

## SUKHDEV'S INDIA: ACTIVISM, IDEOLOGY OR REALISM?

<sup>1</sup>Prof. (Dr.) Bandana Pandey\*, <sup>2</sup>Charu Chandra Pathak

<sup>1</sup>Supervisor, GBU, Greater Noida, India

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, GJU, Hisar, Haryana, India

Email ID: charuchandra1234@gmail.com

Accepted: 04.05.2022

Published: 01.06.2022

**Keywords:** Documentary films, Aesthetics, Activism, Realism, Ideologies.

### Abstract

*The objective of this paper is to analyze Sukhdev's documentaries. Documentary films are known for presenting reality and facts by keeping this under consideration this research is examining the content of his two famous documentary films in representing realism, ideologies, and activism. The films are: And Miles to Go (1965) and India '67 (1968). The documentary films made by Sukhdev has underlined the growing disparities between rich and poor and their coexistence in the new India. The prime objective of this paper is: a) To decode the messages expressed in two of the films made by Sukhdev. b) To see a mechanism followed by Sukhdev in these films to portray realism. c) To examine the ideological inclination in these two films. The present research is based on primary data and to achieve these goals content analysis and interview method is used.*

### Paper Identification



\*Corresponding Author

### The Rise of Sukhdev: An Eclectic Passionate Filmmaker

Sukhdev Singh Sandhu (1933-79) was one of famous documentary filmmaker of India. He was born in Dehradun, Uttarakhand. In just 48 years of life-span and around two decades of his professional career, he is credited for making more than 60 films. India '67 (1968), Nine Months to Freedom, Kathak (1970), And Miles to Go (1965), After the Eclipse (1967) are some of his most discussed documentary films. He won National Film Award for Best Non-Feature Film for And Miles to Go (1965) and India '67 (1968). Satyajit Ray said about India '67, "I like India '67 but not for its broad and percussive contrasts of poverty and influence, beauty and squalor, modernity and primitivity – however well shot and cut they might be. I like it for its details – for the black beetle that crawls along the hot sand, for the street dog that pees on the parked bicycle, for the bead of perspiration that dangles on the nose tip of the begrimed musician."

It is critical to discuss the backdrop in which Sukhdev rose to fame for his 'never seen before' style of filmmaking. India had been struggling for long since gaining the political independence from the bloodthirsty British Raj. There were miseries in all possible forms all around. There were famines and mass scale dissatisfactions were the new constants.

This captured the attention of the academicians and artists who were sensitive about the prevailing conditions in India. One such filmmaker was Sukhdev whose film India '67 and 'And Miles to Go' became very popular. On one hand, India '67 offers a look at the twenty years old India. These twenty years were gone after since it's independence from long colonial rule. New India was supposed to be a country whose economic, social and political order should've been drastically different then colonial era. On the other hand, 'And Miles to Go' focuses upon how should we evolve our country as a better place for everyone. This film urges to strengthen the democratic framework. We will discuss more on these films in later section.

Sukhdev's daughter Shabnam Sukhdev made a film, The Last Adieu (2014), about him to give audience glimpses about Sukhdev's personal and professional life. This biographical documentary is however not part of this research study; however, it gives us few things to note while discussing about development of the filmmaker's prolific career. These are: he was passionate, full of ideas and has appetite to make diverse range of films, dedicated to his work, politically misaligned, enthusiastic about making himself aware of people's views, careless towards his family, well connected with the fraternity and officials.

Sukhdev started his career with Paul Zils, who was German by origin but was pivotal to the landscape of Indian documentary films in 40s and 50s. Sukhdev considered him his teacher (Thunder of freedom, 1976), and he directed his first film on handmade paper industry produced by Zils. Sukhdev not only casted himself in films such as 'No Sad Tomorrow' and 'After the Eclipse'. In 'After the Eclipse', his wife Kanta and daughter Shabnam also acted. Sukhdev also acted in famous Saat Hindustani (1969) by Abbas and other cast of this film including Amitabh Bachchan, Utpal Dutt. He also made a full-length feature film – 'My Love'. 'Shaira' was his last documentary film on

Meena Kumari, which was then finished by Gulzar. 'Four Directors' was his unfinished film, which was supposed to be about Kurosawa, Antonioni, Kazan and Satyajit Ray.

