

NATION & NARRATION

From critiquing the grand Nehruvian vision to endorsing the Emergency, S. Sukhdev is a paradoxical figure, claims **Ashish Chadha**, as he revisits the iconic *India '67*.

By 1979, at the time of his sudden and premature death in a sound recording studio in Delhi, S. Sukhdev had become one of the most polarizing figures in the history of Indian documentary cinema. A prolific filmmaker, Sukhdev had made searing political documentaries critiquing the Nehruvian government during the mid-1960s. But less than a decade later, he was making films justifying the Emergency. His ideological association with Indira Gandhi's repressive measures followed by his premature death relegated his films to the quagmire of history. I want to therefore focus on his most profound work, *India '67* (1968), which is arguably one of the top ten documentary films made in India.

India '67 is the cinematic pilgrimage of a young nation in search of meaning after a turbulent period of colonial

suppression. It journeys into the heart of a nation twenty years after its decolonization. The expedition was not an imperial reconnaissance mission or a voyage into the heart of darkness. It was certainly not an exploratory intervention of the postcolonial state – a customary trope of Films Division's bureaucratic narratives. Produced by the Films Division for the Montreal Film Festival, the 57-minute film showcased the nation's advance into modernity while still being steeped in a pre-modern universe. The devaluation of Indian currency in 1966, the severe famine in the Chota Nagpur Plateau and north Bihar from 1966 to 1967, followed by food riots in

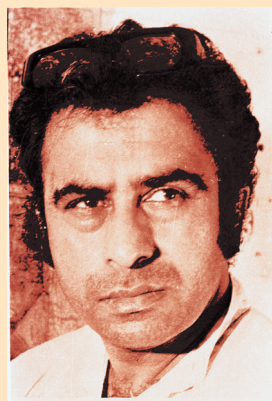
S. Sukhdev. *And Miles to Go...* 14 minutes. 1965.



many major cities like Calcutta and Patna had shattered the pride of the post-colonial state necessitating a government-funded cinematic eulogy to restore its failing dignity.

Shot in Eastmancolor, which was radical for its time, *India '67* is devoid of a storyline, dialogue or didactic commentary. The film has a brazen vanguardist approach. It broke all the rules of a Films Division documentary and emerged as a political poem about contemporary India. Through a mélange of diverse images, the film juxtaposes tradition, industrialization and modernity, and the urban and the rural. *India '67* provides an incongruous portrait of the country, full of paradoxes and contrasts. The beauty of the film lies not in the fact that it used iconic images of India in a cinematic documentary – from ghats, temples and folk musicians to dams, steel factories, nuclear plants and modern artists – but in the witty sagacity and stout candour with which these images are sutured to produce a lyrical portrait of a country straddling contrasting worlds.

India '67 deftly exploits different images and styles to create divergence and convergence in the narrative and provocatively draws from the Eisensteinian montage. The narrative of the film is propelled by the productive tension that Sukhdev creates by manipulating the dialectic dissonance between the urban and the rural, the folk and the technological, the sacred and the industrial. The film begins in the sandy deserts of Western India. As the sun rises, the camera gently sweeps through the desolate wilderness. It meanders around a Rabari family struggling with their nomadic existence in the harsh environment – a snake beaten to death, an open hearth and a crawling beetle valiantly pushing a grain. Soon after, the first sardonic gesture of the film occurs: the camera placidly zooms into a vacant throne in an empty courtyard of the Shri Mohangarh Fortress near Jaisalmer in Rajasthan. In accented English, a voice asks the operator to be connected to “His Highness the Maharaja of Mohangarh”. After a brief silence, the operator tersely informs the caller that the name is not listed. The film thus scathingly announces the end of feudal rule in India and the abolition of the Privy Purse. This ironic tenor becomes the tropological leitmotif of the film occurring at strategic moments. A composite montage follows, which deftly situates India as a fervently religious country, as the camera traverses over the Hawa Mahal in Jaipur, the Mahabodhi temple in Bodh Gaya and temples and churches in South India. However, there are deliberate disruptions – a workshop of car batteries co-existing with a wall plastered with images of Hindu gods and goddess, a young boy attracting customers to a bioscope with a rag doll upholstered with a scruffy bust of the Buddha, among others. In this montage, like in the rest of the film, Sukhdev



S. Sukhdev



S. Sukhdev. *India '67*. 57 minutes. 1968. All images courtesy Films Division of India.

elegantly employs the Kuleshov Effect with élan. Sonorous zooms, jump cuts, elliptical editing, precise visual transitions and smooth aural continuities are employed with sophisticated dexterity to create a complex cinematic semantic that is inundated with intended puns.

