

**International Conference – 2025: Developed India @ 2047****Charting Multidisciplinary and Multi-Institutional Pathways for Inclusive Growth and Global Leadership held on 4th & 5th April, 2025****Organised by: IQAC - Gossner College, Ranchi****Documentary Filmmaking as Activism: A Study of Meghnath and Bijju Toppo's Role in Tribal Rights Advocacy****Anuj Kumar**

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**Abstract**

Jharkhand, a state affluent in minerals, is home to a significant Adivasi population whose rights and quest for justice are often overlooked. The documentaries by filmmakers Meghnath and Bijju Toppo sheds light on the struggles faced by the local communities as they navigate the complexities of exploitation and dislocation stemming from mining activities. Through poignant storytelling and vivid imagery, the film captures the resilience of the Adivasi people, their fight for land rights, and the broader implications of environmental justice. The documentary "Iron Is Hot" by filmmakers Meghnath and Bijju Toppo explores the profound environmental and social repercussions of the sponge iron industry on local communities. By featuring personal narratives from those directly affected, the documentary sheds light on the struggle for justice and raises critical awareness about the need for sustainable practices in local industries. While another documentary film "Development Flows from the Barrel of a Gun" is an award-winning documentary directed and produced by Bijju Toppo and Meghnath. The film underscores the grievous effects of pollution, revealing how industrial practices compromise air quality and threaten the health of residents. The film powerfully exposes the systemic illegal displacement of entire villages orchestrated by the Indian state under the guise of development. This research will conduct a content analysis of these documentary films. It will study what message is being conveyed to society through these films and highlight the situation of the people of Jharkhand, their rights, and the need for justice. This study will also attempt to understand how documentary filmmaking through activism gives a voice to marginalized people.

**Keywords:** - *Jharkhand, Documentary, Filmmaking, Social Activism, Social Change, Marginalized People.*

Documentary films are non-fictional cinematic that authentically depicts real events, individuals, or societal issues. It focuses on the portrayal of reality by capturing life's unfiltered, spontaneous and unscripted moments and transforming them into a narrative that informs, motivates and sometimes even challenges our preconceived notions. The American author and media analyst Bill Nichols has defined the documentary as "a filmmaking practice, a cinematic tradition, and a mode of audience reception, a practice without clear boundaries. Documentary films are non-fiction cinematic works that provide an authentic representation of real events, people, or issues (Nichols, 2001).

Documentary filmmaking is becoming the voice of the marginalized in the context of Jharkhand, using films as a medium for social activism on behalf of marginalized indigenous communities. Unlike fictional movies, which are born from the creative minds of writers and directors,



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documentary films stem from the world around us. Documentary films have a key role to play in how we see the world, educate ourselves, and develop empathy with the lived experiences of others (Marfo, 2007).

Meghnath and Biju Toppo are two filmmakers from Jharkhand who have delivered a strong message of justice and rights for marginalized people through their documentaries. Meghnath and Biju Toppo, the Co-Founder of Akhra, are a filmmaking partnership dedicated to amplifying the voices of underrepresented communities in Jharkhand, India.

As it is said that documentary films showcase the power of truth in storytelling, from heartwarming tales of triumph over the odds to insightful cultural explorations, in the same way, both filmmakers from Jharkhand have conveyed a message by making their films named “Iron Is Hot” (Loha Garam Hai) and “Development Flows from the barrel of a gun.” These films possess the ability to elevate the voices of underrepresented communities, illuminating their challenges and experiences. Impactful films go beyond merely raising awareness and nurturing empathy, they can also inspire action. They motivate audiences to participate, volunteer, contribute to cause, or even engage in protests. This capacity to empower and engage is the strength of cinema and documentary.

Both of these film was co-directed by Meghnath and Biju Toppo, who are among the founders of ‘Akhra’. ‘Akhra’, a film production house working in the field of culture and communication in Jharkhand. The filmmakers, meghnath and Biju Toppo, had formed their organization, ‘Akhra’ and made 22 documentary films, mostly jointly, since 1996. They also bagged three national awards for filmmaking – two in 2010 and another in 2017. (The Telegraph, 2025). ‘Akhra has produced multiple documentary films that focus on the challenges faced by the tribal community, including topics such as water, forest, land, language, culture, displacement, and migration.

Akhra has made several movies on tribal movements- their undocumented deaths, unlawful incarcerations, forest, land, language, culture, migration and, most importantly, displacement issues being faced by them. In a period of 30 years, through nearly 60 documentary films, they made the people aware of the hardships faced by the tribal population, both nationally, and internationally. In a career spanning 30 years, Akhra has received about two dozen national and international awards, including three National Film Awards. (Outlook, 2023).

