ISSN: 2456-9550
JMC
November 2019

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Volume 3, 2019

THE JMC REVIEW
An Interdisciplinary Social Science Journal of Criticism, Practice and Theory

JESUS AND MARY COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI
NEW DELHI-110021

SITES, SUBJECTS, AND PERMISSIONS: DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING IN INDIA

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a sociological analysis of permissions that are required by documentary filmmakers in order to access the locations and respondents that they desire to film. The process of seeking out and acquiring filmmaking permissions gets revealed primarily during 'film shoots' (as they are referred to in filmmaking parlance), which is the moment when the filmic image takes birth. Based on a study of film shoots, the present essay argues that, rather than being an expression of rapport between the filmmaker and the filmed, filmmaking permissions may be classified into different sociological types. This classification is derived from the relationship within which the filmmaker and the filmed are located and reflect the dominant values and formalities associated with the specific community and region where the film is being made. The essay thus presents four types of filmmaking permissions, each revealing the specific social relationship that materialises between the filmmaker and the filmed, and also between those who are to be filmed. The paper is based on fieldwork carried out in Delhi, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh in India.

Key words: documentary film, India, filmmaking permissions, film shoots

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I. Why Study Permissions?

This paper presents a sociological analysis of permissions routinely required by documentary filmmakers during the process of filmmaking. The attempt is to demystify some of the practices adopted in documentary filmmaking by observing filmmakers on the

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jobs, that is, on what are commonly known as 'film shoots'. In film production parlance, a film shoot indicates a process that brings together various filmmaking components (participants, location, story, equipment etc.) in a temporary moment of time to execute the process of filming. For present purposes, this moment constitutes what is understood as the 'field site'. Once the moment has passed and the shoot has concluded, the field site dissolves and will never be precisely replicated again. It is in this transitory process that the documentary film image takes birth. Furthermore, a documentary film shoot is that moment when the filmic image acquires for the first time a materiality, very different from how it was conceived in the mind of the director or the textual description of the writer. In the shoot, the image takes birth, only to be modified, accepted or rejected later. It is argued here that a documentary film shoot is that process which brings together:

> (i) Within a fixed/unfixed duration of time and budget (ii) a practitioner or a collaborative team of practitioners, who will be rendering their respective expertise in the making of images (both photographic and sound) (iii) guided by an idea or script (iv) with their equipment, either owned or hired (v) in a location which will provide or accommodate [a] general imagery, sound and ambiance [b] objects and [c] people; (vi) that are in some way linked to the story or research on the story under construction[i].

Fieldwork on film shoots reveals that the production culture of documentary films is heavily embedded not only in existing social relationships, but also those that are often developed during and for film production. There is something instrumental in these relations, such that social interactions are geared towards accessing certain goals and finishing certain predetermined tasks. To an extent, one finds a pattern within these interactions that they allow an opportunity to analyse sociological concepts such as those of hierarchy, exchange and reciprocity. These patterns become particularly discernible during the moments when filmmakers seek permissions from authorities, locals and informants for the making of their films. These permissions allow filmmakers access to the conversations, locations or work-related images of the respondents, along with their consent to reproduce these in whole or part in the form of a film. Gaining these permissions often requires negotiation skills or, as Wilson (2005) puts it, 'diplomacy' on part of the film crew. The

interest of this paper in filmmaking permissions stems from this aspect of negotiation and diplomacy that the filmmaker or members of the film crew employ in order to access their desired material. The question that the present paper thus seeks to address is, how do documentary filmmakers gain access to their field?

Closely related to the question of filmmakers acquiring permissions is the other side of the problem, that is, why does someone agree or disagree to be filmed for a documentary? It would perhaps be too simplistic to put these questions aside as a matter of personal discretion or choice. For instance, when workers at a dye workshop in Gujarat agree to be filmed because they have been asked to do so by their employer, filmmaking permissions do not simply remain within the ambit of personal discretions. Rather, they trigger social responses from people and need to be located within the dominant values and power structures existing within the respective communities and groups under study. It may thus be worthwhile to delve deeper into the nature of these permissions in order to understand the diplomacy underpinning the practice of documentary filmmaking.

II. A Methodological Clarification

In order to methodologically contextualise this essay, it has to be asserted that the broader interest of this study has been to sociologically understand a process—that of making documentary films. This process is not limited to a filmmaker, a film, a genre, an institute or a region. In fact, it is acknowledged that film production styles and technology are constantly changing and evolving, and cannot be subsumed under a time-less and space-less banner. Accordingly, borrowing from the ideas of Nichols (2001), this paper understands the term 'documentary film' as a practice that different filmmakers envision and execute differently. According to Nichols, it is impossible to arrive at a definite set of rules to which a film must prescribe in order to become a documentary. Rather, the concept and meaning of documentary changes with time, depending upon the individual filmmaker's understanding of the form.

