

Article

Manali Saha

## Revisiting Kashmir: Landscape and Documentary Narrative in Sanjay Kak's *Jashn-e-Azadi*

In the opening sequence of *Jashn-e-Azadi How We Celebrate Freedom* (2007), Part I, the camera glides over the tranquil grey surface of the Dal Lake during winter. Then, a montage of several images, like a boat and a crow mirrored in the lake, are juxtaposed with scenes of protests and violence through slow dissolves. This particular narrative technique is a recurring motif throughout this two-part documentary. Here, director Sanjay Kak has adopted a deliberate non-linear strategy, which integrates location shots with archival materials, news footage, visuals of (folk) performances, protest marches, as well as images of disappeared and martyred Kashmiris. This paper focuses on this particular textual style of the film to explore the intricate relationship between the physical landscape and its depiction through the non-fiction mode, shedding light on the dynamic portrayal of the Kashmir Valley (hereafter referred to as Kashmir or Valley of Kashmir) in documentary filmmaking.

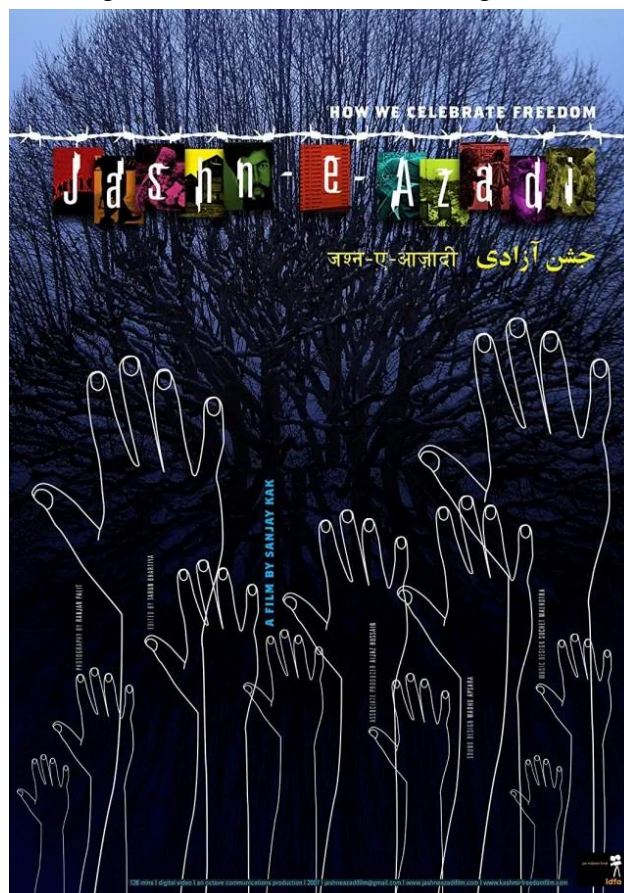
In this context, I explore 'landscape' as a subject of inquiry by focusing on its filmed imagination, construction, and representation. Here, while addressing the film *Jashn-e-Azadi: How We Celebrate Freedom*, I have chosen the term 'documentary' instead of 'non-fiction film' because, other than the fact that the term 'non-fiction film' can

be applied to a broader category of on-screen works which include different forms and diverse experimentations, this film is primarily based on documenting a lived reality and thus, becoming an

archive of particular time and space. So, I believe the term 'documentary' better justifies the film's form and intention.

Documentary practice, in principle, aspires to contest and question authoritarian power by interrogating its rationalisations, which are often normalised by the authority or groups in power. Documentaries aim to record the effects of that power in the everyday life of the communities upon whom it gets enacted and sustained. Through this process, documentary films contribute to the writing of

history and complicate it simultaneously by adding multifaceted layers of human experiences to the official historical records and bringing them into larger public consciousness. They not only attempt to document reality but also shape and interpret it, thus contributing to historical discourse and representing them through subjective perspectives and narrative constructions. The documentary in question here, *Jashn-e-Azadi*, plays this critical role by documenting various aspects of the Kashmir conflict and thus resisting the enforced erasure of multiple accounts from public memory and the records of history.



