

Collective Vision: Analysis of collaborative production practices for short documentaries in India

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Abstracts

Film collectives and collaborative production have evolved into potent vehicles of change, converging on themes of gender and representation of marginalised groups, allowing communities to introspect and create their own cultural identity. Community produced short documentaries, shift dialogue from national to local regions. Film Collectives produce short documentaries, reinforcing modular over conventional. In this study, the researchers aim to examine short documentaries produced through collaborative production approaches at the grassroots level, specifically those serving or created by communities in India. The research places significant emphasis on investigating the advancement of social welfare within the local community through these films. Overall, the language and structure employed in collaborative filmmaking align more closely with traditional documentary practices. The objective of the study is to achieve a thorough comprehension of the importance of community films and to explore their sustainability over the long term. To achieve this goal, the researchers have chosen to analyse four films produced by SPS Media. Through the creation of their films, SPS Media, captures the real-life experiences and obstacles of marginalised communities. Their films serve to bring attention to and facilitate discussions on issues such as poverty, gender inequality, education, healthcare, and sustainable agriculture. Key characteristics of collaborative production are discussed in the paper. The research methodology adopted is qualitative in nature, with a case study and narrative and textual analysis of short documentaries.

Keywords: Film collective, collaborative network, community, community films, documentaries, short documentaries.

1. Introduction

In a country as diverse and heterogeneous as India, films and broadcast mediums like television and radio have been effectively used for social awareness at a national scale in the past. The first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, is credited with recognising the potential role of films in fostering social transformation and national unity. During the Nehruvian era, spanning the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, there was a notable cultural shift as filmmakers were inspired to contribute to the nation-building process (Ghosh, 2019). This period laid the

foundation for the evolution of Indian cinema. In the mid-1960s, Indian scientist Dr. Vikram Sarabhai advocated for a nationwide television system as a catalyst for economic and social development. His efforts led to the establishment of the National Satellite Communication group (NASCOM) in 1968. Following NASCOM's recommendations, the government of India approved the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) in 1969. SITE, a one-year pilot project from 1975 to 1976, aimed to leverage satellite communication to deliver specially designed programming to rural areas (Contractor, Singhal & Rogers 1988). The project's objectives included enhancing rural primary school education, providing teacher training, improving agricultural and health practices, fostering nutritional awareness, and contributing to family planning and national integration (Agrawal, 1981). State-supported documentaries and social awareness films have harnessed the power of film as an audio-visual medium, contributing to building empathy and motivating collective efforts to address societal concerns. Peter Sutoris highlighted the transition from colonial 'sanskari' documentaries to Films Division of India productions, showcasing both continuity and disruption. Films Division aimed to reinforce the state's 'nation-building' narrative by emphasizing differences and dissent, challenging the benevolent image of the state. (Sutoris, 2016).

Documentaries have served as a catalyst for dialogue and discussions (Banerjee, 2018). For example, *Something like a war 1991* (Deepa Dhanraj) raised the issue of India's family planning program from women's point of view and *Cotton of my Shroud 2011* (Saxena & Bahl) raised issues of farmer suicide. Though such documentaries may find audiences at film festival and within policy making department, they are often not consumed by the subjects they feature. Herein, lies the valuable potential of community produced films and documentaries which are based on local issues as well as seen by concerned stakeholders.

The advent, popularity and accessibility of digital media creation and consumption has contributed to a new paradigm of collaborative production practices and distribution. Practices in independent production & distribution of films in India. Short documentaries typically running between 10-30 minutes in length (Hoppenot, 2023) in particular have gained immense popularity due to their ability to capture compelling narratives within limited time frames addressing the attention spans of modern generation and making content accessible for sharing on digital media, which promotes public participation and awareness. Film society movements appeared in India in the early post independence period followed by States conscious effort to establish and create alternative cinema practices as Dr. Chakrabarty, noted in an online session "Gazing in the era of Glance" (November 6, 2023). Predominately, mainstream escapist cinema became the gained primacy in India within pop culture and dominated societal belief. With the digital technology in the 90's the film collectives appeared like the Vikalp, Pedestrian Pictures, Cinema of Resistance, among others, to create a counter narrative to mainstream and state supported media and focus on crucial issues within a smaller yet committed concerned audiences. This fresh approach of film collectives employed innovative exhibition techniques to reach a diverse range of audiences. These unconventional methods, although not entirely new, were notably prevalent in the realm of documentary films. Film collectives were also influenced by Independent non-fiction films, which have had to depend on alternative modes of circulation due to the limited accessibility of traditional film distribution channels. In Indian media landscape the mass audiences have had limited opportunities to watch documentaries. Film collectives emerged as

alternate practices the neglected segment of documentary film production. What sets film collectives apart from previous film societies supported as a 'statest imperative' Dr. Chakrabarty, (November 6, 2023) is their emphasis on diverse perspectives and varied approaches to using films as a medium (Banerjee, 2018).

