



ARTS ILLUSTRATED



Sculpture and text by Riyas Komu



The Importance of being Relevant

Over an email interview with documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan, we discover that the many nuances of conflict is relentless in its relevance and unforgettable in its visual resonance

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Relevance is such a tricky word that it often feels like an incorrigible jester in court. It takes the ludricosity of our times such as, Trump as President or demonitisation to end the plague of black money – and couches it into several pithy statements, one for everyone in the room, leaving you either frothing at the mouth with laughter or offence. It leaves you in a haze, this relevance; and you wonder if yesterday's stories are indeed tomorrow's history, or whether it is really the other way around.

Except, of course, when it finds itself in an Anand Patwardhan film. Because, then, relevance attains a foothold. It is asked to stand straight, feet firmly on the ground, back flat and hips out, and using the strength of its legs relevance is asked to lift the mirror of such a thing called humanity off the ground and place it in front our faces.

And you know this. You know this when Dalit activist, poet and singer, Vilas Ghogre sings, eyes

closed and throat open, at the beginning of Patwardhan's *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011), an old footage from Patwardhan's 1985 documentary on the city of Mumbai, and the next shot is a paper clipping announcing Ghogre's suicide in protest against the Ramabai killings in Mumbai. You know this when just before part one of *War and Peace* (2002) ends, after a mock debate on nuclear testing in a girl's school in Lahore, Pakistan, and in response to Patwardhan's gentle observation of how some of the reasons for the girls choosing to speak 'for' nuclear tests, even if they didn't agree with its philosophy, to 'win' isn't very dissimilar from politicians using the same tactic and one of the girls, in all earnestness says 'I seek forgiveness' and the class erupts in a laughter of solidarity. You know this when faceless voices in *Father, Son and Holy War* (1995) accept that they enjoyed the adrenalin rush of destruction, that it was just 'a few Muslim shops in the area,

not much', or when voices with angry faces in *Ram ke Naam* (1992) tell you Godse was right in killing Gandhi and that it is right to kill anyone who goes against the nation. You know this too, when in *War and Peace* Patwardhan's quiet voiceover against an old file of Gandhiji's funeral procession says that the fact that Godse and his supporters belonged to the same caste – Hinduism – as Patwardhan was enough to teach him forever that one's birth had nothing to do with one's actions.

And, for a brief moment in time, we truly appreciate the criss-crossing lines of this constantly weaving, always-in-motion reality around us, like someone just dragged us out from under water and allowed us to take a long breath, knowing full well that when we go back under water it is the memory of that lungful of air that will bring us back up again. Or, in the jester's language, perhaps it would be the memory of that last joke on relevance



Jai Bhim Comrade, 2011



Anand Patwardhan

Excerpts from the interview

We were in Sophas in 2002 when the Gujarat riots broke out. I am not sure of the timeline here – if we saw your films before or after this happened – but I remember feeling somehow deeply affected. We had, of course, heard about riots before, but something about this stood out. I don't remember if we asked you this in person or if we read about it later, but I only remember that you said you couldn't make a film about this because you felt hopeless. I may be using the wrong word here, but it was to the effect that you couldn't bring yourself to make a film on this. What is it about this nature of hopelessness – that sometimes it burns and sometimes it festers like embers – that you find hardest to understand?

The 2002 Gujarat riots were shocking and depressing. That in itself may not have benumbed me if I had been able to see some hope in the form of resistance to what was happening there. In 1984, after the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi, I had felt a similar sense of helplessness but eventually found a way to intervene. I followed a group of Sikh and Hindu communists who travelled through the villages of Punjab at the height of the Khalistan movement, spreading Shaheed Bhagat Singh's message of justice and communal harmony. In 1992, again, after the riots following the demolition of the Babri Mosque, I was able to film because I connected with people fighting for reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims. But in 2002, I did not come across any silver lining anywhere. Luckily, fellow filmmakers like Rakesh Sharma and later Shubhradeep Chakravarty, did not give in to the numbness and bravely documented the rising fascism of that period. Another factor was that in 2002 I had just completed *War and Peace* that had been four years in the making and I was doing what I always do after completing

