

## COMMENTARIES

# Documenting hidden apartheid in the Indian diaspora

**Abstract:** This article provides an account of an independent filmmaker's work in documenting some of the stories from the global Indian diaspora. Based in Aotearoa New Zealand, with ancestral connections to Fiji, East Africa, UK, US and India, and using documentary making with both its journalistic and artistic purposes, the author firstly refers to the literatures that identifies documentary-making as journalism, diaspora, and the caste system. She then situates herself within the South Pacific Indian diaspora, before describing her experience in the making of the documentary entitled *Hidden Apartheid: A Report on Caste Discrimination*. The article concludes by reflecting on her role and the role of documenting hidden discrimination where it exists throughout Indian communities of the diaspora.

**Keywords:** apartheid, caste system, diaspora, discrimination, documentary, Fiji, filmmaking, India, journalism, New Zealand, South Pacific.

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### Introduction

ACCORDING to Canella (2023) 'documentary film which comprises audio and visual elements is rarely discussed among journalism scholars' although photojournalism has long been accepted as journalism. Back in 1939, Greron (cited in Canella) viewed documentary 'as a collaborative social process that promotes political education and civic engagement'. Although documentary or cinematic journalism has been identified relatively recently, this is becoming more popular as its use surges among news outlets (Canella 2023). Vohra (2011, p. 43) argues that documentaries that foreground the political activism of the filmmaker will incorporate a subjective voice, but 'can be far more politically charged than earlier documentary approaches'. For Ibarra (2023) documentaries 'can return agency to individuals silenced by their legal, economic and cultural marginalisation'. People in the global diaspora who belong to more than one nation or culture, according to Scafirimuto (2020, p.1 07)

writing for the Journal of Global Diaspora and Media, are searching for identity, and documentary storytelling provides a space for diasporic subjects to negotiate their identity through the ‘subjective enunciation’.

### Diaspora and caste

The term ‘diaspora’ has evolved to include those who ‘have moved voluntarily but who are linked to a homeland through a nation that transcends sovereign borders’ (Friesen 2014, p. 122) or ‘any group of people who migrate from the centre (homeland) to the periphery’ (Dwivedi, 2014). About 1879, there was a proliferation of Indians leaving India to work in many countries around the world. At this time the Indentured labour system brought many broken people to the South Pacific. These clans had experienced centuries of oppression through the colonisation by Brahmanical Hinduism and Indentured labour seemed a better option than remaining in India. They were forced out of India by the conditions of the caste hierarchy: poverty, denial of education, lack of self agency. Bondage in other lands was preferable to what they had previously endured. These were subaltern self-exiles migrating for religious freedom. The more recent ‘voluntary’ or ‘economic’ migration started taking place during the 1950s when the new states of India and Pakistan were suffering from fragile economies (Hussain, 2010, p. 189). However, while India became independent and ‘enshrined in social equality in its constitution, the caste system remains deeply embedded in its social fabric.’ As *Time Out* (n.d.) stated ‘its most benighted victims are more than 166 million Dalits or Untouchables, whose lot is even worse than that endured by blacks in apartheid-era South Africa’.

There has been agreement among scholars that the Hindu caste system is very complex, with many layers. The four main castes are the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Sudras or Dalits known as the ‘untouchables’. Hinduism has become to be defined by Brahmanism, and as Hussain (2010, p. 202) stated, whereas Hinduism itself might be a tolerant religion, ‘Brahminism



Figure 1: *Hidden Apartheid*: ‘I had seen discrimination and misogyny and I wanted to find others who would witness these issues.’

is never tolerant’, and is the foundation of the Hindutva ideology that has a benign face of consent and a malignant, dangerous face of coercion. Hus-sain goes further and claims that ‘the ideology of Hindutva was alien to Hinduism. It is a political fascist ideology which had no roots within traditional Hinduism’.

### Being part of the Indian Diaspora in the South Pacific

As an independent filmmaker for more than 30 years, I have been filming issues related to the international Indian diaspora. Being part of the Indian diaspora of Aotearoa New Zealand and the South Pacific, I have sought to understand how hierarchy, misogyny, and caste discrimination have accompanied Indian migrants to other countries. My 2010 documentary *Hidden Apartheid: A Report on Caste Discrimination* (Figures 1, 2) illustrates how casteism originated in Indian society and how caste segregation remains active, even in political democracies with human rights legislation protecting equality.

