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## INTERVIEW WITH NILOTPAL MAJUMDAR

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**INTRODUCTION:** Nilotpal Majumdar graduated from FTII with a major in editing in 1989. He is the ex-dean of the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute of India (SRFTI). He is currently the director of Manipur State Film and Television Institute (MFTI), an Institute nestled in the remote Indian State of Manipur, previously rife with political tension and insurgency in the Northeast of India. Nilotpal Majumdar, or Shantida as he is referred to because of his calm and composed nature, was awarded the EDN 2017 (European Documentary Network) Award for initiating international documentary culture in India. He is also the man behind India's first incubation, pitching and mentoring forum for Documentaries called Documentary Resource Initiative (DRI). In absence of a formalized structure for documentary education as a part of film school training in India and the apathy of the Indian State towards its non-fiction film industry, Nilotpal Majumdar's work in connecting global Documentary networks with Indian filmmakers is pathbreaking, and strives to make India and its documentary filmmakers more accessible to the rest of the World. This interview, was conducted over video conferencing in July 2021, over four individual sessions. He talks in depth about the state of documentary education in India, his previous experience at SRFTI and setting up MFTI in the state of Manipur. He then elaborates on the idea behind Documentary Resource Initiative, and how it is helping Indian filmmakers by connecting their projects with stakeholders from the rest of the World.

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**Deenaz Raisinghani (DR):** So, could you tell me a little bit about your early years in FTII, and at what point did you decide that you were more inclined towards non-fiction filmmaking?

**Nilotpal Majumdar (NM):** I joined FTII in 1987, and passed out in 1989 with a specialisation in editing. Since I was deeply involved in the literary movement in Bengal, I was inclined towards several Bengali authors, like Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, who was very close to me. So, my studies were quite intermittent because we were deeply involved in the ongoing literary movement, and we actually wanted to change the World through cinema as a tool. There was a kind of romanticism, and I was fascinated with some films by Jean Cocteau, Jean

Luc Goddard, Fellini and Antonioni, also by Mrinal Sen, Ritwick Ghatak and Satyajit Ray. I was deeply attached to Ghatak's work because he used to talk about a reality to which I belonged, but I always thought that maybe his work needed some more aesthetic validation and refinement. So that is the reason I went to FTII to study, so I could use cinema as a tool to realise the kind of sensibilities I believed in. I realised some things there about film schools actually. It is a great opportunity and I am lucky to have been inducted there as a student, but eventually my experience with the film school is that it is very limited. Limited in terms of building your sensibilities, enhancing your artistic capabilities and more than that, your vision of life. Those facets in the film school were really limited because the teaching methodology was really craft based. So, I will not use the word 'polytechnic', because life in FTII was really fascinating and every day you watch films, and discuss them. You are in a community that constantly thinks and talks about cinema, but unfortunately you talk about the craft, the skill that is required to be employed and somehow, during that time, I found myself in a conflict.

**DR:** What kind of conflict?

**NM:** Conflict, in the sense that I am into a process of craft and script development, and nothing apart from that is being discussed. FTII is just like any other film school, and more of an environment where you acquire the skill and go to the market as early as possible. So, the ambience was such that you breathe in and breathe out cinema. After the third semester, I got a little disillusioned about my background and love for writing and wondered what I was doing in FTII. However, I passed out and graduated from there, and I did realise that these learnings were important for skill and craft development when you enter the market. So, the training format was industry oriented. FTII is still doing a fabulous job and they have components in cinematography, editing and all those multi faculty skills that are required in the industry and they have given these skill sets to the market. For me, there was a kind of conflict that it was purely a fiction school, and in fiction school, you always think about reconstruction or a protocol, or about tools and strategies available with you. I was very inspired by the way FTII taught me how to look at cinema and find my own personal voice, artistic and creative expression; but in terms of the training programme, the lectures and the critical perspectives, it was always a little isolated in terms of the way the World is moving. You are inside a captive breeding centre to be an artist without really being connected, without understanding the society, the sociological and anthropological perspectives. In FTII, you do not have the time because for almost 14 hours a day, you are into that academic environment and that makes you

quite obsessed with such art forms. It was more obsession and emotive engagement with the craft than objectivity and also, we thought less about life but more about how that particular shot can be taken, how the lensing can be fixed, why this light and about doing something different. There was a spirit and energy to defy the conventional protocol, so in fact most of the students used to aspire to be unconventional. I found out later that the way I see my street, my friends and relatives, was a mismatch with what I had learnt in film school, and that is how I slowly got disillusioned by fiction filmmaking. It is something that you can improvise with your skill and craft, that you can employ to make it credible. I would not say there is no truth in fiction. In fact, there are some great filmmakers who are able to embed their experiences into the body of the work that they create. For me however, something natural or real is what I am attracted to. My writing has always been extremely personal without any structured plot or story. Instead, it's more reflexive.

**DR:** You have said that FTII was mostly a fiction film school. Did FTII offer any introduction to or training in documentary filmmaking back then?

