



# Documentary as an effective tool in creating socio-cultural awareness among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh: A study

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## Abstract

Documentary films constitute a broad category of non-fictional motion pictures intended to document some aspect of reality, primarily for the purpose of instruction or maintaining a historical record. The social impact that it steers by investing time and resources aims to effectively reach the target audience and hence measure the film's influence. The word documentary was coined by Scottish documentarian John Grierson in his review of Robert Flaherty's film *Moana* (1926) and since then Grierson's definition of documentary as "creative treatment of actuality" has gained some acceptance.

The initiative of documentary film making in Arunachal Pradesh was taken up by the Department of Information and Public Relation in the 1970s while it was administered as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). The state started its own documentary filmmaking only in the 1980s until then people were not aware of what documentary film was all about. Renowned documentary filmmakers like Moji Riba, Bindiya Ete Nalo, Apak Gadi, Dr. Kombong Darang, Tanom Jerang, Karry Padu and many others are now there in the state who have put their efforts in making documentaries about various social issues to inform, educate and to create awareness amongst the people. Their documentary films has been able to reach out to niche as well as marginalized audience. Filmmaker Patricia Gooseman observed that "A country without a documentary is a family without a photo album."

The focus of this study is to identify the potential of documentary films as a tool in creating socio-cultural awareness among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and the issues affecting their everyday life. Documentaries are a powerful medium for the generation of localized content, specific to the needs, values and lifestyles of the community as few filmmakers of the state have been able to make a remarkable impact on the audience through

their documentaries. Further, the study also attempts to gain insight of the various reasons that motivates the documentary filmmakers to showcase the reality of life.

Keywords: Documentary, Socio-Cultural Change, Tribal Society, Arunachal Pradesh.

## Introduction

Socio-cultural aspects of a society are in a constant state of change which may be in the form of observable differences over time in social organizations, in thought and behavioral patterns of the members or variations in their relationships. According to M. N. Khan (2011) the changing patterns of lifestyle and media consumption patterns mark the process of socio-cultural change in communities. Research findings have established the fact that mass media plays a key role in bringing out socio-cultural change in society. Analysing the processes of Sanskritization and Westernization systematically to understand religious, cultural, and social change, Srinivas (2017) observes that social change in modern India is vast and complex subject.

The socio-cultural change is taking place in every society including the tribal communities of northeast India. Arunachal Pradesh being one such state nurtures many major tribes witnessing the changes on a large scale. Technological development and modernization contributes largely to the changing societal and cultural approach of the tribal people inhabiting the place. Many tribes have been uplifted while few tribes and their cultures are at the verge of extinction.

Situated in the easternmost part of India, Arunachal Pradesh is the largest state in Northeast region in terms of its land and forest. It is a home to about 26 major tribes with many other sub-tribes ([www.arunachalipr.gov.in](http://www.arunachalipr.gov.in)). B. Pandey (1996) described Arunachal Pradesh as a prohibited formidable area initially but later became a developing state, which has witnessed changes in the social, cultural, economic, political and religious life of its people. While R. Koley (2017) observes that the need for change is accepted by the tribal people in such a manner that would not destroy the cultural integrity of the tribal society.

The media landscape of the state comprises of folk media, newspapers, radio, television and features films and documentary films besides digital media and blogs. All these medium of communication help in creating awareness on various societal issues of this tribal society in regards to information, education, women empowerment, hygiene and sanitation, child education, cultural preservation and others. Bindiya Ete Nalo, a female documentary filmmaker of the state says, she had been told by elders that the Directorate of Information and Public Relation (DIPR) vehicle (Zipsi) came to Hapoli to screen film. The people there used to call the vehicle 'Documentary' because it screened documentary film. Till then, people did not understand the concept of documentary film and they just enjoyed watching the film without any motive or understanding. Those days' people did not want to see feature film, as they found documentary more interesting.

There could have been many possible factors that influenced the socio-cultural change in the state and the most important factors are the contribution of mass media. This study focuses to identify the potential of

documentary filming as a tool in creating socio-cultural awareness among the tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh through distinctive presentations of issues and situations affecting their everyday life.

