Arun Kolatkar<sup>42</sup> (b2010) however, have described Marathi rural culture in a vivid, experiential fashion that I found artistically relevant. It became clear too that I would not be sharing the same devotional motivation for taking part in the pilgrimage as the Warkari themselves, so my vantage point would inevitably stake a difference between us in the filmmaking process. Previous experience, however, had proven that it was often the impromptu details of individual lives that nourish films, allowing one to come closer to filmed subjects' ways of engaging with their values and beliefs.

The environment of the pilgrimage (I later discovered) included an entire visual culture of depictions of Lord Vitthal and the Warkari *sants*: on posters, jewellery, on vehicles and drawings in sandal paste smeared on rocks by the roadside. Vitthal's image was also widely appropriated by, for example, a local steel manufacturing company who erected a 40-foot tall temporary sculpture of Vitthal during the pilgrimage (see image page 67). The deity also features on election campaign posters, since Maharashtra politicians regularly take advantage of the deep affection held for Vitthal by putting airbrushed images of themselves next to his on street hoardings. Such details were not accessible through literary research materials prior to my travel but are, of course, important to a filmmaker.

I found many of the *abhangas* by the Warkari *sants* powerful and moving, particularly when considering the conditions of war, famine and caste oppression of medieval Maharashtra, in which they were written<sup>43</sup>. But I began to refine my search

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<sup>42</sup> Irawati Karve is a prolific scholar writing predominantly in the 1960's and 1970's. Her *On the Road, A Maharashtrian Pilgrimage* (b1988 [1962]) takes the form of a personal journal. Arun Kolatkar's *Collected Poems* (2010, ed. Mehrotra, A.V) are deeply embedded in Warkari myths, gods and regional Marathi identity.

<sup>43</sup> This was the two centuries before the reign of Shivaji Bhosle Maharaj (b.1630-d.1680) in which the Maratha kingdom was yet to be founded by a series of wars against the Mughals'

towards poetry that matched my strategic interest in dance and corporeal communication as a filmmaker and thus turned to discussions (from the *Tukaram Gatha* and the *Jñaneshwari*<sup>44</sup> written by the *sants*) on the ‘body-spirit’ relationship. This poem by the founding *sant* Jñaneshwar, who lived from 1275 to 1296 is an example of a poem that I found instructive:

Beloved Arjuna, those who declare that the Self is confined in the body are like those who say that the ether can be confined in the shape of a pot.

O wise Arjuna, it neither assumes nor abandons bodily shape,

It is eternally the same.

As a day and night appear and vanish from the sky,  
so do bodies come and go by the power of the spirit.

So in the body it neither acts nor causes action,  
nor is it the promoter of spontaneous events.

This of itself it is not subject to the less or the more.

It may be present in the body yet is untouched by it.

(Excerpt, *Jñaneshwari*, 13.1109-1110 Editor, Mokashi’s a1987:186 translation)

A text like this encapsulates much about the mystic/devotional aspect of *bhakti* in which the body is merely a vehicle for the more significant passage of the spirit, yet I

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three sultanates: Bijapur, Ahmednagar, and Golconda. The resistance was lead by Shivaji Maharaj in 1659. The famine took place in the lifetime of *sant* Tukaram in 1629 when thousands of Marathis died (Chitre, b1991: ix).

<sup>44</sup> The *Tukaram Gatha* is a collection of 8000 poems attributed to Tukaram first printed in 1873 though his life span was from 1609 to 1950. The most authoritative translation into English is by Dilip Chitre (b1991). The *Jñaneshwari* is an expansive philosophical commentary on the *Bhagawad Gita* completed in 1290 by Jnaneshwar Translated in 1995 by Dipika Bhavartha.

was wary -as the art historians Gupta and Ray<sup>45</sup> (a2007: 355-6) have warned- of taking core concepts from Warkari *sant* texts and turning them into governing principles that would imply that all Warkari experience their spirituality in this way. Gupta and Ray also emphasize the importance of investigating political histories, and forms of social resistance within religious movements in India such as the Warkari that I subsequently explored.

But my interest in the pilgrimage as a choreographic site remained the most central and important one. I continued investigating how the body is discussed in the *sants'* and other texts, but realized that 'the body' can be interrogated through many different axes, such as in the phenomenon of group dances, the experience of class, caste or gender and so forth. The value of exploring these cultural and symbolic orders of 'the body' as a filmmaker was to enhance my understanding of communication and signs exchanged by people through actions rather than words. Here are some of the ways I was considering these issues.

### **2.5.b Corporeality in the Warkari/Bhakti tradition**

As a European filmmaker working on the Warkari, the issue of caste cannot be ignored even whilst I am conscious that from an Indian perspective, the British in particular<sup>46</sup> have been criticised as reading 'caste' reductively as a matter of discriminatory social divide, even though to make use of caste divisively was outlawed in 1950 with Article 15 of the Indian constitution. On the other hand, it is

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<sup>45</sup> Attreyee Gupta and Sugata Ray are both scholars from University of Minnesota, the latter studying histories of Braj Bhumi (a pilgrimage site in North India).

<sup>46</sup> Dirks (a2001) argues that caste is not an intrinsic component of Indian (religious) tradition, but a modern phenomenon; the product of a concrete historical encounter between India and British colonial rule. He does not attest that caste was 'invented' by the British, but that under British governance, caste became a term used reductively for naming and subjugating many of India's diverse forms of social identity and organization under one universalizing category.



unadvisable to disregard the complexity of caste altogether, in the same way that it would be to silence gender or class disparities when negotiating relationships pertaining to film production.

Amongst the Warkari, the question of caste historically is steeped in ambiguity since, rather than cutting ties with its existence altogether, it is borne as a burden without undermining its regimes. This refusal of violent protest is echoed across the centuries and features in the film, *Sant Tukaram* (1936) characterized in the portrayal of the *sant* himself. Yet, the so-called ‘untouchables’ continue to face discrimination as polluting castes in India, experiencing segregation such as enforced residence outside of the village precincts (Vaudeville 2005: 222). The castes concerned have contested their ostracization through a battle that entered national legislation with Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the Dalit *Ad Dharm* movement in the 1930’s, evolving out of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century social reforms, but there is no uniform way of responding to caste exclusion by those who continue to suffer it. What can be said is that many Warkari resist the caste-ist meta-narratives embedded in Hinduism on a personal as well as a ritual level, demonstrated (for example) in how the notion of ‘corporeal pollution’ is not tolerated in the tradition.<sup>47</sup> When Warkari greet each other, the custom is for both to touch the feet of the other, as a symbolic self-humbling before men, women and children regardless of caste or class status. This is a tactical demonstration against self-abnegation being reserved only for social or caste superiors in more orthodox Hindu and Muslim religious practices.

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<sup>47</sup> The *Gopalakala* or the *Dahi Handi* festival (observed during the *Krishna Paksha* in Shravan, Maharashtra) is an example. A pudding of yoghurt, pounded rice and jaggery, is offered to Krishna, and participants compete to break open a pot suspended on a hook. The same mixture is shared amongst all who attend regardless of caste, thus negating the idea that any participant would ‘pollute’ the food. (Sand, 1994)

With this information, one can appreciate that the overt displays of inclusivity amongst *bhakti* followers during the pilgrimage are linked to the above-mentioned histories and political/ritual resistance, as well as to the principle of divinity existing in all life forms that is part of its spiritual legacy.

Concerning issues of gender and the body, I had wondered prior to the shoot why the female gods of the Warkari are characterized as harsh and powerful (in Marathi, '*kadak*') such as the goddess Bhavani, the lover of Khandoba (Bernsten and Zelliott b1988: 17) and Vithoba (the male deity) is regarded as having a benign, affectionate presence (*saumya*), yet in everyday life the conventions of women's subordination persist. An example, here, would be that the mass dances that take place during the pilgrimage are enjoyed exclusively by men with women watching from the sidelines. Whilst not intending to put gender issues at the centre in my film, one experience I came across whilst shooting showed more fluidity in gender relationships than I anticipated. When my crew was nearing Pandharpur, I asked various pilgrims what they experienced when finally encountering Lord Vitthal. The following answer from Dagdu Baburao Shinde resembled many others I spoke to:

When you reach that level, you truly feel that you are back home with your parents. ...When you fall at Panduranga's feet, you feel you are touching the feet of your father, or your mother. (Shinde, e2010)

The love for Vitthal that the Warkari express, follows what *bhakti* scholars describe as *sakhya bhava*, a love of god that compares with parental love or the love between friends (distinct from other *bhakti* traditions where Krishna invokes feelings of a divine lover, Grewal, b2006:146). Shinde's affection towards the divine is indiscriminately 'maternal' or 'paternal'.

Also relevant to discussion of gender is the Mumbai-based filmmaker, Anjali Punjabi's film, *Some things I know about her* (2001) which features Tara Bhil (from Rajasthan) a follower of the *sant* Mirabai (celebrated by the Warkari too) who declares:

*Bhakti* is a dangerous game, not everyone can play it. Not everyone can walk the edge of a sword like me. (Bhil in *Some things I know about her* (2001), Anjali Punjabi's translation from original Hindi to English subtitles)

The above statement suggests this devotee's affinity with the more transgressive side of Virasaivism<sup>48</sup>. Women like Mirabai, but also today's followers of the *sant*, rebel against the convention of becoming housewives and mothers, choosing instead a mystic union with Shiva (Ramaswamy, b2007:165)<sup>49</sup>. So within the Warkari's broadly patriarchal structure, it is disrupted by a spiritual tradition of women resisting their subordination through an un-institutionalized spiritual commitment.

Moving on to the topic of class, I was aware of research materials that discuss issues of power and agency in film production methods<sup>50</sup>. I also had prior experience of being perceived as a 'white materially privileged person' in my earlier film productions in India, having worked on projects with economically marginal groups in the Delhi suburbs. My stepping unaccompanied into a 'deprived' neighbourhood with

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<sup>48</sup> Virasaivism is a religious organization based on Shiva worship that at least in some elements claimed egalitarian status for women, established in the late 12<sup>th</sup> Century incorporating women sants who were *vachana* writers belonging to Shudra (untouchable) castes and incorporating Tantric influences (Ramaswamy, b2007: 155)

<sup>49</sup> This *vachana* (verse) by Mahadevi Akka seems to link in this sense with Tara Bhil's remark: 'In our embrace the bones should rattle, in a welding, the welding mark even should disappear. The knife should enter totally when the arrow enters, even the feathers should not be seen'. (Trans. Mahadevi Akka, Chennai: 1974:39 citation from Ramaswamy b2007:165)

<sup>50</sup> An example of such literature would be MacDougall's *Transcultural Cinema* (a1998) or Fabian's *Power and Performance* (a1990)



A commercial steel manufacturer's image of Lord Vitthal, erected near Pandharpur to attract customers during the pilgrimage season. Photo: L.King, July 2010





The sacred image of Lord Vitthal from the Pandharpur Temple *murti* (sculpture) The image on the previous page imitates this one. Copyright ISKCON Desire Tree Devotee Network (Accessed <http://www.iskcondesiretree.net> 9.12.2009)

a video camera would automatically signal that I was working for an international development agency, so my task was to readjust such expectations by talking to people (in Hindi). My strategy usually included making the first few visits without taking a camera, until the novelty of being a foreigner and a filmmaker would pass,

also letting my interlocutors handle the camera equipment themselves. But the peculiar circumstance of the pilgrimage made it unlikely that I would meet the same people on route more than once. The problem, however, remained the same: one of interrupting pre-conceptions about *why I would be interested* in filming them.

When the shoot in Pune was underway, I noted that Rajula Shah's students at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) barely acknowledged the presence of the Warkari when they flooded into Pune in their thousands. Events such as pilgrimage are so widespread across India that their presence is often taken for granted. But this 'selective blindness' also demarcates class divides in India's social makeup. When I attempted to recruit a camera assistant amongst the FTII students, their tepid response indicated that my subject matter was not considered attractive, probably because of its perceived lack of kudos for students' career prospects, with its focus on pilgrims who are predominantly working class farmers and small traders. This lead me to recruit elsewhere for my camera assistant, found eventually through the database of a camera hire agency.

The film format I chose for *The Warkari Cycle* [one concerning the walking body] is a cyclical installation-based screening. This decision emerged from discovering that pilgrimages in South Asia historically have taken the form of circular walks to interlinked sacred sites (known as *pradakshina*). Buddhist pilgrimages,<sup>51</sup> amongst the first to appear in Maharashtra, were dedicated to the god, Kannon, and as time progressed, they spread to neighbouring South Asian and South East Asian countries including Japan. The circular pattern corresponds with the concept of rebirth

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<sup>51</sup> In Ackerman, Martinez and Rodriquez de Alisal (b2007: 29), the Buddhist adoption of the concept is claimed to have appeared in the early Buddhist scripture *Mahaparinibbana-suttanta* around the first century CE. The origin of the features of Buddhist pilgrimage lay in the ancient Hindu pilgrimage described in the *Mahabharata*.

in the ten realms of being where the souls of the dead were believed to rotate in the first six realms before entering heaven. The intention of the ritual was to evoke the attaining of a new life in this life; a rebirth on earth. This Buddhist concept echoes a description in the (Hindu) *Upanishads* that also mention circular pilgrimages (Ackerman, Martinez and Rodriguez de Alisal, b2007: 28). I wanted to make use of this cyclical time-structure in my film composition, to create a ‘meditation on a theme’, as opposed to the unfolding of a linear ‘documentary’ argument.

Another finding that became a reference point was the motif of rivers in Hindu pilgrimage. The Hindi word for pilgrimage [*thirth yatra*] contains the word *thirtha*, meaning ‘a ford or a river bank’ or (metaphysically), a place where ‘the river of existence can be crossed, ...to the next world’ (Eck, b1982: 33-4). Furthermore, in Maharashtrian rural culture, to actually cross one’s own land with one’s body on foot is considered the only way to actually know and understand it. (Feldhaus, b2003:39) Pilgrims are thus ‘enacting regions with their bodies, moving along a river or between a river and nearby villages...that dramatize and highlight the region that the river forms’ (Feldhaus b2003:18). Rivers themselves in the Rig Veda (10.90.11-14, in Feldhaus, b2003: 19) are described as having human limbs and body parts; tributaries and the source of a river are described as its ‘mouth’, ‘arms’ and ‘heart’. Reciprocally too, human bodies stand for the primary substance of the universe. I therefore became interested in this perceptual exchange between body/world/consciousness and hoped to make use of it artistically in my film.

### **2.5.c Film sources with relevance to *The Warkari Cycle***

Alongside the reviewed literature, the following lists some key films existing about the Warkari that I watched. There is the renowned historical drama and Marathi classic based on Tukaram’s life story, *Sant Tukaram* (1936) by Vishnupant Govind

Damle and Sheikh Fattelal, one of a series of films that celebrate other Maharashtran *sants*. The film *Sant Tukaram* was produced by the Prabhat Film Company, one of the most prestigious large-scale studio companies of the ‘talkie’ film era<sup>52</sup> where the current Film and Television Institute of India stands. Gajendra Ahire’s *Vitthal*, *Vitthal!* (2005) is a Marathi commercial feature film based on the Warkari pilgrimage featuring Bollywood-style choreographies of the *abhangas* of which there are many similar examples. Regarding ethnographic studies on the Warkari, the historians, Henning Stegmüller and Günther D. Sontheimer produced the film, *Vari (Pilgrimage)* (1990), a classic informational documentary that details the pilgrimage including portrayals of many experienced folk musicians. With the exception of Anjali Punjabi and Rajula Shah, I noted relatively few filmmakers who took the testimonies of *bhakti* followers themselves as their focus, rather than scholars’ investigations of them.

Another film that became relevant to me during the pre-production phase, is one made by a Dutch filmmaker who, like myself, used filmmaking as a way of investigating what India’s traditions might signify for other Indians. The (late) Johan van de Keuken’s film *Het Oog Boven de Put (The Eye Above the Well)*, (1985) takes the people of rural Kerala as its subject, and like my own project, his 94-minute film is predominantly without spoken commentary. His intervention into the lives of various families includes sequences of Brahmin<sup>53</sup> children’s highly ritualized schooling (reciting the Vedas) and families learning the South Indian martial art,

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<sup>52</sup> This studio company was founded by Sitaram Kulkarni, K. Dhaiber, S Fathelal, V. Dhamle and V. Shantaram and shifted premises to Pune in 1933.

<sup>53</sup> Some audiences may find it problematic that van de Keuken isolates one specific (i.e. orthodox Brahmin) caste to represent in this film, but the well-known filmmakers, Kumar Shahani and Arun Khopkar who were his local advisors may arguably have played a part in determining van de Keuken’s topical focus.



Kalaripayattu. What I find important in this film is that without an explanatory commentary, it brings a personal insight into the wealth that the traditions are offering, without justifying rationally how people are engaging with them. In my own film, my intention emerged as being similar, except that I aimed to rely even more emphatically on visual narrative, without including poetic voiceover (as he did).

The film also demonstrates a seamless transition between such ritual structures to people's employment in computer businesses, watching soap operas, and other mundane details of contemporary Indian social life. The implication is that the rituals bring significance whilst also being porous to technological and other forms of environmental change. The film begins with a poem that repeats again when the film ends:

A man chased by a tiger climbs in a tree.

The branch on which he hangs, bends dangerously over a dried up well.

Mice are gnawing on the branch.

Below him, at the bottom of the well he sees a mass of writhing snakes.

On the wall of the well a blade of grass grows, and on its tip a drop of honey.

He licks the honey up.

*This happened in a dream world that repeats itself thousands of times.*

*This happens in the only world we have.*

(Voiceover translated from Dutch as featured in English subtitles, *Het Oog*

*Boven de Put*, with van de Keuken's addition in italics)

The poem is based on the Shanti Parva of the Mahabharata when the Pandava brothers having won the battle, recognize that their victory is hollow, and seek the advice of their great uncle and former adversary, Bhima, who on his deathbed in the

battlefield, conjures up the above image. (Mulay, a2010: 337) At the film's end, van de Keuken repeats the poem, adding the line, *I am there and I see it as if in a dream.*<sup>54</sup>

## 2.6 Film historical inquiry

Beside the research into materials with direct relation to my own project, my intention was to undertake a wider investigation of filmmaking practices based on 'the traditions' in India, exploring its methodological histories and cinematic forms. Herein, I hoped to identify strategies that my peer filmmakers may have inherited that from their collective memory of practices by Indian filmmakers in recent history. Although I must qualify that these filmmakers have equally been influenced by international developments in documentary<sup>55</sup>, I have chosen to focus on influential practices at a national level within India. This is because I wanted to gain insight into how my peers in India imagine 'traditional' art practice in their local context, understanding how this has informed their creative practices. This film historical inquiry then converges into a more detailed consideration of four films that permit me to investigate individual filmmakers' methods and their reasons for choosing to film the traditions, also connecting these findings with ongoing political developments both in the film industry and beyond.

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<sup>54</sup> The final comment also (speculatively) makes reference to the filmmaker's urgency in completing the film at a moment in his life when he had been diagnosed as having a terminal illness. (Mulay, a2010:337)

<sup>55</sup> The Mumbai-based filmmaker Paromita Vohra charts the impact on Indian documentary culture of John Grierson, Paul Rotha and James Beveridge from the late 1920's to 1950's; of Latin American cinema in the 1960's (in particular); of Richard Leacock and the US/Canadian *cinema vérité* filmmakers in the late 1960's and Russian social realist filmmaking in the 1980's. In the current time frame, documentaries produced in India in her words 'cast a doubt on the European or Anglo-centric language of documentary' (Vohra, c2011:52)

I have chosen to consider S. Sukhdev's film, *An Indian Day* (1967), Mani Kaul's *Mati Manas* (1985), Deepa Dhanraj's *Something Like a War* (1991) and Reena Mohan's *Kamlabai* (1992). The tracks that these filmmakers laid have contributed in very different ways to the operational knowledge of filmmakers working today. S. Sukhdev and Kaul are generally recognized as belonging to India's 'New Cinema' movement that emerged in the late 1960's and 1970's, whilst Reena Mohan and Deepa Dhanraj established their careers in the 1980's, both politically motivated filmmakers whose practices grew out of their parallel activity in the women's movement and other civil rights concerns. In the case of Dhanraj and Mohan, I discuss films from later in their careers, (the early 1990's) though their practices already had an impact in the preceding decade. These are not 'unique cases above others' in establishing documentary typologies. Rather, they provide contrasting and influential examples of how the relationship with their filmed subjects has been conceived over the last four decades.

At the time of its production, synch sound recording in filmmaking in which 16mm was the standard was only just coming into use in Sukhdev's *An Indian Day* (1967) so his filmed subjects are mostly rendered mute. Yet although without speaking subjects, it is a valuable example of how visual iconography and sound can convey many different narratives about social and technological development, providing a personalised purview of India in the late 1960's.

Mani Kaul is a filmmaker who challenged some of the ways in which the conventions of naturalism in cinema were established in preceding media histories, though in Kaul's case he was investigating Indian folklore and the art forms of rural cultural groups inquiring into their cultural provenance and mythic storytelling forms. In *Mati Manas* he transforms the traditional myths of Indian potters and ceramic

artists through poetic symbolism in cinema, yet his approach was somewhat detached from an engagement with the potters themselves.

Deepa Dhanraj in the 1980's was among the first to give detailed attention to the ways in which the lives of working class/rural non-literate people are mediated on camera, having an activist's stake in negotiating the rights of such communities and their response to policies (such as healthcare and fertility) in which the 'voice' of resistance stands central.

Finally, Reena Mohan's film *Kamlabai* exemplifies a filmmaking process in which what is usually concealed about the filmmakers' interaction with the filmed subject is revealed and negotiated *on camera*. I will also comment on Mohan's Director of Photography on this project, Ranjan Palit, who has made a significant contribution to documentary development in India through his particular style of camerawork.

Before embarking, however, I will profile the main film institutional patronage body, called the 'Film's Division', against which these filmmakers were rebelling, even though Kaul and Sukhdev were initially funded by the organization. The filmmakers' attitude of resistance also engages a corresponding area of debate on representing traditional communities in cinema history and in cultural/developmental theory. This in turn requires me to give a short introduction to discourses of marginality and 'subalterity' discussed under heading **2.8**.

## **2.7 Early History of the Films Division**

Across most literatures on Indian documentary cited in Chapter 1, the activity of the Films Division (henceforth F.D.) is taken as a barometer for conditions in the

film industry from the coming of Independence (1947) to the mid 1980's. As the Mumbai-based filmmaker/writer, Paromita Vohra, claims,

... a huge part of documentary production was dedicated to the style and goals of the F.D. that a large enough educated elite identified with the prevailing ideas of Nehruvian socialism' (Vohra, c2011: 45).

The F.D. was the largest film commissioning initiative of the Indian government whose precursor (the Film Advisory Board, F.A.B) had formerly been a mouthpiece of British colonial governance, generating propagandist films in support of the Second World War effort. Documentary film was introduced at that time as an expanded elaboration of the 'newsreel' - a current affairs film bulletin and compulsory accompaniment to all entertainment movie screenings (Majumdar, c2007). In the years leading into Independence, this former newsreel model was reconstituted as an instrument of social change. The F.A.B. was replaced by the Films Division, allowing a new context for the investigation of Indian cultural themes, such as director, Paul Zils,<sup>56</sup> and P.V. Pathy's film, *Our India* or *Hindustan Hamara* (1950)<sup>57</sup>, Fali Billimoria's *A village in Travancore* (1957) or later, Vithalbai K. Jhaveri's *Mahatma: Life of Gandhi 1869-1948* (1968)

Giving shape to the political process of decolonization, the F.D. was established as part of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (M.I.B.) in 1948

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<sup>56</sup> Zils, the German, entered India by being rescued by the Indian Navy as a prisoner of war when sailing from Indonesia in a German ship that was torpedoed. After a 4-year imprisonment near Mumbai, he persuaded the (British) External Publicity Unit if the Information Films of India to take him as a filmmaker/employee in India (B.D. Garga in *Cinemaya* journal, 2005, 65/1 p 49).

<sup>57</sup> This film features a central character, Ram from a deprived rural background who, traversing through history demonstrates the travails he undergoes, whilst his brother, Bala, is searches a livelihood in the city. The film censor board truncated whole sequences from the film, fearful that this image of India would provoke controversy despite its 'happy ending'. (Mulay, a2010: 290)

supplying films to several core Ministries. This project also provided free film screenings in rural areas, reaching an estimated 8,000,000 viewers every week. The F.D. was an alliance of government bureaucrats, independent filmmakers, civil society councillors and film industry associates. (Roy, S. 2007:34) Amongst its advisory consultants by the late 1960's and 1970's were Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, K.A. Abbas, and S.Sukhdev. This committee's main task was to re-imagine the documentary to construct an India in which the State was the key agent of social change, creating an 'equitable' representation of Indian society and its development targets. The imperative of 'visibility' of marginal social groups was crucial to this vision, whereby historically, the F.D. assumed a transcendent directorial vision. (ibid, 2007: 34-35)

The commissioning categories then established by the F.D. fell under the rubrics: 'Art and Experimental' films (8% of the total production quota); 'Citizenship and Reform' including biography/celebrity films (18%); 'Class room/Children's films' and educationally motivated films; films of the Defence Ministry, (produced for export and tourism, including coverage of State visits, (17%) and Development and Planning films (38%) (ibid, 2007:43). The 2007 report of the M.I.B, states that in 1954, it established a 'Song and Drama Division' to harness the developmental functions of a variety of performing arts such as dance-drama, puppet shows, folk recitals and *Adivasi* dramas under national cultural programmes that existed at the time. With low rates of literacy, film was construed as an important means of 'educating the nation' following a utilitarian vision of the agricultural and labour classes. Roy cites two films of the 1950's as being in consonance with this Nehruvian-style 'citizenship lesson': (*The case of Mr. Critic* 1954, and *Dilly-Dallying* 1957). The 'message' being conferred was one of developing skills through self-help,

celebrating industrial growth, promising progressive technology but also applying a Gandhian distaste for political machinations.

Whilst the F.D.'s agenda carried institutional-legal mechanisms that considered 'citizenship' as being made up of diverse ethnic/religious/class/caste groups, there were gaps between 'procedural commitments and their actual implementation' (ibid 2007:5). We might then ask as Judith Butler did,<sup>58</sup> "Who is identifying the other as 'culturally different'? Who is the speaking subject that says, 'I' think 'you' are culturally different, therefore 'I' invite 'you' to perform your cultural difference?" It became apparent, for example, that Muslims were marginalized in this imagination of statehood since between 1948 and 1972 only 17 out of 1,742 documentaries dealt with Islamic cultural issues. The notion of a 'democracy' of cultural plurality was clearly not happening in the way that the F.D's policy was being interpreted.

## **2.8 Debates from 'subaltern' theory**

As is evident in the representational politics above, when filmmakers are considering India's traditional cultures as filmed subjects, the way that the lives of marginal communities have been allocated historically is inextricable from the above discourse. The policy of the Ministry was thus conditioning *what is to be understood* as 'marginal'. Thinking through this allocation principle, I would like to turn towards cultural theorists like Gayatri Spivak, considering the legacy of theories of the 'subaltern'. This term links historically with Marxist theory from a Soviet route, incorporating also the political philosophy of Gramsci, referring to 'those removed

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<sup>58</sup> This line of questioning was drawn from a lecture by Judith Butler 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb 2011 curated by INIVA with the title, "Paternalism", debating similar allocation principles in a European context. [http://www.iniva.org/events/2011/keywords\\_lecture\\_2/audio\\_recording](http://www.iniva.org/events/2011/keywords_lecture_2/audio_recording) (Accessed 8.8.2012)

from the lines of social mobility' (Spivak, a2008: 22 [2002]). As a critical field, 'subalterity' was defined through historiographic writings by the 'Subaltern Studies Collective'<sup>59</sup>, its findings crucial to postcolonial theory. It has now been augmented by a new generation of critics who question the imperial binarism of both colonial and anticolonial notions of the 'nationalisms' or 'bounded societal framing' on which it is founded. Leela Gandhi is one such critic whose contests its limitations saying...

...historiography inspired by the Subaltern Studies Collective highlights, in lieu of its claims to anticolonial oppositionality, elite nationalism's self-defeating collusion, collaboration, and implication in the imperial project, its reliance on the infrastructure and grammar of empire to disqualify elusive and disruptive forms of popular resistance (such as peasant rebellions in South Asia) internal to the anticolonial nation state. (Gandhi, L. a2006:5)

The self-representation and assertion by India's dalits (to name a societal group who would be considered 'subaltern') has gained increased attention in the political and academic agenda in the last decade. Yet as Ciotti (c2010:5)<sup>60</sup> reports, many within dalit communities are not happy to be lumped together under one 'subaltern, dalit' identity, regarding it as a stigmatization rather than a vehicle for change. Political parties such as the *Bahujan Samaj Party* that won a majority in Lucknow have greatly

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<sup>59</sup> The Subaltern Studies Collective (S.S.C) dates from the 1980's and critiques/re-constitutes India's historiography which (up to that point) had positioned India as semi-feudal state, colonized by the British, politicized, and eventually earning its independence. In this trope, the Indian elites are presented as the first Indians to gain a political consciousness, inspiring, the ideas and the values, for resistance against the British. The S.S.C. debunked this narrative, problematizing the relationship between elite and non-elite societal groups, and by re-considering the impact of subordinated elements within society by discussing how they should be historicised so as to attribute them inclusively as agents of socio-political change. Key authors associated with this movement are Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak amongst others. (Ludden, a2002)

<sup>60</sup> Manuella Ciotti's study is based on a semi-rural community of Chamars in Uttar Pradesh.



impacted on the lives of ‘low caste’ citizens, but it has many active members who are not universally dalit. So some amongst them argue for a re-imagining of dalit groups as ‘non-victims’ and socio-political subjects that form a plurality. In Karnataka too, anti-Brahmin movements have formed powerful religious/political leadership in which spiritual leaders have gained considerable wealth and power. They then function almost as a parallel state that offers healthcare, education and other social services to their followers (Bates, c2010: 6). But the refined discourse/counter-discourse that has been developed by theorists and activists alike concerning India’s plurality is in many cases far removed from how policy-makers and politicians define minority groups when they administer rights or create policy for the Indian nation as a whole. Whilst public opinion on ‘subaltern’ representation has undergone seismic changes in the last four decades, legislative change, if judged by state policies such as the ‘reservations quota’<sup>61</sup> reforms at a much slower pace, or can become trapped in political deadlock. In such authorization, the more dynamic, heterogeneous or problematic aspects of marginal (traditional) communities typically become replaced with an idea of presenting ‘culture’ reductively, using taxonomies that create ethnicity, geographic region and faith as if they were bounded units. (Kapila, c2008:118). Yet the filmmakers I have chosen to write about in Chapter 3 are ones who have fundamentally changed the ways in which the non-formally educated, the caste minorities and others who fall outside dominant cultural categories are

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<sup>61</sup> This is a law whereby fixed percentages of seats in universities and job markets are reserved for citizens considered socially disadvantaged though the denominations date back to colonial times: ‘Scheduled Castes’(SC) and ‘Scheduled Tribes’(ST). The 1950’s Constitution of India mandate was that a 15% quota of admissions into Higher Education should be reserved for SC’s and 7.5% for ST’s. In 1963, the Supreme Court ruled that the total reservation, including SC/ST quotas, couldn’t exceed 50%, and the term “Other Backward Castes” (27%) emerged in the Mandal commission (1978) only implemented effectively in 1990, by Prime Minister V.P. Singh who copied this template for government jobs resulting in wide scale protests and resistance. (Radhakrishnan, c2002)

represented. This shift (I am proposing) can be traced back to the late 1960's when horizons were changing in society and the film industry at once, concerning the politics of representation.

In response to the wider spirit of the times, the then Chief Producer of the F.D., Jean Bhowmagry acknowledged that the tenor of F.D. films being produced was formulaic in relation to international changes afoot in the documentary. His team made a calculated choice to promote a spectrum of polemical and artistically experimental productions that (claims B.D. Garga, c1988:32) were advantaged by technological change with the arrival of lightweight 16mm cameras fitted with synch-sound recorders. The international influence came from filmmakers like Jean Rouch, (in France) to Richard Leacock (British born), Albert and David Maysles, Joyce Chopra, Tao Ruspoli and D.A. Pennebaker (in America), among others. Under Bhowmagry's leadership, the filmmakers introduced below began reshaping ways of 'voicing' their subjects in the following ways.

K.S. Chari's first film, *Face to Face* allowed the camera and microphone to be handed those he interviewed on the streets. Other key filmmakers of this generation were Pramod Pati, (who directed *Man and His World* (1967) and *Trip* 1970), S.N.S Sastry's *And I Make Short Films* and *I Am 20* (1968) both inspired by Fali Bilimoria, and Shanti Chowdhury. Bilimoria started his career with Paul Zils and his *The House that Ananda Built* (1968) documents a rural farming family in Orissa examining their changed relationship with sons who migrated to the city. Clement Baptista, who studied art at the J.J. School of Art (Mumbai) made animation films including one based on a *dubbahwalla* (who distributes lunch tiffins in Mumbai for a living). Chowdhury, a civil engineer turned filmmaker made *Entertainers of Rajasthan* about the desert storytellers, introducing a more affective style of filmmaking. Mrinal Sen,

Mani Kaul, and Basu Chatterjee made the following key films (respectively) in the year 1969: *Bhuvan Shome*, *Uski Roti* and *Sara Akash* all shot by Director of Photography, K.K. Mahajan. Sen was one of the first to use Direct Cinema methods<sup>62</sup> in his filmmaking in an otherwise fictional script format, to break the narrative illusionism. S. Sukhdev, whose early films include *After the Eclipse* (1967) and *An Indian Day* (or *India 1967* after its release year), also emerged in this period.

Significantly, a recent plea by the folk historian, Muthukumaraswamy still seems to be fighting the ghost of the ‘developmental modern’ trope (Roy, A. c2008) of imagining India’s traditional cultures that these filmmakers from the late 1960’s and 1970’s were addressing for the first time. One could argue that certain elements of the above-mentioned filmmakers’ practices were slowly inching their way towards this scenario (below) becoming a reality:

Ballads and oral epics provide enveloping narratives to our micro history. Myths and folk performing arts...critique discourses of practical reason... If the logic of a culture were to have textual boundaries, every instance of its discursive economy is a folk genre. In that case, folklore must have been in the centre-spread of societal texts, but we often encounter them as condescending footnotes to muddy pages of classicalism. In an era of academic radicalism, ...I plead for equitable cultural space for folklore that need not be justified as voices or voicelessness of the subaltern. What I plead against is the artificial self-marginalisation that dovetailed such reasoning. An intense degree of self-

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<sup>62</sup> ‘Direct Cinema’ refers to a movement that began in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s in North American and French Canada (Quebec) both on the cusp of wide-scale political change. Its pioneers were filmmakers such as Robert Drew, Richard Leacock the Maysles brothers. Direct cinema gave focus to the ethical considerations of filmmaking that it saw as linked with accommodating the impact on the filmed subject of the technology and the filmmaking encounter itself. This was combined with a notion of cinema as an objective space and a desire to match common opinion against cinematic ‘reality’. (Saunders, 2007)

reflexivity...has come to mark our engagements with folklore and anthropological subjects so that we are compelled either to identify ourselves *with subjects* or to assert our freshly marginalised self. (Muthukumaraswamy, c2000: 3)

Muthukumaraswamy's argument is clearly a challenge to the authors of films and ethnographic studies that speak on behalf of others, to call themselves to account before doing so. Lutgendorf (c2006: 236) also notes that so called 'folk' forms in Indian society hybridize across so many different transmission networks that they cannot be isolated from, for example, popular film cultural idioms or classical music in their ways of reaching audiences. Having said this, there are certain disparities in the ways that *some* folk narratives migrate and cross-fertilize whilst others, such as *Adivasi* folk tales and myths, are excluded. *Adivasi* cultural identity tends rather to fall within a peculiar double bind where the term '*adivasi*' itself acquires a historicist, nationalist category in which its politics 'remained subsumed under the dominant Statist paradigm of education, improvement, [and] development' (Banerjee, c2011: 6).

The issue of how the 'subaltern' is defined clearly can't be put to rest by merely pointing to the tip of the iceberg, as I have done here, but I believe documentary filmmaking has played a crucial role in furthering the debate on specific minority groups. Having fleshed out the above contextual issues in brief, and with the desire to re-focus on the visual/acoustic/thematic properties of films themselves, I will now introduce my investigation of the four film directors mentioned earlier discussing their practices in the period prior to, and including my research's allocated time frame of 1991-2011.

## 2.9 Visual narrative and editing as social commentary;

### S. Sukhdev's *An Indian Story* (1967).

Singh Sandhu Sukhdev's film *An Indian Story* (also known as *India '67*) is an ambitious encyclopaedia of India's material culture and an exhaustive anthropological purview of workspaces and public places in this year that marked twenty years of India's independence (1967). The filmmaker's social commentary is evident in his editorial juxtaposition of the lived environments (filmed with great sensuality) that Indians across the country were occupying. Vast industrial atriums of newly built factories show their workers set to task in individual cubicles, masked and isolated from one another. The white-collar workers of such factories, of dams and new nuclear plants are shown as puppet-like figures moving the wheels of change. Framed in counterpoint are communities such as Rajasthani villagers with whom the film opens. A young girl sings and pats the chest of her sister lying windswept in the desert where the human connection is palpable, lives made more approachable by including such emotive and locally rooted details.

From the desert we cut to a palace gate. An off screen telephone voice (in a clipped British accent) calls the operator asking to speak to the Maharaja of Mohanghar. The operator replies that he cannot connect him because the Maharaja is ex-directory. The shot lingers on three women drawing water from a well, all straining to pull one long rope that stretches from the camera to their distant figures. At the riverbank, the same women later draw water to the warm sound of a *ravanahatha*<sup>63</sup> playing. The camera picks out details of the women's jewellery and

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<sup>63</sup> This is a stringed instrument played like a fiddle but supported on the chest, popular in West India. Legend has it that this instrument with its soulful sound was used by Ravana (from the epics) to show his love for Shiva.

water jars (icons of their identity) finally revealing the *ravanahatha* player, seated alone in a palace courtyard (perhaps in Udaipur) who is so engrossed in his playing that the bead of sweat on his nose gathers without being brushed away. Outside, a poster advertising a Brigit Bardot film flaps loose on an opposite wall.

These juxtapositions add up to a portrayal of India made up of many worlds collapsing into each other, each retaining their insularity; a perspective matching the film historian, Vijaya Mulay's observation that,

much of the rural/tribal reality [was] opaque, especially to the English-speaking elite, who in 1967 formed only 2% of the Indian population but who, with the arrogance that comes with power, spoke for the rest (Mulay, 2010: 392).

On a cultural level too, the thought of the *ravanahatha* player sharing space with Brigit Bardot recalls how as far back as the 1920's, Indian development in the arts has been vested with 'an internationalist imagination in which cinema was key for suturing national with European (or American) notions of 'modernity' (Kapur, 2000: 329). But the film challenges us to think *how* these processes are happening at the grassroots, and whether a shared 'national consciousness' can really exist amidst such extreme social disparities.

But there is also danger in Sukhdev's visual signage of stereotyping different social groups in India. He uses, for example, a visual contrasting of 'rich'/'poor' in a montage of 'privileged' and 'common' men's faces. I would argue that this reinforces the trope that television journalism historically perpetuates as a dramatic dichotomizing that actually sustains social divide. The film is also problematic in depicting the rural poor as having no life beyond the toil of carrying water, doing mechanical jobs or tending babies. Yet *India '67* remains valuable for its exhaustive

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search of what constitutes the India that Sukhdev inhabits. It also provides an example of how visual narrative stands central, questioning “Indian-ness” through a phenomenology of objects, public places, rural/urban work sites, music and symbols imbued with cultural memory. I suggest that contemporary filmmakers like R.V. Ramani in his film, *Saa* (1991)<sup>64</sup> are re-visiting similar concerns through his legacy.

By 1971, Sukhdev had turned his back on the F.D. to tackle the controversial topic of the Bangladesh pogroms<sup>65</sup> making *Nine Months to Freedom; The Story of Bangladesh* (1972). The forces of both India and (what was then) West Pakistan had been ruthless with the Eastern Bengalis, the armies of General Yahya Khan rampaging through cities and villages that forced a mass influx to West Bengal and Tripura of around 8,000,000 refugees (Bose, c1997). The filmmaker, Tapan Bose, whose career began by assisting Sukhdev on this film, wrote:

Sukhdev, an ethnic Punjabi Jat from India’s Punjab, was appalled by the mindless violence let loose by the predominantly Punjabi army of West Pakistan. He blamed it on the macho culture and tradition of valorisation of violence in Punjabi folklore... He was producing the film with his own money.