**NM:** I actually started watching documentaries only after I went to FTII. I started studying documentaries from an academic point of view, particularly the British documentary movement, the *avant-garde*, *cinema vérité* from France, or New Cinema of the 60's and Direct Cinema of North America and Canada. So, these are the things that we started reading, but what we learnt from documentary was very little. We were just getting acquainted with it. There were screenings of documentaries and filmmakers used to come for cultural exchanges. A documentary that really moved me was *Night and Fog* (Renaiss 1955). The kind of things that one can imagine happen to humanity are shown there. Ironically, I watched it on Diwali during a special screening after dinner. There were firecrackers everywhere. You could smell gunpowder in the air, and there were diyas and lights in Pune but it was haunting and devastating. That is when I realised that possibly documentary can really change and transform a person. It's not just a community, it is transformative in itself. Documentary also has a lot of temporal values; the value of time in say a documentary like *A Diary for Timothy* (Jennings 1945) set during WW II. I saw a film on Beirut, called *Beirut: The Last Home Movie* (Fox 1988) which I loved. An Australian film that I really loved for its cinematic poetic feel was *The Shark Callers of Kontu* (Rourke 1982). An indigenous guy who has the rare ability to talk to sharks, and uses it to amuse them and catch them or something like that. In that film, I found a connectedness between the man, the water, the sharks, the country boats which take you to a

different universe and that's the kind of film I would personally love to make. Another one was *Turksib* (Turin 1929), a Soviet era documentary. Without FTII, I wouldn't have understood how to look at documentary. However, I realised at that time that I do not know anything about documentary because in most film schools in India, the documentary gets only about eight weeks time in the curriculum. In FTII, it was even lesser. One day, you watch some classics, and the intensity with which it was created but you don't understand how to handle the material, so in terms of documentary treatment, we always thought it was some kind of a programme. We talk to some people; we shoot some things and then we put together the material that gives you a kind of understanding of the person you are talking about. So, basically a biography of a personality like a sitarist, or flautist or some writer or footballer. So, it was always about characters who were powerful by their own independent achievement. At the same time, there were other filmmakers such as Anand (Patwardhan) making films. They were trying to break away from the protocol and it was easier for them because they had never gone into film school which obsessively forces you to learn a certain thing in a certain way. This is eventually the western mode of audio-visual storytelling which tells you how to shoot, where to put your images, how to go for transitions, what cuts you should employ, and how you should balance between all those elements together. So, they are always pushing you into a structure. When I started making documentaries, I realised that it is something more, it is not realism or reality that we talk about. When you start absorbing or inheriting things, and it shows in your story, that is reality. Opening the camera and going to the street corner and shooting something is not reality according to me. It is actually just capturing real time and the elements that are together in that time.

**DR:** Did you watch any Films Division (FD) documentaries at that time?

**NM:** Yes of course! However, I was never attracted to FD films and I do not know why. FD is globally one of the most important institutions in terms of recording the history of India. If you really look at Films Divisions' archive its only FD that has managed to record the pulses of time and history. They have done some fantastic work in this regard. However, because they transformed from Information Films of India (IFI), because of propaganda purposes by the ruling British, there were newsreels everywhere. When the New Economic Policy came to the US, from then onwards documentary started looking at a different perspective. There was an American experimental movement for some time, sort of a surrealist movement. Documentary filmmaking evolved from the word 'propaganda' and tried to induce and inculcate nationalism

in people during War time. The belief that our country is doing really well, our rulers are really brave. So, these films were made mostly around that theme. I was absolutely fascinated by SNS Sastry. One film I can still remember is *The House that Ananda built* (Bilimoria 1968). It's a story of migration and how it touches upon dreams and aspirations of city life. How villages are being abandoned, and old people are forced to stay alone while younger ones move towards the city. *They call me Chamar* (Lalvani 1980), was also great in the context of Indian society and the position of Dalits in India. Some of the films on personalities were also interesting as they give us a certain degree of information and a level of political and cultural history of time so you cannot really ignore those. Mani Kaul made some wonderful films. In the 70's some people from Bombay made some amazing films, such as Anand (Patwardhan) and Rahul Roy among others. If you look at it, except for Mani Kaul, all of these filmmakers were self-taught. In terms of documentary as a form of storytelling, FD films always had issues. Mr Pati (Pramod Pati), SNS Sastry, Sukhdev, Jahangir (Bhownagary), Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani are the few names you will find everywhere because they were pioneers and also in the academic circuit, there is tremendous fascination for these people. Documentary cinema has gone into a totally different direction now.