Documentary films constitute a broad category of nonfictional motion pictures intended to document some aspect of reality, primarily for the purpose of maintaining a historical record. A "documentary film" was originally shot on film stock, the only medium available, but now it includes video and digital productions that can be either direct-to-video, made as a television program or released for screening in cinemas. "Documentary" has been described as a "filmmaking practice, a cinematic tradition, and mode of audience reception" that is continually evolving. Scottish documentarian John Grierson's principles of documentary states that cinema's potential for observing life could be exploited in a new art form; that the "original" actor and "original" scene are better guides than their fiction counterparts to interpreting the modern world. In this regard, Grierson's definition of documentary as "creative treatment of actuality" has gained some acceptance, with this position at variance with Soviet film-maker Dziga Vertov's provocation to present "*life as it is*" (that is, life filmed surreptitiously) and "*life caught unawares*" (life provoked or surprised by the camera).

The initiative of documentary film making in Arunachal Pradesh was taken up by the Department of Information and Public Relation in the 1970s while it was administered as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) but the state started its own documentary filmmaking only by 1980s until then people were not aware about it. Presently, documentary films are rising and also trending in the state as many renowned filmmakers including Moji Riba, Bindiya Ete Nalo, Apak Gadi, Dr. Kombong Darang, Tanom Jerang, Karry Padu and others has put their efforts into making meaningful documentaries about various social issues which help to inform and educate the audience on the state's cultural preservation and to also create awareness amongst the people, thereby, able to reach out to niche as well as marginalized audience. These filmmakers have been making significant contributions by capturing the rich cultural heritage, diverse ethnic communities, and stunning landscapes of the region. Different tribes of the state have their own unique culture and tradition. The traditional attires of Nyishi, Adi, Galo, Apatani, Mishmi, Tagin, Monpas and others differentiate them from each other. These filmmakers often focus on topics like tribal traditions, environmental issues, and social changes. Meanwhile, with the development in all aspects, the culture and dialects and many other traditionally related things were in the verge of extinction from the society and in this crucial period of time, the documentation of various activities plays as a vital role in preserving them.

The renowned documentary filmmaker Moji Riba works on tribal cultures and traditional practices. He has made documentaries that explore the intricate lives of the indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh by focusing on various societal issues. Thus, the research titled "Documentary as an effective tool in creating socio-cultural awareness among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh: A Study" has been carried out to study the identification of immense potentiality of documentary films as a tool in creating socio-cultural awareness among the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh which is abundantly rich both culturally and traditionally.

## A brief history of documentary film

The history of documentary film is rich and varied, evolving significantly over the past century due to technological advancements, cultural shifts, and artistic innovations. The genre began almost simultaneously with the invention of motion pictures, with the Lumière brothers' "Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory" (1895) often considered one of the earliest examples (<https://www.docsonline.tv/history-of-documentary-film/>). The silent era of the 1920s saw notable contributions from filmmakers like Robert Flaherty, whose "Nanook of the North" (1922) is often regarded as the first feature-length documentary. The 1930s and 1940s brought the use of documentaries for social and political commentary, with filmmakers like John Grierson and Pare Lorentz addressing pressing social issues. However, this period also saw documentaries used for propaganda, exemplified by Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will" (1935) and Frank Capra's "Why We Fight" series during World War II.

Post-World War II, the documentary genre expanded with advancements in technology, such as lighter cameras and portable sound equipment, leading to the emergence of *cinéma vérité* and Direct Cinema in the 1960s. This era saw filmmakers like Albert and David Maysles, and D.A. Pennebaker adopting a more observational style. The rise of television in the 1950s and 1960s provided a new platform for documentaries, with series like the BBC's "Panorama" and CBS's "See It Now" reaching broader audiences. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a diversification in styles, with Werner Herzog and Errol Morris pushing boundaries. The digital age revolutionized documentary filmmaking, making production more affordable and accessible, resulting in impactful films like Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11" (2004) and Davis Guggenheim's "An Inconvenient Truth" (2006). In India, documentary filmmaking has its own unique trajectory, with post-independence contributions from the Films Division of India and notable filmmakers like Satyajit Ray and Shyam Benegal. Contemporary Indian documentarians like Anand Patwardhan and the duo Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh have garnered international acclaim, addressing critical social issues and reflecting the genre's dynamic nature (<https://www.docsonline.tv/history-of-documentary-film/>).

