TATE FILM

A Cinema of Songs and People: The Films of Anand Patwardhan
A CINEMA OF SONGS AND PEOPLE:
THE FILMS OF ANAND PATWARDHAN
Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
12 July 2013 – 28 July 2013
£5 / £4 concessions per screening
Season ticket £30 / £20 concessions

Rarely viewed in Britain, the films of Anand Patwardhan represent one of the most important achievements in documentary cinema. This season brings audiences into contact with an astonishing body of work whose profound commitment to radical change offers an experience like few others in contemporary cinema. This comprehensive retrospective, the first to be devoted to the major works of Patwardhan in London, devotes long overdue attention to a giant of cinema whose films inaugurated the independent documentary moment in India in the mid-1970s.

Each film in the season will be introduced by Anand Patwardhan and The Otolith Collective and followed by audience discussion after the screening. Guest speakers include filmmaker John Akomfrah, critic T J Demos, artist and critic Janna Graham, political campaigner Kate Hudson and political historian Shirin Rai.

Curated by The Otolith Collective
Assistant Curator, Fiontán Moran

Tate Film is supported by Maja Hoffmann / LUMA Foundation
Scenes From the Unmaking of Secular India

Anand Patwardhan’s films focus upon the wounded democratic polity of contemporary India, continually returning to the painful entanglements of nationality, warfare, religion, impoverishment, community, gender, caste and class. Born in 1950, Patwardhan studied Sociology at Brandeis University in Massachusetts at the end of the 1960s; after college, he worked with the Farm Workers Union in California with Cesar Chavez, who later appeared in *A Time to Rise*, his 1981 documentary film on migrant farm labourers in British Columbia.

Patwardhan directed his first film in 1974, during a moment of intense upheaval in India. *Waves of Revolution* 1975 captured the excitement of the anti corruption mass movement in Bihar, Northern India in 1974 and the repression imposed by Indira Gandhi when she declared the state of Emergency in 1975. Such a film could never have been directed under the auspices of the state run Films Division that produced and distributed documentaries in India.

*Prisoners of Conscience* 1978, his first film to be widely screened in India, emphasised the widespread policies of arrest and torture, both before and after Indira Gandhi’s dictatorship, while *Bombay: Our City* 1985, his deeply felt documentary, depicted the struggles of Bombay’s millions of pavement dwellers. In a key scene, Patwardhan filmed a Dalit woman holding her baby as she questions his motives:

Where can we go? Do you have a solution? At least give us shelter during the monsoons. After that we’ll go somewhere. But you won’t shelter us even for four months. You just want to earn a name taking photographs! What else can you do? The government has discarded us. You and I can do nothing. So don’t take photographs of the poor.

In the 1990s, Patwardhan embarked upon a series of films addressing what critic Geeta Kapur calls the ‘unmaking of secular India.’ The growing communalism of Indian politics, ‘communal’ being the term used in India for sectarian and increasingly fundamentalist religious communities was, and indeed remains, in direct conflict with the secular, socialist traditions that inform Patwardhan’s aesthetic and political thinking.

Although his films were always subject to censorship, it is this context that explains the increased repression visited upon Patwardhan’s films. The Central Board of Film Certification, to take just one example, demanded 21 cuts from *War and Peace* 2002 until ordered by court to pass the film without cuts, a year later. Doordarshan, India’s national broadcasting corporation, refused to broadcast *Father, Son and Holy War*, completed in 1995, until the Supreme Court forced it to do so in 2006.

Patwardhan has gradually developed a range of aesthetic methods capable of puncturing the aggressive defences common to all fundamentalisms. These methods stem from his style of shooting. As well as editing his films, Patwardhan also operates the video camera and at the same time, conducts interviews. In the frame, he tends to focus upon a single face within a crowd, drawing its forms of speech and varieties of gaze towards his lens. In these moments can be seen the young fanatic that expresses himself with the freedom of the mob and the upper class that articulates self-congratulation in the tone of self-pity.