**DR:** Let us talk about your forays into professional work after you passed out of FTII.

**NM:** When we were passing out of FTII, it was a transition time. U-matic was in full form and Television had started with so called dramatic serials. Dramaturgy was a kind of industry which was emerging in street corners and local hubs. Smaller studios with editing machines were being installed. So, when we came out, there was lesser film work. I never went to Bombay. In Bengal, the mainstream cinema was suffering a lot. Only a few businessmen were investing and a handful of people were making films, so it was quite an exclusive system. We started working as professionals in low band video. Within one year, in 1990 I started working on a documentary film and my friend was my first producer. He gave me the money very generously. It was a disaster as a film because we did not know how to handle real life situations. That is because we did not get that kind of an education. We were somehow temperamentally dominated by the spirit of fiction. I spent a lot of money on the right kind of equipment, most of the lights, track, trolley which are actually redundant elements for making a documentary unless you are making a specific kind of documentary. I should have written a book on the story instead of making a film because it looked very artificial, almost an aesthetic disaster for me. It went to the Bombay International Film Festival (now Mumbai International

Film Festival, MIFF) competition section but I could never really understand deeply the characters I was dealing with. I also made some other films, some small programmes and I started shooting for others. I used to do cinematography, editing, and direction independently. I saw that my friends were making good documentaries and we made a film where I was the editor and cinematographer in 2000. That film was invited to *Cinema du reel* in Paris. It was my first international festival, so we did not have the time to network or chit chat with friends. You watch four to five films a day, and that is when I realised how documentary film is changing globally and how wonderful, intimate ways to make films were happening, things that we always wanted to pursue.

**DR:** What about support for documentary in India? Do you feel the system does not encourage the growth of documentary, even though there is public television, Films Division, and film schools that engage in some form of non-fiction training?

**NM:** Documentaries will never have the so-called audiences that watch dramatic films or television serials. There is no public system or Institution that supports it. The Government runs non-profit making academies like Lalit Kala Academy, Sahitya Academy, Sangeet Natak Academy, hospitals, institutions and Universities. If we look at private Universities, they are also profit-making institutions but public Universities are created with public money, they are welfare institutions and it is an investment that builds the nation. One has to look at documentary like that because it will never be as commercially successful in terms of pulling audiences and pushing them to see something that they do not want. So, in that way, India is the only country where there is no support available, and Films Division is now not commissioning films. During Mr. V.S.Kundu's time (ex-head of Films Division), he completely changed the mode of commissioning films. It was more transparent, it was going to the right kind of filmmakers, who were young and it depended on the content and subject of the film, so it really helped create a batch of good and credible young filmmakers. The perception of documentary is completely absent with the policymakers, the bureaucracy, with the people who decide and define cultural policies of the country. Documentary does not have any space in there.

**DR:** What is the current state of documentary education in India? Is there a complete absence of any formalised programme in documentary filmmaking in public Universities/film schools?

**NM:** If you think of film schools, Jamia Milia Islamia has gifted us some really good documentary filmmakers, even if it is not a film school. Similarly, there are many schools with mass communications or visual communications in the curriculum, that have produced some great filmmakers. They somehow managed independently, but a huge number of graduates are coming out of campuses and research is on the rise. What will they do though? One needs money and resources to make films, so there has to be a system that encourages, supports and advances the process of documentary filmmaking. You cannot really compare this system to mainstream commercial filmmaking. Until today, there is not a single full-fledged course on documentary, which is run by State institutions. It is there as one of the components of your overall filmmaking or communication course. Several of these universities with mass communication or visual communication courses incorporate non-fiction elements, but this is not because of the passion for non-fiction and the necessity for training. These are incorporated because if you go into real fiction filmmaking, it requires a lot of resources, money and investment. You need a special kind of camera; you need a studio and a lot of infrastructural investments. Also, non-recurring human resources such as talent, or a huge production system that requires a lot of investment. So, that is why some of the courses are a little diluted in universities because of the engagement of human resources. If you talk of non-fiction, there are television courses where you learn how to gather and read news, how to script it but in terms of storytelling there are no courses in non-fiction in our country. The Aurobindo institute in Delhi (Sri Aurobindo Centre for Arts and Communication) have started a documentary course, which is a courageous decision. Again, it is not a state institution, it is run by non-profits.

**DR:** So, is this a diploma programme in documentary filmmaking at SACAC?

**NM:** Yes, this is a two-year diploma programme.

**DR:** So, now let us come to the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute (SRFTI), Kolkata. It is under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and since you have worked in the capacity of Dean at the institute, is it a fixed curriculum or is the course syllabi open to change and revision?

**NM:** One of the good things about SRFTI is it is quite open to change. We incorporated a lot of new things because it was not a fixed structure although there was a structure that evolved from FTII, which was a film school with a socialist model. SRFTI embraces state of the art

technology, and helps students get acquainted with the latest equipment that is being used in the industry, so that way it is an incredible space for kids to learn and understand what is happening. The gap between the techno environment and the climate in the school was not much. The faculty was very strongly involved in the administration and tried to propose new things, but at the same time, to be honest, we inherited a kind of a model. Bringing in new technology does not really change an atmosphere. It is access to something contemporary, in terms of equipment and gadgets that you are using. It is fine, but the legacy which was inherited from a so-called film school structure, will stay.