### Griersonian Filmmaker

Anuja Jain (2013) cites Sukhdev in her research paper: "In a note contributed to an issue of Indian Documentary, Sukhdev, who was merely twenty at this time and was an assistant director of Paul Zils, radically reinterprets the ... Griersonian dictum that 'documentary is the creative interpretation of reality,' to 'documentary is the creative interpretation of re-created reality!' He argues for the urgent use of 'technique' and 'social actors' in the documentaries and insists that, rather than making *pukka* and *gorment* (authentic and government) documentaries, the purpose and method of documentary should be changed..." Here she also quotes Sukhdev that he was in favor that filmmakers should "mix well with the people and try to be as one of them, so that we may have strong and authentic story backgrounds for our documentaries."

Camille Deprez (2013) mentions at many places that filmmakers and personnel related to Films Division followed "Grierson's vision of the positive and idealist function of art," however they adapted it as per the need of Indian situation. She mentions that "The FD was particularly influenced by Grierson's idea of the positive and negative social functions of art, with the positive representation always needing to dominate the negative one. This explains why FD film narratives often progress from a problematic situation (a poor irrigation system, a lack of electricity, an unsatisfactory legal system, etc.) to its resolution." This applies to both of the film we have included for this study.

In the light of both these research papers, which covers the situation of Films Divisions and documentaries made during 1940s till 1960s, we can safely say that

filmmakers including Sukhdev followed Griersonian ideas, however they adapted it as per Indian situation. To add to it, Sukhdev was also of the opinion that filmmakers should “mix well with the people and try to be as one of them” to make them authentic.

### Propogandist Filmmaker

Sukhdev was considered to be as ‘connected’ with the ‘important people’ in the government. Ritika Kaushik (2017) in her research paper writes about India '67 that, “Filmmaker S. Sukhdev had friendly relations with Indira Gandhi, and it appears this relationship helped to advance this film project.” She also mentions that, “With a one-page script and such high costs of production, Sukhdev’s privileged status in the FD bureaucracy is quite apparent.”

In this light, and in the facts presented in the film *The Last Adieu* (2014) by Shabnam Sukhdev, it has been said, as per Srikanth Srinivasan’s article on First Post (Firstpost, 2020) that after 1967, “...however, saw the filmmaker taking increasingly pro-government stances. For instance, in *Voice of the People* and *A Few More Questions* (both 1974), Sukhdev interviewed common people across social strata about their opinion on the impending all-India railway strike. Focusing on its potentially catastrophic effects rather than the demands driving it, these films present the strike as a selfish action of a few at the cost of many.”

The article continues that in ‘White Paper on the Misuse of Mass Media During the Internal Emergency’, which was “published under the new JP government in 1977, details the way the preceding regime abused the media, including FD, to glorify the Emergency and stoke a personality cult around its leader.” And, “The document also hints at the special favors Sukhdev enjoyed, receiving projects directly from the MIB, without having to go through FD.”

However, as like Shabnam Sukhdev’s film on her father, Srikanth Srinivasan gives reference to his last

film, *After the Silence* (1976), and agrees that “Sukhdev’s relation to the state was more complex than it appears, that people were always at the focal point of his work.” This statement probably captures Sukhdev’s personality as a documentary filmmaker in much better way and also aligns with many facts mentioned earlier.

### Objectives

The prime objectives of this paper are:

1. To decode the messages expressed in two of the films made by Sukhdev.
2. To see a mechanism followed by Sukhdev in these films to portray realism.
3. To examine the ideological inclination in these two films.

### Methodology

In this research paper, Sukhdev’s two famous documentary films are being studied, which are: *And Miles to Go* (1965) and *India '67* (1968). These films have been selected as they received National Film Award for Best Non-Feature Film.

The present research is based on a qualitative study design. The use of descriptive study design was needed to analyze the objectives of the study. The research has used primary data through qualitative content analysis of the two films taken for the research, to understand the messages expressed in the films. The researcher has analyzed these films on the basis of narration, visuals, symbolic representation, music and song, and editing style. Through these, the researcher has established an association between ideology, realism, and activism in these films of Sukhdev. Content analysis is the process of codifying the visuals, images, and any other visual content into broad themes to interpret the associated linkages. The researcher has developed the analysis around the following broad questions:



1. Is there any ideological content in these films of Sukhdev?
2. What type of shots and visuals were taken in the films to establish the core of activism?
3. What mechanism was followed by Sukhdev in these films to portray realism?

The present research is based on Agenda Setting theory. As described by McCombs and Shaw, agenda-setting is a process through which media influence how people will think and what they will think about on any specific issue. This influence by media impacts the treatment of the media content, be it films or television news which results in the slanted opinion and facts. This treatment changes the perception and mindset of the viewers as per the set criteria whenever a topic is covered in a film or news report that immediately gains more importance for the viewers, which works as the basis to make their judgments about the issues and topics.