In the film *In Memory of Friends* 1990, there is a scene with young Sikh separatists who have claimed the memory of the young Communist
Bhagat Singh, executed by the British in 1931 for rebellion. One man, wearing a pale green turban, white shirt and grey sleeveless jumper, speaks as the lens slowly travels towards him. Patwardhan asks him, ‘Today you’re commemorating Bhagat Singh? The youth agrees quietly. Patwardhan points out that, ‘he called himself an atheist not a Sikh. He was a Communist.’ The man replies ‘No, later it came out he was religious. He was Sikh to start with…’ Patwardhan persists: ‘But he wrote a book Why I am an Atheist.’ The young separatists try to change the subject. Patwardhan insists, ‘What about the book on atheism?’ The man looks down, away from the lens. From out of frame, someone declares: ‘That’s written by Congress. Those are not his words. He was a Sikh, not an atheist.’

Confronted with the historical evidence of their hero’s atheism, the young Sikhs do not rethink their position; on the contrary, they reaffirm it. In this scene, which recurs, with variations throughout his films, Patwardhan’s aim is not to persuade the fundamentalist to correct their faith. It is to reveal the forcefield of faith that reassures the fundamentalist of their duty to deny the truth. Scenes such as this confront the viewer with the realisation that the fundamentalist impulse is not to solve problems but instead to remove all possibility of solution.

This sobering revelation is passed on to the viewer. It is often a moment of noise that is counterpointed to interviews that summon the qualities of what Sadie Benning calls ‘time and air’ into the atmosphere of thinking. Whether it is the Dalit woman that hesitates to speak because she is so accustomed to being ignored or a villager seated indoors carefully narrating the course of events, a context is created for watching people making up their mind about what they think in order to arrive, gradually, at an understanding of their present situation.

From the 1990s onwards, Patwardhan’s films have increased in their gestation: seven years for Father, Son and Holy War 1995, four years for War and Peace 2002 and fourteen years for Jai Bhim Comrade 2012. Perhaps the only equivalent to this form of incubational cinema might be found in the films of Shinsuke Ogawa, a director Patwardhan admires. Partially, this durational process stems from Patwardhan’s processual or ‘unpremeditated’ practice that cannot anticipate the form or the subject of a film nor whether the process of shooting might ever produce a film. Indeed, the epilogue so often appended after the closing scene of his films suggests that the ending is to be regarded as provisional as much as conclusive.

What is striking is how War and Peace and Jai Bhim Comrade move between the quietude of the solitary interview, the noise of the crowd interview and the focus upon the activities that constitute the mechanisms of the media event. Patwardhan’s films alert you to the format of the public event staged for television and newspapers; the festival or the rally sponsored by BJP or by Shiv Sena, the main fundamentalist parties, are especial favourites. Watching Patwardhan’s films entails an education in watching the ways that crowds watch politicians perform and listen to performers politicize. In this way, one begins to gain a heightened awareness of the processes that are accumulated and filtered until, in the words of John Akomfrah, ‘particular events attain the definitive status of the real’.

Perhaps Patwardhan’s most consistent cinematic signature is the song. Whether it is the harvest song that concludes A Time to Rise or the Internationale that is sung in Punjabi in In Memory of Friends or the song sung by Vilas Ghoghre, the charismatic Dalit bard, that guides the listener through the travails of poverty in Bombay: Our City or the anti-caste song
We Are Not Your Monkeys, that Patwardhan co-wrote with Dalit poets to critique the Hindu epic Ramayana, the song conjures powers of gathering and solidarity, memory and futurity that play an important role in the montage and the mood of the Patwardhan film.

Jai Bhim Comrade indeed is a documentary narrated by songs. It is a documentary in the form of a musical that reflects upon cinema’s power to commemorate the mnemonic power of song. It begins by quoting the closing scene from Bombay: Our City in 1985, of Vilas Ghogre, the great singer, in order to question the moment of his suicide in 1997. To grasp the tragic dimensions of these events, the film presses forward into 2011 even as it travels back into the 1970s to evoke the era of the Dalit Panthers. In understanding this complex historical montage, the viewer begins to perceive Jai Bhim Comrade as a process that continues beyond the screen and into the present time of watching the film itself. In its narration of endangered histories and its call to the future of the Dalit movement, Jai Bhim Comrade offers audiences a vantage point from which to revisit Patwardhan’s cinematic compositions of peoples and songs, as if for the first time.

Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar

BIOGRAPHIES


John Akomfrah is a filmmaker, artist and theorist who lives and works in London. He is a founder member of Smoking Dogs Films and Black Audio Film Collective. His recent works include The Stuart Hall Project 2013, The Unfinished Conversation 2012 and Peripeteia 2012. Recent exhibitions and festivals include Sundance Film Festival, 67th Venice International Film Festival, New Art Exchange, Nottingham and Sharjah Biennial 11.


Janna Graham is an artist, critic and educator. Graham is a member of the sound collective Ultra-red and works with the Precarious Workers Brigade in London. She is currently Projects Curator at the Serpentine Gallery and runs The Centre for Possible Studies in Edgware Road, London. Graham is a PhD candidate and Tutor in the Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths, University of London.

Shirin M. Rai is Professor in the Department of Politics and International Studies at Warwick University and Visiting Professorial Fellow at the Gender Institute, London School of Economics. Her research focuses on gendered performance, political institutions and the political economy of development. She is author of The Gender Politics of Development 2008, and editor of Ceremony and Ritual in Parliament 2010.

Kate Hudson is a leading national and international anti-nuclear and anti-war campaigner. She was Chair of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament from 2003 to September 2010 when she became General Secretary. Hudson is author of CND: Now More than Ever: The Story of a Peace Movement 2005.

Friday 12 July 2013, 19.00  
**Kraanti Ki Tarangein/Waves of Revolution**  
1974, 30 min  
Response and audience discussion with Anand Patwardhan, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar

Saturday 13 July 2013, 19.00  
**Uthan De Vela/A Time to Rise**  
1981, 40 min  
**Occupation: Mill-worker**  
1996, 22 min  
Response and audience discussion with Janna Graham, Anand Patwardhan, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar

Monday 15 July 2013, 18.00  
**We Are Not Your Monkeys**  
1996, 5 min  
**Jai Bhim Comrade**  
2012, 180 min  
Response and audience discussion with John Akomfrah, Anand Patwardhan, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar

Wednesday 17 July 2013, 19.00  
**The Children of Mandala**  
2009, 5 min  
**Hamara Shahar/Bombay: Our City**  
1986, 75 min  
Response and audience discussion with Anand Patwardhan, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar

Friday 19 July 2013, 19.00  
**Una Mitran Di Yaad Pyaari/In Memory of Friends**  
1990, 60 min  
Response and audience discussion with Anand Patwardhan, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar

Saturday 20 July 2013, 19.00  
**Ram Ke Nam/In the Name of God**  
1991, 75 min  
Response and audience discussion with Anand Patwardhan, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar

Sunday 21 July 2013, 16.00  
**Fishing: In the Sea of Greed**  
1998, 45 min  
**A Narmada Diary**  
1995, 57 min  
Response and audience discussion with T J Demos, Anand Patwardhan, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar

Wednesday 24 July 2013, 19.00  
**Pitr, Putr Aur Dharmayuddha/Father, Son and Holy War**  
1995, 120 min  
Response and audience discussion with Shirin Rai, Anand Patwardhan, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar

Friday 26 July 2013, 19.00  
**Jang aur Aman/War and Peace**  
2002, 135 min  
Response and audience discussion with Kate Hudson, Anand Patwardhan, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar

Sunday 28 July 2013, 15.00  
**Jai Bhim Comrade**  
2012, 180 min  
Response and audience discussion with Anand Patwardhan, Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar
KRAANTI KI TARANGEIN/WAVES OF REVOLUTION + ZAMEER KE BANDI/PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE
Friday 12 July 2013, 19.00

KRAANTI KI TARANGEIN/WAVES OF REVOLUTION
Anand Patwardhan, India 1974, 16mm, 30 min, Hindi, English subtitles

Dedicated by 24 year old Patwardhan to the ‘revolutionary people of India’, Waves of Revolution captures the optimism of 1974, when the Bihar movement of students and peasants struggled to overcome years of corruption and state repression in Northern India. Scenes of rallies, marches, student meetings and interviews evoke a fervour that is intensified by Super 8 sequences projected and refilmed in 16mm, thereby creating a strobe-effect that pulses periodically throughout the film. Waves of Revolution concludes with Patwardhan explaining that many of the activists seen in the film have been arrested under the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi’s Congress government. In September 1975, one of the two existing prints of Waves of Revolution was cut into segments, smuggled abroad by supporters and reassembled in Canada where Patwardhan added an English voiceover.

