

Documenting the Environment: A Study on Environmental Non-Fiction Films in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh produces a number of documentary films every year and a good number of documentary films are made from environmental aspect. The topics range from deforestation to climate change. However, there are a few ethnographic documentary films which portray the life and culture of marginalized groups and their relationship with the environment. This paper focuses on three selected documentary films dealing with environmental issues from three different aspects – *Sand and Water* focuses on Char people affected by flood and draught, *A Tale of Sundarban* deals the deforestation issues at Sundarbans and *Phulbari* portrays the peoples' resistance against the coal mining project at Phulbari. However, people remain in the centre of all the selected documentaries. This paper takes the opportunity to analyze the films from an ethnographic perspective.

Introduction

Unlike the global scenario, Bangladesh has rarely produced feature films based on environment or environmental issues. The entire bunch of environmental films is made in documentary genre.

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The term 'documentary' was coined by John Grierson, founder of the British documentary movement in the 1920s, who famously described documentary film as "the creative treatment of actuality" (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2006). Grierson also argued that documentary film was superior to fiction film because it presented the real world, not a fantasy or fiction, but should do so with greater imagination than a standard newsreel. In that way documentary is 'real' as well as 'creative'.

Environmental documentary arrived as an important sub-genre in the age of environmental degradation and climate change. However, the tradition of documenting the environment and the nature is very old. The ethnographic film tradition initiated by Robert Flaherty (*Nanook of the North*, 1922, for example) or popular wildlife films and nature series mostly created by Disney (*Seal Island*, 1948, for example) are some of the dominant trends in environmental filmmaking. Other than Disney, The Natural History Unit of BBC was founded in 1957 and is now the largest wildlife documentary production house in the world, making about 100 hours of television and 50 hours of radio a year (Lee-Wright, 2010: 355). However these Disney and safari traditions have been criticised by scholars and countered by independent filmmaking. Gregg Mitman (1999) says nature, in the Disney films and other popular programmes of the 1950s and early 1960s, was a sanitised version of nature emphasizing the environment and nature as beautiful, idyllic, harmonious and above all 'pristine' – untouched and unspoiled by humans ... (cited in Hansen, 2010: 126). Much critique has focused on the popular films and TV series featuring large animals (BBC's *Big Cat Week* and Discovery Channel's *Shark Week*, for example), asking questions about the animal's treatments, the accuracy of the depiction, and the claims of the narrative (Aufderheide, 2007). These criticisms allow us to think over the ethical questions of documentaries.

Bangladesh produces a number of documentaries every year. A good number of documentaries have been made from environmental aspect. However, the subject of the documentaries

is not wildlife or nature rather contemporary issues have been embraced here. It ranges from deforestation to Sidr and Aila – the two cyclones some experts perceive as the results of contemporary climate change. But ethical questions remain here also. Other than a few independent documentaries, most of the films are funded and made by NGOs. The agenda based NGO films are often made in a non-serious manner that results poor treatment of actualities. In many cases, those films are 'real' but not 'creative'.

Method

This paper portrays an overall picture of environmental documentaries in Bangladesh as well as examines the quality of the response towards environmental issues through documentaries. The key method of obtaining data for this paper was in-depth interviews. Also the texts of the selected films were a prime area of investigation.

We selected film naratology as the textual analysis method. Gerard Genette, in his book *Narrative Discourse* (1980) points out that the term 'narrative' has been used to cover three quite distinct notions: *recit*, usually translated as 'narrative', *histoire* or story and *narration* or narrating. The *recit* is the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself, i.e. the verbal or cinematic discourse that conveys the story-world to the spectator. The *recit* has both a material substance and a form. *Histoire* by contrast, is the signified or narrative content of the *recit*, i.e. the story world. *Narration* refers to the techniques, strategies and signals by which the presence of a narrator can be inferred. For the textual analysis of cinema, according to Robert Stam et al (Stam et al, 1992), Gerard Genette's 'narrative discourse' has allowed film theory to describe the various narrative agents and levels in film in a precise manner.

