



## **COMMUNICATING ENVIRONMENT THROUGH DOCUMENTARY 'MERCURY IN THE MIST'**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Environmental issues are gaining in importance. Indian documentaries on such issues contribute to create awareness through this powerful media. The documentary film titled 'Mercury in the Mist' by R.P. Amudhan promises to communicate and create awareness and sensitize the public by motivating and encouraging participation to bring about civic actions and social change. Using the theoretical framework of 'frame analysis' that includes diagnostic, prognostic and motivational perspectives, this film is analyzed as to how issues and concerns affecting the general population are addressed. From a diagnostic framing perspective, the film highlights the damage done to the misty Kodaikanal through disposal of mercury waste. In a prognostic framing perspective, the documentary focuses on the future consequences. The motivational framework instills a sense of immediate action that will result in protest discourse. This film asserts that if a solution is not sought, the consequences of environmental degradation will decide the future fate of our planet and lives.*

**Key Words:** DOCUMENTARY, ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARD, COMMUNICATION, FRAMING, MERCURY WASTE.

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## **Introduction**

Protection and preservation of a pristine environment is the duty of every citizen. The fast growing industrial technology and the pace at which the Indian corporate sector is booming, environment is degraded. Natural resources are constantly exploited and the natural world is thus continuously affected by human activity. Waste disposal that mixes with the earth's surface and clean drinking water through various forms create health hazards. This paper deals with the issues relating to health, economics and politics which are addressed through the documentary film.

Documentaries have not always been a focus on academic research and hence the topic for the research is environmental documentary films. Audience gets involved in real issues. The documentary film 'Mercury in the Mist' focuses on the damage done to Kodaikanal, a hill station situated in the southern part of Tamil Nadu. The film highlights the damage done to this beautiful environment by the most hazardous metal, mercury. Exposure to mercury has damaged not only human beings but also the flora and fauna of the surrounding areas.

Documentary films are, as such, powerful visual media to educate the mass of general population and bring forth reality of contemporary issues affecting people. When several strategies adopted to bring about a solution to preserve the natural environment have not been very successful, this visual medium promises to focus the attention on people, government and policy-makers to the environmental threats and life safety issues that may play havoc to the very human existence.

Frame analysis, as a theoretical framework, tries to highlight these environmental concerns thereby bringing about awareness and sensitization so that a resistance and protest discourse is duly constructed. In this process, it is also analyzed as to whether documentary film as a medium of communication was able to bring about perceptible change in the minds of people so that they are seized of the issues in hand prompting them to act.

## **Review of Literature**

Lamar (2013) suggests that the environmental documentaries bring about the desired change through the use of emotive imagery, through the transportation of the viewer into the narrative and through viewer identification with the character or characters involved. According to Gamson (1982), Snow et al. (1986), and Snow & Benford (1988), social movement scholars employ the verb "framing".

Goffman (1974) says that frames denoted “schemata of interpretation” that enabled individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large. It is, therefore, established that individuals recall their own experiences when they watch these frames in a documentary or in a film. The life is situated and contextualized through these frames.

Snow & Benford (1988) were of the opinion that collective action frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization. The legitimate activities and campaigns in a social movement are given a space in the frames. Collective action frames are, in fact, acting as a mobilizing agent in organizing the people into a movement.

To bring these movements into a frame, it requires a kind of sustained efforts by the filmmakers. Mobilizing and organizing different individuals into a movement is a herculean task about which this film deals with.

The idea that the media provides audiences constructed versions of reality which have been central to communication, media, and cultural studies (Franzosi, 2013).

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

“To frame,” Entman said in a definition that was to stick, “is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (1993: 52). Frames, then, define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest solutions.

According to Snow & Benford (1988), there are three core framing tasks. They are ‘diagnostic framing’ that deals with problem identification and its definition, ‘prognostic framing’ that concentrates on problem solution, and ‘motivational framing’ that focuses on argument of the definitions and solutions. Using framing analysis, the film ‘Mercury in the Mist’ is analyzed and especially the focus is on political influence, people's protest, agony and their decision-making attempts.

This paper takes a single documentary as primary and qualitative data for analysis using framing analysis as a methodology. The entire documentary running into approximately 18 minutes duration includes the interview bytes of industrial workers, trade union leaders and

the parents of the deceased members. The documentary is shot at in and around the factory location at Kodaikanal.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

India with a fast growing population faces some crucial environmental issues at various regions in various forms. Since it has become a major public concern today and since Tamil Nadu has also not been spared from this devastating and immeasurable destruction, this paper deals with the issues addressed through the documentary film. Though different innovative approaches through the print and visual media have created an impact, they have not always been successful.

Documentary films have come up on various themes and issues the world over. The focus for this paper is narrowed down to environmental concerns due to carelessly-treated industrial effluents in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, where several industrial developments have threatened a cleaner healthier atmosphere. And since most of the damage is done in particular sections of the land, only the people concerned voice out. But this ignorance will affect the future. Hence this medium will help communicate the issue in detail and further alert the public in other regions, of the looming similar threats to their part of the nation.

