

Documentary Now

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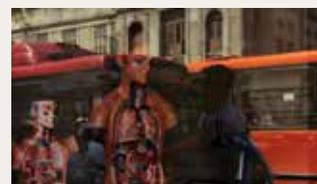
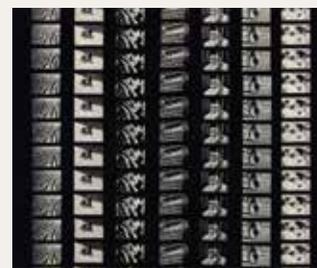
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Introduction

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Pages from the *Marg* archives:
Documentary Films of India,
Vol. 13, No. 3, June 1960.

MARG HAS A HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP TO THE DOCUMENTARY, AS PART OF A modernist moment with multiple parallels and confluences. The magazine was born in 1946 and grew alongside a discourse about the importance of the documentary in the post-independence period, involving important journals such as *Indian Documentary* (1949–50, 1955–59) and institutional forms such as the Film Society (1943 Bombay, 1947 Calcutta) and the International Film Festival (1952). A special issue of *Marg* titled *Documentary Films of India* was published in 1960 which included articles by key filmmakers and documentary ideologues of the time, including Mohan Bhavnani, A. Bhaskar Rao, B.D. Garga, Homi Sethna and Paul Zils, and featured short invited pieces by John Grierson, James Beveridge and Paul Rotha. It included an editorial by Mulk Raj Anand who also wrote for *Indian Documentary*. It is appropriate that a journal with a historical investment in exploring the aesthetic forms of modern life should once again be the venue for what the documentary means today.

The idea of a special issue now poses interesting challenges, of a historical as well as a contemporary sort. We are currently privileged to see a flowering of independent documentary and a bid to recover documentary histories in complex ways. Documentary as we understand it today has great ambition inscribed in it, involving the recovery of key “experimentalists” of the 1960s such as S.N.S. Shastri, Sukhdev and Pramod Pati, and a rich body of contemporary work, from Mani Kaul, Anand Patwardhan, Nilita Vachani and Deepa Dhanraj to Sanjay Kak, K.P. Sasi, Amar Kanwar, Rahul Roy, Lalit Vachani, Manjira Dutta, Ranjan Palit, Surabhi Sharma, V. Ramani, Paromita Vohra, Ruchir Joshi, the Raqs Media Collective, CAMP, Soudhamini, and many others.¹ Documentary has also entered the domain of installation art, often within a transnational constellation of dialogues and curatorial initiative. Schools for the training of documentary filmmakers, as part of a media training syllabus, are proliferating beyond well-known institutions such as Jamia Millia’s Mass Communication Research Centre or Mumbai’s Tata Institute for Social Sciences. And the Public Service Broadcasting Trust has since 2000 supported a substantial corpus of documentary works. In addition to formal institutional training and funding, the possibilities in the contemporary of self-trained documentarists making an impact emerges in films such as Abhay Kumar’s *Placebo* (2016), an exploration of alienation and suicide at the country’s premier medical school.