#### **Discussion: And Miles to Go (1965)**

'Poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere'. In the spirit of Sukhdev's passion for stability, prosperity tempered by the consequences of unfettered, inequitable economic growth, 'And Miles to Go', has a prime lesson: Anger towards the state should not turn into a rebellion without cause. In the spirit of depicting inequality, visuals from all walks of life, in varied situations, are depicted towards the goal legitimizing anger against inequality but ensuring that the said anger is channelized in a positive manner. This aligns with what Camille Deprez (2013) writes, "Grierson's idea of the positive and negative social functions of art, with the positive representation always needing to dominate the negative one. This explains why FD film narratives often progress from a problematic situation (a poor irrigation system, a lack of electricity, an unsatisfactory legal system, etc.) to its resolution."

Initial intertitle in the film sums up its central idea, "This film is dedicated to all the forces of rational thought that are opposed to the path of violence and seeks to strengthen the hands of our government in its stupendous task of tackling the pressing problems that face the country." Though, at the outset, the statement appears to be of an appeasing nature to the then dispensation, a thorough study of Sukhdev's works will lead to the rationalist trend of thought he possessed. To him, structures were a sacred right, while government of the day, a temporary phenomenon.

The first shot of rising sun with the narration, "The night was dark. There were no stars in the sky, when dawn came and brought to light more darkness." At its end, a dark cloud of fumes engulfs the sun followed by a shot of faces of different people, to make it open to interpretations, such as power centers affect people, or still there are clouds in lives of common people, or there are problems in people's life but it's not permanent.

Next scene, through parallel cuts, shows lives of stereotypical rich/poor opposites. The whole scene depicts 'slice of life' for both strata. Sukhdev reveals that it's his perspective, at the end of this montage, by showing his own photograph.

The next few shots of angry and sad people are followed by a montage depicting an uprising/protest while the police force try to suppress the protests. "Down the long road of history, many countries seen the anger and wrath of its people, but before the cup of patience is spilled, before the caution is fumed in the wind, before the institution of law and order is outraged, man must summon up the forces of rational thought." Though Sukhdev attempts to call upon the rational side of man, he legitimizes the anger of the people. Scarcity breeds contempt in the absence of justice.

He admonishes the state and advises its chosen guardians, "Those who are chosen to be the guardians of law and order, and those whom the law has to serve, must never oppose each-other. They must learn to think on a common plane and together defeat the demon of greed and corruption." With these words, evoking the shots already used in the film, as if summing up the film, he exalts his audience to follow the path of the system that serves us well, i.e., rule of law and democracy.

Their key points are highlighted in this documentary: 1. social inequality, 2. importance of democracy, and 3. not to resort on violence for social changes. Democracy rules in the film and director supports it and suggests the ways to strengthen it and appeals to strengthen it. Violence for social change is criticized in this film. Total 65 photographs were shown in the film to align them with narration. Dynamic editing has been used to contrast the different realities for rich and poor and to give slow and fast pace to the scenes as required. Use of silence has also been done to give audience some space to think about what is being said. Music is used to enhance the emotions.

### **Discussion: India '67 (1968)**

This film was labelled as a film that managed to get rid of a major source of bias known as 'narrative' and achieved interpretative and subjective style. The film talks about India's journey 20 years after the independence highlighting the stark realities in the form of persisting difference amongst the haves and the have-nots. The film focused on the poverty and its ripple effects visible in the form of social and economic realities. The increasing economic gaps were shown in picturesque way using symbols like a shot of a goat being killed by a snake. Women fetching water from unthinkable water sources and fiery wind gushing at the back. Film also tries to take a dig on religion with the scenes showing the grand temples and downtrodden praying. But that's not all.

This film also shows political pressure group, such as the Maratha agitation for identity continued with police action on the community, people clicking photographs of the great warrior, Shivaji. In a hard-hitting representation of contrasts and conflict is shown the progress in the atomic energy sector while in the classrooms of rural India-agriculture dominates the narrative.

The contrasts and conflicts of automation and the strikes associated thereto are represented by visuals of workers protesting and being ignored by the powers to be. Scenes from factory floors represent the hard work and the 'work is worship' spirit of the workers, who will not partake the success of the marvels of modern India. Visuals of dams, motorizations, and grandeur of the elite are contrasted with the poverty-stricken rural India. Amul is a case in point. A cooperative success that inspired the world, made India the largest producer of milk, is an automated system contrasted with hungry infants whose parents are unable to afford subsidized milk.

