

**The Documentary as a Tool of Protest: Studying the
Documentary *Jahan Chinti Ladi Hathi Se* (1998)
as a Case of Protest against Bauxite Mining in
Mahuadand, Jharkhand**

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How something gets said matters as much as what gets said (Nichols). Documentary is one such form, which, apart from being a mere art-form is also seen as a form of protest or a tool to bring in to the forefront, the question of social justice. This is what this paper unfolds, and shows how it worked in the cause of the people of Jharkhand, and hence the Jharkhand movement.

To talk of Jharkhand, in the late twentieth century, the demand for autonomy of the state moved from the hands of the people and went into the hands of the various national/ regional/ old and newly formed political parties. The movement was partly a success and partly a failure, it still continued, sometimes subtle and sometimes in stronger forms. Amid all this hullabaloo of the left, right and centre; and the good, bad and ugly, which is an obvious outcome of any political turmoil, specially of the conflict areas of South Asia. Two documentary filmmakers in the region – Meghnath and Biju Toppo, took upon themselves to do “...Something for the people of their region.” As Meghnath puts it, “the people who were always a part of them, who suffered without faults, and who kept on struggling for their rights, at least to be alive”.¹ In the 90s it was, that, while contemplating on the issues of development of the region, especially the Adivasi belt, some youth of this region decided to do something for the people; this was a revolution, certainly, but on the intellectual front- in the form of non-violence. And, thus they began with a group named *Akhra*². This body with a group of committed people, most of them locals, exists; working not only in the field of culture and communication but also for the issues of human rights, especially of the indigenous people of Jharkhand, in particular, as well as that of other parts of India. Biju Toppo, one of the first few filmmakers from the tribal community to make films on his people to “...Counter the misrepresentation of his people in the mainstream

media”, as their pamphlet declares; apart from being involved in film-making, teaches in the Department of Mass Communication of St. Xavier’s College, Ranchi. Meghnath, whose father was an industrialist in Mumbai, and who has spent a good number of days outside Jharkhand, in Calcutta as well as in Mumbai to study and to work, came to Jharkhand in 1981 because he was tired of what everyone else did, of the life he had been offered to so far. He wanted to do something for the region, for the suffering people whom he saw, and thus began his journey of activism, which he has been doing for the last thirty years in Jharkhand, for its people as well as for tribals all over India. He is with the people, against destructive development and voices the struggle of people who remain unheard. Apart from being an activist and a filmmaker, he too like Biju, taught in the Department of Mass Communication of St. Xavier’s College, Ranchi. To speak of activism is fine, to do it is good, but to do it for an actual cause is indeed remarkable. Jharkhand, which got carved out of Bihar in 2000, till then too was reported to be “...Plagued by adverse initial conditions- low average income, very high the incidence of poverty, and little social development...” (*Jharkhand 1*).

The 55th NSS (National Sample Survey) round in 1999-2000 also marked the region to be the lowest (49th) in all over India in terms of rural poverty. With regards to initial health and education indicators too, Jharkhand fared worse than the all-India average. And, even with the improvement in the rate of access to primary education as well as key health indicators in terms of child vaccination, till date it remains a state with the highest rate of poverty in India. The implementation of programs is reported to have increased after its separation from Bihar, but the region still faces difficulty with the growing weaknesses in the implementation capacity of policies (*Jharkhand 3*).

Meghnath and Toppo while working on the various facets of sufferings and exploitation as well as the various effects of destructive development on the regional people collaborated on a collection of documentaries, which apart from being their creative expressions are a tell-tale of the many horrific truths that humans do to humans, and a voicing of the most beautiful of truths, seldom shown or spoken.

They began their journeys of the hidden narratives with *Shaheed Jo Anjan Rahe* or *Unknown Martyrs* in 1996- a movie about the ‘brutal massacre of the indigenous people’ along with the murder of Fr. Anthony Murmu, an ex-parliamentarian and 13 others who were killed in Banjhi, Sahibganj district of Jharkhand. In 1997, they moved on to their next project called *Ek Hadsa Aur Bhi (Yet Another Accident)*, which focused on the destruction that development causes, as was the case in the dam-disaster in 1997 in Palamu district of Jharkhand, which cost 19 lives, apart from the destruction caused to the land and property. The duo went ahead in 1998 with *Jahan Chiti Ladi Hathi Se (Where Ants are Fighting Elephants)* – a story of the struggle of the people against bauxite mining. In 2000, they came up with *Hamare Gaon me Hamara Raj (Tribal Self Rule)*, which deals with the Gram Sabha Movement. Next came, *Vikas Bندوق ki Naal se (Development flows from the Barrel of the Gun)* in 2003, which again talks of how development like a sweet poison loves to play with the violation of human rights. In 2004, they brought forth *From Kalinga to Kashipur* – about people’s struggle against an aluminum factory in Kashipur (Koraput), Odisha. Later in 2005 came *Kora Rajee (The Land of the Diggers)* – this was the first film to be made in a tribal language called Kurukh, which talks of the toil, till and torture of the Adivasi labourers in the tea gardens of Assam and Bengal.