Given this predicament, Marcus' essay on the practice of multi-sited ethnography becomes central in clarifying the nature of fieldwork conducted for this study. The essay forwards the view that certain objects cannot be studied by focusing on 'a single-site of intensive investigation' (Marcus 1995: 96). Rather, one has to participate in research that follows and traces the cultural meanings of such objects by studying their associations and connections through multiple sites. The goal of such ethnography may not be a holistic representation of

a unit as a totality since the attempt is to study the particular conditions emerging around the object of investigation across different locations. Such an ethnographic practice moves away from conventional fieldwork as the set of methods employed in the different sites may neither be uniform nor of the same intensity. However, according to Marcus, a multi-sited ethnography is no more 'fragmentary, or reconstructive' than the historical method, and rather, contributes by positing the different locations within a comparative relationship constituted by the object under investigation (ibid.: 100). Precisely the above conditions mark the distinctiveness of my field.[ii] Because this study focuses on the production of documentary films, it is not confined to one specific location, and instead follows the films on sites where they are being generated. It follows the makers of the films through the locations they have selected or have come across for creating the filmic image. The field 'location' per se in this study is thus not decided by the researcher, but by those who fall within the purview of the research, namely, the director, the fixer, the story, those filmed etc. The use of the multi-sited approach thus has been a methodological response to the very nature of documentary filmmaking practice and is central in shaping the main arguments of this paper. Accordingly, the multiple locations in India where the documentary filmmaking process has been followed for this essay are Delhi, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh.

As mentioned before, these field locations or sites come alive only in the process of filmmaking. Once the film shoot ends, the field can only be accessed through the memories or records of those who participated in the creation of the image, namely, those filmed or those who were filming. Similarly, prior to the making of the film, there cannot be an absolute certainty that a specific location will definitely become a part of the field. The object under study disunites from the location after the acquisition of satisfactory images from a particular site. Accordingly, a prolonged investigation of a specific film shoot site in this research becomes redundant primarily because the object (film production) has long left the field location. For this reason, a revisit to the field by the researcher is dependent on the revisit of the filmmakers to the film shoot site. However, the process, in a way of preparing for the next shoot, or going over the material shot during the course of the day, or transferring of the footage onto the hard drive, discussions over the images etc., continues between the film crew. Thus, to reiterate, the actual field site for this study is not confined to a physical space, but to a practice that is constantly shifting its territory, depending upon

the stage at which it arrives. In the remaining part of this essay, I focus on the stage of filmmaking permissions.

III. The Problem with Rapport Building

John and Malcolm Collier in a seminal book devote an entire chapter explaining how to build rapport with informants such that the photographer is allowed access to the community. This rapport is crucial for gaining entry into the desired field and the authors argue that, 'successful field rapport can be aided by your behavior as a photographer' (Collier and Collier 1986: 25). The authors further suggest how a visual researcher may break into the desired field by citing the example of a photographer attempting to access a fishing community:

> The evening's discussion of the photographs establishes a friendship with a community leader who can vouch for you and introduce you throughout the community […] After all, everyone saw you photographing aboard his boat. Of course you must be a good person with an important mission (ibid.: 25).

The Colliers further site a conversation with Patricia Hitchcock, again indicating how to gain access to the community along with a camera. Hitchcock is quoted as saying that, 'resentment of the camera can be overcome with the help of the right man […] a man who has power in the village and if possible the respect of all factions' (ibid.: 26). There are two difficulties that may immediately be brought up in the work of the Colliers. First, the strategies suggested by them for gaining permissions to photograph a community are terribly contextual, and yet are assumed to be generally applicable in various situations. For instance, will the community really think of you as 'a good man' if you are seen with one of their important members? Will discussions around photographs necessarily establish a friendship with the community leader? Is this going to work in any other situation, say with a group of surgeons or politicians, or when the photographer is 'researching up'? The strategies suggested by the Colliers are thus based on serious presumptions which may or may not prove useful depending upon the specific context.

This brings us to the second problem with their work. Contrary to what is argued by the authors, access to a community for collecting visual material does not merely depend upon the behaviour of the photographer (or, as in our case, the filmmaker) or rapport between the

photographer/filmmaker and the subject/filmed, though these may be very important considerations. Rather, as the Colliers rightly notice (though omit to observe its implication), filmmaking permissions may, in fact, be dependent upon the social dynamics between those who are being filmed. That is, permissions may be in control of those members who may not directly be filmed, but may influence access to those members in the community who would eventually be. It is precisely in this context that befriending the 'powerful man' in the village may be relevant. Sociologically speaking, if befriending the leader or a powerful man gets the filmmaker access to the community, the impact of the nature of this access would be very different from approaching the same community through, say, the police. The Colliers, therefore, fail to observe the consequence of this impact on the overall nature of the visual material retrieved. As we shall see in some of the following examples, the kind of permission acquired may have a bearing on the overall direction of the story and the visual material thus accessed. Accordingly, the examples presented below will show that access to film may not necessarily be unilaterally granted by participating individuals as there may be other actors positioned in complex relationships, eventually determining the nature of the particular filmmaking permission.