As for textual analysis, this paper applies Genette's model of 'narrative discourse'. Genette's model provided a systematic analysis of the selected films. Here we will reorganise the model in a simpler form, where we will use 'first *histoire* then *recit* and

narration' method instead of the original 'recit-histoire-narration' order provided by Genette. We consider *histoire* as the story or signified in the text of the film, *recit* as the statement or signifier of the text of the film and *narration* as the technique or style in film language followed by the director in the narrative. The reorganisation of the model allows as telling the story of the film first by which the analysis of the statement or message and the film techniques are easily integrated.

As we have identified environmental documentaries are mostly made by few NGOs. We have selected two films from two NGOs which have produced a lot of environmental documentaries. These two documentaries are:

- a. *A Tale of the Sundarbans (Badbaner Kotha, 2007)* by Moinul Huda, produced by Steps Towards Development.
- b. *Phulbari (2007)* by Ronald Halder and Philip Gain, produced by Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD).

Another film is selected from independent sector:

- c. *Sand and Water (Jobon Jole Bele, 2002)* by Shaheen Dill-Riaz

These films are also selected for their varied contents. The first film *A Tale of the Sundarbans* is on the largest mangrove forest in the world. The second film *Phulbari* addresses the protest of people against a open pit mine project which will dislocate people and will cause a huge environmental loss. The third film is ethnography of people who live with the mercy of the nature.

We interviewed three filmmakers of the selected films and they were Moinul Huda, Philip Gain and Shaheen Dill-Riaz respectively. However, we also interviewed Manjare Haseen Murad as a leading documentary filmmaker and activist of the country.

Environmental Situation in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the least emitters of carbon and one of the most potential victims of climate change in the world. In the Copenhagen Conference in 2009, the environmental vulnerability of Bangladesh got high attention and the country tried to play an active role in the conference by seeking global attention towards it. In the following environment conference in Cancun in 2010, the country has been assured for some monetary support to cope with the climate changes by the developed countries who are the higher carbon emitters.

One of the major environmental problems in Bangladesh is natural disaster. Bangladesh is a disaster-prone country. Floods, cyclone, storm, tornadoes, Nor`westers, frequently hit Bangladesh which brings endless sufferings to millions of people, and results in human deaths, loss of livestock, spread of diseases and hunger, damaged standing crops, destroyed physical and economic infrastructures. Air pollution is a grave concern in the urban areas and the both urban and rural water are polluted by poor management and use of pesticides in the agriculture. Increasing population and natural disasters cause land degradation. The aggression of people on environment through human settlement, illegal logging and siltation by shrimp cultivation cause loss of biodiversity in forests, rivers and marine water.

Bangladesh is one of the countries most exposed to the effects of climate change, because of its geographical location. The country is low-lying and will be one of the first to suffer from rises in sea levels. If those levels rise by 45 centimetres, then 10 percent of the country will be under water (Giddens, 2010: 180). In the recent times in Bangladesh natural hazards are more frequent and intense compared to the similar kinds of events occurred in one or two decades ago. It is now accepted, mainly by the IPCC scientists and national government, that these climatic hazards are the result of climate change at global and regional level.

The floods of 1987, 1988, 1998, 2004, 2007 and cyclone of 1991, 2007 and 2009 are treated as consequence of global warming, sea

level rise and it's associated problems by the scientists. In this connection, river bank erosion, drought, flash floods, threats from landslides as a result of excessive rainfall could be attributed to recent climatic anomalies (Islam and Leelim, 2010).

Bangladesh is struggling with these key environmental issues and will be victimized more if the change of climate cannot be resisted. Bangladesh government has taken some measures to preserve the environment internally. It has banned use of polythene in 2002, which has brought some improvement in the land degradation process. Vehicles using two-stroke engines also have been banned and CNG usage in automobiles has been encouraged, which has prevented further air pollution in the cities. Bangladesh has set up a National Adaptation Programme of Action to meet the challenges of climate change. But with these few exceptions, Bangladesh is far behind in terms of conserving the environment. Poor law enforcement, corruption in forest, unplanned development programs, pressure of huge population and lack of awareness among public are some reasons of why the environmental situation is worsening day by day. In this time of climate change, media can play a major and effective role in preserving the environment.