Back then, no Indian documentary filmmaker made a film with his or her own money. Almost everyone worked for the Films Division (Bose, c1997)

But Sukhdev’s agenda changed when -through his imminent bankruptcy from the excessive cost of working on 35mm film- he pre-sold the film to the Government’s

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<sup>64</sup> *Saa* is also a film that relies entirely on visual/musical narrative depicting musicians on a Mumbai train, Holi festival celebrations in the Marathi village, Salona and the Ganesh festival in Mumbai, encapsulating differences of rhythm and cultural expression between urban and rural community lifestyles and their patterns of collective communication.

<sup>65</sup> Bangladesh’s struggle as a nation connects with the emergence of Pakistan up to the return of General Rahman to his people.

External Publicity Division who (in Indira Gandhi's era) sought to mobilize international support for military intervention in Bangladesh by demonstrating India's struggle to cope with the influx of refugees. The film was thus diverted away from the more controversial criticism that Sukhdev had originally intended.

Rajadhyaksha (a2009: 241-3) describes a contradictory scenario of the F.D. in the early 1970's in which Indira Gandhi's government 'ought to have' been cautious associating with filmmakers like Sukhdev, yet censorship was not imposed because of internal battles in the industry between the eminent filmmaker Satyajit Ray (and his supporters) and an opposing camp of New Cinema protagonists (such as Kumar Shanani, Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Mani Kaul). The latter opposed the terms of dramatic naturalism in cinema that (Shahani claimed were) 'a tacit support for the parliamentary left under an overall 'mass media' rubric' (ibid, 243). Yet the New Cinema directors were not concerned with fighting the cause of the artists or societal groups depicted in their films. To find filmmakers whose methods were informed by activism, we need to move a little ahead in time.

Anand Patwardhan<sup>66</sup> was one such filmmaker who gained recognition with his half-hour documentary, *Prisoners of Conscience* (1978) about the Emergency's political prisoners, and other associated filmmakers were Ranjan Palit, Vasudha Joshi, Guatam Ghose, Utpalendu Chakraborty, Tapan Bose, Suhasini Mulay, Manjeera Dutta and Deepa Dhanraj. The Emergency was a period when Indira Gandhi assumed the power to rule by decree, suspending all elections and civil liberties and is often

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<sup>66</sup>Patwardhan's other significant works include: *Bombay our city (Mumbai Hamara Shehed*, 1985), *In the Name of God* (1991), *Father Son and Holy War* (1995), and *War and Peace* (2002).



cited as a crucial juncture historically that revealed political allegiances across all forms of cultural production (see Kothari, 1988; Tarlo 2003; Kapur, 2000).

A dilemma came to a head within the Film Finance Corporation by the time of the Emergency<sup>67</sup> about how 'independent filmmakers' should be imagined and supported. In response to the belief that Congress party that she led had fraudulently won the 1971 elections, the M.K. Gandhian-oriented socialist, Jaya Prakash Narayan mobilized change through the provincial governing systems<sup>68</sup>. Films critical of the government in this period were either destroyed or went underground<sup>69</sup>. This inevitably had a decisive impact on what kinds of films were deemed worthy of funding. The New Cinema protagonists still functioned successfully within the parameters of State policy, but their films were reactive in some measure to the protectionism of India's 'traditions' that in their view were being positioned as a symbolic site of cultural authenticity in F.D.-funded films (Rajadhyaksha, 2009:255)

I would now like to take the example of the work of director, Mani Kaul, to show how a resistance against such institutional framings was evident in his filmmaking tactics.

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<sup>67</sup> This took place from 26<sup>th</sup> June 1975 to 21<sup>st</sup> March 1977.

<sup>68</sup> Indira's party was finally defeated in Gujarat by the coalition, Janata Party (People's Party), but the suspension endured legally until 1977 causing major civil unrest across India. The opposition to Indira's governance came predominantly from the excluded castes and labour classes filtering outwards, since her rule was perceived as a powerful urban elite that was tightening control by centralizing economic and fiscal institutions undemocratically.

<sup>69</sup> An example here is the film *Kissa Kursi Ka* (Amrit Nahata, 1977) that satirized the Emergency and was destroyed by Sanjay Gandhi's allies though it was later remade (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 432)

## 2.10 The poetic re-framing of myth in Mani Kaul's *Mati Manas*

(*Mind of Clay*, 1984)

Although the film of Kaul's I wish to discuss, *Mati Manas* was made in the mid 1980's is one that characterizes Kaul's filmmaking<sup>70</sup> as a whole, and is also relevant to my focus on traditional artists' representation. Its protagonists are rurally based potters and their oral traditional myths, from South India, Bengal and Maharashtra.

The film is structured around a voiceover poem penned by Kamal Swaroop (also a filmmaker) interspersed with stories by the potters speaking about their craft. Its epic pace (edited by Reena Mohan) and slow tracking shots are reminiscent of Tarkovsky or Parajanov's films of the 1970's. The set locations are imbued with the dream-like character that the myths inspire for Kaul, and the sensuality and skill of working the clay is detailed in its imagery.

Swaroop's interpretation of the potters' myths taps into stories such as one about a potter, Rākā Kumbhār who placed his jars in the kiln for firing not realizing that a cat had put her kittens in one of them (Abbott and Godbole, b1933). Rākā was a devotee of the god, Vitthal in Pandharpur who is celebrated by the Warkari. Rākā's family prays for the kittens' recovery, agreeing to renounce all worldly attachments if this miracle were granted. When the kittens were retrieved from the kiln alive, the family kept their pledge by abandoning their house and becoming *vairāgīs* (ascetics), living hand to mouth in the forest. The filmmakers, however, seem unconcerned with providing the story in full. Rather, they exploit the fact that such traditions may continually be revisited and re-told in an infinite variety of ways.

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<sup>70</sup> Kaul's key films include *Uski Roti*, (1969) and *Siddheshwari* (1989). Other films are *Dhrupad* (1982) that documents *adivasi* music that migrated from cultural communities of the villages to the classical ritual music of the Marathi courts.

Kaul is imagining cinema as a new form of engaging in an ‘oral tradition’ but this also raises the question of what parts of the story are being omitted. That he omits the detail about the family becoming ascetics bypasses the devotional significance of the story. This tendency in documentary persists in many other examples produced on traditional cultures on which I will later comment. Kaul’s priorities as a filmmaker rather, were to identify the symbolic attributes of images following a phenomenology of visual apparition. He describes his filmmaking as the breaking of representational codes in order to undo the ways we learn to see:

Most of us are trained to...suffer the fiction of a constructed illusion, or a constructed personal narrative... How can we create this extraordinary departure in cinema where the illusion of a narrative is separated from what it is made of? (Kaul, c1999: 62)

Recognizing efforts that had been made in theatre [citing Brecht’s theatre of alienation] he believed that temporality in cinema should similarly be manipulated for dramatic impact (ibid, 1999: 63). About cinema, Kaul writes,

...the project proposes a total inversion of traditional aesthetic methods. The social object is directly situated in society, and is significant and complex. It is *not* to be made significant any more. Rather it requires a breakup, an opening of inner reasonings. (Kaul, *The Director Reflects*, a1991<sup>71</sup>)

It is in this de-construction that Kaul’s cinematic language becomes apparent. A contemporary with Kaul but in some respects his counterpart was the theatre director, Habib Tanvir who had already been working on collaborations with *adivasi*

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<sup>71</sup> Citation source: Rajadhyaksha (a2009: 346) Page ref. to the original document is missing.

traditional artists since 1959, in the region surrounding Chhattisgarh, but their approaches were contrasting (Fischer-Lichte, Gissenwehre and Riley (Eds.) 1990: 221). Tanvir was engaging his urban professionally trained actors in dialogues with them whilst Kaul was appropriating folk myths that he then translated in collaboration with Kamal Swaroop into a poetic screenplay of his own design.

One of the reasons I find Kaul's work significant to the post-1990's generation of filmmakers is that musical structures are frequently taken as the main principle by which films are edited, which is most evident in Kaul's approach. Kaul's biographer, Devdutt Trivedi<sup>72</sup> suggests that Kaul's films gather momentum from shot to shot in the same way that fractal patterning occurs in music in the *shruti* of a *raag*<sup>73</sup>. His interweaving of myth, philosophical speculation and poetry finds a resonance too with Rajula Shah's *Beyond the Wheel* (2005) that explores pottery traditions in Gujarat and Manipur and the myths surrounding their craft. Shah, however, is not re-articulating her filmed subjects fictionally in her scripting, and she also questions the tradition's core values from a feminist perspective.

In the year of *Mati Manas*' release, Indira Gandhi was assassinated (on October 31st 1984). During the same period, the transformation of market boundaries lead to the mobilization and polarization of communal identities (Brosius, 2005). The Bharatiya Janata Party (B.J.P.) first emerged in 1980 as the political wing of the

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<sup>72</sup> From a lecture by Trivedi at the Tata Institute's Centre for Media and Cultural Studies, Mumbai, 20.8.2010.

<sup>73</sup> In Hinduism, *shruti* means "revelation" or "that which is heard directly" concerning religious texts that are believed to have been revealed to humans by gods (i.e. the Upanishads and the Veda). Trivedi suggests that Kaul is operating from the primary impulse of the *raag* (musical composition), not its transmission from memory (like the Puranas). (Flood, 1996)

RSS<sup>74</sup>, gaining strength as the opposition party by symbolically linking itself to the legacy of Nehru and Gandhi (despite its disregard for Gandhi's treatise on non-violence). The Films Division could no longer serve the propagandist agenda of a discredited government and Doordarshan (the news channel) replaced the F.D. the latter having halved production from 104 to 52 films a year (Garga, c1988). As we move towards the mid 1980's, provocative film subjects in documentaries by necessity became independently produced. Exposés of caste and communal riots, police brutality, unethical industrial practices, unemployment, bride burning, were amongst the urgent questions being explored by these filmmakers.

## **2.11 Tactics in the 'on set' encounter in Deepa Dhanraj's film,**

### ***Something Like a War* (1991)**

Reviewing the films selected for the Film South Asia Documentary Festival in Kathmandu, film critic Jotsna Kapur claimed that the early 2000's was spurred by the Indian women's movement in the '80s, when the aesthetic of political documentaries broadened and introduced poetic idioms whilst still seeing it as a medium for radical politics (Kapur, J. c2003). Among the 1980's films that she is referring to here are Uma Segal's *Shelter* (1984), which investigates the lives of street dwellers in Mumbai, Manjira Datta's *Babulal Bhuiya ki Qurbani (The Sacrifice of Babulal Bhuiya, 1988)* on the murder of a coal slurry worker in Mailagora by industrial security guards. There was also Meera Dewan's powerful film about dowry crimes,

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<sup>74</sup> RSS is an acronym for 'Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh'; a Hindu nationalist organization founded by Dr. K. B. Hedgewar and controversially accused of revivalist militancy.

*Gift of Love* (1983) and *Bhopal Beyond Genocide* (1986)<sup>75</sup>. Characteristically, the films of this period were addressing issues of the economically or legally disavowed, as well as concerns of contemporary feminism.

Deepa Dhanraj's film *Something Like a War*, although released somewhat later in 1991 is politically in keeping with the above surge of films. It examines the government's family planning programme from the point of view of women being forced into laparoscopic sterilisations conducted under dehumanizing unsafe conditions under Government population control policy. In discussing this film, I am now consciously setting aside my theme of films based on 'traditional artists and performers' in order to demonstrate how Deepa Dhanraj was thinking through her encounter with working class women she was filming, using methods that had an important impact on subsequent generations of filmmakers.

The three main contexts are inter-spliced in *Something Like a War*. One strand shows a group of women in an informal workshop environment convened by the filmmaker in partnership with two groups of working class women, (rural and urban) facilitated by Abha Bhaiya<sup>76</sup> from *Jagori*. The rural women are *Saathins*<sup>77</sup> from Rajasthan, and the urban women (then) lived and worked in the resettlement colonies of Delhi created after the Emergency. The second strand of the footage shows corrupt private and Government doctors both of whom have set up profitable practices to

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<sup>75</sup> Often attributed to Tapan Bose alone, the latter film emerged out of Suhasini Mulay's assignment as a camera women by the Madhya Pradesh government when the gas explosion occurred and she became involved in local relief work (Cheerath, 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Abha Bhaiya was one of the founders of the Delhi organization, *Jagori* (1984 and ongoing) whose remit combines creative expression with a feminist ideology addressed especially towards women in small towns and rural areas. (See jagori.org, Accessed 2.1.2012)

<sup>77</sup> 'Saathins' are grassroots workers employed under the *Women's Development Project* run by the Government of Rajasthan. The urban women were engaged by *Action India* to tackle issues of poverty, health and violence against women in their locality.

conduct traumatically painful laparoscopic sterilizations on women to meet their quotas. The third strand shows clips from Government's propaganda films that target and blame India's rural and economically marginalized women for their 'backwardness' in birth control measures. The Government also co-operated with the [Canadian-funded] International Development Research Centre instigating a contraceptive vaccination programme conducted on poor, misinformed women. The idea of procreation for the women being sterilized (in Rajasthan) is incommensurate with the programmes, where birth control would in any case be difficult to obtain or beyond question.

The film cross-cuts from the blackmail and torture induced by the interpreters of the policy to their victims, whilst in the *Jagori* workshop, the women are exploring where they stand themselves in relation to their own bodies in a mutually supportive environment. An important scene in *Something Like a War* is a discussion amongst the Rajasthani women about their own sexuality whilst drawing images of themselves. The film thus recovers the voice of those whom the Government's policy has turned into a statistic. Concerning the style of the film, I noticed how 'voices' feature in Dhanraj's documentary grammar, finding a link with how storytelling functions in locally specific collectives, like the workshop mounted by *Jagori*. Since the late 1980's NGOs concerned with social welfare have been very successful in establishing community outreach with a political agenda, by instigating group story-telling initiatives that forge partnership across differences of class, and between literate and non-literate participants<sup>78</sup>. Dhanraj's conversations with the Rajasthani women *on film*, is one I see as drawing upon an existing reservoir of

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<sup>78</sup> The organization, *Katha*, based in New Delhi, founded in 1988 was amongst the pioneers with *Jagori* to do this. (See [katha.org](http://katha.org) - Accessed 6.4.2012)

methods for creating ‘contrived discussion’ that these workshops allow, where personal experience becomes the focus for political change. It also contributes to a particular aesthetic in Indian documentary where- as evident in Dhanraj’s film- the protagonists encircle the camera in a group, talking across the circle. This imitates a physical/bodily arrangement that is archetypal across many forms of *katha vachana* (oral traditional storytelling) where participants encircle the teller. *Vachana* methods have also been adapted for an educational initiative in another separate project of Dhanraj’s called *The Young Historians* (2005). Here it became an alternative teaching method for conveying history to children, leading to a series of educational films that tracked how Government school pupils developed critical analytical tools for their historical research.

Regarding Dhanraj’s communication skills that I suggest have been influential to filmmakers as a creative legacy, she acknowledges the particular attention she gives to *speech forms* used by the people in her films:

In India...I also talk to many people who are not literate so their oral expression is very, very rich. It’s quite a different expression and that’s new to me because I grew up with people who were literate... So the way they used voice was determined by what they had read or heard, watched.... So initially it was...a whole new world where people used phrases, idioms, that...I had never encountered before. (Dhanraj, e2009)

Dhanraj also spoke about the importance of the act of *listening* in her filmmaking practice, to which I will return in the next chapter. Dhanraj’s sensitivity of vocal address is a crucial in navigating her subjects’ political concerns. In contrast to the New Cinema protagonists, filmmakers like Manjeera Datta, Anand Patwardhan,



Deepa Dhanraj and Tapan Bose were acting as ‘reporters’ of political crises, yet they were also deeply involved with their protagonists’ personal and political welfare, campaigning for them directly. Dhanraj remains concerned with what becomes of the people she has filmed, and how her relationship with them is tangible to viewers on screen. *Something like a war* had a very high impact in changing public opinion through its extensive distribution to schools, universities and development organizations both in India and abroad. Dhanraj often combines exposé with personal (and educational) agendas in her films, particularly disclosing dis-equities in India’s legal systems. But I would like to move on to explore another way in which we might look at the on set encounter taking a film by one of her peers, Reena Mohan.

## **2.12 Exposing the authorial voice on camera; Reena Mohan’s *Kamlabai* (1992)**

*Kamlabai* is a portrait of Kamlabai Raghunath Gokhale, a pioneering actress of the Marathi Stage and one of India’s legendary screen actresses in the late 1920’s. As practitioners, Mohan and Ranjan Palit (the Director of Photography whom she met at the National Film and Television Institute, Pune) challenge the notion of seeing directors as the chief authors of a film, since Mohan has been a prominent editor in her career, and Palit has also contributed an unmistakable cinematographic film style across the films of many key directors with whom he has collaborated, such as Anand Patwardhan, Amar Kanwar, Sanjay Kak, Arvind Sinha, Pankaj Butalia and Ruchir Joshi. His technique treads carefully into the emotional life of his filmed subjects, whilst also distilling the underlying mood of physical environments that give meaning to the protagonists’ story.

*Kamlabai* is particularly valuable in demonstrating how cinematic structure can be directed as much by the *filmed subjects’* will power as by the filmmakers’. The tension of this film hinges on Kamlabai’s use of the camera as if it were directly

replacing her memory of different audiences she has played for on stage, or indeed on camera in the early days of cinema when the concept of ‘acting for camera’ was as yet unexplored. Mohan and Palit in response to her initiative, *follow after* her changes of persona, permitting her to transform from a frail old woman into the formidable actress of her past. The film crew thus gains a glimpse into the great heroines she has portrayed since her early career. The question of who is controlling the recording process becomes ambiguous, since Kamlabai whilst dominant also seems not to grasp fully what the technology and the film crew are doing (because of her great age) yet unwittingly she transcends the potential mismatch of giving a stage performance for camera:

Kamlabai: What are you looking at, Reena?

Reena Mohan: The camera is on, you know, and so is the sound.

Kamlabai: ‘On’, you mean it is running? (*pauses looking puzzled*) ‘On’?

(Trans from Hindi, dialogue of *Kamlabai*, 1992 by Director, Reena Mohan)

In such moments of dialogue between Mohan, Palit and Kamlabai, the filmmakers concede to the actress’ truth, suspending what they know intellectually about filmmaking. It is in this suspense that we understand that Kamla and the crew are living and operating in altogether different time zones.

Palit’s camerawork proves time and again his understanding of *what image* best epitomizes the dilemmas of those that he films. From Kamlabai he manages to illicit her unease about not knowing what performance she should give the camera, which acquires a larger significance about her life. Perhaps Palit’s lack of acquisitiveness about the images he is shooting makes him better able to discern which ones will become emblematic. As he comments in his film that reviews his own practice as a Director of Photography autobiographically:

I know when I put on my camera, lives break down into images; images will disappear into memories, to be forgotten. (Palit, first person voiceover from *In Camera*, 2009)

Several of Palit's own films such as *Abak Jay Here* [*Magic Mystic Market Place*, (1996) and the landmark *Eleven Miles* (1991) produced with director Ruchir Joshi on the Bauls or *Abhimanyu's Face* (2001) on West Bengal's Chhau dance have focused on traditional ritual practitioners. Together they form an important legacy for documentary practitioners in this field today.

Curiously, *In Camera* (2009) gives very little away about Palit's camera techniques or practical philosophy that, I suggest, are highly intuitive<sup>79</sup>. One comment he included, however, struck me as provocative. Palit mentions that Vasudha Joshi and he had made a film *Follow the Rainbow* (1991) that tracks the resistance of the Diku (*adivasi* villagers) to the building of a dam on the Subarnarekha River in Bihar that would erase their land and submerge their temples. The campaign led to temporary suspension of progress but, says Palit,

It remains our last 'movement' film. We never came to terms with playing the dual role of activism and filmmaking.' (Palit, *In Camera*, 2009)

This comment makes it *seem* as if political resistance and the priorities of an independent filmmaker would necessarily diverge. The release year of *Follow the Rainbow* (1991) is significant since it marks a sea change in politics that in turn impacted on the film industry. In this year, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank convened to open up India to foreign investment at a time of economic

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<sup>79</sup> He was my Director of Photography on a documentary I directed called *Hide and Seek* (2001) and I have also worked with him on a project in which I was employed as a set designer for the director, Royston Abel making the feature film *In Othello* (2003) from which I observed this in him.

crisis. This agreement shifted resource allocations away from the public sector to the private sector, and foreign markets consciously started integrating India into global economies (Battacharjee, 2010). But whilst this was a period of growing prosperity, the way that political affairs were being communicated to the nation amidst such significant upheavals was dangerously obfuscated (Crawley and Page, 2001:67) so the motivation for activism could not fairly be judged as being 'over' by this time.

The unrest amongst filmmakers cut more deeply than Palit's comment reveals. The film distributor, Gargi Sen (during my fieldwork<sup>80</sup>) made the observation that the underlying assumptions of what is meant by 'activist' filmmaking was being challenged in the early 1990's in the sense that filmmakers were looking more carefully at their own agency in the struggles they were representing. What happened, in other words, when the film crews withdrew from the lives of the people that the films were commenting on? Perhaps contributing to this self scrutiny was that, despite the significant force of documentaries on human, civil or women's rights, the films collectively had not been able to avert new waves of violence in the 1990's to early 2000's that seemed to be dragging the nation back into recursive cycles of communalism and aggressive divide.

In 1991, following the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by the L.T.T.E<sup>81</sup> during his election campaign, Congress (I) established a majority, the shift of regimes also signalled a corresponding realignment in the documentary's commissioning networks.

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<sup>80</sup> This conversation was in Sept 2009 in Delhi.

<sup>81</sup> The L.T.T.E stands for the "Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam"; a militant separatist organization formerly of north Sri Lanka, founded in 1976 by Vellupillai Prabhakaran. Selvarasa Pathmanathan, its leader/successor was arrested in Malaysia and handed over to the Sri Lankan government in August 2009. The assassination was carried out by suicide bomber, Thenmozhi Rajaratnam on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1991 on the grounds that Gandhi had antagonized this and other Tamil separatist organisations for reversing the military coup in Maldives back in 1988 (Stoddard, c2010)

These were now diversifying into private/semi-institutional cultural foundations alongside the NGOs, collectives or trade unions that had supported civil rights-motivated agendas in film practices. Britain's *Channel 4* had a brief spell of funding documentaries made by Indian production companies in the early 1990's. The India Foundation for the Arts (a public trust since 1993) emerged as an independent philanthropic venture launched by Anmol Vellani. Other independent initiatives such as the production/distribution agency, Magic Lantern Foundation also appeared at a similar time, a collective of filmmakers that followed the example set by Kanak Mani Dixit (in Nepal) Dixit, who had instigated an ambitious South Asian touring film festival/debating platform in the late 1980's, and later founded the Kathmandu Film Festival.

Whilst there continue to be scores of filmmakers for whom activism and filmmaking are intrinsically bound, the combination of circumspection around how film methods 'represent' communities, together with a widening of markets for production (including DVD and web distribution) paved the way for other practices to emerge whose political agendas were more complicated by reflexivity. In the 1990's, there was a change and fragmentation of political horizons that went alongside the widening of distribution contexts. As Vohra claims, feminists and other activists distanced themselves from identifiably Marxist affiliations and dalit feminists challenged the feminist movement and its filmmakers for ignoring disparities of caste. This proliferation of commissioning networks and upheaval in the industry generated many new forms of experimentation in which the more visibly subjective, diaristic/essay modes of documentary filmmaking gained ground (Vohra, c2011: 52)

## 2.13 Conclusions

I would now like to draw together the different strands of this chapter, namely my preparation for the project with the Warkari, questions of ‘subalterity’ in an Indian context and India’s documentary histories with a focus on traditional cultures. I will therefore seek junctures that might bridge these different areas of investigation.

Firstly I will clarify how my practical approach in the context of filming the Warkari might relate to issues of the ‘subaltern’ discussed above.

I remark that I am coming to the Warkari tradition and pilgrimage from a position of not belonging to the tradition that I will be filming, at least in empirical terms. In this sense, I do not differ from my peer filmmakers in India, who are also representing cultural communities that they do not belong to (though they share the same nationality). From current debates on ‘the subaltern’, clearly one cannot categorize the Warkari reductively as being “rural, dalit, working class, marginal” Indian citizens. This movement should be seen rather as heterogeneous and non-aligned in its political/religious identity, though the devotees are *bhakti* followers. The vast majority have in common that they believe in the deity, Vitthal and celebrate the *sant* legacy. My not sharing a faith in Lord Vitthal should not automatically lead to a disavowal of the significance of this for them in my way of filming. I also draw from these debates on subalterity the idea that, since I wish to explore questions of corporeality in this tradition, I need to pay heed to the cultural contingencies of how ‘the body’ or ‘bodies’ are understood across a range of ritual, socio-political, gender, caste and class-related capabilities. Bodies (as Augusto Boal affirms) when engaged in the ‘dance of potentialities’ in creative authoring, always exist *in relation to other bodies* and therefore the equation should include my own body. We perpetually

transmit and engage in the reality of the others, in gesture, motion and speech, refining our knowledge of each other through these various forms of argumentation and encounter.

I will now look at what can be surmised from the documentary filmmaking practices on Indian traditions in the four filmmakers' methods I have analyzed.

This discourse affirms that certain 'traditions' have historically been allocated in ways that connect with India's postcolonial, 'Nehruvian' paternalism that sought to position and account for 'marginal' elements in society, particularly in the first two decades after India's Independence. By the late 1960's there was a sea change in which- despite a marked economic/cultural polarization in society (as Sukhdev's film, *India '67* testifies) the mechanisms for reform found critics both in film culture and beyond, regarding assumptions of 'modernity'. In relation to the vast plurality of India's ethnic, religious, or economically 'marginal' social groups- they first needed to become part of a shared visual culture in a range of non-fiction representations, before debates could gain traction about their valorisation. But initially this process (in terms of the films funded by the Films Division) displayed biases in which certain minorities (such as the Muslim poor) may have been stigmatized as 'too contentious' to represent on film without invoking fears of communalism.

On closer scrutiny, I believe it can be misleading as Paromita Vohra suggests, to label the 'style and goals' of the F.D. as emerging from a generic 'educated elite' implying that they all had consensual ideas about India's social development and how this should be achieved in cinema. For the F.D.'s advisory board consisted (even in its early years) of filmmakers like S. Sukhdev who always mobilized the spaces *between* Government policy in his filmmaking, thus challenging a potentially totalizing vision.

We should also heed Leela Gandhi's (2006) warning (see page 80 of this text) and not historicize film according to 'colonial/anticolonial oppositionality' in which 'elite nationalisms' become a convenient way of bracketing collusion in an imperialist project. Rather, political resistance and the disruption of regimes can equally be seen as being generated by people of various social classes or races converging and acting on a shared objective.

In the confrontations brought by activist filmmaking (filmmakers such as Deepa Dhanraj, Tapan Bose and Anand Patwardhan) questions gathered momentum progressively about how filmmaking should be 'voicing' the concerns and problems faced by 'minority' communities or the disempowered, bringing a diversification of *modes of address* towards filmed subjects. The New Cinema directors (such as Mani Kaul, S. Sukhdev and Kumar Shahani) also contributed to changing documentary personae by offering strategies that de-authenticated their relationship with traditional artists, in Kaul's case by introducing poetic interventions. The post 1980's feminist filmmakers also uniquely combined new storytelling techniques whilst still prioritizing exposés and finding ways of 'pamphleteering' through their films. The early 1990s ushered in the next tide of change in the industry, which we might broadly call a 'liberalization and complication' of practices in which questions of authorial sovereignty have been overtly addressed, a trend that continues into the present. The reclaiming of 'popular' modes of storytelling (meaning 'oral histories', 'folk', 'entertainment cinema idioms') indigenous to India has also been part of this wider development. (Vohra, 2011: 50-51)

I will finally explore how the film-historical retrospective might usefully inform my own filmmaking, as well as my understanding of the filmmakers that I would meet and interview during my fieldwork.



I would like first to mention that it is not only through film or political history that Indian filmmakers have been inspired to take *katha vachana* and other devotional art forms as their subject matter. In music history too, a composer like Kumar Gandharva from Madhya Pradesh was exploring Nirguni *bhajans* (devotional songs), reshaping these as Hindustani Classical music in the 1960's. Hindustani and Carnatic music have also been re-imagined in experiments by the immensely prolific Tamil film composer, Ilaiyaraaja from the 1970's to the present. In theatre and painting, Keshavrao Bhole worked with the Natyamanwantar (theatre) group and the painter, K.G. Subramanyan is another example of re-framing traditional practices in his artistic language. Ways of engaging with these traditions hybridize into many different aspects of public life in India. Gazing into the complexity of 'the traditions' as a European artist, I acknowledge that this history is necessarily beyond my naturalized cultural reach. But appreciating how fundamental the problem is of 'speaking on behalf of the other', my first instinct in relation to my filmmaking was to 'fall silent' in my own films. What I mean by this is, not that I lack the courage to 'say' something about the Warkari tradition that I had set out to film. Rather, I wished to explore what I can demonstrate about the Warkari *without words* so that my 'not saying' carries a meaning in itself. My cinematography would, I hope, then contribute to perceptions of the Warkari in a way that avoids speaking on their behalf.

When thinking about the history of films on the traditions, Deepa Dhanraj's films usefully demonstrate *katha vachana* as a communicative system that is echoed in how films made about such communities are imagined. I was interested in how the filmmakers I would meet in India were integrating such artistic languages in their film aesthetics. Mani Kaul's films alerted me to a kind of philosophical/poetic speculation that is also relevant to my questioning of the contemporary filmmakers I would meet.

Other films of Kaul's on traditional artists such as his film *The Nomad Puppeteers of Rajasthan*, (1975) can be seen as a direct precursor to films like RV Ramani's *Nee Engey* (*Where are you*, 2003) on South Indian puppeteers that I will later discuss.

The themes and issues that I found relevant to explore with the filmmakers I was to interview, given the above history of practices began to emerge as these:

How can documentary narrative articulate questions of "Indian-ness" "modernity" and "the place of tradition" through a visual phenomenology of objects, sites, societal groups and their cultural memories (inspired by S.Sukhdev's film, *An Indian Day*)?

How do documentaries on the traditions address issues of authentication; a space where in Mani Kaul's words- 'the illusion of a narrative is separated from what it is made of'. *By what techniques* are 'traditional performance methods' being re-signified on film?

What adaptations and negotiations of 'difference' are occurring between filmmaker and filmed subject, and what modes of 'voicing' are situating these positions (inspired by Dhanraj's practice)?

How is the directorial process being guided by the *filmed subjects* as much as by the filmmaker? And how are filmmakers problematizing or making use of the transfer of control (inspired by Mohan's *Kamlabai*)?

Perhaps above all, I became interested in what *need for relationship* with their protagonists might there be in the filmmakers' endeavour. This wider search is what motivated my interview questioning in a particular direction, which becomes the material discussed in the following chapter.

### 3. Methods and strategies in the ‘on set encounter’; Eight filmmakers from India

#### 3.1 Introduction

In the chronology of the thesis, this chapter and Chapter 4 belong together. In both cases I am now moving into the production phase of making documentaries, where filmmaker(s) and filmed subject(s) now come face to face. I will first look at this moment from the perspective of eight filmmakers from India, whose interviews about their directing experiences I have collated. Chapter 4 then describes the same moment in my own project based on the Warkari pilgrimage. I would first like to flag up certain concepts from Chapters 1 and 2 that will inform my approach to the inquiry on the filmmakers’ methods and strategies.

In Chapter 1, I mentioned that I would privilege the ‘on set encounter’ within film production since this best demonstrates *what the filmmakers are making of their filmed subjects* in a living social environment that somehow has to be moulded into a context in which the film shoot will happen. In the film authoring process, I am now focusing on its **revelatory** capacity; revelation that is, with regard to interpersonal relationships but also audio-visual experiences and situations that are on their way to becoming film. Why is this then important?

Speaking on behalf of filmmakers, our goal is to know what kind of creative decisions will trigger revelations around which our narratives can be shaped. We ask ourselves what intuitions, or what knowledge of filmmaking can we apply to bring us closer to these. (The ‘revelation’, incidentally may not always depend on human encounters, it can also exist between filmmakers and places, natural events, animals, etc). Furthermore, filmmakers need to pay heed to the situational and volatile conditions in the live encounter, since film technique constitutes the ‘way in which

our work engages social relationships’ (recalling Walter Benjamin’s claim, a1968 [1936]:233 see Chapter 1 in this text).

For film theorists, our perception of people and events captured in the films that we theorise, has been conditioned by the perceptual system of the filmmakers who have made them. But the excess of meanings that *filmed subjects* bring to the screen creates an internal dialectics that give films their independent consciousness. Particularly in non-fiction filmmaking, the filmed subjects’ unpredictability on set, their vitality, their statements made in the heat of the moment, their silent gestures, their turning towards or away from the camera, the weather on the day of the shoot, all contribute to the archived moment. The filmed subjects, imagining the reality of the film in which they feature, are permanently captured on camera in their response to the conditions of the shoot. What we see of them, combined with the filmmakers’ intentions in editing the shots, *never leaves the moment of the on set encounter*. How crucial, then, is this often over-looked nexus for comprehending the ambiguities and complexity of a film.

In the particular case of films on traditional artists in India, to assess systems of film authoring indicates furthermore, how these art forms are given meaning by the filmmaker’s framing of them. The ‘on set encounter’ usefully demonstrates how they are inviting audiences to re-live the live event. My questions to the filmmakers for this chapter are framed to explore- *what kinds of experiences they are privileging*, and *why* are they using specific styles of intervention with their subjects. Certain critiques of how the traditions have been represented historically in Indian documentary (from Chapter 2) will be carried forward into this chapter’s inquiry, for example, questions of defining “Indian-ness” and questions of authenticity in the documentary.

Fundamentally, I will be asking what *need for a relationship* exists between all of the participants in the on set encounter.

To some extent, I am updating histories of documentary practice from where we were left in the previous chapter, now examining a small yet significant group of productions that have taken place since the mid 2000's<sup>82</sup>. My selection of these eight filmmakers was made on the basis that their films display a high level of film craft, being well informed about the history of cinema and exploiting the versatility of the medium. Many are (though not all) are ex-alumni from the National Institute of Film and Television, graduating between the 1980's and mid 1990's, and conscious of a legacy of filmmakers who passed through this Institute<sup>83</sup>. I was looking for films that had an open-ended quality, having an argument to resolve within the film text itself. I was also drawn to films in which the filmed subjects have visibly impacted on the narrative. The habit of political resistance, evident both in their films and professional lives, is a recursive feature I noted among them. A prime example of this would be some of these filmmakers' involvement in the *Vikalp* campaign (Jayasankar and Monteiro, c2004) mounted against the Mumbai International Film Festival in 2004. This was initially founded in protest of the Government's ban on controversial films

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<sup>82</sup> The interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2011. In order to condense these statements I have needed to synopsise, though direct quotations have been retained where possible.

<sup>83</sup> Among its former alumni are acclaimed contributors to the commercial Hindi film industry, as well as documentary, such as: Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Balu Mahendra, John Abraham, Kumar Shahani, Kundan Shah, Mahesh Bhatt, Mani Kaul, Mithun Chakraborty, Mukesh Khanna, Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Prakash Jha, Sanjay Leela Bhansali among others. (National Film and Television Archives, Pune, India)

made about the Gujarat riots of 2002<sup>84</sup>. But the campaigners- most of them filmmakers- have sustained a professional network that screens and archives films, curates debates, and continues its advocacy work for the profession. Another common phenomenon in India is that many film production organizations combine as centres for addressing human and civil rights, testifying how political agendas often dovetail with film practice on an infrastructural level.<sup>85</sup>

I include three caveats about my task as a commentator on the filmmakers' testimonies. Firstly, I myself am not a documentary filmmaker. I am a visual artist who makes films. Neither has my practice been nurtured long term in the regional conditions of India. I am therefore not qualified, nor do I find it pertinent to claim that these filmmakers belong to a homogenous 'movement' operating with consensual trends in their practice. Rather, my intention is to learn from individual approaches to film practice in the case of people with whom I have directly engaged. The filmmakers' statements help me to address methodological dilemmas in my own work and to consider their implications to documentary practice as a whole. Secondly, if my analysis seems at times to suggest a degree of suspicion towards some of the filmmakers' methods, I must come clean that my commentary can't pretend to be

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<sup>84</sup> These riots of Feb. 2002 were triggered by a gang of Muslims in Godhra (town) attacked and set fire to two carriages carrying Hindu activists claiming 58 victims including women and children. They were returning from Ayodhya, and were supporters of a campaign of the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* who wished to construct a temple to the deity, Ram on the site of a 16<sup>th</sup> century mosque destroyed by Hindu militants in 1992. Associated riots previously claimed thousands of lives in Mumbai in 1992-3. The 2002 riot ignited a political controversy around the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, claimed to have permitted atrocities against the Muslims of Ayodhya during this conflict under his watch. (Oommen, a2005)

<sup>85</sup> Madhusree Dutta's Mumbai-based organization, Majlis is an example of this as a legal aid organization that engages in advocacy and awareness programmes whilst also producing her films. (Source) "On cultural policies for the north and South" *The Power of Culture* current affairs Journal, issue July 2005 by Sudha Rajagopalan.

neutral. I am also reconstructing the ‘on set relationships’ as I write about them with my particular biases. This suspicion is therefore one that I would commonly direct towards my own practice as well. It is not intended to be judgmental, but is rather to unearth certain dilemmas about the filmmaker’s available choices.

Thirdly I also acknowledge that the filmmakers’ testimonies featured here may capture only a small moment in their creative development at the time when they were interviewed. Before I introduce them, I would first like to think through the concept of ‘authorship’ in theoretical terms as a preface to my study.

### **3.2 On ‘authorship’**

Across this research, there is a problem with framing the filmmakers as the ‘authors’ of the films, whilst the traditional artists become the ‘subjects’, giving a false sense of the passivity of the latter. Films are inevitably co-authored by the protagonists they portray, as well as being inscribed by the patronage and distribution systems of the film industry. Pragmatically, however, if one wishes to name the different agents in a film production, it is hard to avoid such labels. The word ‘authorship’ also has an undesirably paternal etymology<sup>86</sup> associated with literary production, which is not helpful when discussing orally transmitted musical storytelling, performance and filmmaking. Such terminology threatens to literalize creative practices in ways that mask how differently these art forms are generated. Because it is misleading to

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<sup>86</sup> The etymological definition of author is “c.1300, autor “father,” from the Latin *auctorem* “enlarger, founder, master, leader,” literally “one who causes to grow,” related to “to increase” (see augment). It means “one who sets forth written statements” from late 14th century the ‘t’ changed to ‘th’ on mistaken assumption of Greek origin. Source: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=author> (Accessed 2.2.2011)

describe the encounter between ‘filmmaker’ and ‘filmed subjects’ as ‘authoring’, I will see if it makes sense to speak of this moment instead as a ‘revelation’.

Roland Barthes’ *Death of the Author* (a1977) destroys the notion of ‘the author’ in linguistics whereby enunciation (in a holistic sense) can function without a need for it to be filled with the ‘person’ of the interlocutors. From his perspective, any text is made up of multiple writings and forms of articulation, drawn from many cultures that enter into relationships of dialogue, parody, contestation, irony, humour and so forth. The only site where this multiplicity can be located is with the *reader*, not, as is commonly assumed, with the author. In the case of films, the equivalent site would be the *audience*. If we apply Barthes’ approach to the authoring of non-fiction films, then perhaps ‘filmed subjects’ could more accurately be considered as ‘co-actors’, so I will frequently use this term instead of ‘filmed subjects’ across my analysis.

In filmmaking collaborations, co-actors and filmmakers on film sets regularly negotiate with each other about how they perceive the film’s demands. Even if we believe in an indexical referentiality<sup>87</sup> between people recorded on camera and the resulting image, the fact is that we collaborate purposefully to create a particular interpretation of reality that can only exist on film. Often unravelling like a shared desire, revelations happen between filmmaker and co-actor by negotiating the rules as we go along. I sometimes shuttle between instructing my co-actors directly, and waiting instinctively for them to take directorial initiative. It involves surrendering to uncertainty, letting go of pre-conceptions about ‘good filmmaking’ and the habitual role-play that this entails. This negotiating the unknown is simultaneously a *self-*

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<sup>87</sup> This phenomenon relates to Andre Bazin’s ‘ontology of the photographic image’. See the Introduction of Lúcia Nagib’s *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism* (a2011) and Paul Levison’s (1997) concept of photography: “a literal energy configuration from the real world”



revelation, as Franz Kafka understood when describing the process of how he writes<sup>88</sup>.

Whilst steering a directorial process, then, it is vital to recognize the mutual self-exposure and personal vulnerabilities that happen in the filmmaking encounter.