## Operational Definition

**Socio-cultural change:** In this study, socio-cultural change refers to change from traditional to modern settings of society in terms of rituals, customs, marriage, education, dress habits, media habits, health consciousness, education, women empowerment, hygiene and sanitation, child education and cultural preservation.

**Tribal society:** It refers to unique social dynamics and cultural practices. Tribal groups usually have a distinct culture, including language, customs, traditions, rituals, and beliefs, that sets them apart from other communities.

**Documentary films:** In this study, only those documentaries have been selected that present a specific perspective or point of view, and may include the filmmaker's interpretation or opinion on social and cultural matter.

## Objectives

- To study the immense potentiality of documentary film as a tool in creating socio-cultural awareness among the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh.
- To study the various reasons that motivates the documentary filmmakers to document the reality of life.

## Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, focusing on in-depth interviews with four documentary filmmakers from Arunachal Pradesh. The aim is to explore their experiences, motivations, challenges, and perspectives on documentary filmmaking. The study is descriptive and exploratory, seeking to provide a detailed understanding of the subject matter from the filmmaker's point of view.

Participants were selected from professional backgrounds who are documentary filmmakers and actively involved in documentary projects. An in-depth interview was conducted to collect the primary data for the study. A semi-structured questionnaire was used as a tool to collect data. The interviews were conducted over video calls, ensuring accessibility regardless of the participants' locations. The four filmmakers- Dr. Kombong Darang (Adi), Tanom Jerang (Adi), Apak Gadi (Galo) and Bindiya Ete Nalo (Nyishi), selected for this study are from various geographical and cultural backgrounds.

Seven documentary films of independent documentary filmmakers- *Between God and Me and Prayers for New Gods* (2001) directed by Moji Riba, *'Blowin' in the wind'* (2021) directed by Tanom Jerang, *Those Songs and Lullabies I Used to Sing* (2018) and *'The Song We Sing, The Drum We Beat'* (2021) directed by Dr. Kombong Darang, *'The Galos'* directed by Apak Gadi and *'I am property'* directed by Karry Padu have been explored for the study. These documentary film directors represent both traditional and contemporary filmmakers from the state.

This qualitative study aims to provide deep insights into the world of documentary filmmaking through the voices of four filmmakers, representing both traditional and contemporary era. The semi-structured interview approach and analysis uncovered nuanced understandings of their journeys, challenges, and the evolving landscape of documentary film. While for secondary data collection, different books, internets, journals have been referred.

## Limitations

While this methodology ensures a rich and detailed exploration of documentary filmmakers' experiences, it also has some limitations. The findings are based on the subjective experiences of the four filmmakers and may not be

common for the entire documentary filmmaking community. The small sample size limits the breadth of perspectives and the ability to draw broad conclusions.

## Findings and discussions

The Directorate of Information and Public Relation (IPR) initiated the making of documentary films in Arunachal Pradesh during the 1970s under the administration of NEFA. By 1980s the state started to make its own documentary films with Moji Riba being the pioneer documentary filmmaker of the state. He mainly focuses on the audio-visual documentations of the folklore, ritual practices, and the oral histories of the diverse tribes inhabiting the north-eastern states of India, and how indigenous people are adapting to rapid changes. He also leads the Centre for Cultural Research and Documentation (CCRD), a non-profit centre in Naharlagun, Arunachal Pradesh established in 1997. His documentary film *Between God and Me* explores the cultural and spiritual practices of the Idu Mishmi tribe, one of the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh. The documentary provides an in-depth look at the Idu Mishmi tribe's unique traditions, rituals, and belief systems. It also highlights the tribe's close connection with nature and their spiritual practices with a special focus on the tribe's priesthood and the pivotal role of Shamans in their society. It explores the spiritual dialogues and rituals performed by the Shamans, serving as intermediaries between the human and spiritual worlds. *Between God and Me* emphasizes the importance of preserving the Idu Mishmi's cultural heritage in the face of modernization and external influences. His film *Between God and Me* was screened at MIFF and the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival.

Another documentary of Mr. Riba, *Prayers for New Gods* (2001) explores the impact of modernization and development on the indigenous communities and their traditional beliefs in Arunachal Pradesh. It explores how these changes influence their cultural practices, spirituality, and way of life. The film shows the community's struggle to preserve their identity and heritage in the face of rapid socio-cultural and economic changes. The film explores the impact of external religious and cultural influences, such as Christianity and Hinduism, which have been spreading rapidly in the region and the challenges and conflicts that arise when these new beliefs come into contact with indigenous traditions.