In May 2007, they came up with *Khorar Desher Joler Kotha (Story of Water from the Land of Drought)*, which highlights water preservation in Purulia district of West Bengal, which is a drought-prone area. In May 2007 came *Power for Change*, which talks of alternative development model in rural Orissa especially the use of Micro-hydel power- a project packed with positive, constructive and sustainable development. In 2009, they conceived yet another social concern based documentary titled *100 Din Milega Kaam (100 Days of Work for You)* – which uncovers the ground reality of the works covered by the NREGA act in the villages. In the film *Loha Garam Hai (Iron is Hot)*, which released in 2010, foregrounds pollution caused by the sponge iron industry and how people coped with it. The documentary named *Gadi Lohardaga Mail*, produced in 2010, is the only film which is not a part of his issue-based documentaries but rather a nostalgic tell-tale of the local Lohardaga Mail. The film is interspersed with songs in the Nagpuri language. The

documentary *Ek Ropa Dhan (A Handful of Paddy)* (2010), talks of SRI methods of rice cultivation, which shows how rice cultivation can be improved by changing the method of cultivation. The filmmakers consider it to be a form of positive development. In *Mukta Gyan Kutir* (2010), the details study regarding alternative education for tribal girls who dropped out of regular schools, is presented. The 2011 documentary *Sona Gahi Pinjra (The Golden Cage)* paints the plight of people living away from home during festivals; it also talks about how mobile phones make it convenient for them to connect with people back home, and can be a sign of positive development for people. *Taking Side*, a documentary which came out in 2015, depicts the life of Sister Valsa John who was born in Kerala but worked for the Adivasis of Jharkhand. She stood against illegal and exploitative coal mining and even sacrificed her life for it.

The film *Jahan Chinti Ladi Hathi Se* is the focal point of study; it is dedicated to Junus Lakda. This film is based on bauxite mining that was done by the Birla Company in various parts of the state of Jharkhand, focusing especially in the areas of Lohardaga and Palamu, and also deals with minor shots of other affected areas of ‘development’, as the state calls. Any feature film apart from being a tool of cultural expression, also has the potential to be a tool of political expression (Gils, Shwaith 443). Documentary, as a form of art and culture already fits into the category of resistance; owing to its nature of being a realistic representation, or rather a realistic depiction of events, albeit a non-violent resistance. This ‘Intifada’ onscreen, however, on being performed as well as being recorded is an act of resistance as it does not only provide an insight into the people’s struggle and sufferings but also of that of the filmmakers, for later in a scene we see the police prohibiting the shoot. The filmmakers have to give in and stop, and some of them even get jailed. However, the villagers come in camaraderie; just like the filmmakers were in communion with them and the police have to give in. The filmmakers get released ultimately and the shooting starts.

This event was a verifiable act of resistance on the entire crew, against corporate as well as state suppression. The film has various scenes where the “state/corporate versus people” conversations are shot, which are anti to each other. Being a documentary all the actors are real-life people. The film captures some people out of which three were women, who complain of how they were getting deprived of their land. A data says almost sixty percent tribals and 30

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percent Dalits are the ones who had to give up their land for developmental plans, however, only 25 percent have been rehabilitated till now. Nobody knows what happened to the rest, perhaps migration or worst still displaced forever, without any permanent settlement of their own. Adivasis have depended on land since ever. From economy to culture, their livelihood, to their festivals like Sarna or Sarhul, are all land-based, which they consider to be a gift from their ancestors.

