

Article

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Namrata Datta's *Lakshahira: The Woman of Substance*



Dr Lakshahira Das

Till the 1970s in India, the field of documentary was purely male-centric. The number of women working in the documentary industry is steadily increasing. It's a positive indicator. In this regard, eminent film scholar Shoma A. Chatterji asserts in her essay "Dialogues in Diversity: Women Filmmaking": "Indian documentary movement today has as many women filmmakers as men...The International Association of Women on Radio and Television (IAWRT) hosts an annual festival of films every year on a given theme. Despite its international character, the listing points out the rich contribution of Indian women in terms of quality and quantity" (Filming Reality, P.186). Notably, there are an increasing number of female filmmakers in Assam. Manju Borah, Rima Das, Swantana

Bordoloi, and Bobby Sarma Baruah have all had their films praised both domestically and internationally. A fresh name has recently been added to the list of Assamese women directors. The new name is Namrata Datta. Through their first documentaries, Ananya Chakraborty (*Gandhari*), Suhasini Muloy (*An Indian Story*), and Deepa Dhanraj (*Sudesh*) demonstrated their enormous ability to enhance the Indian documentary tradition. Namrata Datta has demonstrated her ability as a director with her film *Lakshahira: The Woman of Substance*, much like these other female directors.

Namrata Datta's *Lakshahira: The Woman of Substance* has been a biographical documentary. National award-winning film critic Shoma A. Chatterji, in her book "Filming Reality", has divided the

biographical documentary into four categories. The first category celebrates some great people who have made meaningful contributions to history, culture, language, economy, and other areas. The second concerns lesser-known people whose identities are not well-known at all but whose contributions must be recorded for the archives. There is another area of the biographical documentary that records individual struggles and triumphs over physical disabilities, mental issues, social obstacles, family hurdles, and so on. A fourth category subscribes to a recreation or revisiting of historical time. *Lakshahira: The Woman of Substance* by Namrata Datta, which honours the life and accomplishments of Sangeet Natak Akademi award-winning singer, songwriter, and scholar Dr Lakshahira Das (1931–), falls under the first category of biographical documentaries.

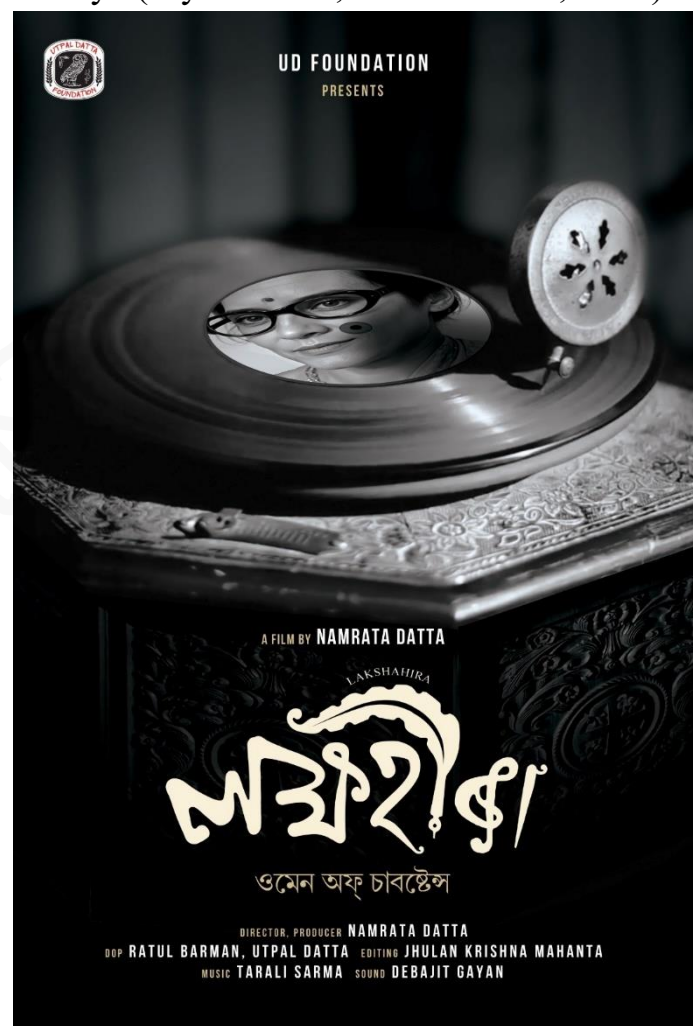
Even at ninety-four, Dr Lakshahira Das continues to be involved in her everyday activities. The younger generations have found inspiration in her life story itself. Director Namrata Datta masterfully captured Dr Das's inspirational journey in her twenty-minute documentary. Eminent writer and Journalist and Film director Vinta Nanda highly appreciated this documentary. She wrote: "Namrata Datta's *Lakshahira* is a powerful documentary that preserves the life and legacy of Dr Lakshahira Das, standing firm against media commercialisation in today's post-truth era...Dr Lakshahira Das is a figure whose body of work as a poet, lyricist, singer, and educator speaks volumes. Yet her life could have easily been lost to time if not for Datta's endeavour to capture her story. Through this documentary, Datta

