

Rajesh S. Jala's *Children of the Pyre*: Observing Life at the Bottom of India's Caste System

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Abstract

In the decades following Indian Independence in 1947, documentary filmmaking in India became synonymous with Prime Minister Jawaharla Nehru's nation building project. Documentarians made bland films about steel mills and dams and shied away from contentious themes such as the caste system and untouchability. As a result, documentary in India became a much-maligned genre. From the 1980s on, however, younger filmmakers such as Anand Patwardhan, began to concern themselves with the pressing social issues facing modern Indian society. More recently, an emerging generation of filmmakers, many of them influenced by Patwardhan, has taken upon itself the task of examining some of the darker aspects of Indian society such as caste and untouchability. Rajesh S. Jala (born 1970) is among this generation of young directors that seeks to investigate and report on some of the social problems of the modern India economic powerhouse. Jala's award-winning documentary *Children of the Pyre* (2008) shows the lives of untouchable children from the Dom community in Varanasi

who are forced to burn corpses at Manikarnika Ghat, the busiest cremation ground in India. This paper looks at how Jala went about making the film and explores some of the ethical implications that arise from making a document about a disempowered community.

1. Introduction: Rajesh Jala and New Indian Documentary

During the three decades or more following Independence in August 1947, documentary filmmaking in India became associated with the paternal output of the Films Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (renamed the Films Division in 1948). The FD had been established under the auspices of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the socialist architect of the new India, who “sincerely believed that the short film could be used . . . to further the interests of a developing nation just as it was used in wartime for propaganda purposes” (Narwekar 1992: 26). Consequently, a pattern was set that made documentary films synonymous with expository short films about such ‘five-year-plan’ topics as steel mills, dams, and agricultural productivity. These sober but optimistic exercises in propaganda were spooned like doses of castor oil down the collective throat of the Indian population. Not surprisingly, disillusionment with the heavy-handed Nehruvian ideology informing the FD’s output set in. Even N. V. K. Murty, FD’s Producer (Newsreels), conceded that

The entire resources of the country in the field of publicity were geared to the task of spreading Nehru’s message of planning. Many worthwhile films were made on this subject. But, some of the films, went overboard with their good intentions and painted, perhaps, a too rosy picture of our planned economy. The people were led to believe that once the plans were completed the country would flow with milk and honey. When this did not happen, the films lost their credibility and thereby their audiences. *(ibid., 48)*

The prominent independent documentarian Anand Patwardhan has expressed it more bluntly:

In India, the early documentary scene was dominated by government propaganda made by Films Division of India, which produced newsreels and documentaries that were compulsorily shown before every commercial film. People either arrived late or walked out for a smoke during these films, and the tag of “boring” became inescapably attached to the documentary. (Maclay 2004: para. 7)

The preoccupation during the Nehruvian era (1947-64) and the decade after with building the nation and fostering intercommunal harmony meant that contentious and potentially divisive issues—the caste system and untouchability in particular—were taboo for filmmakers.¹

This situation began to change in the 1980s when documentarians such as Patwardhan and others like Deepa Dhanraj, Meera Dewan, Tapan Sinha and Suhasini Mulay, who approached their filmmaking as a form of social activism, shook off the yoke of official sponsorship and control and found their independent voices. These filmmakers, often graduates of the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, set about redefining the style, content, purpose and remit of documentary filmmaking in India, steering it away from blandly safe and paternalistic exposition towards searing investigation of social ills. Patwardhan's documentary *Bombay: Our City* (1985), which details the oppressed lives of slum dwellers in Bombay, set an important new benchmark in investigative reportage. Patwardhan's fearless and provocative reporting on issues ranging from communal friction and Hindu nationalism to the plight of fishermen and mill workers inspired a whole new wave of independent documentarians. Now, this emerging generation of documentary filmmakers, following the example set by Patwardhan and

others, is grabbing the nettle by making films that show Indian society as it is in all its problematic complexity. A landmark film in this context is Stalin K's documentary *India Untouched: Stories of a People Apart* (2007), which shows the continuing and ubiquitous practice of untouchability and the violence and prejudice faced by dalits every day in every part in modern India.² Another filmmaker of this emerging generation who has sought to raise public awareness of uncomfortable caste-related themes is Rajesh S. Jala, the subject of this paper.