Sanjay Kak, director of *Jashn-e-Azadi*, is a Kashmiri-origin author, activist, and documentary filmmaker renowned for his works on environmental politics, activism, and political resistance in India. *Jashn-e-Azadi* is primarily regarded as part of a series of three documentaries directed by Kak, described as the “Trilogy of Indian Democracy,” which probe and reflect on the workings of the ‘world’s largest democracy.’ While *Jashn-e-Azadi* delves into the decades-long conflict in Kashmir, *Words on Water* (2002) focuses on the ‘Narmada Bachao Andolon’ (‘Save the Narmada River Movement’), a people’s protest against Narmada dam projects in India. The trilogy’s last instalment, *Red Ant Dream/Matti ke Laal* (2013), centers on the revolutionary ‘Maoist Movement’ in Chattishgarh in India. One of his earlier works, *In the Forest Hangs a Bridge* (1999), chronicles the lives of indigenous people in Arunachal Pradesh in India and their struggles with state developmental projects. Dealing with some of the most contentious issues of Indian politics, these films enter antagonistic spaces of social movements in India. These films collectively reflect Kak’s commitment to documenting nuanced and often overlooked narratives of marginalised communities within the framework of Indian democracy.



*image of Sanjay Kak's films*

Colin MacCabe suggests that the reconstruction of spaces constituted by the colonial gaze in the Indian

subcontinent has a long cultural history and has influenced the cinematic practices of the country (Grieverson & MacCabe, 2017). These cinematic norms eventually produced a famous image of Kashmir in post-colonial India, cemented with idyllic portrayals of scenic beauty and used as a setting for the unfolding (fictional) drama. From the 1960s to 1989, Kashmir was predominantly depicted in Hindi cinema as a playground for the Indian elite, set against the picturesque backdrop of mountains, lakes, and tulip fields. Especially, the Dal Lake, the ‘Shikara’ rides on the Dal Lake, and the Jhelum River became enduring motifs of the romanticised image of Kashmir as a ‘paradise on earth’, solidifying the “tourist gaze as a universal way of seeing” the region (Urry, 2002).

Subsequently, in the wake of the armed conflict in the 1990s, these landscapes took on a different connotation, framed by the ominous presence of barbed wire, symbolising the ‘loss of paradise’ and serving as a visual prelude, setting the stage for conflict-induced narratives. Such generalised portrayals have become a critical point of departure for contemporary Kashmir-centric documentaries like *Jashn-e-Azadi*, where the director uses popular visual tropes of Shikara rides on the Dal Lake, houseboats, and boat journeys on the Jhelum River, but crucially transforming these places into sites of loss, memory, and political expressions of Kashmiri people, through alternative constructions of filmic landscapes. Kashmiri documentarians like Sanjay Kak contest the pre-defined notion of ‘normality’ by focusing on these otherwise ‘regular’ sites through a different lens. Through their narrative style, they study and investigate a conflict situation and, most importantly, situate, articulate, and historicise complex subjects such as conflict, violence, and dissent.

On a broader view, independent documentary filmmakers in India have developed varied approaches to question and contest hegemonic values, modes of reasoning, and dominant discourses. The diversity in form and style makes it impossible to categorise Indian documentaries as a singular or homogenous entity (Sharma, 2015). Independent documentarians in India delve into the myriad

possibilities of politics within filmic modes, engaging in robust debates and advancing complex discussions through innovative formal experimentations. These filmmakers often explore new ways of storytelling, combining personal narratives with broader socio-political themes and employing a range of cinematic techniques to convey their messages. By capturing the 'landscape and its people' of a chosen location/s, they offer diverse perspectives that challenge mainstream and popular narratives and provide critical representations that are politically, discursively, and aesthetically rich. This practice not only highlights the complexities and nuances of Indian society but also underscores the transformative potential of documentary filmmaking as an influential medium for political and creative engagement. Through their work, these filmmakers contribute to a dynamic and evolving discourse that reflects the multifaceted realities of India.



*image of Bollywood films on Kashmir*

In this context of political situations, contestations and engagements, I revisit the question of “landscape” as a critical category. WJT Mitchell explores the concept of landscape as an often-overlooked element that, while frequently treated as a mere backdrop in art and cinema, holds profound

symbolic significance and serves as a tool of cultural power throughout history. Mitchell argues that landscapes are not merely passive settings but active components of visual representation that convey ideological and cultural meanings. He describes landscape “... as a natural scene mediated by culture,” it is both a presented and re-presented space, a frame and its content. He also writes, “It (landscape) is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power.” It can reinforce power structures and reflect societal values by framing narratives in specific ways. Landscapes are imbued with symbolic power, shaping and reflecting how societies perceive themselves and their surroundings (Mitchell, 1994). Building on this perspective, Martin Lefebvre extends the discussion on landscape to the realm of cinema, asserting that the filmic representation of landscapes is central to the medium's evolution. Lefebvre posits that the history of film begins with depicting natural landscapes in motion, marking the origins of what he describes as “cinematic sightseeing.” This notion underscores the universal appeal of seeing natural world images on screen, which has captivated audiences since the early days of cinema. Cinematic landscapes thus offer audiences a window into different environments and ways of life, transforming viewing into an immersive experience. This appeal of cinematic landscapes engages audiences and establishes a visual dialogue between the film and its viewers, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject (Lefebvre, 2007).