ensures that Dr Das's legacy will not be forgotten and that her remarkable contributions to northeastern India's cultural and educational landscape will continue to inspire future generations. Raised in a culturally enriching environment, Dr Das's exceptional musical talent was nurtured by her father, blossoming into a lifelong passion. Her life is a multifaceted achievement: from serving as a university professor and authoring textbooks to becoming a beloved lyricist and vocalist. Her journey illustrates how a woman can excel in multiple arenas—family, career, and art—without ever compromising one for the other. Dr Das has been not only a composer, poet, mother, great-grandmother, and mentor but also an educator whose influence spans generations". ("Alternative Entertainment: Truth in the post-truth era", *The Daily Eye*, September 21, 2024).

Bill Nichols, in his book "Introduction to Documentary", states, "The fact that documentaries are not a reproduction of reality gives them a voice of their own. They are a representation of the world, and this representation stands for a particular view of the world. The voice of documentary, then, is how this particular point of view or perspective becomes known to us...The voice of documentary is the specific way an argument or perspective is expressed." The life of Dr Das is depicted in the film by director Namrata Datta while keeping certain viewpoints in mind. First, by depicting Dr Das's life in the documentary, many untold tales of the cultural history of Assam might be discovered. The second viewpoint is that Dr Das's life demonstrates that women may successfully manage both a family and a

profession. Thirdly, because Dr Das was a successful academic and vocalist, her life shows that a woman may simultaneously succeed in intellectual and cultural pursuits. These viewpoints could be referred to as the documentary's voice. Bill Nichols asserts that the voice of a documentary is not limited to verbal communication but also includes the selection and arrangement of sound and image, as well as the choice of organising logic for the film. This includes decisions on when to cut, edit, frame shots, record synchronous sound, add additional sound, adhere to accurate chronology, use archival footage or only those shot by the filmmaker, and choose the mode of representation to organise the film. There are three points of view in this documentary. Only the first viewpoint has been highlighted in the documentary's prologue. A prologue typically identifies the film's or director's primary claims, viewpoints, and points of view. The prologue's sequence begins with a few close-ups of different audio equipment, followed by a close-up of a harmonium and a woman's fingers while a song plays in the background. The filmmaker then projected a long shot of Lakshahira's room, showing her blurry face. This scene makes it clear that the documentary will focus on the life of a person who has significantly contributed to the cultural arena. Through a symbolic image, the director should try to cover two other important aspects in the prologue. Anyway, the prologue helps the audience fully engage with the content, making it incredibly appealing overall. Regarding the appealing first sequence of the documentary, film critic Deepsikha Bhagawati rightly says, "The valiantly beautiful face of an octogenarian

woman in the frame, an intelligent palm playing harmonium in an aesthetic shot-the transparent anatomy of the veins of that slice of determined skin says, biologically this person is old, but eternally young in spirit, eternally enlightened, eternally creative. This shot can be analysed as the POV of the documentary, which captures the vivid life and incomparable mettle of an undaunted, timeless trailblazer with pristine cultivated clarity" (Mystic Aura, October issue, 2024).