Accordingly, in the following sections, I outline four types of film-shoot permissions encountered during the process of my fieldwork: formal, parapolitical, reciprocal and hierarchical. Each of these types is meant to highlight the specific pattern of the relationship between the filmmaker and the filmed. It must be mentioned at the outset that these four types are neither exhaustive nor do they necessarily occur in isolation to one another. That is, one may encounter a combination of these during the actual shooting process. More importantly, these four types of permissions are based primarily on analytical distinctions, allowing us to appreciate that the interaction between the filmmaker and the filmed, rather than being unstructured and vague, can be situated within larger sociological patterns.

IV. Types of Documentary Filmmaking Permissions

Formal permissions

The formal type of access is tied to institutional legitimacies, such that the issuing authority possesses a bureaucratic nature and filmmaking activities are supported by written permits

drafted according to country, region or institution-specific rules. These rules are usually framed as elaborate guidelines forwarded through funders producing the film project. They are also made available by Consulates, Embassies or the Ministry of External Affairs (in India), particularly when the film crew is foreign to the country. The following is part of an application form that foreign filmmakers are required to fill up and consent to with their signatures if they desire to film in India. The form highlights the guidelines and conduct that the filmmakers are expected to adhere to when filming in the country. These guidelines are issued by the Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I&B Ministry), and reflect the formality of the procedure involved in applying for documentary film shooting permissions in India.

SHOOTING OF FOREIGN FEATURE FILMS IN INDIA
A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

The Government of India invites foreign film teams to shoot their films in India—a country with locations of untold beauty.

… (i) Shooting of the film will be done in locations in India in accordance with the script as approved by the Government of India. If we consider any material changes are necessary in the script, we shall obtain, the prior approval of the Government of India for such changes.
(ii) We shall furnish the detailed particulars of the members of the shooting team and the exact locations where the shooting would take place in India at least one month in advance of the arrival of the team in India. We note that prior approval of the Government of India is necessary for the fixing of locations for shooting in certain areas.
…(iii) We shall shoot the film only in the presence of a Liaison Officer where attached to the team by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.
(v) We accept that part of the Liaison Officer's duty will be to ensure that nothing detrimental in the depiction of India or the Indian people shall be shot or included in the film. In the event of any disagreement arising between the team and the Liaison Officer in this respect, the matter will be immediately referred to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting whose decision will be final. We shall ensure that India's security interests are not compromised in any manner.
(vi) We undertake to show our completed film to the representative of the Government of India/the Indian Mission in*_____ for scrutiny if recommended by the Ministry of I&B and we further undertake to delete and destroy the portions of the film that may be found objectionable on such scrutiny by the

> Government of India, before the film is utilized for public exhibition anywhere in the world.[iii]

In addition to the I&B Ministry, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) too forwards a list of separate requirements, made available on its website. The requirements demand that:

> The completed application form and signed undertaking (placed below) has to be sent, preferably by e-mail, to the officer responsible for press and information work in the relevant Embassy or High Commissions of India [...] Documentary filming is not permissible on other types of visas (e.g. tourist/business visas). Upon issue of the clearance, import of only filming equipment is facilitated.[iv]

These written rules contain a language of formality that specify the 'duties' of the filmmaker when filming in India. These rules are meant to ensure that filmmaking activity takes place neither on the conditions set by the filmmaker, nor by the respondent, but a third party altogether—the state. The language of rules also posits the figure of the foreign filmmaker as someone who has the ability to threaten the 'image' of the nation and thus must be supervised, and her activities be kept under strict surveillance. This is interesting because the government itself sends out the call for applications for documentary films on a regular basis. This contradiction reflects in the very opening sentence of the application form, as mentioned above. From the point of view of the state, documentary filmmakers can make use of the 'untold' beautiful locations of the country, though not representing the nation in a manner opposed to its larger vision. It is for this reason that formal permits are seen to be excessively interfering by filmmakers, and are also seen as great obstacles in the path of creating genuine films. A recent example where a filmmaker is seen to have transcended the Indian state's vision of how it must be represented is that of Leslee Udwin's documentary, *India's Daughter*, a film based on the gang rape of a young woman in Delhi on 16 December 2012. The incident received international media attention as it raised the question of women's safety in India, a controversial issue from the point of view of the state. Because the film contained a detailed interview with one of the rapists, the Indian government acted on the advice of the Delhi Police and declared that the film could create an atmosphere of fear amongst the women in the country.

It was also argued that the film would hamper India's reputation, as the film was part of a larger campaign to defame the country on an international platform. Politicians also argued that the screening of this film would be detrimental to the tourism sector in particular. As a result, the film was stopped from being broadcast in India by the government on the basis of the arguments that all the accused were still under trial and the required permissions were not taken to film this documentary. The filmmaker was also accused of having compromised the identity of the victim, revealing her and her parent's names (even though this was something that certain media outlets in India had already done). The film, however, did make it to international audiences and subsequently to Indian ones through the medium of the Internet, thus making contemporary formal permissions prone to the specific difficulties of image supervision in the digital world.

