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INTERVIEW WITH R.V. RAMANI

PALLAVI PAUL

Introduction: R. V. Ramani was born in 1957 and is a Chennai-based filmmaker. He graduated from the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, in 1985, specializing in cinematography. He started making independent documentaries and short films from 1990. With more than fifteen independent films to his credit, Ramani has established a unique style that is acclaimed all over the world. Although he works within the documentary form, his films offer an experience of fiction. Ramani's works have been shown in numerous international film festivals. His retrospectives were presented at the Mumbai International Film Festival 2002, the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, and DokumentART. This is a conversation held in New Delhi as a part of my M.Phil research on the post emergency independent documentary in India.

Pallavi Paul (PP): What do you think independent documentary is? And do you think the Emergency marks a turning point in the history of what independent documentary meant?

R.V. Ramani (RVR): No I wouldn't place the Emergency as a turning point. I know a lot of people would, but I wouldn't. This is because I know that for documentary maybe you can say the Emergency was important, but for filmmaking as a whole the Emergency was irrelevant. There were people making really independent films even before that and are continuing even today. For example *Bhuvan Shome* (Sen 1969), it's an absolutely amazing work and it's an independent work. Which for me is a major reference point that somebody can do work like that. When you say Independent, it is also a kind of activism. You are trying to be independent of some established norms. You are trying to question them, reinterpret them.

PP: What kinds of norms are these? Aesthetic, cultural, political?

RVR: Norms are constantly changing. Anything can become a norm at a given point in time. The way I am talking right now can also become a norm. Even if something is new it can become a norm by its ritualistic practice. But one has to constantly keep breaking it. About the questions of the documentary specifically again, earlier it was the state that was main producer of documentary films. The notion of documentary was for them largely propaganda. Perhaps independence provided people with the tool to say something against the government. So that initially became the notion of independence that “I have spoken against you.” In that way independence in documentary and the emergency is linked. People were protesting against the government was independence. But is it really independence is what I am asking? In itself is a very important activity and is a form of independence but is that all?

PP: Do you think format had a bearing on independent practice?

RVR: Hmm... see there were things like import permits etcetera but again I look at them as incidental issues. If one was stuck with the idea that all film must be shot on 35 mm then that's another kind of issue, it no longer remains a question of independence. In the market today there are so many things, one can pick. It just becomes about subversion with whatever tools you have. I left working on film because I had to make documentaries. To make a documentary I did not need 35mm film. My films were never going to theatres and 35 mm would have been a waste. 16mm cameras had started to become more and more problematic and there would be many niggles in them. Also the processing and developing became a major issue because most of the labs in India did not have large orders for 16mm stock. So because of all this it was not a very stable proposition to work with film. There were issues like scratching of negatives etcetera. It's like if you go to a place which doesn't make samosas and insist on eating samosas there, what will you get? In my experience I have seen these things change. In 1982 when I joined FTII, people were talking about 35 mm. Even within that there was a hierarchy between Arriflex and Mitchell cameras, where Mitchell was considered to be a better camera even though they were both using the same format film. Then by the time I was in

second year people were talking about 16mm and by the final year U-matic/ Low Band had become a real possibility. But these hierarchies used to never affect me. From the beginning if something was easily available in the market and had good functioning for me, I would take it up. These things change so quickly. You name any format and I have worked with it and therefore I can make this statement to you easily that formats have nothing to do with independent practice.

PP: How did you place yourself vis a vis your contemporaries on these questions?

RVR: To think of it, it was not from film contemporaries, but I learnt this from friends who were artists and painters. The fun of mixed media. They use anything and everything's. Acrylic, oil, charcoal, pencil. So I was learning a lot from there about my practice.

PP: Where did you imagine your films would be shown?

RVR: umm... see there were places where you had to create the possibility for screenings. Because nothing like that existed. There were a few organizations like Max Mueller Bhavan that were open to showing Indian films . new filmmakers and interesting works. Max Mueller Bhavan was one my staple venues. Whenever I used to make a film, Max Mueller would show it in Chennai. Therefore Bangalore and Delhi would also show. I would hold on to that link. Alliance Francaise and American Centre were also venues. They had nice auditoriums and projectors. And other than these there were a few non-commercial entities with a projector and a hall, I would approach them and they would also be happy to show my films. In fact I have never catered to an audience of more than 100 people. Sometimes it would just be a few friends. I don't even think of large audiences now, I don't even need them actually. I like small audiences. I like showing my films to a few people and having a nice feedback and talk. I don't even like to show my films on television.

PP: Why do you feel television is unsuitable for your films?