Still, the Adivasi continues to suffer while fighting for it. Apart from the omnipresent narrator, the movie is interspersed with real-life interviews of the villagers. There is a prominent part in the film where one of the villagers questions "... if development meant development of the state and the privileged population....and degradation of the Adivasis?!..." The documentary also employs dramatic irony, where once the state officials are questioned by the filmmakers about a certain issue, and immediately after, the villagers and the local population are questioned about the same topic showcasing contrary viewpoints. Effortlessly, the filmmakers present the perspective by juxtaposing the opinions of the public with the officials, without putting forth their subjective viewpoints, and thus are able to bring forth the reality as it exists. The villagers were able to put forth their viewpoints as per their experiences. Their words expressed the truth. The people while being interrogated, were more than open while speaking their heart out. A JCB machine marked L&T FOCALIN is shown to lift some earth without measurement like a machine would do; while the bauxite mining was in process. Some labourers (for this particular mine being shot in the film, it were 16 men) were shown working in the field. There were sound and sight of huge machines. Occasionally, shots of blasts were captured which broke open the soil and got blown far off. The shot shows the people who were working in these conditions as normalized as possible. After all it was a daily occurrence. And, no matter what, for the capitalists, should not the show just go on? The camera merges sound and voiceovers with scenes and landscapes getting dug or blown.

The visual irony comes into play yet again, without the cameraperson trying hard to put forth their viewpoint, but doing it solely with candid cinematography. A government official is shown who spoke of how if the bauxite mines were allowed to start up, it would have given employment

to the villagers, apart from various other facilities that the company had promised to grant the villagers with, such as schools, colleges and medical facilities. The immediate scene afterwards in the film was that of a social activist and a human rights worker who explained how the local people were untrained and uneducated to take up administrative or managerial posts. And, hence they never got it. And, since most of the work was handled by machinery, it was only the low, menial groundwork that was given to the locals. The works related to administrative and managerial positions were also given to the outsiders as is shown in the documentary too, on the pretext of better education and training than the insiders. Thus, the entire claim of employment to the locals was proved null.

The filmmakers went to the villagers next, composed of some men and women, whom they asked about the land being given to the company already and the amount they were reimbursed with in return of the land. The prices they quote were as low as Rs. 18,000 for 25 acres, which were much below the normal rates then. When asked as to why they agreed for the deal, they said, "... It was because of the promises that the company people made: of that of a hospital, medical facilities, colleges and jobs for their children, availability of proper drinking water etc...". On being asked if any of it was fulfilled yet, they only gave a look of despair. The answer was a subtle 'No'. The women were more than aggressive on seeing what they were subjected to, the enticements they were promised with and the lies that screened up post the land acquisition by the company. A human right worker and later a woman from the village is shown in the movie who spoke of how the land being given to the company people in return for the services promised was not acceptable to her, as the land they have was a school in itself, it was a blessing from the ancestors that they had got. They could till and sow and reap in the land, and thus could have eaten and carried on with their livelihood; the land was there to stay, but the money they would get would eventually be gone, moreover it was not even guaranteed that they would get the better jobs once the company came with its battalion.

A woman is shown to claim how she did not want anything from Tata and Birla, but only wanted to be with what her ancestors had given to them and their children, they just wanted to study in those schools and be happy with

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whatever jobs they would have got with that later. The camera was set on the landscape, yet again, with the people shown moving and staying happily in their land, while the narrative in the background was that of jobs that would have got created by the companies being set. The irony was yet again set well, the scene in the documentary is that of an old woman who is shown weaving a bamboo basket, who wore a beautiful bamboo earring, on which the camera zooms on, focusing on the local technological talent, implying also that a developmental project of a 'company' was not required to harness technology or teach technology in those areas. Some children were shown playing on a wooden see-saw, some villagers tilling and sowing the field. There were hens and chickens roaming around and grazing, kept by the villagers. Some are shown getting water from the nearby stream in earthen vessels. While it may appear to be romanticized; the depiction was realistic enough to not capture any sophistication; there was no luxury, but the needs are shown to be fulfilled enough for the villagers to live satisfied, without the help of any company by the corporates or the state. Without actually being vocal about it, the directors show what they feel and what the people want, through the cinematography: that they can have a happy, peaceful life if not bothered by the companies and without the company's facilities, if left on their own, with what nature had given to them: i.e., their *jal*, *jungle* and *zameen* (their river bodies/water, forests and land). Life was happy for all of them, unlike the cases with the company where only few of them would have got the jobs of labourers or otherwise, while most of the administrative jobs would have gone to the outsiders or to the machinery that the company official would have brought with them.