In analysing this construction of landscapes in film, I propose three distinct conceptual frameworks through which most films on Kashmir (fiction and non-fiction) engage with physical landscapes and explore, reimagine, and represent them (with deliberate intents). First, capturing and portraying the landscapes on location generates popular narratives and constructs counter-narratives. Secondly, the evidence value of the existing landscapes is preserved through recording and documentation, further imbuing them with archival value. Lastly, creative landscapes can be constructed with different visual and aural elements that are reflective yet not bound to their spatial specificities in an attempt to add a layer of meaning to them. Adopting one or more of these

filmmaking methods can place a film within an active participatory discourse, where filmic landscapes play significant roles beyond acting as a mere symbol or backdrop. I intend to explore and analyse the creative techniques of counter-construction of landscapes in *Jashn-e-Azadi* by studying the director's stylistic choices and locating the documentary within the broader polemics of documentary narrativisation.



*image of Lumiere film*

### **Alternative Narratives through Landscape Construction**

For director Sanjay Kak, a documentary is a medium to provoke and complicate the common understanding of political thinking and experiences. In *Jashn-e-Azadi*, these interventions are developed primarily through the creative techniques of image-making and montage building. Instead of limiting his choice to using conventional visual tropes in this documentary, Kak instils a sense of melancholy, yearning, and irony into the captured landscapes. An ironic point of view is folded into the title itself -- *How We Celebrate Freedom*. Kak returns again and again to Lal Chowk (Red Square) at Srinagar, recording the Indian Independence Day celebration on 15<sup>th</sup> August. The initial visuals of deserted streets consist of a palpable absence: the absence of everyday noise of hawkers and shoppers, vehicles and horns at the otherwise bustling Lal Chowk. His camera also captures ceremonially starched soldiers and army officials singing the National Anthem, Indian flag being hoisted up the shabby Clock Tower, a sharp salute of army boots, slightly off-key trumpets, and several other soldiers watching from

every building around the square with their binoculars, guns held by patrolling police peering out of windows, armoured vehicles rumbling down the streets, and in the backdrop, famous patriotic songs being played on loudspeakers. However, these images of the Independence Day celebration cannot possibly cover up the awkward hush of the curfewed Srinagar – instead, they become a very part of it.

Kak weaves disparate imageries of Kashmir landscapes into one thread to amplify the irony of freedom, to amplify how India's independence symbolises a paradox in the common consciousness of Kashmiri people, embodying the oppression they have endured for decades. It juxtaposes the impassioned Kashmiri desire for freedom and the harsh realities of their oppression by the Indian government. This is one of the first powerful juxtapositions in the film, where the narrator reflects, “The next sixty years (after Indian independence) saw that hope (for true azadi) turn into discontent with India, then to mass resistance, and eventually to armed struggle.” Some Independence Day celebration scenes at Lal Chowk are viewed through the barbed wire barrier, emphasising the divide. The camera then shifts from the empty square to a snow-clad ‘Mazhar-e-Shouda’ or martyr’s graveyard in Srinagar, where an elderly man is searching for his son’s grave. As he searches, the scene changes to women weeping and chanting in unison at a martyr’s funeral, crying out, “Today, on your death, the sky weeps.” Men are seen carrying the martyr’s body in a procession, lowering it into a grave while chanting, “... we reject! Institutions of the Indian state — burn them, burn them!” The camera returns to the quiet scene of the father finding his son’s gravestone. He explains to the filmmaker that the site is quickly forgotten because “one cannot visit often.” He shares that his son was a divisional commander of a militant group at the height of the struggle in the 1990s and was killed in 1996. As the camera shifts between these scenes, an almost unreal sense emerges, contrasting the rituals of occupation with the rituals of protest. What unfolds is a stark portrayal of two mutually exclusive ideological narratives, locked in a historical dilemma — “one backed by the dominant authority of the Indian state, and the other by the

popular authority of the Kashmiri people.” (Sharma, 2015)

The film is replete with such juxtapositions to deliver the message of common ignorance towards the loss and suffering of the Kashmiri people. One striking example early in the film features a scene from 2004. Here, tourists are seen enjoying themselves in Kashmir, posing in traditional Kashmiri dress during summertime in the Mughal Garden, sledging and snowboarding at the winter meadow of Gulmarg, and generally revelling in what the government termed “normalcy” after armed militancy was suppressed. In the scene, a group of men exuberantly proclaim that Kashmir is “heaven on earth,” the “big dad of Switzerland,” and lament that “these stupid people have ruined it” before loudly declaring, “Kashmir is the heart of India... Love Kashmir, love India.” We can hear beats of Kashmiri folk music on the soundtrack, which then quickly changes into a fast strumming of a guitar, just as the landscape changes into a long shot of three Kashmiri sledge-pullers, walking on the snow-clad slopes, returning home after the tourists have left.

