

The Development of Documentary Filmmaking in Early Independent India

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Abstract : This paper proposes to present research findings of an ongoing Hong Kong government-funded project on 'The Documentary Film in India (1948-1975)' (GRF 1240314), for which an extensive research fieldwork has been carried out in various archives in India. This project investigates the role and significance of the Indian documentary film sector from the inauguration of the state-sponsored Films Division one year after independence in 1948 until the declaration of a 'State of Emergency' in 1975. The documentary film production of this first period of national independence was characterised by increasing formal experimentation and analytical social and political enquiry, and by a complex, mixed structure of state-sponsored monopoly and free-market operation. However, that production remains significantly under-researched. What were the main production, distribution and exhibition strategies over this period? What were the recurrent themes and stylistic features of the films produced? In the new context of national independence (in which the State considered film as means of mass persuasion), consolidation of the commercial film, and the emergence of television and art cinema, what role did official, professional and creative factors play in the development of the documentary film sector? What were the impact of such films and the challenges faced by the documentary film in India? Based upon the crossed-analysis of primary written research documents, interviews and relevant films, this study interweaves empirical study of the sector's financing, production, distribution and exhibition strategies, as well as the films' content and form, with the larger historical context of India over the period from 1948 to 1975. Whilst most of the films made within the sector explored social issues, they were rarely able to do so from an overtly critical perspective. However, this paper proposes to analyse the contribution of important filmmakers and producers, including Ezra Mir, Paul Zils, Jean Bhowmaway, S. Sukhdev, S. N. S. Sastri, and P. Pati, to the development of the Indian documentary film sector and style within and outside the remit of Films Division. It will more specifically assess the extent to which they criticised the State, showed the inequalities in Indian society and explored film form.

Keywords : documentary film, film archives, film history, India

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