In the context of film collectives, 'reinforcing modular over conventional', refers to a preference or emphasis on modular filmmaking process over traditional or conventional methods. 'Modular filmmaking' refers to the division of the filmmaking process into smaller, easier-to-manage parts. It is possible to design each module separately and then incorporate them all into the bigger project. The creative process can be flexible and adaptable with this technique. The process of 'conventional filmmaking' is usually more structured and linear. Pre-production, production, and post-production phases are all followed step-by-step. 'Reinforcing modular over conventional' indicates a move towards a more cooperative, adaptable, and flexible non-traditional screening practice (Banerjee, 2018) and filmmaking process within Indian film collectives.

Filmmakers are turning to collaborative methods as it enables filmmakers to harness collective creativity with authenticity. The essence of collaboration is in the shared effort and expertise, brought together by a team of individuals who share a collective vision. The unique, 'Community films' produced by collaborative practices with a documentary style provides a window into the lives of those impacted by issues like water conservation, employment, poverty and debt, urban-rural market division among others, and support building community engagement and conversation. Community films often focus on addressing cultural, social, or environmental concerns associated with community of the local residents and encourage a sense of self-expression and empowerment.

Community films are usually produced by and for members of a specific demographic. For instance SPS Media in Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh, India, is a collective formed by amalgamation of community and professional filmmakers, which have incorporated film production as one of its internal process and core activity. The organisation produces training films, community videos and documentaries. This collective work towards giving marginalised voices a platform to share their particular experiences, viewpoints, and concerns. These films often provide an opportunity for community members to share their own narratives and experiences, helping to shape a more accurate and nuanced representation of their lives.

Film collectives use film as a vehicle for advocacy and social change to address community issues. Collaborative filmmaking as a dynamic has emerged as representation from the grassroots which is created by the concerned community with the presence of filmmakers- both trained and untrained individuals to produce films. Many of these films, for example- made by SPS like Samuh Daura Fasal Sangrahan Karyakram, Apna Bazar, Arzoo, and Nagar Aur Pani Phir Wahi Kahani made by SPS Media, (which has been chosen by the researchers for analysis) deal with topics such as poverty, caste discrimination, gender inequality, and political corruption. The ability to stream these films has been made available by advancements in digital consumption, smart phones, and streaming media platforms like YouTube.

Through this paper the researchers intend to analyse short documentaries, made with collaborative production practices, from the grassroots that function in service 'of or by' a

community in India. The research places great importance on exploring how these films contribute to the development of social welfare in the local community. Overarchingly the language and syntax used in collaborative style of filmmaking is more corresponding to documentary making. The study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of the significance of community films and delve into their long-term viability. For this purpose researchers have selected four films made by SPS Media for analysis. While selecting the sample for case study, researchers have employ two key parameters-

1. Category - out of the four categories namely, Self Help Groups, Agriculture, Watershed and Livestock, two categories have been selected- self-help group films and watershed management which have received maximum traction on the SPS website.

2. Sub-themes- the sub themes selected are- agricultural, education, employment, geolocation, & gender. These sub themes have been chosen in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015. These are no poverty (SDG1), zero hunger (SDG2), good health and well-being (SDG3), quality education (SDG4) and gender equality (SDG5).

Through their films, SPS Media, the producer of these films documents the lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations of marginalised communities, raising awareness and promoting dialogue on issues related to poverty, gender inequality, education, healthcare, and sustainable agriculture. Community filmmaking serves as a catalyst for empowerment, enabling community members to express their voices, share their stories, and advocate for positive change. SPS Media plays a significant role in advancing several SDGs in India, including.

Independent documentary films and Community

Films are a reflection and expression of a filmmaker's view of the world and his or her surroundings. Independent films can cover a wide range of genres, themes, and styles. They can be experimental, artistic, socially conscious, or unconventional in their storytelling. Independent films may be funded by private investors, film grants, crowdfunding, or personal savings. These films are showcased at film festivals and smaller independent theatres, and have limited commercial releases. Independent films are not intended for mass consumption.