The camera then shifts to a starkly different scene (also from 2004) — an unmarked mass grave in Kupwara, north Kashmir. The scene opens with a shot of a stretcher, used to bring dead bodies to the mass grave, propped upon a tree. In his narration, the director says, “In this quiet corner of the Paradise, bodies materialise, as if from the earth and forests...” Here, we can see a group of young volunteers who made a personal mission of burying the unclaimed bodies regularly found in the forests of Kupwara. They explain that most of the bodies are the results of ‘police encounters’ and recall that 27 bodies arrived in 2003 alone. Initially disturbed by these deaths, they now say, “...our hearts have turned to stone.” Their narratives of headless torsos and blood-soaked bodies are drained of any emotion, although the effort of restraint before the camera becomes evident. In the narrator’s words, all these are “Kashmir’s ledger of loss,” which are juxtaposed against the tourists’ complaint that Kashmiris are ruining their playground. The point of Kashmir as a territory for others’ enjoyment in times of continued violence,

bloodshed, death and suffering is thus exposed as an abomination.

The existential cry for ‘azadi’ thus becomes palpable in the film, depicted not just as a political slogan but as a deep-seated yearning that has endured through “five hundred years of foreign rule” and yet remains perpetually deferred, “elusive,” always “in the future.” I argue that this reflection makes the film largely a documentation of ‘absence’. Through these juxtapositions, the film illustrates the contrasts between the everyday realities of the Kashmiri people and the perceptions and narratives imposed by external forces, highlighting the enduring disconnect between the lived experiences of Kashmiris and the narratives constructed by those in power.

Kak also closely records the so-called ‘collateral damages’ of the Kashmir conflict and builds a different landscape through his narration and shot-taking. He shows doctors in a psychiatric clinic in Srinagar, where they are discussing a nine-year-old girl who has been experiencing PTSD after losing her father in a police-civilian clash. This scene is juxtaposed with footage from 1992, where a few families are recalling their experiences of witnessing open firing by the military in their villages. The camera then pans across the tiny OPD of the clinic, capturing the stack of files on the dusty table and the endless stream of patients, accompanied by their relatives, eagerly waiting in a never-ending line. In the background, the narration states: “In the impossible battle against popular sentiment, war spills out from all directions [in Kashmir]. There is no bystander, no civilian. Every Kashmiri is a possible ‘Shahid’, a ‘martyr to the moment.’”

Throughout the film, Kak presents the Indian occupation through the eyes of the Kashmiris, revealing the deep societal fractures it has caused. Midway through the film, the narrator highlights that by the early 2000s, militancy had mainly been contained, with “...less than a thousand armed militants remain [ing] in the fight, but nearly 700,000 Indian soldiers still wage that war... that is one soldier for every 15 Kashmiri citizens.” The documentary illustrates the everyday impact of this overwhelming military presence through a montage of shots: bodies discovered in graveyards (of

unmarked graves), homes indiscriminately burnt by soldiers in Tekipura village, accounts of tortured young men, martyrs mourned, police cleaning fresh blood on the street, an eight-nine years old boy leading a political meeting at the Hazratbal Mosque by chanting slogans, a Kashmiri woman crying silently during a prayer at the Shrine of Makhdoom Sahib, and also, the constant visibility of soldiers, bunkers, army jeeps, and barbed wire — an omnipresent sign of occupation; a constant part of both the physical and representational landscapes of Kashmir.

In order to construct his counter-narratives, Sanjay Kak also delves into creating symbolic landscapes in *Jashn-e-Azadi*. After a series of grainy news footages of armed training from the 1990s, one particular scene culminates into a starkly monochromatic landscape, where we can see the silhouette of a few armed rebels cresting a hilltop. The shot is unmistakably reminiscent of the typical imagery of companions on a long journey for a quest. In the background, the narration talks about the ‘Mujaheds’ and the ‘Intifada’: the companions and the long quest. In another sequence, Kak connects a series of scenes through the verses of Agha Shahid Ali. His camera captures a long shot of a lone person rowing a boat on the grey water of Jhelum in the winter, and he appears to be a silhouette figure. The next scene is of a police-protestor clash at night, captured through hand-held visuals of raging fire, clouds of smoke, and flashes of gun firing, mostly captured from behind a bunker or a building wall. The camera then shifts again to the serene Jhelum River, where a flock of ducks gliding on the water is seen before flying off as a boat approaches from the opposite direction into the frame. All these landscapes come together when the verses of Agha Shahid Ali appear on screen in the sequence: “Freedom’s terrible thirst, flooding Kashmir, / is bringing love to its tormented glass. / Stranger, who will inherit the last night / of the past? Of what shall I not sing and sing?” The scenes also have no background music, making the ambience sound of boat-rowing on water, crackling of fire, gunshots, and quacking of the ducks more real and vivid.