**DR:** From what I understand, there is no standalone course in India except for the one in Aurobindo Institute (SACAC) on documentary filmmaking. So, even in SRFTI, from what I understand, there is a very small component to it. Is that correct?

**NM:** Very little. What we have is a two-month time frame, about eight weeks for documentary or non-fiction. The non-fiction component is introduced as one of the projects, and we give inputs, exposure, hands-on lectures and individual mentoring to support the project. So, this format does not work for documentary training and teaching, because it is more complex as a medium than what we understand as cinema. You can learn the basics of drama and fiction filmmaking, but in documentary a lot more time is required. You work in a completely different environment, with reality and time. So, a mere camera won't do, you need to imbibe some things.

**DR:** So, what is the ideal way to teach a course on documentary then?

**NM:** We have to blend hands-on training and academics together to arrive at a model where we will have to accept that documentary filmmaking is completely on the other side of fiction filmmaking. We need to create an academic trajectory, so that step by step, a defined model of the curriculum can be developed. There is hardly any research on documentary here, so we have to focus on research methodology within the course. We need to bring in a little bit of anthropology, sociology and cultural studies in a big way. When I go into a street corner with a camera and take a position, I will have to know if my position is emotional, ideological or theoretical. I am defining it without knowing, so all these things can be thought of and somehow, we have to dismantle the archived model of teaching documentary in a specific way. Scholarship on documentary is abysmally poor and its non-existent. Universities abroad of course have started talking about it now, and include a documentary component or course



in their programmes. Many of the US and most of the UK Universities also have a documentary course. So, you also need great teachers to teach documentary and establish trust with the students. It is important for the Universities to ensure that teachers do something of their own, which is creative work and submit it. It is difficult for those who are on contractual appointments but for regular positions like associate professors and professors, they should create a body of original work every two years. In our system, it's not very encouraged and it is seen as a kind of business or enterprise that the teacher is taking up. You can of course choose to take up projects as a researcher, but working outside of the University system as an academic is not very encouraged here. In top-ranked and also smaller Universities outside, it is mandatory to create a body of work. A film school teacher cannot be confined for more than a decade into a system of classroom teaching. They have to find themselves and see where they stand. Creating good teachers is most important. Maybe down the line, these young filmmakers who have worked professionally come back to teaching, or we allow them to work while simultaneously teaching.

**DR:** You are right about the lack of a comprehensive module and scholarship on Indian documentary. Don't you feel what we learn about documentary is from a very Euro -American context. Learning through their films and the modes of expression that the filmmakers used, as was established eons ago. We never really bring in the global South into the discourse.

**NM:** These works are very archived and redundant now. In terms of emotions, sensitivity, and politics of portraying somebody and what could be the way to represent someone is completely different now. We look at a particular film and see some common vocabularies coming from the classroom, and we create a kind of an elitist community of students who have a strong vocabulary, but we were actually supposed to talk about the people and reach out to them. It is me, my time and my people. It is time we revolutionized this.

**DR:** So, what led to the idea of a forum like DRI (Documentary Resource Initiative) and when and where was it conceptualised?

**NM:** DRI was actually conceptualised when I joined SRFTI in 2003. I was always curious about where independent documentary filmmakers go and if they can be liberated through a network or system which includes stakeholders that can support their projects. So, it was conceptualised at SRFTI and about six to seven editions of DocEdge (The Asian forum for documentary which is one of the flagship events of DRI) were done at SRFTI. It really started

building up from there and it was the first of its kind forum in any academic institution. Later, because of the spiritual conflict between a forum set in an academic environment, and it catering to the market where filmmakers' projects would be funded, the academic syllabi kind of suffered as students were involved in this forum. Eventually, some of my ex-students and I got together and I decided that this was a unique forum. The most important thing was to present our films to the global community, and do it very professionally in sync with the best practices that are happening globally. So, we set up DRI independently again. Initially, there was very little hope for it because why should investors should come to India, a country which is not known for its documentary practices. A country which is mostly known by its Mumbai film industry, or Bollywood. Globally, there is an alternative tradition but when people talk about India, they talk about dancing, music and ceremonies happening on screen in Indian films. So, people were not confident about coming to India and investing time in travelling so far, unless they really were a fan of India and its culture. Eventually, it started growing and people started coming in. I could see an honest inquiry about Indian culture and its complexities and ethnicities, languages and religions. So, people came in looking for those Indian stories. The training component is generally not available at schools here, so we as a forum should be able to bring in the best professionals to our filmmakers. That is how DRI evolved into a non-profit institution.