Rajesh S. Jala (born 1970) was among the more than 300,000 Kashmiri Hindu Pundits forced to abandon everything and flee for their lives in the early 1990s as a result of murderous attacks perpetrated by Mujahadeen insurgents. Jala ended up in a refugee camp in New Delhi, where he endured eight difficult years living crammed together with other families in intolerable conditions. Longing to become a documentary filmmaker but lacking the money to attend film school, he began to teach himself the necessary skills to become a cameraman and director. Still based in New Delhi, he has now been making documentaries for more than twelve years. His debut work was the short poetic film *Chinar* (1997) about the *chinar* tree (Oriental Plane), which is indigenous to Kashmir but is now, like the Hindu community there, almost extinct. Since then, his choice of themes points to his humanistic interest in individuals or groups that face marginalization or prejudice in Indian society. His second short film, *Aazadi* (Freedom, 1998), concerned the inmates of a psychiatric institution in Kashmir. Jala has commented that this film was "an attempt to understand the pain of isolated living souls of our society. These mentally disturbed patients are discarded and disowned. I wanted to listen to them and bring their voices to the people."³ His third film *Floating Lamp of the Shadow Valley* (2006) depicted the daily struggle for survival of the young son of a Kashmiri militant.⁴ His latest documentary *At the Stairs* (2011) is a short film about the lives of Hindu widows living out their last days in Varanasi

(Banaras) awaiting salvation (*moksha*) at death. My concern in this paper is with his 2008 film *Children of the Pyre* (hereafter *Children*), the film that secured his international reputation as a filmmaker.⁵ *Children*, which depicts the lives of untouchable children in Varanasi whose work is to cremate bodies, has received worldwide acclaim, winning the Best Documentary prizes at the Montreal World Film Festival, the Sao Paulo International Festival (both 2008), and at IFFLA, USA (2009). It also collected the Asiatica Film Mediale in Rome (2009) and has been officially selected at numerous film festivals around the world.⁶

The discussion below will proceed in the following way. In section two I lay the groundwork for my later analysis of the film by briefly describing the key features of the Hindu caste system and locating the untouchable community to which the children in the film belong within the Hindu socio-religious hierarchy. In the same section I go on to describe the nature of the work conducted by the children at the cremation ground and how this affects the way in which they are viewed and treated by caste Hindus. Section three, which draws upon an interview about the film that I conducted with Mr. Jala earlier this year,⁷ describes and examines five points concerned with the making of *Children*: 1) how Jala came to take the lives of the Dom children as his theme; 2) the problems related to the local people and community that he had to overcome both before and during the shooting; 3) the content of the film; 4) the modes of representation adopted by Jala in his direction and camerawork; and 5) Jala's intention in making the film. In section four, the conclusion, I look at the ethical implications of making documentaries about disempowered individuals such the children in Varanasi and examine how different modes of representation reflect the relationship between filmmaker and (subaltern) subject. I close with some personal thoughts about the pressing need for films such as *Children* to be made in present-day India as the country surges ahead economically yet remains mired in medieval caste politics.

2. Caste and the Dom community

In contrast to Stalin K's *India Untouched*, which is a 'horizontal' depiction of untouchability across the whole sub-continent, Jala's *Children* is a 'vertical' case study of one particular dalit community located at the Manikarnika Ghat, India's busiest cremation ground, on the banks of the River Ganges in the ancient holy city of Varanasi. The film reveals the grim lives of seven boys from the untouchable *Dom* community whose job is to cremate corpses all day, every day. Jala's film is an understated yet forceful and objective account of the gruelling hand-to-mouth struggle of these children to earn enough rupees to support not only themselves but also their families, which often have alcoholic and drug-dependent fathers as their heads. The film constitutes a damning report on the iniquitous operation of the Hindu caste system in the microcosm of the cremation ground; it is also a more general indictment of untouchability. In this section, I describe the location and reputation of the Dom community within the Hindu socio-religious hierarchy, and the nature of the mortuary work they carry out, since these matters underpin my discussion of Jala's film in section three.

The Hindu caste system is a highly complex and contested socio-religious hierarchy, and a thorough description of it lies outside the scope of this paper. For present purposes, it is sufficient to note that Hindu society is divided into categories, known as *varnas* (castes), with varying degrees of respectability and circles of social intercourse. The four primary castes, ranked in descending order of supposed prestige and purity, are the *brahman* (priests and scholars), *kshatriya* (warriors and rulers), *vaishya* (farmers and merchants), and *shudra* (labourers). Ranked below the castes and thus excluded from the *varna* system are the literally outcaste "untouchables" whose touch or even shadow, as orthodox belief has it, can defile caste Hindus. All Hindus, both with or without caste, are further subdivided into thousands of occupation- or function-specific and endogamous clans, tribes

and communities known as *jāti* (a Sanskrit term meaning “thus born”) (Dumont 1980). The supposed uncleanliness of the untouchables derives from the impure occupations their fate leads them to be “born to” in their given *jāti*. According to this worldview, no work is more polluted or polluting than that of mortuary labourer or funeral attendant, the occupation traditionally assigned to the members of the Dom community.⁸ Consequently, the Dom have always been treated with contempt not only by members of the four castes but also by members of other outcaste groups.⁹ The members of the Dom *jāti*, therefore, occupy the lowest and most oppressed stratum of Hindu society in Varanasi; they are, to put it simply, the most untouchable of the untouchables.