The documentary is dotted with many more symbolic snapshots – a bunch of bright sunflowers clapped in a barbed wire fence, red chilies soaking in sunlight beside the scene of an encounter, a little Kashmiri girl playing inside the ruins of some derelict buildings, and so on. All these images are parts of broader landscapes but crucially bear the symbolic meanings by themselves to construct the counter-narratives. This irony of the celebration of Independence and the tragic absence of freedom is evident throughout the documentary through the visual mosaic of landscapes. The tragedy of an ‘eternal absence’ is suggested here in a dirge-like repetition of images. The irony emerges from the non-linear form, where one image is juxtaposed with a contradictory one.

Countering the notion that filmic landscapes are bound to the time and space of the film text (Harper & Rayner, 2010), I argue that, in *Jashn-e-Azadi*, this deliberate fluidity frees the filmic landscapes from the demands of ‘eventhood’ and chronology of on-screen textual narrative. Also, this non-linearity has delivered the documentary an episodic structure, from which the technique of counter-narrativization stems. This structure resists coherent narratives by plotting counter-perspectives that have been suppressed, made invisible, or vilified in public discourse. In Kak’s stylistic approach, the perspective appears disjunctive and ruptured. Counter-narrative contests the neatness and inevitability of the traditional discourse both as an aesthetic and a socio-historical process. In *Jashn-e-Azadi*, the inherent feature of disjuncture in capturing and juxtaposing the landscapes builds a broader counter-narrative, which has given the film its distinct aesthetic and politics.

The documentary is also inconclusive in nature, which is another deliberate directorial choice. Like the other works of Kak, *Jashn-e-Azadi* also leaves viewers free to develop a stance of their own or even remain undecided. However, it offers enough exposure to viewers, which lends the necessary complexity to understanding the topic. These features of disjuncture and inconclusively through the creation of cinematic landscape are significant aspects of counter-narratives, and as Bill Nichols

points out, counter-narratives problematize the narrations and discourses of modernity (Nichols, 1991). They position the viewers to make their own meanings or views on the mentioned subjects, views that are not pre-constituted. In the process, these documentaries become inherently political, embodying the politics of ‘proactive observationalism’ within the filmic text and redefining the scope of politics within their narratives. (Sharma, 2015) With the construction of alternate narratives, Kak thus has positioned *Jashn-e-Azadi* as a political medium against being simply a carrier of political content.

### **Landscape as a Medium of Documentation to Create an Archive**

Reflecting on the theory and practice of Cuban documentarist Victor Casaus, Michael Chanan remarks, “...the vocation of the documentary is a testimonial.” (Chanan, 2019). Taking a cue from this statement, I comment that the vocation of testimony is archival. In the case of *Jashn-e-Azadi*, this process of archiving reflects on the acts of capturing and constructing landscapes with the people in them and recording and documenting their experiences through the camera. In the documentary, the narrative moves back and forth through the years, capturing real-time shots taken in 1993, 2004, and 2007 and then interweaving them with archival footage from the 1990s. Thus, the film leaves a historical imprint by recording and archiving diverse events, separated by times and spaces but unified in thought, intention, and articulation. Thus, the cinematography of *Jashn-e-Azadi* facilitates the understanding of the documentary image as evidence, an understanding itself based on the indexical bond between the image and its referent (Sharma, 2015). This ‘evidence’ function then gets further developed through Kak’s approach to editing, in which materials like images and sounds are constructed to portray the communities’ actions and their sense of place in the world, which the forces of history have shaped.

As Bill Nichols writes, “If we consider the imaginary realm of fiction as having a metaphoric relation to history and lived experiences... we might think of documentary as a mode where this fictive

cloud has settled back to earth.” (Nichols, 1991). By creating more expansive and alternative landscapes throughout his documentary, Kak helps the reality of Kashmir to “settle back to earth,” instead of being just metaphorically represented on screen. In its approach, the camera here exercises an appreciation for the indexical properties of the documentary image, which Nichols describes as the inherent link between the documentary image and its referent. In Nichols’ words, “The indexical relationship allows the image to represent a specific aspect of the historical world (reflected in the documentary) with great accuracy.” (Nichols, 1991). Given the political concerns that are the focus of the film, I argue that Kak’s approach to this indexical understanding of the documentary image here is largely concentrated on a specific function: the function of being a witness. The images record the pro-filmic realities by witnessing them and showing them to a larger audience, who commonly have little to no access to them. Also, in this case, these realities have often been withheld or suppressed from circulation. With this understanding, when Kak’s camera frames the actions of groups or individuals with their immediate surroundings, it does not reduce the emotional charge that can be derived from human testimonies but rather intensifies it.