ZAMEER KE BANDI/PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE,
Anand Patwardhan, India 1978, 16mm 40 min, Hindi, English subtitles

Under the state of Emergency declared on 25 June 1975, an estimated 55 to 100,000 people were arrested and imprisoned. With the end of Emergency in 1977, Patwardhan returned to India and resumed making a film on political prisoners begun during military rule. In a series of eloquent testimonies, Prisoners of Conscience documents the conditions endured by a wide range of dissidents imprisoned before, during and after Emergency. In a 1983 interview, Patwardhan pointed out that the film existed as a ‘record of all the difficulties encountered’ during its making; many of its shots were ‘determined more by what we couldn’t shoot rather than what we could.’ These constraints were made visible in ‘devices’ intended to ‘show something of the reality without actually being able to film it’. Devices such as the drawings of prison cells, paintings depicting torture, prison walls filmed from long distances and torch lit-marches filmed at night evoke the courage of activists living through military dictatorship.
A *Time to Rise* was filmed by Patwardhan and Jim Monro in Canada from 1979 to 1981. It documents the struggle to form Canada’s first farmworkers’ union made up of Indian and Chinese labour contracted to pick raspberries, strawberries and mushrooms in British Columbia. Its duration was determined by the time allotted for lunch break by the Canadian Farmworkers Union (CFU) which regularly screened *A Time to Rise* in their efforts to win public support for the farmworkers strike against the established labour contract system. *A Time to Rise* sensitively depicted the encumbered lives of Sikh migrants through interviews that posed bright blue turbans and effulgent white beards against the depleted skies and green verges of Vancouver’s suburbs. The drama of the fight between the newly born union and the complacent violence of the ‘grower’ was powerfully captured in a scene where protestors call to the workers from the road, urging them to drop tools and join the march. A camera zooms into the faces of the farm labourers who hesitate, looking back at the protesters, measuring the distance between them. Then the tension breaks; the workers overcome their doubts, running down the muddy path to join the cheering protestors in their new life.

*Operation: Mill-worker* documents the events of February 1992 when workers forcibly occupied the factories of the New Great Eastern Mill after a four-year lock out. Led by the Closed Mills Action Committee, the film reveals the determination of the workers to reopen their mill. The anxiety experienced during the occupation is transmitted through songs, interviews, an evening screening of Patwardhan’s *Bombay: Our City* and a tense confrontation with the police. *Operation Mill-worker* ends in a fleeting moment of triumph with workers gathering outside the factory gates to celebrate a court order to reopen the Great Eastern Mill.
WE ARE NOT YOUR MONKEYS + JAI BHIM COMRADE
Anand Patwardhan, India 1996, video, 5 min, Hindi, English subtitles

The camera watches the urban poor seated and standing in a circle radiating out from Sambhaji Bhagat, the charismatic Dalit singer who declares: ‘The rulers who controlled all knowledge and claimed the Ramayana to be India’s history called us many names: Demons, low castes, Untouchables, But we were the aborigines of this land, Listen to our story.’ Accompanied by three percussionists and chorus, this opening statement introduces We Are Not Your Monkeys as a revisionist rereading of the Ramayana’s glorification of the caste system. We Are Not Your Monkeys is a powerfully rhythmic anti-caste protest song written by Bhagat, Patwardhan and the late Dalit activist Daya Pawar that self-consciously draws upon Dalit critiques of the Ramayana’s sanctification of racism. Scenes of Dalits lowering themselves into sewers, fundamentalists hammering at the Ayodyha mosque and details from Ramayana comics combine in a montage that reveals Patwardhan’s desire to disenchant the visual pleasures gained from encounters with the images of the Hindu pantheon.