Interestingly, not all documentary films necessarily get 'noticed' by the state and are able to circumvent many rules of formality. This is especially true for films that are not directly funded by state bodies. However, the above example shows how the legality of formal permissions may be evoked, especially when the concerned party, in this case the state, does not agree with the representation of an issue by a film. Furthermore, the requirement of complying with the rules of a given institution is felt more by local filmmakers (compared to foreign ones), whose films may either be censored, banned or their broadcast heavily controlled. Censorship in several of these cases happens after the film has been made. Thus, formal permissions are required not only for making a film, but also screening them. For instance, Anand Patwardhan's *Father, Son and Holy War*, despite being awarded the National Award for 'Best Investigative Documentary' and 'Best Social Documentary', was stopped from being broadcast by Doordarshan (India's primary Public Broadcasting Channel) on grounds that it could arouse 'negative passions' among the viewers. After a long battle with the filmmaker, the channel was directed by the Supreme Court to broadcast the film after all. Left with no choice but to screen the film, Doordarshan decided to air the film at an hour of the day which had the lowest viewership so that as few people as possible would see it. This was a last effort to control its circulation.

Apart from delineating what may be filmed and screened, permission guidelines also at times mention the manner in which the film crew should behave with the people filmed, particularly in reference to paying or stereotyping them. Ostensibly, the purpose of these

written agreements is not only to protect the film from possible legal disputes, but also to safeguard the interests of the various parties involved in the filmmaking process. The formal type of permission also requires that the filmmakers receive signed no-objection forms from those who have been filmed and whose spaces have been used for filming. For instance, the following is part of the content of a no-objection release form of a British Production Company, required to be signed by respondents in Gujarat, reproduced here on conditions of anonymity.

CONTRIBUTORS RELEASE FORM…

- …I hereby waive any so-called "moral rights of authors" in the Programme and such rights under section 77 and section 80 of the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 ("the Act") as I now have or hereafter acquire in relation to the Programme and I hereby grant the Company consent under Part II of the Act to enable the Company to make the fullest possible use of my services hereunder.
- The Company may without my further consent use my name, likeness, biography, photographs of me and recordings of interviews with me in advertising and publicising the Programme in all media and formats throughout the universe.

(Anonymous)

The formal type of access thus constitutes the process of filmmaking as an impersonal exercise, whose terms are applicable to individuals regardless of the rapport between the filmmaker and the filmed. The no-objection letter requires that those filmed waive a series of rights such as those pertaining to further payments, authorship, or even disclosing information regarding the making of the film. Similar undertaking letters are required to be submitted by the filmmakers to the various government and non-government agencies from whom shooting permissions are acquired. The formal type of permission, therefore, adheres to the Weberian rational-legal authority, which puts the actors within a bureaucratic

location, guided by a strict language of rationality, even where relationships of familiarity and trust built by the filmmaker may exist with those being filmed. The trust factor rather translates into a language of precautions that needs to be taken account of between the parties involved. The formal permission type thus appears as a tripartite agreement (between the filmmaker, the government agency and those filmed) that debatably attempts to secure the interest of each involved in the production process. This is something specific to the formal type of permissions. As we will see subsequently, the actual process of interaction between the filmmaker and the filmed is driven more by the sanctity of mutual trust rather than official permits. Even though personal relationships do not hold the legal grounding of formal permissions, filmmaker Andy Lawrence and fixer Tanya Sohal hold the view that in most situations, successful personal rapport works much better in accessing permissions compared to official letters issued by the government.

Therefore, although formal permissions and clearances are required, they are not always necessary for a film shoot to take place. In fact, in many cases, formal permissions are seen as time-consuming, requiring paperwork and monetary charges. In big budget documentaries, often fixers are hired to take care of these permissions since filmmakers themselves prefer not to get caught up in and distracted by these formalities. Presenting oneself as a tourist or as someone filming news are interesting ways to circumvent permission requirements. It is generally believed that compared to filming fiction and documentaries, those who film for news are least hassled for permissions.

During my fieldwork, I encountered documentary crews trying to pass off as news crews on two separate occasions. One of the events transpired during the filming of an American documentary in 2016 in Delhi, when the crew was stopped by the local police in Darya Gunj for not having the required permit to film on the road where a crowd had assembled to see the shoot. The local fixer hired by the filmmaker explained to the police that since they were filming news, they did not know where they would be the next day and so they could not possibly have informed the local police beforehand. Similarly, in an interview with a British ethnographic documentary filmmaker, he revealed how he shot his entire film in India on a tourist visa and pretended to be a tourist with a DSLR camera wherever the police or other security personnel stopped him. This was possible especially because members of an ethnographic film crew are usually very limited in number (in this case only two). However, he did ensure that his identity was not hidden from those filmed, but only

from those who could possibly create formal-permission related problems for him during the making of the film. Such evasion of formal permits was to save time and get around the many restrictions imposed by the government.

Now, to carry a formal authorisation is no guarantee that a shoot will be smooth sailing and materialise successfully. In fact, at times, a formal permit may also be an obstacle in establishing successful personal relationships and rapport. In such cases, other kinds of access become crucial, which either challenge the formal type or become their absolute appendages. One such is the parapolitical type, which is discussed in the next section.