(Battaglia, 2014) in 'Crafting 'participatory' and 'collaborative' film-projects in India. Who's the author? Whose vision?', focuses on answering the questions regarding participation, voices, collaboration and multimedia representations in the audio-visual projects. Researcher argues that participatory and collaborative audio-visual projects enable visual/media anthropologists to simultaneously examine their connection with the film-subject or informant and the film-viewer or reader (Battaglia, 2014). The contribution of the researcher is not limited to identification of the relationship between subject and the maker but also extends to inclusion of the audiences too, the aim of the study was to prove that the image making is a triangular rather than a dual process in between actors and also objectify the image maker as a mediator of the whole process (Battaglia, 2014). The concept of image-making as a triangular process, involving the maker, subject, and viewer, rather than just a dual process. It considers the role of the image-maker as a mediator in this process. The objective is to critically analyse the potential and limitations of this triangular process in relation to the ideas of "participation" and "collaboration" (Battaglia, 2015).

Research explores the debates surrounding multi-modal and interactive documentary art practices. These practices, as discussed by Galloway et al (2007); Blassnigg (2005); Lapenta (2011), Favero (2013, 2014); Hudson, (2008); Nash (2012); extend beyond being just films and offer visual/media anthropologists the opportunity to investigate the relationship between the film-subject or informant and the film-viewer. Additionally, the research contributes to discussions on "participation" and "collaboration" Ginsburg, (1995); Elder, (1995); Crafton, (2004); Battaglia, (2012) by suggesting that these two concepts are not necessarily interchangeable. Instead, Battaglia (2014). 'Documentary and collaboration: placing camera in the community' (Coffman, 2009), addresses question around collaborative documentary work by taking up case studies of four filmmakers, two professional and the other two academic. The research explains how professionals are unconventional in ways of content creation, interaction with the community and distribution of the film. The researcher argues that the academic brings out collaborative techniques from the classroom environment to the field of filmmaking while producing their independent work.

2. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design, employing selective sampling technique, case study methodology, and analyses of short documentaries. The data for this approach is derived from the selected case study Samaj Pragati Sahayog or SPS Media. Four films were selected out of a total of 46 films from SPS website which have maximum traction on the SPS website from early 2000's to July, 2023. The Films have been analysed to identify the approaches- both narrative and technique taken by SPS media to address community problems. The unit of analysis are community problems, social good, gender, water conservation, collective decision making, testimonials from local community, and urban- rural market division in the documentaries.

Samaj Pragati Sahayog

Samaj Pragati Sahayog also known as SPS Media, has been operating in Madhya Pradesh (Dewas district), India, since the 1990s. It is one of the biggest grassroots initiatives in India for sustainable agriculture, community media, livestock, health, and nutrition (SPS, 2023). SPS Media generates media content through interviewing and observing local people and has produced more than 200 films and community videos across two decades, featuring the people's narrative in collaboration with the local community. By producing such documentaries of people from remote areas based on their daily life struggles, SPS Media becomes the people's voice and the "cinema of value". These films provides a perspective of the real life situation and a reflection of the issues faced in the day to day lives of people belonging to a small community, focusing on small scale media collaboration that focuses on raising social awareness and allowing the community to create their own means of cultural expression, news, information and dialogue. This vision of creation of media clearly indicates comprehensibility of the content being the prime motivation for its consumption among its audiences. The films at SPS media's website have been categorised into four sections which are 1. Self Help Groups, 2. Agriculture, 3. Watershed and 4. Livestock and all the films are available for viewing on SPS Media's webpage that further directs over to their YouTube channel.

Table 1.2-Analysis						
S.No	Title of the film	Category	Duration	Issue addressed	Depictions of Sub- themes in documentaries	View/ Comments on YouTube
1	Samuh Daura Fasal Sangrahan Karyakram (Community endorsed agricultural revolution program)	Self Help Group	12:50 minutes	Marginalised farmers as active players in markets	testimonials from local community, gender	1403 views
2	Apna Bazar (Our Market)	Self Help Group	10 minutes	Bulk purchase of FMCG products for rural women.	Urban- rural market division	1904 views
4	Arzoo (Longing)	Self Help Group	14:24 minutes	Physical and emotional hardships of bonded labour.	testimonials from local community, gender	4519 views
4	Nagar Aur Pani Phir Wahi Kahani (Town and water, same old story)	watershed	34:12 minutes	Watershed management- lack adequate infrastructure in rural areas	Community problems, Social good, Water conservation and Collective decision making	602 views

Analysis

The films are shot in natural setting and in natural light in rural village areas of Madhya Pradesh. The production scale is small scale or micro production style, where the camera movement is steady with mostly mid shots and long shots camera angles. The analysed documentaries consist of testimonials and light background music. Standard cuts are majorly used for editing.