However, Tanom Jerang, an emerging filmmaker from Arunachal Pradesh stated that presently, there are many documentary filmmakers in the state who put their efforts in making documentaries to inform, educate and to create awareness about various socio-cultural, political and economic issues. While appreciating the Centre for Cultural Research and Documentation, he is of the view that documentary film plays an important role in preserving the Arunachalee cultures in the form of documentation. Besides all the efforts, the documentary film is yet to get its due recognition while its real status is yet to be realized by the people in Arunachal. In one of interviews, he expressed how documentaries are losing ground as an engaging or effective tool because of the popular prevalence of Vlogs and with the new trend of media consumption among the audience. An intensive and extensive research, quality execution and adequate funding can assist the filmmakers to take up the initiative in

this field. In his view, the films with more entertainment attract the audience more as compared to documentary films.

His documentary film '*Blowin' in the wind*' (2021) focuses on the socio-cultural and environmental issues faced by the indigenous communities in the region. It has been praised for its cinematography and the director's ability to bring out the voices of the often-overlooked communities. Through a combination of personal narratives, scenic visuals, and traditional music, Jerang captures the essence of life in Arunachal Pradesh and the challenges posed by modernisation and climate change. The documentary delves into the impact of deforestation, the struggle to preserve cultural heritage and the ways in which the local communities are adapting to these with changing times. The film not only raises awareness about critical issues but also celebrates the resilience and spirit of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. He also asserts that documentaries have immense potential to offer distinctive presentations of issues and situations affecting everyday life.

Emerging filmmaker Dr. Kombong Darang feels that not all people understand the subject in documentary films nor do they understand its impact for the cause of the society. Social issues like child marriage, inter-culture/inter-caste marriage, impact of modernization, importance of culture and language have been stressed and highlighted in the documentary, which brings forward the localized content, specific to the needs, values and lifestyles of the community.

The documentary '*Those Songs and Lullabies I Used to Sing*' (2018) directed by him explores the rich cultural heritage and oral traditions of the indigenous tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The documentary delves into the traditional songs and lullabies that have been passed on from generations, highlighting their significance in preserving the community's history, identity, and values. It emphasizes the importance of preserving traditional songs and lullabies as a means of maintaining cultural identity and also showcases how these songs are integral to the community's daily life and rituals. His documentary film highlights the role of elders in transmitting these songs to the younger generation. It also portrays the challenges faced in this transmission due to modern influences and changing lifestyles. The film also showcases efforts by community members and cultural activists to revive and sustain these traditional practices. It presents initiatives aimed at documenting and promoting traditional songs and lullabies to ensure their survival for future generations. Hence, the documentary aims to raise awareness about the cultural richness of Arunachal Pradesh and the need to preserve its intangible heritage. By focusing on the songs and lullabies of Arunachal Pradesh, Darang's documentary not only celebrates the region's cultural heritage but also calls for collective action to safeguard these invaluable traditions for future generations.

Another documentary film directed by Kombong Darang '*The Song We Sing, The Drum We Beat*' (2021) explores the significance of music and dance in indigenous communities (Nocte tribe, Kassik Community). Emphasizing how songs and drum beats are integral to their cultural identity, rituals, and social life, the film highlights the importance of preserving traditional music and dance forms, which are at risk of fading away due to modernization and changing lifestyles. It also showcases efforts by the community to keep these traditions alive. It provides an in-depth look at various rituals and ceremonies where music and dance play a crucial role. This

includes festivals, weddings, and other community gatherings where these art forms are performed. '*The Song We Sing, The Drum We Beat*' basically aims to create awareness about the cultural richness of Arunachal Pradesh and the need for its preservation.

Arunachal Pradesh has many issues which could be chosen to make a good documentary film says Apak Gadi, a popular documentary film maker. In an interview, he said documentary could be a perfect tool for bringing change in society. With the emergence of new media technology, internet and OTT platforms, the youngsters now are moving towards all kinds of genres with films and series having more viewership than documentaries. Though documentary films might be less entertaining but it is full of facts and reality of our society and cultures, real people talking about real life in real life settings. 'I was inspired to become a documentary filmmaker to preserve these narratives and educate others about our unique heritage and social issues,' he said. While observing changes in society, he said 'over the years, I've witnessed significant changes. On the positive side, there has been a growing awareness and pride in indigenous culture. However, I have also seen the erosion of traditional practices due to modernization and external influences, which poses a threat to our cultural identity.'