In one scene, the camera captures the destroyed village of Tekipura, which was raided and burnt down by the Indian army, an accusation of sheltering the militants. While the villagers and eyewitnesses recount the incident in detail, the camera pans across the burnt buildings, burnt roofs and blackened walls and cuts to close-ups of dead chickens and animals inside a demolished farm. In another scene, the camera follows a few members of the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS), who were doing a survey of conflict-related deaths in Bandipora. Here, Kak documents the survey in detail, creating a visual archive of the entire procedure and all the information, including dates, places, names, and incidents. However, what sets this particular scene apart from other typical documentary interviews is his filmic approach to the whole scene. Every time the JKCCS group goes to a household and starts to talk with the family members, the snapshot

of the particular dead person from that family appears on screen, juxtaposed with the loud background sound of the camera shutter clicking. The narration talks about the “agony of ‘Shahdat’... bearing the witness of Kashmir’s present.” The close-ups of bloodied and mutilated dead bodies are jarring, but at the same time, adding to the archive and history. By integrating these archival materials into his documentary, Kak bestows an authorship to the information by providing an in-depth angle to personal and social experiences.

In the opening scene of *Jashn-e-Azadi* Part II, Kak’s camera focuses on an elderly man from Bandipora helping to fill up a survey list with details of encountered young boys. The group of villagers alongside him, including an early-teen boy, casually recount the names of the dead rebels, their ages, family members, the militant groups they were affiliated to, and the ways they were killed by the police or the army. Kak’s camera records and archives the accounts, and we, as audience, become witnesses to tragedies turning into mere information. Throughout the two-part film, we can also see several general cityscapes of Srinagar – army jeeps and trucks lined up in a traffic, armed police patrolling on the street, an old man trying to cross a pavement bypassing a group of military, army searching the vehicles at a check-post, pedestrians casually lining up at a street square for the routine security body-checking, an woman walking with her daily groceries passing a raging protest march, and so on. While the camera records these activities, the audience are immersed in the everyday life of people in a conflicted zone. Personal and civic responses to the decades-long crises are recorded and presented here through these landscape snippets, enabling the audience to learn and understand about how common people work through the circumstances on an everyday basis.

Such images, filmed amidst communities, create landscapes that not only keep records of a time of conflict, but also present those people and places as figures moving across wider political and social consciousness. And thus, by constructing those landscapes with the people in them through a wider socio-political lens, Kak crucially ‘socialize’ the

subject of conflict, instead of ‘individualizing’ it. (Sharma, 2015)

Though the witness function of the documentary image rests on the indexical bond, it is not sufficient for the construction of meaning. According to Nichols, “The indexical bond cannot account for the historical referent and meanings embedded within images.” (Nichols, 1991). And that’s why, it’s necessary to add the layer of understanding and meaning construction to the fundamental witness value of documentary images. Kak’s work in *Jashn-e-Azadi* achieved this substantially. I argue that, in this documentary, Kak opens up a scope for further dialogue or discussion, which is necessary to empower the said indexical bond. Through intimate archiving process, he compels the audience to engage with the testimonies, facilitating a diversity of opinion.

Taking note from the previous section’s discussion, we can say that a defining feature of *Jashn-e-Azadi* is that it doesn’t make any particular political events or human subjects as its singular focus. Kak’s directorial and editorial approach in this documentary emphatically depart from conventional documentary structures that deploy event or character-centered narratives. Instead, the framed landscapes are disparate here and the recorded testimonials are excerpted too. The non-linear structure, emerged from this stylistic approach, offers a deeper sense of place and time. The audiences traverse the landscapes and are exposed to the specific conditions and experiences, unrelated yet unified through a sense of resistance. And through this journey, they develop a wider understanding about the reality in conflict-ridden Kashmir.

