

An Interview with Jharana Jhaveri and Anurag Singh – by Raju Sivasankaran and M. V. Ramana

This interview was conducted at a friend's place in Madison, Wisconsin, after the last session of the South Asia Conference in October 1997. Many people, including Raju (and, in spirit, Ramana) who had congregated there to have lunch, asked questions. We have used our editorial privileges to structure, what was more of a free-flowing conversation, into an interview.

Q: How did you structure the film? Why did you make it this way?

Jharana: We went to the Narmada Valley to basically document what is happening. People had so much to say. Their experiences gave new meaning to our lives. That automatically structured the film in such a way as to be logical in their understanding not ours. We would have, say, tried to base the film on the whole cost benefit analysis of the project, we didn't. Why? Because we are trying to say the story through the story of the people. Through this, we are trying to talk about what is the dominant discourse that is being meted out to the world. In terms of who holds the power to decide. And, we are questioning that. What is the logic behind the decision? How does society justify the decision? We ourselves discovered these aspects during the course of the six years.

We are all taught with the obvious justification that "somebody has to pay the price, we can't change our lifestyle. They don't need so much, their lives are very simple. They are happy living the way they are. They are very dirty." Or, other such things about their lives. So we never end up questioning our own lifestyle - the urban way of life -because we assume it is o.k. the way it is. First, it is not ok. Second, the logic we have been employing is only a justification and somewhere we have to own the responsibility for what is happening. That is the reason we brought the whole human aspect of what happens to people.

Anurag: There is also the feeling that the tribals and ordinary people cannot speak about development and such issues. And for that we need Ph.Ds and what not. I feel the best people to talk about those issues are the people who are affected by it. If they say these should be no dam, there is some authority to that. People who, say, who go to Universities do not tell others not to go to universities. And, one listens to them since they have gone through the experience. Similarly, one should respect the voices of these people who are directly experiencing displacement.

Q: What were some of the major obstacles in making the film?

Jharana: I come from an urban area. I had the arrogance of a typical urbanite. And I had to learn a tremendous amount about these people and their way of life. That was the biggest obstacle - myself. Making the movie has really taught me humility.

Anurag: I don't think there was anything significant that I would like to talk about. It is like a carpenter. No one asks him what problems did you have in making this table? Film-making is what I do. Sometimes there are things that don't work. But, then you try and it works out.

Raju: That is a very good answer. We ask film makers- how did you conceive this film? We never ask a carpenter how he conceived the table he makes.

Q: Why is it more important to make such movies? On a more general level, why do you think it is important to introduce politics into "art"?

Jharana: I see all these forms of expressions - writing, painting, art, film making etc. - as activities that can be looked at as belonging to the elite. History, in particular what is considered cultured and civilized, has been recorded by the few in terms of their representations. That is what you are exposed to in the media and it feels very lopsided. How representative is this of reality, of the main concerns in society? That was always dissatisfying to me, even as a student. Thus, there is clearly politics involved in art - the politics of representation.

Q: That begs, the question - should art represent reality?

Jharana: Art is perceived as something decontextualized from reality. That does not make sense to me. Art is fundamentally a means of communication. Therefore it does not make sense to me when it is not taken to common people. For example, I like music. But to listen to it in the midst of people, who are wearing fancy clothes and lots of jewelry, who seem like they have come to show off their wealth, is stifling. Art today is representative of this elite culture. If artists who perform in these places are not capable of taking their art to common people, who do not wear fancy clothes, then that stops appealing to me.

What is more important, is the politics of representation, which I was talking about earlier. While I don't have a problem in general with classical music or folklore or painting in general, there is the question of what is taken to represent a particular society? What kind of art becomes a representation of that particular reality? That is usually not representative of the whole society or reality.

Anurag: It is like the way India is painted - as the land where people play the tabla or the sitar!

Jharana: Art does not have to be self-indulgent but self-satisfying. It has to be something where you try and understand the reality around you - your reality - and relate it back to the world with your vision in it. As an artist, that is what makes you satisfied.

I think, even if I had not taken to making films but to painting or music, I would have still tried to tell the same stories.