JAI BHIM COMRADE
Anand Patwardhan, India 2012, video, 180 min, Hindi, English subtitles

Although Jai Bhim Comrade is not translated into English, it is possible to approximate a translation. ‘Jai’ translates as ‘Victory’, as a cry of Victory to the liberation struggles of the Dalits. ‘Bhim’ is the affectionate abbreviation of Bhimrao, the first name of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, the Dalit lawyer who was Chair of the Drafting Committee of the Constitution of India and who encouraged Dalits to convert to Buddhism and reject the Hindu caste system that condemned them to social death. ‘Comrade’ stands for Vilas Ghogre, the Dalit Marxist whose suicide triggered the film. The term ‘Comrade’ evokes solidarity but also alludes to the tensions between Ghogre and the Communist Party, between Ambedkar and the Congress Party and the Dalit movement’s unresolved argument with Communism. Each word in the title thus alludes to longstanding debates over the legacy of Ambedkar. Everyone in the film is struggling over this political and religious inheritance that takes on an aesthetic dimension. The statue of Ambedkar that was desecrated with a garland of shoes, the portrait of Ambedkar on a wall in a humble Dalit room, the fundamentalist Narendra Modi seen draping a garland around a golden statue of Ambedkar, the advertising hoarding...
with the face of Ambedkar opposite the face of the sociopath Bal Thackeray of Shiv Sena, Sheetal Sathe of the Dalit cultural group Kabir Kala Manch, demanding ‘O Bhim come out from that statue’: each of these indicates the use and abuse of history in the present. Jai Bhim Comrade does not only narrate these debates into a complex montage, important though that is. In showing the different groups of ex-Dalit Panthers, Communists, Hindu fundamentalists and young radicals all fighting over the political symbolism of Ambedkar, it intervenes in support of a future India that has annihilated caste, a direction that is spelt out by Sheetal Sathe who sings the last words of the film.


THE CHILDREN OF MANDALA + HAMARA SHAHAR/BOMBAY: OUR CITY Wednesday 17 July 2013, 19.00

THE CHILDREN OF MANDALA
Anand Patwardhan, India 2009, video, 5 min, Hindi, English subtitles

In Mandala, Mumbai, slum children huddle in a makeshift school as rain falls into waiting metal buckets. Inside huts leaning against each other, tarpaulin draped over corrugated roofs and sheets draped over entrances, they deliver messages of invitation, solidarity and protest. Three girls and a boy ask the viewer to ‘Stay today O Stranger in our Mandala village’. This is Mandala Life School run by a movement for the homeless that fights a State policy intent on withholding education from the poor while destroying the only homes they have managed to build.
HAMARA SHAHAR/BOMBAY: OUR CITY
Anand Patwardhan, India 1985, 16mm, 75 min, Hindi, English subtitles

Patwardhan’s acclaimed documentary, made on 16mm, tells of Bombay’s millions of pavement dwellers. Throughout the early 80s there were brutal efforts to evict families who lived in illegal tenements and on pavements although they literally built the city and provided it with labour crucial to its economy. The film looks at the culture of Bombay’s elite, often contrasting what they say with the physical conditions in which they say it: the former Municipal Commissioner bemoans the lack of space in the city while his pet dog trots around his spacious garden; the Police Commissioner Julio Ribeiro, in a speech at the Advertising Club, talks about the poor as ‘low quality, low intelligence’ people. The pavement-dwellers work in the construction industry in the city’s expensive Nariman Point area on land reclaimed from the sea, while massing clouds on the horizon evoke the possibility of an unbalanced environment which may cause tidal waves to wash away their seaside huts. The film achieves epic dimensions in three remarkable sequences. Street urchins sell the Indian flag on a rainy Independence Day, keeping their precious commodities dry while the Gothic façade of the Victoria Terminus presides over a police march-past; in the thick of the monsoon, a child in one of the homeless families dies; a woman pavement dweller’s angry outburst at the film-makers all highlight the issues involved in the making of this type of documentary.


UNA MITRAN DI YAAD PYAARI/IN MEMORY OF FRIENDS
Friday 19 July 2013, 19.00

Patwardhan’s extraordinary 16mm documentary on terrorist activity in Punjab inaugurated a trilogy of films addressing the growing communalism of Indian politics. The film follows a group of Hindu and Sikh socialists campaigning against both a repressive state government (which not long ago encouraged communalism as a divide and rule tactic) and Sikh fanatics. The focus of their campaign is the legacy of Bhagat Singh, a young socialist Sikh hanged by the British in 1931 and now claimed both by the state as a patriot and by the separatists as a Sikh militant. The filmmaker quotes from the writings of Bhagat Singh, emphasising his rationalist atheism. As in his earlier work, the director isolates the false rhetoric of professional politicians, contrasting it with images and sounds of ordinary people in their daily lives (e.g. the sound of the woman making chapatis). He also debunks the pompousness of official politics together with its representations.
when a central government minister lands in a helicopter, the event is first shown with Patwardhan's own footage, which then cuts to a Doordashan TV clip, including its declamatory voice track, presenting a glorious appeal. The film ends with noted communist leader Jamal Singh Padda, who communicated his universalist message through speech and song in the film shortly before he was shot dead. The film has unforgettable images showing murderous stupidity blazing in the eyes of the fundamentalists as well as the astonishing courage of those trying to build a socialist politics in that situation.