The Dom funeral attendants earn money at the *ghat* in two ways. Firstly, they receive payment for performing certain essential mortuary tasks, namely arranging and constructing the cremation pyre from sandalwood logs; providing the chief mourner (traditionally the eldest son of the deceased) with the never-extinguished fire of the cremation ground with which he ignites the pyre; and tending the pyre carefully throughout the cremation in order to ensure the complete burning of the body with the least number of the expensive fragrant logs. Secondly, as the anthropologist Jonathan P. Parry describes in his *Death in Banaras*, they also remunerate themselves by claiming certain traditional perquisites of the work which include

the shroud, the bier and its appurtenances, and five [carbonized charcoal] logs on the fire. More valuable than these, however, is the right to sift and wash the ashes for the gold and silver which was left on the corpse in the form of rings, jewellery or other ornaments.

(Parry 1994: 91)

As Parry notes, the eagerness with which the Dom funeral attendants have

always laid claim to these perks has given them an “infamous reputation for rapacity” (*ibid.*: 90). The adult Dom labourers take possession of the heavier items (the charcoal logs and bier) and the most valuable (the gold and silver). The Dom children, for their part, spirit away from under the noses of the Dom adults and the mourners the easiest item to ‘lift’, namely the embroidered funerary shroud covering the corpse, which they sell to local shopkeepers for recycling. In Jala’s film, we witness the seven boys engaged not only in burning corpses but also in this so-called “shroud picking.” The profits from snatching the coverings are very slim; as the film shows, the boys receive a mere two rupees for each ‘recovered’ shroud, which the Manikarnika shopkeepers clean and resell for 25-30 rupees. Moreover, the boys are frequently beaten and verbally abused by both irate mourners and the adult Dom attendants. The whole cycle, from snatching the shrouds in order to survive, through the beatings and abuse that follow, to their exploitation by the shopkeepers, is the story of the boys’ comprehensively oppressed position in Varanasi society and forms the core subject matter of *Children*.

3. The Making of *Children*

Jala, long fascinated by Varanasi, had wanted to make a documentary about the ancient city’s culture and traditions. With that intention in mind he went there in 2006 in order to see what might capture his interest and provide the theme for his film. Jala discovered much there that interested him; in particular, he was repeatedly drawn to the Manikarnika Ghat, where he observed the Dom children cremating corpses and snatching shrouds, laughing and joking around, and surviving poverty and abuse.¹⁰ Knowing that he had found his theme, Jala had first to work at overcoming all the people-related obstacles that might prevent him from gaining unfettered access to the *ghat* and from being able to film the children’s participation in cremations. Initially, these problems concerned the children themselves, the

city and religious authorities, and the tourist touts at the cremation ground; subsequently, occasional difficulties also arose from disgruntled mourners at the funerals.

Approximately two hundred Doms work at Manikarnika, of which around thirty are young boys. Jala's film focuses on seven of them—Ravi, Gagan, Sunil, Kapil, Yogi, Manish and Ashish—who ranged in age from nine to fifteen years old at the time of the shooting. The boys were understandably wary of him at first, so he spent the first month interacting with them in order to develop a relationship of trust. These “shroud boys,” made hard and cynical by the terrible circumstances of their daily struggle to survive, were well accustomed to the intrusive cameras of tourists, and to the physical and verbal abuse dished out to them by alcoholic fathers, money-hungry touts, and irate mourners. They did not know how to position Jala, since he neither vanished with the tourists nor abused them like the various denizens of the *ghat*. Nevertheless, the boys soon became used to Jala's presence and allowed him to follow them with his camera, to which they gradually paid less heed. The next access problem concerned what Jala calls the “three-tier permission.” First, the filmmaker had to gain official permission to film on the *ghat* both from the city authorities through a district magistrate and from the priests at Manikarnika. This done, he then needed to approach the Dom cremator community. At first, he recalls, “they wouldn't pay attention to me. But when they saw that this guy was very serious about the kids and that he wasn't disturbing us, they started warming up to me, particularly these seven families” (Cross 2011). After that, he had to win over the touts at the cremation ground who extract money from the tourists by acting as unofficial guides. Jala's “sitting with a camera at the *ghat* was,” he concedes, “a big threat to them” (*ibid.*). The support of the Dom families was the decisive factor in convincing the touts that he would not be interfering with their dodgy business operations. Once filming went ahead a final occasional source of opposition came from the members of mourning families who