Environmental Documentaries in Bangladesh

Environmental documentary films can be categorized in three types – ethnographic, wildlife and issue based. In Bangladesh, there is almost no tradition of wildlife films, though globally it is the most popular genre. Bangladesh has produced few ethnographic films. But most of the documentaries produced in Bangladesh addressed contemporary environmental issues. The topics range from deforestation to climate change. Among the selected films, *Water and Sand* by Shaheen Dill-Riaz falls into the category of ethnographic documentary, *A Tale of the Sundarbans* by Moinul Huda covers issues related to the largest mangrove forest of the world and *Phulbari* by Ronald Halder and Philip Gain covers the resistance of local people against the open pit mining project.

AV Centre of Steps Towards Development has produced seven environmental documentaries. The titles are *Flood in Northern District* (1998), *Oh Dhaka! Oh Buriganga!* (1999), *In Search of Arsenic Free Water* (2000), *A Tale of the Sundarbans* (2007), *Women in Disaster* (2009), *Gender and Climate Change* (2010), *Marooned on Water* (2009). These films are so much inclined to the issues that the titles themselves describe the content of the films. Another NGO, SEHD has produced five environmental documentaries – *A Story of Tea Workers* (2009), *Phulbari* (2007), *Mandi* (1994), *Chokoria Sundarban: A Forest without Trees* (1998) and *Stolen Forests* (1998). *Mandi* is an ethnographic film which portrays the struggle of the indigenous group Garo and the destruction of a unique *Sal* forest in Bangladesh. *A Story of Tea Workers* is also an ethnographic film. But the rest of the films directly address different environmental issues.

These agenda based films concentrates more on facts rather than the aesthetic aspects of the films. Hence, these films lack the creative treatment of actualities. But the independent sector has produced some good quality of environmental films. *The Last Rite* (2003) by Yasmin Kabir and *Ironcater* (2007) by Shaheen Dill-Riaz are two films that are based on the ship breaking yards. *Bonojatri* (*The Riders of Sundarbans*) by Tanvir Mokammel is another ethnographic film that portrays how women of the Sundarbans live by rituals and believe in myths. The latest addition to the lists is *Are You Listening* (2012) by Kamar Ahmad Simon and Sara Afreen which depicts the story of people struggling to the catastrophic consequences of climate change. The latest addition to the lists is the film *Are You Listening* (2012) by Kamar Ahmad Simon which depicts the story of dislocated people struggling after the cyclone *Aila* in a village of South-West Bangladesh.

However, eminent filmmaker Shaheen Dill-Riaz does not consider his films as environmental documentaries though his film *Ironcater* got grand pix award in International Environmental film Festival, Paris in 2007. His view is similar to his film *Water and Sand* as he says, most of the critiques have recognized it as an

'environmental film' but I don't want to do it. That will confine it's complexity (Dill-Riaz, 2011). He says:

I always look for human stories with which I have a certain personal relationship. The fact that some of my films are recognized as "environmental documentaries" is the result of focusing on the particular issue in the respective films by the festival-authorities or certain critiques. But still it is true that there is an established concept of 'environmental documentary' and my observation is that these kinds of documentary films are gradually isolating themselves from the rest. They became the object of study for the environmentalists instead of reaching the wider audience. The reason lies, in my opinion, behind the process of making and financing of these films. In the worldwide broadcasting industry this particular genre of documentary is serving at the moment the expectation of the huge 'environmental-industry' (Riaz, 2011).

