

INTERVIEW

‘FILM-MAKING IS A SOLITARY OCCUPATION’

Anand Patwardhan, the prolific film-maker has worked doggedly for the last four decades to bring to us stories of excluded communities of India. To him, documentary films are a record of the history of modern India, and that is the real value of such films as opposed to fiction. His movies discard the filters that other films use to romanticise realities, giving us an honest and disturbing tale of our society. He does not write scripts for his films; he just follows his instincts to be in the right place at the right time in order to chronicle what takes place.

At the Idea of India Conclave, Patwardhan spoke in the session ‘Right to Dissent’. He spoke of the necessity for youngsters to speak out openly and fearlessly on media like Facebook, stating that this much of a risk we all would have to bear, because if we are going to be scared of our own shadow, we will never be able to fight the monsters that are in power.

In conversation with **SHRUTI SHARMA** and **ANUL JAIN**, Patwardhan responds to questions on movies, censorship and the responsibility of filmmakers.

Why do you make documentaries? Many of your stories have faced relentless censorship, bans and threats. What motivates you to keep going despite these frustrations?

The mainstream media whitewashes stories and shows them in a light which is convenient to certain sections. But when you document what a Narendra Modi or a Bal Thackeray actually said, they cannot deny it later. News also in a sense is documentary, but it is so quick that news channels do not have the time to analyse what they record, because they have to produce and relay it overnight. A documentary on the other hand takes years to make and therefore, there is lot of time to analyse and think it out.

Therefore, I believe documentaries are closer to reality than news or a fictionalised narration of real events.

I have faced a lot of difficulties, but the motivation is the feedback I get from people who have watched my films. Obviously it has done some good at some level. It is depressing if you think about the limited reach of my movies. Nor have such films changed the political reality of our country. But they have brought about a big change for individuals, both in their thoughts and actions.

You recently expressed the view that the Intelligence Bureau report indicting several NGOs was unfair. Foreign funding has become commonplace in all sectors. Comment.

Yes, the report is unfair. The government is getting all kinds of foreign funding to do nasty things. For instance, the recent announcement by the BJP government is to allow 100 percent FDI in the defence sector. Foreign multinationals will come and build the arms for us and then they will tell us whom to fight also. Once you create the arms, you have to sell the arms, which means you need a war. So we will have a privatised industry that will have a vested interest in fuelling wars, like America has.

I personally decided that I did not want to raise money from foreign sources because I knew once I did that I would be attacked when I wanted to criticise my government or criticise the right wing. They would say, “Oh, he is paid by the Americans.” So we decided not to do that. We raise money internally, from friends and family. Afterwards, I sell the film and recover some money. So I think

you can form that kind of a principle where you do not become vulnerable by being dependent on some foreign funding. You have to try to source that funding from broad bases so that you get small money from lots of people rather than large money from one source.

Bollywood and Indian television relay to us biases, discrimination, stereotypes, violence and untruths, everyday. Why have there not been any attempts by filmmakers to counter these as a collective? Like an NGO of Filmmakers maybe?

Filmmaking is normally a solitary occupation, especially documentary filmmaking, as opposed to feature films which have huge budget and huge crew. For my films I wield the camera, do the editing, production, and promotions myself. Therefore, documentaries generally have small teams of two-three people. At a larger scale, when the need occurs, filmmakers do get together to raise a collective voice. For example, when the Mumbai International Film Festival was threatened with censorship of its guest films, we got together to oppose it. At other times we are working only independently.

Movie screenings, conferences and discussions take place within four walls. Do you think they make any impact, and are a source of change?

Their contribution cannot be denied. I think this kind of a conference was important right now because there is such an atmosphere of fear; such a silence! Nobody is willing to speak out against the new government. I think this is a crucial step, even though we are all like-minded people, even though we are not breaking new ground here, we are not getting a lot of other people to come. But at least the people who are here need their own morale to be boosted and their own thoughts to be clearer. So I think that is useful in itself.

It is the same for films; I agree that if it was only being shown in film festivals then it would not be of much use. But we try to show it in *bastis*, we try to show it in working class audiences, in schools and colleges. I try to make Hindi versions of all my films and language versions wherever need be. We are trying to reach out as much and to as many people as possible.