Adding to the above, the South Indian filmmaker, R.V. Ramani's experience (quoted below) offers a powerful reminder of how the filmmaker's task clearly proves that the lived world will always exceed the limits of human endeavours to archive it:

I was facing the Tsunami when it came [*near Kanyakumari*<sup>89</sup>] and I got hit by it and I was actually filming it at that time, but I didn't know how to *film* the Tsunami... it was a big dilemma and the waves were coming towards you and it's so fascinating and you don't know how to film it ...you want to film it... do you pan, or do you keep the shot steady or what? So that kind of thing happens in real life and the dilemma is also about how do you bring that experience in [*to*] a film? It's not possible- first of all- to give up that idea... so I did film... but the water came and I got drowned and the camera, everything gone away- I don't have the footage...So this is something that I will be working on in my next film...that is the notion that there is no image. But the catharsis of it is

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<sup>88</sup> Franz Kafka, in *Letters to Felice* (January 14<sup>th</sup> 1913) a1967 [1974 ]) p. 156, speaks about his authoring process like this: 'For writing means revealing oneself to excess; that utmost of self revelation and surrender, in which a human being when involved with others would feel he was losing himself, and from which, therefore, he will always shrink as long as he is in the right mind-for everyone wants to live as long as he is alive -even that degree of self revelation and surrender is not enough for writing. Writing that springs from the surface of existence- when there is no other way and the deeper wells have dried up- is nothing, and collapses the moment a truer emotion makes that surface shake'.

<sup>89</sup> The Tsunami struck the South Indian coast near Chennai on 26.12.2004 and Ramani was on the Sothavalai beach at the time. The film that he talks of making here became *My Camera and the Tsunami* (2011), which investigates the aftermath of this event as the filmmaker's catharsis. It also explores his relationship to his camera that got destroyed during this incident. Part of this tribute to his camera involves a ritualised reclaiming of the broken instrument in this film that is also an autobiographical appraisal of his filmmaking practice.

that...you feel lost, you feel absolutely inadequate about trying to address.

(Ramani, interview Pune, e2009 *my inclusions in italics*)

Ramani's loss of the ability to make sense of reality through filmmaking (his most familiar and dependable technique) is perhaps the only way to become reconciled with the fact that cameras, no matter how sophisticated, cannot 'capture' the real. Professional know-how pales in the face of Tsunamis, and perhaps even more so, before the elusiveness of *human* nature. Ramani's sense of the absurdity of what he is doing is also charged with a larger mystery of causalities: what comes first in consciousness, the creative thought or the advancing wave?

The fact that Ramani in his moment of panic is still debating in his mind whether to pan or use a steady shot marks his impulse as a filmmaker that emerges from professional training. This training is one he has in common with many of the filmmakers whose accounts of their practice I will soon be discussing. One of my interviewees, Arghya Basu, who was a student and now lectures at the National Institute of Film and Television (where Ramani also studied), claimed that his 5-year training at this institute never broached the subject of how to guide relationships in documentary encounters; rather this was a matter of individual styles of authoring. The training, he said, was one in which (celluloid) film was 'treated as matter; matter that needed certain lighting exposure, tracks, studio set-ups and light rigs, but also creating certain aesthetics, moods, and emotional canvases that vanished with the arrival of video' (Basu, interviewed, e2010). The technical rigor needed to set up a shot in digital media is now relatively minimal since digital cameras adjust more readily to diverse lighting environments, so in Basu's words, 'Video promised a lot that we took without asking' (ibid, Basu e2010).

The traditional artists whom Basu and his peer documentary-makers are filming, however, are *greatly* concerned in their practice to engage with audiences in their singing/storytelling capacities. Whether they are literate or not, in most cases they would not be university educated. They are more likely to belong to a *parampara*<sup>90</sup> where their artistic/musical training is acquired under a guru's guidance that also incorporates spiritual and wider cultural learning. Whilst their art forms are indigenous to India, it would be misleading to consider them as 'insulated' from internationalism. For, since the mid 1980's, there has been a steady tide of entrepreneurs who have brought localized (ritual) dramas from India to western stages. In the performances of these artists, we might say that 'revelation' is catalyzed by and through the 'audience' (or the devotional group in the case of ritual dramas).

In filmmaking, there are three main phases of revelation: the on set encounter, the creative composition during the editing phase, and the public screening of the film. The 'revealing' happens for the filmmaker particularly in the first two of these three phases, and for audiences in the latter. 'Revelation' as we have seen in the filmmaker, Ramani's shooting of the Tsunami may not always be attained. Whether one is shooting natural phenomena or people, it can also lead to communication breakdowns and failures to connect, as much as to the fruitful coming together of an image.

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<sup>90</sup> *Parampara* (from the *Sanskrit*, 'succession') denotes a lineage of teachers collectively constituting a channel for the transmission of religious knowledge and other learning from master to student, applicable to various Indic religions. (Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism)

From this vulnerable yet crucial site, I would now like to introduce the first of eight practitioners who discussed their practices with me, Rahul Roy, exploring what he desired from his co-actors and his film in the filmmaking process.

### **3.3 Rahul Roy; A problem of how to humanize people**

Rahul Roy, (from Delhi) is one of India's leading documentary cameramen/directors whose films primarily focus on issues of gender and masculinity, often seen through Muslim protagonists and citizens of Delhi's economically marginal suburbs. One of Roy's many acclaimed films, *Majma* (*Performance*, 2005) focuses on the performative aspect of a wrestling trainer, Khalifa Barkat, and a small trader, Aslam, who sells potions to increase male sexual performance in a market outside the Jama Masjid (the largest mosque of Delhi). Roy's finely balanced double portrait explores their attitudes to masculinity and sexuality, tracking the 'performance' that Aslam conducts to sell his potions, and other daily life details, such as the customary night gathering of men in the city's park to recite poetry and share bawdy jokes.

In his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (a1968 [1936]: 233), Walter Benjamin made the analogy that whilst the art of the painter compares with the role of a magician the role a filmmaker resembles that of a surgeon. The magician maintains a distance with the subject who- if the enchantment succeeds- believes in the spell, whereas the surgeon penetrates deep into the patient's body, operating on its malfunctions. Since the surgeon's hands invade the patient's organs, his permission to do so is required. The magician on the other hand, takes authority over subject without asking. Documentary filmmakers can potentially be

both ‘surgical’ and ‘magical’ in their methods, though ethical problems arise when they assume the magician’s authority to conduct surgery.

When mentioning the above to Rahul Roy, he re-qualified that those he has filmed ‘*take control* during the operation and re-arrange their own organs’; they were not lying prone waiting to be operated upon as Benjamin suggests (Roy, interviewed Delhi, e2009). To illustrate this, he recalled his experience when making the film *Sundar Nagri* (*City Beautiful*, 2003) which follows two working class families from a Delhi suburb and the impact of the male breadwinner’s long-term unemployment on his family. Radha [the young wife] he explained, used the context of the shoot as if it were a form of reality TV, staging arguments with her husband about his lack of employment, complaining of the pressure on her to earn the family’s keep, sensing that her husband would not pick a fight with her while the camera crew were present. Registering that she was using the shoot as leverage for her domestic battle, Roy allowed the shoot to accommodate this, saying that her move was ‘at least partly unconscious’, and that if he had not acknowledged this, he would have ‘lost valuable filmmaking moments’. Roy and Radha’s complicity consisted in both using the on set encounter for their own purposes ‘as parallel, separate stories’ (ibid, Roy e2009).

Roy spoke of his main motivation as a filmmaker as being ‘a problem of how to humanize people’, believing that documentary representation often operates according to amplified stereotypes in which protagonists are portrayed ‘as demonic, or heroic, politically correct in the positivist sense, or negatively so’. It is in these distortions that he sees the real danger of unethical practice, where the dilemma of ‘power’ lies ensconced. He discussed some countermeasures he has developed in relation to filming *Sundar Nagri*. In conversation on camera, Radha’s parents ask Roy where he is from in Delhi, and together they pieced together descriptions of the city as

they each know it, revealing through the conversation how segregated these worlds are. There is an attempt to let them converge for an instant, however, as Roy is urged to come clean about where he is from, (evidently an upper-middle class neighbourhood) whilst Radha reveals the relative poverty of her neighbourhood. Roy suggested that such communication 'is possible only as far as people allow you into their lives and distinct realities' (ibid, Roy e2009). There are no guarantees.

Returning to talk about Aslam, the trader of sex potions from Roy's film, *Majma*, he claimed that his relationship with Aslam *in the sense of the film* was not important to him (not that he was indifferent to him personally). The importance lay rather in the film's 'representative capacity' that audiences would come to judge for themselves. He also consciously sought to disprove the claim that: 'if one makes a film in which a deep sense of intimacy with the filmed subject is established, it automatically brings with it a degree of power over the interlocutor, given the filmmaker's 'usually privileged' background, the camera presence and the intrusive effect of the technology'. Roy contested this by saying,

I was never convinced by this argument, because if I were actually to manipulate and exploit the situation, I would not really get to make a documentary...it wouldn't be the kind of film I would enjoy watching. What...becomes exciting is how they [the co-actors] use the space that you put together for them in unexpected ways. People only reveal themselves as much as they feel comfortable to do so. You can give them money, you can throw all the power at them that you want, but it won't happen (ibid Roy, e2009).

In the final frame of the film, *Majma*, Roy questions Aslam on camera, asking him “What do you think will come out of this film?” and the following is how Roy interprets Aslam’s reply.

...He knew and had a clear sense of what I was doing from our discussions, but it had never emerged before I asked him that he saw the film as a way that people would come to recognize his medical capabilities and he would gain recognition for his talent...I wasn’t aware of it until that moment (ibid Roy, e2009).

Whilst Roy’s sensitivity towards his co-actors is widely recognized in the film community, I had a different viewing experience than he claimed, for Aslam’s facial expression on camera was filled with dismay and uncertainty about how to answer a question that, in my view, may have been alien to his concerns. The question posed was certainly important to the director, but was Aslam’s discomfort coming from his sense of their class difference and his awareness that the *filmmaker’s* life, and not his own would be changed by the film’s release? When Aslam replied that he hoped that his reputation as a sexual health healer would improve by the film’s circulation, I didn’t take this on face value. Such instances prove how unreliable words can be, when there is an underlying ambiguity about who is empowered to *claim* the meaning of a film. In this regard, the anthropologist, Johannes Fabian remarks that it is problematic to conceive of ‘power free’ human interaction in the context of ethnographic research (or filmmaking), usefully signalling that ‘dialogue’ is often misconstrued as an ideologically based universally positive construct:

Communication and dialogue are [often] invoked in ethical arguments calling for freedom from constraints and domination, for encounter on equal terms...

These criteria are epistemological first (naming conditions that enable us to know) and only secondarily ethical (presenting attitudes to be adopted by ethnographers towards their interlocutors...) We must go beyond using communication and dialogue as cover-all protestations of good will and spell out what actually happens when we engage in dialogue. (Fabian, 1990: 5)

In non-fiction filmmaking, misunderstandings can lurk tacitly when answers are provided for the camera, yet these answers may also *conceal* as much as they reveal. In some ways, we learn more when open conflicts arise on set. My next example of the dialogue between filmmaker, R.V. Ramani and his protagonist, Shihin Hussaini, a karate expert, *does* reach a state of conflict from which learning can be drawn.

### **3.4 RV Ramani; ethical boundaries and the impact of the production process**

The film production concerned, *If I die* (1996) tracks an episode in the life of Hussaini whose apparently supernatural powers enable him to split stone slabs with his bare hands, or withstand sledge hammers demolishing piles of these whilst stacked upon his chest. Ramani like Roy, acknowledges that the camera's presence incites performances from filmed subjects, and he therefore consciously creates a certain ambiance on set that endorses this:

The subject is not his normal self with you... what they [his filmed subjects] told me or decided not to tell me was affected by my presence, so I decided to make that part of the film... and various moments that were awkward in the film, I retained. (Ramani interviewed, Pune, 2009, speaking about making *Nee Engey* based on the puppeteer tradition in Tamil Nadu, 2003)

Returning to explore the making of *If I die*, I begin with how Ramani and Hussaini first met.



Ramani was on a flight from Chennai to Mumbai, and Hussaini, coincidentally sat in the seat next to him. Hussaini's face was familiar to Ramani from posters all over Chennai advertising his Karate activities. The two men shared a conversation about their respective work, Hussaini describing his various stunts as being 'performances' (breaking bricks, snake biting, fire resisting, etc.). They spoke about performance, filmmaking, about fear, courage and so forth. Hussaini, keen to feature in movies as an action hero, had not yet found his break. He also expressed the desire to fight a tiger with his bare hands, and wanted to make a film based on the L.T.T.E<sup>91</sup>, in which he would resolve India's political crisis by heroic brute force. Ramani responded that the general public would assume it was a hoax, but privately he was 'sensing an immense energy in Hussaini' (ibid Ramani, 2009). He was interested in exploring what maintains the boundaries between 'performance' as an artistic expression, and the martial arts. Ramani thus shared his experience with Hussaini of a Joseph Beuys film he had seen (*I like America and America likes me*, 1974<sup>92</sup>) discussing this as an example of how an artist engages with fear. For Ramani, flying itself had always prompted thoughts of his mortality, but when the plane subsequently landed with a thud, it was Hussaini who was clearly terrified. The choice to make the documentary was triggered by what this contradiction might conceal. The perceived

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<sup>91</sup> See footnote 80 for L.T.T.E reference.

<sup>92</sup> Ramani had seen this film in 1995 at the Max Mueller Bhavan in Chennai. Beuys' own account of his action in this film is that, covered in a suit of thick felt, he sought to 'isolate and insulate' himself from anything in America except a live coyote. He was thus transported in an ambulance on a stretcher to an airport and henceforth to the US gallery without having touched American soil. He arranged for the coyote to be confined with him in a sealed art gallery space for three days, documenting this on film. The animal was at times threatening but Beuys remained confined and returned (still insulated) to Germany. Beuys here makes allegorical use of the Native American association of the coyote as a powerful god, traversing both physical and spiritual realms. The film (and his performance) allude to the damage done by white men to native cultures. For film synopsis, see Tate Modern Gallery archive [online] (c2005) in the bibliography.

‘subject’ of Ramani’s imagined film, however, was not just Hussaini himself, but a notion of performance that went beyond crowd-pleasing, becoming a direct provocation to audiences through the proximity of the risk of death.

They subsequently agreed that Ramani would be allowed access to film Hussaini amidst all the crowd scenes of his public displays- even if he should die when conducting a stunt. They agreed contractually on Ramani’s permission to film everything, including (if they were to take place) the post-mortem, funeral rites and all. As the filming progressed, Ramani started wondering whether he was attempting stunts beyond his limits because of the camera’s presence. Hussaini was then (separately) offered a role as a police officer in a Tamil feature film, and when attempting a stunt on set, he jumped from a window and seriously injured his knee but felt unable to reveal this, since it would mar his heroic image. Realizing that his role was in jeopardy, he proposed to the producer the addition of a new scene in which his limping could be integrated into the plot. This manoeuvre was revealed in the second part of Ramani’s documentary and its inclusion was hotly contested by Hussaini.

But their conflicting agendas were eventually bound to backfire. Ramani had perhaps missed registering that Hussaini was giving him the ‘existential evidence’, the near-death fascination that has fuelled more than one of his compelling films. Perhaps unwittingly a tacit sense of hierarchy over Hussaini as a ‘stunt artist’ may have invited the conflict. But they managed to reconcile differences and, resuming work Ramani confessed:

I was looking for the absurdity of the whole thing, and its politics contributed to the uniqueness of it... The film became a critique- but I am also with him... so the second part became very serious when the ambulance came and he almost

dies. I felt concerned- so that's when you really panic and you ask, "What am I doing?" and ...this is where I was confronted with the aspect of fear and wanted to give it a form in the film (ibid Ramani, e2009).

His comment also signals the moment when a film production *itself* undergoes a transformation, and becomes a force of its own that now alters balances of power through the revelations that it triggers. The *film* catalyzes events in the men's relationships in life. This volatile transference of realities between co-actors is what makes discussion on 'authentic testimony' often so complex. For, at what point does the production of a testimony begin? Is it in the coincidence of two passengers meeting on a flight? Or in Ramani's prioritizing one sequence in his edit over another, perhaps influenced by his memory of Joseph Beuys' film? I suggest it is in that which supersedes both Ramani's and Hussaini's desires, becoming blurred by the momentum of the film production process itself.

The thrill of watching *If I Die* lies superficially in a voyeuristic compulsion to watch Hussaini undergo death-defying stunts, depending ultimately on risks that we experience vicariously. But Ramani's tangible self-doubt opens up a precariousness in his authority as the director, creating an unexpected ambiguity about who is in control. Whose claim on the representation dominates? Ramani's film portrait ultimately emerges as respectful of Hussaini's curious heroism that sometimes shoots itself in the foot, and honours his intense physical courage.

The power relationship in the Ramani-Hussaini scenario touches on the question of what they both assume to be the 'strategy' of filmmaking and being filmed. In de Certeau's conceptualization in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (a1984), he provides useful ways to distinguish between strategies and tactics where each inserts a different power relationship between the actors. In his account, a **strategy** occurs

when... ‘a subject of will and power ...can be isolated from an “environment” [and] assumes a place and time that can be circumscribed as ‘*propre*’ [meaning in French, ‘of its own’] to ‘serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it’ such as competitors, clients, targets or research objects (de Certeau, a1984: xix). De Certeau defines a **tactic** on the other hand, as an operation that ‘cannot count on a spatial or institutional localization of its own (*propre*), nor thus on distinguishing the other as a visible totality’ (a1984: xix). To use tactics therefore involves insinuating oneself into the other's space-time. A person who operates tactically alters the conditions of a shared space-time rather than presiding over them and they “constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities” (ibid, a1984).

When Ramani was approaching Hussaini ‘strategically’ it becomes apparent that he is framing Hussaini in ways that reify him for his prospective film audiences. Later in the production, however, Ramani returns to occupy a shared time-space with Hussaini and operates ‘tactically’. This transformation marks a re-distribution of power, which is what gives the film its dramatic tension. In the case of the next filmmaker I will introduce, she consciously makes visible the parameters of power by calculating them in to the shooting programme itself from the onset.

### **3.5 Madhusree Dutta; the performance of testimony**

Madhusree Dutta, is an established filmmaker who is also a curator, producer and activist. A Bengali whose work spans large-scale audio-visual installations, documentary filmmaking, exhibition and film programming, was an alumni of Jadavpur University, Kolkata and directed theatre for many years before turning to filmmaking around 1991. Dutta’s practice demonstrates how her questioning of the

terms of ‘giving evidence’ that documentary filmmaking often demands, has resulted in a particular aesthetic in her films.

Dutta begins from the premise that her protagonists are motivated to participate in her films for reasons very different than her own. The tactics of *cinema verité*<sup>93</sup>, that (in her view) still so fundamentally underscore documentary technique cannot detract from the fact that performances are *willingly produced* in front of the camera and directors make use of this. She observes,

What we call ...*cinema verité* footage is like drugs. The ‘real’ is very addictive, very seductive, much more than fiction. If you create a nice interesting protagonist, and if that person happens to have some tragedy or secret, or some kind of an interesting life...I am almost scared to keep long *cinema verité* sequences in my films. I have an impulse to break it with something which is very obviously contrived. (Dutta, interviewed, Mumbai, e2010)

Having acknowledged in the partnership of Ramani and Hussaini that the *film* becomes a force in its own right in the dynamics of co-authoring, Dutta demonstrates how the *camera* can equally be considered a ‘protagonist’ in the on set encounter:

It has changed with digital technologies because everybody knows about the camera- that it is not that ‘black box’ any more that you will wonder what it can

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<sup>93</sup> ‘Cinema verité’ (literally, “truthful cinema”) is a mode of filmmaking in which techniques are intended to retain a sense of veracity and credibility in how the pro-filmic is recorded with the technology, by keeping the instrumentality of apparatus and crew unmasked and encouraging filmed subjects to acknowledge its presence, rather than feigning that it has no impact. It has been attributed as a set of practices propounded by Alain Renais, Chris Marker and Jean Rouché among others in France though these filmmakers were also inspired by Dziga Vertov’s earlier film activism in the Russian ‘Kino-Pravda’ group. See Nichols (a2001).

do; (the famous ‘black box’<sup>94</sup> stories about anthropological filmmaking). It is now friendly, familiar and unobtrusive...Today anthropology [*N.B. Dutta describes herself as an anthropological filmmaker*] has become so much more complex because it is not that you are observing unwilling or uninformed people- It is rather that these are willing and informed people who actually *want* you to observe them. So it’s much more complex than that. What do you do? (ibid Dutta, e2010 *with my inclusion in italics.*)

In the media saturated civil spaces of India, with its abundance of reality TV programmes, online social networking, and remote villages connected to around 500 channels of satellite broadcasting, the phenomenon of ‘performing for camera’ in response to these multiple platforms has become naturalized. No longer a utopic endeavour of ‘bridge building’ between filmmaker(s) and filmed subject(s), we must acknowledge that we are all already occupants of the same seething network, where the task is rather to reveal how these media are shaping social life. Popular entertainment and journalism thrive on the confessional, the sensational, the exotic or the spectacular and co-opt people to produce this kind of testimony. If filmmakers wish to criticize this, then (following Dutta’s rationale) we either intervene with our cameras in such a way as to *change* the protagonists’ conditioned responses to being filmed, or exploit the ‘performance for camera’ and use editing techniques to create a

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<sup>94</sup> The “black-box” of photographic image-making is discussed by Wilém Flusser in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983). He sees photography and literary history as distinct entities in our cultural development. Whilst writing is assumed to be ‘historical/linear/rational’, photography is historicized as ‘magical/imaginary/two dimensional’. Photographs are referred to as ‘technical images’ emerging from the “machine-to-operator” matrix, whose operation is not divulged, (hence the name “black-box”) what occurs within remains concealed. Images are encoded in its interior, thus any criticism of technical images should elucidate inner workings. (Flusser a1983: 16). Synopsized from Dorota Ostrowska, (c2010) “Magic, Emotions & Film Producers: Unlocking the “Black-box” of Film Production”.

political commentary. Facing this dilemma, Dutta's methods consistently return to the problem of how 'testimony' in documentary is constructed and manifested on camera.

The film she discussed with me was *Seven Islands and a Metro* (2007) that explores various waves of migration in Mumbai, its cultural substructures of inhabitants such as construction workers, bar dancers, tea sellers and a stunt actress who works for the Hindi film industry. To expand on how she understands the statements offered by her protagonists on camera, she comments:

Regarding the authenticity of the testimonies; people create a contemporary self that resides in the cusp of memory and desire. While the memory too gets fragmented, prioritized and interpolated the desire for the future is a fiction based on the memory. When giving testimony, the protagonists create a 'present' which is a concoction of those two states of mind... The first few encounters [with the subject] carry that contrived person that the protagonist create out of the memory and desire of the 'self'...I look for this moment of contrivance/fiction/creativity of the self. A deep connection with the filmmaker breaks that mutually creative moment...For me, my protagonists exist in their creative idea of themselves (Dutta, email with the author, 2010).

Describing one of her film shoot experiences, she spent four nights with two Mumbai tea sellers (who sell tea from urns strapped to their bicycles). One of these tells a story on camera, that he migrated to Mumbai because he had fallen in love with a girl from his village and both sets of their parents sent him away, rejecting his marriage request to the girl because of their caste differences. He then confessed that as a consequence, that the girl tragically committed suicide. Dutta comments:

To this day, I don't know if this is true, and I don't wish to know also- whether the story was a Bollywood story, whether he aspires to make or be in the movies, or whether it was a lived story. (Dutta, interviewed, Mumbai, e2010)

Her understanding was that the tea seller's priority was not necessarily to convey the 'truth' about his life, but rather to fulfil Dutta expectations as a filmmaker. The story seemed so tailor-made that Dutta assumed it existed 'in a grey area between truth and imagination' (ibid, Dutta 2010). She therefore consciously chooses for an elaborate crew and camera setup to facilitate her co-actors' performance. The tea sellers were equipped with a radio microphones and small cameras pursued by the director and crew in a large jeep, lending onus to how they should fulfil their roles.

When I questioned Dutta about how she perceives her *own* performance as the director of her films, she said that she continually swaps roles between being a film director, an anthropologist and a performance director, but sought to be transparent to her audiences about when she was making these shifts. She added,

The convention is this: cinema is always about the 'other', it's always about voyeurism...earlier it was the white people who made films on Indians, now its about the elite Indians who are making films on the poor ones... The camera is always triggering at somebody else (sic). Of course we are always striving to create another model, but that is not the practice, the convention... (ibid Dutta, e2010).

Dutta's 'practice' from these words seems almost synonymous with the notion of (cinematic) 'convention'. From my own perspective, to question the basic premise of how the camera has been used historically falls within the filmmaker's 'practice'. Dutta, however, seems to designate 'practice' as a *fait accompli* that, on a



fundamental level, is beyond challenge. Jumping for a moment to observe myself in the midst of shooting the Warkari pilgrimage in rural Maharashtra, undeniably my presence might have evoked for some the colonial association of the “white anthropologist filming Indians”. But even if ‘practice’ equals ‘convention’ then perhaps it need not be conceived of quite so deterministically. My experience was that my presence as a camerawoman in India came to signify many other types of relationships to the people I was filming, who also bring their own desires and perceptual orders that have no connection with the colonizer-colonized relationship or hierarchies of class or wealth. My point is that the ‘on set encounter’ demands constant scrutiny about how we are forming relationships with the camera as a significant object intruding between personal relationships formed in its presence.

To revisit Rahul Roy’s interaction with his filmed subject, Aslam, I suggest that because his relationship to Aslam was not important to him *in the sense of his film*, this may be the point where his filmmaking process risks becoming voyeuristic. If one does, however, engage with what co-actors might be seeking in the encounter *as an ongoing and changeable condition*, then the learned paradigms of ‘performing for camera’ can be interrupted. In Dutta’s approach, she is clearly requiring her protagonists to demonstrate, for example, how they might make up stories about their lives, because of the crew’s presence. Perhaps Dutta’s own shape-shifting subjectivity is preventing her from revealing herself to her co-actors in ways that I will return to investigate in Chapter 5.

### **3.6 Rajula Shah; reciprocity and the filmed subject**

I now move on to discuss Rajula Shah’s tactical approach in making, *Sabad nirantar* (*Word within the word*, 2008), another example of how the dynamics on set

can be negotiated. At a mid-career phase, her three key films are the above, *Retold by Lokhnath* (2012) and *Beyond the Wheel* (2004) gaining considerable recognition at international documentary festivals. She is also a published poet. In *Sabad nirantar*, she demonstrates ‘voices’ in plural, rather than individual testimonies, since she is less interested in isolated conversations, than with how these voices collectively form a palimpsest of musical poetry inspired by the 15<sup>th</sup> century poet, Kabir in Malwa (Madhya Pradesh).

Prior to working on *Sabad nirantar*, Shah first came in contact with the music of the renowned Indian classical vocalist Kumar Gandharva, (who died in 1992). His unique vocal style is based on the *nirgun* tradition associated with wandering mendicants and *sadhus*. Shah studied how the performance aspect of this tradition had reached communities through acclaimed vocalists like Prahlad Singh Tepaniyar, Dayaram Saroliya, and Kaluram Bamaniya<sup>95</sup>. But she then shifted her gaze to the villagers of Malwa who are not skilled musicians, yet are crucial in sustaining the Kabir cult as an everyday practice binding the communities of this region. She says,

I was interested in how it survived across the centuries and what it means to people, because this poetry seemed very mystical, and esoteric and witty and sarcastic, with that kind of laconic humour... and I wondered if it would be popular still... I wanted to...look for these people, find out if they existed.  
(Shah, interviewed, Mumbai e2009)

Unlike Dutta or Ramani’s protagonists, her co-actors were not selected for having ‘dramatically interesting’ qualities. Her priority was rather to explore the transmission systems of the musical poetry. She discovered that several farmers knew over five

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<sup>95</sup> Saroliya and Bamiya are members of *Adivasi Lok Kala Parishad* in Bhopal who research, practice and document the *Lok* (or folk) traditions of Madhya Pradesh.

hundred *bhajans*<sup>96</sup> by heart. One villager, Shankarlal, is shown in the film taking out a tattered pamphlet of Kabir poems, crossing out the difficult words and substituting his own, explaining that nobody would understand the metaphor of ‘ink fading’ as being a loss of youth, so he changes it to ‘you lose your youth’ whilst still accrediting Kabir as the author. Such are the revelations she gleans from the minutiae of the shared habits of practice.

A key moment in *Sabad Nirantar* is a conversation between Shah and another villager named Kashima. Shah, choosing to partake in the oral tradition herself, shares a story on camera with Kashima (about Lord Vishnu and Narad, from one of the Puranas<sup>97</sup>). But this provokes an interesting reversal of the filmmaker’s quest for testimonies, courtesy of Kashima. Having discussed with Shah some thoughts on her old age and imminent death, Kashima confronts the director with a question about why she is there, perhaps implying that life is so transitory that the desire to archive it is futile:

Don’t mind me saying, but that machine, the one you are lugging around...  
[*the sound recording equipment*] If you die now, it will roll in dust. Say what will you take along then? Nothing my dear!

(Kashima in *Sabad Nirantar*, 2008, trans. Hindi to English by the director, Shah, *my inclusion in italics*)

This is a moment in which the viewers’ experience of documentary ‘evidence’ shifts its axis. The audience, suddenly made conscious of the mediation process, experiences the film through *Kashima’s* (and not Shah’s) framing of it. Whilst the old

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<sup>96</sup> *Bhajans* are sung prayers or poems, in this case derived from the poetry of Kabir.

<sup>97</sup> The story is about Vishnu proving to Narad that the common farmer, rather than those who constantly recite his name in prayer is the one he considers to be the ‘true’ devotee.  
[http://www.webonautics.com/mythology/narada\\_legends4.html](http://www.webonautics.com/mythology/narada_legends4.html) (Accessed 12.3.2012)

woman declares the redundancy of archiving, paradoxically the wisdom of Kabir's poetry is simultaneously revealed through her words, thus affirming what film has the power to testify.

Shah finally commented that for an urban-educated Indian like herself, filming in the context of the villages of Malwa, she is...

...very conscious that I am neither an outsider nor an insider of this 'Indian-ness' or tradition, or knowing my people, ... I don't have the insider's experience and relation- even with something like *bhakti* poetry- that my grandmother might have... [but] my vantage point of being on the threshold between the two worlds is giving me that experience which is very vital in affording an insight into both worlds. (Shah, interviewed Mumbai, e2009)

Perhaps the documentary process allows Shah (conditioned by her urban upbringing) to engage with the 'Indian-ness' of rural people and their life interests. The sense of an 'aspiration to relate' is conveyed in her film technique. Her inclusion in the edit of her co-actors' response to being filmed also resembles Reena Mohan's tactics in the film, *Kamlabai* discussed in Chapter 2; a kind of porousness in communication with her co-actors that in her case depends on her knowledge and engagement with the Kabir tradition, which she may debate with her filmed subjects as an ongoing argument about its significance to the lives of those who partake in the sung-poetry.

### **3.7 Nirmal Chander; the dual positioning of the subject**

Glancing back, we have thus far come across Madhusree Dutta's interest in the performances evoked by on set encounters, Roy's recognition of Radha's 'reality TV tactics', Ramani's tryst with Hussaini, and Shah's 'joining in the argument' of the Kabir tradition. In Nirmal Chander's project, *All the World's a Stage* (2008) we now see a case where traditional artists have become their *own* cultural producers, so that

the music that they practice bifurcates into a devotional and a theatrical expression of the same music; the theatrical version forged into a business enterprise by themselves.

They belong to a community who migrated to India from East Africa over 800 years ago, known as the Sidis,<sup>15</sup> who for hundreds of years, have experienced prejudice both institutionally and on racial grounds, and still carry the legal status of being a 'Scheduled Tribe' despite the fact that they are a Diaspora. Explored in the film are the changing values attributed to the Sidis' drumming, known as the '*dhammal*'. The ritual form of *dhammal* is conducted at the shrine of the Muslim, Baba Ghor, who was reputedly a trader in agate and one of the first migrants who brought the Sidis to Gujarat from Africa. Sidi identity is closely connected to a mystic belief in Baba Ghor's legacy, including his brother who is also worshiped as a *pir* (Lodhi, c2008). But the same *dhammal* has also been adapted for theatres and nightclubs in Europe, transforming the music and dances from the rituals for these contexts.

The ritual *dhammal* takes place over several days and triggers states of trance by the women who participate. When similar percussion and dances by the men-based on peacocks' courting and involving the smashing of coconuts on the head-were re-designed for stage, they were choreographed in shorter, more spectacular versions of the ritual. The Sidis are continually assumed to be foreigners in India because of their African appearance, and the Gujarat Department of Culture,

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<sup>15</sup> The Sidis are an African Diaspora in India (from the word 'Saiyed' meaning an honourable term for Prophet, Mohammed's descendents). In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, African slaves were brought to India by the Emperor Ruknuddin Barbak (1559-1575) who kept circa 8,000 men that were later driven out by King Alauddin Hussain of Bengal (1593-1519). Other accounts state that they only arrived in the 1690's when nobility kept Abyssinian and East Africans slaves, i.e. servants with no local roots that provided them with political security (Naik, Pandya, and Russell, a1993). Both of these accounts are contestable and Chander expressly avoids providing any historical details in the film about the Sidi's cultural 'origins'.

acknowledging that this community was frequently a target of discrimination, also noticed that they were gaining international fame through their unique heritage. The Department, investing in their theatre performances, also saw fit to restyle the Sidis dress to 'look African', since there was nothing distinctive about the clothing that they were wearing in the ritual context and daily lives. What was really being invoked by the costume change was the *rules of how 'being African' operate in the imagination of the patrons*. But perhaps unexpectedly, the Sidis complied and adopted this artificially exoticized look for their shows. In the words of Sabir [one of the Sidis],

The *dhammal* that happens at the shrine cannot be changed because it is an act of devotion. But the stage performances can incorporate change. (Sabir in *All the World's a Stage*, 2008. English trans. from Gujarati: Nirmal Chander)

He sees no contradiction in converting the ritual activity into theatre since they were perceived as different, yet parallel practices. The demand for their music has been welcomed, since the supplementary income permitted their children to attend school.

Chander's presence with the camera crew also triggered a response from the Sidis of presenting themselves as they would have done on stage. In one short scene from the film, Chander allowed a group of the younger dancers and drummers to direct their own scene on film, since they had urged him to let them devise a routine for camera. Conversant in current MTV music videos, they arranged a short sequence on the spot, beginning with one dancer perched in a tree jumping down into the camera's framing. In a flurry of 'rapper-*dhammal*' moves, the scene brings humour to a film that otherwise carries Chander's intellectual seriousness, with its underlying message about the problem of racism. Discovering that this sequence was arranged by

the Sidis themselves, I found it significant that they disrupted the director's ideas about portraying them 'seriously' whilst paradoxically, they also could be seen as re-affirming a popular stereotype of themselves as the 'happy-go-lucky entertainers'.

In Chander's conversation with the Sidis about their performances on camera, he says that the migration of the *dhammal* towards theatre 'should' now permit these artists to include women as drummers and dancers, which in the ritual context, Islamic law would have forbidden. Their response to the idea is tepid. The film also implies in a discussion with the younger Sidis, that the temptation to leave India (after the success of international touring) is fuelled by a wish to escape the racism they have experienced at home, his film thus acting as a siren call to Indian audiences. But the two types of migration- from ritual to theatre, and from India to Germany (the tour location) are shown as intertwined aspirations in their cultural recognition.

Chander's film demonstrates how devotional practices are made into entertainment as a choice of the practitioners themselves, and not only under the influence of institutional patronage, as one might assume. The Sidi's splitting of the *dhammal* into theatre and ritual manifestations also establishes separate rules about how each should be practiced. This move is perhaps protective against the foul play of appropriation, creating a space where the ritual can proceed undisturbed. In Chander's relationship with the Sidis through filmmaking, it reveals their resistance to habitual discrimination. Their answer, it seems, is to use humour to undermine the potential pigeonholing that comes with Chander's directing strategies, as well as the audience's response. They want to be their own directors.

This now leads me to consider to what degree filmmakers acknowledge themselves as responsible for interpreting and re-shaping the realities they produce on film, as I will now explore in Ajay Bhardwaj's practice.

### **3.8 Ajay Bhardwaj; questions of 'invisibility' as the documentary-maker**

Bhardwaj spoke with me about his ambition that his camera should 'become invisible', when making documentaries. Whilst this is literally impossible, I wondered during my research why camera 'invisibility' on set seemed to be desirable to several of the filmmakers that I interviewed<sup>98</sup>. Certain observational filmmaking methods may persuade us that the camera has no impact on how events are recorded, but David MacDougall, arguing a case against observational filmmaking below, attempts to explain how this dissimulation works:

It is a desire for the invisibility of the imagination found in literature combined with the aseptic touch of the surgeon's glove- in some cases a legitimization, in the name of art or science, of the voyeur's peephole... From this desire, it is not a great leap to begin viewing the camera as a secret weapon in pursuit of knowledge. The self-effacement of the filmmaker begins to efface the limitations of his own physicality. He and his camera are imperceptibly endowed with the power to witness the TOTALITY of an event ... And for many filmmakers it has in practice a comforting lack of ambiguity. The filmmaker establishes a role for himself ... and he then disappears into the woodwork. (MacDougall, 1995: 120 *his capitals applied for emphasis*)

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<sup>98</sup> Another filmmaker, Pankaj Rishi Kumar who is influenced by the work of Frederick Wiseman, spoke of 'planting the camera somewhere, and seeing to it that your subject is so comfortable that the camera becomes invisible' seeing the camera as 'an extension of my eye, [only] that eye has to become invisible'. (Kumar, from an interview 12.8.2010 held in Pune)



But this claim may need reconsidering when looking more closely at what motivates the ‘invisibility of the imagination’ in Bhardwaj’s production, *Kitte Mil ve Mahi*, (*Where the Twain shall Meet*, 2004). The film tracks the various strands of resistance amongst the dalit Sufi movements of the Doaba (in the Punjab), seen through the eyes of two key figures: the dalit poet Lalit Singh Dil and Bhagat Singh Bilga, a leader within the Ghadar resistance movement<sup>99</sup>. When I asked the film director what his priorities were in forming relationships with these people, Bhardwaj replied:

The *guise* is very important. How do you enter the field and how do they understand you? That decides what you will get out of them... I was interested in knowing from the practitioners who are part of these Sufi traditions *how they practice*.... [In filmmaking,] I can position up front the heroes whom I value. So the threat of appropriating experiences and their knowledge, and turning oneself into an author of that knowledge is more transparent in a film than in a book. Those who are part of- and practice- these traditions have gone to great lengths in their own personal lives and to follow this is what is worth seeing, knowing and listening to. My films are actually governed by this concern, so ...I try to ‘invisible-ize’ myself (sic). (Bhardwaj, interviewed Delhi, e2010)

‘Becoming invisible’ in this sense can be seen, rather, as an active desire by Bhardwaj to abnegate himself before his subjects’ greater authority, becoming a kind of loyal secretary for posterity. When describing his encounter with Lalit Singh Dil, he

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<sup>99</sup> This film is also discussed in Chapter 6 page 241. The Ghadar movement was initiated by a Punjabi Diaspora in the United States and Canada called the *Hindustani Workers of the Pacific Coast* an armed resistance movement against British colonial rule in 1915, particularly focussed on the Punjab. After World War I, its founding members returned to the Punjab to agitate alongside the Babbar Arkali Movement mounting uprisings against the British government. (Bhoi, 1998)

pointed out that Singh Dil initially refused to talk to him face on, whilst the director kept shooting his back view. Later, Bhardwaj shared the footage with Singh Dil, saying that his body language was greatly revealing by refusing to confront the camera. Singh Dil then warmed to the filmmaker, declaring he had been immortalized. Bhardwaj later noted that the poet carefully prepared himself each time before a shoot, because of the intense pressure he experienced in being filmed. At the end of the film, a shot of Singh Dil is included where he says,

Look over there the camera is watching. The camera is the biggest sun. It sees everything. Forgive us, please leave us. It is larger than the sun. It is bigger than the sun. I implore you, do not unravel everything that is ours. (Lalit Singh Dil in *Kitte Mil Ve Mahi*. English trans. from Punjabi by the director, Ajay Bhardwaj)

His statement aptly reminds us how many people find the experience of being filmed invasive because of its de-mystification of our intimate experiences of self and other that proceed in relative obscurity compared with film's graphic exposure. By way of compensating for this inherent 'violation' that filmmaking induces, Bhardwaj says,

I try to have that emotional resonance with people that I record. If I can have a situation while filming that people have their own spaces to make their choices and decide how they would like to be filmed...Probing is something I never like. ... When you start doing that the bonding breaks... I respect and maintain that relationship of the storyteller and the listener. You just trigger a conversation, and then you step back. ... There is no fixed point "A" of entering into a film and no point "B" to exit a film as far as 'reality' or 'shooting reality' are concerned. *Any* reality, or any point of entering or exiting from reality

would bring me to the same experience as a result... Whatever slice I have [on film] is rich enough (ibid Bhardwaj, e2010).