Key Findings

Looking through the Lens, Ethnographically

Documentaries often portray the living, culture and the history of certain marginalized communities. At least two of the selected films look at the relation of people and the environment around them through ethnographic lens. Hence, the films portray culture, syncretic religious practices and the rituals of ordinary people. The culture and religious practices are manifested through some myths and mysticisms.

The film *Water and Sand* starts with the mythical story of how the river Brahmaputra was created. By using the miniature painting, the filmmaker describes from Indian mythology how the God Brahma was directly involved in creating the river. On its long route to the sea, the Brahmaputra receives a new name when it reaches Bangladesh. Here the son of Brahma turns into a woman with the name Jamuna. Jamuna is very fickle. She keeps changing her course and thereby creates countless islands which are called *Chars*. These islands at the middle of the river are the homes of *Chauras*.

However this mythical story doesn't contribute much to the narrative. This narration gives audience the only information to the audience about what is *Char* and who are *Chauras*. This introduction also gives the idea that this film is perhaps an ethnographic documentary. At the later part of the introduction, the filmmaker says, "as a child I was often told 'don't behave like a *Chaura*'. Yet I didn't know even now what a *Chaura* was. But for the first time I got the opportunity to meet these people." After this description the film starts with the visuals of submerged areas of the *Char*. And this description ensures that this film is about the people who live in these *Chars*. It also gives some impression about *Chauras* with the assertive sentence 'don't behave like a *Chaura*'; that is *Chauras* are uncultured, primitive and uncivilized. In the film, we also see primitive *Chauras* who are far from education, health services or electricity. The film may remind some of us the ethnographic film *Nanook of the North* even in this 21st century.

Although the film starts with a Hindu mythology, the Muslim *Chauras* also have their own myth. An old *Chaura* says, "Our forefathers said, that deep in the water lived the prophet Khowaz-Khizir. He has many workers. They dig away the soil below, until the big chunks fall down from above. We haven't seen it ourselves, but it is really true. ... In the winter months they measure how much earth they want to break away in the coming year." This myth appears naturally because the living here is dominated by water. The old man who believes about the prophet under the water, his house has been destroyed by Jamuna eight times in his life time. But the myth used at the beginning of the film is not justified in the narrative, especially it is not interpreted why and how the myth is related to the life of the *Chauras* or with the narrative of the film.

Mysticism gives the philosophical base for *Chauras*. The nature and environment drive their living, and there is every chance for them to be fatalistic. And they are to some extent as one *Chaura* says, "that's the way we live. Anyway, everything is in God's hands. It's His game, after all."

However, the *Chauras* were not found religious or followers of scholastic Islam. Rather culturally, some of them practice mysticism, a syncretic religious tradition in rural Bengal. At the later part of the film it depicts a session of mystic music. In that session, a group of *Fakirs* that include both male and female, take leaf narcotics and sing song together through *Jikir*, a method of devotion or *vakti*. They sing:

“Oh like in a river
I have lost my river
For whom do I make this
Flower necklace, for whom?
Oh, the flower have dried up,
But my lover never returned
Everything is game for my prophet
He has lit your house brightly
During the eclipse of the moon
And how many oceans he has
Crossed, in a boat of palm leaves!
Ignorant disciple, you haven't
Understood your crazy teacher's game.
No one will ever
Understand his game
Whoever forces his understanding
Will suffer only pain.”

In this way film *Water and Sand* portrays some mystic characters and cultures of the people of the *Chars*.

In the film *A Tale of the Sundarbans*, it is seen that the people of the Sundarbans worship various deities and depend on spiritual guides to protect themselves from tiger, crocodiles and various ominous powers. The names of the local deities are Bonbibbi, Shajongooli, Daxina Rai and Ali Madat. They have got deep faith on sacred texts, amulets and handkerchiefs with incantations from the different spiritual guides or even magicians.