Growing up in New Zealand, my parents embraced other traditions and cultures, my ancestors had a particular closeness with, and were adopted by the tangata whenua. However, I became aware that the Indian community operated differently to that of most of our peers. Originally steeped in the Ayurvedic artisan culture of an Indian village, my mother’s ancestors left India in the late 1800s, immigrating to East Africa, then East London. My mother was betrothed and came to New Zealand. My father’s family left India 120 years ago, and came to New Zealand via Fiji, as free labourers. My family has been in the South Pacific and New Zealand for more than 100 years. I was born in India, yet as a young child growing up in New Zealand from 1960, I was under the surveillance of the Indian community. It seemed that the late 1960s pop culture messages meant to me that one had one’s own autonomy and sovereignty, except it did not apply to



Figure 2: The documentary poster.

Indian girls. Indian girls were monitored, not allowed to ignore religious codes, not allowed to cut our hair or wear it down, or wear make-up or jeans. For most Indian girls, Western films were strictly out-of-bounds (I was fortunate that my parents were more liberal than some, and I grew to study European films). However, the fear of arranged/forced marriage still permeated Indian culture in New Zealand.

By my teens I was really clear that I was not going to allow the Indian community to control me. Already I felt secure in my own path. As a consequence, I was ostracised and alienated from this community. There was no clear pathway forward, but new gateways opened as I worked in feminist media. As part of my social work degree I did a placement at a women's refuge in London. I found that the situation for Indian women was much worse than what I had experienced in New Zealand, including forced marriage with under age brides, dowry abuse, and male honour-based violence. BBC documentaries exposed issues of bounty hunters who were commissioned to search out girls who had run away from home, to avoid forced marriages. These young girls would be punished, tortured, with their arms and legs broken (see for example BBC, 2004; BritAsia TV). Documentaries revealed today on TED Talks and podcasts that some of those victims who are now in their 1950s are telling their stories of forced marriages, honour killings, and the shame of being a woman (see, for example, BBC, 2017; Aouilk, 2021). Some girls in the strictest communities were not even allowed to get an education, or go to school.

Graded inequality of the hierarchical caste system, with 'Brahmans' at the top and 'untouchables' at the bottom, was increasing in Britain, far away from India. Those who had sought to escape to a place where their caste did not define them, found that it existed wherever Indians migrated. The practice of untouchability was common, even by so-called low caste shopkeepers, who would not touch the money placed on the counter by those they considered to be of an inferior caste, once again documented by BBC screening in the 1980s.

### **The making of *Hidden Apartheid***

This knowledge of what was happening on the other side of the world impacted me on my return to Aotearoa, and I felt that the voices of the people who were disempowered needed to be recorded. As part of the Indian diaspora, with an understanding of some of the cultural and traditional histories, I felt it was urgent to address this, somehow. I had seen discrimination and misogyny and I wanted to find others who would witness these issues. I returned to the UK several times to research and document those who would give voice and visibility. Some of the areas of London where Indians had settled were deeply divided. In one area there were more than twelve different places of worship on one road, for members of different castes. There was deep sadness, mistrust and fear, for those in particular

from so-called lower castes, who were made to feel ashamed and humiliated.

It was a slow process to build trusting relationships and seek out people who were unafraid to express their opinions. I encountered some who rejected the strictures of Hinduism and had knowledge of ancient man-made laws of India. These individuals evolved a more humanitarian philosophy for the migrated clans. The power dynamics became obvious and most of the conversations were with men, without their wives present. As a woman, there was a safety factor for me; as I travelled, I made sure I was accompanied by a man, usually a cameraman of colour.

The interviews for the Hidden Apartheid film in the UK were completed over four years, including ones in the US, Australia and New Zealand. What started as a gathering of archival interviews became a full-length independent documentary. As the director I worked with three other people; we did all the research, writing, pre-production, postproduction, editing, marketing and distribution. This film was totally self-funded, a gift of love for those clans and communities who continue to excavate their heritage and seek to live apart from the religious prejudice of their original homeland.

