



# Decline of the documentary

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**REAL MEETS REEL:** Sapat Devi Pal, (centre), founder of the 'Gulabi Gang' of vigilantes and activists from Bundelkhand in northern Uttar Pradesh, attends the special screening of the documentary Hindi film *Gulabi Gang* directed by Nishtha Jain in Mumbai. The Gulabi Gang, a group of women in rural India who strive for social justice, don pink saris and fight for women's rights, against corruption, and for the poor.

## By Gautaman Bhaskaran

It has never been easy to popularise documentary cinema. This is normal, for people tend to gravitate towards fiction features. There is always something magical about stories, and the more fantastical they are, the more alluring they seem.

After all in a country like India, beset with day-to-day problems, fiction films have had this power to transport a viewer to a magical world of pretty women, handsome men and their beautiful romances. Not just this, but the feats they perform fuel the imagination of audiences, allow them to dream.

In contrast, a documentary or a non-fiction movie is rooted to the mundane. It talks of hard truths and pans across the struggles of the real world. Admittedly, this genre of cinema has never had it easy anywhere in the world, but its prospects in India have been singularly bleak.

So, I was not surprised when VS Kundu, Director of the Mumbai International Film Festival, which ended on Sunday, regretted that the seven-day biennial event focussing on documentaries, shorts and animation did not attract enough crowds.

Of course there could have been any

number of reasons for this lack of adequate patronage. Media never rose to the occasion: newspapers in Mumbai hardly carried anything on the Festival, and television too was mum.

Unfortunately, the Indian media is star driven. It is obsessed with the lives of actors, the saucier they are, the better it is. Non-fiction cinema presents no stars — or usually they do not. True it may talk about dancers and thinkers and sportsmen, but these men and women are usually not glamorous in the way a Salman Khan or a Hrithik Roshan or a Priyanka Chopra or an Aishwarya Rai is.

Girish Kasaravalli's movie on U R Ananthamurthy is a brilliant portrayal of the man and his philosophy. Adoor Gopalakrishnan has created great documentaries on classical dance artists. Anand Patwardhan has produced extremely provocative documentary films on the burning issues of the day. Nishtha Jain directed *Gulabi Gang* about the atrocities on women.

But who cares about these movies. For the cinema-going masses, it is the antics of Rajnikanth or Shah Rukh Khan or the coyness of a starlet or the sex appeal of Mallika Sherawat that appear magnetic.

But despite all this, non-fiction fare has a huge significance. This is undeniable. And there are many directors doing this form of film, and their contributions need to be

publicised, highlighted and made appealing in a way that they would attract viewers.

The Festival organised a seminar on "audience development". I was one of the speakers, and the others on the panel had many interesting suggestions to offer. But they seemed to overlook the fact that documentary viewing was an acquired taste, and this had to be cultivated and nurtured from an early age.

I remember my school days in Kolkata, where every month a movie would be screened. Often they were great classics, sometimes animation and at other times, they were documentaries.

I have seen some gripping British documentaries made in black and white during World War II. These were powerful diaries of the some of the nation's darkest days. I think it was at school that I developed a taste for non-fiction films as I did for sensitive, sensible and meaningful cinema.

Again, during one of my trips to the Montreal World Film Festival in the 1990s, I met a Canadian writer and movie director specialising in children's books and cinema. He told me how he had helped this cinema grow.

He and some others arranged for children's films to be screened in schools during weekends, and parents were also encouraged to come. Later, when these movies moved

out of the schools and into regular theatres, parents too went along with their sons and daughters. This was a wonderful way of capturing an audience.

Schools in India and colleges too must screen documentaries, and persuade their students to watch them, and maybe even write about them. This could be a great step towards promoting the documentary genre. Believe it or not, this form of moving images has the enormous ability to captivate viewers, and finally enslave them. Non-fiction can be far more addictive than fiction.

Yet, documentaries have been struggling on a rocky path.

## Steve McQueen and the Oscar

As Hollywood runs up to the Academy Awards on March 2, one of the questions is, will Steve McQueen be the first black director to win the Oscar. Interestingly, his *12 Years A Slave* is all about the struggle of one black man to escape humiliating captivity he faces in the white man's den.

At the moment, McQueen — though with an emotionally engaging film behind him — is not the favourite to walk away with the best director statuette. But if he does, he would be the first black helmer to actually clinch this Oscar, although there have been two other black directors who were nominated in the past. One of them was John Singleton for the 1992 *Boyz n the Hood*, and the other was Lee Daniels in 2009 for *Precious*.

Curiously, while black American helmers have done poorly, black actors have fared very well. Hattie McDaniel was the first black actor to win an Oscar in a supporting role way back in 1939 for *Gone with the Wind* — that brilliant movie on the American Civil War adapted from Margaret Mitchell's only novel.

During the 1960s, Sidney Poitier took the best actor Oscar for *Lilies of the Field*. He was remarkable as a handyman helping some nuns to raise a chapel in a desert.

Black actors, however, had to wait 40 long years before the Oscar went to Denzel Washington — *Training Day* in 2001. That year came as double whammy for black artists. Halle Berry became the first black to win the best actress Oscar for *Monster's Ball*.

More recently, the likes of Morgan Freeman, Forest Whitaker and Viola Davis have been nominated for Academy Awards, and have won in some cases. But no Oscar has ever rolled on to a black producer's lap. Ditto, a black director. Will McQueen change this by beating his rivals?

● *Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades, and he may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com*



**WILL HE, WON'T HE?** Steve McQueen