**Img. 1: Nilotpal Majumdar at Documentor – Tezpur, Assam, Source: Nilotpal Majumdar**

**DR:** So, what are the various activities that DRI does annually?

**NM:** There's *DocEdge*, which is the pitching and training forum. *Documentor*, which is a travelling workshop, *Light School* for screening and discussions, *Mind for Stories* which is a Masterclass with experts and then there is *Lets Doc* which is the fellowship programme for filmmakers. DocEdge is the first Asian forum for documentary, and is the first of its kind in India. Through DRI we are free to connect with anybody to give it a more dynamic shape. We started creatively collaborating with Korean partners, with the Japanese, with European institutions and soon enough the word spread all over the World about this forum. People now believe that it is one of the best global forums for getting hold of good films. We have evolved our training model consistently, so filmmakers know that if I go to *DocEdge* I will be able to make something out of my film and evolve it and I will find some good partners. We focus on the quality of work, and provide rigorous training. So, we started running other programs besides *DocEdge*, such as *Documentor*, a five-day travelling workshop which happens in Tezpur, Jaipur, Kochi, Imphal and other cities. Lot of indigenous students come and attend this as well. What happens here is we screen different kinds of films, we discuss, dismantle, deconstruct, and come up with various views. We noticed how more than 90% students were getting exposed to documentary and special ways of storytelling for the first time. From Imphal, many students came with a basic idea so we mentored them for five days and gave inputs and got them to correct their visual edits, and many of those films have got National and International awards. Our idea is to reach out to underrepresented regions, collaborate with local institutions and not only concentrate on the metro cities because there are enough opportunities to discuss films, and network with other filmmakers in the bigger cities. Like Jaipur for instance does not have a documentary temperament even if it's a big city, so people came there from Ahmedabad, Mumbai so we trained them and the audience got a chance to interact with the filmmaker directly. Similarly, in Imphal, people from Nagaland and Assam came in so we kind of covered the northeast. We also screen films for free regularly, such as in Max Mueller Bhavan Kolkata and in New Town. We have this programme called *Light School*, which is an online festival that has screenings and deconstruction, so it is mostly just screening and Q and A with filmmakers and other experts who are a part of the DRI network. We also have something called a Masterclass, which involves talking to an expert in your space, and indulge in a face-to-face dialogue. It's called *Mind for stories*, where a master is showing

films for two or three days, discussing how and why they have shot it, what is the motivation behind portraying certain things in a certain way. One of the most important events is called *Lets Doc*, which is a five-day mentoring fellowship programme for early career Indian filmmakers. This is a residential fellowship, so the entry and stay are taken care of by us. We have ten to twelve participants, and they reside in an art space and come up with a project. Inputs are provided by expert documentary filmmakers and they go through a gruelling process whereby they learn where to stand in terms of their story. After this stay is over, the filmmakers come back after two months with their developed projects based on the inputs, they got during the first phase. In the final stage, we see that filmmakers have transformed themselves and their films. Two promising filmmakers out of this list are awarded a sum of one lakh rupees to help shoot their projects, or for travel and research. The mentors also make these filmmakers ready for international platforms, so that they can come up well. I am happy to mention that more than five filmmakers from the *Lets Doc* programme are doing incredibly well and have been acknowledged by global documentary institutions. They are working with Sundance, IDFA, DMZ Docs, and that is really commendable because they just came to us with a piece of paper and an idea. So, this impact gives us an idea that we are taking up the responsibility to empower filmmakers and make them understand the way it works and also develop the raw idea that they have in their minds. They too have the intelligence, the devices, tools and strategic understanding to take their films to the global community.

**DR:** So, there is also an interest in Indian stories from what I presume? There are a lot of partners wanting to come to India to listen to filmmakers and support their projects.

**NM:** There is a great degree of interest in Indian stories now. They are fascinated by India because when I attend a lot of international forums, I find that there is something very special and unique about the Indian images, because of the quality of life, the attire, the strangeness that Indian culture offers. This is kind of an overplayed perception actually. The World looks at us as an exotic and poetic entity, there is no doubt about it. They also know about poverty, the GDP and per capita income, democracy being at stake, political hierarchy and the caste system. With all these complexities, they love to get beautiful stories from here. So, if we look at it, we have been able to fascinate the global community, but we cannot generate anything from our own country, which is a contradiction. We know that there are no buyers here, there is no television space, so the market is not local, it is global and they have to prepare

accordingly. So, not only do we train at the grassroots level, but we also bring filmmakers, train them and help them reach somewhere.

**DR:** How do you identify and partner with the global network of collaborators for *DocEdge*, the pitching and mentoring forum?

**NM:** We look at a good mix of distributors globally because we know they pick up certain kind of films. *DocEdge* is a platform that is global in nature, and we focus more on the creative and artistic documentary, rather than a solely political documentary, although documentary can never be devoid of politics. So, we know which distributors are right for our platform. We also know and collaborate with producers who are already working with such kind of filmmakers. They have the credentials through which they can get local funds. For instance, how do you get a Finnish fund for an Indian film which is open to international collaborations? You look for a Finnish producer. Each and every country has a State sponsored coffer that supports the projects. There is a fantastic model that Europe follows actually. We choose them according to their track record, their tastes, their limitations, their needs and also the quality of cinema they are associated with. Some of them may be producers, or distributors, or broadcasters. So, we mix them up. I am trying to get hold of more partners in Scandinavia like in Norway, and Denmark which have a big market for documentary. Korea is also another market that is emerging in both documentary and fiction cinema. We also have tie ups with Griffith Film School in Australia and they send their students to *DocEdge* every year. They come as international observers. Norwegian and Lithuanian and also students from Myanmar come to attend *DocEdge*. A lot of international filmmakers attend as observers at *DocEdge*. We create a global community, where different geopolitical situations, different value systems come together and enrich each other which is fantastic. It is almost like a community of around a hundred people. So, this is how it works. We also like to keep it ruthlessly professional because the creative arena is one of the most undisciplined and we have to take care of that. The global community has been very supportive, whether you talk about BBC, Knowledge network or NHK because they trust this platform, with a high degree of commitment, warmth and sense of community.