According to him, technological development has been a double-edged sword. On one hand, it has provided new opportunities for education and economic development. On the other hand, it has contributed to the loss of traditional knowledge and practices, as younger generations become more disconnected from their heritage.

Apak Gadi's documentary film '*The Galos*' explores the culture, traditions, and lifestyle of the Galo tribe, an indigenous community in Arunachal Pradesh. The film delves into various aspects of the Galo people's lives, capturing their unique practices, rituals, and the strong bond they share with nature. The documentary highlights the rich cultural heritage of the Galo tribe, showcasing traditional music, dance, and festivals. It emphasizes the importance of preserving these cultural practices in the face of modernization. It provides an in-depth look at the tribe's traditional practices, including their agricultural methods, hunting techniques, and the unique craftsmanship of their hand woven textiles and bamboo artifacts. The documentary also addresses the challenges faced by the Galo community in the contemporary world. It discusses issues such as the impact of modernization, loss of traditional knowledge, and the efforts being made to adapt while preserving their cultural identity, therefore, aiming to create awareness about the importance of preserving indigenous cultures and traditions. Two documentary films from Arunachal Pradesh, '*The Galos*' and '*The Songs We Sing; The Drums We Beat*' were screened in the 17th Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF) on May 2022. While speaking about his film, Gadi said his film could be an eye-opener for the rest of the world to understand and acknowledge Arunachal and Galo community's potential to cure through its traditional knowledge connected to ancient medicine and food habits.

One of his another notable film, "40 Years Through the Lenses," focuses on the evolution of filmmaking in Arunachal Pradesh, capturing the region's cinematic journey over four decades. This documentary offers a unique perspective on how the art form has grown and evolved within the state.

The state is a hub for documentary filmmakers to put up issues, ranging from its unique cultures to modern lifestyles. The non-fiction film deals with the reality not fiction. One more documentary film '*I am property*' recently directed by the young filmmaker Karry Padu sheds light on the different communities of Arunachal in which the practice of polygamy is dominantly prevalent. It also explores the experiences of both men and women who exist and participate in the common practice of polygamy by making a statement that although a woman is the breadwinner and nurturer of the land, she does not have any rights to own land. The film explores polygamy and impunity in the context of customary laws in the State of Arunachal Pradesh. It has won the 'Best Short Documentary Film' in Northeast International Documentary and Film Fest. A large part of Karry's creative work focuses on issues revolving around the tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh.

Documentary unearths the truth about issues at hand in an in-depth manner. Common people hardly know about the significance of documentary films while few sections of the society hardly get the opportunity to watch documentary. Documentary can be a best medium to teach in class, for example if we are teaching about sanitation then showing a short documentary in the class room, the students will easily understand the concept through audio-visual medium. Documentary will inform us about our own culture. It could be utilized for creating awareness and also to educate people on agriculture, horticulture, health and many more concerning issues.

## Conclusion

The documentary films, by and large is still made today to inform, educate and to create awareness on various societal issues and for the preservation of one's own culture and tradition. With the advent of new media technologies, internet and OTT platforms, the youngsters prefer other diversified viewing options of web series and commercial films to documentaries. People who like watching documentary films do not expect to see entertainment but they look forward to know the real happening that the real people are facing.

This genre today represents a more considered and in-depth expression in the hands of the independent filmmakers of the state. The filmmaker is continuously making choices that articulate the points of view they wish to urge onto their audience. Documentaries have immense potential to offer distinctive presentations of issues and situations of the tribal people affecting everyday life. They are a powerful medium for creating awareness which can thereby create consciousness among the young tribes of the state in understanding the importance of preserving their cultures and traditions in a fast paced modern world.

As Patricia Gooseman once very aptly said, 'A Country without a documentary is a family without a photo album'. Hence, the state of Arunachal Pradesh is a hub for documentary filmmakers to portray and project their concerns and issues, ranging from its unique cultures to modern lifestyle of the tribal community. The non-fiction film will provide the much needed impetus to the process of liberating the genre to its real and full potential in the public sphere.

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