The scarcity of poverty is contrasted with the lush and plump life of the elite in bars, swimming pools and hotels in the backdrop of ancient engineering marvels of temples, Taj Mahal, and other such monuments where the story of construction, financing, stands witness to the everyday urban dweller who roams their grounds to sell flowers (and other such items of indulgence) to the visitors.

Shots of Rajpath, seat of all power in modern India, appears as the culmination point where in the celebration of democracy, the poor are shown as ignored and unwelcome. As the national flag is unfurled, it provides a sense of security and serenity in the frenzied religiosity that helps the poor and rich alike escape insecurity and guilt. Sukhdev, thus, presents India in all its grandeur and layers, offering a chance to his audience to interpret the consequences of linear growth. This film is a collage of all colors,

including progress and backwardness, superstition and cultural diversity.

The key points highlighted in the film are: 1. There is growth and development in India. 2. Also, many people here don't have enough food, cloths and shelter. 3. Rich people enjoy everything the country achieved so far, but poor people are vulnerable and deprived. 4. Artists are also suffering from the inequality, but simultaneously they are busy in creating an art which is not helpful in focusing the inequality. 5. Homogeneous development is required.

Audio clips from commercial cinema has been used. Total nine (9) such audio clips were used, to suggest that as if people use them to cheer up despite problems in their life. Hindi song, 'Aaj ki raat, ye kaisi raat, kaisi raat...' suggests growing population. Music has been used to enhance the emotions. Music also shows different between rich and poor people. At one place it's either western or classical, whereas in other it's raw and traditional, to show the cultural difference as well.

Similar to, *And Miles to Go*, editing in this film is also highly dynamic. The intent of it makes the film multi-layered and it's very impactful to convey director's vision. This film also raises issues of inequality, uneven progress and areas of improvements.

### Conclusion

As a Griersonian filmmaker, Sukhdev uses documentary film to orient the masses and the 'centers of power' to assign two different responsibilities for achieving a single goal of strengthening the democracy. Masses offers him authenticity and reality and he, in turn, suggest them to unite as "forces of rational thought" to use their right to vote judiciously. 'Centre of power' is urged to work for homogenous development and 'not to silence the voices of have-nots'. Sukhdev appears as an activist filmmaker in both the documentaries, as he not only suggests what's right

and what's wrong, but he also advocates what should be done. He chooses all popular and impactful symbols and unites them to advocate the goal of strengthening democratic framework of the country. He seems to like to 'gel with the masses', uses his 'connections' to persuade them to get his creative freedom, says what he believes into, and doesn't hesitate to experiment, if it's helpful to achieve his goal. He shakes the 'rulers' and 'ruled' alike. Sukhdev is an auteur in his style of documentary filmmaking.

### RÉFÉRENCIAS

- [1] 45 years later, how Indira Gandhi's 1975 emergency appears through the lens of the films division of India -art-and-culture news ,Firstpost. (2020, June 30). Firstpost. <https://www.firstpost.com/art-and-culture/45-years-later-how-indira-gandhis-1975-emergency-appears-through-the-lens-of-the-films-division-of-india-8530771.html>
- [2] Agenda-setting theory. (2009). Encyclopedia of Communication Theory. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412959384.n12>
- [3] Deprez. (2013). The films division of India, 1948–1964: The early days and the influence of the British documentary film tradition. *Film History*, 25(3), 149. <https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.25.3.149>
- [4] Grierson, J., & Hardy, F. (1971). *Grierson on documentary*. University of California Press.
- [5] In search of Sukhdev. (2014, August 18). *The Hindu : Breaking News, India News, Sports News and Live Updates*. <https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/shabnam-sukhdev-makes-documentary-on-her-father-filmmaker-s-sukhdev/article6324214.ece>
- [6] International labour organization (ILO) Philadelphia declaration 1944. (n.d.). The



- global social policy reader, 251-254.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t893gd.26>
- [7] Jain, A. (2013). The curious case of the films division: Some annotations on the beginnings of Indian documentary cinema in Postindependence India, 1940s–1960s. *The Velvet Light Trap*, 71, 15-26.  
<https://doi.org/10.7560/vlt7103>
- [8] Kaushik, R. (2017). “Sun in the belly”: Film practice at films division of India 1965–1975. *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 8(1), 103-123.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0974927617699647>
- [9] Paul Zils. (2008, May 1). Paul Zils.  
[https://second.wiki/wiki/paul\\_zils](https://second.wiki/wiki/paul_zils)
- [10] *Thunder of freedom* (L.V.) (1976). (n.d).  
Indiancine.ma.  
<https://indiancine.ma/RXG/info>