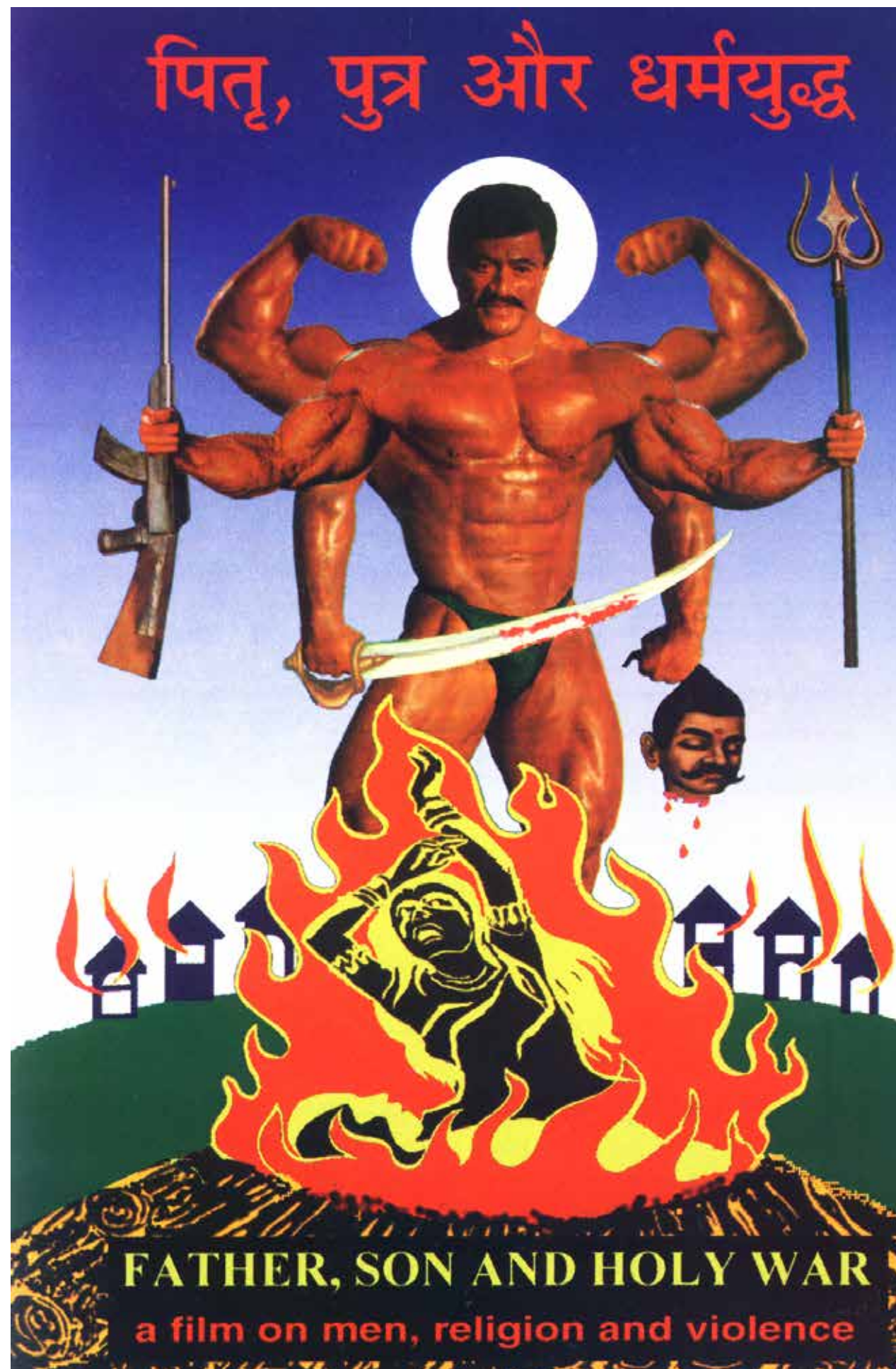
a film – screening it wherever I could, fighting the censors in court and ensuring that all the love's labour so many put in did not go down the drain

*Most of your films span many years in the making. I am curious to know when you know a particular film is done. I ask this for two reasons: One, you have often mentioned your film is made at the editing table. And, two, unlike in the case of *Jai Bhim Comrade* when you definitely knew you wanted to wait for the Ramabai court trial to finish, the other films essentially had timelines you created.*