The above emphasizes and celebrates the unpredictability of the encounter, whilst also acknowledging that ethical boundaries cannot be avoided. Bhardwaj's camera is not becoming a 'fly on the wall', nor is it a weapon for totalizing knowledge. Rather his attitude of *listening* makes the camera's significance recede behind the receptivity of the human encounter.

I would like to flag up briefly my own filmmaking practice, in which I have desired camera invisibility for different reasons than Bhardwaj. This contributed to my choice to shoot the pilgrimage in Maharashtra in which I knew that over a million Warkari pilgrims would take part. The overwhelming numbers and great importance of the pilgrimage for the devotees, I assumed, would render my shooting activity relatively insignificant against this backdrop, whereby I could 'get on with the task of documenting'. In practice, however, my desire for self-erasure undermined the possibility of having a range of different kinds of relationships with the pilgrims I was filming, forcing me to rethink my strategy. I could not progress in the shoot whilst sheltering myself from my own agency amongst the people. I will return to discuss this in more detail in the next Chapter on the shoot.

Remarkable about the following two directors I will consider is the way they described their responsibility with their filmed subjects, both of them seeming to defy what their finished films testify in their interviews with me. The first director, Arghya Basu, talks of his relationship with his subject as a business deal whilst Shabnam Virmani, describes hers as a longstanding friendship with her co-actors; claims which the follow will explore.

### 3.9 Arghya Basu and Shabnam Virmani; A business relationship or just friends?

Arghya Basu, a Bengali filmmaker based in Pune has worked for over six years on films in partnerships with the Lepchas of Sikkim<sup>100</sup>. His two key films, *Death, Life Etcetera* (2008) and *Listener's Tale* (2006) are both situated in Sikkim, and frame the Lepcha communities they document as 'culturally endangered', destined to be subsumed into the Kolkata of tomorrow. Yet being from Kolkata himself, the position Basu is taking is not really one of advocating for the Lepcha in their battle against time. In his own words, he is making films there 'because they give me an image of myself', thus making a clear case of 'art for art's sake'<sup>101</sup>.

What happened for me to take the camera there [to Sikkim] was basically not really the community or the society..., but was ...to connect with film practice itself. It was more to do with that than with the people I was working with.  
(Basu, interviewed, Pune, e2010)

Yet when looking at his films, particularly *Death, Life Etcetera*, they show an intimate connection with his protagonists that would not have been possible without a sensitivity towards their lives and political challenges. The main protagonist in the film is Jigme, the manager of a small hotel and tour guide company, educated in

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<sup>100</sup> The Lepchas are amongst Sikkim's earliest historically recorded inhabitants (around the 13<sup>th</sup> Century) alongside the Tibetan Bhutias (a Diaspora from the Bhud province) who migrated to Sikkim from Assam and Burma. Amongst them the Namgyal clan (1400's) won political control. Phintsok Namgyal became the first Chogyal (King) in 1642, and followed a system based on Tibetan Lamaistic Buddhism that continued for around 330 years. After large-scale invasions from Nepal and Bhutan in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the Nepalese also settled there as farmers. By the 1800's Sikkim's population was very mixed, and recurring internal conflict resulted. Sikkim was supported by British colonizers against Nepal in the war of 1814-15, but by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Sikkim population violently resisted British rule to finally become a protectorate. In 1975 it became the 22<sup>nd</sup> State of India. (Joshi, a2004: 93)

<sup>101</sup> The idea of 'art for art's sake' was launched by Théophile Gautier in the 1860's founded on the idea of an autonomy of aestheticism that traditionally has been linked with an ideological conservatism. For a critical reclamation of the potential radicalism of this concept seen through a postcolonial lens, see Leela Gandhi (a2006: 149)

engineering in Varanasi who has returned to his community in Sikkim. Basu's film follows Jigme and his father, including many of the Lepchas' art forms and traditional ritual celebrations in dance, music and painting. I asked Basu to describe his initial meeting with Jigme and in this encounter, he demonstrated what might be read as quite a calculated approach:

I put a small test for him- I wrote down ... that I needed a mask maker, I needed people who could sing the traditional songs, I needed a whole carnival that would happen in the snow, I needed the snow to fall while the dance was happening... I wrote down my whole wish list because I wanted to see how much of it he really did know and he said, 'Yeah, yeah, it's all there', And I said, "How can it all be there?" and I had put this list, actually, to test his credibility and to see if he could convince me to go to his village. And I said "Who are you, if I may ask?" and he explained who he was and said "You can come with me, and you don't have to pay for it [*meaning, his services as a guide*]. All you have to do is to give me a copy of some shots that I can use for my touring agency". And I said "Are you serious?" and then Jigme made his point very clear saying, "Mr. Basu, my father thinks I am a useless fellow, but I will prove to him that I am a good businessman". (ibid Basu, e2010, *my inclusion in italics*)

That both Basu and Jigme sought to gain from the collaboration seems clear, a desire that on Basu's side of the deal was arguably more acquisitive than merely 'connecting with his practice as a filmmaker'. He was approaching him with a 'request list' of visual cultural phenomena from a pre-conceived scenario of how Lepcha culture might be shown on film. This demand made Jigme potentially somewhat cautious about partnering with Basu, so he found a way to make a proposition that he declares

as profitable to himself. In this conditional symmetry, it seems ambiguous whether Basu was ‘throwing down the gauntlet’ to Jigme with a sense of authorial supremacy, or how ironic he was being in linking himself to the trading of ‘culturally significant images’ of the Lepchas as an urban Bengali funded as he was by a reputable Indian cultural agency, the IFA<sup>102</sup> to make this film.

My reading of Basu’s strategy is that he was effectively saying to Jigme: “I know that you know that I am ‘one of those filmmakers’ who could exploit you, so let’s address that fact openly in our exchange”. This is a particularly sensitive juncture between filmmaker and filmed subject where filmmakers are inevitably instigating a relationship that is potentially exploitative, where his/her creative goals may be opportunistic in adhering to the aesthetic parameters that they know film funders will endorse. This opportunism may in some cases generate certain documentary genres that avoid tackling any real geopolitical tensions in their film topics<sup>103</sup>. Made with the support of agencies like the India Foundation for the Arts, filmmakers adapt their works to be entertaining, tasteful and demonstrate good film craft; they may include ‘carnivals happening in the snow’ as Basu (perhaps ironically) suggests. But I do question whether this then leads to the recycling of conservative narratives of ‘lost’ or ‘endangered’ cultural identities. Economic pressure on the filmmakers influence what relationships can be imagined by them towards subcultures in India such as the Lepchas, which may at times present film audiences with an anodyne view of them.

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<sup>102</sup> The agency concerned is the India Foundation for the Arts, (IFA) in Bangalore.

<sup>103</sup> For example, Sikkim is a vital Indian military defence zone in the eventuality of Chinese invasion on its Sikkim-Tibetan frontier. Therefore the Sikkim population had little choice but to align with India a decade after the 1962 Indo-Chinese war. There are also complex internal tensions with Sikkim’s diverse ethnic representation, which means it has relied on a centralizing external force from India to overcome tensions. Such issues might equally have been explored by the filmmaker, but were not.

But another comment in Basu's description was that he felt that, because he had made a *business* arrangement with Jigme, he was no longer obliging him to 'tell him his story' for the benefit of the documentary project. He says:

He was going about his life and I had become part of his life. He had not become part of my practice. So my practice was not the practice of a 'subject' and here I found a very interesting thing happening; ... It was almost like writing a fiction... I have never been able to make 'documentary' films in fact. Life had other plans for me! (ibid, Basu, e2010)

Hence, the business arrangement is construed as 'saving' Basu from the potentially parasitic power relations that he associates with 'documentary' filmmaking strategy (which he seems to want to dissociate with). He went on to explain that Jigme wished to advance his tourism business by making money out of their agreement, but was doing so out of an altruistic traditional practice of wealth sharing amongst the Lepchas known as '*zhumpcha*'. Jigme, he said, wanted everyone in his village to be able to afford a car and a cell phone and to be able to drive freely from Ghantok (his village in Sikkim) to Tibet. Despite having mentioned this off screen, Basu's film, *Death Life Etcetera* perhaps more strongly conveyed the 'loss' narrative that I felt came across through his (own composition of) melancholic electro-acoustic sound track. Jigme's '*zhumpcha*' that was in fact his subject's *raison d'être* for participating in the film, was not given away in the film itself, though the portrayal of Jigme as the main protagonist of his film was sensitive and intimately observant.

Switching now to filmmaker, Shabnam Virmani, she expressed the desire for *friendship* with her filmed subjects, who in the case of her four-part film series, the

*Kabir Project*, (2003 and ongoing<sup>104</sup>) are musical artists and Kabir devotees from several North Indian states. Virmani is a Punjabi living in Bangalore employed as a resident filmmaker at the Shrishti College of Art and Design that has facilitated her eight year-old venture. Virmani came to filmmaking through feminist activism, a passion for music, and a background in journalism. Kabir's poetry<sup>105</sup> was for her a catalyst for personal and political change in her life and her filmmaking. She has repeatedly documented the vocalist, Mukhtiyar Ali and the more renowned Prahlad Singh Tepaniyar with whom Rajula Shah also began her filmmaking journey. Virmani described her technical/creative choices in her filmmaking in this way:

Professional camera crews are an encumbrance and I would much rather use my own camera and be as '*sehej*' as possible, as spontaneous, easy, natural in the filmic movement as I possibly could. *Sehej* is a key word in Kabir and it keeps cropping up in my consciousness and informs my shoot and edit. *Sehej* means something that arises naturally and spontaneously within you and it implies a 'co-dependent arising'. (Virmani, interviewed, Delhi e2010)

She describes having acquired skills as a journalist of 'circumventing' the performative tendency of her co-actors, and that 'making friends' is intrinsic to this, yet her film follows the principles of conventional investigative journalism. She juxtaposes the protagonists' voices in her film, *Had-Anhad* (2006, the second of the *Kabir Project* films) to 'compare and contrast' followers of different schools of Kabir,

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<sup>104</sup> The four film titles are: *Chalo Hamara Des* (*Come to my Country*), *Had Anhad* (*Bounded, Boundless*) *Kabira Khada Bazaar Mein* (*in the Market Stands Kabir*), *Koi Sunta Hai* (*Someone is listening*) The project is extensively profiled on the site [www.kabirproject.org/](http://www.kabirproject.org/) (Accessed 2.12.2011)

<sup>105</sup> Kabir looms large in the consciousness of many Indians as the epitome of non-sectarian spiritual wisdom- being born a Muslim but addressing and pertaining to both Hindu and Islamic devotional cultures.



some revealed to have potentially sectarian prejudices whilst others do not. This contrapuntal edit gives a moral cast dividing them into ‘tolerant’ (i.e. unorthodox/religiously hybrid) and ‘intolerant’ (Hindu orthodox) devotees. It is not exceptional that filmmakers who come from a history of activism (like Virmani) are concerned with the moral correctness of a cultural practice, but her claim of operating from the basis of friendship is not necessarily tangible in her film structure on screen.

The *Kabir Project* is framed as a “Shabnam Virmani/Shrishti Academy co-production” with a purpose of ‘celebrating’ Kabir’s legacy across religious and ethnic divides. But her production construct actually recalls an age-old patronage system in which folk musicians and artists are paid to *service* the wider ambitions of the filmmakers and patrons, albeit with publicity benefits for the musicians. In the spirit of *sehej*, the expectation would be that the project’s authorship (and indeed its copyright) would be shared, which it is not. The choice of film locations also did not reflect the way that friendship constructs shared habitats in ordinary everyday spaces. Virmani has responded to the spirit of *sehej* by setting up touring performances of these artists in which she also joins them in singing on stage together. But when interviewing Mukhtiyar Ali privately (Ali, e2009), it was clear that he saw these stage performances as deracinated and less personally significant to him than when he played in the context of his village. On the other hand, the *Kabir Project’s* films have been highly successful as a means to showcase many contemporary strands of the Kabir tradition, and whilst I suggest it is founded on a business relationship, this does not diminish its value as a cultural enterprise grounded in substantial research and prolonged engagement in the protagonists of the Kabir tradition across India.

### 3.10 Conclusions

The above commentary about the filmmakers has been exploring their strategies and tactics in filmmaking, looking at their co-actors' impact on the encounter. But I would now like to assess more globally what insights can be drawn about these specific encounters and their authoring methods.

Firstly I must acknowledge that they form a 'scattering effect' of different intentions that resist being streamlined. My decision then, is to make an attempt to categorize below the 'types of on set relationships' that we have been witnessing, to see if it is possible to draw conclusions about the filmmakers' politics of address.

In Chapter 1 page 24, I used a visual diagram to indicate the zone of interactivity on set between filmmakers and their co-actors (labelled [ A ] in the drawing). In this zone, there are times when both sides of the encounter assume roles that have similar purposes, and other times when they diverge. Looking first at when they are similar, we can recognize mutual approaches that express the intention of: 'being next to...', 'being with...', 'listening to...', 'dancing with...', 'gesturing towards...', 'being in solidarity with...', 'arguing with...', 'performing for', or 'confronting...' the other in the presence of the camera. All of these types of approach might lead to a 'revelation' happening between filmmaker and co-actor, whether simultaneously or in turn. Command over the authoring process also shifts fluidly between filmmaker/filmed in these cases. On the other hand, there are cases when there is a dis-balance between filmmaker/filmed. When filmmakers *observe* filmed subjects on camera, this may prevent revelations from occurring on set, since the filmed subject's only choice is whether to refuse or accept 'being observed'. Interestingly though, the space of being observed can often trigger the co-actor to

decide what they wish to expose for the camera. There are many types of filmmaking encounter in which directors assume authority over those they film, by claiming to advocate for them, though the terms of advocacy or representation may be negotiated. Other tactics that filmmakers use are designed to trigger confessions, or to play out conflicts between different sides in existing communities. Co-actors may then comply with, or challenge the filmmaker. By studying such dynamics, we can identify how each of the participants is *making claims on authoring* by fleshing out their own role in the on set encounter. I would now like to consider these forces at work in the examples from the filmmakers cited in this chapter.

In Rahul Roy's approach, he engages with his co-actors in the mode of "being next to" them. In his interaction with Aslam, Roy still remains an outsider looking in at people from a social community he does not belong to. Unlike Deepa Dhanraj in her film, *Something like a War*, he is not in solidarity with his co-actors, advocating on their behalf. He retains a certain distance, even when exploring intimate themes like sexuality amongst Muslims men in New Delhi. This then results in a genre of film that whilst empathetic, also stakes a degree of separation with his co-actors.

In the film, *If I die*, R.V. Ramani shows us a case with his co-actor, Hussaini, where he initially appears to be appropriating from Hussaini's death defying acts. But the relationship becomes more equitable when Ramani takes on board his responsibility for Hussaini's excessive risk-taking in his film. The importance given to the karate practice by Hussaini is that it is an expression of patriotism and his desire to educate young boys in physical bravery. But for Ramani the encounter is being used to explore whether Hussaini's personal quest can be appreciated as 'art'. One of the questions I was left with at the end of Chapter 2 is 'what negotiations of 'difference' are occurring between filmmaker and filmed?' In Ramani's case, the

‘difference’ here is not about Hussaini belonging to a ‘marginal’ community (for he has a sizable popular following in Chennai). Rather, Ramani is negotiating the difference between ‘performing art’ and ‘martial arts’ through his filmmaking.

In Madhusree Dutta’s encounters, “performing for you” becomes the filmmaker’s *and* the co-actors’ prerogative. Whether they are urban intellectuals, small traders or working class citizens, each is entitled to reinvent themselves on screen. Like Mani Kaul in Chapter 2, her practice challenges issues of authentication, and within her film text ‘traditional aesthetic methods’ are challenged by her inclusion of deliberately theatrical devices in a documentary film genre. But her protagonists from these different social strata (as in Kaul’s films) tend not to co-mingle. Rather, she maintains that all classes thrive from a voyeuristic pleasure in peaking into the class that they are not. Class boundaries are clearly etched in her aesthetic system.

In Nirmal Chander’s encounter in making, *All the World’s a Stage*, there is a two-way argument going on between the Sidis and himself. He wants to convince the Sidis that they should let their women practice the *dhammal* (drumming) tradition, now that they have developed a version beyond its ritual context. The film is also a siren call against racism. The Sidis, on the other hand, are trying to push Chander towards *their* point of view, which is that they have no moral dilemma with switching from ritual to theatre in their practice, and they also wish to be treated by the filmmaker as performing artists. Chander’s encounter is also a prime example of how the Sidis have chosen to co-author the film with him.

Ajay Bhardwaj and Rajula Shah have aspects of their methods in common, but there are also differences. In Bhardwaj’s case, his encounters are archived as his

contribution to history for posterity. In Shah's case, she is using the stories of her co-actors rather to define herself as an artist in an auto-ethnographic sense. In addition to this, she is tracking how the stories (stemming from Kabir's poetry) manifest an ongoing argument from generation to generation as a form of spiritual discourse.

Concerning Basu and Virmani about whom I have been more critical, I hope not to typecast how they will be engaging with their co-actors in the future, for as I mentioned, I am merely commenting on a brief moment of their practice. Basu made two subsequent films after *Death Life Etcetera* in which his partnership with the Lepchas went through many stages, organizing collaborations with Sikkim's own filmmaker community. But both filmmakers seemed to demonstrate to me in their interviews, how film patronage has influenced their relationship with the Lepchas and the Kabir *panthis*<sup>106</sup> respectively. This does carry the one-sidedness of the filmmaker making business demands on co-actors; the money or publicity space offered in return is what then re-balances power so that the latter also benefit from the deal.

The limitation of my framing above is that it isolates the on set encounter from the wider political communities mentioned at the end of Chapter 2, such as activist groups, cultural producers, alliances that filmmakers and co-actors have with NGO producers (and so forth). These alliances crucially affect the relationships on set by pre-inscribing them within their contexts. But if we are interested in the microcosm of how filmmakers from one cultural community interact with and represent traditional artists from another, then to observe these discrete exchanges can also be highly instructive, as we have seen.

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<sup>106</sup> *Panthis* means literally "The path of..." (in Hindi) and refers (in plural) to the devotees of a guru and is often associated with Kabir followers.

I mentioned earlier that what drew me to look at these filmmakers from India was there 'multi-textual' methods. I also noted that a common denominator amongst them is to spend extensive research periods living amongst, talking to, and above all *listening* to the people in their films. Whatever quarrel Ramani may have had with Hussaini, he returned again and again to resolve it and complete the film. Another question to be asked is, what sustains the traditional storytelling forms like *katha* *vachana* in India? For it is clear that the storytellers and performers over centuries have thrived in a popular culture of highly attentive *listeners*. As Ajay Bhardwaj's practice recalls, listening *in itself* is an art form, one that can be approached with many different intentions and results. The following description by Deepa Dhanraj crucially brings home how the act of listening allows us to enter the reality of another:

I was thinking why do I love the voice so much. It's because I love stories....  
...There is this eternal fascination with stories. I remember when I was a child, there was a way I would hang around adults. But I wasn't hanging around them because I liked being with adults per se...There were all these stories and people forget then that children are around. So with my mother and her friends, there were stories about men in the family, who was doing what.... gossip basically, what stories! But everybody had a way of saying things. I would just sit there quite invisibly and listen to all this stuff. It was so odd because I didn't know any of these people or care who did what... But it was just this insatiable curiosity about people's lives and how they choose to talk. (Dhanraj, interviewed by Lata Mani, e2009)

Listening is a *human* and not a technological capacity and across the films that these filmmakers have produced, they draw attention to *how the listening is being done, how the story is being told*. Why does it matter that we hear a poem of Kabir

recited by a woman thinking about the end of her life peeling corn on her rooftop (in Rajula Shah's film, *Sabad nirantar*). Shah's documentary, in continuity with filmmakers like S.Sukhdev in the 1960's, is articulating questions of "Indian-ness" in today's cultural environments through the lens of oral histories.

We can remark also that now amongst my examples, no filmmakers are motivated directly by political activism where their films are campaigning texts. Rather, they prove Vohra's point (c2011: 52) from Chapter 2 that practices have shifted in the last two decades towards experiments in which the more visibly subjective modes of address are prevalent. The first person presence of the director is at times made obvious and at other times hidden in the film framing, but there is commonly a comfort with the idea that the documentary is a fabricated construct and should not be treated otherwise. In many of the films, we are not allowed to forget that a filmmaking process is going on, since the film crew- busy at work- are often included in the film frame. Production processes are revealed to the audience with a confidence that this will not distract from the narrative being carried by the protagonists.

Whilst I am reserving a more in depth analysis of the films that result from the 'on set encounter' for Chapter 5, I would now like to return to my project, *The Warkari Cycle*, making a pitch for another way of interpreting an Indian tradition through my own strategies and tactics as an outsider to India during the shooting of this project. This is what will be introduced in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4. The Shoot.



Total view, the pilgrimage en route near Jejuri, Solapur district. July 15th 2010. Photo: Uma Tanuku

### 4.1 Report on the Shoot.

This report demonstrates the production contingencies of shooting my project, *The Warkari Cycle* concluding with a reflection on how this experience challenged my ‘pre-production’ expectations, making me modify my filmmaking tactics in response to situational factors that arose. Within this reflection, I will also cross-reference my findings back to the filmmakers from India and their strategies discussed in the previous chapter, looking critically at how I positioned myself. Opening with a short description of some prior shooting arrangements, I will then enter the shoot itself.

Rajula Shah and I had agreed on not shooting continuously for the whole 21 days of the pilgrimage, but rather to bracket the project into three phases, to



economize on crew costs. Our main halts were arranged at four key temple sites: the Jñaneshwar temple at Alandi, the Tukaram temple at Dehu, the Khandoba temple at Jejuri and the main temple of Lord Vithoba at Pandharpur, the latter being the culmination point of the pilgrimage. We also targeted specific events such as the *ringan* (the ritual horse race in honour of *sant* Jñaneshwar at the village of Vakhri). I chose to work with a Sony PD170 camera, a versatile and relatively inconspicuous Standard Definition camera favoured by many local journalists in Maharashtra. I secured a Research Visa from the Indian High Commission to allow me to shoot in various public sites in India. Extra bureaucracy was also required for permission to film at religious sites such as temples, and as we neared the deadline, other hurdles emerged concerning delayed money transfers, and acquiring basic camera equipment that were finally resolved.

### **Phase 1.**



[A pilgrim's abandoned *chappal* broken and repaired with string from arduous walking]

My most immediate observation when arriving on the pilgrimage route was that the sheer number of participants would force me to shoot a kind of blanket 'coverage', for the constant mobility of the event made it very difficult to strike up sustained

relationships with anybody. This perspective changed as the filming progressed and possibilities arose to connect with people in unexpected ways. The way that public spaces unfolded was that the '*dindis*' (organized travelling groups of between 5 and 300 devotees, most of them over 60) would cook, eat, dance and walk together,

visiting sacred landmarks and setting up tents at night, gathering in the evenings to sing. Each of these sites would be erected and dismantled in unpredictable overlapping gatherings. The idea of creating a visual continuity for my film audience here was unimaginable. Fast adaption to change therefore became an overriding shooting principle. Shah and I had earlier considered attaching ourselves to one group for the entire pilgrimage, but we wanted to honour this uncontainable character rather than seeking a 'representative' group of pilgrims to follow.

My first camera assistant, Sushant Arora, was a student from the Film and Television Institute (Pune) but lacking the necessary commitment, he was soon replaced by a local video journalist who also spoke Marathi, an asset to the shoot that



[The entrance of the Jñaneshwar temple in Alandi]



[A woman reading the *Jñaneshwari* in the same temple.]

permitted my access to conversations with the Warkari, whether on or off camera.

The first shooting location I chose was the Alandi riverbank, the town of the main temple of *sant* Jñaneshwar, but the crowds were scattered and energies fragmented whereby it seemed there was nowhere to focus the camera. The festive atmosphere I had earlier experienced at the Alandi temple (a very significant site for the pilgrims) was marred by the bullying presence of the police recruited to monitor the crowds. I started shooting the C.C.TV surveillance system overlooking the devotees from the

temple balcony, and later the police quarter offices in the temple precinct where monitors installed were playing live feed of the pilgrims pouring in. The pilgrims' encounter with the police was far more visible than the one between devotees and their deities in the inner sanctum of the temple. Temple bells relentlessly hammered whilst hundreds of pilgrims pressed together in lines, queuing to visit the inner sanctum.

When entering the temple's inner courtyard, the *fugadi*<sup>107</sup> that the women were playing was obviously being performed for my camera since when I turned away, they no longer continued. This was the first time I noticed that my camera was provoking a performance in which pilgrims were acting out for me what they would 'normally do' during the pilgrimage. As a newcomer to the event I wanted to understand how activities would have taken place without my intrusion, but soon realised that it was unrealistic to expect that I would have access to the tradition without the inclusion of my impact on it.

I started to experiment with what it could mean to imagine the 'body' being governed by transpersonal forces of the spirit (quoted in the *Jñāneshwari*, see Chapter 2.5 page 52). I thus started to perceive groups of pilgrims as a confluence of energy, rather than as individual travellers. I shot a sequence at night on the riverbank where people were bedding down to sleep, focussing on very minimal shared movements; twitching bodies asleep or nearly asleep re-arranging their blankets, movements that merged into one giant interlinked body.

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<sup>107</sup> This is a game of spinning around with a partner holding each other's crossed wrists, carried out wherever there is reason to celebrate –for example at the arrival of sacred place. It is not exclusive to the Warkaris, but is widespread across other religious festivals in India.



Entrance to the Tukaram Temple in Dehu with Tukaram seated on Garuda, July 2010 Photo: L.King

I noticed a small cloud of moths that were flying above the builders' work lamps getting burnt in its heat. The image (which I filmed) was one I associated with the notion of devotional surrender that features in certain *bhakti* poetry<sup>108</sup>. My shots then widened to encompass a chain of lights across both sides of the river that was containing the crowds in a kind of mirrored corridor; the river being the lap around which all

the pilgrims' activity had flowed by day, transformed (significantly) into the main resting place at night.

The 'transformations of bodily states' of the pilgrims I had envisioned capturing across the whole event was a phenomenon that could rarely be found 'in situ'. The pilgrims were frequently resting in large numbers, eating food or lying under trees, or seemed to be endlessly packing and unpacking provisions from their trucks, so my shooting principle had to become more flexible. Occasionally, however,

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<sup>108</sup> See A.E.I. Falconar (a1995:164) for descriptions of the metaphor of divinity as a flame that devotees are irresistibly drawn towards, like moths, thus gaining immortality. This symbolism is common to Sufi and Bhakti poetry dating back to the *Upanishads*.

events suddenly converged into concentrated focal points. For example, at the Tukaram temple in the village of Dehu, a large crowd poured into the open courtyard forming a planned gathering. Amongst the processions were *dindi* leaders in their red coats and hats (in medieval style). Pilgrims had dressed in fresh clothes and the colours were sharp. After being enmeshed in three different groups continuously breaking into dance, I went up to the temple roof and shot the dancers that were now configuring into a block of about six hundred men. The dance was a formation of partnering lines following a *dhol* beat, with all playing *manjiras* (hand cymbals). Their movement with the music had a trance-like quality though somewhat looser and more relaxed. The feeling was one of elation, a sense of completion about having arrived at Tukaram's birthplace after many days of rigorous walking.

On the third day of the shoot, I made a miscalculation that was, however, instructive. We were leaving Dehu with the procession of the Tukaram *palkhi*<sup>11</sup>. Reaching a long, open stretch of road, the magnitude of the pilgrimage was visible for the first time, the procession stretching as far as the eye could see in both directions. Since there were few bystanders, Shah, Basu and I had more flexibility about how to shoot. Since the trail could not be seen from eye level, I set my tripod and camera on the roof of one of our rented cars and climbed onto it. Setting the frame, I was aware that the only way I could shoot the passing crowds would be to shoot the back of their heads, *after* they had passed my camera, for if pointed it towards the oncoming crowd, people would wave at the camera, a shot that quickly became monotonous. At the moment when the ceremonial ox drawn Tukaram *palkhi* was about to pass, I turned the lens quickly towards the oncoming crowd.

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<sup>11</sup> *Palkhi* is the name for a four-posted carriage (sometimes ox drawn, or motor driven) that is decorated with flowers and carries a significant sculpture or image related to one of the *sants* of the Warkari tradition. It also refers to the following of people who walk together



But the moment I turned, the crowd immediately saw they were in frame and all roared simultaneously. Reeling from the volume, I instantly regretted having created this stunt that also impacted on my colleagues' shoot. I believe the crowd understood



View of the Tukaram *palkhi* and oncoming crowds, near Jejuri, July 2010 Still frame from film, Lucia King

that I was 'the foreign press' or a news reporter, and were overjoyed that their tradition was being given this attention. But I later came across another response by a Warkari named Apparam Patange who spoke of his

experience of being filmed in a somewhat different tenor:

For me, like she [*referring to me behind the camera*] has come here all the way, from abroad to talk to all of us... that itself is such a great thing! And...to be talking in front of people such as you, was something that I always wished for. When the TV people come around asking questions, so many times I have tried to come ahead and talk, but I never got the chance! ...Now that I am actually being interviewed I feel that I have met Lord Pandurang himself! Mauli is not all the way there, it seems like He is right here! Now say, if at anytime, if I do pass away, somewhere this film will be there! Where her home is! And maybe in some other life I will visit there! (Apparam N. Patange, interviewed, e2010, *my inclusion in italics*)

I felt uncomfortable with being seen as the ‘bestower’ of such a privilege, but did not read his comment to mean that the camera was literally associated with divine powers. Rather, his *willingness and pleasure* about being filmed had perhaps become conflated with the elation of taking part in the pilgrimage. What was important for Patange was that the camera *immortalised* his image, ready to be transmitted after his death to a strange environment to which he could thus travel in a virtual sense as his own screen image. Re-considering my idea of the “revealing of the self” from his perspective, he anticipated an encounter with an audience beyond his own life’s conditions. His comment seemed to connect with my idea of the movie camera as a ‘divining instrument’ that I will explore in Chapter 5.8, page 222. In his thinking, it enabled him to cross time zones between his own present and the future.

Shooting in the city of Pune when the pilgrims later past through there was a different experience from the days in the villages or en route. I felt less conspicuously ‘foreign’ in an urban context since Pune as a city is accustomed to outsiders which sheltered me from the magnetic interest that the crew received from bystanders in the rural locations who repeatedly asked which TV channel we were shooting for. I tried to undermine this assumption by remaining longer at one location than a journalist would ‘normally do’ and talking with people (who spoke Hindi in the city). This choice of slowing down is a film tactic in itself, since it allows for other kinds of relationships to emerge than the more acquisitive one of ‘getting coverage’ as a journalist would do.

## Phase 2



Midday crowds gather at the Khandoba temple, Jejuri Solapur district, July 2010 Photo: Lucia King

The second shooting phase took place at the fort-temple dedicated to Khandoba in Jejuri<sup>12</sup>. With my new camera assistant, Prem Mishra, I was able to converse through him with a range of pilgrims. One

*dindi* leader who had travelled from Mumbai expressed the pastoral drive to protect the Warkari from the dangers of leaving farm labourers (that he frequently referred to as ‘uneducated’) to resort to their drinking habits seeing himself as their moral mentor. Prem agreed that there was a need for this kind of disciplining, since in his view, the rigorous working conditions of farming often drove men to drink or to petty crime. In such moments, I regretted the limitations of communicating through an interpreter since it seemed like a contestable generalization, but Prem was already convinced by the argument and felt no need to press questioning.

One of the most demanding days in this phase was the shoot of the *ringan* (the ritual horse race) at Vakhri where we waited for three hours in the midday sun, pressed between packed crowds in an unsheltered field. We had decided on a two-camera shoot, (one tripod, one hand held) standing on the horse track itself. I also

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<sup>12</sup> Khandoba is a manifestation of Lord Shiva according to myth, also known as Khandobachi Jejuri, a key deity worshipped by the Dhangar, one of the oldest populations of Maharashtra. Khandoba is a ‘*sakamabhakti*’ who is believed to fulfil all wishes of his devotees. (Sontheimer, c1984:155-170)



wanted to shoot amongst the crowds to capture the participants grabbing handfuls of earth that the horses' passing hoof prints rendered sacred - a shot that raised concerns about getting trampled. Mishra, used to dealing with such situations, provided a human shield whilst I filmed, also deflecting attention away from the camera. Another frustration arose later when our cars carrying equipment were immobilized by a trail of walkers blocking road access for several hours. Reaching the Khandoba temple at midday, the densely packed crowds in the temple, however, did not feel oppressive (as I had experienced at Alandi) but rather had a familiarity and an intimacy. There were many families and groups of young men where, until this point, the pilgrims were predominantly elderly villagers. Indian tourists were there too, and the Brahmin priests' rituals being carried for family gatherings had a more personal feel than at the Alandi temple.

Returning to the Khandoba temple at dawn the next day, many months of research seemed to crystallize in the filming experience. From my background of making scripted artist's films in which I usually collaborate with stage performers, one of the greatest challenges of this shoot, I had found, was to relinquish control over what event might become worthy of filming. Once I had the time and confidence to be guided more strongly by intuition, I simultaneously allowed myself to be overtaken by the momentum of filming itself. The filmmaker, Louis Malle spoke of a similar moment during his shoot of *L'Inde Phantome* (1969), realizing that whilst he had effectively captured some moments of outward reality with his camera, their significance within Indian cultural life was in fact far more elusive:

In the end, we let ourselves be carried away by our cameras (...) placing more faith and confidence in our senses than our reflections. It was difficult to retain this approach during the editing and to emphasize at which point, within what

we have filmed, the best no doubt escapes us. Matisse has said that one starts to paint when the hand is freed from the head. Earlier I had only vaguely understood what he meant, but while in India, I have experienced the full impact of this truth. (Louis Malle, cited in Mulay, 2010: 213<sup>109</sup>)

Despite the obvious fact that the pilgrimage revolves around a mass expression of love towards the deity, Vitthal, I also had the sense that the events I was witnessing went far deeper than I could possibly grasp during the time I was there, which although inspiring awe, gave me the freedom to immerse myself in the filmmaking task itself. The next morning, we returned to record two singers (*vaghyas*) at the Khandoba temple, who seemed to weave their way into my frame without me asking or directing them. A tacit agreement between us was that they would continue their ritual, undisturbed by my shooting. My understanding of the moment was that they had accepted my presence because the *bhajans* they were singing carried the weight of an 800-year-old history and of the deity Khandoba himself, which was a binding recognition amongst all present, so Khandoba's presence would not be disrupted by the filming process. They generously allowed me to shoot for around an hour. Moments later, a man approached the singers and entered a trance through their singing, but since he did not have the option to refuse being filmed in this state, I felt I should not be filming him without his consent. A group of people had started to gather around because of the voyeurism that film crews naturally attract, making it clear that permission to shoot was over.

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<sup>109</sup> Original source of the Malle citation is from the brochure of the Mumbai International Film Festival for Documentary, Short and Animation films, 1998.

### Phase 3



In the last leg of the shoot, I broke away from the immediate location of the pilgrimage to observe what was happening in surrounding villages including Gopalpur (near Pandharpur). A group of women, including Geeta, pictured left, that

we met there choose not to address us as a film crew, but welcomed us into their homes. I was initially reluctant to shoot there, since this would have changed the spontaneity of their hospitality, so the evening was spent simply hearing out stories about the female *sant*, Janabai. The stories become a very tangible point of connection since they are enduringly pertinent to the Warkari, their imagery making sense of daily realities in the repeatable form that is the currency of their tradition.

When returning the next day to shoot these women, a group of men amongst them wanted us to film their dances, interrupting the continuity with my previous encounter with the women. I was therefore ambivalent about going along with the men's plan, but finally did agree. I entered their dance with my camera, tracking it internally by following the dancers' steps. In my case, where I was dealing with so many unfamiliar cultural/social elements on set, the strive for proximity in simple everyday exchanges was an important factor. The shoot also allowed me to communicate with many different people both superficially and in some depth, challenging my prior assumptions. Amongst them, the following response to my

question about why she was conducting the pilgrimage by Geeta Sudhakar Salunke stood out, and has become part of my short film, *Pandharpur Photo Booth* (2011).



Shooting Babaji Maharaj (myself behind camera) in Pandharpur at the *Ekadashi* with devotees in Pandharpur Photo: Uma Tanuku, the production manager of the shoot

She said:

It is special because, initially my mother had been here for the pilgrimage and she had told me about the importance of this place, the wonder of this place. First my family did not allow me to come, but once I experienced a train accident, and that is when I felt that Pandurang (god) himself had come down to see me...God himself! I was about to slip under the train and I didn't even realize it. When I tried to pull myself up, the train pushed me back down again...and people finally pulled me out. I was unable to even walk...but even in that condition, I had joined the pilgrimage only because I felt that Pandurang had come to my rescue. I felt it deep in my heart. ...Later, when I was having

my meal, my young son, my sister, brother-in-law and their children were there with me. So when I was eating, on the station platform, an old man came to me for a *jawar roti* (buckwheat bread) ... I told [my sister] “Give it” and as the man left, I turned to look and he had disappeared. He was nowhere to be seen! ... So I felt that it was indeed Pandurang himself who I had seen...so even though I couldn’t walk I came here [on the pilgrimage], to visit Pandurang and only later did I go to hospital. (Geeta Sudhakar Salunke, e2010. Trans. from Marathi by Ketaki Desai).

For Salunke and other Warkari I met, the practice of pilgrimage follows after the experience of a miracle. This becomes a motivation to engage in the pilgrimage alongside her existing faith introduced to her by her mother. [Family lines are important as the ones who *transmit* the practice]. Also crucial is that Salunke’s practice is defined by the *emotion* it invokes: ‘I felt it deep in my heart’, a passion for which she is prepared to risk her life by delaying her hospitalization. I found it significant that spiritual practice happens because of ‘feeling it’ rather than ‘knowing it’. All the externally evident activities of dancing, walking, reciting of *abhangas* and ritual participation then become expanded upon as elaborations of that core feeling.



Babaji Maharaj Satarkar delivering *kirtan* in Pandharpur, July 2010 Photo: Lucia King

Concluding the shoot, and the pilgrimage, I had the challenge of filming Babaji Maharaj, believed by many Warkari to be a contemporary *sant*. Due to the density of the crowds, there was no option to shoot this

event except from the top of a truck that was parked outside the central courtyard of Babaji's ancestral home where his *kirtan*<sup>110</sup> was delivered. Because of the crowds, the only access to the truck was to jump over an open sewer (carrying all the camera equipment). The *kirtan* on camera, however, was far less impactful than the live event itself. The fixed camera position on top of the truck created a somewhat monotonous purview, and because the *kirtan* itself is quite static, being delivered as a kind of musical sermon, I had little flexibility in how to record it. Since he had previously asked me to provide a copy of my video material for his archive, I also felt a sense of duty in recording it in a somewhat conservative journalistic mode. This was the last shooting experience related to this project.

#### **4. 2 Reflections on the shoot**

In the pre-production phase of preparing to make this film, my initial approach had not accounted for unpredictability and chance elements (factors such as adverse weather, funding or crew limitations or the variable responses of individuals to being filmed). The shoot pressed home that filmmaking is not as deterministic a process as one theorizes. Clearly there was no 'singular essential' Warkari pilgrimage available to be filmed, nor was there a single 'choreography of the pilgrimage' to be captured. My task was to *re-invent* the pilgrimage as a filmmaking process by imagining aesthetic orders in the unsystematic nature of the live encounter. My decisions were largely guided by having a 'feeling' for a shot, yet I did notice that certain questions concerning methodological approach would repeatedly arise. These questions were:

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<sup>110</sup> *Kirtan* is a form of 'performed discourse' that occurs throughout the year and during the pilgrimage. *Kirtan* in its Maharashtran form is a differently conducted from elsewhere in India, being more layered in its narrative, more musically and theatrically developed, resembling a moral play delivered by the *kirtankar* (the performer of the *kirtan*) who is also a respected guru. (Novetzke, b2008)



- 1) 'Am I shooting in order to explore the dance forms and physical reality of the pilgrimage?' [I am referring here to 'dance' in its broadest sense, whereby a mass procession of walkers is also a 'dance']
- 2) 'Am I looking for incidents that are poetic in themselves? Or am I 'supposed to be' gathering information about how people are experiencing the pilgrimage?'
- 3) 'Am I shooting to investigate the devotional commitment of the Warkari as a human phenomenon?'
- 4) 'Why should I engage with *this* person in the pilgrimage more than his/her neighbour or neighbouring group?'
- 5) 'Am I shooting in order to succumb to the unknown and see where it takes me?'