Sukhdev uses irony as a structural ploy to subvert the authorial agency of the bureaucratic state, allowing the film to slip through the purgatory urges of the censor board. The film did get into trouble when the board wanted the sequence of a dog peeing on a bicycle adjacent to a roadside brick hovel with a Ganesh idol removed. Here, Sukhdev sardonically gesticulates to both – the modernity of the bicycle with its liberatory potential and the religiosity of an anthropomorphic divinity. The trajectory of the new nation ruptures both, Sukhdev suggests, but at the same time he forecasts the preponderance of both in India's future when he intercuts the towering chimney of the Durgapur Steel Plant with that of the Qutub Minar.

The overt politics of the film is subdued, but the documentary unequivocally points to the growing unrest in India during the late 1960s. In the second half of the film, the narrative montage carries images of drought and poverty. The Marxist class consciousness subtext runs through the film as Sukhdev juxtaposes elite, industrial, middle-class India with proletarian, working class, agrarian and poverty-ridden India. Sukhdev's camera infiltrates, for instance, the 1966 Shiv Sena rally in Bombay when the right-wing party was established. A swift medley of images shows the youthful Bal Thackeray persuading his followers to protest against the influence of non-Marathi people in the newly formed state of Maharashtra. Later in the film, Sukhdev shows images of a man scavenging in a garbage dump while you hear a poem recited by the Marxist Urdu poet Kaifi Azmi. As a filmmaker, Sukhdev actively flirted with the world of Hindi cinema, where left-leaning directors, actors and lyricists affiliated with the Indian People's Theatre Association and Progressive Writers' Association played significant creative roles since the 1940s.

The political perspicacity of the film is further enhanced through an elegant self-reflexive move by Sukhdev. He appears in the documentary as himself – a suave, urbane subject returning to his ancestral homestead in rural Punjab. He arrives in an Ambassador car, the symbol of post-colonial industrialization, wearing causal trousers, a T-shirt and a fedora with a camera lazily slung over. Greeted by his elderly aunt, a devout Sikh with a kirpan dangling by her waist, Sukhdev seems estranged and distant but nostalgically explores the burnt brick ancestral house until he reaches a

wall full of photographs. The film cuts from images of his uncles to that of a framed lithograph of the Sikh gurus and Gandhi and finally settles on a photograph showing him receiving a National Award from the President of India, S. Radhakrishnan, for *And Miles to Go...* Sukhdev consciously places himself as an ambivalent product of the teleology that he is critical of. This self-effacing biographic insertion is a mimesis of the nation's struggle he is capturing in his celluloid narrative. The ambivalent trajectory of India into modernity is mirrored by his own uncertain relationship with his living past. He leaves us with an unsettling portrait of a country trudging on a difficult path.

Born Sukhdev Singh Sandhu in Dehradun in 1933, the filmmaker was raised in Bombay where he studied at Khasla College. He began his career working with the German documentary filmmaker Paul Zils, who reached the Indian subcontinent at the end of the war as a POW. Sukhdev first came into prominence in 1958 with the film *The Saint and the Peasant*, produced by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission on Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan movement. Sukhdev's film was a gentle and compassionate critique of the inequities of feudal society. However, in the ensuing years, Sukhdev became politically radicalized, while on an assignment documenting the anti price-rise movement that the Communist Party of India spearheaded in the early 1960s. This eventually gave birth to *And Miles to Go...* (1965), a bitter appraisal of the inequalities the state produced and perpetuated less than twenty years after Independence. The film won a special jury award at the third International Film Festival of India held in Delhi in 1965. Writing on the film for *The Statesman*, film critic Amita Malik called Sukhdev a "rebel with a cause". Soon after, he made *India '67*.

During the independence war in Bangladesh in 1971, Sukhdev made, *Nine Months To Freedom* (1972), which portrays Indira Gandhi as a saviour. It was this valorization of the then Prime Minister of India that brought him close to the regime that unleashed the Emergency in 1975. He took an offer from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting under Inder Kumar Gujral to make films propagating the Twenty Point Programme. Films like *Behind the Breadlines* (1974), *After the Silence* (1977), *Thunder of Freedom* (1976) made an attempt to highlight issues that advocated a tacit support for the Emergency's 'ameliorative' goals. However, by the end of his life, Sukhdev had developed an ambivalent relationship to the Emergency. Like his ideological allies, CPI and Vinoba Bhave, he supported the Emergency as he saw revolutionary potential in it. However, as the repression of democratic rights increased, he became uncertain about its potential. Sukhdev passed away aged 46.