In the Name of God studies the ways in which Hindu fundamentalism stages and mobilises the religious iconography of the warrior god Ram against Muslim communities thereby inciting Hindus to turn upon their neighbours with murderous intent. A roadside hoarding depicts Lord Ram, bow in right hand, arrow in his left, sheaf of arrows strapped behind him, towering above his temple. Next to Ram is the face of LK Advani, the leader of the VHP fundamentalist party, the politician intent on leading a crusade to destroy the 16th century Babri mosque in Ayodha and build the temple in the supposed birthplace of Ram. In the Name of God follows Advani’s journey towards Ayodha in an air-conditioned Toyota built to resemble a rath or religious chariot. Behind him is a flotilla of flatbed trucks, draped with saffron garlands and crowded with men wearing saffron headbands, holding saffron flags and three children wearing the wigs, armbands, headpieces and jewellery of Ram, inciting riots as it
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goes. In this instance, Advani’s promise to build the temple was unsuccessful. But the government delayed the national broadcast of *In the Name of God*. By the time of its broadcast in 1996, the film’s warnings against imminent communal violence, voiced throughout the film, had long come true. In December 1992, fundamentalists finally succeeded in storming and destroying the Babri mosque as promised, unleashing reprisals and counter-reprisals between Muslims and Hindus across India.

**FISHING: IN THE SEA OF GREED + A NARMADA DIARY**

**Sunday 21 July 2013, 16.00**

**FISHING: IN THE SEA OF GREED**
Anand Patwardhan, India 1998, video, 45 min, Hindi, Telugu, English subtitles

From South India to Bangladesh, *Fishing: In the Sea of Greed* traces a choreography of struggle against industrial scale fishing and intensive shrimp cultivation. It follows coastal fishing communities as they gather to make their presence felt on Bombay’s streets. Patwardhan painstakingly documents the efforts of organisers from the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) to co-ordinate fisherpeople from Bombay, Madras, Visakhapatnam and Bangalore in a successful national campaign to blockade foreign factory ships from entering India’s harbours. Through interviews and a muted television advert of a white family enjoying prawns that lasts as long as it takes to blink, *Fishing: In the Sea of Greed* carefully reconstructs the infrastructure of global export. In the jubilant epilogue, fisherwomen and children march, sing and dance in the streets and beaches of Mumbai with fish workers from South Africa, Pakistan, Argentina, Norway, Senegal and other countries on November 21st 1997: World Fisheries Day, a holiday from all fishing, landing and selling.

**A NARMADA DIARY,**
Anand Patwardhan, India 1995, video, 57 min, Hindi, Gujurati, English subtitles

The opening and closing ‘entries’ in the *Diary* are symmetrical; official government documentary footage extolling the irresistible benefits of a hydro-engineered and electrified rural future (‘Speed and Technology’) is counterposed to images of the seemingly timeless harvest festival of Holi, celebrated in March 1994 at the village of Domkheri, threatened with imminent submergence by the rising headwaters of the dam. Linear, progressive, industrial time confronts cyclical, ritual, agrarian time. But in their closing reprise of the traditional
ceremony, Patwardhan and co-director Simantini Dhuru let us see what we can now more fully understand: the body-painted, head-dressed adivasi dancers confront and burn their demons, singling out the newest, greatest malignity of all, the Sardar Sarovar dam itself. Their ritual dance is a configuration of actuality, of living collective experience, open to history. Resistance has been integrated, innovatively, into the everyday activity, language and rites of the people of this region—overwhelmingly adivasis long scorned as ‘tribals’, descendants of the pre-Aryan, aboriginal inhabitants of India.