These questions were emerging from the concrete conditions of my environment as well as 'the idea of my film' and its possible techniques. In question 2) the obligation I felt to 'gather information' relates also to *listening* as an art form that I discussed as crucial to the Indian filmmakers mentioned in the previous chapter. But if one really wishes to honour the art of listening, it requires a particular stillness between teller and listener that the pilgrimage rarely afforded. Clearly my 'listening' became transformed into 'observing' since I was focused on dance, gestural and visual signage and corporeal interactions. This was why, wherever possible, I tried to *enter* the processions, and *join* dances to 'be with' the pilgrims (as discussed in my 'Claim for Practice', Chapter 2.4). Question 4) above also involved making decisions to talk with people such as the women in Gopalpur, where there was no guarantee that it would lead to a filming opportunity at all. In many cases, my attempts to connect

with people and film them would be thwarted or get diverted by the pilgrims' need to participate in the pilgrimage and keep up with their groups.

When I reflect on how I attributed my relationship the Warkari using the same table of “possible relationships” that I applied to the Indian filmmakers in Chapter 3, I admit that I was quite inconsistent. At times my approach towards the Warkari was one of “*being with them*”. At other times I was “*triggering them to perform for me*”. By the end, I was “*dancing with them*”. I found I had an affinity with both Ajay Bardhwaj and Rajula Shah who are “*Exploring the relationship of their co-actors with their stories*”. I too was exploring stories, through bodily interactions and performances and in the patterning of crowd mobilizations. But because of the inconsistency of how I positioned myself, I would now perhaps have to revise my view that the encounters established by my peer filmmakers in India are probably similarly unstable. I was perhaps tempted to categorize them only on the evidence of their edited films combined with their descriptions of the ‘on set’ encounter *after the event*. Now I see that the live experience of being on set is far more volatile and unpredictable than its retrospectively rationalized assessment.

Concerning my self-image of being ‘neither insider, nor outsider’ (see Chapter 2.3 page 50), during the shoot itself I was constantly reminded of my ‘difference’ because of the attention I elicited from the crowds. I was continually being asked where I am from, what I was shooting and why I was there. But my act of repeatedly taking up the camera and pointing it at the pilgrims was responsible for *staking* our difference, so I could hardly condemn this response. In the following section, I would therefore like to consider “what I needed the Warkari to be” for the benefit of my film, and conversely “what did they want from me, by being filmed.”



I needed the Warkari to expose their experience of undertaking their epic journey on the pilgrimage, and to demonstrate this as a mass choreography. I also (perhaps conflictually) wanted to abandon this demand, since my plan seemed to rely on something too systematic from this sprawling and multi-faceted mass event. My desire was to integrate myself into the flow of the pilgrimage and shoot from an interiorized viewpoint, even though I knew that this offered no guarantee of becoming an insider in *cultural* terms, which perhaps I never could as a non-believer in Lord Vitthal. The time when I seemed to create most distance with my interlocutors was when I asked the pilgrims to describe their experience of taking part in the pilgrimage (through my camera assistant as an interpreter). But the fact that in some cases people volunteered eagerly to tell their stories also undermined the potential distance of my being an ‘outsider’ as the person questioning them behind the camera.

Many pilgrims related to me by assuming that I was a video journalist working for a foreign news channel, which triggered them to perform for me. In this respect I was frequently reminded of Madhusree Dutta’s tactics in which “*performing for you*” becomes the filmmaker’s *and* the protagonists’ prerogative where each responds to each other’s performance. But I want to look more carefully at the distinctions of what ‘performance’ can mean through individual examples. For the Warkari, Apparam Patange, the performance for camera was in his view, a means to overcome his mortality, so that he could ‘time-travel’ into other regions through the film’s distribution after his death. He used the on set encounter to “*reveal himself to me*”.



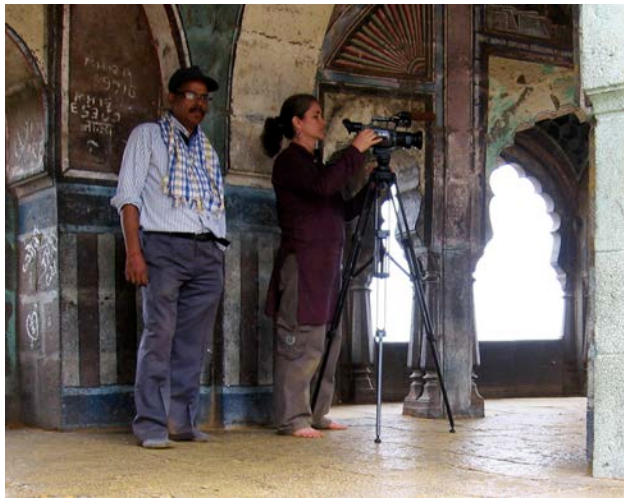
In conversation with Warkari outside the home of Babaji Maharaj in Pandharpur

Babaji Maharaj, on the other hand, had approached me to use my footage for his devotional website as that space has the purpose of proselytizing the Warkari faith, with himself as its visible figurehead. He is thus “*asking me to represent and promote him*”.

Gita Salunke used the opportunity of my filming her to confess her story about the miracle she had experienced, whilst for the women at the Alandi temple, they had used my camera to perform an exotic presentation of the Warkari’s ritual customs. The latter begged the question of whether they were doing so because they thought that this was what I wanted as a filmmaker, or for some other reason. It seemed feasible to me that they were influenced also by styles of television reportage within India itself. An increasing number of reality TV shows in recent years take folk musicians as a topic for entertainment showcases, the producer Gajendra Singh’s programme ‘*Junoon Kuch Kar Dikhane Ka*’ (released on NDTV in 2011) being one such example. For the Warkari women in Gopalpur, they chose to ignore the camera and their desire to offer us hospitality outweighed their interest in being filmed. The *vaghyas* at the Khandoba temple acknowledged my intervention with the camera, but continued their ritual undisturbed giving it less importance than continuing their song.

The above all serves to demonstrate that one cannot describe ‘the Warkari’s response to being filmed’ reductively as one type of response- since the range of responses was so diverse. Furthermore, whilst I was hearing stories from the Warkari about the miracles that provoked their participation in the pilgrimage, my colleague

Rajula Shah, heard some pilgrims admitting that they came along ‘for the free food’, or ‘to enjoy the company’, or ‘because they did not want to be left behind in the villages to do the dirty work’. I wondered, therefore, whether my being a foreigner provoked more idealised answers about miracles and ‘true’ devotion than in Shah’s interactions. We had both, however, often heard that the pilgrimage was a way of ‘offering remembrance’ to the *sants*.



Assistant Prem Mishra and I at Khandoba temple, July 2010 Photo: Uma Tanuku

I should emphasize that I consider myself just as responsible for generating any potential misunderstandings in my perception of the pilgrims as they were of misreading my intentions or my cultural background. To

demonstrate this point, I observed (when shooting in Alandi) a gesture of

the devotees -especially women which was to jump up and down holding on to their ears with their arms crossed over the chest when reaching the thresholds of temples. This was explained by our production manager, Uma Tanuku, as being a gesture that children conduct in front of their parents to show humility for wrongdoing. But for Tanuku it was not clear why they should do this at the temples. Perhaps it was a gesture to demonstrate humbleness before a parental godhead, but I have come away with a South Indian Delhi-based production manager’s interpretation of a particular custom from Maharashtra that may be completely erroneous. Both sides of the filmmaking encounter are, in other words, fraught with possible misunderstandings that perhaps only long-term in situ research can overcome.

The camera's 'point of view' is often one of the most defining ways of demonstrating the nature of the camera operator's relationship with the subject. But when it came to setting my own 'points of view' with the Warkari pilgrims, it was sometimes difficult to break from framings that surveyed them in a clandestine way seen through other groups of people or objects that masked me from view. This was because, in such a highly populated event, it was unfeasible for me to engage personally and take permission from every person I would film. So my falling back into unreciprocated contact during this shoot was partially circumstantial. Overall the experience taught me to work *with* rather than try and resist the inevitable performances that the pilgrims produced for the crew. I also went off the pilgrimage trail to avoid the exhaustive replication of footage that could have been shot within the first hour of working on set, the ever recurring criss-cross of crowds passing the camera. I found my own narrative in the event by letting go of the immense complexity of possible readings of it. My concern was to work with what was there, and not impose intellectually what might be important about this tradition.

I returned to London from India with a sense that it was unrealistic to expect that the above "reconnaissance trip" to provide a sufficient basis for a mature film project to emerge. I found that the parallel requirement I had imposed on my fieldtrip of conducting 19 interviews with my peer filmmakers across three cities competed strongly with the demands of making *The Warkari Cycle*. This competition was not always productive with hindsight. I therefore had to accept some of the time and budget limitations in the hope of being able to return to Maharashtra and the pilgrimage in future. At this stage, however, I did feel that I could draw a line under the production phase I had undergone in the sense of having completed this one stage.

The experience brought home an important insight that an ‘oral tradition’ in an Indian context, although shared by thousands, is equally a personal and quite intimate re-enactment of versions of stories within a genealogy. If I found few opportunities to get physically close to people with the camera, or if I was limited without speaking Marathi, I also had to accept that I could have chosen an alternative strategy. I could, for example, have spent a year in the Solapur villages first learning the language of the pilgrims. This would have given me a very different entrance into the project than my engagement with Indian documentary filmmakers had done. I noticed that Rajula Shah when working on her shoot, tended to avoid shooting panoramic views, choosing frequently to shoot with a macro lens. I, on the other hand, repeatedly worked with wide-angle shots, which at times made me less able to convey the corporeal/gestural/visceral aspects of the pilgrimage, (more tangible if included in close up). Such reflection, however, is all part of a process of admitting that, after the fact of a shoot, one has to reconcile oneself with the reality of choices that have been made. My choice for wide shots was also a natural response to my wonder at the enormity of the event, and the scale of people moving as one body that it encompassed. The task of the next Chapter, therefore, is to observe that process of reconciliation, entering the new creative phase that the edit and post-production ushered in.

## Chapter 5. Post-Production.

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter has two interconnected purposes. The first is to investigate the trajectory of *The Warkari Cycle* in the editing phase in which its ‘aesthetic regime’ is formed. The second is to consider the same process in the case of three filmmakers from India (in their films based on three different traditional cultural practices). I firstly consider the overall priorities of my editing process pointing out how my approach differed from that of my research informants, since they are documentary filmmakers whilst I have produced a video installation for art gallery contexts. This draws attention to the difference of possible screening modes for non-fiction projects, leading into a discussion of ‘the video installation’ in Europe/America vis-à-vis India.

Across the years of conducting this research, a disciplinary categorization of filmmaking strategies that came to my attention is that of ethnographic filmmaking ‘versus’ artists’ filmmaking; two perceptions of practice that are often assumed to be oppositional. Having uncovered certain ethical suppositions ensconced in how they are attributed (giving examples), I then describe and defend my edit in detail when making my video installation, *The Warkari Cycle*. Whilst editing is often conducted as an intimate, personal endeavour behind closed doors, because it involves the imagination of audiences, it necessarily engages a ‘poetics’ that, in our case, needs to take into account the contingent cultural/political/historical forces at stake in representing ‘the traditions’ in South Asia. To explore this field, I have mapped out a kind of ‘interdisciplinary network of commentators’ through which I can pinpoint forces we might recognize as instrumental in the authoring of the films covered in this research, and my own.

From this wider discussion, I then hone in on three filmmakers that were introduced in Chapter 3, using them to examine how their films invoke specific ‘traditional cultures’ through the ‘aesthetic regimes’ of their cinematography. The directors I have chosen are:

- **Madhusree Dutta**, on the legacy of a medieval female poet-sant, Mahadevi Akka<sup>111</sup>, from Karnataka, in her film, *Scribbles on Akka* (2000)
- **RV Ramani**, on the travelling puppeteer communities from South India in *Nee Engey* (*Where are You?* 2003)
- **Rajula Shah**, on the musical recitation of 15<sup>th</sup> century poet, Kabir’s verses by citizens in the region of Malwa, Madhya Pradesh in *Sabad Nirantar* (*Word within the Word*, 2008)

Dutta’s practice is a fitting example of one that accepts and manipulates the ‘performance of self’ in documentary testimony, whilst acknowledging her own performance as a film director. Ramani’s prolific practice over the last 25 years has explored a variety of performance cultures, both in theatrical performance, and in South Indian ritual-based dramas and puppetry. His work furthermore includes self-reflexive elements commenting on how his intervention alters the nature of what he records. Rajula Shah’s work valuably makes the connection between the day-to-day circumstances of her subjects, showing Kabir’s poetry as emergent from these and

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<sup>111</sup> In Karnataka, Mahadevi’s poetry has undergone a revival in the last 20-30 years. The *vachana*, meaning *that which is uttered*, was shaped by the 12th century Veerashaiva movement, but it was not set to any specific metre. Vachana poetry was practiced and transmitted not only by religious leaders, but also by ‘lower’ castes. The myth about the historical figure of Mahadevi is that she rejected king Koushika, who wanted to marry her, being committed to spiritual pursuit, saying sarcastically in a *vachana*. "But for my Channamallikarjuna, all men are mere dolls". A.K. Ramunujan’s work ‘Speaking of Shiva’, b1973, is a key and relevant resource in relation to this tradition.

relying (as would an ethnographer) on long-term fieldwork. These filmmakers' approaches provide rich examples to explore how they position traditional cultures through film compositional techniques. In a summarizing endnote, I draw relationships between theirs and my own mode of film authorship, particularly focusing on the editing phase.

The chapter concludes with a consideration of how agents who control the *distribution* phase have an impact on our films, (sometimes requiring re-editing). [Here, I have taken into account the differences of screening context to which my own and my informants' work is addressed]. This marks the last phase in which a film text is altered before public release, hence the last phase in which authoring strategies can be observed.

Let me begin by discussing my theoretic framework, drawn from Jacques Rancière's philosophy of aesthetics, chosen to name a principle that links all of the films I will discuss. This is his 'aesthetic regime of art' which requires me to explain this concept by first giving a glossary of his term, 'the distribution of the sensible'. The latter refers to the implicit laws of 'that which can be apprehended by the senses' that mark out places and forms of participation in the social world by first establishing the modes of perception acting as their governing principles (Rancière, 2006 [2000]:85). It produces a system of self-evident facts about perception, based on pre-established horizons of the visible/audible world as well as what can be said, thought, made or done. 'Distribution' in this sense, refers both to forms of inclusion but also to what is excluded as it becomes activated in the public sphere. 'The aesthetic regime of art', having emerged in the last two centuries (in his account) is generated by visual artists, filmmakers, authors, musicians and performers. It interrupts the existing distributive orders in society and ...



...abolishes the hierarchical distribution of the sensible characteristic of the representative regime of art...However, the singularity of art enters into an interminable contradiction due to the fact that the aesthetic regime also calls into question the very distinction between art and other activities... [since] an egalitarian regime of the sensible can only isolate art's specificity at the expense of losing it. (Rancière, 2006: 81)

Rancière describes the 'representative regime of art' as emerging historically from Aristotle's critique of Plato, leading to an aesthetic system in European art that separated the arts from moral, religious and ethical accountability, which inaugurated the principle of 'the Fine Arts'. This employs the notion of *poesis* as the fictional imitation of actions that- rather than reproducing 'reality', establishes its own hierarchy of genre, appropriate subject matter and expressive mode, and privileges language over image (Rancière, 2006: 91). Whilst this may be applicable to European art history, the arts in South Asia have an entirely different 'distribution of the sensible' in which the religious and ethical traditions have never been severed from representative regimes that are fictional, mythic or poetic, and where there is no morally redemptive expectation in art that is emergent from Hindu or Islamic cultures.

However, in discussing *Indian documentary* as an 'art form', because of its close association with political activism, it has historically assumed the role of ethical and moral arbitration, claiming to present audiences with a social 'reality' that it implicitly proposes to reform. Indian documentary's 'representative regimes' have, at least in some cases, also staked a separation with fictional 'distributions of the sensible', as well as endorsing a distinction between 'art' and the apprehension of the 'real world' that it seeks to critique, even though this distinction emerges from quite a different cultural foundation than in European art. But what Rancière's framing

proposes is that each time an artwork (read also film) is made, a unique aesthetic order is borne out of a dialectical relationship between the artist and the aesthetic systems of their cultural environment, as well as with ‘the subject’ of their work. Also, this order exists simultaneously in the social world, the reality generated through the artist’s work, *and* the artist’s imagining of ‘citizenship’ (at the level of ontology) and of ‘being’ (as human experience).

Whilst it would be problematic to superimpose a European discourse of what is ‘art’ onto an Indian context, what I extract from Rancière’s argument is his idea that artists occupy a dual position in relation to the world of ‘occupation/work’ since their relationship to art-‘work’ (which includes filmmaking) is inextricable from questions of ‘being’, ‘personhood’ and ‘citizenship’ that generate its forms. *Traditional artists* in India- or elsewhere in the world- also straddle this duality, though it could be argued that their forms don’t usually break the continuum of their own aesthetic regime by moving towards an interpretive authority of ‘art’ that challenges its own history of ‘genre’. Rancière additionally claims that a ‘shared reality’ (either within or outside of ‘art’) is *never simply reflective of geophysical common denominators*. What counts is the **argumentation** of ‘modes of being’ and the determination of ‘occupations’ that modify the conditions of citizenship, forging its perceptual manipulations wherever it can. Elaborating this idea, he states,

...the idea of work is not necessarily the idea of a determined activity, a process of material transformation. It is the idea of a distribution of the sensible: an impossibility of doing ‘something else’ based on an ‘absence of time’.

(Rancière, 2006 [2000]:42)

The power of non-fiction films as artworks, then, is that they claim and re-assign time for their own purposes, so that ‘modes of being’ and what it means to ‘be occupied’ can be re-conditioned.

Relating the above proposition to my own filmmaking, my view is that film *editing* in particular offers a creative space where the *independent existence of the time that the filmed subject lives in*, and the *temporal construction in the film* can be manipulated to serve the ‘argumentation’ that Rancière signals above<sup>112</sup>. Talking about film editing processes, the Delhi-based film director/editor Sameera Jain astutely observes that...

The subjective experience of [the] time of the depicted is different from the internal time of the film’s consciousness. [Editing concerns] being aware of rhetorical structures and open ones...juxtapositions that keep the argument ‘open’ and keep the viewer alive to the conceptual flow of the film. (Jain in Raqs Media Collective (Ed.) a2000: 71)

Jain’s formulation appealed to me as a Frankenstein-like analogy about the ‘monster’ (i.e. the film) and his ‘creator’ (the filmmaker) that compels us to ask, ‘What responsibility do I have in releasing my creation into the world?’

## **5.2 Editing *The Warkari Cycle***

In the question of my responsibility as a filmmaker, I think of this as being seated in my capacity to translate the ‘living of life’ into a process of rendering images. Being a painter and filmmaker at once in my practice, my experience of the close relationship between these two media comes across most tangibly during the editing phase of a film. Hélène Cixous identifies this ‘translation process’ as a

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<sup>112</sup> This notion is inspired by documentary editor and filmmaker, Sameera Jain whose most recognized films are *If You Pause* (2004) and *Portraits of Belonging* (1998). (See Jain in Raqs Media Collective, a2000: 71)

perpetual correction of errors (referring in her case to drawing as an art form), a concept with which I strongly identify:

How do I recognize error? It is obvious, like truth. Who tells me? My body. Truth gives us pleasure... It is hot... Truth strikes us. Opens our heart... Error makes us sense the absence of taste. Drops us like a dead person, apathetic tongue, dry eyes. Error really can't fool us. We've just drawn an executioner... Now we look at him standing on the paper, and we don't feel anything. In us the storm is always alive, on paper, no. I submit myself to the invisible truth of my vision... (Cixous, c1993: 95)

The process of editing film similarly relies on a navigation of one's personal truths in which the filmmaker advances by 'killing off' versions of creative artifice that would jeopardize the new consciousness established by the film. The filmmaker too can be imagined as an 'executioner' in this sense introduced by Cixous.

What I wish for in my own 'aesthetic regime' is that it should emerge from the kinetics- the musical soundscapes and the mass walk of the Warkari pilgrimage. The 'living of life' I was reaching for in *The Warkari Cycle* was the pilgrimage's choreographic potentialities, the mobilization of thousands who return year after year to Pandharpur. In terms of Rancière's 'distribution of the sensible', one could claim that the pilgrims are clearly acting in defiance of an 'absence of time'. Twenty-one non-productive, non-working days bind together this ever expanding ritual that harnesses a collective memory through its re-enactment. I wanted my film to re-create some of its many strands, such as the expression of *bhakti* in the commemoration of sacred sites, and the virtual sites of storytelling, dance and song that are re-ignited by the gathering. It should also reflect the *fragmentation* of the pilgrimage as it exists in actuality, with its appearance and disappearance of travelling groups. I will later detail

how the project was edited but to flag it up briefly, this was why the main work of the video installation was edited as a sequence of short ‘vignettes’ rather than one long work. One of the reasons for designing *The Warkari Cycle* as a ‘video installation’ was to move away from creating a film as a dramatized documentary argument leading towards specific rationalized conclusions. By designing the work to run in a loop, audiences may join and leave a video installation at will. It becomes a ‘meditation on a theme’ including scenes of repetitive dance constellations, song and walking groups that encourage the viewer’s mimetic absorption in the image.

The filmmaker/theorist David MacDougall warns that although cameras have the capacity to move around bodies demonstrating their physical actions, this is ‘the ultimate promise of pornography’. Elaborating this thought he says,

...there is something unattainable and unsatisfying about its transience. The body’s movements are glimpsed only in their passing without the coherent framework they have, for example, in dance (MacDougall, 2006: 22)

Whilst MacDougall describes the filmmaker as being more constrained than the dance participant or audience, I argue that *certain modes* of filmmaking minimize this constraint. The filmmaker, Babette Mangolte’s<sup>113</sup> early film portraits of the dancers, Yvonne Rainer and Robert Morris exemplify the use of long, unbroken takes; a technique that preserves and even amplifies the viewers’ connection to the live moment. Wanting to avoid this ‘pornographic’ potential, I hoped to shift my film towards a more reciprocal mode of spectatorship. Whilst I generally have not used very long takes, the internal rhythm established in my edit provokes a sense of ‘being with’ - a mimetic response to the Warkari as subjects. In choosing this form, however,

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<sup>113</sup> Babette Mangolte’s films on the dancer, Yvonne Rainer in her early film *Water Motor* (1978) and *Four Pieces by Morris* (1993) with Robert Morris are characteristic of this style.

I would like to point out how ‘video installation’ carries its own rhetoric of audience participation that comes from its own history as an artistic medium.

### **5.3 Installation art in India vis-à-vis Europe/America.**

Corinne Kratz (c2011: 28) has studied how museum design (referring to European ethnographic museums from the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the present) constructs the value of the artefacts and audio-visual materials displayed in them within historicized systems of exhibition communication. Her study parallels Brian O’Doherty’s *Inside The White Cube: the ideology of the gallery space* (a1999) that chronicles how art galleries as political-aesthetic spaces have inscribed the art that hangs in them (referring to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> to end 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe) and similar investigations in India’s (post-)colonial context, such those by Singh, K. (c2005), Barucha (a2002) and Mathur, S. (a2007). Alongside these, a third strand of discourse in the arts is the history of ‘video-artworks’ (emerging in the 1960’s in Europe/America) that first imagined platforms distinct from television and cinema, arising out of multimedia performance, experimental film and environmental activism. These disparate movements contested the passivity of television and cinema spectatorship, challenging how we engage with audio-visual media as a performative experience, and using galleries and public demonstrations as their exhibition sites<sup>114</sup>.

In India, the impulse to ‘revolutionize spectatorship’ exists in experimental filmmaking as a counter movement to the commercial film industry, but art galleries and museums were never significant enough sites for filmmakers and artists of the 1960’s to 1980’s to target. In the culturally plural fabric of Indian (and South Asian)

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<sup>114</sup> This is a field area covered by a more dispersed range of visual art and media historians such as Jackie Hatfield (2006), de Oliveira, Oxley and Petry, (2004), Bishop. (2005), Reiss, (1999) Rush, M. (1999) and others.

society, Das Gupta (a2008: 73) comments that in dissident strands of cinema, '[social] realism has been a natural corollary to the medium from the beginning'. Film's potential (or more recently, digital media) to de- or re-construct its modes of exhibition and aesthetic composition have been less urgent than to use these media to comment on 'life as it really is'. Also, in counterpoint to a commercial fiction film culture where Hindi traditionally dominated, it was more pressing for alternative film cultures to articulate different regional experiences and language groups than to debate the terms of art production in relation to experimental film and art distribution systems (as in Europe/America). Furthermore, India's alternative film movements have (from the 1960's onwards) been staking their distinction from western film histories and modes of production, gaining momentum through the influence of Third Cinema directors in Latin America that also inspired the development of critical movements in India (see Dissanayake and Guneratne, a2003).

I would like to demonstrate how the above differences of exhibition history impacted on perceptions of my own project, *The Warkari Cycle*. When reaching the Rough Cut stage, I sought advice on my edit from the filmmaker Sankalp Meshram<sup>115</sup>, who is regarded as one of India's leading feature film and documentary editors. One of his comments was that my film (then in progress),

...must reflect the spirit of the Warkari who are simple people with no pretensions. The film must shed all pretensions too... No attempt should be made to make it look like video art. (Meshram, email correspondence, 2011)

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<sup>115</sup> Meshram is the Dean of the Digital Academy in Mumbai. He co-edited the hit film *Lagaan* (2002) and has recently edited documentaries by Arun Kopkhar and Paromita Vohra alongside a prolific career directing his own films.

In context, his comment implied that video art is pretentious and ‘elitist’ and would necessarily be out of step with the Warkari’s sensibilities. It reminded me, however, that in India, ‘video installations’ in urban art galleries have only started to appear as a result of globalized art fair cultures since the 1990’s. This was spearheaded by artists’ collectives, such as *Sarai*<sup>116</sup> in Delhi that prioritized international more than domestic contexts for exhibition. Unlike documentary film, the production milieu of ‘video art’ in India is often exclusive to a global-travelling elite. Yet as a European, my association with ‘video art’ carries an older association with the radical experiments and alternative sub-cultures from 1960’s to mid 1980’s<sup>117</sup>. Therefore, I did not think that the Warkari ‘ought not’ to be linked with video art, since I did not view this form as elitist. But as Partha Mitter observes, ‘the way you judge any artist is dependent on the way in which art history has been written’ (Mitter in Mercer (Ed.) a2005: 26). More relevant then, is to ask myself *how well my project will travel*, and what will remain comprehensible to viewers in Indian (and other) cultural contexts.

Another reading of Meshram’s remark was that he was advising me not to superimpose my middle class (European) artist’s sensibilities onto Indian farmers and rural people. In imagining my ‘cultural difference’ however, my ‘Claims for Practice’ (in Chapter 2.4) has already clarified how, when I am with the Warkari using my camera, “with-ness” does not indicate for me a site of shared co-habitation but of differentiation (Ahmed a2000: 48), therefore in my editing too, I would not wish to

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<sup>116</sup> Founded by Ravi Vasudevan, Ravi Sundaram Monica Narula, Sarai’s long term partner is The Waag Society in Amsterdam. Since 1994 Sarai has been developing cyber-cultural pedagogic and exhibition programmes largely for international biennales but also in Delhi.

<sup>117</sup> See Rush, M. *New Media in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (1999) for the history of the emergence of video art, citing artists such as John Cage, Nam June Paik, Michael Snow, Robert Whitman, Carolee Schneeman and Joan Jonas among early proponents of art at the intersection of multimedia performance.



feign that there is a parity between the Warkari and I. But this whole issue touches on how filmmakers like myself, both consciously and unconsciously create subjectivities in our films. This is a topic that I would now like to explore as a relevant digression that eventually will reveal how the “I” of authorship is accounted for in my project.

#### **5.4 Terms of subjectivity in artists’ versus ethnographic films**

Throughout this research, I have been aware of a territorial binarism between filmmakers who identify themselves as anthropologists and those who see themselves (as I do) as artist-filmmakers, a distinction I found worthy of investigation. These two approaches are not necessarily antithetical since there is no absolute rule for measuring an ‘artist-filmmaker’ against an ‘ethnographer’ when juxtaposing their films. However, the way that films adhere to certain aesthetic regimes and politicize relationships is increasingly taking centre stage in film critical studies (Nichols, a1991,1994, Mankekar, a1999, Chanan, a2004, MacDougall, a2006, Lal and Nandy a2006, Garga, a2008, et al). More than being a problem of disciplines, these authors confirm that the imagination of a film’s *mode of address* towards co-actors and audiences is central. Yet disciplinary boundaries often retain a mythic status where artist-filmmakers either reject or seek alliances with anthropologists, and vice versa<sup>118</sup>.

To give an example, when discussing his film on the Bauls of West Bengal, *Eleven Miles* (1991), Ruchir Joshi lampoons ‘ethnographic’ film methods. *Eleven*

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<sup>118</sup> The Tate Modern’s 2002 symposium, *Fieldworks: Dialogues between Art and Anthropology* indicates this trend, and included amongst its participants: Michael Taussig, Mara Varna, George E Marcus, Lucy Lippard, Hugh Brody and others, posing the question of whether developments in each field might illuminate the practice of the other.

*Miles* is a groundbreaking diary/essay film following the lives, songs and poetry<sup>119</sup> of a group of Bauls in this Sufi mystic tradition. In Joshi's own words, the film is:

...an anti-ethnographic kino-collage work made with Baul folk musicians in Bengal...The film [has] no story-line that kept it moving...no typical commentary to explain the difficult spiritual and philosophical concepts we were exploring...no sensationalist fly-on-the-wall filming of 'real dramatic moments' in our subjects' lives. (Joshi in Raqs Media Collective a2000:24)

Clearly the 'ethnographic' style that Joshi was rejecting is one he conflates as observational, sensationalizing and didactic about the cultural characteristics of those it represents. But these are 'sins' that artist-filmmakers are equally capable of committing. *Eleven Miles* avoids giving authoritative purviews of the Bauls, and in the spoken commentary it does include, by the Baul historian, Deepak Majumdar this is sabotaged by the filmmaker's ironic humour. This touches on what the anthropologist, Quetzil Castañeda calls the 'teleology of representation' that he identifies in the context of ethnographic fieldwork. Castañeda points towards the problem of *whose* experience becomes naturalized as the object of study, recommending that fieldwork should be based...

....on the necessary emergence of spectators<sup>120</sup> as the privileged locus...rather than addressing itself towards sites of knowledge recirculation *beyond* the site of the fieldwork. (Castañeda, c2006: 77)

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<sup>119</sup> Sufism has diverse forms of practice according to syncretic/regional movements, in this case, from Bengal. It departs from the overarching doctrines of Hinduism and Islam, connecting with both Hindu and Islamic mysticism and Tantrism. Its doctrines are exclusively learned from a guru, (a *mursid/murs* or *gosdi/gosai*) who plays a crucial role in Baul belief and its transmission. (Das 1992: 389).

I found it relevant to my practice to explore what happens when Castañeda's recommendation is **not** observed, for which I now take the example of two filmmakers whose approach is informed by anthropological investigation, Robert Gardner and Akos Östör, in *Forest of Bliss* (1986). This project was documented in detail in a published dialogue between them entitled *Making Forest of Bliss* (a2001). Their imagined audience for both the book and the film were Europeans and Americans, whilst the film is based on the ritual handling of corpses in the *ghats*<sup>121</sup> of Varanasi, invoking allegories of death and competitive survival in a mythic/poetic narrative style. Their discussion demonstrates how the filmmakers depicting Hindu ritual practice are imagining their creative responsibility. At one point, they consider how to show a Varanasi man who in his ritual context, blows a conch shell three times, asking whether it would be defensible to edit the film showing it being blown just once. Gardner remarks that "virtually everyone" in his audience would not know that it is customary to blow it three times, yet he sought to "maintain an individual dignity in the process of representation" (Gardner and Östör a2001: 51). He said, "probity is the issue" rather than faithfulness of the rendition, and that it "has to do with the grace of the action within the image, and the grace with which the action has been filmed".

The moral duty ascribed to film technique is one that I would challenge, especially when coupled with an authorial sovereignty in how he imagines images are rendered. But more importantly, Gardner's statement masks the potential *failure* to

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<sup>120</sup> This is a term he borrows from the theatre director, Augusto Boal, (a1992) who stresses the participatory nature of audience in his performances including the 'performances of self' induced by society at large.

<sup>121</sup> A *ghat* is the Hindi/Urdu term for a broad flight of steps situated on a riverbank that provides access to the water for bathing and other ritual/social activities.

represent that Cixous expressed in her notion of ‘correcting errors’. This potential is especially pronounced in cross-cultural encounters where to make sense of actions in the environment involves subtle processes of translation. Östör later observes that the concept of [Shiva’s] *lingams*<sup>122</sup> depicted in their film is “hard to imagine for outsiders...as an object of veneration or as an idea of a great civilization...the viewer will have to look outside the film for this”, to which Gardner replies:

But that kind of satisfaction might be a long way off if the viewer is asking for the whole doctrinal or metaphysical background of the thing. I suppose it could be said that these images [in *Forest of Bliss*] are an attempt at a sort of first level explanation of what people who are praying look like. (Gardner & Östör, 2001: 42-43)

Gardner’s comment proves Castañeda’s point about teleological framings, for he is asking viewers unfamiliar with Indian culture to suppose there is larger purpose or directive principle behind his aesthetic presentation of Indians praying. By excluding the possibility that there are *Indian* viewers, he disarticulates how they might engage differently with what they see on screen.

I would like at this point, to recall two Indian filmmakers discussed earlier concerning questions of ‘authentication’ vis-à-vis their filmed subjects– Mani Kaul and Madhusree Dutta. This is so as to make a brief comparison between theirs and Gardner’s interest in the ‘property’ of film renditions. It is revealing to note the difference of *focal point* around which arguments of authenticity revolve. For Gardner and Östör, they are concerned with how the *codes of religious ritual* and the *symbolic value of religious objects* might be authenticated through their filmmaking. In my

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<sup>122</sup> The lingam is the Hindu phallic symbol standing figuratively for Shiva (or Shaivic energy) that features in many sculptural variations in temple/ritual sites across South Asia.

view, it would be very unlikely that an Indian filmmaker would have similar priorities, particularly in the case of orthodox Brahmin death rituals in Varanasi, since these would be considered an ancient and unchanging common knowledge that requires no authentication on film. If we now look at the focal point that Mani Kaul contests in terms of authenticity, it is very different. He is rejecting *modes of filmmaking* that assume it is possible to replicate India's traditions as these exist in the social realm<sup>123</sup>. He wants cinema rather, to re-invent itself in a cinematic language that can enter the discourse of India's cultural traditions on its own terms. If we look at Madhusree Dutta's films, her focal point is on the *testimonial mechanisms of documentary technique* (referencing those from India) and her goal is to prove to her audience how misleading and unfaithful these techniques can be.

I wonder then, whether Gardner and Östör's status of being foreigners in India makes them especially keen to prove that they have not misunderstood the cultural significance of what they are recording, whereas a filmmaker operating in his/her home culture would be more likely to engage with how a topic has been represented historically in their region, seeking possible revisions. To include myself in this questioning, I notice that 'foreign' researchers and artists (like myself) or anthropologist/filmmakers (as above) may find it hard to resist the temptation of self-erasure when imagining how knowledge from environments beyond our day-to-day experience should be channelled through our creative efforts. Whilst post structural ethnographic theory since the 1980's<sup>124</sup> has critiqued the various forms of assumed *authority* (such as the authority of empiricism, the authority of language, and the

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<sup>123</sup> In Chapter 2 page 90, Kaul discusses this view. Chapter 3 page 126 refers to Dutta claim.

<sup>124</sup> Some of the poststructuralist theorists I am referring to in this trajectory would include Geertz (1973) Marcus (1982; 1986) Clifford and Marcus (1986) Bertens (1986) Clifford (1998) Tyler (1986) and Taussig (1987) Bourdieu (1990, 2004). For an overarching summary description and bibliographic references in one document, see Pool, R. (c1991).

authority of literate cultures over orally transmitting ones) it is Judith Butler's critique of *self-erasure* in her book, *Giving and account of oneself* (a2005) that I take as most relevant for this scenario of filmmakers working cross-culturally. She states:

When we are up against the limits of any epistemological horizon...The mode of address conditions and structures the way in which moral questions emerge. ...We must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at the moment of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone is a primary necessity...but also a chance...to be addressed, claimed and bound to what is not me...and so to vacate the self-sufficient "I" as a kind of possession. (Butler, a2005: 134-6)

The 'undoing' that Butler refers to comes, I suggest, with considerable personal risks. It involves admitting to, and acting upon one's own mis-understandings and failed attempts to create a dialogue with others. It is often confronting to relinquish one's own sense of "I" without any guarantees of reciprocity in an environment that is not one's own. In my own filmmaking practice, I have observed a great difference between the films that I made whilst living long term in New Delhi, and those produced since my return to London. The latter films have a more objective and distanced feel to them, no matter how hard I have tried to resist this. For, the location in which one awakes each morning *is* the 'condition that belong to us; a power to affect and be affected by our respective worlds'<sup>125</sup>. I suggest then, that the purported battle between the disciplines of art and ethnography is in fact rather a battle of

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<sup>125</sup> I am re-iterating a statement from my 'Claims for Practice' here, in Chapter 2 page 53

acknowledging accountability and admitting not to know the immediate conditions of others that filmmakers (whatever their discipline) may be shy to embrace.

When I consider how I have situated my subjectivity in working on the *The Warkari Cycle*, perhaps I have straddled a ‘foreigner’s’ and an ‘Indian filmmaker’s’ sense of my own agency. On the one hand, the focal point of my contestation of ‘authenticity’ targets the conceit of media journalism from outside India<sup>126</sup> that appoints itself as an authority on what constitutes ‘Indian culture’, (or some aspects of its ritual/devotional practices). Its ‘mode of address’ seems to be towards the cultural tourist. On the other hand, I was contesting documentary authentication by Indian filmmakers in which their traditional practitioners are presented in a way that at times privileges verbal argumentation and a reasoned defence of ‘subaltern’ groups, over the communicative power of their musicality, physicality and devotional drive. But the way I hoped to achieve this critique was in my editing and mounting of the *The Warkari Cycle* as a video installation, thus altering the co-ordinates of my live experience of the pilgrimage and the pilgrims. The practical mechanics of this editing process and the thinking behind it is what the following section will explore.

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<sup>126</sup> I will come to detail what is meant by this trope in the section on film release systems, page 228 of the current Chapter.

## 5.5 Breakdown of the filmed material; *The Warkari Cycle*



Fig 1. Dagdubai from *Pandharpur Photo Booth*

interviewed pilgrims on their experience of the pilgrimage as part of my final work. This was only shot by me for personal reference. I decided, however, to include these ‘talkies’ as looping sequences of pilgrim’s testimonies that are designed to be displayed on wall-mounted monitors with headphones in a corridor leading into the main large-screen projection (in a blacked out room). The ‘talkies’ became three short films: *Pandharpur Photo Booth* (6 minutes), *Vitthal’s line* (3.5 minutes) and *Gopalpur Dance* (6 minutes).



Fig. 2. Pilgrim group from the film, *Vitthal’s Line*

*The Warkari Cycle* is the title given to main large-screen work composed in eight scenes where the whole piece is 48 minutes long. In *Pandharpur Photo Booth*, I have used moving and still-frame images of the Warkari visiting a street photographer to have souvenir pictures taken next to Lord Vithoba’s image (in Pandharpur) intercut with individual pilgrims talking about their experiences. In some places, I have ‘freeze-framed’ the footage to make their exact words more poignant, and also so that my camera framing (when stilled) becomes



comparable with the local portrait photographer's framing which I shot from the computer he was using in his photo booth. *Vitthal's Line* is a more spontaneous caught moment of pilgrims on the move, describing what motivates their pilgrimage. These films contextualize the pilgrimage for those unfamiliar with the Warkari movement in the words of the pilgrims themselves. The third short film, *Gopalpur*



Fig 3. Men's dance in the film, *Gopalpur Dance*

*Dance* (a hand-held recording of a men's folk dance tracking their movement from *within* the dance itself at its original speed, and then 'slow motioned') is a 'taster' for viewers of what is to come in the large installation that I will now detail.

*The Warkari Cycle* exploits the kinetic and choreographic possibilities of film and its cyclical (looped) narrative structure has underscored the main editing principle I have worked with. 'Dynamic articulations' in editing (as Burch 1973: 46 calls them) are as old as their great inventors, Sergei Eisenstein and Jean Epstein,<sup>127</sup> but I have used this principle when recording the Warkari's movements, so that their actions on screen would carry interrelationships such as mirroring and countering the movement flow established by the edit. 'Dynamic articulations' can also be created by modifications of speed. *The Warkari Cycle* opens with a group of Warkari playing *fugadi*, a celebratory game of

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<sup>127</sup> Burch quotes the example of the ascending movement of the people going up the stairs of Odessa in *Battleship Potemkin* that is mimetically sustained by Eisenstein by compressing time and 'smuggling' movements created by changes of camera angle.

spinning in circles with a partner, holding onto one another's crossed arms. Soon after, the 'point of view' shot of the pilgrim's spinning was recreated by spinning the camera around myself and inserting this 'spinning viewpoint' into the edit. I then decelerated the speed to allow details to become apparent that would otherwise be lost to the naked eye.