The film further, shows one of the officials giving his reasons of how resistance from the people was because of the missionaries, as they were "...the ones who did not want the poor to have any sort of growth and development, so that they can bank on their problems to advertise their religion..." The immediate scene is that of the villagers in a protest rally, the flag behind was Green in color, that was adopted by the local party JMM (Jharkhand Mukti Morcha); the initiator of whom was Shibu Soren, the famous leader from Jharkhand, who after having his father killed for speaking against the existing *Mahajani tradition*³ had started the *Dhan Katti Andolan*⁴ against the local elites, and took the form of a political party later, called the JMM (Jharkhand MuktiMorcha)

(Mallick, Munda, 100). The leader was shown to address a mass gathering, where he asked the mass "...Whether it was just the missionaries who suffered displacement, who had to give up on their land, or was it everyone who suffered in the hands of the state and the corporates...?". (The JMM after the initial few years had started including people from every section and community and not just the Adivasis). The speaker who was shown addressing the mass in the movie became secular after a point of time, while referring to the suffering of every community, irrespective of them being a Hindu or a Muslim. Thus making it clear, the message- that everybody should fight against the corporate and state atrocities. The people are shown to sing songs in groups about fighting against any form of oppression that should shall take them away from their land. The film further captures men drilling the mine space without masks or any other protection against the bauxite dust, the scene was accompanied by the voice-over of an interview with human right activists, who informed of how precautionary measures like masks were necessary for the workers so that they did not have respiratory diseases, quite contrary to the scene in the documentary; he further informed how the land should be sprinkled with some water after mining, so that the dust did not go to the nearby villages, affecting more people, which however was a practice seldom followed on any of the mining sites.

The film shows the interviews of several men who were caught, beaten up and jailed by the police for showing any kind of resistance. One of the men on being harrassed by the police said he would prefer to die than letting go of the land he got from his ancestor. The film further shows a clash between the villagers of Mahuadand, Palamu, with the administration in the form of police, who asked them to not to go on with the march, as it was a market day. The villagers are shown responding with a protest, although a peaceful one against the Birla Corporation. The turning point was the arrest of the entire camera team, who get jailed. The villagers stood up for them too, saying "...the camera people were their people and should be left..." the police eventually had to give up and leave the team. The entire episode of the filmmakers' arrest which stopped the shooting was presented in written text in the film, after which the recording resumed. The film shows another fight in Kukutpat where the villagers fought against the Hindalco company. It also showcases the forgery case that the

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village in Mahuadand was an acquaintance of, in which the company had made a petition with false signatures of people who were already dead, and had declared their land to have been handed over to them. The film ends with a huge rally of people consisting of men and women, digging the earth and shouting slogans of never leaving the '*jal, jungle, zameen*' (water, forest, land). An activist is shown who came and talked to the people about how if the land stayed, later on, their children could carry on with a happy and satisfied life there. The film ends with a huge green cover of field with mountains, and men and women cultivating/ sowing crops, the background sound was that of a happy folk song sung during cultivation.

All the films in the very act of filming the movements and the voices are an act of resistance. However, this particular film even had the entire film crew arrested, and yet the filming continued after the crew came out. Thus giving an extraordinary agency to the documentary form; which while capturing reality unlike feature films is not just a protest form in its own, but, while capturing the protest and the social issues and then presenting it to a wider audience, in order to bring about a social justice and change, is also an act of protest and resistance, albeit in a non-violent way through filming it. The camera becomes the tool to resist.

Endnotes

- 1 Based on an interview conducted by the researcher in July 2017
- 2 Originally given to traditional spaces in the village where the indigenous people gathered to have a cultural evening- where people performed folk/ local dance and songs, for entertainment as well as learning
- 3 The Mahajani tradition was that of landlordism, where the local elites or money lenders, most of whom happened to be upper castes and class; after giving money to the lower classes of the village, took more in return, which mostly comprised of land. This was a major way of exploiting the local poor and acquiring their land, most of whom were Adivasis and low-income group people. Shibu Soren, a local leader, after seeing his father getting killed for speaking up against the exploitation, took on a militant/ aggressive way to fight against this system. He along with some other followers had set out on a *DhanKattiAndolan* against the mahajans and the money lenders, which involved cutting down the crops from the fields of the money lenders, especially the ones that they had acquired from the local people.
- 4 Cutting paddy from the landlords' fields

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