#### **‘Iron is Hot’, A Documentary on The Human Cost of India’s Development**

“Iron is Hot” explores the challenges faced by individuals in relation to India’s highly polluting sponge iron industry. It’s a Documentary film by Biju Toppo and Meghnath, bagged national award in 2010. The film highlights the issue of pollution caused by sponge iron manufacturing industry. This 43-minute documentary illustrates an industry that has expanded without restraint, often aided by administrative complicity and a lack of regulatory enforcement. Iron Is Hot is a story of how people survive with India’s Fastest polluting industry that is Sponge Iron. This industry is relatively new, starting with three plants in 1985. These industries are mostly in Orissa, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand and West Bengal and in small



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numbers in Goa, Maharashtra and Karnataka. In India sponge iron is mainly produced by coal-based plants, which is responsible for air and water pollution and so it adversely affecting the health of human being and cattle. Even within the 5 km radius of a plant is seriously affected and drastically reduces agricultural yield. The film documents the people's effort to save their land and livelihood through graphics, title cards, data and interview with a diverse range of individuals – including local residents and activist leaders from areas such as Sundargarh, Rajgangpur, Siltara, etc. the film delivers a powerful critique of the imbalanced notion of industrialization that prioritizes economic growth at the cost of human health and lives, environmental integrity, agriculture, and livestock welfare. This film stresses the need to learn from trial use of natural resources as compared to capital system. 'Iron is Hot' is one of those films for which this duo of filmmakers has already received a national award.

The film opens with live footage of a protest against a sponge iron plant, a local woman is seen raising her voice. Slogans like "we will fight. We will win" "we want food, not iron", "close down the Siddhi Vinayak Company," fill the air. From these protests, the film moves back to trace the history and data on the industry's growth in India. The voice-overs begin with a male voice, alternating with a woman's as the film progresses. Among the protestors too, one finds women are aware, vocal and angry. (India together, 2009). In 2010, the film 'Loha Garam Hai' was awarded the Best Environmental Film.

#### **Award:**

Navatarangam award karimnagar

Best Environment film, IDPA, 2009

National Award, Best Environmental film, 2009

#### **Development Flows from The Barrel of a Gun**

Development flows from the Barrel of the Gun, originally titled 'Vikas Bندوق ke Nal se', Directed by Biju Toppo and Meghnath released in 2003. The 55 mins duration film chronicles the unlawful relocation of entire communities by the government and underscores the injustices resulting from biased development policies in India that affect the Adivasi population. This film is written by Meghnath and cinematography done by Biju Toppo. It features cases from various region across the nation, including utkal Alumina in Kahsipur, Orissa, the koel karo dam in Jharkhand, a world Bank-Supported forestry initiative in Dewas, Madhya Pradesh, a steel plant in Nagarnar, Chhattisgarh, and a port in Umbergaon, Gujarat.

The documentary deals with the struggle of Adivasis, the indigenous people in preserving their land, on which the development projects in question have been sited. Ironically, all these disputed projects are located on lands that are in schedule areas with large tribal population. Such areas have special rights and the Governor of the respective states have powers to make regulations for better governance and for protecting the rights of the tribal community. (Indias Waterportal, 2011).



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This film examines state orchestrated violence against indigenous and local people whenever they protest against development projects on their lands. The filmmakers present examples from all over the country. In each case, the local police force has been deployed to brutalize and even kill protestors, often on trumped up charges of violence. This film serves as a documentary in the conventional manner, capturing events with the utmost objectivity. There is little need for editorial commentary, as the harsh realities are self-evident, and the evidence presented strongly implicates the government. The local officials who are come across as so unpersuasive that it is genuinely uncomfortable to watch.

#### Award:

Star Best Documentary

2. Travelling Film South Asia, 2004

#### Activism in Cinema

Cinema have the ability to reveal concealed truths, highlighting social injustices, environmental issues, and violations of human rights. Activist cinema refers to films created with the intention of promoting social change, raising awareness about social issues, and advocating for marginalized communities. By addressing these matters, a filmmaker encourages dialogue and instill a sense of urgency.

#### Conclusion

Research has shown that documentary films can serve as a means of resistance for marginalized communities, providing a platform for their voices to be heard. These two documentary films have played a crucial role in highlighting the struggles of Indigenous Communities, who have faced historical marginalization and displacement due to colonialism and development projects. These two filmmakers recognized the power of this form of filmmaking and created documentaries on real and burning issues. Through social activism, these two filmmakers delivered a strong message to the government and administration via the documentary, which was later known and heard by people around the world and also received recognition.

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