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ENGAGED CIRCLE

IN THE DOC

Palit's dark, tender gaze is a rare treat

BY SURABHI SHARMA

IN THE DOC

A COLUMN ON DOCUMENTARIES

FILM: **IN CAMERA**
DIRECTOR: **RANJAN PALIT**



SURABHI SHARMA

A WORKER on a loom in Bhiwandi is filmed in available light. A sliver of light renders his form visible in the dark workshop. Lint floats around him, trapping shards of light. Elsewhere, Ranjan Palit's voice draws on screen, "My gaze... My dark... My colour..." *In Camera* is a rare film in Indian documentary. It is Palit's self-reflexive look at his work spanning 25 years. He reflects on his image-making, and his personal journey while he was a witness to seminal moments in contemporary history. Demolitions in Mumbai, protests at a coal mine and against a dam, Bhiwandi, Baliapal, performers, singers, actors — Palit's gaze travels over the images he has created.

"When are we a partisan observer, narrator or voyeur?" Palit asks, a question that remains unanswered. The image of the worker at the loom, however, is not burdened with the doubts he ponders over. It is an unambiguously compassionate image with political clarity. Here, available light is not an aesthetic texture, it is a searing tool. A deeply political stance marks the film's images. The camera moving over a body covered in soot; Kamlabai, the first woman actor in cinema, introducing herself; protesters standing at the edge of a dammed river; Kanai, the bard who sings at the funeral ghat; the snow-covered graves of those killed in police encounters in Kashmir.

Palit revisits sites he had filmed before. He goes back to the pavement dwellings in Anand Patwardhan's *Bombay, Our City*. A concrete flyover towers high, the pavements now clear of squatters. Implicit is the complete erasure of protest in this concrete, glass and chrome landscape. Visible is the passage of time marking a brutal move in the city's view of its poor. In other sequences, the passage of time is laden with trepidation. As a viewer, I am unprepared for the hesitation when he goes back to film a village in Bihar, or Kanai, the blind bard. The journey is sentimental at times, disconnected from the core that is central to Palit's work — to keep the camera rolling, without averting his gaze, unobtrusively.

Palit puts himself in the dock, but elides the debates that erupted while making films

Palit puts himself in the dock, rather than contemplate the many shifts in independent filmmaking in India, but elides the debates and polemics that would surely have erupted then.

Through a window pane, the camera records a violinist perform, the impurities in the glass layering the tender gaze of the filmmaker. Without doubt, Palit's 'gaze', his 'dark', his 'colour' has shaped many impulses in the indie documentary horizon.

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Mirror gaze Palit's work reflects the shifts in the independent filmmaking horizon in India

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