BOUNTY FROM BUNDS

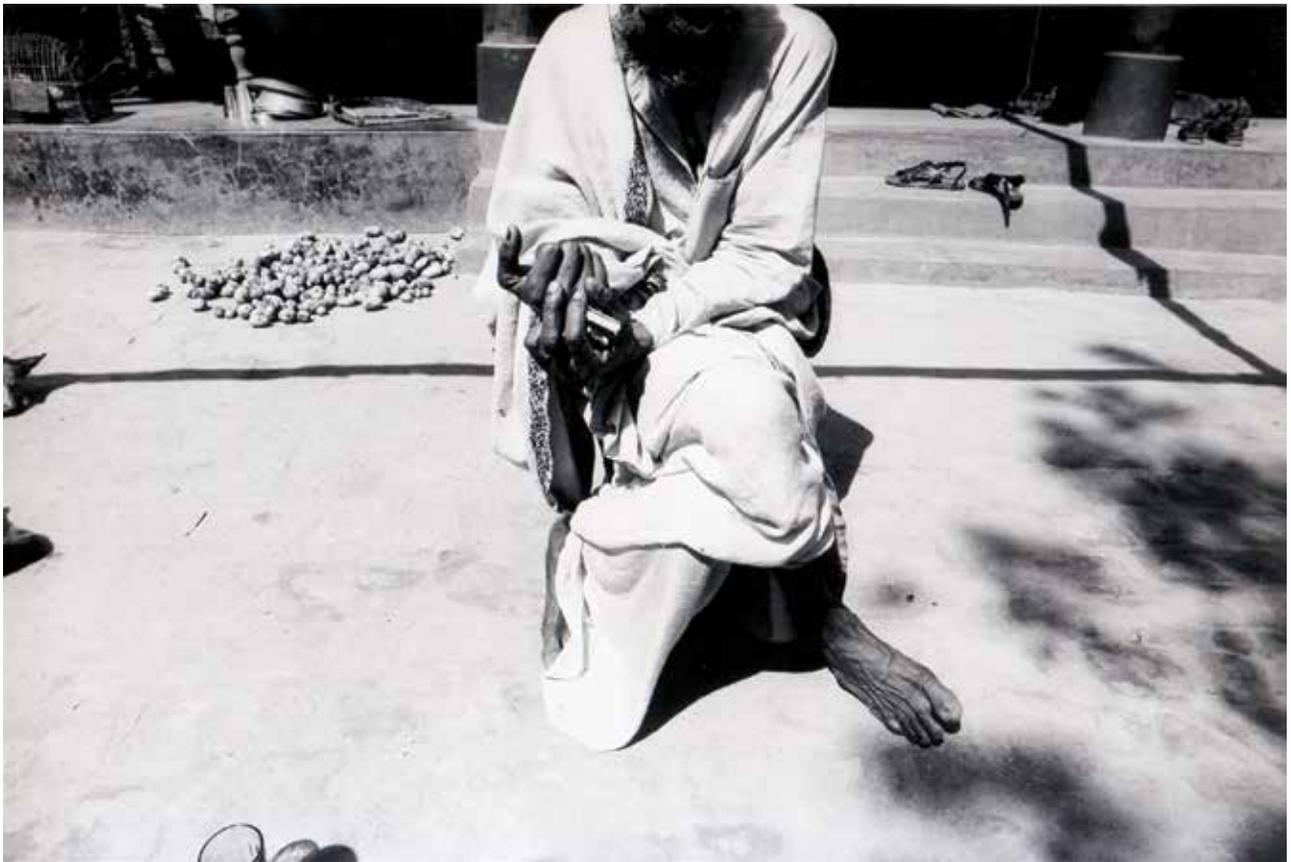


While there is a need to capture the longer history of documentary forms, our focus in this volume is on the contemporary history of the documentary and of the documentary archive. By contemporary history, we largely refer to the proliferation of documentary practice on the basis of video technologies from the 1980s, though our authors also consider the persistence of celluloid. Celluloid constitutes an imaginary horizon, a material referent in digital restoration, an archival object and object of personal and collective memory. As Avijit Mukul Kishore notes, even with the advent of high-resolution Sony digital cameras, celluloid continued to be the perceptual yardstick for video; and Shohini Ghosh points out that for a long time, video was considered inferior, and it took major struggles to have it recognized as a legitimate medium for festivals and awards. Celluloid now carries both the challenge of historical distance and the potentiality of an aesthetic engagement informed by a distinctive awareness of the material forms of media. Thus, experimental filmmakers' and artists' cinema, as in the case of the Experimenta

festival documented here by Anuja Jain, puts a particular value on working with celluloid, and on the context of projection, in its bid to curate a very specific archive.

For a long time, the documentary archive was overwhelmed by the presence of the Films Division (FD), the Indian government's filmmaking unit, even if an array of so-called independents were also making films, and in the 1950s formed an association to further their interests, the Indian Documentary Producers' Association.² These were film professionals who sought various avenues of work, in publicity, propaganda, instruction and advertising, from government, business houses, in educational film, and so on. They were independent because they were not part of government, and had to seek the limited opportunities offered by the Films Division awarding a small number of contracts to "outside producers", the conduit to screening an "approved film" in cinema theatres. While the work produced by these film companies is of considerable interest, they were very much part of the nation-building exercise. Independence today assumes a critical outlook on government, state development projects and mainstream political parties, for how they aggressively marginalize and displace peoples and destroy environments. And it may take us entirely away from such concerns into a varied encounter with life-forms and practices, as Shohini Ghosh outlines.

Whatever the problems of state documentary practices, in recent times it has provided material for historical reflection, not only for what it tells us about official policy, but also for its mapping of people, things, environments. In recent times, thanks to the initiative of FD director-general, V.S. Kundu, and filmmaker-curators Surabhi Sharma, Avijit Mukul Kishore and many others, the Films Division facilitated a curatorial space through its programme FD Zone, showing material from the FD archive alongside contemporary independent cinema. The uses of the FD archive are highlighted in Priya Jaikumar's analysis of travel films for the encouragement of tourism in the 1970s. Jaikumar draws attention to a pedagogy for how



Indians must reform their conduct to encourage visitors, highlighting a precursor moment for the Indian government's current bid to solicit foreign investment. She also identifies a specific object, a German Rollei camera and an advertisement for ORWO, film stock imported from East Germany, gesturing to a specific network of trade and technological linkages with Eastern Europe.

If the FD archives here provide us with information about the object world, they are also a potential database of the elemental world. Veena Hariharan rightly contrasts FD's instrumental relationship to water, as something to be controlled for power, irrigation and so on, to the environmentally aware contemporary documentary. Her approach echoes Adrian Ivakhiv's argument for a film theory alert to the question of ecology. He suggests that while key features of cinematic convention seek to produce the distinction between the human and the non-human, as in Giorgio Agamben's formulation about the anthropology machine, media form may skew the distinction by a variety of techniques.³ It is possible that the FD database, fatally implicated as it was in a suborning of the natural world, may still yield startling ways of placing the human figure and framing the natural world.⁴

Time itself is held in the material form of celluloid, what Ruchir Joshi calls its "hiss and scratch". We get this sense at many points in this archive of the contemporary. There is Joshi's own return to *Egaro Mile*, his 1991 film about Baul folk-singers, shot in the mode of an anti-ethnographic film, unsettling the boundaries of identity by immersing us in performance and ironic reflection. Joshi encounters the film as it is being restored by the Arsenal archive in Berlin, the process weaving a to-and-fro in time, as images, sounds and scenes captured then are worked over in the technical embrace of the digital, and the bid for sensory calibration with the textures of the original. The image of women activists gathered around a low-res video file taken from a scratched 16mm print of *Tambakoo Chaakila Oob*

³ Production still from *Egaro Mile/Eleven Miles*, Ruchir Joshi, 1991.