The documentary Samuh Daura Fasal Sangrahan Karyakram is made for marginalised farmers where the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) leaders advised the farmers to sell their products directly to the market or locally known as Mandi by cutting down the role of a middlemen. A self-help group is a strategy for organising individuals from low-income and marginalised communities to collectively address their personal challenges. In India, thousands of individuals are utilising self-help groups to improve their lives, support their families, and contribute to their communities. The government of India, in its ninth five-year plan, acknowledged the significance and effectiveness of self-help groups in implementing grassroots development initiatives (Sundaram, 2012). SHGs in India have inspired residents of rural areas, particularly women, to actively participate in local economies that have an impact on their daily lives. SHGs provide with a diverse array of financial products, such as regular savings, recurring deposits, fixed deposits, loans secured by fixed deposits, emergency loans (which are carefully evaluated by the members), collective purchase of essential daily needs, loans for cattle, well construction, cattle insurance, life insurance, and more to the farmers. According to SPS Media's website, "Another unique feature of the agriculture programme is its use of community videos produced by local community resource persons trained by SPS for agricultural extension work, over 200 community videos have been produced so far on themes related to agriculture and have proven

to be hugely popular among farmers, these are effective tools of taking messages of the programme to a larger number of farmers” (SPS, 2023). The films are also shown locally apart from YouTube presence.



Image 1 : ‘People’s Mobile Cinema’. film screening for a local community in Madhya Pradesh by SPS Media. (Credit: Pinki Brahma Choudhury, Director, SPS Media)

The short documentary *Apna Bazaar*, shot in Haat Bazaar of village Punjabura, (Dewas district, Madhya Pradesh) deals with the issue of bulk purchase of Fast Moving Consumable Goods (FMCG) products. The film delves into the grassroots economic and social relationships of rural women while tackling important issues in their daily lives. Through captivating storytelling and interviews with rural women, the documentary effectively captures the essence of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) divisions of SPS Media. The film features how SHGs developed a bulk purchase of consumer goods programme, that has allowed women to access better consumer goods and bring quality products at lower prices while maintaining food security for the members. The film highlights the positive ripple effects of this initiative, showcasing how it has led to enhanced self-reliance, and strengthened community cohesion. Overall, *Apna Bazaar* serves as an empowering testament to the potential of grassroots initiatives to promote economic empowerment and contribute to sustainable development in rural India.

In the documentary *Arzoo*, the issue of lifelong bonded labour for generations in return of the price of a small loan is being highlighted. Through compelling firsthand accounts, the film foregrounds the harsh realities faced by individuals trapped in this system. It is the real-life account of Farida and Akram who were helped by a unit of Samaj Pragati Sahyog’s self help group, Muskaan Pragati Samuh, who rescued them from bonded labour. The existence of a formal and timely source of credit with more favourable repayment terms has allowed many

individuals to break free from the burden of intergenerational debt bondage. In the informal credit market, rural moneylenders hold significant power and provide loans to farmers with minimal paperwork. However, these loans come with extremely high interest rates, sometimes reaching up to 60% per year. If the borrowers are unable to repay the loan, they can easily fall into a dangerous cycle where they might end up becoming bonded labourers to the moneylender. Arzoo highlighting the physical and emotional hardships that people like Farida and Akram endure.

Documentaries like *Nagar Aur Pani Phir Wahi Kahani* showcases the story of water crisis at Bagli, a small town in Madhya Pradesh, represents the situation of nearly six thousand small towns of India that are majorly dependable over ground water for drinking purposes. Small towns and rural areas in India often lack adequate infrastructure for providing clean drinking water, resulting in high rates of contamination and disease as well as illness from polluted water sources. In many cases, excessive pumping has led to declining levels of groundwater and surface springs which have an adverse effect upon local agriculture production, livelihoods and food security as farmers face increasing scarcity and rising costs associated with accessing new sources or irrigation systems/storage capacities. According to SPS media's webpage which reflects its vision, "watershed development is not just about harvesting rainwater; it is also about sharing it equitably and managing it collectively and sustainably" (SPS, 2023). SPS has also educated farmers about water harvesting structures that have had a significant positive impact on farming, particularly in the context of drought-proofing crops. One notable outcome has been the increased yield of Kharif (rain-fed) crops by around 10-20%, and a substantial rise of 60-70% in the yield of Rabi (irrigated) crops. This has led to a doubled value of production for Kharif and Rabi crops combined. Additionally, the implementation of watershed projects has resulted in an 80% reduction in distress migration during the relevant years, with expanded irrigated areas and improved crop productivity, the agricultural sector has experienced increased employment opportunities (SPS, 2023).