In War and Peace, nuclear nationalism takes the form of a nuclear theology carefully staged by a Bombay branch of Shiv Sena at the Parel Ganesh festival in the form of a reenactment of the nuclear test detonated by the Indian government at Pokaran in 1998. In the dark, a statue of Ganesh stands on a plinth. Nearby stand four model soldiers. One stands in front of a glowing plastic control panel, facing a model of a bomb suspended by string. A voice emerging from a public address system sets the scene: ‘Pokaran. A beautiful desert of our country. On 11th May 1998, India successfully tested nuclear devices here. On the morning of the tests there was a big storm. The scientists were very worried but just in the nick of time due to divine intervention, the storm subsided.’

The camera slowly travels from missiles propped on grey blocks up the body of Ganesh. A countdown begins: ‘8. 7. 6. 5.’ The missile enters the ground. Lights dim. The control panel glows. Pink light spreads across the dark. The camera studies the expressions of the model soldiers. ‘3. 2. 1.’ An explosion resounds, followed by a second. The cavity beneath the sand glows with the light of the underground explosion. The control panel flashes. Everything goes dark. A trumpet announces a voice that declares: ‘And the Buddha Smiled!’ The camera pans to show the backdrop and comes to rest upon the logo of Shiv Sena: a snarling tiger in a blue circle in an orange flag. The effects of the devotional detonation are transmitted throughout media as forms of magical thinking. The film studies the effects of this atomic mysticism as it spreads throughout India, America and Pakistan.
Storming the Reality Asylum

Anand Patwardhan occupies a unique place in documentary filmmaking. Very few documentarists are accepted as auteurs; among those, few are both directors and technicians; and from this elite corps, even fewer come from the so called Third World. Over the last twenty years Anand has consistently taken strands from different documentary filmmaking practices – the Cuban and Latin American Imperfect Cinema style; the more self-reflective political documentaries of Chris Marker and the Dziga Vertov group; the lyricism and attention to detail of the ethnographic school – and put them to work on a series of stunning documentaries. From *Bombay: Our City* to *Father, Son and Holy War*, his films have dealt with some of the key questions of our age – the ubiquity of difference in modern lives; masculinity as a source of conflict and power; the absurdities of political power. Except for his first two documentaries, his subject-matter has come from successive political crises in India: the Emergency; the rise of fundamentalism and communalism; the growing political polarisation. He has been holding a mirror to the Indian psyche, to see how it reflects questions of class-belonging, gender and political voice. It is unusual for a documentary film-maker of his calibre to have spent so much time and energy working on what are essentially local questions. The questions acquire an immediacy by being intensely regional in their *raison d'etre* and their outcome. Paradoxically, by interrogating the local questions over and over again, he has not only arrived at a refined vision of the state of play in Indian culture and society in the nineties, but also in the world at large – forms of fragmentation, the growing alarm with which people protect their ‘identities’, emerging forms of power – all are prefigured in his work.

These are films driven as much by absences as they are by presences. What is absent are agendas imposed rigidly on people, politics or places. Instead, the films are fixed by interests pursued relentlessly, selflessly, ethically. In Patwardhan’s films there is always a sense that what we are watching is a product of an inquisitive impulse – a search for answers through what people say and how they say it, the rhythms of the everyday, the gestures and actions of individuals.

Nowhere is his interest in the absence/presence dichotomy used to more effect than in *Bombay: Our City*. In this film he investigates the relation between the culture and life which goes with being an affluent Bombay-dweller and what you do when you are poor in Bombay – what streets you sleep on. The relation between absence and presence is made tangible. Patwardhan interviews a lot of slum dwellers who feel that their condition is not natural – that the reason why they are in that position is because of someone’s neglect, incompetence, or the willful manipulation of their life chances. In this way the rich are evoked as a ghostly presence and their traces are etched deeper as the interviews are intercut with images of facades, the rich going about their daily business.