Fig. 4 Playing *fugadi*, the film's opening sequence



Fig. 5. Pilgrims wringing clothes in Alandi

This physical game featured in the pilgrimage whenever pilgrims reached significant religious sites that triggered feelings of elation. My low-angle camera centres on the clasped hands that bind the figures together. This evoked for me the kind of bonding between pilgrims I noticed across the pilgrimage, demonstrated in the way that these men (see Fig. 5) are wringing out a wet garment could equally have been done by one person, but the choice is to share the task. My intention with such an opening was to clarify that my priority is on *movements, gestures and actions* rather than on analytical investigation and interpretation of external evidence.

The next scene shows the pilgrimage in its vast expanse, spilling onto the surrounding landscape in an infinite, uncontainable trail. This imagery visually

demonstrated for me, the connection between the Warkari as travellers and the *Pandharpur kshetra*,<sup>128</sup> the ‘Sacred Land’ that is so significant in devotional terms.



Fig 6. The pilgrimage in wide-angle view en route

In between each of my main scenes, I have inserted an animated image (not shot in India) that I will briefly explain. The image looks like an irregular white line being

drawn across a monotone grey

landscape. To create the shot I constructed a glass-bottomed table and positioned the camera underneath it, filming the light being revealed as my finger passed across a thin layer of clay on the glass surface. My suggestion in this image is of a path being traced across an earthy surface. This action of ‘drawing the line’ brackets the distinct scenes, allowing viewers time to digest what they have seen, whilst suggesting that a journey is continuing. The anthropologist, Tim Ingold (a2007)<sup>129</sup> has written about the co-relation between the acts of walking, story-telling, singing, and drawing as cultural activities that all proceed from ‘the tracing of lines’, a theory that connects well with this image.

I was interested in my edit to reflect how the different kinds of devotional activities that the pilgrims were conducting were shaped by the public environments

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<sup>128</sup> See Chapter 2.5 page 57 for an earlier description of the basic tenets of Maharashtraian *bhakti* and this attachment to the sacred land.

<sup>129</sup> From an anthropological perspective, Tim Ingold proposes an archaeology of ‘the line’ in which he compares human behaviour across cultures that all make use of interwoven or interconnected lines including examples such as musical notation, the architecture of labyrinths, urban and road planning, the formation of calligraphy and alphabets, weaving, (and so forth)- all of which proceed from the imagining of moving lines.

they shared. The ways that temples, route ways, riverbanks (etc) pattern the Warkari or indeed other ‘foreign’ devotees’ actions (should they enter my frame). The point was not to ‘explain’ something about Warkari practices, but to let the images ‘do their work on me’. This is evident in the next scene that explores the Jñāneshwar temple in Alandi, showing the flow of activity around the temple entrance. Here, people are filmed in a slow-motioned top shot, that some may read as an ‘eye of god’ composition implying supremacy over the filmed subject. As Madhusree Dutta commented, however,<sup>130</sup> a surveillance angle offers the most ‘democratic’ framing of all since no single subject is given a preferential close up. My own reason for choosing this vantage point was to be able to trace a large collective of people over a continuous time, engaging in a process that was a recurrent feature in the pilgrimage: the act of ‘commemorating the site’ related to the *sants* of their tradition.



Fig. 7. The ‘surveillance camera’ viewpoint at Alandi temple, Solapur district, July 2010

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<sup>130</sup> Madhusree Dutta, interviewed in Mumbai, e2010.



Just as filmmaking offers many opportunities to consider how the crop of a frame or the duration of a shot establishes the wider meaning of a scene, it is also true that the (pro-filmic) 'living of life' sometimes offers the filmmaker incidents that are



Fig 8. Man stirring a cauldron, Jezuri, July 2010

inherently 'cinematic'. This happened to me in a night shoot in which I held my frame on a man's shadow caught in the steam of a cauldron of food he was stirring to feed the pilgrims. Setting up the shot, I was unsure what would transpire but sensed that something would be revealed. To let

the camera roll in such moments creates an equivalent sense of suspense for the film audience as it did for the filmmaker. I did not know beforehand that the man's shadow would create a ghost-like, double image of him, but merely waited for the shot to happen. Such archived material often requires very little intervention in the edit. Here, the action of stirring the cauldron became resonant through the properties of film itself: the play of light on the smoke which makes the man's figure appear and disappear elusively, the sound of the bubbling cauldron whilst the women sing.



Fig 9. The mass dance at the Tukaram temple

The next scene in the film is a mass dance that involves around five hundred men at the temple of Sant Tukaram in Dehu. For this dance, I slow motioned the shot to amplify the trance-like quality of the men's action,

whilst also compressing an event that in reality lasted around forty minutes to just five minutes of footage. The irregularities in this great tapestry of gesture also become more tangible by decreasing the speed. The slowness lends gravity too to what would otherwise be an up-beat dance. My intention here was to imply that these mass dances also demonstrate a sombre side of religious paternalism that finds an easy association with right wing (Hindutva) militancy (as one of my Indian friends who viewed the film reminded me<sup>131</sup>).



Fig 10. The *Ringan* ritual celebrated at Vakhri

To underscore this darker aspect, I superimposed the sound of a base drum<sup>132</sup> recorded in London where I took great lengths to find drums and a percussionist that could supply a different yet compatible sound quality alongside the drums originally recorded in Maharashtra.

Sound editing has been a lengthy process on this project since whole sequences had to be entirely rebuilt. With its constant flow of thousands of people, the pilgrimage was a magnet for unwanted ‘sound clutter’. The *manjira* (hand cymbals) played continuously by pilgrims destroyed many possibilities of obtaining other types of sound. I therefore recruited a composer/technician, Morgan Davis who mixed diegetic and non-diegetic sound and generated new material in partnership with me. The kind of layering of sound that we found important to achieve can be exemplified in the

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<sup>131</sup> This viewer was Gargi Sen of Magic Lantern who saw the film-in-progress in June 2011.

<sup>132</sup> The *Nagada* that I used is a drum used in *Chchau* (a Bengali) tradition but I chose this because I wanted the ‘warmth’ of an instrument made with an animal skin.

scene of the *ringan* (the ritual horse race) that- if had left untreated, would have been a monotonous roar of shouting crowds. We sculpted the sound so that the crowd noise panned in relation to the action, or manipulated it so that sounds were borrowed from other recording contexts and re-ordered for poetic effect. I wanted to replicate for the viewer a sense of ‘journeying’ through the pilgrimage where each of the separate scenes or ‘vignettes’ would focus on one specific audio-visual and corporeal experience. I was thus recombining sound and image in ways that did not exist in actuality but were my recreation of the experience as an emotional entity.

In *The Warkari Cycle*’s closing two sequences, music gradually comes to



Fig 11. Khandoba temple; the puja before singing

dominate over the intensity of image. These scenes feature the Khandoba temple in Jejuri, in which two temple singers (known as the *vaghyas*) perform a song dedicated to Lord Shiva-as-Khandoba. The *ektar* (a one-stringed instrument) and a small tambour are all that

accompany the two men singing. Many musical possibilities were available to film in the pilgrimage, but I chose the *vaghyas*’ song because of its intimate concentration in contrast with the dense crowds, the din and commotion on the road.

The final scene is of people preparing to sleep, stretched out across the riverbank at Alandi, with a superimposed rendition of *Jāni jay Pāniyāsi* (*When Janabai goes to fetch water*, 2003<sup>133</sup>) by the classical singer, Kishori Amonkar. The

<sup>133</sup> This album was first published under the *Sare Gama* label in 2004.

intention here was to evoke a space for reflection and immersion in the music. The song is attributed to the female medieval poet-*sant* Janabai, an appropriate closure to the film since it refers to how Lord Vitthal is behind all of Janabai's arduous daily tasks. The suggestion is that the pilgrims, whom we see exhausted after several days of walking, are being healed as they sleep under Lord Vitthal's watchful gaze.

Just as in painting, the painter steps back from the canvas to try and see the painting as audiences will see it, so in filmmaking when an edit is near completion, the editor's strive is to detach herself from her own subjectivity. All representative systems in creative practice couple *poesis*<sup>134</sup> with a) the psychological/social powers through which an image prompts its analogue and b) the particular regime of art forms that embed their power in the laws of genre, recognized narratives and ways of presenting their protagonists. A) and b) combined are what Rancière termed *mimesis*, so a film assumes its 'representative' character in so far as *mimesis* is activated to organize these ways of doing, making, seeing and judging (Rancière, 2006 [2001]: 22-3). But how does 'poesis' in the case of my project engage the social, historical and cultural forms of agency that this entails? In order to develop thinking in this area, I will now move on to consider how we can imagine this across various disciplines, later retrieving its relevance to representing traditions, such as the Warkari on film.

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<sup>134</sup> 'Poesis' (from the Greek, *poiēsis*) denotes the act of *making* something specified, whilst *poiētic* is the 'combining of form' (Greek Word Study Tool, accessed 12.3.2012) <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=poi%2Fhsis&la=greek&prior=x#lexicon>



## 5.6 A cross-disciplinary discussion of ‘poetics’

Suman Gupta (a2007: 238) rejects the idea that ‘art’ should be discussed<sup>135</sup> as an *a priori* or a unified conceptual construct that transcends the issues that propel its forms. My claim would be the same in relation to my own video installation artwork. He suggests that an alternative way of writing art history would be to introduce new taxonomies, using concepts such as ‘displacement’ through which to investigate. Agreeing that such re-framings can function well across disciplines, I would now like to consider the term ‘poetics’ whereby various arts (theatre, visual art, film and performance) can be embraced within a single discourse; one that in my case, entails the concept of ‘mobilization’.

The thinkers I have chosen to consider fall into two categories. First, after a brief introduction, I will discuss statements by the filmmakers Sanjay Kak and Anup Singh (the screenplay writer of Mani Kaul). I will then look at those concerned with the purviews of productivity in theatre and cultural history. ‘Poetics’ in their case engages historical or social movements rather than cinematic elements. In this group, I introduce G.P. Deshpande, Partha Chatterjee and Sarah Joseph.

The capability of filmmaking as an art form is to change the status of the “real” whereby the link between technological apparatus and the manner of telling stories happens by *re-combining* the fables that exist in everyday experience, says Rancière (a2006 [2001]: 2-3). ‘Artists’ are those who interrupt perceptual operations that exist in the social realm where their configuration of the world...

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<sup>135</sup> This was in the context of critiquing certain canons perpetuated by the scholars who participated in the debate, ‘Is Art History Global?’ held at University College Cork, Burren College of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago in 2006, published in Elkins, J. (Ed) (2007)

...becomes a morpheme for a combination of ideas [that]...reaches the nervous system directly...by reducing the communication of ideas and...sensory effects to a common unit of measurement (Rancière, a2006 [2001]: 25)

This points towards the fact that film editing can be seen as a crucial process for re-ordering of the grammars of perception. It also serves as a useful introduction to how the Delhi-based filmmaker Sanjay Kak<sup>136</sup> articulates his transformation of ‘the real’ in editing, which also places the idea of art at the centre:

Documentary film is certainly a catalogue of the real ...but it is also an argument with it. [It] is not life, but an argument about it....Like every good work of art, the arguments of a good documentary film aspire towards an eternal life; it is not enough to say that “this is how things are here and now”...but also “and here is why”...tempering the argument with questions and doubts of the process....(Kak, in (eds.) Raqs Media Collective, a2000: 20-22)

What I notice here is that the ‘work’ of art here is non-detachable from the conditions of living, so in order to posit an argument in life, film permits the mobilization of a space-time ‘beyond’ life but (perhaps paradoxically) also engaging ‘with’ it. The filmmaker/theorist Michael Chanan<sup>137</sup> recalls in relation to this idea that ‘one of the most important things about film...[is] its commonality with music as a form of structuring time’ (Chanan, a2004:126). The following quote by Anup Singh, working on Mani Kaul’s film, *The Idiot* (1992, based on Dostoevsky’s novel) demonstrates a

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<sup>136</sup> Kak’s key films are: *One Weapon* (1997), *In the forest hangs a bridge* (1999) and *Words on Water* (2003) and recently, *Jashne-e-Azadi (How we Celebrate Freedom, 2009)* on the plight of Hindu Pundits and various literary/political authors in a divided Kashmir .

<sup>137</sup> This comment is taken from an interview between Chanan and Fredric Jameson in which they contest ‘anti-representational’ trends in current documentary cinema that they read as unresolved in questions of representation within the film texts themselves.

discussion of filmmaking from a very similar perspective, where it becomes a mobilization of acoustic elements and people, in order to structure time:

All endings in Indian classical music...are arbitrary because the note in performance is seen as fluid rather than a fixed point in space. The note, therefore, is always in play and its movements diverse and infinite. Cut at any point, the break functions as an absence, a plenitude of possibilities....To make the field of film similarly playful, we separated the lens from the gaze and connected it directly to the collective nervous system of the crew in the field, making everyone at every moment responsible...for the spontaneous encounters between the script, objects and chance, mise-en-scène, sound and light. ... In *The Idiot* actors were encouraged to become movements.... No movement impersonates or simply characterizes... each is the rain that transforms the world... (Singh, A. c1993-1994: 37-8)

What Singh is describing is a cross-disciplinary way of interpreting performance so that it becomes political and playful at once. In documentary, the sense of play in creating worlds is no less significant than in fiction, yet in critical writing about non-fiction film, protagonists often acquire legal allocations becoming ‘witnesses’ testifying to particular viewpoints rather than being ‘actors’. But we have seen time and again across this thesis how the testimonial has in built dramatic properties. If we return to consider again the filmmaker as Hélène Cixous’ “executioner”, striving to bring art to life by a serial ‘mistake-making’, then many of these mistakes often happen through misunderstandings at the level of *cultural history* between traditional artists and those representing them. My framing of ‘poetics’ therefore now reaches for the point where it involves mobilizing the traditions in India away from the historical canons of how they have been allocated.

Theatre critic, G.P. Deshpande has written about how commercial pressures have affected the traditional performing arts in India in what he sees as an excessive pressure to adapt these for international audiences. He protests that most international patronage from the 1980's onwards encouraged tendencies in these performers to supply to Europe's demand for revivalism in 'ethno-theatre' that 'idealizes a pure, untainted indigenous expression' (Deshpande, c1992: 404). In parallel, he notes that domestically in India, the quest for Indian dramatic forms and 'Indians in theatre' is linked with a coming to terms with colonialism. "Our modernity is part of our anti-imperialism, or at any rate was at some stage", he says and "to deny this history is to deny art" (ibid Deshpande, p 403). A problem has persisted therefore, of India's traditional art forms being either excessively glorified or demeaned (the latter by artists and critics who wished to break with their idealization). Those who glorify them treat the traditions in the Brahminical sense as a *nityonityanam*, 'the constant amongst the inconstant', thus 'modernity' by default becomes the *inconstant*<sup>138</sup>.

Looking further afield, the cultural theorists, Ashis Nandy and Partha Chatterjee agree that some divisions in Indian cultural regimes arise from the imposition of liberal democratic institutions that assume individualism in society whilst advocating a reconnection with 'traditional lifestyles' (a claim made by Sarah Joseph, a2006: 423). Chatterjee states that the elite classes collaborated with the colonizers in this respect but insulated the 'inner spheres' of spirituality, community and family from the perceived impact of modernity. The social engineering of 'subaltern' groups means that they are thus made to become the 'repository' of

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<sup>138</sup> This ties in with director, Habib Tanvir's views who in 1975 described a cultural climate in Indian performance where urban elites were aping western theatre in their policies and methods, rendering local folk traditions irrelevant. (Tanvir in Saberwal a1975: 144)

indigenous culture and wisdom (Chatterjee, 1993:156). Where the communitarian identities of traditional cultures were de-centralized and intrinsically pluralistic, they become compromised and oversimplified in the modifications of such power relationships. But Joseph herself warns of a wholesale idealization of traditional cultures, demonstrating how the State has at times been justified in criminalizing or repressing certain 'traditions' in India. The example taken is the 1987 case of Roopa Kanwar<sup>139</sup> where the "Commission of Sati Act" was drawn up to prevent ritual suicide by women. Where this leaves us is that 'poetics' in a cultural/historical light involves a continual reassessment of the *criteria* for reviving the traditions, rather than universally applying liberal/secular policies across different communities. Joseph also challenges us to think whether 'subaltern' struggles are actually being represented and historicized (on film and beyond) for the notion of 'equality and justice for the subaltern', or rather, because they are considered 'anti-modern' by the State (Joseph 2006: 432). Power differences are generally acknowledged as a threat to democracy, but it is actually 'modernity' and the condition of being receptive to governance that the State foregrounds as its priority.

Although these discourses are quite complex and go beyond what was conceivable to address within one small project on the Warkari, I have tried to be aware of these kinds of allocations of 'tradition' in my project. It has also influenced me as a researcher in seeing that my research informants may have chosen to depict traditional artists in order to reconcile the above-mentioned geopolitical divides in

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<sup>139</sup> Roopa Kanwar was a Rajasthani village woman who was coerced to commit ritual suicide after a brief marriage to her young husband, leading to 1987 "Commission of *Sati* Prevention Act". This Act illegalized this Hindu and Muslim practice that regrettably in very limited examples still recurs Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/09/20/world/india-seizes-four-after-immolation.html> (Accessed, 12. 4. 2012)

Indian society, or to critique the dichotomizing of ‘urban/rural’, ‘subaltern/elite’ or ‘classical/folk’ (in the arts). But if as a filmmaker, I seek to understand more fully how this resistance can be evidenced in documentary technique, then I must take a closer look at individual films and their aesthetic regimes. For this task, I will introduce the practices of the three filmmakers announced at the beginning of this chapter, Madhusree Dutta, RV Ramani and Rajula Shah, setting out to analyze their cinematographic composition and the poetics of their work. I will begin with Madhusree Dutta.

### **5.7. Aesthetic regimes in three filmmakers’ films.**

#### **5.7.a Madhusree Dutta; *Scribbles on Akka* (2000)**

Dutta’s *Scribbles on Akka* (2000) based on the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Karnatak *sant*, Mahadevi Akka, traces how medieval *bhakti* features in contemporary daily life in Karnataka and beyond, as the legacy of the *sant* and her radical poetry. Mahadevi Akka was a nomadic devotee of Lord Shiva, renowned for her bold decision to abandon wearing clothing, her body thus becoming an instrument and publically visible symbol of her devotion.<sup>140</sup>

The film opens with a procession of stagehands advancing through the streets at night, carrying large gilt-framed portraits of the *sant* as she is commonly represented in folk paintings. Mahadevi is conventionally portrayed prudishly hiding behind knee-length tresses of thick black hair, or in village festivals she is represented

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<sup>140</sup> Ramanujan explains the significance of this choice: ‘Nakedness signifies being open to the experience of god. In the Krishna legend, he steals the women’s clothes. In the Jain tradition, a whole community values nakedness, calls itself *digambara*, “clad in the sky” ...When women saints like Mahadevi and Lalla Ded of Kashmir throw away clothes, they are also throwing away the attractive parts of womanhood ...Modesty, like clothes, is a way of resisting and enhancing sexual curiosity, not of curbing it...It is also the ultimate defiance of society, the casting away of every façade.... By exposing the difference between male and female, by becoming indifferent to that difference, she is liberated from it, and liberates anyone who will attend to it’. (Ramanujan, b1989:13)

by a young girl sporting a profusely long wig, thus undermining the *sant*'s radical choice to 'go naked'. After the theatrical pomp of this opening scene the film proceeds by revealing the censorship over centuries surrounding Mahadevi's legacy. Dutta's film tactics typically intercuts fictional, mythical and mundane realities in which dramatized incidents are juxtaposed with *vox pop* testimonies by the *sant*'s followers. The poetry of Mahadevi, distorted in literature by moral arbitrators, continues to raise controversy in current folklore studies, and Dutta's feminist re-telling gently mocks the popular compulsion to silence and sanitize the woman.

The actress, Seema Biswas,<sup>141</sup> first person narration provides musical interludes composed by Ilayaraaja<sup>142</sup> and Shantanu Moitra<sup>143</sup> and Biswas stands for an allegorical figure of 'everywoman' from Mumbai; a contemporary Mahadevi celebrating her divine lover in the guise of a movie heroine. Ilayaraja needed considerable persuasion to be convinced that a 'pop flavour to the songs' was what Dutta wanted, since in her view, traditions survive because of their popular appeal and ability to embrace change. Mahadevi Akka's poetry is conventionally dramatized in

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<sup>141</sup> Biswas became widely acclaimed for her role as Phoolan Devi in Shekhar Kapur's film *Bandit Queen* (1994) but has starred in a wide range of popular cinema and parallel cinema hits.

<sup>142</sup> Ilayaraaja is a highly esteemed Tamil composer who has created circa 823 scores for movies since the 1970's. His music makes elaborate, highly skilled use of orchestration, synthesizing Western and Indian instruments and musical modes. His early years exposed him to a range of folk genres from South India becoming incorporated into his musical styles. Another legendary composer of popular cinema, A. R. Rahman worked with Ilayaraaja's orchestra as a keyboardist. (Allirajan, c2004)

<sup>143</sup> Moitra is the renowned composer of an equally acclaimed vocalist, Shubha Mudgal who produced the albums, *Chaturang (Four Colours)*, Navras Records (2002) and *Mann ke Manjeere (My Mind has begun to play its own Rhythm)* Virgin Records (2001) among many others.

Hindustani classical arrangements that have been popular in Karnataka since the mid 20th century<sup>144</sup> so Dutta deliberately breaks with this convention in her film style.

Her shuttling from scenes that are dramatized by actors to the ‘journalistic’ footage demonstrates that the chance encounters with citizens interviewed on the street are just as performed as the actors’ recreated testimonies, showing that neither delivers a representation of Mahadevi that is more or less ‘authentic’. In *Scribbles on Akka*, one villager claims to be directly related to the *sant* through a series of highly improbable coincidences, possibly claimed to impress the filmmakers. Her film audience witnesses directly how filmmaking can provoke certain exaggerations of the truth from those on camera. She later draws parallels between the contemporary artist, Nilima Sheikh, filmed in her studio (speaking about making her work), and Mahadevi Akka, the poet. She films conversations with poets from Karnataka who recite Mahadevi’s verses, debating their interpretation. We also see how Mahadevi’s image has been adopted affectionately as the logo for a pickle and *papad*<sup>145</sup> business in Karnataka where they express their affection for the *sant*.

The accumulation of oral histories about Mahadevi, and religious folklore are shown to be two intertwined facets of popular culture. She also chooses to connect popular cinema music and Hindustani classical music as a way that religious knowledge is transmitted and shared. Such interventions are also a way to avoid probing her protagonists directly about the personal experience of their faith (which

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<sup>144</sup> This legacy began with A. N. Krishna Rao, a Kannada writer, who converted the poetry into *raag* forms like the *Todi* and *Pahadi*, becoming standard idioms in Karnatik classical music. More can be found on her musical treatment in an online interview transcript with the director. (Gautami, B. c2001)

<sup>145</sup> These are snacks made with gram and wheat flour.



she finds problematic in documentary method). So, whilst she still does depend on interviewing strangers for her films, Dutta's aesthetic system complicates her own impulse to do so by parading various options of how their testimonies can be staged. What she is also doing simultaneously is creating her own collage of the historical accounts about Mahadevi Akka's life. She does this, for example, by dramatizing a scene of a religious inquisition in which Brahmin scholars put the *sant* under trial, challenging her commitment to wander naked (that they misinterpreted as sexual provocation).

One could argue, however, that a certain dimension of the *sant's* identity has remained concealed in Dutta's apparently feminist framing of Mahadevi Akka's legacy. The well known scholar of Virashaiva and *bhakti* movements, A.K. Ramanujan (b1989: 13)<sup>146</sup> reminds us that according to Mahadevi's poetry, she denied any psychological or spiritual difference between men and women, claiming it was only the situational conditions of culture that create artificial differences. Dutta's portrayal omits mention altogether of the issue of caste in her film. Historically, however, there were strong connections between the lives of the untouchables and of women *sants* in these early *bhakti* movements. Both were resisting the exclusivity and sexism of upper caste Brahmin men who denied them access to gods and to temples, so it was a *caste*-based as well as a gender discrimination that Mahadevi Akka was resisting. She was fundamentally indifferent to the way that gender is attributed through visible and behavioural signals.

Nevertheless, Dutta's film does seem to be propelled by a democratizing impulse, with its inclusion of stories of people from a wide social spectrum, each

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<sup>146</sup> See also the Vijaya Ramaswamy quotes in the two footnotes on page 66

celebrated for their contribution to the Mahadevi myth. But the actors she works with for the dramatized portions of her film are exclusively from urban upper-middle class backgrounds like her own. This suggests a perspective of theatrical performance as the domain of her peers. But since Dutta often focuses on the lives of working class and marginal urban or rural citizens in her films, she could feasibly have investigated the different ways in which Mahadevi Akka's stories figure for them in performance workshops that would then feed into her film script, or simply recruited actors to interpret her scripts from other kinds of backgrounds. Perhaps then, she would not have created a narrative divide in which the 'working class village devotees' from Karnataka are shown to be delivering fabricated stories for camera, whereas the 'middle class urban painter', Nilima Sheikh, can talk about her painting without the film director being inclined to question its authenticity as a filmed testimony.

In Dutta's filmmaking, in relation to the 'othering' that anthropological investigation has the potential to create, she explained to me<sup>147</sup> that she plays consciously with what she calls 'colonial modes' of representing people in documentary technique, believing directors in India routinely adopt them and should therefore be transparent about when they are doing this.

As Sophie Gordon (c2007: 10-11) has indicated, what constitutes 'a colonial mode' of photography or filmmaking has often been disputed theoretically. There are two main branches of scholarship, one focusing exclusively on Indian photography produced in India, the other (in a discourse of curators, museum archivists and dealers) that draws upon photographic sources of *colonized nations generically* in the aesthetic history of film and photography. The key literature for 'Indian colonial

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<sup>147</sup> Cited from Dutta, interviewed by the author in Mumbai, e2010

photographic histories' include Karlekar, M. (Ed.) (a2006); Thomas, (a1981); Pinney, (a1997); Gadihoke, (a2006), Ray, D. (a1982) and Pelizzari (a2004). Dutta, from my understanding, was referring to the culturally and racially deterministic aspect of colonial photography that categorizes social groups according to externally visible attributes (cultural or even physiological). By association, she believes that the camera is always and invariably 'a trigger aimed at somebody else':

The camera is about opening the shutter to whoever is in front of you - which you are not- to capture that person. It is always aiming an equipment or arms and capturing it... It was developed for war and anthropology.' (Dutta, *ibid* e2010)

The above view (informed by Virilio among others<sup>148</sup>) begs the question about the primacy of camera technologies, since there have been many alternative conceptualizations of cameras by filmmakers and film historians that I will return to at the conclusion of this chapter.

To complete this observation of Dutta's practice, clearly she is interested in her protagonists' own responsibility in creating their screen identities. In Chapter 3, we saw that she prefers to keep an emotional distance with her protagonists, to allow

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<sup>148</sup> This refers to two separate discourses now about *cameras* from anthropological and military-based theories of earlier camera technology's origins. The former concerns the political investment of (colonial) governors in the process of colonization and its racially deterministic imagination of technology. (Poole c2005: 159-179) In such studies, the informants are Victorian anthropologists who commissioned/collected photographs from India and other (British) colonies as the categorizing quest of imperialism along ethnic lines. The latter concerns Paul Virilio's seminal arguments in *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (a1989 [1984]) and *The Lost Dimension* (1984). He discusses a loss of aesthetics in early cinema, replaced by a militarized and cinematographic field of retinal persistence, interruption, and 'technological space-time'. Virilio's phenomenology is built upon thinking drawn from Husserl, Heidegger, and, especially, Merleau Ponty. He describes himself as a 'critic of the art of technology', not as a cultural/social theorist (Virilio & Lotringer, a1997: 172).

people the space to invent fictional versions of them selves for camera. What perhaps gets interrupted in the process is a willingness to surrender to the power of storytelling in its own right, since she continually interrupts her films with self-conscious reflections on how the story is being told, how the film has been constructed. Whilst working freely with her interpretation of Mahadevi Akka's poetry and its musical and dramatic re-composition, Dutta's main focus seems after all to rest with how her interviewees articulate the *sant's* legacy in their own unique relationships with this folk-cultural figure.

### **5.7.b RV Ramani; *Nee Engey (Where Are You? 2003)***

The next director I will consider, RV Ramani, has an 'aesthetic regime' that can be described as camera-centric. He makes sure that his audience registers the camera's instrumentality in generating everything that we see on screen. The main protagonists of his film *Nee Engey (Where are You? 2003)* that I will discuss here are dispersed communities of South Indian shadow puppeteers, one of whom described his art form as the "original filmmaking" of India. For shadow puppetry both anticipated and closely resembles cinema as a moving image culture. Based on stories from the Ramayana and performed in Marathi, Tamil and Kannada, (in South India) it dates back to the eighth century, practiced by artists who often lived nomadically. The arrival of cinema and television (according to the interviewed puppeteers) led to the depletion of official patronage and has contributed to its gradual disappearance.

Reproducing the temporality of Tamil village life in his film, Ramani's representation of these puppeteers' stories is full of non-sequiturs, jump cuts and the spontaneous interruptions that convey how day-to-day reality unfolds. He resists the temptation to use time 'efficiently' by imposing his shooting schedule, with the result

that his film is 150 minutes long. In the following shot break down of a short scene of *Nee Engey*, I would like to draw attention to three characteristic features of Ramani's cinematography. He mediates arguments between his protagonists, in this case about the art of puppetry. [In other films, it may be other art forms that are being debated]. He incorporates elements of chance and improvisation. He avoids instructing his filmed subjects to perform for his camera, but rather follows after their initiative, including himself and the camera equipment in shot.

To convey how the flow of his shots operates, each bullet point (below) represents a cut in Ramani's edit in a short scene that I describe below. The scene begins with a puppeteer relating how his ancestors came from a unique caste of performers that were sent to Thanjavur from Maharashtra by the ruler Sarfoji (in Shivaji's Maharaj's<sup>149</sup> era), a patronage system that continued until British colonizers withdrew their support, forcing their migration to neighbouring states.

- Performer 1: ...“They [the British] made us refugees!”
- Performer 2, lighting *agarbatti*<sup>150</sup> before applying make up for the enactment of the Ramayana. “Traditionally this puppet theatre was performed by people from Andhra...”
- Performer 1: “No! It was from *here* that they went to Andhra, they were already settled in Thanjavur”.
- Overexposed wide shot of people milling in the streets near a shaded awning where the artists apply their make up in preparation for the drama. A third man

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<sup>149</sup> Shivaji Maharaj reigned from 1674 to 1680 as the raja of Maharashtra.

<sup>150</sup> These are incense sticks lit to mark the beginning of a ritual.

appears in shot looming out of the bleached background: “I am coming after a bath in the sea!”

- Performer 1: “If he goes for a swim in the sea, he will touch Lanka, do a somersault and then only, come back!”
- [*The swimmer gestures to Ramani that he’s going to get made up for the Ramayana drama*].
- Performer 1: It’s like the ocean here too. Everyone wherever they are, will come here for Dusshera<sup>151</sup>. That is her blessing.
- The camera now roves amongst various artists applying makeup and dressing for the ritual.
- The shot follows of a group of three men heading towards to the village centre. One man prostrates himself before a floor-painted *mandala* where the drama will take place. A man with a flaming jar crosses dangerously close to Ramani’s lens.
- Ramani and a camera assistant (in frame) set up a playback monitor, tripod and camera in a courtyard (overexposed). The shot re-focuses on the monitor that plays rushes of scenes we have seen earlier in the film. Ramani says to his assistant, “It starts from here...”

Ramani, as we see, stays close to the spontaneity of these performer’s lives, his camera hurriedly refocusing amidst their activities. His viewpoint savours the closeness of the fire that is lit for the ritual, the man dripping wet returning from his swim and the tactility of the performers’ skin being smeared with makeup.

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<sup>151</sup> Dusshera is a festival of Hindu mythology celebrating the victory of Lord Ram over the Demon, Ravana and the goddess Durga over the buffalo demon.

*Nee Engey* is in some senses like an investigative research film seeking out puppeteers who still practice, dusting off their dilapidated leather puppets kept in storage to recover the memory of the dramas they once performed. Ramani's film importantly also demonstrates, not only the vast diversity of interpretations of the epics, but also uncovers stories unrelated to Hindu mythology. The puppeteer, Belagullu Veerana Bellary (in Karnataka), has a puppet show that tells the history of the (India/Pakistan) Partition in which M.K. Gandhi wrestles with a puppet version of a map of 'the Indian Subcontinent', its three detachable pieces floating across the illuminated screen. He even finds puppeteers who have been co-opted<sup>152</sup> by government development programmes to deliver messages about family planning, or how to prevent AIDS, recalling how folk performance has been harnessed for developmental agendas as a requisite of their patronage.

Notably, whilst Ramani's films evidence a great compassion and fluid sensitivity towards those that he films, his relationship with his camera is equally meaningful. Ramani's later film, *My Camera and the Tsunami* (2011) is his personal ode to a prized camera that was destroyed in the Tsunami of 2004 that he ritually cleans of its sand and waterlogged inner workings<sup>153</sup>. To illustrate how he talks about working with his camera, he screened an unedited piece of his footage during the *Persistence/Resistance* festival (in 2009).<sup>154</sup> It depicted a dog on a beach in a continuous five-minute take. He mentioned while screening it that he was

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<sup>152</sup> The organization concerned is called the "Awareness and Social Services Organization" and is based in South India in Madurai

<sup>153</sup> See earlier reference to this film, Chapter 3 page 112

<sup>154</sup> This was held at the National Film and Television Institute in Pune in August 2009, a Magic Lantern Foundation initiative.

experimenting with the camera ‘as if it were an eraser’ which gave a particular quality to the recording. It de-centred the viewer’s gaze so that we were drawn to look at the spaces *between* the obvious markers of action, creating suspense about *how much* of the dog we would be able to see, and for *how long*. I see this way of re-imagining the camera as typical of Ramani’s ownership and re-invention of camera technology used to explore optical reflexes in our reading of the cinematic image.

Concerning the next filmmaker I will introduce, Rajula Shah’s aesthetics is driven by spoken language more than by such optical effects, but she is as concerned as he is with establishing an intimacy and exchange with her co-actors.

### **5.7.c Rajula Shah; *Sabad Nirantar* (Word Within the Word, 2008)**

*Sabad Nirantar* (introduced in Chapter 3) explores the culture pertaining to the poet, Kabir’s devotees in Madhya Pradesh, and having already detailed how this production came about, I will now focus on her cinematography.

Shah’s aesthetic regime emerges directly as a consequence of engaging with musically untrained villagers who are the perpetrators of the Kabir *panth*.<sup>155</sup> Collecting oral narratives took precedence for her over a search for musical virtuosity in trained performers. This in turn influenced how she conducted interviews when seeking transmission systems that existed beyond the printed word, tracking down villagers who knew hundreds of *bhajans* (sung prayers) by heart, just as Ramani searched for the puppeteer’s stories. Her ethnographic engagement does not convey an observational or a journalistic interest. Rather, she takes considerable liberties in

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<sup>155</sup> A *panth* is a spiritual tradition founded by a *guru* or an *acharya* who may be a learned sage or a devoted practitioner following a legacy of cross-generational transmission.  
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/panth> (Accessed 23.12.2010)



poetically reconstructing her footage in the post-production process. I identified four main elements that exist separately in the events she records, that she recombines in particular orders her films: the visual image, the spoken recited poetry (of Kabir), musical lyrics (singing derived from his poems), and her protagonists' movements in their everyday tasks and lives. When we take an example of her shot break down (as I did with Ramani's film), their aesthetic system in counter-pointing these elements rises to the surface. Here is a shot break down of two minutes from *Sabad Nirantar*:

- Fade in song/image of a group of villagers, dark interior: "Hark sage O one in a million reaches that land". Song continues over...
- Wide pan across a landscape of rooftops of Bhopal, dusk.
- Close up, detail water from a dripping from a leaking pipe
- A criss-cross of wire cables, construction workers work on a balcony, a woman in the distance carries bricks in a basket
- Close up: squirrels run down a tree trunk and sparrows eat rice grains outside Shah's window. Male voice over, villager (spoken): "Word dies, wordless dies and so does the unheard. Deathless the one whom Ram loves says Kabir" (slow pan to the interior of Shah's living room).
- Voice continues, "Here, thought and experience are seamlessly merged. It is the pinnacle of thought, nowhere to go hereafter. The discourse belongs to the highest philosophical realm"
- Close up: the hand of a house painter stirring his hand in bucket of white paint, he transfers the paint to a vessel with a brush in it, ready to paint.
- Close up: feet of the painter, straining to reach up to a high part of the wall he is painting (out of shot)

- Back view of the painter, half blocked by a veil of newspapers hung up to protect the remaining room from spatters of paint.
- Tilt down; his brush licks the side of the bucket. Fade in: music of the film, *Sant Tukaram* (1936)<sup>156</sup> playing on Shah's desktop computer -her living room in the background. Song: "In the beginning is the seed..."
- Close up: the painter's face intently painting the white wall, his face dusted with a fine layer of white pigment.
- Song continues: "The seed sprouts, saplings grows..." A wide, overexposed shot of the painter painting the wall in sunlight. His body becomes a soft focus animated blur ...song continues "from a single pod spring a million trees"
- Pan towards Shah's computer Tukaram (in the film) sings: "You pervade the universe, you manifest yourself in myriad forms"

The above reveals that, for example, the house painter's actions intercut with the Kabir poem, gives both the poem and the painter's action a new reading that comes from Shah's re-combination. The decision to overexpose her camera as the painter paints also makes the sequence surreal as he distorts into a blurred, stick-like form.

Before making her editing decisions Shah stresses the importance of spending a long time with the footage. Just as her protagonists (the Malwi) visit and revisit Kabir's poetry to arrive at a more embedded connection with it, the properties of the footage, in her view, can only be discerned by repeated viewings and living with the film material so that the patterns and life rhythms it embodies can be filtered out. It is in these minutiae and the slowness of gestation that the Kabir tradition is revealed.

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<sup>156</sup> See Chapter 2, page 71 for an introductory reference to this film.

In Shah's visual composition she frequently positions the camera close to the floor, 'earthing' her framing and bringing it physically closer to the tasks of manual labourers who till the soil, peel corn, and groups seated in circles for their informal singing at night. Shah's inclusion of her own domestic environment serves the same function of acknowledging the reflexivity between herself and her co-actors as Ramani's inclusion of himself in frame in his films. She often also includes other incidental figures that contribute to creating a narrative 'the every-day world' such as cooks, cleaners and construction site workers. But perhaps Shah's aesthetic regime excludes some of the tensions and friction that accompanied her on set encounters (as she reported them to me). I wondered then, whether this rendered the relationship she had with the Malwi villagers more idealized than it was in reality.

Shah's film effectively traces Kabir's impact across various intangible and tangible forms, such as published pamphlets, popular expressions, and individual interpretations of the folk songs and their renowned and well as lay interpreters. She avoids the use of dramatizing techniques and seems to be operating from an ontological drive to uncover the roots of the cultural tradition. As fellow filmmaker, Surabhi Sharma (2010) observes<sup>157</sup>, *Sabad Nirantar* also evolves from Shah's spiritual affinity with Kabir's poetry, whilst demonstrating how the Malwi (amongst the wider landscape of Kabir *panthis*<sup>158</sup>) transmit the tradition with their individual signatures and deviations. To recall again my concluding observations in Chapter 3, it

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<sup>157</sup> Paraphrased from the article: 'I have been to the immortal lands' A review of Shah's above mentioned film by Surabhi Sharma, 15.2.2010. See Bibliography: Sharma, S. e2010

<sup>158</sup> *Panthis* signifies a lineage of devotees practicing under a guru or an *acharya* within a spiritual tradition.

is the *way in which* the stories are told that take her full attention in the filmmaking process.

### **5.8 Juxtaposing the methods of Dutta, Ramani, Shah and I.**

Concerning Dutta, Ramani, and Shah's 'aesthetic regimes' explored above, I would now like to assess the impact of how each of these filmmakers has framed the traditions as a representational choice that carries specific implications. I will subsequently re-connect my observations to my own project in filming the Warkari.