**DR:** So, can a filmmaker just walk in with a basic idea, or can they come in different stages of their filmmaking process?

**NM:** They can come in the early stages of development. We prefer if they have some sort of an idea and we encourage films which are not yet ready. Most of the projects are in the production stage, and that is how the partners can give their inputs and suggest if they can be regenerated in a better way. If you come with a movie which has finished production, you may ask for a post-production fund. When the professional community comes here, at the end of the day it is capital being invested, and that investment comes from public funds because all our partners represent grant bodies or philanthropic organisations or public television. When you are a representative of a public television, you have to make it logical and rationalise your investment. When the public television shares it with their audiences, it is a kind of accountability to the public. They cannot really take chances with that public money. Public television network outside doesn't really work as they do here. I do not think anyone even watches Doordarshan anymore. They have the deepest connections with the people of the nation and work on public subscriptions in a lot of places. For instance, in Japan, 80 per cent of the public subscribe to NHK monthly because they believe that NHK carries with it the social and moral responsibility. When the tsunami comes, the first images are carried by the NHK. That is why they are interested in talking about topics around the World that are educative, and informative. So, of course there has to be a quality of work that is presented to these global partners. The idea that comes from the filmmakers therefore has to be supplemented with textual, oral and visual presentations to make sure they are capable of taking the project forward.



**Img 2. Nilotpal Majumdar receiving the European Documentary Network (EDN) Award in 2017,**  
**Source: Nilotpal Majumdar**

**DR:** What is the role of the EDN (European Documentary Network) in encouraging and contributing to the development of DRI?

**NM:** I happened to meet a fantastic person called Tue Steen Muller. He was passionate about pushing documentary in every corner. He was fascinated with young filmmakers, and he did a lot for Balkan and Baltic filmmakers. He was the head of EDN (European Documentary Network) and I wrote to him around 2001. He was not very convinced initially about someone from India writing to him and wanted to know the purpose. When I told him about such a forum, he said it will be difficult because Indian documentaries do not have much of a presence outside, although we have seen some good documentaries. Thinking of India as a market would not be possible. EDN sent Paul Pauwels, a producer to India to moderate the *DocEdge* pitching forum, he is a fantastic person. Paul took a workshop for four days, from 10am to 8pm every day and it was incredible. He knew that Indian filmmakers know very little about how the international market operates. I then asked him if establishing India as a market for

documentaries was a possibility. So that is how we started. After this, Leena Pasanen who was just leaving YLE Finnish TV took over as director of EDN, and she and Stefano Tealdi joined in and really helped. They loved Indian filmmakers and helped nurture this forum like their own. She funded some films for Finnish television. Stefano became an ambassador for *DocEdge*. So that is how the network grew for the first seven years. Then, Paul took over as director of EDN. *DocEdge* has its own design, strategy and framework, but I needed somebody to help me network with partners in Europe. So, Paul used to help me with this but he has resigned from the EDN now. As I said before, this is the first of its kind forum in Asia. Korea, China and Indonesia started similar forums later. Dhaka DocLab in Bangladesh started with my initiative, and then Sri Lanka and Nepal started some work similar to this.

**DR:** What is the source of revenue for running so many activities simultaneously?

**NM:** Being a non-profit, resources are coming from foreign grants and the Ford Foundation has been very generous with us. Also, some local donations work, mainly from our supporters. Our expenditure for human resources is very less actually, even though we conduct such big events. We are a small team. I being a President, do not take money from *DocEdge*. In terms of benefit to DRI, even if we are spending, we are saving some funds, so we can create a professional institute. We want to save for that dream. It is not easy running a non-profit nowadays, in terms of compliance and financial aid, taxes. We need to have regular staff but that needs more resources. We have also received some funding from Sundance Institute earlier. The dream behind *DocEdge* is to really sensitise the public and build an audience, to give professional training to filmmakers by establishing a space for hardcore filmmaking training instead of academic curriculum and giving them a degree. It is about connecting filmmakers to the World, building a co-sharing cross cultural space and DRI has been successful in that. People trust us and it is becoming a global brand now. So, like *The Telegraph* newspaper says 'its unputdownable', this is similar to that. This is not material gain; it is a cause that I have always believed in. So that gives us immense pleasure.