might demand that he stop shooting. When this happened, he would immediately pack up his camera and leave. Once when he was told to stop filming, however, he received support from an adult Dom who told the relative: “If you want to cremate your dead body, then let him be, because he belongs to our community” (*ibid.*). This incident reveals the extent to which Jala had succeeded in becoming an insider in the Manikarnika Dom community.

Jala spent eighteen months interviewing and filming the seven boys in more than 100 hours of footage. Throughout the film the gaze of Jala’s camera settles not just on the seven boys but also on the grim yet fascinating locale of the cremation ground. Thus, the title *Children of the Pyre* indicates the dual preoccupation of the film with the daily existence of the Dom children and with the pyres that they help to build and tend. The camera records the relentless ubiquity of death at the *ghat*—its awful stench and grisly presence—and the effect of its constant proximity to these young lives. There is no dramatic or narrative structure to the film as such, no artfully crafted resolution towards a happy ending for these children. Rather, the film presents a seemingly unending round of cremations and shroud pickings, interspersed with the boys talking about their lives, hopes, fears, and feelings of resignation.

The task of cremating bodies on open fires is filthy, nauseating and debilitating work, and the dangers and horrors of it are captured graphically by Jala’s camerawork. The film contains recurring images of cremations, with close-ups of heads and limbs burning, and sizzling fat dripping from flame-licked fingers. The illuminated faces of the children watching the fires give a clear sense of how the experience is affecting them. The film depicts the full range of the oppressive and dangerous aspects of the boys’ work. The health hazards are numerous. The heat of the pyres, exacerbated by mid-summer temperatures of around 50 degrees Celsius, leaves the skin on their young bodies blistered and pockmarked. The constant smoke attacks

their lungs, and sleeping rough on the *ghat* ruins their bodies. Not surprisingly, they are also damaged psychologically by the work they are “born to” as outcaste Doms. The gruesome sights to which they are exposed day after day result in recurrent nightmares. One of the boys, Sunil, recalls: “One day I saw a post-mortemed body. Its forehead was stitched. I was a novice and got so scared that my heart started pounding.”¹¹ In order to survive these terribly oppressive conditions, the boys abuse and become addicted to tobacco, alcohol and marijuana. This is how Ravi justifies his marijuana addiction: “A corpse arrives here every five minutes and I have to burn it up. If I don’t smoke marijuana, what do I do, worship the corpse? Marijuana freshens the mood a bit. I smoke it under compulsion.” Gagan, for his part, declares: “Here, many small children smoke this. If one gets addicted, can one leave it? I tried hard many times but couldn’t leave it.”

On top of the health hazards of the job and the effects of substance abuse, the Dom children face prejudice and ostracism as outcastes. At one point Sunil declares:

We are considered untouchables. But these motherfuckers [the mourners] don’t understand that at the last moment only we help them. We touch what is considered untouchable by all. Even if we bathe and sit by them, they call us untouchables. Because we handle corpses and touch shrouds, they find us repulsive and keep away from us. They say we are untouchables, we will mince you even if your shadow falls on us!

Very often the boys are beaten by the mourners for picking a shroud from a corpse before the flames can touch it. They are fatalistically resigned to such brutal ill-treatment. As Yogi expresses it: “We are young, what can we do? It’s our fate to be kicked.” There is cruel irony in the abuse faced by these Dom children, since it is the very performance of their allotted duties at a

funeral that, according to orthodox Hindu belief, ensures the untroubled passage of the soul of the deceased caste Hindu from this life into eternal salvation.¹²

Jala's predominant filmmaking approach in *Children* exemplifies what Bill Nichols has described in his *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* as the observational mode of representation.¹³ In this mode, he states,

Recurring images or situations tend to strengthen a “reality effect,” anchoring the film to the historical facticity [*sic*] of time and place and certifying to the continuing centrality of specific locations. These refrains add affective texture to an argument; they stress the historical specificity of the observed world. (Nichols 1991: 41)