### **Crafting Creative Visual and Aural Landscapes to Add Meanings**

While *Jashn-e-Azadi* rests on an appreciation of documentary materials for their witness value, Kak doesn’t treat these materials as sealed containers of finite information. Rather, he uses documentary images and sounds as tools for the articulation and interpretation of meanings, which may not be instantly apparent within those materials. To do this, he constructs specific landscapes through creative



editing process, where against-the-grain connections between seemingly disparate visuals and sounds are established to generate a deeper meaning. The previously discussed scene of the volunteer gravekeepers in Kupwara cuts to a mosaic of visuals, tied together with an aural landscape, created by background music. In the background, we can hear Kashmiri folk song mixed with rhythmic Islamic prayer. Several visuals appear one by one – shadowy Mughal gardens, ducks swimming on Jhelum River, a little Kashmiri girl playing amidst the rubble of a derelict building, etc. Simultaneously, the narration talks about Kashmir's long history. In another scene, Kak interacts with Kashmiri poet Zarif Ahmed Zarif, while he is reading his poem: "What frenzy is this?". As the poet reads the verses, the words appear on screen – "My gaze has tired, what frenzy is this? / I lost the city of love I found, what frenzy is this?... I smeared the glass with blood, to make mirrors / My image – a stranger, what frenzy is this?... Socrates did me no favor in leaving, I shouldn't be saying this, but / He didn't drink my share of poison, what frenzy is this?..." The visuals include a series of images woven like a mosaic: images of uniformed army patrolling a street, shocking shot of blood-stained dead bodies being hastily piled up on street-side after a riot, police performing routine security body-check on pedestrians, mutilated bodies of young boys killed in encounters, vacant gazes of a few children looking directly at the camera, dead bodies wrapped in shrouds waiting for funeral rituals. The poet keeps reading in a calm voice, each verse building up to the question which becomes an indictment: "What frenzy is this?" Like the poem, the visuals also come back to shots of dead bodies, as if asking the same-- "What frenzy is this?"

The part I of *Jashn-e-Azadi* ends with camera panning over the large grassy fields and empty houses in the village of Haal in south Kashmir, a predominantly Pandit settlement. In the present time of 2004, the entire village is abandoned after the Pandit exodus. Kak decides to represent the Pandits in a more oblique way, as a gaping hole in the structure of Kashmiri society. To portray this 'absence,' he again turns to creating cinematic landscapes, which overlap with audio and different

visuals. The scene takes its cues from Piarey 'Hatash', the Pandit poet in-exile in Jammu. He is represented only by a distant voice on the phone line. Throughout the scene, the phone conversation between the director and the poet carries on, where we can hear the poet trying to recite his verses. Then the connection abruptly cuts off with the long beeping sound of lost signal, before the screen turns black. The phone reconnects in part II, where the poet again recites the poem. While his voice carries the Kashmiri verses, translated English words appear on screen. The Kashmiri verses say: "Asi bayo naeb nishanae rov / Kaet tsarav panun, thikanae rov / Thael thael yath aes vaens vuchan / Tath purni kuluph, makanae rov..." ("So brothers our address is lost / Where do we look for our own, that place is lost / What we gazed upon with love all our years / That shelter is locked, our home is lost...") The camera captures different imageries -- long shot of a gliding boat on the shimmering water of Jhelum during a sunset, empty rooms inside the houses in Haal, and dusty frames of wooden doors and windows. The poem becomes part of the landscapes, haunting them, while the narrator tells, "...the broken voice of a poet... a reminder of a lost minority, brushed away as collateral damage..."

This creative editing process of constructing landscapes adds more value to these documentary images, beyond their spatial specificity. It pushes those images from their witness function into a more discursive direction. John Ellis points out that, discursive structures created by film editing catapult raw footages into the realm of meaning. In his words, "Discursive structures grant a channel and a structure to a recording, an added intentionality that it did not necessarily possess as an inert piece of footage." (Ellis, 2012) Maintaining this note, in my view, Kak uses creative aural and visuals in *Jashn-e-Azadi* to advance the witness value of his documentary materials and thus mobilizes them to provoke further critical discourse.

Kak also employs several audio and video overlaps, quite intentionally, in the moments of juxtaposition between two scenes. The audio of a 2005 protest march gets overlapped with the visuals of 1990s archival footage of a funeral procession.

Towards the end of Part I of *Jashn-e-Azadi*, the shots of flying birds, walking people, passing vehicles, long stretch of a narrow street, and green grassy fields on both sides, all captured from inside of a running truck, are thickened with background audio of the chanting a popular slogan: “Hum kya chahe? Azadi!...” In another scene, two aural landscapes gradually overlap, when the visual of the burnt and destroyed Tekipura village are intercut with a totally different scene of a ‘Bhand’ performance in another village. The sound of throwing burnt logs and bricks on one corner of a demolished house gets overlapped with the sound of making a makeshift wooden bench for the ‘Bhand’ performance.