**DR:** What about Indian institutional support, because all of these are global partners. Is that still hard to find?

**NM:** We have some support, but it is extremely difficult to get Indian CSR funds. They go normally to the social sector and during the pandemic, even more so. All the money now goes into healthcare or childcare sector. CSR also goes to the grassroots level and we do not work at



the grassroots level in that way. I don't believe in going to the interior districts, giving them ten days training just to get some grant. I am not making a filmmaker that way and doing justice to them. It would just be an experience and exploration with cameras as toys so to speak so we do not want to spend our energies on that. The grant bodies ask us about the benefits when we say we are organising the forum or festival. We say there is no benefit, you will be our funding partner. We cannot put your poster throughout or a banner in the stage. So, whether its administration, or bureaucracy, or political circuit or corporate executives, the understanding of documentary is absolutely non-existent. So, it's a kind of holistic collapse in India. In all the countries, I have seen that the corporate and philanthropy organisations run the show. They really support documentary. in Korea, Japan, Indonesia the films are supported by the Government. In India, there is no fund for us from the corporate sector or the Government. Television could have come up in a good way to support us. They could have got some great stories from us just by supporting our platform, but it is not happening. We obviously need and want local money as well.

**DR:** What about the forums like NFDC film bazaar?

**NM:** I have never been to NFDC film bazaar but my students have been there. It is a market and its different. NFDC FILM BAZAAR is a one-time invitation to filmmakers through selection. They have also added documentary filmmakers. They have the opportunity to meet mentors, festival programmers, directors, and the people coming from other markets. It is mostly for fiction filmmakers. They get someone to mentor them and they get avenues for production money to come in for their projects. So, it can be called a market for Indian filmmakers.

**DR:** Some projects and filmmakers that you remember that came to DRI and have done well nationally and internationally?

**NM:** *Lets Doc* fellows are doing exceptionally well. There is a first-time filmmaker who has actually managed to get the most important grants available globally. She has been supported really well. There is fantastic support that is coming in, and other professions are getting engaged and involved. She has got French and Norwegian producers to help her out. She was initially in *Lets Doc* and an observer at *DocEdge*. She understood the ecosystem, worked on her project and applied the next year. Now, she is doing incredibly well. This has become the most supported project in the last two to three years. She got the Sundance fund, the Chicken

and Egg women filmmakers award, and also IDFA Europe. With exposure, understanding and workshops, you gather knowledge and experience to sharpen your skill and also understand how the ecosystem works when you come with preparation and propose your film to the international community. So, that is how DRI is an all-rounder and culminates at *DocEdge*. In the last years, over 100 projects have been supported by DRI. If I think about the last two years, there is Rintu (Thomas) and Sushmit's (Ghosh) '*Writing with Fire*' of course. It's a wonderful film and it has won a lot of international awards already including the Oscar nomination, Sundance and HotDocs. There are a few others like Anirban (Dutta) and Anupama (Srinivasan), who have an ongoing co-production and they also won the best pitch at *DocEdge* Kolkata in 2017. Shounak Sen, Kushal Batunge, Ajimesh Saha, Sarvnik Kaur, Vinita Negi, Vivek Chaudhury, Arya Rothe, Nishtha Jain who have been awarded various grants and support for their projects at *DocEdge* Kolkata. Ours is a platform, so we give them the opportunity for creative collaboration and networking and then they go on with their work. We don't own the rights to their work.

**DR:** Now let us come to MFTI, the Manipur Film and Television Institute that you are currently setting up in the remote State of Manipur in North East India, a conflict prone region in the past. Could you talk a little bit about that?

**NM:** The Chief Minister of Manipur during the previous Congress Government set up a committee to establish a film school in Manipur. It was his dream project. So, I was invited and elected by the Committee to establish the MFTI (Manipur Film and Television Institute) to set it up, look after the infrastructure, the academic model, the syllabi, the academic administration and recruitment of teachers. This was around 2016 -17. The CM is no longer in office now, as the ruling party is different. It was supposed to be on a land spanning 100 acres but now it is going to be a defined program on a smaller scale. The initial issues with setting it up are now ironed out, and they are proud of the fact that something in the domain of film is happening in a State like Manipur. Finance is an issue because it is a small State so the revenue is not that much. I have always stressed on the fact that the teaching faculty needs to be at par and with regular posts, not contractual if the course is to do well, and we may need to get faculty from outside for that reason. We have now truncated the model and are trying to establish it as a postgraduate level documentary school, a first in India. This is a great initiative for the North Eastern states because they have a lot of stories to tell which mainstream India does not know in terms of their culture, livelihood and lifestyle. The region is quite cut off

ethnically, so this Institution will integrate the North East with mainstream India. One has to tread carefully in a public sector job-oriented market; there is a question of neutrality, native representation but these issues are all sorted out now. Around 2019, we bought the necessary equipment, we thought the course will begin in May 2019 but the recruitment took time. We are a small team that has been working, and we are waiting for the recruitment to take place. The course structure and curriculum are ready, but because of the pandemic, it has been delayed indefinitely.