3. Conclusion

Documentary films produced by SPS indicates of films made 'for or by' the community as suggested by the researchers. The films focus on farmer benefits and educate them about many additional agricultural issues relating to weed composite, germination, pheromone traps in pest management of crops, seed treatments, plantations, soil fertility and etc. These documentaries are typically exhibited for public viewing in the areas where they are filmed. They are screened outdoors in open fields as shown in the picture above and also in intimate group settings, allowing for closer one-to-one interactive sessions. Approximately 150 media showcases are conducted each month across various locations. This open-air cinema experience fosters connections among individuals, facilitating the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and ideas. During the dry season, once the monsoon subsides and the grounds become suitable for seating, the People's Mobile Cinema (as shown in image 1), A specially converted van serves as a cinema, equipped with a rechargeable power supply, an LCD projector, a portable screen measuring 10ft by 9ft, and 200-watt speakers with amplifiers, travels from village to village, visiting about 30

to 40 venues each season. For digital viewers, these documentaries are distributed through free video sharing websites like YouTube, making the films easier to access for all the netizens.



Image2: Filmmaker with the local community members (Credit: Pinki Brahma Choudhury, Director, SPS Media)

SPS community media's films are an extension of their work. They operate by interviewing people to expose issues from a local perspective to a larger audience in an effort to reach both policymakers and the urban populace by allowing the local community to tell their own story. The interviews are conducted in the regional languages of Bagheli and Awadhi, with Hindi serving as the dominant language. The absence of subtitles of few of the other documentaries produced by SPS for the internet portal available for public view indicates a gap in the post production process. Traditional or folk music made with regional instruments serves as the background music for the majority of the movie.

The fundamental basis of all SPS activities is the women's Self-Help Group (SHG) curriculum. As of the end of 2018, the organisation have established 2,773 women's SHGs in 533 villages and 15 towns, totalling 41,332 members. The majority of the members of these SHGs are members of the underprivileged, adivasi (scheduled tribes), dalit (scheduled caste), landless, and displaced groups of society. With 119 villages and 160,765 acres taken up for the direct implementation of watershed activities, SPS has effectively spent 35.94 crores and created roughly 11.75 lakh worth of employment. The SPS built water harvesting structures have a combined storage capacity of around 29.42 million cubic meters. The main outcome of this has been the security of drinking water for every household in these areas.

SPS is constantly working towards depicting an idea of a community's reality to the outside world in a documentary format. Community generated content comprises of oral histories, personal observations, archived stories and personal experiences (Friend & Caruthers, 2016) Underneath all these stories is the paradigm of the personal for understanding the perspective of voice which can be used to liberate one-self.

The collaborative methods also allow filmmakers to interact with the community to create more non-profit material and work together by helping with each other. Films made under the collaboration of filmmaker and the community, have potential to create a more democratic production environment. The relationship which establishes in between the filmmaker and community foster the ways in which using indigenous actors adds validity to themes related to their culture enabling cross-generational storytelling for larger audiences, thus educating people from different backgrounds on cultural understanding while providing employment opportunities for locals at the same time. The collaborative production environment involving a community in film-making promotes positive relationships where they develop deeper understandings about each other's cultures and knowledge systems. These types of documentary films help promote cultural understanding by breaking down stereotypes through positive representations onscreen which is something especially valuable amongst marginalised groups.

The short documentary format allows the theme of the film to be the centre of attention for spectators. The low production cost and scale of the film allows a certain immediacy. Both Battaglia (2015) and Coffman (2009) views "participation" and "collaboration" as an ever-evolving aspect of filmmaking, constantly changing and adapting throughout the process of representation and agrees that the relationship of community and filmmakers have been evolving, and maintaining the objectivity has been a challenge for decades. By actively embracing the community's perspective, such filmmaking production techniques justify Battaglia (2015) and Coffman's (2009) argument regarding the interaction between subjects and maker. The short films examined for this paper have unequivocally demonstrated the necessity of additional ethnographic encounters. There is potential to conduct more research on this type of engagement where members of the community work with a skilled filmmaker. Analysing films from various such case studies will help in developing a detailed understanding of the production ideology at a microscopic level.

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