This had begun as a personal project and morphed into a vehicle for social awareness. The documentary provided an in-depth history and analysis of caste-based discrimination showing how, since the early 1900s, Indians have migrated across the world seeking freedom from caste-based inequality, only to discover that the practices they meant to escape have resurfaced in their new destinations. Caste discrimination outside India has been reported in community centres, places of worship, workplaces, and educational institutions.

The project gained momentum once the documentary was made. Overwhelming interest from groups in the UK was evident at the premiere screening at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The large audience consisted of clans travelling from all over, including community leaders, anti-caste advocates, human rights organisations, and politicians who had been working on England's *Single Equality Bill* (Rae, 2010). Certain Lords and Ladies were involved in the fight to stop caste discrimination. Jeremy Corbyn (former Leader of the Labour Party) was actively supporting the Bill, from a human rights perspective.

The film was given several accolades from the caste, communities, and clans that were represented. The film was shown at private screenings, theatre releases in several countries, including at Columbia University, New York; Chicago Film School; and in New Zealand. The documentary was acquired by ProQuest for international distribution to academics. Reviews were published in *The Guardian* newspaper and *The New Zealand Herald* (Rae, 2010). A review in *Time Out* commented that the documentary, 'delivers a comprehensive survey of the history of casteism, warns that prejudices are alive and well, not just in India but in many emigrant communities' (*Time Out*, n. d.).

## **Conclusion: Revealing what is hidden**

When I was six, I was taken to my first film. I fell in love with moving images, and later had a passion for looking at all images. I then found I could tell stories with these images. Much later I found the value of film to express the beauty of images in India, where I shot fifteen hours of footage. I absorbed the artisan culture of my family and clans, and brought the footage home to assemble. I also discovered when filming in dangerous spaces, subtle political messaging and subversion can be incorporated into a narrative, in a way that both protects those at risk and exposes those making the threats. Documentaries, while more factual, can also be layered and nuanced. Simplicity can hide subtlety. In other spaces the challenges can be made more openly. Storytelling as an art form, can be used for raising awareness, social issues can be illustrated through films, galleries, as installations or through dance and theatre.

I was born in India, the Indian community of New Zealand is one of my communities, it also includes the international diaspora. I am an insider, I am part of it, I live in it. I am also on the outside because I have other influences that shape my world. I have witnessed casteism and as a documentary maker I have seen hidden apartheid and graded inequality in this country. I've seen two women at an Indian emporium in Auckland being asked for their caste and then offered only inferior goods. I've seen Indian men and women promoted in their professions, then being disrespected and ignored by other Indian workers who consider themselves to be of a superior caste. I know of a Bollywood actress physically and verbally assaulting her 'servant' on a film set. It is about humiliation, shame and keeping people subordinate, In New Zealand it is denied and hidden. I have reported a personal incident to the Race Relations Office, which would not investigate.

Caste-based discrimination is being challenged in Britain through legislation but has not made much progress (see for example, Purohit, 2018; Government Equalities Office, 2010). In the United States, California is attempting to bring in the first law to ban caste discrimination (NBC News, 2023). While in Australia it is unlawful to disadvantage employees based on social origin, The Guardian reported in February 2023 that caste discrimination was on the rise there (Luthria, 2023). Discussions on caste discrimination are almost invisible in New Zealand. Results of a request for information on complaints against caste discrimination received since 1993 by the Human Rights Commission that was made at the beginning of 2023 have not yet been made available (Fernandez, 2023).

Hidden Apartheid is one of the films and documentaries about the Indian diaspora. I am now working with artist Tiffany Singh and performer/filmmaker Mandi Rupa-Reid (see Rupa, Rupa-Reid, & Singh, 2023) to highlight some of these issues through art activism that includes an exhibition to be held as part of the Pacific Media Conference in Suva in July 2024. Hidden apartheid remains

evident throughout the Indian diaspora. It is a human rights issue that needs to be kept in the public eye until more is done to eliminate these remnants of domination.

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