RVR: For television perhaps one needs to make different kinds of films. For the way I make my films, they are not really suitable for that medium. People may like them, but

I'll still be uncomfortable and cinema halls are totally impossible. But there was this one film that was made by me and my friend Soudamini (also a graduate from FTII), the film was called 'Interested' it was shown on TV on a one time royalty. This was in 1990 and the film became the taste of what independent could be for me. That film was made largely because I wanted to make some other film in Bombay. I was generating various kinds of resources to make that film on an expedition to Mt. Kanchenjunga . I was supposed to be the filmmaker traveling with the team but the project never happened. So whatever I had raised for that, we eventually decided to do a film with that. We lived in two villages in the South and the concept was that we were looking for lost songs, forgotten songs. We would go from village to village, meet elders, meet people and ask them what they remember. It is a very short film of 22 mins, but it was a wonderful experience. It was shot on a camera that nobody would use etcetera, and since there is no sound on film, we used an ordinary tape recorder but it was a lot of fun.

PP: Do you think that there is something that can be called a documentary aesthetic?

RVR: No I don't think it can be said that documentary has a separate aesthetic. Is there anything in the world that is without aesthetics? In fact everything is in aesthetics only, documentary is just a set of parameters that you're working with. Basically documentary is that you don't give dialogues. Also, the Films Division model of aesthetics did not have any influence on me, in fact I had hardly seen any documentary films as a student! I was watching *Bhuvan Shome*, *Ajantrik*. Then I heard of Anand Patwardhan in Bombay through friends of mine who had really praised him a lot and that time I was also living in Bombay and was assisting this cameraperson called A.K Bir. I was amongst students who insisted that Patwardhan's films because I wanted to see his work and what he was doing.

PP: What was experience of watching Patwardhan?

RVR: After I saw his work I had an argument with him.

PP: What was the argument about?

RVR: I told him that in his film I did not find a single image that showed empathy. Though the film had that tone or attitude that it's in support of slum dwellers who were being evicted for all the wrong reasons, it was taking that position against the state. In theory I agree, but in my personal experience when I saw *Bombay Hamaara Sheher* I did not see a single image that evoked empathy. In my films I strongly work with that element. How I connect with you is important. If I take a picture of you, to show how I connect with that photograph is important. How do you bring that empathy into filmmaking for me becomes a form of activism. The element of connection is central to this and we almost take it for granted. And if one is not careful about it then it can create other kinds of messages. Lots of clichés can be reinforced or avoided by taking care of this. If you don't, you can get stuck in the oppressor-victim binary. The question of how empowerment actually happens does not get asked and documentary films can get taken to be 'reality' which is wrong. Documentary is not reality.

PP: Okay, so taking your engagement with Anand Patwardhan's cinema a bit further- while he locates himself consciously within a cinema of resistance and is influenced by the Third Cinema moment, you say that you were hardly watching documentaries and were infact influenced by films like *Bhuvan Shome* and *Ajantrik*. So was it ever a struggle in your practice? To arrive at a documentary form rather than place yourself within it as a historically informed choice?

RVR: Hmmm... (laughs) No it wasn't really a struggle because I don't think of fiction as fiction. Our common ideas about fiction come from literature because things are rendered and written in a certain way. But fiction need not be limited to that. Any thing can be fiction no? Fiction is a way of talking, one recognizable act, there is nothing essential about it. Actually frankly speaking I am a fiction filmmaker, I work with fiction. My parameters are a bit strange that's why my films seem weird. I just don't give people dialogues but other than that there are characters, there are songs there are situations- everything is there. I work with all those things. It's juxtaposition, the energy levels all of it comes together to create fiction. Putting two shots together is fiction for me. I work against the notion of information, so if I am working with that as a principle then what is it that is making me chose one shot over others and putting them together while editing.

In documentary filmmaking information becomes a predominant tool for a lot of people. I don't work like that, I am interested in experience. So when I work with experience everything becomes fiction. I keep saying that my films offer an experience of fiction, even though I work with documentary as a plane.

PP: Would you call yourself a political filmmaker?

RVR: Absolutely. My politics comes from being personal and empathetic. That's very political. People's criticism of my work is that it is indulgent and that I am making films only for myself etcetera but that doesn't bother me. Sometimes people are looking for social messages or what exactly the film is offering to someone. In fact a friend of mine was asking me yesterday, why is it important that you show your film to others? So I got very zapped by that question and began to think, really why is it that I show my films to others. Like today I am showing *My Camera* and *Tsunami* in JNU. I am thinking about why is it important to show it. I mean, of course it is very important because something else happens when you show. How the image is perceived becomes palpable. Since I am working against the commoditization of the image this activity of seeing together in this way is necessary. I contest the commoditization of images by making them more porous, less definitive, less judgmental and therefore more democratic. There are not authoritative positions or self-righteous decisions, there are just voices and I hope together they can work towards a better world.

About the interviewer: Pallavi Paul is a film researcher and video artist based out of New Delhi. A graduate of AJK MCRC, New Delhi, she is currently a PhD student at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU. Her first independent video works *Nayi Kheti* and *Shabdkosh* have shown at the Tate Modern Gallery, London, 100 years of experimentation a festival by Films Division, MAMI (forthcoming). She is currently working on her first documentary film.

Contact: paul.pallavi@gmail.com