V. Parapolitical Permissions

The formal type of access has its own challenges, to describe which I borrow the word 'parapolitical'. The term was first used by David Easton (1965) to describe 'lesser arenas of politics' and later developed by F. G. Bailey to refer to 'Those (bodies) which are partly regulated and partly independent of larger encapsulating political structures; and which so to speak fight battles with these larger structures' (Bailey 1969: 281). With respect to filmmaking permissions, parapolitical situations call upon local leaders, groups and their followers, or whom the Colliers refer to as the 'powerful man', to regulate the presence and activities of outsiders in their areas. The leader, with certain identified followers, resolves everyday matters of minor conflicts and cooperation within the locality and they become informal political bodies. Often the source of support from the residents for the leader is this help, which is more immediate and certain compared to that expected from the police or other formal authorities, who may be seen as outsiders or corrupt adversaries. Shooting with formal permits in such situations thus creates conflict between two different sources of authority, since parapolitical situations pose a challenge to the permissions granted by formal bodies, especially by those that are also local and immediate, such as the police.

To illustrate this type of permission, I discuss the case of an Indian–American documentary team, shooting in Delhi for their film on rising population. This shoot took place at one of the busiest marketplaces in Delhi, opposite Jama Masjid. The film crew comprised five people—the cameraperson, soundperson, assistant director, fixer, and me as a helper/researcher. The crew's attempt was to film a busy marketplace and interview 'an interesting passerby' for their 'man from the street' sequence. It was assumed that since

this was a public space, the crew could easily film here as they already had the required formal permissions, not only from the local authorities, but also from the I&B Ministry. What resulted, however, was a challenge to such formal authorisations by a few local members from the area. Following is a brief extract from the conversation between the fixer of this film crew and the local leader along with his follower:

> *Just as the camera is being set up and the cameraperson has identified the person for their 'man from the street' sequence, a person comes running asking the crew to stop filming immediately. He is the owner of the abattoir situated at the end of the lane where we stand to shoot.*
> **Abattoir owner***:* Do you have the permission to shoot here?
> **Cameraperson**: Yes, we have a permit.
> **Abattoir owner**: Whose permit do you have?
> *Cameraperson signals the fixer to handle the matter and asks her to show the owner their formal permits Upon looking at the sheet, the owner exclaims…*
> **Abattoir owner***:* What is this? (*Looking at the letter of authorisation from I&B Ministry).*
> **Fixer**: This is the letter from the government that allows us to film in this location. We have also informed the police that we will be filming here.
> **Abattoir owner:** The police? Police permits mean nothing here. You need to speak to our *Bhai* (leader) before shooting anything here.
> *The owner quickly yells at the locals who had gathered around to view the shooting.*
> **Abattoir owner**: No shooting will happen here! Go on and get busy with your work!
> *The owner now starts phoning someone while some of the locals, who didn't seem to mind the shooting per se, prefer to keep standing at a distance and see what will surface next. After ten minutes or so, a neatly dressed man wearing a white and blue striped sweater and a pair of blue jeans enters the lane. He is in his 30s. He crosses us but doesn't say anything and is about to enter a house in the very lane where the equipment has been set up. The frantic abattoir owner runs behind him and whispers to him. He is the leader.*
> **Leader:** What are you doing all this for?
> **Fixer**: Sir, we are making a documentary film for TV (forwarding the permit letter to the leader).
> **Leader:** Uh huh... *(listening patiently and nodding).*
> **Fixer:** We have a letter from the company where we work and we have also met the local police. Because we are making a documentary, we cannot inform the people beforehand.
> **Leader**: Look, I understand what you are saying. I don't need to see your letter and my concern is not with what kind of film you are making. But, the problem is, you have come here in this area

> where our people live. What you are filming and where are you going to show all of this, we don't know! You must understand that you are filming right outside people's homes here. These are our people and we have to look after them. The police won't care what you film here. But we do.
> **Fixer**: But we assure you Sir, we are not going to film anything offensive. We just want to take some shots of this marketplace. We want to show how lively this area is, full of tourists who are shopping and locals who have set up their attractive shops. If you like, we can show you what we have filmed.
> **Leader:** I don't need to see what you have filmed. But you have to be careful not to cause any trouble here. We have had filmmakers causing trouble in this area before. I hope we won't get any trouble from your group.
> **Fixer:** Absolutely not sir. We completely understand your point. We are going to be very careful about our business. We won't cause any disturbance in your area.
> **Leader:** Fine, you may carry on. And after you are done, do drop in for a cup of tea!

Shooting with formal permits in a parapolitical context thus creates confrontation between two different sets of authority. The denial of permission to shoot in this context may become a part of ongoing tension between the two different sources of authorities, claiming possession rights over the same space. In the context of film shoots, taking sides and flagging one particular party's permission before the other may therefore create further obstacles for the film crew. As observed in the above conversation, the fixer displays the skill of smooth talking and diplomacy with the leader to allow for trouble-free materialisation of the shoot, rather than engaging in a confrontation with the leader on the basis of the formal permit that the crew was carrying. Parapolitical situations thus put the diplomacy skills of the film crew to a great test.