Beginning with Dutta's film, *Scribbles on Akka*, some viewers may be left perplexed by her mixing of genres that cross references documentary, commercial cinema, *katha vachana* and contemporary drama. Yet this excess may also be seen as a purposeful resistance to a postcolonial heritage of paternalistic cultural encounters with the traditions in which the folk practitioners are framed as 'victims' or communities whose cultural heritage is 'endangered'. Here, Deshpande's (earlier cited) recommendation is applicable that we should consider how anti-imperialist strategies in the arts shape their methods of production. Dutta's film does seem to present Mahadevi Akka (the historical figure) as more emancipated and radical than her contemporary village devotees in Karnataka (who are framed as more conservative and prudish). This can be differentiated from a film like Anjali Punjabi's, *Some things I know about her* (on the sant Mirabai's cult) where Punjabi challenges the view that rural women's spiritual radicalism has implicitly 'gone out of fashion' at the popular cultural level.

Rajula Shah's aesthetic regime in *Sabad Nirantar* makes efforts not to alienate or create an 'other' out of folk artist communities when entering them as an outsider. Shah's rendition of the Kabir tradition seems to prove Partha Chatterjee's (a1986)

point that in India, the traditions are entangled *within* the modern, and so to engage with the traditions is not a gaze back in time. Her filmed subjects are not treated as a ‘repository of indigeneity’. Rather she is examining how an oral transmission system operates as a social economy generated through language and verse. Her film editorial technique combines human observation with a reassembling of the ‘tradition’ that ebbs and flows between her own and her protagonists’ imagination. Conversations held in confidence seem to be the only way to resist histories in which folk cultures have been demeaned, plundered or mythologized as ‘marginal’. Shah’s vision is that the traditions are alive and well, and have no need to be defended. There is no redemptive model of reclaiming art from anonymity. Shah is tracing, rather, the genealogy of Kabir narratives as a shared currency in social life.

In Ramani’s work, he seeks an emotional bond with his filmed subjects, but unlike Shah, some of his films reveal how they might *betray* the trust he has established with them<sup>159</sup>. This lack of idealism is one I read as significant in Indian documentary poetics, since it contradicts the view of traditional artists as the ‘innocents’ against a backdrop of India’s emergence as a modern capitalist state. Ramani’s subordination to the time frame set by the puppeteers also avoids imposing his own demands on his filmed subjects. This compares with my own ‘Claims for Practice’ in which I refer to the concept of *moving with* the co-actors in research and filmmaking processes, ‘walking with’ or travelling with them to sustain a connection with their worldview (see Chapter 2, page 56). Like Ramani, I feel it is important in filmmaking to be able to honour the contingency of co-actors in their environment.

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<sup>159</sup> Films like *If I Die* (about the Karate expert discussed in Chapter 3 or *Last Family* (1995) (about nine highly egotistical experimental dramatists) exemplify his cynicism in this respect.

To state the obvious, Dutta, Shah and Ramani are exploring the implications of socio-cultural relationships within their own national heritage, a perspective that as a European is not accessible to me. In my case, I am investigating how performative expressions develop out of a mass devotional context in India, how the Warkari pilgrims reclaim and re-order Time itself through their ritual re-enactment. Dutta's concern seems rather to be about the phenomenology of performance as a branch of anthropology, in cases where anthropology uses movie cameras. My intention was to make a work that is more like a series of musical/visual 'movements' than a socio-cultural investigation of Warkari that in any case resist essentializing. I was also seeking points of connection between filmmaking as my art form, and the "living of life" of the Warkari through their musical transmission, dance and ritual engagement. My project has involved me in an 'argumentation of modes of being' (in Rancière's terms) that creates a distinction with my regular occupation of teaching, making paintings and research. It offered me the opportunity to make certain choices about art, and its relation to social/ritual experience, hoping to make sense of these through practice rather than within the self-contained and controllable nature of academic reflection.

To retrieve Dutta's point about the camera as an instrument of war, I do not underestimate the impact of colonial anthropologists who perpetuated the use of photographic technology to objectify, categorize and criminalize certain castes or ethnic groups in Indian society, but there are other historical attributions of early camera technologies that I would hope not to dismiss in the process. The art historian, Wendy Bellion (c2002: Parts 1 & 2) traces a period in the early camera obscura technologies in America (in 1758 to 1804) in which a variety of magic lanterns, telescopic tubes, magnifiers, zograscope, magic mirrors, and so called "divination

boxes”<sup>160</sup> were invented to speculate philosophically about vision as an optical science. Known collectively as "pleasing deceptions," these cameras exploited optical illusion and visual deception as a popular entertainment theme. This *speculative* attribution to the technology comes closer to my way of assigning the camera that allows me to ask questions about the nature of ‘seeing’ itself, whilst also engaging in the lives of the Warkari. It is also the way that Ramani imagines his camera having multiple purposes, which allows the kind of variation of image that make his films so compelling.

As a camera operator in my projects, I may be receptive to “what I do not know about you” unfolding before the lens, whilst also playing out my suppositions of “your past histories” or “your unrealized futures”. Hence, the camera in my understanding is a means to ‘divine’ what may yet occur between us (in the French sense of ‘*diviner*’ meaning ‘to guess’). It is a divining instrument. But, whilst I may be imagining the camera in one specific way, my *co-actors* may be imagining it differently, drawing on their own film historical memory. This points towards the question of ‘difference’ that I mentioned in my ‘Claims for Practice’<sup>161</sup>. It is necessary to acknowledge that our *empirical* ‘self’ is bounded by identifying itself with our geo-political conditions, whilst what we might wish for a ‘unitary consciousness’ that goes beyond these boundaries. The latter is not always reached by being able to communicate successfully the purpose of making a film, for the idea of a ‘directorial purpose’ often has a way of disrupting the possibility of selves being

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<sup>160</sup> Some of these early inventors were Frances Hopkinson, John McAllister, Signor Falconi, Joseph Harris (who wrote *Treatise of Optics*, 1775) and Pierre Eugene de Simitière and their activities were demonstrated at the American Museum in Philadelphia, USA, contributing to a culture of optical illusionism. (Bellion, c2002)

<sup>161</sup> See Chapter 2, page 54

experienced as shared. Once again I go back to Cixous' framing of the uncertainty of 'self' in the figure of the executioner. With respect to creative processes, it is impossible to seek certainty or fixity of identity.

If Dutta's perception of the film camera as a 'weapon' is an admission that to record 'from life' is inextricable bound to a colonial anthropological epistemology (in Indian production environments), my question would be whether we can disrupt this epistemology by exploring methods that might be anticolonial or at least semiotically disruptive. I mentioned above that Dutta's hybridity of film style in *Scribbles on Akka* might be read in this way, but I question whether this intention is disavowed if, at the moment when she is *on set and shooting*, the camera retains its status as a 'weapon of colonial inscription'. In the overarching film style and edit of her film, she seems to strive for a 'democratized' gaze in which authenticating devices (that are found in colonial filmic paradigms) are debunked. But can this ever happen if the on set encounter is trapped in this distanced and implicit aggression of the camera operator?

In my project with the Warkari, however, Dutta's film did usefully challenge me to confront my 'British-ness' towards India's traditions, taking into account where I stood with regard to my agency in the encounter. Shooting the pilgrimage was my first experience of filmmaking in India beyond the collaborative partnerships I have had with theatre artists and filmmakers in urban middle class environments. The majority of pilgrims are farmers or villagers and singing, dancing and reciting the *abhangas* of the Maharashtran *sants* is their everyday practice. Prior to the shoot, I had imagined that the way of addressing my own cultural biases would be through purely rational means. But this project demonstrated to me on the contrary that 'aesthetic regimes' are rarely formed by conscious choices alone. Rather, there is an



entire web of social, emotional, chance, technological and other contingencies that were constantly affecting my interactions with the Warkari.

This sense of almost infinite contingencies is one that tapers incrementally as the post-production phase nears its end. For once the ‘consciousness of the film’ makes itself known to the filmmaker, we become increasingly concerned with imagining where the future film belongs, and how the release of the film can be planned. In some cases, this may already have been determined by a commissioning agency but alternatively, but if the project was an independent venture, sooner or later we are confronted with film programmers, commissioning editors or curators who impact on the film’s terms of authorship. The way that this intervention happens and the demands that they impose are the subject of the next heading.

### **5.9 The film release phase.** [Notes on distribution contexts for films on India’s traditions in relation to the reviewed filmmakers’ and my own project].

Out of the filmmakers from India discussed in Chapters 2 to 5, many of their films have been produced with funding from multinational private foundations [such as the Ford Foundation] that have strong ties with Indian and global Government development programmes. The filmmaker, Paromita Vohra (c2011:50) writes that since the 2000’s ‘a large amount of funding sources for the documentary remain tied to a programmatic agenda’. Here she is referring to foundations like Ford or UNESCO, but also to the NGO and charity sector domestically whose projects are often linked with agendas of societal reform and civil rights. She adds,

For a film that does not fall into an interpretation of that agenda, funding often has to be sought from outside India. Thus, a significant number of documentaries are now funded by European, British, and, to a lesser extent, US

broadcasters. (Vohra, c2011: 50)

My questioning of the Indian filmmakers' distribution contexts links with an underlying ideological history of patronage of the traditions in India, an important topic that nevertheless exceeds the immediate remit of this thesis. In this document therefore I am merely able to demonstrate a few key observations of how distribution demands excerpt influence on film authorship.

With respect to my own project, *The Warkari Cycle*, I received a very minimal budget from the British Council augmented by personal resources. Since this work was closely affiliated with my PhD research and was unlike any other project in my career as an artist, my identification of appropriate contexts for its distribution is still in development. The British Council did not place any particular demands on the content or edit of my project, since their funding was designated for open-ended research purposes. I will be returning a little later to discuss my imagined site of distribution (in both UK/European and Indian art galleries) and the conditions of curatorship that this imposed.

First I will consider the films (on India's traditional practices) by the Indian filmmakers I have reviewed, initially regarding their *international* distribution. I have remarked that editorial pressures from commissioning agencies and festival programmers display particular and telling tendencies. I thought it relevant to pick out short case-study examples to discuss what lies behind their expectations.

**Example 1:** The filmmaker, Deepa Dhanraj<sup>162</sup> spoke of a demand from European and American commissioning editors and festival programmers (among them, the International Documentary Festival of Amsterdam) to remove the voiceover

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<sup>162</sup> Interviewed by the author per email, 12.3.2012.

commentary in her new film *Invoking Justice* (2012). The film traces a Tamil women's collective who have established their own '*Jamaat*', which is a justice system bound to their practice as Muslims<sup>163</sup>. The filmmaker's first person voiceover restages telephone calls in which she questioned her protagonists. Whilst the example I have chosen does not refer to a traditional *performance* form, it has parallels in many ways as a community-based legal system that is intrinsically bound to religious belief. Dhanraj observed<sup>164</sup> that in current (western) documentary programming conventions, the fashion is to avoid voiceover commentary in documentary for fear of over-prescribing the viewer's experience, but she contests,

...the [voiceover] narration created a level of complexity that goes beyond the easy multi-culti universal access. People are uncomfortable with too much talk of faith and it is easier to cast the [Tamil] women's agency in a secular feminist discourse. (Dhanraj, email correspondence with the author, March 2012)

This secularizing framing in the industry demonstrates how concepts that are frequently explored through documentary, such as 'justice', 'representation' or 'conscience' are permitted an association with politics and gender but not with religious belief. On this bias, the postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies an element within Euro-American political thinking that seems to illuminate how the above tendency in film commissioning practices points to an underlying ideological assumption. In his words, this is the idea "that the human exists in a frame of a singular and secular historical time that envelops other kinds of time" and "that gods

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<sup>163</sup> It was established to take responsibility for legal cases by appealing against the male *Jamaat* that had failed in its ethical responsibility, in the women's view.

<sup>164</sup> Telephone conversation, Deepa Dhanraj, March 2012 with the author.

and spirits are treated as ‘social facts’; that the social somehow exists prior to them”. (Chakrabarty, 2000:16). So there is ultimately a contradiction in the supposed ‘neutrality’ or lack of authorial supremacy that the commissioners require from Dhanraj, whilst her sense is that there is a discomfort with talking about faith in their request. Her response was to create two masters of the project, one for India and one for Europe/America. This importantly indicated to me how narratives get re-shaped by film distributors so that we as audiences already received a culturally biased project.

**Example 2:** When I took part in 2009 in an online film industry forum between filmmakers from India and Europe launched by Zelig, Formedia and the Thomson Foundation<sup>165</sup> called ‘LINCT’, a question raised by one of the projects’ founders, the journalist Neelima Mathur, was whether we could imagine a ‘globally transferrable documentary topic’. Her question led to much controversy and the Indian participants in the forum expressed the view that European commissioning editors privileged documentary scripts that have just one or two key characters and had an auto/biographical style<sup>166</sup>. They rejected narratives that depict communities in their wider political co-ordinates. Gargi Sen, (of Magic Lantern Foundation) commented that ‘the complexities of India are multi-dimensional and so Indian films with

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<sup>165</sup> The initiative is called ‘LINCT’ funded by the EU’s *Media International Preparatory Action* to promote Euro-South Asian film co-productions. The forum took place on 3.6.09 <http://www.docnetworld.org/> (Accessed 4.7.09)

<sup>166</sup> This was re-affirmed by Vohra in her article claiming, “There is a preference and encouragement here for the use of the first person in the narration of these films. The use of the ‘I’ happens here within a very different programmatic context. Foreign commissions often ask for a ‘compelling personal story’ following a single character and placing the film-maker as an ‘I’ looking for a personal connect, an emotional story”. (Vohra, 2011: 50)

complex narratives don't meet commissioning approval in Europe'<sup>167</sup>. I believe also that the European television commissioners see the 'multi-textual' characteristic in Indian non-fiction filmmaking (a cinematography in which categories of 'genre' are more fluid) as potentially 'confusing' for viewers used to western documentary styles. My view cannot really be proven since any commissioning editor would reasonably defend against such bias. But if we believe the highly experienced documentary Director of Photography, Ranjan Palit, quoted on the LINCT platform, he claimed that topics that are 'crass, sexually explicit or morbid' (like prostitution, AIDS, or films based on regions of armed conflict) were also given preference by western editors. Furthermore, scripts were prioritized that re-iterate stereotypes about India and Indians, with themes such as 'India as a 'boom economy with a rotten core' (the 'rotten core' being its human rights record, corruption and caste conflict).

As a British resident, I have long been exposed to the BBC's programmes on India produced in this country that often sustain a neo-colonial mode of address. White British presenters feature in these programmes as adventurers exploring the 'culturally exotic Indian Sub-continent'. The comedian/presenter's 'Paul Merton in India' is a typical example (shown on Channel Five, April 2010<sup>168</sup>). The DVD sales page for the series carries the strap line, 'Searching out the weird and the wonderful in an intrepid Indian adventure'. Simon Reeve, another presenter of 'Tropic of Cancer' (2010 episode 4, India, BBC HD) travels from Gujarat to Kolkata, and "spots the shy Indian wild ass, learns of the violence between Hindus and Muslims in Gandhi's home city of

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<sup>167</sup> This citation of Gargi Sen's is taken from the transcript of the above-mentioned online conference. June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2009 session titled: "LINCT Live area" catalogued under "Day 1".

<sup>168</sup> For reference to this series, see <http://www.channel5.com/shows/paul-merton-in-india/episodes/episode-1-18> (Accessed 2.12.2012)

Ahmadabad and visits the site of the world's worst industrial accident in Bhopal”<sup>169</sup>

Such programmes dangerously ‘dumb down’ major political incidents of India’s recent history that a film like Tapan Bose and Suhasini Mulay’s *Bhopal Beyond Genocide* (1986) would convey far more reliably to global audiences. Indian documentary filmmakers’ response to such trends is either to succumb to the demand for stereotyping, at least in terms of chosen topic, or to seek alternative commissioning sources that would allow other kinds of narratives to be developed. This has triggered many filmmakers to re-focus on domestic sources of production, sticking with what Vohra (c2011: 50) calls the ‘programmatic agenda’ of India’s commissioning and distribution options.

**Example 3:** In an article by filmmaker, Ruchir Joshi, “Can you cut it down?” (Raqs Media Collective, a2000: 25) he describes a scenario in which the UK-based Channel 4 producer, Alain Fountain required him to re-edit *Eleven Miles* (a 180-minute film) that this channel had funded to a mere 26 minutes. This is perhaps the most common requisite that filmmakers from India might face when distributing their works internationally. This explains why a film like RV Ramani’s *Nee Engey* (2003, 150 minutes) has little chance of exposure beyond India, but was conceived rather with a domestic touring context in mind. Clearly the film’s long duration is integral to the narrative, but looking more contextually, we should note that in South Asian film culture both commercial fiction and the documentary have historically been standardized at longer durations. This relates directly to epic storytelling and performance histories in South Asia, influenced also by Arabic and Persian storytelling. [For further reference to such narrative forms, see Booth (c1995: 172)]

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<sup>169</sup> Citation quoted from [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00rz75f](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00rz75f) featured on BBC HD Feb 25th 2011 (Accessed 16.7.2011)

From the above examples we might well surmise that distributors are imposing different conditions on the authorial process in Europe than in India. Films should be short and more concise with single-stranded stories that avoid ‘excessive’ political commentary, questions of faith and multi-textuality. In the case of film commissioners in India, a message of socio-political reform linked topically to the organizations’ specific agenda is to be expected, or alternatively the notion of ‘heritage conservation’ is imposed. Although the pressures cited in these examples are not the only ones, they are nevertheless instructive. The above-mentioned demands from international programmers have also triggered initiatives such as Majlis’ CinemaCity,<sup>170</sup> to prove how independent filmmakers in India are not willing to be compromised by European programming agendas, but choose rather to establish their own distribution contexts domestically.

What happens then, when we lay the above observations next to my own experience when imagining the distribution of *The Warkari Cycle*? As mentioned above, this project is planned for exhibition in art gallery contexts, so it would be inappropriate to make a direct comparison since my project lies in a different category; the art market. Yet if we observe this market from a British perspective, clearly there are biases that prevail here too concerning the selection criteria of programmers of ‘video-artworks’ and where they would position works under the rubric ‘Indian traditional practices’.

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<sup>170</sup> *CinemaCity*, (in Mumbai, 2010-12) curated by Madhusree Dutta and her company, *Majlis* explores Asian cinema since the 1950’s engaging the concept of film production in post-colonial cities. *CinemaCity* documents, archives and re-reads the industry through a city-wide, inter-disciplinary research programme including exhibitions, film screenings and group discussions. Source: <http://asiasociety.org/calendars/cinemacity> (Accessed, 2.6.2012)

Tacit forms of censorship exist in these programming agendas despite the metropolitan nature of cities like London where I live and make my work. The type of debate on ‘traditional’ versus ‘contemporary’ art forms in an Asian context that I have problematized in this thesis has had little attention here. Artworks by artists practicing today who chose to engage with India’s traditions fall outside the boundaries of what is seen as ‘contemporary’ art practice, a term which is of course culturally relative. In Britain too, another phenomenon exists whereby artists whose artworks (whether in video installation or other media) are about regions beyond Europe or America are frequently expected by curators to demonstrate how their work is rooted in their experience of *belonging to the same culture* as the people they depict. To illustrate this point, a video artist like Zineb Sedira is critically reviewed in such a way that her racial background becomes the *raison d’être* for the artwork within current curatorial framings<sup>171</sup>. Whilst the work of artists like Sedira or Zarina Bhimji<sup>172</sup> is important to profile in an art world that for many decades has privileged white Euro-American artists, the way in which being ‘culturally different’ is allocated must necessarily be continually reviewed. This is so that we avoid the notion that race is linked with the locality of creative production in some originary sense. Kobena Mercer offers the insight on this point, that we ‘shouldn’t have had filled the blanks with known identities while we left unknown [ones] out’ saying that, ‘a cosmopolitan figure is someone with no loyalty to a state, but a cosmopolitan person is a framework for

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<sup>171</sup> This review citation by Milliard illustrates this framing: “The French-born, London-based artist Zineb Sedira is perhaps best known for pieces such as *Mother Tongue* (2002), a video triptych showing the generational shift of languages in her family over the course of successive migrations – her Algerian parents’ Arabic, her own French, and her daughter’s English....this work brought into sharp relief the ineluctable consequences of immigration...” (Milliard, c2008)

<sup>172</sup> The artist photographer, Zarina Bhimji, was born in Mbarara, Uganda to Indian parents, and moved to Britain in 1974 studying at Goldsmiths University. She was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2007.



rethinking identities' (Mercer, c2007: 1). In other words, loyalty to one's 'home' state need not become a requisite in imagining cultural identity.

Fortunately, however, through our films and artworks, artists have the capability of re-ordering the terms and conditions of viewership, which in turn impacts on curatorial practice. Despite this potential, there is often a discrepancy between commercial market pressures and the culturally reductive categories that curators sometimes impose, a categorization that artists all over the world are busy resisting. If I look at the type of demands that the Indian documentary practitioners are facing from those who programme their films, I acknowledge that in some ways they resemble the ones that I face. I have been approached, for example, by a London based curator who wishes me to provide an eight-minute clip from *The Warkari Cycle* for a touring exhibition of dance films across the UK. The premise here is that 'short' is marketable, whereas 'long' is not.

I would like to close this chapter by describing *The Warkari Cycle's* first public screening that was in context of an academic conference presenting 'Indian documentary films'. Since my project had not been designed as a 'documentary' this raised some instructive problems about an incompatibility of contexts in exposing audiences to this work that I will use the next section to explore.

The event was titled the *Persistence/Resistance* festival hosted by my university (SOAS, University of London) in partnership with Goldsmiths, LSE and Westminster Universities initiated by Gargi Sen, the director of Magic Lantern Foundation, New Delhi. Nicole Wolf (Lecturer in Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths College) was the London-based partnering curator with Magic Lantern Foundation. Each university was invited to contribute to the programming and selection of visiting

filmmakers in the 8-day programme in November 2011. The invited filmmakers present were Rahul Roy, Saba Dewan, Deepa Dhanraj, Rajula Shah, Arun Khopkar and Yasmine Kabir (the latter, Bangladeshi). Also participating were international academics with a South Asian focus, as well as audiences with little prior knowledge of 'Documentary Practices in India'; the festival's main topic of debate. I decided to consider this as a platform that would help me define how I wished to exhibit the project in future.

*The Warkari Cycle* was thus mounted in a converted classroom with one large screen and two monitors showing the short films set apart from the festival's main auditorium. The three shorter films were played on monitors with headphones. I expected a slow stream of visitors throughout the day but in practice, the bulk of my audience visited the screening in one crowd, and therefore many would not have waited to see the smaller works that were integral to the installation. With hindsight, this context of showing amongst documentaries (screened as linear narratives) compromised my project considerably, since it undermined how a 'video installation' functions differently for its audiences. No discussion at the conference flagged up the difference of video installation shown amidst documentaries, nor the fact that I was depicting an Indian cultural tradition as the only European amongst South Asians. I also experienced a conflict of interests in being a panel moderator *and* an exhibiting artist at once, since my responsibility was to profile the guest filmmakers from India, not my own practice.

Also worth mentioning was that Rajula Shah, who had committed to screening an excerpt of her film on the Warkari pilgrimage that she was developing and had shot alongside me, withdrew at the last minute for personal reasons. But this outcome changed our agreed desire to screen two independent projects on the Warkari

movement alongside each other, Shah's and my own. It aborted the possibility of a potentially valuable artistic dialogue as practitioners that I had hoped to share with her, and I was left to screen my project on my own. What the experience did prove, however, is that *The Warkari Cycle* is a "site-specific" video installation that needs to be re-configured to suit each exhibition context, with appropriate publicity announcement. It also brought to my attention that I would like to include more of the monitor-based short films in future screenings, showing other aspects of the pilgrimage.

Across this paper, I have chronicled various sets of relationships in documentary production; firstly citing the historical canons of how documentary subjects have been situated, then commenting on the filmmaker-to-co-actor relationship as articulated by a range of contemporary filmmakers. Having discussed the film production matrix that I experienced in the Warkari pilgrimage, I then examined how editing tactics, commissioners and distributors impact on the documentary encounter (in relation to my own and to the Indian filmmakers' practice). I then considered how specific examples of documentary aesthetic emerge from, and situate the relationship with their protagonists. From this journey through film production, my final chapter will single out various themes that link these different production phases together, assembling findings about the re-signification of performance traditions as a global and local concern in India.

## Chapter 6. Conclusions

### 6.1 Introduction

We have seen throughout this thesis how aesthetic systems in the films discussed are conditioned by balances of power, political claims and the situational and intimate tensions between filmmaker and filmed. These systems are also subject to time, location and the economy of the medium itself, the digital film industry and its cultural and technological parameters. My model of ‘possible sets of relationships’ cited at the end of Chapter 3 hypothesized what filmmakers and filmed subjects bring to the encounter on an individual level as their ‘mode of address’. But I would like to acknowledge more comprehensively what the practices mentioned in this thesis are contributing to understandings of non-fiction filmmaking in the region, as well as to India’s ongoing discourse on traditional cultural performance as evident in their films.

Concerning the ways that narratives form in society, we can imagine a state of mind in which our emerging consciousness shuttles between the ‘authoritative’ and the ‘internally persuasive’,<sup>173</sup> discourses of religion, politics, moral and social relationships (Bakhtin a1981: 424), and - in my addition also - the discourse of screen-based media as an influential conditioning environment. We are by turns active, passive, powerful/disempowered subjects of these framings, and such tension carries over into the making of films, where these fragmentary resistances rise to the

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<sup>173</sup> ‘*Authoritative discourse* is privileged language that approaches us from without; it is distanced, taboo, and permits no play with its framing context [Sacred writ for example]...It has great power over us, but only while in power. Opposed to it is *internally persuasive discourse*, which is more akin to retelling a text in one’s own words. Human coming-into-consciousness, struggles between these two types of discourse: an attempt to simulate more into one’s own system, and the simultaneous freeing of one’s own discourse from the authoritative word. (Bakhtin a1981: 424 drawn from the editor, Michael Holquist’s glossary of Bhakhtin’s terms)

surface. My research makes the connection that this has a direct bearing on how film technologies are used to stake films' aesthetic regimes. So the choice between, for example, a follow shot or a top shot, the timing, location and a film's edited structure embody the nature of the encounter between filmmaker and filmed subject. But it has also become evident that forces *beyond* the interpersonal encounter already pre-empt what will occur there. I refer here to patronage systems, but also to debates on traditional art forms and specific minority groups, as these exist in India today.

From the wide range of 'documentary' or 'multi-textual' film practices mentioned across the chapters, I have discussed the work of filmmakers who are activists, feminists, artists, anthropologists, ex-journalists and oral historians. I now face the task of commenting on approaches or shared dilemmas that their works illuminate. I will also reflect on my learning from the production experience of my project on the Warkari, tying this in with the above. I have streamlined issues that consistently emerge across this document into five major areas. These are: questions of 'cultural difference'; the revisions and contestations in the films' mode of address; what the films are conveying about the traditions in their cinematic form; personal learning and common cinematographic practices. Using these topics as headings, I will then provide brief sub-headings that announce different facets of the arguments I am exposing under these wider topical frameworks.

## **6.2 Staking 'Cultural difference'**

### **On 'rendering visible'.**

When assessing how the reviewed filmmaking practices are *situating* the traditions, the question of how 'difference' is allocated, and what it means to 'render someone visible' emerged as important considerations. Filmmakers that I interviewed

during fieldwork often justified their endeavour by saying they were ‘giving visibility’ to their filmed subjects, thus saving them from an assumed anonymity or erasure. This was a claim that indicated to me, how their perceptions may have merged with the institutional patrons funding the filmmakers. In ideological terms, it also links with James Clifford’s ‘salvage paradigm’ (c1987),<sup>174</sup> the notion of rescuing an authentic cultural experience from those who are at a distance from the assumed ‘evils’ of mainstream movements. The traditional artists are hereby construed as ‘vulnerable’ and the filmmakers’ task becomes one of reclaiming their value to society. The ‘developmental modern’ ethos of India’s early documentary history (in relation the Films Division and State institutional patronage, see Chapter 2.7) provides a context that strongly endorses this salvage of ‘subaltern’ elements in society which is taken as beneficial to national development as well as to the project of India’s perceived ‘modernization’. Viewed less cynically, the filmmakers’ desire to ‘render visible’ can inversely be seen as a resisting or correcting of cultural stereotypes by revealing certain aspects of societal groups that have been chronically misrepresented or ignored. In such cases, the filmmaker is challenging audiences to revise the ways that subalterity is defined.

### **The ethics of allocation.**

Meanwhile, we can note that many of the groups to whom the filmmakers are giving screen time continue to contest their unjust social exclusion, yet their protests, I would argue, have sometimes been disavowed by the *mode of representation* in the documentaries themselves. I acknowledge that filmmakers (or indeed researchers like

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<sup>174</sup> The ‘salvage paradigm’ in Clifford’s framing reflects a desire to ‘rescue something authentic’ out of cycles of historical change that are assumed to be destructive. The context he attributes this to is in ethnographic literature and studies as well as ‘in the connoisseurship and collections in the art world, in a range of familiar nostalgias’ (c1987: 160)

myself) are often parasitic upon our subjects' artistry and impassioned pleas for justice, whilst sometimes detaching ourselves from the political implications of the role we play in addressing them. By way of illustrating this point is the case of Waqar Khan and Bhau Korde who are both migrant residents of the extensive Dharavi district in Mumbai<sup>175</sup>. They are also filmmakers whose films directly challenge the prejudice they have experienced whilst also seeking to eradicate ethnic tensions within the *basti* using filmmaking to campaign for greater tolerance. Khan and Korde in addition became the subjects of a film made about them by Anjali Monteiro and J.P. Jayasankar called *Naata (The Bond, 2003)* the latter both professors at the Tata Institute, Centre for Media and Cultural Studies (Mumbai). But Korde declares openly on camera in this film:

It suits them to make films about us, the filmmakers and the researchers. (Bhau Korde in, *Naata*, 2003. Trans. From Marathi by the filmmakers, Monteiro and Jayasankar).

Here he is recognizing that he has been chosen as a filmed subject by Monteiro and Jayasankar, who belong to an intellectual elite, because their livelihoods *depend on a perpetual re-casting* of citizens like Korde as 'marginal'. Thus, the urban poor, the slum dwellers, alongside other minorities are construed as communities that filmmakers 'render visible' and 'capacitate'. When I asked Monteiro why she had

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<sup>175</sup> Dharavi is Mumbai's largest and most historic *basti* or 'slum' district, a term often disputed since it accounts for 54% of the city's inhabitants and a vast informal labour network. In business terms, however, its inhabitants are annexed from the rest of the city (for example, by being refused credit loans from national banks.) So a social condition exists that, whilst the labour classes here are annually turning over \$15,000,000 worth of goods, their presence is wished away by the citizens who depend on them economically. (Source: interview with the filmmaker Anjali Monteiro, who is also widely recognised as a social scientist, Mumbai, 8.8.2010)

included Korde's comment in her film, she replied, 'We created a visibility for them, but we can't escape the politics of that' (interview, July 2010, Mumbai). Clearly, Korde's comment was addressed to the directors, but Monteiro and Jayasankar choose not to respond to his observation *in their film*. This leads to an epistemological 'short circuit' that occurs between elite filmmakers and their working class subjects where the impasse goes uncommented on screen. I suggest that this lack of commentary signals a migration of filmmaking tactics usually associated with television journalism that are now being adopted by 'independent filmmakers'. The 'journalistic mode' (if I may speak generically) is to report 'catastrophic facts' or 'dramatize political deadlocks' whilst disengaging with the responsibility to resolve them. But perhaps the expectation of what makes a filmmaker independent is that we render ourselves visible as political subjects, and therefore would consider ourselves accountable at the very least, for the problematic relationships that our own films incite. I will return to make *myself* visible in this respect, under the section on my personal learning.

### **Recovering from the anonymous**

The filmmaker, Shabnam Virmani, whose film series on the Kabir followers of Rajasthan has generated four documentaries<sup>176</sup> discussed with me<sup>177</sup> her collaboration with the Rajasthani vocalist, Mukhtiar Ali, repeatedly mentioning how Ali benefitted from the 'visibility' her films afforded him. This led (in her view) to

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<sup>176</sup> These films are respectively titled, *Chalo Hamara Desh (Farewell our country)*; *Had Anhad (Bounded, Boundless)*; *Koi Sunta Hai (Someone is listening)* and *Kabira Khada Bazaar Mein (In the Market Stands Kabir)* See <http://www.kabirproject.org> for details on the project history and individual outputs (Accessed 2 .2. 2011)

<sup>177</sup> This was during an interview by the author with Virmani, held at the *Indian Council for Cultural Relations*, New Delhi, September 2009.



the increased renown of Ali in his village, and has reduced the impact of prejudice by orthodox Islamic groups against the more liberal/syncretic expressions expounded in his music. Again, whilst Virmani's sincerity is not in question, the perception of the filmmaker as the catalyst of beneficiary effects is one that can be seen as *sustaining and reproducing* a paternalistic (or maternal) hierarchy by positioning herself as Ali's moral and cultural mentor. In reality, however, Ali is *Virmani's* benefactor in terms of intellectual property rights to his music. But there is a more profound economy behind their artistic collaboration that Virmani is failing to recognize. This economy is one that Rancière (a2006: 32) signalled, whereby screen-based media, in order to be able to confer visibility on anonymous individuals, first need to be recognized as art forms rather than merely as 'techniques of reproduction'. The same principle that confers visibility on any potential subject allows for filmmaking to become an 'art':

It is because the anonymous became the subject matter of art, that the act of recording such a subject matter *can be* an art. The fact that what is anonymous is not only susceptible to becoming the subject matter of art but also conveys a specific beauty, is an exclusive characteristic of the aesthetic regime of the arts. Not only did the aesthetic regime of the arts begin well before the arts of mechanical reproduction, but it is actually this regime that made them possible". (Rancière, a2006 [2000]: 32)

Building on the above view, I propose that we first need to assess the underlying principle of what constitutes the 'art' form that filmmakers claim as their property when they are 'recovering the anonymous'. For before any such claim is possible, we should examine what the filmmaker brings to the orders of perception through the recombining of forms in their film language.

But whilst there are some amongst the documentary filmmakers of my survey who appear to be framing the traditions according to a paradigm of ‘salvage’ these are, I suggest, in a minority. Many more filmmakers such as Ajay Bhardwaj, Nirmal Chander, Amar Kanwar<sup>178</sup>, Rahul Roy, R.V. Ramani, Deepa Dhanraj and Rajula Shah are on the contrary *dismantling* paternalistic, authoritarian centre-to-margin cultural orders in the scripting of their films. By way of seeking an un-categorical name for these, I am calling these practices “open ended inquiries” and I would like to take the filmmaker, Ajay Bhardwaj’s film, *Where the Twain Shall Meet*, (2004) as an instructive example to demonstrate its difference from the above approach.

### **Open-ended inquiries**

In *Where the Twain Shall Meet*, Bhardwaj’s filmed subjects are the dalit Sufis from the Punjab, and his purpose is to identify how the combined strands of their cultural identity (spiritual, caste-based, political and musical) converge and claim their own space in a regional matrix specific to the Punjab. What makes this film of Bhardwaj’s ‘open-ended’ is that it shows how the musical artists are operating through a ritualized collective body that transgresses the conventional boundaries of religious and other hegemonic forces that would otherwise have excluded them. This is a very different intention than ‘reclaiming’ a traditional practice from its supposed anonymity. The Punjabi Dalit resistance movement expressed in Sufi *Q’wali* music documented in his film is preventing the community’s marginalization by orthodox

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<sup>178</sup> Although Kanwar’s work has not been discussed in this thesis, his film *Lightening Testimonies* (2000) is detailed under heading 6.3. His exclusion as a research informant is mainly because his work in the 15 years has avoided addressing Indian audiences, making it difficult to trace back the impact of his representation of traditional practices to their domestic contexts.

Jāt Sikhs, (a local ethnically-based religious authority) without explicitly entering a Sikh discourse.<sup>179</sup>

These dalit Sufis<sup>180</sup> view themselves as disenfranchised under the Hindu caste system, though Sufism is equally an Islamic practice in the Punjab (as elsewhere). Furthermore, they are *adivasi* -an ethnic category- and suffer an added form of marginalization through abuses of their land inheritance and rights to work. They sing *na't* (songs praising Muhammad) at the *mazars* (tomb shrines)<sup>181</sup> and music is demonstrated to be the only conceivable way in which cultural identity can cross class, caste and religious boundaries through its ways of defining their community. Bhardwaj's film testifies, then, how a devotional tradition has challenged the discrimination of a religious and civil authority in unexpected ways, staging a collective contestation.

What Bhardwaj as a filmmaker also demonstrates, in common with many of the filmmakers I have discussed, is that the *authoring* process between filmmaker and filmed subject is imagined as a dynamic movement. In other words, the argument that the film presents (even whilst we may consider it a 'finished' film) is suspended in a state of *becoming*; it tracks an ongoing argument between the protagonists and

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<sup>179</sup> This idea is inspired by Catherine Bell's notion of 'privileged contrast'. See Bell in Holdrege, 1990:24)

<sup>180</sup> The history of this movement dates back to the *Ad Dharm Mandal* movement, (the term means 'without religious progeny') when they were pressurized by the Arya Samaj, Singh Sabha (and others) to align themselves to the dominant religions of the Punjab, so as to comply with the separate electorate for each faith under British governance. The *Q'waalis* were then evolving and transforming amidst these movements since Dalits (historically) guarded the key Sufi shrines. Hindu separatists tried to co-opt supporters by repressing the non-Brahminical traditions of the Dalits, and the Jats and the Sikh fundamentalist clergy see any assertion against them as a threat to the Sikh Panth, giving it a communal colour. (Information source: goooglemail chat dialogue with Bhardwaj, 5.8.2009)

<sup>181</sup> See Brockington and King, 2005: 278, for reference to this strand of devotional music.

filmmaker. Rajula Shah's film *Sabad Nirantar* (2008) also creates the impression that her encounter with the reciters of Kabir's poetry in Madhya Pradesh is not over with the last frame of the film. Rather, we have witnessed a slice out of a far larger cultural discourse. Because questions of identity in India engage such complex socio-cultural and regional co-ordinates, different language groups, communitarian alliances and so forth, as Shah herself expressed, a key motivation for her search involves assessing her own "Indian-ness" in relation to these extreme diversities within one nation. This is the type of search that will inevitably fail to deliver fixed answers and therefore is bound to lead to open-ended forms of film composition and inquiry. But to draw out issues that other filmmakers collectively have problematized, I would like to question other forms of resistance demonstrated in the films.

### **6.3 Revisions and contestations in the films' address**

#### **Claims on 'modernity'**

What I have discovered from the research of the cited Indian filmmakers above all is that the representation of the traditions is inevitably a political matter. In an Indian context, religious festivals, domestic storytelling, devotional dramas and events such as pilgrimages offer sites for public discourse that, whilst being entertaining as a by-product, are distinct from performances produced exclusively for the entertainment industry. In complex ways, they synthesize religious, political and regional identities as philosophies and ways of living. It is through these localized practices that conventional (State institutional) concepts of 'development' are continually being challenged. Filmmakers have been drawn towards them to rethink basic cultural value systems, seen from a vantage point *within* the artist-communities.

The project of 'modernization' in India, as Octavio Paz commented (a1995: 81) drawing comparisons between India with Mexico in this respect, has been the

core of the national project of the Indian elites. Common amongst the films I have cited is that they imply that this endeavour and the thinking engaged within it has been hostile to traditional societal groups. Perhaps a more India-centric way of categorizing approaches towards Indian folk/traditional knowledge that expands upon the above (somewhat reductive) view is outlined by Art Historian, Geeta Kapur (a2005: 18) although she also situates the traditions in counterpoint with elite intellectual classes.

In Kapur's paradigm, 'folk art' is presented as appropriated by an aristocratic elite whilst the 'metropolitan intelligentsia' are broadly speaking 'progressive socialists' who would treat this appropriation with suspicion, though a cross-referencing occurs between these two groups. The appropriation of the traditions by the elites corrects (in her view) an all too easy coincidence between progressive and imperialist systems of cultural validation, whilst also deferring claims on 'modernism' for a more discerning independent intellectual community to mobilize. In another parallel trope, India's communists (she gives the example of the Indian People's Theatre Association in the 1950's) have historically elected specific folk traditions (rather than proletariat 'movements') since these are useful as a nexus around which communist agendas can be advanced. A third trope she acknowledges in an Indian context is the Gandhian model, where folk communities are seen as 'the self complete prototypes for a new and utopian social structure' (Kapur, a2005: 19). The urban intelligentsia in her categorization are also painted as nationalists whose 'modernism' asserts a resistance towards First World imperialism. They assume the role of a partially independent, self-conscious bourgeoisie 'who are able to pose issues of their own identity even when they cannot easily resolve the cultural problematic that fetters... their own liberation' (ibid, a2005: 19)

But the danger in both Paz's and Kapur's perspectives is of essentializing societal groups along class lines that many of the filmmakers I have been reviewing (myself included) would reject. Yet the fact that such frameworks are seen as relevant for thinking through inter-cultural relativity (in this case, by an art historian of considerable repute) cannot be ignored. I suggest that the filmmakers, carrying a certain suspicion about what authorizes such claims, find it pertinent to go out and explore the real conditions that nurture folk practices for themselves. They can thus gauge what difference it makes to society that these musical and performance forms are perpetuated, and what is their own relationship to them as artists working in another medium: film. The films have an important collective impact of redefining the terms of how India's contemporaneity is imagined, and who is entitled to claim it as such. The filmmakers are not considering the traditions as pertaining to an historic past. They are encountering India's cultural plurality by entering the arguments of the performer communities considered by many to be 'marginal'. They are effecting 'cross-cultural collaborations' within a national context. Moving from their metropolitan internationally driven film industry, they are inquiring into the minor narratives of India itself, finding ways to re-integrate these into a national consciousness and national (cultural) agendas, or perhaps for their own discrete interest that cannot be measured in these terms, in some cases.