Observational films, he goes on, are “rooted in the present,” affording the viewer “an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experience of others, to gain some sense of the distinct rhythms of everyday life” (*ibid.*). The cool detached style of Jala's filming puts viewers in the privileged position of watching many aspects of the boys' lives as they unfold naturally. It is, in the words of one reviewer of *Children*, “present tense” filmmaking (Aquino 2009: para. 5). Thus, we see the youngsters in work-related situations, toiling at the pyres, snatching shrouds, arguing with each other over a claim to a picked shroud, being abused by mourners or adult Doms, and so on. Other aspects of their lives are also shown. There are scenes in which we witness them teasing and fighting each other, dancing at a festival, intoxicating themselves, yawning exhausted from cremation work before a Bollywood movie on a TV in a neighbourhood shop, and sleeping on the rough stone steps of the *ghat*. Jala, mostly an observant filmmaker behind his camera, remains unseen throughout the film. He explained to me that

I consciously chose to be an observer because I thought my presence on screen would dilute the intensity of the children's suffering. I didn't want to interrupt the viewer or to be an interpreter. I attempted to observe and capture reality and tried to present the same in its true form.¹⁴

This is not to say, however, that Jala completely effaces his presence in the film. In some sequences, as we shall see below, he also employs a more interactive mode of representation that involves his vocal presence.

There are numerous scenes in which the children are filmed talking about themselves directly to the camera. In these sequences we mostly hear only one half of the conversation as the children answer questions that Jala has put to them. These monologues give voice and agency to each boy, allowing him to describe and to complain about his lot in life, and thus provide viewers with a subject-driven perspective of the experiences and worldview of a shroud boy at Manikarnika. As Jala puts it, "I didn't narrate the film myself. I let the kids speak themselves and I wove their bytes to form the narrative."¹⁵ What comes through mostly with their voices is a sense of resignation. The oldest boy, Ravi, who is 15 in the film and has been cremating bodies since he was five, declares: "When few bodies arrive, I feel sad because I lose my earnings. I pray that all the oldies in the world die and are brought here." Talking about the torture of the summer heat, another of the boys declares:

It even makes us dizzy—but we can't help it, we are compelled to do it. In the summers we turn black, develop fever, go mad, one day my condition turned serious. Still, this is our work, and we have to come. If we don't earn how will we fill our bellies and survive.

They hate this work and all that it entails, yet they wish for more of it. Such is the karmic trap of their existence.

In the latter part of the film, with the daily lives of the children well established for viewers, there are moments when Jala's interaction with the boys in the interviews becomes more apparent. We hear his voice, and the boys, especially the eldest, Ravi, sometimes answer him back sharply. Thus, even when interacting with them, Jala allows the boys to retain control over the exchange and over their own interpretation of their lives. This is an example of what David Macdougall discusses in his essay "Beyond Observational Cinema," where he argues for a more participatory cinema in which the filmmaker invites his or her subjects to imprint themselves and their culture directly upon the film. It is by giving them access to the film, he adds, that the filmmaker "makes possible the corrections, additions, and illuminations that only their response to the material can elicit. Through such an exchange a film can begin to reflect the ways in which its subjects perceive the world" (Macdougall 1985: 282-3). An example of this is when Jala asks Ravi how much chewing tobacco he consumes every day. The lad retorts: "Is it necessary to answer that question?" Then, when Jala asks him about his smoking and suggests that he is too young, Ravi snaps back:

Aren't you ashamed of this question? Being so young, if I can earn, why can't I smoke? If you have so much sympathy for me then send 5,000 rupees to my home as dole and I won't even peek at this wretched place . . . otherwise leave me to my state.

This is an interactive moment in which Jala clearly allows Ravi to steer the conversation in his own direction and even to challenge the director's own liberal subject position.

On another occasion, Jala's interaction, again with Ravi, takes on a more interventionist tone. After Ravi has told Jala that the flag-draped bodies of

political leaders are sometimes brought to Manikarnika for cremation, the filmmaker asks leading questions, spurring the boy into uttering political opinions that we might expect Jala himself to hold:

Jala: What kind of people are these leaders?

Ravi: They are motherfuckers. They fleece the poor and feed the rich.

Jala: OK, suppose you became a leader tomorrow. What would you do?

Ravi: If the Lord of this cremation ground [the god Shiva] wills it, I'll do what no one has done. I will have a house built for every poor person and say live happily in it. And in houses without the hearth fire, I will light the fire. And I will provide medicines to the sick, only to the poor not the rich.

Jala: Why not the rich?

Ravi: Leave it brother, I can't say . . . the rich are motherfuckers.

This exchange, which comes towards the end of the film, allows Ravi the opportunity to express what is the only overt political opinion in *Children* about the economic hardship faced by those at the bottom of India's caste system. It is the subtle shift in Jala's approach from observational to interactive and, finally, to mildly interventionist that sets up that critique of the Indian political and caste establishment.