An important aspect of this diplomacy, as evident in the above scenario, is tweaking of the plot of the film at times, in order to gain permission. Filmmakers understand that in order to carry out a documentary film shoot, several people are met with, several people want to come and speak to the crew, and few also become important for obtaining parapolitical permissions, even if they are not directly related to the story under consideration. In order to avoid confrontations and time delays, especially when a conversation cannot be avoided, filmmakers often simplify or tweak the plot of the film. This is explained by the same fixer of the Jama Masjid film shoot in the following manner:

> You cannot really reveal the entire premise of your film to everyone you meet. They won't understand and neither will they be directly affected by it. We are not trying to portray anyone in a bad light, but had I told him (the leader) that the film was on India's population problem and we were filming here because this place is so crowded, chances are, he would not have allowed us to film here. So, to handle such people on shoots, you have to butter them up a little. And of course, sometimes you need to tell a few harmless lies!

While filming documentaries, this tweaking of the plot is usually done not to those directly being filmed, but to those who control permissions, as in the present case. This is seen as part of the diplomacy skills of the fixer or the filmmaker. This skill of diplomacy, especially within a parapolitical context, is crucial in order to negotiate one's way through tricky situations by ensuring that the prevailing social dynamics within the community are not upset by the presence or activities of the film crew, and the shoot may be carried out in a smooth manner. This smoothness cannot be guaranteed by the formal type of permission, even if the intention is there.

VI. Reciprocal Permissions

Reciprocal permissions are dependent upon relationships of mutual interest and mutual respect between (i) filmmaker and the filmed, and (ii) filmmaker and community members who may influence those desired to be filmed. The concept of reciprocity is rather ambiguous within sociological literature and it seems pertinent to contextualise it within the several debates that surround it. Sociological and anthropological literature assert that the notion of reciprocity cannot be simply understood with respect to the principle of rational calculation. Marcel Mauss established that the obligation to give, receive and return have underlying cultural principles and there are normative values that sustain reciprocal exchange (Mauss and Evans-Pritchard 1967). This stands in contrast to the view that reciprocity entails exchanges of roughly equivalent values, an understanding dominant in the discipline of economics, and amongst scholars of game theory who primarily view it as rationally calculated pursuit of self-interest. However, Godwyn and Gittell (2012) remark that reciprocity may equally entail exchanges that are more imprecise and vague, highlighting the components of indebtedness and obligation embedded within it.

Furthermore, sociological literature also emphasises that reciprocal relationships necessarily contain some kind of 'conditional action' (Gouldner 1960) shaped by 'future expectations' (Axelrod and Hamilton 1984) underpinned by the notion of trust, which acts as a 'lubricant to reciprocal exchange' (Arrow 1974). However, this is not to say that reciprocity functions solely on the basis of cooperation and harmony and, as Keohane (1986) observes, reciprocity does not necessarily protect individuals from operations of power. With respect to filmmaking permissions, reciprocity therefore involves an exchange of favours, gestures, payments (direct or indirect, cash or kind), or even strengthening of mutual bonds and trust for future collaborations, not necessarily on precise and clear terms.

To delve deeper into the notion of reciprocal permissions, the following section presents an illustration of a documentary film shoot based in the Kutch area situated in the Northwest region of India. Over the years, the production of colourful textiles and handicrafts by tribal and other local communities have attracted several filmmakers to the region, both from the field of documentary and fiction. I had a chance to participate in two separate documentary film projects here, and interestingly, both the teams had independently contacted the same person—Wazeer Bhai—for accessing the local communities for their respective film shoots. He spent his life collecting textiles and handicraft items from various communities across Central Asia. He is a curator for these and holds exhibitions to revive the forgotten textile practices from these regions. At the age of 70, he is known to be a treasure for anyone trying to access these often unapproachable and geographically perplexing communities of the desert region. Because of his widespread links, his knowledge, and his vast handicraft and textile collection, Wazeer Bhai is an important figure for the local artist communities and NGOs, who maintain obligatory, reciprocal ties with him. As one respondent asserted, 'if you have been referred by Wazeer Bhai, no one will refuse their company'.

For this particular shoot, the contact of Wazeer Bhai was arranged through the fixer provided to the British film team by the Indian production company they had contacted for assistance. This fixer further contacted a local fixer from Kutch who eventually introduced everyone to Wazeer Bhai. For the film, Wazeer Bhai was asked to introduce the filmmaker to a printer who still printed a particular textile pattern, called *ajrakh*, that dated to the Indus Valley Civilisation. Further, Wazeer Bhai himself was asked to give a 'bite' for the

film and explain the historical relevance of this textile. This was a big-budget historical documentary and the crew comprised five people from Britain—two camerapersons, one soundperson, a director and an anchor. Wazeer Bhai obliged the crew and made arrangements for the shoot with the owner of a textile workshop, Javed Bhai, from the nearby village of Ajrakhpur.