The director uses a few close-ups to display Dr Das's honours and letters of congratulations following the prologue. A stunning long shot was captured, showcasing all of Dr Das' accomplishments. The director's intention to depict a woman who has received several honours from society for her achievements is established by these

shots. Following the long shot, a mid-long shot displays Lakshahira's name, portrait, and areas of competence. The scene does not include the date or year of birth. Instead, Lakshahira's age has been estimated to be 94. It's crucial to provide the birth year and day. The image mentioning the areas of expertise of Lakshahira would have been more dignified if it had been written by an academician rather than a textbook writer. Similarly, when the photo of Lakshahira's father was shown in the mid-long shot, the year of her father's birth and death should have been given. Generally, it has been said that data speaks in documentaries. So, the documentary's founding father, John Grierson, said that a documentary is a creative treatment of actuality, data, and documents.

Many aspects of Lakshahira's life are established through interviews. However, old photos are also occasionally used in the film. Archival footage and historical images could have been recovered through research and used in this film. Lakshahira sang in films like "Lachit Barphukan" and "Sarapat". Clippings of these songs or rare images of these films should have been recovered and used in this film. At one point in the film, the note on the film "Sarapat" from a book is shown in a close-up while talking about the film "Sarapat". Establishing a statement through such secondary sources diminishes the dignity of the documentary. Regarding using primary sources and rare documents in documentaries, Rajiv Prakash's "Ved-the visionary" may be a model for new documentary makers. Rajiv Prakash's directorial venture "Ved-The Visionary", the opening film of the Indian Panorama, 2021, is a well-researched, well-documented film with

excellent cinematic narration. This film tells the incredible journey of an internationally acclaimed News Cameraman, Ved Parkash. He beautifully covered many historically important moments in pre-independence and post-independence India. Ved Parkash's extraordinary works included the news coverage of Mahatma Gandhi's funeral, nominated for the British Academy Awards in 1949, the change of power when India became independent, the tragedy that followed India's partition, etc. These rare clippings of the past are beautifully projected in the film. In an interview, Rajiv once described his difficulties when compiling unusual clippings from London.



Namrata Datta

Due to his father's government service, Lakshahira had to live in different parts of Assam. Lakshahira was born in Suwalkuchi and spent his childhood and adolescence in Tezpur. She received her college education at Cotton College, Guwahati. While Lakshahira is saying these words, director Dutta

composed the frames for three different shots. The director uses a long shot when Lakshahira talks about Suwalkuchi's days. Then, he uses a mid-long shot to talk about Tezpur, and a close-up shot is taken when Lakshahira reminisces about Cotton College's days. The director has presented a lengthy description of Lakshahira without bothering the audience by transitioning the shots from long to close-ups. The sequence of the pages of her book passing through her fingers while the songs sung by Lakshyahira are playing in the background is very interesting. Similarly, after the prologue, a close-up shot shows the awards Lakshahira received before bringing him to the audience. While this close-up shot is going on, the viewer hears Lakshahira's dialogue from the following sequence. The appropriate use of J-Cut makes this sequence interesting. The director has composed some frames in black and white while presenting the old days of Lakshahira. Similarly, the sequence where young Lakshahira will join Cotton College as a professor is recreated. This sequence is recreated by a fictional character. This scene

is made by showing only the actress's legs. Such recreation is now available in documentaries. The content of a documentary can be presented through the creation of fictional characters. In this context, Mike Rabiger says: "Until someone invents a time machine, documentaries about the past or the future have to use actors. This means that fictional characters and scripts are not automatically excluded from the documentary". (Directing the documentary). Similarly, Shoma A. Chatterji says: "If the fictional feature were to be kept away from the fact, Mani Kaul's '*Siddheshwari*' (1989) would never have seen the light of day. Or an 'abstractly' conceived '*Khayal Gatha*' (1989) by Kumar Shahani would never have been made." Ultimately, *Lakshahira: The Woman of Substance* by Namrata Datta is a fantastic movie. Vinta Nanda rightly says, "For generations to come, this documentary will serve as a record of Dr Lakshahira Das's legacy and the power of documentary filmmaking to capture truths that matter rather than the half-truths that sell so easily".

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