This leads one naturally to consider the important question of the ideology and intention behind Jala's making of *Children*. In my interview with Jala I asked him about the political ideology that he brought to the film. Did he, for example, align himself with the anti-caste and anti-untouchability project of Jawaharlar Nehru? He denied this possibility and explained that he didn't "want to belong to any political ideology," adding, however, that the closest ideology with which he would associate himself was "that of Gandhi and his

individual vision about the love for humanity and equality” (Cross 2011). I then asked Jala about his intention in making *Children*. He replied that

I think one of the intentions I had with this film, apart from wanting to reach out to the world and show the miserable existence of these kids, was to show that India is not only about shining.¹⁶ There is a particular class or community that is shining. More than 40 or 50% of India is not shining. They’re being marginalized, they’re being pushed further to their miserable conditions, so the top layer of India is shining, but the people who live at the grassroots level, they’re not shining. India is a land full of inequalities. We have to get rid of our corrupt system, our corrupt bureaucracy and political class. And then India would shine only when you see that every family has a house to live in, however little, every family has basic facilities, which any human being requires to live. (Cross 2011)

The wish Jala expresses here for every family to have a house of its own echoes Ravi’s sentiment above. This gives a hint of how Jala’s personal ideological concerns have entered into the discourse of the film. By this I do not mean to suggest that Jala set out to influence the opinions of the children, but what he as director chose to include in the film—Ravi’s tirade against the rich, for example—must be seen as his reflecting his own perspective and agenda with this documentary.

One of Jala’s key intentions in this film was to show that these kids, for all that they are dalits engaged in the worst possible work, are as much children of Mother India as any Brahman priest. This comes through in one sequence late in the film that features an August 15th Independence Day celebration in the neighbourhood of the *ghat*. There we see some of the boys singing the national anthem and raising the national flag. This sequence demonstrates clearly that the children, though suffering terrible oppression

and abuse in their lives, still proclaim a sense of belonging to the same Indian society that tramples them underfoot. When the national flag is raised, the boys clap and shout "Long live Mother India!" When I asked Jala why he had inserted this particular scene into the film, he responded that as a filmmaker his

intention to include those [patriotic] opinions of the kids was to reach out to the people of this country and to say that we have ignored them. But they remember the national anthem so well. They remember at this extreme juncture of their life, where it is so full of miseries, they are aware of their patriotic beliefs. So it is a subtle way of giving information to the whole country that even though you are marginalizing them they still hold your flag. (Cross 2011)

The film, as mentioned above, has no narrative arc as such, yet it does betray a developing pattern of intention on the part of its director. From an initially detached observational mode of representation the film shifts to a later position of advocacy on behalf of the boys. What are the ethical implications of intervening in subaltern lives in this way?

4. Conclusion: What to do with People?

From its very beginnings the realist documentary as a genre has tended towards the observation, representation and investigation of victimhood and suffering. Indeed, Brian Winston writes in his *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Movement Revisited* of "the dominance of the victim as the realist documentary subject" (Winston 1995: 230). Among audiences in the developed world there is a clear fascination with documentaries that deliver narratives and images of subaltern misery, particularly when the subjects are poor and oppressed children.¹⁷ Such 'victim discourses' achieve their greatest success with Western audiences when they are delivered through

the mitigating medium of the English language and from the reassuring perspective of Western filmmakers. A recent example of this is Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman's *Born Into Brothels* (2005), a film about the lives of the children of Kolkata prostitutes which won the 2005 Oscar for Best Documentary. Such discourses may be appealing to Western audiences because they reinforce and confirm comfortable orientalist constructions of an impoverished Third World and allow viewers to become armchair voyeurs of subaltern poverty and misery.

The very concept of the 'victim documentary' raises ethical questions about how documentarians position themselves *vis-à-vis* their subjects and how, in particular, they depict and may make use of disempowered individuals and communities. Bill Nichols singles out a matter of crucial importance for any documentary filmmaker:

If there is one overriding ethical/political/ideological question to documentary filmmaking it may be, What to do with people? How can people and issues be represented appropriately? Each mode [of representation] addresses this question somewhat differently and poses distinct ethical questions for the practitioner. (Nichols 1991: 34)

Essentially, it boils down to the key ethical question of possible exploitation. This is particularly so in the case of Western documentarians who take subaltern subjects as the themes of their films.