Jai Bhim Comrade also did not stick to any timeline. You can imagine that no one in their right mind would choose to take 14 years over a single film. I was waiting for a court verdict in the Ramabai police firing case to get some closure. That verdict came in 2009 when the police officer who ordered the firing that claimed the lives of 11 Dalits was sentenced to life imprisonment. I would have ended my film there but Officer Manohar Kadam never went to jail. He was granted bail by a system that has almost never punished the police. If I had waited for the High Court to decide his appeal, the film would have remained incomplete till today. I finally ended the film in late 2011 when members of the Kabir Kala Manch (KKM), a Dalit cultural troupe I had filmed with, went into hiding after being accused of being Naxalites. It was important to finish and start screening the film right away so people could realise what exactly these young men and women were fighting for. Luckily, the film was well received and we formed a KKM Defence Committee. In 2013, the KKM came over-ground, did a Satyagraha by singing protest songs in front of the Legislative Assembly in the presence of eminent supporters and the



War and Peace, 2002



Father, Son, and Holy War, 1995

media, and were duly arrested. A few members got bail but shockingly, three of them are still in prison. After three-and-a-half years their trial shows no sign of effectively starting. Contrast this with the case of the police officer Manohar Kadam and you get a perfect lesson on the caste system of India. To get back to your question, no, I have no fixed timeline. That is also because none of my films are funded, so the only person breathing down my neck is myself.

You also have many years of battle with the censorship in India with most of your films, no matter which government is in power. When you spend so much time making a film and then spend years again fighting for its release without any cuts, do you find sometimes that you may be living with a film for much longer than you expected? And when working on simultaneous projects (for instance, you started filming Jai Bhim Comrade in 1997 and then shifted focus to War and Peace and came back to Jai Bhim), do you find that one film inadvertently becomes the reality for the next one, that it is never just 'one' film that you live with at any given time?

In a sense, everything I have done is one long film just divided into chapters. They are deeply interconnected, not just by the fact that I made them so they share the same sensibility, but because I never go out in search of a film to make. I'm content not to make any film at all and often many years pass after a film is made before I become conscious of having begun another. Let me explain. I have my own cameras and my own editing system so at any given moment I may film something even without knowing if this will ever end up as a finished film. In between making films I'm preoccupied with the fun of showing films and interacting with diverse audiences from slums to ivory towers and

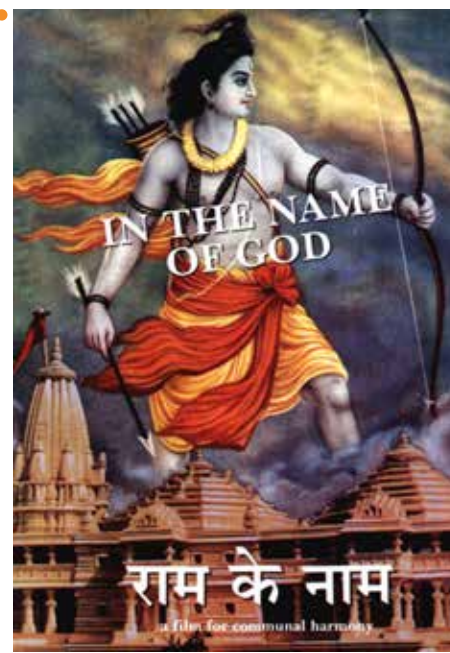
everything in between. It is the feedback from these screenings that sustains me and prevents me from feeling helpless.

Human rights issues in socio-political contexts often have layers and layers of subtext and can get overwhelming in the sheer reach it has in how thought processes are shaped. It's a long process, often taking years to mature. When you work in such a volatile environment that isn't overt as much as it is subtle, how do you keep the many layers alive? Do you have to be conscious of it at all times – cross-referencing, observing, analysing – or is it a natural product of how you approach filmmaking itself?

I think it's a natural process.