Loving the Environment Around

In the film *Water and Sand*, it is depicted that although the people in the *Char* live a hard life, they love their living. They like the environment around. They are comfortable with the way they live. They cannot suit at other places. A *Chaura* says, "even when there is a flood, we often sit together on a dry platform or even on the roof. ... On the mainland, the atmosphere is different to here on the *Chars*. ... They don't visit one another. Such a lifestyle doesn't suit us. That's why we cannot live there. We have peace here. ... This place is good." While saying this, the innocent smile of the person ensures how purely he believes in it. The *Chauras* live in a traditional society. Without the advent of modernity and by living far away from urban anxieties, they have a simple life by loving the environment they live within.

The film *A Tale of the Sundarbans* gives the audience a feeling that despite of all the hardships of life, the people of Sundarbans enjoy their life through their singing and other entertainment process. The people in the film *Phulbari* are very much aware of loosing their favourite habitats and environment around it if the open-pit coal mine project is implemented.

Environment as the Determinant of Socio-economic Condition of People

The nature determines the living pattern of the people of the *Chars*, as the film *Water and Sand* describes it. In the rainy season of four months, people here live marooned by the water. The human and the cattle live together on the scaffold. Whenever the water goes down, they engage themselves in the agricultural works. In the dry season, the same place would be caught by draught. There might be even scarcity of water. In one scene a thirsty person was found digging sand in a wide field to reach to the level of water for drinking it. In the dry season if one looks at the nature of the *Char*, it would be really difficult for him or her to imagine how dramatically the scene would be changed. However, for some *Chauras*, life is really intricate. A *Chaura* says, "After one collapse

we moved around for 13 years. We got a few fields back. We lived on them for six years. Then they were gone again for two years. And this year we're in for it again. We live here and there. When field resurfaces, we return. We have no money. ... We are at the mercy of the river." However they are ready to accept this fate. Another *Chaura* says, "the flood season lasts for four months. We know that the flood will come – sometimes more, sometimes less. We accept hardship during these months." However, they have less complaint about it. The film *Water and Sand* describes the relation of human being with the nature in a given context.

The film *A Tale of the Sundarbans* depicts that the look of forest changes with the change of seasons. Along with that the profession of people related to the forest also changes. One can observe the influence of winter, summer and monsoon on the lives of the people living in the forest. For different season they generally do choose a new profession adapted to that specific seasonal characteristics. The documentary portrays these changes of seasons and the change of professions vividly and that gives a clear picture of people's dependence on the forest.

In the film *Phulbari* it is argued that open cut mining will cause great harm on socio- economic condition of inhabitants of Phulbari. The mining area covers more than hundred of villages and thousands acres of cropland in four thanas in Dinajpur district. People of Phulbari will loose their lands, farms and other properties and most importantly they will be dislocated from their root. In addition to that they will loose their educational and religious institutions, graveyards, mosques and temples. According to Asia Energy, which is in contract with the Bangladesh government for exploration of coal, 40,000 people are needed to be relocated away from the mine area. But the people of this area contend the company's estimate. In the film it is said that Asia Energy claims, Bangladesh will receive half of the total profit accrued from the mining operation. But if the calculations are done right about the crops and other benefits from the land for the next 30 years that will benefit more in comparison to what they will get

from the mine. A villager says, we just have one demand ... ensure our means of livelihood. The film argues that the coal project will have damaging effect on socio-economic condition of Phulbari.

Addressing the Environmental Issues

The Sundarbans is threatened with some environmental and man-made disasters. The documentary *A Tale of the Sundarbans* focuses on these issues distinctively. Increases in salinity, top dying disease of the Sundari trees, unplanned and uncontrolled consumption of forest resources, unlimited felling of trees, brutal killing and poaching of animals and birds, robbery, corruption, search of oil-gas etc are some of causes those are creating threat to the existence of the forest. At the later part of the film the director has delivered a collage of newspapers headlines which address all issues related to the Sundarbans. But before that the film has identified natural and man-made problems of the forest which is depicted through interviews of the local people and by the narration.