Kodaikanal, a beautiful tourist spot in south India, housed the most destructive thermometer factory run by Unilever's Indian subsidiary Hindustan Lever. Mercury containing waste and ground glass pieces have been littered in and around places. The place, established in 1845 by the British raj, is ideal to enjoy cool climate, clean environment, and a healthy atmosphere. Water as far as the distant city of Madurai has been contaminated. Though the factory was closed in 2001 after 18 years of operation, the environmental hazards including health hazards still affect a larger mass of people.

This particular paper concentrates on the documentary on this issue of Unilever's mercury contamination in Kodaikanal by documentary film-maker R.P. Amudhan

From a diagnostic framing perspective, the film highlights the damage done to the misty Kodaikanal and its population through disposal of mercury waste. Air and water-borne mercury contaminated this vast area including the lake harming the fish in the lake. The film 'Mercury in the Mist' throws light on this crucial issue, political influence, people's protest, agony and their decision-making attempts. Several interviews of the affected people have

been recorded and to make it more powerful several close-up shots and mid-shots have been used. Thus this emotive imagery is very effective. This is a major issue calling for immediate action. This framing highlights the corporate indifference to the society as shown in the film through the interviews of people who are affected. As a result of mercury dumping, many have lost their lives and many more have been handicapped. As understood from the interviews in the film, broken thermometer glass is ground till it becomes like sugar. When the glass is ground it flies around like flour contaminating the environment and causing pollution for years. These glass pieces not only harm the environment but also create physical wounds further causing itching on the skin. This corporate greed increases due to the society's negligence. The film hence will contribute to create environmental awareness. The society can be alerted against such foreign businesses which completely neglect the future of the Indian citizens. Although attracted towards income through jobs, our people will think before they join an organization if awareness is created. Such films will create awareness to the extent that the public comes together and refuses to take up jobs in such organizations which bring harm to them and their environment.

Although the company was shut down as a result of the people's protest it refuses to reclaim the dumped waste in the shola forest endangering many species. Pambar Shola is now absolutely polluted. Once released into the atmosphere, mercury can cause severe health hazards. The fatal damage done to the human being and the destructions done to a clean tourist place like Kodaikanal is clearly depicted. The various footages of the film portray emotional labourers affected by the factory that has caused health hazard issues. The film opens up with a shot which depicts a boy badly affected medically. Many scenes depict the bad health conditions of the labourers. Workers recall their poor health condition like leg sores, with puss oozing out. Skin allergy seems to be common as a result of exposure to mercury especially as seen in the film -- the people working in the factory's screening department seems to be affected the most.

In a prognostic framing perspective, the documentary focuses on the future consequences of such damage done to the environment. According to the film, even the doctors refuse to acknowledge the actual medical condition due to pressure from the factory management. Some workers talk about their bad dental problems probably due to the contaminated water. No one from the company seems to help. Though the workers were keen to work for their livelihood they seem to be unaware of the consequences of working in a mercury factory. The film shows clearly that no precaution was carried out to protect the labourers at work. The

family of the labourers seem to be affected equally. Inhaling mercury has caused damage to the womb of the women.

Children have ulcers on their tongue and suffer from chronic leg pain. The film also portrays various people visually narrating this horrendous experience where the teachers of schools seem to complain about the poor comprehending levels in children. Women complain about their health problems during menstruation besides their mental stress and memory loss. Most of the people from different age groups suffer dysfunction below the hip. Mercury also affects the central nervous system. It damages hearing, memory, speech and vision.

The motivational framework is clearly depicted through the visuals in the film which instil a sense of immediate action that will result in protest discourse. It identifies the various strategies adopted by the film-maker to mobilize a more effective solution to save the environment. It helps in persuading individuals directly and indirectly to fight for a cause and also influence governments to make laws in support of social demands. Strong factual images will be viewed at close quarters. It opens up to new reality encouraging more participants to protest. Documentaries have not always been a focus on academic research; hence the topic for the research is environmental documentary films. Environmental destruction is clearly explained and the various visuals in the film prove this. Such awareness through documentary films is essential to prevent any further damage done to any city in the future. Though the problems have aggravated in general throughout India to a great extent, such visual mediums are thought-provoking and they call for rapid action. Under this framing, legal and civic issues are concentrated upon. This will also motivate and encourage participation of a large number of people in bringing about a civic action and social change.

## **Conclusion**

Documentary films like these will definitely aid in bringing about attitudinal changes in the public mind. The public demonstrates worry, fear and sense of insecurity for the future as seen in the various visuals. This film asserts that if a solution is not sought, the consequences of environmental degradation will decide the future fate of our planet and lives.

It is, therefore, concluded that this kind of analysis will bring about clarity and awareness to the general public and the affected people on core issues that are raised in the documentary and this calls for attention from the government and the policy-makers.

As India is marching towards the superpower status, the main casualty would be the environment. As a fast developing nation there are many environmental issues to be

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addressed in a humane manner. Unfortunately in India, public awareness of the environmental concerns and existence of powerful and active environmental movements are lacking. The independent documentary film-makers with environmental commitments are contributing in their own way to serve as a bridge between the environmental issues and the people at large. The academic community in the area of research has not shown much interest about producing these kind of environmental films. This study tries to throw some light on the way in which the environment is being framed in a documentary so that the stakeholders will understand and appreciate the messages in a constructive and meaningful way.

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