Anurag: For me, what interests me, satisfies me, is the kind of Art that comes out of struggles. There are a lot of people in India and elsewhere who are fighting against the kind of “development” that is going on. For example, in the Narmada valley, during the last fifteen years, they have been continually oppressed by the police - arrested, bashed up, etc. In that struggle, how they survive in their day-to-day life leads to interesting insights. They have developed their own critique of what is going on. At times, they make fun of the government, or themselves, and they laugh. They develop their own poems and songs describing their situation. I find this kind of art very interesting, and this is fundamentally political.

Q: You have talked about artists not performing for the common people. How do you deal with that? Are you going to take your films to the common people? How are you going to do that? Structures don't really permit that.

Jharana: Now you come to the politics of distribution. First of all, we have made several films and our films are shown extensively. For us, this is not an individual project. If you show our film, it becomes your film as well. So, in India, our films are shown extensively by many people - and we think it is theirs too. Likewise, we show films of this kind made by other filmmakers wherever we go. Even, for example, in villages in interior Bihar, wherever we can get a TV and a VCR, we show “our” movies. This is always part of the agenda. So even though we may not go on extensive tours like this one, showing films is always a part of our life.

We are really uncomfortable with the commodification of films and medium; how people become personalities. In a sense, this film was not made by Anurag Singh and Jharana Jhaveri. It is ok for credits or brochures to put our names. But to me, everyone who is involved in any way is part of this project.

And, since we don't look upon this in individualistic terms, it is not a commercial proposition. If you look at your work as an individualistic representation, then everything becomes “for sale”. If you reach out to the people, it becomes “for sale”. This whole agenda should be part of everybody's work. Whatever work people do, they would want it to exchange it with the maximum number of people. It is true that it does not happen that way and people usually only want to promote themselves - but that is unfortunate. I guess it all depends on what makes you happy.

Most of our footage has been seen by people in the [Narmada] valley. It is not that we try to make a systematic plan - how to reach out to the most number of people. It is just a part of your life. Then it does not matter how many people are in the audience - whether it is 7 or 200. Like the first day when we landed in New York we had an impromptu

showing. There were only seven people in the audience. But we found the showing and the discussion that ensued very stimulating.

We don't make films for festivals. But, we work hard to show it to the people - to me, that includes people here (i.e. in the US and Canada) who can in some way influence decisions. How money is being channelized? How politics is created? You may see this movie and just go back to your office and continue with the job you had. But, deep down, I think there is some change - and I believe it can make a positive difference.

Q: How do you represent some one (like the government official) in a bad light in order to represent a certain political point?

Anurag: They are not represented as villains. They represent a certain kind of politics. In their view, they are not being villainous. They are talking about development and power and all that sort of a thing. People in the valley are saying no. But there are many who feel it is the correct thing.

Jharana: And in some sense we have put people who are speaking on 'our side' also out of context. We only show a small fraction of what we shot. For instance, we had over 10 hours of Medha (Patkar)- at various gatherings and speeches. But in the film she only appears in one shot- for less than a minute. But the hope is that whoever sees himself or herself in the film should feel that this is what he or she said; then that the film is honest. This film is a kind of alternate history. Fifty years from now if someone is studying what happened at the Narmada valley, they will have the government documentation. But, they will have the film as well. Therefore, the responsibility for what you show becomes far greater. Even Urmila Patel (a noted pro-dam spokesperson) is not trivialized or mimicked. We had about two hours of Urmila - from that particular interview. Anurag must have heard it about so many times before settling on the clip we used. Therefore we have to respect the person and the politics to bring her point of view in completely. So, tomorrow if she says this is not me - if it does not represent her reality to herself- then the film does not hold. That is manipulating. That is not what documentary making is all about.

Q: Did you face frustrations in communicating?

Jharana: It was often difficult to understand what they are saying, especially, the under currents. They talk in a certain way to some extent for the camera. For example, calling themselves uprooted; so that the viewers can understand.

Anurag: When you listen to the same interview ten times, you realize that he or she is saying something quite different from what you first understood. Then there is a problem in trying to see when to present this and how to convey the same effect/meaning.

Q: What is your next project?

Jharana: Now, after having visited the US, I would like to make a film about the nexus between globalization and the common people. I would make that film from a farmer's point of view or a factory worker's point of view or from a rickshaw puller's point of view. What are the connections? How are the chains of causation and linkages formed?