A good example of the ethical tightrope that Western filmmakers may walk is *Born into Brothels*, just mentioned above. The Oscar that Briski and Kauffman won ensured that the hard lives of the Kolkata children received worldwide attention. Nevertheless, Briski and Kauffman have come in for harsh criticism from many quarters for what has been seen by Indian and Western commentators alike as their exploitation of the children for the furtherance of their own filmmaking careers.¹⁸ It is not possible here to enter

upon a full discussion of these criticisms; nevertheless, some of the key complaints are that Briski herself is excessively *present* both visually and vocally, to the extent that she dominates the entire film whether on- or off-screen. Her voice, which provides not only the considerable expository narration of the film, also offers judgements and statements about herself, her 'mission', and her efforts 'to do something' for these kids. Crucially, Briski is seen to take up a hegemonic position in relation to her subaltern subjects. Her lack of Bengali means that she remains on the fringes of the community, speaking only in English to the kids through an interpreter. It is an approach that smacks of cultural condescension. Finally, there are considerable doubts about whether the film actually helped the children in any substantial or lasting ways. All in all, it has been hard for Briski, who received her Oscar in a glamorous backless evening gown, to counter the charge that the film is more about her than about the needy children in the red light district.

Jala, by contrast, being both an Indian who films other Indians and being a former refugee who has had his own share of suffering, has been spared such criticism. Moreover, as we have seen, Jala was accepted into the Dom community as an insider, and he only speaks Hindi with the boys throughout. Finally, Jala employs an almost completely self-effacing mode of observational shooting. One could never seriously assert, therefore, that Jala takes up center stage in *Children*. He is rather a voice from the wings. He himself diplomatically notes the crucial difference between his approach and Briski's:

Born into Brothels and *Children of The Pyre* indeed have some similarities. Both films follow children living/working under extreme conditions. But clearly, the approach was different. Zana Briski's presence in her film was apparently the fundamental difference in approach.¹⁹

It goes without saying that complete objectivity in documentary filmmaking—in any kind of reporting—is an elusive goal. Nevertheless, with his detached observational camerawork and by allowing the children to tell their own stories, Jala comes as close as it is perhaps possible in presenting an objective account of the lives of these young Dom cremators.

For all its much vaunted prosperity and rapid modernization, India is still a society that is structured first and foremost around the prescriptions of the caste system, a system that still enslaves and abuses a greater number of people in the subcontinent than the total population of the United States. As historian Nicholas B. Dirks has observed, far from dying out, caste “remains the single most powerful category for reminding the nation of the resilience of poverty, oppression, domination, exclusion, and the social life of privilege” (Dirks 2001: 16). The central importance accorded to caste has ensured that untouchability, the dark underbelly of the *varna* system, also thrives. Gandhi had tried to eradicate the evil of untouchability, and Nehru ensured that the new constitution, drafted by the dalit lawyer Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, specifically outlawed untouchability. Despite these best intentions, however, the practice of untouchability has lived on into the present, particularly with the demise of Nehru’s vision of a secular and casteless India and with the rise of radical Hindu fundamentalism (*hindutva*), which since the 1980s has reified Brahmanic hegemony. The novelist and anti-untouchability activist Arundhati Roy has expressed her view of this state of affairs in forceful terms:

I’d say the biggest indictment of all is that we are still a country, a culture, a society, which continues to nurture and practice the notion of untouchability. While our economists number-crunch and boast about the growth rate, a million people—human scavengers—earn their living carrying several kilos of other people’s shit on their

heads every day. And if they didn't carry shit on their heads they would starve to death. Some fucking superpower this. (Roy 2007)

Disposing of human excrement or corpses, it is the same problem. There is a great need for documentaries by the new generation of Indian filmmakers such as Rajesh S. Jala that examine the continuing impact of the caste system and untouchability on modern India. *Children of the Pyre* is a humanistic piece of filmmaking that handles its disempowered subjects with great dignity and understanding.

Notes

- 1 A notable exception was Nina Shivdasani Rovshen's *Chahatrabhang* (The Divine Plan, 1975), which depicted the exploitation of untouchables in rural India.
- 2 Stalin K. says about his film that "*India Untouched* will make it impossible for anyone in India to deny that untouchability is still practised today. My team and I spent four years travelling the length and breadth of the country to bear witness to the continued exclusion and segregation of those considered as untouchables" (Perappadan 2007, para. 2).
- 3 Emailed letter to Robert Cross, 10 July 2011.
- 4 See Huggler (2006) and De Bok (2006) for descriptions and analyses of *Floating Lamp*.
- 5 *Children of the Pyre* (74 mins., colour, Hindi with English subtitles) was produced by Jala's company The Elements. Jala's homepage at www.rajeshsjala.com provides comprehensive information about *Children* and his other films, as well as links to reviews.
- 6 In 2008, the film was officially selected at international documentary film festivals in Amsterdam, Pusan, and Leipzig; in 2009, in Jerusalem, Munich, IFLA (USA), Goa, Amsterdam, MOMA (New York), Tampere, and Thessaloniki.
- 7 Mr. Jala kindly granted me an interview in the garden of the India International Centre, New Delhi on 8th March 2011. I would like to record my sincere thanks to him here for giving me his time and attention on that occasion and also for responding to my subsequent questions by email.
- 8 Dom communities may do other work. The Czech Indologist Milena