All his films deal with events which over time acquire political and cultural significance. But there is also the question of aesthetics which is rarely commented on – when people look for aesthetic insights they rarely turn to political documentaries. And yet the way in which Patwardhan investigates the complex relationship between figure and ground – the way he places people in the frame and the space he gives them to express themselves, merit special scrutiny. Through this scrutiny we discover a sustained attempt to think through the ways in which people construct oppressive political languages and motifs for resistance.
We also begin to see the complex aesthetic and formal questions raised by the attempt to provide the narrative for political activity; the attempt to release events in India from the confines of the stereotype. Central to this deconstructive gesture in his films is the question of repetition. In the repetition of motifs, one glimpses the dark power that images, symbols and motifs acquire in the lives of people. In Father, Son and Holy War, the colour orange signals the Shiv Sena’s public rallies and speech-making. Gradually this colour comes to stand for the circulation of notions of ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’. The process by which the film effects this marriage of political extremism and a particular colour is very complex and yet one is struck in the end by how effortless the whole thing seems.

In Patwardhan’s films symbols and icons are both a source of strength and a site of conflict. In Memory of Friends is not simply a biography of a Sikh Marxist who died fifty years ago, but is also about the way in which a number of conflicting groups – the State, Sikh Fundamentalists and fighters for communal harmony – fight over the symbol of Bhagat Singh as a political figurehead in contemporary India. In the film, photographs of Bhagat Singh, both in turban and deracinated, European clothes, are among the images which give clues to the uses and abuses of history. So what starts off looking like a hagiographic exercise on one political symbol from the Indian past becomes a complex film about how people empower themselves and the role icons play in that process.

Part of the attraction of the films lies in the fact that Patwardhan lives those events as a filmmaker. He practices what he preaches – a politics of tolerance. In a period of extreme political intolerance, in which a certain kind of politics exists simply to delegitimise other people and their right to be part of the State, the filmmaker enters, willing to confer on all the social actors the same respect. He goes in prepared to listen to people as individuals and they acquire their status as villains – or heroes – after the fact, because of what they say and do. All the films are narratives about Indians talking, or in some cases not talking but killing one another. But crucially they are about their actions, gestures and rhetoric. He observes the everyday, the unfolding fabric of Indian life as a discrete set of activities before these acquire the status of events. He is not interested in stories, but rather in the fragments which make up the story and the role that particular individuals play in it.

In his films we not only see events acquire the status of the real but get an insight into the complicated process of selection via which particular events attain the definitive status of the real; an insight into the convoluted process of legitimation through which patterns of extreme behaviour become the norm; the Indian reality, condition and fate. Along the way, a few of the mystifying and patronizing platitudes on India – its piety, its fatalism, its extremism – are shown to be ever-evolving historical dramas with living social actors, fragments from a mosaic lived and constructed by social groups.

In In Memory of Friends, there’s a man who is a minor player when Patwardhan first meets him – he does not have written on his forehead: ‘Hero – this man will save the day.’ But in the process of observing, filming and interviewing him, it becomes clear to Patwardhan; and therefore to us, that this man has the right ideological and emotional make-up to provide a solid centre for the film. So gradually he gravitates towards him. It is as if he was there to watch this man make up his mind to stand against extremism. This may explain Patwardhan’s fascination with documentary: its privileged rendezvous with history; its uncanny prophetic power; its
ability to give us an insight into the connections between actions and consequences. In the best documentaries we always glimpse the future. Take a look at Father, Son and Holy War and you’ll see my point.

Documentary film-making at its best – Flaherty, Rouch – is a complicated interrogation of reality. The quest to undermine cultural and political assumptions is central, particularly, the stultifying claims of the stereotypical, the cliché-ridden, the teleological. They are supreme acts of deconstruction. They do not try to replace an ossified image of a more real India. Rather, they work with and through the conventional images by seizing hold of them as frames and exploring how their reality is both manufactured and lived.

Let us take the assault on the mosque in Ayodhya. It was widely monitored by the media and people thought: how terrible, those fanatics in India, they are always doing things like that. But in the film In the Name of God, we watch young men going on a march before they become the mob that tears down a mosque. You hear their opinions and so you follow a trajectory of rage which leads to the outcome. However, we are made aware that many options were jostling to become reality; we get to understand how this option (a mob will attack a mosque) becomes the logical recourse in a perverse chain of reasoning. In another incident, the central figure in In Memory of Friends was killed by fundamentalists after the film was made. I was all the more shocked because in the course of watching the film I felt that the circumstances which led to his death were not a foregone conclusion; that reality is open-ended. Ultimately this is the value of Patwardhan’s films. They remind us that reality is a many-headed beast – wrestling with it requires both courage and flair.

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