While discussing about constructing such creative aural landscapes, I would also like to draw attention to the documentary’s ‘carnavalesque’ nature, which is found in the extravagant construction of several scenes, both of celebrations and grief. Kak’s camera closely follows the mentioned ‘Bhand’ show, capturing in details every step of the preparation, makeup, satirical performance, and crowd reactions. With the ambient sound and loud on-location music in the background, the scene seems like an epitome of celebration – a celebration of Kashmiri culture on Kashmiri land.

Most of the scenes of mourning and martyr rituals are accompanied with vivid aural landscapes too. The visuals of bathing the dead bodies come with on-location ambient sounds of weeping, crying, lamenting, and angry comments by the families and neighbors against the “killer” police. The visuals of martyr processions carry the sound of raging slogans, chanted in unison by a thousand people, a protest march shows the action of effigy burning, with the crowd hysterically shouting anti-India slogans. The absence of any other background music make all these scenes more real, brutal, and haunting.

This creative technique and stylistic choice to construct unique visual and aural landscapes, which reflect but are not limited by specific times and spaces, becomes a crucial mean to reinforce the Kashmiri subjectivity. Thus, multi-faceted struggles for social justice are located, reflected, and represented in the documentary. By evoking cultural memory, exploring lived experiences, and enabling

political agency, Kak aligns *Jashn-e-Azadi* with broader and universal media activism.

### Conclusion

In the process of making *Jashn-e-Azadi*, director Sanjay Kak traverses many uncommon paths to collect different visual for his cinematic landscape. He ignores the pastoral beauty of the valley, much adored magical mountains, jeweled lakes, and crystal streams. He also turns away from the fascination of capturing stone-pelting urban ‘Intifada,’ uniformed soldiers, and masked militants. He doesn’t focus on the stories of half-widows and orphans. Instead, he searches for the silence, isolates them, and tries to find meaning in them. That’s why, at the very beginning, he captures the bright morning of 15<sup>th</sup> August at the Lal Chowk, but without the everyday bustle in that public heart of Srinagar.

Through the sounds of silence, Kak creates his landscapes, where we can read a quiet rage of spirit and resistance. He continues his search of such quiet places throughout the documentary and reaches to different corners-- the unmarked graveyard in Kupwara, the psychiatric clinic, the Mazhar-e-Shouda, the village of Haal, and so on. His camera captures the people, documents the stories, and creates the landscapes with the place, its people, and their narratives. Also, through his directorial approach, Kak crucially takes a critical shift from the politics of ‘victims’ and ‘victimhood’ to of ‘survivors’ and ‘agency.’ In the film, the testimonies of eyewitnesses, interviews of the poets and artists, conversations with the victim families, grave-keepers, and common people, and comments of the political figures, doctors, and students-- all become the most tenacious expressions of a strong desire to keep on living and to overcome adversity in mundane life.

In John Corner’s words, “Proactive observationalism involves a more discursive use of mise-en-scene, through which the documentarist creates a persuasive portrait that compels the viewer to deepen their understandings of political conditions.” (Corner, 1996). Through measured and contemplative editing, Kak instills a polemical thought into the revealed ironies that emerge when an

image is set against a contradictory one to create his cinematic landscapes. It can thus be noted that *Jashn-e-Azadi* does not approach the viewer as a passive entity. Instead, the viewers are required to be active in deciphering materials they are presented with, as the political conditions depicted in the film are acutely complex and they do not lend themselves to any easy binaristic resolution.

Acknowledgement: Prof. Madhuj Mukherjee, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

---

## Bibliography

- Chanan, Michael. *Politics of documentary*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.
- Corner, John. *The art of record: A critical introduction to documentary*. New York: Manchester University Press, 1996.
- Devasundaram, Ashvin Immanuel, ed. *Indian cinema beyond Bollywood: The new independent cinema revolution*. New York and London: Routledge, 2018.
- Ellis, John. *Documentary: Witness and self-revelation*. New York and London: Routledge, 2012.
- Grieverson, Lee, and Colin MacCabe, eds. *Empire and film*. UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017.
- Harper, Graeme, and Jonathan Rayner. *Cinema and landscape: Film, nation and cultural geography*. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2010.
- Jayasankar, KP, and Anjali Monteiro. *A fly in the curry: Independent documentary film in India*. New Delhi: Sage, 2016.
- Lefebvre, Martin. *Landscape and film*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Mitchell, WJ Thomas. *Picture theory: Essays on verbal and visual representation*. Chicago, USA: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Nichols, Bill. *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Sharma, Aparna. *Documentary films in India: Critical aesthetics at work*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Urry, John. *The tourist gaze*. UK: Sage, 2002.

**Manali Saha is a Ph.D. Scholar at the Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. She is working on 'Documentaries on Kashmir; Subjects of Landscape, Gender, and Activism'.**