On the day of the shoot, Wazeer Bhai travelled with the crew to the printing workshop where arrangements had already been made for the team's arrival. After initial introductions, welcomes and chats, Javed Bhai called upon two of his employees, Shakeel and Abu, and instructed them to show the printing process for the film. This process involved first preparing a dye for the cloth, then dipping the cloth into the dye, spreading the cloth and spraying more colour on it. Once the cloth was dry, it was taken for printing. After understanding the printing sequence and while making some rough mental deliberations about the shots, the director instructed his crew where to set up the equipment. Once the equipment was ready, everyone was briefed about what had to be done. The anchor would chat with Javed Bhai, who would be describing the process, while the two boys would perform the actual task of printing. After the briefing, the camera started to roll, but just as the boys were signalled to spray on the cloth, one of them stopped in the middle of the shot not knowing what else to do, since he felt he had put enough colour on the cloth already. As he began to stare at the camera, the director panicked and waived at him saying, 'acting, acting!' This went on for a couple of minutes and the two boys had to repeat the same action several times.

The director then explained to Javed Bhai how he wanted to take the same shot from another angle. With the cameraman, he climbed onto the balcony of Javed Bhai's house to get an overhead shot. The boys were asked to repeat the spraying process, but by now there was no dye left and it would take some time to prepare it again. The cameraman clarified that if the boys just pretended to spray colour on the cloth, this little cheat would not be visible from such a distance. By this time, the worker boys started smiling, as though mocking the filmmaking process while pretending to spray on the cloth with their empty cans. To their relief, their part of the shoot was soon over and after interviewing Wazeer Bhai, the director called for a wrap. The boys then put back their empty cans and huddled up, smirking in a corner with their other workshop friends who were watching the whole

thing from a distance. The film crew on other hand proceeded for an elaborate lunch arranged by Javed Bhai's family.

In my conversation with him, Wazeer Bhai clarified that the lunch gesture was normal for any guest visiting, especially from outside the country. 'They have to be taken care of…this was a gesture of goodwill and hospitality'. He also felt that this film might give Javed Bhai more exposure in international circuits, even though his work was already quite famous. After lunch, the crew proceeded to depart but not without a willingness to offer a cash payment to the boys for their participation in the film. Javed Bhai refused to take any money, so instead, the crew engaged in some shopping in the workshop outlet. The director felt this was one way of repaying Javed Bhai and the boys for their time and effort. Apart from personal shopping, mementos were purchased for the local fixers and personnel who helped during the shoot, including me. The director explained that such direct/indirect payments were built into the production cost and was a common practice. In fact, the director and anchor travelled with several small handy gifts that could be given for the contribution of the people encountered during the making of the film.

This example allows us to understand the nature of reciprocal permissions. While the assistance provided by Wazeer Bhai and Javed Bhai to the film crew may be understood in the light of expanding the global reach and popularity of the workshop and Wazeer Bhai's collection of textiles, there cannot be a certain equivalent measure of this reciprocal exchange. There is no surety that this film would enhance the reputation of the textiles, though there may be a vague future expectation of such an ambiguous return. Rather, pride and satisfaction around one's work were built into the very present moment of their being filmed, the acknowledgement of which was returned through gestures of hospitality. Furthermore, the relationship between Wazeer Bhai and Javed Bhai, through which the shoot could materialise to begin with, was based on trust and cooperation as each knew they had to maintain their association for future projects, activities and larger community ties, irrespective of the presence of the film crew.

Furthermore, with respect to the film crew, the repayment for the contribution of Javed Bhai was offered through the indirect means of purchasing items from the workshop. However, this too cannot be seen as a rationally calculated equivalent exchange, but only

an imprecise gesture of gratitude. Reciprocal filmmaking permissions thus attempt to maintain some notion of balance between the filmmakers and the filmed, whether precise or not. The attempt to arrive at this balance is built into the shooting process, evident by the gifts carried by the film crew for 'people to be encountered' during filming. Although the terms and conditions of this balance may not be necessarily pre-decided, in some filming situations the modes of repayment may indeed be worked out in advance.

Filmmakers like David MacDougall have offered a contrary view to this. They believe that direct pre-decided payments may equally damage the filmmaking process since the respondent's responses may be affected or determined by such payment expectations. Furthermore, when the shooting process is scheduled over a long period of time (say, in case of ethnographic films), such payments could deplete the limited resources of the filmmaker, especially if the film is self-funded. Therefore, such practices of elaborate gift giving may not be possible for small-budget documentaries. Reciprocity therefore becomes an important factor guiding the sociality of documentary filmmaking. More often than not, this reciprocity is imprecise, based on expectations of future friendships and unclear obligations.

VII. Hierarchical Permissions

As opposed to the reciprocal type, hierarchical permissions are based on structures of authority or some aspect of social dominance. Hierarchical permissions, it is argued, derive from a 'vertical arrangement' (Weber 1968) of status, role or function existing between members of the society whom the filmmaker desires to film. Such hierarchies may be institutionalised, for instance like those found within bureaucratic organisations, or may non-institutionally be based on normative values of the community. Essentially, hierarchies place individuals within a chain of command, enabling more control in the upward direction and limited autonomy (Godwyn 2012) as we move downwards. It is this aspect of control and autonomy that characterises hierarchical filmmaking permissions, to illustrate which, one can refer back to the previous case of the Kutch film shooting.