The film *Phulbari* also addresses the potential environmental loss of starting an open-cut coal mining project. The concern is mentioned through the interview of the activists of Phulbari movement and expert opinions. In the film it is argued that when coal is extracted from mine, many minerals come out and they are mixed with rain water. It damages the paddy and other crop fields. It also pollutes river water, kills fishes. Deep voids need to be created to reach coal that lies below the surface. Large number of huge water pump need to be set up in a mine area to keep the pit mine dry. The life time of mine is 30 years. Water needs to be constantly pumped out. As a result, the area surrounding the mine would be dried down. Phulbari is a fertile and vital food-growing region that produces two to four crops per year including rice, the main food of Bangladeshis. The project would also reduce water supplies for by lowering the water table far beyond the project

area. The mine would cause noise and dust pollution through dynamite explosion. More noise and dust will come from the trucks and trains that would haul the coal away from the mine. Coal dust will pollute the air. Water will be polluted from washing the coal, risking pollution of surrounding water bodies.

Environment and Politics

Environmental issues contain political aspects as sometimes it contradicts with development programme taken by government, non-government and private organizations. The director of *Water and Sand* included some development activities in the film by following an NGO worker, who helps *Chauras* in agriculture, education and other kinds of awareness building programme. By this kind of development works, the traditional living is exploited by the hope of better living. The development activity was uncritically represented in the film. The film ignores how the politics and power exercise have made the life of *Char* dangerous. Every time a new *Char* rises, there is a probability of fighting among powerful people to grab the land. The regular erosion of the land creates some legal problems in terms of fixing the land ownership. In these cases ordinary people suffer from losing lands not only by the river, also by the powerful persons. This exploitation regularly happens in the *Chars* which is totally absent in the film. The filmmaker might want to make a simple film on ordinary people, not on their struggle against powerful persons of the society.

The film *Phulbari* has a strong political stand. The treatment of the whole incident has made it clear that the filmmaker supports the peoples' protest against the coal mine project started by Asia Energy, a British Energy company. The film has given enough coverage by including the views of the left leaning political pact who were leading the movement.

The Problem of Gaze

While describing the cultural practices of the *Chauras* the filmmaker of *Water and Sand* is caught by the superstition of depicting exotic elements. This superstition emerges from his class position. The target audience is also from his class. Taking leaf narcotics is a part of *vakti* for mystic people, but the film describes it from a voyeuristic position by exoticizing it. Regarding the problem of gaze in the independent films of Bangladesh, Manjare Haseen Murad the eminent documentary maker, activist and writer says in the interview:

We get fund from two sources – either by direct overseas funding or through NGOs. In both cases we have to face some pre-conditions or serve some agendas. These bring some impacts on the contents. You'll understand it if you look at the contents of the films made by Shaheen Dill-Riaz. He is a good maker but his films contain the problem of gaze (Murad, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper portrayed an overall picture of the environmental documentaries in Bangladesh. It has identified the trends of features of existing environmental film practice in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, there is almost no tradition of wildlife films, though globally it is the most popular genre. Bangladesh has produced few ethnographic films. But most of the documentaries produced in Bangladesh address to contemporary environmental issues. The paper has also found that most of the environmental documentary films were produced by NGO sector, though few independent films have enriched the sub-genre. The independent films are better than the NGO films in terms of aesthetic aspect of filmmaking. The paper has also examined and found that the ethnographic films depict the belief of ordinary people in myths and they practice mysticism as their religious practices. The films portray that people love the environment they live within. The environment is also the determinant of peoples' socio-economic condition. However, most of the documentary films are eager to address the environmental issues directly. The issues range from

deforestation to the effect of contemporary climate change. But not every film is both artistically comprehensive in raising the issues or articulating proper information.

Bangladesh achieved the focus from the global community as it is one of the most vulnerable countries of the potential climate victim. It is assumed that the flow of foreign funds will be increased in near future and more environmental documentaries will be made. But the challenge lies whether the filmmakers of Bangladesh can really, as Grierson says, 'treat' in 'creative' way the 'actualities' of the issues of environment and climate change.

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