### **The nature of the engagement with the traditions**

There are some filmmakers like Rahul Roy and Saba Dewan whose motivation to represent the communities they have documented connects with what I flagged up as a correction of stereotypes or problematic modes of historicizing certain groups. In the case of Roy, he has investigated Muslim working class men in ways that de-stigmatize and 'humanize' them in their lived environments. In Dewan's case,

*The Other Song* (2009) contests both colonial and present-day censorship of a Muslim *tawa'ifs* (courtesans') musical tradition in her exposé that comments on the historical process of the music's erasure. She does not paint the vocalists as 'victims'. Rather she reveals how moral pressure from a cultural elite has threatened this form that classical musicians have freely appropriated whilst letting the *tawa'if* legacy of singers atrophy in discredit.

Since the 2000's, a tendency evident in non-fiction filmmakers working in India is that they seem increasingly more willing to accommodate the unpredictable outcomes that occur through the encounters that they initiate with traditional artists. There is noticeably more tolerance and attention given to their heterogeneity and internal political dichotomies. An example here would be Nirmal Chander's depiction of the African-Indian Sidis in *All the World's a Stage* (2008) that tracks how the Sidis have commercialized one aspect of their ritual practice whilst maintaining a separate space for the ritual. Another indicative tendency in recent films is to avoid 'showcasing' one particular music or performance form. In a film like *My Camera and the Tsunami* (2011, by R.V. Ramani), the puppeteers whom he depicted previously in a more conventional investigative style in 2003 (in *Nee Engey*) have now become characters that are intermittently woven into his auto-ethnographic collage, which also includes his global friendships, a story about his camera and revelations about his experiments with filmmaking. Displaying a very different narrative purpose, but a similarly interwoven text, the filmmaker Amar Kanwar, opens his film *Night of Prophecy* (2002) with the poet, G.Venkanna's powerful

recitation of a dalit protest poem<sup>182</sup> (in Telengana, Andhra Pradesh) and includes other bards and contemporary poets in this roving elegy to human loss, in the aftermath of major civil conflicts in the states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Nagaland and Kashmir. Again, this indicates a synthesizing of multiple agents who are steering the narrative apart from the filmmaker.

#### **6.4 Personal learning from the practical filmmaking project**

Having considered some of the tendencies in the works of my peers in India, I would now like to review my learning from *The Warkari Cycle*, an experience that exposed me to the vicissitudes of negotiating on set relationships with the pilgrims. My own tactics were greatly illuminated by studying the tactics of the Indian filmmakers, but also developed at a tangent. In my case for instance, the discourse of ‘modernity’ that was relevant to them was different from my vantage point as a European. With hindsight I acknowledge that I was questioning an absence of relationality - if not to ‘my traditions’ - then at least to histories of such longevity in artistic production that emerge from devotional practice in my own European environment. My art education and peer discourses tend not to reference histories earlier than the 1960s as being directly influential to our practice. On the question of ‘subalterity’ and how my film allocates the Warkari, the ‘body-politic’ in our on set exchange was important to me, rather than a desire to make wider claims about the

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<sup>182</sup> To give a sense of this poem, the following provides an excerpt:

‘When we drink tea the glass gets polluted, when we enter a temple, the god ‘loses’ his power. But we breathe the air. Will they then boycott the air? We roam in the sun. Will they then forgo the sun? If the air and the Ganges is clean, how can you be polluted by our touch? Lifting our heads is “arrogance” bending it down is “befitting”. Wearing white is a crime, being intelligent is a curse. Our temples are different. Our schools are different. If we look at a high caste woman, they say they will cut off our limbs (..) Pick up the club, Pick up the club and chase away these thieves.’ (G.Venkanna, cited from *Night of Prophecy*, Trans. From Hindi by film director, Amar Kanwar, 2002)



Warkari's political status in Indian society, which I felt unqualified to do. To prioritize visual language, corporeality and music did not mean that the ethical negotiations became less important, but my 'co-actors' were groups of pilgrims in the thousands seen only in one isolated event, and so my intervention was by necessity more exploratory than conclusive.

In the shift from on set encounter to aesthetic choices, I was not always able in practice to go as far as I had hoped in establishing an intimacy on camera with the pilgrims, since this ultimately could only reflect the degree of intimacy I had attained in the pilgrim's environment. My footage therefore demonstrated a more observational quality than I had hoped for, which I then modified through my edit to give it a deliberately displaced treatment of sound and image. The project was extremely valuable, however, in stretching me as a filmmaker, particularly in exposing me to a great variety of responses by the pilgrims to the fact of being filmed. Importantly too, I overcame my own scepticism that I would not be able to engage meaningfully with a community like the Warkari as one who does not follow their religious commitment or belong to the movement and its way of life.

Although this is not necessarily evident in my film, I recognized a kind of inversion of power operating amongst the Warkari that compares with the dalit Sufis in the Punjab mentioned in Bhardwaj's project. This popular movement is made up predominantly of 'low' caste rural citizens who, when conducting the pilgrimage form a powerful corpus that renders local politicians subordinate to it, which they then seek to attract as a vote bank. Now the 'marginal' switches places to become the centre fold. I am wary, however, that by producing my video installation project for art galleries in India and Europe, *The Warkari Cycle* relegates the Warkari to a context in which this potency becomes buried again. Whilst my installation

predominantly addresses a middle class audience (in India and the UK) in ways that does not exoticize them, there are limitations in my choice of screening context, which I may consider re-visiting in future, perhaps by taking the film back to a Maharashtran context to screen it there. As it stands, the project is unashamedly self-interested; it was about *my* journey amongst the pilgrims, experimenting with how to convey the bodily experience of this on camera, through music and editing for this research purpose- to increase my awareness of these kinds of relationships of sociality in a devotional context.

In terms of documentary aesthetics, there are superficial resemblances between *The Warkari Cycle* and RV Ramani's film, *Saa* (1991) or Johan van de Keuken's film, *The Eye Above the Well* (1985). I particularly noted an expansion of my capacity to improvise on set with the camera, and more than the phenomenon of storytelling, I was interested in the pilgrimage as an ephemeral and constantly changing mobilization of a public devotional site. Yet with films that rely almost exclusively on visual and musical storytelling, their interpretation is more unfixed than those whose dialogues spell out their argument; rather than 'saying', our films *reveal* something, and without wishing to state literally what this is in my case, it stays close to the choreography of the pilgrimage itself and its complex and layered manifestations in the everyday.

### **Defending poetic technique**

This brings me to the discussion of what I mean by engaging with film craft as a visual artist (or film poet). This does not mean capturing elegant images for the sake of making beautiful cinema. Clearly, choices such as extending the length of a standard documentary format or making a video installation and not a documentary

also establishes an epistemology concerning how my audience will engage with the subject of my film. If I wish as a filmmaker to acknowledge the temporality of a Maharashtra pilgrimage, I may have to fragment the audience's experience so that sound and visual data are displayed on a series of screens placed next to each other, each showing different facets of this vast event. To make a comparison, a filmmaker like Ramani may need to show the crew appearing in his film frame if it is important for the film's concept to see the relationship happening between crew and filmed subjects (as many Indian documentaries do). Therefore, 'poetic documentary' as a mode of practice is a constant process of defining the connection between camera-technical choices and a film's overarching narrative principle, how to make this accessible to the audience.

### **Denaturalizing the documentary**

If we acknowledge how 'poetics' equally engages a play of socio-historical forces amidst authoring processes and if we as filmmakers wish to *enter into* the argument of an oral traditional discourse (in music, dance, or spoken form), it is important that our techniques critique the paradigms that these histories have established. The poetic or essay film format provides important ways to denaturalize conventional canons of journalistic 'documentary' or films that are assumed to reproduce actuality 'objectively'. In my own practice, for example, my project with the Warkari confirmed that I was striving to resist certain documentary styles I recognized in British broadcasting on Indian themes (of the cultural tourism kind), as well as some of the 'verbally argumentative' modes that I witnessed in Indian documentary. In the case of the latter, traditional practices from India are rarely explored *through the body*, through visuality and music, without the interruption of voiceovers, explanations and qualifications about what we are seeing. In this sense,

video artworks can be seen as making space for new and un-prescribed ways of refreshing vision, rather than directing audiences explicitly to read the information delivered along familiar narrative guidelines. Whilst I accept that oral storytelling and poetry recitation are greatly significant in devotional arts practices in India, my project was thus a conscious move to emphasize physicality, gesture and musicality in my chosen topic.

### **The poetic in popular culture in India**

It is not only for us as filmmakers, but also for our filmed subjects that the poetic character of musical storytelling is of prime importance. The *abhangas* (the sung verses by the *sants*) recited by the Warkari are a mass expression of *bhakti* emotion, proclaiming divinity in the human realm and negating the binarism of self/other. Unique to India as a regional cultural context is its enduring history of dramatic narratives that migrate from devotional cultural movements into *both* non-fiction *and* commercial fiction cinema. Commercial cinema has consistently appropriated music such as these *abhangas* or Sufi *Q'waali*, where dramatic denouement is inconceivable without a direct anchorage to it, where music expresses the reality inhabited by the films' characters (Budha, c2008). In parallel too, as *Sabad Nirantar* (2008) testifies, the everyday speech of citizens such as the Malwi (villagers a region in Madhya Pradesh) closely absorbs the poetry of Kabir as well as other religious poetry. This phenomenon has made many non-fiction filmmakers interrogate social identity by looking through the prism of these orally transmitted storytelling forms. Across India, whether it is the South Indian *bhakti* cults, the Bengali Bauls, the Bhojpuri devotional songs of Bihar and so forth, these narratives reveal the deeper cultural concerns of the communities. The filmmaker, Deepa Dhanraj also justifiably

recognized<sup>183</sup> that people who are not literate often have a richly developed sense of oral rhetoric that a lack of dependency on the written word encourages. Therefore, as a filmmaking technique it is appropriate to connect with the musicality of speech forms and the images that the recited stories invoke.

## **6.5 Common practices in Cinematography; aesthetics generated by the on set encounter**

### **The aesthetics of ‘journeying’**

The films [produced in India] that I have reviewed in this paper are often constructed as *journeys* since the filmmakers are tracking the traditional artists who are often travelling to their audiences themselves. In other cases, filmmakers travel from village to town or city in search of particular variations of practice, such as in Ramani’s film, *Nee Engey* (2003) that explores South Indian shadow puppetry forms across three states, or Saba Dewan’s *The Other Song* (2009) that seeks the memory of a forgotten *thumri*<sup>184</sup> song in Varanasi’s musical families. In my own project too, I followed the pilgrimage across Maharashtra’s rural Solapur district. To understand films as ‘journeys’ can also assist thinking about fieldwork and research. If we acknowledge that these trajectories do not end merely because the filmmaker freezes the encounter in a film text, then researchers and analysts can also be seen as arriving at the encounter from their own ‘journey’ of interpretive history, so the process of

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<sup>183</sup> See Deepa Dhanraj’s comment with reference to her experience of this, Chapter 2 page 95

<sup>184</sup> *Thumri* is a semi-classical musical form from North India, thematically based on the love of Krishna. Often in a dialect of Hindi called *Braj bhasha*, it features improvisational flexibility around the *rags* (called *Pilu*, *Kafi*, *Khamaj*, *Tilak Kamod*, *Bhairavi*, etc). It dates from the 19th century in the Lucknow court of the Navab Wajid Ali Shah and used to be sung by courtesans accompanied by dance. (Accessed 2.09.2012: [orkut.com/Main#CommMsgs?tid=2498689194761106983&cmm=23080836&hl=en](http://orkut.com/Main#CommMsgs?tid=2498689194761106983&cmm=23080836&hl=en))

meaning-making remains ongoing. John Urry (2007: 40)<sup>185</sup> relevantly defends the assessment of cultural practices by *moving with* the groups being studied, understanding social phenomena through their mobility and change, and not as a *fait accompli*. This resonates loudly in the filmmaking methodologies that the filmmakers in this thesis have applied. They have all ‘travelled with’ their filmed subjects as an integral approach.

### Poetic treatments

My interest in exploring poetic treatments is one that I acknowledge as part of Indian non-fiction filmmaking history from key directors in the 1960s, (Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani and S.Sukhdev) through to R.V. Ramani and Rajula Shah in the present. Unique styles of diary and essay films are also important to mention here, such as Ruchir Joshi’s *Eleven Miles* (1991), Anjali Punjabi’s *Some things I know about her* (2002) or Shohini Ghosh’s *Tales of the Night Fairies* (2002). These have all been significant in putting the accountability of a first person narrator back into documentary practices where these engage with traditional artists. In these films, the filmmakers demonstrate how they wish to avoid presenting their protagonists’ lives as ‘objective truths’, but this tendency is not exclusive to Indian filmmakers. It belongs rather, to an international post-modern critique against methods that essentialize cultural knowledge, or attempt to identify human conditions as having singular origins or causes that can be rationalized from a perspective exterior to the subject<sup>186</sup>.

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<sup>185</sup> Cited also in Chapter 2 page 56

<sup>186</sup> I acknowledge that it is problematic to make broad claims when talking about globalised shifts of practice, but the combined filmmakers’ movements from Dziga Vertov to Jean Rouché and *cinéma vérité*, through to the ‘Third Cinema’ protagonists in Latin America and even movements within contemporary Iranian cinema have cumulatively shifted practices towards a destabilized authorial sovereignty.

When filmmaking techniques are used poetically, or with an explicit and self-evident subjectivity, (whilst still anchored in recognizable social dilemmas) the “I” of the filmmaker is more apparent to the viewer. Such treatments additionally have the capacity to employ the mimetic, sensory and associative grammars of film that are closely related to how the traditional artists’ narrative intention functions, as I have detailed above.

### **Priorities within practices**

In terms of common practice amongst filmmakers, I identified that detailed attention is given to the extreme diversity of storytelling *modes and expressions*, and prolonged periods of research are dedicated to understanding the local environments that spawn the practices. I discovered furthermore that a large portion of the cited filmmakers rely heavily on improvisation when recording the arguments and art forms of their subjects, rather than working from pre-scripted concepts. During fieldwork, filmmakers would repeatedly mention<sup>187</sup> to me that because of India’s extreme linguistic and cultural diversity, they often considered themselves ‘foreigners’ amidst the people they were filming, requiring extra efforts to bridge these differences. There is also an informality of technical approach that low cost digital camera equipment has now permitted. But this has unexpectedly coincided with far less adventurous experimentation with the film medium itself than we find in films made on celluloid from the 1960’s and 1970’s by filmmakers like Promod Pati, S.N.S Sastry, Mani Kaul and S. Sukhdev. In the current scenario, there is little attempt (as there was

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<sup>187</sup> I had this response from Madhusree Dutta, Rajula Shah and Pankaj Rishi Kumar among others.

exceptionally in the late sixties)<sup>188</sup> to harness talent from the visual arts within documentary production, and a distinct category of media has now emerged in parallel, in ‘the video installation’ where experimental practices seem rather to proliferate (see Butler and Mirza, 2006, on artists such as Nalini Malani, Tejal Shah and Tushar Joog).

### **Multi-textuality**

Whilst the documentaries cited in this research are not particularly experimental in their visual treatment, an important characteristic is what I have termed their ‘multi-textuality’; they include compositional structures that combine fiction and non-fictional or poetic/essayist methods, and spoken or sung *words* often direct their arguments. The camera framing in many cases seems subordinate to the task of *logging conversations* in which the voice dominates. This brings to mind the author, Amartiya Sen’s appraisal of Indian cultural history in *The Argumentative Indian*, (a2005)<sup>189</sup> that details how India’s pluralism from the time of the Mughals to the present, has been responsible for a long tradition of philosophical arguing, both within and beyond debates between religious communities in which an attitude of scepticism thrives. But this characteristic of arguing is not what makes the films ‘multi-textual’ according to my use of this term. Rather, the directors when imagining their films are re-combining (in Rancière’s terms) ‘distributions of the sensible’ from the lives of traditional performers/communities that are already part of their cultural environment. For example, Dhanraj’s film, *Something like a war* could not have

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<sup>188</sup> This initiative was lead by Chief Producer, Jean Bhowmargary of the Films Division (see Mulay, 2010).

<sup>189</sup> The first two chapters of Sen’s book, “Voice and Heterodoxy”, and “Culture and Communication” are relevant reference points on this issue.



existed without her partnership with the women's rights advocacy group, Jagori, who before her intervention, were already delivering workshops using *katha vachana* as a communication tool. Jagori's techniques are in a sense an intellectual property that comes from their political mission and Dhanraj's authoring makes use of this. She simultaneously also integrates other agendas, such as exposing Government corruption, or letting working class women articulate their experiences first hand. The film style thus emerges from these various dovetailed authorial agents, which generates a multi-textual film aesthetic. There are other examples I could have cited too where diverging modes of subjectivity fragment within one film aesthetic.

## **6.6 How the reviewed films frame the traditions in their cinematic form.**

### **Whom the films are addressing**

Even though many of these films are gaining exposure in international contexts, I believe that their mode of address is primarily to Indian rather than international audiences. One can appreciate this by positioning them next to India's entertainment film industry that, particularly since the late 1990's, has produced a high ratio of films that are consciously scripted for Indian Diasporic and international audiences (see Bhattacharya Mehta and Pandharipande, 2011). The success of a project like Ramani's *Nee Engey*, however, was that it was later developed as a tour of live workshops and film screenings engaging the puppeteers who featured in his film, Indian university students, theatre artists and scholars, to debate and extrapolate the value of these creative/ritual practices within India. Filmmaker, Paromita Vohra confirms this view that the documentary filmmakers' main focus is on domestic audiences:

Along with many of the film-makers working through the 1990's and in the

contemporary moment, I am also engaged in constructing or re-constructing more indigenous theories of documentary practice and language which might eventually contribute to a more self-sustaining and enlivened (..) funding, creating, viewing, and exhibition context than has existed for some time. (Vohra, c2011: 52)

But this localised approach is what makes these films so valuable to international research, since they demonstrate what is important to Indians' imagination of their own cultural development.

### **Epistemologies regarding the traditions**

There is a separate consideration that I would like to explore in the following. What happens in the *apparent seamless*ness of showing Indian traditions (which emerge from everyday life) as a distinct formal medium to be viewed in a darkened room or emitted from a computer screen (in film)? I suggest that *certain aspects* of these traditional practices are habitually being left out or are ideologically transformed in the process. Filmmakers are wittingly or unwittingly disarticulating aspects of the live encounter altering how we come to understand it. Devotional expression through music, and other live media is an everyday practice woven through activities of work and sociality, but on each instance of recording, the filmmakers are stratifying what they find significant to film. I would like to take note of how this selection is happening.

### **Secularity**

We could broadly claim that many contemporary filmmakers (such as Madhusree Dutta) have tended to detach themselves from the spiritual significance of

traditions such as medieval *bhakti* as practiced today<sup>190</sup>. This can also be observed in films like Mani Kaul's *Mati Manas*. This secularization has furthermore featured historically in the Indian government's appropriation of traditional performance to mobilize marginal citizens towards its political agendas. Global stakeholders in 'heritage conservation' have engaged traditional arts too as a way to influence citizen rights, health and labour policies in which 'god does not matter'. In India's postcoloniality, the debate on secularism continues to attract critique due to the strategies of modernization that both the Mughals and the British Raj established in secularizing forms of governance that have persisted in post-Independence administration (see Sen, a2005; Bhargava, a1998; Srinivasan, a2007; Calhoun, Jeurgensmeyer, VanAntwerpen, a2011 for a more sustained political appraisal of secularism). But if it is the case that the filmmakers belong to class or cultural backgrounds where they are less likely to follow a devotional path, it can be problematic to wish away differences in what both sides of the encounter find significant. This means that there can be no such thing as a context-free ethical 'best practice' in negotiating such differences on camera between filmmaker and filmed.

### **The message imparted to audiences**

We can, however, take note that audiences watching these documentaries in international film festivals might assume that these Indian traditions are merely a form of entertainment or are 'for agitprop' if their spiritual significance is disavowed. In this respect, a film like Nirmal Chander's *All the World's a Stage* (2008) valuably

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190 See also online review of Rajula Shah's *Sabad Nirantar* (2008) by Surabhi Sharma, (Sharma 2010) which presents Shah as an exception to this tendency in her account.

demonstrates to its audience the transition from ritual to theatrical manifestations of the same drumming tradition practiced by the Sidis.

The films often give the impression that the traditional artists are not negotiating their own terms of representation and distribution, but this could be deceptive since the artists concerned are increasingly more media conscious and not 'lying prone', waiting to be filmed. There are a number of reality TV shows<sup>191</sup> in recent years in which traditional (folk) artists and movements have been showcasing themselves. There are also self-mobilizing groups of artists that are taking their music and dramas to audiences beyond their place of origin in an entrepreneurial spirit (evident in Shabnam Virmani's film *Had An-had*, 2004). Since the demand for these practices as entertainment has multiplied in India, the motivation for performers to seek their own representation has now become more complex.

On a more positive note, however, the cumulative impact of the films I have been discussing is to reveal groups in Indian society that are persuasive examples of syncretism, solidarity across caste and class, and art forms that have the power to cut through the conventionally assumed divisions between cultural communities. We might ask whether the 'epistemological gap' between the live experience of traditional performance practices and the films made about them *matters*. Do folk art forms 'count more' when they are critiquing a discourse of practical reason addressed to and amongst the localized communities? Does satire bite the hardest when the protagonists it derides are a commonly recognized enemy from the immediate community? I am wary of becoming excessively romantic, since whilst localized

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<sup>191</sup> Such as one produced by Gajendra Singh: *'Junoon Kuch Kar Dikhane Ka'* (released on New Delhi TV in 2011).

performances may provide ‘enveloping narratives to India’s micro histories’<sup>192</sup>, these narratives are often critical of political or caste elites, and these criticisms need to be heard and taken seriously, particularly by contemporary filmmakers who claim to be advocating for them, or ‘making them visible’.

The issue of documentary dissemination is certainly one that begs further debate, and raises larger questions of what we (filmmakers, artists, film distributors, anthropologists, historians, etc.) are *seeking* from the ‘existential evidence’ of those we film. Given that the traditional artists volunteer themselves and are ever more informed about the implications of being filmed; given also that they agree to do so for reasons that go beyond mere self-promotion, the filmmaking encounter deserves further scrutiny about what it reveals of the cultural priorities of all the participants involved.

## **6.7 Academic and other applications of this research**

It is important for film theorists, students and filmmakers to study films as incomplete creative acts, since the film production process reveals key authorial methods *as they are being applied*, some of which are no longer accessible in the films’ final form. Certain analytic frameworks that I have used in this paper, such as the analysis of ‘possible sets of relationships’ in the on set encounter (Chapter 3, page 145) can also be usefully adapted as analytic tools for students, to explore films by highlighting the importance of the conditions of production. By instigating an analysis of films through interpersonal balances of power and imagining, we come closest to their compositional source, returning to the ‘doing’ of filmmaking.

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<sup>192</sup> I am re-utilizing Muthukumaraswamy’s (c2000) phrase here. The full quote is on page 82.

The relatively small range of documentary practices cited across this paper demonstrate an ‘underbelly’ of contemporary Indian practices that more mainstream forms of cinema would conceal, revealing a counter culture to India’s commercial (Hindi) fiction cinema that has been quite extensively theorized<sup>193</sup> whilst the (post 1990’s) documentary has not. The value of these practices globally is in their relativity with other political documentary cultures of postcolonial nations. India’s exception is in its cultural/religious/ethnic pluralism intersecting with its ‘postcoloniality’, and it is through a discourse on the status of the traditions *on film* that these complexities become accessible to audiences and to research. Across a relatively small group of practices their work richly demonstrates a wide range of artistic and political tensions that can be measured in their strategies.

Firstly, the type of study I have conducted is crucial to expand the knowledge base of practicing filmmakers in an increasingly global industry, who need access to debates at the level of production in South Asia. Secondly, audiences who are unfamiliar with documentaries from this region would find this study and the films themselves valuable from the point of view of performance studies. For Indian folk genres are vastly diverse, with song varieties like *bhajan* and *kirtan*, dance-dramas like *yakshagana*, and the travelling dramas of *jatras*, *nautanki*, *bhawai*, and *tamasha*. We need points of entry into their myriad intellectual discourses, and the documentary is just one medium available to bridge this connection.

Thirdly, there is a conspicuous absence in television broadcasting of documentaries produced by India’s independent filmmakers on British and European

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<sup>193</sup> Theorists here include Booth 2000, Vasudevan, 2000, Viridi, 2003, Ganti, 2004, Desai, 2004, Kaur/Sinha 2005, Chatterjee, 2002, Bose 2007, Mazumdar 2007, Saari, 2011, Dwyer and Pinto, 2011, Bhattacharya, Mehta and Pandharipande, 2011, et al.

television channels. Nevertheless, there has been a rapid expansion in informal networks of appreciative viewers of Indian documentaries since the 2000's through DVD distribution, internet portal TV, web archiving and film festival release. Occasional screenings of these films I have discussed occur at university symposia. But a greater impetus is needed to promote non-fiction film from India on national Film Studies curriculae<sup>194</sup>. There is a growing trend and welcome diversification in Film and Media studies institutes that needs to be matched by research expertise in current production environments in India (as well as other 'non-Western' film cultures). My research thus seeks to contribute at this level. Fleshing out the current conditions of practice that cannot be obtained from library resources alone, I can add value to the field by (later) publishing the filmmakers' testimonies on their methods.

Fourthly, the Literature Review (Chapter 1, page 31) demonstrated that in English language texts about Indian non-fiction cinema, the terms 'national cinema' or 'postcolonial subjectivity' in their referencing are frequently used without any real critical appraisal of how these terms change meaning over time. The scholar Leela Gandhi (2009 [online]) flagged up a problem that 'postcoloniality' has come to be used reductively to mean the moment of colonial encounter as a 'paradigmatic moment' in which the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have gained a disproportionate importance. She views this as counterproductive in conveying how postcoloniality includes many internally oppositional elements evolving over a far greater time span, right up to the present. Applying a similar rule to the theorizing of 'national cinema' in India's 'post-coloniality', it is equally unhelpful to consider only paradigmatic *themes* such as 'the Partition of India' on film. I therefore recommend looking

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<sup>194</sup> A small number of institutes such as SOAS, University of London, or the universities of Goldsmiths, Westminster, Manchester Metropolitan and the London School of Economics do offer global cinema programmes that include South Asian non-fiction.

towards ‘post-colonial’ subjectivity as defined by the filmmakers cited in this paper, who are examining their traditions and local histories in a set of highly unconventional, exciting and instructive practices. They are clearly attempting to get closer to issues that bring insight into specific sub-cultures as an ongoing critical inquiry. Concerning ‘traditional performance’ the difference between ‘marginal’ and ‘mainstream’ also becomes blurred according to how we acknowledge each other across geopolitical divides. A tireless scrutiny of one’s own methods and approaches in research as well as filmmaking is needed in order to cross these divides.

In general terms, my research topic intersects in valuable ways with theories of archiving, with performance mediation on screen, the anthropology of media and South Asian art and aesthetics. The point of contact between these related fields is in the concept of authoring; the terms and conditions established by films, filmmakers, performers, patrons and historians in the cultural sector. In a South Asian context, it is important to acknowledge the politics of development and the forces of ‘modernization’ as well as cultural differences in how traditional (devotional) performance contributes to ‘contemporary’ arts practices. It is hoped that my study has demonstrated how this is happening at the grassroots level, whereby it gains greater traction in international film studies and critical debate. Finally I hope that this thesis has demonstrated authoring as a ‘revelation of self/other’, which I find so pertinent as a visual artist and filmmaker amongst my peer filmmakers in India. For, as the writer, Samuel Beckett acknowledged, amidst the storm of living, writing, performing and attempting to bridge our perceived cultural divides,

All language is a gap of language.

(Beckett, [cited in Badiou, 2008: 257] from the novel *Molloy*, 1955)



This Bibliography lists the reference materials under these categories:

- Books (section **a**, see top right hand side of this page)
- Warkari Research Materials (for ref. to Chapter 2.5.a) (**b**)
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N.B. All interviews below up to Vohra, Paromita were documented on camera, and transcribed by the author for this research. Unless otherwise stated, the topic of these interviews was ‘Methods and strategies of authoring’ concerning the filmmakers’ or subject’s professional practice. (Date and locations where the interviews were taken are supplied).

Ali, Mukhtiyar (7.9.2009) Campus of the India International Centre, Delhi.

Basu, Arghya (2.8.2010) Campus of the National Film and Television Institute, Pune

Bhardwaj, Ajay (4.9.2010) Filmmaker’s residence, New Delhi

Chatterjee, Gayatri (Film Historian) (2.8.2010) Campus of the National Film and Television Institute, Pune. Interviewed ‘On the Warkari legacy in film culture’.

Chawla, Veenapani (7.7.2008) Campus of Adishakti Performance Laboratory, Pondicherry

Dhanraj, Deepa (8.11.2011) Own residence, London.

Dutta, Madhusree (18.8.2010) Majlis (the director’s office), Mumbai

Jinghan, Shikha (2.8.2010) Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi

Kaushal, Molly (Professor of Folklore Studies) (14.9.2009) Indira Ghandi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi. ‘On the state patronage of Indian traditional performance’

Meshram, Sankalp (29.8.2010) Filmmaker’s residence, Mumbai

Monteiro, Anjali and Jayasankar, K.P. (26.8.2010) Centre for Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute, Mumbai

Pantange, A.P. (20.7.2010) Warkari Pilgrim on the pilgrimage route to Pandharpur, Maharashtra

Punjabi, Anjali (28.8.2010) Filmmaker’s residence, Mumbai

Ramani, R.V. (9.10.2009) Pune, in context of “Persistence/Resistance Festival” 2009

Rishi Kumar, Pankaj (10.10.2009) Pune, in context of “Persistence/Resistance Festival” 2009

Roy, Rahul (12.6.2009) Filmmaker’s office, New Delhi.

Rycroft, Daniel (Senior Research Associate of the Centre for World Environmental History) (19.8.2009) University of East Anglia Campus, ‘On *adivasi* culture in India’

Salunke, Geeta (21.7.2010) Pilgrim on the pilgrimage route to Pandharpur, Maharashtra

Sen, Gargi (Film Distributor, Magic Lantern) (9.9.2010) Distributor’s residence, New Delhi. ‘On film distribution operational systems in India’

Shah, Rajula (2.9.2010) Private residence, friend, Mumbai

Shahani, Kumar, (14.11.2008) Artsadmin Offices, London

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Shinde, D. B. (20.7.2010) A Warkari pilgrim from Taluka Kalamturi, Hingoli district, interviewed on the pilgrimage

Virmani, Shabnam (7.9.2009) Indian Institute of Culture, New Delhi

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## Filmography

<u>Film Director</u>	<u>Title (as on screen)</u>	<u>English Translation</u>	<u>Region of filmed topi</u>	<u>Release date</u>
Abel, Roysten	<i>In Othello</i>		Delhi	2003
Amudhan, R.P.	<i>Notes from the Crematorium</i>		Madurai	2005
Bhasin, Monica	<i>Temporary Loss of Consciousness</i>		Delhi & Indo-Pak bord	2004
Basu, Arghya	<i>Death, Life, Etcetera.</i>		Sikkhim	2008
	<i>Listener's Tale</i>		Sikkhim	2005
Nandini Bedi	<i>Notes on Man Capture</i>		Meghalaya	2008
Bhardwaj, Ajay	<i>Kitte Mil ve Mahi</i>	<i>Where the twain shall meet</i>	Punjab	2004
Bhattacharya, Nilanja	<i>Under this Sun</i>		Pan Indian	2005
Chakravorty, Amitabl	<i>Fakir Songs- Bishar Blues</i>		Bengal	2007
Chander, Nirmal & Mohan, Reena		<i>All the World's a Stage</i>	Gujarat	2008
Deshpande, Avinash	<i>The Great Indian School Show</i>		U.P.	2005
Dhanraj, Deepa	<i>Something Like a War</i>		Pan Indian	1991
Dutta, Bhishakha	<i>In the flesh</i>		Bengal	2002
Datta, Manjira	<i>Babulal Bhuiya ki Qurbai</i>	<i>The Sacrifice of Babulal B</i>	Bokaro	1988
Dutta, Madhushree	<i>Seven Islands and a Metro</i>		Maharashtra	2006
	<i>Scribbles on Akka</i>		Karnataka & Mumba	2000
	<i>Sundari- An Actor prepares</i>		U.P.	1999
Dutta, Ishaka	<i>Love Song of the World</i>		Bengal	2010
Dewan, Saba	<i>The Other Song</i>		Varanasi	2009
	<i>Naach</i>	<i>Dancer</i>	U.P.-Maharashtra	2008
	<i>Delhi-Mumbai-Delhi</i>		Delhi/Mumbai	2005
Gardner, Robert	<i>Forest of Bliss</i>		Varanasi	1986
Garga, B.D.	<i>Storm over Kashmir</i>		Kashmir	1949
Ghosh, Joydeep & P.B. Chaki		<i>The Alkap Story</i>	Bengal	2009
Ghosh, Shohini	<i>Tales of the Night Fairies</i>		Kolkatta	2002
Ghosh, Sumit	<i>Flying inside my body</i>		Delhi	2008
Ghatak, Ritwik	<i>Meghe Dhaka Tara</i>	<i>The cloud veiled star</i>	Bengal	1960
Fattelal, Sheikh & Vishnupant Govind Damle	<i>Sant Tukaram</i>		Maharashtra	1936
Jain, Sameera	<i>If You Pause</i>		Pan India	2004
	<i>Portraits of belonging</i>	<i>Bhai Mian</i>	Delhi	1998
Jingan, Shikha	<i>Born to Sing: Mirasans of Punjab</i>		Punjab	2002
Joshi, Kavita	<i>Some roots grow upwards</i>		Manipur	2002
	<i>Tales from the Margins</i>		Manipur	2007
Joshi, Ruchir/Palit, R	<i>Eleven Miles</i>		West Bengal	1991
Jayasankar, K.P. & Monteiro, A.		<i>Our Family</i>	Tamil Nadu	2007
	<i>Naata</i>	<i>The Bond</i>	Mumbai	2003
Kak, Sanjay	<i>Jashn-e-Azadi</i>	<i>How we celebrate Freedom</i>	Kashmir	2007

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Kaniyadi, Pradeep	<i>Directed by Adoor Gopalakrishnan</i>	Kerala	2004
Kanwar, Amar	<i>A night of prophecy</i>	Maharashtra, Andhra, Nagaland, Kash	2002
	<i>The Lightning Testimonies</i>	Pan Indian	2000
Kaul, Mani	<i>Siddheshwari</i>	Varanasi	1989
	<i>Sata se Uthata Aadmi</i> <i>The Man arising from the Surface</i>		1980
	<i>Mati Manas</i> <i>Mind of Clay</i>	Pan Indian	1984
Kazimi, Ali	<i>Narmada, A Vall Rises</i>	Narmada Valley	1994
Khopkar, Arun	<i>Born Again (on Vishnudas Bhawe)</i>		2001
Kumar, Arun	<i>Land of Memories</i>	Bhojpuri-Mauritia:	1998
Kumar, Pankaj Rishi	<i>Pather Chaujaeri</i> <i>(form of Kashmiri folk drar</i>	Kashmir	2002
	<i>Punches and ponytails</i>		2008
Kumar, Shyamal	<i>I am the very Beautiful</i>	Mumbai	2006
Lang, Fritz	<i>Dr. Mabuse the Gambler; Dr. Mabuse, der Spiele</i>	Germany	1922
Mohan, Reena	<i>Kamlabai</i>	Maharashtra	1992
	<i>On an Express highway</i>		2003
	<i>Skin Deep</i>	U.P	1998
Palit, Ranjan	<i>Abak Jaye Here</i> <i>Magic Mystic Marketplace</i>	West Bengal	1996
	<i>Follow the Rainbow</i> codirector: Vasudha Joshi	Bihar	1991
	<i>Forever Young</i>	Shillong	2008
	<i>In Camera</i>	Various	2009
Panjabi, Anjali	<i>A few things I know about her</i>	Rajasthan	2002
Patwardhan, Anand	<i>Hamara Shehed</i> <i>Our City</i>	Mumbai	1981
	<i>Jang aur Aman</i> <i>War and Peace</i>	Pan India, US.	2002
	<i>Father Son and Holy War</i>	Gujarat/Mumbai	1994
Raja, Vinod	<i>The bee, the bear and the Kuruba</i>	Karnataka	2003
	<i>Mahua Memoirs</i>	Orissa/Jharkand/A.P	2007
Ramani, R.V.	<i>Nee Engey</i> <i>Where are You?</i>	Tamil Nadu	2003
	<i>If I Die</i>	Tamil Nadu	1996
	<i>Saa</i>	Pan India	1991
	<i>The Language of War</i>	Manipur/Tamil Nadu	19
Roy, Rahul	<i>Majma</i> <i>The Performance</i>	Delhi	2001
	<i>Sundar Nagri</i> <i>City Beautiful</i>	Delhi Surroundings	2003
Sathyu, M.S.	<i>Garam Hava</i>	Indo-Pakistan	1972
Saeed, Yuosuf	<i>1) Basant 2) Muharram 3) The train to heaven (triptych)</i>		1997-2006
Shah, Rajula	<i>Re-Told by Loknath</i>	Orissa	2012
	<i>Shabad Nirantar</i> <i>Word within the Word</i>	Madhya Pradesh	2008
	<i>Beyond the Wheel</i>	Rajasthan/Manipui	2004
Shahani, Kumar	<i>Bhavantarana</i>	Orissa	1999
	<i>Kasba</i>		1990

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	<i>Bamboo Flute</i>	Parts 1 and 2	Pan India	2000 + 2001
	<i>Chandrasena</i>		Mythical/Lanka	1936
Sharma, Shurabhi	<i>Jahaji Music; India in the Carribean</i>		Bhojpuri-Carribean	2006
	<i>Jari Mari; of cloth and other stories</i>		Mumbai	2001
Sharma, Rakesh	<i>Final Solution</i>		Gujarat	2002
Singh, Gurvinder	<i>Pala</i>		Punjab	2003
Sastry, S.N.S.	<i>Ustad Amir Khan</i>		Madhya Pradesh	1970
Anupama Srinivasan	<i>I wonder</i>		Pan India	2009
Sinha, Arvind	<i>King of India</i>		Bengal	2008
Soudhamini	<i>Vettaikku Oru Magan</i>		Tamil Nadu	2008
Stegmuller, Henning & Stontheimer, Gunther	<i>Vari (Pilgrimage)</i>		Maharashtra	1990
	<i>King Khandoba's Hunting expedition</i>		Maharashtra	1984
Sukhdev, Singh	<i>An Indian Day</i>		Pan Indian	1967
Swaroop, Kamal	<i>Mast Qalandar</i>	Uttarkand, Jammu	Kashmir/Assam	2009
	<i>Life and Times of Dadasaheb Phalke</i>		Maharashtra	2010
	<i>Om Dar-B-Dar</i>			1988
Tseten, Kesang	<i>We Homes Chaps</i>		Kalimpong	2002
	<i>On the road with the red god: Machchendrenath</i>		Nepal	2005
Tuli, Nidhi/Ashraf, Abl	<i>Art in Exile</i>		Tibetans in India	2006
Vachani, Nilita	<i>Eyes of the Stone</i>			1990
	<i>Diamonds in the vegetable Market</i>			1992
Vijay, Vipin	<i>Hawamahal</i>		Kerala	2003
Virmani, Shabnam	<i>The Kabir Project</i>		Rajasthan/and other	2003-2005
Vohra, Paromita	<i>Morality TV and the Loving Jihad</i>		Meerut (UP)	2007
	<i>Where's Sandra</i>		Mumbai	2005
	<i>Unlimited Girls</i>		Delhi	2002
	<i>Cosmopolis</i>		Mumbai	2004
	<i>Partners in Crime</i>		Pan India	2011