- Hübschmannova noted that whilst the Dom community in Varanasi has always been occupied with cremations, elsewhere in India “most Dom are traditionally musicians” (Hübschmannova, undated, para. 7).
- 9 Prof. Govind S. Ghurye observed in his seminal study *Caste and Race in India* that “No Hindu of decent caste would touch a Chamār [leather worker] or a Dom; and some of the very low castes are quite strict about contact. Thus [he quotes from the 1911 Census] ‘The Bansphor [bamboo workers] and Basor [basket makers], themselves branches of the Dom caste, will touch neither a Dom, nor a Dhobi [laundry worker]’” (Ghurye 1932: 8).
- 10 While there he also became interested in the old lower caste widows who wait for death in a charity house overlooking Manikarnika Ghat. The footage that he shot of them while working on *Children* would become his latest film, *At the Stairs* (2011).
- 11 All quotes from the boys are taken from the English subtitles used in the film.
- 12 As the anthropologist Rosa Maria Perez notes, the Dom of Varanasi “are indispensable to the salvation of the souls of the dead; and to that extent they are essential to the maintenance of social order, since without them, the dead may be transformed into malevolent beings threatening the world of the living” (Perez 2004: 167).
- 13 Nichols presents a very useful four-fold taxonomy of the primary modes of representation employed by documentary filmmakers—expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive—and explores their various ethical implications.
- 14 Emailed letter to Robert Cross, 10 July 2011.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 “Shining India” was a slogan expressing overall optimism that appeared in India in 2003 after the bumper harvests that year. Subsequently, it was adopted by the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during the general elections in 2004. This label has been widely attacked for its false and unfounded message of optimism.
- 17 This is true also of feature films. Witness the phenomenal success of *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, 2008), the ‘feelgood’ drama about a group of kids from the Dharavi slums in Mumbai which won eight out of the ten Oscars that it was nominated for, including Best Picture and Best Director. Boyle, for all his success with *Slumdog*, has received some harsh criticism for what has been seen as his simplistic depiction of subaltern poverty. See, for example, the criticisms expressed in Rushdie (2009) and Sengupta (2009; 2010).
- 18 See Swami (2005), Banerjee (2005), Sirohi (2005), and Brouillette (2011).
- 19 Emailed letter to Robert Cross, 10 July 2011.

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《日本語要旨》

ラジェシュ・S.ジャラの「火葬場のこどもたち」
—インドのカースト制度下位の生活観察

ロバート・クロス

キーワード：ラジェシュ・S. ジャラ、ドキュメンタリー映画、ヒンドゥーカースト制度、不可触賤民、ドムのコミュニティ、ヴァラナシ、児童労働、火葬

要旨：

1947年のインド独立後の数十年間、インドにおけるドキュメンタリー映画製作は、ジャワハルラール・ネルー首相の国家建設プロジェクトの代名詞となった。ドキュメンタリー製作者は、製鋼所やダムなど当たり障りのない映画を作り、カースト制度や不可触賤民など議論を呼ぶテーマを避けてきた。その結果、インドにおけるドキュメンタリーは厳しく批判される分野となった。しかしながら、1980年以降、アナンド・パトワルダンらの若い映画製作者が、現代のインド社会が直面する差し迫った社会問題に関心を持つようになった。最近では、新興世代の、その多くがパトワルダンに影響を受けている映画製作者が、カースト制度や不可触賤民などのインドの負の側面を観察することに乗り出した。ラジェシュ・S. ジャラ（1970年生まれ）は、経済大国、現代インドが抱える社会的・文化的問題を調査し報道しようとする、若手監督世代の一人である。ジャラの受賞作品「火葬場の子供たち（2008）」は、インドの最も混雑する火葬場である、マニカーニカガットで死体を火葬させられるヴァラナシのドムのコミュニティの不可触賤民の子供たちの生活を描いている。本稿では、ジャラがどのようにして映画を製作するに至ったのかを考察し、無力なコミュニティについて記録することによって生じる道徳的含意を検討する。