The two workshop boys, Shakeel and Abu, were never asked whether they wanted to be filmed at all. In fact, no conversation took place between the film crew and the two boys, apart from the limited signalling to 'start acting' that was given by the Director. Two different levels of access are thus understandable from this case study. The relationship

between Javed Bhai and Wazeer Bhai was that of reciprocity, while the relationship between Javed Bhai as the workshop owner and his employees was that of hierarchy. In this hierarchical structure, the decision to partake in the project rested outside of the two employees filmed. What we see here is alienation from making a decision about one's own participation in the filming process. Furthermore, placed within this hierarchy, the decision to accept payment from the Director in return for their role in the film also did not rest with the two boys and was taken by Javed Bhai. Alienation therefore is central to such hierarchical structures, and if we return for a moment to the strategy suggested by the Colliers to access the community through a powerful man, a possibility of this alienation may be present in a major way. While this case illustrates an aspect of a formalised hierarchy existing between an employer and his employees, during my fieldwork I have encountered similar hierarchical accesses with respect to informal social structures as well.[v] Such hierarchies may not be necessarily institutionalised but built into the specific values of the particular community, such as control wrested by community elders, permissions granted by husbands and fathers, or even religious figures. Such permissions render people (those intending to be filmed) with limited autonomy because the decision of their participation in a film shoot rests with other members of the community.

VIII. Conclusion

This discussion attempted to throw light on some of the different types of permissions that are central to documentary filmmaking. It did not merely intend to outline the method adopted by filmmakers to access permissions, but also delve into the sociologically relevant conceptual categories emerging in this process. It has to be mentioned that there are occasions where none of the above measures guarantee filmmaking access. This happens when the personal cost of appearing in a film and revealing one's identity is so high that aspects of the individual's self-respect or self-protection could be at stake. For instance, in the film *Transgenders: Pakistan's Open Secret* (2011), filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy admits to not getting access to speak to the boyfriend Maggie, one transgender respondent, even though his family knew about their relationship. Accordingly, filmmaking permissions have the ability to reveal something about the social life of the community being filmed. As presented in this essay, they carry and reflect the diplomacy skills of the filmmaker on the one hand, and norms and values of communities on the other, as the practice of documentary filmmaking attempts a delicate balance between the two.

Notes

[1] Quite certainly, the term 'film production', especially to a Western audience, will throw up the influence of production guidelines and the larger industrial matrix within which the process of filmmaking is embedded. As Pryluck notes:

> Various aspects of institutions constrain or facilitate the production of certain kinds of films at any particular time […] Numerous constraints such as legal, social, technological, economic, and industrial exist for all film production from the massive Hollywood output to the minuscule Danish industry to the most isolated underground filmmaker (Pryluck 1976: 1).

However, to necessarily factor in production and distribution norms within the definition of a documentary film shoot would be erroneous as the practice of documentary filmmaking, especially in India, may at times escape the ambit of distribution guidelines while it is being made. For instance, often the intricacies of these guidelines are revealed to the budding filmmaker after they have shot and edited a part of the film. Also, sometimes filmmakers circumvent some of these guidelines because they may involve time-consuming paperwork, especially for those who are under time and fund constraints. Therefore, the degree of influence exercised by production guidelines is specific to individual film projects.

[2] Marcus points out that media production is one of the important areas where multi-sited ethnography can and is being used. This is especially true for anthropologists studying the production and reception of media within particular events such as social movements where often the makers and the viewers of the images merge or overlap.

[3] I&B Ministry. *Shooting of Foreign Films in India: A Step by Step Guide*. Available at: https://mib.gov.in/sites/default/files/flm1.pdf (last accessed 10 September 2018).

[4] Ministry of External Affairs. *Documentary Filming in India.* Available at: https://www.mea.gov.in/documentary-filming-in-india.html (last accessed on 5 August 2018).

[5] This point may be elaborated by referring to my fieldwork in Sardinia, Italy, where a student film shot amongst a Senegalese community in Sardinia was under production. This was a short, 10-minute film based on the only African community residing in Sardinia. The filmmaker, a student at Istituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico (ISRE), had approached the owner of the Sengalese shop in the area where the community members would meet up every evening for conversations, music and community updates. The young shop owner, Thiam, agreed to be a part of the film and introduced the filmmaker to other members of the community. Preparations were made for the shoot, and the first sequence to be filmed was a musical evening where two djembe drummers would render a duet performance to be attended by other community members, including women and children. However, right before filming, Thiam instructed the filmmaker not to film the women, as that went against their community values. He further stated that in case the women were filmed, the video should not be shown to anyone else but the community members. The filmmaker agreed, though during filming she realised that the women themselves did not mind being filmed as they danced freely to the beat of the djembe and often stepped before the camera while clapping and grooving. Indeed, the women appeared pretty excited about the couple of shots in which they did appear, though the filmmaker had to assure the men that those shots would not be used in the final film, and at least the women's faces would certainly not figure. Through this example we see that the permission to film the women was with the men, even though the women themselves did not find being filmed particularly problematic in an overt way. At the same time, the women did not protest the decision of the men that disallowed the former from being filmed, and one of them clarified this by saying, 'this is just how it is'.

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