**DR:** So, is this a Master's Degree or a PG Diploma in documentary? Could you elaborate a little bit on the course structure because it will be unique in its own way?

**NM:** Sure. So, it is going to be a Post Graduate Diploma, and we are waiting to launch it. A Master's Degree needs an affiliation with the Universities and UGC (University Grants Commission) has strict rules about curriculum and recruitment. We need about four hours of practicals with students every day. I have been a board of studies at the Universities and I have seen that the UGC cannot afford to have a model with a heavier practical component, unless something changes. For the course structure, we want to focus not only on the craft, but want to push on skill development in all areas. We want to incorporate the thought of the human being as an artist and how to look at life. We have created interfaces between the local communities and students. We are planning to have workshops where we will teach them how to incorporate stories with indigenous elements in their body of work. So, these workshops will be followed by dialogues and discussions. There will also be film screenings where the students will critically look into the work, without intervention by filmmakers, who will just listen to the critical analysis by students. Screenings are the most important part of the academic journey. We wanted to incorporate grassroots' engagements in the curriculum. The basic eligibility is graduation in any stream with or without experience. A minimal amount of filmmaking experience may be helpful for this course, because then it is predetermined that you are joining this course because you have the passion. I am hoping all this gets realised someday because it is tiring and takes immense effort and I do not have the same energy as before. Even if I am not personally there to run it, the school will start soon because everything is mostly ready to launch the documentary course. This course will help the local students because it is a small State with geopolitical differences, linguistic diversity, and problems with access due to the location. They really need to speak in their own voices so it becomes

important in the National context because they are so isolated. We mostly hear of news from a place like Guwahati, Assam which is bigger and more centrally located.

**DR:** So, the funding for this course comes from the State?

**NM:** Yes, that is correct!

**DR:** In our conversations, you refer to the term 'knowledge factory' if we are to understand documentary in the current scenario. How do you define the term 'knowledge factory' as a part of the larger documentary discourse?

**NM:** Everyone knows that documentary is recording history, and recording time. Any motion pictures being recorded are documenting history and time. There are two things that are happening. We are into a space and we record what we see outside, but we also give our personal interpretations to it. While the recording is happening, we are constantly trying to connect to ourselves as individuals. This is a kind of synergy that says something more than public history. Me, myself and I are somehow planted into my surroundings and story space, or the kind of issues and subjects that I am dealing with. You are really chiselling out reality with your own understanding, and interpretations. This personalised connection with my reality when I record in a documentary situation keep adding layers and layers of knowledge which add to humanity. That is what I was referring to as a 'knowledge factory'. When people access it in libraries even 500 years later, it goes beyond perceived history. This mode of storytelling is absolutely direct and tries to deal with reality. So, this is something that is really unique. Documentary storytelling leaves something for posterity.

**DR:** We have been talking of an environment where documentary will be nurtured and there will be more space and focus on it, much more than it has got in the past. So, do you feel with the advent of the documentary programmes like the ones that you are starting, be it an incubation forum like DRI or the PGDBA in documentary at MFTI, the environment for documentary will thrive in the future?

**NM:** Definitely! Documentary as a genre is becoming one of the most vibrant forms of storytelling. There is information overload with the change in technology and people are not very happy with that. Documentary is more than just information, and it is more than dramaturgy. People love to associate themselves with what they see on screen. The audience is slowly building up and, in some cases, we have seen the theatre, or festivals absolutely full.

People are slowly beginning to enjoy documentary and they realise it gives them more than what they thought of. This form has transformed itself over the year so I feel the future is great. There will certainly be more and more people like academics, or policy makers who will be interested in this form.

**DR:** What do you see yourself doing in the future; do you see yourself pursuing academia or do you want to pursue your work only with DRI?

**NM:** I would like to continue to be engaged with DRI and find an alternate way to deal with filmmakers, give them professional exposure, a higher level of creative intent and motivation. It is easier to be radical with this kind of a population because institutionalised format is very stringent. It is not bad because they get initial training at these schools, but I would like to work with early career filmmakers in the future as they have already decided that they wish to pursue this with passion, so it better to have a dialogue with them and share my thoughts with them. Rather than teaching the craft, I would like to mould them as human beings, as artists to bring out something special from them, so they know how to deal with this market in terms of funding, industry compliances etc. I do not know how much longer I can continue. I do not believe in working with everybody. My motive is to get more people interested and involved in documentary.

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**About the interviewer:** Deenaz Raisinghani is a UGC-JRF Doctoral Fellow and lecturer at the Department of Media and Communication Studies, Savitribai Phule Pune University, India. She is a Media and Communications graduate. Her current PhD research is focused on the digitalisation of Indian Documentary post 2010. She has previously worked in a UGC-DAAD cross cultural research project on Internet access between The University of Tübingen, Germany and The University of Pune, India. She has also presented her ongoing research at The World Cinema Conference 2021 (WoCICO) in association with The Asian Film Festival Barcelona, and the International Film and Media Conference (IFM 2022).

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