I have never been a theorist and never over-thought what I do. I think that has the potential of spoiling one's instincts. Of course, I'm gratified when someone deciphers the layers I very much intended to be visible and even more gratified when layers I had not consciously applied are pointed out to me. After all, we work with real human beings and not actors who are told what to do or say. So the room for serendipity is enormous. The trick then is to recognise when the moment arrives and be in the right place at the right time. Conversely, it is irritating when superficial viewers make the mistake of confusing clarity and focus with simplicity. In the documentary format, and perhaps the same is true for fiction, it is far easier to make a clever film than one that has integrity and conviction.

You also favour long, close shots, like a pause allowing us to exhale. And this, somehow, became a different kind of pause with Jai Bhim Comrade and the use of songs (with the motif of close shots that continues). These pauses, like full stops in a sentence, are they meant to be a pause for us – the viewer – or you, the maker? What I mean here is giving space and time within the narrative structure for some things to



● In the Name of God' (Ram ke Nam), 1992

● Jain Bhim Comrade, 2011

All images Courtesy of Anand Patwardhan

sink in better. And how then did the use of songs within the film change the way you envisioned these pauses, if at all you look at them as that.

My perennial problem is that I'm trying to say too many things at the same time. Also, my films are perhaps more aural than they are visual. I hate to lose out on nuances of what people are saying. I often wish I had a second camera-person who concentrated on the visual side of things. Recently, I have done a few two-camera shoots and the possibilities are enormous. As much of my filmmaking is done on the run, I'm jealous of camera people who really take the time to compose their shots. And yet, a film made up of perfect shots could lead its audience to wonder how the shot was composed rather than what the film is saying. Equally, a badly composed film is distracting. Ideally, one needs a healthy marriage of both. This is a long drawn out explanation for what you notice as my emphasis on the "pause". It is my tiny bit of breathing space where nothing is said but the camera lingers. Frankly, I never get enough of these moments and the films breathlessly jump from thought to thought. As for songs, you have obviously noticed that I never use background scores to enhance the mood. The songs are part of the expression of the people I film and not something extraneous that is imposed by me.

When you are constantly filming stories of devastation and the corruption of lies, what bears on your mind more – the responsibility you have towards the story that needs to be told, or the responsibility towards your own inner angst that desires change?

I would never consciously tell a lie or distort what I see. But, yes, I do want my films to make a

positive intervention and not remain an anthropological or voyeuristic exercise in documenting reality for the consumption of the well-to-do.

Cinema is the most effective language that reaches the masses and your fight to have your films screened on DD is therefore significant. Do you think that the urban populace with the exposure and education at its disposal is somehow at a disadvantage while watching your films, as against people living in disadvantaged conditions (city or rural) because these are the stories they live with, while the city-goer, already inundated with a slew of videos/visuals, might somehow be inured to it? Do you think that the impact is lesser in this social media generation, even though the reach is better?

Actually, every screening presents its own challenge. Working class screenings in the open air are specially challenging and exciting because they are not common. You have to do virtually everything from organising the big screen, ensuring that the electricity supply does not fluctuate, setting up the projector (sound systems people are generally used to managing as public meetings are common enough), and so on. The rewards are equally great precisely because the audience is not used to seeing this particular kind of cinema. This is clearly not Bollywood and once this fact sinks in, the excitement and interest is palpable. No one walks out and people keep trickling in as the sound track wafts through the colony. I don't write off the value of screening for middle class and elite audiences, either. In many ways they are the willing targets of right wing, communal and corporate propaganda. My films are surely a rare but much-needed antidote these days. When the discussion that follows such a screening is frank,

even when there is disagreement, it is productive. In this time of fraudulent nationalism, just presenting irrefutable historical facts can do powerful good. I'm aware that even this interview will be carried in a coffee table magazine for the well-heeled. I welcome this just as much as if it were carried in an activist magazine.

War photographer Don McCullin in one of his interviews once said that he finds it difficult to live in peace after all that he has seen... Do you find it difficult to live in the day-to-day world that is different from what you film, even though everything is constantly bleeding into the other, even if we aren't aware of it?

I think we live in a time when the real danger is that we are becoming immune to the man-made disasters of the world. Take the growing war-loving fascism in this country. We pretend it is not happening or that it has nothing to do with us. For myself, to be able to sleep well at night, I need to convince myself that I'm a part of the solution and not a part of the problem. That isn't always easy to do, so, sometimes I don't sleep well.

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Who is inside
Who is outside
Await the pillarstop
of repentance
